Qualitative Personal Interviews in International Business Research: Some Lessons from a Study of Hong Kong Transnational Corporations

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Abstract — This paper is concerned with the role of qualitative personal interviews in international business research. Based on an ongoing research into more than 120 transnational corporations from Hong Kong and more than 60 of their subsidiaries and/or affiliates in Southeast Asia, I argue that the qualitative personal interview method is a much better technique than other common techniques in international business research such as postal surveys and telephone interviews. This argument is particularly relevant when the research is conducted in an urban context and the objective is to probe deeply into the processes and mechanisms of international business. Another dimension of the qualitative personal interview method is that it provides much flexibility both in the conduct of data collection and subsequent analysis. This advantage proves to be critical to international business research because of the changing context of research and concern with business firms operating simultaneously in several geographical locations.

Key Words — International Business Research, Research Method, Qualitative Personal Interviews, Postal Surveys, Hong Kong Firms.

Introduction
Research method has been a relatively underdeveloped enterprise in international business research. For example, although a large number of methodological texts are written on interviewing methods, few relate specifically to the contexts and requirements of international business research. On the other hand, one does not need to read extensively in leading international business journals (e.g. International Business Review, Journal of International Business Studies, Management International Review, The International Executive Journal and others) to realise that published articles are often long in their theoretical constructs and empirical findings, but short in their methodological discussions. We often have only a vague idea on how

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a piece of research or finding has come about in their published form. This phenomenon of 'hollowed methodology' in international business research triggers a fundamental concern, in this paper, which attempts to bring forward the methodological 'cart' that often does not even come with the theoretical–empirical 'horse' Among the various methods discussed in textbooks on international business research, interviewing is probably the most useful and direct method. The beauty of this method lies in its validity (i.e. dealing directly with decision makers and the richness of information collected) and reliability (i.e. replicable in practice).

This paper arises from an ongoing research into transnational corporations from Hong Kong (HKTNCs) and their subsidiaries and/or affiliates in ASEAN countries (Association of South East Asian Nations).* In the course of conducting this research project, I personally interviewed some 120 top executives from parent firms headquartered in Hong Kong and another 60 or more who are involved in managing their ASEAN subsidiaries and/or affiliates. The entire research process, however, was not as smoothly run as suggested in conventional texts. Rather, I had a dramatic shift from the initial conception of a postal survey to a pragmatic deployment of the qualitative personal interview method in view of changing research contexts both in Hong Kong and ASEAN. I am particularly keen in reporting this traumatic experience in this paper and thereby argue that the qualitative personal interview method performs its function as one of the best and most suitable methods in international business research in an Asian urban context.

Although multi-method strategy and triangulation underpin the fundamental research philosophy of my study, qualitative approach is more preferred in the actual conduct of personal interviews with business elites. This strategy is consistent with the combination of intensive and extensive research in critical realist philosophy (Sayer, 1992). Intensive method refers to an iterative process of abstraction in which theories are produced and conceptualised. The primary source of data in this difficult process comes from qualitative research method (in this case, qualitative personal interviews). Extensive method, on the other hand, provides the background information to offer a complete view on the historical and geographical formations of any concrete phenomenon, such as why firms seek to operate overseas. Taken as a whole, this paper privileges qualitative research method because of its flexibility and richness. This argument for qualitative research can only be understood vis-à-vis the relation between research design and research method. I argue that there is no simple one-to-one correspondence between design and method because in practice, we often adapt and adjust our research methods in view of changing research contexts. In this sense, we may have a perfectly valid and reliable design in theory (say, postal survey). In practice, however, we may face serious social and cultural resistance to postal survey in the business community. This practical difficulty not only

*Major findings of this research are contained in my forthcoming doctoral dissertation in the School of Geography, University of Manchester.
may jeopardize our field research, but also may render our research method invalid and unreliable. The flexibility of qualitative method therefore presents potential windows of opportunity for international business researchers to resolve problems of designing a valid and reliable research project. I will take up these points in later sections of the paper.

As a preamble, I purport to accomplish two objectives: first, I intend to discuss some general issues in research methodology that are relevant to the practice of international business research. Owing to space limitation, I have to list the points at certain junctures. Second, through presenting a reconstructed logic of my research into Hong Kong firms, I seek to argue a case for the qualitative personal interview method in international business research. I will also suggest a set of guidelines for future researchers intending to conduct studies on companies in an urban context. In the concluding section, I draw from my pursuit of the qualitative personal interview method some implications for international business research.

Before going into substantive issues, let me briefly discuss some methodological problems generic to international business research: how do we collect data and information pertinent to business firms? First, the issue of fieldwork and field interviews confronts virtually every researcher in the field of international business. By definition, international business refers to the simultaneous operations of business activities across national boundaries. Researching international business becomes a much more problematic enterprise than many other types of uni-locational research. Of course, multinational research collaboration does happen in selected topics of social research; but these topics are not as ubiquitous and generic as that in international business research. In empirical international business research, a researcher's major challenge is how to overcome the geographical spread of business activities. Should we collect information from the headquarters of transnational corporations or their overseas subsidiaries and/or affiliates? Or should we see them as an integrated network of operations with varying degrees of control and co-ordination? These questions pose serious problems in the actual research process itself as shown later in this paper.

Second, international business researchers are often puzzled by the issue of what is the phenomenon under study. International business research is mostly concerned with processes, interrelationships and mechanisms of transnational business activities, rather than with static patterns and characteristics of these very business organisations. This statement does not deny the importance of a deep understanding of industrial structures and firm characteristics as a prelude to further structural analyses. In other words, international business researchers more likely will ask questions such as why do national firms internationalise their operations and how do they succeed to do so? Questions such as what are the number of employees and modes of operation in each country become secondary issues.

A final issue in international business research relates to who to interview. Business elites tend to be the target of most studies because international
business research addresses corporate and strategic issues. This group of social actors is so far one of the most unreachable areas in empirical research. Very few methodological papers have been written on this subject of interviewing business elites (e.g. Spencer, 1973; Healey and Rawlinson, 1993). Enhancing the access to these actors through strategic research methods is the mission statement of this paper.

