

Messiness and Strategies for Elite Interview: Multi-Sited Ethnographic Research in Mainland China

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Abstract : The ethnographic research involved a multi-sited field trip study in China to compile in-depth data from Chinese multilingual academics of Korean, Japanese, and Russian. It aimed to create a culturally-informed portrait of their values and perceptions regarding their choice of language for academic publishing. Extended and lengthy fieldwork, or known as 'deep hanging out', enabled the author to gain a comprehensive understanding of the research context at the macro-level and the participants' experiences at the micro-level. This research involved multiple fieldwork sites, which the author selected in acknowledgment of the diversity in China's regions with respect to their geopolitical context, socio-economic development, cultural traditions, and administrative status. The 14 weeks of data collection took the author over-land to five regions in northern China: Hebei province, Tianjin, Jilin province, Gansu province, and Xinjiang. Responding to the fieldwork dynamics, the author positioned herself at different degrees of insidership and outsidership. This occurred at three levels: the regional level, the individual level, and the within-individual level. To enhance the ability to reflect on the authors' researcher subjectivity, the author explored her understanding of the five 'I's, derived from the authors' natural attributes. This helped the author to monitor her subjectivity, particularly during critical decision-making. The methodological challenges the author navigated were related to interviewing elites; this involved the initial approach, establishing a relationship, and negotiating the unequal power relationship during our contact. The author developed a number of strategies to strengthen her authority, and to gain the confidence of her envisaged participants and secure their collaboration, and the author negotiated a form of reciprocity that reflected their needs and expectations. The current ethnographic research has both theoretical and practical significance. It contributes to the methodological development regarding multi-sited ethnographic research. The messiness and strategies about positioning and interviewing elites will provide practical lessons for researchers who conduct ethnographic research, especially from power-'less' positions.

Keywords : multi-sited ethnographic research, elite interview, multilingual China, subjectivity, reciprocity

Conference Title : ICMTCA 2020 : International Conference on Method and Theory in Cultural Anthropology

Conference Location : Paris, France

Conference Dates : May 14-15, 2020