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Research Note

Japan Studies at a Distance:
Conducting Primary Research in Third-Party Countries

Ryan HARTLEY
Tohoku University, Faculty of Economics, Graduate School of Economics and Management, Assistant Professor

This research note summarises years of planning and conducting field research on Japan's political and business relations in Southeast Asia. Japan Studies usually, and obviously, means conducting research either in Japan or in the researcher's home country. However given Japan's wide-ranging involvement in many other countries, this is unnecessarily limiting, and so my research in Japan Studies has focused on examining 'Japan outside of Japan'. This research note is a detailed and practical step-by-step guide to planning primary-level research methods, focusing on interviews with elite (political and business) Japanese actors operating in countries other than Japan or the researcher's own country. It will highlight planning and conducting each stage of the field research, in addition to the many small and easy-to-overlook points for researchers who are engaged in Japan Studies. Not limited to field research outside of Japan and equally applicable to research being conducted within Japan itself, this research note will present some of the challenges and solutions for future students to predict and plan for when necessarily engaging with Japan Studies in third-party locales.

Keywords: Japan Studies Methodologies, Interview Methodologies in East Asia, Japanese Political Interviews, Japan and Southeast Asia, Japanese Business Interviews

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1. Introduction

This research note seeks to make the case for the following: (1) that there is a need for and a space within Japan Studies for a greater focus on what Japan means in the world from beyond Japan's borders; and (2) to comprehend the perspective of third-party countries (neither Japan nor the researcher's own country of origin)with regards to Japan in the world. To support this and to illustrate how this can be achieved, a detailed interview-based methodology for the conduct of primary research-based Japan Studies is outlined herein.

Too often 'Japan Studies' means part or a combination of the following: first, studying Japan at a distance from within the researcher's home country (thereby inherently biasing the focus to only relations from within the researcher's comfort zone); second, a short funded period of research in Japan; or third, a longer term stay if funding or other opportunities become available. Often, due to the short-term of the research period and the researcher's status of visitor, this leads to limited or overly audacious conclusions being reached. Japan Studies can concomitantly become limited to research focused on: (1) the researcher's home country or (2) Japan proper. Therefore, it is proposed that Japan Studies can, and should, also include a third geo-spatial thinking space. This involves what Japan means to the researcher, and/or how Japan/Japanese operate in a third-party country that is not of the researcher's own origin and is not Japan. Indeed from this line of reasoning, it becomes justified to argue that Japan Studies could be pursued in any country where there is an interest in Japan or features some interests of Japan's that are active threre.

1.1 Justification

Research concerning Japan needs to understand Japan in the world across multiple dimensions (political, business, and cultural strata) which is justified for a number of reasons:

1. Any great power country with global, regional, sub-regional, and sub-national reach such as Japan, needs to be understood not only by how *they* regard the world but also to understand how the world regards *them*. With imperialism long behind us whereby one actor could stamp a unique view of the world onto that world, globalisation is now prompting a vast array of inter-subjective inter-national relations. Therefore, if we are to understand 'Japan as global'—the long-time and repeatedly stated policy objective of Japan's various leaders over the past decades—we must attempt to chart both sides of that inter-subjective relationship.
2. Researching Japan at the level of third-party countries allows the researcher to discern empirical effects rather than simply idealised intentions. That is, the researcher is able to focus upon the empirical outcomes of Japan's intentions in the world, rather than only the rhetoric of what elites would like them to be. Such a realistic clarity of vision rather than a focus upon the ideal, permit the researcher a much more rigorous understanding of Japan in the world. To take an example, a good deal of Japan Studies literature grounds itself in evidence-based sources such as media statements or public reports. However, these are not necessarily evidence of activity in the 'real world'. That is, they may not adequately describe a combination of *two* actor's *mutually* understanding an activity, resulting in empirical behaviour on *both* actor's parts. Instead, such evidence-based sources represent the activity of an idealised world, in addition to being representative of only one party's (usually Japan's, if it is Japan Studies) standpoint.
3. Building on the above is the related justification of being able to understand the organisational dynamics of how Japan *actually* operates in the world, i.e., to understand the qualitative, everyday dynamics of how Japanese actors operate and how their interests are pursued within social realities. For example, there is often a gulf between the world as Tokyo sees it and the world that local actors see. Ministry planners in Kasumigaseki and legislators in Nagatachō are subject to institutional worldviews and organisational incentives that can be widely different to those of, for example, local and third-party operating Japanese trading companies or government agency operations. While the former may conceive the world in sweeping and strategic ways, the latter are more likely to understand the practicalities of what is or is not possible. When spoken to, for these reasons, in-country Japanese specialists are even themselves often likely to be fairly critical of—or not even understand—those Tokyo-based planner's thinking.
4. A focus on third countries also allows for an appreciation of the subaltern, of the weaker party, of the 'other' who is being acted upon. The situational differences of the countries in which Japan operates offer a rainbow of differing reactions to what Japan means in and to the world. Not only singular events such as political protests at certain activities being engaged in by Japan, but also deeper structural factors such as inter-cultural relations between different nationalities and Japanese actors—all play important parts in how Japan behaves in, and is regarded by, the world. For example, the trade disputes between Japan and the U.S. in the 1980s over automobiles have become canonical in the history of Japan's 20th-century economic relations. However this is only the case because of the parity of power between the U.S. and Japan. How many are familiar with the raging protests of the democracy movement in Myanmar during the 1980s to 2000s regarding Japan's consistent provision of aid to the military junta? Or of the protests in Thailand during the 2000s about Japanese chemical company's activities at Ma Phut? These events rarely make it onto the Japan Studies radar because they involve asymmetrical power relationships. A focus upon

third-party countries would help to remedy this ignoring of the subaltern.

