Between fan pilgrimage and dark tourism: competing agendas in overseas field learning

Chris McMorran*

Department of Japanese Studies, National University of Singapore, Singapore

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An overseas field learning itinerary can be a powerful pedagogical tool for both directing student attention and complicating preexisting spatial narratives. However, one must beware of using the itinerary to replace one narrative with another. This paper examines the itinerary negotiation for a 15-day overseas field module conducted three consecutive years. It uses the concepts of fan pilgrimage and dark tourism to explain the inclusion of two destinations and introduces a student-led research project that produced nuanced understandings of Japan’s rural geographies. Evidence comes from reflective field diaries, oral debrief sessions, written assignments, and an anonymous post-module survey.

Keywords: field learning; dark tourism; fan pilgrimage; reflective field diaries; Japan

Introduction: locating overseas field learning in higher education

Learning outside the classroom has long been valued in higher education, especially in geography, where fieldwork is considered central to the discipline. While readers of this journal know that taking students outside the classroom does not guarantee effective learning (Fuller, Edmondson, France, Higgitt, & Ratinen, 2006; Kent, Gilbertson, & Hunt, 1997; Lonergan & Andresen, 1988; Nairn, 2005), geographers have long praised fieldwork for its potential for innovative, active, emotionally engaged learning in economically and socially diverse contexts (Boyle et al., 2007; Castleden, Daley, Sloan Morgan, & Sylvestre, 2013; Dummer, Cook, Parker, Barrett, & Hull, 2008; Elwood, 2004; Guinness, 2012; Kasimov, Chalov, & Panin, 2013; Kent et al., 1997; Wright & Hodge, 2012). However, in recent years, field learning – from short field trips to fieldwork-based modules lasting weeks or months – has grown in importance in departments from Asian Studies to Zoology.

Why learn outside the classroom? The impetus stems from multiple concerns. In addition to potential educational and socialization benefits, overseas field learning may be vital for student recruitment, with many students wanting to add a travel element to their education (Chang, 2004; McGuinness & Simm, 2005; Robson, 2002). Also, the inclusion of categories like “international outlook” and “internationalization” in global university rankings has incentivized the development of overseas experiences for students by institutions. Finally, organizations outside the university may wish to encourage, and even sponsor, fieldtrips to particular destinations.

*Email: mcmorran@nus.edu.sg

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While all these parties may promote overseas field learning, they may have different agendas, and each agenda has the potential to essentialize a destination into what Elwood (2004) calls “pre-existing spatial narratives.” As Elwood explains, “narratives about place and identity have tremendous power to influence the meanings that students attach to particular urban places” (p. 55). Elwood’s point extends beyond cities to entire countries or world regions. Plus, students are not alone in having preexisting spatial narratives. Instructors, departments, and funding agencies also encourage field learning to destinations based on what they believe students might learn there. Thus, when teaching human geography topics like economic and racial marginalization (Elwood, 2004; May, 1999), indigenous peoples (Castleden et al., 2013; Wright & Hodge, 2012), development (Guinness, 2012; Robson, 2002; Wright & Hodge, 2012), and spaces of political contestation (Sidaway, 2002), instructors plan stops where they believe students can encounter and reflect on the phenomenon. Like lecture topics, readings, assessments, videos, and other learning materials, a field learning itinerary is chosen to tell a particular story. Indeed, Lonergan and Andresen’s (1988) oft-cited piece on field learning suggests as much, advising instructors to “carefully plan and select the experiences they intend students to have” (p. 63).

Unfortunately, such planning threatens to reduce the complexity of a place to a single syllabus topic and make the itinerary a spatial narrative that is not innocent; it is a story that like all stories has “hidden agendas that influence what the narrative includes and excludes” (Cronon, 1992; p. 1352). In the context of overseas field learning, Glass (2014) describes this problem as “reducing complex urban environments into simplified conceived fields for academic consumption” (p. 83). He continues, an instructor’s “attempt to ‘show’ research sites to students undercuts the capacity for students … to experience the textures and characteristics” of a place (ibid.). One must create an itinerary that challenges students’ preexisting spatial narratives without simply replacing them with an equally narrow alternative. One must be able to answer the question, “Why go there?”, while remaining open for the unanticipated at each destination.

