

Contesting Global Norms: Politics of Identity in Japanese Pro-Whaling Countermobilization

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Cut down the last redwood for chopsticks, harpoon the last blue whale for sushi, and the additional mouths fed will nourish additional human brains, which will soon invent ways to replace blubber with olestra and pine with plastic.¹

Introduction: The Anti-Anti-Whaling Campaign

On the face of it, international management of whales and whaling should be a straightforward matter. Given the hegemony of science in global environmental governance, the near-universal acceptance of sustainability norms, and the relative “countability” of whales, reaching some stable international agreement would seem feasible. Why then is the world, or rather the global virtual communities of anti- and pro-whalers, engaged in an on-going, prolonged conflict over whales dating back to the 1970s? One important, and amply documented, reason is that anti-whaling campaigners have turned whales into rights-bearing persons, sacred human-like creatures, whose killing is immoral and uncivilized.² Logically, the other major reason is that various groups and actors around the world are actively contesting this “global” anti-whaling norm, with its taboo on whaling and whale eating. The global locus of this contestation is Japan, for reasons explained below. However, this pro-whaling countermobilization, or anti-anti-whaling campaign, has received far less academic attention than its environmentalist twin.

In this article, I take a closer look at pro-whaling countermobilization, its protagonists, strategies and, particularly, its politics of identity, as this has been

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1. Huber 1999, 81.

2. See for example Kalland 1993; and Kalland 1994.

unfolding mainly in the Japanese context. The reasons for focusing on Japan will be self-evident for connoisseurs of whaling debates. Following a global moratorium decision, all commercial whaling has been prohibited according to international resolutions since 1986. Whaling continues, however, in three primary forms: so-called “aboriginal subsistence whaling” conducted by indigenous peoples; small-scale coastal-based commercial whaling in Norway; and so-called “scientific whaling” conducted mainly under the auspices of the Japanese government.³ While this scientific whaling is strongly criticized by “Western” NGOs and governments alike, contrary to the Norwegian case, the Japanese government is stubbornly justifying its whaling activities as legitimate in international arenas. In other words, the burden of constructing the moral case for a pro-whaling campaign has fallen heavily on Japanese actors.

Unsurprisingly, given this international political constellation, contemporary whaling conflicts are usually framed in cultural-political idioms, as a clash between “the West” and “Japan.”⁴ Concomitantly, there is no shortage of attempts by political scientists to explain *why* Japan, or more specifically the Japanese government and the powerful Fisheries Agency, will not “give up whaling.”⁵ While authors apply different emphases, a convergence suggests that perceptions and interests of Fisheries Agency bureaucrats,⁶ marginalization of the Japanese environmental ministry,⁷ limited domestic NGO pressure,⁸ and a cultural worldview at odds with the anti-whaling norm,⁹ are important factors.

In what follows, I do not primarily attempt to challenge these established claims about Japanese whaling policy or their underlying theoretical frameworks. However, based on dissatisfaction with the often static, “substantialist” approach to state-internal structures and interests found in much existing literature, I seek to enrich the picture by adopting a more “relational,” processual, and interactionist theoretical perspective. Inspired by recent innovations in social movement theory, the focus is thus redirected towards processes of collective identity construction in Japanese pro-whaling responses. This redirection, importantly, entails a shift in explanatory focus, bracketing the *why* of Japanese state behavior to explore in more detail *how* pro-whaling claims are framed within contemporary Japan. Such exploration, I suggest, entails several advantages, supplementing (without rendering obsolete) existing analytical frameworks. First, it assists in conceptualizing how, far from reflecting some pre-existing national “interest” or “culture,” these notions in fact arise during the process of contestation itself. Second, the social movement approach highlights how pro-whaling countermobilization reaches beyond Japanese state actors, depending on a broader set of nonstate allies. Third, focusing on the *how* of pro-

3. Other nation-states, notably Iceland, have similarly been conducting whaling for scientific purposes.

4. Cf. Catalinac and Chan 2005.

5. Danaher 2002.

6. See for example Miyaoka 2004.

7. See for example Wong 2001.

8. See for example Hirata 2005.

9. See for example Kalland 1998.

whaling helps put questions of symbolism and identity, arguably at the core of whaling controversies, into perspective.¹⁰ In particular, an interactionist approach to collective identity reminds us of the importance of international “outsiders” in shaping domestic Japanese political responses.

More specifically, the main argument to be pursued here is that Japanese (and by implication, global) pro-whaling mobilization has been constructed as a comprehensive *moral* challenge to the identity claims espoused by the global anti-whaling community. This challenge is essentially reactive, giving it the semblance of a countermovement to the anti-whaling movement. Further, it is essentially symbolic in character, standing in for a range of broader normative clashes—just as anti-whaling has become symbolic of environmental protection in general.¹¹ Notably, notions of scientific rationality, cultural authenticity, national sovereignty, and ethical relativism are all mobilized as frames in a pro-whaling identity struggle for “moral capital,” domestically and internationally. Framing whaling in rigid identity terms, pro-whalers have constructed a comprehensive and uncompromising moral universe. Consequently, the whaling case is now one of a stark “diseconomy of moral disagreement,”¹² in which conflicting parties demonize each other and recursively multiply the contrasting symbolic stakes. By implication, what whaling conflicts are “really” about is an essentially contested normative question. Throughout this article, I will seek to distinguish three competing normative interpretations, embedding whaling conflicts in a broader context of moral diseconomy around “global” environmental norms.

In the next section, a brief introduction is provided to the current international whale protection regime. Following from this, some theoretical remarks are offered, clarifying the notions of countermobilization, politics of identity, and moral diseconomy introduced above. The following section provides the main analyses of Japanese pro-whaling discourses, based on fieldwork, publications, and qualitative interviews with central actors. The article ends by returning to the theoretical framework and the normative questions around the politics of contesting “global” environmental norms-in-the-making.

The Whale Protection Regime: A Brief Background

As an environmental controversy, whales were scarcely a consideration before the middle of the 1960s, when scientific reports warning of imminent risks of species’ extinction started to emerge. Until this time, whaling was simply one industry amongst others, albeit one involving fierce global competition, large-scale investments, national prestige, and harsh working conditions.¹³ Since the late 1960s, due in large part to the efforts of a growing number of nongovern-

10. Stoett 2005.

11. Kalland 1994.

12. Cf. Humphrey and Stears 2006.

13. Tønnesen and Johnsen (1982) remains the most comprehensive account of the history of modern whaling.

mental whale protection organizations (NGOs), whales have been transformed into the quintessential “endangered species.” Nowadays, few people in the Euro-American world would question the conservation credentials of these animals. In brief, a strong anti-whaling norm has emerged and gained near-global diffusion, although it is still rejected by certain states around the world. Japan, in particular, has proved a difficult context for the anti-whaling norm.¹⁴

In terms of legal-political regimes, the management of whales spans a complex network of international and regional institutions. For instance, since its inception in 1975, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) has been instrumental in enforcing restrictions on whale product exports.¹⁵ The most important arena for global whale politics, however, remains the International Whaling Commission (IWC), an intergovernmental body established in 1948 to regulate the then-thriving whaling industry. From being a “whalers club” up until the early 1960s, IWC was gradually turned into a “whale preservation club,” due to sustained political pressure from key states such as the United States and environmental NGOs such as Greenpeace.¹⁶ The institutionalization of the anti-whaling norm culminated in 1982, when a three-fourths majority of IWC member states voted in favor of a ten-year moratorium on all commercial whaling, to take effect from 1986. While some species and stocks of whales had no doubt been over-exploited to dangerously low levels, the scientific justification for this blanket ban was, and is, highly controversial, including within the Scientific Committee of the IWC itself. By 1992, Norway and Iceland led the way in forming the North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission (NAMMCO), a regional institution serving largely as a platform for challenging the IWC-sponsored moratorium.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the moratorium remains in place today, well beyond its intended 10 years.

