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QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH AND ISSUES OF POLITICAL SENSITIVITY IN RURAL CHINA

Lily L. Tsai

Political sensitivity is always a challenge for the scholar doing fieldwork in nondemocratic and transitional systems, especially when doing surveys and quantitative research. Not only are more research topics likely to be politically sensitive in these systems, but in trying to collect precise and unbiased data to give us a quantitative description of a population, we are sometimes doing exactly what the government – and sometimes certain members of that population -- would like to prevent. In this chapter, I discuss some of the methodological and ethical issues that face researchers working in these contexts and describe strategies for dealing with these issues. I argue that in these contexts a “socially embedded” approach to survey research that carefully attends to the social relationships inherent in the survey research process can help alleviate problems of political sensitivity, protect participants and researchers in the survey research process, and maximize data quality.

For this chapter I draw on my experience conducting a village-level survey on village conditions of officials in 316 villages in rural China in 2001 as part of the twenty months of fieldwork I conducted for my doctoral dissertation and book, *Accountability without Democracy: Solidary Groups and Public Goods Provision in Rural China*. Unlike an individual-level opinion survey of the mass public, this survey focused on village-level institutions and outcomes and interviewed one or more village officials in each village as informants on their village’s economy, politics, and society.

After an overview of the project’s objectives and research design, I discuss the difficulties I encountered in trying to conduct quantitative research in rural China generally, and in studying politically sensitive questions more specifically. These difficulties will be familiar to

anyone who tries to collect quantitative data, whether on individuals or communities, in rural China. I then describe the methods I used to try to overcome these difficulties and evaluate their strengths and shortcomings when used for a village-level informant survey. I conclude with a brief discussion of the appropriateness of these methods for individual-level attitudinal surveys and how the tradeoffs between bias and variability, interviewer and respondent effects, validity and generalizability, and allocation of resources may differ.

Overview of the research project

For this project, I was interested in accounting for variation in local governmental performance and public goods provision. More specifically, I was interested in evaluating the effects of formal bureaucratic and democratic institutions of accountability and informal institutions of accountability provided by community religious and lineage groups. After conducting preliminary fieldwork in seven provinces, I decided on a multi-stage, multi-method research strategy combining ethnographic study of a single set of villages in Fujian province over four months, a survey of 316 villages and 948 households in four provinces – Shanxi, Hebei, Jiangxi, and Fujian, and a structured comparison of in-depth village case studies selected from the same four provinces. The fieldwork took place over twenty months from 1999 and 2002.

In the first stage of my fieldwork, I focused on developing a detailed understanding of local governance and political processes. During this period, I was based in Xiamen and repeatedly visited four villages in the area almost every week (and villages in other parts of China less frequently). Sometimes I interviewed villagers and village officials. At other times, I simply observed everyday interactions between villagers and daily administrative work by village officials. I also periodically attended village meetings, participated in community festivals and social gatherings, and followed the informal politicking behind the scenes of the

2000 village elections. Through these visits, I discovered a variety of community groups and institutions that often dominated village life and village politics but are sometimes hidden. Officially, community groups were required to be registered with the state. Unofficially, township and county governments often looked the other way. In one village, for example, residents and village officials alternately referred to the unregistered community council of villagers associated with the village's temples as the village council, the temple council, the senior citizens' association (*laonianren xiehui*), the village elders, and the state-approved wedding and funeral council (*hongbai lishihui*).

My time in Xiamen gave me a basic understanding of political and social interactions at the village level, but it was based on only four villages. The next step was to collect data that would enable me to generalize about village governmental performance and public goods provision for a broad range of villages. The National Bureau of Statistics does not collect data on the provision of public services at a level as low as the village, and few studies of rural governance had systematically addressed this topic. I thus designed an original village survey to collect statistics on village-level provision of public services, village public finance, township-village relations, village democratic institutions, and community social institutions.

Since foreigners are not allowed to administer surveys in China, I needed to find Chinese researchers who would be willing to act as guarantors and help me to administer my survey. I pursued discussions with three researchers who had contacts in four different provinces: one, a researcher in the Ministry of Agriculture, who had contacts in Shanxi and Hebei provinces; another, a professor in Jiangxi, who could arrange for a survey in that province; and a third, a professor in Fujian, who could potentially expand the sample for a survey he was already conducting in that province to accommodate my survey and sampling requirements.

These four provinces – Shanxi, Hebei, Jiangxi, and Fujian – varied along two important macro-level dimensions. Coastal and inland regions differ significantly from each other in terms of economic development, and north and south China vary greatly in their institutional history and social organization. In order to make my findings as generalizable as possible, I sought to conduct the survey in two provinces in north China and two provinces in south China. Within each pair, one province was coastal and one was inland. Pursuing leads for administering the survey in these four particular provinces also made sense in terms of backup plans because the survey design would still make sense if one or two of the leads fell through. Administering the survey in two northern provinces or two southern provinces, for example, would allow me to hold geographical factors constant while varying level of development. (For more detailed information on the research design, see the first chapter of my book *Accountability Without Democracy*).

To my surprise, however, all three of these people eventually agreed to help me administer my survey. Within each of the four provinces – Shanxi, Hebei, Jiangxi, and Fujian – two counties were selected purposively according to a combination of theoretical and practical requirements. Although selecting counties within each province randomly would have increased the generalizability of my findings, my primary concern was maximizing the validity of the data. In order to control the quality of the data, I wanted to supervise the survey administration personally. The Chinese researchers who had agreed to assist me thus had to draw on local government contacts who would be willing to host a foreign graduate student, and the only contacts they had who were willing to do so were in county governments. I thus decided to select two neighboring counties in each province that were as similar as possible except that one would be a model county for village elections and the other would not (see book for details). With the

help of these Chinese researchers, I was fortunate to have complete control over questionnaire design and survey sampling within each of the eight counties. Within each county, a random stratified sample of forty villages was selected.

