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I

Concepts of Japan, Japanese culture and the Japanese

Introduction

Reams have been written to question, explore and define 'Japan', 'Japanese culture' and 'the Japanese', both by Japanese scholars and by foreign observers of Japan. Most of it is based on an unwitting existential assumption that 'Japan', 'Japanese culture' and 'the Japanese' are 'things' out there, whose objectively verifiable forms need only be ascertained. Much of the discussion has centred on the specificities of these forms. I submit that this is not a productive approach: that at best, all these discussions and pronouncements of what 'Japan' is, what 'Japanese culture' constitutes, and who 'the Japanese' are, vary in accordance with innumerable and variegated experiences in changing historical circumstances.

In mid-20th century sociology and anthropology, facile assumptions were made that society, culture, people, polity and territory were coterminous such that their respective boundaries perfectly coincided.¹ This assumption was created and reaffirmed by structural-functionalist theory which pervaded social sciences of the time. It was thought that each society possesses a unique culture and that society and culture are contained in the political boundaries of the state. Japan was described and analysed on the basis of such a static theory in the early days of postwar Japanese studies.

Entirely new paradigms developed from the 1960s to account for the ever-changing and globalising world order which characterised the second half of the 20th century. How is Japan to be described in this new theoretical regime? In this chapter we explore this new approach to understanding Japan, appreciating the fact that the isomorphism of land = people = culture = society = polity is no longer tenable in Japan, if it ever was.

‘Japan’

‘Japan’ cannot be dissociated from Japanese culture, since Japan is not just a physical entity. Japan as a chain of islands is meaningful only when culturally interpreted. Current conventional thinking is that Japan consists of the four major islands of Honshū, Kyūshū, Shikoku and Hokkaidō, plus the Ryūkyū Islands (Okinawa) and some small islands surrounding the four major islands. While Japan has such a physical reality, the perception of it is culturally elaborated and interpreted. Moreover, as culture is historically constructed, the meaning of ‘Japan’ changes with time.

Stratified Japan

Cultural interpretations of ‘Japan’ clearly emphasise the socially and politically stratified nature of this country. For example, cultural narratives of ‘Japan’ evoke a country of four seasons: spring with cherry blossoms, a summer of sweltering heat, autumn with beautiful foliage colours and a bitterly cold winter. But these evocations are biased in favour of central Japan – a region from Kansai (Kyoto–Osaka) to Kantō (Tokyo) – where the power to create such cultural narratives has historically resided. These images are a creation of the intellectuals based at the centre of Japan, and it is only from this vantage point that these evocations ring true.

From the peripheries of Japan, these seasonal changes are only partially true at best. As celebrated in the literature for eons, the famed cherry blossoms are supposed to be viewed from late March to mid-April. But school children in Naha, Okinawa, where the cherry trees blossom in January, simply have to memorise what they do not experience as prescribed in textbooks: namely that cherry blossoms are viewed in March–April. So do children in Hokkaidō, where they blossom well into May. The sweltering, hot and humid summer is unknown in Hokkaidō, as is the phenomenon of *tsuyu*, or ‘plum rain’ (the drizzly rainy season from June to July), so central to Japan’s culturally defined seasonality, which covers Kanto and the south, but is decreasingly real and meaningful in Tohoku – the northern-most part of Honshū – and not at all real or meaningful in Hokkaidō, where *tsuyu* is non-existent. Similarly, autumn colours, celebrated in haiku and *waka* poetry, are unknown or diminished in Okinawa. The bitter cold of central Japan is foreign to Okinawans. Hokkaidō and Okinawa – territories that were added to Japan in the 19th century – simply do not feature in Japanese central narratives of seasonality. They are forever condemned to the peripheries, not only literally at the southern and northern ends of the

island chain, but also figuratively in the culturally constructed seasonality of Japan.

The so-called 'standard' Japanese language, while not exactly the same as Tokyo dialect, resembles it more than any other dialect. Ever since the establishment of the modern government in 1868, the state has defined 'proper' Japaneseness, including the language, and tried to mould the Japanese in peripheral regions and non-ethnic Japanese into this state-defined form. School children are expected to speak 'standard Japanese' – the language of the power centre – disregarding the dialects they feel so at home in. Ainu and Okinawan school children were prohibited from using their native tongues, which are totally different languages from Japanese, and were forced to learn the 'standard Japanese', a practice still continuing to this date.

