Doing Ethnography in a Chinese 'Ghost' City:

A Note on Field Access

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Fieldwork access depends on the researcher's familiarity in the field, and that in turn, is dependent on the researcher acquiring at minimal an adequate or ideally, a 'native' level of cultural knowledge of the field site. This itself is a challenging process which demands an ongoing reflexive examination of positionality. However, there are also external factors which limit access to the field – ones that are often beyond the researcher's control. Based on ethnographic research for my doctoral dissertation on ghost cities in China, this essay will examine two such factors which problematise access: government surveillance and a ghost city as a field site which defies emplacement. I also reflect on the role of positionality in the field as a potentially both facilitating and hindering data collection, and considerations of how new points of entry can be produced.

Keywords: ghost cities, urban ethnography, field access, positionality, China.

Introduction

The focus of this essay will be a reflection of gaining field access. Access is dependent on the researcher's familiarity in the field, where adaptation of local knowledges and practices are up to 'cultural expectance' (Mulhall, 2013). The process of going 'native' or at least, acquiring some level of cultural expectance is a challenging one and has to be mediated with a constant, ongoing reflexive analysis of the researcher's positionality in the field, and what kind of access is enabled by positionality; or what Bourdieu (2003) describes as 'participant objectifivation'. However, external factors which limit access to the field and are beyond the control of the researcher do exist, and they demand flexibility and a reflection of research strategies. In this essay, I will examine two such external factors which problematise access to data: *first*, surveillance by authorities which can circumscribe access and data collection; *second*, the nature of the field itself which cannot be assumed to be a stable one. In the face of such challenges, what are the strategies to find new entry points of access, and how a researcher's positionality facilitate or hinder data collection?

'Report to the authorities': Seeking official consent in the field

For my doctoral dissertation, I study 'ghost cities', specifically those in China. I define them as new cities built to host more than a million residents but remain under-utilised and under-populated some years after completion. Embedded in urban marketing to potential residents and investors are visions and promises of imagined, better future(s) of various kind. The realisation of these promised futures had been disrupted by factors such as poor planning, overly ambitious urban blueprints, economic crisis or regulations on capital flows. What remains are

arrested developments, leaving its inhabitants haunted by the future. To date, media reportage accounts for twelve large-scale ghost cities to be found in China. Ghost towns and estates are easily observed even in large-tier cities. This haunting is not exclusive to China. In varying smaller scales, such urban excess can be found in the ghost estates of Ireland (Belfast Telegraph, 2012; Anex, 2013; Daley, 2013); abandoned towns and urban infrastructure in Spain (Paumgarten, 2013; Marcinkoski, 2016); deserted developments in the Egyptian desert (Sims, 2014); the ongoing 'smart cities' movement in India that has resulted in mostly vacant new residential towns (Anthony and Pandya, 2018); Johor Bahru's new coastal developments which has seen dwindling investors (Garfield, 2017; Larmer, 2018); and, Australia's poorly-planned new towns (Bolleter, 2018; Allchin, 2019). A simple Google search will find extensive media coverage of such urban excess, visually represented by emptiness, housing vacancy, abandoned developments, barren public spaces contrasted by scant human presence to highlight the emptiness.

My primary research site is Ordos City in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of China. Generally, autonomous regions in China have strict regulations on foreign visitors (meaning: non-Chinese nationals) due to the government's problematising of ethnic minority populations which are of higher population proportion in these regions. The most notable regulation is limiting stay by foreign visitors who are only allowed to find accommodation in government-sanctioned hotels; this usually means international chain hotels, which are also expected to keep strict documentation of foreign guests and their whereabouts. Although Ordos is overwhelmingly Han Chinese, these regulations still apply and had worsened during my field research. Before my field research began, Ordos City had received numerous foreign media reportage labelling it a 'ghost city'. Given media representation and its potential impact on investor confidence, the local government of Ordos was understandably wary of foreign visitors who could be reporters who were there to contribute to the negative reportage. According to a local reporter in the field, even CCTV reporters from Beijing were not spared

