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Rethinking Culture, National Culture, and Japanese Culture

Eika Tai

1. Introduction

The recent literature of social and human sciences, such as anthropology, history, and cultural studies, has scrutinized the concept of culture, particularly as it refers to ethnic or national culture. Many scholars have pointed out that, contrary to a common-sense understanding, national culture such as Japanese culture is far from natural, but is invented in the process of nation building, which is often interwoven with other political processes such as colonization. It is invented as an essence of the nation, as an integrated homogeneous whole shared by the members of the nation. Other scholars have examined the fluid, unbounded, and changing nature of cultural phenomena, while deconstructing the concept of national culture and disclosing power relations underlying the concept. Culture is no longer seen as natural, well-bounded, static, or independent of political power as it was once imagined.

   In this paper, I would like to present a theoretical overview of culture, national culture, and Japanese culture, focusing on recent developments. I believe that an understanding of these three concepts in light of the recent literature will help us, teachers of Japanese, to take a more critical approach to our work. We need to remember that the first tide in the teaching of Japanese as a second language took place under an assimilationist policy in Japanese colonies. We have to examine our ways of teaching in order to stay away from the colonial legacy of assimilationism or the sanctification of Japanese language and culture. Ryuko Kubota (2001) finds a legacy of colonial dichotomies in the discursive construction of the images of Asian cultures in U.S. classrooms. Asian cultures, often described as passive and docile, are positioned as diametrically opposed to the mainstream U.S. culture, which is considered to be the norm. Addressing ESL professionals, Kubota suggests that they should critically examine their perceptions of cultural differences in order not to perpetuate colonial dichotomies. Unless we carefully scrutinize our assumptions

about Japanese language and culture, we may inadvertently reproduce colonial practices in our own classrooms in a way specific to Japan's political relations with the U.S. and other parts of Asia. We need to rethink culture, national culture, and Japanese culture in order to be responsible for the political significance of our work.

2. Culture

Culture is a complicated word. The meaning of *culture* has been debated in anthropology for decades. In their historical overview of the meanings of the word, Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn (1952) discovered more than 150 definitions. The most influential definition of culture in early anthropology may be the one presented by Edward B. Tylor (1877). For him, culture is a unified totality, "the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (1). The concept of culture has been re-conceptualized again and again since then. In the 1950s, with scholars influenced by structural linguistics such as Claude Lévi-Strauss (1976), culture came to be understood as consisting of cohesive systems of signs and symbols "regulated by internal laws" (18). In the era of what John W. Bennett (1999) calls "classic anthropology" (1916–1953), when anthropologists typically studied tribal cultures, culture "seemed to be a distinctive, integrated, relatively consistent set of habits and rules" (952). There seemed to be a match between the boundary of a tribe (ethnic group) and the boundary of a tribal (ethnic) culture.

Such a holistic and static view of culture was challenged in the mid-1950s. Edmund Leach (1954) challenged the assumption of covariance between a social unit and a set of distinctive cultural traits. Facing a diverse and fluid cultural situation in the site of his fieldwork, the Kachin Hills Area in Burma, he found it difficult to determine where one group ended and another began. He looked into the subjective processes of people as agents for bringing about group formation and social change and concluded that the actual society was "largely independent of its cultural form" (16).

Following up on Leach's work, Fredrik Barth (1969) demonstrated culture as a dynamic process of subjective intentions and manipulations. He conceptualized ethnicity as the process of boundary maintenance instead of the "cultural stuff" that the boundary enclosed. Members select and use some cultural differences as the salient and symbolic significance that marks the distinction from other groups, i.e., the boundary, while

downplaying other cultural differences. For Barth (1994:14), "global empirical variation in culture is continuous." That is to say, "it does not partition neatly into separable integrated wholes." It is the process of boundary maintenance that generates and sustains relative discontinuities or the appearance of discontinuity in the actual flux of culture. Accordingly, cultural variation within any particular population is "contradictory and incoherent, and it is differentially distributed on variously positioned persons."

Boundary maintenance may be coordinated by leaders who attempt to mobilize other members in collective actions for the pursuit of their political interests. This point gives rise to an instrumentalist view; subjective claims to ethnic identities may be derived from the instrumental manipulation of cultural features in service of political and economic interests. This view is opposed to a primordialist view of ethnicity, advocated by Clifford Geertz among others. Geertz (1963:259) argues that people are bound to the congruities of blood, speech, and cultural custom by virtue of primordial sentiments that stem from being born into a particular cultural community and following particular social and cultural practices. In this view, cultural features and ethnic identities are seen as stable and difficult to manipulate, since people are assumed to have primordial attachments to their community, identity and culture. The debate on whether ethnicity is produced and sustained through natural affective ties or political manipulations has been transcended by anthropologists who look into ethnic consciousness as well as political processes. Tambiah (1996:140), for example, argues that "ethnic claims and sentiments and ethnic stereotypes are not only constructed but also naturalized and essentialized . . . as patterns of ideas and sentiments." Put differently, sentiments of ethnic identity and culture are politically created but are taken as natural by people who are under the effect of the politics.

The conception of culture as a set of objective norms and rules was challenged in a theoretical development that focused on practice. Pierre Bourdieu (1977:27–80) shows that rules are broken and denied as well as respected in everyday practice, while pointing out that people's actions are orchestrated without any explicit coordination when regularities are observed. To analyze practice, he employs the concept of "habitus," a system of dispositions which people acquire through processes of inculcation, especially when growing up. The habitus, which is preconscious, generates practices; it functions as "principles of generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without in any way being the product of obedience to rules"

(72). The habitus of a group (or class) is produced by objective material conditions specific to that group. It can generate a multiplicity of practices, but the practices it produces tend to "reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions" (77–78). Bourdieu's practice theory opens up a new way to study culture, going beyond both objectivism and subjectivism. It points to the preconscious nature of cultural practice, to an intricate relationship between cultural practice and political economy, and finally to a distinction between practice and discourse about practice, i.e., between culture in practice and ways of talking about culture.

