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INSTITUTE OF
ASIAN STUDIES

Doing Fieldwork on Indonesian Chinese Migrant Workers in Brunei Darussalam

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Working Paper No. 84

Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam

Gadong 2025

Editorial Board, Working Paper Series

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Westly Lo is a graduate student who recently submitted his MA thesis for examination in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, under the supervision of Professor Lian Kwen Fee. The author developed this working paper from one of its chapters. The thesis is entitled: Traversing Land Borders: Meaning-Making and The Migration Experience of West Kalimantan Chinese Workers in Brunei Darussalam. The author is interested in migration, nationality, Chinese diaspora, and Borneo.

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Abstract

This paper makes the case for a more spontaneous approach to collecting data from the field in qualitative studies of labour migration rather than an overly planned one. It shows the benefit of this supplemental method in fine-grained investigations by illustrating how my own fieldwork in a circle of the Indonesian Chinese migrant workers transitioned from intentionally planned to a more impromptu engagement. A defining feature of ‘hanging around’ as method is the fieldworker’s conscious effort to not view the migrant workers as simply informants and go beyond that. It involves the researcher humanizing the interviewees as people who have motivations and concerns as migrant labour other than purely pecuniary and in further establishing a connection with them before proceeding to interview.

Keywords: Brunei; Data Collection; Fieldwork; Indonesian Chinese; Migrant Workers

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Introduction

Conducting a qualitative exploration of how migrant workers view their migration experience is not straightforward. Our social backgrounds and baggage influence fieldwork and interactions with informants. How do we overcome the sense of outsider-insider dichotomy between researcher and the worker? What constitutes this dividing line, how does that affect our position in the field, and how do we respond and deal with it? How much inside is considered an insider and how much outside is considered an outsider? Although such a distinction between researcher and subjects exists, is it an insurmountable hindrance? How far do we need to go into private and personal lives before we can sufficiently regard narratives as authentic and genuine?

In this paper I detail how I sought to address these questions and challenges in my own research. Apart from one-off interviews and returning inquiries, I mainly collected data by ‘hanging around’ in my informants’ everyday environment. This exposed me to my informants’ side and network outside their working experience in the process of establishing long-term ties with them. It afforded me a level access to their personal lives otherwise absent from more formalised interview meetings. Countless times, I threw myself into the field outside an interview setting. They invited me, and I followed them to their quarters, social gatherings, fishing sessions, journeys back to their hometown, and the odd chat and gossip here and there. I also spent prolonged periods hanging around in their workplace, especially during non-peak hours in the restaurant’s kitchen, emergency staircase, and dining area.

The following sections illustrate the preparation phase and the fieldwork's sampling. I explain the fieldwork in three periods: the first year, second year, and data processing phase, after situating my social background in the field. A short discussion about this fieldwork's challenges, solutions, and key takeaways concludes the deliberations. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that a more spontaneous approach to fieldwork reaped its own rewards. My inquiry moved into the realms of being regarded as the migrant worker's friend and taken into their confidence.

Brunei Context

Brunei has historically depended on imported foreign labourer to build and sustain its economic development since the colonial-protectorate era (Noralipah, 2015, p. 149). Foreign migrant workers often fill laborious and service-providing jobs. Migrants from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Myanmar, and Thailand make up a large proportion of the country's unskilled and semiskilled labour force. Hence, a diverse workforce is typical of Chinese restaurants in Brunei today.

By the last quarter of the twentieth century, Brunei's booming economy attracted more foreign workers. New and preexisting migrant workers' networks have evolved and expanded. This phenomenon has been entrenched in the oil-rich state although foreign workers may appear temporary because of the contract-worker arrangement. Some of these workers have stayed on and made their lives in Brunei over the past four decades, each continuing the existing network or making new ones themselves (Lian et al. 2016, p. 6; Castles, 2004, pp. 222-225).

Migrant workers seek better jobs that provide higher wages and stability. Brunei prides itself on being a migrant-receiving nation due to its strong currency. Noralipah binti Hj Mohamed (2015: 152) suggested that migrants worked in the country to remit money to their home at the origin. Such explanations are dominant in many migrant studies in Brunei (Santoso, 2009, p. 536; Mani, 1996, p. 207; Asato, 2019, p. 136; Kumpoh, 2022, p. 60).

