Ethics in Social Science Research on China

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Although research ethics remains an underdiscussed topic in the field of Chinese studies, it is becoming increasingly important due to evolving research practice standards and growing international distrust of the Chinese Party-State. This essay draws from the relevant literature and the author’s own experiences to offer a reflection on professional, personal, and political ethics in social science research in China. It argues that we must recognise the complex trade-offs involved rather than proposing simple solutions. Social research in authoritarian settings such as contemporary China requires delicately weighing different options, none of which will be ideal, if we do not want to forgo any chance of firsthand data-gathering inside the system.

Research ethics is an underdiscussed topic in Chinese studies that has only recently attracted more attention due to increasing geopolitical tensions and the concomitant anxieties about China’s shifting global role. In this essay, I aim to reflect on often-overlooked aspects of research ethics in the study of contemporary China and consider the implications for the field going forward. My comments proceed in three steps, discussing professional, personal, and political ethics. This is a simple heuristic distinction and does not define clearly separated fields as, in practice, these dimensions overlap and interact in complex ways. Thus, my main argument is that, as with many other questions of empirical research, when considering research ethics, we are...
presented with trade-offs and must make difficult choices, often representing outcomes that are far from ideal.

Professional Ethics

While different disciplines have their own understandings and standards for ensuring research ethics, approaches have become institutionalised over time. Standards were first developed for biomedical research, leading to frequent complaints among social scientists about the ‘bioethical imperialism’ that had invaded their academic disciplines (Emmerich 2016; Zhang 2017: 149). The objection is that the standards of ethical conduct developed for biomedical research may not be appropriate for the social sciences—in fact, they may even be counterproductive (Sleeboom-Faulkner et al. 2017). Moreover, there is a geographical component to this advance of formalisation in research ethics as well. Like many academic trends, it started in the United States and expanded throughout the Anglophone world. In contrast, in continental Europe, it is not yet quite as entrenched (Sleeboom-Faulkner et al. 2017: 73 ff.). In addition, Chinese studies—as a form of interdisciplinary ‘area studies’—seemingly continues to be less affected by this standardisation than many social science disciplines.

There is considerable controversy about proper research ethics practices. What is the problem? From the critics’ point of view, the institutionalisation of research ethics in the form of an obligatory ethics review before any research project involving ‘human subjects’ introduces a ‘regulatory straightjacket and ethical principles of standard research models’ (Sleeboom-Faulkner et al. 2017: 73). Social scientists are forced to mimic biomedical researchers and their methodology (usually laboratory experiments). As an unintended consequence, social researchers may become cynical and see research ethics reviews as nothing more than futile exercises in checking the right boxes and using the correct jargon to gain approval and get on with their research. Building on Guillemin and Gillam (2004), Zhang (2017: 150) calls this ‘proce-
once—so alien does the concept seem to be for both Chinese informants and China scholars. Beyond this, there are practical limitations, too. For instance, reporting on her fieldwork on resettlement in the Three Gorges Dam project, McDonald-Wilmsen (2009: 298) explains that she had to make do with verbal consent (not tape-recorded) since many of the survey respondents were unable to read or write.

This is not to say that the question of informed consent should be taken lightly in the context of Chinese studies, but I argue that we must discuss and develop our own standards for how to obtain it. As a master’s student in 1997, I participated in a study aimed at identifying appropriate sites for organic cotton pilot studies in southern Hebei Province. Our team was looking not just at the environmental and economic conditions of the villages in question, but also at aspects of gender and local politics. The village leaders had an interest in having their locality selected as a pilot site and were taking my colleague and me to various households for interviews (as well as being interviewed themselves).

Two ethical questions with respect to informed consent emerged. First, how much of a voluntary choice did our informants really have if village cadres brought foreign researchers into their homes? Second, even though all concerned knew what the study was ostensibly conducted for, none of them could have known that I was going to use the data for my MA thesis, which was later turned into a book and an article (Alpermann 2001a, 2001b), on village self-administration. The reason is simple: I did not know this myself at the time. So, there was no way of getting their informed consent before, and arguably also not later, given the very limited channels of communication in rural China at the time. I do not think that reusing the data for different research outputs is a problem per se, as this is in line with recent requests to make all data available for secondary analysis by other scholars (which presents its own problems; see Glasius et al. 2018: 108 ff.). But since these later studies looked at birth-control implementation at the grassroots level, including the collection of very personal information in this policy area from our informants, this is not a trivial matter. My justification for using the data was that they were completely anonymous and even the placenames below the county level were protected. Therefore, no direct ‘harm’ was being done to the interviewees, while the ‘benefit’ of shedding light on a previously understudied aspect of rural governance could be achieved.

