

**VSJF Jahrestagung 2025***VSJF Annual Conference 2025***Programm der Fachgruppen***VSJF Section Meetings*

Freitag, 7. November 2025

online only*

9.00 Uhr bis 12.30 Uhr <i>9 a.m. to 12.30 p.m.</i>	Technik (online)* <i>Technology (online)</i>	S. 2 <i>p. 2</i>
10.00 Uhr bis 12.30 Uhr <i>10.00 a.m. to 12.30 p.m.</i>	Bildung und Erziehung (online)* <i>Education (online)</i>	S. 6 <i>p. 6</i>
10.00 Uhr bis 12.00 Uhr <i>10 a.m. to 12 p.m.</i>	Geschichte (online) <i>History (online)</i>	S. 10 <i>p. 10</i>

Samstag, 8. November 2025

Universität Wien
Institut für Ostasienwissenschaften
Spitalgasse 2, Hof 2, Tür 2.4 (Campus)
1090 Wien

9.00 Uhr bis 11.00 Uhr <i>9 p.m. to 11 p.m.</i>	Politik (hybrid)* <i>Political Sciences (hybrid)*</i>	S. 13 <i>p. 13</i>
	Kultur, Medien und Kommunikation (hybrid)* <i>Culture, Media and Communication (hybrid)*</i>	S. 17 <i>p. 17</i>
	Soziologie/Sozialanthropologie (hybrid)* <i>Sociology/Social Anthropology (hybrid)*</i>	S. 20 <i>p. 20</i>

* Die Links zur online-Teilnahme finden Sie bei den einzelnen Fachgruppenprogrammen. / *The links for online participation can be found in the individual section meetings' programs.*



7. November 2025

Technik / Technology

(Time zone: Japan / Germany)

Organizers: Assoc. Prof. Susanne Brucksch (Teikyo University, Japan)
Dr. Cosima Wagner (Freie Universität Berlin, Germany)

Date: November 7, 2025 (Fri)

Venue: Online Meeting (VSJF Annual conference 2025, University of Vienna)
Participation via login data will be provided after prior registration via email:
technology[a]vsjf.net (until Nov 6, 2025).

09:00 Germany // 17:00 Japan

Greetings and Retrospective View:

**Celebrating the 10th Anniversary of the VSJF
Technology Section**

Cosima Wagner, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany

09:15 Germany // 17:15 Japan

**Session A: Imaginaries and Practices of a “Future
Japan”**

***Imagining Green and Futuristic Japan: Representations of “Society 5.0” in the
Osaka-Kansai Expo 2025***

Ross Cheung, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Living with Machines: Reconfiguring Social Practices of Everyday Interaction in Japan

Mena Mesenhöller, Heinrich-Heine University Düsseldorf, Germany

10:15 Germany // 18:15 Japan

Short Break

10:30 Germany // 18:30 Japan

**Session B: AI and Virtual Technology in Teaching and
Research on Japan and Beyond**

Teaching About and With AI Technology in (Global) Japanese Studies

Susanne Brucksch, Teikyo-University, Japan

Uncovering Hidden Japan: Using AI to Support Deep Intercultural Learning

Eva Csendom, University of Osaka, Japan



Embodied AI in Elder Care: Comparing Human–Avatar and Human–Robot Interaction across Settings and Cultures

Eva Jahn, Siegen University, Germany

12:00 Germany // 20:00 Japan

Session C: Open Exchange and Discussion

Further exchange on research projects, etc.

Moderator: Cosima Wagner, FU Berlin

12:30 Germany // 20:30 Japan

End of Section Meeting

Imagining green and futuristic Japan: Representations of “Society 5.0” in the Osaka-Kansai Expo 2025

Ross Cheung, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Past scholarship on mega-events has mainly focused on Western countries and the events themselves, while neglecting the mechanisms of socio-technical processes for nation-building. The Science and Technology Studies (STS) typically focus on specific technologies or national plans which have not examined the imaginaries behind mega-events. Under the theme “Designing Future Society for Our Lives,” this Osaka-Kansai Expo has 158 country and territory participants, along with seven international organisations, in the artificial Yumeshima Island from 13 April to 13 October 2025. This paper views the representations of sustainability and temporality imaginaries as forms of nation-building for hosting the Expo 2025 in Japan. The design of the Japan Pavilion symbolises the cycle of life and the circular economy, while the Future City Pavilion aims to answer “(W)hat kind of tomorrow awaits us?”. These sociotechnical imaginaries are positioning Japan in the future as a more technologically advanced, economically prosperous, environmentally friendly, and socially vibrant society. These imaginaries, infrastructures, and mega-events are co-produced to symbolise the pursuit of “Society 5.0” national plan. With onsite and online observation, this paper will further discuss how the “Society 5.0” and the Osaka-Kansai Expo 2025 is a state-led response to crises and globalisation. Based on findings in this mega-event, the paper critically reflects on the crucial role of technoscience and the representations through mega-events in the process of nation-building in the 21st Century.

Living with Machines: Reconfiguring Social Practices of Everyday Interaction in Japan

Mena Mesenhöller, Heinrich-Heine University Düsseldorf, Germany

As ageing societies worldwide face pressing challenges related to workforce shortages, digital inclusion, and technological adaptation, Japan has emerged as a pioneer in the integration of everyday automation technologies, such as self-cashier machines. Widely implemented across Japanese retail spaces, self-cashier machines represent a microcosm of broader societal and policy debates on the role of technology in an ageing society. While these technologies promise efficiency and convenience, they also raise concerns regarding accessibility, digital literacy, and social isolation, particularly for older adults. The transition from human cashiers to automated systems is thus not merely a technological shift but also a social one.

This project examines how different generations in Japan engage with self-cashier machines, how manufacturers of these machines navigate technological implementation in light of



demographic shifts, and how policymakers balance the needs of older versus younger generations when introducing new technologies. Based on a series of group interviews with users across different generations, as well as expert interviews with industry representatives, and policymakers, this study explores the socio-material implications of automation in an ageing society. The research is grounded in Social Practice Theory and analyzes how technological adoption is embedded in everyday routines, social norms, and material infrastructures. The theory helps to illuminate how self-cashier machines are not only tools of convenience but also transformative elements shaping the social fabric of everyday life. With Japan having to balance intergenerational digital equity and economic pragmatism, this tension is also increasingly relevant to other ageing societies in Europe, which must similarly navigate the intersection of automatization, demographic change, and social needs.

Teaching About and With AI Technology in (Global) Japanese Studies

Susanne Brucksch, Teikyo-University, Japan

Artificial Intelligence (AI) as an emerging technology evokes manifold expectations and concerns across various disciplines. Particularly, Science and Technology Studies usually take a critical stance when analysing the impact of a technology and its surrounding social settings. The perspective offered by this discipline can refine the contextualization of AI within teaching and research focused on Japan. Although STS research provides in-depth studies of the situatedness of technologies, the specific locale regarding a critical reflection of the socio-cultural context of an emerging technology remains somehow limited on that part (Brucksch, Wagner 2016). Therefore, this presentation advocates that both STS research in Japan and Japanese Studies provide essential perspectives to critically engage with AI applications in teaching about research topic and as tools employed in education concerning Japan. This stance will be underlined with data from a student survey on prior experiences with AI tools and examples from teaching (Global) Japanese Studies.

