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Research Note

Conducting Research in China: Impediments and Some Options

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Among China researchers, those reliant on field studies in the conduct of their research often face the most daunting challenges. While obtaining funding is a first and often major challenge, the trials and tribulations of fieldwork loom ever large. Relying on primary and secondary sources, this paper explores structural and practical impediments to gathering data in China. What factors influence the release of data by Chinese sources? How can researchers improve the likelihood of obtaining meaningful data? The paper begins by exploring the structural-bureaucratic and practical obstacles to data collection in China, and then provides suggestions on how to overcome such challenges. While relying primarily on examples from environmental protection-related research initiatives in China, many of the obstacles encountered and the strategies for overcoming those obstacles can be generalized more broadly to other areas of China research.

KEYWORDS: **China; research; field; impediments; options**

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Recently, a World Bank official searching for data on daily water flows through China's Yellow River (黄河) experienced a not unusual oc-

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currence for researchers in China. Having failed to obtain the water flow data through official channels, he went directly to the YRCC (Yellow River Control Center) operations office. Officials at the YRCC office denied the existence of such data. However, even as they denied the data's existence, the World Bank official observed the data he was searching for—daily data from the entire Yellow River system—coming in on the office fax machine.[1]

Why did YRCC officials not only refuse to provide the requested data, but deny their very existence? This example is illustrative of a broader phenomenon where foreign researchers in China frequently encounter significant impediments to research. What factors influence the release of data by Chinese sources? How can researchers improve the likelihood of obtaining meaningful data? Relying on primary and secondary sources, this paper explores structural and practical impediments to gathering data in China. It then offers some suggestions on how to overcome these impediments. While relying primarily on examples from environmental protection-related research initiatives, the impediments and the suggestions for overcoming those impediments can be generalized.

Political-Structural Factors Impeding Data Access

National security considerations are an obvious factor restricting access to data by parties both in the Chinese bureaucracy and the international community. Officials are unlikely to release data that might compromise China's security. However, national security considerations, no matter how broadly defined, cannot explain many cases where obtaining data is problematic.

Not all data are restricted (*neibu* 内部). Indeed, many types of data are available in publications of the Chinese State Statistical Bureau (國家

[1]Meeting of the "3 x 3 group" (May 2001). The "Three by Three" project is a cooperative study among universities from Canada and China. The goal is to identify practical solutions to water scarcity problems in the Beijing-Tianjin region. See <http://www.chs.ubc.ca/china/index.html>.

統計局). However, due to a lack of political clout, the State Statistical Bureau is often not made privy to much of the data collected by other units of government. Furthermore, the data provided are often of questionable quality.[2] Additional and more accurate data are often best obtained directly from the source—the units producing the data. This is the stage where difficulties are most often encountered. Who controls access to data?

Information is a source of power, and data are often carefully guarded. Data may be released only after significant pressure is brought to bear on collecting units by senior officials. Given the growing complexities of relationships of power among units of government, any person collecting data from Chinese sources must begin by identifying the source of the data and the government department(s) likely to control their release. The researcher must then obtain the support of the relevant government department(s) to access these data.

In *Policy Making in China*, Lieberthal and Oksenberg produce an important analysis of the state decision-making process and the relationship among levels of government in the sphere of economic policy.[3] In pre-reform China (before the late 1970s), the state controlled an impressive organizational system that transmitted state policies from the center to the lowest levels.[4] Any lower-level government unit hoping to implement a policy was forced to follow a complicated path up through various levels of the bureaucratic hierarchy to obtain central government support. With reform came a shift of controls. Different organs of the bureaucracy increased their roles in policy development and implementation, often at the expense of past micro-control exercised by the central government. As a result, the Chinese bureaucracy and decision-making structure is often described as a combined unified hierarchical system and fragmented world of competing agencies, or "fragmented authoritarianism."[5]

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[2]Kenneth Lieberthal, *Governing China* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 175.

[3]Kenneth Lieberthal and Michel Oksenberg, *Policy Making in China: Leaders, Structures, and Processes* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988).

[4]Jean C. Oi, "The Role of the Local State in China's Transitional Economy," *The China Quarterly*, no. 144 (December 1995): 1133.

[5]See note 3 above.

