

Aggravated Uncertainties, Researcher Resilience, and Ambiguous Positionality Doing Fieldwork in China Amid COVID-19 Pandemic

International Journal of Qualitative Methods
Volume 23: 1–15
© The Author(s) 2024
DOI: 10.1177/16094069241296986
journals.sagepub.com/home/ijq



Hongsheng Zhao^{1,2}  and Wenwei Bao³ 

Abstract

This paper aims to answer the research questions of ‘How did COVID-19 aggravate the uncertainties in geographical fieldwork, and how could the researchers cope with the challenges?’ Referring to the case study method in scrutinising a fieldwork case that has been conducted by the researchers on Chinese rural-urban migrants in 2020–2021, this research explores the multi-layers of increased uncertainties amid COVID-19. It reveals that that recent COVID-19 pandemic and its knocking-on effects have profound impacts on fieldwork in Chinese context: not only aggravating the scale of uncertainties, but also extending the uncertainties through several dimensions, including harder access to the field, more severe surveillance, which lead to fragile trust between informants and field researcher. The article further posits the significance of researcher’s resilience and reflectivity in fieldwork to address the emerging challenges, proposing adjusted positionality for researchers under the similar context of doing fieldwork in China amid COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords

geographical fieldwork, COVID-19 pandemic, fieldwork in China, uncertainty, researcher resilience, positionality

Introduction: Studying Fieldwork Amid COVID-19 Pandemic

Fieldwork is defined as ‘the process of observing and collecting data about people, culture and natural environments’ (Kent et al., 1997, p. 314; Royal Geographical Society, 2023). A classic approach in collecting research data in geographical studies, anthropology, sociologies (Bryman, 2012; Bulmer, 1984; Fife, 2005; McGarrol, 2017; Saxena, 2023), it remains a popular data collection method for accessing qualitative and quantitative first-hand data (Bryman, 2012; Saxena, 2023). Compared to other disciplines, field research in the discipline of geography is characterised by closer association with specific geographic locations – often referred to as fields, which may expose the process of data collection more to risks incurred by global crisis like COVID-19 pandemic (Royal Geographical Society, 2023).

COVID-19 has been declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020, and further to

characterize an International Health Crisis on 11 March 2020, by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020). It has caused instantaneous impacts on international geographical fieldwork, with national state government imposing international travelling bans since early 2020 (Herrick et al., 2022; Zou & Zhao, 2022). The impacts on researchers conducting

¹School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Glasgow, UK

²School of Technology, Business and Arts, University of Suffolk, UK

³Department of Geography and Resource Management, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region

Corresponding Author:

Hongsheng Zhao, School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Glasgow, Rm 229, Bute Garden, Hillhead, West End, Glasgow G12 8QQ, UK. School of Technology, Business and Arts, University of Suffolk, Rm 103, Arts Building, Ipswich IP4 1 QJ, UK.
Email: jhszhao@cantab.ac.uk

Data Availability Statement included at the end of the article



Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

fieldwork can be more profound as the entangled crisis of COVID-19 has not only hindered mobility for travel, but also bestowed unexpected challenges and psychological stress towards field researcher – this is even more severe challenge for researchers conducting field work in Global South context with surging number of COVID-19 cases, inadequate healthcare infrastructure and public health resources, as well as erratic, unreconciled local government policies and administration (Giwa, 2015). These conditions have caused knocking-on effects that reveal the deeply embedded inequality and intrigued conflicts of the fieldwork (Bhakta, 2022; Pio & Singh, 2016).

This paper aims to answer the research questions: ‘How did COVID-19 aggravate the uncertainties in geographical fieldwork, and how could the researchers cope with the challenges?’ as there is a need to reflect on researcher vulnerability and resilience during global crises such as COVID-19 (Asante et al., 2021; Chen, 2020). The research will tease out discussion on researchers’ individual reflections in fieldwork amidst COVID-19 by reflectively examines individual researchers’ experiences (Saxena, 2023).

The remainder of the paper comprises three sections: a literature review on fieldwork and COVID-19’s impact, a case study on vulnerable rural-urban migrants in China by the authors, followed by reflections on uncertainties, resilience, and positionality.

Literature Review

Fieldwork and Uncertainties

‘The current disruption to fieldwork faced by scholars across the academy brings to the surface numerous issues at the heart of social-scientific fieldwork practice.’ (Woodworth et al., 2022).

Geographers have long been aware of the uncertainties in research, especially those involving fieldwork (Senanayake & King, 2021). As early as the 18th century when geographical fieldwork still took the form of expeditions, uncertainties were a certain component of fieldwork. Oxford’s *A Dictionary of Geography* summarizes two broad categories of uncertainty in geography: the first is uncertainty related to the estimation of measurement error, and the second is related to the production of geographical knowledge (Mayhew, 2015). For the first issue, Fusco et al. (2017) identified eight domains in geography where the uncertainty with knowledge itself arises, including geographic information, geographic definitions, the explanation of geographic phenomena, the complexity of spatial systems, geo-simulation, the representation of spatial knowledge, subjectivity in spatial phenomena, and planning. The second category focuses more on uncertainties in the process of ‘how we come to know’, which is the main theme of this article.

Though there have been more discussions on uncertainties after the outbreak of COVID-19, many have dashed into the

discussion without clearly stating the exact meaning of uncertainty. Uncertainty is often used interchangeably with risk in various contexts. However, they are distinct concepts (Senanayake & King, 2021). Both concepts can find their origin from the subject of economics, where risk is defined as ‘randomness with knowable probabilities’, while uncertainty as ‘randomness with unknowable probabilities’ (Mayhew, 2015, p. 1). In human geography, ‘uncertainty’ is defined as ‘a condition in which the possible consequences of an action are known, but not the relative likelihood of their occurrence’ (Rogers et al., 2013). Based on extensive literature exploration and the researchers’ own fieldwork experiences, the uncertainties caused by COVID-19 to fieldwork research can be sorted into the following categories, in Table 1:

Researcher Vulnerability and Resilience

With increasing uncertainties in research, both participants’ and researchers’ vulnerability has been paid more attention by the academic (Howard & Hammond, 2019; Råheim et al., 2016). Deeply rooted in the tradition of social science research, particularly those studies that employed qualitative methods, participant vulnerability is a topic that has drawn intensive attention and discussions within the realm of research ethics (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012; Fisher, 2012; von Benzon & van Blerk, 2017). Participants, also known as informants, are deemed as vulnerable in research due to asymmetrical information, imbalanced power relationship and surveillance (Gillen, 2012; Yu et al., 2022), while researchers are assumed to possess a more privileged position (Amos, 2014; Bashir, 2020; Råheim et al., 2016).

Meanwhile, qualitative researchers increasingly acknowledge the vulnerabilities they face during fieldwork. These vulnerabilities arise as researchers establish close connections with participants, both professionally and personally. For instance, delving into emotionally charged topics can strain researchers’ psychological well-being (Howard & Hammond, 2019; McGarrol, 2017).

Researcher vulnerability, outlined by Jafari et al. (2013), encompasses catalysts such as sensitive contexts and emotional exposure, resulting in emotional distress or threats to safety. Sterie et al. (2023) expanded on this concept during the pandemic, identifying dimensions like reciprocity and ethical challenges, stemming from factors including sensitive topics and inadequate support. COVID-19 has exacerbated these vulnerabilities, leaving researchers more exposed to physical and mental challenges.

Encountered with all forms of uncertainties in fieldwork, building up resilience among researchers worth more discussion (Rahman et al., 2021). Resilience refers to the ability to keep the research project thriving during both peaceful times and crisis (Suadik, 2022). Some scholars managed to build up resilience by setting up collaborative and caring research team with the help of emerging videoconference

Table 1. Categories of Uncertainties in Fieldwork.

