

Fieldwork among the Dong national minority in Guizhou, China: Practicalities, obstacles and challenges

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Abstract: *The People's Republic of China (PRC) is increasingly open to foreigners undertaking social science fieldwork; yet obstacles remain. Working with ethnic minorities adds further complexities because of the sensitive topics such research may raise. Based on recent fieldwork among the Dong in southeast Guizhou, as the first foreign researcher to ask for and gain official permission to work in the region, this article exposes some of the challenges, both practical and methodological, of conducting research in the PRC. Gaining access to my field site was a long trek through the hierarchic maze of Chinese administration. While reflecting upon this process, I detail my negotiations with local authorities. I then examine how I found reliable statistical data, was able to access the voices of peasants, acted to protect the anonymity of dissident informants, and negotiated working with local research assistants once in the field. These aspects, in turn, highlighted the importance of considering positionality in the field. Although each person's experiences and routes to fieldwork are unique, there are recurrent issues that shape the research process in the PRC. I reflect upon a number of these here, in the hope that this can smooth the way for future researchers.*

Keywords: *fieldwork, national minorities (Dong), People's Republic of China, positionality*

Introduction

Social science fieldwork is shaped by opportunities, constraints and chance. Clearly, as noted by De Neve and Unnithan-Kumar (2006: 5), 'anthropological fieldwork has never been completely determined by the researcher'. Relationships in the field are established according to one's positionality, including one's gender, age, ethnicity, social status, education, sexual orientation, language ability and social networks; all these, in turn, determine accessibility to different informants and data sources (see Sultana, 2007). In other words, researchers are part of their fieldwork. Because 'the practice of fieldwork and the production of knowledge are mutually constitutive in any given fieldwork context' (Reid-Henry, 2003: 185), it is important to situate the researcher within his or her process of fieldwork. Reflecting upon the constitutive aspects of fieldwork both elucidates the

organisation of the society one is examining and reveals the limits of one's fieldwork according to varying degrees of integration in the field.

There are important particularities in the People's Republic of China (PRC) that impact on fieldwork and knowledge production. As a country only recently open to foreign social science researchers, obtaining permission to do extensive fieldwork in the PRC is characterised by a long trek through the hierarchic maze of Chinese administration which immerses the novice into the complexity of Chinese society. This 'trek' reveals structures of power; it brings forth traditions attached to establishing contacts and building relations; it defines sensitive issues linked to national minorities and local histories; and it informs the researcher of state expectations regarding the social sciences. Meanwhile, the researcher hires local research assistants who may both assist and confine the research. What is more, once the researcher is in the field,

statistical data are frequently inaccessible or unreliable (Curran and Cook, 1993: 71), access to the voices of villagers and especially women is restricted, and informants who disclose dissident information must be carefully protected.

This article is intended to contribute to a better understanding of the complexities involved in conducting fieldwork among national minorities in the PRC. Based on PhD fieldwork in the village¹ of Zhaoxing, Guizhou, which consisted of regular visits between 2000 and 2009 as well as long-term fieldwork between 2006 and 2007, this article presents the obstacles, practicalities and strategies that accompanied my research among the Dong national minority in southwest China. I hope that these insights will be valuable for researchers working with ethnic minorities within China and elsewhere in the Southeast Asian massif, who may experience similar challenges and constraints. After briefly contextualising my research project, I explore the local norms of undertaking ethnology, explaining how these influenced both the procedures I needed to follow to reach the field and the actual fieldwork I was able to undertake. Then I discuss the establishment of relationships and the administrative hurdles to be overcome to obtain official fieldwork permission. The suspicions arising from the state's perception of foreign social scientists and the awkward intermediary position occupied by research assistants are discussed. Finally, I explore the challenges and obstacles faced when one actually reaches the field; negotiating with local authorities, establishing rapport with villagers, and protecting dissident informants. While presenting the challenges of doing fieldwork in the PRC, I also hope to infuse this article with the tremendous pleasure of undertaking fieldwork in this grandiose country. As Pieke (2000: 131) noted:

doing fieldwork in China has a taste of forbidden fruit; despite the drudgery of endless negotiations and gatekeeping rituals (banquets!), fieldworkers in China relive at least some of the excitement of the small child sneaking up to the apple-stand in the neighbourhood greengrocer's.

Contrary to the child who conceals such escapades, this article aims to shed light on some of

the intricacies involved in doing fieldwork in the PRC.

My research and field site: Tourism development in the Dong village of Zhaoxing

The village and its Dong population

Zhaoxing, my fieldwork site, is a picturesque village located in the *Qiangdongnan* prefecture in the Miao-Dong Autonomous Region of southeast Guizhou, southern China (see Figure 1, number 1, in Turner's introduction to this issue). The village has three main characteristics: it is a rural township seat; it is inhabited by the Dong national minority; and it is an area in which tourism is being extensively developed by provincial, county and local government representatives in cooperation with a private company. This rapidly changing context, observed over the past 10 years, provides a timely opportunity for examining the processes of tourism development and its multiple implications for villagers of a remote national minority region.

