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# Seeking Japanese conceptions of humanitarianism

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While the contemporary humanitarian order has its roots and origin in traditional Western/Christian culture and has been dominated by the West, Japan was one of the earliest non-Western/non-Christian states to be integrated into the order. Japan is a member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD's DAC), and a part of the Good Humanitarian Donorship mechanisms. More than 30 Japanese non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are signatory to the "Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief." These distinguish Japan from other humanitarian actors in East Asia (for example China) which are not part of any of these institutions.<sup>i</sup>

While being part of the order, Japan has a distinct feature in the ways humanitarianism is conceptualized and humanitarian actions are undertaken. This essay identifies the Japanese conception of legitimate humanitarian actors and their practices today. It argues that traditionally the government and officialdom have been regarded as the primary legitimate humanitarian actor, which has created the sense that the government and officialdom hold hierarchically more legitimate position than those of civil society actors. This means that politics has an immense impact on Japan's humanitarian action conducted by both the government and NGOs.

### **The roots of contemporary humanitarianism in Japan**

The distinctiveness of Japan as a donor and as a provider of humanitarian assistance must be understood in relation to the background of Japanese conceptions of humanitarianism. This includes the historical development of the notion of helping others, especially the socially vulnerable and victims of wars. Factors that underpin this development include the Buddhist view of the world and the development of social welfare systems within Buddhism. Mercy (*jihī*) and compassion (*awaremi*) to others are particularly important in the teachings of Buddhism. Another significant factor that shapes traditions of humanitarianism in Japan is the spirit of *Bushido*, the code of samurai. Yet another key factor is the way in which Western humanitarianism was introduced to Japan through encounters with the Red Cross movement in 1867. Japan was applauded by Western societies for its humanitarian attitudes and practices towards prisoners of war during the Sino-Japanese War in 1894, as well as the Russo-Japanese War in 1904. However, this was not the case in the Second World War and the Sino-Japanese War from the 1930s to 1945, in which a series of cruel and inhumane acts became synonymous with Japan. In seeking to understand humanitarianism in Japan, therefore, studies on those issues are prerequisites to grasping and understanding the Japanese notion of humanitarianism. However, whilst it is important to recognize the complex range of historical and cultural factors that underpin contemporary practices, tradition and history alone cannot explain contemporary Japanese practices of humanitarianism. These practices are also deeply influenced by the social and political structures of modern Japan.

## **“Legitimate” humanitarian actors in Japan**

Conceptions of legitimate humanitarianism in Japan are strongly influenced by the enduring structure of state–society relations. This structure privileges the role of the state in the provision of public goods, and the citizen is strongly dependent on the state, as reflected in the idea articulated in the Meiji period — “hard labor as the duty of citizens, public service as the duty of the state.”<sup>ii</sup> This hierarchy of agency is reflected in the structure of Japan’s humanitarian system.

There are two kinds of humanitarian agency in Japan who are perceived as legitimate. The first is the *kan* (central and regional government/officialdom) and its related agencies such as the bureaucratic system, the Japan International Cooperation Agency, the Self Defense Forces (SDF), the Japanese Red Cross Society (JRCS), and the United Nations (UN). The second kind of humanitarian actors are NGOs, a relatively new set of actors in Japan’s humanitarian assistance.

The *kan* occupies a predominant position over NGOs in terms of the Japanese perception of legitimate humanitarian actors. Traditionally, it was considered legitimate that the government monopolized the provision of public or social services and should have the responsibility to do so.<sup>iii</sup> The centrality of the *kan* as humanitarian actors was embedded in Japan’s traditional concept of *okami*, which refers to the top state authority (i.e., the Emperor, the Shogun, and the current government) as the supreme lord to provide mainstream public services. Kusumi argues that the idea of *okami* drastically limited the opportunities for civil society actors to develop as the main social services provider.<sup>iv</sup> Although many social, financial, commercial, and agricultural mutual aid associations existed, the scope of their activities was largely limited to the area where people had face-to-face contact.<sup>v</sup>

