



## Confronting Sexual Harassment in the Field

#MeToo Within the Ivory Tower and Beyond

'Harassment'. PC: @frag-ileruins (Flickr.com).

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*This essay sheds light on gendered violence negotiated by researchers conducting fieldwork in China. It examines coping and resistance strategies employed by female researchers, and analyses how the female researcher's body is disciplined in a hetero-patriarchal setting. Linking gendered field experience to the #MeToo movement in China, the essay discusses the role of academics in feminist movements and the implications for the broader civil rights issues in the Chinese context.*

It was midnight when I was making a phone call from my fieldwork site in southeastern China to my friend, who was also in the midst of her own fieldwork in south-western China. 'I was sexually harassed by a participant,' I said over the phone. She replied: 'So it happened to you too.' My friend is one of the many female researchers who have encountered similar experiences of gendered violence during fieldwork. This 'rather common' gendered fieldwork experience

(Kloß 2017), however, has yet to lead to the institutionalisation of pre-fieldwork training or post-trauma support, largely because the male body has historically been assumed as a neutral instrument and male positionality as the normative basis of fieldwork (Ross 2015; Hanson and Richards 2017; Rinkus et al. 2018). Yet, in reality all researchers are potentially vulnerable to gender-based violence (Green et al. 1993). In writing this article, I am calling for an open dialogue on gendered threats and risks faced by field researchers, and to better prepare graduate students to anticipate and negotiate sexual politics in hetero-patriarchal settings. I further contextualise my own gendered fieldwork experience within the #MeToo movement in China, and discuss the role of academics in feminist movements vis-à-vis broader civil rights issues in illiberal settings.

## Enshrouded in Silence

Gendered violence in the field has been systematically overlooked in scholarly and professional literature for multiple reasons. In addition to general concerns about blaming and stigmatising the victims, researchers in particular have been inhibited from speaking about sexual and sexualised problems encountered while conducting their research for fear that it may undermine their academic credibility and professional standing (Moreno 1995). Many graduate researchers have scant pre-fieldwork knowledge about handling gendered violence in the field, and have to recover, on their own, from post-traumatic feelings of frustration, failure, guilt, shame, humiliation, fear, depression, and disempowerment. As Sundberg (2003, 188) notes, the peculiar silence implies academia ‘fails to provide adequate guidance for students preparing for research, leading many to individualize and therefore conceal

the challenges they encounter.’ This situation further depoliticises structural violence by obscuring power relations.

A lack of institutional support further discourages victims from reporting gendered violence. As Huang (2016) incisively points out when reflecting on her experience of being raped during fieldwork, the researcher’s body is institutionally recognised as ‘merely a liability’, with institutional concern for researcher safety largely revolving ‘around the university not wanting to be held responsible’. To date, safety guidelines of Institutional Review Boards largely focus on event-based threats like warfare, robbery, and disaster, paying little attention to the pervasive structural violence researchers have to negotiate on a daily basis. When I was completing detailed forms to apply for the approval of my research project before entering the field, I was deeply frustrated by Institutional Review Board’s guidelines and instructions that were unapologetically Western-based and context-insensitive, despite researchers conducting fieldwork across a wide variety of contexts with disparate sociopolitical settings. Researchers, and especially female researchers, are exposed to a spectrum of gender-based violence in the field, ranging from verbal harassment to sexual assault; yet, often it is the researchers themselves who are held accountable for gendered violence in a way that is textbook victim blaming. I did not inform my institution of my own personal incident for fear that safety issues may be used to restrict future access to the field and restrain my mobility.

## Saying No to Power

To say no to a harasser is not hard, but it is rather difficult to say no to power. It is a common experience for researchers to struggle with ending relationships with powerful participants perpetrating gendered violence,

considering that perpetrators are typically key informants or gatekeepers (Mügge 2013; Clark and Grant 2015; Thambiah et al. 2016). I called my friend not only for emotional support but also for professional advice on how to handle sexual harassment during fieldwork. Should I have dropped this contact, even if the harasser was a gatekeeper controlling accesses to research resources and opportunities? The stakes were high. Yet, ignoring his behaviour might have been taken as consent or an invitation, which would lead to further risks. Given that data gathered from informal and casual settings are crucial for ethnographic research, it is easy for professional boundaries to blur during interviews and interactions with participants. Managing the distance between the researcher and the research object is therefore tricky: on the one hand, the researcher has to cultivate a comfortable and encouraging atmosphere to facilitate data collection (Kaspar and Landolt 2016), while on the other hand, efforts to engage participants can be misinterpreted as sexual bargaining. In contrast to the masculine perspective that sees researchers as cultural penetrators exercising power over their subjects, in reality researchers are often in a more dependent position due to the unidirectional flow of information. In many contexts, female researchers are in an even more vulnerable position due to their contextually-subordinate position as a woman in sexist-patriarchal settings, and have to balance fieldwork progress and personal safety on a daily basis.

