Chapter 2
Research methods and reflexivity

2.1 Research design and research strategies

2.1.1 Selecting and entering the field

Before my doctoral studies I had already approached the ritual of Mazu pilgrimage for the Museum of World Religions in Taipei in 1997. In the course of preparing for an exhibition on Taiwanese religious life, I decided to present pilgrimage groups from Dajia and Baishatun. While the variegated and beautiful panorama of the Dajia pilgrimage parade, a myriad of pilgrims on foot, fitted the needs of a museum exhibition perfectly, one elementary section was absent in this pilgrimage group, namely the ritual of dividing incense (cf. 1.3.3.2 and no. 49). While searching for other examples to complete the exhibition, my attention was drawn to a small group from the rural coastal area of Baishatun. To my surprise, this pilgrimage group not only represented the longest journey in terms of walking distance, but also preserved many of the conventional rituals. Having observed and participated in their pilgrimage for twelve days in the spring of 1997, I was deeply impressed by the enthusiasm of local residents and the piety of the pilgrims and believers. Although the exhibition was interrupted due to other constraints, I continued working on the topic of pilgrimage for my own doctoral research in Germany. The first version of my research proposal saw a comparison of the two pilgrimages, since I had been in contact with both pilgrim groups in 1997. My fieldwork survey in 2000, however, made me change my mind to concentrate exclusively on the group from Baishatun, as comparative research transpired to be difficult to handle without an adequate understanding of both groups. Hence, I decided to focus on the small group from Baishatun, with which I was less familiar but felt more interested in than the other group. This village-scale pilgrimage made up of approximately three thousand pilgrims and containing numerous conventional rituals seemed to me to be a more realistic topic for my dissertation.

On my first journeying experience in 1997 I got to know people from Baishatun, many of whom were young emigrants living in Taipei. They not only undertook central pilgrimage tasks such as carrying the goddess’s palanquin on the journey, but also formed a small group resembling a brotherhood, which was called “dajiaozu” (“palanquin association”) (cf. 5.2.2). As a result of their substantial experience with visitors from Taipei (such as actors
and actresses from several theatre companies), they are willing to make friends with outsiders. Having taken part in the journey with members of the Golden Bough Theatre Company at the time, I was soon welcomed by the Baishatun people. My role as a museum researcher and my experience with the Dajia pilgrimage probably aroused their interest and made them curious to talk to me. Because they were concerned about the reputation of their home village, my job of collecting data in order to present their pilgrimage in the museum was of importance to them. Apart from making the journey together, we discussed the problems of their pilgrimage, including even their ideas on its reformation. I continued to exchange letters and emails with several pilgrims after I came to Germany. In particular, the leading figure in the palanquin association wrote to me to discuss their reformation plans. As a friend, I responded with my opinions and suggestions. In fact, my friendship with these people since 1997 proved to be of enormous help in carrying out my fieldwork in 2000 and 2001. They not only facilitated my travel arrangements and stay in the village, but also introduced me to other people for the purpose of interviews. I got to know other pilgrims in the course of both journeys, and although some of them did not know me personally before the interview, they recognised me from the journey. With their assistance, I found more people for interviews. Generally speaking, my journeying experience provided me with a good grounding to enter the field. The journeying experience I shared with the pilgrims, regardless of whether we knew each other or not, made me feel at ease and completely free to carry out my fieldwork.

2.1.2 Research strategies
Basing on the research questions stated in 1.1, my fieldwork follows the principles of ethnography. Ethnography is defined here as a qualitative research method, whereby participation is carried out in people’s daily lives with the aim of collecting data from their “naturally occurring settings or field” (Brewer 2000:6, cf. Hammersley and Atkinson 1995:1-2).

