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GENDER IN ASIA

A Feminist Reflection on Ethnographic Research in China: Gender, Sex, and Power in Cross-Cultural Context

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As a feminist cultural anthropologist specializing in social transformations in contemporary China, my research and teaching necessarily involves exploring the construction of difference, the intersectionality of gender with other social positions, and how difference upholds or challenges power. In this essay, I employ biographical reflection to illustrate how my everyday experiences as a student, foreign English teacher, and scholarly researcher in China have refined my awareness of these important insights of feminist theory. As my attention to these processes increased, I became more mindful of the myriad ways women negotiate cultural configurations of gender and power in their everyday lives. Personal experiences also prompted me to reflect on how my identity and positionality impact the research process and outcomes. Thus experiential knowledge greatly enriched my study and understanding of the changing lives of women in China. I suggest how educators can impart these valuable lessons to students through experiential learning.

Keywords: China; Gender; Feminist ethnography; Women

Introduction

As a heterosexual, white, American feminist and cultural anthropologist who studies social change in contemporary China with particular focus on women and gender, my research and teaching necessarily involve exploring the social constructions of difference, the intersections of gender with other social positions, and how difference reinforces or challenges power (Lamphere 2006). Feminist anthropology counters assumptions that gender, class, race, sexuality, or nationality are essential and universal categories. My work likewise considers how such differences are produced in particular cultural and historical contexts, what powerful political purposes they serve, whose realities they represent or shape, how they intersect, and how they influence social and structural inequality (Stockett and Geller 2006). In regard to contemporary China, I have been especially interested in how rural women's migration to the city to engage in off-farm work and urban women's attainment of higher education and career success, respectively, has transformed these women's self-identities and social statuses, and how these qualities in turn influence their attitudes and choices in regard to marriage and family, ultimately contributing to broader cultural and institutional shifts (Gaetano 2014, 2015). In short, my work demonstrates that social roles and identities are shaped and transformed in response to changing environments and social contexts.

In this essay, I employ autobiographical reflection to illustrate how my everyday experiences in China over three decades—as an undergraduate participant in a study abroad program in 1987, as an English teacher at a prestigious military academy from 1991–1992, and as a research scholar since the late 1990s—have refined my awareness of these important insights of feminist theory. In particular, the encounters described below helped me to understand that individual identities are not fixed, but are constructed through cross-cultural social interactions, and how intersectionality—the intertwining of gender with other social positions—results in diverse meanings and experiences of womanhood as well as unequal power relations, even among women (Lamphere 2006). Through hands-on learning about these theoretical tenets, I have grown mindful of how my own identity and positionality (i.e., as a

heterosexual, white, American woman in China) shape research processes and outcomes, and in turn are transformed through cross-cultural social encounters and field experiences in China. Thus experiential knowledge, which is also the aim of the ethnographic method favored by cultural anthropologists, greatly enhanced my grasp of feminist anthropological principles and ultimately enriched my research on the changing lives of women in China. In each section below, in chronological order, I describe specific cross-cultural encounters and follow each with a discussion of relevant lessons learned and how I apply such insights to my ethnographic study. In conclusion I suggest how educators might facilitate imparting these valuable lessons to students through encouraging their experiential learning, self-reflection, and conscientious cross-cultural exploration.

Socially Constructed Differences

I became interested in the lives of women in China, and the gender and feminist issues that impact them, when I began to study Chinese language and history in college in the mid-1980s. I devoured books written by American women, from missionaries like Ida Pruitt (1945) to journalists like Emily Hahn (1944), about their experiences in China during the tumultuous decades leading up to the founding of the PRC in 1949, and their impressions of Chinese society. I admired the adventuresome spirit of these writers and, as a white, middle-class U.S. college student, I no doubt identified with them and desired to travel to a faraway place and experience another world, and to write about both, as they did. A decade later, as a graduate student exposed to postcolonial theory, I learned to reflect critically on how white, Western privilege made these women's international travel and residence in semi-colonial and war-torn China possible, and shaped their worldviews (Mohanty 1991; Said 1979). Although these particular writers offered subtle insights into women's lives in China and opposed gender and racial inequality in their own societies, the Chinese nation and people generally served as a primeval or monolithic backdrop against which Western women constructed their own independent, and superior, identity (see Chin 2003 and Ford 2011).

