When Network doesn't Work:
Strangers' Encounters and Awkwardness in Urban China[1]

Rumin Luo
(University Duisburg-Essen, Germany)
Rumin.luo@uni-due.de

This article focuses on methodology drawing on reflections on personal research experience in urban China. The main question is how to interpret and understand problems of tension and awkwardness between outsiders and insiders when researchers encounter insiders *as strangers* in cities. The city as a dynamic environment and a social institution of heterogeneous individuals has transformed the intimacy of relationships typically found in rural settings into segregated impersonal acquaintanceships. The classic problem of 'insider and outsider' is usually associated to western researchers in non-western societies. This problem now extends to complex urban settings where most individuals — including the researcher and the insiders — become strangers. I argue that, in the urban context, massive migration flows, ethnic diversity and the presence of various religious denominations are leading to a 'super diversity' of human interaction. Therefore, the original characteristics of the urban 'local' are weakened and differences are strengthened. I shall draw on first-hand experience of failed attempts to mobilize transnational networks for fieldwork purposes in order to explore how the production of new knowledge is initiated with hope and aspiration. I conclude that researchers should value the random and coincidental moments when they encounter strangers in the field.
Keywords: Stranger, insider, outsider, network, awkwardness.

> We live as we dream — alone.
> (Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 2005: 31)
>
> We are all strangers in a strange land, longing for home but not quite knowing what or where home is. We glimpse it sometimes in our dreams or as we turn a corner, and suddenly there is a strange, sweet familiarity that vanishes almost as soon as it comes.
> (L'Engle, The Rock that is Higher: Story as Truth, 2002 [1993]: 17)

Introduction

According to Steinmüller (2011a), in classical anthropological works, the tension and awkwardness between insiders and outsiders originate from the inherent dichotomy between the two. Here 'awkwardness' is to be understood as a sense of inappropriateness and frustration: the feeling of unfamiliarity that researchers experience when entering the field. As Steinmüller (2011a: 222) points out, 'spying into other people's houses might be somewhat problematic and ethically questionable'. Understanding this problem will help to improve dramatically our research in new urban settings. As Krase argues (2012: 1), 'What we see makes a difference in how we respond to the places and the people we find in our increasingly complex and changing urban surroundings.'

Malinowski addressed the same problem in his reflections on the relationship between anthropologists and their object of study in ethnographic fieldwork (Malinowski 1922). On

---

the basis of his extensive experience living in New Guinea from 1914 to 1918, Malinowski suggested that in order to grasp the insiders' point of view, 'his [sic] relations to life, to realize his [sic] vision of his [sic] world' (Malinowski 1922: 290) anthropologists should go 'inside' the community; that is, in order to enhance their understanding of native peoples and their cultures, ethnographers who do fieldwork in a foreign milieu should emphasize their role as 'participants' rather than mere 'observers'.

This is also reflected in Max Weber's writing on a value-free social research, which addresses how outsiders should attempt to understand the perspectives of insiders. Weber claims that outsiders cannot have the necessary sensibilities for an empathic understanding because, as outsiders, ethnographers are not initiated in the cultural values of the people they study; thus, outsiders may only provide subjective interpretations of the meaning, motivation and rationality of those cultural values (Weber 1922). Objective knowledge relies on the degree in which researchers can detach themselves from the prejudices they might have on the social groups they study (Simmel 1950). In other words, the competent researcher should create a balance between the 'proportion of nearness and remoteness' (Simmel 1950: 404) in order to gain access to credible information and data.

Many scholars have joined this classical debate, describing how anthropologists as outsiders live through ambiguities and contradictions, being torn between two different worlds (Merton 1972, Ohnuki-Tierney 1984, Young 1992). For instance, Young argues:

'Anthropologists are two-faced and two tongued; and we too look in two directions at once — at the culture under observation and at the culture that bred us as observers. We have to be duplicitous yet friendly, agreeable if not liked…..Although we are uneasily aware that they too might be engaging in duplicity, we have all relished those gratifying moments when our hosts grant us the accolade of a kinship designation'.(Young 1992: 194).

The basic assumption in this insider vs outsider debate rests on the exact boundaries and contrasts between the two. As Griffith points out, the insider is 'someone whose biography (gender, race, class, sexual orientation and so on) gives her [sic] a lived familiarity with the group being researched', while the outsider is 'a researcher who does not have any intimate knowledge of the group being researched, prior to entry into the group' (Griffith 1998: 361).

Recently, however, there has been a shift in the conceptualization of categories of insider and outsider. Scholars and theorists such as Minh-Ha (1989), Harding (1987) and Rosaldo (1989) have challenged the essential nature of the researcher/subject dichotomy, allowing us, instead, to 'walk the hyphens of the Self and Other' (Fine 1992: 74) by critically analysing the reflexive relationship between 'us' and 'other'.

