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**The Contents of Power:
Narrative and Soft Power in the
Olympic Games Opening Ceremonies**

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Abstract: *This paper examines debates about soft power and popular culture, with particular attention to the framing and reception of the opening ceremonies at the Olympics. It examines how national narratives, particularly in the oft-noted Beijing 2008 Games and the London 2012 Games, have been analysed, turning then to a discussion of clues regarding the likely framing of the 2020 opening ceremony in Tokyo.*

Keywords: Soft power; popular culture; narrative politics.

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1. Introduction

Before 1989, scholars of international relations were little concerned with the hardness or softness of power itself. To be sure, disagreements abounded; the neorealists who followed the work of Kenneth Waltz, particularly his 1979 classic, *Theory of International Politics*, stood in contrast to the classical realism of Hans Morgenthau, who had envisioned power as emerging mostly from military and economic clout – tanks and banks – but also viewed amorphous qualities like ‘national character’ (Morgenthau 1993 [1948]: 143–49) as playing a role in what states could or could not accomplish; the stoic, largely uncomplaining Russian was a tough match for the enterprising, never-say-die American. Amongst liberals – those who viewed interest and strategy emerging around and through the international institutions increasingly dotting the global landscape in the 20th century – power was usually articulated in materialist terms, although shaped by the expectation that interests might be guided more by the promise of absolute gains through transnational cooperation than by the firm expectation of relative costs and gains imposed by an anarchical system structure. Whilst some wrote about the transmission of ideas through these institutions, there was little appetite for a rethinking of power itself, particularly of its hardness or softness, amongst those liberals who frequently faced the threat of being called analytically soft by their hard-headed, gimlet-eyed realist counterparts.

As with much else, this began to change with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War that, besides its profound cultural consequences for countries around the world, had left an indelible mark on the field of international relations itself. On the one hand, one might look at the emergence of a unipolar United States (US) – alone astride the world like a victorious Colossus – and understand it as the vindication of a complex calculation of power resources that left the wealthy and efficient (not just well-armed) US as the key winner of the war, with the highly armed but economically catastrophic Soviet Union as the obvious loser; stronger power won, weaker power lost. But, on the other hand, the US was not truly alone, particularly as the 1980s had revealed economic challenges that threatened to position some of the country’s allies – Japan and West Germany – as the real victors of the Cold War, the ones whose economic growth

had outpaced the US's and would reap the benefits of an increasingly peaceful world order for which the US had paid disproportionately.

Harvard political scientist and occasional US foreign policymaker Joseph S. Nye sought to theorise the US's continued pre-eminence when he first published his short article 'Soft Power' in the respected professional magazine *Foreign Policy* in 1989. Reacting in particular to the ostensible threat of Japan's rise, Nye argued that the US would remain the world's top actor for the foreseeable future in part because of its ample reserves of 'soft power': the power to persuade, not simply the power to coerce. Nye therefore drew the conception of power away from the materialist preferences of most political scientists and towards a more ambiguous, perhaps more realistic, world in which actors are swayed by all sorts of forces, some the calculable quantities of guns and troops, or of votes and electoral funding, and others the power of charisma, appeal, and message (Nye, 1989). In some ways, this represented an effort to draw the study of international politics away from the structuralist underpinnings of Waltzian neo-realism and to return it to the mid-century qualities of Morgenthau's emphasis on character and values as elements in a country's profile. For Nye, the US's relative cultural openness and the near-hegemonic reach of its communication apparatus (including not just government efforts but also media and popular culture) gave the US an almost insurmountable lead over insular and largely withdrawn Japan. Others might be entranced by the US's commitment to democracy and to the rules of a mutually beneficial international order, and might be willing to accede to US demands for this reason. Japan's goals – voiced probably in heavily accented English and with little recourse to national ideals or values understood or appreciated abroad – would ostensibly be met only through the diplomatic leveraging of the country's formidable economic (or hard power) resources.

As a theoretical matter in political science, 'soft power' has turned out to be something of a non-starter. With virtually no successful and rigorous tests of its importance, its conceptual survival in global debate is owed to something other than the virtually non-existent evidence that it actually matters. And yet even the most cursory check online will reveal a dazzling array of reports, studies, papers, articles, and books about it, mostly authored by journalists, former diplomats, instructors in foreign policy programs, and the like – people whose work is generally measured more by rhetorical cleverness, fidelity to existing government priorities, and appealing anecdotes as by

rigorous and replicable evaluation of variables (e.g. amount of soft power or actual government policy) and their relationships. And so this has largely been a story that people who depend in part on foreign policy institutions tell themselves and others about what works and why. My point is not to suggest any dishonesty here, but rather that the popularity of the term likely owes something to its inherent desirability amongst writers. Those whose job it has been to convince other governments of the rightness of their own countries' positions might well be predisposed to believe that this matter of convincing – this changing of minds, this persuasion – matters, and matters more than do the nuts-and-bolts, hard calculations of costs and benefits of different policies. Were the efforts by the different Bush administrations in their wars with Iraq (George H.W. Bush's in 1990/1991 and George W. Bush's a bit more than a decade later) made more or less successful because the former Bush administration had more soft power and was more persuasive? Or were sceptics like France sufficiently confident about their own hard power as well as of the consequences of supporting the war that they were less willing to be swayed the second time around? Put a bit differently, when students reiterate points I have emphasised in class over the course of a semester in their final examinations, I am of course eager to believe that I persuaded them because of the power of my ideas, the attractiveness of my values. But to convince myself of this, I would need to ignore an important fact that they themselves almost certainly do not: that I am grading their exams. And so the appeal that soft power has to me comes not despite my hard power, but perhaps because of it; because I want to believe that something other than brute force makes people agree with me.

