

The image features a background of a classical building facade, likely the main entrance of the Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg. The building has multiple stories with arched windows and classical columns. A large, stylized white 'U' logo is overlaid on the left side of the image. The text 'Julius-Maximilians-' is in a smaller font above the main title 'UNIVERSITÄT WÜRZBURG', which is in a large, bold, white sans-serif font.

Julius-Maximilians-
**UNIVERSITÄT
WÜRZBURG**

Methodological Questions of Chinese Economic Research

Fieldwork in China & Research Ethics



Course Evaluation



Session Goals

1. Understand the **practical challenges** of conducting fieldwork in China (access, risk, data collection)
2. Reflect on **ethical responsibilities** in politically sensitive environments
3. Identify how fieldwork methods could apply to your **own term paper project**
4. Recognize what it means to do research **with, about, and among** actors in an authoritarian context
5. Prepare for fieldwork by asking the right questions: **before, during, and after** entering the field

Why does fieldwork
(in China) matter?

Why Fieldwork Matters (in China)

- Fieldwork provides access to **practices, meanings, and informal dynamics** that are often missing from official sources (e.g. documents)
- In China, many political processes are **opaque, fragmented, or strategically staged**
- Fieldwork allows us to trace **actor interactions**, observe **local variation**, and test how policies are **understood and implemented**
- Especially relevant for **policy implementation (variation) or governing practices, identifying hidden agendas, ambiguity, and new actors**
- Fieldwork grounds your research in “lived realities” & might challenge your assumptions

Types of Fieldwork in China

- **Elite or expert interviews**

→ with officials, scholars, business actors, journalists, etc.

- **Surveys**

→ legally regulated and difficult without affiliation or permits

- **Ethnography**

→ highly sensitive, especially in rural or minority regions

- **Participant observation**

→ rare and often informal; difficult in bureaucratic or political contexts

- **Document collection**

→ local archives, regulations, guidelines, media, social media

Access & Gatekeeping in the Chinese Context

Who lets you in, and why?

Gaining access is shaped by:

- **Formal structures** (e.g. institutions, regulations, affiliation requirements)
- **Informal relationships** (e.g. guanxi, trust, introductions, status)
- **Political sensitivity of your topic**
→ Some themes may lead to denial or avoidance

Access & Gatekeeping in the Chinese Context

Who lets you in, and why?

Common obstacles:

- **Lack of affiliation** = no access to official actors
 - (Local) authorities may redirect or **ignore** requests
 - Interviewees may agree, but later **withdraw** or **censor themselves** (including foreigners)
 - Foreign researchers are often treated with **suspicion**
- **Access is never neutral:** Who agrees to talk, and what they say, depends on who you are, what you do/ask, and what they expect (to gain)



Permissions, Visas & Institutional Affiliation

Formal status ≠ actual access

Types of visas: Tourist visa, Student visa, Research visa

→ **Visa-free access** for Germans and other nationalities has been in place since December 2023, allowing stays of up to **30 days**

But: only for tourism and private purposes! This does not include field research!

Field affiliation: permission from Chinese partners is needed to legally conduct interviews (or access archives)

Permissions, Visas & Institutional Affiliation

Key risks

- Increasing surveillance of foreign researchers in Xi Jinping era, especially after 2016/7
- Misrepresentation of your purpose (even unintentionally) can raise red flags
- **Diverse realities on the ground:**
Some affiliations are **symbolic only**, others come with **party-state supervision**
→ High ambiguity and uncertainty

What to do?

Be honest, but strategic, and always consider what risks your research might pose for local collaborators

Language, Translation & Interpretation

Fieldwork is not just about *what is said*, but *how it is interpreted & understood*

→ **Your interpretation of the data begins during the conversation, not just in the transcript!**

- Meaning is **culturally embedded**
→ key terms (e.g. “innovation”, “democracy”, “governance”) do **not translate one-to-one**

- Interviewees may use **coded language, metaphors, or slogans**

Risk Awareness: Researcher & Respondent

Not all risks are visible, and some are not yours

→ In authoritarian settings, ethics is not only about ticking boxes!