This culturally defined geographic hierarchy was also manifested sociologically in open discrimination against the Ainu and Okinawans. The Ainu suffered discrimination in their own land of Hokkaidō, where increasing immigration of Japanese from southern islands, quickly made them a numerical as well as a social and political minority, with their culture being treated simply as a relic of the past. Okinawans have remained the majority numerically in Okinawa, but when they migrate to foreign countries and to the northern islands of Honshū, Kyūshū and Shikoku, they are still subject to discrimination.

As Hokkaidō was colonised by Japan in the 19th century, its agriculture was much influenced by American farming methods introduced by the Japanese government from the start of the modern period. Its landscape is dotted with American-style silos, grain elevators, and farm buildings often painted in primary colours that one does not see in Japan to the south. But when the Japanese nostalgically evoke their homeland (*kokyo*) in terms of countryside, such as in *enka* songs,² Hokkaidō is seldom featured. It is, rather, rural scenes with small rice paddies, grass-thatched houses, and fishing villages in core Japan that are quintessentially evoked.³ This conspicuous absence of Hokkaidō in the cultural imagination of Japan emphasises its peripheral status.

Hokkaidō's absence from the mainstream cultural imagination of Japan is not surprising, since it was officially added to Japan only in modern times. Except for its southern tip, which had been controlled by the Matsumae clan since the Tokugawa period, the island was not colonised by Japan until the Meiji era.

During its most expansive time, lasting from 1895 until 1945, 'Japan' included Taiwan, the southern half of Sakhalin, the Kuriles, the Korean

Peninsula, and Micronesia. The 'Japan' of that time was probably the most multi-ethnic and multicultural in Japanese history as it included numerous ethnic and racial groups in these territories. This fact, however, did not stop Japanese politicians and intellectuals from proclaiming a Japan of homogeneous culture and people. That is, 'Japanese' in the core area, and their culture, were considered to embody the essence of Japan. Those in other territories were considered second-class Japanese at best, not only because they did not speak Japanese, but also because of their lack of other core Japanese cultural accoutrements, and further, because of their colonial status. This distinction was expressed in the dichotomy of *naichi* and *gaichi*, *naichi* meaning Japan proper and *gaichi* signifying colonial territories. Tai⁴ lucidly discusses this hierarchical subjectivity in imperial Japan.

Colonial peripheries were expected to emulate the 'real' Japan as much as possible. School classes in imperial colonies were given in Japanese, and Japanese was the language of colonial administration. Shinto shrines were exported to *gaichi* territories in an effort to 'Japanise' them. Volcanic mountains in *gaichi*, too, were nicknamed this or that Fuji as a way of emulating the 'real' Mt Fuji in central Japan. Colonials were 'Japanese', but they were inferior Japanese in the eyes of the 'pure' Japanese. This class system in the meaning of 'Japan' persisted throughout the pre-1945 imperial period.

Othernesses of Japan

We have seen that 'what Japan is' is not necessarily what Japan is in an absolute, objective and metaphysical sense. Images of what Japan is are rendered not only by the Japanese, but also by foreigners in comparison with their own countries. As I have elaborated in *Othernesses of Japan*,⁵ outsiders' images of Japan are very much coloured by the historical relationship their countries have had with Japan.

Let us examine what Japan has been for the United States, and to some extent, the rest of the West. Before the Second World War, on the one hand, Japan was seen as a quaint, exotic country. The image of Japan as *Exotica japonica* was prevalent throughout the Western world, due in large part to the 'japonisme' craze that swept the Western art world, especially among French impressionists.⁶ Also, as portrayed in the Orientalised *Madame Butterfly*, Japan was seen as a frail, feminine country of which the masculine West was able to take unfair advantage with impunity, as the US did in 1853–54 when Japan succumbed to the threat of the West's military might through 'gunboat diplomacy'.⁷ On the other hand, Japan's image was coloured in the

US by American attitudes toward Japanese immigrants, which increasingly grew hostile due to racism accentuated by the rumoured 'yellow peril'. Japan reacted against this attitude with equal hostility, eventually leading to the Pacific War.

