

MAKING SENSE OF *NIHONJINRON*

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ABSTRACT This article attempts to examine *Nihonjinron*, the popular essentialist genre in Japan, which purports to analyse Japan's quintessence and cultural core by using three concepts – nationality, ethnicity and culture – synonymously. The focus of the paper will be placed on: (1) the widespread political bases of *Nihonjinron* and its internal divisions; (2) its changing features in the face of globalization; (3) the possible productive uses of *Nihonjinron* at both conceptual and theoretical levels; and (4) the dilemma of inter-societal and intra-societal cultural relativism, which the *Nihonjinron* debate has highlighted. The paper presents an outline of an inductive, pluralistic, multicultural model of analysis as a possible alternative.

KEYWORDS cultural relativism • ethnocentrism • globalization • identity • nationalism

THE N=E=C EQUATION

Stereotyping Japanese culture and personality has been the national sport of Japan's reading public for many decades. Books and articles which claim to identify the essence of 'Japaneseness' have flooded the market, with some selling millions of copies (notably Doi, 1973; Nakane, 1970). Foreign Japan specialists figure conspicuously in this field, with the translations of some well-known writers (e.g. Benedict, 1946; Reischauer, 1977; Vogel, 1979) also selling millions. The preoccupation of the Japanese readership with these publications has long established a genre called *Nihonjinron*, which literally means 'theories of the Japanese' (*Nihonjin*). Major bookshops in Japan have a *Nihonjinron* corner where dozens of titles in this area are assembled specifically for avid readers in search of Japan's quintessence and cultural core. While the degree of obsession has fluctuated over time, the discourse endures even at the end of the millennium as reputable writers keep producing books with

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titles such as *What is Japan?* (Sakaiya, 1993; Umesao, 1986), *Who are the Japanese?* (Umehara, 1990; Yamamoto, 1989) and *Rediscovering Japaneseness* (Hamaguchi, 1988; Watanabe, 1989a).

One estimate suggests that some 700 titles of *Nihonjinron* were published between 1945 and 1978 (Nomura, 1978). By now, more than likely, over 1000 have been brought out in this genre. Another study estimates that at least one-quarter of the contemporary Japanese population, upwards of 20 million people, have read one or more books in this category (Befu and Manabe, 1987; Manabe and Befu, 1992). Given the sheer size and great tenacity of the *Nihonjinron* phenomenon, this paper attempts to examine: (1) the widespread political bases of the genre; (2) the changing features of *Nihonjinron* in the face of globalization; (3) the possible productive uses of *Nihonjinron*; and (4) two types of cultural relativism that the *Nihonjinron* debate has highlighted.

Before addressing these issues, however, it is important to be mindful of the way in which *Nihonjinron* tends to use three concepts – nationality, ethnicity and culture – almost interchangeably. At the core of the *Nihonjinron* discourse lies the notion of Japaneseness, a set of value orientations that the Japanese are supposed to share.¹ *Nihonjinron* advocates share the fundamental assumption that Japaneseness, which every single Japanese supposedly possesses, has existed indefinitely, that Japaneseness differs fundamentally from ‘westernness’, namely western orientations, and determines all aspects of Japanese ways of life (Morris-Suzuki, 1998; Mouer and Sugimoto, 1986). The *Nihonjinron* discourse uses the notion of Japaneseness interchangeably with Japanese culture and rarely articulates its demographic basis. Generally speaking, however, *Nihonjinron* defines the Japanese in racial terms with *Nihonjin* comprising most members of the Yamato race and excludes, for example, indigenous Ainu and Okinawans as groups who are administratively Japanese, but not ‘genuinely’ so. Furthermore, when *Nihonjinron* analysts refer to Japanese culture, they almost invariably mean Japanese *ethnic* culture and imply that the racially defined Japanese are its sole owners.

