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Role-speak, raw materials, and many temporalities

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My research interest in Japan was a natural growth out of my upbringing in Tokyo and a couple of short-term stays overseas which gave me a comparative lens to look at what had been normal to my unsuspecting eyes. When it comes to the subject of Japanese studies, however, I had little knowledge when I chose to study international history at LSE for PhD with a Japan-focused dissertation project. The biggest reason I came to consider my research within the context of Japanese studies was because I chose to study Japan while based at an academic institution overseas: generally speaking, studying Japan within Japan makes you a sociologist, political scientist, economist, historian, literary scholar, and so forth, but not Japanologist. The Japanese studies in my conceptualization therefore entails a certain degree of distance, geographically or discursively, between the scholar and the subject of study. Some people would understand Japanese studies differently and include locally produced research as part of Japanese studies, but for the purpose of this essay, I focus on the research done on Japan either outside Japan or in non-Japanese languages (or both).

The book manuscript revises the narrative on the origins of modern Japan's territorial limits. My main question is why Japan in the mid-to late-nineteenth century, supposedly under threat from Western imperialism, ended up expanding its geographical control in the course of its emergence as a territorial sovereign state. I look at remote islands around Japan in all directions, as well as Honshu, and in each case except for Sakhalin, I found that no foreign governments saw sufficient strategic or economic benefits in occupation, and therefore gave no support for their merchants and speculators who had begun obtaining special rights and concessions. The treaty powers were more likely to co-opt Japan for the territorialisation of these space, because they competed not against Japan, but against each other, understanding the Japanese control as a way of maintaining a strategically acceptable balance. Meanwhile the Japanese government until the mid 1870s believed that their regime's survival rested on claiming all border zones, even the one that they saw as void of any practical value. This overall multilateral balance around the Japanese archipelago was the key factor that enabled the emergence of modern Japan with the border zones previously governed in a non-territorial manner as part of Japan's sovereign territory. This modifies both the 'safety valve' theory which explains the expansionist Meiji state as being driven by the need to divert the attention of the domestic opposition as well as the subaltern imperialist thesis that stresses the role of ordinary settlers in territorial expansion. Based on the readings of mostly local archival documents I argue that the fear of the fall of the territorial domino was significant in the crucial years of bakumatsu and early Meiji in forming the Japanese government's attitude towards the off-lying islands, and I also argue that Japan's eventual possession owed as much to the non-Japanese actors. With this argument I try to push back against the teleological tendency in recent scholarship that traces the roots of Japanese colonial empire to the Tokugawa era without discussing what kind of global environment enabled the policies and ideas before the Meiji Ishin to continue and expand.

Japan's 'role' as a postwar concept

One of the questions for this essay was the role of Japanese studies in the future. As a historian of Japan's international relations, I could not help but drawn to the word 'role', which in Japanese would be *yakuwari*. It has been a popular theme for different kinds of discussions on Japan, but in particular within the policy circles. For instance, the verbatim records of the postwar bicameral diet contains 1,375 references to 'Japan's role (*nihon no yakuwari*)'.[1] In other words, in the last seven decades, someone in the Japanese Diet was talking about 'Japan's role' on record approximately every nineteen days on average. This term has a historical baggage that needs unpacking, so this section attempts to consider the role of Japanese studies in the future by describing what I might call '*role-speak*' in postwar Japan.

The discourse on the role of Japan usually appears in association with 'the international society', 'international relations', or when the discussion focuses on the region, 'Asia', 'East Asia,' or 'Northeast Asia.' Or it could be about what Japan should do in the alliance with the United States, provision of ODA to less-developed countries, or in the multilateral stage of diplomacy in the United Nations or other international organisations. One commonality in these references to the role of Japan is that they represent perspective of someone with political or economic power. It is rare to talk about the role of the Japanese as a people, presumably because it is harder to imagine it acting as though it was a singular unit, whereas a nation state, represented by a government, operates under such pretence. The speakers assume the existence of a certain regime which Japan takes for granted, and then discuss what Japan could and should do within it to maximize its presence and benefit, without challenging the order.

This is a terminology the frequent use of which can be observed explicitly in the post-Second World War discourse among Japan's political pandits. Prior to that, imperial Japan seldom talked about its role in the world in this manner. Instead what dominated the discourse of the politicians and intellectuals was how Japan was aspiring to build 'the New Order' for itself as well as for other countries especially in Asia under the colonial dominations of European and American imperialism. It gave rise to pan-Asianism, while cloaking the development of Japan's colonial empire. In other words, imperial Japan's ultimate objective as a state was a search for some sort of an alternative and comprehensive vision of the world to what it saw as the existing order dominated by, in the language of Konoe Fumimaro, 'pacifism centered on England and America,' or more simply put, Anglo-American capitalism.[2] This was the vision that fuelled the desire for Japanese imperialism in Asia and the Pacific, which made Japan by the 1930s 'a challenger to the new international order that the international community sought to establish after tremendous sacrifices [of the First World War],' as Prime Minister Abe Shinzō characterized in his statement on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of the Japanese surrender in the Second World War.[3]

After the postwar occupation led by the United States ended in 1952, the Japanese government manoeuvred the domestic debates on Japanese politics and foreign relations so that there would be no rise of a nation-wide call for the challenge to the existing order, either

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[1] Based on the keyword search on http://kokkai.ndl.go.jp, accessed June 9, 2019.

