

German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ)

DIJ History and Humanities Study Group



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Towards an Intellectual History of Japan's 1980s Bubble Culture and Economy

In the popular imagination of contemporary Japan, the so-called 'Bubble Economy' of the late 1980s has become a place of nostalgia by itself. In it, the 1980s live on as a spectacular feast with endless excitement and seemingly bottomless resources, while contemporary Japan seems mired in dearth and boredom of the everyday. Of course, things were not quite what they seem, as 1980s Japan was also a deeply neurotic society, beset by anxieties and fears that were shared by many cold-war societies, but in part also entirely local. Thus, studies of the culture of the period either focus on the sense of loss and of nostalgia for vanishing traditions (whatever their claims to authenticity) or on the relentless commodification that went hand in hand with it but seemed strangely disconnected. And yet, none of this fully explains the extraordinary dynamics, both cultural and economic, that drove the excesses of the period and gave it its particular atmosphere.

This talk presents the project of an intellectual history that seeks to further elucidate this particular dynamic through the combined analysis of economic and cultural discourses in popular media of the time. Though very much a work in progress, it ventures the hypothesis that a substantial part of the bubble dynamic was driven by an intensifying occupation with the concept of the virtual and a growing fascination for the 'economic sublime'. Thus, the bubble period should not only be seen as the final end to Japan's high-growth period, but also as the vanguard of a development of which we are still very much part of.

Urs Matthias Zachmann is Professor of Modern Japanese Culture and History at Freie Universität Berlin. Before moving to Freie Universität in 2016, he was the Handa Professor of Japanese-Chinese Relations at the University of Edinburgh. His fields of research are the intellectual and cultural history of Japan, the history of international relations in East Asia, and law and legal history in East Asia. Among his publications are *China and Japan in the Late Meiji Period: China Policy and the Japanese Discourse on National Identity, 1895-1904* (Routledge, 2009/2011) and *Völkerrechtsdenken und Außenpolitik in Japan, 1919-1960* [The Discourse on International Law and Foreign Policy in Japan, 1919-1960] (Nomos, 2013).

The DIJ History and Humanities Study Group is a forum open to scholars working on Japan in any field of the humanities. It is organized by Ronald Saladin and Torsten Weber. All are welcome to attend, but prior registration (weber@dijtokyo.org) is greatly appreciated.

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