

BOOK REVIEW

## The semantics of development in Asia: exploring “untranslatable” ideas through Japan

Edited by Jin Sato and Soyeun Kim. Singapore: Springer. 243 pp. Hardback, ¥7,149 JPY, ISBN: 978-9819712144. Softcover, ¥4,999, ISBN: 978-981-97-1216-8. Ebook, open access, ISBN: 978-9819712151

Nikolay Murashkin

Australian National University (Ritsumeikan University campus), Ibaraki, Osaka 567-8570, Japan  
Email: [nikolay.murashkin@anu.edu.au](mailto:nikolay.murashkin@anu.edu.au)

(Received 26 December 2024; accepted 26 December 2024)

As decision-makers and experts ponder development strategies in an increasingly non-Western-centric world, the challenge of getting the evidence-based policy mix right keeps drawing their attention to the development experience of other countries. Japan’s development track record is a particularly noteworthy case in that respect. On the one hand, Japan has been consistently sharing its development recipes for multiple decades, itself historically evolving from the champion of selective borrowings and their localisation to knowledge producer. On the other hand, Japan’s development experience frequently gets in the “blind spot” of broader development studies. As East Asian states, including Japan, have stepped up their exports of development knowledge in recent years, they have recurrently faced the inevitable question: how adaptable and shareable is their development experience elsewhere in Asia and other regions? What is unique or distinct, and what is universal? Can something perceived as unique become universalised? Is a translative adaptation possible? In this context, the topic of translatability looms particularly large, as it would in any other cross-border flow of ideas. This is where the volume edited by Jin Sato and Soyeun Kim makes a valuable contribution, addressing the debates and myths related to universality and distinctiveness as regards Japan’s development experience, while avoiding the pitfalls of universalism and particularism.

This very rich and dense book helps the reader navigate the complex domain of Japanese “indigenous” ideas related to development while locating it in the broader Asian context with Japan as case in point. Namely, the volume addresses the usage and meanings of both well-known and more specialised terms of Japanese development lexicon, drawing upon the expertise of academic scholars and experts with practitioner experience. The scope of this selective compendium is quite diverse, excavating the knowledge of terms ranging from long-established buzzwords, such as *kaizen* (Chapter 2), to practical matters, such as yen loans (Chapter 12), aid, investment and trade (Chapter 13). The thematic grouping of chapters reflects both an anthropological and a practical focus, progressing from norms and manifestations of dichotomies of Self and Other to practicalities such as specific aid strategies and dealing with the international environment, including responses to criticism.

The authors acknowledge the long history of translation of various foreign concepts in Japan, from ancient times to modernity, when Japan’s modernisation policies relied on intensive ideational imports and selective adaptations of ideas. This excursus into intellectual history includes a discussion of how thinkers such as Nitobe Inazo and Maruyama Masao analysed the problems associated with these kinds of translations. The book introduces the historical context, especially the post-World War 2 period, in

which Japan's aid philosophy has evolved and sought to differentiate Japan from Western donors. Japan's aid approaches such as the "request-based principle" and "self-help support" (examined in detail in Chapters 7 and 8, respectively) emerged as part of that evolution.

The inquiry's approach seeks to elucidate the actual meaning of many ideas, thus testing their perceived self-evidence and illusion of familiarity, as these concepts were routinised (or perhaps even de-semanticised?) by some practitioners while remaining abstract or vague terms for the wider audience.

After the introduction provides a crucial point of departure addressing the phenomenon of vernacular concepts, a sector-specific Chapter 1 focuses on the domestic origins of such core element of Japan's development cooperation as infrastructure construction. Those examining Japanese-language sources on infrastructure would remember that *doboku* is a go-to keyword in navigating and making sense of Japan's civil engineering milieu. However, the semantics of *doboku* aren't identical or reducible to "public works", as its usage in the context of development assistance implies "working in the mud together with the local laborers" to gain their trust, which is expected to lead to the successful completion of the project.

Chapter 2 explores the intricacies of *kaizen*, a popular concept often viewed as almost inherently Japanese but having non-Japanese origins, as clarified in the book. The chapter explains that the concept's meanings are sometimes conflated. This ambiguity is due to its complex origins including the diverse aspects of, on the one hand, quality and productivity, and, on the other hand, worker protection. In turn, that duality is further complicated by the U.S.-Japan Cold-War era circumstances of *kaizen* as phenomenon, as well as by the history of Japan's business management system, and the context-specific nature of *kaizen*.

