

The Reinforcement of Cultural Nationalism in Japan:  
An investigation of Japaneseness and “the Notebook  
for the Heart”

By

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## Introduction

This paper focuses on how the Japanese government, business people, intellectuals, and educators reemphasize the homogeneity and uniqueness of Japanese culture to enhance national identity among the Japanese citizens. I particularly examine the content of the theory of Japaneseness, *Nihonjinron*, and a moral education textbook, *kokoro-no-noto* (*the Notebook for the Heart*). My standpoint is that the separation of citizens by the mono-ethnic view of Japan/Japanese would disintegrate the life of the mainstream Japanese and minority groups, including foreign residents. More specifically, such Japanese ethnic identity prevents us from being a global citizen who is able to interact with people beyond differences.

McVeigh (2004) argues that nationalism is “an international ideology that is...legitimated by the existence of other national states and their nationalisms (p. 188). Like his definition, the reemphasis of nationalism in Japan is actually an outcome of globalization where increasing numbers of migrant workers forced homogeneous Japan to transform into a multiethnic/multicultural environment. In fact, as of 2005, the population of foreign residents constitutes 1.57% (2,011,555) of the total Japanese population (127,756,815) in Japan. The foreign residents’ population has increased 47.7% (649,184) from a decade ago. The largest foreign population is Koreans constituting 29.8% and its population has decreased. The second largest foreign group is Chinese and its population

has increased since the middle of 1970s. Following Koreans and Chinese, the Brazilian, Filipino, Peruvian, and Americans consisted of other foreign residents (Ministry of Justice Immigration Bureau, 2005). Due to the drastic increase of the non-Japanese population, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, which did not respond to the needs of foreign residents, finally published the proposals in facilitating a society with multicultural coexistence in 2006.

While the civil society has flourished toward the coexistence slogan, *tabunka kyosei* (multicultural coexistence), the government, elite business people, and journalists tend to maintain the myth of homogeneity. The cultural nationalism is revealed in the popular theory of Japaneseness, *Nihonjinron* in literature and the moral education textbook. Therefore, I will investigate how the Japanese state and elites enforce a homogeneous ideology under the emergence of civil society.

## **Cultural Nationalism of Japan**

### *Japanese Nationalism*

In this paper, I use Yoshino's definition of nationalism which is "the belief among a people that it comprises a distinct community with distinctive characteristics and the will to maintain and enhance that distinctiveness within an autonomous state" (1992, p. 6).

In the case of Japan, nationalism shapes this form into "a psychological phenomenon by which individuals defines themselves as members of the group" (Stronach,

1995, p. xviii). Some people call this type of nationalism as ethnic nationalism because ethnicity comes first and territoriality is second in people's mind. Max Skidmore illustrates well how nationalism works:

Nationalism involves a group's perception of itself as distinct from others, and the awareness of its members as components of the group. It also involves the group's desire to protect and preserve its identity and to enhance its power and status as a nation. It is this that leads nationalism often to become territorial, to develop an attachment to a certain land as home. It is the perception, or the belief, that is important. Many factors many serve as the explanation for "nationhood," including common culture, language, historical experiences, religion, and the like. The important factor is not whether the explanation is correct, but rather that the group believes it to be true. (as cited in Stronach, 1995, p. xviii-xix)

Both Stronach and Skidmore clearly state that Japanese people possesses the nationalistic view of their country psychologically and socioculturally. However, the general public is not aware that their practice and beliefs in society are in fact nationalistic in the eyes of outsiders. On the contrary, the word "nationalism" has a very negative connotation due to the misunderstanding of the term. Their image of nationalism relates to "pre-war emperor system, wartime mobilization, right-wing organizations" (McVeigh,

2004, p. 3). In the academic field, this type of nationalism is called “fundamental nationalism (or ultranationalism) defined as “a lethal mix of statist militarism, xenophobia, and racism” (p. 3). Because of the remembrance of Japanese imperialism during World War II, the term works as a taboo word (McVeigh, 2004).

