

## Editorial

# Fieldwork in Japan: New Trends and Challenges

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Japanese Studies is an interdisciplinary field. Research focusing on Japan's society, politics, culture, and history draws from a wide variety of theories and methods across multiple disciplines. The challenge of producing both an area-sensitive yet also academically sound study is not only a problem for scholars and students of Japanese Studies, but also for all researchers working within the field of Area Studies — who have to adapt methods developed in various other disciplines (mostly in the West) to a specific (and often non-Western) field site and research subject. In addition, new trends, topics, and tools have recently emerged in social science research about Japan. These include the transnationalization of research subjects and technological innovations that provide new means of getting in touch with informants via social media, accessing data online, analyzing data through software programs, and making large sets of data available for other researchers or the public. These new opportunities also pose ethical challenges with regard to protecting the privacy of informants, while also creating new forms of reciprocity within social media networks (Lewis 2015).

Increasing interdisciplinary and international research collaboration, the demands of funding bodies for the long-term storage and sustainable usage of data, as well as new technological tools all render the discussion of transnationalization and technological change, and their impact on fieldwork, a crucial one. In social science research on Japan, reflection on these challenges is not yet common, being often focused on individual practices rather than on fieldwork as a process and a set of practices. However, in order to produce reliable, accurate, and sustainable data, mutual reflection on how we conduct research on Japan both in and outside of the country is key. Paying more attention to ethics and transparency will enhance the quality of future research, and enable scholars from Japanese Studies and other fields within Area Studies to reach out and collaborate as equal partners with researchers from social science disciplines, and vice versa.

In response to the increasing demand for more systematic and transparent research practices in Area Studies communities (Basedau and Köllner 2007), the anthropology section of the 17th conference of the German Association of Japanese Studies (Japanologentag), held in Berlin in August 2018, set out to discuss how Japanese Studies scholars conduct fieldwork against the backdrop of

transnationalization and technological innovation — as well as the methodological challenges arising from these recent developments. Discussions on social science methods and fieldwork in Japanese Studies in Germany are rare (see Linhart et al. 1994); even within the international community of Japan scholars, only a handful of publications are to be found on methods addressing specifically the study of Japan (see Bestor et al. 2003; Aldrich 2009; McLaughlin 2010). Therefore, over two days, PhD students and senior researchers reflected across eight presentations on the conducting and teaching of fieldwork. This special issue presents six papers based on these presentations, and includes also an additional one on ethnography in Japan that was not part of the original conference. The authors address how fieldwork has changed and how they respond to challenges when accessing the field, specifically in their reciprocal relations with informants, when choosing the best means of presenting results and teaching research methods to students. I argue that a discussion about ethics, transparency, and teaching research methods in Japanese Studies and in Area Studies in general is necessary in order to produce reliable, comparable, and comprehensive results that scholars from Area Studies and from the social science disciplines alike can relate to. Thus, beyond summarizing the outcomes of the discussion in the anthropology section of the aforementioned conference, this special issue hopes to inspire further conversations within and beyond Japanese Studies communities both in and outside of Germany.

### **Fieldwork in and beyond Japan: Transnationalization, technological innovation, and ethics**

According to McLaughlin, all research in Japan is fieldwork — no matter what disciplines researchers belong to — because every scholar arriving in the country “must learn to navigate unfamiliar social protocols to see [their] project move from idea to tangible result” (2010: 1). Bestor et al. define fieldwork as “gathering information *in situ*, non-experimentally, from and about human informants” (2003: 3), and argue in a similar manner to McLaughlin that researchers from various disciplines “rely to a greater or lesser extent on field research, even if ‘fieldwork’ as such is not defined as part of a particular discipline’s methodological canon” (2003: 3). In their book on fieldwork in Japan, 21 Japan scholars share their fieldwork experiences and provide valuable insights for students and researchers on how to effectively conduct it. However, since the book’s publication in 2003 the transnationalization of research practices and subjects has, alongside technological innovations, brought about new challenges and opportunities for fieldwork — and not only in Japan.

