Discovery, Research (Re)Design, and Theory Building

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Biographical Sketch

Kevin J. O'Brien is a professor of political science at the University of California, Berkeley. His research currently focuses on theories of contentious politics and popular protest in rural China. He is the co-editor (with Neil J. Diamant and Stanley B. Lubman) of *Engaging the Law in China: State, Society and Possibilities for Justice* (Stanford, in press), and his latest articles have appeared in *The China Journal*, *China Quarterly*, *Comparative Politics*, *Mobilization*, and *Modern China*.

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Since it became feasible in the late 1970s, interviewing has become the heart of much fieldwork conducted in China. From western political scientists who speak with grassroots officials to Chinese ethnographers who do oral histories in their home villages, conversation has become a signature form of data collection in the China field. At the same time, many Sinologists are more deeply embedded in the social sciences than ever before. Although these scholars usually continue to publish in area studies outlets, they also write for anthropology, economics, political science, and sociology journals, in which the expectation is that their research will contribute to theory development in some fashion or other.

Bringing what we know about China to our disciplinary colleagues is certainly a worthwhile goal. But it is often a challenge to adapt the freewheeling stories that interviews elicit to the demands of theorizing. The strength of interviewing is, of course, the particular and the vivid. Claims to representativeness are always problematic, especially in a place like China, where meetings are often arranged through the most idiosyncratic of channels. (Some of the best interviews I ever did arose from literally bumping into a well-connected former student on Wangfujing--one of Beijing's busiest shopping streets). Given the opportunistic way many of us gather information and the 'non-standardized data' (Dean et al. 1969: 20) that interviewing produces, how can interviewing in China contribute to theory building?

In this chapter, I will sketch an approach to research design that hinges on staying open to unforeseen ideas (and even new topics of inquiry) that emerge in the course of interviewing. I will use my own study of local people's congresses in the early 1990s (as well as examples drawn from more recent work on village elections, policy implementation and popular resistance) to illustrate how one young fieldworker fumbled his way toward a type of research that aims to speak to both China scholars and disciplinary audiences. The strategy I espouse bears some relationship to 'grounded theory' (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and is a form of 'exploratory' analysis (Gerring 2001: 231-32). It is a modest enterprise that accepts (even revels in the fact) that the best generalizations are usually bounded. It encourages us to shop for existing theories and concepts before and after we head to the field, but not to buy much of what we find (Jones 1974: 219), especially when interviews make it clear that our preconceived notions have led us to miss the real question or imagine a dilemma that does not exist. This strategy treats research design as an ongoing process and emphasizes discovery rather than verification (Gerring 2001; Glazer and Strauss 1967). It attaches considerable importance to the subjective experience of interviewees (Schwartz 1996: 107) and regards shoe-horning evidence into 'ill-fitting a priori categories' (Gerring 2001: 231; also Glaser and Strauss 1967: 253) to be just about the greatest sin imaginable.

When the approach works, the result is knowledge about China and, equally importantly, insight into some theoretical question or problem (Gerring 2001: 22-23; Kaplan 1964: 77-78). When convincingly done, such research may even succeed

in nudging our disciplinary colleagues to take Chinese experiences more seriously and to acknowledge that a theory they hold dear is not quite as universal as they thought.

Research (Re)design

The best advice I ever heard about research design centered on how to approach a prospectus defense. R. William Liddle frequently told Ph.D. students at Ohio State University that submitting a dissertation proposal was like applying for a fishing license. We, the representatives of your field, are granting you permission to go fishing in a certain place where we are fairly confident there are some fish. In presenting your research proposal, you need to persuade us that the project is both feasible and interesting. But we don't know which fish you will find, and more importantly, we can only guess which fish is going to be the biggest. You have to figure that out when you are in the field. Some contacts may prove to be better than others. Someone may drop a fascinating book based on fieldwork into your hands. An aspect of the project that you thought was minor may suddenly start to look like the big payoff, both empirically and theoretically. This counsel underscored what I take to be the one unalterable key to developing rich, sound data that also has theoretical repercussions--flexibility. Researchers must recognize, in other words, a big fish when they catch one, and not throw it back, just because they started out looking for some other fish, which when they located it turned out to be tiny, uninteresting, and not-too-tasty.

This small, even mundane point, which is particularly relevant to Sinologists because China is still a relatively closed polity and much social science theory was developed to study very different sorts of places, has many implications for research design. First, fieldworkers should always strive to be open to new ideas, theories that did not originally seem pertinent, and new research foci. Like good journalists, we ought to arrive in the field with an area of interest and some hunches about how a social process is unfolding, but then be ready (and eager!) to let our informants redirect us by telling us what concerns them most.

