Gender and fieldwork in China: Investigating migrant workers in restaurants

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*My multiple roles as a friend and a researcher serve to explain the diversity of my behaviour under different circumstances. I argue that the influence of gender, class and hukou on the research process is subtle and complex, writes **Yang Shen**.*

Fieldwork experiences are not only influenced by the geographical location of the field and timing that a researcher enters. Arguably, the experience of a white male middle class researcher conducting fieldwork in urban China in the 1990s is hugely different from the experience of a female Shanghainese researcher focusing on urban China today. For example, Farrer (2002) did his fieldwork in Shanghai from 1993 to 1996. He wrote that 'I have about a dozen very close Shanghaiese friends who helped me and continue to help me with my research', and another dozen local friends who invited him to dance clubs, and even TV shows (Farrer, 2002: 328). He married a local Shanghai woman. As a middle class white man who conducted the fieldwork in the 1990s, his fieldwork experiences were very different from mine.

Shanghai, China
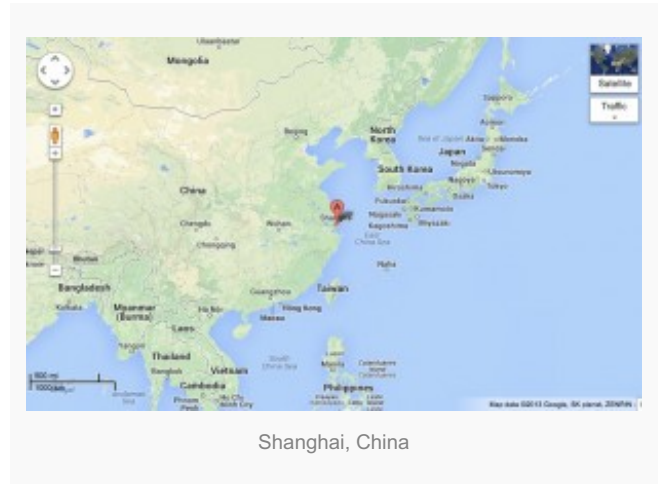
My research focuses on new-generation migrant workers (NGMs) in restaurants in Shanghai. New-generation migrant workers are defined as the second generation migrant workers following the Reform in 1978, and according to a national report published by the All China Federation of Trade Unions, refer to those whose ages are above 16 and born after the 1980s. The research explores their life experiences, the changing gender relationships, and their economic share of China's rapid development in recent years. I have conducted a series of fieldwork (in total, amounting to six months) from April 2011 to January 2013 in Shanghai.

A researcher's position has a great impact on the whole process of the research undertaken. Some western scholars discuss the identities of gender, race and class that influence the researcher's position (Killick, 1995; McCorkel and Myers, 2003; Moreno, 1995). Fieldwork in China shares similarities with fieldwork elsewhere, but remains peculiar in some ways. Since all of my informants are of Han ethnicity, and I am Han as well, race and ethnicity is not a profound aspect to consider in terms of this fieldwork in China. However, *hukou* status is an aspect that is more conspicuous in the field.

Hukou refers to the binary household registration system in China, which divides residents as urban and rural households. The binary division has been fixated since the establishment of the *hukou* system in 1958, creating the superiority of urban *hukou* holders, and the inferiority of rural *hukou* holders. Class and *hukou* status intertwine together; positioning peasant migrant workers as a disadvantaged group in the city, sometimes discriminated against by urbanites. Class is resilient within China in the context of economic growth and rising affluence, but growing inequality. Gender, class and *hukou* status intersect accounting for some differences between me and my informants, which necessitate the reasons why I need to reflect upon my personal background and how I have presented myself.

