

# Researching Abused Women in China

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## Abstract

When investigating 'sensitive' topics as researchers, we have a responsibility to abide by ethical standards. Two issues are of particular concern in this article, namely conducting ethical research and putting cultural sensitivities into consideration. I try to demonstrate how researchers can make 'muted groups' talk by addressing cultural sensitivities and adhering to ethical standards during the process of participant observation and in-depth interviews. It is argued that researchers need to understand, recognize and exercise cultural sensitivities while bearing in mind issues of confidentiality. Over the past four years I have been involved in researching domestic violence and abused women in Chinese society in the country's economic reform era. The observations and narratives in this article are based on my experiences of conducting qualitative research on abused women between December 2000 and September 2001.

**Keywords:** Research, Sensitive Topic, Abused Women, China, Participant Observation, Interview, Domestic Violence, Consultation, cultural sensitivity.

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## 1. Introduction

'All Happy families are more or less dissimilar; all unhappy ones are more or less alike.'

Leo Tolstoy [\[1\]](#)

Among all these unhappy families, domestic violence is a great contributor. It occurs in almost all cultures and countries, across all divisions of wealth, race, education and social class. Research on domestic violence and abused women started in early 70s in western countries, especially in Britain and the United States.

However, China lags far behind by turning a blind eye to it until mid-nineties. Not until 1994 did the government formally admit the existence of violence against women (Gao and Wang, 1998, p 3). As to research on abused women in China, it is almost a wasteland that needs ploughing and weeding. Doing research on women who believe in a traditional concept 'domestic shames should not be made public' [\[2\]](#) requires researchers to be ethical in their conduct as well as culturally sensitive. On the basis of my experience of working in the The Women's Law Studies and

Service Centre (hereafter, WLSSC) as a consultant, in this paper I aim to discuss ways of addressing cultural sensitivity. In addition, I will also present some practical tips on researching sensitive topics in the Chinese context, with specific examples taken from my fieldwork. I will start with definitions of a sensitive topic, move on to provide the basic information of my fieldwork site and my experience of addressing cultural sensitivity, and finally come to the point of providing tips on conducting research on abused women in China.

## **2. Defining a Sensitive Topic**

There are several versions of how to define a sensitive topic. Sieber and Stanley define a sensitive topic as:

‘Studies in which there are potential consequences or implications, either directly for the participants in the research or for the class of individuals represented by the research’ (Sieber and Stanley, 1988, p 49).

Although this definition is broad in scope and is more likely to alert researchers to pay attention to their social responsibilities, it fails to specify the scope or nature of the consequences and implications of such research, therefore it has the danger of neglecting the more technical and methodological problems involved in conducting sensitive research (Liebling and Shah, 2001).

According to a definition by Renzetti and Lee, sensitive topics have elements of either threatening or risky in some way, so such research involves potential costs and consequent problems for both the participants and researchers (Liebling and Shah, 2001). Lee further illustrates sensitive topics as areas that are private, stressful or sacred, or expose stigmatising or incriminating information (Lee, 1993, p 4). Researching on abused women fits in the category of sensitive topics, hence it requires more consideration in terms of ethics and cultural sensitivity.

## **3. Research Settings**

My fieldwork was carried out between December 2000 and September 2001. It consisted of mainly two elements: namely participant observation in the WLSSC in Beijing and in-depth interviews with abused women.

WLSSC is a non-governmental legal aid agency attached to the Law School of Beijing University, which was established after the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995). The WLSSC works with the objectives of ‘providing legal aid; protecting women's rights and interests; safeguarding legal justice; studying the issues relating to women's rights and interests; promoting development of the causes of legal aid and protection of women's rights and interests in China’. The

main tasks of the WLSSC fall into three sections: providing legal consultation, undertaking cases and doing research. The three tasks complement each other in operation. By providing legal consultation, the staff of the WLSSC acquires first hand information and materials about the status quo of the protection of women's rights and interests in China. Undertaking cases can not only help under-represented women but also brings the talents of the staff in the Law School of Peking University into full play. Case research is also backed by the academia of the Law School and the result is used to promote the cause of women's rights and interests protection through a high-level channel that Beijing University maintains with policy making bodies.

