Chapter 6

‘AN OPEN LHASA WELCOMES YOU’:
DISCIPLINING THE RESEARCHER IN TIBET

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‘An open Lhasa welcomes you.’
‘An open Tibet celebrates the 50th anniversary of the peaceful liberation of Tibet’
‘An open Tibet welcomes you.’ – Street banners, Lhasa, summer 2001

Since the implementation of national economic reforms, thousands of Han Chinese farmers have migrated to Lhasa, capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), to rent land from peri-urban Tibetan villagers for greenhouse vegetable cultivation, an activity from which they earn considerable profit. In September 2000, I arrived in Lhasa planning to study ethnographically the political ecology of greenhouse vegetable farming in one village. Political restrictions made this impossible, forcing a change in research design. Nevertheless, through ten months of fieldwork, I was able to analyse the political economy and cultural politics of greenhouse vegetable farming and land rentals, and to use the case as a lens onto broader questions about landscape, development, and state incorporation. This was made possible in part by two factors.

First, I gradually realized that my fieldwork difficulties were produced by the same strategies of state control that shaped the lives of the people with whom I was working. Thinking reflexively about my internalization of certain common idioms of state discipline, for example, helped me to understand why local Tibetan farmers and Han migrants made some of the decisions that they did. Second, Tibetans with whom I worked incorporated me into their everyday ‘repertoires of resistance’ by shaping the way my identity was read in different situations. In particular, they creatively made use of the fact that I am a Chinese-American
who speaks Tibetan. This in turn gave me insights that I otherwise might not have had. In this essay, I use my fieldwork experience to illustrate how political constraints on access to data can significantly re-shape field research, but also how those same constraints can lead to unexpected insights. I also show how, as fieldworkers, we are not always in control of how people interpret our identities.

THE POLITICS OF FEAR

The well-documented political repression in the TAR\(^1\) is the product of the Chinese state’s inability to naturalize completely a particular narrative of Tibetan history. The active work needed to produce and maintain the narratives on which state legitimacy is based takes the form of an ongoing ‘struggle against splittism.’ The resulting politics of fear is not unlike the situation that Mayfair Yang (1994: 20–21) described concerning her fieldwork in Beijing in the early 1980s:

> In the first half of the 1980s, the culture of fear was still a powerful force in constraining actions and speech in everyday life... even the absence of direct threats to one’s personal security did not signal a dramatic change in the habits of wariness and self-protection.

Visible forms of surveillance help maintain this politics of fear. In Lhasa, I learned about the fact of surveillance before my field research, while I was a language student at Tibet University. Like other schools in China, Tibet University strictly segregates foreign students from the rest of the student body. Unlike many other schools, however, Tibet University still requires anyone who enters the foreign students’ dormitory to provide extensive information, including whom they visit, age, name, and identification number. More importantly, this careful record of visitors is collected and reviewed by the school’s foreign affairs office. This system clearly gave foreign students the message not only that tabs were being kept on us, but also that we could easily bring trouble to local Tibetans.

This politics of fear means not only that access to interviews and data is far from ideal, but also that all interactions and relationships are shaped to some extent by wariness of political trouble. Thus, fieldwork constraints can be more than just headaches to work around; they can be constitutive of the final research product. In my fieldwork, this worked through my own inculcation into the politics of fear, and its corollary, the fear of politics. As I have discussed in detail elsewhere (Yeh 2003), the politics of fear produces subjects who internalize surveillance, and this self-surveillance is directed at anything which might be construed by
state agents as ‘political.’ However, the boundary between the political and the non-political is ambiguous and unstable, a condition which further encourages self-policing. For example, many of my Tibetan friends in Lhasa were convinced that their phones were tapped, and thus were quite careful about monitoring what they said on the phone.

