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Training for fieldwork in Japan at home: Reflections on the 2022 D Summer Field School

Introduction

Fieldwork and ethnography are important contributions to the methodological toolbox of social sciences used for generating data in close proximity to and during lasting engagement with the social issues in the focus of research. Fieldwork and ethnography also support the description of other people's lives in detail, making them understandable on the basis of first-hand experience. Ethnographic fieldwork is best suited to gaining a deeper understanding of living conditions from the perspectives of those being researched (Corte / Irwin 2017). Data collection is done in the field, drawing on a variety of observation techniques and data collection methods that must be selected—as well as learned and tested—beforehand to fit the research question and conditions of the research site. Particularly when researching the social lives of people in different cultural settings and about their views on life, fieldwork is better qualified than textbook studies and quantitative survey techniques (Bernard 2006). The best way to make the complex demands and opportunities of ethnographic field research clear to students and next-generation scholars is in the field.

But what to do when the field site suddenly becomes inaccessible, as was the case after Japan's borders remained closed to research visits for more than two years during the COVID-19 pandemic? Can the same learning outcomes be achieved when the research site is transferred from Japan to a location in Austria that merely resembles Japan? In this essay, I will explore the potentials and pitfalls of researching Japan at home by reflecting on the insights gained from running the 2021 D Summer Field School in Austria's mountainous Pinzgau region as a substitute for the 2020 Aso Summer Field School originally planned to take place in the Aso basin in northern Kumamoto where our research activities on rural well-being are concentrated. I will first briefly expand on the general didactic and educational benefits of the field school as a distinctive way of learning before moving on to outline the winding and

bumpy road to the D Summer Field School. The final section will reflect on the feasibility and applicability of field school training in Austria as a contribution to the education of next-generation scholars of Japan, through the voices of participants. These voices were collected in two focus group interviews with all participating students two days after their return from the field. The gender balance among the nine students was nearly even, all but one were in their early 20s, and except for one graduate student, all interviewees were in the second or third year of their undergraduate studies. Together with a postgrad student who had supported me during the field school, we asked the participants about their impressions and experiences. We wanted to know what their goals for the Summer Field School were, whether they felt they had achieved these goals, where they saw problems in implementation, and what lessons they had taken with them from the experience. The focus group interviews took place online via Zoom and lasted for about 80–90 minutes each; recordings were transcribed with the help of a teaching assistant and analysed using the software package MaxQDA.

The potential merits of field school classes

When teaching qualitative research methods in lectures and textbooks, the focus is on unique research techniques and theoretical conceptualisation. However, the actual practice of these techniques occurs in the active process of individual research in the field, where researchers are often confronted with unexpected turns and twists (Mannay / Morgan 2015). Researchers know that ethnographic research is neither static nor fixed, but students do not. Relocating the learning environment into unfamiliar and relatively challenging fields helps students realise that ethnographic research is personal, transformational, contingent, and must respond to often-shifting conditions (McGranahan 2014). By doing guided fieldwork together with their professors, students learn to use uncertainty and serendipity to their advantage during research (Hendry 2003), to cope with dead-ends and frustration (Hirsch 2008), and to appreciate the 'ethnographic moment' as the effect of engaging the field site and the site back home, where learning, planning, and writing take place, together (Strathern 1999).

Field schools place students and the learning process directly in the research field and have been justifiably praised for their didactic value. Students are likely to learn better when they are involved in hands-on research projects, including "collecting, verifying, and analysing data, and preparing a research report" (Schmid 1992). Autonomy in planning the chosen research tasks and self-responsibility for proper implementation enhance student mo-