Through transnational dynamics and mobility, studying Japan now increasingly involves research on migration and other cross-border flows that require new ways of conducting fieldwork both in and outside of the country. Japan scholars focusing on the transnationalization of cultural, social, and political phenomena face a number of methodological challenges. Studies on Japanese nationals living and working

abroad (Aoyama 2015), Japanese communities overseas (Adachi 2006; Manzenreiter 2017), migrants in Japan (Vogt 2017), or other transnational flows of knowledge, goods, food, or activism require, for example, multilingual case studies or fieldwork undertaken at multiple sites in and beyond Japan (Arrington 2016; Avenell 2015; Farrer 2015). But challenges emerge not only from transnational research topics; the research enterprise itself has become more global in nature. In addition to greater cooperation across the boundaries of individual Area Studies (Middell 2018), teams of researchers from different countries regularly study phenomena relating to Japan. This poses questions related to languages, institutional differences, and divergent ethical requirements.

Technological innovations can help facilitate (transnational) research in a multitude of ways. Technology has enabled international collaboration through online communication, the generation of “new” information, via new forms of data collection and management, and by making it possible to access the field and to publish and disseminate (preliminary) findings in various innovative ways. New technologies also pose challenges for researchers studying Japan. These require them to develop fresh strategies for research (like netnography or virtual ethnography), give rise to questions about the liability, viability, and comparability of data, create new types of reciprocity, and demand attention be given to the impact of social media on fieldwork and social networks both online and offline (Baker 2013; Danley 2018; Postill and Pink 2012).

Therefore, research ethics and the issues raised by changing research practices are of key importance. Ethical considerations related to scholarship on Japan have only been discussed infrequently within the international scholarly community (Bestor et al. 2003; Robertson 2007) — although these debates have increased since the March 2011 tsunami, earthquake, and nuclear disaster in Northern Japan (Gill 2014; Numazaki 2012). This triple disaster has changed the role perceptions of some researchers in and outside of Japan. However the resulting call for enhanced political engagement and scholar activism also raises questions about researchers’ responsibility for those being studied, and regarding the links between political engagement and the accuracy of data (Yamashita 2012). But no matter whether one is an activist scholar or not, “anthropologists and researchers using the ethnographic method must develop research practices rooted in prior consultation, cooperation, and collaboration with local communities, and must introduce reciprocal processes with tangible benefit for local communities, if ethnographic work is to continue” (Iwallyen 2007: 509).

Within this context, this special issue aims to discuss new trends and challenges with regard to fieldwork and teaching methods in Japanese Studies programs. The various contributions reflect on how scholars researching Japan conduct fieldwork against the backdrop of increasing transnational entanglements, new technological developments, and emerging ethical challenges in a transparent and principled way in order to produce reliable and comprehensive results. With regard to technological

innovations, the papers touch upon the use of social media for gaining access to field sites and informants, the role of online communication for teaching methods courses, ethnographic film and video blogs as means of presenting findings, and the relationship between online and offline communication, ethics, transparency, and reciprocity. The transnationalization of research on Japan is discussed in articles on Brazilian migrants in Japan, the Japanese diaspora in Düsseldorf, and Japanese foodscapes in Berlin.

### **Contributions on conducting and teaching fieldwork**

The first four contributions to this special issue are devoted to personal fieldwork experiences in Japan. All of the authors concerned address how they accessed their respective field sites and maintained relationships with informants through online and offline media, alongside discussing ethics and reciprocity. Nana Okura Gagné's (2019) paper starts out with a review of the origins of fieldwork and, in order to "demystify" it, provides a definition of what fieldwork means in Anthropology. Drawing on her research about the changing dominant ideologies and the impact of corporate restructuring on Japanese workers, she discusses processes of selecting and accessing field sites. In her research, it was important to conduct fieldwork at different ones in order to connect the spheres of work and leisure — which had previously only been researched separately. Gagné stresses the importance of flexibility "in judging the situations and acting accordingly" when accessing field sites and dealing with gatekeepers. The paper also raises awareness about gatekeepers' influence on the findings of research projects, and discusses the issue of reciprocity. Gagné considers gift-giving and taking obligations to people who introduce researchers to others seriously, being essential for maintaining good relations in the long term. While she also addresses internet-based research and related ethical challenges, she strongly advocates for fieldwork in the "real world," because "meeting people in person provides unparalleled information, as this might reveal the slippage between what they write on social media and what they say in person."

