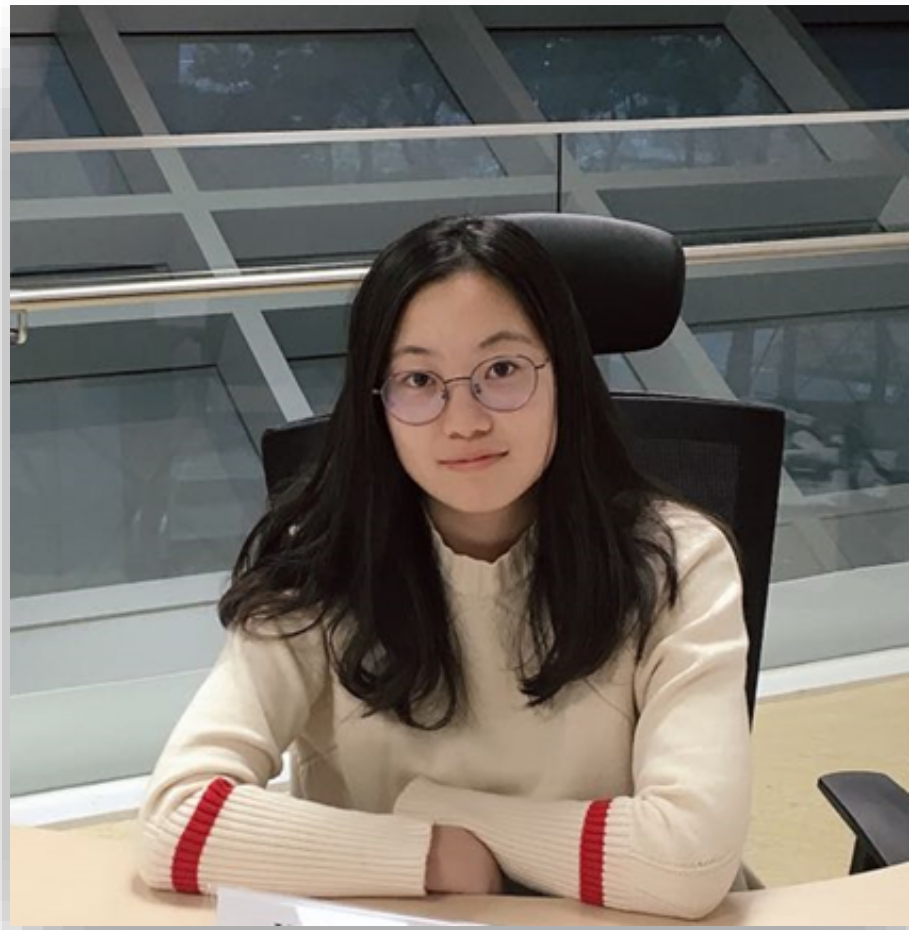




THE UNIVERSITY OF
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Centre for Contemporary Chinese Studies Outstanding China Fieldwork Insights Award

| 2022 Winning Paper



China Fieldwork Insights

Third Place Prize paper - 2022 Outstanding China Fieldwork Insights

Xiaoxuan Chen

PhD project title:

Coastal Management, Community Resilience, and the Law: A Comparative Analysis of Shandong Province in China and the State of Victoria in Australia

Xiaoxuan Chen

PhD candidate
Melbourne Law School
the University of Melbourne

Xiaoxuan Chen is a PhD candidate at Melbourne Law School. Her research interests include international law, environmental law and Chinese law. She has been investigating and examining the impacts of laws and regulations on developing community resilience and adapting to climate change in coastal areas.



xiaoxuanc3@student.unimelb.edu.au

Fieldwork Brief Introduction

Shandong Province and the State of Victoria, as important coastal regions with a dense population, important coastal industries and long coastlines that are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, can provide important cases to investigate for strong comparative analysis. The cases will not only reflect the local-level governance but also can provide a good perspective for the national strategies' development, especially under the Paris Agreement and Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDC). Eventually, a comparative analysis could help us identify the factors affecting community resilience/adaptive capacity and distinguish the influence of legislation from that of other conditions. On the other hand, the comparison could also help us understand to some extent the reasons for the similarities and differences in environmental legislation and adaptation actions between these two places, and help the two regions studied to draw on each other's strengths to make their legal systems more adaptive to the changing environment.