In this article, I draw on my research experience on migration and religiosity from 2010 to 2014 to discuss how to deal with problems of tension and awkwardness when researchers (outsiders) encounter insiders as strangers, especially in the context of rapid mobility in urban settings in China. Facing the reality of super diversity and temporary elements in the urban space, the question remains of how researchers are going to map this space, especially in

mega cities. If we are all strangers, how can we deal with these issues? What is the state of the insider/outsider dichotomy? It has been argued that the dynamics of the urban condition are blurring the identities of 'us' and the 'other' and the difference between 'acquaintances' and 'strangers'. In dealing with the dilemmas and the diffiulties generated by this new situation, researchers may find a solution by respecting the blurring identities and cherishing the random encounter as a moment that generates new knowledge. Before relating my research experiences to this theme, I shall outline the high degree of mobility in urban settings that runs parallel to China's extraordinary economic growth.

City of Mobility and Diversity
Urban settings are important fields for anthropologists, as cities are important sites of human diversity and interaction (Pardo and Prato 2012: 5). Yet, the issue of conducting anthropological fieldwork in cities has been object of debate because anthropological expertise was often associated to 'traditional aspects of the rural social structures' (Parry 2012: 29; Pardo and Prato 2012), whereas urban social relations are characteristically 'segmental' (Parry 2012: 39).

Along with extraordinary economic growth, China has experienced more than two decades of rapid urbanization.[2] The level of urbanization has gradually increased from 18 percent in 1978 to 21 percent in 1982, 40 percent in 2003, 43 percent in 2005 and 49.68 percent in 2010; it is expected to exceed 60 percent by 2020 (Duan 2003, State Council 2014). Migration from the countryside to the city has been the main drive of urban growth. Rural-urban migration is also playing an increasingly important role in shaping the economic and demographic landscape of Chinese cities.

China's economic growth has been accompanied by massive migration flows which have resulted in the huge increase of urban inhabitants. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBS 2014), in 2013 there were 289 million internal migrants,[3] which accounted for approximately 20 percent of China's population (1.37 billion). In Shanghai alone the population increased to 23 million, of which 9 million are 'internal migrants' (Shanghai Bureau of Statistics 2011). According to the 2005 National 1 Percent Sampling Data and the 2010 Census, migrants in Shanghai account for around 39 percent of the whole municipal population.

---

[2] Urbanization is intended here as the physical growth of urban areas, primarily as a result of modernization and global change. The word urbanization can represent the ratio of urban dwellers relative to the overall population, or it can represent the rate at which the proportion of urban areas increases. Urbanization may indicate a change in the employment structure from agriculture and cottage industries to mass production and service industries.

[3] According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China, in the Chinese context, 'migrants' are defined as people who live for more than six months a year in a location (for example, a city) other than the place where their permanent residence (*hukou*) is registered. The *hukou* system is a household registration that functions like a domestic passport system to regulate the migration of people between locations, especially from rural to urban and from small cities to big cities.

External migrants (transnational migrants) are also highly represented in Shanghai. In 2010, the 'transnational migrants' residing in China amounted to 1 million (0.59 million of which are foreigners). [4] In Shanghai alone there are 0.2 million transnational migrants, accounting for 20.45 percent of all transnational migrants in China (NBS 2011b). By categorizing the national origins of all transnational migrants, it emerges that 0.12 million (20 percent) are from Korea, 0.07 million (12 percent) from the USA, 0.066 million (11 percent) from Japan, 7 percent from Burma and 6 percent from Vietnam. Shanghai boasts 0.14 million foreigners and 0.06 million migrants from Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan; 27.3 percent of the transnational migrants came to Shanghai in search of jobs and 22.8 percent for business cooperation. The average time actually spent living in Shanghai is 20 months. If 'residence' is defined as 'living in Shanghai for more than 6 months'(see n. 3), then 85.2 percent of foreigners and 89.2 percent of Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan trans-regional migrants are to be considered 'residents' (Shanghai Bureau of Statistic 2011).

The most interesting aspect is that Shanghai's 'transnational migrants' originate from 214 countries and regions (Shanghai Statistic Bureau 2011); this situation could be defined as one of 'super-diversity' in the sense described by Steve Vertovec (2007 and 2011). Vertovec developed this concept in his analysis of foreigners living in Frankfurt; he estimated that 40 percent of the city's inhabitants (around 700.000 within a metropolitan area of more than 5 million people) had a 'foreign-born' background and that they belong to 170 nationalities (see also, van der Veer 2012).

In urban China, 'super-diversity' is present not only in the form of internal and transnational migrants but also in the huge diversity of ethnicities. In the first decade of the 2000s the number of minorities living in Shanghai increased by 165.9 percent, from 0.10 million in 2000 to 0.28 million in 2010. The proportion of ethnic minorities in the total population of Shanghai increased from 0.5 percent in 1990 to 1.2 percent in 2010. Shanghai's population now includes all 55 Chinese minorities, whereas in 1990 there were only 44 minorities (Shanghai Bureau of Statistic 2011).