In further defence of this research practice, one could argue that even though I considered the data on birth control to be ‘very private’, this was certainly not the case for the local villagers and cadres. In fact, part of village self-administration in this field is to openly display such information on large blackboards in the main square to enhance ‘transparency’. Readers can judge whether these justifications suffice. My point here is that formalised regulations on informed consent would not necessarily have helped in such a case because: 1) we cannot know whether participation is completely voluntary if a local official is present, and 2) getting approval from a research ethics committee and having a form signed by informants are next to meaningless when the data are later used in ways other than the original purposes. At least with respect to the first point, the experience prompted me to take a different approach during my PhD research and instead conduct interviews with private businesspeople exclusively, without the presence of any officials (Alpermann 2010: 196).

Regarding the second issue of prior approval, de Seta (2020: 89 ff.) touches on similar issues in a radically different case—namely, digital ethnography in China. The more connected world of the internet today is not a guarantee of easier solutions in terms of informed consent but instead presents new challenges: ‘These discussions move research ethics away from the evaluation of risk and informed consent prescriptions of human subject research, towards more relational and situational ethics negotiated according to the digital media context at hand’ (de Seta 2020: 90).

Returning to the special position of the Chinese studies field, there is another conundrum. Funding agencies usually emphasise that whenever a relevant portion of the research is conducted abroad, the laws and regulations of that country must be respected. This is one reason research ethics has become more salient over the past few years for
those conducting research in China. Since the People's Republic of China is an authoritarian state under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), it has never been fully open to social research. In the past, however, it was often possible to conduct even fairly large-scale surveys on political issues in collaboration with Chinese counterparts. These academic partners would usually be more knowledgeable than outsiders when it came to navigating the political minefield of academic research in the country. For instance, they would suggest an appropriate wording for questionnaire items or facilitate access to localities where the foreign researcher would be given greater leeway (Dickson 2010; Tsai 2010). With the hardening of politics under the current CCP leader, Xi Jinping, Chinese authorities have become much more restrictive in granting access and allowing data collection. One indication of this enhanced vigilance is a national campaign against foreign spies that began in 2016 (Chen 2016; Kuo 2018). Another is the tightening regulations on data protection and privacy over recent years. So, when organising a survey under these conditions, a foreign researcher must consider whether the Chinese partners are putting themselves in danger by misjudging the sensitivity of a study. We can no longer console ourselves that those domestic collaborators will be able to correctly sense the political problems and steer clear of them—particularly as ‘red lines’ are often ‘fluid’ in authoritarian settings (Glasius et al. 2018: 40 ff.).

Being misidentified as a ‘spy’ is neither a new danger nor reserved for those researchers gathering large-n quantitative data (see, for instance, Franceschini 2020). Wu (2021: 108 ff.) reports of a ‘spy episode’ during her ethnographic fieldwork in Guizhou Province in 2009. Studying educational policies among ethnic minorities—a potentially sensitive topic—she came under suspicion of gathering data to ‘make China lose face’ (丢脸). Given the accusation of ‘smearing China’ is heard even more often these days, chances are that studying almost anything that could potentially make China (more precisely, the Chinese Government) look bad could land you in a similar situation. Wu (2021: 109) had to navigate these difficulties, which gave rise to ‘a range of emotions—guilt, embarrassment, frustration, fear, stress, disturbance’—while trying to cling on to her field site. In the end, she decided to leave for another locality and wait until things had calmed before returning to the first.

Nor does this issue arise only with politically touchy issues. When conducting interviews among private businesses in the cotton industry in a rural county in Shandong (Alpermann 2010), I was suspected of being a spy for the local tax bureau or for foreign cotton companies. This was bemusing at the time, but in the current political climate these accusations would have seemed more alarming, especially in the context of the arrest and long-term detention of two Canadian citizens, Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig (BBC 2021).

