

Embodying Research: Maternal Bodies, Fieldwork and Knowledge Production in North-West China

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Abstract

How do we come to know ethnographically? During cross-cultural ethnographic fieldwork with ethnic minority mothers in north-west China I struggled to understand the 'boundaries' of my ethnography. In this paper, I re-envision ethnographic fieldwork as a method of embodied relational engagement with a 'site' or 'space' where a multiplicity of trajectories converge (Massey, 2005). I reflect on the role the ethnographer's body plays in fieldwork, through considering how my own trajectory as a maternal body in Qinghai worked to 'centre' my fieldwork within the disparate, unbounded field. The site of my body facilitated a particular kind of cross-cultural engagement with the subjects, spaces and practices which became the focus of my research – other maternal bodies and the economic and physical spaces within which we moved and lived and mothered. Through story and analysis, this paper explores the embodied aspect of the ethnographic research process to think about how knowledge about (m)others in north-west China is co-produced through cross-cultural embodied engagements.

I HAVE heard it said that it is in fully experiencing our own bodily vulnerability that we are able to become aware of and connect with 'the Other' – whether this Other is our own failing or sick body, the natural and material world, or the social Other (Gronda, 2010; see also Naess, 1995; Plumwood, 1993). In this paper, these ideas are important as I explore my embodied experience of fieldwork in north-west China, in particular my embodiment as a mother of a young baby. I am interested not only in the way in which I began to understand and experience the *limitations* of my maternal body, but also how surrendering to this vulnerability released new ethnographic *possibilities* – possibilities which hold potential for environmental and social awareness, and possibilities which lead to a certain kind of knowledge production that draws on this awareness. Embodied vulnerability and limitations pushed me to re-think, re-theorise, and re-work my ethnography, in ways that I hope will ultimately contribute to enriching our practices of cross-cultural ethnographic fieldwork.

The Limits of the Body

The fieldwork experience is meant to be as embodied as it is cerebral. In fact, that is really the whole point of fieldwork! But as we negotiate our research planning, funding and ethics procedures, it is easy to forget that our fieldwork is dependent as much on our body as our

mind (to invoke that tired Cartesian dualism). Feminist writers have worked hard to bring the body and affect into the academy (my favourites are Gibson-Graham, 2006; Gibson-Graham & Roelvink, 2010; Grosz, 1994; Longhurst, 2001, 2008; Rose, 1993; Sedgwick, 2003), and qualitative researchers in particular hold on to the researching body as the *sine qua non* of research methods (Crang, 2003). Still, in writing about fieldwork, the body is often a taken-for-granted 'absent presence' (Law, 2004), and beyond the standard 'positionality' statement regularly trotted out, does not seem to be accorded the centrality or the materiality it perhaps warrants (Crang, 2003; Longhurst, 2001; Underhill-Sem, forthcoming). Just how dependent fieldwork is on one's body was brought home to me in my PhD fieldwork in the province of Qinghai in north-west China. In fact, it was the limitations of the body – mine and others – that led up to a crisis point in my fieldwork, a crisis which led to a revision of my fieldwork philosophy and practice.

As part of my PhD research, I carried out three fieldtrips to Qinghai between 2006 and 2009, the longest of these being a nine month stint in 2007. My husband and eldest daughter accompanied me for these trips; she was four months old for the first, and celebrated her third birthday during the last. The incidents adding up to crisis point in my 2007 fieldwork are too many to detail, but they included illness and injury (of key contacts and myself and family), physical limitations such as altitude adjustment, breastfeeding, and separation anxiety. Other limitations included those of being an 'Other' body: being clearly foreign and thus requiring supervision or escort by appropriate people in China, and also being female which restricted me to certain sections of the Muslim communities I was attempting to study. My fieldwork experience seemed to be a constant battle with the limitations of the body – especially the particular restrictions of the maternal body, which had to be shared with my infant daughter.