No wonder, as an undergraduate student participating in a group study-tour of China in 1987, I fully expected to find traces of a strange and timeless culture or socialist utopia. In reality, of course, I found China and Chinese people to be much more complex, and I was forced to revise my preexisting stereotypes. Eventually I would discover that there are as many "Chinas" as there are Chinese people, or rather, as there are one's experiences of them. But I arrived at such realizations gradually, beginning with stark confrontations with my own difference, as viewed from the perspective of others. For example, our study-tour group of mostly white undergraduates from the United States routinely attracted a crowd of curious observers when we appeared in public in China's small cities. Someone in the crowd might even reach out to touch a hirsute arm or finger blonde locks! The U.S. and China had only recently reestablished educational exchanges after decades of Cold War noncooperation, so students from the U.S. were still relatively uncommon, and understandably attracted attention. Yet even in relatively cosmopolitan Beijing in the early 2000s, I occasionally heard passersby on the street remark on my presence by calling out "foreigner!" (*laowai*, literally, "old outsider").

To receive so much public attention solely due to my outward appearance (and, specifically, my racial characteristics), was an unsettling experience for me, because in the U.S. whiteness has long been the unmarked or default identity (Frankenburg 2001). In contrast, some years later, an African-American student told me that he felt subjected to greater and more hostile scrutiny as a black man in the U.S. than while studying in China during the late 1990s. Called upon to represent our nation or presumed races rather than ourselves as individuals, most of us on the study-tour in 1987 felt like "aliens emerging from a spaceship," as one classmate expressed. Similarly, white British writer Fuschia Dunlop (2008, 126) describes being "paraded around the village like a zoo animal or a celebrity, a real flesh-and-blood foreigner, just like those the locals had seen on their crackly black-and-white TVs" during her 1990s visit to a Chinese classmate's hometown, and concludes, "It is an honor and a chore at the same time to be the honorary foreign guest" (ibid).

Another white woman living in 1990s China, Kathleen Erwin, related her experience performing the role of a "white Western woman" in a Shanghai television drama as evidence that the term "foreigner" reduces all non-Chinese to one undifferentiated entity, which in turn is endowed with specific meanings, such as wealth and modernity (Erwin 1999, 245). Given its mostly positive associations, the ascription of "foreigner" to all non-Chinese is certainly less pernicious than the symbolic violence of Orientalist depictions of the Chinese nation and people that helped to promote Western imperialism and colonialism (Said 1979). Yet reductive binaries of difference are equally problematic ideologically in that they uphold or establish relations of power when unopposed, for example by fueling nationalism, racism, or xenophobia. To challenge them is to expose the social inequalities they bolster and, possibly, provoke a reaction.

I became more attuned to the artifice of difference and how such constructs reinforce power when I returned to China a few years later, from 1991–1992, to teach English to graduate student soldiers and officers of the Chinese army at a prestigious military academy. The first homework I assigned to my mostly male students was to "describe a typical American." While I was flattered that several selected me as their model, and moreover referred to me as pretty, I was perplexed to read their descriptions of my blonde hair, blue eyes, and white skin, because in fact my eyes and hair are dark brown and my skin tone more Mediterranean than European. Before returning their graded essays during the next class meeting, I walked around the classroom comparing locks of my hair to the hair of several students. Of course they were perfectly capable of "seeing" our similarities, as well as distinguishing between me and their other foreign teachers, just as I could discern one uniformed military student from another. But until we knew each other as individuals, we focused primarily on our stereotypical differences, seeing one another as homogenous representatives of our respective nations. Indeed, I presumed the students to be as alike in thought as in their attire, brainwashed by Communist Party propaganda and military discipline.

