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► **To cite this version:**

Valérie Gelézeau. Problems in Landscape Interpretation: The Fieldwork Paradox in North Korea. AKSE (Association for Korean Studies in Europe) conference, AKSE (Association for Korean Studies in Europe) conference and Bochum university, Jul 2015, Bochum, Germany. halshs-01180032

HAL Id: halshs-01180032

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01180032>

Submitted on 24 Jul 2015

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AKSE CONFERENCE 2015

10-15 July 2015, Bochum

Problems in Landscape Interpretation – the Fieldwork Paradox in North Korea

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Keywords: North Korea, fieldwork, ethnography, methodology, epistemology, area studies, landscape, cultural geography, ethics, 'closed context'

Abstract:

In the field of humanities and the social sciences, and more particularly in that of area studies, direct access to sources and materials gathered locally, and in the vernacular languages, are core sources for research. Furthermore, as ethnographic methods tend to disseminate not only in the domain of anthropology, but in all disciplinary fields of the social sciences (Wacquant 2003), the question of fieldwork has been the topics of many epistemological discussion in the scientific literature (Descola 1994; Blankaert 1996; Houssay-Holzschuch 2008; Volvey, Calbérac and Houssay-Holzschuch 2012). But, while decades of discussion regarding the politics, praxis and ethics of fieldwork have been engaged by many disciplines in the social sciences, within the field of Korean Studies, those topics are rarely discussed *per se* – short of some attempts mostly by anthropologists (see for example Guillemoz 2010). This is particularly true regarding studies in and about North Korea, where the conditions of research and access to materials is such that common knowledge considers impossible the practice of fieldwork.

Indeed, as many other fieldwork contexts such as authoritarian countries, or more generally spaces where access to data and free speech is restricted (such as prisons for example), North Korea is a 'closed context' (Koch 2013) where the traditional fieldwork methods are impossible to implement: statistics are difficult to obtain, often inconsistent, subject to doubt, and render quantitative methods unreliable; the surveillance of the 'organs' (Gentile 2013) seems to make impossible qualitative methods based on interviews and surveys; and a 'culture of fear' makes

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simple observation extremely challenging (Gentile 2013). 'Doing fieldwork in North Korea' seems like an ultimate paradox.

Yet current debate on fieldwork in the social sciences, as well as the urge to develop a 'robust [academic and scientific] engagement' (De Ceuster and Breuker 2013 after Barmé) towards North Korea, and a 'thick reading' of this country, renders this discussion an imperative.

This paper proposes to address the internal contradiction of "doing fieldwork in North Korea", by challenging a positivist view of what fieldwork is, as something external to be discovered and interpreted. To do so, it will draw on the combined perspective of cultural geography and Korean studies by using the most recent epistemological discussions regarding fieldwork and landscape interpretation in geography on one part, and past experience of study tours or research trips in North Korea, from 2007 to 2013. The objective of the paper is both to bring to think about how research about that country is possible, how to reach out to colleagues within the country, and how to develop sustainable projects in social sciences regarding North Korea.

How can the implementation of field methods occur in such a 'closed context' like North Korea? Is the notion of fieldwork even possible in North Korea? How to untie the paradox of 'doing fieldwork in North Korea'? How to interpret landscapes in North Korea? Is the movement of landscape interpretation even possible in this context?

To answer these questions, the paper intends to use several sets of materials. First, materials regarding the two trips to North Korea, which were labelled in both cases as study tours or scientific trips (and not touristic ones). Those materials consists first in the materials gathered *during* the trips : materials allowing to analyze *the praxis of fieldtrip* according to a decided 'program' (*iljǒng*) and targeted to a particular foreign academic delegation (*taep'yodan*) always treated as a collective body, extensive field notes in their various stages, photos, books and materials collected during the trip, etc. But I use also materials produced *before* (all material – contacts and organization matters – allowing to retrace the organization of the fieldtrip and analyze *the politics of fieldtrip and its actors*), and *after* the trip (scientific production, seminars, conferences, projects developed, etc.) allowing to evaluate the

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impact of the fieldwork. Adding to those materials a series of interviews with people considering themselves as having done 'fieldwork' in North Korea, the paper first uses those sources to critically discuss the so-called 'fieldwork pact' (*le pacte du terrain* – Calbérac 2010) – as applied, or not, in this North Korean context. In such a critical approach, fieldwork is not understood in a positivist manner as an objectifying process (ruled by the omniscient gaze of the scholar from the outside) but rather as space to investigate ethnographically, a research network to build, and a place where to question the scholar's own ideological assumptions – in short, a mediating space.

In a second part, using attempts to interpret North Korean landscape, rural and urban, as an example, the paper argues that the North Korean context illustrates that fieldwork is a complex process of knowledge construction, which opens the possibility of engaging research with and in North Korea in a renewed way. On the ground of the conclusions reached in the first two parts, the paper finally engages in discussing the ethical issues regarding doing fieldwork in North Korea – and more generally in closed contexts – where the politics and praxis (described in the first two parts) put at stake not only the researcher herself (and the institutions that she is representing), but also – and although in diverse ways – the people (colleagues, minders, guides) who are actors of the fieldwork within North Korea.

In a larger realm, this paper hopes that the quasi-experimental case of fieldwork in North Korea will trigger more general and theoretical discussion, allowing to add up to the general conversation of the social sciences regarding this topic, and help to better understand and use this essential methodological tool for the social sciences.

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Image: A critical image of fieldwork in North Korea: crayon sketch of a routine meal during the 2013 trip

Meals – collective body of the delegation and North Korean « organs »



Pyongyang, October 2013

Caption: Conventional academic writing and the « fieldwork pact or commitment » (*le pacte du terrain*, Calbérac 2010) rarely leads to set oneself in fieldwork pictures and fieldwork pictures are usually not supposed to be changed according to the need of the demonstration. This images does the contrary, putting the collective body of the delegation (in which I am) at the centre, and having the picture heavily rearranged, using the “crayon” artistic effect in powerpoint software. This visual trick is one way to perform the discussion I am trying to initiate, trying to put my fieldwork picture at a distance, expressing how fieldwork pictures are only pictures, and overall trying to discuss the practice of fieldwork as it is structured within certain normative ways. This is somehow my experimental way to reconstitute some significant aspects of what “fieldwork in North Korea” may be about, and beyond that, fieldwork in geography more generally.

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