

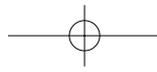
Interview with Edward Fowler Professor of East Asian Languages and Literatures, UC-Irvine and ICU Visiting Professor, Autumn 2010

Conducted by Gavin H. WHITELOW
(International Christian University)



Professor Edward Fowler teaches courses in the departments of East Asian Languages and Literatures and Film and Media Studies at the University of California - Irvine. His scholarship has focused on autobiographical narrative in early 20th-century Japan. He maintains an “abiding interest” in the social and cultural dimensions of postwar Japan as well. His research and writings over the past several decades have engaged with some of the less visible and accessible but nevertheless critical dimensions of the human landscape. Along with articles on minorities and migrants, Fowler's book, *San'ya Blues* (Cornell Press 1997) , and his English translation of Oyama Shiro's memoir, *A Man With No Talents* (Cornell Press 2005), provide rich, ethnographically textured accounts of day laborer life in Tokyo. Fowler's work speaks to students and scholars of Japan across academic disciplines.

During the 2010 Autumn term, Professor Fowler was a visiting professor at ICU and co-



taught a course entitled *Contemporary Japan: From Ramune to Anime* with Professor William Steele. In addition to weekly classroom lectures, both professors led a series of walking tours in Tokyo and Mitaka that allowed students to experience first-hand some sites that they were studying. The following piece is an edited transcript of an hour-long interview conducted with Fowler on October 28, 2010. The discussion highlights Fowler's own "long engagement" with Japan-both regional Japan and Tokyo-and reveals how a notion of *genba* (site) is situated in his research approach and teaching.

You are at ICU this term co-teaching a course on Tokyo. As a scholar of Japanese literature, what role do you see Tokyo and the notion of genba (site) playing in your own teaching and research?

FOWLER: How I see it is in a fairly unscholarly way. I always have an interest in eyeballing a place once I learn something about it. That's my style. There is also this happy coincidence at ICU because the professor I am co-teaching with, Bill Steele, is a lot like me in this way. He knows Tokyo, he knows the *jiyū minken* (citizens' rights) movement, and he knows the campus in a way that few others do. His knowledge of this area is filling in a lot of blanks for me and contributes a whole new dimension. Also, I think part of the interest comes in the course of aging. You might happen upon a place but you don't really see that much the first time. Then for some reason or other you get back there and realize that it's not the same as it was before. It is the accretion of differences that you pick up on over time. Perhaps this sort of repeated examination doesn't appeal to some, but it definitely appeals to me. I was not enthralled with Tokyo at all in the beginning, by the way. It really turned me off, actually. I had a very different reaction to it than I did, say, with London, which was love at first sight. I was much happier to be in *tōi inaka* (out in the provinces), which is where I spent most of my time during my first two stays in Japan, than in Tokyo. I missed what was out there and hated what was here. It took quite a while for that feeling to wear off. Finally, though, after revisiting different neighborhoods over the years and thinking about why things were the way they were-how this whole city was put together-Tokyo became a place of real interest to me.

Did you ever study at ICU as a student?

My first experience with Tokyo was in the 1960s. I didn't study here, but ICU was my last stop in Japan. All of us fifty exchange students stayed here. We spent three or four days for a debriefing after our homestays with families around the country. We were put on a big bus and whisked away from a student hotel in Ochanomizu to Mitaka.





Your exposure to Tokyo was initially limited. To what extent then did your experiences in regional Japan-Kyushu and Akita-influence your later relationship with Tokyo and its shitamachi neighborhoods?