According to the 'one percent sampling' carried out in 2005, the largest ethnic group, the Han, constitutes about 91.9 percent of China's total population. The next largest ethnic groups include: the Zhuang (18 million), the Uyghur (11.3 million), the Manchu (10.7 million), the Hui (10 million), the Miao (9 million), the Tujia (8 million), the Yi (7.7 million), the Mongols (5.8 million), the Tibetans (5.4 million), the Yao (3.1 million), the Buyei (3 million) and the Koreans (2.5 million). Minority populations have grown faster than that of the majority Han. The percentage of minorities increased from 8.04 in 1990 to 8.49 in 2010; in contrast, the Han have decreased from 91.96 in 1990 to 91.51 in 2010 (NBS 2006, NBS 2011a).

However, in Shanghai the Hui constitute the largest ethnic minority group, with a presence of 28.3 percent residents, followed by the Tu (12.2 percent), the Miao (11.4 percent), the Manchu (9.1 percent) and Koreans (8.1 percent). Each of these groups includes more than

---

[4] The census of 2010 recorded 'transnational migrants' from Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and several foreign countries who had lived or were planning to live in mainland China for more than 3 months.

20,000 individuals. Within the ethnic minority groups, 64.4 percent do not hold a local *hukou*. In Shanghai, the groups without a local *hukou* amount to more than 39 percent of the entire population. Holding a local *hukou* is most important for migrants because without it they face significant difficulties in accessing local welfare and the education system (Shanghai Bureau of Statistic 2011).

Apart from the ethnic status, a variety of religious denominations has also dramatically contributed to urban diversity. According to the 2007 World Values Survey, which reported on the religious situation in China,[5] around 89 percent of the population does not belong to a specific denomination; those who declared a religious affiliation include Christians (4.4 percent), Buddhists (3.6 percent), Muslims (2.4 percent) and Taoists (0.5 percent). The survey also suggests that there were approximately 58.14 million Protestants in China.[6] In Shanghai, there are around 0.82 million Christians, 0.67 million Buddhists, 0.45 million Muslims and 0.09 million Taoists (deducted from the national ratio). Christianity is the fastest growing religion in China. In 2010, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences announced that there were 23 million Christians in China. However, international scholars argue that this number appears to be much larger if Protestants 'in house churches' are taken into consideration.[7]

In this complex background, locals are absent in the urban context; most urban dwellers are 'strangers' in China's mega cities. Insiders, too, could be defined as strangers because of the huge variety and diversity of ethnicity, migration background, religious denominations, gender and occupational and social status. However, despite this complexity, the researcher, as a 'stranger' who goes into a foreign field, remains *the* outsider who will have to face several awkward moments.

When Network Fails: The Awkwardness of the 'Outsider'

In addressing the stranger's dilemma, we should consider that, on the one hand, this dilemma strengthens the insider/outsider dichotomy; on the other hand, however, we cannot ignore that 'individuals have not a single status, but a status set' (Merton 1972: 22) and that identities are 'always relative, cross cut by other differences and often situational and contingent' (DeVault 1996: 35). In other words, according to Merton, we cannot permanently locate individuals according to a single social status. Rather, there are a set of social statuses that individuals can occupy; for example, one can hold an insider status at a specific moment in time and an outsider status at another. From this sociological perspective, '"one" is not a man or a black or an adolescent or a protestant, or self-defined. Sociologically, "one" is, of course, all of these and, depending on the size of the status set, "much more."' (Merton 1972: 24).

---

[5] For further details on the World Values Survey, see: http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp

[6] This calculation is based on the national population of 1.32 billion recorded that year (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2008)

[7] In China, 'House Churches' are unregistered assemblies of Christians, also known as the 'Underground' Church or the 'Unofficial' Church in the People's Republic of China, which operate independently of the government-run churches. They are not officially registered organizations, therefore they cannot independently own property, and hence they meet in private houses (see, for example, Aikman 2006)

Let me now focus on my own experience. I am from the biggest Hakka district in Canton,[8] mainland China, and Hakka, Cantonese and Chinese are my first (three) Chinese 'languages'.[9] Before and during a relatively long-term period of study in Germany, the USA and the UK, I had had working experience in over ten Chinese provinces (including autonomous municipalities).[10] Thus, when I began my fieldwork, urban settings such as Shanghai were not a strange to me. However, as I shall explain later, mainly due to religious boundaries, I was seen as a non-native and had many awkward moments when I entered the field.

I grew up in non-religious communities and families; my religious experiences were limited to the local Hakka customs, which we celebrated during the most significant festivals. In 2010, seven-month stay in Boston was in some respects the beginning of my knowledge about Christianity. I was introduced to the Chinese[11] Protestant Church by an old friend, Xiao Li, whom I had known since 1998. She converted to Christianity after staying in the USA for three years; however, she did not reveal her Christian identity when she stayed in mainland China. Almost two or three times a week I went to my friend's church and participated in the worship and in the fellowship and festival celebrations. Through my church attendance, I quickly came to know a large amount of people and, soon, my everyday life more or less revolved around this network. Apart from their 'Christian' identities, what made this community attractive to me were a range of (Chinese) activities — such as their leisure and academic activities — that were quite familiar to me, which drove me to getting involved.