While a conceptual distinction between race and ethnicity remains a moot point of debate around the world (Eipper, 1983), the Japanese term *Nihon minzoku* means the Japanese not only as a biologically characterized racial group but also as a culturally defined ethnic group. In the Japanese language, the two concepts are virtually one and the same. Definitions of *Nihonjin* in current and widely circulated dictionaries are revealing precisely because they evince the popular conceptualization and imagery that *Nihonjinron* advocates invoke. For instance, *Kojien* of Iwanami Shoten (4th edn, 1991) defines *Nihonjin* as ‘those who possess Japanese nationality. Anthropologically, they belong to the Mongoloid race, their skin being yellow, their eyes black and their hair black and straight and their language Japanese’, a definition which suggests that Japanese nationality is a racial category. Sanseido’s *Kokugo Jiten* (2nd edn, 1974) is equally explicit in equating nationality with ethnicity when it defines *Nihonjin* as ‘the people who live in the Japanese archipelago and

make up the Japanese ethnic group (*Nihon minzoku*). Clearly, genuine Japanese are assumed to be those of Japanese biological pedigree.²

On the hidden assumption that the Japanese thus defined are supposed to be the authentic producers and consumers of Japanese culture, *Nihonjinron* proponents build their arguments on a triangular, three-way and tautological equation, which one might call the N=E=C equation, between N (nationality), E (ethnicity) and C (culture). These three dimensions are used as synonyms.

In this context, the *Nihonjinron* cultural analysis can and does operate like a facade used to conceal nationalistic and/or racial doctrines that it embodies. Indeed, some observers justifiably argue that *Nihonjinron* is based on prejudicial ideologies (Lummis, 1982) and harbours racist assumptions akin to those of some currents of German thought (Dale, 1986). Others demonstrate that, with Japanese culture presented as courteous and benign, it also serves as a 'decorative bouquet' veiling Japan's nationalist ideological agenda (Nishikawa, 1995). While all theories of the Japanese may not be racist and nationalistic, it would be difficult to deny that the *Nihonjinron* discourse is at least based tacitly on racial classifications and the state ideology of national integration. Furthermore, *Nihonjinron* logic in defining Japanese culture in racially monolithic terms plays down the empirical reality that Japan is a complex and highly differentiated society where rival cultural matrices are formed along a multiplicity of class and stratification lines, including variables like occupational position, firm size, educational background, gender and age (Sugimoto, 1997). The N=E=C equation masks not only ethnic minority issues in Japan but also its intranational, non-ethnic variations and conflicts.

INTERNAL DIVISIONS OF NIHONJINRON

Nihonjinron emanates from a variety of ideological bases which compete with each other on political issues. Some are narcissistic and others critical of the status quo. One group may be isolationist and another expansionist. Nevertheless, they unite in sharing hypotheses of Japanese homogeneity and commonly take for granted unchanging Japaneseness frozen in time. In this respect, they are symmetrically identical in their logical structure, notably in three different areas.

The first of these symmetries concerns common *Nihonjinron* orientations which cut across lines of political difference. In view of the nationalist tone of *Nihonjinron* it is not surprising that both conservatives and traditionalists have espoused its doctrine. During the Second World War, the *Nihonjinron* ideology was used to justify the colonization of Korea and much of China as well as military aggression into South-east Asia. It exalted the development of the notion of *kindai no chokoku* (literally, transcendence of modernity), a point of view which regarded Japan as the forerunner in Asia's fight against western imperialism and cultural domination in the region. After Japan's military defeat

in 1945, anti-western sentiment continued to manifest in the writings of right-wing authors who were committed to pre-war state ideology, imperial tradition, the Shintoist heritage, not to mention the legacy of the Japanese family system. Invoking the N=E=C equation, these ideologues called for the preservation of unique nationhood, ethnicity and Japanese culture.

However, *Nihonjinron* cuts across the political divide between both the right and the left. During the post-war years, *Nihonjinron* gathered support from socialists, communists, unionists and other reformist elements of Japanese society (Oguma, 1995, 1998). The holocaust at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the American-led occupation of Japan (1945–52) and Japan's military subjugation to the United States promoted a sense of victimhood in the Japanese political left. They conceived Japan's ethnic independence (*minzoku dokuritsu*) as their core cause, thereby tacitly corroborating the dogma in which the uniform Japanese race was encouraged to stand up against the imperialist west. The leftists' endorsement of the Maoist revolution in China and their sense of alliance with the National Liberation Army against Americans during the Vietnam War helped enhance this perception. In social movements against the ratification of the US–Japan Security Treaty in, 1960, known as AMPO, some communist and Marxist groups pressed the thesis that the struggle against the imperialism of the United States, which they define as the enemy of the Japanese race (*Nihon minzoku no teki*), is of crucial importance.

