

Lingnan University

## Digital Commons @ Lingnan University

---

Staff Publications

Lingnan Staff Publication

---

12-6-2008

### Conducting ethnography in China

Leung-sea, Lucia SIU

*Lingnan University, Hong Kong*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://commons.ln.edu.hk/sw\\_master](https://commons.ln.edu.hk/sw_master)



Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), [Regional Sociology Commons](#), and the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Siu, L. L.-S. (2008, December). Conducting ethnography in China. Paper presented at the 10th Hong Kong Sociological Association Annual Meeting, Lingnan University, Hong Kong.

This Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by the Lingnan Staff Publication at Digital Commons @ Lingnan University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Staff Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Lingnan University.

# Conducting Ethnography in China

To be presented in the 10<sup>th</sup> HKSA annual meeting, Hong Kong, 6 Dec 2008

**Lucia Leung-Sea SIU *PhD***

Affiliation: Lingnan University  
Email: [lssiu@ln.edu.hk](mailto:lssiu@ln.edu.hk)  
Phone: (852) 26167208

Department of Sociology and Social Policy  
Lingnan University  
8 Castle Peak Road, Tuen Mun, N.T.  
Hong Kong

## **Abstract**

Conducting ethnography in modern China can be highly fruitful, yet there are special-care items that seldom appear in methodology literature. Drawn from the author's fieldwork in China's futures markets in 2005, the first part of this paper discusses a list of practical items that ethnographers are likely to face: field access, the organizational culture of public and quasi-public institutions, obtaining trust, the scenarios of gifts and banquets, reliability of statistical data, politically sensitive areas, and personal safety.

The second part is a reflection on standpoint issues, namely Orientalism and nationalism. Ethnographers usually face tensions that arise from their roles, as they are both insiders and outsiders of their target communities. The tension can be acute in the case of Hong Kong researchers; yet it is possible to turn this into a methodological advantage.

**Keywords:** Ethnography, China

## **Introduction**

### **Field access: Top-down versus Bottom-up**

### **Murky waters: the public, private and quasi-public sectors**

### **Hong Kong Identity: Benefits from the “valley of death”**

On top of the Sino-western boundary issues in academia, the researcher's identity as someone born and brought up in Hong Kong introduced both convenience and disadvantages to her project. At the first instance, access to formal institutions seemed to be more difficult because I was never received as an academic from “overseas”. After more than three decades of close interactions with Hong Kong and the city's handover back to China in 1997, mainlanders were no longer curious about Hong Kong people. Worse still, I was only a postgraduate student without any academic position or titles; hence I never got official receptions, briefings or arranged visits as an “international guest”. As described in the Access section, I had to figure out how to improvise other access channels to the field by informal, bottom-up ways.

A Hong Kong identity had some merits for an ethnographer. I was entitled to travel in mainland China without having to apply for a visa. Unlike foreigners (especially whites) who could still attract a lot of attention and excitement in small and medium cities, the locals were far less conscious about my presence, and far less curious about what I was doing. If I did not expose my southern accent, I could “blend in” amongst crowds, industry meetings and office settings (Hammersley & Atkinson 2001:78-83), minimizing the amount of disruption (Hughes et al, 1994) and alarms.

While I did not get the honourable treatment as a special guest, usually I was not cosily trusted as a real local either. There were remarkable differences between my field environments and Hong Kong ranging from spoken dialects, Mandarin

accent, systems of written Chinese characters, Chinese keyboard input methods,<sup>1</sup> food and diet, to more subtle differences in social life and values – such as how to stand in a queue or how to use traffic lights. In the far north, the accent differed so much that I had been mistaken as a Korean for multiple times, and one colleague in the Beijing futures company who had never come across my keyboard input method thought that I could not type or write in Chinese. These differences may seem small compared with those faced by European ethnographers in China. Yet they were significant enough to give me a position where I could neither enjoy the benefits of a foreigner, nor the benefits of a “real” local – as compared with other interns who came from the local city. It was an identity that was grossly on the “inside” of the nation, yet never fully localized throughout my period of stay. During fieldwork, the intermediate status between insider and outsider was never a comfortable or relaxing position to be in; in self-taunt it is like the “valley of death” in marketing, where a product with bad market positioning strategy is unlikely to sell well. Nonetheless, looking back with hindsight, my peculiar position between insiders and outsiders was actually an ideal one to keep a balance between understanding the insiders’ perspectives, and maintaining a reflective sensitivity to make enquiries about existing practices in the field.

