



## **THEME: Fieldwork in China**

Challenging hegemonic knowledge

Fieldworking in an interdisciplinary perspective

The book

Research (re)design. Some notes on how to recognize a big fish when you catch one

Insiders and outsiders ask different questions

The 'Insider' and 'Outsider' in collaborative fieldwork

Repertoires of resistance and the responsibility of 'knowing'

Fieldwork as a becoming

**Editorial and production**

NIAS – Nordic Institute of Asian Studies,  
Leifsgade 33,  
DK-2300 Copenhagen S, Denmark

Tel: +45 3532 9502  
Fax: +45 3532 9549  
Email: leena@nias.ku.dk  
Online: www.nias.ku.dk  
Online version  
<http://www.nias.ku.dk/nytt>

**Editor**

Gerald Jackson (responsible under the  
Danish press law)

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**Contents**

Editorial: Challenging hegemonic knowledge  
by *Cecilia Milwertz* • 3

Fieldworking in an interdisciplinary perspective  
by *Maria Pi Højlund Nielsen* • 4

The book  
by *Stig Thøgersen and Maria Heimer* • 6

Research (re)design. Some notes on how to recognize a big fish  
when you catch one  
by *Kevin O'Brien* • 8

Insiders and outsiders ask different questions  
by *Bu Wei* • 13

The 'insider' and 'outsider' in collaborative fieldwork  
by *Mette Thunø* • 16

Repertoires of resistance and the responsibility of 'knowing'  
by *Emily T. Yeh* • 20

Fieldwork as a becoming  
by *Elin Sæther* • 23

Coming conference: Culture and the configuring of security • 26

A chink of optimism in the doom and gloom?  
by *Gerald Jackson* • 29

New books from NIAS Press • 31

**Fieldwork in pictures**

Russell Harwood • 5

Eva Luedi Kong • 10, 11

Maria Pi Højlund Nielsen • 11, 15, 25

Henrik Kloppenborg Møller • 12

Ellen Bangsbo • 18-19, 22



# Challenging hegemonic knowledge

This issue of *NIASnytt* is based on the book *Doing Fieldwork in China*. The book presents a cornucopia of experiences and advice that can guide the social science fieldworker through the many choices that must be made in the course of the knowledge producing struggles and pleasures of collecting and analyzing data.

One of the issues the book addresses is the question of language. Is it – or to what degree is it – necessary to be fluent in Chinese languages in order to study China? What strategies do fieldworkers use to overcome language barriers and what difficulties do they encounter in their work with interpreters? In her recent book *China, Sex and Prostitution* Elaine Jeffreys contests the way China scholars' legitimize their knowledge by claiming that their fluency in the language enables them to capture the 'truth' or 'reality' of China since they can translate both linguistically and culturally.

Jeffreys has also challenges the position taken by several leading China scholars and argues that their portrayal of the Chinese Communist Party as monolithic precludes the possibility of finding anything positive or productive in the operation of power in China. Whether or not one agrees with the critique, the book raises the pertinent issue of the way in which hegemonic knowledge is either reproduced or challenged.

What we take to be 'true' knowledge is inevitably formed within some closed, hegemonic system of ideas. Even if we wish to question the dominant discourse, it is difficult to break free of these hegemonic systems since they are grounded in taken-for-granted assumptions. As Kevin O'Brien notes in his contribution to this issue, we should pay attention to those unexpected 'big fish' we sometimes land during fieldwork. O'Brien's analogy is a reminder that our most important findings sometimes turn up unexpectedly. These may well be instances of marginalized or suppressed experiences and knowledge that can subvert hegemonic knowledge.

Challenges to Chinese hegemonic knowledge are goldmines for the fieldworker; Western China scholars seem to have a penchant for any challenge to dominant, party-state endorsed knowledge. The burning question, however, is perhaps to what extent Western students of Asia are willing to engage with empirical data that instead challenge Western hegemonic knowledge, particularly when the data conflict with their personal (political) convictions.

*Cecilia Milwertz*

# Fieldworking in an interdisciplinary perspective

*Field research or fieldwork is the foundation for research in many disciplines. Some disciplines have their own particular methods, and other methods, such as interviewing, are practiced by many disciplines. Shared are some of the basic conditions for conducting research in situ (in real life) which are very different from research in a laboratory. In life, no setting is ever bounded, but in order to study it the researcher creates an analytical framework that delimits the field. In a laboratory research aims to control an experiment, whereas in life the researcher observes and studies phenomena that are in uncontrollable motion.*

During the First World War the Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski was stranded on the Trobriand Islands near Papua New Guinea, and had to spend several years there among the natives whom he referred to as “the savages”. It was during this time that he ‘invented’ *participant observation*, which has ever since been the most prominent field method in anthropology and an inspiration to other disciplines such as sociology, psychology and the arts. This method brought one of the fundamental premises of research based on fieldwork to the foreground: The fieldworker him- or herself is an instrument in the research process, and therefore personal interests, position, and bias have an influence on the outcome of research. Relying on the researcher as an instrument does not invalidate the research process or outcome but put demands on researchers for awareness and transparency. Moreover, fieldwork can take as many forms as there are researchers, projects and circumstances.

Before going to the field plans are made and strategies laid for how to crack the nut once you’re there. After having arrived and settled, things often turn out differently than planned. Experienced fieldworkers will know that this is not necessarily a consequence of bad planning or insufficient preparations but rather one of the premises of this approach. The revision of strategy, method and sometimes even the problem is an important and eye-opening

process where new knowledge is acquired. Nevertheless, it can still be frustrating, and accounts of fellow scholars’ experiences and coping strategies are desirable reading before going to the field and while in the field.

The challenges and unpredictability of fieldwork have given it an almost mythical status, and fieldwork experiences are often described as “rituals of becoming”. Insiders to the fieldwork-field often speak in a taken-for-granted manner about fieldwork. This reinforces its status as an obscure and esoteric practice for the initiated, while excluding outsiders. But in fact, fieldwork is very much about being practical in the sense of making things work out – and if they don’t, to try again in new ways. This is the kind of knowledge that could and should be shared in order to become useful for fieldworkers-to-be.

Unfortunately, I wasn’t able to get hold of a copy of *Doing Fieldwork in China* until after returning home from my first fieldwork in China. But even after returning the book proved to be useful. The different contributions revoked situations and experiences, and I felt comforted to learn that I wasn’t the first and the only one to struggle with problems of language, of being an outsider, or of not understanding what was going on around me. The book is a valuable source to some of the intricate particularities about the China field, and reminds us that there are things to learn



and be inspired by from various disciplinary perspectives as well as from interdisciplinary practice. I sincerely hope you will enjoy the excerpts from *Doing Fieldwork in China* presented in this issue of *NIASnytt* as well as the striking illustrations contributed by friends and colleagues.

*Maria Pi Højlund Nielsen*

Visit at the local primary school, northwest Yunnan province

Photos on this page were taken by **Russell Harwood**, PhD student, School of Social and Cultural Studies, the University of Western Australia. He is carrying out research on economic development and education in the Nujiang Valley, northwest Yunnan province.

