

All Research is Fieldwork: A Practical Introduction to Studying in Japan as a Foreign Researcher

研究はすべて実地調査——外国人研究者として日本で研究するための手引き

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Article summary

This is a short, pragmatic guide designed to assist researchers, particularly graduate students and other novice scholars, through initial stages of Japan-based study. All of the advice here is designed to help researchers address what they should do, how they should do it, and the long-term dividends they can enjoy through careful conduct in the field.

In Japan, all research is fieldwork.

Whether you are an anthropologist, sociologist, or political scientist documenting on-the-ground activities or a scholar buried in an archive, as a researcher arriving in Japan you must learn to navigate unfamiliar social protocols to see your project move from idea to tangible result. All research situations are different; every library in Japan has its own cataloging modes and hierarchical control of materials, all subcultures assume insider knowledge of their particular histories and specialized vocabularies, and each situation is structured by a nexus of social networks where, as a researcher who has just parachuted in, you necessarily begin on the outside, an object of curiosity and an unknown quantity. Whether or not you set out to do fieldwork, as a researcher new to Japan, no matter your field, you will

have to carry out participant observation to get a feel for the specific society of your research site, be it a band of bikers or a temple library. It is only through hard-won personal experience that one becomes familiar with the unwritten rules of any research site, be it in the “field” or within the confines of a university. This may be true of any place, but I would argue – at the risk of reigniting contentious debates regarding Japanese “uniqueness” – that in Japan the implicit outweighs the explicit in ways that are particularly challenging to foreign researchers, especially junior scholars who face these challenges for the first time.

This essay is designed as a short, practical guide to help researchers prepare to carry out their studies as foreigners in Japan. Essentially, this is an account of things I wish I had been taught before I began my Japan-based research. It grows out of fieldnotes on the research process (fieldnotes on fieldnotes, as it were) that I accumulated over the last few years while I was immersed in on-the-ground research for my dissertation. I have undertaken fieldwork and other forms of academic study in Japan for approximately ten years, much of it as a researcher attached to a Japanese university. Like all scholars in Japan, I forged connections with my research subjects and colleagues in the academy in a largely *ad hoc* fashion, and the connections I have made were achieved through a long process of trial and error. This paper could easily transform into a book-length practical guide to Japan-based research, but for now it is my hope that this list of practical tips in its current abbreviated state will help others

reduce time spent on errors as they pursue their own trials in their research.

I was fortunate to have had the chance to develop ideas that appear in this guide in an exchange with researchers at a workshop on fieldwork technique that I ran at the “Asia and Europe in a Global Context Cluster of Excellence” at Heidelberg University in January 2010. Many thanks to Inken Prohl and her students at Heidelberg for making this happen. Helpful comments from coordinator Mark Selden and from Ted Bestor at Harvard University and Sabine Frühstück at the University of California at Santa Barbara, who reviewed this article, greatly improved what you are reading now. Remaining errors and oversights are mine alone.

Though this guide is designed primarily for graduate students and other scholars coming to Japan from abroad for the first time to pursue their own research projects, some of this advice should also prove useful to veteran Japan scholars, and some of it should resonate with the experiences of a foreign researcher studying in countries other than Japan. With the aid of the advice laid out here, you will hopefully be able to transform initial, cautious acceptance into lifelong friendly connections. Most of these tips address participant observation and interview-based research, yet all should strike a chord with any researcher arriving from abroad, no matter her or his disciplinary specialty.

Information similar to that which appears in this essay is scattered throughout books on fieldwork, some of which you should read alongside this guide. *Doing Fieldwork in Japan* (Bestor et al. eds., University of Hawai'i Press, 2003) is a good place to start, in particular the chapters by Helen Hardacre (on negotiating a place for oneself within institutions and planning surveys), Andrew Gordon (on the people side of archival research), and Theodore Bestor (on following human networks, and

especially his comments on writing up). Also take a look at Roger Sanjek's edited volume *Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology* (Cornell University Press, 1990). The articles in *Critical Asian Studies* Volume 39 Number 4 (2007) that make up a special issue entitled “Politics and Pitfalls of Japan Ethnography: Reflexivity, Responsibility, and Anthropological Ethics” provide valuable insight into dilemmas faced recently by researchers in a variety of sites in Japan. All of the articles in this special issue reveal insights into practical aspects of ethnography, and Sabine Frühstück's concise concluding overview “New Conversations, New Truths” in particular provides a helpful synthesis of ethical challenges researchers face today as they engage their subjects through fieldwork and writing.

There are lots of other guides on qualitative research, note taking, and other aspects of working in the field. Unfortunately, fieldwork guides tend to be preachy, vague, and full of war stories that, while entertaining, are of limited utility to the novice fieldworker. This guide may be preachy, and it includes a war story or three, but it's not vague; in contrast to the approach taken in existing guides, I aim here to include only the most pragmatic advice on Japan-based research - what to do, how to do it, and why it's important. My aim is to provide a step-by-step approach for use by scholars embarking on the field phase of their research, as well as by more advanced researchers who seek to make the most of relationships with Japanese communities and gain entrance to the Japanese academy. I welcome additional suggestions and corrections to improve and expand these tips, and I hope that readers will append these to the “comments” section at the end of this article.

Getting started: forging initial contacts at universities and gaining the support of professors

Different researchers have different objectives. As a researcher arriving to study in Japan from abroad, you may be interested primarily in connecting to a community beyond the purview of an academic institution, you may be seeking to install yourself within a library to take advantage of its holdings, or your objectives may involve a complex combination of goals. No matter what your research objectives may be, it is likely (especially if you are a graduate student) that fostering an affiliation with a Japanese university or government or corporate institution will be a key aspect of your scholarly experience.

It is important to keep in mind that, as a visitor to a Japanese institution with no immediate plans to pursue a life-long career inside the Japanese academy, you will always begin as someone peripheral to the institution. At worst, you will be perceived as basically hitchhiking. You are asking for a ride in a strange car that will take you in the direction you want to go. The car may even take you right to the end of your journey, but the driver does not really get all that much out of picking you up. Japanese institutions and individuals rarely have financial reasons to accept a visiting foreign researcher, and we tend to be obstructive and demanding, sucking up time and other valuable resources. Occasionally, you arrive at a Japanese university as part of a robust exchange relationship wherein Japanese and foreign scholars from your home institution take advantage of each other's resources and routinely spend time at one another's schools. These situations are rare. Generally, what social capital there is to be gained by Japanese universities with the addition of international flavor can be easily outweighed by a foreign researcher's unfamiliar and occasionally onerous demands. This being the case, I'm constantly amazed at the level of sincere interest and kind assistance that most foreigners receive in Japan.

The extent to which people in Japanese

academic institutions remain helpful will depend on how carefully you conduct your behavior within them. Use your time spent as a visiting scholar in a Japanese institution to forge long-term contacts that benefit not only your own research interests but also those of your Japanese colleagues, to transform cautious formal acceptance into sincere, friendly, and long-term relations of mutual benefit.