Vulnerability and Surrender

My first surrender to vulnerability as a mother came when I realised my husband and I could not parent '50-50' (as we had planned) if we wanted to be responsive to my daughter's needs both nutritional and emotional. It was a big shock to me that she too was a person who could communicate her own desires and needs, and an equally big shock to discover her complete dependency on my particular body. It was quite a process surrendering to the fact that I would not be separated from her for any significant periods until she was ready – a gradual process of increasing independence that lasted until around two years. I also discovered that mothering is an intensely embodied, physical job, relying on the interpretation of subtle physical cues from a small being and from myself – milk letdowns, facial expressions and body language. Carrying around a small baby, picking her up, putting her down, changing nappies, feeding, burping – it was a big change for my body to move from a desk-based job to full-time manual labour.

For my fieldwork, I was partnering with a Hong Kong-based charity that wanted some ethnographic research on rural Muslim communities, particularly women. I detailed my research proposal assuming that after my three-month Mandarin booster course in the provincial capital of Xining, I would conduct in-situ ethnographic research in one of these communities with my family present with me. However, the altitude both of the particular villages involved, and the mountain passes to be crossed to reach them, was considered too great a risk to the health of my daughter for the charity to agree for me to take her there. Part of

surrendering to vulnerability was taking the advice of the charity's medical advisors and restricting my daughter (and thus myself) to the relatively lower altitude of the provincial capital (which is itself 2000 metres above sea level). And so it was that I found myself in Xining, three months into my fieldwork, stranded without a thesis topic that I felt I could pursue. Still, I was not willing to surrender, and I continued to follow up contacts and push people to help me in any way they could to get me and my family out to an appropriate (lower-altitude) research 'site' where I could do my ethnographic thing.

Eventually the crisis came to a head a few weeks after a planned fieldtrip with a local academic colleague fell through. Seeing that I was frustrated and stressed by what I saw as my constant failure, my husband decided a holiday was in order. We packed up and headed out to the province of Xinjiang for a two-week backpacking holiday in a place that felt more middle-eastern than Chinese. Backpacking around Xinjiang as a family was just what we needed to refresh ourselves from our difficulties in Xining, but in the last week of our trip things took a turn for the worse. In the city of Kashgar, near the border of Pakistan, my husband and I fell ill with severe food poisoning. This particularly bad bout kept us holed up in a hot, cheap hotel overlooking a noisy construction site for close to a week, and continued to haunt us periodically even months after we seemed to have recovered and had returned to Xining. While coping with this, my daughter dislocated her elbow, and subsequently contracted violent gastroenteritis, probably from the hospital where we took her to be x-rayed. As my daughter was unable to keep anything down, the doctor recommended I try to breastfeed as much as possible in order to avoid the trauma of hospitalisation and an intravenous drip. It was at that point that I gave up on my fieldwork, and felt almost relieved to spend two weeks propped up on the couch, watching DVDs and breastfeeding a rather large toddler.

Starting Where You Are

As we all started to physically recover from a tough month in our vulnerable bodies, I began to consider what I was going to do with the ruins of my major fieldtrip. I thought back to some of the ideas that had been inspirational for me in starting a thesis. In changing the world for the better, I have always liked the grassroots strategy of 'starting where you are' – a concept key to second and third wave feminism (Harcourt & Escobar, 2002), Liberation and Quietist Theologies (Guyon, 1975 [1685]; Romero, 2007 [1977]), and also in the work of J.K. Gibson-Graham in transforming the economy (Gibson-Graham, 1996, 2005, 2006). I realised that although it is perhaps admirable to not give up on my research, pushing people around me to adapt themselves to my desires for a particular type of research was not exactly 'starting where I was' or changing the world for the better. I realised that I would have to give up on my prepared research proposal completely, and start again in Xining as a true beginner in order to be open to the possibilities. J.K. Gibson-Graham write:

Zen master Shunryu Suzuki reminds us that '[i]n the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's mind there are few'...[the] practice of doing weak theory requires acting as a beginner, refusing to know too much, allowing success to inspire and failure to educate, refusing to extend diagnoses too widely or deeply (Gibson-Graham, 2006: 8).

