

Imagined Asia for Japanese Contemporaries

Hiroshi Aoyagi (School of Asia 21, Kokushikan University)

The past decade of politicoeconomic campaigns to internationalize Japan had made some significant changes in the lifestyles of the Japanese people. Visa deregulations enabled the populations of workers and students (let alone tourists) to flow into Japan from outside, new concepts such as "multiculturalism" earned citizenship, and the ethnic boom phenomena facilitated Japan's urbanites to celebrate products and customs from abroad more broadly and easily than ever before. With respect to Asia, more Japanese are becoming aware of neighboring nations from Eastern, Middle Eastern and Southern Asia. In this presentation, Aoyagi will pose a question of whether or not such a change in the living environment of contemporary Japanese people made any essential transition in their national identity. Based on a series of ethnographic interviews, especially with regards to the question of Japanese attitudes toward other Asian nationalities, Aoyagi uncovers the ongoing sense of collective cultural conservation that utilizes the distinction between identity and identification for the purpose of maintaining monoethnic identity. While Aoyagi's informants appears to celebrate, understand, and therefore are open to "Asian others" more than ever, they in fact tend to be stressing efforts to identify, objectify, and tolerate these "external Asian elements" with national interests in mind.