2. The Rise of Soft Power in Japan

For years following the (soon translated) publication of Nye's 1990 magnum opus on the topic, *Bound to Lead*, most Japanese observers repeated their own versions of Nye's most geographically relevant claim: that Japan simply was not the source or beneficiary of much soft power. In the conventional view, whilst Nye may have misunderstood, or more likely been disinterested in, the roots of Japan's insularity, he had the diagnosis

more or less right: Japan's myriad attractions did not add up to a persuasive voice in global politics.

This began to change rapidly in 2001, following the publication (also in *Foreign Policy*) of journalist Douglas McGray's article 'Gross National Cool'. During the course of a several-month stint in Tokyo under the auspices of a Japan Foundation fellowship, McGray, a writer mostly for the highly popular technology magazine *Wired*, examined the creative scene in Japan, argued that Japan's strengths in anime, manga, and J-Pop, combined with robotics, high-tech, and postmodern design, were together likely to make it a new kind of cultural mecca; it had, in this view, become attractive, and McGray asked whether this would mean that Japan might develop critical soft power resources of its own. Over the next 18 months, interest within Japan combined with events outside of it to suggest that McGray was onto something. The term 'Gross National Cool' swept across Japanese officialdom and the mass media, with 'Cool Japan' emerging as a theme capable of spawning an NHK television program, a 2003 major symposium (at which McGray himself spoke, alongside notable figures like 'Iron Chef' Morimoto Masaharu, the venerable Shogakukan and Pokémon producer Kubo Masakazu, and legendary animator/designer Ikuhara Kunihiko of *Revolutionary Girl Utena* fame) at the Nikkei Hall (Nikkei Shimbun, 2003), and myriad government reports. The 2003 win by Miyazaki Hayao's *Spirited Away* of the Best Animated Film at the Academy Awards – the first Japanese film so honoured – seemed to put an exclamation point on Japan's emergence on the global cultural stage.

Of course, what this actually meant was anyone's guess. The distinguished cultural theorist Iwabuchi Kōichi had argued that Japan's popular cultural products were sometimes distinguished by their very absence of a distinctive national imprint; he referred to their *mukokuseki* quality (Iwabuchi 2002). In another piece published in an edited volume comparing the US and Japan as 'soft power superpowers', former Japanese ambassador to UNESCO Kondō Seiichi characterised Japan's appeal a bit differently:

Many people in the world now prefer contemporary expressions in art and culture instead of the missionary preaching of ideals. This is a situation apparently favorable to Japan, which is not good at projecting ideals.... The most important factor on the receiving side probably has to do with the psychology of contemporary human beings. Whilst enjoying the freedom and material prosperity

that are the fruits of modern rationalism, people feel perplexed at the growing divide between rich and poor, cutthroat market competition, environmental destruction, and identity crises, as well as the social unrest and terrorism that have arisen partly because of their inability to resolve these issues. For those who have some doubts about modern life but cannot articulate them, the messages from Japanese anime emphasising human complexity and the importance of coexistence with nature may appear to offer some hints for problem-solving options superior to reliance on the simple dichotomy of rewarding good and punishing evil (Kondo, 2008: 199).

Whilst none of these claims is really alien to broad contemporary claims about Japanese culture and society, their specificity is striking. If anything, this seems less about Japan than about the US, particularly in the George W. Bush/War on Terror era – the photographic negative implied by Kondō here: the ‘missionary preaching of ideals’, ‘modern rationalism’, ‘cutthroat market competition’, ‘environmental destruction’, ‘social unrest and terrorism’, and ‘the simple dichotomy of rewarding good and punishing evil’.

My point is not that Kondō is wrong; how could I know? Even surveys and polls about the reception of anime and other Japanese popular culture overseas tend to be imprecise and varied in their outcomes. My point rather is that a great deal of projection goes on in discussions of soft power, like when observers like Nye purport to speak authoritatively both about the character of US values (freedom, tolerance, democracy) and about their overseas appeal, despite cultural products and actual policies that emphasise violence and punishment of those who wrong the US. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the *Rambo* films – in which a sweaty, heavily-armed sociopath gunned down hundreds of Vietnamese and Russians – were more popular internationally than contemporary liberal-message films like *The Color Purple* or *Good Will Hunting*, and there is little reason to believe that the latter had more of a hold on global judgements of the US’s values than the former. They certainly seem not to have swayed Kondō himself, a sophisticated thinker on these matters. Similarly, Kondō’s expression of what Japanese values are communicated through its anime seem to take a particular vision of anime

(presumably Ghibli films) and then to presume how they are understood by their overseas fans, and what the 'Japan' that emerges from them is.