Zhaoxing is administratively a township seat (rural township, *xiang*: 乡) with two parallel distinct branches of local government. One branch is composed of a township leader (乡长 *xiangzhang*) and vice leaders (村长 *cunzhang*) who are elected. The other branch is composed of party representatives (with a party leader, 书记 *shuji* and vice leaders, 支书 *zhishu*) who are appointed and who hold greater power and authority than the township and vice leaders. My research focused on 'Zhaoxing proper', composed of some 800 households and a population of over 4000 people divided into three administrative villages (political division, *xingzheng cun*: 行政村); Upper Zhaoxing, Middle Zhaoxing and Zhaoxing. Each village has a vice leader *cunzhang* and a *zhishu*. Traditional social organisation overlaps with the three administrative villages, dividing the whole of Zhaoxing into five hamlets or 'drum tower groups', each represented by elders (*zhailao* 寨老).²

The Dong minority is composed primarily of subsistence farmers practising wet-rice cultivation (Geary *et al.*, 2003), which applies to the majority of the population in Zhaoxing. Here, each family has a plot of land for rice cultivation

and a plot for vegetables and spices. The only exceptions are officials drawn from other villages whose land is located in their home village, families of primary and high school teachers, and newly arrived immigrants (bar and hotel owners with or without land in their hometowns). Prior to 1998, subsistence farming was combined with logging, while more recently, wages from migration to factories and from tourism have become increasingly important.

The Dong are one of the 56 officially recognised nationalities (民族 *minzu*) in the PCR, comprising approximately three million individuals living in Guizhou, Guangxi and Hunan provinces. The Dong refer to themselves as the Kam (pronounced 'gum') and speak the Kam language which is a branch of Kam-Shui, itself part of the Kam-Tai family (Geary *et al.*, 2003: 30). Their villages feature drum towers and wind-and-rain bridges which are promoted for cultural tourism. Drum towers, each built in the name of an extended family, are taller than the surrounding village houses and are ornately decorated with paintings and carvings. They provide a meeting place in the village where local people gather to talk, gossip, sing, celebrate, listen to stories or entertain guests. Wind-and-rain bridges are also richly decorated. The bridges are covered with layered, temple-style tiled roofs, and along the bridges, there are often wooden benches on which locals meet to converse. In addition, the Dong are well known throughout China for their specific singing culture, also promoted for tourism (Geary *et al.*, 2003).

Until recently, the region in which Zhaoxing is located was isolated and difficult to access. Guizhou is the second poorest province of China, and infrastructures such as roads, railways and airports were limited. On my first visit in 2000 (and on subsequent visits until 2006), it took at least two days to reach Zhaoxing by bus from Guiyang, the major provincial town. By 2006, an airport opened in the nearby county town of Liping and the road between the town and the village was paved. Via airplane and bus, it now takes only about five hours to reach Zhaoxing from Guiyang. Accessibility will continue to increase with the current construction of a railway and a highway, both of which pass close to the village.

Tourism development in Zhaoxing

In accordance with the Chinese state's desire to modernise and develop remote regions of the country, over the past 10 years the provincial government of Guizhou has enthusiastically turned to tourism as a means of economic development (Oakes, 2000; Tan *et al.*, 2001). Specific villages throughout Guizhou have been designated to represent particular minorities and have been given funds by the National Tourism Administration (NTA) to develop tourism and serve as examples for other villages of the province (Oakes, 1998). Zhaoxing is one such village: located in a picturesque valley surrounded by three mountains rising to 1000 metres, and featuring five drum towers and five wind and rain bridges, it is the largest Dong village in China.

In the past 10 years, Zhaoxing has been undergoing significant change. This has included numerous tensions and paradoxes, including the revival of so-called 'traditions'; clashes over different understandings of modernity; unequal economic development; the imposition of state defined ethnicity; shifts in relations of power and consequent resistance; increased urbanisation; and a transition from an agricultural economy to one based primarily on a service industry, tourism. All are physically affecting the village and its surroundings, and are impacting upon villagers' own positionalities in the Chinese reality. Assessing how Dong villagers of Zhaoxing perceive and indigenise the economic transition led by China's process of modernisation, in particular tourism since the 1990s, is at the heart of my research. The remainder of this article focuses on the process of conducting this research.

Procedures to reach the field

Establishing relationships: Finding a research centre and a host university

Gaining access to the field, let alone actually interviewing villagers and collecting data was, for me, a long road filled with detours. In China, an official research permit is necessary in order to undertake long-term fieldwork and especially to be allowed to conduct tape-recorded interviews with government representatives. In

addition to arduous negotiations with Chinese authorities, this requires being affiliated with a university or a research centre (see Pieke, 2000: 133; Heimer and Thøgersen, 2006; Thunø, 2006: 249, among others). Because of the difficulties foreign researchers experience in gaining the necessary permissions, long-term extensive research in one field site is still relatively uncommon in China (Heimer, 2006).

