

A Look at *Nihonjinron*: Theories of Japaneseness

日本人論への視点

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Abstract: *Nihonjinron* is alive and well. It is a ‘theory’ put in practice as it permeates every inch of Japanese society and embodies by the individual in his or her daily life. It serves as a source of self-image for the individual and national identity for the Japanese. It provides simplistic expressions of the Japanese culture and its uniqueness. It is the national identity of the Japanese as expressed in the emphasis on regenerating the national community through preserving, creating and strengthening its cultural identity. Because it is ubiquitous and functions in explaining every facets of life of the people of Japan, *nihonjinron* deserves a look and commands the attention to those of us who are concerned with Japanese society and culture. This paper attempts to review the definition and characterization of *nihonjinron*, its underlying assumptions and particular theses, a glimpse of its beginnings, its expressions in various fields, and the extent of its influence in ordinary people. It is not the contents of this phenomenon that is most interesting; it is just the fact that it exists relentlessly changing at times to serve its purpose.

Keywords: *nihonjinron*, Japanese national identity, cultural nationalism, Japanese self-image, Japanese uniqueness

「日本人論」は、単なる理論の枠をこえ、日本社会そして個々の日本人が毎日の生活の中で体現している生きた「現実」である。それは、日本人自身の自画像や日本という国のナショナルアイデンティティを生み出すための大切な役割を果たしている。日本文化やその「特殊性」を、単純明快に表現するときに使われることも多い。また、文化的アイデンティティを守り、創りだし、あるいは強化することによって、世代を超えた国家共同体の重要性を強調する。

なぜならば、それは、日本人の生活場面のいたるところに存在し、語られ、血肉化しているからである。日本人論とはそうした意味で、様々な視点から研究の対象とされるに値する。本論では、日本人論の定義や特徴、また前提となる独特の論理、その起源、表現方法、そして日本人一般への影響力等々について考察を深めたい。

「日本人論」とは、実はその個々の論議の内容というよりも、さまざまな日本人論が休むことなく次々と提起され、存在し続け、日本や日本人に対する見方に影響を与え続けているところに、その現象の本質があり、興味深い研究対象となりうる根拠があるのである。

Definition and Characterization

Nihonjinron is the general term used for the discourse on Japaneseness. It refers to theories, discussions, reflections and thoughts that focus on issues of nationalism and cultural identity in varied fields as history, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, science, psychology, linguistics, music and the arts. It is the body of work that could be said as the worldview, the middle mass and the ideology of the individual Japanese. (Befu and Manabe, 2003). Nihonjinron is characterized by the attempt to capture the essential character, personality, and behavior that mark a national population as distinct and different from other people. Albeit some materials of nihonjinron are considered academic, most of the discourse takes place mainly in the Japanese media, ranging from serious books to the quiz shows on television. The theory of Japaneseness is the typical English translation of nihonjinron, but the *theory* is not based on research but copious of ambiguous explanations about culture and tradition. These writings are mainly written by business people, elites, and journalists who are famous or become famous by describing distinct views of how the Japanese practice their culture in a *collective* manner. The purpose of the literature is to entertain the general public, so the writers' job is to provide readers with light reading and quick understanding of their identities.

Befu (2001) argues that contents of nihonjinron are not only the basis of cultural model, but also political ideology with official sponsorship: ...what is at issue [in the Japanese mind] is the invincible that uniqueness and the claiming of uniqueness in the discourse. (...) Comprehension of these unique features supposedly requires belief in nihonjinron not rational or logical understanding, but an *intuitive* insight into Japanese culture that only natives can achieve. Thus foreigners are defined as incapable of understanding the essence of Japanese culture. This belief gives comfort to the Japanese:

here is one essential “sociocultural territory” they can protect as their own. The notion that foreigners could fully comprehend Japanese culture and therefore act and behave like any Japanese threatens their ethnic and national integrity.

