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Media Ethnography in China – Ethics, Access and Interviews in a Non-Western Context

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Abstract: This paper is based on my PhD thesis about the production culture of Chinese entertainment. I will discuss the challenges I faced during my fieldwork in China and will reflect on a general level on how to access this non-western field for doing media ethnography. As a UK-based university researcher, doing ethnography in my own country, China, this brought me particular challenges. Some ethical guidelines in the UK were not applicable to issues concerning consent. Regarding this inapplicability, Chinese scholar Suiming Pan questioned the application of Western guidelines in a Chinese context: as sociology in China lacks local theories, should Chinese researchers apply Western theories in China or invent new theories based on phenomena that have never occurred in the West? By the same token, how should Chinese researchers adapt Western ethics guidelines? This paper aims to discuss these questions in the Chinese context – how I had to be flexible with guidelines while upholding academic standards. Since gaining access to Chinese media remains challenging, many compromises were made during the interactions with television production teams, gatekeepers and colleagues in the field. Furthermore, I encountered problems during my interviews with creative workers. Lastly, I will illustrate how I built relationships with people in the field and how I handled my identity crisis as an ethnographer in my own culture, hoping that my research experience can shed light on future ethnographic works in non-Western contexts.

Keywords: Production studies, television production, ethnography, participant-observation, Chinese entertainment, non-western context, critical reflection

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Ethnographic research under the interpretivist paradigm to grasp realities on the ground

The ethnographic approach to qualitative research comes mainly from the field of anthropology. The word 'ethnography' is used regularly to refer to empirical accounts of particular human populations' culture and social organisation. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (1983), ethnography can be understood as:

[...] simply one social research method, albeit an unusual one, drawing on a wide range of sources of information. The ethnographer participates in people's lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions ... collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues with which he or she is concerned. (p. 2)

Based on my fieldwork experience, I followed an ethnographic approach, more specifically, participant observation. This was the adequate method to address the difference between what people do in contrast to what people say they do, for example, in interviews. I was especially critical of the answers I obtained from interviews as I realised that sometimes, even the interviewees did not have clear answers to specific questions. Before carrying out the fieldwork, I decided to take the interpretivist paradigm as my research paradigm, as it is a distinct move away from the scientific attitude of the positivistic paradigm in terms of its research procedure, and it enables the ethnographers to interpret the field data with more subjectivity. In contrast, the positivistic paradigm sees participation as a highly problematic and rather unnecessary part of fieldwork, as the positivists believe that the anthropologist's participation violates the separation of the observer and the observed and thus goes against the scientific principle of anthropology (Ellen, 1984, p. 26).

Interpretative social science, on the contrary, derives from the realisation that a social scientist is not merely observing things but is interpreting meaning (Gephart, 2018). Walsham (1993) argues that there are no 'correct' or 'incorrect' theories in the interpretive tradition. Instead, they should be judged based on their attempt to derive their constructs from the field by an in-depth examination of the phenomenon of interest. Gephart (1999) argues that the interpretivists assume that knowledge and meaning are acts of interpretation; hence there is no objective knowledge independent of thinking, reasoning humans. Appropriately, access to reality is only achieved through social constructions, such as language, consciousness and shared meanings (Myers, 2009). Clearly, the interpretivists believe observation cannot be the only or even the primary process through which data are collected. Instead, participation should be the main data yielding technique. The researcher does not participate in the subjects' lives as a bystander but instead observes while participating fully and actively in the subjects' lives. In this way, the researcher can more fully understand the meanings of the subjects' actions because they also undertake and share those actions with them (Ellen, 1984, pp. 26–30). In addition, active participation in the social life of the people one studies becomes the primary method of discovering the actors' cultural meaning, their emic rules and their logic.

In interpretative social science, the validity of the researcher's account is tested against the everyday experience of the community of people (Deetz, 1996; Aikenhead, 1997).