A critical part of this initial research process is building and maintaining social networks and chains of contact. In summer 2004, I undertook a three month pre-fieldwork visit to Guizhou province with the goals of finding a research centre with which to be affiliated and establishing contacts with local scholars who shared an interest in my topic. This chain of contact started at *Université de Montréal* (Canada) with my Chinese language professor and his connections with the linguistics department at Nankai University in Tianjin (南开大学), near Beijing. In Tianjin, I met with two professors who redirected me to Guizhou University. I remember walking around the campus there asking everyone I could, where I could find 'the Dong specialist Professor Shilin'. Eventually, I was pointed in the direction of the Guizhou University Southwest Minority Language and Culture Research Institute (贵州大学西南少数民族语言文化研究所). There, I met Western, Han Chinese, and national minority scholars whose research concerned national minorities in Guizhou, many of whom were focusing specifically on the Dong. Albeit, though I met and conversed with many Dong specialists, it was only towards the end of my fieldwork that I finally met Professor Shilin. As with other foreign researchers working in China (and elsewhere, see Reid-Henry, 2003), establishing contacts followed a winding route which often entailed a mix of helpful initial contacts and fortuitous meetings.

Among the people I met through the research centre were Dr Geary and Professors Wang and Long, who considerably increased my historical, cultural, practical and linguistic knowledge about the Dong. Our conversations also shed light on their own positionalities and how these influenced their views on the Dong national minority. Geary, who is Irish and fluent in the Kam language, is a linguist aiming to bring bilingual education to Dong children. In this

capacity, he is involved in building schools, training teachers and creating textbooks in the Kam language. Furthermore, he collaborated in the publication of the first description of Dong culture in English (Geary *et al.*, 2003). Wang, director of the research centre, is a Han Chinese anthropologist. He helped me to unveil and decipher official state discourse and also provided useful comparisons from his fieldwork with the Miao in Xijiang, nearby. Long is an 'elite member' (see Litzinger, 2000) of the Dong national minority working at the Guizhou University for Nationalities who contributes to establishing government policies for the 'development' of his ethnic group. Many of Professor Long's students obtain government positions upon graduation and his contacts greatly facilitated my navigation of the official procedures to do fieldwork. Acting as gatekeepers for my research (see Hay, 2000; Heller *et al.*, 2010), these three scholars had important connections that played a determining role in smoothing or delaying (as I later discovered) procedures related to my fieldwork.

During my pre-fieldwork visit, I accompanied each of these three scholars to their respective field sites. These visits allowed me to witness some of the challenges Dong minorities (and Miao minorities) face as the state attempts to modernise them. Furthermore, exchanges with these scholars illuminated the particularities of my case study as well as the similarities that different minority people in the province shared. These relationships also presented me with the many different perceptions people have of minorities (see Blum, 2001), in addition to the position that scholars hold in Chinese society, which I explore next.

Ethnology in China: Making one's research 'applicable'

In order to better understand how social science researchers, be they foreign, Han Chinese or national minority, are perceived and expected to behave, a brief note on ethnology in China is necessary. The social sciences in China are seen as serving one purpose: the formulation of social policies. For this purpose, populations are investigated/researched on a regular basis. Indeed, every 10 years, a large-scale nationwide census is published including data on edu-

cation, income, urbanisation, ethnic affiliation, fertility, and so on. The collected data are then used to legitimise the application of politically driven policies. As a result, the researcher faces at least two challenges: first, the authorities who seek the applicability and usefulness of the research; and second, an over-investigated population which has become suspicious of the claimed benefits of such investigations (see Gros, this issue).

The social sciences in China are seen as an applied field, and therefore academic researchers are often placed in an awkward situation. Informants tend to quickly associate a fieldworker's activities with those of the government, expecting changes, either material or in the form of new social policies that might affect them. They thus enter the research process with a mixture of reservations and expectations. As Hansen (2006: 82) observes:

Over the years, many Chinese peasants have discovered that investigations into their household have a direct economic consequence for them: loss of illegally cultivated land, children sent to school, birth control, granting of loans, to mention some common examples. Justified or not, due to the state's long established tradition of intruding into the lowest levels of society, the fieldworker (Chinese or foreign) is vested with a special authority and power, and placed in a recognizable role as a researcher or investigator. She is walking in the footsteps of the Communist Party.

Meanwhile, in attempting to obtain permission to undertake research, the researcher sees his or her project assessed by the provincial government according to its possible contribution to the national modernising project. Research permits must be approved by state authorities, which further associates the researcher with high-level government goals in the eyes of the population studied. This population includes not only villagers, but also local officials subjected to provincial policies.