Category of Uncertainty	Examples	Source
A. Uncertainties in access to the field	Travel restrictions, institutional regulations on fieldwork in certain areas	Newman et al., 2021; Eggeling, 2022
B. Uncertainties in participant recruitment	Social distancing, closure of public facilities, 'digital gap'	Hall et al., 2021; Kobakhidze et al., 2021
C. Uncertainties in the quality of data	Limitations of online data collection methods, building trust	Tremblay et al., 2021; Engward et al., 2022
D. Uncertainties in research collaboration	Communication with collaborators at distance, researcher-RA relationship	Envuladu et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2022
E. Uncertainties in compliance with research ethics	Receive informed consent, data privacy and confidentiality	Hall et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2021
F. Uncertainties in personal and career development	Complete research and degree within limited time, funding issues, loneliness and lack of support, physical and mental well-being	Rahman et al., 2021; Cornejo et al., 2023

Source: adapted by authors from various sources.

platforms and instant messaging tools in the pandemic (Asante et al., 2021; Dunia et al., 2023; Envuladu et al., 2022). While some scholars highlight the importance of constant reflection and generating pragmatic contingency plan (Suadik, 2022). The researcher's own strategies to enhance resilience when conducting fieldwork in Mainland China during the pandemic are discussed in the following sections.

Context of Study: Unfolding COVID-19 in China and Greater Bay Area

Since the first cluster of cases were reported in China in December 2019, COVID-19 has swept the whole world in the three years, imposing tremendous changes on people's everyday lives. COVID-19 is a global crisis in general and 'uncertainty crisis' for research practice in particular. The pandemic itself and measures to combat it have brought unprecedented uncertainties to researchers working in various fields.

In Mainland China where the fieldwork mainly took place, people experienced more stringent restrictions to combat the pandemic. Wuhan, the origin of the first COVID-19 case, was put into lockdown first on 23rd January 2020 (Illmer et al., 2021). This also marked the beginning of a nationwide lockdown starting from late January and lasted until March or April according to the situations of respective provinces and cities. Individual cities would start lockdown for the whole city or certain districts when deemed necessary. China also developed a three-tier risk management system, classifying different regions into 'High-risk Area', 'Middle-risk Area' and 'Low-risk Area'. Different measures were tailor-made for different risk areas, and risk areas would be adjusted according to the changing situation (Cheng et al., 2023).

Besides lockdown and other macro measures, there were also various micro-management measures. Mask mandate was applied in crowded venues, including public transport, workplaces and schools, and mass gatherings were prohibited. Restrictions were imposed on both international and domestic

travelling. International travellers entering Mainland China were subject to compulsory quarantine in designated places and completed regular tests throughout the quarantine. People were required to make health declarations and report their trajectory in the past 14 days when travelling to a different place within the country (National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China, 2022). The Chinese state also used big data to assist virus containment. A 'Health Code' system - known as *Jiankangma* in Chinese, was introduced for COVID-19 contact-tracing. Under the system, each person had a constantly updated Quick Response (QR) code in different colours, which represents the individual's exposure to COVID, including the risk level of area the individual travelled to (Cheng et al., 2023). People were required to show their health code before entering public places such as shopping malls, schools, and workplaces. People with yellow, orange, or red code would be denied access to public facilities and their mobility would be constrained. These restrictions and regulations underpinned China's 'Net-Zero' COVID-19 policy, but also increased the uncertainties in fieldwork in Mainland China, which will be discussed in detail in section three of the paper.

In the Greater Bay Area, high mobility of migrants and population density brought extra challenges in confining the outbreaks of the pandemic. The first COVID-19 case in Guangdong Province was confirmed as early as on 19th January 2020 (Caixin, 2022), and spread quickly with the returning of migrants after the spring festival of the Lunar New Year. In February 2020, Guangdong became the province with third largest number of COVID-19 cases (China Development Institute, 2020). Luckily, the public health system in Guangdong is relatively familiar with large-scale pandemic due to the experience of combating SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) back in 2003 and took prompt actions to contain the virus. During the fieldwork of this research, the situation of COVID-19 in GBA was relatively stable, without severe city-level outbreaks. The management of COVID-19 was incorporated into people's daily routines, including social

distancing, regular tests, and digital management like health code. The effective controlling of COVID-19 in GBA provided the possibility for research team to conduct fieldwork while posed uncertainties and difficulties at the same time.

Given the challenging context with heterogenous demography and high mobility, governments in GBA strengthen the management of vulnerable and mobile population amidst COVID, including migrants as informants of this research. For example, urban villages in GBA are one of the major affordable accommodations for migrants and were identified as key areas of pandemic control (Wang et al., 2009), they were converted from un-gated communities to gated communities by adding turnstiles at entrances. People were required to present health code and trajectory records if they want to enter the village. Moreover, grassroot governments conducted large-scale screening of migrants and registered their personal information and health status (Health Commission of Guangdong, n.d.). Both COVID-19 itself and the pandemic prevention measures greatly affected the ongoing fieldwork in Chinese GBA, and the impacts are further elaborated in the following section.

COVID-19 Impacts on Fieldwork

Obstacles to Ongoing Fieldwork. The outbreak of COVID-19 has brought unprecedented obstacles and challenges to fieldwork in general and particularly fieldwork in human geography. Among those most affected are the fieldwork which had already started before the hit of COVID-19, as the situation might require the adaptation of the whole research design of ongoing research projects (Kobakhidze et al., 2021). This section delves into the main obstacles that COVID-19 brought to these ongoing research projects.

The institutional restrictions were the obstacles researchers experienced at the early stage of fieldwork. Institutional restrictions include travelling restrictions and border control, as well as some higher education institutions' ban on their members doing research in some high-risk countries. These restrictions resulted in denied access to travel to the field site (Yip, 2021). As a result, researchers were left with options of delaying the fieldwork period, changing the fieldwork site, or cancelling the fieldwork, all of which can have adverse impacts on the whole research project. When the researchers were denied physical access to their field site, but the fieldwork was about to continue, they were forced to rely more on remote practice like 'remote fieldwork' and the assistance of 'facilitating researchers', who are usually the local researchers (Dunia et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2022). Both remote fieldwork and remote collaboration added more communication cost and uncertainties.

For fieldwork at a later stage, it became difficult, if not impossible, for researchers to recruit participants via conventional measures due to the widely implemented lockdown and social distancing (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2022). Various public facilities were closed, and people were 'absent' from

public places. Even when the researchers managed to approach potential participants, sometimes they found it more difficult than in the past to build rapport amidst the heightened surveillance and hostile atmosphere during COVID-19 (Woodworth et al., 2022). Besides the access to participants, researchers who rely more on local archives also lost access to some important public facilities, such as local library or archive centre, which could otherwise enhance the field research (Elshater & Abusaada, 2022; Finn et al., 2020). These COVID restrictions added to obstacles in collecting first-hand and second-hand data, which is usually the primary purpose of fieldwork.

Another obstacle for ongoing fieldwork is how to complete the research project while maintaining good ethical practices amidst the pandemic. As researchers were geographically separated from the participants, they were forced to use alternative approaches to obtain proper consent from participants. With more use of online platforms in remote fieldwork, the confidentiality and privacy of participants sometimes could not be guaranteed, and researchers need to scrutinise the relevant policies of the online platform they used (Comejo et al., 2023). Researchers may also be aware that the pandemic exaggerated inequality and vulnerability among various social groups and need to carefully assess if the involvement in research would have negative impacts on the participants.

It has been acknowledged by scholars that research conducted in authoritarian settings with intensive surveillance can be more challenging (Koch, 2013; Menga, 2020), as surveillance has substantial impacts on access to and rapport with potential respondents. This issue was magnified during the pandemic. During COVID-19, many states imposed more stringent surveillance, starting from the public health sector, to trace infected people and contain the virus (Calvo et al., 2020; Yu et al., 2022).

Throughout the fieldwork, COVID-19 also brought more obstacles for the researchers. One major issue is maintaining both physical and mental well-being when conducting the fieldwork. Another major obstacle is that COVID-19 might diminish the already limited time and funding for research, especially for early career researchers (Saxena, 2023). As a result, COVID-19 also increased the time and financial costs of fieldwork. It can further heighten the anxiety towards future career development among young researchers and has negative impacts on their psychological well-being.

Emerging Forms of Innovative Fieldwork. COVID-19 has impacted both ongoing and forthcoming fieldwork, inspiring innovative formats like remote fieldwork utilising virtual tools such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams for qualitative research (Bhakta, 2022; Lobe et al., 2020). These methods extend to co-production of online street 'story maps' and virtual photovoice projects (Chen, 2020; Hunter et al., 2021; Woodworth et al., 2022), though researchers have acknowledged some of these methods' limitations and propose for scrutiny.