Before you leave for Japan, you will most likely require a formal introduction to a Japanese university, research institute, or other institution of higher learning. Every major fellowship (Monkashō, Fulbright, Japan Foundation, etc.) requires an introductory letter or statement of support from a Japanese professor. Even if you do not require formal affiliation with a Japanese institution to carry out your work, academics and non-academics alike in Japan will want to know with what Japanese institution you are affiliated, so forging a connection with a Japanese university - even a *pro forma* one - is the best way to begin your work. The most fruitful introductions emerge from personal connections between Japanese faculty and their colleagues outside Japan - ideally your advisor. If your advisor does not have a direct connection to a professor at a Japanese university in your field, you should do the following. Politely ask your advisor to inquire on your behalf as to the top people in Japan working in your area, then request that your advisor contact a professor in Japan on your behalf. If this is a cold call, this connection may be made more smoothly by asking your advisor to contact one of his or her colleagues outside Japan who has a personal connection to the prospective Japanese advisor in question to make this request on your behalf. In any event, a personal request by a senior scholar made on your behalf to the professor in Japan is generally preferable to a letter or email arriving out of the blue.

Also, if such professionals are available where you study, take advantage of the expertise of librarians at your home institution before you begin your Japan-based research. Librarians in the United States and other countries who are knowledgeable about Japan will be able to facilitate introductions, provide research advice, and teach you how to use reference materials. Perhaps most importantly, they will be able to guide you in using online databases, including newspaper archives, government websites, and catalogues where you can identify materials that you wish to acquire while in Japan. Working with a librarian before you leave for Japan will save you from wasting immense amounts of time navigating Japanese library systems. Look at Harvard University's North American Coordinating Council on Japanese Library Resources (NCC) at [this site](#) to begin familiarizing yourself with available online sources.

As you prepare your applications for fellowships to study in Japan, start contacting the people you wish to meet by email and phone. I use the very handy *Writing Letters in Japanese* published by the Inter-University Center for Japanese Language Studies in Yokohama for tips on expressions to use for formal seasonal greetings and proper ways to beg people you barely know for a meeting. You may be attempting to contact a professor whose English is fluent and with whom corresponding in English is appropriate. However, you are much more likely to be getting in touch with a scholar who would prefer to communicate in Japanese. If you are intending to sit in on this professor's Japanese-language seminar or otherwise consult with him or her about work that deals with Japanese-language materials, you had better make a good first impression with a Japanese-language introduction. It is a good idea to follow up an email two or three days later with a phone call to the professor's office. Though the last few years have seen a vast jump in email use, a surprising number of people still

do not use email regularly, especially if they are older. Time is precious; call these people directly. Skype will save you enormous amounts of money. Download Skype [here](#) and look at [this site](#) to find cards that offer calls to Japan for as little as 2 cents/minute from the United States.

If possible, visit the university where you wish to study on a preparatory trip to Japan before you begin your research proper. Preliminary visits to Japan are obviously expensive, but there are ways to fund these trips. If you are a student at a university in the United States, look into the SSRC's Dissertation Proposal Development Fellowship (accessible [here](#)) as a means of getting you to Japan in order to forge the connections you will need at universities and in the field. The Association for Asian Studies maintains a fairly comprehensive [list](#) of other funding sources. The best source of information on funding to study overseas is, perhaps unsurprisingly, grad students and new faculty in your subfield. Ask these people about how they are funding their research.

Approach your first meeting with your potential Japanese university advisor with care. Arrange a time to meet in advance and bring a gift when you go - a proper Japanese *omiyage* (see below) is a good idea. Nothing over 3000 yen if you are a grad student. You should be prepared to discuss two things when you meet with this professor: 1) the professor's research, and 2) your own research project.

Be prepared to explain your research project in about three minutes. I highly recommend reading *The Craft of Research*, 2nd Edition (Booth, Wayne C. et al., University of Chicago), especially Chapter Two ("Connecting with Your Reader") in advance of this meeting for tips on preparing a short, effective description of your project to interested yet busy parties. Booth et al. recommend preparing the "elevator story" version of your research project. If you were in an elevator standing next to a preeminent

scholar in your field who expressed polite interest in your topic, how would you describe it to him or her between the first and twentieth floor? Your explanation should include 1) a basic description of the topic you study 2) the dilemma / aspect of this topic left unaddressed that you are researching, and 3) how your project will contribute to the field and your own subfield of research. You need to do this in about three or four persuasive sentences. First, hone your version of the “elevator story” in English (and/or your native language if it is not English, but you should also be able to do this in English for obvious professional reasons), and then get help from a native speaker of Japanese to render this into a form designed for maximum impact. The first impression you make on this scholar is, like all first impressions, extremely important, so it is worth preparing carefully.

Also be prepared to expand on your “elevator story” by saying something about your own academic career: how you became interested in Japan, how you were drawn to your topic, and how far along your research is at its present stage. Be ready to speak about what you envision as your final product. Will it be a paper or article, or a Master’s thesis or Ph.D. dissertation? What are your ultimate objectives – do you aspire to become a university teacher, work in government, or pursue some other career path? These are the kinds of things a potential advisor will be likely to ask you about.

In addition, prepare several (between two and four) specific questions for the professor about his or her research. In order to do this, familiarize yourself with the professor’s work. Japanese professors tend to publish a lot, so you should not have difficulty finding at least two or three recent articles (and, hopefully, one or more books). Speaking about the professor’s work (and, if appropriate, that of his or her colleagues) will indicate that you are not solely focused on yourself, and this will enable you to ask more easily about connecting to other

university resources and making yourself part of life at the Japanese institution. Ask about attending the professor’s seminar. Ask about the other graduate students in the seminar and the department and what they are studying. Ask about the library and other university collections. The more specific your questions are, the easier it will be to ask for that professor’s assistance. If you can have an intelligent conversation about the professor’s research (after reading the professor’s books and articles) you can then request to sit in on his or her seminar and to be introduced to his or her graduate students without appearing to be overly demanding.

Graduate students: Your future colleagues

If you are planning to spend a long period (one year or more) at a Japanese university or research institute, you should do your utmost to engage constructively with the people there. As a graduate student, it is likely that you will learn the most from and interact most frequently with other graduate students. It is therefore worth seeking an institution that has an active graduate student community when you are looking for a Japanese university base for your research; a decade or less from now, those grad students will be professors to whom you will send your own students and whose students may consult with or seek to study with you. Because the grad students you get to know now will be your colleagues in the years to come, it is paramount that you not only get along but that you begin to forge working relationships that have the potential to develop into joint research projects and other long-lasting, mutually beneficial connections.