As Preston (1992) points out, there is a methodological difficulty in researching pilgrimage, since it involves unbounded phenomena and varying pilgrim behaviour. Indeed, my first journeying experience in 1997 did much to prove the difficulty of researching the pilgrimage group from Baishatun. No fixed route or detailed timetable was worked out for the pilgrims in advance, so that movement was totally dependent on the direction of the

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1 In fact, actors and actresses from several theatre companies in Taipei have continued to participate in the journey each year since 1990. Viewing the act of walking as part of their training, many of them were able to complete the entire journey on foot, thereby gaining the recognition of other pilgrims.
goddess’s palanquin. In other words, the path to be taken by pilgrims and the time allotted for resting only emerges during the journey itself. Thus, I first of all encountered difficulty in recording the route and the events that occurred around the goddess’s palanquin (cf. 5.3 & 5.4). I also had problems interviewing pilgrims on the journey, which is mainly carried out on foot, albeit pilgrims can rest by taking a lift in a car. As a rule, pilgrims wanted to concentrate on walking in order to keep up with the palanquin bearers, preferring to take a nap when they got into a car, or they were busy trying to find somewhere to have a bath and a sleep for a few hours. Moreover, I too was constantly exhausted after walking with the pilgrims on the strenuous journey. The physical fatigue caused by walking long distances coupled with a general lack of sleep during the pilgrimage can take its toll.

Nonetheless, because the journey is an integral part of the pilgrimage and is embedded in a particular social-cultural context, I divided the fieldwork into two parts: the journey and ordinary life.

Making detailed records of the journey is essential to understanding the pilgrimage, especially since the journey takes place only once a year and the selection of paths and resting places varies according to the circumstances. It also means that the movement of the pilgrims is subject to specific considerations that are dependent on different factors en route. It is also necessary to realise how and why a particular choice of path or resting place is made, and to observe the respective reactions of pilgrims and believers. While my first journeying record in 1997 had lost much of its relevance, I included more detailed descriptions of the journeys made in 2000 and 2001. This was not solely due to my accumulated experience, but also to pertinent information given to me by other pilgrims.

Meanwhile, the pilgrims have indeed become my key interviewees. Apart from taking notes on the journey, I attempted to get to know as many pilgrims as possible in order to continue with interviews after the pilgrimage.

The second part of the fieldwork deals with the daily lives of the pilgrims, since understanding how pilgrimage is embedded in specific social and cultural contexts is crucial. The relevant points include the local ritual cycle of temples and general religious life in Baishatun, the ritual process of the pilgrimage, the organisation of the journey, and the reactions to and impact of the pilgrimage in Baishatun. I lived in the area of Baishatun where the Mazu temple is located. Besides worship behaviour, ritual séances, and special festivities of several temples in this area, the ordinary domestic ritual customs of the

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2 Bowman (1985:5) criticises the descriptive data used by the Turners (1978), which he claims was taken from pilgrimage propaganda and secondary elaborations by social scientists. He argues that statements made by pilgrims are far more relevant for anthropologists.
residents were also taken into account. In addition, the organisation and management of each temple and the relations between the temples were reviewed. Although I lived in the central area of Baishatun I also visited people and temples (or shrines) in the peripheral areas (the southern and northern villages, cf. 4.3) in order to grasp their social and ritual relations with Baishatun. Because participation in the pilgrimage is not confined to local residents, my informants included Baishatun emigrants living in Taipei or other cities, and the goddess’s pilgrims and believers in other towns and villages. The emigrants interviewed were selected according to their tasks and roles on the pilgrimage journey. Most Baishatun emigrants live in Tucheng and Xinzhuang, two suburban towns of Taipei, each of which contains a temple branching from Baishatun. A meeting point for emigrants to chat or exchange information, these two branch temples became key places for participant observation. Moreover, many devotees played an important role in supporting the pilgrimage en route. The devotees chosen for further interviews were spread over several places, most of which had been visited by the goddess’s palanquin on recent journeys, i.e., Dajia, Zhanghua, Santiao, Sanjun, and the final destination of Beigang. My main concern was to find out why they had become devotees of the goddess of Baishatun, why they organised support for the pilgrimage, what relations existed between them and Baishatun, and how these are maintained etc.