Noteworthy in this context is a pattern called *Nihon kaiki* (return to Japan), a form of intellectual conversion from internationalism to Japanism, repeated in many phases of Japanese intellectual history. It was especially popular during the Second World War when socialist, communist and liberal authors made a complete volte-face, embraced the notion of Japaneseness and endorsed the war. In the post-war years, some leaders of the radical student movements became ardent ideologues supporting the tradition of Japanese nationhood and other *Nihonjinron* tenets (Nishibe, 1997; Murakami et al., 1979).³ As the intellectual environment became increasingly depoliticized after the end of the Cold War, a few vocal critics of *Nihonjinron* in the, 1980s made an about-face in the, 1990s to articulate a *Nihonjinron* type of analysis of the archetype of Japanese culture (compare, for instance, Kawamura, 1980 and 1982, with 1993). The right–left symmetry made it easy for those on the left to voice essentialist or nationalist reasoning.

Second, the *Nihonjinron* discourse comprises not only ethno-nationalistic arguments but also what may be called an ethnocritical perspective, which critiques Japanese values and modes of life on ethnic grounds. While the *Nihonjinron* discourse in general tends to praise and glorify a selected set of Japan-specific characteristics, some writings are ethnocritical, and advance the thesis that the Japanese have negative traits, such as those of 'getting excited easily and disillusioned quickly', 'having the narrow islander mentality', 'lacking individuality' and 'hiding under the cloak of ambiguity', qualities which have allegedly remained constant among the Japanese.

Ethnocritical *Nihonjinron* writings sustained enduring popularity among the reform-minded readers who wished to find simple explanations for a sometimes complex and disagreeable environment.

Moreover, the tenor of *Nihonjinron* appears in the writings of some renowned progressive Japanese intellectual leaders. While these critics may not share the ethnocentric orientations of leftist nationalists, one cannot overlook their commonly accepted premise that the Japanese share a number of ethnic value orientations. Ethnocriticism forms an intellectual tradition which contradicts many ethnocentric *Nihonjinron* assertions. Nonetheless, it shares the presumption of ethnocultural homogeneity in a symmetrical fashion.

Shuichi Kato (1991), a leading social thinker in contemporary Japan, for instance, lists five archetypal characteristics which he maintains define Japanese society and culture as an integrated whole: (1) competitive groupism; (2) this worldliness and absence of universalistic values; (3) present orientation as distinguished from past or future orientations; (4) extreme ritualism and extreme emphasis upon intra-group communication; and (5) exclusivism and a closed attitude towards the foreign world. Masao Maruyama (1991), a most celebrated historian of political thought, also, points to the prototype of Japanese thought, the ancient layer of Japanese culture and what he calls the *basso ostinato*, the persistent, underlying historical, ethical and political consciousness of the Japanese. The ethnocritical tradition further resembles the ethnocentric version of *Nihonjinron* because it fails to specify the demographic base to which its descriptions of Japaneseness are supposed to apply. Studies have shown that readers who are interested and engaged in curing the ills of Japanese society have read *Nihonjinron* as a type of ethnocritical literature which provides clues to solving social problems intrinsic to Japanese ethnic culture (Yoshino, 1992, 1997). Ethnocentric and ethnocritical *Nihonjinron* show a kind of doublet pattern: they assess the alleged Japaneseness in a diametrically opposing manner, but they both make no explicit reference to the conceptual boundary of *Nihonjin* and share an analogous appreciation of who the Japanese are.

The third divide of the *Nihonjinron* discourse concerns rivalry between isolationist and hegemonist perspectives. On the whole, it has taken an isolationist line and has presented a defensive argument against hegemonic power centres, claiming that the core of Japaneseness should be sustained intact in spite of some inevitable foreign influence. This stance is partially attributable to the dual and almost 'schizophrenic' position of Japanese society in the international community. On the one hand, Japan has been the only non-western country that has achieved and even surpassed the level of economic and technological development attained by industrialized western countries. On the other hand, in terms of cultural and linguistic influence, the nation remains at the periphery internationally. Japan's status inconsistency between the two ladders of international stratification has given Japanese writers and readers an understandable sense of unease, angst and imbalance. *Nihonjinron*

arguments tend to drift between 'ethnoperipheral centrism' and 'ethnocentric peripherism', reflecting the fact that Japan is both a centre and a periphery.

