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Positionality and Comparisons: Critical Views on Qualitative Research across Asia

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Abstract

The paper is based on the autobiographical reflection of two female researchers who have conducted qualitative and ethnographic research from 2008 to 2014 in Central Asia (CA) and in Southeast Asia (SEA). Experiences of fieldwork are proxies of comparisons in our paper. By focusing on the role of positionality in the field, our study shows, first, that having a middle ground position and speaking the local languages are imperative in order to enter and conduct ethnographic field research. Second, different regions predetermine different cultural and political settings that consequently shape the social science research. Third, being female had both advantages and disadvantages. Lastly, in terms of methodology, internships and interviews have proved to be reliable methods for collecting rich empirical data in SEA and CA, but not necessarily to build trust.

Résumé

Ce cahier est basé sur la réflexion autobiographique de deux chercheuses ayant effectué des recherches qualitatives et ethnographiques, de 2008 à 2014, en Asie centrale et du Sud-Est. Les expériences sur le terrain constituent des moyens de comparaisons dans le présent document. En mettant l'accent sur le positionnement sur le terrain, l'étude montre que, d'abord, il est essentiel de détenir une poste intermédiaire et de parler une langue locale afin de garantir un accès et de mener des activités de recherche sur le terrain. Deuxièmement, différentes régions prédéterminent des contextes culturels et politiques ponctuels qui, à leur tour, façonneraient la recherche en sciences sociales. Troisièmement, le fait d'être une femme présente à la fois des avantages et des inconvénients. Enfin, en termes de méthodologie, les stages et les entrevues se sont avérés des méthodes fiables pour la collecte des données empiriques sur les régions ci-dessus mentionnées, sans pour autant permettre de bâtir la confiance.

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Introduction

This paper is an autobiographical reflection by two researchers who have conducted qualitative and ethnographic research in Central Asia (CA) and Southeast Asia (SEA). Having conducted empirical research in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam from 2008 to 2014, it is timely to consider the stock of the work, to draw comparisons and reflections.

The paper builds further from two tenets: an autobiographical account (Banks, 1998) and an account of the subjective experience of researchers (Schuetz, Luckmann, 1973). Critical social science research is not a cold, detached and clinical science. Thus, the autobiographical account of the authors is a key feature of the paper. The authors of the paper are two women: the first author is Anastasiya Shtaltovna. She is Ukrainian by origin. Having grown up in the Soviet Union, she has a good understanding of the other post-Soviet republics (this concerns the countries where research was conducted) in terms of language, history, politics and culture. Shtaltovna has two international degrees. She was baptized at birth but is not a practicing Christian. Farah Purwaningrum, who is the second author, is an Indonesian by origin and nationality. She has a Javanese ethnic background yet speaks Indonesian and Malay languages fluently. She has received training for social science research methods at Universitas Islam Indonesia and the London School of Economics. Purwaningrum is a practicing Sunni Muslim who tries to keep an open-mind on cultural differences.

The next feature of the paper is its comparative parts. Experiences of fieldwork are proxies of comparisons in our paper. Although it is narrative oriented, there are similar features as well. Before going to the field, both authors obtained similar social science backgrounds and were equipped with the same set of qualitative research methods from the Department of Political and Cultural Change (ZEFa), Center for Development Research, University of Bonn. The paper will, later on, illustrate how they went to the field and applied similar research methodologies yet with different outcomes and responses. The authors intend to show how, having similar backgrounds and having the same research toolkit at hand, the research has materialized differently in two different parts of Asia.

The main research question asked is: what role positionality plays while conducting qualitative ethnographic research in different parts of Asia? We limit ourselves to the following five aspects of positionality: insider and/or outsider; speaking local languages; adjustment to political and local culture; entering the field as a female; trust building and qualitative method. The paper has two objectives: firstly, it provides two autobiographic reflections and empirical experiences of fieldwork in countries in Asia. By doing so, secondly, this paper sheds light on lessons that one can draw from the type of research that is ethnographic. Amongst others, the paper provides reflections on collecting in-depth data in Asian states.

In order to answer the research question, the paper is organized as follows. The next section discusses current themes of positionality. Section three and its subsections provide proxy of comparisons from the two regions of Southeast Asia and Central Asia; namely, themes of insider-outsider local vernacular in fieldwork; political and cultural context; being a female researcher and qualitative method and trust building. The fourth section then summarizes the paper.

Positionality of the Researcher

The two authors conducted an ethnographical type of research. It is a research typically characterized as immersed, long-term research in the field. It is known more in anthropology. In sociology, it is an approach at a micro level, describing intricacies and details of social processes. The macro social processes in sociology call for an understanding of the micro processes, as they are dialectically interlinked. Ethnography is a means and approach in sociology, either in focused ethnography (Knoblauch, 2005) or reflexive ethnography (Burawoy, 2003).

In this kind of in-depth fieldwork, comprehending the researchers' positionality is vital as it acknowledges the self, the field and the context of the country wherein the researcher conducted fieldwork. Positioning infers responsibilities for enabling practices in carrying out research. Following this line, it calls for contestation and struggles over politics and ethics, and what counts as rational knowledge (Haraway, 1988; 587). Thus, understanding one's positionality may involve the identification of key political aspects of the self (Moser, 2008, as cited from Cloke et al., 2000). Personality is also important when one bears positionality in mind. Moser identifies that, for scholars conducting intensely social fieldwork, it is critical to have an understanding of their own emotional abilities and how their personalities influence the research outputs and processes (Moser, 2008: 289). Aspects of identity, in respect of race, class, gender, caste, sexuality and other attributes that signify relational positions in society, may denote positionality (Chacko, 2004). Qualitative researchers are likely to appreciate the fluidity and multi-layered complexity of human experience. Thus, a researcher's knowledge is always based on his or her positionality (see: Dwyer, Corbins, 2009; Mullings, 1999).

