

Refugees and Migrants in Tokyo: An Oral Narrative Approach (2024 - 2025)

Japan Team

David H. Slater: d-slater@sophia.ac.jp

Participating Members: John Williams

Maiko Kodaka, ICC Research Fellow

Affiliates: **Tanaka Masako**, Sophia U., Faculty of Global Studies

Berlin Team

Megha Wadhwa, ICC visiting scholar, Post-Doc Fellow, Japanese Studies, Free University of Berlin

Participating Member: **Verena Blechinger-Talcott**, Professor of Japanese Politics and Political Economy, Free University of Berlin

Overview

The past year has been an exceptionally productive one for our research group, with four concurrent projects driving significant academic progress and public engagement. These initiatives have resulted in multiple research outputs, public lecture series, and open university events. This report outlines the key activities, achievements, and research dissemination efforts undertaken during the period.



Public Lecture Series and Events

ICC Sophia University and the Free University of Berlin presents an Online Lecture Series

Migration, Memory, and the Art of Storytelling on Film

Hosted by **Megha Wadhwa & David H. Slater**

This lecture series provides a chance to delve into the complex fabric of human migration and memory through the lens of film. Renowned directors and storytellers will discuss the art of filmmaking as a unique medium for narrating the complex experiences of displacement, longing, and identity. During each talk we will screen a film or section of film as the basis of our discussion. By watching films, participating in discussions, and hearing the directors' perspectives, attendees will gain a deeper appreciation of how film serves as a conduit for preserving and sharing the nuanced narratives of migration and the indelible imprints of memory.

All the lectures will be on Zoom. Please register from here: <https://forms.office.com/971836261>

This project is a part of DMSI (Federal Ministry of Education and Research Germany funded project – "Displacement and Self in the Migration Process of Foreign-Bornness in Asia and supported by Free University of Berlin, Goethe University Frankfurt and the ICC Collaborative Research Unit "Visual Studies and Displacement in Asia Japan", a Joint Research Unit between Institute of Comparative Culture at Sophia University Japan and Free University of Berlin.

- **Sanderien Verstappen**, Social and Visual Anthropologist (University of Vienna) screening & discussing her film *'Living like a Common Man'* directed by Sanderien Verstappen, Marie Ruten and Isabelle Mayak. **12 June 2024, 18:00 to 20:00 (JST) / 11:00 to 13:00 (CEST)**
- **Martha-Cecilia Dietrich**, Anthropologist, Filmmaker, Curator (University of Amsterdam) screening & discussing her film *'Between Memories'* **16 July 2024, 18:00 to 20:00 (JST) / 11:00 to 13:00 (CEST)**
- **Laura Liverani**, Documentary Photographer and Filmmaker screening & discussing her film *'Ainupuri'* co-created by Laura Liverani and Kanako Uozumi. **13 August 2024, 18:00 to 20:00 (JST) / 11:00 to 13:00 (CEST)**
- **Zakaria Mohamed Ali**, Journalist, Documentary Filmmaker (vice-president of Archive of Migrant Memories) screening & discussing his film *'To whom it may concern'*. **17 September 2024, 18:00 to 20:00 (JST) / 11:00 to 13:00 (CEST)**
- **Megha Wadhwa**, Anthropologist, Filmmaker and Writer (Free University of Berlin), screening & discussing her film *'Finding their niche: Unheard stories of migrant women'*. **22 October 2024, 18:00 to 20:00 (JST) / 11:00 to 13:00 (CEST)**
- **Özgür Çiçek**, Media and Culture Studies (University of Amsterdam), discussing her work migrant cinema, memory studies, and documentary filmmaking. **12 November 2024, 18:00 to 21:00 (JST) / 11:00 to 13:00 (CEST)**

1. Migration, Memory, and the Art of Storytelling on Film

Co-hosted by ICC Sophia University and the Free University of Berlin, this lecture series—organized by Megha Wadhwa and David Slater—brought together leading ethnographic filmmakers working on themes of displacement, migration, and representation. Each session featured a film screening followed by a discussion with the filmmaker, providing a deeper understanding of migration and memory through film.

Notable Events:

- [Living like a Common Man](#) – Sanderien Verstappen (June 12, 2024)
- [Between Memories](#) – Martha-Cecilia Dietrich (July 16, 2024)
- [Ainupuri](#) – Laura Liverani (August 13, 2024)
- [To Whom It May Concern](#) – Zakaria Mohamed Ali (September 17, 2024)
- [Finding Their Niche: Unheard Stories of Mi-](#)

[grant Women](#) – Megha Wadhwa (October 22, 2024)

- [In Discussion with Özgür Çiçek](#) – Özgür Çiçek (November 12, 2024)

This series was funded by the Free University of Berlin under the auspices of ICC Sophia University, representing an exciting new institutional collaboration. All events were well attended and stimulated lively discussions.

2. Abe/SSRC Project: “Consent” in Sexual Violence – Cross-Cultural Perspectives in Japan and the US

This project examines the social and legal construction of “consent” in cases of sexual violence in Japan and the U.S. By leveraging the 2022 NHK survey on sexual violence and Osa-wa Machiko’s book on the topic, the research team aims to compare cross-cultural perspectives and provide insights for policy-making and social justice efforts.

