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## Red Stamps and Gold Stars

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# 12

## The Silenced Research Assistant Speaks Her Mind

*Sarah Turner*

Many recent texts in social anthropology and human geography have investigated subjectivity and reflexivity, in particular focusing on the impacts that a researcher's gender, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, and politics can have on data collection, field experiences, and analysis (cf. Burgess 1986; England 1994; Rose 1997; Dowling 2000; Scheyvens and Leslie 2000; Kobayashi 2001; Valentine 2002). This social constructivist approach has produced valuable scholarship regarding positionality during field research in both familiar and foreign locales. Concurrently, debates over bias and rigour in qualitative research have further stressed the need for reflexive approaches as well as carefully designed research procedures (cf. Baxter and Eyles 1997, 1999; Bailey, White, and Pain 1999a, 1999b). Given the broad scope of this type of literature, it is remarkable how little has focused on the dynamics between researcher and research assistant/interpreter. Moreover, from the limited literature to date – mostly regarding interpreters within health sciences – I could find none centred on the voices and opinions of assistants themselves. Despite all the progress made within the social sciences to include voices of “the other,” especially underrepresented research subjects and participants and our own voices as reflexive researchers, a key partner in the research process has been rendered invisible and effectively silenced. Consequently, little is known about the positionality, experiences, and reflections of research assistants and interpreters.

Qualitative research undertaken in a cross-cultural setting often involves the help of research assistants/interpreters, situating it far from the myth of “lone ranger research,” as many contributors to this book have shown (Chapters 5 to 10; cf. Geertz 1983; Davidson Wasser and Bresler 1996). Due to the vital role these assistants frequently play and the lack of reflexive work regarding these individuals to date, the aim of this chapter is to give space to their opinions and reflections. I group “research assistant” and “interpreter” together here (and use the term research assistants) because the two individuals at the centre of this piece wore both hats. In my experience,

regardless of job description, interpreters are frequently called on to fulfill “a cultural consultant role,” becoming both interpreter and assistant during fieldwork in cross-cultural situations (Freed 1988, 315). As Temple and Young (2004, 171) note, “the translator always makes her mark on the research, whether this is acknowledged or not, and in effect some kind of ‘hybrid’ role emerges in that, at the very least, the translator makes assumptions about meaning equivalence that make her an analyst and cultural broker as much as a translator.”

In this chapter, I bring together the reflections of two research assistants employed by authors in this collection: Chloe, who worked as an assistant with Candice Cornet in China (Chapter 5), and Vi, who worked with Christine Bonnin in Vietnam (Chapter 7). My aim is to give voice to the reflections of these research assistants regarding *their* field experiences so that we might better understand their agency and positionalities. From these narratives emerge a number of valuable lessons and suggestions for future cross-cultural fieldwork. Before delving into such findings, however, let us assess the rather limited literature on research assistants and interpreters to date.

### **The “Triple Subjectivity” of Fieldwork**

In social science literature concerning assistants and interpreters, we chiefly find reports regarding ethnographic translation and procedures for interpretation. A body of established anthropological texts has focused on precise translation details and the technicalities of the interview process (such as Malinowski 1923; Casagrande 1954a, 1954b, 1955; Werner and Campbell 1970; Venuti 2005).<sup>1</sup> Such authors are concerned with rigour and process, and how to arrive at a “correct” version of an interview transcription. As Temple and Young (2004, 163) have observed, “this is the predominant model in much cross language research, if only by default.”

Since the late 1980s, a series of articles in the health science and social work fields have focused on the options available to health service providers hiring interpreters. Debates have included the pros and cons of hiring trained interpreters versus friends or relatives of the interviewees (Freed 1988; Phelan and Parkman 1995), as well as communication effectiveness with and without interpreters (Kline et al. 1980), potential seating arrangements for effective interviews (Freed 1988; Phelan and Parkman 1995), and cross-cultural interviewing concerns in social work (Freed 1988). Again, the focus of such literature is practical and unreflexive, the objective being to solve “problems” when one is aiming to obtain the closest possible interpretation of the original language – such as undertaking “back translation” to test interpreter skills – and to reach consensus on what constitutes best practice (Edwards 1998).<sup>2</sup>

In one of the few early pieces to discuss the interpreter’s role and positionality, Philips (1960, 297) notes that “it is clear that the interpreter’s effect

on the informant – on what the informant may or may not say – is theoretically no different from the anthropologist's effect." Yet, taking a positivist approach, Philips (1960, 298) goes on to note that "ideally, the interpreter should be nothing more than an agent for transferring messages between the informant and the field worker – a kind of passive instrument for the anthropologist."