In the post-Second World War period, the scope of the *kan* has been extended from domestic institutions to incorporate the UN. The Japanese government adopted an official policy, called “UN-oriented” (*kokuren jyūshi*) or “UN centrism” (*kokuren chūshin shugi*) policy. This policy complements the Japanese citizens’ sense of admiration of UN agencies. This admiration is demonstrated by the amount of private donations given to UN agencies. For example, Japan’s private donations to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) were US\$128 million in 2011, which was ranked number one in the world for private contributions. This compares with the Japanese government’s US\$193 million contribution to UNICEF, which was ranked number five in the world ranking for contributions. This private–government ratio of contributions contrasts starkly with that of most other top donor countries, in which private funding for UNICEF is rather small and incomparable to the level of government funding. For example, the US government’s contribution to UNICEF is US\$345 million, while its private donation is US\$87 million; and the UK government’s contribution is US\$290 million, while its private donation is US\$41 million.<sup>vi</sup> Furthermore,

the size of Japan's private contribution to UNICEF contrasts markedly with the relatively small private funding to NGOs, as discussed later.

Another actor that is considered to be part of the *kan* is the JRCS.<sup>vii</sup> As with UNICEF, the Japanese public provides significant donations to the JRCS. The International Helping Hand Campaign, launched in 1983 by the JRCS in collaboration with the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK), is the biggest and most effective fundraising campaign for overseas assistance in Japan, raising a total of approximately 21 billion yen from 1984 to 2011.<sup>viii</sup> This annual campaign is held for a month in December and is widely recognized and supported among the public due to NHK's successful promotion of it on television. The funds raised are used exclusively for the JRCS's humanitarian activities.

The second group of actors that are perceived as legitimate humanitarian actors is NGOs. These are independent organizations that adhere to the four basic principles of humanitarian assistance — humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. NGOs have become major actors in relation to Japan's international aid, with their numbers increasing steadily from about ten organizations in the 1970s to an estimated 400 today.<sup>ix</sup> However, the growth of humanitarian NGOs has been boosted by an increase in government subsidies. In April 1989, the Japanese government began Grant Aid for Grassroots Projects and NGO Project Subsidies to extend financial assistance beyond development NGOs to humanitarian NGOs. The government explained the background of these new subsidies as follows:

Compared to European and American NGOs, which have abundant experience and stable financial bases, Japanese NGOs, in general, are less experienced in the international aid field and have weak finances with which to achieve satisfactory aid activities. This resulted in growing hopes for government support for NGO activities, and led to the introduction of the NGO subsidy framework in FY1989.<sup>x</sup>

In addition to this subsidy framework, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) also introduced a new scheme of grant assistance for Japanese NGOs' emergency relief projects (the so-called "Direct Fund") in 1999, as a result of the Kosovo crisis that attracted media attention and led to emergency NGOs' increased pressure on the government to support emergency NGOs.<sup>xi</sup> In April 2000, the government started Grant Assistance for NGOs' Emergency Relief Projects, which made available funds for humanitarian NGOs at the time of an emergency (whereas MOFA had an annual deadline for funding proposals). Encouraged by the government grant scheme, ten emergency NGOs, the MOFA, and Nippon Keidanren (Japan Business Association) jointly established Japan Platform in August 2000, with the aim to provide prompt and effective emergency humanitarian assistance activities for disasters and conflicts, in coordination and cooperation with Japanese NGOs, economic circles, and the government.

However, the predominance of the *kan* in humanitarian assistance is still quite visible today. Before the establishment of Japan Platform, Japanese government funds for emergency humanitarian assistance were disbursed only through the UN agencies. Although part of the funds are now channeled directly to NGOs (much of which through Japan Platform), the bulk of the government's humanitarian assistance is still provided through the UN multilateral framework.<sup>xii</sup>

### **Humanitarianism and politics**

Japan's humanitarian imperative is driven by a complex blend of empathy and politics. First, the way in which the Japanese government defines and provides "humanitarian assistance" is often determined by the political structure — in particular, the Japan–US alliance. The Japanese government has used "humanitarian assistance" as a means to contribute to US political aims and through this to honor the Japan–US alliance. Japan's "humanitarian and reconstruction assistance" to the Iraq War is a case in point. Based on the Law Concerning the Special Measures on Humanitarian and Reconstruction Assistance in Iraq, which passed the Diet in July 2003, Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro dispatched the SDF to Iraq. He labelled the SDF's activities conducted as a part of US-led coalition forces "humanitarian and reconstruction assistance."<sup>xiii</sup> Japan's considerable financial "humanitarian assistance" to Iraq also suggests how significant the Japan–US alliance is to Japan's "humanitarian" policymaking process. Foreign Minister Kawaguchi Yoriko pledged US\$4,914 million at the International Donors' Conference for Iraq in Madrid in October 2003.<sup>xiv</sup> The contribution was second only to that of the US, and far exceeded that of the next largest donors, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UK.<sup>xv</sup> In addition to this contribution, MOFA provided Japan Platform with approximately 16 billion yen (approximately US\$147 million) in 2004. This was about a 9 billion yen (US\$83 million) increase from the government's subsidy to Japan Platform in 2003, and the increase was earmarked specifically for use in Iraq.

