More about "Research in Ambiguous, Conflictual, and Changing Contexts": Studying Ethnic Populations in China, Xi'an to Urumqi

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Abstract

A recent article in this journal discusses ways to manage uncertainty when the research field abruptly and significantly changes on researchers working inside their own society (Kacen & Chaitin, 2006). Our essay extends this discussion by asking: How do researchers manage ambiguous, conflictual, and rapidly changing events when they engage in study outside their own society? We describe three aspects of our data collection experience that coincidentally began one week before the Urumqi city, Xinjiang, China, riots of 2009 in which over 200 people were reported as killed and several thousand injured: (a). our original research agenda and the uncertain situation in Xinjiang in recent years; (b). how we modified our research project and approach to data collection; and (c). what we learned that can contribute to knowledge about conducting research under ambiguous, potentially unstable and rapidly changing socio-political conditions.

Keywords

Research and Context, Racial Tension and Conflict, China, Ethnic Minorities

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A recent article in this journal discusses ways to manage uncertainty when the research field abruptly and significantly changes on researchers working inside their own society (Kacen & Chaitin, 2006). Our essay extends this discussion by asking: How do researchers manage ambiguous, conflictual, and rapidly changing events when they engage in study outside their own society? We describe three aspects of our data collection experience that coincidentally began one week before the Urumqi city, Xinjiang, China, riots of 2009 in which over 200 people were reported as killed and several thousand injured: (a). our original research agenda and the uncertain situation in Xinjiang in recent years; (b). how we modified our research project and approach to data collection; and (c). what we learned that can contribute to knowledge about conducting research under ambiguous, potentially unstable and rapidly changing socio-political conditions. Key Words: Research and Context, Racial Tension and Conflict, China, Ethnic Minorities.

In their recent article in this journal entitled, *Undertaking Qualitative Research in Ambiguous, Conflictual, and Changing Contexts,* Kacen and Chaitin (2006) pose an interesting and increasingly important question researchers can face when studying populations in ambiguous, conflictual circumstances. They ask: "how does the researcher know what events are 'worthy' of study when the context in which s/he is working is uncertain, ambiguous, and constantly changing?" (p. 210). Even more relevant to our essay is a second issue they raise: "once a topic of inquiry is chosen, and the field abruptly and significantly changes on the researcher, how [does] s/he deals with these rapid changes; changes which might result in a severe revision, or even worse, the end of the planned research?" (p. 210).

The Kacen and Chaitin (2006) article explores qualitative research issues that arise when researchers engage in study *within* their own society. They argue that "the researcher who is in the middle of such 'action' may have quite a lot to offer not only to audiences from his/her society, and to audiences from other places around the world, but also to herself as she reflects on her special place within the society and within the research" (p. 223). For example, one of the authors contributes important insights about *insider* issues, such as waiting to present research results until her children were no longer at the age for compulsory military service.

Our essay extends discussion about ways to consider managing uncertainty when the research field abruptly and significantly changes on the researcher. We describe how we confronted a series of dilemmas with our project, based on a modification of the question posed by Kacen and Chaitin (2006). Our question states: "When researchers engage in study *outside* their own society, how do they manage unstable, conflictual, and rapidly changing events?"

Our data collection experience coincidentally began one week before the Urumqi city, Xinjiang, China, riots of 2009 in which over 200 people were reported as killed and many more injured. Our essay is comprised of three topics: (a) our original research agenda and the uncertain situation in Xinjiang in recent years, (b) how we modified our research project and approach to data collection, and (c) what we learned that can contribute to knowledge about conducting research under ambiguous, potentially unstable, and rapidly changing socio-political conditions.

Our Research Agenda and the Uncertain Situation We Confronted

For the last several years we have been studying ethnic minorities in China, with special attention to the Uyghur population of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China, a Muslim group. Nearly all Uyghur people live in Xinjiang, where they comprise 43.35% of the region's total (Li, 2005). Racial tension and conflict in ethnic minority regions of inland and Western China, such as Tibet and Xinjiang, have a long history and have been escalating in recent years. Racial conflicts in areas inhabited by minority nationalities have been the subject of many studies (e.g., Clarke, 2009; Gladney, 2004; Harrell, 2001; Lipman, 1997; Tyler 2004), but very little research has been conducted to analyze the impact of racial conflict on the health of elderly populations of these geographic areas.