tivation and enable the development of transferable cooperation, teamwork, reflexivity, and leadership skills. Peer assessment is particularly useful for improving motivation levels, autonomous learning skills and a sense of connectedness with other students (El-Mowafy 2014). In order to review the work of their peers, students need to reflect on key learning objectives and proper fieldwork methodology. In the preparatory stages, students become more intimate with the field and their new role as researchers by obtaining background information, designing the research plan, and establishing contacts and points of entry. In the midst of this hands-on engagement with places, actors, and events, students reposition themselves as actively self-responsible research subjects when they, for example, have to reschedule field days, develop coping strategies for unexpected obstacles, or follow new leads. As students gain a greater understanding of their research field through engagement, direct experience, and peer assessment, their identity shifts from that of a student to that of a researcher (Keeling 2008). Students not only obtain a better understanding of the features of their surroundings and of the relevant theories for making sense of their observations, but also a greater awareness of their own role in the learning process and their personal engagement onsite (Marvell et al. 2013). Without the authoritative voice of a course instructor or textbook explaining the rules of action and sequential logic of processes, they have to come to terms with the messiness of the moment, the confusion of multi-perspectivity, and the ever-present possibility of emergence even when it seems like nothing is happening. Confronted with the unpredictable immediacy of the field, students learn to cope with phases of boredom and heightened attention, recording, and categorising their observations in order to identify patterns and interpret possible meanings. The affective as well as cognitive resonance spectrum naturally leads students to grapple with issues such as subjectivity, presuppositions, one's own role, and positionality. Like all fieldwork, a field school is an intense experience that often pushes students and researchers to their limits, both physically and mentally –thereby providing opportunities to learn more about oneself and grow from the challenges.

Field schools have been criticised for being "frequently prohibitively expensive and inaccessible to many [...] restricted to graduate students, effectively ignoring the majority" (Copeland / Dengah 2016). In my eyes, the greater challenge is figuring out how to fit a field school, including the preparatory and post-visit data analysis courses, into the tight corset of the Bologna curricular structure. Taken all together, a two-week summer field school actually requires a commitment of a year and more, if one includes the ap-

plication period for external funding. However, if properly prepared, ethnographic fieldwork training is nevertheless possible on an extremely tight financial budget when, for example, (a) students are invited to collaborate on pre-existing research projects (Schmid 1992), (b) teaching, preparing for, and participating in the field research project is included as part of the curriculum, (c) students are empowered to use time-saving approaches and participatory rapid assessment techniques such as non-participant observation, object collection, and semi-structured interviews, and d) prior frequent visits by faculty members have generated stable relationships in the field and the foundations for mutual trust and unobtrusiveness are therefore laid, allowing students to quickly access the field and their research subjects.

Outline and design of the 2020 and 2021 field schools

In 2019, I successfully applied for funding from the Toshiba International Foundation and the Japan Foundation to hold a follow-up course to the 2018 Aso Summer Field School (Manzenreiter / Miserka 2018). While the 2018 ASFS was designed to provide survey data and ethnographic data on the interplay of social connectedness and rural well-being in Aso, the 2020 programme was designed as an expression of gratitude for the support and trust we found in the region since beginning our research in Aso in 2015. The output of the 2020 summer field school was expected to contribute future regional diversity and local sustainability by supporting inbound tourism and the international outreach activities of local stakeholders.

Tourism is a key industry with which outlying regions can counter the impacts of population shrinkage and economic restructuring. The beauty of natural scenery, regional history, local customs, and traditional ways of life have special appeal for visitors who want to get a glimpse of Japan that goes beyond the metropolitan centres of the past and the present. However, local stakeholders too often fail to understand the objectives of travellers from abroad, or they do not know how to communicate with foreign markets. Administrative boundaries restrict collaboration with stakeholders from neighbouring areas, thereby jeopardizing the great potential to be found in pooling the local resources of slightly wider areas to attract special interest tourism. The 2020 Aso Summer Field School was designed as action research to develop recommendations for short- and midterm visits to the Aso area to attract foreign visitors wanting to explore Japan beyond the beaten track. Student participants actively engaged with materials on and from the region with the aim of using local resources (nature, history, culture, and people) to design

self-guided theme trips ranging from a half-day to multiple days in length. It was hoped that, in the long run, domestic visitors might emulate the travel behaviours of international tourists, thereby generating new sources of regional income and local sustainability.

