

Short Article

First of all, I want to say THANK YOU to the SRA. Before informed of the grant, I was hesitated on flying to China again. I actually did a baseline survey in June 2012. My team obtained approval to go to the schools we selected, but right before our departure, we were rejected by a county officer due to a local emergency. As a result, I was only able to do the baseline in two small schools of other counties. When collecting data in developing settings, it is not unusual to have this kind of unexpectedness, especially when the topic could be considered as “sensitive” — it costs your time, tests your patience, and makes you doubt of the value of your research.

Let bygones be bygones, with the support of SRA, I took my second attempt and finally got the data. Being a student of economics, I have few experiences in field surveys. Our common practice is to wait for the release of a data set, and then apply econometric models to it. Therefore, I could make naive survey mistakes due to my unfamiliarity of data collection. On the other hand, I really learned a lot from such process.

The first thing I learned is speedy communication with my team members. I arrived at Hong Kong airport in the evening of September 19th. With a 12-hour jetlag, I then drove 3 hours to Guangzhou the next day, and another 4 hours to the sites. The schedule is so tied that I need to keep timely communication with my assistants who were scattered in several cities. Together, we managed to pick up the rental car, acquire all materials, gather 6 persons, confirm with all surveyed schools, and reach the motel near to one of the rural schools in just one day. It is hard to describe that day in words, but I can say there were plenty of phone calls, and every member cooperated with each other to assure nothing went wrong.

Something did go wrong. The assistant in charge of questionnaire printing printed some wrong ones because he missed an emailed instruction I sent before leaving New York. We had to spend extra time on correcting the questionnaires. Lesson learned: make not only emails but also phone calls for important arrangements, even if there is a distance of 12 time zones.

The second thing I learn from this field survey is that there is always something unexpected, either bad or good, so we should better be flexible and persistent. The worst one I have experienced, as mentioned above, was the final-moment disapproval of the June survey. No matter how hard you worked on it, it just happened. Yet the good news can come if you do not give up. In the beginning of the September survey, principals of the two largest schools only allowed us to randomly survey 4 classes for each grade (about 70 students per class). Interestingly, the principals were out for training when we visited the schools, and they assigned the vice-principals to assist my survey. After a short negotiation, they allowed us to select 3 more classes for each grade.

This is not the end of lucky time. I meet a young principal during the survey. He agreed with my idea of using rigorous econometric technique to look at his students' education decision, and invited my team to have the same survey in his school. Since we did not have extra questionnaires for his 1,800 students, I assigned one assistant to conduct it later in mid-October.

The final thoughts I would like to share is to feel by own observation, not just by looking at the cold data. It is true that my dissertation mainly relies on data analysis, but without going to the sites I can never have a strong feeling of the scale of the problem, or in other words the value of my research. Actually, this was the 4th time I visited the sites since May 2011.

Every morning in the town, we went to the same restaurant for breakfast, where a small Wonton soup costs only 3 RMB. The first time I visited that restaurant was 9 years ago when I was a teaching volunteer. For 9 years, the price of a Wonton soup, a pure local product, stays unchanged, yet it is apparent that people are having better life. I would say this is an example of how external incomes drive the development of rural China. Those external incomes mostly come from migrant jobs in urban city. Students are leaving the schools for urban opportunities, so are their parents. That is why in the research design I see migrant work as a post-compulsory education option, and see family separation as a possible determinant of some negative moves, such as dropout and low academic performance.

When I arrived at the final school for questionnaire collection, there was a girl crying at the administrative office. The provost told me that she ran 5 kilometers right after the lunch to be on time for the classes, which made her stomach extremely painful. She is a grade-4 student, used to drop out but then returned to the class. For some reason, she preferred to go home for lunch, and her father was a migrant worker who had been out of town for a long time. I noticed that the girl was wearing slippers. It is hard to imagine how she could run with slippers for 5 kilometers. The school was developing a program for students like her. Over 80% of its students are “left-behind” children who have one or both parents in the city. These kids are in need of physical, intellectual, and emotional supports.

Back to the Wonton restaurant, the owner’s son participated in the Lighthouse summer program in 2004. That was the first year Lighthouse volunteers visited his town, and I was the team leader. I was young at that time, while he was just a kid newly graduated from elementary school. Now I am already a father, so are some of the kids in that summer. The rural life is getting better, but the girl I met in the last day reminds me that some problems still persist, and some new problems are emerging, that summons me to the field.

One of our cars in a small accident; Got up at 5am to prepare for the questionnaire distribution