In the beginning, I became involved mainly out of curiosity and for fear of being alone. Later, however, I felt that this involvement was becoming an interesting process. I engaged in studying the Bible very seriously and after some time I became a beginner who asked relevant questions. The peers in the church liked me and I was encouraged to engage in all their activities. I almost declared a commitment to Jesus (Jue Zhi)[12] after having heard a very

---

[8] The Hakka (*Kèjiā*), sometimes Hakka Han, are Han Chinese who speak the Hakka language and have links to the provincial areas of Guangdong, Jiangxi, Guangxi, Sichuan, Hunan and Fujian in China. The Chinese characters for Hakka literally mean 'guest families'. The Hakka's ancestors were often said to have arrived from what is today's central China centuries ago. In a series of migrations, the Hakkas moved from central China and settled in their present locations in southern China; they have also often migrated overseas to various countries throughout the world. The worldwide population of Hakkas is about 80 million, though the number of Hakka-language speakers is fewer (*Encyclopædia Britannica Online*; available at: http://www.britannica.com. Accessed 7 April 2015).

[9] Hakka and Cantonese are defined as 'languages' under the United Nation and World Bank recruitment requirements. In China, however, they are defined as 'dialects'.

[10] In the Chinese structure of governance, autonomous municipalities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and Chongqing are at the same level as provinces.

[11] Here, I use Chinese in its general meaning of 'Huaren'; this term applies to people of Chinese ethnicity or descent, irrespective of language, politics or geography, and includes all overseas Chinese, Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese.

[12] Commitment is a process, during which one must acknowledge that one is a sinner and is ready to commit oneself to Jesus. This process is not as formal as that involved in being baptized, but it is an equally important initial step in claiming to be a Christian.

touching speech delivered by a famous priest. My fellow friends and acquaintances in the church also tried to persuade me to 'declare a commitment', but I felt that I was not yet ready to do so.

I had very difficult moments when I started to become more involved in Christianity. Unclear boundaries between me and the real Christians existed everywhere. I was cautious about what I said and did because I did not want to annoy them. When I was in Shanghai, these boundaries seemed to be even broader and stricter.

I identified myself as a 'seeker', even though I had not yet achieved a recognised status of 'believer' or 'follower'. This identity was constructed in Boston and later conveyed to Shanghai through another network. In 2007 I met another Christian through Xiao Li; her name is Xiao Qu and, at the time, she was doing research in Shanghai and trying to finish her PhD in the USA. When I began my research in 2011 on migration and religiosity, I tried to establish a contact with a 'house church' with her help. By then, she had already finished her PhD, was doing research on a house church in Shanghai and was affiliated to a local university. I imagined it should for her to help me but, surprisingly, she refused to introduce me to the house church. Then, one evening, Xiao Qu sent me a message in which she apologized and 'pointed out' that the situation in China was not as easy as in foreign countries. She said that if nobody would take me to the house church I was not allowed to show up and, because she was not in Shanghai at the time, she was unable to contact people who could take me there.

Although I could not immediately grasp the real meaning of Xiao Qu's words, it was clear that, having realized that she represented an important 'gate keeper' for me, she was refusing to offer me access to the house church. At that moment, it seemed that none of my identities as a 'seeker', a 'researcher', and even as a 'long-distance friend' were relevant. I was simply an 'outsider' and she was an 'insider' as she was already a Christian and an accepted researcher in the house church. Thus, I had to accept that I was a stranger in Shanghai, a non-native and non-believer, and a migrant. It is precisely this kind of 'awkward' situation that I am going to address here.

On the one hand, this awkwardness stems from the gap between 'outsider' and 'insider'. Frequently, anthropologists tap into things that are at least potentially embarrassing to outsiders; for instance, the strange old customs of peasants who were perceived as being 'behind the times', or the ironies of the insiders which the outsiders are unable to understand (Steinmüller 2010, 2011a: 230 and 2011b). My awkwardness stemmed from my ignorance of the religious space which interacted with this broken social connection — a broken link with which I was trying to come to terms. As Steinmüller (2011a: 227) pointed out, 'Such gestures of embarrassment, irony and cynicism point towards a space of intimate local self-knowledge'.

On the other hand, this awkwardness originated also from the typical characteristics of religious space in China. Generally, religions in China are still struggling between the state and public space. Furthermore, different religions have different social and political spaces: Buddhism and Daoism are mostly safe, due to their historical connection with ancient China, but Islam, Catholicism and Protestant House Churches still bear a mark of foreignness. Some

scholars argue that Protestants have better connections to some local governments and therefore they are 'allowed' more space, even in mega-cities like in Beijing and Shanghai. As Weller and Sum note, 'Protestants have been active in the grey zone….for example, missionize among rural migrants to cities — a group that temple religion is not well placed to serve and that Buddhism has been too cautious to approach' (2010: 47).

