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Reinforcing Trust, Evoking Nostalgia and Contrasting China: Japan's Foreign Policy Repertoire and Identity Construction in Myanmar

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Abstract

In the immediate aftermath of the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021, Western countries and the EU condemned the coup, imposed targeted sanctions against military leaders and military-owned companies, and redirected essential humanitarian aid to NGOs. Japan, however, chose to neither align with its democratic allies nor completely suspend its aid. Despite a long and complicated pre-war history and limited engagement after 1988, Japan-Myanmar relations experienced a resurgence between 2012 and 2021. This article contends that one key driving force in contemporary relations is identity construction. Drawing on the literature on relational identity and foreign policy repertoires, the article demonstrates how the discursive statements and embodied practices of a network of Japanese identity entrepreneurs activate, negotiate and renegotiate the identities of the Japanese Self and its Others. Through an analysis of interviews conducted with elite stakeholders in Myanmar and Japan, the article studies Japan's constructed identity as an economic great power and post-war development pioneer, peace promoter and diplomatic mediator. It finds that Japan constructs its identity temporally in terms of nostalgia (*natsukashisa*) and a longing for a time when Japan was a post-war industrial powerhouse, but also spatially in terms of Japan's legal, moral and industrial superiority over other countries involved in Myanmar's development, in particular vis-à-vis China.

Keywords: Japan, Myanmar, China, identity, foreign policy, discourse, legitimation

Introduction

Despite a long and complicated pre-war history and limited engagement after 1988, Japan-Myanmar relations have experienced a resurgence since Myanmar's

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reopening in 2012. The rekindled relations developed at an accelerated pace, particularly on the economic front, with Japan first cancelling Myanmar's hefty debt of over 5 billion USD, between 2012 and 2014, and then committing another 8 billion USD to the country's development in 2016. Quickly assuming the role of Myanmar's top aid provider, Tokyo committed to leading a number of large infrastructure development projects, including the upgrades of two of Yangon's major railways, and the establishment of Thilawa, the country's most successful Special Economic Zone. Moreover, Japan's fast-paced reengagement in Myanmar extended to soft projects targeting economic and social development, namely in the education sector, where Japan developed the next generation of the country's national primary school textbooks, and in human capacity building, through vocational centres that offer training in Japanese-style management. Politically, Japan engages with both the democratically-elected National League for Democracy (NLD) and the Tatmadaw military leaders who staged a coup in February 2021 – despite criticism from Japan's Western allies of the NLD government's handling of the Rohingya refugee crisis and the military's violent assumption of power. This article considers one facet of Japan's diplomatic engagement with Myanmar, namely that of identity construction.

Extant literature in the field of international relations attributes Japan's fervour to rebuild its relationship with Myanmar primarily to geopolitical interests and competing overtures from neighbouring China,[1] which has become an increasingly active player in Myanmar's development, particularly during the latter's isolated military period (1988–2012) and in the northern parts of the country. Other accounts suggest that Japan's "special relationship" and "close friendship" with Myanmar, rooted in their pre-war exchanges and paradoxical post-war comradery, is a motivating factor behind Tokyo's heightened engagement.[2] This article builds on this extant literature with the argument that the key to understanding Japan-Myanmar relations is to examine how states construct their self-identities through interactions with others: as a product of past ties, nostalgia and foreign policy repertoires. As Tokyo navigates the competitive dynamics in a location of key geostrategic value, it also tends to its own identity construction through discursive statements and embodied practices that activate, negotiate and renegotiate the identities of the Japanese Self and its Others.

Drawing on the literature on relational identity construction and foreign policy repertoires and through a discursive analysis of official texts and a set of 20 research interviews, this article addresses how Japan constructs its own identity through its engagement in Myanmar. While states have a number of instruments at their disposal when making policy decisions, it is only in the activation of these instruments in networks that agency occurs and foreign

1 Cf. Reilly 2013, Seekins 2015, Bi 2017, Lanteigne 2019, Yoshimatsu 2018, Zappa 2021.

2 Cf. Söderberg 2015; Lam 2016; Hartley 2018a, 2018b.

policy repertoires come to life.[3] Japan's foreign policy repertoire in Myanmar, both during the post-war period and today, prioritises Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) as an instrument and Japan's role as a donor. Yet, why does Japan's foreign policy repertoire vis-à-vis Myanmar remain largely consistent, despite the fact that Japan's allies, including its primary security ally the United States, have criticised Myanmar for its handling of the Rohingya crisis and for the military coup? While Japan's heavy reliance on a foreign policy repertoire that risks political and social capital may seem perplexing, an explanation may be found in sociologist Ann Swidler's work on the cultural influence on repertoires. Swidler describes such behaviour as that of a "settled culture", one that limits itself to certain strategies of action, unable to imagine alternative ways of organising (Swidler 1986: 284).

Such cultures "constrain action over time because of the high costs of cultural retooling to adopt new patterns of action" (ibid.). In the case of Japan, retooling its repertoire to align with the sanctions regime in the West could mean risking its economic and political relationship with a state that it has fervently pursued since the latter's re-opening and in which it has been deeply invested, economically and socially, for over 70 years. Relatedly, it could mean a missed opportunity to counter China's increasing advances into what is perceived to be Asia's last frontier and the gateway between South Asia and Southeast Asia (Interviews 2 and 18, Zappa 2021). In particular, there are concerns about Myanmar's development, as well as international access to sea lines of communication should China gain access to and control of the Indian Ocean (Interviews 2, 13, 19). Japan constructs its identity through its engagement in Myanmar by contrasting it to that of others involved, such as China, and suggests that Japan's involvement is more aligned with Myanmar's interests.

This article argues that Japan's identity construction in Myanmar is prioritised and reinforced by a network of identity entrepreneurs – "political actors who promote their desired versions of Japanese identity through the discursive representation of issues and actors" (Hagström / Gustafsson 2015: 8). These actors play an intrinsic role in advancing the narrative of Japan as a responsible, trustworthy and experienced global player who is committed to Myanmar's peaceful development. While Kathryn Finnemore and Martha Sikkink's (1998: 895) "norm entrepreneurs" attempt to convince states to embrace new norms through persuasion, "identity entrepreneurs" seek to alter identity construction by discursively promoting their desired versions of identity. In their narratives during interviews, identity entrepreneurs distinguish Japan in Myanmar as 1) an economic great power and post-war development pioneer, and 2) a peace promoter and diplomatic mediator. This article asks: How are these suggested roles legitimised and embodied by identity entrepreneurs? While there are a

3 Cf. Tilly 2006, Goddard / Nexon 2016, Goddard et al. 2019, Yennie Lindgren 2021a.

number of empirical enquiries into changes in Japanese development policy or the strategic aspect of ODA in Myanmar,[4] the way in which contemporary development assistance contributes to Japanese identity construction remains overlooked despite its integral importance.