As arenas for intergovernmental debate and decision-making, the IWC and other regional and global management institutions are bound by modernist conventions on allowable terms of discourse.¹⁸ In the IWC, arguments couched in the vocabulary of population management, whale biology and treaty obligations dominate, while openly value-based, “political” or “emotional” statements are discouraged. This state of affairs no doubt contributes to the ritualistic and predictable character of confrontations within the IWC. Anti-whaling environmentalists, however ethically motivated, are forced to pursue their beliefs in formalistic ways. Thus, while anti-whaling policy decisions such as the 1994 establishment of a Southern Ocean sanctuary can be justified in legal-scientific terms, openly opposing whaling for moral reasons will not work in the IWC.¹⁹

14. Hirata 2004.

15. Andresen 2004, 44.

16. Andresen and Skodvin 2003.

17. Hoel 1993.

18. Martello 2004.

19. There are notable exceptions, where governments (such as the Australian) adopt ethically imbued animal welfare positions in IWC discussions.

Public debates on whaling, on the other hand, including the public discourses of anti-whaling NGOs, enjoy a much larger degree of discursive freedom. This freedom has meant a proliferation of strongly morally imbued anti-whaling discourses. Importantly, a wide range of transnational whale protection NGOs, with Greenpeace as the most publicly visible, has labored to create an image of whales as near-sacrosanct creatures.²⁰ In anthropomorphic style, these groups have created what anthropologist Arne Kalland dubbed “the Super-Whale myth:” an image of “the whale” as an endangered, friendly giant, an intelligent, curious, socially complex animal—even a good singer, with reference to the famous humpback whale song.²¹ In the process, Kalland argues, important distinctions between the 80-plus species of whales are blurred beyond recognition, as is the fact that attributing these characteristics to whales lacks scientific justification. Nevertheless, whale protection groups are often joined or supported by conservation-minded biologists.

In their Super-Whale incarnation, whales come to have moral standing and rights that are, if not equal to, then at least resembling that of humans. While views on this issue differ in complex ways between groups and individuals, general ideas about animal welfare and rights have been strongly influential in shaping the anti-whaling norm. Amongst anti-whaling proponents, killing whales has come to be viewed as uncivilized and barbaric, a cruel act committed by morally dubious hunters.²² Concomitantly, a “trans-national food taboo”²³ has been established around whale meat, depicting whale eating as vulgar, immoral, and sometimes even akin to cannibalism. In a few notable cases, such identity discourses have combined with racial prejudice to create highly degrading public media depictions of Japanese whale-eating practices.²⁴ Prejudiced or not, the anti-whaling norm necessarily leads to much bad publicity for Japan in Euro-American media.

In sum, the currently dominant anti-whaling norm, while certainly strongest in the “Western” world, has gained a near-global diffusion, if not acceptance.²⁵ In its legal-scientific shape, the norm is institutionalized in the IWC, while in more public settings it takes on a distinctively moral shape, installing taboos on whale hunting and eating. The two “faces” of the anti-whaling norm generally reinforce each other. However, the anti-whaling norm is being actively challenged in certain parts of the world, not least in Japan, where a pro-whaling counter-mobilization has been orchestrated by leading policy actors. The next

20. Kalland (1994) identifies 74 whale conservation and research organisations in the United States and Canada alone. Many of these are transnational and some have offices in Japan. Greenpeace opened its Japanese branch in 1989.

21. Kalland 1993, 4.

22. Kalland and Sejersen 2005.

23. Lien 2004.

24. The most notorious example occurred in the British tabloid *Daily Star* on 11 May 1991, running a front-page article titled “Sickest dinner ever served. Japs feast on whale.”

25. “Western” is a highly imperfect descriptive term, in that Canada, Norway, and Iceland blur the geographical picture.

section outlines a theoretical framework for understanding this pro-whaling countermobilization.

Theoretical Framework: Countermobilization, Identity, and Moral Diseconomy

One characteristic of current wildlife conservation debates, and of wider environmental issues, is that strongly value-laden positions are lined up in adversarial deadlock.²⁶ This is particularly evident in debates involving the iconic animals of nature-protectionist NGOs: whales, dolphins, elephants, tigers, pandas. In the literature on environmental values, the dominant antagonism is described in terms of conservationists and preservationists. Put abstractly, while conservationists highlight the instrumental value of nature and animals, as defined by principles of sustainable utilization, preservationists highlight the protection of individual animals as holders of intrinsic value and rights.²⁷ Needless to say, however, elements of both normative positions often get entangled in specific debates, as is indeed the case with the anti-whaling norm. Thus, rather than abstract principles, these composite moral universes should be studied in empirical context.

Indeed, as a long-standing and politically salient conflict, the making of the anti-whaling norm during the last 30–40 years has received considerable attention. To say nothing of the natural science dimensions, analysts from across the social science disciplines have approached the issues in characteristic ways. Put briefly, political scientists and jurists tend to focus on the legal-political aspects of the global IWC “governance regime”,²⁸ while anthropologists have mainly been analyzing (and defending) local “whaling cultures.”²⁹ The various organizational and discursive processes “in between” these global and local foci have remained comparatively less studied. This uneven attention is also found in the specifically Japanese context. While, as noted, a growing literature exists on Japanese whaling policy and diplomacy, other societal actors have received far less attention. By drawing on the political sociology of social movements, this article attempts to start filling some of these gaps.

From a social movement perspective, anti-whaling protagonists, like other environmental movements, are engaged in “moral entrepreneurial” activities, aimed at the social construction of moral meanings.³⁰ Through their endeavors, the plight of endangered animal species, and entire ecosystems, has become a central political concern worldwide, and previously acceptable activities, such as hunting and eating whales, have been rendered illegitimate. More often than not, however, these moral entrepreneurial activities have met with resistance,

26. Thompson 2002, 186.

27. Miyaoka 2004.

28. See for example Friedheim 2001.

29. Mullin 1999, 218.

30. Humphrey and Stears 2006, 417.

leading to political struggles for public support and legitimacy—or “moral capital.” In some instances, resistance takes the shape of countermovements: networks of opposing institutions and vested interest groups, actively contesting the policies and moral meanings espoused by environmentalists. In the United States, for instance, “environmental skepticism” in the shape of anti-environmentalist ideas and networks with overt ties to conservative think tanks has been influential in shaping political (non)-responses to global climate change.³¹ Whaling controversies provide another good illustration of these oppositional dynamics, this time centered on Japan as the locus of backlash against an emerging “global” environmental norm.

As Meyer and Staggenborg have argued,³² countermovements are likely to arise when three conditions are fulfilled in the structure of political opportunities: first, movements show signs of success; second, movement goals threaten vested interests; and third, political allies are available to the countermovement. Evidently, these conditions are amply satisfied in this case, although it is necessary to recast theoretically the structure-based notion of “vested interests” in a more constructivist direction. First, the global institutionalization in the 1980s of the anti-whaling norm represented a major success for the anti-whaling movement. Second, this success in turn impinged directly on Japanese whaling practices, in that sense constituting a clear threat to whaling interests. Exactly what these “interests” are, however, is much less obvious. Arguably, material economic interests have consistently played a relatively small role. Thus, by the time of the whaling moratorium the economic value of the Japanese whaling industry had already declined significantly, employing a mere 1,300 workers, and popular demand for whale meat is now at an economically negligible level. Overall, it seems clear that political and cultural-symbolic “interests” have been more important. As demonstrated by the actions of the pro-whaling countermovement, whaling is clearly invested with strong moral signification in Japan. To understand this, however, we need to look at how “interests” are shaped in tandem with collective identity frames. I return to these issues below.