**Research Designs and Techniques: a Review**

This section seeks to throw some light on the ways in which empirical data can be obtained through researching into *business organisations*. In recent decades, practical issues revolving around data collection and analysis have received serious attention in the methodological literature on social research (Baker, 1986; Bryman, 1988a; Robson, 1993). There are also specific methodological prescriptions devoted to organisational studies (Bryman, 1988b, 1989; Gummesson, 1991; Rosenfeld *et al.*, 1993; Cassell and Symon, 1994a). Table 1 depicts a variety of research designs and methods in organisational studies. *Research designs* refer to “the overall structure and orientation of an investigation. This structure provides a framework within which data are collected and analysed” (Bryman, 1989, p. 28). *Research methods*, on the other hand, refer to operational techniques of data collection. They are less the overall strategy of investigation than the actual means to seek empirical data and information. In the practice of international business research, one could therefore adopt a multi-method research design and yet at the same time implement this design through qualitative research methods.

The literature has highlighted a number of key features in the process of researching into business organisations. First, *access* is a perennial problem in organisational studies; it is very much an issue of negotiating for access and

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**Table 1.**

Major Research Designs and Methods in Organisational Research

Source: Adapted from Bryman (1989, Table 1.2).
‘getting in’ the organisation. In general, access to organisations is constrained by the financial background of the research project, the nature of organisations and the role of individuals and ‘gatekeepers’ in these organisations. In practice, opportunism is often the word of the day in organisational research. Bresnen (1988, p. 47), for example, concludes his research into construction project organisations that “many of the methods that are useful for obtaining reliable and valid case data rely upon some degree of cunning, deviousness, opportunism and persistence on the part of the researcher.” Second, social relationships between the researcher and researched are an equally important issue, i.e. ‘getting on’ with the research process. It is vital to allow respondents’ understanding of the aim of the study and to develop their feeling of the researcher’s trustworthiness. These can be achieved through a sincere curiosity of the researcher as shown in pre-understanding and acquisition of institutional knowledge, the deployment of the researcher’s interpersonal skills and the use of feedback in the post-research work. A third issue is the strategy for withdrawal, i.e. ‘getting out’ of the organisation. This issue becomes particularly relevant to prolonged research in case study organisations. The researcher needs to exercise a proper management of the process in order to maintain an option of returning for further research. A short letter of gratitude, for example, would suffice. In some cases, respondents would request a proper report of the research findings. These reports should be written in ways useful to the organisation; they should be narrative and descriptive rather than academic with lots of jargons and references.

Looking at Table 1 again, which research strategy should a researcher choose for international business research? Since experiments are impossible in practice and action research is unlikely, quantitative survey, qualitative research and case studies are the only available options. Underpinning these options seemingly lies a fundamental clash between quantitative and qualitative methods in the social sciences (Bryman, 1988a; Brannen, 1992a). My position, however, is that we should deconstruct this quantitative-qualitative divide (cf. Bryman, 1984, 1988a, 1992; Platt, 1986, 1988; Bulmer, 1988; Brannen, 1992a; Hammersley, 1992; Silverman, 1993; Morrow and Brown, 1994) because “there is no fundamental clash between the purposes and capacities of qualitative and quantitative methods or data. What clash there is concerns the primacy of emphasis on verification or generation of theory” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 17). Table 2 presents some differences between quantitative and qualitative research. This paper calls for a multiple-strategy approach to international business research because “[t]here is nothing about a method per se which makes it weak or strong. The argument about the method depends on two factors. First, the relationship between theory and method, and, second, how the researcher attends to the potential weaknesses of the method” (Hartley, 1994, p. 208; original italics).

One of the most well-known multi-method strategies is triangulation (Webb et al., 1966; Denzin, 1970; Jick, 1983):
The triangulation of data by multi-method approaches is essential to answer many of the most important questions in organizational research where we are concerned with very complex processes involving a number of actors over time (Cassell and Symon, 1994b, p. 4).

The logic of triangulation rests on the fallibility of any single measure as a representation of social phenomenon and psychological constructs. Such fallibility can be safeguarded by the use of triangulation to achieve convergence validity (Brinberg and McGrath, 1985; Fielding and Fielding, 1986). Denzin (1970, Chapter 12) suggests four basic triangulation:

1. data triangulation: data with respect to time, place, person and level;
2. investigator triangulation: between multiple observers of the same phenomenon;
3. theoretical triangulation: between multiple theoretical perspectives with respect to the same set of objects; and
4. methodological triangulation: between-method (dissimilar methods) triangulation and within-method (variations within the same basic methodology) triangulation.

Jick (1983) devoices a continuum of triangulation design from simple design (e.g. field observation of strike to strengthen statistical results on job dissatisfaction) to complex design (e.g. complementarity between quantitative and qualitative methods). Triangulation can be used in a number of ways:

1. to analyse a variety of independent derivation, identification or measurement processes;
2. to look for and analyse things which are invariant over or identical in the conclusions or results of those processes;
3. to determine the scope of the processes across which they are invariant and the conditions on which their invariance depends;
4. to analyse and explain any relevant failure of invariance.
Triangulation, in particular its methodological form, can do much to improve the validity and reliability of data collected on the assumptions that the method is well-understood and different data complement each other in revealing different facets of the social world. Methodological triangulation is therefore broadly compatible with the deployment of both intensive and extensive methods in realist research (Sayer, 1992). Some cautions, however, must be given at this juncture to prevent its unqualified intrusion into international business research. First, triangulation may suffer from the problem of ‘ironies’ in data collection (Silverman, 1985, p. 20, 1993) when action makes sense only in context. It becomes much more problematical to compare different sets of data than implied by the method of triangulation. Second, a real difficulty is encountered in locating a common unit of observation for each theory to be applied. Triangulation does not help much in this regard. Third, when data from different methods are in conflict, it may be extremely difficult to decide which should be accepted and who should take the decision. In triangulating his research on the effects of a merger on employees by using standard survey and other unobtrusive observations, Jick (1983) found immense difficulties in weighing the data generated from different sources and methods. Fourth, there is a tendency to regard qualitative data as more trustworthy than quantitative data should differences in findings arise (Bryman, 1992). This may raise the issue of bias in interpretation. Fifth, the seduction of eclecticism is very real in triangulation because “[i]n so far as data are treated as objective phenomena which unproblematically reflect the ‘real world’, researchers will tend to pile up research findings in an additive way. Triangulation when it is used according to this formulation is simply eclecticism” (Brannen, 1992b, p. 14). Finally, there is the usual question of time, cost and accessibility to critical data areas, types or levels.