Culture in the recent anthropological literature "has dissolved into a stream of cultural processes with uncertain places and boundaries. No longer a fixed body of traditions, meaning, or other elements, culture has become something constantly 'in the making'—an ever-changing outcome of social processes and struggles" (Sökefeld 1999:429). Pointing out that culture is neither an "object to be described" nor a "unified corpus of symbols and meanings that can be definitively interpreted," James Clifford (1986:19) states that "culture is contested, temporal, and emergent." Therefore, ethnographic truths in the study of cultural phenomena are "inherently *partial*" (7; emphasis in original). If, as he says, "culture, and our views of 'it,' are produced historically, and are actively contested" (18), we need to examine the historical processes through which culture in practice and discourse on culture are produced. We need to look into the historical processes of nationalism and colonialism.

3. National Culture

3.1. *Nationalism and National Culture*

Derived from the Latin word *cultura*, the word *culture* began to be used at the end of the thirteenth century in Europe (Nishikawa 1993). Raymond Williams (1983:11–14) identifies four senses in which the word has been used during the modern times: the "intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development" of the individual; "culture as a universal process"; artistic objects; and anthropological and sociological usage. The fourth sense is most relevant to the usage of *culture* in language education. It emerged with German philosophy in the late eighteenth century as it was contrasted with the concept of *civilization*, the second meaning of *culture* discussed by Williams. While *civilization* meant a universal development of human beings and societies, *culture* indicated particularity: every people had their own culture. Both concepts spread in Europe as part of nationalist ideology, but each country chose to focus on either civilization or culture

according to political needs; France and England chose the former, and Germany the latter (Nishikawa 1993:10). In Germany, *culture* (*Cultur*, *Kultur*) first meant something similar to civilization, but its usage became contrasted to *civilization* as Germany started to have political conflicts with France (13). In this process, culture was linked to ethnicity and nation. Put differently, as it was distinguished from *civilization*, which was assumed to spread universally beyond national boundaries, *culture* came to mean the culture of a particular ethnic nation, a "national culture."

How does a nation come into being and sustain itself as a nation? In a manner similar to the debate on the origin and maintenance of ethnicity, this question has been addressed as a debate between primordialists and constructivists. The latter broadened the instrumentalists' political view to look into the process of nationalism. Constructivists "emphasize the historical and sociological processes by which nations are created." This creation is "often a self-conscious and manipulative project carried out by elites who seek to secure their power by mobilizing followers on the basis of nationalist ideology" (Calhoun 1997:30). Benedict Anderson (1983) traces the origins of national consciousness in modern print capitalism, such as "the novel and the newspaper," written in the standardized national language. He captures nation as an "imagined community." It is imagined "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (15). Print capitalism enables the creation of this image; for example, the "newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop or residential neighbours, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in every day life" (31).

Arguing that "the basic characteristic of the modern nation and everything connected with it is its modernity," constructivists challenge the widely held primordialist assumption that "national identification is somehow so natural, primary and permanent as to precede history" (Hobsbawm 1990: 14). As Craig Calhoun (1997) points out, the phenomenological experience of people generally makes them imagine that "their nations are always already there" (30). They are apt to experience their nation and national culture as natural and primordial since their early socialization takes place in the preexisting national system. It is based on the observation of such experiences of people that primordialists argue that national bonds are natural. Yet, it is also true that the existence of cultural commonalties or affective ties does not guarantee the development of claims to national status (32). National identification is constructed, but people perceive

and experience it as primordial. In other words, it is "experientially pri-
mordial" (31).

In their efforts to inculcate national consciousness in common people,
nationalist elites may invent traditions, symbols, history, and culture. As
Eric J. Hobsbawm (1983) argues, "'traditions' which appear or claim to
be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented" (1). In
nationalist movements, "even historic continuity had to be invented," and
such an invention was sometimes effected by creating "entirely new
symbols and devices" such as the national anthem, the national flag, and
"the personification of 'the nation' in symbol or image" (7). Gellner
(1983:56) observes that "the cultural shreds and patches used by national-
ism are often arbitrary historical inventions." National culture is a modern
invention. In the process of creating a national culture, some preexisting
values and practices are selected, usually from a dominant culture, and
modified, while others are downplayed or dismissed. At the end of the
process, the constructed nature of national culture is erased. Likewise,
national languages are invented by selecting one vernacular and by stand-
ardizing national grammar and orthography, and hence are not "the pri-
mordial foundations of national culture and the matrices of the national
mind" (Hobsbawm 1990:54).

Nationalist discourse is generally predicated on essentialism as well as
on primordialism. Essentialism refers to "a reduction of the diversity in a
population to some single criterion held to constitute its defining 'essence'
and most crucial character. This is often coupled with the claim that the
'essence' is unavoidable or given by nature" (Calhoun 1997:18). In the
process of nationalism, the homogeneity of a population is not merely
disseminated as a myth but is actively sought in practice. Bourdieu (1999)
argues that "the state contributes to the unification of the cultural market
by unifying all codes, linguistic and juridical, and by effecting a homoge-
nization of all forms of communication" (61). The state education system
plays a critical role in homogenizing cultural practices within a nation
state and inculcating "the fundamental presuppositions of the national
self-image" (62). National culture is thus disseminated at least in two
ways: as a cultural content that includes customs, language use, and be-
liefs, and as a discourse, "a way of speaking that shapes our consciousness"
(Calhoun 1997:3), which revolves around primordialist and essentialist
views.

