
Status Hierarchies and Stigma Shifting in International Relations

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Abstract How do states as social actors cope with stigma-induced status anxiety? I propose the concept of “stigma shifting” as a way in which status-anxious states overcompensate for their stigma-induced inferiority and reaffirm their place in the world: by seeking identification with higher-status states and differentiation from lower-status states. In identifying with the desired group of states, stigmatized states engage in approval-seeking behavior and reaffirm their in-group status in areas where they feel discredited. In differentiating themselves from the undesired group, stigmatized states engage in distinction-seeking behavior, claiming their superiority over this “lesser” group in areas that gave rise to their status anxiety in the first place. Stigma shifting, in other words, allows a stigmatized state to take the role of a stigmatizer. To demonstrate the concept’s depth and analytical utility, I draw on the case of East Asia in three disparate issue areas: colonial redress, nuclear disaster, and international order making. Japan, stigmatized in all three areas, has reaffirmed its status by shifting the stigma onto its significant but “lesser” others: China and Korea. Ultimately, stigma shifting solidifies status hierarchies in the world—not just the hierarchy as represented by the “Western” dominance of international society but also the regional hierarchies of the non-Western world.

How do states as social actors cope with status anxiety, a sense of unease about their place in the world? Disparate strands of international relations (IR) research on status,¹ hierarchies,² ontological (in)security,³ and stigma politics⁴ variously tell us that states strive for higher international standing, struggle to feel secure in their own skin, and behave in ways that reflect their consciousness of other states’

1. Davis 2023; Freedman 2016; Haugevik 2015; Larson and Shevchenko 2010; 2019; Leheny 2018; Murray 2018; Renshon 2017.

2. Kang 2020; Lake 2009; Mattern and Zarakol 2016; Park 2017; Suzuki 2009; Zarakol 2017.

3. Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020; Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020; Mitzen 2006; Pacher 2019; Steele 2008; Zarakol 2010.

4. Adler-Nissen 2014; Kurowska and Reshetnikov 2021; Pacher 2019; Rogstad 2022a, 2022b; Saha 2022; Sauer and Reveraert 2018; Smetana 2020; Zarakol 2011, 2014.

judgments of them. One common thread emerges out of these findings: states as social actors compare themselves to others as they make sense of their place in the world.

Drawing on the literature at the intersection of status and stigma in world politics, I propose the concept of *stigma shifting* as an undertheorized way in which stigmatized states as social actors reaffirm their place in the world. More specifically, stigma shifting allows status-anxious states to cope with their sullied reputations and reaffirm their status by engaging in upward and downward status comparisons at the same time, identifying with higher-status states and differentiating themselves from lower-status states. When seeking identification with higher-status states, states engaging in stigma shifting do not merely emphasize their worthiness as a member of that group by tooting their own horn; instead, they assert their supposed superiority *vis-à-vis* other, supposedly lower-status states in areas where they feel discredited and stigmatized. In doing so, these stigmatized states overcompensate for their perceived deficiency: rather than engaging in “normal” striving behavior, they shift their stigma onto others by claiming relative superiority in areas that gave rise to their status anxiety to begin with.

I apply the concept of stigma shifting to Japan’s seemingly puzzling interactions with the international community (as represented by the “West”) on the one hand and East Asian “significant others”—South Korea (hereafter Korea) and China—on the other hand. I conduct three original case studies in issue areas that otherwise appear entirely unconnected: colonial redress, nuclear disaster, and international order making. More specifically, I focus on Japan’s (1) dealings with victims of Japan’s colonial and wartime atrocities, especially the Korean wartime sex slaves known euphemistically as “comfort women”; (2) management of the tsunami-hit Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant; and (3) construction of the Indo-Pacific as a new geostrategic grouping. Drawing on government statements and documents, I show that Japan, as a status-anxious social actor, has sought to overcome stigma in all three areas—as an apparently impenitent colonizer, an incompetent handler of the nuclear disaster, and a defeated aggressor newly shamed for security free riding, respectively—in ways that cannot be adequately accounted for by existing explanations. Japan’s approval-seeking and distinction-seeking behavior in these instances is aimed at simultaneously demonstrating its worthiness as a member of the higher-status community of states and claiming superiority *vis-à-vis* its supposedly lower-status East Asian neighbors. This dual approach has had the effect of solidifying status hierarchies both globally and regionally.

This paper makes the following contributions. Theoretically, the concept of stigma shifting explicitly incorporates downward comparisons as part of status evaluation and reaffirmation. Doing so adds a vertical dimension to theories of status and stigma in IR, further complicating the dynamics of status politics in the international system. The concept also contributes to the theorization of overcompensation as a potential outcome of stigmatization in international politics,⁵ which broadens the

5. Zarakol 2014, 317.

toolkit available to states struggling to manage their stigma. Empirically, Japan's upward comparisons with the "West" and downward comparisons with the "East" further demonstrate how liminal states deal with status hierarchies.⁶ Selecting issue areas in which Japan is least likely to proclaim superiority provides a hard test for the concept. The three dissimilar cases also demonstrate the concept's depth and analytical utility.⁷ Ultimately, this paper shows that status anxiety, when manifested in the form of stigma shifting, is far from being a destabilizing force in international politics, as much of the status literature presumes.⁸ Instead, stigma shifting reinforces the real and imagined status hierarchies in the world—not only the hierarchy as represented by the "Western" dominance of international society⁹ but also the regional hierarchies of the non-Western world. As an originally stigmatized state assumes the role of a stigmatizer in its sphere of influence, stigma is replicated, and stigma-based world hierarchies are reproduced as regional hierarchies.

Status and Stigma in World Politics

Status is defined as "the relative social or professional standing of someone or something in a formal or informal social hierarchy."¹⁰ Status in world politics rests on "collective beliefs about a state's standing and membership" based on its possession of desirable attributes.¹¹ Measuring one's status involves comparisons with others, and states do a host of things to improve their standing *vis-à-vis* others—or, more precisely, *vis-à-vis* "significant others".¹² they assert themselves militarily,¹³ make domestic changes that conform to international expectations,¹⁴ aspire to membership in select international organizations,¹⁵ and try to outperform each other on global performance indicators.¹⁶

Whether acknowledged explicitly or implicitly, status presumes a hierarchy, defined as "any system through which actors are organized into vertical relations of super- and subordination."¹⁷ With the proliferation of research on hierarchy, it is no longer controversial to state that hierarchy and organized inequality, as opposed to anarchy and sovereign equality, shape much of state behavior across vast swathes of space and time.¹⁸ The present study engages with the "logic of

6. Zarakol 2011.

7. Gerring 1999, 379–80.

8. MacDonald and Parent 2021.

9. Adler-Nissen 2014; Zarakol 2011, 2014.

10. Kelley and Simmons 2019, 498.

11. MacDonald and Parent 2021, 360.

12. Haugevik 2015; Renshon 2017.

13. Murray 2018; Renshon 2017.

14. Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 2013; Risse et al. 1999; Simmons 2009.

15. Davis 2023.

16. Beaumont and Towns 2021; Kelley and Simmons 2020.

17. Mattern and Zarakol 2016, 624.

18. Kang 2020; Lake 2009; Mattern and Zarakol 2016; Zarakol 2017.

positionality” strand of status hierarchy research, where a shared recognition of status-based hierarchies and states’ positions within them—namely, “‘above’, ‘below’ or ‘at the same level as’ one another”¹⁹—shapes state behavior.²⁰ Research shows that states have a broad view of their identity, which includes a belief about where they belong (or want to belong) on a status ladder.²¹

Given the apparent omnipresence of status hierarchies, do states—and the people within them—feel status anxiety, a sense of unease about their place in the world? The consensus in the literature is that status differentiation motivates states to “move up” the ladder and attain a higher status rank,²² which shows that states are not always content with their current place in the stratified world. Building on insights from sociology and psychology, IR scholars are increasingly theorizing anxiety as a motivator of state action and inaction in international politics.²³ The vast literature on ontological security, for example, shows that states, like individuals, are motivated not only by their need for physical security but also by their need to feel a secure, stable, and consistent sense of self.²⁴