[2] Konoe Fumimaro, 'Eibei hon'i no heiwashugi wo haisu', in de Bary, William Theodore, Carol Gluck, and Donald Keene, eds., *Sources of Japanese Tradition: Volume 2, 1600 to 2000* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 291-292.

[3] 'Statement by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe,' August 14, 2015. Retrieved from https://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/statement/201508/0814statement.html, accessed June 9, 2019.

from the left or the right. This was because any sign that could look disruptive to its security treaty partner in Washington would have resulted in the rollback of political, military, and economic assistance, without which the postwar reconstruction could not be completed. The postwar Japanese government, led by Yoshida Shigeru and eventually crystallised into what scholars call 'the 1955 system' under the Liberal Democratic Party, therefore chose to live under the American security umbrella, part of it nuclear, and diverted the resource to develop civilian industries to get back its export up to speed again and recover quickly. The years of Kishi Nobusuke, who did want a more independent course, was overturned by the successor Ikeda Hayato. In the course of its economic recovery the Japanese products dominated the Southeast Asian market, leading one critic to quip that the imperial Japan's vision of the Great East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere was finally achieved in the postwar era. Yet in doing so, Japan refrained from imagining itself to be a builder of the international order. The international order was already there for them, conditioned by the bipolar structure of the Cold War. Japan was given a 'role' within such order, a vital one for the American effort to fight the Cold War in Asia. The continued presence of American military bases in Okinawa and other prefectures in Japan was a clear reminder of this arrangement. Similarly in the realm of economy, what the Japanese saw as its own economic miracle in the 1960s and the 1970s, though part of its credit is due for them, was impossible without the environment that favoured Japan's growth through export to the United States and the Southeast Asian economies in particular. Japan's entry into GATT, pushed by the United States in 1955 over grumbles of other members, was a visible example of this setting.

By Speaking about the role, instead of the vision or the principle which it wanted to promote, postwar Japan's political discourse was always truncated. As the *Anpo* crisis receded into the past and the US-Japan trade friction dominated the negotiation tables in Tokyo and Washington, the Japanese official discourse opted to put a lid on its discussion and imagination about its future that went beyond the *role-speak*. It had lost the language with which to think out of the box. The end of the Cold War saw the comeback of the 'role' question in the new world order, but even in the following three decades the *role-speak* did not go away. Scholars and pandits on the far right did speak of Tokyo's departure from the reliance on Washington, hoping to reverse what they saw as the unjust imposition of American power over postwar Japan, but to this day their attempt at gaining mainstream support faltered, as evidenced by the continued existence of the 1947 constitution. It is rare to find a narrative from the political centre in Japan that problematises this very core of the consequence of the postwar occupation and the ensuing alliance with the United States in the face of perceived communist threat. Centrists in Japanese politics, in other words, has not figured out how to speak about Japan's foreign policy trajectory without talking about the 'role'.

Thus the discussion on Japan's role could have been a time-specific one, but it has outlived the political structure out of which it emerged. In today's international politics that is radically different from the era of the two superpowers, Japan's foreign policy priorities and goals cannot be the same as in the past, and that was exactly why many scholars in the 1990s tried to define Japan's outlook in the post-Cold-War world. What these discussions may have overlooked, however, is the genealogy of the *role-speak*. In theory it makes more sense today to talk about the core value for which one stands, rather than the role in the world where the previous structure is no more to be found. Nevertheless, by failing to abandon the term from the previous century, newspaper editorials, academic and non-academic articles, and politicians' speeches all continue to speak of Japan's role, unconsciously closing the door for a possible renewal of discourse.

If we are to consider the 'role' of Japanese studies in the years beyond 2020 within the study of humanities, therefore, we should at least be conscious of the political context within which the postwar scholarship—not just the study of Japan's foreign relations, but also the research on Japan's society, economy, culture, and everything else—within and outside Japan developed. The political context loomed large, as is well documented, and the resulting economic growth and the increasing political and economic clout provided the strong reason for people outside Japan to study how it functioned.