Studies that discuss positionality and fieldwork are predominantly carried out in anthropology and geography. Of course, one should also mention the contribution of feminists' works on this area (see, for instance: Kim, 1994; Haraway, 1988). Anthropological studies are the types of studies characterized by long-term fieldwork and immersion into a society, to enable a 'native's point of view' (Adams, 2012; Geertz, 1976; Davies, 1999). Indeed, the idea of a native anthropologist or native sociologist is not new (see Ergun, Erdemir, 2010; Motzafi-Haller, 1997; Davies, 1999; Kanuha, 2000). Those that involve positionality are situated on multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1992) and thick ethnography (Ponterrotto, 2006; Geertz, 1976), though they did not make explicit reference to positionality, as such. Instead, they discuss the shaping and transformation of identities encompassing one's subjects; of their social systems; of the nation-states with which they are linked; of the researcher and the ethnographic research project itself (Marcus, 1992).

Both authors gauge positionality's tempo as before, during and after fieldwork. For the purpose of our paper, the authors limit and, thus, define positionality as encompassing the tenets of insider and outsider; usage of local languages; processes of building trust and the kind of methods used; being a female when conducting research and adjusting to a political system and local culture. These five themes resonate in the works of ethnography and social science research methods. We discuss them further in the ensuing paragraphs.

First, with regard to insider and outsider, nativeness is an inseparable element. It is, in this sense, referring to an insider: a category used in framing a researcher's identity. The extent of a scholar's insiderness, or the degree to which scholars are able to overcome their outsiderness, is believed to have an impact in terms of access to informants, the reliability of data collected and the success of field research (Ergun, Erdemir, 2010; Narayan, 1993; Lal, 1996; Nagar, 2002). Banks (1998), for instance, had pointed out two dimensions, the first of which reflects the origins of the researcher in relation to the community studied (indigenous or external), and the second the perspective taken during the research itself (insider or outsider). The second theme is mastery of local languages. Researchers may capitalise on their language abilities. The fact that they speak the language of locals and live in the community where they conduct their fieldwork enables trust to be gained (Adams, 2012).

The third theme, paramount for researchers, is the understanding of the different political systems and local cultures. Researchers must have awareness of the types of political systems where they operate in the field. Keeping an open mind to how local culture works shows how researchers respect the field and the respondents. Literatures on 'activist ethnography', for instance, emphasize how researchers should be aware of various bestowed privileges, thanks to their citizenship (Castango, 2012). Scholars who choose the path of 'activist scholar' face a persistent back-and-forth shift between critique and commitment that perturbs their identity.

Building trust and methods is the fourth theme. Sharing of identity with the majority of locals in the community wherein the researcher is working may ease the process of gaining acceptance (see Naz, 2012; Kanuha, 2000). Dwyer (2012) identified how one's membership automatically facilitates a level of trust and openness. Sociologists, nonetheless, need to be able to exercise a diverse set of methods required due to their professional trainings. This may encompass allegiance to research ethics to asking a set of exploratory questions combining local knowledge and disciplinary knowledge. At times, they would feel the need to overcome a dilemma and choose between the need to reconcile professional versus personal identities (Motzafi-Haler, 1997, as cited in Davies 1999).

The fifth theme is the issue of gender and, to a certain extent, sexuality. Female researchers may find that their gender and/or sexuality inhibit the processes of data collection. Yet it can also work in the reverse: female researchers can work with women who are informants in the field. Smith stated how grounding an analysis in the everyday lives of ordinary people, especially women, can be the beginning of an improved comprehension of social forces as they operate to confirm and continue inequities and privileges of dominant groups (Smith, 1987). Feminists have argued that, as insiders, women are the best informants about their own lives (Acker, 2000).

Topics of positionality and qualitative research have yet to be conclusively discussed in literatures of ethnography and qualitative research methods. This is where our contribution fills the void. Moreover, to date there have not been studies that thoroughly engage in a comparison of method across two regions in Asia; i.e. Southeast Asia and Central Asia. In the following paragraphs, the authors will elaborate on these topics based on our experience of working and conducting fieldwork in two regions: Southeast Asia and Central Asia.

Comparisons of Southeast Asia and Central Asia

Insider and/or Outsider at Play

The process of conducting fieldwork often evokes a sense of being caught between the worlds of insider and outsider (Narayan, 1993; Lal, 1996; Nagar, 2002; Chako, 2004). While reflecting on her positionality, Shtaltovna is neither an insider nor an outsider in Central Asia. She is not an insider because she does not originate from one of the researched countries. On the other hand, Shtaltovna is neither an outsider as she stems from Ukraine, which used to belong to the great Soviet Union for some 70 years (a situation similar to CA republics). This implies that Ukraine and CA countries lived as one some years ago. They share one common language – Russian, common history and strongly intertwined relations: there are a lot of Soviet legacies that only people from those countries can comprehend and recall. So, in this way, in contrast to foreign researchers, Shtaltovna is more of an insider than an outsider. This kind of standing is referred to, in the literature, as a 'hybrid form of those two' or 'a fluid identity', an "in-between" position (Razon and Ross, 2012; Narayan, 1993). For that "static conceptualization of insiderness and outsiderness does not fully explain the complexity and ambivalence of the researcher's transformative experiences in the field (Ergun and Erdemir, 2010). Thus, this partial insider identity could either facilitate or hinder conducting the fieldwork. As will be demonstrated in the following, occupying the middle ground definitely provided her with a number of advantages during her field work in all three countries in Central Asia: these were crucial in obtaining ethnographic data.

Purwaningrum's nationality and her ethnicity in Indonesia allowed her a native position with regard to her research. This 'native' standpoint enabled an emic perspective. While conducting her research in Indonesia, Purwaningrum was entering the field by introducing herself as an Indonesian national with a Javanese ethnic background. She speaks Indonesian fluently, as it is her mother tongue.

Hence, interactions with respondents during her time in the field were mostly in the Indonesian language and with an inherent understanding developed through her introduction and social interactions. In addition to this, she obtained viewpoints as an insider, due to her internship in the three organizations. Her training allowed her different reference points in addition to being ‘native’. To begin with, she was equipped with an academic training as a sociologist, whereby she was taught to take some time to reflect on the field and findings, either ex ante or ex post facto. Her academic training enabled her to adopt the kind of detachment that is a prerequisite for reflexive thinking[2]. This detachment quintessentially means she engaged not only from an emic perspective and from her identity, as frames of reference, but she was open to social interactions to be framed analytically from critical social science theories. Externally, one of the strategies she employed for detachment was by informing respondents that she was on leave from her previous post in the Indonesian Institute of Sciences and she also introduced herself as a PhD student. Thus, she holds a middle ground position.

