

地理研究 第58期 民國102年5月  
 Journal of Geographical Research No.58, May 2013  
 DOI: 10.6234/JGR.2013.58.01

## Reflecting interview places: Experience in cross-Strait fieldwork\*

### 訪談地點的方法論意義：以跨岸研究之田野調查為例

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#### 摘要

本文透過回顧個人在海峽兩岸不同地點訪談臺灣科技產業人士的田野經驗，探討訪談地點除了作為研究者與受訪者問答互動的所在之外，其對於研究過程與訪談結果的方法論意義。本文發現，受訪者如何認知訪談地點，以及如何看待自己在受訪所在的主體性，將微妙的影響其報導的態度與情緒。受訪者所在的報導處境通常存在著多重尺度的複雜張力，而這種張力來自於全球在地脈絡中的空間政治角力的作用。受訪者將因為對這些張力的敏感性，而投射不同情緒或態度在對於受訪地點的認知上。

**關鍵詞：**公司訪談、訪談地點、跨岸田野調查、報導處境、多重尺度政治

#### Abstract

This essay concerns dynamics of interview place. It reflects tension of reporting situatedness by drawing methodological dilemmas of talking with Taiwanese electronics experts during multi-sited fieldwork. My experience highlights that how informants conceive of and situate their own position within where they talk to researchers can subtly enable or constrain what they report. The essay concludes with observations that *the where* involving trans-local economic practice is rife with complicated tension arising from spatial and political encounters in *a glocal context*. Such tension might sensitise those border-crossing informants prior to interviewing. Thus, it requires a methodological concern with 'scalar politics *in place*' during multi-sited fieldwork.

**Keywords:** Corporate interview, interview sites, cross-Strait fieldwork, reporting situatedness, multi-scalar politics

\* I wish to acknowledge Dr You-Ren Yang and Dr Yu-Hui Cheng who have come to my assistance in many ways during the study without any hesitation. I also feel a gratitude to two anonymous reviewers for their comments on this methodological reflection.

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## Introduction

A qualitative turn of research instruments has emerged in economic geography since the mid-1980s because corporate agents have dealt with more entangled constraints and choices in the globalising world economy (Clark, 1998; Healey and Rawlinson, 1993; McDowell, 1992; Schoenberger, 1991). Compared to a traditional standardised survey, in-depth interview as one of alternative methodologies is more efficient and intensive to research the ‘indefinable’ information, which either has not been surveyed statistically or could not be made public so as to “avoid the ‘top-down’ setting of research priorities” (Mullings, 1999: 338). More than questions-and-answers, the in-depth interview are semi-structured and flexible which is able to dig into rich narratives displayed unintentionally to grasp the attitudinal and motivational responses of corporate agents via detailed examples in open conversation. Therefore, the interview has become popular in acquiring more entangled and implicit knowledge of corporate strategy.

It has been critically acknowledged that evidence gleaned by such a conversation-based method is full of subjectivity that represents *a partial view generated in situated contexts*. Multiple ‘selves’ of informants and researchers are constructed in the flow of utterances (Collins, 1998). As such, interview is well-described as “a game in which participants often are playing with a different set of rules” (McDowell, 1992: 214). The ‘rules’ for producing knowledges are power-laden in association with identity and positionality. In other words, knowledge ‘is situated in the complex and sometimes contradictory social locations of producers and audiences’ (Women and Geography Study Group, 1997). However, the *actual* arena – *i.e.* interview place – where the ‘contradictory social locations of producers and audiences’ are situated is less concerned in methodological literature. This essay aims to reflect the methodological relevance of interview place to knowledge production by drawing my PhD research on the transplantation of the integrated circuits (IC) industry across the Taiwan Strait (called the Strait for short hereafter) (Chang, 2010).

