

CONTEMPORARY JAPAN THROUGH THE LENS OF SELF-REPRESENTATION

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While operating in a context of growing interconnectiveness, political actors construct their identities through multiple channels of self-representation. The adoption of a constructivist framework of analysis enables us to highlight how political discourse shapes a country's national identity.

The Japanese economy experienced a slowdown after the 1997 Asian financial crisis, entering what became known as the 'lost twenty years' (ushinawareta nijūnen 失われた20年). Over the past few decades, Japan has nonetheless remained one of the world's leading economies. The current Abe administration has formulated a far-reaching economic policy reform package under the name of Abenomics, with the aim of building a "robust" future Japan and lay out reforms that include measures designed to attract foreign investment. What is interesting to note, however, is that this economically "robust" Japan also appears to

be strategically oriented toward enhancing its soft power.

The Europe Regions MIRAI Program is one of the stages where Japanese self-representation discourses are made to circulate. This short-term youth exchange program – part of Japan's regional Friendship Ties Programs – gives selected students and recent graduates the opportunity to visit Japan under the sponsorship of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA).

Mirai is the Japanese word for "future". The MIRAI Program is in fact designed for "future leaders of Japan and the world", its main purpose being the long-term construction of Japan's image as an influential and reliable actor. Among the declared goals of the program is the promotion of mutual understanding; with this in mind, priority is given to the intellectual discussions held throughout the program, which aim to foster intercultural networking.

What emerged during some of the lectures and tours run during the MIRAI Program is that Japan seeks to convey an image of itself as a peace-loving nation that

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Children welcome MIRAI participants at the Kiyomizu-dera temple, Kyoto. The authors were part of the first cohort of University of Torino China & Global Studies graduate students admitted to the MIRAI program.



This is a crane made by *Origami*.
We, in Japanese, call it "Orizuru".
We always make it with hoping for
world peace.

supports nuclear disarmament. This particular aspect emerged not only during a visit to the Hiroshima Memorial Park, but even at the Kiyomizu-dera Temple of Kyoto, where a group of Elementary School students distributed postcards to MIRAI participants, affirming their “wish for world peace”.

Without falling into the trap of equating narratives to concrete policymaking, it is nonetheless interesting to analyze the context that shapes the pacifist messages that were delivered throughout the MIRAI Program. Since its WWII defeat, Japan has been a key US ally in the Asia-Pacific region. Its Maritime Self-Defense Force may require a more forceful power projection, but it is still ranked among best navies in the world. The 2016 SIPRI Yearbook reports that Japan’s arms sales have increased by 14.7 percent since 2014. At the same time, however, Japan has maintained a low-profile security policy since the years of the Yoshida Doctrine, focusing its strategic interests on economic recovery and growth. Today, Abe’s well-known defense reform plans, which call for Japan’s more proactive involvement in peace building, are constrained both by the challenges posed by a severe regional security environment, and by the guidelines set by the Japan-US Defense Cooperation.

Going back to the discursive context, two historical memories that underwent some important dialogical clarifications in 2016 were also discussed during the 2016 MIRAI Winter program. First was Obama’s visit to Hiroshima, which was seen as a first step toward the United States’ recognition of the trauma caused by the atomic bombings, firmly impressed in Japan’s collective memory. The second was the Comfort Women Issue, which is now considered as key by the Japanese government. Abe’s open expression of his “most sincere apologies and remorse” has marked an official admission of Japan’s guilt for this controversial war crime, and is bound to act as catalyst for the development of “a new Japan-ROK relationship”.

At this point, we can reconnect Japan’s peace-loving image with other ones that emerged during the lectures and visits organized for the 2016 Winter edition of the MIRAI Program. One is certainly the image of Japan as a progressive power, promoting UN Security Council reform. The other is that of a country which actively engages Africa to ensure its long-term development. Being a G4 member, Japan has expressed its support for the former issue, calling for the expansion of the permanent and non-permanent categories of the UNSC to reach a more inclusive decision-making balance; with regards to the latter issue, Japan’s TICAD VI manifesto places great emphasis on the notion of African ownership of development strategies – alignment with Africa’s own agenda, human security, people-centered development, and follow-up mechanisms of implementation.

Another image promoted through the MIRAI Program is that of Japan as a driving force of innovation. The visit to the Tokyo Tower and the choice of Shinkansen Train as a means of transportation were organized with this

objective in mind. It is well recognized that since the 1980s Japan’s growth strategy has been focusing on enhancing the country’s competitiveness in sectors including high-tech and infrastructure. Today, investment in R&D and education remains an important component of the government’s economic policies. This can be best seen not only in Tokyo’s high-tech districts, but also in the number of museums and cultural sites that are often taken over by students.

With regards to this, another significant representation of Japan conveyed through the MIRAI Program was that of a country which greatly values its history and traditions. The visit to the Edo-Tokyo Museum, the tours in Miyajima’s and Kyoto’s temples and shrines, and the exceptional public opening of the Kyoto’s Urasenke estate were conceived in this frame of reference. Extra-curricular activities thus became a showcase for traditional Japanese aesthetics and culture.

Being one of the stages where Japanese political discourse is transmitted, we could look at the 2016 MIRAI Experience reflecting upon the importance of certain forms of Japanese self-representation. The influential and reliable image of itself that Japan wants to convey through programs such as MIRAI is best understood by bearing in mind the economic slowdown that is tarnishing its soft power.

The MIRAI Program offers a glimpse of the framework within which Japan constructs its identity through political discourse. A more in-depth analysis could highlight the different implications that various political narratives have on policy making. What we would like to emphasize here is the centrality of certain images within Japan’s mechanisms of self-representation. Pictures of a peace loving, progressive, advanced, but also a traditional Japan that were displayed during the MIRAI Program are all integral parts of the country’s discursive construction of its identity and power. At a higher level, Abenomics and the recent emphasis on pro-active pacifism are part of the same strategy of renewing Japanese soft power in a global context. With the coming 2018 elections, it’ll be fascinating to see how Japanese political discourse will continue to evolve, and how it will continue to be transmitted.

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