### Personal Ethics

While consent forms establish a paper trail to show that proper procedures have been followed, they do not guarantee the research is doing no ‘harm’ to the participants (Emmerich 2016: 18). Ideally, it should be beneficial to them, if only in the sense of making their voices heard within the academic community. A fundamental idea here is that of reciprocity. Participants in any study give up something of their own—at a minimum, their time and the personal information they reveal. What can they expect in return? What is ethical to give in return without compromising the quality of the data and the ethics of the researcher? Should such a counter-gift be made upfront and openly or should one wait until the right moment arises to pay back the respondents and informants? Zhang (2017: 151 ff.) argues for an ‘ethics of care’ that extends beyond the fieldwork phase. An example he gives for such a ‘post-research ethics’ is his helping former interlocutors with English translations of captions and texts for a tourist site about Jinmen. While these are, as he admits, only humble contributions to local development, they go some way to repaying the debts incurred during fieldwork. The case may look innocuous enough, but even here one can sense there could be ethical strings attached. Zhang lent his help to govern-
ment-sponsored touristification of the research locality—something with which one may not feel comfortable in all cases.

Reciprocity can become much more uncomfortable, of course. Discussing his fieldwork among underworld figures in Chengdu, Osburg (2013) beautifully exemplifies how a particular ‘godfather’ called Brother Fatty (胖哥) came to befriend him:

Fatty, Chen, and their xiongdi subordinates were masters of a type of relationship-building referred to in the Sichuan dialect as goudui, which can be understood as a form of courtship for some instrumental purpose ... Given their seductive onslaught of gestures of care and generosity toward me, maintaining distance in a way that did not threaten to undermine our relationship became a serious challenge. (Osburg 2013: 300)

He argues that anthropologists easily fall prey to ‘ethnographic seduction’ (Anthony Robben’s term) because this gives them the feeling of exploring ‘hidden worlds’. But, as Osburg writes: ‘By being “won over” or “seduced” by our informants, we may risk legitimizing their claims to morality, virtue, or honor at the expense of more critical perspectives’ (2013: 301).

My own experiences support Osburg’s observations. While doing research in Hubei Province, I encountered a local official who sought through various ways to gain advantage of me (or so it felt, although I was clearly also looking to get what I wanted from him). First, he insisted on taking me out for lunch, which devolved into an afternoon of drinking and mahjong, neither of which I enjoyed. A few days later, he followed this up with a dinner with his family. His hope was that I might be of help in getting his child into a German university. I patiently explained that I was in no position to do so and could only offer general advice. Failing this, he next asked for euros since this currency was still hard to get in the Hubei countryside. One of his superiors was preparing to go to Europe and he wanted to make him a ‘gift’. Again, being a PhD student on a scholarship, I could not see how I might help. After this, he first took home his wife and child, then offered me a ride to my hotel. Once in the car, he proposed continuing the night with a visit to a nearby brothel. This was the point when I decided I had had enough.

While I could extricate myself from this uncomfortable situation, I kept thinking about what it told me about conducting research in China. With hindsight, I believe this official wanted to enhance our social relations so he could invoke reciprocity to get what he wanted. He did so in ways that were shaped by the habitus of his group, for whom dining, drinking, visiting karaoke clubs and brothels, as well as handing out bribes, were all too common. Little did he know how repulsive all of this was to me, coming as I did from a very different social and cultural background.

As a male researcher, I never felt like the object of ‘sexual conquest’, as described by three female authors in a landmark paper (Schneider et al. 2021), even when I had to ‘sing for my data’, as they call it, in a karaoke parlour. But refusing to play along and accept an offered sexual service does potentially risk continued access to the field because the refusal may cause the host to lose face. Fortunately, this has never occurred to me because, in those rare instances, the hosts were not important gatekeepers for me. But, like what Schneider et al. describe, these experiences contributed to my decision to shift my research focus away from rural governance. Thus, they had concrete ramifications for my research.

There are other ways in which doing research that depends on Chinese (local) officials can be ethically challenging. For instance, it appears to be quite common that local governments want to be briefed by their foreign guests about their findings (Glasius et al. 2018: 61). Having been in their locality for some time, one cannot easily reject such a request since it is based on reciprocity. At the same time, it would be foolish to do so because discussing these issues with local officials could provide important pointers on how the local state views the issue at hand, what their policy goals are, and so on. But how to get through these briefings without revealing too much about one’s informants can be tricky. This is even more so when, as is frequently the case, a local TV crew happens to be around as well. In such a scenario,
the foreign researcher is expected to play along and find words of praise for the host government. Again, this raises obvious ethical issues. One does not want the host to lose face, but on the other hand, one may be unwilling to profusely praise the government’s performance—not least because this may open oneself up to criticism on political grounds (see below). So, one must strike a balance that feels comfortable.