During the Second World War, as John Dower has ably shown in *War without Mercy*,⁸ Japan was portrayed as being 'treacherous' and 'sneaky'. A monkey was the favourite animalistic representation of the Japanese. Yet the same Japan was envisioned during the postwar Allied Occupation – largely consisting of US personnel – as a backward country badly needing reform in all aspects of life. The Occupation's image of backward Japan was supported by US scholarship, in which political scientists, for example, tentatively characterised postwar Japan as having 'a half-baked democracy' or a 'one-and-a-half party system', as if the US two-party system is superior to Japan's 'one-and-a-half' party system only because the US system allows alternation of controlling parties whereas Japan's 'one-and-a-half' party system does not. In the Soviet Union, predictably, the image of a backward Japan was given a Marxist twist, characterising Japan on the basis of the Marxist evolutionary scheme.⁹

Another biased US view of Japan positions Japan as an opposite of itself. Thus Americans are supposed to be individualistic, while the Japanese are said to be groupist – where Japanese groupism is definitely given a lower value status than US individualism.

From this single example it is easy to see how different the 'Japan' imagined by the West would be from the 'Japan' that the Chinese or Koreans, for example, would envisage, given their tortuous relationship with Japan in modern times. Japan is inevitably many things to many nations.

'Japanese culture'

Essentialism

The conventional understanding of Japanese culture is shrouded with the notion of *Nihonjinron* (discourses on Japaneseness).¹⁰ *Nihonjinron* basically asserts the uniqueness of Japanese culture and people, and spells out the ways in which they are unique. The discourse on exceptionality covers the whole gamut: from the biological make-up of the Japanese,¹¹ prehistoric cultural development,¹² language,¹³ literary and aesthetic qualities,¹⁴ human relations,¹⁵ and social organisation¹⁶ to philosophy¹⁷ and personal character¹⁸. In some formulations of *Nihonjinron* these features are interrelated. For example, Watsuji Tetsurō¹⁹ argues that Japan's monsoon-impacted

ecology influences Japan's agriculture, settlement pattern, family system, and even personal character. These qualities are assumed to have persisted throughout the history of Japan from time immemorial.

Numerous scholars have criticised *Nihonjinron*²⁰ for not admitting to the ethnic and cultural heterogeneity of Japan. Yet another important flaw, which these critics have failed to argue, is that features of the essentialised Japan propounded in *Nihonjinron* do not account for some of the most important events in Japanese history. Japan's first major transformation took place when Chinese culture was introduced from Korea. This transformation involved the introduction of elaborate political structures in government, a Buddhism rivalling the native Shintō, a writing system which allowed recording of history and literary accomplishments for the first time, and continental art and architecture in the form of magnificent edifices and refined Buddhist sculpture. None of these achievements are registered as part of the essentialised Japanese culture.

Second, the long period of Chinese influence from the 4th to the mid-19th century was replaced in the Meiji period by influence from the West as strong as, if not stronger than, the previous Chinese influence. As a result, Japan became heavily Westernised practically overnight. Strangely, the essentialised Japan of the *Nihonjinron* is one that is stripped of Chinese and Western influence. The injustice of this essentialised characterisation is that it disregards what made Japanese culture into a civilisation through the largesse of the Koreans, and ignores what made Japan an industrial powerhouse in the 19th and 20th centuries through Western borrowing. A characterisation of Japan that cannot account for these major events in Japanese history has to be defective.

Furthermore, an essentialist Japan that emphasises homogeneity does not recognise ordinary people's varied daily patterns of living, such as cultivation of yam, taro, all sorts of fruits and vegetables, and cereal crops other than rice, like barley, wheat and millet. Even fishing as a rural lifestyle is ignored in favour of rice growing, in spite of the vital importance of marine products in the Japanese diet. Also disregarded in the essentialism of Japan are regional cultural variations of all sorts, such as architectural style, clothing, rituals including weddings and funerals, food and culinary art, and dialect variations. Linguistic differences from region to region are enormous even now, let alone during the Meiji past. Such variations are totally ignored in favour of the 'standard Japanese', or *hyōjungo* (now replaced by '*kyōtsūgo*', meaning 'common language'), which is supposed to be common to all Japanese. But in reality *kyōtsūgo* is a veneer over dialects that are still

vibrant and are the preferred speech form used to express intimacy and local pride.