"The new path links the village to the local primary school"



# The book

**By Stig Thøgersen and  
Maria Heimer**

*The editors present the publication **Doing Fieldwork in China** which came out of a workshop on methodological issues arranged by NIAS in October 2003.*

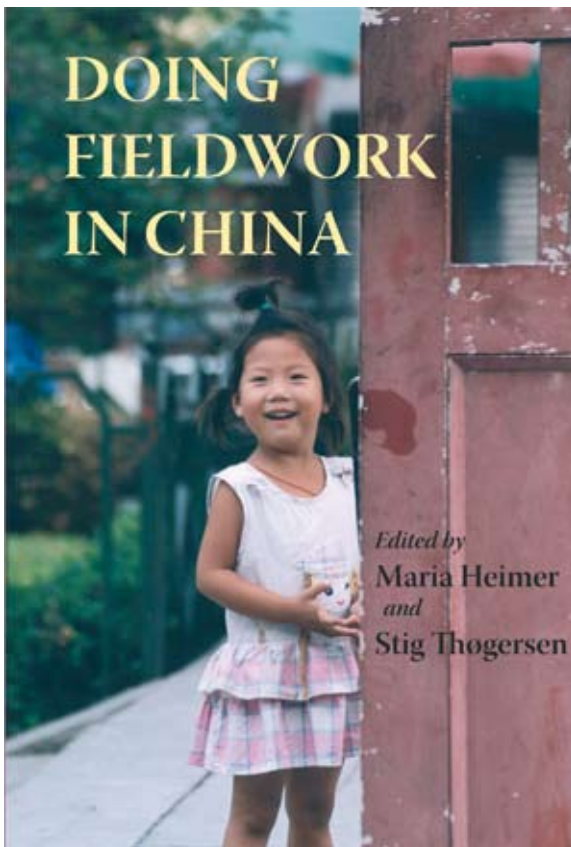
In October 2003 NIAS arranged a workshop on methodological issues related to doing fieldwork in China. Nordic, Chinese, and US scholars from several disciplines exchanged experiences and debated common problems we had met when we did our field research. Some contributions to the workshop were later rewritten, new papers were solicited, and in 2006 *Doing Fieldwork in China* was published jointly by NIAS Press and the University of Hawai'i Press. We are happy that the editors of *NIAS-nytt* has decided to print selections from some

of the papers as an appetizer to potential readers, and we are grateful to Maria Pi Højlund Nielsen for selecting the excerpts.

The workshop showed that many of us – graduate students and experienced researchers alike – felt that there was a lack of public debate on fieldwork problems. This not only undermines academic standards of openness, it also stalls constructive discussion on coping strategies to shared problems, and it leaves graduate students going to the field for the first time with a feeling of being the only ones to encounter difficulties. Exchanging experiences would help us all to make better compromises between ideal methodology and actual practice.

*Doing Fieldwork in China* has two main aims: to provide a frame of reference for students and scholars who are new to China, and to provoke a public discussion among scholars in the China field on the problems we encounter in fieldwork, on possible coping strategies, and on how fieldwork methods affect our understanding of China. The individual authors give their personal accounts of how fieldwork actually gets done, along with reflections on how their experiences are linked up with more general questions around fieldwork methodology and findings.

We concentrate exclusively on fieldwork in China, but this does not mean that we regard the problems as being unique to the PRC. On the contrary, many of them are common across countries, and given the fact that limited access is a problem in many countries, China fieldworkers with their long experience with various coping strategies should be able to contribute to ongoing discussions on general fieldwork methods. Our point of departure is that although fieldwork in the PRC is subject to many political restrictions the fundamental issues are universal. Compromises always have to be made between methodological principles and the actual reality in the field – whether carrying out a local community study in Sweden or writing an ethnography on religious rituals in Zimbabwe



– and the choices we make in the process always need to be highlighted and discussed. At the same time, in order for the discussion on fieldwork methods to be meaningful it should focus on concrete examples. China is unique, and so are all other places. Each country and situation presents its own specific conditions and difficulties and calls for different solutions and coping strategies.

The excerpts selected by *NIASnytt* illustrate some of the crucial problems we face in China about how to adjust and revise our research agendas while we are in the field, about our often complicated relationships with Chinese officials, informants and colleagues, and about our own changing identities in the field. Other papers in *Doing Fieldwork in China* deal with the role of fieldwork in the research process, political restrictions on doing research in China, ethical issues, as well as more practical problems about how to do interviews, gain access to written sources, and collect economic data.

We hope these short excerpts – and the book in general – will serve as an encouragement and inspiration for more fieldwork in China. To gain a better understanding of how China is changing – and why it may be changing in a different direction than we anticipated – it is absolutely essential that we build a stronger base of empirical observations from the field.

**Stig Thøgersen** is professor of China Studies, East Asian Department, Institute of History and Area Studies, Aarhus University, Denmark. His main research interest is social, political and cultural change in rural China. He is the author of *A County of Culture – Twentieth-Century China Seen From the Village Schools of Zouping, Shandong* (University of Michigan Press, 2002) and several other books and articles on modern China.

**Maria Heimer** (formerly Edin), Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science at Uppsala University, Sweden. Research interests include local governance, state capacity, rising poverty, and institutional change. Her new research project focuses on political protest and its impact in China.

## CONTENTS

- 1 Stig Thøgersen and Maria Heimer: *Introduction*
- Section I: The Role of Fieldwork in the Research Process**
  - 2 Kevin J. O'Brien: *Discovery, Research (Re)design, and Theory Building*
  - 3 Elin Sæther: *Fieldwork as Coping and Learning*
  - 4 Maria Heimer: *Field Sites, Research Design and Type of Findings*
- Section II: Official China and Beyond**
  - 5 Mette Halskov Hansen: *In the Footsteps of the Communist Party: Dilemmas and Strategies*
  - 6 Emily T. Yeh: *'An Open Lhasa Welcomes You': Disciplining the Researcher in Tibet*
  - 7 Stig Thøgersen: *Beyond Official Chinese: Language Codes and Strategies*
- Section III: Data Collection**
  - 8 Björn Gustafsson and Li Shi: *Surveys – Three Ways to Obtain Household Income Data*
  - 9 Dorothy J. Solinger: *Interviewing Chinese People: From High-level Officials to the Unemployed*
  - 10 Baogang He: *Consultancy: A Different Gate to the Field*
  - 11 Stig Thøgersen: *Approaching the Field through Written Sources*
- Section IV: Insiders and Outsiders**
  - 12 Bu Wei: *Looking for 'the Insider's Perspective': Human Trafficking in Sichuan*
  - 13 Björn Kjellgren: *The Significance of Benevolence and Wisdom – Reflections on Field Positionality*
  - 14 Mette Thunø: *In the 'Field' Together: Potentials and Pitfalls in Collaborative Research*
  - 15 Marina Svensson: *Ethical Dilemmas: Balancing Distance with Involvement*
- Appendices**
  - Anja Møller Rasmussen, Inga-Lill Blomkvist and Mads Kjeldsen: *An Annotated Bibliography*
  - Chinese Glossary*
  - Index*



# Research (re)design

## Some notes on how to recognize a big fish when you catch one

By Kevin O'Brien

*Before going to the field time and efforts have been spent on formulating the research project into a well-defined problem. But once the researcher is there it sometimes turns out that the defined problem either doesn't match the formulation, or that something more interesting and of higher relevance appears. How to deal with this common problem? This article suggests a strategy that treats research design as an ongoing process and emphasizes discovery rather than verification.*

The best advice I ever heard about research design centered on how to approach a prospectus defense. R. William Liddle frequently told PhD students at Ohio State University that submitting a dissertation proposal was like applying for a fishing license. We, the representatives of your field, are granting you permission to go fishing in a certain place where we are fairly confident there are some fish. In presenting your research proposal, you need to persuade us that the project is both feasible and interesting. But we don't know which fish you will find, and more importantly, we can only guess which fish is going to be the biggest. You have to figure that out when you are in the field. Some contacts may prove to be better than others. Someone may drop a fascinating book based on fieldwork into your hands. An aspect of the project that you thought was minor may suddenly start to look like the big payoff, both empirically and theoretically.

