Getting the right interview in Asia

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ABSTRACT

There has recently been a significant increase in the number of Western researchers conducting business research in Asia. Whether the research is cross-cultural (etic) or within culture (emic), the researcher must adopt an appropriate research methodology and tactics for obtaining reliable data in a non-Western oriented domain. This paper focuses on the techniques used in three studies in Asia that relied on gaining the 'right' access to the 'right' interviewees, so that, with the use of appropriate interview techniques to gather the quality of data required, meaningful outcomes were achieved. The aim of the paper is to assist future business researchers to improve their data collection techniques in these difficult primary research domains. The contribution of the paper is to provide guidance on obtaining good interviews by describing a suitable process and identifying 13 key success factors.

Keywords: cross-cultural, respondents, sample, emic, etic.

INTRODUCTION

During the last decade there has been an increase in the number of Western researchers conducting research into different aspects of Asian business practices. Whether the research is cross-cultural or within culture, the researcher must adopt a research methodology and research tactics for obtaining reliable data in a non-Western oriented domain. Researchers have found that some doors remain closed and access is only obtained to junior members of staff. Also data has been difficult, if not impossible, to obtain, or reliability and validity has been constrained by low response rates. In other cases, the data obtained is questionable and often discarded by the researcher.

Such difficulties have limited the number of 'foreigners' conducting research within the Sino and Japanese cultural conditions. The aim of the paper is to assist future IMP researchers in improving their data collection techniques in these difficult primary research domains. In the three cases described, each researcher was investigating business activities within their respective cultural environments, with two researchers conducting within culture (emic) research and one researcher conducting cross-cultural (etic) research. The research question addressed was thus: **What techniques can be used by Western researchers conducting qualitative research under these difficult cross-cultural conditions in Asia to gain access to appropriate interviewees in such a way as to then obtain meaningful data in interviews?**

There is much literature written on conducting qualitative research within Western environments (Patton 1990; Miles & Huberman 1994; Neuman 1991; Yin 1993), but there is a dearth of literature in discussing how to conduct qualitative research within Asia. Traditionally researchers, including IMP researchers, have compromised and used adapted Western techniques discussed in the literature. Other researchers have resorted to previous experiences and/or discussions with more experienced researchers. Then there is the common occurrence of choosing 'easier' targets like Hong Kong and Taiwan as surrogates for Mainland China (Kriz & Fang 2000) and/or students because they offer convenient and obliging samples (Fang 1999).

Such a trial and error approach to data collection may lead to interviews leaving both the interviewer and the interviewee unsatisfied with the overall result. Qualitative research appears to be a source of higher returns in Asia but to be meaningful for both theory and practice the data has to be 'rich' and its validity self evident. These commonly encountered difficulties have been recognized by IMP researchers, in their pursuit of understanding how business networks operate in Asia.

This paper addresses this issue by highlighting some practical techniques that Western researchers have successfully used when conducting qualitative research within Asian cultures. This paper presents in case study form, the experiences of three Western researchers, who on the evidence of the data, appear to have been able to obtain access to the 'right' respondents with appropriate referrals which has lead to 'rich data' in Asia. The

three cases cover research in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand and Japan. The cases cover: the use of 'social' network in obtaining access; how to gain access to the 'right' people who are willing participants; gaining access through multiple points to improve reliability; and use of tape recorders during interviews.

CASE 1. JAPAN

As the first non-Caucasoid country to industrialise, Japan has developed its only key natural resource by focusing on the education and training of its abundant population. It has achieved this focus by using its own cultural values, inherent dynamism and proven work-practices and by selectively adopting only those Western practices which it can usefully adapt into its own framework. As a result of the development of its human resources, Japan has become a meritocracy wherein educational credentials and skills determine an individual's employment prospects, promotion and social status.

Japanese managerial personnel total more than 2.5 million and their ratio to the total labor force is more than 4.5% of the total of employed persons (Inohara 1994). The process of Japanese managerial skills and knowledge development occurs within a highly Confucian, patriarchal relationship, and the employment system and human resources are organised and motivated in an unusual and unique way. This effective system of human resource utilisation in Japan is geared to nurturing and training diligent and capable managers whose continually accruing experience helps to develop reliable and sound values, keen perceptions and a broad understanding (Ballon 1992). The high quality of management has been achieved due to a number of factors, and arguably the most important factor is the Japanese education and training system with its key components of quality, dedication and discipline (Lorriman & Kenjo 1994). How graduates are trained and developed into managers is both distinctively unique and interesting. Thus, this research investigated the development of Japanese managers in major corporations from their introduction into a company to, some 20 to 25 years later, becoming senior managers.