Despite the insecure outcome of the funding situation pending decisions in late April 2020, a group of 13 students applied to participate in the Summer Field School and enrolled in the four-month preparatory course. The nagging sense of uncertainty due to funding was only aggravated by the Japanese government's restrictive COVID-19 travel rules, announced a few days into the summer semester. Only the hope of the restoration of normal travel conditions before the summer travel season kept participants motivated to prepare their work packages for the field visit. Students were unable to meet in person for most of the semester but got used to meeting and supporting each other via various online channels. During the course, students learned about (a) the region of interest; (b) natural and cultural resources on the ground; (c) organisations in charge of managing tourism; (d) hands-on ethnographic research methods, including interviews, unobtrusive participation, taking field notes; (e) designing special interest travel recommendations, and (f) advertising travel plans to unknown audiences via the internet. By the end of the term, student working groups had designed four thematic travel itineraries to encourage tourists from abroad to visit the target region for extended periods of time. Each travel itinerary gave travellers the opportunity to delve more deeply into local history, culture, and customs and to learn more about Japan's history in general, the influences of geography and topography on community life, and the connections between folk traditions, myth, and agriculture. For this purpose, the working groups drew on a variety of sources that were sparse and, if available at all, usually only in Japanese. Students studied online and print materials issued by tourism authorities on the target places and topics, studied folklore and regional history texts, and compiled the logistical data needed for a self-organised exploration of the region's cultural, culinary, or geological treasures. It was planned to discuss the itineraries with local tour operators and municipalities, have them tested by participants during the field visit, and finally to develop them as English website content for local tourism promotors. Additionally, the material would be compiled with photos, films, and stories gathered from interviews with inhabitants and researchers of the region.

When it became clear that the borders would remain closed throughout the summer, the field school was rescheduled to the fall. When this trip could

again not be realised, consultation with the sponsors resulted in the transfer of the summer field school to the following year. However, a year later, none of the originally enrolled students were still available. Four weeks into the summer term, in our third semester of distance learning, I suggested a radical change to the new group: holding a summer field school in rural Austria in order to avoid the frustration of the previous year and to gather comparative data. The students' initial response was sceptical, which I personally understood very well.

The only precedent, by early Viennese Japanologist Alexander Slawik, who sent his students to do fieldwork in the Burgenland region and other sites of eastern Austria (Kreiner 2000), seemed to me to be a slightly crazy and ultimately quite strenuous exercise that was based partly in his own roots in ethnology and folklore studies, and to the lack of a curriculum prior to the early 1970s that would have required a thorough legitimisation of such unusual coursework. It should be noted that Slawik's own writings reveal the epistemological foundation of such academic exercises (Slawik 1961). However, the reason I changed my mind on this was due not only to learning more about his theoretical reflections or the insurmountable problem of travelling to Japan during the pandemic. Rather, I came to agree with the earlier scholar's concept that the cultural discrepancy between the academic life of a student in Vienna and the Austrian countryside is considerable enough to experience a sense of foreignness and reflect on positionality while systematically rehearsing methods collecting observational and interview data in unfamiliar terrain. Thinking about some of the junior undergraduate students who participated in the 2018 Aso Summer Field School but lacked the language skills to contribute to the generation of data through conversations and interviews, I realised that the problem of activating student skills could be mitigated by reducing the cultural distance between the urban us and the rural other. The game changer was ultimately the creditability of participation in the field school as an internship, as required by the curriculum. Students usually conduct their internship in Japan or doing Japan-related activities, but were largely denied access to this during the pandemic. Grants by the faculty and by myself, the author, mitigated the financial burden to students' budgets.

I chose the small village community of D-village in Pinzgau/Salzburg as the target region. Since I had repeatedly taken colleagues and students from the department, as well as visitors from Japan, to the village for retreats and excursions, we had ample insight into the locality and reliable access to gatekeepers and interlocutors. The university owns a simple sports and seminar

centre in the village, thus solving any logistical problems by providing affordable lodging and meals and sufficient space for group meetings, preparatory work, and retreat.

