Notes Toward an Affective Anthropology of International Relations

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Abstract

The demise of national character studies in the 1960s confirmed for anthropologists that people do not so easily and uniformly embody the nation. But such studies might have alternatively asked, do nations act like people? In representations in mass media and even in some rhetorical conventions of IR scholarship, nations often take on the quality of human subjects: they can be offended, ignored, angered, or, as Japan is sometimes depicted in relation to China, apologetic—though never really meaning it. Such personifications of the nation might be forgiven as “just a way of talking” if policy makers themselves weren’t often found to adopt and be influenced by a similarly idiosyncratic perspective. Drawing on fourteen months of fieldwork among a variety of Japan’s government agencies tasked with implementing cultural diplomacy programs toward the realization of Japan’s cultural reserves of soft power, this paper explores possibilities for an anthropology of international relations. It does so by first, demonstrating how anxious affects generated through perceptions of shifting geopolitical power relations in East Asia are translated into policy, and second, investigating para-ethnographic sites for collaboration between anthropologists and IR practitioners whose imagined models of both the nation and the global overlap.

Key words: affect, anthropology, international relations, soft power

In the early 1990s, toward the end of a highly anxious period of time to be evaluating America’s status in the geopolitical community, political scientist Joseph Nye introduced the term soft power. A concept increasingly naturalized within international relations today, it refers to the notion that a country can build its national prestige by attracting foreign publics to its culture, values, and political ideas, thus enabling it to better achieve its national interests (Nye 1990, 2004). In part due to a series of optimistic statements Nye
made about Japan in the early 2000s, and reinforced by a prominent article in *Foreign Policy* by Douglas McGray in 2002 that celebrated the country’s pop culture achievements, Japanese bureaucrats began to seriously reflect on their own country’s soft power potential. In just a few years after the publication of Nye’s book *Soft Power* in 2004, the term found its way into the Japanese government’s most important annual policy report, the “Annual Policy Plan for the Japanese Economy” (*Keizai zaisaku kaikaku no kihon hōshin*):

> With the economic forecast predicting an economic crisis in addition to sweeping changes in industrial and employment structures, there is a need for a shift from excessive dependence on economic growth based on foreign consumption to a new, more dynamic model of growth. First, endeavoring to bring forth a productive cycle based on markets and innovation through the creation of global, cutting edge markets in fields like low-carbon steel, health and longevity, and *soft power*, we aim to acquire an international competitive edge by realizing high quality employment and creation. [Kantei 2009, italics added]

Placing the cultural resources of Japan’s soft power along its economic ones of low-carbon steel, this and other reports revealed how soft power had entered the bureaucratic imaginary as a novel instrument of national prestige-building. As a theory of persuasion and influence, the term offered the possibility of rendering Japan’s cultural heritage into political expediency, as fans of Japan’s traditional and, more importantly, its booming popular culture became potential resources for soft power growth.

Inspiring novel practices of policy making and program management, soft power demonstrated a powerful capacity to transform present anxieties over Japan’s economic and political decline into future hopes for its resurgence in the domain of culture. Such encounters between the affective fields of anxiety and hope with the bureaucratic ones of rationalized policy-making and program management reveal the challenges of understanding the relationship between the radically interior realm of personal feeling and the ideological and institutional architecture of geopolitics in which it is entangled. Such challenges have inspired some anthropologists (Hubbert 2015) to explore the possibility of
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constructing a viable anthropology of international relations. The notes that follow represent one contribution to this effort.

The Nation Personified

The primary claim this essay makes in integrating these notes is that in order for an anthropology of IR to be effective it also needs to be affective. That is, it needs to pay attention to how what we typically imagine as the mechanical procedures of bureaucratic state administration and the cool, calculating practices of diplomatic realpolitik are not only punctuated by moments of dramatic feeling and emotion, but are also fundamentally sustained by a sensitivity—and often in Japan, a sentimentality—in regard to what a nation needs to survive. I will further suggest that what in part enables this condition of affective transfer, and ultimately, its inscription in policy, is the discursive practice of talking about nations like we talk about people.

The evidence for this comes from ethnographic vignettes collected over 14 months of fieldwork in Japan’s state bureaucracies of national culture: the Ministry of Education’s Agency for Cultural Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ Public Relations office, and most of all, the Japan Foundation. Much of this fieldwork is spent in government offices, symposiums, and at summits where I would listen to diplomats speak to invited international audiences. Quite often these events are rather mundane affairs, characterized by monotone speeches, political platitudes, and strategically generic phrasing. But sometimes the typically measured register of politicians, bureaucrats, and even of experienced diplomats can rise to that of the melodramatic. Such moments often come when these speakers for the nation speak of their nation as they would for a close friend, loved one, or, in a classic trope of national belonging, a family member. In a presentation given at Japan’s International House during my fieldwork in 2010, an American diplomat offered the following assessment:

The relationship between the U.S. and Japan too often, I think, resembles a husband and wife. Sometimes when there is instability in a relationship one partner will ask the other, “Do you still care about me?” “Do you still need me?” It’s not a healthy relationship. Japan sometimes does this. I think Japan needs to
stop being so concerned with what the U.S. thinks and start telling it what Japan wants.

