COMMENTARY

IS THERE AN I IN ANTHROPOLOGY?
THOUGHTS ON STARTING FIELDWORK IN JAPAN

In the spring of 1983 I gave a paper to a small group of post-
graduates from the Oxford Institute of Social Anthropology. The
source of the paper lay in a nagging doubt I had felt for some
time about the general nature of anthropological reportage, and
in particular about my experience while undertaking research for
my undergraduate dissertation on a Western Buddhist Community of
which my own brother was a senior member. For several reasons,
which I detailed in the paper, I felt that I had not been totally
honest in the final account of my dissertation and that my dis-
honesty (undertaken with the purest of motives) had seriously
affected the conclusions which I had presented. This lingering
guilt had been compounded into a more general doubt by often
hearing anthropologists tell stories about their own fieldwork
experience which are conspicuously absent in their monographs.
I could not help but feel that the personal accounts of mistakes,
disasters, loves and hates that occur during fieldwork have a
vital bearing on any thesis. Why, therefore, I wondered, is the
anthropologist so often invisible in his own work and why does he
try so hard to subordinate his individuality to his role as an
anthropologist? Surely an anthropological account without a
background history is like a newspaper story without a context,
except that experience has taught us what to expect from the
Daily Telegraph or the *Daily Mirror*.
     The British philosopher J.W.N. Watkins once wrote that:

     One method is to take the reader into your confidence
     by explaining to him how you arrived at your discovery:
     the other is to bully him into accepting a conclusion
     by parading a series of propositions which he must

accept and which lead to it.[1]

It would, of course, be an unfair exaggeration to suggest that this is a subject about which anthropologists have not thought. In 1971, David Pocock pointed out that:

> The observations of the sociologist, no less than the myths of the primitive he studies, are determined by his own society, by his own class, by his own intellectual environment.[2]

From this point he goes on to discuss what he calls the 'Tripartite Dialogue' which exists between the researcher, the subject and the academic community. Unfortunately, he does not expand extensively on this point, but it is interesting that he should talk of the 'sociologist', since it is generally to the work of sociologists that we need to turn for further enlightenment, as a short, if somewhat jargonistic, piece by Paul Willis demonstrates. Referring to what he calls 'the self-reflexive technique and the analytic moment', Willis argues that the researcher must

> ... analyse the intersection of his own social paradigms with those of the people he wishes to understand. Such an intersection, of course, speaks as much to the researcher and his world as it does of any other world .... Usually thought of as unavoidable costs, the 'problems' of fieldwork can be more imaginatively thought of as the result of a fine intersection of two subjective meaning constructions. The points of contact have profound significance for the understanding of fundamental differences between social worlds .... This is the real validity of the method: these destructive moments provide the mapping points for another's reality. It is in this complex moment that we can speak of empathy.[3]

Following Willis, therefore, I proposed in my paper that the anthropologist in the course of his fieldwork should not only recognise that he is an individual but exploit the fact. Anthropological fieldwork should start from the acceptance that (1) *the anthropologist is an individual*, with personal prejudices, blindnesses and presuppositions; that (2) he *intrudes* forcibly,

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[1] ' Confession is Good for Ideas', *The Listener*, Vol.LXIX (April 1983), pp. 667-9; at p. 668.

[2] *Social Anthropology*, London: Sheen & Ward 1971, p. 84.

[3] *Profane Culture*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1978, p. 197.

rarely subtly into (3) *another group of individuals* (regardless of the fact that he is more interested in their social and not their individual aspect) with their own biases and beliefs; and that he is (4) *interacting with every individual* that he meets on an individual basis, person-to-person as well as on a cross-cultural level. Each of these points should be described as fully and as explicitly as possible in the final narrative so that the readers of the thesis (be they academic or not) can judge for themselves the results and conclusions of the author against the background from which he came to those findings. The anthropologist should not present himself as a mere data-collecting and analysing machine but as an aware and sensitive human being; moreover, rather than that this approach should be seen as 'unscientific', on the contrary the more the anthropologist is subjectively aware, the more he might, in effect, be called 'scientific'. Perhaps the best example that we already have of such an approach in anthropology is Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*, which allows us to follow the path of his spiritual and intellectual growth and, as one reviewer has said, 'to get to know and be delighted by one of the scholarly minds of our time'.[4] That Lévi-Strauss can recognise the source of his own ideas and is able to express them on paper may be the true measure of his genius.