When seeking to understand employee development in Japan, it was fundamentally essential to note that a corporate executive's career is not simply an economic arrangement nor an emotional commitment, but a mutually beneficial and complementary agreement

involving all aspects in an employee's working life from economic productivity to company loyalty in exchange for an unrestricted effort by the employee. In return for this, the employer is implicitly bound to faithfully recompense the employee with financial and other benefits equal to this lifetime commitment.

Hendry (1993) noted that the need to look behind the veneer still remains of the utmost importance in understanding Japan and her people. When Japanese Human Resource Development (JHRD) practices in corporations are compared to other societies, they are manifestly different and clearly stand in need of further research (Fruin, 1992; and Axel 1995). It has also been observed that this topic demands the attention of non-Japanese managers, as there is much that can be learnt and applied to international HRD outside Japan (Abegglen 1994).

Following this path of enquiry, the research focused on Japanese HRD by conducting an ethnocentric study in various large organisations and their subsidiaries in Tokyo.

Method

The phenomenological research involved a three phase study, exploratory, main field work and a follow-up survey.

The exploratory phase comprised interviews conducted with academic and industry experts on Japan.

The main field work used an elite interview methodology using introductions and also limited snowballing, encompassing in-depth, qualitative interviews with 38 middle and senior managers.

The final phase was an additional data collection survey using a scaled questionnaire of the interviewees.

In addition, corporate information and the researcher's field observations were also important sources of information.

Limitations

A clearly stated limitation of the research was that the sample of managers interviewed is not representative of all Japanese workers experience. The data obtained from this research can plausibly be used to predict the effects of company training upon elite managers within the Japanese lifetime employment system (LES). Due to the great emphasis placed in Japan

on the importance of retaining the firm's intellectual capital that individual employees acquire over time, the LES and the JHRD system are incrementally changing in response to societal and contextual changes.

Definitions

To allow consistency of use and interpretation, various key definitions were developed during the exploratory phase of the research. These definitions encompassed fundamental business values, a manager's vision of their role and function within the company, environmental orientation and the contextual influence of manager's within the firm in terms of political-legal, industrial-organisational, socio-cultural or economic-financial influences.

Sampling

This research was conducted throughout a range of Japanese companies and organizations, many of which were head offices or subsidiaries of some of the largest Japanese corporations. These corporations are at the forefront of Japanese industry, are diversified across Japanese commerce and industry and include trading firms, car manufacturers, the I.T. sector, television, retail department stores, advertising, textiles, steel, vehicle manufacturing, banking and service products. The research was conducted with interviewees chosen from mainstream divisions within their firms.

Access was gained partly through the researcher's business and personal contacts in Japan developed through his 18 year marriage to a Japanese national and also through the kindness of Australian and Western business and institutional representatives in Japan who were satisfied with the depth of the researcher's experience with Japanese culture and who were thus confident that the researcher would strictly adhere to Japanese protocols and manners during contact with interviewees.

The organizations and firms selected, represented some of the leading firms and organizations in Japanese society.. It was felt that data obtained from depth interviews with the organizational and company managers would be able to be generalisable across leading organizations and companies in Japan.

Conducting interviews

The exploratory interviews were conducted in an informal environment to identify the main constructs of the topic, and to aid the researcher in developing interview technique and topic knowledge in the cross-cultural environment. This phase was essential in laying the ground and developing skills required for the main fieldwork. Due to the quality of the introduction to the firm, and the relationship between researcher and firm, agreement to tape interviews was established for every interview, thus greatly aiding the validity and reliability of the analysed data. In order to obtain the most reliable data, the researcher focused on putting the interviewee at ease in order to facilitate full, complete and uninterrupted responses to interview questions.

