Culture or Conformism? (Re)imagining Difference(s) in the Japanese EFL Context

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This workshop critiqued the image of Japan as a homogeneous culture, and focused on deepening teachers' understanding of intracultural diversity and inequality in Japan. How do common approaches to teaching "culture" actually reinforce conformity to norms which limit students' self-actualization? How can learners explore and expand their personal identities through creative understanding of "different" cultures? This paper will suggest that teachers address differences of all kinds, not just intercultural differences, within their language classrooms.

> Everything, given a chance, can be or become culture. Culture no longer functions as a specific referent to any one thing or set of things....Everything is culturally determined, as it were, and culture ceases to mean anything *as such*. (Readings, 1996, p. 17)

At last, teaching culture has become a common, even integral, part of teaching language. Cross-cultural diversity in peoples' ways of interacting and behaving, in their assumptions about the world and about the nature of reality, finally hold a central position in EFL curricula. However, this paper will argue that, given the discursive construction of the notion of 'culture' in Japanese contexts, it is essential for foreign language teachers and learners in Japan to examine the ways in which they conceptualize both culture in general and Japanese culture in particular. Certainly cultural differences exist, and often have a crucial impact on communication between people holding differing sets of assumptions, values and priorities (e.g., Yamada, 1997). Nevertheless, differences in culture may not be the only, or even the main, source of misunderstanding or conflict in any given situation. In order to teach effective L2 communication skills, language teachers in Japan must teach their students to understand and deal with differences of all kinds, not just cultural differences.

What Difference does "Culture" make? The Myth of Japanese Homogeneity

> The discourse of Japaneseness...is ultimately a form of mythology....Assertions of Japaneseness are quasi-religious utterances. (Lie, 2001, p. 164)

Given the importance of teaching culture in ELT, what is the problem with the idea of culture in Japan? Why must language instructors be wary when teaching this fundamental component of language use? Unfortunately, the Japanese notion of culture is inextricably linked to the notion of Japanese cultural homogeneity; this combination has the potential to adversely impact Japanese EFL students in a number of ways.

'Japan', as the story goes, is a nation of one culture, and 'the Japanese', a single people who share a unique language and a common history. The necessary complement to this Japan (with its homogeneous inhabitants) is an opposite Other, a foreign, 'outside' language, culture, and people. In the most simplistic version of this story, the 'foreigner' becomes a (white) Westerner/American, and the 'outside' language becomes English (see Creighton, 1997; McVeigh, 2002).

Except that, of course, the myth of Japanese homogeneity, and the binary dualisms it necessitates, are factually inaccurate. It should (but cannot always) go without saying that outside Japan's borders lies a world of diverse peoples, cultures, languages, and races--not just a unified mass of "foreigners" who all speak Standard American English and resemble Brad Pitt. Similarly, within Japan, there continue to be important individual and group variations, cleaved along lines of gender/sexuality, social class/income, religion, educational attainment, physical/mental ability, region/dialect, and race/ethnicity--variations which greatly affect the lives and opportunities of the residents of the Japanese archipelago (for more on these variations, see AMPO, 1996; Buckley, 1997; Liddle & Nakajima, 2000; Summerhawk et al., 1999; Cutts, 1997; Okano & Tsuchiya, 1999; Suzuki & Oiwa, 1996; Denoon et al, 1997).

In fact, as of 1990, in this supposedly ethnically homogeneous nation of 125 million, there lived between five and six million non-Yamato Japanese citizens and resident aliens (both legal and illegal)--a minority population proportionate to that of Britain in 1992 (Lie, 2001). A "persistent fissure between the articulated assumption of monoethnicity and the tacit awareness of multiethnicity" (Lie, 2001, p. 46) underlies the fundamental 'reality' for most people (both inside and outside Japan) of the myth of Japan's homogeneity.