For the Shanxi and Hebei portion of the survey, I selected and trained a team of eleven graduate and undergraduate students from Beijing. In Jiangxi, I trained a team of twenty graduate students from the provincial party school, and in Fujian, I trained a team of twelve or so undergraduate students from Xiamen University. The survey took approximately eighteen days per province to administer in Shanxi, Hebei, and Fujian. In Jiangxi, we had twice as many survey interviewers so administration time was cut in half. In each province, I traveled with the interviewers to the countryside in order to supervise the administration of the survey directly. Every night or two, I met with the survey interviewers to discuss problems and issues arising in the field and check through the questionnaire. When I found errors or skipped questions, survey interviewers called or re-visited the respondents to make corrections and fill in the blanks. In order to correct problems in the field, an assistant and I used laptop computers to code and input the questionnaires each day.

In the final stage of my fieldwork, I wanted to evaluate whether community social institutions really affected village governmental performance in the ways that findings from the survey suggested. To check whether these findings really made sense in a variety of different cases, I put together a set of in-depth village case studies selected from the same four provinces in which the survey had been conducted. As Susan Whiting also notes in her chapter in this volume discussing the use of multiple sources and methods, these case studies allowed me to explore the causal processes underlying the correlations identified by statistical analysis, make inferences about interaction effects between different explanatory variables, and gather more

observations of the implications of the theories being tested. Gathering data through case studies also helped to trace the evolution of a village's political and social institutions and understand how local historical and cultural contexts shaped these institutions.

The Challenges of Quantitative Research and Political Sensitivity in Rural China

First, the biggest challenge to doing quantitative research on nondemocratic and transitional systems like China is obtaining high-quality data. In the case of rural China, if we want village-level data, we have to collect them ourselves. Official statistical yearbooks published by the National Bureau of Statistics contain only data aggregated at the county level (with a little data aggregated at the township level). Another major problem is that nondemocratic and transitional systems rarely collect – or if they collect it, rarely publish – data on many of the political and social variables in which we are interested. In my case, official data on voluntary associations, for example, which are available for many OECD countries, are not available for rural China for two reasons. First, the government does not collect such data. Second, many groups that we might think of as voluntary associations are unregistered and often deliberately trying to avoid notice by official authorities.

These two reasons correspond to two different ways in which the collection of quantitative data is politically sensitive. First, as in other nondemocratic and transitional systems, survey research *itself* is politically sensitive in China. Quantitative description of a population can often be used as a measure of the performance of particular officials or local governments. Not surprisingly, all levels of the state thus seek to control the collection and flow of statistical data (Huang 1995; Cai 2000). Local officials have strong incentives to manipulate the reporting of statistics – grain output during the Great Leap Forward, income per capita and industrial output in the reform period – in order to portray their performance in the best light possible.

China's level-by-level reporting of official statistics facilitates this manipulation. Because government officials have so much at stake when it comes to statistical data, citizens also find survey research a politically sensitive matter. As Belousov et al. (2007: 163)) notes for Russia and other post-Soviet states, "there is still a general fear of answering questions per se." This political context makes survey research by both Chinese or foreign academics a politically sensitive matter.

Nevertheless, survey research and quantitative data collection by foreigners is a particularly sensitive issue. As Melanie Manion discusses in more detail in Chapter 12, the Interim Measures for Administration of Foreign-Related Social Survey Activities issued by the National Bureau of Statistics in 1999 list numerous restrictions on survey research with foreign participation. Any foreigner contemplating survey research in China should look at the regulations in full.¹

Second, the collection of quantitative data can also be politically sensitive when the *content* of our research topics is politically sensitive. To complicate matters, in an authoritarian or transitional system all sorts of topics may be considered politically sensitive, and a researcher does not always know which topics are politically sensitive. Topics that do not seem explicitly political may be politically sensitive. What is considered politically sensitive may also vary across regions and over time. Once, while chatting with a village official in Fujian, I offhandedly observed that ancestral graves were interspersed with the village fields, and the official suddenly fell silent and then changed the subject. I later found out that local officials in that area had been struggling to enforce the new regulation requiring cremation as well as trying to convince villagers to cremate the remains of already buried ancestors in order to increase arable land. The conflict had already led to more than one violent clash between villagers and officials. In another

village, in Jiangsu province, I asked officials if I could use the village's public toilet. Again, the village's officials fell silent. We had been talking about public projects in the village, and the officials had highlighted their investment in the large new public toilet – centrally located in the village, beautifully tiled, with a flushing system. They had, they emphasized, gone above and beyond the targets set by the county's recent sanitation campaign for village public toilets. Instead of showing me to the toilet, however, I was politely ushered out of the village. Confused, I asked the driver as we left the village why I hadn't been allowed to use the public toilet. The driver explained that, in clear contravention of the spirit (if not the letter) of the county's campaign, village officials kept the toilet locked up so that villagers were not allowed to dirty it. The man with the key was away that day so they were unable to unlock it for me.

These examples also highlight the distinction between topics that are politically sensitive to government officials and topics that are politically sensitive to villagers. Residents of the Jiangsu village were happy to point out that village officials had constructed the new public toilet only for show, while village officials were understandably reluctant to highlight this fact. In the case of the Fujian village, the new cremation and burial regulations were a sensitive topic for both villagers and officials. If I had been surveying on the topic, I would have had to frame my questions differently depending on whether my respondents were villagers or officials. Villagers, for example, might not have responded well if I had asked them whether they were “complying” with the new regulations, whereas officials would have been less likely to object to this wording. Officials, on the other hand, might have responded poorly if I asked how well they were enforcing the new regulations.

