



## Japan, the Ambiguous, and My Fragile, Complex and Evolving Self

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# Japan, the Ambiguous, and My Fragile, Complex and Evolving Self

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## ABSTRACT

This essay takes literature laureate Kenzaburo Oe's Nobel lecture from 1994, *Japan, the Ambiguous, and Myself*, as a point of departure for thinking about Japan, the ambiguous and how the already fragile and complex narrator that is *I* has evolved ambiguously over time in relation to a similarly ambiguous and changing imagination of Japan. Based on aikido practice—the narrator's gateway to Japan—the essay ends up proposing a different understanding of and approach to ambiguity to Oe's.

## KEYWORDS

Aikido; ambiguity; identity; Japan

Literature laureate Kenzaburo Oe started his 1994 Nobel lecture by narrating the memory of being a little boy in a remote wooded valley on Shikoku during the 'last catastrophic World War' (Oe 1995, 197). As I re-read the lecture, years after it was originally given, the romanticised image of the smallest of Japan's main islands made me recall my own beginnings. As a boy, I too felt as if I was surrounded by woods; but when I revisited my old neighbourhood in Stockholm's northern suburbs as a middle-aged man, I found mostly groves amid the worn concrete. Oe went on to talk about his infatuation with literature as a child, and how fellow literature laureate Selma Lagerlöf's *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* made him want to fly off with geese, just like Nils, to Scandinavia (1995, 109). I also enjoyed reading novels as a boy, but later found another pastime that attracted me more profoundly. At the age of 14, I became *imprinted* on *aikido*—a martial art from a remote country I knew little about: Japan.

I say 'imprinted', rather than 'became interested in', let alone 'fell in love with', because I immediately struggled to make sense of aikido and was ready to quit many times, only to be called back by my Swedish *sensei*, or teacher. Nor did I make the decision to practice aikido fully of my own volition. As a rather short, physically weak but precocious child, I was occasionally bullied by older and stronger boys and thought I needed to know *karate*, or how to hit and kick, in order to defend myself. However, as so often during my childhood, my father appealed to my better judgement. He recommended aikido, which he

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said nurtured ‘peaceful warriors’, having become fascinated by a book with those words in the title (Grönholm 1985). Without any deeper insights into the world of *budo*, I think he correctly worried that karate might be too violent: ‘We risk becoming what we practice’, he said. ‘Also, if you know karate well, you could end up seriously hurting someone by mistake’.

I later discovered that aikido is hardly a *martial* art at all but perhaps better described as a complicated art of movement. It appeared even more complicated and frustrating to me in the first few years because of the many arbitrary teachings and seemingly harmful practices to which I was exposed, and in which I participated. It did not help that I secretly wished to defeat the bullies, and soon began to worry that aikido might not be sufficient.

In his lecture, Oe expanded on what I think is the most intriguing term in its title: ‘the ambiguous’. The term he used in Japanese—*aimai na*—arguably has more negative connotations than ‘ambiguous’ in English. Oe described ambiguity as ‘a chronic disease that has been prevalent throughout the modern age’ in Japan (1995, 121). He portrayed it as a token of Japan’s conflicted nature, describing the country as ‘split between two opposite poles of ambiguity’ (Oe 1995, 117): between ‘the West’ and Asia; between the desire to modernise and to uphold traditional culture and values; between ambitions for material and spiritual prosperity; and, not least, between the seemingly conflicting aspirations to militarise and to uphold the pacifism that is inscribed in Japan’s post-war constitution (Oe 1995, 116–117). Oe lamented that the way Japan had tried to construct a modern state, modelled on an imagined West, had been ‘an arduous task’ that ‘sometimes brimmed with satisfaction’, but had already once ended in ‘disaster’ (1995, 123). He noted how: ‘The ambiguous orientation of Japan drove the country into the position of an invader in Asia, and resulted in its isolation from other Asian nations’ (Oe 1995, 117). Importantly, Oe expressed a fear that Japan’s ambiguous position and goals might once again entangle the country in military conflict.

