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International relations and identity: a dialogical approach [book review]

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Review

Taku Tamaki

Ever since the flare-up of Sino-Japanese tensions in the summer of 2012, the political debate in Japan has centred on how to maintain, if not enhance, the US-Japan security treaty considered a linchpin of Japanese foreign policy. Another dimension to the on-going territorial dispute between Japan and China has been the reaffirmation of the perception that Asia remains a dangerous neighbourhood for Japan (Tamaki, 2015). While the main concern for the ordinary Japanese remains the state of the economy, the landslide victory by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in the December 2014 general election emboldened Prime Minister Abe Shinzō to pursue his nationalist dream of creating a ‘beautiful country’ (*utsukushii kuni*) imbued with cultural values reminiscent of the late-19th and early-20th century Japan, not to mention an increased role for military, as well as the potential recasting of the 1947 pacifist constitution. In essence, the heightened tensions between Tokyo and Beijing had precipitated a bout of national soul-searching propelling the debate on what and how Japan ‘should look like’ in the 21st century.

Given this identity crisis in Japan, Xavier Guillaume’s *International Relations and Identity* (2011) provides a welcome addition to the literature, both to the general theoretical discussions within International Relations (IR), as well as to the exploration of Japanese identity. Moreover, the explicit linkage between identity theorising in IR, on the one hand; and a *tour de force* on the historicity of Japanese identity narratives, on the other, provides a valuable intervention into the persistent ‘gap’ between Postpositivist IR theorising as applied to the international politics of the Asia-Pacific.

In what follows, I will first engage with the theoretical discussions provided by Guillaume. My intention here is not so much to provide a fully-fledged metatheoretical debate akin to the ontology *versus* epistemology debates, as these discussions seem to digress significantly from empirical considerations that should lie at the heart of IR theorising. Rather, my primary aim in the theoretical exercise is to try to tease-out the theoretical implications

that should help us refocus our attention on the dialogical processes experienced by ‘Japan’. This leads to my second discussion on the narratives of ‘Japan’ as espoused by Guillaume. There are fruitful discussions on the Othering of the West as an inherent part of the Japanese identity construction. Indeed, the multiple constructions of the West as a product of Japan’s iterated socialisation with the Western powers throughout the centuries are crucial ingredients in the ways that Japanese Self had been narrated by generations of Japanese identity entrepreneurs. There is nothing particularly problematic with the focus on Western Otherness in Japanese identity construction. Yet, concentrating on the West necessarily denigrates another crucial dimension to Japanese identity construction. And this is the focus of my third and final point. What seems to be missing from Guillaume’s discussion is the Japanese gaze on Asia. It is only by alter-casting the West *and* Asia that a myth of Japanese uniqueness has been sustained through time, particularly in the calamitous decades of the early 20th century with deadly consequences. I will aim to suggest that, without a profound reference to Asia as a notional counter-weight to the West, any discussion on Japanese identity remains necessarily incomplete.

Theorising identity

Guillaume locates himself at the heart of the identity debate in IR theorising, partaking in the discussion on whether or not we can talk about international actors as entities with clear ideas of their own, solidified, identities; or whether the idea of Self needs to be considered as a metaphor (Neumann 2004) or as a product of a dialogical process which involves focusing on ‘the characterization of the processes, the transformation, whatever the normative characters these forms [of identity construction] take’ (Guillaume 2011, 40). For Guillaume, identity is an event (2011, 31) encompassing multiple dimensions requiring addressing the questions of ‘where and when’, ‘how’, and ‘to whom’ (2011, 33). For him, identity—or the process of identity construction—remains an ‘on-going struggle for meaning’ (2011, 50), and even if an identity seems continuous, in truth, they are collapsed into a series of succeeding practices, representations, and contexts—what he terms a ‘synchronous repertoire’ (2011, 55).

