Positionality and Power: Reflexivity in Negotiating the Relationship Between Land-Lost Farmers and the Local Government in China

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Abstract
Reflexivity has gained a vital role in qualitative research. Distinct from the extant global literature that explores reflexivity conceptually or practically, gaps are found in China studies and the Chinese literature, where the discussion of reflexivity remains in the conceptual realm while falling short of practical terms. Doing reflexivity entails the self-reflection of the researcher as well as the reflection of the research participants. This article aims to deal with the following questions: What are the respective positions of the researcher and the research participants, and how do they relate to each other? How do such positions and their relatedness affect the research processes and products? Such are the issues of positionality and power. There are studies that focus on either positionality or power, respectively. What remains underdiscussed is the complexities incurred by the combination of positionality and power when the relationship between two distinct actors is concerned, especially in the Chinese context. To fill these gaps, this article focuses on the practice of reflexivity in a case study on the relationship between land-lost farmers and the local government in China. Specifically, the core questions regarding positionality and power—of myself and of the research participants—are discussed in terms of how to manage the role of the researcher, how to treat participants’ utterances, and how to manage the power relation between the researcher and the researched as well as the power relations in the field. A key finding is that being reflexive about positionality and power not only substantiates an understanding of China studies for global researchers but also situates the understanding of reflexivity, positionality, and power in a wider global framework, while highlighting the distinctiveness of the interrelated positionality and power in the Chinese context.

Keywords
reflexivity, positionality, power, practice, China

Introduction
Reflexivity has gained a vital role in qualitative research (QR). It is believed to be “one of the most fundamental concepts and practices that differentiate qualitative from quantitative research” (Hsiung, 2008, p. 211) that rotates around debates on subjectivity, objectivity and, ultimately, the scientific foundation of social science knowledge and research (Burawoy, 1998a; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Harding, 1991).

Conventional wisdom holds that reflexivity is “the dynamic self-reflection necessary for researchers to acknowledge and engage with their role in, and contribution to, the research processes and products” (Mauthner, Parry, & Backett-Milburn, 1998, p. 736) or a process for researchers to confess how their “research agenda and assumptions, subject location(s), personal beliefs, and emotions enter into their research.” Through personal accounting, researchers must become more aware of how their own positions and interests are imposed at all stages of the research process—from the questions they ask, to those they ignore, from whom they study, to whom they ignore, from problem formation, to analysis, representation, and writing. In this way, researchers are communicating about the social world with more accessible accounts (Harding, 1986, 1987).

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rather than presenting their research findings in a straightforward manner. QR is a research approach of intersubjectivity that must involve the interaction between the researcher and the research participants, which means that the researcher and the research participants are mutually influencing and being influenced by each other. Thus, the reflexivity in QR should not merely be confined to the self-reflection of the researcher, but such self-reflection should be based on and in relation to careful engagement with the research participants. In this sense, the present article is particularly concerned with the following questions: What are the respective positions of the researcher and the research participants, and how do they relate to each other? How would such positions and their relatedness affect the research processes and products? Such are the issues of positionality and power.

There are studies that focus on either positionality or power, respectively. Positionality is the wider historical, political, economic, religious, social, and intellectual contexts of a person, which affect both interpersonal relations and QR processes (Merriam et al., 2001; Temple & Edwards, 2002). “Part of a researcher’s positionality is also how they view themselves and are viewed by others: as an insider or outsider, someone with power or feels powerless, or coming from a privileged or disadvantaged situation” (Ozano & Khatri, 2018, p. 191). The existing literature mostly considers positionality on the part of the researcher (e.g., Atkinson, 2019; Chase, Otto, Belloni, Lems, & Wernesjö, 2019). In regard to reflexivity on power, it is argued that reflexivity can open the way to “a more radical consciousness of self in facing the political dimensions of fieldwork and constructing knowledge” (Callaway, 1992, p. 33) and “the politics of those we study” (Hertz, 1997, p. viii). It can be seen that the power aspects related to the research subject receive more attention (e.g., Durnova, 2018; Farr, 2018). What remains underdiscussed is the complexities incurred by the combination of positionality and power in terms of the relationship between two distinct actors, especially in the Chinese context.

The issues of positionality and power are particularly important in the case of the present article, which aims to study the relationship between land-lost farmers and the local government under the background of urbanization in China. To be clear, land-lost farmers are those farmers who have been displaced from their land due to land expropriation during urban extension; the local government is responsible for the expropriation of their land as well as their compensation and resettlement. Such a topic is first and foremost imbued with a power perspective. Due to the distinction of their standpoints and hierarchical positions, the two sides are situated in a power imbalance, with the local government as the dominant and the land-lost farmers as the subordinate. However, it is now well known that the seemingly powerless turn out, in fact, to have a certain amount of power, which makes it possible to reconceive both domination and resistance within each party’s influence over the other side. When the positionality of all involved in the research as well as the power relations present in the field and between the researcher and the researched (Merriam et al., 2001) are considered, the reflexivity on positionality and power becomes more important and complicated. As shown

![Figure 1. Positionality–power complexities.](image)

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in Figure 1, both I as the researcher and participants including land-lost farmers and local government have positionality and power, respectively, which, in a relationship-based context, are interrelated with each other. And that may pose further questions. How would the positionality of the researcher affect the power (im)balance? What would the two sides of the power (im)balance respond to the research? Is there only one way for the two parties to relate to each other?

In the extant global literature, inquiry into reflexivity is usually undertaken conceptually or practically. In conceptual terms, reflexivity is argued to be an approach that is more inclusive and sensitive to the research (e.g., England, 1994), or, to move a step further, to be a ubiquitous and unavoidable constituent of research (e.g., Lynch, 2000). In practical terms, the main objective of doing reflexivity in QR is, first and foremost, to “acknowledge and interrogate the constitutive role of the researcher in research design, data collection, analysis, and knowledge production” (Hsiung, 2008, p. 212). Thus, various issues of doing reflexivity are considered such as how to deal with the self of the researcher, the politics of researching in personal life, and how macro-social forces can influence the process of fieldwork (e.g., Hertz, 1997). That said, reflexivity is both a concept and a practice. However, gaps are found in China studies and the Chinese literature.