Based on the above reasoning, my PhD ethnographic study is situated in the interpretivist paradigm because, in my research, my own participation was the primary means of verifying my account. Meanwhile, I did not stand above or outside of Chinese TV but was a participant-observer, in my case, an intern, who engaged in the television production activities and discerned the meanings of actions as expressed within a specific Chinese social context. As an ethnographer, I successfully became a member of the community studied. Hence, my understanding of the working culture was a collective interpretation of the Chinese television production community and my own intellectual input as an anthropologist. Indeed, I made sense of a specific production culture via understanding its shared meanings within the industry. According to the interpretative paradigm, 'facts' are products of interpretations. Therefore, the researcher is given the freedom to draw presumptions about his/her experience in the field.

Ethics guidelines in a non-Western context – The example of doing media fieldwork in China

As Ellen (1984, p. 138) illustrated, ethnographers must reconcile various parties' rights and interests during fieldwork, including informants and other research participants, gatekeepers, colleagues, sponsors and funders, their universities or employers, their own and host governments, themselves and the public. Moral and ethical decisions have to be made at all stages of research, from selecting a topic to the publication of findings and disposal of data. During fieldwork, especially, ethnographers owe responsibilities to informants, participants, gatekeepers, and colleagues. Ethnographers should recognise citizens' rights to be informed about the methods and aims of the study, its anticipated consequences and potential benefits, risks and disadvantages. Ideally, ethnographers should also give feedback on the results and, where practicable, consult participants over publication.

Ellen's (1984) account can be viewed as generic ethics guidelines, but such generalised obligations can bring various problems in specific scenarios. During my fieldwork, it was not always possible to obtain informed consent, and I was constantly reshaping my research focus until the end of my ethnography. More importantly, the need for informed consent may present fieldworkers with acute difficulties concerning cross-cultural contexts, and it may be challenging to obtain knowledgeable and voluntary (let alone written) consent from everyone in the field (Ryen, 2004, p. 5). Even when informed consent is possible, the researcher will also encounter these problems: from whom is it to be obtained, in relation to whom, what matters, what events and data? If consent is withdrawn, what implications are there for the field data relating to that person, and can withdrawal take retrospective effect (du Toit 1980, p. 282; Jorgensen 1971; Trend 1980)? Theoretically, informants could

still be harmed by any published data. In my research, I had to answer these questions as, in retrospect, some practitioners were not aware of my identity as a researcher, and others asked for anonymity.

Before carrying out the fieldwork, I intended to follow ethical guidelines in the UK, such as the *Ethical Guidelines for good research practice*, issued by the *Association of Social Anthropologists* (1999) of the UK, and the *Statement of Ethical Practice*, issued by the *British Sociological Association* (2017). I also read academic works both in English and Chinese to help me understand ethnography in non-Western contexts. In the specific context of my research, I was an ethnographer in my own society. My fieldwork is different from the kind of anthropology where ethnographers work in unfamiliar environments different from their own. I did not encounter problems with language or culture. Because of my identity as a native Chinese national and as a graduate of a renowned Chinese media university, I was granted exclusive access to media organisations and potentially gained more trust from media practitioners. Although conducting ethnography in one's own society has advantages, researchers should not underestimate the fieldwork's difficulty or ignore research ethics during the fieldwork.

Pan, Huang and Wang (2011)'s *Social Research on Methods: Quantitative and Qualitative Sociological Studies in Chinese Contexts* helped me understand ethnography and its ethics in China enormously. Having studied China's underground prostitution since 1997, Suiming Pan and his students provided scrutinised fieldwork experience with extreme ethical dilemmas they encountered. As prostitution has been illegal in Mainland China, Pan's ethnography had to be carried out with enormous care and secrecy. Pan discussed whether a researcher should intervene when seeing research subjects being bullied and whether a researcher should say hello when bumping into a former interviewee. Pan believes that whether or not to carry out 'ethical' research is a test of the researcher's morals and professionalism. However, he also stated that researchers might not find any 'correct' solutions in some tricky situations. The question of how much should an ethnographer intervene when interviewees are harmed, and the question of anonymity are directly relevant to my study.