The municipality covers an area of 49.7 square kilometres at the foot of the 3,000-metre-high Hochkönig massif. About half (49.8%) of the municipality's area is covered by forest and a quarter (25.2%) is alpine terrain (as of 2020, Statistik Austria). 18.4% is used as permanent settlement area, 14.9% for agricultural purposes. The region is one of the most sparsely populated in Austria. In 2021, 721 persons lived in D-village, coming to 15 persons per square kilometre (or 85 in the permanent settlement area). The majority of the population lives in the village centre or in smaller settlements along the main transport routes. There are 310 buildings registered in the cadastre, including 6 hotels and numerous smaller lodging establishments. Tourism is a significant economic factor in the municipality, which provides capacity for 1,600 overnight stays during peak season. About half of all jobs in the municipality are in the tourism sector. A good two-thirds of the 365 local employees must commute to work and cars are indispensable not only for this: only four buses pass through the village during the day, and getting to the nearest train station (13 km) requires a taxi or private car. It takes a little over an hour to travel by car to the provincial capital of Salzburg, 70 kilometres away; it is 18 minutes to Saalfelden (18 kilometres), 25 minutes to Bischofshofen (22 kilometres), and 35 minutes to Zell am See (31 kilometres). There are no schools in the village and the local doctor opens the clinic only sporadically; the only small supermarket is open half days. Most of the people in D finished their educational career at the level of compulsory education (29.5%) or with an apprenticeship (40.6%). 25% attended secondary school and 3.3% earned a university degree (Statistik Austria 2022).

The landscape of Austria, like Japan, consists of up to 70% steep mountainous areas. This shared feature, however, has completely different impacts on the social and economic structures of the two countries, mainly due to Austria's significance in domestic and international winter sports and alpine tourism. Whereas in Japan, regional decline and population shrinkage is widespread throughout the country and in some cases has even reached metropoles and regional urban centres, in Austria many rural regions benefit disproportionately from tourism. Rural outmigration, population aging, inadequate infrastructure, and structural economic insufficiencies are not unknown in Austria, but, particularly in the alpine regions of western Austria, many localities have succeeded in reversing the socioeconomic urban-rural

divide to their advantage. Of course, not every community nor the entire population of a place benefit equally from tourism, and the prosperity of some generates social and environmental consequential costs that are imposed on all of society. We heard critical voices about this from the population during interviews and private conversations, in the pub late at night, and in written comments on our survey.

As D village suffers from over-tourism, the focus had to shift from action research and tourism promotion to questions of subjective well-being in rural peripheries (Manzenreiter 2016, 2018). By replicating the research program conducted in Aso in 2018, we wanted to find out whether rural areas contribute to the well-being of the population through specific forms of social organisation and interpersonal interaction. By comparing observational and survey data, we also hoped to see whether country-specific differences between Japan and Austria became more visible when using the same survey instrument. During the 10-week run-up to the field school, students independently worked on one out of five work packages. Four to five persons per group were responsible for (a) reviewing literature on happiness and well-being in Austria, (b) recording the socio-economic, historical, and topographical characteristics of the study area, (c) method development, (d) planning and logistics, and (e) finances and PR. Information on work progress and materials was shared through a digital learning platform and discussed in weekly online plenary sessions. Students met in person for the first time in the field. A short note composed by the PR team announced our stay in the community newsletter, and photos and news about Japan and happiness research shared on Instagram and Facebook aimed to reinforce interest in the topic.