I found that working on the topic of tourism development among a national minority group made it easy for higher level officials to see potential and direct links with the modernising project of the nation. However, this also implied – both to those officials and to my research subjects – that I may provide the government

with ideas and data from my research on how to develop tourism. I often felt placed in an awkward situation, balancing the expectations of the provincial and the county governments that I contribute to their goals of economic development, while collecting often conflicting perspectives from villagers. For example, when my official fieldwork was complete I was summoned by the county authorities to participate in a televised interview discussing the recent development of tourism in the region. My challenge was not only to answer in Mandarin Chinese while being filmed, but moreover, to answer diplomatically. In other words, I attempted to voice villagers' concerns regarding top-down, imposed tourism development without seeming to criticise county and provincial tourism development procedures.

Obtaining the official research permit from the Chinese authorities

The relationships and social networks I had built in 2004 in Guizhou and had worked to maintain since then, both helped and created obstacles for my negotiations to obtain permission to undertake long-term fieldwork in Zhao-xing. Indeed, when I returned in 2006, it took almost three months of arduous negotiations to obtain an official research permit. Three obstacles prolonged the process. First, I was the first foreigner to undertake official research in this region. Second, in order to obtain such a permit, I had to be registered at a local university, and hence, became the first foreign doctorate student to register at Guizhou University. Finally, the research centre I wanted to be affiliated with – the Guizhou University Southwest Minority Language and Culture Research Institute noted earlier – turned out to be largely funded by a faith-based organisation, the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL International). This organisation of linguists focuses primarily on studying, documenting and assisting lesser-known languages, yet their link to Wycliffe International³ specifically, and to Christianity in general, caused suspicion on the part of Chinese authorities.

The process and required documentation to register as a doctoral student at Guizhou University and to apply for a research permit were not clearly established, and authorities at different levels had to agree on a set of procedures. As a

result, once I had submitted the initial required documentation to the Foreign Affairs Office of Guizhou University (in charge of obtaining the research permit for me), other required documents were subsequently added to the list, lengthening the procedure and inevitably delaying my fieldwork. Ultimately, the list of required documents included: proof of a medical examination; a range of photographs of specific sizes; a resident permit; a copy of my diplomas (translated from Latin); a copy of my resume; a detailed research proposal in Chinese; a photocopy of my scholarship papers; proof of registration, a photocopy of the ethics approval from my home institution, and a letter from the director of the Southwest Minority Language and Culture Research Institute which stated clearly their responsibility in supervising my research during the entirety of my fieldwork. Because of the religious character of SIL, the provincial authorities asked me to add a written letter attesting to my non-affiliation with this organisation and with religious movements in general.

Two months after all the documents had been submitted I was told my permit was ready. However, when I visited the Foreign Affairs Office to collect it, the local official still had not received it from the issuing provincial authorities. At that stage, I slowly became this Foreign Affairs Office official's 'worst nightmare' (her own words), frequently phoning her or sending text messages to find out how my application was progressing and if she had any suggestions as to how to speed up the process. I am not sure this actually changed anything, but I am convinced that this official shared my joy when, three weeks later, I finally obtained my researcher's identification card. The deviations and delays I encountered in attempting to obtain permission to do fieldwork forced me to readjust my research schedule. I had certainly learnt to be more flexible, a necessary quality for any fieldworker, while I had also been initiated into the administrative hierarchy of the government research approval bureaucracy (see Thunø, 2006: 249–250).

Working with local research assistants and coping with their suspicions

While fieldwork in general requires flexibility and adaptability, this applies also to working

with research assistants. The fieldworker is challenged to consider and make the best of his or her assistants' skills and positionalities in order to meet research goals. As is often the case when doing long-term fieldwork, it is often necessary to work with multiple assistants. Each assistant has his or her own unique background and each brings different opportunities and constraints to the field. The assistant's gender, ethnicity, social status, economic situation and personality all influence the establishment of the social encounters through which data are collected. How research assistants translate and reflect upon informants' statements, and the assistants' involvement in the research process itself, have direct impacts on the researcher's perspective and contribute to shaping the research (see De Neve and Unnithan-Kumar, 2006: 87; Turner, this issue). In the PRC, whether it is required by the unit one is affiliated with or for reasons related to language proficiency, working with research assistant(s) is almost inevitable (Hansen, 2006; Thøgersen, 2006).

Although I had one main research assistant, Chloe,⁴ three other young women acted as assistants at different times during my fieldwork. As a woman, I consciously favoured female assistants. First, it enabled sharing the same room for accommodation, thereby reducing the costs of fieldwork and permitted late night work discussions. Second, I was more comfortable working with a woman in order to avoid any cultural misunderstandings about seduction/attraction and to avoid confusion about the nature of our relationship by informants (see Kulick and Willson, 1995).