One of the reasons I became interested in the phenomenon of Tokyo, without necessarily liking the city, was that the children of the families that I had been staying with both in Kyushu and Akita lived in Tokyo. Not because they liked it either, but because Tokyo was where the jobs or the schools were. In the case of my host family in Akita, there were three children and all three were living in Tokyo area. One was going to medical school, one was attending a pharmacology college, and another was a housewife in Saitama, not too far from Tokyo. They all visited their parents when I was doing my homestay in Akita, during spring break in March, and later visiting again in the summer. The parents, meanwhile, would sometimes come to Tokyo to visit. The long spring and summer breaks allowed the two college students to visit home for fairly long periods, and so I got to know them well, first in Akita, and then later on when we were all in Tokyo. Gradually, I began to take note the relationship between the provinces and Tokyo, specifically, Akita and Ueno. Ueno is the terminus for people coming out of the north. A couple of decades later I would come to understand that Ueno was also the place that many people first came to before ending up in San'ya. I learned that after the war it was a gathering spot for people without roofs over their heads, whether it be residents who were bombed out of their homes in the city, or evacuees who had returned from the countryside, or soldiers repatriated from the continent. Ueno was "homeless central" during the immediate postwar period, but the government eventually took measures to move the homeless out of the area. That was when San'ya really took off as a toehold in the city for day laborers and *dekasegi* (seasonal, rural laborers). San'ya was already a day laborer quarter before the war, but its heyday was in the postwar period. My own connection with San'ya didn't begin until the late 1980s, yet I'd heard about it as early as around 1970. What people told me about the place led me to think that I shouldn't be going there any time soon, and maybe not at all. I ended up striking out on my own because no one else seemed to be interested in tagging along.

To what degree did your disciplinary interests play a role in your investigations of Tokyo?

I was what you might call a *bungaku seinen* (literary youth), and insofar as I was reading Japanese fiction and so much of it is set in Tokyo, it seemed worth looking around and seeing some of the places that were being written about. I suppose I got into it from that angle. Not that I was avid in my search of the setting for such and such a story, but that was





certainly part of it. I got to know people though colleagues and professors who were far more knowledgeable than I in that respect and that no doubt rubbed off a bit. Even my connection with San'ya was through literature. I became interested in Futabatei Shimei (1864-1909), who was a student of *Tsubouchi Shōyō* (1859-1935) and one of the first to write fiction in the vernacular. He was also something of a guide, apparently, someone who came from outside Tokyo and got to know the city better than the locals. He took newspaper reporters around to this and that neighborhood, and to several notorious slums. His interest rubbed off on people who then went on to write about these areas. I thought to myself, "Wow, this guy is doing more than one thing." Anyway, Futabatei seemed to justify my own interest in walking the city, starting with Asakusa, which I began frequenting in the late 1960s, and later San'ya.

Was there a political side to Futabatei's interest in these sorts of areas?

He was certainly politically aware. The people he took around were connected with the media and they would write about those places. And they were shocked by what they saw because the slums were really miserable. Yokoyama Gennosuke (1871-1915) and others wrote about the "three great slums" of Tokyo. One of them was in Shitaya Mannen-chō, which was northeast of Ueno Station, not far from where the Taito Ward Office now stands. Another was in Samegahashi, which was just outside the grounds of the Akasaka Tōgū Goshō, now the official residence of the Crown Prince, and at that time the emperor's residence for many years while the palace was being built. The name survives as the name of one of the entranceways leading into the Akasaka Goshō, guarded by a police box: Samegahashi Gate. It's a short walk downhill from Yotsuya Station. The third was in Shin Ami-chō, very near where Hamamatsu-chō Station is located today and practically in the shadow of the World Trade Building. All of them were populated by the underclass, which had moved in during an earlier period.

So, a sense of curiosity drew you in?

Yes, curiosity. I should mention that Futabatei was an immensely curious person. He cut his teeth on Russian literature and he visited Russia at the end of his life. His translations of Turgenev and other Russian writers are actually better known than his own writing. They are what really woke people up to the beauty of the modern idiom. He, more than anyone else, showed what a writer could do with modern Japanese.





As a scholar and translator, do you get anything out of going to these places? Is there a connection with a place rubs off or feeds into your understanding of the vernacular?

