

# (Shared) ethnicity in ethnographic research on clandestine and informal practices in the migrant and ethnic minority economy

## Methodological and ethical challenges

*Jing Hiah*

**Dr Jing Hiah** is an Assistant Professor in Criminology in the Erasmus School of Law, at Erasmus University, Rotterdam, the Netherlands and a Dutch Research Council NWO Rubicon fellow at Migration Mobilities Bristol at the University of Bristol, UK

### **ABSTRACT**

This article addresses the methodological and ethical challenges of ethnographic research on sensitive topics such as clandestine practices in the migrant and ethnic minority economy. Drawing on related criminological and sociology of deviance literature I draw on my experiences of insider-ethnographic research in the Chinese migrant and ethnic minority economy in the Netherlands and Romania to demonstrate how stigmas related to race/ethnicity and clandestine practices can strongly shape access, rapport and researcher's positionality in the field. Research participants' concerns about these stigmas also revealed ethical questions on how to report on clandestine and informal practices without contributing to further stigmatisation and racialisation. At the same time, my experiences show that whether clandestine practices and race/ethnicity are considered sensitive topics is an emergent issue. In the Netherlands, due to active enforcement of clandestine practices in the migrant and ethnic minority economy, these practices were a sensitive topic of inquiry. In Romania, by contrast, clandestine practices were not treated as sensitive subject matter as these were normalised by research participants and broader Romanian society, due to a lack of active enforcement and criminalisation.

### **KEY WORDS**

Clandestine labour, Netherlands, Romania, Chinese migrant workers, research on sensitive topics, participant observation, ethnography, insider research

## Introduction

Clandestine labour, employment of undocumented workers, tax evasion and bribery fall within the scope of what the methodological literature refers to as particularly 'sensitive topics': research topics in which there are potential consequences and implications for those participating in the research. Reporting about committing or being a victim of such practices may have (perceived) grave consequences for research participants. For example, it could lead them being investigated and/or stigmatised<sup>1</sup> (Lee & Renzetti, 1990; see also Hamm & Ferrell, 1998). The sensitivity of a topic is a central methodological issue for criminologists and scholars in the sociology of deviance as it not only poses challenges in the negotiation of access in the field but also raises questions of how to gain insight into and understanding of often-hidden behaviours and practices (Anderson & Calhoun, 1992; Becker, 1967; Ferrell & Hamm, 1998). Furthermore, researching clandestine conduct among racialised minority groups such as ethnic minority entrepreneurs (the group that this contribution focuses on) complicates the matter further because it touches upon ethical issues such as the (further) stigmatisation of these groups on a broader societal level (Siegel, 2016; Van der Leun et al., 2010). The risk of stigmatisation is recognised by various ethical codes of research (e.g. European Commission, 2020). An evaluation of the risks of stigmatisation is needed in the light of the sensitivity of a topic but its stigmatising effect must be understood not as a static given, but an emergent issue (Lee & Renzetti, 1990). In addition, a researcher's positionality may play a further role in determining the extent to which a topic, or certain information, is considered sensitive by research participants (Bucerius, 2013). From a methodological perspective this means that whether clandestine and informal practices are considered sensitive topics is a question that should be addressed, which this contribution aims to do.

This contribution questions the sensitivity of research topics by reflecting on methodological and ethical issues concerning research into clandestine and informal practices in the migrant and ethnic economy.<sup>2</sup> The ethnic economy refers to sectors in the economy where businesses are either owned, supervised or staffed by ethnic or migrant minority group members, regardless of size, type and locational clustering (Waldinger, Aldrich & Ward, 1990; Zhou, 2004:1043). While ethnic economy scholarship has paid specific attention to informal and clandestine practices (e.g. Kloosterman, van der Leun & Rath, 1999; Ram, Edwards & Villares-Varela, 2017), limited attention has been given to the methodological challenges and ethical issues that arise in conducting qualitative or ethnographic research on these topics (Vershina & Rodionova, 2011). One explanation for this is that, whilst the field of ethnic economy scholarship has advanced considerably, most of the methodological approaches have a quantitative character, funnelling a specific set of perspectives and approaches (Vershina & Discua Cruz, 2021).