Moreover, the findings suggest that identity entrepreneurs, in describing the chance to see and experience a Japan of the past in contemporary Myanmar, engage in a form of temporal Othering, whereby Japan differentiates its contemporary self from its own pre- and post-war identities. In this way, identity entrepreneurs invoke notions of nostalgia (*natsukashisa*) about Japan's pre-war empire and its remarkable post-war development, remnants of which can be seen, felt and heard in present-day Myanmar. As a way of dealing with postmodern temporality, nostalgia is understood as a cultural practice that expresses a longing for and mourning of the past. Here, it is treated as a critical analytical category (Stewart 1988) that has both discursive and experiential dimensions (Lems 2016). The existing literature on temporal Othering and Japan has focused primarily on how domestic discursive struggles about Japan's past and present have shaped various temporal Others and led to or accounted for Japan's security policy changes[5] or cultural uniqueness (Tamaki 2019) or technological (domestic) superiority despite countervailing (international) inferiority (Tamaki 2023). This article, however, considers Japan's temporal Othering in a foreign context. It goes beyond the domestic discursive struggles echoing in the chambers of the Japanese Diet or printed on the pages of Japanese newspapers by capturing the explanations of the identity entrepreneurs who are on the ground, engaged and embedded in identity construction in one of Japan's most prioritised foreign policy contexts in Southeast Asia. By analysing their words and actions, I demonstrate how identity entrepreneurs engage in temporal Othering by harnessing the connective power of nostalgia in their relations and by seeing Japan's past in Myanmar's present, while also engaging in spatial Othering through their pronouncements about Japanese legal, moral and industrial superiority.

This study examines the contemporary engagement of Japan in Myanmar in the context of the historical trajectory of bilateral relations. It demonstrates how on-the-ground networks perpetuate a relationship of mutual affinity and nostalgia through discursive statements and embodied practices. To achieve this, I employ an interpretivist methodology in the form of discourse and practice analysis of a series of official texts and a set of 20 research interviews. The interviews were conducted in Tokyo (Japan) and the Myanmar cities of Yangon, Naypidaw and Thilawa, primarily in English, with elite Japanese stakeholders from government, aid agencies, business and academia (see Appendix for interview list). Such a methodology favours an inductive approach – where the researcher

4 Cf. Asplund / Söderberg 2017, Kato et al. 2016, Reilly 2013.

5 Cf. Hagström / Hanssen 2016; Gustafsson 2015, 2019; Hanssen 2020.

moves from specific observations to broader theories – in order to apprehend the social reality, which is understood to be accessed through social constructions such as language, shared meanings, practices and consciousness. The semi-structured interviews were mainly conducted in business settings (offices, embassies, ministries) and involved a series of open-ended questions. A relational approach was used, in which informants are able to offer causal logic and narrate their perceptions of change through a dynamic dialogue. As a method, relational interviewing can be likened to a two-way dialogue, rather than a one-way interrogation or a conventional back-and-forth question-and-answer format (Fujii 2018).

In this article, discursive analysis entails studying "discourse signs", as meaning and identity are "constructed through a series of signs that are linked to each other to constitute relations of sameness as well as through a differentiation from another series of juxtaposed signs" (Hansen 2006: 42). The studied texts and transcriptions of the interviews were coded for discourse signs related to Japan's engagement in Myanmar and to perceptions about developments in the bilateral relationship. While discursive analysis considers written or spoken text, practice analysis accounts for meaningful and regulated bodily material practice outside of the text (Bueger 2014: 7).

Whereas earlier contributions on the trajectory of Japan-Myanmar relations have primarily emphasised textual accounts in their analysis,[6] this article takes the extant research purview a step further by also considering on-the-ground dynamics related to Japan' identity construction in a foreign space. Specifically, I provide first-hand accounts of how identity entrepreneurs simultaneously promote and negotiate Japan's engagement in Myanmar while contributing to the identity project of the Japanese state and activating Japan's foreign policy repertoire in Myanmar. As such, the analysis centres primarily on the Japanese donor side. However, I have incorporated some Myanmar-based recipient perspectives from government, business and research institutions that are relevant to how Japan constructs its identity on the ground in Myanmar.[7] The analysis focuses primarily on the period of Japan's engagement with Myanmar prior to the military coup in February 2021.

6 Cf. Reilly 2013; Seekins 2000, 2015; Strefford 2016; Black 2023.

7 For more on the recipient side, see Watanabe's (2019) detailed ethnographic account of the work of a prominent Buddhist Japanese NGO in Myanmar and how intimacy, politics and religion play out in contemporary aid relations.

Relational identity construction and foreign policy repertoires

The theoretical underpinning of this study is based on the idea that identity is socially constructed through the differentiation of the Self from the Other.[8] It further adheres to constructivist scholarship that suggests that identity and foreign policy are mutually constitutive (Campbell 1992). A number of recent contributions to the field of Japanese foreign policy have pioneered research in a similar vein by looking at how Japanese identity construction, in its many forms, has played out in the post-war era. Through discourse analysis, these critical constructivist accounts unpack how the Japanese Self constructs its identity in constant negotiation vis-à-vis its Others, such as North Korea, China, Russia, South Korea or even Asia.[9] Identity construction is not only a matter of words uttered within a domestic context, but also a matter of actions (practices) outside of the Self's geographic space that culminate in a state's foreign policy (Neumann 2002, Pouliot 2016).

In my analysis, I utilise the analytical apparatus of repertoires to highlight the fact that identity influences foreign policy choices. Drawing inspiration from Charles Tilly's work on contentious repertoires and social movements (2006) and adapting it to the context of global politics, a repertoire approach suggests that states have a number of instruments at their disposal when making policy decisions, yet it is only in the activation of these instruments in networks that agency occurs (Goddard / Nexon 2016, Goddard et al. 2019, Yennie Lindgren 2021b). How states "activate" or "deploy" their foreign policy is a matter of preference and decision making that is directly dependent on capabilities (Goddard / Nexon 2016: 8), but also influenced by narratives of how the actor's identity deems certain policies, practices[10] and instruments "acceptable" or "conceivable" in a given political context (Doty 1993, Rumelili 2004, Holland 2011). Instead of being entirely determined by the structural context, or chosen among the nearly infinite potentialities available to human beings, the repertoire approach hypothesises that we can expect collective actions to maintain established practices and performances, but that changing environments lead to more change. While the repertoire concept allows for innovations and modifications in prior known instruments, performances and practices, it is suggested that these only take place within reasonable boundaries. In the case of stable circumstances, we expect little innovation or modification, while in times of economic or geo-political ruptures, the theory hypothesises increased change in the repertoires (Wilson Rowe 2020). As explained by Iver B. Neumann and Ole Jacob Sending

8 See Wendt 1992, Neumann 1999, Rumelili 2004, Wæver 2002.

9 See e.g. Hagström / Hanssen 2015, 2016; Gustafsson 2015, 2016, 2019; Suzuki 2015; Tamaki 2015; Bukh 2012; Yennie Lindgren / Lindgren 2017.