Van Wolferen states in his book, *The Enigma of Japanese Power*, --“Very little serious writing by Japanese on anything relating to their society is entirely free of nihonjinron influence. It is also amazing how much nihonjinron has crept into assessments by foreign authors. The possibility of coercion or indoctrination as formative factors of Japanese behavior is not considered in the universe of nihonjinron imagery. And therein lies its propagandistic force. In the nihonjinron perspective, Japanese limit their actions, do not claim ‘rights’ and always obey those placed above them, not because they have no other choice, but because it comes naturally to them. Japanese are portrayed as if born with a special quality of brain that makes them want to suppress their individual selves.

Underlying Assumptions

In his book, “The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness” Peter Dale discusses the three major assumptions of nihonjinron. First, the Japanese constitute a culturally and socially homogeneous racial entity, whose essence is virtually unchanged from prehistoric times down to the present day. Second, the Japanese differ radically from all other known peoples and finally, the Japanese are conspicuously nationalistic, displaying a conceptual and procedural hostility to any mode of analysis which might be seen to derive from external, non-Japanese sources. In a general sense then, nihonjinron is concerned with ‘uniqueness’ of Japan in any aspect, and which are hostile to both individual experience and the notion of internal socio-historical diversity. Some particular theses of the Nihonjinron genre include the following:

1. The Japanese race is very unique to the point that it has no affinities with any other race.
2. Living in an island country, cut off from the rest of the world, the Japanese enjoy distinct seasons that shape Japanese thinking and behavior making the Japanese an extension of nature itself.
3. The Japanese language is so unique in its structure that it creates the condition for the Japanese to think in a peculiar and vague way. Foreigners may speak it fluently but could never be perfect in its usage.
4. The Japanese society is based on a hierarchical relationship and operates on parent-child patterns of behavior. Groupism persists while individuality cease to exist.

5. The perception of how one feels toward the other based on particular dependency wishes forms Japanese human relationships.

Under the broad term *nihonjinron*, the following serve as its sub-genres: *shinfūdoron* or “new theories on climate” (implying the influence of climate on peoples), *nihonbunkaron* or “theories on Japanese culture”, *nihonshakairon* or “theories on Japanese society”, *nihonron* or “theories on Japan”, and *nihonkeizairon* or “theories on the Japanese economy”

A Taste of Nihonjinron

Examples of *nihonjinron* abound. One of the most nefarious manifestations of *nihonjinron* appeared in a 1978 book entitled *Nihonjin no No* (“The Japanese Brain”) by Tadanobu Tsunoda. Dr. Tsunoda is an otolaryngologist at Tokyo University, who took up the study of the Japanese brain and declares that the Japanese race is equipped with brains that operate more sophisticatedly than those of other races. He locates this difference in the Japanese language which changes one’s brain-wave functions and hemisphere dominance. Although he emphasizes that there is no inherent genetic component implied in his findings, it would follow that even Westerners could have a Japanese brain if he or she were born into and raised in a wholly Japanese-speaking environment. Although the results of his experiments have never been duplicated by independent researchers, the public and the media devoured it requiring, to this date, thirty-eight Japanese editions. Referring to what he has discovered about the brain, Dr. Tsunoda reported, “My findings seem to provide an explanation of the unique and universal aspects of Japanese culture. Why do Japanese people behave in their characteristic manner? How has the Japanese culture developed its characteristic features? I believe the key to these questions lies in the Japanese language. That is, “the Japanese are Japanese because they speak Japanese.” My investigations have suggested that the Japanese language shapes the Japanese brain function pattern, which in turn serves as a basis for the formation of Japanese culture. It has been found that there are essentially two brain function patterns – one shown by Japanese and Polynesian people and the other by the rest of people”. In a Japan Times online article, Dr. Tsunoda says that, “Japanese-language brains get tired easily. They hear all natural sounds, from birds singing to raindrops, from howling wind to laughter and cries, in the left hemisphere. Apart from Polynesians, everyone else in the world processes them in the right hemisphere. So we use the left brain way too much.”

