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***Fang-tan* in Research among Chinese Communities in New Zealand and Australia:  
A Cultural Approach to Engagement**

**Abstract**

This paper proposes *Fang-tan* as a cultural approach to engagement in Psychology research among Chinese communities in New Zealand and Australia. *Fang-tan* reflects the degree of 'being-in-relation' throughout the research process. The paper suggests that 'being-in-relation' as a concept is a form of cultural engagement that enables the researcher easier and more culturally-appropriate access to research participants. *Fang-tan*, a Chinese phrase, is comprised of two Chinese words: *Fang* and *Tan*. *Fang* refers to interviewing and asking questions, while *Tan* is concerned with dialogues and conversation. There are four features of *Fang-tan*: participant participation, the equality of status between the researcher and the participant, the insider relationship between the researcher and the participant, and the use of the Chinese language. The paper illustrates how *Fang-tan* was conducted in three studies with the Chinese communities and offers the authors' insights into and reflections on conducting *Fang-tan*.

**Key words:** *Fang-tan*, engagement, being-in-relation, Chinese culture, community engagement, empowerment

## **1. Introduction**

### ***1.1 Culturally-engaged approach to research***

Research engagement is often referred to as the meaningful involvement with participants throughout the research process in order to study them—from topic selection through the design and conduct of research, to dissemination of results. Engagement in research is defined as the interaction between researchers and participants for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge, understanding and resources within the context of partnership and reciprocity (Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering, 2015). Nevertheless, engagement in research is far more than this perspective suggests. Research engagement has extended from passive scholarship (Kellett, 2009) that places researchers and the benefits they accrue from the research in the centre of their research, to active, committed and passionate action (Clair, 2012). Engaged research is now more concerned with a wide range of practices from public interest studies that aim to influence policy and public opinion (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood and Maguire, 2003), to social movements that may situate outside the academic institution (Urla and Helepololei, 2014). Engaged researchers endeavour to become involved in, and produce work that is meaningful to the community including disadvantaged communities such as ethnic minority groups. The evolution of the understanding of research engagement suggests that researchers need to devote time and effort to build a level of trust with their participants, and negotiate the mutually acceptable approaches (Urla and Helepololei, 2014) that both the engaged researchers and their participants need and want in the research project.

Theoretically, Boyer (1996, 1997) conceptualised the scholarship of engagement where the researcher must become an active partner with the community when researching into pressing social, civic, economic, and moral problems, and must reaffirm their commitment to social change. Boyer believed that universities are “one of the greatest hopes for intellectual and civic progress” (1996, p.11) and for this hope to be fulfilled, universities and researchers must engage with the community. There are four dimensions in Boyer’s model of the scholarship of engagement: Scholarship of discovery where researchers commit to research that advances knowledge; scholarship of integration that places discoveries in historical, social, cultural and multidisciplinary contexts; scholarship of sharing knowledge where academics must continue to communicate not only in academic journals or conferences but also with the community and their participants; and scholarship of application that goes beyond the service duties of a faculty member to involving the rigor and application of their research to make a difference in the community. Boyer’s model highlights the engaged research activities such as community-engaged scholarship, civic engagement, service-learning, community development and research outreach (Kasworm and Abdrahim, 2014).

Methodologically, Clair (2012) theorised that “engagement in ethnography refers to (a) the role of the researcher, (b) the perspective from which the researcher is poised, (c) how and why the researcher enters into and enacts with the ongoing cultural phenomenon, (d) how the researcher tends to the subjects, and (e) how the researcher presents the story to others” (p. 134). This model emphasises the role that engaged researchers should play in their studies. It advocates that engaged research is not only being explicit about the researcher’s critical perspectives but also his or her participating

with people, who are most affected by the issue under study, to understand and work actively to transform conditions (Susser, 2010).