Chapter 3 tackles *genba-shugi* (emphasis on the locale, a field-oriented approach), which is a key approach to development cooperation embraced by the Japanese development community, especially in terms of overseas activities. Importantly, the chapter explores the framing of this concept as used in Japan's business management, technical cooperation, and in the context of organisational reforms at the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). Namely, the readers find out about the antithetical positioning of *genba-shugi* both by Japanese businesses (in juxtaposition to Western counterparts) and by JICA experts close to the locality (in their dealings with the domestic centralised bureaucracy, as the autonomy of JICA and aid integration gradually increased). Here, both the discourse of Japan's "unique" experience and the dichotomy of universalities and particularities become refracted through perceived oppositions within Japan's aid apparatus, as well as between Japan's businesses and Western competitors.

The book then proceeds to Chapters 4, 5, and 6, which bring the manifestations of the Self-Other dichotomies in practical concepts and approaches to the fore. Chapter 4 invites the readers to reflect on Asia, the geographical and spatial scope of the book, or, more specifically, on the ideational aspects of the concept of Asianism, as embraced in modern Japan and the wider region. The interpretation of Self-Other dichotomies of Asia and Japan in opposition to the West by various Asian thinkers and political figures is at the heart of the chapter's analysis. Notably, the authors distinguish between "Alliance-style Asianism" and "Leadership-style Asianism" throughout various phases of Japan's pre-World War 2 and transwar history, while also arguing that some sources in Anglophone literature conflate those two types of Asianism under a single umbrella term of Pan-Asianism. Those historical origins serve both as a counterpoint and as a source of certain, if limited, continuity for the postwar period of Japan's international development cooperation with Asia and contemporary Asian regionalism.

Chapter 5 compares the idea of *hito-zukuri* with its commonly perceived equivalent – or possibly a partial translation – of "human resource development". The analysis fleshes out the qualifications of that limited translatability by focusing on the aspect of moral education, in particular the idea of "Japaneseness", acknowledging its colonial-era origins and postwar development context and pointing to moral and ethical dilemmas in the use of the term.

Chapter 6 traces the evolution of the concept of "endogenous development" in the West and in Japan, focusing on Tsurumi Kazuko's theory (*naihatsuteki hattenron*). Through comparisons and by

drawing parallels with similar concepts from outside Japan, the chapter presents the features of Tsurumi's theory contextualised in the Asian development experience. Namely, Tsurumi's concept appeared as a third way and an alternative to both the Western-centric modernisation theory and its critiques embedded in the dependency theory. Tsurumi's concept in that sense appears to indirectly resonate with the idea of multiple modernities, advanced by Shmuel Eisenstadt in the 1990s and 2000s.

Chapters 7–10 examine ideas in Japanese aid strategies which might *prima facie* appear as elusive but in practice represent the recurrent fundamentals of Japan's aid approach: the request-based principle (*yōsei-shugi*), the principle of self-help effort (*jijo-doryoku*), ownership (*ōnashippu*), and international contribution (*kokusai-kōken*). Those concepts and respective chapters have a common thread of analysing Japan's evolving adjustment to and interaction with the changing external environment, in particular, the shifts in aid landscape and donor structure in the various periods of the postwar and post-Cold War eras. This section's inferences have a strong contemporary relevance, as the 2023 revision of Japan's Development Cooperation Charter introduced the concept of offer-type aid, which is likely to affect the future interpretations of request-based aid and self-help efforts.

Chapters 11–13 further cover the practical aspects of Japan's interaction with recipients and comparison with other donors, especially in terms of Japan's engagement with external criticism and the emulation of Japanese concepts in other countries. Chapter 11 addresses the concept of *kaihatsuyunyū*, a de facto combination of resource development with economic cooperation, that is formally translated as the “development and import scheme.” Chapter 12 examines the phenomenon of yen loans, particularly in light of their criticism by Western European and North American donors, arguing that Japan devised an alternative model. This proposition merits particular attention as it brings pluralist and diverging perspectives and positionality of non-Western actors in the context of heterodoxy of development discourse. Chapter 13 analyses a concept of “trinity” of trade, aid, and investment, which are combined to achieve a win–win relationship between the development donors and recipients. Here, the wider East Asian ramifications of this concept's shareability are of notable scale, as after emerging with a low-key recognition during the late Cold War period, the trinity of aid, trade, and investment has gained a new life by becoming increasingly popular in contemporary China.

Reflecting on the book's focus on semantics and the concluding chapter's case for pluriversal knowledge production, one might ponder the question: going forward, will a de-semanticisation of Japanese development concepts occur gradually, as they get accepted, adopted, or absorbed into the wider international mainstream of developmentalists' lexicon? Only time will tell – until then, the understanding of the semantics of these ideas via this volume, which covers extensive ground, will definitely benefit scholars and practitioners alike in development studies, Japanese studies, and broader social sciences across the world.