These examples also illustrate how questions can sometimes be politically sensitive because disclosure of the truth can potentially harm the respondent and sometimes because

people feel uncomfortable talking about certain topics. In the case of the public toilet, village officials did not want to admit to locking the toilet because their behavior was contrary to the policy objectives of higher levels. The issue of digging up ancestral graves, on the other hand, was not only politically charged for policy-related reasons but for normative and historical ones as well. Digging up ancestral graves not only violates deeply held moral and spiritual convictions but also reminds villagers of the state's often violent efforts to stamp out what it considered "feudal superstitions" during the Maoist period.

There is one last point worth making about political sensitivity and one's research questions: it is critical to know where the line is between subjects that are politically sensitive and subjects that are taboo. *Asking questions about subjects that are taboo can destroy your ability to ask questions about subjects that are politically sensitive.* In his research on the guerilla warfare of the Irish Republican Army, Sluka (1990) found that he could ask people questions about their support for and criticisms about the IRA but not questions about arms or explosives, or who might actively be a guerilla (Sluka 1990: 114-126). In the context of rural China, some questions related to the birth control policy, for example, are politically sensitive; others are taboo. In one Hebei village I visited, I talked with the village's branch of the state-mandated women's association about their responsibilities and activities. As they became more comfortable with me, they described how one of the ways in which they encouraged villagers to follow the birth control policy was to perform comedy skits (*xiaopin*) that mocked "out-of-quota birthing guerillas" (*chaosheng youji dui*), villagers who go into hiding in order to give illegal out-of-quota births. They were comfortable gossiping about frequent cases like these in their locality. If, however, I had asked questions about illegally coerced abortions and sterilizations, they may very well have stopped telling colorful stories and reported me to the local authorities.

Similarly, questions about underground Christian churches were politically sensitive but questions about the Falun Gong were taboo. In another area of Hebei, a township official felt comfortable telling me that the biggest fear of the county government was the proliferation of underground household churches in the area. Shortly after this discussion, however, he volunteered that of course there were no Falun Gong activities in the area. Since I had not asked about the subject, his comment gave me the impression that probing into Falun Gong activities would be taboo.

In short, issues of political sensitivity complicate the collection of quantitative data in rural China in various ways. First, arranging for the administration of a survey is a challenge. Foreign researchers have to find Chinese collaborators who are willing to take responsibility for conducting the survey, able to gain access to research sites and respondents in the sample, and willing to vouch for your trustworthiness. Second, researchers have to worry about getting respondents to give truthful and precise responses to politically sensitive questions. We have to know what the political incentives and sanctions are for giving certain answers. Sometimes there may be pressures on respondents to decline answering a question or to give only a vague answer. At other times, there may be pressure for respondents to avoid answering a question and yet appear as if they are answering the question to the best of their ability.

Third, researchers have to accommodate a suspicion of survey research in general. Both local officials and villagers can be uncomfortable and wary of being interviewed by people they do not know from outside their locality. For some people, the basic format of a survey interview may be unfamiliar or reminiscent of unpleasant interrogations by state agents. In these contexts, innovative question formats and questionnaire designs such as anchoring vignettes (King 2004: 197-207) or list experiments (Streb 2008) may actually raise suspicions and undermine data

quality. When I tried a simplified version of the political efficacy vignette described by King et al., I not only had trouble securing the cooperation of respondents but even when they agreed to participate, they were extremely confused by the format. A few even reacted by walking away, leaving me alone in their house. List experiments raised suspicions among respondents that they were being tricked in some way because they found it hard to understand how the question worked. Finally, as with almost everything about doing research in China, there can be tremendous variation in political sensitivity issues across regions and individuals.

Strategies for Accommodating Political Sensitivity Issues in Quantitative Research

Before I go on to discuss some of the methods I used in order to accommodate the difficulties associated with the various issues of political sensitivity in collecting quantitative village-level data in rural China, I want to emphasize that *one should always be willing to change research topics due to issues of political sensitivity*. No academic project is more important than the safety and security of the people involved in the project.² We have an ethical imperative to “do no harm.” As Elisabeth Wood notes, “there are some settings where research cannot be ethically conducted and should not be attempted or should be curtailed (Wood 2006: 373-386). Wood provides a valuable discussion of the research procedures that she followed in order to implement the “do no harm” ethic during her fieldwork in El Salvador.

An important strategy for learning how to “do no harm” and when to change research topics is to *do qualitative research before attempting the collection of quantitative data*. The initial stages of my fieldwork – a preliminary two-month trip, six months in Fujian, and several short trips to Shanxi and Hebei – were invaluable in helping me to design and pretest survey questions (Park 2006:128). During these stages, I allocated much of my time simply to chatting conversationally with villagers and local officials in different provinces about their lives and

their communities in general. Like Wood, I found that rural residents I interviewed had far more political expertise than I did and a far better sense of what was politically risky. The more time and opportunity I gave them to teach me about the specifics of political sensitivity, the safer and more productive my subsequent research was (Wood 2006: 380).

