

HSSPFS 7

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The Research Grants Council of Hong Kong
Prestigious Fellowship Scheme under the Humanities and Social Sciences Panel
Completion Report

(for completed projects only)

Part A: Project and Award Holder

1. Project Title

A Market under the Veil: The Micropolitics of Social Ties and Money in Hospital Care in China

2. Award Holder and Academic Department/Unit Involved

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HSSPFS 7

5.2 Revised workplan

Date of approval from the RGC: April 17, 2013

Reasons for the change: _____

The original workplan was to collect data in Beijing and Guangzhou. The revised workplan was to expand the scope of data collection to include more cities in China for field research and surveys.

HSSPFS 7

- 1. To adopt qualitative methods to study patients seeking hospital care in China so as to fill the methodological gap in medical sociology.*
- 2. To examine the practices of informal payments and the role social networks in gaining access to hospital care in China in order to contribute to the literature of economic sociology.*
- 3. To collect data (including interviews, observations, and surveys) in major cities in China.*

5.3 Realisation of the workplan

The workplan was fully achieved. I adopted qualitative methods that combine ethnographic observations with face-to-face formal and informal interviews to fill the gap in medical sociology that traditionally relies heavily on quantitative methods. I also produced two papers that analyze the practices of informal payments and the role of social networks in seeking hospital care in China. I describe the data collection in detail as follows:

5.3.1 Surveys

To roughly assess the popularity of the use of social networks and cash gifts to gain access to hospital care, I hired two part-time research assistants to assist in conducting non-random sampling surveys in Guangzhou, Beijing, and Shanghai. We distributed self-administered questionnaires to employees in 70 work units in these cities. We had a contact person at each work unit who helped to distribute and collect the questionnaires to and from their colleagues. The contact persons were either our friends or our friends' friends. These work units, all non-medically related, included state-owned enterprises, domestic private companies, foreign companies, educational institutes, and government offices. We collected a total of 572 valid questionnaires, of which 193 came from 16 work units in Guangzhou, 192 from 21 work units in Beijing, and 187 from 33 work units in Shanghai.

5.3.2 Field Research:

From January 1, 2013 to June 30, 2014, a total of 85 face-to-face interviews (lasted for one to three hours) were conducted. Among which 54 were conducted by the award holder in Guangzhou and Xi'an. Others were conducted by a research assistant in Beijing and Shanghai. The primary interviewees include physicians, patients, and patients' family members, though we also interviewed medical students, nurses, hospital administrators, and social workers. The interviewees were recruited through three different channels. First, we mobilized our direct and indirect social ties (i.e. our friends and our friends' friends) to reach out to the personnel in hospitals and to the local residents who had received hospital care or had a family member done so. About half of the interviewees were recruited through this informal means. Second, we employed "cold calling" to reach out physicians in various hospitals. We found hundreds of physicians' email addresses from various healthcare-related websites, and we sent emails to these physicians requesting an interview. Some of these physicians further referred their colleagues to us, and so the snowball method was also adopted. Third, we identified from the survey some respondents who had used social networks and/or informal payments to gain access to hospital care or helped to connect patients to physicians, and some of them indicated at the end of the

HSSPFS 7

questionnaires that they were willing to be interviewees. These constituted about half of the patients and family members interviewed.

During the same period, we conducted 56 participant observations in the outpatient and inpatient wards in 10 hospitals in the four cities. Among which 48 were conducted by myself primarily in Guangzhou and secondarily in Xi'an. In January – February 2013, I conducted intensive ethnographic observations at two General Surgery wards in two tertiary hospitals in Guangzhou. I attended the daily morning meetings, ward rounds, and case discussion meetings, and I observed the interactions between physicians and patients in the wards. Other observations were conducted in outpatient wards and other inpatient wards of various specialties in different tertiary hospitals. At the same time, my research assistant and I carried out 30 informal chats with relevant informants in the field, such as physicians, patients and patients' family members who were too busy for a scheduled interview. Among which 23 were conducted by the award holder.

My research assistant and I each wrote extensive fieldnotes and interview transcripts. Some of my interviews were digital-recorded with interviewees' consent and were transcribed by another research assistant hired for this particularly task. Data coding was performed by the award holder with the aid of NVivo.

