［招待: 研究ノート］

Notes on Area Studies

from “Privileged” and “Expert” Positions

地域研究ノート

特権的立場とエキスパートの立場から

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Abstract:
This is an inquiry into the two types of views on the area of research that I found in my research on poverty-stricken families or people with disabilities and their families in Vietnam and East Asia. One is what Maynes and others call a “privileged” position of seeing, hearing, sensing, and living with what that area offers. The other is an “expert” position informed of scientific and professional knowledge about the area. Neither of these positions alone could make an area study stimulating and fruitful.

本論文では、障害者とその家族や低収入住民による日常の維持の現地調査を、ベトナムなどで進めながら筆者が気付いた、観察を支える地域研究には欠かせない二つの立場を検討する。まず、物理的な空間ではなく、社会的・物理的環境から歴史的背景にいたるまで、自分たちの生き方を通して人間が主観的に表現する地域をキャプチャーする「特権的」な立場がある。他方、専門的・科学的な知識に基づいて地域を構築しようとする「エキスパート型」の立場がある。地域研究の実践の場ではこの二つが絡み合いながら観察を活性化しているのである。

Keywords:
area studies, privileged position, expert, field research
地域研究、特権的立場、エキスパート、現地調査

There are areas to study, and there are area specialists, making area studies infinitely diverse. However, many area specialists often remain oblivious to the two positions of the privileged and expert. How these two positions interact is exhibited in the two Japan specialists: Ruth Benedict, an anthropologist, and Edwin Reischauer, a Japanologist and a US ambassador to Japan.

1. Cases of Ruth Benedict and Edwin Reischauer

Ruth Benedict, though not initially a specialist in Japanese studies, is best known for her seminal work on Japan, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946). [1] Having never visited Japan, her work exemplifies the study of “culture” at a distance.

In contrast, Edwin Reischauer, born in Japan and “one of the earliest professional scholars in East Asian Studies,” developed his expertise on Japan through direct, living experience. He taught Japanese language and Japanese studies and authored numerous books on Japan before becoming the US ambassador to Japan in 1961.

We start with Ruth Benedict. In 1944, the US government assigned Benedict to examine Japanese culture and society. She acknowledged that the assignment was “difficult” because it was too “easy in wartime to condemn [Japan] wholesale” and “far harder to try to see how your enemy looks at life through his own eyes.” She was aware that “it is not possible to depend entirely upon what each nation says of its own habits of thought and action” because “the lenses through which any nation looks at life are not the ones another nation uses.”

Her point is intriguing: “We do not expect the man who wears [spectacles] to know the formula for the lenses, and neither can we expect nations to analyze their own outlook upon the world.”

Using anthropological techniques, Benedict extensively examined how Japanese behaved in daily life, the “habits that are expected and taken for granted.” She believed that “no matter how bizarre his act or his opinion, the way a man feels and thinks has some relation to his experience,” and was particularly interested in exploring the “ordinary conditioning of such strangeness” even in the “trivial details of daily intercourse” in Japanese culture.

The problem was that she could not travel to Japan for her research. To overcome this, she relied on secondary sources, including existing literature, and analyses of Japanese films, plays, novels, and other cultural artifacts. She also conducted interviews with Japanese Americans “who had been reared in Japan.” She asked about “the concrete facts of their own experiences” because “many of these answers,” she was confident, “were embedded in the rules and values of Japanese culture and could be found more satisfactorily by exploring that culture with people who had really lived it.”

Despite the absence of field research, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* was a startling work on Japan for someone who studied Japan and Japanese people from a far distance. Clifford

Geertz praised Benedict for providing a picture in which "Japan comes to look, somehow, less and less erratic and arbitrary" and "the enemy who at the beginning of the book is the most alien we (the Americans) have ever fought is, by the end of it, the most reasonable we have ever conquered." (Geertz, 1988, p.116-25)

Ruth Benedict passed away in 1948, two years after her book was first translated into Japanese. In 1950, *Minzokugaku kenkyu* published a special edition of the reviews by Kawashima Takeyoshi and four other Japan specialists.[2]

While expressing admiration for Benedict's "scholarly ability," all were critical of her view of Japanese culture as static and homogeneous, and "ahistorical" for not considering the social and other changes since the Meiji period. They all expressed the regret that she never made it to Japan to observe it firsthand.