In this paper, I use the question “Why go there?” to frame dilemmas surrounding the itinerary of a 15-day overseas fieldwork module to Japan I conducted over three consecutive years (2011–13). From module proposal onward, I provide a longitudinal perspective that reveals my early mistakes and gradual adjustments that helped reduce the power of the itinerary to limit student learning. The study has two aims. First, I stress the importance of the field learning itinerary, which can be a powerful pedagogical tool for both directing student attention and disrupting preexisting spatial narratives. Second, I point out the similarities between field learning and forms of fan pilgrimage and dark tourism, concepts from media studies and tourism studies, respectively, that help frame agenda negotiation in overseas field learning. While most geographers agree students can reap vast rewards from learning in the field, one must be careful not to plan an itinerary that either bolsters existing student spatial narratives to keep them happy, or merely points out the struggles of others in order to explain geographical concepts. After all, departments and instructors cannot afford for students to return home either no longer excited about the destination or still wearing rose-colored glasses. This is particularly true for instructors in Area Studies programs, where maintaining student interest in the region or country is essential to department survival, but the same applies to Geography departments, where a popular field learning program can be an important recruiting tool. The paper draws on my reflections and students’ reflective field diaries, daily oral debrief sessions, research papers, and an anonymous online follow-up survey.
Field studies in Japan: overview

Field Studies in Japan (FSJ) is a four-credit, upper division module involving approximately 70 h of faculty contact. It is open to all majors (Table 1). The only prerequisite is the equivalent of 2 years of Japanese language, which is necessary for listening to lectures and communicating with people on site. Due to spatial constraints at some destinations, enrolment is capped at approximately 10, with roughly double the number of applicants each year. Funding from a philanthropic organization subsidizes much of the cost (more below).

FSJ begins with 5 days (6 h per day) on the home campus with lectures, discussion of readings, film excerpts, and individual and group presentations. Lectures and assignments provide historical background on Japan, a conceptual framework that changes each year, and an introduction to qualitative research methods. Since the department has no research methods module, all students enter FSJ with the same level of fieldwork experience: zero. Pre-departure assessment includes a photo essay in which students analyze holiday photographs using Urry’s (1990) “tourist gaze” and an exercise in which students analyze their neighborhood using two of Meinig’s (1979) “ways to view a scene.” Students also learn basic participant observation techniques and receive instruction on writing reflective field diaries (Dummer et al., 2008; Elwood, 2004). Overall, the homework highlights the role of media and anticipation in the construction and reinforcement of spatial narratives and provides frameworks for observing, interpreting, and reflecting on what students may encounter in Japan (Table 2).

Pre-departure lessons are followed by 10 days (9 nights) in 4 to 5 destinations in Japan, where students join walking tours and listen to lectures from locals, conduct individual and group research projects, and participate in a farmstay (Table 3). After returning home, they complete a 3000-word (10 pages) individual research paper incorporating knowledge from the pre-departure lessons with observations and experiences from their reflective field diaries. The module concludes with a presentation of research findings in a public forum.

Module proposal: avoiding fan pilgrimage

From the outset, those connected to the module had different agendas. The module was first proposed in 2010, when I joined an Area Studies department (Japanese Studies) as the only geographer. The module was designed to shift focus depending on the interests

Table 1. Profiles of participants and experience in Japan (note: all participants were Singapore citizens between the ages of 20–24).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Previous Japan experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>10 (9 female)</td>
<td>Japanese Studies (6), life science, environmental engineering, geography, psychology</td>
<td>5 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>13 (10 female)</td>
<td>Japanese Studies (7), psychology (2), economics (2), geography, life science,</td>
<td>8 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>10 (6 female)</td>
<td>Japanese Studies (8), physics, pharmacy</td>
<td>8 students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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of any instructor in the department. However, I have been the only leader since it began. The department hoped for a short-term field-based module for majors lacking the time or money to study abroad in Japan. The ideal program would also attract non-majors into the department.