Japanese professors are ludicrously busy. They tend to have enormous teaching loads and many spend eight hours or more at a time, day in and day out, in mind-bogglingly dull departmental meetings. Once you have settled in at a Japanese university, ask your advisor there to set you up with a graduate student

working in a field related to yours who is willing to tutor you. It is this student, not the professor, who will spend hours helping you read texts, showing you how to use specialized dictionaries and other sources, and teaching you how to navigate the university library. Don't be afraid to ask this student embarrassingly basic questions about work in the seminar, where to look for information, and how to use the school's resources. You will most likely not be able to bother the professor with questions like this, but someone of your generation should help you out. I remain deeply indebted to graduate students at the University of Tokyo who spent hours patiently instructing me on how to use specialized dictionaries at the Department of Religious Studies and how to find books in the Byzantine warrens of Tōdai's main library. I of course also remain indebted to professors at the University of Tokyo, but it would not have been appropriate for me to ask them for this kind of detailed assistance.

In exchange, you should offer to help your tutor and the other graduate students in your seminar in areas where your strengths lie, most likely with material in English. The academy in Japan is expanding outside Japanese parameters with increasing rapidity and even Japan-centered researchers are producing monographs with English abstracts or other non-Japanese texts. Offer to help proofread or translate your colleagues' English-language writing and help them with reading English-language material. Share information with them about developments in their field outside of Japan. This can take the form of connecting them with study opportunities in your home country, informing them about upcoming conferences and other professional developments in your field, and including them in panels at English-language conferences overseas. Politely refuse outrageous demands (such as "will you translate my Master's thesis for free?" - a request I actually received as a grad student in Tokyo), but otherwise seek to repay your colleagues' generosity by helping

them with reasonable tasks. Mutual assistance of this nature, in addition to providing you with a fantastic education, will help you forge lifelong academic connections and real friendships.

Be sure to exchange *keitai* (mobile phone) and email information with your tutor and other students. Ask if there is a departmental mailing list of email or *keitai* contact information and if you can be added to it; these lists are common, but visiting foreign researchers are generally left out of the loop. Belonging not only to the everyday life of the department but its electronic community will help integrate you into the department's events as well as conferences, news about upcoming publications, and the general social life of your colleagues. See below for more information on the *keitai* and its importance.

Administrators and librarians: people you must never alienate

While spending time at the department or seminar, get to know the administrators who run the department's daily operations. All organizations in Japan essentially operate on the assumption that everyone already knows everything about how things work; questions about how to do things or why things work in one particular way are generally greeted with dissembling or incomplete answers, and it almost never pays to ask the person who is nominally in charge about how things should be done. Whatever you do, do NOT express your (inevitable) impatience with Japanese administrative procedures, even if they reach Kafkaesque levels of bureaucratic inscrutability. You will only render things slower and more socially awkward by expressing anger or frustration. The absolute worst thing you can do in a situation like this is say something like "in my country" or "at my university," and then go on to describe some Utopian ideal that is probably mostly fictional. Keep your cool. Remember that you are there

to learn the system, not change it.

Maintaining good relations with departmental secretaries who deal with funding and especially with staff responsible for a department's book collection will yield great benefits. When you first arrive at the department at the beginning of your long stay, bring a gift that can be shared among the department staff, such as a box of cookies, *senbei*, or the like from a department store. Politely greet the staff each time you arrive at the department and get to know them by name. Be smart about this; bring them small *omiyage* if you go on trips, give them gifts on Valentine's Day and/or White Day, and get to know them as people. Good relations will open the door to requests and assistance.

Depending on the nature of your research, the written resources you require could all be neatly organized and in one location. This is a fantasy that is almost never realized in Japan, so you will need to learn 1) where the books and materials you need are kept and 2) who is responsible for the collections. Ask your tutor to take you to the library to show you how to use the catalogue system and the references, data collections, or other resources. Introduce yourself to the librarians and researchers who oversee the books you need and remember their names. This is not a bunch of random shelves; this is their domain, you are a foreign interloper, and you must tread carefully and respectfully. Basically, it is only in the United States that librarians are commonly regarded as trained professionals dedicated to providing service to any library visitor; in all other places, but perhaps particularly in Japan, librarians tend to be overseers of arcane lore who only grant access to those they deem worthy. Once the librarians know who you are and what you are researching, it will be easier for you to ask specific questions about the resources you need. In Japan, every library, even every *section* of each library, has its own culture and way of doing things that do not necessarily

correspond to what appears in a catalogue. Get to know the people who organize the books and you will learn a great deal about your subject and avoid many hours of pointless rooting around. Also, librarians in general are often overlooked as scholars in their own right; be sure to ask them about issues directly related to your research and about their own research interests, as you may find people who are untapped wellsprings of knowledge.

Outside the university: introductions to individuals and organizations

Fieldworkers in disciplines like anthropology, sociology, and political science will of course need to cultivate a site for research, but researchers of all types will be required at times to leave the confines of their host university and forge contacts in other institutions or with individuals unconnected to their regular circle of colleagues. Needless to say, it is difficult to generalize about challenges faced by foreign researchers who study the broad spectrum of human activity in Japan. However, there are a few general guidelines to keep in mind as you initiate contacts.

Introductions to individuals are relatively easy; contact the person directly by phone or email or - much better than this - ask a friend or colleague who has a connection to the person to make the introduction on your behalf. You may have in mind a clearly delineated organization that you wish to research, or you may be embarking on a project wherein you will have to identify through careful fieldwork the institutions, networks, kinship groups, and other organizations that will become the objects of your study. No matter your goal, it is important to remember that, if you are contacting an individual in Japan, that person is definitely linked to a network of other people. Assume that this network is organized hierarchically; it is incumbent upon you to learn where the individual you meet sits in this social network. Treat every introduction to an

individual as an introduction to a large organization that has the potential to affect your research as a whole. In other words, assume that the first impression you make on any one person will be reported to a network of people. Be ready to explain your research with the same level of persuasive intensity and empathy that you bring to bear on preparations to speak with Japanese professors (see below for more on preparing for these meetings).

There is no single standard that can be applied to approaching human networks, but it has been my experience in multiple situations that the best way to be introduced to a group of people or institution in Japan is through a personal connection to someone **from the middle to the bottom** of the organization's social hierarchy. Starting off relations with a group by requesting a formal introduction from the head of an institution will tend to calcify your relations with the rest of the group's members. Leaders are liable to issue orders downward to underlings instructing them to assist you in your studies. Depending on the individuals involved, lower-ranked members may resent being ordered to help you, and this resentment may be transferred (either passively or through open aggression) to you and your project. In other words, initiating connections with a group by starting at the top and working your way down may lead to constrained relations with the people who run the organization's day-to-day activities. Instead, be enterprising. Seek to become acquainted with people involved in a mid-level capacity in the activity or group that you are interested in and ask them to make introductions for you. An initial contact via a known quantity, i.e. a member who will vouch for you, is infinitely preferable to demands enforced top-down from their superiors to see that your research interests are met.

