

Hiroyuki Watanabe, Japan's Whaling: The Politics of Culture in Historical Perspective. Translated by Hugh Clarke from the Japanese Original, *Hogei mondai no rekishi shakaigaku* 捕鯨問題の歴史社会学: 近現代日本におけるクジラと人間, Tokyo, Tōshindō, 2006

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Few East Asian science-infused topics have been as globally controversial over the past decades as the Japanese whaling issue. In what has become a predictable political ritual, Anglo-Saxon environmentalists react to reports of Japanese whale hunting in the Antarctic Ocean—ostensibly for scientific purposes—with vocal mass media outcries. Meanwhile, public knowledge of the historical and contemporary conditions of Japanese whaling remains limited, both inside and outside of Japan. This book by sociologist Hiroyuki Watanabe, published in Japanese in 2006 and now available to English-reading audiences, promises to rectify this situation, providing a well-researched account of relations between whales and humans in modern Japan. Focusing on early-modern hunting technologies, global overfishing, and the sensitive politics of representing whaling as “Japanese culture”, this book brings a host of valuable insights to ongoing debates. Beyond whaling buffs (like this reviewer), the book should appeal to wider audiences in Science and Technology Studies (STS) interested in the social organization of industrial technology and the cultural and material underpinnings of human–animal relations.

Watanabe divides his book into six chapters, each zooming in on a different aspect of how Japan's whaling industry has developed over the last century. In historical terms, the bulk of the book is dedicated to the period from the introduction of so-called Norwegian-style whaling, using harpoons and steam-powered boats, at the turn of the twentieth century, to the peak of Antarctic factory whaling in the 1960s. At the same time, Watanabe positions his analyses within an overarching

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narrative of contemporary whaling debates, which he views as sadly deadlocked due to “single-minded emotions” (3). His main analytical ambition is to show that existing anthropological approaches to whaling, which present whaling as a longstanding and unbroken tradition, provide a simplified and politically problematic picture of historical realities. In a framework that corresponds well with STS notions of the contingency of human relations with technology and nature, Watanabe documents how, rather than one unified “whaling culture,” a plurality of relations among humans and whales coexist in modern Japan.

Against this backdrop, each of the book’s chapters can be read as critically questioning some aspect of what has become, over the past 25 years, an anthropological and political orthodoxy in Japanese pro-whaling discourse. In Chapter 1, for instance, Watanabe analyzes the wide-ranging changes in industrial organization and social hierarchies brought about by Japanese adoption of Norwegian technology into their coastal whaling operations from around 1897 onwards. During this process of technology transfer, whale hunting was not conducted solely by the Japanese themselves: Norwegian harpooners acted as respected bearers of the new technology, while poorly paid Korean seamen undertook much of the manual labor. Large shares of these whale hunts were conducted off the Korean peninsula, and Watanabe thus convincingly links the rise of modern Japanese whaling to a history of colonial expansionism. This history, he shows, is conveniently hidden from view in standard anthropological accounts of “the diffusion of whaling culture.”

In subsequent chapters, Watanabe challenges other aspects of the orthodoxy. Chapter 2 focuses on a specific historical incident: in 1911, fishermen from Same village, Aomori prefecture, violently rebelled against what they perceived as a polluting and destructive whaling industry. Relations between established fisheries and new whaling companies were rife with frictions, in part because local fishermen considered whales as benign incarnations of the Shinto god Ebisu. In Chapter 3, Watanabe turns to a fascinating consideration of the history of nature conservation in Japan, showing how two species of cetaceans (the finless porpoise and the gray whale) came to be accorded very different conservation status, due mainly to economic considerations. Next, Chapter 4 uses statistical data from 1942 to document significant regional differences in whale meat consumption prior to World War II—another issue frequently obscured in anthropological depictions of whale meat as a “traditional” Japanese food.