2.1.3 Research phases
Field research was carried out in two phases, the first of which lasted from 8th March to 7th May 2000. Based on the experience of 1997, this two-month fieldwork first focused on testing my research questions. Apart from participating in the eight-day journey with Dajia pilgrims and the nine-day journey with Baishatun pilgrims, I chose four devotees resident in Dajia and Zhanghua for interviews during the rest period en route. Meanwhile, I had chosen 16 informants for interviews in Baishatun and Taipei in order to revise my research questions and research proposal. The second fieldwork phase was from 4th March to 3rd September 2001. After participating in the pilgrimage journey in March, ethnographical research was to become the focus of this second phase. According to the calendar of relevant temple festivities, I frequently moved between Baishatun and Taipei. This was because many of the informants were indeed emigrants who lived and worked in Taipei; additionally, mutual visiting between local residents and these emigrants very often took place through their kin or temple relations. Generally speaking, I spent more time in Baishatun in March, May, July and August,
whereas my interviews were concentrated in Taipei in April and June. Interviews with pilgrims and believers from other areas were carried out from 23rd to 31st May. Informants were selected from the residents of Zhanghua, Snatiao, Sanjun and Beigang.

2.1.4 Methods of data collection

2.1.4.1 Participant observation

Participant observation is crucial to ethnographical research. In order to observe the natural setting and maintain professional distance, a proper balance in the researcher’s dual role as part insider and part outsider must be maintained (Brewer 2000:59-60). A female researcher and Taipei resident, I speak the same Minnanese dialect as most of my informants, albeit without a Baishatun accent. Because I had participated in three pilgrimage journeys, I was regarded by many pilgrims as part of their group. While my personal social background made me part outsider in the field, my journeying experience and relations with some of the informants made me part insider. In fact, the role of insider and outsider is fully dependent on the circumstances, occasionally making it difficult to maintain a balance. I will discuss this aspect in the next section (cf. 2.2).

As mentioned earlier, I did not stay in Baishatun throughout the whole fieldwork period. When I came to Baishatun for the first two and a half months in 2001, I stayed in a house belonging to the parents of an emigrant I have known since 1997. It is located close to the Mazu temple. Apart from the host and hostess, who were in their seventies, other family members living in the house included a daughter-in-law and her two children. With a view to extending my relations with other local residents, I stayed in a different house from May to August. Located in the vicinity of the morning market, this house was about 500 metres away from the Mazu temple. As a friend of the hostess’s granddaughter, who was born and brought up in Taipei, I was also regarded as a friend by the hostess, who is over sixty and lives alone in the house. In the final fieldwork stages I moved again for several days, at the suggestion of yet a third host, to another location that was more convenient for participation in and observation of temple activities at the village centre. The host is an emigrant who lives in a city in central Taiwan and only returns to the village for holidays or to attend festivities.

Participant observation of temple activities took place frequently in my fieldwork. Apart from the Mazu temple, there are four neighbourhood temples and two religious associations in Baishatun, as well as two branch temples in Taipei. By and large, each temple or shrine

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3 This particular emigrant has worked and lived in Taipei with his wife and children for over twenty years, but often returns to Baishatun to visit his parents.
organises a main festival each year, and some hold their own annual pilgrimage or séance rituals one to three times each week. Local residents and Baishatun emigrants usually congregate at these festivities, where relations among people and temples can be observed. In fact, interviewing also involved participant observation (cf. Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 139-151).

2.1.4.2 Interviewing

Independent of how difficult the journey was (cf. 2.1.2), interviews with several local devotees were held during resting hours. Pilgrim interviews took the form of spontaneous chats or conversations, in which I induced pilgrims to talk about the topics I wanted to know about. I used a tape recorder throughout the journey because taking notes was too difficult. I wrote down some of the points from memory as I filled in the daily journal at rest times.

Interviewees were selected according to several criteria related to my research concern (cf. 2.1.2). These included the tasks they performed on the journey, their pilgrimage experience, ritual knowledge, life experience in Baishatun, their status in local politics, affiliation to temples, specific social roles, and relevant occurrences experienced by them en route, etc. Generally, the male informants chosen had more knowledge of ritual or politics and more experience of past journeys, whereas female informants tended to speak more about their personal life histories and recent journeying experience.