What is necessary in the process of triangulation is to compare and contrast different sources of findings if they are addressing the same phenomenon. Alternatively, if different methods are used to investigate different facets of the same phenomenon (e.g. international business studies), the resultant findings tend to be complementary. The methodological implication is that triangulation is useful in so far as different facets of a concrete phenomenon are researched through the most appropriate combination of methods; it surely is not about replication per se, but about making connections within particularly cases. In the remaining two subsections, I will explicate in detail the arguments for and against quantitative and qualitative methods, bearing in mind multi-method triangulation as the central strategy recommended for international business research.

Quantitative Methods in Organisational Studies
In quantitative surveys, the twin issue of validity and reliability clearly stands out for a closer scrutiny. Silverman (1993, p. 156) even argues that “the issue of validity is appropriate whatever one’s theoretical orientation and use of quantitative or qualitative data”. The first measure of the validity of a survey
is known as ‘construct validity’ that refers to the correct operational measures. Writers from both camps of research methods often disagree on whose method is most valid. Quantitative surveys tend to exercise a strict control over construct validity through rigorous testing of questionnaires and inferential statistical instruments. A second measure of validity is ‘internal validity’, i.e. whether information gathered from a research instrument explains what it is supposed to explain and whether statistical results show causal relationships or spurious relationship? This criterion of validity is often verified at the end of the analysis because it is very difficult to assess the internal validity of a questionnaire until it generates some kind of data or information. ‘External validity’ is a third measure of validity, referring to the domain of generalisation, i.e. whether results from an instrument are generalizable to other research settings and situations? This criterion again cannot be assessed until empirical data are gathered. It appears that external validity is best assessed via a qualitative route because “the value of generalisations depends upon the qualitative nature of the objects to which they refer. They can only supplement but never replace qualitative methods” (Sayer, 1992, p. 103).

Reliability is the other side of the same coin, referring to the replicability of findings. This measure is one of the most powerful criteria through which researchers in the quantitative tradition launch their criticisms on qualitative research. They argue that data and information gathered from qualitative research are not readily subject to replication and verification. These data thus lose scientific rigour and do not deserve the same respect as survey information. Researchers from the qualitative camp, in rebuttal, counter that quantitative survey cannot replicate their findings as perfectly as they claim. In practice, Brinberg and McGrath (1985) note that validity varies with the process of research so that it may mean ‘values’ in the preparatory stage, ‘correspondence’ in the stage of ‘doing a study’ and generalisation and/or robustness in the following-up stage. Bryman (1989) also shows the various problems in ascertaining validity and reliability in organisational studies:

1. the presence of alternative ways of interpreting some ensuring findings;
2. conceptual difficulties in the procedures, e.g. testing between convergent and discriminant validity; and
3. rarely conducted in organisational studies: e.g. most empirical studies rely on internal reliability and no such test on validity was found among 193 organisational research articles published in five leading journals in 1985 (Bryman, 1989, p. 64).

I reckon elements of truth in both camps and believe that different methods are valid and reliable in different research contexts (cf. Layder, 1985, 1988, 1993). What we need to appreciate, nevertheless, is the relative advantages of different methods and how to use them discriminatingly and flexibly under different research contexts. As I will show in the next section, doing empirical international business research is not a simple matter of taking one or more neat methods/packages from the research technique ‘supermarket’ and use
them without due consideration of the research context. Very often, research circumstances change so rapidly and unexpectedly that we have to bend our actual methods to suit the changing context rather than the other way round. Precisely because of this inherent instability of the research context, it is even more justified to employ a multi-method approach because we have different methods at our disposal at any time when we need them. It is not enough, for example, to prepare a well-designed self-administered questionnaire and face a very high non-response from the sample postal survey. In the meantime, I will discuss qualitative research methods in organisational studies.

Qualitative Methods in Organisational Studies

Not until the last decade has there been a burgeoning literature on qualitative methods in social research (Taylor and Bogdon, 1984; Silverman, 1985, 1993; Walker, 1985; Berg, 1989; Marshall and Rossman, 1989; Patton, 1990; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Fielding and Lee, 1991; Glesne and Peshkin, 1992; Bryman and Burgess, 1994; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Miles and Huberman, 1994). Some texts were specifically written to shed experience in organisational studies (van Maanen, 1983; Gummesson, 1991; Cassell and Symon, 1994a). Many of these books on qualitative methods were written from a specific sociological and theoretical perspective such as critical realism (Silverman, 1985, 1993; Layder, 1993; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Morrow and Brown, 1994), grounded theory (Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Bryman and Burgess, 1994) and symbolic interactionism (Denzin, 1970; Berg, 1989). Others were written for applied qualitative works (Walker, 1985) and educational research (Marshall and Rossman, 1989; Glesne and Peshkin, 1992). One popular text defines qualitative research as a process of designing research “that entails immersion in the everyday life of the setting chosen for study, that values participants’ perspectives on their worlds and seeks to discover those perspectives, that views inquiry as an interactive process between the researcher and the participants, and that is primarily descriptive and relies on people’s words as the primary data” (Marshall and Rossman, 1989, p. 11). In organisational research, however, qualitative research has a distinct set of meanings because “qualitative research is not simply quantitative research without numbers; it stands for a quite different set of beliefs about how organisations and their inhabitants ought to be studied” (Bryman, 1989, p. 168):

(1) adopting an insider’s stance to the organisation (see also Bryman, 1988b);
(2) a strong sense of contextualisation;
(3) an emphasis on process;
(4) unstructured approach with little prior theoretical orientation and no presupposed hypotheses;
(5) a variety of data sources such as field notes, interview transcripts and documents; and
(6) ability to obtain and retain close proximity to the phenomenon under study.
It appears that qualitative methods provide a better opportunity to access to the interplay of network relations and business decision makings, vis-à-vis quantitative check-list approach commonly adopted in international business research.