The WLSSC has four departments operating under an overall working administrative commission, consisting of one senior consultant, the director of the centre, the executive director and deputy director. The four departments deal respectively with office administration, legal consultation, litigation and research. The consultation department deals with the helpline, answering general inquiries, writing letters, selecting representative cases and analysing the results of consultations. The litigation department deals with lawsuits taken by the WLSSC, while the research department is in charge of doing research work on individual cases, organising seminars and preparing reports. The office is in charge of daily work, including arrangements for staff to work on different shifts, maintaining files and contacting other agencies and organisations.

Judging from the structure of the centre, it may seem to be a very complicated organisation. In fact, the centre only has six full-time and 18 part-time staff. To fulfil three major tasks, it is obvious that the centre has a serious shortage of working staff. Although in theory, the centre is divided into four departments, in actual practice, staff do all kinds of work. All except the secretary deal with legal cases. To make up staff shortage, the centre takes law students as volunteers. All the staff are well qualified. They are university professors, associate professors and postgraduates. Most of the working staff also have dual status. They are lawyers attached to law firms as well as being consultants working for the WLSSC.

#### **4. Participant Observation in WLSSC**

The reason I chose WLSSC is that it is a comparatively open unit. It is not only a base for Beijing University Law School students to put their legal knowledge into practice, but also a window to the international world. The centre has already established its reputation in providing legal service and legal aid to women all over the country. I worked there as a volunteer during the whole process of my fieldwork.

Participant observation is a very natural way to approach research subjects and it is the least noticeably intrusive of all research techniques. Compared with more structured methods, this method has the flexibility to yield insight into new realities or new ways of looking at old realities (Adler, 1992, pp 87-92). When it is combined with other research methods, such as in-depth interviews, which I used in my fieldwork, it is an alternative source of data to enhance cross-checking or triangulation (Douglas, 1976). Direct observation, when added onto other research yielding depth and/or breadth, enhances consistency and validity (Alder and Alder, 1998, p 90).

I spent the initial stage of my fieldwork in WLSSC reading files in order to pick up cases of domestic violence. Meanwhile, I observed closely their daily routine and kept a diary. I tried to establish a trust relationship with every one in the centre in order to lay a good foundation for later interviews. My daily job was to provide legal service to women either face to face, or by answering telephone calls. In addition, I kept a written record on individual consultation. Participant observation enabled me to see how working staff in the centre dealt with different kinds of people.

Having built up a good relationship with everyone in the centre, I showed my interest in domestic violence cases and a desire to be involved in any activities related to domestic violence cases. As a result, whenever there was a domestic violence consultation, I would be informed and invited to sit beside a staff member there, taking notes and observing the whole process. I was also allowed to go to investigate domestic violence cases with lawyers in the centre. Participant observation provided me with first hand information about domestic violence cases, the actual situation of abused women and their experiences of relevant organizations. Participant observation was particularly useful to discover what abused women concern about and how relevant organisations treat them.

## **5. Working as a Volunteer in WLSSC**

By working as a volunteer in WLSSC, I gained useful information on the working mechanism of this organisation as well as the type of people who asked for consultation.

One of the major tasks of the centre is to assist abused women. According to statistics in 2000, the centre acted as agents for 27 domestic violence cases. [3] As there are many cases that belong to family and marriage matters, it becomes important to define domestic violence cases. There are two basic principles: one is to listen to the litigants account, observe whether she gets injured, and judge from her behaviour whether she is abused psychologically. If the litigant complains about being beaten constantly or seriously, it is categorized as domestic violence

case. If the litigant shows depression and signs of inferiority, she is abused psychologically. Some litigants bring photos to prove they were beaten. Another principle is to ask whether the litigant reported her case to the police, because the police's record is an important evidence for lawyers to help litigants.

