Japan in the United States Reverse Course: An Inter-imperial Analysis of Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World*

Ngoi Hui Chien
Universiti Malaya, Malaysia

Abstract

This article examines how Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) represents the ambivalence of Ono, its Japanese narrator in postwar Japan, as he confronts his past role in creating propagandistic posters for the Japanese Empire's militarism during the United States Reverse Course. After World War II, the US occupation of Japan (1945–1952), which marked the US Empire's dismantling of the Japanese Empire, initially sought to demilitarise Japan. However, to counter communism, around 1947 or 1948, the US introduced the Reverse Course in Japan, which contradictorily relaxed its demilitarisation efforts and permitted remilitarisation. The Reverse Course's contradictory messages about militarisation, this article argues, serve as the backdrop for *Artist*'s depiction of Ono's ambivalence about his past involvement in Japanese militarism. Mobilising Laura Doyle's inter-imperiality, the textual analysis demonstrates that, under the US Empire's Reverse Course, Ono is ambivalent about admitting his past advocacy of the Japanese Empire's militarism was wrong, despite acknowledging the ideology's severe consequences in postwar Japan. It shows how the US Reverse Course perpetuated remnants of Japanese militarism after the war. The findings fill the research gap of current scholarship on *Artist*, which is rarely grounded in the intertwining of Japan's postwar history and US policy.

Keywords: Reverse Course, ambivalence, Japanese militarism, United States occupation of Japan, Inter-imperiality, *An Artist of the Floating World*

Introduction

In the 1980s, the literary world witnessed Kazuo Ishiguro's emergence as a prominent British novelist of Japanese descent. At the same time, Margaret Thatcher served as the United Kingdom's Prime Minister. The period was marked by nostalgia for the lost glory of the British Empire, as depicted in Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989). Such nostalgia for past imperial glory, which manifests as ambivalence about critiquing imperialism, also percolates through Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), hereafter abbreviated as *Artist*, albeit

in reference to the Japanese Empire.[1] *Artist* is set during the Allied occupation of Japan led by the United States Empire (1945–1952). The US atomic bombings of Japan in 1945 catalysed Japan's surrender and the collapse of the Japanese Empire, for Japan had already been weakened by pressure from international powers, military defeats, and economic strain by then.[2] Told from the first-person point of view of the Japanese narrator, Masuji Ono, *Artist* follows Ono's ambivalence in confronting his past association with Japanese imperialism during World War II. As a propagandistic painter, he produced posters that advocated the Japanese Empire's military expansionism during WWII.[3] Although he painted the propaganda in good faith to strengthen Japan, he is now accused by some in postwar Japanese society of playing a part in plunging Japan into a catastrophe. After all, Japan's military aggression made it the target of the US atomic bombings. Yet, despite Ono's awareness of his past mistake in working as a propagandistic painter, he is unwilling to fully admit his wrongdoing, at times even justifying the righteousness of supporting Japan's military expansionism.

Artist is written in the form of a diary with four entries: October 1948, April 1949, November 1949, and June 1950. Each entry serves as a chapter. Since *Artist* begins in 1948, it is plausible that Ono's perception of the past is influenced by the US Empire's Reverse Course, although the term "Reverse Course" is not mentioned throughout the novel. When the US occupation of Japan began in 1945, the US focused on reforming Japan through demilitarisation and democratisation. However, with the advent of the Cold War in 1947, the US shifted the policy of the reformation by implementing the Reverse Course from around 1947 or 1948 till the end of its occupation in 1952.[4] In contradiction to the occupation's early demilitarisation efforts, which imposed punitive measures against Japanese military aggression, the US Reverse Course shifted the emphasis to anti-communism and economic recovery instead.[5] It even pushed postwar Japan towards remilitarisation to combat communism in the face of the Korean War. Hence, the Reverse Course, which allowed

remnants of Japanese militarism to persist in postwar Japan, seemed to "reverse" the country to the time when militarism was prevalent, before the collapse of the Japanese Empire.

In this regard, this article aims to examine Ono's ambivalence about his former role as a propagandistic artist who created propaganda supporting the Japanese Empire's militarism, in the context of the US Empire's Reverse Course. By "ambivalence," this article refers to the coexistence of conflicting or uncertain attitudes, which, in Ono's case, pertain to his past military role. His ambivalence unfolds as he recalls Japanese imperial militarism and grapples with its lingering presence in postwar Japan, a consequence of the Reverse Course. The questions to be answered are: first, how does *Artist* represent Ono's ambivalence in confronting his former role as a propagandistic artist who supported the Japanese Empire's military agenda? And second, how does Ono's ambivalence underscore the impact of the interactions between the Japanese and US Empires during the Reverse Course?

Through these lines of enquiry, this article argues that *Artist* portrays Ono's ambivalence in confronting his past military commitment against the backdrop of the US Reverse Course's contradictory messages about militarisation. The term "contradictory messages" refers to the contradiction that, although the US Empire sought to counter the Japanese Empire's militarism in the early phase of the occupation, its Reverse Course relaxed the demilitarisation measures, which perpetuated traces of militarism in postwar Japan. In *Artist*, Ono sometimes acknowledges the dire consequences of Japanese militarism while dealing with characters critical of militarism, echoing the early occupation's demilitarisation efforts. Nevertheless, there are other moments when Ono justifies his past in upholding militarism, suggesting that he might not be genuinely remorseful about his past military role. His ambivalence in grappling with his erstwhile military commitment exemplifies the Reverse Course's contradictory deemphasis on combating Japanese militarism. Due to his ambivalence,

Ono tends to obscure his past involvement in militarism and the grave consequences of militarism, rendering his narration unreliable.

To develop the argument about the significance of the Reverse Course in *Artist*, this article draws upon Laura Doyle's theory of inter-imperiality, which examines the rivalry between empires and the impact on individuals manoeuvring within their spheres of power. While textual analysis will explore how *Artist* represents Ono's ambivalence in confronting his past involvement in Japanese militarism, the theory of inter-imperiality will contextualise his ambivalence within the interactions between the Japanese and US Empires during the Reverse Course. Therefore, a textual analysis through the lens of inter-imperiality will frame Ono's ambivalence as resulting from the US Empire's decision to deemphasise the demilitarisation efforts during the Reverse Course, which allowed remnants of the Japanese Empire's militarism to persist in the postwar era.

