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WIN-WIN! with ODA-man: legitimizing development assistance policy in Japan

Wrenn Yennie Lindgren 

Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), Oslo, Norway


ABSTRACT

Official development assistance (ODA) constitutes one of Japan's most important foreign policy instruments as it builds Japan's global network and supports allies in the Southeast Asian region and beyond. In the context of a rising China and an increasingly severe fiscal and demographic situation at home, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) promulgated a domestic-oriented legitimization campaign featuring a popular anime character rebranded as 'ODA-man' to increase public understanding of and support for Japan's ODA. Drawing on interpretivist analysis of performances at a development cooperation promotion festival, anime videos on the MOFA YouTube channel and interviews and examining the use of rhetorical strategies, this article provides an in-depth study of the promotion of one of the central instruments in Japan's foreign policy repertoire. Though he comes off as goofy and benign, ODA-man's messages are serious ones that reproduce dominant economic and security narratives about Japan and the world. Analysis points to both innovation and path dependency in Japan's foreign policy repertoire; while ODA-man may be new the story he is telling, and the way that he is performing it, is very much familiar. The article further illuminates important trends in the public legitimization of foreign policy in Japan.

KEYWORDS Japan; development assistance; foreign policy; security; diplomacy; narratives

Introduction

In 2018 the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) promulgated a domestic-oriented legitimization campaign for Official Development Assistance (ODA) featuring a popular cartoon character rebranded as 'ODA-man'. The purpose of the campaign is to deepen public interest in and understanding about ODA. Though ODA-man comes off as benign, goofy and childish, his messages about the world, Japan and development

CONTACT Wrenn Yennie Lindgren  wyl@nupi.no  Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), PB 7024 St. Olavs Plass, 0130 Oslo, Norway.

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assistance are serious ones. And this is because ODA is a very serious matter for Japan, not only in terms of financial commitments and returns but also in terms of power and prestige. It has been a reputation-mender and builder for postwar Japan and not least a vehicle for Tokyo to showcase its commitment to global affairs and participation in the global aid regime, epitomized by Japan's membership in the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC). ODA-man matters not only because he speaks on behalf of the government to legitimize one of Japan's most prioritized foreign policies but also because he demonstrates the important, yet often overlooked, cultural dimension of foreign policy.

During the past decade, and particularly after the return of Prime Minister Shinzō Abe to power in 2012, Japan has reshaped its ODA policy to improve its standing in the world vis-à-vis a new geopolitical context that features a rising China. However, Japan's ODA policy is not only changing due to regional developments but also due to domestic transformations. As a number of pressing national security issues including demographic challenges, prolonged fiscal crisis, soaring social welfare costs and severe labor shortages put major strain on the public system and budget in Japan, costly policies have come under increasing scrutiny. In 2018 ODA consumed the largest part of the MOFA budget¹ and its formulation and coordination involves a myriad of actors both nationally and internationally. In the squeeze between a strategic desire to maintain development assistance as a key instrument in Japan's foreign policy repertoire and diminishing public interest in increases in the budget for it, the ODA-man campaign was created.

In the field of international relations (IR), rationalist approaches assume that actors can draw upon a (nearly) infinite array of foreign policy instruments, but choose the ones that optimize the state's economy, power and prestige. Here, I argue that a more fruitful approach, yet less utilized in the study of IR, is presented in Charles Tilly's works on 'contentious repertoires' (2006, 2008). With the repertoire concept, Tilly proposed that collective action, such as that of a social movement, a revolutionary group or a state bureaucracy, derives from the contributors' known 'repertoire'. In the IR context, this would mean that we would expect to see the Japanese state employ familiar instruments in its foreign policy as well as in its public legitimation and promotion of policies. While facing new circumstances, be them geopolitical, social or economic, may bring about changes, modifications and innovations, these adjustments are often still within the cultural and historical repertoire of the collective (Goddard, MacDonald, & Nexon, 2019; Goddard & Nexon, 2016). In its acknowledgement of the social embeddedness of world politics and the path dependency of doing what is known and familiar, the repertoire concept allows for capturing the cultural aspect of doing foreign policy, providing new and interesting avenues for

understanding why states make sometimes puzzling policy decisions. Here, the use of a cartoon character in a state's public legitimization of its foreign policy is an illustration of how repertoires can be culturally specific.

In this article, I study the strategic deployment of ODA-man and the use of rhetorical strategies (narratives and commonplaces) in the public legitimization of Japan's development assistance. I employ Tilly's repertoire concept in my analysis of ODA-man as a new and innovative foreign policy instrument, but also as one that makes sense and is familiar in a Japanese cultural context. Drawing upon an extensive and varied data collection, consisting of observations at Japan's largest development cooperation festival, cartoons, government pamphlets, animated videos, press conferences and interviews, I illustrate how Japan promotes one of its major foreign policy instruments to the Japanese public performatively and rhetorically through the deployment of a familiar and likeable cartoon character.

The diverse literature on Japan as a policy actor includes contributions on public legitimization projects. Here, I distinguish between public legitimization as 'contests' and as 'promotion'. While *public contests* concern political actors' struggle to shape the boundaries for reasonable, natural and smart foreign policy in contests with other political actors (for empirical studies on Japan see Hagström & Gustafsson, 2015; Hagström and Hanssen, 2016; Gustafsson, 2015; Lindgren, 2016, 2019; Lindgren & Yennie Lindgren, 2019), *public promotion* is the marketing performances, practices, and instruments that government institutions employ in a 'one-way monologue' towards a domestic or international audience. In the literature on Japan, scholars have primarily investigated the public promotion of Cool Japan or Cute Culture (Bukh, 2014; Iwabuchi, 2015; Leheny, 2018; Nakamura, 2013; Otmazgin, 2012; White, 2017). Other contributions have researched how the defense programs or Self-Defense Forces have marketed themselves to the public (see Brummer, 2016; Frühstück, 2007; Pryor, 2015). While there are a number of important studies on the changes in Japanese development policy or the strategic aspect of aid (Arase, 2005; Kato, Page, & Shimomura, 2016; Söderberg, 2018; Yamamoto, 2017) and the use of crisis narratives to delegitimize Japan's ODA policy in the 1990s (Yamamoto, forthcoming), how contemporary aiding is legitimized, marketed and promoted to the Japanese public has been largely overlooked by the academic community. This article is therefore also an attempt to remedy this lacuna.

Finally, this contribution makes an additional move to capture internal mobilization in repertoires. As is demonstrated, ODA-man's purpose is to interface with the Japanese public, not vis-à-vis international actors, and this makes him largely a domestic character. However, in being who he is and doing what he does, ODA-man sets the stage for the broader Japanese foreign policy context. His communications with the Japanese public are

indeed a form of the claimsmaking required by repertoires (Tilly, 2006, 2008). While extant contributions on foreign policy have largely studied inter-state claimsmaking, it is shown here that the domestic dimension is part and parcel of this. I argue that it is important to not overlook the domestic context in considerations of the scale of claimsmaking, as it is a crucial and necessary component that requires maintenance and augmentation over time in order for inter-state claims to be made.

This article proceeds as follows. After introducing the theoretical and methodological perspectives of the study – namely repertoires, and rhetorical strategies – I present the extensive research data gathered. I then analyze ODA-man's performances and rhetorical strategies, demonstrating how he is an innovation in Japan's repertoire but also employs familiar narratives about Japan and its place in the world in his legitimation attempts. In the conclusion, I summarize the findings of the study and explain their implications for the field.