Central to this conceptualisation of identity is the notion of alterity—the need to distinguish between the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, the Self *versus* the Other dichotomy inherent within the way agents recognise their relative positioning within a social environment

(Guillaume 2011, 18). By focusing on the dichotomy of meanings in social contexts, Guillaume seeks to explain ‘the origins of collective political self-understandings/representations in the transactions of alterity’ (2011, 21). Hence, any discussion involving an actor’s corporate identity (Wendt 1994, 1999) necessarily essentialises identity; and even if the concern centres on social identity, insofar as the debate stops short of discussing the very *processes* involved in the construction of Self/Other dichotomy, then such considerations become vulnerable to charges of reification. As such, a discussion on an actor’s military capability that might represent a facet of a state’s identity in relation to its international status, or debating how a state’s preference might be affected by its ideological- or political structure ultimately reifies identity as a ‘thing’. For Guillaume, it is precisely this

‘[R]eifying mode of expression’ which in turn leads us to naturalize and crystallize entities that are processual and dynamic in ‘nature,’ to individuate entities that are relational in their agency and structure, and, finally, to essentialize, to the point of anthropomorphism (2011, 14).

Therefore, any characterisation of identity that fails to acknowledge its inherent fluidity potentially commits a sin of reification.

As I mentioned above, my intention is not to engage in a deep metatheoretical debate on whether states are like persons (Jackson 2004; Wight 2004; Schiff 2008), or whether epistemology should be prioritised over ontology, or *vice versa* (Chernoff 2009; Michel 2009; Franke and Roos 2010). Yet, if we are to explore the constructions of Japanese identity through time and space—as Guillaume is seeking to do here—it seems pertinent to ask what I think is an important question: ‘who’ experiences these encounters with the Others? Admittedly, these discussions tend to degenerate into a caustic mutual name-calling, coupled with accusations and counter-accusations of reification (Kessler 2012; Weber 2012; Wight 2012). Effectively, these discussions in IR theory are replicas of the similar—if not original—debates within Social Theory. As Postpositivist theories of IR share common Social Theory pedigree, I believe it is sufficient to revisit some of the main points as a way to transition into the empirical problem of ‘who’ it is that is narrating the Japanese Self, as well as the important consideration of ‘who’ is experiencing the series of dialogues without falling into the potential infinite regress of representations.

When we ask the question of ‘who’ is experiencing this transition from one dialogue to another, the familiar riposte takes the very act of questioning as a tendency for one to reify what is inherently a fluid set of languages that metamorphose as social contexts change (Elder-Vass 2010, 2012). While the point about the dialogical nature of identity formation is well-taken, there is also the sense that the very agents—or groups of identity entrepreneurs who provide the dominant narratives of Self/Other dichotomy—must be able to experience the actions, both verbal and non-verbal, of Others. Just as Guillaume provides a series of case studies, there seem to be Japanese agents throughout time and space who came into contact with the Western Others, reacted in their particular ways to these external stimuli, reflected on their particular circumstances, and decided or felt that a particular illocution was appropriate. Just as Dave Elder-Vass (2012, 100) notes, language is socially influenced, not socially determined. Needless to say, Guillaume (2011, 39) makes a similar point, indicating that the dialogical process ‘enables us to consider identity as a superordinate, continuous and multiplanar process by switching the emphasis from the identity *of* a social *entity* to an identity *as* a social *continuant*’. Yet, it is also the case that identity is treated as an ‘on-going struggle for meaning’ (Guillaume 2011, 50), and continuity is effectively collapsed into a succession of practices, representations, and contexts without a trace of the very agent who might be exposed to such encounters with the purportedly threatening Western Other (Guillaume 2011, 55).

This leads to an interesting theoretical conclusion. While Guillaume (2011, 12-13) is correct in pointing out the risk of reification in Constructivism, he himself is not free from it. An aversion to any semblance of Self that can be construed as Cartesian runs the risk of reifying language and performance (Elder-Vass 2012, 144) with agents being ‘reduced to nodal points through which messages pass, and the self becomes dissolved into discursive structures’ (Archer 2000, 3). If we are to take Japan’s encounters with the Others seriously, then we need an account of the Japanese Self that is engaged in a dialogical process. If that resembles reification, then perhaps it is. However, as Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2000, 5) point out, ‘reification is a social process, not only an intellectual practice’. In an effort at appreciating the various constructions of Japanese identity, then we might need to destigmatise reification.