To the extent that I became an active participant in this politics of fear, I contributed to the production of state power (Yang 1994: 21). I unconsciously adopted specifically Tibetan idioms of fear, in particular the frequently expressed notion that ‘what we know in our minds/heads (sems), we don’t need to say with our mouths.’ I did not realize the extent to which I had begun to internalize these disciplinary techniques until an American friend visited Lhasa and invited me to dinner with some other tourists. At a Sichuanese restaurant, they joked boisterously about the fact that the Dalai Lama was ‘the name that can’t be said,’ and loudly bemoaned human rights violations in Tibet. I found myself becoming increasingly nervous and agitated. I looked around the restaurant, wondering if any of the other patrons were state security agents. Could anyone else understand what the tourists were saying (in English)? Why couldn’t they keep their mouths shut? Finally I told them in a low, urgent tone, ‘There are some things that you know that don’t need to be said!’ In other words, I found myself unconsciously adopting local forms of self-surveillance. Reflecting on this later gave me greater context to help interpret various comments and behavior that I observed.

RESEARCH ACCESS AND THE RE-SHAPING OF FIELDWORK

How, then, did this politics of fear shape my research access and methodology? As in other parts of China, official research requires a sponsoring work unit to issue a letter of invitation, but in the TAR the unit must also obtain a Tibet entry permit. During a year of language study in Lhasa two years prior to dissertation research, I tried to cultivate relationships with every work unit that might possibly be able to issue an invitation. By the end of the year, one had extended an oral invitation to me. However, not long before I was to leave for Tibet, I received a terse fax stating that the letter of invitation would not be issued after all; no further explanation was offered. The circumstances of the withdrawal were unusual, but not that surprising considering that, to my knowledge, up to that point no US-based graduate student had received official permission for village field research in the TAR. Fortunately, when I scrambled to contact everyone I knew in Lhasa after the invitation fell through, a relatively high-level employee
at another unit, whom I had met at a conference, was able to issue an invitation and an entry permit. Relieved, I asked no questions and arrived in Lhasa hoping that this was, in fact, all I needed for my dissertation fieldwork there.

Things did not turn out to be so simple. My sponsor was understandably nervous. He called me into the office three times in the first week after my arrival, each time to give a lengthy warning that I must never say or write anything critical of the Chinese government or its policy. He told me in no uncertain terms that I was not to become involved in ‘politics’ in any way. He also suggested that I might not need to conduct interviews at all. Perhaps I could just sit in his office and read locally published research journals. Furthermore, official permission to live in a village was definitely out of the question, as it would have required additional permission from other administrative units. It became clear (though he never said this explicitly) that my sponsor was unwilling to request this permission because it would have attracted more attention to his invitation and my presence. When I maintained that I really would need to talk to people, even if I did not stay overnight in a village, he told me that I should have a peitong – a minder from the work unit who would assist me but also report on my actions. I replied that this would be fine with me, and that we should negotiate the pay and time commitment of the peitong. However, my sponsor then dropped the issue without ever raising it again.

At first I thought this was an advantage: without an official worker watching me at all times, I would be free to talk about whatever I wanted. Soon, however, I realized that this was not the case. Not only did I find myself monitoring myself at all times, perhaps more effectively than a peitong could have done, but I also found it difficult to find an appropriate research site. Spending every day in, and interviewing all of the households of, one village would inevitably attract a great deal of attention. Village leaders would therefore want assurance that there would be no political trouble from such concentrated attention. Their fear of being held responsible for not preventing any political trouble leads officials to want multiple forms of documentation, not because it is required legally, but rather to serve as insurance against unforeseen consequences. In fact, there seemed to be no uniform regulations or understanding of what exactly would constitute proper official documentation for a systematic village study. However, having a letter of introduction with an official red seal stating that I would conduct a village study surely would have helped put village leaders at ease.

Because a clear letter about a village study was not forthcoming from my sponsor (more on this later) my fieldwork took on a very different form than I had originally intended. Instead of an intensive study of vegetable farming in
one village, I conducted interviews extensively, in each of the more than twenty peri-urban villages and state farms around Lhasa where land rentals were taking place. In contrast to intensive daily interviews in one village, visiting households in different villages on different days seemed much less troubling to everyone. Many village leaders agreed to be interviewed once or twice. Furthermore, I was able to make repeat visits to certain villages over a period of months.