In China, both the quantitative and qualitative approaches to research have been entangled and influenced by Mao Zedong’s legendary and hegemonic investigative research (diaocha yanjiu, 调查研究, IR), which has a long history and continues to be lauded as a social science method with Chinese socialist characteristics. Under the influence of IR, where research topics were bureaucratically selected, official rhetoric assembled, and empirical data trimmed for the purpose of boosting up the official discourse with “data” (Hsiung, 2016, pp. 61–62), it has to be said that research practices in China are doomed to be distinctive and even distorted, especially for the qualitative approach that seems to be more akin to IR. Under such circumstances, Chinese sociologists admit to a mess in the use of the concept of reflexivity in Chinese academia and therefore remain at the stage of assimilation, speculation, and review of the concept, probing into topics such as the meaning of studies of reflexivity; its connection with reflection, its multiple connotations and its possibility as a paradigm (Xiao, 2005); and its connection with discourse analysis and its possible development (Lin, 2007). What the concept or even paradigm of reflexivity means philosophically is discussed, but it remains to be evaluated what actions researchers ought to take to be reflexive in a particular study.

More discussions on the practice of reflexivity are needed in China studies, especially by Chinese researchers, to fill the gaps in the studies of reflexivity in the Chinese and English literature. This article will focus on the practice of reflexivity in a case study on the relationship between land-lost farmers and the local government in China. In particular, I deal with the core questions of positionality and power—of myself and of the research participants—considering how to manage the role of the researcher, how to treat participants’ utterances, and how to manage the power relation between the researcher and the researched as well as the power relations in the field. Doing so can not only enhance understanding of China studies for global researchers but also situate the understanding of reflexivity, positionality, and power in a wider global framework, while highlighting the distinctiveness of the interrelated positionality and power in the Chinese context.

Context of the Case Study

China is currently undergoing rapid urbanization, generating an enormous demand for land. Given the land ownership regulations in China, which divide suburban and rural land as collectively owned from urban land as state-owned and prohibit development on non-state-owned land, land expropriation is the primary means used by local governments to procure the land required by rapid urbanization. It is the process of land expropriation that brings the two parties of the case study—the land-lost farmers and local government—into the fore.

Under the existing urban–rural division, land-lost farmers face uncertain livelihood and security prospects after land expropriation. On account of their often involuntary change of status, land-lost farmers tend to attribute most of the difficulties they face in their lives to the authorities, and hence, they are seen as liable to cause social unrest. On the other hand, as the overseer of the arena in which urban development and land expropriation specifically take place, it is the local governments that have to respond to the diverse social problems engendered by the fact that so many farmers lose their land. Nevertheless, Chinese local authorities have the power to implement provisions according to their practicalities and their own self-interests. Thus, the problem of land expropriation has become a main point of social conflict in contemporary China.

The primary objective of this case study is to obtain a systematic understanding of the relationship between land-lost farmers and local government officials. This objective is guided by Mannheim’s (1991) sociology of knowledge, which champions a mode of sociological inquiry of “reality” that is free of ideological and utopian distortions, and shows respect for the research paradigm of Verstehen (interpretative understanding). That means I have to take on an unanchored position beyond the ideologies of the social groups under study. For this purpose, I am interested in people’s own appraisals of their lives and the separate responses of both sides when they confront each other. Issues of positionality and power will be fully unfolded through this way.

The fieldwork was performed in City C in central China on three occasions: from November 2005 to May 2006, from February 2008 to May 2008, and from February 2010 to May 2010. This mode of tracking over time and investigating for a total of 12 months established both familiarity with and contacts in the field. Interviews with study participants constitute the core of the fieldwork, which include land-lost farmers, some of whom were active members within their own communities and even well known to people of other communities and others were chosen according to my observation, at random, or
by snowballing, as well as local government staff responsible for land management at various levels, from the provincial to the resettlement community level.

**Positionality and Power of the Researcher and the Researched**

Based on Brewer’s set of guidelines for good practice (1994, pp. 235–236), the remainder of this article will present reflexivity in the course of my study, with the focus on matters of the positionality and power of the researcher and the researched, in order to make explicit the contingencies within which any representation must be located. Positionality and power are actually interrelated, especially when involving all concerned.

**Recognizing the Influence of My Personal Biography**

The positionality of the researcher may involve various aspects throughout the whole course of research. In particular, the “boxes” you bring during data collection will determine what you hear and find (Hsiung, 2008, p. 222). “Our positionality—who are we for them?” (Caplan, 1993, p. 180) is one of the most important factors that determine the kinds of data we collect. The concern for the researcher’s personal biography arises from the fact that qualitative researchers often use themselves as the primary tool of the research while doing fieldwork. The question of locating the self has to be considered in terms of such factors as our gender, age, and life experience (Caplan, 1993, p. 180), which all affect the researcher’s “field interactions” (Callaway, 1992, p. 33). “Although the researcher may consider ‘being a researcher’ one’s most salient self, community members may not agree” (Reinharz, 1997, p. 3). For example, Reinharz (1997) identified 20 “selves” when she was in the field that she configures into three major categories: “research-based selves,” “brought selves,” and “situationally created selves.” Because these “brought” and “created” selves are relevant to the people being studied, they shape or obstruct the relationships that the researcher can form and hence the knowledge that can be obtained (Reinharz, 1997, p. 4). Such multiple and constructed “selves” exist and play important roles in affecting the researcher’s ability to conduct research. Fieldwork effectively brings home to me that no matter what I decide about my appearance and behavior and how well I adhere to these decisions, ultimately, I cannot determine how other people choose to see me, and what information they choose to share with me in a given research study.