In these matters of reciprocity, a researcher is well advised to be open and honest about what he or she can and cannot do. Leading someone on and pretending to be a greater potential help than is realistic are not ethical conduct, even if they lead to short-term gain. Conversely, as a fieldworker, one needs to develop a good sense of where real friendship starts. For example, one of my acquaintances during field research was a businessman manufacturing plastic flowers. Even though I was never able to open the German market in plastic flowers for him in the way he may have hoped when we first met, we are still friends. I take this as a sign that I was able to manage his expectations successfully.

**Political Ethics**

We all have our own political values and opinions, and these undoubtedly impact on our research; the only question is whether we acknowledge such an influence and reflect on it. This starts with the selection of topics we study, which are not pre-determined, though they are certainly influenced, by the state of the field or academic trends. Even so, we have lots of room to choose varying angles of how to study a subject. For instance, scholars researching China’s nongovernmental organisation sector may be inclined towards opening up spaces for social activism; those who are attracted to environmental topics will often hold ecology and natural protection dear; others are animated by specific personal concerns to engage in research on gender issues, LGBTQ+ rights, or similar topics. However, none of these topics can claim to occupy higher moral ground than other questions for social research. It is simply impossible to unambiguously assign an ‘ethical value’ to a study on LGBTQ+ rights and compare it to one on ‘traditional family values’ because there is no commonly accepted moral standard for doing so. Likewise, we cannot say that a study of China’s civil society is morally superior to one of the private business sector.

What further complicates matters in the Chinese context is the fact that scholars might be subjected to suspicions of having ‘sold out’ to the Party-State. The economist Carsten Holz (2007) was among the first to ask the question: ‘Have China scholars all been bought?’ Even before his publication, China scholars reflected on what it meant to be conducting research ‘in the footsteps of the Communist Party’ (Hansen 2006) or being ‘disciplined’ as a fieldworker (Yeh 2006). But Holz framed his observations in more confrontational terms. In essence, he charged that due to a combination of factors—including opportunism and intimidation by the Party-State—international China scholars had established cosy relations with the regime up to the point where they engaged in self-censorship and presented a much too benign image of China’s realities. Very similar points have been raised more recently (Fulda 2021; Fulda and Missal 2021). There is no question that China’s Party-State has a deliberate policy of courting ‘foreign friends’. As Brady (2000) has shown, the CCP has strategically used ‘friends of China’ for a long time. The real question is whether China scholars are naive enough to not reflect on their own role and, conversely, whether they can make strategic use of the affordances offered to gain insights into facets of China normally closed to them or engage in meaningful interactions that would otherwise be impossible. It is hazardous to generalise about this, since the dilemmas and predicaments are real, but researchers will deal with them in their own way. So, the outcomes will indubitably vary. Moreover, the argument that ‘China scholars have been bought’—with money, honorary positions, and so on—and now report positively about China may suffer from reverse causality. It is just as likely that Chinese institutions seek out those scholars to grant them the
above-mentioned favours exactly because they hold opinions and do research that the party sees as favourable—and not the other way around.

Nevertheless, one should be mindful of the potential pitfalls of close relations with official Chinese counterparts. During my time at the Center for Chinese Studies at the University of California at Berkeley, I got to know a Chinese historian who also was a guest there. We got along well and when that person attained a professorship at a highly respected university in eastern China, I was invited to attend a conference there. The catch: it was at one of the newly created Institutes of Marxism (short: 马院, mayuan). These are part of President Xi’s drive to reinforce ideological rigour in Chinese higher education. Therefore, I was wary about becoming too close, yet intrigued to learn more about how such an institute functions, what its role and position within the university is, and so on. The conference topic was ‘consultative democracy’ (协商民主)—a concept used by the CCP to deflect criticism of the lack of electoral accountability within the Chinese polity. Attending such a conference allowed me to gain insight into the latest thinking among leading Chinese scholars about the evolution of CCP rule. Of course, in such a setting, one cannot expect to meet political dissidents, but there was a fair degree of variety in views on which direction political evolution should take. Thus, I clearly benefited from the insights gained.