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1 In this contribution 'stigma' is used in the way that Goffman conceptualised it: 'an attribute that is deeply discrediting' (Goffman in Tyler 2018: 750). and generally refers to devalued stereotypes. Stigmas disqualify individuals from full social acceptance. Stigmatization accordingly refers to the process of how stigmas are produced in social settings (Tyler 2018).

2 In this contribution the concepts of 'ethnic minority'/'(im)migrant minority' and ethnic economy/'(im)migrant economy' will be used interchangeably

This contribution also makes a case, following Vershinina & Discua Cruz (2021), for insider research as an appropriate method to study the ethnic economy. Insider research refers to studies in which researchers examine their own social group, organisation or culture (Delyser, 2001; Katz, 1994; Merton, 1972). It is commonly assumed that insider researchers can more easily negotiate access to sensitive topics and hidden groups (Becker, 1963; Vershinina & Rodionova, 2011). While the added benefit of insider researchers has been emphasised, there are only few studies that have applied this methodology so far in ethnic economy research (Vershinina & Discua Cruz, 2021). Furthermore, the perspectives of racialised ethnic minority (insider) researchers are also warranted as they are still under-represented in scholarship on ethnic entrepreneurship and deviance (Ajil & Blount-Hill, 2020; Vershinina & Discua Cruz, 2021; see also Osanami Törngren & Ngeh, 2018).

To address these gaps in the literature, this contribution explores the methodological and ethical challenges of insider-ethnographic research into the access to sensitive information and topics in two different but comparable cases: the Chinese ethnic economy of catering businesses in the Netherlands and the open-air market of wholesale trade in Romania. The reason for reflecting on two cases is to demonstrate the context-specific nature of the sensitivity of a topic. Furthermore, it is especially relevant to reflect on methodological and ethical issues in researching informal and clandestine conduct in Chinese ethnic economies in the Netherlands and Romania as these economies have been subjected to a long history of crime control policies and enforcement in which racialisation has played an important role (Hiah, 2019). Accordingly, the fieldwork sites central to this contribution are considered as particular cases of racialisation of Chinese migrant and ethnic minorities that characterise everyday ideas about (Chinese) race and ethnicity today (see also Chan & Hoon, 2021). Therefore, by contrasting Romania with the Netherlands, this contribution also provides insight into how the enforcement context shapes methodological challenges and ethical questions in research on ethnicity, migration, crime and deviance.

This article is organised into three sections. First, the background of the study will be provided, including an account of the history of the Chinese ethnic economy in relation to a history of racialised informality and criminality in the Netherlands and Romania. This section will also provide the context for the next sections. Next I reflect on how I aimed to find a balance between the (fear) of stigmatisation on one hand and ethnicity as a meaningful social category in research on clandestine and informal conduct on the other. Then I will go on to reflect on how my (perceived) insider positionality based on ethnicity played a role in negotiating access to clandestine and informal practices. In this section I also question the contextual nature of sensitive topics by comparing my fieldwork experiences in the Netherlands with my experiences in Romania.

## **Background**

Sociological and criminological literature has on the one hand regarded Chinese migrant businesses as an important factor in benefiting the economic incorporation processes of Chinese ethnic minorities in the society in which they have settled (Zhou, 1992). On the other hand, Chinese migrants and their businesses have traditionally been associated with informality and illegality. The concept of illegal migration emerged as a consequence of migration and labour restrictions for Chinese migrants in

the United States in the 19th century of which The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 is a prime example (Van Eijl, 2012:76). While these practices of racialisation seem to lie in the past, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown how racial stereotyping of Chinese ethnic minorities and Asians, in some cases leading to physical violence, still shapes their social position today (Gao & Sai, 2021; Li & Nicholson, 2021). In the Netherlands and Romania, the two cases discussed in this contribution, racialised discourses have also been pervasive in governmental policies regarding Chinese migrants and their (informal and clandestine) economic activities.