Instead, the discussion of a country's representation overseas – its 'soft power', its 'national branding' that emerges from its 'cultural diplomacy' – should be approached as if the dominant forces shaping it are those emanating from inside, not outside, of the country. And if anything, they should be regarded as a government talking about the outside world to its own citizens, or perhaps even to itself. This perspective, whilst foreign to much of the writing on soft power in opinion magazines and in major newspapers, is increasingly the consensus in critical international relations theory (see, e.g. Bially-Mattern, 2005; Hayden, 2012). Rather than debating whether soft power really exists or whether it matters, scholars are instead asking what it means that a concept that is so difficult to operationalise and with so little evidence for its actual importance, has turned out to generate so much discussion globally, and certainly in Japan.

To be sure, two attractive elements of 'soft power' are its instinctive viability as well as its exploitability. We have all sorts of markers about how people in one country or another feel about other nations. Public opinion polls routinely include questions about how people view other nations, and one can track the rise and fall of the US, China, the United Kingdom, Japan, France, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and other nations in terms of global popularity. Numbers of students enrolled in language classes – of Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, French, English, etc. – might give a sense of which nations are on the rise and which are on the decline in terms of their attractiveness as targets of costly and time-consuming learning. Korean protests against Japan, Pakistani protests against the US, Philippine protests against China: surely these tell us something about how the people of Country X feel about Country Y. And kids around Asia love K-Pop, or Japanese anime, or American hip-hop. Surely that affects how they view the Republic of Korea (hereafter, Korea), Japan, or the US.

Maybe these patterns do matter, but it is not entirely easy to explain why. Almost certainly some of the Chinese demonstrating against Japan in the wake of diplomatic rows over disputed territories have watched and enjoyed anime, even admiring the Japanese creators of them. Surely many Americans enrolled in Chinese-language classes, including at 'Confucius Institutes' in the US, are critical of China's trade policies or human rights violations. And surely many participants in anti-military base protests in Japan have

enjoyed Hollywood films and may even be vocal fans of their directors and stars. Indeed, whilst it is relatively easy to imagine a scenario in which a government is swayed by vocal disapproval by its citizens of another country's policies, it is far harder to imagine one in which government policy is shaped substantially by the attractiveness of another country, and in the absence of other material inducements. And yet the myriad ways in which people's 'feelings' about other countries are reflected in popular media and debate, as well as the centrality of diplomats in trying to create this positive buzz, together feed a sense that these feelings matter politically, and that soft power must both exist and must be relevant.

Perhaps even more important is the even unconscious exploitability of soft power as a topic. This was immediately apparent in Japan during the post-McGray 'Gross National Cool' phase. For security-minded conservatives, soft power was useful insofar as it implied that Japan – through the global popularity of anime and Japan's new coolness – would underscore the country's re-emergence as a globally trusted state that could now consider reappearing as a normal military power, with the ability to make regional and global contributions to security. That is, soft power would allow Japan to shed its image as a pariah forced into a pacifist constitution as penance for its wartime behaviour and instead re-emerge as a trusted international player, able to exercise normal military force in a widely accepted manner. On the other hand, for those on the Left, soft power has been the necessary and obvious counterpoint to hard military power: that a trusted Japan was one that would engage the world through its *Doraemon* and its Ghibli films, not through military engagement that would only diminish Japan's global influence (e.g. Nagatsuma, 2015). Everyone was able to agree that soft power was good, but what exactly it was good for would remain a matter of debate.

3. The Olympics as Representation

Although they have likely met their match in television ratings with the global popularity of the FIFA World Cup, the Olympic Games remain arguably the most visible representation of global sports, particularly given the range of events (curling, biathlon, figure skating, etc. in winter; track and field, judo, basketball, fencing, etc. in summer) as well as the number of countries represented. And unlike football, most of whose leading competitors can be seen regularly outside of the Olympics as members of clubs in Europe, Asia, and the Americas, for many Olympic athletes, the once-each-4-years Games are their only opportunity to reach broad audiences. Amateurism is no longer the rule of the Olympics, but it remains the norm in many events that, unlike basketball or sprinting, are insufficiently monetised to allow most participants to make a stable living just from training and competition. Even in an era in which sports fans are jaded by the myriad doping scandals associated with transnational competition, let alone the nearly biblical levels of corruption rumoured (and sometimes proven) to be central to international organisations like the International Olympic Committee (IOC) or to FIFA, the Olympics maintain a romantic image. TV networks will still cover the global route of the torch as runners carry it from one venue to another and in which silver medalists from earlier eras might briefly return to prominence as commentators in arcane events too specialised for regular sports bureaus to cover with any confidence. For an event ostensibly designed to bring countries together through the purity of competition on the field (or court, or pitch, or track, or mountain, or ice, or in the pool), many spectators' fondest memories will be tinged with distinctly national pride. We beat the Americans; our guy outran that Jamaican sprinter; our boys blew out the Russian hockey team.