Initially, during my pre-fieldwork in the summer 2004, the research centre introduced me to Xiao Lu,⁵ a Dong native of Zhaoxing. She accompanied me to her hometown and, as we quickly became friends, she provided me with an important opportunity for participant observation and contributed to my integration in the village. Thanks to Xiao Lu and her family, I experienced fishing in rice paddies, harvesting and planting rice, making sticky rice cakes, visiting friends in the village and in neighbouring communities, and tending her family's store during market days. In this case, spending time as a friend with Xiao Lu prior to undertaking official fieldwork meant that I was afforded

many informal interactions that contributed to setting the stage for subsequent more formal interviews (see Reid-Henry, 2003: 192).

Xiao Lu later became an important facilitator of my official fieldwork. When I returned in 2006, she had graduated from university with a degree in minority studies (she had been a student of Professor Long) and had been granted a lower-level position in the Zhaoxing local government. At the beginning of my official fieldwork, she helped me organise interviews with local officials and clarified information I gathered. I would turn to her with questions regarding Dong culture, Kam language, village organisation, or practical information on agriculture, land distribution and the like. However, because of our respective positions in the village and as my work progressed, I involved and informed her less directly in the specifics of my research in order to protect both her and my informants from inquisitive higher officials.

During my pre-fieldwork trip in 2004, I had also met Chloe, who became my research assistant during my long-term official fieldwork. When I returned to Zhaoxing in 2006, Chloe was a master's student, studying philosophy. She is a Bai national minority, from a small agricultural village in the mountains of north-west Guizhou. Compared with the Dong, the Bai are significantly more sinicised (Blum, 2001: 106–173), and Chloe admitted that she could not speak the Bai language, nor could she think of any particular characteristics that differentiated herself and her family from Han Chinese.

Chloe was an excellent research assistant. She had grown up in a large, poor family and was accustomed to harsh living conditions. As a result, she adapted quickly to life in the field. She was knowledgeable on basic agriculture and could explain to me (a Belgian-Canadian suburbanite) the seasonal cropping cycles that organised village life. Although not Dong, she made a point of introducing herself as Bai to informants in order to facilitate more egalitarian social interactions.⁶ Her clear memory for names and the stories told by interviewees allowed her to gain their trust and respect. However, her background, ethnicity and employment status combined with her lack of fieldwork experience, led her to be very cautious initially in her interactions with me.

Suspicion towards foreign researchers is to be expected in the PRC (see Heimer and Thøgersen, 2006; Curran and Cook, 1993; Yeh, 2006). Indeed, in China, there is a 'culture of fear' and I was often reminded that I was working and living in a non-democratic country (see Yang, 1994). In addition to the obstacles while obtaining a research permit, 'this politics of fear mean not only that access to interviews and data is far from ideal, but also that all interactions and relationships are shaped to some extent by wariness of political trouble' (Yeh, 2006: 97). I was to experience this firsthand during my fieldwork in Guizhou.

One night, while walking back from the research centre in the provincial capital with Chloe, she grabbed my arm and whispered: 'someone is watching you!' I quickly looked around the darkened back street before realising that her concerns lay elsewhere. She had been convened by a provincial official and questioned about who I was, what I was doing, and what type of questions I was asking. The official had instructed her not to give me access to internal documents and statistics, making it clear that she was responsible for any of my wrong doings. She further told me of a Chinese scholar who had been sentenced to jail after collaborating with foreign scholars and providing them with unofficial, internal statistics (see Rofel, 1993). Such tactics confirmed to me, as Yeh (2006: 104) also notes, that 'the pressure of "responsibility" is a disciplinary technique of the state'.

Chloe continued to be apprehensive throughout our time in the field and was highly suspicious when I asked questions regarding the organisation of the government or whether or not she was a party member. There were, I soon realised, sensitive topics that needed to be postponed until I had earned her trust to a greater degree (see Michaud this issue). It took all my skills of persuasion, a great amount of patience, and numerous visits to her hometown to convince her that I was neither a Canadian nor a Belgian spy, but was rather becoming a friend. Even so, it was only towards the end of my stay in China that she opened up and became more critical of her situation and that of her country.

Chloe's fear and suspicion shaped how she translated interviews and how she accounted for situations that we witnessed in the village. Yet I saw clear changes in her attitude as our

relationship evolved over the long course of my fieldwork. By 2009, we could discuss the situation of the village – including how locals were covertly resisting certain ‘development’ initiatives – in what I felt to be a more constructive way, since Chloe had sharpened her critical lens towards the role of different actors (be it government, tourism companies or villagers). In sum, such long-term research cooperation allows moving beyond initial suspicion, but at the same time demands that the researcher is careful to protect not only his or her informants, but also his or her research assistants. As Chloe wanted me to realise, ‘one cannot simply publish findings because it could mean the end of another academic career or the punishment of respondents’ (Curran and Cook, 1993: 79–80).

