

Interdisciplinary Japanese Studies On Site

Preserving tradition: Burden or pleasure?

Ageing, paucity of employment opportunities and depopulation are presently the most common associations with rural areas in Japan. However, numerous positive aspects of life in the countryside tend to be ignored: a wealth of cultural heritage and stronger social cohesion.

The current DIJ research project “Tradition appropriation in contemporary rural Japan: Pursuit of happiness?” examines these aspects, which have so far received only limited attention in both scholarly studies and the media. It aims to analyse the correlation between the engagement for the preservation of traditions and happiness.

The appropriation of rural tradition as a pursuit of individual happiness?

Hideji Onozuka is more than just a farmer: in his leisure time, the 88-year old, who lives in a village in Niigata Prefecture, performs as a female kabuki actor (*onnagata*). His face tells how much he enjoys performing. With a great smile he explains that for him, being on stage is tantamount to happiness.

In numerous tradition preservation groups (*dentō hozonkai*) all over Japan, residents like Hideji Onozuka practice and engage in transmitting traditions designated as cultural property (*bunkazai*), such as kabuki or *kagura* theatre. Many members of these groups are over 65 years of age and have been part of the group for decades. The groups usually perform



► Welcome dinner before the *kagura* performance in the village of Akakura (Niigata Prefecture)

at local festivals. Most members explain that they were asked to join by friends or relatives. Some members remember that they initially perceived membership as a burden, but that they now view it as a pleasure.

Motives for engaging in the preservation of traditions

Previous stretches of participant observation and interviews, conducted as part of this new research project, have shown that reasons for membership in tradition preservation groups are manifold: health, a break from routine, pleasure, but above all the chance to encounter others. For many of the long-term members, regular practice, performances and the subsequent downing of rice wine or beer constitute a precious occasion to engage in social interaction with fellow members and to exchange ideas that are not necessarily related to the tradition per se. However, all members confirm that their engaging in the preservation of vernacular values and traditions, as well as the social interaction that emerges from them, have considerably enriched their lives. Hideji Onozuka agrees on that: “There is nothing more enjoyable than sharing a glass with other members after a successful performance.”

DIJ launches “Contemporary Japan”

Japanese studies are being increasingly conducted within the framework of international cooperation and by all academic disciplines. One effect is that the potential audience is larger than ever. To make it easier for this growing audience to access these research results, but also to offer researchers better opportunities for publishing their work, the DIJ has broadened its publication platform.

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► *Kagura* performance in Akakura

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Alternative housing for the elderly in Japan

Japan's demographic change has serious repercussions on housing and living arrangements. Although this development certainly results in changes for every age group, the elderly are especially affected – not least because the ageing process may result in the need for continuous care.

Three-generational households have been declining for a long time in Japan. Today most elderly live either alone or with their spouses. A small percentage live in institutionalized housing such as nursing homes. In recent years, however, new living arrangements have emerged in Japan, facilitated by alternative forms of housing such as “group living” (*gurūpu ribingu*) and “collective housing” (*korekutibu haujingu*). These usually combine conventional private living with common spaces and communal activities, and can be age-homogeneous as well as multi-generational. Their organization and architecture varies widely, responding to both the visions of the organizers (often non-profit organizations) and the wishes and needs of residents.

Signs of social change

Far from being a mass phenomenon, forms of communal housing in Japan are, nevertheless, signs of social change, of people not waiting for the government to act, of new lifestyles and a new self-perception of the elderly who are actively involved in the planning. Communal housing disproves the perception that elderly people always depend on help.

An independent life

The dissolution of the traditional family, i.e. elderly people living with their children and grandchildren, is often said to be caused by the offspring not feeling responsible any more for taking care of their elderly parents, as well as daughters or daughters-in-law not being available any more because they pursue their own careers. But also the elderly themselves do not always expect to be cared for by their kin. Many have their own visions of how they want to spend their remaining years. Deviating from the still prevailing norms, however, can cause conflicts

with family members. When Mrs. H., who lived with her son's family after the death of her husband and who is now in her mid-70s decided to move into a communal housing project, she met with disapproval. Her family feared the move could be interpreted as a violation of filial duty: “My daughter-in-law does not want people to think that I moved out because we didn't get along well.”