We became interested in studying the health status of ethnic minorities in China, including the impact of racial conflict on health, for personal and professional reasons. Dr. Li was born and has lived in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region in China. However, she has lived in the U.S. for the last 25 years and now is an American citizen. Because of her early life experiences, she has developed an ongoing interest in racial conflict and the effects of globalization in Xinjiang. Her research focuses on the social and economic impact of developmental policies on marginalized groups in China, and racial tensions in Xinjiang and how they are likely to be intensified through Xinjiang's increasing levels of urbanization and modernization. Dr. Dorsten is an American who has served as a research consultant for local, state, and national health and social services agencies. Dr. Dorsten has spent several years studying Chinese culture, including Mandarin language. She has studied and written about various population subgroups, most recently the Chinese population with Dr. Li. She has traveled to China in the past, although her first trip to Xinjiang was in the summer of 2009 to work with Dr. Li on the research described in this essay.

While we have had experiences living and traveling in China, as researchers we are outsiders. As outsiders, we have confronted a variety of complications associated with sensitive contexts, beginning with preparations for research in China. In spring 2009 we had to make numerous trips to the Chinese Consulate in New York City to apply for a visa because Dr. Li was born in Xinjiang and was required to present documents

and paperwork that most other visa applicants (including Dr. Dorsten) were not expected to present. The extra paperwork, which was not mentioned in the Consulate's website or publicized elsewhere, included a statement concerning the reasons why Dr. Li wanted to go to Xinjiang, and why her parents were in Xinjiang when she was born. Dr. Dorsten was denied a visa without explanation in Spring 2008, perhaps due in part to possible unrest in Xinjiang as the Olympic torch traveled across Xinjiang to its destination in Beijing. On a second trip to the Consulate, Dr. Dorsten did receive the visa after providing additional documents. However, we postponed data collection that summer to avoid possible research complications associated with rising uncertainty and tensions in Xinjiang and its province to the south, Tibet. These and other *outsider* issues, such as locating and hiring translator/guides while living outside the target society, and confronting last-minute changing circumstances from a distance as discussed below, have made us acutely aware of the difficulties inherent in preparing for research where socio-political circumstances complicate the endeavor.

The research described in this essay was funded by a grant from the American Sociological Association (ASA) through a matching grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF). Our research currently is comprised of two main components:

> (a) We are examining how elder health is affected by adequacy of health care and other social and economic impacts of developmental policies, focusing on areas with high minority concentrations and limited socio-economic development that have received negligible research attention, particularly elders.
> (b) A second issue we are examining, and a major reason why minority populations have not received as much research attention as majority Chinese (Zeng, Vaupel, Xiao, Zhang, & Liu, 2001), is over-reporting of age by ethnic minority elders. Age misreporting by the Uyghur population, particularly Uyghur elders, is believed to be especially high.

Each of these two research components is briefly described below, after which we describe the changing situation we confronted within China.

Elder Health Status

Knowledge about elder health will become increasingly important as societies increase in rate of aging, with a concomitant increase in need and demand for health services. Yet, access to basic, local health care services remains inadequate for much of the world's population, with the greatest negative effects on the elderly and very young. China has one of the most rapidly-growing aging populations in the world, with the largest number of elderly persons and the largest percentage aged 80 and older (United Nations, 2001; Annan, 1998).

Local resources, including those affected by globalization, determine health care services and social welfare of elders. In China, one problem with profound implications is uneven progress in health care improvements in rural areas, particularly areas with a strong, inverse relationship between the percentage of ethnic minorities and regional economic well-being. Guided by Deng Xiaoping's differential economic development,

the Chinese government, three decades ago, selected the coastal region to spearhead economic reform (Holbig, 2004; Shih, 2004). The coastal region has benefited from many advantages, including top-down economic and foreign trade policies and abundant human capital and technological resources, while non-coastal regions have not. Escalating differences in economic development between coastal and non-coastal regions during the last two decades have generated tremendous social, political, and economic problems predicted to continue.

