

INTRODUCTION

Myth, History and Contemporary Politics in Japan

Jocelyn O. CELERO

Issue Editor

Associate Professor, Asian Center

University of the Philippines Diliman

jocelero@up.edu.ph

This special issue showcases papers that articulate the link between mythology, history and politics in contemporary Japan. The contributions in this special issue were derived mainly from the entries submitted to the Japanese Studies Research Competition, an annual event co-organized by the Asian Center and The Japan Foundation Manila, and were complemented by other Japan-themed essays.

Engaging Japan and its place in Asia and the world through the interplay between myth, history and politics is both relevant and timely in an infodemic era where we are constantly challenged to distinguish between fact and fiction. Myths are narratives and representations that function as popular and political discourses on a national identity (Burgess 2010). Carol Gluck prefers the term “mythistory” to emphasize how myth and history are reconfigured in literature, multimedia, and museums in order to construct a national memory that transcends generations (Gluck 1990). This conflation of contradictory and fossilized clichés about the nation are etched in the imagination of the outside world. For instance, in Angela Louise Rosario’s article, the images of female domesticity in the newspaper *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, which depicted the inferiority of Japanese women over their American counterparts and of Japan over the US, were circulated

to justify American liberation. Shinzo Hayase's "The Continuing Japanese Myth on "Benguet Migrants"" illustrates that in museums and memorials in Baguio City, northern Philippines, the sacrifices of Japanese emigres to serve the Japanese empire were overstated, while the "false image" of Japan as a superior nation became an accepted fact.

The time-starved illusion of a unified nation remains a political issue fervently arousing contention about the nature of contemporary Japan, its place in Asia and its vision for the world. Mico Galang's article, for example, shows Japan's role as a diplomatic power, forging a strategic partnership with small powers like the Philippines through aligning with the current international order, extending capacity-building efforts, and contributing to ASEAN-led multilateral engagements. Indeed, post-WWII, Japan has proven itself to the Philippines and the rest of Southeast Asia through its reconciliation and development initiatives amidst the persistence of collective memory of war and varying degrees of historical antagonism in the region. Thus, there is compelling reason to periodically assess the (un)changing political discourse on Japan's national identity, given recurring debates on constitutional and historical revisionism that may implicate its pursuit of a trust-based bi/multilateral cooperation.

The remaining articles offer vital lessons for researchers studying Japanese history and politics. First and foremost is exercising reflexivity matters in relating Japan with other societies and polities that must inevitably evolve with time for the sake of survival and progress. Critically examining Japan entails spotting even the most incremental sociopolitical changes that may have cracked open new directions for policymaking. For instance, in Samantha Chikiamco's essay, the current COVID-19 pandemic should be seen as an opportune time for Japan to revise its antiquated views and norms of gender. In order to fully address the pervasive health, economic, and social disparities that continuously invisibilize Japanese women, 21st-century Japan must adopt policies that promote gender diversity and inclusion.

Treating the divergence between imagined and real Japan with sheer introspection, four Asian Center students regard their participation in the 2019 Matsushita Konnosuke Cultural Exchange Program in the Kansai region as a form of enlightenment. Their travel accounts suggest that reliance on the imagination, which exoticizes Japan and its people, is partly a byproduct of their limited social contact and historical knowledge. The latter, meanwhile, is a notable outcome of their week-long accumulation of first-hand cultural experiences which allowed for verifying (or otherwise) long-held imaginings about the nation. No longer complacent with convenient yet romanticized representations, these Filipino students brought home ideas and memories of Japan that are, in Faith Ong's words, "less unique than initially thought, but not less reflective of Japanese character."

The second lesson that can be drawn from this special issue is that in a global community bound by increasing interdependence and shared modernity, Japan's national history can no longer be treated in isolation from Asia and the rest of the world. Maria Cynthia Barriga's review of Greg Dvorak's *Coral and Concrete: Remembering Kwajalein Atoll between Japan, America, and the Marshall Islands* prescribes "bringing numerous disconnected stories back into the larger collective narrative" through "re-membering" the dismembered histories. Documenting the multilayered narratives re/connect localities with Japan, Barriga's review coheres with Hayase's recommendation towards mixed blood Japanese-Filipinos, bereft of the right to history and heritage, to reform their historical view by nurturing a shared affinity both with Baguio community and Japanese state. Perhaps, through them, Japan will likely seek cultural affinity with the Philippines and Asia, fostering bilateral and regional cooperation that is beyond the economic. Offering a similar corrective, Nicole Tablizo's "Identity Gambling in History: The Intergenerational Search for Zainichi Identity in Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko*" argues that overcoming identity and belonging issues does not mean privileging a single voice or class experience of being Zainichi; rather, it brings to the fore the accounts and shifting perspectives of even the most ordinary people excluded from the grand narrative of history.

Collating untold histories about and related to Japan implies neither denial of cultural difference nor betrayal of tradition. J. Neil Garcia's review of the 2018 film *Tanabata's Wife*, a poignant tale of romance between a 20th-century Baguio-residing Japanese farmer and a Bontoc woman, for instance, underscores how cultural dissonance and identity issues arising from such intercultural relationship form a significant part of narrating history and nostalgia about Japanese presence in pre-war Philippines. Just as films can effectively convey literary images, so does AI technology mediate both artistic heritage and modernity. Paolo Valdez' essay illustrates that the use of artificial intelligence (AI) algorithm accentuates rather than distorts the distinctive elements of Japanese art works by transposing these styles into the newly-formed images. The positive result of employing this modern technique lies in younger generations' improved recognition of Japanese artistry in our increasingly digital society.

We deeply express gratitude to all the contributors for journeying with us towards making this special issue on Japan a reality. This is indeed a collaborative process of learning and reaffirming the salience of history in understanding contemporary Japan in Asia and in the world.

References

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