In the Netherlands, concerns about clandestine migration, labour and criminality in Chinese ethnic businesses, particularly in the catering sector, led to racialised policies of the Dutch government towards Chinese migrants and migration in the 20th century. In political and public discourse, stereotypes and portrayals of Chinese migrants as 'vermin' engaged in clandestine conduct shrouded by mystery and secrecy characterised the so-called 'Chinese problem' against which authorities took serious measures (Wubben, 1986). These discriminatory, straightforwardly racist and violent policy measures led to poverty and the deportation of Chinese migrants (Van Eijl, 2012). These measures did little to solve the underlying reasons for undocumented migration and labour which were amongst other push and pull factors of migration related to labour shortages in the Chinese catering sector. The measures, however, lasted well into the 1960s and have continued, in a somewhat different guise, to the present day (Van Eijl, 2012). The number of undocumented migrants has, according to estimates, dropped and so has the number of restaurants during the last decade (VCHO, 2020; Wagenvoort, 2015). Yet with the criminalisation of labour exploitation in 2005, the Chinese catering sector in the Netherlands again received special attention from law enforcement (Hiah & Staring, 2013; Hiah & Staring, 2016; NOS, 2021). At the same time, Chinese restaurant owners have complained vehemently about labour shortages caused, amongst other reasons, by restrictive migration policies that specifically target immigration from outside the EU and therefore hamper the hiring of Chinese migrant workers (Hiah & Staring, 2016; NOS, 2021). In reaction to these shortages, the Dutch government has since the 1990s developed a special quota system to employ Chinese workers from abroad. Yet these quotas are considered insufficient as the demand for labour has generally been much higher (Hiah & Staring, 2016). While the concerns of authorities may be based on good intentions to address criminality and prevent victimisation, there is little empirical evidence to show a connection between ethnicity and criminality, despite enforcement efforts that have specifically targeted the Chinese ethnic minority (Hiah, 2019). Today there are approximately 2,700 Chinese restaurants in the Netherlands (see Spronsen & Partners 2019). The popularity of the Chinese catering sector as a means of employment has diminished among the second and subsequent generations of Chinese Dutch. The tough labour conditions make the sector unattractive for younger generations (Hiah & Staring, 2016).

In Romania, racialised discourses concerning Chinese migrants were also invoked in relation to their places of work: open-air markets selling cheap made-in-China goods. Chinese migrants have been trading and working on these markets since the post-socialist transition. Since the arrival of these markets in Romania, popular media have spread nationalistic and xenophobic discourses about Chinese migrants as

important players in organised crime networks that govern the marketplaces together with Roma minorities (Radu in Wundrak, 2009: 3). Chinese immigration has been described as a 'danger from outside' and a 'threat to Romanian society' and references made to the 'yellow peril', a public discourse that was also common in the United States at the turn of the 1900s (Kawai, 2005). Despite such racialised discourses, the policies towards Chinese immigration and entrepreneurship were *laissez-faire* in the early 1990s, not uncommon in the post-socialist transition. These *laissez-faire* policies generated unique economic opportunities in which informal networks and corruption among the Romanian authorities were key. Some authors have therefore argued that Chinese migration and entrepreneurship are intertwined with the history of corruption in post-socialist Romania. Yet by the mid-2000s legal barriers were raised against Chinese migrant businesses that became increasingly restrictive. In practice, the barriers were enforced by constant police raids and identity checks in and around the marketplaces in which Chinese migrants conduct their businesses (Nagy, 2011). My research shows that these raids and checks at the marketplace generated opportunities for authorities to ask for bribes. While bribes have become normalised today, it is not always clear to migrants themselves whether they are breaking the law when they pay a bribe, or that they are an easy target of extortion (Hiah, 2020). What is however clear is that, due to more recent anti-corruption measures by the Romanian government, doing business in Romania was perceived as less attractive by the entrepreneurs. This added to a situation in which their income was declining in what had become a saturated market (Hiah, 2020). Due to a lack of clear (and recent) statistical data, there is unfortunately no information on the number of Chinese migrants in Romania, although my fieldwork found estimations ranging between 8,000 and 10,000 Chinese nationals living in Bucharest in Romania in 2013, a number that has been dropping in subsequent years (Hiah, 2019).

It can be concluded that racialised discourses in relation to Chinese minorities and criminality and deviance are pervasive in the histories of both the Netherlands and Romania. Proving a causal relationship between the described racialisation in governmental crime policies and how Chinese ethnic communities deal with informal and clandestine behaviours as sensitive information lies beyond the scope of this contribution. However, what I would like to stress is that the attitudes and perspectives Chinese ethnic minorities and migrants have towards law enforcement and clandestine and informal conduct are embedded in the particular histories sketched above. In turn, these attitudes and perspectives influenced the methodological and ethical challenges I encountered during my fieldwork.