Regarding me as just a "foreign" teacher, or a "typical American," my students could maintain their distance from me, and preserve their distinct national and

cultural identity against the “spiritual pollution” that their leaders had warned them was spread by Americans (see DeWoskin 2005). Once I gained their trust, however, many students confided to me their dreams of “jumping into the sea,” i.e. quitting the military to enter into business, or studying abroad. As we spent time together inside and outside of class, I discovered their individual talents and passions. Among my students was a gifted singer and guitarist, a dedicated follower of the BBC news, a nature enthusiast, an epicurean, a Shakespeare enthusiast, and a very filial son. Students shared their independent opinions about topics they were forbidden by their superiors to discuss with me, such as Taiwan’s independence and the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations. It was telling that just as I became privy to such confidences, the university military authorities stepped in to limit my access to students outside of class.

These early encounters with the Chinese/foreigner binary were invaluable in many ways, and they imparted skills I draw upon in my professional role as an anthropologist. Being overtly labeled a “foreigner” helped me to question the taken-for-granted categories that define identity in uniform and essential ways. I learned to look beyond superficial differences and build relationships with individuals across national and cultural borders. Establishing trust and closeness with those whose lives are relevant to the topics I study has provided me access to their experiences and worldviews. Now, in my research and writing, I strive to avoid stereotyping or homogenizing by emphasizing individuality and agency, even as I point out the cultural beliefs and material structures that may constrain and enable individual choice. Focusing a text around the lives of a few key informants and integrating direct quotations from interviews into scholarly articles are two devices I use to highlight the diversity and dynamism within “a culture,” producing what feminist anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) calls “ethnographies of the particular.”

I have so far suggested that notions of race, wealth, and modernity intersect with the social construction of the “foreigner” in China. In the following two sections I present additional personal experiences that led me to realize how social positions

based on nationality, race, and class intersect with cultural constructions of gender and sexuality to further complicate cross-cultural relationships—including those forged through ethnographic fieldwork—and exacerbate inequalities.

Gender, Sex, and Power in Cross-Cultural Context

As previously mentioned, an important insight of "third wave" feminist theory is that because gender intersects with other categories of identity, such as race, class, nationality, and sexuality, women's experiences may vary greatly, and thus the meaning of "woman" is not uniform, even as all women may encounter some degree of sexism in patriarchal society (Crenshaw 1989). Like other Western women in patriarchal Asian societies, I learned firsthand how intersectional identities and cultural norms complicate cross-cultural interactions. The two stories that follow serve to demonstrate the potentially harmful consequences of forging intimate and professional relationships, respectively, across borders fraught with cultural misunderstandings and imbalances of power, and together offer lessons on the ethical conduct of research, which I discuss in the final section.

A Romantic Entanglement

Despite strict regulations prohibiting fraternization between foreign teachers and students at the military academy where I taught from 1991–1992, I did build close friendships with one group of mature graduate students, commissioned officers earning Master's degrees while on leave from their professional positions (as military doctors, engineers, etc.). After graduation, my friendship with one former student, "Michael," became romantic as we toured the province together. In retrospect, no doubt our shared hotel rooms and my visit to his hometown, where his mother warmly welcomed me, were interpreted to indicate a more serious commitment than I intended, but at the time I was oblivious. Some weeks after returning to the U.S. to begin graduate school, I was flabbergasted to receive an indirect marriage proposal in a letter written by an intermediary, Michael's best friend, who beseeched me to return to China and mend his friend's broken heart. Although I felt terribly sorry to cause my ex-lover such distress, I declined the offer.