Uncovering Hidden Japan: Using AI to Support Deep Intercultural Learning

Eva Csendom, University of Osaka, Japan

This presentation explores how AI can be integrated into teaching to foster deep intercultural learning about Japan. Drawing on classroom practices from Japanese Culture through Stories, a course taught in English at the University of Osaka for both international and Japanese students, it examines how AI can be used to reinterpret Edo-period *kibyōshi* picture books and reveal cultural meanings beyond surface images. Combining the cultural iceberg model with creative AI-based visualizations, the talk discusses how technology can both reinforce and challenge stereotypical images of Japan. It argues that, when used critically, AI becomes a medium for cultural reflection, enabling learners to recognize and move beyond stereotypical representations while engaging with Japan's layered identities (historical, visual, and conceptual) through dialogue between the past and the present.

Embodied AI in Elder Care: Comparing Human–Avatar and Human–Robot Interaction across Settings and Cultures

Eva Jahn, Siegen University, Germany

This talk presents findings from the Nightwatch study, as part of the FUSION project on the University of Siegen, which deals with embodied AI in elderly care. Based on qualitative field research in a German nursing home, the first phase examined how nursing staff and



residents—with and without dementia—can be supported by the avatar Ann-Sophie during the day and night. The results showed that the quality of interaction and acceptance depended heavily on the context and the cognitive and emotional state of the residents. The second phase, conducted at the senior citizens' fair in Kaiserslautern, focused on the embodiment of AI as Avatar Ann-Sophie versus the humanoid robot Ameca. After the interaction, both technical systems were evaluated and ethical issues associated with their use were discussed. The third phase aims to conduct a comparative study in Sendai, Japan, where the setup with Ann-Sophie in Japanese was presented in a care facility to identify intercultural differences in the acceptance of such a system. This comparison allows us to discuss how different material forms and cultural expectations of “care” influence the trust, commitment, and perceived value of AI companions.



Bildung und Erziehung / Education

10:00-12:30 (CET), 18:00-20:30 (JST)

The section meeting «Education» at the annual conference of the German Association for Social Science Research on Japan (VSJF) is a network for (young) researchers and students interested in education in Japan, but also for people outside the academic context. Our aim is to provide an opportunity to engage with the topic of education and its political and social implications in the Japanese context and to promote exchange between people from different backgrounds. We see ourselves as a forum for young scholars and students to present their research (from finished papers to work-in-progress) and benefit from feedback from senior scholars and the interested public.

For further information please refer to <https://vsjf.net/die-vsjf/fachgruppen/fachgruppe-bildung-und-erziehung/> or contact me at vincent.lesch@zo.uni-heidelberg.de / education@vsjf.net

Zoom Meeting-Link:

Meeting-Link: <https://eu02web.zoom-x.de/j/62350857676?pwd=4l205WnAzilmoliJyz3dnLITjwfK88.1>

Meeting-ID: 623 5085 7676
Password: 290238

Zoom Etiquette: Participants can enter and leave the meeting by themselves. Permission from the host is not necessary. Please turn off your microphone when you are not speaking to avoid noise interference etc.

Opening remarks

Vincent B. LESCH, Heidelberg University

From Policy to Practice: Challenges in Implementing Environmental Education in Japan Miwa TATSUNO, Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES)

Since the 1960s, Environmental Education (EE) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in Japan have evolved from pollution control to integrating environmental, social, and economic dimensions (IGES, 2024). ESD is now embedded in national education policy, and Japan's 2024 revision of its Basic Environmental Education Policy reaffirms its commitment to sustainability (MEXT, 2024). Despite progress, implementation remains uneven. This study examines the gap between policy and practice, identifying five main challenges: resource deficits that limit school- and municipal-level implementation; institutional rigidity rooted in hierarchical governance and lifetime employment; socioeconomic inequities reducing access to experiential learning; misalignment between sustainability competencies and evaluation systems; and fragmented trends such as "New Capitalism" and "Ethical Job Hunting" that lack policy integration.

To address these barriers, the paper proposes four strategies: strategic investment in educators and curricula; stronger policy integration linking education and labor markets; equity measures to support inclusive participation; and cross-sector collaboration among government, private, and civil society actors. Japan's case underscores the need to overcome economic and institutional barriers to realize the transformative potential of EE and ESD. Reframing



these not only as educational tools but as drivers of economic resilience and innovation could position Japan at the forefront of the global sustainability transition.

Rethinking Human Rights Education in Japan: Interdependence, Democracy, and (Un)Equal Futures

JD PARKER, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa and Kyoto University

Across the globe, democracy and equality face growing pressures from economic inequality, resurgent nationalism, and planetary crises. Human rights education (HRE) is often seen as a means to sustain democracy but typically rests on liberal ideals of individual autonomy (Takeda, 2012; Meyer, 2020). While this has advanced protections for marginalized groups, it neglects the social and ecological interdependence crucial for addressing current global challenges (Komatsu et al., 2019).

Japan offers a distinct perspective. Since the early 2000s, it has formally integrated HRE into its national curriculum (Hirano, 2020). Rooted in cultural notions of relational selfhood, Japanese approaches contrast with Western individualism (Kasulis, 2002; Takayama, 2020). Ethnographic research in an Osaka municipal school shows how the Ikiru Kyōiku ("Education for Living") program teaches human rights as practices of interdependence—fostering omoiyari (empathy), sōdan (dialogue), and tsunagari (connections) that support mutual care (Parker, 2025). This case illustrates how localized pedagogies can reshape democracy and equality globally. It emphasizes education's role in cultivating relational capacities, highlights Japan's philosophical traditions as resources for rethinking political theory, and shows how collective orientations may be vital for responding to planetary crises. Japan's approach thus invites a reimagining of democracy grounded in interdependence and community well-being.

From Language Students to Specified Skilled Workers: Specified Skilled Study Abroad scheme and implications

Anh Phuong LE, Waseda University

This chapter explores the collaborative efforts between overseas sending agencies and language schools in Japan to facilitate a seamless transition for international students from language learning to employment under Japan's Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) visa program, known as Specified Skilled Study Abroad. The new scheme aims to prepare students for integration into Japan's labor market by promising a clear and short pathway from language education to skilled labor. Through interviews with staff from sending agencies from Vietnam—one of the biggest sending countries of language students and manual skilled workers to Japan and students who are engaging in this scheme, this study investigates the mechanisms and strategies employed to align language training with the demands of the SSW framework. By analyzing the roles of these agencies and Japanese language schools, the research examines how they collaborate to shape the migratory experiences of international students. This chapter also outlines the evolving education-migration policies, which indicates the Japanese government's effort in widening the pathway to labor market for international students.

