Rethinking Japan's Identity and International Role

An Intercultural Perspective

Susanne Klien

Routledge
New York & London

Published in 2002 by
Routledge
29 West 35th Street
New York, NY 10001

Published in Great Britain by
Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane
London EC4P 4EE

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group
Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Klien, Susanne.
Rethinking Japan's identity and international role : an intercultural perspective / Susanne Klien.
p. cm. — (East Asia)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-415-93438-9
1. Japan—Foreign relations—1868– 2. Japan—Foreign relations—Asia.
3. Asia—Foreign relations—Japan. 4. Japan—History—Philosophy. I. Title.
II. East Asia (New York, N.Y.)
DS881.96.K57 2002
327.52—dc21 2002017788

INTRODUCTION

AIMS

THIS THESIS PRESENTS A STUDY OF JAPAN'S IDENTITY IN CULTURAL, POLITICAL AND historical terms and its implications for Japan's foreign policy and international role from the mid-19th century until today. How the Japanese self-perception of the country's role has changed throughout history is a particular focus of this study. While there have been numerous studies about these issues by Western scholars, few have taken Japan's point of view into consideration. The Japanese domestic debate about Japan's international role and international contribution has been intense and vivid; in other words there is an abundance of material. The problem, however, seems to be that a large part of this national debate has been carried out in the Japanese language and is, except for a few articles, not accessible in English. This is the reason why I have made an effort to base my analysis and reflections essentially on the Japanese self-perception and on Japanese materials. In other words, I have made a conscious effort in this study to overcome the Eurocentrist tradition and to present the Japanese perspective from an intercultural, universalist point of view.

Since this approach makes it necessary to incorporate knowledge from a wide range of academic disciplines besides political science—from Japanese studies, philosophy, psychology, sociology and history—I would like to point out here that the aim of this thesis is neither to present a survey of the evolution of Japan's international role in purely historical terms nor to pursue studies about Japan's international role scenarios from an exclusively political science point of view. It goes without saying that such an interdisciplinary approach involves opportunities as well as problems.

METHODS

The investigation presented here covers three main thematic areas: the above-mentioned identity issue, Japan's relations with Asia and Japan's foreign policy as a civilian power. Although each of these three pillars are individually complex in nature, they are all mutually related. Since Japan combines qualities that make it both Western as well as Asian, engaging in debates about Japan's identity has become an essential need and a national pastime for the Japanese. The question how Japan defines itself in relation to its Asian neighbours is dealt with in the section about Japan's identity issue as well as in the historical survey in Chapter Three. It is also discussed in the context of Japan's contemporary approach to historical issues (rekishi ninshiki) in Chapter Four. What makes Japan's position in Asia so controversial is that on the one hand, Japan has managed to be seen as an economic role-model; on the other hand, however, due to the phenomenon of "auto-Orientalism" (Befu), Japan has not been accepted as a genuine member of the Asian community. In other words, since Japan has made a conscious effort after its successful modernization process to conceive itself as a Western nation, popular notions in Asia maintain that Japan does not belong to Asia (whatever the definition of "Asia" may be).

The civilian power concept was introduced by the German political scientist Hanns W. Maull at the beginning of the 1990s. This concept envisions a state which differs radically from the traditional Realist image of the state in the sense that "power" is no longer necessarily associated with military power. Due to its geographical and historical circumstances, Japan has often been seen as the ideal embodiment of such a civilian power. After tracing earlier instances when a purely mercantilist role was conceived for Japan, I investigate whether and to what extent the notion of Japan as a civilian power exists in Japan's recent domestic debate throughout the 1990s. By means of a systematic qualitative content analysis of selected Japanese journals I conceptualize four different groups of thought in the contemporary domestic debate about what foreign policy Japan should pursue: Centrists, Independentists, Pragmatic Multilateralists and Pacifists. Although the unsettling and fluid conditions in which both Japan's domestic politics and international politics find themselves since the end of the Cold War make a systematic categorization rather difficult, a clear picture of the individual groups of post-Cold War thought on Japan's international role emerges in Chapter 4.

STRUCTURE

This study consists of five parts. In Chapter 1 the theories to be applied are briefly discussed and methodological issues are broached. Chapter 2 presents a discussion of Japan's ambiguous identity and related issues, giving a survey of how Japan defined its identity throughout history. In Chapter 3 the histor-

ical survey, the evolution of Japan's international role and the way Japan has encountered foreign nations since the mid-19th century and its implications for the contemporary debate about what course post-Cold War Japan should take with regard to its foreign policy are explored. The main purpose of this historical survey is not only to give a background of the way Japan's conceptualization of its international role has evolved in the course of time, but primarily to illuminate the continuity of Japan's past and present. Chapter 4 presents a systematic qualitative content analysis of Japan's domestic debate in the 1990s about what foreign policy it should pursue and what international role it should adopt. On the basis of a systematic qualitative analysis of selected Japanese journals, four different groups of thought emerge and are conceptualized. Each group is then studied and evaluated according to concrete criteria: What are the essential values of the individual group? What are its visions with regard to Japan's alliance with the US? What are its suggestions about constitutional revision? What international role does it conceive for Japan? What does its approach to Japan's past look like?

