

When Silence Speaks: Denied Access and Knowledge Politics

A Critical Reflection on Denied Access to Chinese Care Robotics Research

Yuyun HU

School of Social and Political
Science

University of Edinburgh
Edinburgh

s2590715@ed.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This article examines denied field access to Chinese care robotics companies as a methodological and analytical resource. Over three months of attempted field entry, through cold emails, insider contacts, and various organizational gatekeepers, I received no formal research permission from any of the robotics companies I approached. Rather than treating this “failure” as mere obstacle, I argue that systematic silence, declining interest, and non-response constitute important data about knowledge politics in the care robotics field. Drawing on refusal literature (Simpson 2007; McGranahan 2016), I propose that when refusal comes from power elites rather than marginalized groups, the analytical framework must be inverted: corporate silence protects not vulnerability but hype, maintaining the separation between frontstage promotional narratives and backstage technical realities. This reflexive account contributes to methodological discussions in STS and HRI by demonstrating how blocked access itself reveals the maintenance work required to sustain sociotechnical imaginaries.

CCS CONCEPTS

• Human-centered computing • Social and professional topics

KEYWORDS

Care robotics, field access, refusal, sociotechnical imaginaries, knowledge politics, hype, boundary work, China, ethnographic methods, STS

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1 Introduction: Why Is “Not Getting In” Worth Writing About?

This article tells a story of failure. Or more precisely, a series of “unsuccessful” attempts. As a PhD student in science and technology researching Chinese care robotics, I spent over three months trying to gain access to robotics companies, yet have not received formal permission from any of them by the time of submitting this paper. According to conventional methodological

narratives, this should be the part that gets omitted or glossed over: researchers eventually enter the field, collect data, and only then have something worth writing or publishing. Denied field access is typically viewed as an obstacle to overcome, not an object worthy of analysis.

However, I want to make a different claim: my “failure” itself constitutes important data about the imaginary system of care robotics. Every unanswered email, every gradually fading interest, every indefinite silence following “let me discuss with my colleagues” are not obstacles to obtaining information, but part of the research itself.

Contemporary discussions of refusal (e.g., Simpson 2007; McGranahan 2016) primarily focus on the refusal rights of research participants (particularly marginalized groups), theorizing refusal as an act of sovereignty and decolonial practice. However, when refusal comes from power elites, such as technology companies, corporations, the state, rather than marginalized groups, the analytical framework must differ. In such cases, refusal is not the resistance of the oppressed, but the operation of knowledge politics. It reveals what kinds of knowledge are permitted to be produced, what kinds of observers are allowed entry, and how the frontstage and backstage of the technological vision of “care robotics” are separated and protected.

Gusterson (1996), after being denied access to American nuclear weapons laboratories, transformed “why won’t they let me in” into an analysis of national security culture. Ortner (2010) articulated the dilemmas of “studying up”, noting that access barriers when researching power elites themselves reflect the workings of power. My experience continues this tradition, but in a different context: I face not national security institutions but Chinese robotics companies at the forefront of global technological competition.

In the following sections, I will first explain my research design and its dependence on field access, then narrate my various attempts and their outcomes in chronicle form, and finally gives an analysis of my “failed” experiences. My goal is not to complain, but to transform personal encounters into a methodological contribution to the field of care robotics research and, more broadly, to the study of Chinese technology.

2 Background: Research Design and Field Expectations

2.1 Research Question and Methodological Approach

My doctoral research asks: How do different stakeholders imagine “good robotic care”, and how are these imaginaries practiced (or fail to be practiced)? Care robotics is a field fraught with tension, carrying grand visions of addressing population aging and labor shortages, while provoking anxieties about technology replacing human care. Within this field, multiple actors hold competing visions: engineers imagine technological possibilities; policymakers imagine industrial development; investors imagine market returns; while caregivers and care recipients, those who will ultimately live with these robots daily, their imaginaries are often least heard. Understanding the power dynamics between these competing visions requires ethnographic access.

Drawing on Actor-Network Theory, particularly Latour’s (2005) “follow the actor” approach, I aimed to trace robots from laboratories to deployment settings: observing how engineers embed care imaginaries into technical design, tracking how robots are marketed and sold, and examining how they enter nursing homes or households. This design is ambitious but heavily dependent on field access. I need to enter robotics companies, interview engineers and product managers, and observe human-robot interaction in real care settings. Without such access, “follow the actor” remains empty rhetoric.