As both a student and a foreigner, there was little doubt in my mind that I was indeed a beginner in thinking about the economic landscape of Xining. Gibson-Graham, as 'experts' in

political economy, have to *teach* themselves to use a beginner's mind. My task was much simpler: as an obvious beginner starting again 'where I was' I had to merely *allow* my 'beginner' body to become a primary resource for a rich, embodied description of the place in which it (already) moved and lived and mothered.

So it was that during my last month in Xining, I interviewed, observed and wrote notes on the people who lived around me, focusing on mothers with small children of any ethnicity. Even with this 'data' I was unconvinced about my ability to be able to write a thesis using it. We decided to pack up, suspend my enrolment, and return to our home country of New Zealand for a period of rejuvenation with our family, friends, and old places of work.

As we travelled from west to east, I noticed a curious change in the tempo and rhythms of life and mothering. I almost seemed to physically experience the changes as we travelled from Xining, to Chengdu, to Bangkok, Canberra, Sydney, Wellington then finally settling down for the year in Palmerston North. In the poorer part of Xining where I lived, many local mothers and most grandmothers planned short, wandering outings and staggered work schedules around the rhythms of babies' sleeping and eating. Nobody seemed to try to achieve too much in one day while looking after kids, and certainly very few mothers cared for their children alone in their own homes. Yet as we slowly travelled east, I felt the pressures of industrialisation and the rationalisation of time management coming to bear on me and my family. Increasingly, the rhythms of babies and the natural environment meant nothing to the ongoing clock of the workplace. Stopping in Chengdu for a few weeks, we adapted to the busy routine of a friend who managed her life as a working mum with the help of fulltime commercial day-care for her 2 year old – who ate all three meals of the day at kindergarten. This feeling of pressure increased as we stopped in fast-paced Bangkok then returned to Canberra where the parks were empty of children and the workplaces full of mothers and fathers trying to stretch themselves between the demands of home and of work (in a place where three cooked meals are not provided). All the people I knew there seemed stretched, strained and even exhausted – and I certainly did not meet any of them just hanging out in the park or on the street. It was this feeling and experience of pressure and stress that brought into relief the slower-paced, more flexible lifestyle I had experienced in Xining. I began thinking about the possibilities of doing some autoethnographic and comparative writing as part of my thesis work, in order to pull apart and analyse the things I was sensing as I moved across provinces, continents and cultures.

What the Body Knows

Meanwhile, returning to NZ was a further concession or surrender to my bodily limitations. Finally surrendering to the limitations of my maternal body and pottering away on my thesis part time freed me to explore a more embodied strategy of ethnography – I spent time pushing swings and wandering around public libraries with my almost-two-year-old, allowing myself to be aware of the social and physical spaces of my mothering in NZ – which of course brought into relief my time mothering in China. Part of my 'starting where you are' experiment was to stop trying to separate out my 'mothering' and my 'work' time, and to attempt to work within and around the rhythms of childcare as my daughter grew and changed. I became more aware of the dualistic nature of women's 'emancipation': second-wave feminists

fought hard for equality for the female body in the workplace, which is now welcomed as long as it keeps to the 'traditional' practices, rules and hours of the workday – practices, rules and hours I had studiously adhered to since beginning primary school twenty years earlier. My experiences as a mother made it increasingly clear that the traditions these work practices are built on have worked to exclude the obviously *maternal* body from the workplace – which through its potential leakiness, messiness, 'distractedness' and unclear boundaries between infant and mother, awkwardly challenges the masculinist imagination of bodies as clean, hard and bounded (Longhurst, 2001). I began noticing the 'silences' around maternal bodies in my circle of acquaintances (Underhill-Sem, forthcoming), as mothers tried to erase the traces of maternity in the workplace and the workplace in their homes through various strategies of separation.

