

11-1-2016

## Cornet, C. and Blumenfield, T. (Eds.). Doing Fieldwork in China... with Kids! Singapore: Nias Press, 2016

Emily Chao Ph.D.  
Pitzer College, emily\_chao@pitzer.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Chao, Emily Ph.D. (2016) "Cornet, C. and Blumenfield, T. (Eds.). Doing Fieldwork in China... with Kids! Singapore: Nias Press, 2016," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 8: No. 1, Article 20.  
DOI: 10.62608/2158-0669.1340  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol8/iss1/20>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of International and Global Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact [phuffman@lindenwood.edu](mailto:phuffman@lindenwood.edu).

**Cornet, C. and Blumenfield, T. (Eds.). *Doing Fieldwork in China... with Kids!* Singapore: Nias Press, 2016.**

*Doing Fieldwork in China...with Kids!* provides testimony and reflection on the difficulties, challenges, and rewards of combining parenting with fieldwork in China. It chronicles the experiences of seven anthropologists seeking to provide for the health, safety, and educational needs of their children while conducting research and negotiating professional identities. These divided duties often resulted in questioning assumptions about cultural relativism and sometimes led to rethinking the enterprise of research.

Mette Hansen concluded that bringing children to the field influences the choice of research topic and selection of field sites and ultimately limits one's research. Her expectations of separating "work and spare time" and "public and private life" were untenable for a foreign researcher in China, in part because her family became a spectacle. In 1995, Hansen's family—consisting of herself and her husband, two daughters, her own mother, stepmother, and stepsister—was the subject of a special China Central Television program on Western families in which a film crew pursued them for a week, recording the minutia of their daily activities. Her daughters' presence in public spaces consistently drew the attention of Chinese on-lookers who were enamored with their blond hair, light skin, and green eyes.

During one field stay studying Han immigrants, Hansen's housing placement (with daughters in tow) in a local family planning office led to discussions about gender, children, and ethnic identity. Being treated not as a researcher but simply a mother with children, Hansen had relaxed, unguarded, and ultimately richer conversations with informants. Yet, she was also subject to scrutiny. Informants judged Hansen based on Chinese assumptions about gender and reproduction under the country's One-child Family Policy. With Hansen initially arriving in the field with two daughters and later having a third daughter, her third child was assumed to be a failed attempt to have a son. Multiple children were seen by Chinese as evidence of her privileged and unregulated reproduction. Her decision to send one child to a private international school was mistaken as a critique of China's educational system, and was seen to evidence Hansen's power and privilege as a foreigner.

Jeanne Shea's experience sharing an apartment with a loving, multi-generational Chinese family provided an intimate view of cross-cultural parenting differences. Shea and her seven year-old daughter regularly encountered discordant childrearing expectations. When the grandmother of the house likened Shea's daughter's behavior to that of "an untamed animal—wild, rambunctious, and undisciplined," Shea struggled to protect her daughter's freedom to engage in play. Her daughter's eating habits were criticized by her host family and her daughter's kindergarten teacher, who admonished her daughter to eat more and to eat everything she was given. Shea interprets the unrelenting attentiveness to her daughter's eating, health, and socialization as expressing middle-class concerns with raising the quality or *suzhi* of children in a competitive urban Chinese setting.

Although Denise Glover was willing to experiment with Tibetan remedies for her own illness, she lost her ability to be a cultural relativist when confronted with her one-year-old son's health crisis. Her article debates the struggle between "being a cultural being oneself" while striving to be "an open-minded anthropologist accepting of local healing customs." Like Glover, Tami Blumenfield and Candice Cornet conducted fieldwork in China without their spouses. Drawing on her experiences, Blumenfield suggests how to integrate children into research, create educational projects for children in the field, prepare children for travel, and

facilitate reentry to home countries. Another chapter by Blumenfield is devoted to practical information on packing and preparations, health considerations, childcare cost, language and educational options, and special needs and sensitivities.

For Blumenfield and Cornet, parenting in the field required flexibility, but they reached limits of their cultural adaptability in cases of health and safety. Cornet initially lets her children join other children in a local river on a hot day but reverses her decision after her daughter reports that a boy defecated in the river. In Shenyang, Cornet verified pollution levels before permitting her children to play outdoors. Blumenfield sadly, but firmly, prohibited her children from touching flea-infested farm animals. Cornet's account, perhaps the most personal of the group, chronicles her experiences as a single, unmarried fieldworker, a pregnant anthropologist, a mother of a single child, then a divorced mother of two children. For Cornet, discussion and questions about her own marital and reproductive trajectory yielded rich data about Dong perceptions of reproduction, parenting, and marriage.