Protestant house churches are also seeking a place in the 'grey zone'. As Weller and Sun have noted, 'These urban house churches, especially those in Beijing, have attracted well-educated professionals, college and graduate students, writers and artists' (2010: 43). Nevertheless, their public space is still under state supervision and intervention. As Berling has argued, the government controls the religious activities through *Patronage*: 'The Chinese imperial government always reserved to itself the legal power to define "orthodox" and lawful religious thought and practice; the People's Republic continues that practice, although they have a legally defined principle of "religious freedom"' (2011: 7). Weller (2011) also agrees on this point and claims that 'sometimes' it is the 'ambiguity in religion policies' that creates quasi-visible spaces.

This quasi-visible space of religiosity in urban China helps to explain my awkwardness. A little time after Xiao Qu's refusal to introduce me to her house church in Shanghai, I found out that she was working with another famous American scholar who was doing research on Chinese religion and offered several young Chinese scholars the opportunity to participate in sub-projects. Xiao Qu was one of them and she was working on the house church in Shanghai. This might be a major reason why she did not want another scholar to gain access to the same sites and do research in a similar field of study as hers.

While still pondering on Xiao Qu's refusal, I remembered that I knew another Christian, Xiao Ma, whom I met on Facebook as an acquaintance of Xiao Qu. It turned out that we had a much stronger connection than I initially thought, due to our shared experience of living in Europe and dealing with unfamiliar cultures. However, compared to Xiao Qu, Xiao Ma was a stranger to me, for we had met only once. Nonetheless, when I turned to him for help, he said to me: 'Yes, I am not in Shanghai, but I could introduce you to other friends and they can take you there tomorrow.' Xiao Ma kept his promise and, on the following day, some of his friends introduced me to a house church on NJ Road in Shanghai. At the time, I did not fully realize that the shared experience, identity and status as students overseas were helping me to achieve the goal of entering into house churches.

I had deep feelings of awkwardness because I had too many diverse experiences in constructing my network in the field. Initially, I had a pre-conception of inevitable success, but this kind of arrogance embarrassed me when entering the field. Then , the failure of the network on which I had initially counted became the beginning of an important reflection. As I mentioned earlier with reference to Simmel's work (Simmel 1950), the reflection of knowledge and objectivity stem from the position of strangers who can travel between distance and nearness. My transnational network did not work when indeterminacy, uncertainty and disappointment occurred. However, at these moments of failure the production of new knowledge started, with hope (Miyazak 2004) and aspiration.

'Why They don't Really Talk to Us?': Strangers' Encounters

George Simmel's (1971) socio-psychological concept of the 'stranger' links to the role and experience of new migrants to the city. The 'stranger' is similar to Robert Park's 'marginals', a word used to describe a trait he believed to be embedded in the migrants' social structure (see, for example, Gottdiener 1994). More generally, Simmel (1971) believed marginal personalities to be manifestations of cultural hybridity — of living on the margins of two cultures without being a full members of either. Here, I use these concepts to refer to and explore my experience of going into the field with my own interpretation and identity.

One early morning in August 2011, I arrived at the house church in NJ Road with two friends of Xiao Ma: Xiao Wen and Xiao Wu, both of whom had been student migrants who had settled in Shanghai after completing their university education there. I was surprised to see that the house church was located in one of Shanghai's busiest business districts. The fellowship took place in a sport club on the ninth floor of the highest building. The location was quasi-visible for, although the name of the building could not be read anywhere, the general location could be easily known due to the proximity of a nearby shopping mall.

I looked around at the participants in the group and found that most looked quite young and enthusiastic. Xiao Wu told me that the majority were students or new 'white collar' workers. After the morning session singing songs, reading the bible and listening to a priest's speech, it was announced that one sister from the group was going to have a wedding party in the afternoon. This woman was closely affiliated to this house church and was going to marry a man from another house church. All participants from this group were invited to the wedding party in the afternoon.

Unfortunately, I did not know how to go to the wedding. Xiao Wen and Xiao Wu could not accompany me because they had to sing for the wedding and needed to practice. I was embarrassed and felt that I should abandon the idea of attending the wedding when two girls behind me asked the priest directions to the wedding venue and then discussed how to go there by public transport. I guessed that they, too, were alone, as all the other people had already left; so, I asked whether I could join them. They were initially sceptical, but finally agreed to take me along. This marked my first meeting with the Chen sisters, Chen Jie (36-years-old) and Chen Mei (34-years-old).

During the entire morning session, I worked very hard to concentrate on the bible study and to follow people's speeches. Nevertheless, I continued to feel awkard in that context, because I felt like a total stranger. The bible study was a bit similar to the experience I had in Boston but here, in Shanghai, the attendants were even more serious, particularly in their cautiousness and attention during the learning session. It was clear that religious boundaries were still present for me, even though this was, apparently, a multicultural context (Prato 2009).