The homogeneity of national culture is constructed not only domestically
but also by creating cultural others. Historically, the process of nation
building is often intertwined with the process of colonial expansion. In

such cases, the colonizers' national culture is discursively constructed as that which the colonized lack and hence have to learn. As Edward Said suggests in *Orientalism* (1978), an interrelated set of European writings produced the "Orient" or the "Other" and provided the basis for Europe's self-appointed colonial rule. The cultures of the colonizers and the colonized are co-constituted as civilized and uncivilized, and cultural assimilation is imposed on the latter. The discourse of assimilation supports and is supported by the essentialist assumption of nationalism that "all citizens possess a common national culture" (Morris-Suzuki 1998:156). Moreover, it paradoxically precludes the colonized from assimilating completely since it points to their lack of a primordial national essence. They are forced to assimilate in practice but kept as colonial others in the discourse of Orientalism.

3.2. *Nationalist Discourse and Cultural Practice*

In practice, cultural homogenization is never complete. Our lived experiences cannot be reduced to the national essence stressed in nationalist discourse. What we find in practice is "a richer, more diverse and more promiscuously cross-cutting play of differences and similarities" (Calhoun 1997:19). There is no essence in this play. If we think we find an essence beneath surface variations, we are being caught by the essentialism of nationalist discourse. If we actually observe uniformity in people's cultural practices, then we need to think about what political power has brought about that uniformity. Under a surface commonality, we may also find "the personalized nature of the construction and interpretation of the nation" (Cohen 1996:802). Individuals differ in interpreting and acting out what a nationalist discourse dictates while using the same cultural idioms from the discourse. A nation can be called an imagined community, but individuals imagine that nation in multiple ways. In this sense, each individual constructs his or her own version of the nation. In sum, our daily lives are abundant in heterogeneous cultural practices and interpretations.

Thus, Homi Bhabha (1994) talks of the ambivalence of the nation. Although "the scraps, patches and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a coherent national culture," such a nationalist project is undermined by the heterogeneity of the nation's people. The nation is split within itself between nationalist discourse and "the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative" (145). This split renders the nation ambivalent, keeping it from stabilization. The nationalist discourse is continuously challenged, for the nation is "internally marked by the discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending

peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural differences" (148). Gender, social class, sexuality, and ethnicity are just a few of the ways in which people are minoritized within the nation state. Those minoritized people are oppressed by the homogenizing force of nationalist discourse, but they can also challenge the discourse and articulate the heterogeneity of their cultural practices.

   In a colonial context, the ambivalence of the nation can be produced by "colonial mimicry." Taking advantage of assimilationism and presenting themselves as in-between or "almost the same, but not quite," the colonized can undermine the legitimacy of the national boundary and threaten the neat colonial divide (Bhabha 1994:86). They can also resist and challenge the dominant culture by creating and asserting their own national culture (Hobsbawm 1990:137). National culture is thus a site of confrontation of various political forces.

4. Japanese Culture

4.1. *Nation Building and Colonization*

The concept of Japanese culture was constructed as Japan emerged as a modern nation state in the late nineteenth century, while exercising colonial power over other parts of Asia. The Japanese equivalent of *culture*, *bunka*, was first used in the late 1880s as the translation of *Kultur*, while the term itself was borrowed from Classical Chinese. It was not used widely in academic or political discourse until the 1910s (Nishikawa 1993:20). In early Meiji Japan, it was the term for civilization, *bunmei*, that was popular in both public and academic discourses. The word reached the common people as the slogan *bunmei kaika* (civilization and enlightenment), generating the awareness that Japan needed to become as "civilized" as Western countries. *Bunmei* was a key word in the series of works by Yukichi Fukuzawa, an influential theorist in Meiji Japan. In his 1875 work, he stressed the importance of civilizing the people in Japan (Fukuzawa [1875] 1995). As Nagao Nishikawa (1993) argues, for Fukuzawa, civilization meant the creation of a nation (*kokumin*) in Japan and the achievement of the independence of Japan against the imperial encroachment of Western powers. This defensive argument turned into an aggressive attitude toward the rest of Asia in his conclusion (23–25). The word *bunmei* lost its popularity toward the end of the nineteenth century. Yet, it became an important concept in the discourse of overseas colonial control, which began around that time. Fukuzawa's idea of civilizing the

masses in Japan, which was predicated on a view of them as uncivilized, was projected onto Asians outside of Japan.

To construct Japanese people (*Nihonjin*) as distinct from other peoples, the notion of "national character" was borrowed from Western countries. In early Meiji Japan, the word *Nihonjin* was used in the titles of many writings, but the discourse about Japanese national character appeared only on the margin of the discourse of *bunmei*. Around the time of the Sino-Japanese War, the *Nihonjin* discourse began to flourish in a tide of ethno-nationalism fueled by the victory over China. *Taiyō*, the first fully developed nation-wide magazine in Japan, included many articles on *Nihonjin* from the start of its publication in 1894, when this war began. Liu Jianhui (2001) finds three traits repeatedly appearing in the *Nihonjin* discourse in this period: loyalty to the state, work ethic, and cleanliness. He argues that the authors consciously tried to spell out the concept of the Japanese nation by referring to those features (86).

The Japanese national character was not merely invented and spread as a discourse; its constitutive personality traits were inculcated in pupils in the newly established state education system. The idea of *chūkun aikoku* (loyalty to the emperor and love for the state) was central to the education rescript (*kyōiku chokugo*), the major doctrine in public schools. Educational leaders also created mechanisms to develop the character suitable for national subjects. For example, as Shun'ya Yoshimi (1994) points out, the *undōkai* (athletic meet), a widely-practiced school event in today's Japan, was invented in the Meiji period to discipline the bodies of children and to inculcate loyalty in them. The *undōkai* was created by integrating military training practice and discipline into the custom of local festivals.

