

Asian Ethnology Podcast

Introduction to the new series “Disability and Japan in the Digital Age” Transcript

Guest: Mark Bookman, University of Pennsylvania

Interviewer: Ben Dorman, co-editor Asian Ethnology

Recorded 3 November 2020

Ben: Welcome to *Asian Ethnology Podcast*. My name is Ben Dorman. I am the co-editor of Asian Ethnology today my guest is Mark Bookman, who's a PhD candidate at the University of Pennsylvania. Mark has been a guest on the podcast before. Today he is launching a new project together with Asian Ethnology and also the Nanzan University Anthropological Institute entitled Disability And Japan in The Digital Age. I thought I'd bring Mark on to talk about this project and what he hopes that people will get from the project. Mark, welcome to the podcast.

Mark: Thanks much for having me, Ben.

Ben: Can you tell us a little about the project and who you're aiming at for, broad themes of the project and so on?

Mark: Sure, the project is being conducted, as you mentioned, in an affiliation with Asian Ethnology and the Nanzan Anthropological Institute. It's designed to call attention to the way that disability is currently intersecting with shifts in communication that are coming about, partially as a result of recent developments in Internet technology and social media but also the acceleration of those developments prior to COVID-19. I'm going to talk about that point a bit later.

In terms of audience, really, I'm trying to hit anthropologists who might be interested in the study of disability in Japan. As we'll see, it's never just in or on Japan but is connected to larger international and transnational flows. Really beyond anthropologists and other academics, who operate in adjacent spheres, I'm really trying to recruit advocates in multiple sectors of society.

The project looks at how ideas about disability and accessibility are constructed, not just by academics who study "what does it mean to be disabled?" but by architects and engineers and policymakers and legislators and others who shape the disabled experience every day. For instance, we can imagine how, for myself as a wheelchair user, I get up in the morning with the help of a caregiver, who has to transfer me into my wheelchair that an engineer builds, which I take across my barrier-free apartment that an architect puts together. I take the train that an attendant has to help me board. Then I get to my school, where an academic administrator will help me with accommodations.

Everyone is involved in facilitating my access and my daily activities. I'm really hoping to reach larger audiences and get everyone to think about their role in

Asian Ethnology Podcast

Introduction to the new series “Disability and Japan in the Digital Age” Transcript

shaping what it means to be disabled right now both domestic to Japan and internationally when we have a rapid transformation of society like we're seeing with COVID and as a result of different social media developments.

Ben: It's not just academic project. You're actually trying to get people to realize issues about accessibility from a number of different angles. Is that fair to say?

Mark: Exactly. I think it's important to understand it's not just that it's an academic project or a non-academic project either. It's interlocking. I want academics to be more engaged with the practitioners who are participating in these fields. For instance, if you're a historian, I want you to think about how your history is affecting the activities of educators or engineers, who are building their practices based on the decisions and stories that we tell.

What does that mean for disabled people? What possibilities will that open? What doors will that close? What can we do with that knowledge to generate a society that is more inclusive for a lot of people? We need to think about who those people are and who exactly we are working for. Those are also some questions that I hope to explore with the project is not just how do we help disabled people and to create access? That's a very broad statement. Who exactly are we trying to help? How exactly are we trying to help them? What can we do to streamline our efforts a little bit and make sure that we are engaging with broader communities?

Ben: You're answering one of my questions is about the importance of this project. Why is this project important now? I can hear some of it but I think I'd like to ask you a little bit if you could go into a little bit more detail about the importance of it, especially at this time.

Mark: Well, especially right now when everyone disabled and non-disabled alike are having difficulties going outside because of COVID-19. I can't speak for other places but I'll say right now in my own Tokyo, we're certainly seeing less people on the trains. We're seeing less people going to work. There's a lot of telework going on. Lots of people not in schools, remote education. Homeschooling is becoming increasingly common. We're seeing this moment when domestic and public spaces are changing in terms of their roles and who's involved.

One of the things that I have become acutely aware of is how these changes are affecting disabled communities. As I mentioned, I myself am disabled. I think about my own experiences, where normally I would go outside and I would be able to go to my school or go to my class. I'm unable to do that right now because I'm unable to get caregivers to come in to start that process in the morning of getting me out of bed, because of fear of infection along the way as they come on their trains.