10 Defined here as "socially recognized forms of activity […] capable of being done well or badly, correctly or incorrectly" (Neumann 2002: 630–631).

(2021: 4) in their study of performing statehood through crises, "specific actor and audience constellations and contexts will make every performance unique, but performances are nonetheless readily recognizable as belonging to a repertoire, and have a modular quality to them." Repertoires are thus uniquely tailored to meet the situation at hand, yet also draw heavily on what are deemed to be appropriate or meaningful acts vis-à-vis a given audience and context.

Repertoires highlight the fact that identity influences foreign policy choices, in that states must make a myriad of foreign policy decisions and in so doing must consider various configurations and how these will play out, both in physical and ideational terms. As an influential factor, identity not only impacts this decision making but is also considered when forecasting the outcomes of certain repertoires, meaning that repertoires are both enabled by and enable identity (Yennie Lindgren 2021a). In determining what is preferential in its bundle of tangible objects, policies, speech acts and practices, Japan weighs a number of ideational and physical arrangements against each other while assessing the potential impact of a given combination of instruments on its foreign policy identity and trajectory. Processes of identity construction are part of the broader foreign policymaking process, which is delimited by what is considered acceptable, conceivable and desirable. For instance, when Japan draws on resources domestically and then employs them internationally – as it does when acting as an ODA donor – it considers what policy and projects make sense from a number of perspectives, including an identity perspective, in evaluating its course of action. The reason for resistance to dramatic repertoire change is that "states attach their identity to and perform their distinctive profile through repertoires" (Haugevik / Sending 2020: 444).

In the case of Myanmar, Japan primarily relies on a foreign policy repertoire that positions Japan foremost as a development donor, reinforcing its identity as an ODA great power – albeit one that has significantly declined relative to its peak status in 1989, when it surpassed the United States as the world's largest donor – yet one that faces several growing domestic economic and political constraints. In activating this foreign policy repertoire, a network of embedded identity entrepreneurs, primarily elder and male politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen who first encountered Myanmar during the post-war period and built good rapport with their Myanmarese counterparts, engages in heavy emotional and logistical work to perpetually reinforce a relationship of mutual affinity and trust through frequent face-to-face meetings, close communication (including in Burmese) and guidance for – rather than criticism of – Myanmar's thorny political situation (Interview 19). Commonly described by on-the-ground Japanese identity entrepreneurs as a *yorisō* approach ("walking along with" or "standing by"; can also be read as "cuddling up to"), Japan deliberately chooses to go along with Myanmar and to support the government financially, morally and politically rather than oppose or sanction it for

the human rights abuses targeting the Rohingya people in Rakhine state (Interview 10, Interview 19). The *yorisō* approach is notable in that, in contradiction to hierarchical arrangements where the Self is a kind of custodian or chaperone for the Other, in this case it lets the Other lead the way, and then follows.

While the United States, Japan's security alliance partner, imposed sanctions on Myanmar's military leaders over their handling of the ethnic conflict, and the International Court of Justice ordered Myanmar to prevent Rohingya genocide, Tokyo deployed a notably different type of engagement. Up until the 2021 coup, Japan hosted and trained military leaders under the auspices of the Japan-Myanmar Military Officials Exchange Programme run by the Nippon Foundation, and Prime Minister Shinzō Abe received senior-level generals from Myanmar with the aim to promote bilateral defence relations. Myanmar State Counsellor Daw Aung Suu Kyi was welcomed to give keynote speeches at prominent conferences in Tokyo and to attend the enthronement of and meet Japan's new emperor. Japan's approach to engaging Myanmar was also a stark contrast to that of European states, who cautiously downgraded their re-engagement, imposed trade embargoes and prohibited any military cooperation from 2018 on (European Council 2019).

Myanmar is seen as "a rare case" where Japan can have significant influence on a country's social and economic development and serves as a blueprint for Japan's engagement with other Asian countries that primarily face the challenge of how to handle China's influence (Interview 18). Moreover, Myanmar has long held a special status among Japan's elite (and in particular political elite and dynasties such as the Abe family), which has ongoing implications for how Japan engages with Myanmar today.

Japan as an ODA great power and development pioneer

Throughout the transformative post-war years (defined here as 1945–1991), as Japan continued to industrialise and rebuild with the help of foreign aid, it simultaneously became increasingly engaged in development projects around the world. Though Japan developed an international reputation as an ODA great power, it should be noted that its transition from aid receiver to aid donor was neither simple nor occurred overnight. As Hiromi Mizuno (2018: 3) suggests, it was a complicated and transformative historical process that involved a network of technology and development that was key in helping Japan to overcome the immediate post-war challenges (destruction of infrastructure, the collapse of its empire) without foregoing opportunities. Specifically, Japan's technological aid was a crucial factor, in the form of Japanese services and goods provided by Japanese consultants, engineers, companies, machines and equip-

ment, an approach that had also fostered Imperial Japan's economic growth during the pre-war colonial period (Mizuno 2018).

During the immediate post-war period, Japan implemented a general policy of "bridging" (*kakehashi*) in an attempt to re-enter international society after a devastating defeat and replaced its policy of international military dominance with one of economic development donorship. Tokyo's broad bridging policy segued into ODA programmes that were constructed by various Japanese governments as "providing both a model of successful democratization through development which other states could learn from, as well as the means through ODA to 'bridge' the divide between repressive states and liberal democratic capitalist international society" (Black 2013: 339). The programmes initially targeted countries in Southeast Asia, where Japanese aggressive imperial rule had left deep scars. In 1954, Japan's first reparations in the region were sent to Myanmar, a country that the Empire of Japan had occupied from 1942–1945, and these served as a blueprint for treaties with other Asian countries (Mizuno 2018: 15). Japan faced particular constraints in the 1950s and 1960s in dealing with war reparations and aid projects, as it needed to demonstrate that post-war Japan was different from wartime Japan and thus heavily engaged in temporal Othering.