Liu (2001: 84–87) points out that the national character was created as something that people in Japanese colonies and territories lacked and hence had to learn from *Nihonjin*. Referring to Said's *Orientalism* (1978), Sang-jung Kang (1996) calls Fukuzawa's prejudiced perception of Koreans and Chinese a Japanese Orientalism; that is, through imaginatively identifying with the civilized West, Japanese leaders attempted to project their negative self image as barbarous Asia onto people in the rest of Asia (86–106). Similarly, Ichirō Tomiyama (1994) discusses the birth of *Nihonjin* in the context of the internal colonization of the Ainu and the Okinawans. Japanese identity, he argues, was created through the modern scientific technology of observing and classifying "symptoms" found among the colonized either as similar to or as different from "the Japanese." In this process, Japanese identity was substantiated while negative cultural features were attributed to the colonized (39). In sum, *"Nihonjin"* was

constituted by discursively creating colonial others as less civilized or barbarous.

As Eiji Oguma (1995) points out in his extensive research, there were two theoretical approaches to explaining Japanese superiority. One was to depict the Japanese as ethnically homogeneous and pure, descended from a single blood line, and the other was to emphasize multi-ethnic mixed origins. Oguma observes that the popularity of one approach over the other shifted according to the changing political circumstances. During the interwar period, theories of diverse origins dominated, since they could justify the goals of imperial expansion. The *Yamato minzoku* (Japanese ethnic nation) was imagined to have come into being through an intermingling of diverse populations in Asia, and the emperor was seen as having led this assimilation in a harmonious way. It followed that he should continue this mission in contemporary Asia and that the people in Japan proper who had preserved the original customs and language should assimilate those in other parts of Asia who had not (119–135).

Among invented traditions in modern Japan, *kokugo* (national language) was particularly important for nation building and colonization. It was invented as an ideology to develop national consciousness among a populace which was yet to be unified as a nation, and also as a standard language to regulate the language practice of the people who spoke numerous speech forms. Kazutoshi Ueda (1968) played an important role in this invention. In his seminal 1894 speech, he conceptualized *kokugo* as the essence of what made up the Japanese, imaging it as their spiritual blood and stressing its importance in perpetuating the Japanese state. Soon after his speech, he engaged in creating a standard language based on a particular Tokyo speech form to unify language use in Japan (Nakamura 1987). All the other speech forms were now relegated to the status of dialects and subsumed under *kokugo* as regional variations. *Kokugo*, as a nationalist discourse and as the standard language of Japan, was disseminated to the common people in the home islands of Japan through the nascent public school system, and it was applied to assimilationist education in colonial Taiwan and Korea. *Kokugo* hardly spread as a spoken language in Japan until the start of radio broadcasting in 1925, and even after this, it was not easily disseminated despite the exercise of harsh punishment for the use of a dialect in school. The government had to tolerate regional differences in language use, but only as internal variations of *kokugo*.

4.2. *Inventing Japanese Culture and the Japanese Ethnic Nation*

According to Nishikawa (1993:26), the usage of *bunka* in the sense of

German *Kultur* first appeared in the work by Katsunan Kuga in the 1880s. Kuga ([1888] 1987:190) emphasized the importance of the development of a unified national culture in maintaining the independence of the Japanese state, defining culture as the "totality of language, custom, genealogy, habits, laws and social institutions that made up the particular national character" (my translation). Underlying the idea of culture unique to the nation in Kuga's writings was a "desire for a pure culture (exclusiveness) and for an ancient tradition (reactionary tendency)," which could easily be turned into an ethnocentric pride in one's own culture and contempt for other cultures, as evident in the Japanese historical experience (Nishikawa 1993:28; my translation).

The usage of *bunka* in Kuga's sense did not reach popular consciousness until later. When *bunka* became a popular word in the Taishō period, its usage was associated with the expansion of consumer society and the middle class, as in the case of the expressions *bunka-jūtaku* (cultural residence) or *bunka-senpūki* (cultural fan). These were the tangible symbols of "the popular equation of culture with the novel and the foreign" (Morris-Suzuki 1995:763). During the same period, "culturalism" (*bunka-shugi*) dominated in the fields of art, architecture, and literature, indicating the expansion of consumer society and a reaction against industrial progress and scientific rationality associated with *bunmei*. While culturalism had a cosmopolitan flavor in the beginning, it began to acquire nationalist meanings in the late 1920s (764).

In the 1930s, the word *Nihon-bunka* (Japanese culture) began to emerge frequently in academic discourse such as the writing of Kunio Yanagita. It was diverse social forms and local peculiarities in rural Japan that were stressed in his early work (Yanagita 1973). Yet, the focus of his study shifted to the notion of Japanese culture as an integrating broad framework in the 1930s (Yanagita 1993). As Tessa Morris-Suzuki (1995) points out, Yanagita came to think that culture must be national and found a sense of belonging to local culture problematic for the unity of the nation. Thus, "the definition (of culture) slips quietly from being a description of *actual* social beliefs and practices in all their dynamic complexity, to being a description of *the beliefs and practices which must be created*" (766; emphasis in original).

An important work on national character in the 1930s was produced by Tetsurō Watsuji. In *Fūdo* (Climate), published in 1935, he discussed the Japanese national character from an ecological perspective. He categorized Japan into the monsoon climate zone, but made it clear that Japan differed from other countries in this zone since it was affected by Arctic air and

occasionally beset by typhoons. Hence, the Japanese were uniquely charac-
terized by quiet endurance and occasional expressions of extreme emotion.
He also found the Japanese uniqueness in wet-rice agriculture, architecture,
and inter-subjective relationships (Watsuji 1935). Watsuji presented a
mono-ethnic image of Japan, going against the multi-ethnic view that
had been widely accepted. This image was to become a basis for postwar
theory on Japanese uniqueness.