The disparate strands of IR research on status and ontological insecurity beg the question of whether states are inherently and equally status-anxious. Judging from much of the status literature, states seem to almost universally strive for greater status. A recent survey of the literature shows that “status hierarchies are common in world politics” and that “states crave high perches within these hierarchies.”²⁵ Still, some states are more status-wary than others, at least some of the time. Such concepts as “revisionist states” (as opposed to “status quo states”) and “ontological (in)security” would not have gained currency if all states were inherently and equally status-conscious at all times. While some argue that ontological security is never fully attainable, varying degrees of anxiety still exist.²⁶

Some of this anxiety is about stigma, a source of status loss.²⁷ Stigmatization causes “shame and humiliation,” which are “emotional outgrowths of existential anxiety.”²⁸ After all, the flip side of status aspirations, as indicated by efforts to acquire desirable attributes, is anxiety about the stigma associated with failing to do so.²⁹ This study builds on a subset of studies that focus on status-related anxiety in international politics as it relates to stigma. IR research on stigma extends Goffman’s³⁰ classic study of stigma in social life and applies it to the

19. Adler-Nissen 2014, 200.

20. Mattern and Zarakol 2016, 637–40.

21. Evers 2017, 789.

22. Mattern and Zarakol 2016, 644.

23. For an overview, see Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020; Krickel-Choi 2022.

24. Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008.

25. MacDonald and Parent 2021, 359–60.

26. Krickel-Choi 2022, 9–14.

27. Adler-Nissen 2014, 146.

28. Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020, 249; Steele 2008, 13; Zarakol 2010, 20.

29. Zarakol 2011, 243.

30. Goffman 1963.

international realm. If Goffman talks about the stigmatized of his time—people with disabilities, for example—IR scholars have talked about countries stigmatized for being, among other things, “backward” or “authoritarian.”³¹ Similarly, what Goffman calls “normals,” or “those who do not depart negatively from the particular expectations at issue,”³² has been extended to the global “audience of normals”—the stigmatizers who decide what is appropriate and inappropriate in international politics.³³ Such popularized terms as “renegade regimes” and “rogue states” indicate the presence of a judgment, at least in the liberal democratic West, about what constitutes normality and deviance in state behavior.³⁴ This audience of normals is often synonymous with the “West,” most notably the United States and the European Union.³⁵

In international politics, status, status anxiety, and stigma are intertwined with the question of state identity. Zarakol draws on the cases of Turkey, Japan, and Russia to show how these defeated, non-Western former empires sought to Westernize to overcome the stigma associated with their inferior, outsider status.³⁶ Similarly, Turkey and Japan struggle to come to terms with their past atrocities because their insecurity about their standing in the world makes it difficult for them to reconfigure their identity narratives.³⁷ Stigma-induced status anxiety also motivates “post-Soviet de facto states,” such as the Donetsk People’s Republic, to establish their identity as “normal” states by pursuing seemingly meaningless diplomatic relations.³⁸ India’s anxiety about its stigmatized pursuit of nuclear capabilities drives an identity-management strategy based on selective compliance with nuclear norms.³⁹ Greeks’ self-stigmatizing discourses during the Eurozone crisis⁴⁰ and Chinese overtures to African states as a means of overcoming international isolation in the 1960s⁴¹ have also been analyzed as expressions of status anxiety.

As these studies show, states do more than passively accept the stigma imposed on them. As Goffman showed for stigmatized individuals and groups, stigmatized states have various coping strategies. Adler-Nissen provides three categories for how states manage a stigmatized image: stigma *recognition*, whereby states accused of deviance correct their behavior and act like stigma imposers would; stigma *rejection*, whereby states refuse to accept stigma and assert instead that they are not unlike others; and *counter-stigmatization*, whereby states embrace the stigma and turn it into a source of pride.⁴² Saha added the concept of stigma *redaction*, whereby states occasionally,

31. Zarakol 2011, 11.

32. Goffman 1963, 5.

33. Adler-Nissen 2014, 152.

34. Nincic 2005; Wagner, Werner, and Onderco 2014.

35. Hatuel-Radoshitzky and Jamal 2022.

36. Zarakol 2011.

37. Zarakol 2010.

38. Pacher 2019.

39. Saha 2022.

40. Adler-Nissen 2017, 199.

41. Suzuki 2017, 240.

42. Adler-Nissen 2014.

but not consistently, engage in corrective behavior to prevent themselves from being permanently stigmatized.⁴³ Rogstad and Sauer and Reveraert have identified the category of stigma *evasion*, whereby states attempt to evade stigma by interpreting deviance differently or minimizing deviance's negative implications.⁴⁴ Stigma evasion conceptually overlaps with such sociological concepts as neutralization techniques,⁴⁵ accounts,⁴⁶ and interpretive and implicatory denial⁴⁷—all of which equip states with rhetorical tools to manage their stigma. For example, deviant behavior can be justified on the grounds that little harm was done or that it was necessary for a higher cause.⁴⁸ Lastly, Kurowska and Reshetnikov demonstrate that these stigma-management categories are not always distinct; a single actor may embody more than one. States—notably Russia—sometimes engage in what the authors call *trickstery* by simultaneously deriding and defending norms being promoted by the stigmatizers. Performing trickstery involves overidentification with the promoted norms—or a theatrical “imitation of the Western normative script.”⁴⁹

Stigma Shifting

Following the tradition of the “social ‘actorness’” of states in international society,⁵⁰ I propose stigma *shifting* as an undertheorized way in which status-anxious states, being mindful of both higher-status and lower-status states as reference groups, manage their stigma and reaffirm a sense of their place in the world: by ennobling themselves (that is, identifying with higher-status states) and stigmatizing others (that is, demonstrating superiority over, and emphasizing the inferiority of, lower-status states) in the area of perceived deficiency. In the social world, “the attribution by status” can be “positive (ennobling) or negative (stigmatizing).”⁵¹ As identification and differentiation happen in the area of perceived deficiency, status-anxious states shift the stigma originally imposed on them onto other, supposedly lower-status states. The term *shifting* here is used to highlight the dynamic and hierarchical nature of transferring one's externally imposed stigma onto another, which has the effect of allowing a stigmatized state to take the role of a stigmatizer. Stigma shifters ultimately seek to reaffirm their desired place in the world, as part of the high-status club and ahead of the rest of the pack.

More specifically, stigma shifting has three components: status anxiety stemming from stigma, a source of status loss; efforts aimed at identification with high-status

43. Saha 2022.

44. Rogstad 2022a, 2022b; Sauer and Reveraert 2018.

45. Sykes and Matza 1957.

46. Scott and Lyman 1968.

47. Cohen 2001.

48. Sykes and Matza 1957, 667–69; for an IR application, see Smetana 2020.

49. Kurowska and Reshetnikov 2021, 242.

50. Smetana 2020, 32.

51. Bourdieu 1987, 23.

groups in areas where one is stigmatized; and efforts aimed at differentiation from lower-status groups in areas where one is stigmatized. The first component motivates stigma shifting, and as states engage in the second component, they simultaneously resort to the third component. In identifying with the desired group, the stigmatized engage in approval-seeking behavior and reaffirm their in-group status in areas where they feel discredited and anxious (that is, a source of stigma). In differentiating themselves from the undesired group, the stigmatized engage in distinction-seeking behavior, claiming their superiority over this “lesser” group in areas that gave rise to their status anxiety in the first place.