Like other researchers, I found that spending a relatively long period and making repeated trips to China worked to my advantage. Toward the end of my first six-month trip, I met by chance a high school teacher from one of the peri-urban villages in which I was most interested. Through her introduction to her family and friends, I was able to conduct a mini-ethnographic study of that village on a later trip. Finally, another very important way in which these constraints shaped my fieldwork was in expanding the scope of my study. In particular, I learned about urbanization partly because it was much easier for me to participate, observe, and conduct interviews in urban Lhasa than in villages. Later, I saw that both urbanization and greenhouse farming contributed to a larger argument about development and landscape transformation.

Having discussed the ways in which restricted access changed my research methods, I want to return to the question of why my sponsoring unit acted as it did. At first, I did not give the invitation letter I received much thought. Only later did I learn that my sponsor had secured the invitation through a fast-track process, often used for donors and consultants, which bypassed the main regional foreign affairs office. The fact that this is possible is an ongoing irritation to the main foreign affairs office, which would prefer a complete monopoly on the right to issue entry permits. My sponsor knew that this route was the easiest (and at the time, possibly only) way for me to obtain the invitation and entry permit, but also that it would make things more awkward for him should any trouble arise.

Once I was in Tibet, he adopted a 'one eye open-one eye shut' way of dealing with my presence. He warned me repeatedly to stay away from politics (and by doing so, partially fulfilled his responsibility) and frequently said, 'well, just stay out of trouble,' and 'don't draw attention to yourself.' My burden therefore was not only to avoid trouble for my interviewees, but also to avoid implicating my sponsor in anything that the Public Security Bureau or other government units might not like. The largest difference between my research difficulties in Tibet and the experience of many foreign researchers in China was thus that many of the access restrictions placed on me were never clearly spelled out. I had no peitong, and yet the palpable tension and my internalization of fear meant that I was not free from surveillance: I found myself constantly under self-surveillance.
While my access in villages was precarious, my access to higher-level government officials was virtually nonexistent. My sponsor informed me right away that statistics, policy information, and any interactions with government officials were completely out of the question. I tried to maneuver around this through unofficial relationships, but this was one arena where no one dared to take the risk. For instance, the parents of a Tibetan friend now living in the US were mid-ranking government officials with many personal friends who worked on land policies directly relevant to my research. However, though they were very welcoming and helpful to me in other ways, they told me there was absolutely no way they could introduce me to these friends, even informally, unless I had very explicit letters of introduction. My friend’s mother explained, ‘You know how it is in Lhasa. If you don’t have the right papers, if I take you to go to talk to someone – they will immediately have to report to their superiors about everything you asked, and why you asked it.’

An incident later on suggested that this was indeed the case. A young woman who was a foreign affairs officer at another administrative unit befriended me and offered to help me gather some data. She examined my invitation letter and permit, and in her inexperience, believed that I was all set. She took me straight to a relevant government office. Rather than being allowed to conduct an interview, however, she and I were both questioned extensively about who I was, what I was doing, and who had invited me to Tibet. Fortunately, the fact that her father and sister were both officials in a closely-related government unit prevented them from further pursuing the matter.

RESPONSIBILITY, IDENTITY, AND REPERTOIRES OF RESISTANCE

At the same time that my fieldwork was heavily shaped by political restrictions, it was also shaped by my incorporation into local repertoires of resistance – forms of everyday resistance that are ‘simultaneously conscious of and constrained by the social and political limits of collective and individual action’ (Peluso 1992: 13) – of the Tibetans I worked with. Their attempts to guide me into their everyday tactics of maneuvering around official restrictions allowed me to achieve certain understandings that might not otherwise have been possible. This started with my sponsor, who counted on me to ‘avoid drawing attention to yourself’ by virtue of my ability to blend in. When I lived in Lhasa, I was very frequently mistaken by Tibetans and Han alike to be Tibetan. Less often, I was assumed to be a Han PRC national. Occasionally when I informed local residents that I was not Tibetan, they refused to believe me.
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This presented interesting opportunities and dilemmas, and greatly complicated my thinking about my own fieldwork. Unlike some other researchers in Lhasa (e.g. Adams 1996), for example, I never felt particularly worried about going to Tibetan friends’ homes. Many Tibetans who invited me over for meals explicitly said things like, ‘You should come over to our house to eat whenever you want, poor thing, so far from home. Come over, any time! It’s no problem at all. After all you don’t have blonde hair, blue eyes. You look just like one of us. No one would ever know the difference.’ In fact, my Lhasa friends were sometimes willing to take much greater risks than I thought were wise. Several Tibetans offered to let me live in their homes, because ‘nobody will know the difference.’ ‘Don’t worry,’ they said, when I reminded them that this was not permitted, ‘we’ll just tell them you’re a relative.’ When I complained of my research troubles, I was almost always told, ‘just pretend to be Tibetan (or Chinese); no one will know the difference!’ My sponsor took the same approach. When I asked him to write a letter of introduction for me to give to village leaders, he did in fact produce one, rather than saying no directly. However, it was somewhat vague about my research (and said nothing about an in-depth village study). More importantly, his letter used only my Chinese name. It did not state that I was from the United States.