In this paper, I single out two species of qualitative research methods: (1) qualitative interviews and (2) case studies.* First, qualitative and intensive corporate interviews (Schoenberger, 1991; Healey and Rawlinson, 1993; King, 1994) are one of the most preferred modes of gaining access to the realm of international business. There are, however, few systematic treatments of the nature of and problems inherent in the process of interview itself (cf. Briggs, 1986). In fact, interviews are not some purely objective instruments designed primarily to collect information; they are, in the process of realizing themselves, continuously transforming the context and information gathered for subsequent analyses. Interviews, in particular qualitative interviews, should be conceptualized as communicative events in which interviewers and respondents are engaged in active interaction and exchange of information through various communicative channels and codes. Interviewers must therefore be always sensitive to different modes of communication through which meanings and interpretations are construed by and communicated through respondents. Failing to recognize this crucial nature of interviews may render interviewers what Briggs (1986, pp. xiii-xiv) called ‘communicative blunders’ which “reflected a deep and pervasive pattern that was inherent in received interview techniques as used in a wide variety of disciplines. These blunders followed from the imposition of one set of communicative norms — those embedded in the interview situation — on a speech community that organized talk along opposing lines”. If we take interviews as a form of symbolic interaction through which intersubjective knowledge is gained, the validity of subsequent analysis of interview data will be based on ‘deep’ understanding of the respondents’ rationale and points of view. Statistical formulae are irrelevant in validating this process of empathic understanding of social actors and activities. I shall discuss later the implications of interviews as communicative events for international business research.

Interviews are an arena of power relations. We should never overlook the politics of interviews; this issue is particularly salient in interviewing ‘business elites’ such as top managers and executives. Owing to the sheer power structure of interviews, there is always a tendency for the interviewee to impose his/her meta-communicative norms on the interviewer. Power relations are also involved in the analysis of organisational interviews. Information and data obtained from these interviews must be interpreted in context. The interviewer must be cautious of not only what the interviewee

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*A third species of qualitative research is action-oriented research in organisations (Bryman, 1989; Gummesson, 1991; Chisholm and Elden, 1993; Greenwood et al., 1993; Fryer and Feather, 1994) which devotes much attention to decision making, implementation and change processes within companies and other organisations.
has got to say, but also how and why such an answer is given. In qualitative interviews, the use of tape recorders and subsequently interview transcripts are quite common as far as circumstances allow (Silverman, 1993).

In the final analysis, a good qualitative interviewer must be concerned with the social nature of interviews, their power relations and other situational issues. Glesne and Peshkin (1992, Chapter 4) have suggested some attributes on being a good interviewer:

1. anticipatory and be prepared;
2. alert to establish rapport through mutual trust and interest;
3. naive nature — the researcher’s special learner role;
4. analytic: considering relationships, salience, meanings and explanations in interviewing;
5. paradoxically bilateral: dominant but also submissive; questions of power and control;
6. non-reactive, non-directive and therapeutic; and
7. patiently probing.

Second, case studies are a popular research tool in organisational studies (Hartley, 1994; Yin, 1994), in particular in the business and management literature (Gummesson, 1991). Hartley (1994, pp. 208–209; emphasis added) defines case studies as “a detailed investigation, often with data collected over a period of time, of one or more organisations, or groups within organisations, with a view to providing an analysis of the context and processes involved in the phenomenon under study”. The method is characterised as:

1. an empirical inquiry of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context:
2. many more variables than data points in survey;
3. reliance on multiple sources of evidence (and hence need triangulation) and
4. prior development of theory to guide the case study research.

The case study method is useful in organisational studies because it “allows an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events — such as individual life cycles, organisational and managerial processes, neighborhood change, international relations, and the maturation of industries” (Yin, 1994, p. 3). It is particularly relevant when there is a need to unfold the history of particular companies. But the researcher must also be sensitive to the taboos of companies and executives so that interpretations and analyses are put into the organisational context.

**The Qualitative Interview Method in Practice: Researching into Hong Kong Firms**

I shall discuss in this section what specific designs and techniques have been adopted in an ongoing research into the transnational operations of Hong Kong-based companies. Reconstructed logic thus underpins the following post ante recapitulation of the research process. I prefer to offer a personal account of my research into Hong Kong companies in the next two subsections. Then, I will probe deeply to offer some critical reflections on international business research and recommend a set of guidelines.
Why not Postal Survey?

Let me start with my initial conception before entering into the ‘field’. I consulted many methodological texts on questionnaire design (Lockhart, 1984; Briggs, 1986; Converse and Presser, 1986; Bridge, 1992; Foddy, 1993; Rosenfeld et al., 1993) and survey methods (Dillman, 1978; Dillman et al., 1984; Goyder, 1987; Fowler, 1988; de Vaus, 1990; Fowler and Mangione, 1990). Now I had to make a choice between postal survey or personal interview. Postal survey was a better choice because it is apparently cost-effective and quicker, allowing me more free time to collect secondary data and other information. There are also generally no ‘interviewer’s effects’ in using the method. Another issue I needed to resolve is the sample coverage of postal survey. I divided my sample firms into two groups: (1) home country firms, i.e. headquartered in Hong Kong and (2) host country firms, i.e. their subsidiaries and/or affiliates in the ASEAN region. My main rationale for conducting surveys on both headquarters of HKTNCs and their ASEAN subsidiaries was to offer a better cut into their processes of transnational operations. Most empirical studies of HKTNCs and other TNCs from developing Asian countries rely on surveys of either headquarters or subsidiaries, see Yeung (1994a) for a review. I was particularly disappointed by this ‘methodological separatism’ because very often subsidiaries offer a different view from their headquarters. In the context of ASEAN operations, many countries in the ASEAN-5 (e.g. Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines) require a substantial local equity participation. Rather than an exception like in Anglo-American transnational operations, joint ventures and other collaborative forms of international business have become increasingly popular among HKTNCs in the ASEAN region (Yeung, 1994b). Many subsidiaries of foreign firms in these ASEAN countries are managed by local executives or partners; they may offer a different view on the processes in which they come into co-operative ventures with their foreign investors. They also possess an intimate knowledge of the local way of business and politics of investment that are extremely important in understanding the processes of transnational operations.

Next, I tackled the issue of survey method. Dillman’s (1978; Dillman et al., 1984) Total Design Method (TDM) appealed to me most because it claims to achieve an average response rate of up to 70% if the method is fully and properly implemented. My original plan for conducting a postal survey in Hong Kong was characterised by the following steps:

Step 1: Send a letter stating the purpose and utility of the survey (preferably legitimised by letterhead papers and envelopes from an established research centre in Hong Kong, accompanied by my business card) and telling them that I will call back to identify the person in charge of overseas operations.

Step 2: By the time my letters reach potential firms, telephone sample firms to identify the person responsible for overseas operations.