China has become the major destination for Taiwanese capital over the last two decades (Borru, 1997; Kao, 2001). A lasting ‘go-west fever’ has made it a focus of scholarly investigation regarding *trans*-border production (Hsu, 2006; Steinfeld, 2005; Wang and Lee, 2007; Yang and Coe, 2009; Yang and Hsia, 2007). Scholars from various intellectual backgrounds have widely adopted corporate interview to capture knowledges of strategies and practices pursued by those go-west firms. Successive numerous ‘astronauts’ (Portes, 2002) involving intra-firm mobility are key agents engaging the westward investment and, so, are often identified as potential informants.<sup>1</sup> The study on the cross-Strait production is correspondent to critical changes in corporate interview of economic geography. There is an epistemological tendency towards a *culturally-sensitive* economic geography (Lee and Willis, 1997). On this intellectual basis, employment of corporate interview is to illustrate the truth that informants,

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<sup>1</sup> It is clearly difficult to grasp precise quantitative estimates though.

the corporate agents, tell “about themselves and their industry” (Clark, 1998: 79). By doing so, the contexts/settings within which the agents are embedded could be grasped substantially. It is in a sense that the contexts/settings refer to an actual presence/milieu which is geographically specific and cuts across historical contingencies (see Wang and Lee, 2007 for example; Yang and Hsia, 2007). Furthermore, coupling with this epistemological insight of a cultural turn in economic geography is a globalising tendency of economic practice (Hughes, 1999). This empirical trend is involved with the fact that intensification of functional linkages has been transforming the nature of business systems and its geography (Amin and Cohendet, 1999; Arndt and Kiezkowski, 2001; Dicken et al., 2001). Corporate agents, including enterprises and individuals, now act in “a rapidly changing and increasingly globalised world in which geography and locality matter” (Cormode and Hughes, 1999: 299). It implies that interviewing corporate elites is likely to become more common on a multi-sited level considering a *glocally* embedded nature of the corporate elites.

The fact that economic integration across the Strait coincides with political conflicts is not merely one context-specific agenda. But its tricky conditions of political circumstances also complicate *practice* of research projects. However, if any, little attention has been drawn to issues of *conducting* research spanning the Strait<sup>2</sup>. In that sense, the essay will also seek to respond to that methodological omission by focusing upon interview location which features largely in doing fieldwork across the Strait. A very primary concern with doing research on a cross-Strait level includes the amount of time could be realistically spent and financial constraint. Beyond this, it is found that politics of knowledge construction in my fieldwork was geographically associated. The reflection below points out reporting tensions arising from ‘multi-scales of social relations intersecting in interview sites’ (Elwood and Martin, 2000). By drawing my study, dynamics of interview place will be projected onto a *multi-scale* context with regard to my interviewees’ *glocally* embedded experience. The fieldwork was conducted by interviewing with an elite group of Taiwanese electronics experts (35) in selected cities in Taiwan (Taipei and Hsinchu) and China (Shanghai, Suzhou and Nanjing) during 2004 and 2005. I targeted at corporate staff in both managerial and engineering positions. A caveat is that the reflection is drawn upon the electronics sector – the interview places where I have involved represented distinctive socio-political idiosyncrasies for my informants, and surely, for interview encountering.

In next section, implications of interview place are discussed by retracing reflexive accounts of interviewing experiences. Following this, I will compare two sets of places where my interviews were conducted to reveal different experience in accessing to my ‘field’ on an awkward time. Thirdly, methodological challenges from issues referring to *the where* emerging during the fieldwork are discussed. How location of interview places is related to interviewer-interviewee relations and identity constitution is explored to underline dynamics of reporting situatedness. Finally, the essay concludes

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<sup>2</sup> In Making capitalism in China, Hsing appendixes a very brief account for her fieldwork on a practical level. But there is deficient in in-depth reflection on methodology (Hsing, 1998).

that *the where* involves trans-local practice and is rife with complicated tension arising from spatial and political encounters.

