Review Section

Doing Fieldwork in Japan. Edited by Theodore C. Bestor, Patricia G. Steinhoff, and Victoria Lyon Bestor. University of California Press, Berkeley, 2004. ix, 414 pages. $55.00, cloth; $22.95, paper.

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> Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight. . . .Imagine further that you are a beginner, without previous experience, with nothing to guide you and no one to help you. For the white man is temporarily absent, or else unable or unwilling to waste any of his time on you. This exactly describes my first initiation into field work on the south coast of New Guinea. I well remember the long visits I paid to the villages during the first weeks; the feeling of hopelessness and despair after many obstinate but futile attempts had entirely failed to bring me into real touch with the natives, or supply me with any real material. I had periods of despondency, when I buried myself in the reading of novels, as a man might take to drink in a fit of tropical depression and boredom.[1]

Like the initial descent of Izanagi and Izanami to the coagulating island of Onogoro, Bronislaw Malinowski's arrival at his first field site in 1912 is the stuff of disciplinary legend in anthropology. This overwrought paragraph is emblematic because it opened an introductory chapter to his first ethnography that formulated a fieldwork methodology that remained programmatic—and problematic—for decades. We have become embarrassed by his language, appalled by some of his attitudes, but nonetheless convinced that he captured the complex emotions of vulnerability, anxiety, and uncertainty that for many of us are among the strengths of the fieldwork method, not its liabilities.

Sites and sensibilities have changed radically in the interim, but "doing fieldwork" is a gerund still much used to characterize a research method the

1. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922), p. 4.

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core of which is long-term hanging around in a particular life-world or activity sphere. Of course, this is a deceptively slothful phrasing because most fieldworkers supplement their "participant-observation" with surveys, questionnaires, formal interviews, focus groups, and archival study. This more capacious methodological mix is the subject of the volume under review. "Doing fieldwork in Japan" here embraces any research in which data collection and analytical understandings emerge from direct, extended personal engagement with particular people and places.

Of the 21 contributors, anthropologists lead (9) but do not dominate. Others are from political science (4), sociology (3), religious studies (2), legal studies (1), and history (1). For instance, the sociologist Mary Brinton dissects the highly interpersonal and often tortuous work of building her own massive data set to study the gender wage gap in "fact-rich, data-poor" (p. 234) Japan. The religion scholar Ian Reader studied Shikoku pilgrimages by riding minibuses with pilgrims, staying at temples, and stopping by travel agencies and tour promotion offices. The legal scholar David Johnson pursued the role of the prosecutor in the legal process through over 200 extended visits to the Kobe Prosecutor's Office. The political scientist Ellis Krauss spent years, off and on, in television newsrooms and broadcast studios. Even the historian Andrew Gordon, whose research was perhaps the most archival, reminds us of how the discovery and assembling of primary documents and writings and oral history testimony usually require the sensitive cultivation of complex social networks and personal relationships. Thus the first strength of this essential volume is its focus on the issues, challenges, and dilemmas common to a commitment to field research, whatever the discipline.

It is topically diverse as well. The 37 or so field sites mentioned in the text range from northern Hokkaido to Okinawa, and the people and places are a panoply of contemporary Japan: small rural communities and municipal wards, government bureaucrats of many stripes, factory assembly lines, distressed mining communities, Self-Defense Force bases, religious groups, pilgrimage routes, high school classrooms, Shibuya teenage girls, government prosecutors, research lab scientists, incarcerated leftist activists, NHK television news studios, *enka* fan groups, and more.

The volume's effectiveness is heightened by its form of instruction. It is not a didactic abstraction of research dos and don'ts, nor is it is single fieldworker's extended confessional. Rather, each author distills, with admirable candor, a few lessons from and in the idiom of his or her field experiences: prosaic and dramatic problems encountered, satisfying achievements and frustrating failures. They give us *shidō* through *hansei,* guidance by critical self-reflection. Like savvy political campaign managers, the editors have successfully kept all contributors on message—and they have produced a volume that is remarkably coherent and consistently informative. The result

is a distinctive accomplishment in our social science literature on methodology. While I studiously avoid attaching the adjective "unique" to anything Japanese, this volume is indeed unique in anthropology.

The editors have organized the contributions into four sections ("starting out," "navigating bureaucratic mazes," "asking: surveys, interviews, access," and "outsiders in insiders' networks") although most chapters understandably range beyond the section theme. Throughout, there is much practical advice to be gleaned from their experiences in arranging introductions and affiliations, in gaining access and acceptance, in struggling with language learning and use, in negotiating multiple fieldworker roles, in preserving local confidentialities, in finding effective interview techniques, in attempting to reciprocate individuals and institutions for their forbearance and cooperation, and in trying to hold to a responsible ethics of comportment and communication (Hardacre has a telling section on "When You Don't Like What You Learn," pp. 80–84!). A substantive appendix on digital resources was contributed by the third editor, Victoria Lyon Bestor. Such virtual sites are now essential supplements to the "on-site" space-time of research projects that increasingly are both compressed (a heightened sense of instantaneous connections) and extended (when I can remain in daily internet phone, email, and web contact from New Haven with my Japan informants, when does fieldwork ever end?).

The multivocal format of the volume thus replaces rigid formulas with juxtaposed alternatives. In reading through the accounts, the reader comes to appreciate the trade-offs of unstructured versus structured inquiries; of continuous long-term fieldwork versus periodic visits; of academic versus policy-oriented research; of bottom-up versus top-down (and "sideways," p. 297) approaches to a site and problem; of individual versus collaborative projects; of using or avoiding a tape recorder; of remaining in a single site versus moving through multiple sites; and of participating actively (e.g., as apprentice performer or worker) or observing passively from the margins. Students will take from the volume strategies, not recipes.

