

Rice wine and fieldwork in China: Some reflections on practicalities, positionality and ethical issues

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/fieldresearch/2014/04/10/rice-wine-and-fieldwork-in-china/

Editor

4/10/2014

*In China, social networking in both the professional and private spheres is usually achieved through group meals or banquets. Drinking is often an important element of these social events as a means of showing respect and friendship. Researchers who wish to conduct in-depth fieldwork in China need to engage with this social practice and, ultimately, the choices that researchers make while navigating the Chinese drinking culture during fieldwork have important implications for the design, implementation and outcome of research, as well as for research ethics, writes **Nicholas Loubere**.*

Introduction

As anyone who has spent time in China can attest, the most common way to make new social connections, strengthen old ties, or simply spend time with family and friends is through group meals. When first entering a fieldwork site in China, researchers will invariably be required to spend a significant amount of time attending meals with potential research subjects and gatekeepers. Heavy drinking is frequently a prominent feature of these meals, with the customary drink being a strong rice wine (40% alcohol or higher) known as baijiu. Throughout the meal toasts are given and attendees are then expected to drink an entire glass of rice wine (ganbei) in order to show friendship and respect.

As both [Charles Stafford](#) and [Hans Steinmüller](#) have already noted in previous posts, the way in which researchers engage with this cultural practice has significant practical implications for both access to the field and quality of research. A researcher's ability to 'play the game', say/do the right things, and ultimately make a good impression on potential gatekeepers during these meals is often directly related to that researcher's ability to gain prolonged and meaningful access to fieldwork sites. At the same time, these meals are sometimes the only chance a researcher will get to speak with important research subjects. Since 'playing the game' properly often means drinking vast amounts of alcohol, vital fieldwork sometimes takes place in a drunken haze, which raises questions about the validity of data collected from drunk sources by an inebriated researcher. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, the way that the researcher participates in the act of socialising during fieldwork is intertwined with a number of issues related to researcher positionality and research ethics that are of fundamental importance to the research that is produced and how it impacts research subjects.

In this article I will provide some specific examples of how I navigated the practicalities associated with being a guest at banquets/meals during empirical fieldwork, and then reflect on some of the implications for researcher positionality and research ethics.

Practical responses to the expectation to drink

From early 2012 to late 2013 I conducted four phases of fieldwork in three rural fieldwork sites (townships and villages) in Jiangxi Province. This multi-phase/location approach gave me the chance to test a number of tactics with regard to consuming alcohol at the obligatory banquets I was invited to in each new place.

In my first phase of fieldwork (my scoping trip) I strived to be a good guest by participating wholeheartedly in the banquet drinking culture. In one sense, this approach to drinking was successful in that it ingratiated me with a number of important contacts who were able to help facilitate future fieldwork; however, I also lost chances to collect important information and perhaps make even stronger connections with people due to inebriation. The most extreme example of lost opportunities due to drinking occurred at the very end of the trip. I met a professor for dinner

one night and we had a very good conversation about my research. He then offered to arrange an interview with someone who could have provided important information and potentially facilitated access to fieldwork sites. He told me that the interview time would depend on his contact's schedule and he would verify the time over the next few days. The next morning I was invited to lunch by another group of contacts and I felt obliged to attend. As this group of people already knew that I was willing to drink, my refusal to participate in the group drinking could have been perceived as an insult. However, since it was lunchtime I thought that the drinking would be relatively light and I hoped that the professor would not call about the interview that day. Unfortunately, about halfway through the meal a 'VIP' who I had not yet met arrived, which prompted expensive bottles of rice wine to be opened followed by a flurry of introductions and toasts. Obviously, at this point it was impossible to decline any drinks, and after the meal was over I ended up back in my room, drunk and quite ill.



Rural Jiangxi, China

Much to my dismay, this is exactly when the professor called to inform me that the interview would go forward in 30 minutes and that I should get in a taxi immediately. I then had to explain to him what had happened and that I was in no state to conduct an interview. Unsurprisingly, I never had a second chance at this interview and the professor has not offered to help me with my research since.