Partly in reaction to such statements, a small number of authors have begun to take a more reflexive stance towards analyzing working relationships with interpreters. Awareness has increased that "researchers need to acknowledge that they carry out interviews with, rather than through, interpreters, and that the latter's role should be made explicit and be the subject of critical reflection" (Edwards 1998, 197). Edwards (1998) adds that nearly all social science research raises ethical quandaries to some extent, being riddled with power disparities on multiple levels; working with interpreters is no exception. Noting that most academics undertaking research with immigrants (her field of research) are not from those groups themselves, she reasons that a reliance on in-group interpreters can be vital, yet she questions why the relationship between interviewer and researcher is seldom discussed (see also Temple 2002; Temple and Edwards 2002). Similarly, Temple and Young (2004, 164) suggest that "the relationships between languages and researchers, translators and the people they seek to represent are as crucial as issues of which word is best in a sentence in a language." These authors problematize the fact that the positionality of interpreters has been ignored in qualitative research and stress the impact this has on knowledge construction. They argue that there is no such thing as a neutral position from which translation can take place and that we must acknowledge the power relationships inherent in such research (see also Simon 1996; Spivak 1992; Scott, Miller, and Lloyd 2006). Accordingly, the "intellectual auto/biographies" of researchers and translators should be made part of methodological discussions (Temple 2002).

While on occasion research assistants are labelled "field staff" and problems regarding gaining well-trained "staff" are noted (Bulmer and Warwick 1983), there is a dearth of literature on the roles these assistants play. In one exception, Sanjek (1993) provides an interesting overview of the different relationships between informants/assistants and anthropologists that characterized anthropological fieldwork from the early 1900s until the 1950s. He notes (13):

While professional ethnographers – usually white, mostly male – have normally assumed full authorship for their ethnographic products, the remarkable contribution of these assistants – mainly persons of colour – is not widely enough appreciated or understood. In no major treatment of the discipline is it portrayed as a fundamental part of the history of anthropology.

In the anthropological tradition, Sanjek suggests, the position of field assistant, or “cultural guide,” became more common from the 1930s. Malinowski is often credited with this shift from relying on one or two participants for information using preset questions to a more active fieldwork approach in which people involved in everyday life and ceremonial activities became objects of observation and targets of interviews: the official origin of participant observation. To undertake such interviews, local assistants became increasingly necessary. “It became common to enlist, and pay, one local cultural guide as a member of the ethnographic team. This person might translate, introduce, negotiate, gather facts, and even conduct interviews and write field notes to facilitate the work of the professional ethnographer” (Sanjek 1993, 14). Karttunen (1994) also provides historical insight into the worlds of assistants working for missionaries, civil servants, anthropologists, and linguists, drawing on autobiographies and other secondary sources for sixteen field workers from the 1500s to the present.

While the multiple roles of assistants in contemporary research are briefly mentioned in a piece on collaboration in qualitative research teams by Davidson Wasser and Bresler (1996), in a more reflexive piece on her time as a graduate student researcher in Nigeria, Robson (1994) delves further into researcher/assistant relationships. She expresses anxiety over whether she could discern a “just” versus exploitative arrangement with her assistants, noting the potential pitfalls of living arrangements in the field when accompanied by assistants of both genders. Also reflecting on their experiences as graduate student researchers, this time in Vietnam, Scott, Miller, and Lloyd (2006) raise concerns regarding the ethnicity of assistants with whom they interviewed ethnic minorities, as well as tensions along gender and class lines – concerns also mentioned by Yeh (2006) vis-à-vis her fieldwork with assistants in Tibet. Finally, Molony and Hammett (2007) write of the ethical dilemmas surrounding power relations and wealth imbalances with assistants in the field and the complications regarding choosing an appropriate assistant. They provide one of most nuanced pieces to date regarding research assistants, complemented in this book by insights from Sowerwine (Chapter 6), McAllister (Chapter 9), and Sturgeon (Chapter 10) regarding their assistants’ positionalities and working relationships.

In sum, while contributions on the roles, positionalities, and reflexivity of the *researcher* have helped to add depth to our understandings of cross-cultural research, there still remains a gap in our understanding of the research process as a whole due to the lack of attention paid to the *voices* of our assistants. Our research is subject to a “triple subjectivity” involving interactions among researcher, research participant/interviewee, and assistant (Temple and Edwards 2002). Yet, in our task to put pen to paper and analyze our field data, the process of working with assistants and interpreters has been frequently overlooked, and their voices too often ignored.