## Placing interviews

Interview place, together with researcher and informant, is inherently integral to an interview. Spatial metaphors of ‘positionality’, ‘situatedness’, ‘location’ and others are widely applied to illustrating the reality that ‘selves’ are constructed and, so, knowledge are produced in the intangible and entangled power relations (Haraway, 1988). However, as Sin interrogates, “*immediacy* of the interview site as a structured and structuring force on the construction of these identities and knowledge” is curiously ignored (Sin, 2003: 306, emphasis added). Often, consideration of interview place is treated as a marginal step in project design. How to choose an appropriate place – conveniently located, quiet without interruption, appropriate for safety precautions, etc. – in which informant might have a cordial conversation with researcher, has been well directed in research guide to project designing. Namely, finding somewhere in which informant may feel comfortable and confidential is a priority in dealing with interview place. The pragmatic consideration to make sure smooth going without interference tends to see interview place as “a stage on which the ‘performativity’ of identity and knowledge construction unfold” (Sin, 2003: 306). Such an instrumental view assumes that social encounters have nothing to do with such *mise-en-scene* but simply occur out there.

However, space is by no mean neutral but rife with values, emotions and politics to which informant and researcher attach reflexively. As a result, an increasing number of feminist scholars, refusing to treat interview place as a value-free container, have critically expounded the relevance of power dynamics to interview place. Certain methodological dilemmas occurring in cross-cultural research were reflected. Unequal (power) relations between the researcher from the Western societies and the Third World informant were discussed in reflexive texts (Gilbert, 1994;Katz, 1994;Mohammad, 2001;Mullings, 1999;Skelton, 2001). The western researchers may be a more privileged position of greater control *vis-à-vis* the informant in terms of wealth, class, education and beyond, so they likely risk “leading the witness and distorting the information obtained” (Schoenberger, 1991: 182). The ethical and political dilemmas in the fieldwork are elusively entangled with the power matrix of social categories in the context of post-/colonialism. The critical methodological literature contributes to an understanding of inter-subjectivity tensions on a worldwide level. However, this reflection tends to arbitrarily fix power dynamics of a particular place in a hierarchical division of the modern world. Namely, the interviewee-interviewer dynamics are primarily registered in a binary world-system.

Latter, some methodological literature moved away from the structural perspective to considering multi-faceted relations between the researched, the researcher and interview site and underlined that an interview place “can be interrogated to illuminate substantive research material about the power relations and social identities of the people participating in these interviews” (Elwood and Martin, 2000:

652). These discussions primarily relate identity politics and positionality to ‘micro-geographies’ of interview sites. Two dimensions have been reflected. Firstly, the self-identity represented *in situ* is spatially constructed. McDowell’s experience in interviewing professional employees of merchant banks might be pertinent for our understanding. That several informants preferred to talk in their own work area might indicate certain peer pressure making them anxious about ‘being seen not being working’. The female informants, compared to their male counterparts, felt more “reluctant to talk about their nonworking lives” (McDowell, 1998: 2140). The case implies that the female workers seemed more preoccupied with a struggle for multiple positionalities when accepting an interview in the workplace. Certain qualities of interview place – subjected to diverse discourses, e.g. the politics of gender in a workplace – have influence upon the way informants identify and posit themselves, determining what sort of role they intend to perform.

Secondly, inter-subjective tensions are invisibly but spontaneously projected by a politically-inscribed site. Mullings, for example, found some difficulties in collecting data from Jamaican data-entry operators in shop floor – the workers were reluctant to talk in fear of reprisals, and were even asked to “go and answer the questions that the lady *outside* wanted to know” (Mullings, 1999: 342, emphasis added). For the informants, to be interviewed was not so much a ‘choice’; let alone they were ‘arranged’ to say something in the workplace under surveillance. An opposite case is Sin’s experience in talking with a male Chinese elder in Britain (Sin, 2003). Selecting a community centre as the interview place was decided by the informant himself. The social interactions there indicate that his self-identity was constructed in *and* by this community centre. More specifically, the social contexts of the interview location serving to underline his stature among the community might be an intention to make himself perceived as a person of authority. In a word, the reflections evidence that the interview place entangled with existing social relations and forces could abridge the informants’ voice or “situate them in positions of authority” (Sin, 2003: 309). That is to say, contextual dynamics of interview place are associated with informant’s *power of speaking*.