Consider, for example, my experience in a Shandong village in 1994 when I thought I was doing a project on village elections. Lianjiang Li and I had prepared dozens of questions on the implementation of the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees, and the local cadres we spoke with tried their best to answer them, but honestly, they were completely listless on the subject of grassroots democracy. Then, without warning, they suddenly perked up when someone brought up the topic of 'ten-star households'. These 'stars' were related to village charters that were being drawn up under one of the lesser known features of the villagers' autonomy program, and households received stars for tasks such as paying their taxes, respecting the law, keeping their yard clean, keeping their pigs off other people's property, and taking good care of the elderly. Interestingly, the stars were awarded to cadres as well as villagers and where everyone stood was public knowledge: how many stars a household had received was indicated right on top of the family doorway. Most fascinating of all, our interviewees told us that young people preferred not to marry into households that had fewer than eight stars and

cadres who fell below eight or nine were at risk of losing their position or at least their status in the village.

Our objective during this research was to examine the implementation of basic-level elections, but in this village the real story concerning political accountability and social control centered on these stars. In these circumstances, the best way to discover what there was to be learned was to let our informants talk and just listen. We occasionally drew them back toward our original area of interest, but mainly let them fill in one piece in a mosaic that might be called 'village political life' or 'grassroots cadre-mass relations'. We did not use forced choice questions and in fact abandoned many of the open-ended questions we had intended to ask. Nor did we employ a formal coding scheme to make sense of their remarks on this new and entirely unanticipated topic. It did not even bother us greatly that we had never asked about stars in any other village we visited. This was the story in this location; this is what interviewees became most animated and most concrete about, so we were happy to learn what they had to say. We would figure out how their remarks fit into our project later, *or even better*, we would mull the interviews over and consider whether our current project (and a set of theories and concepts we were just itching to deploy) should be modified to incorporate the insights derived from our stay in this village.

In this particular case we did not alter our research focus or go searching for new concepts or theories to lend order to our findings (on placing 'ten-star households' in a broader context, see Thøgersen 2000: 138-40), but fieldwork that same summer in other parts of Shandong and Hubei did lead us in a direction we

could never have foreseen. This occurred when a series of cadres repeatedly brought up problems they had encountered dealing with *diaomin* (shrewd, unyielding people) or *dingzihu* (nail-like people). Some of our informants also made a distinction between these two varieties of villagers based on how 'reasonable' (*jiangli*) they were. Before our interviews, it had never occurred to us to develop a typology of rural protesters, but we were quickly persuaded that this project (Li and O'Brien 1996; O'Brien 1996) was far more interesting (and better supported by the evidence we had gathered) than our original aim of investigating whether electoral reforms designed to increase stability had actually decreased it.

Students of social science methodology call these mid-course corrections 'mutual adjustments' (Gerring 2001: 231) or 'successive definitions' (Kaplan 1964: 77). This simply means that a researcher's topic of inquiry and the concepts or theories employed to understand it may evolve in the course of conducting research (in our case, by doing interviews). In such exploratory work, 'doing' often precedes 'knowing' (Jones 1974). Theory and evidence are closely intertwined and theories, concepts and evidence come to be aligned at the end of the research (Gerring 2001: 231; also Dean et al. 1969: 22-23). The 'analysis is at once inductive and deductive, like someone who is simultaneously creating and solving a puzzle, or like a carpenter alternately changing the shape of a door and then the shape of the door frame to obtain a better fit' (Emerson et al. 1995: 144). Data-fitting, the horror of researchers who seek to confirm of disconfirm preformed hypotheses, is a boon (Gerring 2001: 232) for people like Lianjiang Li and me, who

continually adjust the scope of our investigation as our fieldwork unfolds, and who only settle on which concepts and theories to employ once the data is all in.