### **Research Assistants Contribute Their Voices**

The two research assistants contributing their insights here both worked for foreign graduate students for a number of months. Vi worked in Vietnam with Christine Bonnin, then a graduate student from Canada, for eight months during 2006 and 2007. Their fieldwork took place in Lào Cai province, a northern mountainous province on the Chinese border, with a large number of ethnic-minority communities (see Chapter 7). Vi is of Kinh (majority Vietnamese) ethnicity and was raised in the lowland province of Nam Định, one hundred kilometres from the capital, Hanoi. Nowadays, she lives and works in Hanoi; when interviewed in 2009, she was twenty-five years old. Chloe worked as a research assistant with Candice Cornet, also a Canadian graduate student at that time, for four months during 2006 and 2007, after they originally met in 2004. Their fieldwork took place in Guizhou province in southern China, home to a large Dong ethnic-minority population (see Chapter 5). Chloe is a Bai (Bai Zu) ethnic minority. She lives in Guiyang city, the provincial capital of Guizhou, and was twenty-six years old in 2009. Both Vi and Chloe have university degrees: Vi has a Bachelor of Arts in English for Technology Purposes (a degree for interpretation and translation), while Chloe has a Master of Arts in Religion.<sup>3</sup>

I also worked with Vi in Lào Cai province for one month in 2007, and with Chloe in Guizhou province for two weeks in 2009. Given that I know both assistants and the Canadian graduate students for whom they worked, I was cognizant from the start that what Vi and Chloe said to me would very likely be biased, as they might want to portray their employers in the best light (especially as I supervised one of them at that time). While I considered having someone more independent undertake these interviews, I felt this would yield fewer insights. An independent person would have had little awareness of the tasks these women completed, the work circumstances in both upland regions, the relationships they had forged with their researcher employers, and the difficulties (at least some of them) that I already knew they had faced. I wanted to probe these a little more. Despite the biases introduced by my directing these interviews, it appeared to be a potential route to gaining an in-depth understanding of Vi and Chloe's experiences. In an attempt to reduce partiality, I avoided questions about their employers, focusing instead on a priori themes of job practicalities, emotions they felt during fieldwork, and their own comments and suggestions for future research assistants and overseas researchers.

Vi's interview took place in Hanoi in mid-May 2009, while Chloe's interviews took place in late May 2009, in Zhaoxing village, Guizhou province, where she had worked as an assistant. On both occasions, we discussed the purpose of the interview and the project as a whole. Each was given an opportunity to review or "member check" a draft of the manuscript before

publication (cf. Turner and Coen 2008), and both replied with comments that I have incorporated. Vi, in Vietnam, preferred to use a pseudonym that she chose, stating that this would enable her to be more open in her remarks. Chloe, in China, decided to use her “Western” name, which could be thought of as a semi-pseudonym, since only foreign researchers and locals familiar with her work with foreigners know her by this name.

### Research Assistant Positionality

If one believes, as I do, that “one’s position within the social world influences the way in which you see it” (Temple and Young 2004, 164), assistants come to the field with their own preconceptions, values, and belief systems, just like any researcher. While the position of the *researcher* is sometimes touched on by authors willing to discuss their positionality and reflexivity, such as Morton (1995) in her account of fieldwork in Tonga, and Mandel (2003) in Benin, these elements are just as likely to affect the assistant yet are consistently ignored.

The positionalities of the assistants at the core of this story are strongly influenced by ethnicity. As is obvious from the other chapters here, in socialist China, Vietnam, and Laos, the state deals with ethnic minorities for the most part so as to ensure that the country as a whole moves steadily forward in economic progress. As such, minority views on livelihoods, environmental sustainability, resource use, and so on are frequently overlooked. In the case of the research projects described here, state directives play directly into relationships forged in the field and local majority/minority understandings of the “other.” In Vietnam, where ethnic minorities are not generally well understood among the lowland Vietnamese majority, the former are commonly depicted as “backward” or “lazy” (Hickey 1993; van de Walle and Gunewardena 2001; Sowerwine 2004; Nguyen Van Chinh 2008; World Bank 2008). These perceptions are shaped by the fact that “in a country that invests great measure in recollecting and commemorating the past, few minority cultures have indigenous archives, and are thus categorized as ‘peoples without history’” (Turner and Michaud 2008, 160; Scott 2009). The situation is fairly similar in China (Hathaway 2010). Yet, with far higher absolute numbers of ethnic-minority populations in China, in the provinces in which they are most numerous they tend to be granted more tolerance by the state and migrant Han Chinese. There are obvious exceptions in politically sensitive areas, however, as in Xinjiang during 2009 and Tibet (Chiao and Tapp 1989; Gladney 1994; Baranovitch 2001; Harrell 2002).