Yet, it does not tell the full story of a migration journey and often overlooks that the migrants have considerations other than money and personal factors that influence their choice of migration. By taking greater account of migrants on the ground, this paper seeks to fill this gap by showing that migration is a lived experience and that cultivating a more insider view can assist the researcher in accruing comprehensive data from their fieldwork endeavours.

Preparation

The preparation for the fieldwork started with the observation of my everyday life as a resident of Brunei. Other than knowing that there are Indonesian Chinese workers employed in my relative's restaurant and other Chinese-owned restaurants, I do not know anything about this group of migrants. I started preliminary site visits and observation by frequenting Chinese restaurants where Chinese-looking workers were aplenty.

Casual questioning about their origins informed me that they all came from different parts of West Kalimantan, of which Singkawang and Pontianak are the most cited places. Listening to their poor Mandarin showed that the standard Chinese language is not their first language. I overheard that they spoke Hakka and Bahasa Indonesia among themselves. Once I was certain that most of these Indonesian workers found in restaurants had originated from West Kalimantan, I began narrowing down my literature to be reviewed exclusively in West Kalimantan. Following this, I began to build my knowledge about the Chinese of this provincial origin.

Knowing that these migrants speak a version of Hakka that I could roughly get by, I began learning the dialect. The Indonesian national language (Bahasa Indonesia) is the least concern because I have already picked up everyday Malay language, which can be used almost synonymously with Bahasa Indonesia before this research. To my advantage, some of these migrants, especially female workers, are comfortable conversing in Mandarin, my first language.

Fieldwork

The relevance of my social background has to be clarified before sketching the context of the field and my position in it. I have resided in Brunei for the past twenty years. My ancestry traces to early Chinese diasporas who moved and settled in Brunei and West Kalimantan before my grandparents fled Pemangkat, a small town one hour away from Singkawang today, and migrated to Sarawak. I went through my education phase from primary school to my first degree and established myself and my network in Brunei. I hold a Malaysian passport and a permanent residence status in Brunei. As such, my tripartite origin became very tricky when I shared my history with the migrants. Other than enrolment in a university, I have also worked as a vegetable supplier for eight years. The social network that I am exposed to is inevitably the migrant workers circle, which mainly consists of Indonesian nationals such as Javanese, Sundanese, and Madurese.

This background was how I introduced myself to my informants and influenced how they treated me.

I eventually found out that all of them speak either the “HePo” (河婆) or “MeiXian” (梅县) Hakka as lingua franca (Hui, 2011, p. 21). Between the two versions of Hakka, the latter is “softer” in tone than the former. Mary Somers Heidhues (2003, p. 36) explained that these dialects originated from Hakka migrants who migrated to and concentrated in different parts of West Kalimantan during the early days of goldmining Kongsis era in the 1700s. The HePo Hakka migrants came from “Jieyang, Lufeng, Haifeng, Fengshun, and Huilai.”, whereas the MeiXian Hakka counterpart migrated from “the Hakka capital of Meixian”, both group of origins are located in the Guangdong region of China.

I consulted my partner and a Bruneian Chinese friend who knows the language for translation and explanation. They also helped me to translate and convey my words and made female informants more at ease when they joined me where I hung out in the field.

First Year

Loud noises from other diners chatting in English and Chinese, the utterance of orders in Tagalog, Malay, English, Mandarin, and Hakka across the whole dining area, bell ringing to pick up cooked dishes of rice or noodles from the kitchen’s counter, clicking sound from the cashier counter, and sounds of metal spoon stirring glass of tea or coffee make up the recurrent ambience of the main site where my fieldwork began: Chinese restaurants and coffeeshops (Kopitiam). With almost zero connection, my fieldwork started during my exploration on these sites.

Having checked many restaurants and other businesses such as workshops, supermarkets, goldsmiths, and the vegetable markets, I narrowed my focus to restaurants where there were more Indonesian Chinese workers. I went to a list of selected restaurants more regularly to ‘show my face’ and ‘hang around’ by myself or with my friends for tea or a meal.

