



Einladung zum Vortrag von Prof. Winstanley-Chesters

Skeleton Crews and Sensitive Shores: Cultural Geographies Produced by Unwanted North Korean Bodies during the Ghost Ships Phenomenon 2011-2020

North Koreans were always required to work hard. In difficult times they were implored to work still harder. North Koreans living in coastal communities were encouraged to extract as much as possible from the sea. North Koreans who were not been traditionally part of the nation's maritime industries, thus set to sea underprepared and under-resourced. Given the vagaries of weather, navigational challenges and simple bad luck, many of these came to grief on the high seas of the Yamato Bank and months later their vessels arrived unannounced and unexpected on the shores of Honshu, Hokkaido and elsewhere, intact but with a macabre crew of dead North Koreans. This phenomena between 2011 and 2020 saw these ships and their crews termed "ghost ships" and it was an extraordinary challenge for Japanese political authorities to manage this form of North Korean unexpected mobility. The outbreak of Covid 19 has for the most part and perhaps temporarily curtailed their arrival.

Prior to 2020 the complexities of political and cultural relationships between Japan and North Korea meant that their bodies proved very difficult to return. Sometimes local authorities in Honshu were required to liaise with organisations such as the Pyongyang affiliated General Korean Residents Association of Japan, (Chongryon or Chōsen Sōren), which they would not normally have engaged with, and which they faced negative political pressure for having done so. Previous experiences of Japanese people being kidnapped from the shores of mainland Japan by North Korean special forces using midget submarines to serve as translators across the East Sea/Sea of Japan, meant that the appearance of the boats and bodies raised fears of infiltration and espionage. Equally North Korea's reputation for deprivation and squalor generated health concerns as to whether the unfortunate bodies might harbour infectious diseases. Local police forces and authorities were thus required to manage the logistics and risk when it came to recovery and disposal accordingly. In the period before their return, and sometimes when the bodies of these North Koreans simply could not be returned, shrines and temples took responsibility for their recovery, storage and cremation, their material remains becoming part of Japanese spiritual and cultural geographies.

With past writing by the author and others in mind on notions of spectral or ghostly geography, the agency of material objects and necromobilities, and with the cultural geographies generated by other unwanted bodies in Japanese history in mind, this paper explores the experiences of those local institutions tasked with recovering the crews of North Korean Ghost Ships. In doing so the paper considers the intersections generated by these bodies with the complicated geo-political relationships between Japan and North Korea. Finally, the paper investigates, as much as possible, any new cultural geographies surrounding death and human remains produced or manifested by the bodies of Ghost Ship crews, in particular any available experiences recounted by shrine guardians and priests of looking after the remains, or any alterations to existing rituals made to account for their Korean or North Korean identity.

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(die Zugangsdaten können im Geschäftszimmer über korea.aai@uni-hamburg.de angefragt werden)