This counsel underscored what I take to be the one unalterable key to developing rich, sound data that also has theoretical repercussions: flexibility. Researchers must recognize, in other words, a big fish when they catch one, and not throw it back, just because they started out looking for some other fish, which when they located it turned out to be tiny, uninteresting, and not-too-tasty. This small, even mundane point, which is particularly relevant because China is still a relatively closed polity and much social science theory was developed

to study very different sorts of places, has many implications for research design. First, fieldworkers should always strive to be open to new ideas, theories that did not originally seem pertinent, and new research foci. Like good journalists, we ought to arrive in the field with an area of interest and some hunches about how a social process is unfolding, but then be ready (and eager!) to let our informants redirect us by telling us what concerns them most.

### Ten-star households

Consider, for example, my experience in a Shandong village in 1994 when I thought I was doing a project on village elections. Lianjiang Li and I had prepared dozens of questions on the implementation of the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees, and the local cadres we spoke with tried their best to answer them, but honestly, they were completely listless on the subject of grassroots democracy. Then, without warning, they suddenly perked up when someone brought up the topic of 'ten-star households'. These 'stars' were related to village charters that were being drawn up under one of the lesser known features of the villagers' autonomy program, and households received stars for tasks such as paying their taxes, respecting the law, keeping their yard clean, keeping their pigs off other people's property, and taking good care of the elderly. Interestingly, the stars were awarded to cad-



res as well as villagers and where everyone stood was public knowledge: how many stars a household had received was indicated right on top of the family doorway. Most fascinating of all, our interviewees told us that young people preferred not to marry into households that had fewer than eight stars and cadres who fell below eight or nine were at risk of losing their position or at least their status in the village.

Our goal during this research was to examine the implementation of basic level elections, but in this village the real story concerning political accountability and social control centered on these stars. In these circumstances, the best way to discover what there was to be learned was to let our informants talk and just listen. We occasionally drew them back toward our original area of interest, but mainly let them fill in one piece in a mosaic that might be called 'village political life' or 'grassroots cadre-mass relations.' We did not use forced choice questions and in fact abandoned many of the open-ended questions we had intended to ask. Nor did we employ a formal coding scheme to make sense of their remarks on this new and entirely unanticipated topic. It did not even bother us greatly that we had never asked about stars in any other village we visited. This was the story in this location; this is what interviewees became most animated and most concrete about, so we were happy to learn what they had to say. We would figure out how their remarks fit into our project later, *or even better*, we would mull the interviews over and consider whether our current project (and a set of theories and concepts we were just itching to deploy) should be modified to incorporate the insights derived from our stay in this village.

## Making mutual adjustments

In this particular case we did not alter our research focus or go searching for new concepts or theories to lend order to our findings, but fieldwork that same summer in other parts of Shandong and Hubei did lead us in a direction we could never have foreseen. This occurred

when a series of cadres repeatedly brought up problems they had encountered dealing with *diaomin* (shrewd, unyielding people) or *dingzihu* (nail-like (i.e. resisting) households). Some of our informants also made a distinction between these two varieties of villagers based on how 'reasonable' (*jiangli*) they were. Before our interviews, it had never occurred to us to develop a typology of rural protesters, but we were quickly persuaded that this project was far more interesting (and better supported by the evidence we had gathered) than our original aim of investigating whether electoral reforms designed to increase stability had actually decreased it. Students of social science methodology call these mid-course corrections 'mutual adjustments' or 'successive definitions.' This simply means that a researcher's topic of inquiry and the concepts or theories employed to understand it may evolve in the course of conducting research (in our case, by doing interviews).

In such exploratory work, 'doing' often precedes 'knowing.' Theory and evidence are closely intertwined and theories, concepts and evidence come to be aligned at the end of the research. The 'analysis is at once inductive and deductive, like someone who is simultaneously creating and solving a puzzle, or like a carpenter alternately changing the shape of a door and then the shape of the door frame to obtain a better fit.' Data-fitting, the horror of researchers who seek to confirm or disconfirm preformed hypotheses, is a boon for people like Lianjiang Li and me, who continually adjust the scope of our investigation as our fieldwork unfolds, and who only settle on which concepts and theories to employ once the data is all in.

**Kevin J. O'Brien** is the Bedford Professor of Political Science and Chair of the Center for Chinese Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. He is the author (with Lianjiang Li) of *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (Cambridge, 2006) and editor (with Neil Diamant and Stanley Lubman) of *Engaging the Law in China: State, Society and Possibilities for Justice* (Stanford, 2005).

## Characters in the Chinese urban landscapes

*Chinese characters are omnipresent in China's urban landscape. Not only do they appear as rows of shop names, neon lettering on buildings' façades or megaprint advertising posters, but also on temporary walls around building sites or on ruins of old houses. In such transitional places inscriptions often happen to transform their meaning - it's as if the transformations themselves would make subtle comments on the overwhelming changes going on in Chinese society. What I wanted to capture was the transient irony and accidental beauty of such statements.*

**Eva Luedi Kong**, Associate teacher at China Academy of Art, Hangzhou, P.R. China

'Cultivate the mind' - this contemplative statement happened to appear due to a casual inter-section of two very profane contents: the character for 'mind' remained from an official wall inscription, and a character that can mean 'repair' as well as 'cultivate' is a hand written in-scription referring to a repair-shop around the corner. Hangzhou, 2004. Photo by Eva Luedi Kong





'Beautiful!' – the two characters remained from an official wall inscription originally saying: 'Let's keep our environment clean and beautiful!' Hangzhou, 2000. Photo by Eva Luedi Kong



**chai** 拆 is a Chinese character often seen on walls and old buildings. In this context it means demolition and indicates that a building is planned for destruction, but the character also refers to antiquated things or ideas that should be destroyed.

Photo by Maria Pi Højlund Nielsen





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**The Xiangyang market in central Shanghai opened in 2000**, and attracted both customers in search of cheap copies of branded commodities and rural migrants in search for better paid jobs in Shanghai. Because it openly violated intellectual property rights and due to city development plans the market was closed down in July 2006.

Photos on this page by Henrik Kloppenborg Møller



My fieldwork was carried out among a group of young entrepreneurial migrant men – the *huang niu*, or 'yellow bulls' – who worked as middlemen between customers and shop owners for a profit of the sales. The aim of the fieldwork was to study how the migrant vendors created new socio-economic opportunities and positions through their jobs in Shanghai in spite of marginalization from the local society. In my thesis, I will discuss how informal economic practices and social positioning of 'subaltern' groups are being linked in the contemporary urban Chinese context. The working title of the thesis is on "Yellow Bulls Grazing in a Grey Zone. Negotiations of Socio-Economic Values, Resources and Positions among Migrant Entrepreneurs a Shanghai 'Fake' Market".