Boyer's arguments for research engagement was built upon by other researchers, and in particular, Urla and Helepololei (2014) proposes a radical 'morally engaged turn' which addresses research work that could (and should) be politically committed and morally engaged (Scheper-Hughes, 1995). From this perspective, research is ethically grounded and morally relative. From this perspective, too, researchers cease to be passive and objective scholars and the traditionally-accepted view of them as being neutral, dispassionate, rational, objective observers of the human condition is no longer appropriate (Kellett, 2009). The morally engaged turn requires researchers to transform themselves from objective, dispassionate outsiders to politically and morally engaged insiders (Scheper-Hughes, 1995).

The argument that passionate engagement is more relevant for researchers conducting research with ethnic minority groups in Western countries is certainly a valid point to make. Research suggests that culture plays a central role in ethnic identity construction (Li, Hodgetts and Ho, 2010) and ethnic disparities in mental health (Yasui, Pottick and Chen, 2017). According to Yasui and colleagues (2017), ethnic minority children and families are less likely to access mental health services than their mainstream counterparts. They are also more likely to delay seeking treatment and to quit treatment. Yasui, et al. argued that such ethnic disparities in mental health services may be caused not only by logistical barriers, but may also be the result of racism, cultural

stigma associated with mental illness, and lack of knowledge about mental health. They urged that improved cultural engagement in mental health research and treatment may be the key to tackle these problems.

Similarly, researchers call for culturally passionate engagement in qualitative Psychology research with ethnic minority groups (Li, 2013; Hodgetts et al., 2010). In qualitative studies, researchers listen to, and analyse participants' stories that are culturally bound. Li (2014) argued that the structure of the narrative differs across cultures. Chinese narratives, for example, are holistically and episodically structured. This is different from the Western narrative structure that emphasises a unitary form to allow the narrative to follow a coherent sense of having a beginning, a middle and an end in each individual episode (Flick, 2006). The Chinese narrative tends to be a holistic narrative in which stories move from one episode to the next; where the main storyline does not emerge in individual episodes, but from the entire narrative (Li, 2013; 2014). This suggests, then, the need to engage with research participants more than once, and to follow the narrative as it unfolds from the series of episodic accounts.

Such cultural differences in narrative structure provide the theoretical foundation for what the authors propose as culturally appropriate engagement as used in their research. Culturally appropriate engagement is crucial in qualitative research with ethnic minority groups because such engagement reflects the notion that the manifestations or patterns of a psychological phenomenon are unique within the cultural context.

As discussed, culture serves as a major force in shaping the way in which people conceptualise the self. Yang (2006) proposed that the Chinese self is a 'cobweb'. The 'web' constitutes a dynamic field that connects the person to many other individuals, each of whom is also a web. The cobweb self is positioned "as the centre of a bundle of relationships that links a person's action with the environment and beyond" (p. 345). The concept of the cobweb self provides a cultural angle through which the Chinese self is understood. Any action by the Chinese self will lead to reshaping the web and all other webs associated with it. When Chinese people migrate to a western country such as Australia or New Zealand, they need to 're-cobweb themselves'. Through the cobweb, the actions of the (re)cobwebbed self always influence and are influenced by others. Each person who is involved in the cobweb has obligations to particular others who are in his or her own cobweb. Society as a whole is woven together from many webs made of different social relations. Ontologically, the Chinese self can be regarded as 'being-in-relation' that emphasises a reciprocal engagement between human beings. In other words, 'being-in-relation' can be considered as a cultural mode of engagement for Chinese people.

Inspired by the aforementioned engagement theories and models, Li (2013, 2014, 2015, 2017), in her research with Chinese community in New Zealand and Australia, developed a culturally-engaged approach—*Fang-tan* that reflects the degree of being-in-relation throughout the research process. In the following sections, we will first offer the rationale of the development of *Fang-tan*, followed by an illustration of how *Fang-tan* is conducted. We will then discuss our insights into and reflections on conducting *Fang-tan*.