Even if I'm able to get someone here, then the question becomes, "Well, I can't always participate online for instance because not all mediums of communication, Zoom for instance or Skype or what have you, are not always that accessible for a

Asian Ethnology Podcast

Introduction to the new series “Disability and Japan in the Digital Age” Transcript

lot of disabled community. People who need captioning or sign language services for instance, we can build these technologies to include those type of communication methods but we're not necessarily doing that.

It opens up all these questions about what does the reorganization of this space mean at this moment because of COVID, because of Corona, because of the fact that people are able to recognize the problems and organize in places like Facebook or Twitter to start lobbying for change about them? What does this moment bring? Again, I started off this line of thinking by mentioning that it's not just disabled but also non-disabled populations. I think that's such an important point right now is that everyone is not being able to go outside. Everyone is transitioning to Zoom. Everyone is engaging in this new digital space. What it means to be disabled or not is is changing.

Disability used to be, "Well I can't get out of my bed so I can't go to the workplace." Now because everyone is transitioning to telework, it's a lot easier to do that. It's changing the social, political, economic divides between traditionally thought of disabled and non-disabled populations. That opens up a lot of really exciting possibilities for how do we create new inclusive categories and new ways of thinking that are going to have not just ramifications for your neighbor next door but will lead to new innovations and law and policy, architecture and education, certainly new ways of thinking about media? There's a lot of room for innovation and growth right now. I think it's a good time to explore that.

Ben: I'd like to ask you. How does the project look? How are you envisioning this project?

Mark: Sure. At the moment, I'm anticipating we're going to have around nine speakers come in to deal with a number of issues that can broadly be divided into three categories. The first of which is Deaf studies or Hard-of-Hearing Studies. The second of which is Disability Law and Policy. The third of which is Margins or Intersections, mainly looking at things like gender, sexuality, issues of subjectivity. Walking through each of these in sequence, I imagine that we're first going to have a series of speakers on Deaf Studies and Hard-of-Hearing studies, which tend to focus on communicative issues or disabilities for various people. How does language factor into the changes that we're seeing right now? Certainly, we're seeing divides in deaf education in the way that people get access to subtitles or captions. New systems being developed for that. We're seeing ways that some communities are being ostracized when those accommodations are not provided for. We're seeing the introduction of new technologies into the workplace in terms of media representation of deaf people. Certainly, since COVID there have been many, many demonstrations about access to information regarding the pandemic that have led to new media presentation of information for deaf individuals.

In terms of technology, we're seeing new types of hearing aids and devices being built for use inside the home as more people are spending more time at home. I want

Asian Ethnology Podcast

Introduction to the new series “Disability and Japan in the Digital Age” Transcript

to spend the first part of this lecture series really thinking about what communication and language to some disabled communities means at the moment. What developments are coming out of it and what is our role in thinking about those developments historically and working to make sure that they are as inclusive as possible proactively for the future?

The second unit I can go ahead and jump right in is looking at issues of disability law and policy. For me, this really hits home as I am a historian in disability law and policy in Japan. I think it is really important to think about how this moment which is calling attention to all the breaks in the system. The fact that my wheelchair means that I can't go outside every day and people are starting to recognize that as they themselves cannot go outside every day. That this moment allows us to rethink well, how do our laws and policies have to be designed to allow for greater inclusivity? Not just for linguistic or communicating disabilities as we mentioned at the start but for people with mobility impairments or blind people or people with intractable diseases or chronic illnesses. How does the diverse range of experiences of disability at the moment allow for new types of advocacy online, the generation of new policy, who's involved in policy-making processes, and why?

It's a good moment to think about that question and it's a moment to think about what can we do to create a more inclusive policy that connects all the disparate spheres of accessibility. The home, to the workplace, to the school, to the entertainment venue. What can we do to make sure that everything is synchronized? That the wheelchair user or the chronically ill individual can clearly, easily get to one place to another and do what they want to do. Not just domestically to Japan again but recognizing that people travel everywhere. You go from Japan to Australia, to the United States. Thinking about how to streamline those policies at the local, regional, national, international, and transnational levels, it's a good time to have that conversation. I think we'll spend some time talking about that with a couple of speakers.

Then finally there's a question of what is the result of the policy that we make? Certainly, any policy that we try and design to be inclusive will not include everyone. I really want to stress this point. The example I always give here is imagine a toilet. It's a bit of a crude example but if the toilet is too low to the ground, then someone in a tall wheelchair will not be able to use it. If it's too high off the ground then someone in a lower wheelchair will not be able to use it. You can only install so many toilets of so many different heights in a bathroom and even if you find a way to adjust them it's going to be cost inhibitive and there will be issues.