First mail: Send questionnaires to those persons in charge and/or top executives.
Week 1: Send first reminders after one week.
Week 3: After two weeks from first reminders, call up those who have not returned questionnaires and/or send second reminders with questionnaires for those losing or misplacing previous questionnaires.
Week 5 (optional): Either final reminders or third follow-up letters or telephone follow-up and/or interviews.
Week X: Conclude the survey.

A similar set of procedures was designed for Hong Kong firms in host ASEAN countries:
Step 1: Send with each questionnaires my business cards and cover letters, explaining the purpose of the survey and the fact that we have already interviewed their headquarters in Hong Kong.
Step 2: One reminder (postcards) may be sent, depending on the time and resources available.
Step 3: Conclude the survey.

Cover letter is a vital pillar in the TDM because it provides the first point of contact between the researcher and the researched. Multiple cover letters can be used to contact different actors and endorsement letters can be designed to gain entrée to companies and organisations (Altschuld and Lower, 1984). In my cover letters, I placed much emphasis on limited time demands and strict confidentiality to overcome the so-called ‘respondent crisis’. This crisis is particularly pronounced in Hong Kong because the business culture is embedded in a very fast-going and business-oriented society. In ASEAN countries, with the exception of Singapore, respondents are typically not very proficient in English and thus I must make sure that they do not need to spend hours to fill in my questionnaires. I also emphasised in my cover letters that this study would provide important feedback to the business community and policy makers and that their opinions would be highly valued.

Why Qualitative Personal Interviews Then?
Another methodological area I spent much effort prior to fieldwork was the design of qualitative interviews (Schoenberger, 1991; King, 1994). I believed that qualitative information gives the researcher a more realistic ‘feel’ of the world that cannot be experienced in ‘cold’ statistics. I decided to use aide-mémoire or interviewing cues, instead of completely open types of interview technique as in ethnography and action research. I intended to use tape recorders as much as possible because of the richness in data collected. Since my study is concerned with processes and mechanisms of internationalisation, I may need verbatim quotes to illustrate my arguments in later writings (e.g. Yeung, 1995). I also wished to transcribe interview tapes as soon as they were over.

In my original plan, the choice of in-depth interviewees needed not be too broad and large in coverage. What I wanted was key figures and informants from a selected number of HKTNCs and other organisations. In this regard, the concept of ‘theoretical sampling’ in the ‘grounded theory method’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; also
Layder, 1993) was most suitable for corporate interviews. Theoretical sampling by a researcher refers to "seeking samples of population, events, activities guided by his or her emerging (if still primitive) theory" (Strauss, 1987, p. 16). This sampling method is harnessed implicitly or explicitly to making comparisons according to various sub-dimensions and theoretical categories. In the context of international business research, theoretical sampling would be useful to distinguish the transnational operations of, for example, HKTNCs under different contexts and circumstances. The purpose of this comparison is not to pursue a more encompassing theory, but rather to stimulate 'theoretical sensitivity' (Glaser, 1978) in the service of generating and/or testing theory. I thus considered qualitative interviews as instrumental in the understanding of the processes of transnational operations. Target respondents would be theoretically sampled from (1) business executives from different sectors and industries; (2) government officials from both home and host countries and (3) representatives from the various non-government organisations, e.g. Chambers of Commerce, regional economic organisations and academic institutions.

Now everything was in place and I set off for my fieldwork in Asia, both Hong Kong and Southeast Asia. With a directory of 227 Hong Kong firms that supposedly had transnational operations in at least one of the ASEAN-5 countries, I had two objectives in mind: (1) to conduct a detail firm-level postal survey and (2) to collect more secondary and published information. After consultation with some established researchers in Hong Kong and Britain, I decided to adapt my survey strategy to the changing research context in Hong Kong. Since my census list for the postal survey contained about 227 HKTNCs, I thought it would be a good idea if I conduct a personal census of all the 227 firms, as long as time was available. I was aware that the actual population of HKTNCs operating in ASEAN countries would be much bigger than 227. But since no such population frame or anything similar was available, my directory of 227 firms should be considered as the second best. I thus revised my census strategy for home country firms in the following ways:

Step 1: I carefully screened all 227 HKTNCs on my directory by telephone: (1) to confirm their correspondence and right person in charge because these information change very often in the context of high rental rates and personnel turnover in Hong Kong and (2) to make sure that their headquarters are based in Hong Kong and to prevent a misidentification of HKTNCs. After this process of screening, 45 firms were excluded from the initial directory because they either did not have operations in any of the ASEAN-5 countries or they had just ceased their ASEAN operations. I had therefore 182 HKTNCs in my directory available for personal interviews.

Step 2: I sent a letter, stating the purpose and utility of the survey on letterhead papers of the Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, to alert potential respondents. These letters were sent in different batches to make full use of time because I could not possibly follow up rapidly
enough if I sent, say, 200 letters in one go. In each batch, I sent out about 50 letters to potential respondents.
Step 3: I then called the addresses to arrange for interviews or, alternatively, sent a postal questionnaire for them to fill in and return.
Step 4: I followed up the appointments and interviewed the person.

The field interview lasted for four months from late January 1994. I aimed to gain some background information and characteristics on the transnational operations of Hong Kong firms, such as the number and forms of subsidiaries, motives for different country operations and so on. During personal interviews, I used in-depth probing technique to gain qualitative information. I did not strictly follow questions in my questionnaires and in fact, I often diverted from the questionnaires when interesting topics were raised by the respondent. Top executives were allowed almost complete free-play on what to say and how to say. The actual conduct of interviews became very much like a form of communicative interaction, rather than a rigid adherence to the researcher-researched dualism. I intended this interview technique to give me better insights into the processes and mechanisms of transnational operations. In most interviews (up to 90%), I was permitted to use my tape recorder. By applying both types of interviewing technique simultaneously under one roof in most cases, I was able to transcend the quantitative–qualitative divide typical in contemporary international business research. This is because both techniques measure and probe into different meanings and aspects of essentially the same phenomenon—transnational operations.