   It was with such thoughts in my mind that I decided that it would be useful to write a paper just at the start of my fieldwork, in the hope that my final thesis can be seen not as a post-rationalisation or reconstruction of that position but as a gradual process towards understanding. Of course, I am aware of some of the limitations of such an attempt for, as the sociologist John Lofland has rather cynically put it,

> What goes into 'how the study was done' are typically the second worst things that happened. ...what person with an eye to the future ... is going to relate anything about himself that is professionally discrediting in any important way?[5]

Nevertheless, I think it worthwhile to try and present as clear a picture as possible of where my research stands at the moment, and of how I hope to see it progress over the next two years.

   Immediately after gaining a degree in anthropology and sociology from Durham University, I came to Japan in 1981 on a scheme run by the Japanese Ministry of Education for young British graduates to teach English in Japanese universities, colleges,

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[4] Quoted on the flyleaf of the 1973 edition published by Jonathan Cape.

[5] *Analysing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*, Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth 1971, p. 132.

schools and companies. I was assigned to Ube, a city of 170,000 inhabitants in Yamaguchi Prefecture at the extreme south-eastern point of the main island of Japan (Honshu); the mention of the place often elicits the response from more sophisticated Japanese, *'honto ni inaka inaka'* ('that really is the Styx'). Since I was one of the first publicly employed teachers in the prefecture, my arrival met with considerable media interest and people were certainly as curious about me as I was about them. For one year, I taught in nine different Junior High Schools (for children aged between twelve and fifteen), but was based for three days a week in just one school of 700 students where, unusually for a foreigner, I was treated as a full-time teacher with access to information and was expected to attend meetings. I had decided to stay a second year in Ube, when I was given the chance to start research at Oxford and decided to return to England instead. Nevertheless, despite innumerable frustrations and problems with the language, the experience of just one year in a remote part of rural Japan teaching in a variety of schools proved to be an invaluable background to the present research.

I spent eighteen months in Oxford, much of the time being taken up with intensive language work, especially reading. Most important, though, was to discover an appropriate research topic. For several reasons which had come out of the year I had already spent in Japan I had already decided that I wanted an area of study which involved extensive cross-cultural contact. First, I had become very wary of the idea that it is possible somehow to 'pick up' a language during fieldwork, and I wanted to work in an area where less than perfect Japanese (my experience was already sufficient for me to know that mine, at least, could never approach perfection in the time available) would not mitigate seriously against my understanding of what it was that I was studying. In a sense this is a greater problem for anthropologists of Japan than of many other places, since Japan has such a long history of literacy, demanding a high level of ability in reading the Chinese characters (*kanji*) which the Japanese imported as a writing system. Secondly, I felt - largely influenced by Victor Turner - that it was by looking at what happens at the edges of a society, where the definitions of cultural boundaries are most threatened, that one can learn the most about what is at the heart of the culture itself. Thirdly, I was aware of the current intense Japanese concern with the concept of *kokusaika* (internationalism), a concept which they seem to conceive of in a way vastly different from the way it is conceived of in the West. As Japan has been increasingly brought into the international arena through its economic activities over the past few years, it seemed that to understand the Japanese notion of internationalism could be of extreme relevance in the modern world.

With these criteria in mind, I toyed with the idea first of examining the role of foreign Mormon missionaries in Japan (because of their large number and extensive network into even the remotest corners of the country), and then the role of the Jews in Japan (as the only foreign business community to have had

