# Navigating Fieldwork as an Outsider: Observations from Interviewing Police Officers in China

**Suzanne E. Scoggins,** *University of California, Berkeley*

Understanding how foreign governments operate is a cornerstone of political science fieldwork, but gaining access to representatives of the security state is difficult, particularly for foreign researchers. Scholars seeking to break into this world must identify points of entry, navigate cultural differences, and establish trust with their interviewees. Such tasks are challenging for any researcher, but they are particularly daunting for newly minted PhD candidates, many of whom set out for the field without prior experience conducting large, independent research projects. My own fieldwork on the police bureaucracy in China was filled with challenges, many of which related to my status as an outsider to China's policing world. Perceptions of my identity as a Caucasian woman with no professional experience in policing influenced my research by imposing limitations on where I could go, whom I could interview, and what kind of responses I received. Yet outsider status also opened up opportunities. Although some potential interviewees were reluctant to speak with me, other respondents were curious about foreigners and happy to tell their story to someone who was willing to listen. Cultural differences are thus a double-edged sword, wielding opportunities as well as obstacles. Researchers can capitalize on the former by learning as much as possible about their area of interest and by remaining flexible when implementing fieldwork plans.

Scholars have addressed outsider status as it pertains to subjects and interviewers by focusing on power dynamics (Merriam et al. 2001), the blurred distinction between insider and outsider (Dwyer and Buckle 2009; Naples 1996), and the ability of outsiders to gain valuable information from insiders (Herod 1999). Such discussions draw on debates in anthropology regarding insider-outsider status and the accumulation of knowledge (Merton 1972). Yet there remains a dearth of practical advice on the subject for young scholars facing a steep learning curve when implementing research projects. In the following pages, I discuss the obstacles I confronted in the field and detail the strategies I employed to make use of my identity and ultimately gather enough data for my dissertation. My goal is to pull back the curtain on my own fieldwork experience to expose the gritty details. When viewed together with the other articles in this symposium, these experiences provide insight into the type of struggles that accompany fieldwork-focused research projects and give real-world examples of how to overcome them.

## METHODOLOGY AND RECALCULATIONS

My standard paragraph on methodology is clear cut: between 2010 and 2013, I spent 21 months in mainland China interviewing police officers as part of my research on the relationship between local state stability and China's public security bureau. I conducted 103 in-depth interviews with 51 police officers at the county, municipal, provincial, and central levels in five cities across four provinces. I also interviewed a handful of individuals with detailed knowledge of police activities. Finally, I spent two months at the Chinese University of Hong Kong conducting archival research. Nothing in this account reveals the difficulties I faced in the field, although readers might have an idea if they did the math and realized that 103 interviews over 21 months is slightly more than one interview per week. Indeed, one of the biggest challenges I faced in the field was finding people who would talk to me.

To build a pool of interviewees, I started with people in my social network. Before entering graduate school, I spent years working and studying in Beijing and Hong Kong. During that time, I taught English to a group of police officers and made friends with people whose fathers, uncles, and cousins were on the force. These contacts were my entry point because the prospect of a foreigner walking into a randomly selected police station and asking if they could interview officers was out of the question in China. Although I knew the drawbacks of snowball sampling (Hoyle, Harris, and Judd 2002, 188–89) there was no other way to access this group of hard-to-reach individuals. As it turned out, problems of representativeness would be the least of my concerns once I began the research.

I went into the field with the mistaken impression that rolling a few snowballs would trigger an avalanche of contacts, but after four months of lackluster interviews and few leads I returned to California feeling dejected. Fortunately, my advisors were skeptical when I floated the idea of relying solely on archival research. Interviews were the cornerstone of my dissertation plan. Other scholars had approached Chinese policing from the top down, but I was interested in the lived experience of frontline officers. Since this information was not available in the archives, I needed to interview street-level cops or go back to the drawing board.

Having learned that outsiders have a hard time when they are picky, I returned to China with a new goal—find any police officer who would talk to me.[1] Before, I was selective, looking for police officers of a certain rank who were engaged in specific activities. Now I was asking every friend and acquaintance I knew to help

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me locate officers of any type. If my point of contact requested more guidance, I asked them to introduce me to someone they knew fairly well and who would be willing to talk. I also let them know that location did not matter; I would travel anywhere. Such changes to one's research plan require hard choices. My new recruitment strategy of "any officer, anywhere" meant I had to throw away my case selection plan of six bureaus in six specific provinces chosen on the basis of economic development.