#### *Shared Culture as a Way of Uniting the Nation*

Since the direct use of nationalism sticks with the negative image, the central government needs to use other terms in order to “justify, legitimate, and defend” the politico-economic status quo (McVeigh, 2004). One major way to unite people is the emphasis of Japanese culture. In other words, the culture plays an important role in maintaining loyalty to the Japanese society. This type of nationalism is called cultural nationalism which “aims to regenerate the national community by creating, preserving or strengthening a people’s cultural identity *when it is felt to be lacking, inadequate or threatened*” (Yoshino, 1992, p. 1, Italics added for emphasis). By using the word “culture,” the government, business elites, critics and journalists, and intellectuals attempt to reconstruct the homogeneous image of the society under the pressure of multiculturalism. Thus, cultural nationalism is a new form of constructing the national identity of post-war Japan (McVeigh, 2004).

However, their attempts to the reconstruction of homogeneity not necessarily operate unless the ordinary Japanese buy into their views of Japanese society. In fact, by

the elites' conscious effort, the perception of mono-ethnic view of culture stays in the Japanese mind. In here, multiple realities in the society, such as the presence of non-Japanese citizens, are not included. Then, how and in what way is the perception of “us-them” created among citizens? By looking into the popular literature about the Japanese people and culture, *Nihonjinron*, the process of making the perception is revealed.

### ***Nihonjinron*, The Theory of Japaneseness**

#### *Overview of Nihonjinron*

*Nihonjinron*, the theory of Japaneseness, is a variety of literature focusing on Japanese culture, people, society, history, and national interest. Japaneseness is analyzed by various academic fields, including sociology, anthropology, political science, archaeology, history, linguistics, and psychology. This genre of literature, including books, magazines and daily newspapers, intends to emphasize the uniqueness of the Japanese and differentiate Japan from the rest of the world. More specifically, the focal points of comparison and contrast are Others, particularly the West which has strong political and economic relationship with Japan. Moreover, since Japanese society has transformed into a more Westernized version over the last 150 years, *Nihonjinron*, has played a vital role in providing self-identity of the readers as Japanese citizens. By propagating the Japaneseness to each reader, usually White-collar people and students, *Nihonjinron* serves as a major source of information in maintaining national cultural identity after the post-war

era (Befu, 1992, 2001).

The theory of Japaneseness is a typical English translation of *Nihonjinron*, but the theory is not based on research and have full of ambiguous explanations about culture and tradition. These books 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 collective manners. The purpose of the literature is to entertain the general public, so *Nihonjinron* writers' job is to provide readers with light reading and quick understanding of their identities. *Nihonjinron* literature embraces group orientation, hierarchy (vertical-stratification, intra-company solidarity), harmony, and *amae* (affectionate dependency), and interpersonalism as the distinctiveness of the Japanese people (Befu, 2001; Yoshino, 1992, 1999). These themes would be illustrated with various examples the Japanese people consciously or unconsciously tend to do in their daily life (Befu, 2001).

#### *The Ideology of Nihonjinron*

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 *belief in* (Italics in original) that uniqueness and the claiming of uniqueness in the *Nihonjinron* discourse. (...) Comprehension of these unique features supposedly requires

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* (p. 67, Italics added for emphasis).

In order to protect the unity of Japan along the lines of the homogeneity of ethnicity, *Nihonjinron* connects Japanese “pure-blood” citizens with the land of Japan, race, culture, language, and religion (Befu, 2001). As Cohen claims, the Japanese culture, characterized as ethnicity, artistry, citizenship, race, lead to proprietary nationalism which “own nation-ness” (as cited in McVeigh, 2004, p. 187) since the nation is consisted of collective individuals. In other words, it is an “exclusive ownership” since only the Japanese possess the cultural notion of ethnicity, artistry, citizenship, and race. The proprietary nationalism indicates that “only Japanese can (or should) possess things Japanese” (McVeigh, 2004, p. 187). In sum, only those people who have the Japanese blood and practice Japanese culture with the native Japanese speakers are acknowledged as “us.”