Given this context, Vi, as a lowland Vietnamese, had only had previous exposure to ethnic minorities through television programs that displayed aspects of their material cultures. She had travelled to the upland town of Sa Pa once before starting employment as a research assistant there, and

remembered from that trip: “I didn’t talk to them [the ethnic minorities]. I just looked at them, that’s all ... I couldn’t recognize who was Hmong, Yao ... Maybe only the Hmong people I could recognize because they are on television many times.” When asked what she thought of the different ethnic-minority groups she encountered during that first visit, she added, “at that time I had no idea about those people. I had no intent to talk with them, or to find out if they are interesting or not ... Of course I still feel that they are dirty, even after I meet them and know them very well, I still think that they are dirty [laughs].”

For Chloe, an ethnic minority herself, the situation is clearly different. She carefully emphasized that she believes it is wrong that some cultures are considered more backward than others in China, but, rather, that “many cultures are just different.” She recounted how, as a school pupil, her Han Chinese teachers would tell her class that the *shaoshu minzu* (“minority nationalities”) are “‘backwards in production’ and very different; they would stress the difference.” She continued, “I never really believed the teacher but you were never allowed to say anything. Only at university could you ever speak in class.” She added that perhaps other teachers were not so strict and she thought that the situation might have changed in recent years. Chloe had not been to the Dong ethnic-minority village where she worked with Candice before they travelled there together in 2006. Her first impressions were of “a very big village, and beautiful. It hadn’t been destroyed so much by modernization. Local people seemed simple – pure hearted and friendly.”

Such introductory comments already illustrate divergent inter-ethnic power relations at play. While Vi’s knowledge of and interactions with ethnic minorities increased significantly during the time she spent in the field with Christine, she retained very specific understandings of how these groups differ from lowland Vietnamese. In contrast, Chloe appeared more attuned to how state discourse on ethnic minorities becomes reiterated through daily practices at the local level (see also Chapter 10). While such interpretations are part and parcel of these assistants’ daily lives and positionalities, they can become even more accentuated during fieldwork processes and interactions. If researchers do not reflect on such elements of their assistant’s situatedness, the consequences remain masked and the rigour of fieldwork becomes compromised.

Alongside ethnicity, a broad spectrum of other positioning factors is at play in the field for the research assistant. For example, it is not necessarily easy for a young woman in Vietnam or China (or in many other parts of the world) to face a government official and try to elicit information or obtain research permissions for her employer, an overseas researcher. Research assistants have their own approaches to dealing with such negotiations that



they usually have to devise on the spot, since, at least at the outset of field-work, it is unlikely that the overseas researcher comprehends the intricacies involved in these negotiations and relationships. Or, as Robson (1994, 47) puts it, "it is common for the researcher on entering the research environment to find him/herself in the role of naïve idiot."

Chloe was adamant that the most difficult people to attempt to interview were government officials in the provincial capital of Guiyang, and, indeed, she never managed to interview any. She explained: "Government officials seemed indifferent to the [research] project. We would call them for information but they would say 'no, we're busy, and you can see all the information on the Internet' and then they would hang up." She added that, in comparison, "scholars and academics in Guiyang were more easy going, they are people who can relate to what we are doing and they are doing similar research projects." Likewise, Vi in Vietnam observed that the most difficult interviewees were "men who work for the People's Committee. It's very difficult to get exact information from them." She added that this was the case regardless of the level of government administration, from provincial to commune level.

In China, Chloe observed that it was always easier to talk with residents in Zhaoxing village than in Liping (the county-level administrative city) or Guiyang. She noted that people in the village "like talking with others." When I asked whether she thought gender made a difference to the ease with which they could undertake interviews, she replied, referring to Dong ethnic-minority interviewees:

Men here [in Zhaoxing village] are usually educated so they know the Chinese language, so that makes it easier ... Men will talk a lot, while women will also talk, but less. Women will say, you should talk to my husband ... The older women don't speak Chinese so that makes it difficult. This is also about traditional rules ... it's normal that men are the spokesperson for things "outside," while women are "about the house."

She remarked that, in contrast, interviewing men and women of younger generations involved the same levels of difficulty.

In Vietnam, Vi found that lowland Vietnamese (Kinh) men were easier to interview than Vietnamese women, although, intriguingly, the reasoning was quite different and she relied on her charm to help get the job done. She explained:

It was easiest for me as a female to interview the [Vietnamese] men. They are very interested in talking. If I'm a female and I'm interviewing a man, even if he works for the market management, or People's Committee they

are very interested in me, except for the ones already married. The free men ... Because they think I am from Hanoi, so I must have interesting information and a lovely way to talk ... Being female is the plus ... You must be interesting, you must have a lot of information about the world outside, so if you are a girl it is a plus for them.