I have the features of a young female researcher who comes from outside the investigation sites. To begin with, I have to deal with my female status. There is a greater potential for female researchers to meet with physical dangers in the field, especially in a remote area, such as my study area on the urban–rural fringe. I stay more alert to the situation in the field—whether it is safe, what kind of people I meet, what behavior is appropriate, and so on—in addition to the fact that female researchers are more sensitive and inclined to reflect on themselves and the things they encounter. In this way, the experiences of female social researchers would encourage a self-aware and reflexive approach (Gill & Maclean, 2002). Though, as a researcher, I have the least willingness to act in an effeminate way to avoid being subordinate or dependent whilst carrying out fieldwork, my research participants tend to focus first and foremost on my female status and treat me accordingly. For instance, while trying to approach an active land-lost farmer who is prone to undertaking extreme actions (he once attempted to commit suicide in Tiananmen Square) to strive for more compensation, his neighbors suggested that I should be accompanied by a male, at least for the first interview. They provide such a suggestion since they are worried about my ability to interact well with a male person who seemingly has a propensity for violence. Under such cases, my awareness of myself as female is heightened, and thus, the research findings may have been confined within the scope seemingly appropriate for the female status.

Additionally, they would bear in mind my status as a modern and educated person. Once I am seen in this way, there must be some unavoidable distance between me and the land-lost farmers due to our marked differences. For example, the land-lost farmers, who are mostly undereducated, are not used to participating in such a contrived research setting as an interview, and thus they are not adept at elaborating upon their ideas and feelings. Some of them may even be too anxious to collaborate with me as a researcher who seems much more educated and higher positioned than them. Under this circumstance, I sincerely acknowledge such a distinction, on which basis I communicate with participants in their natural environment and let them use their own language to describe what happened in their lives.

On the other hand, my personal biography brings me advantages as well. My roles fit in with a humble, listening, and learning mode, which comes relatively easy to me and is beneficial to the process of data collection with the aim of receiving and being receptive to information. To some extent, I can gain trust from government cadres because they think that I can advance suggestions to solve problems concerning land exploitation. When I approach officials, I am always asked to show my researcher identification. Maybe they are afraid that I am a disguised journalist intending to publicize information received from them and about them. Hence, the status of being a researcher, though not wholly welcome, at least means that some of the research participants provide credible opinions once I have been accepted.

I can gain the trust of those active members among land-lost farmers because they believe that I am a scholar with a sense of justice, and they hope that I can write their stories of struggle with care. Usually, I interviewed these active land-lost farmers several times and invited them for dinners or drinks and respected them for what they had done and said. I can feel their desire and sense of achievement in describing their stories. In addition, I can gain the trust of ordinary land-lost farmers because they hope or believe that I can have some influence on their daily lives. One interviewee who claimed to have been beaten by government staff eagerly provided many materials to
me, among which, some photos showing his skin disease were especially impressive. He said that because of the disease, the government was spreading the rumor that he had cancer in order to provide an excuse if he should unexpectedly die. In such a case, the interviewee actually saw me as having a chance of rendering assistance in his struggle with the government. Though these thoughts from the various participants put pressure on me, they are favorable for forming the basis of trust to shorten the distance between me as the researcher and the participants.

It can be seen that different characteristics of the researcher are actually relevant and even created in the setting, through which “the self becomes the key fieldwork tool” (Reinharz, 1997, p. 4). While some characteristics of the researcher are created and initiated by the researcher, some are created and utilized by the participants, and thus, it is through the understanding of the different characteristics of the researcher that the researcher and participants are linked together. I recognize that what I have absorbed are responses to my presence in the field, shaped by the painful unraveling of my own ideological assumptions, as much as by the efforts of the participants to balance what they feel I should know and what they feel they are politically obliged to tell me (Siu, 1989, p. 301).

My Powerlessness and Power

If a fieldworker cannot gain a certain approval from the community, cannot eliminate the local people’s feeling of his/her being an “outsider,” and cannot observe in participation, the penetration of his/her fieldwork would become a problem, not to mention that impartial access is not always guaranteed. When the researcher’s power over the participants is emphasized, it seems that the researcher’s powerlessness is being ignored. Actually, when the researcher is trying to enter the field, his/her status as an “outsider” determines that he/she is situated in an inferior position in interaction with the participants, since to gain access to the participants is usually an arduous process, especially in regard to a contentious and political sensitive topic like mine.

With regard to land-lost farmers, at the outset, I relied on the local cadres for information. It is clear that these are people to whom I was introduced by local cadres for informally sensitive topics like mine. It is also difficult to obtain the acceptance of officials. In consideration of the sensitivity of the topic, officials often display indifference, and from their standpoint, there is substantial difference between a theoretical understanding of the situation informed by research and the practicalities of dealing with land expropriation and the resultant land-lost farmers.

Entry into the participants in a real sense can only be approached through first being accepted and then establishing some kind of personal relationship, a process through which the positional and power between the researcher and participants take a concrete shape.

Regarding the land-lost farmers, they are standing nearly at the bottom of Chinese society to be almost desperate about striving for their rights, including the right to speak out. They have met with some instances when they extend their trust to media reporters and talk about their situation to the media but later find that their voices have not been accurately reported because of the local government’s intervention. Instead, the land-lost farmers care more about their own immediate interests, such as what my research can contribute to them. Throughout my fieldwork, when I approach land-lost farmers, they always start with such questions: What is it that interests you about us poor and pitiful people? Can you make our problems heard by higher authorities? Can you make our problems public to the media? If not, what can you do to help us to resolve our problems? It seems that the land-lost farmers are eager to construct their own power by my assistance. However, it is such ideas that further complicate the relationship between me and them. I have to treat their expectation with great delicacy, balancing between casting them down and providing empty promises. Obviously, such manipulation is not easy and can only work on a small part of them, even if effective. When asked such questions, I am often filled with no other feeling than awkwardness. Even the media that they thought useful turn out to be distrustful. Most of them are inclined to think that research like mine is futile, and thus, they are not willing to become involved, let alone take the risk of speaking out directly about their discontent with the local government. Therefore, it is not easy for me to obtain land-lost farmers’ consent to take part in interviews. Those who take part tend to focus on describing their disadvantaged situations, for instance, based on a comparison between their original land and the “not enough” compensation, as they said.

a setting are given as “correct.” Thus, I try to develop my own network of friends in the field.