No doubt, the Japanese living in America were a valuable substitute. Interviewing Japanese, whether inside or outside Japan, would help uncover much about their culture. Jerome Bruner notes, "Human minds and lives are expressions of culture and history [as well as biology and physical resources]." (Bruner, 1990, p.138)

However, it is crucial to note that discussing their country, people, and themselves within their living context—in Japan—is fundamentally different from doing so in a foreign soil. "In their natural environment, their behaviors and thoughts are taken for granted between doing and understanding," Bruner said. It was much like "young kids being skillful at divvying up marbles but having little inkling of the mathematics that guides them—or perhaps, the Egyptians who fashioned the pyramids before understanding the geometry needed to do so." (Bruner, 2002, p.4)

When individuals are relocated from their daily context in Japan to a foreign country, they undergo an "extreme transition." (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p.37) Adjusting to that new environment demands greater effort and a heightened awareness of their origins and cultural practices. Japanese Americans' perception of Japan as a nation with a cultural identity, and personal origins in there becomes more pronounced.

Due, perhaps, to the urgent need to complete the assignment, Benedict failed to offer little attention to the Japanese Americans' narratives to reinforce the foundation on which to build what she thought were Japan and Japan's culture.

The opposite case is Reischauer. Born to missionary parents in Japan in 1910, he spent much of his formative years in Japan during the most problematic phase of modern Japanese history. He experienced the impacts of major historical events in Japan, which reached him on a personal level.

The Spanish Flu in 1918 forced his mother to keep him and his brother home, and she taught them for their entire third and fourth years at the elementary level. When the Great Kanto Earthquake struck in 1923, Reischauer was in Karuizawa and spared its devastating impacts. The fear of the earthquake and the scenes after it "hung heavily" on him and "lingered on" for years. (Reischauer, 1986, p.26)

In 1927, he left Japan for college, where he "was determined to become a typical American college man" (Reischauer, 1986, p.29) and tried to establish his "self-image as an American who happened to be born in Japan rather than a resident of Japan who happened to be an American citizen" trying to "fit into life in the United States." (Reischauer, 1986, p.33)

It was an effort for him to be American, but it was "natural and normal" for him to be in Japan even while in the U.S:

> My present home in Massachusetts I actually designed on the basis of our neighbor's house, but Japanese often describe it as being an adaptation of contemporary Japanese domestic architecture. If so, this is the result of Japanese artistic canons that I have unconsciously absorbed, not because of any conscious imitation. … The smells of Japan were equally distinctive. Some emanating from noodle shops and other little eating establishments or from food vending pushcarts were enticing. Others were repulsive, though accepted by me as part of my natural habitat. (Reischauer, 1986, p.4)

Reischauer's expertise in Japanese studies emerged from more than his being born and living in Japan. Three years before his birth, Reischauer's father, August Karl, began a missionary mission in Japan in 1907. August Karl's interest soon shifted to studying Buddhism, believing "... no point in trying to convert Japanese to Christianity unless one understood the religion they already had." (Reischauer, 1986, p.19)

Reischauer noted, "It was probably no accident that my brother and I became scholars in the Japanese field." (Reischauer, 1986) The "appalling ignorance and lack of interest in Japan" among Westerners also helped Reischauer to pursue Japanese studies. The same realization led him to "the study of history during college," focusing on the "almost nonexistent

field of Japanese history, and the broader field including China and Korea." (Reischauer, 1986, xi, xii)

After several years in the United States and Europe, he returned to Japan in 1935 amid Japan's turbulent phase. The "Taisho Democracy of that time had faded, to be replaced by militarism and incipient fascism." (Reischauer, 1986, p.53) Nonetheless, he "fitted back into life in Tokyo without a ripple" (Reischauer, 1986) and deeply immersed himself in Japanese studies, particularly in the research on the Japanese Buddhist monk Ennin.

In 1961, President Kennedy appointed Reischauer, then a Harvard professor, as the United States Ambassador to Japan, a position Reischauer had not even remotely expected to receive. Many may have suspected him of being too close to Japan and the Japanese. Still nothing stopped him from focusing on his primary goals: promoting the relationship between the two countries and enhancing Americans' understanding of Japan.

Not everyone with the privilege of living in Japan becomes an expert like Reischauer. Similarly, not everyone without direct exposure to Japan can produce a defining work on it like Benedict. These two American scholars highlight the need to consider the respective roles of having the privileged position of living in the area and that of an expert who is given the authority to define the area even from a distance.

The following section examines these two conflicting, mutually reinforcing, and often inspiring positions.