As Western sociology theories became popular in China in the 1990s, Pan et al. (2011) asked a critical question: as sociology in China lacks local theories, should Chinese researchers apply Western theories to explain many distinct phenomena that have never happened in the West but only have happened in China? Or should they invent new theories based on phenomena that have only happened where they carried out the fieldwork? This question, for years, has triggered debates in Chinese academia (Hu, 2011, Zhai, 2020). There has not been an easy answer to this question. Even Pan et al. did not outline any generic methods that were applicable for Chinese society only. They have, however, reminded scholars to be aware of different academic words' connotations and denotations in their original languages and translations. For example, the meaning of 'body' is different in English and Chinese.

They also called for special attention to Chinese people's 'typical personality caused by historical and cultural legacy', which is 'tend not to say no but could hide the truth' when participating in social surveys. Therefore, the strategy by Pan et al. was to create a private and safe environment for interviews, for example, creating online surveys for sensitive questions so that interviewees did not feel they had to answer these questions in front of any real person. As the overall situation in China can be different from that of the West, the feasibility of Western ethical guidelines may not always apply, just like the case of theory adaptation discussed before. Ethnography in non-Western contexts may require different ethics guidelines, and flexibility should be allowed in one's intended guidelines. Appell (1978) suggests the best anthropologists might be those who can tolerate the moral ambiguities characterising a discipline that involves 'cross-cultural inquiry... at an interface of ethical systems' (p. 3). Xie (2018) added that Chinese researchers using Western methods should understand the social contexts for their studies, maintain independence, and exercise creativity. Although my research was not as sensitive as Pan's, some of his insights have helped my work. For example, what should I do when gatekeepers ask me to sign a Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA)? If I agree to sign an NDA, how should I relay my fieldwork experiences without revealing secrets (e.g., commercial)? In what situations should I conduct covert research, which is research not disclosed to the subject, where the researcher does not reveal that research is taking place (Spicker, 2011)? Should I interview informants who have lost their jobs? As follows, I will explain how I applied Western guidelines as much as possible and the compromises I had to make.

Access, responsibilities, and ethics approval

From March to July 2018, I conducted four months of participant observation and a small amount of passive observation in three state-owned television stations and two independent TV production companies in China. As a participant-observer, I interned at four television programmes and was also a passive-observer at two other production teams. The research was mainly conducted in Beijing and Shenzhen, but I passively observed one production team's production process in Nanjing for a few days. Whilst working with television practitioners, I observed their daily production practices and tried to understand how they viewed their working conditions from an insider's perspective. From January to March 2019, I interviewed 26 television practitioners in China and the UK.

I faced a specific challenge when I was trying to get access to TV stations and companies. This challenge is based on specifics of the Chinese working relationships. For getting access, I sent out my CV from London to many production companies and television stations, hoping to obtain an internship without relying on personal contacts, as I wanted to reach out to more diverse television formats than I had contacts from. However, there was no reply, so I had to change my access strategy. As soon as I started to rely on my personal contacts and got instant replies, I realised

that Chinese media was a miniature version of *renqing* (which can be translated as human relationships based on favours) society, so informal recommendations remained the quickest way to gain access. The downside of such a method was that some gatekeepers who helped me gain access could not remember or understand my research intentions, let alone retell my identity as an ethnographer to others in the field. Sometimes, I had to translate academic terms into plain language, but the original meaning was soon misunderstood or not appropriately comprehended. Therefore, there have been confusion and difficulty during the fieldwork, although the difficulty in translation is not China-specific.

In February 2018, I asked one of my relatives who worked in a provincial television station whether I could take on an internship at a studio-based entertainment show. She worked in management, so she rang someone else in a management position at the TV station, who immediately asked why I was interested in the internship. My relative told them I was a researcher from a UK university and wanted to study their television production processes as part of my thesis. The person refused her immediately and emphasised that all interns must sign an NDA and reminded her that when the *Two Sessions*¹ were held at a politically sensitive time, every decision at the managerial level must be cautiously made and go through more administrative procedures. This means that an official internship must be approved by every TV station's senior leader, and I should also submit relevant information, including a health certificate. Acknowledging that it would become a time-consuming process, but my time was limited, as I had confirmed other internship dates, my relative decided not to introduce me as an ethnographer to save me some time. She rang another executive and said I was a researcher from a UK university who had returned to China for a research project held by *Communication University of China (CUC)*, where I graduated with a BA.