However, it is an arduous process to reach the state of mutual trust. On the one hand, I attach plenty of “felt necessities” (Stanley, 1990) to my own topic, as most researchers would do to theirs, but this feeling is not usually shared by the research participants. On the other hand,
Confronted with this circumstance, I often become confused about whether it is proper to adopt a disguised role\textsuperscript{1} within the spectrum of ethics, and if so, what role would be appropriate for me to occupy when in the field. Nevertheless, I conceive that I could hardly take on any other role with proficiency but would simply cause further confusion and complexity. Thus, I have to abandon attempts at role disguising. All I can do is to promise to the land-lost farmers that I am attempting to portray their situations more faithfully than the media and others have hitherto, while promising to the government staff that my research will contribute to the management of their relationship with land-lost farmers.

Basically, I approach land-lost farmers in two ways. The first is through encountering ordinary land-lost farmers. By wandering around the communities, I am able to come across the land-lost farmers, who also spend much time roaming and chitchatting in the community’s public spaces. Once this happens, I usually stand aside to listen to their conversation and find chances to chime in. Most of them would just ignore me, but some of them respond to me, and it is through those who respond that I establish the initial contact. Once there is any initial contact, I try to visit them repeatedly, and they may then bring in more informants. However, as earlier mentioned, it is frustrating to say that the information obtained through this approach is quite limited and accidental.

The second method is through direct visits to the active members who are usually recommended here and there. Generally, the active members among the land-lost farmers are more easily accessing because they can understand what I am doing and expect I may be helpful to bring in connections or offer suggestions, in contrast to the awkward expectations raised by the ordinary land-lost farmers. These people are also the most important informants, not only because they are more knowledgeable to provide more information but also because they take a lead in activities that may take place in the whole community. Thus, they are the ones with whom I spend the most time to excavate information.

An ethical matter needs to be confessed here concerning my relationship with some active members among the land-lost farmers. Some of them not only accepted formal and informal interviews many times but also introduced other land-lost farmers. The reason that they were so warm-hearted is because they were raised by the ordinary land-lost farmers. These people are also knowledgeable to provide more information but also because they have a lead in activities that may take place in the whole community. Thus, they are the ones with whom I spend the most time to excavate information.

Frankly, while in the field, what usually discourages me is the sense of powerlessness and dismay resulting from my lack of control over how the research is perceived. This severely affects my confidence in continuing with the research at some points. At times, when the study is impeded by doubts and skepticism from participants on both sides, even I begin doubting what the research is being done for and what realistic gains would come from my research. It can be seen that the same mental suffering has been experienced by other researchers (e.g., Malinowski, 1967). It is safe to say that meeting with less than perfect realities in the field is “normal” to a certain degree, so it would be helpful if more accounts of “first fieldwork,” discussing the supposed circumstances and emotionally does not totally disappear in my narrative, it is not a major concern of my study. In this sense, I am indeed in debt to them for their trust. However, from another perspective, if I told them at the outset that I am not only doing research on land-lost farmers’ resistance but am more concerned with the interrelationship and even counterbalance of power between land-lost farmers and the local government, then basically my investigations with them would not be carried through, while if I conceded to their wishes, then how could I also examine the efforts made on the part of the local government? Certainly, such a complicated ethical problem is not only encountered by me but exists for many field researchers (Whyte, 1993, p. 400). As Chu (1997, p. 41) points out, the ethical embarrassment of QR lies in the fact that participant observation is unavoidably involved with interactional hypocrisy and, more importantly, in direct experience, the “supposition” of academic integrity runs up against the essence of social reality: impression management, information manipulation, camouflage, equivocalness, secret, and surface-even deep acting. To be honest, I cannot eliminate such perplexity but only regret it for these aspects of my research relationship with those active members who helped me in the field.

As time goes by, I obtain a comparative understanding of the information obtained from official connections and the unofficial ones I have established. Regarding the local government staff, their initial reserve toward me also wears off. There is an interesting phenomenon. When people of either side discuss topics that are relatively sensitive with me, they usually add a “note” in advance: “We are now talking with the door closed.” The word “closed” signifies that the boundary between the inside and the outside is clear-cut and that a temporary united front between them and me is formed. Therefore, I have to say that mutual trust can be established in a more solid and long-lasting manner through more and more, bit by bit, adequate communication and interpersonal awareness.
difficult nature of the experiences, are available before going into the field. Anyway, the painful powerlessness of the researcher needs to be acknowledged and carefully handled, especially at the beginning of the research, which matters a great deal for the final intervention.

In contrast to the powerlessness of the researcher, the power of the researcher over the participants is more widely realized and discussed, particularly in data collection and data analysis. Here, I would like to focus on two aspects during data collection.

The first is the sample site selection. Based on an initial wider investigation of 24 resettlement communities, I selected 3 as the sample sites of the study. As Mitchell (2006) notes, there is often no statistical way to establish that a case is typical or representative, and therefore, the sampling choice should be justified according to theoretical considerations. Furthermore, as Van Velsen (1967) argues, concrete empirical instances should be provided to allow the emergence of “exceptional” and “accidental” instances in terms of the general theory used. These three resettlement communities displayed distinctive characteristics as regards the land-lost farmers’ and the local government’s actions and responses to each other and thus distinctive relationships between the land-lost farmers at the three study sites and their respective local governments. It is fair to say that I wield my power in considering the differences between study sites, which allows a more complete analysis of the relationship under discussion and enhances the credibility and reliability of this study.