Critical Responses to *Artist*

The gap in current scholarship of *Artist* lies in the interpretation of the novel in the context of Japan's postwar history intertwined with US policy. In his recent monograph, Peter Sloane categorises Ishiguro's novels as follows: "the end of the British Empire (*RD*); the bombing of Nagasaki (*PVH*, *AFW*);[6] the formation of the idea of Britain after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire (*BG*), organ harvesting/genocide (*NLMG*)" (4).[7] Indeed, the formation and disintegration of empires, along with the transitional dynamics between them, is one of the central themes of Ishiguro's novels. In this view, contemplating the fraught status of the Japanese Empire is crucial because postcolonial studies not only focus more on Western empires (Ching 30; Kim-Kiteishvili 60–61) but have also yet to receive significant traction in Japanese society (Gabrakova 1). There exists a substantial body of research on how areas like

Korea, Taiwan, and China were impacted by Japanese imperialism,[8] but such works remain relatively scarce within the wider field of postcolonial studies. Besides, English-language postcolonial literary studies tend to centre on the British Empire (Boehmer 157), which overshadows literature about other empires. In terms of Ishiguro's novels, particularly his Japan novels, Jerrine Tan observes that scholarship has generally been preoccupied with aesthetics. The paucity of research analysing Ishiguro's novels in dialogue with Japanese history suggests that "Japan remains problematically and chronically unreadable to Western critics and the Western reading public" (93).

Among the few scholars engaging in historicist interpretations of *Artist*, Ching-Chih Wang contextualises the novel within Japan's rise as an empire. Still, it leaves room to explore how the US occupation and its shifting policies bear upon Ono's recollection of his previous involvement in Japanese imperialism. In this respect, Yoshiki Tajiri briefly draws upon the Reverse Course, claiming that Ono "could begin to feel less uncomfortable due to the policy reversal" (32–33). He also references Wai-chew Sim, who offers a short explanation of how Ono is "simultaneously blameworthy (but less so)" in the Reverse Course (43).

Building on these studies, this article contextualises *Artist* in the US Reverse Course, which is Ono's historical vantage point to view Japan's imperial past. It seeks to demonstrate that Ono's ambivalence about his past military commitment to the Japanese Empire arises from the US Empire's manipulation of postwar Japan during the Reverse Course. This US manipulation shifted from initial demilitarisation to a reversal of the policy to secure Japan's role as its strategic ally against communism, which ultimately led to remilitarisation. Understanding the political background will shed light on the significance of the term "floating world" in the novel's title, a translation of the Japanese word "*ukiyo*," which, starting from the Edo or Tokugawa period (1603–1868), connotes the impermanence of reality (Morikawa 172).[9]

This impermanence of the "floating world" is echoed in the shifting political landscape of postwar Japan. As the US's demilitarisation policy in postwar Japan becomes precarious during the Reverse Course, Ono, once an artist, also appears ambivalent in reconstructing his identity, obscuring his previous military commitment in the way an artist reconstructs reality through art.

Inter-imperiality of the Reverse Course

After Japan's defeat in WWII, the country was occupied by the US Empire under General Douglas MacArthur's direction. The US initially carried out the White Purge to remove former Japanese military personnel from the workforce. However, in response to the communist threat during the Cold War, the US regarded Japan as a crucial ally against communist powers in China and the Soviet Union. Therefore, from around 1947 or 1948 till 1952, the US implemented the Reverse Course, which shifted the occupation's focus from demilitarisation and democratisation to anti-communism and economic recovery. The Reverse Course delivered contradictory messages about militarisation to postwar Japan. This is because, during the Reverse Course, the US conducted the Red Purge, which removed suspected Japanese communists from important positions. The Reverse Course also "depurged" many of the previously purged Japanese militarists, allowing them to return to the workplace. The intersection of the Red Purge of communists and the depurging of former militarists "was perhaps the most dramatic example of the '[R]everse [C]ourse'" (Gordon 240). In the later phase of the US Reverse Course, Japan even established the National Police Reserve, a sign of remilitarisation, to assist the US military in combatting communism during the Korean War.

To situate the Reverse Course in the interactions between the Japanese and US Empires, this article draws upon Doyle's theory of inter-imperiality. Inter-imperiality explores the "multiply vectored relations among empires and among those who endure and maneuver among empires" (4). Put another way, it inspects the political structure and individual lives shaped by the "vying" or "interacting empires" (2). As a framework that scrutinises the "complex galaxy of charged relations," inter-imperiality illuminates how empires are "co-constituted" (18). This is because an empire's ability to control foreign territories is inextricably linked to its geopolitical relations with other empires (6). Inter-imperiality thus shifts the focus of critique away from a singular empire. Notably, while examining the interconnectedness of empires, inter-imperiality also emphasises the varying degrees of damage perpetrated by different empires. Doyle points to the Japanese Empire as an example, noting that, despite ruling colonies like Korea, it is still considered one of the "smaller empires" that "suffered from the coercions of larger empires and have had less leverage in the geopolitical field" (6–7). One of the "larger empires" in question is, as *Artist* portrays, the US Empire, whose atomic bombings led to Japan's subjugation under its occupation. At the same time, inter-imperiality also examines the impact of political dynamics on individual identities at a micro level. Specifically, it analyses the "structural function" of identity in constituting the imperial systems that decide how individuals are mobilised to sustain those powers (13).