CASE 2. AUSTRALIA/THAILAND

Thailand is centrally located in South-East Asia and has been culturally influenced through invading countries over the centuries. The country is a mix of different religious influences including Hindu, different sects of Buddism and Islam. Thai people have been able to peacefully integrate all of these influences to develop a distinctly Thai approach to their business practices (Chen 1995), although it needs to be pointed out that there is a strong ethnic Chinese influence due to their control over many of the private enterprises in Thailand (Itthiopassagul & Blois 2000).

Australia Thai relations began developing during the Vietnam war when Australian troops were stationed in Thailand, and the two countries have now developed close economic trading relations. The oldest relationship investigated for this research developed during the late 1960's and had endured for just over 30 years.

This research project consisted of cross-cultural research between Western (Australian) and Thai business people. Research was conducted within a professional service industry and investigated relational aspects in the Thai/Australian network. The research was particularly aimed at the cross-cultural junction in the Thai/Australian network as it was considered important to investigate the relational behaviours occurring at this nexus, where much of the international business is conducted.

Sampling

The researcher was an Australian conducting the research from an Australian based university. Respondents from both countries were interviewed, with those in Australian conducted before those in Thailand, for the following seven reasons:

- Ease of access to Australian respondents

- Financial limitations on travel to Thailand

- Develop an interview technique so that problems were overcome before starting the Thai interviews

- Ensure that all discipline areas were covered before data was collected in Thailand

- Easier to follow up if new data was required in Australia than Thailand

- Develop contacts from which further interviews could be obtained (both Australian and Thai) using a snowballing technique

- The researcher was required to travel to some East coast Australian capital cities during the early stages of the research and travel issues within Australia was not a problem.

- A list of Australian respondents were discovered through the following techniques:

- Contacting the international marketing managers of major companies

- Personal contacts from the researchers social network

- Contacts generated through the Universities network

Each respondent was asked whether they wished to be involved in the research and it was found that most respondents were willing to be participants. Only three organisations did not wish to be involved from the initial list generated.

The researcher was an "outsider" to the network and required some form of introduction or referral to be able to gain network access. The researcher used the Australian respondents to generate contacts and interviews in Thailand. Each Australian respondent was asked whether they could recommend any Thai interviewees that the researcher may approach. As each Australian respondent had worked in Thailand for a period of time they all had a number of contacts. Some Australian respondents declined to allow the research access to their contacts but enough Thai contacts were generated to ensure the research could proceed. Those Australian respondents who gave the researcher potential Thai contacts

were asked if their names could be used as an introduction to the Thai contact to assist the Thai respondent in knowing the source of the referral. This step for obtaining a list of potential Thai respondents used the existing relationships developed within the Australian/Thai network for the researcher to gain access to the 'inner circles' of the network both in Australia and Thailand.

The quality of the referral varied according to the existing relationships that were established between the Thai and Australian respondents. If the existing relationship was strong and enduring (usually operating at a personal level) then the Thai contacts nearly always agreed to be interviewed. The Thai respondent had often worked with the Australian over a period of time and was a 'decision maker' within their organisation, irrespective of whether government and private. These 'decision makers' were ideal people for the interviews as they were involved in numerous aspects of the exchange process between the Australian/Thai network. If the Australian respondent had taken a more transactional approach to a previous project, then the Thai contacts often did not agree to participate in the research. In such cases the Thai contact considered that there was enduring relationship with their Australian counterpart and thus did not need to fulfill any obligation.

By gaining Thai contacts through numerous Australian organisations the researcher approached the network through multiple access points. Australian competitors would often supply the researcher with contacts of competing Thai companies, thus maximising the variety of sources and ensuring access to a number of different networks. Thai government contacts came from similar backgrounds, but potential corporate interviewees often came from a variety of sources thus maximising the breadth of network coverage in which the researcher was able to conduct interviews. By maximising network coverage the data was analysed for commonly occurring themes ensuring that the results typified that type of network, thus increasing the generalisability of the research.

Method

A Thai national was used to arrange the interviews as this was often conducted with the respondent's personal assistant rather than directly with the respondent. A Thai translator was present during each of the interviews to assist with any translation problems that may have arisen. The translator was invaluable in arranging and scheduling the interviews with

the personal assistants and ensuring that regular contact was maintained so that the Thai respondents were available when scheduled. In Thailand it is not uncommon for respondents to not be available for interviews due to traffic problems or emergency business meetings, therefore, the translator was able to reschedule as such emergencies arose. It should be noted that the translator was required in only two interviews during the course of the research. All interviews were conducted in English, as all the Thai respondents were fluent in English. Due largely to the quality of the referrals, all the interviewees allowed the interviews to be taped, thus greatly aiding the accuracy of the data obtained.