The second aspect is the “power dynamics of qualitative interviewing” (Hsiung, 2008, p. 221). Due to “intersubjectivity,” the responses of participants are affected by the researcher’s “communicative competence,” which means the “qualification of speech and symbolic interaction (role-behavior)” (Habermas, 1984). At its simplest, different tones of the researcher in phrasing questions would induce different kinds of responses from the participants in the interview. With respect to two groups with unbalanced power, as in my research, this is particularly true to the power-inferior group. For instance, when using a tone that is too gentle, the land-lost farmers are inclined to overstate the unfair treatment they are suffering; on the other hand, when using a tone that sounds somewhat indifferent, it is more likely to appear to the land-lost farmers that I stand on the same side as the local government, and thus they would hold back their feelings. In this sense, as it is I as the researcher who is guiding the interview process, I have to strike a balanced “communicative competence” to bear on the participants.

Data analysis is another area in which to confess my power as a researcher. Obviously, this is a wildly pronounced issue in the literature. On this point, I cannot resist my desire to reiterate Scott’s vivid caricature (1990, p. xv): ‘Unsnarling the traffic meant shooting several drivers, burying their vehicles, and resurfacing the road as if they had never existed... The result of a reinvigorated moving-forward intellectual traffic comes at the considerable cost of eliminating intersections that would have permitted travel in different directions to new destinations. Similarly, it may be inescapable for a study to exclude several “irritating” interpretations to become a “research.” Thus, it is up to me as a researcher to interpret the researched for my own personal purposes. There is no way to escape from my power as a researcher in analyzing the gleaned material since this is all done by myself. I can only realize such an effect and try to be as faithful to the original circumstances as possible.

Handling Power Relations in the Field Via Participants’ Utterances

With respect to the power relations in the field, namely, “a site where some voices may be enhanced while others are silenced” (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003, p. 423), in my case, it is easy to understand that the government has an absolute superiority over the farmers. It is significant to note this point since “in situations of inequality, the political response of the deprived may be seen as a function of power relationships” (Gaventa, 1980, pp. vi–vii). Furthermore, whether Marxist or poststructuralist, sociologist, or literary critic, people tend to champion the rights of the “weak,” to give “voice” to the “voiceless,” to assist the “oppressed” in their efforts to escape exploitation at the hands of cynical “elites” (Fletcher, 2001, p. 42). Nonetheless, I have to say that my research topic is itself based on avoiding this tendency owing to its ultimate effort to probe into the relationship between land-lost farmers and the local government. Ideologically, I make an endeavor in two aspects. One is related to what is expected of professional culture, which asserts the ethos of sober self-restraint and detachment. Taking this into consideration, “feeling rules” (Hochschild, 1983) should be obeyed to some extent and emotion work should be undertaken to guarantee my professional competence. On the other hand, I realize the importance of averting the presupposition of considering the local governments’ behavior as cynical manipulations of power and to attribute all blame for the unfavorable relationship to them. Thereby, I interview both land-lost farmers and local government staff to make their respective perspectives explicit, to test what they say (since people may deliberately try hiding or exaggerating), to determine whether there is any compromise between them and to understand the ways in which differences between them engender conflict. This is what is required to try maintaining a neutral positionality.

As Davies (2008, p. 6.4) contends, “listening and responding to participants and their values is important to develop an ethical approach that privileges the research respondents’ views and experiences in qualitative sociological research.” In the data collection of QR, we draw mostly on the utterances of participants; in writing-up, what we can count on are still “voices in the texts” to “validate the authenticity” of the material (Brewer, 1994, p. 234). Thus, the issue arises as to how researchers treat participants’ utterances, which reflect the positioning of the researched—“who are they for us” (Caplan, 1993, p. 180)—and depend on the power relations in the field. Having experienced neither peasantry nor administration
myself, I tend to view both the farmers and the local government staff as “experts” about their attitudes toward and relationship with each other, namely, they are regarded as insiders. Nevertheless, this is compounded by the fact that sometimes either the farmers’ or government staff’s accounts may be contradictory, and thus, it becomes important, though difficult, to keep myself from being blindly influenced by the participants’ utterances and to assess the credibility of their statements as much as possible.

Hence, first, we need to answer questions such as the following: Is the participant’s voice one that can be rendered transparent, or is it viewed as an interactive resource between different research participants (Frith & Kitzinger, 1998)? Is the participant’s account regarded as meaningful only in the particular research context in which it is produced (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003)? These reflections make it necessary to pay great attention to the conditions and constraints under which the individuals’ accounts are produced and the ways in which I interpret them. My current view is that people are meaning-endowing. This means that participants’ utterances carry a link with their experiences rather than being transparent. Thus, “truth-telling” is personal, is situational, and even carries a political component, denouncing “injustice, inequality, and abuses of power” (Hsiung, 2018, p. 86).

As regards the two sides of participants with unbalanced power in my study, the concern about their utterances should be underlined by taking into account the existence of “public transcript” and “hidden transcript” proposed by Scott (1990). Out of Scott’s observation, the “public transcript,” as comments and conversations that the actors (the dominant and the subordinate) play out in each other’s presence, can inform us about power. The greater the disparity in power between the dominant and subordinate and the more arbitrarily it is exercised, the more the public transcript of subordinates will take on a stereotyped, ritualistic cast. However, as a matter of fact, the subordinate would criticize power behind the back of the dominant; such “hidden transcripts” are the “offstage” presentations that take place within groups. They contain speech acts and a whole range of practices, in the form of rumors, proverbs, jokes, parodies, gossip, gestures, folktales, and so on. Correspondingly, the powerful also develop a hidden transcript representing the “practices and claims of their rule that cannot be openly avowed.” The contradiction between the “public transcript” and “hidden transcript” is still acknowledged to exist in my research. This adds to the question of how to peep into the backstage of both sides to get relatively reliable utterances. Nevertheless, the possibility of probing into offstage discourse and conduct is minute and a lot more difficult for a little-respected early researcher like me. The disadvantage is so obvious when lacking this possibility that Scott (1990, p. 4) himself admits that “without a privileged peek backstage we have no way of calling into question the status of what might be a convincing but feigned performance.”