Surrogate families?

Mutual help is usually an important part of the expectations for communal housing forms. Some housing projects even have quite formalized help and care arrangements. But in contrast to most old people's homes, here residents remain independent and self-determined as far as possible. Accordingly, “independence and companionship” (*jiritsu to kyōsei*) is the motto of probably the most famous group house, COCO Shōnandai, founded in Fujisawa (Kanagawa Prefecture) more than ten years ago. It serves as an example for many newer group houses. Leading an independent and self-determined life without giving up community seems to be the wish of many older people in Japan. For Mrs. N., in her mid-50s, it was an easy decision after her divorce to move into a collective house: “Should I live alone until I die?”

The DIJ project “Housing and living arrangements in Japan's ageing society”

The DIJ project “Housing and living arrangements in Japan's ageing society” focuses on communal forms of living for the elderly in Japan. Qualitative interviews are conducted to examine the impact of prior housing and family experiences on their choice of an alternative form of living.



► The name says it all: the “Community House Hōryūji” in Nara Prefecture

More and more elderly people are looking for alternative forms of housing.



► The communal dining hall for both young and old at the Collective House “Seiseki Sakuragaoka” in Tokyo

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DIJ launches “Contemporary Japan” (continued from page 1)

“Contemporary Japan” is the title of the DIJ’s new, peer-reviewed journal. More than its predecessor “Japanstudien” which comprised 21 volumes, “Contemporary Japan” will function as an exchange and publication medium for German as well as international researchers and their work. The new journal reaches out to authors and readers who wish to participate in international academic competition and exchange.

One of the means by which this aim is pursued is the journal’s consequent opening for English language contributions. Feedback to the first calls for papers has shown that this offer is being widely accepted. With its launch, the number of submissions for “Contemporary Japan” already clearly surpasses that of its predecessor. At the same time, the pool of qualified referees the editors can fall back on has grown manifold.

The positive feedback is also due to the fact that “Contemporary Japan” meets the requirements of present-day academic publications by providing the (technically complex) electronic indexing and up-linking of its articles. Publisher De Gruyter is well equipped for this task due to its wide Internet presence and its well established distribution channels.

Thus the DIJ is optimistic that “Contemporary Japan” will help to present more high-quality research to a larger audience and at the same time become an attractive publication outlet for a growing number of researchers.

The first issue entitled *Mind the Gap: Stratification and Social Inequality in Japan* will be out in October this year.



www.degruyter.com/cj

Religion and the politics of happiness

For more than a year now an international group of academics led by Axel Klein (DIJ) and Steven Reed (Chūō University, Tokyo) has been researching the complex relationship between religion and politics in Japan.

To discuss their results and to generate new input, the group held an international conference in November last year in cooperation with Christian Steineck (University of Zurich).

Mostly Japanese experts presented their findings regarding the question how religious organizations translate their images of happiness and a better life into politics. The cooperation of political scientists and experts in religious studies proved to be very appropriate in also staking off this yet little tilled field and identifying tasks for future research.

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Marriage, love and sex

Japanese marry less and later in life, with women having greatly contributed to these trends. What do Japanese women’s magazines have to say about this?

DIJ sociologist Barbara Holthus has analysed four representative magazines, focusing on the period from the 1970s to the 1990s. In her book (German only), she now provides detailed accounts of the history and production of women’s magazines as well as their consumption by readers and their role

in public discourse. The main focus, however, lies in the analysis of partner relationships as they are discussed, constructed, and construed by women’s magazines. Discourses on “marriage”, “love”, “sexuality” and “masculinity” lie at the core of a qualitative and quantitative content analysis. The findings point to the heterogeneity of magazine discourses, the construction of an idealized “West”, and the importance of “age” in gendered discourses.



▶ *Paarbeziehungen in japanischen Frauenzeitschriften seit 1970* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen).

