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This workshop will focus on “race” and ethnicity in contemporary Japanese society, with a particular focus on critically examining representations that contribute to our understanding of what “looking Japanese” means.

The topic warrants analysis because of the growing number of Japanese individuals who do not “look Japanese”. While census statistics gathered by the Government of Japan reflect a 97.8% ethnically Japanese population (e-Stat, 2018), it is important to note that this statistic includes Japanese births where one parent is non-Japanese (this statistic also includes Ainu and Ryukuans). As the number of births in Japan to ethnically Japanese parents is declining, the number of births where one parent is non-Japanese is increasing. The appearance that Japan is a monoethnic and homogenous society is an inaccurate assessment of the increasingly ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse society it is.

Overshadowing this very complex topic is the broader context of Japan’s declining population, its growing ageing population, globalisation, the immigration of blue-collar workers, the impending 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games, the recent abdication of Emperor Akihito and the Imperial succession crisis. Japan is at an interesting crossroads with regard to “race” and identity. How it develops in the future is uncertain, but opportunities to address what “looking Japanese” means, has never been more possible.

Finally, this is not a discussion that is unique to Japan, globally similar conversations are being had in relation to identity, representation of the nation and belonging. Visiting workshop co-host, Dr. Erika Smith, from Western Sydney University (Australia) will draw upon her research to offer comparative discussions that are occurring in Australia with regard to “race” and ethnicity.

We invite workshop participants to share, consider and discuss how Japanese media, film, television, politics, economics (eg. the increase of foreign blue-collar workers), literature, art and advertising/marketing (eg. Nissin Noodle’s whitewashing of Naomi Osaka) contribute to and/or challenge what “looking Japanese” means.