Most students take modules and major in Japanese Studies because they are Japan “fans.” Japan is the source of their favorite animated characters, cuisine, fashion trends, manga artists, novelists, filmmakers, pop idols, and more. A visit to Japan, then, is a sort of “fan pilgrimage.” Fan pilgrimage is usually a synonym for “media pilgrimage,” or travel by fans to the (real or fictional) settings of films, television programs, and novels and bridge the fictional ideal with reality (Couldry, 2003; Norris, 2013). Examples include Lord of the Rings film fans visiting New Zealand and detective drama fans joining Wallander Tours in Sweden (Reijnders, 2010). However, I suggest fan pilgrimage as a way of conceptually encompassing broader travel motivations and practices in overseas field learning. This includes travel to a country that has long held a cherished place in a student’s imagination, not only because of media, but also language, history, food, friendships, and more. For such “fans,” the answer to “Why go there?” is that overseas field learning offers a chance to bridge the divide between the imagined ideal and the lived reality. In fact, the learning objectives of the module are secondary to the chance to eat the food, see the sights, speak to locals, and experience life in situ. Of course, fandom is not limited to Area Studies students. Geography students are often attracted to overseas field learning programs because of a desire to visit a particular place.

While I was happy to lead a module that would attract students and satisfy their desire to visit Japan, I initially rejected the idea of catering the itinerary to “fans.” Instead, I designed the module to introduce students to some dark sides of Japan and thus complicate their impressions of it as a technologically advanced economic giant with a mostly urban, wealthy, harmonious society. This spatial narrative is apparent from discussions and written work in other modules. According to students, nearly all Singapore citizens, it arises from exposure to news, popular culture, and prior travel with family and/or friends to destinations like Tokyo and Kyoto. The location of the university in Singapore, a long-time aspirant of Japan (Avenell, 2013) and avid consumer of Japanese culture (Iwabuchi, 2002) further frames a celebratory narrative of Japan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Weightage (%)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class facilitation (group of 2–3) – create short lecture and lead discussion on one destination (approx. two hours)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Tourist gaze” and “ways to view a scene” exercises</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tsumeta exercise (group of 2) – map businesses and homes of one neighborhood; talk to residents when possible and note attempts (and failures) at revitalization</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurokawa walking tour (individual) – in a small group you will go on a walking tour led by a future business leader. Ask about revitalization efforts, but let the conversation emerge from prompts in the surroundings as you walk. Reflect on this experience in your field notebook</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nakabaru exercise (group of 3–4) – spend two hours walking around the hamlet, noting and photographing opportunities and barriers to economic revitalization. Develop a tourism development plan based on your findings</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research paper (3000 words) and public presentation of findings</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage</td>
<td>Destinations in order (1–2 nights each)</td>
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<td>-------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1 – 2011</td>
<td>Huis ten bosch Isahaya Bay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2 – 2012</td>
<td>Huis ten bosch Isahaya Bay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3 – 2013</td>
<td>Tsuetate (overnight) Kurokawa</td>
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Because of my research interests, the module emphasized the geographically uneven social, economic, and environmental impacts of Japan’s post-war economic growth, as well as recent responses to these impacts in small cities and villages. The era of high-speed economic growth from 1960 to 1972 is frequently called Japan’s “economic miracle.” However, for decades scholars have been unpacking this “miracle” by focusing on people and places that suffered both during the period, as well as in the decades that followed of continued problems like rural depopulation (Gordon, 2009; Kerr, 2001; Knight, 1994; McMorrnan, 2014; Moon, 1989).

Clearly, the agendas of these three parties conflicted: department (attract students), students (fan pilgrimage), and instructor (undermine a celebratory spatial narrative of Japan). When planning the first year’s itinerary, I ignored these agendas of the department and students. Without considering the negative impressions of Japan that might remain, I avoided a fan pilgrimage by creating a “dark” itinerary. I later discovered that this threatened to replace one narrow spatial narrative with another.

