

German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ)

DIJ History & Humanities Study Group



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“Robophily” as National Character? Discussing the Popularity of Robots in Japan

The popularity of robots in Japan has been discussed since the massive installations of industrial robots during the 1980s and has come into focus again since the end of the 1990s. New “social robots” are introduced as future service providers for Japan’s ageing society and praised as “saviors of Japan” (book title in 2006). Governmental strategy papers declare “next generation robots” to be one of seven most important industries for the future of the Japanese economy. Regarding the reasons for the great openness towards robot technology, most studies stress a perpetual “robophily” as a national character trait of the Japanese people, from ancient Shinto belief of a “soul” in every object to the mechanical dolls of the Edo period, and to the countless robot heroes of Japanese popular culture since the 1950s.

By analyzing social robots with a cultural sciences perspective on technology research and development, this paper sheds a more differentiated light on the discussion about the acceptance of robots in Japan. It will be argued that on the one hand, as a Japanese Studies research topic social robots illustrate the “negotiation character of the creation and use of technological artifacts” (Hörning). On the other hand, as a cultural topos, they mirror the dreams, desires and needs of human beings at a certain time and therefore have to be interpreted as political objects as well.

Cosima WAGNER is research fellow and lecturer at the Japanese Studies Dept. of Goethe University, Frankfurt. Her interests include cultural sciences research on technology, history of objects, consumption and everyday life in Japan as well as the global boom of Japanese popular culture. In 2008 she finished her doctoral degree with a thesis on “Robotopia Nipponica? Research on the acceptance of robots in Japan” (in German, to be published with Tectum Verlag, Germany).

The presentation will be given in English. Everybody is welcome to attend. Registration is appreciated (backhaus@diptokyo.org).

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