I spent time in part-time lecturing and contract research, and also in writing notes and small pieces that tried to bring my embodied fieldwork experiences into some sort of conscious analysis. Since initially I spent a large part of my day mothering, I came to do this mostly through exploring the differences in mothering environments, spaces and practices between Xining and Australasia. These were differences that I came to act out unconsciously rather than cognitively. For example, in New Zealand, if I wanted to get something done around the house or even in a public environment like the library or in my office, I would put the baby down on the floor. Yet in Xining, I never felt right about putting my baby down on the floor or the ground, but carried her around constantly. If I needed to do something without holding her, I passed her to another person to hold while I completed the task. On reflection, I realised I had never seen a baby on the floor in Xining, and that babies were held until they could walk unaided. Or in New Zealand it seemed appropriate to allow a young toddler to urinate on the grass if caught short at the park – presumably as it was quickly absorbed into the ground and was not obvious. Yet in Xining, one would always hold the toddler over a concreted area, presumably so that it *was* obvious, and other people could see and avoid it. In Xining, it was common for children to share their food and I found myself encouraging my daughter to share her snacks when out playing, while allowing her to share in other children's snacks. Yet in New Zealand, I found myself always asking other caregivers if sharing was permissible before allowing my daughter to offer her food: here children's food is monitored through their mother or caregiver, and sharing snacks indiscriminately was not appropriate. None of these examples illustrate rational decisions I reached through careful observation, but rather embodied adaptations to the social environment I made without even thinking, just knowing it was 'right' or 'wrong' in the particular place I found myself.

Trying to become aware of small things such as this helped to bring into perspective all sorts of spatial and social differences that I had come to *embody* in the field (rather than merely 'observe'). Most of my useful 'fieldwork' notes were therefore written *after* I returned from the field and began to consider mothering practices and spaces as a topic for my thesis. This type of knowledge was quite different from what I had seen as 'fieldwork' or 'ethnography' before, and I started devouring books on autoethnography and alternative ethnographies (Anderson, 2006; Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004; Law, 2004; Tsing, 1993, 2005).

So it was that during the break from my doctoral research brought about by the limitations of my (maternal) body, I came to consider how my supposedly vulnerable and

limited maternal body also presented an opportunity and possibility for a different type of aware research. I was struck by a recent seminar given at my research centre by dance ethnographer and housing policy analyst Hellene Gronda (Gronda, 2010). She theorised that illness and disability can force us to become aware of our bodies and recognise our vulnerability, and this in turn allows us to be more aware of our environment and that which is Other. The awareness that I was cultivating through 'starting where I was' as a beginner and a maternal body was also what allowed me to be aware of 'other' spaces and practices, the ones I had begun writing about as I reflected back on my time in Xining. I started to think of my fieldwork 'site' as perhaps not a bounded community, but as my own maternal body and its interactions in the spaces I found myself.

The Possibilities of Embodied Knowledge Production

The rise of the use of reflexive autoethnography alongside traditional ethnography has been received with relief by some (who see it as honestly including the role of the ethnographer in creating knowledge) and reserve by others (who see it as narcissistic and inimical to the production of useful knowledge). Anthropologist Henrietta Moore (1996) traces these developments in the introduction to *The Future of Anthropological Knowledge*, and argues that:

Critical reflection on our practices would suggest that there are compelling moral and ethical reasons for trying to develop a modern range of anthropologies which do actually take account of the complexities and techniques of knowledge production within and between societies, groups and regions (Moore, 1996: 14).

With regards to my ethnographic fieldwork in Xining, I not only came to reflect on the complexities of the production of local mothering knowledge, but also on the fact that my very presence as a maternal body was an aid and catalyst to this complex knowledge production. It became clear as I reviewed my notes and interviews that the presence of 'Other' (foreign) mothers such as myself in the city was enough to spark thought and discussion on child-raising knowledge and practice amongst local mothers and grandmothers. This was particularly highlighted by the hours of discussions I had with a local *baomu* (nanny) who used to share with me the 'shocking' practices of other foreign mothers she and her friends worked for. These practices included putting babies in separate rooms to sleep, letting them cry alone without attempting to comfort them, forcing children to finish their meals, and so on. She seemed to feel that she could share these shocking stories with me because of the apparent 'Chineseness' of my parenting style: my husband and I seemed to do everything in the way she approved, including having our baby in our bed, practicing Chinese-style infant toileting, carrying her around, preventing rather than responding to distress and so on. My presence was as what Krebs (1999) and Chang (2008) term an *edgewalker*: in this case, one who was not quite Other in terms of child-raising because of my supposed 'Chinese' way of parenting, yet at the same time familiar with the Other and a sort of conduit to the Other.

