DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY, YALE UNIVERSITY

DISSERTATION RESEARCH PROSPECTUS

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Konbini: Modern Convenience, Local Familiarity, and the Global Transformation of the Japanese Mom-and-Pop

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Summary
Shopkeepers, neighborhood stores, and politically powerful merchant associations have been an
temporary dimension of Japanese community life and social class formation for much of the postwar period.
However, within the national landscape of small, family-run businesses, a new institution has emerged —
the convenience store franchise. Developed in the United States prior to the Great Depression and successfully
introduced to Japan in the late-1960s, the convenience store model has quickly taken root in “foreign” soil.
Today there are nearly 51,000 konbini (convenience stores) in Japan and almost sixty chains operating
nation-wide (Fukunaga 1999; Takahashi 2001). More remarkably, the past decade of economic uncertainty
and socio-political instability has not curbed convenience store expansion. Since 1991 and the collapse of
the economic bubble, the number of konbini has nearly doubled. Although reporters and economists herald
the konbini as an innovative and successful counterpoint to the faltering paradigm of “Japan Inc.”, to this
date there has been no sustained ethnographic study about what these stores mean to local people or about
how the expansion of these stores articulates with important qualitative shifts in neighborhood retailing,
community relations, and global social and economic trends.

In this project, I will examine the emergence and proliferation of the convenience store in urban and
rural Japan and investigate the meaning of this retail transformation for late modern society. Currently,
konbini serve and employ more people than the nation’s department stores or supermarkets (Kawabe 2003).
Urban residents visit them upwards of twice a day and the industry itself boasted 7.1 trillion yen in total
annual sales in 2001. These statistics indicate the strong integration of a formerly American franchise model
into the daily lives and social networks of communities where small shops and local merchants have long
been considered to be the “bulwark of tradition and the sustainers of cultural identity” (Bestor 1990).
However, this transformation is neither seamless nor uncontested. As convenience stores support an
increasingly divergent range of lifestyles, their expansion generates new discourses and anxieties about the
nature of this success and its wider social implications. Konbini super-saturation and fierce competition have
contributed to the demise of less competitive stores and exposed fissures in long-standing merchant alliances
and customer relationships. These 24-hour “post-modern” mom-and-pops are seen to embody ultra-modern
notions of progress and predictability. At the same time, they are admonished for their unhealthy food,
mountains of waste, and round-the-clock noise.

Research Questions
Through a thorough analysis of Japan’s convenience stores, their communities, and the complex,
often conflicting meanings that this retail expansion has generated, I seek to understand how global forms
and economic shifts are transposed in local terms in neighborhood contexts and the roles that shop owners,
part-time employees, consumers, shōtengai and trade associations, and corporations play in localizing and
substantiating this national marketing node and global retail model.

My project addresses several central questions: (1) the extent to which konbini are being integrated
into rural and urban communities; (2) how people perceive their relationship to konbini vis-à-vis other forms
of retail and how this relationship may be changing over time; (3) the amount of variation (actual and
perceived) between particular stores and chains; (4) how “convenience” is being constructed by various
actors and institutions; (5) and the extent to which local actors are influencing the retail store’s packaged
model. The ultimate goal of my study is to question the assumption that konbini, like other chain store
species, are merely cookie cutter establishments, or kintarōame (Terauchi 2000), a traditional Japanese candy
used metaphorically to describe things that are identical and lack individuality. By considering the lives and
daily activities centered around these stores and the processes of meaning making in which operators,
workers, and consumers engage, I will examine how convenience stores are not merely imposed and
accepted but adapted and changed by human interaction.

Theoretical Framework and Significance
Japan’s konbini phenomenon has received significant media attention, yet there has been very little
academic research that draws out the convenience store’s significance for larger questions of globalization
and Japan’s changing retail economy. Although two economic studies of the history of 7-Eleven Japan (Bernstein 1997; Ishikawa and Nejo 1998) have been published in English, there exists no sustained ethnographic research on konbini and the communities that use them. In framing such a study, I draw on and will contribute to research on globalization, anthropological literature about Japan’s urban transformation, and ethnographic studies on retail, service, and consumption.