To conduct ethnography in China’s commodity futures markets, I was studying an “insider” community from the identity of an “outsider” (Merton 1972). Membership of the commodity futures industry of China is, to a large degree, achieved through work experience, training and social connections; inborn or ascribed attributes such as nationality, class and gender also had their influences (*ibid*: 15). In this research the insider/outsider boundary was three-fold: between academics and market people; between sociology and economics; and, between Europeans (where this thesis was formulated and assessed), mainland Chinese (where the field subjects

---

<sup>1</sup> Mainland China has switched to a system of simplified Chinese characters since the 1950s, while Hong Kong is still using traditional Chinese characters. Most Chinese typists in mainland China used a keyboard input method based on alphabetical phonetics, while I type with the Taiwanese “Changjie” (倉頡) input system based on character strokes, which was not installed at my internship offices.

worked and lived), and Hong Kong Chinese (where the researcher was born and brought up). Here discussion is focused on six issues surrounding the insider/outsider boundary: access, training, versions of disciplinary knowledge, orientalism, cultural essentialism, and power. The methodology discussion will then proceed to triangulation, ethical issues, and safety and health issues in fieldwork.

### **Orientalism and Cultural essentialism**

I used to be a research student in a Scottish University, while the target of study was China's futures industry. As a Sino-British cultural frontier is involved, the issue of orientalism (Said 1985) deserves some discussion here. Edward Said used the term orientalism to question how Asia has been studied, discussed, represented, and imagined by Eurocentric discourses. The discourses were "a grid filtering the Orient into Western consciousness" (Gran 1980) that was gradually accumulated over the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, during an era when Europe had strong colonial and imperial interests in Asia. Most of the time Said referred to examples from the Middle East, but the Near East and the Far East were in a comparable position. Through this cognitive grid, Europeans see the Orient as a backward, docile and exotic land, carrying ethnic cultures and natural resources, awaiting the exploration and discovery by the "more advanced" European civilizations. Said employed Michel Foucault's concept of "the Other" to portray this cultural projection: "the Orient is anything that the Occident is not." By creating polarized cultural attributes, the Occident was actually establishing its own identity by talking about the Orient on the opposite end of the polarized cultural axis. This projected image of the Orient is a mixture of romantic imagination and hegemonic control; it was also a distorted picture from how Asians actually lived and worked on their own land.

Asian Studies as a body of knowledge in western societies has its heritage from an older version that is closely associated with orientalism. While it was not practical to discard the whole body of knowledge solely due to issues of orientalism, it will certainly be helpful if the modern researcher is aware of potential problems. Area research from a western university should not be a hegemonic discourse that objectifies its field subjects, pushing them to a status dispossessed of their own voice. When conducting market comparisons, are such comparisons done in a manner to achieve exploitation, control and wealth redistribution? The researcher should be

aware that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such control is not necessarily imposed in the old form of political and military control. Such discourses are more likely to appear in a liberal economic front, for example, in the name of free market economy and globalisation. Since orientalism resides in a body of knowledge over a prolonged period of time, its influence has diffused across racial, disciplinary and geographical boundaries. Both European and Asian researchers in modern times are prone to see society through this filtering grid (Gran 1980), regardless of the researcher's race and cultural origins. Being Asian does not necessarily exempt the researcher from its influence.

