TRaNS: Trans –Regional and –National Studies of Southeast Asia Vol. 6, No. 1 (January) 2018: 27–45.
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Instrumental Culturalism: The Work of Comparisons across Japan, 'the West' and Myanmar†

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Abstract

As 'emerging donors' push alternative paradigms of development cooperation 'beyond aid' onto the global agenda, some scholars discuss those from Asia as presenting culturally specific approaches. These observations echo the claims that aid practitioners and policy makers themselves make about, for example, Japanese forms of development. In this article, I caution against scholars repeating these culturally essentialising arguments that promote certain political interests. Instead, I propose that we 'take seriously' these aid actors' instrumental culturalist views as ethnographic artefacts—that is, as logics and practices that our interlocutors use. By taking what I call instrumental culturalism as the object of study, rather than the analytical frame, this article shows that the work of comparisons plays a central role in producing culturalist worldviews. In short, culturalism is performative, creating that which it names. If we are to understand the "beyond aid" agenda, we need to attend to the ways that the production of culturalisms through the work of comparisons informs development actors' understandings of social organisation and global interaction.

KEYWORDS: Development, NGO, Culturalism, Japan, Myanmar

'Asian Approaches'

In 2017, we are seeing a growth of so-called emerging donors, including the powerful Asian development cooperation partners such as China and Korea (Satō and Shimomura 2013). A number of discussions are taking place among development practitioners, scholars and state officials to understand better how these new partners are reshaping the development cooperation landscape. For example, in May of 2015, development experts, policy specialists and government officials from a dozen Asian countries, as well as Australia and the United States, gathered in Cambodia for the twelfth meeting of the Asian Approaches to Development Cooperation (AADC) dialogue series (Mulakala and Ankel 2015).[1] While their discussions raised important points about approaches and issues in the field of development cooperation that move 'beyond aid' (see Kharas *et al.* 2011;

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†Abstract and keywords have been added since original publication. An erratum notice detailing this change was also published (doi: 10.1017/trn.2017.21).

[1]I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing me to this event and article.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2017.15 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Janus *et al.* 2014; Mawdsley 2015), I interrogate the implications behind phrases such as 'Asian approaches' that offhandedly and purportedly explain these phenomena (Stallings and Kim 2017; Watson 2014). In short, I caution against the adoption of culturalist explanations as analytical frameworks (see Breidenbach and Nyiri 2009; Kim and Kang 2015), but propose to take development actors' own culturalist arguments as ways to understand how certain notions of culture emerge in transnational encounters. The task is to see the usefulness of culturalism as an ethnographic artefact and not as an analytical framework.

Scholars, policy makers and aid practitioners alike have produced analyses of emerging Asian donors, pointing to particular characteristics of their approaches to development cooperation (Asia Foundation *et al.* 2010: 2; Binder and Meier 2011; Brautigam 2009, 2011; DeHart 2012; Six 2009). For example, one common reference is to 'the China model', often conflated with the perception of 'a China threat,' which is notable for the central role of state-owned enterprises, private commercial actors, authoritarian politics and an adherence to a non-interventionist principle in respect of sovereignty (DeHart 2012; see also Bräutigam 2009, 2011; Shimomura and Ping 2013). Scholars also talk of Korean approaches to development assistance that have been shaped by the longstanding conflict between North and South Korea, the Korean War and Japanese aid, factors that differentiate them from (so-called) 'traditional' perspectives on development cooperation (Kim 2011; Kondoh 2013). Studies also attend to the alternative philosophies and ethics among emerging donors, including ideas of mutuality and reciprocity, the primacy of infrastructural projects and the fact that many of them were once aid recipients or colonies of Euro-American empires themselves (Kim 2011; Mawdsley 2011; Six 2009).

Within this discussion of emerging donors, Japan has tended to be excluded because of its status as a so-called traditional donor and former colonial power. Nevertheless, it exhibits aforementioned characteristics—such as a focus on infrastructural projects and partnership with private actors—that do not fully fit into traditional paradigms of aid (Arase 1994, 1995; Kato *et al.* 2016). As such, scholars of Japanese foreign aid have also recently revisited the history of Japan's development cooperation system to argue its significance on the initial formation of Asian approaches as well as its potential influence on emerging donors (Kato *et al.* 2016; Satō and Shimomura 2013). In talking about Asian approaches, then, I refer to texts that discuss Japanese actors as well as those that focus on other so-called emerging Asian actors in the field of development cooperation.