In fact, Japanese literati have long been accustomed to a Janus-headed existence. Before the 19th century, China, which called itself the Middle Kingdom, was the only significant centre for the existing Japanese leadership who saw their own culture and civilization as belonging to the Chinese periphery. A premodern source of inspiration from which *Nihonjinron* derives its intellectual orientation can be located in *Kokugaku*, a nationalistic discourse which attempted to identify Japan's spiritual cultural roots by tracing them back to the period prior to the importation of Confucianism and Buddhism from Continental Asia. The *Kokugaku* school which consolidated in the 18th and 19th centuries championed such classical literature as *Kojiki*, *Nihon Shoki* and *Manyoshu*, which attempted to present the essential attributes of Japanese culture. The *Kokugaku* theorists sought to revitalize Japan's indigenous religion, Shintoism, and link it to the imperial institutions and practices, thereby bolstering the essence of the Japanese spirit. In the early Meiji period, at the time of state building, a process of Europeanization was accompanied by the slogan, *wakon yosai* (Japanese spirit and western technology), an idea that even if Japan westernizes in the material sense, Japan's cultural essence should remain intact and unshaken. This dual attribute of Japan's intellectual history has fostered a belief among most *Nihonjinron* writers that Japaneseness should be insulated from non-Japanese who, in any case, are incapable of understanding.

The same duality, however, has also promoted a hegemonic stance among some *Nihonjinron* proponents. In the, 1990s, Japan's cultural uniqueness advocates came to realize that they gave critics of Japanese practices ammunition to chide Japanese leaders for falling out of step with internationally accepted norms. In the face of the rising US-based revisionist argument that Japan is unfairly closed and even 'alien', some *Nihonjinron* theorists shifted their emphasis away from Japan being portrayed as an isolated unique case and started maintaining that the 'Japanese model' has *universal* applicability. For instance, Eshun Hamaguchi, a sociologist who had defined Japan as a uniquely *kanjin*-oriented society in the 1980s (Hamaguchi, 1982), made an about-face and started suggesting in the 1990s that this orientation is latently omnipresent around the world and is therefore transplantable across national boundaries (Hamaguchi, 1996a).

The renewed interest in Japanese culture as a possible counter-discourse to western culture and a possible universalizing force echoes the assertions of pre-war nationalists. Arguably the most eminent pre-war sociologist, Yasuma Takada, wrote, 'Our Japanese sociology is a discipline which formulates the practical guiding principles not for the internationalization of Japan but for the Japanization of the world and we must take an initiative to present concrete methods to achieve this goal' (quoted in Kawamura, 1982: 161). Both isolationist and hegemonist versions of *Nihonjinron* co-opt the

N=E=C equation, exalt Japaneseness and accept the dual nature of Japan's position in the global context, but they differ symmetrically in determining whether Japan should be insular or expansionary. Because of the similarities in content, it has always been easy for the advocates of the Japanese mystique to convert to a Pan-Asianist position (Watanabe, 1989b), a scenario which has remanifested itself to a considerable degree in recent years.

GLOBALIZATION AND NIHONJINRON

With the increasing influence of the Japanese economy around the world and the concomitant globalization of Japanese society, the three aforementioned internal divisions of *Nihonjinron* have been both consolidated and weakened. In the face of Japan's rapid involvement into transnational affairs, the Japanese establishment has a greater interest in managing images of Japanese society and culture both domestically and internationally. Government institutions and corporate interests give certain brands of *Nihonjinron* explicit moral and financial support. For obvious reasons, the *Nihonjinron* images of Japanese society as harmonious, integrated and consensual have appealed to the Japanese leadership precisely because these portrayals blur the lines of class cleavage, downplay the potential of class conflict and promote the supposed mythical and ideal qualities of Japanese culture which foreigners are not expected to comprehend fully. The image control functions of *Nihonjinron* have changed in recent years in response to the twists and turns of globalization as they impinge upon various interests of Japanese society. Here four developments merit attention.

