Critical Teaching of Japanese Culture

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1. Introduction

The world today increasingly faces cultural and political clashes among groups with different racial, ethnic, religious, and political affiliations. Various conflicts in the wake of September 11, 2001, make many wonder how the field of teaching foreign languages can help build a better world. Some professionals in the United States may focus on the functional aspect of language learning and emphasize the benefit of foreign language education for national security and intelligence, while others may explore how our profession can help end hatred and mass killing and, instead, promote mutual understanding and global peace. Those who pursue the latter goal may argue that by encouraging learners to understand different cultural perspectives, learning a foreign language may reduce conflicts among different racial, ethnic, or religious groups, as well as among nation states. They may further argue that learning a foreign language, regardless of the language, helps students become culturally sensitive in the global community. However, the current reconceptualization of culture developed in the fields of anthropology and cultural studies, as Eika Tai delineates in this issue, poses a challenge for such an optimistic vision.

This challenge can be found in a work of cultural criticism written in relation to the 9/11 tragedy. In October 2001, *The Nation* published an article titled "The Clash of Ignorance" written by a renowned cultural critic, Edward Said, who critiqued a thesis proposed by Samuel Huntington (1993, 1996). According to Huntington, the primary source of conflict in the post-Cold War world would be cultural rather than ideological or economic; that is, world conflicts would be between nations and groups of different civilizations, particularly Islam and the West. Said (2001) criticizes this view as essentializing and dichotomizing the civilization of the West and that of Islam. As Said argues, public opinion since 9/11 indeed seems to uncritically support a binary view of Islam versus the West. Said states, "The basic paradigm of West versus the rest (the cold

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war opposition reformulated) remained untouched, and this is what has persisted, often insidiously and implicitly, in discussion since the terrible events of September 11."

Said criticizes how current political discourse ignores the internal dynamics and plurality that every civilization has and neglects the fact that the challenge in modern cultures concerns the definition or interpretation of each culture. He opposes speaking for a whole religion or civilization in a single term. Referring to the contradiction between the alleged 9/11 terrorists' ability to maneuver sophisticated Western technologies and the concept of "Islam's" inability to be a part of "modernity," Said states:

> How . . . inadequate are the labels, generalizations and cultural assertions. At some level, for instance, primitive passions and sophisticated know-how converge in ways that give the lie to a fortified boundary not only between "West" and "Islam" but also between past and present, us and them, to say nothing of the very concepts of identity and nationality about which there is unending disagreement and debate.

In his essay, Said warns readers of the danger of drawing a rigid boundary between two cultures or civilizations, creating a binary between "US (or 'with US') versus THEM (or 'with TERRORISTS')," which legitimates the rationale for the conflict.

In terms of teaching foreign languages, Said's insight provides some critical implications for a common understanding of culture in our field. His insight indeed raises the possibility that Japanese language educators in the United States might unintentionally create a rigid dichotomy between the United States and Japan, or US and THEM. It also raises the following questions: For what social, political, or economic purpose is our understanding of cultural difference mobilized? What are the sociopolitical implications? The construction of the concept of Japanese culture is indeed closely related to domestic and international politics and relations of power. For example, Japanese culture was studied and described by Ruth Benedict in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, a study commissioned by the United States government for the purpose of ruling Japan after America's anticipated victory in World War II. In the 1960s and 70s, the uniqueness of Japanese culture was interpreted as the cause of Japan's economic success and became the core tenet of *Nihonjinron*. In the 80s and 90s, the concept of Japanese uniqueness was appropriated by political and opinion leaders to revive the Japanese identity threatened by globalization and Westernization. The recent controversy over the textbooks developed by *Atarashii rekishi kyōkasho o tsukuru kai* (the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform) demonstrates the efforts of conservative

groups to strengthen nationalism by turning to identity politics. It is necessary to be aware that the way we present Japanese language and culture in our classrooms is not isolated from the politics and discourses that surround us.

This article explores critical approaches to culture in Japanese language education. Critical explorations of culture are particularly important because of the recent emphasis on teaching culture in foreign language education, as seen in the development and implementation of the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project 1999; referred to as "National Standards" hereafter). This article will critically examine how culture is conceptualized in the National Standards and propose an alternative conceptual model for understanding culture that incorporates descriptive understanding of culture, diversity within a culture, the dynamic nature of culture, and discursive construction of culture. The following section presents a critical examination of the way in which culture is conceptualized in the National Standards.