**Henrik Kloppenborg Møller**, MA student at the Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen, held an MA working place at NIAS, while writing his thesis.



# Insiders and outsiders ask different questions

By *Bu Wei*

*During fieldwork, Bu Wei discovered the difference in perspective between herself as a native researcher and her informants who were women in danger of being trafficked. This discovery broke up the way the research question was originally framed, and led to a rephrasing of the questions into a more fruitful formulation based on the perspective of the informants. This article takes us to the field and presents some of her findings.*

Since labour markets are major venues for trafficking we visited the Jiuyanqiao Labor Market and the Huangwa Street Domestic Labor Market in Chengdu. Jiuyanqiao is the largest labor market in Southwest China, and it is visited by thousands of job-seekers every day. As soon as we entered we saw anti-trafficking posters produced jointly by UNICEF, Sichuan Public Security Bureau, Sichuan Provincial Women's Federation, and Sichuan Labor Bureau. Inside the market we crossed the section for former state-employed workers who had been laid off before we got to the women's section. Unlike the male workers, the women did not have a piece of paper in front of them describing their skills and the sort of jobs they were looking for. They explained to us that they were too modest to attract employers in this way. They were sitting or standing, all waiting for someone to come and pick them up.

On one of the walls surrounding the female workers' section there was an anti-trafficking bulletin board set up by UNICEF, and a small crowd was looking at it. As soon as I entered this section I was surrounded by women who took me for a potential employer. When I told them I was a researcher they quickly disappeared. I walked over to a group of young women who were standing close to the bulletin board and found out that they came from Jianyang district and were all in their teens. I asked them if they liked the content of the bulletin board and whether they found the in-

formation useful. They did not reply. I stood around feeling uncomfortable for a long time, then I walked over to another group and asked them the same questions but they did not take any interest in the bulletin board either. Some of them said it was useful, others said it was not, and I could feel that they were not taking me very seriously. I soon realized that there was something wrong with my questions, they were all the questions of an outsider. They aroused no interest among the insiders, and they did not know how to reply to them.

## Finding ways to enter the field

When I went outside the market together with my co-researcher I saw that even here there were many rural women waiting by the side of the street, so I sat down and started chatting to them. After about an hour a kind of mutual trust had developed, and I asked them whether they were afraid of being abducted when they contacted employers outside the official market. A 19 year old girl replied: 'No, I am not afraid, I can always tell a trafficker.' I immediately felt that I had discovered a topic worth looking into, so I asked her how she could tell them. All the women now started describing to us what a human trafficker at the labor market might look like: 'Most of them are men, but there are some women as well'; 'they never carry a bag'; 'they never have an identification card or any other ID, or if they have one it is probably fake'; 'they look for waitresses and

promise high wages'; 'they are only interested in pretty girls'; 'they have a small truck waiting at the roadside, one of them starts talking to you and the others push you into the truck, and then it is too late to get out'; 'they often turn up at the labor market'; 'when he says he has got a job for you, you should look into his face, if he is a swindler he will lower his voice and look over his shoulder all the time. Those who are really looking for workers behave much more naturally.'

Based on their descriptions I also learned to spot the traffickers. I saw a tall, good-looking woman turn down the suggestion of a trafficker, and I understood that the communication between the female job-seekers had much more effect than the poster saying 'Resolutely Fight the Criminal Activity of Trafficking Women.' They had to persevere in looking for jobs, but knowing how to spot a trafficker had become a basic skill of their trade. I now felt that the time was ripe to invite them to a restaurant. They first politely declined, but in the end six of them joined us.

### Insiders strategies

During the meal they told us how they had learned to prevent trafficking. They would, for example, never tell their real name and address to a stranger. They also said that the names and addresses they had given to us at the start of the interview were all false; they always carried their ID card and a contact phone number in their bra; they would often look for a job together with a mate; some girls were accompanied by their mother or another relative who would not leave until they knew where they would be working, and so on. I felt this was a very fruitful evening because now I had some information about how village girls protected themselves. I had abandoned the question 'Do you find the bulletin board useful' and started to find out what sort of questions made sense to the job-seekers. 'How do you spot a trafficker?' was their own question, and it was essential for their survival that they knew the answer. When they answered this question

their experiences and strategies for preventing kidnapping came to the light of day.

### New discoveries

This project first of all taught me the importance of going to the field. This may sound like a very evident point, but every time I went to the field to observe and conduct interviews I realized just how necessary it was. Through my fieldwork I learned that earlier propaganda contradicted the knowledge and strategies that the rural job seekers had gained when they came to the city. Even the 'protection' of the authorities was harmful to them. The project also made me reflect on my role as an outsider.

It is still a challenge for me to see things from the insiders' point of view. In the course of the project I discovered many facts, and after analysing these facts we revised the earlier information strategy, but I am sure that much remained hidden from me, I only saw the tip of the iceberg. I also learned that in order to see things from the insiders' perspective we must first discover our different ways of perceiving the same facts. We must uncover what sort of questions the insiders find it important to ask, and then thoroughly discuss these questions. Only when our research questions and hypotheses interact with those of the insiders will we be able to get useful information.

**Bu Wei** is professor at the Institute of Journalism and Communication, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, China. Her research focuses on feminist communication studies, adoption, use and impact of media, empowering vulnerable groups through communication, alternative media, social advocacy by NGO's, and ICT gaps in China.

My fieldwork took place in a small urban neighborhood built during High socialism in central Hangzhou. Some of the older residents defied the plans of the local government to tear down the neighbourhood in order to build modern high rises. Following property privatization politics in the late 1990s the residents had bought their houses and claimed their right to inhabit and protect their property. They were not convinced that living in modern high rises would improve their living conditions. The working title of my thesis is In the eye of the storm. Perspectives from an old neighborhood in a modern Chinese city.

**Maria Pi Højlund Nielsen**, MA student at the Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen, holds an MA workplace at NIAS

*Societal transformations can be seen as highlighting contrasts between different historical and developmental eras, and is often strikingly visible in the material structures of the urban landscape. These photos were taken in Shanghai and Hangzhou during spring 2006.*

Photos on this page by Maria Pi Højlund Nielsen



# The 'insider' and 'outsider' in collaborative fieldwork

By *Mette Thunø*

*Doing collaborative fieldwork can be a great advantage for research, but sometimes also involves new dilemmas and pitfalls. This article presents some of the benefits from collaborative fieldwork between a European and a local Chinese researcher on a project investigating the 'fallen people' of Zhejiang province.*

Some anthropologists doubt the value of combined local and non-local research. 'I wonder what outside scholars bring to the research encounter. Are they the "expert" in theory who teams up with the specialist in local culture? Collaboration seems to be a way of hiding weaknesses as researchers. Is the native scholar not just a glorified assistant?'. Joseph Bosco (professor of Journalism) assumes that a foreign scholar cannot positively contribute to the fieldwork process, but my experience shows that fieldwork benefits from the synergy of diverse identities, biographical backgrounds, personal interests, and professional concepts and techniques.