Indeed, informant and researcher are sensitive to emotional, social and political milieus of a particular site where an interview is held. Recognition that interview place is represented as an arena of power and negotiation in which informants and researchers are involved, the following is moving onto interrogating “how interview participants relate to the space of the interview” (Elwood and Martin, 2000: 652). I should first illustrate the experience in the fieldwork. The following seeks to explore how interview place to constitute, and be constituted by, ‘multiple scales of social relations’. I argue that particular situatedness or reporting is produced by the dynamics of interviewee-interviewer relations and informants’ perception of a certain place may differentiate their attitudes towards researchers.

## The experience: A suspicious outsider?

As has been said, “[f]ieldwork is permeated with the conflict between what is theoretically desirable on the one hand and what is practically possible on the other” and “[i]n the conflict between the desirable and the possible, *the possible always wins*” (Buchanan, Boddy and McCalman, 1988: 54, emphasis added). The business of actually initiating my interviews was a frustrating experience. What one manager said was both explicit and pertinent:

[We are all] afraid to talk. All are proceeding [in the Mainland] on tiptoe; [but] just cannot [talk].

This was due to a lasting political hostility across the Strait. An investment embargo had been imposed on account of the supposition that locating IC manufacturing there might produce technology spillovers which would enable China to overcome its technological-lag with respect to Taiwan. In reality, however, making manufacturing investments in Mainland China was always an open secret even though it has long been forbidden legislatively by the Taiwan Government. At an early stage of the research, therefore, there was often no reply after mailing named individuals. I was also directly rejected, mainly by secretaries, when making a direct enquiry to relevant companies on the list.

Certainly, the accessibility is involved with the methodological nuance of *reflexive ontology* demonstrating that free-floating access is hardly a case in concrete studies. Having received a series of rejections, I decided that I would need to make the reason for the request of an interview less specific. The wording of the objective was slightly altered: “I’d like to ask you some questions about corporate strategies and disposition for *outward* investment” – in place of *westward* investment. Changing the tone appeared a bit deceptive but was necessary in order to pass through several gatekeepers. Drawing on personal networks (by means of calling or mailing friends and relatives to ask if they knew any potential informants) bore an immediate result by comparison (cf. McDowell, 1998). It seemed to me that seeking out a potential informant directly was less easy than getting through by *guanxi* (i.e. interrelationships) at least in the first round of fieldwork in Taiwan.

The initial cases in which I was refused were conveyed with a gentle wording under thin excuses – such as a coincidence of a manager’s tight schedule, an impression of intrusion or corporate confidentiality. The situation *worsened* later. Many corporations I contacted made no excuses but simply gave a flat denial. This was particularly problematic during an episode of legal action in February of 2005. United Microelectronics Corp. (UMC, the second biggest made-to-order chipmaker worldwide) was raided by the public prosecutor in Taiwan. It was accused of having illegal links to another start-up foundry, He Jian Technology Co. (HJTC), in Suzhou. For the government, the significance of this connection was undoubtedly that of a flight of technology to China by cultivating a Chinese foundry without secured permission. At the same time more than 20 employees of HJTC (who were UMC’s ex-employees) were detained for further illegal investigation when they returned to Taiwan for home leave. This event, albeit surprising, threw the whole industrial circle *and* me into a panic and discloses the true reason why the interviewing access was so problematic. For the managers/engineers, it would

doubtless be running the risk of talking to someone unknown who might share information to create trouble or even ruin them (cf. Sabot 1999, Mullings 1999, McDowell 1998).

I do not mean to define the incident as a watershed, differentiating a degree of difficulty concerning corporate responses found in Taiwan, but simply to point out the tip of an iceberg that indicates a suspicion of research enquiry in the industry. The problem of permission and access is pertinent in explaining the ‘sticky’ moments at which objects, events and considerations are contextualised. Take an example from that sensitive time. According to regulation, once an investment project has applied for a grant, the result of the official decision should be given in three months. A domestic chipmaker proposed to apply for permission to open a wafer-fabricating plant in China in August of 2004, but the project was asked not to make an application until January of 2005 (some six months later). One informant in charge of opening a branch plant complained about the administrative delays on qualification. The words that an official of Taiwan’s Investment Commission suggested he quoted make sense: “you [would be better to] come [to apply for a grant] after an election”. The reason is that, once the outcome was declared in December of 2004 when the presidential campaign was in full swing, the public voice must make a noise no matter whether this project would be approved or not.