5. Developing this point on the importance of reflections on the nature of power within research, a focus on the source (Japan) tends to privilege the 'I' over the 'other'. For example, a Japan Studies project examining Japan's relations with Cambodia will likely privilege Tokyo's plans, policies, and ideas over Phnom Penh's. The result is that the field of Japan Studies acts as intellectual agent for an intellectually power privileging discourse. Most countries cannot afford 'Country X Studies'. Japan's wealth and status allows for its own privilege to be self-replicating by not only projecting various aspects of Japan ideationally into the world, but simply by providing Japan with a status that emerges from being important enough to study in the first place.
6. At an individual level, how Japanese actors operate abroad vis a vis how they operate within Japan, and the personalities of Japanese actors who choose internationally oriented work, represents a distinctly different profile of international organic intellectual and needs to be better appreciated. The international versus provincial mind-set is not a unique psychological phenomenon to Japan. However the so-called *shima guni hito* (island country people) mentality is far less pronounced in Japanese actors operating outside of Japan. From these actors, one is more often able to discern a degree of self-reflexivity that is more difficult to detect in actors within Japan. This means that forms of Japan Studies research that root themselves in Japan are limiting themselves to sample populations that may not be reflective of the types of Japanese actors that actually operate in the world.

1.2 Benefits and Challenges

These justifications are not exhaustive and there are many more, however the benefits of adopting a third-party country approach to Japan Studies is also easy to recognise. First and most obviously, it opens up a huge arena of potential research sites from which to study Japan; any country in which Japan has a reasonable interest becomes appropriate for Japan Studies research. Not only does this allow for a widening array of Japan Studies topics to emerge, but also concomitantly for a greater degree of originality and vibrancy in Japan Studies research. Second, at the practical level, primary-level Japan Studies research can be cheaper than researching in the researcher's home country or Japan. If the topic is, to take a popular one, to examine Japan's ODA (overseas development assistance) relations and activities, then researching Japan in a developing country allows research funds to stretch further than, for example, a developed-country researcher researching in a developed or relatively developed country. Third, a Japan Studies that embraces third-party country study opens up space for researcher's native to poorer countries to engage with Japan Studies through Japan's relations with their country. And, on an equal footing, provides opportunities to developed-country researchers as their local knowledge adds significantly to the research resources being employed. Rather than necessitating expensive and often limited research funding to go to Japan to study, a Japan Studies project focused in situ allows for local actors interested in Japan to become valuable partners within global-level research endeavours focused on Japan.

This is not to argue that such a third-party country approach to Japan Studies is easy. Significant challenges are presented, principal amongst which is language. Japan Studies researchers are likely to have spent a good deal of time studying Japanese, but this third-party country study proposal negates or reduces the utility of this skill. Third-party country study means needing to operate in a third, a fourth, or a fifth language. English as the global language may allow the researcher to deal in daily conversation, but documents are likely to be in that third, fourth, or fifth language, in addition to advanced-level conversational topics. A second challenge is the cultural dislocation of researching from within a third, intermediary mental space. For example, the European researcher studying Japan in a country such as Uzbekistan or Ghana can possibly be a quite jarring psychological state, and the researcher should be aware of such realities before embarking. A third challenge is the practical difficulty of attempting to conduct the research—finding sites, navigating streets, photocopying documents, etc.—in unfamiliar countries where resources may be lacking. Since it will be the researcher being granted access to resources, it will be the researcher's responsibility to make the effort to go *to* those resources. Trying to conduct research within the context of large and unfamiliar cities is a daunting prospect at the outset.

Nonetheless, if carefully calculated, the potential benefits outweigh these challenges, and so the remainder of this research note will attempt to sketch out a step-by-step guide to conducting primary level, third-party country Japan Studies research in the hopes that future researchers' anxieties may be assuaged from attempting to adopt this valuable research approach.

2. Why Interviews?

There are a number of methodologies that become available to a third-party-country Japan Studies research design that are less likely, if at all, to be open to researchers if conducted solely in their native country or Japan. National and local archives for documentary evidence, statistical databases that are restricted to local-only access, local populations that potentially become sampling frames for questionnaires, in addition to the researcher being able to gather localised 'colour' that can add depth to the writing (photographs or local anecdotes for example), all become potential research avenues with third-party-country research designs. However the main methodology of focus in this research note is on the research interview. That is, the interviewing of Japanese actors, principally Japanese elites, active outside of Japan.