Although I always had my main research questions in the back of my mind, I also just wanted to get to know people as much as possible. When I knew I would have multiple chances to talk to someone, I often waited until later meetings to ask them the questions on my structured interview schedule or on my draft surveys. The sociologist Ned Polsky's first rule of field research worked well: "Before you can ask questions, or even speak much at all other than when spoken to, you should get the 'feel' of their world by extensive and attentive listening – get some sense of what pleases them and what bugs them, some sense of their frame of reference, and some sense of *their* sense of language." At the same time, it was also important to answer their questions about my background. As Polsky also writes, "it is important that [the interviewee] will be studying you, and to let him study you. . . . He has got to define you satisfactorily to himself if you are to get anywhere" (Polsky 2006: 128, 132).

This approach allowed me to find out which topics were easy to bring up and which topics were off limits, and how the line between sensitive and taboo varied from region to region. Often I would ask people to give me tours of their neighborhoods, which would often gave me the occasion to ask about something that we saw – an abandoned road project, a Catholic church in the center of town, a twenty foot gully full of garbage, or a burnt-out storefront. This strategy resulted in interesting stories involving corruption, competition for congregants between local Catholic and Protestant churches, conflict between villagers and officials, and conflict among lineage groups. Chatting socially with people also allowed them to bring up local current events,

which sometimes touched on my research interests – a scandal in a neighboring county where a local journalist reporting on local governmental investment in irrigation reached down to show TV cameras a new irrigation pipe and it came out of the ground, attached to nothing; or rumors about a contentious village election in the area that had resulted in one of the candidates being lured to a karaoke bar and stabbed. Although these kinds of rumors did not constitute reliable data, they gave me a valuable sense of the political climate and a context for gauging the topics people felt were politically sensitive and the ways in which they were willing to talk about these topics.

A period of qualitative research also taught me about regional variation in the political sensitivity of particular topics. The topic of underground Christian house churches was very sensitive in Hebei but openly discussed in Fujian. In some Fujian villages where conflict between lineages had erupted into physical fights between villagers, local officials explicitly warned me not to ask about it. By contrast, in Hebei, villagers freely recounted the longstanding feuds between a village's sublineages and found the different ways in which sublineages tried to sabotage each other amusing. There was also variation within provinces. In eastern Fujian, I found that local officials felt they had to justify the existence of unregistered village temple councils by talking about how they contributed to village public goods provision and social stability. In western Fujian I talked to local officials who simply stated that villagers did not trust township and village cadres and that informal villager councils were now running the villages.

After this first stage of fieldwork, it became clear to me that I would have to *attend to data quality before pursuing generalizability*. Getting survey respondents to give accurate and truthful answers to politically sensitive survey questions was going to be a primary concern. I therefore made a conscious decision to maximize the validity and reliability of the data rather

than the generalizability of the findings. Drawing more valid conclusions about a smaller population seemed like a more sensible way to build knowledge than drawing less valid conclusions about a larger population. In theory I could have hired a market research firm to administer the survey nationally or piggybacked on an existing national survey by adding questions to an existing survey instrument. After, however, witnessing firsthand how much responses to politically sensitive questions could vary depending on how comfortable respondents were and how they perceived the person doing the asking, I decided that I needed as much freedom, control, and participation in the actual administration of the survey as possible. This decision guided my sampling for the survey. Within each of the eight counties in the survey I used a multi-level stratified random sampling strategy to select villages, but I selected both the provinces and counties purposively based on where the Chinese researchers assisting me had personal contacts who would allow me to conduct a large-scale survey freely. Strictly speaking, this strategy limited the generalizability of findings from survey data analysis to these eight counties, but it was crucial to maintaining the quality of the data.

In the case of rural China, one is often forced to choose between obtaining a nationally representative sample and controlling the local conditions under which the survey is administered so that the accuracy of the data is maximized. Surveys based on nationally representative samples have become possible in China, but once the terms of survey administration have been negotiated, foreign researchers participating in these surveys often have limited control and leverage over the local conditions of survey administration. The actual administration of the survey is outsourced and often takes place quickly.

The extent to which one has to choose between data quality and generalizability, or internal validity and external validity, depends in part on the kinds of questions one is trying to

study. For research questions that are relatively uncontroversial, controlling the local conditions of survey administration may be less important. For these projects, the researcher may not have to choose between obtaining a nationally representative sample and obtaining accurate data. But for projects on potentially politically sensitive topics, researchers have to worry not only about securing access to sampled research sites and respondents but creating an interview environment in which they feel comfortable giving truthful responses to survey questions. In these cases, obtaining a probability sample of a more limited population may be a reasonable choice.

Conducting “Socially Embedded” Survey Research

In order to create this kind of environment and maximize the quality of quantitative data collected on politically sensitive topics, I argue that *researchers need to recognize that survey research is embedded in social relationships among researchers, official authorities, interviewers, and respondents. Moreover, researchers need to invest in building and shaping these social relationships so that they generate trust and mutual obligations.*³ While this approach may sound obvious, many survey research projects in fact try to render the survey research process as impersonal as possible. Researchers often pay firms or domestic research institutions to conduct their surveys, treat official approvals as purely bureaucratic hurdles, and seek to “standardize” interviewers and depersonalize interviewer-respondent interaction in order to minimize interviewer error. Rather than thinking about how to foster social relationships based on trust and reciprocal obligations with domestic collaborators and official authorities, survey researchers often think in terms of principal-agent problems, incentives, and monitoring (Fowler 1993).

In the following sections, I discuss four types of social relationships that influence the process of survey research and quantitative data collection, and consider the ways in which these

social relationships can generate trust and obligation to influence the quality of data on politically sensitive research topics (Granovetter 1985: 482, 490).