long-term post-war success), before Dr Waswo of the Nissan
Institute in Oxford finally pointed me towards the idea of study-
ing Japanese children returning from overseas and the problems
they have in re-entering Japanese society. Looking through my
file of twelve months' newspaper cuttings, I discovered several
editorials specifically on the subject of the *kikoku shijo*, as
returnee children are called in Japanese, and I realised that I
had been put onto something both tangible and relevant. Every
year around 9,000 Japanese children return after receiving some
or all of their education overseas, and for many of them it is a
considerable shock to enter, or re-enter, Japanese society. They
are said to face both institutional and psychological problems:
institutional, because social status in Japan is so heavily de-
pendent on educational achievement, which in turn is largely
measured by the ability to accumulate vast numbers of facts over
a set period of time, so that anybody missing out on even a rel-
atively small portion of such an education is heavily penalised
as a result; psychological, because the returnees' way of think-
ing may be too individualistic for the group-oriented society to
which they return. Recognition that a real problem exists has
meant that, since the mid-1970s (when the Japanese expansion
overseas began most dramatically) the number of full-time Japanese
schools overseas (*nihonjingakko*) has risen to around 120, the
number of supplementary schools (*hoshuko*) to about 50 and the
number of schools which receive grants from the Japanese Ministry
of Education specifically to help the readjustment of children
returning to Japan from overseas (*ukeireko*) to about 90.[6] To
undertake a phenomenology or ethnography of how the tension
between internationalism (*kokusaika*) and integration into Japanese
society (*kokunaika*) is perceived and tackled, while helping
children readjust in just one of these *ukeireko*, is one of the
major foci of my fieldwork in Japan.

   Having decided upon a fieldwork area, I then spent several
weeks making an intensive examination of as many types of insti-
tutions as possible in Britain where Japanese currently receive
education. This was to try and gain some idea of the range of
educational experience gained by overseas Japanese, and I dis-
covered that in Britain this spectrum extended from a nursery
school in North London to a two-year finishing school in Win-
chester for forty girls aged twenty, and included full-time and
part-time Japanese schools, day schools and boarding schools,
state schools and private schools, international schools and
American schools and, of course, language schools which are at-
tended by more than 4,000 Japanese each year in Britain.[7] The

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[6] Tetsuya Kobayashi,*Kaigai Shijo Kyoiku: Kikoku Shijo Kyoiku*
[Overseas Children's Education: Returnees' Education], Tokyo:
Yuhikaku 1981, ch.1.

[7] M. Houser, 'The Winchester College Connection', *Japan Educa-
tional Journal* [London], no.16 (1983), pp. 9-10.

type of education received by Japanese, in Britain at least, depends very greatly on their age, sex, where they live, the parents' idea of the correct balance between internationalism and Japanese-ness and, quite simply, financial resources: the result was far from homogeneous.

My final aim, during my time in Oxford, was to try and gain some idea of the essence of Japanese culture as portrayed in the literature, and it is to the effect that this 'background reading' has had on my research methodology that I wish to devote the rest of this article. What struck me most, as I spent several months reading and making notes, was that the more I read about Japanese culture the less coherent my picture of it became. Or, perhaps, the more I read, the more it seemed to contradict my previous reading and personal experience. In a sense, of course, this is purely the nature of anthropological research, since it is people that are the focus of study and people are not always predictable in their actions. However, while many writers have been extremely aware of the apparent contradictions inherent in Japanese culture - what Ruth Benedict called the 'warp and woof of books on Japan'[8] - few seem to have asked how, or even if, the Japanese actually live with such contradictions in their everyday existence. A second phenomenon, not unconnected with the foregoing, of which I also became aware during this reading period was the way individuals, upon discovering my research area, would be quite happy to lecture me on Japanese society, even though they might have the minimum personal or literary experience of Japan. Moreover their accounts were extremely coherent, whereas I found it extremely difficult to construct even the smallest generalisation about Japan without being able to think of any number of exceptions. I like to think of this as the 'Plastic Pearl Phenomenon' after the title I was offered for a book on Japan ('for nothing') by a publisher whose own knowledge was particularly limited. Of course, I am aware that deep in this comment lies a certain 'academic snobbery', but when I look back through my own early letters and notes from my first visit to Japan, I too was guilty of what Jon Woronoff calls an '"instant understanding" and "inside view"' version of Japanese society.[9] Puzzled by this inversion of conventional wisdom regarding the road to knowledge, I could think of no other solution but to undertake a thorough sociology of knowledge of all my reading to see who had written what, when and why.

Following the example of Neustupný,[10]   I divided my reading

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[8] *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1977, p. 2.

[9] *Japan: The Coming Social Crisis*, Tokyo: Lotus Press 1983, p. 10.