## **1.2 Fang-tan: A culturally-engaged approach to research with Chinese communities**

Different from Western people who are seen as more open to express their emotions and feelings, Chinese people's emotional behaviour is normatively moderate and in some case, suppressed altogether. Confucius, whose philosophy forms the basis of Chinese tradition and beliefs said, "A gentlemen covets the reputation of being slow in word and prompt in deed" (Confucius, 1999, p. 39). Confucius believed that when a person speaks, "from every word he (a gentleman) utters, from every intonation, he must remove all trace of coarseness and impropriety" (Confucius, 1999, p. 81). Furthermore, Confucianism emphasised that children should be taught "no leaping, arguing, joking, slouching, or using vulgar language" (Wu, 1996, p. 145). The popular teachings of Confucianism train Chinese people not to express their opinions without careful consideration especially in front of visitors and strangers. Additionally, research into Chinese traditions, beliefs and behaviours suggests that Chinese people believe an individual's emotional expression to be dangerous to social relations because it may bring damage to social harmony (Russel & Yik, 1996; Yik, 2010). As a result, Chinese people usually will not spontaneously open themselves to visitors or strangers such as a researcher who comes along with many questions to ask them.

Chinese people's suppression of emotion requires engaged researchers to put more effort into establishing rapport with participants by knowing more about their participants through engaged conversations. *Fang-tan* is a tool to help the researcher become 'being-in-relation' with participants. *Fang-tan*, a Chinese phrase, is comprised



of two Chinese words: *Fang* and *Tan*. *Fang* refers to interviewing and asking questions, while *Tan* is concerned with dialogues and conversation. Distinct from the Western-based interview which literally translates as *Cai-fang* or *Fang-wen* in the Chinese language, *Fang-tan* emphasises the dialogical conversation between the researcher and the participant instead of the researcher with a list of questions in hand and asking questions, and the participant simply responding, as in the structured interview that is practiced in Psychology studies (Li, 2014, 2017).

The conversational engagement makes *Fang-tan* particularly appropriate for building rapport and trust with Chinese people, which is manifested by four features of *Fang-tan*. Participant participation is the first feature of *Fang-tan*. In *Fang-tan*, the structure of *Fang-tan* is not predetermined by the researcher. This participatory nature promotes shared ownership of the research project between the researcher and the participant. It affords the participant the opportunity to be actively involved in the conversation process. Rather than a full list of questions to ask, a tentative *Fang-tan* outline consists of a small number of topics that may be discussed within the conversation. This outline will be revised and improved upon during *Fang-tan* when the participant's story opens up a new perspective. To foster a more spontaneous dialogical interaction and more active engagement, it is suggested that the researcher commits the outline to mind, instead of holding an outline in hand. By setting the scene as friendly and non-threatening or overly formal, participants are thus encouraged to relax and open up to the researcher.

The second feature of *Fang-tan* is the equality of status between the researcher and participant. *Fang-tan* features constant reversal roles between the researcher and the participant during the dialogical interaction. During the conversation, the researcher encourages the participant to ask questions. The researcher also shares his or her opinions with the participant. The opinion sharing echoes above-mentioned Boyer's (1996) notion of the scholarship of sharing knowledge. This sharing is also established in the belief that an engaged researcher should not just extract data from participants and then leave. As Ervin (2000) pointed out, many participants are at odds with the conduct of academic research on themselves and their communities because so many researchers just collect data from the community and do not share their thoughts and findings with the community. Ervin continued to argue that people want information that can improve their lives rather than furthering someone's career (2000). In other words, participants expect some form of reciprocity, wanting to satisfy his or her own curiosity to get to know the researcher better (Pe-Pua, 2006) and to enrich his or her knowledge related to the research being conducted. By sharing knowledge, interviews as social interactions become *inter-actions* between the researcher and the interviewee through which they develop *inter-views* (Li, 2013). In *Fang-tan*, the participant is free to ask the researcher as many questions as he or she wants. Hence, the researcher and the participant could be viewed as a research group. The participant learns how *Fang-tan* works, having a say over the topics discussed in *Fang-tan*, and having co-ownership of the research with the researcher. The Participant thus acts much like a co-researcher.