Asian approaches, as in the AADC meeting title, can refer to actual differences due to specific political, economic, institutional and conceptual approaches to development cooperation. Nevertheless, at times, the ways that some policy makers, development practitioners and scholars speak of Asian characteristics (or Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and so on) employ a kind of reasoning that I call instrumental culturalism. Culturalism can be defined as "the defence of distinct and essentialized communities in the name of the respect for differences"

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(Fassin and Rechtman 2005: 348). Although the respect for differences is important, culturalism takes the further step in that it naturalizes otherness as if differences were cultural, natural, essential and immutable. At its most extreme, culturalism can take the form of a theory of the 'clash of civilizations' (Huntington 1996), which has been widely criticized for ignoring the interconnectedness between cultures and the internal diversities within any given culture, resulting in a dichotomous us versus them view of the world (e.g. Said 2001). Instrumentalisation in the way that I use in this paper refers to how culture has been objectified as a means to an end—a tool that can be used to achieve particular ends such as aid effectiveness. Anthropologists of development have elucidated how aid practitioners and policy makers instrumentalise culture, that is, define culture as a bounded management tool that can be deployed to do development better (e.g. Li 2011). However, as I elaborate below, the instrumentalisation of culture can collude with particular political interests, rather than offer a critical analysis.

There are, certainly, historical and regional characteristics of Asian donors that differ from those of traditional Euro-American paradigms. Nevertheless, such differences must not be reduced to cultural essentialisms. Differences are, rather, products of contingent historical and social processes conditioned by both national and international political economies. Similarly, culturalist explanations are also products of history and politics, as they are often mobilised by particular nationalist interests. To take instrumental culturalism at face value—that is, to accept arguments about Japaneseness, for example, as a set of timeless cultural values and an instrument to implement development projects more effectively—is to become a vehicle for specific political interests. Scholarly work cannot be reduced to such a function.

Despite the problems of instrumental culturalism, it is fruitful to understand culturalist claims such as Asianness and Japaneseness as an ethnographic artefact—that is, as a logic that ethnographers find among their interlocutors. While culturalist explanations fall short of critical analysis, culturalism as an ideology and practice in the world brings forth phenomena. In other words, instrumental culturalism is not representational; it is performative (Austin 1962) in that it brings into being that which it names. In the pages that follow, I explore how aid workers in one of the oldest Japanese NGOs, the Organization for Industrial, Spiritual and Cultural Advancement (OISCA), and in their agricultural and environmental training programmes in Myanmar, produced particular culturalist explanations of the world through the work of comparisons. Japanese and Burmese actors variously defined and distinguished between Japanese culture, Burmese culture and Western culture, thereby constructing essentialising definitions of culture. It was through the designation of differences as cultural in the work of comparisons that culture itself emerged as a bounded and static category. Instrumental culturalism is performative in this sense: it does not represent the world as it is but creates it in culturalist terms in the moment that it is named as such. More specifically, by looking at the performative effects of instrumental

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culturalism in development practices, we can gain insight into how culturalist views emerge from transnational encounters. The analyses will appear as common sense to anthropologists and, as such, this article is intended for non-anthropological audiences with the hopes that anthropological perspectives can change the terms of discussion in other fields. In the end, I ask: what kinds of futures are brought into being through particular articulations of instrumental culturalism in the field of development cooperation? The answer might serve as a warning against taking culturalist arguments at face value.

Problematising Instrumental Culturalism in Asian Approaches

What are the specific problems with instrumental culturalism employed in allegedly Asian (or Japanese in this case) approaches to development? Here I identify three, which will be familiar to anthropologists: essentialisation, self-orientalisation and instrumentalism. Cultural essentialism can be defined as "a system of belief grounded in a conception of human beings as "cultural" (and under certain conditions territorial and national) subjects, i.e., bearers of *a* culture, located within a boundaried world, which defines them and differentiates them from others" (Grillo 2003: 158, emphasis in original). It attributes a set of traits to a group of people, understood as timeless and uncontested. From an anthropological perspective, assuming that there is such a thing as a coherent Asian approach (or a Chinese or Japanese or Korean one for that matter) suggests an inaccurately static view of culture. UNESCO in *Post-2015 Dialogues on Culture and Development*, for instance, defines culture as "the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of a society or a social group" that has a role to play in human development and can act "as a force for bringing stability, resilience and meaning to communities" (2015: 8).[2] Identifying a set of unchanging traditional principles that actors draw on reflects this definition of culture as a bounded resource that can be mobilised for human flourishing. This reductionist tendency reflects a culturalist turn in international development, whereby local heterogeneity, political economic factors and the hybridity or coproduction of the local and global, traditional and modern, are minimised if not ignored (Breidenbach and Nyiri 2009).

