

Japanese Cultural Nationalism : An Empirical Investigation of *Nihonjinron*

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With Comments of Fumio Watanabe***

Nihonjinron, also known as *Nihon bunkaron*, *Nihon shakairon*, *Nihonron*, etc. is a body of discourse which purports to demonstrate Japan's cultural differences from other cultures and Japan's cultural uniqueness in the world and thus tries to establish Japan's cultural identity. It is said to be the worldview, the middle mass and the ideology of Everyman.

While some *Nihonjinron* is serious academic discourse, a great bulk of *Nihonjinron* is discoursed in popular genre—in newspapers, television, radio, magazines and popular books. It is this popular version of *Nihon-*

(9) To what degree are you interested in *Nihonjinron*(also called *Nihon bunkaron*, *Nihon shakairon*, etc.) —explaining the characteristics of the Japanese, culture and Japanese society — in the following media?

Very interested	Considerably interested	Somewhat interested	not very much interested	Not at all interested
1	2	3	4	5

-
- A. Newspaper
B. Television
C. Radio
D. Magazine
E. Book

(10) Do you think that there has been increase or decrease in the discussion of *Nihonjinron* in the media?

Increased		Can't say one way or the other	Decreased		Don't know
a lot	somewhat	3	somewhat	a lot	6
1	2		4	5	

-
- A. Newspaper
B. Television
C. Radio
D. Magazine
E. Book

(11) Do you think that *Nihonjinron* discussion will increase or decrease in the media in the next several years?

Will increase		Can't say one way or the other	Will decrease		Don't kow
a lot	somewhat	3	somewhat	a lot	6
1	2		4	5	

-
- A. Newspaper
B. Television
C. Radio
D. Magazine
E. Book

(12) Do you think it is a good thing that there is a great deal of *Nihonjinron* discussion in the media? Or a bad thing?

A very good thing	Somewhat good	Can't say	Somewhat bad	Very bad	Don't know
1	2	3	4	5	6

-
- A. Newspaper
B. Television
C. Radio
D. Magazine
E. Book

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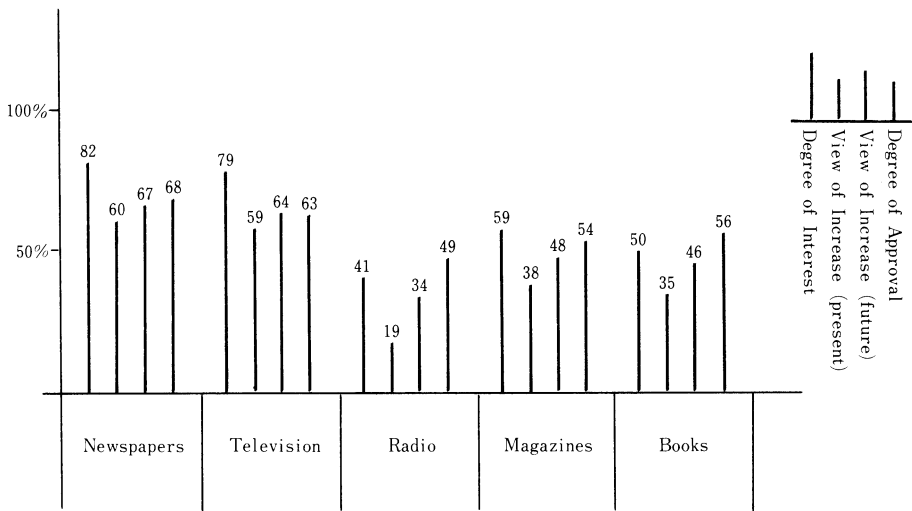


Figure 1 Degree of Interest In, View of Increase In, and Degree of Approval of Increase In Nihonjinron.

jinron that we wish to examine here.

The popularity of this subject is reflected in the large number of books being published in this genre. Nomura Research Institute's compilation of books published between 1945 and 1978 in this genre, for example, lists some 700 titles (Nomura Soogoo Kenkyuujō 1978). By now, the total has reached at least 1,000 titles in this category.