My sense is yes, definitely, but it may be a false sense, because what you see is not necessarily what was there when the story was written or when the author was living there. Change is such a constant in this city. So my sense is an illusion. Yet despite the illusion I suppose I do have a curiosity about what a place is like or was like. In the case of one translation I did, however-of a short story by Shiga Naoya set in Matsue, not Tokyo-it was a good thing that I checked the place out. What I saw was rather different than what I was imaging from the story I read, and I was getting it wrong. The place in question was the moat around Matsue Castle. I thought it looked a certain way, but it turned out not to look that way at all. I was sure that even fifty years earlier, when the story was written, it couldn't have looked the way I was imaging it. As a result, I made some small and very subtle but for me very important adjustments. So that kind of correction is possible if you actually visit a place.

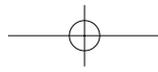
Do you think that other scholars in your discipline have a similar instinct?

Yes, I think a fair number do. It's not like in the days of Arthur Waley, for example, who translated *The Tale of Genji* but never went to Japan. For me, seeing a place either spurs interest or nips it in the bud. Sometimes I realize that a place is just not for me. Roppongi, for example, is an area that just doesn't resonate. Asakusa, on the other hand, piqued my interest from the start, and I wanted to learn as much as I could about it. It's the history and literature of the place that makes Asakusa so fascinating-not simply the history or the literature but the connection between the two.

Once you are into a place you meet others who have similar local interests. What has your experience with such "local" experts been like?

Most of those experiences have been quite rewarding. I'm often in awe as I walk up and down a street with someone who really knows the area and listen to his or her stories about seemingly every building or shrine. Most of this doesn't get into your writing. You just absorb it. Still, you always have to think carefully about the information you're getting, and who you're getting it from. You have to think about the reasons for what you're being told. You have to understand the person's agenda and decide whether you agree with it or not. I've asked myself that question many times over the years while being guided about Asakusa and Mukōjima and San'ya by people who have a personal or economic or cultural stake in these





areas. I am generally quite sympathetic to their efforts, but I still believe it's important to establish my own perspective and not simply be swayed by the views of those who guide me. This is all the more true of my investigation of lower-class neighborhoods in Tokyo where *burakumin* reside. It is not easy to learn about these neighborhoods. In fact, most people don't even realize they exist in Tokyo. In that sense I've been the very fortunate recipient of expert guidance by people in the know. Some of them have a very set agenda, however, and I feel that I owe it to myself to be able to see around it or else I'll just end up transmitting the Gospel, so to speak. I'm not saying that the Gospel is wrong, necessarily, only that I don't consider it my task to be a mouthpiece. The inability of some outsiders to see around their guides' agendas has actually been a problem for a lot of research on that particular subject. I want to make it clear, though, that the benefit I've gained from such guidance has been incalculable.

Does this dimension of "fieldwork" find its way into your own teaching?

Most definitely. It has proved far more valuable for my teaching than my dissertation research ever was. In fact, I've never taught the subject of my dissertation, which was on the kind of writing known in English as the "I-novel" (*watakushi shōsetsu*), in all my years of teaching. A Japanologist cannot live by literature alone, at least on my home campus. The courses I teach on Japan are rarely on just the literature. One year, for example, I taught a survey course for lower division students on *burakumin*, starting from the Edo period and working up to the present. I wanted to introduce students to the idea that very strict class distinctions were prevalent from early on in Japanese society, and that their vestiges linger to the present day. I also wanted to get beyond the common depiction of marginalized groups simply as victims of society. It turns out that they, through their various occupations, have made substantial contributions, and I wanted to find a way to highlight those as well. My goal was to take a "worm's eye view" of society instead of the more common bird's eye view—that is, the view from the exalted perspective of shogun or daimyo or prime minister or bureaucrat, which is the way that many tend to see things. I was in league with the social historians who wanted to rethink society from the bottom up and, in my case, gain a better understanding of the functions performed by various groups known as outcastes (*eta*, *chōri*, *kawata*, etc.), and a deeper appreciation of their symbiotic relationship with the rest of society.

Do you have a long engagement with a place?

Yes, I have had long engagements with several areas in Tokyo. I suppose that San'ya is the





most spectacular example because it is the most unusual. The interesting thing is that I've been looking at San'ya now many more years after I published my book on the place than before. As I said, I really didn't start visiting the area until the late-1980s, and most of the book is about my experiences in the early 1990s. Fifteen years have gone by since the book was published, but I keep going there each time I come to Tokyo, usually more than once. The place has changed a lot-more than I ever dreamed it would-but at this point, I guess nothing is surprising.

