There is no doubt about the importance of the socialization process during childhood not only for each individual but also for societies in general. Its importance is stressed by the fact that the responsibility for a successful completion – in a socially beneficial way – gradually shifted from individuals such as parents or teachers, towards an all-embracing liability of the authorities of the modern nation-state. While Erik Erikson in his famous study Childhood and Society still could claim that historians ignored the function childhood played for the fabric of society, since the 1950s the number of historical publications increased and Philippe Ariès's Centuries of Childhood instantly became a classic within the modern humanities.

One concern of modern humanities is to show that perceptions and basic concepts of worldviews are not constitutional but rather influenced by cultural, historical and social factors. These factors form the core construct within which human imagination exists. Similar to the concepts of “women” and “men,” which are seen as the results of an unconscious identification with culturally constructed norms of gender the images of “children” and “childhood” are also subject to historical shifts. But whereas for Western Europe the so-called “discovery of childhood” since Renaissance times has become a much-discussed topic, there is not much research in Western languages on the history of childhood and childhood images in Japan. This is all the more surprising as there is a vast number of sources and materials – both textual and visual – as well as a large amount of research literature in Japanese. Today’s talk wants to draw attention to some of the sources and topics to be found in recent Japanese research on the history of childhood as well as to raise interest in a field of study that calls for further exploration.

***

Michael Kinski is Professor at Goethe University, Frankfurt. His research areas focus on: theoretical concepts of order: the history of Japanese ideas of the early modern period (Confucianism, ethics and political ideas); practical concepts of order: early modern Japanese lifestyles and adherence to values as reflected in self-help literature; the history of science taken from the example of Dutch Studies in 18th and 19th century Japan; material culture: Japanese food traditions, history of childhood and of childhood imagery. Among Kinski's research projects are: Food culture and table manners in early modern Japan, Japanese self-help literature as a practical concept of order, Confucianism and the history of Japanese political ideas, Medical history: materia medica of the Edo period, History of childhood and of childhood imagery (joint research project) and FrankAsia: 100 years of research into East and Southeast Asia in Frankfurt (joint research project).