◀ **Dr. Barbara Holthus**, sociologist, heads the project “Marital happiness: Discourses on marriage in Japanese women’s magazines”. holthus@diytokyo.org

Recent publications

Maren Godzik (ed.):

Altern in Japan
(=Japanstudien; 21).
Munich: ludicum, 2009.

Michael Prieler, Florian Kohlbacher, Shigeru Hagiwara and Akie Arima:

Gendered Portrayals of Older People in Japanese Television Advertising. DIJ Working Paper 09/2. German Institute for Japanese Studies Tokyo and Stiftung DGIA, 2009.

Florian Coulmas:

Hiroshima. Geschichte und Nachgeschichte.
C.H. Beck: Munich, 2010.



New home page

The DIJ home page underwent a major redesign earlier this year.



The URL has remained the same:
www.dijtokyo.org

The DIJ Newsletter is published both in German and in English and is also available for download as a full-text version from our website.

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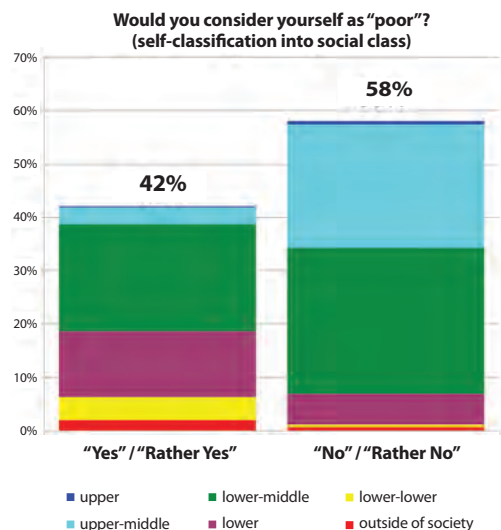
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Felt poverty

Surprising numbers are revealed in a recent Japan-wide representative DIJ survey: 42% of the Japanese respondents consider themselves to be poor.

It is astonishing, however, that slightly more than half of the self-assigned “poor” places themselves in the upper or lower middle class. How is it possible to reconcile a self-assigned middle class status with a feeling of poverty?

Whether the fear of status loss might have a stronger impact than experiences of actual poverty remains to be investigated in the further analysis of the survey data. *C.L.H.*



Data: DIJ/Hommerich, 2009.

Read for you

Akitoshi MASUDA (2008, 5th reprint 2009): *Kyō, hōmuresu ni natta – 15-nin no sararīman tenraku jinsei* [Today I’ve lost my home – the social decline of 15 employees]. Tokyo: Saizusha, 223 pages, 524 yen (ISBN 978-4-88392-650-3 C0095).

This volume contains the experiences of fifteen former employees who became redundant and eventually homeless for various reasons. The multifaceted biographies of the narrators – covering a broad range from a 51-year-old fund manager in a prestigious American investment bank who fell victim to structural reforms, to a 31-year-old employee of a small metal company who could not pay back his outstanding debts – demonstrate the great variety of the causes of unemployment and ensuing homelessness. Furthermore, the reader also gets a first-hand account of how homeless individuals in Tokyo cope with their everyday lives. *S.K.*

Catchword

限界集落 (*genkai shūraku*)

The term *genkai shūraku* means a hamlet or a small village that is threatened by extinction through population decline and ageing. Due to demographic change such settlements are no longer a rarity. This relatively new term was originally coined by the regional sociologist Akira Ōno who defined *genkai shūraku* using two criteria: First, more than half of the inhabitants are 65 years or older and, second, there are signs that central community functions may not be maintained. A village or hamlet completely deserted is called a *haison* (“abandoned settlement”). *V.E.*

Author key: *C.L.H.* – Carola Hommerich; *S.K.* – Susanne Klien; *V.E.* – Volker Elis.

Picture credits: Page 1: {welcome dinner} and {*kagura* performance} by Susanne Klien. Page 2: {Community House Hōryūji} and {Seiseki Sakuragaoka} by Maren Godzik. Page 3: {magazine cover} DIJ: “Contemporary Japan”, {book cover} Barbara Holthus. Page 4: {statistic} by Carola Hommerich.

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