



SJEAA
JAPAN

BACK TO THE LAND OF THE SETTING SUN?

Japan's "Return" to East Asia

A common meme in recent international relations media commentary and scholarship is that of Japan's "Return to Asia". The key point of discussion around this meme is whether Japan's recently renewed interest in Asia is opportunistic or is reflective of a more emotive, identity-based disposition, where Japan "returns" to the "East Asian fold" after a 150-year "hiatus". This paper outlines the context of these discussions by touching on Japan's historical identity in the context of borrowing from both Eastern and Western civilizations. It then examines contemporary developments in East Asian regionalism and details Japan's involvement in these developments. It concludes by asking: Is Japan's recent re-engagement with East Asia part of an inevitable process of integration that will culminate in Japan committing to a comprehensive East Asian identity in the future?

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Introduction

A common meme in recent international relations media commentary and scholarship is that of Japan's "Return to Asia".¹ Last year's historic elections gave this meme a new lease on life as the new DPJ government seemed more willing to show deference to nations in East Asia than had previous Japanese governments.² A key point of discussion around this meme is whether Japan's recently renewed interest in Asia is opportunistic from the perspective of political economy, or is reflective of a more emotive, identity-based disposition, where Japan turns away from the West³ and "returns" to the East Asian fold after a 150 year "hiatus".⁴ I attempt to answer this question by reflecting on Japan's historical identity in the context of borrowing from both Eastern and Western civilizations. This will take us through the formation of the modern Japanese nation during the Meiji era, and the construction and reconstruction of Japanese national identity prior to and subsequent to World War II.

Next I describe where Japan and the East Asian mainland have deepened relations in varying domains of activity since the 1980s. This will reveal that Japan, whether through design or accident, does indeed look to be becoming an in-

tegral part of the East Asian region. I argue that despite Japan's recent increasing interactions with East Asia there is a need for caution when discussing Japan's return to East Asia. Instead, it is important to understand that Japan is re-engaging with its traditionally ambiguous and sometimes ambivalent relationship with East Asia after the nation's journey through a turbulent 20th century. I will conclude by discussing the implications of this insight.

Historical context

Japan's historical relationship with both the "East" and the "West" has been of great fascination for historians and social scientists. In historical narratives, Japan is described as a country that has a penchant for borrowing from other cultures and adapting culture, language, ideas, and technologies for its own use. The earliest of these great "borrowings" is the influence the ancient Chinese culture had on the Japanese archipelago. It is well known that the Japanese written language since 600 CE has borrowed heavily from the Chinese written language. The Confucian familial orientation is also known to have heavily influenced Japanese societies, as did Buddhism and Taoism. Much of the linguistic, cultural, and

religious knowledge inherited from Chinese civilization was in fact mediated through the Korean peninsula throughout ancient East Asian history. Even architecture, such as the construction of ancient Heian (modern-day Kyoto), was based on Chinese norms of the time, specifically from the Tang Dynasty capital Chang'an.⁵

Japan inherited much of this knowledge both from official missions received or sent by various rulers such as the scholarly missions from Japan to China between 607 CE and 894 CE.⁶ Informal contacts from East Asian politicians, scholars, priests and artists that Japan inherited from Paikche on the Korean mainland during the wars around the Taika 大化 reform period, were probably even more important in terms of their contribution to the development of early Japanese civilization and culture. However, these East Asian knowledge systems were very seldom accepted passively. Often they failed to match local conditions and were adapted or abandoned. Japan's early experience with Chinese-influenced agricultural and administrative reform and Confucianism and Buddhism both fall into this category.⁷ This led to the development of Japanese institutions, which while "East Asian" in inspiration, can only be recognised as uniquely Japanese.