Simultaneously, I started taking field notes during my observations. I noted, for instance, how many Indonesian Chinese workers are employed in this shop, what are their relations among themselves, how they act when the employer is or is not around, what is their interaction with the employer and coworkers of other nationality or ethnicity (similar Indonesian Chinese, Chinese of

different nationality) how do interactions with the employer and customers differ according to ethnicity, and what is the organizational hierarchy like inside this restaurant concerning ethnicity or nationality. This included eavesdropping on their conversations, which was inevitable as they openly spoke to one another in the dining area. These notes eventually served as a valuable source in writing the present thesis.

Six months later, I proceeded to the next stage by getting to meet and know these workers. I engaged them in everyday conversation about Indonesia and West Kalimantan and a bit of biographical inquiry, such as their name, origins, and siblings working in the same place. In these casual chats, I exchanged some information about myself with them. I kept highlighting my Pemangkat ancestry and relatives in our conversation and used it as a common topic that both parties could relate to. Throughout this process, I initially introduced myself as ‘Westly’, a local Chinese student studying at university and interested in interviewing them. To them, I remain a local educated Chinese stranger, then a local educated Chinese stranger with ancestry from West Kalimantan.

My notes began to be saturated with texts of similar observation, and the chats with the migrants did not go beyond immediate and superficial questions. Yearning for more direct contact, I kept my scope of potential informants open and asked my friends and connections for recommendations. This benefited the research as I have received some good suggestions.

However, one traumatic rejection experience from asking a Singkawang Chinese woman who is a banana vendor in a local market led me to believe that I should not jump into asking for an interview. Learning from this lesson, instead of introducing myself and this project and then requesting an interview, I resolved to meet and get to know the migrant first. I told them more about myself, clarified my research intention, and saw cultivating the relationship as long-term work. For instance, instead of asking for an interview, I started asking for a coffee and chat session (which turned out quite cringy for workers who already have access to complimentary tea and coffee from working in a restaurant).

As such, I chose to hang out in their restaurants by sitting down, having my tea and food, doing my work, and chatting with them when the traffic in the restaurant was low. Having made my interest in West Kalimantan clear to them, some of these workers came to me and chatted about people and things happening in Singkawang and Pontianak. One memorable exchange was the

“*Kueh Chap*” dish, typical in Chinese restaurants in Brunei. My key informant, Weng Feng, said that he had never tried the Brunei version before (which was imitated from Malaysia) and mentioned that Pontianak also has a similar dish. The name is “*Kweh Kia Teng*”, in TeoChew. I bought the dish and gave it to Weng Feng the next time I visited him in the kitchen.

Further communication also gave me more opportunities to tell them more about myself. As such, my new identification emerged, ‘Ah Wei’, a local Chinese with Pemangkat ancestry who speaks broken Hakka, likes to eat Indonesian food, is interested in learning about Singkawang and Pontianak, sells vegetables for side income, eats out very often, and is studying in university and interested in interviewing them. Before they could decide whether to accept my request for an interview or give me a confirmed appointment for a tea or coffee session, I already became more acquainted with them through these little chats and interactions.

Interestingly, asking for coffee sessions or interviews never worked out because the migrant workers’ view of time and appointment is uncertain. From their perspective, their job often took out much of their time. These workers’ immediate working overtime or gatherings with their friends and kin are hard to expect but frequent enough. They already have their time constrained by their work. Thus, they would not be interested in having scheduled interviews. It changed my perspective on approaching the field and conducting recorded interviews.

When I was enjoying my tea and scribbling on my notes, a Singkawang Chinese waitress, who never clearly answered my request for an interview, asked me if I would be interested in ordering some homemade Chinese biscuit from her, which she called ‘*Bok Kok Pia*’. After inquiring about where she learned to make this biscuit, she explained that it is a typical food in Singkawang and that most people who came from Singkawang would know it. Following, she added, “all of us here [workers in that restaurant] came from Singkawang.”. Her presentation also explained why some dishes on the menu were called “Singkawang Chicken Rice” and “*Singkawang Kueh Tiaw Goreng* (flat rice noodle)”.

The home cuisine associated with a particular locality gave me an opportunity to initiate conversations with the other Chinese workers. When I meet some of my acquaintances in different restaurants, I engage them in conversation about food from Singkawang, for instance, “Have you heard that this place is selling Singkawang Chicken Rice?”, “Take a look (shows photo of *Bok Kok Pia*), a Singkawang woman sold this to me. Do you know what is it (although I already know)?”.

Their replies varied; some were surprised, while the rest were not after I gave them some pieces of the biscuit to try. Most of them started talking about their memory of the food of origin.