→ it's about knowing when not to ask!

For the researcher:

- Political/Sensitive topics may draw attention from **security organs**
- Interviews can be **monitored, documented, or disrupted**
- **Post-fieldwork consequences** (e.g. visa denial, institutional scrutiny)

For the respondent:

- Expressing criticism may lead to **professional or legal consequences**
- Affiliation with a foreign project may feel **dangerous**
- **Decontextualization**: Even “casual remarks” can be used **against them** in the wrong context

How to conduct ethical research in China?

The Ethics of Doing Research in China

In China, ethics is shaped by:

- **Party-state norms and practices**
- **Legal ambiguity**
- **Strategic behavior by researchers and respondents**

Key ethical tensions:

- Official permission vs. genuine **informed consent**
- Access vs. **participant safety**
- Transparency vs. (intended) **ambiguity**
- Publication vs. **Protection**

→ *You should adapt ethical principles to specific contexts, without abandoning core responsibilities*

Positionality & Reflexivity

Who are you in the field, and what does that mean for your research?

→ *There is no neutral researcher: Your position shapes your access, your data, and your interpretations*

Ask yourself in an interview setting:

How are you perceived by interviewees? (Foreigner? Student? Academic? Threat?)

How do your **language, appearance, affiliation**, and **questions** shape the interaction?

Reflexivity in practice

- Keep a **field diary** to document impressions, discomforts, unexpected responses
- Pay attention to **what people say AND avoid saying**
- Note how **your presence** might change what is said or not said

Handling Sensitive Topics

Just because you can ask, doesn't mean you should

→ Be a careful listener, and know when **silence** is more ethical than proactive curiosity

Strategies to reduce risk in an interview setting

- Use **indirect framing of questions** (“How is this issue discussed in your field/industry/department?”; “What are the main narratives you hear about...?”)
- Let the **interviewee “lead”** and follow their cues
- Don't press for objective “truth” → better explore subjective **perceptions** and **framings**

Know when to step back → You are not an investigative journalist!

- If someone becomes nervous, evasive, or repeats slogans
- If a topic triggers discomfort

Anonymity & Protection

Your ethical duty doesn't end after the interview

→ **Confidentiality must continue after the fieldwork is done**

Protecting your respondents

- Never write down **real names** in fieldnotes or transcripts
- Use **coded identifiers**: e.g. "municipal official 1, province 2"
- Remove details that could lead to indirect identification (location, event, role combinations)

Triangulation Under Constraints

When access is limited, cross-checking becomes essential

→ **The gaps, silences, and contradictions are often the interesting stuff (“the real data”)**

Why triangulate?

(e.g. policy documents, interviews, media coverage & other secondary data like company reports)

- **No single source is fully reliable**, especially in authoritarian settings
- Documents may be curated, interviews censored, online data **manipulated**
- Triangulation helps you **cross-validate claims** and **spot contradictions**

Get a feeling and pay attention to...

- **Missingness**: What’s not published or discussed?
- **Shifts over time**: When do actors start or stop saying something?
- **Conflicting narratives**: Who tells what story, and why?

Reflection Task: Apply to Your Own Project

Think about your term paper project: 5 min!

1. Could **fieldwork in China** (real or hypothetical) help answer your research question?
2. What kind of **data** would you ideally collect on site?
3. What **challenges** might arise regarding ***access, ethics, and risks?***
4. How could you **triangulate** this data if field access is limited?

Ethical Dilemmas in the Field: What Would You Do?

Doing fieldwork in China (and other authoritarian contexts) often means facing ethical grey zones

In this section, we will...

- Work through 3 scenarios
- Reflect on competing values: access vs. safety, knowledge vs. protection
- Practice justifying field decisions in writing

Ask yourself...

What are the risks, for me and others?

What are my responsibilities?

What would I do, and how would I explain it in my thesis?

Case 1: The Anonymous Official

You interview a local/provincial/central party-state official on industrial policy. He/She speaks freely “off the record,” criticizes national reforms, and shares policy-relevant details.