*****SHORT BREAK*****

**Educational Competition and Status Attainment in Japan Revisited: From School to Work to Happiness?**

Steve R. ENTRICH, University of Zurich

Since the 1980s, Japan has undergone dramatic demographic, economic and social change, which has had a lasting impact on young people in particular. The lost decade following the burst of the bubble-economy in the early 1990s was accompanied by rising youth unemployment, an erosion of job security and widening inequalities. Japan became soon known as *kakusa shakai* or “gap society”. Young people born in the 1980s and 1990s, who have never experienced the booming Japanese economy, started questioning the traditional path towards “happiness”: It seemed as if the arduous path to one of the high ranked universities did no longer guarantee men well-paid, secure jobs in major companies, whereas significant labor market barriers and gendered family expectations continue to restrict women’s opportunities to pursue men-equivalent careers despite having high educational credentials. In this talk, I will discuss how and why the sweeping educational reforms that were intended to reduce competition and inequality between students may have not had the anticipated results. Worse still, related problems of bullying (*ijime*), delinquency, truancy, and student suicide resulting from the rigid, uniform school system, its multiple rules and the highly competitive exam culture (and the resulting “exam hell”), as well as the high use of private supplementary lessons (at *juku/yobikō*) have by no means disappeared.

Drawing on recent national panel data for youth in Japan, this paper theoretically and empirically examines the question: What are the challenges youth face on their way to (un)happiness in present Japan? Results are discussed with regards to social inequalities focusing in particular on the ongoing role of private supplementary tutoring for educational competition and inequality formation for the first time also looking into effects of these pathways for life satisfaction in early adult life.

**Social-emotional competencies and social support in access to study abroad:
From Japanese adolescents’ perspectives**

Naho YOSHIKAWA, University of Zurich

Once viewed as a broadly middle-class meritocracy, Japan has become a ‘gap society’ where learning capital and multidimensional competencies determine social mobility. Kariya’s concept of learning capital emphasizes the rising importance of “individuality,” including aptitude, personality, and extracurricular engagement (Chiavacci & Hommerich, 2017; Kariya, 2009). The shift from exam-based selection (*senbetsu*) to multidimensional admissions (*sentaku*) reflects broader educational and labor changes, as lifelong employment declines and individuals must accumulate their own competencies. Shadow education has diversified beyond academics into extracurricular and overseas programs, aligning with government initiatives like *Tobitate!* (2014) promoting “global human resources” (Yamada & Yamada, 2014). Despite these policies, study-abroad participation has fallen since 2004 (Yokota, Ota, & Niimi, 2018).

Empirical studies show that study abroad enhances language, intercultural, and non-cognitive skills valued by employers (Harder et al., 2015). Yokota et al. (2018) found higher incomes and greater personal development among former participants, linking these outcomes to Japan’s concept of “basic social skills” (*METI*). However, few studies examine how adolescents mobilize learning capital amid socioeconomic constraints or how social-emotional competencies shape access to study abroad. This qualitative study, part of the Japan Transnational Education and Career Panel Study (JTEPS), addresses this gap through



interviews with 30 adolescents, analyzing how social support and non-cognitive traits interact to enable participation in study-abroad programs



Geschichte / History

10.00 Uhr bis 12.00 Uhr / 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. (CET/)

Organisator:innen:

Dr. Anke Scherer, Ruhr-Universität Bochum

Dr. Torsten Weber, Deutsches Institut für Japanstudien, Tokyo

ONLINE via ZOOM:

Meeting-ID: 640 2968 9923

Password: 136599

Zoom Meeting Link: <https://ruhr-uni-bochum.zoom-x.de/j/64029689923?pwd=oNT89NRoHC5cziPy5tJwB1hRbA3elZ.1>

PROGRAMM:

10:00 – 10:40: Jonathan Krautter (Hitotsubashi Institute for Advanced Study)

The Coordination State: The Japanese Ministry for International Trade and Industry and Its Role for the Industrial Transformation During the Economic Miracle Years, 1950–1976

Ever since Chalmers Johnson's MITI and the Japanese Miracle (1982), Japanese industrial policy has been linked to the concept of the developmental state. Johnson conceptualized the developmental state as a strong state that employs a rational industrial policy to steer industrial transformation by nurturing growth industries and guiding private firms to act in accordance with government goals. However, subsequent research has thoroughly refuted Johnson's account in most respects: The policy instruments employed by the Japanese government were used more to support declining industries than growth industries; government officials were mostly unable to steer, guide, or otherwise influence private sector behavior as intended; and many industrial policy initiatives failed either due to private sector resistance, or flawed policy measures.

Notwithstanding these findings, political economy and economic history research often continue to describe the postwar Japanese state as a developmental state. I argue that the underlying reason for this is the lack of a unifying model that can reconcile the two fundamentally different perspectives dominating the field. On the one hand, state involvement in industry was ubiquitous, as reported by innumerable witnesses and documented by many researchers. Moreover, some industries with deep government involvement, such as the computer industry, became globally competitive. On the other hand, many researchers have highlighted the weaknesses of the postwar Japanese state and its industrial policy, showing that numerous industries with extensive government involvement failed, such as the petrochemical industry, while some with little state involvement became global success stories, such as the camera industry.

Based on extensive archival research in corporate and public archives, I present a new model of the postwar Japanese state that integrates these two perspectives: the "coordination state". The coordination state differs both from the developmental state and from the minimal state—which limits its activity to the provision of an institutional infrastructure to enable markets—in that it neither imposed industrial policy on the private sector nor restricted itself to market-



enabling activity. Rather, the postwar Japanese state assumed the role of a coordinator that helped private firms resolve their coordination problems (Jens Beckert) in three major ways: it obliged firms to participate in coordination processes; it participated in these coordination processes in a (more or less) equal capacity; and it underwrote the compromises resulting from such coordination processes.

10:40 – 11:20: Sai Kiet Niki Lau (Heidelberg University)

Reforms in the local context – Sumiyoshi as a case for the realization of the burakumin-measurement policies between 1969 to 2002

The Special Measurement Law for Dōwa Projects or SML was an attempt by the Japanese government to tackle the buraku/dōwa issue through economic and social policies. Research on the law and its partial effect on certain aspects such as the infrastructure, education, or the political struggles of making local policies were conducted before. Surveys conducted on the national level further enhance the comprehension of how the SML made in general a positive effect on the vast dōwa area residents. My research focuses on the local implementation of the SML and compare the data found at two areas in Osaka with the national level to understand if the policies were able to provide the residents of the dōwa areas a more stable life situation.

I conduct a mixed-method approach in which I interviewed social workers from two different dōwa areas in Osaka and collected an extensive amount of surveys from the local areas for the qualitative comparison with the national level. For both local areas, I was able to get statistics from around the beginning of the SML in 1969 to data from after the end of it in 2002. These surveys and the knowledge gained from the interviews are the foundation towards the understanding of the how the policies were implemented and what outcome they had.