2. Privileged Position and Expert Position

I was born and raised in Vietnam and currently reside and work in Japan. Whenever someone casually ask me about Vietnam as if I were a Vietnam expert and knew everything about it, I wonder what it means to be born and live in an area versus being an expert on it. Would living, or being born, in an area make someone an all-knowing authority on it? Does an expert on an area need to be there or live there?

When we, the outsiders, enter an area, we have access to local people who hold a "privileged" position of living there. They possess a specific type and range of knowledge about their surroundings to navigate their daily lives. However, they may not be able to fully articulate that knowledge and often do not even think of their "being there" as a "privilege." Keeping the distinction between the two positions is an important mental exercise for area researchers.

For over 20 years, with others' help, I have been conducting field research in Phu Cat, Binh Dinh Province in Vietnam—an area heavily contaminated with Dioxin-yielding Agent Orange during the Vietnam War.[3] On one occasion, we visited a few families in a small commune in the Nui Ba mountain, one of the targets of the US's Agent Orange spray operation. Few locals were familiar with Agent Orange. Many recalled seeing the "yellow rain" and experiencing rashes afterward. Some recounted, "We herded cows into the mountain. We saw some substance. After that, many cows died, so we stopped taking them there."

To these locals, there seemed no need to differentiate between "causal relationship" and "correlation," between the yellow rains and the deaths of their livestock. Their narrative of the incident speaks the truth as long as their explanation is acceptable to the narrators and to those who share their living context.

The deaths of their livestock were not the only eye-catching incidents. Before our research, the medical evidence had linked the exposure to Agent Orange with the high incidence of congenital disabilities among the children born after the war. Yet, for the families with disabled children, attributing the disabilities to Agent Orange seemed a far-fetched explanation, disconnected from their everyday lives.

Instead, a familiar narrative, "it is fate," dominates most families of disabled children, with their neighbors nodding in agreement. Some families provide a little more involved explanation. "It is our fate. We live with it." One 17-year-old girl, the sister of a severely disabled girl, offered a twist: "My sister bears the sin for my whole family, so it will be my obligation to take care of her."(Vu, 2020)

It may appear that these people invented their own narratives out of nowhere. However, these explanations about their situation are not as random as they seem. The narratives and the narrators are very much aware of their immediate surroundings, physical, social, cultural, and all of the social norms and practices regarding what is allowed and not allowed, as well as what is acceptable and what is not within their community.

Putting it differently, the locals' understanding of events in their surroundings operates within "believable" realms, or a "narrative mode," rather than "verifiable" realms, or a "paradigmatic mode." (Bruner, 1986, p.11-43)

On this point, Maynes et al. also warn us that these people should be regarded as "privileged but not definitive observers of their own historical context." (Maynes et al., 2008, p.45) Their experiences, behaviors, and narratives are, in essence, their

interpretations of their situation within their context, i.e., within the "historical possibilities of their situation and time." (Maynes et al., 2008, p.59)

Vietnam began to take shape in my mind only after I came to Japan and when it became a research target. Until then, Vietnam was just the place where I happened to be born, grew up, and tried to meet the expectations placed on me as a daughter and a student, but certainly not as a Vietnamese. The war, too, was part of a distant history.

What I did not realize earlier was that I was in the midst of that history, that the landscape I was born and lived in was the *post*-war landscape, and that the hard work my parents had exhibited was the extension of that war.

Only after I began delving deeper into the locals' narratives in the research field did Vietnam become a complex "concept" that needed diverse ideas and perspectives to capture it. I began to recognize the "privilege" of having been born and lived in Vietnam, which ceased to be mere patterns, a spot in the map, and a remote history. I also discovered the uniqueness and complexities of everyone else's story, a richness that only those from their "privileged position" could provide.

Edwin Reischauer likely experienced Japan in a way similar to how I experienced and constructed Vietnam, even though he may have realized his "privilege" much earlier due to being born in Japan. Unlike me, he may have "never had to discover Japan." (Reischauer, 1986, p.3) His deep affection for Japan was tied to the landscape, the smells, and the housemaids. And this affection may have led Reischauer naturally to understand the difficulty and inherent unfairness of reducing the Japanese people to a single pattern. Herein lies his somewhat muted criticism of Benedict, who was deprived entirely of a "privileged" position:

> [Though]insightful on certain aspects of Japanese psychology, it scarcely portrays the Japanese. (Reischauer, 1981, p.124) ... For Japanese, these penetrating looks into their society from a single point of view can be stimulating and are not seriously misleading, *for they know* that these are but glimpses into far more complex realities. ... Japan's complex society is made up of a great variety of elements, some of which do not fit well together and all of which are subject to change. (p.125, Italics added.)