Purwaningrum was often seen as a local, or a Malaysian in Brunei Darussalam. She then introduced herself as a Javanese. The Javanese were often viewed as a part of the Kadayan ethnic group in Brunei Darussalam[3]. Hence, respondents were familiar with her ethnicity in Brunei. Spending time in the field also allowed her to gain a view of Malay culture: she not only learned the Brunei-Malay language, she also grasped the Malay sense of hierarchy, which emphasizes respect for seniority and the elderly[4]. Understanding Malay culture and being perceived as Malay afforded her a partial insider stance with respect to her fieldwork in Brunei. However, limitations prevailed which restricted Purwaningrum in the field. Her identity as a

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[2] Detachment is defined as exploring possibilities offered by theories or experiences drawn from other fields outside of one’s own. Reflection from the field, categories and concepts used are enabled through one’s training (See Bourdieu, Pierre and Wacquant; Loic J.D., 1992).

[3] Historically the Javanese were brought to Brunei Darussalam by colonial power as slaves.

[4] This is similar to the idea of power in Javanese culture (see: Anderson 1972).

Sunni-Muslim,[5] for instance, has hindered some of the interactions with male respondents.[6]

To sum up, both researchers held a middle-ground position, being neither an insider nor outsider, while conducting fieldwork in CA and SEA. In the case of Shtaltovna, her middle-ground standing was due mainly to her nationality (and the perception of it) in Central Asian states. Being Ukrainian takes her one step closer than any western researcher to her interviewees and the researched field: furthermore, because Ukraine - as well as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan - used to share Russian as a bridging language and many other attributes of the former Soviet empire, such as culture, literature, understanding of how the system functions, and many other aspects. Having a semi-insider/semi-outsider standing offered many advantages while Shtaltovna conducted her fieldwork in CA, as will be reflected in the forthcoming parts of this chapter. In the case of Purwaningrum and her fieldwork in SEA, her academic training helped her navigate, negotiate and detach herself from her insiderness as a native Malay-Javanese in both fields.

Do you speak Malay or Russian? Speaking local languages

Speaking local languages when conducting fieldwork is definitely an asset. In the Soviet Union, Russian was the national language. Even though every country has shifted to its own national language (Uzbek, Kazakh and Tajik in the given cases) since the end of the Soviet Union, a vast majority of people can still speak Russian. Speaking Russian was a great asset in conducting research in CA. Having carried out research there, too, Veldwish, Wall and Oberkircher refer to Russian as a hegemonic language and opine that it is associated with elites and thus prevents close access to the informants and obtaining reliable data (Veldwish, 2008; Oberkircher, 2011; Wall, 2006). The experience of Shtaltovna proves the opposite. Speaking this language allowed her to work almost all the time without a translator[7]. She could have a conversation with anyone and could discuss any matter, given the informational vacuum in Uzbekistan and generally very positive attitude towards someone from another former Soviet republic, especially Ukraine. Nearly every second farmer was in a sanatorium or in military recruitment in Ukraine during the Soviet period. This fact has opened the doors of all people; farmers, service providers, state organizations and others. Interviewees were curious to know about her: they wanted to know about how life has evolved in Ukraine, and agriculture in particular, since the end of the Soviet Union (SU). Given her international background – she carried out research in the framework of a German research institute – interviewees were curious to hear about the agricultural practices in Germany and Europe, too. They loved discussing and comparing how things used to work in the Soviet period, how they work or do not work now, and about their future ambitions. People enjoyed sharing their stories and nostalgia related to SU with Shtaltovna. In this way, it was not just an interview but resembled a vibrant discussion with people talking not just about the questions listed in her notebook but also about their lives. Speaking the language opened doors to Shtaltovna, offering her access to many stories providing a wealth of insights for the research. If she were a local researcher, she might not have heard revelations from the people as those countries – especially Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – are putting significant efforts into breaking their ties with the Soviet past.

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[5] Purwaningrum singled out religious identity, as literatures that discuss becoming Malay identify the process as involving Malay ethnicity and embracing Islam as a religion (see King 1993, 2008). This is particularly evident in Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam and, to some extent, the Malay part of Indonesia; i.e. Sumatera (Sumatra).

[6] In the Sunni-Muslim community, there is strong segregation between males and females: akin to the division in the Mosque, for prayer, the same logic is applied for different functions in Brunei Darussalam; i.e. for wedding events and, in some cases, for dinner and lunch events.

Shtaltovna has learnt the basics of Turkish language spoken in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. She has used this language skill mainly to greet and approach interviewees. The main research language was Russian, though this was considered as a semi-local language in the region and one that used to be spoken in these three countries during the Soviet period. However, many people still used it. Thus, speaking Russian adds to the previous point that Shtaltovna was an 'in-betweener'; that is, neither a foreigner nor local. Such position in the given cultural and political settings turned out to be very helpful. To this end, being an 'in-betweener' and speaking Russian provided a great deal of communication with people at all times. It played a crucial role in accessing unique ethnographic data in any country she visited for research in Central Asia (Shtaltovna 2013).

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[7] During the interviews, Russian language was always used but while doing participant observations during the internships in organizations, people talked to each other in Uzbek or Kazakh: in those cases, translator assistance was used.

It was also an asset for Purwaningrum as she spoke fluent Indonesian when she did her research in Indonesia. In a few instances, having been trained in Germany enabled her to converse with other alumni using her conversational level of German language. This assisted her in becoming familiar with the field of manufacturing engineering and dual production system. Thus, being able to speak Indonesian and German languages and being a part of alumni network enabled familiarity with other Indonesians in the field, some of whom would turn out to be respondents and/or informants. In addition to this, it equipped her with know-how and familiarity with how the dual production system[8] worked in Indonesia. Whilst in Brunei Darussalam, conversations would flow, at times, in Brunei-Malay or thick Singaporean English. The former was enabled due to the fact that Purwaningrum speaks Malay and understood the local vernacular of Brunei-Malay. This proved to be of assistance in interpreting data and, later on, calibrating data where she had to cross check, one-by-one. In this regard, she did not rely on external translations assistance for her data analysis and calibration as she understood Malay language (Field-notes, 02.08.2013, Brunei Darussalam). Her experience in Brunei Darussalam indicates how speaking a local language - i.e. the Malay language in Brunei - and comprehending gestures or non-verbal expression when speaking had significantly assisted her in data collection.