Japan's aid activity in Myanmar developed at a rapid pace, accounting for nearly half of the country's development assistance from 1970–1988 (Strefford 2016: 493). At their inception, the programmes were largely conducted directly between Japanese businesses and Myanmar, which led to a positive image of Myanmar among the Japanese elite, which reportedly continues to generate development projects at present (Strefford 2016: 491). However, what took root at this time was not only a bilateral economic relationship but also a number of people-to-people connections that for decades to come would serve what Ryan Hartley (2018b: 406) refers to as Japan's "'elite-oriented soft power': the preference for a quiet, multi-dimensional, elite level impact that may in a trickle-down fashion at some point meet with popular appeal".

In the immediate post-war period, top-level political figures, such as Japanese Prime Minister Kishi Nobosuke, prominent business figures and technical advisors led a strikingly successful reconciliatory campaign by visiting Myanmar to deliver messages of commitment to peaceful relations and economic reparations. Through their frequent visits they developed a deep affinity for shared cultural commonalities on religious and social levels, despite vast differences in economic development, and came to be known as the "Burma lovers" (*Biruma kichigai*, often shortened to *biru-kichi*, literal translation "crazy about Burma"; Seekins 2000: 318). *Biru-kichi* enthusiasts praised Myanmar for its deep morality, commitment to Buddhist principles and conscientious use of reparation funds (Seekins 2000: 318–319), while instigating a sense of shared values and like-mindedness that eventually paved the way for the mutual exchange of stories

of fraternal camaraderie and post-war friendship, which are offered in present-day explanations for why Japan and Myanmar continue to enjoy a "special relationship" and a sense of "cultural similarity and oneness" (Watanabe 2019: 136). However, these sentimental accounts also served to emphasise Japan's miraculous economic rise and the hierarchical, metaphorical kinship it instilled in bilateral relations, which has been described by interviewees as a "parent-to-child" (Interview 10) or "older brother to younger brother" type of arrangement where Japan exercises the upper hand due to its economic advancement and international reputation (Interview 4; see also Haugevik / Neumann 2019).

Tokyo's high-economic growth hit troubles when the bubble economy burst in 1991, and in 1998 the increasingly severe financial situation at home forced ODA budget reductions. Japan maintained its number one donor status – a source of great national pride – from 1989 until 2000, when the United States regained the top spot. While being an aid provider remains a longstanding trait of Japan's foreign policy and post-war identity today, the country faces an increasingly precarious domestic economic outlook and the public's interest in and support for ODA has waned over the years (Yennie Lindgren 2021b). In 2023, Japan was ranked the third largest donor country in absolute terms and the largest in Asia,[11] with 0.39 per cent of Japan's gross national income going to ODA (Donor Tracker 2023). Though ODA is a relatively small share of Japan's gross national income, it was the largest item in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024 budget (MOFA 2023c) and development assistance constitutes one of Japan's most important foreign policy instruments (Yennie Lindgren 2021b).

Despite the relative decline since its remarkable post-war development and ODA "superpower" status, Japan continues to actively promote its development pioneer legacy by promulgating educational and public awareness campaigns targeted to both foreign and domestic audiences. Examples of this include the series of education programmes on "Japan's Modernisation Experience as a Legacy for the World" that the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) launched in 2018. These programmes aim to educate young leaders in developing countries and foreign master's degree students at Japanese universities about how they can use Japanese development knowledge in their home countries. Various public diplomacy campaigns by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) are another example. These campaigns employ celebrities and popular anime characters, such as the ODA Man, a MOFA-sponsored character used to publicise, legitimise and promote Japan's development assistance policy, to educate Japanese citizens about the importance of ODA for Japan and the world (Yennie Lindgren 2021b).

11 China is not included since it is not part of the OECD Development Assistance Committee.

In reviewing the discursive statements and practices of the various initiatives promoting Japan's development pioneer legacy, it becomes evident that Japan's own development story and contributions to international development remain a source of great pride and a key component in the complex construction of the Japanese state's identity (Tamaki 2023). Interviewees affirmed this notion of ODA as a great source of identity for Japan, explaining that development opportunities in present-day Myanmar are not only a chance to help the country develop but also to showcase Japan (Interview 3, Interview 5). As one interviewee explained, Myanmar's reopening in 2012 presented Japan with the opportunity to re-exercise its identity as an ODA great power:

> When JICA received the list of requests from Myanmar with many infrastructure projects, some big, they were so happy because they had a sense that they could help the next generation after Thailand and other SE Asian countries had graduated to donor status and told us that they did not need Japanese ODA money anymore. (Interview 5)

ODA as an integral instrument in Japan's foreign policy repertoire in Myanmar should not be considered solely quantitatively, in terms of economic returns, but also as a source of crucial geopolitical and social gains. Japan's geo-economics strategy, which ODA is part of, has been defined by Saori Katada (2020: 11) as "a particular set of national goals ranging from the promotion of economic benefits to the maintenance of stability and the enhancement of its influence". Under the second Abe administration (2012–2020) and the subsequent Suga (2020–2021) and Kishida administrations (2022–present), ODA has been used as a tool to exert geopolitical influence, as exemplified by Japan's "infrastructural means for strategic ends" approach (Garbagni 2021: 2). Yet another overarching function of Japan's ODA is that of supporting peace and stability in Asia (see Rix 1993). In this sense, the use of ODA as a foreign policy instrument can differ from context to context. For instance, ODA as a foreign policy instrument can be used to further development in poor countries but can also be targeted at producing economic returns in the donor nation. ODA can also be used as statecraft to affect foreign or domestic policies of recipient countries. For Japan, the geopolitical risk of disengaging from Myanmar is perceived to be too high, as Japan has invested too much economic and social capital to simply retreat, particularly in the face of a rising China (Interviews 19, 18, 4, 11, 21). As Ann Swidler's "settled culture" suggests, retooling a repertoire could come at more of a cost than benefit. Furthermore, it is not just ODA in monetary terms that determines how it is used but what countries do with ODA that fits within different and sometimes competing repertoires.

The 2015 revision of Japan's ODA charter (1992, 2003) to a "Development Cooperation Charter" marked the introduction of an updated aid policy with renewed rhetoric that aligned with a Japanese Cabinet decision to make ODA more strategic and driven by national interests, to reflect changes within and outside Japan (MOFA 2015). The revised charter introduced several new principles

that made it more tactical, including: 1) the consideration of cooperation with recipient countries' armed forces or members of the armed forces for nonmilitary purposes such as public welfare or disaster-relief on a case-by-case basis,[12] 2) the strengthening of aid initiatives that promote cooperation with the private sector, NGOs and local governments, and 3) an emphasis on poverty eradication through "quality growth" involving human resources development, infrastructure development and private sector growth.