**Funding field learning: avoiding dark tourism**

In late 2010, I stood before representatives of a Japanese philanthropic organization, requesting funds to subsidize the first iteration of the module. I explained the learning objectives and itinerary highlights (Table 3). They included Minamata, site of the industrial pollution incident responsible for thousands of deaths from “Minamata Disease.” This would teach students about the industrial pollution incidents and social inequalities that occurred during the “economic miracle,” as well as vibrant forms of environmental stewardship, support for environmental disaster victims’ rights, and green entrepreneurship (George, 2001). I concluded by hoping the experience would not only give young Singaporeans a new perspective on Japan, but also encourage them to reflect on the social, economic, and environmental impacts of their own country’s current economic growth.

“Why go there?” a representative asked. He worried these locations would present a particularly “dark” (kurai) picture. Another added, “We are afraid your students will get the wrong idea about Japan; that it is filled with controversy and problems.” Taking students to Japan was not the issue. The organization sponsored other programs that sent students to Japan, and ultimately ours. However, the itinerary gave members pause. I saw the itinerary as a tool to introduce students to some complexities of Japan’s post-war economic growth and current situation. However, the organization worried the itinerary would leave students with only negative impressions of Japan, simply replacing one stereotype (prosperous, urban, harmonious Japan) with another (collapsing, rural, contentious Japan).

His reaction bothered me because I did not want the module to be a fan pilgrimage that simply praised Japan. At the same time, I understood the rarity of my circumstances. Most students around the world pay the entire cost to participate in overseas fieldwork, and as tuition rises in the US, UK, and elsewhere, students’ financial burden grows. I did not want to jeopardize the funding, since I knew it would benefit students and boost interest in not only the module, but potentially the department. Also, the funding might reduce my pressure to pander to Japan “fans” and allow me to create the itinerary I wanted. However, his comment made me wonder if I had swung too far in the opposite direction with my “dark” itinerary.

It is no surprise that an itinerary focused on controversies appeared “dark” to an organization whose agenda is to present Japan in a positive light within SE Asia.
However, his comment also provides a theoretically rich counterweight to the idea of fan pilgrimage. First, from a Japan-specific perspective, my “dark” itinerary both references and undermines the “bright life” (akarui seikatsu) frequently associated with Japan’s “economic miracle.” Our itinerary would show that these “bright” days were not experienced evenly. Indeed, our stop at Minamata, one of the places that suffered most during this period, would provide a glaring contrast to the narrative of Japan’s economic miracle that has inspired admiration among Singaporeans for decades.

Beyond the context of Japan, the representative’s depiction of the itinerary as “dark” suggests a resemblance to “dark tourism,” usually defined strictly as tourism to sites of death, disaster, and the macabre (Stone & Sharpley, 2008). Our visit to Minamata and intention to hear a patient’s testimony (kataribe) qualified. However, calling the entire itinerary “dark” suggests dark tourism might include any travel that shows the darker side of a place. Clear examples include slum/favela tourism or disaster tourism (Diekmann & Hannam, 2012; Freire-Medeiros, 2009; Pezzullo, 2009); however, many overseas fieldwork itineraries by human and cultural geographers to sites of social, economic, or environmental injustice would also fit this definition. The objectives of such forms of travel align. For instance, Diekmann and Hannam (2012, p. 1321) note that slum tours “lead many tourists to actually reflect and debate issues of global ethics in ways in which they may not have done so beforehand.” Similarly, Pezzullo (2009, p. 101) emphasizes that disaster tours like Katrina tours in New Orleans “can offer a mode of communication to educate and to persuade those who have been otherwise isolated from environmental injustices.” Using an itinerary to create an opening for reflection and communication has long fit the learning objectives of overseas field learning experiences (McGuinness & Simm, 2005; Robson, 2002), suggesting geographers and tourism scholars have much to learn from each other.