The discourse of cultural essentialism relating to Asian actors circulates widely among scholars and policy makers. To state, for example, that "China and South Korea share a common culture based on Confucian values" is to reductively characterise these countries as informed largely by so-called Confucian principles (Watson 2012: 84; see also Nishikawa 2005). The problem with

[2]Although UNESCO promotes culture as open to change and interaction, it also assumes that everyone has a discrete and bounded culture and passes judgment on what is "*the right kind of cultures*" that can be open to change (Nielsen 2011, emphasis in original).

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essentialism is that it assigns pre-defined values to a group of people, as if they "naturally" lived by these immutable rules. Even when divergences from these values are discussed, they are represented as exceptions to the norm. Adopting this particular view of culture is problematic as it would ultimately amount to bolstering a culturalist ideology in which difference is reduced to a naturalized cultural otherness that explains away political and socioeconomic factors. Who defines ideas of Confucian values, what political processes make these appear as ruling principles and when they might seem irrelevant are questions that remain unaddressed in essentialising explanations. It is only a short logical step from here to end up with a Huntington-esque argument of the clash of civilizations—a perspective that requires critical scholarly engagement.

The second problem is how the people we study sometimes adopt essentialising and orientalising definitions of their cultures themselves in order to advance particular political interests. Anthropologists have noted how some people around the world embrace essentialising and exoticising images of their so-called cultural uniqueness in a move that has been described as "counter-orientalism" (Moeran 1996), "self-orientalisation" (Ong 1999) and "auto-orientalism" (Mazzarella 2003), among others. These moves indicate a strategic use of culturalist ideas to objectify one's own culture and use it to advance certain political and economic ends (Spivak 1988) or even scientific knowledge and acclaim (Fan 2017; Ito 2017). Self-orientalisation thrives in contexts where there is a global market for consuming particular culturalist representations, such as Japanese politicians and corporations who actively promote the image of the Japanese as hardworking and disciplined, and the reason for the country's postwar economic success (Sugimoto 2015; Turner 1991).

Self-orientalising discourses also exist in the area of development cooperation in Japan. On the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)'s website that explains its training programmes for foreign experts who come to Japan, it states that Japanese people have an innate ability "to select and apply foreign knowledge and skills through trial-and-error, always keeping in mind the existing conditions of Japan" (JICA, n.d.). The ability to meld "the Japanese spirit with Western skills (*wakon yōsai*)" is presented as an essential Japanese cultural quality, which people from other countries can learn by spending time in Japan. As Koichi Iwabuchi argued, such claims amount to what he called hybridism, an ideology in which "identity is represented as a sponge that is constantly absorbing foreign cultures without changing its essence and wholeness" (2002: 54). Self-orientalisation in the case of Japan includes assertions that the Japanese have always excelled at mixing other cultures with their own, therefore able to act as good models of modernisation in Asia that balance Euro-American influences with one's own traditions. To echo such claims in our studies would merely reflect particular political interests, rather than offer a critical analysis of the phenomenon at hand.

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The third problem of instrumental culturalism is the instrumentalist aspect: the reduction of culture as a tool or means to serve particular ends. This is already evident in the above two characteristics of this line of thought. In an analysis of the conceptualisation of culture in UNESCO, Bjarke Nielsen writes that culture in the agency is "a political tool… [which] promotes culture as a road towards a better world" (2011: 278). In this context, culture is a bounded entity that can be grasped and mobilised to serve UNESCO's universal mission. A similar view can be found in how UN and other aid agencies instrumentalise ideas of community in development. Tania Li (2011) describes how the World Bank rendered communities technical, that is, objectified and classified local communities and their cultures as resources that could be harnessed through participatory methods to make aid delivery more effective (or make them appear so, see also Mosse 2005). This analysis resonates with Nikolas Rose's diagnosis of communitarian thinking in Europe and America, which seeks to reinvent government "through the political objectification and instrumentalization of […] community and its 'culture'," as if it were something that could be "investigated, mapped, classified, documented, interpreted" (1999: 172–3, 175). In short, communities and their cultures become valuable for aid agencies in so far as these can be bureaucratically categorised and used to meet project aims, and ultimately technically evaluated. As we will see, the Japanese and Burmese aid actors whom I encountered did not technically instrumentalise culture in this way, but they did see essentialised ideas of culture as means to an end. That is, they ultimately saw essentialised cultural values—Japaneseness, Burmeseness or Western-ness—as a set of characteristics that could help or hinder in the aim of project delivery, or in the case of OISCA, of managing an agricultural training centre based on a communal lifestyle.