If having children in the field posed substantial challenges, so too did they create benefits. Chapters by Blumenfield and Eriberto Lozada focus on the unforeseen research opportunities precipitated by bringing children along into the field. Blumenfield gained access to information on Na childbirth, parental childrearing philosophies, and the household role of children. The presence of Lozada's wife and son enabled in-depth interactions with a knowledgeable widow and a group of young teenage girls. The absence of his family might otherwise have made Lozada vulnerable to suspicions of sexually inappropriate liaisons.

The Swain and Swain chapter alternates mother and daughter dialogue about being in the field. This co-authored piece was inspired by a genre of feminist anthropology that scrutinizes researcher/researched positionality in fieldwork, power exerted during research, and the politics of academic representation and writing. Margaret Swain emphasizes how children are partners in knowledge production and thus should be given attribution. Anthropologist Swain apologizes for erasing her daughter's presence in earlier anthropological accounts and lists her as co-author. Melissa Swain seems more agnostic: "I do not stake a claim one way or the other about naming myself as co-researcher. I still think that's your job, Mom, which is perhaps telling." True to its name, this book is a collection of personal reflections on doing fieldwork with children and the distinctive challenges anthropologists face as researchers who are simultaneously parents. The authors agree that bringing children to the field humanizes the researcher, making her/him less "other" by being visibly embedded in a kinship network and in parenting, a parallel project to that undertaken by many of their informants. As parents, the authors also agree that their children's presence provided enhanced access to particular kinds of conversations about reproduction, children, and parenting—although these benefits do not speak to anthropologists who may not be interested in such topics. The book raised questions for this reader about gender inequality, hidden labor, and attribution in ethnographic publishing.

Most of the authors, women who conducted research without the support of partners, discuss the difficulties and responsibilities entailed by bringing children to the field. Yet they do not question the feminized labor of parenting and only touch on the double-duty faced by female anthropologists accompanied by children. Ironically, it is the one male anthropologist, Lozada, who notes, drawing on Susan Frohlick's insight, how as a "fieldworking father," he was not subjected to the "double burden" experienced by women in the field of having to conduct field work while simultaneously providing primary childcare. In contrast, female researchers, he notes, were both anomalies as researchers and subject to gendered conceptions of work and family. Whereas Lozada experienced only positive responses to his fatherhood from villagers,

and professional colleagues, Cornet's motherhood conferred a "lower status" among officials.

Cornet and Blumenfield imply the presence of children in the field leads us to realize we must reconceptualize fieldwork. Cornet proposes that children blur "personal and professional selves," and Blumenfield encourages us to "integrate our families into our lives as researchers." Such a strategy would certainly be ideal, though it sidesteps expectations at home and abroad of parenting as feminized labor. Reinventing fieldwork to assume this double burden is not persuasive as an emancipatory solution for female anthropologists. For most of these anthropologists, women parenting alone, research was considerably more labor intensive. The two researchers who did not experience this, Lozada and Hansen, worked out arrangements for spouses to undertake childcare and domestic responsibilities while in the field. Lozada's wife took on childcare and household duties at his field site in exchange for him doing the same when she conducted research in Korea. Hansen arranged for her spouse to take on childcare and cooking during her research. Hence, labor issues did not factor into the parenting and fieldwork combination for Lozada and Hansen because the onerous burden of childcare and domestic labor had been offset by others. Familial and/or societal flexibility with respect to shared parenting would seem important to mention here.

Another proposal by Swain and Lozada opines that children be included in research and recognized as co-producers of knowledge. Lozada's son Patrick (about seven), who helped his father take photographs and whose missteps inadvertently led to the discovery of ethnographic insights, is credited as co-authoring the chapter as a research assistant. Yet, the co-authored article is written from the senior Lozada's perspective, and the younger Lozada's voice or authorial views rarely appear. Incongruent with the goal of acknowledging shared research, Lozada's wife, Rebecca, a trained anthropologist who ran the household, home-schooled her step-son, and enriched Lozada's research with her insights, receives no recognition as co-author or even research assistant.

As a child, Melissa Swain's "job" was to distract the guide/field assistant "Fuzzy," assigned to Margaret Swain by her host institution so she could do her "actual work." Melissa's status as co-researcher is dubious if the "actual work" (presumably anthropological research) was performed when she was otherwise occupied. Discussions of power dynamics in research and attribution made by Margaret would be more persuasive if her field assistant "Fuzzy" and key informant "Bi," described as her "co-researcher," were also credited as co-authors along with Melissa.

Overall, *Doing Fieldwork in China...with Kids!* is an informative guide for anthropologists contemplating or planning to take their children to the field. It provides the researcher with candid accounts of an array of circumstances faced by intrepid anthropologists and their good-humored children. The chapters combine thoughtful reflections and moving personal stories with valuable information and advice. The book is an engaging read for the researcher considering fieldwork in China and will be of particular interest to anthropologists electing to combine fieldwork and parenting.

Emily Chao PhD  
Pitzer College  
emily\_chao@pitzer.edu