Third, as concerns the availability of political allies, Japanese pro-whaling is best conceptualized as an “elite-driven countermovement.”³³ In particular, central bureaucratic actors associated with the powerful Fisheries Agency (FA) have been performing in roles as both policy initiators and public educators on whaling. Generally, as is well established in the literature on Japanese whaling policy,³⁴ FA bureaucrats are the chief actors in government policy-making and thus central to understanding the emergence of pro-whaling countermobilization since the early 1970s. These bureaucrats have shaped Japanese state responses, sometimes in competition with Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA)

31. Jacques 2006.

32. Meyer and Staggenborg 1996.

33. Pichardo 1995. I am unaware of any previous attempts to apply this analytical concept to Japanese social movements.

34. See for example Miyaoka 2004; Wong 2001; and Ishii and Okubo 2007.

officials more concerned with international reputation,³⁵ and at the same time served as initiators of wider nonstate pro-whaling networks. Following long-standing Japanese practices, for instance, ex-FA officials populate the leadership of semi-governmental pro-whaling research and industry associations, such as the Institute of Cetacean Research (ICR), which is responsible for current scientific whaling. Organizations such as the Japan Whaling Association (JWA) and the Japan Small-Type Whaling Association (JSTWA) likewise receive government subsidies and maintain close relations with government officials.³⁶ Finally, the two largest political parties in Japan, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), have both established pro-whaling legislative groups. Whaling is not a major divisive political issue in Japan, however, and is usually left to the discretion of Fishery Agency officials.

As an elite-driven countermovement, pro-whalers possess economic and symbolic resources, in the shape of knowledge and social prestige, making them a powerful force within the domestic political space. Generally, this direct access to domestic political resources distinguishes elite from citizen-based movements, particularly in a highly centralized political system such as the Japanese one.³⁷ It also partly explains why, unlike their mass-based transnational opponents, pro-whaling mobilization has remained much more focused on national power structures. As such, there are clear similarities, but few direct links, in how Japanese, Norwegian, and Icelandic elites have responded at the national level to the threats of the anti-whaling movement.³⁸ Meanwhile, recent years have seen an increasing internationalization of pro-whaling countermobilization, by Japanese and other actors. This internationalization is particularly evident in the 1996 establishment of the World Council of Whalers. Here, the various whaling cultures around the globe are increasingly linking up via technological means such as the Internet, exchanging resources and strategies while still emphasizing cultural diversity in their discourses.³⁹ For instance, when the US-based Makah tribe resumed whaling in the late 1990s amidst fierce international criticism, Japanese pro-whalers allegedly provided money, boats, and lessons on whale hunting as part of the international struggle against IWC restrictions.⁴⁰ At the diplomatic level, the pro-whaling side has had some success lately in mobilizing new Caribbean and African state allies to join the IWC, amidst strong (and seemingly justified) allegations against the Japanese government for using Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) to buy voting support.⁴¹

Having introduced these aspects of the political opportunity structure of Japanese pro-whaling, we turn now to the central question of this article:

35. For more on MOFA's stance on the whaling issue, see Wong 2001.

36. Hirata 2004, 192.

37. See Reimann 2002.

38. Cf. Andresen 2004; and Brydon 2006.

39. Epstein 2003.

40. For a full analysis of the Makah case, see Martello 2004.

41. See Miller and Dolšák 2007.

namely, *how* this elite-driven network attempts to accumulate moral capital. Here, drawing on symbolic interactionist theories of social movement activity, I focus on the framing strategies of pro-whaling actors, and in particular their strategic construction of a collective identity serving to distinguish “us” (pro-whalers) from “them” (anti-whalers). As Benford and Snow point out, “identity constructions are an inherent feature of the framing process,” understood as the generation and diffusion of “action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings.”⁴² In other words, collective action and the enactment of identity are inextricably intertwined, serving to create a sense of internally shared community vis-à-vis an identifiable opponent and providing the struggle with existential significance. Applying this theoretical assumption, I will argue that strong and inflexible oppositional identity claims form an integral part of the whaling controversy, helping to explain why this controversy has thus far continued for four decades.

The main source of theoretical inspiration underlying this approach stems from the sociological tradition of symbolic interactionism, embodied particularly in the work of Erwin Goffman. The central concept of “framing” derives from Goffman’s emphasis on frames as “schemata of interpretation,” serving to negotiate shared meanings and thus guide processes of collective action.⁴³ As has been argued convincingly by extending this perspective to social movement activities,⁴⁴ the dynamics of movement-counter movement interactions are centrally important in understanding the construction of activists’ collective identities. In the whaling controversy, for instance, anti-whaling movements have frequently employed highly moralized frames portraying whaling as inhumane, uncivilized, and against “world opinion.” These framings have occasionally been explicitly anti-Japanese. There is little doubt that the persistence with which Japanese elites have reacted against the anti-whaling entrepreneurs stems in part from collectively shared feelings of humiliation and national pride aroused by these anti-whaling framing strategies. Thus, the divisive framing strategies of the anti-whaling movements illustrate a more general dynamic in which movements help spark their own opposition into being through processes of contentious interaction.

In terms of the Japanese pro-whaling framing strategies analyzed in this article, theirs has overwhelmingly been a politics of *national* identity, appealing to wider nationally shared beliefs and values. As Calhoun points out,⁴⁵ enactments of nationalism can generally be considered a very large-scale instance of the politics of identity, appealing to notions of an imagined national community. One striking illustration of the intertwining of whaling and national sentiments is the ease with which both anti- and pro-whaling groups identify Japan with the transnational discursive category of a “whaling nation,” alternatively a

42. Benford and Snow 2000, 614; 631ff.

43. Benford and Snow 2000, 614.

44. In particular Einwohner 2002.

45. Calhoun 1994.

source of shame or pride.⁴⁶ Still, the identity constructions of pro-whalers are multi-layered, encompassing a variety of substantive claims situated within a multiplicity of “master frames.” Importantly, these master frames are not confined to the national level, but rather seek to establish connections to globally legitimate ideals and norms deemed threatened by the opponent. This alignment of whaling with larger cultural-political values may be taken as illustration of a more general tendency for identity-based movements to multiply the symbolic stakes of confrontation, thus making them insular and divisive rather than compromise seeking. Strong politics of identity thus tends towards a “diseconomy of moral disagreement,” with in-built logics of spiraling confrontation.⁴⁷ It is my contention that whaling controversies are best analyzed as an instance of such moral diseconomy.

Exactly what motivates actors in continuing this spiraling confrontational logic is difficult to ascertain, partly because the answer is inevitably embedded in normative interpretations of what the conflict is “really” about. One corollary of the symbolic interactionist framework, however, is that whaling controversies are no longer primarily about whales. To make sense of Japanese pro-whaling countermobilization in the context of a broader politics of contesting “global” environmental norms-in-the-making, I believe one can distinguish three competing normative interpretations. Inspired by the language of political theorists, I will refer to these as the “radical politics,” “simulation,” and “deliberation” perspectives. Elements of each circulate widely in the literature on the whaling controversy, but they are seldom made explicit as competing frameworks. More importantly, they are seldom taken seriously as explanatory resources in accounting for pro- and anti-whaling mobilizations. Without claiming that material and political interests are irrelevant, my argument here is that these symbolic-moral issues deserve closer attention.⁴⁸ Here, I briefly introduce the three perspectives, before returning to them in the conclusion.