this distrust and allegedly turned away at the local airport because officials were expecting more negative reportage from them. To gain some control over media and academic narrative, local officials had encouraged all foreign researchers, journalists, documentary and filmmakers to register themselves at the Foreign Affairs Department— local wing of the Central Leading Group for Propaganda and Ideology[1]. The Foreign Affairs Department would be familiar to most foreign researchers in China, especially those who work on matters which are deemed 'threatening' to the interests of the Chinese state. Being followed or police harassment is practised by officials from the Department to intimidate or 'constrain' researchers to work within 'acceptable' boundaries. As my research could not be categorised as a politically sensitive subject matter, and even the central government itself was paying attention to the phenomenon of 'ghost cities' in China, I paid little heed to register myself at the Department.

During my preliminary field stay, I received repeated 'advice' and reminders from officials whom I had interviewed to 'report to the authorities'.[2] Doing so would give researchers sanctioned or 'overt' field access. Those formally registered would gain easier access to local officials. Translators and drivers would be assigned to them. The translator would be a local official from the Foreign Department who would shadow the researcher, provide official expertise to the field, even source for interview respondents. While 'overt' access does offer its conveniences of facilitating access to data, having a translator shadow my research was simply government surveillance disguised as research assistance. Furthermore, what kind of data would I be able to collect? I had concerns that doing so would circumscribe what I was able to collect, and consequently, the reliability and validity of my data. There were other legitimate concerns such as the safety of respondents if I spoke to them in the absence of an official or if their responses were perceived by the authorities to be less than 'flattering'. I was also uncertain if the data collected would have to be first reviewed by the Department.

Being a foreigner researching Ordos then potentially positions the researcher in a double limitation

of 'access'. On one level, without dismissing the methodological limitations a native would encounter in studying the familiar, a non-native in the field is already limited to access due to cultural limitations. Secondly, government regulations and surveillance are in place to circumscribe the kind of access, and at worse, restrict access altogether by threats of expulsion from the field. I then had to consider if local officials were an essential component of my research sample; if so, access to them would be advantageous. This consideration was quickly resolved during my preliminary fieldwork. While I did not register at the Foreign Affairs Department, I had already established communication with a few local officials and planners through my gatekeeper. Without my gatekeeper's networks, it was clear that I would have been simply dismissed or being told officials were 'in a meeting' without any promise I could ever meet them. The attempt to access officials was to gain further insights into planning initiatives and rationales that might not have been addressed in official planning reports. However, local officials were honest that their positions were to defend themselves from any criticism or critique. Narratives established were nothing less than celebratory of the city's urban model. When asked if the local economic crisis that had plagued the city would impact further developmental plans, officials uniformly presented the crisis as temporary and nowhere as severe as represented in media reports without addressing the question[3]. There was nothing new or different from what I could derive from statements in newspaper reportage or official sources; and when they were, they were explicitly stated as off-the-record and could not be utilised as data. It would have been far more productive reading official planning journals in the library.

On that same trip, contacts introduced by local officials to gain a general understanding of the conditions as experienced by the residents would either be reluctant respondents or equally unforthcoming. Self-censorship was a concern. I was investigating future orientations of respondents in response to the 'suspended future' the city was undergoing. Without trust and rapport, I believed I would not be able to accomplish insightful data collection. Urban residents were wary but more fearful of repercussions from local officials if found to have assisted foreign reporters. This fear seemed more imagined than real, often based on gossip and hearsay of misfortune befalling on those who did[4]. With an official in tow, one could imagine the discomfort felt by any potential informant, and in turn, its influence on the trust and rapport between researcher and informant could not be discounted. One of these respondents introduced by local officials who I serendipitously met elsewhere shared that it was anxiety-inducing to respond to my questions in the presence of an official, and apologised for 'wasting my time' as he felt he had responded in a way the official would find 'appropriate'. On one occasion, as a local official was communicating with a potential informant on his mobile phone to grant me an interview, I heard him instruct the latter, 'You ought to know what can be said and what cannot be said'. The official had relayed his instruction for self-censorship in front of me. In interviews, a researcher can expect some degree of inclusion/exclusion of information as an inevitable outcome of the subject's presentation of self.