Reveling in the Particular and the Concrete

That prolonged 'soaking and poking' can alter the empirical and theoretical questions under study (quoted text in Fenno 1978: 250; Gerring 2001) encourages researchers to focus on the specific--precisely the forté of interviewing. In my experience, the most important statement to interject when speaking with Chinese officials or ordinary citizens is 'please give me an example' (*qing ju yige lizi*). I have conducted interviews on the people's congress system in the Great Hall of the People, where scholars or officials started quoting the Constitution while our precious time was wasting away. Lianjiang Li and I have talked with villagers who understandably enough had difficulty deciphering western social scientists' questions, and who did not even quite comprehend what academic research was. In these circumstances, keeping questions factual and down-to-earth is crucial. I inevitably learn most when an interviewee tells a long, involved story full of incidents that I can chew over for their import. Upon hearing the tale, I might not immediately grasp what many of the twists and turns mean, but that's not important. Field researchers need examples to think with in order to refine their topic and test their 'priors'. Especially for projects with conceptual or theoretical aspirations, it is useful to treat a detailed, winding story like a prism, which the researcher can keep turning around and around (sometimes years after leaving the field) to see what colors it casts off. What is not comprehensible now might

become so at a later date, perhaps in the midst of writing, when a hole in the analysis suddenly appears. Abstractions generally will not help fill the hole. If relied upon unduly, the researcher will most likely slide right over an important counterintuitive or counter-literature point and do what we all do sometimes: deduce what may be happening rather than provide a rich and telling example of what actually is occurring somewhere. Much of the concrete, experience-near data I am extolling is frankly anecdotal (it is not even appropriate to call it a 'case study'), but if it is deployed fairly and well, readers will recognize the kernel of truth in it. It will, in other words, ring true, and accord with the experience of other researchers in other parts of China or elsewhere. It may even help other scholars see their own topics in a new light. And should others examine what has been claimed and discover that an anecdote is not truly representative, or has been misconstrued, all the better. Attaching scope conditions to generalizations is an important way that a research community makes progress.

Let me offer some examples. My wife is a forest ecologist, so when she has accompanied me to the field I have often had an opportunity to gather stories about forest guards threatening local cadres who attempted to fire them, or people's congress deputies supporting better fire-fighting, improved schools or gun control in remote, mountainous areas. I have never written about forestry *per se*, but conversing with foresters about the specific concerns that trouble them has frequently had a payoff in producing nuanced data that I can review and bounce off the theoretical predispositions I arrived with. Interviewees most of the time, not all the time, want to please us. They just don't know what we need. If we talk with

them about rarefied concepts like representation we will most often get blank

stares. But we can find out much of what we need about representation and how

well the concept travels, for example, by asking interviewees to explain who votes

for a family where one person casts the ballot for each household, or what an

informant's views are on raising people's congress deputy quality (which also

implies downgrading the role of worker and peasant representatives), or by

hearing, as I did in 2002 in Yunnan, a woman candidate give a speech moments

before an election, in which she pointed out that her only female rival had

withdrawn, the village had been allocated a quota of one female villagers'

committee member, and voters should act accordingly. Intensive, open-ended

interviewing (and unabashed story-mongering) is the best way I know to locate the

topic I should have been studying in the first place (see Fenno 1978: 250-51: Dean

1969: 22), to avoid 'tendentious characterizations' of a phenomenon, and to resist

the 'impulse to vindicate a particular theoretical outlook' at the expense of empirical

validity (for the quoted text, see Shapiro 2002: 597).

There are of course well-known problems related to bias and even

truthfulness that spring from relying on a limited number of informants in a small

range of places. For fieldworkers who rely on interviewees as much as Lianjiang Li

and I do, it is a continual struggle to sift out remarks that are unreliable,

unrepresentative, self-serving or ideologically-driven. But at this point in our study

of China, at least for the questions that interest me, I would opt for depth of

knowledge over breadth of knowledge nearly every time.[1] And this is doubly

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[1] On using a number of field sites to understand one case better, see Maria Edin's chapter in this section.

important when one of our primary goals is to determine if a given theory or concept should be jettisoned, modified, or employed to organize what we have turned up in the field.

Readers may question whether so much can be gleaned from interviews. And they would be right: interviews have limits. They are never complete and Lianjiang Li and I always wish we had asked certain questions at the outset that we only came up with three months later. None of my comments so far should be understood to denigrate the importance of other types of evidence. Few topics can be studied based solely or even mainly on interviews. I myself have never published anything in which written sources were not at least half of the total citations. Interviews, as critical as they are for filling in missing links in an argument and identifying frameworks that fit are inevitably partial.

This is why materials developed by others can be invaluable. More than once, superb secondary sources have helped Lianjiang Li and me interrogate the theories and concepts we planned to deploy and have led us to revise our understanding of what we were studying. Toward this end, some of the best written materials I have come across include: 1) field studies by Chinese researchers (including an internal book (Zhao and Wu 1990), which was crucial to my work on local people's congresses); 2) inside-the-bureaucracy communications and documents in which officials related problems they faced in their work (this has been pivotal for exploring the implementation of village elections); 3) unpublished and pre-edited articles and letters to the editor that Lianjiang Li and I obtained from a journal on township affairs that employs thousands of stringers scattered across

China; and 4) responses to open-ended questions on a series of village surveys Lianjiang Li conducted from 1997 to 2001. All these written materials gave us a little more confidence that interpretations we had derived mainly from interviewing were not overly idiosyncratic or flat-out wrong.