However, while these overlaps suggest productive possibilities for participants in “dark” tourism, a different issue looms for instructors of overseas field learning. Reflecting on the representative’s comment, I realized I needed to find a way to balance fan pilgrimage and dark tourism. After all, I had to do more than replace one narrow spatial narrative (prosperous, urban, harmonious Japan) with another (collapsing, rural, contentious Japan). Indeed, as I noted in the introduction, departments and instructors in Area Studies, Geography, and elsewhere must maintain student interest in a destination while encouraging critical reflection on it.

**Year 1: brightening the itinerary**

In response to the organization’s concerns, I added a “bright” spot: Kurokawa. “Why go there?” This hot springs village has found success among tourists in recent decades precisely due to its remote location and rural landscape, typically factors in rural decline elsewhere (Figure 1) (McMorran, 2008). I believed Kurokawa would highlight the vitality of some areas even as others struggle, thereby demonstrating the complexity of issues facing Japan that arose in part from the country’s so-called “economic miracle,” such as rural depopulation.

Kurokawa was the final stop on an emotionally taxing trip around Kyushu. Students spent the first day exploring the town in small groups. The following day, we met local young people – the next generation of business owners – who gave a lecture about the village’s recent dramatic success and shared their ideas for further developing the village during a short walking tour (Figure 2). Students asked questions and seemed genuinely
interested in the town. In reflective field diaries, students later called Kurokawa “magical,” “picturesque,” and even “therapeutic.”

I was glad students had been engaged and enjoyed their visit. However, I was disappointed with the final papers. I expected papers that contrasted the different sites we had visited, thereby acknowledging the complexities surrounding social, economic, and environmental issues in Japan today. Instead, students largely ignored what they learned before the trip and simply praised Kurokawa. They wrote about it as if it existed in a vacuum. In the follow-up survey completed online 6 months after returning home, students were asked their overall impressions of the module, as well as which destinations
they learned the most from and would have liked to stay longer if possible. Students praised the module, giving the kind of positive comments common to field learning. They called it “interactive and informative” and an opportunity to “gain a deeper insight” and “see a different face” of Japan.

One student’s remark, though, gave me pause: “Going into the field and … seeing what we have learnt during lessons unfold in front of your own eyes will stay in our memory forever (as compared to purely memorizing facts from readings).” Based on all the final papers and survey, our visit to Kurokawa, in fact, had not reinforced what students learned in class about rural Japan. Instead, the visit seemed to replace classroom knowledge, indicating a risk of a field learning itinerary. Kurokawa had succeeded in brightening the itinerary, but it seemed to overpower the other destinations. My Japan “fans” seemed to fit Kurokawa into their preexisting spatial narratives and completed the module with an impression of contemporary Japan lacking nuance and complexity.

Year 2: showing rural problems

In Year 1, I had included Kurokawa to show that Japan’s countryside is not defined by collapse. However, the visit replaced one stereotype with another, leading students to forget the issues facing much of rural Japan. In Year 2, I tried to balance this view by adding a new destination: Tsuetate. “Why go there?” This hot springs village boomed during the decades of the “economic miracle” but now suffers problems common to rural areas: depopulation, business closures, and the aging of both population and infrastructure. It is also a short drive from Kurokawa, and as a similarly sized tourist village, it would show the rural problems presented in class. In order to maximize the contrast, I scheduled both destinations on the same day: an afternoon walking tour of Tsuetate, followed by an evening walk and overnight stay in Kurokawa.

Upon arrival in Tsuetate, our mini bus dropped us in an empty parking lot, where we met an acquaintance and past resident who had agreed to guide us around town (Figure 3). He spoke of the town’s boom during his childhood (the “miracle” years), as well as its current struggles and attempts to revitalize. As we walked the deserted alleys, students stopped to photograph the rusted windowsills and broken tiles on shuttered inns. I overheard some call it a “ghost town,” and several half-joked that the village could be a massive haunted house at Halloween. One of the few people we encountered had closed his inn several years before in order to cut his losses. Now he sells souvenirs in the former lobby. One student bought a trinket, later telling me she felt sorry for him.

