

Digital Research and COVID-19: An Argument for using both Primary and Qualitative Secondary Data in a Hong Kong Ethnography

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Abstract

This paper addresses the challenges of conducting theological ethnographic fieldwork during COVID-19, and proposes a solution of incorporating qualitative secondary data from online databases. The author draws from her experience in conducting her doctoral research in Hong Kong to explore the issues of whether ethnographic fieldwork has to be in a physical space, and how qualitative secondary data from online databases can be used. The study employs a methodology in which lived theology informs and shapes written theology. This paper asks whether being physically present in a field site is still necessary for conducting ethnographic fieldwork, since the pandemic has shifted much of human interactions online. The author argues that physically being in a field site is still necessary to build rapport with the community. This paper also considers the use of existing qualitative secondary data in conducting ethnographic field research. The author sees using qualitative secondary data as more than a way to overcome obstacles set by pandemic restrictions. Researchers who can access under-used data sets can triangulate with their primary data to give stronger support to their arguments.

I was in the middle of my fieldwork when COVID-19 broke out, and the pandemic shifted many aspects of my fieldwork to online contexts. Inevitably, I had to consider what the digital shift means for my research practices. In this paper, I will provide some background to my doctoral research project, and explain why I think lived theology necessitates an ethnographic approach. I will then provide some context on how Hong Kong society behaved during the pandemic, and argue for the importance of being physically present in the field, despite the wide use of online platforms that emerged during the pandemic. The pandemic limited my access to my field sites, and as such, I will elaborate on how using qualitative secondary data has been important for my project. Finally, I will offer some concluding thoughts on online-offline field sites, developed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

My Doctoral Research and Lived Theology

I am writing my doctoral thesis with the School of Divinity at the University of St Andrews, focusing on the discipline of theological ethics. Through this research, I aim to ask questions on how languages of democracy and human rights interact with the Christian faith in Hong Kong. Furthermore, I explore how average, non-clerical Hong Kong Christians reconcile their faith and civic identity. This research requires an ethnographic approach, as average Christians rarely write down their religious practices. Through field observation and follow-up semi-structured interviews, I am able to sketch the lived theologies of several average Hong Kong Christians.

I am using Hong Kong's recent resistance movements to examine how Christians under a non-democratic regime handle civic engagement. The Umbrella Movement in 2014 paralysed key areas in Hong Kong for over two months by blocking major roadways. In the wake of the Umbrella Movement and civic actions in 2019, individuals and organisations are devoting more effort to considering Hong Kong's identity and core values. As an insider-researcher, I am motivated to conduct this project by my own identity as a Hong Kong Christian. I ask questions about how Christians in Hong Kong reconcile their religious convictions with their political inclinations.

Through this research, I find the voices of average Christians important, as expressed in their lived theologies. Written theologies are, in fact, a distillation of lived practice (Marsh, 2005, p. 6). Natalie Wigg-Stevenson (2014, p. 170) describes this relationship thusly: '[e]thnographic theologians acknowledge and accept that there is no theological "view from nowhere" that we can access, and that all theological claims are embedded in and produced by particular contexts, practices, and systems of power and privilege.' As an aspiring ethicist who employs ethnographic tools to conduct her research, I am of the conviction that the shared practices of individual Christians lead to theology worthy of being theorised. It may be thought that Caucasian male theologians have a monopoly to think in abstraction and impose their theologies for all to follow. However, I believe theological principles must emerge from and be cross-checked again by the communities they serve. Therefore, my methodology is to collect primary data through field

observation and interview, and analyse qualitative secondary data from online oral history databases on individual Christians in Hong Kong. In addition, I analyse writings by Hong Kong theologians. By analysing three different forms of data, I aim to sketch a fuller picture of how average Hong Kong Christians navigate their faith and civic identity.

What published theologians write is already heavily edited and revised. I find it to be a third-hand account of what is actually happening in the church. Lived theologies, distilled by daily practices, is as or more important than theological writings, and much more difficult to decipher. This is because 'most Christians do not need a detailed theological understanding of their religious practices to participate fully in them' (Wigg-Stevenson, 2014, p. 26). Nevertheless, lived theologies are confusing, complex, contradictory, and sometimes incoherent. Conducting ethnographic research in theology does not mean that lived practices must trump written theology, or that they are not compatible. Instead, I would argue that the knowledge that emerges from such a context is itself a revelation of God, and that there is spiritual power in conducting ethnographic theological fieldwork.

