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Internationalization, *Nihonjinron*, and the Question of Japanese Identity

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The recent discourse on internationalizing Japanese education calls for measures to bridge the differences that separate Japan from other nations: improving foreign language skills, promoting greater exchange of personnel, and developing a sense of world citizenship and global community. Closer examination reveals, however, a paradoxical similarity between this literature and that known as *nihonjinron*, which stresses rather the uniqueness, and hence separateness, of Japanese culture. In both discourses, for example, the primary concern is for Japan's relationship with the West; there is also a tendency in both to treat Japan and the West as monolithic entities. Moreover, both discourses seem animated by the same sense of ambivalence about Japanese cultural identity, an ambivalence that generates anxiety about being judged inferior internationally on the one hand, while supporting feelings of cultural, and ultimately racial, superiority on the other. The different emphases of the two discourses may thus be understood as alternate solutions to the same underlying problem: the question of what it means to be Japanese in the modern world. Persisting ambivalence about this question may continue to confound Japanese attempts to achieve a well-balanced sense of internationalization for a considerable time.

国際化と日本人論－日本人のアイデンティティに関する問題

最近の日本における教育の国際化論には、外国語の上達、人事面での広い交流、地球人としてグローバルに世界を見る意識の発達など、日本と諸外国との隔たりを縮める対応が要求されている。しかし、よく見るとこの国際化論は、日本の独自性を強調する「日本人論」と称されるもう一つの論議と、逆説的に似ているところがある。二つの議論で焦点があてられているのは、日本の西洋との関係であり、又、「日本」も「西洋」も単一モデルとして扱われていることである。さらに両論は日本人のアイデンティティに関し、一方では文化的・人種的優越感を抱きながら、他方では国際的に劣っていると評価される事への恐怖心が、相反する感

情として、二つの論議を活発にするようだ。従って両論の異なる主張は、現代に生きる日本人であることがどのような意味を持つかと言う共通の問題に対する２つの可能な見解があると言えよう。この問題についての両面価値がある限り、バランスの取れた国際感覚は、当分の間、容易に達成できないであろう。

In the context of Japanese education, the current discourse on internationalization is hardly a new development. The call recently issued by the Council on Educational Reform—for "education compatible with the new internationalization" (Rinji kyoiku shingikai, 1987)—was preceded by similar statements made by the Council's forerunners in 1965, and again in 1974. In a recent historical overview of this discourse, Kobayashi (1988) interprets these earlier pronouncements as partly the product of the political atmosphere of the time. By the 1960s human rights had become a salient issue worldwide, one actively promoted by the United Nations through declarations of the universal rights of children, and of the rights of all to equal educational opportunities. Such developments, Kobayashi argues, helped arouse in the Japanese a growing awareness of their membership in a "pan-human society" (p. 5). But the deeper causes of the emerging concern for internationalization lay in the economic sphere. Kobayashi relates that the term "internationalization" (*kokusaika*) first appeared in the mid-1950s, in reference to problems faced by domestic industry in upgrading for competition overseas, and to difficulties that Japanese firms with foreign ventures experienced in adjusting to external conditions. From the mid-1960s the referents of the term came to include the educational needs of overseas company personnel—both the needs of employees suddenly forced to communicate in a foreign language, and those of their children while living abroad. More recently, resentment against Japanese economic practices overseas, and the post-oil shock awareness of Japan's dependence on the international community, have further fueled the concern for producing more internationally minded Japanese.

In thus pointing largely to economic causes for the concern to internationalize Japanese education, Kobayashi implicitly endorses the logic visible in the recent Council report. "Along with the

development of transportation and telecommunication media," declares the latter, "and the expansion of the economic and cultural exchange among nations, the world has rapidly become smaller, and all countries in the world are increasingly interdependent" (Rinji kyoiku shingikai, 1987, p. 12). Japan, it argues, having caught up technologically with the other advanced industrialized countries, cannot survive in isolation but must interact in cultural and educational spheres as well. To this end the educational system must be changed to promote greater exchange of personnel with other nations. Among the report's concrete proposals are calls for more participation by foreigners, for greater acceptance of Japanese students returning from abroad, and for more emphasis on mastering English as a tool for communication.