In this understanding, inter-imperiality can answer this article's research questions by contextualising Ono's identity as a Japanese man ambivalent about confronting his former military role. The framework shows how Ono's ambivalence articulates the US Empire's shift from its past combat of the Japanese Empire's militarism to its current deprioritisation of demilitarisation during the Cold War to counter the surge of communism. In Doyle's observation, an empire's subjects often gain support from another empire to launch "rebellions against 'their own' empire" (43). This idea, to a certain extent, resonates with *Artist*. Despite

his past advocacy of the Japanese Empire's militarism, the older Ono knows that the military commitment was a mistake. Hence, in narrating his story, he aligns with the US Empire, whose Reverse Course reverses its sanction against Japanese militarism, thus relieving him of guilt over his propagandistic paintings. The interactions between the Japanese and US Empires in terms of their ideologies instantiate inter-imperiality, which, to borrow Doyle's words (25), is not only "an object of literary representations" but also "a condition of aesthetic production." That means the novel's portrayal of Ono's ambivalence while he navigates through Japanese and US imperialism is sustained by the tension between the two empires in history. Notably, this article uses inter-imperiality to explain aspects of Ono's identity after the war. The inter-imperial framework will not, for example, explain the younger Ono's creation of the two propagandistic posters during the war, an ultranationalist decision fuelled entirely by Japanese militarism. After all, this article focuses on the older Ono's identity in the context of postwar Japan in the Reverse Course, which witnessed the interactions of Japanese and US imperial ideologies.

In an interview with Ken Chen, Ishiguro states that, during the Cold War, in order to make the Japanese their ally, "[t]he Americans did not try to make the Japanese remember or feel too bad" about Japan's military atrocities in WWII. This statement clearly refers to the Reverse Course. Ishiguro expressed this view after *Artist*'s publication, yet it serves as a helpful reminder that, although the Japanese Empire was dismantled by the US Empire's atomic bombings in 1945, the US Empire's attempt to consolidate its global power during the Cold War perpetuated remnants of Japanese militarism. As Naoki Sakai laments, "the years during and soon after the Reverse Course were almost a honeymoon period" for Japanese conservatives who supported the war, making the Cold War era in Japan seem like "a rosy era of an extended Japanese Empire" (233).

The US's relaxation of its sanction against the former Japanese militarists provides a context to understand why Ono is unwilling to fully admit that it was a mistake to be involved in the Japanese Empire's military operations. Nonetheless, as shall be demonstrated, there are still a few other characters in *Artist* who express strong criticism of Japanese militarism, which heightens Ono's ambivalence towards his past. This is because the US Reverse Course did not completely reverse the demilitarisation measures. The US still conducted "a purge of politicians and others who were believed to have been too closely involved in the pre-war and wartime regime," meaning "not everything was reversed" (Stockwin 4). Besides, to resist communism, the US only enacted a limited remilitarisation (Zhang 117) rather than a total war mobilisation. Still, the US Empire's Reverse Course, with its leniency towards militarism, contradicted the initial demilitarisation measures. This leniency enabled traces of the Japanese Empire's militarism to persist in postwar Japan, which explains Ono's ambivalence towards his previous wartime role.

Ambivalence Towards Japanese Militarism During the US Reverse Course

Art of Persuasion: October 1948

The novel opens in October 1948, about three years after the US atomic bombings of Japan, which led to the US occupation of the country. Most importantly, the date also marks the initial phase of Japan in the US Reverse Course. The opening chapter focuses on Ono's attempts to persuade himself and others of the righteousness of his past commitment to painting propagandistic posters to advocate Japanese militarism. He behaves this way to ensure the successful *miai* (matchmaking) of his younger daughter, Noriko, because associations with previous Japanese militarism are regarded by some as disgraceful after Japan's surrender to the US. Significantly, Ono's defence of his previous art is akin to his art of persuasion, which

reconstructs his identity so that it appears less culpable in postwar Japan. Such an art of persuasion is evident in Ono's recollection of his conversations with Miyake and Suichi, who respectively criticised the former militarists reinstated to the workplace by the US and their obsequiousness to the US. Therefore, this sub-section examines how Ono's art of persuasion in those conversations signals his ambivalence towards his past support for the Japanese Empire's military agenda during the US Empire's Reverse Course.

In one of the most telling scenes, Ono remembers meeting Jiro Miyake, Noriko's former fiancé more than a year ago, meaning before October 1947. When Ono and Miyake discussed the loss of life brought about by the war, Ono acknowledged that it was "a great waste" how "[s]ome of [the] best men [were] giving up their lives" in war. However, the tension between them escalated when Miyake insisted, "There are plenty of men already back in positions they held during the war. Some of them are no better than war criminals" (55–56). Clearly, this incident refers to the US Reverse Course's depurging of former Japanese militarists, which reinstated many of the former militarists after the US eradicated communists from the workplace via the Red Purge. Provoked, Ono rebutted, "But those who fought and worked loyally for our country during the war cannot be called war criminals" (56). Ono's defensiveness in persuading Miyake of the inappropriateness of the phrase "war criminal" signals his urge to justify the righteousness of his previous militarism. Although Ono acknowledged the human toll of the Japanese Empire's military fervour, which he had supported through his propagandistic posters, the defensiveness in his art of persuasion alludes to his ambivalence in confronting his former military role in helping Japan expand its empire.

Noteworthily, the depurging of ex-militarists, as Tajiri meticulously points out, was implemented primarily from 1950 to 1952, not 1947 (when Ono encountered Miyake). Ishiguro's depiction of the depurging thus "sounds a little anachronistic" (32). It is unknown

whether Ishiguro's confusion of dates is deliberate or otherwise. Regardless, this misdating of the depurging allows *Artist* to show that Ono's defensiveness towards past militarism is in tune with the US's relaxation of demilitarisation, as attested by the return of the militarists who had originally been purged in the early phase of the US occupation. Such unwillingness to confront past militarism dramatises Ono's ambivalence in manoeuvring between the Japanese and US Empires.

The divergence in Miyake's and Ono's views on Japanese militarism arguably demonstrates the impact of the US Reverse Course's contradictory messages about militarisation. On the one hand, Miyake's resentment against the "war criminals" embodies the demilitarisation ethos instituted by the US Empire in the early phase of its occupation of Japan, which focused on addressing the Japanese Empire's wrongdoing during the war. It shows that the Reverse Course, while deprioritising the demilitarisation efforts, did not fully reverse Japan back towards militarism. On the other hand, Ono's quest to persuade Miyake of the inappropriateness of his understanding of "war criminals"—which also articulates Ono's ambivalence in criticising his former military commitment—underscores the impact of the US Empire's relaxation of its sanction against the Japanese Empire's militarism during the Reverse Course. The tension between Miyake and Ono illustrates how the US Reverse Course mitigated the culpability of Japanese imperial militarism during Japan's recovery from its war defeat.