In *Bureaucracy, Politics, and Decision Making in Post-Mao China*, Lampton and Lieberthal expand this analysis by assessing the relevance of fragmented authoritarianism to spheres other than economics.[6] They focus on interactive processes (bargaining and accommodation) among levels and clusters in the Chinese bureaucratic system. They suggest that the authoritarian aspect finds reflection in the continuing dependence of the various bureaucracies on the center, while the increasingly interactive aspect of these relations reflects the fragmentation of the system.[7]

The authoritarian aspect of the Chinese bureaucracy is reflected in the decision-making hierarchy. The State Council (國務院) rests atop the formal Chinese decision-making hierarchy and is the ultimate arbiter of all arguments and disagreements by lower levels of government. It is at the State Council level (and more specifically at the level of the Standing Committee of the State Council 國務院常務委員會) that the various bureaucratic lines of power combine and final decisions can be made. Directly under the State Council are commissions. Commissions are extremely powerful and include the State Development Planning Commission (國家發展計畫委員會) and the State Economic and Trade Commission (國家經濟貿易委員會), among others. Commissions have responsibility for the entire national system (e.g., the entire national economy in the case of the State Development Planning Commission). Below the commissions are the ministries and provinces. These units are responsible for particular sectors or regions.[8] Relationships of power continue down the bureaucratic levels.

The top leadership in China remains very powerful. While reforms have decentralized administrative control over many resources, they have also increased the leverage of the top leaders vis-à-vis their own bureaucracies. This effect is largely a result of the preferred access top officials have

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[6]Kenneth Lieberthal, "Introduction: The Fragmented Authoritarianism Model and its Limitations," in *Bureaucracy, Politics, and Decision Making in Post-Mao China*, ed. Kenneth Lieberthal and David Lampton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 5-8.

[7]Ibid., 12.

[8]But not final authority. If dissatisfied with a ruling by a commission, a ministry or province can appeal directly to the State Council. Commissions have formal authority over ministries and provinces.

to additional resources, including valuable information and technologies not available to lower levels of the bureaucracy.[9] Also contributing to the influence of the center is its power of appointment, transfer, or dismissal of all top leadership (both state and Party).[10]

The fragmented aspects of fragmented authoritarianism are exemplified by the relationships among officials and bureaucracies both vertically (*tiao* 條) and horizontally (*kuai* 塊). *Tiao* refers to the hierarchies that stretch from the central government to the local levels, whereas *kuai* refers to relations among hierarchies at the same level (see figure 1).[11]

Organizations of equal rank can bargain with each other as equals while higher ranks can issue orders to subordinate organizations. Recognizing this reality, government officials expend immense effort to increase the bureaucratic ranking of their organizations.[12]

Relations across hierarchies can be complicated. Officials in one hierarchy have no jurisdiction over officials in another (even when the officials in the latter hierarchy are of a lower rank). Since approval for many policies requires the cooperation and agreement of disparate hierarchies, relatively simple is for one hierarchy to block a policy supported by another. This situation is often further complicated by the difficulty of obtaining approval from different levels within any single hierarchy (*tiao*). As a result, any decision that requires input from more than one unit involves complicated voluntary cooperation and agreement both across hierarchies and between levels of government within each hierarchy (see figure 1).

Overcoming the complications inherent in the existing bureaucratic system involves two essential mechanisms. The first is formal contacts via

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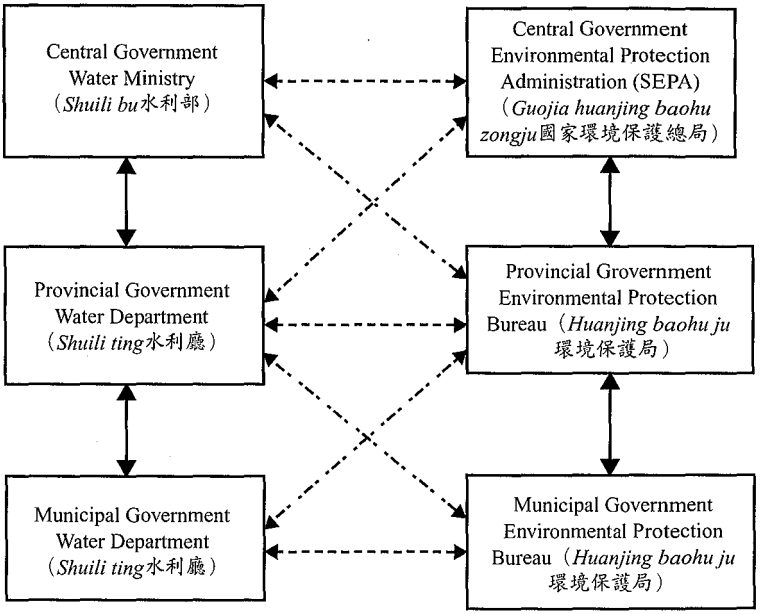
[9]Lieberthal, "Introduction," 15.