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[8] The dual production system applicable in the ATMI Polytechnic, Cikarang, originated in Austria.

Thus, a mastery of local languages and some knowledge of German, along with understanding context, allowed Purwaningrum to grasp what gestures mean and to accrue a first-hand account of data collection and interpretation in Indonesia and Brunei. In the cases of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, despite the fact that Shtaltovna did not really use their local languages, her native knowledge of Russian helped her to successfully operate there. Russian was not so much spoken any more in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, unlike Kazakhstan, but was understood in all three countries. While using Russian, most of the interviewees were eager to hear from Shtaltovna how agriculture works in other countries (where she has studied or worked) or to remember about the good old days of the Soviet. These numerous conversations conducted by Shtaltovna, during her fieldwork in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, gave her direct access to interviewees and thus to in-depth qualitative data.

Adjusting to political context and local culture in the field

Shtaltovna's fieldwork in Central Asia indicates how the political systems of each country and the role of agriculture therein directly impacts on the research that is conducted. Despite a shared history and a similar set of challenges, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan have undertaken different paths following the end of USSR. The present system of governance, established during Soviet times, with highly-centralized state power, strong vertical hierarchies and top-down rule, relies heavily on the use of state control, planning and intervention in many sectors of the economy, particularly in agriculture (World Bank, 2011). The Uzbek government maintains strong control over agricultural production to ensure food security and rural employment, as well as profits from cotton production (Kandiyoti, 2003; Spoor, 2004; Khan, 2005; Wehrheim, 2008). Cotton, as in Soviet times, remains the 'white gold' of Uzbekistan. Cotton occupies around half of Uzbekistan's total cropland (USDA, 2013) and is the country's most important export product, estimated by the World Bank as amounting to 18% of GDP (World Bank, 2011). Uzbekistan has largely adapted the Soviet agricultural procurement system, where farmers have to fulfill wheat and cotton production goals assigned by the government (Shtaltovna, 2013). On a daily basis, it translates into the Uzbek government's control of everything and everyone who is involved in cotton production. This political aspect of cotton production in Uzbekistan has an immediate impact on research conducted there (Wall, 2006; Trevisani, 2009; Oberkircher, 2011). Any social or political scientists were not welcome in the country. Shtaltovna conducted research as part of a bigger institutional project, and this made her study possible[9]. Furthermore, some of her colleagues were monitored by representatives of the state and some were questioned about the content of their subsequent publications. Thus, while conducting a social science research in Uzbekistan, one had to be very careful and keep potential consequences in mind.

In Kazakhstan, by contrast, the transition from a planned economy to a market economy has been more comprehensively carried out, with government influence in agriculture decreasing to a minimum over the past twenty years. The decision-making rights over land use, the agricultural production process and the post-harvest manufacturing and marketing of the produce now lie primarily with the farmers themselves, resulting in decentralized production and marketing approaches (Shtaltovna & Hornidge, 2014). Kazakhstan benefits from more lucrative sectors, such as oil and gas (Kandiyoti, 2007). Thus, this political standing towards cotton production in Kazakhstan translated into relatively easy access to the data and overall, to conduct research. One does not even need a local partner or a letter permitting research. Furthermore, people were not afraid to meet and answer questions, in contrast to some cases in Uzbekistan. Conducting research in Tajikistan and Kazakhstan was easier, in contrast to Uzbekistan. For example, in Tajikistan one needs an official letter from an academic institution to be able to conduct research.

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[9] The research in Uzbekistan was conducted as part of the ZEF/UNESCO project 'Economic and Ecological Restructuring of Land and Water Use in Khorezm', funded by BMBF.

After its procurement, it is easy to talk to anyone and later publish, with no fears based on the collected data.

Given the political sensitivity of agriculture, especially in Uzbekistan (to a much lesser extent in Kazakhstan and not at all in Tajikistan), people do not always want to be interviewed and if they did answer questions they would not always give sincere answers. They would rather display political correctness in order to stay safe and not get into the trouble with the state (Oberkircher, 2008: 12; Wall, 2006: 64). To overcome this aspect, Shtaltovna had to adjust her research techniques and methodology to avoid placing her interviewees, herself and her local partners who assisted in conducting the research at any kind of risk. One of the ways to deal with the political sensitivity of the agricultural sector, in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, was hiring local experts. The local expert in Uzbekistan was a person who knew the agricultural sector very well and who worked for the state organization at the same time. Those two properties have been crucial in gaining access to any kind of national secondary data[10] and getting interviews with important people working in the state organizations; those who are usually busy and do not want to talk to foreigners, given a choice. Those local experts[11] were usually men. They often accompanied Shtaltovna to the interviews.[12] This would ensure that the interviewee talks and the security of the researcher.

The great local hospitality of Central Asian states played its significant role in the Shtaltovna's fieldwork. Some researchers who conducted studies in Uzbekistan regard it as disturbing (Veldwisch, 2008: 50; Oberkircher, 2011: 8). According to Shtaltovna's experience, it was helpful. She was hardly ever rejected in any of her requests for an interview. Moreover, she was always invited for a tea or for a meal. Over food, one tells other people about oneself, what the research is about. People are careful in the beginning but, in the course of meal, they open up and divulge interesting information. Despite the fact that interviews usually took place during the day, alcohol was served during the meals. Interviewees, especially the men, encouraged Shtaltovna to drink. Depending on the situation, Shtaltovna would state either that she does not drink or would sip very small volumes to demonstrate respect. Drinking alcohol when the outside temperature is averagely +40 C can quickly lead to dizziness. The positive side of it is that people become more talkative; hence they would provide more information about their business and very often details about the politics of agriculture when they would not engage so willingly, otherwise. However, there is a downside. Some people would change the topic of the conversation, or start making jokes, and some would fall asleep or try to get too familiar with the researcher. Recognizing such behavior, Shtaltovna never went for an interview alone: she would either be accompanied by an assistant, or a hired expert, or a driver, or by people with whom she had established trust over time. Thus, having decided to conduct research in such a location, one should automatically be prepared for anything that could happen; i.e. intimidation, arrest, or a range of other utterly foreseeable dangers (Kovat-Bernat, 2002: 2014; Naz, 2012: 97). Overall, Shtaltovna chose the right attitude of being open to accepting local culture.

