



Beyond Japan Transcript

[Series 2, Episode 22: The Body Politic with Dr Andreas Musolff](#)

Edited by Oliver Moxham, Host and Producer

OM: Oliver Moxham

AM: Dr Andreas Musolff

OM: Hello and welcome to Beyond Japan. An interdisciplinary podcast looks at the broad reach of Japanese studies from within and beyond Japan. This podcast is brought to you by the Centre of Japanese Studies at the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures, in collaboration with the University of East Anglia. I'm your host, Oliver Moxham, Research Projects Coordinator at the Sainsbury Institute and researcher of language and Japanese war heritage.

This week, we are joined by Dr. Andreas Musolff, professor at the School of Politics, Philosophy, Language and Communication Studies at the University of East Anglia, to discuss the body politic and how metaphors for nations vary across the world. Andreas shares the insights from his recent book, *National Conceptualizations of the Body Politic: Cultural Experience and Political Imagination*, covering an eight-year survey of over 2000 students across 29 countries. We hope you enjoy the show.

OM: Okay, good afternoon, Andreas. Thank you for joining me on the podcast today.

AM: Thank you very much for having me, Oliver.

OM: So first of all, we'd like to know a bit more about you and tell us about your area of expertise and how you're interested about you there?

AM: Well, I'm interested in intercultural communication and in particular in the use of figurative language, especially metaphors and linguistically. They present all manner of interesting issues. They appear in idioms and proverbs and such, and they produce false friends or translation problems. And that's what I've been researching on for quite a while.

OM: And how did you arrive at that area of research?

AM: Well, because I'm a linguist and interested in intercultural communication as metaphors present such an interesting problem area. Everyone has to deal with them, whether it's language learning or translation or the ideas about idioms, et cetera. And metaphors always play a central role, and that's how I got interested in them.

OM: I see. Thank you. So let's begin with unpacking the term "body politic", the imagining of political bodies as a metaphorical physical body. Where does the term come from, and how widespread is this concept across world history?

AM: Okay. The term body politic in present-day English means the whole of the political and social entity of a nation. So we have, for instance, British politic, US body politic, et cetera. But this is a different meaning from that of the term "political body", which refers to institutions such as government, Parliament, et cetera. And the difference, the sheer linguistic difference, between body politic and political body indicates a contrast in meaning, but also a different history.

Body politic dates from the 16th century when adjectives follow the noun rather than preceding it, as in modern English, like political body, which is much more modern. And in fact, body politic is a 16th century

Copyright © 2022 Oliver Moxham, © 2022 Oliver Moxham. May be freely distributed for education purposes.

translation of the late medieval Latin term "corpus politicum", and it has cognated in many other European languages, for instance, "corp politique" in French, and in the 16th century it meant something different from today. It designated the virtual or sacred body of the monarch, the King, as an abstract concept of political theology as opposed to his physical body, the body natural. So a King had two bodies. There is a famous book, "The King's Two Bodies", the body natural and the body political. The body natural was vulnerable and could die. And the same as motto, "The King is dead", body natural, "long live the King", body politic, is connected to this.

So the meaning would be, in modern English, something like the kingship that survives while the individual Royal person dies. And Tudor and Stuart Kings used the concept to legitimate their god-given rule. But in the 17th century, slowly but steadily, the concept changed. It now meant the whole of the state. There's a famous depiction of the state as a man's body in Thomas Hobbes' "Leviathan". And within that concept, the King or Queen is no longer seen as owning the whole body, but as a head of state. And head of state and head of government themselves have become lexicalized expressions in English and have equivalents in many other languages.

OM: I see. And how did this notion change, moving into the industrial era and beyond?

AM: Well, in the industrial era, the political concept as such has not changed that much since the early Enlightenment. So the Enlightenment was the context in which the idea of the whole nation as a body was established. What has changed is the understanding of what are the main organs of the body. And in the 18th and 19th century, you had many mechanistic ideas about the blood circulation and the nerves of the body politic, which did not exist before, but the political unity aspect was established in the 17th century already.

OM: Thank you. So in your 2021 book, "National Conceptualizations of the Body Politic: Cultural Experience and Political Imagination", you have undertaken an impressive eight year survey of over 2000
Copyright © 2022 Oliver Moxham, © 2022 Oliver Moxham. May be freely distributed for education purposes.

students across 29 countries to understand differences by nation between body and person based metaphors for nations. So what inspired you to undertake this wide-ranging survey and what kind of questions were you asking?