The key difference here was that the internship request was being made in connection with the Chinese university I graduated from, rather than specifying a foreign university. By changing the host of the internship request, I was immediately seen as an insider. She also said my research background was in media studies, so I would like to learn from a television production team. Without mentioning the thesis or the connection with a foreign university, I was immediately put in contact with a producer of a local dating show by the executive. My relative sent my CV to the dating show's producer and the executive she rang before, and who were the gatekeepers, so they both knew I was a PhD student at a UK university, but neither of them questioned my intention at that stage. Bearing ethical guidelines in my head, I considered my relative's white lie as a compromise to get me into the field, and it was probably the only quick way to gain access then. In hindsight, I realised 'the fixer', my relative, could get in trouble if anyone found out that she did not tell the whole truth about my research institution, although she did mention I was doing a PhD at Royal Holloway. I did some initial risk assessment and we both agreed that

¹ The national or local *People's Congress* and the national or local committee of the *Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference* of the *Chinese Communist Party*.

understating my foreign education background while emphasising my connection with CUC, China's top media university, was not a lie, but a strategy. The possibility of the whole truth being found out was small and my relative was unlikely to get in any serious trouble. Worst case, she could say I made a mistake explaining my research or she misunderstood my project. The fact that she had to understate my research at a foreign university showed that China's media industry was cautious with their internal management structure and intellectual property being exposed, especially to unknown foreign forces. This was probably down to extra political consideration during a politically sensitive time. To sum up, this was the first compromise I made in order to gain easier access to Chinese media.

With the help of this producer, I started a three-week internship at the dating show. However, I soon realised the show was not ideal for my research because it did not involve much studio production. It was mainly shot in locations. My relative later contacted the chief executive of the Programme Development Department of this provincial TV station, and this person put me in contact with an independent production company that produced a reality show commissioned by this provincial channel. My relative told the chief executive that I was a PhD student from *Royal Holloway* but was required by CUC to study studio production techniques. This was the compromise we had to make at this stage, as I would be refused access if my relative told them the internship request was made by a UK university. The chief executive, therefore, relayed this to the production company. He agreed to introduce the company's CEO to me, but I needed to go to Beijing. I went to Beijing the next day. When I arrived at the company, I did not see the CEO, but the show's producer greeted me. She told me that the Head of Programme Development told her I wanted an internship because it was part of my schoolwork. As my relative had already intentionally told them the wrong information, it was at this point that I realised that I must go along with the wrong story. I knew that if I suddenly revealed my real intention – to critically study their TV production processes and examine how they treated their employees – I would be refused access.

There were also additional reasons causing difficulties in gaining access. Firstly, concern over intellectual property (IP) protection was growing in China, and most companies would require employees to sign an NDA. Due to the lack of IP protection in execution and the low chance of winning in court, the industry greatly valued its intellectual output. Therefore, they were reluctant to allow anyone to write down anything that could expose their IP. This was confirmed by creative workers I interviewed during the fieldwork, who told me that there had been cases when lawsuits could not solve ownership issues. Secondly, the time I looked for media access, i.e., February to March 2018, was a politically sensitive time for China when the Two Sessions were held. After careful consideration, I decided not to reveal my identity as a researcher and stick to my relative's story. After a few days, the CEO spoke to me in her office, asking me to contribute to the company's TV production process since I was a PhD candidate in media studies. I could not tell her my research intentions as I knew she was informed with the wrong information. Moreover, since many

people were involved in the information circulation process, the reason I was there had different versions, and even the original was not my real intention. Others in the company only knew me as a PhD candidate who somehow became an intern. I realised that I had to conduct the so-called ‘covert research’, which is research not disclosed to the subject, where the researcher does not reveal that research is taking place (Spicker, 2011). This was because mistakes were already made on the gatekeepers’ side, and I could risk losing access if I tried to correct the wrong information they already had passed on to everyone in the company.