I adopted the semi-structured interview with several previously prepared questions (Brewer 2000:63). The most important element of interviewing is to establish trust. Because most of the interviewees were found with the assistance of people I knew, I was accepted easily. Many informants were more than willing to tell me stories associated with the goddess’s protection, and of their pilgrimage experience. Several informants stated that they saw the propagation of Mazu’s efficacy as part of their religious practices. However, interviewing informants individually was not always easy due to the presence of others. Several members of the palanquin association, for instance, were difficult to interview because they constantly tried to influence me to take the direction they thought I should follow. More importantly, they had arranged the interviews in circumstances similar to their group gatherings, thus making a personal interview nigh to impossible. Nonetheless, I adopted the method of group discussion, asking questions spontaneously so that they could talk freely without worrying about being the target of an interview. I used a similar method in

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4 There are two cases of individual interviews from this small group.
talking to people in a festival situation, where asking questions was as important as participant observation.

I attempted to record each interview on tape or to take notes either on the spot or immediately afterwards. I did not use a tape recorder or small notepad if informants felt insecure or were unwilling to be recorded. In this situation, I wrote down the content of the interview later on from memory. I also kept a fieldwork journal apart from the interview notes and daily schedule, which contained my general impression of the interviews, my feeling in the field, and what seemed important to me from observation and interviewing, etc. In fact, apart from taking field notes and writing journals everyday, I had very limited time to transcribe my interviews from the tapes or to analyse data in Baishatun. The interaction with residents turned out to be so dense that I seldom had enough time for myself. In contrast to the hard work in Baishatun, I was able to arrange my time more easily in Taipei, and thus deal with the data after interviewing.

2.1.4.3 Other related methods and data

The visual record can be juxtaposed with written and sound-recording data. I made photographic records to supplement my brief descriptions about the main resting places and events that occurred on the journey. These pictures keep the journeying process and related events in mind when checking my field notes and journals. I also used a camera to take pictures of some of the pilgrims, as a means of becoming more familiar with them. Similarly, the video camera was applied to record selected séance rituals and temple festivity ceremonies. This video data of distinctive ritual contexts can be used as an aid in discussing the content with informants later on. Unlike other temples in possession of annals or brochures, the Mazu temple in Baishatun was devoid of all written records when I was in the field. However, journalists have continually reported the pilgrimage held by this temple since the 1990s. I collected the relevant reports from newspapers and magazines, as well as videos that had been shown on TV or made by the pilgrims or believers themselves. Moreover, I constantly exchanged emails and letters with several Baishatun people (including emigrants in Taipei) after withdrawing from my fieldwork. I thus kept up to date – sometimes even by telephone – about recent events in the village. In fact, several

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5 Watching a video with informants usually gives rise to a discussion about the respective event. Although I did not use a camcorder on the journey, I participated in a discussion with informants after watching journeying videos made by a pilgrim in 2001.

6 I collected brochures and annals from some of the temples en route.
place-making projects have been implemented since 2002, subsequent to my fieldwork. One Baishatun resident engaged in local place-making projects offered me digital data on written proposals and pictures of activities. Meanwhile, opinions and discussions in the guest books of Baishatun’s three web sites on the Internet have provided me with useful information about recent events in the village. Regardless of whether they were collected first-hand or not, all data related to my research is included in the discussion of this thesis.

2.1.5 Data collection and analysis
Apart from my field notes and journals, the total number of interviewees was approximately 112 for the two fieldwork phases. Most of the interview content focuses on pilgrimage, with 12 cases including more detailed personal life histories. The informants are categorised according to residence in Table 2-1. The number of recorded interview hours totals 88. The visual data includes 70 rolls of colour film (each film was developed into 36 prints or slides), and five VCDs covering one particular temple festivity in Taipei and two séance rituals in Baishatun.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Places</th>
<th>northern village</th>
<th>Baishatun</th>
<th>Southern village</th>
<th>Emigrants in Taipei</th>
<th>Devotees in Beigang</th>
<th>Devotees in Zhanghua</th>
<th>Devotees in Other places</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of informants</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of the interview tapes were transcribed into Chinese, and occasionally include the Minnanese dialect spoken by the informants. Only some of the selected interviews that appear in the thesis are translated into English. Due to fieldwork time constraints, transcription was mostly carried out after withdrawing from the field. Each interview contains a basic description that includes the informant’s background (such as name, age, gender, ethnicity, occupation or regular work, address and telephone number) and the specific interview situation (such as date, place, how the informant was reached, the interaction between the informant and myself, interruption or end of the interview etc.).
After typing out the contents of the interviews, I organised the data into several categories adopting the inductive method. These categories are listed in Chart 2-1, which details the items of each category.
By creating data categories, I also separated the different levels of analysis. Firstly, the pilgrimage is embedded in the ethnographic setting of Baishatun in terms of the religious, political and economic dimensions. Secondly, organising the pilgrimage journey is based on the cultural repertoire and Mazu cult in Baishatun. Thirdly, I divided the content of pilgrimage into three parts: ritual, journey, and what occurred (or what could be observed) on the trip. The first two parts concern the ritual process and journeying sequence; the third
part deals mainly with events related to or caused by the goddess’s palanquin performance, the stories associated with the events, mutual assistance and competing relations among pilgrims, and pilgrim discord and conflict. And finally, the thesis will concentrate on the impact of the pilgrimage on the local Mazu cult, as well as on the pilgrims and devotees. As Chart 2-1 shows, many elements of the religious dimension are mutually relevant. Elements concerning the political or economic dimensions should not be overlooked, as the impact of the pilgrimage is not confined to the religious field only.