Why is this an ideal third-party-country research methodology? Secondary-level research understanding can easily be gained in the researcher's own country or Japan. Statistics, reports, and academic literature are all available online. However it takes deep, primary-level, in-the-field research to add original and qualitative flesh to the secondary research bones. This can be overlooked in Japan Studies where Japanese-language learning takes up so much time that the researcher is naturally drawn to Japan and documentary sources in Japanese. It is proposed here that it is possible for Japan Studies to be as rugged as archaeology or as intrepid as cultural anthropology, and it is interviewing that is the main mechanism through which this becomes a possibility.

Aside from archival research in third-party country research which offers an equal level of, if different in nature, potential originality to the researcher's endeavour, interviewing generates a number of important advantages of which some are general, and some are unique, to Japan Studies. In general, interviewing of course generates the most contemporary, the most interpretivist, and the most expert information sources possible. If, as was the case in this author's own research, elite interviews are the target, then the level of expert opinion is second to none. While there will always be issues surrounding the agency problem—individualised opinions rather than mass surveying and lying/hiding on the part of the interviewee—the method is a sound one; especially when supported by contextualising these individual interviews within secondary level statistics that are wider in scope.

Furthermore, the technique offers unique advantages to the field of Japan Studies in particular. First, a good deal of public information released by Japan (reports, media statements, policy briefs) is expressed in such a way as to almost be written in code. This is not to mean completely hidden, but code as in 'hidden in plain sight'. The language used may seem to the casual observer as non-controversial, middling, even boringly over - diplomatic. However an interview with those directly involved in that sector often reveals a hidden discourse beneath the banality; a discourse not revealed by simply reading the reports oneself. For example, compare the language presented on the left with that on the right in Table 1. On the left are samples taken from a JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency) report on their three-prong strategy towards Thailand, and on the right is the actual meaning; revealed through a frank interview with a JICA professional in Bangkok.

Table 1. JICA Rhetoric vs. Actual Policy Meaning

Policy brief language	*Actual meaning*
Sustainable development of economy and coping with maturing society.	To support the base for economic activities to escape the 'middle income trap' and make conditions favourable for the over 5,000 Japanese companies active in Thailand.
Coping with common issues in ASEAN countries.	Generating inter-connectivity with Thailand's surrounding countries—the CLMV—meaning generating a hubs-and-spokes system with Bangkok as the hub, and dealing with issues from a sub-regional and multi-country perspective.
Promotion of cooperation towards countries outside the ASEAN region	Japan positions Thailand as a proxy through which to generate inter-regional connectivity focused on 'south-south' (Southeast Asia–South Asia) connectivity.

Source: Author, based on interviews with JICA Bangkok officials.
Note: For original JICA rhetoric see footnote[1]

The reader will note the obtuse nature of the language on the left but the fairly concrete policy goals of the language on the right. This is because, if the language on the right were to be used, Japan's actual intention would be stated so openly then other countries could conceivably take issue with them. However through this 'hiding in plain site' language, Japan's ODA establishment is able to have clear goals while appearing to smudge them with generality. The interviewing technique is thus able to reveal the discourse beneath the discourse.

Finally, Japanese professionals active abroad are surprisingly open to interrogation, much more so than other Northeast Asian actors. If approached properly—in a formal and timely manner—all levels of professional are usually more than happy to talk about their activities. This may at first glance seem surprising given how closed many Japanese institutions can appear. Unlike their Western counterparts, a glance over institutional websites of Japanese companies or universities will rarely reveal any individual's details or contact information. However the interviewing technique allows the researcher to bypass the standard institutional obtuseness in Japan and attempt to peer inside the black box; 'black box' being a phrase frequently used by other developed country actors to describe Japan's activities in that third-party country. In the words of one well placed to comment American interviewee on Japan's activities in that shared country: "we know what goes in and we know what comes out, but in-between we have no idea". The research interview can help the researcher try to discern what is happening within this middle space.

3. A Guide to Interviewing Japanese Elites

Given the afore-outlined justifications and potential advantages to third-party country, interview methodology based, Japan Studies research; in this section the research note moves to establish a guide to conducting such an interview based survey. This methodology is based on years of extensive experience utilising the method detailed herein, and will hopefully serve as not only a guide but also as a protection against potential pitfalls for future Japan Studies researchers. This is going to be in as much detail as possible. A lot of guidance on the interviewing technique tends to be 'instructive' (telling the researcher what they 'should' ideally do) without being very detailed on what should *actually* be done. This guide will be broken down into four steps—preparation, the approach, replies and scheduling, and the interview itself.

3.1 Preparation

The first step, and it is a lengthy one, is the creation of a sampling frame that is then used for approaching potential interviewees. This is not easy due to the aforementioned tendency for Japanese institutions not to open themselves and their members up to public observation, in addition to being fairly intent on operating

[1] See: JICA [online] *Country Assistance Policy for the Kingdom of Thailand* (December 2012). Available at http://tinyurl.com/h5mjnar (accessed 15.11.2016)

quietly and without controversy in international contexts. The researcher must overcome this and identify all relevant parties, keeping a long list along the way. One solution to the above problem is to use a company's overseas contact information from their websites and discover in which countries they have operations. A second solution is to understand that Japanese institutional actors are likely group-able. For example in Japanese business, if one trading company is discovered to be operating in country X, then it is highly likely that the other six out of seven will also be there and approachable. If one corporation is found, there is a strong possibility of other large Japanese corporations also being present, along with the potential for connecting with *keiretsu* businesses (industrial conglomerates), etc. Japan's international actors are very risk averse and prefer operating with other Japanese. Therefore once one possible contact is discovered there will likely be many more. Looking into certain projects can often reveal all interested parties and other connected potential interviewees. A third solution is to target the social grouping organisations that form in the countries being operated in. Business councils, chambers of commerce, alumni associations, etc., will likely contain lists of potential contact to approach.