## RETHINKING INTERVIEWS

Managing one's outsider status also means learning the unwritten rules of how to communicate with subjects. During the summer of 2009, I conducted predissertation field research and quickly realized my mistake of thinking I could walk into a police station at a prescheduled time to ask questions with my notebook in hand. Instead, I did interviews at large banquet tables, small tea houses, Western coffee shops, and, occasionally, loud karaoke lounges. I never set foot in anyone's office. I also learned to leave the notebook at home. During the early days of my predissertation fieldwork, I conducted all interviews by dutifully writing down everything my interviewees said. Often these meetings were tense, and my efforts to put the interviewee at ease were unsuccessful. Only later after I heard a professor describe her experiences in the field did I learn that the best way to make an official in China uncomfortable was to visually remind them that every word out of their mouth was being recorded. Getting rid of the notebook meant relinquishing control of the interview.[2] This approach forced me to set aside my list of predetermined questions and let the conversation go where it would. Often this meandering led to far more interesting information than I would have obtained with my original questions.[3] This experience was fundamentally different from the journalistic-style interviews I once conducted as an undergraduate, but it was a necessary adaptation because it encouraged more open conversation.

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## ESTABLISHING TRUST

Foreign researchers often struggle with getting interviewees to trust them. In China, my status as a foreigner was off-putting to certain subjects. On more than one occasion, a contact would set up an interview that would later fall through because the interviewee got cold feet over speaking to a foreigner about their work. My pool of interviewees was thus limited, which undoubtedly affected the type of information I obtained. Many potential interviewees, however, saw the chance to talk to a foreigner as a novel opportunity. This opened doors that might have otherwise remained closed, but it also shaped the conversation in ways that were not conducive to research. For some of my respondents, this was their first conversation with a foreigner, and many of the others had previously experienced only limited contact. Dinners thus began with questions about whether or not I could use chopsticks and what my family ate for dinner. I was happy to answer questions, but I also needed to steer the conversation back to topics related to my dissertation. Sometimes I accomplished this by discussing policing in America, which in turn encouraged them to compare those stories with their own experiences.

Developing a rapport that goes beyond cultural exchange and comparison is not easy, and appropriate strategies are often location-specific. In my experience, many interviewees revealed little about their work at the first meeting, so the opportunity of a second, third, or nth meeting was critical for obtaining information. Having a mutual acquaintance set up additional meetings helped, but success also hinged on my ability to develop more meaningful connections. With female or younger officers this was relatively easy because we shared commonalities. It was far more difficult to relate to older, male officers. With these men, I found the best way to erase barriers to communication was to enter their world of banquet dining. This meant learning the local region's toasting traditions and drinking *baijiu*, a Chinese liquor. My adventurous eating habits also helped. The common assumption is that foreigners are unwilling to eat certain foods considered delicacies in China, so almost all of my interviewees were pleased when I tried and enjoyed their local cuisine. After a few glasses of *baijiu* and a good meal, the cultural and gender differences became less relevant and conversation flowed more freely.

## MANAGING POLITICAL SENSITIVITIES

Unfortunately, all the food and drink in the world cannot erase political sensitivities. Because China remains a semiauthoritarian state, research on the inner-workings of the government is sensitive for foreign and domestic researchers alike. Although the situation has improved—the type of research I did would have been far more difficult just 10 years ago—barriers remain, and knowing the political limits of a research project is crucial for conserving time and energy. I tried to identify these limitations before going into the field, but I inevitably ran into a few surprises along the way.