The findings reported in this article are based on multi-site ethnographic fieldwork in the Netherlands and Romania among Chinese ethnic/migrant entrepreneurs, Chinese (undocumented) workers, professionals, governmental institutions and NGOs active in migration and labour exploitation in different locations in the Netherlands and Romania from 2010 to 2016 carried out as part of the author's doctoral research (Hiah, 2019). While various types of informants were interviewed, this contribution focuses mainly on the fieldwork among ethnic entrepreneurs, giving the so-called employer perspective. The analytical focus of the study was initially on labour relations and emic (or 'insider') perspectives on what the legal discourse describes as labour

exploitation. Yet the field research exposed the importance of a wider array of informal and clandestine practices in the everyday functioning of the ethnic economy in the Netherlands and Romania. Informal and clandestine practices in this contribution refer to a variety of practices and conduct, including clandestine labour, employment of undocumented workers, tax evasion, bribery and administrative abuses such as the lack of permits and licences for starting a business or employment.

In total, 106 qualitative interviews were conducted during 2010 and 2011 and 2014 and 2016. Forty-six of those interviews were with entrepreneurs and (undocumented) workers with a Chinese migrant background who were working in the Chinese restaurant sector in the Netherlands and the wholesale markets in Romania at the time of the interviews. In addition, there is a group of ten research participants, consisting of both first- and second-generation migrants, who previously worked in Chinese restaurants in the Netherlands. Because Chinese migration started later in the Romanian context, the second generation is very young and, with a few exceptions, was not included in this study. However, young first-generation migrants are part of the Romanian component of this case study. These are (family members of) entrepreneurs who migrated to Romania at a young age, following their parents, and who, at the time of the fieldwork were aged in their early to mid-twenties. In both the Netherlands and Romania, the businesses included in this study were typical family businesses (Kidwell, Hoy & Ibarreche, 2012) in which family members such as partners and children were often called upon to help in order to keep labour costs low, among other reasons (Hiah, 2019).

The primary language of interviews was Dutch in the Netherlands and Mandarin in Romania, although many interviews were conducted in a mixture of languages, including English and different Chinese dialects. The acquired information was interpreted on the spot into English and in some cases Dutch. To minimise the loss of meaning through translation, key native words/phrases were noted down and described. Data acquired through participant observations were jotted down in fieldwork notes and summarised later. Many of the qualitative interviews were recorded but it was not always possible to record conversations during observations. Fieldwork notes, summaries and transcribed interviews were analysed with qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti (see Evers, 2016). Fieldwork was carried out by the author and in the next section I will reflect on my positionality in relation to negotiating access.

## **(Fear of) stigmatisation versus importance of ethnicity as a meaningful category**

Scholars who have researched criminality and deviance among ethnic minority groups have hotly debated whether it is ethical to explore the relationship between ethnicity and crime. On the one hand scholars show concerns that looking into the relationship between ethnicity and crime may result in further stigmatisation of already racialised minorities (Siegel, 2016; Van der Leun et al., 2010). Furthermore, various studies have demonstrated that there exists no clear-cut relationship between ethnicity, which is already a complex concept that may refer to various things including nationality, race, colour and community involvement (Guibernau & Rex, 2010) and crime (e.g. Unnever, 2019). Therefore, focusing on criminality among particular ethnic groups may incorrectly suggest causality between ethnicity and deviance. At the same time, research

has shown that ethnicity is a meaningful social category for social identification and boundary drawing among racialised ethnic minority groups (e.g. Lamont & Molnár, 2002). These researchers approach ethnicity not as a static given, but as a dynamic phenomenon, meaning that researchers should not so much depart from ethnicity as having predefined characteristics, but leave it as an open question that should be posed to research participants. Ethnicity should thus not be considered as something 'in' the world, rather, it is something about 'how' we view the world (Brubaker, 2009:32).