In addition to the many ‘Why don’t you just pretend?’ suggestions I received, over the course of fieldwork, five different Tibetan men offered to make a fake Chinese identification card (shenfenzheng) for me, and a handful of Tibetan women offered to lend me their cards. What struck me was the way in which these Tibetans — some of whom I barely knew — took pleasure, indeed downright glee, in thinking about how to help me get around my access constraints. It seemed that they really relished the possibility that I would ‘get around the rules’ — but not because they had personally invested in my success or even cared particularly for my research or for me as an individual. The frequency and motivation with which Tibetans offered to make a shenfenzheng for me upon any mention of my problems as a foreigner suggested to me that this sort of identity deception is part of a repertoire of resistance to state disciplinary strategies. In de Certeau’s (1984: 37) terms, finding ways to get around such obstacles is a tactic, ‘a calculated action … [that] takes advantage of “opportunities” and depends on them … an art of the weak.’

Although I declined these offers, I was unable to escape the question of how my identity would be read and interpreted. When I began to carry out village interviews, the fact that I had no clear, official letter of introduction, no peitong, and no other village contacts made me nervous about how to proceed. I hired several urban Tibetan friends as assistants. They all agreed, but on the condition
that they would make the introductions in the interviews. One friend with whom I conducted a few preliminary interviews introduced me to a village acquaintance as a Chinese college student who was writing a book. Another Tibetan friend, about my age, insisted on presenting us as two (Tibetan) college students from Tibet University. A third always referred to me as ‘a student from Beijing.’ In all cases it was very clear that I was a student doing research. What varied was the presentation of my ethnicity and assumptions about my citizenship.

I felt quite strongly that the correct and ethical thing to do was to present myself very clearly not only as a student, but as an American, despite what my sponsor chose to write in his letter. However, this view was quickly challenged by a middle-aged Tibetan cadre who agreed to help me. Cosmopolitan, well-educated, and traveled, he understood my research and seemed genuinely enthusiastic about my research questions. He promised to help by introducing me to a retired official in a nearby township, an old high school friend of his. This official, he said, would be able to provide me with valuable information about one aspect of my project.

One evening, we took a taxi and then walked the rest of the way to his high school friend’s home. In the taxi, he examined my sponsor’s letter of introduction, and was satisfied to see that it had only my Chinese name on it. ‘It’s good that it doesn’t say anything about the US,’ he said. ‘That would only cause trouble.’ When we arrived, he introduced me to his friend. I was flabbergasted to hear him introduce me as a distant relative of his from a Tibetan area of Sichuan province. He explained to his high school buddy that I had gone to school in eastern China from a young age, but nevertheless spoke some Lhasa-dialect Tibetan, and was now here doing research in the TAR. He added that I had both a Chinese name (as indicated on my letter of introduction) and a Tibetan name. He then asked his buddy to introduce me to other township officials, and to help me with my work. I became very nervous and uncomfortable and, after we left, told my cadre friend in no uncertain terms that I would not dissemble about who I was and that I thought that his introduction had definitely not been a good idea.