Second, official humanitarian assistance, particularly in the context of complex emergencies, is shaped by the constitutional restrictions on the use of force overseas. This affects Japan's provisions of humanitarian assistance in complex emergencies in two ways. First, the Japanese government depends more on civilians than on the armed forces in providing humanitarian assistance, because Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution allows only a limited range of SDF activities to be carried out overseas. Second, Japan's humanitarian contribution to complex emergencies is largely limited to financial and "in-kind" support rather than military intervention. The Law Concerning Cooperation for United Nations Peace-keeping Operations and Other Operations (often called the International Peace Cooperation Law) was enacted in 1992, allowing the government to dispatch the SDF to participate in UN peacekeeping and humanitarian operations. However, the law stipulates that strict conditions have to be met for the SDF to participate in any international operations.<sup>xvi</sup> These conditions limit the SDF's ability to contribute to humanitarian intervention.

Third, Japan's experience of its own natural disasters further significantly influences Japan's humanitarianism, which affects the way it acts in humanitarian crises. Japanese society has a great deal of empathy with other countries facing natural disasters, due to Japan's own experiences of frequent severe earthquakes and tsunamis. As a result, Japanese citizens are more keen to help victims of natural disasters overseas, rather than those of complex emergencies.

Fourth, this tendency is also reflected in the activities of Japan's humanitarian NGOs. They prefer to provide assistance for natural disasters, rather than complex emergencies, because of financial reasons. The Japanese private sector, such as the business community and other private donors, are keen to donate money to humanitarian assistance missions dealing with natural disasters, but not to those in complex emergencies, such as in Afghanistan or Pakistan. This makes humanitarian NGOs' operations in complex emergencies even more financially dependent on government funding. Almost 100 per cent of the funding for these missions undertaken by Japan Platform comes directly from the Japanese government. The reluctance of the private sector to become involved in assistance in conflict situations is also due to the political sensitivity surrounding such conflicts, and the concern that businesses might be perceived as political entities pursuing a specific political agenda. This problem further deters many humanitarian NGOs from operating in complex emergencies. Politics, therefore, plays a significant role in shaping when and how Japan's humanitarian actors provide assistance.

## Conclusion

Although Japan has been officially integrated into the structure and institutions of the contemporary humanitarian order, Japan's political and social particularities have influenced its conception of humanitarianism. Japan is a non-Western/non-Christian country, just like Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) and many Islamic states that have emerged as humanitarian donors and actors in recent years. More research into the Japanese experience and the Japanese conception of humanitarianism will be valuable. In particular, comparing and contrasting Japan's humanitarianism to that of other non-Christian donors, such as the BRICS and Islamic states, could provide useful insights into the degree to which the emergence of these new actors challenges the traditional humanitarian order.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Yukie Osa, "The Growing Role of NGOs in Disaster Relief and Humanitarian Assistance in East Asia," in Rizal Sukma and James Gannon, eds., *A Growing Force: Civil Society's Role in Asian Regional Security* (Tokyo: Japan Center for International Exchange, 2012). The Code of Conduct was created in 1994, and the number of signatory NGOs has increased to 512 (as of October 2012). See International Federation for Red Cross and Red

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Crescent Societies, “Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief: List of Signatories,” 2012, [www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/disasters/code-of-conduct/codeconduct\\_signatories.pdf](http://www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/disasters/code-of-conduct/codeconduct_signatories.pdf); accessed March 5, 2013.

<sup>ii</sup> Tsuyoshi Kusumi, “The Current Situation and Issues of Japan’s Government-NPO relations,” in Gen Watanabe, ed., *The Present State of Nonprofit Sector in Japan* (Tokyo: Japan NGO Center, 2002), p. 3.

