



Another Japan is possible, too

Free speech, knowledge transmission and the acceptance of human flaws in the world of Rakugo Storytellers

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Nov. 9th. 7pm (Tokyo time) start

On Zoom

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Abstract: Even before the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic, many so-called “traditional” performing arts in Japan had been in a precarious situation, not able to attract enough new performers and audiences. One exception, however, is *rakugo*, a centuries-old form of oral storytelling which has witnessed a significant revival in the last two decades, bringing the number of professional *rakugoka* to be the largest ever recorded since the art’s heydays in the late Edo period. Through an ethnography of the *rakugo* art world, I hope to understand which factors determine its resilience, and how its members have been dealing with the challenges imposed by the ongoing pandemic. Career decision-making, gender, class, respectability (*katagi*) and self-censorship in contemporary Japan are some of the themes I am exploring.

In the field, I have found a complex and diversified social world, undergoing paramount changes, and regulated by rules and discourses at times in conflict with mainstream social norms (and with the Japanese Law); an art world characterised by a peculiar, non-monetary system of knowledge transmission; its members’ imaginary populated by a dual mythology of story characters and of storytellers, who provide living examples of an alternative (if “traditional”) way of life centred on the acceptance of humans’ shortcomings. I believe that my engaging with this understudied community will provide valuable insights and theoretical contributions to both Anthropology and the field of Japanese Studies.

On a more practical level, I also hope that the case of *rakugo* will present helpful suggestions on how to save other endangered art worlds.

Bio: Marco Di Francesco is a D.Phil. Candidate in Area Studies (Japan) at the University of Oxford and a Visiting Researcher at Sophia University's Institute of Comparative Culture. He is currently in Tokyo to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in the world of *Rakugo* oral storytelling. He holds a B.A. in East Asian Studies from Ca' Foscari University of Venice and an MSc in Japanese Studies from the University of Oxford.

This talk is organized by David H. Slater (Professor of Anthropology, Sophia University).

Sophia University Institute of Comparative Culture: <https://www.icc-sophia.com>