At the same time, I also found many West Kalimantan sellers of homemade “Singkawang” food such as *sambal* (chilli sauce), cakes, and other biscuits on Facebook and some of the acquaintances’ relatives or siblings who are married and staying in Brunei, whom I immediately inquired about and placed an order with. At the point of collection, I get to meet these West Kalimantan Chinese housewives and chat with them about the food they are selling and, some biographical information about them and myself. Similarly, I engaged them with the topic of home cuisine and other sellers in the restaurants and online. Over these little interactions and communications with these people, I gradually picked up some local knowledge of Singkawang and West Kalimantan. I employed these topics of conversation to engage the workers subsequently.

One definitive breakthrough in my relationship with these Chinese workers happened after returning from a trip to Singkawang towards the end of the first year. Having acquainted Suk Juan before the trip, she suggested that my partner and I join her journey back to Pontianak at the end of her contract. After consulting the other workers and those who have already returned to West Kalimantan for good, I planned my travel journey. They suggested what to do, not do, where to go, and not to go. The trip itself and my experience in Singkawang and the Kuching-West Kalimantan border helped to strengthen my relationship with the migrant workers after returning.

Having seen Singkawang myself, I met the workers again with a head full of ideas to tell them what I saw during my trip to the city. I also had many questions that I had in mind to ask them, which included: Why do many food vendors name their shop using numbers in Singkawang, say, “*Bakso Sapi* 88 (beef ball), *Nasi Uduk* 998 (uduk rice), *Chao Phan* 515 (flat rice noodle)? Why were there significantly fewer Chinese food stalls in the city centre? Why were more Chinese located some distance away from the central? Why did the private driver charge me differently after knowing I have relatives in Pemangkat? Using the same questions about home cuisine in Brunei and the observations in Singkawang, my trans-local knowledge accumulated and became useful later.

In my conversation with Won Bin, Jhoni and Nhandra, I told them about the other Indonesian Chinese workers I have encountered. Since Singkawang is famous for being a *Kota Amoy* (City of Young Women) I told them I rarely encountered any while staying in central Singkawang. Jhoni explained,

Many *amoy* have gone out [to other countries] to work already. You would spot them easily during Chinese New Year, and most of them would be back. (laughs) so it is like a *Kota Auntie*, ya? You should see them at night in the coffee shop or mall by dinnertime. You probably find it hard to see them during that time because they fear getting tanned.

In addition, Won Bin added, “Central Singkawang is populated by *Fan Ngin* (Malay); you should have stayed in Pasar Hong Kong, close to Makhota Hotel; you would know once you visit these places”. I then verbally compared the Singkawang Chicken Rice dish I ate in Singkawang and Brunei. They were amused and said the two dishes could not be compared, while Won Bin claimed he could do the dish. Then, they recommended what to eat in Singkawang the next time I went.

Since I know about the prices of vegetables in Brunei, I was also constantly comparing the cost of vegetables I saw in Singkawang in which I claimed that “*petai* [bitter bean]” is very cheap and green there. They knew the price of *petai* in Brunei and were astonished by my interest in it and agreed that it is expensive in Brunei. In one instance, Won Bin joked about my identity “You are truly a descendant of Indonesian (for liking to eat *petai*).”. Upon sharing that Mui Ling stayed in Sungai Duri, Jhoni told me that that place is called *pak-ujan* locally, and then I started talking about the migration history of Mui Ling.

I kept myself engaged with my informants outside of the fieldwork throughout this period. This includes actively engaging my contacts by sending photos of the home cuisine, local food, my trip to Singkawang, my university campus, the fluctuation in the value of the Indonesian Rupiah, interesting news about Singkawang and essential notices about Brunei, and the daily COVID-19 updates. All these little talks here and there cemented our friendship over time. Eventually, our rapport improved, and they became more receptive and open to my queries.

Second Year

Communicating and exchanging information about ourselves helped to gradually improve our relations. By the second year, the migrant workers were comfortable with my presence as I hung around in their environment. I eventually found these chats insufficient in getting to the details of their experience. Interviews as a method of data collection had seemed less intrusive and almost synonymous with our everyday chat at this point. However, the remaining fieldwork and inquiry methods were to be determined by my informants unilaterally.