Fundamentally, the problem with essentialisation, self-orientalisation and instrumentalism arises when scholars adopt these perspectives as their own analytical frameworks. Analysis becomes, then, merely a platform for certain interests or a mirror of the objects of study (cf. Riles 2006). In the case of Japanese development cooperation, if scholars repeated JICA's claim of Japanese essential abilities to meld "the Japanese spirit with Western skills," the description would simply echo JICA officials' statements and definitions of Japanese culture. In other contexts, the replication of instrumental culturalism can collude with even more aggressive political projects. For example, anthropologists of Britain have shown how the reduction of people's identities to culture has tended to obscure factors of class (Evans 2012; Grill 2012). Relatedly, across Europe we see a rise in what Stolcke (1995) has called cultural fundamentalism, which incorporates older forms of racism and reifies cultural boundaries of difference (see also Grillo 2003). How these perspectives contribute to a dangerous clash of civilisations argument can be seen in the rise of Islamophobic movements around the world. These examples should give scholars pause before making the argument that a particular phenomenon, such as Asian approaches, is due to some

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static understanding of culture that can be channelled for particular political or managerial ends. In my view, treating culture as an object and a tool is a problem when such conceptualisations can be easily used to serve particular political interests.

Anthropologists have long addressed the problem of how popular discourses and anthropologists understand culture differently. In many ways, given how anthropologists and others have critiqued the essentialisation and instrumentalisation of cultures for decades (Stolcke 1995; Grillo 2003; Kuper 2003; Wright 1998), it is curious why this perspective persists in popular discourses. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the reasons for this. What interests me is how instrumental culturalism appears as an ethnographic artefact—as something that the people we study imagine and do. In the end, even if anthropologists see the problems with this perspective, it is a view that exists in the world of the people whom anthropologists study. Therefore, instead of rejecting instrumental culturalism all together, I take it as an object of critical ethnographic inquiry. That is, I seek to understand how development practitioners use instrumental culturalist logic and what its consequences are. By doing so, we can grasp the significance of such thinking for development actors and its performative effects in producing essentialist views of culture in transnational encounters. We can examine the ideological and political consequences of calling something culturally Asian or Japanese, even if it is done in a casual way.

The Work of Comparisons

Japanese politicians and aid agencies often say that Japan and Myanmar have had a "special relationship" (Nemoto 1995). This claim derives from the historical links in which Burmese independence fighters, namely Aung San and his comrades, trained in Japan to prepare for the overthrow of British colonialism (and overlooking subsequent Japanese colonial rule of Myanmar). But another common reason given is the idea that Japanese and Burmese people share similar cultural values such as a respect for elders, indirectly distancing themselves from the West which, supposedly, does not value a similar reverence for one's elders (overlooking the fact that this is probably a value shared by many other cultures) (Yamaguchi 1999). This is an example of cultural essentialism and self-orientalisation that simultaneously shows the uniqueness of Japanese culture and shared cultural values between Japanese and Burmese people. These assertions are present in the context of other Asian donors in Asia as well. Scholars have argued that "Asian donors feel very comfortable in their own home region largely because of cultural similarities," quoting academics and aid actors who make such claims (Stallings and Kim 2016: 127). These views exist as instances of instrumental culturalism that development practitioners use.

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Yet, the pages that follow illustrate that assertions of cultural difference and similarity, and subsequent essentialisms, might not necessarily be givens for development workers on the ground. They are, in fact, consequences of the work of comparisons that preoccupies many people's experiences in the transnational spaces of development practice. Thus, looking at the discourses and practices through which development workers produce instrumental culturalist thinking shows that ideas of Japaneseness (or Asianness) are not inherent to people's worldviews nor do they serve as explanatory frameworks. Culturalist ideas are made and reshaped in everyday processes of comparison that ascribe differences and similarities to culture. Ultimately, the ethnographic analyses below illustrate how the work of comparisons that development actors are constantly engaged in can produce culturalist views that curtail the possibility of debate.

Japaneseness versus Western-ness

Between 2009 and 2011, I conducted ethnographic research with OISCA, one of the oldest NGOs in Japan, established in 1961. I undertook participant observation at their year-long training programmes in sustainable agriculture and environmental education. I moved between the Tokyo headquarters, the four training centres in Japan and the training centre in Myanmar over the course of 20 months. I also conducted field research at similar institutions as points of comparison and to trace the extent and limitations of OISCA's mode of development assistance.