So who counts as 'really' Japanese in this typological construction of culture? To paraphrase Orwell, some Japanese are more Japanese than others. Unlike English, which allows for useful terms like 'Japanese-American', there is as yet no possibility for a hyphenated identity in Japan. Non-Japanese Japanese are, like the Ainu, always about to disappear; or, in the case of Okinawans, truly Japanese; or, like third-generation Korean-Japanese and Chinese-Japanese, actually foreigners (Lie, 2001). One usual solution to the problem of hybrid identity is for individuals to give up their complex personal and family histories, and (try to) pass as 'normal' Japanese; for example, Japanese of Korean heritage often hide their heritage in order to be

able to live, free from discrimination, as 'real' Japanese (Creighton, 1997). Thus is the painful possibility of prejudice compounded by a general denial of discrimination and the erasure of ethnic difference--so individuals suffer silently between social inequality and invisibility (Lie, 2001).

Foreign language teachers can, in some small way, counter this on-going injustice by creating a space where students can feel safe challenging the conundrum of monoethnic Japanese identity (see Pratt, 1991). A critique of the dualistic notion of culture is one place to start the dialogue about hidden ethnic (and other) diversity that needs to take place in order for healing to begin.

The image of a homogeneous Japan, with its concomitant over-simplistic conceptualization of culture, is not only painful for minority students; it is also limiting to majority Japanese. The uniformity of the stereotype of what it means to be Japanese, along with the pressure to conform to a narrow range of acceptable behaviors and life choices, restrict people's ideas of what it is possible for them to become:

> One consequence of the discourse of Japaneseness is that it circumscribes the culturally accepted boundaries of Japanese utterance and behavior. Strong norms about what it means to be Japanese translate into strong sanctions to squelch deviance. There are in fact many ways in which Japanese lives are prescribed and circumscribed. (Lie, 2001, p. 165)

Similarly, a dualistic view of culture blinds people to the actual diversity that they encounter--or worse, allows them to see any 'difference' only as a threat, rather than as a potential source of creativity, growth, and even joy. Creating classrooms in which all students can explore and create their own identities and differences, rather than teaching notions of culture that reinforce restrictive stereotypes, can help counteract the pressure on Japanese people to conform.

On top of the personal pain and restriction caused by the discourse of Japanese homogeneity, the correlation of culture and sameness can also hinder students' communicative abilities in the L2. Those taught to think within this framework may assume wrongly that, like Japan, every nation-state is homogeneous; they may also mistakenly take one member of a culture as representative of all members of that culture, overlooking important intracultural differences (Lie, 2001). This will in turn hinder communication with and understanding of English-speaking individuals from such multicultural, racially/ethnically/linguistically diverse societies as Canada, Australia, the U.S., India, and Kenya.

As Kubota (2001) points out, stereotyped concepts of the target culture may lead to inappropriate socio-linguistic behavior on the part of L2 learners: "Japanese ESL respondents may have overgeneralized a perceived directness of the US communication style and lack of politeness indicators in English" (p. 29). In this case, students' simplistic (mis)understanding of American culture could easily lead to miscommunication. Lack of nuanced understanding of "foreign" cultures is particularly unfortunate in EFL learners, considering how widely English is spoken, and by how many different kinds of people. Indeed, Sandra McKay (2004) goes so far as to suggest that an international language such as English be considered

"a denationalized language that does not involve the cultural norms of native speakers and is taught to facilitate communication of learners' own ideas and cultures."

In short, students who are willing and able to revise their own (and others') personal identities and their cultural-linguistic knowledge will be more successful at foreign language acquisition and use. Conversely, inflexible conceptions of identity ('who I am') and potentiality ('who I can be'), along with a lack of sensitivity to variations in context, will limit a student's success in the target language (Brown, 1996; Acton & de Felix, 1996). For the sake of Japanese learners of all kinds, it behooves L2 teachers in Japan to examine their assumptions about Japaneseness--and to ask their classes to do the same.