In the first place, the globalization of the Japanese economy has dramatically increased the number of those individuals who are Japanese in a liberal sense but who may not satisfy the N=E=C equation. They include: expatriate businessmen, retirees and their family members who have chosen to live overseas; immigrant workers employed in Japan; foreigners naturalized as Japanese; returnee children who were educated abroad and are not fluent in Japanese; and children of mixed marriage who live in Japan. Their very existence blurs the boundaries between Japanese and non-Japanese and highlights 'boundary dissonance', from which *Nihonjinron* recoils. The growing number of Japanese outside the N=E=C equation has also made more visible a variety of such ethnic and quasi-ethnic groups, such as: Koreans resident in Japan, most of whom do not hold Japanese nationality but assume Japanese 'identities'; underclass buraku residents who are Japanese by nationality and ethnicity but subjected to prejudice and discrimination because of a subtly entrenched caste system; and the Ainu race who are the indigenous Japanese. Okinawa, which had its own kingdom during feudal years and was later under US occupation for nearly three decades after the Second World War until 1972, has been a thorn in the side of the N=E=C perspective, by exhibiting visibly different cultural and political orientations from 'Japan proper'.

The Japanese with mixed identities problematize the criteria for defining the Japanese and Japaneseness and point to a multiplicity of benchmarks including citizenship, biological pedigree, language competence, place of birth and residence, not to mention subjective identification (Mouer and Sugimoto, 1995). Globalization has brought into view many kinds of Japanese of whom *Nihonjinron* lost sight and who pose a fundamental challenge to its core assumptions.

The second development in the *Nihonjinron* field reflects two-way fluctuations in images of Japan: centralization and diversification. The appreciation of the Japanese yen has made it increasingly difficult for overseas Japan specialists to conduct research for a long period of time in Japan without securing some financial support from the Japanese government, companies or foundations. Inevitably, scholars are placed in a self-censoring environment which tends to induce them to subscribe to, or at least take into consideration, the views of these organizations.

In the meantime, while government and corporate activities that endorse *Nihonjinron* images of Japanese society intensify, the very expansion of Japan's economy leads to their diversification as well. The voluminous increase in the number of students and researchers studying in Japan has empowered them to examine almost every facet of Japanese society. A growing number of foreign workers who constitute the lowest echelon of Japanese society have inevitably been exposed to those unpleasant practices and customs which *Nihonjinron* avoids addressing: alienation, crime, poverty, corruption, discrimination and so on. The expanding presence of Japanese multinational corporations around the world has forced their local non-Japanese employees to face the reality of authority relations and exploitative structures built into them, rather than the sanitized official version of Japanese corporate culture. In other words, the representations of Japan are now subject to a tug-of-war between two competing forces: centralization on one hand and diversification on the other.

The third development in the *Nihonjinron* literature in the 1990s concerns the question of transferability of Japanese culture. The Japanese establishment has always availed itself of the idea of Japan's 'unique national culture' to defend what it perceives as Japan's national interest. During the 1970s and 1980s, Japanese trade negotiators used to make maximum use of the alleged cultural uniqueness of Japanese society and benefited by mystifying Japan's social practices. For instance, they attributed the slow decision-making process of Japanese companies to Japan's unique consensus culture; the scarcity of foreign nationals in top managerial positions in Japanese companies in their countries to their inability of appreciating Japanese customs. They also justified unfair trade behaviour by pointing to 'culturally unique' Japanese institutions such as *keiretsu*. Japan's unwillingness to take in refugees from Indochina was ascribed to its inimitable tradition of a one-race society.

In the 1990s, representation of Japanese society as one with an impenetrable mystique backfired and proved counter-productive. The once popular thesis that Japan's company culture can never be understood by foreigners has now given way to a more universalistic proposition such as that of Koji Matsumoto (1991), an ex-official of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry, who claims that *kigyo shugi* (corporationism) à la Japan, which differs from both capitalism and socialism, will gain ground as a new international economic system all around the world. Eisuke Sakakibara (1993), a high-ranking official of the Ministry of Finance, also advanced the view that Japanese-style capitalism forms a civilization type which is transplantable to other societies. In the world of visual representations, similar trends are discernible as Japan's multimedia organizations attempt to win an international audience by presenting Japanese cartoons, dramas and advertisements in a transnational and universally appealing manner. These images are exported to Asia and other regions and played on television screens overseas, with the 'Japanese fumes' being carefully removed from these programmes (Iwabuchi, 1998). The more *Nihonjinron* stresses the transferability of Japaneseness, of course, the more it would lose its claim for uniqueness, the very foundation upon which the *Nihonjinron* argument has been constructed.