That states seek higher status—the second component of stigma shifting—comes as no surprise. The status literature is united in its focus on states’ status-enhancing behavior, with higher-status states—for example, great powers, economic giants, and soft power superpowers—as a reference group. In other words, states make an “upward comparison.”⁵² Even when states make temporal comparisons about their status over time, status anxieties arise when the past is more glorious than the present⁵³—another type of upward comparison. IR research on stigma similarly focuses on stigmatized states as inferior members of the international community, with higher-status states, as represented by the audience of normals, as enforcers of normality and appropriateness.⁵⁴ Less theorized is the third component of stigma shifting: lower-status groups as a potential reference group. If anything, the possibility of lower-status states playing any role in states’ self-assessment of their status is sometimes completely ruled out: “States measure themselves against a reference group that is equal or higher in status, not a lower one.”⁵⁵

The very definition of status hierarchy, however, means that knowing one’s place in the world involves comparing oneself to two groups: those supposedly above and below oneself in a given hierarchy. Social psychology research, which has partially formed the basis of the IR literature at the intersection of status and stigma, has long established that social comparisons serve as a means of self-evaluation.⁵⁶ These comparisons are directional: upward and downward. According to downward comparison theory, individuals whose sense of well-being is undermined compare themselves to others with supposedly lower status in order to feel better about themselves.⁵⁷ The more insecure one feels about one’s status, the stronger one’s need is to believe in the inferiority of lower-status groups.⁵⁸ Similarly, sociological research attests to the importance of lower-status groups in establishing a sense of group position. Group status positioning in a given hierarchy is based on a dominant group’s sense of superiority over, and distinctiveness from, a subordinate group. This sense

52. Larson and Shevchenko 2010, 68.

53. Freedman 2016.

54. Adler-Nissen 2014; Rogstad 2022a, 2022b; Saha 2022; Zarakol 2014.

55. Larson and Shevchenko 2019, 172.

56. Festinger 1954.

57. Wheeler and Miyake 1992; Wills 1981.

58. Harding et al. 1969.

of group position becomes especially salient when a dominant group feels that a subordinate group poses a threat to its privileged position—in other words, when a lower-status group serves as a reference group.⁵⁹ Social identity research further supports the third component of stigma shifting. A positive in-group identity is attainable by means of “differentiation” from an out-group, which involves “maintain[ing] or achiev[ing] superiority over an out-group.”⁶⁰

Scaling up, self-evaluation by status-anxious states as social actors also involves both upward and downward comparisons. Indeed, findings from seminal IR studies on stigma implicitly suggest the importance of lower-status groups in status assessment. The very act of stigma imposition, for example, can be seen as an attempt by ontologically insecure states to reaffirm their identity by relegating others to the margins of international society.⁶¹ Similarly, lower-status states loom large in the worldview of the states on the receiving end of stigmatization as long as their drive to identify with a higher-status group is intertwined with their awareness of a lower-status group and the desire to dissociate from it.⁶² For these status-anxious states seeking identification with high-status states, lower-status states are an out-group from which they seek differentiation. In other words, any given state’s “significant others” include lower-status states along with high-status states.

Stigma shifting as a means of status reaffirmation enables these status-anxious states to demonstrate superiority over lower-status reference groups. Rather than straightforward correction, however, stigma shifting can be understood as attempted *overcompensation*—a possible outcome of stigmatization in international politics⁶³ that remains undertheorized. Stigmatized groups and individuals are aware of their inferior status in a given hierarchy. Such awareness results in compensatory efforts, including in the area of perceived deficiency.⁶⁴ Often, those who are hypersensitive about their perceived inferiority feel the compulsion to compensate by striving for superiority.⁶⁵ The difference between compensation and overcompensation is a matter of degree. According to sociologists and psychologists, overcompensation goes beyond “normal” striving; it involves overzealous compensatory efforts to over-excel in the area of perceived deficiency, which reduces or masks a sense of insecurity.⁶⁶ As status-anxious states’ efforts to overcome their stigma-induced inferiority are demonstrated in the form of asserting superiority over “lesser” states, their compensatory efforts go beyond “normal” striving as represented by stigma recognition and behavioral correction;⁶⁷ instead, they border on overcompensation.

59. Blumer 1958; Bobo 1999; for an application in IR, see Kobayashi et al. 2020.

60. Tajfel and Turner 1979, 41.

61. Adler-Nissen 2014, 150.

62. Suzuki 2009, 145; Zarakol 2010, 11, 2011, 249.

63. Zarakol 2014, 317.

64. Goffman 1963; Shih 2004.

65. Adler 1979; for an IR application of Adler, see Snyder 2020.

66. Ansbacher and Ansbacher 1956; Mosak and Maniaci 1999; Willer et al. 2013.

67. Adler-Nissen 2014; Saha 2022.

Having laid out the three components of stigma shifting, I now turn to three scope conditions for use of the concept: anxiety about stigma as an undesirable source of status loss; plausible claim to membership in both higher-status and lower-status groups; and the perceived threat posed by lower-status reference groups. These scope conditions establish when states will turn to stigma shifting rather than other stigma-management strategies.

First, that states should feel anxious about stigma as an unwanted source of status loss means that the stigmatized accept the broadly shared understanding of appropriateness and deviance. While this may be stating the obvious, the concept of counter-stigmatization illustrates that not every state on the receiving end of stigmatization will treat it as a shameful marker of deviance; instead, counter-stigmatizers see stigma as “an emblem of pride”⁶⁸ and challenge the very social understanding of deviance.⁶⁹ Indeed, for some states, intentional norm violations become central to their identity.⁷⁰ In this sense, the first scope condition eliminates the possibility of states’ opting for counter-stigmatization and outright transgression as responses to stigma imposition.

Second, status-wary states should be able to plausibly claim membership in both higher-status and lower-status groups. This liminal state influences states’ sense of where they belong (and want to belong) in a given hierarchy.⁷¹ Given the seemingly universal penchant for high status, states would rather be seen as deserving members of the former group. Being part of a higher-status group means states should respond to stigma by striving—a condition that eliminates the possibility of stigma rejection, defined as an insistence on the part of the stigmatized that it is no different from the stigmatizers.⁷²

Lastly, the perceived threat of lower-status reference groups enables overcompensation. Without this condition, states may opt for stigma recognition, accepting and rectifying their perceived deficiencies.⁷³ While all states arguably have lower-status reference groups, their salience varies. Group position theory, discussed earlier, specifies a necessary condition for the salience of a lower-status reference group: its perceived threat to some form of group exclusivity jealously guarded by a higher-status group.⁷⁴

Stigma shifting explains state behavior that is not fully captured by previously studied stigma management strategies. To demonstrate the concept’s usefulness in terms of differentiation,⁷⁵ I compare it to stigma recognition/acceptance, counter-stigmatization, stigma evasion, and trickstery. First, while stigma shifting involves

68. Adler-Nissen 2014, 153–54.

69. Rogstad 2022b, 4.

70. Evers 2017.

71. *Ibid.*, 789.

72. Adler-Nissen 2014, 154.

73. *Ibid.*, 153.

74. Blumer 1958; Bobo 1999; for an application in IR, see Kobayashi et al. 2020.

75. Gerrig 1999.

efforts toward destigmatization by seeking approval from the audience of normals, it goes beyond mere acceptance of stigma. While aspirations for higher status drive both of these stigma-management strategies, overcompensation is a necessary component of stigma shifting but is not required for stigma recognition/acceptance. Stigma shifting, unlike stigma acceptance, entails “punching down” as a means of proclaiming relative superiority.

Second, stigma shifting is differentiated from counter-stigmatization because the former indicates defensive hyperawareness of one’s stigma as a source of unwanted status loss rather than a source of pride. And whereas counter-stigmatizers identify with the stigmatized or, relatedly, with a “counter-audience,”⁷⁶ stigma shifters do the opposite: they identify with a higher-status audience of normals. Adding to Adler-Nissen’s conceptualization, scholars have highlighted specific rhetorical techniques as key features of counter-stigmatization: highlighting positive aspects of deviant behavior by citing a greater cause;⁷⁷ and discrediting the discreditors.⁷⁸ Two points can be made here. First, specific rhetorical strategies (such as citing higher loyalties) are not a necessary conceptual component of stigma shifting. Second, stigma shifters differentiate between higher-status and lower-status states as potential discreditors. Their pursuit of distinction from lower-status states can take the form of discrediting the “lower-status” discreditors.

Finally, let us consider stigma evasion and trickstery. Stigma evasion entails various interpretive and implicatory justifications, excuses, and denials,⁷⁹ while stigma shifting is not tied to specific rhetorical strategies. And unlike trickstery,⁸⁰ stigma shifting does not involve theatrical derision of norms or defiance of the higher-status stigmatizers.

Stigma Shifting in East Asia

I demonstrate the usefulness of the concept by drawing on Japan’s recent stigma-shifting behavior in the areas of colonial redress, nuclear disaster, and international order making. The following case studies highlight how, in these seemingly unconnected issue areas, Japan has dealt with its stigma and reaffirmed its status by, on the one hand, identifying with high-status states—that is, the frequently invoked “international community” (*kokusai shakai*), which in practice refers mainly to the audience of normals represented by the West—and, on the other hand, differentiating itself from its supposedly lower-status yet significant East Asian “others”: Korea and China.

