Project Title: Zine-making in Tokyo’s book club community
Country/ies and/or tribal or ethnic lands where project will take place: Japan
Sponsoring Institution: International Students House London
Project Leader and name of all student team members: Yoshiyuki Ishikawa [Home Country: Japan, University: University College London]

Project summary:

I would like to conduct a community-based publication project with specific interest in addressing feminist issues. I will work with the Tokyo-based book club initiative called Neon Book Club to offer a space for the community to discuss critical issues in Japan today, and to use the platform of zines to envision participatory modes of social critique. I would like to make the best of the benefit of the funding that the Davis Project for Peace generously provides to not only cover the publishing costs but also to 1) organize launch events, 2) design a safe space of critical dialogue, and 3) collaborate with independent artists, activists and cultural practitioners to extend the circle of dialogue.

This project will operate in an increasingly hostile and conservative political climate in Japan that negatively affects the life of minorities, which can be made clear by considering the case of gender and sexuality. In 2022, Japan was ranked 116th out of 146 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report announced by the World Economic Forum, pointing to the country’s lack of structural support for women. The legal recognition of queer people is almost non-existent as same-sex marriage is not legalised, and the legislation on trans people’s change of legal sex requires forced sterilisation among other things, which Human Rights Watch in 2021 condemned as “anachronistic and harmful.”

In response to such pressing circumstances, this project will use the medium of zines, i.e. community-based, small-scale publications, as an approach to envision peace. Zines have a long history of giving feminist voices a platform. As zine scholar Alison Piepmeier argues in Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism (2009), since the 1990s “[z]ines created by girls and women [...] are sites where girls and women construct identities, communities, and explanatory narratives from the materials that comprise their cultural moment” and “offer idiosyncratic, surprising, yet savvy and complex responses to the late-twentieth-century incarnations of sexism, racism, and homophobia.” In other words, zine-making is a highly independent and creative response to address complex issues of society. It has a specific emphasis on constructing personal narrative and aesthetic, as well as sharing zines with the community of zinesters and beyond. I chose this medium because this suits the idea of peace I attempt to envision. I consider ‘peace’ in this project as an active willingness to carve out a safe space for people to freely discuss socio-political issues regardless of their background. Using the medium of zine is the perfect ground of experimentation, community-building, and creative output. The content may take the form of personal reflection, manifesto, poetry, collage, photography etc. Translating the Japanese texts on feminism into English will also enhance the mission of peacemaking by designing the transnational conversation.

The project substantially contributes to the community I work with in three ways. First, this publishing project takes place outside the academic context. As I explain below, Neon Book Club is a space of discussion that is open to people regardless of their background. I am a firm believer in widening the participation of marginalized and underrepresented voices in any social space. Participants in the events by Neon are often cultural practitioners and some of them have no higher education qualification. To employ a non-academic register in the output of my project is essential, since the demographic make-up of both audience and creators of the zine will become significantly more diverse. This allows a space of heterogeneous voices and critiquing intersectional marginalization including gender, sexuality, race, (dis)ability, class, illness etc. There are certain things that can be said only in such a context. I hope this project provides a space of intersectional affirmation.

Second, zines encourage participatory experimentation. Zines embody the spirit of DIY creativity, and this project will benefit from the history of the medium. In particular, I would like to collaborate with artists,
activists, and cultural practitioners in Tokyo who have connections with the Neon Book Club community. I am interested in employing artistic expression as a unique mode of social critique, not only to represent certain ideas but to pose a critical question.

Third, small-scale publishing enables a greater autonomy on the side of the community to decide on the topic, content, style, and design of the publication. Although my aim to enhance feminist discussion in Japan might benefit from a wider, more conventional output from publishing houses, zines allow for greater mobility and self-determination of creative decisions. This is important because this project does not aim to publish, say, my academic work. It is a communal effort to construct its own narrative, to praise the voices which otherwise might be impossible in other avenues of publication.

Background:

Neon Book Club was formed in Tokyo in February 2022 by four cultural practitioners including myself and other club organizers, DJs, contemporary artists, and artist-run space organizers. Since the first event which discussed the French feminist Virginie Despentes’ manifesto-like essay *King Kong Theory*, Neon Book Club has delivered reading events every two months. As one of the founding members, I have a personal connection to the organization and have contributed in hosting the past events. As a literary community with interest in art, Neon has collaborated with art institutions such as the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo to bring the space of social critique in a community of diversity. I have learned the process and care required in such a community-organizing effort, and I would like to further my aim with this book club.

Implementation:

The budget will be used for the cost of my stay in Tokyo (I am not from Tokyo and need to secure a place to live) and the cost for publication/events: design fee, cost of publishing, translation, and distribution.

The project will unfold in the following schedule. In June, the project will be announced together with Neon Book Club and project meetings will take place with myself and the other organizers. This will be followed by hosting a periodic meeting with the book club community to discuss the content, principle, and contributors of the publication. In July, I will host open studio sessions where people can come to the zine-making space to discuss the development, materials, and aim. This might take the form of a zine-making workshop in collaboration with Tokyo zinester communities and talk sessions to discuss the societal issues upon which this project is based. In August, the editing of zines will finalize and the outcome will be presented to the community. The zine will be distributed across Tokyo’s independent literary hubs.

Anticipated Results:

The short-term goal is to materialize the community-building effort in the form of zine publication. This will mark an important moment for the community to materially demonstrate its own position and self-reflection through the lens of feminist zine-making against the pervasive social oppression. The event series that lead up to the publication will involve active participation in the community work, which I consider as the indicator of short-term success. The long-term prospect is that this zine-making would catalyze a wider conversation on social issues. Having the physical output of the zine will enable the dialogue to persist across time and space, and the workshops will equip participants with skills to pursue their own publication project after this summer project. The zine might be archived, presented in different ways, and circulated beyond our knowledge. In short, the long-term success indicator of the project is that zine-making brings about a ripple effect in the community I work with to amplify their concerns and individual agendas with concrete skills. This project positively contributes to peace by allowing participants and beyond to bring about the space of their own safety and profound affirmation, and to invite more people into their conversation that reaches beyond social barriers.