So far, I have made a brief explanation of the corporate interviews in Taiwan by drawing upon the informants’ response after receiving an academic enquiry. I now turn to the interviews in China. The distinctive encounters there were set off by the particularities of the reporting situation. I contacted potential informants (Taiwanese managers and engineers) in China via three interviewed informants. As Lee states, “[a]ccess to a research setting is never a given” (Lee, 1995: 16). Only three interviews were arranged before my setting out. I was obliged to reconcile myself to the possibility of failure in data collection but took the decision to take the plunge. Surprisingly, the first fieldtrip to China was of some help, despite starting with a small number of interviews. I seemed to have more positive replies when making a call to ask if there would be any possibility of conducting an academic interview *during* the sensitive period I was there. The result is an additional four informants were recruited through a snowball method in the locality. At one time in Suzhou one interviewee introduced me to his colleague by making a joke that “I’m sure she is okay; she won’t spy on us”.

Considering the interview processes, the Taiwanese staff in China were friendly towards me in general, which was in sharp contrast to the experience in Taiwan. Those who were assigned to China appeared more relaxed, although some of them might have felt ill at ease at the outset. As they made sure that my purpose in coming would not be threatening and perilous to them, a rapport was developed to a degree. They talked about the organisational structure, the (outline of the) strategies for marketing and manpower, and their personal experiences in a light-hearted manner. Certainly, their narrative accounts were prone to go adrift and strayed around the latest products, unintelligible engineering, anecdotes, and living experiences in Chinese cities or encountering verbose bureaucracy. Many of them even voluntarily made an apologetic statement concerning the *meanings* of companies’ outward expansion (to China), and made sarcastic remarks on the policy contractions of ‘go-west’ affairs (in

Taiwan) and the generous tariffs (in China). The same issues would be evaded by their Taiwanese colleagues who were circumspect and tended to dodge my queries about the business in the Mainland.

### Questioning the deeper structures

The experience of recruitment might be the result of coincidence or luck, or just that business people are reluctant to answer student queries. Some methodological texts argue that researcher might encounter ‘loss of control’ when doing research on firm behaviours “since the likely respondents are people accustomed to being in control and exerting authority over others” (Schoenberger, 1991: 182). However, I agree that ‘the higher, the better’ could be a methodological fallacy in the light of interviewing elites (Cormode and Hughes, 1999; Rice, 2010; Smith, 2006)

On the one hand, it is a rough and problematic division of informants into dualistic categories. On the other hand, it is inadequate logic to homogenise the elites and the modalities of power available to them (Allen, 2003; Smith, 2006). The managers and engineers I met did not exactly intend to exert their authority of a peculiar profession upon our relationship when talking. Reflected by methodological rationality, the term ‘elites’ is an arbitrary one “without any substantive conceptual depth” (Woods, 1998: 2101; cited in Smith, 2006: 646). Therefore, we should further ask the possible reason that led the professional informants to pose obstacles by their ‘upper hands’ to weed out/turn down interview requests.

I found that my challenge of obtaining corporate interviews was very likely a fear of political reprisal or rejection that resulted in ambiguity, obfuscation and cryptic comments. It is a matter of timing when seeking access in precarious circumstances. Some turbulent situation(s) – known or unknown – ‘out there’ did unbalance the state of equilibrium between researcher and informant and, so, affected the research proceeding ‘in’ the field. In my case, the timing is concerned with a sensitivity to ‘the politics of time as a research moment’ (Ward and Jones, 1999), which might in turn work upon the informants’ negative sentiments, such as anxiety, fear, panic or hostility (cf. Neal and McLaughlin, 2009). The access obstacle seemed in a *defensive* sense against a suspicious stranger whether they purposely manipulated their prominent position or not. In other words, a series of rejections might be associated with the political effects of time. Accessibility and positionality susceptible to moments of political sensitivity highlight the fact that the means of accessing the field were not intentional but were compelled by *the* circumstances at the time (Desmond, 2004; Reid-Henry, 2003; Visser, 2000). It is certainly the case in doing cross-Strait study on economic affairs.