The Mongolian invasions of 1274 and 1281 strongly influenced the uniting of mainland Japan, and thus helped shape Japanese national identity. Prior to this, while there was a *seii tai shōgun* 征夷大將軍 responsible for national defence, it was a role mainly dedicated to expanding the boundaries of the Japanese state on the archipelago itself, which included battling the Ainu in the North and suppressing other rebellions at the outskirts of the limits of the then Japanese empire. The Mongolian invasion was the first threat from a non-Japanese actor to the Japanese mainland. Before these invasions, central government control was often challenged by local interests, and individual and group identity was formed along socio-economic and familial lines rather than nationalistic lines. However, helped by natural causes, a weak Japanese state

repelled the Mongol threat. Meeting this first external threat enhanced the sense of sacredness of the Japanese mainland and added to the mystique of the emperor who had been kept on the throne for centuries by the nation's power brokers as a symbol of spiritual, political, and sovereign authority.⁸ While Shōgun 將軍 and dominant political families' influence waxed and waned during this period, this concept of a singular Japan was to survive the Warring States period of the 15th and 16th centuries and eventually be further cemented in the Japanese imagination by Tokugawa Ieyasu's famous victory at Sekigahara in 1600.

Japan was not overwhelmed by Western cultural influence despite initial interactions with traders and missionaries in the 16th to 17th centuries. This was mostly attributable to the introduction of diplomatic isolationist policy (*sakoku* 鎖国) (1633 - 1853), which, with some minor exceptions, ensured there were few interactions between Japanese and foreigners. The Tokugawa Shogunate did allow and even promoted Chinese studies (*kangaku* 漢学), and to a lesser degree Dutch studies (*rangaku* 蘭学), which ensured that Japan was not completely isolated from the outside world. However, the manner in which this knowledge came to Japan during this period was inconsistent.⁹ While Chinese thought in particular had an impact on the social order of the time, adaptations to local conditions of foreign knowledge and cultural customs during the mostly peaceful Tokugawa era lead to the development of some very recognizable "Japanese" institutions, values and cultural artifacts that are still symbolically important today.

During the Tokugawa period, we see the Japanese attempt to balance traditional Eastern and Western knowledge. One of the earliest such examples was the Japanese receiving a medical text from Holland in 1774 (named the *Tafel Anatomia*) which to Japanese scholars better approximated human anatomy than did Chinese medical wisdom. This was but one example of knowledge transfer that led to the gradual questioning of Chinese knowledge.¹⁰ Around this time Chi-

nese learning started to lose the prime position it occupied in Japanese knowledge systems and as a key foreign cultural referent, and this was not simply because of the supposed “superiority” of Western knowledge in contrast with Eastern ideals and values. Around the mid-to-late Tokugawa period, the study of *kokugaku* (国学, National Study) amongst Japanese elites became more common. Scholarly reflections in the field of *kokugaku* explicitly imagined that the “natural” Japanese community was a pre-Chinese community which existed in a mystical “divine age”.¹¹

Chinese knowledge systems, especially Neo-Confucianism and Buddhism, were seen by the “disillusioned” late Tokugawa elite to be corrupt Chinese influences that underpinned the increasingly problematic Tokugawa social order. Special attention was paid to the uniqueness of Japanese language, religion (especially Shintō 神道), literature, history, and aesthetics (such as *mono no aware* 物の哀れ), and *kokugaku* scholars enjoyed some prestige in the early Meiji Restoration period.¹² This is important for later discussion as it shows that modern Japanese social and political identity was not a matter of switching between an East Asia–influenced worldview to a Western one, but was part of a conscious process of modernizing through identification with a nation-state on Japanese terms.