As Japan went to war against China in the 1930s, ethno-national con-
sciousness was widely spread among ordinary Japanese people. Kevin
M. Doak (2001) attributes their support for intervention in Asia to their
nationalist sentiments based on ethno-nationality (*minzoku*). This notion
had existed since the late nineteenth century, but it did not become in-
fluential enough to be a source for nationalism until the period around
World War I. In the 1930s, many literary writers challenged the biological
understanding of *minzoku*, arguing that "'*minzoku*' was an ethnic and
national identity that had to be produced through cultural work" (6–8).
Ethnologists associated with the Japanese government also came to stress
a cultural aspect in the concept of *minzoku* in the 1940s (10). Yet, the
focus on *minzoku* did not mean the erasure of the race concept. Doak
contends that "race and ethnicity were used to signify distinct levels of
identity" in Japanese imperialist ideology and that this ideology emphasized
"a culturally defined ethnic concept of nationality as an essential element
in constructing a social hierarchy suitable for a self-consciously conceived
mono-racial (but multiethnic) empire" (4). The National Eugenics Law
of 1941 facilitated the reconstruction of *minzoku* on a biological basis,
solidifying the divide between ethnic Japanese and the rest of Asia that
had been formed in public consciousness.

In the late 1930s, the idea of *bunka* in defining Japanese ethno-nationality
was applied to the imperialization movement (*kōminka*) in Taiwan, Korea,
and other territories. It was also deployed in further imperial expansion,
as noted in *bunka-kōsaku* (cultural maneuver), a strategy for controlling
people in Asia. Imagined as the essence of Japanese people and culture,
kokugo was central to *kōminka* and *bunka-kōsaku*. The colonized were
forced to study *kokugo* while being prohibited from speaking their own
languages. The Japanese language assumed another label and another
meaning in the 1940s, when it was imagined that it would become a
common language in the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere that
Japanese leaders had decided to construct. The language that was to be
spread in Asia was *Nihongo* (Japanese language), which referred to the
Japanese language as taught to non-Japanese as a foreign language. *Kokugo*

was preserved for ethnic Japanese since it was their "national essence." The distinction between *kokugo* and *Nihongo* thus functioned to maintain the boundary of ethnic Japanese. Yet, the national boundary was kept ambivalent in the colonies, where Japanese was taught as *kokugo* and where the colonized were imagined to become *Nihonjin* (Tai 1999).

4.3. *Discourse on Japanese Culture and People in Postwar Japan*

The concept of culture was central to the rebuilding of the nation in postwar Japan. Having lost the colonies and other territories, whose populations had been forcibly japanized, Japanese culture came to be seen as an exclusive property of the Japanese. In this context, the discourse of a mono-ethnic society, *tan'itsu-minzoku-kokka* (mono-ethnic nation state), which was not compatible with imperial expansion, came to dominate in public consciousness. Many of the pre-1945 cultural theories were re-appropriated in the postwar discourse of *Nihonjin* and *Nihon-bunka*, designated as *Nihonjinron*, in which mono-ethnicity was taken for granted. As "one of the most referenced works in *Nihonjinron*"(Befu 2001:17), Watsuji's *Fūdo* contributed to spreading the myth that Japan had always been mono-ethnic.

Another influential work in early postwar *Nihonjinron* is *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* by Ruth Benedict (1946). Harumi Befu (2001: 51) even says that "one is tempted to claim that the postwar anthropology of Japan is in large part made up of footnotes to Benedict's classic." This book set a tone of *Nihonjinron* in a particular way; Japanese culture is described almost always in contrast to the U.S. mainstream culture and is positioned as diametrically opposed to it. In this perspective, Japanese culture is represented as unique and the U.S. culture as normative, while comparison to other Asian cultures is virtually absent.

Nihonjinron writings are focused on demonstrating "unique qualities of Japanese culture, Japanese society, and the Japanese people," and hence, "broad generalizations of an essentialized Japan abound in this genre" (Befu 2001: 4). The assumption of a homogeneous culture in *Nihonjinron* is often followed by "implicit genetic determinism"; that is to say, "unique features cannot be understood or fully comprehended by non-Japanese" (67–68). This perception seems to draw on the idea of *minzoku* that dominated in political and public consciousness during the last decade of the Japanese empire. An exclusionary attitude is particularly evident in the discussion of the Japanese language, one of the central themes in *Nihonjinron*. The structure and usage of the language are presented as uniquely Japanese and extremely difficult for any others to master. Thus, the distinction created in the 1940s between *kokugo* for

ethnic Japanese and *Nihongo* for non-Japanese is kept intact, but without any reference to the political and historical significance of this distinction (Koyasu 1994).

By the end of the 1970s, *Nihonjinron* books had been widely circulated as consumer goods and had attracted a wide range of readership, claiming a special section in bookstores. Befu (1983) argues that the popularity of *Nihonjinron* in the 1980s was a nationalistic pursuit of maintaining Japanese identity against the tide of internationalization that had been penetrating into everyday life in Japan. Kosaku Yoshino (1997) sees *Nihonjinron* as a form of cultural nationalism. He distinguishes *Nihonjinron* in the 1970s and 1980s from the nationalism of the Meiji era. Whereas Japanese people developed cultural traits in the latter, they developed awareness of those traits that they had already acquired and became conscious of national identity in the former. Put differently, as they gain national sentiments, consumers of *Nihonjinron* learn ways of talking about *Nihonjin* and *Nihon-bunka*, using cultural idioms amply provided in this discourse, such as *haji* (shame), *omoiyari* (empathy), and *wa* (harmony).

This may explain an observation by a U.S. study team that even though the Japanese are aware of the presence of cultural differences in Japan, they "prefer to define themselves in a manner which emphasizes their core of commonly held beliefs and values" (OERI Research Team 1987: 3). Lie (2001: 51) also observes that cultural differences manifested in everyday life "do not fundamentally challenge the belief in essential Japanese homogeneity" held by many Japanese people. In other words, *Nihonjinron* facilitates the essentialized way of thinking and talking about Japanese people and culture, i.e., taking observable cultural differences only as surface manifestations of an underlying Japanese essence rather than as fundamental features of Japanese society in themselves.