If we see “the time-specific politics of (and on) the research moment as a situated practice” (Ward and Jones, 1999: 309), and then we should turn to further questions with special regard to the interviews conducted in the Mainland: why was the anxiety about the interview requested by me – who was someone unfamiliar – not intensified during that awkward time? Does it imply there was some other variable influence upon the constituting of relationships between those expatriate informants and me



and the reporting proceeding? Having been said, it would be dangerous to dismiss “the *deeper structures* that generate events and discourses” (McDowell, 1992: 213, emphasis added). One thing critical here is to ponder whether the acquisition of messy evidence is open to the charge of producing “debilitating effects of fragmented identities and separate loyalties” (Clark, 1998: 83).

## Interpretations: Identities, locations and reporting situatedness

[T]he reasons for why a community and/or situation which ... is not open to you may reveal vital clues to its character [of the research objectives].

(Cook, 1997: 132)

Considering the two sets of interview sites, the reporting was given in a distinct manner but its qualities were not, generally, mutually exclusive. I do not espouse the either/or stances of interviewees’ statements in a neutral sense of *data accuracy*, but I tried to figure out why the field location made “a story [that] was told ‘that’ way” (Riessman, 1993: 2). It is proper (and easier) to think of the question by drawing upon the assigned cadres since they were directly involved with the investment in China. Many of the posted managers and engineers have been keen to work abroad (to the Mainland *they meant*). Such resident cadres had a clear stance: “if you [like to] keep doing semiconductor things, then just stay in the Mainland”, or “your view would be widened, [despite you have] no idea of ups or downs”. Their *new* workplace – *i.e.* the locus of interview – is reflected by those informants’ individual/social identities<sup>3</sup>, and which might constitute interviewer-interviewee dynamics in two dimensions.

The first is identity formation. That is to say, the dialectical interactions between those expatriate informants and me were spatially situated. It is found that the dynamic intersection of diverse social identities positively constituted particular social relations *at that locale*. I should briefly illustrate issues of personality in a general term. That a female researcher paid her visit to a sectoral realm of masculinity in order to inquire into some industrial matters represents a sort of unusual situation – it is surely distinguish from sorts of male-dominant business conferences or engineering meeting. As an interviewer, dressing in smart and sensible attire might be helpful for me to create a good impression on the informants. Of course, I had to ask succinct questions to demonstrate my professionalism and knowledge of what I was talking about. Gender issues, here, are also worthy a discussion. One young male geographer, who was conducting similar fieldwork in Shanghai and smaller cities in the vicinity, told me that ‘smoking’ was his vehicle for digging out stories behind the scenes since “a smoky room is particularly a space [in which] we fellows talk”. On some occasions, this did seem like a tactic that would work. But I did not perceive this to be a particularly strong or failsafe strategy – not all the bosses

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<sup>3</sup> Political identities appear subtle and somehow sensitive for those who did business in China owing to the tricky cross-Strait politics (Wu, 2005). In that sense, I did not keenly touch upon informants’ personal inclination and their attitudes towards ‘blue-green’ political complex while interviewing. Therefore, this essay avoids dealing with the aspect of political identity for fear of inappropriate or false inference.

had the time to befriend him in the ‘smoke’ after all. My female status could be somehow helpful, since I was seen as being “less threatening, more intriguing, or presumed to be a better audience for the recounting of exploits” (Schoenberger, 1992: 217). Drawing upon my experience, I agree that ‘acting dumb’ (O’Connell Davidson and Layder, 1994: 146; cited in Valentine, 1997: 121) is a smart tactic to encourage the senior, male respondents to tell more details and give a clearer explanation. This tactic was also useful – and necessary – when their reports were totally beyond my comprehension.