The vast majority of the 104 million ethnic populations, about 8.4% of China's population, reside in non-coastal regions, with heaviest concentrations in western China. Many ethnic populations are geographically remote and economically marginalized, falling further behind despite economic advances elsewhere (EDDSEAC, 2004; Holbig, 2004; Shih, 2004). Among rural populations, elder health has received the least systematic research attention until the last few years, and studies of elders in rural provinces of inland and western China still are scant.

Age Misreporting

Age misreporting has been reported in elder populations in China (Coale & Li, 1991; Jowett & Li, 1992; Zeng & Gu, 2008), in the U.S. (e.g., Elo, Turra, Kestenbaum, & Ferguson, 2004), in Canada (e.g., Bourbeau & Lebel, 2000), and elsewhere. The initial report about Chinese (Uyghur) age misreporting by Coale and Li was based on statistical analysis of 1982 Chinese census data, the results of which have led to at least one major survey research project, the Chinese Longitudinal Healthy Longevity Survey, ([CLHLS] Duke University, 2009) excluding nearly all geographic regions in which Chinese minority populations reside, including Xinjiang[1]. There are no studies we have found using more recent data to examine the accuracy of age-reporting by the Uyghur population, although two more censuses have been conducted in China since 1982 (one in 1990 and the other in 2000). Nor have we found any published research that attempts to explain the reasons for possible age misreporting by Uyghur elders.

Our original research agenda was to collect data about health status and age from the Uyghur elder population, with attention to greater detail of information than provided by the census. We had planned to conduct personal interviews and field research in areas where the Uyghur population concentrates, such as the cities of Urumqi, Khorana, and Kasha in Xinjiang. Our plans were to interview several hundred residents age 65 or older about their health and age, and how they think about each of these concepts, validating each resident's age and health status in several ways. In addition, we would visit data repositories in each community to collect field data, as needed.

In spring 2007 we contacted the provincial Foreign Affairs Bureau in Xinjiang and were granted permission to do the pilot project in Turpan, a city in northeast Xinjiang province. For our 2009 research, we called the provincial Foreign Affairs Bureau about continuing our research, and again were given permission to do so. Local requests were made for the cities of Xi'an and Lanzhou. Governmental approval and assistance were essential in doing research successfully in China, particularly in ethnic minority regions.

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[1] Data collection for the Chinese Longitudinal Healthy Longevity Survey (CLHLS) began in 1998.

In Spring 2009, we started making arrangements to conduct our research during the coming summer. On July 5, 2009, one week before our scheduled departure from the U.S., international headline news reported that "racially-motivated violence" had taken place in Urumqi, Xinjiang's capital, reportedly killing nearly 200 people and injuring nearly 2,000. Urumqi is the provincial capital and largest city in Xinjiang, with nearly two million people. The violence caused waves of demonstrations, unrest, and panic in the city and the region. Curfews and travel restrictions were imposed by the Chinese government. The U.S. State Department suggested that citizens reconsider visiting Xinjiang during Summer 2009.

Two days of intense deliberation by us involved close observation of news, messages issued by the U.S. State Department about the situation in Xinjiang, as well as indirect information through personal contacts and professionals outside Xinjiang. Nonetheless, we decided to travel to China in spite of the complicated situation, rather than postpone the trip and incur additional travel costs in the future. We did not know until we arrived in China that cell phone service, email, and other Internet services into and out of Xinjiang became unavailable shortly after the violence began. Internet services and email in Xinjiang were not restored until the end of May, 2010.