As a 14-year-old boy, I was similarly conflicted between my wish to use violence against bullies, if necessary, and my father’s hope that my personality was more in line with that of a ‘peaceful warrior’. So I became imprinted on aikido when I was just a boy and as I returned home from the *dojo* after my first class, both overwhelmed and puzzled, I could not possibly have imagined the deep and lasting impact that the encounter would have on my life.

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In the lecture, Oe notes that his method of writing ‘has always been to start from personal matters and then to link them with society, the state, and the world in general’ (1995, 109). While this method is rather common for novelists and poets, it might seem less conventional, or even inappropriate, for a social scientist such as myself to adopt. Nonetheless, there has in recent years been a growing interest in autobiographical or auto-ethnographic methods in several academic disciplines. Brigg and Bleiker claim that despite all our other differences, we inevitably ‘serve as a type of “hub” through which the world becomes known’ (2010, 780). Inayatullah notes that in most research, ‘the supposed scientist only pretends to be absent’, and warns that attempts to approximate such absence can be ‘counterproductive, if not dangerous’, by distorting description and

skewing analysis (2011, 5). These and other forerunners have thus challenged us, their fellow researchers, to explore our personal experiences, and to connect them to broader cultural, social and political meanings and understandings.

The aim of this essay is to offer some autobiographical reflections on how Japan became a big part of my life through my encounter with aikido, and how I have ambiguously evolved alongside changing understandings of both, and indeed of ambiguity itself. Oe claimed to have suffered ‘continual hardships in different realms of life’ and specifically mentions ‘Japanese society’ (1995, 108). I cannot claim to have endured any real ‘hardships’ yet, but I have often found myself reflecting on my ‘special relationship’ with Japan and worrying that it has been jeopardised or even forfeited. As mentioned above, Oe saw ‘the ambiguous’ as something problematic that led Japan down the path of war and must be overcome in order to avoid repeating history. While I share Oe’s concerns, to the extent that they have shaped my research agenda in recent years, based on decades of aikido practice I have come to understand ‘ambiguity’ quite differently.

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I began to study Japanese right after my high school graduation in 1991. Having been certain for more than a decade that I wanted to be a journalist as an adult, and with only half a year to go before I had to join the Swedish Navy as a conscript, I figured I could do something just for fun for a few months. Yet studying Japanese was a much more arduous task than I had imagined, at least in the beginning. To learn the grammar and characters seemed to require a serious restructuring of my brain, which was frustrating and at times even painful.

I visited my grandparents after the first week of classes. Now that they are no longer with us, having passed away many years ago, I would do anything to spend a weekend in their company. Back then, however, I chose to spend the visit mostly in the company of my textbooks, trying to memorise both phonetic lettering systems, *hiragana* and *katakana*, around 100 characters overall. While pushing as hard as I could, I was hardly able to speak, write or understand anything by the time the term ended; but once again I had become *imprinted* and when I was demobbed from the Navy a year later, I returned to Japanese studies seemingly without making a clear choice of direction.

Mastering both aikido and Japanese soon became intertwined as my primary goal and I let nothing and no one distract me. I was hoping that each would provide me with privileged knowledge and perhaps a secret shortcut to the other. However, when I flew to Japan for the first time in the summer of 1993, for a month of intense aikido practice, I could just barely formulate simple questions, such as ‘how do I get to exit B23’, when getting lost around Shinjuku Station for many hours. Most of the time, I had no idea what the kind people who stopped to help were saying, so I had to ask again and again and again. There was a lot of ambiguity involved here too, if the term is understood in Oe’s sense, between my desire for understanding, or indeed certainty, and the reality of understanding very little.