One of the problems of *Nihonjinron* is that except for a very few studies, such as the so-called "national character surveys" (*Kokuminsei Choosa 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5*), *Nihonjinron* arguments lack quantitative demonstration. That is, *Nihonjinron* arguments have been offered without telling us whether all Japanese espouse the tenets of *Nihonjinron* or whether only some of them do ; and if only some of them espouse the tenets of *Nihonjinron*, what kind of people are they and what percentage of the total population do they represent?

To rectify this near absence of empirical studies, Kazufumi Manabe and Harumi Befu conducted a questionnaire survey in the summer of 1987 to determine the extent to which *Nihonjinron* tenets are espoused by Japanese and to identify the characteristics of those who do and those who do not uphold these tenets. The questionnaire was distributed to a random sample of 2,400 adults in the city of Nishinomiya, which is basically a bedroom community feeding white and blue collar workers to nearby Osaka and Kobe. We collected 944 returns or 39.3% of the sample.

For the first time in the history of the study of *Nihonjinron*, we have been able to establish the extent of its popularity. Eighty-two per cent of those who responded said they were indeed interested in the subject and read about it in newspapers, while others found television, radio, magazines and books useful in this regard (Figure 1).

Figure 1 shows that :

1. In regards to the level of interest in *Nihonjinron*, over half of the respondents expressed interest in *Nihonjinron* in magazines and books, and with respect to newspapers and television the interest level neared 80%.

2. With respect to the perceived desirability of the increase in *Nihonjinron* in the various media, respondents expressing their approval of this trend numbered roughly 50% with regards to radio, over 50% with respect to magazines and books, and nearly 70% with respect to television and newspapers. It can be conjectured that this high level of interest in and approval of *Nihonjinron* is what supports the *Nihonjinron*-boom phenomenon.

3. In all five media, we see that respondents feel that *Nihonjinron* will increase even more in the future than

it has up until now. Especially with respect to television (over 60%) and newspapers (nearly 70%), respondents predict that *Nihonjinron* will increase even more in the future.

In our survey we chose 21 *Nihonjinron* books currently in circulation that have gone through a comparatively high number of printings and asked respondents 1) whether they have heard of the author, 2) whether they have heard of the book title, and 3) whether they have read the book.

The results of the responses is shown in Figure 2.

(13A) Here we list books in Nihonjinron. Please circle if you have heard of the title. If you can think of others, please list them.

(13B) If you have heard, please indicate whether or not you have read it by circling "yes."

13A		13B	
A. Aida Yuji	a. Omote no Ronri Ura no Ronri	1. Yes	2. No
B. Ruth Benedict	b. Kiku to Katana	1. Yes	2. No
C. Suzuki Takao	c. Tozasareta Gengo Nihongo no Sekai	1. Yes	2. No
D. Edwin Reischauer	d. Za Japaniizu	1. Yes	2. No
E. Doi Takeo	e. Amae no Kozo	1. Yes	2. No
F. Herman Kahn	f. Cho Taikoku Nihon no Chosen	1. Yes	2. No
G. Hamaguchi Eshun	g. Nihon Rashisa	1. Yes	2. No
H. Endymion Wilkinson	h. Gokai	1. Yes	2. No
I. Itasaka Gen	i. Nihonjin no Ronri Kozo	1. Yes	2. No
J. Zbigniew Brzezinski	j. Hiywana Hana Nihon	1. Yes	2. No
K. Kamishima Jiro	k. Nihonjin no Hasso	1. Yes	2. No
L. Donald Keene	l. Aoi Me no Taro Kaja	1. Yes	2. No
M. Minami Hiroshi	m. Nihonjin no Shinri	1. Yes	2. No
N. Ezra Vogel	n. Japan azu Namba Wan	1. Yes	2. No
O. Nakane Chie	o. Tate Shakai no Ningen Kankei	1. Yes	2. No
P. Gregory Clark	p. Nihonjin: Yunikusa no Kigen	1. Yes	2. No
Q. Toyama Shigehiko	q. Nihonjin no Ronri	1. Yes	2. No
R. Lee O-Young	r. Chijimi Shiko no Nihonjin	1. Yes	2. No
S. Kindaichi Haruhiko	s. Nihongo no Gengo Hyogen	1. Yes	2. No
T. Paul Bonnet	t. Fushigi no Kuni Nippon	1. Yes	2. No
U. Isaiah Ben Dasan	u. Nihonjin to Yudayajin	1. Yes	2. No
V. Others (Please list) : ()	v. ()	1. Yes	2. No