Fortunately, though, I found a way of circumvention out of methodological as well as realistic consideration. First, with the task of exploring the relationship between land-lost farmers and the local government, this study tries to emphasize face-to-face interactions between both sides. Second, this study of land-lost farmers in present China is very different from the historical studies of slavery, serfdom, untouchability, racial domination, and highly stratified peasant societies from which Scott draws the concept of the “hidden transcript.” Rather, the bilateral relationship in this study is based in great part on the developing rights-interests consciousness of the land-lost farmers, and as a group of people that are forced to transform their status, they are more likely to attribute problems and difficulties to the government. Third, in the contemporary Chinese bureaucratic society, the land-lost farmers and the local government staff seldom have the opportunity to relate to each other except when specific problems arise. For these reasons, the necessity of “hidden transcript” would decrease dramatically. Instead, the land-lost farmers and local government staff in my research are more likely to recognize themselves as being on the front stage.

Thus, we return to the management of the participants’ utterances. I pay attention to developing the capacity of attaining the implicit social meaning of the participants’ utterances as well as, perhaps more importantly, behavior. In my opinion, a potent social researcher should be able to sort out credible narratives according to the participants’ actions, including body language. This is what I try to balance in participant observation: observing and musing on what I have seen in relation to what I have been told, so as to obtain a measure of understanding otherwise unobtainable. That is, we can only reveal the situationality and credibility of “meaning” implied in participants’ utterances through methodological triangulation.

More importantly, a certain categorization system may help improve the accountability. As not every participant would tell the truth but reliable ones do actually exist, what I can draw on is “the meat and potatoes of the fieldwork” (Burawoy, 1998b, p. 23), that is, the field notes I have taken, which are as identical to the voices of the participants as possible, no matter whether they are actually the truth. Nonetheless, when sorting out the data, I find it difficult to summarize a common nature from either the land-lost farmers’ or local government staff’s responses. “Negative cases” and “deviant cases” (Emigh, 1997) always exist. Actually, the participants themselves are aware of such diversity within their group. Therefore, I realize the importance of identifying the indigenous categorization system. In this way, I can see that there are diverse types of attitudes that land-lost farmers take toward the local government, and vice versa. In my case, the categorization of land-lost farmers’ as well as local government staff’s attitudes may be a solution to handle participants’ utterances since by doing so, I can divert my attention from discerning the genuineness of their utterances to analyzing the internal differentiation.

Through careful analysis, the land-lost farmers are actually differentiated into five subgroups: The activists of resistance and those who see the local government’s position as justified are the two extremes, with three different subgroups strategically adopting the way of the medium, including the followers, the grumblers, and the overcautious. Similarly, based on differences in their working attitudes, government staff can be
classified into two types: The moderates who tend to apply measures of appeasement to land-lost farmers and the radicals who instead tend to control land-lost farmers. In addition, the difference between the “public transcript” and “hidden transcript” can, to some extent, be a standard of categorization. For instance, the activists usually have more courage to publicly express their true feelings than the other subgroups, while those who see the local government’s position as justified have interrelated interests with the government and thus do not share the same “hidden transcript” with the other subgroups. By the same token, the moderate government staff are not as arrogant and imperious as their radical peers. Consequently, with the categorization system, first, the power relations in the field are unveiled much more clearly. The activists of resistance take the lead to “break the ice” (Gaventa, 1980) and make efforts to change the power relations. Moreover, as different land-lost farmers and different government staff take different attitudes, it can be found that there also exist negative cases in the mode of interaction. For example, though conflict is the main relation of the two sides, some land-lost farmers, mainly including the grumblers, the overcautious, and those who see the local government’s position as justified, are likely to ingratiate themselves with the government for their own safety and tangible benefits.

To summarize, the presentation of the participants’ utterances, which is complicated by the divergence between the public and hidden transcripts, signifies a force of power wielded in the understanding of the relationship. However, it does not end here. The categorization of participants and the subsequent full disclosure of different circumstances greatly explore structures of domination and patterns of resistance and highly increase the generalizability of the case study. Furthermore, my powerlessness in the face of the participants who are unwilling to take part in the research can be explained from methodological as well as theoretical perspectives, for example, it may be just because they belong to different subgroups and have different considerations. Such an explanation allows me to endure the difficulties in getting access to participants to some extent.

Writing Myself Into the Data

The final area to draw particular concern on the positionality of the researcher is in the writing-up of the final text. As Denzin (1994, p. 503) points out, “[r]epresentation… is always self-presentation… the other’s presence is directly connected to the writer’s self-presence in the text.” Thus, writing-up is a very important showcase for locating oneself in the research. Writing-up is also a process of communicating the self with the data. As Mauthner, Parry, & Backett-Milburn (1998) put forward:

The amount of data and the number of issues raised can make it difficult to decide which ideas to focus on and pursue. There is anxiety about what this huge amount of data means and pressure to make sense of it all. Indeed, it is through this process of making sense of it all that data are constructed. (p. 738)

By understanding this, what is called “writing-up” is a matter in which I decide what to present to my readers on the basis of what I have learned. Such is the voice of authors to express themselves within a QR. The voice of the author may be absent as in third-person “realist tales” (Van Maanen, 1988), or the author’s voice may be the subject of inquiry as in “experiential representations” (Richardson, 1994). In between, there are many different ways in which the author’s voice appears in QR—from using a school’s code language to demonstrate the author’s theoretical alliances (Walton, cited in Becker, 1986, pp. 38–39) to the author as a visible narrator and coparticipant in the text (see, e.g., Harper, 1982). As qualitative researchers “write themselves into their projects in various ways” (DeVault, 1997, pp. 219–220), namely, from simply “writing-up findings,” (p. 217) to “writing oneself into the text” and even “incorporating personal writing into empirical studies,” there is an increasing trail of reflexivity.

