

# Out of quantitative research, into ethnography: Studying Taiwanese migrants in China

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/fieldresearch/2013/12/12/out-of-quantitative-research-into-ethnography-studying-taiwanese-migrants-in-china/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/fieldresearch/2013/12/12/out-of-quantitative-research-into-ethnography-studying-taiwanese-migrants-in-china/)

Editor

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*There is no 'orthodox' research method in social sciences: there are just 'different' research methods for each individual, empirical research project. A research method should be decided on the basis of research topics and the availability of data. By turning to ethnography, I was able to collect more valid data than would have been the case with tape-recorded interviews and more than what was possible previously, writes **Ping Lin**.*

Most textbooks on methodology treat fieldwork as a type of research method which can be 'standardised' for a guidebook to follow step by step. However, this is not what I encountered in my fieldwork. My PhD thesis 'Easy to Move, Hard to Settle Down: Taiwanese People in China' (2007) was partially based on my fieldwork conducted from 2004 to 2005 at Dongguan Taiwanese School in Dongguan City, Guangdong Province, and Huadong Taiwanese School in Kunshan, Shanghai Metropolis. My experience of fieldwork was a series of unexpected events related to the field, no matter how much I was prepared. A good fieldwork is not just the result of talent and hard work. It is also affected by the researcher's personality and the field site he or she selects. Fieldwork is about building up long-term trust in people rather than short-term friendships with respondents in the field.

## **Research Methods: from formal to informal inquiry**

Most empirical research falls into two separate types: quantitative research and qualitative research. Some social scientists have taken a model from the natural sciences for their research approaches and exactness, so they pay much attention to developing standardised models for research. They maintain a distance from their research subjects, and conduct their research with structured methods. Their research is often labelled as 'quantitative research'. Some other scientists hesitate to follow research models of the natural sciences. These researchers explore the social reality by getting involved with their subjects and analysing their research targets from the participants' point of view. They conduct their research with flexible and unstructured methods. Their research is often labelled as 'qualitative research'.

Being educated in a sociology institute which is well-known for quantitative research, I was encouraged to conduct my PhD research with quantitative methods. At the initial stages, I planned to conduct a paper survey and tape-recorded interviews. Later on, however, I turned to adopt ethnography as my main research method and eventually, took my field notes as the main source of information for my analysis. This section discusses what I originally planned and explains why I changed my plans.

## **Original Plan**

Since quantitative research appear to be 'mainstream', I initially adopted a paper survey, based on statistical sampling, for my PhD research in the hope of gaining some reliable and measurable data and being able to explore the motivations and integration processes of migration. In the original research proposal, I planned to construct a Taiwanese group as a sub-population in order to carry out a statistical sample survey. This group was to be comprised of parents in Taiwanese schools, members of Taiwanese Business Associations or residents in some ethnic exclusive districts. However, none of these worked in practice. The main reason was that the Taiwanese in China did not trust any kind of surveys which might be used as "evidence" to describe their life.

My first tape-recorded interview was conducted in late October 2004, which was eight weeks after I started working at Dongguan Taiwanese School. I believed I might have successfully dis-alarmed my colleagues, so invited some of

them as respondents for tape-recorded interviews. They all happily agreed. However, most of them felt nervous during their interview and were reluctant to talk as spontaneously as they did in casual conversations; even on some interview topics that they used to happily discuss in their daily conversations. After having ten tape-recorded interviews done, I gave up this method and turned to trying a paper survey. However, I found the paper survey did not work well either.

Why were they so cautious even when I had excluded all sensitive questions from the interview and paper survey? The following scenario illustrates why it is difficult to conduct formal inquiry in China.

*Mr. Huang said, 'We normal people think the cost of producing one pen in China is \$5, for example. If we can sell for \$5.50 in Singapore, then we will have 50¢ as our profit. Taiwanese in Dongguan have different ideas. According to the current laws, all goods [we produce in the firms] should be exported to other countries, not sold domestically in China. However, these Taiwanese often illegally sell these pens to different provinces of China for a higher price, \$10 per pen, for example. To do this, they have to keep a double accounting system and bribe the local officials in Guangdong Province and destination provinces. Most Taiwanese here make money by this means, more or less. Their ideas about income and costs are different from ours. Most Taiwanese businessmen are partially doing illegal business here. They think any questionnaire may release what they actually do. They don't want to leave any document as evidence, so they are very unlikely to fill in any form with any implications regarding numbers'.*

*(Field notes in Dongguan on 06 January 2005)*

Just as the informal economy is often found within well-developed enclaves in Europe or the United States, most Taiwanese in China also conducted some informal activities. Informality allows incipient ethnic businesses to bypass costly tax and labour regulations and thus to compete with better-capitalised firms. As Mr Huang suggested, Taiwanese in Dongguan, more or less, used their formal activities to cover their informal ones. Such informal activities were the main reason why respondents in Dongguan were cautious about doing any tape-recorded interviews or paper surveys. How about respondents in Shanghai?

Taiwanese businesses in Shanghai are vastly different from those in Dongguan in terms of the type of their investment and forms of association. Unlike Dongguan which attracts traditional industries from Taiwan, Shanghai attracts more high-tech industries from Taiwan. What are the differences and their implications? If we take computers for example, Taiwanese firms in Dongguan produce keyboards and LED monitors for them; while computer chips are produced by Taiwanese firms in Shanghai. The latter need more intensive investment in both capital and skills than the former. However, the Taiwanese Government is quite unhappy about Taiwanese high-tech investment in Shanghai because such investment may help Chinese firms upgrade their technologies in China.