Moreover, the pandemic has highlighted the significance of certain aspects of the contingency plans, such as health and mobility, these are often overlooked in prior research practices (Dunia et al., 2023). Similar to the public health sector during COVID-19 (Wang et al., 2020; Mattei & Vigevano, 2021), contingency planning related to health and mobility is now deemed crucial in fieldwork research. To tackle unprecedented uncertainty, researchers are adopting ‘Plan B’ or even ‘Plan C’ strategies to anticipate and manage unforeseen situations (Krause et al., 2021).

COVID-19 inadvertently led to a reshaping of researcher-collaborator relationships and altered brand-new knowledge production methods (Nguyen et al., 2022). Traditionally, research assistants in field sites were limited to supporting roles, receiving less credit in the final project output (Deane & Stevano, 2016; Turner, 2010). However, with travel restrictions affecting principal researchers from Global North institutions, reliance on local collaborators in the Global South increased. This shift potentially elevated the importance and influence of researchers in the field, challenging the imbalanced power dynamics and fostering more equitable relationships (Dunia et al., 2023). Furthermore, COVID prompted reflection on research inequalities and power dynamics with participants. Remote fieldwork highlighted disparities in digital access, raising awareness of the “digital gap” and unequal participation opportunities (Salma & Giri, 2021).

To summarise, the COVID-19 pandemic, though offering insights for future crisis management, amplified the inherent uncertainties in fieldwork. Addressing longstanding distress and mental health concerns among researchers in academia has been hindered by the emphasis on rationality over personal experiences. This following section delve into a specific PhD research project in China during COVID-19 to further unpack the dynamics.

Case Study: A PhD Fieldwork in Chinese Greater Bay Area

This section explores a completed PhD fieldwork in China’s Greater Bay Area (GBA) conducted from December 2020 to May 2021. The research focuses on the urbanisation experiences of rural-urban migrants, known locally as *shiminhua*. The study involved visiting three cities in the GBA to gather both qualitative data through Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) and semi-structured interviews, and quantitative data obtained from surveys.

The GBA, established in 2016, encompasses a city cluster in the previously known Pearl River Delta of South China, comprising two special administrative regions and nine cities in Guangdong province. It spans 56,000 sq. km and hosts a population of approximately 68 million (Local Gazetteers Editing Committee of Guangdong Province, 2014). The region’s rapid development since the 1980s is benefited from the foreign investment and industrial spill-over from Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and favourable state policies. It

is famous for being one of the first of several manufacturing hubs on the frontier of the Chinese economic reform and opening-up policies; numerous international companies have located their factories there, attracting large influx of migrant workers from the rural hinterland (Li & Siu, 1997; Lin, 2006). Table 2 highlights three central cities in Guangdong province—Guangzhou, Dongguan, and Zhongshan—chosen as field sites within the GBA.

Fieldwork Plan, Design, and Administration

The fieldwork spanned from late November 2020 to early May 2021, lasting five months with a half-month break during the Lunar New Year in early 2021. Covering 45 sites across three cities, the data collected included 12 Focused Group Discussions (FGDs), a pilot study with 48 questionnaires, 307 survey questionnaires, and 30 semi-structured interviews.

Figure 1 outlines the fieldwork structured into three phases: Phase I involved 12 FGDs with 4 to 6 participants each, conducted in various locations by the field researcher. After FGDs, a brief tidying-up process included numbering questionnaires, addressing illegible handwriting, and transferring data to spreadsheets. Field notes that were made during the process documented noteworthy situations or topics for later review. Phases II and III, initially designed as separated phrases, ended up merged due to time constraints and workload volume. Data saturation in Phase III signalled the conclusion of fieldwork administration (Bryman, 2012; Crinson & Leontowitsch, 2016). Administration entailed setting specific targets for FGDs, interviews, and surveys per field visit, preceded by communication with gatekeepers to schedule visits (Lamprianou, 2022). Field visits were supported by a local field team organised by the principal investigator.

Organisation of Fieldwork Team

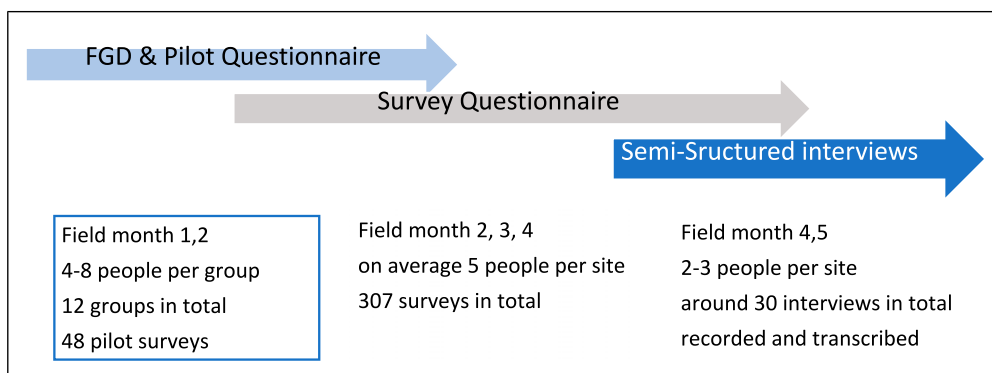
The principal investigator applied for visiting research assistantship at University S, a local University based at Guangzhou, subsequently organised a field team of eight researchers to support intensive data collection. Recruitment started in late April 2020, with advertisements highlighting research background of the project, application eligibility, expected time commitment, and participation methods, targeting local social media, senior undergraduate, and post-graduate groups in related subjects. Around 60 applications were received, followed by Zoom interviews assessing motivation, fieldwork experience, and outreach abilities. Proficiency in local language Cantonese was a plus but not mandatory when recruiting local researchers.

Successful candidates received contracts outlining their rights and responsibilities according to UK institutional guidelines. Despite diverse disciplines, three one-hour training sessions were arranged pre-fieldwork to cover field conditions, challenges, and potential COVID-19 lockdown

Table 2. Comparison of the Three Selected Cities in GBA.

	Guangzhou	Dongguan	Zhongshan
City tier	Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3
Location	23°08'N; 113°16'E	23°02'N;113°43'E	23°08'N;113°16'E
Population	14.90 million	8.32 million	3.14 million
Rural-urban migrants	228,093	173,662	46,905
Area	7,434 km ²	2,465 km ²	1,784 km ²
City Status	Provincial Capital	One of the 'four tiger cities' in Guangdong	Medium-sized city, early experiment in local reform

Source: 2019 Statistical Yearbook of Guangdong Province.

**Figure 1.** Field research timeline in GBA. Source: Authors, adapted from (Bryman, 2012).

scenarios. Guest speakers, experienced in intensive fieldwork in China, addressed the aspects of ethics, knowledge, and skills, via 3 online seminars detailed in Table 3.

During these training sessions, the team established work procedures, devised strategies to address COVID-19 risks based on guest speakers' insights and personal experiences. Additionally, team evaluations at the end of each phase promoted team cohesion and progress tracking. Informal peer evaluations assessed field researchers' performance. The team collaborated on documentation and detailed field notes from diverse perspectives, finalized within the same week after on-site work. These notes served as reflective points for an in-person debriefing team session held on May 4, 2021, where field researchers, informants, local research partners, and other involved researchers shared preliminary project results in a mini-conference.

Ethical Considerations

The other aspect to consider throughout the fieldwork are ethical issues. This is of importance as the informants of the case are vulnerable rural-urban migrants: The vulnerability of the informant group is constructed by multiple factors, including precarious job status, unsuitable living conditions, suffering from local discrimination, and higher level of surveillance in working places etc. (Khan & Kraemer, 2014).

Hence, particular care and efforts have been devoted to ethical issues to protect the rural-urban migrants from potential harm (Sun, 2019).

Participants were briefed via a Participation Information Sheet and signed an Informed Consent Form before surveys or interviews. Questions followed a prepared Interview Guide, conducted in safe, agreed-upon spaces - usually one of the factories' conference rooms. Data was securely stored in the online cloud space encrypted and protected by the researcher's institution for safety and flexible access considering the high mobility of the researchers; and anonymized during analysis to safeguard informants' identities and minimize negative impacts. Participants consented to participate the research on an anonymous basis - name of the informants and other personal information were codified to prevent the revelation of real identity. The aim is to reduce the negative impacts on the informants to a minimum extent.