Specialists in education complement these suggestions with proposals of their own. Beyond mere exchanges of personnel and the acquistion of foreign language skills, they assert a need for a fundamental change in values. Thus Ebuchi (1987) envisions the emergence of a "consciousness of world citizenship overarching national differences" and "a ready interchange of information and values" (p. 21). Kawabata (1987) makes a similar call for an international awareness in which "true understanding of a universal human culture, bridging particular cultural differences, will promote . . . a sense of global community" (p. 17).

The image thus offered—of a Japan emerging from its cultural isolation, fostering greater understanding of other nations while assimilating a set of universal human values—has paradoxically gained strength in parallel with another postwar discourse, one that also takes as focus the question of Japanese cultural identity. Known by the generic label of *nihonjinron*, it is defined in a recent critical review as "the commercialized expression of modern Japanese nationalism," which subsumes "under one genre any work of scholarship, occasional essay or newspaper article which attempts to define the unique specificity of things Japanese" (Dale, 1986, p. 14). Like the call for internationalization, *nihonjinron* became visible in the 1950s, and gained in vigor throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Its emergence has also been attributed to the same causes: the postwar recovery of the Japanese economy, and the attending increase in Japanese experience overseas (Ishida, 1967, p. 2; Kumon, 1982, p. 5; Pyle, 1982, p. 223). But rather than leading to

an awareness of the need for social and cultural change, as seen in discussions of internationalizing Japanese education, these factors have produced in *nihonjinron* declarations of Japan's cultural superiority. Rather than calls for the assimilation of external values as a means to internationalization, we hear assertions of the need to promote foreign understanding of Japanese culture for assuring the country's international success. And rather than a search for ways to bridge cultural differences, there is bold celebration of the pre-eminent uniqueness of Japanese culture—a claim, in effect, that the differences separating Japan from other nations can never be overcome. How, we may ask, could such diametrically opposed discourses coexist in the same society? How could such diverging views be held without generating open conflict?

My intent here is to argue that the paradox just sketched is more apparent than real, that whereas the two arguments about the national identity may seem opposed on the surface, they are structured at a more fundamental level by a common set of elements—and thus share a common problem inherent in those elements.

Let me do so by now returning to the question of the internationalization of Japanese education, in order to note a confusion in the discourse at first not readily apparent. In its recent report, the Council on Educational Reform holds up an ideal of a "peaceful and prosperous international community based on coexistence and cooperation among diverse cultures," in which Japan must strive to participate fully (Rinji kyoiku shingikai, 1987, p. 13). Yet how "diverse" is the community that forms the Council's main object of concern? Recall that internationalization itself is defined in the report as being spurred by technological and economic advances. The report's historical perspective on Japanese internationalization echoes this view: in its period of "catching-up modernization," Japanese efforts were "focused on importing and transplanting science and technology from advanced industrialized countries in Europe and North America" (p. 12). Now having caught up technologically, Japan must "shift [its] emphasis to well-balanced international exchanges in which mutual exchange will be promoted between Japan and other countries in the fields of education, research," and so on (p. 12). But where does this leave less advanced nations, those which have yet to catch up with the

West and are thus unable to participate in such exchanges on a mutual basis? The effect of the Council's report, despite its avowed intent, is to exclude those nations from consideration, thereby robbing its own proposal for a diverse international community of real meaning.