To be sure, Japan—both prewar and postwar Japan—has a reputation for being a status-anxious state. There is a broad consensus among observers that Japan is

76. Adler-Nissen 2014, 153; Rogstad 2022a, 5, 2022b, 8–9; Suzuki 2017, 226.

77. Sauer and Reveraert 2018, 447.

78. Rogstad 2022a, 4, 2022b, 4.

79. Rogstad 2022a, 2022b; Sauer and Reveraert 2018.

80. Kurowska and Reshetnikov 2021.

“especially sensitive to the perception abroad of [its] role in international society.”⁸¹ Based on a “strong hierarchical worldview,” Japan constantly assesses its relative international stature.⁸² As the first Asian country to gain membership in the European great power club,⁸³ Japan can claim membership in both the West and Asia. Its insecurity, however, comes from the realization that it is not “securely anchored” anywhere.⁸⁴ Meiji Japan’s (1868–1912) goal of *datsu-Ā nyū-Ō*, literally “leaving Asia and entering Europe,” seems to remain tantalizingly close yet perpetually unfulfilled. Further adding to Japan’s status anxiety in more recent years is the ascendance of China and Korea as significant East Asian “others.”⁸⁵ While their “similarity, proximity, and situational salience” make them a reference group,⁸⁶ Japan has sought distinction from them.

One way that Meiji Japan dealt with its perceived inferiority *vis-à-vis* Europe was by “invent[ing] Japan’s own ‘Orient,’” namely China and Korea, and assuming the role of the West in the region *vis-à-vis* its Asian, “Eastern” neighbors.⁸⁷ However, this supposedly lower-status group is becoming an increasingly threatening one. Although Japan was once a role model that could teach China and Korea how they too could become “civilized,”⁸⁸ the country has worn this badge of honor “with as much pride as it has shown its terror at losing it.”⁸⁹ China has replaced Japan as the world’s second-largest economy, and some economic indicators place Korea’s living standards above Japan’s, just as Japan, once the biggest economy in Asia, struggles to put behind its lost decade(s) of economic recession. Meanwhile, China’s aggressive foreign policy is considered a threat to Japan, while Japanese politicians struggle to loosen institutional constraints on the use of force. Even Japan’s status as a soft power superpower has taken a hit due to the meteoric rise of Korean pop culture. While Japan may be able to stomach that the days of “Japan as [the world’s potential] Number One”⁹⁰ are long gone, it now faces a new reality in which it can no longer claim to be Asia’s Number One. Despite this, or perhaps for this very reason, Japan continues to search for ways in which, even in its apparent decline, it can guide the rest of the world.⁹¹

While Japan may be an obvious candidate for a study on status anxiety in world politics, the disparate cases this study focuses on—colonial redress, the Fukushima nuclear disaster, and the construction of the Indo-Pacific—make Japan a hard case for stigma shifting. Japan has been deeply stigmatized in all three issue areas,

81. Davis 2023, 253.

82. Park 2017, 12.

83. Suzuki 2009, 179.

84. Zarakol 2010, 18.

85. Kobayashi et al. 2020.

86. Tajfel and Turner 1979, 41.

87. Lim 2022, 182.

88. Suzuki 2009, 180.

89. Lewis 2024.

90. Vogel 1979.

91. Leheny 2018.

making it highly unlikely for the country to assert superiority there. First, Japan's past wrongdoings as an imperial power remain a source of stigma nearly eight decades after the end of World War II. The country's global reputation as "the model impenitent" continues to elicit frequent, unfavorable comparisons to Germany.⁹² In particular, Japan's brutal colonial rule of Korea (1910–45) makes the case of colonial redress a seemingly clear-cut story of perpetrators and victims, with relatively clear (if contested) normative expectations about the former's responsibility for the latter. As UN human rights bodies continue to remind Japan, there are broadly shared expectations about what Japan should do to provide full redress to the "comfort women"—women, most of them Korean, who were mobilized to provide sexual services to Japanese troops from 1932 to 1945. The fact that Japan, long stigmatized for its alleged lack of contrition, claims superiority over Korea in this issue area is a puzzling development that cannot be fully explained by the typical state behavior of norm evasion.

Second, Japan's handling of the 2011 triple disaster—an earthquake, a tsunami, and a meltdown at the nuclear power plant in Fukushima—bruised its global reputation and self-image as a technology superpower, a leader of disaster management, and a safe and attractive country that tourists flock to. Given the colossal magnitude of this man-made disaster and the "psychic damage" it caused the historically nuclear-wary population,⁹³ as well as the universal criticism of Japan's incompetent political, corporate, and regulatory leadership,⁹⁴ Japan's claims of superiority in this issue area appear counterintuitive. Also arguably counterintuitive is the aggressive manner in which Japan has denigrated Korea and China—its two neighbors, who are, in part by virtue of geographical proximity (if also due to blatant political motivation), bound to react more viscerally to Japan's decision to release treated radioactive water into the ocean. Overcompensation as indicated in the claims of superiority goes beyond the mere national branding of post-Fukushima Japan and reflects Japan's hyperawareness of its stigma.

Third, Japan has attempted to shape international order, as attested by its promotion of the Indo-Pacific construct under the vision of a "free and open Indo-Pacific." This geostrategic initiative is striking because Japan has suffered a deep, enduring stigma over its imperial past. Japan's status as a defeated aggressor has long prevented the country from asserting itself—let alone claiming leadership—in international security affairs. Indeed, Japan's preoccupation with its post-World War II economic ascendance is attributed to how the country, stigmatized and humiliated, sought to catch up with the West.⁹⁵ Ironically, however, Japan's imposed anti-militarism, a byproduct of the original stigma of being a wartime aggressor,⁹⁶ has evolved into a new source of stigma: Japan as a security free rider. That Japan has since taken initiatives in international order making with explicit security

92. Berger 2012.

93. Glosserman 2019, 130.

94. Samuels 2013; Sternsdorff-Cisterna 2019.

95. Zarakol 2011.

96. C.J. Kim 2023, 42–43.

implications indicates a reformulation of its state identity. There is a certain irony in how Japan has gone about assuming that leadership role, which has had the effect of ostracizing China and (until recently) alienating Korea—the two most prominent victims of Japanese aggression, the original source of stigma. Nonetheless, no previous study has analyzed Japan's Indo-Pacific initiatives from the perspective of status and stigma.

In addition to setting up a hard test for Japan, these cases demonstrate that stigma shifting can occur across widely different contexts, which indicates the depth of the concept “as shorthand for those [commonly found] instances/characteristics.”⁹⁷ With the goal of conceptual development, the following case studies are structured along the three key features of stigma shifting: status anxiety as it relates to stigma; identification with higher-status states (which, in the case of Japan, is repeatedly manifested by assertions of self-worth as a respectable member of the international community, particularly the West); and differentiation from lower-status states (as repeatedly manifested by aggressive assertions of superiority over China and Korea). In making this argument, I rely as much as possible on primary data: official Japanese government statements, including speeches given by prime ministers; press briefings by the foreign ministry and the Cabinet Office; and government reports submitted to the UN.

Case 1: Colonial Redress

Stigma and Status Anxiety

Hyperconscious of its reputation for historical impenitence, the Japanese government defines rectifying its sullied image as one of its “core national interests.”⁹⁸ What particularly rankles Japan is more than thirty years of international condemnation over the comfort women issue, which has become a global symbol of conflict-related sexual violence since the issue's emergence in the early 1990s. Much to Japan's chagrin, the issue remains controversial despite its redress efforts. In 1995, Japan established the Asian Women's Fund to compensate victims in multiple Asian countries. But this failed to put the issue to rest, especially in Korea, where many victims and their advocates boycotted the fund.⁹⁹ In 2015, Japan made another attempt to put an end to the dispute, which I see as a turning point that enabled stigma shifting.