This sentiment was echoed by a former Japanese ambassador to the United States who explained:

It is very difficult for Japan to express itself...however, even if we do not express ourselves as well, we are often evaluated for what we are speaking about and our message is appreciated.

Other prominent US officials visiting Japan have made similar comments. In a symposium for US and Japanese officials hosted in Tokyo in 2009 (Fulbright/CULCON), former US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage said,

In terms of public diplomacy, I am afraid that the United States is often accused, and many times correctly so, of confusing public diplomacy and loud speech. If we only speak more loudly, people will understand us. I could make the opposite point that if we were only quiet a little bit and listen to people, that might make for more effective communication. The criticism for Japan, however, is just the opposite of that for the United States. I think that for far too long Japan has spoken too softly.

Obama’s first ambassador to Japan, John Roos, expressed a similar sentiment in speaking to an audience at a major university in Tokyo: “60 years now after the U.S.-Japan Security Alliance, I want to hear what Japan wants today. What does Japan need?”

The observation that diplomats, journalists, and IR specialists personify nations and their relationships to other nations (Japan as America’s wife, in the most striking example above) is neither new nor surprising. To the degree that such forms of speech act as a

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1 As a further indication of the popularity of both soft power and its author, I was told by a number of Japanese officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the time that, to their delight, Joseph Nye was originally considered for this position. Unfortunately for them this did not materialize.
short-hand for describing a conglomeration of various and often competing agencies and offices of a state, one could argue that the rhetorical device is simply a necessary heuristic for getting on with the political work of administration in and of the nation state. But I want to argue that speaking of nations in terms of personal motivations, personality types, and tendencies also interestingly enables the transfer of affect. That is, it enables the possibility among diplomats and officials to feel and make others feel, to be affected by what a state, as imagined subject and agent, does to other states. This might not be so interesting an observation if it weren’t for the fact that, as I observed in my fieldwork, quite often the design and administration of government programs—usually imagined to be a rather rationalized and mechanical process—seems driven by affective forces that don’t easily fit into the prescribed formats of bureaucratic administration: the drafting of plans and budgets, the measurement of program inputs and outputs, and the evaluation of aims and goals met or not. Soft power and the administration of cultural policy in Japan illustrates this nicely.

Identifying affect, however, is tricky ethnographic work. For those anthropologists and philosophers of the affective turn (Clough 2007) seeking to examine its movements in culture, affect is defined as a dimension of human feeling generative of discourse but often circulating in and between bodies outside of conscious recognition and articulation. Emotions, in contrast, refer to those feelings that fix in subjects and crystalize in consciousness and speech (Massumi 2002, 36). As such, affects cannot be empirically observed but only inductively inferred. I began to suspect affect’s role in cultural policy construction and administration through what I observed as a contradiction that emerged repeatedly in the discourse of soft power among my interlocutors: in short, the amount of energy and optimism officials invested in soft power’s potential seemed to increase despite the abundance of evidence suggesting it could not, in fact, be very successfully realized as a tool of political persuasion. According to many experts working in the field of public diplomacy, soft power faced a number of real problems. First, within Japanese administrations strategizing soft power, definitions of it were multiple, poorly formulated, contradictory, and vague. Second, there was a large consensus that soft power could not be quantified in measurable indexes, a particularly acute problem for bureaucratic offices that are required to demonstrate clear relationships between program costs and benefits in order
to justify their taxpayer-supported budgets. Third, what indicators might exist for measuring soft power’s positive effects would likely become foreseeable only far into the future. The benefits of educational exchange programs, it was argued by many diplomats, can best be evaluated only ten to twenty years after their implementation, when students reach positions in industry or politics prestigious enough to effectively influence colleagues and form partnerships beneficial to the host country. Fourth, hard evidence from those content industries cited as resources for Japan’s soft power (anime, manga, music, games, film) indicates a stagnation in many sectors (Kawamata 2005). Finally, the efficacy of these cultural commodities to endear foreign publics to Japan is tempered by the common observation that consumers enamored of a nation’s cultural goods are equally as capable of despising its policies. While Chinese and South Koreans may adore manga, for example, this in no way aids the Japanese government in realizing its political objectives, which, as issues like Yasukuni shrine and various territorial disputes illustrate, often elicit outright hostility from foreign publics. Further, where national governments do seek to invest in culture the results are often counterproductive. To put it bluntly, there is nothing more uncool than having ageing, stiff-suited bureaucrats promoting counter-culture.