One of the broader themes across the chapters is the relative importance of chance and design in conducting fieldwork-based research in Japan. Joy Hendry and Ian Reader in particular evince the virtues (and sometimes necessity) of a radical serendipity, a kind of go-with-the-flow, seat-of-the-pants openness to the twists and turns of chance encounters. For others, especially contributors who sought access to restrictive institutional spaces such as schools (David McConnell), government offices (e.g., Glenda Roberts, Sheila Smith, David Arase, John Campbell), companies (e.g., Joshua Roth), and prisons (Patricia Steinhoff), lines of access, chains of introductions, and constant self-monitoring were imperative. Even in these projects, though, the researchers were constantly adjusting their expectations to changing circumstances, and there are multiple examples of why a distinc-

tion between chance and design is a false dichotomy. Every contributor demonstrates that fieldwork is effective only by maintaining a productive tension between pursuing what you think you want to know and being ready to meet what you never imagined you didn't know. Or as Merry White (p. 23) and others note, we must always be tacking between confirming expectations and confounding them.

Conceiving of a project is itself a combination of calculation (what you think your discipline needs at the moment) and enthusiasm (for something that will keep you interested for what can stretch to years of disciplined commitment). The cases reveal that many of the best projects present themselves as a puzzle or a provocation rather than by reasoned deduction from an analytical framework (for example, pp. 177, 249, 296, 361).

The temporal pace of fieldwork itself has frequently reminded me of the *jo-ha-kyū* rhythms of *nō* drama—the slow and stately beginnings to find and settle into a site; the long, fitful middle months of developing relationships and knowledge; and the brief, frenetic ending of nonstop activity when many things suddenly and unexpectedly come into focus. The volume helps us to understand why this is so and how this rhythm is shaped by the path of inquiry and nature of the understandings we seek. That is, for much of fieldwork, as several contributors observe, we are not looking for answers but looking for questions. We begin relatively clueless—which is not the same as being ignorant because we often do have a framework of problems and concepts and propositions that have stirred our curiosity, persuaded advisers, and gained us funding. But we must nonetheless spend a long time learning what to ask and how to ask it, seeking clues about how local knowledge is framed and learning how to transpose our original interests into mutually intelligible dialogue with what is locally meaningful and particularly significant.

This leads several contributors to the hoary questions of immersion, acceptance, and identity. Few researchers (though perhaps more nonacademic sojourners) seek quixotically to become one with local informants ("turning Japanese"), but we do endeavor to establish some mutual rapport. The understandings achieved in fieldwork are fundamentally intersubjective (even if our eventual analysis is not). Anthropology's common term for the fieldworker's stance, "participant-observation," is rather clumsy in this regard. Ted Bestor improves upon it with "inquisitive observation" (p. 317). I have always felt that the fieldworker must cultivate and practice what Kurt Singer called in another context "tense listening," a posture (literally and figuratively) of sustained but relaxed concentration, of disciplined focus and empathic spontaneity.[2] It is communication not identification that we seek in

2. Cited by David W. Plath in "Bourbon in the Tea: Dilemmas of an Aging Senzenha," *Japan Interpreter,* Vol. 11, No. 3 (1977), p. 379.

fieldwork, and I often feel we are fortunate to work in Japan, where such a modality of engagement resonates well with the situational and sociocentric terms of Japanese identity consciousness, social relations, and linguistic politesse.

Of course the researcher is not an abstract bundle of forms and feelings; we approach our field research as quite distinctively differentiated social beings. Again, this volume makes for provocative reading because it rather complicates the search for sweeping generalizations about positionality, power, project definition, ethical choices, and other qualities of research and researchers that we sometimes think to be so determinative of an outcome. Reading the many experiences together, we realize there are clear disadvantages and discomforts but also perhaps unexpected strategic advantages and disclosures to "doing fieldwork in Japan" as, for instance, a Japanese American, a female, a parent, a graduate student, an imperfect speaker of standard Japanese and/or local dialect, or a multitasking senior professor, constantly deflected from full-time fieldwork. 'I am, therefore they think' is a dangerous presumption. However, the lesson I draw from the futility of reducing one's treatment to one's trait is not that anything goes, but that our principles of inquiry are formed at and of a higher level of commitment—to a steady posture of tense listening, to continuous, critical self-reflection, to an open and honest presentation of motivation and method (to ourselves as well as to others), and to a commitment to finding ways in teaching and writing to communicate the understandings we have gained from our time in the company of others. The 3 Rs of fieldwork—resourcefulness, resilience, and responsibility—are well demonstrated by the volume's authors.

Thus, for anyone contemplating an intensive research engagement in Japan, the volume is an invaluable compendium of research reflections that far exceed the advice of any single adviser or mentor. Especially for anthropological fieldworkers of Japan, it should be a required companion to Roger Sanjek's *Fieldnotes.*[3] For any Japan scholar, the collection is also valuable because all of the authors have published books from the fieldwork they are reflecting upon here, and their accounts provide a new perspective and fresh appreciation of a corpus of publications that are at the center of our Japan social science. And for any social scientist who ponders the methodological foundations of our modes of inquiry, it is a rich set of cases, which reaffirm for me that fieldwork remains one of our fundamental grounds of rewarding research and lasting knowledge about the human condition.

3. Roger Sanjek, ed., *Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).