The impact of the West became much more forceful in the 19th century with the pivotal event of the arrival of Admiral Perry’s Black Ships in 1853. The political and symbolic impact of Admiral Perry’s arrival set off a chain reaction during the *bakumatsu* 幕末 interlude that, by destabilizing Japan and undermining the Shogunate’s authority, eventually led to the Meiji Restoration in 1868. While *kokugaku* scholars were not successful in intellectually displacing the influence of Confucian and other “Chinese” influences from Japanese culture, the rise in national consciousness in an increasingly complex international environment meant that the Japanese became more conscious of what they were appropriating during the years leading up and subsequent to the Meiji Restoration. Embodied in the

slogan *wakon yōsai* 和魂洋才 (Japanese learning for essence, Western learning for practice), the Japanese believed they could, in the same way they had with Chinese culture in previous centuries (previously embodied in the concept *wakon kansai* 和魂漢才), adapt and improve upon Western learning for local conditions.¹³

Areas where the Japanese did not accept wholesale Western knowledge include the political conceptualization of sovereignty. The place of the emperor as a Japanese Shintō spiritual authority within a communitarian cultural paradigm was not disputed. Despite this, Western-style political administration was well-received, as was a parliamentary system of government. In the development of a Western-style civil code, there is another divergence from “Western Learning”. While the Meiji-era criminal code was influenced by Western ideals of jurisprudence, the reformers appealed to Neo-Confucian values to maintain the family as the basic societal unit in the civil code, rather than the individual.¹⁴ To this day, Japan still maintains the *kōseki* 戸籍 system to track movements in births, marriages and death within families. Education was another area where Western methods were studied and employed, but the meaningfulness of education was connected to national, rather than individual, goals to appeal to Japanese communitarian values.¹⁵

Japan made a promising start in building a strong, independent nation in the Meiji period. *Fukoku kyōhei*¹⁶ 富国強兵 (rich country, strong army) was the rallying cry of the early Meiji period, and Japan appeared to have met these initial modernizing expectations. It had implemented a parliamentary system of government backed by a civil administration with many democratic features, and it had made progress in modernizing its economy. Japan’s military accomplishments in the mid-to-late Meiji period were especially significant for the development of national identity as, within ten years, Japan defeated both the historical “older brother”, China (1894-1895), and an increasingly menacing European imperialist power, Russia (1904-1905).

However, Japan is often seen going from combining the “best” of both civilizations to the “worst” of both, in the space of only thirty to forty years. The culmination of this process is seen in Japanese expansion into East Asia during World War II.¹⁷ A strong reform-minded state with a unified population governed by a “balanced central government”¹⁸ in terms of the relationship between the citizen and the parliamentary, executive, and judicial organs of state could be seen in early Meiji Japan. However, from the 1890s onwards, Japan became more unstable over time and authoritarian control manifested itself in public life among more liberal periods such as the Taisho Democracy period after World War I. Authoritarian control was eventually consolidated in the events subsequent to the Manchurian incident in 1931.¹⁹

Prior to this, there was much borrowing from Western, particularly German, models which offered the Japanese ways of reconciling some of the trickier issues of the Eastern-Western value trade-off that beguiled Japanese scholars of economics, politics, and philosophy. A new national polity was formed and strengthened to a point where Japan could match Western colonial powers – which was a government goal as embodied in a oft-heard rallying cry *oitsuke, oikose* 追いつけ、追い越せ (catch up, overtake).²⁰ However, eventually this evolution came full circle and certain elites and factions in society began to invoke traditional motifs against the West and in favor of greater authoritarian control and expansion into East Asia. These motifs included obviously native ones such as Shintō and Bushidō (武士道), but also appeals to Confucianism and East Asian solidarity were not uncommon. Japan came to strongly (re)associate its international identity with that of being an East Asian nation. Japan’s rapid development gave it the confidence to propose a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere in the 1930s with Japan as the self-appointed leader and defender. The military actions ostensibly taken to support the creation of this Sphere were considered essential to resist colonial Western powers’ incursions into Asia. Ultimately the

aim was to defend Japan’s, and the rest of Asia’s, cultural, political, and economic interests against aggressive colonial powers that did not understand nor respect the cultural traditions and history of East Asia.²¹