The outcome of the fieldwork in Shaoxing in terms of both written and oral sources probably could not have been reached by either one of us working independently. As the non-Chinese researcher, my initial arrival via the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences CASS in Hangzhou was an entry from above in the local political power hierarchy, which proved useful for both of us. An essential local government report on the fallen people from the early 1920s had been cited in a few local publications, but despite several attempts my research partner had been unable to obtain it from the local library. The gatekeepers to this source only released it on my request via CASS in Hangzhou. In this manner, our collaboration made it possible for the local researcher finally to obtain this important historical source.

The 'fallen people' refers to a group of in-

ternal migrants who during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) possibly migrated to the area around Shaoxing and Ningbo in Zhejiang province and as a result became socially ostracized and categorized as the fallen people. After 1949, this social stigmatization was officially abandoned and the social category of the fallen people ceased to exist. Today, the fallen people of Shaoxing are thus regarded as a historical phenomenon.

## Getting 'into' the field

In the field, local and non-local identities also proved valuable. My Chinese colleague applied her local knowledge, local dialect and social networks to locate informants in the villages where those formerly categorised as fallen people still reside. On my own, this task would have been impossible. When we had located the informants who were mostly elderly people, we found that they were usually more than willing to account for their past, especially in the presence of a non-Chinese researcher. Prior to our project my partner had experienced some difficulties conducting fieldwork in her own locality and was surprised how open the interviewees became in the presence of an outsider.

Naturally, the identities that researchers bring to the field have a profound impact on the fieldwork process. My position as 'der Fremde' (the stranger) permitted me, following Georg Simmel, to become more 'intimate' with our informants. Old women who gener-



ally were ashamed of their former social status as fallen people had nothing to hide when talking to a foreigner with limited relations to Chinese society. Consequently, personal histories of shame, humiliation, suppression and tragedies were disclosed and many tears were shed during these interviews.

### Sharing perspectives and finding blind spots

Fieldwork conducted with a local researcher also raised the question about distance and partiality when studying one's own society. In contrast to Euro- American anthropologists, who sometimes are criticised when conducting research in their own societies for making presumptions based on cultural sameness, 'native' anthropologists are now often assumed to have privileged access to their own societies.

As probably most local or 'native' researchers, my partner was not really working 'at home' in the sense that she belonged to a family that had been labelled as fallen. Her local knowledge of conceptual categories and historical events proved highly valuable, but these categories were also constantly challenged. In some cases conventional local knowledge created blind spots, as when local perceptions about the fallen people as victims of feudal society forced to live on the fringes of majority society prevented her from probing into their cultural history as a group with a history of achievements of their own and with internal organizational power structures. She was surprised when I asked questions about their identity constructions in opposition to majority society and social structures prior to 1949. The discovery of elaborate cultural traits and an internal social hierarchy and social organization soon led her to appreciate these questions posed from my perspective as the outsider.

My research partner's knowledge of local history, language, society and culture also repeatedly forced me to broaden my partial perspective. One particular instance is worth mentioning here: my Chinese colleague's con-

stant reminder that the fallen people had not only been located in the two streets in the centre of today's Shaoxing where the authorities for centuries had confined them to live. Local Shaoxing history writing focuses almost exclusively on the city dwelling fallen people, but my local colleague broadened our research to include possible enclaves in villages far away from Shaoxing. At that moment, when she persuasively extended our fieldwork location from a single enclave of two streets to several groups distributed geographically in many locations, I was reminded how easy it is in the fieldwork process to privilege a single culturally defined location.

### Team work as a benefit for fieldwork

My collaborative fieldwork experiences in Shaoxing city and neighbouring villages reflect that the relationships in the field between informants and 'inside' and 'outside' researchers may be more complex than just being the non-Chinese researcher teaming up with a specialist in local culture to hide academic weaknesses, or the local researcher being used as an assistant. Undoubtedly, both of us have academic weaknesses, but by working in a team these possible weaknesses were turned into strengths by mutual acknowledgement of diverse approaches and personal and academic backgrounds. In the end, the empirical findings indicate that joint fieldwork and collaboration stimulate questions that can significantly raise the quality of fieldwork methods and empirical results.

**Mette Thunø**, Ph.D., is Associate Dean for Research at the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark. She has conducted extensive fieldwork in China and among Chinese migrants in Europe. She is also the author of numerous studies on Chinese migration, co-author of *Transnational Chinese: Fujianese Migrants in Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004) and editor of *Beyond Chinatown: New Chinese Migrants and China's Global Expansion* (NIAS Press 2007).



**Tibetans are one of the 55 recognized 'minority ethnic groups'** (shaoshu minzu) in China. In addition to mastering their own language, Tibetan schoolchildren are compelled to have proficiency in Chinese if they are to get a job later on. Chinese is the common language in towns, but in remote high-altitude herding areas the language spoken is Tibetan, and children from rural areas have difficulty in following a school curriculum taught in Chinese. An emphasis on maintaining their own language combined with the large geographical distances has encouraged the establishment of local primary community schools, often with an interior signaling local values more than seen in township public schools. The schools vary between day- and boarding schools. With limited funding, a simple tent makes it for a temporary classroom. Education takes place in many different 'spaces', be it village or township levels but also the domestic sphere, when a monk teaches a child within the encampment of nomad summer tents. The photos here are from my fieldwork amongst rural Tibetans settled as nomadic herders at the altitude of 3,500–4,500 m. in mountainous areas at Shiqu in Sichuan, Zeku in Qinghai and rural areas at Medrogonkar in Tibet (TAR). My positioning as a foreign female researcher traveling alone, speaking Tibetan but no Chinese and obviously having some knowledge of Tibetan culture helped without any doubt the positive reception: my questions and inquiries were met with less suspicion by local Tibetan nomads than if I had been part of a larger research team asking all households to fill out survey questionnaires.





Photos on this spread by Ellen Bangsbo

**Ellen Bangsbo**, an anthropologist with a BA in Tibetan Studies, has been affiliated at NIAS as a researcher. Her research focuses on education for Tibetans in Nepal, Tibet, Qinghai and Sichuan.





# Repertoires of resistance and the responsibility of 'knowing'

By *Emily T. Yeh*

*Entering the field the fieldworker tries to position herself in ways that give access to data while maintaining ethical standards that are also in accordance with local principles. However, as Emily Yeh shows, becoming part of the field means we are not always in control of how people interpret our identities. In her case, a 'misreading' of her identity was ethically problematic, but at the same time facilitated valuable information about the field.*

At the same time that my fieldwork was heavily shaped by political restrictions, it was also shaped by my incorporation into local repertoires of resistance – forms of everyday resistance that are 'simultaneously conscious of and constrained by the social and political limits of collective and individual action' – of the Tibetans I worked with. Their attempts to guide me into their everyday tactics of maneuvering around official restrictions allowed me to achieve certain understandings that might not otherwise have been possible. This started with my sponsor, who counted on me to 'avoid drawing attention to yourself' by virtue of my ability to blend in. When I lived in Lhasa, I was very frequently mistaken by Tibetans and Han alike to be Tibetan. Less often, I was assumed to be a Han PRC national. Occasionally when I informed local residents that I was not Tibetan, they refused to believe me.