Hong Kong During the Pandemic

I used ethnographic methods to conduct fieldwork in Hong Kong, which includes field observation and interviews. I immersed myself in two field sites, a broadly pro-establishment church and a broadly pro-democracy divinity school, observ-

ing gatherings and conversations, then conducted interviews with 18 individuals across both sites, to probe what I had observed more deeply. Some interviewees were referred to me by others, while some were loose acquaintances. In both cases, our pre-existing relationship gave us a foundation for our conversations, and the participants were able to see me as an insider despite being a researcher. Being in situ, especially in 2019-2020 when civic protests occurred, added to my interview process because I knew what the participants were experiencing. If our interviews were conducted online, I would have much less context for what the participants were experiencing on a daily basis.

COVID-19 is one of the biggest challenges in my research. From the beginning of the pandemic to 13 February 2022, there are 16,719 confirmed cases and 219 deaths in Hong Kong (Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2022). For a city of 7.4 million, the number of cases and deaths is low compared to many other areas in the world (Census and Statistics Department, the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2021). However, COVID-19 and its repercussions affected my fieldwork, which began in December 2019 and was meant to finish by the end of March 2020. My fieldwork slowed down significantly after the Chinese New Year in January 2020.

Digital Field Observation in the Midst of COVID-19

My field sites began operating on a limit-

ed basis in mid-January 2020. I could not access either location, so I did not make field observations in person; however, I observed the unique circumstances as gatherings moved online. Sunday church service was offered on Facebook Live or YouTube, and church fellowship and divinity school classes were held on Zoom, though since the pandemic, these have sometimes returned to in-person meetings with limited capacity and tracking measures. While understandable, these changes dramatically altered my relationship to my field site, which I had the chance to observe from behind a screen. There were far fewer interactions to observe in the online church site, as pastors were broadcasting their services and side conversations in the sanctuary ceased to exist. However, in the divinity school, interactions became more robust as students who may have been too shy to ask questions and give comments during in-person lessons, began in the online context to keep a running commentary on the side as the lecturer spoke. This made my act of observation very different from sitting in on in-person classes.

Since so much social activity has moved online for an extended duration, I wonder if it could supplant the traditional fieldwork paradigm, where we need to be physically present in a local setting, or whether we can simply conduct fieldwork from home? After all, technology has made remote access to field sites a possibility. Robert Kozinets, Pierre-Yann Dolbec, and Amanda Earley (2014, pp. 262-275) argue that:

Online fields offer dramatically increased field site accessibility. [...] Where once there were face-to-face meetings and conversations, supplemented by letters and phone calls, researchers now must also consider blogs, Twitter accounts, Facebook postings, LinkedIn groups and meetings, and many other forms of social media meetings and communication. Moreover, the online interactions are themselves complex: they can happen both privately and publicly, both asynchronously and synchronously, over different time periods, and with numerous contributors, as well as from several different site sources and in different formats.

Although the power of face-to-face interactions cannot be replaced or underestimated, I wonder what this online space means for *being in the field*, especially when studying locations that are potentially inaccessible due to political tensions. While it has not been an issue for me to enter my field site, I can see immigration and visas being a potential barrier to foreign researchers who wish to conduct fieldwork in contentious regions. In such cases, perhaps digital methods would be the only means for those researchers to conduct their fieldwork. If I were not able to access my field site physically, I would have immersed myself in social media, mass media, and diasporic communities in attempts to replicate the experience of physically being in the field.