Artist's portrayal of Ono's ambivalence in confronting Japan's imperial past suggests that Ishiguro's writing of Japan's imperial nostalgia is, as mentioned, influenced by Thatcher's government, which was drawn to "[t]he appeal of being great again" following the decline of the British Empire (Gilroy 95). As Svetlana Boym notes, what one is nostalgic about is always "on the island of utopia where time has happily stopped" (13). However, while Britain can be nostalgic about "the 'good' and 'bad' in [its] empire," Japan finds it hard to "define [its] empire

as 'positive'" due to the catastrophic defeat it suffered in WWII (Mitter 84). Hence, even though the US Empire's Reverse Course was lenient with traces of Japanese militarism, military fervour did not fully revive in post-war Japan given its defeat and public disenchantment with militarism. This phenomenon explains why, in *Artist*, Ono can only be nostalgic about his loyalty to wartime Japan by downplaying the aftermath of the Japanese Empire's militarism in the face of Miyake's critique of Japan's military past. Such a stark contrast between the "something good" one was working towards and the "topsy-turvy" that society inflicts on one thereafter is an idea that, as Ishiguro notes in an interview with Gregory Mason, underpins his writing of *Artist* (339).

As Ono's narrative continues to unfold, he recalls Miyake saying that those unapologetic militarists were "the greatest cowardice of all" (56). Clinging to the remark, Ono wonders, "Did Miyake really say all this to me that afternoon? Perhaps I am getting his words confused with the sort of thing Suichi will come out and say" (56). Suichi is the husband of Ono's elder daughter, Setsuko. Thus, Ono's evasive drift from Miyake to Suichi—from a past potential son-in-law to the current son-in-law—betrays his current urge to persuade himself that his past militarism was a reasonable decision rather than a war crime, which would alleviate the distress evoked by Miyake's charges. Although trying to distinguish between Miyake and Suichi, Ono uses expressions like "Certainly," "I am certain enough," and "I am sure" (repeated twice), all in close proximity (56). This entanglement between uncertainty and certainty shows that identity, like art, is subject to reconstruction. As Ono admits, a self-portrait "rarely comes near the truth" (67). The process of reconstructing his identity implies his unwillingness to fully admit his wrongdoing and lack of genuine remorse, which makes him an unreliable narrator. Ono's conflict in confronting his past military commitment illustrates Doyle's idea that, in inter-imperiality, "old embers keep burning" (44). Given how the Reverse Course made US-occupied Japan an "empire under subcontract" (Sakai 232–233)—allowing

postwar Japan to retain traces of the Japanese Empire's militarism due to the US Empire's deprioritisation of demilitarisation—it is not difficult to understand why Ono appears ambivalent towards his former espousal of militarism.

Similar evasive defensiveness is evident in Ono's attitude in his meeting with Suichi at the funeral of Ono's son, Kenji, who died in Manchuria. The funeral was held two years and one month ago, meaning in September 1946. After the funeral, Suichi lamented "the waste" of lives in the war. In response, Ono persuaded him by saying, "Yes. It's terrible to think of the waste. But Kenji, like many others, died very bravely" (58). He believed sacrificing one's life for the nation was a righteous duty. The lines echo his insistence to Miyake that those currently held guilty of war crimes were men who did all they could for the country. To refute Ono, Suichi deplored "the real culprits" of the war who were now "behaving so well in front of the Americans" and were unwilling "to admit their responsibilities" during the war (58). The image of the "culprits" criticised by Suichi is strongly reminiscent of the many Japanese militarists who were depurged by the US Reverse Course and thus absolved of their wartime responsibilities. Hence, although Ono's conversation with Suichi happened in 1946 (before the onset of the Reverse Course), it is fair to believe that *Artist* has, once again, brought forward the Reverse Course and its depurging of former militarists, which strengthens its self-critical representation of Ono's attempt to disavow his association with Japanese militarism.

Understatement of Responsibilities: April 1949 and November 1949

While the scenes with Miyake and Suichi demonstrate Ono's defensiveness regarding his past, there are also times in *Artist* when Ono recalls how he painstakingly understated his responsibilities as a propagandistic painter. One salient example is Ono's encounter with Enchi, Kuroda's student. Kuroda was Ono's former student, who was imprisoned and tortured after

Ono reported him to the wartime authorities. Another germane example is Ono's memory of Noriko's *miai* with Taro Saito, during which the Saitos seemed aware of Ono's previous espousal of Japanese militarism. Hence, this sub-section scrutinises Ono's recollection of how he understated his association with the Japanese Empire's military agenda as the US Empire implemented the Reverse Course.

In the April 1949 entry, Ono recalls a visit to Kuroda, during which he was received by Enchi. On learning about Ono's identity, Enchi accused him of being one of "the real traitors" responsible for Kuroda's torture by the authorities, who had considered Kuroda a "[t]raitor" during the war. In response, Ono warned Enchi: "Young men of your generation tend to see things far too simply" and "You're too young, Mr Enchi, to know about this world and its complications" (113–114). Ono's repetition of "young" not only suggests his age and experience but also indirectly acknowledges his association with the Japanese Empire's military ideology as an artist in his "young[er]" days. Yet, simultaneously, Ono's repetition of "young" also highlights his perception of Enchi's immaturity in understanding the complex history, thus allowing him to understate his responsibilities for Kuroda's suffering.

Ono's ambivalence about his wartime responsibilities suggests that Enchi, like Miyake and Suichi, is figured as a contrarian character who embodies the ethos of opposition to the Japanese Empire's militarism, an ethos implemented by the US Empire in the early occupation. To counter Enchi's criticism of militarism, Ono withholds the reason why he reported Kuroda to the wartime authorities in his narrative. Evidently, when Ono brings up the Kuroda incident again in the November 1949 entry, he indicates that he was once "an official adviser to the Committee of Unpatriotic Activities" (182). This position suggests that Kuroda had probably done something "unpatriotic" against the Japanese Empire, which prompted the ultranationalist Ono to report him. To understate his role in Kuroda's suffering, Ono does not reveal the details

behind his decision to report Kuroda. Instead, he recalls how his younger self questioned the wartime authorities searching Kuroda's house: "But why? Has Mr Kuroda committed any crime?" (181). Here, the older Ono frames himself as an innocent man who had no idea why Kuroda's house was searched by the authorities, even though he was the one who reported Kuroda. Ono's selectiveness in narrating his previous loyalty to the Japanese wartime government resonates with the Reverse Course's obscuration of Japan's previous military violence.