[10] J.V. Neustupný, 'On Paradigms in The Study of Japan', *Social Analysis*, no.5/6 [Special Issue: *Japanese Society: Reappraisals and New Directions*] (1980), pp. 20-28.

into three categories: Western authors, a small group of Marxists and Japanese scholars. I started with the pre-war Western authors whose main interests were in the exotic elements of Japan that would appeal to Westerners, and it is of course no coincidence that the romantic reminiscences of those such as Hearn and Chamberlain are still reprinted almost annually in Japan today. The post-war period saw the arrival in the West of many genuinely serious academics of Japan. Highly specialised though they often were and also extremely proficient in the Japanese language, what was of crucial significance was the fact that they had come to their speciality and obtained their proficiency through the exigencies of the era - the desperate need to learn more about Japan during the Second World War. As these scholars carried their studies into the post-war period, their comparative outlook was often painfully limited to their own culture, and therefore it can be no wonder that many such authors (e.g. Abegglen, Cole, Keene, Passin, Seidensticker and Vogel, to suggest only a few) tend to focus only on those facets of Japan which force themselves most effectively on their Western consciousnesses. Since they are generally comparing such different cultures as the United States and Japan, the latter is naturally presented generally in terms of polar opposites and not structuralist similarities. Of course, the vogue for functionalist anthropology in the post-war period, when societies were studied solely in their own right, must also take a share of the blame for this approach. However, even today, those who approach the examination of Japanese society through the study of the language are still liable to end up with the same problem of a narrow comparative focus, though they naturally have great advantages in other ways over outside specialists who must turn their attention to the study of the language for the first time.

Rather than take up a disproportionate space on the few non-Japanese Marxists who have written about Japan, it should suffice here to repeat Kirby's conclusion in his *Russian Studies on Japan* (London 1981) that such studies tell us at least as much, if not more, about the ideological context from which they are produced than they do anything about Japan itself.

Considerable recent interest, however, has focused on the theories of Japanese authors about their own society, work that is often known collectively as *nihonjinron*, or 'Theories of the Japanese People'. Harsh criticism has been aimed at the consensus, harmonious, one-family view of a 'unique' Japanese nation which often occurs in such work. Sugimoto and Mouer, for example, insist that such work is ideologically based, that it purposefully fails to take into account variations by region and class, and the difference between voluntaristic and coerced behaviour,

and that it lacks historical perspective.[11]   Befu similarly de-
nounces it as a form of nationalism,[12] and Miller, perhaps the
most vehement of the critics of the *nihonjinron*, examines its
position on the subject of the Japanese language (*nihongo*) and
concludes that:

> Thanks to the elaboration of the modern myth of Nihongo,
> the Japanese language has gradually been elevated to the
> position of one of the major ideological forces sustain-
> ing Japanese society, at the same time that it helps that
> society to close its ranks against all possible in-
> trusions by outsiders.[13]

Miller has in turn, and quite justifiably, been criticized by
Saint-Jacques[14] for various methodological inadequacies, but it
is interesting that this criticism should appear in the Japan
Foundation Newsletter, an organ which Miller particularly casti-
gates as a disseminator of the myth of *nihongo* and *nihonjinron*.
   An interesting article by Kawamura sets out 'The Historical
Background of Arguments Emphasizing the Uniqueness of Japanese
Society',[15] in which he traces several 'periods' of such liter-
ature stretching from the 1930s to the 1970s, and shows how
themes of uniqueness have variously been sought in Japan's clim-
atology, folklore, rural family sociology, democracy, management
policies, culture and psychology. Major authors he cites in-
clude Yanagida Kunio, Maruyama Masao, Nakane Chie and Doi Takeo
and, as well as presenting powerful evidence of affiliations
between several of the authors, the National Government, Tokyo
University and two large publishers (Iwanami and Shoten),
Kawamura attempts to document possible ideological foundations
for the emergence of various uniqueness theories, suggesting a
history from pre-war and war-time anti-Westernism and nationalism,
through the influence of anti-communism to a new confident

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[11] Y. Sugimoto and R.E. Mouer, 'Competing Models for Understanding
Japanese Society: Some Reflections on New Directions', *Social
Analysis*, ibid., pp. 194-294; *idem*, 'The Study of Japanese Soc-
iety: Figments of Whose Imagination?', *The Japan Foundation News-
letter*, Vol.X no.5 (1983), pp. 1-9.