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[10] This included a lot of legal data on agriculture and statistical data.

[11] Later, in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, Shtaltovna hired other local experts.

[12] In some cases, they were there during the interview or sometimes they would be absent.

Indonesia pursues a state ideology of Pancasila, recognising Indonesia’s pluralistic and multicultural society. Censorship was not an issue when Purwaningrum was conducting her fieldwork in Indonesia. Her topic of research was not politically sensitive. She was able to pose a variety of questions to the government officials in Bekasi and in Bandung – West Java, Indonesia. Some of these questions pertained to budget for research and industrial clusters’ development (see Purwaningrum: 2014). These questions were answered with ease by respondents. A similar response was attained from the private sector; i.e. Jababeka Industrial Cluster. The local culture is known to be hospitable, but when it comes to research in the greater Jakarta area, in Indonesia, initiating contacts prior to fieldwork is a must. It is imperative so that one is able to start research and to gain approval from respondents to be interviewed. In general, in terms of the political system and local culture, Purwaningrum was able to smoothly carry out research in Indonesia. Brunei Darussalam presented more of a closed society for Purwaningrum. This does not imply that the society wherein she conducted her fieldwork was unfriendly. The local culture denotes friendliness and benevolent gestures. Yet fieldwork in Brunei is not as easy as greeting people, as one has introduce oneself and divulge details about one's own origins and profession in order to facilitate conversations. In addition, there is a predominant usage of Malay language that one has to master. Political systems matter as well, in terms of research. The state pursues an ideology of Malay Islamic Monarchy (*Malay Islam Beraja*). Social science research has not been a predominant theme in Brunei Darussalam. This is evident in the lack of recent publications in English about Brunei society. Professions related to social science research, such as anthropology or sociology, are still nascent in Brunei. The country is largely a closed society where social ties and kinship remain a focal point, in terms of mobility. Acknowledging that a state ideology was in place, with emphasis on Malay Islam and the monarchy, Purwaningrum placed emphasis on working on the industrial sector, for her research. Respondents displayed a tendency to not answer questions that were political in nature. For instance, questions about the government procurement process and the extent of the government's involvement regarding a budget for vocational schools' curriculum development were outside of her remit. This made social science research difficult. Purwaningrum dealt with this situation by refraining from asking politically sensitive questions. Thus, she dealt with the politically sensitive nature of conducting research by distancing herself from the public/government sector in Brunei Darussalam. This was distinct from her experience in Indonesia, where it was relatively open for her to carry out research.

As is seen from the experience of both researchers in CA and SEA, the implications of the political system and local culture of each country directly impact upon the research. In Uzbekistan, due to the high political sensitivity of the researched topic, social science research was hardly possible. Thanks to the fact that Shtaltovna was a part of the ZEF/UNESCO project, her research was possible. In addition, to overcome this aspect, Shtaltovna had adjusted her research techniques and methodology in order not to put her interviewees at any kind of risk. To this end, she had to hire local experts to help her establish a bridge with her interviewees. Purwaningrum faced a similar experience in that Brunei society is also closed. Social science research has not been a predominant theme in Brunei Darussalam and often respondents were not keen to answer questions that were political in nature. Purwaningrum dealt with this issue by refraining from asking politically sensitive questions. This was distinct from Purwaningrum's experience in Indonesia, where political censorship was not an issue and the topic of her research was not politically sensitive, either. In practice, it meant that she was able to ask a variety of questions to anyone, including the government officials. Similarly in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, this political standing towards cotton production translated into relatively easy access to the data and overall, to conducting research. Having a letter from the partner scientific organization in Tajikistan and a local expert who would help in approaching all kinds of interviewees in Kazakhstan were sufficient in order to collect primary qualitative data in those countries. To this end, local hospitality in Central Asia, with its pros and cons, was a great asset to conducting research in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.

Entering the field as a female

Being female did have an impact on Purwaningrum's fieldwork, especially on the shop floor. Two of the ethnographic organizational studies in the Jababeka Industrial Cluster, Indonesia, were masculine and male-dominated, due to their manufacturing orientations. The type of work that was carried out in these two organizations required stamina enough for 10 hours per day. Consequently, interactions were gendered and tended to be more male-based. When she was conducting fieldwork in ATMI Polytechnic[13], one of the organisations she entered, there were instances where meetings in the canteen would be attended only by male engineers and instructors working at the polytechnic. If she came closer to these informal meetings during lunch-breaks, the employees would be quiet and respond minimally. In context, this was to let her know that she should distance herself from joining conversations. Gender also plays a role in exclusion. Purwaningrum realised her gender, as a female, would preclude her from a few interactions in informal meetings during her internship in a Japanese supplier company and in a polytechnic in Cikarang, Indonesia. For instance, she was constantly being called '*Mbak*' (Miss) as opposed to '*Ibu*' (Ma'am).[14] She navigated through the field by means of participating in what others did, when they were working. This lessened the predominantly male shop floor. Overall, her gender did limit her in terms of interactions in Indonesia, but she worked around her restriction by means of internship, to understand everyday social interactions.

In Brunei Darussalam, segregation based on gender is much more prevalent, particularly in formal meetings. Interactions with male Sunni counterparts were made with minimum eye contact. To deal with the situation, Purwaningrum was assisted by her research assistant in order to deal with the limitations whereby follow-up questions can be asked. During these interactions, for the purpose of research, there were instances where she was met with silence by men due to her gender as a female. Due to her identity, also, as a female Sunni Muslim, she was unable to engage in direct eye-to-eye contact or to ask what kind of knowledge was shared during or after Friday prayer. In Brunei Darussalam, she navigated through the field constantly, with follow-up questions, and having a research assistant who happened to be a female was tremendously helpful in altering the interview session from a female-to-male event to one comprising two females and a male.[15] This helped thaw possible tensions; thus, she was able to elicit answers, despite her limitations. She learned to grasp the Malay sense of hierarchy that, among others, reinforces segregation based on gender. To sum up, having a research assistant, particularly a female one, was helpful on site as Purwaningrum had to face interviews with males in Brunei.

