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Family as the Sanctuary, but I Was Hiding from It

When Uncertainty and Instability Became the Everyday Reality in the Ethnographic Field

Paper proposal for the planned handbook "Accompanied Fieldwork in Anthropology", edited by Julia Koch-Tshirangwana, Judit Tavakoli & Sophia Thubauville, cp. GAA Working Group „Family in the Field" & Handbook Project "Accompanied Fieldwork in Anthropology"

This study explores the relationship between parental impact, caregiving responsibilities, and gendered familial norms in influencing the fieldwork experiences of an ethnographer. Based on my investigation of the Jain community in Malaysia, I examine the influence of my identity as a 33-year-old single researcher from China—where Confucian-influenced family values highlight filial duty—on my methodological strategies and personal experiences of "floating" (Xiang 2021). The expectations set forth by my parents regarding proximity, marriage, and career stability significantly shape my sense of obligation and subsequently affect my interactions within the field. The necessity to balance familial oversight with professional autonomy highlights the wider conflicts faced by mobile researchers tasked with navigating caregiving duties across different regions. Utilizing a blend of ethnographic case studies and autoethnographic reflection, this paper posits that the dynamics of parental control and care expectations influence both individual mobility and the methodologies researchers employ in their interactions with subjects. This discussion is framed within the extensive anthropological discourse surrounding kinship, migration, and precarity, emphasizing the profound influence of entrenched family norms on agency and belonging, particularly in the realm of transnational fieldwork.