Getting hands on raw materials

This leads me to the observation that, for a historian, handling Japanese-language sources comes with a risk of unconsciously accepting the paradigm of the previous generation. Today a large portion of current research in modern Japanese history—loosely conceived as post-1868 history—continues to rely on published materials in Japanese, many of them dating back beyond 1990. The Japanese local municipalities have been exceptionally diligent in producing compilations of the history of prefectures, cities, towns, and villages, and so much of the local sources are transcribed and became readily available. This becomes a convenient resource for scholars working on Japan's relations with neighbouring states or regions. However, a heavy reliance on this type of sources runs the risk of reinforcing the narratives of the producers, who may not be willing to acknowledge certain aspects of local history, such as embarrassing incidents or emotionally charged topics for the locals. The fact that a certain material is easily readable and comprehensible to us in the 2010s indicates that it had been processed by somebody, who cannot claim to be completely impartial. The fact that somebody chose to edit, transcribe, compile, copy, and store the material reflects a motivation that favours a certain version of the story over the others.

In order to overcome this bias—a good example of which is what Conrad Totman called the 'Meiji Bias', concentrating on the stories of the victorious side of the Meiji Ishin—we need to get to the raw materials. We need to read unpublished, untranscribed manuscripts. This means that, even for modern historians of Japan, reading materials written often in cursive handwriting (*kuzushiji*). Those who are on the mailing list of EAJS would have noticed that there have been workshops on *kuzushiji* in European universities, often in collaboration with scholars based in Japan. Such initiatives should be encouraged for a new generation of scholars on Japan who can produce research free from the potential bias in the choice of sources.

Reading unpublished materials takes time, and there is no shortcut. A recent surge of digitized materials, through the effort by the National Diet Library, the National Archive of Japan, and university libraries and museums across the archipelago is a great help, but it is subject to the same bias that has chosen to publish certain sources over the rest: what to digitise and what not to digitise is a reflection of decision by people who naturally come with their own preferences. This requires scholars to visit archives and put their hands on the material. Further, even in the age of AI-powered *kuzushiji* reading softwares, we still need to invest our time in reading them closely. Such a time-consuming task, in today's field of humanities with the shrinking wherewithal, becomes a difficult one to undertake for those burdened with committee work, grant applications, student supervision, and the like. Doctoral students who tend to have more time at their discretion should be at the forefront of this endeavour to engage unpublished manuscripts. Giving them enough time to work on the

topics of their interest, free from financial worries and administrative hassle as much as possible, would be a good way to support such initiatives and help develop the field further.

Many temporalities

On 20 June 1999, the Japanese novelist Mizumura Minae gave a lecture in Maison du Japon in Paris under the title 'La littérature moderne japonaise: deux temps' – 'The modern Japanese literature: Two temporalities'.[4] Her point was to agitate the audience to reflect on the dominance of the English language in intellectual activities across the world, chasing French out of its once dominant position. Here is a short excerpt of the lecture where she gave out a hypothetical remark she would make to a French novelist or an intellectual:

> Welcome! Welcome to my side of the asymmetrical relationship! You used to be on the other side, on the dominant side. No, you used to be more than that. Because of your past splendor, you were often the very symbol of that dominant side. Yet, alas, you are now sadly in the same sorry camp as me. You too are now made to live in two temporalities: the universal temporality that flows in texts written in English, and the particular temporality that flows in texts written in your own language. Like much of the world's population, you too can easily hear the voices of those who speak in the universal temporality, but you can no longer easily make your own voices heard. Moreover, this asymmetry does not end there. It even robs you of your past splendor. That's right. Until just a while ago, Racine was a figure on a par with Shakespeare. But look where he is now. Most high school students in the world—which has now come to include the whole non-West as well—are probably familiar with the name of Shakespeare. But what about Racine? Who is he? Probably only a very few high school students anywhere have heard his name. I am afraid their number may eventually dwindle to the number of those who have heard the name of Lady Murasaki Shikibu, the author of *The Tale of Genji*. What a shocking demise![5]

Whilst she almost certainly adopted the aggravating tone on purpose, the asymmetry that she describes should sound familiar to the scholars of Japanese studies, regardless of thematic discipline. Not everyone works in the same temporality: some work in the English lingosphere, others in French, German, Chinese, Japanese, or other languages. Many work in more than one. The temporalities do not overlap completely because they were conditioned by local situations of higher education, motivations for interest in Japan, availability of resource, and many other factors. Although Mizumura strikes a pessimist tone by emphasising the fall of all other temporalities in the hegemony of the Anglophone intellectual world, the gap between any sets of temporalities should inform us about potential biases and idiosyncrasies that each contains. This means that the effort of international collaboration is useful for getting aware of one's own bias some of which are ingrained in the system and difficult to become aware of. Japanese studies, conducted outside Japan or in non-Japanese languages, have a lot to offer to the Japanese academia in this regard.

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[4] On the venue of this lecture, see http://mizumuraminae.com/biography.html. Accessed 28 October 2018.

[5] Minae Mizumura, *The Fall of Language in the Age of English*, trans. Mari Yoshihara and Juliet Winters Carpenter (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 62. The original book was published in Japanese as Mizumura Minae, *Nihongo ga horobiru toki: Eigo no seiki no naka de* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 2008).