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Queering Japan: Transnational Perspectives on Politics, Society and Culture

Bericht zum internationalen Symposium am 06. und 07. Juli 2018 in Düsseldorf

Organisation: Department for Modern Japanese Studies, Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf

The two-day symposium was launched with a closed session at PULS, a youth centre in Düsseldorf for young lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender persons and their friends. One of the managers of PULS, Jana Hansjürgen, informed the participants about the youth center and current LGBT rights activities in Düsseldorf. The international guests were impressed with this local example of youth activism for and by LGBTIQ youth, and with the moral and financial support that such activism receives from local politicians and other social, civil and religious organisations. The international and national guests were invited to have their welcome session and first coordination/networking meeting at PULS, whose rooms and atmosphere were both bright and friendly.

The public sessions of the symposium began at the Haus der Universität in the afternoon, with welcome addresses given by Central Equal Opportunities Officer Anja Vervoorts, by the Head of Diversity Coordination Office Inge Krümpelbeck, and the representing organiser of the symposium, Andrea GERMER, Chair of Modern Japanese Studies I from Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf. Each speaker stressed the novelty of such a symposium dedicated to Queer Studies at Heinrich Heine University, as well as how well this theme fits into the university's overall diversity strategy.

The first session, (Trans) National Law and Politics, chaired by Andrea Germer, started with a presentation by Vera Mackie (Wollongong) en-

titled "Thinking sexual citizenship through the family". An expert in gender and human rights in the Asia-Pacific, Mackie problematised the concept of Japanese family-based nationalism and repro-nationalism (nationalism regarding reproduction), and discussed alternative family forms in contemporary Japan using the concept of sexual citizenship, which has been gaining attention since the late 20th century. Subsequently, legal scholar Taniguchi Hiroyuki (Kanazawa) gave a presentation about legal issues pertaining to LGBT sexuality in Japan. Introducing several cases that are currently pending in Japanese courts, he focused on the recent development of legal discourses in Japan regarding two topics: same-sex marriage, and the criteria required to change gender markers within official documents.

The next speaker, legal scholar Konstanze Plett (Bremen), discussed the trajectory of legal views on sex and gender in Germany. She gave examples of law reforms that were crucial for the development of the terms "sex" and "gender" within German legal terminology, connecting these reforms with contributions from the women's, gay/lesbian, transgender, and intersex movements. The subsequent open discussion between speakers and the audience revolved around the ideological power of the concept of family, as well as the assumption that family members should always stay together. The premise of the heteronormative family was discussed as a concept that needed to be ap-



Opening address and introduction, Andrea GERMER (Düsseldorf)



Panel discussion "Health, Disability and Education". Left to right: MANO Yutaka (Hiroshima Shudo), IINO Yuriko (Tokyo), John TREAT (Yale) and Michael HEINZE (Düsseldorf) Photos: Vu Thuy Doan Huynh

proached and relativised from cultural, social and legal standpoints.

The second session, Institutions: Matrimony – "Ehe für alle?", chaired by Annette Schad-Seifert (Düsseldorf), began with a presentation by queer theory scholar Shimizu Akiko (Tokyo) entitled "Marriage equality as strategy: family registration, moral conservatives, and the 'LGBT' fad in Japan". Shimizu underscored that marriage in Japan was primarily a matter of the exclusive and highly problematic family registration system, and argued that same-sex marriage in Japan therefore cannot simply be a matter of equality between gay and straight couples. She introduced two different types of attitudes towards same-sex marriage in Japan: "idealist" groups seeking to change the current family registration system to open it up to same-sex couples; and "pragmatist" groups that seek to establish an alternative civil union law outside of the family registration system.

Queer theory scholar Kawasaka Kazuyoshi (Düsseldorf) further explored the issue of same-sex marriage in his presentation "LGBT rights are human rights, but in what sense?". Noting that LGBT rights in Japan have been strongly influenced by U.S. policy, Kawasaka contextualised and analysed LGBT rights activism in recent years. He referred to the symbolic same-sex marriage certificates that some municipalities in Japan issue for publicity reasons, which have no legal effects. He argued that while the Japanese government is accepting of diversity as an international value, it also seeks to maintain the Japanese conservative family system.

