

Samantha Vortherms

Scott Kloeck Jenson Fellowship Final Report

Summer Travel Grant (2013)

Beijing & Chengdu, China; Hong Kong

With the generous support of the Scott Kloeck Jenson Pre-Dissertation Travel Fellowship, I completed eleven weeks of pre-dissertation field work in the People's Republic of China. A variety of research opportunities took me from Beijing to Chengdu, an internal manufacturing hub, to the southern Pearl River Delta region. While in the field, I conducted interviews with academics, presented my research design to local scholars, did archival research, and cemented invaluable relations for when I return to the field in May 2014 with the assistance of the Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad program and the National Science Foundation.

The primary focus of my research is the impact of China's household registration system. For the last fifty years, the household registration system has divided every city's population along two lines: rural/urban and local/non-local; only local urban citizens are eligible for social welfare benefits, including pensions, public health insurance, access to public schools, and college entrance exams.¹ Those with rural or non-local *hukou* have not enjoyed these benefits. Your status is inherited from their mother, independent of where you are born, and also semi-permanent: until recently, people have been unable to change their status, cementing which class, the privileged in-group or the disadvantaged out-group, you belong to. Recognizing the significant disadvantages, structural inequalities, and limits on both labor and socio-economic mobility the segregation created, the national government began a campaign in 2003 to reform the system. Calling for policy change, it pressured local governments to de-couple access to social services from registration status. Even with central pressures to reform and expand social welfare, the resulting process of policy change has varied dramatically across municipalities. My research evaluates the motivations for change, variation in change across municipalities within China, and the potential impact these changes will have on access to social welfare and wages across China.

During my time in the field, I had two primary goals. The first was to develop contacts in the internal city of Chengdu, a city at the center of policy reform. Based on the opportunity to meet with existing contacts, I began my field work with a week in Beijing to connect with research contacts developed during a previous summer pre-dissertation trip. This decision changed the fate of the entire research trip. While in Beijing, I met with the director of a central level think tank and through discussion of my research design, we decided to implement a survey together when I return to China later this spring. Given the difficulties of implementing large-scale surveys in China, such as the fact that foreigners themselves are not allowed to implement surveys and groups doing such research must obtain a survey permit which this think tank has, this opportunity was quite unexpected and invaluable to my future research.

The trip to Beijing also provided me with extremely helpful contacts in Chengdu, Sichuan, an important city where, before this trip, I had only one contact. Chengdu is a "necessary" city for me to consider in my research because it was named one of two experimental cities in 1997. Given this official status, local leaders in Chengdu had central permission and encouragement to experiment with new policy reform specifically in the area of the household registration system. While instigated to reform by the central government, the two experimental cities took

¹ Other benefits available to local urban citizens include unemployment insurance, prenatal and maternity care, workers compensation, urban housing subsidies, and subsidies for widows and orphans.

dramatically different paths. Unlike the other experimental city, the local leaders in Chengdu implemented a very successful reform of the household registration system, essentially tearing down all of the restrictions implemented by the system while the other experimental city only superficially removed restrictions while segregation remained. Additionally, the Chengdu government provided significant research and documentation about the city's reform, which highlighted the rationale behind reform.

With the assistance of introductions from my Beijing contacts, I was able to get in contact and interview municipal level bureau heads in Chengdu, the highest level of government official I have been able to contact yet. These officials were very forthcoming and engaged with my research topic, with some interviews over tea lasting 3+ hours. Not only did I learn more details about the reforms in Chengdu, but I was also able to ask about the motivations behind decisions, why some paths were chosen over others, and the local leaders' relationships with the municipalities around them. Overall, this case provided an important contrast to the other municipality I know best, Guangzhou, a municipality at the top of the Pearl River Delta on the east coast. Leaders on the east coast see their municipality as one node in a larger web of cities, most likely because of the higher density of large and economically powerful cities on the east coast. As such, leaders of the largest city explicitly influence those around them in order to reform the system of municipalities. The leaders of the internal city of Chengdu saw themselves, on the other hand, as the "older brother" of the municipalities around them, leading the way by setting an example rather than direct influence. I am only beginning to understand the impact of regional systems on reform, but this experience verifies the differences I expected based on pre-field research.

After my time in Chengdu, I returned to the Pearl River Delta region to re-cement previous research contacts and delve into archival research, accomplishing my second goal of field research. While in the south, I spent substantial time in Hong Kong at the Universities Service Centre (USC) for China Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. This specialist library is home to thousands of PRC government publications. My time there was spent in two ways. First, I was able to secure digitized data needed to expand a dataset I have been working on for the last two years. Second, I used their resources to create a standard of data collection which I will use to gather nation-wide data on household registration reforms in the last few years. Like a survey instrument, I was able to refine my questions and categories of evaluation to improve the efficiency of data collection. This data collection will begin this month with an undergraduate I am working with through the Undergraduate Research Scholars program.

While I was in Hong Kong, I was also reminded of how small the academic world is: while working at the USC, I was able to meet two well known scholars in the field of Chinese political science who live and work in the United States, but who happened to be doing short term archival work in Hong Kong. I was able to discuss my research, both design and subject matter, with both of these connections, allowing me to gain even more insight from experts in the field in an unexpected way. One connection will also be sharing data with me to further expand my current data set.

This research trip allowed me to continue my qualitative interviewing, establishing valuable and necessary contacts in a city I must include in my final research. I also gained invaluable connections and opportunities, which will provide me with the best background for continuing my field work this coming May.