While other countries struggle for a unity due to different groups of people based on

ethnicity, class, language, religion, and regional differences, Japan is believed not to encounter this issue. The first reason lies in the lack of beliefs in these differences, except regional variations. People notice regional differences in culture and tradition, but this does not cause any trouble in the homogenous discourse. In addition to the lack of identifying socioeconomic and cultural differences among the majority Japanese, there are no plausible threatening minority groups who might challenge the dominant Japanese group identity. Even larger minority groups, Korean and Chinese residents, are assimilated into the mainstream Japanese society (Stronach, 1995). As the result, some conservatives would think that *Nihonjinron* writers are seen as the spiritual leaders of the post war era (Befu, 2001).

*How Does the Ideology Work?*

#### Producers of *Nihonjinron*: The state and the *Nihonjinron* writers

Yoshino (1992, 1999) claims how the diffusion of cultural nationalism in *Nihonjinron* literature can be comprehensively understood by both “producers” and “consumers.” In his view, *Nihonjinron* ideologies are produced by “thinking elites” of various occupations, such as intellectuals, critics and journalists, diplomats, and business elites. Some of them would deliberate ideological manipulation, but *Nihonjinron* writers does not show the whole picture of why the ideology spreads to the general public, not just interest groups. Thus, the author stresses the importance of examining the diffusion

process from the consumer side, such as readers and redistributors of *Nihonjinron* discourse, as well. Therefore, this section begins with the main actors who are privileged and manipulate their ideology to influence the masses. It also includes their purpose of why *Nihonjinron* discussions need to be ideological for national unity.

#### Producers: The collaboration of the Government and *Nihonjinron* writers

The involvement of *Nihonjinron* writers in policy implementation is clear in governmental documents. In here, I introduce the first episode of their collaboration. In 1980, a committee of *Nihonjinron* advocates sent a report, *Bunka no Jidai* (The Age of Culture): Reports of the Policy Group of Prime Minister Ohira---Number One), to the Prime Minister Ohira Masayoshi. The chair of the committee was Yamamoto Shichihei known as Isaiah BenDasan, the author of the three-million-copy best-seller, *Nihonjin to Yodayajin*, the Japanese and the Jews. Other members included Tokyo University professor Kumon Shumpei, one of the co-authors of erudite *Nihonjinron* treatise and Komatsu Sakyō, another *Nihonjinron* writer who is the best-known science fiction and mystery writer. The report embraces harmonious human relations as the comparison with the Western individualism. According to Kawamura (1982), this report was the first time in which *Nihonjinron* officially influences policy formation (as cited in Befu, 2001).

Interestingly, the Department of Comprehensive Policy Studies of Chuo University focused on *Nihonjinron* as a major approach to analyze the formation of national policy.

The department had a two-year graduate program investigating *Nihonjinron* with 25 faculty members. Their report was published in 2000 (Befu, 2001).

*Nihonjinron* is very selective about simplifying the complexity of life. The selection is based to *Nihonjinron* writers' careful purpose to promote certain cultural values as if these values are shared by all ethnic Japanese. Then, what would be their intention? Befu (1992, 2001) claims that *Nihonjinron* is "a convenient substitute" of the pre-war national symbols and identity, including the imperial institution, the national flag, anthem, emblem, monuments, and rituals:

[i]t is in the absence of major symbols which can serve to define cultural identity, express national unity and demonstrate national pride that *Nihonjinron* comes in as a convenient substitute. *Nihonjinron* is not suggested here as a 100 per cent [*sic*] functional substitute, since *Nihonjinron*, as a discourse, lacks the strong emotional content which the national flag and other physical symbols have (Befu, 1992, p. 42).