While Gagné mainly focuses on the offline world, Julia Gerster (2019) shows in her own article the importance of social media for gaining access both to the field and to informants, as well as for maintaining long-term relations with the latter. She discusses how social media use affects reciprocity. While previous works on fieldwork in Japan advised researchers to "follow up every interview with a thank you, either in writing or by phone" and suggest "to write thank you letters on high-quality paper" (McLaughlin 2010: 13), Gerster stresses the significance of expressing gratitude via social networks as experienced during her own fieldwork in northeast Japan. This can include, for example, liking the informant's personal social media profile or sharing pictures. The author reveals in a very intriguing way how the online and offline worlds merge and affect social relations within the communities studied, as well as between the researcher and her informants. She also

stresses the problems that can arise from these practices when researchers or informants share information about the researcher or their ongoing investigations, either via traditional or social media platforms. She reflects on experiences with informants from different ideological camps, and on the ethical issues that arise from social media use. Gerster argues that paying attention to these issues is particularly important when conducting fieldwork with people affected by disaster, or those who find themselves in a vulnerable position.

The focus of Isabelle Meyer-Prochaska's (2019) paper lies on documentary film as a medium via which to generate data and present research findings. The article outlines the production process behind a documentary film, one that was created as part of the ethnographic project "Aged communities and active ageing — A case study of rural villages in the Japanese Alps." The author discusses how the making of the film affected access to the field, informants, and the reciprocal relationships between researchers and their interlocutors. Through fieldwork conducted in three villages with a high rate of ageing in Nagano and Yamanashi Prefectures, the film aims at offering insight into the everyday life of two protagonists and introducing the services and infrastructure provided by the municipalities for elderly people. During two fieldwork stays, cooperation with the local municipal offices proved to be crucial for gaining access to informants and to recreational activities for senior citizens. With regard to the specific situation of filming in the field, Prochaska-Meyer shows that the presence of the camera actually facilitated access to local people by functioning as a conversation starter. In addition, presenting research findings via a documentary in Japanese turned out to be a great way of providing reciprocity.

Access to the field, social media use, and reciprocity are also addressed in Chaline Timmerarens' (2019) contribution about fieldwork among Brazilian migrants in Hamamatsu. Her paper reflects on the aspects that she found key for gaining access to a multicultural field site in her anthropological research: the diversity of the research subject, multilingualism, social and other media, reciprocity, and the researcher's personality and identity. She argues that especially the latter plays a crucial role for accessing the field, as it directly affects informants' acceptance and trust of the researcher. Timmerarens also points out that the diversity of her research subject demanded more than one way of accessing the field. Finding creative and multiple modes of access (McLaughlin 2010: 8, 9) were crucial to her research. In order to achieve this, knowledge of the languages and cultures of all the ethnic groups that she studied was necessary. The specific cultural and social contexts also affected her choice of media for contacting potential informants, and practices of reciprocity. In a more general sense, Timmerarens shows how in multicultural field sites, flexibility and the ability to take the perspective of all groups concerned are crucial in gaining access.

Teaching fieldwork methods is the focal point of a further three contributions to this special issue. This is due to the need to include methods education in Japanese

Studies programs after the Bologna Accord, and the concurrent introduction of mono-Bachelor programs on the one hand and the emergence of innovative approaches to teaching methods at many universities both in and outside of Germany on the other. Discussions have intensified on how best to teach research methods in Japanese Studies programs, on top of Japanese language classes, courses on basic skills in academic writing, and the teaching of in-depth knowledge of Japanese society, politics, economy, literature, and culture. The anthropology section of the 17th conference of the German Association of Japanese Studies provided a forum in which to exchange teaching concepts and experiences at different universities, and to further address the challenges related to teaching and conducting fieldwork. The respective authors of the contributions on teaching fieldwork all agree that related skills can be best acquired through hands-on experience. However, depending on the institutional setting, budget, staff, and time available — as well as requirements of the respective study programs — the approaches taken differ. While colleagues in Düsseldorf prepare students for their fieldwork in Japan via practice exercises in that German city, Japanese Studies students from the University of Vienna take a fieldtrip to the country itself and are included in one of the institute's research projects there. In Berlin meanwhile, students learn how to conduct fieldwork by carrying out their own research projects on the capital city's Japanese foodscapes.