However, as can be seen in the sometimes divisive debate between scholars in the post-Meiji Restoration era, there was no clear consensus on where Japan’s cultural future lay.²² East Asia was often considered backwards compared to Japan by Nativist and Shintō scholars²³. Even supposedly enlightened individuals such as Fukuzawa Yukichi 福澤諭吉, an important post-Restoration cultural elite in the 1880s²⁴, often referred to the backwardness of the Asian mainland, saying: “Our immediate policy, therefore, should be to lose no time in waiting for the enlightenment of our neighbouring countries in order to join them in developing Asia, but rather to depart from their ranks and cast our lot with the civilized countries of the West.”²⁵

Later in 1937, (Prince) Konoe Fumimaro 近衛文麿, another important cultural elite, would also bring up Asian backwardness in the context of Japan’s own national mission.²⁶ In articulating the idea of an *East Asian* Japan, Japanese elites often simultaneously embraced and disparaged an East Asian identity.

Nevertheless, the superior essence of collective “Eastern” morality and emphasis on the family was overtly emphasized at the time, as were specifically Japanese cultural memes and traditions such as *yamato-damashii* (大和魂) and Bushidō.²⁷ Like similar movements of the time in China, traditional values were considered superior to Western ways of thinking. Despite cultural and political elites having trumpeted the need to “leave” Asia for Europe (*datsu-a nyū-ō* 脱亜入欧) in the late 19th century, discourse seemed to go back, reemphasizing entry back into Asia through the *kō-a ron* 興亜論 (thought about staying with Asia) discussions in the early 1900s. Amidst increasing nationalist sentiment surrounding the acquisition of Taiwanese and Korean colonies from Russia and the Qing dynasty in China²⁸, there was also significant reac-

tion against the West's political and ideological hypocrisy. This was due to the actions of colonial powers in colonized nations, or the actions on the international stage of these powers, best embodied in the offense caused to Japan during the Paris Peace Conference when Japan's racial equality clause was rejected.

These strategic and philosophical debates seem to be a reflection of often incoherent developments in Japanese society in the post-Meiji Restoration period up to World War II. Starting from the parliamentary Meiji period, proceeding through to the pluralistic Taisho Democracy period²⁹, up to the eventual dictatorial World War II government, Japan was unstable. There was much scholarly "anguish" and debate in this period, which reflected the anguish of society as a whole, and which was beset by uneven economic development and political disempowerment as well as intellectual disunity.³⁰ There was significant disagreement over how to best address "in a Japanese way" the developing social and foreign policy problems, which presented a challenge to the ongoing development of a coherent Japanese national identity.³¹ The intellectual, socio-economic and spiritual malaise, combined with perceived international threats (and disparagement), and the impact of the Great Depression on an already export-dependent society led Japan to seek comfort in the dictatorial and militaristic developments of the 1930s. Japan believed it could not trust the Western world completely, and soon found out that the West's overbearing and often brutal treatment of its East Asian "siblings" (as well as its own) was going to create seemingly irreconcilable problems in the East Asian region after the end of World War II.

World War II and the Cold War: Japan as a Western country?

In addition to Japan's patronizing attitude towards East Asian peoples prior to World War II, Japan's actions during the war introduced a problematic historical element into Japan's relationship with the East Asian mainland. Japanese soldiers committed various atrocities during the

war which were etched into the historical memories of peoples throughout Northeast and Southeast Asia. The Korean "comfort women" and the Nanjing Massacre are some of the most enduring flashpoints for Japanese political and cultural relations with Korea and China. While Japan justified its intervention in East Asia by way of an obligation to help its "underdeveloped" neighbours, the outcome was anything but helpful for Japan's relations with East Asian nations in the post-World War II period.

The post-World War II period introduced an additional variable into Japan's ongoing positional dilemma between East and West. After the war, Japan came under the occupation of the US Allied Forces until the San Francisco Peace Treaty was signed in 1951. Even after the occupation, however, Japan could still be counted a loyal ally of the United States and, together, they served as a powerful bulwark against the "Cold War's East", be it the Soviet Union or Communist China. Japan's vital positioning in the Cold War theatre was problematic because it aligned Japan with the US and other former colonial powers directly against communist countries in Asia, such as North Korea, China and Vietnam. Japan became vitally dependent on the US security guarantee while it rebuilt its economy, a strategic arrangement that came to be enshrined in the Yoshida Doctrine.