Challenges Imposed and Aggravated by COVID-19 Pandemic

Resonating the literature section on conducting fieldwork, COVID-19 exacerbated longstanding challenges in field research, amplifying issues like logistics, project funding, travel, and local accommodations. To assess the consequences of COVID-19 on fieldwork in Global South contexts, this

Table 3. Online Training Log for the Field Team.

Session	Time	Theme	Guest Speaker
1	Wednesday 11 November 19:30–20: 30	Overview and Ethical Issues of Fieldwork	E. Gao (London School of Economics): Dealing with local bureaucracy in fieldwork in China
2	Sunday 15 November 20: 00–21:00	Quantitative Fieldwork: Assisting Surveys	F. Lyu (Stockholm Economic School): Resident survey administration for high-quality data
3	Wednesday 18 November 21:00–22: 00	Qualitative Fieldwork: Focus Group and Interviews	Y. Jia (University of Cambridge): Doing interviews in China & X. Liu (Local Journalist in Guangzhou): Transcribing semi-structured interviews efficiently

Source: Compiled by authors.

section will delve into three challenges due to the pandemic: field access, heightened surveillance, and fragile trust with informants.

Limited Access to the Field. One of the largest challenges could be traced back to the very initial stage of getting access to the field (Lata, 2020). Local policies on COVID-19 by late 2020 and earlier 2021 were opaque and erratic in many countries (Lau, 2022). As required by the policy at that time, any overseas arrivals – as the case of the field researcher coming from the UK were liable to be quarantined in a hotel located in Guangzhou suburbs for a fortnight to clear out any potential COVID-19 infection risks (Chen, 2020). Since the quarantine hotel provided limited hours of Wi-Fi and very weak telephone signals, the researcher found it arduous to reach out to potential gatekeepers via online meetings or phone calls during the quarantine period, disturbing the original plan for proactive engagement with the field during the hotel quarantine. Despite the inconvenience in the two-week hotel quarantine, the researcher managed to run three online training sessions for the field research team as specified in Table 3, with essential logistic support in setting up online meetings from other field team members.

The researchers faced difficulties accessing manufacturing sites given a snowball sampling method for data collection. These manufacture sites, focused on three major industrial sectors with a high concentration of migrant workers, proved particularly challenging to get access to. This difficulty stemmed from the aftermath of COVID-19 and the global economic impact on the export-driven GBA. Many factories, previously thriving, were now stretched thin and reducing staff to survive. Consequently, during the initial phase of fieldwork, some factory owners declined interview requests due to staff shortages, as they are to prioritising their own factories' production capacity. Others were too preoccupied or reluctant to host field research amidst their business challenges. Additionally, gatekeepers like factory owners would sometimes cancel interviews last-minute, concerned about potential COVID-19 risks brought by external visitors such as the field researcher, to their already precarious businesses.

Though slightly better-off, the restaurant owners in the food and beverage sector were subsequently impacted by the lockdown and limitation of number of gatherers as a national-wide strategy to tackle potential COVID-19 outbreak, which lead to comparable circumstance for the research to gain access to the field (Li et al., 2023).

Delays in accessing the field hindered planned fieldwork, raising uncertainty about data collection. Frequent changes to the fieldwork schedule added to unexpected slow progress and increased stress for the researcher. Whilst wider outreach efforts eventually led to successful field trips and the accumulation of substantial data, gradually alleviating those challenging situations.

Increased Surveillance in the Field. The COVID-19 outbreak accelerated the urban technical landscape, fostering the rise of what was termed “Pandemic Tech” (Marvin et al., 2023, p. 459). Newell (2021) highlighted the dramatic increase in national government surveillance on individuals due to the pandemic, particularly evident in China, where public surveillance was already considered prevalent (Morris, 2023).

Surveillance is defined as ‘close observation, especially of a suspected spy or criminal’ (Morris, 2023), with the conceptualisation that could be traced back to Foucault (2011). Though surveillance by local authorities might not always have negative implications, it can potentially infringe upon the freedom and safety of researchers and informants, impacting the risks associated with fieldwork practices (Ryan & Tynen, 2020).

In the GBA field case, researchers encountered surveillance from national, social, and other angles at all stages of fieldwork. Moreover, ‘self-surveillance’ became a part of the process across various phases (Starkey, 1997, p. 2). The digital infrastructure was repurposed to bolster urban mobility control, and this aspect has a direct impact on the fieldwork.

Before the pandemic, Guangzhou already employed a grid-management system at the community level, extending it to monitor mobility rigorously post-COVID-19. The researchers, situated in an urban village near University S, faced mandatory registration at the local police station. The nearby University transformed its open-door policy into a closely

managed system with turnstiles and added campus guards, often denying access to those without campus cards. Local Health Codes, a pervasive daily surveillance tool, generated controversy due to its compulsory installation. People required a green code for public transport, commercial spaces, restaurants, and various public areas, creating widespread monitoring.

Figure 2 illustrates the interface of the Health Code, a QR code within a local mobile app once downloaded to track carriers' locations. While green colour indicates free mobility, amber and red indicate users must be self-quarantined, trapped potential interviewees in apartments and excluding them from public transport (Yu et al., 2022). Moreover, Yu et al.'s research also pointed out the frequent technical malfunctions of this form of digital surveillance devices, causing glitch of the intended 'governance by algorithm' and 'technological solution to social problems' by the state (2022, p. 95).

Apart from digital surveillance, unexpected physical surveillance at the local level could hinder fieldwork and compromise researchers' safety.

In one incident near a township government square in suburban Guangzhou, two patrolling guards requested to inspect the interview materials. The researchers, unsure if the content was deemed sensitive, despite ethical approval, presented only the interview guide after citing affiliation with University S. The two researchers had prepared the interview guide in Chinese language but was not certain whether the content of the interview would have been considered

'questionable' by the local authorities, despite all the ethics has been approved by the UK university's ethics committee. Moreover, there have been questionnaires of the previous group of survey taker with their private information, but the researcher would not be able to use GDPR - General Data Protection Regulation, a European Union regulation on information privacy - as a legal protection of the personal data - as GDPR has no liability in GBA. In response, the researcher has emphasized their affiliation to the local higher educational institution - University S, thus negotiated to present the interview guide only to the guards. The other field researcher has observed that the guards are with non-local accent thus prompt whether they would accept our interview as both guards would fall into the category of 'rural-urban migrants'. They subtly shifted the guards' perspective from enforcers to potential informants, eventually bypassing participation requests due to the guards' alleged heavy patrol duties. This manoeuvre emphasized the researchers' identity as visitors at a prestigious local institution rather than Chinese researchers affiliated with overseas institutions. It led to the guards declining participation due to their patrol responsibilities, allowing the researchers to navigate the incident of physical surveillance.

To summarise, both digital and physical surveillance can have multiple impacts on the fieldwork administration. Tactics which are in reconciliation with the local context plus a phronesis of flexibility could be helpful in identifying and dealing with surveillance.



Figure 2. A type of Health Code in App used in GBA, indicating different levels of COVID risk. Source: Guangzhou Government Website https://www.szlhq.gov.cn/ydmh/epidemic_prevention_193327/latest_news_193329/content/mpost_9600428.html.

Fragile Trust with Informants. Bryman (2012) emphasised the importance of trust in qualitative data collection, especially in methods involving intensive interpersonal interactions, for instance, ethnography and in-depth interviews. However, barriers such as inaccessibility and surveillance have widened the psychological gap between researchers and informants, affecting interpersonal trust (Ryan & Tynen, 2020; Yu et al., 2022). Furthermore, given the teamwork approach adopted in this research, building internal trust among the field research team, aligned with Equity, Diversity, and Inclusiveness (EDI) principles, became crucial (Lata, 2020). Attending an EDI workshop prompted the principal researcher to strategically structure the team, recruiting and organising members based on these principles, adapting to local customs and conditions.