Theory and method

Theoretically, this article draws inspiration from literatures on repertoires and on public legitimation. The repertoire perspective is a fruitful model to study MOFA's use of a cartoon to increase public understanding of and support for its development assistance activities in that it highlights both the strategic deployment of instruments and that states draw from known territory when they innovate and modify within their existing array of instruments. Since repertoires are performed by collectives' actions and utterings, specific attention should be paid to the articulations (rhetorical constructions in speech and writing) and behavior of actors in their daily engagements on the international scene or domestically. From the public legitimation literature, the narrative approach presented by Krebs (2015) and rhetorical commonplaces perspective by Jackson (2003, 2006) illuminate that rhetorical strategies are a primary feature of human collectives' action repertoire and that public promotion campaigns of foreign policy instruments are a large, perhaps always major, rhetorical component.

Foreign policy repertoires

Charles Tilly proposed the concept of 'contentious repertoires' in his studies of collective movements in Europe and the United States in the 18th and 19th century (Tilly, 2006, 2008). The fundamental idea behind the repertoire concept is that humans coming together in groups (collectives) draw upon the knowledge pool of the participants when executing collective action. Tilly therefore hypothesized that collective action draws upon known

repertoires of action: an array of actions, instruments, performances and practices that are already known to some of the participants. The potential space for collective action is therefore a far cry from what is theoretically available to the collective. Answering the question of how collectives struggle for legitimacy and dominance over others involves inquiry into the dynamics of *power politics* and the myriad of instruments of power that collectives, states included, employ (Goddard & Nexon, 2016, p. 11).

Here foreign policy repertoires consist of what states (and other non-state actors) deploy to improve their hands in the struggle for influence among political communities, including physical objects, policies, speech acts, performances (Alexander, 2006, 2011), and practices (Adler & Pouliot, 2011; Neumann, 2002; Pouliot, 2016). Instruments make up repertoires and refer to 'the forms of power at work in the deployment, practices and relations of global power politics' (Goddard & Nexon, 2016, p. 8). The repertoire concept allows for innovations and modifications in prior known instruments, performances and practices, but only within reasonable boundaries. In the case of stable circumstances, we expect little innovation or modifications, while in times of economic, geopolitical or military ruptures, the theory hypothesizes more change in the repertoires. Claimsmaking as a political performance that airs certain claims to an audience is an integral part of repertoires (Tilly, 2006, 2008). Domestic-level claimsmaking (i.e., ODA-man's performances airing claims to the Japanese public) is a crucial and necessary component that requires maintenance and augmentation over time in order for claims to be made also at an inter-state level.

The repertoire approach is one version of constructivism in international relations theory, different from both norm and critical (post-structural) constructivism. While norm constructivism (Berger, 1998; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Legro, 1997) emphasizes the internalization (or lack thereof) of norms among political actors, the repertoire approach rather suggests that it is in the very activation of instruments in networks that agency takes place. Moreover, critical constructivist approaches (Gustafsson, 2015, 2019; Hagström and Hanssen, 2016; Hanssen, 2020; Suzuki, 2015; Yennie Lindgren & Lindgren, 2017) are predominantly concerned with differentiation processes, how actors construct identity - Self - in constant negotiation vis-à-vis its Others, which is helpful for understanding how policies, practices and instruments become 'conceivable' in a political community (see Doty, 1993; Holland, 2011; Rumelili, 2004). When it comes to repertoires, however, the concern is to situate the activation and promotion of this particular instrument - ODA-man - as part of the broader family of instruments, and to illuminate the continuity of Japan's foreign policy repertoire in the face of a rising China and deteriorating public finances at home.

Rhetorical strategies of legitimation: narratives and commonplaces

International relations and politics concern not only inter-state relations but also the domestic origins and maintenance of state actions (Kaarbo, 2015; Putnam, 1988). In a world that is increasingly understood to be 'inter-mestic', the domestic and international aspects of how policy comes about is part and parcel of the research process. The emphasis on *power politics* indeed means a scientific commitment to see politics, both international and domestic, as *the* domain for human contests and agency (Goddard & Nexon, 2016).² This merging of the domestic and international extends itself to IR's 'rhetorical turn' literature where the focus of a number of seemingly domestically-oriented pieces (Krebs, 2015; Krebs & Jackson, 2007; Nexon & Musgrave, 2018) is ultimately to understand international politics.

In studying the continued reproduction of dominant narratives in Japan, I combine the repertoires approach with literature from the rhetorical turn and specifically the works on the public legitimation of foreign policy. Here, scholars are particularly interested in how a certain policy became 'conceivable' (Doty, 1993), 'resonant' (Barnett, 1999) and 'dominant' (Krebs, 2015). Narratives offer meaning about the world and self, and it is through national security narratives that international events, other countries' actions, and world affairs more generally are interpreted (Krebs, 2015). Proponents of specific national narratives participate in a domestic struggle to shape the public understandings of international developments, events and trends. Since power to shape the narratives can transform to power to shape policies and practices, they are implicit in wielding influence and in determining boundaries of action.

Dominant narratives play an important role in national policymaking processes in that they 'establish the common-sense givens of debate, set the boundaries of the legitimate, limit what political actors inside and outside the halls of power can publicly justify, and resist efforts to remake the landscape of legitimation' (Krebs, 2015, pp. 3–4). To maintain, produce and transform the 'common-sense' is to engage in rhetorical strategies to shape the commonplaces in public discourse. These rhetorical strategies of commonplaces are to be understood as cultural resources that the agents can draw upon in order to 'render the policy in question possible, acceptable, and even inescapable' (Jackson, 2003, p. 238). Public contestants who are able to draw upon dominant narratives and shape the specific content of commonplaces within the narratives are more likely to succeed in public contests because the social relations and knowledge produced in them will be seen as commonsensical.

Method

Depending on the particular characteristics of a given instrument, the method for studying repertoires vary. Since my purpose here is to study the innovative application of a new instrument in Japan's repertoire, I pay attention to the deployment of ODA-man in different arenas to reach out to the Japanese public. I look for the specific constructions of the cartoon character, the messages in his production, and the cultural and social context in which he 'comes to life'. The point of the analysis is to understand how actors attempt to shape and alter the public realm.

This study takes as a starting point that foreign policy narratives and performances need to be studied in their concrete manifestations in human networks. I apply Kenneth Burke's (1969) definition of a narrative: narratives are constituted by act (what is happening?), scene (where is the action taking place?), actors (who is acting?), agency (what means or methods do agents employ?) and purpose (what are agents' motives or reasons for action?) (derived from Krebs (2015)).

My method is further inspired by Alexander's theorization of the cultural pragmatics of social performance. Alexander (2011) contends that two conditions must be met in order for social performance to be effective. First, the cultural meaning of the performance must be comprehensible. Second, the performance must be understood to be authentic and sincere. Once these two conditions are met, there is a 'fusion' between the actor and their script and they deliver what the audience in turn deems to be a convincing and authentic performance. This 'fusing' is at the core of Alexander's theory of cultural pragmatics where he argues that on today's increasingly complex and fragmented societal landscape, fusion can no longer be taken for granted and re-fusion is needed in order to bring authenticity back. Studying performance thus involves studying this re-fusion attempt and the elements inherent in it.

Through interpretivist analysis that combines ethnographic and textual analysis methods, I capture the spoken, written and performative aspects of Japan's legitimization of its development assistance. Analysing the narrative content of ODA-man's performances, I demonstrate how some arguments, linked to commonplaces, become successful in the legitimation of boundaries. Filling the commonplaces with meaning means legitimizing specific social transactions and boundaries.