Thus the essentialised Japan is a standardised Japan with uniform characteristics disallowing internal variation. This Japan is largely the making of the central government since the Meiji period, bent on creating a unified, uniform, and homogeneous nation. This essentialised Japan is an imagined community far from the reality the country presents.²¹

De-territorialisation/re-territorialisation

Japanese culture has spread to all corners of the world over the years. This dispersion has taken two separate routes, one through Japanese emigration and the other through independent diffusion. The earliest emigration in modern times took place in 1868 when Japanese plantation workers went to Hawai'i. This was followed by emigration to North America and then to South America. While emigration to the Americas was going on, other Japanese citizens left for Micronesia, Australia, the Asiatic continent, and South-East Asia.²² As Japanese emigrated, they necessarily took their culture with them. Over a million Japanese were living abroad before Japan's defeat in 1945. The largest overseas Japanese communities were in East Asia – China, Singapore and the Philippines – and the west coast of North America. Virtually all of them except those in North and South American, however, were repatriated with Japan's defeat in World War II. These communities had Japanese schools, Buddhist temples, Shintō shrines, retail shops selling Japanese consumer goods, business corporations, civil organisations, hobby groups, etc. Their language of communication was Japanese in all these instances. Here were transplanted Japanese communities: extensions of Japan.

After the war, the Japanese government continued its emigration program in order to alleviate population and economic problems. This time emigrants, by and large, went to South America. As this wave of emigration was winding down in the 1960s, Japan's postwar economic globalisation began in earnest, exporting its products and establishing corporate offices around the world. Businessmen were dispatched to staff the overseas offices, and their families accompanied them. As travel and living abroad became easier, other Japanese began to move to different parts of the world, notably to areas where Japanese corporate offices were concentrated, and settled there. By 2006, the number of Japanese residing overseas had once again exceeded one million.²³ In these areas, new Japanese migrants began businesses catering to business families and fellow Japanese. Here, again, in

the postwar setting as in prewar times, Japanese communities sprang up, complete with Japanese establishments such as schools, restaurants, grocery shops, medical clinics, garages, real estate businesses and travel agents. In 2006, 16 cities abroad each were home to more than 10 000 Japanese people, including Bangkok, Hong Kong,²⁴ London,²⁵ Los Angeles,²⁶ New York, Paris,²⁷ Shanghai, and Singapore.^{28,29} Japanese language is again the common means of communication in all these communities.

These prewar and postwar communities are extensions of Japan. The 'Japan' in the conventional sense was de-territorialised and re-territorialised to incorporate these numerous overseas extensions. Japanese culture is reproduced in these communities, with varying degrees of modification in adaptation to the local scene.

Aside from the spread of culture through emigration, cultural diffusion also takes place through another, independent means, motivated by the interest and desire of people abroad for things Japanese. As noted above, from the late 19th century we are familiar with French impressionists' interest in Japanese art, especially *ukiyo-e*, or woodcut prints from the Edo period. Japanese pottery also was exported to Europe in large quantities about this time. Japanese manufactured goods began to be sold abroad in the latter half of Meiji period. They were reputed to be cheap and of inferior quality in the early days. But gradually, after the war they were replaced by industrial products of superior quality – from automobiles to electronic goods – establishing Japan's reputation for technological excellence. Also in the 1950s and '60s Japan enjoyed a streak of well known, innovative films, such as those by Kurosawa and Ozu. Although this trend did not last long, it established Japan's reputation in the field of popular culture. This was a precursor to the interest in Japanese pop culture that has arisen in Asia and the Americas since the 1990s, centring on manga and anime,³⁰ karaoke,³¹ cuisine – especially sushi and instant ramen³² – computer games, flower arrangement and tea ceremony.

The spread of Japanese religions, especially Zen, is also noteworthy. Most Japanese religions have basically followed emigrating Japanese, establishing themselves in overseas Japanese communities. But Zen and several so-called 'new religions', such as Sukyo Mahikari, Sekai Kyusei Kyo, and Soka Gakkai International, additionally took a different route, spreading largely to non-Japanese communities abroad though sometimes with the initial help of Japanese immigrants or gurus from Japan.³³

What we see here is a breakdown of the formula: Japanese culture = Japanese territory. The isomorphism assumed in the homogeneity theory

of Japanese culture is no longer, if it ever was, maintained. Since the Meiji era, Japan's culture has been de-territorialised and spread throughout the world. This new distribution of Japanese culture has re-territorialised the domain of Japanese culture.

