

# Planning and Preparing for Fieldwork

Shin'ichi NAKAMURA

## 1. Creating a meticulous plan

The act of fieldwork is conducted in order to achieve a particular objective. Any purposeless act, undertaken with a “let’s just head off, we’re sure to find something” attitude, is nothing more than drifting. As long as the objective is clear, the strategy for the fieldwork will fall into place, and the necessary preparations also become apparent.

And if that’s all it is, then fieldwork seems like a breeze.

Indeed, that’s the case. But we need to think a little more calmly. Fieldwork is the act of going yourself to a certain region or community in order to conduct research there. If the subject of that research were your own university or a shopping district where you go shopping every day, then you probably wouldn’t need to do too much preparation and could most likely complete the research with ease. But these are very unusual examples. What about if your research required you to head to the Amazonian jungle to study a tribe living there, or to the deserts of Arabia for an archaeological dig? Immediately there is a palpable sense of danger, and physical hardship seems more likely, too. And, of course, there’s the question of how much it will all cost. Few research projects are blessed with all the money and time and people they can use, which is precisely why it is necessary to maximize the opportunity presented by fieldwork. And that requires plenty of meticulous preparation.

Specifically, the following points need to be determined in advance: 1) the location of fieldwork; 2) the procedures and methodology of the fieldwork; 3) the time of the year and length of the fieldwork; 4) travel arrangements to the fieldwork location; 5) accommodation during the fieldwork; 6) emergency measures; 7) necessary expenses.

Unexpected accidents are an inevitable part of fieldwork. Bad weather might make work impossible for days at a time. Sickness might render you incapable of working. Inadequacies in paperwork might cause research hold-ups. A research plan that’s too ambitious or too tightly packed

might cause panic when these unexpected accidents occur. You should always retain a little leeway in your research plan.

## 2. The importance of gathering data

The next step is to make preparations according to the research plan. The most important thing to do first is to collect relevant academic information on the fieldwork you are about to conduct. Perhaps this goes without saying. After all, you should have already read relevant reports and papers, talked to your teachers and senior students, and asked for their advice in the process of determining what fieldwork to conduct. But there is still the chance that you may have missed something important. It might be the case that the research you are planning to conduct in the field has already been conducted and published in the local language; such things happen surprisingly often. It’s always best to check again.

There is also much to learn from disciplines other than your own field of specialization. Information on the climate and the terrain of the area you are planning to visit is vitally important. It is also vital information for planning the schedule for your fieldwork and for getting equipment ready. Looking at maps and satellite pictures of the fieldwork location, plotting that location, and getting a sense of the area are also important stages.

Being familiar with the manners and customs of the local area can also help you to avoid becoming involved in any unnecessary trouble during your stay, and is useful in building relationships smoothly with the local people. Behavior accepted as entirely normal in your own country may be taboo in the area you are planning to visit. In Thailand, it is unacceptable to pat children on the head, for example, and in Germany, sniffing is considered very uncouth.

Violations of the local etiquette might result in you being reprimanded or looked at with suspicion, but the consequences of violating the law will not be as light. For example, damaging cultural property or removing cultural

property to another country is forbidden in most countries. Care must be taken not to end up like a certain notorious student, who scribbled graffiti onto a very famous edifice and ended up all over the papers for it. There are also certain areas where access is restricted to foreigners, such as areas surrounding military facilities and national borders. Even if access is permitted, it may be forbidden to take photographs or use GPS technology. Make sure to check all relevant legislation, in order to avoid being faced with arrest or large fines.

For language, the best possible solution is fluency. If the counterparts of your research can speak Japanese or English well, then it might be possible to conduct research without having any understanding of the local language. But that is not the case for research based on interviews. For such research, you must be sure to learn the local language in advance.

### 3. Thinking about safety

Fieldwork, particularly fieldwork conducted overseas, can result in exposure to unpredictable risks. Incidents of terrorism, kidnap and natural disaster may be few and far between, but robbery and traffic accidents are not so uncommon. Attention should also be paid to the risk of infectious disease and food poisoning. By familiarising yourself with the risks present at your destination, you will be better placed to avoid them, and to mitigate any damage that might result where the risks cannot be avoided. More important than anything is to cast aside any thought that someone will be there to protect you, and instead to be very clear about the fact that you are responsible for protecting yourself. That alone should be enough to decrease your chances of becoming caught up in an accident or crime as a result of carelessness.

It should be possible to check for useful information on safety in countries around the world via foreign ministry operated websites. In Japan, for example, the Overseas Safety HP, a website operated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA), provides useful information on safety in countries throughout the world: <http://www.anzen.mofa.go.jp/>. There, you can check if any threat information has been issued for the part of the world to which you are planning to travel.