Research data

The empirical data in this article derives from two main sources. First, ethnographic data was collected in 2018 and 2019 on the site of *Global Festa*, Japan's largest annual event promoting public understanding of

international cooperation. Second, I assembled and documented various textual, photo and video sources at the MOFA HQ in Japan, on the MOFA website and on the MOFA YouTube channel. I also discussed ODA-man in eight semi-structured interviews with Japanese ministry officials, aid administrators and with his creator (see appendix for interview table).

In 2019, the *Global Festa* was held for the 29th time under the organization of MOFA, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the Japan NGO Center for Cooperation (JANIC) and brought together NGOs, international organizations, embassies, relevant ministries, agencies and businesses to promote international exchange and its necessity for Japan and the world. The scheduling of the two-days festival is usually over a weekend around international collaboration day (October 6) and approximately 183,743 people attended in 2019, which was held in an large, open space at Odaiba Center Promenade in Tokyo. The festival is advertised to the Japanese public via posters in Tokyo Metro subway stations, social media (such as *Global Festa* Facebook, Instagram and Twitter accounts), and on the webpages of its co-organizers and participating entities.

At *Global Festa*, I engaged with participants and exhibitors, interviewed MOFA officials and aid administrators, documented activities with pictures and videos, observed performances on the festival stages and gathered written information (brochures, booklets, documents, goodie bags, annual reports, etc.). Over 250 colorful, informative and interactive booths line the promenade, featuring the work of Japanese and international organizations, serving international cuisine and selling handmade goods from primarily Southeast Asia, South Asia and Africa (see MOFA YouTube, 2018b for summary video of the 2018 event and ODA-man's debut). Event exhibitors, often dressed in the traditional garments of the countries they represent or work in, come from a broad range of backgrounds (i.e., government, research, business, NGOs, education.) and generally have experience working with issues related to the developing world. Exhibitors eagerly engaged with festival attendees by striking up conversation about their organizations' work while handing out information brochures, questionnaires or goodie bags. Out of the 250+ festival exhibitors, MOFA occupied two larger tent areas. One tent was a photo exhibit of Japanese international aid projects in developing countries and of the people in those countries. It was arranged to serve as both an exhibit and a resting area with benches where festival goers took breaks to eat or chat. At both entrances to the tent, stands and tables with MOFA documents, booklets and brochures promoting ODA policy in English and Japanese were displayed. There were copies of the ODA-man manga brochure (see MOFA, 2019d) that was launched at *Global Festa 2018* as well as the 'ODA Girl and Househusband Boy'³ manga previously developed by MOFA to teach about development cooperation.

The second MOFA tent featured a poster board ODA-man quiz about Japan's development activities around the world, a TV screen showing short anime videos of ODA-man, a quiz completion gift reward table of goods that MOFA had received during diplomatic exchanges, a survey about the MOFA foreign affairs journal *Gaiko* ('diplomacy') and also a table for information and consultation sessions for those interested in working for MOFA. I collected materials from the tents, spoke with MOFA officials outfitted in ODA-man t-shirts and attended ODA-man's performances on the festival's main stage.

My source gathering involved assembling textual, photo and video sources of ODA-man. At MOFA HQ in Kasumigaseki, the government district in Tokyo, I documented pictures of the promotional usage of ODA-man in the Ministry's reception area and at the nearby Kasumigaseki metro station and collected hard copies of brochures on display, such as the Ministry's ODA mail magazine featuring ODA-man. On the MOFA YouTube channel, I accessed the first series of five, two-minute ODA-man videos that feature ODA projects in four geographic locations: 1) Southeast Asia, 2) Kenya, 4) Istanbul and 5) Peru (see MOFA YouTube, 2018a). On the MOFA website, I located documents that cover ODA promotion activities, such as press releases and relevant white papers. I also analyzed posts about ODA-man in MOFA social media accounts.

Empirical analysis

In this section I carry out the repertoire and rhetorical analysis of the data collected. I begin by setting the unique cultural and historical context of promoting government policy in Japan through comics and anime and proceed by introducing ODA-man. An examination of the background provides evidence for ODA-man being an innovation within a well-rehearsed part of Japan's foreign policy repertoire. I then proceed with a two-fold analysis: first I study the deployment of ODA-man and his performance during *Global Festa*. Second, I analyze the rhetorical strategies that ODA-man employs to persuade of the significance of ODA for Japan and the world. Taken together, these performance and rhetorical analyses not only point to innovation in Japan's repertoire but also to the familiar narratives about Japan and its place in the world.

ODA-man as an innovation in Japan's foreign policy repertoire

In order to be sustainable over time, governments are concerned with legitimizing their foreign policies. Different cultures and histories around the world apply distinct public promotion strategies. In Japan, one method is

to draw upon the rich tradition of popular visual culture to attract readership and enhance the ability to mediate the government's voice to the general populace. In other cultural contexts, deploying an animated character to publicly legitimize and promote foreign policy is rarely an attractive and viable option, and thus not part of a given state's cultural repertoire. In the Japanese case, however, articulations of manga and characters to inform and persuade the public about government policies are numerous. As Tilly (2006, p. 43) explains, repertoires are deeply cultural and structural in that 'they certainly rest on shared understandings and their representation in symbols and practices (that is, on culture) but they also respond to the organization of their social settings'.

The fact that a cartoon character is seen as a strategic move and a serious foreign policy instrument by MOFA, for children mostly, but also for mass consumption by an adult audience, relies heavily on the cultural heritage of *manga* (comic books and graphic novels) and *anime* (animation) in Japanese society. Reading manga or watching anime is 'a significant part of daily life for millions of Japanese' (MacWilliams 2008). Certain age or peer groups, families or colleagues, often consume manga that is specific to their hobbies, interests or work. From the outside, the adult consumption of cartoons may be perceived as immature or fantasy-seeking (Brenner, 2007; Kinsella, 2000) but in Japan it is a longstanding and uncontroversial part of the national culture. Japan is described as 'one of the only countries in the world where 'comic books' have become a full-fledged medium of expression, on par with novels and films, and read by what often seems to be everyone' (Schodt, 2008, p. vii). In recent years, Japan's anime and manga production has developed into extensive, globally-renowned and lucrative industries with recent combined annual revenues hitting approximately 23 billion USD (Jozuka, 2019).

Manga often engages politically by narrating controversial and sensitive historical and political issues (Frühstück, 2007; Otmazgin & Sutter, 2016). Given this, manga authors can be complicit in productive power processes that create knowledge and attempt to persuade why a certain course of action is un/justified, un/desirable, or even in/escapable (Barnett & Duvall, 2005). Efforts to gain public support for controversial policies – such as providing ODA with the clear goal of pursuing the donor country's own economic and security interests – by trivializing issues with characters, can be considered part of Japan's 'cultural industry complex', which involves (1) the *production* of cultural products by a large range of private anime and manga companies, (2) the *consumption* of such cultural products by the Japanese public, and (3) the government's *promotion* of the same products in their information and legitimation campaigns. Since manga and anime are such an integral part of cultural mass consumption in Japan, it makes

sense for Japanese bureaucrats to tap into this industry and exploit its already existing production chains in their public promotion campaigns. Moreover, the almost infinite potential of already established connotations, experiences, and feelings that are evoked when Japanese people consume manga and anime make the genre an attractive media for MOFA.

A diverse set of cartoon characters play a significant role in government institutions' and public offices' communication with the general public. At the local level, most cities in Japan have a cultural ambassador character providing public information about their city or region's history, nature or 'specialized goods' (*meibutsu*). Characters are also used in cartoons to communicate local/national policy and protocol (i.e., preventative public health measures, manners on public transportation or procedures during a natural disaster evacuation). For example, in 2015, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government released 'Tokyo Bosai' cartoons featuring a 3-year old rhinoceros character that informs about disaster survival (Tokyo Bosai, 2015). Then, in 2017, at the height of missile attacks from North Korea, the Hokkaido Prefectural Government released a colorful cartoon booklet instructing how to protect oneself during a missile attack (Hokkaido Government, 2017).