My own research has focused primarily on Sōka Gakkai, Japan's largest active religious organization. When I began fieldwork, I was

initially guided to make contact with the organization through administrators at Sōka Gakkai headquarters in Shinanomachi, Tokyo, who were specifically tasked with providing an institutional interface with the non-Gakkai world. I became close with these administrators, who were especially helpful in providing the organization's point of view, but they were most interested in introducing me to "representative" members, most of whom also held administrative posts, and who mostly recapitulated material available in Gakkai-produced sources. I was more interested in knowing about the spectrum of experience and opinion among non-elite members in local areas, about whose lives relatively little has been written. After I quickly reached the limits of what the Gakkai administrators provided to a novice researcher, I considered other ways in which people encountered Sōka Gakkai. A principal activity of Gakkai members is soliciting subscriptions for the *Seikyō shinbun*, Sōka Gakkai's daily newspaper, which is delivered each morning by devout members. I contacted one Gakkai friend who was not part of the group of administrators I had come to know at Shinanomachi, and asked him to connect me with a local *Seikyō shinbun* delivery person in the suburban Chiba Prefecture neighborhood where I was living at the time. When I received my first newspaper I also received a friendly note from the Married Women's Division member charged with delivering the paper in my neighborhood, which included her phone number. I called her, introduced myself, and asked if I could attend a *zadankai*, a "study meeting," or one of Sōka Gakkai's regular gatherings of local members. This marked the beginning of what has transformed into a decade-long connection with Gakkai members in this neighborhood, who are happy to include me in their activities despite the fact that I have not become a member of Sōka Gakkai. These members have, in turn, introduced me to their member friends and relatives who now form a national (and international) network of hundreds of

grassroots-level Gakkai adherents from all walks of life. The contacts that I have forged through my own initiative, unmediated by Gakkai administrators, provide a spectrum of experience and a diversity of opinions regarding their own Gakkai faith far beyond that which the Gakkai administration made available to me.

The advice that I would offer from this example would be to identify a node, a gathering point of activity and/or information related to the community you wish to study that includes elite and non-elite participants, and then find the simplest possible way in which to interact with community members at this node. The more straightforward your engagement, the greater the likelihood that you will meet the broadest possible spectrum of people involved in the topic of your study. The guiding question for your fieldwork engagements should always be “how can I learn about this?” By continuing to ask this question, you will be able to remain open to constantly adapting your strategies of approaching the people whom you wish to research.

How to do this: leave the library and get involved with people engaged in the activity or community that interests you. Approach this challenge with the utmost pragmatism. Ask your Japanese friends and acquaintances if they have friends or relatives who could help you. Contact people whom you have met in the past who may be able to help you. By the way, this is one of many good reasons to hang on to *meishi*, Japan’s ubiquitous name cards that foreigners are wont to discard. Do two things with *meishi* that you receive: 1) record the name and contact information about the person in your fieldnotes along with a brief description that contextualizes that person in your ongoing research, and 2) file his or her card in a folder designed for *meishi*. You can buy these folders at stationary stores like Maruzen for a small amount of money.

Rest assured that every person confronts anxiety about approaching people and asking to take part in their activities or observe their group. The best thing you can do to overcome this anxiety is be polite but persistent in contacting your friends’ friends and colleagues about your research interests and asking them for assistance. Adopt this phrase as your personal mantra: “the worst thing that happens is nothing.” If one personal connection does not yield access to your research interest, you have lost nothing. Just move on to the next potential connection. Even when it does not appear that a person is pointing you in the direction you think you may go, pay attention to that person’s responses and seemingly unrelated introductions; he or she may well be guiding you toward something you did not anticipate that is relevant to your topic, even if you cannot perceive this right away.

If you are able to make a preliminary foray to Japan in advance of a long-term research project, use part of this time to meet up with people you are interested in studying and to survey resources for your project. Even a week or ten days spent making self-introductions and asking sincere questions about your research will help prepare you to hit the ground running when you return for your longer study period. Be sure to plan your trip well in advance (two or three months) and contact the people you wish to meet by email and phone to make sure they will be there. Bad times to come to Japan for a short visit include the days just before and after the New Year, the end of March (the end of the fiscal and academic years, which tend to be mayhem), Golden Week in May, the end of summer / early fall before classes begin for academics, and *obon* in August for anyone.

When you meet initially with representatives of an organization you are either interested in studying or in asking for help with your research, there are several things you should do. Bring a gift that can be shared with multiple people (cookies, cakes, etc. all

individually wrapped in those pretty, non-environmentally-conscious ways that dominate Japan's *omiyage* culture). As in meetings with professors, prepare a short oral version of your research, only this time pitch it for a non-academic audience. Remember that you are not talking to a researcher. When you propose to study a group, you have to explain why your research will be to their benefit, even if only in the indirect sense of making their viewpoint accessible to people outside Japan. If you are talking to non-academics, you should explain why you are personally interested in the subject, based on details drawn from your personal experience. Offer this sort of explanation in anticipation of questions that will inevitably arise in this vein (see the section below on preparing a *jikoshōkaisho*).

It is a good idea to prepare a version of your “elevator story” for a non-academic audience. Be ready to talk about what you’re studying, why you are studying it, and how what you study is broadly relevant to Japanese society. Be prepared to answer questions about why non-Japanese are interested in your topic, and to discuss comparisons with similar organizations or activities in your home culture or elsewhere. Also, don’t be afraid to bring in reasons why research on the people to whom you are speaking will benefit scholarship more generally, even if they are not scholars. Take advantage of the fact that, in Japan, the scholarly profession is held in high regard by almost everyone, and that attention from researchers is usually perceived as a contribution to the social capital of a group that is the object of study.

If you are meeting with an organization’s administrators, come prepared with a few (two to four) very specific requests that are clearly related to the topic you are investigating, and be ready to make the connection clear if it is not obvious. Administrators tend to be busy and suspicious of completely unknown agents. Vague requests will only irritate them. This is

why you must always remember a useful rule that applies to dealing with institutions of all types: **the more specific your request, the easier it will be for people to help you.** There also tends to be a direct relation between the specificity of your request and how much you can ask for: **the more detailed your request, the bigger it can be.** Be prepared to ask for specific book titles, to speak to specific people by name or title, or for access to specific sites listed by name. Tell them exactly when and where you wish to access the information and how long each encounter will take. Be prepared to explain how these specific requests will aid your research and thereby benefit the organization. Also, be prepared with backup requests in case your first round is dismissed out of hand. Remember that each request is also a gateway for further requests, so even a refusal is an opportunity to expand on the relationship you are forging with the organization. In short, aim for maximum specificity in making requests to organizations.