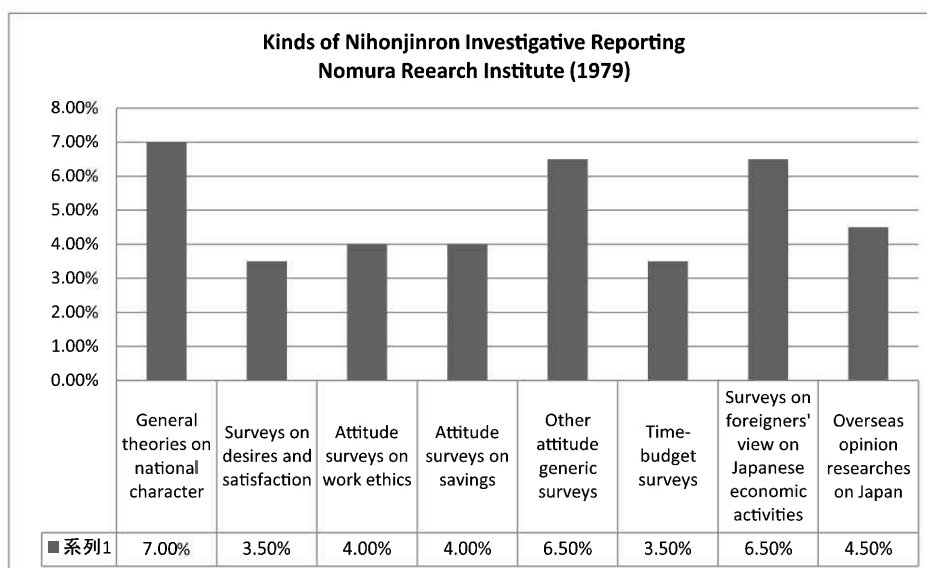
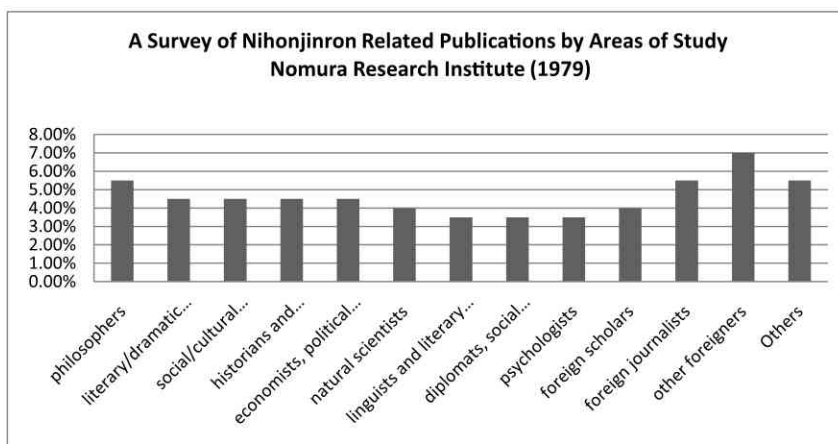
Ethnomusicologist, Tomiko Kojima, in her book *Nihon no Ongaku o Kangaeru*

(Thoughts on Japanese Music) achieved a great measure of popularity with eight printings in eight years with the following opinion: "...the rhythmic sense is, I think, determined by the lifestyle of a people. For example, the Japanese are an agricultural people who have long lived by paddy-field cultivation. That determines the behavior of the Japanese - the way they do things. Working in the paddy fields, one must stand with the entire surface of the soles of the feet touching the ground, lower the center of gravity, and bend forward, quietly lifting one foot and then the other. So the fundamental beat in Japan is a quiet, simple duple time, with no strong or weak beat. On the other hand, since stock-raising people live mainly on horseback, they have acquired a lively sense of the forward moving, up-and-down rhythm."