2.2 A reflexive account of the research

The existence of the ethnographer’s authority in his or her research is inevitable, as Clifford and Marcus’s book (1986) has clarified. Apart from the problem of epistemology, anthropological writing is only one contingent explanation of the complicated and fuzzy world we live in and includes various interpretations that may differ from the anthropologist’s account. Since I am part of the social world I study and represent, I cannot disregard the subject of reflexivity in my research (cf. Brewer 2000: 127, 129; Hammersley & Atkinson 1995:16-21). This section will describe the various contingencies involved in the outcome of my research.

Firstly, my role in the field varied according to the stage of fieldwork. When I walked on the pilgrimage in 1997, I was first mistaken by pilgrims for a member of a theatre company, because the theatre people and myself were all outsiders from Taipei. I was a museum researcher at the time, and my interaction with Baishatun people (i.e., residents, emigrants, and pilgrims) was still laced with distance. Because of my long-lasting friendship with several people in the palanquin association (see above) since that journey, people treated me as one of their own when I returned to Taiwan for fieldwork in 2000. The contact with these people during the first stage of fieldwork strengthened our relationship, making it closer than before. In the second fieldwork phase in 2001, I helped to build up the Baishatun Fieldwork Office (BFO), an NGO organisation for cultural preservation, so much so that some Baishatun people thought I was a “member” of this organisation or at least related to it in some way. I was also said to be a “Baishatun resident” by some locals when I lived in their village for a few months. In fact, the different roles I was identified with by these informants in the field reflect the different relationships I had with them.

As an “indigenous” researcher, I believe that the anthropological approach can also be adopted in the study of one’s own society, since the same collectivity is made up of different
parts, where the so-called “others” can refer to “both ourselves and those relatively different from us” (Peirano 1998: 122-3). For the purpose of adequate observation and data collection, ethnographic research requires the maintaining of professional distance with the researched (Brewer 2000:60). Nonetheless, anthropological distance can sometimes be “challenged, blurred, relationally reconstructed” (Clifford 1997:81). Indeed, I did encounter the difficulty of keeping a professional distance in my fieldwork. Confronted with requests by friends from the palanquin association and the BFO, it was often a struggle to maintain a balance in terms of the researcher’s double role in the field of part insider and part outsider. My relationship with people from the palanquin association was of key importance in the research. Most of them have played significant roles in the palanquin brigade of the pilgrimage for years. Unlike members of the temple administrative committee, these people, devoid of formal titles in the temple, have owned a specific ritual power on the journey (cf. 8.1.2.1). In particular, their skills and knowledge of the performance were widely recognised by the pilgrims. Despite the diverse interpretations of the performance, accounts of the performers themselves seem to prevail in the understanding of the performance. My observations and data collection will inevitably be shaped by these people’s ideas, as were other pilgrims by such dominant voices en route. While I attempted to include other interpretive accounts in my analysis of the performance, my preconception was unavoidably affected by these voices.