In 2015, Japan and Korea announced a diplomatic agreement that, ambitiously and reportedly without the victims' consent, declared the comfort women issue “resolved finally and irreversibly.” Notably, the deal came with a rare nondisparagement clause that illustrates the remarkable extent to which Japan cared about its reputation among the audience of normals: “[Japan and Korea] will refrain from accusing or criticizing

97. Gerring 1999, 379–80.

98. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2017.

99. C.J. Kim 2022.

each other regarding this issue in the international community, including at the United Nations.”¹⁰⁰ Given that Japan has been on the receiving end of criticisms at the UN, it is clear what function this clause was supposed to serve. Indeed, Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzō’s motivation for negotiating the agreement had much to do with Japan’s hyperawareness of the internalized stigma attached to its imperial past: in his own words, he was liberating himself, as well as his successors, from ever having to “mention even the character *i* [which means “to comfort”] in *ianfu* [comfort women] again.”¹⁰¹ It is no coincidence that the 2015 agreement came in the same year Abe marked the seventieth anniversary of Japan’s defeat (though politicians like Abe avoid the word *defeat* and say “the end of the war” instead) with the following declaration: “We must not let our children, grandchildren, and even further generations to come, who have nothing to do with that war, be predestined to apologize.”¹⁰²

Identification

I now turn to the first feature of stigma shifting: seeking approval from, and thereby identifying with, the audience of normals. The 2015 agreement soon stalled due to public and political opposition in Korea. President Park Geun-hye, who reached the agreement, was driven out of office over a separate political scandal in 2017. Her successor, Moon Jae-in, was critical of the agreement and left it in an ambiguous state: he dissolved the Japan-funded foundation, a crucial pillar of the agreement, but stopped short of renouncing the agreement or demanding a renegotiation.

As the deal faltered, Japan sought to draw legitimacy from the praise the agreement had received from the audience of normals. In particular, approval from the UN and the United States—the two most important stigmatizers of Japan—became the first line of defense against the implosion of the agreement.¹⁰³ In a 2016 document prepared for consideration by the UN’s Committee Against Torture, a vocal critic of Japan’s handling of the issue, Japan said it hopes to “draw the attention of the Committee to the fact that the international community is now welcoming the agreement,” pointing to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s celebration of it.¹⁰⁴ Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide (who later succeeded Abe as prime minister), as he explained why Japan was calling on Korea to implement the agreement, stated: “Even the Secretary-General of the United Nations went as far as to issue a statement welcoming the agreement.”¹⁰⁵ Japan made the same appeal to the secretary-general’s authority in its seventh periodic report to the Human Rights Committee in 2020.¹⁰⁶

100. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2015.

101. Abe 2023, 171.

102. Abe 2015.

103. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2021.

104. Government of Japan 2016, 2.

105. Suga 2018.

106. Human Rights Committee 2020, 23.

Citing the approval of the audience of normals became a stock expression for Japan, which repeatedly emphasized that the 2015 agreement was “highly valued by the international community, including the United States,”¹⁰⁷ and again “highly praised overseas, including the United States.”¹⁰⁸

Differentiation

The second feature of stigma shifting is manifested in Japan’s attempts to distinguish itself from the inferior Asian “other” and assert its worthiness as a responsible member of the international community. In many ways, the derailment of the 2015 agreement—which, for those who boycotted the agreement for its alleged shortcomings, was meant to be a victory—had an unintended consequence: it enabled stigma shifting.

Following the implosion of the deal, Japan began to claim that it was “morally superior” to Korea in the area of colonial and war responsibility. This is a vexing development for Korea, the most vocal of all the victim countries, which used to claim the position of moral superiority *vis-à-vis* Japan. For example, Kim Young-sam, who came to office in 1993 as Korea’s first civilian president after three decades of authoritarian rule, declared that his country, from the position of “moral superiority” (*dodeok-jeok uwi*), will not seek material compensation from Japan but will instead ask the country to reveal the historical truth about the comfort women issue. The botched 2015 agreement, however, allowed Japan to turn the tables, at least rhetorically. In a memoir published posthumously in 2023, Abe claimed that Japan was able to seize the “moral high ground”—he used the English term—on the issue.

Japan’s moral superiority, according to Abe, stems from the fact that Korea has failed to implement the agreement and thereby broken a promise made in front of the international community—a “witness” to the deal.¹⁰⁹ Japanese officials have repeatedly emphasized that the agreement, “a commitment at the international level,” told “the world that the issue is irreversibly resolved.”¹¹⁰ Therefore, it remains Korea’s “duty ... to the international community” to follow through;¹¹¹ as long as Korea drags its feet, the reasoning goes, it is unworthy of membership in that community. Abe rejoiced in his newfound role as a stigmatizer: “Every time I met [Korean officials], I was now in a position where I could say, ‘You guys, do it properly’ [*kimitachi, chanto yare yo*].”¹¹²

Japan’s claim of superiority also rested on Korea’s inaction regarding comfort women statues and memorials erected around the world—the physical reminders of its stigma. The 2015 agreement came with a pledge: Korea, in recognition of Japan’s being “concerned” that a statue standing in front of the Japanese embassy

107. Suga 2017.

108. Suga 2018.

109. Abe 2023, 170–73.

110. Suga 2017.

111. Kōno 2018.

112. Abe 2023, 173.

in Seoul “impair[s] ... its dignity, ... will strive to solve this issue.”¹¹³ As the agreement faltered, Abe’s aides likened Korea’s inaction to a “bank transfer scam” (*furi-kome sagi*), implying that Korea deceived Japan into coughing up money without delivering on its promise.¹¹⁴ Japanese officials, including the chief cabinet secretary and top foreign ministry officials, repeatedly argued that Korea is “clearly violat[ing]” international law—the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, to be more precise—by not removing the statue. When Korean activists installed yet another statue, this time in front of the Japanese consulate in Busan, Japan responded by recalling its ambassador to Seoul and suspending currency-swap negotiations. According to Japanese media, the move was intended to generate “international public support” by “creating the impression” that Korea is not fulfilling its international obligation. It is worth noting that the recall came shortly after Abe gained Joe Biden’s understanding in a phone call, which, according to Japanese media reports, had the effect of “establishing Japan’s moral superiority internationally.”¹¹⁵ As Japan continues to insist on its superiority as a worthier member of the international community, it has sought, sometimes successfully, the removal of statues from places ranging from Glendale, California, to Kassel, Germany.

Korean court rulings in favor of the victims have resulted in similar Japanese accusations that Korea is unworthy of membership in the ranks of respectable states. In 2023, reversing a lower court decision, the Seoul High Court ruled that Japan should compensate sixteen former comfort women and bereaved families. (The lawsuit began in 2016, a year after Tokyo and Seoul announced a deal to put the issue to rest; only one victim-survivor was alive to receive the verdict.) This ruling came on the heels of a separate court decision in 2021, which also ordered Japan to compensate twelve victims and bereaved relatives. The biggest contention was about whether the principle of sovereign immunity—whereby a sovereign state cannot be subjected to the jurisdiction of another state’s courts—applies to the case. Japan, in arguing that the principle must apply, has appealed to the authority of international institutions and the audience of normals. Its foreign ministry says the rulings were “clearly contrary to the international law,” as the principle of sovereign immunity “was also articulated in the judgment of the International Court of Justice.” According to Japan, the court rulings also violated the 2015 agreement, whose implementation “the international community has been closely following.”¹¹⁶ Korea, by extension, is failing in its duty as a state: Korea must “immediately ... remedy the status of its breaches of international law on its own responsibility as a country.”¹¹⁷ Stigma shifting, in other words, has allowed Japan to situate itself as a “victim” (of Korea’s illegal conduct) and Korea as a “perpetrator.”¹¹⁸

113. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2015.

114. *Asahi Shimbun* 2017.

115. *Sankei Shimbun* 2017.