AM: Well, the key experience was ten years ago when I taught a class of international students at UEA about the term body politic. And as is usual when you teach international students in English, all the students have English. You use English, as it's called, as a lingua franca. And so the assumption is that everyone understands each other. But just to be sure that the term was understood because it's complex and its form is archaic, I did a little test, a vocab test, and this was part of it, body politic, and it became clear when I looked at the results that the students from Western countries, Asian and Arab backgrounds, had different ideas of what it referred to.

So the UK and US students highlighted the interdependence and hierarchy of the organs in the body politic. And Chinese students, for instance, referred to the contours of the People's Republic of China as a body with cities like Beijing, Shanghai and others as key organs. Interestingly also as it were problem places like Hong Kong and Tibet or Taiwan which were seen variously as missing organs or body parts or that were being reintegrated into the body. And some Arab students spoke of the whole community of Muslims as one body and not of the nation state. So then it became clear that there was cross-cultural variation in the meaning and we discussed it in class and the students were very strongly interested in this and we devised a little questionnaire which then got distributed with the help of many colleagues all over the world and the result is that book that you have referred to which details the differences across different national contexts.

OM: I see. And I guess despite the massive variations between students that there isn't really a wrong answer to give, is there?

AM: No, that was the point. The students had perfectly understood the question and they all gave a valid answer but the answers differed. I mean at first I had just one class and the differences could have been arbitrary but then I looked at in the course of the study which grew and grew over the years and I had in the end more than 2000 respondents and several cohorts were 100 or more respondents strong and then one could see some patterns emerging and it became clear that there was not one culture that had only one interpretation of the metaphor but there were five main patterns, namely:

1) the nation as a body hierarchy from top to bottom or down to the feet; 2) The nation as a geographical body or geo bodies which appeared in these Chinese answers for the first time they appeared in all cohorts; So these are two, but 3) is the nation as part of a larger body, which is relatively rare, but it does occur. So you could say, for instance, until a few years ago that Britain was part of the body of the European Union, and geographically you could still do that, not of the European Union, but of Europe as a continent; 4) There were also interesting and very emphatic answers about the nation as part of the writer's own body. So something like the nation is a blood that runs through my veins, the nation is my heart or in my heart, et cetera, et cetera; And the fifth main pattern (5) was a nation as a person with character traits and age and sex characteristics and social roles, and this was quite often associated with traditional national symbols. So, for instance, Britain or England as Britannia or the United States as Uncle Sam, et cetera.

And one interesting aspect was that overall, the vast majority of characterizations were those of the nation as a benevolent, caring mother, even in nations and languages that have term such as fatherland or in German, Vaterland, etc. So there are ideas about males or male chauvinist ideas about nationalism. But in my data, the vast majority of respondents who were all, it has to be said, students of the age between 18 and 25, the vast majority of them looked at the nation as a caring, sharing, nurturing, benevolent mother rather than a strict father or so.

OM: Fascinating. So I'm intrigued by the regional approach that you took in categorizing trends and body politic metaphors such as your chapter or an Asian perspectives. Was this provide a familiar framework for the reader, or did you find similarities and metaphors in regions with shared linguistic histories?

AM: Yeah, it was a bit of both. There were presentational advantages as well, but the linguistic and cultural contact regions seem to play the biggest role, but also particular national political cultures. So, for instance, English speaking countries that were represented in the survey the UK, the United States, Australia and New Zealand (I didn't get anything from Ireland) share the preference for the top down here hierarchy of the body members. And that, of course, agrees with the conceptual tradition that has been built in political philosophy. English speaking political philosophy. I mentioned Hobbes and there are many other famous authors, so that stood out as a rather obvious cohesion aspect. And another thing was that the English-speaking answers contained the strongest representation of ironical or even sarcastic answers, criticizing the nation person with sometimes even drastic caricatures of the schizophrenic or mad personality of the nation.

OM: I suppose it was quite a time to be doing the survey, wasn't it, for England?

AM: Yeah. Well, but I have to say, if this doesn't play too much to national stereotypes, the US and Australian answers were the strongest one. They brought up things like Frankenstein and so on. The English answers were according to stereotype of a more implicit ironical version of they focused on tea drinking and queuing and having lost much of the national closing thanks to losing the Empire and stuff like that.

OM: So I'd like to unpack the Japanese notions of the body politic a bit more. I wouldn't be able to call it 'Beyond Japan' if I didn't. So I was quite surprised by how some respondents saw the Emperor as the face or heart of the country, despite the Imperial family being constitutionally separated from politics after the Asian Pacific War (1931-45). So what else stood out to you in the responses there?

Copyright © 2022 Oliver Moxham, © 2022 Oliver Moxham. May be freely distributed for education purposes.

