Japanese Cultural Identity :

Old Tradition, New Technology*

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1. The Concept and Dimensions of Japanese Cultural Identity

The purpose of this paper is to discuss Japanese cultural identity in the age of electronic media. In this respect I would first like to give thought to the concept and the dimensions of Japanese cultural identity. Fundamentally identity has to do with the self-given answer to the question, "Who am I ?". Accordingly, there are several ways of answering the question. Each person has many identities—— personal, familial, occupational, regional, cultural, national, and many other. If I could gain a sense of existence with conviction just by saying "I am Kazufumi Manabe", there would probably be no need to search for identities further. Normally, however, the situation is otherwise. People wish to confirm their feeling of existence by identifying a place to belong to. Now that is also where the problem of cultural indentity arises.

My paper is about Japanese cultural identity, the question of who Japanese are in a cultural sense. It is extremely interesting that the Japanese themselves have been and still are showing a consuming interest in this topic. Characterizing one's own society, culture or societal members is a game anyone can engage in. This is especially a favorite game in Japan. There is even an established genre variously called *Nihon bunkaron, Nihon shakairon,* and *Nihonjinron. Nihon* is Japan. *Ron* refers to theory, idea, hypothesis, model, etc. *Bunka* and *shakai* refer respectively to "culture" and "society". *Jin* refers to "person". Thus these three terms denote roughly the "theory" of Japanese culture, society, and character (or personality) respectively. As *Nihon bunkaron,*

Nihon shakairon and Nihonjinron are used loosely and interchangeably, rather than as distinct genres or separate fields, I will simply use the term *Nihonjinron.*

Nihonjinron has been popular in Japan since long ago, but, especially since 1965, it has enjoyed a long-term boom that continues to this day. Popularity of this subject in Japan is reflected in the large number of books and magazines being published, TV and radio programs being put on the air, and newspaper articles.

Popularity of *Nihonjinron* is also attested to by the questionnaire survey which Harumi Befu, an anthropologist at Stanford University, and I conducted in 1987 in Nishinomiya, Japan, a medium size city of about 420,000 near Osaka and Kobe. Most of those who responded said that they were indeed interested in the subject in the newspapers and television respectively, while others found radio, magazines and books useful in this regard. It can be conjectured that this level of interest in *Nihonjinron* is what supports the *Nihonjinron*-boom phenomenon.

2. Tenets or Propositions of *Nihonjinron*

Before discussing the relation between Japanese cultural identity and the mass media, especially the electronic media, it is advisable to introduce what forms Japanese cultural identity, that is the contents of the aforementioned *Nihonjinron*. After conducting an extensive review of the *Nihonjinron* literature to date, we have compiled various propositions or tenets into five major categories.

(1) Uniqueness : Japanese culture is a unique culture. (Belief in the uniqueness is a salient feature

of Japanese mentality. It is a truism that every culture is in some sense unique. However, to what extent participants of a culture are conscious of or concerned with this uniqueness is an empirical question.)

(2) Homogeneity : Japanese are a homogeneous people and Japanese society is a homogeneous society.

(3) Blood : Japanese "blood" is essential for mutual communication, mutual understanding, understanding of the culture, and physical appearance as Japanese.

(4) Cultural competence : Foreigners are incapable of fully understanding Japanese culture or mastering the language.

(5) Social participation : Socio-cultural territoriality of Japan should be defended and foreigners excluded in the areas of marriage, employment, teaching, and political and artistic leadership.

The aforementioned questionnaire survey by Harumi Befu and myself revealed that quite a number of those responding espoused these tenets or propositions of *Nihonjinron*. What is of importance here is the following point : Namely that *Nihonjinron* is not a portrait of the empirical reality of Japan, but instead it is a world view, a conception of Japanese culture, Japanese society or Japanese people, grossly distorted though it might be. It is also a model for behavior, a prescription of action for Japanese. In my opinion, espousing these tenets or propositions of *Nihonjinron* produces "cultural nationalism".

3. Relation between Japanese cultural identity and electronic media

Japan is one of the leading nations in the world in terms of technical development of electronic media——along with the United States and some West-European countries——. However, with respect to the question whether the form of the flow of international information by means of this technology in Japan is similar to the advanced nations of the United States and Western Europe, the answer is, "No". Next I want to focus especially on television in electronic media and present the characteristics seen in this flow of international information concerning ① TV entertainment programs, ② news programs, and ③ commercial messages

(Kazuo Kawatake, 1983).

(1) First of all, concerning imported TV entertainment programs, among all the countries in the world Japan is said to be a country with an extremely low import rate of TV programs. This is because Japan has the capability to produce TV programs like the United States. However, though in fact Japan is a country with a low import rate in terms of share of imported programs among all telesision programs, considering that there are many TV stations and also long broadcasting hours in Japan, the actual quantity of imported programs is vast. The same can also be stated for electronic media other than television, like video, film and CDs. It is said that Japan is Hollywood's biggest movie export market, and similarly large quantities of movie video tapes and music CDs are imported from the United States.

So from the quantitative point of view, imported information by electronic media is extremely vast. In comparison, exported information is still confined to a low amount. Statistics show that in recent years the volume of export of Japanese-made TV programs is increasing, but this increase of export is mainly due to export of "animation films" and not export of Japan-related information, such as introductions to Japanese culture.