Narrating Japan

Guillaume (2011, 5) concentrates his attention on Japan's encounters with the West through the centuries, starting 'from the mid-sixteenth century to the first half of the twentieth'. On the one hand, tracing Japanese identity construction, *vis-à-vis*, the West is a justifiable move, as the Western Otherness has always featured in Japanese narratives of Self. On the other hand, though, it seems rather ambitious in seeking to distil Japanese identity construction spanning several centuries into a couple of chapters. Guillaume's (2011, 63) identification of *shinkoku* and *kokutai* as signifiers for Japanese identity are also well-taken, but more contextualisation might have been beneficial to the reader: justification for the choice of these would have been beneficial. While the pre-Meiji iterations of identity narratives are beyond my expertise, there is a sense that an etymology of key words such as *kokutai* might have also helped put Guillaume's arguments into more perspective. For instance, Guillaume (2011, 66) discusses the political dynamic behind the adaptation of the term 'Japan', but given the historical scope of the discussion, an etymological discussion on how 'Japan'—or how *Nippon/Nihon* superseded *Yamato/Hinomoto*—emerged as the designated name of the polity would have revealed that Asia has always been within Japanese elites' gaze along with the Western Otherness. Put differently, there was a political intention behind adopting 'Japan' by the elites of the time, and without any further discussion on the domestic dynamics, Japan ceases to become a collective agent, and instead being construed as a mere receptacle for anti-Western narratives to be deposited.

Likewise, Guillaume (2011, 83) provides a discussion on how the term *kokutai* is associated with *kokka*—the Japanese word for 'nation' or 'state'. While this, too, is well-taken, there remains an unease in the invocation of *kokka*, given the difficulty of translating concepts such as the 'state', the 'nation', and the 'people' into Japanese. Yeun Keun-cha (1997, 20-27) agrees with Guillaume that *kokutai* was established as an iteration of national identity by the 1850s. Yet, it is also the case that Yeun (1997: ch. 7) points out the pitfalls (*otoshi-ana*) of translating these concepts into Japanese, often precipitating an identity conundrum. Furthermore, without reference to the theory that emerged in the 1910s (to be outlawed by the military in the 1930s) that the emperor was a mere organ of the state (*tenno kikan-setsu*), Guillaume's (2011, 87) discussion of the link between the emperor and the community suffers from a lack of full potential. Put differently, there are numerous internal discussions and conflicts that have taken place as Japanese elites encountered Western Otherness. In the process of constructing a coherent Japanese identity narrative of *kokutai*,

one can infer from Guillaume's arguments that there were internal conflicts. Yet, unless that can be exposed further, 'Japan' ceases to be the main agent in the construction of Japanese identity, confined to being a mere receptacle for Western Otherness to prompt a discursive response. In short, the agency of Japanese elites in responding to their encounters with the West remains rather silent. This is particularly the case, given Guillaume's focus on various policy/identity entrepreneurs through the ages. Perhaps they are 'nodes' in the process of narrating Japanese identity; but it also seems to infer some form of an agent fully cognisant of the Self in opposition to the Other. It seems that the self-awareness needs to precede an realisation of Others for the dialogical process to take place.