## LEARNING TO USE PROPER TERMINOLOGY

As Jensenius' article (this symposium) demonstrates, researchers must pay careful attention to nuances in language. Without proper care, seemingly small differences in terminology can quickly derail an interview, particularly when a topic is politically sensitive. At my first fieldwork interview with the

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supervisor of a friend's cousin, I was told no questions were out of bounds, so I jumped in and inquired about protests in the area. The supervisor soon cut me off to tell me that Americans know nothing of what happens in China. His stern lecture stretched at least 20 minutes, making it obvious I had committed some dreadful, unknown faux pas. Weeks later, the puzzle was solved when I recounted the story to a friend. Within minutes, she stopped to ask why I was using a particular word for protest. I had relied on my dictionary to find the word *kangyi*. *Kangyi* is indeed a word for protest, but it denotes large-scale social unrest. *Shangfang*, the politically correct word for smaller scale incidents, was the word I should have used.

The *kangyi* kerfuffle taught me a lesson about politically charged words. Dictionaries were of limited use for identifying sensitive words, which can fall in or out of favor quickly. To prevent future mistakes, I began having more conversations with Chinese friends about my research topic because they would correct me without recrimination. I also paid careful attention to how interviewees used language. Whenever I heard a new term or phrase, I made a note that it was probably safe to use in future interviews.

## ADDITIONAL RESEARCH DESIGN LIMITATIONS

Finally, political sensitivities place limits on the types of research methodologies outsiders can employ. Although other academics have conducted survey research in China with success,[4] I abandoned hopes of a survey early in my prospectus planning because my project was sensitive and I feared I would be unable to find enough respondents to give honest answers. I was also concerned that my attempts to collect information would attract unwanted attention to my project. By deciding against survey research, I may have unnecessarily engaged in self-censorship, but as a young researcher with few connections and limited experience, I decided it was not worth the risk.

Observational research was also out of the question. I initially hoped to spend time in local stations and observe police activity without having to ask questions and receive answers that were inevitably filtered. This type of organic observation would have added depth to my research, but every officer with whom I spoke agreed it was too conspicuous to allow a foreigner to spend long periods of time in their station. I instead had to settle for observing police action on the street in a somewhat haphazard way. Although this was not an ideal solution, there was no alternative.

Political sensitivities even put strains on my interview data. I found I could talk to officers about certain politically sensitive topics in one city but not in another, making the data I collected across cities incongruent. I agonized over these discrepancies for almost a year, hoping the inconsistencies would even out with time and more interviews, but the differences in the information I obtained only widened. Eventually, I decided to reorganize my data around actors instead of field sites. This allowed me to make full use of the information I had obtained while simultaneously sidestepping comparability issues within cases.

*Interview research requires time, patience, self-awareness, and a willingness to adapt. Foreign researchers do well to keep this in mind at all stages but especially when designing their project, applying for funding, and beginning their fieldwork.*

## CONCLUSIONS

The problems and strategies discussed herein are highly context specific and bound by both time and space, but some themes remain constant. Interview research requires time, patience, self-awareness, and a willingness to adapt. Foreign researchers do well to keep this in mind at all stages but especially when designing their project, applying for funding, and beginning their fieldwork. Adaptation is particularly important, because plans can go awry quickly. In these situations, paying attention to cultural cues such as language and local customs is just as important as recognizing the limits of your methodologies. Often this means making hard, project-altering decisions when you are thousands of miles away from your advisors, colleagues, and family.

Researchers should also keep in mind that personal identity cannot be divorced from their research project. The specific examples I give from my fieldwork in China illustrate how outsider status shaped my research design and interviews, but the influence of identity also crops up in more subtle ways. Importantly, our identities can affect what types of projects we pursue, how we frame our research, and what kinds of larger questions we ask. Consciously reflecting on where one stands in relation to one's interviewees, what some have called the insider-outsider continuum (Hellawell 2006), is the first step toward recognizing these influences. Good research depends on identifying limitations, planning projects accordingly, and acknowledging the influence of personal identity in our work. ■

## NOTES

1. Solinger 2006 provides a detailed account of the how conversations with a wide variety of respondents can be used as an effective strategy when conducting fieldwork in China.
2. Converse and Schuman 1974 is a good resource for those who want to learn more about how to engage respondents when conducting in-depth interviews.
3. For a detailed discussion of how open-ended interviews improve research by enabling theory building, see O'Brien 2006.
4. Manion 2010 provides a comprehensive overview of survey research in China. See Tsai 2010 for a discussion on managing political sensitivities surrounding surveys.

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