Literature on globalization (Watson 1997) has cautioned against understanding it solely as cultural homogenization. Indeed theorists have shown clearly that globalization is far from a uniform process (Appadurai 1996; Hannertz 1996; Sassen 2001). Localization, as well, is not a unilinear process even within the same nation state. The selective appropriation of a U.S. franchise model, its nationalization and differentiation through competitive commercial practices in Japan, and its subsequent exportation by Japanese companies as a global retail template complicates notions of Western cultural imperialism (Ritzer 1993; Tomlinson 1991) and suggests a far more creative, contingent, and layered process than proscribed under the usual binary of “global” and “local.”

Urban transformation and the tensions between tradition and modernity are another frame into which convenience stores can be placed. Although white collar office jobs and large companies have had considerable influence on the formulations of middle class identity in postwar Japan (Rohlen 1974; Vogel 1991; Kelly 1993), medium and small enterprises make up a far larger percentage of the Japanese work experience and economy (Bestor 1989; Roberts 1994). While anthropologists have been attentive to this issue, most ethnographic studies concerning small businesses focus on enterprises involved with production (Kondo 1990; Roberson 1998). Bestor’s 1989 study of a Tokyo neighborhood and Plath’s After Hours (1964) are notable exceptions that insightfully depict the world of shop owners and their social position within the community. Both books predate the collapse of bubble economy and the rise of the convenience store industry. My study will focus on the transformation from such family businesses to franchised stores and how local communities make sense of these changes.

Lastly, research on convenience stores will contribute to the growing literature on retail, service, and consumption both within and outside of Japanese studies. Ethnographies on work in large Japanese department stores (Creighton 1996; Matsunaga 2000) combined with studies by Hochschild (2003), Ehrenreich (2001), and Raz (2002) on emotions, service, and late capitalist economies are highly instructive but have yet to fully take up the relationship between service and notions of convenience that are defined, packaged, consumed, and accepted. Of equal interest is how konbini fit into the larger continuum of Japan’s globally inflected retail, service, and leisure industries. Although based on a model developed in America and imported to Japan in manual form, konbini are more indigenized than Tokyo Disneyland (Raz 1999) where Japanese elements play a subordinate role to a foreign, “Western” image. Like commercial wedding parlors (Goldstein-Gidoni 1997), konbini chains compete for market share, but to what extent is a particular chain’s success dependent on balancing “traditional” and “modern” elements through a bricolage of invented practices that Goldstein-Gidoni reports for the wedding businesses? Furthermore, konbini managers are motivated, like those in the Japanese funeral service industry (Suzuki 2000), to expand their services to fit the changing lifestyles of the customer, but the presentation styles and the services being offered often appear less concerned with preserving community “rituals” than generating store profits.

Preparation, Methods, and Research Design

This study will be carried out over a fourteen-month period beginning in September of 2004. The basic form of the research will be in the convenience stores themselves and the local communities and networks within which they are located. I will combine my observations as a convenience store clerk with structural and institutional analyses of the stores. I will also use questionnaires and conduct interviews with owners, employees, customers, and industry officials. Based on preliminary research, my ethnographic fieldwork will focus on two main sites in Japan. One is in the Shonai region of rural Yamagata, where I lived for three years and where the introduction of convenience stores is relatively recent; the second is the residential and commercial district around Tsukishima, Tokyo, one subway stop away from Japan’s first 7-Eleven and where konbini have played a part in day-to-day life for nearly thirty years. I have already had an opportunity to work with the economic historian, Professor Nobuo Kawabe, of Waseda University’s School of Commerce and will accept his kind offer to join his study group as a visiting research scholar next year.
Bibliography


Terauchi, Kunihiko. 2000. "Benrissa' e shinka tsutzuku" (The evolution of 'convenience'). Yomiuri Shinbun, April 22.