Research Aims and Questions

A. Research Aims

The project is based on case studies and interviews in Shandong Province and the State of Victoria, which are essential coastal regions of China and Australia respectively. These two regions are encountering similar climate change impacts on the coasts, while their legal practices of environmental protection vary significantly due to different administrative and legal settings. A comparative analysis of these two regions will provide important empirical evidence for understanding the relationship between law, community resilience and coastal management.

B. Research Questions

RQ1: For coastal communities in Shandong Province and in the State of Victoria, what is the relationship between the law, adaptation, adaptive capacity and the preparedness aspect of community resilience?

RQ2: To what extent does the law affect the preparedness aspect of community resilience? How does the law facilitate adaptation options in coastal communities? How does the law obstruct adaptation options?

Data Collection Methods

The research methods include textual analysis and interviews. The combination of these two is based on the grounded theory, which is a qualitative research method. The main purpose is to establish theories with empirical data, which needs fieldwork. The fieldwork will collect original data from different groups of stakeholders, and the collected data will be further textual analysed to generalize the findings to meet the original research questions and purposes. From the legal perspective, the interviews will help the researchers to gain more specific cases of law facilitating or obstructing adaptation which could provide a more grounded and accurate starting point for subsequent legal analysis. For example, based on local policy, their own experience of engaging with the governmental decision-making process, or the direct impacts of the coastal industries' adjustment.

Reflections on Questions

A. How would you evaluate the importance of fieldwork in China to your research and research in your field in general?

To better understand how a resilient community adapts to the impacts of climate change in coastal areas. The fieldwork in China provided raw data to evaluate the extent of community and citizens involved in decision-making and decision-complaining from a legal perspective. Then, the findings from fieldwork provide evidence to further discuss the differences in the comparative section.

B. How has the Covid outbreak impacted your fieldwork in China? And how did you manage the situation? What are the differences from doing fieldwork before Covid?

The original plan for conducting fieldwork was to do interviews and case studies in person based on a snowball approach, through seven coastal cities in Shandong Province. In 2021, the researcher finalised the ethics application remotely in China due to international travel restrictions. It discusses how to manage the fieldwork during the covid pandemic, including data management, consent forms etc. In practice, most interviews were conducted online via zoom meetings or WeChat calls, and some are in person. It caused some difficulties in two ways. First, interviews were designed to have more interviewees based on the snowball approach, which was not easy to reach more people remotely. Second, interviews were designed to see the field in person and take photos as evidence in coastal areas. However, it is not easy to achieve because of travel bans. In the end, participants assisted to obtain photos and other potential interviewees' contact, but it took more time.

C. How has the Covid outbreak impacted your research on China more generally and how have you managed it? The research structure has been adjusted because of international travel restrictions. The original plan was to conduct in-person fieldwork in Australia as well. However, the fieldwork funding for the Australian part cannot be approved until the researcher returns. As the travel bans continued until the end of 2021, which delayed the fieldwork. In that case, the project focuses more on fieldwork in China and uses documentary analysis for the Australian part instead.

D. What are your primary concerns and difficulties with regard to conducting fieldwork in China or doing research on China? Can you name the top two wishes for policymakers/university leaders?

The primary concern is the participants might refuse to sign the form due to their own personal concerns. The ethics application provides two approaches to solve that problem, written consent and verbal consent are both available for any potential participants. I wish that the university can provide specific training for future PhD students to better manage the fieldwork when travel bans (or similar difficulties) occurred, whether online or in-person. Also, strengthening international cooperation between academic institutes would be helpful to students to prepare and conduct fieldwork overseas with local support.

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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