A few more tips on forging connections within a group

- 1) Once you have cleared initial introductions and are known to members, ask about being connected to the group’s communications networks. Many organizations or subgroups will have *keitai* mailing lists, email lists or even private websites of which you may not be aware. Ask if there are networks of this nature and whether you can be added. Do not be surprised if this request is refused initially, as you will have to prove your commitment to the group. This, more than anything, takes time.
- 2) Leave the most controversial or critical issues until you have gained a high level of trust after considerable time spent with the people you are researching. Start with the innocuous and the positive, and work your way toward weightier topics gradually.
- 3) Make yourself useful. Don’t just hang around and take notes; to the extent that is practical

and ethically permissible (see below), integrate yourself by taking on responsibility within the group. The more responsibility you shoulder within an organization, the deeper your connections will be. Be prepared to volunteer to do the most basic grunt work that is perceived as undesirable within the organization. Get your hands dirty in a visible, non-complaining way. See below for more on considerations related to research ethics.

4) You may be researching an organization in which your only possible role is that of an observer, but even in this capacity you should try to the best of your ability to find a constructive place for yourself within the group. One of the best ways to gain a position of responsibility is to place yourself in the role of student or trainee where you are responsible for learning how to perform a role within the organization. Whatever it is that you're involved with, chances are most of it is new to you. Just as you would seek out a tutor at a university, request that a senior member of the group align you with a tutor, someone who can spend time with you and to whom you can easily ask blunt, idiotic questions.

Some advice in this regard: 1) Draw on your strengths, and 2) embrace field research as a chance to learn new skills. First, take advantage of your own experiences and the skills you have learned through them. I did this by supplementing my local-level research on Sōka Gakkai with playing violin in an orchestra organized by the Gakkai's Young Men's Division. I have played violin since I was a child, and I trained quite seriously as a musician when I was a teenager. Through local connections, I made contact with a Gakkai member whom I knew played in one of the organization's Ongakutai (Music Corps) orchestras and asked if I could bring my violin to a rehearsal. They let me sit in, and continued to let me participate for several years. The fact that I was not a Gakkai adherent occasionally irked some of the orchestra members, but the

fact that I was dedicated to their musical missions, that I was and remain completely serious about every aspect of the rehearsals (which included Buddhist chant and religious testimonial), has granted me the status of a permanent orchestra member. I continue to prevail upon the amazing cross-section of Gakkai membership - from disgruntled near ex-members to absolutely devoted senior administrators - who come together to play music within Sōka Gakkai.

Fieldwork is one of the best chances you will have to build a new area of expertise. When I was living with a Gakkai family in Tokyo in the autumn of 2007, I was offered the chance to join Young Men's Division members in preparing for the biannual *nin'yō shiken*, or "appointment examination." This is a comprehensive test on principal aspects of Nichiren Shōshū Buddhism, which forms Sōka Gakkai's doctrinal base. I spent weeks in late-night study sessions sequestered with young Gakkai men in which we pored over study materials, quizzed each other on Buddhist terminology, and developed a deep level of camaraderie through hours of intense training. One of the most valuable aspects of this phase of fieldwork was the opportunity it afforded to enter into a relationship of mutual responsibility within the Sōka Gakkai community. Local Young Men's Division leaders who had completed the examination shouldered responsibility for my fellow *jukensha* (examinees) and myself. They ensured that we understood the material, persevered through the study program, and demonstrated our commitment to the organization by taking the test. We, in turn, were responsible to our mentors for persevering as loyal students; contributing to Sōka Gakkai's institutional mandate to train its youth in doctrinal basics; and forwarding other priorities of the organization, including fostering deference to its leadership. By playing a valued role in the regular activities of the organization, I developed a higher level of expertise in the

Nichiren Buddhist lexicon that informs how Gakkai members interpret the world, and I was able to delve far more deeply into the lives of members than would have been possible had I stuck solely to the role of a non-member observer.

Make yourself a tool; find a role for yourself in the community that you research, and take on the responsibilities that accompany this role. Then others in the community will, in turn, become responsible to you. Keep in mind that commitment can take many forms, from full-scale membership to demonstrating one's sincerity through consistent attendance at community events. In every case, do your utmost to not only observe but take part actively.

Tips on interviews in Japan

In keeping with the idea that all research in Japan is fieldwork, no matter the disciplinary area of the researcher, tips on carrying out an effective interview should prove useful to everyone. Even if you have no intention of actually “interviewing” a subject for research purposes, these interview guidelines should help you negotiate social relations and glean information from the people you speak with in the course of your work.

1) There is no absolute rule, but in my experience the ideal interview is often with the friend of a friend. You stand to gain the most information from the close friend of one of your close friends or colleagues. The friend of a friend provides a good balance of trust and distance; you are a known quantity so the person feels he or she can speak freely, yet there is nothing really important at stake in the relationship so what he or she says does not bear too heavily on social relations. Mine the social relations of the people around you for contacts to interview.

2) When you interview someone, don't call it an “interview.” I learned this the hard way. Having

asked one of my close friends in Sōka Gakkai for an interview, I was dismayed when he reacted to my questions like a prisoner being interrogated. When I talked to my wife Lauren about this experience, she said, “Then don't call it an interview. Just ask if you can talk to them.” I've done this since and had no problems whatsoever. So, don't say you want to “interview” someone. Avoid loaded words like *mensetsu* or *intabyū* when you bring this up. Instead, tell them you would appreciate a chance to talk to them about X and ask if they could spare some time (*moshi jikan ga areba, X ni tsuite chotto ukagaitai koto ga arimasu ga*, or the like). Of course, the same rules that govern confidentiality and other ethical matters still apply (see below), but keep the tone light and everything will go smoothly.

3) Be prepared to abandon any pre-scripted questions you have prepared, even if you are intending to carry out a structured interview. The person to whom you are talking is virtually guaranteed to bring up topics and life episodes that relate to issues far more revealing than anything you thought up in advance. Also, most people realize rather quickly that they enjoy talking about themselves, especially when they come to understand that they do not have to stand in as a representative for an entire group but can instead expound on their own life history at their leisure. Nuggets of information buried in the free flow of relaxed conversation will be the gold that you will mine in the writing-up phase. You will record far more material than you planned to acquire and far more than you will ever be able to handle in writing, but the more people are willing to talk, the better.

4) If you are speaking to someone at his or her home, place of work, or where he or she otherwise regularly spends time, get to the location a half hour or hour early and walk around. Get a feel for the space the person inhabits. With the person's permission, take pictures of the interview site and the general

area to look at later as you go over your notes to reinvolve a feeling for the place, to look at when you listen to the recording to enrich the note-taking process.

5) No matter how you feel about your ability in spoken Japanese, attempt to initiate the conversation in Japanese and carry out the entire interview in Japanese. You will writhe in agony when you hear yourself speak on a recording, but keep in mind that, no matter how awkward this can be, the person with whom you are speaking will be more likely to provide an authentic response in her or his native language than in English.