Referring to the insights that are gained in this section, it is then examined whether and to what extent each group supports the notion of Japan as a civilian power. In Chapter 5 a number of potential scenarios for Japan in the 21st century and a summary of the main findings of this study are presented.

PROBLEMS

As stated above, every approach involves both chances and risks. Since the topic and the scope of this thesis is quite extensive, sifting through the enormous abundance of materials available, particularly on the issue of Japan's identity, means having to decide what is relevant and what is acceptable. Quite a considerable part of the material I came across in the course of this sifting process, was written in a semi-academic, sometimes even polemical, style. Second, the rather opaque style many Japanese scholars and politicians demonstrate sometimes make a valid evaluation difficult. Third, the "language problem" turned out to be considerable: literally deciphering Japanese texts, determining their literal and their figurative meanings and transferring them into comprehensible English texts sometimes proved a Sisyphean task.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I ACKNOWLEDGE WITH GRATITUDE THE ADVICE AND ASSISTANCE THAT I HAVE RECEIVED from a wide range of persons in universities and research organizations in both Austria and Japan. This study would not have been possible without the many valuable comments, ideas and information they provided in personal conversations, discussions and correspondence. I would like to express my gratitude to the Japanese Ministry of Education for its financial support. I would like to thank both of my academic supervisors, Helmut Kramer and Franz M. Wimmer for their patience, support and their valuable advice. I am also grateful to Hanns W. Maull for his advice in the very early stages of this study, to Nakanishi Terumasa and Kishima Takako of Kyôto University, and to Edward Newman of United Nations University, Tôkyo. Last, but not least, I would like to express my deep gratitude to my family and friends for their wonderful support, humour and encouragement.

Next I would like to thank Anna G. Levine and Virginia Bertolini for their enormous help: without their patient proof-reading skills I would not have managed to cope with the traps of the English language. Finally, I would like to express my thanks to the editing staff at Routledge. Although this study was not possible without the help of the people mentioned above, all responsibility for its contents rests with me.

A Note on the Text

All English translations of the Japanese sources were made by the author, unless stated otherwise. Since word-to-word translations tend to be misleading due to the discrepancies in grammatical and conceptual structure between the Japanese and the English language, I have put priority on reproducing the essential meaning rather than preserving the structure of the statement. As regards Japanese names, they have been reproduced in the Japanese order, i. e. family name first, first name second.

ABBREVIATIONS

AMF	Asian Monetary Fund
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
BC	Before Christ
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
EAEC	East Asian Economic Caucus
EC	European Community
EPA	Economic Planning Agency
EU	European Union
G-7	Group of Seven
G-8	Group of Eight
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
GHQ	General Headquarters
GNP	Gross National Product
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IRAA	Imperial Rule Assistance Association
JCP	Japan Communist Party
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
JOCV	Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers
LDC	less developed country
LDP	Liberal Democratic Party
LP	Liberal Party
MDB	multilateral development bank
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
OCF	Japan Overseas Cooperation Fund

ODA	Official Development Aid
OECD	Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development
PKF	Peace-keeping Forces
PKO	Peace-keeping Operations
SCAP	Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers
SDF	Self-Defence Forces
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNCPCR	United Nations International Covenant on Political and Civil Rights
US	United States

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Rethinking Japan's Identity and International Role

CHAPTER ONE

THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION

THIS THESIS PRESENTS A STUDY OF JAPAN'S INTERNATIONAL ROLE WITH A SPECIAL focus on its historical evolution. To that end the following three pillars will lay the necessary theoretical foundations: One, the notions of historical and political identity and a discussion of the ambivalent shapes they have taken in Japan; two, the regional context, an examination of Japan's situation with respect to Asian history as a whole, and finally the third pillar, the "civilian power" concept, as described by Hanns W. Maull. Each of the three pillars will be explained in further detail below. While each of these three aspects will be discussed separately, one has to keep in mind that they are all mutually related.