The Japanese government's use of cartoons and animation in public relations is also increasingly visible in the foreign policy domain. Given the Japanese state's financial situation in the post-bubble era, costly foreign policies attract more criticism and scrutiny, thus, it is not surprising that there is an increase in efforts to make such policies resonate with the Japanese public. For instance, following the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF) deployment to the Iraq War in 2004, the SDF cartoon mascot Prince Pickles was used to portray a 'cutesy and cuddly image' of Japanese troops (Tabuchi, 2007). Then, in 2015, The Ministry of Defense released a four-part anime series on its YouTube channel featuring Bo-Emon, a talking bird who explains the purpose of the SDF to the curious children of an air self-defense F-15 pilot (MOD, 2015). The animated character narrates how the SDF role should be understood as a promoter of global stability and protector of Japan and warns of misunderstandings about the SDF (i.e., that it is invading other nations) while also instructing on the meaning of security concepts like 'deterrence' and the importance of it in 'discouraging others from fighting' (MOD YouTube, 2015). In addition to this series, since 2006, the Ministry of Defense has published a 'manga style' version of its annual *Defense of Japan* white paper (MOD, 2019a). In 2017, they published the first English version of the manga (MOD, 2019b).

Following terrorist attacks on Japanese citizens in Syria in 2015 and in Bangladesh in 2016, a MOFA official came up with the idea to deploy an assassin character from bestselling manga *Golgo 13: The Professional* (first published in 1968) to teach the Japanese public about safety when abroad

(MOFA, 2017). First deployed in a 2016 government manual on overseas safety, *Golgo 13* advises on the importance of using the overseas travel registry and remembering the three core safety principles – ‘blend in, stay unpredictable and be watchful at all times’. Then, in 2018, *Golgo* took on an animated role to raise the awareness among small and medium Japanese businesses abroad about measures to protect from terrorist attacks (MOFA, 2018d). The 13-episode series of animated videos features interactions between fictitious Foreign Minister Takakura (voiced over by former Foreign Minister Tarō Konō) and is broadcasted on the MOFA YouTube channel as well as on Japanese airline carriers.

Concerning public relations about development assistance, MOFA has been broadcasting TV programs to raise Japanese people’s awareness since 1993, focusing on how Japanese assistance programs ‘bring smiles to the faces of people around the world’ (MOFA 2018b, p. 155). According to a MOFA official working with development assistance, over the years, the section of the Ministry’s International Collaboration Bureau that is in charge of public outreach evaluated different options of how to best communicate about Japanese ODA to the public and landed on using celebrities, pop stars and comedians to relay the messages (Interview 2). This led to collaborations (*collabo*) with famous figures such as entertainer Pikotaro for promoting public-private cooperation on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (MOFA YouTube, 2017), Japanese comedy duo Oriental Radio and, most recently, ODA-man.

On the hunt for more powerful disseminations and a stronger impact on public opinion, for MOFA the Japanese visual culture and its multitude of characters and aesthetic expressions are sensible choices within the Japanese cultural context. As I will demonstrate below, ODA-man is innovative yet well-within the government’s use of visual popular culture, construction of narratives, use of commonplaces and expression of cultural heritage. In other words, while exploiting manga and anime as media for public promotion is readily available in the Japanese government’s repertoire, the production of ODA-man represents a cultural innovation, in the sense that the combination of existing symbols and narratives constituted a new strategy for MOFA in their attempt to increase the legitimacy of development assistance. In regimes with relatively stable governments, such as Japan, ‘strong, flexible repertoires prevail’ and ‘contenders experiment constantly with new forms in the search for tactical advantage, but do so in small ways, at the edge of well-established actions’ (Tilly, 2006, p. 43). In this sense, MOFA works within the realm of what is known but innovates with new representations; MOFA officials created ODA-man as an innovation within a well-rehearsed part of Japan’s foreign policy repertoire.

The making of ODA-man: who, when, why and how?

ODA-man first came about because of a lack of public understanding of 'the significance, purpose, and importance of ODA programs' (MOFA, 2018a). As one MOFA official explained, since development assistance programs are generated by valuable Japanese taxpayer yen, the public not understanding or showing interest in ODA creates a long-term challenge for MOFA (Interview 7). In my discussions with policy elites and academics, ministry officials, aid practitioners and ODA-man's creator, it was often remarked that the Japanese public does not know about ODA (Interview 2; Interview 3; Interview 4; Interview 5) or 'may have heard the acronym but does not understand it' (Interview 7; Interview 8). However, one official also caveated that 'the Japanese do not care' and that public awareness and opinion may not actually play such a significant role in influencing the amount of ODA (Interview 7). Similarly, an informant working for JICA described public opinion as 'negligible' and argued that the Japanese government had a 'free hand' in decisionmaking, and considering this it is a 'kind of paradox' that they created ODA-man in the first place (Interview 4).

Japanese public opinion towards ODA is tracked by the annual Public Opinion Poll on Diplomacy (*Gaikō ni kan suru yoron chōsa*), conducted annually since 1977 by MOFA in cooperation with the Cabinet Office. Extant research studying the poll results suggests that public opinion does indeed influence Japan's development assistance policy and that in recent years development cooperation is more explicitly linked to 'national interests' (Ando, 2019; Midford, 2017). As Midford (2017) demonstrates, the Japanese public's understanding of China as a rising threat has allowed for more security-linked development assistance, including cooperation with foreign militaries, but Japanese public opinion has also limited the scope of changes.

While it may be questionable whether MOFA needs to increase the public support levels for ODA in the short-term, it is hard to see how Japan can sustain costly foreign policy instruments without sufficient interest and understanding among its populace in the long-term. For many years the Ministry used 'serious explanations' when government officials would communicate about ODA but ordinary people did not respond positively to this approach (Interview 7). Therefore, ODA-man was 'appointed' by then Foreign Minister Tarō Konō 'to deepen public interest in and understanding of ODA' and 'to contribute to the public understanding of the significance of implementing ODA programs' (MOFA, 2018a). According to one MOFA official, ODA-man was selected as a finalist among the approximately five submissions to a Ministry tender because he has 'a soft, familiar way of telling about ODA ... Japanese people do not want to know about ODA but

MOFA wants to teach them' (Interview 7). Although some of the competing submissions were popular, there was concern that they could invoke gender issues or be sensitive and there was reportedly a personal penchant and connection for ODA-man among one of the Ministry's Senior Officials, which influenced the ultimate decision (Interview 7). Officials tasked with the promotion of Japan's ODA explained that ODA-man was a good candidate because 'his humor is very comfortable— he uses *gyagu* (jokes)' and this is effective to access those who do not know about ODA (Interview 7). Another official explained the cross-generational affect of ODA-man since he 'has strong power to approach the children' and that this is important because 'ODA's future is a problem for all developed countries—it is similar to the aging problem' (Interview 2).

In an interview with ODA-man creator, Ryo Ono (AKA FROGMAN), it was revealed that ODA-man serves as a medium to communicate what the foreign ministry cannot (Interview 8). For instance, discussions about national interest (*kokueki*) and its relation to ODA are considered sensitive and so 'MOFA cannot send the message that ODA is for national interest and they cannot focus on the merits for Japan' (Interview 8). However, as Ono explained, ODA-man can say what MOFA cannot since he is considered the '3rd staff' (*daisanshokuin*) and not a ministry employee (Interview 8). Citing examples such as energy and resources that Japan is import-reliant on, Ono explained that through easy-to-understand and humorous stories ODA-man demonstrates how Japan benefits from ODA domestically. He admits that prior to the project he himself questioned 'the need of ODA' considering Japan's societal challenges, particularly its status as 'a low-birthrate and aging society' (*shōshikōreishakai*) that has experienced prolonged 'economic stagnation' (*fukeiki*) (Interview 8).