2. National Standards and an Anti-Essentialist Critique of Culture

The National Standards have been developed in response to the national initiative to create clear learning goals in various subject areas for precollege students. In the case of foreign language learning, however, the National Standards have been adopted for most languages, including Japanese, from kindergarten through college, indicating their large impact on how languages and cultures are taught and learned. In the National Standards, culture constitutes an important component as one of the five Cs (i.e., Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities). Culture is also mentioned in one of the Comparisons standards. This section critically examines how culture is conceptualized in the Cultures standards and the Comparisons standards.

2.1. *Standards on Culture*

There are two standards on culture, as seen below (National Standards 1999:50–51):

> **Standard 2.1** Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied.
>
> **Standard 2.2** Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and perspectives of the culture studied.

These standards conceptualize culture in three elements or three Ps, namely, "*perspectives* (meanings, attitudes, values, ideas), *practices* (patterns of social interactions), and *products* (books, tools, foods, laws, music, games)" (National Standards 1999:47), which are seen as interconnected to constitute various cultural phenomena in society. The National Standards document stresses the importance of avoiding cultural misunderstandings and stereotypes. It refers to the misconception that people who share the same language represent only one culture by pointing out as examples the diversity among Spanish-speaking and French-speaking peoples around the world. The document then states that a lack of information about the target culture often leads to interpreting the culture based only upon one's own cultural view, which lends itself to stereotyping. The document goes on to stress the importance of teaching both similarities and differences. It states that focusing on similarities fosters a positive mindset toward speakers of the target language, while analyzing differences helps learners understand common cultural misunderstandings and conflicts. It is argued that learning a second language allows learners to understand an "insider's" perspectives through directly interacting with the members of the other culture in their native language. The explicit focus on the three dimensions of culture delineated in the document would certainly avoid a cursory treatment of culture in a foreign language curriculum. The National Standards do guide learners to an important step for developing cultural understanding of the Self and the Other. However, there are several limitations.

First, the Standards tend to view a particular culture as a homogeneous group, overlooking the diversity that exists within the culture. Although diversity within a particular linguistic group is mentioned in the document, it is not incorporated into the wording of Sandards 2.1 and 2.2 above. Thus, in conceptualizing culture as consisting of three interrelated elements, teachers may interpret the Standards as promoting the view that there are standard sets of cultural practices, products, and perspectives, and that they are interrelated in a certain predictable way. What is missing from the Standards is not only cultural diversity but also a focus on the dynamic nature of culture. As Eika Tai discusses in this issue, postmodern understandings of culture in many scholarly fields no longer view culture as a neutrally, inherently, and ahistorically determined fixed category. Rather, culture is viewed as diverse, dynamic, and fluid, constructed and transformed by political and ideological forces. From this perspective, the static and fixed view of culture in the Standards is limited.

Second, learners' knowledge about culture is viewed in terms of a

binary opposition, "correct versus incorrect," preventing a broader understanding of cultural knowledge. In encouraging teachers and learners to understand the relationship between cultural practices or products and cultural perspectives, the National Standards presuppose these categories of culture as well as the interrelationships among them as objective *truths* about which learners are eventually supposed to *demonstrate an understanding*. Some of the terms used in the document, such as "misunderstanding," "stereotypes," and "erroneous judgment," suggest that there is "correct" cultural knowledge or information that reflects the authentic "insider's" perspectives, and that developing understandings of such accurate information reduces stereotypes. While learners may hold clearly erroneous beliefs such as that all Japanese wear *kimono* every day, the question of whether correctness in all cultural information can be obtained is a contentious issue. This is partly because culture has a diverse and dynamic nature. For example, cultural practices and products can vary according to gender, race, ethnicity, generation, class, occupation, geographic region, and historical period. When it comes to cultural perspectives, the assumption that there are accurate cultural perspectives that are applicable to all members and situations becomes even more problematic. For instance, cultural perspectives such as respect for and emphasis on nature, harmony, and social hierarchy are often believed to characterize Japanese culture. However, there are many sociocultural phenomena that contradict these concepts (Sugimoto and Mouer 1982). It is difficult to determine objective accuracy in cultural perspectives because cultural perspectives are not readily observable and because perspectives, including values, beliefs, and meanings, are often implicated in politics and ideology. As Sugimoto and Mouer (1982) argue, the Japanese emphasis on social harmony, for instance, can be interpreted as a tool for political and ideological control to prevent or hide various kinds of conflicts that do exist in the society. Although it could still be argued that Japanese culture is unique for its ideology that emphasizes social harmony for the purpose of social control, it cannot be argued that Japanese culture is characterized by an emphasis on social harmony in an objective sense. Put differently, it is difficult to determine whether the notion that the Japanese culture values social harmony is "correct" information that reflects a neutral and objective fact.