Once potential interviewees have been identified, their contact information will be required. Never contact head offices and request they put you in contact. Always contact the local operation directly. It will be best to find a name; so scanning through newspaper articles that might reveal a name (because Japanese websites may not) becomes useful. A simple fishing search on Google with terms such as for example "Mitsubishi CEO gives speech in [country X]…" even if it is not known whether anyone has given a speech or not, may reveal someone active in the country. Otherwise your letter will be a 'To whom it may concern' letter; which is not something to panic about, as Japanese professionals do understand that their contact details are not usually available publicly.

Once you begin collecting names, it is advisable to enter contacts into a Word document table of the sort found below in Table 2. Not only is this for your own records, it is also incredibly useful when you are later dealing with hundreds of replies and scheduling issues, enabling you to keep a record of how you contacted the person (letter, email, or telephone) and what their response was. In addition since the list is digital, Word allows for the option of sorting contacts which becomes very useful for grouping those who responded in either the affirmative or the negative, as well as it being possible to upload to Google Drive for your access anywhere. This latter feature becomes incredibly useful later when you are perhaps operating without proper mobile phone access and are limited to Wi-Fi only.

Table 2. Example Sampling Frame

Type	Name and details	Contact details	Form of contact	Response?
Social	Mr./Mrs. X Chief Executive Officer	Address 1 Telephone 1 Email 1	Letter Email Telephone	Yes, open to interview [details of contact name]
Business	Mr./Mrs. X Chief Executive Officer	Address 1 Telephone 1 Email 1	Letter Email Telephone	No, not open to interview
Political	Mr./Mrs. X Chief Executive Officer	Address 1 Telephone 1 Email 1	Letter Email Telephone	No, not open to interview but recommended/forwarded another contact instead

Source: Author

3.2 The Approach

This refers to your letter asking for the recipient to allow you to interview them. This is very important.... it should be a letter, and <u>not</u> an email. Aside from the difficulty or likely impossibility of accessing the correct email, interview or meeting request emails tend in general to be dismissed, especially so in East Asia. I have heard from many of my contemporaries of their difficulty in gaining interviewees and 99% of the time they will have sent their request by email. Whereas my success rates are substantially higher, even if elite interviewees are being targeted. Emails do not allow for the degree of professionalism and formalism that I will now outline as necessary for gaining access to Japanese institutions.

The letter itself needs to be carefully crafted in the following ways. First, it should be business—like in presentation. This means address and date created in the top or bottom corners, clear paragraphing and titling—not a single block of prose, a hand-written signature (in the space between 'yours sincerely' and your name), and with your business card paper-clipped to the top (not stapled as you will be attaching multiple sheets that need easily separating). If you do not have business cards, you must order some—all business in East Asia is done with business cards and the collection that you receive will form a useful folder of contacts for you when you return. In addition, business cards should be dual language (one language on either side), preferably with 'tinyurl' links or QR codes on them linking to your online profiles. Also, make sure the difference between your given name and family is clear by presenting your given name in lower case and your family name in upper case, e.g. Ryan HARTLEY.

Second, the structure of the letter should be in four paragraphs, each only about 4-5 lines (the letter should not have to take the reader too long to get the point). The first paragraph under the recipient name line should be a brief introduction as to who you are, what your professional affiliation is, and what you are seeking. The second paragraph should be a very brief outline of your <u>research topic and aims</u>. The third paragraph should be <u>details of the interview</u>—why you are doing interviews, what the interviewee should expect, and details such as length of time it will take. The fourth paragraph should be details of a <u>possible meeting opportunity</u>. Because you, the researcher, are imposing on the interviewee who is likely to be a busy individual, the researcher should present a wide time range and then let the interviewee decide dates and times that are best for them. Then sign off with the aforementioned printed and handwritten signature (remembering as with the business cards to print your name so as to make the distinction between given and family names clear), including underneath the name your title and affiliation. A good deal of thought needs to go into making this letter as clear as possible, as this is the only chance the researcher will get; changing the details later is both unprofessional and will become confusing to organise.

Third, once completed the letter should be translated so that the researcher can include multiple language versions of the letter. This will mean one copy in English, one copy in Japanese, and one copy in the language of the third-party country being investigated. The likelihood will be that English will be the medium of exchange in an international context, but multiple languages being offered at the outset not only helps the reader more quickly grasp what you want and avoid them throwing it straight in the bin out of frustration, it also demonstrates a degree of cross-cultural understanding that will likely be appreciatively commented on if you are successful in securing an interview. In my own research due to five dependent variable country case studies being selected (Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam) along with three independent variable countries active in those countries (Japan, China, and South Korea), my approach involved working in nine languages (including English).