The debate on the relationship between ethnicity and clandestine and informal conduct is ongoing in the literature on ethnic entrepreneurship. The first approach, the structuralist perspective, explains clandestine and informal conduct as a survival practice of migrant and ethnic minority entrepreneurs who are unable to find other avenues for subsistence. Due to labour market marginalisation, it is argued, ethnic minorities more often than majority groups engage in informal behaviours (e.g. Kloosterman, Van der Leun & Rath, 1999; Castells & Portes, 1989). The second approach, the neoliberal perspective, considers informal conduct as a rational strategy of ethnic entrepreneurs (e.g. Ram, Edwards & Jones, 2007). A third and more recent approach challenges the previous perspectives for their market-centred theorising in which economic gain is emphasised. This third approach views informal conduct not simply as a means of survival or businesses strategy, but highlights non-market, culturally informed motivations for informal conduct, such as exploring new work identities, skills and training (e.g. Hiah, 2019; Bloch & McKay, 2013; 2014; Rodgers, Shahid & Williams, 2019). This third stream of literature takes a more inductive approach towards ethnicity, instead of departing from a predefined notion of ethnicity, as in the previous two literatures. This third category is where this current contribution is situated.

To counter ethnocentric notions of ethnicity in my research I did not depart from a predetermined definition of ethnicity, I did not even question ethnicity at first in my interviews. It did however come up as a meaningful category. Ethnicity as 'Chineseness' played an important role in the meanings research participants attributed to various (informal) work and employment practices. Employing undocumented migrants was considered typically 'Chinese'. But working relations and work ethics were also ethnicised by respondents. They contrasted their 'Chineseness' with non-Chinese workers to explain their preference for co-ethnic employees. Important to them were both the cultural knowledge of the skills needed to work in the ethnic economy and speaking the same language, but some softer indicators, such as work ethic and cultural ways of communication, were also considered 'Chinese'. Because my research was comparative, I could also contrast the meanings of Chineseness in the Netherlands with the meanings of Chineseness in Romania. Generally, in Romania, people departed more often from a nationalistic account of Chineseness, referring to the People's Republic of China (PRC). These participants would reflect on current political affairs and geopolitical relationships between the PRC and the rest of the world. In the Netherlands only a minority of participants referred to this more nationalistic aspect of Chineseness. An explanation could be that the Romanian participants recently immigrated, and all came from the PRC, while the participants in the Netherlands have settled in the Netherlands for years and many of them are part of the overseas Chinese

diaspora, having ancestry in other countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Suriname. Finally, it was not only Chineseness that played a role in the everyday of the ethnic economies. Sub-ethnicity also played an important role. Differences were based on language barriers (different Chinese dialects) and on regions of origin. Some participants did however argue that ‘we are all Chinese’.

Ethnicity also played a role in describing adverse migration experiences. In both the Netherlands and Romania, participants felt that they were being stereotyped and/or discriminated against. Whereas in the Netherlands the complaints were about being perceived differently and ‘being’ culturally different, in Romania, ethnicity played an important role in the (perceived) lack of safety and insecurity of participants. They felt that their ethnicity was a reason for local authorities to target them for bribe demands and that they could not turn to local authorities when they were victimised by crime. Especially their migrant status, such as having a temporary residence permit and not speaking the local language, played an important role in their (perceived) vulnerability. In this context, focusing on how ethnicity relates to institutional exclusion became very important. Furthermore, recent developments during the COVID-19 pandemic also painfully demonstrated that racialisation and racism are phenomena that Chinese ethnic minorities still have to deal with today (Li & Nicholson, 2021).

Despite the racialisation of labour practices by participants themselves, (the fear of) stigmatisation was still an ethical and methodological issue I had to tackle in my research. When I started out my doctoral research I was not very aware of the potential stigmatising effects my study could have on the research group. I actually thought that I would be able to provide more visibility for the emic perspectives of research participants whose voices had been missing in public debates despite being targeted, as the previous section showed, by a long history of racialised governmental policies. As my research progressed, these issues came up. I noticed that my participants were very much aware of the potentially stigmatising and political connotations of my research. Various research participants explained that paying attention to clandestine and informal practices within the Chinese community may have negative consequences for the Chinese minority group’s status and ‘reputation’, which suggests a strong awareness of how stereotypes of the Chinese minority conducting criminal and informal behaviours have played an important role in the Netherlands. For instance, Henry, a close-to-pension-aged entrepreneur in the Netherlands claimed:

*These [clandestine practices] are not good things to make public. Making this public would be bad for the Chinese. A lot of illegal [Chinese] and workers would be very angry. And of course, older Chinese would also get very angry. Certain things should not be made public, because this [results in] a very bad image for the Chinese. I have been part of the Chinese community for so long, almost 30 years, I know all kinds of things.*

Because of this fear of stigmatisation, it was for many research participants a deliberate choice not to speak up about these sensitive topics.