In addition to the above two principles, the centre decides whether it acts as agent for litigants on individual basis. The decision is closely linked with the economic condition of the abused. The poorer the litigant is, the more likely it is that she gets free legal service. The decision is also linked with the case itself. If the litigant is seriously hurt, or the abuse continues for years, it is more likely for the litigant to get help. Another objective element is funding. Due to limited funds, the centre has to select cases in accordance with its financial capability. Therefore only limited numbers of abused women get legal aid from the centre.

The following are some examples of ways in which the WLSSC assists victims of domestic violence:

### **1) Telephone Consultation**

A 30 year-old saleswoman phoned, saying her husband beat her so seriously that doctors had to put ten stitches in her arm. She asked how to look into his responsibility and how to divide the property. Her husband threatened to possess the child and the house if she dared to file for a divorce. The advice of the centre was to get a certificate from a legal medical expert. If the injury was up to the standard of light bodily harm, she could file for a Criminal Private Prosecution Incidental Civil. If the injury was not up to the standard of light bodily harm, she could ask for civil compensation, which includes medical fee, transportation fee and compensation for her absence from work. She was also advised that the property would be divided equally among the couple according to the law.

### **2) Face to Face Consultation**

Many women choose to consult lawyers in person. They come from different provinces all over China. Some women even come to the centre many times. One day, a woman walked into the centre very slowly. Her left arm and leg could not move freely. She looked very depressed with a dull look in her eyes. Her face was wax yellow. She was just over forty, but looked over fifty. In her eleven years of marriage, she suffered from nephritis, cervicitis, cervical erosion, and cerebral embolism.

'The first year I got married, he started to beat me. I was sent to hospital three times. He broke my rib. He put his hand into my vagina. Once he cooked for me. In

the midnight, I vomited and twitched. He did not show any sympathy, but beat me. I was diagnosed to have cerebral embolism. That year I was only 34'.

The woman was already divorced. She had been to many places for justice, such as local courts, local people's congress, local women's federation and the police station. She wanted to file her former husband for offences of bigamy and maltreatment. She wanted to get more money to foster her children, as she had no job.

The woman came to the centre several times. The first time she came, she was told to get medical certificates for her diseases, together with all other written materials available. Although her case was a typical domestic violence case, the centre refused to act as agent for her due to several facts. She lived in Hebei Province (not in Beijing) where was expensive for lawyers to travel in order to get evidence. She was divorced for a year. The court made the judgement, therefore it was not easy to overrule the court decision. Her evidence was mainly her statement that might not be convincing in court. Unfortunately the centre could not provide her help.

### **3) Written Consultation**

Some people write to the centre for advice. The majority of those people live in other provinces. It is expensive and inconvenient for them to ask for advice in person. One woman wrote:

'Dear lawyers:

I am a 26 years old woman. My husband often beats me. He hurts me with hot water. He beats me with wooden stick. Could you please tell me what I should do?

Sincerely yours

Xiao mei'

A lawyer wrote the following:

'Dear xiao mei, I am very sympathetic to you. My advice is that you can file him for abuse. You need to collect evidence, for example, after he beats you, you take photos with the date on it. You can also ask doctors to write down a detailed description of the wound. If he beats you seriously, you should phone the police. You can ask the police to write a letter for you in order to get a medical expert certificate. When he beats you, you can ask your neighbours for help. Your neighbours can act as witnesses if you file for a divorce.

We hope that you can fight against violence in your family. Remember the most important thing is not keeping it within the family. Whenever he beats you, ask for

help. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us. We are always here to help you.

Sincerely yours,

A lawyer in WLSSC'

#### **4) Action on Domestic Violence Cases**

The centre has several measures to deal with domestic violence cases. The measures can be categorised into three types:

##### **1) Where the litigant wants a divorce**

If the litigant has been found to have light injury, the lawyers in the centre will ask litigants whether they would like to seek criminal punishment. Light injury can become a major reason for litigants to file for a divorce. The centre takes the certificate of legal experts as solid evidence to get a favourable result for litigants. Meanwhile the centre also suggests litigants to report the violence to their neighbourhood committees, the police and women's federations so as to get more evidence.