Finally in the fourth place, competition between Japanese and American nationalism has intensified in the context of globalization. As the portrayal of Japanese culture in the public arena fluctuates in accordance with Japan's relations with the United States (Mouer and Sugimoto, 1986), the rising economic confrontation between the two countries appears to have been translated into clashes in the cultural sphere. On the Japanese side, as mentioned earlier, the state machinery has long participated in the build-up of *Nihonjinron*. Indeed, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its extradepartmental organizations have accepted *Nihonjinron* as legitimate descriptions of Japanese society and culture and have distributed large quantities of newsletters, magazines, books and videotapes, free of charge, as a matter of course. The Japanese government commenced a campaign in 1980 under the Ohira administration, claiming that Japan had entered the 'age of culture': the Japanese establishment began to regard 'cultural engineering' from above openly as an important device for ideological manipulation. In 1987, the Nakasone administration established the International Research Center for Japanese Studies which aroused controversy over the extent to which it would serve as the institutional arm of Japanese cultural nationalism and *Nihonjinron*. Some political leaders of South-east Asia who have endeavoured to advance the thesis of 'Asian values' found inspiration and justification in the *Nihonjinron*-style argument. It was not a mere coincidence that Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad and Japanese conservative novelist politician Shintaro Ishihara co-authored a book entitled *The Asia That Can Say No* (Mahathir and Ishihara, 1994).

Against this background, the intellectual partnerships and alliances that

Japanese *Nihonjinron* analysts and leading American writers on Japan had enjoyed until the early 1980s collapsed when Japan's economy posed a serious threat to the US economy. In the 1970s, the American academic establishment still had sufficient scope to praise Japan's achievement with composure, a situation which delighted *Nihonjinron* writers and readers in Japan at the time, but Ezra Vogel's *Japan as Number One* (1979) proved to be the last marker of the cosy cooperation between the two. When the reality of Japan's economy drove home to some US analysts the fact that it was outperforming its American counterpart, the so-called revisionist theories of Japan mushroomed in the United States. Concerned that American national interests were now under serious threat, some of their proponents portrayed the Japanese as having a unique mentality; the Japanese were considered workaholic in lifestyle, irresponsible in civic obligations and monstrous in corporate expansion everywhere. The underlying theme was that, given the cultural orientations of the Japanese, their external expansionist tendency should be stopped and contained. A version of American nationalism proved to be the major motivation of many, if not all, of the revisionists who made these claims. The anticipated 'clash of civilizations' has already manifested itself across the Pacific in the form of a series of frictions between Japanese and American nationalism, both of which have played the cultural difference card. Used this way, culture is indeed the 'final fortress of nationalism' (Nishikawa, 1995: 116).

POSSIBLE USES OF NIHONJINRON

As studies of cultural relativity form the bedrock of social sciences, some elements of *Nihonjinron* may be used productively to the extent that its emphasis on Japan's alleged uniqueness and dissimilarity is accepted as a healthy corrective against the Eurocentric framework of social analysis. The potential can perhaps be discernible at two different levels: conceptual and theoretical.

There is no denying that concepts currently in circulation in sociology are mostly extracted from Euro-American experiences. Though initially *emic* notions in the western societies, they arguably became *etic* because of western cultural hegemony around the world. In this context, a repertoire of Japanese *emic* ideas that *Nihonjinron* has generated can be used as *etic* categories for cross-national and cross-cultural studies. The *Nihonjinron* discourse opens up the possibility that the inventory of Japanese *emic* concepts that it has developed may be tested as comparative variables for use beyond the Japanese N=E=C sphere. For example, one can ask how the level of *amae* orientation differs between various countries. How do various societies rank in terms of *giri* relations? Which societies tend to exhibit the high levels of *wa*? Similar questions can be investigated within societies outside Japan. For instance, in which groups is the *tatemaie/bonne* distinction stronger in the

United States? To what degree is *enryo* manifest across different groups in Germany?⁴

The issue, of course, must be addressed with care. The fact that Japanese culture has *emic* concept 'A' does not necessarily mean that the attitudinal or behaviour patterns that 'A' represents are more prevalent in Japanese society than in any other society in the world. An empirical study has shown, for example, that the *kanjin* orientation which Hamaguchi claims is a conceptual category *emic* to Japan is lowest in Japan, particularly among Japanese men, than in any other of the four countries surveyed (Kashima et al., 1996). Hamaguchi (1996b: 62) himself appears to be surprised at his own empirical finding that the *kanjin* orientation is low in Japan in comparison with other societies he surveyed. These studies reveal dangers of blindly equating the presence of a certain concept with the prevalence of the cultural dynamics it represents.