I explored whether this had led these men to flirt with her or ask her out on a date, to which Vi replied:

No, never. Because if I make the signal, then they think “ok this girl is very easy I can go out with her.” But I do not, I just come here, and I try to be friendly but not too close to them ... But if we are friendly with them, then they will give us a lot of priority and good information.

When asked about interviewing ethnic-minority Hmong and Yao men, Vi noted that this had been far more difficult, often just eliciting what she perceived to be embarrassed laughter from potential interviewees, especially in marketplaces.

Such nuances in cross-gender interviewing are not always intuitive for foreign researchers entering a new research field, and a common assumption is that assistants will be more comfortable interviewing people of their own gender. Research tactics differed regarding how the assistants tried to draw information from participants, based in part on gender dynamics. Their individual agency shows how the production of data is a social process, shaped by a multitude of identity factors (cf. Pratt 2010). Such findings signal the importance of discussing interview dynamics with assistants before, during, and after the fieldwork process. This can shed light on erroneous assumptions and lead to new, potentially more rewarding approaches in the field, including more nuanced understandings of local gender dynamics.

At the outset, the roles of research assistant and informant can be blurred, as research assistants often help bring foreign researchers up to speed regarding cultural nuances that outsiders might not yet have learned or understood. This may not always be the case, however, when assistants vary significantly in their positionality from those being interviewed (such as majority/minority ethnic identities). Without a greater understanding of assistant positionality, the twists and turns in these gendered and ethnic-based negotiations become lost and important biases ignored or misinterpreted.

### **The Task at Hand**

I asked both Vi and Chloe to define, in their own words, the job position that they had held. Chloe replied: “Before Candice arrived she already sent me a plan of her research so I knew what it was about, and what she wanted to do. Then we do interviews, observations, ‘free talking’ and we discuss a

little bit. I helped Candice to interview people and talk with them, ask them questions, translate answers to Candice.” She continued in more detail:

I would also contact people in the village, book the hotels for her, book airline tickets for her, call bureau directors that Candice wants to interview. I would explain Candice’s research topic to the people that I rang, such as: “I am co-operating with a foreigner who is a PhD student, her main topic is related to minority culture and tourism, can you help us?” Normally people will co-operate with us, but contacting people wasn’t so easy ... people don’t know what it is we do, I have to explain a lot. It was easier in the village because if someone was busy then we could come back the next day.

Chloe went on to note the difficulties involved in her position:

My job as RA was very difficult. I had to interview, then we [she and Candice] would go over the tape together, and translate it to English as we listened. I then would also transcribe the tape later in the evening to Chinese ... Often I would work from 9am to 9pm ... And if Candice didn’t understand something during the interview, I would have to translate during it, and then the person being interviewed often also wanted to know what Candice was saying.

Vi likewise described both interpreter and research assistant aspects of her employment, and the multitasking this involved:

The job is mainly interpreter, and sometimes I work as, like, co-ordinator ... I mean I have to arrange the interview between the other people and Christine ... in advance ... I have to ask them, maybe the ones in Si Ma Cai for example [market management people, hotel owner, market traders], we tell them when we will arrive next time. So I have to keep in touch with them, to make sure that next time they will receive us. I try to text them to say ‘how are you’ and ‘thank you’ ... blah, blah, blah ... it’s like keeping in touch.

Vi clarified the parts of her role she felt were important: “I try to remember their [interviewees’] history, about their life, so next time I remember and ask, so that they think, ‘Oh this girl, she’s considerate about our lives, she remembers what we talked about before’ so it’s easier to talk with them.”

Vi also illustrated the difficulties of her job when interviewing:

In the interview, I have to “break the ice.” And I have to make the questions in my way. Because sometimes you [the researcher] ask this, but I do not directly ask that question because based on my knowledge it’s too straight

to that person or it's too difficult for them to answer ... Too straight into their life ... It's that saying "if you go to Rome, act like in Rome."

Although not always the case with other assistants with whom I have worked, in these two instances we see how assistants can play the vital role of cultural broker and be central in helping the researcher's work to proceed smoothly (a point also made by McAllister in Chapter 9, regarding unexpected access to young Khmu women that her male research assistant facilitated). Again, since much of this occurs in the language of the interviewee, foreign researchers may be oblivious to the careful negotiations and social positioning undertaken by assistants as well as the potential stress and anxiety this can cause.

More reflection on these dynamics could potentially lead to fewer *faux pas* in the field and a more positive working relationship between researcher and research assistant. At the same time, it is naïve to think that assistants are likely to openly voice concerns or anxieties over their role or the interviewing style, especially if they are dependent on the researcher for immediate employment, advancement in their (state) career, or a letter of recommendation. Researchers must ascertain discreetly and diplomatically how the research assistant is viewing fieldwork and any concerns he or she might have.