When I returned to Japan as an exchange student in 1994, just months before Oe received his Nobel Prize, I was on a quest to learn Japanese around the clock, looking up and trying to memorise all the words I did not already know, and enmeshing myself in Japanese society as much as I could. On many occasions, I felt as if aspects

of societal grammar were hidden from me. At other times, the great hospitality of several Japanese families and all the fun I had in the company of other university students reassured me that I was on a path to understanding and perhaps even *becoming* Japanese. I wonder if my desire to understand and belong was enhanced by the fact that the Japan of the early 1990s was often idealised and mystified, by Japanese and non-Japanese alike, as ‘unique’, ‘an enigma’ and, indeed, ‘ambiguous’ (Dale 1986; Van Wolferen 1989; Befu 2001).

As we strolled through Shinjuku Station on our way to a cheap *shabushabu* restaurant in Kabukichō, watching bewildered foreigners carrying their suitcases just as I had done little more than a year earlier, my circle of Japanese friends and I laughed and said: ‘That *gaijin* [pejorative for “foreigner”] looks really lost!’ And when we met one of my Japanese teachers—a middle-aged Swedish man—in the Isetan department store, I just brimmed with satisfaction on hearing his broken Japanese.

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It is more than a little embarrassing to narrate my desire for knowledge and identity—or indeed certainty and status—in my late teens and early 20s but like all other methods, the autobiographical one is premised on a degree of honesty and self-reflexivity. Meanwhile, in his lecture Oe referred to the poems of Zen monks, most of which are said to revolve around the ‘*impossibility* of telling the truth’ (1995, 112, italics added). In the same vein, the goal of autobiographical writing is not necessarily to report accurately on events, but rather to reflect on how the narrator is positioned and positions himself or herself in the world.

On my return to my native Sweden after a year in Japan, I saw the country from the outside for the first time and noticed aspects I did not understand or particularly like. I feel nostalgic now that I recall the post offices of my childhood, where my grandmother used to work, because they are all but gone after 30 years of neoliberal policies. Having just returned from Japan in the autumn 1995, however, the lack of systematic queuing and the rudeness of the cashiers annoyed me tremendously: ‘This would never happen in Japan!’ I thought. In its idealised guise Japan remained closer to my heart and I engaged in vivid exchanges with dozens of Japanese friends.

When I went back to Japan for another student exchange two years later, however, I was unable to relive my experience of just a few years earlier. Although it was amazing to encounter my Japanese alter ego again, as ‘he’ ‘awoke’ at Narita Airport after two years of ‘sleep’, I found that ‘his’, or my, Japanese had deteriorated and feared that it would continue to do so as long as ‘we’ did not decide to live in Japan more or less permanently. But I also soon discovered that I did not want to live in Japan. Many of my friends from university had become *sarariiman*, or salaried workers, and the glimpses I got of their lives seemed to confirm common preconceptions about the arduous inequality and conformism of Japanese society. Japan did not strike me as the place where I wanted to become an adult, get a job and possibly raise a family. At the same time, I found that the Japanese aikido teacher, whose techniques I had practiced hard to learn during my previous stay, had left our aikido organisation, straying from the ‘way of peace and harmony’, as aikido is often translated, in favour of more violent *kobujutsu* or ‘old martial techniques’. For a few months I stayed in a dormitory in Seijō, just south-west of Tokyo’s city centre, close to where Oe used to live and, I think, still lives. I saw him

from a distance several times strolling around the area with his son as I rushed to the local train station on my way to Waseda University, and the packed trains that always seemed too cold in the summer and too hot in the winter.

I sprained a foot as I fell down the station stairs one day, and although it hurt and I was hurting, I could not quite let go of my dream of Japan. On gaining admittance to a PhD programme in political science in Sweden, I decided to problematise and challenge the notion of an enigmatic or puzzling Japanese foreign and security policy for my thesis. As I think about that research project now in the context of this essay, I wonder if it is possible that I wanted Japan to become more intelligible to me again. For a few years, I travelled back and forth—with my Japanese alter ego waking up at Narita Airport, but each time experiencing greater difficulty speaking and interacting with people, and each time feeling increasingly *less* Japanese.