At a theoretical level, many *Nihonjinron* propositions can be reformulated with the clear specification of the population to which they may be applicable and the conditions under which they may be sustained. For example, while the theory of vertically structured impersonal relations being conducive to economic productivity may not hold when applied to all Japanese, it may be tenable with respect to some sections of the workforce under certain conditions. Once qualified and made contingent upon a set of sociological variables, some *Nihonjinron* theses would perhaps become more articulate and sustainable although, strictly speaking, they then cease to be *Nihonjinron* in the sense that they explain the attitude and behaviour patterns of only a *partial* segment of *Nihonjin* under specific circumstances. A growing number of empirical studies suggest that some Japan-specific theoretical propositions different from and opposite to those derived from western experiences are credible in such areas as bureaucracy (Befu, 1990; Deutschmann, 1987), skill formation (Koike, 1988), industrial relations (Kawanishi, 1992) and gender issues (Ueno, 1988; White, 1987), to name only a few, though comparative studies have unfortunately been dominated by Japan-US comparisons.

Given its emphasis on indigenous concepts and fundamental disagreement with theories of unilinear development, *Nihonjinron* has some potential to be linked with the indigenization argument which has gained considerable currency in postcolonial societies in Asia. Because of the Euro-American foundation of contemporary social sciences, sociologists and anthropologists in South-east and South Asia are increasingly and justifiably concerned about their relevance and applicability to their own societies. The *Nihonjinron* discourse shares this concern precisely because Japan constitutes not only a centre but also a periphery and should be able to contribute to the debate in this area. More broadly, many particulars of the *Nihonjinron* literature can act as building blocks for the analysis of multiple modernities (Arnason, 1997; Eisenstadt, 1996).

DILEMMA OF TWO TYPES OF CULTURAL RELATIVISM

The $N=E=C$ equation makes the *Nihonjinron* discourse both exclusivist and assimilationist. It is exclusivist in assuming that the Yamato race is the genuine Japanese race and in excluding Okinawans, Ainus, resident Koreans and other minority groups from its demographic bases. The equation is assimilationist in implying that those who have learned and acquired Japanese culture are the authentic Japanese. The direction of the causal arrow points from cultural characteristics to demographic attributes, not the other way around. As a logical consequence of this model, for example, Ainus are supposed to be able to *become* Japanese once they are acculturated into Japanese culture.

These considerations spotlight the domestic cultural imperialism built into *Nihonjinron*. The notion of Japaneseness and its specific characteristics are by and large extracted from the cultural features of the male elite sector of Japanese society at the exclusion of those of the numerical majority that occupy the lower strata of society. In other words, *Nihonjinron* uses value orientations and lifestyles of dominant groups within Japanese society as the yardstick to measure the traits of Japanese culture as a whole. This holistic approach veils various cultural configurations of competing groups formed along such multiple dimensions of stratification as gender, age, region, occupational position, firm size and educational background. For example, *Nihonjinron* defines Japanese work culture primarily in terms of male regular employees in large corporations, who form less than a quarter of the entire workforce. Tokyo culture, male culture and the culture of the well-educated class tend to be used as the empirical data or the samples, on the basis of which sweeping generalizations about the totality of Japan are made.

This tendency appears to stem from what one might call intellectual incest among writers, editors and readers of *Nihonjinron*, who share similar socioeconomic backgrounds: relatively high educational qualifications, good incomes and prestigious jobs. Holding more or less identical class characteristics, the producers, distributors and consumers of *Nihonjinron* tend to engage in a kind of mutual confirmation game in which they rarely step outside the intellectual milieu that shapes their world view.

Nihonjinron proponents advertise cultural relativism on the assumption that the unit of culture is either a nation or an ethnic group that shares an internally uniform cultural configuration. This premise is not only subject to theoretical challenge but also at odds with the empirical reality that a nation or an ethnic group shows cultural variations and varieties to a degree which makes it difficult to define national or ethnic culture in the singular. The cultural dynamics of managers, large company employees, university graduates, men and senior citizens differ, respectively, from those of unionists, small enterprise workers, employees without tertiary qualifications, women and teenagers. Upon accepting cultural differentiation and stratification within a given society, one must address intra-societal cultural relativity in the context of the cultural relativism debate.

