

# What are we comparing China with?

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Editor

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*In considering the challenges faced by researchers in China, it may be useful to take a comparative perspective. In this posting, I discuss a recent project that involved carrying out fieldwork both in rural Heilongjiang and in rural Oklahoma. The comparison reminds us, among other things, that the methodological ‘advantages’ and ‘disadvantages’ of a given field site may generate unexpected consequences – both good and bad – for research, writes **Charles Stafford**.*

The academic discipline of social anthropology, in which I work, is meant to be comparative – but rarely actually is except in a roundabout way. An anthropologist who carries out research in the Himalayas might later do research in Boston, but probably not at the same career stage and/or in relation to the same questions and/or using the same methodologies.

Of course, we routinely compare what we know about one place, e.g. Amazonia, with what we know about another, e.g. Melanesia, normally based on reading the work of other anthropologists. But this is usually not done very systematically. In particular, we tend to compare cultural artefacts (e.g. rituals) from different societies without asking if the methods used to elicit data about these artefacts are commensurable. Actually, this question of commensurability in methods/data is raised from time to time but, unlike experimental psychologists and others, we rarely obsess about it at any length.

As an extension of all of this, when anthropologists comment (usually informally, and often negatively) on the methodological challenges they face in a given fieldwork setting, it is likely that they have little basis for comparison, either directly via their own research experience or indirectly via the research experience of others. This is somewhat like people who complain about their own families without realising quite how bad things are next door.



As part of a recent pilot project that was designed to be comparative, I carried out two months of fieldwork in rural Heilongjiang and a further two months in rural Oklahoma, focusing on the same general question: the socioeconomic “rise and fall” of families over time. Given the radical differences between Chinese and American history, culture, politics, economics, etc., I suppose that this might, on the face of it, seem an odd comparison to make. And yet there are families in both places, of course, and these families perceive themselves as doing (collectively) better or worse at given moments in history. I found discussing this topic with people in Heilongjiang and Oklahoma fascinating, not to mention highly thought provoking and analytically productive.

My basic conclusion, by the way, is that experiences of family rise and fall in these two settings – notwithstanding the historical, cultural, etc., differences between them – are strikingly similar in certain key respects. In particular, people in Heilongjiang and Oklahoma confront the (very general human) problem of how to coordinate goals, intentions and actions with others over time, including across generations in families and larger kinship groups.

I'll come back to this problem in a moment, but before doing so I want to focus briefly on the advantages and disadvantages of being an anthropological researcher – in both places.

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The first thing to report is that, holding an American passport, I simply flew to Oklahoma and started doing fieldwork. Given the considerable time and effort I've spent sorting out arrangements to do research in China, including in Heilongjiang, this felt odd, almost anticlimactic. (Note, however, that if I had wanted to do something that required special permission, such as research with vulnerable people, this might well have been harder in America than in China. And as doctoral programme director for the LSE's Anthropology Department, I am confident in saying that gaining permission and access for field research in China is no worse than in much of the rest of the world, and in some respects it is better.)

The second thing to report is that Oklahomans, on the whole, speak a kind of English. This made me feel much smarter than I typically feel in rural China where, among other things, I tend to understand jokes without properly getting them, to the disappointment of my friends. (Note however that, with the passage of time, I have concluded that my very first fieldwork – carried out in a Taiwanese fishing community with relatively poor language skills – is probably the best anthropological research I have done. So perhaps my fluency in Oklahoman will, after all, turn out to be an impediment to good work.)

The third and perhaps more substantive thing to report, which relates to a number of previous postings to this blog, is that I found the nature of social relations to be very different, possibly radically different, in these two fieldwork locations. To make the point as simply as possible: sociality seemed to be much more intense in Heilongjiang than in Oklahoma, which perhaps is just what one would expect in comparing a notionally "collectivist" society with a notionally "individualistic" society. (Note, however, that I find these labels deeply misleading.)

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At around the mid-point of fieldwork, I calculated that my rate of "connections making" in Heilongjiang was roughly four times higher than it was in Oklahoma, i.e. there were four times more individuals in the network of connections I built up in the former, at an equivalent stage in research, because network-building is so much easier among Chinese people. I also reckoned that the frequency of meal-sharing – again, for me personally, in the course of fieldwork – was roughly *twelve* times higher in Heilongjiang than in Oklahoma.

As might be predicted, however, it turns out that sociality is of importance in rural Oklahoma too, i.e. in spite of these striking, and quantifiable, differences. People there get together via churches, of course, but also via coffee groups (for old men), sewing groups (for old women), farmers' associations, extended family networks, etc. And yet one would not immediately notice this, in part because the aesthetics of friendship and mutual assistance in Oklahoma are very low-key and understated by comparison with the raucous banqueting and *guanxi*-building activities of rural Heilongjiang.