But what about the costs incurred? To begin with, I had to lend my ‘white face’ to the organisers’ attempt to enhance their reputation. It soon became apparent that the primary reason for the presence of just four foreign participants was not the content of their presentations. Institutes of Marxism were still quite recent inventions and were responsible for classes such as ‘Deng Xiaoping Theory’, which students of all majors had to take. But mayuan did not have their own degree programs or were just getting started in creating them. Despite being lavishly funded, the institutes were, therefore, suffering from low academic prestige. The conference was one attempt to raise their scholarly profile and having international guests was a key component of this strategy.

Next, my ‘old friend’ asked me to supply their dean, whom I had met during the conference, and his entourage with a letter of invitation to visit Germany. The expected academic value of this exchange was low, I admit. Nevertheless, I complied out of a feeling of reciprocity. As anticipated, the trip involved not much more than vague ideas being swapped about future activities. At this stage, I felt it important to make clear that any cooperation between our own institute and the Chinese side would have to go beyond the mayuan for practical as well as political reasons. In the years that followed, a second delegation visited Germany very much along the same lines.

Then, I was invited back to give a ‘high-level talk’ at the Chinese university. This was a prestigious invitation—an honour that should go to scholars holding a Nobel Prize or the like, according to the documents I saw. There was a budget to cover my travel to China and the cost of my hotel there. I hesitated, since without doubt, there would be a catch. This was revealed in due course: the topic of my presentation was set to be China’s Belt and Road Initiative and its ‘community of common destiny’—both intimately connected to Xi’s political agenda. In the end, I accepted because I saw it as a chance to give a talk to a large auditorium full of young Chinese and pass on some of my thoughts. Addressing more than 300 Chinese students in an elite university is an opportunity I do not get often (actually, only this once). Needless to say, this meant I had to find an indirect way to frame my criticism of Chinese foreign policy and keep my distance from the ideological mantra of the ‘community of common destiny’. I believe I managed both, but others may not be convinced. The same risk was inherent in the next step in my relationship with the Institute of Marxism. My acquaintance approached me one day with a request to join an international advisory board for a centre on ‘Xi Jinping Thought’ they intended to establish. My workload would be low, it was promised, just a trip to China once a year to attend a board meeting. Again, I was torn between accepting and rejecting. And again, in the end, I
allowed my name to be put forward. The reason was simply my curiosity about what was going on in CCP ideology and the related academic field. Would a position on an advisory board not offer me a unique position from which to study these developments and see what was happening behind closed doors? In the end, the application was rejected so I never had the chance to answer this question. At any rate, being on such a board could have rendered me open to attack. Given the current political climate, this is not an entirely theoretical possibility, since China scholars are once again under scrutiny regarding their political orientations and are often not given the benefit of the doubt (Fulda 2021; Fulda and Missal 2021).

However, many who accuse Sinologists of ‘lacking spine’ do not consider the justification scholars may have for treading cautiously. A survey among China scholars conducted by Greitens and Truex (2019) regarding their ‘repressive experiences’ is enlightening in this regard. It demonstrates that outright acts of repression against researchers or their collaborators and interlocutors are rare but do happen. However, they also show that these usually have the opposite of the intended result: they make China scholars more critical of the Party-State and more willing to speak up about this. Furthermore, they find:

[A] majority of respondents (68 per cent) identified self-censorship as a concern for the field, but provided several important correctives to accusations of careerism and cowardice. Respondents stressed the moral requirement to protect one’s interlocutors and subjects. Many also articulated a distinction between the ethical imperative to avoid self-censorship in the core tasks of academic work versus what they perceived to be a more discretionary choice about adopting publicly critical stances, especially on topics outside an individual’s research expertise. (Greitens and Truex 2019: 351)

Thus, the charge that China scholars collectively acted naively or opportunistically or were intimidated by the Party-State to adopt self-censorship is simplistic and does not come close to adequately grasping the delicate dilemmas with which we must deal. In fact, some China specialists would argue that their foremost duty as publicly financed professors is to provide the public with relevant research output on China, including its official policies, and that to do so, they need to maintain access to their field of study. Hence, they say, a degree of moderation in public statements and of mimicry while in China is necessary and even an ethical requirement to live up to their primary task.

Again, doing social research on China presents us with real dilemmas for which there is no simple solution. We need to appreciate this complexity if we are to make progress in our debate on research ethics. It seems also pertinent to broaden the debate and recognise that social scientists working in authoritarian contexts throughout the world grapple with similar issues (Glasius et al. 2018).