

Wastefulness and Reinvention in Millennial Japan

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Discussant: Dr. Charles Schenking
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Venue: Meng Wah Complex T6

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Japan experienced a veritable “mottainai” boom—a surge in the use of the term that could be defined and translated as “wasteful.” Attention to the idea of mottainai intensified as books, magazines, newspapers, songs, government ministries, corporations, and non-governmental organizations took up the question of what was to be deemed wasteful. In the process, the word “mottainai” came to capture not just the act of wasting, but also those values and feelings associated with the consciousness of wastefulness such as regret and shame for the loss of things; appreciation and respect for things as well as those who made them; and even more abstractly, empathy and compassion.

This talk will explore how this discourse that was ostensibly about wastefulness constituted a subtle call for attention to excess and respect for material things as well as a redefinition of affluence. It will also consider how the evocation of the reimagined concept of mottainai was more profoundly about how individual Japanese and the country as a whole might reinvent and remake themselves in Japan’s second continuous decade of economic anemia.

Eiko Maruko Siniawer is Associate Professor of History at Williams College and specializes in the history of modern Japan.

She is the author of *Ruffians, Yakuza, Nationalists: The Violent Politics of Modern Japan, 1860-1960* (Cornell University Press, 2008).

Her current research is on the history of the concepts of waste and wastefulness in postwar Japan.

All are welcome.

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