In practice, implementing EDI principles involved creating a structured workflow before, during, and after fieldwork. Pre-fieldwork meetings assessed risks, fostering a safer environment. During fieldwork, designated team members managed emergency plans, while post-fieldwork de-briefings encouraged note documentation, idea sharing, and reflection in a supportive environment, often over meals at a nearby food court. A social media group was established to facilitate real-time communication, task sign-ups, and new initiative proposals.

Externally, establishing trust with gatekeepers and informants proved challenging under post-COVID-19 conditions; online communication as a new normality replaced in-person interactions, which would require versatility to build trust (Zhao, 2017).

Applying EDI principles extended to the organisation and facilitation of FGDs. Groups comprised informants from similar industry sectors and seniority levels to prevent power imbalances or coercion (Heimer, 2006; Zou, 2023). Moderators utilized icebreakers and balanced participation to maintain discussion equality.

To further establish rapport, researchers applied another useful nudging skill, based on the understanding of the local cultural concept of reciprocity, or as mentioned by previous work on the fieldwork in Chinese community, to build good interpersonal relationship or ‘*guanxi*’, with the informants (Wellman, 2001; Gao & Fennell, 2018; Zou, 2023). This includes presenting small utility souvenirs after survey, clarifying research aims emphasising learning from migrant experiences, and positioning themselves as learners rather than researchers with affiliations to authorities (Amit & Bar-Lev, 2015). This approach aimed to counter rural-urban migrants’ mistrust towards officials or scholars, fostering trust through shared identities and a learning-oriented approach.

Reflection and Discussion

The fieldwork barriers: limited access, surveillance, and reduced trust - intensified uncertainties, particularly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. These uncertainties could compromise the research’s credibility through biased sample

selection, inaccessible data, and insufficient materials for analysis, impacting the validity of the empirical data (Bryman, 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Beyond research implications, these challenges also strain the well-being of field researchers, leading to demanding tasks and unforeseen circumstances. In the case study, various mitigation strategies were employed during fieldwork, offering insights into three main themes, namely: uncertainty, resilience, and the researcher’s positionality. These reflections shed light on conducting geographical fieldwork during crises like COVID-19.

Aggravated Uncertainty Amidst COVID-19

The case fieldwork echoed the literature’s stance in 2.3 that uncertainty is inherent in fieldwork, exacerbated by COVID-19 - rather than being solely caused by it. Managing this uncertainty within the researcher’s time and capacity is essential, with strategies suggested for incremental handling and appropriate responses (Boulus-Rødje, 2018). This involves three stages: pre-fieldwork, during, and post-fieldwork.

Pre-fieldwork preparation during COVID-19 poses financial uncertainties due to increased expenses. For instance, travel restrictions raised flight prices significantly, with tickets from London to Guangzhou reaching £4000, nearly ten times more expensive than the pre-COVID rates (International Air Transport Association, 2021). The researchers in the GBA case amalgamated multiple fieldwork bursaries to support its six-month project, highlighting the importance of proactive engagement with funding bodies. Communicating detailed plans and schedules during the application process not only ensures funding but also identifies potential financial risks.

Beyond financial concerns, uncertainties manifest in accessing the field, navigating surveillance, and rebuilding trust with gatekeepers and informants, creating challenges during fieldwork. Balancing planning and flexibility are essential, recognising that constant adjustments may be necessary to adapt to uncertainties.

The timeframe of fieldwork planning brings its own uncertainties. Determining optimal pilot study and major fieldwork initiation times, and when to conclude the research, involves a blend of intuition, prior experience, and rational planning. Flexibility in scheduling became evident when the researcher initiated the pilot study upon release from hotel quarantine and commenced Phases II and III after proper team training and network establishment. The decision to depart was driven by data saturation and a pending university relocation.

Innovative methods like ‘remote fieldwork’ mentioned in 2.3.2 can alleviate travel-related uncertainties but introduce new challenges. They require robust digital infrastructure or strong team cohesion to overcome distance barriers (Bhakta, 2022; Lobe et al., 2020). In Global South contexts, digital communication challenges—such as unstable Wi-Fi connection, device affordability, and limited digital

literacy—further complicate these alternative data collection methods amid the pandemic. In summary, despite available strategies, uncertainties persist in field research. COVID-19 has introduced new layers of uncertainty, requiring cutting-edge response strategies.

Researcher Resilience to Alleviate Uncertainty

Amidst escalating uncertainties, particularly those posed by COVID-19, effective mitigation strategies are required. However, the resilience of researchers becomes paramount when facing unprecedented and enduring uncertainties in the field, referred to as ‘resilient research’ by Rahman et al. (2021, p. 2).

Resilience, defined as ‘the ability to withstand or quickly recover from difficulties’ (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.), proves vital in dealing with substantial challenges during data collection, as highlighted in sub-sections 3.1.3 and 4.1. Working under stress aids field researchers in developing adaptability (Asante et al., 2021; Fife, 2005). Moreover, unprecedented surveillance imposed on researchers becomes a significant stressor, impacting personal health and safety, potentially shaping the post-COVID fieldwork.

The authors highlight three key components of research resilience in fieldwork, drawn from both the case study and literature review: (1) Adaptations to uncertainties, emphasising the need for swift adjustments in erratic field situations; (2) Emotional capacity, focusing on researchers’ ability to manage intense emotions in challenging environments and seek collaborative support (Bayor, 1978); (3) Practical ethics, balancing ethical research practices with contextual feasibility (Bryman, 2012). This balance, especially evident in Global South like the GBA in China, involves navigating informal local institutions and fostering trust with gatekeepers of migrant communities (Ferdoush, 2021; Wellman et al., 2002).

In addressing research resilience, specific strategies were employed in this GBA case to enhance the researcher’s resilience within the team. The first strategy is personal reflection. The researcher maintained a weekly reflective journal, addressing urgent issues, conflicting values, and managing intense emotions through self-care practices like meditation, referred to as ‘using critical reflection to build resilience’ (Suadik, 2022, p. 3). Secondly, via team support: Emphasising EDI principles, the research team fostered strong mutual trust, offering not just extra field assistance but emotional support during challenges. Last but not least, a strong mutually supportive local network. Proactively establishing a supportive local network, such as a discussion group of PhD researchers in GBA, provided solidarity, shared practices, and encouragement during fieldwork.

Despite these resilience-building methods, circumstances in the field may occasionally become hazardous, which challenge the researcher’s resilience beyond capacity. In such cases, fieldwork should be suspended, thus prioritising the

researcher’s physical and mental well-being (Boulus-Rødje, 2018; McGarrol, 2017).

Adjusting Positionality and Re-building Trust

The discussion of researchers’ resilience further leads to reflections on their field positionality, defined as the social identities of the researchers that are locally perceived (Brasher, 2020; Gillen, 2012; Jansson, 2010). In qualitative research, this involves examining personal values and how they influence the research process and outcomes (Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2011; Bryman, 2012). Specifically, in the case study, questions arose about facilitating discussions, participant interactions, and the researcher’s social role, notably significant back to the Global-North-based researchers conducting fieldwork in the Global South due to power imbalances and cultural differences (Gillen, 2012; Jansson, 2010). These complexities can potentially lead to an identity crisis for the researcher, questioning their belonging and making it harder to connect with people (Mason-Bish, 2019).

In addressing complexities of positionality, the paper referred to a specific occasion from the case of fieldwork on rural-urban migrants in GBA: with a mentality of learning by doing in the fieldwork, the researchers managed to pick up some wisdom from the informants in fieldwork. When the researchers were facilitating a FGD comprising a group of four elderly male workers in one garment factory, one participant jumped in and asked us a sharp question, ‘Are you a foreigner?’. As the two researchers are in fact Chinese citizens from Northern China - though not originated from the GBA in South China, his question might have come from the researcher’s northern accent, which is nuanced from the accent in GBA. Under circumstance of the peak of COVID-19 outbreak in January of 2021, it was considerably a sensitive question when the pandemic had just been confined in GBA - many foreigners and returned Chinese diaspora were accused of bringing back the virus, with prevalent unfriendly and untrustworthy sentiment. The question essentially challenges the researcher’s positionality as well, as he is considered an outsider, thus possess potential threats to the locals. Whereas, instead of answering it directly, the researcher joked with him by taking an over-exaggerated funny southern tone - which is acceptable in GBA but generally considered as non-standard Mandarin Chinese. ‘I am speaking such STANDARD Mandarin; how could I be a foreigner?’ Rather than directly answering, the researchers humorously mimicked a local accent, fostering rapport and acceptance, thus enabling smooth continuation of the interview.