In May 2005, UMC (United Microelectronics Cooperation), the second largest IT firm in Taiwan was accused by the Taiwanese Government of illegally investing in China by means of setting up a new firm called He-Jian. This accusation frightened Taiwanese in Shanghai.

*During our chats about the accusation of the Taiwanese Government against UMC, Mr Hsue was quite cautious. I teased and asked him why he was so cautious: I said, 'Everyone knows He-Jian is from UMC...you are not from He-Jian. Why are you so cautious?' Mr Hsue said, 'No,no... To the Taiwanese Government, all of us are illegal, no matter whether you are from Grace or He-Jian or SMICS. All of us are illegal'.*

*'So, it is better to keep a low profile', he said.*

The Chinese Government, however, welcomed high-tech investment projects from Taiwan. Although those investments were made formally in Shanghai, they were regarded as informal by the Taiwanese government. The accusation against He-Jian reminded Taiwanese people in the IT industry of the Taiwanese government's attitudes. This explains why Mr Hsue kept a low profile although the Taiwanese Government never accused the firm that he worked for. It also explains why respondents in Shanghai were reluctant to have paper surveys or tape-recorded interviews as were their counterparts in Dongguan.

One may think there must have been some 'less sensitive' questions which my respondents were more willing to answer in a survey, yet my experience in the field shows that they were extremely cautious with any survey. Even as basic a question as "When was your first visit to China?" could be sensitive for them. Why? As far as I know, some of them visited China before the lifting of the travel ban in 1987. During the period of martial law, visiting China was a serious crime. Although respondents did not care about telling me this in an informal conversation, they did not want such crucial information to appear as 'evidence' in surveys or interviews. To them, all questions are likely to be sensitive questions when presented in the form of interviews or surveys. Thus, I finally gave up these methods and turned to the method of ethnography.

### **Ethnography I Conducted**

Because I was a little worried about the potential problems in statistical data and quantitative surveys, I had taken an ethnographic approach (mainly participant observation and a few tape-recorded interviews as ad hoc) as a 'backup' research method since the beginning of my fieldwork. My jobs as part-time school teacher at the two Taiwanese schools in Dongguan and Shanghai respectively provided me with a good means to participate in the Taiwanese community and observe their life. In the field, I paid attention not only to my conversations with respondents but also to how Taiwanese immigrants in general behaved. I transformed the questions in my survey into different and smaller topics in order to explore respondents' ideas in suitable situations.

Whilst my part-time job as schoolteacher helped me to obtain their trust, my travel experiences in inner China (or student life in Oxford) are often good topics to talk with some potential respondents. My personal background and experience often spurred them to talk about their own life in China spontaneously. During such interactions, I seldom 'asked' my respondents in the manner of a formal interview, but rather 'talked and listened to' them as in casual conversations. Without my 'asking' interview questions, they naturally told me most information I needed in different contexts. Most of their nervousness and cautiousness often shown in an interview format disappeared in these daily talks. Sometimes the contexts of conversation (how and in what situation they responded), were even more important than the contents of conversation (what they expressed in words) because these various contexts assisted me in properly understanding and interpreting respondents. Thus, I included more contexts than the dialogues themselves as 'supporting evidence' in the paper that I published later on although someone might regard such contexts as redundant.

This method might be criticised as less 'scientific or systematic', but I obtained more diverse and detailed information than would have possibly been obtained via traditional tape-recorded interviews or paper surveys. In order to understand my respondents' life transformation, I kept contacts with my respondents for seven years after the fieldwork. Some of my other respondents continued their life in China; some returned to Taiwan; a few others moved to a third country. I made numerous phone calls, exchanged emails, and sometimes had dinner gatherings with them. All the encounters and contact gave me a detailed picture of the transformation in their life.

### **Conclusion**

To sum up, there is no 'orthodox' research method in social sciences: there are just 'different' research methods for each individual, empirical research project. A research method should be decided on the basis of research topics

and the availability of data. Because of some statistical pitfalls and barriers in my fieldwork, I found that the 'main-stream' research methods, such as statistical sampling, paper surveys, and tape-recorded interviews, were inappropriate to my research project. By turning to ethnography, I was able to collect more valid data than would have been the case with tape-recorded interviews and more than what was possible previously.

By doing ethnography, my own personal life has also changed in great deal: I am now married to one of my respondents and had our baby. It seems my fieldwork is never finished, but continues in various forms and occasions in life. To me, fieldwork is not about building up short-term relationships with people in the field, but about making long-term commitments with people throughout life.

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## About the Author

**Ping Lin** an associate professor at Department of Politics, National Chung Cheng University in Taiwan. He was previously a visiting scholar at the Centre of Taiwan Studies, SOAS in the UK between February and August in 2013. In 2004-2005, he did one year fieldwork at two Taiwanese Schools in China. In 2009-2012, he has published some results of his fieldwork in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Mainland China, and Europe. Now he is conducting a new project to examine the ethnic issue in migration by comparing the life of Taiwanese Diasporas in rural China and rural Indonesia.

## Related Publications

- 2013. Memories of A Future Home: Taiwanese Teenagers in China. *Journal of Population Studies* (Taiwan)
- 2013. [Taiwanese Women in China: Integration and Mobility in Gendered Enclaves](#). *China Information* 27, pp.107-123
- 2011. Chinese Diaspora "at Home": Mainlander Taiwanese in Dongguan and Shanghai. *China Review* Supple. special issue 11(2), pp.43-64