By the time the Summer Field School began in July, the questionnaire, a translated and adapted version of the survey used in Aso in 2018, had been written, tested, and accordingly finalised. The schedule, still rudimentary at the time of field entry, ultimately featured a dense work schedule in the two weeks from July 17–30, including the personal distribution of questionnaires to all households, site visits to the municipal administration and public infrastructure facilities, a hike led by the local branch of the mountaineering club, guided tours of the biomass heating plant and wastewater treatment plant, and meetings with representatives of the local brass band, volunteer fire department, hunters association, and two cultural heritage preservation groups (Trachtenfrauen and Hochkönigpass). Due to COVID-19, some appointments were cancelled at short notice (flag consecration), postponed (open-air concerts, the Hundstein Ranggeln wrestling competition), or added at short no-

tice (meeting with the mayor, distillery visit). Furthermore, the students also staffed a meeting booth in the marketplace, where locals and visitors could learn to fold origami or write in Japanese, and enjoy cold *mugicha* (roasted barley tea) and *taiyaki* (a fish-shaped waffle with red bean filling) made in the hotel kitchen. Daily time slots were set aside for morning briefings, instructions, and work assignments; in the evenings, there were opportunities to share experiences, reflect, and write field protocols. Care was taken to provide for enough downtime to distance oneself from fieldwork and/or the group.

Although the survey was distributed to the doorstep of all households, including Japanese snacks and tea bags as a small sign of appreciation, the response rate was only 30%. A total of 138 questionnaires could be used for analysis. Results were presented at various occasions throughout the following year, including the annual meeting of the Japan Association of Regional Policy and the conference of the German Association of Japanese Studies.

Student voices: Goals accomplished

When asked about the goals of the field research session, the students tended to answer in generalisations, differentiating between the didactic and practical research orientation:

> The goal can be seen, firstly, in the introduction to field research and the techniques of working in field research, and secondly, in the collection of data for comparison with Aso research. (2.2)

> I would say there were two major goals. One was to learn about field research methodology, what you can do, interviews, surveys, how to approach people, how to start conversations, how to conduct them, how to lead them, what difficulties there can be. The second was, of course, the research goal, more or less related to the interplay between social contacts and structures in a village community, and how these can then affect feelings of happiness and cohesion. (1.3)

Interviewees agreed that these goals were more or less achieved:

> Yes, I think that we obtained a very good insight into field research, what it could look like. I mean, we had never done this before. (1.5)

> I also got a lot out of it and I'm glad that I signed up. […] In retrospect, I really think that the field study itself was very well done. (1.1)

The methodological goal of the Summer Field School was addressed indirectly when participants were asked what they had learned that would benefit their future development:

> I have always shied away from conducting qualitative interviews, I just didn't know much about it, but something I will definitely take with me is that a good interview needs preparation. […] I found the instructions to be very good and structured and I think that I would very much like to take this with me. (2.4)

> In general, these methods, let's just say, the interview or the structure of the questionnaire, these could be techniques that could later play a role in Japanese studies with regards to, how should I say, seminar papers, bachelor theses, or further research projects. (2.2)

> I didn't expect that fieldwork would necessarily interest me, […] but now after the actual field visit, I can imagine more and more that this will become something that I would possibly do in some form, not necessarily professionally, but in some way in the future. (2.1)

Gains in transferable skills were also seen in terms of basic social and communication skills:

> Yes, so approaching people, I think we have already learned a bit about that. (1.5)

> So, just to listen more carefully in a conversation and to look at the questions again is, I think, certainly a competence that is important. (1.1)

> Personally, I have also learned a bit about how to approach situations, how to formulate questions in certain situations, how to perhaps steer or move the conversation forward […] and the other thing was how to approach people, because personally, I am not really the kind of person who would approach someone on my own and be very open, and I have found it helpful to move a bit outside my bubble and I think it is always helpful to try something new. (1.2)

On a personal level, the participants were very happy with the progression of the field weeks and had many positive surprises, as they stated during reflection. Most of the praise was directed at the group itself.