If one suspects that behind this de facto slighting of the Third World lie prejudicial attitudes on the part of the Japanese, one need look no farther than accounts of Japanese educational experiences abroad for supporting evidence. Horoiwa (1987) reports, for example, that Japanese children living overseas soon learn to dichotomize their world into the two classes of "things properly Japanese" versus "things un-Japanese"; the former accorded high value and the latter felt somehow deficient. Thus a "Japanese person" may be counted in the former group but not a "Nikkeijin" or a "local person"—the same applies for a "Japanese [day] school" versus "Japanese language school," or for a teacher sent directly from Japan versus one hired locally (p. 71). Nakanishi (1988) points out that attitudes of superiority are especially pronounced among Japanese children living in Third World countries. He cites as an example one teacher's surprise, during his assignment in Brazil, at how many children looked only at negative aspects of the country, complaining that "It's full of beggars," "There's too much garbage," "You can't drink the water here," "They don't do things on time," and so forth as the reasons "why we hate Brazil" (p. 19). Teachers returning from Central America and Southeast Asia also tell of children's prejudices taking the form of expressions like "dirty," "poor," "backward," or of complaints that the local people are "dishonest" or that "they don't keep their word" (p. 20). Nakanishi concludes that children living in developing nations no doubt learn such attitudes both at home and in the local Japanese community. Schools maintained by the Ministry of Education can be a contributing factor: often they exclude non-Japanese, or they concentrate solely on education needed when the children return to Japan.

It is a sad irony that Japanese children overseas should exhibit such prejudicial attitudes towards outsiders, for it is these same children who often suffer, on their return to Japan, the stigma of having become something less than "properly Japanese" by their foreign experience. Even educational programs designed specifically for returnees convey a negative message, stressing that they

have lost considerable ground in their studies of the Japanese language and of mathematics, and that students already in junior high school must now work doubly hard if they wish to enter a top-ranking university. If such institutional policies give little hint of support for the rich experiences that returnees bring with them, the reception afforded by their peers is likely to do the same. Parents of returnees frequently lament the pressures their children feel to assimilate with peer groups (Nakanishi, 1988, p. 21). Labels such as "foreign upbringing" and "un-Japanese" used in applying such pressure are no more than covers for a more general prejudice against the socially different, notes Horoiwa (1987, p. 70), a prejudice whose effect is to press the returnees to rid themselves of their foreignness.

If the treatment of the returnees can be taken as a "barometer for the openness of Japanese education per se," as suggested by Ebuchi (1987, p. 20) during a recent symposium on intercultural education, then it is a very telling one indeed. For at one level we find general agreement that awareness of the returnees' problems has increased and that their treatment has improved; the Council's recommendation for greater acceptance of returnees may be seen as a continuation of this trend. But beneath these signs of change at the surface of the discourse lies a deeper ambivalence about Japanese cultural identity that undercuts such movement. At the symposium just mentioned, one panelist (Saito Takeshi) touched off sharp reaction with his comment that in order to avoid a "rootless kind of internationalization" it is necessary to provide children with a firm sense of pride in their own national culture, therefore "pressing children into the mold of Japanese culture is more important than considerations of their autonomy" (Ebuchi, 1987, pp. 23-24).

In his summary statement as the symposium's moderator, Ebuchi (1987, pp. 25-26) noted a general consensus among the participants that as a precursor to internationalization, Japanese children should indeed be firmly grounded in a sense of their identity as Japanese, and that accordingly educational programs designed to (re)make Japanese out of returnees are reasonable to an extent. But he also remarked that despite variation between speakers in the specific content of what they took to be Japanese,

underlying all such claims was a common assumption of a single, homogeneous Japanese identity—that which must be instilled in children before international exposure, or reinstilled in them on return from abroad. It is the same assumption, Ebuchi remarked, that lies behind the fallacious equating of race, language, and culture so frequent in Japanese discourse on national identity; the same assumption that underwrites the unreasonable demand that all Japanese-looking people speak Japanese fluently, and so forth. But when Ebuchi therefore called for a pluralistic definition of Japanese identity, as a necessary measure for alleviating the problems experienced by returnees, his suggestion was denounced from the floor as "too radical."