Nonetheless, information exclusion due to impositions made by figures of authority will certainly impact both the reliability and validity of interview data. Under such circumstances, it was clear that gaining official consent to access the field would be unproductive for my research. Access to the field had to be gained without official consent from the local authorities. For the subsequent field trips, I decided I would undertake 'covert' research; here, 'covert' is defined as without formal registration at the Foreign Affairs Department[5].

'Covert' research would have its costs; admittedly, mostly psychological. During my extended field stay in summer 2013, two plain-clothes (*bianyi*) police officers visited me at my hotel room one night, requesting for my identification and purpose of visit. They asked when I had arrived in China, what my nationality was, if I had a visa, scrutinised and took pictures of my passport and student card. An impromptu interview in Mandarin took place at the hotel lobby as the police tried to ascertain if I was a foreign reporter. I was asked if my doctoral scholarship was financed

by foreign news media. As my identification papers were in languages foreign to the police, they could make little headway but seemed to have added to their suspicions that my intent was not innocent. This was despite repeated declarations that I was not a foreign reporter looking to contribute to negative reportage of the city, and was critical of unfair media reportage myself. Understandably, what I said meant little to the police then. I was a foreign national who had no formal access to the field. That immediately positioned me as suspicious and a potential spy. Their manner of speaking became harsh and intimidating. The questions remained the same and repetitive. As the meeting dragged past 11 pm, my initial calm was beginning to wear. I began to fear for my safety. Requesting a toilet break, I called family friends –made via my gatekeeper—who were high-ranking officials in the Inner Mongolian region to inform them of the situation. Soon after the meeting was resumed, one of the officers received a call on his mobile phone. The meeting abruptly ended. A servile tone replaced the previously brash manner of speaking. They apologised for the inconvenience posed and wished me a good night.

I could only assume my influential contacts had resolved this predicament on my behalf. There was immense relief when I witnessed the officers drive out of the hotel carpark. They never returned. Perhaps, I was left alone due to influential social relations, or police surveillance on foreign visitors was never strictly enforced, or I was under surveillance by highly skilled plain-clothes officials without my notice (but unlikely). Nonetheless, I never felt at ease doing 'covert' research at my field site again, even as I persisted for better access. There was some paranoia for a few weeks if I was being followed. I wanted to appear unsuspicious by conducting research in plain sight but concerned if my informants were witnessed by officials to have assisted me in my work. More than that, I was annoyed that a single visit by the police had served its insidious purpose of intimidation even when I was not doing anything which could be transgressive!

Gaining greater familiarity in the field resolved much of this anxiety. I consoled myself that my persistence was going somewhere in terms of data collec-

tion, and at least, I had not experienced further trouble or gotten myself expelled from the field. The unease that never went away gave me an inkling of the harassment and fear experienced by foreign researchers who were working on what was deemed politically sensitive subjects. In light of recent developments, much worse has also happened to Chinese nationals doing the same. Even though state power should not be conceived as a monolith, doing research in authoritarian contexts does imply that it is certainly something that the researcher has to reckon with, even if at a distance.

Transient Space, Disappearing Subjects.