On the Japanese copy, unless your Japanese is native, you are likely going to need a native speaker professional to help you with the language due to the need to use *keigo* (formal Japanese). As with any native speaker of a language, simply speaking a language does not necessarily mean being able to communicate professionally in it and the formal systems of Japanese are not necessarily utilised by most Japanese frequently. As such your letter is going to need to be checked by a native speaker who is familiar with professional or business communication. Take for example the difficulty in just deciding how to address your recipient. You will need to decide between four possible options, found below in Table 3:

Table 3. Four Ways of Addressing Formal Japanese Correspondence

Title of address	*Transliteration and translation*	*Function*
ご担当各位	*go'tanto kakui* everyone [implication is 'group'] responsible	For addressing a group of people
イギリス大使館 御中	*igirisu taishikan onchū* For the attention of/Dear Embassy of the United Kingdom	For addressing an institution [for institution, ご担当 is not required]
ご担当 Ryan Hartley 様	*go'tanto name sama* (Mr./Mrs. name responsible	For addressing an individual (whose name is known)
担当者様	*tantō'shya'sama* Person in charge	For addressing an individual (whose name is not known). This is likely the honorific best to use most often.

Source: Author

Finishing details for the Japanese copy will include the need for a *hanko* (personal seal) rather than handwritten signature at the bottom, and for the letter creation date in the header to use the Japanese *gengo* (Japan's dating framework that is linked to the emperor's birthday) system of dating rather than the Western calendar.

With regards to the third-party country's language—that is, the likelihood of not operating in either English or Japanese this is important to consider for the following reason: the probability is that the secretaries who open these letters will be nationals of that third-party country and not Japanese. They may speak English, they may not, but your letter being in their language again helps avoid it finding its way into the ignored bin. Dealing with some of these third-party country languages, especially if they are not roman script, can be challenging, as many computers may not be loaded up with the keyboards and scripts to display or edit them. There are solutions to these problems—for viewing, make sure that once a translation is completed you receive a PDF in addition to Word copy of the document. For editing Google Docs is likely to be able to handle most scripts, so upload the document to Google Docs and edit there, downloading in PDF form once you are finished.

Fourth and finally, once all documents are collated and pinned together with the paper-clipped business card, the letter can go in the envelope. Preparing the envelopes is a task in itself. Writing on hundreds of envelopes by hand is incredibly tiresome, so the best way to manage the volume of correspondence is to print your sampling frame. In this tabulated sampling frame you will have collected all the addresses and recipient names which can be printed, sized appropriately for the envelope, then printed, cut into their individualised blocks and glued to the envelopes. Make sure these are grouped by country, and preferably the country should be in large letter text in the address so as to avoid sorting mistakes in international mail. Then all that is required is for you to match by name your printed letters with the prepared envelopes. This whole process is going to take a very long time; much more than you would think simply printing letters will take, and will be *very* boring. Allocate a good amount of time for this.

3.3 Replies and Scheduling

As stated above, letters rather than emails are likely to receive a much higher response rate, especially if the steps outlined above have been taken and the approach has been suitably formal. Japanese actors are quite good at responding to letters even if the answer to your request is no. The replies are likely to be in Japanese or English, the former more likely if based in Japan but the latter the more likely from international actors, and even if you have sent your approach letter in Japanese. That Japanese approach letter will however provide the impression that your Japanese ability is of an advanced level (if you had it checked by a professional native speaker), so you will need to clarify which language you will both be using.

The replying actor—the actor all preliminary negotiations will be with will likely not be your target interviewee. They are likely to be a secretary, and they will likely reply by email (letter for the approach, all future missives by email). You will probably not have any contact with your target until the day of the interview, so be aware that the person being corresponded with probably will not have any knowledge of the details of your letter, research, or intentions. Remember however that the replying actor will know this, so make sure you remember their details—it will be embarrassing later if you are so focused on the main target interviewee that you forget the 'little people' organising everything for you. Also remember that they may indeed be in the interviewee later with you and the interviewee, so always be polite and grateful… but not gushing.

Your reply to the recipient is going to need to clarify a few things—date and time of meeting, the place, and the medium of language. The recipient may also pass along a request from their superiors for a list of questions or discussion points that you want to use, especially when dealing with controversy sensitive government actors. This becomes a research methods ethical dilemma and you will need to be ready for it. On the one hand if you say no to providing interview questions/discussion points for fear of creating prepared answers, they may refuse to meet you. On the other hand if you do gain access by providing the requested questions/points your interview may become shallow, even pointless, by not allowing any more than a simple questionnaire could have achieved. The researcher must judge for themselves based on the value of the interviewee and the sense gained from the correspondence. Personally I do not meet said requests, although for a select few interviewees that I really wanted to meet I provided a small number of bullet points (which were later not employed anyway); never would I provide a set of interview questions. Be aware of the fact that all of this exchange is going to be with a person in their second or third language, so keep things short and simple. I always reply in separated sentences rather than long single block paragraphs, in order to make points easier to discern. In addition, as any language teacher will tell you, it is important to overcome feelings of needing to be polite in your own language that will result in lots of extra and complex language that easily confuses. In English this usually means an excessive use of modal verbs (would, could, might, should, etc.) in order to be avoid being affirmative. However this level of grammar is some of the most complex in the English language, and is not taught until later stages in a language-learning curriculum. Using them or excessively being polite is likely going to cause more problems than solve. Keeping things simple in a second or third language setting is much more effective than keeping things polite. Finally, change your email settings so that your presented name to the recipient in their inbox is as easy to read (given name and family name are clearly discernible, and in katakana if possible).