When I rented a friend's house in another Tokyo suburb for a few months in 2000 to carry out fieldwork, I made another discovery that made my heart sink. After a festival, a close Japanese friend and I began to discuss history and politics. At one point she told me that there was no evidence that the Imperial Japanese army had systematically organised the sexual slavery of tens of thousands of women before and during the Second World War, and I countered that denial of past atrocities is punishable as a crime in many European countries. We argued back and forth the entire night, and when I returned to Sweden again she stopped returning my calls.

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The title of Oe's lecture, and by extension this essay, alludes to the Nobel lecture by the previous Japanese literature laureate, Yasunari Kawabata, back in 1968: 'Japan, the Beautiful, and Myself'. Oe explained that he could not share Kawabata's enthusiasm for the title and thus had to alter it (1995, 116). I interpret Oe as seeing Japan not just as beautiful, but as stuck between the potential beauty of pacifism, which strong political forces have continued to resist, and the ugliness of having waged wars of aggression—wars that he did not believe the Japanese people had sufficiently reflected on, and that therefore risk being repeated. Again, I interpret this as the gist of Japan's ambiguity for Oe.

Oe explained that Japan is a nation that 'was stampeded into "insanity in enthusiasm for destruction"' (1995, 116). He saw defeat in the Second World War as creating 'an opportunity for Japan, as the aggressor, to attempt a rebirth out of the great misery and suffering' to which it had subjected other people and also endured itself (Oe 1995, 118). Oe proclaimed his affinity with other post-war Japanese writers and their hope that Japan would seek 'with some humility reconciliation with the rest of the world' (Oe 1995, 118). This arguably resonates with the ambition of the late literature Professor Kazuo Watanabe, of whom Oe spoke fondly, and who 'had a lonely dream of grafting the humanistic view of man onto the traditional Japanese sense of beauty and sensitivity to nature, which fortunately had not been entirely eradicated'. Oe clarified that 'Watanabe's conception of beauty and nature was different from that of Kawabata' (1995, 123).

It occurs to me that the 'beautiful' in Kawabata's title may be more reminiscent of the 'beautiful' in the title of a book by Shinzo Abe, Japan's late former prime minister, *Towards a Beautiful Nation* (*Utsukushii kuni e*). Published in 2006, the book advocates discarding Article 9 of Japan's post-war Constitution, which is often seen as the core of the country's promise to implement pacifism. Abe complained that the constitution

had left Japan with a contradictory ‘military without war potential’ (*senryoku naki guntai*), which was unable to properly defend Japan (2006, 124). Pacifism had allegedly also damaged Japan’s standing, since other countries viewed Japan’s unwillingness to participate in upholding international security as ‘cunning’ (*zurui*) (Abe 2006, 142). To become a truly beautiful country, Abe concluded, Japan must revise the constitution and be ready to engage in collective self-defence, which would ‘not only enable the defence of Japan, but also contribute to the stability of Asia’ (2006, 133).

Although Abe had just barely been elected to the Diet for the first time in 1994, in his Nobel lecture, Oe criticised exactly the kind of arguments Abe would famously construct a decade later:

In recent years there have been criticisms leveled against Japan suggesting that it should offer more military support to the United Nations forces and thereby play a more active role in the keeping and restoration of peace in various parts of the world. Our hearts sink however when we hear these commitments. After the Second World War it was a categorical imperative for Japan to renounce war forever as a central article of the new constitution. The Japanese chose, after their painful experience, the principle of permanent peace as the moral basis for their rebirth (Oe 1995, 119).

Oe continued that ‘to remove the principle of permanent peace would be an act of betrayal of the people of Asia and the victims of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki’ (1995, 120). He seemed concerned that vocal calls for Japan to contribute more proactively and to take responsibility for international security commensurate with its economic capability were dishonest. In the background, he sensed ‘a popular feeling of support’ for the pre-war constitution, which he said, ‘in some quarters’ was ‘more substantial than mere nostalgia’ (Oe 1995, 120).