The third feature of *Fang-tan* is the insider relationship between the researcher and participant. As discussed previously, the Chinese self is a cobweb self which is being-in-relation with others and where the self is perceived as integrated within society. The self cannot be removed from one's relational networks (Hwang, 2006). There are two categories of relationship between the self and others in the network: the insider and outsider (Scollon & Scollon, 1994). The insider means 'one of us', while the outsider means 'one outside of us' (Li, 2017). Chinese people make a clear distinction between insiders and outsiders, and this distinction exists in all levels of social interaction (Gao, 1996). An insider is regarded as being nice, trustworthy, caring, helpful and empathetic (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). Insiders are often treated differently from outsiders. Compared to an outsider of a group, an insider of this group often holds privileges and receives special treatment by the group to which he or she is perceived to belong. In the context of research, if the researcher is regarded as an insider (one of us) by the participant, the research relationship will be characterised by rapport, understanding, acceptance and mutual trust. An outsider researcher can become an insider through sufficient preparation for *Fang-tan* which will be discussed in the next section. This view is very different from the Western culture view where boundaries between the self and others are fixed. In the Chinese culture, boundaries between the insider and the outsider are always shifting.

The fourth feature of *Fang-tan* is the use of the Chinese language. This is essential to *Fang-tan* in terms of its conversational nature. Through their mother tongue, participants can best and comfortably express their attitudes, emotions and beliefs.

Moreover, the use of the Chinese language can lead to the richness of the cultural concept which is more meaningful when embedded in the Chinese language (Li, 2017).

In the next section, three studies that were conducted in the Chinese communities in New Zealand and Australia will be employed as examples to demonstrate how Fang-tan is conducted. The three studies are: Study 1 which explored gambling experiences among Chinese international students in New Zealand, Study 2 which investigated older Chinese migrants ageing in place in New Zealand and Study 3 which focused on Chinese women in cross-cultural marriages in Australia.

## **2. Fang-tan in action**

### ***2.1 Conducting Fang-tan in our own empirical research***

Study 1 aimed to investigate the gambling experience of 15 Chinese international students who lived in New Zealand when the study was conducted. It also aimed at developing a culturally-engaged narrative approach—*Fang-tan* which was used in the second of two interviews conducted with the participants. At the end of the second interview, the participants were asked to comment on *Fang-tan as a method of research*.

Study 2 explored 32 older Chinese migrants' collective experiences of ageing in place in New Zealand, a new 'place' for many of them. The study aimed at providing a better

understanding of Chinese immigration and ageing. It also aimed at further developing and validating the culturally-engaged approach—*Fang-tan*.

Study 3 aimed at investigating the experience of interracial marriage between Chinese women and Australian men. Issues of acculturation and identity construction for both wives and husbands were explored. The study also aimed to further validate *Fang-tan* as a research method engaging with the Chinese women as participants.

To ensure the rapport and trust were established, *Fang-tan* was not employed until the second or third interviews. The previous interviews before *Fang-tan* aimed to collect concrete everyday stories of the participants. For example, apart from collecting demographic information of the participants such as age, gender, education, marital status and length of stay in New Zealand in the first round(s) of interview, Study 1 explored the participants' gambling experiences in China and New Zealand. In Study 2, the focus was on the life history of the participant (e.g., histories of immigration and housing) and concrete aspects of the participant's present experiences (e.g., stories related to places such as home, community, and home and host countries). Study 3 investigated the participants' dating and wedding experiences, expectations of married life in Australia, and their experiences of raising children in a cross-cultural marriage.

Before *Fang-tan* was conducted, considerable preparation was required across each of the three studies. First, the previous interviews acted as an essential part of the

preparation of *Fang-tan*. Second, the preparation also comprised of preliminary analysis of the previous interviews, involvement in the participants' community activities, and offering photos that were taken in previous interviews with the participants as gifts. It was through the preliminary analysis of the data collected from the previous interviews that the researchers established a picture of the participants' everyday experiences in New Zealand or Australia.