During the walking tour, our guide mentioned some revitalization projects. However, the empty streets and dilapidated structures seemed only to tell a story of failure. Of course, this was why Tsuetate was on the itinerary, to contrast Kurokawa and support what students learned in class about the harsh realities facing rural Japan. However, we seemed to be confirming the philanthropic organization’s fears and veering into a form of dark tourism. In fact, as we walked through the “ghost town” of Tsuetate, I began to feel guilty for using it as a prop. By placing Tsuetate on the itinerary as an example of a failing village, I gave students little opportunity to see it as anything else. It was difficult for an alternative spatial narrative to emerge.

In our debrief session and their reflective field diaries, only two students refused to accept the conclusion the itinerary implied. Two students saw Tsuetate not as a failure, but as possessing valuable unique qualities. One called it “peaceful and soothing” and pointed out its “old world charm” despite its “desertedness.” The other wrote, “I thought that Tsuetate was a very beautiful and serene place, and I liked that there weren’t a lot
of other tourists.” He mentioned that many buildings were “visibly abandoned” and “rusting. Nevertheless,” he concluded, “there are several potential attractions in this area.” These two students saw in the village’s situation opportunities for it to distinguish itself. For them, the itinerary not only built upon, but also provided room to challenge classroom knowledge and, in turn, to develop their own spatial narratives of rural Japan.

These two students made me realize how narrowly I had conceived of the potential of Tsuetate, or any destination for that matter. They also made me question the accepted practice of using an itinerary to “show” phenomena or tell a certain story. Following the advice of scholars like Lonergan and Andresen (1988), I had prepared the pre-departure briefing and itinerary with fixed learning objectives. As they note, “Briefing on the overall aim imposes a structure for learning and sets boundaries within which learning experiences will take place. These guidelines help keep learning within manageable proportions” (p. 73). My students’ interpretation of Tsuetate convinced me that such “structures” and “boundaries” reduce the complexity of destinations to easily digestable packages “for academic consumption” (Glass, 2014, p. 83) and thus potentially narrow what students might learn about a place. In order to negotiate between fan pilgrimage and dark tourism, I needed to create opportunities for unscripted and agenda-free encounters between students and destinations.

**Year 3: toward an agenda-free destination**

In Year 3, I kept Tsuetate and Kurokawa on the itinerary. However, I made two significant changes. First, instead of passing through Tsuetate, we stayed overnight, thus giving equal time to both villages. This also addressed an ethical concern of the economic power wielded by our group (Robson, 2002). Staying overnight in Tsuetate meant we were not just passing through on our way to its nearby rival. According to students, this was significant to residents they spoke with and may have encouraged more open discussion. Second, I introduced the following exercise. Without giving students any

![Figure 3. Walking tour in Tsuetate led by former local resident (center) (image: author).](image)
background on the village through readings or orientation, I suggest this exercise gave students freedom to discover Tsuetate largely on their own.

Upon arriving in town, I distributed maps from the local tourism office. I split the town into five sections and assigned a pair to each section. Each pair was responsible for noting the make-up and condition of structures (how many homes vs. businesses? how many stories? new, old, renovated, abandoned, etc.?). If they encountered people willing to speak with them, they were to ask questions about the town and the module theme for the year – *chiiki saisei*, or regional revitalization (e.g. What do you know about the term? What does it mean to you? What are you or the town doing to revitalize?). Students could also note anything else that interested them about their section of town. Incidentally, the questions were devised as a group prior to departure to give students working in a second language a basic vocabulary of terms with which they felt comfortable beginning a conversation. Then, students had roughly two hours to explore their section (an area that could be covered in about 15 min) (Figure 4). Afterward, students shared their findings in a group debriefing session at the inn. It was cozy, with all students seated on the floor around a small table in one guestroom.

The exercise revealed a broad range of impressions about the town. As expected, a common thread was the visible decline of the town. For instance, all groups mentioned the prevalence of abandoned buildings, a feature seldom found back home in Singapore. In a “dark” trend similar to the previous year, one group described the alleys in their section as “creepy”, while another joked that in some places, “you could be killed and

Figure 4. Students exploring Tsuetate (image: author).
no one would find you.” Several students mentioned poignant signs of stagnation, including a “Caution: children playing” traffic sign on a deserted street, as well as multiple souvenir shops closed the entire afternoon. A sign on the door of a hair salon particularly disturbed one student. Instead of listing the days it would be closed for the month, it listed its five open days. “How can it stay in business?” he asked in disbelief.

