

Interdisciplinary Japanese Studies On Site

With flying colours

Japan's labour unions are facing difficult times. Plagued by shrinking membership and little political clout, their position in this year's wage negotiations is further weakened by the economic crisis. The unions' line of argument follows traditional patterns: The way out of the crisis is increased domestic demand, driven by higher individual consumption and fuelled by higher wages. At the same time, Rengō, the Japanese Trade Union Confederation, seeks to secure jobs, explicitly also for non-regular workers. As things stand right now, political headwind may make the unions go down with flying colours.



The lost paradises of the precariat

Since the early 1990s, “freeters” have become an increasingly popular figure in literature and media. However, during the past two decades, fictional representations of the freeter lifestyle have undergone radical change.

Freeters were once considered individualists choosing to pursue their dreams instead of getting stuck on the treadmill of working in a company. They were, however, also perceived as a threat to mainstream society, as their way of life deviated from what was considered the standard life course established in the 1960s. Moreover, the emergence of young *men* refusing to follow in their fathers' footsteps radically questioned the dominant idea of a “happy life” inextricably linked to the male breadwinner-model. This ambiguity is typical of many early freeter representations in literature, film and TV-drama.

From self-realization to precariousness?

More recent literary texts and TV as well as film productions tend to focus more on the growing precariousness of the freeters' lives. These works unmask the presumed independence of freeters and other non-regular employees as myths, characterizing them as “work-

ing poor” instead. Both, in TV-drama and in literature, exploitative labour conditions are becoming an increasingly important topic. In literature, this so-called “sociological turn” has even prompted discussions about a “new proletarian literature”. At the same time, novels published by authors of the proletarian literary movement of the 1920s and 30s have recently been drawing unexpected attention.

A new research project

To sum up, many of the early works construct “a freeter life” as a transitory phase often related to the “search for the true self”, while recent works tend to paint a rather demure picture of precarious living conditions devoid of “dreams”. The change of connotations of non-regular employment in literature and TV-drama lies at the centre of one of the new projects of the DIJ's research focus on “Happiness in Japan: Continuities and Discontinuities”. Concentrating on gender and class aspects, the analysis of topoi such as work and the search for alternative happiness will form a vital part of this project.

The eco-bag type

This year's company recruits were just recently labelled as “eco-bag type” (*eco baggu gata*) by the Japan Productivity Center, a local think tank. Their predecessors two years ago were called “day trader type”. Signs of change. The eco-shopping bag is gaining ground. The day trader types may abhor it, but environmentalists hail it as ushering in a shift from profit to green and an opportunity for raising the awareness of *mottainai* or unnecessary waste. While this is clearly a trend in Japan today, the government seems to be slow on the uptake, leaving the protection of the environment to consumers with their eco-bags rather than supporting it by a coherent environmentally-friendly industrial policy.

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Demographics on every level



Further information about the symposium can be found on the DIJ's homepage:
www.dijtokyo.org

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Low fertility and social ageing have far-reaching consequences for the social system and economic development. These consequences are diverse and complex, not least on the local level.

Japan and Germany are at the forefront in regards to population decline, ageing and low fertility. In both countries these tendencies have attracted a great deal of public attention and provoked sometimes rather nervous reactions on the part of politicians. However, since the consequences of these population dynamics are as multifaceted as their causes, there are no ready-made simplistic formulae to account for them. Population decline is a phenomenon without precedent, which calls for interdisciplinary co-operation; no single scientific discipline is equipped to deal with all of its aspects.

Populations are imploding

From 2 to 4 June 2009 the DIJ hosted an international symposium to discuss problems of population decline from the points of view of diverse disciplines. Twenty-one scholars from Japan, Germany and other European countries were joined by those DIJ researchers involved in the DIJ research focus "Challenges of Demographic Change". This conference, entitled "Imploding Populations. Global and Local Challenges of Demographic Change", was generously supported by the Japan Foundation.

The papers presented on the first day of the conference were theoretical in nature, addressing the causes and the progression of demographic change in national and international contexts. The following two days were dedicated to presentations about specific consequences of population decline in urban and rural settings.

