

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.