It is intriguingly to find in many cases that my positionality as a doctoral student educated in U.K. seemed quite conducive to win the informants’ confidence. Doing doctoral study seemed to them a signifier of an academic position; that is, I was as professional as they were despite in various spheres. Besides, many of the expatriate informants, having received training or studied in U.S., were apparently interested in comparing learning and living experience between Britain and America. Being educated overseas served as some kind of ‘cultural capital’, indicating that my social class compared favourably with theirs. Such talking-points lubricated the conversations and made for developing a rapport to a degree during interviewing. In other words, that cultural capital helping to connect social linkages between the informants and me is certainly *a spatial sense of displacement* regarding our common experience of staying abroad.

What was much more constructive than giving off the appearance of an academic could be my ‘Taiwanese accent’. Indeed, the nuance of Chinese spoken, which is quite different from the way local people speak, shared by us helpfully made me not so much as an alleged stranger to them. To a degree, I was just like a visitor (or even some ordinary friend in a couple of cases) all the way from their home town to *chat with* them. Several interviewees warmly shared me their consideration to personal career and life in Shanghai or their expatriate experience around different cities in China. One interview was even conducted over 2.5 hours – the informant (in a managerial position) seemed pleased to stay gossiping with me instead of dispatching the interview in a hurry. As Sin argues, “[at] different times and places, and with different people, an individual may emphasize certain positionalities and identities and not others” (Sin, 2003: 308). There was sort of fellowship and familiarity produced subtly in the interview sites *out of* Taiwan, which made the ‘corporate’ interviews not so stern and, at the same time, contributed to encouraging more reporting.

The second dimension is more intangible and intricate. It refers to the expatriate informants’ self-identity of *career*. The reasons why those informants accept the posted assignment is differentiated. Promotion and vision are two chief considerations, shown as two pieces of report below:

One senior manager in Shanghai: “Certainly, I was a mere cipher or a director of ordinary in Taiwan. I might have little opportunity to come to the front among so many talents. [The reason] I came here was not less for broadening my own view than for making careers... That was a chance [for me]. I had only 50 staff when I first came here; now is 140.”

A customer engineer in Suzhou: “A promotion ladder in Taiwan becomes rare, because there is no more

fab<sup>4</sup> building in Taiwan. Each foothold has been taken. The chance [of promotion] becomes less.”

However, no matter if they aimed at ‘getting on’ or widening their scope, a possible risk to their career had been stressed before moving: “my boss told me, ‘never calculate upon a withdrawal; [if you fail] your place won’t be [reserved] here’, or “you have no place once you return [to Taiwan]”. It is certainly that those transferees as active doers in a macro-sense of industrial relocation were not pressed to leave or represented determined characters somehow. That is, many of them were voluntaries.

In spite of their own intention, the career they engaged is referred to the cross-Strait production which was not encouraged politically, and even prohibited legally, in the home country. As such, geographical location mattered because it manifests some tactic of ‘displacement’ by which a certain group of professional elites have ‘expatriated’ themselves to an alternative position out of home country’s domain (of geography and governance). One Taiwanese CEO (having run a start-up in Suzhou financed by a Taiwanese firm) said bluntly that

I don’t care [about investment limitations]. I’m of American nationality. I won’t be fined 5 million [NT] dollars [by the Taiwanese government] like Richard Chang.<sup>5</sup>

The distance was originally as a result of capital flight, but then became a measure for business purposes. On the one hand, it is meant that being a foreign national was somehow instrumental in doing cross-Strait investment without official permission. On the other hand, I found a *status of distance* to be a dynamic issue in methodological terms. Distance here gives an artificial impression: *being* far from the territory of the domestic regulation effectively allowed the expatriate informants a ‘buffer space’ when talking about something sensitive. Deliberately or not, they themselves owned a relatively sheltered and secure status from which to represent their own opinions and knowledges. For those informants were geographically divorced and detached from the (domestic) debates, they were able to pass me information of strategic trade-offs, ‘buzzes’ and their own interpretations of business perspectives from technological, managerial and locational points of view, in often subtle ways.