[10]Shaun Breslin, *China in the 1980s: Center-Province Relations in a Reforming Socialist State* (London: Macmillan, 1996), chap. 2; Peter T.Y. Cheung, "Introduction: Provincial Leadership and Economic Reform in Post-Mao China," in *Provincial Strategies of Economic Reform in Post-Mao China: Leadership, Politics, and Implementation*, ed. Peter T. Y. Cheung, Jae Ho Chung, and Zhimin Lin (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 10-17.

[11]Susan Shirk, *The Political Logic of Economic Reform in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), chap. 9, gives a more detailed discussion of *tiao* and *kuai* relations.

[12]Lieberthal and Oksenberg, *Policy Making in China*, 139. Also impacting the power of organizations is their role, wealth, and strategic significance as well as the personal connections, ambitions, and acumen of their leadership.

Figure 1
Official Ties Among Different Bureaucracies



Note that solid lines represent strong relations, dashed lines represent medium relations, and dash/dot lines represent weak relations. (Municipalities in China are equivalent to counties in the United States—a large geographic region.)

meetings and document exchanges within and among bureaucracies. However, this must be supplemented with informal relations (often referred to as *guanxi* 關係) among officials and the provision of reciprocal favors.

Research activities in China are normally conducted under the auspices of a specific host organization (*danwei* 單位) relevant to the research. The status of each research organization within the state hierarchy is different. Generally speaking, there are three major categories. The first category includes research institutions under the purview of government agencies. These organizations conduct research for the government and therefore enjoy government cooperation. A second category includes universities or academic research organizations.[13] Unless working officially

[13]This refers to domestic rather than international institutions.

for the government, these organizations are relatively separate from the state. However, as state-owned organizations, they do, nonetheless, enjoy a connection that may provide them with indirect support. The final category is private organizations such as foreign or local private businesses. Organizations in this category face greater impediments than the first two since they lie outside the government bureaucracy.

The emphasis for foreign researchers must be on obtaining the appropriate support from relevant government organizations. Once support from the government organization has been obtained, the next step is having that organization inform its subordinates to cooperate with the researchers. Depending on the nature of the data being collected, this process may involve instructions being passed from the central government ministerial level, through the provincial, municipal, county, district, and eventually community level (*tiao*). This can be a time-consuming and complicated process, made more difficult if additional hierarchies are involved (*kuai*). If additional hierarchies are involved, it may be necessary to obtain approval from them, following the same procedure. Normally, the greater the status of the organization supporting the research efforts, the greater the likelihood of success.[14]

The committed support of a powerful government organization may overcome many impediments to successful research. However, a gap clearly looms between theory and practice. As anyone experienced in conducting research in China will attest, even after obtaining high-level official support, collecting data can be an extremely challenging process.

For example, a large and long-term Canadian project enjoying State Council support was unable to advance a project as first conceptualized.[15] This was the result of disagreements over expenditures that arose between the State Council and officials in the Education Ministry.[16] Despite the higher bureaucratic ranking of the State Council, it was unable to force co-

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[14]Interview #65 (March 24, 2001, International researcher). Most interviewees requested anonymity; hence the lack of names and titles.

[15]Interview #65. The goal of the project was to educate through seminars and information exchanges.

[16]Interview #65.

operation by the Ministry of Education. Even officials at the highest level of the Chinese bureaucracy may encounter difficulties advancing research projects in the face of uncooperative officials. Why?

Practical Impediments

As noted, security concerns play a role in limiting access to data. Officials may not release data they believe to potentially threaten their own, their region's, or China's security.[17] Some officials may fear possible retribution from their own superiors should the data they provide prove embarrassing or result in unflattering conclusions.[18] Past cooperation with foreign researchers resulting in embarrassment or negative censure for the cooperating official will make future cooperation less likely. Officials may also be concerned that research might uncover contradictions between actual and reported conditions.[19] Officials are being asked to trust their careers to foreign researchers who are unlikely to comprehend the pragmatic concerns surrounding data releases in China. Many officials may prefer to avoid taking responsibility for a foreigner who is not easily controlled or sanctioned (since he/she comes from outside the Chinese system).[20] Interviewees may also be uncomfortable speaking with a foreigner, simply because the foreigner may not speak the local dialect and looks and behaves differently.

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[17]In one case, the concern was that the foreign researcher heading the project was affiliated and somehow providing the results of the research to Taiwan.