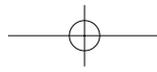
Your book, San'ya Blues, is very ethnographic in orientation. The book mixes observation, participation, and interviews. Were you trying to bridge a disciplinary gap with this monograph?

I wouldn't put it in such grandiose terms. In the beginning I wasn't really conscious of having any particular approach. I started reading the scholarly material pretty much after-the-fact in my effort to get my experiences down on paper in a way that was more than just a bunch of notes. That's when I began reading seriously in anthropology, especially ethnography. Then I came to realize that my project had many similarities to the discipline-so similar that I started worrying that it would be judged by how close my material was to the platonic ideal of ethnography. It was the motivation for including the afterword on interviewing-to cover my fanny, so to speak. A lot of my colleagues in literature asked me, "So why aren't you doing literature anymore?" Actually, I thought I still was. But it seemed rather far removed to them. From my perspective, though, whatever it was I was doing seemed a lot more like literature than social science. It's pretty clear, at least from the reviews I've seen, that sociologists believe what I was doing is very different from social science!

Were there any particular authors and texts that you turned to?

Yes. The work by Clifford Geertz of course, such as *The Interpretation of Cultures and Local Knowledge*, and Oscar Lewis's landmark oral history, *The Children of Sanchez*. My book includes a collection of oral histories, but they differ from Lewis in one very important respect. In some instances his interviews of various individuals were edited into composite figures. I wanted to present a discrete portrait of each of my subjects, however rough it might appear. As a result, some of my interviews suffer from being too sketchy. I try to make up for it by grouping the interviews in such a way that made the whole greater than the sum of its parts. That was the goal, anyway.





Did you look at any ethnographies of Tokyo?

I had looked at Ronald Dore's *City Life in Japan* from a long time back as well as more recent ethnographies like Dorinne Kondo's *Crafting Selves*. But there were other inspirations as well, outside the field of anthropology, such as Masao Miyoshi's *As We Saw Them*, which is a one-of-a-kind classic. I was looking at a lot of different sources, as you can gather from my preface, none of which fit into a neat category. That's why a lot of people have told me that I could never have gotten tenure with this sort of book. It's a good thing I already had tenure. The older I get, though, the less interested I am writing a monograph that only people in academia might want to read. This desire does create problems, however. I mean, how does one get published? I admire those who manage to combine the best of scholarship with fine writing. A fine example is Paul Waley's *Tokyo Now and Then: An Explorer's Guide* (Weatherhill, 1984). It is an in-depth guide of the city with a list of places in each district, scored Michelin style, but it does far more than tell the reader what to see. But is the kind of book that probably no publisher would touch now, and it is sadly out of print. In the meantime I'm trying to decide how to write about Asakusa and some of the marginalized areas to the north and east. I think I could get my material published in a journal, but at this point in my life, that is not my goal.

Your connection with San'ya also had a role in your translation of Ōyama Shirō's A Man with No Talents.

Oh, certainly. Some asked me if I was going to write a sequel to *San'ya Blues*, because so much had changed, and low and behold, here was this book that was doing just that. And so I was inspired to attempt a translation. The thing is, the place has changed immensely even since his book came out in 2000. It was only afterwards that backpackers from abroad, for example, came in droves to San'ya-especially from the time of the World Cup hosted by Japan and Korea in 2002-and made use of converted day laborer lodgings that were just beginning to be advertised on the Internet. I had a chance to meet Ōyama, by the way, on Sakurabashi, the pedestrian bridge over the Sumida River. It took a year to set up an appointment. He is a bit paranoid and he asked to meet me in the middle of the bridge-well out of earshot of anyone. He arrived late and I wondered if he'd even show up. He finally did. Later we wound up in a kissaten (coffee shop) in Asakusa. He said he hadn't been in a one in years. He talked about his walks up and down the Sumida River, which is like his backyard.





