Insider-outsider: reflections on cooperative fieldwork in a village in the West of China

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Introduction

Researchers:

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Book: Golden Goose, 2019, Palgrave.
Story 2
Zhen and her village

The village is Jin’è (金鹅) which means “Golden Goose”.

Visit years: 2012    2014    2016

Discussed with the people

Zhen was born in 1930s and had lived in the village through times of war and famine, but despite all the challenges had brought up and educated her eight children, four boys and four girls.
Oral history

Oral history records personal experiences and life stories, and so allows the researchers to explore the interpretations and meanings of different individuals (Banks-Wallace 2002, Yow 2014). Oral history has different forms including life stories, life history and personal narratives (Yow 2014). Storytelling is a pervasive mode of everyday communication (Bruner, 2002).

Not a well-organized chronology of events

Selected and evaluated

Recounted and crafted – desired impact
Oral history

• Keep the stories close as possible to that told

• Timeline--- continuity and place in the historical events.

• The first person –how the narrator thinks of world
Translation

Translation is a key component of cross-cultural research and the richness embedded in the research data can only be uncovered by making translation visible through open dialogue (Wong and Poon, 2010). Translation and back-translation are particularly important when studies are made across linguistic boundaries (Spector, Liu et al. 2015).

Real meaning

Dialect

Appropriate English
Excerpt 1

Xu: How was food during the famine time?

Participant: Food became rich in the commune canteens and people was hungry to look for things to eat.

Xu: Do you mean food was rare?

Participant: Yes, it was rich and even no any food in the canteens.
Be recognized as a cultural insider

Immersion
Even for insider researchers, local knowledge can only be accomplished through extended periods of immersion (Gokah 2006, Ramji 2008, Liamputtong 2010).

Returning-Reimmerge-Reestablish
Entering the community with foreigners---outsider
Childhood friends---become insider
Biased---balance—effectiveness

Appropriate manners: add food
Local knowledge

- **Excerpt 2**
- Xu: Did your family have food to eat?
  - Lady: YOU A, YOU A (we had, we had).

- Later in the interview.
  - Xu: What was your childhood like?
    - Lady: E A, E A (be hungry, be hungry).
    - Lady: Ta Si La, Mei You Dong Xi Chi (He - her father - died because of no food).
1 An ideal gatekeeper

The question of “Who are you?” is quickly answered by the collaborative relationship between insider and outsider.

- The outsider is more quickly accepted and brought into the network of communication.
- The bias of the insider is restrained.
2 The challenge of method

Question: “Why do you want to know this?”

• Our research aims and methods seem alien to people unfamiliar with academia and especially to those who are illiterate.

• The outsider needs to be respectful, often patient and follow the insider.

• The insider needs to be aware of the problem and be aware of the dichotomy in his or her own thinking.
3 Informants have their own agenda

Question: “If I help you, can you help me?”

• Reciprocity is an important element in all relations.
• This is something that both insider and outsider continually face.
• People often want their story to be known.
4  Question of voice

“In short, the work of the social anthropologist may be regarded as a highly complex act of translation in which the author and translator collaborate. A more precise analogy is that the relation between the psychoanalyst and his subject. The analyst enters the private world of the subject in order to learn the grammar of his private language…. It becomes scientific to the extent that the private language of intimate understanding is translated into a public language, however specialized from the layman’s point of view, which is the case of the language of psychologists.” (Pocock 1961: 88)
• The narrator’s story is an externalization of their personal experience. Unfortunately, the informants’ voices become concealed as the ethnographer interprets what she or he has collected.

• It may be that a multitude of different voices become expressed as one local voice.

• In *Golden Goose* we left the different voices to speak for themselves.
5 The edited story

“The whole truth and nothing but the truth.” Is this possible?

• How can one informant tell the whole story?
• What if the informant wants elements omitted from his or her story?
• In collaborative research the outsider wants “the whole truth”, but the insider is more selective.