How We Modified Our Research Agenda

After we arrived in Shanghai, we decided to make several adjustments to our research plans. First, for safety reasons and to minimize the potentially negative consequences of the uncertain situation in Urumqi, we decided to collect data in Turpan, a smaller city about three hours by bus from Urumqi, rather than in the more remote cities of Khotan or Kashgar in the southern part of the province. (Given the political and social situation in Urumqi, we had abandoned the possibility of data collection in that city before leaving the U.S.) Turpan, in the northeast section of Xinjiang, also has a large Uyghur population and was not experiencing any of the violence or unrest of Urumqi. Indeed, Turpan is known for being a relatively peaceful and tranquil area among all the oasis towns in Xinjiang, with little racial conflict (Rudelson, 1997). With caution, we anticipated undertaking research in Turpan without running into social or political problems.

Our second research adjustment is an extension of our first adjustment. Rather than employing two interpreter/guides (one for each of us) and traveling to several cities in Xinjiang where racial tensions and uncertainty could escalate (and had in past summers), we decided to travel only to Turpan. There, a local resident we had contacted earlier to be our translator/guide joined us, and the three of us traveled together to interview Uyghur elders at their homes. (A translator was necessary, as most elder Uyghur speak Uyghur, a Turkic language.) To add a measure of personal safety, we asked our guide to identify in advance neighborhoods appropriate for our project (e.g., rural and urban areas with high concentration of elders where we, physically identifiable as outsiders, were less likely to attract high levels of attention). We were graciously welcomed into each home, given tea, fruit, answers to our questions, and sometimes asked to stay for a meal. For these visits, Dr. Li read each question in Mandarin, which our interpreter immediately translated into Uyghur language. When the interviewee had completed each answer, our translator summarized the response in Mandarin to Dr. Li,

who took summary notes while the translator informally reviewed the notes. As with our previous interviews in the cities of Xi'an and Lanzhou, Dr. Dorsten took descriptive and reflective field notes. In Turpan, she also audiotaped conversations with each interviewee, which are being translated for subsequent analysis using a qualitative software program.

A third change to our research design is that we decided to extend our sample to include Hui (Tongan) Muslim elders in the northwestern provinces of Shaanxi and Gansu while en route to Xinjiang. Traveling by train and making stops at Xi'an, Lanzhou, and Zhangye (which had not been part of our original travel itinerary), we interviewed Hui elders in Hui Muslim communities in Xi'an and Lanzhou. Our rationale for this change in respondents was that one argument presented in the literature to explain Uyghur elders' tendency to misreport age is their religious background. For example, research has shown that Muslim populations in other parts of the world such as Africa and Pakistan also tend to inaccurately report age (e.g., Nagi, Stockwell, & Snavley, 1973; Retherford & Mirza, 1982). So we decided to incorporate a comparative analysis of age misreporting between Hui and Uyghur elders, both Muslims, which was part of our future research agenda. Except for religious background, the Hui population shares more cultural traits with the Han majority Chinese than do Uyghur people. For example, Hui people speak Mandarin, which is Dr. Li's native language.

The fourth modification is actually a two-step change initiated in Xi'an, our first data collection location under our revised agenda. The first step was deciding to conduct our interviews in public settings rather than door-to-door in residential areas as originally planned. We approached individuals outside mosques and at street stalls who we judged were about age 70 or older. The reason for selecting individuals in public sites was because we were not familiar with Hui neighborhoods in Xi'an and Lanzhou, and some of our contacts for future local guides were unavailable under the short notice imposed by our revised agenda. The second step was that during our first interview, we quickly decided to capture as much observational information as possible about interviewees, their social circumstances and how they responded to our project using descriptive and reflective field notes. Thus, Dr. Li conducted interviews in Mandarin while Dr. Dorsten recorded observational data. This second step came from the realization that we were working in public rather than home settings, along with anticipation for interviews in other locations and perhaps even with Uyghurs if we did decide to travel to Xinjiang. Some of our most valuable information came from the third and fourth modifications to our research agenda, which we discuss in the next section.

