Interview – Tom Le

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Tom Le is an Associate Professor at Pomona College, where he teaches International Relations of East Asia, security and cooperation in International Relations, as well as intermediate and senior seminars on International Relations. His research areas include Japanese security policy, the U.S.-Japan alliance, war memory and reconciliation, militarism norms, and demographics and security. He is the author of Japan's Aging Peace: Pacifism and Militarism in the Twenty-First Century (Columbia University Press 2021). His works have been published by *the Washington Post*, *the Diplomat*, *East Asia Forum*, and *Foreign Affairs*. He is a research associate at the PRIME Institute at Meiji Gakuin University.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

Anything that is not related to traditional power balancing and nuclear weapons is exciting. I really enjoy researching demographics, examining aging and declining populations. I think that's exciting, because you can look at it and see how that affects regular security, but also how gender relations and society and environmental issues are linked to this problem. So there's a lot to pursue here. Research on soft power is fun, such as attempts made by the government to influence civil society. Lastly, using social media as political propaganda and decentralized finance in East Asia are exciting. Cryptocurrency seems like a new area of security that we did not consider before.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I didn't have a huge shift. The world has not fundamentally changed for me. But we try to learn every day, so I don't think the changes are so obvious. Then you look at yourself fifteen years later, the change is huge. When I started graduate school, I was a realist. But now I'm the kind of the non-traditional constructivist scholar. Yet, that change happened slowly and depends on what kind of data you collect. Talking to people all over Asia, such as policy makers, activists, people in the country I study changed my perspective. Hearing their voices was enlightening to me as an American, who looks at these issues from an outsider's perspective.

In your book, Japan's Aging Peace, you highlight efforts by the Japanese government to increase military recruitment by targeting women. Do you think this strategy is effective? What factors may limit its effectiveness?

It depends on what effectiveness means. Will it increase military recruitment of women is one question of effectiveness. Secondly, will increasing the military recruitment by targeting women make the military stronger. There are two intentions here. If you are talking about the first intention, then I say yes. The statistics on recruitment increased from four percent to six percent. This is an objective increase. Later, it may even reach eight or nine percent. However, there are limitations. A lot of the military in Japan that I interviewed are not still interested in having women in the military. They think they are not really designed for combat and it is better for them to be nurses. So there's still an old way of thinking that will make it hard for women to join the military. Also, as long as it's an all-voluntary force, a logical person, will not join, if they have superior opportunities in the economy. Why join the military if you lose a lot of freedom to travel when you can just work for Sony? I think a lot of women and men look at it that way.

On the second intention, will this recruitment strategy make the military stronger? Ultimately, unless they drastically increase the overall number of people in the military, it will not have an effect. It might stop the bleeding when the government struggles to recruit enough men, but unless the overall number goes up, it will not be a major improvement for the military. Why does Japan have a military? Two of the reasons are to balance against China and to counter the nuclearization threats posed by North Korea. How does having an extra 500 women in the military change China's or North Korea's behavior? So I think it has no effect when looking at the big picture.

You have emphasized the importance of considering multiple meanings of militarism. What is the significance of this approach?

I think a single definition of militarism is narrow. If China gets certain weapons, it must mean they are ready to attack the U.S.? But what if a country buys a giant ship and uses it mostly for disaster relief ? Or what if a country purchases an advanced weapon, but only intends to use it for defensive purposes? So these are different ways people use the military to get what they need. If you just have one view of militarism, then any action taken by other sides will always be seen as antagonistic. However, if you have a more complex view, we can kind of get out of the security dilemma a little bit. For example, consider a hypothetical scenario. China gets five submarines but uses it only for research in the ocean. While its military may become stronger because of this, you can't say with certainty that China is ready to attack.

Your recent book underscores the connection between demographics and security. What factors led to the current demographic crisis in East Asia? How does this crisis influence security in this region?

Calculating the aging and fertility rate reveals limitations of recruitment into the military. Usually, to address this problem, countries can choose to get better technology. But the demographic crisis also makes this decision hard because the government needs to spend most of its taxation income on social security and health care to accommodate the needs of the aging population. However, the demographic crisis can also be destabilizing. In China, there are a lot more men than women. Men, if they have the right mission, then they can be critical to the economy and national security. But if not, they can also be quite destructive, using violence domestically and internationally. Also, if the economy slows down in these countries because of decreasing productivity, then the political stability in some countries, such as China, will be affected. The CCP relies on economic growth for its legitimacy. The stagnation of economic growth may upset its own people. Thus, economic instability can lead to security instability.