To be clearer, in response to Seale’s (1999) linking reflexivity with specification of the methodological details to permit an audit trail by peers and thus possible replication of the results,14 I would like to draw attention to different manifestations of reflexivity, displayed as the positionality of the self in the text. One such manifestation is overt reflexivity. Reflexivity can be saliently incorporated into the work, something like what Van Maanen (1988) calls “confessional tales,” making strong statements about the social world while being sensitive to problems around representation and legitimation. Representative of this way would be Whyte’s Street Corner Society (1993), which is recommended by O’Reilly (2005, p. 224) as “an excellent example” of “a full and reflexive account of the field research and subsequent report writing.” The other is a literary way of writing that involves covert reflexivity. A representative of this way would be Lin’s The Golden Wing (1947). It is actually the course of the historical vicissitudes of Lin’s own family, which in a sense is a kind of autoethnography, but with covert reflexivity. This requires the researcher to suspend him/herself, probably out of technical virtuosity on the part of the researcher, or his/her personal status, or position to play the roles of being a member of the setting and a researcher concurrently.

I adopt the overt manifestation of reflexivity in my study. Though I have been in the field for a total of 12 months and I have established relatively familiar relationships with the study’s participants, I have to admit that except for the purposes of the study, I am not otherwise present in the field. My role in the field is no more than a participant observer. I am sure I do not possess the abilities necessary to manage covert reflexivity.

Discussion

To this point, I am eager to hold that this article has accomplished its purpose to use my own case to illustrate the practice of reflexivity on positionality and power in the Chinese context. The implications for other research are embedded in the answers to the research questions of this article.
The Respective Positions of the Researcher and the Research Participants

Researchers are reflexive selves and interactional individuals in QR. The researchers’ positionality is directly contained in their personal biography. Nevertheless, as can be seen from my field experience, different characteristics of the researcher are relevant and even created in the setting. The achieved data are responses to the researcher’s presence in the field as well as what the participants choose to share with the researcher in a given research study. It is worth noting the importance to stay with the outside researcher status in maintaining a neutral positionality in a relationship-based research. On the other hand, due to the specific context in China and especially under the background of the politics of urbanization, the power relations in the field between the land-lost farmers and local government create more complexity when relating to their respective positionalities as involved in their utterances, which underlines the importance of basing the analysis on the participants’ utterances.

The Interrelated Positionality and Power of All Concerned

As presented in Figure 1, both the researcher and participants have positionality and power, respectively, which, in a relationship-based context, are interrelated with each other. The researchers’ positionality determines their power and powerlessness in undertaking the research and also affects the power (im)balance in the field, even though taking the standpoint of a neural positionality. The two sides of the power (im)balance would also respond to the research in different ways, especially for the power-inferior side. The complexities involved signify that there is more than one way for the two parties to relate to each other, for example, when some subgroups of land-lost farmers ingratiate themselves with the local government.

How Do Such Positions and Their Relatedness Affect the Research Processes and Products?

Throughout the course of my study, I have dealt with such issues as how to manage the role of the researcher, how to treat participants’ utterances, and how to manage the power relation between the researcher and the researched as well as the power relations in the field. The research processes and products may have been affected when I dealt with such issues, which, in the end, exhibits the power relations in the field in a more extended and generalizable way, for example, by introducing a categorization system for a full exploration of the internal structure rather than being entangled in too subjective a clarification of participants’ utterances. Finally, whether all such concerns on positionality and power are communicated to the readers depends on how to write-up, which means an overt or covert manifestation of reflexivity in the text.

Conclusion

Placed in a section on “method,” the story of a research project serves a legitimizing function: The story that is told provides a warrant for the analysis to follow (Clifford, 1983). It should reveal a researcher who is intelligent, responsible, thorough, and objective (at least as much so as is humanly possible). Here, the purpose of personal storytelling is to establish the researcher’s authority: The story is meant to say, “Believe me, because I did it right.” These purposes are highlighted by the account of “what really happened” in the field of QR (e.g., Johnson, 1988; Stacey, 1991; Thorne, 1988; Van Maanen, 1988). In other words, “writing that reveals personal sources for a research endeavour can be seen as an attempt—although a futile one—to balance the positions of researcher and subjects” (DeVault, 1997, p. 225).

Following the tenet of intersubjectivity between the researcher and researched, reflexivity requires researchers to examine their locations in relation to the researched as well as the location of the researched as its own and the location of the researched in relation to the researcher. These are interrelated issues, revealed as the positionality and power of the researcher, of the researched, and between the researcher and the researched. It is through the exact case-study experience that such intricacies were discovered, as well as the ongoing reflexivity that helped to situate the knowledge into a wider global framework.