'The Japanese'

The conventional approach to the question of who the Japanese are is to identify them in terms of a number of objective criteria, such as state affiliation,³⁴ language and cultural competence. A person who was born in Japan of Japanese parents, is a native speaker of Japanese, and embodies Japanese culture through enculturation and socialisation processes from birth is considered 'pure' or 'typical' Japanese; those who lack one or more of these features to the full extent is considered 'suspect' to varying degrees. But many categories of people are Japanese in one sense and not in another. Ruling all of them out is arbitrary and does injustice to many who consider themselves Japanese. Let us examine some of these cases.

Koreans and Chinese in Japan

The pre-1945 *naichi/gaichi* hierarchy has persisted metaphorically after the war by appropriating the distinction between 'the Japanese' and others, who may be discriminated against. More than a million people of Korean and Chinese descent were living in *naichi* (Japan 'proper') at the end of the war. These people were Japanese by legal definition as long as they came from Taiwan or the Korean peninsula. Although many of them repatriated at the conclusion of the war, most remained in Japan. Legally they retained the same status as any other Japanese after the war, however, the pre-defeat attitude of prejudice against them continued. This limbo state of having Japanese legal status and yet having a foreign (*gaichi*) social status lasted until the peace treaty was signed in 1952, at which time those of Korean and Chinese descent were stripped of their legal status as Japanese. Did they completely cease to be Japanese at this point? Not quite so. Let us examine some particular cases.

Passing as Japanese: During the colonial period, and into the latter part of the 20th century, many Koreans in Japan were assuming Japanese names. Since their appearance did not betray their ethnic origin, by using a Japanese name they could 'pass' as Japanese in day-to-day affairs, such as shopping, schooling, or banking, thus avoiding discrimination by the Japanese in most daily situations. Some were quite successful, effectively submerging into the

sea of ethnic Japanese, not to be found and not wanting to be found. They continue to live in an uncomfortable situation of not necessarily wanting to be Japanese, but trying to appear Japanese, sometimes while retaining their Korean legal status. How are we to treat these individuals when considering the meaning of being 'Japanese'? To the extent that they are treated as if they are Japanese, at least in some situations, they are Japanese to others in these situations.

Japanese women married to Koreans: When, in 1952, the Japanese government stripped Koreans residing in Japan of their legal status as Japanese, Japanese women married to these Koreans automatically lost their legal status as Japanese.³⁵ These Japanese are biologically Japanese, born of Japanese parents, speak Japanese natively, and possess Japanese culture. Can they truly be said to be 'not Japanese' only because their marriage has made them not so in the legal sense?

Children of Koreans living in Japan: As time passed, children of inter-marriages and also of Korean couples have grown up with varying degrees of Korean cultural input and competence. Some have retained no Korean cultural heritage – no linguistic competence and no cultural knowledge of Korea – especially if their parents are 'passing' as Japanese. Their lifestyle is totally Japanese. Only their names, if they retained them, betray their Korean heritage. Tokyo Metropolitan University's Chung Daekyun³⁶ has maintained that these Koreans should naturalise and legally become Japanese since they are already 'all but Japanese' anyway except for their legal status, and possibly their names.

Dual citizenship: When the former Peruvian president, Alberto Fujimori, defected and resigned his post while he was in Japan, the Japanese government allowed him to stay. The Japanese government defended its actions by demonstrating Fujimori's Japanese citizenship, in addition to his Peruvian citizenship. Is Fujimori Japanese? In his defection to Japan, he was conveniently Japanese in spite of the legal stipulation that any Japanese with dual citizenships is required, before age 22, to give up one or the other legal status. Hence Fujimori should have been required to give up his Peruvian citizenship before being allowed to seek refuge in Japan as a Japanese citizen.

Conventionally, a Japanese is not a foreigner and a foreigner is not a Japanese. These are mutually exclusive categories. But before the war, it was common for Japanese immigrants in North and South America to register their children with the local Japanese diplomatic mission, so that the children would have Japanese state affiliation through the Japanese law