Doing fieldwork in a 'ghost city' also made access challenging because the 'field' cannot be said to be a stable one, given how the spectral future impinges on residents and the space itself. As mentioned, the new city remained under-populated relative to its official population projections throughout the three visits I made to Ordos. Given that most consumer activity of residents in the new city still revolved around the older city of Dongsheng, the low population density of the new city made the continuity of commercial services very uncertain. Shopping malls meant to play host to international brands and cosmopolitan consumers were desolated; visitors to the mall were events as opposed to normality. Found in every residential community was a commercial strip bounded by one or two rows of shophouses, with the ground level providing retail shops which service residents living in nearby estates. While these strips enjoyed greater foot traffic than the malls, shopkeepers still found it hard to keep businesses afloat. With the exception of banks and shops providing mobile phone services, all other forms of businesses appeared transient. In the commercial strip I frequent during my field stays, I observed shops closing down and replaced by something else each subsequent time I returned to the field. Thus, even in spaces integrated into the everyday residential life, the instability, the absence of permanence, gave the city an atmosphere of flux and transience.

The same could be said about field subjects. In

spite that more residents had moved into the new city between 2012 and 2014, consistency of a research sample was hard to establish. When I started on research, I had intended my sample to mostly consist of urban residents of one field site - Ordos City. Urban residents would be defined by residents with urban *hukou* (household registration status) and migrants without a hukou but had decided to make the new city their home and future. However, given the economic crisis that befell Ordos in early to mid-2012 lingered even during my last field stay in summer 2014, what was defined residence, home, and future would change not only for my research but my field subjects as well. It would also transform how I considered and define *field* and *field-site*.

Consequently, this influenced me to undertake a 'multi-sited' strategy (Marcus, 1999). Except for residents who were in relatively stable employment such as the civil service, a significant number experienced financial precarity that compelled mobility. There were residents with Ordos' urban *hukou* but had fled to neighbouring cities due to debt. To them, Ordos was home but not where the future could be ensured. My interviews with them were conducted in these other cities where respondents perceived to be 'new beginnings and new futures'. Some respondents interviewed in 2012 had moved when I returned to the city in summer 2013, and contact was lost. Then when I returned in 2014, there were also new informants made in the previous year that had now disappeared. The difficulty in seeking permanent employment in the city demanded many residents to seek economic opportunities elsewhere. For them, the transcience that permeated the city was manifested in their future-orientations and their relations to the city. There were informants who would leave the city with little notice and re-appeared a few days or weeks later, explaining that their entrepreneurial endeavours took them to a neighbouring city or further. These endeavours never gained permanence, more often a 'quick fix' for capital which would sustain them till the next opportunity was designed or came along. Their future was limited to the temporal boundaries of what came next. They returned to Ordos because they had regarded the city as home no matter how precarious

their future at present might be.

Rather than precarity, mobility can also be a result of privilege. These even more mobile informants were residents whose forms of capital were desired by local officials and their aspirations for Ordos to be a global city. The latter were individuals with a cosmopolitan outlook (and education) but with nationalist desires to return 'home' and contribute to realising the global future of Ordos. There were two sisters: the elder was a fresh Beijing University graduate applying to do graduate studies in the United States, and the younger was a management major at the Inner Mongolian University. I had met both sisters fortuitously at the Hohhot Airport while waiting for our transit flight to Ordos[6]. When I returned to the field in 2014, the elder sister was already enrolled in Boston University with plans to make her future in the States. The younger sister was preparing to depart for a private school in Vancouver to prepare for college admission in a Canadian university. According to her, a degree from a Canadian university would make a 'much better future'. Strangely, while I had interacted with both sisters during my field trips to Ordos, in-depth interviews with them were conducted elsewhere: once in Singapore and another in Berlin. During both occasions, the sisters were on holiday trips and sought me out. In Berlin, I was introduced to another Ordos local by a mutual friend. He was an urban planning major at a German university. Like the sisters, discussions with this Ordos local was never conducted in Ordos itself. In late 2016, I had already moved back to Singapore from Berlin. He had returned to China after graduation and had shared with me through a messaging app that his idea of 'future' had changed following a brief stay in Ordos. I had a follow-up interview with him in Shanghai where he had found employment in an architectural firm. While my introductions to these highly mobile informants from Ordos were by chance, gaining access to them was conditioned on my own mobility that was embedded in a privileged position as a Singaporean pursuing a doctoral degree at a German university and whose research was in China. Mirroring travel and future trajectories of these subjects, my multiple lives in Singapore, Berlin, and cities in China enabled field

research to be extended beyond the field site of Ordos, thereby gaining access to another particularly mobile group of informants. Moreover, rapport was most easily established with this group of individuals given that we shared similar class habitus.