Instead of how I, as a researcher, think that data should be collected, my informants decide how they want to tell me about their lives, which is often not in an interview format. Although many of these migrants expressed themselves humorously, they usually perceive the interviews as something they are not familiar with, formal, and causing anxiety and doubts about ‘what is the right thing to say?’. My interview with them was the first interview that they had experienced. Most of my eighteen informants are not articulate or expressive storytellers, but it did not stop them from reflecting on their lives and recounting their migration experience as storytelling.

Many informants happily chatted with me about their lives, answering all the questions and inquiries. These interviews lasted two hours, on average, in the form of casual inquiries and chats, just as we usually did outside of the interview. The only exception is that I was allowed to inquire about the details directly. For example, Agosto identifies as being of Singkawang Chinese descent proudly (his Hakka has a strong Singkawang accent too!) who grew up in Pontianak.

The two hours of interview from each informant are never enough to learn about their lives. In the casual chats we did when I was hanging around, they recalled other detailed parts of their experiences. I would jot down these verbal accounts immediately after returning to my car.

Notably, they were also unclear about all the events and details. This includes the timing, reaction, thoughts, and things they said or did, which were confusing and vague for them to recall, let alone migrants who have been circulating between West Kalimantan and Brunei over the past ten or twenty years. Nevertheless, they remembered the impressions, sentiments, significant people, and critical events that led them to migrate. They perceived migration as a separate experience from their daily life. My interviewees lived their days without association with migration. For example, their narratives such as “when I first come out to work”, “my first job in Brunei”, “I

decided to come back to Brunei because...” and “I was thinking at that time...” coherently highlighted the differences in their experience before and once they migrated

On a side note, in terms of improving our friendship and being regarded as an insider as our friendship developed, I received invitations and offers of food, drinks, access to Wi-Fi, staying the night in their quarters (because sometimes I finished too late in the night and hence risky to drive), and special treatment when I order food in the restaurant.

It turned out that I was the one who was late in opening up to them. In the early period, I denied all these offers to avoid disturbing them or taking anything from them. I did not realise that their invitations were genuine, and heart-felt and would contribute to goodwill and friendship.

Friendship is essentially, to them at least, reciprocal. Eventually, I went from “no, thank you, I am good.” to “oh yes, please!” and began to demand or ask for things, such as “when are you cooking this for me to try? can you try baking this?”. Since then, I have followed my migrant worker friends to their social gatherings and received inquiries from them which they thought an English-educated, Chinese-literate, Malay-speaking, and Hakka-try hard student could help them solve, translate or explain.

One time, Fook Zai asked for my help to buy eight bottles of rice wine from Miri to ferment some Chinese medicine to be applied to the skin to help with muscle pain on his back. In another instance, I helped to book air tickets for Suk Juan to go to Kota Kinabalu and for Weng Feng to fly back to Kuching before he took private taxis back to Singkawang to visit his family. I also helped the housewives to promote their homemade food products through my existing network.

Countless times, I was also asked to help read the recipes and cooking instructions written in Chinese for the chef who showed me the recipe sheet or video. I became the source of clarification for some new directives announced by the government for the waitresses and education consultant for the housewives. Though I may not be the best person to offer assistance on these matters, our relationship as informants and researchers was built on such reciprocal exchanges.

This is how my approach to fieldwork has changed from intentionally directed inquiries to more passive and casual participation, absorbing and listening throughout my engagement with these migrant worker friends. Another group of informants exists besides the eighteen listed

informants. This group comprises West Kalimantan Chinese acquaintances or friends I met from fieldwork. They provided useful bits and pieces of information for my study.

In processing the verbal data collected, I translated their spoken Hakka into Mandarin words. In cases when a direct translation cannot be found, I would maintain the Hakka in Roman alphabetical spelling. I transcribed their Indonesian language as it was.

Challenges and Significances

The changes in my method of networking, building rapport, and data collection are responses to the dynamics of the field. My perception of the migrant group changed. I could not avoid assuming their hardship and sympathizing with them as many researchers about unskilled and semi-skilled migrant workers do in the early stages of reading and observing the West Kalimantan Chinese migrants. I thought they were poor, so they migrated to earn a better living before returning to their hometown.

The West Kalimantan Chinese migrated with the experience and culture they gained from living and socializing in West Kalimantan. They interpreted the context and people in Brunei with it. On the other hand, I similarly perceived my informants with preestablished impression gained from my part of the experience in Brunei.