More recent criticisms of the discourse on internationalizing Japanese education echo this suggestion, however. For it is precisely the lack of such a pluralistic definition of the Japanese nation, agrees Nakanishi (1988), that supports continuing peer pressure against returnees despite improvements in the reception afforded them by the formal educational system. A Japan that takes "as its central axis a unidimensional culture," one that "maintains the character of a unitary ethnic nation," he warns, will be "intolerant of alien elements, constitutionally unable to accept the existence of different kinds of Japanese" (p. 21). The same lack of a pluralistic definition explains the conceptual link that Nakajima (1988) sees between the problems faced in Japanese society by returnees, and the experience of resident foreign populations, most notably persons of Korean descent. Nakajima notes the criticism leveled at precisely this lack of concern for such groups in the Council's report, and in official educational policy in general. Thus while government discussion of returnees now calls for greater efforts to help them preserve their acquired differences, critics note that similar calls for Japanese repatriates from China or for refugees from Southeast Asia are lacking. Moreover, official concern for providing education in the Japanese language for Japanese living overseas is not mirrored by a similar call for resident foreigners to have instruction in their own languages. The omission of these groups from the discourse, claim the critics, shows that the real question at hand is one of Japan's status and relation with the West—not internationalization, but Westernization.

I would like now to take a step back from this material, in order to sum up the essential elements as I see them in the discourse on internationalizing Japanese education. First, the overriding concern is for Japan's relationship with the West—as witnessed by the focus in the Council's report, for example, on technologically advanced nations to the effective exclusion of all others. The second element in the discourse is the tendency to regard both terms of the relationship—Japan and the West—as monolithic entities. The notion of a pluralistic definition of Japanese identity is still unwelcome, and care to discern differences between the "advanced industrialized countries of Europe and North America" is equally lacking in the Council's report. The final element is an underlying sense of ambivalence about Japanese identity. This finds expression in the uneasiness generated by the suggestion that there might be different kinds of Japanese; it is also manifest in the long-standing anxiety over Japan's position vis-á-vis the West—the feeling of inferiority that formerly propelled efforts to catch up technologically, and that is now transformed into the fear of being judged inferior in areas of culture, research, and education. But together with this anxiety are feelings of cultural, and ultimately racial, superiority. While these are most striking in Japanese views of Third World nations, they are also evident in the more general attitude that returnees have become something less than "properly Japanese," and must therefore rid themselves of their foreignness to regain acceptance.

Note that the same three elements also structure much of the content of *nihonjinron*, as pointed out by recent critics of that discourse (Dale, 1986; Mouer and Sugimoto, 1986). Here too we find highlighted Japan's relationship with the West, for it is primarily through contrasts between the two that questions of Japanese identity are explored. Here too, both terms of that relationship are treated as monolithic entities, through archetypic representations of Japan and the West that preclude recognition of internal variation. And here too we see behind such representations an ambivalence about Japanese identity, an uneasiness that prompts shrill claims for the uniqueness of Japanese culture, and often as not, equally shrill assertions of its superiority. Thus while the dominant tones of the two discourses differ—one being a

celebration of the perceived uniqueness, and hence separateness, of Japan; the other seeming to call for measures to reduce or bridge that separateness—we may view these as nothing other than logically related attempts to work out alternate solutions to the same problem, a problem posed by the same set of underlying elements, and animated by the same sense of ambivalence over what it means to be Japanese in the modern world.

Let me conclude with the assurance that in making this comparison it is not my intent to ignore the substantive differences that indeed separate the two discourses. I am hardly suggesting that participants in the debate on internationalizing Japanese education are the blatant fanatics that proponents of *nihonjinron* are depicted to be in the caricature given by their critics. Neither do I wish to impugn as insincere the concerns of educators who seek internationalization as a way of alleviating Japanese xenophobia, nor to ignore the laudable recommendations of the Council's report for meaningful change in precisely that direction. But I cannot close my eyes to an element of confusion that I find in the writings on internationalization, a confusion traceable to the same basic ambivalence that underwrites a literature of a vastly different sort. Nor can I escape the fear that the persistence of this ambivalence will continue to confound for a considerable time the achievement of a well-balanced sense of internationalization, one in which the Japanese can participate as one country among many in a truly diverse community of nations.

Note

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gikai, 1987). These were taken from an English translation provided by the Ministry of Education; the page numbers cited refer to the corresponding portions of the original Japanese.

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