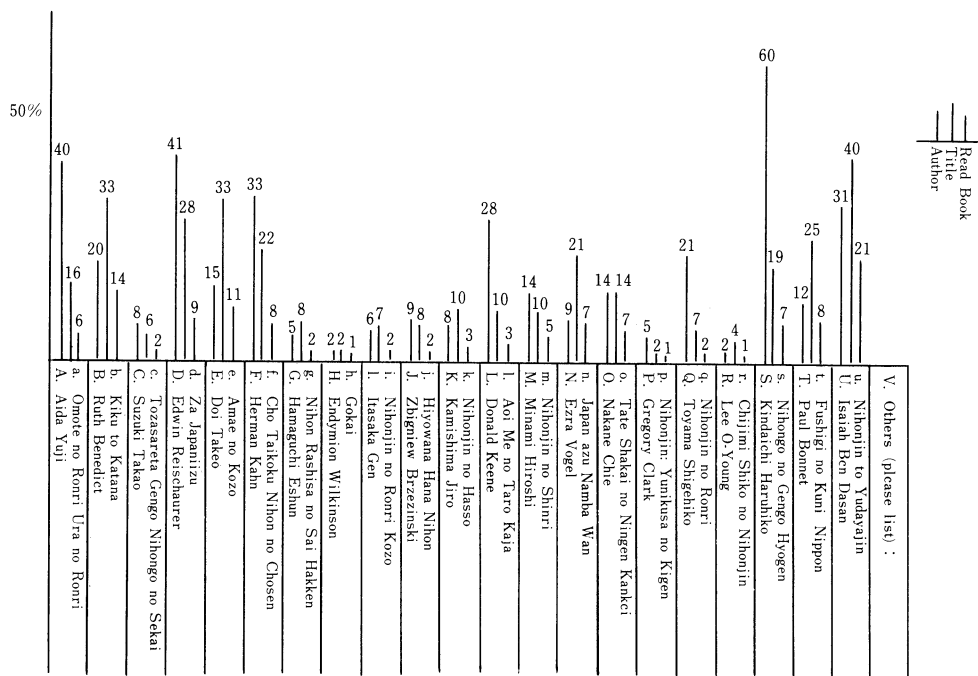


Figure 2 Familiarity and Contact With Nihonjinron Authors and Books

The following points can be noted from Figure 2.

1) Familiarity with author's name :

60%—70% Kindaichi Haruhiko

40%—50% Aida Yuji, Edwin Reischauer

30%—40% Ruth Benedict, Donald Keene, Toyama Shigehiko

10%—20% Doi Takeo, Minami Hiroshi, Nakane Chie, Paul Bonnet

The percentage of respondents familiar with other authors were all less than 10%.

2) Familiarity with book titles :

40%—50% Nihonjin to Yudayajin

30%—40% Kiku to Katana, Amae no Kozo

20%—30% Za Japaniizu, Cho Taikoku Nihon no Chosen, Japan azu Namba Wan, Fushigi no Kuni Nippon

10%—20% Omote no Ronri/Ura no Ronri, Nihonjin no Hasso, Aoi Me no Taro Kaja, Nihonjin no Shinri, Tate Shakai no Ningen Kankei, Nihongo no Gengo Hyogen.

The percentages of respondents familiar with other titles were all less than 10%.

3) Whether or not respondents have read the books :

20%—30% Nihonjin to Yudayajin

10%—20% Kiku to Katana, Amae no Kozo

5%—10% Omote no Ronri/Ura no Ronri, Za Japaniizu, Cho Taikoku Nihon no Chosen, Nihonjin no Shinri, Japan azu Namba Wan, Tate Shakai no Ningen Kankei, Nihongo no Gengo Hyogen, Fushigi no Kuni Nippon.

The percentages of respondents who have read other books were all less than 5%.