That said, I still believe that interviewing can play a crucial role in theory building by illuminating (better than any other method) the institutional environment in which informants live. This is especially true for officials. Like most people, Chinese cadres are usually willing to go on at great length about how hard their life is and the many incompatible demands they face--at the grassroots, this would include building roads without levying too many fees, carrying out the birth control policy but not using coercion, implementing village elections but ensuring that only reliable people win. This may all sound like garden-variety grumbling, and much of it is, but it also allows the researcher, just briefly, to see issues the way people on the ground see them. Interviewing, in a word, enables outsiders to locate research problems of genuine importance (and to prioritize among possible explanations) by discovering what is agitating people in the thick of the system. This is how Lianjiang Li and I ended up writing about the 'cadre responsibility system' (*ganbu gangwei mubiao guanli zerenzhi*) (O'Brien and Li 1999; also Edin 2003), a topic that was not on our agenda when the village elections fieldwork began. Hard and soft targets, hard aspects of soft targets, 100-point scales. This is what a series of officials wanted to discuss when Lianjiang asked why they had so little enthusiasm for carrying out popular policies, like village elections, and so much enthusiasm for implementing unpopular policies, like birth control and collecting taxes and fees.

This brings us to a key point: exploratory research is always circular and it matters little where it commences. We may 'begin with a hunch, a question, a clearly formed theory, or an area of interest' (Gerring 2001: 22). There is only one place from which we can start--where we are (Kaplan 1964: 86). For me, this means engaging social science theories before and after arriving in China, but also taking interviewees' problems and the way they explain them to heart. Go to the field, as I have, with discipline-driven questions about representation, institutionalization, and political participation, but be ready to come out with answers about remonstrating (O'Brien 1994a), embeddedness (O'Brien 1994b) and rightful resistance (Li and O'Brien 1996; O'Brien 1996).

'One' Project

By early 1990 I had finished a book on the National People's Congress (O'Brien 1990), based largely on archival research, with a short stint of fieldwork at the last moment (when it became possible to attend the 1989 NPC). Conducting interviews with deputies and staff members enlivened the book, and running into a former student helped get me out of the public gallery and the staged press conferences and into some small group meetings and interviews. Still, the book was mainly historical and a product of library research. To the extent it engaged social science theories and concepts, it borrowed familiar ones from the study of western parliaments (e.g. representation, responsiveness, oversight, liberalization, rationalization) and the state socialist systems of the Soviet Union and East Europe (e.g. regime support, inclusion).

In the late 1980s, when the book was nearly complete, I began designing a project to study local people's congresses. I wrote several grant proposals employing one of the key concepts--representation--I had used in my book. But when I went to the field for three months in 1990 and six months in 1991 progress was at first slow, and not only because Sino-American relations were at a low ebb and interviews often began with a ritual denunciation of the United States and the US Congress. More to the point, interviewees were continually raising issues and suggesting interpretations that could not be accommodated by the framework I had come equipped to use. In the Procrustean bed I had built, I was not cutting off a few toes and a lock of hair, but rather everything other than a sliver of my interviewee's midsection. The project obviously had to be altered.

The primary way I reoriented myself was through open-ended, semi-structured interviews (see Wildavsky 1989: 57-102). In four cities (Beijing, Harbin, Tianjin, and Wuhan) I spoke with 39 individuals engaged in people's congress work or scholarship. Interviews were conducted in Chinese without a tape recorder (but often with an assistant taking notes), and were transcribed immediately on a laptop computer. I always sought individual meetings, but in some cases had to settle for the three-ring circus of 'discussions' (*zuotanhui*) with three to five individuals. I arrived with a set of questions, but as suggested above, I allowed respondents a fair amount of freedom to take the discussion where they wished (on 'guided monologues', see Wildavsky 1989: 77-78), and my questions evolved both as my reading progressed and as interviewing opened fresh lines of inquiry. In several cases, interviewees also provided written responses to my questions, and I found

that making an interview plan available in advance (something I had resisted), quite often allowed deputies, scholars and staff members to display considerable subtlety in their arguments. The only clear drawback of providing questions beforehand was that interviewees sometimes prepared a ten or twenty minute comprehensive response that might drift a little too far afield--and I then had to decide whether to interrupt them and whether this would spoil the interview.[2]