If we look at the results of the policies in a vacuum of the dōwa areas themselves, then there were positive outcomes. For example, the matriculation rate to senior high school within the data sets of the dōwa areas showed an improvement from 30.3% in 1963 to 92.0% in 1994. Now, if we add the comparison to Osaka prefecture, the rate was 64.2% in 1963 and 96.4% in 1994. This shows that not only was the situation of the dōwa areas pre-SML severe and improved to a close standard to the general population but the gaps between both people still exists.

My thesis contributes to the insufficient understanding of the SML and policy implementation in relation to the local areas where policy becomes reality. The statistics collected for this research are difficult to get and my research contributes to the wider lack of data about the SML or dōwa areas. This opens up future paths to explore how the situation of the areas became after the end in 2002 or how the laws effected the rural dōwa areas.

11:20 – 12:00: Aya Hino (Ruhr University Bochum)

Chronopolitics, Temporalities, and A Future Imaginary of the Japanese Empire

How was a future imagined at the intersection of the exercise of power and utopian thinking? In the established philosophical language of Mannheim, Jameson, and Ricœur, a utopia is understood as a position from which one could challenge the present. However, during the period of the Japanese Empire, a utopian future imaginary was forged, legitimised, and promoted by the political centre not as a critique of the present but as a legitimate extension of the present, as an expectation of the future of the Japanese Empire. This presentation traces the historical formation of a utopian future that culminated in the East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere by attending to shifting political discourses, future imaginaries, and temporalities during



the period between the 1880s and 1945. From this empirically grounded analysis, the presentation teases out some theoretical implications, which enable us to reconsider the axioms of historical scholarship, that is, the modern time regime and its foundational temporality.



8. November 2025

Politik / Political Science

09.00 bis 11.00 Uhr / 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. (CET)

Organizers:

Steffen Heinrich (FU Berlin)
Momoyo Hüstebeck (Uni Duisburg-Essen)

To participate online please use the following link:

<https://fu-berlin.webex.com/fu-berlin-en/j.php?MTID=m349934fa7b5dd0a889653858377260e3>

10 minutes presentation + 10 minutes Q&A per paper.

Stefanie Schwarte (LMU München)

Breaking barriers, shaping agendas: Female mayors in contemporary Japan

Women remain significantly underrepresented in Japanese politics, particularly in executive leadership positions. As of August 2025, only 4.1 percent of municipalities are headed by a female mayor, amounting to 72 out of 1,741 offices nationwide. While this marks a slow yet steady increase over the past two decades, female mayors remain a rarity in most local contexts. Against this backdrop, my dissertation examines how female mayors understand their role within local politics, how they perceive their own scope of action, and what significance they attribute to gender in campaigning, governing, and agenda-setting.

The project contributes to the broader debate on gender and political representation by addressing a notable research gap: whereas existing scholarship has extensively analyzed parliamentary underrepresentation, the figure of the directly elected female mayor as a highly visible local leader has received little systematic attention. Theoretically, the study draws on Hanna Pitkin's (1967) and Anne Phillips' (1995) concepts of descriptive and substantive representation, complemented by Michael Saward's (2010) approach to performative representation, which is particularly pertinent to election campaigns. Methodologically, the project is based on qualitative fieldwork conducted in Japan between 2023 and 2024. This included semi-structured interviews with seven sitting mayors and additional female political actors, participant observation of election campaigns and activist events, as well as a document analysis of campaign materials, websites, and local media. Preliminary findings reveal distinct career trajectories: while some mayors have advanced through local assemblies or administrative careers that provided networks and institutional knowledge, others entered politics from business or civic activism and present themselves as non-political community representatives. These trajectories shape not only their self-perceptions and leadership styles but also their engagement with gendered expectations. Female mayors thus navigate visibility



both as a challenge and as a strategic resource, highlighting the complex interplay between career background, political practice, and gender norms in contemporary Japan.

David Chiavacci (Universität Zürich) / Carola Hommerich (Sophia University)

Old, doomed, forgotten and getting enraged? Japan's old middle class in the Lower House election 2024

The old middle class in Japan is disappearing before our eyes. Whereas the self-employed and family workers still accounted for about one third of the workforce in 1980, they now make up less than one tenth. Since the mid-1990s, two major shifts have reshaped Japan's class structure: the growth of the lower working class of low-skilled, non-standard workers, and the decline of the old middle class of the self-employed. While the rise of non-standard workers (the so-called *furitā*) has been widely studied and features prominently in public and political debates about Japan as a "gap society" (*kakusa shakai*), the collapse of the old middle class has attracted far less scholarly attention and remains largely absent from public discourse and political narratives.

This paper seeks to address this research gap by analyzing the voting behavior of the old middle class in the 2024 lower house election—an election of historic significance in which the conservative ruling coalition led by the LDP lost its parliamentary majority. The analysis draws on original quantitative survey data ($n=3000$) of self-employed workers in Japan. Long considered a core constituency of the LDP, the old middle class is now drifting away from the conservative establishment. Our survey shows that more self-employed voters supported progressive opposition parties than the conservative ruling bloc, while roughly one quarter cast their ballots for new populist parties on both the right and the left. The paper examines the factors shaping this shift and discusses its broader political implications.

Paul Kramer (LMU München)

How democracies weather crises: Governance, vigilance, and resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a stress test for the crisis management capacities of governments worldwide. Japan's response was remarkable in several respects. Instead of enforcing legally binding measures, the government appealed to the principle of voluntary self-restraint (*jishuku*). Despite its aging population — which is particularly vulnerable to the virus — Japan recorded a lower excess mortality rate than Germany. This was achieved while maintaining public life, without encroaching on individual freedoms, and without large-scale protests against the government. One line of explanation attributes this success primarily to Japanese culture. A second perspective emphasizes the importance of social capital, social networks, and social infrastructure as crucial predictors of community resilience. A third approach focuses on the tight-knit networks of local governance, which proved essential for effective and socially acceptable pandemic management. This research asks how effective, solution-oriented, and democratic crisis governance can function. Through the lens of vigilance, it brings together the three existing research approaches and analyzes how the interaction between governance structures and institutionalized forms of vigilance enabled the activation of democratic resilience. Using an explorative-interpretative research design that draws on a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, the dissertation investigates the following three sub-questions: 1) How is vigilance addressed in society? 2) How is vigilance employed in governance? 3) How is resilience produced in everyday practices through vigilance? The



dissertation contributes to the ongoing debate on how democracies can govern societal transformations and seeks to expand this debate through the concept of vigilance. In this presentation I discuss first findings from my ongoing inquiry into local community networks and how they institutionalize crisis response into daily life.