In their joint contribution, Peter Bernardi, Ludgera Lewerich, and Michiko Uike-Bormann (2019) from Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf present their approach to supporting students during fieldwork in Japan via e-learning. In the BA Plus program “Japanese Studies — Cultural and Social Perspectives,” students acquire skills in qualitative research methods before they leave for Japan so as to be able to carry out research projects there. While in the country, they continue this course of study via e-learning. By combining a virtual classroom with a learning management system for documentation, this blended learning setting supports students throughout their individual and heterogeneous fieldwork phases in Japan. Bernardi et al. argue that both of these aspects — the offline introduction to qualitative research methods before fieldwork alongside online classes during its actual occurrence — are equally important. They suggest that especially e-learning and blended learning scenarios are useful tools for bridging the distance between teachers and students, and for better supporting the latter in the field.

Wolfram Manzenreiter and Antonia Miserka (2019) from the University of Vienna argue in their joint contribution that experiencing ethnographic fieldwork is better suited than studying textbooks to the obtaining of a deeper understanding of social life in an unfamiliar setting. Drawing on their experience of a field trip with students to Aso in Kyūshū as part of their education in Japanese Studies, the two authors reflect on didactic and methodological challenges during the 2019 Aso Summer Field School. The authors argue that by moving the learning environment into an unfamiliar and relatively challenging field, students realize that ethnographic research is personal, transformational, contingent, and responsive to often-shifting conditions. But, the authors also point to the difficulties of teaching fieldwork: it is

difficult and time-consuming, and often not more than one qualitative research method can be taught and hopefully mastered. The students' responses to the field trip, as presented in this paper, offer a rather positive outlook. Although they felt overwhelmed at times during fieldwork, the students also experienced empowerment through being part of the research project.

Students' empowerment and participation is also a key concern of Cornelia Reiher's (2019) paper, which introduces research and fieldwork methods education for Japanese Studies students at Freie Universität Berlin. The methods course aims to support training in research design, methods, and fieldwork both in and beyond Japan. Drawing on Berlin's vibrant Japanese foodscape, it provides students with opportunities to plan and conduct research projects on various aspects of Japanese cuisine. Students present their research results and reflections on methods and fieldwork in video tutorials posted online, via the course blog. Based on her experiences with teaching this course for four years now, Reiher suggests that in order to teach a successful methods course in Japanese Studies programs, it is important to inspire students to conduct their own fieldwork, to provide opportunities for them to actively participate in the course and decision-making processes with regard to the syllabus, and to make results visible so as to build a body of knowledge that peers can draw on. Thereby, the author hopes that the course contributes to more systematic methods training in Japanese Studies through continuity over time.

In summary, each of the contributions to this special issue demonstrates that fieldwork is an important part of studying Japan, and they all share some common themes: Social as well as other media forms play an important role in conducting and teaching fieldwork. This is true for gaining access to the field, for practices of reciprocity, and for presenting findings, but also for teaching fieldwork methods through e-learning or video tutorials. The transnationalization of research subjects and practices is another recurrent theme in the various papers — as revealed through topics like Brazilian migrants in Japan, Japanese foodscapes in Berlin, or the Japanese diaspora in Düsseldorf, as well as via the cross-border mobility of both students and teams of researchers. Thus, the discussion of the methodological and ethical challenges arising from these new trends in fieldwork, and more generally speaking in social science research in and on Japan, should be continued. The contributions to this special issue will, in this way, hopefully inspire further reflection on the conducting and teaching of fieldwork in and beyond Japan.

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