



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Centre for Contemporary Chinese Studies Outstanding China Fieldwork Insights Award

| 2022 Winning Paper

China Fieldwork Insights

Top-prize Prize paper - 2022 Outstanding China Fieldwork Insights

Zihong Deng

PhD project title:

Children's agency and well-being in the context of rural-to-urban migration in China



Zihong Deng

PhD candidate

Social Policy Research Centre
UNSW Sydney

Zihong Deng is a PhD candidate in the Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales. Her research interests include migration, child protection, and social determinants of health and well-being. She has participated in fieldwork in different provinces in China and conducted structured and semi-structured interviews since her undergraduate study.



zihong.deng@unsw.edu.au

The research

Children are portrayed as passive recipients of parents' migration and family migration in many studies. Drawing on the social relational theory and new social studies of childhood, this study describes the experience and actions of left-behind children and migrant children in China to examine how they have perceived and shaped their agency and well-being.

Data collection methods

The fieldwork took place in Wanzhou, Chongqing and Changzhou, Jiangsu. Purposive sampling was employed to select research participants, including left-behind children and their parents/caregivers in Wanzhou, and migrant children and their parents/caregivers in Changzhou. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, transcribed, and analysed following the process of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and using NVivo 12.0.

Challenges

Fieldwork with children is categorised as being highly sensitive in Australia. The ethics approval in Australia has strict procedural requirements for studying children, which requires lots of paperwork to make sure that the research is ethical. In China, it becomes very sensitive for an overseas PhD student to do field research on migrant population, especially at a time when there was strained international relationship between China and Australia. Facing the high sensitivity, doing fieldwork in China becomes more complicated than usual. The pandemic added to the difficulties by adding great uncertainties and restrictions to researchers' mobility. All these factors put emotional and practical pressure on the researcher who was an international student in Australia and doing fieldwork in China. Several practical issues arose.

Great uncertainty in travelling at the height of COVID

My original plan was to complete the fieldwork in 2020. However, in February 2020, it turned out that I could not return to China and had to return after the situation got better. Facing the uncertainties, I added a systematic review and a quantitative chapter to the thesis. This allowed me to use the available resources to keep the project moving. Although there is no fit-for-purpose dataset, I managed to use proxy variables for the quantitative analysis and produced some insights related to the thesis. When I finally returned to China in early March 2021, I was required to quarantine in a hotel in Shanghai for 14 days and in a hotel in Wanzhou for half day, and then self-isolate at home for 14 days. After finishing the quarantine and self-isolation, I first conducted interviews in Wanzhou and then travelled to Changzhou. However, when I was in Changzhou, the summer camp event in which the fieldwork was to take place was postponed due to the new round of pandemic in Nanjing, Jiangsu. In late 2021, there was another round of pandemic, and the weekend camp event had to be postponed again. To catch up with the time lost, focus groups were not conducted as planned, and I focused on semi-structured interviews.

Ethics requirements are not culturally responsive

The ethics procedures follow strict time schedules that are not designed to respond to researchers' emergency needs in the field. As a result, the ethics approval lags behind causing financial and psychological stress for the researcher. What is more, the ethical requirements in Australia may not be suitable in China's cultural context (Alpermann, 2022). For example, the ethics committee required formal approval letter from schools, but schools, even if they considered the research not sensitive, would be reluctant to provide a written approval letter for an overseas PhD student and thus rejected to participate. Without strong personal networks, it would be challenging to obtain a written approval letter from schools. Additionally, written consent is not customary for many Chinese participants, and such a requirement may even make the researcher sound suspicious and make the mood awkward (Zhang, 2017). The researchers conducting field research with Chinese speakers also have to prepare both English and Chinese documents for ethics approval, which is more time-consuming to prepare and invokes extra costs. As a PhD student, I fully agree with the importance of following ethical conducts during research. However, ethics requirements and procedures need to be culturally responsive. The existing ethics application system may benefit from co-design practice with researchers who have lived experience of doing fieldwork in different cultural contexts.

A Chinese student studying in China and abroad

Before COVID, I participated in fieldwork as an undergraduate from Renmin University of China. After my schoolmates and I showed our student cards and explained the research objectives, most people agreed to participate in the research with a small number of refusals. The interviewed groups were interested in making their voice heard, and after all they knew Renmin University. When I conducted the fieldwork as a UNSW student, the situation changed. Many people in China including schoolteachers have never heard about this university. Also, as the Australia-China relation became worse and widely reported in the Chinese media, people were worried that my fieldwork might affect them negatively. Nevertheless, as I was an intern and volunteer at a local NGO, and this NGO has been conducting helpful activities, participants finally felt my project was not harmful for them.