Like our other design changes, our fifth adjustment is an extension of previous changes. We quickly had to adapt to interviewing in mosques and marketplaces, taking care to avoid behaviors that might compromise the data or its collection.   For example, interviews in public settings were completed while we stood, versus interviews conducted in homes where we were invited to sit down. In both public and home settings, Dr. Li could read from and record using interview guides. However, a second note-taker (and foreigner) standing near the interviewee and making notes (especially in marketplaces) seemed somewhat intrusive and possibly distracting. Therefore, in the public settings Dr. Dorsten recorded notes after the interview or stood far enough away to attract less attention. Of course, further distance between interviewee and note-taker could mean fewer details recorded or misinterpretation of observations. Therefore, immediately after

such an interview we would briefly discuss our individual perceptions and note any differences.

Given our research experience, our last major adjustment was more predictable and simpler to manage than other changes we made. We previously had selected a subset of questions from the Chinese Longitudinal Healthy Longevity Survey ([CLHLS], Duke University, 2009) secondary dataset in order to compare our quantitative results from the CLHLS with our anticipated interview data, as we had planned to interview several hundred elders. But under our revised agenda, the need for validity and reliability of questions had to be balanced against the difficulty of getting people to participate that we approached informally. Thus, we had to delete or shorten some questions we had prepared.

What We Learned About Conducting Research in Uncertain Social Contexts

In this article, we have looked at the difficulties in undertaking research in an unstable social and political context when one is an outsider. As outsiders, our decision to interview Hui elders in public settings not only led us to a better understanding of the meanings attached to their life events but also helped us grasp some important methodological insights.

The first insight gained is that the value of obtaining only quantitative data quickly diminished, and qualitative information from observations became more valuable in meeting our research goals than we had anticipated. Moreover, our modified design led to collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. Combining personal interviewing with observations reduces shortcomings of collecting data by either method alone.

A second set of insights we acquired is how the role of religious contexts could influence respondents' answers, as well as how social settings could shape, even preclude, responses by gender and possibly education. For example, only Hui males attend mosques, a site of some of our interviews in Xi'an, whereas women more than men were tending street stalls selling food and other items (some perhaps because their male family members were at mosque services). Although some of the males at mosques refused interviews, those who agreed to be interviewed not only seemed to have somewhat higher levels of education than others who refused, but also provided us with important clues about how culture can shape evaluations. One responded to age questions by averring that "every day is a gift, so how long one has lived is not important" and to health status questions by admonishing us, stating that "only God can define our health status." On the other hand, Hui women at street stalls were more likely to agree to be interviewed than men at mosques, but tended to give shorter answers as if they were somewhat unfamiliar with being asked such questions (or asked such questions by outsiders). We did not notice the same reactions by males tending street stalls, but we only spoke with a few.

Third, we learned that researchers need to be prepared for unanticipated outcomes when trying to conduct interviews as "outsiders" during an impromptu situation. In addition to meeting the U.S. equivalent of Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines about research with human subject's[2] governmental approval and cooperation is

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[2] Researchers are likely to need permission from an institutional review board (IRB). On college campuses, this group might be called the human subjects review board (or human subjects committee).

important for conducting research in China. Our experiences in this regard varied in Xi'an and Lanzhou. In Xi'an, with the help of a mosque director, we successfully located the provincial-level Muslim Association, a governmental organization. On our impromptu visit there we were greeted with much hospitality. The governmental official we visited did his best to introduce to us the Muslim population in the city, gave us literature that the Association was responsible for publishing, and made a phone call to an individual he considered a good candidate for our interview. In Lanzhou, on the other hand, our experience in getting permission for data collecting was more frustrating. To find an office that specializes in research on Muslim populations, we spent half a day walking around a major academic institution in the province and still did not find it. Moreover, most faculty were not on campus during summer recess. Those who were available were either unaware of the department we were looking for, or they gave us conflicting information.

Observational research often targets unusual populations like homeless persons, victims of disasters and others, which nearly always are entirely excluded from other methods of data collection such as surveys. A fourth insight gained was that although we cannot claim that we were able to incorporate unusual populations, we might not have readily located some of the more physically active elders if we had limited our data collection to those at their residences. Of course, likely we would have not located oldest-old with health problems limiting their mobility if we had discontinued all home visits (e.g., the 100 year-old woman we interviewed in Turpan).