That focus on the national in the midst of the global is, barring something particularly intense in the midst of a competition (say, a Japan–Korea final in martial arts) or a controversy (e.g. low scores assigned by rival judges in skating), likely to be most evident, and certainly most planned, in the Games's opening ceremony. To win the right to host the Games, a government needs to be committed to the project: planning for massive numbers of visitors, ensuring the safety and convenience of athletes and spectators alike, and committing to the speedy construction of expensive facilities capable of hosting the

events. Given the complex costs and economic benefits of the Games – certain elements of the local tourist sector certainly benefit in the short term, although longer-term consequences are far more complex – prestige and status remain amongst the most desirable factors in absorbing the myriad infrastructural and institutional headaches associated with hosting, in one metropolitan or resort area, the world’s largest sporting event over the course of 2 weeks. And if status matters, it is really the opening ceremony, which typically attracts a massive global audience and allows the host committee to present some version of their country to the world, that best exemplifies this.

And so it is little surprise that in recent years scholars working in fields as diverse as cultural studies and political science have considered what Olympic opening ceremonies do and how they function. Whilst it is far from a uniform view in the field, one conventional argument has it that the opening ceremony is an element of a country’s public diplomacy: its effort to present itself in an appealing way globally that may help to enhance its soft power, or its ability to achieve national goals through persuasion rather than coercion.

The opening ceremony itself is not entirely open to invention and interpretation, as the modern Olympic Games include a number of fixed elements. The delegation of each country, with one athlete as flag bearer, has been a standard element since the early 20th century. The Olympic flame is lit, usually by a legendary athlete of the host nation. The vagaries of fire, however, have led to some evolution, particularly with the traditional release of peace-symbolising doves following the flame’s ignition; the flame of the 1988 Seoul Olympics famously burned a number of doves alive, leading to subsequent games alternating the timing of their release or using symbolic doves to spare the real birds the scorching fate of their unlucky forebears.

And there are the words. Speeches are delivered by the head of the local organising committee and by the president of the International Olympic Committee, before the games are opened by the head of state. Whilst the opening lines are basically scripted – for 2020, they would ostensibly be ‘I declare open the Games of Tokyo, celebrating the Thirty-Second Olympiad of the modern era’ – leaders have occasionally improvised to fit some kind of additional, usually national, agenda. Five months after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US, for example, President George W. Bush evoked them by opening his statement ‘On behalf of a proud, determined, and grateful nation...’ before continuing

with the globally recognised script. It might have been odd, of course, had Bush not referred to the event early into the US-led ‘War on Terror’ precipitated by the attacks, but the statement was notable both for injecting a specific political statement into the Olympics whilst concealing it in part by invoking that ostensibly national emotions (pride, determination, gratitude) that flowed around it. Still, the fact that this anodyne if not innocent expression was notable in the first place gives some sense of just how scripted many elements of the opening ceremonies are.

But not so for the ‘artistic section’ of the ceremony, in which creative directors can put their own stamp on the moment. Whilst early 20th-century ceremonies were largely that – ritualised moments for a quadrennial event held in different countries – their spectacular possibilities were perhaps best anticipated by Nazi Germany, which not only initiated the current ritual of the torch relay (International Olympic Committee, n.d.) but amplified the potential for combining aesthetics with intense political messages (Rossol, 2010). Whilst serving in part as a cautionary tale about the potential relationships between spectacle and fascism, however, the 1936 Berlin games in part became a mark of things to come by connecting propagandistic national promotion with the spectacle of international athletic competition (Large, 2007). Indeed, the meticulous planning for the cancelled 1940 games in Tokyo reflects an imperial Japanese government avidly seeking both to emphasise the country’s spiritual uniqueness and leadership of Asia. When Japan finally hosted its first Games in 1964, the organisers deliberately emphasised Japan’s globalism and its unique perspective on war and peace, choosing as its final torchbearer Sakai Yoshinori, who had famously been born on 6 August 1945: the date of the bombing of Hiroshima, opening the world’s atomic age (Collins, 2007).

And so the ostensibly non-political Olympics have often followed a political subtext, which might, although need not be, understood as aiming to promote soft power. In one interesting contribution, Chris Arning adopts a semiotic analysis of the opening ceremonies of recent opening ceremonies – going back as far as the 1984 Los Angeles games and up through the 2012 London games approach to interrogate six fields through – to suggest six frames through which they try to build national soft power: ‘mass orchestration, technological prowess, symbolic ingenuity, aesthetic enchantment, whimsy and humour, and musical grandeur’ (Arning, 2013: 526). More a hermeneutic framework than a straightforward statement on the ceremonies, Arning’s piece explicitly,

if a bit uncritically, calls attention to the ways in which the ceremonies might be designed to enhance soft power, a property the paper takes more or less for granted.