On two occasions, Chloe was unable to accompany me to the field. During this time, the research centre found two master’s students in anthropology who came together to replace her. They were quite different from Chloe: both had grown up in Guiyang city, both had fathers holding official positions in the provincial government and both were Han Chinese. Their background, the social status of their family, and their ethnicity clearly marked them as outsiders in the village. Their positionality was revealed through actions such as wiping their seat before they sat down to interview or eat, wearing city clothes and shoes, carrying a cell phone and an MP3 player, as well as a general condescending attitude towards village informants. Reflecting on how to make the best of this situation, I soon realised they were much more suited to interviewing high-level Han officials (interviews that made Chloe, a non-Han Chinese, nervous) and I readjusted my interview schedule accordingly.

Working with different research assistants forced me to consider how different positionalities influence the type of data that is collected, including reflecting on my own positionality, which I address below. All told, I consider that having varying points of entry to the field enriched my research and allowed me to reflect on contrasting attitudes and viewpoints related to status and ethnicity. My research assistants each represented a segment of the population of Guizhou and provided me with a sample of different visions and understandings of Chinese society.

Collecting data having reached the field

When I finally reached the field, permit in hand and accompanied by an officially sanctioned research assistant, I faced yet another set of obstacles and dilemmas. I had to find strategies to collect the data I wanted despite constraints imposed by my own positionality and that of my assistant, not to mention those of local officials and villagers.

Interviewing and negotiating with local authorities

Before I left for the village, scholars from the research centre at Guizhou University made a useful suggestion: they recommended that out of respect for local authorities, I start my interviews with the highest local officials. Since my research permit was granted by provincial authorities and approved by county officials, this status allowed me to obtain audiences with the local township leader, the local party leader, and their assistants. At the same time, this also implied that my presence was, to some extent, imposed on them by higher level authorities.

Yet, beginning my fieldwork by interviewing officials at different hierarchical levels was good advice for a number of reasons. It allowed me to introduce myself and present my project and research goals to the local authorities, while at the same time showing respect for the village’s hierarchical structure. It also made me aware of the official discourse towards tourism development, economic growth, and Dong culture and preservation, at the outset of my research, permitting me to recognise subsequent deviations from it. As I found out much later, initial data collected in the field, whether from officials or peasants, is generally official discourse. Following Yang (1994), by ‘official discourse’ I do not mean that it came from officials, but rather, I found a unifying public discourse reflected in the style of language being used by all my initial informants, projecting the hegemonic authority and politics.

Although an official permit opens the gates to data held by officials and the local elites (in this case, decision makers in the development of tourism, including private promoters), it can also be problematic. By the time I began interviewing villagers involved in tourism, I knew all

the high level officials of the village. This had an impact on my interviews. Officials, knowing I would later interview villagers, concealed information they did not want passed on to villagers, such as tourism development policies regarding allocation of land for hotel construction, or new requirements for entrance tickets for tourists visiting the village. Moreover, working down the hierarchical ladder, official subordinate workers I interviewed had often been briefed on my research topic and questions by their superior ahead of time. Indeed, I recall an interview with the vice leader of the township in which he talked for half an hour on his vision of the development of tourism in the village before I could even pose a question.

Furthermore, my identity as a foreign researcher with links to provincial and county officials gave me a position in the village that was sometimes manipulated by local authorities during my fieldwork. I was invited to banquets when higher-level officials visited the village. I was also asked to participate in the school's certificate ceremony and, as I mentioned earlier, in a televised interview in the county town on tourism development. My association with relatively powerful officials permitted participant observations that contributed to my understanding of village dynamics and shed light on the positions of power of different actors in and out of the village. However, it also brought ethical dilemmas and restricted my access to certain villagers.

Protecting dissident informants

In 2003, a tourism company from Guiyang signed a 50-year contract with local and county governments acquiring a monopoly on tourism development in Zhaoxing and its surroundings. Without going into the specifics of this situation,⁷ it quickly became clear to me that villagers who had briefly but substantially benefited from more informal tourism arrangements prior to 2003 were now those the most likely to lose out. They would provide me with the most critical – albeit, not necessarily balanced – commentaries on tourism development.

Despite my concerns that my position as a foreign social scientist associated with provincial and county authorities and perceived to

be reporting on the village situation would hinder gaining information and views from local villagers, it actually led some villagers to participate in my research as a way to get 'their voices heard'. Through them I acquired 'official documents', including a copy of the contract between the tourism company and the government and two petition letters villagers had sent (one to the provincial government and one to the national government in Beijing) against the new, official tourism scheme. I was told that these documents were considered 'internal' and I was clearly not supposed to have access to them (see Thøgersen, 2006: 189–205). Reading and discussing these with informants allowed me to understand the reasons for local protests, the resistance expressed in the petition letters, and also the refusal of a growing number of villagers to work for the tourism company.