As Ono navigates between the Japanese and US Empires—the "several sets of watchful imperial eyes" (Doyle 66)—his military past becomes a shadowy presence. Towards the end of the April 1949 entry, Ono recalls his experience at Noriko's *miai* with Taro. A scrutiny of the event shows how deeply the inter-imperial interactions between Japan and the US are embedded in the postwar era, such that subjects like Ono who had been loyal to the defeated Japanese Empire are constantly aware of the past. As the two families—the Onos and the Saitos—discussed the ongoing workers' strike in Japan, Dr Saito (Taro's father and Ono's peer) appeared to endorse the spirit of liberal democracy during the US occupation. However, Taro seemed cautious: "Democracy is a fine thing, but it doesn't mean citizens have a right to run riot . . . We've yet to learn how to handle the responsibility of democracy" (120). Taro's dissatisfaction with the implementation of democracy resonates with the reversal of democratisation and demilitarisation during the US Reverse Course, a key event that perpetuated vestiges of Japanese imperialism in postwar Japan. The divergence in views between the father and son intensified the sensitivity of the topic of Japan's military history at the meeting.

Worried that the Saitos might be aware of his past military role in painting propagandistic posters, Ono apologised: "I freely admit I made many mistakes," "I admit this,"

"I admit this quite readily" (repeated twice), "I am not now afraid to admit that I was mistaken" (123–124). This confession has been described as an "epiphanic moment" (Davis 198). Ono expressed himself so fluently, as though he had no qualms about embracing his past deeds. Yet, despite the repetitive admissions, Ono did not make any substantive revelation. Under the dominance of the US Reverse Course, although Ono acknowledged his role in upholding Japanese militarism, he still ambivalently obscured the mistakes, rendering his narration unreliable. Hence, what is more "epiphanic" in this scene is the perturbing matter lying beneath Ono's seeming frankness.

The perturbing matter is hinted at by the word "happier," which Ono uses after recalling the successful *miai*. He uses it specifically in relation to his other painting student Shintaro, who wants to disavow his relationship with Ono in order to get a job: "Shintaro would in my view be a happier man today if he had the courage and honesty to accept what he did in the past." Ono's implication is that he himself is now "happier" after confessing his guilt at the *miai* with "honesty," which is apparently just his own assumption. Ono thinks that Shintaro had found a job by downplaying his past involvement in producing posters for the "China crisis" with Ono (125).[10] Historically, following Japan's 1945 surrender, China adopted the policy of *yide baoyuan* (以德报怨), or reciprocating hostility with morality, for the sake of international peace. China suffered gravely under the Japanese Empire's military invasion (1937–1945). Nonetheless, according to Song Zhiyong, citing *Ta Kung Pao*, as of January 1949, only about one-fifth of the Japanese suspects were sentenced to death or imprisonment under the *yide baoyuan* policy (47). This history explains why Ono can understate the role he played in Japanese militarism. China's magnanimity in dealing with its wounds inflicted by Japan, in conjunction with the US Empire's Reverse Course, enables Ono and, more broadly, postwar Japanese society, to downplay the responsibilities for violence committed in wartime. Therefore, when *Artist* describes how Ono uses Shintaro to express his own happiness in

relation to the China crisis campaign, it does not just launch a postcolonial critique of his conflicting attitudes in confronting the Japanese Empire. Instead, in inter-imperial terms, it frames Ono's ambivalence towards his erstwhile military role as a consequence of the Reverse Course, through which the US Empire contradictorily perpetuates traces of the Japanese Empire's militarism.

Recuperation of Contributions to Japan: November 1949 and June 1950

Whether to persuade others and himself of the righteousness of his past military commitment or to understate his wartime responsibilities, Ono's ultimate goal is to prove the significance of his well-meaning contributions to Japan's imperial strength. His nostalgic quest to recuperate or reclaim his contributions to Japan manifests in his recollection of his two propagandistic posters. Yet, the quest is sporadically interrupted by his retrospective unease over how the Japanese Empire's militarism eventually led to the subordination of post-war Japan to the US Empire. This dynamic is poignantly exemplified by the Korean War, an important phase of the Reverse Course, which forms the background of Ono's narration towards the end. As such, this final sub-section of the textual analysis examines Ono's thwarted recuperation of his contributions towards strengthening Japan, which underlies his ambivalence in confronting his past involvement with Japanese militarism.

The November 1949 entry reveals that Ono was inspired to produce the propagandistic posters after witnessing three scowling boys torturing an animal with sticks on a squalid street. In his first painting, "Complacency," the three mischievous boys were recast as admirable patriots. His recollection of this painting reveals his nostalgia in recalling his contributions to Japan via his propaganda art, a role that detaches him from the societal voices in postwar Japan that are critical of militarism. As Boym remarks, nostalgia "seduces rather than convinces"

while drawing one into the bygone times (13). Recalling the painting when it was near completion, Ono notes, "[T]he scowls on their [the boys'] faces would not have been guilty, defensive scowls of little criminals caught in the act; rather, they would have worn the manly scowls of samurai warriors ready to fight" (168). Furthermore, the samurai warriors' image was superimposed on the image of "three fat, well-dressed men" who "seem decadent" (168). By transforming the "little criminals" into "samurai warriors," the stock image of Japan's fighting spirit, Ono seemingly implies that his past promotion of militarism should likewise not be regarded as a war crime but rather as a contribution to Japan's strength.