As Befu (2001) argues, *Nihonjinron* can be called "intellectual hegemony" since it is intended to shape the values and behaviors of the intellectual and business elite. It is prescriptive; "to be counted as true Japanese, . . . many Japanese feel compelled, in varying degrees, to practice what is prescribed" in *Nihonjinron* (79). The business establishment endorses many propositions presented in *Nihonjinron*. Befu points out that "it is based on a conscious decision on the part of *Nihonjinron* writers to represent a homogeneous stance with respect to Japanese culture" (71). Furthermore, "the hegemonic ideology of *Nihonjinron* is maintained and supported by the state in many and varied forms," as illustrated in the case of the committee of *Nihonjinron* advocates appointed by former prime minister Masayoshi Ōhira, which hailed the harmonious nature of

Japanese culture. In sum, "intellectuals write *Nihonjinron* as prescription for behavior. The government turns it into a hegemonic ideology, and the corporate establishment puts it into practice" (81).

Nihonjinron may work to coerce certain behavior patterns in elite men, but it also helps to perpetuate their cultural dominance over other Japanese. As Ahn Jung Eui (2000:42) points out, behavior patterns discussed in *Nihonjinron*, such as the use of elaborate honorific speech, can function as what Bourdieu (1977) calls "cultural capital," i.e., society's symbolic resources. Put another way, *Nihonjinron* supporters define behavior patterns pertaining to themselves and other elites as symbolically important and as "Japanese" while downgrading other cultural practices.

Nihonjinron is not merely a problem of domestic power relationships. Harry Harootunian and Naoki Sakai (1999) analyze it in the context of the U.S.–Japan relationship in the course of a dialogue on Japan studies. Harootunian finds *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* problematic not merely because the book was commissioned by the Office of War Information and was about "how best to understand the enemy so that we (Americans) can beat the Japanese," but also because it set up an area study of Japan based on the colonizers' attitude found in the American occupation of Japan. Japan was treated as "an ethnographic space filled with colonized natives," not as a "country" such as France or England (597). Japan was studied "as a coherent and unified totality, as a unified culture" (597). In this way, the classic anthropologists' holistic view of culture was taken for granted in *Nihonjinron*. Sakai points out that American and Japanese scholars of the Japan study mutually endorsed "American exceptionalism and Japanese cultural nationalism" (605). Harootunian and Sakai argue that it is often in this U.S.–Japan power relationship that *Nihonjinron* is produced.

4.4. *Homogenizing Forces and Homogeneity and Heterogeneity in Cultural Practice*

Nihonjinron is a discourse about the culture of Japanese people created through a political power play and is limited as a description of their everyday cultural practices. As Yoshio Sugimoto (1997:1–2) argues, contrary to the image of a typical Japanese projected in much *Nihonjinron*, "a man with a university diploma working in a large company," the demographically calculated average Japanese is "a female, non-unionized and non-permanent employee in a small business without university education." He goes on to say that "the portrayal of Japan as a homogeneous and egalitarian society . . . contradicts many observations that it is more

diversified, heterogeneous, and multicultural than is widely believed to be the case" (5). Although there are cultural differences in social class, age, gender, occupations, and the like in Japanese society, only certain kinds of beliefs and practices are labeled and disseminated as Japanese culture in *Nihonjinron*. Intellectuals, bureaucrats, and elite businessmen who produce and consume *Nihonjinron* have more power in spreading ideas than women, the less-educated, and physical laborers, among others. The *Nihon-bunka* they discuss is likely to be the culture familiar or ideal to them, while other kinds of cultural practices are considered to be marginal, insignificant, or even less Japanese. Thus, those Japanese who do not want to conform to "the culturally accepted boundaries of Japanese utterance and behavior" circumscribed by *Nihonjinron* may say, "I am not really Japanese" (Lie 2001:165).

Yet, this is not to conclude simply that Japanese people are culturally heterogeneous. To say so is to negate modern Japanese history, in which certain cultural traits have been disseminated through the state education system and other mechanisms, including *Nihonjinron*. In other words, various kinds of homogenizing forces operate to produce and reproduce a certain level of cultural homogeneity in society. As a form of cultural nationalism, *Nihonjinron* draws on the actual sharing of certain cultural traits among Japanese in certain social sectors (Yoshino 1997). As an intellectual hegemony, *Nihonjinron* compels many Japanese to behave in certain ways (Befu 2001). The nation-wide circulation of popular culture is another mechanism that facilitates cultural homogenization. John Lie (2001:126) points out that through the spread of popular culture, "Japan became a culturally integrated nation by the 1960s; the claim of cultural homogeneity became plausible to ordinary Japanese people."

As Hidenori Mashiko (2001:235–245) points out, the state education system plays a central role in disseminating cultural nationalism to the general population beyond *Nihonjinron* consumers, and also prepares those consumers to endorse *Nihonjinron* arguments. The state education system contributes to creating homogeneity in cultural practices, using the key word "national education." Most importantly, *kokugo* as a common spoken language has penetrated into Japanese society through public schools as well as media, bringing about linguistic homogenization to a noticeable degree. Public schools also disseminate certain personal traits. According to a U.S.–Japan governmental study of 1987 on Japanese education, "there is a strong consensus that schools have the obligation and authority to impart fundamental Japanese values as the foundation of proper moral attitudes and personal habits" (OERI Research Team 1987:

3). One such value is placed on "harmonious relations" and hence "teachers attempt to foster group cohesion and a strong group spirit by avoiding overt recognition of differences in individual ability and minimizing one-against-one competition" (3). Such "uniform education" (*kakuitsu kyōiku*) helps to produce cultural homogeneity in practice.

The state education system also contributes to spreading nationalist consciousness, especially through such subjects as national history and *kokugo* (Mashiko 2001). The recent controversy over the conservative history textbooks published by *Atarashii rekishi-kyōkasho o tsukuru kai* (the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform) demonstrates that history education is subject to manipulation for the purpose of raising nationalistic sentiments. National history textbooks in general facilitate the inculcation of primordial attachments to the Japanese nation by designating as "Japanese" people who lived in ancient times in what is now called Japan and treating them as if they had shared national identity with contemporary Japanese. Sakai (1996) sees national history and *kokugo*, as well as *Nihonjinron*, as technologies through which common affective sentiments to Japanese nationality, or the feelings of "we Japanese," are produced and sustained.