Arning's approach bears some resemblance to that by Chwen Chwen Chen, Cinzia Colapinto, and Qing Lu (2012) regarding the 2008 opening ceremony in Beijing. Arguably the most spectacular ceremony ever created, film director Zhang Yimou's efforts involved a staggering number of participants, nearly biblical levels of synchronised choreography, technological grandeur, and visually arresting artistic flourishes. Chen, Colapinto, and Lu note that these together fit well with government efforts to build international soft power by mobilising images of China's traditional Confucian values, innovation, and harmony, both at the level of domestic unity of myriad ethnic groups and the global level of peaceful cooperation. Here, too, the focus is on visual analysis rather than on the idea or logic of soft power itself.

But one need not extend the analysis of opening ceremonies to the point at which they seem to generate soft power by successfully communicating some kind of internally planned message. M.R.G. Pope's 2014 paper on the London Games addresses a 'cosmopolitan' logic of public diplomacy, one purportedly guided not only by a locally determined message to be transmitted to the world, but one crafted instead through more widely circulating discourses of openness and tolerance in which there are multiple actors, including transnational ones, not only national ones. For example, Pope notes that the organisers of London, whilst enthusiastic about a positive image of London generated by the Games, collaborated with IOC officials on an open, tolerant message that in many ways fit well with the artistic design of director Danny Boyle, to whom we return below. The IOC famously banned from the Games a Greek athlete who had posted racist screeds on social media, and the London Committee eagerly advertised the fact that Saudi Arabia's decision to field female athletes meant that London would be the first games in which all national teams would be represented by both men and women (Pope, 2014).

One comparative study of these legendary opening ceremonies, both helmed by globally renowned film directors, examines them less for their visual flourishes or their presumptive consequences for global stature than for the stories each ceremony seemed to tell about the host country. Lee and Yoon (2017) argued, using the terminology the cultural theorist Stuart Hall, that 'narratives of nation' ought to be at the centre of the analysis because the implicit and sometimes explicit stories are constructed with and

mobilised within explicitly national frames, emphasising shared experiences of sacrifice and triumph. Their analysis at times comes close to a critical review, as the authors clearly seem to have appreciated the dry humour and explicit openness of the London Olympic opening ceremony as opposed to the virtually humourless opening ceremony, although visually and sonically dramatic, in China, with the former representing multicultural pluralism and the latter a nearly chauvinistic ethnonationalism. In their comparative analysis of artistic styles and national identity in the Beijing and London ceremonies, Park and Tae (2016) also drew from Hall's critical approach to nations, shrewdly noting modern and postmodern aesthetics in Zhang's and Boyle's productions. They then somewhat surprisingly naturalise the idea of 'traditional' culture in analysing each ceremony, ending with a question for the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Games: 'how to demarcate many things native to the current Korean society under a custom global interchange and transnational experience as well as how to associate the historical context of Korea with the interests of the global community' (Park and Tae, 2016: 190).

The reviews of 'Isles of Wonder', as the Boyle-directed London ceremony was titled, were largely positive about its tone and humour, but it inspired a number of jabs, mostly because of the somewhat cloistered way in which British history was described. To be sure, Boyle's team carefully crafted an image of a multicultural London, with a racially mixed cast and musical/dance teams representing a city of vibrant diversity. And the celebration of successful forms of state intervention in the economy, notably with dancers jumping giddily on top of large moving hospital beds symbolising the National Health Service, seemed in part designed to respond to the many pro-austerity pressures facing and sometimes extolled by the British government (Biressi and Nunn, 2013). But the story was also one located entirely within the borders of the contemporary United Kingdom, accepting those of different races without in any way considering how they might have ended up there in the first place (Woods, 2012). That is, this was a story of Britain that somehow neglected the British Empire, which could in many ways be seen as the central, defining fact of modern British history.

Leaving aside the question of whether Boyle should have engaged this, or whether he was in any way obligated to do so, it was potentially notable for observers in former colonies. In an analysis of international responses, Oettler (2015) cautioned against assuming that those in colonies would take an anti-imperialist line in their critiques,

noting that newspapers in former British colonies in the Caribbean, Africa, and South Asia were largely positive in their appraisals of Boyle's opening ceremony. In some cases, such as in a South African newspaper, writers critiqued Boyle's obfuscation of the Empire, whilst more seemed consumed with the feeling that 'Isles of Wonder' provided an entertaining lens for viewing a country in unmistakable decline. Had the same ceremony been deployed post-Brexit or in the wake of a fractious debate with a former colonial state like India or Uganda, one might have witnessed a different global framing of its meaning and place.

And so the question of 'soft power' is but one way to consider the meaning and role of the opening ceremonies of the Olympics. But to the extent that it is an issue that will be on the minds of local officials, it would seem to be worth attending to the way in which a national story is told. And a story that is largely taken for granted within a country – a national narrative – may be at least questionable or open to critical engagement from overseas. Boyle's cheeky, irreverent opening ceremony in London offered a different kind of story than did Zhang's monumental, sweeping spectacle in Beijing. Both, however, attended to forms of contemporary nationalism that at least left them vulnerable to charges that their stories were partial and were more inward-looking than externally engaged.