The researcher should be sensitive to questions like, are market attributes represented on a simplistic and polarized axis, exaggerating the Occident-Orient contrast?<sup>2</sup> Is ethnography conducted in the form of “research tourism”, only highlighting the exotic elements of the indigenous area that is different from the researcher's own environment, without addressing to more core issues of the research? When applying western theoretical framework on Asian cases, attention should be drawn to the local context and the country's economic history. For example, Alkrich's concept of technology transfer (Alkrich 1992) can be applied to China's introduction of futures markets from the Chicago model; but futures markets in China also had their own line of history from the Qing dynasty in the late 1800s, through communist times to post-communist times (see Chapter 3). The local context should not be totally ignored. Last but not least, the version of knowledge derived from research work should be compatible, and not distorted, from the factual reality how field subjects live and work in the markets. Kapp (1980) mentioned a test that could show whether the researcher is weaving some knowledge that purely exists in her orientalist imagination. If the research report is translated into the local language and read by the field subjects, at least the findings should be factually acceptable to the locals. It should not be a fabrication that is constructed solely to appease a western academic audience, with little substance that represents the actual market and people being

---

<sup>2</sup> Examples of polarized, exaggerated attributes: Marcel Mauss (1954) portrayed gift economies in village societies (e.g. Melanesian societies) and commodity economies in western societies as two dualistic forms (Arkush 1997); Fei (1948) described differential mode of association as a “Chinese” property, while the organisational mode of association as a “western” attribute (see Chapter 2).

studied. To carry out the test, the researcher intends to draw part of this submitted thesis and submit to some academic journals in Chinese.

Another problem that arises from the Sino-European boundary was cultural essentialism. During fieldwork I often came across the discourse of “Chinese characteristics” (*Zhongguo tese* 中國特色) and “China factor” (*Zhongguo yinsu* 中國因素). When the *Financial Times* writes about “China factor”, the term basically refers to how the supply, demand, or capital flow factors associated with China exert influences on global market conditions such as freight derivatives, commodity prices, and stock prices (see Oakley 2007, Chung 2007, Bergsten 2006). In its simplest meaning, “China factor” recognizes the existence of local factors, which can differ from the overall global conditions.

When used by domestic futures people, I found the term “Chinese characteristics” bundled with a mixture of ambiguous meanings that deserve some clarifications here. Sometimes the market people used the phrase “constructing futures markets with Chinese characteristics” (建設具中國特色的期貨市場) to express nationalistic sentiments and resentment against foreign imperialism. On private discussions, some field subjects related their attitude to the economic history of 1870-1945 (when domestic markets were heavily controlled by colonial powers, see chapter 3), or the hegemonic control of Third World economies by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in recent decades – from a perspective of political economy, this was a valid precaution grounded upon issues of power and national interests. The discourse could also be entangled with official political propaganda, as the verbatim was adopted from former state leader Deng Xiaoping’s political directive in 1982: “to construct socialism with Chinese characteristics”. In speeches in industry conferences, the phrase “construction of futures markets with Chinese characteristics” could be read as a supportive statement towards the state’s economic directives.

“Chinese characteristics” can also have a third meaning related to cultural essentialism – that Chinese markets are essentially different from markets elsewhere. Some field subjects adopted a strong form of essentialism and believed that it was impossible for any foreigners to gain genuine understanding of China’s markets. Some field subjects emphasized that “Chinese characteristics” and “situations of the

country” (*guoqing* 國情) were beyond the grasp of outsiders. Only Chinese, by virtue of our ascribed identity, have the rights to claim for better understanding about Chinese markets. The first two meanings of “Chinese characteristics” are understandable in their respective context, but this third meaning is a problematic attitude that deters communication and understanding about markets. Merton (1972) has made a clear argument why such claims should not stand any for social groups in general. While outsiders are likely to be hindered by cultural gaps and foci of vested interests, it was also likely for insiders to be influenced by biases such as a myopic perspectives (*ibid*: 44), or the aggrandizement effect – that is, overestimating the prestige of one’s own social group (*ibid*: 17; Caplow 1964: 213-216). Given enough training, exposure and insights, competent knowledge is attainable by both insiders and outsiders.<sup>3</sup> “Chinese characteristics” indeed exist for Chinese markets, just like Russian, Indonesian, Italian, American, and French characteristics exist in the respective markets. Nonetheless local characteristics should still be eligible to the analysis, discussion, comparison and understanding by insiders and outsiders alike. In fact, fuller understanding is more likely to arise from the synthesis of the perspectives of both insiders and outsiders (Merton 1972: 36-44). The researcher is aware that, being racially Chinese does not guarantee a better understanding of Chinese markets. In the light of the diasporic paradigm when multiple Chinese markets (mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and overseas Chinese) are taken into account, what constitutes “Chineseness” is constantly shifting and drifting (Ang 1998). It is impossible to obtain a single orthodox definition of “Chinese characteristics” of “Chinese markets” based on cultural essentialism.