##### **2) Where the litigant does not want a divorce**

The lawyers in the centre will judge individual case and analyse problems for litigants. If there is a third party involved in the marriage, the purpose of the violence may be to force the woman to end the marriage. The lawyers in the centre will advise litigants to file for a divorce. If the violence is the result of the husband's bad temper or financial problems, the lawyers in the centre will advise litigants to seek help from relatives.

##### **3) Where a litigant has been handicapped by the use of violence**

The lawyers in the centre will investigate the case, collect evidence and bring the perpetrator to trial.

As a volunteer consultant in WLSSC, I provided telephone consultation, face-to-face consultation, and written consultation to abused women. These activities enabled me walk into the world of abused women to gain a better understanding of their experiences.

#### **6. Types of WLSSC Complainants**

In order to have a rough idea about my potential samples, I paid attention to the type of people making complaints to WLSSC when I read files and conducted

participant observation. There is a variety of people who make complaints about domestic violence. In terms of age, it varies from those in their 20s to over-70s. In terms of economic situation, it also varies from penniless poor women to well-to-do women. Although consultants on duty are required to write down the name, age and occupation of customers, they often ignore making notes or make very simple notes that loses a great deal of value for researchers. In 2000, the recorded number of consultations was 356, among which 29 cases were seen as involving domestic violence. [4] Normally there are two lawyers and one law school postgraduate student available for consultation. Customers have to queue for service. Under such circumstances, consultants often neglect to make notes in order to save time.

In terms of education level and economic situation of the litigants, my observations indicated that there are three types:

### **1) Well-educated litigants**

They are university graduates. They can write indictment and defend themselves in court under the supervision of lawyers. This group of people has a solid economic background. They are not entitled to legal aid.

### **2) Litigants with high school education and income**

Their problems mainly centre on marriage and other civil cases. They not only require lawyers to provide detailed legal knowledge and assistance to write indictments but also need guidance to defend themselves in court. It is not very difficult to help them successfully.

### **3) Litigants with lowest social status**

This group of people includes waitress, women in the countryside, unemployed women, housewives and handicapped women. Due to their lower social status and lower education, their cases are the most difficult ones. Most of such cases have the characteristics of complexity, being long lasting, and having little hope of success. As litigants have no sense of law, they can hardly understand legal terms. Meanwhile as they try in vain to appeal for a long time, some of them have psychological problems. Therefore to solve their problems successfully, a lawyer needs to have knowledge of law, psychology, and sociology. The lawyers in the centre provide help in all aspects, including explaining legal terms and legal procedure, writing indictments for them, and acting as agents. This group of people is economically disadvantaged and candidates for legal aid.

My interview samples were drawn from the three categories of people mentioned above. By practicing participant observation and studying the structure and services

WLSSC offers to abused women, I gradually had a clearer idea about the samples. I tailored my interview plans to suit individual circumstances in order to avoid asking irrelevant questions to distract these women. Participant observation and involvement in the actual practice as a volunteer consultant enabled me gain cultural sensitivity, which is an essential step leading to successful interviews.

## **7. The In-Depth Interviews**

### **7.1 Choosing the sample**

In addition to being the base of my participant observation, the WLSSC also provided me with samples of abused women for interview.

Selecting interviewees was a long and painful process. I used three ways of selecting interviewees, namely to choose from wound-up cases in the centre, to contact abused women for whom I had provided consultation, and to select from the registration forms in the centre.

While reading files, I wrote down all relevant information about domestic violence cases, including personal information, main causes of the violence, and contact numbers. At the same time, I had a rough idea on what questions I should ask individual interviewees as different cases had different personal background, causes of violence, and ways of dealing with relevant organisations. I listed the candidates and asked lawyers who had dealt with the cases to contact them. As lawyers had provided legal aid to these candidates, they were quite grateful to these lawyers, therefore I encountered less difficulty in locating them. They were quite cooperative during the interview.