From these results it turns out that roughly half of the 21 books we asked people about have been read by over five percent of respondents. If we were to extrapolate this percentage to the whole of Japan's population, we would arrive at a figure of more than five million people. Of course, it is possible that these figures reflect the peculiarity of Nishinomiya city, the area in which the survey was conducted. Even so, it is difficult to deny that awareness of and contact with *Nihonjinron* is high.

A preliminary report of this survey has been published (Befu and Manabe, 1987). It is clear from this report that none of the basic tenets of *Nihonjinron* is espoused by anywhere near 100% of the sample. These tenets may be grouped into four major categories :

1. *Homogeneity* : Japanese are a homogeneous and unique people (*dooshitsu shakai, tan'itsu minzoku, and uniiku na bunka*).

2. *Blood* : Japanese "blood" is essential for mutual communication, mutual understanding, understanding of the culture, and appearance as Japanese.

3. *Cultural competence* : Foreigners are incapable of fully understanding Japanese culture or mastering the language.

4. *Social participation* : Sociocultural territoriality of Japan should be defended and foreigners excluded in the areas of marriage, employment, teaching, and political and artistic leadership.

The following tables (Table 1,2 and 3) indicate the percentages of those who agree/diagree with *Nihonjinron* propositions in these categories.

With regards to respondents' level of agreement with these three propositions, the percentages of those who felt that these propositions were accurate was 38% for "Japanese are a homogeneous people", 36% for "Japan is a homogeneous society", and almost 50% for "Japan is a unique culture"

The idea that the Japanese share "blood" and that this sharing constitutes the basis of the exclusivity of Japanese is generally submerged in the semi-consciousness of the Japanese people, though from time to time it is brought to the surface of consciousness. We see in Table 2 responses to the question of the importance of blood. The influence of shared blood is acknowledged most with regards to physical dimensions, followed by its perceived role in communication, and finally, its role in social and linguistic competencies. It would seem that even in Japan today a deterministic view of the role of blood is alive and well.

Another proposition of *Nihonjinron* to date is a deliberate emphasis on how foreigners differ from Japanese.

- (14C) Do you agree or disagree with the idea that Japanese are a homogeneous people?
 1. Totally agree
 2. Somewhat agree
 3. Can't say one way or the other
 4. Somewhat disagree
 5. Totally disagree
 6. Don't know
- (15C) Do you agree or disagree with the idea that the Japanese society is homogeneous?
 1. Totally agree
 2. Somewhat agree
 3. Can't say one way or the other
 4. Somewhat disagree
 5. Totally disagree
 6. Don't Know
- (16C) Do you agree with the idea that the Japanese culture is unique?
 1. Totally agree
 2. Somewhat agree
 3. Can't say one way or the other
 4. Somewhat disagree
 5. Totally disagree
 6. Don't Know

Table 1 Japan's Homogeneity

	Agree	Disagree	other
Are Japanese a homogeneous people (<i>tan'itsu minzoku</i>) ?	38%	23%	39%
Is Japanese society homogeneous (<i>dooshitsu</i>) ?	36	6	58
Is Japanese culture unique ?	49	9	42

- (19) Please circle the opinion which represents yours the closest.
- | | Totally agree
1 | Somewhat agree
2 | Can't say
3 | Somewhat disagree
4 | Totally disagree
5 | Don't know
6 |
|---|--------------------|---------------------|----------------|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Those who share the Japanese blood can understand each other. | | | | | | |
| 2. Those who have the Japanese blood can speak Japanese. | | | | | | |
| 3. Those who have the Japanese blood can understand Japanese culture. | | | | | | |
| 4. Those who have the Japanese blood can be part of the Japanese society. | | | | | | |
| 5. Those who have the Japanese blood have the appearance of the Japanese. | | | | | | |

Table 2 Importance of "Blood" for the Japanese

	Agree	Disagree	Other
For physical appearance as Japanese	52%	17%	31%
For mutual understanding	29	18	53
For becoming part of the society	26	30	44
For understanding Japanese culture	24	34	42
For speaking Japanese	20	41	39

This hypothesis involves a particularistic way of looking at Japanese culture (as opposed to a universalistic way of thinking). In order to investigate this hypothesis, we included five statements in our survey and asked people to respond to them.