Returning to the construction of ‘Westly’ and ‘Ah Wei’ in the field, they perceived the former as a person of higher status who would be uninterested in knowing everyday mundane things about their lives. It was not until I gradually built up the latter identification that they would start to see me differently and as someone interested in hanging around with them. The stereotype they had about me in the early phase of my fieldwork lingered in our interaction even after I shifted my identification to Ah Wei.

The label they assumed of me has naturally been essentialised, therefore serving as the foundation of this divide between us. Ah Wei is, hence, a Chinese person from Brunei. Similarly, my informants are Chinese from West Kalimantan and Indonesia. Fook Zai and a few other people always referred to me as ‘boss’ although I have already denied it and explained that I am not a business owner and would prefer him to call me Ah Wei. Their univocal reply was, in different words, “It does not matter. What if you become boss one day, right? Calling you boss more often would bring you closer to becoming a boss!”. They held to this view throughout my interactions

with them, conscious that I was different from them despite all the effort I made to remove this distinction.

As I became friends with my interlocutors, I thought, “Does the boundary still matter? So what if they still refer to me as somebody different from the West Kalimantan Chinese group? Do I need to reach a point when they would see me as a natural group member?”. The answer to these questions is simple. I can never get to the extent of an insider as their peers would have been among themselves. Indeed, I did not need to achieve that extent of familiarity to cultivate the proximity of friendship that I have achieved with them. On a side note, I continue to feel ‘going native’ is part of my character. Spending two years thinking, reading, observing, meeting, chatting, and hanging out with them has also stirred how I see my position in Brunei and West Kalimantan.

From being exposed to their working and personal life experiences in and outside the workplace and their subjective perspective of and how they make meaningful sense of their lives I came to appreciate that their lives as Hakka Chinese from West Kalimantan are not separate from that of migrants. The Indonesian Chinese identity does not come together neatly in a package.

The adaptation of racial identity, contestation of ethnic identity, and the construction and consolidation of national identity all break down in the face of the local environment and the place they inhabit. For instance, the local sociopolitical history, economic trajectory, geographical features, relation with the nation-state, immediate social environment, ecological diversity, ethnic composition and relation. The life experiences and outlook of my interlocutors as migrants differ from their Chinese counterparts in the metropolis, major cities, and other provinces in other regions of Indonesia.

My informants are foremost Chinese men and women who live a subsistence way of life, and Indonesian nationals of West Kalimantan before becoming migrants and semi-skilled and skilled wage labour in the host cities. Emily Hertzman (2017, p. 23-25) had a similar experience of holding certain assumptions about the Singkawang Chinese when she started her fieldwork. She thought the Chinese were searching for “safer places for ethnic Chinese belonging” to stay permanently. She eventually found that a considerable proportion of the migrant group migrated for “economic reasons” and did not settle in the host society for good.

It was not until I did the first few interviews that I realised I was guilty of looking at the West Kalimantan Chinese migrant workers from how other scholars had described them. For example, I started my fieldwork with questions aimed to incite my informants to elaborate how they see themselves as different from the Chinese of Jakarta. I found that the subjects in my list of questions for interviewing them were not meaningful to my informants, nor were they concerned about what I thought was the typical Indonesian Chinese's experience to begin with.

I also asked questions about topics I thought were important in their life. For instance, I eventually found out that the interviewees rarely bothered to talk about their experience in West Kalimantan and their expectations or plans if not prompted. Nevertheless, they were happier to talk about the present instead. The men were delighted to talk about their fishing experience instead of how they could not afford to buy fish or to eat when they were young. The females were happy to talk about travelling, recent popular Chinese TV dramas, and gossip about some customers instead of their plans for the future. Over time, I shifted from the first questionnaire (Figure 1) to the second (Figure 2). Then, in the third (Figure 3), each gets less and less dictating the interview session and becomes more and more of a guided casual chat, significantly giving the guiding torch to the interviewees as they speak their minds.