In my written research, as well as in discussions with officials, I had to balance my desire (and some villagers' desire) to voice local concerns, supported with evidence of their resistance, with the need to protect informants' anonymity. Moreover, I had to consider and acknowledge a wide spectrum of divergent views villagers had on tourism development and avoid promoting certain viewpoints over others. Additionally, as a researcher, although I could attempt to articulate the multiple perspectives of the Dong villagers on county television and through future publications, I had to be cautious to ensure that the villagers knew the limits of my power and involvement in changing their situation or redressing injustices (see Svensson, 2006). As in any fieldwork, I had to carefully reflect upon the implications of my presence in the village and local expectations of my research.

Accessing statistical data

A considerable challenge while researching in the PRC is accessing and obtaining reliable statistical information. Local governments within China have a history of manipulating local statistics to hide the number of births (because of the one-child policy); to downplay the grain harvest (in order to be eligible for state financial support or avoid paying taxes); to demonstrate the success (however unsure) of new policies; and so on. As a result, official documents,

including basic statistics, are difficult to obtain and may conceal official goals of which we are not aware (Thøgersen, 2006: 198–199; see also Heimer and Thøgersen, 2006: 16). Statistical data, hence, need to be cross-checked whenever possible. For example, when I asked officials about the social characteristics of a village (demographic data such as educational level, household income, number of children, age of marriage, and so on), I was always told everything was ‘typical and normal’. I was repeatedly told that the village social situation was ‘the same as in any other minority village of China’, and I would be provided with figures that matched the nationwide state-issued averages. In order to gain a clear understanding of the particular situation of Zhaoxing, I resolved to ask the same statistical questions to officials in charge of different parts of the village (*cun-zhang*) and to cross check this with local elders. Unfortunately, even these statistics remained vague averages. I ended up adding additional demographic questions to my interviews in order to get a more accurate picture of the village situation; but what proved difficult at this point was being able to interview a representative sample of villagers.

Accessing the voices of villagers

My status as a foreigner staying in the village gave me the opportunity to speak with hotel owners, bartenders, souvenir shop owners and restaurant owners. However, I found it difficult to reach the population that was not involved directly in tourism, particularly households still relying entirely on agriculture. Furthermore, compared with state officials and those involved in the tourism industry, many villagers, especially the elderly and women, primarily spoke their minority language (Kam) and had a relatively poor level of Mandarin Chinese. I, therefore, had to find strategies to overcome these obstacles using my networks, relying on my research assistants, and taking advantage of my own position and gender. In order to access peasant families, I first asked Xiao Lu to assist me, since she spoke Kam and came from a peasant family. She introduced me to some of her friends and acquaintances, sometimes also acting as an interpreter. I also relied on Chloe’s capacity to connect with

peasant families, often initiating conversations with farmers who were tending their fields. Nevertheless, I still had difficulty interviewing village women.

Accessing women’s voices

Being a Western woman researcher in China can often be very frustrating. Like Louisa Schein, who also completed fieldwork in Guizhou, I was ‘a white western woman who had undertaken to live in a part of China notorious for being rugged and remote with people known for their “backwardness”’ (Schein, 2000: 26). I was also young (early thirties) and a student, yet this was counterbalanced by a certain social status because of my ‘official’ point of entry. Nevertheless, being a woman clearly restricted my ability to access men, reducing my ability to gain a more intimate view of their perspectives since my interactions with the majority of men in the village was, by necessity, very formal. Meanwhile, women in the village tended to keep their distance. When I attempted to interview women (even those Xiao Lu introduced me to), they would often call their husband to answer for them, claiming they ‘did not know much about anything’ and that their Mandarin was not good enough for a conversation with this outsider.

Not being fluent in the minority language spoken in Zhaoxing was certainly an important constraint for my research since villagers had to express themselves in their second language,



Figure 1. The author’s daughter getting to know locals in the field

Source: Candice Cornet, April 2007.

Mandarin, creating problems in translation as well as the official/authoritative positionality associated with speaking the majority language in a minority situation (see Gros, this issue). I realised about halfway through my fieldwork that my interviews to date had been mainly with higher status men (officials, guest-house owners, elders, and souvenir shop, restaurant and bar owners) and a few high status women (restaurant owners and government officials). My inability to speak Kam, my status as a researcher and my 'official contacts' had thus far limited my access to women's perspectives.

This issue was resolved both unconsciously and unexpectedly. At the time of my fieldwork, my daughter was eight months old and was staying with my husband who was working in Shanghai. I was travelling frequently between my field site and what was then 'home'. Twice during fieldwork, my husband had to travel abroad for work and I brought my daughter with me to the field (see Fig. 1). Although there were an increasing number of foreign tourists visiting the village, the villagers had never seen such a small foreigner. Through this experience, I learned that 'children can have a beneficial impact on the research process, particularly in terms of the endeavour to achieve more egalitarian relationships with our participants . . . accompanied ethnographers are seen as less anomalous' (Cupples and Kindon, 2003: 214). After introducing my daughter to villagers, my relationship with them changed dramatically. My 'new' identity in the eyes of locals had suddenly repositioned me in an unanticipated way (Swanson, 2008).