1.1. IDENTITY DEBATE

Japan's position as an Asian country that joined the ranks of the industrialized Western world at a relatively early stage preconditioned it for being faced with the very fundamental question to which continent it truly belonged. Having a clearly Confucian cultural heritage from China, maintaining its Shintoist traditions and having been influenced more or less strongly at times by the West in various fields, Japan could be seen as the epitome of the country that is being torn between its various sources of origin and root. This basic ambiguity that has never been clarified completely has most probably given rise to the popular "nihonjin" discourse, a discourse about the essence of the Japanese as a people and nation. It has been pointed out many times by foreign observers, journalists and researchers that no other country indulges in this practice of self-observation and self-analysis with as much enthusiasm and insistency as Japan. One could describe this discourse as a public self-dissection at various levels, be it through articles published in newspapers tar-

geted at the man in the street, books written for people with higher education or academic papers. This discourse which has been going on for many decades now can only be interpreted as a sign of Japan's patent frustration with the difficulty of coming to terms with its identity problem. An interesting point is that this discourse has commonly been directed at and therefore in a way determined by the foreign culture considered to be the most important for Japan at the time[1]; the "nihonjin" discourse can thus be taken as a reflection of Japan's negative "other", i.e. an examination of self modelled on supposedly entirely different others.

Apart from the purely emotional implication, however, there is the aspect of identity as a precondition for diplomacy; in other words, it is no exaggeration to say that a country needs to construct a fairly clear picture of its identity and values in order to be able to play a role at the international level—and to be taken seriously in exercising this role.[2] While Japan was putting all its efforts into reconstructing its post-war economy and enjoying the benefits of its security arrangements with the United States, deliberations about national identity were clearly in retreat. As soon as the Cold War era ended, however, and Japan had reached a certain level of saturation in its economic development, the well-known problematique was back on people's minds again. The familiar debate about the nation's characteristics, unique points, and last but not least, international role and tasks was taken up again.

After having argued that clarifying one's identity is essential for practising an international role, I will change directions to make a contention which may appear to contradict what I have said before, but which in fact is just a point on the opposite end of the scale: the wilful determination of a nation's identity may in some cases be misused for distinguishing one's country from an external threat, whatever its form. This threat, in philosophical terms, has been referred to as the "other" as opposed to the "self". This abuse of the national identity concept for the national interest in the Realist sense is exactly what happened in the Japan of the 1930s, to give one example, when the "kokutai" concept was mentioned with ever increasing frequency to suggest that the Japanese people, sharing a divine origin of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, were united in the framework of the "kokutai" which could be described as a sort of family state with the emperor as the father of the Japanese nation.

When referring to the clarification of national identity, I certainly do not have this kind of wilful distinction of a nation in mind that is carried out primarily for setting some border with the "other". But still, the phenomenon of laying down one's (imaginary) self for the sake of saving one's skin from outer threat can be detected in Japanese history again and again, with the "other" varying depending on the particular time period. Concrete cases of this phenomenon will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter 2. It goes with-

out saying that otherness as the essential criterium for the definition of "self" is not unique to Japanese history; it is a phenomenon that can be found even in countries and—at a smaller level—in individuals with the most varied cultural backgrounds and at all times. For example, Augustine seemed to have experienced the phenomenon of "otherness" when he found it necessary to propagate the negative "other" of paganism in order to consolidate the "self" of Christianity. The idealized (in the sense that the negative aspects were emphasized to let the self appear in a more advantageous way) "other" was thus evidently essential for the creation of the Christian "self".[3] It seems to be a basic need of human existence to delineate one's own territory or "self" against that of fellow human beings or "others". It is for this reason that Connolly's definition of the concept of "identity" seems plausible enough:

> An identity is established in relation to a series of differences that have become socially recognized. These differences are essential to its being. If they did not coexist as differences, it would not exist in its distinctness and solidity.[4]

To put it more drastically, "self" cannot exist without "other". Even if concrete information about that "other" is not available or available only in a very limited way, myths and images about it tend to be created sooner or later. Dale argues as follows:

> The more distant the country, the greater is the temptation to extend the submerged landscape of private fantasy into the hearsay reaches of an exotic geography, to populate it with creatures of the imagination whose existence is otherwise rendered improbable by the dulling pressures of a known and banal reality. The mind abhors the vacuum, and where facts are in short supply, myth stands ever ready to cast its narrative nets over the yawning gaps.[5]

Apart from this general human phenomenon of setting some kind of border to delineate the territory of one's personality, the "self-other" problematique is of particular importance in Japanese society in light of the existence of the concept of "soto" (outside) and "uchi" (inside). The distinction between one's domain and what does not belong to that domain has been a well-established one in Japanese society.[6]

Seen against this background, it hardly comes as a surprise that the main aim of the aforementioned *nihonjinron* is to define Japanese identity in terms of difference or autonomy from the West or China, depending on which of them represented the relevant "other" at the time. One could also see Japan's identity dilemma as a struggle between the forces of particularism (emphasis on Japan's uniqueness) or relativism and universalism:

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