After this experience I vowed never to let drinking get in the way of research again, and in my second phase of fieldwork I became a teetotaler. I found that as long as I gave a reasonable excuse for not drinking and did not waiver in my resolve, it was possible to overcome the pressure to drink. The benefits of this approach were immediately noticeable. I had a clear head while people were saying interesting things, and after the meals I could go home and write intelligibly in my fieldwork journal. In this way I was able to collect far more data than on my first trip. However, I noticed that the reception I received was often slightly cooler than before. During one lunch with some local officials (some of whom I was hoping to interview individually later) I politely refused to drink claiming that my stomach hurt. This excuse was met with some incredulous looks and I was told that I should not to tell anyone about the alcohol at lunch. I realised later that drinking at lunchtime was banned for local officials, and that my voluntary self-exclusion from the forbidden activity meant that some of the people involved viewed me with suspicion. Conversation at this lunch ended up being very sterile and I was not able to interview any of the officials at greater length afterwards.

In my final two fieldwork trips I decided to take a more moderate approach to drinking. I told my hosts that rice wine makes me very ill and asked if I could drink beer instead claiming that it is the custom in my country. For the most part this request was respected, and fortunately most Chinese beer is only around 3% alcohol (or less!), so drinking one or two bottles has little effect. By participating in the social practice of drinking during meals, I was able to show respect to my hosts and others in attendance, which fostered trust, good will and an environment more conducive to finding out important information. The success of this approach was evident during a dinner with township officials at the end of my final phase of fieldwork. Like other meals I had been invited to, there were a few attendees who seemed slightly suspicious of my presence. However, during the meal I made sure to toast everyone separately and show my respect by finishing my small cup of beer while they drank rice wine. As the meal progressed the more suspicious attendees seemed to let their guards down slightly, and the overall environment was very relaxed, comfortable and fun. After the meal I was able to sit and have tea with a smaller group of the officials who spoke candidly and at length about the realities of local governance with regard to my research.

Researcher positionality and ethical issues

These three examples are related to my practical experiences of necessarily engaging with the social practice of

drinking in China, while at the same time attempting to get the most 'research value' out of the events. However, engaging with social practices during research (especially those that involve alcohol consumption) requires us to think beyond the practicalities of field access and data collection, and to seriously reflect on the issues related to the position of the researcher and research ethics. In the social sciences there has been a significant amount of discussion about the importance of the position of the researcher in relation to the people/places that are being studied. In particular, researchers are often thought of as occupying either an insider or outsider position, which shapes the type of data that is collected and the work that is produced. However, researcher positionality is complex, and in reality researchers simultaneously occupy a variety of overlapping positions that are located on wide spectrums, are dynamic and malleable, and are defined relative to the context specific situations that researchers find themselves in. Underpinning these diverse positionalities are relative levels of power and powerlessness, which not only facilitate/constrain access to the field and shape what researchers are able to discover, but also have a variety of ethical implications, particularly with regard to the potential of the research to 'cause harm'.

One such relatively powerless position that researchers often find themselves in is that of the 'guest'. As a guest at banquets, the researcher has limited power to control where or when the meal will be held, who is invited, what is consumed, and who pays. Nevertheless, researcher action, inaction or inability to act can have direct consequences for themselves and/or for others. For instance, when I attended meals with research assistants, it was obvious that they felt obliged to drink if I was drinking. Therefore, my missteps in the first example above, which resulted in illness and a horrible hangover, also extended to my research assistant at the time. Situations where large amounts of alcohol are consumed have the potential to cause harm and therefore become an area of ethical concern. It is also important to consider who is paying for the meal (and the expensive alcohol) and where the money has come from. In my experience as a guest in China, I have never been allowed to pay for a meal. In rural areas, this may mean that someone with relatively little money is subsidising my food and drink. When dining with local officials, it is often the case that the local government will cover the cost of the meal, which is obviously problematic when working in impoverished areas. Regardless of who picks up the tab, there are also unspoken quid pro quos that the researcher may not even perceive. In other words, our presence in the field and attendance at mandatory meals often represent debts that our associates, colleagues and friends will need to repay after we have left.