The case of the Chen sisters provided another interesting and fresh perspective on the whole situation. They told me that they were from a rural area in the Anhui province and came to Shanghai with their aunt, who had business in the stamp-card-coin market in Shanghai. This aunt was also engaged in some Christian activities, such as participating in International Christian Conferences in Switzerland, and hired the Chen sisters to help her with

her work load, as she was often engaged with other tasks. According to China's migrants classification, the Chen sisters could be defined as 'non-*hukou* migrants' (*liudong renkou*) or 'migrant workers' (*nongmin gong*),[13] because they had migrated to Shanghai three years earlier but had only worked temporarily in the city (that is, in the stamp-card-coin market). The purpose of the stamp-card-coin market is speculation, which entails a large degree of temporality and risk. So, the Chen sisters did not work in the market permanently. Because of this situation, they left their *hukou* registration[14] at their village of origin in the Anhui province and planned to go home whenever their involvement in the stamp-card-coin business slowed down or did not work well.

Having carried out research on migration previously, I soon recognized their occupational and social status. Given the nature of their job, they were hesitant to discuss it openly, but it was clear to me that they derived great satisfaction from it despite regulatory restrictions. In fact, mainstream research indicates that policies and institutions are the most significant factors that affect the marginalization of migrant workers in urban spaces, both individually and as a collective labour force (see, for example, Du and Bai 1997, Bai and Song 2002).

Being myself a 'stranger' in the city, it was easy to empathize with the dilemma of migrants and with their difficulties in moving in and dealing with the urban space. This empathic understanding especially applied to migrant whose *hukou* registration was still in the rural areas. This transient status prevented people from developing an urban-based identity. After spending the whole afternoon together, the Chen sisters told me, 'We don't feel good in the house church because it seems that people are not willing to talk to us. We feel distance and no intimacy. Is it because they are students or "white collar", so they are more "élites" than us in Shanghai? But you are so nice'.

It is significant that at that moment all three of us were strangers. I was a stranger in this context due to religious boundaries; they felt they were strangers and marginalized because of their occupational or social status. Because of this shared feeling, we became in a sense a group who was trying to reach the wedding party. We had lunch and then prepared presents for the wedding couple. The sisters were very considerate and helpful during the whole process. For example, when on the way to the wedding my shoes broke and were clearly hurting me they took me to buy a new pair. I listened to their advice on which shoes I should

---

[13] As I explained in note 3, in the Chinese context, 'migrants' are defined by the *Hukou* (household registration) system. Here it is worth pointing out the difference between 'non-hukou migrants' (*liudong renkou*) and 'hukou migrants' (*qianyi renkou*). The former are those who maintain the *hukou* registration in the village of origin; the latter category includes those who have re-registered in the new place (usually a city) where they work. A further category is that of 'migrant workers' (*nongmin gong*), which includes persons who have agricultural *hukou* status and are employed in secondary and tertiary industries.

[14] The 'status or type of *hukou* registration' (*hukou leibie*) essentially refers to 'rural' and 'urban' *hukou*. Before the 1980s, this system determined a person's access to state-subsidized grain and other privileges and was often more important than the location of *hukou* registration. For further details, see Luo (2012).

pick. We were delighted with the whole process, which brought us closer to each other and, together, we bought several other things. Thus, we constructed a sort of 'female intimacy'.

It is worth reporting at length another relevant conversation that I had with the Chen Sisters:

Chen Sisters: 'How old are you?'

Me (slightly embarrassed): '30'

Chen Sisters: 'Have you been married?'

Me: 'Unfortunately, not yet.'

Chen Sisters: 'Oh poor you. You should really hurry up! Your parents are not worrying about that?'

Me: 'Yes, they do! But I just could not manage that. Are you both married?'

Chen sisters: 'Of course, for a long time ago. But our kids are still in Annhui living with grandparents. You know, they could even sing some Christians songs now as they always go to churches with grandma. We only go home to see them during the holidays. And our husbands are working in Zhejiang provinces. They are not religious, but they don't disagree with our beliefs, so it is OK.'

In Chinese culture women should marry at the age of 25 and have babies at 26. Most of the time, girls who are over this age are considered to be too old for marriage, or are regarded as women who have been 'left over'; those who are not yet married at 30 are called 'super left over'. The Chen sisters showed me their sympathies and they felt we had a common understanding and a common heritage from a gender point of view. After our encounter as strangers, they agreed to take me to their stamp-card-coin market to conduct another part of my research there. This was a great fieldwork opportunity for me because the migrants working in the market were from different ethnic groups and had different religious backgrounds; some went there following their kinship network. Therefore, this market was a very suitable site in which I could observe the interaction among migration, religiosity and kinship networks, as well as the way in which religiosity influenced financial activities and how moral and informal economic activities emerged in this context.

I appreciated this random encounter among strangers. It felt like Simmel's 'strangers', travelling between distance and intimacy. Not only I experienced personally that feelings of intimate relationship are universal to humankind; I also realized that an element of strangeness is always present even among the closest relationships, as each individual is socialized in a different context. This seemed to confirm a paradox of the stranger — embodying both closeness and distance — which encourages trust in the relationship while at the same time maintaining distance (Simmel 1950).