Benedict was assigned the role of "defining" Japan before she became an expert on the subject. She completed a report titled, "Japanese Behavior Patterns," in three months between May and August 1945, right before the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Benedict exhibited the skills of an expert, utilizing the tools of anthropology.

Some later consider her work as "unprejudiced" and "revolutionary." (Stille, 2003) However, that evaluation is about a simplified and warped reality. The Japanese whom Benedict interviewed were those who had been living outside of Japan. For them, Japan had likely been crystalized into a set of rules, norms, and practices they needed to maintain. Living in a foreign country, they were likely in a constant state of reflection on why certain traditions remain intact and should be upheld.

For Japanese Americans, following certain traditions must have also been an effort to preserve their roots, especially when situated between the two vastly different cultures—Japan, which they held close to their hearts, and America, where they lived. In many ways, their life in the U.S. meant they did not need to adapt to the changes occurring in Japan. They rather focused on protecting their own culture from American influences. They were distant from the pressures of everyday life in Japan and the changes taking place within that context.

Benedict was adept at identifying the general foundations of Japanese behavior, but she tied their behavior squarely to those foundations, focusing on the contradictory aspects rather than the changes in their behavior. Prompted by her assignment's pragmatic purpose, she, intentionally or not, reduced Japanese culture to a few fixed patterns.

Benedict's analysis did not go into the dynamic "negotiation" process between the individuals and their culture. Between the culture she reconstructed and the culture in Japanese American's narrative lies a nearly unsurmountable distance.

3. Study in the area[4]

> He has ridden across the length of the known world to Peking, yet it seems to him that the road from the palace gates to the interior is longer and more dangerous than any he has traveled. (FitzGerald, 1972, p.3)

Thus began *Fire in the Lake*, Frances FitzGerald's book about Vietnam. She parallels a world-traveling Westerner's walk to the palace's interior and the Western efforts to understand wartime Vietnam. She sees Westerners discovering that dealing with Vietnam is more complex and challenging than they casually anticipate. FitzGerald's analogy illuminates the contrast between

"studying in the area" and "studying the area" from a distance.

When one commits to being in the area for study, one must be prepared to suspend at least some of the preconceived concepts, theories, and abstractions about it. The experience of "being there" results, if temporarily at least, in a state of confusion, chaos, and even fear in researchers' mind; it helps uncover and test how the two positions of evaluation (expert) and understanding (the privileged) work and what their interactions in the researchers may bring about.

I frequently return to the same areas of research over a long period of time—a necessary step to overcome the inherent difficulty of understanding and explaining the lives of the observed in their everyday and changing complexities.

Phu Cat is one of those areas. I often let myself swayed by the local people's narratives, which are often filled with inherent contradictions. The contradictions are in my expert's eyes and cease to be so in my privileged eyes.

Here is an example.

A woman I met on one visit had five daughters and a lingering hope to have a son. She was with the fifth daughter with Down syndrome. To my inquiry, she claimed, "At the time I was pregnant, there was no ultrasound machine available to detect abnormalities." When I pressed her if she would have considered abortion, had the machine been available and detected the abnormality, she was quick and frantic, "No, no way." Her first reaction appeared to blame the medical establishment for not providing a means to detect the birth defect early. Her second reaction may have revealed a deeper emotional conflict, showing her fear and aversion: having chosen the abortion would have deprived her of the child she now loved and cared for.

These contradicting responses led me to wonder whether her initial statement was a convenient justification, blaming her daughter's disabilities on something beyond her control. Or, it could have been an excuse for not wanting to know the child's gender. She already had four daughters and hoped for a son.

Her conflicting minds are not there for me to dissolve. They are a precious feed into my continued efforts to capture "life" as lived in a chosen area of research.

There may be one more crucial factor in any effort to immerse oneself in a chosen research area: the physical and psychological distance to the area. The distance makes a difference in how the privileged and expert positions enter and interact within the researcher.

After the first few years of research, we began enjoying the local people's warm reception in Phu Cat. Some of them would invite us out for coffee or even light meals.

After a long day in the field, we would go straight to nearby street shops for noodles or steamed pancakes. These spots are packed with local families eating out. At the tables, people shout at the owner to prepare orders, or demand extra servings or spices. Everything is bustling and animated.

