

German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ)

DIJ Social Science Study Group



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Blurring Boundaries: An Analysis of (In)dependent Contractors in Japan

Since the 1990s, a renaissance of self-employment is taking place in most OECD countries, but not so in Japan. At the same time, however, a diversification of self-employment types can be observed in Japan, emerging in parallel to the much discussed diversification of salaried employment forms. In contrast to the overall decrease of self-employment, some new subgroups significantly grow in number and gain in importance. These “new self-employed” mostly establish micro or solo businesses in the corporation-oriented service sector. They are often highly mobile, flexible and professionalized. Some enjoy great freedom in their work arrangements and are characterized by remarkable work and life satisfaction – in contrast to many *saraīman*. Yet, to what prize does this happen? And to what extent is this work-style an (appropriate) answer to the challenges Japan’s labor society is currently facing?

In this presentation, based on a PhD research project, the evolution of self-employment in Japan is analyzed, contrasting “old” and “new” self-employment. The main research objective is to examine the work styles of solo self-employed and (in)dependent contractors in regards to their significance within the overall transformation of Japan’s work society. For this purpose, the dissertation analyzes 1) the cause of emergence, 2) the objective labor structure, and 3) subjective orientations and individual work-life strategies of individual outside-contractors in Japan. As theoretical basis, the presentation will draw on the sociological concepts of delimitation and subjectivization of work. Data comes from the analysis of secondary data and of own interviews with (in)dependent contractors. These provide interesting insights into contractors’ concrete way of working and living, biographies and motives.

Shizuka JÄGER-DRESEN studied Japanese Studies and Sociology at Bonn University and Kagoshima University. Her master thesis dealt with changes in employment integration in Japan. In 2007 she joined the Institute of East Asian Studies at the University of Duisburg-Essen and is currently working on her PhD thesis. In 2008/2009 she was conducting research in Japan as a Visiting Research Scholar at the University of Tokyo, Institute of Social Science (JSPS Fellowship). She is presently a Doctoral Research Fellow at the German Institute of Japanese Studies (DIJ) in Tokyo.

The DIJ Social Science Study Group is a forum for young scholars and Ph.D. candidates in the field of Social Sciences organized by Maren Godzik, Barbara Holthus and Ralph Lützeler. All are welcome to attend, but registration (luetzeler@dijtokyo.org) is appreciated.

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