AM: Well, interestingly, face and heart were preferred by Japanese respondents over the much more common head or brain, which are the main preferred organ images to refer to the government or the highest hierarchy in most other cultures. So that in itself - face and heart - face is not the same as head or brain, obviously, and it has some outward ceremonial aspect to it or so. And the heart, of course, that is also strongly represented in other contexts. The most glaring characteristic of the Japanese type of answers was an emphasis on the nation's bones, referring to the ancestors' shrine. So they said, "our nations has lots of bones and we visited them". The notion of bones in the body politics did simply not occur in any other cohort at all. It's totally unique for the Japanese one.

Another one, it was very interesting what you said about the role of the Emperor having changed since World War II. Nevertheless, the Japanese cohort showed the strongest emphasis of all national cohorts on the hierarchy of the body parts. So it was, one could almost say, obsessed with hierarchy and always said this is the top body part and this is the lowest body part. 68% of all answers focused on that. And on the other hand, in contrast to the Chinese answers, for instance, but also to most European answers, the personalized characterizations had a very low percentage of just 12%. And this has something to do also with the lack of criticism, because personalized characterizations were used in other cohorts, especially in the English-speaking group, as I just mentioned, for ironical or strongly explicit criticism. And this did not occur at all in the Japanese cohort. So the Japanese cohort had effectively no instance of a critical take on the nation's body.

OM: I like to go into that a bit more because I'm also fascinated by this lack of criticism in both mainland Chinese and Japanese respondents to the body metaphors, while the English respondents were quite happy referring to aspects of the nation as the "anus", "appendix" or rather creatively, a "fungal nail infection." I mean, what do you make of that?

AM: Yes, the English speaking respondents were likely to poke fun at specific body parts and even went into taboo areas such as genitalia and the bottom and so on. As I mentioned, some subsections of the English-speaking group really rejoiced in that almost and drew it out. And for Asian respondents, both Chinese and Japanese, this seems to have been an absolute taboo. It just doesn't occur. Overall, the mainland Chinese and Japanese cohort has the lowest irony criticism ratio of answers, so below 5% in Japanese, effectively zero. And the exception in the Chinese cohort were Hong Kong respondents but they did not use body references but personal characterizations. As I just mentioned, to give a psychological or moral condemnation of the nation and interestingly, this combined with this my own place is part of something bigger. So usually they criticize the mainland Chinese nation and said, we are part of it, but we don't like it. This had to do with the fact that I collected them five to two years ago when there was a strong student movement in Hong Kong quite critical of the relationship to China. I think I wouldn't get such answers nowadays.

But speaking about both groups, the point is that outspoken criticism of the nation in a survey context, and perhaps in other non-private contexts, seems to be frowned upon in Asian societies. And I have a few answers which were too little to count, but also from Vietnam and Thailand, which corroborates that. And the other point is that the body taboo areas are the least available conceptualization for political criticism. So if you criticize, maybe you say something about the personality or so, but you don't go to the taboo area comparisons or something like that. That's just not possible, it seems, in such a context. It may be the case that this happens in other genres or other contexts, but this was, after all, a semi-official educational context, a university environment in which, of course, everything was anonymized and so on, but the respondents were aware that this was a kind of survey in which they had to perform according to the standards that they would assume of polite or acceptable communication. And within that, this radical criticism, using taboo areas for witty comparison seems not to be done.

OM: That's fascinating. Well, thank you for answering all my questions, Andreas. Before we finish the episode, could you share with us what other projects you're currently working on?

Copyright © 2022 Oliver Moxham, © 2022 Oliver Moxham. May be freely distributed for education purposes.

AM: Well, I continue to work on aspects of the relationship between nation, nationalism and body metaphors. But given the circumstances and given the wealth of material, I have now moved on to the context of the pandemic, which has brought out some very interesting body concepts, including, of course, the complex idea of viruses, both in our physical bodies but also in the body politic and what kind of damage they do, how they multiply and change themselves with all the variants, et cetera. And in connection with the rising conspiracy theories, these questions have become an area of major political and cultural conflict, both within and across nations, and are still in the process of being very hotly debated. So I'm looking at these debates, especially the interplay of metaphors and conspiracy theories, very topical, and look forward to seeing what comes out.

OM: Well, thank you for joining me today, Andreas. It's been a real pleasure.

AM: Thank you very much, Oliver, it's been great.

OM: You can find a link to Andreas' research profile in the description below. Don't forget to subscribe on JapanInNorwich.org or on your preferred podcast provider for updates on new episodes. *Beyond Japan* will be taking a break as I have been summoned for jury duty, and I'll be away from the microphone for a short while. We will be back in April with episodes on such topics as the global practice of Japanese woodblock printing and public attitudes towards the death penalty. We hope you will join us then. Thank you for listening.