Third, the assumption that "correct" cultural information exists is likely to lead to a prescriptive approach to teaching and learning about culture. There are cultural assumptions that are commonly accepted, such as the notion that Japanese society exhibits a rigid social hierarchy. Once this

notion is conceptualized as a "correct" insiders' perspective, it influences the way we interpret various cultural practices and products and works as a fixed and convenient formula to explain cultural phenomena. This danger is demonstrated in examples of gender- and status-specific language use, as Meryl Siegal, Yoshiko Matsumoto, and Shigeko Okamoto discuss in this issue. Lacking here is a descriptive approach to culture that gives rise to an understanding of how people actually use language and act in social situations.

Fourth, the National Standards' conceptualization of stereotypes may further reinforce static and fixed images of the culture. While the National Standards address the importance of counteracting stereotypes, the underlying assumption about stereotyping is based upon a binary distinction between true and false, which limits our understanding of the social, cultural, and political motivations and implications behind *essentialism*, the term I prefer for referring to the pursuit of a pure, unique, and all-encompassing identity for a certain group. The logic behind the Standards document is that stereotyping is created by making assumptions about another's culture only through one's own cultural lens and thus leads to negative reactions or prejudices against the people in the target culture. This implies that once learners gain accurate detailed information about the target culture from the insider's perspectives, stereotypes are likely to be eliminated. While this might be the case in some instances, one limitation lies in the interpretation of stereotyping merely as negative *false consciousness* juxtaposed with the existence of accurate knowledge of the target culture as truth. As argued above, a postmodern understanding of culture would reject the assumption that cultural perspectives reflect transcendent objective truths. Moreover, when stereotyping is interpreted only as negative reactions against another culture, it misses various political and ideological motivations behind essentialism. This leads to the next point.

Fifth, the Standards document overlooks the political and ideological construction of knowledge about culture and reflects a limited understanding of cultural essentialism. As Eika Tai explains in this issue, notions such as national culture and cultural homogeneity are actually constructed in the process of nation building, which seeks a unified identity and ethnic pride. The concepts that Tai introduces, such as imagined community and invention of tradition, suggest that many aspects of our knowledge about cultural practices, products, and perspectives are indeed political invention. In creating the imagined unity of a certain culture, the notion of essentialism plays an important role. Whereas the stereotyping that the

Standards document mentions is a negative form of essentialism that is often used to describe the Other as an inferior category, it is important to understand that essentialism is not only negative; it can romanticize the culture of the Self or the Other, giving positive and yet fixed homogeneous images.

For instance, affirmation of Japanese culture for its uniqueness, particularly its homogeneity and harmony (Sugimoto and Mouer 1982), prevailed between the mid-1960s and mid-1980s (Aoki 1990). These images were produced by both Japanese and non-Japanese scholars. The self-affirmation of a unique Japanese identity as promoted by *Nihonjinron* has been reinforced by such influential publications as Nakane 1967, Doi 1971, and Tsunoda 1978, constructing Self-Orientalism (see Kubota 1999; Susser 1998), whereas publications by non-Japanese scholars such as Vogel (1979) and Reischauer (1978) reflect romanticization or exoticization of the Japanese as a homogeneous group that is completely different from the Western cultural groups. Underlying the contemporary construction of the uniqueness of the Japanese are the social, political, and economic conditions of the 1960s and 70s, when Japan experienced rapid economic growth and Westernization. The economic success compelled non-Japanese scholars to find cultural explanations, whereas Westernization encouraged Japanese scholars to explore strategies for resistance in order to preserve pure Japaneseness (Befu 1987). In this co-construction of the *Nihonjinron* discourse, essentialism is reflected both in defining the Other and in inventing a pure, unique identity of the Self. In both cases, essentialism is not a negative false conception juxtaposed with true reality but rather a strategy to define who the Self or the Other is, giving truth claims to particular cultural perspectives and practices. When culture is understood in this way, it becomes clear that a large part of our knowledge about culture is produced by political influence and motivation—a notion that is absent from the account on stereotyping in the Standards document.

Some alternative conceptualizations of culture discussed thus far—i.e., a focus on diversity and dynamism, the notion that objective accuracy in cultural information is often unobtainable, a descriptive approach to culture, the importance of moving beyond the interpretation of stereotype as false conception, and an understanding of culture as political and discursive invention—indicate that learning Japanese as a foreign language should not aim only to demystify inaccurate information, such as that all Japanese eat sushi every day. It should also aim to explore the diverse and shifting

nature of culture and raise critical consciousness about the political and ideological underpinnings of popular cultural images and interpretations.