Lenard Görögh (Freie Universität Berlin)

Schlaflos im Internetcafé oder Problemkind der Straße? Diskursive Zuschreibung und politischer Handlungsdruck in der Jugendwohnungslosigkeit in Deutschland und Japan

Jugendwohnungslosigkeit wird im deutschsprachigen medialen Diskurs häufig als Verlängerung „klassischer“ Wohnungslosigkeit verstanden und damit primär individualisiert: als Folge abweichender Sozialisation, instabiler familiärer Verhältnisse oder fehlender Anpassungsleistungen. In Japan hingegen wurde in den frühen 2000er-Jahren mit Begriffen wie Nettokafe-Nanmin (Internetcafé-Flüchtlinge) eine neue Form der Wohnungslosigkeit sichtbar, die sich explizit vom Bild des obdachlosen Tagelöhners absetzte. Die gesellschaftliche Problematisierung junger Wohnungsloser vollzog sich dort als diskursiver Bruch. Sie wurden nicht primär moralisch abgewertet, sondern als Symptom wachsender sozialer Ungleichheit verhandelt.

Der Beitrag nimmt diese Gegenüberstellung zum Ausgangspunkt, um die diskursiven und politischen Bearbeitungsformen von Jugendwohnungslosigkeit in beiden Ländern vergleichend zu analysieren. Aus einer regulationstheoretisch informierten Perspektive wird Sichtbarkeit nicht als rein mediales Phänomen, sondern als Selektionsmoment gesellschaftlicher Regulation verstanden: Sichtbarkeit entscheidet mit darüber, welche Gruppen als regulierungsbedürftig gelten und welche Problemdeutungen politisch durchsetzbar sind. Auf Basis einer politik- und diskursgeschichtlichen Analyse wird gezeigt, dass in Japan durch die diskursive Neubeschreibung junger Wohnungslosigkeit Spielräume für alternative Interventionsformen entstanden, während der deutsche Diskurs stärker pfadabhängig bleibt: Jugendwohnungslosigkeit erscheint dort überwiegend als Fortsetzung eines bestehenden Problems – mit entsprechend begrenztem Handlungsspielraum. Der Beitrag plädiert dafür, Jugendwohnungslosigkeit nicht nur als empirisches Phänomen, sondern auch als Ausdruck konflikthafter Reproduktionsverhältnisse zu verstehen, deren Sichtbarkeit selbst Ausdruck politisch-ökonomischer Selektivität ist.

David M. Malitz (German Institute for Japanese Studies, DIJ)

At the crossroads: Japan-Thailand relations

Thailand is one of Japan's most important partners in the Indo-Pacific. Bilateral relations were formally elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in November 2022, and Japan's 2025 Diplomatic Bluebook describes the Southeast Asian kingdom as of "great geopolitical importance" due to its location, as well as "indispensable" to Japanese supply chains—particularly in the automotive industry—given the large number of Japanese companies operating there.

Yet not all is well in Japan–Thailand relations. Since 2021, the People's Republic of China has overtaken Japan to become Thailand's largest trading partner and, more recently, its leading source of investment, notably through the establishment of production hubs for Chinese electric vehicle manufacturers. China has also emerged as a far more significant market for



Thailand's tourism sector. Furthermore, since the 2014 military coup, PRC–Thailand military cooperation has expanded considerably. This paper examines the shifts in Japan–Thailand relations and considers their implications for Japan's vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.



Kultur, Medien und Kommunikation / Culture, Media and Communication

09:00 Uhr bis 11:00 Uhr / 09:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. (CET)

Organizers:

Dr. Michaela Oberwinkler (Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf)

Jasmin Rückert (Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf)

Online participants can log in via Webex:

<https://hhu.webex.com/hhu/j.php?MTID=mc75904974e01853a0a4b657b670fbac2>

Meeting-ID: 2785 451 7572

Meeting password: jeFkiiP3J72

Presentations:

Anna Linder (Universität Wien)

Das Konzept „Ironie“ in der gesprochenen japanischen Sprache

In meinem Dissertationsprojekt beschäftige ich mich mit dem japanischen Verständnis des Konzepts „Ironie“ sowie seiner Anwendung und Funktion in der gesprochenen japanischen Sprache; nach ausführlicher Beschäftigung mit den Definitionskriterien sowie dem Begriffsdiskurs konnten *hiniku* 皮肉 und *aironī* アイロニー als das gesuchte Konzept „Ironie“ am umfangreichsten abdeckend bestimmt werden. Beide Begriffe nehmen in der Forschungsliteratur aufeinander Bezug und werden gelegentlich sogar synonym verwendet. In diesem Zusammenhang ebenso als relevant zu betrachten sind die Begriffe *hango* 反語 [Antiphrase], *atekosuri* 当て擦り [indirekte Kritik] und *iyami* 嫌味 [„bitterer Beigeschmack“ einer Aussage], welche wesentliche Teilaspekte von *hiniku* (und auch von *aironī*) darstellen.

Da es sich um ein bisher eher dünn beforschtes Gebiet handelt und eine fokussierte theoretische und empirische Aufarbeitung von Ironiebegriffen im Japanischen in der japanologischen Forschung bisher fehlt, wird in diesem Vortrag zunächst auf die grundsätzliche Frage eingegangen, wie sich „Ironie“ im Japanischen und die damit in Verbindung stehenden Begrifflichkeiten definieren. Diese werden im Anschluss hinsichtlich ihres Bedeutungsspektrums und ihren Funktionen diskutiert. Abschließend sollen Beispiele für die tatsächliche Anwendung von japanischer „Ironie“ im gesprochenen Japanischen aufgezeigt werden. Als Analyserahmen dient japanische „Talkshow-Sprache“, welche so konstruiert wird, dass für Dritte der Eindruck von Spontaneität und Natürlichkeit der in der Talkshow verwendeten Sprache entsteht, wodurch im Idealfall auch Rückschlüsse auf die Standardsprache zulässig sind. So soll gezeigt werden, wie und wozu das Konzept „Ironie“ in der gesprochenen japanischen Sprache gebraucht wird.



Michaela Oberwinkler (Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf)

Zwischen Kreativität und Kontrolle: KI und Sprache in Rie Qudans Tōkyō-to dōjō-tō

Rie Qudans Roman Tōkyō-to dōjō-tō 東京都同情塔 wurde 2024 mit dem Akutagawa-Preis ausgezeichnet. Bei der Preisverleihung erklärte Qudan, dass sie etwa fünf Prozent des Romans mithilfe einer KI verfasst habe. Diese Aussage löste in der Öffentlichkeit eine heftige Debatte aus, da der Einsatz von KI beim literarischen Schreiben vielfach als problematisch gilt. Unabhängig von diesem gesellschaftlichen Diskurs zeichnet Qudan in ihrem Roman jedoch ein deutlich kritisches Bild der sprachlichen Möglichkeiten und Grenzen künstlicher Intelligenz.

Die Handlung des Romans wird abwechselnd aus der Perspektive der beiden Hauptfiguren erzählt: der erfolgreichen Architektin Sara Machina und dem mit ihr befreundeten Modeberater Takuto Tōjō. Sara nimmt an einem Architekturwettbewerb teil, bei dem sie ein luxuriös ausgestattetes Gefängnis in Form eines riesigen Turms im Zentrum Tōkyōs entwerfen soll. Takuto hilft ihr dabei, den richtigen Zugang zu diesem Projekt zu finden. Beide greifen im Verlauf der Handlung aus unterschiedlichen Motiven und in unterschiedlichem Umfang auf KI zurück – mit jeweils unterschiedlichen Konsequenzen.

