

## At home and in the field: ethnographic encounters in Asia and the Pacific Islands

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**At home and in the field: ethnographic encounters in Asia and the Pacific Islands**, by Suzanne S. Finney, Mary Mostafanezhad, Guido Carlo Pigliasco and Forrest Wade Young, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2015, xiii + 331 pp., US\$28.00 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-8248-5379-2

This book presents several layers of knowledge creation and dissemination suitable for a wide variety of readers: for the novice scholar interested in pursuing research in Asia and the Pacific Islands, this work will serve as a highly suitable primer for understanding the state of ethnographic fieldwork in the region and the intellectual and logistical preparations that should be made prior to arriving. For the seasoned ethnographic researcher, this book will provide moments of sympathetic (and potentially empathetic) understanding as well as food for thought in reflexively analyzing one's own past and current fieldwork experiences. For the general reader, the book demonstrates an amalgamation of engaging stories of travel and identity within the region.

The text is split into nine distinct portions which each explore a particular social and/or cultural encounter as it relates to ethnographic fieldwork in Asia and the Pacific Islands. It is noteworthy to point out that the experiences and situations discussed within the chapters may easily transfer to other geographical locations. Although distinct, each section of the book follows a cohesive intellectual thread of understanding that explains the emotional, physical, and scholarly rigor that accompanies ethnographic work in Southeast Asia. The topics of discussion follow a bottom-up trajectory, beginning with encounters surrounding the lived experiences of individuals and small social groups, and move towards broader environmental and political encounters involving several layers of representation.

The book opens with "Real Encounters: Predicaments of Ethnographic Encounters", a collection of chapters discussing notions of respect for local knowledge, mistrust of locals, and spaces of safety and danger within ethnographic fieldwork. This transitions to Part Two, titled "Meaningful Encounters: Learning, Representing, Engaging the Field". This portion of the book is concerned with illustrations of how classic techniques in ethnography can be transformative as they develop into new, innovative methodologies, with a particularly fascinating case study of exploring notions of reflexivity in participant observation while competing in a robotics contest in Japan. Part Three is titled "Language Encounters: Voices, Discourse, Digital Practice" and highlights a portion of ethnographic fieldwork whose considerations are virtually impossible to decouple from the research process: language-based encounters. As noted within Part Three, language reflects social position and therefore ethnographers should, and will, expect to experience their fieldwork through a lens of understanding the social dynamics surrounding language in the environment in which they are situated. These language dynamics further influence navigations of identity, belonging, and gender, as demonstrated next in Part Four: "Identity Encounters: Gender, Ethnicity, Nationality", including case studies of refugee identity in South Korea and gender politics in Thailand. From this point forward in the book, the chapter sections broaden to consider the wider social


dynamics of ethnography, still incorporating the individual experiences of ethnographic researchers and their subjects of interest but also presenting larger-scale considerations of social networks, marriage, inequality, environmental justice, and political conflict and resistance. The final section, entitled “Deep Encounters: Worldview, Religion, Spiritual Practices”, contextualizes the book through case studies of how cultures in this region view life and death, embodied experiences, and their context within a broader global culture.

The books employs accessible, colloquial language, with each chapter short enough to provide a glimpse into the particular dynamics surrounding the authors’ ethnographic fieldwork but also effectively connecting the authors’ experiences to broader discourse pertaining to challenges experienced within ethnography, a hefty proposition considering the book’s small chapter size. Admittedly, it is easy to become engrossed in the chapters only to find that the story often ends after two to three pages. However, although frustrating from the standpoint that the fieldwork and associated ethnographic encounters are presented in an engaging manner and the short chapter sizes may leave some readers feeling intellectually unfulfilled, it is important to note that the strength of the book is the ability of the chapter authors to effectively present their fieldwork, their reflexivity within the ethnography, and the broader implications of their encounters within such a short frame of text.

This book will be of immense service to cultural geographers whether their research is based within Southeast Asia or elsewhere. The format and progression of the book very much mirrors the myriad of complex social processes and structures that an ethnographic researcher is likely to encounter in the field, particularly those in which they did not anticipate. Although a reader’s research may be situated in another geographic region outside of Southeast Asia, the chapter authors are wise to contextualize their experiences in the broader realm of ethnographic research.

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