



THE UNIVERSITY OF
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Centre for Contemporary Chinese Studies Outstanding China Fieldwork Insights Award

| 2022 Winning Paper



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Yajie Li is a PhD candidate in Anthropology at the University of Melbourne, with research interests in television production study, migrants and mobility, architecture and cultural diversity, everyday life in urban settings, and the consuming body in contemporary television. Her PhD project investigates how independent actors respond to employment precarity in the industry through, in particular, the deployment of bodily and affective techniques in China. The research sits at the interface of and contributes to both the Anthropology of Labour and Media Studies.



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China Fieldwork Insights

Runner-up Prize paper - 2022 Outstanding China Fieldwork Insights

Yajie Li

PhD project title

Playing a Role of Anachronism: Reenactment, Affective Labour and Precarity in a Film-Television Production Town --An Ethnography of Actors in Hengdian

Research Theme

My dissertation research focuses on actors' experiences of working in film studios in China. Its field site is Hengdian, the centre for producing historical drama in Chinese TV and film. It investigates how independent actors respond to employment precarity in the industry through, in particular, the deployment of bodily and affective techniques. The research sits at the interface of and contributes to both the Anthropology of Labour and Media Studies.

Research Design

This project rests methodologically on an autoethnography of the industry where I “worked” or “attempted to work” as an extra actress, reflecting both on my own experiences and reaching out to fellow actors. The project mainly targets the actors in Hengdian since Hengdian is a relatively concentrated ecosystem within the industry and because of safety considerations and time constraints during the pandemic, which precluded travel. In the later stage of the research (about January-April 2022), I planned to go to Beijing and Shanghai to explore the specific situation of the actors there, doing comparative studies. However, because of the worse situation in Shanghai at the beginning of 2022, I finally gave up my journey to Shanghai and was stuck in Beijing for three months.

With the development of the research, three main methods were used in Hengdian: participant observation, structured and semi-structured interviews and ethnographic writing. From 2021 to 2022, I stayed in Hengdian for eight months, which allowed me to experience and fit into the space more completely. The fieldwork provided me with the possibility to live in the space for double roles – both as a film extra/actress and a researcher. But due to the rigid hierarchy within the industry, my role as a film extra/actress restricted my access to other staff, such as shooting crews. A timely change in my status would help me communicate with different people more smoothly. I will also reflect on the trivial or important events in the everyday field notes, on which the subsequent ethnographic writing builds up later this year.

Access to the Field Site

There is a constant concern about fieldwork and whether we can access it and be accepted; if so, how will we be accepted? After the approval of my ethics application from the university, I asked the statistical bureau of Zhejiang Province for investigation consent. The staff on the phone seemed not very sure about such overseas research, which was conducted by an individual researcher/PhD student. He suggested there, “We once were informed sometimes by domestic university departments for accessing the related statistics or consent of field survey which were normally lead by lecturers or tutors. I consulted with my colleagues, and none of them knew about your case. We advise you to contact the statistic bureau of Jinhua City. They will give your further instructions.” Then I called the statistic office in Jinhua, where Hengdian is located. They mentioned that they did not have any procedure for my investigation at all and suggested that it might be best to ask the town government.

Afterwards, I also contacted two other PhD students in the same year who had begun their fieldwork in China. Both of them thought that it was better to work around the authorities and employ personal relations to outreach them through an informal channel. We agreed that under the intensive political repression, the more formal way we informed the authorities, the more responsibility and risks they were undertaking.

Therefore I decided to access and then expand my networks at the individual level. I employed the strategy of ‘shallow cover’ (Mears, 2011), that is, between an, informed and uninformed identity. My presence was, for those present, sometimes a researcher and sometimes an actor. As a researcher, I had not told my fellow actors what the specific research topic was, because I was still in the process of exploring theoretical issues and research priorities. This kind of shallow burial of my real and complete purpose was an ideal posture within the range of my control. The advantage of this was that I could better integrate into the actor group in Hengdian as an actress and gain almost equal experience with them, and occasionally I could have unrestricted access to information that might be inspiring to my project. But the downside is that for people who thought I was a rookie actor and then generously helped me and warmly welcomed me into their circle, in order to inform them of my multiple identities in time, I fell into deep self-blame and was ethically tortured sometimes.

The Impacts of Covid-19

In the past decade, Hengdian has always been a barometer of China's entertainment industry and was dubbed as "half the sky of the Chinese entertainment circle" since the setup of the shooting crew, the number of production companies and resident actors, schedules of celebrities here directly reflect how the industry runs. Due to the "taxation earthquake" triggered by Fan Bingbing in 2018, the production of films and television was reduced; production companies and acting agencies went bankrupt; extras and actors left Hengdian and changed their careers. Moreover, the restrictions on settings and studios worsened matters during the pandemic.

In 2021, the time I arrived, few films or televisions were rolling here, and most of them were very low-budgeted. Hengdian is a place that is supposed to be nourished by the making of high-budget feature films or televisions because the tiny town includes the whole production chain ranging from external and internal settings, extras and actor casting, property making, hotel and catering sectors, costume, makeup, and hairstyle design, to trained animal selection. However, at that time, many extras and actors remained unemployed or hunted for gigs to survive through such a hard time, waiting for audition opportunities. Due to the repetitive positive cases and strict Covid-19 policy there, some actors who normally resided in Beijing came to Hengdian to secure their jobs. Therefore, frequent interactions between the actors ensued. Meanwhile, due to the inconvenience in the shadow of Covid-19, I have begun to look for actors on social media and contact them from Little Red Book (similar to Instagram). This group of actors have been vloggers, and they are creating certain kinds of public images by posting and sharing more industry information on social platforms. The pandemic challenged actors' strategies against uncertainty and precarity and brutally stretched their resilience. Thus, covid-19 influences both actors working conditions and the conduct of my research; it also provided me with many opportunities or serendipities to explore multiple dimensions of "precarity" and "affective labour" in the industry.

Reference

Mears, A. (2011). *Pricing beauty*. University of California Press.



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