Statement of Purpose

Against the backdrop of an uncertain economy and an unstable socio-political landscape, Japan’s convenience store industry stands out as an innovative and successful counterpoint to the faltering paradigm of “Japan Inc.” Since 1991 and the collapse of the economic bubble, the number of convenience store franchises in Japan has nearly doubled. Today approximately 51,000 of these stores illuminate neighborhood streets, rural byways, and office buildings. A majority of Japan’s konbini (convenience stores) are individually owned and managed. However, through franchise agreements most stores maintain close ties to larger commercial enterprises. These connections contribute to the konbini’s ability to combine scale, efficiency, and adaptability with familiar neighborhood service in a way that sets new standards for “convenience” both within Japan and abroad (Bernstein 1996; Kawabe 2002). They are also sites of cultural negotiation where global forms are imposed and appropriated by local actors.

I propose in this project to examine the emergence and proliferation of the convenience store in Japan. My research will focus on how konbini and an emergent concept of convenience are globally packaged, culturally influenced, and locally practiced. In particular, I am concerned with how individuals operate and use these stores and the ways in which konbini graft onto the routines of shōtengai (shopping “main streets”), neighborhoods, and other commercial spaces at a time when such places and their populations are in flux. By emphasizing the dynamic interaction between local citizens, stores, and larger corporate entities, I hope to better understand the crucial role that neighborhood actors – shop owners, part-time employees, and consumers (both paying and non-paying) – play in localizing and substantiating this national marketing node and global retail model.

Currently, konbini serve and employ more people than the nation’s department stores or supermarkets. Urban residents visit them upwards of twice a day and the industry itself boasted 7.1 trillion yen in total annual sales in 2001. For some, these statistics are a clear indication of the extent to which a formerly American but increasingly global franchise model has been integrated 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). But such facts and figures only reveal part of the story. 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, large and small, 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, round-the-clock noise, and as refueling zones for gangs of feral youth.

Through a qualitative analysis of Japan’s convenience stores, their communities, and the complex, often conflicting meanings that this retail expansion has generated, my research ultimately seeks to understand how global forms and economic shifts are transposed in local terms in neighborhood contexts.
Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Japan’s konbini phenomenon has received significant media attention, particularly in Japanese newspapers. However 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 (Ishikawa & Nejo 2003; Bernstein 1996) have been published in English, to this date there exists no sustained ethnographic research on Japan’s convenience stores and the communities in which they are embedded. In framing just such a study, I draw on several major bodies of literature: research on globalization, anthropological works about Japan’s urban transformation, and ethnographic studies on retail, service, and consumption.

The spread of a formerly American retail form in urban and rural Japan makes convenience stores an important site for understanding how global models are domesticated in different contexts. Literature on globalization (Watson 1997; Miller 1991, 1992) has cautioned against understanding it solely as cultural imperialism or cultural homogenization. Indeed theorists have shown clearly that globalization is not a uniform process in all parts of the world (Appadurai 1996; Hannerz 1996; Sassen 2001; Ong 1999). Although “global cities’ are often touted as the key spaces of arbitration for emergent cultural forms and trends, Japan’s convenience store example suggests a much more complex set of processes and perspectives must be taken into account. A study of konbini in both rural and urban Japan will provide a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which local actors contribute to the nationalizing of the convenience store model, to differentiation between large chains, and to creating the distinctiveness of particular stores.

Urban transformation and the tensions between tradition and modernity are another frame into which convenience stores can be placed. Although the images of white collar office jobs and large companies have had considerable influence on the formulations of middle class identity in postwar Japan (Rohlen 1974; Vogel 1963; Kelly 1993; Ogasuwa 1999), it has been noted that medium and small enterprises make up a far larger percentage of the Japanese work experience and economy (Kondo 1990; Bestor 1989; Roberts 1994). While anthropologists have been attentive to this issue, most ethnographic studies concerning small businesses focus on particular enterprises involved with production (Kondo 1990; Moeran 1984; Roberson 1998). Bestor’s study of a Tokyo neighborhood and Plath’s After Hours (1964) are two notable exceptions that insightfully depict the world of shop owners and their social position vis-à-vis 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 convenience 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 1988, 1992; Matsunaga 2000) combined with studies by Hochschild (2002), 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. Both konbini and
commercial wedding parlors (Edwards 1989; Goldstein-Gidoni 1997) find themselves competing for market share, but to what extent is a convenience store chain’s success dependent on balancing “traditional”/Japanese and “modern”/Western 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**

My background experience for this research includes five years of Japanese language study, three years of working in rural Japan as an English teacher, and several shorter periods of intensive pre-dissertation research. For my Master’s degree at Harvard University, I had the opportunity to work with Professor James Watson and prepared a thesis on a general history of Japan’s retail industry and the development of convenience stores.

The research itself will be conducted over twelve months from 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. Based on preliminary research, I have selected two primary communities to work in. 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 in a small shopping district in Tsukishima, Tokyo, one subway stop away from Japan’s first 7-Eleven and where, for close to thirty years, konbini have played a part in day-to-day life. I have already had an opportunity to work with the economic historian, Professor Nobuo Kawabe of Waseda University’s School of Commerce. I will accept his offer to join his study group as a visiting research scholar (kyakukenkyūin) next year.