[18]Interviews #15 (January 1999, Provincial Environmental Protection Bureau [EPB] official), #26 (November 1998, Municipal EPB official), #27 (September 1998, Provincial International Coordination Officer), #28 (October 1998, official in the regulatory sector of the Provincial EPB), #38 (December 1998, official in the Policy Research Center for Environment and Economy, State Environmental Protection Administration, SEPA).

[19]Chinese organizations may hesitate to provide accurate data if in past they provided inaccurate data on the same issue (to government agencies). The original provision of inaccurate data may arise from a desire to meet the requirements of superiors. The Chinese organization may then be limited by its initial deception. As a result, data relevant to the formulation of a new project may be incorrect. In such a case, the project is inevitably flawed and doomed to failure even before it has begun.

[20]Wang Fenyu, "Institutional Features and Social Survey Research in China: An Examination of the Indigenization Approach" (University of Toronto Seminar Paper, November 28, 1997).

Such hesitation is not surprising given China's long history of confrontation with, and isolation from the West.[21] This is especially true in China's hinterland where, due to relative inaccessibility, contacts with foreigners are infrequent. Nonetheless, security and a historic distrust of the West do not fully explain the failure of researchers to obtain data from Chinese sources. Drawing on the experience of numerous researchers who have worked in China, this section identifies additional pragmatic impediments often encountered in the field.

A straightforward obstacle to data collection is China's lack of an equivalent to the U.S. or Canadian "sunshine" laws requiring both transparency of government and access to government documents. Thus, for example, a scholar searching for data on Sino-Soviet relations during the 1950s—a period of good bilateral national relations—was refused access to Chinese archives.[22]

"Foreigner fatigue" can also be problematic. Following the opening of China to foreign investment, trade, and academic research in the 1980s, China was flooded with previously frustrated researchers eager to enter and explore a hitherto isolated country. Many Chinese officials were swamped with requests for information and cooperation. Collecting and distributing data to foreign researchers represents an additional, highly demanding responsibility both in terms of time and funds—two scarce resources. Indeed, these resources have become increasingly scarce following the central government decision to slash funding to broad sectors of the bureaucracy. This has forced some government agencies (such as the Chinese Academy of Sciences) to take responsibility for much, if not all, of their own budgets.[23]

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[21]For more on the historical relationship between China and the West, see Jonathan Spence, *In Search of Modern China* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).

[22]Interview #64 (March 2001, International researcher). Meanwhile, archival data in Russia were made available (Russia has the equivalent of a Sunshine Law—"Law of the Russian Federation on Information, Informatization, and Information Protection," January 25, 1995). Interestingly, the scholar encountered these difficulties despite having high-level connections with Chinese officials supportive of his research. In the end, the researcher was forced to abandon the project.

[23]Interview #41 (Zhou Zejiang, senior research scientist and director of the Information Center of the Nanjing Institute of Environmental Science, SEPA, January 1999).

As with distrust of foreigners, foreigner fatigue—caused by incessant requests for information by foreign sources—contributes to a desire on the part of Chinese officials to avoid the demands of cooperation with foreign organizations. This situation presents Chinese officials with a problem. On the one hand, faced with the challenges of self-funding, Chinese officials increasingly view international organizations as alternative sources of much-needed income. On the other hand, however, these officials are often reluctant to invest the time and resources necessary to provide the cooperation and information international agencies expect in return.

In many cases, researchers encountering a lack of cooperation by their Chinese counterparts are unaware that their project may be one of many concurrent projects under the purview of a particular Chinese agency. Faced with their own needs and aware of the time-limited nature of international projects, Chinese participants may choose to wait out the clock—allowing the project to come to a close without having achieved its stated goals. This is especially attractive when the Chinese organization is concurrently participating in additional international projects with greater funding potential. Depending on the project's size, budget, timeline, and influence of the supporting international organization, a project will receive higher or lower priority.

Finances clearly play a major role in data accessibility. Data, as in Western countries, can prove both expensive and difficult to collect. Having gathered data, Chinese officials may choose to retain control over said data and, by extension, strengthen their leverage over organizations requesting those data.

In some cases, Chinese partners may lack the necessary equipment and training to collect meaningful data. Such equipment could include computers and software for data analysis or bicycles for travel to interview locations. Correctly measuring effluent discharges to a river requires sampling equipment. Training is essential to ensure that samples are taken at the right times and at the correct locations along the river. Furthermore, the samples must be stored correctly and analyzed within a specific time frame. Failure to adhere to correct procedures will result in spoiled samples and faulty results.

