

Writing with empathy: reflections on Tamara Jacka's Ginkgo Village



151

Jacka, Tamara. 2024. *Ginkgo village: trauma and transformation in rural China*. Canberra, ANU Press.

ISBN: 978-1-760-46641-1, 314 pp., 40€ (pbk), free eBook

DOI: https://doi.org/10.14195/2182-7982_42_9

Understanding the distant “other” — across boundaries of geography, nationality, class, and gender — has always been a tricky issue in anthropology. To build inclusive and empathetic narratives that embrace “the other” as equally human and worthy of respect, Australian anthropologist Tamara Jacka has placed “empathy” at the center of her ethnographic and life-history research in Ginkgo Village (a pseudonym). To achieve this, Jacka adopted a hybrid methodological approach that merges ethnography, historical analysis, and self-reflection. She aimed to foster an empathetic understanding of how villagers in Henan Province, central-eastern China, experi-

enced historical change in their everyday lives, presenting detailed reflexive materials on her and her research assistants’ fieldwork experiences in Ginkgo Village between 2015 and 2019.

The book adopts an intentionally non-linear structure, with the author employing fragmented episodes of daily life as entry points to interrogate broader narrative frameworks. There are nine chapters in addition to the introduction. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the village’s physical environment, demographic structure, and governance. Building on this foundation, Chapters 3, 4, and 8 focus respectively on textiles and attire, fertile land, and motherhood, fore-

grounding how rural women's gendered roles are situated within and shaped by the dual spheres of production and reproduction. For example, through Gao Xiuhua's memories of ceaseless weaving and sleepless nights at the spinning wheel, Chapter 3 reveals how women's unpaid and undervalued labor sustained rural households during collectivization. The remaining chapters (2, 5, 6, 7, and 9) examine both traditional and transforming aspects of village life through folk narratives, festival rituals, clan structures, and spatial arrangements. Chapter 2, for instance, uses ghost legends to reveal how historical collective trauma continues to haunt the village in "ghostly" form through the medium of folk narrative.

Ginkgo Village is a bold attempt to "challenge conventional notions of what constitutes 'knowledge' and of how best to build and communicate it" (p. 7). Across the nine chapters, eight stories are fictional yet rooted in actual fieldwork encounters. These stories are primarily grounded in ethnographic interviews, with only minor details — such as descriptions of fleeting moments of unease — being fictionalized. The incorporation of fictional details aims to immerse the reader in a re-enactment of fieldwork that is evocative, representative, and emotionally resonant. Additionally, the main character interacting with villagers, Laoshi, is modeled on Jacka herself, while the assistant character Li Wei is a composite of two real assistants. The main body of the book is virtually devoid

of obscure terminology, as theoretical discussions are primarily placed in footnotes and appendices. As Jacka notes in a recent interview (Loubere and Jacka, 2024), this writing strategy is an attempt to narrow the gap between the researcher/writer, the reader, and the villagers by making her writing more engaging and accessible. By innovating a more accessible approach to knowledge production, Jacka aims to resist the elitism of knowledge production and strive for broader public education and empowerment.

The debate about the distance between the researcher and "the other" in knowledge production is embodied in the Reflexive Turn in anthropology. Since the 1980s, anthropologists have begun to question the depiction of the researcher as an "objective and neutral observer," starting a larger discussion about the role of reflexivity in fieldwork research and the impact of the anthropologist's position on the construction of knowledge (Rosaldo, 1993; Behar and Gordon, 1995; Abu-Lughod, 2008; Clifford and Marcus, 2010). As early as Jacka's work in 2006, reflections on identities and experience were exemplified: "It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience" (p. 12). Since experience is narratively constituted rather than empirically compiled, objective accounts alone are inadequate; empathy and hybrid writing are essential to grasp and convey experiential depth (Narayan, 1993; 1997). In *Ginkgo Village*, the statement "empathy

is a vital form of knowledge, built more effectively through storytelling than through factual analysis or argument" (p. 7) endorses this conviction, revealing the motivation for the book.

As a way of grasping the inexpressible, empathy fosters emotional proximity between the researcher or reader and the interviewee. However, it still needs to be wary of the subtle differences between empathy and projection. Projection involves an unconscious emotional transfer from one person to another, which can distort the understanding of the interviewee's experience (Tronto, 1993; Noddings, 2013). In *Ginkgo Village*, Jacka seems to face a similar challenge and acknowledges the complexities of building empathetic understanding.

In Chapter 8 (Motherhood), Li Wei (a pseudonym for Jacka's two assistants) was able to empathize and connect with Tan Zimei in a way that Laoshi (Jacka) could not. The text explicitly suggests that one reason for this failure in connection is that "Tan Zimei reminded me too much of myself at that age" (p. 227). This "age" refers to the parallel hardships faced by both Jacka's mother, Tan Zimei, and Jacka herself in relation to motherhood. At 19, Jacka's mother, overwhelmed by guilt following the tragic death of her son Tommy in a train accident, channeled her emotional distress toward her family members, particularly Jacka. After Jacka became a mother, she continued to care for her child Misha by herself despite suffering severe physical trauma

during childbirth, including a torn perineum and damaged spine. Jacka and her mother, Tan Zimei, experienced life through vastly different struggles, yet motherhood was the thread that united them. This projection guided by motherhood was so profoundly influential that it was difficult to establish a connection with Tan Zimei: "I should have done more to draw on that connection and deepen it, but I wasn't brave enough. Empathy was too painful" (p. 229).