In the 2023 revision of the Development Cooperation Charter, Japan further introduced cooperation aimed at creating ODA projects that both "help resolve the challenges of developing countries while leading solutions for Japan's own challenges and growth of the Japanese economy" (MOFA 2023b). Such a model emphasises a more strategic use of ODA, whereby Japan proactively proposes projects that are in line with its own national interests and diplomatic objectives, such as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision (Interview 22). Given the reach of ODA and its various aspects, whether social, economic, geopolitical or peace-promoting, there is no set definition of what a foreign policy repertoire featuring ODA as a prominent instrument involves, beyond what is stipulated for member countries of the OECD Development Assistance Committee. Japan's foreign policy repertoire in Myanmar should not be understood narrowly in terms of the material outcomes of development assistance, but also as a source of ideational capital that reinforces Japan's economic great power identity.

In telling the story of Myanmar-Japan relations, identity entrepreneurs have discursively constructed nostalgic accounts of a nation that was not only once a post-war economic great power, but also a pre-war imperial power. By referencing commodities of nostalgia, contemporary identity entrepreneurs convey both emotions of excitement about the possibility of helping Myanmar develop (in a Japanese way) and sentiments of nostalgia for a Japan that once was (Interviews 19, 11, 5). They offer narratives of a heroic post-war Japan, when the country experienced rapid growth and the power to stand up to other great powers.

Commodifying nostalgia: Rice and automobiles

In Japanese, the term *natsukashii* is often used to describe a nostalgia for the past and the way it evokes "a distinctive way of relating the past to the present and the future" (Robertson 1988: 504). In the case of Japan's engagement in Myanmar, nostalgia signals a longing for a Japan of the past but also a renewed hope for the prospect of recreating Japan's own development story and evoking the emotional passage from a devastated post-war nation to an economic superpower. Two symbols in particular are frequently referenced when commodify-

12 See Hoshiro 2022 for a discussion of the increase in non-military cooperation with military personnel since 2015.

ing the nostalgia at the core of Japan-Myanmar relations – rice, symbolising camaraderie, humanness and care, and automobiles, signalling Japan's industrial edge and the durability and quality of its products.

In describing the bilateral relationship, Maruyama Ichirō, Japan's Ambassador to Myanmar and one of the most prominent figures in Japan-Myanmar relations, with his near-native fluency in the Burmese language and customs and close rapport with State Councillors and leading military officials, describes a "difficult but surprising" period following World War II when rice supplies played a pivotal role in shaping interstate and people-to-people connections (Interview 19). Maruyama maintains that memories of the post-war provision of rice, as well as a series of post-war friendships among political elites, have had trickle-down effects for bilateral relations, as stories were passed down to those who eventually assumed leadership positions.

He illustrated this with an example from when he served as an interpreter for former and late Prime Minister Abe Shinzō and Abe's father, then foreign minister Abe Shintarō, when they visited Myanmar in the early 1980s, at a time when Japan was being criticised for the overpresence of Japanese companies in Southeast Asia. The receiving Myanmar officials, however, expressed only gratitude to Japan, declaring that they had achieved post-war independence because of the help from Japan. Maruyama described the political visit as a seminal occasion that motivated positive future relations at the highest political echelons. As he recounted: "at the leaders' dinner they were singing Japanese military songs[13] and Foreign Minister Abe was impressed […] he reportedly told his son [Abe Shinzō] 'We, Japan, should take care of such a special place'" (Interview 19). According to the Ambassador and other informants, such emotional elite encounters have been a driving force for the close political and economic relations today (Interviews 19, 18, 6, 8). Indeed, kinship as a legitimating force in Japan's foreign policy, including vis-à-vis Myanmar, was a prominent trait of the Abe administrations (2007–2008 and 2012–2020; see Yennie Lindgren 2018 for a discussion).

Relatedly, sentimental stories about human ties in the immediate aftermath of Japan's defeat saturate the foundation for contemporary relations among identity entrepreneurs. Despite the brutal Japanese occupation (1942–1945), Burma – as Myanmar was formerly known – was the first to sign a peace treaty with Tokyo and did so unequivocally. The decision not to make any formal claims against Japanese aggression steered the course of bilateral relations away from what interviewees suggest could have been a dramatically different relationship (Interviews 10, 17). Most notably, the Burmese even cared for the many Japanese soldiers who tried to escape the country upon defeat by nursing

13 Multiple interviewees referred to the Burmese military's reciting of Japanese songs, which they had learned through training with the Japanese military, as a uniting cultural commodity that reinforced mutual understanding (Interview 4; Interview 10).

them back to health with food and medicine and making sure that those who perished were given proper Buddhist burials (Interview 11). In Japan, this reciprocal sentiment of human understanding and respect for the dead, rooted in Buddhist tradition, was popularised by the 1956 film *Harp of Burma* (*Biruma no tategoto*, based on the 1946 novel of the same name), which became the most prominent story of immediate post-war amity and a frequent explanation for why Japan and Myanmar were able to surmount their brutal shared war history and foster positive diplomatic and people-to-people relations during the post-war period. The film, which is often referenced as a point of fraternity during diplomatic exchanges, continues to generate a positive image of Myanmar in Japan today and some Japanese living and working in Myanmar claim that they resonate with the film's protagonist because they too have a deep, visceral connection to Myanmar (Interviews 15, 6). Interviewees referred to the film as evidence of a special bond shared through humanity and Buddhism that has influenced monumental political decisions, such as the cancellation of Myanmar's 5 billion USD debt to Japan upon its reopening (Interviews 11, 8, 6).

However, the primary commodification of reciprocity and nostalgia is undoubtedly the supplies of rice that Burma sent to Japan in the post-war period, when the resource-poor island nation faced a devastating food shortage. As Maruyama explained, "even though it was not a lot, it carried great significance" as a human gesture of compassion, even for one's former enemy (Interview 19). According to interviewees, the provisions, which were provided from 1949 to 1968, prompted a great deal of sympathy for Burma in Japan, particularly among the now older generations who "feel they owe Burma to a great extent for this" (Interview 11). At present, a diplomatic exchange between the countries is almost never void of expressions of gratitude for Burma's help in Japan's post-war rehabilitation and today Japan sends "symbolic rice" to conflict areas in Myanmar in the form of food aid via the Nippon Foundation (Interview 10). This expressed and performed sympathy for Myanmar's development is discursively employed in Japan's identity construction of being an aid donor with a unique understanding of Myanmar's situation, given the reciprocity in the aid provided.