Conducting interviews

Each interview was started with a conversation of the Thai respondent describing how they were initially introduced to the Australian network. This approach ensured that the respondent was made to feel comfortable during the early stages of the interview by describing previous events. Questions were elaborated on from that initial discussion and the respondent was asked to give more detail in particular areas. It was considered important that the Thai respondent felt comfortable during the interview to help improve recall in some situations, especially those where the relationships had a long life and the respondents were being asked to recall instances that had happened many years ago. Evidence of the interviewee feeling comfortable usually resulted in the Thai respondent joking or giving a humourous comment during the interview, often occurring on breaks or at the end of the interview.

Each Thai interviewee was requested whether there were any other connections they had that would help the researcher gain further interviews. This technique of snowballing through the network did generate another five interviews with Thai respondents during the Thai phase of the data collection process.

Limitations

Although this approach allowed the research access into the network, it had a number of limitations. There was no way that the researcher could assess the size of the network and there may have been some important network links that were missed, especially as not all Australian organisations wanted to be involved in the research.

The Thai interviews were conducted in a period of transition in Thailand, following the Asian crisis of 1997, and a number of Thai government officials had greater concerns due to the change of government that occurred while the researcher was in Thailand.

Some Thai respondents evaded questions that may have indicated conflict within the business relationship.

CASE 3. CHINA

According to the political scientist Michael Dutton (1998), life in China was traditionally all about harmony, propriety behaviour, moral virtue and balance. For the Western business outsider visiting China, it most probably resembles chaos, confusion, deception and corruption (Pye 1982; Chu 1995; Fang; 1999; and Backman 1999). Why the apparent paradox? Chinese business is the epitome of an emergent self-organising system (Davies 1998; Ormerod 1998; and Wilson 1998), complicated by embedded layers (Hofstede 1997; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 1997; and Wilson 1998) and exhibiting non-linearity (Scarborough 1998; and Redding 1990). Such is the enigma and complexity of the elusive Chinese *guo qing* or native characteristics (Yan 1994).

This study investigated the general research question of how do persons of Chinese ethnic origin build business relationships and in particular, trust (*xinren*) between Western and Chinese business people. The research used a protocol to investigate Chinese markets using tools that support an emic investigation aimed at gathering rich and credible data. In Chinese markets access to respondents and access to credible data means using *guanxi* (connections and/or relationships). Qualitative research often requires one to 'get in' so *guanxi* is not an exception in terms of gathering 'rich' qualitative data. In this case *guanxi* was used as a tool that needed careful management to ensure a cross sectional representation. The researcher's interview process offered an audit trail for future researchers. Although the *guanxi* links were unique to the researcher, the process is replicable.

It became obvious from the literature that in Chinese markets *guanxi* and snowballing through *guanxi* were prerequisites for success. The paralleling or mirroring function of the researcher's process with the actual study became apparent as the synergy of the two

processes became more self-evident. The researcher's *guanxi* process became an internal validity check for the analysis of the data.

Method

The study comprised two phases, a pilot study and the main field work. The difficulty involved in cross-cultural research, particularly in conducting emic research in Chinese markets, is best understood by the limited number of such studies (Redding 1990; Triandis 1995; Fang 1999; Kriz & Fang 2000). Despite the researcher's previous business research experience in various Chinese markets, the decision was taken to begin the pilot study with Chinese residing in Australia, which had several significant benefits as it:

- enabled the researcher to become more familiar with the questions in action and respondents' reactions;
- had significant benefits for building a *guanxi tree* for the overseas interviews;
- provided additional rich data which was able to be incorporated the main study;
- highlighted that important issues, such as taped interviews and language, were not likely to be a significant barrier; and,
- highlighted that using Chinese script characters (pictographs) was a significant tool for discussion and a concise tool for defining constructs for all Chinese.