To allay fears and demonstrate sufficient 'friendliness' while investigating a sensitive topic at a tense time, I began all interviews by distributing a stack of documents and introduction letters from my sponsors and Chinese colleagues. I also prefaced each interview with a statement confirming that I was not a journalist, that anonymity would be maintained, and that my goal was simply to introduce China's political system to westerners who often did not understand China very well (on the 'teach-me approach', see Wildavsky 1989: 69). In almost every interview, after I followed this protocol, my informants protested that there were no problems at all, that I should not be worried, and that they were glad to assist me and to do their bit for improving Sino-American relations. After more pleasantries and some gift giving they usually relaxed, and most interviews proceeded quite well.

In this research, as always, I did not attempt to code informants' answers or treat them in any formal way. Instead, for an issue (local people's congresses) on which few scholars had conducted empirical research, I simply tried to squeeze all the meaning out of whatever information my interviewees chose to share. Letting

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[2] When I sensed that a demand to review questions in advance was purely a screening device, I sometimes omitted the most sensitive questions and then casually reintroduced them during the interview. Most informants were too polite to decline to answer.

interviews take their own shape was particularly beneficial with informants who conceived of themselves as intellectuals or local notables. In my experience, economic, social, and political elites do not like to be led around by the nose. They find it confining and insulting, and more than once during this fieldwork I dropped my original line of questioning and let the conversation flow where my informants wanted, usually to considerable advantage.

In practice, a flexible approach to question choice, question order, and follow-up queries greatly increased the probability that my neat analytical categories and unexplored assumptions would be challenged. Invariably, it was most helpful not when my informants answered a question, but when a response demonstrated that my question was poorly put: that it had been conceptualized incorrectly or that I had posed a dilemma that did not exist or missed a dilemma that did.[3] Examples of such wrong-headed but ultimately useful questions included asking local legislators: 'do you represent the interests of the state or your constituents'? The most interesting ones typically said something along the lines of: 'both, and here's how we do it'. Or asking other individuals involved in people's congress work: 'how can a legislature develop without becoming more autonomous, without moving farther from the Party'? And the thought-provoking ones said: 'the only way to develop is to avoid conflict and to move closer to the Party. That's how we'll get more resources, better staff, and expanded jurisdiction'.

These responses, though unnerving at first, encouraged me to consider why I had come up with questions that so woefully failed to capture the complexity of

what was happening in China. They also led me to modify my main project and to begin exploring two new topics. My original study swiftly morphed into an examination of a Chinese analogue of representation ('remonstrating') (O'Brien 1994a). At the same, I decided to pursue what would eventually become a comparative reassessment of the early stages of legislative development (what I called 'embeddedness')(O'Brien 1994b) and an examination of ties between people's congresses at different levels, which focused on why many leaders and staff of lower congresses preferred to be subject to 'leadership relations' (*lingdao guanxi*) rather than 'guidance' (*zhidao*) or 'contact' (*lianxi*) relations (O'Brien and Luehrmann 1998).

This iterative approach to research design continued throughout the interviewing, such that by the end of my stay I was testing my arguments directly on interviewees, typically saying: 'Some other people in people's congress work have told me [X]. What do you think about this'? A continuing effort to draw theory, concepts and evidence together (Gerring 2001: 231) also affected how I ultimately presented my findings. Developing 'hooks' for three articles I wrote based on this fieldwork entailed organizing illustrative anecdotes and interpretations from my interview notes around puzzles inspired by the wrong-headed questions that got me started. The puzzles were: How can a legislator represent the interests of constituents and be an agent of the state at the same time? How can parliaments develop even when they generally avoid confrontation and are subservient to strong executives? Why are leaders of higher-level

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[3] On the importance of long field stays and collecting one's own data (for analysts who may need to reformulate their research questions during fieldwork), see Maria

people's congresses not empire-builders while leaders of lower congresses are willing to sacrifice their autonomy? These were real puzzles in one sense, but not in another, in that the interviewing had already shown how to solve them. Writing then mainly involved establishing the apparent conundrum and showing how Chinese legislators and staff explained it could be made to disappear. And my typical conclusion was that the theory and concepts I had set out with (the ones that inspired my original, misconceived questions and nearly foreclosed more germane questions) had to be refined, usually because they arose from unwisely extending a western understanding of political reality to a place where it did not apply.[4]

This is ground-level up theorizing and it is markedly different than case studies, small-n comparison, hypothesis testing, or confirmatory analysis. I did not have a theory and a crucial case. I did not have a number of cases that I subjected to systematic, side-by-side comparison. Nor did I have a set of hypotheses that my interviewing and library work sought to verify. I most certainly did not have a predisposition to find what a theory told me to look for and to pry rich data into a framework that was inappropriate. I found remonstrating, not parochial representation, embeddedness, not institutionalization, 'looking for leadership', not a yearning for autonomy--and, for me, that was enough.