In your lectures and in some of your books, San'ya Blues in particular, you use many of your own photographs. Could you talk about the camera and the role that photography plays in your research.

I've taken pictures from the get go-since my first trip to Europe with my family as a child and later on my first trip to Japan with the American Field Service-but I'm not taking as many now. I still have the pictures of my first Japan trip from over forty years ago, though, some of which I showed just today in class because they still are useful. The ones I took of Meiji Shrine, for example, are of greater interest today than when I originally took them forty-five years ago, which is to say only half a dozen years after it had been rebuilt. All of my pictures are color slides. Now my wife is kindly helping to digitalize them for easy storage and for classroom presentations. Now that she has done that, I see how many gaps there are that I'll probably never be able to fill in, but at least I have some material. Most of the slides I have are of Tokyo, but I also have quite a few of Osaka, Kyoto, Kyushu, Akita, and other places in Japan. I teach a course at UC Irvine on the history of Tokyo and I use my slides for that course in an effort to give students a sense of what I am trying to talk about.

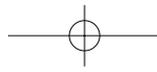
Do you see the camera as being integral to an approach you take?

I think that if this interview were ten or twenty years ago, I'd probably say, "Yes, definitely." But this is less and less the case now. My connection with a place, more and more as time goes on, a visceral one and that you really can't get on film. This is a hard thing to put my finger on. I'm talking about a three-dimensional experience that has become a part of me, and to the extent that it's physical, it's difficult to write about, because conveying such an experience with words or pictures is fraught with problems. I said visceral," but "personal" might be another term. I suppose this gets me back to where this conversation started, with the non-scholarly aspect of my association with Japan and my so-called "research." Nevertheless, this visceral quality does provide the bass line, if you are into music-the foundation. Maybe it doesn't come out in a specific way, but it is surely there in everything I am trying to express about a place.

If these places have become a more visceral, three-dimensional experience, then visiting these sites with students may offer one interesting means for sharing knowledge. What have you found? What people take away can be very different a place can be very different from you own experience.

Most definitely. I think I realized that right away. I've taken people around the city for many,





many years, and actually most of them have been Japanese who live in Tokyo. Just seeing their reactions has an effect. Even if they've been to the area we visit before, they often respond afresh to the perspective I provide. Some react in ways I expect, others do not. But that's not so important. The important thing is to pique their interest enough to go again and have a look on their own. That is what happened to me. People would take me around somewhere and sooner or later I'd pretty much forget what I was shown. But the experience of having been taken around stuck with me. Some of the places I recalled being taken to I revisited, sometimes several times over, and eventually made my own. That's the kind of process involved in getting to know a place. Some of the people I've taken around have offered a perspective that makes me rethink what I thought I knew. That is a revelation, and it's quite refreshing. That's why I can say that I conduct this sort of activity out of pure selfishness. I probably get more out of the experience than any of the students. You know how it is, surely: if you want to learn something you had better try teaching it—the maxim certainly applies here. It is an exercise in connecting the dots. Say I have this spotty information about one place and maybe a little better information about another. Exploring an area just one time is not enough to connect the dots, and so I go again and think about the place some more. Tokyo is a big city with very different neighborhoods that are homes to very different lifestyles. I'm always asking myself what kinds of connections can be made between neighborhoods and lifestyles—sort of like observing how railway lines connect terminals. Needless to say, I get plenty of use out of the railway system here. And the buses. But Tokyo's greatest attraction, of course, is that it is so walkable. Its convenient transportation system gets you to the area you want to explore. Once you get there, you walk about at will. This is just so much easier to do than in most American cities.

Yet with Tokyo you still have to have to encourage people to 'get lost'. You need to have them break from their routes and routines.

You took the words out of my mouth. Whenever I have the time, I get off the train one station before my destination and walk the rest of the way. It's a great way to get a feel for an area. I've done that repeatedly. That is the one problem with subways. They don't give you a sense of how places link up. Bus transport is much better in that regard, because you move above ground. But the best way of all is to go on foot. That's how you really get to know a place. The slower you go, the more you absorb.