(2) Concerning "news programs", the situation is similar to the aforementioned imbalance of "outgoing information" and "incoming information". Especially in recent years with the development of satellite broadcasting technology, the share of foreign picture material (film, video tapes and live broadcasting) has risen rapidly. Compared to this the amount of news being sent overseas is still confined to a low level.

(3) Finally concerning "commercial messages" in television we can state first of all that a lot of TV commercials being broadcast in Japan show foreign elements. It appears that nearly half of the commercials include some kind of foreign element. Furthermore, concerning advertisements of Japanese companies in overseas countries I can give the results of content analysis of two American magazines I conducted with David McConnell, then of Stanford University and content analysis of two German magazines I conducted with Marc Löhr of Tokyo University. These content analyses have shown that Japanese companies in "overseas countries"——in this

case the United States of America and Germany——adopt some sort of "Japan disguising" style of advertising. This means, in concrete terms, that in the United States and Germany in advertisements by Japanese companies, except for company names like "Toyota", "Minolta", "Sony" and the like printed in small size, elements apart from the company name such as persons, background, expression and vocabulary would not reveal at all that these are advertisements by Japanese companies. They cannot be distinguished from advertisements by American or German companies.

So what now is the relation between this form of flow of Japan-related international information in the media and the already mentioned Japanese cultural identity? This problem can be examined from the following two sides:

(1) Influence of electronic media on Japanese cultural identity.

(2) Influence of Japanese cultural identity on electronic media.

In the case of (1) the following two points can be raised.

① As mentioned before Japanese electronic media, like TV programs, take up tenets or propositions of *Nihonjinron,* whereby tenets or propositions of *Nihonjinron* further infiltrate Japanese society. Thus Japan's cultural nationalism is further inforced.

② Through electronic media, information from overseas countries has been flowing rapidly into Japan in recent years, but as a reaction to it a *Nihonjinron*-boom has arisen which is still continuing at present. It has been said that what originally lies behind the Japanese beginning to discuss "Japan" and "Japanese-ness" is a kind of psychological response, in which the consciousness of "Japanese-ness" has increased as Japanese contact with foreigners, foreign culture and things heterogeneous has increased.

Concerning (2) we have to examine separately the following two propositions for "TV entertainment programs", "news programs" and "commercial messages" ① the amount of incoming information from foreign countries is huge and, ② the amount of outgoing information to foreign countries is small.

As one cause for ① there has been a long history of Japanese feeling inferior toward the West and an almost unconditional admiration of things

Western, a condition, I think, that still continues.

Concerning the causes for ② there is not only an institutional cause (international information transmission is mostly in the hands of Western news agencies like AP, UPI and Reuter) but also Japanese cultural nationalism, like views of uniqueness or particularism as represented by the opinion "Foreigners cannot understand Japanese culture completely" to be considered. For example in the case of Japanese international advertisements I developed the following ideas.

Why do Japanese companies in the United States and Germany adopt such a "Japan disguising" style of advertising? The fact that usually local corporations are entrusted with advertising activities overseas gives no sufficient explanation. So let us raise several hypotheses here, like the "hypothesis of assimilation", meaning to adapt instantly the culture of foreign countries, as in the proverb, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do", or the "hypothesis of Japanese particularity", namely that Japanese - style advertisements cannot be understood except by Japanese people and thus are not comprehended in foreign countries, or the "camouflage - mac hypothesis", which means refraining from laying *emphasis* on the fact of being an advertisement by a Japanese company in order to promote sales while cleverly avoiding Japan bashing. What all these hypotheses have in common is "efficiency". By means of this "efficiency" Japan has attained prosperity. But it has also paid a price for this prosperity. Namely, it has become negligent in cultivating a strong attitude toward maintainig communication in the face of differences, while still laying value on each one's identity.

4. Conclusion

As was already mentioned, in order to understand the social phenomenon of the *Nihonjinron*-boom, it is necessary to consider as a backdrop the process of Japan's internationalization. It goes without saying that one of the major developments of our time is the arrival of an international age. If we then ask what kinds of social changes are taking place, we can say that the spread of international communication and the rise of global problems (such as population, resources and environment) have come to the foreground. On the other hand,

major factors that deter international communication and obstruct the solution of global problems continue to exist as before. One of these is the so-called ethnocentrism (cultural nationalism), which is the tendency to think of everything within the confines of one's own cultural framework. People everywhere are more or less ethnocentric. But in this age, overcoming ethnocentrism has become a very important challenge. In other words, the current age now requires the ability to think in a global framework. *Nihonjinron* is certainly not exempt from this requirement. Specifically, by becoming aware of the ethnocentrism inherent in the propositions of *Nihonjinron,* Japanese can create an opportunity to "enter the circle of humanity once again". We can say that we have the same way of grasping this issue as R. Mouer and Y. Sugimoto (1984 : 20-29) express in the following quote :

"...it's probably due to the poor quality of Japanese communication styles while abroad. Remarks to the effect that Japanese are often misunderstood when abroad are numerous. It can be thought that behind this problem Nihonjinron, which emphasizes only the peculiar characteristics of Japan, is playing a very definite role. This is because by focusing only on points of contrast a hotbed of suspicion and antipathy is formed".

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