Four key informants (Chinese business people residing in Australia) were used initially for pre-testing and to develop a protocol for the pilot interviews. The idea of pictographs emerged originally from the multidisciplinary literature but was increasingly supported by the key informants. Accordingly, six Chinese characters were used to provide a universally accepted and a literal Chinese description of *xinren;* conditional *xinren;* full *xinren;* a list of *guanxi* characters; the *Art of War;* and a hierarchy of relationships for ranking purposes.

Main field work

The pilot study transcripts were then reviewed by other experienced researchers and it was agreed that the substance of the interviews fitted the objectives set out in the interview questions. This enabled the researcher to combine the pilot interviews into the main study as the 11 pilot study domestic interviews and the 32 main study interviews conformed to the standard protocol used in all interviews. The main study program was then implemented and the overseas interviews proceeded as planned.

Limitations

The research followed the interpretive paradigm where depth rather than breadth is a focus (Patton 1990). A number of limitations were identified:

- the study was limited to an investigation of Chinese businesspersons who had been involved in buying or selling products and services from other Chinese and Foreign individuals and firms;

- the focus was on individual relationships, not between firms;

- the study used a sample of business people from Xiamen, Shanghai, Beijing, Taipei, Hong Kong and Australia to identify if similarities and differences existed between regions, but a complete study of all the regions of China was ruled out due to time and cost constraints;

- the focus was on individual relationships developed within a B2B, rather than B2C, context. This research was focused on Industrial Marketing in an international context, so the emphasis was on buyer-seller relationships, joint ventures and alliances;

- *guanxi* as discussed was pivotal in gathering rich and authentic data. Accordingly the research was limited by the amount of *guanxi* the researcher could build; and

- follow up interviews were not used due to time and cost constraints. *Guanxi* enabled access but it was not a permit to overstay a welcome.

The researcher thus used several strategies to minimise the risk involved in this emic study in China using the interpretive paradigm. As a result, these limitations did not significantly compromise the reliability and validity of the study.

Definitions

Defining and describing constructs such as *guanxi* and *xinren* was the focus of this research, and so more precise definitions for these constructs were developed as a result of the analysis. The constructs were allocated working definitions where *xinren* was treated as equivalent to the Western construct of trust, which has been defined in the Macquarie dictionary as 'reliance on the integrity, justice, etc., of a person'. Trust was compared with *xinren* to investigate differences. *Guanxi* was termed as *personal connections* or

relationships (Backman 1999). To alleviate misunderstandings the Chinese pictographs for *xinren* and *guanxi* were used in interviews to ensure that terminology was Sino-centric.

Sample

The building of *guanxi* locally in Australia through the pilot testing phase ameliorated some of the problems of gaining broad access in China without extensive preexisting contacts in all markets. However, the referral process had to be balanced with a need for gathering a cross section of respondents that represented as much as possible a representative sample of business people and business styles of the respective regions.

The development of a representative interview 'tree', a dendrogram, became a critical aspect of the study. To keep the sample from being dominated by one person's *guanxi* network, the researcher used several access points to develop the tree. The contacts ranged from life long personal friends to contacts that had only just been introduced. If they were contacts only recently introduced then the relationship was based on justifying the research concept to them and on their views of the need for such research. If the contacts were life long friends they needed fewer details of the research and had sufficient trust in the researcher to provide further referrals.

For the main field work the researcher obtained a representative sample of the economically developed or developing regions, Shanghai and Beijing, Hong Kong, Taipei and Xiamen. The snowballing and referral process was geographically directed and accordingly a number of interviews were conducted in each region.

Conducting interviews

Eleven pilot interviews were conducted using emigrants from northern and southern Mainland China and Hong Kong. All eleven respondents were fluent in English as a second language and ten of the eleven were either undertaking or had post graduate qualifications. All interviews were tape recorded with no need for interpreters. Five of the respondents were female and six were male. They filled positions predominantly at a middle management or Managing Director level in a broad range of industries.

The Chinese characters were found to be an excellent mechanism for communicating on a Chinese emic level, for adding focus and as a talking point. Respondent 3 summed up the communication benefits by suggesting, 'I like Chinese characters because whenever you

see this word it means something, just like a picture in your mind.' All eleven respondents could see the importance of studying *xinren* and *guanxi* in Chinese markets.