OISCA's training centres in Japan target rural youth from around the world and the centres in other countries focus on local trainees. OISCA had sixteen training centres across the Asia-Pacific region at the time of my fieldwork. All of the programmes require trainees as well as Japanese and non-Japanese staff members to live together in a communal setting and contribute to shared tasks around the training centres such as cleaning and cooking duties, and engage in hard physical labour in the agricultural fields. The founder, Nakano Yonosuke, was also the founder of a Shinto-derived new religion called Ananaikyō, established in 1949. The NGO's mission echoes Yonosuke's spiritual teachings, such as the interconnectedness of all life forms through what he called the Great Spirit of the Universe. Yet, the NGO's staff members stressed that the organisation was not religious. But neither did they claim a secular position. As I discuss elsewhere, I take these assertions of being "not religious" (*shūkyō ja nai*) seriously and argue for a conceptual space of the nonreligious, neither religious nor secular (C. Watanabe 2015). That is, although OISCA's staff members distanced themselves from the category of religion, this did not mean that they embraced a rational, disenchanted and scientific paradigm, as secularism might suggest (Taylor 2007). Instead, Yonosuke and his successor and adoptive

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daughter, Nakano Yoshiko, promoted what I call a Shinto ecology. They and the other OISCA staffers often explained that the influences of Ananaikyō on OISCA were fundamentally about Shinto values, and that Shinto was ultimately about Japanese cultural values. One of these values was to live in harmony with nature, an ability that Yoshiko and other OISCA staff members claimed the Japanese have developed organically in the rich environment of the Japanese archipelago.

These conceptions resonate with nationalist-culturalist discourses that have existed in Japan since the 18th century and in the popular theories of Japanese uniqueness (*nihonjinron*) (Befu 1997; Dale 1986). It is no surprise, then, that Yonosuke, Yoshiko and other Japanese staff members in OISCA have had strong connections to nationalist and even rightwing, historical revisionist political actors throughout postwar Japan and in the current era (C. Watanabe, forthcoming). Although I do not go into detail here, this context is important in understanding the political implications of instrumental culturalism—that is, the collusion with rightwing nationalist interests—among OISCA's Japanese actors.

The culturalist ideology of Japaneseness in OISCA was something that many nationalist political actors in Japan supported. For instance, in a roundtable discussion among politicians, bureaucrats and Yoshiko that took place in 1986, a Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) official stated that he was deeply impressed with the approach to human resource development that he saw in OISCA's agricultural training programmes. The official, Fujita Kimio, praised the strong emphasis on the spirit (*seishin*) of hard work and the value placed on practices in the field (*gemba*) of aid in OISCA, which he characterised as a "uniquely Japanese way" (OISCA 1986: 21). To illustrate the point, he described how new employees in Japanese railway companies, for example, would always start by clipping tickets regardless of their levels of education or status. He pointed out that even Gotō Noboru, heir of Tokyu Corporation and future president of the Japan Chamber of Commerce, started his career cleaning toilets in his father's company. Others at the roundtable voiced their approval of these points, reinforcing the idea that industriousness and the importance of working in the field, regardless of status, were quintessential Japanese values. Thus, as anthropologists have observed in other spaces of learning and training, the focus on hard work and shared physical labour made OISCA's training programmes seem like a reflection of essential Japanese cultural values (Kondo 1990; Rohlen 1974; Singleton 1998).

The assertion that Japanese values defined OISCA was something that staff members sought to actively promote not only to highlight its particularity but also as the foundation of their global activities. One of the most senior staffers who had been with Yonosuke's movements and OISCA since the 1950s, Watanabe-san, focused on this message in his role as liaison between OISCA and the international aid community. In a report about attending the fifth meeting of the UN

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Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in Manila in 1979, Watanabe-san wrote that he was struck, not for the first time, by the differences between what he called Western NGOs and OISCA (T. Watanabe 1979). Western NGOs seemed to simply respond to the demands of developing countries due to their sympathetic and perhaps guilty feelings toward their former colonies. In contrast, he wrote, OISCA advocated that the role of developed countries should be to create a foundation for self-reliance (*jiritsu*) among developing countries through "making persons" (*hitozukuri*), that is, human resource development.[3] Echoing similar views from Japanese state aid agencies that also emphasised self-reliance and *hitozukuri*, he explained that accepting all requests for aid from developing countries would ultimately hinder their abilities of self-help (*jijo doryoku*). He lamented that Western NGOs did not seem to understand OISCA's, and therefore Japanese, views (T. Watanabe 1979: 18). Sixteen years later, when OISCA received the ECOSOC Category I status,[4] Watanabe-san wrote another piece explaining the significance of this international recognition. He saw it as proof that "the kind of steady activity based on the hardworking spirit (*kinbensa*) and humility (*kenkyosa*) flowing through the blood of the Japanese [evinced in OISCA's activities], now works (*tsūyō suru*) in the international community" (T. Watanabe 1995: 10). He added that this was an opportunity for OISCA to move toward becoming even more of an "earth NGO (*chikyū NGO*)" through Japanese values. In short, Japanese cultural values could become the basis for a universal movement.