The post-World War II era was an unusual period for Japan's broader international identity. For much of this time, Japan had economically been considered part of the developed nations of the West by both Western and Japanese scholars.³² Japan however did not merely follow Western models for modernization and development as can be seen in the "Japanese Economic Miracle" which started with the income doubling plan of 1960.³³ The narrative of post-World War II development in Japan heralds the successful combination of Western style capitalist and constitutional political systems with a strong centralized state apparatus. Collectively-orientated labour relations and a hard-working "nationalist spirit" also purportedly enabled the

Japanese to prosper in the immediate post-war period. For some time, this Japanese model was seen as an admirable confluence of Eastern social values and Western political economy.³⁴

Western, Japanese and many East Asian elites came to see Japan as the desired model for civilizational progress in East Asia. Although economically Western and acting in line with Western security interests during the Cold War, Japan was defined as an inherently Asian society that could be an inspiration to other Asian countries.³⁵ However, these definitions of Japan's cultural dispositions were often opportunistic. For example, in the 1960s Western and Japanese modernization theorists argued that Japan due to its success was more culturally Western than other Asian countries. However, when Japan started suffering economically, its "Asianness" came to be the causal explanation for its deterioration due to the collective, inefficient and socially immature nature of Asian nations, including Japan.³⁶

1990s and beyond: the return to Asia?

These discussions over Japanese identity would radically change due to the combined effects of three major developments in the late 1980s and early 1990s. First, the popping of the "bubble economy" following 30 years of remarkable societal and economic development led to the end of the Japanese economic miracle and undermined Japan's status as an economic superpower. This limited Japan's capacity to influence world events through its economic clout alone. Second, the post-Cold War transition to a US-dominated international security order after the unification of Germany and dissolution of the Soviet Union took away Japan's pivotal importance (to the US at least) in global security politics and its attendant benefits. Lastly, the economic rise of Singapore, Hong Kong, and newly democratic Taiwan and South Korea and later a market-orientated China, in addition to a developing East Asian "regional" consciousness, has forced Japan to reconsider the value of having closer ties with East Asian nations.³⁷

There is a growing sense that Japan's future

is inextricably linked to East Asia politically, economically, and culturally. Japan, rather than being a global economic superpower, is now imagined to be a regional middle power within East Asia by foreign policy elites and citizens.³⁸ A 2006 Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs poll found that 77.9% of the public favored improved relations with China despite the tension between the two countries at the time.³⁹ Prime Minister Hatoyama has recently proposed an East Asian community with China, South Korea, and Japan at the center.⁴⁰ There have also been considerable attempts through multilateral institutions to promote "confidence building" exercises in the form of joint military exercises.⁴¹ The next section goes into further detail on some of the changes in Japan's political, economic and cultural posture towards East Asia.

There have been major political and economic developments in Japan's relationship with East Asia since the late 1980s, particularly in the regional geopolitical and geoeconomic domains where South Korea, China, Taiwan, and the ASEAN countries have risen in economic and political power. Japan also is increasingly questioning US willingness or ability to address those security concerns most important to the Japanese government and the public, such as the North Korean nuclear program and the kidnapping controversy.⁴² Japan has also turned its attention to supporting the development of an East Asian regional order, and importantly, one that might exclude the US. Japan has traditionally been reluctant to enter into any regional political or economic grouping that did not include the US, preferring broad supra-regional mechanisms such as APEC.⁴³ Recently however, Japan has been an active supporter of multilateral institution-building in the post-Cold War era in East Asia, as best embodied in the East Asian Summit which is based on the ASEAN+6 grouping. Financial collaboration and trade and investment between countries in the East Asia area and Japan have in particular been of great importance.