However, each group also shared a more complex picture of its section, which emerged from talking with residents and a handful of tourists, some of whom actually hoped the town would not revitalize. Some students spoke with locals who enjoy Tsuetate because it is relaxed and not crowded, especially compared with Kurokawa. Other groups met local business leaders excited to share their ideas for improving the town and residents hoping for revitalization, but worried local businesses and government would fail to make this a reality.

After all groups shared their findings, the discussion moved in numerous directions, including students suggesting ways for the town to make the most of its unique qualities (“What about a heritage tour that celebrates its booming past?” and “What about turning empty lots into gardens and letting tourists practice organic farming?”). Some students even expressed surprise that some locals actually prefer the town as it is: nearly deserted. After 2 h of animated discussion, I was sad to close the session. However, I was pleased to have learned that even among the few people the students encountered there exists a range of attitudes toward the issues facing the town. The exercise offered neither fan pilgrimage nor dark tourism, but let the students understand some of the complexity found in rural Japan through their research in one village.

In the anonymous online feedback six months after returning home, students identified the exercise in Tsuetate as their favorite learning activity. One student commented, “I like the fact that we are given time to explore on our own during activity time (e.g. Tsuetate neighbourhood survey)” (Student A). While this student may have just wanted a break from the mentally and physically rigorous itinerary, mentioning the Tsuetate exercise specifically indicates a preference for this student-driven form of learning. Another student hinted at the Tsuetate exercise in this comment:

I liked that the students at certain points were able to think of new ideas and connections through the interactions, the tours and their own observations. I think this is what makes the field studies special as students are able to give their personal opinions and critical analysis in the entire learning journey and are not constantly being led by the lecturer or the student assistant. (Student B)

A third student emphasized the hands-on element of this and other exercises. “Personally I prefer hands-on activities … compared to just listening to talks/visiting museums. I thought the Tsuetate neighbourhood survey was practical in that we got to contrast whatever we learnt second-hand to first-hand interactions” (Student C). Here, the student also highlights the freedom to come to different conclusions via contrasting knowledge learned in different ways. In other words, the itinerary not only reinforced classroom knowledge, but also allowed them to challenge classroom knowledge. This insight can also be seen here:

I particularly liked the Tsuetate stay because not only did we hear that Tsuetate is in decline, we could also feel the decline for ourselves due to the various inconveniences as tourists there. However, we also saw that it was not only dull and gloomy, but residents in that place were also trying to liven up the place for themselves, not just for tourists. (Student D)
For this student, experiencing inconvenience reinforced classroom knowledge about the decline of rural Japan, thus justifying my original reason for placing Tsuetate on the itinerary. However, the straightforward narrative of rural decline was complicated by local efforts to revitalize, emphasizing the usefulness of digging beneath the surface via geographical research methods.

A final student focused on the itinerary, mentioning the importance of staying in Tsuetate, as opposed to only the walking tour her/his friend experienced the previous year:

> It really gave a different perspective having stayed one night over instead of just passing through which allowed the group to enjoy the “furusato” [nostalgic hometown] atmosphere and even challenge the notion that it was an inferior place compared to Kurokawa. (Student E)

While the literature on rural Japan would regard Tsuetate a failure, especially compared to its successful neighbor, this student refused to accept this conclusion, and thus began to create her/his own spatial narrative.

Through these responses, one can see that Tsuetate may demonstrate many of the problems facing rural Japan, but it does not represent all rural villages. Its unique local features (past tourism boom, current revitalization efforts, narrow alleyways, abandoned buildings, satisfied tourists) mean it must address its future in its own way. This was an important lesson best learned by students interacting with the village free from the lens of a guide. Importantly, the exercise enabled students to see past the crumbling façades, to learn what mattered to locals; to not just see the town as lacking, failing, or suffering, but as comprised of individuals with diverse visions for the town’s future. Some were content with the status quo, while others strove to return the town to its glory days. None of this diversity of experiences and beliefs was obvious on the surface, and I did not predict any of this when I first placed Tsuetate on the itinerary.