However, in the rapidly changing landscape of human participant research, only certain practical aspects of the work have moved online. My research still consists of engaging a homogenous group that I could not otherwise reach had I not already connected with its members before it moved online. If I had not had an existing relationship with these churches and known their community and liturgy, it would not have made sense for me to connect virtually. There would be no reason for them to spend the time talking to me so frankly if I were not already a multifaceted human to them; not just a researcher, but also a daughter to my parents and a congregant in the church. Lila Abu-Lughod (1999, pp. 12) also reflects on how similar familial ties proved to be helpful in her field research in Egypt's Western Desert in her monograph, *Veiled Sentiments*. She found her father's presence in her anthropological fieldwork

immensely helpful, as she later discovered that the Bedouins 'for whom belonging to tribe and family are paramount and the education of girls novel, would assume that a woman alone must have so alienated her family, especially her male kin, that they no longer care about her.' Abu-Lughod's experience resonates with mine: if I had not had family members cultivating these relationships with the Hong Kong Christian communities before my arrival, it is unlikely that I would have been received so warmly. For example, I was given access to book meeting spaces to conduct interviews, and my gatekeeper from the church was very enthusiastic about my project. My church site is not known to be welcoming to outsiders, as they have been previously targeted for their political stances. Without the relationships my family members had previously cultivated, it is unlikely they would have let me conduct research within their community.

Likewise, Geert Hofstede (1980, p.215) observes the differences in Western and Chinese thinking. He finds that the Chinese word for (hu)man 'includes the person himself plus his intimate societal and cultural environment which makes his existence meaningful.' Hofstede's argument suggests that digital methods might not be able to bridge strangers, especially in cultures such as Hong Kong with a more collective community, even if those digital tools do exist. Furthermore, there is 'the somewhat false distinction between online and offline social "worlds"' (Kozinets et al., 2014, pp. 265-275). Without the connection in the physical world, it is hard to justify the immediate acceptance of virtual connections, especially by those who are not comforta-

ble with virtual environments. I find that having the virtual space facilitates my understanding of my field site, but it in no way supplants my in-person field observations. Nevertheless, it added depth and nuance to my research, as it digitised and captured interactions between participants that would otherwise have been lost, because I cannot record and transcribe every conversation going on around me.

Use of Qualitative Secondary Data in Research on Church and Practice

A more challenging consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic is that, in addition to the 18 participants I interviewed in my primary data collection, I turned to other data sources to compensate for lost time and interview opportunities. This adjustment, made in the wake of unforeseeable limitations of the field, actually had the effect of strengthening my overall research design and deepening my understanding of Christian practice in Hong Kong. Hong Kong society has undergone tremendous socio-political change since the pandemic restrictions began. Given the implementation of the National Security Law on 30 June 2020 and the implementation of electoral reform on 30 March 2021, which were both perceived as means to tighten the freedoms of speech and assembly in Hong Kong, it would be unlikely for me to recruit further interview participants. Even if there were people who would still wish to speak to me, our conversations would differ greatly from pre-pandemic times due to these new restrictions. Therefore, I used qualitative secondary data to supplement my research, rather than turning to new

participants.

Qualitative secondary analysis occurs when previously gathered data is reanalysed, usually by different researchers. As Sharon Greenwood (2020) observes: 'Pre-existing datasets are typically under-used, despite the vast investment and promotion from research councils.' Although my use of such data is motivated by the limitations of my field, using data collected by other researchers allows me to explore new questions not previously considered by the original researchers by applying different analytical approaches, strategies, and frameworks.

After considering several sources, I finally settled on two online archival sources, both of which provide raw data, such as video and audio footage, as well as transcripts and translations, so I could code and analyse the data in the same fashion as the interviews I conducted. This would not have been possible if only the analysed text were preserved. The first online video archive is from the University of British Columbia, titled *After the Protest: A Vancouver Archive of the Umbrella Movement*, which contains interviews with Hong Kongers who experienced the Umbrella Movement and are now based in Vancouver, Canada (Hong Kong Studies Initiative, The University of British Columbia, 2021). A second online video archive is by the Hong Kong Baptist University, titled *An Oral and Documentary History of Hong Kong Protestant Christians: Religious Discourse, Social Participation, and Identity Construction from 1970 to 1997*, which hosts interviews with members of the Hong Kong Christian community (Department of Religion and

Philosophy, Hong Kong Baptist University, 2021). As I analysed and coded these transcripts with the same deductive codes from my primary data analysis, I found that the issues these participants wrestled with are similar to those of my participants. For example, several participants from both my primary and secondary data sets raised concerns about the institutional church being too involved in social action, such that they neglected evangelism. This demonstrates an inward-looking theology among pro-establishment Hong Kong Christians that is consistent with different sets of data.