Inspired by British and American versions of superheroes like Batman and Superman, creator Ono came up with ODA-man as a way to communicate to both adults and children. Ono described initially associating the ODA acronym to a 'businesslike' (*kaigiteki*) term and so, once hired by the ministry, he set out on a mission to create a character who would have a high 'favorability rating' (*nattokukan*) among the Japanese public and would 'help children understand the words of ODA' (Interview 8). ODA-man was already partially familiar to the Japanese public since he is a rebranded version of the popular Japanese anime character Yoshida-san, a lead protagonist in the flash anime series *Secret Society Eagle Talon* (*Himitsu Kessha Taka no Tsume*), created in 2006. The anime tells the story of a Tokyo-based secret society that is set on world domination but deviates from a typical plot in that the series' protagonists are the evil villains while the superhero nemesis is a secondary character portrayed as a narcissistic, poorly-tempered, inept tyrant who nevertheless successfully foils the society's

plans of world dominance. ODA-man's character influence, Yoshida-san, is a kind-hearted 24-year-old Lieutenant who exhibits childlike tendencies and a child's voice despite his age. Chancellor, the Society's 55-year-old founder who is also featured in the ODA-man manga and anime, has conflicting aspirations to both conquer the world and to achieve world peace. Though second-in-command, Yoshida-san often causes the Society's takeover plans to fail. The characters are well-known and recognizable in Japan among adults and children after a successful series that was broadcasted on NHK, Japan's national television station. They are also continuously featured in a number of Japanese companies' promotion of their products and services (Interview 8). In 2020, *Secrety Society* characters collaborated with Japan's National Policy Agency on a public awareness campaign about cybercrimes, featuring a series of short videos informing about issues such as ticket fraud and phishing (Taka no tsume, 2020).

Deploying ODA-man

A major part of the Japanese bureaucrat's work is to go to great lengths to orchestrate the logistical minutiae around the launching of new policies or international events. The deployment of ODA-man into the public sphere was no exception and involved a succession of well-orchestrated events led by the Foreign Ministry's International Cooperation Bureau. MOFA secretariats and bureaus are often assembled for and tasked with dealing with the many details, activities and communications for large-scale multilateral meetings to be held in Japan, such as the G20 or APEC. Therefore, the calculated debut of ODA-man over a one-week period in September 2018 is not surprising but rather an example of the detail given to public relations in the Japanese foreign ministry.⁴ Then Foreign Minister Kōno was the first to introduce ODA-man when he announced that the famous character Yoshida-san had been appointed as ODA-man in a MOFA Press Conference on 21 September 2018. On the same day, the Ministry started broadcasting five 2-minute anime videos featuring ODA-man on Tokyo Metro subway cars, the MOFA YouTube channel and on BS broadcasting television. The Tokyo metro broadcasting was short-lived due to exorbitant costs (author conversation with then Foreign Minister Kōno), however posters featuring ODA-man were mounted around the Kasumigaseki metro station and also featured in the Ministry's reception area.⁵ An internal MOFA-wide e-mail was reportedly sent out to inform of the public relations campaign and to instruct employees on how to promote it (author conversation with MOFA diplomat). The business cards of the Foreign Minister and some Foreign Ministry staff also began to feature a small ODA-man mascot. Usually such business card mascots are reserved for the promotion of larger international

events to be hosted by Japan (i.e., Tokyo Olympics, G7, G20, TICAD, APEC) and thus the use of ODA-man on the business cards demonstrates the high level of importance placed on the campaign. On 29 September 2018, ODA-man made his major public debut at *Global Festa* as one of the festival's main public entertainment features. From December 2018, ODA-man was promoted by Japanese embassies and JICA through social media channels such as Twitter and Facebook. At a March 2019 Ministry press conference, then Foreign Minister Konō announced that he had just started wearing an ODA-man badge and wanted to publicize that the character was created 'to make ODA easy to understand for all citizens' and that he wanted ODA-man 'to firmly be an explanation of the significance of ODA and more' (MOFA, 2019a). In May 2019, MOFA created a Twitter account dedicated to ODA and public relations that prominently features ODA-man (see MOFA Twitter ODA, 2019). At the August 2019 Kasumigaseki children's viewing day, MOFA promoted ODA-man to Japanese youngsters through quiz and coloring activities. Then in September 2019, ODA-man made a courtesy call to then Foreign Minister Konō to update him on his activities and on how many people had watched his YouTube videos (MOFA YouTube, 2019). Continuing his duties, ODA-man revisited the *Global Festa* 2019 stage to promote his new online ODA simulation game and second series of reports (see see Taka no tsume, 2019). In 2019 and 2020, ODA-man also held a number of 'business trip classes' at schools, universities and museums around Japan to educate about the importance of ODA for Japan and the world.

Although ODA-man's physical deployment into the public sphere was meticulously planned and scripted by his makers, my concern here is not to identify whether MOFA's legitimation attempt was successful or not. Instead, I exploit the ethnographic material to analyze the deployment of ODA-man at *Global Festa* as a unique (yet familiar to a Japanese audience) performance indicating how the Japanese government promotes its foreign policy instruments to a domestic audience.

Legitimizing ODA through performance: ODA-man at Global Festa

ODA-man's inaugural appearance at the *Global Festa* in 2018 had several performative aspects. First, the appearance created a theatrical space where performers – ODA-man and his promoters – followed a script and presented a dramaturgical representation of life. Second, it was a type of cultural communication that attempted to reinvigorate the idea of ODA as a foreign policy instrument that has positive effects for the world and Japanese society through joviality and an emphasis on win-win situations. In his 30-minute debut performance, ODA-man bobbed around center

stage explaining 'ODA means official development assistance ... with ODA the Japanese government supports many countries' and loudly proclaiming 'ODA, me and you love it!'. The anime-videos featuring ODA-man's various global excursions were played with guiding commentary about their meaning and creation, breaking it down for the audience. As I show below, ODA man's speech connected to collective representations of Japan and the external world, expressed through powerful narratives and commonplaces. Third, ODA-man's performance can be likened to that of a ritual, reflecting 'the social structures and cultures of their historically situated societies' (Alexander, 2006, p. 38). Representing an archetypical Japanese performance setting with attention to detail, a stage, microphones and a script⁶, ODA-man characters are deeply engaged in rehearsed sociodramatic work; they are emotive and energetic but also pedagogic and likeable. Though ODA-man travels to far-away, unknown places to carry out risky work, he preemptively pilots the audience's concerns by guiding them and posing rhetorical questions. Socialization into such performances provides a degree of familiarity with its ritual-like situation, contributing to making it seem like a safe and innocuous learning space. Moreover, the characters' playful wielding of powerful, embedded cultural codes, such as respect and humility, benevolence and forbearance, makes them both relatable and likeable to the audience. Fourth, the symbolic intensity of the display of a character on stage, familiar to many as Yoshida-san from the popular anime, wobbling around, cast together with the Chancellor, was based in simplified and repeated cognitive frames (Goffman, 1974). Although the character himself was perhaps not familiar to everyone in the audience, the very use of the cultural heritage of visual productions, attempted to connect the audience to the theatrical performances on stage.