While the impact of this exercise seemed obvious to me both at the time and upon reflection, other factors could have led to improved student learning. First, Tsuetate moved from the end of the itinerary (Year 2) to the beginning (Year 3). Having visited a week’s worth of “dark” spots before Tsuetate in Year 2 might explain most students’ inability to see beyond the itinerary aim, which was to show a failing village. However, in both cases students had pre-departure briefing on the problems impacting rural Japan, as well as similar levels of fatigue: a long trip nearing its end and a 1-hour bus ride to Tsuetate in Year 2 and a 6-hour overnight flight followed by a 2-hour bus ride in Year 3. Therefore, the exercise seems to have made the difference. Also, in both cases, Tsuetate preceded Kurokawa, allowing consistency in the itinerary. Finally, my openness to allowing students to both engage with and interpret Tsuetate on their own was another possible factor in affecting student learning. However, the exercise was necessary to put that openness into action.

**Conclusions**

The literature on field learning usually encourages instructors to brief students for overseas field learning, which includes telling them what they will learn. In this paper, I suggest resisting this advice and instead providing at least one destination that gives students the freedom to encounter on their own. The exercise introduced here provides one example of student-led research that empowers students to encounter a destination and develop their own spatial narrative, admittedly with certain limitations. For
example, by giving the students a map upon arrival, I gave them a tool that potentially limited their learning. Like Cronon’s stories, mentioned in the introduction, maps have hidden agendas that necessarily include and exclude particular aspects of places (Del Casino & Hanna, 2000). Having a map, then, means already having some direction on how to encounter the place. Given safety concerns, however, especially overseas, this limitation seems difficult to overcome.

Second, by assigning a theme, I began to narrow what students might find. Indeed, preparing students with readings about revitalization and helping them formulate questions about it in Japanese prepared them to look for examples of places that needed to be revitalized and places successful at revitalization. The very notion of revitalization implies something that used to be vital, but then suffered decline. However, given my desire to prepare students with a conceptual framework before setting out, this limitation also seems difficult to overcome. Indeed, even without my framework, the students’ knowledge of contemporary Japan from coursework and media meant they had other frameworks for understanding the place.

Increased importance placed on learning outside the classroom will continue to provide opportunities for educators to create field learning experiences both at home and overseas. As I have tried to show through my reflections on this program to Japan, no matter the destination, every instructor must answer the question, “Why go there?” One must take the itinerary seriously, in order to create learning moments that both acknowledge and complicate pre-existing spatial narratives and balance the agendas of various stakeholders in a program. As I have shown, one must beware of the itinerary’s power and create ways for students to learn beyond, and even challenge, the spatial narrative implied by an itinerary. The itinerary should not simply cater to the desires of “fans” (or funders or departments) or confirm what students learned in class. Nor should it create new “dark,” but equally narrow spatial narratives. I argue the adoption of more diverse itineraries, coupled with student-centered research methods and opportunities for reflection, is an effective way to increase the potential of field learning to complicate student spatial narratives and encourage student learning.

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Notes
1. All student subjects provided consent for use of their reflective field diaries for research and publication purposes. The online follow-up survey is voluntary and asks 10 questions related to the field learning module. Students are asked to rank different activities “as a learning
experience” and then offered space to explain their choice if they wish. Students are also asked for qualitative feedback on what aspects of the module should be improved and how. The research cleared IRB.

2. A subsidy may be unheard of to geographers; however, the rise and growing competition among “soft power” organizations within Asia like Confucius Institutes (PRC), Japan Foundation, and Korea Foundation, means student fieldwork to these countries may be sponsored in the future. In my department, in addition to this module, various Japan-related organizations offer fully funded ad-hoc fieldtrips for up to 10 students each year.

References