This presented interesting opportunities and dilemmas, and greatly complicated my thinking about my own fieldwork. Unlike some other researchers in Lhasa, I never felt particularly worried about going to Tibetan friends' homes. Many Tibetans who invited me over for meals explicitly said things like, 'You should come over to our house to eat whenever you want, poor thing, so far from home. Come over, any time! It's no problem at all. After all you don't have blonde hair, blue eyes. You look just like one of us. No one would ever know the difference.' In fact, my Lhasa friends

were sometimes willing to take much greater risks than I thought were wise. Several Tibetans offered to let me live in their homes, because 'nobody will know the difference.' 'Don't worry,' they said, when I reminded them that this was not permitted, 'we'll just tell them you're a relative.'

When I complained of my research troubles, I was almost always told, 'Just pretend to be Tibetan (or Chinese); no one will know the difference!' My sponsor took the same approach. When I asked him to write a letter of introduction for me to give to village leaders, he did in fact produce one, rather than saying no directly. However, it was somewhat vague about my research (and said nothing about an in-depth village study). More importantly, his letter used only my Chinese name. It did not state that I was from the United States.

## Identity deception

In addition to the many 'Why don't you just pretend?' suggestions I received, over the course of fieldwork, five different Tibetan men offered to make a fake Chinese identification card (*shenfenzheng*) for me, and a handful of Tibetan women offered to lend me their cards. What struck me was the way in which these Tibetans – some of whom I barely knew – took pleasure, indeed downright glee, in thinking about how to help me get around my access constraints. It seemed that they really relished the possibility that I would 'get around the



rules' – but not because they had personally invested in my success or even cared particularly for my research or for me as an individual. The frequency and motivation with which Tibetans offered to make a *shenfenzheng* for me upon any mention of my problems as a foreigner suggested to me that this sort of identity deception is part of a repertoire of resistance to state disciplinary strategies. In de Certeau's terms, finding ways to get around such obstacles is a tactic, 'a calculated action ... [that] takes advantage of "opportunities" and depends on them ... an art of the weak.'

Although I declined these offers, I was unable to escape the question of how my identity would be read and interpreted. When I began to carry out village interviews, the fact that I had no clear, official letter of introduction, no peitong (*assistant*), and no other village contacts made me nervous about how to proceed. I hired several urban Tibetan friends as assistants. They all agreed, but on the condition that they would make the introductions in the interviews. One friend with whom I conducted a few preliminary interviews introduced me to a village acquaintance as a Chinese college student who was writing a book. Another Tibetan friend, about my age, insisted on presenting us as two (Tibetan) college students from Tibet University. A third always referred to me as 'a student from Beijing.' In all cases it was very clear that I was a student doing research.

What varied was the presentation of my ethnicity and assumptions about my citizenship. Being ethical in the local context I felt quite strongly that the correct and ethical thing to do was to present myself very clearly not only as a student, but as an American, despite what my sponsor chose to write in his letter. However, this view was quickly challenged by a middle-aged Tibetan cadre who agreed to help me. Cosmopolitan, well-educated, and traveled, he understood my research and seemed genuinely enthusiastic about my research questions. He promised to help by introducing me to a retired official in a nearby township, an old high school friend of

his. This official, he said, would be able to provide me with valuable information about one aspect of my project.

One evening, we took a taxi and then walked the rest of the way to his high school friend's home. In the taxi, he examined my sponsor's letter of introduction, and was satisfied to see that it had only my Chinese name on it. 'It's good that it doesn't say anything about the US,' he said. 'That would only cause trouble.' When we arrived, he introduced me to his friend. I was flabbergasted to hear him introduce me as a distant relative of his from a Tibetan area of Sichuan province. He explained to his high school buddy that I had gone to school in eastern China from a young age, but nevertheless spoke some Lhasa-dialect Tibetan, and was now here doing research in the TAR. He added that I had both a Chinese name (as indicated on my letter of introduction) and a Tibetan name. He then asked his buddy to introduce me to other township officials, and to help me with my work. I became very nervous and uncomfortable and, after we left, told my cadre friend in no uncertain terms that I would not dissemble about who I was and that I thought that his introduction had definitely not been a good idea. He, in turn, was completely exasperated, even angry, with me.

Back in his house, he explained his interpretation of the situation to me: 'Look! First of all, if you tell them you are from America no one is going to tell you anything real. You won't be able to learn anything at all. But if you just tell them that [my sponsoring unit] sent you and don't tell them anything else, then they are not responsible. If someone asks them, then they can honestly say they have no idea who you are, and that all they know is you are from [the work unit]. It's better for everyone that way, don't you see? It's better for them, and it's better for you. They *don't want to know!* To him, the ethical course of action was to give the people with whom I spoke a way out. They did not want to be responsible for the knowledge of who I was, and if I forced them to be, they would either have to refuse to talk to me alto-

gether, or they would have to bear responsibility that they did not want.

### Room to manoeuvre

The pressure of 'responsibility' is a disciplinary technique of the state. As I realized this, I began to believe that giving my interviewees room to maneuver by pleading ignorance was a more, rather than less, ethical choice. The other alternative seemed to be completely withdrawing from the research altogether. Instead, I gradually settled on a framework to help me resolve the question of identity that arose in each interview. I decided that any time I conducted interviews with Tibetan assistants, I would let them decide how they would introduce me, and abide by their introductions (as long as they were clear about my status as a student doing research, which they always were). When I conducted interviews on my own (as became increasingly common as time went on), or when I intended to do a series of follow-up interviews, I informed my interlocutors straight away that I was from the US.

**Emily T. Yeh** is Assistant Professor of Geography at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Her research focuses on environmental politics, the political economy of natural resource use and conflict, and the cultural politics of identity and development in Tibetan areas of China. Her publications have appeared in journals including *The China Quarterly*, *Society and Space*, *Development and Change*, *Pacific Affairs*, and *Environment and Planning A*.

Photo by Ellen Bangsbo



# Fieldwork as a becoming

By *Elin Sæther*

*Facing problems and obstacles is an inherent aspect of the fieldwork learning process, and cannot be avoided. Making difficulties visible as part of our common fieldwork discourse can transform them into signs of learning instead of indications of failure. In this article Elin Sæther shares some of her reflections on the fieldwork learning process.*

When all different sources of learning are taken into consideration, it becomes obvious that the learning process is going on throughout the whole fieldwork. In my case, I learnt about China while I was establishing a daily life in Shanghai. I was learning through conversations with students and friends (both Chinese and foreign), and by having to face obstacles, in addition to the learning process connected to the interviews. During almost every interview something was added to my understanding: the non-verbal information, the way things are told, body language, laughter, and omissions, which can also be a source of increased understanding. Through doing interviews in Chinese, my vocabulary increased, which probably also contributed to a sense of progress towards the end of my stay.

## Tacit learning

Being in China means being involved in a multitude of interactions. Living in a neighborhood, eating in restaurants, taking trains and taxis, shopping, dealing with formalities, spending time with informants, Chinese students, friends, and studying language – these experiences can all be understood as connecting points between the fieldworker and the local context. In addition, there are other textual and visual connections, such as reading newspapers and magazines (both English-language publications and Chinese), watching television and Chinese movies, listening to music or radio, observing people, street decorations and festivities.