Despite this set of challenges attached to the idea of soft power, the concept was nonetheless enthusiastically embraced by officials, suggesting something more deeply affective circulating just below the level of public discourse. Through its ability to transform present anxiety over Japan’s slipping geopolitical prestige into future hope for its content industries to reclaim it, soft power proved itself effective in generating an optimism powerful enough to sustain its ideological promises even in the face of its practical challenges. As soft power became slowly inscribed in various bureaucratic organizations, it manifested this contradiction more poignantly. Bureaucracies which had over a long time established standardized procedures and objectives subsequently found it difficult to incorporate such a vague concept into practical administration. However, the very circulation of the concept increasingly naturalized the term within bureaucratic environments. In other words, as soft power was becoming naturalized within government

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2 The claim that soft power’s rise in popularity is connected to shifting regional power relations in East Asia has also been discussed by Choo 2009, 2010; Daliot-Bul 2009; Leheny 2006, 2011; and Otmaazgin 2008.
administrations it was at the very same time revealing its *unnatural* adaptability to them. What resulted was a number of new policies and programs, some quite strange even in the eyes of the officials I worked with at the Japan Foundation, that were previously unimaginable outside a logic of soft power, such as those of the Anime and Cute Ambassadors (see White 2015).

**The Nation Embodied**

I have attempted thus far to suggest that where affect seems to emerge in policy and in practice, it often does so where the nation state is personified: as a subject *qua* nation that when compared with other nations enables affective flow. However, a correlative to the idea of the nation-as-person is the *nation embodied*. In a variety of ways, nations are embodied in subjects, most regularly through media representations of heads of state such as Barack Obama and Abe Shintaro where they appear as kind of metonyms in the flesh. In fact, for many of the Japanese diplomats and bureaucrats I worked with, the affective flows of anxiety they felt over their slipping status in geopolitics was refracted through their American counterparts. In media worlds what people do to people, particularly heads of state, nations do to nations — they can, for example, personally *offend*. This spectacle of the national imaginary, in which Japan’s presence is compared to that of the United States, emerges in narrative accounts given by Japanese officials on what are perceived to be dramatic American transgressions, the most prominent of which was the Nixon shock (*Nikuson shokku*). As a term that circulates globally, the Nixon shock refers primarily to the decision of the US government in 1971 to untether the US dollar to gold; in Japan, however, the Nixon shock refers simultaneously to the revelation of Nixon’s decision to visit China in 1971 without directly informing Japan, which was often explained to me by my bureaucrat interlocutors as a personal blow to Japan. In 1996, Kusuda Minoru, the former Chief Secretary to Japan’s Prime Minister during the Nixon shock, Sato Eisaku, gave an account of the day they learned of Nixon’s intentions:

> It was on Friday, July 16, 1971, Japan time, on a day when the regular cabinet meeting was being held. Usually these cabinet meetings start at 9:00 a.m. Just before the end of the meeting, a message came from the Foreign Ministry to the
official residence of the Prime Minister. The contents of the message said National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger went to Beijing from July 6th to July 7th, whereupon Kissinger told Chou En-lai that President Nixon wanted to visit China.

This message had been relayed from the Secretary of State Rogers to the Japanese Ambassador in Washington, Ushiba, and then to Vice Foreign Minister Yasakawa in Tokyo. It had not been communicated through the U.S.-Japan hot line, one that had been installed upon an agreement at the Sato-Nixon meeting in November 1969. As soon as I received the news, I rushed to the Cabinet meeting room, but the meeting for the day had been adjourned, so I went to the Prime Minister's office and reported the news to Prime Minister Sato. The Prime Minister's instantaneous expression was very hard to describe. It seemed as if he were fighting a thousand emotions in one frozen minute in time. His verbal reaction was only one word of acknowledgment, "Soka?" [sic] or literally translated, "Is that so?" He fell silent afterwards.

In the discourse of international relations, nations seem to act quite like people; in turn, when heads of state act, their actions represent the actions and even feelings of the nation.

In 2009, the new Prime Minister Aso Taro’s first meeting with Barack Obama was covered with especially high interest in the press, with papers and news stations eagerly speculating over what kind of impression Aso would make on the enormously popular and charismatic new American President. News anchors evaluated Aso’s sonzaikan, or “presence.” Their ultimate assessments were overwhelmingly negative. Aso, it seems, did not make a very good impression, nor—worse—any real impression at all. News stations compared the event to Hirohito’s iconic visit with General McArthur in 1945 (Fig. 1). In the wake of Aso and Obama’s meeting in 2009, I Googled “Aso” and “Obama” in Japanese and clicked “images.” The one below (Fig. 2) was the second to appear.
(Figure 1. “MacArthur and Hirohito.” Faillace, Gaetano, U.S. Army photographer Lt. 1945.)