2.2. *Standards on Comparisons*

While culture constitutes one of the 5 Cs in the National Standards, it also appears in the Comparisons standards that aim to develop insight into the nature of language and culture, as seen below (National Standards 1999: 58, 60):

> **Standard 4.1** Students demonstrate understanding of the nature of language through comparisons of the language studied and their own.
>
> **Standard 4.2** Students demonstrate understanding of the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own.

Comparing and contrasting the target culture or language with one's own certainly helps learners understand the language system, language use in context, and worldviews that are different from what they are familiar with. However, linguistic and cultural comparisons may reinforce fixed ideas about differences and exotic *foreignness* if language and culture are approached with a static view.

In teaching Japanese in the United States, the concept of the uniqueness of the Japanese language and culture as evident in *Nihonjinron* tends to underscore cultural and linguistic differences. The section that describes some features of Japanese language and culture in the National Standards indeed emphasizes the uniqueness of Japanese culture and language by stating that they are extremely distant and different from the language and culture that American students are familiar with. While affirming cultural and linguistic differences is essential in teaching and learning a foreign language, it is equally important to understand the politics of difference and essentialism in relation to cultural comparisons. It is important to note that an assertion of difference is naturally built upon comparisons between two categories. As many critics of *Nihonjinron* have pointed out (e.g., Befu 2001), the uniqueness of Japanese culture and people in the post-World War II world has been constructed through cultural comparisons only between Japan and the West. In other words, Japanese culture is made unique and exotic vis-à-vis the West. This point may not be so problematic when the teaching context is in the United States, which belongs to the West. However, as Osborn (2000) points out, this view presumes the existence of a homogeneous American culture and language which is represented mainly by the White monolingual English-speaking population, ignoring the multicultural and multilingual reality of the United

States. Just as the culture and language of the Other (Japan) is essentialized, the culture and language of the Self (the United States) is essentialized as well. This indicates that cultural and linguistic comparisons in Japanese language classrooms could run the risk of confirming and further reinforcing the static binaries and essentialism that already persist in academic, educational, and public discourses.

Some may argue that a focus on similarities would alleviate the problem of essentialism and cultural dichotomies. The National Standards document indeed promotes the exploration of similarities so that students can have a positive view of people from other cultures. However, a focus on similarity juxtaposed with difference is based on a binary logic of *similar* versus *different*, paralleling the binary opposition between *correct* and *incorrect.* Moving beyond such binary thinking, the view that conceptualizes culture as invented or discursively constructed, as mentioned above, enables us to explore why these differences and similarities are claimed and what kind of political motivations or implications are hidden behind these claims. It is important to note that the pursuit of both similarity and difference between the Self and the Other reflects the liberal pluralist approach to multiculturalism, which endorses a color-blind vision of society based on individual equality and meritocracy while reinforcing the exoticization and romanticization of the Other through celebrating differences (Kincheloe and Steinberg 1997; Kubota forthcoming; Nieto 1995).

3. Critical Appraoches to Teaching Culture: The Four Ds

The above discussion underpins the following four concepts (the Four Ds) that could help teachers reconceptualize their approaches to teaching culture: (1) *descriptive* rather than prescriptive understandings of culture; (2) *diversity* within culture, which addresses notions such as diaspora and hybridity; (3) the *dynamic* or shifting nature of culture, which allows one to interpret cultural practices, products, and perspectives in historical contexts; and (4) the *discursive* construction of culture—a notion that our knowledge about culture is invented by discourses, which requires us to understand plurality of meaning as well as power and politics behind cultural definitions. By offering these concepts, I recognize the danger of reducing the complexity of cultural understanding to fixed knowledge. Thus my intention here is not to offer these concepts as the only alternative way to approach culture, but rather to suggest them as a heuristic device that teachers and students can utilize in order to gain insight into cultural

politics. The following sections provide a conceptual foundation for each of the Four Ds.

3.1. *Descriptive Understanding of Culture*

As discussed earlier, teaching Japanese language and culture tends to rely on prescriptive knowledge, such as the belief that there is a clear distinction between male and female speech patterns or that the difference in social status between two speakers determines which register they should use. However, the papers in this issue by Matsumoto and Okamoto and by Siegal and Okamoto demonstrate that the ways people actually use language in naturalistic situations may be quite different from such prescribed knowledge. In understanding culture, a common belief that the Japanese respect nature, for instance, is a prescriptive notion that contradicts many realities including environmental destruction. This does not imply that prescriptive ideas or dominant perspectives should never be presented in order to avoid false cultural information; rather, it is important for students to understand that commonly accepted beliefs about the target culture may not reflect the complexity of how people actually live and communicate or how society functions. Teachers should critically evaluate the prescriptive information about language and culture presented in the textbook or other materials and understand language and culture in a more descriptive way. For instance, in discussing male/female speech styles or honorifics, one can audiotape naturally occurring conversations among native speakers and analyze what forms are actually used. If native samples are not available, one can use Japanese movies or TV shows, although some of the interactions may be scripted.