By late May 1994, I successfully interviewed, through personal interview method (and sometimes telephone interview method), 112 Hong Kong TNCs operating in at least one of the ASEAN-5 countries. Sixty-nine firms either refused to be interviewed or dropped out for other reasons. The census was very successful not only in terms of response rate (up to 61.5%), but also in terms of the quality of information collected. Some 93 of all 112 interviews (83%) were done through the qualitative personal interview method and because of that, much qualitative information was ascertained. Out of these 112 interviews, at least 70% of respondents were top executives, ranging from Chairman, Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer to Director and Executive Director. The rest were Company Secretary, General Manager and occasionally divisional managers. This positional attribute of my respondent characteristics is extremely important because often only those at the top management level possess a fairly accurate knowledge of the strategy and processes of internationalisation among companies from developing Asian economies.

After interviewing those headquarters of HKTNCs in Hong Kong, I went on to interview their subsidiaries and/or affiliates in ASEAN countries. My research strategy was to interview mainly those companies whose headquarters responded to my census interviews in Hong Kong. The logic-in-use was to build up comprehensive case studies of fewer companies (with both their headquarters and ASEAN subsidiaries), rather than to interview as many unrelated subsidiaries of HKTNCs as possible. My approach to their subsidiaries and/or affiliates in host countries is characterised as follows:
Step 1: I faxed cover letters to prospective subsidiaries and/or affiliates in respective host countries, stating the purpose of my study and the names of top executives I had interviewed in their parent companies in Hong Kong.
Step 2: Some companies replied with an appointment for interview. If not, I would call up the company when I visited the host countries.
Step 3: I interviewed, as far as possible, the top executive in that subsidiary and/or affiliate. Visits to Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore further generated 63 successful interviews from 103 ASEAN subsidiaries contacted (61.2% response rate).

Critical Reflections on Qualitative Personal Interviews in Asia
In retrospect, my field research was essentially an amalgamation of pragmatism, opportunism and professionalism — a rather different picture from orthodox methodological texts. First, pragmatism underscored my entire fieldwork. The most obvious example was my dramatic shift from a postal survey strategy to a personal interview method. This was deemed an inevitable shift in view of several potentially disastrous difficulties. In the first place, I encountered grave difficulties in reaching the right respondent in Hong Kong. As a result of extremely high rental rates and volatility in business, companies in Hong Kong change their office locations and hence addresses rather often. Those mailing addresses in current business directories become outdated rapidly. Given a high personnel turnover rate in the tight Hong Kong labour market, even large companies encounter a frequent change in top executives. A combination of these two factors resulted in a loss of some 20% of my cover letters, let alone questionnaires. The sampling coverage of postal survey would be jeopardised if key decision makers in business organisations are under-represented in the actual response.

Another usual problem with postal survey is how to secure an appropriate answer. The broad geographical coverage of my survey questionnaires necessarily implies that they are long and thick. This not only reduces the response rate, but also increases the chance of misunderstanding and misinterpretation as evident in a pilot test on some MBA students with former managerial experience in Hong Kong. Since most methodological texts suggest the use of simple factual questions in postal surveys, the information collected through this method generally sheds little light on the processes and mechanisms of international business, especially in their qualitative disguise. On the other hand, if more complex and open-ended questions are included in a postal questionnaire, one would risk even lower response rate (less than 10%). The forced-choice method in postal questionnaire design further aggravates problems in data analysis. How does one make sure that processes in international business conform to a standard forced-choice mode of answering questions prompted by some unknown and remote researchers? In my research, it is practically unthinkable to ask top executives from Hong Kong firms to fit their mind-sets into my questionnaire. Even if they do so, the resultant information would be highly unreliable because I cannot be sure
whether they are really answering my questions or doing me a favour. I suggest that qualitative personal interviews, conducted in a discursive dialogue form, tend to overcome some of these notorious problems associated with postal surveys in international business research.

Despite higher time and costs involved and more difficulties in arranging for qualitative personal interviews, I argue that the method offers one of the best solutions to problems in international business research. The decision to conduct qualitative personal interviews was proven exceptionally fruitful in that I could achieve a high response rate (at least 61.5%) and a much better quality of information (more than 60 qualitative transcripts generated). In this case, personal interviews were conducted in an interactive environment, comprising of dialogue, discussion and even debates. In general, qualitative personal interviews tend to emulate a higher response rate. One review of 43 local and regional surveys of economic activity in Britain found that, although response rates varied widely, the average response rate for postal surveys was 51%, while for face-to-face interview surveys, it was 75% (Healey and Rawlinson, 1993, p. 342). In an Asian urban context, a 61.5% response rate for both HKTNCs and their ASEAN subsidiaries would be considered very high.

Another distinct advantage of qualitative personal interviews is that the researcher is able to talk to the right person. This is perhaps the single most important point in international business research because only these so-called 'business elites', usually at least at the level of Board Director, possess privileged access to the processes and mechanisms of transnational operations. A related merit of qualitative personal interviews points to the completion of questionnaires or interviewing cues. In most cases, much flexibility is open to the researcher during these interviews because the interviewing process is itself a social process involving the interviewer and the interviewee. One can choose to ask questions in a standard manner and flow across all cases. Or one can ask the same questions in a different manner and order throughout different interviews. A final possibility is that one can vary questions and probing according to the interview context, i.e. asking more and in greater detail if the respondent is more keen and friendly (e.g. my study). Open and discursive dialogue seems to be the most efficient form of eliciting information from business executives.

Another advantage of qualitative personal interviews is that instant corrections of one's interview schedule is possible under flexible interview processes. For instance, my questionnaires were originally designed for postal surveys of manufacturing firms, but I used them in my personal interviews with all Hong Kong firms and their overseas subsidiaries and/or affiliates. During some interviews with service HKTNCs, I was questioned by some critical executives who noticed inconsistencies in my questions because some questions referred specifically to manufacturing firms. Questions on relocation due to political uncertainty and labour-intensity were certainly embedded in the manufacturing sector and had little relevance to service-sector companies. If the questionnaire was used in postal surveys, I would
either obtain incomplete questionnaires or no response. For qualitative personal interviews, however, at least I was given a chance to explain my wording and meanings. I therefore managed to get around with them and paid much more attention to service transnationals from Hong Kong — a relatively under-researched topic in international business.