However, unlike the nostalgia in the recollection of the first poster, Ono's recollection of his second poster, "Eyes to the Horizon," alludes to his distress over the impact of Japan's military fervour, a cause that his art had been promoting. In the second poster, which was a reworking of the first, the three decadent men were agitated by the boys who eventually became soldiers, "looking to each other for initiative." The men awakened to militarism, Ono describes, resembled the "three prominent politicians," though he does not mention the politicians' identities (169). This ambiguation insinuates Ono's resistance to recalling his poster's role in spurring militarism. Such discomfort about his former profession becomes more conspicuous when he describes the three soldiers. One soldier, Ono remarks, "held out his sword, pointing the way forward, west towards Asia" (169). Clearly, "west" denotes the direction in which the Japanese Empire expanded "towards Asia." This frames Japan as distinct from Asia—that it was a polity stronger than Asia. If so, "west towards Asia" hints at Ono's pride in his contributions to strengthening Japan. At the same time, by suggesting that Japan was not part of Asia, the phrase also signifies that Japan was akin to the strong imperial powers of the West, like the US Empire, given the US's key role in ending Japan's self-imposed isolation.[11] Yet, when considered within the context of postwar Japan, the phrase frames Japan as a polity subordinated to the West, particularly the US Empire. This interpretation accentuates how

Japanese militarism had eventually subjected the country to US hegemony. Therefore, while Ono recalls his posters to recuperate his contributions to Japan, the recollection—especially of the second poster—ends up incurring his distress at having played a part in leading to Japan's catastrophic defeat and manipulation by the US.

Through the lens of inter-imperiality, it is arguable that the older Ono's recollection of his propagandistic posters, which illustrates his ambivalence towards his past support for the Japanese Empire's military agenda, articulates the contradictory messages about militarisation conveyed by the US Empire's Reverse Course. Focusing on the transformation of the "little criminals" into three "samurai warriors," Ono's description of the first poster echoes the Reverse Course's deemphasis on the previously implemented demilitarisation efforts, which entails the return of traces of the Japanese Empire's militarism in US-occupied Japan. As for his description of the second poster, his attention to the three men awakened to militarism alludes to the former Japanese militarists who, as Miyake condemned earlier, are now "back in positions they held during the war" due to the Reverse Course's depurging of militarists (56). Hence, under the influence of the Reverse Course, although Ono remains ambivalent about fully admitting his wrongdoing in painting those propagandistic posters, his description of the posters suggests his awareness of the complexity of Japan's predicament, where the reinstatement of former militarists marked Japan's subordination to the US.

However, rather than expressing remorse for his past deeds, Ono tries to prove that his earlier advocacy of ultranationalist militarism was a collective movement, not his own political agenda. This idea is dramatised in his recollection of his wartime conversation with Chishu Matsuda, an art appreciator who catalysed his decision to espouse militarism. Ono remembers Matsuda telling him, "We are now a mighty nation, capable of matching any of the Western nations. In the Asian hemisphere, Japan stands like a giant amidst cripples and dwarfs" (173).

Noteworthily, Matsuda's overall speech as retold by Ono after the war, which is far longer than the quote, is dotted with numerous instances of "we" and "our" (173). The way Ono recalls the scene suggests that he views Japan's rise more as a collective feat orchestrated by the military state, with him playing a minor role. Ono's unreliable narration reconstructs his identity like an artwork so that he can frame his propagandistic posters as his well-intentioned contributions to Japan, which are dissociated from militarism's devastating aftermath. His nostalgia in recuperating his contributions to Japan gestures towards the Reverse Course, which contradictorily relaxed the demilitarisation measures practised in the early occupation.

As the Reverse Course instituted contradictory discourses on militarisation, it also underlined the capricious way the US Empire handled the military afterlives of the Japanese Empire. *Artist* animates this point in the June 1950 entry, the novel's shortest entry, where Ono reflects on the city's rapid postwar development. June 1950, in history, marks the beginning of the Korean War, the Cold War's first military clash. The US joined the war to protect South Korea from communist North Korea. The Korean War (part of the later phase of the Reverse Course) witnessed how the US steered postwar Japan towards remilitarisation. Since the US army was redeployed to Korea, Japan was permitted to establish the National Police Reserve, a military body, to bolster its security. Besides, thousands of Japanese citizens moved to Korea to contribute to US military efforts (Morris-Suzuki 1). As the Reverse Course shifted from demilitarisation to downplaying the punishment of militarists, it set the stage for the Korean War to repurpose the Japanese military to combat communism.

Understanding these larger tensions explains why Ono is not profoundly perturbed by his erstwhile involvement in the Japanese Empire's military agenda. Feeling glad to see "how things have recovered so rapidly over these years," Ono ends his narration as follows: "Our nation, it seems, whatever mistakes it may have made in the past, has now another chance to

make a better go of things. One can only wish these young people well" (206). The pronoun "one" signifies Ono's detachment from the young people due to the generation gap (Cheng 236). Yet, given the increasing controversy over Japan's remilitarisation during the Korean War, an integral part of the US Empire's Reverse Course, "one" also suggests Ono's unease in foregrounding his identity as someone partly responsible for the Japanese Empire's military fervour during WWII, which eventually led to a catastrophic defeat. It is thus challenging for him to bring himself to extend good wishes to the younger generation who will likely undergo remilitarisation. In this light, the novel's last line quoted above—"One can only wish these young people well"—acquires a cautious, if not downright ominous, undertone by linking the present (remilitarisation of Japan) with the past (imperial militarisation ending in defeat). Such a conflicted identity sharply contrasts with his earlier resoluteness in nostalgically recuperating his contributions to the creation of propagandistic posters, especially the first poster. Embedded in the larger events happening beyond Japan's shores like the Korean War, Ono's ambivalence towards his past association with the Japanese Empire intensifies. He is thus unable to entirely seek comfort in the "chance" offered by the US Reverse Course for Japan "to make a better go of things" (206).