Beyond the narrative about rice fostering comradery, Japanese identity entrepreneurs also engage in spatial identity construction, with Othering that focuses on Japan's legal, moral and industrial superiority over other countries, in particular China. Spatial Othering is different than temporal Othering in that it focuses on the difference from others rather than on the difference from who the earlier Self (Hanssen 2020). As a site for Japanese industry for trucks, small cars, agricultural machinery and electrical appliances in the 1960s and later as an avid purchaser of used automobiles and appliances, Myanmar has both hosted and consumed Japanese industry. Japanese identity entrepreneurs cited Myan-

mar's consumption of Japanese goods as a mechanism for generating favourable relations that were rooted in the Myanmar people's belief in and pronouncements about the durability and quality of Japanese products and Japan's generous donations of used products. This transactional effect is described by interviewees as generating a kind of "trust" in Japanese goods and business (Interviews 10, 16), but also a sense of Japanese superiority vis-à-vis other suppliers, and particularly China. As one interviewee articulated:

> 90 per cent of cars in Myanmar come from Japan. There are Toyotas everywhere. This is because they prefer the Japanese quality. They cannot trust the Chinese products [...] a bunch of Chinese automakers had to leave because they were not able to sell. (Interview 11)

Myanmar's penchant for Japanese products supports the Japanese identity-constructing narrative of being a provider of "quality" while simultaneously evoking notions of nostalgia for older Japanese goods (Interview 18).

In my conversations with Myanmarese government and business representatives, their frequent expressions of deep respect for Japan's post-war development and international donor experiences suggest that Japan serves as a model both in terms of national and industrial development, one that Myanmar looks up to. Interviewees shared sentiments of veneration for the Japanese miracle, which continues to generate the desire to involve Japan in Myanmar's ongoing economic development today (Interview 14, 12, 17). One of Myanmar's leading business stakeholders referred to Japan Inc. – a descriptor for Japan's modern, highly centralised economic system and export-led growth strategy – as "something admirable" and explained that Japan has experience from all over the world, which, for Myanmar, makes it easier to meet international standards when involved in development and business projects with Japan (Interview 14). A top official at Myanmar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed a similar view – that Japan could use its experience to offer guidance in the establishment of crucial legal frameworks, and also that compared to other donors (i.e., China), Japan offered a high and worthy standard:

> Japan's assistance to the outside world is not like others [...] there are low interest rates and they try to understand people's sentiments very deeply. There are no strings attached. (Interview 12)

Through such affirmations, Myanmar counterparts are reinforcing Japanese identity construction as an ODA great power and development pioneer, and as a superior donor than other Asian countries. The discursive recognition of Japan as a desirable, experienced, respectable and fair donor validates the very identity that Japan seeks to project in both international and domestic spaces.

Temporally, Japan sees its own past in Myanmar's present, engaging in a form of temporal Othering where Japan differentiates its contemporary Self from its own post-war identity. This temporal Othering is an expression of

nostalgia as a longing for a bygone era, understood to be a time of miraculous economic prosperity, when Japanese products, such as automobiles, tractors and electrical appliances, were deemed superior and faced little competition from today's cheaper producers in China, South Korea or India. It was also a time when the Japanese populace faced a promising outlook in economic and social terms, in stark contrast to the precarity that is experienced in many facets of society today (Allison 2013).

This temporal Othering is used to construct a story of uniqueness in the bilateral bond, as well as one of opportunity for Myanmar's development in a Japanese way. It is conveyed in private and public spaces, primarily by Japanese identity entrepreneurs trying to promote Japan's engagement and to foster deeper business activity. In my fieldwork, I encountered this Othering frequently in my conversations with prominent business leaders, who explained that Myanmar's state of development reminded them of Japan's Shōwa era (1926–1989) – and sometimes the Meiji era (1868–1912) – and implied a sort of nostalgic dream to relive Japan's epic development story in Myanmar (Interviews 4, 9).

One interviewee described a scene in which he was in a rural area of Myanmar and in the midst of the desolate countryside suddenly heard a familiar sound echoing in the silence: the old-fashioned warning signal of a Japanese car *bakku shimasu* ("backing up"). This instilled in him both a feeling of *natsukashii* ("nostalgia") and a sense of pride in Japan's presence in Myanmar (Interview 4). Such scenery and sensory stimulation evoke nostalgic memories of a Japan that once was and activate the experiential dimension of nostalgia as an expression of a longing for and mourning for the past while also conjuring a sense of dignity in the presence of Japanese products in faraway places, reinforcing the identity of the country as a development pioneer.

Engagement in Myanmar is also nostalgically emphasised as a way for contemporary business entrepreneurs to experience a Japan that they never had the opportunity to see for themselves, for instance, the early Shōwa era (1926–1989). At a government-sponsored Myanmar investment forum in Tokyo in October 2019, hundreds of Japanese businesses gathered to hear why they should invest their money in Myanmar. Pitches to the audience emphasised the opportune timing for entering Myanmar's "last frontier" market, efforts to expedite tedious bureaucratic procedures and the assistance that Japanese government entities, such as the Japanese External Trade Organization (JETRO), could provide. But they also emphasised the unique chance to see and experience what Japan was like in the past by investing in the Myanmar of the present.

In a presentation in Japan advocating business investment in Myanmar, a representative of Toyota Motor Company, which had recently inaugurated the company's first overseas plant in decades, in Myanmar's Thilawa Special

Economic Zone, appealed to the audience with a temporal Othering of a Japan of pure nature, early industrial growth and young demographics:

> Myanmar has a high level of charm and a proactive spirit where people often say "tomorrow is a better today". There is a lot of green nature, it is just like Shōwa Japan – there are beautiful temples in the countryside. It is just like what it was here [in Japan] several decades ago with the younger people. (Toyota Motor Company Representative at JETRO event)

Another interviewee described Japan's "very special nostalgic sentiment about Myanmar" as a condition of the utmost feeling of closeness with Myanmar people "in terms of mentality and feeling":

> Myanmar reminds Japan of its old days [...] particularly pre-war Japan. In the 1970–90s, it felt like pre-war Japan in the poor areas. Myanmar is compared to Japan in the 1930s [...] this is different from China, South Korea, Thailand or India. (Interview 9)

Through such reflections Japan not only engages in temporal Othering but also likens the Other to an imagined past Self. Until the 2021 military coup, this notion of experiencing Japan's temporal past in the present made a strong impression and served as a driving force for top-level decisions to promote Japan's deep engagement in Myanmar, on both economic and political levels, despite the risks involved.