Another prominent ethnomusicologist the late Fumio Koizumi echoed Dr. Tsunoda's suggestions in his quote in *Nihonjin no No*: "In the music world, your research has been a source of great edification...with your research we now have a basis for understanding the mechanism within the human body to scientifically prove how sensitivity to sound differs. This is truly a source of inspiration. The Japanese hear the sound of insects as music with their dominant left side of the brain, whereas Westerners and others hear it as noise with the right hemisphere of their brains..."

A Survey of Nihonjinron

The Nomura Research Institute conducted a survey (1979) on nihonjinron related publications in Japan between 1946 and 1978 amounting to about 700 books and some of them have gone through multiple printings. *The Anatomy of Dependence* by Takeo Doi has undergone 130 reprinting; *Nihonjin no No* or *The Japanese Brain* by Tadanobu Tsunoda (1978) reached twenty-seven printing by 1983 and in 2006 produced its thirty-eight Japanese edition. Other well known examples are Ruth Benedict's *Chrysanthemum and the Sword* and Tetsuro Watshuji's *Fuudo*. (Befu and Manabe, 1995). The following graphs represent the breakdown in percentage of who the authors comprised of, the themes and topics discussed in the published nihonjinron materials:



A Quick Look When it All Began

Albeit nihonjinron is often written about as a post-war phenomenon (Oguma,1995), it developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many of its major themes can be traced back to the Tokugawa period of 1600 to 1868. The period of nation-building in the advent of the Meiji restoration of 1868 forged an urgency in defining Japanese self-identity vis-à-vis the new Other- the West.

After the end of World War II, discussions of Japanese identity were inobtrusive. With the new-found economic prosperity in the 1960s attention again altered to the positive dimensions of that identity. As Japan's economy became stronger in the 1970s and 1980s so did nihonjinron-related publications increased. According to Befu (2001), post-

war discussions resembled pre-war ideologies in all but two respects: lack of mention of the emperor and the low level of state involvement. Thus, at least until relatively recently, post-war discussions on identity in Japan tended not to mobilize common symbols of national unity, such as flag, anthem, and monarchy. Such symbols were largely discredited post-1945 due to their wartime connections. Befu argues that because Japan was no longer able to exploit such national symbols effectively, there emerged a kind of identity or *symbolic vacuum* which was filled by nihonjinron.

When the economic bubble burst in the 1990s interest in nihonjinron abated to some degree. With the passing of the anthem and flag bills in 1999 a rise in rhetoric similar of the pre-war era, the *symbolic vacuum* that Befu described was filling up. He continued on to suggest that nihonjinron is a stronger, more firmly rooted ideology than wartime nihonjinron because it gains support not centrally from the state apparatus but emanates from the grassroots.

Peter Dale(1986), covering the period analyzed by the Nomura survey, distinguished three major phases in the development of post-war nihonjinron discourse: First phase (1945-1960) : Dominance of the Western model with repudiation of Japanese uniqueness occurring at the same time. Most of the discourses at this phase are in a critical light. Second phase (1960-1970) : Recognition of certain defects in Western industrial society and merits in Japanese traditions, as they are re-engineered in Japanese modernization and the third phase (1970-?) : Recognition of Japanese uniqueness as a positive model for a Japanese road towards modernity and its global outreach.

The Extent of Nihonjinron in Ordinary People: An Empirical Study

Befu and Manabe (1990) conducted a questionnaire survey during July-August 1987 in Nishinomiya, a city between Kobe and Osaka, Japan of a random sample from 2,400 of adults over the age of 20 of which 944 or 39 per cent returned the questionnaire. Three of the nine tables of the results of their questionnaire survey have been reproduced here to highlight some of their findings: interest in nihonjinron by media, foreigners' cultural competence and functions of nihonjinron. Table1 shows that eighty-two per cent of those who responded were interested in the subject and read it in the newspapers while the others used television, radio, magazines and books. Befu and Manabe assert that although nihonjinron arguments would not be fundamentally different in newspapers and monographs, newspapers articles are much shorter portraying Japanese culture in stereotypical and clichés. They concluded that newspapers articles may provide a more