By bringing my baby daughter to the field, I had altered my positionality from that of a scholar linked with the authorities to that of a mother far from home, caring for her child. Having my daughter with me certainly delayed my fieldwork and, as also noted by Starrs *et al.* (2001: 75), 'with family along, fieldwork is no longer just about the researcher and a cluster of cherished contacts – documents and archives, peoples and places, organisations and outlooks. Suddenly logistics become far more complex'. Yet, this decision also facilitated considerable contact with village women.

Many women were curious to meet my daughter with her blond hair and blue eyes.

These encounters generated numerous informal conversations and chances to interact, and suddenly we had a number of common affinities and shared a 'common ground' (Sultana, 2007: 378). Even though the level of spoken Mandarin differed among the women visiting (generally according to age), there was always someone present to facilitate conversation by translating from Dong if necessary, most often a young local woman or Xiao Lu.

In addition, by showing my vulnerability as a mother, and by temporarily shifting my focus from fieldwork to my child, I engaged in interactions that necessitated a great amount of trust on my part (not just, as is often the case in research, on the research participant's side). I had to find someone to look after my child while I was conducting interviews and this certainly was quite a stressful experience. However, looking back, there is I believe no greater sign of respect towards 'the Other' than accepting that his/her way of life and way of raising children – including food, drink, sleep, play, hygiene and so on – be applied to one's own child, even if only temporarily.

This change in my positionality was a turning point in my research, yet it would be arrogant and unrealistic to assert that through my child's presence I had become an 'insider'. I was, and always will be, a foreigner, both educated and richer than locals, and thus comparable to the foreign tourists visiting the village. Nevertheless, this experience deepened my understanding of local reality since my daughter facilitated greater rapport and people tended to recognise me as quite different from 'those tourists' (see Cupples and Kindon, 2003). I was given the opportunity to learn about women's realities and their perspectives on the changes their village was facing. Interestingly, knowing women in the village also facilitated my interactions with men, since men could now invite me to their house because I knew their wives, sisters or daughters, and potential jealousies were thus avoided.

Conclusion

Reflecting on one's fieldwork, from the prelude of administrative complexity and the building of official networks, to the complexities of interviewee and research assistant

interactions, provides insight into the construction of fieldwork based knowledge. Fieldwork must be considered 'a critical journey, in which the ethnographer engages with informants, assistants, friends and collaborators, and gets involved in a myriad of encounters and events' (De Neve and Unnithan-Kumar, 2006: 87). The field as such becomes a process rather than a locality, in which the researcher is ascribed and takes on different roles that allow the gradual acquisition of insights. Detours, delays and blunders (see Gros, this issue), as well as varying levels of cooperation, unease and suspicion by local scholars, officials and research assistants all contribute to this experience.

As the PRC and other socialist countries open up to foreign researchers, discussions about the obstacles, challenges and strategies associated with such fieldwork conditions must continue. These need to address the ethical dilemmas and awkward situations we face as we negotiate access to the national minorities who so often are silenced in the fast-paced endeavour of the state to modernise, while bringing ethnic minorities within state 'development' programmes. As I have described, doing official fieldwork ascribes one with a specific status. Coupled with gender, age, education, language ability, ethnicity and whether one has a child, this composite identity leads to positions that simultaneously open doors just as others may close because of wariness, fear, and government control or restrictions. Consequently, fieldworkers must constantly juggle their goals, their positionality, and the realities they face in a fundamentally negotiated process (Bradshaw, 2001).

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Notes

- 1 Administratively a township composed of three villages, Zhaoxing is considered by locals and outsiders to be one large village in cultural and social forms, and I will call it such here.
- 2 According to a Chinese anthropologist from Guizhou University, this power differential is typical, yet there may certainly be exceptions or different cases within the tremendous number of villages and townships in China. The division into drum tower groups, however, is particular to the Dong national minority in which each drum tower represents a clan (see Geary *et al.*, 2003). *Zhailao*, or elders, are elected by members of the drum tower group and must be over 60 years old. Their status is recognised up to the township level but not beyond. They resolve conflicts, act as intermediaries with the government and members of their drum tower groups, and are responsible for the protection of the forest (*zhailao* interview, 19 April 2007).
- 3 Wycliffe International is dedicated to translation of the biblical scripture in all languages.
- 4 Chloe is my research assistant's foreign name and she has accepted that we use it in publications.
- 5 Lu (陆) is the family name of 98% of Zhaoxing villagers; Xiao (小) means little, hence, I would call almost all villagers that were younger than me 'Xiao Lu'.
- 6 For discussions on the historical and recent relationship between the Han majority and the Dong (as well as other minority nationalities in Guizhou), see: Lombard-Salmon (1972), Berlie (1998), Oakes (1998) and Herman (2007).
- 7 See Cornet (2009) for some preliminary data on the development of ethnic tourism in Zhaoxing and the issues it raises.

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