Furthermore, stigmatisation was not only feared because it might contribute to negative stereotypes, but also because of negative past experiences with Dutch authorities. Various entrepreneurs emphasised that they felt that the labour shortages in



their businesses, and accordingly demands for more accommodating labour migration policies, were not taken seriously by the Dutch authorities. From their perspective, focusing on clandestine conduct and informality in the Chinese catering sector would not help their case for better policies. Finally, some participants also feared individual consequences, which will be discussed in the next section. The fear for stigmatising effects of conflating ethnicity and criminality by research participants was an important challenge for me to tackle during my fieldwork in the Netherlands. In Romania these issues were not experienced as such by entrepreneurs. They did feel they were discriminated against or even victimised by authorities, but this had less to do with clandestine and informal conduct, as they were of the opinion that clandestine conduct was rather the rule and not the exception in Romania. Yet, independent of whether research participants see it as an issue or not, the potential harm of conflating ethnicity with criminality is an ethical question that needs to be taken seriously.<sup>3</sup>

In short, reservations among research participants on how ethnicity may lead to stigmatisation was an important challenge to overcome in my research, both from an ethical and methodological point of view. At the same time, ethnicity proved to be a meaningful category to participants and therefore deserves scholarly attention, albeit taking into account ethical considerations.

## **Negotiating access through (perceived) insider status in the migrant economy**

While the added benefit of insider researchers has been emphasised, there are only a few studies that have applied this methodology so far in ethnic economy research (Vershina & Discua Cruz, 2021). An insider is a researcher who shares group identity and belonging with their research participants (Delyser, 2001). Insider researchers are expected to have less trouble negotiating access, building rapport with research subjects and questioning sensitive topics such as clandestine and informal practices (Becker, 1963; Vershinina & Rodionova, 2011; Vershinina & Discua Cruz, 2021). Yet being an insider, or perceived as such, not only comes with benefits but also with trade-offs such as being subjected to social control (see also Delyser, 2001). Insider status can be based on a variety of identity markers such as gender, culture, religion, social class, profession and sexual orientation (Zempi, 2016). Accordingly, insider status and research positionality in general should not be considered as fixed positions but, like social identity, should be considered context-dependent, fluid, hybrid and diverse. A researcher does not have one identity but has different identities and takes on different roles and social positions in different contexts (Hiah, 2021). Therefore, the distinction between insiders and outsiders, researchers who do not share group identity and belonging with their research participants, may be exaggerated (Merton, 1972).

In the following section I will first reflect on how my (perceived) insider status and positionality, as a co-ethnic and a daughter of Chinese ethnic entrepreneurs, played a

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3 In another contribution I reflect on the position of ethnic minority scholars conducting research on a group with which they share a similar ethnic background and the various implications this has for the perceived quality of research of ethnic minority scholars (Hiah, 2021).

role in negotiating access. In this contribution I will focus on ethnic and entrepreneurial identity, although other markers such as gender and nationality were salient in determining my positionality. Central to my reflections are what Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman (2017) have described as key to positionality: credibility and approachability. Approachability is defined as the ability to be considered non-threatening and safe. Approachability is necessary for both initial and ongoing access to the field. Credibility refers to the degree to which researchers are perceived as sufficiently reputable to invest time in. There are different forms of credibility. The three most relevant forms for this contribution are cultural, professional and relational credibility. As a researcher you show cultural credibility by demonstrating familiarity and openness with a specific subcultural setting. Professional credibility relates to your researcher background. Relational credibility is built when you conduct research into a community or group for a longer period of time and build relationships with research group members. Although credibility and approachability can be intentionally pursued, research participants also attribute these to the researcher. Second, I will illustrate how my positionality in relation to the two different enforcement contexts also has an impact on what were considered sensitive topics.