Theorising my Ethnographic Practice

In trying to theorise my positionality as an edgewalker, a mother, and an ethnographic researcher in Xining, I found anthropologist Anna Tsing's (2005) book *Friction* helpful. Tsing

developed an ethnographic practice that allowed her to study global interconnections through a methodology of studying 'awkward engagements' between 'travelling universals'. She writes:

How does one do an ethnography of global connections? Because ethnography was originally designed for small communities, this question has puzzled social scientists for some time. My answer has been to focus on zones of awkward engagement, where words mean something different across a divide even as people agree to speak. These zones of cultural friction are transient; they arise out of encounters and interactions. They reappear in new places with changing events (Tsing, 2005: xi).

The ethnographer thus can become less concerned with delineating boundaries or communities upon which to practice ethnography, and more concerned with noting moments of friction and interactions of interest, these 'zones of awkward engagement' that tell us something about the types of beliefs or 'universals' that are present and engaging. Tsing gives the example of how 'universals' of environmentalism inspired social movements in the Soviet Union and Indonesia, and served to articulate a larger frame of reference than state-led patriotism. Once the authoritarian regime (with which this 'friction' occurred) disintegrated, in both cases, politics took off in other, multiple, directions. An ethnography of global connection would have to take notice of the universals thus engaged at that particular moment of observation.

By the time I came to do my second stint of fieldwork in 2009, I had begun to see myself as a point of friction, or a zone of awkward engagement between mothering 'universals'. The imagined Western mother was partially embodied in me by virtue of my nationality (New Zealand) and my ethnicity (Anglo-Celtic), and many Xining mothers 'spoke' to her through me. Yet because of my apparent 'Chineseness' in mothering practices, the women I talked to were able to address the deficiencies (and less often, the benefits) of 'Western mothering practices' without fear that I would be personally offended. This in turn allowed me to see certain 'universals' they subscribed to, which only became visible through discussion of the strange and shocking practices of the (Western) Other.

An example of how this worked in my ethnographic practice is my interactions with the *baomu* or nannies. Although they interacted with many foreigners and their child-raising practices, they were unable to really engage with foreign beliefs about child-raising in an environment where they are employed to carry out particular sets of instructions. For example, although finding it strange for an employer to insist that she not allow a child to eat between meals, a *baomu* would interpret this merely as a 'strange Western practice', and either obey or surreptitiously ignore the instruction. Their primary resources for thinking and analysing these practices might have been their own experiences of child-raising and their own ideas of the universal needs of children, mothers, and their families. Thus 'friction' was not created, as the beliefs of *baomu* and employer slid past each other without ever engaging. Meeting an 'edgewalking' mother/foreigner such as myself who reaffirmed many of their beliefs and experiences as mothers and caregivers provided a moment of more productive friction that allowed us to explore the relationship between conflicting mothering practices, our social environments, and our beliefs about children and mothers.