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After the heated discussion with my Japanese friend about whether the Imperial Japanese army had been involved in forced sexual slavery—a conversation I found both surreal and frightening—I began to see signs that several of my acquaintances in Tokyo were or had become conservatives and nationalists, and supporters of the likes of Shinzo Abe. When we met for drinks and food in smoky *izakayas*, or bars, our conversations were no longer just light and fun, and politics was in the air. This time I tried to think of these encounters as part of my fieldwork and steeled myself to listen and understand the logic of what I heard without offering the type of judgement that was spinning around in my head. Perhaps these experiences *were* part of my fieldwork, in the sense that they might have been provoked in part by the fact that I had become a political scientist who was now flying into Japan with the aim of deciphering Japan’s foreign and security policy.

My coming and going to Japan also unwittingly correlated with events that would become important in this policy area. In October 2002, I arrived at Narita Airport at almost the same time as five Japanese abductees, who had been permitted to leave North Korea having been kept captive there for decades. In the nationalist frenzy that I could see materialising on the television set in my small hotel room, a mixed bag of emotions seemed to become collectivised. I sensed anger and hostility directed at North Korea and its then leader, Kim Jong-il, for having tried to cover up the abductions for decades and for not releasing all the abductees even now; a degree of relief, joy and even pride that five abductees had finally been repatriated; sympathy with the abductees’



families, whose sorrow had been on public display for years; shame that the abductees had not been released earlier and that some remained captive; resolve that the five abductees should now remain in Japan, contrary to the Japanese government's deal with Pyongyang and their own expressed wishes at the time; and resentment vis-à-vis generations of Japanese politicians who had seemingly not taken the issue seriously enough. For some of my friends, and politicians like Abe, the issue soon became the ultimate argument for why Japan should revise its post-war constitution and remilitarise.

I sought to reformulate my qualms about my friends and their political convictions into more academic puzzles: Why is a North Korean threat often emphasised over a Chinese one in Japanese security debates? Moreover, why do many Japanese seem more preoccupied with the abduction issue than with the North Korean nuclear and missile issues? In fact, why do North Korean abductions of Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s seem to provide the ultimate argument for Japan's remilitarisation decades later? Finally, why are the Japanese government and people making so much fuss over some 17 abductees 20–30 years ago when Imperial Japan only a few decades earlier had forcefully removed and enslaved hundreds of thousands of Koreans, tens of thousands of whom died from exhaustion and lethal working conditions?

While conducting a series of interviews about Japan's North Korea policy in May 2008, I got to ask the last question in an interview with a prominent conservative Diet member from the Liberal Democratic Party. On hearing my question, the politician stood up quickly, his face turning red, and yelled his response, saliva spouting from his mouth: 'How do you think you would feel if Swedish citizens had been abducted by foreign agents?' While his question momentarily made me empathise and identify with Japan, once again, I was unable to share his emotional experience in-depth and over time.

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I tried to sharpen my understanding by imposing academic concepts, such as identity, emotion and narrative, but wonder if that just further estranged me from Japan. A closely related concept is 'ontological security', which sociologist Anthony Giddens defines as 'a sense of continuity and order in events' regarding self-identity (1991, 243), or 'biographical continuity' (1991, 53). The quest for ontological security, which psychological research construes as ongoing in individual and collective actors alike, can be likened to a pursuit of certainty and *unambiguous* identity and belonging.

It is no secret that I craved ontological security as a teenager and young adult, and I believe I shared this desire with many fellow students of aikido and Japanese. It turns out that the quest for ontological security is strong in Japan too. Perhaps unlike Oe, I have thus come to understand Japan's conffliction not as ambiguity, but as colliding agendas on how to get rid of ambiguities and make Japan *unambiguously* proud and 'beautiful'.