This digitally mediated encounter helped me to deepen my understanding of the communities I studied, as the archival interviews were mainly with members of the silent or baby boomer generation, while my interview participants were mainly from generations X, Y, and Z. The use of qualitative secondary data provided perspectives that I was not able to tap into, and furthered my understanding of the field. With the raw material available, even though I was not the person conducting the interviews, I could hear how the questions were asked and observe the natural behaviour of the interlocutors. Being personally acquainted with the archives' interviewers also helped me understand how their participants might perceive them. Both interviewers are middle-aged Chinese male professors, and their social status would likely be perceived differently from mine, as a younger Chinese female doctoral student. This may possibly cause different responses from the participants, which I took into account during my analysis. For example, in the interviews I conducted, participants

sometimes challenged my researcher status, or perceived me as naïve. During those interviews, I leaned into this presumption to get them to elaborate on their thoughts and opinions. As I watched the videotaped interviews from the qualitative secondary data, I did not find the same dynamic between interviewers and participants.

There are also ethical issues in the analysis of qualitative secondary data. As Isabelle Dufour and Marie-Claude Richard (2019) point out:

[U]sing secondary qualitative data raises many ethical issues in terms of consent, opportunity and risks, data sharing, transparency, clarity and anonymity, permission and responsibility. The quality of data can also be problematic. Data can be incomplete or outdated or may have been collected improperly, and it can be difficult to assess the quality of the original data collection procedure. The breadth and richness of primary data can also be crucial when addressing new research questions.

The new ethical consideration to obtain university approval was whether the reuse of publicly available secondary data requires additional consent from database holders, which I obtained by email. The process gave me a good perspective to consider what constitutes the ethical use of qualitative secondary data.

There is also the issue that an interview designed for an oral history project is substantially different from a semi-structured interview that focuses on a specific research question. However, I find that because the original aim of the research

was similar to mine, that is, seeking out ideas of democracy and rights, and the civic participation of individual Christians, the secondary data is highly relevant to my project. I coded their transcripts using the same codes as I would for the interviews I had conducted, which allowed me to crosscheck my interpretation of both my primary and secondary data, even though my interviews were conducted at a later date. I coded both my primary and secondary data using the same set of deductive codes, and as such, created a framework for understanding the different sets of data through the same themes. The interviews I conducted worked well to triangulate the secondary data because I could observe consistencies in the speakers' theological interpretations of actions and events between my primary and secondary data sources. I have not found tension between the two data sets; in fact, I believe including qualitative secondary data strengthened my argument, because the interviews conducted by different researchers with different participants at different times generated consistent results. The analysis of previously collected data is beneficial, especially seeing that it supports my primary data collection, and provides access to rich descriptive data from another perspective (Dufour & Richard, 2019). With the intensifying oppression of civic freedoms in Hong Kong, the availability of these digital archives has new political value, as the newly implemented National Security Law will make such a research unlikely in the future. These digital archives will serve as a valuable record of a time when Hong Kongers still felt they could speak freely on issues related to faith, freedom, and rights.


In analysing my secondary data with the same codes as my primary data, I am able to triangulate and validate my interpretations of whether democracy and rights language are Christian, and how average Hong Kong Christians reconcile their faith and civic identity, ensuring that I am neither *too close* nor *too distant*.

Conclusion

Although the use of qualitative secondary data in my research and the consideration of prohibitions and opportunities with online field observation were never in my plans, these changes have shaped me as a researcher. I consider undertaking a doctoral degree not simply as writing a thesis, but more importantly, forming who I am as a scholar. Scholarship is about thinking of creative solutions while facing the challenges and obstacles of conducting research.

Although my research questions have not changed as a result of using digital methods, I find that my initial findings have been strengthened with respect to how democracy and rights language have influenced how Hong Kong Christians express themselves. Using digital means, including digital archives, has added depth and nuance to my research, as I had data from various sources from which to develop my arguments and assertions.

My research methods are based on my conviction that lived theology informs written theology. How Hong Kong Christians live out their daily lives, with all its messiness, and their occasionally self-contradictory thoughts, is itself theology.



The point of conducting qualitative research is not to iron out inconsistencies, but rather, to find God and revelation precisely within those contradictions. Doing theology should not be monopolised by published theologians from the West since, as the saying goes, actions speak louder than words

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