Correctly using a survey questionnaire requires special training in the

crafting of a questionnaire, its translation, and the time, place, and method of its implementation. Those conducting surveys must also exhibit awareness of unspoken messages and body languages and sensitivity to the concerns of the targeted audience—cross-cultural communication.[24] Those present at the interview may also influence interview results. Obtaining useful responses may be difficult if the interviewee is concerned by the reactions of attending superiors (or colleagues).

On the other hand, interviewees may receive assistance from colleagues in ways that interfere with data collection, providing assistance to the interviewee in ways that may skew the questionnaire results. This might include answering in the interviewee's stead or prompting the interviewee with hints and information to enable the interviewee to answer more knowledgeably.

Problems often arise around project design. International organizations often develop a project based on their own criteria and goals. The result is a project that has received only limited input from Chinese partners, and that inevitably includes assumptions regarding shared goals and interests.[25] International participants may set clear and rigid guidelines for dispensing funds, often in keeping with requirements to justify expenditures to international auditors, leaving little room for "creative" financing.[26]

Finally, an insidious problem faced by foreign researchers in China is the danger of unconscious self-censorship. In many cases researchers fail to ask certain questions, recognizing that answers are unlikely to be forthcoming and that even asking might strain delicate relationships and future access.[27]

To summarize, the structure of the Chinese bureaucracy, with its complex vertical and horizontal relationships and overlapping controls over the dissemination of information, is a major contributor to the impediments encountered by those attempting to conduct research in China. Additional

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[24]See note 20 above and David Lampton, *Same Bed, Different Dreams* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2000), x-xii.

[25]As in the case of the "Three by Three" project.

[26]"Creative funding" refers to funds available for gifts or banquets—often essential aspects of any field project.

[27]Interview #64; *New York Times*, August 4, 2001.

impediments to successful research include security concerns; a history of distrust; the lack of a Chinese sunshine law; growing demands on Chinese agencies, coupled with a shortage of fiscal and human capital in these agencies; and faulty assumptions, exclusionary planning practices, and self-censorship. Drawing on exemplifying cases, the next section illustrates impediments encountered by international research teams and some of the strategies developed to overcome such obstacles.

Exemplifying Cases

Case 1: TVIE Pollution Control

The goal of the TVIE (township and village industrial enterprise) pollution control project was to develop cost-effective options to curb the production of adverse environmental impacts by TVIEs in a particular province.[28] With a five-year/US$2.5 million budget, the joint foreign-Chinese team intended to gather data on TVIEs in the province and develop appropriate pollution abatement technologies.[29] The foreign participants obtained affiliation through the Chinese State Science and Technology Commission (SSTC 國家科學技術委員會).[30] The SSTC delegated responsibility for the project to the provincial STC. The provincial STC provided the project with letters of introduction and dealt with high-level contacts. Day-to-day issues were the responsibility of the provincial Environmental Protection Bureau (EPB 環境保護局). This bureau is in a bureaucracy separate from that of the SSTC.

When establishing contact with TVIEs, the project relied on EPB officials. These officials established contact with factories often ignoring specific requests by the foreign team. Thus, for example, EPB officials would direct the project to factories that were not TVIEs. In other cases,

[28]I do not divulge the title and details of the project at the request of the participants.

[29]Part of the funding was to come from Chinese sources, which the Chinese side eventually failed to provide. The foreign team was informed by its supervisory body abroad that this outcome was anticipated.

[30]In March 1998, the State Science and Technology Commission was renamed the Ministry of Science and Technology.

EPB officials chose factories that had closed and, despite assurances to the contrary, would not open again. In one case, a factory chosen by the research team to receive a demonstration effluent treatment facility provided detailed information about effluent types and quantities to the foreign experts who then designed an appropriate treatment facility. Following installation, the experts soon discovered that the technical situation differed completely from that presented by the factory. The treatment facility was therefore nearly useless. When confronted, factory officials claimed EPB complicity with the misrepresentation of information. The EPB confirmed this statement expressing concern over the proprietary nature of manufacturing processes.

In the opinion of foreign team members, the primary goal of EPB officials participating in this project was to appear cooperative with an important foreign government agency, and to attract foreign funding and resources at a time of budget cuts. A secondary goal was to direct foreign assistance to specific factories (with whom relationships already existed). Foreign team members also noted that mid-level EPB officials were concerned the project might unearth embarrassing or negative information and might impinge on economic growth. Finally, according to the foreign team leader, the Chinese participant agency believed the foreign team would be easily enough controlled. Team members contrasted the above examples of obstruction with the warm and helpful behavior of their Chinese counterparts in personal encounters.[31] Ironically, despite the failed efforts of the project team, the project may have obtained its stated goal of decreasing TVIE pollution levels by 10 percent by 2001. In the words of the project director, success was not the result of their own efforts, rather the result of a countrywide economic slowdown that forced the closure of numerous polluting TVIEs.