As the last speaker of the second session, political scientist Dorothee de Nève (Gießen) presented the German case regarding same-sex marriage: "Merkel's gut feeling-debate about marriage for all in Germany". Tracing how gay and lesbian activists in Germany have called for equality of

same-sex partnerships since the 1990s, de Nève discussed the political processes of legislation, along with existing controversial debates and citizen attitudes towards same-sex marriage. Citing statistical surveys, she underlined the disconnect between opinion polls that have shown decades-long support for gay marriage among the populace, and the long political and legal process up to its actual implementation.

During all of these presentations, as well as in the ensuing discussion, it became clear that same-sex marriage is never a simple matter of equality, but that it is implicated in specific political, cultural, and even international systems of privilege and inequality both in Japan and Germany.

The third session, Markets and Consumers, which was chaired by Michiko Mae (Düsseldorf), began with a presentation by sociologist Kawaguchi Kazuya (Hiroshima Shudo) titled "Consuming identity and lifestyle: transforming queer subjects in Japan". Kawaguchi explored how human rights discourses on sexual minorities emerged in Japan, and how these gained visibility through media, markets and consumption. Taking up a popular Japanese TV programme, which introduced the famous gay district Shinjuku Nichōme in Tokyo, Kawaguchi critically analysed the commercialisation of identities and the lifestyles of sexual minorities. He underlined that sexual minorities gain visibility, while their cultural practices are commercialised and exploited as an "exotic" culture that is "different" from stressful mainstream society, and presented as imaginary healing and relaxation spaces for members of heteronormative society.

Thereafter, Japanese popular culture expert Elisabeth Scherer (Düsseldorf) discussed the expansion of queer wedding ceremonies in Japan. Scherer explained how the wedding services industry has discovered queer couples as new



KANNO Yuka (Doshisha) presenting on "Framing: Lesbian Representability"



Discussion at the closed session. Left to right: SHIMIZU Akiko (Tokyo), Dorothee de NÈVE (Gießen), IINO Yuriko (Tokyo) and Annette SCHAD-SEIFERT (Düsseldorf). Photos: Vu Thuy Doan Huynh

customers during the past few years, and accordingly offers them various commercial services. She critically noted, however, that such service providers do not interact with same-sex couples in the same way as they do with heterosexual couples, as they set up separate, unconnected websites for customers depending upon their sexuality.

The last speaker in this session was queer theory scholar Iseri Makiko (Tokyo), who gave a presentation titled "Showcasing Diversity: Disability, Market and Queer/Crip Criticism". Iseri examined the discourses and representations of "diversity" wherein LGBT and disabled people are selected as symbols, and also critically discussed neoliberalism's central demands for 'flexibility' and able-bodiedness. Referring to Crip Theory and Posthuman Disability Studies, she underlined the risk that the neoliberal request for 'flexible bodies' may pose upon disabled subjects who are equipped with high-tech prosthetics as being 'useful' representations of diversity, while other queer and disabled subjects may become invisible.

The combination of the three papers in this panel allowed a good glimpse at the complex problem of visibility for queer subjects, which can never be simply 'liberating'. Visibility in neoliberal market societies also entails the risk of exploitation, as well as of rendering invisible those who cannot be incorporated into the logic of the market. On the second day of the symposium, Michael Heinze (Düsseldorf) chaired the fourth session, Health, Disability and Education. In his paper "Put to the test: abjection and sexual citizenship in Japan", literary scholar John Treat (Yale) discussed how issues of HIV and sexual orientation connect with questions of citizenship. Recounting his personal experience of an involuntary HIV test in Japan in 2015, Treat explored work on abjection by LGBT scholars, and its intersec-

tion with recent critiques regarding the concept of sexual or "intimate" citizenship and the social activism based upon it. Pointing to the exclusive nature characterizing the concept of citizenship, Treat questioned strategic scholarly and activist politics that aim to "integrate" HIV and undesirable/non-citizens in Japan such as homosexuals, sex workers, and foreigners. Referencing several works of Japanese popular fiction, he discussed the ways in which the inclusion and exclusion of non-normative sexual and other minorities are (re-)presented in contemporary Japan.

The next presentation, given by disability scholar Iino Yuriko (Tokyo), was titled "Queering' disability may be possible, but ...". Iino explored the intersectional issues of Queer Studies and Disability Studies, both of which question the categorical divisions between normalcy and deviance/disability, and approach their subjects as socially/medically constructed. Japanese disability politics have long deployed medical examinations and disability certifications for enforcing a dichotomous distinction between disability and normalcy. Iino traced the shift in disability politics from a medical discourse to one of social and human rights after the enforcement of new disability laws, and discussed whether this shift helps us to de-essentialise disability categories.