Moreover, the ritual-like performance made use of signs, symbols and speech acts. True to his animated image, ODA-man displayed a permanent frown and sported active attire (helmet on head, shovel in backpack) while educating about ODA origins, offering tips for remembering the ODA-acronym and playfully teasing his counterpart character Chancellor for his ignorance about the important policy. The performance's mundane material objects, such as a helmet, shovel and backpack, are effectively vehicles for symbolic production in that they 'serve as iconic representations to help them dramatize and make vivid the invisible motives and morals they are trying to represent' (Alexander, 2006, p. 35). The performance's 'standardized expressive equipment' (Goffman, 1956, p. 34–51) involved a 'setting' (scenic parts) and 'personal front' (i.e., size and looks, posture, speech patterns, facial expressions, bodily gestures), with both suggesting that ODA-man is engaging in physical and taxing work of great importance for Japan and the world.

The transmission of ODA-man's onstage performance was guided by two interlocutors: creator Ryo Ono and a Director-level MOFA official (see MOFA YouTube, 2018b for video of performance). Ono, script in hand, reflected on recreating his famous character Yoshida-san into ODA-man, describing the project as a transformative experience where he too deepened his knowledge about ODA. The MOFA Director provided additional narration in an attempt to fuse the audience interest and the Ministry's public relations objectives. He bluntly suggested that ODA may be something that those in the audience do not relate to in their daily life but this is because 'this is a policy that you probably do not know about'. Giving simplistic examples of protecting Japanese nationals from dangerous security situations, such as terrorism, when traveling abroad and promoting Japanese business through ODA he presented arguments for why Japan's ODA is needed. Moreover, he described ODA policy as a way to activate a number of other policies established by the Abe administration, namely the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision (see Yennie Lindgren, 2019) and the promotion of SDGs.

Following his onstage debut, ODA-man continued performing as he trudged through the muddy festival grounds with his signature clumsy gait, mingling and taking selfies with festival attendees while flanked by MOFA officials (see MOFA Facebook, 2018 for video). Reminiscent of a Disney character or a sports mascot on the sidelines of an American basketball game tasked with riling up the crowd and getting them to cheer, ODA-man performed alphabetic O-D-A hand gestures (see MOFA YouTube, 2018b for video) and joked with the crowd while commiserating that ODA might be hard to understand, but reminding that he was there to help make it easier.

The symbolic production of Japanese ODA: global excursions with ODA-man

ODA-man's in-person physical performances at *Global Festa* correspond to the symbolic production of his animated and textual products. With his 'clear explanations' communicated through the short anime series and a corresponding mini cartoon booklet, ODA-man embarks on exciting excursions, explaining along the way the significance of using Japanese taxpayers' money to support foreign countries. His engagement in dramatic social action is epitomized by 'the ensemble of physical and verbal gestures that constitute performance' (Alexander, 2011, p. 36). In the anime series and cartoons, ODA-man attempts to raise public awareness and interest in his missions to four faraway places, which MOFA carefully selected in an attempt to challenge the 'narrow understanding of ODA' by demonstrating

that there are many kinds of ODA, including: industry, human capacity, policy assistance, infrastructure (Interview 7, see for MOFA, 2019d for figures of ODA-man performing in different contexts concerning maritime safety, education, infrastructure development and capacity building). ODA-man first travels to Southeast Asia to discuss maritime security, combat piracy and support Coast Guard capacity building. He then travels to Kenya to highlight Japanese mathematics and science education initiatives that also promote Japanese businesses abroad. Next, he goes to Turkey to visit Japanese infrastructure projects such as the speedy Marmaray subway that travels under the Bosphorus strait. Finally, ODA-man treks to Peru to showcase the six fire trucks and four ambulances that Japan has provided for emergency assistance, along with capacity building programs on to use them.

Each one of ODA-man's four global excursions begin with him expressing 'let's go ODA-man' and warning 'you often hear it but don't understand what it means but ODA-man will explain it for you!' ODA-man is scholastic in a soft and engaging way as he jokes with puns and play-on-words: 'People often read ODA as "oda" but it is not Oda as in Oda Nobunaga [famous Japanese feudal lord], it is O-D-A!' ODA-man pedagogically spells out the ODA acronym in different ways to make it a more memorable mnemonic: 'O-omoshiroku! D-dokomademo! A-areshimashō!', meaning 'O-interesting! D-anywhere (to the ends of the earth)! A-let's do that!' (MOFA YouTube, 2018a). ODA-man is plucky, maladroit and memorable as he waves his arms in the air to spell out O-D-A. His performance can be described in contrasts: goofy yet gregarious, clumsy yet determined and childish yet knowledgeable. Paradoxically, his affable qualities provide a seemingly innocuous medium for smooth communication and legitimation attempts of one of Japan's most calculated and important foreign policy instruments.

Shaping and reproducing the boundaries of Japan and the external world with ODA-man

A number of components of the ODA-man campaign shape and reproduce the boundaries of Japan, its foreign policy repertoire and the external world. This shaping involves filling the commonplaces – Japan and the external world – with specific meaning. Here, commonplaces are understood to exist within larger narratives, and the shaping of narratives can be done by filling the commonplaces with meaning, but also by adjusting narratives in other ways. The rhetorical strategies employed by MOFA in the ODA-man campaign are part of a continuous struggle to dominate the public narratives specifically about development assistance, but also about government policy and practice more generally. The ability to shape and sustain the dominant

narrative translates into making the foreign policy instrument of ODA more sustainable among the Japanese public and in the long-term.

The external world is a complex place, so is Japan, and manga and anime of a Japanese character are needed to reduce the complexity into manageable proportions, in effect making reductionist narratives unavoidable. However, that the use of scarce resources on this particular campaign has been the object of scrutiny, discussions, and careful selection by MOFA's bureaucrats means that the campaign is a window into both how this important institution publicly promotes its foreign policy instruments, as well as what narratives and commonplaces official MOFA campaigns subscribe to and engage with. In my analysis, I have identified four rhetorical strategies that the ODA-man campaign employs to contour the boundaries and relationships between Japan and the external world in the public narratives fed to the Japanese polity.

The first strategy argues that *Japan was a postwar beneficiary of development assistance, now it is a developed country that should help others*. Here, ODA-man fills the commonplace of 'Japan' with familiar arguments relating to the country's miraculous growth in the postwar era and its benevolence in promoting a safer world and human dignity. In the 'prologue' video of the anime series, ODA-man chastises his leader for his lack of knowledge about 'the very important mechanism' that is ODA and offers a telling that centers largely around a normative imperative: that it is now Japan's turn to contribute after being a recipient of aid itself (MOFA YouTube, 2018a, all narrative quotes in this section from this source). Referring to the World Bank loans that Japan received from 1953 to 1966 to finance fundamental national industries such as electric power, transportation, water and infrastructure, ODA-man attributes this aid to crucial development; because of the assistance, transportation infrastructure such as the Tokaido Shinkansen high-speed rail and the Tokyo-Nagoya expressway were able to be built, and this contributed greatly to fostering Japan's economic recovery. Narrating in an authoritative yet juvenile voice, ODA-man explains that it is thanks to the ODA from other countries that 'postwar Japan in its state of devastation was able to rebuild at an astounding pace' and that 'we Japanese will never forget that kindness'. As an animated image of a Christ-like deity thanks the world in the background, ODA-man rhetorically asks, 'this time, we are the ones that are able to serve the world, as humans isn't it natural to do so?' He conveniently contours snippets of the postwar economic narrative to emphasize the beneficial aspects of Japan's assistance for the world and Japan, reminding of its reciprocity and commitment to international peace. Japan's normative imperative to help out is reiterated in later episodes with statements such as 'Our postwar recovery was assisted by the large amount of support from foreign countries' and 'Once, in Japan too, support from the

world made it possible for many businesses to be established! This time Japan is on the side that is supporting the world!