Nonetheless, I kept in sporadic touch with Michael over the next several years. He quit the military to join a state-owned construction firm that sent him overseas to serve as an interpreter between the Chinese workers and English-speaking foreign bosses. Having imagined a comfortable life abroad, Michael was disheartened by the reality. For two years he endured horrific work conditions, then returned home and reluctantly followed his father into civil service. Eventually he married a local woman and became a father. Soon after, I severed our contact. I felt I had to reinforce the finality of our breakup for the sake of his family, but also to relieve myself of feelings of guilt and obligation.

My story echoes that told by Dana Sachs (2005) about her youthful romance with a working-class Vietnamese man named Phai, which ended similarly. As with that couple, my relationship with Michael was not one of equals. Due to our differences in citizenship and relative wealth, I was in the advantageous position; unlike Michael, I could freely leave China and remain in the U.S., thus ending our romantic liaison and ultimately severing our communication. Like Sachs, I could not imagine myself in the roles of wife and daughter-in-law in that more conservative cultural context, and did not believe such a marriage could work. As in Vietnam, gender norms in China dictate that men be the superior party in a marriage, as the household head or primary breadwinner; the relative wealth and high status of an educated American wife would clearly challenge these norms and upset the power structure, creating tensions in the relationship (Gaetano 2014; Sachs 2005). Moreover, my affection for Michael was inseparable from my fascination with his country; as Sachs noted of her relationship with Phai, "I had wanted a human object of my passion for Vietnam. I couldn't tell how much of my love was for Phai himself and how much was for this place he came from" (Sachs 2005, 231). Though Michael and I shared affection and recognized each other's individuality, we nonetheless viewed the other through the prism of "foreigner" and "Chinese," and did not really try to overcome our actual or presumed cultural differences.

An Unwelcome Sexual Advance

During 1998–1999, while affiliated with a local research institute, I conducted graduate-level fieldwork in Beijing, investigating the influence of gender on rural-to-urban migration and the experiences of women in such migration. A Chinese scholar at the

institute who studied transnational migration invited me to join him on a research trip to Fujian province, a major sending area of undocumented migrants to the U.S. Eager to observe the conduct of research and to visit an American friend based in the nearby city of Fuzhou, I accepted the offer. The trip turned out to be a government junket. Our host in Fujian was my colleague's friend, a government official in a medium-sized city. He arranged for all of us to stay in a state-owned hotel under his jurisdiction, and together we spent the next few days hosting other municipal and county officials over fancy lunches and dinner banquets accompanied by generous alcohol consumption. One evening we went to a KTV club for singing and dancing. I sat awkwardly as pretty young hostesses entertained our predominantly male entourage. I not only felt ridiculous at such events, but was vulnerable to the advances of inebriated men, including my Beijing colleague one evening, though I was able to fend him off with a firmly shut and then locked hotel room door. After three long days of such partying, we finally visited the countryside, traveling in a sedan with government plates to selected villages for prearranged interviews with household heads in the presence of village officials, generally all men. Immediately afterward, seeking to extricate myself from the situation, I fabricated an excuse to part ways with my hosts, and departed for Fuzhou sooner than planned.

Taken together, the two anecdotes illustrate intersectionality, the intertwining of gender with other social positions to complicate power relations and compound inequalities between men and women, as well as among women. Both tales are cautionary reminders that all relationships, and cross-cultural ones in particular, involve power, and thus require constant negotiation along with an understanding of, and respect for, diverse cultural standpoints in order to address inequalities and avoid harmful blunders (see Hay 2011). In the first incident, I was in a relatively privileged position, and my behavior, which I later regretted, unintentionally hurt someone's feelings. As a woman refusing a man's marriage proposal, I may have affronted my ex-lover's masculinity and caused him to lose "face"—social standing among his peers (see further discussion of the concept of face below). As a middle-class, American citizen able to pursue a career in academia, which Michael also desired but could not possibly afford or easily access, I surely compounded his sense of disillusionment and failure.