He, in turn, was completely exasperated, even angry, with me. Back in his house, he explained his interpretation of the situation to me: ‘Look! First of all, if you tell them you are from America no one is going to tell you anything real. You won’t be able to learn anything at all. But if you just tell them that [my sponsoring unit] sent you and don’t tell them anything else, then they are not responsible. If someone asks them, then they can honestly say they have no idea who you are, and that all they know is you are from [the work unit]. It’s better for everyone that way, don’t you see? It’s better for them, and it’s better for you. They don’t want to know.’ To him, the ethical course of action was to give the
people with whom I spoke a way out. They did not want to be responsible for the knowledge of who I was, and if I forced them to be, they would either have to refuse to talk to me altogether, or they would have to bear responsibility that they did not want.

The pressure of ‘responsibility’ is a disciplinary technique of the state. As I realized this, I began to believe that giving my interviewees room to maneuver by pleading ignorance was a more, rather than less, ethical choice. The other alternative seemed to be completely withdrawing from the research altogether. Instead, I gradually settled on a framework to help me resolve the question of identity that arose in each interview. I decided that any time I conducted interviews with Tibetan assistants, I would let them decide how they would introduce me, and abide by their introductions (as long as they were clear about my status as a student doing research, which they always were). When I conducted interviews on my own (as became increasingly common as time went on), or when I intended to do a series of follow-up interviews, I informed my interlocutors straight away that I was from the US.

Two interesting observations came of this: who decided to introduce me how, and the way my assumed identity affected my interviews. First, I found that almost uniformly, the Tibetans who assisted me preferred to dissemble about my citizenship. Only two of them initially introduced me as American. Both were relatively well-educated cadres who were more confident in their social position than most of my other helpers. After a few interviews, however, they too changed their ways of introducing me. One was a local Tibetan researcher whom I met through a foreign scholar. Accustomed to working with the other foreign scholar, the Tibetan researcher began our first few interviews together quite formally, introducing me as an American researcher. After a handful of interviews, however, he changed his tactics without warning or explanation. One day, out of the blue, he introduced the two of us as being from the same work unit. After a few more days, on our way to an interview, he warned me, ‘Don’t let any Chinese escape from your mouth … and heavens, no English! Not that you’ve spoken English at all so far. If we tell him we’re from [his work unit], it will be better.’

Being assumed to be a PRC national by villagers was not always the best option for my research. Each reading of my identity had its advantages and disadvantages. Overall, I found that being presented as a PRC national helped primarily in terms of access, especially to low-level officials (village leaders). However, introducing myself as an American sometimes encouraged villagers (rather than officials) to be more, rather than less, frank. In no case did a villager
refuse outright to talk to me when I presented myself as American right away, though village officials did. (Some villagers did, however, say very little). Although villagers were more wary of talking to a foreigner in the first place, those who did so frequently had quite a lot to say.

For example, in one peri-urban village, a high-level government program had built greenhouses specifically for Tibetans to use. However, township officials had rented almost all of the greenhouses to Han migrants in order to profit from higher rents. Nevertheless, I found two Tibetan farmers who were growing greenhouse vegetables, despite corrupt local officials’ attempts to stop them. The Tibetan assistant who accompanied me to this particular village introduced me to both farmers as an American student. I made the mistake of interviewing the first farmer in the village teahouse. He laughed nervously at my questions about greenhouses and stated several times in reply that he ‘couldn’t say,’ because if he did, ‘there will be trouble.’

Learning from this mistake, we interviewed the other farmer in his greenhouse. Although my assistant had said only that I was an American student, the farmer assumed that I was a Tibetan-American. This made him even more eager to talk, in the privacy of his greenhouse, about village politics and local leaders. He added, ‘Before you came, the Chinese television stations came ... a lot of television stations, municipal TV stations, leaders ... they all came to find out about our greenhouses! But when they ask questions, I always say, “I don’t know!”’ When they asked me, ‘How many Tibetan families are there [planting vegetables] here?’ I told them, ‘I don’t understand these things. I don’t know.’ All of these questions that the two of you are asking – when they asked, I said “I don’t know!” “I don’t understand.” If I answered otherwise, well, that would make it hard for me to stay here [in this village.]’ Later, he said ‘You must have gone over there [to America] when you were very young.’ It was not until that point in the conversation that I realized that he had assumed I am ethnically Tibetan. He added, ‘the Tibetans over there benefit us [in Tibet] a great deal.’