Moreover, several leading figures in the palanquin association were also the principal founders of the BFO (cf. 7.3.1.2). They were mainly Baishatun emigrants in their forties and fifties, who lived in Taipei. Faced with the threat disappearance of ritual customs and the commercialisation of the pilgrimage, these emigrants were concerned with preserving Baishatun culture when I joined their discussion in 2000. Encouraging them to record the pilgrimage themselves, I introduced them to several young pilgrims I had met on the journey, who could undertake the work of writing and photographing. To my surprise, their first step was to create the BFO web site on the Internet in 2000, and information on the organisation of the BFO spread widely in the following year. While several pilgrims and I photographed the process of crossing the river during the journey in 2001, some pilgrims and believers were motivated to set up the BFO to propagate their pilgrimage culture. Since the purpose of the BFO was to record the journeying of that year, many volunteers, including myself, provided written or visual data, and participated in the discussions about publishing the VCD film and the pilgrimage book (cf. 7.3.1.2 & 7.3.3.1). I have the impression that I was far too involved to offer opinions and make suggestions
prior to the founding of the BFO. I also encountered a number of problems when I was asked by the emigrants to assist the BFO. As a native researcher, I was well aware of how human relations in the field were maintained, including the matter of mutual assistance. As five interviewees were found with the help of these people, I was expected to write something for the book, quite apart from my own research. Being an outsider of Baishatun, I contributed to the BFO by sharing part of my field pictures and writing 12 small essays on the pilgrimage, including several stories emanating from pilgrims but with their concession. Moreover, my Chinese manuscript (Lu 2001) on pilgrimage ritual was also given to them to assist the editing of the pilgrimage book. While I still own the rights to my written and visual data (several essays and pictures, cf. Wu ed. 2001), the outcome of such a random selection of my writings and pictures is indeed beyond my control.

While involved in the work for the BFO, I found myself confronted with an unusual fieldwork situation. The BFO discussion on the pilgrimage film and the book was a remarkable occasion for the observation of how pilgrimage representation is made by Baishatun emigrants in Taipei, and what feedback was given on my writing or on other people’s opinions. Since it was the first time that the pilgrimage was presented by the “Baishatun people” (including these emigrants in Taipei) themselves, the emigrants insisted on their perspective to such an extent that any opinion that differed from theirs was considered unacceptable. I was amazed at how powerful these BFO founding figures were, to the effect that none of the other interpretations found their way into the book (cf. 8.2.1.2 & 8.2.2.2). Different interpretive accounts of the pilgrimage, which I had collected in Baishatun, were in fact totally excluded.

Unlike my research, the BFO book focuses on the coherence of the pilgrimage. Meanwhile, another anthropological master thesis dealing with this pilgrimage and written in Chinese by You (1996) has supported the Turnerian idea of *communitas*. My research differs from both perspectives for two reasons. Firstly, I adopt the constructive approach and stress the coexistence of community and arena, as mentioned in 1.1. My preconception of the arena in the research is based on my observations during my first journey and the latter part of my fieldwork. I was struck by the serious dispute that occurred in the main hall of the Mazu temple on the eve of departure in 1997; I was also impressed by the discord among pilgrims on the journey itself. During my fieldwork I particularly learned about the daily rivalry among people from different local factions in Baishatun. Thus the pilgrimage functions as a common stage where different people come together in the arena. Secondly, You focuses on the central area of the Mazu cult in Baishatun only, similar to the pilgrimage book, whereas
my research includes the peripheral areas of this Mazu cult (cf. 4.3.1). Not only because residents from the peripheral areas have a share in the ritual privileges and obligations of the pilgrimage, but also because they are eligible for membership in the Mazu temple organisation. In brief, the focus of my research is based on my different preconceptions of this pilgrimage, which in turn may differ from those of others.

Furthermore, the discussion in the seventh chapter focuses on the different ways of constructing community, where a sense of shared belonging related to the pilgrimage is claimed by the people researched. However, as a native researcher, I cannot exclude my own account from the process of construction. Having participated in the journey three times, I shared experience with other pilgrims so that I could be included in the pilgrim community as a whole. In particular, I was involved in the BFO work, also part of constructing community. Yet, in writing this thesis, I am the only person in a position to construct my ideas and arguments, using data collected from research in the field.

I hope that my own reflections on the research process will prove an important reference to my readers.