(17) Please circle the opinion which represents yours the closest.

	Totally agree	Somewhat agree	Can't say	Somewhat disagree	Totally disagree	Don't know
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Foreigners cannot understand Japanese culture completely.						
2. Foreigners cannot completely master Japanese language.						
3. Japanese culture cannot be understood completely in foreign languages.						
4. Foreigners cannot totally assimilate into Japanese society.						
5. Total mutual understanding between Japanese and foreigners is impossible.						

As for foreigners' cultural competence, as Table 3 shows, 63% of the respondents said foreigners are incapable of completely understanding Japanese culture. As for assimilation into Japanese culture, mastering the Japanese language, and achieving mutual understanding with Japanese, again, less than one half of the respondents thought foreigners lacked these cultural competencies. From these results, we can see how strong the particularistic way of thinking about Japanese culture is in modern Japan.

Table 3 Foreigner' Cultural Competency

	Agree	Disagree	Other
Japanese culture can't be understood completely in foreign language	66%	14%	20%
Cannot understand Japanese culture completely	63	17	20
Cannot totally assimilate into Japanese society	41	32	27
Cannot master Japanese	36	43	21
Cannot achieve total mutual understanding with Japanese	30	40	30

(24A) Are you in favor of or opposed the following?

	Very much in favor	Somewhat in favor	Can't say	Somewhat opposed	Very much opposed
	1	2	3	4	5
1. A Japanese marrying a foreigner					
2. A foreigner employed by a Japanese company					
3. A foreigner employed by the Japanese government					
4. A foreigner becoming a regular faculty member of a public college					
5. A foreigner becoming a regular teacher of a public high school					
6. A foreigner becoming a regular teacher of a public middle or elementary school					
7. A foreigner serving as a leader in traditional arts and crafts					
8. A foreigner becoming a political leader in Japan					
9. A foreigner living in Japan permanently					
10. A foreigner taking out Japanese citizenship					

Table 4 Social Participation of Foreigners

	Agree	Disagree	Other
Have regular appointment at a public college	74%	4%	22%
Regular teacher at a high school	71	5	24
Regular teacher at elementary or middle school	62	11	27
Live permanently in Japan	58	4	38
Employment in Japanese company	57	6	37
Gain Japanese citizenship	53	7	40
Employment in government	39	21	40
Marriage with a Japanese	35	9	56
Leadership in traditional arts/crafts	33	23	44
Political leadership	8	62	30

The results are similar for social participation of foreigners. As we can see from Table 4, the domain in which acceptance of foreigners is highest is education (with the highest level of acceptance at the college level, followed by high school, then junior high and elementary school); next comes the domain of private companies and the general principle of foreigners living in Japan permanently and, further along the same line, taking out Japanese citizenship. More than 50% of respondents expressed approval of foreigners taking on roles in these general areas. However, when it comes to the domains of government and politics or the private domain of marriage, the degree of approval becomes exceedingly low.

Thus, when we refer to those who espouse the tenets of *Nihonjinron*, we should be well aware that we are not speaking of the entire population of Japan, but of only a segment of the population, whose size varies depending on the question at hand.

Now, obviously some Japanese believe in the tenets of *Nihonjinron* more than others, some less than others. Who are the believers and who are the non-believers? In order to answer these questions, we calculated Pearson's Correlation Coefficients for each of the *Nihonjinron* proposition items with demographic items and

Table 5 Correlations* of Nihonjinron Proposition Items with Background Items

	Sex (Female→Male)	Age (Young→Old)	Education (Low→High)	Liv'g stand (Low→High)	Trav'l abroad (No→Yes)	Foreign friend (No→Yes)
Homogeneity Japanese are a homogeneous people	-.0197	.1415	-.0779	.1630	.0078	-.0158
Japanese society is a homogeneous society	.0743	.0883	.1101	.1086	.0487	.0696
Japanese culture is a unique culture	.0244	.1222	-.0118	.0129	-.0409	.0258
Blood	.0821	.4117	-.1852	.0310	-.0524	-.0944
Social participation	.0512	-.1078	.1737	.0509	.1972	.1842
Cultural competence	.0354	.1873	-.0313	.0384	-.0244	-.0627

* Pearson's Correlation Coefficients.

foreign experience items (Table 5).