Low birth rates in want of explanation

From the papers dealing with low fertility it transpired that a comprehensive explanation of why ever fewer babies are born is still outstanding. Both economic factors, notably the flexibilization of the labour market, and changing attitudes towards family and gender roles are involved, but it is

unclear how these factors interact and, even more so, what political counter-measures should be taken. Klaus Peter Strohmeier (Ruhr University Bochum) demonstrated that just increasing the number of day care facilities insufficiently tackles the real needs of German families with children living in inner cities. To avert a downward poverty spiral, social integration policies are more important.

Sawako Shirahase (University of Tokyo) pointed in the same direction with her paper on ageing and socio-economic inequality in Japan. On the basis of compelling data she elucidated the risk of a widening social cleavage and new poverty in the wake of present demographic developments.

Countries differ, and so do towns

Several papers examined various aspects of ageing, ranging from urban districts where the elderly form the majority of the population to rural areas suffering from depopulation, as well as the "silver market" phenomenon, communication in old people's homes, and alternative living arrangements to the adult guardian system in Japan and Germany.

Taken together the contributions to this conference provided an in-depth view of two societies embroiled in demographic change. While risks and problems usually dominate the discourse about ageing and population decline, certain opportunities such as the development of new products and forms of communal living also became apparent. In addition, the conferences demonstrated that differences concerning the causes and effects of demographic change exist not just between, but also within the two countries at the centre of the discussion. In any event, solutions must be found on the local level.

Healthcare communication

Unintelligible doctors speak, clueless patients, patronized care receivers: Communication in healthcare contexts can be a difficult endeavour. A DIJ workshop dealt with the topic from a Japanese perspective.

The workshop took place at the German Institute for Japanese Studies on 25 April 2009. It was held in cooperation with the National Institute for Japanese Language and funded by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. Its aim was to bring together academics and practitioners to discuss communication problems in Japanese healthcare contexts and consider improvements.

Lead market Japan

More and more companies are discovering the growth “silver age” market as a business opportunity and potential for new products and services.

At the workshop “Japan: The Silver Market Phenomenon. New Opportunities, Big Challenges”, experts on Japan as well as company representatives discussed the impact of an ageing society on strategy and business in Japan.

The organizers of the workshop – the German-Japanese Industrial Cooperation Committee, the Japanese-German Center Berlin and the DIJ – were happy to see a strong interest in the Japanese silver market on the part of German businesses and a fruitful dialogue between academia and the corporate world.

(Let’s not get) lost in translation

A workshop was held at DIJ on 19 May in preparation for a quantitative survey on social exclusion in Germany and Japan.

In addition to DIJ staff, the participants included two German sociologists, Heinz Bude and Ernst-Dieter Lantermann of the University of Kassel, and five sociologists from Japan, Yoshimichi Sato, Hiroshi Ishida, Ryozyo Yoshino, Seiko Yamazaki, and Ulrich Möhwald.

The presentations dealt with topics such as the “translation” of difficult medical terminology into everyday language, politeness strategies in doctor-patient interaction, difficulties of gaining compliance in institutional elderly care, the linguistic education of future care workers, as well as required communication skills in dementia care. The animated discussions converged on the insight that there are no ready-made solutions. Although some generalizations are possible, good healthcare communication largely depends on individual, interpersonal efforts.

The event was held on 19 May at the Bavarian Ministry for Economic Affairs, Transport and Technology in Munich. It was agreed that even in the lead market of Japan, the growth potential has not yet been fully tapped or recognized. Urgent issues are a better understanding of the actual needs and wants of older people, which must then be translated into product development, marketing and sales.

The new study *Silver Business in Japan: Implications of Demographic Change on HRM and Marketing* by DIJ, GCCI Japan and Hamburg University of Technology was presented at the workshop. An English version of the study will be available this autumn.

The main purpose of the workshop was to deliberate the suitability in the Japanese context of the questionnaire, which was based on previous surveys carried out in Germany. The discussion centred on aspects of content as well as translation problems. The workshop proved to be an important step towards ensuring the comparability of the data collected by the surveys in Germany and Japan, both of which will be conducted this autumn.

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A variety of problems, but no ready-made solutions

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Forthcoming events

**International Conference:
Communication in Institutional
Elderly Care: Cross-cultural
Perspectives**
(DIJ, X/1–2/2009). Organizer: DIJ.