Another good resource was to contact those for whom I had provided consultation. This group of women was quite cooperative, because they took me as one of the working staff of the centre who could provide them with help. They found it helpful to talk to me and to discuss alternative ways of dealing with the violence in the family. Therefore they were willing to talk to me several times.

The most difficult group was those I chose from the registration forms in the centre. They either came to the centre for help once or twice or contacted the centre by telephone. Most of them were not willing to have the interview for the following reasons:

- a) Did not want to irritate her husband by having an interview;
- b) Did not want to recall the terrible past as she had already divorced;
- c) The centre had not helped, so she did not want to waste her time;

d) She did not plan to have a divorce, so she wanted to keep it a secret.

The limitation of the sample selection lies in the fact that it only reflects the actual situation of a small number of women who try to sort their problems out. Those are the women who want to find a solution for the violence, to end the abusive relationship or who are forced to end the marriage by the perpetrator. Some women are left out of the research. They are the women who either dare not file for a divorce or have no intention of divorce, or even dare not to ask for legal advice, or it is not regarded as an issue that can be addressed through legal channels.

The research was targeted at married women who are in an abusive relationship for a minimum of one year. I chose married women as my sample because a large majority of women in China are registered as married. According to statistics in 1994, China registered nearly 10 million marriages each year while there were about two million illegal marriages annually. Of those illegal marriages, more than 80 percent were early marriages and the rest were cohabitation, arranged or mercenary marriage, close relative marriages and bigamy (Beijing Review, pp 7-8). Therefore choosing married women as the research target makes the results closer to the actual situation the majority of abused women face. Another reason for me to choose married women was that research made by Dobash and Dobash showed that quite often only after the couple had been married that abuse started (Dobash and Dobash, 1998, p 23). The minimum year limit I put to the sample was to make sure that interviewees had a clear idea about the pattern of the abuse, and the help they desired to be available.

## **7.2 Purpose of Interviews**

To understand and bring forward the position and experiences of women is one of the purpose of this research. In order to present this accurately, it is essential for the researcher to observe and listen to women's true stories. Hilary Graham states that one of women's typical forms of communication is story-telling (Graham, 1984, pp 104-124). It is the most natural way for women to express their experiences and feelings. It is also believed that interview can bring out people's ideas and memories in their own words rather than the words of researchers, therefore enabling the researcher to understand the nuances of each story and its uniqueness. Interviewing women is a way of learning from women. It has special significance in the sense that it changes centuries of practice of ignoring women or having men speak for women (Bell, 1988).

I chose semi-structured interviews as one of the major means to collect data, because I believed it could avoid several disadvantages in collecting data on sensitive issues like domestic violence. Firstly, formal interview techniques that

require interviewees to answer questions do not allow women to think and present in their own ways. The danger of it is to deny women the space to relate their true feelings and their real needs. They have to answer questions that may not be relevant to their particular experiences, which distracts from what they really want to say. In addition to it, they are more likely to tailor their answers to meet researchers' needs rather than what they want to tell. Secondly, according to some feminist researchers, such as Finch, Graham, Oakley and Ramazanoglu, traditional ways of interviewing women have the tendency of re-creating the power imbalance that exists between men and women in the society. During interview women are put in a passive position, whose activities are controlled by interviewers.

The semi-structured interview technique I used was to ask questions under a rough framework with the main purpose of encouraging women to tell their stories. It did not take the form of questions and answers. Instead, it took the form of conversation. Questions were only used to lead women to tell their stories. I tried to avoid interrupting their story telling by asking abrupt questions. Instead I raised questions to help them finish their stories. By doing so, I gained in-depth information about the complexity of and interaction between women's experiences, their coping skills, and barriers they encountered during the whole process of seeking help from non-institutional and institutional organizations. I also gained many unexpected details of their experiences as abused women.

The major advantage of the in-depth interview, as Judith Bell mentioned, is 'the way in which a response is made (the tone of voice, facial expression, hesitation, etc.) (Bell, 1993, p 91) can provide information that a written response would conceal', so 'the interview can yield rich material and can often put flesh on the bones of questionnaire responses' (Bell, 1993, p 91).