Japan as a peace promoter and diplomatic mediator

Interviewees described Japan's engagement in Myanmar prior to the 2021 coup as important for Japanese self-identity as a peace promoter and diplomatic mediator trying to help Myanmar in a crucial phase of its development as a democratic state (Interviews 19, 10). One interviewee explained that Japan distinguishes itself by being committed to Myanmar's democratic political development through unwavering economic and diplomatic engagement. It serves as a selfless diplomatic mediator facilitating information sharing with Western allies (such as the US and EU), who, due to their restricted engagement in Myanmar, are not privy to information that prominent Japanese identity entrepreneurs suggest is crucial to helping Myanmar develop as a peaceful and democratic state (Interview 19). While external perspectives of Japan's foreign policy repertoire in Myanmar often deem it to be controversial, internally Japan presents it as serving the interests of both Myanmar and the international community.

Despite the critical reactions from members of the international community and domestic actors in Japan (Kasai 2019, 2020), who hold that Japan is "whitewashing" the Rohingya crisis by engaging with Myanmar, Japanese identity entrepreneurs suggest instead that Japan provides a type of rare diplomatic good by engaging both sides of the sanctions spectrum and indirectly mediating between them through information sharing (Interview 19, 10). In their altering

of the framing of Japan's role in the crisis, these voices promote the identities that they themselves espouse as embedded actors in Japan's activities in Myanmar. In my conversations with those involved on the ground, this status and access is a point of pride – rather than an example of divergence from some of Japan's closest allies – and is presented as a role that Japan benevolently takes on for the greater good, with the interest being in helping Myanmar to develop and "take the driver's seat" (Interview 19). This identity construction discursively frames Japan as "unique" and serves to promote identity entrepreneurs' desired version of identity.

Japan's ability to build this "unique" position is suggested to be the result of long-term, persistent political investment in building close rapport at elite levels and a strong stakeholder presence in Myanmar's developing institutions (Interview 6, 18). The Japanese government has invested not only in the establishment of a number of branch offices in Yangon (such as those of JICA, JETRO, the Japan Foundation and the Nippon Foundation, among others), but also in Japanese personnel (e.g., JICA experts), who are uniquely embedded in Myanmar's national institutions to assist with capacity building. According to one JICA representative, Japan is there to assist Myanmar since it is "a closed and isolated country and so not always following international contracts" (Interview 1). By demanding access to public offices in order to be able to monitor aid and fight corruption early on ("buying into institutional space", as described by one interviewee; Interview 7), Japan has reached a unique level of political connectivity that is presented by informants as an influential source of confidence-building in bilateral relations. This embedded access allows for the quick communications and informal exchanges crucial to developing trust and relationships, placing Japan in a "prime position" to mitigate risk in Myanmar by operating with "the power of presence". Over time, this has also meant that Japan has become a kind of institutional power in Myanmar (Interview 7, 20). The role of trust in facilitating Japan's foreign policy repertoire in Myanmar emerged in various interviews when informants described why Japan was viewed as a reliable and valuable partner. Trust was primarily depicted as an outcome of experiences with Japan by Burmese informants and as an important goal or trait of bilateral relations, rather than being a necessary precondition for Japan's engagement.

Tokyo's institutional-level embeddedness has also extended to Myanmar's challenging peace process since 2012, with Japan playing a prominent participatory role. Japan's securing of a privileged seat at the negotiation table, despite not having a direct stake in the process, was attributed to the tireless efforts of Sasakawa Yōhei – the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Special Envoy for National Reconciliation in Myanmar since 2013 and the longstanding Honorary Chairman of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, as well as Chairman of the Nippon Foundation (which runs a number of aid programmes in Myanmar) – to mediate

between Myanmar's generals and many ethnic armed organisations. Liaising closely with the Japanese Embassy and recognised for playing a central political role in managing Japan's relations with the Tatmadaw (the Armed Forces of Myanmar), Sasakawa both discursively constructs and embodies Japan's identity construction and policy in Myanmar. His work in Myanmar involves communication and trust-building through regular face-to-face meetings with Tatmadaw military leaders and frequent visits to Thailand to engage with the ethnic armed organisations from Myanmar based in Chiang Mai. Additionally, he conducts visits to conflict areas and camps for internally displaced persons along Myanmar's borders with Bangladesh and Thailand (Interview 21). Identity entrepreneurs on the ground emphasise the investment of time and persistence in communications as a practice that has allowed Sasakawa to gain access to and the respect of prominent military figures (Interviews 4, 10, 11). Citing Sasakawa's activities as examples of Japan's role as a peace promoter and diplomatic mediator who necessarily engages with the military regime in order to facilitate communication (Interviews 10, 11), they challenge accounts that accuse Japan's peace promotion of overlooking human rights abuses and massive displacement, in particular concerning the Rohingya humanitarian crisis (c.f. Kasai 2019, Nagakoshi 2020).

Identity entrepreneurs suggest that Japan's engagement fosters Myanmar's economic development, which leads to a more stable political outcome (Interviews 19, 4, 11). They argue that Japan's logistical and moral support for Myanmar's development, for instance in the ongoing peace process, should be distinguished from that of others, namely China, since it is focused on peaceful outcomes, rather than meddling in internal affairs (Interviews 10, 11, 19).

A senior advisor at the JICA office in Yangon conveyed a similar account, suggesting that Myanmar is "a rare case where Japan can have such a big influence", whereas other countries in Southeast Asia primarily grapple with how to handle China's interference (Interview 18). In this way, Japan constructs its identity through its activities in Myanmar's peace process by contrasting them to those of others involved, such as China, and suggested that Japan's involvement is more aligned with Myanmar's interests. As another informant explained:

> Myanmar has an idea of the path to peace and Japan just needs to be standby. But China tries to get too involved in the peace process […] Japan is involved but this does not mean that Japan wants to be China – Japan is not arrogant. Japan is asked to do something, and then they [Japan] do it. (Interview 10)

Japan's need to differentiate itself can be traced back to the transformative decades immediately following WWII, when it heavily engaged in temporal Othering to demonstrate that post-war Japan was different from wartime Japan. At the time, Japan's repertoire was severely constrained, as viable options were limited after the collapse of its empire, and war reparations and aid projects served as a crucial medium for Japan to differentiate itself from its past Self (Mizuno 2018). Today, however, the focus has shifted to differentiating Japan

from "arrogant" China and, as such, the identity construction that was necessary in the post-war historical context now has a different function in the contemporary geopolitical context.