In the last two chapters of the book, Watanabe brings his historical account up to the present, focusing on the global overfishing of whales and the politics of representing whaling as Japanese culture. Analyzing the “logic of overfishing” as developed by the whaling industry, Watanabe points to a history of statistical fraud and silencing of mounting scientific evidence accompanying the period of intense whaling competition in the 1950s (the so-called “whaling Olympics”). Japan, he concludes, achieved a dominant position in Antarctic whaling only at the cost of considerable environmental destruction. This assessment provides the impetus for his subsequent criticism of essentialist “whaling culture” arguments advanced by anthropologists since the 1980s as part of a political defense of whaling. At the same time that Watanabe criticizes his Japanese colleagues for deliberately painting a simplified and one-sided picture of human–whale relations, he likewise criticizes

American whaling analysts for exhibiting only a shallow understanding of Japanese history and politics. Rather than sticking to their own narrow-minded frameworks, Watanabe suggests, proponents and opponents of whaling ought to face each other's arguments more tolerantly, acknowledging the plurality of economic, religious, and emotional ties between humans and whales.

As should be clear from my summary, this book provides a carefully researched, historically comprehensive, and analytically sophisticated view of one of the most fascinating cases of human–animal relations in East Asian—and indeed global—twentieth-century history. Given that contemporary disputes over Japanese “scientific” whaling have been the subject of my own recent research, which is inspired by concerns similar to those of Watanabe, I find his perspectives and conclusions mostly convincing, appropriate, and valuable. Further, considering the global nature of modern-day concerns with Japanese whaling, the appearance of this highly readable English translation is in itself praiseworthy. Watanabe's book has the potential to become part of that global circulation of knowledge, by which political actors engaged in whaling disputes interpret the issues and orient their positions. Just as anthropological discourses of “whaling culture” have helped shape actors' identities, in ways that will be familiar to STS researchers, something similar might happen with Watanabe's book. Overall, the book provides a good starting point for a new “cosmopolitics” of human–whale relations, inside and outside of Japan.

Having expressed my admiration for the book, I also feel the need to point to a few shortcomings—not least as considered from a transnational STS perspective. Less than stringent theoretical criticisms, my concerns have more to do with the book's position within, and travel between, different linguistically embedded academic sub-cultures. There are at least two issues here. First of all, at several points, Watanabe arguably runs the risk of attaching his own work too closely—albeit negatively and implicitly—to those very discourses on whaling culture, developed by Japanese anthropologists, that his book otherwise sets out to counter. This stylistic feature may make the book harder for non-specialists to appreciate, inside and outside of STS, than it might ideally have been. No doubt, this problem stems in large part from the difference between a Japanese academic audience, for whom the book was originally written, and the potential audience of this translation, most of whom will be less familiar with the Japanese context. Watanabe, in short, takes for granted a great deal of cultural assumptions. Somewhat ironically, then, the very act of translation may reveal that his anti-culturalist arguments rely on more implicit cultural detail than the writer might wish to acknowledge!

This observation brings up a second issue, arguably of more substantial interest to an STS audience. While the book is firmly set within historical and environmental sociology, it seems to me that Watanabe nevertheless misses a few opportunities for strengthening his arguments through a more active engagement with STS literature. This is true not only of his analyses of socio-technical change in the whaling industry, which tend to downplay issues of technological contingency *as such*, focusing instead on variable social hierarchies. More fundamentally, while Watanabe's analysis of Japanese nature conservation statutes is already astute, the contingent interactions between scientific, legal, economic, religious, and folkloristic knowledges—all of which played a part in shaping those statutes—are deserving of further inquiry. This is also true, incidentally, of the very anthropological expertise

Watanabe criticizes. As an instance of the “co-construction” of knowledge and social order, the story of how this anthropological knowledge of “whaling culture” has come to be politically mobilized and publicly disseminated to great effects—often in conjunction with material artifacts and commitments to the cooking and eating of whale meat—really requires more attention than it receives in the book.

These minor quibbles aside, this book is still highly recommended to anyone wishing to learn more about one of the defining issues in the modern history of human technological exploitation of nature. Meanwhile, East Asian and international STS scholars in search of authentic cultural experiences may wish to consult Watanabe’s book when planning their next trip to Japan before they decide to indulge in a piece of whale sushi!