In the end, my conclusion was that networks and connections actually matter about equally in both places, although accessing this as a researcher in Oklahoma is arguably very much harder than doing so in Heilongjiang.

In both settings – which were totally new field sites for me – I lived in cheap hotels and had no formal arrangement for sharing meals with local people. What I found was that, in Oklahoma, people were incredibly open and generous and warm in talking with me about their lives and experiences, e.g. in relation to the Dust Bowl and Depression era when many of them grew up as poor farm kids. But they virtually never invited me to stay around afterwards, e.g. to share a meal, and as a result I often ended up in my hotel room watching television alone. In Heilongjiang, by contrast – and this will be no surprise to others who have done fieldwork in rural China – I was almost immediately caught up in cycles of meal-sharing which meant that, as noted above, I met a large number of people in a short space of time. I was literally dragged away from my hotel room for evening meals, sometimes when I had scarcely recovered from a lunchtime drinking session.

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On the surface, then, Heilongjiang has a distinct advantage over Oklahoma – at least from the perspective of an anthropologist – in the sense that ordinary people (i.e. prospective research informants) more or less force themselves upon you, albeit in a nice way.

There are, however, at least three potential disadvantages to this. The first is that spending large amounts of time at collective social events (such as the extended eating, drinking and *majiang*-playing sessions that take place during the new year festival) may actually be relatively unproductive. People focus on each other, mostly, or on their *majiang* games; they tend to say and do quite a lot of formulaic things; and of course difficulties with language are exacerbated by the general background noise and confusion that follows when people are together having fun.

For me, it has always been more productive, anthropologically speaking, to have one to one conversations with informants, in quiet settings, without witnesses. Certainly, people in Oklahoma said some wonderfully interesting things to me, in relatively quiet/still settings, before sending me home to watch television alone. Having said this, I would stress that it was significantly easier to carry out “flow of life” ethnography in Heilongjiang, whereas in Oklahoma my research was ultimately reduced to a series of time-constrained semi-formal interviews. I personally consider the former to be massively more important as an anthropological activity than the latter.

The second disadvantage is that getting very drunk through attendance at social events, as is sometimes expected of men in north China, while not necessarily a bad thing for an anthropologist, does tend to interfere with thinking, speaking, note-taking, etc. And if this becomes a routine – even everyday – occurrence, it can become a serious hindrance to research, not just a minor annoyance.

This brings me to the third disadvantage, which relates to gender. To state the obvious, men the world over are somewhat boring by comparison with women, and if you have the opportunity to talk with women you should do so, in my experience, ignoring any men who happen to be nearby. And one problem with all the fascinating network-generating activities in Heilongjiang is that they tend to be quite heavily gendered, and this often (but not always) compels a man like me to talk to men. That is, men become the “network” – while the women are off having their (probably much more interesting and informative) conversations elsewhere.

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At this point, let me remind you of the thing I actually went to Oklahoma and Heilongjiang to study: the socioeconomic “rise and fall” of families over time. As I observed at the outset, people in both places confront the problem of how to coordinate goals, intentions and actions with others, including across generations in families and larger kinship groups. As an anthropologist, I basically want to observe this problem being dealt with in the flow of life and to talk with people about it – *and*, of course, I want the evidence that I collect in relation to this topic, in rural China and America, to be comparable.

But the (very different) nature of sociality in these two fieldwork locations – which obviously impinges directly on how real world cooperation unfolds for ordinary people there – also happens to generate methodological constraints that may stand in the way of this goal of comparability. Among other things, cooperation is often “performed” (and thus easily observable) in Heilongjiang, whereas it is typically understated, and sometimes almost invisible, in Oklahoma. Meanwhile, it soon became obvious to me, in both places, that cooperation both within and between families is ultimately only explicable in relation to the activities of women. But gaining access to evidence about this may be constrained, in different ways, by the patterns of cooperation and sociality to be found in the two locations.

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## About the Author

**Charles Stafford** is Professor of Anthropology at the Department of Anthropology, LSE. He has carried out fieldwork in rural Taiwan and China since the mid-1980s, and has specialised in questions related to learning, cognition, child development, morality and economic life. He is the author of *Separation and reunion in modern China* (2000) and the editor of *Ordinary ethics in China* (2013). He is also the publisher of the online review journal *Anthropology of*

*this century*. The fieldwork reported herein was carried out during the 2010/11 academic year in rural Heilongjiang and rural Oklahoma.

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### **Editor's Note**

This posting is based on the author's contribution to a panel discussion at the workshop held in June 2013, "[Addressing Field Research Constraints in China](#)". Readers may also find it interesting to read the response from [Jennifer Robinson](#), "[Comparing places](#)".