My identity in the field was a joint production between myself, the Tibetan friends who assisted me in interviews, and the Tibetan (and Han) farmers whom I interviewed. All long-term researchers adopt certain patterns of behavior, dress, and speech which help them blend in or live in greater harmony with their host communities. Many are forced to change their presentations of self or modify their positionality to conform to the demands of the fieldsite (e.g. women often have to say that they are married). However, my ‘passing’ as Tibetan was not only a matter of how I looked, spoke, or behaved, but also required that others wanted me (on some level) to be Tibetan. Indeed ‘passing’ may not be an
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adequate concept for this misreading of national or ethnic identity since it seems to suggest a degree of control that I frequently did not have. In other words, it should not be assumed that researchers alone have agency to determine how they are recognized by the people with whom they work.

LEARNING ABOUT STATE CONTROL: AN EXAMPLE

Nevertheless, being read as Tibetan allowed me access to situations and insights that would not otherwise have been possible. As part of a larger field of deception, my Tibetan assistants saw it as an effective tactic for negotiating state strategies of control. Here I turn to an example which shows how unintentionally ‘passing’ put me in a situation which then allowed me to analyse responsibility as a disciplinary technique.

A few months into my research, I was placed in the unusual position of being hired as a ‘local interpreter’ on a large bilateral development aid project. At the time, a team of foreign development experts had arrived in Tibet on their first appraisal mission. The government office representing the Chinese side was responsible for finding local interpreters for the foreign experts. They tried to hire my sponsor for his English skills, but he was busy and not particularly interested given the low pay. He asked me to do it instead, presenting it as ‘an excellent opportunity for you to learn more about agriculture in Tibet.’ I was unsure of how to interpret the offer: did he genuinely have my best interests in mind, offering me an opportunity to travel outside of Lhasa to an agricultural area I would otherwise not be able to visit? Or was he merely trying to unload the constant stream of extra work that came his way? Either way, I thought I had better agree to it, since it was thanks to him that I was in Tibet at all. I cautioned him that I might not be able to fully understand the local Tibetan dialect spoken in the distant villages. He assured me that this would not be a problem as there were other interpreters, and that I would only be required to use Chinese and English.

The night before we were to drive to the project site, the Tibetan official who was responsible for coordinating interpreters, and whose office had issued my fast-track invitation letter, met with me. He asked to see my paperwork (which his office had processed), saying, ‘We actually wanted [my sponsor] for this job. We have to make sure all of your paperwork is correct, otherwise — you know what the situation in Tibet is like — this could be a big burden on my head if anyone complains.’ I quickly told him that I was in no way asking to be an interpreter, and that I would be quite happy to withdraw. However, he seemed satisfied with
my papers, and told me what time to be ready in the morning. I was surprised that even someone in his relatively high position would be concerned about what might happen ‘if anyone complains.’ I was also surprised that the expediency of hiring me (because he was having trouble finding interpreters) would outweigh these concerns. After arriving at the project site, we met the Chinese deputy director of the relevant prefectural unit, whom I will call Hu. He greeted the Tibetan official as an old friend and the two smoked cigarettes together during a long lunch. Afterwards, the Tibetan official introduced the interpreters. I was taken aback when he introduced me simply as being ‘from [my sponsoring unit].’ That is, he failed to say where I was from, and thus Hu assumed that I, like the other three, was a PRC Tibetan. The Tibetan official had clearly weighed the probability that my citizenship would be uncovered against the possible consequences of being criticized for recruiting an American interpreter; he had decided that the former was unlikely enough to make avoiding the latter desirable. In doing so, he had not lied, but merely played upon Hu’s assumptions. I witnessed this particular tactic many times in my fieldwork. In the meantime, I had become a ‘local interpreter.’