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[13] ATMI Polytechnic was one of the organizations where she interned. It is located in Jababeka Industrial Cluster, Indonesia.

[14] '*Mbak*' means Miss. It is informal and usually is used to refer to younger females, whilst '*Ibu*' means Ma'am, which is more formal and is used to refer to adult, more elderly females.

Central Asia shares an Islamic religion that is exercised to a different extent in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. However, if one has to describe this part of the world in one sentence, it would be “This is a man’s world”. Local women very often cannot look directly at a man (who is already known) or greet him in the street, or approach a man and ask what time it is; for a man and a woman, who are not part of a family, having lunch/dinner together is unacceptable. A woman can easily gain a bad reputation in such a society (Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, especially). Shtaltovna’s research on agriculture very often brought her into contact with men: 90% of people with whom she worked were male. But here, her ethnicity and ‘middle-ground position’ had freed her from those rules, as they would apply solely to local and native women. These customs stem from the times when many Slavic people – Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Moldovians (to some extent) – came to work in Central Asia in the Soviet period. Given the Christian background and traditions, particularly in terms of clothing and women’s improved standing in society, a different attitude was afforded to her, in contrast to the local women. Thus, for Shtaltovna, as a female, it was acceptable to attend an interview with a man or a group of men. This is another advantage of holding a middle ground position while conducting research.

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[15] Purwaningrum had thought about hiring a male research assistant, but after careful consideration (as she is a Sunni), she acknowledged that it is not customary to work in research projects with a male counterpart. Thus, she preferred to work with a female researcher who was keen to learn and deemed more appropriate. She did most of the interviews herself: her research assistant was helpful in explaining context and transcribing interview transcripts.

Having an assistant during some stages of the fieldwork in Uzbekistan had assisted Shtaltovna in accessing respondents and available data, just in Uzbek. As it turned out, it makes a difference where the research assistant is a male or a female. Shtaltovna experienced working with both. When she employed a male assistant, the experience was similar to working with a male local expert. Very often, during interviews, the male interviewees would use her male companion to enquire about Shtaltovna, whether or not she was interested in a date, etc. Her male assistant, or local expert, would reply with an answer upon which they had earlier agreed: that she was an engaged woman and that they worked for UNESCO (in Uzbekistan they were affiliated with UNESCO) and that they were constantly watched, thus it was better not to touch her. This was very helpful. Between the lines, it could have become clear that being a young female in Central Asia would open a lot of doors but it also brought a lot of annoyance from the men. Thus, the role of the assistant-translator was crucial as a safeguard and in being Shtaltovna's ears in locations where she was either not present or could not understand, given that locals would speak in the local language amongst themselves. Thus, the translator-assistant played a much more important role than that of an interpreter, per se. During her second field visit to Uzbekistan, Shtaltovna had employed a female assistant. Regarding the security/annoyance issue, Shtaltovna had to take care of her female assistant, in contrast to the male assistant. That also worked out well but it was more stressful than employing a male assistant. There were also several advantages in having a female assistant. The female aide was more trusted by the informants than a male assistant. For some reason, when Shtaltovna was accompanied by a male assistant in Uzbekistan, people would often think that he was a spy and would not trust him. There were no such thoughts when Shtaltovna was accompanied by a female research assistant: but she did act as a 'spy' for Shtaltovna. When Shtaltovna did an internship in the organization, a female assistant would often go to chart or just sit in the office of some employees. In this manner, she could conduct observations and sometimes ask research-related questions in an informal way when Shtaltovna was working with other people. From Shtaltovna's experience and observations in three countries, people would feel less fear towards a female and would rarely imagine that a woman could cause harm.

To summarize this section, both researchers felt that being a female had an impact on conducting fieldwork in CA and SEA. In the case of Shtaltovna's research, her gender reaped many advantages in accessing accurate data during the fieldwork in Central Asian republics, but it was, by no means, ideal. Being a female brought regular annoyance in all three countries where Shtaltovna conducted her research. Shtaltovna had to improvise using different aspects of her positionality and the help of either her assistants or local experts to ensure her security and in fulfilling her tasks. In contrast, Purwaningrum's gender limited her in terms of interactions in similarly male environments in both Indonesia and in Brunei, wherein she had to conduct her research. In addition, she was unable to engage in direct eye-to-eye contact and there were instances where silencing occurred, due to her gender as a female and due to her identity as a female Sunni Muslim. She navigated through the field constantly with follow-up questions and having a female research assistant as one of the ways to overcome this obstacle: it was also very helpful conducting interview sessions as two females and one male, instead of a one-to-one female and male context.

Trust building and method

Building trust takes time in Indonesia and in Brunei Darussalam. Reflecting on her own experience, Purwaningrum had to acquire formal approval from the government as the first step in gaining trust from her respondents. This approval was gained through attaining a research permit from the Bekasi District Government in Indonesia. The research permit added legitimacy when she asked for informed consent. Before recording the interview, she always asked the participant whether he or she agreed to take part in the interview and if so, whether the interviews may be recorded. Respect for confidentiality of data added weight in gaining trust. The data collected was kept confidentially and utilised solely for the purpose of research. The next issue would be the anonymity of respondents. All of the respondents and companies were referred to anonymously. Finally, the time spent on the shop floor of an industry, the polytechnic, and the university assisted her quest for trust. She was also involved in the daily routines of the organisations. Sharing the same office space with administrative staff members also exposed her to emotions such as disappointment aired when they were reprimanded for not carrying out tasks beyond their ‘job description.’ There was a level of comfort achieved from spending time with respondents. Slowly, respondents were able to inform her of their experiences. Hence, trust was built through gaining consent, maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, as well as spending time in the field, which in fact is imperative for ethnographic research.

The level of everyday interaction in Indonesia was not achieved in Brunei Darussalam. Owing to the nature Brunei Darussalam’s closed society, Purwaningrum attempted to gain trust from respondents by participating in meetings. She engaged in a relaxed conversation between herself and a respondent. Through these meetings and conversations, she managed to spend time getting acquainted with others. In due course, she became familiar with the respondents. Another formal means of attempting to gain trust was by showing respondents that her research passed ethical clearance from the university wherein she was based. This assisted her in ensuring that data would be treated with anonymity and that consent would be sought. Speaking Malay assisted her in engaging in casual conversations and to get to know her respondents. For instance, after few meetings a respondent imparted to her that attendance and approval from the Chief Information Officer is vital to legitimize a decision in the ICT field (Field notes, 25.02.2013). Conversation was a combination of Malay and English. However, such engagement augmented the level of trust given. Consequently, through participation in meetings, using

Malay language and the time spent in the field, she attempted to gain trust from her respondents[16].