Conclusion

In this article I have addressed the identities of 'us' and 'other', looking at how in contemporary urban settings the difference between 'acquaintances' and 'strangers' seem to become blurred. This raises a new problematic for sociologists and anthropologists who carry

out urban research because, I have argued, when the researcher enters the new urban field, both he or she and the insiders are 'strangers'.

It has been argued that cities are a special type of social institution because of the indifference that seems to characterise urban social relations as opposed to the intimacy found in rural societies (Wirth 1938). This approach is parallel to classical sociological analyses that distinguish between 'Gesellschaft' (urban societies) and 'Gemeinschaft' (rural communities) (Tönnies 2002). This distinction seems to be occurring in the modern globalizing world where insiders and outsiders are running into the common world of 'strangers' (Simmel 1950). Simmel points out that 'spatial relations are only the condition, on the one hand, and the symbol, on the other, of human relations' (1950: 402). Therefore, strangers may exist everywhere, even within a group. It is not only outsiders who are strangers; there can be strangers also among insiders. If mobility takes place within a closed group, such mobility ends up embodying the synthesis of 'nearness and distance' that constitutes the formal position of the strangers (Simmel 150: 403).

In discussing my experience of awkwardness and disappointment when attempting to enter the field, I referred to my failed attempt to use a transnational network. However, such moments stimulated the production of new knowledge, generating further hopes and aspiration. Following Miyazaki, it could be said that the possibility of achieving congruity between knowledge and its object emerged out of 'provisionality, indeterminacy, and open-endedness' (2004: 138). This reflection stems from the fact that in a globalizing world, the concept of community in urban spaces should be re-thought. Unlike rural areas, where people rely heavily on close-knit networks and on familiarity, in urban spaces networks and social trust are affected by the provisional character and accelerated pace of urban life.

Reflecting on the common sense consideration that researchers should get into the field through networks, I drew on my experience of encountering insiders as strangers and pointed out that encounters with strangers should be reviewed in urban studies. As Krase argues, it is possible to visually 'read' and 'experience' (in my case) how the 'meanings of urban spaces are changed by ordinary people…and in the process how their agency helps them to become both producers and products of those spaces' (2012: 205). This reflection should stimulate researchers to abandon their pre-conceptions and be prepared to reconstruct their existing knowledge. In conclusion, I suggest that fieldworkers should value their random and coincidental encounters with strangers.

References

Aikman. D. (2006). *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Changing the Global Balance of Power*. Washington: Regnery Publishing.

Bai, N and Song H. (2002). *Going Back to Countryside or Going to Cities: Research on Labor Workers of Rural China* (Bai Nansheng, Song Hongyuan. *Huixiang, Haishi Jincheng? Zhongguo Nongcun Waichu Laodongli Huiliu Yanjiu*). Beijing: China Economic Press (Zhongguo Jingji Chubanshe).

Berling, J. (2011). Why Chinese Thought on Religious Diversity is Important. Keynote speech delivered at the *Symposium on Religious Diversity in Chinese Thought*, 27–31 October 2011, University of Münster (WWU), Cluster of Excellency on 'Religion and Politics'. Chinese Academy of Social Sciences *Blue Book of Religion*, Social Science Academic Press.

Carrier, J. G. (ed.) (1992). *History and Tradition in Melanesian Anthropology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Conrad, J. (2005). *Heart of Darkness*. San Diego, CA: ICON Classics.

DeVault, M. L. (1996). Talking back to Sociology. Distinctive Contributions of Feminist Methodology. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 22: 29-50.

Du, Y and Bai N. (1997). *Go Out of Rural Areas: An Empirical Study on the Migrants Workers* (Duying, Bai Nansheng Zhubian, *Zouchu Xiangcun-Zhongguo Nongcun Laodongli Liudong Shizheng Yanjiu*). Beijing: Jingji Kexue Chubanshe. Economic and Scientific Press.

Duan, C. (2003*)*. On the Social Adaptability of the Floating Population. *Journal of Yunnan University (Social Science)* 2, No. 3: 54-60. (Lun Liudong Renkou de Shehui Shiying:Jiantan Beijingshi Liudong Renkou Wenti, Yunnan Daxue Xuebao (Shehui Kexue Ban).

Fine, M. (1992). *Disruptive Voices: The Possibilities of Feminist Research*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Gottdiener, M. (1994). *The New Urban Sociology*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Griffith, A. I. (1998). Insider / Outsider: Epistemological Privilege and Mothering Work. *Human Studies*, 21: 361-376.

Harding, S. (ed.). (1987). *Feminism and Methodology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Joseph, F. (ed.) (2010). *China Today, China Tomorrow: Domestic Politics, Economy, and Society*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Krase. J. (2012). *Seeing Cities Change*. Farnham: Ashgate.

L'Engle, M. (2002 [1993]). *The Rock that is Higher: Story as Truth*. Shaw Books: WaterBrook Press.

Luo, R (2012). Across the Institutional Passage of Migration: *Hukou* System in China. *InterDisciplines, Journal of History and Sociology*, 3(1): 120-147.