(Figure 2. “Barack Obama and Taro Aso in the White House.” Pete Souza, photographer, White House. 2009.)
In widely circulated images like these, the nation is mirrored in the mediated flesh of its leaders. One can almost feel the tension in the room. It is a tension that roots in bodies and seems to emerge in a variety of forms: sometimes in the material products of policy; and sometimes, as I show below, even in the immaterial imaginaries of dreams.

In further comments offered by Kusuda (1996) in his retelling of Nixon’s personal slight to Japan, he references dreamscape:

There is no denying that there was a joke circulating among Japanese diplomats that one of them had had a nightmare that one morning he would wake up and find U.S. and China had established relations and failed to tell Japan. This nightmare had become a reality, and so I hope you can understand the sense of astonishment and consternation among the government, the business world, the academia, and the media.

I thought about Kusuda’s reference to nightmares after another moment of my fieldwork in which a high level official made a reference to dreaming. As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, officials in Japan, usually rather formal and predictable speakers, can sometimes offer dramatically personal insights into their private worlds, and into the world of deep affect. Toward the end of a long meeting in 2009 with officials from the Agency for Cultural Affairs, in Japan’s Ministry of Education, I found my attention wandering. The perfunctory nature and monotonous tone which characterizes these meetings are rather conducive to this. However, I was soon startled by a rather loud and animated voice that proclaimed, “Last night President Obama appeared in my dreams!” The voice was that of the Agency’s Commissioner. I tuned in just in time to register the Commissioner’s message. It seemed Obama had appeared in his dreams to motivate the committee: real change, not a regular characteristic of Japanese bureaucracy, was, it seemed, possible. *Ganbarimashō!* he ended enthusiastically, a phrase I would usually translate as “let’s give it our best,” but given the timing of the meeting in 2009, I might more appropriately translate here as “Yes we can!”

What can the anthropologist make of Obama’s appearance in this official’s dream? Obama, so much the promise of a hopeful America in the flesh, was here in dream image a
hope for Japan as well.³ The nation here—in human body, then in dream figure—seemed to take on an almost magical power to affect, to transcend space and time in visiting the Commissioner’s dream as a kind of haunting or hallowing host. The bureaucratic staging of this juxtaposition between the monotony of administration and the mystery of dream felt odd. But then, I had begun to experience the same feeling at other similar intersections of reason and romance during my fieldwork. The experience is consistent, in fact, with Don Handelman’s (2007, 134) description of what he calls the state’s regular “torquing of passion and reason,” a major function of bureaucracy whose ultimate objective is to negotiate the mutual demands of nation and state:

The modern state depends on torquing together the sides of this divide. The vector of bureaucratic logic shifts the State towards the mathematical, towards lineal topologies of separating and fitting together parts with the exactitude of sameness and difference, while governing these machinic processes through rationality, clarity, precision, control. By contrast, the vector of totalizing effervescent emotion shifts the State towards the modern national, towards the romantic sublime (Weiskel 1976), combining a secular metaphysics of transcendence with nationalism, generating the intense arousing of emotion, their over-abundant penumbra of effervescence spilling over, uncontainable within lineal classification…The State must join the two sides of the divide, yet does so without being able to predict emergent outcomes. [134]

Bureaucratic logic is generally understood as vacant of emotion; however, as Handelman shows, it establishes a fluid and mutually constitutive relationship with a national imagining that is actually motivated and sustained by it: “Bureaucratic logic may constrict, strangle, choke off the emotionalism of the national,” Handelman (2007, 135) explains, “and the enthusiasm of the national may overflow and swamp the neat borders and divisions made through bureaucratic logic.”

³ The affective energy surrounding Obama’s rhetoric of hope has been described as a global phenomenon. Christine Yano’s essay (2013) on its permutations in Japan is especially informative and parallels the spread of the soft power discourse in many ways.
Conclusions

In my fieldwork I continually observed officials struggle with making the hopeful and ideological promises of soft power amenable to bureaucratic administration. It was often a rather awkward affair. What soft power as a theory of international relations becomes in these sites fluctuates according to what its various administrators in diverse offices require or desire of it. However, if soft power is a theory of international relations it is also clearly a theory of interpersonal relations—of influence and the power of charisma and persuasion. What I have endeavored to demonstrate here is that one way to approach an anthropology of international relations is to pay attention to how the capacity to affect, enabled by the imagining of nations as subjects, is actually fed back into national policy as a mechanism for administration. I’m not sure academics and politicians working through the framework of IR would allow affect and dreams into their modeling of states’ interactions (realist, idealist, neoliberalist); however, if anthropological fieldwork reveals that dreams and affect nonetheless do play a role in the practice of state administration, then it seems worth the effort to find ways to make an anthropology of international relations not only possible but also constructively communicable to those outside our discipline.

References


Images