The fact that Purwaningrum is a partial insider and partial outsider in Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam was helpful in her fieldwork in each country. This will be reflected in the method of interview and internship in the coming passages.

In Indonesia, Purwaningrum had used firstly an internship as a method to enable her to grasp an understanding of everyday life in the field. She had lived in the residential area in the Jababeka Industrial Cluster and this enabled her to interact with her key informants where she worked. Several of her key informants lived in an area close to her. This internship assisted the building of trust that enabled information to be imparted. In retrospect, this was due to the fact that the internships allowed her access to the day-to-day interactions of the organisations and the proximity with respondents living close to her. Apart from internship, she utilised expert focused interviews to elicit specific answers where spontaneity was sought. She interviewed experts, namely individuals who hold years of experience in their respective fields. Those who were also included are the policymakers who hold positions in Ministries in Indonesia. She managed to gain approval and ready answers by informing her respondents of her doctoral research. The questions for the expert interviews were prepared beforehand, yet they remained open-ended so that follow-up questions, in response to answers, equipped the discussion. Through a dialogic process, approval and ease of answering questions, to a certain degree, trust was attained, at least in the form of answering questions, contestation of social facts and findings. Thus, Purwaningrum's experience shows how an expert focused interview became a viable method for elicitation of answers and questions in a dialogic process. Specifically, the expert focused interview was useful as Purwaningrum could operate in different social categorizations of these insider and outsider notions; the former in the encasement of understanding how the civil service works, in general, in Indonesia; the latter, within the notion of being trained as a researcher in sociology and understanding existing studies in innovation and sociology of knowledge. A different type of interview proved to be more useful in her fieldwork in Brunei Darussalam. Unstructured interview was the most feasible method for her research as it enabled Purwaningrum to explore questions not covered by the breadth of literature on the topic she was working on in Brunei. She realized there was not a significant amount of work carried out in her research area. Cognizant of the fact that there might be unwritten and undocumented history, she would need to rely on rich field data. Exploratory questions and preliminary findings in the field were then more helpful in terms of data collection. These were facilitated via unstructured interview. Attempts to win trust were carried out by asking respondents for their consent and ensuring anonymity. On reflection, in some cases, respondents asked for interview questions to be sent beforehand and for her to share more of the research findings; how were other ICT companies progressing in terms of human capital development or what strategies to retain talents were used by the companies, comprised some of the questions asked. The two-way communication process assisted her in her unstructured interview and in attaining trust in the process.

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[16] In contrast to the fieldwork in Indonesia, Purwaningrum did not do any internship in Brunei Darussalam. This was due to her research fellow appointment, which occupied most of her time.

Summing up, qualitative field methods in both countries managed to produce rich qualitative data: entrance to the field hinged, to a certain extent, upon Purwaningrum’s positionality and her ethnicity of Malay-Javanese. Nonetheless, the methods utilised were also influenced by the time spent in the field, the skills of the research assistant and the political ideology in place. These were not the same in Brunei Darussalam and in Indonesia.

Shtaltovna had chosen particular qualitative methods; i.e. semi-structured interviews, internships in organizations, and participant observations with a rationale of taking into account different levels of the political sensitivity of agriculture in each of the three countries. Another rationale is that she needed to carefully think how to gain trust. With the experience of semi-structured interviews, normally lasting 1-2 hours, it was hard to build trust. This is due to the fact of meeting a person just once over a limited period of time. Therefore, to obtain maximum reliable data, Shtaltovna had to mobilize her best interpersonal communication skills; speaking the language, using her knowledge about the country and cultural background. As mentioned earlier, Shtaltovna's post-Soviet background and knowledge of Russian would awaken interest in the interview process and the session would always end up in a friendly discussion containing many insights. All of those contributed to gaining trust from the interviewee. In addition to this, the semi-structured interviews were conducted with a large number of informants. Moreover, semi-structured interviews provided a framework for the questioning but allowed for deviation, as the interviewees would always stray from the main line. In this way, they would provide valuable additional information about the studied matter. To this end, she would always triangulate the received data by checking the secondary data and discussing the same issues with the informants with whom she has developed trust, over time. This experience was similar in all three countries.

Second, a very useful method of data collection was conducting an internship in an organization. This was carried out in Uzbekistan. During the internships[17], Shtaltovna met the same people on a daily basis; she made observations of the daily business of the employees; she chatted with them on research related topics and also beyond that, participated in their daily business including visits to the field, to the selector, business meetings with clients and government representatives. When Shtaltovna was participating in staff meetings or meetings with the representatives of the government, she was told not to take notes. Internships provided a repetitive contact with the interviewees. Over time, employees of the organization perceive her as one of them. This led to development of trust. Being present in the organization gave Shtaltovna a completely different perspective on how the agricultural business works (Burawoy and Verdery, 1999). Having conducted internships, Shtaltovna has made a lot of new local friends and developed trust with her informants.[18] This gave her access to usually inaccessible data and provided the possibility to be a part of the state agricultural machine. Thus, once again, holding a middle ground position; speaking Russian; knowing something about the local culture and sharing the Soviet past with the interviewees played a great role in awakening interest in her interviewees, rather than a fear. Repeated contact with the same people over time helped in developing trust between the researcher and the interviewees. Consequently, the more trust is built, the higher the chance of obtaining unique ethnographic data. The experience during the internships was unique and valuable in terms of getting to know the agricultural business from inside out, accessing data and learning about the culture.

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[17] The internship lasted between 3 to 9 weeks in three organizations in Uzbekistan.

The participant observation method in CA does not really allow trust building, but with the given set of skills, Shtaltovna's positionality, interviewing a large number of people and triangulating data allowed the collection of a great deal of the data; for example, background information about the settings of the research and the researched. The experience with the participant observation method was the same in all three countries.