The interviewees describe a Japan that is not only superior in how it supports Myanmar in its peace process and political development but also an experienced diplomatic mediator who can perform certain diplomatic practices well. As Maruyama explained, Japan's diplomacy is tailored to Myanmar's preferences, generating great trust:

> Quiet diplomacy is very important in Myanmar. Do not send [the] message publicly, but provide advice in private. I make an effort to prepare documents in the Myanmar language so that Ministers can share them with each other and so that they are read. (Interview 19)

Arguing that such an approach is important because in this way Japan is "helping Myanmar be who it wants to be" through support and patience rather than criticism, Maruyama describes a Japan that understands how to navigate the nuances of formal and informal channels of diplomacy in Myanmar, thus making it a preferred partner who is easy to work with (Interview 19). As one interviewee concluded, "Myanmar knows where it wants to go, it just needs our help getting there" (Interview 10).

Conclusion

This article has focused on identity construction in Japan-Myanmar relations from Myanmar's reopening to the world in 2012 until the military regime under General Min Aung Hlaing violently assumed power in February 2021. In the immediate aftermath of the coup, Western countries and the EU condemned the coup, imposed targeted sanctions against military leaders and military-owned companies, and redirected essential humanitarian aid to NGOs. Japan, however, chose to neither align with its democratic allies nor completely suspend its aid (Sasamori 2021). While Japan has suspended new yen loans to Myanmar since March 2021, ongoing pre-coup development projects continue, and the landmark Thilawa Special Economic Zone remains in operation (Abb / Yennie Lindgren 2023). Moreover, some of the most prominent Japanese identity entrepreneurs in Myanmar, including Japan's Ambassador to Myanmar, Ichiro Maruyama, who remained in his post after the coup, have continued their close contact with the military and have called for Japan to "be a bridge between the Tatmadaw and other democratic countries" while warning of "blindly aligning" with the Western policy of regime change (Watanabe 2021). Instructing Japan to remain unafraid of departing from the policies of the US and other democratic allies, they cite the military's "long-standing admiration for Japan

and democracy as Myanmar's ultimate form of governance" and reference Japan's "historic mission of guiding Myanmar's military government in service of a free and open Indo-Pacific" (Watanabe 2021).[14]

Today, Japan's engagement in Myanmar continues to face mounting international criticism and demands for Japan to "step up pressure" on the military government in Naypyidaw (UN News 2023, Black 2023). In light of this, one would expect Japan to retool its foreign policy repertoire rather than risk political and social capital. However, Tokyo has maintained its support of the claim by the now overturned Suu Kyi government that no state-sponsored genocide occurred during the Rohingya crisis (Nagakoshi 2020), as well as its ties with the military-led regime. Although Japan has released statements urging the military regime to cease violence and work towards a peaceful resolution with the NLD, it also believes that keeping open a line of communication with the military via ethnic armed organisations is essential (MOFA 2023a, Interview 21).

As argued in this article, a key impetus and explanation for Japan's engagement in Myanmar is its own identity construction. Japanese-Myanmar relations are a product of past ties, nostalgia and foreign policy repertoires that are both enabled by and enable identity. A network of Japanese identity entrepreneurs in Myanmar reinforces Japan's identity as 1) an economic great power and post-war development pioneer and 2) a peace promoter and diplomatic mediator, while activating Japan's foreign policy repertoire in Myanmar.

Through detailed logistical and emotional efforts, as well as repeated acknowledgement of the two countries' strong post-war ties, identity entrepreneurs reinforce a relationship of mutual affinity and trust, in which guidance for Myanmar's political development is said to be prioritised through the *yorisō* ("walking along with") approach. On-the-ground entrepreneurs construct Japan's identity temporally in terms of nostalgia and longing for a time when Japan was a post-war industrial power, but also spatially in terms of Japan's legal, moral and industrial superiority over other countries involved in Myanmar's economic development (in particular vis-à-vis China). Prior to the 2021 military coup, this involved conveying enthusiasm about the possibility of helping Myanmar develop – in a Japanese way – and sentiments of nostalgia for a Japan that once was, using statements that reinforce Japanese identity construction as an ODA great power and development pioneer as well as a superior donor than other Asian countries.

Amidst the ongoing turmoil in present-day Myanmar, Japan has gradually adapted its engagement and currently places primary emphasis on supporting

14 It should be noted that the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) is an official policy strategy by the Japanese government, which has instigated similar policies with a number of other countries, such as the United States and European countries including France, Germany and Lithuania (see Yennie Lindgren 2019; Brummer et al. 2024 forthcoming).

safe and unhindered humanitarian assistance, having donated more than 109 million USD via international organisations and NGOs since the 2021 coup (MOFA 2024). Despite this shift in focus and the challenging circumstances, Japan continues to play a pivotal role and, in doing so, reinforces both its commitment to Myanmar's development and its identity as a reliable and experienced partner.

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Appendix 1

Interview no.	Position and affiliation	Place and date
Interview 1	Senior Director, JICA	Tokyo, 2018
Interview 2	Senior Director, Nippon Foundation	Tokyo, 2018
Interview 3	Director General, JICA	Tokyo, 2018
Interview 4	Assistant Director, MOFA Japan	Tokyo, 2018
Interview 5	Executive Senior Research Fellow, JICA	Tokyo, 2018
Interview 6	Myanmar expert and Professor, University Sector	Tokyo, 2019
Interview 7	Myanmar expert and Professor, University Sector	Tokyo, 2019
Interview 8	Myanmar expert and Professor, University Sector	Tokyo, 2019
Interview 9	Professor Emeritus and JICA Affiliate	Tokyo, 2019
Interview 10	Deputy Head of Office, Nippon Foundation Yangon Office	Yangon, 2019
Interview 11	Executive Director, Nippon Foundation Yangon Office	Yangon, 2019
Interview 12	Deputy Director General, MOFA Myanmar	Naypyitaw, 2019
Interview 13	Chief Representative, Japanese Bank International Cooperation (JBIC)	Naypyitaw, 2019
Interview 14	Vice President, Myanmar Japan Thilawa Development Ltd.	Naypyitaw, 2019
Interview 15	President, Myanmar Japan Thilawa Development Ltd.	Thilawa, 2019
Interview 16	JICA Expert	Thilawa, 2019
Interview 17	Researcher, Policy Institute	Yangon, 2019
Interview 18	Senior Representative, JICA Yangon Office	Yangon, 2019
Interview 19	Maruyama Ichirō, Japanese Ambassador to Myanmar	Yangon, 2019
Interview 20	JICA Expert	Yangon, 2019
Interview 21	Executive Director, Nippon Foundation	Tokyo, 2023
Interview 22	Deputy Director, MOFA Japan	Tokyo, 2023