> What really worked well was the overall group dynamic and the group itself. I think there was really a very good dynamic, good teamwork from all sides. (2.2)

> I think that in two weeks you can already see how far you can actually take each other, for example, when we all handed out the questionnaires and met in the evening and talked about it, that you can take something from every other team afterwards and also make use of it yourself. And everyone took part in the brainstorming, so I think that was worth a lot. (1.1)

> I didn't expect the group dynamics to be so good, I have to admit. I'm a bit pessimistic, because I'm used to the fact that groups tend to diverge a bit, and you somehow don't know what the others are doing, or information isn't passed on, and that everything is somehow a bit uncoordinated. (2.4)

The prominent emphasis students placed on team building and group dynamics is probably due to the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic. All the interviewees had spent most of their time during the previous semester separate from each other at their homes. The summer field school was the first time in nearly two years that they could be together with their peers. The assessment of collaboration and mutual assistance may have also been caused by various communication and coordination problems that occurred during the term. Only two of the five working groups had few problems when self-organizing their task packages; the other three were partly unaware of their weekly or overall goals, were difficult to reach or failed to motivate team members, and did not know how to effectively use the online platform's forums and file storage or communicate through their own social media channels.

This may also explain why they rated the contribution of their own preparatory work for achieving these goals and accomplishments as being rather insignificant. The fact that the establishment of rapport with gatekeepers and interlocutors, arrangement of guided tours, preparation and testing of survey questions, and collection of interview topics were also the result of the preparation phase passed by comparatively unnoticed. However, the importance of contacts, trust, and supporters was mentioned in the interviews.

> In such a small place, even getting in without knowing anybody is probably very difficult. (1.1)

> I think we were very lucky to know G., because when his name came up in conversation, people were immediately like, "Ah yeah ok, I see you're staying there in the village," and that helped tremendously. (1.3)

> […] and what was also unexpected was that the mayor took so much time for us and did so many things for us. The fact that we almost had the key to the village, more or less, was also a bit unexpected. But it was also somehow a good feeling to know that we were taken care of from above, and were actually so welcome. (2.2)

Negative experiences in the field were most likely to be reported in the area of mental and physical stress, due to glaring summer heat, overexertion, and the challenging demands on concentration and memory skills during interviews.

> What I didn't expect was that my feet would get so cold and that the sun would be so extreme, because at home I live in a very similar region (2.1).

> I also expected that sharing a room with someone would not be easy, and this expectation was exceeded in the negative sense. (1.4)

> I found it quite difficult to follow the conversation, also to take notes, […] for example, the interview with the hunter, he threw out lots of information very quickly in the beginning, and I couldn't keep up with the writing. (1.1)

> What I didn't like were the extremely long interviews, which sometimes lasted for two to two-and-a-half hours, especially if they were at 8 o'clock at night, it was very exhausting to somehow keep the ball rolling, because one's concentration was gone after a while. (1.4)

Field research, as the participants experienced, is stressful because of long working days and the feeling of not being able to divest oneself from the role of the observer.

> I had a picture in my mind of us only working during certain periods of time, and after a few days it really became clear to me that it was just almost 24 hours a day and you are

> also constantly busy observing. It was there for many of us in the background, but we didn't fully realise it until later. (1.2)

> Because even if someone tells you, you're going to have to observe for two weeks straight and you're going to feel a lot of stress because you're always kind of on duty, I don't know if you can understand that when it's just pointed out to you. (1.3)

To be fully prepared for such a situation is impossible as

> ...when you're out in the real field, the whole day is stressful and that's with you all the time, that's the added factor that you can't simulate. (1.4)

Another factor they mentioned was the feeling of rejection and strangeness they faced as visitors.

> So that people were quite dismissive, especially in the beginning when we were over there, I mean, I knew that they might not be so open to people from the University of Vienna, but I would not have thought that they would be so dismissive. (1.5)

> I also have to say that I expected very little cooperation. When I look at it from home, I have the feeling that our stay was accepted from a distance, and then the unexpected thing was that, over time, it became apparent that we had settled into the community a bit. (1.3)

If more time had been available, more would have been possible, according to the unanimous tenor of the interviewees. Often, reflection on what was learned expressed the realisation that research in the field comes with unexpected surprises that require adaptive strategies or creative solutions.