Lofland has pointed out that interviews and participant observation go hand in hand, and many of the data gathered in participant observation come from informal interviewing in the field (Jayarante, 1991, p 56). A good combination of the two research methods will enrich the research results.

### **7.3 Interviewing abused women**

The subject is a very sensitive topic to Chinese women as it is strongly believed that 'Domestic shame should not be made public'. [\[5\]](#) Investigating such a sensitive issue in a comparatively conservative country requires researchers to be culturally sensitive. Cultural sensitivity refers to the understanding and approaches that enable one to gain access to individuals in society, to learn about their lifestyles, and to communicate in ways that the individuals understand, believe, regard as relevant to themselves, and are likely to act upon (Liebling and Shah, 2001). Every step of

the interview needs careful preparation in order to get a sensible response. Considerations include contacting abused women by the right person, explaining the purpose of the research, arranging a right place and right time to conduct the interview, preparing appropriate questions to ask, making sure to ask good follow-up questions, establishing a trust relationship with them, and making feedback telephone calls to them to make the interview complete.

As I have mentioned earlier, finding the right person to contact the abused women is the first step to an interview. I tried to contact several abused women directly, the majority of them turned me down. So I changed my strategy by asking the involved lawyers to contact them, explaining the purpose of my research, and telling them that I would like to contact them soon. Before I contacted an abused woman, I read her file first, prepared myself about what I should talk with her and how I was going to do so.

### **1) Finding the Right Place**

Carolyn Hoyle pointed out that 'the nature of domestic violence means that any intervention from outside the family might be considered by the perpetrator to be provocative. Hence research on this issue - in particular interviews conducted within the victims' homes- is likely to result in further harm to the participants than research in most other areas of social science... It does mean, though, that interviewers need to be sensitive to the dangers to which victims might be exposed as a direct result of the interviewer's presence' (Hoyle, 1998, p 41). The house of respondents is not a good choice unless the respondent is very sure that the abuser will not turn up during certain period of time. To find a quiet and safe place to conduct the interview is an essential condition to gain a successful result.

I used three kinds of settings for my interview, the centre, a quite public place like a park, and my house. I normally asked my participants to express their preference for an interview place, because an easy place for them would help to get a good interview result. By comparison, my house was the best place to conduct an interview. I prepared water and tissue for my interviewees. I normally greeted them at bus station, chatted with them casually, and made them sit comfortably on my sofa. As there was no interruption during the interview, we could talk for hours before I wound up the dialogue. The centre was another good choice, because women felt safe there. But sometimes respondents would prefer a third place to talk about their experiences instead of the above two, such as a quiet park. My experience has shown that a public place is not suitable for conducting such an interview, because there are more distractions in these places. Women are not completely open under such setting as they cannot express their feelings freely, for example, crying or showing strong emotional feelings. In addition to it, they tend to

lower down their voice, which is a clear sign that they do not feel comfortable to talk about their family matter in a public place.

## **2) Face to Face Interviews**

Isobel Bowler pointed out that 'interviews are particularly problematic where there is a difference in expectations and experiences between interviewee and interviewer. Unlike participant observation, the interview depends upon the active participation of the research subject, who needs to share the general objectives of the researcher and to provide information or articulate views and opinions' (Bowler, 1997, p 70). To achieve a satisfactory research result, the active participation of the research subject and their precise understanding of the research objectives are deciding elements leading to the success of the interviews.

Research may be carried out for many reasons, however, the most frequently underlying assumption is that the research may make things better, and perhaps this motivates people to participate. Respondents perceive a stake in the outcome of the research, not necessarily for themselves but for others like them, or society as a whole.

Before starting an interview, I always explained to my interviewee that the purpose of my research was to understand abused women better so as to provide better help for them. They were quite cooperative after I explained the purpose of my research. Many of them called on relevant organisations to be more involved in providing help to people like them, because they found it hard to get sufficient help. Quite a number of them thought highly of the significance of my research and encouraged me to channel the research result to higher authorities.