4. Narrative and the 2020 Olympics

The term 'narrative' is overused in political discourse and punditry, although a number of critical international relations scholars (e.g. Subotić, 2016) have been deploying it in a more sophisticated manner. Television analysts frequently describe a political figure's narrative, by which they typically mean something like 'the image they want the public to believe'. When someone tries to 'shape the narrative', she is consciously crafting a version of events that is beneficial to her interests, and someone challenges the narrative when she disagrees with it. In this sense, a narrative might be a simple statement: I did not collude with the Russian government to win the election, or I am being responsive to Okinawan concerns about the relocation of the Futenma military

base. But this is not how one would understand narrative in a conventional sense, such as in narrative fiction or a narrative film. Who wants to see a film in which someone does things other than colluding with a rival foreign power and then says so upon winning the election? Who wants to read a book in which a prime minister listens to one concern after another from local citizens, finally reporting that yes, indeed, he has listened and will continue to do so?

Indeed, narrative functions in film and literature because of the ways in which it evokes desires, one of the crucial points made by the distinguished literary theorist Peter Brooks (1984) and echoed by the sociologist Francesca Polletta (2006). As he noted, stories have predictable beats and ups and downs, the way the reader's voice sounds when it says 'once upon a time' differs from the intonation of 'happily ever after'. There are flows that place prior events in front of current ones, and the audience desires an expected resolution: the hostages are rescued, the feuding couple rediscovers their love for one another, the detective catches the killer. And there is an implied continuation, perhaps happily ever after, perhaps the unsettling extension of contemporary corruption (see Leheny, 2018).

This continuation seems to weigh heavily on Nomura Mansai, the renowned *kyogen* actor and chief executive creative director of the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games, as well Takashi Yamazaki, the popular film director who will serve as the executive creative director of the opening ceremony of the Olympics. In a July 2018 press conference, Nomura and Takashi explained the overriding concept of the opening ceremony as 'Requiem and Rebirth' (*chinkon to saisei*). Noting that the themes are central to *kyogen* plays, Mansai explained he wanted to incorporate new technology into older performance forms to present the 'quality of the Japanese spirit' in the service of the 'reconstruction Olympics' (*fukkō gorin*), invoking that idea that these Games would be partly designed to showcase and support Japan's reconstruction following the 2011 tsunami and nuclear disaster. Yamazaki then emphasised that the concept itself seemed like one that would allow him to dig deeply in a number of ways, and that he hoped that he could make it entertaining (*Eiga Nathalie*, 2018).

This would be directly in Yamazaki's wheelhouse. Arguably Japan's most domestically successful live-action film director in the last 20 years, Yamazaki – who first became famous for his work in crafting digital effects – has marked himself a popular

entertainer of the first order. With films that cut across animated family comedy (*Stand By Me Doraemon*), sentimental historical comedy-dramas (the *Always – Sanhome no Yūhi* [*Always – Sunset on Third Street*] series), war cinema featuring spectacular aerial battles (*Eien no Zero* [*The Eternal Zero*]), historical biopics (*Kaizoku to Yobareta Otoko* [*A Man Called Pirate*]), sci-fi horror (*Kiseiju* [*Parasyte*]), and sci-fi action (*Space Battleship Yamato*), amongst others, Yamazaki has made a number of major box office hits that have also garnered him two awards for Best Picture: the first *Always* film (for which he also received screenwriting and directing honours) as well as *Eien no Zero*.

He is, however, far less well-known internationally than recent Olympic directors like Boyle and Zhang. This might of course be blamed on the limited reach of Japan's live action films in theatres overseas; indeed, recent waves of Japanese directors with international reputations have largely included foreign art-house favourites like Cannes laureates Kawase Naomi and Koreeda Hirokazu, neither of whom relies on the kinds of spectacular visual flourishes or encouraging narrative structures likely to earn them the recognition of a local Olympic organising committee. One alternative might have been Miike Takashi, director of hyper-violent, low-budget oddities like *Ichi the Killer*, *Audition*, and *Dead or Alive*, but also bigger budget and sometimes deeply affecting films like *Thirteen Assassins*, *The Great Yokai War*, and *Harakiri: Death of a Samurai*. His crazed films, which have sometimes imagined a future, multicultural Japan populated with as many Chinese and Japanese, might have displayed an alternative reading of modern Japan that could have attracted global attention, but would likely have been deeply controversial at home.