Here, I should put two points to end this reflection. Firstly, compared to their colleagues in Taiwan, the expatriate informants might feel easier and more comfortable to report outright since the location of far-away-from-home was considered as a safe space of speaking. It indicates that the perception of a peculiar place can either enable or constrict interview reporting. Certainly, their perception might be associated with a contingent timing. The second point refers to the dilemma I met: considering the built-up of interviewee-interviewer dynamics in the peculiar location, I wondered if these resident staff

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<sup>4</sup> The word ‘fab’ is short for wafer-fabricating plant.

<sup>5</sup> Chang was the founder and chair of Semiconductor Manufacturing International (SMIC). He, as a Taiwanese citizen, was accused of opening chipmaking facilities in the Mainland that broke bans intending to foster China’s IC industry. The government penalised him with a NT\$5 million fine and requested him to repay the investment within six months (EE Times March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2005). Stalemate resulted. Chang “[denied] any wrong doing” (Business Week June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2004) but made a declaration of alienage in August 2005, while the government turned down his petition and imposed a further two penalties on his new investing projects in Tianjin (in 2003) and Beijing (in 2004) (EE Times March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2005).

received my request for an interview in expectation of disseminating new smart devices or expressing their appeal (to policy-makers or the public) by having their business affairs prioritised through me who would make their narratives public, or if they simply were enthusiastic to help. To cite what Rose has exclaimed, “I don’t think I can or should be sure” (Rose, 1997: 318).

## Concluding remarks

This essay has drawn my fieldwork of the cross-Strait study upon the methodological implications of interview location. I agree with the previous reflexive texts rejecting to see interview place as a static physical containment where a talk occurs. The nature of particular sites chosen as interview places is not pre-existing considering “spatialities intrinsic to actors’ actions that are themselves a mirror and reflection of the information, the prejudices, and foibles and the traits of the agents that perform them” (Taylor, Ekinsmyth and Leonard, 1997: 60). I intend to conclude the methodological reflection with two points. Firstly, this essay considered displacement of reporting situatedness. It is found in my fieldwork that the qualitative nuances of reporting are discerned by the informants’ perception of the interview sites. Those sites located in two sides of the Strait were apparently attached by complicated tension arising from spatial and political encounters cutting *across multiple scales* (e.g. implicit, fluid corporate networks and definitive national domains). For my experience, the reporting processes were *constrained/enabled* by a time–space contingency (a sense of politics in my case), so that the reporting results could be referred to methodological consequences of structured contexts. In what way and to what intent that the informants articulated corporate information, creative insights and/or arbitrary attitudes might be represented strategically or emotionally in response to elusive *milieu* during interviewing. This is because, to cite Schoeberger’s words, “the knowledge generated is unavoidably filtered through the processes by which people make sense of their experiences” (Schoenberger, 1991: 183).

Secondly, I recognise the argument to probe subtle nuances of ‘micro-geographies of spatial relations and meanings’ (Elwood and Martin, 2000). But I moved onto reflecting the practices in doing research of the cross-border production and explored matters of ‘trans-local geographies’. With ‘functional integration of multiple sites into larger fields’ (Kelly and Olds, 2007), multisite study becomes more popular (Cormode and Hughes, 1999; c.f. Marcus, 1995; Willis and Yeoh, 2002). However, “the [multi-site] fields are not some mere collection of local units” (Hannerz, 2003: 206). It can be methodologically insufficient if attention is simply paid to territorial distinctions between individual sites in understanding *translocality* of economic life. That is, those sites that involve translocal practice are rife with spatial negotiation between implicit, fluid trans-local networks and definitive national domains. Such tension might sensitise those border-crossing informants prior to interviewing. In this sense, there should be a methodological concern with ‘scalar politics *in place*’ during fieldwork which importantly responds to what Amin stresses ‘scalar politics *of place*’ (Amin, 2002). To sum up, being

sensitively aware of the quality of interview places – at *micro*, *macro* or *multiple* scales – and its relevance to interviewee-interviewer dynamics is valuable for a geographical researcher to grasp social relations of situated knowledge and knowledge production considering that interview data is socio-spatial construction.

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投稿日期：101 年 9 月 21 日

修正日期：101 年 11 月 13 日

接受日期：101 年 12 月 13 日