At this point, I had to explain the situation and acknowledge the ethical dilemmas to the *Research Ethics Committee* at Royal Holloway after submitting the *Ethics Review Form*. The Committee required me to demonstrate how I would protect people in the field. I emailed them my procedures in detail, and they approved my fieldwork. To comply with the ethical guidelines that I had followed, I anonymised all information regarding the production company and the provincial TV station that put me in contact with the production company throughout this thesis, including all staff members and other organisations involved. Staff members are anonymised with the use of pseudonyms and job titles. Relevant television programmes are anonymised and given pseudonyms. Details of the reality television format descriptions are also simplified, so the show became unlikely to be identified.

Although I passed the research ethics review from Royal Holloway, I realised my initial decision to maintain anonymity would not benefit the rest of my research, as I could lose the opportunity to reveal details of the production processes if I had to anonymise the names of the reality shows again. Therefore, despite the first covert research experience, I was open with my identity as a researcher to as many people as possible during the rest of my fieldwork when I moved on to work with the five other production teams. It was not an easy decision, as I risked being denied access. Although I was denied access several times, it was worth the risk because I could reveal details about each television programme.

At the end of my internship with the independent production company, I received a phone call from a friend who worked at a financial news programme on CCTV-2, the second channel of China’s largest national broadcaster *China Central Television*. She knew I wanted to observe studio-based reality shows, and she knew the producer of a CCTV-1 reality show. I was introduced to the show’s producer, who later changed her mind after being told that I wanted participant observation. When this show denied my access, I told my friend what had happened. She contacted another colleague, who later helped me get an internship at another reality show in CCTV.

Interviewing creative workers from the field and beyond

When I was in the field, I had many informal interviews with creative workers. The informal interviews enabled me to introduce materials and questions previously

unanticipated. Sometimes, group interviews took place when others clustered around and started to chip in. When there were a few days' breaks between changing internships, I had a few opportunities to sit down and speak with senior workers for a longer time. I realised that it became necessary to hold formal but semi-structured interviews with more workers with questions generated during and after the fieldwork. Television practitioners who suited the interview criteria usually generously offered an hour or two of their time.

I want to reflect on the theories of ethnography and the importance of cooperation from people in the field. To begin with, "the conduct of ethnography... is an intensely personal exercise in which the ethnographer pits personality against the odds of incomprehension, rejection, sometimes extreme physical conditions, sometimes outright hostility" (Ellen, 1984, p. 228). During the fieldwork, ethnographers may make friends with the informants and learn a great deal about themselves. Hence, the ethnographer's success is a combination of his/her social interaction competence and help from informants. Help from informants is crucial because anthropologists can be easily perceived as a burden or intruders to the communities they study. Anthropologists must understand that intrusion and seek to represent informants fairly in return. It is the anthropologists' moral responsibility to approach the informants with humility and integrity. More importantly, anthropologists must bear in mind that their use of interviews and informants should be informed by humane values, as anthropology's competence to discover and describe other cultures lies in the proper application of research ethics.

When interacting with my informants, I have encountered three problems that I want to share with future ethnographers: the dilemma between validity and anonymity, the issue of trust, and using legally problematic information. More importantly, I will demonstrate how these problems are related to the Chinese context. In a nutshell, these problems are caused by competition, self-censorship and the culture of returning favours, or *guanxi* in Chinese. Having said that, I do not mean these problems do not exist in other cultures/countries. I would argue that they could be universal problems that exist to varying degrees in other contexts. However, at least in China, these problems are affected by the overall political-economic environment that is different from other contexts.

The first problem I encountered during interviews was the dilemma between validity and anonymity. Some argue that researchers should not offer confidentiality and anonymity in exchange for access, which will negatively affect the research's validity (Bruun, 2016, pp. 131–146). Although Bruun's advice could benefit researchers in the long run, such advice does not apply to those who would be in trouble if their names were revealed. During my fieldwork, offering anonymity was one way to uncover hidden rules of the industry. A former classmate of mine shared many hidden facts about the television industry and the hierarchy of labour within CCTV. She insisted on retaining anonymity, and she was not the only one who requested anonymity. In Chinese TV, censorship plays a vital role in what should and should not be

said. Any creative worker who wishes to stay in the industry has gradually internalised the rules. Hence, they apply self-censorship to themselves and are cautious with the information and opinions they share with others. It could be anything ranging from politics to gossip. Sharing sensitive and unwanted information against censorship could lead to various consequences. As my interviews were semi-structured and conversation flowed, many interviewees exposed their honest opinions against the rules of censorship. Therefore, offering anonymity and agreeing to hide names during interviews protected the workers and ensured the credibility of the information, even if it meant the information's credibility in future academic papers would be affected by the lack of named interviewees. It appears to be a paradox, but it is a risk I am willing to take.