The last speaker of the fourth session, queer pedagogy scholar Mano Yutaka (Hiroshima Shudo), introduced grassroots LGBT educational activities. In his paper, "LGBT education in Japan: grassroots activities in curriculum development", Mano presented detailed examples of how teachers at a local school adopted the concept of sexual diversity to their classrooms. The audience asked several further questions about LGBT education in Japan during the subsequent discussion, wherein Mano underlined the gap between the central government acting

on the premise of hetero-normality as reflected in the National Teaching Guidelines, and certain grassroots movements that successfully included LGBT education into the "Morals" subject in local schools. Mano also emphasised the need to include the topic of intersex in LGBT education. All three papers in this session pointed to the need – but also to the difficulty, if not the impossibility – of fundamentally questioning hetero- and other normative concepts in order to enhance the life chances of queer subjects.

The fifth session, Popular Representations, was chaired by Stephan Köhn (Cologne). Cultural historian and gender scholar Andrea Germer (Düsseldorf) analysed Shinkai Makoto's recent animation film and spectacular box office success *Your Name* (2016) in her presentation "Queer carnival and fascist moments". Germer explored the queer/body-swapping story of a girl and a boy in the film, and how this queerness is presented as entangled within the specter of natural catastrophe that forms a parallel narrative. Germer argued that both narratives presented a performative 'world turned upside down', and that they can be interpreted through the concept of "carnival", which can paradoxically contribute to stabilising the hierarchical social order and gender relations. Indeed, the film ends when the main characters, supported by the Shinto gods, restore the 'natural order' and revert to their former bodies and hierarchical gender roles. Like other recent animations that incorporate queer elements, this "beautiful" film – instead of queering the established order – employs religio-cultural essentialisms to reify the fantasy of an able-bodied, mono-ethnic, unchanging and heteronormative Japanese essence.

The second presenter, Gender and Japanese Studies scholar Jasmin Rückert (Düsseldorf), investigated "Queer space in television drama". Rückert focused on spaces such as restaurants and bars in television dramas featuring queer characters, and discussed the functions of such settings as spaces wherein queer characters meet peers for the first time, or else as background scenery for coming-out performances. In doing so, she opened up questions regarding whether such spaces can be interpreted as demonstrations of 'queer spaces' that provide opportunities to subvert normative assumptions about gender and sexuality.

The third speaker, visual culture expert Kanno Yuka (Doshisha), explored queer female intimacy and its erotic possibilities within girls' films in her presentation "Framing: lesbian representa-

bility and the genealogy of girls' culture". Kanno referenced friendship and kinship as frames for lesbian representability, and discussed the visual strategies that make such representability possible. Pointing out both the transnational and trans-generational nature of girls' culture with reference to Japanese and early German films, she traced how female intimacy frames the transmedia practice of girls' culture. This was followed by an enthusiastic discussion regarding the ambiguity of the lesbian representation that Kanno had introduced. She emphasised that while there is no clear proof of so-called lesbian representation, there is also no way to prove that girls' intimacy does NOT reference lesbian representation. The three papers that explored queer elements and narratives in popular visual culture highlighted the openness and indeterminacy of queer representation, and discussed the ends to which such representation can be (mis-) used.

Whereas the public sessions ended with the popular representations panel, the speakers and chairs continued their discussions during the closed session in the afternoon, wherein they explored future possible opportunities for networking and research. The following themes and clusters were taken up as research topics that would yield valuable insights into the state and politics of queer lives in East Asia and Europe: backlash and countermeasures, translation politics and access to knowledge, aging and death, the marketability of queerness, sexual citizenship, and family. As joint projects, the participants discussed various possibilities: transnational studies on elections and social consciousness among/toward LGBT persons, educational cooperation (video conferences/joint lectures), translation projects, and the sharing of materials for LGBT education. Furthermore, the participants agreed to form and name a network, and to aim toward the joint publication of selected papers from the symposium.

This symposium in Düsseldorf was the first such scholarly meeting and conference that was dedicated to transnational German-Japanese Queer Studies – a still narrow focus that the organisers aim to open up to encompass other countries in East Asia and Europe. This will hopefully become a starting point for East Asian Studies to take the issues of sexual minorities seriously, and to grasp the opportunity that the "queering" paradigm provides for the transcultural, social and political sciences in Europe and East Asia.

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