Notably, before reflecting on the rapidly developing city, Ono's narrative in the June 1950 entry also describes his last visit to Matsuda, who had motivated him to espouse militarism, before Matsuda's passing. Ono first recalls seeing two small boys playing by the water on the way to Matsuda's house (197). After that, he recalls another boy who, according to Matsuda, always watched him from the tree trunk (201). The juxtaposition of Matsuda with the three boys here conjures up Ono's propagandistic posters, in which he transformed three mischievous boys into samurai-like heroes who fought for Japan. By reinvoking the image of the three boys who now seem harmless to society, the last entry illustrates Ono's abiding ambivalence when confronting his artistic commitment to the Japanese Empire's military

expansionism. Due to the US Reverse Course, which culminated with the Korean War, Japan's wartime responsibilities have been reduced to an easily forgivable error, akin to that of a child.[12] In this sense, the novel laments how postwar Japan casts off the burden of its wartime past and embarks on a new path of development.

Conclusion

Mobilising Doyle's inter-imperiality, this article analyses Ono's ambivalence towards his past role as a propagandistic painter, who advocated the Japanese Empire's militarism, under the influence of the US Empire's Reverse Course. On this basis, this article argues that Ishiguro's *Artist* portrays Ono's ambivalence in confronting his past military commitment against the backdrop of the US Reverse Course, which conveyed contradictory messages about militarisation to postwar Japan. While demilitarisation was the priority of the early phase of the US occupation of Japan, the US Reverse Course shifted focus to anti-communism and even involved postwar Japan in the US military operations in the Korean War. Consequently, the Reverse Course seemed to "reverse" postwar Japan back to its military era.

The textual analysis of *Artist* highlights the political significance of Ono's ambivalence towards his erstwhile support for the Japanese Empire's militarism in his retrospective narration. Occasionally, Ono acknowledges the severe consequences of Japanese militarism. For example, he grapples with the casualties suffered by Japan in his conversations with Miyake, Suichi, and Enchi. Moreover, his description of his posters articulates his unease over how military fervour led Japan to a devastating defeat and left the country subject to US political machinations. However, he hardly admits that his past military role was a mistake. Instead, he attempts to persuade himself and others of the righteousness of his former role as a propagandistic artist, understate his responsibilities for advocating militarism, and recuperate

his past contributions to strengthening Japan's imperial power, as discussed in the three sub-sections of the textual analysis. His ambivalence as such illustrates the impact of the Reverse Course, which allowed those who had supported the war to disavow their association with Japanese militarism.

With that, this article demonstrates that the US Reverse Course played a key role in fostering ambivalence in confronting Japan's imperial past. By allowing vestiges of the Japanese Empire's militarism to endure in postwar Japan, the Reverse Course contradicted the US Empire's demilitarisation measures in the early occupation. To accentuate these shifts in postwar Japan, *Artist* includes the characters Miyake, Suichi, and Enchi who openly critiqued militarism. These contrarian characters manifest the demilitarisation ethos passed down from the early US occupation. It is through these characters that *Artist* paves the way to elicit Ono's unease over the US's control of Japan. By compelling Ono to question his former military ambition, the novel exposes Ono as an unreliable narrator, whose narrative conceals and reconstructs his identity like a piece of artwork.

The implication of this analysis of *Artist* is that, due to the US Reverse Course, postwar Japan's reflections on Japanese imperial militarism concentrate more on Japan's complex relationship with the US, rather than on regions that once suffered from Japanese military aggression. The US Empire not only vanquished the Japanese Empire but also ideologically mitigated Japan's accountability for its imperial expansionism. Hence, the identity of postwar Japan is generally preoccupied with navigating the despair of war defeat instead of addressing its military transgression. Throughout his narrative, Ono's ambivalence towards his past espousal of Japanese imperialism is primarily concerned with the grave impact of militarism on Japan, including, as noted earlier, people's sacrifices in wartime and Japan's eventual subordination to the US. He scarcely broaches Japan's fraught relationship with the regions it

formerly invaded. The only exception is the brief mention of the China crisis. Put another way, under the influence of the Reverse Course, Japan's wartime aggression gradually fades into history.

Ono's younger self was eager to make meaningful contributions to Japan. Yet, with the catastrophic downfall of the Japanese Empire, which is ultimately followed by the US Empire's Reverse Course that culminates with the Korean War, a mist of ambivalence lingers over his worldview. Ever like a floating-world artist, Ono is left to keep crafting his identity, which is intertwined with how the Japanese Empire's militarism is manipulated by the US Empire to reinforce its worldwide hegemony. Art may not be feeble before politics, but an artist—an artist of identity—ostensibly is.

Notes

1. In an article from *The Guardian*, Ishiguro admits that *Artist* was written between 1981 and 1985, a time of significant political upheaval due to Thatcherite economic reforms.
2. To ensure succinctness, this article also refers to the Japanese and US Empires as "Japan" and "the US," the respective metropolitan centres of the empires.
3. *Artist*'s figuration of Ono as someone who promoted Japanese militarism through art has a historical basis. According to Asato Ikeda, during the war, there were indeed Japanese artists who produced propaganda, either voluntarily or under pressure from the Japanese government (15–24).
4. The Reverse Course's starting date varies among scholars. The year was, for example, 1947 for Jennnifer Miller (28) and approximately 1948 for Naoki Sakai (232).
5. Towards 1947, the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) rallied Japanese workers to launch strikes, demanding better economic conditions and contesting the political system of the US occupation. To protect the weak Japanese economy, the US banned the strikes.
6. *Artist* is set in an anonymous city rather than Nagasaki after the atomic bombing, although that was Ishiguro's childhood hometown.
7. Sloane's statement refers to *Remains of the Day* (*RD*), *A Pale View of Hills* (*PVH*), *Artist* (*AFW*), *The Buried Giant* (*BG*), and *Never Let Me Go* (*NLMG*).

8. Examples of scholarship about Japanese imperialism in Korea (Kim-Kiteishvili), Taiwan (Ching), and China (Song) are cited elsewhere in this article.

9. In the same period, the term "*ukiyo*" also signified pleasure in Japan, emblematised by "teahouses, brothels, and puppet and kabuki theaters" (Desai 3).

10. Although the term "China crisis" was intelligible between Ono and Shintaro (102–103), it is not an established term in the scholarship of WWII. The novel's dubious use of "China crisis" thus alerts readers to Ono's unreliable narration in portraying his self-assumed nobility.

11. Since the early 19th century, Japan had been practising *sakoku* (self-isolation), preventing the Japanese from leaving and the foreigners from entering. Yet, the visit of Commodore Matthew Perry, a US naval officer, to Japan in 1853 pressured Japan to open trade with the US.