If someone eventually replies in the negative, do not waste the opportunity; they have still replied when they could have just ignored your letter. Do not let them off the hook too quickly. Make sure you push to offer alternative dates and options, or otherwise ask if they can recommend anyone else they think you could speak to.

If the answer to your request for an interview is yes, they will either suggest a time but more likely ask you to suggest a more specific day and time to meet. This will become difficult as you begin to need to schedule. You are going to need to organise your own calendar from these replies and it is not a good idea to constantly change appointments. You will not be receiving all of your replies at the same time, so they will have to be slotted together into a manageable schedule. To keep things simple and also able to be accessed through Google Drive, I prepare a blank Excel file of the sort shown below in table 4 that is then filled up as replies are received. This can become chicken-and-egg difficult because you do not know where you need to be until you receive replies, but you also do not know when to schedule meetings because you do not know where you will be. However as the meetings begin to clump, it becomes possible to colour code and to determine what sort of schedule you will have.

Table 4. Example of a Flexible Excel Schedule

Country, city (period in-country)	Date	Time	Person/Event	Location	Contact details	Notes
Thailand, Bangkok (Sun 14—Fri 19)	Feb 15th	6.30pm	Person 1	Address 1	Email 1	
	Feb 17th	2.30-3.30	Person 2	Address 2	Email 2	
Cambodia, Phnom Penh (Fri 19—Fri 26)	Feb 22nd	2pm	Person 3	Address 3	Email 3	
	Feb 23rd	9am	Person 4	Address 4	Email 4	
Laos, Vientiane (Sun 28th—Fri 4th)	Mar 29th	1.30pm	Person 5	Address 5	Email 5	
	Mar 2nd	9am	Person 6	Address 6	Email 6	
Vietnam, Hanoi (Tues 8th—Sat 12th)	Mar 8th	10am	Person 8	Address 8	Email 7	
	Mar 10th	3pm	Person 9	Address 9	Email 8	

Source: Author

To help with this pre-scheduling, it is necessary to understand two things when navigating this messy scheduling problem—how long you will need and the distances between sites you will visit. On average an interview will last around one hour, and Google maps can help you judge how long the transit time will be between sites. On average two, perhaps three, interviews per day is a good target. However Japanese interviewees can be very generous with their time and I regularly have had two or three hour interviews. This will need to be factored in to your pre-field research scheduling with perhaps the best option being scheduling for a morning session and an afternoon session. Do not let slip any information about other people you are meeting. For example, person X wants to meet at a time when you are interviewing person Y. Do not say "oh sorry, I am busy at that time meeting with person Y". You may feel a desire to show-off and demonstrate whom you are meeting, but this is likely to work against you. Person X might know person Y and change their answers accordingly. Remember these people are local, and likely to swim in similar social circles; you are not, and do not.

3.4 The Interview

The night before the interview it will be preparation time. A good idea is screen shot or save all details such as addresses and maps to your phone, rather than relying on the Internet. An offline copy will be very useful the next day. In addition you will need to prepare for the individualities of the interviewees you will speak to the following day, in order to add to your prepared general questions. The dress code will be business attire, but in hot countries you do not need to wear a tie; Japanese do not, and do not wait like their counterparts in Japan for cool biz authorise them to do so.

On the day and time of the interview you are likely to follow a similar routine. You will arrive at a business tower or office. If a business tower you will need to have identification with you (passport or driving license) to exchange at reception for an ID card that will gain you access to the building and elevator. If an office, or once you have reached the office within the business tower, you will arrive at a reception staffed by one or two nationals from the country. Your meeting will be on the secretary's daily schedule and reception will likely be informed, so they will check who you are and then guide you to a meeting room. Unlike Western actors who often like to meet outside offices in coffee bars or restaurants (for a lunch or dinner meeting), Japanese actors will always meet in meeting rooms. You will likely be offered a drink, and then have around 5-10 minutes before your interviewee enters the room. In this time you can prepare the desk in front of you with materials, note-taking accessories, and extraneous extras such as business cards. It is best to do this at that point so there is no fumbling around later.

Your interviewee will usually come with a partner, and if this has not been experienced before, it can be a little off-putting as it begins to feel like you are at a panel job interview. Unlike Western actors who happily usually meet alone, Japanese actors and indeed most East Asian actors, meet in pairs. Sometimes this will be because of concerns about controversy; in which case one of the members will be a PR/media relations/international relations representative. You may have to use your interviewing skills to get beneath some spin, however only in a very small number of cases have I experienced this with Japanese actors. The need for two people is more often the need for confirmation of various points, so for example one person will work in one area and the other in another area. Given the details of your letter, these may reflect what you are interested in and will be an attempt to help you as much as they can. It is of course also important that there are two people present so that they can check each other.