### Eliciting Emotional Reflections

I ran through a series of emotions – happy, sad, angry, anxious, and frustrated – with both Vi and Chloe to elicit spontaneous reflections of specific fieldwork events that had left them with lasting impressions. Vi, in Vietnam, noted that she had felt the happiest (*hạnh phúc*) during an event while she was off duty in the uplands. She had been able to assist a young, illiterate Hmong woman obtain a passport by helping her complete the paperwork. Vi stated that this was her happiest field moment "because after a while I understand their life and I think that I cannot give them money, so I can do something else for them." She added that "their life is not as good as our life, and also, some girls are still very small, and they deserve to know more about the world, not just Sa Pa." In contrast, Chloe, in a comment more focused on the research task at hand, noted that she felt the happiest (*kuai le*) "if we interviewed someone and he or she told us something interesting, that was very helpful to Candice's research, and if it was a new thing for me too."

When asked if she had felt sad (*buồn*) while working as an assistant, Vi smiled and replied that she thought she had been bored more often than sad, observing that "sometimes I felt it was very boring to be an interpreter there. No friends to talk with, and of course because I have to speak English all day, so it's like I live in a foreign country." Both sadness and anxiety were apparent, however, when she continued: "I missed home. And I think maybe

this job is not for women ... it's like a temporary job, so I think about when I come back [to Hanoi], what will I do," clarifying that she had been worried about her future after this position. Chloe was less inclined to discuss this emotion, noting only that she felt sad (*shang xin*) "if I work a lot ... (laughing) ... if I'm too tired."

Vi spoke of the time she had felt the most angry (*túc giận*) in what seemed to be very restrained terms (compared with what I had already heard about the event from her companion researcher, Christine). Vi explained: "I never felt very angry, except for one time, I think it was so crazy. In Si Ma Cai market, a man there tried to force me to drink and he touched me [on my side] and I was very angry. And I think 'I cannot do this anymore!' ... he was a Kinh person, he was not polite." In contrast, Christine's version of the event, detailed to me with distress, was that the man had slapped Vi on the face. Vi's toned-down comment might have been for my benefit or a move to put the experience behind her. Regardless of motive, a year after the event her interpretation of what had happened was very different from that of her researcher employer, a point I return to later.

Vi noted that meeting new people did not make her anxious (*lo âu*), since she felt fairly confident in such situations. She commented instead that it was the long distances they travelled on mountainous roads that had made her very nervous (and carsick), clearly adding another layer of fatigue to the process. Talking through such anxieties also reminded me of previous Vietnamese research assistants who were nervous working in the uplands with me because of the malevolent spirits and ghosts they believed resided there (cf. Scott, Miller, and Lloyd 2006; Chapter 9). This begs the question of how many Western academics going to work in a foreign context think to ask their research assistant whether there are bad spirits and ghosts where they will be working, and whether the assistant will be perturbed by the situation.

When asked if she had become frustrated while on the job, Vi replied:

I'm not sure about that, but sometimes it's more like I get confused [*không biết làm thế nào*]. Like sometimes I cannot understand Christine with her questions! She repeats the questions! Why? She doesn't understand me? Sometimes she asks the question and I ask the other [person], and maybe it's not clear and she asks another question on it. But I think it's already clear enough to answer all her questions.

Vi continued to explain that after a while she came to understand Christine's motives – trying to gain clarification on a specific point, or make certain that the question had been fully understood by the interviewee – yet Vi considered such repetition unhelpful. "To Vietnamese if we ask the same question but

in a different way, they will think we are very silly. Then they are not very interested in answering the questions." Vi raises an important point here regarding the need for foreign researchers to make sure their assistant understands the specific types of information being elicited and the methods being used. In addition, although assistants may not be familiar with all the skills required to complete appropriate in-depth interviews, they can often provide valuable insights into suitable ways to approach such a task.

Chloe commented that she felt the most frustrated (*bu nai fan*) when "we are interviewing someone and they don't really understand what we're getting at; they answer but it's not what we want [to get at]." She continued to note that it was also frustrating when villagers did not cooperate with them. She gave an example of a local hotel owner whom Candice and Chloe had known for over three years; when they returned in 2009 to ask him a few questions he stated (while hung over), "I have nothing to tell you." Chloe explained, "such a time makes us feel awkward and embarrassed."