116. Motegi 2021a.

117. Kamikawa 2023; Motegi 2021a.

118. Totsuka 2021.

Case 2: Nuclear Disaster

Stigma and Status Anxiety

The 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster deeply shocked Japan, a country that had long prided itself on technological prowess and a reputation as a safe country unmatched in disaster preparedness. Fukushima has been likened to “Japan’s meltdown,” and, in reference to World War II, yet another “defeat”¹¹⁹—a rupture in Japanese identity.¹²⁰ A prominent feature of Japan’s post-Fukushima debates was a constant concern about Japan’s tarnished “country brand.”¹²¹ When Japan’s Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry issued a report on Cool Japan, a government-directed national branding strategy, it devoted significant attention to the topic of “overcoming the earthquake” and “restoring the shine of the ‘Japan Brand’.”¹²²

Post-disaster Japan has desperately sought to create the impression of normalcy. Many visiting dignitaries, from Wen Jiabao to Prince William, have had the good fortune to be fed Fukushima food. But Japan’s status anxiety over Fukushima is perhaps best illustrated by the 2020 Tokyo Olympics (held in 2021), which Japan’s foreign minister said offered an “opportunity to send a message to the world” that things were just fine.¹²³ Like the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, the post-Fukushima games had a symbolic meaning as the “reconstruction Olympics” (*fukkō gorin*)—a PR event that could “restore Japan to a place of prestige in the international arena.”¹²⁴ Assuaging the radiation fears of the international community was a primary goal of Abe’s sales pitch to the International Olympic Committee in 2013. Immediately after greeting the committee members, Abe got straight to the point. “Some may have concerns about Fukushima,” he said in English. “Let me assure you, the situation is under control.”¹²⁵ Tokyo 2020, in many ways, was also Fukushima 2020. The torch relay began in Fukushima, which was also chosen to host softball and baseball matches, and the Olympic flame was named the “flame of recovery.” Bouquets handed to the winners were made of flowers from Fukushima and two other disaster-hit areas, Miyagi and Iwate. Food provided at the Olympic Village included ingredients sourced from Fukushima. Japan, in other words, was acutely aware of the stigma associated with what Fukushima represented.

Identification

The first component of Japan’s stigma shifting consists of establishing its in-group status in the community of respectable states. In the context of Fukushima, Japan

119. The quoted phrases are taken from the titles of newly published Japanese books, as noted by Samuels 2013, 103.

120. Glosserman 2019, 130.

121. Legewie 2011; for national branding in IR, see Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi 2019; Beaumont and Towns 2021.

122. Cool Japan Public–Private Expert Council 2011, 1.

123. *Kyodo News* 2021.

124. McDonald 2020, 601.

125. Abe 2013c.

has achieved this by repeatedly emphasizing that its decisions are in line with scientific, and therefore neutral and apolitical, standards as endorsed by the audience of normals—in particular, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the United States. Variations of the following phrases appear repeatedly at Japanese foreign ministry press briefings on Fukushima: “in compliance with international law,” “based on international practices,” and “based on scientific evidence.”

This appeal to international scientific authority is most noticeable in Japan’s justification of its decision to release Fukushima’s wastewater into the ocean, a widely supported move that some critics nonetheless argue violates the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.¹²⁶ A shift in terminology indicates Japan’s hyperawareness about its newly stigmatizing reputation as a polluter. As Japan considered what to do with radioactive water stored at the wrecked nuclear power plant, it began to formally distinguish between “contaminated water” (*osensui*) and “treated water” (*shorisui*). The latter term came to be used in conjunction with the Advanced Liquid Processing System (ALPS), as in “ALPS treated water,” which serves to emphasize the science behind Japan’s decision to release the wastewater after removing sixty-two radioactive materials but not tritium. A series of Cabinet meetings since 2013 on the radioactive water question shows the evolution of the terminology. Until 2021, these meetings were about decommissioning the Fukushima power plant and handling its “contaminated water.” Beginning in 2021, the year in which Japan officially announced its plans to release the water, the term “treated water” began to appear on the meeting agenda.¹²⁷ Japan attaches great importance to this technical distinction between *osensui* and *shorisui*. When fisheries minister Nomura Tetsuro accidentally used the former term to describe the latter, prime minister Kishida Fumio ordered him to apologize.

Japan has found the biggest source of legitimacy in the authority of the IAEA. This is an “international organization with the authority to formulate... international safety standards in the field of nuclear energy,” according to Japan’s Cabinet secretary.¹²⁸ Therefore, according to the Japanese foreign ministry, the IAEA “will confirm the safety of the ALPS treated water from a neutral and scientific viewpoint.”¹²⁹ The Japanese government’s factsheet on Fukushima, titled “Face the Facts,” prominently features IAEA Director-General Rafael Grossi’s remarks—in bold and underlined—and IAEA reports supporting the water discharge.¹³⁰ As Japan readied to release the treated wastewater in August 2023, it repeatedly referred to an IAEA report, which concluded that this would not threaten human health: “The IAEA ... has conducted an assessment based on scientific evidence as an independent third party.”¹³¹ The foreign ministry website offers information on the carefully

126. Greenpeace 2023.

127. Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2023.

128. Matsuno 2023a.

129. Motegi 2021c.

130. Government of Japan 2020.

131. Ono 2023.

worded “ALPS treated water” in nine different languages—the central message being that the IAEA has officially vouched for the water discharge, which is “consistent with relevant international safety standards.”¹³²

Differentiation

The second component of Japan’s stigma shifting comes in the form of calling out the supposedly unscientific East Asian “others”—the party poopers ruining Japan’s Fukushima celebration. Japan has repeatedly contrasted its pledged commitment to international standards with Korea and China’s alleged lack of scientific common sense, suggesting that they are unworthy of membership in the community of respectable states.

Since the disaster, local farmers, fishermen, and government officials alike have used the term *fūhyō higai*, which refers to reputational—as opposed to physical—damages based on “rumors” about the unsafety of all things Fukushima.¹³³ While many use the term to express their legitimate concerns about a drop in demand for Fukushima’s agricultural and fishery products, the deployment of the term also creates the image that concerns about radioactive contamination are impressionistic rather than science-based. Dispelling *fūhyō higai* associated with treated radioactive water, in the words of Japan’s environment minister, became an “extremely important” undertaking for the nation.¹³⁴

In 2019, at the IAEA general conference in Vienna, Korea expressed its concerns about Japan’s (at the time unconfirmed) plans for wastewater disposal. Korea characterized Japan’s suspected water release plan as “a grave international issue” that could threaten “the whole global marine environment,” a claim Japan called “baseless negative publicity.”¹³⁵ After the IAEA conference, the Japanese embassy in Korea began posting on its official website aerial radiation levels detected daily in four places: Fukushima City (the capital of Fukushima Prefecture), Iwaki City (in Fukushima Prefecture), Tokyo’s Shinjuku Ward, and Seoul. Japan’s Kōno Tarō tweeted that listing Seoul’s radiation levels alongside Fukushima’s was his initiative as a foreign minister, calling it “a measure in response to Korea’s high interest” in the matter.¹³⁶ The data, which showed similar air dose rates in these four places, came with a thinly veiled criticism directed at the supposedly unscientific Korea: “The Japanese government intends to continue providing accurate information based on scientific evidence.”¹³⁷ In a similar dig, Japan also claimed that the ALPS-treated water would contain far less tritium than the water routinely released from Chinese and Korean nuclear facilities.¹³⁸

132. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2023.

133. Sternsdorff-Cisterna 2019, 55–57.

134. *Asahi Shimbun* 2019.