[12] Harumi Befu, 'A Critique of the Group Model of Japan', *Social
Analysis*, no.5/6 (1980), pp. 33-4.

[13] R.A. Miller, *Japan's Modern Myth: The Language and Beyond*,
New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill 1982, p. 283.

[14] B. Saint-Jacques, 'Language Attitudes in Contemporary Japan',
The Japan Foundation Newsletter, Vol.XI nos.1-2 (1983), pp. 7-14.

[15] In *Social Analysis*, no.5/6 (1980), pp. 44-62.

economic nationalism of recent years. Another historical account
of the *nihonjinron* phenomenon - that by Hinoshi Minami[16] - traces
its history even further back to the Meiji Restoration.

Perhaps the single most important *nihonjinron* example of
recent years is the well-known work by Nakane Chie, *Japanese
Society* (Harmondsworth 1973), of which a few years ago free
copies were liberally distributed by Japanese agencies around the
world. Nakane applies what can only be described as a double-
think structuralist method to Japanese culture by first deciding
to study it as a separate society, essentially different from
other societies, and secondly as a structuralist whole once it
has been thus separated. From this emerges a typically neat
picture of the Japanese not only as a unique but also as an
extremely homogeneous race. There is no doubt therefore that
though the rather stark articles on *nihonjinron* by Kawamura,
Sugimoto and Mouer, Miller and others might suggest rather more
of a high-level Machiavellian plot than some observers would like
to see, the subject has become one which, as Crawcour says, needs
to be studied in its own right as an important sociological
phenomenon.[17]

When I had completed my sociology of knowledge, I attempted
to undertake an examination of the historical and cultural back-
ground of the Japanese educational system in the hope that it
would offer some clues to the nature of Japanese society. Even
though the educational system of a country may occasionally lag
behind or even precede more progressive or reactionary elements
of the society (and its history in Japan has examples of both),
it is perhaps true to say that, especially in the case of long-
term centralized systems like Japan, it provides a useful guide
to the 'pulse' of the culture. The two most common descriptions
of the Japanese educational system seem to be 'Confucian' and
'Western', with mentions of Buddhism and Shintoism conspicuous
by their absence.[18] I decided therefore to try and examine the
history, development and significance of these two traditions in
Japanese culture as a nexus for the whole research. Unfortunately,
there is not the space here to look at my study except to put for-
ward the conclusion I reached - that what has been called 'Con-

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[16] 'The Introspection Boom: Whither The National Character?',
Japan Interpreter, Vol.VIII no.2 (1973), pp. 159-184.

[17] 'Alternative Models of Japanese Society: An Overview', *Social
Analysis*, no.5/6 (1980), pp. 184-7.

[18] See for example H. Passin, *Society and Education in Japan*, New
York: Teacher's College, Columbia University 1965; T.P. Rohlen,
Japan's High Schools, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of
California Press 1983; Tetsuya Kobayashi, *Schools, Society and
Progress in Japan*, Oxford: Pergamon Press 1976; J. Singleton,
Nichu: A Japanese School, New York etc.: Holt, Rinehart & Winston
1967.

fucian' and 'Western' in Japan has been so eclectically *adopted* and idiosyncratically *adapted* to conform to existing patterns that neither tradition in their own right can be said to play a strong role in Japanese society. Rather their significance has been subordinated to the political culture and struggles over definitions which related to their introduction and dissemination, so that I decided that it would be most appropriate to site my research in the context of what I would call 'political pragmatism'.

I now find myself embarking on my fieldwork and have been in the field exactly three weeks in a private boarding-school eighty kilometres north of Tokyo; the school has 1300 students (aged between twelve and eighteen) of whom around thirty per cent are called 'overseas students' (*kaigaisei*) or returnee students (*kikokushijo*). The 'rehabilitation' of these children is taken very seriously, and the school receives financial help from the Ministry of Education specifically for that purpose. I will spend the first of the school's two terms teaching full-time to classes of returnees and getting to know the students and the school system. For the whole year I will live in a room attached to the school dormitory and eat in the school canteen, taking on a share of the pastoral work incumbent on any boarding-school teacher. The methodological implications of actually being in charge of many of my informants have still to be worked out, but there is no doubt that to teach virtually what and how I like to small groups of returnee students for four periods each per week has many practical advantages.