This was particularly worrisome to me because I did, indeed, find myself having trouble understanding the local Tibetan dialect. After a few days, while I was trying to work out how I would get myself out of this situation, Hu called the four ‘local interpreters’ to a series of private meetings. One of the other interpreters had complained about our compensation. After discussing this issue, Hu turned to more important matters. He told us that we should not translate any sensitive questions that the foreign experts might ask the villagers. According to him, this included questions about contagious diseases, birth control, politics, human rights, the Dalai Lama, and military districts. He commented we must keep his warnings in mind. Otherwise, he lamented, he might be notified out of the blue, weeks later, that there was a political problem. At that point, he said, it would make no difference that he was the leader and we the interpreters. ‘Everyone, all of you and I as well, will have trouble.’ He went on to explain:

Actually, I should count as someone who is relatively familiar with politics, but even I don’t know sometimes what kinds of things will suddenly become a ‘problem.’ One never knows when something will suddenly become a ‘problem.’ Therefore, the principle is to stick closely to the project. For example, if a villager says, ‘There was no well here in the past. Now we have a well, but we still need more water;’ that is perfectly fine. After all, that is the kind of work this project is supposed to do. But you must avoid sensitive issues, especially politics. You should also avoid talking about resettlement …This is our dilemma. On the one
hand ... they are the project experts so we have to let them do their work. On the other hand they are foreign project experts, so we also have to keep that in mind. Otherwise I may get a phone call, and there may be a problem, and then I won't even know where or why the problem arose. So we must understand and help each other.

This incident showed me that even someone as experienced and familiar with politics as Hu very much feared 'politics'; yet he was unsure about what exactly counts as politics at any particular point in time. In the absence of clear rules, Hu casts a wide net, forcing very conservative behavior for all lower-level officials. The rubric of responsibility thus becomes a political technology which disciplines subjects through mutual surveillance and self-surveillance. This insight later contributed to an analysis of why the trajectory of economic reform in the TAR has differed in certain ways from that of other provinces. My point here is not only that these forces strongly shaped my fieldwork, but also that I only learned about them through the agency of local sponsors who deliberately put me in a situation where my identity was mis-read.

A note on ethics

I want to conclude by noting that ethical dilemmas in fieldwork are not frequently discussed in depth in a typical graduate education in the social sciences (on ethics, see also Svensson's chapter). In thinking through my own questions about ethics, I have found the Statement of Professional Ethics of the Association of American Geographers (1998) to be quite helpful. In particular:

Informants and local researchers should be asked whether they prefer anonymity or recognition, and the project should be implemented and its results should be presented in keeping with these individuals' preference ... local traditions and mores should be respected unless they directly undermine the basic human rights of affected individuals. Moreover, assistance provided by local informants and co-researchers may be controversial, and protecting these persons should be paramount.

In this light, the particular circumstances of my 'passing' seem to me to be ethical. As discussed above, I never hid my role as a researcher. On the question of reading ethnic and national identity, I let local co-researchers decide what they believed, based on their local knowledge, was in the best interests for themselves, local informants, and me. In many instances this allowed people to talk without burdening them with the responsibility of knowledge of my
citizenship or ethnicity (even if, perhaps, they had their private suspicions). The way responsibility is used by the state to discipline or control subjects suggests that providing the opportunity for local people to honestly say they didn’t know much about me could reduce risks. Based on similar logic, I tried to follow measures in fieldwork and in later writing (as in this essay) to maintain the anonymity of Tibetan interviewees.

NOTES

1 See for example the extensive reports by Tibet Information Network. http://www.tibetinfo.org

2 A number of caveats are in order here. American professors Melvyn Goldstein and Cynthia Beall had been given permission to conduct long-term fieldwork. A number of European graduate students, especially from Norway, who worked under official cooperative projects were able to obtain official permission. A few American and other graduate students were also able to conduct research unofficially. Finally, note that since my fieldwork ended, the establishment of the Tibet Himalayan Digital Library has allowed a number of US graduate students to do research officially.

3 Zheng yi zhi yan, bi yi zhi yan, i.e. to turn a blind eye, to pretend not to see

4 These are reconstructions of his speech based on my notes taken shortly afterwards.

5 http://www.aag.org/Publications/OtherPubs/EthicsStatement.html

REFERENCES