---

<sup>3</sup> During fieldwork, I had come across some foreign investment bankers who showed exceptional understanding about the commodity futures markets of China.

## **Reference**

- Atkinson, R. and J. Flint (2001). "Accessing Hidden and Hard-to-Reach Populations: Snowball Research Strategies." University of Surrey: Social Research Update(33).
- Babbie, E. (1995). *The Practice of Social Research*. Belmont, Wadsworth
- Bian, Y. and J. R. Logan (1996). "Market Transition and the Persistence of Power: The Changing Stratification System in Urban China." *American Sociological Review* 61(5): 739-758
- Blaikie, N. (2000). *Designing Social Research*. Cambridge, Polity.
- Burns, J. P. (1989). "Review: The Reach of the State: Sketches of the Chinese Body Politic by Vivienne Shue." *The China Quarterly*(117): 146-147.
- Carrier, J. G. (1995). *Occidentalism: Images of the West*. Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Chen, X. (1995). *Occidentalism: A Theory of counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China*. New York, Oxford University Press.
- Denzin, N. (1978). *Unobtrusive Measures: the Quest for Triangulated and Nonreactive Methods of Observation*. *The Research Act- a theoretical introduction to sociological methods*. London, McGraw-Hill: Chapter 9-10.
- Francis, C-B. (2001). "Quasi-Public, Quasi-Private Trends in Emerging Economies: The Case of China." *Comparative Politics* 33 3: 276-294.
- Gates, H. (1996). *China's Motor: a Thousand Years of Petty Capitalism*. Ithaca ; London, Cornell University Press.
- Gran, P. (1980). "Orientalism." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 100(3): 328-331.
- Gold, T. B., D. Guthrie, et al. (2002). *Social Connections in China: Institutions, Culture and the Changing Nature of Guanxi*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Hamilton, G. (1999). *Cosmopolitan capitalists: Hong Kong and the Chinese diaspora at the end of the twentieth century*. Seattle, University of Washington Press.
- Hammersley, M. (2000). *Taking Sides in Social Research - essays on partisanship and bias*. London, Routledge.
- Hammersley, M. and P. Atkinson (1983). *Ethnography: principles in practice*. London, Tavistock.
- Hannum, E. and Y. Xie (1998). "Ethnic Stratification in Northwest China: Occupational Differences between Han Chinese and National Minorities in Xinjiang, 1982-1990." *Demography* 35(3): 323-333.
- Hertz, E. (1998). *The Trading Crowd: an Ethnography of the Shanghai Stock Market*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- King, L. P. and I. Szelenyi (2005). *Post-Communist Economic Systems*. *The Handbook of Economic Sociology*. N. Smelser and R. Swedberg. New York, Princeton University Press.

- Merton, R. K. (1972). "Insiders and Outsides: a Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge." *The American Journal of Sociology* 78 [1]: 9-47.
- Siu, L. (2008). "Cadres, Gangs and Prophets: the Commodity Futures Markets of China". PhD thesis. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh.
- Wank, D. L. (2002). "Business-State Clientelism in China: Decline or Evolution?" in Gold, Guthrie and Wank (eds.), *Social Connections in China: Institutions, Culture, and the Changing Nature of Guanxi*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 97-115.
- Yang, M. M.-h. (1994). *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: the art of social relationships in China*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press: 159-172, 287-311.
- Zhang, L. (2001). *Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and Social Networks within China's Floating Population*. Stanford, Calif., Stanford University Press.
- Zaloom, C. (2006). "Out of the Pits: Traders and Technology from Chicago to London". Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 邊燕杰, 李路路. (2006). *社會調查實踐 - 中國經驗及分析*. 牛津.
- 費孝通. (2007). *鄉土中國*. 江蘇文藝出版社.