Recent publications

Hiromi Tanaka-Naji:
*Japanische Frauennetzwerke und
Geschlechterpolitik im Zeitalter
der Globalisierung* [Japanese
women networks and gender
politics in an era of globalization]
(=DIJ Monographs; 44). Munich:
ludicum, 2009.



**Shigeru Hagiwara, Michael
Prieler, Florian Kohlbacher,
Akie Arima:** *Nihon no terebi CM
ni okeru kōreishazō no hensen:
1997-nen to 2007-nen no hikaku*
[Changes in the representation
of elderly adults in Japanese TV
commercials: Comparing the
years 1997 and 2007]. *Keio Media
and Communications Research* 59,
2009, pp. 113–129.

**Florian Kohlbacher, Pascal
Gudorf, Cornelius Herstatt:**
*Silver Business in Japan: Auswir-
kungen des demographischen
Wandels auf Personalpolitik und
Marketing* [Silver business in
Japan: Implications of demo-
graphic change for HRM and
marketing]. Tokyo: DIHK, 2009.

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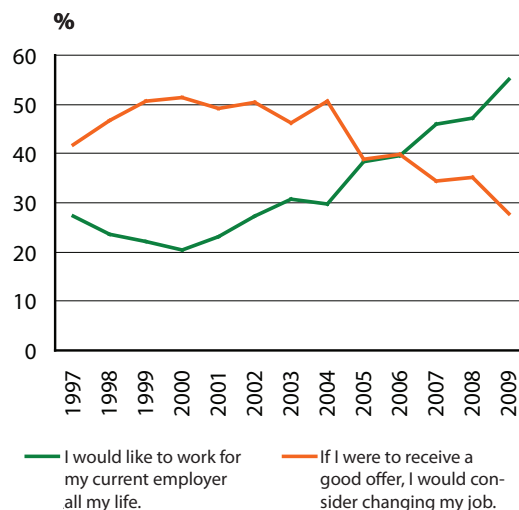
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Desire for lifetime employment

Reaching for safe shores...

Happy to have a job and determined to keep it are young Japanese employees who managed to secure regular employment this spring. Since 2001, the share of those who wish to stay with their current employer all of their working lives has been on a constant increase, reaching 55.2 per cent this year according to an annual survey by the Japan Productivity Center (JPC). During the same time span, the share of young employees who would be willing to change jobs if presented with a better offer dropped by over 20 points to 27.9 per cent. A follow-up survey polling the same recruits scheduled for December will show whether loyalty to one's employer lasts or merely is a short-term reaction to the stressful experience of job hunting.



Source: Japan Productivity Center (2009),
Shinnyūshain ishiki chōsa.

Read for you

**Bungeishunjū (ed.) (2008):
O-hitorisama magajin [Singles
magazine], special issue December
2008, 162 pages, 900 yen (ASIN
B001J7CJ2A).**

In a special issue of *Bungeishunjū*, a magazine with a mainly male readership, gender specialist Ueno Chizuko tackles the issue of female singles. She found that many of them consider being independent and leading a peaceful domestic life an advantage of being single. The recent increase of female singles, according to Ueno, is a result of more women being materially independent. Since material independence presupposes professional skills, the possibility of opting for a single lifestyle has a social aspect that ties in with stratification.

Catchword

アラフォー (arafō)

Arafō – from the English “around forty” – refers to a new target group of the Japanese consumer goods industry: single, working women around the age of 40. Permanently employed and materially self-sufficient, they constitute an even more attractive market segment than the so called “parasite singles” who continue to live with their parents. The expression was made popular in 2008 by the TV drama “Around 40”, in which actress Yuki Amami plays a typical representative of the *arafō*. In 2006, as a precursor to *arafō*, the fashion industry had courted the *arasā*, women “around thirty”. The latest trends now are *arafif* (around 50) and *arakan* (around 60) in allusion to *kanreki*, the 60th birthday.

Picture credits:

Page 1 {trade union assembly} Axel Klein.
Page 2 {cover} Conference booklet cover.
Page 3 {cover} German edition of the study.
Page 4 {statistic} Carola Hommerich.

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