The second incident illuminated my own vulnerability in cross-cultural fieldwork. In gender-hierarchical societies such as many in Asia, where men disproportionately occupy the higher-status, often public, social roles, women anthropologists report that cultural notions of status and their position as foreign or foreign-educated professionals outweigh their otherwise subordinate status as determined solely by local gender norms (McAllister 2013; Huseby-Darvas 1999). Routinely, in the field, women anthropologists are placed in a "liminal category," in which they are "recognized as women but because of their foreignness and perceived higher social status are treated as 'honorary men'" (McAllister 2013, 168). Such consideration provides them access to some, if not all, male spaces and activities from which most local women would be excluded (see Brannagh 2005; DeWoskin 2005; Dunlop 2008; Huseby-Darvas 1999; McAllister 2013). In such a position myself, I was invited to join the institute's research team, granted equal access to meetings with male officials as well as village and household heads, included in the drinking rituals during banquets, and waited on by the hostesses at the KTV club.

However, occupying a liminal identity, the woman anthropologist may be regarded as an "honorary man" only in certain contexts, such as in formal or public settings (McAllister 2013). Thus, while foreign and foreign-educated women anthropologists in the field report being perceived as masculine or desexualized because they do not wholly conform to the local gender norms, they paradoxically may be prone to unwanted romantic attention or even sexual harassment by local men (Brannagh 2005; Huseby-Darvas 1999). Indeed, as a woman I felt uncomfortable in the private space of the (men's) KTV club, where other women offered sexual services, and where I was susceptible to inebriated men acting on their libidinous impulses.

In conservative Asian societies such as Vietnam and China, gender renders the solo woman traveler especially vulnerable to sexual intimidation or harassment. Writing about Vietnam, Sachs (2000) astutely observed that a woman who travels without a male escort is viewed as a transgressor of the patriarchal order, and judged to be morally and hence sexually loose, akin to a prostitute rather than a proper

wife or daughter. As a rather naïve actor in a Chinese TV drama that first aired in 1995 and became a runaway success, Rachel DeWoskin (2005) discovered the dual meaning of "openness" (*kaifang*), a term frequently associated with Americans. She was cast in the role of a vixen and homewrecker—a white, American woman who seduces a married Chinese man—because in the eyes of many Chinese, American women are adventuresome in spirit, but also morally, and hence sexually, unscrupulous. Local gender norms and this misperception of American values perhaps led my colleague from the Beijing institute to expect that I would be keen to engage in a one night stand.

Erwin (1999) explains that her television character, the "white Western woman" married to a successful Chinese man, served to enhance her fictional spouse's prestige, and allegorically signify his nation's rising prosperity and internationalism. Similarly, I recognized my value to my colleague and his Fujian friends as cultural capital, a term which French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986) used to indicate symbolic markers of social status. In China, men are especially eager to improve their social status by building their reputations, or "face," through attainment and display of cultural capital. John Osburg (2013, 299) notes that a Chinese man can accrue face simply by having and showing off a foreign "friend." Offering the gift of "friendship" (or mere display of it) is one way a foreign researcher can return the favor, for example, of assistance in accessing a field site, and thus solidify a mutually beneficial relationship (ibid). As a (white) foreigner, my presence gave my companions face or social standing by contributing a patina of modernity and cosmopolitanism to these low-level officials' gatherings, while my being female no doubt enhanced their sense of masculinity.

Fortunately I was not beholden to my colleague from the institute in Beijing or his friends in Fujian, and so could risk causing them offense by ignoring their sexual overtures without jeopardizing my access to the field. I might have been hard-pressed to reject their advances, and would certainly have needed to do so more tactfully, had they been high-ranking members of my research institute or the Chinese government (see Brannagh 2005). Accessing field sites in socialist

states like China and Vietnam is quite onerous and potentially risky for foreign women, as permits and letters of invitation are required from authorities in the public security bureau and a sponsoring research institute, who are most often men and could leverage their institutional power to exact sexual favors (McAllister 2013; Brannagh 2005).