There are, however, three areas in particular where my background research in Oxford has already vitally affected the way I want to approach my fieldwork. The first two relate to the sociology of knowledge I undertook, the third to my understanding of Japanese culture. Due to the confusion which has arisen from direct comparisons of Japanese culture with Western cultures, and from the tendency of many Japanese scholars to stress the uniqueness of their own culture, it seems that some sort of research is necessary which compares suitably selected elements of Japanese culture, not with those of the West, but with other East Asian countries with which Japan has much closer geographical, historical and cultural affinities. Naturally, such comparative work has been undertaken before (for example by Pelzel on Japanese and Chinese kinship systems, or McMullen on Japanese and Chinese Confucianism),[19] but most of it has been done by East Asian scholars themselves and is not readily available to a Western readership. The reason for this is not hard to find: the number of Westerners who can handle one Far Eastern language is not large, while the number who can handle two or more is very small indeed. The case

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[19] J.C. Pelzel, 'Japanese Kinship: A Comparison', in M. Freedman (ed.), *Family and Kinship in Chinese Society*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press 1970, pp. 227-248; I.J. McMullen, 'Non-Agnatic Adoption: A Confucian Controversy in 17th and 18th Century Japan', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol.XXXV (1975).

of children returning from abroad, however, offers a comparable
community for study without the same linguistic difficulties,
since many such children can express themselves fluently in
European languages and/or Japanese. The two most obvious countries
for such a comparative study would appear to be Korea (probably
culturally as well as historically and geographically the country
nearest to Japan), and Thailand (the only other major Asian
country not to have been colonised by a Western nation). From
initial investigations it would seem that the continuum of
acceptance-rejection by the home culture of foreign-educated
returnees in Japan, Korea and Thailand would make an interesting
study, and after this year in Japan I hope to spend six months in
both countries. Practical considerations may determine that the
results of such an investigation will occupy no more than a
chapter in the final thesis, but the attempt to demonstrate a
correct context for structural analysis, which has largely been
absent in Japanese studies, seems as important as presenting the
initial results of such a study which could, in any case, always
be expanded upon in the future.

The second area in which my sociology of knowledge has det-
ermined my fieldwork approach in Japan concerns my doubts over
the homogeneous picture of Japan that is so often presented. It
is for this reason that I undertook such an extensive background
research in England before coming to Japan, and it is for this
reason also that I wish to gain an idea of the full range of the
experience of Japanese returnees, as variously determined by
their returning to private or state schools, to the city or the
countryside - and especially by parental income and attitudes.

My examination of the cultural context of education has
affected my approach to the extent that I wish to examine the
return and treatment of returnee children in Japan as a *political
process* involving the utilisation of highly emotive and powerful
symbols - 'tradition', 'internationalism', 'Confucianism',
'Westernisation', 'meritocracy', 'equality' etc. The tension
between 'internationalism' and 'tradition' must be seen as a
struggle between pressure groups (both inside and outside Japan)
and not as a battle between inanimate and inviolate cultural
traditions. I will need, therefore, to extend my study of full-
time and part-time Japanese schools to those in Asia, in order to
compare them with those in Britain and to see to what extent they
stress the Japanese nature of education and try to interact with
the wider community, as well as, of course, examining the politi-
cal debates that have been waged in Japan over the past few years
between the two factions which Kitsuse calls the *kokusaiha* (the
'internationalists') and the *kokunaiha* (the 'integrationists').

The foregoing has been an account of eighteen months' prep-
aration for fieldwork and the spring-board which that preparation
has created. It has been purposefully a personal account written
in the first person, since anthropological research is essentially
a personal activity. It is only when the researcher writes him-
self fully into the account that the reader is really able to
judge for himself its merits and defects. To write oneself out

of the script, even to the minimal extent of referring to oneself
in the first person plural, is not to be completely honest with
one's readership. Perhaps such an approach is particularly
appropriate when writing about Japan where the so-called 'I-novel'
(*shishōsetsu*) first appeared with such force as a literary genre.

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