<sup>iii</sup> Yukie Osa, “The Role of Japanese NGOs in the Pursuit of Human Security: Limits and Possibilities in the Field of Refugees,” *Japan Forum* 15, no. 2 (2003), pp. 251–65.

<sup>iv</sup> Kusumi, “The Current Situation,” p. 3.

<sup>v</sup> Kokusai Kyoryoku Jigyodan Seinen Kaigai Kyoryokutai Jimukyoku [Japan International Cooperation Agency’s Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers Bureau], “21 seiki no JICA borantia jigyo no arikata hokokusho [Report on the Role of JICA Volunteer Work in the 21st Century]” (Tokyo: JICA, 2002), p. 15.

<sup>vi</sup> UNICEF, “UNICEF Annual Report 2011” (New York: UNICEF, 2012), p. 32, [www.unicef.org/publications/files/UNICEF\\_Annual\\_Report\\_2011\\_EN\\_060112.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/publications/files/UNICEF_Annual_Report_2011_EN_060112.pdf); accessed March 5, 2013. UNICEF has 36 national committee partners, which raise funds for UNICEF from ordinary citizens and private sectors.

<sup>vii</sup> The JRCS is officially registered as an NGO, but is widely regarded as an official agency.

<sup>viii</sup> Japan Broadcasting Corporation, “NHK saimatsu tasukeai, NHK kaigai tasukeai, Heisei gannen kara no jisseki [NHK Year-End Helping Hand Campaign, NHK Overseas Helping-Hand Campaign: Achievement since 1989],” no date, [www.nhk.or.jp/event/tasukeai/jisseki.html](http://www.nhk.or.jp/event/tasukeai/jisseki.html); accessed March 5, 2013.

<sup>ix</sup> Masaaki Ohashi, “Nihon ni okeru NGO katudo no jittai to ruikei [Situation and Typology of NGO Activities in Japan],” in Yoshiki Mine, ed., *Gurobaru ka, henkaku shutai, NGO* [Globalization, Change Actor, and NGOs] (Tokyo: Shin Hyoron, 2011), pp. 40–1.

<sup>x</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Box 1 NGO Subsidy Framework: Changes over the Last Decade,” in *Japan’s Official Development Assistance Annual Report 1999*, [www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/summary/1999/box\\_01.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/summary/1999/box_01.html); accessed March 5, 2013.

<sup>xi</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Refugee Assistance,” 2013, [www.mofa.go.jp/policy/un/pamph2000\\_archive/refugee.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/un/pamph2000_archive/refugee.html); accessed March 5, 2013.

<sup>xii</sup> Only 3 per cent of Japan’s total net official development assistance disbursed in 2008 was allocated to or channeled through NGOs, compared to the average DAC share of 7 per cent. See OECD, “Japan: Development Assistant Committee (DAC) Peer Review,” 2010, p. 49, [www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/oda/doukou/dac/pdfs/houkokusho\\_10e.pdf](http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/oda/doukou/dac/pdfs/houkokusho_10e.pdf); accessed March 5, 2013.

<sup>xiii</sup> Cabinet Public Relations Office, “Continuing Reconstruction Assistance to Iraq,” *Koizumi Cabinet E-mail Magazine* 145, June 24 (2004), [www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/m-magazine/backnumber/2004/0624.html](http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/m-magazine/backnumber/2004/0624.html); accessed March 5, 2013.

<sup>xiv</sup> United Nations Development Group, “International Donors’ Conference for Iraq, Madrid, October 23–24, 2003: Summary Table by Type of Assistance,” [iraq.undg.org/uploads/doc/summary%20tables.pdf](http://iraq.undg.org/uploads/doc/summary%20tables.pdf); accessed March 5, 2013.

<sup>xv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xvi</sup> These conditions are: “(1) a cease-fire must be in place; (2) the parties to the conflict must have given their consent to the operation; (3) the activities must be conducted in a strictly impartial manner; (4) participation may be suspended or terminated if any of the above conditions ceases to be satisfied; and (5) use of weapons shall be limited to the minimum necessary to protect life or person of the personnel.” See Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Current Issues Surrounding UN Peace-keeping Operations and Japanese Perspective,” January 1997, [www.mofa.go.jp/policy/un/pko/issues.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/un/pko/issues.html); accessed March 5, 2013.

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