While Watanabe-san promoted culturalist ideas of Japaneseness as well as Western-ness to distinguish OISCA from the Euro-American actors that he met at international meetings, he also at times expressed admiration for the West. When he attended the 13th General Meeting of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the UN in Geneva in 1976, he saw how misunderstood Japan was in the eyes of other developed countries, as it tended to be seen as simply an extension of US interests and an "economic animal" (T. Watanabe 1976: 22). He explained that although Japanese people tend to value the virtue of "action without words (*fugen jikkō*)," he realised that Japanese people needed to learn to speak clearly for their own interests when interacting with people from other countries (T. Watanabe 1976: 22). The ability to use words adeptly was a supposedly Western value that he thought Japanese people, including OISCA's development workers, needed to learn. These kinds of comparisons that waver between a pride about Japanese exceptionality and a sense of inferiority vis-à-vis the West are common in the *nihonjinron* ideologies of Japanese uniqueness, and accordingly, in essentialisations of the West (Kelly 1991;

[3]*Hitozukuri* in OISCA actually goes beyond human resource development in the ordinary sense of the term because it encompasses a holistic sense of "making persons," not simply the cultivation of people's skills (see C. Watanabe, forthcoming).

[4]In 1975, OISCA gained roster consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and elevated to general status in 1995. By having consultative status with ECOSOC, NGOs can attend international conferences, participate in discussions, organize side events, enter UN premises, and lobby.

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Moeran 1996). Making comparisons between Japaneseness and Western-ness seemed to create opportunities for Watanabe-san and other actors involved in OISCA's activities to assess what constituted Japanese values, how to learn from an essentialised West and, most significantly, how Japanese values combined with some Western wisdom could become the basis for a universal movement.

Japaneseness versus Burmeseness

The second ethnographic vignette illustrates how Japanese and Burmese aid workers in OISCA's training centre in Myanmar engaged with the work of comparisons in ways that produced notions of Japaneseness and Burmeseness. Sakurai-san, the thirty-something director of the Myanmar training centre, had taken up the role a couple of years before my arrival in August 2010. He was the only Japanese staff member left, overseeing the approximately 40 Burmese staff members and 20 trainees each year. Together, they ran a training centre that was also a farm, cultivating organic rice and vegetables, and raising chicken and pigs. As in all of OISCA's training centres, everyone lived together in a communal lifestyle, sharing in the cleaning, cooking and agricultural duties. The trainees and staffers were mostly ethnically Burman, and therefore Buddhist, but there were also a few people from ethnic minority regions such as Chin state and Kachin state. They generally came from middle-income rural families who had some kind of connection to local government officials—it was through these government contacts that the trainees' families usually heard about OISCA's training programme.

Sakurai-san had extensive experience working with trainees and staffers in the multicultural environments of OISCA's training centres in Japan and Myanmar. Yet, he was often confounded or surprised by some of the ways that the Burmese staff members and trainees behaved. He often described these encounters with difference in terms of culture. For instance, during an evening staff meeting in October 2010, one of the senior Burmese staff members raised the issue (in Japanese) that, in that particular week, the staffers and trainees in charge of cooking breakfast had been too loud in the mornings.[5] Apparently some of the trainees had also complained about it. Sakurai-san's response caught me off guard (in Japanese): "But that's the same problem with the fact that the male staff members play loud music, right? That's your responsibility, isn't it?" He continued to say that Burmese people always play their music loudly and do not seem to care if other people want to listen to it or not. "In Japan," he stated rather heatedly, "it would be a problem if you played music loudly and you would get complaints from everyone." While this message was still sinking in, someone else asked if the time to show up at the kitchen to

[5]All staff meetings at the Myanmar training centre were conducted in Japanese. Burmese staffers had to do use the varying levels of Japanese language skills that they had learnt as trainees and staffers over the years.

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help with breakfast duties was still 5 a.m. because, when he got there this week, the work had already been done. Another staff member explained that lately the trainees had been eating all the rice from the previous day so they had to cook new rice every morning. This meant that the people in charge of breakfast had to start their work earlier at 4 a.m. Sakurai-san interrupted the discussion to instruct the staff members that if the rules had been changed, everyone needed to be told about it. He elaborated, once again, with his culturalist theory: "In Myanmar, it is always the case that the rule is to *not* follow the rule, like with motorcycle helmets. People disobey rules as if *that* were the rule."