Thirty two further interviews were conducted for the main field work (making 43 in all), each of which was taped. The firms included State Owned Enterprises, joint ventures, foreign ventures, Chinese privately owned ventures and multinationals. Interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to three hours. The type of business was impacted upon by the fact that exposure to foreign businesses was a prerequisite for selection of respondents. Service areas included public relations, trade facilitation, education, information and insurance. Product areas included food, fibers, pharmaceuticals, minerals, engineering equipment, electronics and petrochemicals.

In summary, the transcripts have a high level of accuracy particularly given the anticipated language barriers. Fifteen of the 43 interviews were transcribed independently of the main researcher and were subsequently checked by the two researchers to ensure reliable transcription and observations. Based on their observations of these interviews, the accuracy of transcription is equivalent to a qualitative study undertaken without cross-cultural and language differences.

DISCUSSION

The three cases above outline the methods and techniques used by the researchers. Each of the studies resulted in very rich data that has provided significant new insights into the three areas of study. In all three cases it was evident that the quality of referrals had a direct impact on the quality of the information gained from each interview, the better the referral, the more likely that the interview would provide rich and valid data. What can we learn from these experiences? In the three cases there are some common themes and techniques that were utilised in order to access the 'right' people, respondents who were able to provide rich and meaningful data:

1) *original idea* - for all academic research there has to be an original idea. In all three cases the researchers had some idea of what they wanted to research, but the exact focus came later. In all cases colleagues pointed out the difficulties associated with gaining

access to the right interviewees, and even then of obtaining worthwhile and reliable data. Determination to pursue the original idea was thus critical in all three cases;

2) *thorough literature review* - in all three cases a very thorough literature review was undertaken. In addition to the traditional purpose of undertaking a literature review, such as identifying gaps in knowledge and being up to date with the literature and topic, these reviews had several other benefits:

   - identified many difficulties that previous researchers had encountered gaining access to appropriate people in Asia;

   - providing insights into the culture(s) to be investigated. This aspect varied with the amount of previous exposure the three researchers had previously had with the culture in question, but even with one researcher who had extensive cultural knowledge there were new aspects of the business culture identified;

   - the reviews provided an initial refining of the focus of the study;

   - each researcher was exposed to a number of different possible foci for the study, thus allowing some choice for the actual focus (achieved later in the process).

3) *exploratory discussions* - all three researchers spoke to people 'on the ground', either in the industry or with recent knowledge of the business environment and culture. These initial, or exploratory, discussions were most useful as they provided a second source to the literature for both focusing the topic and indicating how a suitable sample could be accessed;

4) *exploratory interviews* - the use of exploratory interviews was critical to the success of each study, in particular with respect to:

   - obtaining first hand experience and up to date knowledge of current business activities;

   - developing and refining the interview technique that would be most appropriate in the country under study;

   - finding an initial line of questioning that eases the respondent into the interview, especially to avoid difficult of 'threatening' questions that the respondent might hesitate to answer early in an interview before a rapport has been established;

- gauging the response to difficult questions, especially to establish if any topic might bring an interview to an early close;

- these early interviews were often a means to obtaining a referral for interviews in the Asian country. The snowballing technique started in Australia in all three cases, so the importance of these interviews and contacts should not be underestimated.

5) *establish credibility of researcher* - one of the precursors to success in these early interviews (and in the main field interviews) was that the credibility of the researcher had to be clearly evident to the respondents, otherwise referrals would not be given. Thus, it was essential for the researchers to resist seeking interviews too early in their study, but to wait until they had a reasonable focus, and until they had sufficient knowledge of the topic and culture they were studying. In Case 3, the use of pictograms helped establish the credibility of the researcher as they were in Chinese and readily recognised.

6) *use of contacts in Australia* - two of the three researchers established and used contacts in Australia to snowball referrals into target country/ies. In Case 1 the researcher already had well established contacts in Japan. In Case 3 the researcher had been previously involved in exporting to Asia and so had established contacts from which to start the snowballing sampling plan. In Case 2 the researcher had engineering contacts from which she commenced the process, and being a qualified engineer helped to establish credibility.

