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Early Fieldwork at the Beijing Farmers' Market

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Abstract

Now that I've passed tenure review, published a book, cemented my teaching skills, and learned how to be a productive member of a college committee, I feel confident, self-assured, and filled with certainty about every aspect of my career as a professor. The same certainty extends to research and fieldwork. From choosing a topic to developing research questions to getting a good start in the field—it's all a piece of cake.

Ha! I wish I felt this confidence. The truth is that passing the tenure phase two years ago, as wonderful as it was, opened up a whole new set of questions: Who am I as a scholar? What truly interests me now? What kinds of fieldwork am I able and willing to pursue at this point in my life? (*excerpt*)

Keywords

Beijing, China, Farmers Market, fieldwork

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Amy Young Evrard February 20, 2018

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As a farmer wannabe, and someone interested in rural life and the importance of agriculture to it, I thought I might look into research on farming in the United States. I have joined the Women in Agriculture program sponsored by the University of Maryland Extension program and went to several classes with female farmers about how to run a farm as a business. That was fascinating, both intellectually and personally. I have roamed around Maryland and Pennsylvania visiting farmers' markets and thinking about to turn something so fun into a research project. I have stared at the soil in my garden, studying the critters there, and thought about the interesting readings I've done recently on human-animal interactions and how those readings might apply to farming. I've even traveled out to Utah to visit some intentional communities organized around farming and homesteading. Tenure has given me the luxury of time—to read, think, and consider—that I never had in graduate school.

Who am I as a scholar? What truly interests me now? What kinds of fieldwork am I able and willing to pursue at this point in my life?

But nothing has fully grabbed me yet. I've been waiting for that a-ha moment, when I suddenly realize that there is a specific project out there that I was born to do.

This summer I went to Beijing, China, for one month on a faculty development trip supported by the Fulbright-Hays Group Projects Abroad and sponsored by my institution, Gettysburg College.

The main point of our trip was to learn about the Chinese educational system, and we attended a series of fabulous lectures about China and education, visited schools, and interacted with teachers. We also tried to learn as much Mandarin as we could in one month – which turns out to be not very much at all. Each of our thirteen participants also had to choose an independent research topic and make some headway on it. I chose the general category of “food and agriculture” and waited to see what the staff at CET, our host institution in Beijing, would line up for me.

They connected me to the Beijing Farmers Market and one of its organizers and passionate advocates: Chang Tianle. The market includes a large assortment of organic farmers and like-minded folks selling all kinds of produce; meat, eggs, and cheese; snacks; juices; and even apparel and bags dyed with organic dyes. Although it’s only three years old and rotates to various sites in one of the world’s most urbanized environments, it has a loyal following and attracts as many as 2,000 people each day it is held.



The Beijing farmers’ market, held in June, 2017, on the grounds of the Shangri-La Hotel. Amy Young Evrard

I went to the farmers’ market and spent a couple of hours with Tianle as she guided me around to talk to the participants, hear their stories, and sample some of their delicious products. Suddenly my head was buzzing in the way it does when we anthropologists find something that fascinates us. So many of the issues these Chinese farmers faced were the same as those in the US: young people wanting to go back to the land but having difficulty securing it; the need to build a culture and a community around small, organic farmers in order to ensure customers; the problem with regulations and government commitment to industrial agriculture. But other issues were so different: the lack of private property ownership, meaning that that a farmer might put years into building healthy soil only to lose that land to development projects; the general lack of awareness of environmental issues and the role of agriculture in them; changing consumption patterns making young Beijingers crave fast foods, restaurants, and home delivery rather than trudging to a farmers’ market and carrying food back home that must then be cooked. Even

though there was a language barrier, I felt I understood the joys and worries of these farmers, their pride in their role in this burgeoning movement, their hope against hope that the movement would continue and grow. And I was fascinated by the unique-to-Beijing challenges that these farmers were determined to overcome and change.



A typical Beijing farmers' market attracts around 2,000 customers. Amy Young Evrard

Then I went to a film screening about one of the farmers at the market and her long story of building an organic farm as a retreat from her own high-anxiety career and failing health. I learned more about the problems facing organic farmers. I networked with people who helped me to see the structure of environmentalists and farmers among the NGO community in Beijing, making me feel that I was already connecting with people who could help me. Slowly, slowly the feeling built up in me that I was onto something interesting and important, something that could fuel my research for the near future. I also dreamed of some practical implications of such research: farmer exchanges between the US and China, ideas flowing back and forth that could help this burgeoning movement, connections with young Chinese entrepreneur wannabes who might be able to think of ways to monetize organic produce online. My mind was crackling with ideas and excitement. All of this connected to lectures we were having in the program about economic and environmental challenges in China's present and future, which helped convince me of the importance of a project on agriculture. I began to ask people what kinds of research they thought an anthropologist could do in China to help draw awareness of certain issues, and I recorded their responses with excitement.



This farm, which sells meat products at the market, also runs a training program for young farmers.Amy Young Evrard

It was, in short, the beginning of fieldwork. Let's face it, fieldwork is difficult. In part that is because of the uncertainty that we feel from beginning to end. Are we asking the right questions? Are we consulting the right people? Are we understanding the language and the body language behind the language? Are we smart enough, prepared enough, good enough to see this project through? And will anyone care once we're on the other side of it and trying to publish, get tenure, and accomplish all of our other goals?

But that uncertainty is the fun of it, too, as I remembered in Beijing. It feels good to be off center and unsure of ourselves because that's when we allow ourselves to follow our nose. I had no idea what would happen at that farmers' market that day, and I was nervous the entire time. But it was fun, too, as I began to relax and let myself talk to people as people, without some kind of agenda or list of questions. I listened and talked, ate and drank, and followed the lead of my "key informant" for the day. I let all my reactions to and questions about what I was learning roll around in my head and didn't worry too much about organizing or containing or following up on them in that moment. I went to the film screening, forced myself to go up and talk to strangers, asked naïve questions, and had a ball.

I have no idea what will come of these early days of thinking about some kind of field research project in China. But I know that I hope something comes of it. And I know that it felt great to be off center in that early-fieldwork way, something I haven't felt in a long time. It's the anthropology equivalent of being a child again, and we should embrace it. After all, it's children who ask the most useful question of all: why?

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Ioulia Chuvileva and **Meg Maurer** are contributing editors for Culture & Agriculture.

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