Sakurai-san judged what he deemed to be Burmese people's problematic habits as problems of culture, especially in contrast to what he defined as Japanese values. He saw management and operational problems as consequences of cultural difference, and vice versa. The Burmese staffers with whom I talked later were incensed by Sakurai-san's accusations. The next day, during the morning walk that I used to take with Ma Khaing, Ma Phyo and Ma Su, three of the female Burmese staffers in their mid-twenties, I asked them what they thought of Sakurai-san's talk the day before. Ma Phyo, the most outspoken of them, stopped in her tracks and told me angrily that she was upset by his characterisation of Burmese culture. Ma Su chimed in (in Burmese): "He belittles Myanmar (*hnein dè*) and looks down on us (*ahtin the: dè*)." The three of them were Burman but from different parts of the country—two from the Yangon area in the south and one from a region not far from the training centre—and had been with OISCA for approximately five years. Although I knew that they were committed to their work and the training centre, they also talked about such moments with Sakurai-san as reasons for considering other lines of work elsewhere. But eventually, instead of leaving, I learned a few years later that the Burmese staffers rebelled against Sakurai-san's directorship, leading to his replacement with a different Japanese director.

Sakurai-san's derogatory views may be extreme and exceptions to the rule, but they do not exist in a vacuum; they are part of an existing milieu of culturalist explanations. To say that Japanese approaches to development cooperation have unique cultural characteristics is not necessarily the same as saying that Burmese behaviours are culturally different and inferior, but they depend on the same framework that rigidifies differences in terms of cultural distinctions. Difference and moments of conflict are not seen as interpersonal frictions or structural effects, but cultural gaps that seem insurmountable and potential fodder for a clash of civilisations.

While Japanese actors such as Sakurai-san depended on specific culturalist and hierarchical views of Japaneseness and Burmeseness, the Burmese staff members also sometimes echoed similar culturalist thinking developed through the work of comparisons. One day, I participated in the agricultural work in the rice paddies with some of the Burmese staffers and trainees. We spent the morning making organic fertiliser, called *bokashi*, which uses a mixture of

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chicken manure, rice bran, oil scraps and other natural materials. Half-way through the process we took a break. While some of the staffers went off to buy snacks for everyone, I asked the senior staff member in charge, Ko Thein, about the women working in the rice paddies, who I did not recognise. We spoke in a mixture of Japanese and Burmese. He explained that they were hired labourers from nearby villages, often relatives of staffers and trainees at the training centre. He told me that the OISCA trainees were from farming families but many of them were fairly well-educated, some of them even university graduates, and so they had little experience actually working the fields. As a result, they did not have the stamina to work as much as Ko Thein would have liked and so he hired extra hands to help out. These women had been working in rice paddies since they were children so their expertise and strength were a saving grace for the training centre.

At this point, we heard the women and staff members joking and laughing over a plate of fried snacks. Gesturing to them, Ko Thein told me that the ways that people work in Myanmar and Japan were different. "Here," he explained, "people work while having fun." In contrast, in Japan, when people work, they just work, without laughter. "At the training centres in Japan, of course you were not allowed to sing and you were not even allowed to talk," he told me. You were allowed to say something if it was a question about the task at hand, but anything unrelated to agriculture was prohibited. "But in Myanmar, there are songs for the agricultural tasks; for example, there is a song for rice planting and people sing about the scenery as well." I nodded, thinking that this was also the case in traditional farming practices in Japan, just not in OISCA. He summarised: "People have fun here and they still get the work done, and it feels good." He described how this was quite different from what he saw in Japan. During his home-staying experience at a farmer's household near one of OISCA's training centres, he realised how seriously everyone worked. "But," he added, "when it was time to rest we had a lot of fun." Work and fun were separated in Japan, whereas he understood these to go hand-in-hand in Burmese culture.

As much as Burmese staffers disliked Sakurai-san's culturalist determinations of Burmeseness, at times, some of them also engaged in similar thinking. Thus, despite the apparent conflict, Burmese and Japanese staffers shared a logic of instrumental culturalism in making sense of their relationships with each other. Recognising the fact that development cooperation is, at its most fundamental level, a space of transnational encounters points to the various works of comparison that make expressions of cultural uniqueness, difference and similarity central to aid actors' worlds. Culturalism and the idea of culture itself become particularly manifest in the context of transnational encounters. In fact, these encounters are not seen as cultural until after the fact; that is, making the moments seem like *cultural* encounters is one of the outcomes of the interaction. Hence, the fact that Ko Thein met farmers in Japan who worked without laughter might have been a simple personal quirk of that particular Japanese farmer and not about cultural

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difference at all. But after comparing this experience with Burmese farmers whom Ko Thein knew, who seemed to combine fun and work, the difference appeared cultural for him. Claims of Burmeseness as well as Japaneseness were products of such interactions and comparisons. As anthropologists have long argued, it may only be in comparison that culture appears as such.