Economic integration in East Asia

Aside from the interactions between growing financial and stock markets in the East Asia area, a couple of key initiatives demonstrate Japan's dedication to creating a stable and strong financial order in East Asia. The most notable recent Japanese intervention in the East Asian economic sphere was the Miyazawa Plan, a policy produced by Japan and coordinated by the IMF to help countries suffering from financial liquidity issues during what was called the 1998-1999 East Asia financial crisis. Japan provided up to US\$40 billion in aid and loans to adversely affected countries in the area, including South Korea, Indonesia, and Thailand. It has been recognized that Japan's intervention, along with China's discipline, was a major reason that the crisis did not worsen for both East Asia and the world beyond. It also showed that countries in East Asia could resolve their own issues, and emboldened some countries to put forward an idea of an Asian Monetary Fund outside of the ambit of the IMF where "East Asian" models of social, political and economic development could be more flexibly applied.⁴⁴ While the US successfully pressured Japan to not go ahead with this idea, this has not stopped East Asian countries from pursuing other financial collaborations. In particular, currency default swaps have become popular. The expansion of the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI), which was originally set up after the East Asian Financial Crisis is another notable example of increased financial cooperation.⁴⁵

In terms of trade relations, Japan's imports and exports with ASEAN+3 countries have increased rapidly over the last 15 years.⁴⁶ Imports from East Asian developing economies continue to flow into Japan, but now Japan no longer only accepts imports from East Asia, it also produces high quality products for the growing middle class in East Asia. Indeed, China now receives more Japanese exports than does the US, signifying the crucial importance of the Japan-China trade relationship.⁴⁷ While the "decoupling" theory of potential East Asian economic independence from the US economy was shown to

be exaggerated by the recent recession⁴⁸, it is interesting to note that it took a rare financial collapse for the impact of the financial crisis to be fully felt in Asia.

Japan, along with other countries in the area, is not stopping at merely increasing the volume of trade either. There is a legitimate push to liberalize trading regimes within East Asia by removing many tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade. Japan's own flagship proposal, CEPEA⁴⁹, was approved for further study at the 2007 East Asia Summit. Other studies for an East Asian Free Trade Agreement (EAFTA) have suggested that GDP returns to all countries due to increased efficiency in trading would be significant and the Economic Research Institute for Asia (ERIA) have also reached the same conclusion.⁵⁰ Currently, Japan has signed or concluded FTAs with Singapore, Malaysia, Chile, Brunei, Mexico, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Switzerland.⁵¹ Samuels, in describing Japan's reorientation towards East Asia, makes the argument that the Japanese government and large Japanese companies have been very deliberate in reforming their economy after the brutal 1990s by making Japan East Asia "ready" to take advantage of rising opportunities while maintaining Japan's economic security.⁵²

Finally, due to Japan's significant positive private asset balance (both consumer and corporate), Japan has been of extreme importance in the economic development of East Asia through Foreign Direct Investment (FDI).⁵³ In addition to development loans through the East Asian Development Bank, the amount of private-investment FDI which Japan has poured into Asia in the last 15 years has been a significant factor in the creation of regional production networks: parts of Japanese goods may be made in one country, refined in another, assembled in yet another, and then sold in Japan, or under a Japanese brand to overseas markets. Not only are regions becoming economically connected, but various joint ventures have been initiated. With ownership of factories and service companies being increasingly shared, this suggests that human

resources are being transferred as well as skills and technology.⁵⁴

***Social issues coordination
and the environment***

Japan has an extensive “shadow ecology” in East Asia where environmental impacts of activities undertaken in Japan are felt beyond its own borders.⁵⁵ This is not just air pollution, but also domestic consumption demands that have an impact on the environment in other countries through fishing, mineral extraction, deforestation, and shrimp farming. If Japan wishes to be viewed as genuine in its re-engagement with Asia, then it is essential that it be seen to take the impact of its economy on other countries seriously. Climate change is of great concern to the East Asian region, with many of the countries being islands or littoral in nature. These environmental problems have been given more importance over the last few years in particular, and at fora like the East Asian Summit there have been joint declarations on climate change, energy security, and alternative energies to try and address these issues.⁵⁶ Japan has been working with China, whose own shadow ecology is an environmental challenge for the region, by increasing Overseas Development Aid (ODA) and technology transfer to China to help increase the environmental efficiency of their economy.⁵⁷ In addition, the Japan-Vietnam relationship is developing well, with Japan pledging to support the construction of a high-speed rail network and nuclear power plants in Vietnam.⁵⁸