12. Rather than endorsing the idea that the Japanese supposedly "needed the Americans to guide them back to 'the path'" (Shibusawa 95), the comparison serves to underscore how postwar Japan's development was contingent on US occupation policies.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr Vandana Saxena and Dr Fiona Lee Hsiao Yen, who supervised my English literature dissertation submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the English Department, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya, from which this article is derived. I am thankful to Dr Vandana as well for her support during the preparation of this article. My thanks also go to the editorial team of *SARE: Southeast Asian Review of English* and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback. Furthermore, I am grateful to Dr Dougal McNeill and Dr Shin Takahashi for their guidance during the early stages of my study of Ishiguro's *Artist*, which has since evolved significantly.

Works Cited

Boehmer, Elleke. *Postcolonial Poetics: 21st-Century Critical Readings*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. Basic Books, 2001.

Chen, Ken. 2015. "Kazuo Ishiguro: My Own Private Japan." *Asian American Writers' Workshop*, 7 April 2015, aaww.org/kazuo-ishiguro-my-own-private-japan/.

Cheng, Chu-chueh. "Cosmopolitan Alterity: America as the Mutual Alien of Britain and Japan in Kazuo Ishiguro's Novels." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2010, pp. 227–244, https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989410366892.

Ching, Leo T. S. *Becoming "Japanese": Colonial Taiwan and the Politics of Identity Formation.* U of California P, 2001.

Davis, Christopher. *Reading, Writing and Understanding the Postcolonial*. 2016. U of Warwick, PhD dissertation. Warwick Research Archive Portal. wrap.warwick.ac.uk/id/eprint/80930/.

Desai, Vishaka. "Introduction: Censorship and Art: Japan and America." *Undercurrents in the Floating World: Censorship and Japanese Prints*, edited by Sarah Thompson and Harry Harootunian. The Asia Society Galleries, 1991. pp. 1–6.

Doyle, Laura. *Inter-imperiality: Vying Empires, Gendered Labor, and the Literary Arts of Alliance*. Duke UP, 2020.

Gabrakova, Dennitza. *The Unnamable Archipelago: Wounds of the Postcolonial in Postwar Japanese Literature and Thought*. Brill, 2018.

Gilroy, Paul. *Postcolonial Melancholia*. New York: Columbia UP, 2005.

Gordon, Andrew. *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present*. Oxford UP, 2003.

Ikeda, Asato. *The Politics of Painting: Fascism and Japanese Art During the Second World War*. U of Hawai'i P, 2018.

Ishiguro, Kazuo. *An Artist of the Floating World*. 1986. Faber & Faber, 2001.

—. "Kazuo Ishiguro: Thatcher's London and the Role of the Artist in a Time of Political Change." *The Guardian*, 24 June 2016, theguardian.com/books/2016/jun/24/kazuo-ishiguro-my-turning-point-reading-proust-on-my-sickbed.

Kim-Kiteishvili, Jungah. "Specters of Comfort Women: Biopolitical Colonial Warfare, Questions of Humanity, and the Haunted Future." *Violence: An International Journal*, vol. 4, no. 1–2, 2023, pp. 48–70, https://doi.org/10.1177/26330024231213102.

Mason, Gregory. "An interview with Kazuo Ishiguro." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 30, no. 3, 1989, pp. 335–347, https://doi.org/10.2307/1208408.

Miller, Jennifer. *Cold War Democracy: The United States and Japan*. Harvard UP, 2019.

Mitter, Rana. "An Asian Nostalgia." *International Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2021, pp. 83–96, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479591420000650.

Morikawa, Takemitsu. “When Market Promotes Individuality: Arts in Early Modern Japan from the Macrosociological Perspective.” *The Sociology of Arts and Markets: New Developments and Persistent Patterns*, edited by Andrea Glauser et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 159–181.

Morris-Suzuki, Tessa. “Post-War Warriors: Japanese Combatants in the Korean War.” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* vol. 10, no. 31, 2012, pp. 1–19, apjjf.org/2012/10/31/tessa-morris-suzuki/3803/article.

Sakai, Naoki. *The End of Pax Americana: The Loss of Empire and Hikikomori Nationalism*. Duke UP, 2022.

Shibusawa, Naoko. *America’s Geisha Ally: Reimagining the Japanese Enemy*. Harvard UP, 2006.

Sim, Wai-chew. *Kazuo Ishiguro*. Routledge, 2010.

Sloane, Peter. *Kazuo Ishiguro’s Gestural Poetics*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2021.

Song, Zhiyong 宋志勇. “Zhanhou chuqi Zhongguo de duirizhengce yu zhanfan shenpan” 战后初期中国的对日政策与战犯审判 [China’s policy towards Japan and the trial of Japanese war criminals in years immediately after World War II]. *Nankai xuebao* 南开学报, no. 4, 2001, pp. 40–48. *CNKI*, oversea.cnki.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CJFD&dbname=CJFD2001&filename=LKXB200104006&uniplatform=OVERSEA&v=CVNaGpgrb_75ag5GZ_AIRPDn0TZMy5pRVNeYkGW8nCGZPX9yBuPXiijMoLFYRYmx.

Stockwin, Arthur. *The Failure of Political Opposition in Japan: Implications for Democracy and a Vision of the Future*. Routledge, 2023.

Tajiri, Yoshiki. “Ishiguro and Japan: History in *An Artist of the Floating World*.” *The Cambridge Companion to Kazuo Ishiguro*, edited by Andrew Bennett, Cambridge UP, 2023. pp. 27–40.

Tan, Jerrine. “Screening Japan: Kazuo Ishiguro’s Early Japan Novels and the Way We Read World Literature.” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 67, no. 1, 2021, pp. 89–122, https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2021.0004.

Wang, Ching-chih. *Japanese Imperialism in Contemporary English Fiction*. Springer Nature, 2019.

Zhang, Xiaoming 张小明. *Meiguo yu Dongya guanxi daolun* 美国与东亚关系导论 [An introduction to the history of US-East Asian relations]. Peking UP, 2010.