You can never please everyone all the time in terms of accessibility. Who do you target? Is the big question and figuring out the issue of how do you accommodate as many as often as possible? For me anyway is a question that intersects very nicely with gender studies and sexuality studies. Marginal studies more generally. I think it's a moment for us to reflect on, okay communication is opening up these new possibilities for community building and advocacy. Disability law and policy is changing as a result but who's left out? We need to look at those margins and

Asian Ethnology Podcast

Introduction to the new series “Disability and Japan in the Digital Age” Transcript

intersections a bit. Certainly looking at issues like gender and sexuality as I mentioned also race and class, all the different intersections that we can think of that shape the diversity and experiences that might lead people to be excluded from policy. How do we think about those exclusions as yet more opportunities to invite people to the table to make more policy, to reshape the technologies that we're using, and to work toward making true inclusivity and accessibility again at multiple scales local and global?

Ben: I'm looking at the title of the project and this is where Japan comes in but you've spoken about how you envisage the project itself as being not just Japan-based but can be applied globally really and in many circumstances. What is it about Japan and particularly about disability that you feel is important about this project?

Mark: There is not a lot out there in terms of disability in Japan in English certainly but what I see as the most important facet of Japan here is the current moment is defined by accompaniments of domestic and international pressures that is really shaping this process of technical, legal and social development to be much faster in Japan than we're seeing in other places for disabled people.

Japan has the world's fastest aging population. Japan has the Olympic and Paralympic games coming this coming summer. Japan recently ratified in 2014 The United Nations Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities which comes with a number of provisions that a country has to build accessibility. In 2016 the country enacted the law for the elimination of discrimination against persons with disabilities which, as the name suggests, prohibited discrimination which meant introducing new types of accommodations into the workplace and the school.

If you combine this with international forces of the UN and the Olympics with the domestic aging population and act of discrimination legislation, it's this moment where accessibility is being built rapidly and for a lot of different people in new and exciting ways.

We don't necessarily see those same pressures in places like the United States for instance where there has been accessibility legislation arguably for longer. Think about The Americans with Disabilities Act is the benchmark that people go to being passed in 1990. Since then certainly, just like Japan, there have been updates but I think the pressures in the US are a bit more defused and not as strongly felt. The opportunities for community building and exploration are not as prevalent in the US as we're seeing in Japan.

I think Japan is a good laboratory for thinking about what these developments might look like. It's not just that it's a case study. Let me also be clear about this. It's not just we study Japan so we can see how the same thing works in the US or Canada or somewhere else. It's Japan because of the transnational flows of technology information and policy is directly affecting all these other countries. For instance, Japan has an aging population problem. They decide to solve this by building

Asian Ethnology Podcast

Introduction to the new series “Disability and Japan in the Digital Age” Transcript

caregiving robots. Well, caregiving robots are then sent to Germany where there's also an aging population problem and that affects the way that their culture operates because those robots are built to Japanese standards and the localization process takes time and there are all these different types of flows that we could think about or how Japan is reshaping the globe just as the globe is reshaping Japan right now. I think that there's nothing special about Japan besides the fact that it has these pressures going on. I don't mean to say that other countries are not innovating at all. That's certainly not my intention. I do think that because of the unique circumstances of Japan that is the fact that it is the Olympics, it is the age of population instead of other pressures. That leads to a very particular kind of innovation, with very particular consequences for other places.

Ben: The plan for this project is to conduct podcast interviews, Asian Ethnology podcast interviews with speakers, and then have them give a lecture and in the future, to write essays and produce an edited volume. It's certainly an exciting project and I really want to thank you for not just putting this out there for the Nanzan on Institute. I think it's a very significant theme that affects everybody in different ways.

Mark: I just like to welcome everyone here and as I said earlier, we are all involved in this process of access building in some way, whether we're research on media, a research on technology, research on education, research on history, of law, that policy, whatever we study, we are invented in this process.

I really invite you to come and listen to these lectures and hear and reflect and contribute your own opinion about how your work it fits into the structure of accessible and for disabled people in Japan and beyond, and to open up conversation. Because at the end of the day, what I view as the ultimate goal of this project is to start conversation across borders across disciplines, to get us really thinking about how we can use our work to make a more inclusive global society for everyone.

Ben: Mark Bookman, thank you very much for your time, and I'm really looking forward to this series. You've been listening to Asian Ethnology podcast, my name is Benjamin Dorman, thank you very much for listening.

[00:22:04] [END OF AUDIO]