2.2 The Specificity of the Chinese Context

I chose China because it is among the fastest-growing robotics markets globally, with the government designating robotics as a strategic emerging industry. Yet STS research on Chinese care robotics is virtually nonexistent. Existing literature comes mainly from engineering and medical fields, focusing on technical functions rather than imaginaries and power.

However, the Chinese context presents particular difficulties. Against the geopolitical backdrop of US-China technological competition and an increasingly sensitive domestic environment, my research request triggered multiple high-risk labels simultaneously: China, robotics/AI, care/medical/elderly, qualitative fieldwork, foreign doctoral student, social science research (rather than engineering collaboration). I faced a structural predicament where sensitive factors compound.

3 Chronicle of Attempts: A Series of Boundary Encounters

I will now narrate my field contact attempts in chronicle form. I chose the word “chronicle” to emphasize that this is not a linear failure narrative, but a series of boundary encounters. Each attempt let me touch a different part of the boundary and each blockage revealed a different aspect of it.

3.1 Phase One: Systematic Screening and Cold Emails

My first step was establishing systematic screening criteria. I was looking for a robot that could interact with people in both social and physical senses, not merely a voice assistant or screen interface, but one with physical form, capable of moving through space, even capable of physical contact; ideally being deployed or piloted in care settings rather than remaining at the laboratory stage; and technology not in the late stage of its lifecycle, as I hoped to observe the process of technological evolution rather than an already-stabilized product.

Using these criteria, I identified five Chinese robotics companies and their corresponding products specializing in elderly care robots. These five companies are undoubtedly leading players in the industry, with substantial funding, media exposure, and technological accumulation.

On one hand, I tried sending connection requests through Maimai (脉脉), the Chinese version LinkedIn to potential contacts; on the other hand, I sent cold emails through official channels. To maximize the chance of being taken seriously, I clearly stated my identity (PhD researcher at the University of Edinburgh's School of Social and Political Science), specified my research topic (care robotics, human-robot interaction, science and technology studies), emphasized the nature of my research (academic, non-commercial, non-evaluative), expressed ethical commitments (confidentiality, minimal disruption, respect for participant autonomy), and provided detailed materials: I prepared an elegant slide deck conveying in reciprocal terms the potential value of this research for the company, the industry, and society.

The result was as expected: five companies, zero replies.

3.2 Phase Two: Indirect Paths Through Insiders

After the cold emails failed, I adjusted my strategy, attempting bottom-up infiltration. Searching on LinkedIn, I found a robotics PhD student at Imperial College London interning at one of the leading companies I had contacted. I sent him a connection request, assuming our shared position as “doctoral students in higher education” might facilitate dialogue.

This strategy partially worked. He accepted my request and was willing to talk. In our conversation, he revealed a crucial piece of information: the product I had highly valued (a star product prominently promoted at major exhibitions and positioned by the company as their entry into the care sector) was internally considered to be “cheating investors’ money”.

This statement shook my initial assumptions. I had thought this product represented cutting-edge progress in care robotics, but the insider perspective revealed an enormous gap between the company's frontstage narrative and backstage reality. Nevertheless, this intern helped convey my proposal to “relevant people” in the department and subsequently shared the contact information of the company’s Strategic Cooperation Director.

I sent my carefully prepared materials to this director and began several rounds of communication. I explained my research purposes, emphasized academic independence, and proposed flexible participation options. From deep ethnography to one-time interviews, from on-site observation to remote exchange, I tried to offer a graduated menu of options so the company could choose their comfortable level of participation.

These negotiations, or more accurately, my unilateral persuasion, continued for some time. Then silence descended. No explicit refusal, no explanation, just no more replies. My follow-up messages disappeared into the void. The conversation simply faded away, like a river seeping into sand.

3.3 Phase Three: Expanding Scope, Lowering Standards

After being blocked at leading companies, I adjusted my strategy again: expanding contact range, relaxing screening criteria. I began approaching smaller companies, more recently established startups, trying to find entry points from different positions in the industry. This phase produced two particularly illuminating cases.

Case One: A Major Appliance Company's Incubated Startup

The first case came from a startup founded just over a year ago, incubated by one of China's largest home appliance conglomerates. Within less than nine months of establishment, this company released its first "market-ready product": a health management robot for home use. It was wheeled, with a robotic arm capable of physical interaction, claimed to move autonomously through the home and sense its environment, understand user commands and emotions through voice and multimodal interaction, actively monitor health data and provide health management (such as medication reminders, chronic disease management, and cognitive training), and form closed-loop support in conjunction with professional medical services.