In geographical field studies, the issue of self-identity intertwines with power imbalances inherited from the colonial traditions where Global North researchers explore ‘unexplored areas’ through Euro-centric perspectives (Radcliffe, 2017). This creates a power divide where researchers are seen as motivated and intellectual while informants are portrayed as passive and responsive, facilitating the objective reporting of

findings. COVID-19 exacerbates this power disparity: researchers can leave if situations deteriorate in the field to unbearable level, unlike informants who are much less mobile. Furthermore, researchers could navigate local surveillance with institutional support, highlighting their privilege compared to informants who are usually on their own.

As a result, the researchers will need to realise the issue of positionality and self-identification are inevitably considered as part of the research method submerged in the research tradition within the discipline of geography, as depicted by Xiang and Wu's term 'Self as Method' (Xiang & Wu, 2020). The researcher's value and background shape the fieldwork and data collection procedure thus have a significant implication on research findings (Ferdoush, 2021).

To summarise, aggravated uncertainties require researchers' resilience and keener reflections on positionality in the field, with interwoven layers of North-South institution, physical-virtual space nexus, and the local-global dichotomy. Therefore, the discussion does not mean to have a definite closure of the debates whereas to open up more thoughts on the issues backed up by contextualised field cases. COVID-19 is hereby arguably an opportunity to provoke a reconfiguration of fieldwork to inspire the emerging generation of field researchers (Dunia et al., 2023).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper delves into a case study in analysing the multiple aspects of COVID-19's impacts on fieldwork in Chinese GBA field conducted by scholars from Global Northern institutions between 2020–2021, unveiling challenges and vulnerabilities in field research (Dewsbury & Naylor, 2002). It highlights the compounded impacts of the pandemic on field access, heightened surveillance, and the need to rebuild fragile trust between the researchers and the informants.

This paper further argues that researchers conducting field research during COVID-19 has faced multi-layered, entangled challenges in the field, that requires long-lasting resilience building and adjustment in positionality.

The paper also touched upon the imbalanced power dynamics between Global North institutions - where fieldwork is funded and planned, and the Southern field in the Global South - where administration and data collection occur. COVID-19 has potentially enlarged this existing disparity between Global North and South, placing researchers in the Global South field in precarious conditions.

In responses as remedies, key elements for completing a successful fieldwork amid COVID-19 involve adopting a more detailed contingency plan, effective teamwork through rigorous planning training, and establishing a supportive network with local institutions and fellow researchers. The ability of field researchers to balance the rigour of data collection plans with flexibility in operation during fieldwork is essential to successful data collection.

Further research on fieldwork can focus on comparing field projects before and after COVID-19, examining the lasting impacts on fieldwork practices for data collection in the post-COVID era as the new normalities. Diversifying regions of fieldwork beyond the Global South, reflecting on the power dynamics among stakeholders including research funders, educational institutions, and local entities would enhance the understanding of fieldwork as a pivotal process in qualitative data collection.

Acknowledgments

We thank CUUC field team for providing supports for the fieldwork in the case study. We thank Professor Mee Kam Ng, The Chinese University of Hong Kong; Dr Jihuan Li, University of Cambridge, Dr Froilan Malit Jr, University of Glasgow, and three anonymised reviewers for providing feedbacks on the earlier drafts of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical Statement

Ethical Approval

This study has been ethically approved and is in compliance with ethical standards.

ORCID iDs

Hongsheng Zhao  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2701-7649>

Wenwei Bao  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7435-8572>

References

- Aluwihare-Samaranayake, D. (2012). Ethics in qualitative research: A view of the participants' and researchers' world from a critical standpoint. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 11(2), 64–81. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691201100208>
- Amit, K., & Bar-Lev, S. (2015). Immigrants' sense of belonging to the host country: The role of life satisfaction, language proficiency, and religious motives. *Social Indicators Research*, 124(3), 947–961. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-014-0823-3>
- Amos, L. (2014). Researcher vulnerability: An overlooked issue in vulnerability discourses. *Scientific Research and Essays*, 9(16), 737–743. <https://doi.org/10.5897/SRE2014.5849>
- Archer-Kuhn, B., Beltrano, N. R., Hughes, J., Saini, M., & Tam, D. (2022). Recruitment in response to a pandemic: Pivoting a community-based recruitment strategy to Facebook for hard-to-reach populations during COVID-19. *International Journal of*

- Social Research Methodology*, 25(6), 797–808. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2021.1941647>
- Asante, C., Burack, S., Chileshe, M., & Hunleth, J. (2021). Co-producing knowledge and care in team-based fieldwork in the Covid-19 era. *Anthropology Southern Africa*, 44(4), 175–191. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23323256.2021.1974908>
- Bashir, N. (2020). The qualitative researcher: The flip side of the research encounter with vulnerable people. *Qualitative Research*, 20(5), 667–683. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794119884805>
- Bayor, R. H. (1978). *Neighbors in conflict: The Irish, Germans, jews, and Italians of New York city, 1929–1941*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Ben-Ari, A., & Enosh, G. (2011). Processes of reflectivity: Knowledge construction in qualitative research. *Qualitative Social Work*, 10(2), 152–171. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325010369024>
- Bhakta, A. (2022). A less muddy glee? Perspectives from a disabled researcher in the era of virtual Global South fieldwork. *Area*, 54(4), 531–535. <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12832>
- Boulus-Rødje, N. (2018). Stuck with my body at qalandiya checkpoint: Reflections upon conducting fieldwork in an uncertain field site. In *Sage research methods cases*. Sage Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526437839>
- Brasher, J. P. (2020). Positionality and participatory ethics in the Global South: Critical reflections on and lessons learned from fieldwork failure. *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 37(3), 296–310. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08873631.2020.1760020>
- Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Bulmer, M. (1984). *The Chicago school of sociology: Institutionalization, diversity, and the rise of sociological research*. University of Chicago Press.
- Caixin. (2022). Beijing Guangdong baogao 3 ren quezhen xinxing guangzhuang bingdu feiyan. [Beijing and Guangdong reported 3 COVID-19 cases]. <https://m.caixin.com/m/2020-01-20/101506019.html>
- Calvo, R. A., Deterding, S., & Ryan, R. M. (2020). Health surveillance during covid-19 pandemic. *BMJ*, 369, m1373. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m1373>
- Cambridge Dictionary. (nd). Resilience. In *Cambridge dictionary*. Retrieved October 4, 2023, from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/resilience>
- Chen, J. (2020). Experiencing graduated intimacies during lockdown (Fengcheng): A reflexive and comparative approach to the COVID-19 pandemic in urban China. *Anthropology in Action*, 27(2), 9–19. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13021-020-00146-3>
- Cheng, Z. J., Zhan, Z., Xue, M., Zheng, P., Lyu, J., Ma, J., Zhang, X. D., Luo, W., Huang, H., Zhang, Y., Wang, H., Zhong, N., & Sun, B. (2023). Public health measures and the control of COVID-19 in China. *Clinical Reviews in Allergy & Immunology*, 64(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12016-021-08900-2>
- China Development Institute. (2020). Feiyan yiqing dui Yuegang'ao dawanqu de yingxiang ji yingdui [Impact of COVID-19 on the Greater Bay Area and responses]. <https://www.cdi.com.cn/Article/Detail?Id=16978>
- Cornejo, M., Bustamante, J., Del Río, M., De Toro, X., & Latorre, M. S. (2023). Researching with qualitative methodologies in the time of coronavirus: Clues and challenges. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22, 16094069221150110. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221150110>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Sage.
- Crinson, I., & Leontowitsch, M. (2016). Semi-structured, narrative, and in-depth interviewing, focus groups, action research, participant observation. *Public Health Textbook*. <https://www.healthknowledge.org.uk/public-health-textbook/research-methods/1d-qualitative-methods/section2-theoretical-methodological-issues-research>
- Deane, K., & Stevano, S. (2016). Towards a political economy of the use of research assistants: Reflections from fieldwork in Tanzania and Mozambique. *Qualitative Research*, 16(2), 213–228. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794115578776>
- Dewsbury, J. D., & Naylor, S. (2002). Practising geographical knowledge: Fields, bodies and dissemination. *Area*, 34(3), 253–260. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-4762.00079>
- Dunia, O., Eriksson Baaz, M., Maria Toppo, A. O., Parashar, S., Utas, M., & Vincent, J. B. M. (2023). Visibilising hidden realities and uncertainties: The 'post-covid' move towards decolonised and ethical field research practices. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 26(5), 549–564. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2023.2173427>
- Eggeling, K. A. (2022). Embracing the 'inverted commas', or How COVID-19 can show us new directions for ethnographic 'fieldwork. *Qualitative Research*, 23(5), 1342–1358. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941221096594>
- Elshater, A., & Abusaada, H. (2022). People's absence from public places: Academic research in the post-covid-19 era. *Urban Geography*, 43(8), 1268–1275. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2022.2072079>
- Engward, H., Goldspink, S., Iancu, M., Kersey, T., & Wood, A. (2022). Togetherness in separation: Practical considerations for doing remote qualitative interviews ethically. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 21, 16094069211073212. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211073212>
- Envuladu, E. A., Miner, C. A., Oloruntoba, R., Osuagwu, U. L., Mashige, K. P., Amiebenomo, O. M., Abu, E. K., Timothy, C. G., Ovenseri-Ogbomo, G., Ekpenyong, B. N., Langsi, R., Goson, P. C., Charwe, D. D., Ishaya, T., & Agho, K. E. (2022). International research collaboration during the pandemic: Team formation, challenges, strategies and achievements of the African translational research group. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 21, 16094069221115504. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221115504>
- Ferdoush, M. A. (2021). To 'help' or not to 'help' the participant: A Global South ethnographer's dilemma in the Global South. *Geoforum*, 124, 75–78. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2021.06.004>
- Fife, W. (2005). *Doing fieldwork: Ethnographic methods for research in developing countries and beyond*. Palgrave Macmillan US. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403980564>