What we see here most prominently is a consistent correlation of age with *Nihonjinron* tenets: the older the respondent is, the more likely he or she espouses *Nihonjinron*. In terms of sex, men tend to believe in the efficacy of "blood" and women not; for the other variables, too, positive correlation obtains with sex, although the significance level is not very high. Education is negatively correlated with the espousal of *Nihonjinron*

tenets : the more education a respondent has, the less likely he or she is to believe in *Nihonjinron*. This correlation follows from the positive correlation with age, since the younger generations are receiving more education, especially college education, than the older generations.

Those reporting a higher standard of living tend to agree with the homogeneity and “blood” theses of *Nihonjinron*. This may seem curious in light of the fact that, generally speaking, education and living standard are positively correlated. However, education and age are slightly negatively correlated ; that is, older Japanese are somewhat less educated than younger people. And in Japan, because of the seniority rule operating in industry, older persons tend to earn higher wages, allowing a higher standard of living. Thus the positive correlation between “blood” and living standard is probably a reflection of the age factor.

Travel experience abroad and having foreign friends seem to have a salutary impact on belief in *Nihonjinron*. Those who have traveled in a foreign country and those who have foreigners as friends tend to believe less in the tenets of *Nihonjinron* than those without foreign experience or foreign friends. Befu (1983) has once suggested that the trauma of having to adjust to foreign customs and to negotiate in a foreign language would have the effect of convincing Japanese to believe in *Nihonjinron*. Data shown here demonstrates this hypothesis does not hold.

We were also interested in the general outlook of respondents toward other aspects of *Nihonjinron*. We found, for example, that those espousing *Nihonjinron* tenets tend to :

1. be interested in the media coverage of *Nihonjinron* (which is hardly surprising) ;
2. believe that *Nihonjinron* discussion has been on the increase and will continue to increase—perhaps an expression of wishful thinking ;
3. believe that media coverage of *Nihonjinron* is a good thing rather than a bad thing ;
4. believe that in comparison with the rest of the world Japan has a higher level of technological, artistic and economic achievement ;
5. believe that *Nihonjinron* performs a positive function for them in the sense that it helps them to know themselves, satisfies their self-pride and their pride as Japanese, satisfies their intellectual curiosity, helps them think about Japan's role in the world, etc.

In conclusion, then, *Nihonjinron* is the world view of the older male with a higher standard of living, that is those in the mainstream and those in power, and these older men with higher incomes tend to be upbeat about the tenets of *Nihonjinron* and the role it plays. They are also upbeat about their *Nihonjinron*-based self-identity. *Nihonjinron* is thus the world view and the ideology of the establishment. It may be espoused by less than a majority in a numerical sense ; but those who espouse it are in the majority in the political sense.

However, there are data in our survey to predict a weakening of *Nihonjinron* in Japan. First, younger generations have doubts about *Nihonjinron*. As they grow older, there is a possibility that the hold of *Nihonjinron* on Japanese will weaken. Second, belief in *Nihonjinron* is negatively correlated with education, travel abroad and having foreign friends. All of these three factors are likely to increase over time. Given the paranoid concern of Japanese with education, the general level of education in Japan cannot help but rise. Also, given the strong global economic position of Japan, more and more Japanese, with increased income, are likely to travel abroad in connection with academic or business assignments. As this happens, Japanese will make more and more foreign friends. Our data shows that all these developments will have the tendency to weaken the hold of *Nihonjinron* on the general populace of Japan.

On the other hand, there are two countering tendencies which need to be observed. One is that as a person becomes older, he or she tends to become more conservative ; thus, the younger generation in years to come will tend to behave more and more and like the older generation. The reason for this conservative tendency is that the conservative values of the society are not just accidentally associated with the establishment ; rather, they are there because they buttress the existing economic and political institutions. These institutions are slow to change. As they persist, the value system supporting them also is likely to persist. As younger Japanese join established economic and political institutions, then, they are likely to become more conservative in outlook and espouse more conservative values, in short, tenets of *Nihonjinron*.