Anxiety kicked in

The repeated rejections and uncertainties in the field and the unwillingness to grant flexibility by the ethics approval procedures make me anxious when approaching people, worrying that my interviewees would sense my anxiety and being afraid of getting rejected. Therefore, I needed a long time of psychological preparation before I could start an interview. As an introvert, sometimes I was perhaps more nervous than some adult interviewees, especially those who were doing business and good at communicating with people from different backgrounds. After the interviews, I felt exhausted and upset about children's experiences and about those helpless, sad, and stressful moments in life. I also felt guilty that I used the information from children and their parents/caregivers to write thesis and meet my research needs, but I could not help to solve many of their problems. In addition to the small gifts provided for participants after interviews, I always wish I could do more for them. As a researcher, it is important to focus on participants' rights and safety. Nevertheless, researchers' emotions, safety, and psychological burden should not be neglected. This point is not new and has been addressed by previous research (Chatzifotiou, 2000; Kudela-Świątek, 2020). Beyond academic supervision, early career researchers also need informal and formal psychological support especially those who do fieldwork among sensitive groups during challenging times. It is important for the university staff to function as coordinators for PhD students and promote peer support and resilience training to researchers. Such support and training also need to be culturally responsive.

The advantages of online interviews

The COVID makes online interviews more popular and acceptable. Online interviews have advantages in my project. First, conducting online interviews protected children's health and safety. When I had a cold at the time of the interviews or when there was a lockdown, online interviews made it possible for the research to continue. Second, some children who were more used to social media communication clearly felt less embarrassed to talk about their feelings and parent-child relationship during online interviews. Third, children had heavy study load were less willing to arrange time for face-to-face interviews at their school. Online interviews are much more flexible for them. Fourth, in rural areas where some left-behind students scattered in different villages, face-to-face interviews at students' homes would be difficult considering commuting time, transportation costs, and researcher safety. Additionally, migrant parents often worked long hours during the day and could only participate in the interviews in the evening or at night, and it was safer for the researcher to conduct online interviews at that time. Finally, for the subject matter, by conducting online interviews with children, the researcher gained more knowledge about adults' control and monitor of children's usage of electronic products, which is helpful to understand

children's agency and well-being in this aspect. Nevertheless, online interviews also have salient disadvantages regarding respondents' selection bias, e.g., age of interviewees, and the attitude of the interviewees may also be different. In this way, online and in-person interviews were conducted depending on the situation.

In summary, it is difficult to do interviews with left-behind children and migrant children in China, and it is even tougher during the pandemic. I am grateful to all the participants for their generous sharing of their feelings, thoughts, and experiences during the difficult time. I hope my reflections could be helpful for students who need to do fieldwork with sensitive groups during extreme situations and for universities to gain insights on what kind of support the students would need. Finally, I appreciate the opportunity to study in Australia, which allows students to gain the training to be critical and devoted to make changes to ourselves, to the established institutions, and to the world.

References

Alpermann, B. (2022). Ethics in Social Science Research on China. *Made in China Journal*. <https://madeinchinajournal.com/2022/06/27/ethics-in-social-science-research-on-china/>

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

Chatzifotiou, S. (2000). Conducting Qualitative Research on Wife Abuse: Dealing with the Issue of Anxiety. *Sociological Research Online*, 5(2), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.472>

Kudela-Świątek, W. (2020). What I Usually Do not Write about My Fieldwork: Negative Emotions in Research on the Experience of the Second World War in Eastern Galicia. *Rocznik Antropologii Historii*. <https://doi.org/10.25945/rah.2020.13.005>

Zhang, J. J. (2017). Research ethics and ethical research: some observations from the Global South. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 41(1), 147–154. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03098265.2016.1241985>



当代中国研究中心

Centre for Contemporary Chinese Studies
Asia Institute, the Faculty of Arts, University of Melbourne



China-centre@unimelb.edu.au



<https://arts.unimelb.edu.au/centre-for-contemporary-chinese-studies>



@CCCS_unimelb

Centre for Contemporary Chinese Studies
Sidney Myer Asia Centre
The University of Melbourne
Parkville, Victoria 3010
Australia