Before the interviews, interview information and consent forms were sent to all interviewees. The consent form helped them understand the area of question topics and their rights before, during and after the interview. However, it transpired that many of them did not even read the consent form carefully, let alone sign the sheet. Many participants were happy to participate even without reading or signing the consent form. This was because, in China, trust is built via *guanxi* and *renqing*, i.e., personal contacts and the return of favours. The majority of people I interviewed were either helped by me, by my contacts they already trusted, or by their managers who had helped them, so they felt they had to return the favour by accepting my interview request. Asking to read the consent form carefully would potentially mean a breach of trust either to me or to our mutual contacts. Therefore, many showed their trust by not reading or signing the consent form. In the Chinese context, this behaviour is called 'giving face'. Only one interviewed requested anonymity, and the rest were, in fact, happy to have their names published in the thesis for the same reason – to 'give face'. Others admitted that they did not have time to read the form on some other occasions. Whether they read the form or not, I always reemphasised its contents and their rights before the interviews, even if I understood that it would breach the cultural norm for them to sign the consent form. Their anonymity has been maintained regardless because, as a researcher, I am obliged to protect the informants. Additionally, the informants may disagree with the analysis in my later publications. Even though academic publications are likely to be only circulated within academia, I am aware that informants circulate specifically within the media industry at a high frequency in different fields. Therefore, rumours about a researcher's ethos can be known beforehand, for better or worse. In this sense, anonymising the informants benefits most parties involved.

The second challenge I encountered during the interview was the issue of trust. The problem with interviews is that researchers may reveal little information and leave much concealed. Therefore, ethnographers must have the ability to judge and manipulate circumstances to maximise both the amount and the quality of information yielded (Whyte, 1960/1982, p. 352). Trust-building, undoubtedly, is a critical element in conducting interviews and must be carefully dealt with throughout the entire ethnography. Building trust in the researcher's project is crucial as interviewees'

motives for participating in research interviews will affect the research results (Ortner, 2009; Alasuutari, 1995, pp. 85–115). Frandsen (2007, p. 47) highlights that trust can be built or undermined based on the informant's knowledge of the researcher's previous research, media performances, personal merits and communication skills. To improve mutual trust, the researcher should have background knowledge of the subject in question and a professional understanding of the problems in the informant's world (Bruun, 2016). As explained, in China, trust-building is based on *guanxi* and *renqing*. However, even if the interviewees trusted our mutual networks, it did not mean they automatically trusted me, especially when they knew I had internships at other media institutions that were their competitors. After all, as employees, they were obliged to withhold confidential information, such as internal bidding prices and budgets. When I interviewed creative workers, who were not close to me, I went back to the Chinese relationship-building custom by buying them meals, giving them gifts, and listening to their personal matters. All these methods came naturally to me as a native Chinese person, and I knew how blurring the boundary between the business and private matters could fasten the process of trust-building, even if this behaviour might not have been encouraged by Western standards.

In my specific case, the interviews were like meetings between professionals and personal acquaintances at the same time since people knew I had studied media and was introduced by someone they trusted. On the one hand, the interview questions originated from real-life production. Hence, the interviewees had no problems making comments. On the other hand, some professional talks led to disagreement, especially when questions were critical. It has been argued that some critical questions will make the informants defensive and very quickly become counterproductive to building trust, especially when the informants are well-known professionals or celebrities (Bruun, 2016). For example, I interviewed a Chinese scholar who worked on international television format trade and training. She was a former classmate of my second supervisor, and because of the culture of *renqing*, she agreed to be interviewed. Out of academic curiosity, she asked about my research, so I shared some of my critical thoughts because I trusted her likewise. She perceived my findings as negative and untrue and tried to prove me wrong by sharing the opposite experience. Rather than arguing or dismissing her experiences favouring my own findings, I listened to her academic opinions regarding my research questions. The interview became an in-depth discussion and, ultimately, a thesis defence. In this instance, the Chinese culture of the return of favour and personal network blurred our professional and personal boundaries when she criticised my research as a friend. She should have simply answered my interview questions, but as she felt that I was a student of her classmate and friend, she gave me more advice than I needed. I also should have refrained from sharing my research hypothesis at that stage, but I also failed to strike a balance between being an ethnographer and a student.