The emotions revealed here arose from a diverse range of circumstances to which the assistants brought their own locally appropriate coping mechanisms. The complexity of the tasks they undertook is revealed in the nuanced reflections on their positionality. Giving voice to these assistants enables us to delve into the "triple subjectivity" that is ongoing in the fieldwork process. It is clear that their responses are not those that outside researchers would automatically assume, again highlighting the importance of keeping communication channels open. Cross-cultural empathy is as important with research assistants as it is with interviewees.

### **Practical Advice from the Professionals**

Undoubtedly, Vi and Chloe are well placed to provide sound advice on how one might best cope as a research assistant working with an overseas researcher, and how researchers can help make the working relationship succeed. I asked both which qualities or skills they thought were required to help them complete their role. In China, Chloe replied that the research assistant's relationship with the researcher was of utmost importance. She explained: "You have to get on really well with the person you're going to be working with. And if you can't get on really well with them as a friend, at least you have to try to work very well together."

Chloe added that the relationships that the assistant develops in the field with local people were essential to the fieldwork's smooth progress, explaining that "you have to learn about the local people and be willing to interact with them. You have to learn about their way of life and be willing to sit and chat with them." In Vietnam, Vi also remarked on the importance of being able to empathize with interviewees and adapt the interview process to meet interviewees' abilities and expectations:

If you go to talk to a simple, poor person, you have to act like you are simple too. You shouldn't be "high thinking." But with the people that work for the People's Committee you have to be very strong, very educated, like very professional ... But with poor people, if you act like you are powerful, then they will be afraid of you, and think "oh, is that right, or is that wrong?" For them you have to use soft voice and ask short questions. But for the People's Committee, or with a leader of something, you have to be very confident.

Vi believed the most important quality a research assistant required was to be strong and healthy, so that "they would not be exhausted when making interviews." She continued, "if you are exhausted you cannot interview properly. For example, if I am exhausted, I know the questions, but I do not care much about the question or answer. So that's not good enough." Vi added, in a comment that links back to the frustrations that she had felt during her field period, that the assistant and researcher have to be on the same page with regard to the questions being asked and the type of information the researcher is trying to elicit:

If you [the assistant] do not understand the question of the researcher, you have to ask ... Because sometimes maybe you think that you know, but the actual content, the information that they want to get is not similar, so I think it's better that you know the question well. For example, if you ask me "do you like it?" – but I do not understand – "do you like it in what way"?

Having thought carefully about her advice for overseas graduate students or researchers arriving to work in her country, Chloe remarked:

You have to get on with the research assistant. You [the researcher] can't be arrogant and you have to be natural. Try to be friendly with the assistant. But when you are working you must also be serious, so that the research assistant understands that there's an important job to be done. If you always joke around then the research assistant will too – but there's time for that after the work is done each day.

She continued: "Try to learn about the local culture and be friendly with the local people and also try to learn a little Chinese in advance, to make it easier for the research assistant."

In Vietnam, Vi also stressed the importance of researchers' being friendly with their assistants, while adding a cultural nuance:

To be honest, if you want to work with Vietnamese it's kind of difficult ... Because we do not work because we have to work, sometimes we work based

on our feeling. So if you act like the boss of the interpreter you will not get a good result. You have to be friendly with the interpreter, say that you need their help, and discuss things before the work. Because the interpreter, like me for the first time with Christine, I was so nervous, because this is my first time, and I thought “oh this is a PhD research, this is very big, and I haven’t even finished my B.A. degree, so how can I help her?” So you have to encourage the interpreter.

Vi continued that a researcher has to be “half boss, half friend. I think it’s very difficult. Because if the interpreter likes you, she or he [the assistant] doesn’t mind to do anything, anything. But if I don’t like you, even if you pay me the money, then I do it, but it’s not as good as you expect.”

In one of the few earlier publications to mention researcher/research assistant relationships, Robson (2004, 47) notes that as a graduate researcher she worked hard not to become too friendly with her assistants. She explained: “Keeping some distance was necessary for the maintenance of our good working relationships.” Similarly, Chloe and Vi point to the very careful balancing act required between friendship, professionalism, and avoiding the appearance of arrogance.

### **Researchers and Assistants Together Make for Successful Fieldwork**

Research assistants are part and parcel of the knowledge production process, and as such researchers should be obliged to write them into understandings of field experiences and the results that are produced. Through their positionality and subjectivity, research assistants and interpreters influence numerous relationships, negotiations, and differential access to interviewees and resources during social science qualitative fieldwork.