6.3 Realisation of the dissemination plan

6.3.1 Conference and Seminar Presentations:

As the duration of the project lasted for only 18 months, I was very active in presenting the work-in-progress papers at different venues during this period. These venues include international conferences, workshops, and seminars, as well as conferences and seminars held in Hong Kong, Taiwan, China. A total of 14 lectures based on this project were presented, among which 8 were conducted within the grant period and 6 went beyond. I list my presentations below in the order of dates:

- (1) "Relational Work in Intermediated Ties: The Dynamics of *Guanxi* in Hospital Care in China," presentation at the colloquium series of the Department of Sociology, University of Hong Kong, March 2013.
- (2) "The Dynamics of *Guanxi* in Hospital Care in China," invited lecture at the Pearl River Delta Social Research Centre, Department of Sociology & Universities Service Centre for China Studies, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, March 2013.

HSSPFS 7

- (3) "Multiple Levels of Intermediations and Indirect Reciprocity: A Case Study of the Dynamics of *Guanxi* in Hospital Care in China," presentation at the International Network for Social Network Analysis Conference, Xi'an, July 2013.
- (4) "Intermediations and Generalized Exchange: The Dynamics of *Guanxi* in Hospital Care in China," presentation at the 108th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, New York, August 2013.
- "A Market of Distrust and Obligation: The Micropolitics of Unofficial Payments for Hospital Care in China," invited lectures at
 - (5) the Council on East Asian Studies, Yale University, New Haven, October 2013;
 - (6) the Global Finance Initiative for the Einaudi Center for International Studies, Cornell University, Ithaca, October 2013;
 - (7) the School of Sociology and Anthropology, Sun Yat Sen University, Guangzhou, December 2013.
- (8) "The Dynamics of *Hongbao* and *Guanxi* in Hospital Care in China," invited lecture at the Department of Sociology, Baptist University, April 2014.
- "A Market of Distrust: Unofficial Payments for Hospital Care in China," invited lectures at
 - (9) the Department of Sociology, Peking University, Beijing, September 2014;
 - (10) the School of Social Development, East China Normal University, Shanghai, September 2014;
 - (11) the Department of Sociology, Fudan University, Shanghai, September 2014;
 - (12) the Department of Sociology, National Taiwan University, Taipei, November 2014;
 - (13) Cultural Sociology Theoretical and Empirical Research Seminar, Fudan University, Shanghai, January 2015;
- (14) Hong Kong Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Hong Kong, March 2015.

6.3.2 Articles for Publication

The two papers presented at various venues have been substantially revised and they are about ready to be submitted to major journals for review.

- (1) "A Market of Distrust": This paper is listed as co-authored in order to acknowledge the contribution of the research assistant who helped to conduct some of the interviews in Beijing and Shanghai. The paper is entirely written by the award holder. It examines why and how informal exchanges take place between patients and physicians in post-Mao China, and why these exchanges are performed in a certain pattern. I argue in this paper that it is the generalized public distrust in physicians that drove patients to offer cash gifts to physicians to boost their assurance that the physicians would treat them with ethics. However, physicians' generalized distrust in patients led them to refuse the cash gifts offered by those patients without any personal connections with them. This paper is in dialogue with the literature of trust and informal economy. The earlier drafts of this paper were presented at Yale University, Cornell University, and Sun Yat Sen University. I substantially revised the paper in 2014 based on the feedback from these presentations. The revised version was then presented in Fudan University, East China Normal University, Peking University, and National Taiwan University. The paper is now under a final

HSSPFS 7

revision and will be submitted to *American Journal of Sociology* (impact factor 4.045 in 2013, ranked No.2 in all sociology journals) for review early next month.

(2) "Strong-Tie Chains and Generalized Exchange": This paper examines how ordinary Chinese mobilize their social networks to gain access to hospital care. Theoretically, it analyzes how network chain length and tie strength are associated to facilitate generalized exchange. In this paper, I argue that strong ties and chain length are associated for both cultural and structural reasons to facilitate network-based generalized exchange. I also illustrate how direct and indirect reciprocity operates in mediated exchanges. This paper received very positive feedback and enthusiasm from the audiences when it was presented. More data was collected in 2014 and it is now under final revisions for submitting to *American Sociological Review* (impact factor 4.266 in 2013, ranked No.1 in all sociology journals) for review in early August 2015.

7. **Other impact**

The award holder was interviewed by an American journalist about her research on informal payments for hospital care in China. Her paper, "A Market of Distrust," along with the interview, was cited at length in *New York Times* on April 28, 2015.