Orientalism to Nihonjinron: (En)countering the Construction of a Discourse

> What is defined as culture or what constitutes culture is closely related to the question of who defines it and what kind of power relations exist between those who define it and those who are defined by it. (Kubota, 1999, p. 17)

Where from, this ubiquitous idea of a uniform Japanese culture? What lies behind this ideological construct? According to deconstructionists and postmodern theorists, the concept of culture, like any category of human difference (race, gender, sexuality), is socially constructed:

> Culture is not a monolithic, fixed, neutral or objective category but rather a dynamic organism that exists in discursive fields in which power is exercised. Labels used for representing cultures are produced, reinforced, and contested by discourses that manifest power struggles within the culture and between cultures. (Kubota, 1999, p. 11)

Japan, like every modern nation-state, is a historically constructed entity, formed primarily in the interests of those who orchestrated its construction (Weiner, 1997; Morris-Suzuki, 1998; Ivy, 1995). The denial, exclusion and/or assimilation of ethnically different groups (including Burakumin, Ainu, Okinawans, and Korean-Japanese) is still underway (Lie, 2001)-- just as forces that create and maintain gender (and other) distinctions between people are perpetually in action. Furthermore, the discourse of Japanese uniqueness must constantly be reproduced, through print and visual media (including advertising images of *gaijin* which parallel American racial/racist stereotypes; e.g., Creighton, 1997), as well as examination-centered public education (including compulsory English education; e.g., Zeng, 1999; McVeigh, 2002) and for-profit English conversation schools (e.g., McVeigh, 2002). Conversely, the constructed nature of this discourse must remain hidden in order for its mythic qualities to remain viable. Deconstructing the myth of Japanese homogeneity by tracing the historical, contingent nature of the terms and strategies underlying it will lead to a more critical, practicable understanding of contemporary Japanese cultural identity upon which to base EFL teaching strategies.

Lie (2001) traces the changing conceptualizations of Japanese multi/monoethnicity. During Japan's pre-modern period, the Tokugawa Shogunate had no need for the notion of national-cultural commonality; for people living in the Japanese archipelago, family, village, and caste/status

affiliations were central. The Meiji government, facing the threat of colonization by the West, followed a course of rapid modernization, Western-style. This included building a modern nation-state (and later, an empire) of its own. The formalization of previous outcaste groups into Burakumin led to the formation of Japan's first ethnic group--along with anti-Burakumin riots in 1871, and the nascence of the Buraku Liberation movement in the following decades (p. 85-87).

Although the Tokugawa Bakufu had claimed Ezochi (which included northern Honshu, and which the Ainu people designated Ainu Mosir, or human land) as foreign territory since 1807, its fundamental conflict had been with the Matsumae-han, a competing domain based in northern Japan. In 1869, the Meiji state renamed Hokkaido, and in 1873 claimed it as imperial land. Under the so-called Hokkaido Aborigine Protection Act (HAPA) of 1899, the Ainu people suffered cultural genocide and discrimination similar to that of the Native American peoples of the United States; HAPA was finally overturned in 1997 (p. 90-93).

Ryukyu—modern-day Okinawa—has a long and venerable culture and history apart from Japan; its language is arguably distinct from Japanese. Ryukyu become a unified kingdom, paying tribute to Ming China, in 1429; from the 14th through the 16th centuries, the island country was a node of active trade between East and Southeast Asia. However, the fledgling Meiji government invaded in 1872, and finally conquered and colonized Okinawa in 1879. After the collapse of Japanese empire, Okinawa was annexed by the United States military; not until 1972 were the islands 'returned' to Japan--without consultation with the Okinawan people (p. 95-99).

The efforts of Japan during the early 20th century to build its European-style empire--ostensibly as a defense against colonization by the West--meant building a multi-ethnic society. As Japan expanded its sphere of influence, invading Taiwan, Korea, and Manchuria, Taiwanese, Koreans and Chinese subsequently immigrated (or were forcibly relocated) within the empire. By 1944, there were 2.5 million Koreans living in the Japanese archipelago (two-thirds of whom returned to Korea after the war). However, although the Japanese empire had considered Koreans to be (second-class) citizens, possessing formal legal status, following the collapse of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, the one million Koreans who remained in Japan were stripped of citizenship rights. Their descendants continue to be considered foreign, temporary residents of Japan, even though by the 1970s, 75% of Korean-Japanese were Japanese-born and educated--many raised with little or no knowledge of Korean language or culture (p. 101-109).