And so it is unsurprising that the spot was awarded to Yamazaki, a visually focused crowd-pleaser whose narrative structures tend to reinforce a larger story about what Japan has been, what it has become, and what it ought to be. It is, of course, not his story alone, and one might treat elements of it as harkening back to the early 1980s, when a study group working under Prime Minister Masayoshi Ohira aimed to redefine Japan's national purpose, now that the country had achieved economic parity with its former models in North America and Western Europe. Indeed, as policies shifted away from 'catch-up industrialisation' and towards the idea of Japan as a fully, equally modernised nation, there was a simultaneous effort to lionise and celebrate the ostensibly domestic cultural and social sources of Japan's high-speed growth. Matched in part overseas by the work

of scholars eager to point to a non-Western example of full industrialisation to complicate simplistic judgments and predictions about modernisation (Borovoy, 2012), these projects aimed simultaneously to craft an image of Japan that moved out of the ashes of war, becoming a thriving economic powerhouse shaped largely by sophisticated, advanced, but peaceful technology. This became less a story of the heroism of Japanese leaders – Kishi, Ikeda, Sato, Tanaka, and others were hardly celebrated as benevolent visionaries the way in which American hagiographies tend to portray Truman, Kennedy, or Reagan – and more that of the Japanese people, who collectively sacrificed and endeavoured to turn the ingenuity of specific people in larger groups towards national advantage.

One can see elements of this in political speeches and texts of the times, but even more so in the later popular culture that would nostalgically treat the 1950s and 1960s as a period of common purpose and endeavour. This is not to suggest that these images are fully incorrect – the idea of common national advancement was central to government policy – but rather that they are incomplete and, to the extent that they are selective only unintentionally, reflect the way in which a pervasive national narrative inhabited and was reproduced in the fabric of Japanese social life. For one example, one might look at the long-running and highly successful NHK docu-drama series *Project X*. Where other series on Japan's broadcaster are famously character driven, such as the historical figures at the core of each season of the historical *Taiga Drama*, or location oriented, like *Bura Tamori's* weekly visit by a comedian and other celebrities to some town or city in Japan, *Project X* each week tracked a technological accomplishment – a tunnel, a medical innovation, a new train – that may have had a key figure or two, but was usually accomplished by larger if ultimately anonymous groups of Japanese who, against the odds, had succeeded and helped to propel the Japanese economy (and Japan itself) forward.

And this is the kind of story that Yamazaki has successfully told. The Tokyo Olympics organising committee will surely be savvy enough to avoid touting one of his major accomplishments in the international press: *Eien no Zero* is based on a novel by the brazenly nationalistic writer Hyakuta Naoki who, of course, has denied that the controversial film celebrates the *tokkōtai* (kamikaze) pilots from the Second World War. Against the vocal disapproval of the globally acclaimed animator Miyazaki Hayao (*J-Cast News*, 2013), Hyakuta famously defended his novel and the subsequent film by

pointing out that his lead character is openly doubtful about the point of taking his own life in a suicide attack (which serves as the film's climax) and is brutalised by his militaristic superiors in part because of this. The supremely gifted pilot openly wants to return to his wife and family, a stance that resonates amongst some of his subordinates and colleagues, even leading one to sacrifice himself in combat to save the main character. The character's ultimate sacrifice is portrayed as a tragedy, but he himself remains a source of pride to his grandchildren, whose discovery of his heroism 60 years later makes the film at least as much of a commentary on contemporary Japan as on its war history. After all, unlike their callous and ignorant classmates and friends, the brother and sister who serve as the book's window onto the 1940s come to learn that the kamikaze were not mere 'suicide bombers' and were, even if misguided in approach, serving the nation in an honourable manner that deserves, even demands respect today. And the film is no more curious about the internationally controversial aspects of Japan's wartime behaviour than is Yamazaki's *Space Battleship Yamato*, in which the flagship of the wartime Imperial Japanese Navy, the Yamato, is pulled from the bottom of the ocean hundreds of years later to serve as the shell of a spaceship designed to repel a hostile alien species. Sunk in a futile quasi-suicide mission to stall the allied invasion of Okinawa in early 1945, the *Yamato* took with it over 3,000 of its sailors and, famously, its captain, who legendarily lashed himself to the ship's wheel. In a dramatic speech before the ship's final attack, acting captain Kodai says, 'In April 1945, the battleship Yamato sallied forth to create a bit of hope in the midst of despair. We're doing the same thing now.... If there's even a small chance to create a bit of light in the midst of the darkness, we need to proceed. That's the destiny of a ship called *Yamato*'.

Selective memories are at the heart of most war cinema, and there is little about these films that would seem terribly out of place in the sentimental militarism of US war films, including those, like *Platoon*, that explicitly focus on the 'innocence' of American soldiers dragged into a confusing imperial war. What is notable about these films is that they touch openly on the third rail of Japan's post-war international relations: the thorny relationship between memories of Japan's interwar and wartime empire and contemporary Japanese politics and culture. And Yamazaki and the members of the organising committee are sufficiently sophisticated to avoid these representations as they consider what 'requiem' and 'rebirth' might mean.