Research Objectives:

- Comparative analysis of the NHK dataset with international examples.
- Supplementary surveys and interviews with victim support organizations, legal experts, and law enforcement officers.
- Macro- and micro-level analysis of the legal definitions and societal interpretations of consent.

Notable Events:

- Film Screening: “[Team Sonoko](#)” – Discussion with Sachi Nakajima, Yuni Tomodsuka, and Akiko Takeyema (January 10, 2025)



- Film Screening: “[Company Retreat](#)” – Featuring the director, lead actress, and Dr. Machiko Osawa (October 18, 2024)



3. Refugees and Migrants in Tokyo: An Oral Narrative Approach

Over the past five years, the issue of migration and refugee policy has gained unprecedented attention in Japan. This research project provides an in-depth oral narrative approach to document and analyze the lived experiences of refugees in Tokyo. The study highlights coercive policies, barriers to integration, and the personal narratives of displaced individuals.

Notable Events:

- [Refugee Stories Through Comics, Games, Videos, and Websites](#) – Gregg Bucken-Knapp, Rosa Barbaran, and David Slater (December 22, 2024)



- [Forced Migration and Humanitarian Action: Perspectives from Humanitarian Actors](#) – JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute (January 31, 2025)

Workshop Series: Insider Perspectives



- [A Symposium about Syrians in Japan](#) – Dania Alakkad, Yahya Aoyagi, Suzan Husseini, and Mohammed Al-Masri (July 21, 2024)
- [Transnational Repression and Resilience in the Myanmar Diaspora](#) – Discussant: Tin Tin Htun (December 14, 2024)
- [Vietnamese Perspectives on Vietnamese Migrants in Japan](#) – Mai Chi Nguyen, Phuong Anh Le, Bao Quyen Tran, and Hong Vy Huynh Vu (June 23, 2024)

4. Exhibitions and One-Off Lectures

- **Photo Exhibition: “[Beyond Borders: Voices of Dreams & Hopes in Japan](#)”**

Co-hosted by the Sophia Refugee Support Group and ICC, supported by the Catholic Jesuit Center. (July 1 – July 30, 2024)



- **[Perilous Wagers](#): Gambling, Dignity, and Day Laborers in Tokyo** – Klaus K. Y. Hammering (January 15, 2025)
- **[“The Girls are Here”](#)** – Hip-Hop Film Showing and Discussion – Dr. Natalia Koutsougera (April 26, 2024)
- **[On Methods Acting](#): Anime’s Transnational Animation Performances** – Stevie Suan (December 6, 2024)
- **[“Feminists, Lesbians, Boys Love Artists and Fans”](#): Rethinking “Women” in 1970s– 1980s Japan** – James Welker (October 25, 2024)
- **[The Intersections of the Sensory, Multimodal and Ba](#): “The Tachinomi Project”** – Steven C. Fedorowicz (July 17, 2024)



5. Lecture Series: For and about Refugee Asylum Seekers

This series features talks by external experts and discussions led by and about current refugee asylum applicants in Tokyo. These are closed events that do not utilize any funding, but ICC has generously provided support and university space.

In this first semester, we have focused on mental and physical health, obstacles and strategies, facilitating a unique dialogue between refugees and service providers. This direct exchange allows both parties to gain firsthand insight into each other's experiences. Our goal is to deepen the understanding of the real conditions faced by refugees in Japan while simultaneously leveraging this knowledge to benefit the refugee community itself.

This is an uncommon and innovative program that has drawn interest from groups both in Japan and abroad. Notably, fact-finding missions from the University of Tokyo and the Australian National University have sent delegations to observe our sessions with the aim of replicating this model at their own institutions.



Research Outputs and Future Directions

1. Grants

Based on the Workshop Series: Insider Perspectives, we have to be fortunate enough to have used this ICC seed money to secure a Kaken National Government Grant, a Kiban B.

2. Refugee Voices Japan

This website is the primary publication outlet for our refugee oral narrative project. It integrates film, photography, and text to make refugee voices accessible to a wider audience. Significant updates have been made, including four additional full-length video and text entries.

3. Digital Interface Development

Ongoing improvements to the website's design and data collection framework to enhance accessibility and engagement.

4. Upcoming Publications and Reports

“Migration, Memory, and the Art of Storytelling on Film” has generated a book proposal and lead to a much larger funding project from Kaken next year.

Findings from the “Consent” project will be presented in a policy report and academic workshop. We have been accepted at a conference in Korea, and the papers therein have been accepted for publication in APJ: Japan Focus for the fall.

The “Refugees and Migrants in Tokyo” project will continue expanding its database of oral histories and multimedia storytelling.

Conclusion

This year has been marked by significant advancements in research, public engagement, and cross-institutional collaboration. Our projects have fostered new academic discussions, influenced public discourse, and created innovative digital and multimedia platforms for disseminating knowledge. We look forward to continuing these efforts and expanding our impact in the coming year.