Your interviewees will also likely have varying degrees of localisation, meaning how 'native' they have become. Japanese companies and public institutions tend to prefer generalists to specialists, and their staffs are often rotated frequently around multiple posts. It is important for you to quickly discern what level of localisation your interviewee has. There will be three types: (1) the careerist—this person is likely to rotate position frequently, strongly represent the institution, and weakly convey local settings, possibly preferring Japan to international assignments; (2) the internationalist—this person likely enjoys being outside of Japan but may also consider their career and rotate positions frequently, but possibly within a regional context and so be able to convey some of the local settings along with the institutional 'line'; and (3) the nativist—this person is likely to be working for a Japanese institution but perhaps in a less stable capacity (e.g.: part-time or contract), be able to strongly see the viewpoint of the host country they are in (likely to speak the local language too), may even defend the host country and be critical of Japan or Tokyo. The best indicator of which of these three types you are speaking to is the length of time they have been resident in the country. Japanese do not tend to like being outside of Japan for extended periods and, depending on the natures of the local peoples, have differing tolerances for differing locales due to a tendency towards prioritising human-to-human relations (in addition to food, cuisine is a major point of concern for Japanese deciding to reside abroad). Surprisingly perhaps, the age of the interviewee is not a good indicator and it is frequently found that internationalism is not the reserve of the youthful Japanese worker prior to the responsibilities of family. You will find a wide array of age ranges of Japanese residing abroad, and many in the upper age demographic especially in mid-senior positions. Incidentally, this latter group make for very good interviewees as they not only have the experience and seniority to worry less about the institutional line, but they also have the local knowledge and worldliness to be able to reflect knowledgably and critically on Japan's role in the world and in the third-party country.

At the outset the interviewee/interviewees may see it as their job to provide you with a 'briefing'; indeed this may be something they will have wanted to clarify during the reply/scheduling stage. It is standard practice for Japanese interviewees, especially less senior professionals, to want to remain close to a prepared script of some sort which usually means reading you through a corporate brochure that will also be available on their website. This is a waste of valuable time, and you can politely skip this by telling them you have already read it (and of course you should read it). Instead, spend the time on a more important element—nurturing rapport. Japanese interviewees want to get a 'feeling' about you—you are stranger after all. Even amongst the most powerful and high ranked political or business professionals I have interviewed outside of Japan, I have never once met a pushy Japanese professional in the mould of a Western trained MBA 'lean forward' type. Japanese elites, especially perhaps those outside of Japan, are usually very modest and patient. Rather than going into the interviewee with the mind-set of an overly professionalised and scripted, BBC-style *Hard Talk* interview, Japanese interviewees will prefer to want to gain a human-to-human 'feeling understanding' of you.

Once the opening has been completed and everyone is comfortable, you can move on to the main body of your interview. There is a typical research structure that is taught in research methods classes in the West that is not strictly necessary when dealing with Japanese interviewees. For example the recommendation to employ a five-stage process that involves 'warm up stages', 'cooling down stages', etc. is often recommended. This is rarely necessary due to the Japanese desire for the aforementioned human-to-human feeling and, aside from adding unnecessary pressure to the interviewer by them having to remember which stage they are at, the level of formality will likely turn-off a Japanese interviewee as being too cold. Instead I have usually found that Japanese interviewees are quite happy to jump straight into difficult topics or questions, so long as they are introduced well, which means softly and in a non-accusatory manner. There is another aspect of interviewing taught in Western universities that focuses on research ethics, which in terms of interviewees requires the gaining of 'informed consent', often in the form of a signed consent form. This is not a good idea when interviewing Japanese elites. Aside from their often being confused by the fact that if they have responded to your letter of invitation then they have obviously consented in an informed manner, asking them to sign a document after a formal introduction to the topic/interview, is likely to pour cold water on any 'warmth' you might achieve that will yield interesting answers. As such, I strongly advise *against* the formal informed consent procedure at the outset of an interview.

As for the main body itself, this is obviously going to depend on the nature of the questions needing answering. In addition this research note is a piece about interviewing Japanese interviewees rather than being a general interview guide, of which there are plenty of materials available. However there are a few points about the main body to mention.

Japanese interviewees, especially but not exclusively if they are mid- to lower-level representatives are likely to do one of two things in order to maintain a protective barrier between themselves and you, while remaining open and not being what they regard as rude by being blunt or refusing you something. This is achieved in two ways: (1) use in-house company materials to give you in effect a 'briefing' (dealt with above), or (2) reference publicly available information, for example a news story, public statement, or report from head offices back in Tokyo or other world powers/multilateral actors. This is what can be dubbed the *yoraba taiju no kage* strategy ("if you take shade, do it under a large tree", meaning, if you are going to rely on someone, pick someone who can do what you need). In terms of interviews, this refers to the tendency for Japanese elites to try to be open while simultaneously not revealing anything themselves, instead attempting to justify their comments in light of broader knowledge bases so as to diffuse their own personal responsibility. This will be done with the utmost politeness but will ultimately be useless to you the interviewer.