6) Attempt to record the interview. Generally, showing someone a recorder, in Japan or any other place, tends to make him or her recoil in horror at the sight of it. At the beginning of the conversation (see, I didn't call it an interview), tell the person that Japanese is not your native language, that you have difficulty following the details of Japanese conversation, that your memory is not the best, or other plausible reasons you may have to record your conversation. Assure the person that the recording is for your reference only and that you will not let anyone else hear it. Do not lie about this. If you really want to play a segment of the recording for other people, you can make that request specifically. Never, EVER abrogate the terms of an oral contract. Even if you are allowed to record the interview (and very few people refuse if they are asked politely), be sure to take written notes as well to keep track of the conversation, make a note of points you want to return to during the conversation, and flag parts of the person's account that you want to focus on when you return to the recording. If you are really on the ball, you can pinpoint an important phrase in the course of the conversation and ask that person on the spot if it would be all right to replay it publicly (while preserving that person's anonymity); recorded oral consent should be enough to make this permissible. Chances are slim that you will

actually do this, but getting permission during the conversation is much easier than seeking it at a later time.

7) Do not start the discussion by launching into your questions. Begin by asking about mundane things - work, family life, the nature of the connection that brought you together. This should lead tangentially to one of the issues that you seek to discuss, which will launch you fully into the meaty part of the dialogue.

8) ...and it will be a dialogue. Be prepared to answer a lot of questions about yourself. Unless the people you are talking to are somehow involved in public life, chances are that they have never been interviewed before. You may also be the first non-Japanese person they have ever had a conversation with. This is a big deal and is something you should not take lightly. Answer their questions as sincerely and completely as tact allows but whenever possible respond by asking a question of your own. Always steer the conversation back to them. A common complaint of many interviewees is that they realize, after listening to their own recordings, that they talk too much themselves. Resist the urge to hold forth or provide lengthy explanations and instead turn every response into a question about the other person.

9) Be sure to follow up every interview with a thank-you, either in writing or by phone. Depending on the nature of your connection to the person you interviewed, you may not have his or her mailing address, but you are sure to have access to his or her telephone (probably *keitai*) number. A written thank-you on high-quality paper is optimal; refer to *Writing Letters in Japanese* for some nice examples. However, written thanks can be time-consuming and difficult to deliver or to print out, depending on your circumstances. At the very least, call the person a few days after the interview to thank him or her sincerely for talking with you. People remember these phone

calls and inform other members of their group about how you took the time to thank them. The *arigatō denwa* (as I've heard it called by several people to whom I've made these calls) is an investment in your long-term relationship with the group.

Tips on home stays

If, in the course of research, you have the opportunity to stay at a Japanese friend or colleague's home, a few tips should help smooth things out.

1) Bring a gift when you arrive, no matter what. Food and/or booze in this case could be just the thing.

2) Japan is ridiculously expensive and utilities are particularly steep. Depending on the nature of your relationship with the person with whom you are staying and their socioeconomic position, it may be appropriate to offer to defray some of the expenses your stay will necessarily incur. Unless you are very close with the family or individual putting you up, at the very least offer to leave between 2000 and 3000 yen for every night you stayed. Present the money in an envelope (NEVER give naked cash) purchased at a convenience store. You may have to wrestle them to the ground and you may not be able to give this to them, but the gesture is important.

3) Don't hang around all day taking up space. Keep busy. If you are carrying out participant observation, don't take notes in front of people. Ask lots of really obvious questions about what is going on to lead into questions about more sensitive topics.

Tips on general practices

The omiyage

No matter where you go or whom you meet, Japanese social protocol demands that you

bring an *omiyage*, a simple gift, to demonstrate your sincerity. Many people, especially novice foreign researchers, tend to put too much thought and effort into preparing the perfect gift. In general, it does not pay to over think the *omiyage*. Some people recommend bringing souvenirs with the logo from your home university and other mementoes like that. Frankly, most American and other non-Japanese universities produce pretty tacky stuff, most Japanese people don't really want things like mugs and big plastic keychains cluttering up their homes, and it's a drag for you to lug these things around in your bag. Give your recipients something they actually want - a familiar, comestible item. Go to the basement of a department store and select something in a box that costs between 1000 and 3000 yen, like *senbei* or *manjū*; if they don't like it, at the very least they can regift it, so they will be pleased to have it. In general, wine or other alcohol is a fine gift for men, especially professors, but it can be an inappropriate gift for people you do not know well. Go with something nicely wrapped, don't spend more than five minutes of your life picking it out, and don't spend less than 1000 yen (you'll look cheap) or more than about 3000 yen (you'll look desperate to please).

The meishi

Meishi, name cards or business cards, are ubiquitous forms of formal introduction in Japan. *Meishi* printed at your home institution outside Japan with nifty crests and embossed text look good, but I've found that no one in Japan reads anything but the Japanese on a name card. Include your name and mailing address in English on the *meishi*, but ensure that you have an entirely Japanese-language set made for your Japan-based research. Have them made in Japan once you arrive with your name in *katakana* and all of your Japanese contact information, including your *keitai* number. It is worth spending a little bit of money on these, i.e. not printing them by

yourself on your computer, unless you can do this with professional proficiency. All homemade *meishi* look bad. If your Japanese handwriting is truly excellent, consider writing out a few cards by hand; I've received a number of these recently and they're charming. Otherwise, most large universities will have a print shop that will make them up for you (though many will not let you use their crest if you're not a registered student) or go to a print shop like Fedex/Kinkos. Alternately, you can prepare Japanese-language *meishi* in North America (and elsewhere, probably) if you send the copy shop a photoready copy (as a pdf file) of your Japanese text. Be sure to have an educated native reader of Japanese check your text to avoid embarrassment.

When someone offers you a *meishi*, do the following: whip out your own *meishi* (make sure it is clean and unbent), offer it with two hands and bow. Receive your opponent's *meishi* with two hands, read the name carefully and then treat it with great caution; leave it on the table in front of you for a while or put it away carefully in a folder or book. Treat it like an extension of the person's body. Do not write any notes on the *meishi* while the person is present.

A note on institutional affiliation

In Japan, name values for non-Japanese universities are tremendously deflated. Outside of the academy, everyone will know Harvard and many will have heard of Oxford and Cambridge, but that's about it. Use this to your advantage; with the exception of forging relations with other academics, affiliation with famous institutions will, more often than not, create barriers rather than open doors. If regular people learn that you come from a "famous" university, they tend to struggle to say something intelligent and feel they have to place you in a special category. If you are trying to get into a library or otherwise deal with Japanese institutional hierarchies, use

your connection to your Japanese school (however nominal it may be) rather than your non-Japanese academic registration to secure the trust of mid-level librarians, and use your highest name-value affiliation (from any country) to impress the head of the institution. If you are dealing with on-the-ground research or networking with people outside of an institutional framework where you seek to foster horizontal social relations, introduce yourself using your non-Japanese academic affiliation rather than bandying about a Japanese affiliation such as Tōdai, Kyōdai or Waseda. No one will really care where you're from (unless you invoke Harvard or Oxford) and you will be able to have an ordinary conversation.

