

Japanese Studies after the 'Somatic Turn'

In social science research, it has been commented that the 'cultural turn' and the 'linguistic turn' have been succeeded by the 'somatic turn'. Bryan Turner even refers to the 'somatic society', where 'major political and personal problems are both problematized in the body and expressed through it'. Turner's contextualisation of the body in the context of modern liberal consumer capitalism is likely to be highly relevant to the study of modern Japan. In studies of the body, in addition to considering gender, sexuality and reproduction, we need to consider the embodied experiences of work and leisure. The mind/body split is built into the very structures of modern capitalist societies, and is intimately entwined with class structure. The most prestigious occupations are those which have more of a mental component and less of a physical component. In contemporary societies which employ immigrant labour, the classed distinction between mental and physical labour also takes on an ethnicised and racialised dimension. In considering what I call the 'embodiment of difference', we need to consider not only 'what bodies are', but 'what bodies do'. Differences are not essential attributes of bodies, but are produced through embodied practices. A limitation of existing studies is a focus on the body which is subject to violence, repression, suppression and exploitation, with little consideration of the bodies which wield violence, and enact repression, suppression and exploitation. We need to consider not only 'marked' bodies: female, homosexual, disabled, infertile, aged, working class, and 'othered' bodies, but also the 'unmarked' bodies against which 'others' are defined: male, heterosexual, 'able', fertile, youthful, middle class, and so on. There is, however, a paradox in the academic study of the body. No individual can ever gain full insights into the embodied experiences of others. We are always reliant on linguistic and cultural representations of embodied experiences. This paper will focus on two questions which emerge from my current project of writing a 'cultural history of the body in modern Japan'. How would the study of contemporary Japanese society and culture look if we took 'the body' as the starting point; and what methodologies would we employ for such a study?