7) *focus on one theme* - it was found important to have a clear focus of almost exactly what was being researched when the exploratory phase commenced. It is not advisable to undertake interviews unless the topic is reasonably clear, unless they are conducted on the basis of being very early interviews to provide that focus.

8) *emic versus etic* - two of the studies on China and Japan were emic, while the Thai-Australian study was etic in nature. It is clearly important to establish between the two approaches as early as possible, and certainly before interviews commence.

9) *importance of definitions* - in all three studies having concise definitions for the main constructs was important. This approach is not always possible, as often finding a definition and/or description of a construct is a primary aim of the study, as it was with

Cases 2 and 3. In Case 3 the use of pictograms was important as they were immediately recognised by respondents, and in some ways were better understood than the words used to describe them. Where concise definitions are not available it is important to discuss respondents views and understandings of the constructs involved to help clarification.

10) *appreciation of culture* - a fundamental tenant of all three cases was the researcher gaining a specific understanding of basic elements of culture specific to each country/region under study. This appreciation was essential as adherence to basic codes of conduct, simple formalities and an appreciation of mannerisms was a prerequisite for nurturing a relationship with the respondent as each interview proceeded.

11) *appropriate management levels were targeted for interviews* - in all three cases the researcher was able to target an appropriate level of management for their own study. For Cases 2 and 3 middle and senior managers were appropriate, as junior people would not have the experience required to address the respective topics. In Case 1 the study required the researcher to access all levels of management, from very junior to very senior, and all levels in between.

12) *use of other researchers throughout* - in all three studies the researcher had access to, and regularly conversed with, fellow researchers. These regular forums for discussion were fundamental in assisting the researchers to address problems, aided in generating better definitions and in identifying new aspects of qualitative research methods, required in Cases 2 & 3. In addition, the support of colleagues provided the sustaining element during the whole process, from conception to final analysis. These three studies all encompassed a great deal of work, the attention to detail and effort required to gain access and complete interviews, transcription, analysis, and writing up all being very time consuming.

13) *low 'wastage' rate of interviews* - the quality of the interviews was such that only 5 out of 125 interviews (4%) across the three studies were unusable. This very low 'wastage' rate of interviews is testament to the success of the techniques used and the quality of the referrals.

The 13 elements above constitute at least a starting point for a check list of key success factors in undertaking business research in Asia. While no such list can ever be complete as each study will have its own complexity, nuances and challenges, it provides researchers new to this field of study with a starting point on which to build. Figure 1 shows the process and key success factors.