Case 2: Soil Erosion Prevention

The goal of the joint Canada-China soil erosion prevention project

[31]Some Chinese team members commended the efforts made by the foreign team and promised to explain the reasons for noncooperation encountered during the project, but only after the project had run its course.

was to identify means to reduce soil erosion in a number of provinces. The Canadian team was frustrated by a lack of active cooperation from its Chinese partners. The team soon discovered that the small Canadian budget and high demand on the resources of the Chinese participants were a major stumbling block to progress.

Data gathering had been a Chinese responsibility. Lacking sufficient resources, however, the Chinese team did not obtain the data. Due to the nature of the Canadian funding guidelines, the Canadian agency was unable to assist in defraying Chinese costs.

The likelihood of successfully concluding the project declined further when the Chinese team was informed by its own bureaucracy that it must become an independently funded agency. Immediately, any project requiring extensive research and a large investment of time and resources became a liability.[32] Cooperation declined further when the Chinese project leader, who had strong personal ties to the Canadian team, was removed from the project.

Very soon the project began to slow and the quality of the data gathered deteriorated. For example, a survey conducted by the Chinese partners of three hundred households returned the exact same answer to specific questions. This result caused concern among the Canadian participants regarding the reliability of the results. In this case the problem was eventually identified as a combination of poorly trained interviewers and their efforts to conserve resources by completing the surveys themselves while attempting to provide the answers they believed the commissioners of the survey were expecting.[33]

Case 3: Environmental Policy Enforcement

The goal of the environmental policy enforcement project in which this author participated was to identify factors influencing the ability of the subprovincial environmental protection bureaucracy to enforce cement factory compliance with environmental regulations. To obtain this goal,

[32]Interview #63 (March 2001, International researcher).

[33]Interview #63. Efforts to correct the results by conducting an additional survey failed.

the author conducted interviews with EPB and factory officials and visited numerous factories. Prior to arrival in China, the author obtained official support from the Chinese ministries of Education and Foreign Affairs and from the Canadian government.[34] This represented an effort to address the bureaucratic impediments to research. The unit charged with providing support for my research was a provincial EPB.

Despite letters of support from these sources, this research project faced significant impediments. One factor contributing to the project's failure to obtain full cooperation was concerns that the research was unusual and required Chinese partners to work outside standard operating procedures. Thus, for example, the Chinese side would be required to contact government units in a separate bureaucracy—presenting both *tiao* and *kuai* complications (see figure 1). In addition, the author did not come as a representative of a large international organization and did not have a very large budget.[35]

Above all, officials expressed concern that the project would discover embarrassing truths about environmental protection under their jurisdictions, and that the information provided might be used to criticize their efforts, resulting in possible retribution from their own superiors.[36] In an unusually blunt exchange, the leader of the EPB suggested that this author drop the research and focus instead on language study. The leader also refused to provide any assistance for my research, suggesting that there were certain things foreigners were not to know.[37] As a result, cooperation was slow, and the research was fraught with impediments.[38]

Overcoming these impediments required a number of steps. First, the author expanded the terms of the research to include more easily accessible factories (chemical plants in this case) and more forthcoming government

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[34]This was a Canadian-sponsored project.

[35]For greater detail see Jonathan Schwartz, "Compliance with Environmental Regulations in China: The Role of State Capacity" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Toronto, 2001).

[36]Interviews #29 (February 1999, Foreign NGO official), #31 (March 1999, Foreign NGO team leader), and #59 (January 1999, Foreign NGO team leader).

[37]Interview #16 (December 1998, director of the Provincial EPB foreign affairs office).

[38]Impediments included difficulty obtaining letters of introduction, and failure to inform me of developments or requirements to obtain letters.

officials.[39] Second, the author actively cultivated relationships with relevant officials resulting in their willingness to speak openly outside the official framework. This second point is exemplified by an informal conversation held with an environment official en route to an official interview. During our conversation the author learned an immense amount about the nature of environmental protection in his region. The official also openly criticized lax enforcement and widespread corruption in his office. However, in the presence of his colleagues, the same official became reticent.[40] Clearly, informal settings, far from prying eyes and ears, provide a less threatening atmosphere.