The idea of Japan paying it forward is rooted in Japan's economic narrative about its own past and pride in its identity as a non-Western donor who has the 'dual experience' as a recipient and donor (Asplund & Söderberg, 2017). This relates to an idea that constitutes one of the fundamental parts of Japanese identity: that Japan is a unique nation that qualifies as neither the West nor the East. The *Nihonjinron* centered around Japan's quintessence reinforced this idea which dates back to the Meiji period, but also survived WWII (Kawamura, 1980). As a central postwar foreign policy instrument, ODA was intrinsic to both Japan's national reconstruction and to making allies in the Southeast Asia where decades of imperialism and the Japan-led bloc-mentality under the Greater East-Asia Co-prosperity Sphere left heavy scars. ODA-man's storytelling is void of direct engagement with criticism of Japanese development assistance model but he indirectly addresses the criticism by reiterating what Japan *does*. In his storytelling, he emphasizes Japan's capacity to change (with its unique experience as neither part of the West nor the East, as an economic locomotive in East Asia and as an economic phoenix after WWII) but also a normative imperative to do so.

The second rhetorical strategy contends that *Japan is a security and peace protector in a dangerous world*. Here, it is suggested that Japan is facing a precarious regional security environment that comes to life in the ODA-man episode that takes him to the Association of East Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries to fight evil, defend security and promote peace. One of the centerpieces of contemporary Japanese security policy is maritime security as there is a sense of an increasingly precarious situation on the seas of East Asia, especially due to Chinese unilateral actions in the South and East China Seas. From the onset of his second administration in December 2012, Prime Minister Abe has put great economic and human resources into the promotion of a rules-based maritime order and emphasized Japan's responsibility to do this as 'one of the oldest sea-faring democracies in Asia' (Abe, 2012) and as a promoter of peace. Maritime security is also the focus of seminal policy documents, such as the 2018 National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) and the 2018 Third Basic Plan on Ocean Policy. Accordingly, ODA-man's messages about the dangerous world out there and Japan's task to protect from it echo the dominant security narrative of a hazardous maritime space.

ODA-man describes the maritime region around Southeast Asia as 'very troubled by frequent incidents of piracy and the appearance of suspicious ships, as well as poaching, and pedagogically explains that 'Japanese ODA is supporting these countries in the area of the Coast Guard' to address this. Here, he refers to JICA programs where the Japanese Coast Guard (JCG) has

expanded its role to provide access to the monetary and physical resources needed to enhance the maritime capacity of a number of Southeast Asian nations, including Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia and Vietnam. In addition to providing hard equipment, such as patrol boats, JCG has been sharing the technical know-how, conducting joint training programs and reinforcing counterpiracy operations with counterpart Coast Guards in Southeast Asia. Explaining that 'in order to keep the world safe, we need to learn many things' ODA-man lists the contents of Japan's capacity building programs as examples: maritime law training, training for making sea charts performing hydrographic surveys and oil spill support training. ODA-man caveats, 'it is not only about training!' and that Japan also helps by providing patrol boats and supporting the construction of coastal monitoring radar systems. However, critically assessing the role of the JCG in Japan's development activities requires going beyond the limited narrative provided by ODA man. As one informant working at JICA divulged, 'JCG activities have become more sensitive because they became more visible. Japan had to ask the countries to create coast guards so that they could receive ODA ... but these are really navies in disguise! ...and the training is absolutely needed!' (Interview 4). Given their geographic locations, the ASEAN states are all understood to be allies in promoting free and safe passage in international waters. They are located in close proximity to sea lines of communication (SLOCs), such as the Straits of Malacca, that are vital to Japanese national interests and productivity.

Adhering to the dominant security narrative of a precarious maritime domain epitomized by piracy, illegal activities and incursions by mysterious vessels, ODA-man presents Japan as a generous, knowledgeable and experienced mentor who can help others based on its own experience with, for instance, 'ghost ships' from North Korea off of the coast of Japan or illegal fishing incidents and incursions into Japan's territorial waters, especially in disputed areas in the East China Sea. This is the same aspect discussed in the first rhetorical strategy where Japan is presented as a benevolent contributor to the greater good.

The third rhetorical strategy maintains that *Japan is a maritime country that is dependent on the rest of the world for its survival*. In response to his rhetorical question of why Japan provides support to ASEAN states, ODA-man quips, 'Because, as you know, Japan is a maritime state!' and goes on to explain the trickle-down effect of Japanese actions. He reminds that Japan's national resources and food are largely imported and transported to the island nation by using sea routes and that this support ensures the safety of such routes; 'it is precisely a lifeline (*seimeisen*)', exclaims ODA-man. 'Maritime safety is the foundation of a high quality of life!' Here, ODA-man tags onto the identity discourse sign of Japan being a 'maritime state'

(*kaiyō kokka*⁷), reproducing and strengthening it. This discourse sign has been activated in a number of other foreign policy arenas, but especially in statements regarding territorial disputes, maritime security and the protection of the oceans (see Yennie Lindgren, 2019; Yennie Lindgren & Lindgren, 2017). It is used by ODA-man in his justification for why Japanese taxpayers are putting precious resources into capacity building programs for the ASEAN countries. Elsewhere, Tamaki (2015) has shown how Japanese discourses reify specific narratives about East Asia; while Northeast Asia continues to be reproduced as a security threat to the Japanese nation, Southeast Asia is constructed as an area of economic cooperation and opportunity. While ODA-man does not deny the economic opportunities and resource access that development assistance allows for, his narrative clearly presents maritime activities taking place in Southeast Asia as a threat to security. It is within this fundamental security narrative of a dangerous world that ODA-man narrates; by engaging in overseas development aid, the Japanese government is reducing the hazards of the external world. Before the ASEAN episode closes, in a high-pitched squeal ODA-man declares another 'WIN-WIN!' situation where both Japan and the ASEAN countries benefit from ODA programs to keep the maritime realm safe and secure. On the sideline, Chancellor affirms that he now understands why this is important, also declaring it as mutually beneficial cooperation.

The final rhetorical strategy claims that *Japan is an innovative donor and beneficiary of its own ODA*. Rhetorically, this strategy is employed through positive-sums about how Japan also 'wins' by doing aid. While it has been shown earlier that Japan exhibits both the capability and the moral imperative to support other countries, for those who are still not convinced, this positive-sums adds the argument that ODA is beneficial for Japan too. For instance, on his excursion to Kenya, ODA-man explains that main imports from Kenya to Japan are popular consumer product such as coffee, tea, spices, processed foods, cut flowers and mackerel. Though Kenya's main industry is agriculture, ODA-man explains that 'compared to other African countries Kenya is a country where industrialization is advanced'. Despite this, Japan is still providing ODA in the form of support for math and science education since 'infrastructure maintenance supporting life is also important!' and 'the key to development is education!', as ODA-man enthusiastically exclaims. This development program is also illustrated as beneficial to Japan since it fosters business by using the education products of Japanese private companies: 'in their (Kenyan schoolchildren's) daily life we can teach scientific logic with our teaching materials!' ODA-man beams and then reminds that this business potential is not limited to Kenya but can extend all over the world. Chancellor chimes in, reifying collective Japan with his remark 'Japan's public and private cooperation is supporting the future of other countries! It is surely Team Japan!'

An additional example of Japan as an innovative and benevolent donor is found in the episode about Japan providing transportation infrastructure support to Turkey. In this excursion, ODA-man explains that Japan has provided Turkey with an underground railway in 2013. Chancellor lauds this project as 'amazing!' while revealing a time reduction of 30 minutes to four minutes for crossing the Bosphorus strait. In doing so Japan is using its innovative technology in helping 'troubled people' and ODA-man reasons that this is the reason/logic (*douri*) of humanity. This implies Japan's role as a benevolent and innovative provider of public goods, as Chancellor expresses 'if everyone connected to each other through congratulations *and* gratitude the world would be peaceful!'