Figure 1. Accessing the right respondents
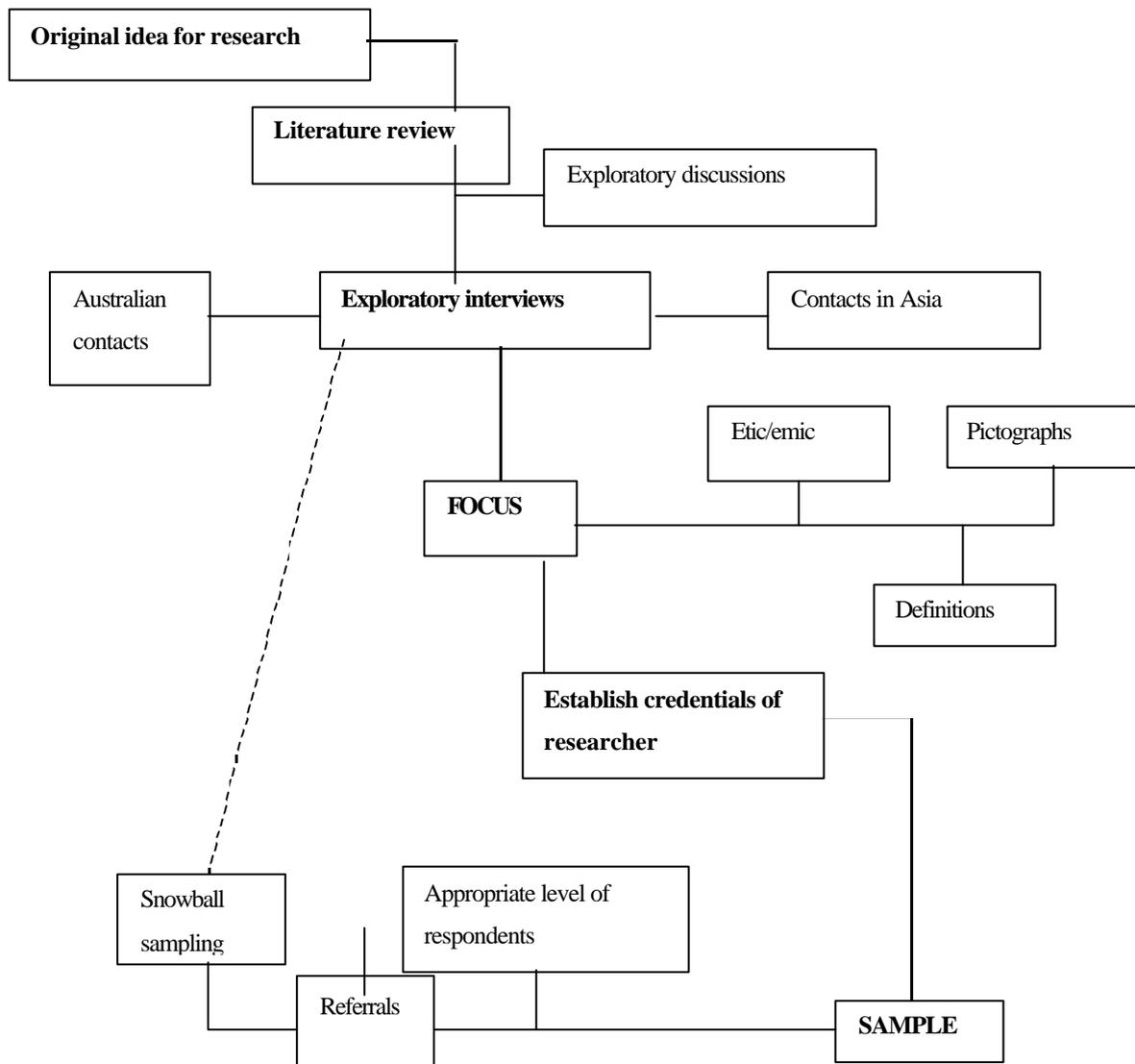
The process commences with an original idea for researching, followed by a detailed literature review. Following informal discussions exploratory interviews establish a first set of contacts and the study is focused. At this stage a number of elements of the study are identified, such as whether it will be etic or emic, the possible use of pictographs, key definitions and other parameters as required.

The referrals from the exploratory interviews are then used to establish the credentials of the researcher, and these two factors enable the snowball sampling process to be undertaken. In this way the actual sample of interviewees is developed with an appropriate level of respondents.

CONCLUSIONS

A number of conclusions emanate from the three cases above:

1) it is clearly shown that Westerners can do 'good' research in Asia;

2) much time and effort are required in preparation and undertaking a literature review;

3) the above guidelines of process and techniques do aid access;

4) there are clear benefits to achieving a better understanding of Asian business practices;

5) it is essential to gain a level of empathy with the culture being researched; and,

6) the quality of referral allows access to the 'right' respondents, but also substantially increases the opportunity of an interview providing rich, insightful and valid data.

This final point cannot be over emphasized. Unless the research can arrange high quality referrals to be given to the business people in Asia the researcher should not expect to be able to gather high quality data.

LIMITATIONS

The model developed above suited the three cases described, but clearly will not be universally applicable. There are many ways of achieving successful access to suitable respondents in Asia, this is only one. In some cases it may be possible to dispense with exploratory interviews, but if so an alternative starting point for gaining access to respondents would have to be found.

In addition, other ways of achieving the many other benefits identified of exploratory interviews would need to be found. If a researcher accesses the network, but is not able to achieve a bond with interviewees then the data obtained is unlikely to be rich, insightful or valid. The model is only of use where interviews are being conducted. Where other means of gathering data are concerned alternative techniques would need to be used.

FUTURE RESEARCH

In many way Westerners are only just scratching the surface of business research in Asia. There remains much to be done and learnt. Interestingly, the methods used to gather high quality data in Asia are very similar to those used by western companies who successfully conduct business in those same markets. More emic studies need to be conducted in different countries and regions of countries (especially the larger ones) in order to gain a better understanding of, and to nurture and build, business relationships.

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