On the road

To prepare before you go:

On your computer, on flash memory, on an external hard disk, and uploaded online, have the following prepared before you leave for Japan:

Curriculum vitae *and* *rirekisho*

Prepare an updated academic CV in English and, if possible, a Japanese *rirekisho* 履歴書. Get help from a Japanese colleague once you arrive in Japan with this, as conventions with *rirekisho* in computer form are prone to change, and if anything the Japanese *rirekisho* is even more narrowly formatted than the American CV. You may find yourself applying for visiting research positions, access to archives and museums, or other opportunities that you learn about after you get to Japan. Many of these applications will require information from your CV and/or *rirekisho*.

The jikoshōkaisho

Write up two versions of a self-introduction letter in Japanese, or a *jikoshōkaisho* 自己紹介書. The first version should be aimed at fellow

researchers and should essentially be a summary of your dissertation prospectus or research plan, i.e. a one-page introduction that assumes an academic reader. The second should be an introductory letter that introduces you as an ordinary person and explains why you are interested in what you are studying. Describe where you are from, your family, how you became interested in Japan, and why you study what you study. In both cases, your letters should explain in a sentence or two the relevance of your work and the broad contributions of your project - to academic study in the first instance, and to knowledge about Japanese society in the second. Be prepared to have this document distributed widely among many interested readers. Have a few copies of the non-specialist version on hand to pass out if you are going to a meeting where you anticipate being called upon to explain your project, and be ready to supply further information in written Japanese via email or fax when this letter's recipients have follow-up questions. Get a native Japanese speaker to read and correct both versions of this introduction; even if you are a native or near-native Japanese speaker yourself, it is impossible to view yourself with the eyes of a complete stranger.

Equipment: the *keitai*

In addition to a constant flow of *omiyage* and a sheaf of beautiful *meishi*, you should make it a practice to always carry the following:

The mobile phone, or *keitai denwa*, your lifeline: You may not carry a mobile phone where you live outside Japan, but this is going to change. Don't waste any time - get a *keitai* as soon as you land at the airport in Japan, and purchase a regular *keitai* with a monthly plan as soon as you can. Information on renting phones at Narita airport is available [here](#) - they tend to run about 500 yen / day plus usage fees, and you can find mobile phone companies everywhere in Japan; DoCoMo, Vodafone, and

KDDI are among the most popular. There is little difference in price or service between the companies, but ask your friends for their advice on which company to use. Portable phones in Japan are expensive - prepare for at least 10,000 yen per month in total charges - yet they are utterly essential facts of life. Japan, especially urban Japan, is a highly mobile society, and the *keitai* is often the best way to get in touch with someone. Your contacts in the field, especially outside the academy, may never touch a computer, but they will all use their phones.

Other equipment for documenting your experiences

If all research is fieldwork, then every researcher is a fieldworker.

Even if you do not think of yourself as an ethnographer, you will benefit immensely from documenting your everyday experiences in Japan. Scholars in supposedly non-fieldwork-related disciplines like history and other archive-focused subjects routinely refer to their real-life encounters during their time in Japan in their teaching and writing. Many of these researchers include photos, videos, and other recorded episodes in their work, and many more express regrets about not having properly documented their experiences when they had the chance. Don't look back on your time spent in Japan with these regrets - be ready to gather ethnographic information, regardless of your area of expertise.

It is easy to fall into the trap of either obsessing over fieldwork gear or forswearing all things electronic, but no matter how technophobic you may be there are a few items that you should always have at hand. Always carry a notebook, a digital recorder, and a digital camera wherever you go.

Notebook

I use 50-page Kokuyo Campus lined notebooks,

A4 size. For some reason I only use the ones with the salmon-colored cover. Campus notebooks are ubiquitous in Japan, for sale at every convenience and stationary store, are almost indestructible, and cost about 200 yen each. Any more than 50 pages (100 A4-size pages) and I get paranoid about losing the notebook and the accumulated data. Because they're all the same size I can shelve them and find my raw fieldnotes relatively easily. Write in pen (not water-soluble ink), and not pencil (which smears over time).

It is also handy to have a number of A4-sized clear plastic sleeves with you at all times for keeping together the various pieces of paper that one inevitably accumulates when visiting an organization, such as pamphlets, maps, reports, and the like.

Recorder

I use a Sanyo digital recorder with built-in mic that cost about 12,000 yen in Akihabara, Tokyo about three years ago. This works fine, but it is now very dated. Better and cheaper ones are available now and external mics are available for 3000-5000 yen if you need truly superior sound quality. For about 10,000 yen you can get an IC recorder with built-in high-quality mic, at least 80 hours of memory, and a USB plug that goes directly into a computer. These are fabulous. Carry extra batteries at all times and change them as soon as the battery indicator goes down from three to two bars - losing a long interview 3/4 through is a terrible feeling.

Camera

I carry a Victor video camera with 12 hours of memory at normal quality on a hard disk. The camera also takes still shots of indifferent quality, good enough for a website or PowerPoint but not National Geographic material. Spend between 15,000 and 30,000 yen on a good digital camera for still shots. Use video if you think it will actually be useful to

you and if you are in an environment where standing around with a video camera won't be overly obtrusive.

Buying electronic equipment

If, like me, you are not obsessed with technology, do the following. Check out product information and prices at [this fantastic website](#) and, armed with this knowledge, go to Akihabara in Tokyo, Denden Town in Osaka or any of the large shops (Yodobashi Camera, Sakuraya, etc.) in any Japanese city and buy the things you need at one place in order to bargain for a reasonable discount. Be pushy; tell the clerk that you saw the same items for sale cheaper next door, and ask for a further discount if you buy more than one item at once. Expect about 5-10% savings.

Cultivate paranoia about your notes and data

Notes

When you are nearing the end of your notebook, photocopy it TWICE at a convenience store, Fedex/Kinkos or wherever else you find while you're on the road. Leave one copy somewhere in Japan where you are not, in a clearly marked file, and mail one copy to your address outside Japan. If you are lucky enough to be in a place where you can scan, send the pdf version of your notes to an email address that you can access from any computer (Gmail, Hotmail, or the like). Do the same with other documents you accumulate in the course of fieldwork that link to your fieldnotes.

Digital data

Save everything in at least three places. I save my digital fieldnotes, other documents, my recorded interviews, my images, and other files created by fieldwork on my computer, on flash memory, on an external hard drive, and on online storage. Buy a portable flash memory drive at Amazon or Buy.com before leaving the

US or in Japan on which to store text files. Carry this with you at all times. Consider also buying a larger-capacity external hard drive for all of your data to leave in a secure location in Japan while you are traveling.