What excited me was this company's marketing strategy: they claimed that more than 100 units were sold within the first few days of release and announced the establishment of a special program, aiming to let the first thousand user households purchase the robot at a low price and "co-create" this technology with the company. The word "Co-creation" made me see an opportunity. I thought, shouldn't a company promising to co-build technology with users be open to social science research aimed at understanding user experience? One of my research goals seemed to align with their "co-creation" promise. Perhaps I could enter these robot consumers' homes for field observation, and my findings could help them fulfill their co-creation commitment.

I enthusiastically contacted this company's liaison. Initially, she showed some interest in my research. But when she heard this was "social science research", I sensed her interest cooling. When I further mentioned needing to conduct fieldwork in user homes or interview company engineers, she completely lost interest and stopped replying to my messages.

Case Two: The Candid Overseas Marketing Manager

Another illuminating case came from an overseas marketing manager at a robotics company with a similar background. Unlike other liaisons, she displayed surprising frankness in private communication.

This marketing manager was also female woman, and she had also studied in Scotland. When we discovered this during our exchange, a sense of affinity naturally emerged: we were both Chinese women trained in the British academic system, both having experienced cross-cultural academic life, both occupying marginal positions in some sense. This shared experience seemed to lower her guard, making her willing to communicate with me in a more open way and this is something no official channel could achieve.

When I asked her about the specific details of the company's promotional claim that robots had been deployed in nursing homes, she told me directly: that was only for "promotional purposes". She also revealed an industry insider's judgment: care robots in this field "mostly aren't a solution yet". "Solution" is industry jargon referring to mature technology that can independently accomplish its design objectives in deployment settings. By this standard, most care robots don't qualify. They might demonstrate a few functions at trade shows, but cannot yet operate reliably in real care settings.

This marketing manager's view reveals a division between promotion and reality. But notably, this openness occurred in private conversation, not in any formal setting that could be traced; she subsequently did not help me gain further access to the company's interior, because in her view, the field I imagined did not exist given their company's operational situation.

4 Analysis

Jasanoff and Kim (2015, p.4) define sociotechnical imaginaries as "collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology". However, this definition less directly addresses the question: How are these visions maintained? What happens when reality and vision diverge? My failed attempts to enter the field offer one window into what may be the everyday operation of imaginary maintenance work.

Among the five robotics companies I contacted, not one directly refused my research request. What I encountered was not explicit rejection but silence, deferral, and declining interest. Whether this constitutes strategic refusal or organizational resistance or some combination is itself analytically ambiguous. What happened behind this silence, whether the request was passed upward, whether anyone discussed it, why there was no response, I cannot know. This unknowability itself is a characteristic of boundary work: it prevents researchers from distinguishing "being rejected" from "being shelved", from judging whether silence is strategy or inertia. No one closed the door, the door simply never opened.

This pattern can be understood at two levels. Internally within organizations, these refusals stem from diffusion of responsibility under bureaucratic hierarchy. When my email arrived at a company's official mailbox, the mid-to-lower-level employee managing that mailbox faced a choice: whether to pass this "high-risk" request upward? For them, not passing it on is safer than passing it on. No one gets punished for ignoring an email from an unknown PhD student, but if they pass it on, the company accepts, and problems arise later, the chain of responsibility becomes clear and traceable. The result may be organizational inaction: no one says "no", but no one says "yes" either, possibly because saying "yes" requires someone to take responsibility for consequences. I cannot verify this interpretation, but it is consistent with broader patterns of risk-averse bureaucratic behaviour.

Externally, my research request can be read as an attempt to cross between the frontstage and backstage (Goffman 1959) of the imaginary system. It crosses from the hyped optimistic narrative carefully managed for investors, the public, media, and policymakers, into reality, the daily work in laboratories, engineers' actual judgments, technology's real limitations. I cannot confirm whether companies perceived it this way, but this framing helps explain the pattern of non-response.

De Togni (2024), in her ethnographic research on Japanese care robotics, revealed the mechanisms of hype: care robots are presented by the state, industry, and media as already reliable, ready to enter the market solutions, but this narrative is a carefully constructed techno-politics of innovation, serving to attract investment and maintain industry legitimacy. Her cross-national research with collaborators (De Togni et al., 2023) further demonstrates that hype management is a universal phenomenon: professionals in AI and robotics fields must perform a delicate balance between attracting resources and maintaining academic credibility, constructing what they consider socially and ethically "acceptable futures".