In the case of Ordos, given that the nature of the field itself is in flux, it disrupted the ethnographic mission of gaining access to insider knowledge. Was insider knowledge even possible when transience disables permanence of sociality? If sociality was in flux, then can one produce an in-depth or 'thick' description of the field? Could there be an emplacement of the urban ethnography I was trying to produce? Disappearing, highly mobile subjects also meant having to find new informants and establishing new contacts with each subsequent research trip. Thus, who was included in a research sample was always changing with each field stay. 'This number is no longer in service' had generated high levels of anxiety. Trust and rapport always had to be rebuilt with new informants. To track absent-present subjects, field site was no longer contained within a city. Mobility was demanded. Fieldwork had transformed into something more extensive than what I had previously imagined it to be: a singular field site. Sometimes, I would travel to neighbouring cities to interview or observe through interactions with these informants who had a spectral relation with Ordos. The willingness to travel had worked to build good relations with informants, perceived by them as 'sincere gestures' and therefore, deserving of trust. This perceived sincerity also reduced the inevitable instrumentality that characterised relationships between researcher and informant, and thus very helpful in building close rapport.

Concluding Remarks

To a large extent, urban ethnography involves emplacement; that the urban context has stable and relative permanence to its material and social relations. Studying ghost cities disrupt these ethnographic expectations. This does not mean that there is no sociality to be discovered, but its spectral quality defies emplacement. In Ordos, while the physical infra-

structure of the city exists, its city-ness and the various ways it is and can be represented by is transient. A common complaint by informants is that 'things are always changing around here. It is hard to say for certain.' Well-conceived research strategies and preparation in content proved inadequate when there were highly mobile and disappearing subjects, or managing psychological anxiety when faced with potential threats of expulsion from the field. Certainly, in Ordos, both these factors were never documented and were only discovered 'on the job'. This could only mean that gaining access and 'insider' knowledge would be even more labourious and time-consuming than it already is in more conventional contexts. Nonetheless, field research is essentially learning 'on the job'. Intricacies and complexities are mostly discovered in the field. Being in the field demands contingency responses, flexibility, and as all researchers can attest to, some good luck to help you along.

Notes

[1] Every city has the same department.

[2] I was not spared from this 'friendly advice' even from hotel administrators. Each time during my extended field stays, hotel staff would ask for a name-card, my 'intentions' for being in Ordos, and other instrusive questions which were not observed for check-in protocol for Chinese nationals. Due to the high vacancy rate of the hotels in the new city, identity checks for foreign visitors became more salient.

[3] The extent of severity of the economic crisis is disputed by my resident informants who were experiencing financial difficulties and reduced life conditions after the crisis.

[4] In the field, even without a figure of authority shadowing my research, establishing trust with respondents was in itself challenging. Haunted by rumours of political censure, interview respondents explicitly requested no audio recording. Data had to be documented the old-fashioned way, by pen and paper, and I could only depend on my memory during transcribing. Nonetheless, with repeated interactions and visits to the field, trust and rapport were eventually established.

[5] Although I had not sought consent from local authorities for field access, I was always honest with respondents in the field. I never hid my position as an academic researcher. Without exception, I informed

each and every respondent that our interactions were observed and would constitute part of research data, and spoken consent was sought and given for formal interviews.

[6] Hohhot or commonly known as Hushi to Chinese nationals, is the capital city of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region.

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