Media representations are a rich source for understanding the framing of different prob-

lems, which connotations they carry, and how they are valued in Chinese public discourse. Through everyday interactions the fieldworker can learn about local understandings of the world, about local problems, and about what is considered fun or repulsive, important or trivial. Some of this knowledge is tacit, which makes it difficult to describe. Nevertheless, tacit knowledge is easy to recognize among those who share it, and because of this it plays a crucial role in the data collection, that is, in the learning of codified knowledge. This shared knowledge is important in developing an interpretative framework for understanding one's research topic.

The knowledge about how certain topics are represented will be reflected in the interview questions. Through communicating an understanding of a phenomenon, the fieldworker expresses a common starting point, which facilitates the later exchange of viewpoints and information. In my case, the preparations for the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, with its flower decorations, front page portraits of the CCP leadership, and red banners became something we could joke about during the interview, demonstrating that we had a shared understanding of the spectacle connected to Chinese politics.

## Making notes, keeping a diary

Writing is probably the best way to become aware of the new knowledge that develops during fieldwork. Keeping a fieldwork diary ensures that the early experiences, which after some time seem prosaic and commonplace, do not disappear. This is important in being able to reflect on the learning process. In the final part



of the fieldwork period, the knowledge gained during the first few weeks will often seem banal and self-evident. But the learning that took place during the initial stage was important in the process, and it will probably be important information for the future readers of the thesis too.

It is difficult to write about failures. In any representation of fieldwork, there are days that are omitted just because nothing happened. Days wasted watching American DVDs, reading spy novels or in other profitless ways. I cannot claim that these days contributed much to my understanding of the critical press in China. Still, they were there, in between the days when things were happening, as days where the feeling of insecurity and failure crushed the ability to cope with that insecurity and move on. Those days are difficult, as much because they are so very much out of place in fieldwork discourse, which emphasizes the active approach taken by the fieldworker. The empty days made me doubt the entire project, or at least question my ability to get something done that later could contribute to academic discourse.

### Fieldwork discourse

There are many normative statements within fieldwork discourse. In addition to constructing a particular image of the fieldworker, the different social relations within fieldwork are graded. Friendships with key informants are very highly ranked, while interactions in the tourist field are regarded as low value. The ranking reflects the perceived degree of difficulty in establishing the relation. The lack of established high status relations might become another source of a feeling of failure. Alternatively, instead of estimating the value of the connections against a preconceived value scale, it is much more useful to use the writing process to reflect on how these connections contributed to the research, and to the understanding of the field.

### Writing

The writing process following fieldwork will be familiar to most students, even though it has

its own challenges. Seen from the depressed viewpoint of the wasted days, coming home and dropping plastic bags filled with materials down on the desk can be quite a relief. Suddenly, it seems like you have actually done something, that time has been well spent.

At home, you are cut off from the context from which your materials originate, where people are familiar with the world that you want to write about, and suddenly you relate only to a fragment of all the things that are going on in China. As the writing process begins, many master and PhD students ask themselves what they can possibly write on the basis of their material. It seems very usual to doubt the quality of one's data. This partly reflects the insecurity connected to the fieldwork process, but some of the distrust of the material is probably caused by the remnants of positivism that most of us still carry with us. As the social sciences have moved towards a post-positivist paradigm, ideas about the objective researcher have been criticized and undermined, but positivist thinking still seems to influence the experiences of fieldwork.

Even in qualitative work, which does not aim to generalize the empirical findings, 30 interviews still sound better than 12. It does not seem to matter that neither 12 nor 30 interviewees make a representative selection. If the qualitative method is taken seriously, the number of interviews in itself is uninteresting. What is important is the kind of interviews, observations and interactions, and what the fieldworker gets out of them.

This is not intended as an argument against rigorous fieldwork methods, but as an argument for utilizing and recognizing the richness of the learning process involved in fieldwork. Based on the multiple sources of learning, it is possible to communicate a story which will be a meaningful addition to academic discourse.

**Elin Sæther** is a PhD student of Human Geography at the Department of Sociology and Human Geography at the University of Oslo, Norway, and works as a lecturer in Human Geography. Her dissertation is focused on the political role of Chinese media and the development of critical journalism in China.



**Government statements on large billboards** are common features in urban land-scapes in China. They often cover walls surrounding construction sites. The legend here states: 'Promote the five big strategies that guide towards harmony and innovation. The Spiritual Civilization Office, Hangzhou.' Photo Maria Pi Højlund Nielsen

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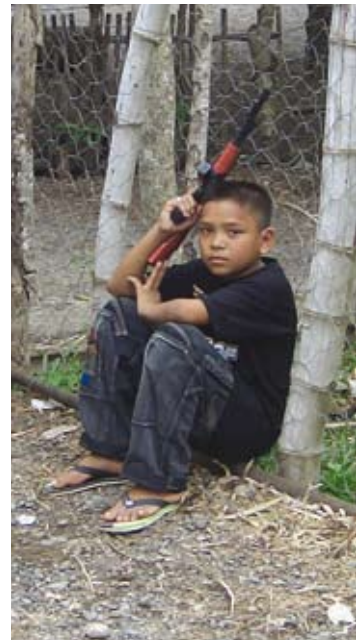
Senior Fellow and Director, Center for the Study of Politics and Security, East-West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii

- ***Caroline Hughes***

The Department of Political Science and International Studies, The University of Birmingham

- ***Shamsul Amri Baharuddin***

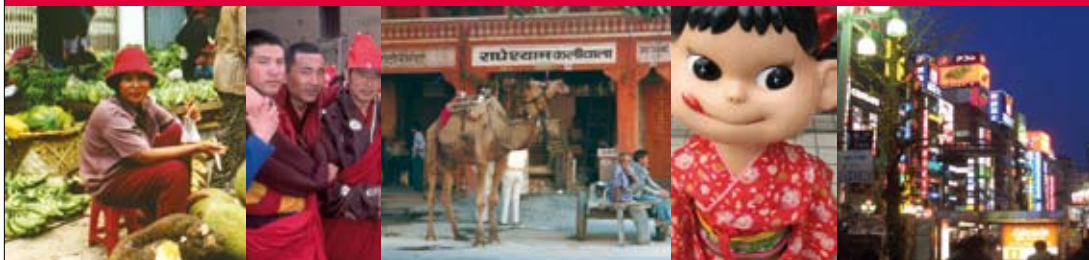
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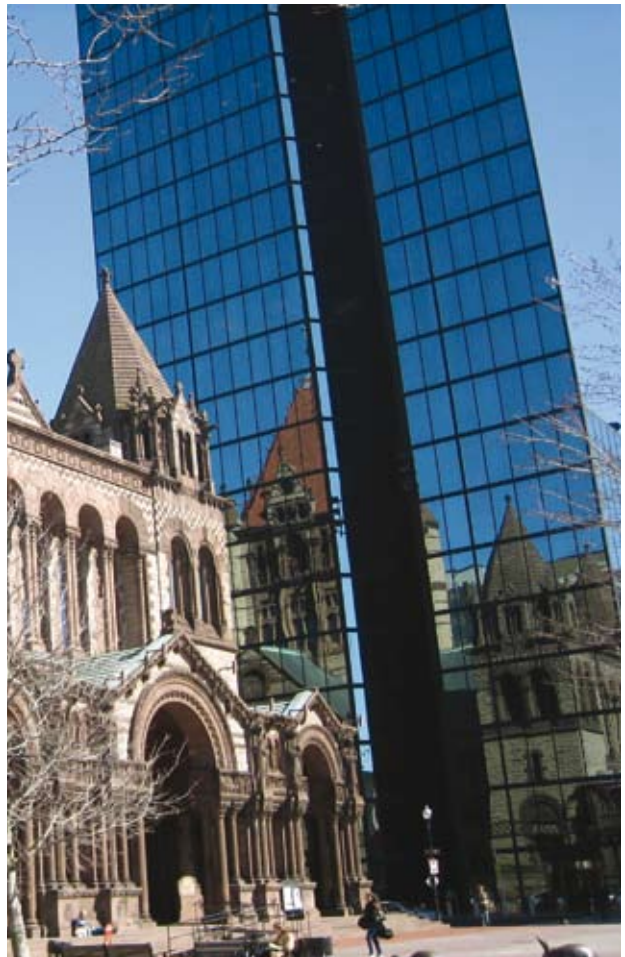
## NIAS warmly welcomed in Boston

