Course Title

Japan at Play: Cultural Orderings of Leisure and Asobi

Instructor’s affiliation, department, job title and name

Björn-Ole KAMM, Program Specific Senior Lecturer
Center for the Promotion of Interdisciplinary Education and Research

Academic semester that the course is offered

Fall 2017

Outline and purpose of the course

Nation-building or regional marketing at first glance appear as matters of politics but they also penetrate deeply into the sphere of play, amusement, and leisure. This course revolves around the question how certain actors seek to create a specific “Japan” through leisure policies, domestic tourism, or the recent “Cool Japan” country-marketing campaign. Who decides what is play and non-play? Who decides about “good” play (asobi) in Japan? What role do regions outside Japan as well as leisure’s supposed opposites, seriousness and work, play in these attempts?

By tracing play as a matter of concern for policy makers, intellectuals, and ordinary people, the course further introduces a new theoretical and methodological approach to Cultural Studies that is less concerned with meanings and values but with contested, contingent modes of cultural ordering: narratives about, for example, a given nation’s place in the world and their material embodiments, such as written laws or metropolitan redevelopment projects.

Course goals

Students will receive basic instruction in the etymology of asobi and its role in discourses about the Japanese (nihonjinron). First and foremost, students will learn step-by-step protocols for analyzing cultural phenomena, such as play and leisure activities, by focusing on describable attempts of ordering (discourses, institutions, embodiments) that produce these phenomena using the example of Japan in a transcultural context.

Course schedule and contents

The course will be offered in accordance with the following general structure. A detailed plan for each class will be determined depending on the number of and the feedback from the participants, and will be announced in class.

(1) Introduction [3 weeks]

Lecture on Cultural Studies as the study of ordering modes (theoretical concepts, basic terminology, methodological protocols) and “play” as an object of inquiry, followed by an introduction to debates about the “Japaneseness” of leisure activities in Japanese-language discourse (since the 1960s).

Students will further be provided with guidelines for class preparation and exercises.

(2) Readings and Discussion [5 weeks]

Students will read studies on play, leisure and work taken from different moments in Japanese history (e.g., Meiji Restoration, prewar tourism, postwar income policies, lifestyle superpower, moratorium on urban armament and cultural industries) to present and discuss these readings in class. The focus lies on the question if – and how – these readings exemplify studies of ordering modes and how different approaches may lead to different conclusions.
(3) Exercises [6 weeks]

Building on the previous sessions and depending on the number of participants, students will formulate and conduct exercises on current issues in Japan in which play is ordered and managed. This can take the form of individual, basic studies of such a matter of concern (e.g., through a newspaper analysis), or the development of gaming simulations to understand cases of ordering.

(4) Conclusion and Feedback [1 week]

Prerequisites

3rd year and above.

Evaluation

Homework (20%), exercise (20%), feedback (10%), final report (30%), participation (20%).

Studies to be done outside of class

The participants are expected to attend every class and spend a certain amount of time outside of this class for this course. Regular homework as well as exercises will play an important role in this course, so preparation and review out of the class requires at least about an hour.

Further readings

The course materials as well as lecture slides will be made available via the course webpage. The course takes guiding cues from Kendall, Gavin, and Gary Wickham. 2001. Understanding Culture: Cultural Studies, Order, Ordering. London, Thousand Oaks: Sage.


Reading these books is not mandatory but the course will reference certain points of their discussion. https://www.cats.bun.kyoto-u.ac.jp/ (see KULASIS for details and the enrolment key)

Others

Consultation (office hours) by appointment. The course webpage will be available to download the course material. Please contact the instructor Björn-Ole Kamm <kamm@cats.bun.kyoto-u.ac.jp> for any questions regarding this course syllabus.


M: Book covers of monographs about the play and the Japanese.

R: Posters from the "Cool Japan" Campaign showing Ayanami Rei, 2012.

About the instructor

Björn-Ole KAMM
Ph.D. in Japanese Studies, Heidelberg University
M.A. in Japanese Studies and Communication & Media Studies, Leipzig University
Areas of Specialization: Practice theory, transculturality, uses and gratifications of Japanese popular media, role-playing theory and practice.