- Finn, J. C., Arima, E., Bell, M., Budds, J., Seemann, J., Valdivia, G., Tung, D., Carter, E., & Marcus, A. (2020). Editorial: Mobility, connectivity, and the implications of covid-19 for Latin American geography. *Journal of Latin American Geography*, 19(4), 6–8. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lag.2020.0098>
- Fisher, P. (2012). Ethics in qualitative research: ‘Vulnerability’, citizenship and human rights. *Ethics and Social Welfare*, 6(1), 2–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17496535.2011.591811>
- Foucault, M. (2011). *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison (Nachdr. der Ausg. 1975)*. Gallimard.
- Fusco, G., Caglioni, M., Emsellem, K., Merad, M., Moreno, D., & Voiron-Canicio, C. (2017). Questions of uncertainty in geography. *Environment and Planning A*, 49(10), 2261–2280. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X17718838>
- Gao, Y., & Fennell, S. (2018). *China’s rural–urban inequality in the countryside*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-8273-3>
- Gillen, J. (2012). Investing in the field: Positionalities in money and gift exchange in Vietnam. *Geoforum*, 43(6), 1163–1170. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2012.03.003>
- Giwa, A. (2015). Insider/outsider issues for development researchers from the Global South. *Geography Compass*, 9(6), 316–326. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12219>
- Hall, J., Gaved, M., & Sargent, J. (2021). Participatory research approaches in times of Covid-19: A narrative literature review. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20, 16094069211010087. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211010087>
- Health Commission of Guangdong. (nd). Guangdong: Province-wide coordination to advance the three major screening initiatives, prevent the spread of epidemic to communities [Guangdong: quansheng ‘yi pan qi’ zhashi tuijin san xiang da paicha gongzuo, jiangjue fangzhi yiqing xiang shequ manyan]. *Health Commission of Guangdong Province*. Retrieved 1 June, 2024, from https://wsjkw.gd.gov.cn/xxgzbd/fk/content/post_2895623.html
- Heimer, M. (2006). *Doing fieldwork in China*. University of Hawaii Press.
- Herrick, C., Kelly, A. H., & Souldard, J. (2022). Humanitarian inversions: COVID-19 as crisis. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 47(4), 850–865. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12544>
- Howard, L. C., & Hammond, S. P. (2019). Researcher vulnerability: Implications for educational research and practice. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 32(4), 411–428. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2019.1597205>
- Hunter, J., Chitsiku, S., Shand, W., & Van Blerk, L. (2021). Learning on Harare’s streets under COVID-19 lockdown: Making a story map with street youth. *Environment and Urbanisation*, 33(1), 31–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956247820979440>
- Illmer, A., Wang, Y., & Wong, T. (2021, January 22). *Wuhan lockdown: A year of China’s fight against the Covid pandemic*. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-55628488>
- International Air Transport Association. (2021). Air travel and COVID-19. [Association News]. <https://www.iata.org/en/youandiata/travelers/health/>
- Jafari, A., Dunnett, S., Hamilton, K., & Downey, H. (2013). Exploring researcher vulnerability: Contexts, complications, and conceptualisation. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 29(9–10), 1182–1200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2013.798677>
- Jansson, D. (2010). The head vs. the gut: Emotions, positionality, and the challenges of fieldwork with a Southern nationalist movement. *Geoforum*, 41(1), 19–22. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2009.10.013>
- Kent, M., Gilbertson, D. D., & Hunt, C. O. (1997). Fieldwork in geography teaching: A critical review of the literature and approaches. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 21(3), 313–332. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03098269708725439>
- Khan, M. M. H., & Kraemer, A. (2014). Are rural-urban migrants living in urban slums more vulnerable in terms of housing, health knowledge, smoking, mental health and general health? *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 23(4), 373–383. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12053>
- Kobakhidze, M. N., Hui, J., Chui, J., & González, A. (2021). Research disruptions, new opportunities: Re-imagining qualitative interview study during the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20, 16094069211051576. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211051576>
- Koch, N. (2013). Introduction – field methods in ‘closed contexts’: Undertaking research in authoritarian states and places. *Area*, 45(4), 390–395. <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12044>
- Krause, P., Szekely, O., Bloom, M., Christia, F., Daly, S. Z., Lawson, C., Marks, Z., Milliff, A., Miura, K., Nielsen, R., Reno, W., Souleimanov, E. A., & Zakayo, A. (2021). COVID-19 and fieldwork: Challenges and solutions. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 54(2), 264–269. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096520001754>
- Lamprianou, I. (2022). Surveying through gatekeepers in social research: Methodological problems and suggestions. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 25(6), 783–795. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2021.1940775>
- Lata, L. N. (2020). Negotiating gatekeepers and positionality in building trust for accessing the urban poor in the Global South. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 21(1), 76–86. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-03-2020-0017>
- Lau, M. (2022, November 28). China’s zero-Covid protests: Slogans chanted, blank paper placards held aloft as public patience over restrictions wears thin [Online Newspaper]. *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3201315/anger-chinese-covid-restrictions-boils-over-rare-protests-major-cities>
- Li, S. M., & Siu, Y. M. (1997). A comparative study of permanent and temporary migration in China: The case of dongguan and Meizhou, Guangdong province. *International Journal of Population Geography*, 3(1), 63–82. [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(sici\)1099-1220\(199703\)3:1<63::aid-ijpg53>3.0.co;2-a](https://doi.org/10.1002/(sici)1099-1220(199703)3:1<63::aid-ijpg53>3.0.co;2-a)
- Li, Z., Gu, W., & Meng, Q. (2023). The impact of the COVID-19 on logistics and coping strategies—a literature review. *Regional Science Policy & Practice*, 15(8), 1768–1794. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rsp3.12665>