My field experience allowed me to observe this production and management of hype from a different position: not as a bystander to a macro phenomenon, nor as a social scientist granted access, but as an actor attempting to cross the hype boundary who was blocked from entry. This position provides a unique perspective, precisely because I was denied entry, I could observe how the boundary is maintained.

The startup is a typical case. Releasing a "commercially viable market-ready product" less than nine months after founding is itself a speed worth questioning. They claimed to let early users "co-create" technology, which is a narrative containing all the fashionable elements of contemporary tech entrepreneurship: rapid iteration, user participation, ecosystem co-construction. I was initially attracted by this narrative, thinking the promise of "co-creation" might indicate openness to academic research. But when I explained that my research would involve fieldwork in user homes and interviewing engineers, the liaison's interest vanished.

This turning point suggested a possible contradiction between "co-creation" rhetoric and actual boundaries (though it is also possible

the liaison simply lacked authority or interest, rather than enacting company policy). The "user" the company imagines is the user as data source, whose usage behaviour tracked, feedback collected, whose "co-creation" incorporated into the company's product iteration cycle. But researchers as critical observers, even if our research might equally help improve products, are blocked from entry.

This distinction points to a broader phenomenon: the boundary management of hype. From an agnotology perspective, the function of this boundary work is managing "who knows what". Proctor (2008) distinguishes different forms of ignorance: ignorance as native state, ignorance as result of selective attention, and ignorance as strategic production. Companies know exactly that gaps exist between their products and their promotions, but they need to manage who sees this gap and how. It's worth emphasising that hype management is not merely deception. Borup et al.(2006), in their research on technological expectations, note that optimistic visions have a performative function in technology development: they attract investment, recruit talent, coordinate expectations, create self-fulfilling prophecies. In this sense, even when insiders know a product isn't a solution yet, promoting a more optimistic version is a necessary strategy for organizational survival. Therefore, which audiences see which version of the story must be carefully controlled. Investors see potential, media see breakthroughs, users see promises, while social scientists might see cracks, this last audience is unwelcome, because social science's temporal scale is the present.

My repeated contact attempts and repeated blockages were actually testing various entry points into this boundary management system: official mailboxes, insiders on LinkedIn, strategic cooperation departments, overseas marketing managers and so on. Each entry point has its own filtering logic, but together they constitute a system protecting the hype/reality boundary.

Notably, my positionality adds additional dimensions: against the geopolitical backdrop of US-China technological competition, a "foreign researcher (even if ethnically Chinese)" studying Chinese tech companies is itself viewed as a potential security risk. I am Chinese, does that mean I'm "one of us"? I completed my undergraduate and master's degrees in London and am now pursuing a PhD in Edinburgh, does that mean I'm an agent of foreign forces? I'm a social science researcher rather than an engineer, does that mean I don't understand technology and only know how to nitpick? I'm a first-year PhD student, does that mean I have no resources to exchange and am not worth taking seriously? Before Chinese robotics companies, my Scottish university affiliation is not a neutral academic endorsement but can be a geopolitical signal requiring assessment. Boundary work is thus not only organizational but also national: what knowledge can be obtained by foreign institutions, what research is permitted—these questions were implicitly answered before I knocked on any door.

Yet my complex positionality, these dimensions are not simply additive but selectively activated and interpreted in specific contexts. Positionality is not something I possess but something

constructed in each interaction. The same “me” is imagined as entirely different beings in the eyes of different companies and different liaisons. When I contacted the Imperial College London intern through LinkedIn, I assumed our “shared background as doctoral students in higher education” would be an advantageous common ground. This proved true. He was willing to share insider perspectives that no official channel could provide. But this affinity based on student identity stopped precisely at his personal goodwill, he could tell me the insider’s view but couldn’t help me gain entry, because his position in the organization was also junior, transient, unable to take responsibility for decisions. The overseas marketing manager who was willing to candidly share internal information with me, we share similar identity in some sense. This shared positionality created an unspoken understanding that made her willing to communicate more openly.

Haraway’s (1988) “situated knowledge” provides a useful framework here: all knowledge is produced from particular positions and claims to position-free “objectivity” are the illusion of a “view from nowhere”. My experience further reveals fluidity and relationality of positionality. My position depends not only on who I am but on what space I’m trying to enter and how my liaison imagines me. This construction process itself is data and reveals something on how do companies imagine a “social scientist”? How do they imagine a “foreign university”? How do they imagine “research”? These imaginations reveal the knowledge politics of the care robotics field, what kinds of knowledge are welcomed, what kinds are turned away.