1. Self-introduction

- Name
- Date of Birth
- Language
- Marital & Children
- School experience
- Family status
- Parents / Siblings

2. Can you describe to us about your life experience in your kampong?

- Future Marriage / Children's future?
- ETC

3. Why do you think it was necessary to work overseas, not in your kampong or Indonesia?

- What is your family's view about this? Are they supportive?
- Any problem or pressure or stress you face in your kampong other than money?
- 4. How did you learn about the possibility of working in Brunei? Did someone tell you about it? Does the person have any experience in Brunei?
- 5. What did you think about Brunei at that time? Why not consider other countries, maybe Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, etc.?
- Ask about who helped them to prepare their journey (flight, etc.) and visa (employment) to come to Brunei.
- Do they have family/friends in Brunei? What job are they in?
- Who helped them adapt?
- 6. Can you tell me about your working experience in Brunei?
- When did you first arrive and work here?
- Changing jobs? Where?

- If change, why change?
 - How frequently do you go back to kampong? Do you stay a long time?
 - Do you maintain contact with family/friends in your kampong?
7. Do you send your salary back to kampong or save/use yourself?
- If split, how much is divided for send back and save/use yourself?
 - If send back, who in your family do you send it to? Why that person and not the others? Do you know what they spend the money on? Do they ask you for permission first?
 - What are the top 3 uses of your salary in kampong?
8. You have long working hours and work almost every day. When do you have time to meet with family or friends in Brunei?
9. Where do you meet with them at (as said in 13) that time? What do you guys do?
10. Have you met any new friends? How?
11. Is the food you eat at your kampong different from here? Can you tell me about their difference? Do you miss eating them? Can you cook those foods yourself here, or do you eat outside?
- If you eat outside, where do you eat? Can you describe to us about the place? Who goes there? What food name? Expensive?
 - If you cook by yourself, do you eat it yourself or share it with people? Who? Do they like it?
12. Do you know about Warung Orang Indon in Brunei? Do you go there?
- If yes, what do you think about their food? Price?
 - Do you stay there and talk with friends/families?
 - Do you know where your Indonesian friends frequently hang out?
 - Ask further detailed questions about WARUNG or the place he/she frequently goes with friends or family.
13. Coming to a close, is there any other thing that you would like to share with us?

Figure 1. First Questionnaire

1. Intro
2. Kampong
3. Work oversea, Family status
4. Pressure
5. Vacancy info
6. View of BN and other countries
7. Travel process
8. Work Experience
9. Return and return
10. Name of origin
11. Agama
12. Language learning
13. Lao gu ban
14. Education/ training
15. Ambition
16. Thoughts/ feelings / view

Figure 2. Second Questionnaire

Can you tell me about your life in Kampong before migrate?
Can you tell me how did you end up here?
Can you tell me about your work experience and lifestyle?

Figure 3. *Third Questionnaire*

Migration as an Individualistic Lived Experience

This discussion on my preconceptions leads to the next issue about viewing migration as a lived experience. It is easy to forget that migration is a ‘lived experience’ constituted by the migrant’s daily routine. The informant’s perception of migration as they live in places away from home is constructed by experiences they gained by migrating and living as labour migrants. In this way, migrating for work is a particular experience that each migrant goes through. One can grasp the migrant’s perspective more effectively by looking at their broad migration experience that starts from when they first come into contact with the idea of migration in their hometown and how the perception changes over time.

This approach to understanding labour migration problematizes the conclusion that has been arrived at by many researchers who wrote about the Chinese of West Kalimantan and their motivation to migrate. As this paper has shown, West Kalimantan Chinese migrant workers are seen as actors who are constantly making sense of leaving their familiar and comfortable homeplace, travelling to, living, and working in the destination society. It shares similarity with the work of Johan Lindquist (2009, p. 148) who studied the individual experience of Indonesian migrants who migrated to Batam for work. He focused on the internal world of the migrants, how they perceived the context they found themselves in, and how they made sense of migration with the Indonesian concept of “*merantau* meaning circular migration... *malu* meaning shame or embarrassment... *liar* meaning wild.”.

Although money, exposure, and status are the obvious answers to which they subscribe to in rationalizing the often-spontaneous decision to move, these are the responses most migrants would say to cut short interrogation from a researcher. In other words, besides money and social expectations, practical and everyday considerations are also influential factors in their individual

experience with migration; concerns, thoughts, feelings, expectations, expenses to move, or impressions are often overlooked by scholars. These examples are components of the migrant's aspiration and capability, which the individual actively rationalizes.