*Fang-tan* was conducted about six to 12 months after the initial interview. Participants who represented different backgrounds based on, for example, duration of residence in New Zealand, gender, income, etc. were selected for *Fang-tan*. During the interval of the previous interview and *Fang-tan*, the first author met informally with the participants, observed the community activities they participated in, practiced Chinese singing and dancing with them, learned to grow Chinese vegetables from them, or kept in touch with them via email or phone from time to time. Such involvement not only helped the researcher select *Fang-tan* participants in terms of representation and to better understand them, but this direct engagement provided the researcher with opportunities to become 'one of them'. During the interview interval, the first author also returned to the Chinese community to either briefly report on the preliminary findings or deliver presentations on the status of the research project. Those reports and presentations were well received by the attendees from the Chinese community. They remarked that the reports and presentation were meaningful to them because they were not expecting that they would have opportunities to offer feedback to and comments on the research. Some of the members of the audience who were not

participants even asked the researcher whether they could participate in the research as they would like to offer their experiences and points of view on the topic being studied.

Apart from offering vouchers to the participants to thank them for the time they invested in the research, the researchers also offered them photos of their everyday life or photos showing them participating in their community activities. These photos were taken with their permission and the exchange of photographs was a good way to begin *Fang-tan*. The photographs were appreciated and some participants told the researcher that they would frame the photos so that they could keep good memories of having participated in the research.

It was through all these preparations that a higher level of rapport and mutual trust was attained with the participants. It was also through the preparation that the participants came to regard the researcher as an insider. They were more open to share their stories with the researcher. For example, some participants in Study 3 shared intimate stories of their sexual life with the researcher. Moreover, some participants who did not agree to be digitally recorded in the previous interviews gave permission to record *Fang-tan* after having had direct engagement with the researcher in many non-typical research settings.

Specifically, the procedure of *Fang-tan* consists of four steps. The first is to develop a *Fang-tan* outline which reports preliminary analysis of the previous non-*Fang-tan*

interviews, and explaining the method of *Fang-tan*, and discussing photographs taken in previous interviews. The second step is to conduct *Fang-tan* with the participants. As stated previously, in this phase, the participants are encouraged to ask questions and the researcher can openly share his or her own thoughts and feelings about the research topic with them. In the examples of previous studies conducted, specifically Study 2, for example, the elderly participants asked the first researcher included about her own immigration experiences, the difficulties she encountered in a new country and how she overcame those difficulties. The third step in *Fang-tan* is to invite the participants to talk about developments and further thoughts regarding the issues discussed since the last interview. In Study 2, for example, the most frequently mentioned issue was that the participants would appreciate it if the researcher could conduct research into older Chinese migrants' health and mental health as well. The final step is to reflect on *Fang-tan*. In the studies thus far conducted using *Fang-tan*, the lead researcher shared her reflections with the participants and asked them to share their reflections, in turn.

## ***2.2 Insights into and reflection on conducting Fang-tan***

Adopting Boyer's (1996, 1997) and Clair's (2012) theories and models of engagement, in this section, we offer our insights into *Fang-tan* and our role as researchers that reflect the level of 'being-in-relation', a cultural understanding of engagement, when we worked with the Chinese communities both in New Zealand and Australia.



### 2.2.1 The role of the researcher: An insider of the community

The previous section demonstrated that *Fang-tan* requires the researcher to devote a great deal of effort to establish rapport with the participant and the community, becoming an insider of the communities and becoming 'one of them'. The practice of being an insider of the community reflects the concept of the Chinese cobweb self. As discussed previously, the cobweb self suggests that the self is relational and to a great degree, is defined in terms of one's roles in family, community and society, as well as one's relationships to specific others (e.g., the researcher in a research project one participates in). In this sense, an individual's social roles and relationships are a major constitutive part of his or her personal identity (Jiang, 2006). As Hwang (2006) posited, in the Chinese culture, there is no clear boundary between the self and others. The relational cobweb self indicates that there is an extraordinarily high sensitivity towards the existence of others in one's identity. Being an insider, the researcher became part of his or her participant's cobweb. This experience of self and the researcher in the participant's phenomenological world is likely to merge to such an extent that the participant may be separated from the world to form a self-in-relation-with-the-researcher (Hwang, 2006). In this regard, the research project becomes a collective focus between the researcher and the participant. The researcher thus should not regard himself or herself as the person who knows more than his or her participants, or one who occupies a higher level in the social hierarchy than the participants.