In fact, Tan Zimei's experience bore limited resemblance to that of Laoshi. The timidity and sensitivity displayed by Tan Zimei stemmed from her past experiences of being forced into hiding and facing financial ruin. These hardships were compounded by the public humiliation she endured for having a second and third child, as she navigated the tension between traditional Chinese expectations of bearing a son and the restrictive One-child Policy. As Jacka described in *Ginkgo Village*, she grew up in a middle-class home and attended the top university in the country for her studies. She had no experience of material deprivation or the discrimination that had impacted Tan Zimei's youth. When Laoshi entered Tan Zimei's room, Jacka reflected that her bourgeois feminist brain subconsciously popped up with contradictory feelings of sympathy and contempt: "Your clothes are cheap and nasty, your house is a mess" (p. 217).

This contradiction reminded me, as a reader, that empathy sometimes can

slip into projection. As a metaphor, projection implies inserting oneself into another's situation, yet it frequently distorts rather than elucidates the other's reality by substituting the observer's own internal referents (van Dijke et al., 2020). This is closely related to what Spivak (2023) called "false representation": when intellectuals claim to speak for the subaltern, they often end up reinforcing their authority. As she wrote, "Representing them, the intellectuals represent themselves as transparent" (p. 70). Nevertheless, as D'Andrade (1995) criticized the Reflexive Turn in anthropology, infinite criticism of the possibility of representing marginalized perspectives has resulted in an excessive preoccupation with intellectual discourse, which also diverts attention from the actual lives and struggles of marginalized groups.

Debates over whether scholars can adequately represent the subaltern point to a key drawback of the Reflexive Turn: researchers risk over-reflecting and becoming overly preoccupied with their own positionality in the field. This illustrates a subtle yet notable flaw in Jacka's work. While the book offers a valuable ethnographic record of changing rural life in central-eastern China, it also reads as a personal journey of self-exploration and healing, occasionally blurring the line between analytical observation and introspective narrative. Jacka is careful not to fall into the trap of narcissism, but the risk is there, and nowhere in the book can we find reflections on the dangers of

over-reflection and excessive attention to the researcher's self.

Ginkgo Village is a highly accessible book that can be used in undergraduate and graduate courses in anthropology and China studies to introduce qualitative approaches to social transformation and discuss questions of reflexivity in ethnographic research. More than a record of rural life in China over the past decade, this book also challenges conventional modes of anthropological academic writing. By enhancing its readability, the book advances efforts to reconcile theoretical ambition with reader-friendly narrative forms.

References

- Abu-Lughod, L. 2008. *Writing women's worlds: bedouin stories*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Behar, R.; Gordon, D. A. (eds.). 1995. *Women writing culture*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Clifford, J.; Marcus, G. E. (eds.). 2010. *Writing culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- D'Andrade, R. 1995. Moral models in anthropology. *Current Anthropology*, 36(3): 399–408.
- Jacka, T. 2006. *Rural women in urban China: gender, migration, and social change*. 1st edition. New York, Routledge.
- Jacka, T. 2024. *Ginkgo village: trauma and transformation in rural China*. Canberra, ANU Press.
- Loubere, N.; Jacka, T. 2024. Ginkgo village: a conversation with Tamara Jacka. *Made in China Journal*, 9(2): 180–187.

- Narayan, K. 1997. *Mondays on the dark night of the moon: Himalayan foothill folktales*. New York, Oxford University Press.
- Narayan, K. 1993. How native is a “native” anthropologist? *American Anthropologist*, 95(3): 671–686.
- Noddings, N. 2013. *Caring: a relational approach to ethics and moral education*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Rosaldo, R. 1993. *Culture & truth: the remaking of social analysis*. Boston, Beacon Press.
- Spivak, G. C. 2023. Can the subaltern speak? In: Cain, P. H.; Harrison, M. (eds.). *Imperialism: critical concepts in historical studies*, volume III. Abingdon, Routledge: 171–219.
- Tronto, J. 1993. *Moral boundaries: a political argument for an ethic of care*. New York, Routledge.
- van Dijke, J.; van Nistelrooij, I.; Bos, P.; Duyndam, J. 2020. Towards a relational conceptualization of empathy. *Nursing Philosophy*, 21(3): e12297. DOI: 10.1111/nup.12297.

Zihan Zhao

CIAS – Centro de Investigação
em Antropologia e Saúde
Departamento de Ciências da Vida
Universidade de Coimbra
e0965963@u.nus.edu
Orcid: 0009-0005-8520-1876