I also explained to them that the research was anonymous. Their names would not be used anywhere so that they needed not worry that people would distinguish them. Ardener elaborates: 'We may speak of 'muted groups' and 'articulate groups' as being along a dimension. There are many kinds of muted groups. We would then become aware that it is muted simply because it does not form part of the dominant communicative system of the society expressed as it must be through the dominant ideology' (Fontana, 1998, p 76). The abused women in China are a muted group, because domestic violence has been ignored for so long and the cultural tradition forbid women to speak out their anger and shame. My mission was to make them speak out what was in their minds without reservation.

Once I had established a trust relationship with my interviewees, I realised how depressed they were, how desperate they wanted to find somebody to share their misery, and how eager they were to get efficient institutional help. One woman told me that she had cried all her tears out during more than ten years of abuse. Another

seriously burnt woman told me that she would have killed herself long time ago if her child had grown up and her former husband was sentenced to death. She chose to stay alive because she wanted to see her perpetrator to be sentenced to death.

One important detail in conducting interview is how to explain domestic violence because the concept is fairly new in China. The concept of domestic violence has not been widely accepted in China, although wife beating is a common phenomenon in cities as well as in the countryside: 'The use of language and specific terms is very important for creating a 'share of meanings' in which both interviewer and respondent understand the contextual nature of the interview' (Fontana, 1998, p 76). Instead of asking whether they experienced domestic violence or not, I used a widely accepted term 'wife beating' to convey the same concept. This had effectively avoided confusion at the start of an interview. By the end of the interview, I asked their definition of domestic violence. Many of them said they did not take fighting between couples or wife beating as a family problem called domestic violence. They either knew the concept recently or had no idea about the concept of domestic violence at all.

I tape-recorded our conversations with the consent of participants, and converted them into written notes. Having had face-to-face interview, I went back to write it down, then I picked up missing points and conducted follow up face to face interviews or telephone interviews again. Some of the participants had been interviewed for more than five times. The duration of interviews varied from four to ten hours.

### **3) Relationship with the Participants**

The relationship between researchers and their participants is an important element in deciding whether researchers can get the information they require, particularly when this concerns a sensitive issue like domestic violence.

Abused women in China tend to keep quiet of their sufferings in the marriage due to traditional family values. They are particularly concerned about gossip among relatives, colleagues, and neighbours. In fact, they are eager to talk to people to release their depression and seek for advice. A 'knowledgeable stranger' is what they need. As a researcher, the fact that I was totally outside of her community satisfied her need for confidentiality. As a knowledgeable professional, I provided her relevant knowledge and support, especially legal advice that they needed desperately. The satisfaction of getting support and expressing their long-constrained feelings stimulated them to communicate with me constantly. A friendly relationship between the researcher and participants helped participants give detailed narratives about the abuse they experienced.

## 8. Conclusion

This article discusses some issues of defining and researching sensitive topics with specific reference to conducting fieldwork on abused women in China. It is essential for researchers to understand, recognise, and exercise cultural sensitivities while bearing in mind issues of confidentiality. Participant observation is a good way for researchers to build up a better understanding and recognition of specific cultural background. In-depth interviews unveil many myths around abused women in China. Qualitative research method helps to present a true landscape of the issue, as the research on domestic violence in the Chinese context remains an unplanted land, where neither theoretical framework nor thorough understanding of the issue is easily available.

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### Endnotes

[1] Tolstoy, L (1965) *Anna Karenina*<sup>1</sup>, ed Leonard Kent and Nina Berberova, trans Constance Garnett (Modern Library).

[2] This is a traditional saying in China.

[3] The centre keeps records of cases that it acts as agents. Domestic violence case is under the category of divorce cases.

[4] The figure is far from the actual figure as the researcher notice that each day there are about six people asking for legal advice in person and there are at least ten telephone calls on average.

[5] This is an old saying in China.

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