We sit on low tables and chairs on the pavement next to the shop, enjoying our hot noodles topped with fish cakes and chunks of pork knuckle while grumbling about the heat. The local families around us, busily digging into their hot bowls of noodles, stealing glances at us, complaining about the heat. We smile back at them as if to tell them we, too, are one of them.

Another scene of intimacy comes from our regular hotel, the first of its kind in the area. Two stars are displayed in front. One of the original three fell off. We constantly deal with shortages of toilet paper, bugs on the bed sheets, the pervasive smell of chlorine used to wash the floors, and uncontrollable air conditioners, among other things.

These problems notwithstanding, we would stay there because of its location close to a business section of Phu Cat and our research area. Each time we returned, the staff would be excited and ask where we had been. We would even ask them to buy us groceries so that we use their kitchen to prepare dinner. This local hotel is an extension of the communes of our research.

Of course, regardless of where we launch and end the day's research activities, the locals in the area know that we are outsiders, even though we hope that some of them view us as familiar and even intimate. The critical point we realize is that physical and social distance could easily become psychological distance, which is a real obstacle to our research.

Through the intimacy with the research area and the locals, some students who accompanied my research became aware of what the privileged position (of being in the research area) might entail as they became aware of the limited relevance of the language they had picked up in lectures at academic institutions and academic writings, i.e., the products of a purely expert position. They may have become aware that there are "privileged" and "expert" positions, as exemplified by Edwin Reischauer, and that Benedict is lacking.

There is a symbolic interaction between us and the locals, especially those we examine closely. We are researchers of the locals as we are researched by the locals. We are the subject of their gazes, gossip, and curiosity. The interviewees may casually tailor some responses to what *they* think we wish to know. Such a symbolic interaction with the locals is part of an area study.

4. In Lieu of Conclusion: Neither a tourist nor an observer

Area researchers are drawn to what they first perceive as unusual or strange. Studying in the area is a "privilege": monopoly of the opportunity to be exposed to the daily context of people's "strange" lives, with all the comfort and discomfort they entail from the climate, social living conditions, cultural norms, to complex social relationships, among others. These conditions and relationships either facilitate or constrain how people live, behave, and even explain their lives. The deeper we delve into their living context, the more confused we may become at least at first.

We encounter reality's ambivalence in one's life. That reality, however, does not necessarily imply conflicts, changes of heart, or even lies. As a psychologist observes, people may not aim to live their lives consistently as an integral whole. There is a need to bridge the discrepancies and conflicts in our behaviors and thoughts across different phases of life to maintain a sense of "unity" and "purpose" in how we see ourselves and how others see us. (McAdams, 2001)

As a field researcher, I travel to various locations in Vietnam and elsewhere in East Asia. Unlike anthropologists who stay in one area for an extended period, I opt for shorter but frequent visits over many years. Each visit ranges from a few days to a week or two. I ensure I return to the same areas and families. The distance between each visit time is crucial, as the physical distance between the research areas and home is crucial for me to process what I see in the area clearly.

First, seeing in the field is more than witnessing or recording what is there. It involves experiencing the act of seeing itself. It is a total reaction—physiological, psychological, and intellectual—to what my eyes see and the ears hear. That experience is both exhausting and exhilarating, confusing and mind-opening.

Second, seeing also involves "being seen." The locals see and react to us trying to capture their lives as they narrate them. Researchers must be just as concerned about their presence in the locals' responses.

Third, researchers may need to maintain an ever-present sense of the area, as if they were there to "live," not just pass by on borrowed times.

After each fieldwork, I return to my daily life with renewed energy to organize my thoughts, reconstruct the life I observe, and explore the "larger historical forces" that may shape the context and how people live within it. The field research enters its final stage, where I examine how the privileged and expert positions interactively dictate the research. That final stage of one research prepares new research into a relatively new area.

Notes

1. For this part, I rely exclusively on the first chapter of eBook version, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*. eBook produced by Al Haines Cindy Beyer & the Online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team. 2019.
2. Later translated into a special issue of *Japanese Review of Cultural Anthropology*, 2015 and 2016.
3. For some of my observations over the past 20 years, see Vu (2020). The purpose of the research is to capture individuals' decision-making over a period of time facing insurmountable problems with limited resources. Agent Orange-induced congenital disorders among the postwar generation are an example of the problems.
4. Here, I share Clifford Geertz's insistence on "study[ing] in," as opposed to "about," the area. (Geertz, 1973, p.22)

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