Some influences are more easily identified and articulated at the time of our work, while others (perhaps more) may take time, distance, and detachment from the research to “gain a vantage on who we are and what we are doing and thinking” (Frankenberg, 1985, p. 414). Even so, “there may be limits to reflexivity, and to the extent to which we can be aware of the influences on our research both at the time of conducting it and in the years that follow” (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003, p. 425). Furthermore, the subjectivity of explanation is not easily explainable. Thus, the researcher should “adopt a critical attitude toward their work” (Brewer, 1994, p. 234) during all stages of the research, and that is what is required by practicing reflexivity. The exploration of reflexivity in philosophical terms may take the readership on a trip through the conceptual kingdom of reflexivity, that is to say, no matter how far we go, we may still remain in the vortex of the concept or paradigm. Reluctant to say, this is the situation of studies on reflexivity in China. However, what is promised by practicing reflexivity is, at the first level, digging out the underpinnings of the knowledge that is proffered and, maybe more importantly, relating to global discussions on significant issues (such as positionality and power). Only through practicing reflexivity can I come to a more substantive understanding of the case under study and come to figure out what is significant for such an understanding, that is, positionality and power. Additionally, only through practicing reflexivity on positionality and power do I realize that such issues have their distinctiveness and are particularly important in the Chinese context, especially in regard to topics in negotiating relationships. Such discussion is not only
necessary for a more thorough understanding of China studies for global researchers, but it is also beneficial to studies on positionality and power, which constitutes a much more inter-related schema and provides much more complex considerations on all involved in the research.

“Reflexivity is ubiquitous. It permeates every aspect of the research process” (Hertz, 1997, p. viii). We may not have an exact answer as to “how much reflexivity is enough” (DeVault, 1997, p. 225). What we can be sure of, though, is that once we have embarked on the course of reflexivity, it will be imprinted as a practice that permeates throughout a researcher’s career. The use of reflexivity is the key to deconstructing not only one’s positionality and power but also the internal forces at play that are embedded before we arrive as a keen researcher.

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Notes
1. The positionality of the researcher is actually one aspect that differentiates qualitative research from quantitative research (QR), as researchers are the objective authority in QR but reflexive selves and interactional individuals in qualitative research.
2. Mao used the technique of “eating together, living together, and working together” with peasants in the countryside in the 1920s and 1930s, which he referred to as investigative research (diaocha yanjiu, 调查研究, IR), and one representative of such is Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan. Some people consider IR responsible for the policy failure during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962) that resulted in an estimated 15–55 million Chinese deaths (Dikotter, 2010; Song & Ding, 2009; Thaxton, 2008; Yang, 2008; Yu, 2005). However, political forces in China continued to promote it as a research method with Chinese socialist characteristics (Gao, 1987). Until today, China’s current President and General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping, still states that IR should be routinely carried out by rank-and-file bureaucrats (Xi, 2011).
3. Articles 9 & 10, Constitution of the People’s Republic of China (1982), http://english.people.com.cn/constitution/constitution.html, accessed May 7, 2011. These articles have been unchanged during the five revisions of the Constitution in 1988, 1993, 1999, 2004, and 2018.
4. Article 43, Land Administration Law of People’s Republic of China (2004), http://www.gov.cn/banshi/2005-05/26/content_989.htm, accessed March 30, 2011.
5. During the fieldwork, City C has been implementing the “reserve-land” resettlement method, which means a particular proportion of the total expropriated land is reserved for land-lost farmers’ living needs and subsistence. Under this resettlement method, the farmers of a particular village are resettled collectively by allocating a piece of land as residential space, which is called the resettlement community. This resettlement mode was widely implemented nationwide at the time of the research.
6. Brewer’s set of guidelines includes the practice of reflexivity in both the descriptive and analytical senses and is thus composite and highly related when we refer to the practice of reflexivity here. Specifically, he argues that researchers should reflect on the following issues: 1. The potential connection between the topic and its rooted setting; 2. The characteristics of the topic; 3. The theoretical framework and the broader contribution; 4. Neutrally evaluate their integrity as researcher and author by considering (1) the foundation on which intellectual claims are made reasonable; (2) the background, experiences, world views and positioning in the topic and setting; (3) the limitedness imposed through the research; and (4) the merits and demerits of their research design and tactics; 5. Critically assess the data by (1) mentioning by which criteria they selected their material, (2) discussing the problems that arose during all stages of the research, (3) introducing the grounds on which they advocated the categorization system, identifying clearly whether this is an indigenous one or an analyst-constructed one, (4) outlining rival explanations and alternative ways of organizing the data, (5) supplying sufficient data extracts in the text, and (6) discussing power relations within the research; 6. Display the complexity of the data by (1) indicating negative cases, (2) showing the multiple and often contradictory descriptions profited by the respondents, (3) emphasizing the situational nature of respondents’ accounts and descriptions.
7. An example of these would be the wave of autobiographical writing that is being undertaken particularly by feminists (DeVault, 1997, p. 216).
8. Okely (1983), for example, who studied traveler gypsies, was given access by local officers who were thinking about introducing sedentarization.
9. Gaventa (1980) provides a theoretical justification for such apathy: “the conceptions of the powerless may alter as an adaptive response to continual defeat. If the victories of A over B… lead to non-challenge of B due to the anticipation of the reactions of A… then, over time, the calculated withdrawal by B may lead to an unconscious pattern of withdrawal, maintained not by fear of power of A but by a sense of powerlessness within B.” (p. 16)
10. As found out in the extant literature, such as Dahl (1961, p. 221).
11. Burawoy (1998b) holds that “[t]o penetrate the shields… the social scientist has to be lucky and/or devious” (p. 22).
12. According to Mitchell (1993, pp. 14–22), the researchers may extend sympathy to their participants, especially the seemingly weak, either out of the research objective or their emotional inclination, with the former being “informed sympathetic” and the latter “naïve sympathetic.”
13. Like in Scott’s research (1990, p. ix), on the part of the farmers, the most economically dependent villagers are more likely to generate contradicting opinions, while there are some independent ones whose expressed opinions are more consistent.
14. In spite of this concern, we cannot assume the effects of reflexivity and replicability to be equal. All social research is subjective, and as a result, calls for replicability to rely on naïve realist assumptions that there is a single external reality that can be known irrespective of how we come to know it. By the same token, Hammersley (1998) and Seale (1999) have attempted
subtle realist (more self-aware realist) responses by suggesting practical ways through which we can ensure some degree of replicability, while acknowledging that complete replicability is unrealistic and even undesirable. See O’Reilly (2005, p. 227).

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