Malinowski, B. (1922). *Argonauts of the Pacific*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Merton, R. (1972). Insiders and Outsiders: A Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge. *American Journal of Sociology*, 78(1): 9–47.

Minh-Ha, T. T. (1989). *Woman, Native, Other. Writing postcoloniality and feminism.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Miyazaki, H. (2004). *The Method of Hope: Anthropology, Philosophy, and Fijian Knowledge.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

National Bureau of Statistics (NBS). (2006). *China Statistic Yearbook, 2005.* Beijing: China Statistic Press.

National Bureau of Statistics (NBS). (2008). *China Statistic Yearbook, 2008.* Beijing: China Statistic Press.

National Bureau of Statistic (NBS). (2011a). *Reports for the Sixth National Census of 2010 (No.1)* (Published online on 29 April 2011). Available at: http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/tjgb/rkpcgb/qgrkpcgb/201104/t20110428_30327.html, accessed on 7 April 2015 (2010 Nian Di Liuci Quanguo Renkou Pucha Zhuyao Shuju Gongbao).

National Bureau of Statistic (NBS). (2011b).*Reports on the foreign, Hongkong, Macow and Taiwan Residents in Mainland China, for the Sixth National Census of 2010* (Published online on 29 April 2011). Available at: http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/tjgb/rkpcgb/qgrkpcgb/201104/t20110429_30329.html. Accessed on 7 April 2015 (2010 Nian Di Liuci Quanguo Renkou Pucha Jieshou Diaocha de Gang'AoTai Jumin He Waiji Renyuan Zhuyao Shuju).

National Bureau of Statistics. (2014). *National Economic and Social Development Report 2013 (2013 Nian Guomin Jingji he Shehui Fazhan Tongji Gongbao).*

Ohnuki-Tierney, E. (1984). 'Native' Anthropologists. *American Ethnologist*, 11: 584–586.

Pardo, I. and Prato, G.B. (2012). Introduction: The Contemporary Significance of Anthropology in the City. In I. Pardo and G.B. Prato (eds).

Pardo, I. and Prato G.B. (eds) (2012). *Anthropology in the City: Methodology and Theory.* Farnham: Ashgate.

Parry, J. (2012). Comparative Reflections on Fieldwork in Urban India: a Personal Account. In I. Pardo and G.B. Prato (eds) (2012).

Prato, G. B. (2009). *Beyond Multiculturalism: Views from Anthropology.* Farnham: Ashgate.

Rosaldo, R. (1989). *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis.* Boston: Beacon.

Shanghai Bureau of Statistic (2011). *Analysis from Sixth Census Data.* Shanghai Statistic Bureau of 2010 (Published online 3 May 2011). Available at: http://www.stats-sh.gov.cn/fxbg/201112/237137.html, accessed on 7 April 2015

Simmel, G. (1950). The Stranger. In Kurt Wolff (trans.), *The Sociology of Georg Simmel.* Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press: 402-408.

Simmel, G. (1971). The Metropolis and Mental Life. In D. Levine (ed.), *On Individuality and Social Forms.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 324–39.

State Council (2014). *National New Urbanization Plan (2014-2020)* (Guojia Xinxing Chenzhenhua Guihua (2014—2020).

Steinmüller, H. (2010). Communities of Complicity: Notes on State Formation and Local Sociality in Rural China. *American Ethnologist*, 37(3): 539–49.

Steinmüller, H. (2011a). The Reflective Peephole Method: Ruralism and Awkwardness in the

Ethnography of Rural China. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 22: 220–235.

Steinmüller, H. (2011b). The state of irony in Rural China. *Critique of Anthropology*, 31(1): 21–42.

Tönnies, F. (2002 [1887]). *Community and Society*. Newton Abbot: David & Charles.

Van der Veer, P. (2012). Keeping the Muslims Out. Concepts of Civilization, Civility, and Civil Society in India, China, and Western Europe. Presented at the *Workshop on Chinese Religiosities*, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, 12 May 2012.

Vertovec, S. (2007). Super-diversity and its Implications. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 29(6): 1024-54.

Vertovec, S. (2011). Migration and New Diversities in Global Cities: Comparatively Conceiving, Observing and Visualizing Diversification in Urban Public Spaces. *MMG Working Paper*.

Weber, M. (1922). *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. Tübingen: Verlag von J.C.B. Mohr.

Weller, R.P. and Sun Y. (2010). Religion, the Dynamics of Religious Growth and Change. In F. Joseph (ed.).

Weller, R.P. (2011). Chinese Communist Thought and Practice on Religious Diversity. Speech delivered at the *Symposium on Religious Diversity in Chinese Thought*, 27–31 October 2011, University of Münster (WWU), Cluster of Excellency 'Religion and Politics'.

Wirth, L. (1938). Urbanism as a Way of Life. *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 44, No. 91: 1-24.

Young, M. (1992). Gone Native in Isles of Illusion: In Search of Asterisk in Epi. In James G. Carrier (ed.).