It is important to note that although a descriptive understanding of language and culture is important, it does not escape the binary opposition between true and false; that is, descriptive data are regarded as accurate whereas prescriptive information is viewed as inaccurate. This limitation will be discussed in more detail later.

3.2. *Diversity within Culture*

Diversity exists in any culture. Cultural practices, products, and perspectives vary depending on various categories such as geographical region, gender, generation, occupation, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and language. They are also manifested differently for each individual member of the culture. Discussing such diversity in the classroom can facilitate a non-essentialist understanding of language and culture. Students and teachers need to focus on the above-mentioned multiple categories

and explore the multiplicity of cultural practices, products, and perspectives. In exploring diversity, students can develop in-depth understandings of politics and history. For instance, students might explore the geographical diversity observed in food culture. To take *ozōni* as an example, there are many recipes and, moreover, it does not traditionally exist in Okinawa. This topic can be extended to a discussion on the culture, politics, and history of Okinawa that reflects the legacy of its struggle over sovereignty, marginality, and U.S.–Japan relations. Another example is cultural diversity among generations. Younger generations are likely to differ from older generations in terms of their lifestyles and values.

Ethnic diversity also demonstrates the hybrid nature of culture. Contrary to the belief that Japan is a mono-ethnic nation, there is a considerable amount of ethnic diversity, reflecting past colonialism as well as recent globalization. Minority ethnic cultures in Japan have played an important role in various aspects of the mainstream culture, while they have been marginalized and oppressed. The above example of *ozōni* can be applied to the exploration of how people with Korean and Chinese heritage may celebrate the New Year's holidays in Japan, which brings up a number of related questions. How important is cultural heritage to minorities? In what way do minority cultural heritage and mainstream dominant culture merge together? How do the forces of assimilation affect the lives of ethnic minorities? What diversity exists within minority communities? Do minority experiences in Japan parallel those in the United States? How can we create a better society that values diversity and promotes equality among diverse people?

Moreover, many aspects of Japanese culture have been influenced by other cultures around the world. Japan's industrial and economic growth and the more recent globalization of the economy have promoted Westernization, Americanization, or even McDonaldization (Ritzer 1996). With all these diverse facets of society, Japanese culture cannot be defined as mono-ethnic or purely unique; rather, it has integrated experiences of various groups, constituting a hybrid culture.

Another aspect of the diversity of Japanese culture is related to diaspora. While many ethnic minorities have been in Japan for generations, many Japanese went abroad and established communities. For American learners of Japanese, understanding the Japanese diaspora in the United States and their experiences and historical struggles would broaden their understanding of diversity within the United States, which should be one of the foci for foreign language education (Osborn 2000). Furthermore, the recent arrival in Japan of migrant workers of Japanese heritage from

Latin America is an important topic to explore in relation to issues of cross-cultural influence and identity.

3.3. *Dynamic Nature of Culture*

The above discussions indicate that culture is always shifting and reshaping itself into new forms. This indicates that culture should be viewed as a dynamic organism and that cultural practices, products, and perspectives need to be understood in historical contexts. For example, some of the features of the Japanese management system that were once believed to be culturally unique, such as the lifetime employment system and the seniority wage system, are no longer maintained in many organizations. Likewise, family values, seen in the expectation that children should take care of their elderly parents, are changing. Thus, it is necessary to critically evaluate a commonly held notion that, for instance, Japan and so-called "traditional" cultures respect and support the elderly more than Western cultures not only emotionally but also physically and financially. Other examples can be seen in sociocultural transitions, observed in practices of marriage, family structures (i.e., multi-generation versus nuclear families), and gender roles.

It is important to note that the dynamic as well as diverse nature of culture is closely related to domestic socioeconomic and political conditions as well as international influences. Hybridity and diaspora were generated largely by past Japanese colonial politics and economy as well as by the more contemporary globalization of the economy. Thus, the diversity and dynamics of cultural practices, products, and perspectives cannot be divorced from domestic and international politics and economy.