### **Questioning ethnicity: differences in the Netherlands versus Romania**

My (perceived) shared ethnic and cultural background raised considerable challenges in negotiating access. First, while I was able to use my personal network in the Netherlands to negotiate access, it did not always prove to be enough. An important challenge was internal social control. Because I had close family members who were running a Chinese restaurant, there were restaurant owners who might have been reluctant to participate as they thought I might be doing research for self-serving aims. While not explicitly admitted by those restaurant owners who refused to participate, various participants suggested that some restaurant owners might have been afraid I wanted to interview them to get more information about their business strategies and information to advance the business of my family members. Therefore, my insider positionality did not always benefit from the use of chain referral strategies. My approachability was actually quite low: I was considered a threat because of being part of the community. On the other hand, as it was often assumed that I would know why and what practices take place in Chinese restaurants because of my community ties I was often given replies like: 'Yes, you know how it goes' when I asked questions. In cases where research participants feel that you already know the answer to a question you are asking, continuing to ask questions may be perceived as irritating. When conducting insider research, you as a researcher have to balance between the assumptions that research participants have about what you already know and your search for answers to your research questions (see also Delyser, 2001). Therefore I had to emphasise my professional credibility more often in the Dutch context.

Furthermore, while I was perceived as an insider in the Netherlands due to my shared cultural and ethnic background, in Romania I was not considered 'insider' enough, nor did I have an existing network to tap into. On the positive side, I did not have to deal with insider issues (as discussed above) in Romania. My 'Chinese' ethnic identity was challenged in Romania due to me not being able to speak Mandarin

fluently. One of the participants for instance exclaimed: 'you're Chinese, learn Mandarin'. These types of claims and questions I'd receive more often in the Romanian context.<sup>4</sup> My (Chinese/Asian) appearance in combination with not having a complete command of Mandarin raised questions. My fluency in Mandarin was adopted as an indicator of my Chinese identity and I did not score sufficiently on that. Because of my poor control of Mandarin, I was not seen as a sufficient insider of the group in Romania. In the Netherlands my ethnic identity was not so much questioned when it came to my command of Mandarin. In the Dutch context, many of the research participants did not speak Mandarin as their first language but spoke the Cantonese dialect and/or Mandarin was a second language for many participants. Another difference is that the Chinese migrant community has been much longer present in the Netherlands. There were many second-generation migrants among my Dutch research group, while in Romania the first-generation participants themselves had only been in Romania for less than ten years. To my Dutch research participants it was not a surprise that I was less proficient in Mandarin; many research participants had children who spoke Dutch as their first language. I was sometimes compared to the children of these participants: more 'Dutch' than 'Chinese'.

In short, my fieldwork experiences show that 'being Chinese' played an important role in both the Dutch and Romanian context, but in different ways. In the Dutch context, I was regarded as sufficiently 'insider', which meant that I had to emphasise my research role, my professional credibility, more often. In the Romanian context, I had to negotiate my Chineseness to be considered an 'insider' for both approachability and credibility. This required investment of time and building relational credibility. This illustrates how identity and with it the positionality of the researcher is relational, context-dependent and (partly) attributed.

### **Sensitivity of topics as an emerging issue: influence of positionality and the enforcement context**

As already discussed, insider researchers are assumed to have more easy access to topics that are considered sensitive. I, however, still had to deal with challenges related to gaining access to clandestine and informal practices. To my surprise, what was considered sensitive information differed between the Netherlands and Romania. In the Netherlands, informal and clandestine practices were treated very carefully by participants, as a sort of taboo. Various participants and even close family members were of the opinion that it would not be a good thing to speak openly about these topics, with one participant stating firmly 'nobody is going to talk to you about these topics', because this would have perceived negative consequences for participants (and as I have demonstrated above, also the perceived stigmatising effects for Chinese ethnic minorities as a group played an important role). Yet interestingly, in the Romanian context, informal and clandestine behaviours were considered less sensitive than in the Netherlands. Informal behaviours such as tax evasion, clandestine labour and small-scale bribery were actually considered more or less the norm. Various participants

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4 For an in-depth analysis of the role of speaking Mandarin in the construction of 'Chineseness' see Ang (2001).

would admit outright that they paid bribes for working permits, employed their workers informally without paying taxes and/or were evading value added taxes. Informal behaviours were thus more or less normalised, which is in line with the literature that shows that the informal economy in some contexts is rather the norm and not the exception (Williams & Oz-Yalaman, 2021).