1) Relationships between foreign and Chinese researchers

In order to collect quantitative data in China, foreign researchers must work with Chinese researchers who are willing to take official responsibility for conducting the survey. In the case of surveys on potentially politically sensitive topics, this responsibility is an especially serious one. It is not to be taken lightly by the Chinese researcher or by the foreign researcher asking for the assistance of the Chinese researcher. The fact that the Chinese researcher bears official responsibility does not let foreign researchers off the hook. In asking for the help of a Chinese researcher to collect data on potentially politically sensitive issues, the foreign researcher is obligated to take responsibility for the security and well-being of the Chinese researcher. Not only should we always listen to and defer to our collaborator's judgment on what is too politically sensitive, but if our collaborator seems more daring than seems sensible, then it is also our responsibility to rein him or her in. Although they may be right in judging something to be perfectly safe, our responsibility for them requires us to listen to our own judgment as well. It goes without saying that one should never do something without the full knowledge and consent of one's collaborator.

It is impossible to collect high-quality data without a skilled and reliable collaborator. As Albert Park, an economist working on China, notes: "Nearly all successful surveys in developing countries depend on the support of energetic, capable research collaborators from the host country who know how to get things done within the country's institutional, political, and social environment; are skilled at interacting with government officials and community leaders; have developed reputations within the country that build trust, and have valuable substantive insights

into the research question. On the flip side, collaborators pursuing agendas at cross-purposes with those of the researcher can easily frustrate research plans” (Park 2006: 122-123).

The more potentially politically sensitive one’s research topics are, the more important it is to work with a collaborator whom one trusts. I grew to know my collaborators and their families. We moved in the same professional circles within China, we had mutual friends and acquaintances, which reinforced the mutual trust and confidence necessary to collaborate on politically sensitive survey research, and we continue to keep in touch.

Research collaborations always carry an ethical obligation to reciprocate the other party’s time and efforts. As Park discusses, one can reciprocate by providing intellectual benefits (providing them with useful ideas and tools for their own research, acting as a guest lecturer, co-authoring papers, or facilitating a visit to one’s own research institution), material benefits (adequate compensation for services), or personal (developing personal relationships and being friendly) (Park 2006: 123). When, however, the research project involves politically sensitive topics and political risk, relying solely on material compensation is unlikely to work – and if it seems to work, one should be extremely cautious about proceeding.

One’s collaborator also has to have a finely honed sense of what political concerns different types and levels of officials may have about the research project. I usually found that researchers working for state ministries and government organs were better informed about the political sensitivity of particular issues and more experienced at negotiating people’s concerns. As a result, they were generally more confident about tackling politically sensitive questions than researchers in universities or academic research institutes.

2) Relationships between researchers and official authorities.

After forging a research collaboration based on mutual trust and obligation, the next step is to build relationships with government officials whose approval and support are needed. In many cases, the informal support is far more important than the official approval. As Belousov et al. comment, “[f]ieldwork in difficult to access places often needs to be facilitated by key ‘gatekeepers.’” Belousov et al. note that after their gatekeeper was murdered, his “personal patronage” and “this informal status disappeared, even though the formal agreements remained intact. While no-one now attempted to prevent our research activity, in contrast with the earlier stage, nobody went out of their way to help us either” (Belousov 2007: 166).

Collecting valid and reliable data on potentially politically sensitive subjects requires extremely careful attention to how the survey is administered and how relationships between interviewers and respondents are structured. Control over these aspects of survey administration in turn required a very high degree of trust and confidence from local officials in the counties where I conducted the survey. In order to achieve this level of comfort from local officials so that they would not intervene in our survey of village officials, I had to work in places where my Chinese collaborators had relationships with provincial, municipal, and county officials. My collaborators generally went through contacts they had made in their previous field research. When my sampling strategy required us to work in a county where they did not have a contact, they would go through a contact at the municipal or provincial level instead. Because my collaborators had already established relationships with local authorities, which they worked at maintaining over time, local officials were willing to trust me and to take more time to get to know us and our project, which also increased their level of comfort with the survey administration.

As a result, we were given relatively free rein within each county, and county and township officials did not attempt to intervene in the administration of the survey. We were allowed to administer the survey in a village immediately after it was sampled so that higher-level officials had little opportunity to call up sampled villages and de-brief them on how they should respond to our questions. In most cases, I or one of my assistants accompanied the higher-level officials making arrangements for us and witnessed most of their telephone interactions with lower levels. We were allowed to spend as much time as we wanted in whatever area we wanted, which enabled us to probe the responses of village officials to make sure they were giving us the most accurate answers possible. We were allowed to talk with multiple village officials and in some cases, former village officials to corroborate information about village-level conditions. Without this degree of freedom and the flexibility to adjust the administration of the survey to local conditions, it would have been much harder to ensure the accuracy of data on sensitive subjects such as the existence of village religious activity or the collection of illegal local levies.

3) Relationships between researchers and interviewers

While forging relationships based on trust and reciprocity among researchers and official authorities is essential for setting up the survey and setting up the conditions for collecting high-quality quantitative data on politically sensitive subjects, *the people who are most important for ensuring the quality of the data are the interviewers*. They are the ones who are doing the actual collection of the data. In the field, I realized that the efforts of the interviewers depended heavily on my relationship with them. Even if my funds had not been limited, it would have been hard to compensate them enough for undergoing the hardship of administering a rural survey. Personally supervising the administration of the survey and traveling to research sites along with the

interviewers allowed me to build stronger relationships with them and strengthen bonds of mutual obligation and reciprocity. The more I was able to convince them of the intellectual and social value of the project, the more effort they invested in trying to obtain accurate data *and the more they felt that they had a responsibility to invest this effort.*

Leading by example and doing things to express my gratitude for their work helped immeasurably to improve the quality of survey administration. These things ranged from advising them on their theses to staying in the same accommodations to hand washing their laundry when they were busy with survey administration. I traveled with them to each locality and took all of the same long-distance bus and train trips. When I spot-checked enumerators by dropping in on them, I picked villages that were difficult to access as often as ones that were easy to access. The more effort I showed, the more they realized how important data quality was to me, and the more they realized how important and valuable they were to the process, which in turn motivated them to put in more effort.