It will be harder to avoid the unifying narrative of the Long Post-war, both because it has been central to much of Yamazaki's oeuvre as well as to the way in which the Japanese spirit as well as the Japanese technology that Mansai himself invokes is commonly presented. That is, in the wake of Japan's defeat and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan emerged both uniquely aware of the terrible costs of war as well as determined to achieve international success a different way. And so, working together for a better future, the Japanese People collectively contributed, in ways large and small, to the common project of making Japan a leader again, but this time peaceful and fuelled primarily by hard work, by industrial ingenuity, by close and long-term ties between firms and employees, and by a monoethnic cultural ethos that facilitated social trust and coordination rather than distrust and divisiveness. Whilst there are, of course, elements of truth in this representation, it also conceals at least as much as it reveals: the environmental despoliation affecting poor communities in particular, labour unrest at times put down through violence, highly expressive political protests that yielded frustratingly few immediate concessions from the conservative government.

And this has been the core mythos in much of Yamazaki's work, from the lovable bunch of Tokyo residents in his *Always – Sanjoume no Yūhi* trilogy through the strident economic nationalism of Kunioka Tetsuzō, the lead character in *Kaizoku to Yobareta Otoko*, loosely modelled after Idemitsu Sazō, the founder of the fuel company Idemitsu Kosan. Based on another novel by Hyakuta Naoki, this film takes for granted a world in which those focused primarily on the well-being of the Japanese nation are at odds with a global economic order slanted heavily against them, particularly when nearly seditious globalists at home are willing to sell out the country's economic interests to advance their own. Japan's interests are taken to be unproblematic and advanced through a character's own canny awareness of their encompassing existence. As in the novel (Hyakuta, 2012), Kunioka thinks first and foremost about Japan, and only secondarily about his own financial interests even though these are in general viewed to be more or less aligned with what is best for Japan.

Eien no Zero, of course, remains Yamazaki's most controversial work, heavily criticised at the time by none other than Miyazaki Hayao, the celebrated anime director who might be the most internationally recognised Japanese film director since Kurosawa Akira, and perhaps surpassing even him. This is not to give particular credence to

Miyazaki's view that the film is a fundamentally dishonest depiction of wartime violence and behaviour, nor to support Hyakuta's self-defense that the film is fundamentally a critique of militarism and far from a celebration of kamikaze pilots. Hyakuta's publication record suggests that he would properly be regarded as a conservative nationalist, although the same is not precisely true of Yamazaki. Instead, we might instead note that Yamazaki's films – frequently but not always marked by sentimental nationalism – typically reaffirm a previously tragic, currently hopeful vision for a Japan that can, if it can build on its cultural strengths and if its citizens view themselves to be committed to a larger collective cause, re-emerge as a successful, respected, powerful country.

And this, in a sense, is what makes this first and foremost a narrative of sorts – not simply the fact that the past is described as a chronology, but that there is a future towards which the choices and activities of protagonists will lead. What makes the lead character of most Yamazaki films heroic is less his (and, to be clear, it is virtually always 'his' rather than 'her') nature or direction of his ethical or principled commitments than the ways in which these are aligned with the fate and well-being of the Japanese nation. This will not, of course, be the 'message' of the 2020 opening ceremony's artistic portion. But it seems likely to reflect a stance that will fit well within Japanese public memory of the years since 1945 as well as Yamazaki's broader oeuvre. These together suggest that Japan's 2020 Olympic opening ceremony – filled with the familiar shots of athletes marching proudly into the stadium, the dull speeches of officials, the expected bombast of the quadrennial global event, and some remarkable visual motifs and musical clips reflecting the talent assembled – will rest on a story that emphasises Japanese collective effort towards reconstruction and growth, even if its particulars will have little resonance outside of Japanese territory.

5. Concluding Thoughts

My point in this working paper has not been to criticise the choice of Yamazaki to serve as creative director of the opening ceremony. A gifted visual entertainer and storyteller whose films have been popular, particularly with current cabinet members, he

seems to be a logical choice for Japan's Games. And whilst few of his films have offered real surprises, he may yet surprise audiences with a version of Japan's post-war that will do less to reinforce a widely held domestic narrative than to engage broader transnational audiences in ways that eluded Zhang Yimou and Danny Boyle. Even if Yamazaki offers more or less precisely the vision of post-war Japan that I expect he will, the creative team's efforts will almost certainly make it an eye-catching and thoroughly entertaining collection of performances and set pieces.

But I suspect that, as is often the case with those very properties that are tagged as sources of soft power, it will be far more inspiring and memorable to people in Japan – the supposed wielders of soft power – than to audiences overseas, those who absolutely need to be persuaded if the concept of soft power is to have any meaning. And my guess here is that a different kind of vision, a different kind of artist, might have achieved something altogether rarer and more transnationally popular: a vision of a host country speaking openly and curiously to an outside world, not one speaking authoritatively and ostentatiously to itself, as Yamazaki's films seem so often to do. This will be far from a disaster for Japan, and the immediate press reactions will likely be predominantly positive, as they usually are after opening ceremonies. But I expect that the 2020 opening will, for all its fanfare and all the planning and talent behind it, represent a missed opportunity that will be all the more poignant for how difficult it will be to see from Tokyo that it was missed in the first place.

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