An example of a more powerful position that the researcher often occupies is that of the 'cosmopolitan disseminator' who is actively involved in large social/research networks both in China and globally. In research on rural China, this position is in stark contrast to the more parochial or locally-focused actors who researchers often seek to interview in order to gain 'local knowledge'. Even if consent is explicitly obtained, local actors may not fully understand how the information they provide will be disseminated and what impact it may have on their lives. It is also worth asking whether interview consent can really be granted while intoxicated. As trained professionals, researchers are often skilled at eliciting information from research subjects during both interviews and more informal conversations. Some research subjects may not have the experience of being interviewed or probed for information, and therefore may accidentally expose sensitive information that could cause problems for themselves or others, especially under the influence of alcohol. This is particularly true in the focus group-esque setting of a group meal where it is impossible for the researcher to control confidentiality. While researchers obviously have no power over what other people say, we cannot shirk the responsibility of creating the environment where the things are said.

Of course, more permanent and visible identity markers, such as age, nationality, race and gender, also shape researcher positionality in the field. In particular, the sociocultural practices revolving around drinking mentioned above are gendered in the Chinese context, albeit differently depending on the geographical area and/or groups being researched. For instance, the pressure to drink is often more easily avoided by females and, especially in rural China, female researchers will usually not be expected to drink at all. This situation can facilitate access to female groups that may be closed to male researchers who are expected to participate in extended drinking sessions with other male research subjects. On the other hand, this can also sometimes result in female researchers being excluded from social practices that have traditionally been male dominated, particularly when working with business and/or political elites. Ultimately, this means that the same situations described in this post

would be experienced entirely differently by male and female researchers of different ages, nationalities and races, resulting in different research approaches and (potentially) outcomes.

Concluding thoughts

Obviously, this short article only scratches the surface of a rich set of issues that are of fundamental importance to the research we produce and the impact that we have on the people we encounter in the field. The fact that these issues are prevalent in a seemingly mundane and necessary social interaction (i.e. drinking during group meals) underscores the importance of rigorously reflecting on how we carry ourselves while engaging with any social practice in the field. Unfortunately, as the examples above illustrate, there are no easy answers or static blueprints for the researcher to follow during empirical fieldwork. Instead, researchers need to navigate these practical, positional and ethical issues on a case-by-case basis by systematically drawing their own experiences and the experiences of others.

About the Author

Nicholas Loubere received a master's degree in International Relations from Xiamen University in 2011 with funding from the China Scholarship Council, before being awarded a Fully-Funded International Research Scholarship to undertake his Ph.D. research on Chinese rural finance at the [White Rose East Asia Centre](#), University of Leeds. From 2012 to 2013, Nicholas conducted ethnographic fieldwork in rural Jiangxi Province with the support of research grants from the Worldwide Universities Network (WUN) and the Universities' China Committee in London (UCCL).

Follow Nicholas' work on [Twitter](#) and [Academia.edu](#)

A Note on the Research

This article describes experiences from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Jiangxi Province from 2012 to 2013 as part of an on-going research project exploring the ways in which financial services are provided, acquired and utilised in the rural Chinese context, and the roles that financial services play in the construction of diverse rural livelihoods. Below is a list of publications related to this research project:

- Loubere, N. (2012) Gānbēi (Bottoms Up): Navigating the Chinese drinking culture during empirical fieldwork. In Loubere, N., Morgan, R., Kruckenberg, L., De Beukelaer, C., & Hernandez Montes De Oca, P. (eds.) [RiDNet practical fieldwork notes](#), Leeds: Researchers in Development Network
- Zhang, H.X. & Loubere, N., 2013. [Rural Finance, Development and Livelihoods in China](#). Duisburg Working Papers on East Asian Studies 94: 1–28
- Lin, K., Yin, P.J., & Loubere, N. (2014) [Social Support and the 'Left Behind' Elderly in Rural China: A Case Study from Jiangxi Province](#). Journal of Community Health

For citation: Loubere, Nicholas (2014) Rice wine and fieldwork in China: Some reflections on practicalities, positionality and ethical issues. Field Research Method Lab at LSE (10 April 2014) Blog entry. URL: <http://wp.me/p46hMd-5u>