Finally, as a third challenge, ethnographers may also encounter the issue of legally problematic information. Caldwell (2008) has reflected the many types of self-

reflexivity that characterise the production culture of television drama production in the USA. Legally problematic information may also characterise a production culture's understanding of itself even if the knowledge obtained cannot be published. Researchers are advised 'to go with the flow' and let the informant 'run with the story' without completely rejecting this kind of information (Ryan & Lewer, 2012, p. 82). I did not reveal certain information to protect the informants from potential trouble caused by complicated media censorship in China. Indeed, some gossip and behind-the-scene stories were irrelevant to my research, but some others might have been useful. I still decided not to use them because it might be possible to trace the identities of interviewees based on the nature of the information. Additionally, some of the 'deep backstage' information was irrelevant to academic research. After all, a researcher needs to distinguish between interesting and useful data (Ellen, 1984, p. 317).

Professional ethics and personal morality: ethnographer's inner struggles

Apart from the three problems encountered during ethnographic interviews and the challenges of getting access to the field, I also want to share how I reconciled my professional ethics and personal morality in the field.

Ethnographic fieldwork is subjective both in the sense that ethnographers selectively report what they are inclined to see, hear and record from events taking place every day in the field; and in the sense that the kind and quality of information which comes their way depends on a large extent on the kind and quality of relationships between ethnographers and their informants. Additionally, the nature of participant observation makes it difficult for ethnographers to balance his/her multiple identities as a researcher/participant/community member/colleague. Participant observation is an oxymoron, a form of paradox that generates meanings and permits different interpretations. That is to say, most ethnographic research is having to "live as a human being among other human beings yet also having to act as an objective observer" (Gans, 1968; Middleton, 1970, p. 9).

My fieldwork experience made me realise that, in many cases, ethnographers have to pick sides during the fieldwork. According to Ellen (1984, p. 227), ethnographers may realise it is not easy to remain detached as expected, and they may unconsciously pick a side based on their own beliefs, background and personality. As a researcher in my own society, bias was still a danger for both insider and outsider researchers. The tension between the need for both empathy and detachment is a problem facing all anthropologists. This is often forgotten by those who argue against the 'insider' working in his/her own society, as opposed to the 'outsider', transplanted to an exotic setting (Aguilar, 1981, p. 22). After all, as anthropologists, many intend to study people whose values and lifestyles are different, even within our own societies (Ellen, 1984, p. 130; González y González & Lincoln, 2006; Leung,