A similar conffliction and desire for certainty, by the way, can be seen in many other places, including my native Sweden at the time of writing. After Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and especially since its fully fledged war of invasion on Ukraine since 24 February 2022, the Swedish government and a majority of Swedes now want the country to seek refuge in the imagined West by joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Hagström 2022).

In his Nobel lecture, Oe professed more kinship with the Irish literature laureate W. B. Yeats, who received the Nobel Prize in 1923, than with Kawabata. Oe told how



the Irish Senate had proposed a motion to congratulate Yeats, which noted that ‘there will always be the danger that there will be a stampeding of people who are sufficiently removed from insanity in enthusiasm for destruction’ (1995, 115–116). There is indeed a risk that people might be stampeded in support of remilitarisation and away from the potentially more ambiguous policies of pacifism in Japan and non-alignment in Sweden. In a political climate where certainty is paramount, and no ambiguity can be tolerated, those who stray just a little from dominant security discourses themselves risk being securitised along with the enemy, as ‘patriots’ are demarcated from ‘traitors’ (Hagström 2021).

The inherent *insecurity* of all security assessments, and indeed of knowledge and identity, makes this hugely ironic. In both countries, as elsewhere, it seems that the challenge is how to think about self-defence without hurting others and without sowing the seeds of militarism. Indeed, that is similar to the challenge pinpointed in aikido practice.

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At the age of 14, I thought I needed self-defence but accidentally found aikido. Thirty-six years later, I am no longer imprinted on it but practice only occasionally, when family life and work permit. I imagined I would follow the path my entire life and see my own imagined children grow up in the dojo, but forks in the road sent me in new directions: first to the Japanese language, then to Japan’s foreign and security policy and later to International Relations more broadly, and to research on identity, narrative, emotion and ontological security. Thirty-one years after taking my first Japanese class, I still know my way around Shinjuku Station, but many things about Japan continue to escape my understanding. It does not help that my ability to read and understand Japanese is diminishing by the day, and that I sound increasingly like a toddler when trying to speak the language. I agree with Oe that Japan is ambiguous, but so is my native Sweden, and all the hours of aikido practice, which are still ingrained in me, now tell me to embrace and curiously explore these ambiguities and uncertainties.

Aikido seems to offer a way to mitigate ontological insecurities without exaggerating claims to certainty, identity or status. According to the late aikido master, Koichi Tohei, the literal meaning of aikido is the ‘way to union with the Ki of the universe’ (2001, 41). ‘Ai’ (合) stands for ‘union’ or ‘unification’ and ‘Do’ (道) is ‘way’ or ‘path’, but what exactly ‘Ki’ (氣) stands for is ambiguous. Tohei sensei explains: ‘Ki is something impossible to find, mysterious and incomprehensible’. He then asks: ‘How can you become one with something that you cannot grasp?’ (Tohei 2001, 41). This challenge is what I have come to understand as the gist of aikido practice and Tohei sensei advocates a spirit of continuous investigation, self-reflection or meditation—both a method called *shūchūhō* (集中法), which is premised on concentration and centring the mind; and *kakudaihō* (拡大法), which is the other side of the coin and means expanding one’s mind. The proverbial glass is neither half-full, nor half-empty, but there is just constant contraction and expansion. In that vein, I have come to understand aikido as an endless striving for understanding of and unity with endlessly small ambiguities, conflicts, tensions and insecurities (Hagström and Bremberg 2022). In this understanding, ambiguity is unavoidable so we should embrace it and be curious about it.

I am no longer a good aikido student, and I tell myself that is okay. Yet I hope more than ever that this ‘peripheral’, ‘marginal’ and ‘off-center’ art of movement, which also

has a distinctly peripheral, marginal and off-centre presence in its country of origin—Japan—might be able to provide a ‘modest’, ‘decent’ and ‘humanistic contribution’ that could be ‘of some use in the cure and reconciliation of mankind’, which by the way is similar to Oe’s plea at the end of his lecture back in 1994 (1995, 121).

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