> So I learned that field research is something very organic, and by that I mean that it is not really something that you can plan or that has to follow a particular fixed guideline, but something that happens, how shall I say, naturally and unplanned and also spontaneously. (2.2)

> You can plan three weeks well, but whether it really works out the same way is questionable, especially with the dynamic aspects of field research, where we are a larger group and so many factors influence the research process. (2.3)

> The more time you have, the better it is, and if you could have made it longer than two weeks, it would have been of course very, very good. (2.2)

> In the very beginning, I wouldn't have wanted to be there for three weeks, but now of course I would, especially because we already know each other, and if we were to plan another excursion as a group, somewhere else, then I think almost everyone would be in for three weeks. (2.4)

Rating the experience

From the students' perspective, the field research training was a great success, primarily due to the experiences gained during the actual field visit and when applying field research methods. However, as a professor, I wonder if the long-term effects might rather be expressed in the appreciation and promotion of general soft skills such as teamwork, flexibility, openness, creativity, and spontaneity than in the implementation of methodological knowledge for future projects, such as interview techniques, questionnaires, time planning, network building, etc.

Both positive and negative memories of the field school may have a formative impact on similar research projects, even if these effects require reflection and directions for action that were not formulated in the jargon of ethnological theory, project planning, and organisational management of the interviews. For example, relativity and positionality were never directly addressed in such terms, but that doesn't mean that students didn't become aware of them:

> It was interesting to observe how people came up with ways to introduce themselves and behave on their own. That's probably part of fieldwork, too? And that's something that will probably also be different from place to place, because it will certainly be quite different in Japan than in Salzburg or when I do research in Vienna. (1.1)

> We realised that each person always has a distinctive point of view. That's why I think it's important to find several contact persons right from the start, so that you can get a coherent picture and not just bring your own subjective impression in later. (1.1)

> Yes, you learn to get outside of yourself a bit more, to interact with many different people and to bite the bullet a little and approach people (1.1).

From a methodological didactic perspective, it is interesting to note that in the unanimously positive assessment of the field school experience, there was little mention of gaining academic knowledge, and none at all about the research impact of the lower-than-expected distribution and response rates of our questionnaire survey. Things that were more at hand received more attention, such as rural well-being and the social fabric of community life.

Students said that during the two weeks of residency and through the guided tours and conversations with local people:

> … we also gained good insight into what life and the community are like. (1.5)

> … and also what we learned in the interviews, we really learned how this village works, which is also applicable to other places and cities, that was very interesting in terms of content. (1.3)

> And yes, what else did I personally learn during the excursion […] just very, very much about life in the country, or what satisfaction in the countryside is made up of, and that not everything is perfect, and yes, in principle what makes country life especially in this remote area so unique. (2.2)

Conclusion

I do not entirely agree with the interviewees in these points. Without denying that they have learned a lot about the village and its people, they and I are very far from understanding the social rules and connections of this village community, or "the village" in general, and much less about how these may or may not be related to individual and collective happiness. This difference in perception speaks to the assumption that—regardless of any positive outcomes and appreciation—participants did not settle into the intended role as researchers, instead continuing to see their contribution and experiences from the perspective of students.

From my own experience, I still struggle to acknowledge the applicability of a summer field school in Austria for Japanese studies. While still believing the theoretical benefits outlined above, I also see the difficulties in the implementation process in this concrete case and several possible lessons if another attempt is made. I agree with students in their self-assessment that they learned a lot about themselves and the difficulties of research in an unknown field. Advancement in methodological skills, problem solving, teamwork, and critical reflection of one's own position in the research process

also deserve unanimous acclamation. However, more time would be needed to consolidate these experiences. Students would immensely benefit from joining the processing of research data and thus accompanying the project to its end. However, this would require a minimum of three courses total, spread out over an entire academic year, during which one has to deal intensively with data and questions that are, if at all, only indirectly relevant to the understanding of Japan. Creating a full package suffers from the efficiency corset of the Bologna curricula structure, from the lack of a suitable minor curriculum open to students from other area studies, and from the scarcity of funding opportunities for reorganising the summer field school to last for six to eight weeks. Yet these are practical problems and, as a scholar, I am more concerned with ideas and ideals. No matter what, I look forward to taking students out in the field again, whether in Austria or Japan.

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