The recruitment processes of the three studies cited also prove the importance of being an insider of the community. In Study 1, a total of 10 organisations (e.g. Chinese

churches, language schools, polytechnics and universities) were approached to recruit potential participants. Although the organisations agreed to refer potential participants to the researcher, only one potential participant emerged from these referral groups. This reflected a difficulty in recruiting participants to take part in a qualitative study that focused on gambling issues through these public channels because gambling is regarded a shameful activity by the public in the Chinese culture. A snow-balling technique, which established connections between the researchers and potential participants through persons that the researchers and potential participants both knew, was then employed. The researchers emailed the information sheets of the study to their personal contacts who were Chinese international students in order to assist in the recruitment of participants for the gambling study. The researchers then asked these initial participants to forward the information to their friends. A total of 14 participants were recruited through snow-balling (for details see Li and Tse, 2015).

The first author was the key researcher of Studies 2 and 3, and has been actively engaged with the Chinese communities prior to the research. She had established rapport and trust with the Chinese organisations and this helped in recruiting participants. She also had good relationships with Chinese people in the communities being studied. Participants were recruited via two channels—the Chinese organisations and snow-balling through the researcher’s personal contacts.

Interestingly, the Ethics Committee that approved Study 3 did not agree with the proposed method where the researcher would approach potential participants through personal contacts. The Committee argued that potential participants could feel pressured to participate in the research. The Committee suggested sending an invitation by post or email instead, to all members of the Chinese associations, with the invitation to contact the researcher if people were interested. The Ethics Committee's suggestion appeared to disregard the importance of engagement in qualitative research, particularly with ethnic communities such as the Chinese community. For the Committee, 'being-in-relation' approach was unacceptable. Like Study 1 on gambling, no potential participants for the interracial marriage study contacted the researcher after the email invitation was sent to all members of the Chinese associations. Participants were successfully recruited when the first author approached them one by one personally. The question "did you feel pressured when I [the first author] approached you to invite you to take part in the research" was put forward to the participants in *Fang-tan*. None of the participants felt they were pressured to participate. An example of their answers was "I did not feel pressured at all. I know you are a caring and passionate person through your engagement with the Chinese community. You are a trustworthy person." (Study 3, female, 38 years old).

### 2.2.2 Interacting with the participants: Empowering participants

In psychological research, empowerment is a construct that promotes participant strengths, competencies and proactive behaviours by the research and researchers involved (Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995). It focuses on research participants' wellness

instead of illness, competence instead of deficits, strength instead of weakness, and power instead of powerlessness. Although we emphasised the equality of status between the researcher and participants, it is pertinent to stress that in our three studies, there was an asymmetrical relationship of power between the researcher who expected or was expected to conduct the interview, and the participant who expected or was expected to be interviewed (Li, 2013). For example, as an academic, the researcher was regarded to have higher social status than the participants who were gamblers, older migrants or females living in Australia with limited English abilities and skills. Nevertheless, through *Fang-tan* these asymmetrical relationships of power in research were addressed and the conduct of the research with disadvantaged Chinese people became more engaged, respectful, sympathetic and empowering. As a result, *Fang-tan* established reciprocity and promoted empowerment through conversational interaction between the researcher and the participant. The reciprocity and empowerment endorse what Elbow (1986) called 'connected knowing' where the 'knower [the researcher] is attached to the known [the participant]' (p. 147). That is to say, the concerns, interests and agenda of the researcher (the knower) become the concerns, interest and agenda of the participant (the known) (Bishop, 2005). Consequently, empowering relationships nurture the feeling of connectedness that promotes equality, caring and mutual purpose. The connected knowing assists the researcher in avoiding losing sight of the psychological phenomenon of interest by simply focusing on data collection where the participant and his or her world become invisible.