The missing gaze on Asia

However, there is an even more conspicuous silence in Guillaume's discussions. Any exploration into Japanese identity construction needs to bear in mind the *trichotomy* inherent in its narrative structure, rather than the *dichotomy* between the Japanese Self in counter-distinction to the Western Other. What needs highlighting is the tripod of identity construction involving the Western- and Asian Others, along with virulent claims to Japanese uniqueness. This has been the case, particularly since the Meiji Restoration when Japan was thrust into the midst of *Realpolitik* between and among the Western colonial powers jockeying for influence in East Asia. Even before the Restoration, the *bakufu* was aware of what was happening on the continent; and there was a palpable sense of vulnerability shared among the Meiji oligarchs that a purportedly 'weak' Asia, namely China and Korea, posed an existential risk for Japan, while simultaneously sensing that a technologically advanced Japan was well-placed to 'liberate' the rest of Asia from Western chokehold. As Yamamuro Shinichi (2010, Intro.) lucidly illustrates, the arrogant Pan-Asianism of prewar Japanese intellectuals and policy elites needs to be understood in response to the dual threat of Western colonialism, on the one hand; and the perceived weakness of Asia, on the other. It entails a dialogical process, but it is a dialogical process involving elites anxious about Japan's future. And the idea of 'West' and 'Asia' necessitated a process of rationalisation whereby the founders of modern Japan wondered aloud about what they should have done to rise up to the challenges posed by what they understood to be a hostile international environment. As such, the sense of Japanese Self in counter-distinction to the West and Asia seems to have reified

Japan that was neither Western nor Asian. Yet, it was precisely this reified Self/Other dichotomy that was the crucial ingredient in appreciating the horrors that befell East Asia until Japan's defeat in August 1945.

Guillaume's relative silence on Japanese ideologues such as Miyazaki Tōten, Kita Ikki, Ishiwara Kanji, and Ōkawa Shūmei seem rather problematic. Miyazaki's assertion that Western powers posed barriers to a free and equal society (Ishida 1998, 84), and that it was necessary for Japan to bring Asian peoples together (Ishida 1998, 82) suggested that *both* the West *and* Asia were seen as crucial ingredients in the construction of a Japanese identity narrative. On the other hand, the focus of Kita's main thesis was how to redefine *kokutai* into a socialist programme to forge a resilient Japanese society. While, correctly, Kita is normally seen as a rightwing ideologue, the roots of his thoughts could be traced to his exasperation with the rapid Westernisation of Japan—which is in line with Guillaume's focus on the Western Otherness. Yet, Kita was also concerned with liberation movements in China, meaning that his programme necessitated the West *and* Asia to be addressed simultaneously (Kuno and Tsurumi 1956, ch. 4). As the mastermind behind the Manchurian Incident of September 1931, Ishiwara was a realist who called for Japan to prepare itself for an Armageddon between the West and Asia (Iriye 1966, 111-13). According to Iriye Akira (1966, 112-13), Ishiwara felt that, in order for Japan to protect itself against Western imperialists, Japan needed to become an Asian superpower which ultimately entailed subjugating Asia for the benefit of Japan and Asia as a whole. Similarly, Ōkawa felt that it was imperative for Japan to help realise Asia for the Asians by overcoming the indignity imposed by the West (Ōtsuka 1998, 208).

Hence, the intellectuals in Japan since the 1920s were preoccupied not just with the Western Other, but with Asia as well. Japan's geographical location in East Asia signified Japan as a non-Western entity, while its technological advance and the hubris following the victory over Russia, in what was understood to be the 'first victory of a yellow race over a white Western empire' in 1905 (Bukh 2010, 14) meant that Japan was distinct from what was understood to be a 'backward' Asia. Hence, when the focus of Japanese identity narratives centred on the West, Asian Otherness was reified into a signifier denoting backwardness typical of Asia from which only Japan managed to extricate itself. Just as the participants at the infamous 'Overcoming Modernity' (*Kindai no chōkoku*) roundtable discussion in the summer of 1942 sought solace at the arrival of the war to end all wars between the Yellow- and White races, Takeuchi Yoshimi's (Kawakami and Takeuchi 1979, 307) critique that the

participants failed to comprehend the ‘double-meaning’ (*nijū-kōzō*) of the War needs re-emphasising: that it was both a war of liberation from the West, as well as a war of imperialism against Asia. The striking thing about this double-meaning was the clear sense of Japanese Self as a unique entity which was established by the 1930s. It was this reified sense of Self, Western- and Asian Otherness, and the perception that the international environment was a relentless struggle for survival that provided the backdrop to the deadly events of the 1930s and 1940s.