*The AAS Annual Meeting returned to Boston a few weeks ago with weather much warmer than the blizzard experienced in March 1999. The response to the NIAS Press book exhibit was equally warm.*



Wearing the NIAS Press badge this time was Karen Mikkelsen, who reported big crowds and a tussel between conference goers for some of the new NIAS books just out. The conference was also an excellent opportunity for Karen to get to meet some of the people responsible for promoting and selling our books around the world. Karen is dead keen to repeat the experience next year in Atlanta. Let's see what the budget looks like!

Opposite: Karen with Marie Lenstrup (from European distributor ASBS) and Triena Ong (new Asian/Australasian distributor ISEAS). Below: Colins Kawai (from US distributor Univ. of Hawai'i Press).



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# A chink of optimism in the doom and gloom?

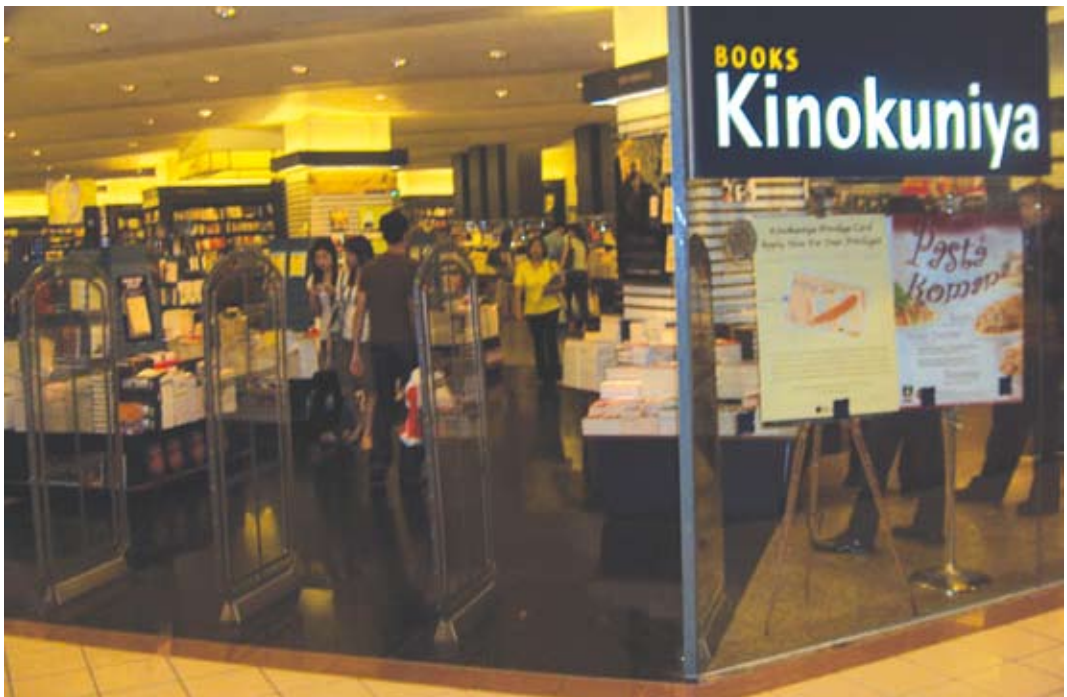
*The forecast for academic publishing in the West is largely unchanged: general gloom becoming darker and with increased outbreaks of despair likely by late afternoon. NIAS Press also suffers in this dismal climate but the recent completion of a new sales and marketing network in Asia and Australasia offers some hope.*

Publishers may not be happy with the collapsing academic library market and decline in personal purchasing by individual researchers but nor is there much joy out there among authors and other researchers *or* librarians. Much energy and investment is thus being put into new electronic products or refocusing on books with a wider appeal. Increasingly, authors of the more traditional specialized monograph, once a backbone of scholarly communication, find it hard to get published.

However, what is interesting here is that even today Western authors and publishers largely ignore Asia as a significant market for their books. Australasia is completely ignored. The syndrome is perhaps especially found in the United States, which until now has been a huge, easy and high-value home market for U.S. publishers.

Of necessity, NIAS Press – an English-language publisher without any English-language home market – is export oriented

The size and range on offer at Kinokuniya on Singapore's Orchard Road rivals what is on offer at leading bookstores in London. A range of NIAS books are found here with more on their way.







Gerald Jackson and staff from the ISEAS Publications Unit following a meeting in early March that charted the promotion and sale of NIAS Press books in the region.

but no less guilty. We have long been aware that our arrangements in Asia and Australasia were inadequate but until now have had to rely on U.K.- or U.S.-based distributors in the region.

As such, in December we were very pleased to finalize a new sales and marketing network in the region based on three nodes: Singapore (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies), Thailand (Silkworm) and Japan (United Publishers Services).

The logic of the move is compelling. There is an explosion in middle-class affluence in Asia that the big Western corporations are looking to tap with their consumer products, not least in China. But there has also been a huge growth in the numbers of middle-class professionals (not just academics) interested to understand their own countries better. Then there are the visitors, with Singapore (population 4.5 million) a prime example. In 2006, 33 million people passed through Changi

Airport. And because Singapore is not only a travel hub and tourist destination but also has an active conference industry, many of the 9.7 million who actually stopped over were highly educated book buyers. No surprise, then, that the size and range on offer at Kinokuniya on Orchard Road, for instance, rivals what is on offer at leading bookstores in London.

The proof of a pudding is of course in the eating; we shall read our sales reports with great interest. Nor is this the end of the matter. If eventually the bulk of our sales are in Asia, this must begin to shape what and whom we publish. Globalization works both ways.

*Gerald Jackson*



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NIAS Studies in Asian Topics, 34

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*Agrarian Transformation in the Uplands of Sarawak*

R.A. Cramb

- ☒ Traces the role of community, market and state in the agrarian transformation of a major upland society in Southeast Asia.
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This book examines the process of agrarian transformation in the uplands of Southeast Asia through a study of the Saribas Iban of Sarawak. Combining in-depth village studies with historical and comparative analysis, the book demonstrates that the Iban have been active agents in their own transformation, engaging with both market and state while retaining community values and governance. '[T]his study is certain to become a major reference point for future work on land use, tenure, and agrarian change in Upland Southeast Asia' (Clifford Sather).

NIAS Monographs, 110

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