

Gambling, Dignity, and the Narcotic of Time in Tokyo's Day-Laborer District, San'ya

Klaus K. Y. Hammering



Budget hotels for unemployed people in San'ya district, Taito-ku, Tokyo, Japan by Kounosu via Wikimedia Commons

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This talk examines the social practice of gambling among

stigmatized construction workers in Tokyo's vanishing day-laborer district, San'ya. By considering the abstract temporality of surplus extraction imposed on the manual laborer at the construction site, and the deadening effects of this discipline upon his sensorial experience of the world, the article demonstrates how the enactment of masculinity through gambling involves a transformation of the abstract time of the working day into what Walter Benjamin has described as a "narcotic." Whereas manual labor demands that the construction worker shield and numb himself against interruptive contingencies of accidents and material stimuli, the gambler seeks an embodied exposure to the penetrating contingency of victory or defeat in a moment of risk. The article argues that the form of this transformation of time propels the gambler, and that it is through debt and credit that he actualizes his reputation as a man.

Klaus K. Y. Hammering is a cultural anthropologist and research fellow at ICC. He completed his doctorate in the US and has returned to Japan after teaching a few years abroad. His ethnographic work focuses primarily on a vanishing cohort of day-laborers in Tokyo, their construction work, gambling, and questions of dignity in abjection. Other interests include the enactment of conformity in Japan's educational system, social expulsion, the radical left, hate speech, and the discursive closure effected on Fukushima (as elsewhere in Japan).

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