I was also uncomfortable in the KTV club because, at the time, I was researching the lives of people like the hostesses: mostly young women who migrated from poorer, rural areas, to find more lucrative work in urban areas. Even as an "honorary man," being female usually provides the woman ethnographer access to women's social spaces and activities, such as the domestic realm and the rearing of children, from which a male researcher might be excluded or at least need to work harder to gain access and build rapport (McAllister 2013; Stacey 1991). However, in many cases shared gender is not sufficient to overcome perceived differences in social status rendered by one's nationality or foreign education (McAllister 2013; and see Dunlop 2008). Indeed, as a woman ethnographer I certainly empathized with the women working in the KTV club, and with the absent wives of my colleague's married companions. But my status as a foreign researcher set me apart from them, as I was included in the men's social space. Moreover, by accompanying my colleague and the officials to the club, I unwittingly reinforced the mutual association of cosmopolitanism and consumption with masculinity, empowering these men with cultural capital at the expense of the hostesses and the men's absent wives (see Erwin 1999). Again, the feminist notion of intersectionality underscores that there is no uniform category of "woman," as other social positions divide us, even as we may all be impacted (but differently) by patriarchy.

In hindsight, the two incidents also illustrate the complexities of the researcher's negotiated identity and shifting power relationships in cross-cultural fieldwork. As McAllister (2013, 169) notes, "researchers interpret, negotiate, and [strategically] deploy certain local 'scripts' and expectations attached to various identity characteristics in order to ethically gain access to the field and build rapport during fieldwork." In my early years in China, however, I was ignorant of those scripts. Rather, with Michael, I naively believed that mutual affection rendered cultural differences insignificant, and my failure to recognize and abide

by the local gender script caused unnecessary hurt. Through graduate study and further experience in China over time, I gained this strategic knowledge. As an institutionally based scholar in China, accepting the role of "honorary man" gave me access to research sites and resources. However, it made me vulnerable to potential sexual harassment, and it also distanced me from the migrant women I was most interested in meeting.

The two incidents also highlight the different degrees of power and kinds of discrimination facing specific groups of women—foreign, urban, or rural migrant—in various patriarchal contexts in China. My direct encounter with the masculinized culture of the research institute and officialdom especially heightened my sensitivity to Chinese women's exclusion from, or marginalization in, the higher echelons of academia and government, as well as their sexual objectification in the entertainment industry. This awareness increased my concern for those marked as different and so exploited, as well as my interest in how they negotiate power in their everyday lives. It also motivated me to forge research connections outside of the official research institute, such as through nongovernmental organizations and personal social networks. Now long past, that regretful affair with Michael and that unwelcome sexual advance keep me mindful of the complex power dynamics in my cross-cultural research relationships, and my responsibilities as an ethnographer to cause no harm to others, but also to protect myself. Concern and respect for diverse individuals informs my role as an anthropologist committed to the ethical conduct of fieldwork, which I explore next.

The Ethical Conduct of Cross-Cultural Fieldwork

As discussed above, gender complicates cross-cultural relationships, including those forged in ethnographic research. To ensure the ethical conduct of academic research with human subjects, institutional review boards implement federally mandated protocols that social scientists must follow, including procedures for attaining consent and ensuring confidentiality of all participants. But the long-term relationships established through ethnographic fieldwork require additional care and commitment, as attested to by a vast body of literature by anthropologists that discusses ethical matters (see Bourgois 1991). Much of this literature urges

anthropologists to become engaged in promoting social and economic justice within their research communities and between their own societies and those they study, and thus combat the material and social inequality between the relatively privileged anthropologist and the disadvantaged populations they typically study (ibid; Patai 1991; Stacey 1991).