First, the “radical politics” perspective will claim that Japanese pro-whaling countermobilization is basically a fight against an unjustified Western cultural imperialism, imposing foreign notions of animal protection on the Japanese. This interpretation scheme relies primarily on anthropological discourses on Japanese whaling culture to challenge the universality of the anti-whaling norm,⁴⁹ and as we shall see, it very much underlies the self-presentation of Japanese elite pro-whaling actors. One implication of this framing is that pro-whalers are driven by sincere convictions. Contrary to this, the second framework of “simulation” basically suggests that we are dealing instead with a “staged” or coordinated controversy. In essence, this interpretation suggests that both sides of the controversy, anti- and pro-whalers, stand to gain materially

46. Brydon 2006, 232.

47. Cf. Humphrey and Stears 2006.

48. See Stoett 2005 for a similar argument.

49. See for example Kalland 1993; and Lien 2004.

and symbolically from continuation of the moral dispute. For the anti-whalers, framing Japan as the ultimate enemy eco-outlaw may assist in raising support and bolstering ideological commitments,⁵⁰ while for the pro-whaling bureaucratic elites, whaling may well serve as a relatively harmless outlet for a much broader resentment towards “Westernization” and American dominance in Japan.⁵¹ Third, the “deliberative” framework suggests that both of these interpretations fail to account for the serious real-world problems embedded in the strong politics of identity around whales. From this perspective, neither anti- nor pro-whalers are seriously responding to very real concerns raised by other actors in the debate, whether ecological, socio-economic, democratic, or cultural in character. The important point of the deliberative perspective is that, given the interlocking moral diseconomy, existing problems are unlikely to be addressed.

To sum up, these three normative frameworks for interpreting whaling controversies are set out in order to embed Japanese pro-whaling countermobilization in a broader, global context of moral diseconomy around emerging environmental norms. From the symbolic interactionist perspective advocated here, these normative interpretations cannot be dismissed as mere epiphenomena to underlying “real” interests, material or otherwise. Rather, they are integral to how pro- and anti-whaling actors construct and frame collective identities, serving to confer symbolic signification to continuing political confrontations. In short, by emphasizing this interactionist logic, the theoretical framework outlined here sets the stage for understanding both *how* and *why* moral capital is fought for by the Japanese pro-whaling countermovement vis-à-vis the institutionalized anti-whaling norm. While the details of whaling disputes can be extremely complicated, employing this analytical framework serves to demonstrate important regularities in confrontational patterns.

In what follows, I analyze the main pro-whaling politics of identity, distinguishing between different master frames employed to construct a positive self-identity. In specific terms, my analysis points to four interrelated pro-whaling master frames, pertaining variously to science, culture, animal ethics, and legalism. For lack of space, however, I concentrate on the former three, leaving issues of international law, sovereignty and identity unexplored.⁵² Throughout, my main empirical material consists of publications from pro-whaling organizations, together with fifteen qualitative interviews with Japanese pro- (and anti-) whaling nonstate political actors. Supplementing this, fieldwork has been conducted in Japan, attending pro-whaling meetings and visiting traditional whaling towns, museums, and exhibitions. Finally, I judge the public resonance of pro-whaling framing strategies with reference to existing opinion polls on whaling in Japan.

50. Cf. Kalland 1994.

51. Cf. Ishii and Okubo 2007.

52. For an analysis of legalism in Japanese whaling diplomacy, see Friedheim 1996.

Legitimizing Japanese Whaling: Empirical Explorations

On a sunny late-summer September Sunday in 2006, the Group to Preserve Whale Dietary Culture (GPWDC)⁵³ held a public symposium in Ishinomaki, a medium-sized city in Northern Honshu and traditionally an important port for Japanese fisheries and whaling activities. The purpose of the gathering, as local public announcements made clear, was to introduce whales and food culture, or *geishokubunka*, a well-recognized concern in Japanese whaling discussions.⁵⁴ The fourth consecutive annual meeting of its kind, this year's saw a record 450 citizens attending,⁵⁵ seemingly bearing witness to the local prominence of whale meat. The vast majority of attendants were in their 50s and 60s, members of the generation of Japanese still remembering, some with nostalgia, the post-war practice of serving whale meat in school lunches as a cheap source of protein. People came because they were interested in whaling issues, to hear presentations by knowledgeable experts, and to obtain the free whale meat lunchbox.⁵⁶ Overall, this was no-go territory for anti-whaling proponents: banners reading "Delicious whale meat is a pride of Japan" set the tone of discussion.

Nongovernmental "citizen" organizations like GPWDC formed in Japan during the 1980s and 1990s, with the purpose of actively supporting the government in enhancing public support for whaling. This type of cooperation is illustrated well by the Ishinomaki meeting: it is organized by a non-profit "citizen" group but with the national Fisheries Agency and the local Ishinomaki city administration featured as sponsors, evincing strong ties to political elites. Indeed, one of the main speakers during the symposium was Mr. Morishita Joji,⁵⁷ head of the Whaling Section of the Fisheries Agency and a high-ranking player in Japanese whaling policy, clearly speaking from a position of high public authority.

Overall, the pro-whaling countermovement has the character of a multi-organizational network, crisscrossing state-industry-civil society boundaries and with a certain division of rhetorical labor. Some groups, such as GPWDC, organize around a shared focus on "whale eating culture." They are joined by JWA and JSTWA, formally whaling industry organizations nowadays functioning more as pro-whaling public relations coordinators. Still other groups pursue broader marine-resource and sustainable-use agendas, including the Beneficiaries of the Sea Coalition (BSC) and Global Guardian Trust (GGT). Many pro-whaling groups are active both domestically and internationally, organizing events around Japan and participating as NGO observers at IWC meetings, presenting themselves as voices for "ordinary Japanese." Pro-whaling groups hardly

53. *Kujira shokubunka wo mamoru kai*, in Japanese. All translations from Japanese in this article are by the author.

54. Cf. Hirata 2004.

55. According to local newspaper coverage.

56. Based on a survey conducted by the organizers, the results of which were kindly shared with the author.

57. Japanese names are given in the Japanese form, with family names first.

correspond to standard notions of NGOs, however. Most leading actors in the nonstate networks are ex-bureaucrats, academics, journalists or writers, and thus members of a cultural elite, or whale restaurant owners framing themselves as spokespersons for Japanese food culture. Clearly, the interests and motivations for joining pro-whaling mobilization vary among these actors. Often, however, groups combine economic, political, and cultural-symbolic concerns, as is the case, for instance, with whale restaurant owners linking material interests with the cultural-symbolic significance of whale as food culture. Across this diversity in discursive emphasis and interests, however, all groups share certain basic pro-whaling framings, serving to constitute a collective identity. In the following analysis, I unravel the making of this strong pro-whaling identity.

Science, Numbers, and Emotion Management

A simple reality had become abundantly clear: a majority of IWC nations were hell-bent on stopping commercial whaling regardless of whale populations. Science would not persuade them. Logic, fact, data were to be ignored.⁵⁸

One trope running consistently through Japanese pro-whaling discourses since the 1970s is the opposition between “science” and “emotions.” Ever since the idea of a whaling moratorium was introduced to global environmental politics in the early 1970s, Japanese pro-whaling actors have been arguing that it lacks any “scientific basis,” being based instead on “pure emotionalism” or a “politically-driven ideology.”⁵⁹ In other words, while science may once have assisted the environmental movement in gaining support for the protection of endangered whales, pro-whaling actors are now confidently asserting that science is among *their* strongest allies. This transformation in science discourses is notable and carries important extra-discursive implications. Since 1987, the Japanese government has spent around 900 million yen (app. 5.7 million Euro) yearly on subsidizing the ICR-conducted whale research whose main purpose, according to an ICR spokesman, is to “prove that commercial whaling is possible.”⁶⁰ Japanese pro-whaling countermobilization has thus meant intensification in the politics of knowledge. More importantly from my perspective, however, framing whaling in scientific terms has clearly been a way for pro-whaling advocates to construct an identity of rationality, appealing to the assumed universal legitimacy of science.