This threat information is published on those countries for which it is thought necessary to issue cautions and warnings to Japanese citizens planning to travel to or stay in those countries. It is divided into four levels, as follows:

- ① Take necessary precautions
- ② Reconsider your travel plans
- ③ Consider postponing your travel plans
- ④ Leave the country. Postpone your travel plans.

The threat information on MOFA's website is not legally binding in terms of being able to limit travel to or stays in any given country. However, it is certainly worth paying attention to, as would any information issued by any similar service from any other foreign ministry. In particular, for countries for which a warning level of 3 or 4 has been issued (in some cases, the relevant risk will have been reported in the media in Japan, but there can be cases in which the researcher has heard nothing of the risks posed by travel to a certain region, and is surprised by the situation upon arrival), it will be necessary to postpone the fieldwork. The same website also contains a wealth of other useful information, so it is a good resource to use when planning fieldwork.

### 4. What to prepare in advance

We all know that you need a passport to travel overseas for fieldwork. Some places also require a visa (particularly for long stays), which needs to be applied for well in advance at the embassy of the relevant country. In case of loss or theft, you should make copies of your passport and visa. You should also make note of the contact details of the embassy or consulate of Japan in the country to which you are travelling.

It may be possible to pay for round-trip tickets and hotel charges for reservations made from Japan in advance. Payment for local travel, food, sundries and compensation will have to be made locally, however. There are a number of ways to do this, such as payment by credit card, or in cash, either in the local currency or in a foreign currency such as American dollars. Of course it is dangerous to walk around with large amounts of cash, but there are also many regions where credit cards and traveller's cheques will not be accepted. It is a good idea to obtain as much information as possible in advance, including information on whether you

will be able to withdraw money from your Japanese bank account at local banks.

You must enrol in travel insurance before departure. There are many different types of travel insurance, so you should choose a policy with coverage appropriate to the situation in your destination and the nature of your fieldwork.

To avoid becoming ill during your stay or getting injured, you should be taking care of your personal health well before your departure. If you have any pre-existing conditions, you should discuss them with your doctor, and establish whether it is appropriate for you to conduct the fieldwork. You should also prepare any medicine or health-related items required for the duration of your trip. Depending on your destination, you may need to have vaccinations to prevent any risk of infectious disease.

If you intend to drive a vehicle at your destination, you will need to obtain an international license in advance, while still in Japan. If you have a valid Japanese license and have the necessary documentation regarding your travel, you should be able to obtain an international license at your local prefectural Driving License Center, for a fee. You should note that some countries, such as China and Vietnam, are not party to the Geneva Convention on international driving licenses, so you should check well in advance how to obtain your license.

## 5. What to take

Apart from the obvious—clothes, toiletries, items for daily life—the items you will need to take on your fieldwork will vary considerably according to the location and circumstances of the destination and the content of the fieldwork. For example, researchers going on an archaeological dig would require the following equipment and tools:

- ① Excavation equipment (shovel, joren pointing trowel, hand hoe, trowel, bamboo spatula, hand broom, sieve, winnowing basket, etc.)
- ② Measuring equipment (transit, level, plane table, levelling rod, measuring tape, drawing board, GPS receiver, etc.)
- ③ Survey equipment (graph paper, rules, divider, compass, mold, writing equipment, etc.)
- ④ Photography equipment (digital camera, video camera, lenses, tripod, electronic flash, reflector

board, etc.)

- ⑤ Organizational equipment (plastic cases, plastic folders, labels, tape, glue, etc.)

These can be divided into those items which can be purchased locally and those which need to be brought from Japan. The latter can either be divided between the researchers going on the fieldtrip, if there are enough of you, and if that will not be possible the relevant items should be shipped to your destination in advance by international post. This runs the risk of damage and loss, however, and so valuable items should always be carried by hand. Even where an item can be purchased locally, what is available may be expensive or of poor quality, so it may be prudent to take it from Japan. If the plan is to conduct research a number of times in the same region, then it may be possible to rent an office or storage space locally, where all necessary provisions may be stored, thereby saving on the cost and trouble of postage.

Laptops are vital to fieldwork, whatever the research subject or methodology. A single laptop is a great asset, ideal for storing and sorting fieldwork records and photographs. If you have access to the internet, it can also be used for email correspondence and internet searches.

A communication device, such as a mobile telephone, is extremely useful for getting in touch with your organization and family, particularly during emergencies. Mobile telephones designed for use in Japan cannot be used overseas, so you will need to choose a model that can make and receive calls when overseas. The use of mobile telephones is now extremely common in most overseas countries, and international calls are possible even in regional areas. But, of course, this will not be the case if you are in the middle of the Amazonian jungle or the Arabian Desert. In such cases, you will have to rent a satellite phone to make direct contact with Japan. Satellite phones can be very expensive, so be aware of the cost efficiency when making any agreements. If you have no access to a mobile telephone, you can also look forward to another benefit; you will find yourself freed from your addiction to email.