I gained the entry to the restaurant through my father. He knew the manager in person and informed him to keep the

way in which I entered the field as a secret. I told the workers that I was introduced through one of my relatives, which is the most frequent approach for the workers to get the job – through kinship networks. I presented myself to my informants as what I was – an unmarried heterosexual Shanghainese woman who was studying abroad and doing research on NGMs in the restaurant. I did not see the necessity to hide any information from my side. As suggested by Mack et al. (2005), one should give a truthful response to informants' questions in terms of one's role and what one is doing in the field. Some of my colleagues (informants), both female and male, were surprised and jealous because I am the single child in my family and then interpreted this to mean that all local Shanghainese families have only one child. They were jealous because my parents were able to put all their resources towards me, whereas they had to share the scarce resources with brothers and sisters. They were shocked that I

Indoor decorations of the restaurant, taken by Yang Shen, 2013

am an unmarried woman in my late 20s, which was very unusual in their eyes. Almost all the women they were familiar with were married in the early 20s. They justified my unmarried status because, to them, Shanghainese women prioritised their career on top of marriage, preferring to marry later in life.

My informants justified their differences with me by succinct conclusions: '*shang hai ren'*, connoting that 'you are different from us because you are a Shanghainese' even though I presented my family as an ordinary family (*putong jiating*) in Shanghai. Many of my informants had no idea what 'middle class' meant in reality, so it was proper to present my family as '*putong jiating'.* They portrayed average Shanghai families based on the customers who dined in their place of work – possessing a car, stable job, a flat in the city, certain amount of savings and pension once they retire. Their perception of my family and on the Shanghainese in general, reflected their disadvantaged situation – having no car, precarious jobs, a house in a rural area, scarce savings, little or no pension. Although not every Shanghainese family possesses a car, and not all family members have stable jobs, the overall conditions faced by a Shanghai family is much better than those in rural areas.

As discussed at the beginning, the relationships of the researcher to those researched are crucial, and the researcher's class, *hukou* status and gender are crucial to make sense of the relationships formed within the field. Oakley (1981) argues that a reciprocal relationship between an interviewee and an interviewer is more productive for research. It applies to participant observation as well. My informants were willing to reveal themselves to me more because of my role as a friend, rather than solely a researcher.

I cultivated friendships with some colleagues; Waitress Ye was one of them. She often helped me with my work and sometimes we made jokes and laughed together. She told me that her parents preferred her brother to her, which is quite normal in rural areas. Born in 1993, she had kept sponsoring her younger brother for his college fees. She told me that her brother wanted a laptop and she was about to buy one for him. I felt compassionate for her; therefore I gave her my spare laptop and taught her how to use it. Ye's accounts on her personal experiences made me emotional. I was crying in the library when writing down her story after the interview. However, as a researcher, I tried to analyse her story beyond sentiments. The more my informants disclosed to me, the more I came to realise how their personal experiences arose from uneven development in China, which motivated me to seek the ways to change social and gender inequality.

Gender is a parameter that cannot be neglected when considering the relationship between the researcher and those researched. Some scholars demonstrate that sexuality has a crucial impact on their fieldwork (Killick, 1995; Moreno, 1995). Therefore, it is necessary to explore the extent to what my gender identity influences the fieldwork. It is notable that how to protect oneself as a researcher may not be of concern for many male fieldworkers. However, female fieldworkers have to think about it carefully before entering the field.

I interviewed a male pantry helper Yao twice, both of which took place in a quiet compartment while nobody else was there. At the end of the first interview, he put his hand on my shoulder, dragging me back and preventing me from going out. I put his hand away, and left. At the beginning of the second interview, he refused to answer my questions unless I sat by his side. I refused to do so, realising that he was exerting power by taking advantage of me. We were in stalemate for around 10 minutes and then he began to cooperate. Unexpectedly, he tried to hug me at the end of the interview. I struggled to get free and cursed him 'psycho' with a feeling of disgust on my face. Based on what he had told me in the interviews, I speculated that his inappropriate behaviour was associated with his misfortunate childhood experiences, which he claimed he had revealed to no one in the restaurant except me. When we came across one another in the workplace a couple of days later, he said he wanted to marry me. I responded 'I don't want to marry you' with an emotionless face, and following the interviews, I lived in fear. I recalled the article written by Manero (1995) on her fieldwork experience of being raped by her assistant. Therefore, I told my colleagues what had happened. They responded that he had done a similar thing to an old female pantry helper not long ago. Scolding him a psycho, they advised me to keep distance from him. Soon after, he quitted the job in order to find a more profitable role and we lost contact since then.