There are several reasons why pro-whaling actors have been compelled to enroll scientific justifications. Most immediately, it reflects the global institutional setting of IWC governance, allowing pro-whaling states to (formally) comply with international regulations while continuing so-called “research

58. Komatsu and Misaki 2001, 34.

59. Yonezawa 2001, 17.

60. Author’s interview with Murakami Mitsuyoshi (ICR), Tokyo, June 2006.

whaling" activities. Furthermore, IWC is statutorily a "science-based" institution, with its own Scientific Committee, meaning that scientists enjoy privileged positions of cognitive authority in this regime.⁶¹ This privilege, of course, is not unique to whaling: across a variety of environmental governance settings, science is called on to determine levels of "sustainable use" of natural resources, a principle strongly emphasized by pro-whaling actors. Finally, as stated above, science is clearly part of the wider politics of identity: being "scientific" means to be rational, persuaded by fact and logic. Conversely, in its binary distinction to "emotions," it creates the image of sentimental anti-whaling opponents, whose motivations and arguments are not only irrational but also *unreasonable*.⁶² For instance, one high-profile Japanese pro-whaling advocate suggested during an interview that anti-whalers are "sort of outpatients from the mental hospital."⁶³

The Japanese government launched its program of scientific whaling in 1987, in an effort to challenge the newly institutionalized anti-whaling hegemony. Scientific whaling continues to date, despite fierce international criticism. Within the IWC, the anti-whaling political majority has continuously passed resolutions condemning Japanese research whaling.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, protracted controversies between factions of the scientific community are played out on the pages of prestigious natural-science journals such as *Nature* and *Science*, arguing over the scientific necessity of lethal research on whales.⁶⁵ Finally, in more public criticisms, including those of many environmental NGOs, the alleged "science" is simply dismissed as "commercial whaling in disguise." As the leader of the Australian Green Party asks rhetorically: "What is it after 20 years that they've discovered? That whales go well with soy sauce?"⁶⁶

From the perspective of the pro-whaling camp, however, what scientific whaling allows is, first of all, to challenge the claim that *all* species of whales in *all* ocean areas are endangered. While the label of "endangered-ness" has effectively removed all large whales from hunting and trading, pro-whaling actors are responding by creating "spaces of abundance" for particular whales.⁶⁷ Thus, almost all Japanese research whaling activity focuses on minke whales, seemingly the most abundant of IWC-regulated large whale species, and on particular ocean areas, notably the Antarctic Ocean and the North-West Pacific. An essential component of the research effort is to calculate population-specific abundance estimates based on sighting surveys, and the Japanese government has been instrumental in providing vessels, crew, and researchers to these IWC-coordinated activities. Already in the early 1990s, then, pro-whaling actors

61. Andresen and Skodvin 2003.

62. Cf. Brydon 2006, 229.

63. The identity of the interviewee is kept anonymous in this case for reasons of discretion.

64. Miyaoka 2004.

65. Gales et al. 2005.

66. Quoted in "Japan's hunt for rare whale enrages Aussies," *Japan Times*, 15 June 2006, 14.

67. Cf. Thorne 1998.

gained important momentum when the IWC Scientific Committee endorsed a Southern Ocean abundance estimate of some 760,000 minke whales.⁶⁸

The importance of this figure to pro-whaling countermobilization lies not in its exactness, but simply in the fact that it is high. Clearly, a magnitude of 760,000 whales does not correspond to ideas of endangered-ness. Consequently, this and similar (high) numbers appear continuously in the communication of pro-whaling actors. They appear in brochures and posters released in Japanese and English by the ICR, visually illustrated by a world map featuring a huge minke whale roaming the Antarctic Ocean with the number “760,000” printed on it.⁶⁹ They are circulated in the media, and they appear at important interfaces with whale-interested members of the Japanese public. For instance, text announcing that “nearly 1 million minke whales inhabit the world” is printed on cans of whale meat widely encountered in Japanese supermarkets. Here, the justificatory importance of scientific numbers is quite apparent: feel free to eat this whale, the message implies.

In other words, scientific arguments play a fundamental role in pro-whaling discourses, in part because they help establish an “imaginary” of whale abundance. Public surveys suggest that this pro-whaling strategy is working: in 1992, Japanese (and Norwegian) citizens were less likely than Australians or Germans to believe that “all large whale species are currently in danger of extinction.”⁷⁰ Scientific justifications, however, may also serve to detract attention from other, potentially critical, issues. For instance, couching discussions in the impersonal language of population management science is far from being a neutral platform of discussion, and should rather be seen as integral to the identity construction. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the impersonal language of ICR researchers: here, whales are “sampled” (killed), “analyzed” (cut up), and rendered into “by-products” (whale meat).⁷¹ Clearly, such “non-emotional” language is just as much part of a discursive emotion management as when anti-whaling advocates frequently brand Japanese research as whale “slaughter.”

To sum up, Japanese pro-whaling countermobilization has relied significantly on heavy investments in a scientific master frame, both discursively and in material terms of money, equipment, and research personnel. Primarily, the attempt has been to challenge whale endangered-ness, by assembling and publicizing selected spaces of minke whale abundance. On the whole, the assertiveness with which pro-whaling actors make claims to scientific rationality suggests a level of perceived success, but scientific numbers nevertheless fail to provide strong and publicly convincing motivations for action. Put bluntly, while

68. It should be noted that this figure was withdrawn again in 2000, in the light of new survey data, and that current population estimates are suggested to be only 39 percent of those from the mid-1980s (cf. Branch 2006).

69. Institute of Cetacean Research 2004, 3.

70. Freeman and Kellert 1992.

71. Author's interview with Murakami Mitsuyoshi (ICR), Tokyo, June 2006.

science may establish the *possibility* of whaling, it does not by itself compel you to *actually* do so. Thus, in the absence of obvious economic interests, pro-whaling countermobilization has turned to supplementary framing strategies.

Culture, (Re)Invented Traditions, and the Public Mouth

Japan is proud of the tradition of whaling which she has built up over nine thousand years and firmly believes in the sustainable use of whales as food resource.⁷²

If science is relatively weak as a motivational force for human action, culture is arguably one of the stronger forces. Perhaps it comes as small surprise, then, that discourses about Japan's allegedly unique whaling and whale-eating culture have been central to Japanese pro-whaling countermobilization since the early 1980s. What was once a relatively unremarkable post-war business, at most arousing curiosity for its harsh work conditions, has become a hypersensitive symbol of Japanese national identification. While similar tendencies of emphasizing cultural "uniqueness" can be observed in both Iceland and Norway, Japanese pro-whaling mobilization arguably stands out for the sheer intensity of cultural discourses. No doubt, this partly has to do with the pattern of whale eating, which is more widespread in Japan than anywhere else. More importantly, however, framing whaling as tradition implies pitting Japan in cultural conflict with "the anti-whaling West," a them-and-us formula enjoying widespread resonance in wider Japanese discourses on national identity.⁷³

Along the lines of the radical politics framework introduced above, what this cultural master frame suggests is that Japan is at the receiving end of Western neo-imperialism in the whaling controversy. As with the scientific framing, the global institutional context of IWC has provided strong incentives to pursue such cultural discourses. In 1981, IWC recognized a distinction between "commercial" and "aboriginal subsistence" whaling, thus legitimizing forms of whaling based on cultural needs and tradition. While this crude distinction is empirically untenable,⁷⁴ and while its precise application is highly contested (as in the Makah case), it nevertheless carries important political consequences, because it has meant empowerment and public goodwill for groups of indigenous "subsistence hunters" such as the Inuit in Alaska and Greenland. On the other hand, non-indigenous groups of small-scale whalers found in Japan and Norway have not enjoyed these benefits. Consequently, seeking international recognition of cultural needs for whaling has been a consistent strategy of Japanese pro-whaling mobilization, in what is essentially a "self-indigenizing" move.