In our own empirical studies, *Fang-tan* was not only a data collection tool but it also promoted personal growth of the participants in our studies. After the interviews, our participants often thought about what had been discussed in the interviews. For example, an elderly participant in Study 2 in *Fang-tan* showed the researcher a picture which he drew after the previous interview. This was a picture of a house he dreamed about. His dream house included a Chinese vegetable garden, fruit garden, flower garden, fish pond, a Chinese pavilion and playground. In Study 3, a couple was separated when the first interview was conducted. Inspired by the interview where they recalled the happiness when they were together, the couple openly talked through their marriage issues and moved back together.

These encouraging actions taken by the participants suggest that engaged research prompted them to think and rethink their lives over through post-interview self-narration. As Chase (2005) proposed, the post-interview self-narration leads to the participants' 'personal emancipation' (p. 668), through which they sought better stories in their lives and alternative versions of their life events.

Furthermore, *Fang-tan* through empowerment promoted social action and brought about social change in our studies. In *Fang-tan* of Study 2 with the elderly immigrants, the researcher shared stories of a Chinese association in one of the biggest cities in New Zealand with the participants who were living in a secondary city at the time of the study. These participants were inspired by their counterparts in the big city and started

to establish their own association. Their group has more than 300 members since 2011. The Chinese association organised weekly activities involving the older Chinese migrants as part of their program. As Li and colleagues (2014) expressed it, the Chinese association functioned as an emotionally textured place where for a short time each week, the participants expressed, shared and validated their positive and negative emotions with their peers. The weekly activities supported this emotional process through which the participants established 'we-ness' and shared cultural identity. The social action inspired by the engaged research constituted an arena for social support that played an important role in the participants' successful adaptation and wellbeing.

### 2.2.3 Analysing and presenting the story: Participant validation

As Mero-Jaffe (2011) stated, participant feedback on data interpretation contributes to the quality of the research undertaken. The process of such correspondence, where the participant has the final say in the story, assists to validate the interpretation of the data, and to empower the participant by allowing him or her control of what will be written. We term this process as participant validation. Specifically, in the three studies discussed in this paper, three strategies were employed in participant validation.

First, the researchers verbally presented summarised interpretations of the stories in Chinese to the participants during *Fang-tan* and/or via telephone after *Fang-tan*. The participants were asked to assess if the stories chosen to be analysed were appropriate and if the interpretations of the stories made sense to them. All participants then

confirmed or supported the summarised interpretations. Some participants supplemented their stories with new information to help further interpretation of the data. Second, as aforementioned, the researchers conducted verification presentations in the Chinese community and with the participants. The researchers elaborated what had been found and sought feedback on whether the interpretations reflected the participant's experiences. Overall, people who participated in the presentations confirmed that they agreed with the interpretation. The confirmation helped the researchers further elaborate and interpret the data, and served as evidence for data validation. Third, along with those more formally structured presentations, in many instances, the researchers talked informally about the research findings with Chinese people who they met in public and private events or meetings. These conversations were also supportive of the findings.

Hence, participant validation can be seen as a technique not only for establishing the validity of researchers' interpretations of the data that are collected from participants, but also for ensuring that the participants have access to, and have a say on what has been made of their experiences (Sandelowski, 1993). The process involves an academic obligation to conduct good science and ethical commitment to supporting participants' right to know about the research and its findings. This engaged process also provides the researchers with opportunities to find out what participants think of their work. During the process, participant validation often offers the researchers new theoretical insights into the research. We thus regard this afterlife of the research to be as informative as the research itself.

### 3. Discussion

This paper demonstrates the importance of adopting a culturally-engaged approach to research. The paper highlights that *Fang-tan*, which is a culturally-engaged approach developed and employed in three studies in which the authors have been involved, provides the researchers with opportunities to work while 'being-in-relation' with the Chinese communities and participants throughout the research process. As a result of being-in-relation, a cultural mode of engagement, *Fang-tan* boosts researchers' commitment to the community with whom they research.