In most cases, completing pre-designed questionnaires is not a problem. Rather, the problem lies in the sort of information gathered through interviews. To this end, we turn our attention to qualitative interviews. Qualitative interviews in international business research typically are criticised on their alleged 'unscientific practices': (1) lack of proper statistical sampling coverage; (2) lack of a clear-cut procedure of verification and hence the problem of reliability; (3) 'interviewer's effects' on the data collection process. Let me deal with each of these misplaced criticisms. First, statistical sampling coverage is not a key element in assessing the success of international business research because very often, a comprehensive population frame from which individual firms are sampled is simply not available. This happens when most existing population frames (e.g. business directories and government census listings) are restricted by their national boundaries. Most international business firms, however, have cross-border operations that stretch beyond the confines of any directories or listings. One consequence of this peculiarity of international business is that statistical representation becomes a rather meaningless measurement of the reliability of research. Validity issues emerge at the forefront of international business research and I would argue that these issues are much better resolved through qualitative personal interviews.

This argument brings us to a second argument for the survey method — the issue of verification and reliability. I would argue that qualitative personal interviews tend to be a more reliable source of obtaining information from international business executives. Very often, a researcher cannot be certain that a reliable set of information is secured through postal survey because the entire process of postal survey is devoid of human interaction. Qualitative personal interviews, on the other hand, give the researcher a much better impression of the processes in which business executives offer their experience and viewpoints. Therefore, "when carefully administered, [qualitative personal interviews] may offer greater accuracy and validity because it allows a more comprehensive and detailed elucidation of the interplay among strategy, history, and circumstances. By contrast, the standardized survey instrument must necessarily standardize and simplify a complex reality" (Schoenberger, 1991, p. 11).

Up to this point, nevertheless, critics would raise another argument on 'interviewer's effects' on the research process. This argument, in my view, is a matter of value judgement; it depends on whether a researcher believes that there is no objective research. In the practice of international business research, my experience shows that we need to be as much concerned with how business executives feel and think, as what their businesses are about. Factual questions are no doubt important in the final analysis; but the mind-
set of business executives is as critical in the understanding of their actual behaviour and decision makings. After all in an era of global capitalism, the business world has been transformed into a much messier and complicated economic landscape than a century ago. It is absurd to assume contemporary business executives manage their operations in a standardised manner. This messy nature of international business activities further reinforces the need for a closer and more personal approach to research. For example, in an interview with the Managing Director for Southeast Asia (also a founding shareholder) of a Hong Kong-based listed service company in Singapore, I was treated with much suspicion and distrust at the beginning of the interview. But after several attempts to explain the research background, my academic affiliation and the confidentiality of information collected, I was able to build up a stronger trust and rapport with the British expatriate who later offered me a detailed and sensitive personal history on how he came about founding the parent company in Hong Kong with two ex-colleagues and how his application for a permanent resident was rejected by the Singapore Government during the early 1980s when the Hong Kong-based company first internationalised its operations into the Southeast Asian region. The interview went into hours of discussion on how personal feelings and business connections were intermingled with objective corporate strategy in the company’s Southeast Asian operations. I suspect any postal survey can achieve qualitative information of comparable depth and details. Another precondition to overcome ‘interviewer’s effects’ can be achieved when all interviews are conducted by very limited number of interviewers, preferably only the researcher himself or herself. Consistency is therefore the key to minimise ‘interviewer’s effects’.

Besides, the qualitative personal interview method has an added advantage of getting ‘bonuses’ in the form of extra company materials and additional contacts. This advantage, untapped in the postal survey method, is perhaps quite important in international business research because a rich source of information is contained in these published (e.g. annual reports) and unpublished (e.g. company brochures and profiles) materials. Some researchers in organisational studies have recommended an analysis of secondary documents and data (Forster, 1994). Getting additional contacts is equally helpful in international business research because we are often concerned with headquarters and their relationships with subsidiaries, affiliates, representative offices and subcontractors. In my study, I was able to obtain several privileged contacts through some generous top executives from parent companies. When I embarked on field interviews in the ASEAN region, these contacts proved to be exceptionally useful in gaining both access to and trust from some otherwise unreachable local executives.

Next, I seized on every possible opportunity to secure interviews and information. I took advantage of my local expertise and acquaintance with both Hong Kong and the ASEAN region, especially Singapore. Through local connections, I was able to construct detailed case studies of several Hong Kong companies and their ASEAN operations. By virtue of my resident status
in Hong Kong and Singapore, I was particularly aware of the language and atmosphere of qualitative personal interviews. Cantonese, a local dialect in Hong Kong, was used in most of the interviews conducted in Hong Kong. I also used Cantonese in my interviews with several Hong Kong executives managing overseas subsidiaries in the ASEAN region. This linguistic advantage was critical because it enabled me a better access to both the company and the inner world of the respondent. Had it been an English-speaker, the interview might be conducted in a totally different manner and no similar information might be obtained.

Finally, I entered and left the field with much professionalism. I followed a ‘business-like’ way of approaching executives for qualitative personal interviews. Not only did I send individually addressed letters on high-quality letterheads provided by different research centres, I also enclosed with each letter (except for faxes) my business card to correspond my determination to talk to the addressee. This method was again very successful. On the other hand, I dealt with ethical issues in strict professionalism. My objective during each interview was to illicit as much information from the respondent as possible. I made sure that each interview was completed in a mutually-beneficial manner and there was always room for further discussion. In fact, many companies continued to send me their reports and information after the actual interviews. In return, I promised to send them, upon request, copies of the executive summary of this study. Meanwhile, my research topic was inherently sensitive and confidential because it involved financial commitment and corporate strategy. For example, I was given sensitive information (e.g. expected profitability over the next few years) by some of the largest public-listed companies in Hong Kong that made the handling of such information an extremely confidential issue.

Towards a Practical Guideline for Qualitative Personal Interviews in International Business Research

My field interview experience justifies a set of procedures that can be adopted in securing higher response rates and co-operation in qualitative personal interviews. These procedures are by no means a ‘cook-book approach’ because in the practice of international business research, one needs as much flexibility and reflexivity as rigid orthodox teachings such as most methodological texts. My guidelines seems most appropriate in the context of researching into international business in a changing and fast-growing urban fabric. Space allows me only to list them for readers to practise on their own.

Step 1: Obtain the name and address of potential respondents from existing business and telephone directories. The coverage should be as broad as possible.

Step 2: After constructing a sampling frame or one’s own research directory, dial up individual companies to reconfirm the address and addressee. If the addressee is unknown to the researcher beforehand, ask politely for the name of the top executive or equivalent person in the company.
Step 3: Print individually addressed letters on letterheads supplied by some authorities, either research centres or government departments. Each cover letter should be signed by the researcher in charge to achieve maximum trust and rapport during the first contact.