Perhaps, however, this chapter has raised more questions than answers regarding the nuances of research assistant positionalities and the triple subjectivity among local assistants, foreign researchers, and interviewees. For example, what levels of complexity are added when working with interviewees for whom the language of the interview is a second language, such as ethnic minorities? In both the Dong village in China and in Hmong communities in Vietnam, Chloe and Vi were using the language of the dominant ethnic group in the country (Mandarin, Vietnamese) to converse with interviewees who had an ethnic-minority language as their mother tongue. No translation is neutral and it is important to remember that researchers gain only the interpreter’s “take” on what is being said, with other possible interpretations lost. But interpretations between majority/minority languages raise even more questions. The numerous differential power relations and politics at play in these circumstances warrant further investigation (cf. Alcoff 1991). While the obvious solution is for overseas researchers to



spend a very long time in the field learning ethnic-minority language(s) and local dialects, often the practicalities of fieldwork and researchers' access to these locales means that this solution is untenable. This is frequently the case in socialist China, Vietnam, and Laos.

Furthermore, the comments that Vi made when she was "touched" (her words) or "slapped" (her researcher employer's words) by a Vietnamese man during an interview in a rural market raise questions about whether both assistant and researcher should be interviewed about specific fieldwork events to compare situated knowledges. When I sent a draft of this chapter to Vi for member checking or participant validation, she reflected on this, adding: "For me, it is because of the culture, and the place we were in." Consequently, if details of such events are going to be written into a researcher's work, whose report is the most accurate – the person who experienced the event with the greater awareness and understanding of her own culture and its norms, or the culturally out of place researcher writing up the account? How should this knowledge be constructed? And who should decide?

Such telling comments by research assistants also demonstrate that as outside researchers, we must be *doubly* sensitive to the emotions and concerns of those alongside whom we work, even if we believe we are already. While undertaking fieldwork – and for graduate students this can be their first time undertaking long-term fieldwork away from family and friends, as well as their first time in the position of employer – how often do we carefully reflect on the feelings of our employees? While assistants may be in their own country, do we falsely assume that the task is easier for them than it truly is? They too might be in a foreign, unfamiliar situation and physical location for the first time, away from family and friends, and coping with a number of uncertainties, anxieties, and mixed emotions. Keeping the communication channels open, as well as showing gratitude on a daily basis for tasks completed, is vital for the emotional well-being of one's assistant, a positive working relationship, and quick resolution of problems.

More broadly, to what degree should research assistants be part of the data-interpretation process? The length of time a researcher has to work with a specific assistant, funding, and, for graduate students, other degree requirements all come into play here. This also depends on the assistant's willingness to be further engaged with the research project at hand.

Perhaps one of the most instructive take-home points I gained came when I asked Vi whether she had any other comments to add, or, given her skills at asking interview questions, whether there was a question I should have asked her. She replied:

If you ask me a question about how about the future of the research assistant, if they want to work like this for their whole life ... to me it's no. Because

first, we have to go far away from our family, and if we get married we cannot do it. And also the ones who want to get promoted they would never do it. So mostly the research assistants who assist the students like yours, they would never do it again, like when we get a job like me now [assistant manager in a Western-operated firm].

Vi added that now she would prefer to work in Hanoi rather than travelling far away, such as to upland areas, and that “even if you paid me a lot, [the answer is] no. So usually you get the ones who have just graduated who are very young and are willing to move far away.” This, in itself, raises a number of concerns for researchers who may wish to continue to work with a specific interpreter or translator over a long period, especially if they feel that they have invested a lot of time, energy, and funds in training him or her. All told, foreign researchers in these locales have to remember that these assistants are not just here to assist – they are individuals with their own socio-cultural positioning, and their own life goals and dreams. Continuing to assist us might not be part of those dreams.

### Notes

- 1 There is clearly a whole linguistic sub-branch of anthropology, as well as literary critiques regarding the construction and discourses of texts, but that moves away from my central concern here about the actual people who undertake these roles.
- 2 During back translation (or double translation), one interpreter translates either spoken or written English into a second language, that version is then translated back by a second interpreter, and the two versions are compared (Werner and Campbell 1970; Edwards 1998). The process is used either to determine the skills of a potential interpreter or to add rigour to the research process (cf. Marin and Marin 1991). It would be rare, in my experience, to have the opportunity to hire interpreters/research assistants using such a technique for fieldwork in China, Vietnam, or Laos, given the relative lack of available keen, skilled applicants (see also Chapter 6).
- 3 On a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being fluent, I would rank Vi’s spoken English as 6, improving during fieldwork to 8, while Christine Bonnin had Vietnamese fluency ranked 2-3 at the start of fieldwork. In China, Chloe’s spoken English was ranked 5, while Candice Cornet’s Chinese was 6-7. Hence, there were distinctions in language skills between each researcher/assistant team, adding further nuances to their relationships.

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