Another dimension to Japan’s relationship with East Asia is the “human security” aspect. Illegal immigration, and drug trafficking have been problems for the region. Since the late 1980s, Japan has taken on a greater and more nuanced role in engaging with East Asian countries to limit the damage. The National Police Agency, through such commitments as the US\$95 million to anti-trafficking activities between 2002 and 2006, has shown Japan to be taking unprecedented steps to coordinate with police organizations in other countries to tackle these issues.⁵⁹

Furthermore, anti-piracy efforts in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand have become a genuine concern for Japan, which is heavily dependent on maritime trade.⁶⁰ To address this issue in 2006, under the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships (ReCAAP), an information sharing center was set up in Singapore. The Japan Coast Guard, operating within Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, has been dispatched to the area and has added to the capacity and effectiveness of these anti-piracy efforts.

Recently, Japanese ODA has also shifted its strategic focus to East Asia. Through the Japan International Cooperation Agency, Japan has attempted through its ODA to invest in smarter ways than before, often aligning its ODA with private-sector efforts to ensure the desired success for the regional communities is achieved, particularly in environmental protection.⁶¹ Two specific examples are Japan working with China to improve its air quality through monetary and technical assistance, and with Thailand, who have expertise in reversing deforestation, in order to address the deforestation problem in Indochina. Japan’s ODA in Asia has been strategically designed to not only improve and save lives, but also to build infrastructure and sustainability.⁶²

Cultural connections in East Asia

Increased cultural interactions between Japan and East Asia are also important. They are an essential prerequisite for Japan to develop an East Asian identity, as well as an essential part of resolving some of the lingering distrust and antipathy towards Japan. Pan-Asian NGOs have increased over time, as have educational exchanges to and from Japan, in addition to a marked increase in scientific and technological collaboration and Track II activities since the 1990s.⁶³ Popular Japanese cultural productions such as manga, anime, convenience stores, food and movies have also found lucrative niches in the wider East Asian market, especially since South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, and China have relaxed censorship around references to Japan or

Japanese culture since the 1980s.⁶⁴ At the same time we have seen a rise in Japanese interest in popular culture from Taiwan, South Korea, and even China. Asian languages such as Chinese in Japan have also seen an increase in popularity at universities and high schools.⁶⁵ Japanese television also shows that interest in East Asia has broadened beyond elite diplomatic and academic circles, as stories on East Asia are abundant, and many popular *tarento* タレント (on-screen entertainers) have East Asian heritage or are actively learning East Asian languages.

Up until now I have described a number of ways in which Japan is trying to increase its engagement with the East Asian region. We see a number of political, economic, and social networks developing between East Asia and Japan. We also see Japan begin to rethink its relationship with the US and enter into dialogue with other East Asian countries on how to address pressing economic, social, environmental, and security concerns. Furthermore, concepts such as “Asian Values” have been discussed by scholars and East Asian elites, with many of these values derived from Confucian, Buddhist, or simply communitarian features of East Asian societies.⁶⁶ These developments show that there may be potential for a set of common values to develop in the East Asia region, which some scholars and East Asian elites hope may underpin a regional identity in the future.