While clandestine and informal conduct were not considered sensitive topics in Romania, topics related to the everyday running of the business and business strategies were. Questions regarding these topics were answered reluctantly or not at all. For instance, when I put a question to an entrepreneur about why she started out selling women's clothing in the markets, she wasn't prepared to answer that question, although she was willing to talk to me about paying bribes to local authorities. Another example is how one of the key participants, who had conveyed to me various sensitive and personal information, including that he was running his business entirely illegally on a student visa, was still not convinced of my research intentions and assumed I was actually interested in running a business. During my goodbye dinner he asked 'So . . . are you really not going to start a business yourself, in Romania?' He posed that question because he still thought I was going to start my own business and that this was the reason I had been interviewing Chinese migrant business owners at the market in Bucharest. This indicated to me that competition on the market was severe and that this made general business information more sensitive than information about clandestine and informal conduct. And because of my (perceived) shared ethnic identity, I was seen as a potential competitor in business in the Romanian context.

In sum, the fieldwork findings demonstrate that whether informal and clandestine conduct is considered a sensitive topic in ethnographic research is an emergent issue. In the Netherlands, research participants were reluctant to openly discuss informal and clandestine practices as they feared the potential legal and stigmatising consequences. In Romania, informal and clandestine practices were not considered sensitive topics. Research participants spoke openly about engaging in these practices, arguing that they are part of the day-to-day social organisation of open-air markets and not actively enforced by Romanian authorities.

## **Conclusion and discussion**

A rich tradition of scholarship has addressed clandestine and informal practices in the migrant and ethnic economy. Yet limited attention has been given to the methodological challenges and ethical issues involved in conducting qualitative or ethnographic research among ethnic entrepreneurs and workers. More recently, the importance of qualitative and ethnographic research methods to study migrant and ethnic entrepreneurship has been highlighted, together with a call for more ethnic minority insider researchers on these matters, as they are suggested to be better suited to gaining access to sensitive topics and building rapport with research participants (Vershina & Discua Cruz, 2020; Vershinina & Rodionova, 2011). Ethnic minority (insider) researchers are also warranted as their perspectives are currently still under-represented in scholarship on ethnic entrepreneurship and deviance (Ajil & Blount-Hill, 2020; Vershinina & Discua Cruz, 2021; see also Osanami Törngren & Ngeh, 2018).

This article fills previously signalled gaps in the ethnic entrepreneurship literature by exploring the methodological and ethical challenges of insider ethnographic research on sensitive topics such as clandestine practices including informal and clandestine labour, tax evasion, undocumented labour and bribery in the Chinese migrant economy in the Netherlands and Romania. It finds that whether clandestine practices are considered sensitive topics and whether they are potentially stigmatising strongly depends on the (enforcement) context. In this study, concerns for stigmatisation in relation to ethnicity and clandestine practices should be understood in the context of a long history of racialisation in enforcement policies targeting the Chinese ethnic economy in the Netherlands and Romania. Interestingly, in Romania, the migrants were less concerned with stigmas related to ethnicity and clandestine practices. It seemed that clandestine practices were normalised in the broader Romanian society and therefore not considered as sensitive subject matter. In the Netherlands, the opposite held true. The Dutch participants were careful and sometimes even reluctant to address these clandestine practices openly. Various Dutch respondents also mentioned the stigmas related to clandestine conduct and racialisation of ethnicity in the form of (anti-)‘Chineseness’. At the same time, ethnicity was not only associated with stigma. On the contrary, to those participating in the migrant economy, ethnicity in the shape of ‘Chineseness’ played an important role in the meanings Chinese migrant and minority entrepreneurs attributed to their (adverse) work and employment practices and their experiences of discrimination and racialisation. Furthermore, ethnicity also played a key role in the methodological challenges I had as a (perceived) ethnic minority insider researcher. Whilst my reflexive experiences detailed in this contribution argue that the distinction between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ status is exaggerated, they do nevertheless show that ethnicity, albeit in different shapes, informed my positionality and was key in the negotiation of access to sensitive subject matter.

Finally, the findings of this contribution demonstrate that it is possible and worthwhile to conduct ethnographic research on informal and clandestine practices in the ethnic economy. Yet pursuing this type of research demands that researchers find a balance between, on the one hand, doing justice to ethnicity as a meaningful social category and, on the other, heeding the dangers of stigmatisation related to ethnicity and sensitive research topics. Researchers should reflect on whether ethnicity matters as a meaningful social category for understanding the practices in the migrant economy or whether it may actually be detrimental and reify the racialisation of ethnic minorities.

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