It cannot be denied that we observe and experience a certain level of "cultural homogeneity" in certain social settings. However, if we simply call that situation "a homogeneous culture," we are being caught by nationalist discourse and dismissing the cultural heterogeneity also present in practice. Rather, when we observe a homogeneity, we need to think about what political and economic mechanisms have produced that homogeneity. Furthermore, what we cursorily observe as a homogeneity may have heterogeneous interpretations and effects. To illustrate, as Dorinne Kondo (1990) demonstrates, Japanese people positioned differently in social settings interpret and act out *uchi* (inside) and *soto* (outside) differently, while sharing these historically-mediated cultural idioms. These concepts are represented in a certain way in *Nihonjinron*, school curricula, media, and the like, but are practiced in multiple ways. Conversely, when we actually observe a heterogeneity, we may hastily take it as an internal variation or a surface manifestation of an underlying cultural essence. If so, we are being caught by the essentialist way of thinking and are not looking at a cultural heterogeneity in its own light. In sum, we need to be aware of the power of nationalist discourse and homogenizing forces in understanding cultural heterogeneity and homogeneity in practice.

4.5. *Voices for Heterogeneity, Diaspora, and Hybridity*

Although the myth of Japanese culture as homogeneous and unique has been deconstructed in academic fields, this image still persists in much of public consciousness. It is also true that there have been increasing assertions of cultural heterogeneity in Japan. The discourse of a homogenous culture produces institutionalized discrimination against various kinds of minorities and oppresses the expressions of cultural heterogeneity among Japanese people in general. However, those who are marginalized by homogenizing forces may depreciate, ignore, or challenge the discourse in their struggle for political empowerment. Grassroots movements have been orchestrated, often based on the idea of "co-living" (*kyōsei*), by various groups of people such as women, people with disabilities, and *burakumin* (former outcastes). They reveal the heterogeneity of cultural phenomena and the contentious nature of Japanese culture, while shattering the myth of homogeneity. In those movements, the concept of culture is deployed as a basis of assertion of heterogeneity. For example, people with disabilities have begun to claim that they have their own culture (Matsunami 2001).

The ethnic landscape in Japanese society has been changing since the end of the 1980s because of the public assertion of cultural identities by the Ainu, Okinawans, and permanent residents such as Koreans and Chinese. Moreover, there has been a continuous flow of new arrivals from other parts of Asia, South America, and many other parts of the world. Those diasporic people contribute to diversifying and hybridizing the cultural and ethnic climate in Japan by introducing their own cultural heritages. Many of the school districts that accommodate children of foreign origins and/or Japanese returnees from abroad have been integrating multicultural education and teaching the value of "*chigai*" (difference), generally following the guiding principle of multicultural co-living (*tabunka-kyōsei*). In some school districts such as Kawasaki City, *chigai* is used in the phrase, "*chigai o yutakasa ni*" (treat difference as a source of enrichment), which is applied not only to ethnic diversity but also to diversity in talents, skills, and personality traits. The idea of *tabunka-kyōsei* has begun to spread among those Japanese who appreciate cultural diversity. Conversely, Japanese nationals and ex-nationals living overseas, or diasporic Japanese, have been changing the cultural climate of their local communities while maintaining old cultural practices in new hybrid forms.

As demonstrated in the criticism against *Nihonjinron* and other nationalist discourses and the cultural assertions of various kinds of people in Japan

and in the Japanese diaspora, the concept of Japanese culture is contentious and is constantly in the making. It is a site of confrontation, a site in which different views and practices intersect, merge, and compete. In this conceptualization, we can no longer talk of "Japanese culture," but only of cultural phenomena taking place among multiple networks of people in various contexts in Japan and beyond. These cultural phenomena inform and are informed by various political forces, such as those revolving around gender and age, and not just by nationalist forces. Yet, if we still need to use this term *Japanese culture*, we should be careful not to think of "it" as homogeneous, fixed, bounded, or apolitical as depicted in *Nihonjinron* and other nationalist discourses. We should understand "it" as diverse, unbounded, dynamic, and politically charged, if we want to acknowledge the invented and contentious nature of Japanese culture and to use the term to refer to cultural phenomena taking place in the lived experiences of all the people living in Japan and Japanese people in the diaspora.

Precisely because cultural phenomena are politically contested, voices speaking up for heterogeneity, diaspora and hybridity are subject to co-option. The state school system has begun to move away from uniform education and to pay more attention to appreciating and developing individual talent and *chigai*. The government's 2000 Basic Plan for Immigration Control stresses the importance of *kyōsei* between Japanese nationals and foreign residents. We need to be cautious, though, about where such governmental initiatives are heading; *chigai* may be being deployed to justify the prestige of elite groups, and *kyōsei* may be meant to reestablish social hierarchy between citizens and foreigners.

5. Pedagogical Implications

In discussing the current tide of the teaching of Japanese as a second language, Nishikawa (2002) cannot but think of the legacy of colonialism and imperialism; the field of *Nihongo* education was created to exclude foreigners and protect *kokugo* for the Japanese nation. Yeounsuk Lee (2000) observes the persistent legacy of the nationalist and colonialist view of *kokugo* in the governmental discourse in today's Japan. Many officials still take it for granted that all the Japanese people speak *kokugo* as their native tongue and develop a Japanese mind through *kokugo*. They can neither see the existence of foreign residents speaking Japanese as their native tongue nor can they recognize that they are imposing the concept of *kokugo* on foreign children at public schools (338). As Nozomi

Tanaka and Takeshi Komagome (1999: 85) point out, the teaching of Japanese based on the idea of *kokugo* may lead to the imposition of Japanese cultural values and practices on learners, creating "quasi-Japanese excluded from perfect Japanese." It goes without saying that this is similar to what happened in assimilationist colonial education.