Many female researchers—including myself—are not unprepared for gendered violence. Frequently we assume defensive positioning against gendered violence, which, ironically, renders us agents of the patriarchal system that reinforce and reproduce gendered norms in the field. One of the strategies to avoid unwanted male attention is to neutralise gender differences. For example, I cut my long hair and kept my hair short during fieldwork. Many female researchers wear old-fashioned

and conservative clothes in the field. One researcher shared with me the story that she had thought a skirt suit might look more ‘formal’ than a pantsuit; however, after she was groped by a participant, she decided never to wear a skirt again during fieldwork. Another strategy is to discourage participants from viewing the researcher as sexually available by wearing a (fake) wedding ring or using a (fake) couple photo as a mobile phone wallpaper. However, defensive strategies do not guarantee immunity from gendered threats and risks, and female researchers experience threats in unique ways and under constantly-evolving circumstances. Moreover, all preventive strategies are in essence victim-blaming and body discipline, through which female researchers internalise the male gaze and patriarchal logic.

Personally, I have faced two-fold masculinity when conducting fieldwork. Geographically, most of my participants have been from the Chaoshan region (consisting of the cities of Chaozhou, Jieyang, and Shantou in Guangdong province), a place known for its particularly patriarchal society. Throughout my fieldwork, I have been repeatedly reminded of my status as a ‘leftover woman’ (剩女) and told that I would not be able to find a husband once I completed a PhD degree. Compared with unwanted physical contact, I viewed personal questions and offensive comments about my appearance or personal life as more bearable. Sectorally, since I was conducting fieldwork in a male-dominated ‘high-tech’ industry, only two of my participants were female. Nevertheless, during these two interviews I was much more comfortable, reassured, less distracted, and more able to concentrate on my research, as defensive strategies against violence can be time-, energy-, and emotion-consuming. One female informant suggested that we have the interview at her home so that she could take care of her two kids, and I agreed. I would not even consider the suggestion had it been made by a male participant.

## Empowered by #MeToo

Since my initial fieldwork experiences, I have been wondering about other resistance strategies—beyond passive coping mechanisms—that female researchers could take up to challenge oppressive sexist ideology and patriarchal domination. The time I was in the field (2017–18) coincided with the peak of the #MeToo movement in China (Lam 2019). During fieldwork, I closely followed the progress and setbacks of the movement in the news and on social media. In January 2018, Luo Xixi posted an open letter on Weibo accusing her former advisor Chen Xiaowu, a professor at Beihang University, of sexual misconduct, which marked the beginning the #MeToo movement in China. After that, the movement spread from university campuses and exploded across Chinese new media platforms, with repercussions far beyond the ivory tower. Despite tightened authoritarian control, this epic feminist awakening has inspired and resonated with other social movements in China. The case of Yue Xin is a notable example. Yue, a graduate of Peking University, became known to the public in April 2018 due to her questioning of the university's handling of a #MeToo case that caused a student's suicide two decades earlier. She later went missing while working in support of the Jasic workers in Shenzhen in August 2018 (Zhang 2019). Another example is that of Xu Chao, an environmental investigator working at Greenpeace East Asia, who helped her friend Xianzi in her case against a high-profile TV host Zhu Jun in July 2018 (Yang 2018).

The Internet has allowed feminist movements to take off in China. Relying on social media, #MeToo in China has largely been led by young and well-educated women living in cities or abroad (Fan 2018). Being a victim of gendered violence myself, I have been empowered by survivor solidarity expressed through the movement. Drawing on my field experience

and observations, I view fieldwork as political in essence, as the field is always politically situated, shaping and shaped by interactions between the researcher and researched. Data collection and interpretation are inherently contingent on the identity and positionality of the researcher, as well as on field settings and dynamics. Confronting sexual harassment in the field in the midst of #MeToo has forced me to reflect upon my identity as a professional researcher, an organic intellectual, and a Chinese national and citizen, and to rethink the role of academics in forging bonds between the ivory tower and the field or the world at large.

Luo Xixi, the first survivor to come forward in the #MeToo movement in China, stated that she was encouraged by her belief that her silence might result in more people being victimised. Inspired and emboldened by her and other courageous survivors, in this essay I have attempted to cast light on the unspeakable and uncomfortable realities of gendered violence faced and negotiated by female researchers in the field on a daily basis, in the hope of helping actual and potential victims to feel less isolated. ■