What potential threats pose the biggest challenges to security in East Asia?

While great power balancing and the nuclerization of North Korea can be destructive, they are not the biggest. Problems that we are not prepared for, such as the environmental problem, can be more challenging. Resource use in China is quite destructive and that does not go away. I think the environmental problems in this region are difficult to solve and governments are not taking them seriously enough.

Does a stable East Asian order require a significant presence of the U.S.?

I think so – the U.S. is part of the East Asian order. The U.S. is a pacific county that trades with countries in Asia. If the U.S. were to truly leave, China would struggle, as it would lose a major trading partner and a strategic competitor. Japan's reliance on the U.S. market and the fact that South Korea is a purely export country would make them struggle too. Besides the importance of the U.S.' economic presence, its security presence in the region is also prominent. The U.S. has made it possible for Japan and South Korea to spend less on the military. Thus, they can flourish economically and maintain stability, which benefits the U.S. in the long term.

As a constructivist scholar, how do you evaluate the impact of historical legacy on the identity and foreign policy of East Asian Countries, such as Japan, China, and South Korea?

I think historical legacy is everything. There is no such thing as "post-colonial," as countries will always live with the

memories of colonialism. Colonization can fully change the historical trajectory of some countries. Because of colonization, modern South Korean and Chinese identity is based on rejecting Japanese power. For Japan, it will forever be a dark spot on its history, something they can learn from and want to avoid. So you can never escape from the past. We talk about reconciliation, as if we can repair things and return to the past. But time does not work that way. We always move forward, so we are always influenced by the accumulation of past events. We cannot pick and choose and erase the parts we do not like. The past is a crucial component of the environment that we interact with.

It affects the foreign polices of these countries as well. Japan needs to maintain its security with a limited military. They cannot directly strengthen their military and rely on its alliance with the U.S. South Korea tends to spend lots of time to argue with Japan about historical issues, which limits the efficiency of cooperation between them. The talk over historical problems is always a burden, an additional political cost for them. Also, the split of South and North Korea is a colonial legacy. As long as the countries are not united, then they will waste lots of energy trying to solve this problem. For China, the country has been at the top for the vast majority of its existence. I think the ways history is taught in China is really disruptive. The CCP can use the historical narrative to its benefit. Even though history may not be a problem naturally, because it is invisible, it will be a politicized problem that will affect how countries talk about each other and what policy options are available. If South Korea and China describe Japan as negative and continue to cooperate and trade with them, then the public may become confused. If the leader uses a politicized historical narrative to gain some points, then their actions and future policy possibilities will be constrained, because contradictions in their policy objectives will make them look hypocritical.

As an Associate Professor at a liberal arts college in the U.S., how do you address the Eurocentric biases in standard IR theories in your curriculum?

In my classes, I draw lots of readings from non-western scholars. But in the end, I don't even like the western/non-western binary. So I just focus on what good scholarship is and expand the perspectives. Also, we openly talk about the biases in class, which allows students to become aware of this problem. However, there are still limitations. All readings I assigned are written in English. If you really want to read non-U.S. based works, you have to read them in the original language. We can all try to "pretend" that we are not Eurocentric, but the fact that we only read in English and teach it in an American environment indicates that we are not breaking from this Eurocentrism.

What is the most important advice you could give to early practitioners and scholars of international relations?

I have two pieces of advice. One is you cannot time the market. Don't assume that pursuing a "popular" research topic will get you attention. It won't work, because the market may move away from you by the time you are done. Also, you will probably not be good at it – you should research what you are passionate about. Eventually, the market will catch up with you. You want to be early, not late. Secondly, don't be a jerk. Ultimately, academia is very isolating and lonely, since you mostly work on your own articles. But, the best part is where you share ideas, engage in debates, build connections, and help students. So it's easier if you choose to help everyone and not be overly-competitive. If you are a jerk, people notice you. Even if you don't suffer financially and career-wise, which are possible, I think you will not enjoy the experience.