accurate picture of the nihonjinron of the everyday person. Table 2 illustrates nihonjinron as a boundary-maintenance mechanism wherein foreigners are incapable of adapting to the Japanese culture. Sixty-six per cent states that Japanese culture cannot be understood in a foreign language and sixty-three per cent says foreigners cannot understand Japanese culture one hundred per cent. Table 3 shows the functions of nihonjinron with seventy-five to seventy-eight per cent concern for Japanese identity and role of Japan in the world. Befu and Manabe concluded that although the credence of nihonjinron are not embraced by all Japanese, it is an essential subject matter to a great majority that guides their thoughts and actions in different degrees depending on specific situations. They added that albeit nihonjinron writers write as if their argumentations apply to the entire population, their

TABLE 1. Interest in Nihonjinron by Media

Media	Interested	Not Interested	Other
Newspaper	82%	13%	5%
Television	79	16	5
Magazine	59	34	7
Book	51	42	7
Radio	41%	51	8

TABLE 2. Foreigners' Cultural Competence

	Yes	No	Other
Japanese culture can't be understood 100% in a Foreign Language	66 %	14%	20%
Cannot understand Japanese culture 100%	63	17	20
Cannot totally assimilate into Japanese society	41	32	27
Cannot master Japanese	36	43	21
Cannot achieve mutual understanding with Japanese	30	40	30

TABLE 3. Functions of Nihonjinron

	Agree	Disagree	Other
Think about Japan's role in the world	78%	3%	19%
Know who Japanese are	75	3	22
Keep up with current topics	72	6	22
Build a better society	69	5	26
Conversation topic	69	6	25
Know oneself	68	9	23
Satisfy curiosity	62	6	32
Have a pride as Japanese	49	11	40
Gain Respect from others	36	20	44

findings instead support that they are true to only by less than the whole population which sometime a majority or at times a minority.

Civil Religion Discourse

Many modern Japanese are not eager to declare themselves religious when asked. Although most Japanese consider themselves Shintoist, Buddhist or both, religion does not play a major role in the life of most people of today but follow religious rituals in ceremonies such as births, weddings and funerals. They go to shrines or temples on New Year and participate in local festivals most of which have religious backgrounds.

Nihonjinron discourse fulfills religious functions in the society in what Bellah (1967) coined as civil religion. The discourse and those who espoused its tenets are political leaders, intellectuals and other influential people with the rest of the people of society as the followers.

According to Bellah, civil religion is a belief system in which people embrace common fundamental credo, values, holidays, and rituals, parallel to, or independent of, their chosen religion.

Looking Forward

This paper attempts to review what it is meant to be Japanese, the pride of being Japanese, the cultural and psychological bonds that they feel toward each other and their sense of identity with Japan. The shared uniqueness of being Japanese is a result of an intensely held in-group feelings and a psychological sense of community. This sense of nationalism, based mostly on racial and ethnic characteristics, was brought to Japan by the West in the process of defining itself vis a vis the West.

Bruce Stronach, now the current dean of Temple University, Japan and the first non-Japanese who held a post in a public university in Japan (Yokohama City University), explains the Japanese society as follows: Japanese society has always been extremely conservative in that maintaining the status quo has had a greater salience than progress for progress' sake. Japanese society, forms of behavior, and institutions do not change rapidly, draw a sharper line nor do they change without fundamental cause. Japan is the quintessential "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" society. Thus, when things are going fine, there is a strong tendency to continue the status quo. The vast majority of people in contemporary Japan are happy with the way things are right now, and the last thing they

want is change. This statement was made by Stronach in his book, *Beyond the Rising Run: Nationalism in Contemporary Japan* more than a decade ago but the fundamental values and social systems have not changed much since then.

With the force of globalization, Japan has no choice but to welcome change faster than it did previously. To become a world leader again, it also has to define what that change is in terms of its national identity and relations to the rest of the world.

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