Diametrically antithetical to the exclusivist and assimilationist *Nihonjinron* model is a multicultural paradigm which is fundamentally inclusivist. It embraces all ethnic minorities as parts of the underlying Japanese population who shape Japaneseness. This framework is based on the idea that Japaneseness expands or contracts in correlation with how exclusively or inclusively the Japanese are defined and, in that sense, proves to be a variable, not a constant, placing the cultural matrix at the super structure side of the formula. Put differently, Japaneseness is not a singular but a plural noun. Multiculturality here also comprises the so-called subcultural groupings, including, for example, female culture, part-time workers' culture, physically handicapped people's culture, youth culture, homosexual culture and so on. The multicultural paradigm is an inductive framework in regarding Japaneseness, if any, as an aggregate or commonality of these stratified cultural configurations, whereas the N=E=C model is a deductive scheme in assuming Japaneseness a priori and defining the Japanese as those who embody it.

Stratified culture cuts across ethnic and national boundaries and displays a number of common characteristics to which surrounding structural conditions give rise. Technocrats around the world, for instance, share a set of value orientations stemming from their bureaucratic and technologically sophisticated milieu as well as from their high educational credentials. Teachers across different nations demonstrate analogous lifestyles and ways of thinking which are attributable to the position that they occupy in society. Fishermen in every society have a similar world view precisely because they have a relatively marginal social status and spend a significant part of their lives at sea. This, of course, does not rule out the possibility of cross-national and cross-ethnic cultural differences of these subcultural groupings. The point here is that the balances between differences and similarities (i.e. between particularities and universalities) be kept in perspective. Cultural relativism considered in non-ethnic and non-national terms also sensitizes and encourages individuals to possible communications between similar cultural groups across ethnic and national boundaries. Intra-societal cultural relativism relativizes ethnicity against other dimensions of social discrimination, including gender, health, religion and sexual preference.

Given two types of cultural relativity, the question of cultural literacy presents complex dimensions. There is no easy answer to the question of who is more cognizant of the culture of the Japanese construction industry: foreign guest workers in Japan or suburban housewives? Who is better versed in the culture of defiance against school teachers: the students of vocational high schools or the managers of large corporations? When it comes to the culture of ethnic discrimination in Japan, who are more informed: Ainu community residents or middle-class tea ceremony masters? The answer to the question of who knows Japanese culture best depends upon which stratified culture is under consideration.

It must be reiterated that inter-societal cultural relativism tends to be based upon intra-societal cultural imperialism. Yet, one would have to be

careful about the merits and demerits of the two types of cultural relativism: one that emphasizes cultural relativity *between* societies and the other that stresses cultural relativity *within* each society. Once intra-societal cultural relativists apply their logic in full, they are inevitably in a position to suggest that the internal cultural diversity of a given nation or ethnic group is so extensive that inter-societal cultural relativity is minimal, an argument which would sometimes make them insensitive to Eurocentric or other forms of international and transethnic cultural imperialism. This means that a *negative correlation* exists between inter- and intra-societal cultural relativism: the more we emphasize inter-societal cultural differences, the more cultural homogeneity we would have to presume, thereby siding with the assumption of internal cultural imperialism. The more we stress the significance of intra-societal cultural variety, the more we tend to play down the threat of external cultural domination and ethnocentrism. This dilemma, which the *Nihonjinron* debate has brought into clear relief, puts the theoretical formulation of the 'relativity of cultural relativities' on the contemporary intellectual agenda.

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Notes

1. Japaneseness is expressed in the Japanese language variously as *Nihon rashisa*, *Nihon-teki*, *Nihon-sei* or *Nihon bunka*.
2. To use a common expression, anybody is Japanese as long as they have Japanese blood (*Nihonjin no chi ga nagarete iru*), a proposition that only the Yamato race possess genuine Japanese culture. For some *Nihonjinron* writers, the Yamato language uncontaminated by foreign languages is as old as 'our blood' and 'directly rooted in the original soul of the Yamato race' (Watanabe, 1974: 8–12).
3. Nishibe was among the key leaders of leftwing student movements at the time of the AMPO struggle in 1960.
4. For a detailed account of these concepts, see, for instance, Wierzbicka (1997).

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