Die vorliegende Arbeit untersucht verschiedene Perspektiven auf den Einsatz von KI innerhalb der Romanhandlung anhand einer detaillierten Textanalyse. Ergänzend werden Interviews mit Rie Qudan herangezogen, in denen sie ihre Haltung zur Nutzung von KI präzisiert. Die Analyse zeigt, dass Qudan sowohl im Roman als auch in ihrem eigenen Schaffensprozess einen kritischen Umgang mit KI verfolgt: Sie bezweifelt die sprachliche Kompetenz künstlicher Intelligenz und kritisiert insbesondere den übermäßigen und stilistisch zweifelhaften Gebrauch von Fremdwörtern.

Jana Aresin (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg)

Heroes or Victims of a Lost Cause? Intersecting Representations of Suicide Pilots in Japanese War Museums and Popular Culture

The contested figure of the tokkōtai suicide pilot seems representative of the complexities and contradictions of World War II memorialization in contemporary Japan. This paper aims to outline parallels and differences as well as interconnections between the representation of suicide pilots in museums and in selected recent films and novels and explores in how far depictions of the pilots as 'tragic heroes' of a lost cause are instrumentalized for a rehabilitation of Japanese national identity.

Sociologist Akiko Hashimoto argues that postwar memorialization of World War II in Japan has been shaped by three contradictory narratives: Firstly, a narrative of 'heroes' that represents Japan's military actions as justified and as the foundation of the current peace; secondly, a narrative of 'victims' that emphasizes the violence and destruction of the war yet is limited to the suffering of the Japanese population, ignoring the victims of Japanese military aggression; and thirdly, a narrative of 'perpetrators' that pulls attention to Japanese imperialism and colonialism and the suffering and destruction caused by the Japanese army in East and Southeast Asia. The figure of the suicide pilot seems to encompass these contradictions most vividly. As Hashimoto points out, the extreme nature of the suicide attacks lends itself to



portrayals of the pilots as tragic heroes who ‘sacrifice’ themselves for the nation, and who, despite being perpetrators of violence themselves, are easily sentimentalized as victims of ‘senseless orders’ of the military and government elites.

Memorializations of the suicide pilots therefore seem to be particularly suited for a more subtle kind of historical revisionism that stands in contrast to an outright denial of Japanese war crimes and responsibility. The ‘senseless’ deaths of the pilots place them in an ambivalent space between victim and perpetrator that makes visible the brutality and injustice of war while simultaneously reviving a heroic self-sacrificing figure that generates empathy on an individual level yet also reproduces nationalist discourses. The attractiveness of suicide pilots as figures who can be used simultaneously for pacifist and nationalistic narratives may also explain their growing presence in various Japanese media representing World War II, many of which gained widespread popularity but also garnered criticism and controversies, such as Yamazaki Takashi’s 2013 film “The Eternal Zero” (Eien no zero) or the 2023 romance film “Till We Meet Again on Lily Hill” (Ano hana ga saku oka de, kimi to mata deaetara). At the same time, representations in popular culture increasingly seem to enter wider public discourse on history and memorialization, standing in as historical sources or referencing them directly, for example by including museums and real and fictionalized historical sources within the story. This paper asks how the interrelations of representations of suicide pilots in museums and popular culture might impact the production of collective memory and national identity in new ways.

Birgit Staemmler (Universität Tübingen) - online

Vertrauenswürdigkeit spiritueller Websites: Eine ganz kurze Zusammenfassung einzelner Ergebnisse

Vertrauenswürdigkeit ist bekanntermaßen ein zentrales Thema bei der Auswahl von Websites und der Auswertung ihrer Inhalte. Das gilt auch für Websites mit spirituellen Inhalten. Dieser kurze Bericht fasst die Ergebnisse einer längeren Analyse über vertrauenserweckende Elemente auf den Websites japanischer spiritueller Heiler:innen zusammen.

Allgemein gelten Kompetenz, Zuverlässigkeit und Wohlwollen als die drei Kernelemente von Vertrauenswürdigkeit, wobei die genauen Inhalte und Gewichtung stark vom Kontext abhängig sind, vor allem von der konkreten Angelegenheit, in der vertraut werden soll. Im Zusammenhang von Websites sind u. a. Darstellung und Nutzbarkeit zusätzliche Faktoren, die beeinflussen, ob Websites und deren Inhalte als vertrauenswürdig wahrgenommen werden.

Analysiert man die verschiedenen Elemente, aus denen Websites japanischer spiritueller Heiler:innen bestehen, im Hinblick auf eine vertrauenswürdige Darstellung, so zeigt sich, dass sehr viele, auch unerwartete, Faktoren zusammenwirken, um Vertrauenswürdigkeit zu demonstrieren: ausführliche Informationen, je nach Angebot unterschiedliche Beweise von Kompetenz, Beteuerungen von Professionalität und einer angemessenen, das heißt zuverlässigen und wohlwollenden, Persönlichkeit, Zugehörigkeit, Kundenberichte, Konsistenz und nicht zuletzt die direkte Ansprache der Leser:innen, die die Heiler:innen greifbar und die Begegnung mit ihnen vorhersehbar werden lassen.

**Soziologie/Sozialanthropologie / Sociology/Social Anthropology**

09:00 Uhr bis 11:00 Uhr / 09:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. (CET)

This section meeting is held in hybrid form. Presentations and discussion will be in English.

Organizers:

Carola Hommerich (Sophia University)
Steve R. Entrich (University of Zurich)

Zoom-Link:

<https://sophia-ac-jp.zoom.us/j/92172474120>

Meeting-ID: 921 7247 4120

Kenncode: vsjf2025

Programme

This year's section meeting brings together eight contributions that explore how meaning, value, and belonging are constructed, negotiated, and contested in contemporary Japan. Moving across diverse social arenas—labour, entrepreneurship, ritual, consumption, urban space, art, and education—the papers reveal how individuals and institutions respond to the contradictions of late modernity, demographic change, and global interconnectedness.