Specifically, the pro-whaling network has constructed a third category of

72. Ohsumi 2003, 5.

73. As evidenced, for instance, in the well-known genre of *nihonjinron*, or "theories of being Japanese."

74. Cf. Moeran 1992.

minke whaling, “small-type coastal whaling,” legitimated in cultural terms as an “integral part of community identity and well-being.”⁷⁵ While the current number of affected people is small—approximately 100 people operating nine whaling vessels based in the villages of Ayukawa, Taiji, Wada and Abashiri—their plight has received considerable attention. In particular, the Japanese pro-whalers have aligned themselves with and financed an international group of anthropologists, authorized experts on culture. Between 1986 and 1994, the Japanese government presented 33 papers to the IWC, written by 23 anthropologists and social scientists from eight countries, on the cultural aspects of its coastal minke whaling operations.⁷⁶ Clearly, these social-science specialists have been enrolled to bolster cultural armaments in the dispute for moral capital.⁷⁷

Beyond IWC political strategies, focusing on the culture of small-scale coastal whalers allows pro-whalers to foster positive personifications of tradition-bearing whalers, challenging widespread anti-whaling identity frames on this “barbaric” practice. Coastal whalers are presented as the present-day heirs to a historical legacy of community-based whaling, found since the 1600s over much of Japan. The features of this “whaling culture” are reiterated in media reports, parliamentary debates, and pro-whaling brochures; and it is reflected in “whale festivals” held in traditional whaling towns. Material artifacts from this history, including fifteenth century whale-meat recipes and nineteenth century Buddhist tablets (*kuyou tou*), are frequently displayed in museum exhibitions throughout Japan, drawing support from the Fisheries Agency and pro-whaling NGOs. Thus, a variety of activities purposefully serve to enhance the Japanese public’s awareness of their “own” national whaling past.

While long traditions of whaling in Japan have no doubt given rise to distinctive socio-economic, dietary and religious practices,⁷⁸ the coordination of this multifaceted history into a unified (and glorified) “whaling culture” should mostly be considered a feat of pro-whaling political mobilization.⁷⁹ For instance, prior to the late 1970s there were no mentions of “culture” (*bunka*) in connection with whaling in either the Japanese Diet or the *Asahi Shimbun*, one of the major Japanese newspapers.⁸⁰ In this sense, whaling is a (re)-invented tradition, whose symbolic importance has been growing exponentially in tandem with its industrial decline. Nevertheless, the present socio-economic hardships of the few remaining coastal minke whalers are real and visible, attracting public sympathy in Japan.

Moreover, this cultural framing of whaling plays into a global politics, where “authentic” culture is increasingly perceived as intrinsically valuable. Here, cultural justifications have become hard to criticize, not least in the Japa-

75. Japan Small-Type Whaling Association 1997.

76. Kalland 1998, 20.

77. For an illustration, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan n.d.

78. Kalland and Moeran 1992.

79. Cf. Watanabe 2006.

80. Ishii and Okubo 2007, 13.

nese context where Western (or “Westernized”) critics can easily be accused of ethnocentrism.⁸¹ Cultural framing strategies thus not only define a positive self-identity, but also de-legitimize criticism as prejudiced “foreign interference” (*gaiatsu*), something strongly felt by members of Japanese anti-whaling NGOs. For instance, Greenpeace has come to serve as the core symbolic enemy in this politics of identity, employing a logic expressed succinctly by one NGO representative: “Greenpeace equals anti-whaling equals anti-Japanese equals terrorist.”⁸² Obviously, such framings are frequently contested in the Japanese public sphere, by media commentators, critical scientists, and Japanese pro-conservation NGOs.⁸³ In general, however, critics’ access to Japanese media remains constrained.

Even from a pro-whaling perspective, however, discourses on “whaling culture” carry the limitation that few Japanese citizens share any direct connection to whaling as such, reducing the potential for civic mobilization. In this regard, justifications referring to “whale dietary culture” (*geishokubunka*) carry more promise. While whales have been consumed for centuries in coastal Japan, mass consumption on a nationwide basis occurred only after the Second World War. By around 1952, whale meat was officially included in school lunch-boxes nationwide, staying there for a couple of decades. Consequently, older generations in present-day Japanese society widely share memories of eating whale-meat during childhood, and such habitual dispositions help explain why discourses of whale dietary culture have gained resonance amongst Japanese politicians and journalists. Meanwhile, Japanese dietary habits have changed drastically, with beef, pork and chicken taking over and whale-meat all but disappearing: in a 2002 survey, only four percent would “sometimes” eat it, nine percent ate it “infrequently,” and 86 percent had either stopped or never tried.⁸⁴

Like whaling practices themselves, however, whale-meat eating has gained in symbolic significance in tandem with losing its basic dietary significance. As supply and availability of meat has decreased, whale has become a highly “select” food, usually enjoyed at special occasions or at specialty whale cuisine restaurants. Anti-whaling campaigns have helped turn whale meat into a symbol of Japanese food culture, and eating the “totem animal” of sentimental Westerners can serve to express one’s belonging to “the Japanese tribe.”⁸⁵ Essentialist identity discourses of pro-whalers suggest that whale meat suits the biological DNA and blood of Japanese people.⁸⁶ Further, in the context of an encroaching global “food taboo,” practices of cooking and eating potentially become acts of

81. Cf. Ishii and Okubo 2007, 4.

82. Author’s interview with Kurasawa Nanami (IKAN) and Sakuma Junko (ex-Greenpeace), Tokyo, July 2006.

83. Cf. Kurasawa 2001.

84. Sakuma 2006, 4.

85. Kalland 1998, 23. Indeed, during and after interviews with pro-whaling actors, I was often asked to “prove” my willingness to eat whale meat, as a proxy for my political inclinations.

86. Koizumi 2005, 84.

political resistance. During the 1991 IWC meeting in Reykjavik, the owner of an Osaka whale cuisine restaurant, Ohnishi Mutsuko, cooked and served a fin whale dinner, and according to her, even anti-whaling people joined in the eating.⁸⁷

Nevertheless, the pro-whaling network worries about the small and dwindling consumption of whale meat, not least amongst younger Japanese, and has tried to come up with pro-active ways of enrolling the “public mouth.” The practice of serving whale meat in school lunches has been partially resumed since the 1990s, in selected areas throughout rural Japan. Similarly, the ICR runs a program of school visits, including 50 to 100 schools a year, combining a basic lecture on whale biology with eating opportunities.⁸⁸ Worryingly for the pro-whalers, however, there are indications that most Japanese feel rather indifferent towards whale meat.⁸⁹

To sum up, a cultural master frame pertaining to whaling and whale-based dietary habits has been strongly mobilized by the pro-whaling network, in a politics of national identification. Rather than reflecting some unbroken continuity, however, these cultural discourses represent an active work of “culturalization,” drawing on historical artifacts, anthropological expertise, and whale-eating habitual dispositions to assemble a unified (and glorified) “whaling culture.” In the process, globally legitimized notions of cultural diversity are enrolled for support. Indeed, the partial success of this pro-whaling culture-work is strongly felt by an organization such as Greenpeace, and is reflected in Greenpeace Japan’s meager support base of 5,000 members.⁹⁰

