

Red Stamps and Gold Stars: Fieldwork Dilemmas in Upland Socialist Asia

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Red Stamps and Gold Stars: Fieldwork Dilemmas in Upland Socialist Asia

Edited by Sarah Turner. Vancouver, Canada: University of British Columbia Press, 2013. x + 295 pp. CAD 34.95. ISBN 978-0-7748-2494-1.

Negotiating rural fieldwork with ethnic minorities in contemporary upland socialist China, Vietnam, and Laos is rarely easy—as I can attest from personal experience—and frequently requires patience, mental dexterity, and the right connections, at various levels. Unfortunately, however, researchers—both graduate students and more senior scholars who conduct research in the region for the first time—are frequently unprepared for the challenges that they encounter. This being the case, *Red Stamps and Gold Stars: Fieldwork Dilemmas in Upland Socialist Asia*, edited by the human geographer Sarah Turner, represents an important contribution. Overlapping somewhat with a 2010 special issue of *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* titled “Challenges and dilemmas: Fieldwork with upland minorities in socialist Vietnam, Laos and southwest China,” guest edited by Sarah Turner and Steeve Daviau, this 15-chapter edited volume, with contributions from social anthropologists and human geographers, should become required reading for anyone planning to conduct ethnographic research in this part of the world. It is the first book of its kind and a welcome addition to the literature on qualitative research methods.

Part 1 encompasses 2 chapters that frame the overall volume, written by Sarah Turner and Jean Michaud, respectively. Part 2 includes 10 chapters that largely reflect the individual experiences of researchers during the 1990s and the 2000s. The first 3 are situated in southern China (written by Stephane Gros, Magnus

Fiskesjo, and Candice Cornet), followed by 2 located in northern Vietnam (written by Jennifer Sowerwine and Christine Bonnin) and 2 in central and northern Laos (written by Pierre Petit and Karen McAllister). Then 2 chapters address field research across national borders, 1 dealing with ethnic Akha people in China and Thailand (by Janet Sturgeon) and another related to research with Tibetans in Lhasa and Dharamsala (by Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy). The last chapter of this section deals with the underreported contributions of research assistants, on which I will elaborate more below. Part 3 of the book includes 3 chapters that address “post-fieldwork,” the first 2 written by Oscar Saleminck and Stevan Harrell with Li Xingxing, respectively, and the last authored by Sarah Turner as a short conclusion.

One of the biggest challenges of edited volumes is ensuring that the individual contributions “hold together.” Fortunately this volume demonstrates that there is still an important place for such collections. While the individual chapters all represent useful contributions in themselves, the whole is indeed greater than the sum of the parts. What is particularly beneficial is that the chapters describe various institutional and personal arrangements that researchers, mainly doctoral students reflecting on their research experiences years later, became embroiled in when conducting extended periods of fieldwork. The book demonstrates through engaging prose how researchers have variously dealt with and adapted to their particular circumstances in the field, with different results. Ultimately all the authors were successful in their research endeavors, but not without limitations. Each chapter is written reflexively and with careful attention paid to frankly describing past challenges.

Although many interesting observations and reflections are documented in the book—certainly more than I could possibly discuss in this

short review—probably its single most important contribution relates to the greatly underdocumented roles of research assistants, including translators or interpreters, when conducting fieldwork. Here the volume’s value extends well beyond its regional focus. While a number of the chapters discuss the role of research assistants, Sarah Turner’s chapter specifically on the issue is particularly useful for thinking about the often crucial, but vastly underreported, contributions of research assistants to the coproduction of knowledge. Turner engages with the topic by interviewing 2 female research assistants, one in northern Vietnam and the other in southern China. Their responses are revealing, and for those planning to utilize research assistants in the field, they are definitely worth reflecting on. My impression is that there is plenty of room for more scholarship related to the roles of research assistants in knowledge production, and I hope this volume inspires greater attention to this crucial scholarship.

Ultimately this volume will be important for informing researchers preparing to conduct fieldwork in upland China, Vietnam, and Laos. It provides examples of how researchers have variously negotiated their particular research circumstances, including the crucial process of gaining official permission (red stamps) to conduct fieldwork, and sometimes working more informally to gain access to the field by engaging with various kinds of gatekeepers. The book will also serve as a useful tool for teaching qualitative methods generally. I certainly plan to use it in the course I teach on qualitative research.

Although I am extremely positive about the volume, a few important aspects of field research in this region are underrepresented in the collection. One is the large amount of academic knowledge that has recently been produced by researchers who engage in collaborative arrangements with nongovernment

organizations, international organizations (ie organizations in the United Nations system), and even multi-lateral banks such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank. Another is that the volume deals with only the experiences of white researchers from Western countries. To complement this volume, more scholarship needs to be focused on the experiences of researchers of Asian descent (both those who have grown up in Western countries and those who are nationals of Asian countries) conducting research in this region, because they undoubtedly experience quite different types of challenges compared to the authors represented in this volume.

Hopefully this collection will inspire others to reflect on their particular experiences, positionalities, and research dilemmas. Indeed, one of the most useful things about *Red Stamps and Gold Stars* is that it seems likely to inspire more types of similar reflections, which I greatly appreciate and eagerly anticipate. In this sense the book is groundbreaking. It does not represent a full range of possible research dilemmas—that would indeed be impossible for a single book to achieve—but it does include quite a variety of possibilities, and it certainly indicates the importance of carefully considering the different dilemmas of fieldwork that researchers with different back-

grounds encounter within the particular contexts that they find themselves.

REFERENCE

Turner S, Daviau S, guest editors. 2010. Challenges and dilemmas: Fieldwork with upland minorities in socialist Vietnam, Laos and southwest China. Special Issue. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 52(2): 121–228.

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