Thinking of my presence as a site enabling 'awkward engagement' was just the beginning for reworking my ethnographic practice. It also led me to rethinking my site of fieldwork too. The crisis in finding a 'site' for my fieldwork during my 2007 trip was to do with my assumption that a site has to be a physical or cultural space delimited by particular research

boundaries such as a specific ethnicity or geographical location. Instead, I began to envision my 'site' as a relational space centred around the moving trajectory of my mother-body. Here I am drawing on the work of geographer Doreen Massey, who proposes that space is a 'simultaneity of historical trajectories', or, 'the sphere of multiplicity, the product of social relations' where social relations are 'real material practices, and always ongoing' (Massey, 2005: 61, 95). If we think of ethnographic research as a method of embodied, relational engagement with a 'site' or 'space' where a multiplicity of trajectories converge, it enables us to rethink the parameters of our ethnography. In my case, it helped me to accept my ethnography as perhaps 'unbounded' and difficult to delineate. Yet although 'unbounded' it is still *centred*: in this case centred on my own embodied engagement with particular trajectories of Qinghai – the trajectories of various marginalised and minority mothers with young children.

Embodied Ethnography and Knowledge Production

So what kinds of research and knowledge production resulted from this re-thinking of my ethnographic practice? In a forthcoming book chapter (Dombroski, forthcoming), I illustrate a particular 'awkward engagement' that I was able to explore due to my particular embodiment as a mother in the field. In my ethnography, I considered my maternal body as a relational space that included the practice of mothering I engaged in daily. These practices of mothering included the practices of *ba niao* or infant toileting, co-sleeping, baby-led feeding practices, and baby-carrying/wearing practices which made me appear to local women as 'more Chinese' than the other foreigners they had come into contact with. The awkward engagement of my foreign mothering body with local mothering practices stimulated instances of conversation that not only allowed me to better understand the types of mothering beliefs my participants lived (thus producing research knowledge), but also allowed us to engage in two-way 'maternal conversation', stimulate 'maternal thinking' (Ruddick, 1989) and thus actually contribute to the continued production of mothering knowledge in Xining.

The continued production of mothering knowledge in Xining included interactions between local marginalised mothers and my 'edgewalking' maternal body which (inadvertently) stimulated these mothers to experiment with their own mothering and child-raising practices: in particular infant sleeping, feeding, and clothing practices. Xiao Shi, a migrant mother of two, for example, experimented with restricting her baby's intake of processed snacks after a particularly conflicted three-way discussion on 'foreign feeding practices' with myself and her elderly neighbour, where her neighbour spoke to 'the foreign mother' through me, insisting I write in my 'report' that foreigners were misguided in their strict feeding practices. As she and Xiao Shi questioned me on the various 'rules' of introducing solids promoted in Australia (most of which I had ignored in my own mothering practice), Xiao Shi was able to sift through this information and come up with her own experiment designed to address her 5-month old baby's constipation – thus participating in the production of new local mothering knowledge and practice.

Through paying attention to the role of my maternal body in producing awkward engagements in cross-cultural mothering beliefs and practices, I came to see how changes in mothering practices in north-west China are thus not some kind of overwhelming, irreversible 'natural' occurrence that necessarily plays out with increasing contact through globalisation.

The mothers I was able to engage with did not unthinkingly 'convert' to the practices of western modernity, whatever that is. Rather, they reveal how the discursive and material forces of globalisation are produced in specific places and specific social worlds (Liu, 2009). The mothering practices of women in north-west China help to 'make' different social worlds not just locally but globally, through the two-way awkward engagements that inspire others, such as myself, to experiment with mothering practices.

My embodied vulnerability as a mother provoked certain limitations on what I could do as an ethnographer in the field. Becoming aware of, and surrendering to, this vulnerability led to different possibilities for a particular ethnographic engagement that could only happen under these vulnerable circumstances. I would even go so far to say that this vulnerability became *the central moment* of interaction, as it was this surrender to the embodied practices of mothering that made me appear 'more Chinese', and thus become the edgewalker mother that could act as the point of friction or awkward engagement between two worlds of mothering. It was this awkward engagement that allowed myself and my participants to produce ethnographic knowledge about mothering practices in both north-west China and Australasia. Ethnographers have always known ethnography is an embodied process. However, we have been less inclined to celebrate the vulnerabilities and crises of our embodiment in the field as moments of possibility for cross-cultural knowledge production. I hope that this generation of graduate ethnographers can be part of changing that.

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Biography

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