4) Relationships between interviewers and respondents

The relationship between interviewer and respondent is the most immediate and critical context for the generation of valid and accurate data. While in the village, interviewers maximized the quality of the data from village officials by spending a large amount of time visiting the village. Even though the survey focused on interviewing village officials as informants on village conditions, interviewers also talked with villagers as well as current and former village officials. Interviewers typically spent half a day to a day in each village. Depending on the time it took to travel to the village, interviewers sometimes stayed in a village overnight.

We administered the survey as a genuine two-way conversation between interviewers and village officials. When village officials gave responses that seemed to conflict with their previous responses or with the personal impressions enumerators had gained from walking around the village and talking with villagers, interviewers would ask follow-up questions to probe their responses more deeply and reconcile contradictions. To corroborate the responses of village officials, interviewers also asked for and were typically able to look at supplementary village documents including village account books, village receipts, minutes from village government meetings, village election ballots, and election records.

Conducting the survey as a conversation and spending a significant amount of time visiting each village also helped interviewers and village officials get to know each other as people. Not only did this process make village officials more comfortable with talking to the survey enumerators, but it also enabled us to repay the village officials a little by providing them with information and answering their questions about us, our research, and our backgrounds. The more we were able to create a relationship based on reciprocity and trust, the higher the quality of the data we collected.

Several other factors also helped to build a relationship between interviewers and respondents and maximize the comfort of village officials with our research on potentially politically sensitive topics. We were able to stress the purely academic nature of the survey to village officials credibly. The survey was in fact purely academic, and the data were not collected for policymaking purposes. All of the interviewers and I looked like, and in fact were, university students. In the vast majority of cases, interviewers were not accompanied by higher-level officials when interviewing village officials. We also administered the survey at the convenience of village officials. We scheduled the survey so that it did not coincide with peak

times for agricultural work such as harvesting or administrative work such as tax collection or village elections. When interviewers arrived in a village and village officials were busy, they waited around until the village officials had sufficient time to sit down with them for a lengthy conversation.

Perhaps most importantly, the high quality of the data was due in large part to the skilled and diligent administration of the survey by the student interviewers. All of the interviewers underwent two to five days of training in the classroom and in practice administrations of the survey in the field. Most of the students had grown up in villages themselves. A number of them had worked as enumerators on previous rural surveys. Because of their personal backgrounds, they were particularly adept at putting the village officials at ease by talking about their own experiences growing up in a village and drawing on their personal knowledge of rural life. Many of them applied to work on the survey because they were writing theses on rural issues and could take advantage of the time in the field to collect information for their own research projects.

Choosing a Mode of Interviewing:

Conversational or Flexible Interviewing vs. Standardized Interviewing.

One of the most important factors for data quality in this survey was choosing to use conversational or flexible interviewing rather than standardized interviewing. In standardized interviewing the ideal interviewer is a simple reader of the questions as they are written in the survey instrument. Lavrakas (1993:132) describes the standardized interviewer as an “intelligent automaton,” and as Weisberg (2005:47) comments, “the emphasis often is more on the interviewer as automaton than as intelligent.” The standardized approach to interviewing characterizes the relationship between interviewer and respondent as a professional relationship in which the interviewer seeks to obtain high-quality data from the respondent by providing

incentives, appealing to the respondent's own values, and teaching respondents how to play their expected role in the survey interview and what good answers should be like (Weisberg 2005:48).

The standardized mode of interviewing has a number of advantages. If conducted properly, it minimizes interviewer variance (Groves 1987:164). Having interviewers adhere strictly to a script reduces the demands on interviewer skills and comprehension of the research project and the costs of training interviewers (Weisberg 2005:48). Standardized interviewing is also much faster than conversational interviewing and decreases administration time (Biemer and Lyberg, 2003:154).

There are few systematic studies providing data on the circumstances under which standardized or conversational interviewing produces higher-quality data, and more such studies are sorely needed (Weisberg 2005:62). Based on my experience with my 2001 village survey, standardized interviewing presented a number of problems when conducting research in rural China on potentially politically sensitive topics.

Some of these problems existed irrespective of the research topics and arose because interviews and surveys were completely unfamiliar to most rural residents. Many villagers in China lack experience with multiple-choice questions, standardized tests, interviews, or even informal conversations with strangers from outside their locality. Even when dialect is not a problem, simple misunderstandings were particularly common. Village officials would, for example, confuse "preliminary" or "primary" village election candidates and "final" or "formal" village election candidates, regardless of how clearly and thoroughly we defined the concepts for them. During a question about preliminary candidates, for example, it might become clear that the respondent was thinking about final candidates because the number of candidates he had in mind matched the final slate rather than the primary slate. In a standardized interview the

interviewer should simply record the respondent's answer exactly as given, even if he knows it does not represent the facts accurately (Groves 2004: 289). In conversational interviewing the interviewer can ask the respondent whether he is definitely thinking about preliminary candidates or actually thinking about final candidates and clarify that the current question concerns preliminary candidates.