Welcome

Steve R. ENTRICH (University of Zurich)

Session 1: "Work, Place, and Belonging: Everyday Contradictions in Contemporary Japan"

Early career scholars' session: 18 min. per talk (13 min. presentation + 5 min. discussion)
09:02 to 10:14 (CET) / 17:02 to 18:14 (JST)

Paper 1 "The Persistence of "Bullshit Jobs" in Contemporary Japan: Sociocultural Roots and Consequences in the Age of Automation"

Anne-Sophie DÖRIG (University of Geneva)

Paper 2 "Artificial Worlds of Contrast in Eatertainment – Experiential Consumption and Space in the Case of Themed Gastronomy in Japan"

Mirco HELLER (Heinrich-Heine-University Düsseldorf)

Paper 3 "Between tourism, machizukuri and local identity: An ethnographic perspective on the linguistic landscape of the day labourer town Kamagasaki (Airin), Ōsaka"

Julian WOLLINGER (University of Vienna)

Paper 4 "Oldcomers and Newcomers: Policy Paradoxes in Japan's Education System"

Thi Linh NGUYEN (Osaka University)



Session 2: “Work, Worship, and Worth: Making Meaning in Contemporary Japan”

Advanced scholars’ session: 11 min. per talk (8 min. presentation + 3 min. discussion)
10:15 to 11:00 (CET) / 18:15 to 19:00 (JST)

Paper 5 “Sharing Creativity: Art Projects and the Negotiation of Change in Sumida Ward, Tokyo “

Anna-Maria STABENTHEINER (University of Vienna)

Paper 6 “Study hard, work smart”: The transnational startup scene and its production of ‘skilled’ entrepreneurs in Asia“

Helena HOF (University of Zurich)

Paper 7 “Pet hatsumōde: Between business and enchantment“

Barbara HOLTHUS (German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ), Tokyo)

Paper 8 “Reconsidering Cultural Capital through Local Traditions: Insights from the Onbashira Festival in Suwa, Japan“

Shinichi AIZAWA (Sophia University)

Abstracts

Paper 1 “The Persistence of “Bullshit Jobs” in Contemporary Japan: Sociocultural Roots and Consequences in the Age of Automation“

Anne-Sophie DÖRIG (University of Geneva)

Japan is often seen as a technological pioneer, particularly in robotics and automation, while at the same time facing an unprecedented demographic crisis marked by an aging population and labor shortages. Against this backdrop, the study explores a paradox : why do structurally “meaningless” jobs continue to exist in a society under such intense economic and demographic pressure?

Drawing on David Graeber’s theory of “Bullshit Jobs” as well as Japanese scholarship (Ohta Hajime, Furuya Seito, Tanaka Yōko), this research combines a qualitative approach with field observations and Japanese-language sources gathered during a research stay at Kyoto University (2024–2025). The analysis shows that roles perceived as empty of substance often persist not by accident but because they reflect deeply embedded cultural and organizational logics, such as loyalty, visible effort and conformity within hierarchical structures.

The findings highlight three key dynamics:

1. The coexistence of advanced automation with rigid bureaucratic practices, where presence is valued over performance.
2. The psychological and social toll of meaningless labor, from demotivation to what can be described as “symbolic burnout.”
3. The contradiction between widespread labor shortages in vital sectors and the preservation of low-value positions in large companies and administrations.

By linking the persistence of Bullshit Jobs to broader issues of alienation, social withdrawal and shifting generational attitudes, this study contributes to ongoing debates on labor, meaning and social cohesion in contemporary Japan.

**Paper 2 "Artificial Worlds of Contrast in Eatertainment – Experiential Consumption and Space in the Case of Themed Gastronomy in Japan"**

Mirco HELLER (Heinrich-Heine-University Düsseldorf)

With its preference for thematic staging, Japan has positioned itself as a pioneer in the development and establishment of consumption spaces that extend far beyond the presentation of goods. Themed environments – such as amusement parks, conceptual shopping malls like Venus Fort Odaiba, restaurants designed in prison style such as The Lockup, or cafés like the Vampire Café – create immersive experiences that merge consumption and entertainment. These spaces are closely tied to cultural staging, social needs, and technological innovations. They function not only as places of consumption but also as platforms for social interaction and identity formation.

Using the example of themed gastronomy in Japan, the presentation will highlight strategies of staging experiences through thematization, atmosphere, and individualized moments. More specifically, it critically examines how selected gastronomic spaces are designed and to what extent their thematization promises consumers unique experiences. Drawing on fundamental theories of space and experiential consumption, the analysed examples will demonstrate that it is above all the desire for staged experiences that renders these destinations attractive to consumers.

In my presentation, I will share initial findings from participant observation conducted in August in selected sites of themed gastronomy in Japan. Looking ahead to the further stages of my dissertation project, I also wish to discuss with the group the growing significance of staging and the question of authenticity of experiences in the context of postmodern consumption, as well as exchange ideas on the challenges of recruiting interview partners in temporary encounter spaces such as restaurants.

Paper 3 "Between tourism, machizukuri and local identity: An ethnographic perspective on the linguistic landscape of the day labourer town Kamagasaki (Airin), Ōsaka"

Julian WOLLINGER (University of Vienna)

Approximately over the past twenty years, Kamagasaki (Airin) in Ōsaka has transformed from one of the largest day labourer towns in Japan into a place that attracts large numbers of foreign tourists, primarily due to its cheap lodgings and convenient location. Gentrification and machizukuri (a participatory process of local urban development) play a decisive role as driving forces of urban change. Previous research shows that changes in tourist areas can have an impact on the linguistic landscape, just as multilingual signage can be fostered by an increasingly linguistically diverse readership. Using a quantitative analysis of 2.932 linguistic landscape elements paired with qualitative, ethnographic approaches such as semi-structured observation, questioning, and mapping, I examined the extent to which this also applies to Kamagasaki, whose structural changes and rising tourist numbers are indicative of a possible development towards a multilingual linguistic landscape.

In this presentation I want to focus on the qualitative aspects of my research, drawing on my fieldwork conducted in July and August 2024 and February 2025. The aim is to discuss the spatial dynamics as well as tendencies and topics that are reflected in the linguistic landscape of Kamagasaki and the image that is generated through it. My analysis showed that the day labourer town exhibits only a limited degree of internationality and that tourist spaces also only partially overlap with those of the local population. It also transpired that the institutional linguistic landscape is primarily aimed at residents, whereas the non-institutional linguistic landscape is more often intended for an international readership. Nevertheless, both categories partake in the transformation of Kamagasaki through implementing signs that support the ongoing machizukuri-initiative.



The rather high amount of warning and prohibitive signs and their implicit meaning, however, generate a distinctive atmosphere of a “dangerous” town, working against the aimed for destigmatisation. Thus, it remains to be seen how current developments, which suggest greater internationalisation and, with it, further multilingualisation in the future, will affect the socio-spatial dynamics of Kamagasaki and how this is perceived by the locals.

Paper 4 “Oldcomers and Newcomers: Policy Paradoxes in Japan's Education System“

Thi Linh NGUYEN (Osaka University)

Japan's demographic landscape is undergoing a profound transformation, characterized by a increasing foreign-origin population whose presence traces back through distinct historical waves. The earlier wave, commonly termed “Oldcomers,” includes groups like the Zainichi Korean community, whose roots are deeply embedded in Japan's colonial and post-war history. In contrast, the more recent “Newcomers,” arriving mainly from the late 20th century onward from South America, Southeast Asia, and beyond, reflect Japan's contemporary responses to globalization and labour shortages. This study examines the systematic disparities in Japan's educational policy toward these two distinct minority groups. Through analysis of policy documents from Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) and local implementation reports, this research identifies two characteristic policy models that have emerged from these different historical contexts.