135. Suga 2019.

136. Kōno 2019.

137. Embassy of Japan in Korea, n.d.

138. Matsuno 2023b.

Japan's condemnation of its prickly neighbors is aimed at international audiences. In 2015, for example, Japan went to the WTO over Korea's import ban on Fukushima seafood, accusing Korea of failing to adhere to international rules: the WTO's sanitary and phytosanitary measures agreement (known as the SPS Agreement) and the 1994 General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. (Korea won this dispute in 2019.) China was another frequent target, and it was an easier one. China's (current) notoriety among the (Western) audience of normals has made it easy for Japan to contrast its petulant neighbor with the rest of the "sensible" world, to which Japan belongs. Japan's prime minister, foreign minister, and trade minister have repeatedly urged China to exercise common sense. When Zhao Lijian, China's combative foreign ministry spokesman, posted a satirical picture combining a popular piece of Ukiyo-e art with an image of Fukushima water dumping, Japan's foreign ministry responded by questioning China's place in the world: "We wonder how the international community views ... such personal tweets by a person in a position of responsibility to his country of China."¹³⁹ When China instituted an additional food import ban to protest Japan's water discharge, Japan responded by emphasizing China's alleged pariah status, saying China's decision "go[es] against international trends" of other, sensible countries lifting similar bans.¹⁴⁰ Sekō Hiroshige, secretary-general of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's upper house, has argued that China, a country that imposes import bans "without any scientific basis," is "completely unqualified" to be admitted to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, a trade pact Beijing is seeking to join.¹⁴¹ At the IAEA's latest General Conference, Japan singled out China as "the only country that continues to spread scientifically groundless information"—a remark reportedly intended to evoke the image of China's deepening isolation in the international community.¹⁴²

Japan finds solace in the fact that it could, as the foreign ministry put it, resort to "objective assessments from countries that do not neighbor Japan."¹⁴³ It is no wonder, then, that when asked how Japan would explain the planned water release to Korea and China, Japanese foreign minister Motegi Toshimitsu felt the need to appeal to Western authority: a tweet by US secretary of state Antony Blinken in support of the release. "The United States has highly appreciated Japan's policy decision," Motegi noted.¹⁴⁴ Indeed, the United States has praised Japan for "openness, global citizenship, and scientific rigor ... especially when contrasted with China's" behavior.¹⁴⁵ The Group of 7 (G7) has joined the chorus, with its trade ministers singling out China in calling for "the immediate repeal of" import bans that are not

139. Yoshida 2021.

140. Hayashi 2023.

141. *Nikkei* 2023.

142. *Yomiuri Shimbun* 2023.

143. Yoshida 2021.

144. Motegi 2021b.

145. US Mission Japan 2023.

“science-based.”¹⁴⁶ To Japan’s consolation, the United States is now bulk buying all the scallops spurned by China to feed its armed forces stationed in Japan.

Case 3: International Order Making

Stigma and Status Anxiety

The idea of the Indo-Pacific, which conceptualizes the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean as one continuous geostrategic region, has caught on so fast in the past few years that the United States now proclaims itself an Indo-Pacific power, and nobody bats an eye. This newly constructed concept has not only replaced the Asia-Pacific as a geographical grouping; it has also come to signify a new international order with explicit implications for great power rivalry between the United States and China. Less known, however, is Japan’s contribution to the creation and diffusion of the Indo-Pacific order.

International order making is an unlikely venture for Japan, a country long associated with postwar antimilitarism and “reactive” foreign policy.¹⁴⁷ Japan’s relative unassertiveness in international security affairs is rooted in the deep stigma associated with its past as a defeated aggressor.¹⁴⁸ Ironically, however, Japan’s decision to renounce war and focus on economic growth, itself a response to stigmatization, has led to newly stigmatizing accusations that Japan is free riding on others, especially the United States, when it comes to international security. Japan was derided during the Gulf War for taking no action and only chipping in financially, which, though it chipped in USD 13 billion, earned the country a reputation for “checkbook diplomacy.” More recently, Donald Trump repeatedly described Japan as a free rider.

By conceptualizing and propagating the idea of the Indo-Pacific, an initiative dating back to the mid-2000s, Japan has sought to overcome the twofold stigma stemming from its wartime wrongdoings and postwar passivity—and, in doing so, assert its status as a respectable world power. “Take back Japan,” an election slogan for Abe and his Liberal Democratic Party, presumes yet resists Japan’s decline in the same way that Donald Trump’s “make America great again” does.¹⁴⁹ As an apt follow-up to this narrative, the title of the first speech Abe gave to a foreign audience after returning to office as the prime minister claimed that he was reversing the decline: “Japan Is Back.” Japan, he said in this speech in Washington, DC, “is not and will never be a tier two country.” Instead, the country will lead the fight against a host of problems plaguing the world because “the world still awaits Japan.”¹⁵⁰ It is no coincidence that the “Japan is back” speech, which repeatedly referenced Japan’s aspirations to become “a leading promoter of rules” and “a

146. Trade Ministers of the Group of Seven 2023.

147. Calder 1988.

148. Zarakol 2011.

149. Leheny 2018, 8.

150. Abe 2013b.

guardian of the global commons,” marked one of the earliest enunciations of Japan’s Indo-Pacific strategy.

Identification

Japan’s self-appointment as a leader of the Indo-Pacific corresponds to the first component of stigma shifting: proving its worthiness as a member of the major-power club. Not only can Japan show that it is “no longer a free rider,” but it can also claim to offer something useful to powerful countries.¹⁵¹ According to prime minister Kishida Fumio, “free and open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP), a buzzword that came out of the Indo-Pacific initiative, offers the international community “a guiding perspective that is acceptable to all about what the international order should be.”¹⁵² Notably, it affirms normative commitments to values that are meant to be universal but are more often associated with the liberal international order as traditionally represented by the West: “a rules-based international order” buttressed by “freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law.”¹⁵³

Therefore, Japan’s assertion of its place in this new world order is not a threatening one, unlike the way China’s rise came to be perceived in the West. Japan, while aspirational, claims to be a leader, not *the* leader. The earliest iterations of the Indo-Pacific concept, for example, make it clear that US support for this new regional grouping is “a given.”¹⁵⁴ Japan has since repeatedly made it clear that “the United States is our most important partner in realizing [the Indo-Pacific] vision.”¹⁵⁵ If anything, the concept’s emphasis on counterbalancing China and bringing India on board aligned perfectly with the strategic interests of the United States; it was as if Japan’s FOIP “[gave] the US administration a way to say” what it had meant to say all along.¹⁵⁶ As a result, Washington did not just endorse the Indo-Pacific nomenclature; it appropriated it and made it its own.¹⁵⁷ The Trump administration, which began using the term in 2017, was quick to emphasize the binary the grouping represented: “the US and our friends” versus China.¹⁵⁸ The new concept caught on so fast that in 2018, the United States Pacific Command became the United States *Indo-Pacific* Command. It also led to the revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), originally proposed by Abe in 2007 as another counterweight against Chinese maritime aggression. In the end, FOIP became so tightly associated with US strategy that Biden and his advisors reportedly had to be reminded that “it’s Japan’s [idea],” not “Trump’s,” before they too embraced it.¹⁵⁹

151. Rozman 2022.

152. Kishida 2023.

153. Hayashi 2022.

154. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2007, 3.

155. Hayashi 2022.

156. Detsch 2021.

157. Wilkins and Kim 2022, 416.

158. Tillerson 2017.

159. Green 2022.

That Japan took bold global initiatives but readily conceded the leadership role to the United States suggests that it aspires to solidify its status as a member of the major-power club, not take it over. In a recent reiteration of this intention, Kishida consoled the Americans for “the loneliness and exhaustion” they suffered for having “almost single-handedly” upheld the international order. Tokyo, he said, will share Washington’s “heavy burden.”¹⁶⁰ Japan views its international order-making as a success that has elevated its status. The word *sonzai-kan*, which translates to a sense of presence (and, by extension, importance), appears repeatedly in foreign ministry briefings about the country’s globe-trotting Indo-Pacific diplomacy. In the “increasingly tense” global atmosphere, the international community’s “expectations” for Japan’s role, as well as its “presence” in the world, are growing, foreign minister Motegi Toshimitsu claimed.¹⁶¹ The country’s efforts to “lead” the world in the areas of order-building and rule-making have had the effect of “bolster[ing] Japan’s presence ... and ... position in the international community.”¹⁶²

Differentiation

Japan’s approach to propagating the Indo-Pacific order corresponds to the second component of stigma shifting: differentiating itself from East Asia’s “significant others” by demonstrating superiority over them. This initiative had the effect of cementing Japan’s conception of status hierarchies within East Asia, with Japan as a peerless leader, China as a pariah, and Korea as the odd one out.