One of the main arguments for using conversational interviewing rather than standardized interviewing parallels the issue of translating cross-national surveys into different languages: using the same words does not guarantee the same meanings to different respondents. (Suchman and Jordan 1993:233; Iarossi 2006:85-86). Schober and Conrad (1997) demonstrate in a laboratory experiment that while both standardized and conversational interviewing produces high levels of accuracy when respondents are certain about how concepts in a question map onto their own circumstances, conversational interviewing produces higher response accuracy when respondents are unsure about these mappings and interviewers can provide additional assistance and explanation. Unclear mappings are a particularly salient problem for China. Because of the immense amount of regional variation, it is particularly difficult to anticipate all the possible questions and definitional issues that might arise, regardless of how thoroughly one pretests the survey instrument. In this context, conversational interviewing may offer significant advantages over standardized interviewing. As Groves (1987) notes, "many of the normal mechanisms of assuring clear communication, of correcting misimpressions, of addressing the questions of the listener have been stripped away from the 'standard-ized' interview." Moreover, standardized interviewing may reduce interviewer-related error at the expense of increasing respondent-related bias: "The effects of [standardized interviewing] may have been to minimize interviewer

variance but to increase bias, due to poor comprehension or minimal memory search for relevant information (Groves 1987: S164).”

Standardized interviewing in contexts where respondents lack experience with surveys and strangers can also have a dramatic effect on response rates and data accuracy. A stranger who appears on a villager’s doorstep and wants him to provide answers to questions read mechanically from a prepared script may elicit a number of reactions that are not conducive to the collection of high-quality data. One reaction, as Suchman and Jordan observe, is simple disinterest: “As respondents realize that their expectations for ordinary conversation are violated (and violated without recourse), they may react with boredom (with consequent intellectual if not physical withdrawal) and impatience (with answers designed to “get it over with”)” (Suchman and Jordan 1990: 233). As a result, response rates go down, and missing data and “don’t know” responses go up.

Another reaction that I experienced when I tried to conduct standardized interviews in rural China was related to the political sensitivity of survey research itself. Villagers and village officials often did a suspicious “double take” if I refused to deviate from the prepared script. Even if the respondent’s initial reaction to my request for an interview and explanation of the process was good-natured willingness, as soon as I explained that I had to follow the script in order to make sure that I had collected information in the same way as all the other interviewers, the respondent would often ask, “Who did you say you were again? What did you say this was for again?” or “Is this for a government office (*zhengfu bumen*)?” Even if I attempted at that point to reiterate reassurances that this research was purely academic and this practice was simply to ensure that all the interviewers collected the same information, respondents usually

remained visibly disturbed or disengaged for the rest of the interview, especially if I continued to refuse to deviate from the script.

Trying to get me to deviate from a standardized script was in fact a way of equalizing the power dynamics in the interviewer-respondent relationship. Deviating from the script was like agreeing to drink *bai jiu* at lunch – a concession that both symbolically and practically allowed the other person to exercise power over my behavior, which in turn made him more inclined to agree to my requests. Moreover, because formal interviews and the collection of quantitative data themselves are politically sensitive matters in China, the more formal and professional the process is, the more the experience smacks of political and governmental authority. Respondents assume that the authority that the script has over the interviewer is because the study is actually being commissioned by government authorities.

Conversational interviewing also had a number of other advantages over standardized interviewing when it came to asking questions about politically sensitive topics.⁴ Giving respondents the opportunity and conversational space to explain and justify their behavior often made them feel better about giving truthful answers about politically incorrect behavior. In one Hebei village, for example, village officials were willing to admit to using floating ballot boxes instead of officially mandated fixed polling stations. They, however, wanted to spend some time explaining to us that floating ballot boxes worked much better in their village because many villagers worked on fishing boats that went out to sea at different times of the day.

Conversational interviewing also allowed interviewers to cross-check responses and allowed respondents to relate anecdotes that provided interviewers with information about the validity of the data. More than once, respondents changed their minds later on in the interview when they

felt more comfortable and indicated that an earlier answer they had provided was false. In a standardized interview, this kind of later admission of the truthful answer would be ignored.

Finally, the conversational mode of interviewing permits interviewers to ask questions using terms that are not politically sensitive to respondents but may be politically sensitive to official authorities. Some Chinese researchers, for example, are wary about putting questions on government corruption on the written questionnaire. Their solution is to write a question about something like “problems of public administration,” which will not raise the eyebrows of official authorities, and then have interviewers explicitly explain to respondents that the question actually asks about problems of corruption. Paluck (2007) uses a similar technique in Rwanda to collect survey data on opinions about ethnicity. Since the Rwandan constitution bans speech about ethnicity, Paluck had to replace the word “ethnicity” with “types of people” in her survey. She notes: “Researchers followed up these questions with an explanation that implied the significance of this term. I am confident that these questions were understood to implicate ethnicity, because Rwandans are accustomed to using such ‘coded’ language to refer to ethnicity on a daily basis, and because it was clear from our participants’ responses that they understood the question, as many dismissed the coded language altogether and referred directly to Hutus, Tutsis, and Twa”(Paluck 2007: 54).

Reflections on Conducting Individual-Level Attitudinal Surveys

Although these observations are drawn from my administration of a politically sensitive village-level informant survey, they may also be applicable to the administration of public opinion surveys on politically sensitive topics. As with village-level surveys, we need to attend to the problem of data quality before pursuing generalizability.

Since individual-level public opinion surveys can be even more politically sensitive to official authorities than village-level surveys, using a socially embedded approach to survey administration is perhaps even more critical. Creating relationships with Chinese researchers, official authorities, interviewers, and respondents that are based on mutual trust and obligation is doubly important for creating an environment in which respondents feel less pressure to give politically desirable responses.