Before leaving, he adds: *“Please don’t quote me.”*

What would you do?

- Do **not cite** or paraphrase the content, even anonymously
- You may use the knowledge **internally as background information** to guide further research or triangulation, but not as empirical evidence
- Document the situation in your **field diary**, not in your analysis
- If the insight is crucial, try to **verify it through other sources**

→ **Consent can be withdrawn at any time, and must be respected unconditionally**

Case 2: The Surveillance Shadow

You are interviewing a former SOE employee in a second-tier city. During the conversation, you both sense surveillance (e.g., cameras nearby, questions from hotel staff).

The respondent appears nervous but says: *“It’s okay. I’ve done this before.”*

What would you do?

- Politely **pause the interview** and reaffirm that withdrawal is always an option
- Emphasize that **safety comes first**, and that stopping the interview is absolutely okay
- If concerns persist, **end the interview** to avoid unintentional harm
- Document your **own role in the situation** (reflexive field notes)

→ **Ethical research means protecting participants, even when they underestimate the risk themselves**

Case 3: The Offered Access

A local contact/collaborator offers to introduce you to a high-ranking cadre, but only if you first submit your interview questions to a supervisory and propaganda office.

What would you do?

- **Do not share detailed interview questions** in advance → this invites **censorship**
 - If you choose to proceed:
 - Treat the meeting as **contextual background**, not as a source of candid insight
 - Avoid **sensitive** questions
 - Document this access strategy **transparently** in your methods section
 - Alternatively, seek **less politicized interlocutors** (e.g. retired officials, scholars, or policy advisors)
- **Negotiate access carefully, but protect & do not compromise the integrity of your research**

Group Reflection: What Did You Learn?

1. Which of the three cases challenged you the most, and why?
2. Did your opinion change after hearing the best-practice response?
3. How would you document a similar situation in your **methods section**?
4. What principles guide your own ethical decisions in the field?

→ **There are no perfect answers, but reflections make you a more responsible researcher, hopefully**

10 Questions: Before Going into the Field

Research Focus

1. What is my **working title and topic**, and how politically sensitive is it in China?
2. What is the **core research question**, and does it require field-based insights?

Access & Data

3. What kind of **data** would I ideally collect, and who controls access to it?
4. Could I collect this data **directly**, or must I rely on **documents, media, or third parties**?

Ethical Awareness

5. Could my fieldwork **put anyone at risk**?
6. How will I **obtain consent**, and what will I do if someone speaks informally or “off the record”?

10 Questions: Before Going into the Field

Protection & Reflexivity

- 7. How will I protect **identities** (and store data) responsibly?
- 8. How might I be **perceived** in the field, and how will that shape access and trust?

Adaptability & Reflection

- 9. What will I do if **access is denied** or only partial? What's my plan B?
- 10. How will I write honestly about **what I could and could not do** in my methods section?

→ These questions don't need final/conclusive answers, but they shape how you prepare, reflect, and conduct responsible research

Continue Working On Your Research Project

1. **Working Title** → What is the topic (policy issue) of your project?
2. **Relevance** → Why is this important to study?
3. **Research Question** → Refine your question: “Why”? “How”?
4. **Research Aim** → What do you want to find out?
5. **Theoretical Approach** → Which theories & concepts might help you answer your question?
6. **Method** → What type of research design would you choose? (e.g. qualitative vs quantitative?)
7. **Empirical Material / Data Sources** → What kind of data might be available or needed?

The image features a background of a classical building facade with columns and arches, likely the main building of the University of Würzburg. On the left, there is a blue-tinted area with tree branches. Overlaid on this is a white logo consisting of a stylized 'U' and 'W' shape. To the right of the logo, the text 'Julius-Maximilians-' is in a smaller font, and 'UNIVERSITÄT WÜRZBURG' is in a larger, bold, sans-serif font.

Julius-Maximilians-
**UNIVERSITÄT
WÜRZBURG**

Thank you for your attention