Conclusion

The rise of so-called emerging donors has foregrounded the fact that there may be regional and country-specific approaches to development cooperation that go beyond orthodox paradigms of aid. The reassessment of Japanese development actors in this context is also a welcome move to open up analyses to the multiplicity of forms of aid and beyond. Nevertheless, the analysis of alternative approaches should not depend on instrumental culturalist explanations that merely echo the claims made by the people we study. One of the reasons for this is that development actors often use culturalist arguments such as about Japaneseness, Burmeseness and Western-ness in ways that bolster specific political agenda. In the case of OISCA, the culturalist views about Japanese values dovetailed conservative nationalist interests in Japan. In a wider sense, instrumental culturalism among development actors resonates in part with the culturalism we see among nativist and rightwing movements around the world. The aims might be different, but the logic appears to be the same. Thus, when scholars talk about Japanese approaches to development cooperation or distinctions between Japanese and Burmese cultural conceptions of good behaviour, for example, such discussion or reference needs to be made with an attention to the milieu of discourses to which we might be contributing.

Despite the problems of instrumental culturalism as an analytical framework, I have argued for the benefits of examining instrumental culturalism as a logic that development actors use. Looking at how people in OISCA produced instrumental culturalist arguments showed the centrality of the work of comparisons for the everyday work of development. As highlighted above, by understanding culturalism as a social and ideological product and not a framework, it can be shown how culturalism—and possibly conceptions of culture—are inseparable from moments of transnational encounter. To make sense of the challenges that they faced in the daily operation of projects, development workers compared across differences and similarities, and often concluded that these were due to culture, thereby producing culturalism. For scholars, especially anthropologists, the question is not to define culture, but to investigate what the people studied think and do in the name of culture, and with what consequences.

But why was it necessary for development actors to frame these encounters and differences as cultural, while other factors such as class, gender and ethnicity were ignored in such discussions? What were the consequences of labelling something as culturally Japanese or culturally Burmese? What happened to

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other possible explanations for the affinities and conflicts in these encounters? The first of these questions is beyond the scope of this paper, except to say that perhaps there is something about transnational encounters and moments of perceived change that trigger a sense of cultural anxiety and culturalist ideologies (Grillo 2003; Stolcke 1995). But in regards to the second and third questions, I suggest that one of the most significant consequences of instrumental culturalist views in the field sites that I observed was that spaces of debate and discussion diminished. When something was categorised as culturally Burmese and contrasted with Japaneseness, for example, differences seemed too profound to surmount. When differences seemed to be due to issues of custom and culture, attempts to understand or overcome them were too difficult. After all, if people defined the differences or difficulties in management issues as cultural ones, nothing short of a fundamental cultural change on one side or another of the relationship would lead to a solution. At the meeting in OISCA with Sakurai-san and Burmese staff members, the fact that Sakurai-san framed the problems at hand as cultural ones meant that the required solutions would need to also tackle questions of culture. Therefore, since the problem of loudness appeared as a Burmese habit, the implied solution would need to be a reformation of Burmese staffers' and trainees' relationship to music and sound, and accordingly even their embodied identities. The problem became one of human character rather than structure or organisation, and the conflict appeared as an all-or-nothing kind of clash of civilisations.

Ultimately, bearing the danger of instrumental culturalism in mind, it is critical for both scholars or practitioners to carefully consider and remind themselves what kind of future is brought into being when recent approaches to development cooperation are explained as Asian (or Japanese, Korean or Chinese). One evolving trend is that it colludes with nationalist politics around essentialised cultural units by promoting their 'unique' development experience at the core.[6] Another consequence might be that internal differences, alliances and hybridities across presumed cultural units could be ignored in favour of a homogenised understanding of culture. Situations when culture is a moot point would also be eclipsed. Most significantly, why certain approaches and strategies are used in a development project becomes impossible to question when the answer is "because it's the Japanese/Burmese/Western way." To leave space for the critical analysis of power, it is crucial for scholars and practitioners of development to avoid instrumental culturalist arguments as taken-for-granted explanations while engaging the processes through which such arguments appear and take hold among development actors as well as among some of us scholars.

[6]This would be the caution that anthropologists raise against ideologies of multiculturalism that also essentialise cultural boundaries (Grillo 2003; Hage 2000).

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2017.15 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Acknowledgements

I thank the staffers and trainees in OISCA in Japan and Myanmar for making this research possible. I am also grateful to the participants of the workshop 'Exploring the "Beyond Aid" Agenda through Southeast Asia's Rapidly Changing Development Landscape', held at Sogang University, Seoul, in May 2016, for their helpful comments. Three anonymous reviewers and the editor, Soyeun Kim, were especially instrumental in helping me refine the arguments here. I thank them for their feedback. The research was funded by the Social Science Research Council and Cornell University.

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