Another advantage of informal, one-on-one interviews became obvious during an effort to assess the familiarity of a particular factory official responsible for pollution control at a certain plant. The interview consisted of questions to assess the interviewee's mastery of relevant government pollution control regulations. Attending the interview was an EPB official who intervened with answers to each of my questions, defeating the purpose of the interview.

Third, the project offered anonymity to any cooperating official and offered access to my results in advance of their publication. Forced to trust this author's word, the offer, while important, cannot be attributed great weight as a means to convince officials to participate in interviews.

Fourth, the author developed strong relations with other international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) active in the region, leading to information and contact swapping as well as joint field trips. Finally, the extension of the length of the project allowed the author to take advantage of alternative contacts developed independently.

Strategies to Overcome Impediments to Successful Data Collection

Conducting research in China is an often daunting and fraught en-

[39]Normally, the higher the ranking of the official the more willing to speak openly.
[40]Interview #30 (February 1999, Provincial EPB official).

deavor. As a result, interesting and important research projects are, in many cases, left untouched. Despite the numerous formal and informal impediments to conducting research in China, success is possible. Organizations seeking data in China have developed a variety of effective strategies to overcome these impediments. Exemplifying an indigenous strategy are Chinese research centers.

In her study of information flows and policy coordination in China, Nina Halpern assesses data gathering strategies developed by top-level officials in the Chinese bureaucracy.[41] Zhao Ziyang (趙紫陽), China's premier until 1989, recognized that impeded information flows were constraining the ability of China's top leadership to develop and implement effective policies.[42] To overcome the significant constraints to information flows both across and up through bureaucracies, Zhao established research centers that were given special status as extra-bureaucratic units.

The explicit intent was to encourage cross-departmental and interdisciplinary perspectives on policy matters, to permit some independent evaluation of policy options, and to enhance policy coordination. The research centers were able to draw together a wide array of experts from various (often competing) ministries, departments, universities, and research centers. Such a mix of participants was quite unprecedented. The end result was a more holistic approach to analysis based on access to a wealth of information from numerous sectors.

To obtain such broad cooperation, the research centers ensured that those asked to provide information were cognizant of the fact that the premier and other top officials paid close attention to reports deriving from the research centers. Given the numerous responsibilities and demands on the top leadership, such attention must be considered a scarce resource. Any unit hoping to have its perspective represented to the top leadership would likely cooperate.

Research centers were also able to offer financial incentives such as

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[41]Nina P. Halpern, "Information Flows and Policy Coordination in the Chinese Bureaucracy," in Lieberthal and Lampton, *Bureaucracy, Politics, and Decision Making in Post-Mao China*, 125-48.

[42]Zhao Ziyang was ousted following the Tiananmen Incident of 1989.

payment for data. In addition, research centers exchanged the services of their highly qualified staff for data required from other units. Finally, personal contacts were employed. This is *guanxi* in its most basic form—contacting personal acquaintances in other government units in order to obtain their cooperation. By circumventing the complex hierarchies and providing useful exchanges for data, the research institutions succeeded in enhancing the quality of information and policy recommendations provided to the upper echelons of government.

Obviously, these methods cannot be adopted wholesale by international organizations planning research projects in China. Nonetheless, the efforts of indigenous research institutions illustrate the advantages of cultivating personal contacts with influential actors within and outside formal bureaucracies, and investing in the purchase of information, in transfer or exchange of technology, knowledge, and skills.

In general, the greater the status and influence of the Chinese partner to an international project, the greater the likelihood that bureaucratic and structural impediments will be overcome. In addition to formal relationships, informal relationships are essential. Developing relationships outside the official structure is an important means to nurture mutual respect and trust, and a shared commitment to the proposed project. Developing this kind of a relationship requires both time and a willingness to invest in materiel and training in the preparatory stages of the project.

Forming such relationships can be facilitated by international organizations with long-term projects in China. A policy of staff continuity (even between projects) encourages familiarity and trust between the international organization and Chinese counterparts and, by extension, increases the likelihood that future projects will enjoy greater cooperation and success.

Funding can be a major impediment or opportunity. As noted, Chinese government institutions are increasingly forced to look outside the government for funding. At the same time, foreign organizations funding a project are often required to meet stringent accounting standards, justifying any and all expenditures. Funding is often rigidly controlled and allocated. As in the case of the soil erosion project, the Canadian team could not use the project's funding to purchase the data required despite the cost

of the data and the lack of means available to the Chinese partners. As a result, the data were not obtained and that aspect of the project was stymied.