Online storage

There are several good options for saving files online for free or very little money. I currently use [Mozy](#) (about US\$55 / year for unlimited storage), but there are several other companies out there as well. When you finish recording an interview, upload it the first chance you get. Upload digital documents daily if you have an Internet connection where you are staying. If you are on the road, visit a *manga kissa* 漫画喫茶 (or *manki* 漫喫 in the current argot) to use a computer with a broadband connection to upload your files. Take advantage of the big *manki* chains like Manboo which have branches all over Japan. At the *manki* you can also check your email, read manga, take a shower, and drink an unlimited number of syrupy, caffeine-laden coffees and sodas as your files move online. You can stay overnight at these places in a pinch and thereby join the ranks of those dubbed the *manki nanmin*, or “Internet Café refugees.” Your data may be eaten by the deer in Nara park, trampled by tanuki in the forests of Aomori or accidentally immolated by a firewalking ascetic, yet your files will remain immortal online.

Issues pertaining to research ethics

There are numerous recent discussions of ethical dimensions of fieldwork in Japan available for reference. I recommend starting with Patricia Steinhoff’s chapter in *Doing Fieldwork in Japan* for a frank account of the role of an ethnographer in accessing hidden social networks (of left-wing radicals in her case), and I recommend reading all of the articles in the “Politics and Pitfalls of Japan Ethnography” special issue of *Critical Asian Studies*. All of these papers, such as the pieces by Tomomi Yamaguchi (who includes reflexive

accounts of her research on right-wing groups as a feminist anthropologist) and Ann-Elise Lewallen (who describes obstacles she faced as a researcher among indigenous Ainu women in Hokkaido) offer detailed discussions of what’s at stake for researchers today. I am certain that readers of this essay can recommend in the “comments” section many more examples of published works that include discussions of fieldwork ethics, and hopefully they can include some experiences of their own to create an ongoing conversation.

If you are coming from a university in the United States, you must make yourself familiar with your school’s requirements for research involving living human subjects, as all US universities that receive federal funding are required to establish an Institutional Review Board (IRB) to oversee research on living people and grant researchers Human Subjects Research Approval. Familiarize yourself with your school’s IRB operations by asking the people in your department about what is required in terms of informed consent and how IRB requirements will affect the conduct of your field research and the protection of your data.

Not every researcher is required to follow IRB regulations or maintain other official, legally mandated limits on their field research. However, regardless of whatever legal protocols you may be required to uphold, there are a few basic ethical principles that you must internalize as a researcher regardless of where you are coming from and what your field or object of study may be. At the very least, there are two basic rules that you must never forget: 1) never misrepresent who you are or what you are doing, and 2) always protect the lives and livelihoods of your subjects by maintaining confidentiality.

Put simply, you should never be in a situation in which you lie about who you are or why you are there. Lying violates terms of mutual trust

and respect that you should seek to foster between yourself and the people you study, and it creates a real danger of legal retribution (or worse). I have never encountered a single example of a fieldwork topic in Japan that has required a researcher to out-and-out lie about his or her identity or intent, and this includes a number of cases in which colleagues are researching truly vile and/or dangerous people and organizations. As a simple rule, if you are in a position of radically disagreeing with the people or organization that you are studying, respond to questions about why you are there with the simplest answer possible. Most often, this takes the form of something like “I want to learn about you and your community in order to explain it to the world at large, which knows relatively little about you.” Most people and groups are not actively trying to hide from the public; in fact, most are flattered by attention, seek to be acknowledged as leading meaningful and significant lives, and are ultimately enthusiastic about helping a researcher with her or his work. If you are asked about what you think of a person or idea with which you disagree, fall back on your identity as a scholar. Emphasize that your role is as a researcher and that, as an outside observer, your scholarly account will help readers take the person or organization seriously. These are not lies.

Do your utmost to protect the privacy of the people with whom you interact. Keep your fieldnotes, photographs, and other data away from the scrutiny of others, and only share your information once you have anonymized your sources. Always use pseudonyms for your informants and for the names of organizations and locations whose identity threatens the confidentiality of your informants. Receive written or recorded oral consent to use the real names of people if you think their real identities are an essential component of your final project, but generally you will find yourself coming up with all kinds of alternative names for the people and places that populate your research. I have had informants cheerfully

declare that they want their real names to appear in my published research because they are proud of who they are and what they are doing, but I nonetheless change their names to pseudonyms in order to protect them over the long term. Your guiding principle should always be to maintain the wellbeing of the people you study.

Wherever you are, always remain sensitive to the people and things you are photographing. Seek to take photos with permission, hesitate to take shots of things that you think might be taboo (such as objects of worship in a temple or shrine), and generally try to avoid annoying people with your camera. If you think you might use your photos in a publication at some point, try to get permission from people on the spot. Harvard’s NCC has fortunately recently set up a very extensive set of materials that deals with intellectual property and seeking consent for use of images. The uploaded materials include templates for bilingual letters for obtaining permission to use your own and others’ images. Consult these examples [here](#).

General rule of thumb

While keeping in mind guidelines for ethical conduct, if you encounter something that appears valuable to your research, acquire it by all means necessary. If you think you should take a picture or video of something, get permission and do it. You will never see it again. If you think you should copy down a book title or other text, stop, beg forgiveness if necessary, and do it. You will not see it again. If you see a book you can afford and think you should buy it, buy it. You will not see it again. If you are in a researcher’s office or a person’s home and they have valuable documents, ask to borrow the books or letters to make copies. Return the resources with a small gift (1000-1500 yen) as soon as humanly possible. Assume that you will never see these documents again, so be polite but persistent in asking to make copies.

The peril of this rule, of course, is that you accumulate seemingly unmanageable mountains of material. Despite this very real danger, I guarantee that, no matter how many documents, pictures, and recordings you amass, there will always be that *one* piece of paper or that *one* shot you regret not having acquired. Limit the possibilities of this happening by going with your gut and erring on the side of gathering too much rather than not enough material.

Conclusion

It is my hope that this relatively short list of tips will help researchers embarking on study in Japan to carry out their work in a mindful, efficient, and pleasurable manner. I have no doubt that readers will be able to provide elaborations, corrections, and alternatives to the pieces of advice that I have provided here. I sincerely hope that these readers will take advantage of the format at Japan Focus to add comments to this article and start a conversation about on-the-ground research that includes insights from their own experiences, and I hope that the total package of article with comments will enhance the research experience for novice scholars and veteran researchers alike.

Levi McLaughlin is Assistant Professor of Religion at Wofford College. He is currently writing a book about Sōka Gakkai in Japan that privileges a perspective on the lives of ordinary members gained primarily through fieldwork. He wrote this article for The Asia-Pacific Journal.

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