Whales-as-Fish, Food Security, and Ethical Relativity

In the minds of the majority of the Japanese people, whales are not so much a symbol of intelligence as they are symbol of marine food resources.⁹¹

While currently widespread environmental discourses on biodiversity suggest the equal value of all animals and organic life, the reality of human-animal relations is somewhat more differentiated. Clearly, most of the energy behind biodiversity conservation campaigns flows toward animal species approximately the size of, or bigger than, humans; and (blue) whales are after all the largest animals on Earth. In the cynical language of (some) biologists, echoed by Japanese pro-whaling advocates, whales, seals, and elephants are collectively referred to as “charismatic megafauna.”⁹² Such language links directly to pro-whaling discourse on science: anti-whaling NGOs, it suggests, relies on “mediagenic” whales to arouse public emotions, rather than depending on fact and ra-

87. Author’s interview with Ohnishi Mutsuko (*Toku-ya* restaurant), Tokyo, May 2006.

88. Author’s interview with Murakami Mitsuyoshi (ICR), Tokyo, June 2006.

89. Cf. Sakuma 2006.

90. Author’s interview with Sato Junichi (Greenpeace Japan), Tokyo, September 2006.

91. Misaki 1993, 3.

92. Yonezawa 2001, 10.

tionality. Nevertheless, hierarchies in animal popularity are themselves a social fact, and Japanese pro-whaling actors have evidently felt compelled to confront this politics of animal popularity directly.

One unlikely consequence of this confrontation is the way in which the alleged intelligence of whales has become a matter of global political significance. While the science of whale intelligence and “culture” is complex and contested,⁹³ Japanese pro-whaling discourses squarely pronounce the non-intelligence of whales. On the English-language webpage of JWA, for instance, one reads “the proportion of a blue whale’s brain to its body weight is 0.007 percent on the average, as compared with 1.93 percent for human beings.”⁹⁴ In a related fashion, pro-whaling advocates make frequent claims to the effect that whales are “perceived by the Japanese as a kind of fish.”⁹⁵ Implicit in such claims, of course, is a reference to animal hierarchies. The claims gain some credibility from institutionalized features of Japanese culture, notably the Japanese script (*kanji*) character for whale (*kujira*), which includes a radical that means fish (*uoben*).⁹⁶ Nevertheless, it is hard to miss the element of “self-indigenization” at stake. Contemporary Japanese are obviously aware of the basic fact that biological knowledge classifies whales as mammals, not fish.

Nevertheless, the “whales-as-fish” discourse is also institutionalized in Japanese whaling policy, in that power is heavily concentrated in the Fisheries Agency. This reflects the way in which, bureaucratically and scientifically, strong attempts are made to situate whaling issues within larger questions of marine food resources. Apart from the bureaucratic embedding, this linkage is constantly reinforced in the discourses of pro-whaling advocates. For instance, in the introduction to the purpose of ICR, a research institute focused solely on whales, references are nonetheless made to restrictive measures being “imposed internationally on fisheries, including high-seas fisheries.”⁹⁷ Similarly, as one pro-whaling advocate puts it, whaling “is a tip of a very huge iceberg,” referring to Japanese fisheries and other natural resources.⁹⁸

In the discursive politics of pro-whalers, attempts are thus made to defend a principle of sustainable use of marine resources. Undoubtedly, material and symbolic interests in the lucrative (and environmentally problematic) Japanese tuna fishing industry lurk in the background of many pro-whaling discourses.⁹⁹ More explicitly, situating whales in discourses of marine resources serves to link whaling to issues of food security, traditionally a strong concern in Japanese

93. Cf. Rendell and Whitehead 2001.

94. See Japan Whaling Association n.d. Interestingly, similar information does not occur on JWA’s Japanese-language web page. Indeed, the Japanese and English web pages of JWA are generally quite different.

95. Misaki 1996.

96. Hirata 2004, 188, note 17.

97. See Institute for Cetacean Research n.d.

98. Author’s interview with Yonezawa Kunio (GGT), Tokyo, June 2006.

99. Indeed, there is an overlap of people, organisations, and discourses between the two issue areas in Japan (cf. Barclay and Koh 2005).

politics. In a rather extreme twist of identity politics, some pro-whaling advocates thus portray whaling as a conflict between Anglo-Saxon “meat-eaters” whose “anti-fishing movement” threatens Japanese (and Asian) “fish-eaters.”¹⁰⁰ It is not difficult to see how such framings tie in with previously mentioned discourses of Western cultural imperialism. Thus, Shiraishi Yuriko, the leader of the Women’s Forum for Fish, a pro-whaling consumer NGO, argues for an alliance of Asian “fish food cultures” against the West in what she terms the “fish war” of the 21st century.¹⁰¹

In many strands of Japanese pro-whaling discourse, the attempt is generally to reduce the standing of whales in the hierarchy of animals—even to the level of being a pest animal.¹⁰² One often-cited low point occurred in 2001, when Fisheries Agency councilor Masayuki Komatsu referred to minke whales as the “cockroaches of the sea.”¹⁰³ Somewhat contradictorily, however, Japanese pro-whaling discourses also contain frames meant to denote a unique Japanese sensibility toward whales. Buddhist notions of indebtedness to nature, shown in memorial ceremonies (*kuyou*) traditionally performed for the souls of killed whales, are thus invoked as signs of deep-seated respect for whales.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, pro-whaling actors make frequent comparisons between whales and other highly esteemed animals considered eatable in particular places, notably dogs in South Korea and kangaroos in Australia.¹⁰⁵ Such comparisons imply that whales belong to a “special” category of food, while justifying whaling on the basis of the ethical relativism of cultural standards.

Even within pro-whaling discourses, contradictory perceptions of whales are thus visible. Unsurprisingly, this variability increases manifold if one looks at wider public perceptions of whales in Japan, influenced as they are by multiple sources including anti-whaling frames. While analysis of public opinion is beyond the scope of this article, a brief look at a recent survey result is instructive. Asked what terms they associate with the word “whale,” a majority of Japanese respondents answered *both* “whale watching” (77%) and “whale dishes” (62 percent).¹⁰⁶ As in other parts of the world, the popularity of whale watching increased rapidly in Japan during the 1990s, and whale watching has even formed part of a deliberate strategy on the part of Japanese anti-whaling advocates, through a network known as *geisharen* (“whale people band”), to gradually change public perceptions.¹⁰⁷ The survey result may be seen as indicative of

100. Shima 2002, 28.

101. Quoted in Barclay and Koh 2005, 24f.

102. Tellingly, since the late 1990s, ICR has attempted to cast whales as fish-eating predators, competing with humans for scarce fish resources. E.g. Institute of Cetacean Research 2004.

103. “Fishery official defends description of minke whales as cockroaches of sea,” *Japan Times*, 20 July 2001.

104. Komatsu and Misaki 2001, 98.

105. Author’s interview with Misaki Shigeko (JWA), Yokohama, May 2006.

106. Nippon Research 2006.

107. Author’s interview with Iwamoto Hisanori (*geisharen*), Tokyo, October 2006.

just such changes: amongst younger generations of Japanese, the vast majority is now opposed to whaling in the high seas.