Which of these two sets of opposing forces will have the upper hand in the future, no one can say. One

scenario would have Japan become more internationalized and less oriented toward *Nihonjinron*. The other would forecast a more conservative Japan increasingly favorably oriented toward *Nihonjinron*. Still a third scenario would see both trends continue, with increasingly divergent and polarized public opinion, where conservatives in the establishment upholding tenets of *Nihonjinron* will continue to guard the establishment while the liberals, disenchanted with *Nihonjinron*, will gain in numerical force without being able to capture political power.

Comments on a Paper by Manabe and Befu

Fumio Watanabe

1. Contributions of a study by Manabe and Befu

A paper by Manabe and Befu offered us an opportunity to recognize the importance of meta-*Nihonjinron*. I would like to point out two things from their conclusions which will broaden our understanding on *Nihonjinron* phenomenon.

One is the relationship between the social class and the tenets of *Nihonjinron*. They say “these older men with higher incomes tend to be upbeat about the tenets of *Nihonjinron*,” and conclude that *Nihonjinron* is the world view and ideology of the Japanese establishment. This is an absolutely new observation to us which can not be inferred unless a study at meta level of *Nihonjinron*, such as this one is conducted.

Another significant point in their paper is their suggestion to use the different degrees of the orientation toward *Nihonjinron* as an indicator to predict characteristics of the Japanese society in the future. They relate the declining popularity of *Nihonjinron* to growing internationalization of Japan, the increasing popularity of *Nihonjinron* to growing conservatism in Japanese society, and divergent of it to polarization in Japanese society. This is a new approach to predict the direction of the movement of Japanese society.

2. Silent *Nihonjinron* : Is *Nihonjinron* really weakening ?

In their paper, Manabe and Befu predict a weakening of popularity of *Nihonjinron* over time. Their prediction is based on two findings : “younger generation have doubts about *Nihonjinron*” and “*Nihonjinron* is negatively correlated with education, travel abroad and having foreign friends.” These factors which affect negatively the popularity of *Nihonjinron* are assumed to be dominant in the Japanese society over time.

I would like to pose a question to their prediction. If one defines *Nihonjinron* as straight discussions of “who is Japanese,” “what is Japanese,” and “what should be Japanese,” I would agree with their prediction.

However, I would like to propose a new definition for *Nihonjinron*, which can cover a recent phenomenon among younger Japanese. I would like to call it silent *Nihonjinron*. We find it in numerous publications about traveling in Asian countries and in reports about the people and societies in Asia, written recently by the younger cohorts of Japanese below the age 40's. I interpret their interests in Asia as their search for self-identity by knowing Asians directly and concretely. This is a clear contrast with the old Japanese cohorts who try to form self-identity through comparing themselves with the westerners by reading books, listening to western music and looking at western arts and films.

The younger Japanese find an unexplored world among Asians. They are much more interested in having direct experience with the real world, and less interested in grand and abstract discussions of *Nihonjinron* defined earlier, which the older generation prefers.

Another evidence which indicates the existence of silent *Nihonjinron* is a popular word among the younger Japanese, “ethnic.” They use it like in “ethnic foods,” “ethnic clothes,” “ethnic restaurant” and so forth. “Ethnic” in this context does not mean something ethnic in southern German, Scottish, nor Japanese traditions. The implication of the word is something Asian and African.

As many Japanese who visit East and South East Asian countries report, they feel curious and comfortable simultaneously in those countries. They find various kinds of similarities culturally and physically between Asian people themselves. Japanese engineers working in the Filipino rural area whom I interviewed mentioned “indirectness in expression,” “vertical interpersonal relations,” and “strong continuity of public and private

selves,” which are commonly considered Japanese characteristics, as the Filipino’s, while they mentioned many others which are very specific for Filipinos.

Silent *Nihonjinron* may be a movement to search for self-identity as Japanese, which does not require tension.

I would like to conclude that there is the great possibility of the birth of new types of *Nihonjinron* which are based on multipolar world views in the future.

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