5 Methodological Reflections: Implications for Care Robotics Research

My experience raises several methodological questions for care robotics research and, more broadly, for research on Chinese technology, worthy of further exploration. My analysis of these experiences attempts to show that access negotiation itself is part of the field, and blockage itself is data. A note on the limits of this analysis is, I am interpreting silence, and silence is polysemous. The same non-response could indicate strategic boundary-guarding, bureaucratic incapacity, indifference, or simple overwhelm. I have chosen to read these encounters through the lens of knowledge politics and hype management because this framing is analytically productive and consistent with insider testimony I received. But I do not claim this is the only or definitive reading. The value of this analysis lies not in proving that companies intentionally excluded me, but in showing what becomes visible when a researcher is positioned outside the boundary and whatever the reasons for that positioning.

This is not to say I’ve abandoned efforts to enter the field. Direct entry into laboratories, observing daily work, extended time with engineers remains my goal, because things invisible from a blocked position exist there. But while direct entry is blocked, the blocked position provides another perspective, revealing things that direct entry might actually miss: where boundaries are, how they’re maintained, and why they exist. When direct entry is blocked,

margins and fissures may be alternative entry points. My experience has already suggested some possibilities:

Former employees are a potential resource. The intern willing to tell me the truth privately could do so precisely because his position in the organization was temporary and transient. He didn’t need to maintain organizational boundaries like permanent employees. Former employees (especially those who have left the industry or moved to academia) may be more willing to share insider perspectives because they are no longer bound by organizational loyalty requirements.

Public materials are another resource that can be more systematically developed. Patent documents, academic papers, industry reports, media interviews, social media posts, job listings, user reviews, these publicly available materials constitute an analysable body of texts. Though most of this material belongs to the frontstage, careful textual analysis can still identify gaps and tensions. For example, how is the same product presented differently in different contexts (academic conferences vs. investor roadshows vs. user forums)? Such analysis can reveal the rhetorical strategies of hype management.

Industry/academic conferences provide limited but real observation opportunities. While conference presentations are still carefully staged frontstage, the marginal spaces of conferences such as casual chat during coffee breaks, wandering between exhibition booths, informal exchanges after sessions may produce some insights beyond the frontstage. More importantly, conferences allow me to observe competition and coordination between different companies and different technological visions, to observe how the care robotics imaginary is collectively constructed at the industry level.

Reverse contact from the deployment end is another path I’m exploring. Since I have difficulty entering from the company end, perhaps I can enter from the nursing home end. First contact care institutions that are already or are attempting to use robots, and through them understand the actual deployment situation in reverse. The advantage of this strategy is that nursing homes’ interests differ from robotics companies’; they may be more open to external research. Of course, this path has its difficulties: nursing homes involves vulnerable populations, making ethics approval more stringent; and many deployments may be only promotional, with robots not actually integrated into daily care practice.

Local academic institution endorsement is another path I’m exploring. My supervisor has rich connections and experience in other cultural contexts but is less familiar with the Chinese context, so finding a mentor at a Chinese university who is familiar with the local STS context and may have industry connections becomes a worthwhile approach. This potential mentor might become a crucial gatekeeper for my field entry.

6 Conclusion: Failure as Method

This writing tells an ongoing story, a story without a clear ending yet. I am still trying to enter the field, still adjusting strategies, still waiting to see whether certain silences will transform into responses. But regardless of whether I ultimately obtain formal access, I have already begun treating refusal itself as a finding.

Over these months, I used very standard practices from the Anglo-American academic system: cold emails, institutional endorsement, research proposals, ethical commitments. But I was knocking on an environment that relies more on personal introductions than emails from strangers, and is highly vigilant toward social science research. The result was a kind of rupture: the clearer, more standardized, more ethics-emphasizing my writing, the more the other side didn't know who is responsible for the decision to accept this request.

I did not enter the laboratories of robotics companies, but I entered another field which constituted by silence, evasion, well-meaning leaks, and careful boundary management. What this field reveals are not how robots are manufactured, but how knowledge about robots is managed and how the imaginary system of care robotics is maintained and protected.

More fundamentally, my experience invites us to expand contemporary theoretical discussions of refusal. Technology companies' refusal is less about protecting vulnerability or resisting colonial gaze, but more about protecting hype and maintaining the separation between frontstage and backstage of the imaginary system. The systematic silence I encountered reveals the operation of knowledge politics where refusals themselves are important data about the power structure of the care robotics field. They are not about what robots can do, but about what we are permitted to know.

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