For Oldcomers, educational policy demonstrates a distinctly defensive character, primarily focusing on preventing discrimination while lacking proactive efforts to recognize their history, culture, and identity within the national curriculum (Chapman, 2006). Ethnic schools such as Korean schools maintain a marginalized existence—barely acknowledged and systematically undervalued within the education system (Lee, 2013).

In contrast, policies for Newcomers exhibit a reactive and fragmented nature (Shipper, 2008). Initiatives like Japanese as a Second Language (JSL) classes depend heavily on variable local budgets and political will, resulting in significant disparities in support quality and the absence of a clear, stable integration pathway (Tsuneyoshi, 2004).

The research reveals a fundamental paradox: while Oldcomers need identity recognition, they receive only tolerance, whereas Newcomers require systematic support for integration, they receive merely ad-hoc solutions. These inadequacies reflect persistent rigidities in the conception of “Japaneseness” (Burgess, 2012) while simultaneously creating barriers to building a genuinely multicultural democracy in Japan. This paper argues that addressing this dual paradox requires a fundamental rethinking of educational governance. The study concludes by proposing a needs-based policy framework that transcends the “old-new” dichotomy through three key shifts: from tolerance to active recognition of cultural identity, from ad-hoc local initiatives to standardized national support systems, and from passive accommodation to active partnership with minority communities. This approach points toward a more equitable and inclusive educational system appropriate for a multicultural Japan in the 21st century.

Paper 5 “Sharing Creativity: Art Projects and the Negotiation of Change in Sumida Ward, Tokyo “

Anna-Maria STABENTHEINER (University of Vienna)

Since the 1990s, “art projects” have become an increasingly popular method of machizukuri, or community-building, in Japan's urban as well as rural areas. Today, a wide range of large-scale development projects, ward-level initiatives, and smaller independent efforts emphasize the arts' potential to foster social cohesion, support economic revitalization, and enhance the livability of urban space.



One area where these developments can be observed is Mukōjima, a former industrial district in Tokyo's Sumida Ward. Here, experimental approaches to vacant housing, disaster prevention, and community-building have been intersecting with artistic practices since the early 2000s. Today, a growing number of (often young) creatives are active in the neighbourhood, organizing and participating in neighbourhood-based projects such as the Sumida River Sumiyume Art Project or the Sumida Mukōjima EXPO.

In this presentation, I draw on the case of Mukōjima and reflect on the ways in which power is constantly (re)negotiated between actors in the multi-layered structure of the area's creative ecosystem in the face of urban change driven by (e.g.) demographic shifts and urban redevelopment. Rather than focusing solely on creativity as an economic driver, I consider how artistic practices are shared locally, under what conditions they can take root sustainably, and how they might contribute to long-term social and spatial transformation in the neighbourhood.

Paper 6 “Study hard, work smart”: The transnational startup scene and its production of ‘skilled’ entrepreneurs in Asia“

Helena HOF (University of Zurich)

This presentation argues that the promise of transnational startup entrepreneurship can drive migration or offer long-term migrants ways to avoid deskilling. Interviews and ethnographic observations with highly-educated migrant startup founders in Japan and Singapore reveal how transnational entrepreneurship is undergirded by the fetishized buzz words of innovation and skills. Globally connected startup scenes have emerged in ‘innovation hubs’ such as Tokyo and Singapore, offering startup visa and accelerator programs. These institutions promote meritocracy, freedom from corporates, location independency, and monetary success. The article uses the concepts of risk and hope to understand the formation of the entrepreneurial subject in neoliberal market economies and contends that ‘sponsored’ startup entrepreneurship is a new career path in skilled migration regimes. The cruel nature of the entrepreneurial dream however obstructs migrants’ desires of ‘doing good’. Rather, it causes precarity and inequality, excluding those who do not fit the idealized image of the transnational entrepreneur. The analysis reveals contextual differences between startup-related institutions in Japan and Singapore, which are rooted in the different development of the migration regime in the two countries and their subsequent incorporation of ‘others’.

Paper 7 “Pet hatsumōde: Between business and enchantment“

Barbara HOLTHUS (German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ), Tokyo)

Since 2022, the annual number of pets brought into families has superseded that of children being born in Japan. Surveys show that the majority of pet owners considers their pets as family members. Thus, it is probably not surprising that pet owners include their furry family members in their leisure time activities and important family outings, including visits to shrines and temples. This presentation focuses specifically on the ritual of the first annual shrine or temple visit of a new year, the so-called hatsumōde. Some shrines and temples have started holding specific pet-blessing events. Data comes from participant observation at several such events, informally talking to pet owners, distributing a small survey among participating pet owners, and interviewing an overseeing priest. I argue that rituals (inherently a human endeavour) such as hatsumōde have now become inclusive, but not to the degree that the distinction between human and non-human animals has really started to blur. Aware that there is a segment of the population that can be termed “anti-pet”, shrines and temples are managing the fine line between inclusion of non-human animals as well as not bothering those that would be put off by pets. Dressing your pet in fancy clothes for the hatsumōde, buying the participation in the rite itself, plus the obligatory purchase of omamori charms is also a lucrative business, as is the entire pet economy. And shrines and temples know how to tap into the pet



market, from blessings to funerals, and know how to foster the desire of pet owners to include their non-human family members in religious rites.

Paper 8 "Reconsidering Cultural Capital through Local Traditions: Insights from the Onbashira Festival in Suwa, Japan"

Shinichi AIZAWA (Sophia University)

This paper reconsiders the concept of cultural capital by analysing the interplay of community traditions, political networks, and gender roles in contemporary Japan. While Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital has become a central framework in sociology, its operationalization has been largely shaped by Western cultural practices. Inspired by the empirical approach of *Culture, Class, Distinction* (Bennett et al. 2009), this study explores how cultural capital can be measured and understood in non-Western contexts, arguing that Japan provides a particularly fruitful case for rethinking established frameworks. In methodological terms, the paper also demonstrates how large-scale survey data can be fruitfully combined with the analysis of local ritual practices to capture mechanisms of cultural reproduction.

The Onbashira Festival is a ritual with more than a millennium of history, deeply embedded in local social and political structures. Drawing on a questionnaire survey conducted in 2023 with 2,000 residents (837 valid responses), this paper investigates participation in cultural activities, leadership roles in the festival, and their associations with socio-demographic factors. The findings confirm that women report higher levels of participation in Western cultural activities, consistent with prior studies. At the same time, men, particularly in middle age, are significantly more likely to assume leadership roles in the Onbashira Festival. Moreover, engagement in traditional cultural practices is closely associated with personal ties to local politicians, indicating that political capital and cultural participation intersect in ways rarely captured in conventional measures of cultural capital. Taken together, these patterns reveal how gender, politics, and tradition contribute to the reproduction of social inequalities in Japan.

By bringing together Bourdieu's theoretical framework with the empirical orientation of *Culture, Class, Distinction*, this paper argues for a broader and context-sensitive understanding of cultural capital. It also shows how the Japanese case can enrich comparative debates in sociology and social anthropology, illustrating how local traditions provide insights into cultural inequality that extend beyond Japan.