In sum, the conclusion that I drew from my survey experience was that a conversational mode of interviewing, which preserved the neutrality guidelines associated with but not inherently exclusive to standardized interviewing (Dijkstra and van der Zouwen), created a mutually trusting relationship between interviewer and respondent that maximized the quality of quantitative data collected. It is not surprising that studies find that experienced interviewers instructed to use standardized interviewing often use elements of conversational interviewing anyway. Viterna and Maynard's (2002) study of twelve university survey centers that purported to use the standardized approach found that only one consistently followed standardized interviewing procedures. Houtkoop-Steenstra observes that interviewers have a strong tendency to try to maintain rapport with respondents by breaking the rules of standardized interviewing. In a survey on illiteracy, interviewers tried to make respondents more comfortable by rephrasing questions frequently, praising their achievements, and indicating that they sometimes shared some of the respondent's problems with reading.

Interviewers should be nonjudgmental of respondents, and probing should be neutral. Depending on the circumstances, interviewers might act "bland and naïve," or matter-of-fact and knowledgeable about corruption and other characteristic qualities of rural politics (Wood 206: 382). Conversational interviewing enabled respondents to ask interviewers questions about what

survey questions meant and why we were interested in asking them. It enabled respondents to obtain often-detailed information about us and our research that helped to alleviate their concerns and suspicions and helped to build a relationship governed by reciprocity of frankness. Dijkstra (1987: 312) also finds that conversational interviewing in which the interviewer shows interest and empathy helps to motivate the respondent to try harder to understand the question, retrieve the information needed to answer the question, and to repeat this process until an adequate response is provided.

Conversational interviewing gave respondents power and control not just over the decision to participate in the survey but also during the survey interview process itself. This sense of equality in the survey interviewing relationship was critical to the willingness of respondents to volunteer truthful information on politically sensitive subjects.

Using conversational interviewing for attitudinal surveys may require even more intensive training of interviewers, but I argue that this investment could help us advance the study of public opinion in China more systematically. Interviewers can be trained to answer factual questions about the survey and definitional questions about terms and concepts in survey questions without giving their opinions. They can be trained to answer, “I don’t know,” or “I’m not sure” if respondents ask for their own opinions. Like standardized surveys that include questions with statements like, “Some people do this, while others do that,” interviewers can be trained to make conversation that refers matter-of-factly to the existence of both politically desirable and undesirable behaviors and attitudes. It is true that conversational interviewing may sometimes be less likely to introduce additional bias or variance when we are collecting factual information than when we are collecting attitudinal data since there is a definite “right” or “wrong” answer to factual questions. However, if the danger of political desirability bias is high,

the decrease in political desirability bias may be worth the risk of increased interviewer variance. Training interviewers to use conversational interviewing for attitudinal surveys may also be more costly than using standardized interviewing, but again, it may be important to spend resources on improving data quality before we spend resources on maximizing sample size.

Finally, starting with smaller-scale attitudinal surveys can free up resources for collecting systematic data on interviewers and interviewer-respondent interactions. Instead of using standardized interviewing to allow us to ignore or assume away interviewer variance, a better strategy is to collect data on the interviews and interviewers and *to study these effects explicitly*.

Additional Notes on Strategies for Dealing with Political Sensitivity Issues

Several other nuts-and-bolts strategies were also very helpful when conducting survey research in rural China on potentially politically sensitive subjects. One important strategy was sending teams of two interviewers to conduct survey interviews. One interviewer could try to draw away any higher-level authorities monitoring the interview by asking them for a tour of the environs, leaving the other interviewer free to conduct the survey without interference. Another strategy was to try to corroborate responses by collecting supplementary data on things that could be seen. In addition, for example, to asking about lineage activities, I also asked about the existence of lineage hall buildings and, if they existed, whether we could go and see them. Similarly, survey interviewers also collected various documents from villages they surveyed, such as election ballots and reports, villager tax receipts, and cadre responsibility contracts.

Conclusion

In the end, surveys are inherently compromises (Groves POQ S167). In making decisions about survey design and administration, researchers make endless tradeoffs – between data quality and generalizability, time and money, interviewer effects and respondent effects, bias and

variance, conducting pretests and the main survey, and more. This chapter offers some thoughts on how to make these tradeoffs in nondemocratic and authoritarian contexts where political sensitivity is a central issue. I argue that data quality is of both paramount importance and concern in these contexts and that central to maximizing data quality is conducting survey research that is “socially embedded.” Survey researchers in any context take on multiple roles and invest in different interpersonal relationships: “The decision to conduct a survey is a decision to become not just a scholar but also a project manager, a fundraiser, a survey methodologist, and a motivator and supervisor of others” (Park 2006: 128). Prioritizing the investment of time, resources, and attention into constructing these social relationships so that they are based on mutual obligation and trust can be invaluable for overcoming the methodological and ethical challenges associated with politically sensitive quantitative research.

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¹ These regulations are available online from the Supreme People's Court of the PRC at

<http://en.chinacourt.org/public/detail.php?id=3897>.

² See Nancy Howell, *Surviving Fieldwork: A Report of the Advisory Panel on Health and Safety in Fieldwork* (Arlington, VA: American Anthropological Association, 1990). Sluka, 1990; and

Christopher B. Barrett and Jeffrey W. Cason, *Overseas Research: A Practical Guide* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997).

³ The concept of social embeddedness I use here comes from Granovetter's (1985) article on economic exchange. Granovetter's emphasis on the "role of concrete personal relations and structures (or 'networks') of such relations in generating trust and discouraging malfeasance" is the point I highlight here.

⁴ Kish (1962) finds that interviewer effects are not necessarily greater for politically sensitive questions.