Yet another illustration of Japan's WIN-WIN aid surfaces in ODA-man's telling of Japan's aid provisions to Peru, specifically recycled ambulances and fire trucks. ODA-man explains that Japan's 'excellent' fire trucks can prevent fire expansion and the ambulances can help with 'smooth' emergency response in the country where earthquakes and other natural disasters happen. It moreover strengthens the organization of firefighters and emergency response through capacity building. 'It's amazing, isn't it?' (*sugoi desho?*), ODA-man rhetorically asks. Japan's assistance activities in Peru are deemed an 'eco WIN-WIN!' since they reuse resources that have 'retired' in Japan but can still be 'precious' in developing countries like Peru. 'Don't put things to waste!' ODA-man advises.

Each of these four rhetorical strategies work to shape and reproduce commonsensical meanings about Japan, its past and present, and the external world. The main dichotomy among them is moral imperative versus beneficial to Japan. This dichotomy and the way that ODA-man engages with it demonstrates that current MOFA campaigns transcend the historical distinction between MOFA's aid as a humanitarian donor and then Ministry of International Trade and Industry's⁸ aid for economic growth 'discourses' of the past (Hook & Zhang, 1998). The roaming between self-interests and normative imperatives blurs the presence of distinct differences between the two discourses and signals instead the evolution of a dual legitimation strategy of Japanese ODA (if the normative imperative fails to persuade the public, maybe a positive-sum narrative will?). Furthermore, ODA-man shapes the meaning of central commonplaces in the dominant security and economic narratives. Specifically, 'Japan' and 'the world' are constantly rendered in certain ways, challenging and supporting the dominant narratives (see Lindgren and Yennie Lindgren, 2019). Ultimately, ODA-man should be understood as a new and innovative instrument, yet one that is deeply embedded in the broader Japanese cultural context and foreign policy repertoire. The reason ODA-man works is because he is *not just* ODA-man; he embodies various aspects of Japan's repertoire, getting to the configurational aspects of it as well.

Conclusion

This article studied the implementation of ODA-man – a public legitimization campaign to shape the meaning and legitimacy of development aid in Japanese society. Although the campaign was solely directed at a domestic audience, the ultimate objective of increasing the Japanese public's understanding of and support for ODA meant that by design it was an instrument in Japan's foreign policy repertoire. Seen from this perspective, MOFA's strategic *choice* of innovating within its foreign policy repertoire oriented towards public legitimization domestically and the specific *execution* of the instrument of ODA-man represent power-political processes, whereby a state evaluates its instruments at hand and deploys what it deems to be most strategic or likely to succeed.

ODA is one of the key instruments, perhaps the most important, in Japan's foreign policy repertoire. Since the return of the Abe administration in 2012, competition with China and the push to strengthen economic, political and security ties in the Indo-Pacific region has only expanded. At the same time, demographic and financial challenges at home have put expensive foreign policies into question. What is less obvious is why a benign, goofy and childish cartoon campaign is seen as the optimal answer to MOFA's challenge to generate public attention to and support for ODA.

The specific implementation of a cartoon character for public support of foreign policies only makes sense by applying a cultural repertoire analysis of what is familiar territory to the producers (MOFA) and the audience (the Japanese public). While using a cartoon character to communicate urgent foreign policy messages and to muster public approval is unthinkable in most parts of the world, in Japan it remains a common cultural medium. As Tilly (2006) contended, actors in collectives draw upon what is known to them and, given this, innovation takes place as incremental modifications of existing frameworks more than completely new activities. The ODA-man campaign was, as such, innovative yet within the boundaries of familiar terrain. By situating the creation of ODA-man within the massive Japanese 'cultural industry complex', MOFA's deliberate choice to promote its development aid in this specific form becomes more comprehensible.

As empirically illustrated in this article, ODA-man has partaken in the power struggle to legitimize the Japanese government's development assistance policy as a meaningful and acceptable use of scarce national resources. Though he comes off as goofy and childish in his performances, ODA-man's messages about the world, Japan and development assistance are serious ones that reproduce dominant economic and security narratives about Japan and the (dangerous) external world, ODA's role in Japan's industrialization, and the duality of self-interest and normative underpinnings of Japan's ODA activities. As a medium for public promotion, ODA-man

offers a ‘one-way monologue’ towards the Japanese domestic audience and is an example of the internal mobilization of repertoires, illustrating that claimsmaking is not just a matter of inter-state affairs but also concerns the domestic arena. Taken together, the performance and rhetorical analyses in the article point to both innovation and path dependency in Japan’s foreign policy repertoire: while ODA-man may be new, the story he is telling, and the way that he is performing it, is very much familiar.

Interview list

1. Official, MOFA Japan, 2018
2. Official, MOFA Japan, 2018
3. Professor, University sector and JICA affiliate, 2018
4. Researcher, JICA, 2018
5. Security policy expert, University sector and Government Committees, 2019
6. Researcher, University sector and JICA affiliate, 2019
7. Official, MOFA Japan, 2019
8. Ryo Ono, ODA-man creator and animator, 2019

Notes

1. 60% of MOFA’s initial budget and 50% of its final budget was assigned to ODA (MOFA, 2019b). Japan’s overall ODA budget, which includes funds from 10 ministries and two agencies, totaled \$18.46 billion USD in 2017, a 9.8% increase from the previous year on a gross disbursement basis (MOFA, 2019c, p. 234; MOFA, 2018b). Among DAC members, Japan ranks third, after the U.S. and Germany.
2. Structural realism, for instance, treats politics itself as epiphenomenal, as systemic forces in international politics shape state actions (Waltz, 1979).
3. “Househusband” is meant as opposite of housewife (*shufu*), a common Japanese term. The manga is accessible on MOFA website at: <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/oda/ebook/odagirl/html5.html#page=1>
4. An example of routinized diplomatic practices, such as those illustrated in Neumann’s (2007) ethnographic account of speechwriting in the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Neumann describes the practice as an “identity building project, with the resulting text serving as an instantiation of the Ministry itself” (183).
5. For illustrations of MOFA’s promotional images of ODA-man, see MOFA (2019c), pp. 243–245; MOFA (2019d).
6. This performance setting and its detail is typical of seasonal festivals, university festivals and cultural festivals. in Japan.
7. The word *kokka* can be translated into nation, state and country. It is a combination of *kuni* (land, country) and *ie* (family), and most often referred to as ‘state’ in translation of official documents.
8. MITI, now part of METI (Ministry of Economy Trade and Industry).

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Notes on Contributor

Wrenn Yennie Lindgren is a Research Fellow at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) and an Associate Fellow at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI). She was also a 2018 Japan Foundation fellow at Meiji University and visiting researcher at Waseda University in Tokyo, Japan. Yennie Lindgren's research focuses on the politics and foreign policy of Japan, international relations in East Asia, East Asian states' interests in the Arctic, and traditional and non-traditional security issues in the Asia-Pacific region. Her work has been published in *Polar Geography*, *Asian Perspective*, *Asian Politics & Policy*, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, *Japanese Journal of Political Science* and *Journal of Eurasian Studies*. She co-edited the volume *China and Nordic Diplomacy* (Routledge, 2018) and contributed chapters on Japan to *Kinship in International Relations* (Routledge, 2018) and *The Routledge Handbook of Arctic Security* (2020).

ORCID

Wrenn Yennie Lindgren  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1293-2246>

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