2015). On the one hand, being a researcher in one's own society is advantageous. Throughout this fieldwork, I was told information as intimates, which would not have been given in other circumstances. Television practitioners barely saw me as an outsider and gradually accepted me as one of their own. From their perspective, my identity as a PhD candidate in a foreign university was always a convenient ice-breaking topic. In exchange for information, I shared my overseas life experience and knowledge of British television formats. My other identity as a graduate from CUC also won the trust of the alumni working in the same production teams. My dual identities as both an insider and outsider clearly made me an 'interesting' character in the field, as people would come and speak to me once they heard about my academic background. I had my struggles: I struggled to be a 'cooperative' colleague as I sometimes challenged my colleagues' opinions and provided alternative viewpoints. In some situations, I even felt guilty about being a researcher as I could not agree with the way things were done, and I knew I would critically analyse how things were done later in my thesis. On the one hand, I felt that I must not abuse my informants' trust. On the other hand, I also needed to stay true to myself, my university and my identity as a researcher. The feeling of guilt and 'needing to stay true to myself' was actually a conflict between my Chinese and Western look at things – I noticed that sometimes I had more of one look than the other when I evaluated what people told me and how they told it to me in the field. My intuition was uncontrollable – I could not stop from feeling in a certain way, but later, when I reflected on how I felt and judged things, I realised this was a matter of one's value system, and there is likely no right or wrong answer in terms of our first reactions. However, it is the academic reflection that matters during the fieldwork. I tend not to think of a Chinese and a Western look at things as adversaries. Instead, I believe it is natural to view things from both perspectives and evaluate which perspective gives more benefit in certain situations. This evaluation process has brought me inner struggles. For example, during the coaching process with vulnerable studio participants in one reality show, the directors had to ask the participants sensitive questions and some participants went through second-time trauma recalling their sad memories. My first reaction was to know how actions were taken to look after everyone's mental health during that coaching process. I realised this reaction was influenced by my Western standard, coming from my own overseas study experience. I also understood that there was a systematic lack of mental health training for both the TV directors and the studio participants in Chinese media, and I should adjust my view on the lack of mental health awareness from the TV directors as they were not trained at all. If I had taken more of a Western look at how these studio participants were trained during conversations with the directors, I could have easily concluded that the coaching process was not 'professional.' However, this would have been unfair to the hardworking TV directors as they should not be blamed if they did not receive relevant training.

Indeed, the balance between bias and objectivity has been a challenge for ethnographers. Ethnographers need to understand that they will always be somewhere on the continuum between empathy and detachment, home and strangeness, and

seeing and not seeing (Ellen, 1984, p 132). Barnes (1984, p. 2) points out that ethical and intellectual compromise is an intrinsic characteristic of social research and that the competent fieldworker is he or she who learns to live with an uneasy conscience but continues to be worried about it (pp. 21–22). Although, as ethnographers, we may later find flaws in our fieldwork during self-reflection, we still need to understand that we can do better fieldwork as long as we learn from the past and follow all the guidelines.

Conclusion

The lessons I want to share is simple but might be controversial and contradict some existing Western ethics guidelines. My participant observation suggests that conducting media ethnography in China can be complicated due to China's collectivist culture, the overall competitive media environment and the loosely protected intellectual property rights. It may not be difficult to gain initial access to some television production teams for both the 'insiders' and others from different backgrounds. However, it could become challenging to gain further informed consent because television practitioners, especially gatekeepers, did not wish to leak what they saw as proprietary information via any publication, including academic work published abroad. Although it is in every ethnographer's attempt to reveal his/her identity as a researcher, sometimes it is better not to discuss the research questions in great detail because not only will the gatekeepers dislike the research, but they may also not understand the level of academic discussions. What is China-specific here is that due to China's concerns about IP protection and the overall competitive media market, gaining access is very difficult without professional networking and *renqing*. This can complicate the process to access, and if the reasons for academic research do not make gatekeepers feel safe, the chance of gaining access would be slim. Therefore, it is best to explain one's research in a language easily understood. More importantly, I would even argue that some research information does not need to be shared with the gatekeepers because it might become sensitive before and during the fieldwork and irrelevant after the fieldwork. After all, ethnographers might adjust their research questions after fieldwork. It is an art between being conducting ethical research and staying safe, which means that ethnographers reveal the appropriate amount of research information, no less and no more.

Because of all these factors, I did not reveal my identity as a researcher when working at the independent production company, and inevitably, the beginning of my fieldwork became covert research, which I decided to adjust afterwards. I then expressed my intentions clearly to the rest of the teams I worked with, and despite some refusal, the payback was rewarding. More importantly, my fieldwork in China reminds me to critically reflect on the feasibility of existing ethics guidelines, such as an over-emphasis on informed consent. In my view, certain flexibility is needed during fieldwork, and in my specific context, I would prioritise whether I can get access instead of debating how to gain access. After all, without access and data,

ethnographers cannot research and write anything. My solutions and attitude toward research ethics may be debatable, but I believe it is down to future ethnographers to make what they consider to be the correct decisions, at a specific time, in particular locations, and in certain situations.

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