Similarly, a legacy of imperialism is found in today's *Nihongo* education. It is now practiced as *kokusai-kōryū* (international exchanges), but it is not very different from *Nihongo* education enforced under the plan for the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, if teachers conflate *Nihongo* with a standardized image of "Japan" or "Japanese culture" (Tanaka and Yasuda 1999). The idea of *kokusai-kōryū* makes teachers feel responsible for the interests of the Japanese state and encourages them to teach Japanese culture and language in the way the state dictates. Yet, their teaching has to be free from the state's interests (Tanaka and Komagome 1999: 85).

Both an assimilationist approach and an exclusionary orientation are found in the context of *Nihongo* education today. One may be more evident than the other in each setting, depending on the nature of the students. Asian students tend to encounter the former and U.S. students the latter, but both groups can be subjected to both orientations.

As Nishikawa (2002) argues, teachers of Japanese have to fight against the legacy of colonialism and resist the effect of *Nihonjinron*. We have to examine critically our own preconceptions of Japanese culture and language. We need to ask ourselves whether we see Japanese culture as a static and unified whole or as a primordial essence of ethnic Japanese. We need to stay away from these views and rethink our approaches to teaching Japanese culture. The formula of the "Four Ds" that Kubota discusses in her contribution to this issue gives us clear guidelines for this reconceptualization.

We also need to check whether we are inclined to take an assimilationist approach or an exclusionary orientation. If classrooms are places for cultural exchanges, they should be places for equal exchanges. In contrast to one-sided exchanges characteristic of colonial contexts, equal exchanges require a transformation of Japanese language and culture themselves. Nishikawa (2002) contends that what is most needed in the field of teaching Japanese is the recognition and acceptance of this inevitable change. He goes on to say that what is important in the recent assertion of multilingualism and multiculturalism is to discard such ideas as pure culture, pure language, mother tongue, and correct language and to explore

a new possibility with the idea of creole, which signifies change, hybridity, multiplicity, and diasporic border crossings.

Teachers of Japanese can find numerous ways to implement the new conceptualization of Japanese culture. Seiko Kataoka (2000) provides some innovative ideas and practical guidelines. In her search for a non-assimilationist Japanese culture course, she finds the idea of "smooth communication" problematic. This idea, often listed as a teaching goal, makes teachers inclined to push students to assimilate to a "Japanese-style communication" discussed in *Nihonjinron*. Critical of such a one-way process, Kataoka proposes to approach Japanese culture education as a "process where a learner and a teacher cooperate in studying and thinking about 'Japanese culture.'" In this process, each deepens his or her own understanding of "Japanese culture" (43). To be sure, by "Japanese culture," Kataoka thinks of multiplicity, hybridity, and fluidity. In order to approach Japanese culture as such, she recommends the use of popular culture in teaching materials. Popular culture can be a site of discovering cultural similarities and continuities across national borders as well as cultural change and exchange (55).

To follow up on Kataoka's work, I would like to make a few suggestions. Excerpts from ethnographies can make effective teaching materials for discussing cultural practices in concrete contexts, instead of in abstract images. Kondo's (1990) ethnography of everyday life in a small family-owned factory located in a Tokyo working-class neighborhood is an excellent example. It demonstrates a strategy of departing from *Nihon-jinron*, which tends to focus on the culture of elite business men. Kondo's vivid accounts of artisans and women part-time employees and her analysis of their power relations would trigger interesting discussions on such topics as gender, social class, and identity in concrete terms and raise the question of how nationalist ideology enters into individuals' cultural practices. Her situated analysis of *uchi-soto* relations can be used as a model for analyzing other cultural idioms such as *tate-shakai* (vertical society) and *omoiyari* (empathy). Furthermore, her careful choice of the phrase "the people I know" over "the Japanese" provides a strategy to avoid making gross generalizations.

Political and cultural issues involving ethnic minorities can make interesting discussion topics for exploring multiplicity, hybridity, and fluidity in Japanese culture. Yet, an examination of ethnic issues should not end with an affirmation of the essentialized notion of ethnic culture. Rather, it should be a way for teachers and students to understand how the meaning of Japanese-ness is negotiated politically as well as how ethnic cultural

practices hybridize Japanese culture. Resources for discussion can be found in newspapers and on the internet. Teachers and students can conduct small research projects, for example, to find out about the social impact of the U.S.–Japan foreign policy on Okinawa and to learn about hybrid cultural practices in this region. Or they can look into the effect of the 2002 World Cup soccer games on the perception of Korean-ness among Japanese people and discuss the fluid nature of the political and cultural meaning of Japanese-ness.

In exploring the dynamics and multiplicity of language phenomena, teachers can start with their own familiar speech habits. They can introduce regional vernaculars, gendered speech forms, and social-class-oriented language use that they are familiar with and discuss with their students differences and similarities between their individual speech habits and textbook Japanese. They can talk about their own experiences of using honorific expressions in relation to the social rules discussed in a textbook. They can also take advantage of a variety of speech forms available in TV shows, in movies, and on the internet. They can have discussions on such topics as generational differences in language use, and Japanese creoles found among newly arrived foreigners, old-timer Chinese, and Japanese returnees.

We have to keep in mind that what we know about Japanese culture is "inherently *partial*" (Clifford 1986: 7), for culture is always in the making, and cultural practices are largely generated through preconscious dispo-sitions (Bourdieu 1977). We cannot describe Japanese culture definitively. As Kataoka (2000) suggests, we do not need to act as representatives or specialists of Japanese culture, but can join our students in learning more about this subject after providing teaching materials and instructional guidelines. By examining Japanese culture critically and by approaching Japanese culture education as a process of mutual learning, we can engage in decolonizing our classrooms and our minds.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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