Even the vast majority of Yamato Japanese did not until recently identify with the agenda of their nation-state. Pre-modern farmers regarded bureaucrats as outsiders (even 'bloodsuckers'). The Meiji regime instituted the national registry to regulate individuals at the family level; mass education suppressed local religious beliefs and aimed to "instill a new quasi-religious national identity" (p. 120). But even by 1945, national identity and integration continued to be limited; most of the population were still regionally-based farmers. Not until the prosperity of the late 1960s--meaning easy access to consumer goods and widespread television ownership--did the discourse of Japaneseness finally seize the popular mind. By the 1960s, urbanization,

mass education, and modern transit systems had led to a loss of regional diversity and a nostalgia for a rural life (see Ivy, 1995): "Ironically, once popular national identity had been achieved, there was no compelling answer to the question of what constituted Japaneseness" (Lie, 2001, p. 128).

The loss of local identities and traditional social networks, along with the association of ethnic diversity with the failed empire (p. 134) led to a resurgence in popularity of Nihonjinron (writing on the Japanese character), a genre originally developed following the model of 19th-century European national character studies during the nation-state-building Meiji period (see Kubota, 1999). Reiteration of a monoethnic Japanese identity filled the need for a unifying answer to the question of Japaneseness. The notion of the singularity of Japanese culture continues to be constructed largely in binary opposition to a complementary opposing West: "Many canards about Japanese difference or uniqueness arose from comparing Japan to the United States" (Lie, 2001, p. 137).

Kubota (1999) asserts that the struggle to shift power relations between Japan and Western colonial powers led to the appropriation by 19th-century Japanese intellectuals of Orientalism, a discourse developed in the West which posits fundamental, unbridgeable and ahistorical differences between Eastern and Western cultures (p. 20-22). Despite the implicit racism of the discourse, in recent decades, Japanese writers have, in the genre of Nihonjinron, usurped Orientalism as a form of cultural nationalism in the face of on-going Westernization. Yet ironically, ostensibly nationalist Nihonjinron manages to be simultaneously pro-West/pro-American, pro-economic recovery, and pro-corporate capitalism. This form of auto-Orientalism, in promoting loyalty to the nation and reducing intranational conflict through concepts such as "harmony, groupism, and homogeneity", also "works as an ideology that serves the interests of political and business leaders" within Japan (Kubota, 1999, p. 20). Thus, while the discourse of Nihonjinron may pacify the populace, the ideology of sameness facilitates the exploitation of the citizenry, becoming a "nationalism of fools" (Lie, 2001, p. 136).

The spectre of mass control through ideology is in itself enough to stir anyone outside the ruling elite to challenge the ubiquity of Japanese national identity. Certainly, teachers of EFL who wish to foster their students' critical thinking skills must analyze the processes that sustain the notion of Japanese cultural homogeneity. Susser (1998) summarizes the logic of Orientalism as follows: Othering (positing fundamental difference between one's own group and another, with the Other being inferior); stereotyping the Other; representing (rather than depicting) the Other; and essentializing the Other to abstraction. Kubota (1999) states that "the assumption underlying this approach is that there is a systematic, culturally determined way in which all members of a certain culture think, behave and act" (p. 14). Such typological thinking (Lie, 2001) in which "a dogmatically asserted category defines a class of subjects" (p. 159) allows for, and perhaps even requires, logical inconsistency and contradiction, since "historical transformations or internal variations [within the category] are systematically ignored" (p. 157).

As the discourse of (auto)Orientalism and the (il)logic of typological thinking are central to current mainstream

Japanese understandings of culture, language teaching professionals must foreground the contingent nature of knowledge and the processes by which discourses are constructed in order to instill in learners more sophisticated models of culture. To help students acquire the mental flexibility necessary for becoming successful, self-actualized L2 users, teachers must consider how to foster new kinds of understanding in their students, in order to provide alternatives to existing discourses and modes of thought.

Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Culture: Teaching Differences

> My aim, then, is an anti-modernist rephrasing of teaching and learning as sites of *obligation*, as loci of *ethical practices*, rather than as means for the transmission of scientific knowledge. Teaching thus becomes answerable to *the questions of justice*, rather than to the criteria of truth. We must seek to do justice to teaching rather than to know what it is. (Readings, 1996, p. 154)

How can concerned language instructors approach culture within foreign language classes without reinforcing the discourses of (auto-)Orientalism? How can ELT professionals challenge the "managed imagining of the Japanese cultural self" (Creighton, 1997, p. 213)? My personal answers--which remain ever exploratory--reflect the concern of feminist and critical (language) pedagogy for connecting the personal with the structural imbalances of power that affect every individual's life (albeit in disparate ways). Tough questions arise when learning how to communicate in a new language; however, exploration of difference in language classes must not be limited to cultural-linguistic difference. As the previous section illustrates, analysis of the construction of national-cultural identity cannot be undertaken without understanding formation of ethnic and racial (as well as gender and other) identities. Such complex analyses are most easily undertaken when grounded in specific contexts--the sites of learning.

Thus, teachers must be willing to go beyond the abstract and global, to the personal and concrete. Communication with others means asking questions such as: How best to deal with someone who is 'different' from myself--in culture, region, age, gender/sexuality, ethnicity, and/or social class--or simply in temperament or taste? How best to resolve difficulties that may arise between people who have conflicting personalities, values, priorities and/or lifestyles? How might I myself be 'different' than I once (thought I) was? How best to deal with the shock and discomfort which arise when dealing with the change and growth that attend the learning process?

Both empathy and creativity are crucial in developing the skills needed to begin answering these questions (Jude, 2003). Role play and strategic interaction can help both students and teachers to step more easily into an Other's shoes, to deal imaginatively with(in) situations of confusion and conflict by envisioning (from) a different perspective (see Di Pietro, 1987; Wessels, 1998). Language use in such situations must be spontaneous, individualized, and specifically situated; therefore, both teachers and students must be prepared to be spontaneous and flexible in their everyday language classes.

Furthermore, teachers must develop (with students and with other teachers) ways of knowing that are meaningful and useful to individuals and communities, rather than reproducing knowledge in service of the economy and state (Spring, 1998). Teachers and students can collaborate to co-construct knowledge about the worlds they inhabit. This approach inoculates learners against typological thinking, with specific details and factual evidence that can counteract inaccurate 'common knowledge'.

Within language classes, foreign language instructors can ask students to describe Japanese culture by looking at exceptions, borderline cases, and hybrid cultural forms (think curry-rice, ramen, enka, J-pop), thus enriching students' understanding of the (hidden) complexity of their own heritage. Learners should examine intercultural similarities as well as intercultural differences; in like manner, they should study intracultural diversity as well--both within Japan and in the target cultures. Exploration of difference can, depending on students' and teachers' own particular experiences, expand to include other variation as well--adding spice and flavor to the sometimes tedious work of language learning.

As TESOL researchers, we must work our way out of the trap of the discourse of Orientalism--intercultural comparison can be useful only when it is specific and situated (Susser, 1998). As people in positions of relative privilege, we must take responsibility for the ways in which we benefit from unjust economic, political and social systems; one way to do this is to subvert epistemological racism, "the creation and reinforcement of a range of research epistemologies that are based on the social history and culture of the dominant race" (Kubota, 2001, p. 89-90). Finally, in both teaching and research, we must keep open questions of value and judgement (Readings, 1996), rather than seeking the safety of closed/binary categories of thought/identity.

ELT professionals hold positions of influence. There exist native democratic movements for social justice within Japan (see AMPO, 1996; Buckley, 1997; McCormack, 1996; Suzuki & Oiwa, 1996); we as English teachers can deny our power and thus reinforce the status quo, or instead, find ways to support social equality and the democratic inclusion of all people within our various communities. While it may seem more objective, more professional, or simply safer to manage one's authority by assuming an apolitical stance, I believe it is the responsibility of each of us to explore how we co-create (knowledge of) the world through our teaching and research practices. If we demand of students the courage to flout conformity, we must also be willing to take a stand:

> Teaching should cease to be about merely the transmission of information and the emancipation of the autonomous subject, and instead should become a site of obligation that exceeds an individual's consciousness of justice. (Readings, 1996, p. 154)

In today's fearful and conflict-ridden world, teaching/learning how to negotiate and celebrate our differences can be a revolutionary act.

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