Like many others in my discipline, I give much thought to my responsibility to my research communities. I am grateful to the highly educated career women in Beijing and Shanghai who I have interviewed for my ongoing study of their changing attitudes about marriage and family (Gaetano 2014). I feel even more indebted to a handful of migrant women working in Beijing whom I met in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when they were newly arrived in the city, and whose lives I observed for over a decade and chronicled in a book (Gaetano 2015). Not only did these women share their stories and thus provide the data for my scholarly studies, they also arranged for me to interview others and encouraged me to publish their narratives, and so acted as collaborators as well as informants. By exercising this agency these women also influenced the content, direction, and scope of my projects; they were not passive and powerless "research subjects" (Ong 1995; Ashkenazi and Markowitz 1999), although I did maintain ultimate control over when and how to report our findings (Patai 1991; Stacey 1991). Indeed, the power relationship between anthropologist and informant is not necessarily or only characterized by domination and subordination (Ashkenazi and Markowicz 1999; Ong 1995; Osburg 2013).

Many of the women I spoke with welcomed me warmly into their homes and families, and offered me their friendship and (fictive) kinship. As among friends and relatives, our relationship is reciprocal; we expect and demand things of each other, and feel obligated to respond and give. Thus far, clear communication about mutual expectations has helped us avoid misunderstandings that could cause tension. Further, our affection and empathy seem to be equally shared, and these feelings in turn propel my engagement with their stories as a "political project" (Abu-Lughod 1991). Aihwa Ong (1995, 354) elaborates on how feminist anthropologists should use their position of privilege to collaborate with the disadvantaged women they study in fighting for social justice: "The most critical point is not that we reap material and

social benefits from their stories [though we do] but that we help to disseminate their views and that we do so without betraying their political interests as narrators of their own lives."

As a feminist anthropologist and, moreover, as a friend to my collaborators, I am committed to empowering these women in their own lives. So I provide assistance, including monetary aid, to the migrant women, but only as I feel comfortable and as is culturally appropriate. For example, the custom at Chinese New Year is for elder kin to give red envelopes of cash to younger kin, and so during each annual visit (if not the actual holiday) I give those envelopes and other practical gifts their children, to whom I am "Auntie." The urban interviewees are relatively privileged; to them I offer other kinds of support, such as information, entry to my social network, and hospitality (e.g., invitations to visit me in the U.S.). Indirectly, as a feminist and as an educator, I aim to represent all of my informants accurately, and humanize them, in order to raise awareness of the ideological and institutional structures that limit their agency (Ong 1995). I also incorporate their stories into my teaching, giving them a voice, and then guide my students to make connections between their own lives and those of women in China, such as through the globalization of production and consumption, or of ideas of femininity and romance.

Conclusion

As educators, we seek to expose our students to global cultures and broaden their understanding of human diversity in order to teach the lesson that we are all similarly human yet also culturally variable and individually unique. Such awareness enables students to question essentialist categories of difference and ideological foundations of power in their own culture and that affect their own lives. We can impart such knowledge to our students more effectively by facilitating direct experience and practice, not only by encouraging study abroad, but also by providing opportunities for ethnographic research at home. For example, students can undertake participant-observation among diverse community or campus groups. Experiential learning can also encompass the armchair study of culture by reading (auto) ethnographies and viewing documentaries. My long-term fieldwork in China has certainly

led to shifts in my own perspectives and positionality; I no longer hold a romantic view of Chinese society, for example, and am more attuned to inequality and power. Likewise, it may be useful to have students maintain journals or write reaction papers at the start and end (at the least) of their ethnographic research projects to encourage reflection on their positionality and assumptions, how these influence or are impacted by the research, and how they shift over time. Just as experiences and everyday social interactions in the field enhanced my grasp of key feminist concepts and motivated my feminist commitment to dismantling inequality, so too fieldwork as a supplement to course lectures and readings may better engage students in learning as well as prompt them to apply this knowledge outside of the classroom.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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