- Lin, G. C. S. (2006). Peri-urbanism in globalizing China: A study of new urbanism in Dongguan. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 47(1), 28–53. <https://doi.org/10.2747/1538-7216.47.1.28>, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.2747/1538-7216.47.1.28>
- Lobe, B., Morgan, D., & Hoffman, K. A. (2020). Qualitative data collection in an era of social distancing. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19, 1609406920937875. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920937875>
- Local Gazetteers Editing Committee of Guangdong Province. (2014). Z. Qiquan, X. Huaqiang, X. Zhiheng, X. Shaohua, & C. Qiang (Eds.), *Guangdong Sheng Zhi (1979-2000) [A local chronicles of Canton province]* (1st ed.). Local Gazetteers Press.
- Marvin, S., McFarlane, C., Guma, P., Hodson, M., Lockhart, A., McGuirk, P., McMeekin, A., Ortiz, C., Simone, A., & Wiig, A. (2023). Post-pandemic cities: An urban lexicon of accelerations/decelerations. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 48(3), 452–473. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12607>
- Mason-Bish, H. (2019). The elite delusion: Reflexivity, identity and positionality in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 19(3), 263–276. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794118770078>
- Mattei, P., & Vigevano, L. (2021). Contingency planning and early crisis management: Italy and the COVID-19 pandemic. *Public Organisation Review*, 21(4), 647–663. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11115-021-00545-1>
- Mayhew, S. (2015). Uncertainty. In *A dictionary of geography* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780199680856.001.0001>
- McGarrol, S. (2017). The emotional challenges of conducting in-depth research into significant health issues in health geography: Reflections on emotional labour, fieldwork and life course. *Area*, 49(4), 436–442. <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12347>
- Menga, F. (2020). Researchers in the panopticon? Geographies of research, fieldwork, and authoritarianism. *Geographical Review*, 110(3), 341–357. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00167428.2019.1684197>, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00167428.2019.1684197>
- Morris, C. (2023). ‘It would be smart to discuss this on telegram’: China’s digital territorialization project and its spatial effects on contentious politics. *Regional Studies Association*, 11(6), 1081–1099. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2023.2183894>
- National Health Commission of the People’s Republic of China. (2022). *Protocol on prevention and control of novel coronavirus Pneumonia (Edition 9)*. [Xinxing guan zhuang bing du fei yan fang kong fangan (di jiu ban)]. <https://www.nhc.gov.cn/jkj/s3577/202206/de224e7784fe4007b7189c1f1c9d5e85/files/504a946af7e744fb9ad7eb1e0f1f9923.pdf>
- Newell, B. (2021). Introduction: Surveillance and the COVID-19 pandemic: Views from around the world. *Surveillance & Society*, 19(1), 81–84. <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v19i1.14606>
- Newman, P. A., Guta, A., & Black, T. (2021). Ethical considerations for qualitative research methods during the COVID-19 pandemic and other emergency situations: Navigating the virtual field. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20, 16094069211047823. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211047823>
- Nguyen, P., Scheyvens, R., Beban, A., & Gardyne, S. (2022). From a distance: The ‘new normal’ for researchers and research assistants engaged in remote fieldwork. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 21, 16094069221089108. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221089108>
- Pio, E., & Singh, S. (2016). Vulnerability and resilience: Critical reflexivity in gendered violence research. *Third World Quarterly*, 37(2), 227–244. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1089166>
- Radcliffe, S. A. (2017). Decolonising geographical knowledges. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 42(3), 329–333. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12195>
- Råheim, M., Magnussen, L. H., Sekse, R. J. T., Lunde, Å., Jacobsen, T., & Blystad, A. (2016). Researcher–researched relationship in qualitative research: Shifts in positions and researcher vulnerability. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.3402/qhw.v11.30996>
- Rahman, S. A., Tuckerman, L., Vorley, T., & Gherhes, C. (2021). Resilient research in the field: Insights and lessons from adapting qualitative research projects during the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20, 16094069211016106. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211016106>
- Rogers, A., Castree, N., & Kitchin, R. (2013). Uncertainty. In *A dictionary of human geography* (1st ed.). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780199599868.001.0001>
- Royal Geographical Society. (2023). Fieldwork and expeditions. <https://www.rgs.org/about/the-society/what-we-do/fieldwork-and-expeditions/>
- Ryan, C. M., & Tynen, S. (2020). Fieldwork under surveillance: Rethinking relations of trust, vulnerability, and state power. *Geographical Review*, 110(1–2), 38–51. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ger.12360>
- Salma, J., & Giri, D. (2021). Engaging immigrant and racialized communities in community-based participatory research during the COVID-19 pandemic: Challenges and opportunities. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20, 16094069211036293. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211036293>
- Saxena, C. (2023). Letting failure be: COVID-19, PhD fieldwork and to not (want to) learn from failures. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 44(2), 322–338. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjtg.12477>
- Senanayake, N., & King, B. (2021). Geographies of uncertainty. *Geoforum*, 123, 129–135. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2020.07.016>
- Starkey, K. P. (1997). *Foucault, management and organisation theory: From panopticon to technologies of self*. Sage. <https://www.torrossa.com/en/resources/an/4912003>
- Sterie, A.-C., Potthoff, S., Erdmann, A., Burner-Fritsch, I. S., Oyine Aluh, D., & Schneiders, M. L. (2023). Dimensions of researcher vulnerability in qualitative health research and

- recommendations for future practice. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231183600>
- Suadik, M. (2022). Building resilience in qualitative research: Challenges and opportunities in times of crisis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 21, 16094069221147165. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221147165>
- Sun, L. (2019). *Rural urban migration and policy intervention in China: Migrant workers' coping strategies*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-8093-7>
- Tremblay, S., Castiglione, S., Audet, L.-A., Desmarais, M., Horace, M., & Peláez, S. (2021). Conducting qualitative research to respond to COVID-19 challenges: Reflections for the present and beyond. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20, 16094069211009679. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211009679>
- Turner, S. (2010). Research Note: The silenced assistant. Reflections of invisible interpreters and research assistants. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 51(2), 206–219. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8373.2010.01425.x>
- von Benzon, N., & van Blerk, L. (2017). Research relationships and responsibilities: 'Doing' research with 'vulnerable' participants: introduction to the special edition*. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 18(7), 895–905. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2017.1346199>
- Wang, J., Qi, H., Bao, L., Li, F., & Shi, Y., National Clinical Research Center for Child Health and Disorders and Pediatric Committee of Medical Association of Chinese People's Liberation Army. (2020). A contingency plan for the management of the 2019 novel coronavirus outbreak in neonatal intensive care units. *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*, 4(4), 258–259. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642\(20\)30040-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642(20)30040-7)
- Wang, Y. P., Wang, Y., & Wu, J. (2009). Urbanization and informal development in China: Urban villages in Shenzhen. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 33(4), 957–973. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2009.00891.x>
- Wellman, B. (2001). Physical place and cyberplace: The rise of personalized networking. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 25(2), 227–252. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.00309>
- Wellman, B., Chen, W., & Weizhen, D. (2002). Networking 'guanxi'. In T. Gold, D. Guthrie, & D. Wank (Eds.), *Social connections in China* (1st ed., pp. 221–242). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511499579.013>
- WHO. (2020). World health organisation COVID-19 dashboard. *International Organisation*. <https://covid19.who.int/>
- Woodworth, M. D., Ren, X., Rodenbiker, J., Santi, E., Tan, Y., Zhang, L., & Zhou, Y. (2022). Researching China during the COVID-19 pandemic. In S. D. Brunn, & D. Gilbreath (Eds.), *COVID-19 and a world of ad hoc geographies* (pp. 2705–2721). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-94350-9_146
- Xiang, B., & Wu, Q. (2020). *The Self as Method: In Conversation with Biao Xiang (ba ziji zuowei fangfa: Yu xiangbiao tanhua)*. Shanghai Press of Literature and Art.
- Yip, M. (2021). We have never been so bounded: Pandemic, territoriality, and mobility. *The Geographical Journal*, 187(2), 174–181. <https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12389>
- Yu, Y., Brady, D., & Zhao, B. (2022). Digital geographies of the bug: A case study of China's contact tracing systems in the COVID-19. *Geoforum*, 137, 94–104. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2022.10.007>
- Zhao, Y. (2017). Doing fieldwork the Chinese way: A returning researcher's insider/outsider status in her home town. *Area*, 49(2), 185–191. <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12314>
- Zou, G. (2023). Beyond 'insider' and 'outsider' in the field: Reflections on the roles of human geographers in shifting contexts. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22, 16094069231169095. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231169095>
- Zou, Y., & Zhao, W. (2022). Neighbourhood governance during the COVID-19 lockdown in Hangzhou: Coproduction based on digital technologies. *Public Management Review*, 24(12), 1914–1932. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2021.1945666>