While Guillaume’s focus on the Western Otherness is not wrong, his silence on the ideologues of early *Showa* period, as well as the sharp criticism by the likes of Takeuchi remains a disappointment. Having exposed the *nijū-kōzō* of War, Takeuchi (1993, 109-10) argues that Japan had failed to comprehend Asia by subscribing to the Western notion of Asian Otherness as signifying backwardness, not realising that its prewar understanding of Asia had been misplaced until after the devastating defeat in August 1945 (Takeuchi 1993, 95). It is this necessity for the alter-casting of Asia along with the West that needs more serious consideration, if one were to fully appreciate Japanese identity construction. The shared sense of Japan among the prewar policy elites that Japan was unique and existentially vulnerable from the West but distinct from Asia holds the key to appreciating the reified sense of Japanese Self. This reified Japanese identity enabled a generation of policy elites to experience the insecurity of Meiji Restoration, the exasperation of failed attempt at ‘modernising’ Asia, and the resignation that an Armageddon with the West was inevitable. While dialogical in nature, we also need an account that enabled Japanese Self to engage in such a process. And the reified Japanese identity that locates itself in between the West and Asia holds the key. It is only by reflecting on the narratives of Japanese identity in the 1920s and 1930s that we can gain a fuller sense of Japanese identity construction.

Conclusion

Guillaume’s contribution has a definite potential to enhance the scope of Postpositivist analysis into Japanese experience—a welcome addition to the literature on the IR of the Asia-Pacific region in general. Given the proliferation of rational-choice approaches into the study of Japanese foreign policy, Guillaume introduces a breath of fresh air. While the study of Japanese culture and history as informed through Social Theory has been rife within Asian

Studies as well as Cultural Studies, IR has been rather late in adopting a similar approach, especially with respect to the IR of East Asia. It is for this reason that Guillaume's efforts can be commended for shining a new light into an area that has become rather stale with the familiar treatment of international actors as being automatons waiting for exogenously-given preference and interests to befall them. Guillaume (2011, 137) is correct in pointing out that, until about 25 years ago, IR has not been interested in unravelling the 'formation, performance, or transformation' of collective identity. To be sure, while this approach still remains a niche product in the IR of East Asia, it is to be hoped that Guillaume's contribution will encourage similar literature to emerge.

With respect to Japanese foreign policy, this is particularly the case. Prime Minister Abe's push for a 'beautiful Japan' (*utusukushii kuni*) seeks to redefine Japanese collective identity. Tokyo's alliance with Washington remains the linchpin of Japan's foreign policy; and whenever policy elites in Japan feel compelled to reappraise the state's security posture, the role of the United States in Japan's security looms large. Indeed, the centrality of security alliance has been reaffirmed following the flare-up of Japan's territorial disputes with China. This confirms Guillaume's thesis that West (read the US) remains a significant Other in the narrativisation of Japanese Self. As Michael Yahuda (2014, 4-6) notes, much of Japanese foreign policy thinking revolves around Japan's love-hate relationship with the US.

Yet, as the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute since the summer of 2012 shows, the resurgence of Japanese nationalism also implies that Asia (read China) also remains a significant Other that cannot be ignored. Hence, Abe's assertion that 'Japan is back' also implies potentials for enhanced rivalry with Asia (Shad 2014), as Asian Otherness is elaborated into a reified reality against which Japanese policy makers feel the need to formulate policies. This reminds us again that any discussion of Japan's collective sense of Self undoubtedly entails a dialogue with the Western- and Asian Otherness simultaneously. While unravelling the constructions of Western Otherness is a necessary start, the narratives of Asian Otherness are an essential component that warrants close attention. Had Guillaume done that, his study would have been even more powerful.

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