Our analysis suggests that, for the Chinese, relation is concerned with engagement and connection. At the same time, relation is also a declaration of being. Relation is seen an ontological reality that defines human beings (Hasemhuttli, 1992). Moreover, our analysis demonstrates that the concept of the Chinese cobweb self provides a cultural angle through which the stories of the participants in the three studies may be understood. The participants' actions influence and are influenced not only by themselves, but also those people who are connected to, and engaged with the cobweb, including the researchers with whom they interact. Their actions thus result in reshaping the web and all other webs related to it.

In our analysis, we emphasise that a cultural insider could well carry out research in a more sensitive and responsive manner than an outsider. However, there are concerns



that insiders may be inherently biased and that insiders may be too close to the culture to critically analyse the data (Bishop, 2005). Efforts need to be made to minimise or remove bias. For example, in the three studies, the research teams were composed of Chinese and non-Chinese researchers. The non-Chinese researchers were from European, Filipino and South African cultural backgrounds and they provided outsider perspectives, leading to dialogues that encouraged the Chinese researchers to search and re-search cultural relevance and significance from a more critical perspective. The dialogues were particularly significant when the analysis involved social and cultural phenomena that the Chinese researchers took for granted from their own observations (Li, 2013).

Ethically, culturally-engaged research method such as *Fang-tan*, may challenge some of the assumptions and practices that some members of the institutional ethics review boards hold. Research, which engages with a particular culture and focuses on particular struggles that people from the cultural encounter, challenges ethics committee members to think beyond the conventional quantitative psychological research methods. Attention should be drawn to what happens before and after fieldwork in culturally-engaged research—it is not just a means of collecting data, but rather a process that may inspire revolutionary social transformation (Urla and Helepololei, 2014). To promote better understanding of culturally-engaged research, an ethics committee should include members who have strong qualitative research backgrounds and a solid understanding of cultural minority groups that ethics applicants wish to engage with. Co-chairship, sharing by a quantitative and a qualitative researcher, of the

ethics committee could be considered as a means to enhance the committee's capacity to review culturally-engaged research.

As demonstrated in our analysis, our culturally-engaged research inspires 'personal emancipation' among participants. Such personal emancipation functions to increase the participants' understanding of themselves and others. It also encourages participants' self-reflection which may help them strengthen their capacity to cope with, or to change adverse situations. Consequently, participants grow in the process of taking part in culturally-engaged research.

Furthermore, our analysis shows that the culturally-engaged research contributes not only to personal emancipation among the participants with whom we worked, but also to 'emancipatory social change' (Urla and Helepololei, 2014, p. 439). Our reflection suggests that culturally-engaged research moves beyond merely talking to participants, to participating with them in challenging the situations they experience, but also in potentially advocating for social change (Susser, 2010). In this regard, engagement, which is central to social movements, guarantees further exploration in research with cultural minority groups. Such exploration is especially important if psychological research is to seek ways and work towards understanding how a world of possibilities for social change can be effected (Clair, 2012).

To conclude, *Fang-tan* demonstrates the application of culturally-engaged research method that make it possible to elicit relevant and deep information from Chinese participants who otherwise would remain voiceless. As researchers, we subscribe to the call for engaged research and we see this as vital to the scholarship in Psychology. In some cases, engagement has necessitated relinquishing the traditional role of the researcher as 'the expert' but this has meant that the key ethical imperative of acknowledging the contribution of participants to the research is highlighted. At the same time, for many participants, it is only when researchers recognise and value the importance of localised sources of knowledge that truly useful data are obtained. In the case of the various Chinese communities and participants in our three case studies, *Fang-tan* not only allows participants to tell their story in the way that is naturally embedded within the Chinese culture, but also enriches Psychology as a discipline as it addresses issues in a more holistic way that captures the totality of the phenomenon.

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