Another example relates to the accepted practice in China of gift exchanges and invitations to often lavish banquets. To comply with these expectations, foreign organizations in the field are often forced to be creative in justifying their expenditures to the foreign agency funding their work.[43] By increasing the budgetary autonomy of foreign organizations in the field, the needs of both international and domestic partners can be more fully addressed.

The problem of delaying tactics by Chinese project partners requires that careful consideration be given to the length of a project. If too short, a project runs the risk of limiting the time available to develop relationships, overcome inevitable snags, and obtain results. In addition, short-term projects are relatively easy to wait out. A project that is too extended, however, has its own inherent problems. A project may lose priority for the Chinese partner if other, more lucrative shorter-term projects become available. Loss of momentum will decrease the likelihood of achieving a successful outcome.

Maintaining maximum control over disbursal of project funds will also increase the likelihood that delays will not stymie the project. International organizations are often required to hand over control of funds to Chinese counterparts. Funds disbursal is an important source of leverage and should be relinquished only as a last resort.

Flexibility is all the more important given the dynamic nature of socioeconomic developments in China. As realities rapidly change, so too must project goals. When possible, review processes should be incorporated into longer-term projects. The reviews should, however, be quite restrictive in order to eliminate attempts to renegotiate the basic structure of a project. A moderately flexible timeline with funding disbursal con-

[43]For example, one foreign team leader made a practice of eating frugally for weeks on end in order to ensure that sufficient funds would be available to pay for banquets in honor of local officials. The goal was to ensure that overall expenses remained within a range acceptable to the foreign funding agency. Gifts were not covered by the funding agency—forcing team members to pay for them out of pocket.

trolled by the international agency and a mid-project review may be difficult to plan, but strengthens the likelihood that delaying tactics can be overcome and results achieved.

As noted, international organizations conducting research in China often assume that their Chinese counterparts have been trained in Western research methods. However, this is often not the case. Despite the additional resources that must be committed, international organizations are well served when expending significant effort on advance training. Advance training provides an excellent opportunity to teach the methodologies crucial to a successful project, to provide a service desired by the Chinese partners, and to develop strong relationships and mutual understanding that will strengthen the project in later stages.

Another important key to success is inclusiveness in project development. Members of both the international and local organizations should participate in formulation of the project, its goals, and the methods to achieve those goals. In this early planning stage, important is that expectations be clear and that misunderstandings be clarified.[44] In choosing to include local participating organizations in the preparatory stages of a project, the international organization may be forced to sacrifice certain project goals. However, inclusion will strengthen the trust of the local participants and, by empowering them to participate in decision-making, increase the likelihood that they will actively work toward successfully completing the project. Building understanding and trust can be greatly facilitated if the foreign team includes fluent Mandarin speakers and people with a solid grounding in Chinese culture and government.

Moreover, active Chinese participation in establishing initial contacts and during the interview process will enhance the likelihood that interviewees are less hesitant to cooperate. A further advantage of active Chinese participation is the sensitivity to body language and nuance in responses that a non-Chinese interviewer is likely to misinterpret or even fail to notice.

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[44]In many cases, Chinese team members will prefer to avoid outright rejecting foreign team proposals. However, this can lead to unrealistic expectations and the inclusion of unachievable goals.

Conclusion

Both the nature of the Chinese bureaucratic structure and the practical challenges inherent in any project involving cooperative research contribute to the challenges researchers encounter in China. In many cases projects fail or are only partially successful. Data are often hard to find and incomplete. Recognizing the fact that no project has limitless time and funding, compromise is essential. Where gaps in data exist or impediments appear, creative solutions including alternative sources or even changes to the very conceptualization of the original project may prove necessary. Above all, researchers should remain flexible both with regard to the end results of their research and the methods employed to obtain those results.

While relying on examples drawn primarily from environmental protection initiatives at the subprovincial level, the lessons of this paper are broader. With some variations on emphasis, the obstacles encountered by foreign researchers at the subprovincial level are prevalent at all levels of the Chinese bureaucracy and in all spheres of research.

A final suggestion may prove helpful. Countless international agencies and individual researchers participate in research projects in developing countries. Project coordination—even among such major organizations as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), World Bank, Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and United States Agency for International Development (USAID)—is extremely limited. Given the difficulties inherent in any field project, an effort to develop an easily accessible database with information on ongoing or planned projects in the region along with useful contacts would be highly beneficial. Such a database, made accessible to a wide range of researchers, could cut the time spent duplicating projects, developing new contacts, and accessing data. Such a database would address many of the impediments and challenges described in this study.