However even this clever style of obfuscation can prove useful to the interviewer for a number of reasons:

- A lot of the information may indeed be official lines or public information e.g. to be found in newspapers. However if you were to simply read all of the newspaper stories you would not be able to know which are more or less important. When an interviewee raises a point/story however, then you are able to discern which are priorities that you should read more into. The interviewee thus can act as filtering mechanism for you for when you return to your office or laboratory for further research.
- They may indeed not follow the government/company line *exactly,* and tell you interesting new information. This new information may then allow you to return to the secondary information and re-interpret it.
- They may interpret these events/stories differently, and thus rather than the interviewee as repository of information, their utility moves towards their representing a particular interpretative position.
- The interviewee may not only be useful in an interpretive way by providing their own opinion, they may also be useful in interpreting the meaning of public information itself. As outlined above, a lot of materials produced for public consumption by official Japan Inc. often says one thing but in fact has an underlying meaning that is only known to those in the industry or within Japanese institutions. Interviewees can aid in disclosing these hidden structures of insider parlance. For example, when current Prime Minister Abe refers frequently in public statements about the need in ODA projects for more "high quality infrastructure", the true reference point has little to do with quality but actually represents a diplomatic sideswipe at China and 'cheap' Chinese infrastructure projects that compete with 'high quality' Japanese infrastructure projects. Multiple interviewees helped confirm for me this particular reading between the headlines.

Other points to bear in mind during the main body are socio-cultural in nature. Similar to such cultural behaviours as the tendency for persons of Southeast Asian cultures to smile and laugh when they are nervous, provoking a seemingly happy mood when in fact the opposite is the case, there are certain socio-cultural tendencies to watch for when interviewing Japanese respondents. First, Japanese interviewees are highly likely to submit and listen rather than be forthright or interrupt/disagree/criticise. This means that the skilful interviewer must attempt to understand that the more they speak, the less the Japanese interviewee will. Even if something that is said is known to be wrong, they are unlikely to correct you. Second, they are likely—again, for the sake of maintaining a comfortable mood—to follow leading lines of interrogation rather than correct them. The interviewers must avoid leading or argumentative expositions in favour of open-ended or choice based questioning. If not, the response will likely be a series of meaningless "yes's" rather than true answers that the interviewer does not already know. Third, Japanese interviewees are very comfortable with silence; to an extent that others may not be. Rather than refuse answering they are likely to simply stare at the interviewer, something that can be frustratingly off-putting. However, this can also be a useful prodding strategy for the interviewer, and given a proclivity to allow other's lines of inquiry, silence can be used in reverse in order to prompt answers from the interviewee. This may not initially be the most comfortable of things to do, but it is very effective if persisted with. Finally, there is an identifiable difference in how Japan deals with international affairs and how Western actors approach international affairs. This is not the place to get into the details of this, but broadly speaking, Japan favours a more pragmatic, quiet, and uncritical approach to its activities in the world, whereas Western actors tend to be more theoretical, outspoken, and sometimes critical in their approaches to certain countries or issues. Japanese interviewees are therefore not likely to find it comfortable discussing issues in a philosophical/conceptual manner, or in ways that might be controversial. If the interviewer would like to do this, it is better to approach it carefully from a practical perspective first (what is empirically occurring in a shovel-ready project sort of way), and then move towards the theoretical/critical. Displacing the topic onto hypothetical subjects e.g. "one person might say X, but another might say this is unethical", can also be fruitful.

Once completed—and it is polite to spot the tell-tale signs and finish on-time as your interviewee is likely to have a meeting following yours but will not want to be impolite and stop you—there is a little more to do. Gaining access to these interviews should hopefully not be a singular event. Ideally these people should form a personal network that the interviewer can access again in the future. With personal business cards in hand, you now have personal contact information that pierces through normally faceless institutions and their websites. As such the interviewer should be trying to leave the interviewee on friendly and professional terms that leaves a lingering feeling of trust and confidence. Japanese respondents, especially when dealing with non-Japanese, favour this friendly rather than overly professionalised approach. If achieved, the interviewer is likely to be able to call on interviewees again, and/or send follow-up questions by email. Japanese respondents are very open to this and can prove to be not only a singular but potentially repeated information source for the researcher. This can be even more pronounced in the context of third-party country context research, as both the interviewer and interviewee are out of their comfort backgrounds and away from their majority social groups.

4. Conclusion

This research note sought to propose that the field of Japan Studies, given the widely international role that Japan in political and business forms plays around the world, needs to better incorporate the need for research in third-party countries. Rather than Japan Studies as referring instinctively to research either in the researcher's home country or in Japan, researchers interested in Japan can feel justified in approaching the field through their subject of interest as manifested in any country in which Japan may be active. The research note justified this approach with relevant benefits and challenges, and followed by focusing on the research methodology detailed here—the interviewing of Japanese elites. The main body of the note then detailed step-by-step how to approach the research methodology of interviewing when dealing with Japanese elites in third-party country contexts. The research note can now conclude confidently with this proposal being justified in its fullest detail, and hopes that other researchers active within Japan Studies can benefit from the insights hopefully made here. Subsequent work that would be helpful would be research notes that detail the pursuit of alternative research methodologies such as conducting questionnaires or archival research in third-party country contexts. Alternatively would be research notes that investigate particular contextual issues with the different countries in which third-party country Japan Studies is conducted.