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Methods, Moments, and Ethnographic Spaces in Asia

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I did not initially grasp the editorial framing of “Asia as Method.” The chapters are, however, a collection of narratives explaining the developed methods inspired by Kuan Hsing Chen’s *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (2010). Thus, insight emerges into how the authors created methods, moments, and ethnographic spaces across Asia, while attending to the task of finding “inter-Asian referencing” to “create multiple reference points within Asia” (xxi).

The book has three sections, titled “Reflexively Re-Reading the Field” (4 chapters), “Thinking Across Space and Time” (3 chapters), and “Notes on Positionality” (4 chapters). I developed appreciation for two things: (1) the reason why the editors chose this topic and its value to several disciplines, particularly an anthropological approach to Asian-related area studies, and (2) how each author uniquely positioned themselves to explain their methodological and epistemological approaches to engaging with “Asia.”

One of my students recently lamented about one chapter I shared in a course, in which they explained that the book “reads like a blog piece.” However, I perceive this to be one of the book’s strengths. While each author has gone to some depth to explain their methodological approaches through disclosing anecdotal vulnerabilities, impasses, and hacks, what emerges is that the ways in which someone conducts fieldwork must become resiliently creative. As such, graduate students can learn from these narratives about how to enter and be in the field, as well as how to conceptualize it beyond somewhat static and outdated frames. They can also learn how to relate—not only to the Other,

but also the Self. Furthermore, what emerges is that in the early twenty-first century “Asia,” the “field,” the “researcher,” and the “researched” exist in far more complex and dynamic flows that require unique methodological patches as needed to deal with whatever issue might arise.

From a geographic perspective, section 1 covers the Western Pamirs, India and Nepal, Cambodia, and Pakistan. Section 2 focuses on Cambodia, India and Papua New Guinea, and Bali. Section 3 focuses on Japan, India, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. The chapters that have the greatest impression are “Astronauts of the Western Pamirs: Mobility, Power, and Disconnection in High Asia” (chapter 1), “The Bali of Anthropology and the Anthropology of Bali: Research in a Fast-Moving Part of Asia” (chapter 7), and “‘We Have Always Been Cosmopolitan’: Towards Anthropologies of Contemporary Complexity in Japan” (chapter 8).

While this does not suggest these chapters are superior, it is these from which I recall more immediate detail. Notably, “The Astronauts” is a great starting point. Perched up high on top of the world, “mobility between places in High Asia that are disconnected by complex national boundaries as well as by colonial and Cold War legacies” is discussed (3), through highlighting the ambiguity of space and dominion, and by comparing these “astronauts” with Bronislaw Malinowski’s *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. This results in “stretching definitions of modernity, urbanity, and the centre” (3).

The themes of the other chapters are equally engaging and thoughtfully explicated. Chapter 2 focuses on methodological issues around repositioning the individual self and field in relation to subnational and marginal narratives within and adjacent to the Indian state, through examining Maithili language and culture spread across India and Nepal. Chapter 3 explores issues pertaining to Cambodia’s Cold War legacy and the very real threats of trying to do fieldwork in a region under authoritarian rule. Chapter 4 focuses on Karachi and the ways in which urban ethnography can be approached while thinking reflexively about how one’s positionality and identity are “constantly shifting concepts that are interrogated and challenged during the process of fieldwork and that are related to the social and economic pressures that are driving Asian urbanisms at large” (65).

Chapter 5 returns to Cambodia to explore the idea of “The Child as Method.” One of the key arguments focuses on the fact that while

children as research subjects are considered inherently powerless and therefore require special protections, local assertions of cultural autonomy may reinforce children’s status as more empowered, and as bearing more responsibilities, at an earlier age than the strict dividing line of eighteen years would suggest. (87)

Chapter 6 argues for the epistemological power of comparison. It focuses on how and why an inter-Asian, multi-sited cultural comparative method can work and should be considered feasible. It focuses on grassroots women’s organizations located in both India and Papua New Guinea (Asia and Oceania), providing insight into “how to undertake a comparative ethnographic study of NGOs” (116).

Chapter 7 provides two approaches to the study of Bali by its co-authors. The chapter aims firstly to “provide a rough sketch of the complex landscape of this new Bali and secondly to outline the way each of us, half a generation apart, have developed methodological approaches” (147) toward “an increasingly complex and interconnected world. . . . Our role then as ethnographers is to trace relations, make sense of the global

connections and flows, and indeed incommensurabilities between levels of scale as we encounter them” (161).

Chapter 8 focuses on the author’s attempt at a reflexive examination of “anthropological life in, and now I daresay of, Japan” (171). It probes the anthropological Other and the realizations of how that might not fit with the reality of how the Other lives and how the researcher encountered it. It plays on probing the essentialist narratives that take for granted the less-than-bounded physical and social realities present in contemporary Japan, particularly as they relate to the economy of reinscribing “essential Japan,” even with “forced or chosen cosmopolitan” realities that exist (187).

Chapters 9–11 are respectively located in India, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. They explore similar issues to chapters 2 and 4. The common thread is how they are written by women who rely on varying degrees of feminist anthropological framing to explore how identity, legitimacy, authority, and access are perpetually constrained and negotiated. The insights of these chapters build on the notion of becoming more reflexive and probing these moments of awkwardness and tension through the dynamism of the insider/outsider binary. In unique ways they provide insight into the implicit negotiations the researcher must manage, within oneself and explicitly with others, around gaming performativity and the perceived expectations of those they engaged with in the field. Adding to this is the fact that these women are mostly locals and insiders who studied and lived abroad and have typically returned “home” to conduct research. Thus, they had to contend with unintended and unforeseen issues around familial obligations or societal expectations while trying to do fieldwork. This leads to questioning one’s loyalty, location, and identity. Chapter 10 provides a slightly more circuitous narrative to the field site through explicating the anxiety and insights gained by understanding the perceived values of context-dependent identities by being perceived as not so much the Other, but, let us say, Another.

Overall, I enjoyed reading this book. It made me think in new ways about new places and topics, all of which I can draw from. It has much value as a teaching resource, beyond anthropology and Asian studies.

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