To this end, in addition to the chosen method, Shtaltovna had promised anonymity to all of her respondents in the three countries. Throughout her years of experience in CA, Shtaltovna was asked to show the official permission to conduct research twice, once in Uzbekistan and another time in Tajikistan. In both cases, there were state-related organizations. Thus, having an official document allowing the conducting of research always has to be in place but the issue was rarely raised.

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[18] This included the directors of the organizations and state representatives.

To sum up, internships and semi-structured interviews have proved to be reliable methods to collect rich empirical data in SEA and CA. Similarly, in both regions, building trust was essential. In SEA, it worked by assuring the interviewees of confidentiality and having gained informed consent from respondents; receiving official permissions; using initial received contacts; participating in meetings; familiarity in the field and the time spent with interviewees, passing ethical clearance. In CA, having official permission was a necessary precondition to conduct research, but interviewees rarely demanded confirmation. Similarly to SEA, anonymity was appreciated by the respondents, especially in Uzbekistan. Building trust worked especially well through repetitive contact with interviewees (internship was particularly helpful here); investing time in establishing trustworthy contacts; friendships with the interviewees; finally, through hiring local experts who would bridge the researcher with the local partners. Otherwise, similarly in both regions, methods such as semi-structured interviews and participant observations allow the gain of insightful data but not to build trust.

Conclusion

The paper provides qualitative research insights in two Asian regions emerging from autobiographical account and experiences of female researchers during the past 8 years. In particular, the paper explored how having been trained in the same school and having employed nearly the same research methods, researchers went to the field and their research materialized in different forms. The paper asks the question of how what role positionality plays while conducting qualitative ethnographic research in different parts of Asia? ? Experiences of fieldwork are the proxies of comparisons. The paper touches upon experiences of research conducted in five countries in Asia: Indonesia, Brunei Darussalam, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan and discussed the following five tenets of positionality: insider and/or outsider; speaking local vernaculars; the ability to adjust to political and local culture; conducting fieldwork as a female; trust building and qualitative method. So what worked out similarly and, in contrast, differently, while looking at these two accounts? What can be learned?

First of all, different regions - Central Asia and South-east Asia - predetermine different cultural and political settings that consequently shape the social science research. The political sensitivity of the researched topic in Uzbekistan and the closed stance of the Brunei society, in general, made it difficult for both researchers to conduct research. To overcome this barrier, it was helpful to be a member of a large international project, rather than being a single researcher in Uzbekistan. In addition, Shtaltovna had adjusted her research techniques and methodology to avoid any possible risk either for her interviewees or herself. To this end, she had to hire local experts who would help her in approaching interviewees during the fieldwork in the given political circumstances. In Brunei, Purwaningrum dealt with this issue by refraining from asking politically sensitive questions. In other researched countries with little or no political censorship, both of the researchers were able to ask a variety of questions to anyone, including government officials. Holding a letter from the partner scientific organization, or from the local officials, and using a local expert who would help approach all kinds of interviewees, especially in CA, sufficed in collecting primary qualitative data and conducting research. To this end, local hospitality Central Asia, with its pros and cons, was a great asset to conducting research in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. Whilst in Southeast Asia, local hospitality is a social surface that researchers have to encounter before actual fieldwork.

On account of being an insider or outsider, both researchers held a middle-ground position. Neither of them were complete insiders nor outsiders while conducting fieldwork in CA and SEA. In the case of Shtaltovna, her middle-ground standing was gained mainly due to her Ukrainian nationality, the perception of it in Central Asian states, speaking Russian, and her experience of living in and knowledge of the Soviet Union. Shtaltovna did not speak any of the local languages. However, as she spoke

Russian (considered one of the recent ‘local’ languages in CA), it awoke interest in most of the interviewees regarding how agriculture works in other countries, wherein she has studied or worked, or to simply have a chat and remember the good old days of the Soviet Union of the past. Shtaltovna conducted such conversations during her fieldwork in Uzbekistan. Thus, her knowledge of Russian and being able to converse with interviewees on topics outside the immediate research boundaries afforded Shtaltovna many advantages while conducting her fieldwork in CA. Regarding Purwaningrum and her fieldwork in SEA, her academic training helped her to navigate, negotiate and detach herself from her insiderness as a native Malay-Javanese in both fields. In addition, Purwaningurm’s mastery of local languages, plus some knowledge of German along with understanding context, allowed her to grasp first-hand accounts of data collection and analysis in Indonesia and Brunei.

Being a female had both advantages and disadvantages in conducting fieldwork for both researchers in CA and SEA. In the case of Shtaltovna, her gender won many advantages in accessing accurate data during field work in Central Asian republics, but the situation was not always perfect. Being a female brought regular annoyance in all three countries where Shtaltovna conducted her research. In these countries, Shtaltovna had to improvise using her positionality and the help of her assistants, or local experts, to ensure her security and fulfilling of her tasks. Purwaningrum employed a similar technique to face this issue. Employing a female research assistant helped her in changing the interview session to a two females and one male session. She navigated through the field constantly with follow-up questions. In contrast to Shtaltovna’s experience in CA, Purwaningrum’s gender limited her in terms of interactions in a similarly male environment wherein she had to conduct research, in both Indonesia and Brunei. In addition, she was unable to engage in direct eye-to-eye contact and there were instances where silencing occurred, due to her gender as a female and to her identity as a female Sunni Muslim.

Finally, in terms of methodology, internships and interviews have proved to be reliable methods to collect rich empirical data in SEA and CA. Similarly in both regions, building trust was essential. In SEA, it worked by assuring the interviewees of confidentiality and having gained informed consent from respondents; receiving official permissions; using initial received contacts; participating in meetings; familiarity in the field and the time spent with interviewees; passing ethical clearance. In CA, official permission was a necessary precondition to conduct research, but proof of such was rarely demanded by interviewees. As in SEA, anonymity was appreciated by the respondents, especially in Uzbekistan. Building trust worked especially well through repeated contact with interviewees. In making continuous and repetitive contacts, internship was immensely helpful in this regard, as was investing time in establishing trustworthy contacts and friendship ties with the interviewees. Otherwise, similarly in both CA and SEA, methods such as interviews and participant observations do allow the gain of insightful data but do not necessarily build trust.

All of these accounts of comparisons are meant to provide insights and lessons to other scholars who want to conduct either similar research or work in the aforementioned regions.

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