Edin's chapter in this section.
[4] In her contribution to this volume, Bu Wei discusses a similar misunderstanding. In her view, some analysts have interpreted the closing of internet bars from an overly political perspective (in terms of censorship and paths toward democracy), rather than as an effort to prevent teenagers from neglecting their studies.

Generalizing and Theoretical Eclecticism

Keeping our theorizing close to the ground is a good way to avoid wooden, predictable research that may appear solid, but somehow misses the mark. If village elections concern state-building as much as democracy (O'Brien and Li 2000), Sinologists need to say it, even if doing so makes China less 'legible' (Scott 1998) to disciplinary colleagues who would prefer to hear about political participation, electoral connections, popular support, and civil society. Common analytical vocabularies, attractive as they are, can mislead as well as clarify.[5] This point is especially relevant for Sinologists today because China is in transition--and to what, we don't truly know (cf. Steinfeld 2002). Should the pace of change moderate and China's sociopolitical system become more like that of other nations, more familiar theories and concepts will apply. But at least on the topics I study, that time has not arrived and uncritically accepting the 'stale categories which now dominate our discourse' (Schwartz 1996: 112) threatens to transform striking examples of legislative remonstrating into dull and misleading accounts of 'parochial representation'.

This suggests that perhaps we should not be too concerned with sorting out the 'wild profusion of new labels' which Baum and Shevchenko (1999: 333) gently mock in their review essay on 'the state of the state'. For now, I will cast my vote (provisionally) in favor of theoretical and conceptual promiscuity. Let's let a hundred flowers bloom as multiple lines of inquiry proliferate and compete. Let's

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[5] I say this as a person who has examined "citizenship" in China's countryside (O'Brien 2001) and who is currently writing a book with Lianjiang Li about how well concepts from the social movements literature apply to the study of popular resistance in rural China.

try to explain what occurs in China more analytically than we have in the past by clustering our findings under a host of often made-to-order concepts and bringing Chinese experiences into social scientific ways of thinking more than we have up to now. But let's postpone a quest for broad covering laws and sweeping generalizations until searching for them makes more sense than 'looking for a general theory of holes' (Shapiro 2002: 601).

If we heed this advice, it is unlikely that Sinologists will soon reach a consensus on a single model that characterizes, for example, the local state or state-society relations that is immediately recognizable to disciplinary colleagues. But a parade of paradigms need not be a formula for exoticizing China. Sinologists have much to offer the social sciences. What is most exciting about China, from a disciplinary perspective, is how much low-hanging fruit is waiting to be harvested--if only we keep ourselves open to new ideas and topics that emerge in the course of fieldwork. China is teeming with things that shouldn't be (i.e. theoretical anomalies), which our interviewees are glad to serve up to us. One of our key jobs is merely to recognize and repackage these insights for disciplinary colleagues who have been working with grand theories that actually apply only in a limited context. Our simplest, most obvious findings (e.g. much contention in China is neither 'transgressive' nor 'contained', but 'boundary-spanning'(O'Brien 2003)) may be news to scholars weaned on theories and conceptualizations that have seldom engaged Chinese experiences firsthand. This is a time, in other words, when challenging assumptions that stand behind existing theories and concepts is a particularly tasty and easy fruit for Sinologists to pick.

      Research (re)design involves locating whatever theory might be helpful

(some of it beforehand and some of it afterwards) to make intelligible what we find

on the ground, and then immediately using one's fieldwork to suggest inadequacies

in the theories or concepts themselves. This entails theoretical eclecticism and

more reading of the comparative literature, not less. In my own work, I have

successively dipped into theories of institutionalization, role accumulation, popular

resistance, elections, implementation, principals and agents, social movements,

citizenship, and law & society--whatever it took to help understand the significance

of my interviewees' comments, to place my findings in relation to others, and to

generalize (ever so modestly). For me, the challenge of linking high-flown theory to

the most local of detail is what makes interviewing in China so exciting and

rewarding.

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