Step 4: Send these letters to a manageable group of individual respondents together with business cards if available. Business cards are very important when it comes to international business research because most respondents are high-power authorities in the companies. Having one’s business card is one good way to raise one’s status and hence reduce the ‘power gap’ between the researcher and the researched.

Step 5: After a few days, dial up individual companies to make arrangement for interviews. One must bear in mind that making appointments is frequently a very tedious and time-consuming business. But these arrangements are necessary when potential respondents are either out of town or busy with their work. Patience and perseverance are two key factors to success in making appointments, though they do not guarantee a successful qualitative personal interview.

Step 6: On the other hand, qualitative personal interviews can be arranged even though the respondent may not be free or willing. Always ask for other appropriate personnel. In my study, I tried to contact the chief executive officer or managing director in most cases. But sometimes I was referred to either other Board directors or their deputies. It is unlikely that a researcher is able to make an appointment with the Chairman because he or she does not normally become involved in an executive portfolio.

Conclusion

Qualitative personal interviewing is a social process in which the researcher interacts with the researched in an open discursive dialogue context. In international business research, the method stands out as one of the most useful ways of gaining access to top executives and their mind-sets. It appears that the advantages of qualitative personal interviews outweigh their disadvantages vis-à-vis other methods such as postal surveys and telephone interviews. Provided that most international business research deals with transnational corporations and their processes of overseas operations, qualitative personal interviews can claim to offer much depth and richness in the data collected. The method, if executed rigorously, could overcome the twin obstacles of validity and reliability in any social and organisational studies. By way of a reflexive excursion into an ongoing research into Hong Kong transnational corporations, I have brought up some issues concerning the use and success of the qualitative personal interview method. I have also suggested a set of guidelines to obtain better results from international business research in an Asian urban context. A final caveat is that my discussion by no means claims universality because it is grounded in a specific time–space context. More future methodological work is certainly required if international business research wants to gain wider recognition and currency in the social scientific discourse.
What then are the implications of the qualitative personal interview method for international business studies? First, we should be much more concerned with the depth of our explanations. Without going into philosophical debates, I would argue that many existing theories of international business offer a rather ‘hollowed’ view of the reality of international business. Let me cite an example of the so-called ‘Third World multinationals’ literature (cf. Yeung, 1994a). Most existing work in this research area has been based on western-centric economic theories, in particular the transaction cost argument. No doubt these theories are applicable in general terms such as foreign direct investment flows. Their relevance to explaining actual corporate behaviour and spatial organisation of TNCs is less significant. One of the most serious problems with these theories lies in their reliance on secondary sources of information, e.g. official statistics. What they lack is some grounded explanations of the real world of international business. In Asian developing countries, including those Newly Industrialised Economies (NIEs), international business takes a rather different platform because it is much embedded in local business networks and connections (Redding, 1990, 1991; Clegg, 1990; Biggart and Hamilton, 1992; Hamilton and Biggart, 1992; Whitley, 1992a, 1992b; Yeung, 1995). To unravel these complex processes of transnational operations and mechanisms of establishing overseas subsidiaries, we have to delve deeply into the complicated web of business and personal relationships within, between and outside these Asian-based companies. I would argue that the qualitative personal interview method offers the most promising hope to achieve such an idea in international business research.

Second, we have to accept a different world view on the so-called ‘scientific method’: statistical method is not the only scientific method in the research business. Traditionally, the scientific method poses itself as an overarching guideline for academic research. In order to be ‘scientific’, any method must be objective and replicable: the same results must be produced in repeated ‘experiments’. I raise two objections to this world view of the scientific method. In the first place, such a definition of the scientific method lacks what realist philosophers have called ‘ontological depth’. Space precludes a detail discussion of the realist philosophy (see Bhaskar, 1975, 1979, 1986, 1989, 1994; Harré and Madden, 1975; Harré, 1985, 1986). By ‘ontological depth’, realist philosophers argue that reality does not appear as a neat set of successive events; rather, reality is made up of deep and enduring structures that possess causal powers to produce and reproduce empirically observable events and activities. This philosophical argument implies that in order to explain the empirical world (e.g. international business), we need to probe into its underlying structures and causal mechanisms. In this regard, statistical methods (extensive method) are not sufficient to accomplish the task of explaining reality. They are only useful in painting a broad picture of empirical patterns. Causal explanations do not originate from statistical correlation, but they are rather a product of deeper abstraction and theorisation (intensive method). On the other hand, because human agency
possesses causal powers, human reasons can serve as causal explanations in the realist philosophy (cf. Bhaskar, 1979, 1986, 1994; Harré, 1979). Applied to international business research, I argue that qualitative personal interviews can potentially contribute as much to theory-building as any other methods.

A second objection to the traditional world view of ‘scientific method’ is that because experiments are almost impossible in the social sciences (Bhaskar, 1979, 1986, 1994; Sayer, 1992), replicability of findings is not a sufficient criterion to adjudicate the scientific status of a method. This non-replicability of findings is further reinforced by the changing contexts of research (cf. Layder, 1993) in which the empirical world is shaped by different contexts. In international business research, it becomes very unlikely that the same researcher would obtain exactly the same findings under different research contexts. Consequently, qualitative personal interviews should not be seen as utterly unscientific because it is almost impossible to achieve replicability in any research dealing with the social world in open systems. The qualitative personal interview method is thus a legitimate method in international business research.

Finally, a natural implication of my preceding arguments is that much interdisciplinary work is warranted, in this case in methodological developments. This paper has shown that the qualitative personal interview method owes much of its origin to method in social science, for example ethnography and qualitative research. Many leading scholars in international business research have already made a plea for interdisciplinary research (e.g. Dymsza, 1984; Dunning, 1988, 1989, 1993; Williamson, 1990; Buckley, 1992). The future of international business research no longer rests upon narrow disciplinary introspection. Instead, a much broader interdisciplinary approach should be the hallmark of tomorrow’s research in international business. The challenge that “the cobbler should stick to his last” should be confronted with great determinism in interdisciplinary research in which future path-breaking developments are embedded. In terms of methodological developments, international business research can learn much from the social sciences in which significant effort and heated debates have been centred around research method. My objective is not to push for a further ‘hair splitting’ that carries little relevance to what we are interested in. Rather, we have to recognise that many other disciplines have much to offer to international business research — a better understanding of the qualitative personal interview method is only one such example.

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