3.4. *Discursive Construction of Culture*

While the above concepts (i.e., descriptive understanding of culture and the diverse/dynamic nature of culture) would broaden teachers' and learners' understanding of culture, there are limitations and caveats that need to be considered. The fundamental challenge is to overcome the modernist pursuit of objective truth that is inherent in these concepts. A descriptive understanding of culture implies that descriptive analysis generates illustrative facts about Japanese language and culture, whereas a prescriptive approach reinforces counterfactual or false knowledge. While a descriptive approach is an important step toward challenging fixed and essentialized images of culture and language, the implied dichotomy between true and false parallels the problem of the way in which the National Standards document conceptualizes stereotypes, as discussed earlier. That is, stereo-

types are viewed as false beliefs which can be eliminated by knowing the true insiders' perspectives. However, because of the complexity of linguistic and cultural phenomena caused by situational specificity, individual variation, and so on, it is often difficult to identify certain observed cultural or linguistic practices as generalizable reality. Descriptive understandings of culture and language also tend to assume that there are certain normative cultural and linguistic codes accepted by "Japanese people" or "native speakers," thus potentially undermining possibilities of cultural and linguistic creativity, particularly creativity performed by the marginalized, including learners of Japanese as a second/foreign language. Whereas a prescriptive approach fixes the norm with no empirical evidence, the descriptive approach generates knowledge about a certain norm based on actual observations. Thus, no matter how well-intended, the descriptive approach cannot escape the pursuit of a norm.

A similar paradox exists in the focus on the diverse/dynamic nature of culture. While a focus on diversity related to various categories, such as gender, class, ethnicity, age, and geographical location, or on cultural dynamism, aims to avoid essentializing a particular culture, it may not escape essentializing groups within each category or at a specific time in history. For example, in exploring ethnic diversity in Japan, one might make generalized claims about the characteristics of Ainu, Chinese, or Korean culture in Japan. Also, in discussing cultural hybridity influenced by Westernization or Americanization, Western or American culture might be perceived as unitary and homogeneous. Thus, it is necessary to be aware that the notion of hybridity does not evade essentialism when it assumes a blend of two cultures that are pure, unique, and essentialized (May 1999).

These limitations need to be overcome by a poststructuralist notion of discourse and the discursive construction of culture, which provides an alternative understanding of culture. As Tai's critical examination of *Nihonjinron* reveals, our knowledge about a certain culture is produced by *discourses*. Weedon (1987:108) defines discourses as "ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and the relations between them." Simply put, discourse is the use of language and other modes of communication to organize our knowledge about the Self and the Other in a certain way. Thus, *Nihonjinron*, for instance, can be seen as a discourse that constructs a particular understanding of Japanese language and culture. In this view, many of the common beliefs about a culture, such as the Japanese respect for nature, reticence and indirectness

in communication, or collectivism, are constructed by discourses rather than reflecting objective or scientific truths. A dominant discourse serves the major political and economic interests, convincing the general public to endorse the dominant way of thinking. Yet there are discourses that challenge the dominant worldview. Thus, for example, while a dominant discourse may define the characteristics of *Nihonjinron* or Japanese people in a certain way, there are counter-discourses that challenge that definition, as seen in the various critiques of *Nihonjinron* (Befu 1987, 2001; Dale 1986; Iwabuchi 1994; Lummis and Ikeda 1985; Mouer and Sugimoto 1986, 1995; Sugimoto and Mouer 1982; Yoshino 1992, 1997). This means that the answer to the question "What characterizes Japanese culture?" is neither singular nor fixed; rather, it embodies a multiplicity of meanings that are constructed within discourses and compete against each other in a struggle for power. In this view, there is no transcendent truth outside of discourses and power relations. This perspective indicates that the descriptive approach to culture, despite its usefulness in providing alternative knowledge that challenges prescriptive *Nihonjinron*, works within a modernist discourse of positivism that seeks objective truths.

The notions of discourse and discursive construction of knowledge further reveal the politics behind certain knowledge about culture and cultural difference, providing an understanding that such knowledge is often used strategically for pursuing certain political and ideological purposes. For instance, as Tai discuss in this issue and in Tai 1999, the concept of cultural difference is used for different purposes. Under Japanese colonialism, cultural or linguistic difference was used as a rationale for assimilating the colonized people through teaching *kokugo*. However, the same concept was later used to draw a rigid boundary between the colonizer and the colonized, as seen in the distinction between *kokugo* and *Nihongo*, which served to preserve the pure essence of the culture of the Japanese, preventing the colonized from having access to it. Here, cultural difference is strategically used in different ways. While the former strategy is based on the logic of assimilation (i.e., "They are different, so they need to become like us."), the latter is based on alienation (i.e., "They are different, so they need a language different from ours."). Either way, cultural difference in this example is used for domination. Conversely, the same concept of cultural difference can be used by the oppressed to create a positive meaning for their own culture. Shifting the focus to the U.S. context, we find this strategy in the Black Movement or Chicano Movement, in which these historically oppressed peoples redefined their identities by emphasizing their uniqueness in a positive sense.