To sum up, Japanese pro-whaling actors have chosen to confront the popularity of the anti-whalers' Super-Whale directly, by engaging in a discursive politics of animal ethics. In pro-whaling discourse, whales usually emerge as non-intelligent fish or pest animals, to which no exemptions from principles of human exploitation are warranted. Clearly, what a whale *is*, and how we humans ought to treat it, have become parameters around which an entire identity politics unfolds. In Japanese pro-whaling discourse, killing whales-as-fish has come to symbolize an identity of scientific rationality, cultural integrity, legal righteousness and marine food security. Opposing this killing has been branded as the emotional and illegal cultural imperialism of the anti-fish-eating West, seeking to protect a "mediagenic" phantom. As people have engaged in moral reasoning by means of nature, whales have thus come to symbolize starkly opposing collective identities.¹⁰⁸

Conclusions: Identity Politics and Moral Economization?

This article has argued that, in order to understand why global conflict over whales continues into its fourth decade, one must understand the politics of identity undertaken by the pro-whaling countermovement in Japan. Applying concepts from the political sociology of social movements, this pro-whaling network is conceptualized as an elite-driven countermovement, encompassing powerful actors and organizations from the bureaucratic, political, industrial and cultural spheres. Using international (IWC) and domestic political platforms, this pro-whaling network is actively working to enhance the acceptability of whaling and whale eating, primarily to the domestic Japanese public. In the struggle for moral capital between anti- and pro-whaling communities, both sides have relied on framing strategies entailing the construction of rigid and mutually irreconcilable collective identities. Based on such identity claims, pro-whaling actors have built a comprehensive moral universe, challenging the legitimacy of the globally dominant anti-whaling network of states and NGOs.

Specifically, four master frames of the Japanese pro-whaling identity have been singled out, relating variously to ideas of scientific rationality, cultural integrity, animal ethics, and legal sovereignty.¹⁰⁹ Importantly, while each master frame serves to create a positive self-identification, it simultaneously serves to shame and delegitimize the anti-whaling opponent. Anti-whaling is framed as an emotional, irrational, and illegal attack on the historical legacies and current-day integrity of Japanese whaling communities and national marine-based food culture. Combined with the highly moralized taboo on killing and eating

108. Cf. Brydon 2006, 237.

109. As previously stated, discussion of the master frame of legalism was left out of the analysis for reasons of space.

whales espoused by the anti-whaling movement, and their occasional resort to anti-Japanese identity framings, the stage is set for a spiraling moral confrontation. In this situation, external criticism is likely to fuel internal pro-whaling mobilization, as critics are taken to confirm the negative identity constructs afforded to them. In this moral diseconomy of interlocking and confrontational identity politics, dialogue has nearly disappeared.¹¹⁰

In the moral universe of pro-whalers, appeals are made to a variety of broader ideals and norms, spanning a mixture of domestic and “global” sources of moral capital. For instance, framing the conflict in terms of “science” and “emotionalism” clearly draws on the assumed universal legitimacy of scientific rationality. Nevertheless, the key to understanding the persistence with which the Japanese pro-whaling network justifies whaling may well be the way in which this conflict is framed to resonate with a broader domestic politics of cultural nationalism in Japan. In particular, framing whaling in the idiom of cultural conflict between “Japan” and “the West” resonates with broader societal discourses on Japanese distinctiveness.¹¹¹ National sentiments of pride and humiliation are clearly at stake for pro-whaling elites. Still, as has been pointed out, this elite concern for Japanese “whaling culture” faces increasing indifference, even opposition, amongst members of the Japanese public. As dietary habits shift away from whale meat, as critics gain stronger media presence, and as leisure activities such as whale watching pick up, mass support for pro-whaling ideas seems increasingly fragile, particularly amongst younger generations of Japanese.

Overall, apart from illustrating the general symbolic interactionist insight that movements and countermovements feed off and motivate each other, the whaling case can be taken as a stark illustration of identity-based political mobilization leading to “diseconomy of moral disagreement” on a global scale.¹¹² Nowadays, each side of the controversy tend to demonize the other, multiplying rather than containing the symbolic stakes. Indeed, as previously argued, whaling conflicts are no longer primarily about whales at all, but rather symbolize entire competing political philosophies of nature and society. This conclusion returns us to the three competing normative interpretations—radical politics, simulation, and deliberation—set out briefly in the theoretical section of this article, in order to gauge the significance of whaling controversies in the broader context of contesting “global” environmental norms-in-the-making.

As should be clear from my analysis, Japanese pro-whaling countermobilization thrives to a large extent on framing its fight in the radical political terms of Western cultural domination. This rhetoric self-consciously attempts to link up with voices of the global South, casting CITES conflicts during the 1990s over African elephants as an important precedent: a partly successful fight

110. Epstein 2003.

111. Cf. Yoshino 1992.

112. Cf. Humphrey and Stears 2006.

against Northern “green” imperialism. In tandem with vote buying through ODA, these discursive alliances may help explain why African and Caribbean states are currently joining Japanese pro-whaling efforts. However, one should be careful in scrutinizing this pro-whaling politics of identity and supplement it with an understanding of whaling controversies as simulation. There is little doubt that for Japanese bureaucratic and cultural elites, the moral confrontations over whaling afford a rare, controlled, and low-cost outlet for strong anti-Western assertions of cultural pride and independence. Further, the powerful Fisheries Agency by now has clear political interests in continuing scientific whaling and thus engaging in pro-whaling framing strategies.¹¹³ Most importantly, as has been argued in this article, rather than representing some unbroken continuity, Japanese “whaling culture” should largely be viewed as a re-invented tradition, the outcome of political mobilization by pro-whaling advocates.

The symbolic interactionist perspective advocated in this article is broadly congruent with much recent literature within international relations focusing on transnational norm diffusion—although contrary to most existing case studies of how this process is influencing Japanese politics,¹¹⁴ whaling is obviously a case of active and sustained norm defiance. In particular, as argued by Miyaoka, an important key to understanding this rather exceptional resistance is the illegitimacy of the anti-whaling norm in the collective eyes of Japanese political elites.¹¹⁵ My analysis has traced the construction of this illegitimacy, adding that it must be situated within strategic-symbolic processes of collective identity formation.

Needless to say, however, arguing for the theoretical importance of symbolic-moral framing does not compel the analyst to adopt the normative framework of the actors. Thus, to be clear about my own normative commitments, I want to end by stressing the deliberative approach as a neglected platform in real-world whaling politics. In particular, given the interlocking logic of moral diseconomy, neither pro- nor anti-whaling proponents are seriously responding to a series of legitimate concerns around whales. These range from ecological concerns with endangered species and climate change¹¹⁶ to socio-economic concerns with hardships faced by small-scale coastal whalers in Japan and Norway.¹¹⁷ Further, concerns should be raised with the democratic non-accountability of Japanese pro-whaling policies,¹¹⁸ as well as with unwanted side effects in terms of negative cultural stereotyping emerging from the very confrontational politics of identity itself.

If one aims to resolve these interrelated problems, the analysis presented

113. Cf. Ishii and Okubo 2007.

114. See, e.g., Reimann 2002; Gurowitz 1999; and Miyaoka 2004.

115. Miyaoka 2004, 97.

116. Burns 2000.

117. Kalland and Moeran 1992.

118. Ishii and Okubo 2007.

here suggests that it would require actors on both sides of the controversy to start practicing a certain “moral economization.” In other words, they would be required to stop framing whaling within rigidly constructed and antagonistic moral universes. Realistically, such moral economization is unlikely to come from current elite participants in whaling controversies, who are mostly veterans habitually attuned over 30 years to an antagonistic body language. However, one might wonder what would be the outcome if the global community were to assemble a new “parliament of whales” alongside the IWC. For instance, modeled on the notion of a consensus conference, citizens from various key pro- and anti-whaling states with no prior socialization into the moral diseconomy of whaling might be expected to reach entirely new outcomes. Reshuffling the moral economy and politics of identity around whales along these lines might lead past the current deadlock and into more reasonable ecological, cultural, and political settlements.

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