Female dormitory, taken by Yang Shen, 2012

Contrary to my presumption that female workers encounter sexual harassment by male customers, I did not find such cases between female workers and customers. Sexual harassment was usually initiated by male colleagues in the workplace. As a young female fieldworker, gender serves as a constraint, as well as an enabler to me. As Yao told me, he would never disclose his detailed personal tragedy to any of the workers in the restaurant. My role as a researcher as well as a female sexual being enabled him to reveal himself to me. A male fieldworker would probably not encounter sexual harassment in a restaurant, but he may be unable to motivate a male migrant worker to talk about his, for example, tragic childhood.

Studying phenomena in a natural setting is emphasised as a necessary thing to do by some scholars (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). After being in the field for a while, my informants and I became close. It is inevitable for me to feel compassionate for their situation.

One day, a customer claimed that he had lost a mobile phone in the restaurant. According to Shift Leader, Xing, the customer said to table servers: 'tell your boss to be ready not to stay in the catering sector (*hun bu xia qu*) if my phone cannot be found'. Xing said in a heavy tone: 'it is a very expensive phone, even more expensive than an iPhone. It is called 'Heimei' (Blackberry). Whoever found it please turn it in, otherwise all of you will have to pay for it'. My colleagues told me that a similar incident had occurred in another branch of the restaurant chain, and the workers had shared the customer's loss. They complained the potential upcoming loss of their own money. I felt this to be unfair that the service workers had to share the customer's loss without verifying whether the customer dropped their mobile somewhere else or it was stolen in the restaurant. I expressed my opinion explicitly after the meeting, and also searched the price of a Blackberry online as proof that a Blackberry was no more expensive than an iPhone. Luckily, the customer did not ask the restaurant to compensate his loss anymore; otherwise I would have been trapped in a further conflict.

I was acutely aware that I ran the risk of changing the natural setting by challenging the unfair requirement from the customer as well as undermining the power of the shift leader, but it was unacceptable for me to keep silent under this circumstance. I behaved differently from the other workers because I have more knowledge on electronic equipment, better Internet searching skills and more consciousness of social inequality. As discussed earlier, the conventional mode of participant observation requires a researcher to minimise his/her impact on the natural settings. However, my sense of morality does not allow me to deliberately ignore abusive situations. I propose that another approach other than keeping the settings as natural as possible is to react, to intervene and then to reflect upon the aftermath – why the intervention is considered necessary and to what extent it may have changed the settings.

As discussed above, my multiple roles as a friend and a researcher serve to explain the diversity of my behaviour under different circumstances. I argue that the influence of gender, class and *hukou* on the research process is subtle and complex. It is important to point out that I am in a more privileged position than my informants because of my class and *hukou* status. My relatively advantaged status is reflected by our daily interactions, which could influence what kind of data I could collect and the process of my analysis. Moreover, I argue that female researchers need to consider sexual harassment in the pre-fieldwork risk assessment. In addition, I argue that reasonable intervention in the field may be necessary by challenging the view that researchers should minimise their impacts on the field. Above all, this contribution has drawn on my position and the relationships between me and my informants, through which I hope to contribute to the methodological discussions in terms of conducting fieldwork in China.

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Yang Shen a PhD candidate in Gender Studies at the LSE funded by China Scholarship Council. Her current research topic is New-generation Migrant Workers in the Catering Sector in Shanghai. Her research Interests cover gender and migration, contemporary China studies, and poverty reduction. She did an internship at the UN Women China in 2012. She has organised a volunteering group for children in rural Guizhou Province from 2008-2011 and she is now a columnist for the newspaper UKChinese.

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