The Indo-Pacific grouping is a balancing act against China wrapped in normative language—an effective strategy because China is (or at the very least is seen as) a norm transgressor in many ways. Japan’s expansive conceptualization of “broader Asia” came with an unequivocal normative judgment about who belongs to the new club and who does not.¹⁶³ When Abe proclaimed that “Japan is back,” he characterized his country as a “guardian” of liberal internationalist values standing among “like-minded democracies.”¹⁶⁴ Japan’s “arc of freedom and prosperity,” another conceptual precursor to the Indo-Pacific, emphasized human rights and democracy.¹⁶⁵ FOIP is itself an unequivocal value judgment about what is right—“free” and “open”—and what is not right. This normative language is intertwined with security interests, with Japan as a “policeman in East Asia”¹⁶⁶ and China as a target. Abe’s proclamation of “Asia’s democratic security diamond,” an earlier iteration of the Indo-Pacific concept, offered an explicit security rationale: “Increasingly, the South China Sea seems set to become a ‘Lake Beijing’ ... Soon, the PLA Navy’s

160. Kishida 2024.

161. Motegi 2020, 20.

162. Motegi 2021d.

163. Abe 2007.

164. Abe 2013b.

165. Abe 2007; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2007, 2.

166. Lindsay 2013.

newly built aircraft carrier will be a common sight.”¹⁶⁷ As China grew increasingly aggressive in territorial disputes with Japan, Abe warned that Japan’s “sovereignty itself” was at risk.¹⁶⁸ Kishida continues to raise the alarm about China while emphasizing Japan’s efforts to protect a “free and open” international order, warning in 2024 that “Ukraine of today may be East Asia of tomorrow.”¹⁶⁹

Equally salient, if less explicit, in these in-group/out-group dynamics was the apparent exclusion of Korea—a country, as a democracy and a longtime US ally, that could otherwise fit well in the Indo-Pacific club. To be sure, Korea’s conspicuous absence had much to do with its own reluctance to alienate China;¹⁷⁰ in just one example among many, President Moon Jae-in feigned ignorance of the concept after Donald Trump called the US–Korea alliance “a linchpin ... in the Indo-Pacific.”¹⁷¹ Still, it is noteworthy that Japan made little effort to invite Korea to the party it threw, where other Asian countries—including ASEAN nations, which were similarly wary of antagonizing China¹⁷²—were already welcome guests. Japan’s Diplomatic Bluebooks of 2021 and 2022, which even mentioned the European Union as a like-minded supporter of the Indo-Pacific, left out Korea. Korea’s status as the odd one out was a “source of unease” for the audience of normals;¹⁷³ Korea was criticized for appearing “fearful” of and “diffident” toward China¹⁷⁴ and incapable of pointing out China’s maritime aggression and human rights violations.¹⁷⁵ If China was an unabashed rule breaker—from Japan’s perspective as a self-appointed guardian of liberal internationalist values in East Asia—Korea was a “bystander”¹⁷⁶ or an “outlier.”¹⁷⁷ Japan’s self-characterization as a bulwark against the breakdown of the liberal international order, in this sense, served the function of demonstrating superiority over Korea.

Conclusion

Stigma shifting in world politics enables status-anxious states to reaffirm their place in the world by ennobling themselves, in part by shifting their stigma onto others. By further hierarchizing the dynamics of status within the international system, stigma shifting reveals more complicated power dynamics in the international politics of stigma than hitherto theorized.

Beyond the three cases just examined, we see other attempts at stigma shifting induced by status anxiety. In another example involving East Asia, Japan’s claim

167. Abe 2012.

168. Abe 2013a.

169. Kishida 2024.

170. Yeo 2022.

171. Trump 2017; Yu 2017.

172. Hosoya 2019, 21.

173. E. Kim 2023.

174. Klingner 2022.

175. Yeo 2022.

176. *Ibid.*, 3.

177. Klingner 2022.

of superiority over Korea as a worthier member of the international community has since expanded to another area of historical wrongdoing: wartime forced labor. Japan has condemned Korean court rulings that ordered compensation from the likes of Mitsubishi and has cast Korea as a country undeserving of a spot in the community of law-abiding, respectable states. In a move similar to Korea's exclusion from the Indo-Pacific club, Tokyo opposed Donald Trump's idea of inviting Seoul to a G7 summit in 2020 by downplaying Korea's worthiness: unlike Japan, Korea is "not in lockstep with" G7 members about China and North Korea. Notably, the opposition from Japan, the sole Asian member of that exclusive club, was specifically targeted at Korea, even when Trump suggested adding three other countries, including Russia. Motegi Toshimitsu publicly asserted that "it's very important to keep the [current] G7 framework"¹⁷⁸—meaning, to keep Korea out.

Stigma shifting is broadly generalizable when the scope conditions are present: states that (1) are anxious about stigma as an unwanted source of status loss, (2) have a plausible claim to membership in both higher- and lower-status reference groups, and (3) feel their current status is threatened by lower-status reference groups. Beyond East Asia, Israel, which straddles the West and the East in its own ways, has long touted its worthiness to the international community by describing itself as "the only true democracy in the Middle East"—a democratic beacon besieged by the nondemocratic, backward Arab world. According to Israel's political leaders, the country has "special ties with the democratic world," and as a result, the Western countries' "attitude" to Israel is "very warm and friendly."¹⁷⁹ In a 2017 speech at the UN, Benjamin Netanyahu claimed that the world was "finally [waking] up to what Israel can do for them," which has resulted in "a revolution in Israel's standing among the nations." He even quoted the prophet Isaiah in describing Israel as a "light unto the nations, bringing salvation to the ends of the earth."¹⁸⁰ This apparent overcompensation stems from stigma-induced status anxiety, as Israel's policy toward the occupied (Arab) territories has been likened to "apartheid," and its unending conflicts with Arab neighbors remain a source of unease for the world.¹⁸¹ The Soviet Union's status anxiety as a great power that nonetheless failed to surpass the United States economically at least partially explains why it refused to learn from the economic successes of its lower-status partner in the communist—and "Eastern"—world, China. We see hints of overcompensation in the Soviet Union's unsubstantiated claims of superiority over—and derision of—China as the Soviet Union sought to reaffirm its great power status.¹⁸²

What are the consequences of stigma shifting? The latest developments suggest that it has worked to Japan's benefit. Korea, a former Japanese colony, now finds itself in a situation where it gets scolded by Japan whenever it uses the term "sex slaves" at the UN to refer to the comfort women. Korea has also shown greater

178. *Kyodo News* 2020.

179. Netanyahu 2017a.

180. Netanyahu 2017b.

181. Adler-Nissen and Tsinoi 2019.

182. Larson and Shevchenko 2019, 170–74.

tolerance of Japan's position on the water-discharge issue. Yoon Suk Yeol, Moon's successor, released Korea's own Indo-Pacific strategy in December 2022, becoming a latecomer to the party. While the leadership change in Korea's domestic politics can partially explain these developments, the latest attempts to bury the hatchet are intertwined with Korea's own need for approval from the United States. It is no coincidence, in this sense, that the Yoon government's conciliatory gesture toward Japan over the forced labor issue was immediately hailed by Joe Biden as a step toward "our shared vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific."¹⁸³

By contrast, China, more suited to be a counter-stigmatizer with the potential to form a counter-audience (for example, in the form of the Belt and Road Initiative), and less vulnerable to pressure from the West, has proven far more resistant to Japan's stigma shifting. In August 2023, China expanded, rather than contracted, its import ban on Japanese seafood amid international derision from the likes of the United States. The country also seems decisively uninterested in changing its image of being the largest threat to the liberal international values that the Indo-Pacific order claims to represent. China's intransigence, however, does not mean that stigma shifting has failed. Western wariness about China's potential as a leader of an alternative, illiberal "counter-audience"¹⁸⁴ only further highlights the importance of Japan as a counterweight. In the end, these responses solidify Japan's identification with the audience of normals—which is the aim of stigma shifting.

More broadly, stigma shifting has the effect of consolidating real and imagined status hierarchies—not just the Western-led world order but also the presumed hierarchy in East Asia. While much of the conventional status literature presumes that status-hungry states are likely to destabilize international politics, status anxiety, when manifested in the form of stigma shifting, does the opposite. Certainly, frictions created by stigma shifting have destabilized bilateral relations between Japan and its East Asian "others." At the same time, however, these tensions only reinforce the pre-existing boundaries around which states deserve—or do not deserve—membership in the ranks of respectable states, thereby stabilizing the status hierarchy as overseen by the audience of normals. As an originally stigmatized state assumes the role of a stigmatizer in its sphere of influence, stigma is replicated, and stigma-based world hierarchies are reproduced as regional hierarchies.

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183. Biden 2023.

184. Rogstad 2022b, 8.

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