Somewhat surprisingly, given that the conflicts in Urumqi broke out just prior to our travel to China, our data collection process was more smooth and fruitful with the Uyghurs in Xinjiang than with Hui. Of course, one explanation could be that we had arranged for a translator/guide for the data collection in Turpan, but not with the Hui in Xi'an and Lanzhou, because those interviews had not been anticipated. Thus there were different levels of preparation between the two Muslim groups. Another reason could be that our guide in Turpan made judicious decisions about residential areas to visit. Another explanation might be that our data collection time period (and stay in Turpan) was short, lasting only a few days. Or perhaps it was the relatively more peaceful nature of Turpan – or possibly a combination of several of these (or other) explanations.

Some Final Thoughts—and a Caveat

Morse (1994) observes that:

> (e)xperienced researchers. . . are persistent, recognizing that good fieldwork is often merely a matter of completing one small task after another. Good researchers are meticulous about their documentation, file methodically, and keep [field] notes up-to-date. . . . Information must be verified and cross-checked constantly, on an ongoing basis, and researchers must be constantly reviewing notes and other data collected. (pp. 225-226)

Although each of us has over 20 years of research experience, we cannot claim to be researchers whose expertise is to navigate unstable, tense social settings to obtain our

data. Nor do we proclaim ourselves good researchers, although we did try to be as meticulous as possible under the circumstances. Indeed, both to maximize the quality of our data and minimize risks to our personal safety, we were constantly communicating with each other about what had just taken place and what could be our best next steps, cross-checking our information during our entire stay in China, and continually discussing possible modifications, including conferring with colleagues and contacts by email and phone. This process began before leaving the U.S., continued for each city we stopped at before reaching Xinjiang, and was maintained by personal and professional contacts after arriving in Xinjiang. As is evident in our discussion of insights acquired in the previous section, even one design modification can lead to others, many of which cannot be predicted in advance. Thus, constant communication between researchers, as well as with local and other colleagues, organizational leaders, government officials, and even knowledgeable family and friends, can become imperative for research success and personal safety in ambiguous, conflictual, and changing situations.

Dr. Li's parents and sister live in Urumqi. Yet as outsiders we were making a trip into a city under heavy police and soldier presence, still jittery from riots only a few weeks earlier and coming out of city curfew—but still under the worldwide swine flu pandemic of 2009—where Dr. Dorsten routinely was described in public settings as "Meiguoren" (American). Therefore, suffice to say we did not make any decision lightly. Nonetheless during our data collection we believe we were treated as we would have been in our own society, perhaps even better by our Uyghur respondents. Sometimes, for example, it took us repeated polite refusals when requested to stay longer and share a meal.

Why did we postpone data collection in the summer of 2008 due to rising uncertainty in Xinjiang and Tibet, yet choose to travel the following summer when riots already had broken out in our research staging city in Xinjiang?   Part of the explanation is that we had advance notice in 2008 that the Olympic torch would travel through Xinjiang and Tibet, with possible unrest and increasing ethnic tensions, but the 2009 riots occurred only one week before we left the U.S. (However, Dr. Li did travel to Xinjiang in 2008 to visit family.) Our decision had a practical aspect also: we had purchased non-refundable airfares in the spring of 2009 (our airfares were refundable in 2008) and decided to travel to China, even if we had to postpone our data collection for another year. We would take a bit of time to be tourists, then make decisions as we slowly traveled west across China by train, gathering the best information we could obtain about the socio-political circumstances in Xinjiang (and elsewhere, if needed).

A caveat—our experiences clearly reaffirm the value of paying careful, ongoing attention before and during research (and even after, in some cases) when conducted in areas with unpredictable, volatile political and social atmospheres, particularly those incidents that are induced by racial and ethnic confrontations. Yet not all research in such environments can be safely (or effectively) continued through modifications en route, as we were fortunate to do. In some cases, postponing such a research project just might be the better decision.

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