Conclusion

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, there is a prevalent scholarly and media meme that suggests Japan will continue to re-engage with East Asia in the future. Based on the above discussion it would seem that there is good justification for taking notice of this meme. Real world developments show that Japan is genuinely starting to integrate into the region. Furthermore, there have been explicit statements from the government and from Japanese elites on the need for further engagement with East Asia for strategic reasons. The rational self-interest component for Japan increasing its integration into

East Asia is clear. With its economic problems, the US losing leverage in East Asia, and the rising influence of China, on a geopolitical level it is in Japan’s interests to manage both of these two key relationships, preferably with other middle powers in the region. This will ensure that there are ways of mediating conflicts between the superpowers so that one is not forced to choose one side or another as happened under the bipolar Cold War system.⁶⁷ Also, as many ASEAN countries are now rapidly developing, Japan has a chance to help shape the development of these countries to create a more stable political and economic security environment. Related to this, social and cultural exchange may help Japan and nations in the area go beyond the divisive disputes over historical culpability. Japan also has a strategic opportunity to revitalise its own economy through economic integration.

Together with the already noted increases in intellectual and cultural exchange, is it therefore inevitable that Japan will again identify with East Asia and rely on it for its political, economic, and cultural wellbeing? While there has been conscious appropriation of East Asian elite and popular culture since the early Yamato period in Japan, the relationship between Japan and the mainland in the Japanese imagination has been one of intermittent collaboration, conflict, and disinterest. It is undeniable that Japan is growing economically and politically closer to East Asia, that its national identity was *originally* shaped by interactions with the East Asian mainland, and that Japan also has many interests in common with its East Asian neighbors. However, Japan’s national identity is imagined in a way that its international identity is unlikely to affiliate itself strongly with either an “Eastern” or “Western” world. Indeed, Iwabuchi argues that “Japan’s modern national identity has always been imagined in an asymmetrical totalizing triad between ‘Asia’, ‘the West’, and ‘Japan’.”⁶⁸

As discussed earlier, the field of *kokugaku* had a significant impact on the early “imagination” of the Japanese nation-state and identified the “original” Japanese community as being “pre-

Chinese” in origin, and disillusioned Japanese elites actively disassociated Japan from East Asia in the early Meiji era. However, through the late Meiji and Taisho eras we see similar misgivings around Westernization and the cultural malaise it brought with it, best embodied culturally in the work of Natsume Soseki 夏目漱石, and politically in the outrage around the rejection of the racial equality clause at the Paris Peace Conference. While Japan swung back towards an East Asian identity leading up to World War II, it was solidly aligned political and economically with the West in its aftermath.

Since the Japanese recession in the early 1990s it is not at all unusual to hear both Japanese and Western commentators again lamenting the moral and economic malaise that has taken hold of contemporary Japanese society.⁶⁹ This is important because discussions of moral and economic problems in Japan have traditionally led to vigorous discussion of Japan’s international role, national identity, and strategies to reinvigorate Japanese society. It may appear that a panacea for these problems may be found in Japan embracing East Asia and taking on a more explicit East Asian identity. However, I would argue that Japan is actually re-engaging with its traditionally ambiguous and sometimes ambivalent relationship with East Asia. Japanese have always considered themselves as “existing at the outer fringes of a world cultural sphere”.⁷⁰ Perhaps the distinct modern challenge for Japan will not be

full integration into one region or another, but the ability to exist on the outer of two dominant world cultural spheres instead of one.

Scholars should remember that Japan has always had an adaptable and flexible approach to the process of political, economic and cultural absorption, and its national identity is based on a strong sense of internal connectedness and external difference. Not only will Japan forge connections where it is advantageous, it will also readily adapt social, economic and political models where they are shown to be successful, while abandoning those that it sees as practically or morally bankrupt. This is not to argue that traditional or modern Japanese national identity is simplistically calculating. Rather, when considering the role national identity plays in its international identity, we need to consider the “constructive” but independent nature of this identity, and its desire to use and adapt that which will enrich its own culture and society. This should give scholars pause as, while Japan owes much to East Asia, there are significant limitations on trying to bring Japan into that regional grouping through the cultivation of an East Asian identity. Rather than be overly concerned that Japan is “returning to Asia”, and turning away from the West, we should watch with interest as Japan re-engages with its historically ambiguous and inconsistent identification with the mainland, and navigates new territory between two civilizations that have contributed so much to its own.



ENDNOTES

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