The plurality of meanings and functions of discourses implies the existence of contradictions and paradoxes in society. In the case of the Japanese colonial language policy, two contradictory policies (i.e., providing vs. not providing access to *kokugo*) served the same underlying political aim. The recent global military conflicts after the events on 9/11 reveal many contradictions involving such concepts as freedom and justice. Teachers, as intellectuals committed to multiculturalism and cross-cultural understanding, need to notice and scrutinize the contradictions and paradoxes that a discourse reveals.

The critical analysis of discourses is important for teachers and students, who are often passive consumers of various kinds of information, including teaching materials. It is commonly assumed that textbooks convey accurate facts about the target culture and language. However, as discussed so far, the definition of Japanese culture is highly contested. It is essential for teachers to become critical consumers and users of cultural information and to avoid conveying to the students fixed images of the target culture as objective truths. To put the above discussion in context, the following section presents some examples from a textbook which demonstrate that in many cases, if not all, things that are often understood as unique products, practices, and perspectives of Japanese culture are discursive constructs rather than objective truths.

4. Critical Understanding of Cultural Information in Textbooks: Examples

Some examples of how cultural information is presented are seen in *Adventures in Japanese* (Peterson 1998, 1999, 2000; *Adventures* hereafter), a comprehensive textbook series developed for high-school learners of Japanese as a foreign language. Divided into three volumes, *Adventures* contains a number of creative and useful communicative activities. The series also includes "cultural notes" and "cultural corner," which present such topics as culturally specific language use, cultural products (e.g., food, parts of a house/building, and pop culture), cultural practices (e.g., school life, manners, retail services, gift giving, parties, sports, and commuting), cultural perspectives or rationales behind products and practices (discussed below), and other cultural phenomena or concepts (e.g., nature, seasons, and foreign influence). In the following discussion, it is not my intent to undermine the usefulness of this text or imply that teachers should not use it. Rather, I argue that the cultural information that appears in textbooks like this one needs to be critically consumed and utilized in

order to develop deeper and non-essentialist insight into culture and language. In this sense, textbooks such as *Adventures* can provide excellent opportunities for further intellectual explorations and dialogues.

The discussions in the previous section suggest that our understandings of culture and cultural difference are often products of discursive construction. *Nihonjinron* as a discourse significantly influences how teachers understand and present cultural practices, products, and perspectives to their students. Revisiting the example of eating *ozōni* for the New Year's holidays, to say that everyone in Japan enjoys this food for New Year's reinforces the mono-ethnicity and cultural homogeneity promoted by *Nihonjinron.* Shifting attention from concrete objects (cultural products) to cultural practices and perspectives, cultural explanations become more problematic. For example, in explaining "Why are Japanese people 'reserved'?", *Adventures* states:

> . . . Japanese tend not to express their opinions freely. It may have to do partly with family upbringing and the education system. At home, children are not always encouraged to form or express their own opinions, but must often subordinate themselves to their parents' thinking. At school, students are not provided time for much discussion because of traditional teaching styles and large class sizes. . . . (Peterson 1998:131)

Here, a major difficulty is justifying the claim that the Japanese on the whole are more "reserved" than Westerners, although the text mentions elsewhere that this is a stereotype. The explanation of this claim also requires scrutiny. The textbook takes it for granted that children in Japan are expected to comply with their parents more than in other cultures. An authoritarian teaching style and lack of class discussion are further presented as reasons for the Japanese reticence, but again, it is difficult to justify this claim. Although this image of the Japanese classroom may generally characterize junior and senior high schools in Japan, recent research has dispelled the myth that Japanese schools discourage independent thinking (LeTendre 1999). Yet the image of teacher-centered pedagogy and lack of critical thinking among Japanese students persists as a stereotype, influencing the thinking not only of the general public but also of researchers in creating a dichotomy of US and THEM. Ironically, when U.S. researchers focus on domestic problems of education, the same negative images tend to be associated with American classrooms (Kubota 2001).