So, how do we dig deeper and unearth what is happening beneath the surface of the migrant's pecuniary narrative? In addition to looking at what they say during the interview and what they do in contrast to their narrative, I also look at their everyday lived experiences and our conversation. In their everyday lives, we can see that they are not always consistent about their goals or logical economic reasoning. Decisions and actions that migrants make during migration can be irrational or unpredictable. There are also non-goal-oriented behaviours that make up part of their life. They are simply living their lives from day to day or week to week.

As such, examining their everyday lived experience throughout the migration process, from toying with the idea of migration in their home of origin, the migration journey, and working and living in the host society is important. To narrow these many variables down, it is useful to categorise and analyse the migrant workers' life experience based on five identities: economic status, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and place of origin.

Larger social and structural changes are of course relevant influences in migration and its trajectories. However, this paper does not dwell on the analysis of macro-context, for the focus is on how migrants view and experience their own migration. Structural changes are mostly an abstraction for these migrants in their everyday lives, and they do not always know about them. For instance, while the structural impact of the 1997-1999 financial crisis drove more Indonesian workers to migrate abroad (Hugo, 2003, p. 441), my informants rarely referred to this event, while the younger ones did not know about it either.

Other Considerations

One significant point was that my informants recollected and talked about their lives by looking backwards. This is important to keep in mind because their responses may mislead us in assuming that these migrants knew what was going on and what to do when they were young, especially in times when they were thinking about or leaving their places of birth to work for the first time. My informants frequently justified their decision to migrate in the past. They drew on the results that they have achieved or the objective they had at the time of the data collection stage as if they were

trying to deny the possibility that they did not have a grand plan in mind when they first migrated out to work. In the process of recollection and reflection, I received regular responses such as, say, “we all come to look for money.” “I came because of money.”, “Brunei has better money.”, “the currency here is so much stronger.”, “Yea, the plan [to come to Brunei] is still favourable in those days, but [with inflation and stagnant economy in Brunei], it is not so sufficient [for a good living] anymore now.”.

Gender differences also proved tricky in both the preparation and data collection phases. Female informants were more careful in their dealing with me. One of the female informants thought I wanted to court her younger sister who worked in the same restaurant. One housewife tried to introduce me to her daughter. Some female informants also asked to be interviewed together with other female informants. Some housewives asked to do video calls or ask me to visit them in their house instead because they have children to look after or do not have transport. For the guys, it was a lot easier. But getting the guys to talk to me was the most challenging part because the male migrants are less expressive and more guarded.

Conclusion

A defining feature of hanging around as method (it did not have to be as such if I started the fieldwork with an open mind) is the fieldworker’s conscious effort to not see the migrant workers as simply informants. As this paper has shown, qualitative data collection in labour migration studies should go beyond this view. To do so, involves the researcher humanizing the interviewees as people with motivations and concerns as migrant labour other than purely pecuniary and in establishing a connection with them before proceeding to interview.

Fieldwork recollections show that I experienced difficulty in establishing a good rapport with the migrants due to the differences in our social backgrounds as evidenced in my presentation of myself as Westly and then Ah Wei. The insider-outsider divide hindered my access to collect more subjective and richer personal data beyond the standard ‘pecuniary’ responses. A key insight I gained was that any plan of jumping straight to interview is difficult to realize without mutual trust between me and my interviewees. Even if an interview had taken place, the data output of the interview would have revealed little as opposed to the discussions built on trust and familiarity between me and them.

By illustrating how I established a connection with migrant informants, I have shown the difficulties and challenges of building rapport with them and gradual bridging of that divide as we gained more information about each other. Data collection and building a connection with informants is a two-way process. We want to know more about their life as researchers, reciprocally, they too need to know about us before they feel at ease, trust and accept our presence. I have also shown that the insider-outsider divide can never be wholly dissolved due to our sociocultural baggage. However, this dichotomy does not necessarily prevent the researcher from accessing the informants' stories of the other side. The building of mutual knowledge and trust with the interview subject can open greater access to the rest of their migration experience. I end this paper with quotes from two of my informants when I expressed my deepest gratitude to them for granting me an interview.

Informant A replied, "no problem as long as it is within my ability to help a friend.". Similarly, informant B said, "if you are not my friend why would I bother to talk to you? Why would I tell you all these things (about his life)? Why would I bring you to meet my friends?".

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