As the above example illustrates, trying to make an explicit connection between cultural practices and perspectives (or finding a causal link) can be problematic. In another example of this problem, *Adventures* provides

the following explanation in response to the question, "Why do Japanese people always discuss weather when they greet each other?":

> First, Japanese do not like to get directly to the point when speaking with one another. Talking about the weather is a 'safe' common ground from which to start a conversation. Another reason is the Japanese respect for nature. The native 'religion' of Japan is *Shinto*, which among other things can be described as a form of nature worship. . . . This 'oneness' with nature is reflected even in everyday interactions such as greetings. (Peterson 1998:30)

Here, the practice of talking about the weather in greetings is considered to be culturally specific. While this notion may be commonly accepted, the premise that Japanese speakers tend to mention weather in their greetings more often than speakers of other language is mere speculation. Furthermore, the reasons behind this assumption are harder to infer. In this example, a causal link is drawn between the talk about the weather and the Japanese tendency toward indirectness and respect for nature. This explanation sounds reasonable within the discourse of *Nihonjinron* because *Nihonjinron* emphasizes Japanese uniqueness in terms of language use (indirectness) and spiritual life (*Shintoism*). However, the perceived Japanese uniqueness such as indirectness in speech and respect for nature can be regarded not as objective facts but rather as discursive constructs for the following reasons. First, the indirectness of the Japanese language is a controversial topic in linguistics and applied linguistics research. It is indeed difficult to generalize the degree of indirectness in one language compared to another. This is partly because there are many speech situations and genres in writing as well as variations among language users in terms of their age, gender, social status, and other aspects of their backgrounds. It is also because language, influenced by other languages of power, changes over time. For instance, globalization is homogenizing the ways people communicate, using as the ideal the communication styles used mostly by White middle-class Americans (Cameron 2002; Kubota 2002). Second, as mentioned earlier, the notion that respect for nature is unique to the Japanese contradicts the large amount of environmental destruction hap-pening all over in Japan. This example illustrates that the discourse of *Nihonjinron* indeed makes a causal link between a cultural practice and cultural perspectives appear logical and plausible.

As demonstrated in this example, attempting to explain what seems to be a culturally specific practice with cultural perspectives presents problems. Another example is the explanation of why Japanese people do not say . . . *-tai desu ka* 'Do you want to . . . ?' and . . . *hoshii desu ka* 'Do you want . . . ? to superiors. As an explanation for this linguistic phenom-

enon, the textbook states that the Japanese avoid directness in language and behavior because they live on small islands and prefer to avoid conflict. The text says, "the Japanese are sensitive about living harmoniously and 'keeping peace'" (Peterson 1998:244). While these expressions may not usually be used with the superiors, the cultural perspectives behind this phenomenon can only be speculated upon. Yet this causal relationship is justified as cultural fact in the discourse of *Nihonjinron*.

These examples raise the question of whether cultural practices need to be "explained" at all, when very often they are arbitrary. Connecting cultural practices or products with cultural perspectives, as the National Standards encourage students to do, could merely reinforce the dominant discourse or stereotypes. Emphasizing the exotic and alien images of Japan may fascinate and motivate students. However, stressing the uniqueness of Japan reinforces a cultural dichotomy that is embedded in the current West versus Islam paradigm mentioned at the beginning of this paper. It is important to be aware that such a dichotomy often manifests a certain perceived relation of power—"US" as "superior" and "THEM" as "inferior" or vice versa.

The critiques presented in this article indicate that teachers need to challenge cultural essentialism by raising their awareness of competing discourses that generate different views about Japanese culture. To understand these divergent views, teachers need to become familiar with counter-discourses that problematize *Nihonjinron* through reading works by such critics as the ones cited in this issue. When encountering teaching materials that present essentialist assumptions about the uniqueness of Japanese culture, teachers may try to deconstruct the information by asking questions such as: Does this cultural explanation apply to all people in all situations in Japan? Can the same phenomena happen in other cultures? Are there any contradicting phenomena? and How is this explanation made plausible? Teachers are often encouraged to seek accurate information which may be left out of textbooks or other teaching materials. However, it is important to further understand that in postmodern society with multiple discourses clashing or converging, "accuracy of information" is often difficult to obtain. An important point is that teachers and students need to explore multiple perspectives and to critically examine plural ways of representing perceived cultural facts.

5. Conclusion

Our understanding of culture and cultural difference shapes not only our

knowledge of human behaviors, values, and beliefs, but also our social, professional, and political actions. In discussing multiplicity within culture and the shifting and constructed nature of culture, this article does not suggest that culture or cultural difference cease to exist. Rather, it suggests that teachers as professionals go beyond the static, essentialist, and neutral view of culture and explore instead how culture is understood and manifested in many different ways and how common knowledge of culture is implicated in politics and relations of power. The skill to analyze culture in this way is particularly important in an increasingly complex world that requires sophisticated understanding of how and why people live and act the way they do. As the events of 9/11 and related debates demonstrate, foreign language teachers and students are surrounded by powerful discourses that reduce the world's cultures into simplistic binary oppositions of US versus THEM. However, foreign language education that aims to foster cross-cultural understanding among global citizens must explore ways to expose the politics of cultural difference and seek non-essentialist understandings of culture.

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