Therefore, with *Nihonjinron* themes and discussions being flexible from time to time, some would stress that the *Nihonjinron* ideology would be different from the war-time nationalism, but this argument would be a justification. This is on the grounds that both wartime nationalism and post-war *Nihonjinron* "rely heavily on primordial sentiments inherent in the presumed 'ethnic essence' of the Japanese-blood, purity of race, language,

mystique-which are the basic ‘stuff’ of *Nihonjinron*, pre-and post-war. For example, the idea of the Japanese people being homogeneous and Japanese culture being pure and unique was the very basis of the wartime nationalistic ideology, and is repeated in the post-war *Nihonjinron*” (p. 44).

While the *Nihonjinron* writers have careful choices of words/sentences to entertain readers under these hidden messages, readers buy into the writers’ ambiguous and nonacademic explanations about Japanese uniqueness. What would motivate readers to believe these messages? The section focuses on reader’s interpretation of these books. In here, the foci of readers are business elites and educators who influence ordinary citizens.

#### Consumers of *Nihonjinron*: Business elites and educators

As mentioned, *Nihonjinron* presents subjective and ambiguous views about the uniqueness of Japanese people to entertain readers with light reading. The writers’ arguments are not based on research; however, some readers buy into the distinctiveness of the Japanese. In Yoshino’s findings from *Nihonjinron* readers, educators’ and business people’s specific interest in reading these books include cross-cultural and organizational/occupational concerns. *Nihonjinron* helps readers develop their personal identity and solve their occupational matters through reading *Nihonjinron* themes, including group orientation, hierarchy (vertical-stratification, intra-company solidarity), harmony, and *amae* (affectionate dependency), and interpersonalism (Yoshino, 1992, 1999).

From his qualitative interviews with educators and business elites, Yoshino revealed that the more they are exposed to *Nihonjinron*, the more abstract they are about Japanese uniqueness. It means that their view of Japanese culture is strongly influenced by *Nihonjinron* literature and they buy into the writers' arguments (Yoshino, 1992, 1999). The level of exposure to *Nihonjinron* varied between educators and business people. More business people than educators showed an interest in theories of Japanese society because many writers are business elites themselves who conclude their view of Japanese and non-Japanese through their business practice. Those who had first-hand experience in cross-cultural communication with foreign people tended to become more aware of their Japanese origins, which motivated them to read *Nihonjinron*. Elite people whose occupation is to manage employees, such as school principals and executive-class elites, are more likely to read *Nihonjinron* to receive some hints to manage their employees and staff. By reading core values of Japanese culture, especially business culture, which most *Nihonjinron* literature explains, they try to utilize these ideas to work cooperatively with employees. Especially, *Nihonjinron* helps executive people connect what they have seen at work with contents in Japanese behavioral characteristics, such as interpersonal communication and group-oriented business practice. In other words, the content is not new to them, but it provides "theoretical, conceptual and comparative perspectives on what they already feel about their own society in one way or another" (Yoshino, 1992, p. 143).

These people who influence the ordinary citizens would also be reproducers or redistributors of *Nihonjinron* arguments. The next part illustrates the role of reproducers in spreading Japanese uniqueness.

#### Reproducers of *Nihonjinron*: Cross-cultural manuals

In addition to the reader's side, Yoshino (1992, 1999) pays attention to "reproducer" and "distributor" which plays a role as an inter-mediator between academic *Nihonjinron* theories and ordinary people. He illustrates that "cross-cultural manuals" are often written by the staff of major Japanese companies whose business partnerships include non-Japanese companies. He uses the example of the Nippon Steel Corporation's *Nippon: The Land and Its People* whose themes include Japanese society, culture, and national character. The manual is in accordance with *Nihonjinron* themes and is made for practical uses in international business settings. The practical uses include a conversation manual for talking with foreign people in English. By encountering more foreign people in business, the Japanese business people are required to explain Japanese culture and cultural differences with non-Japanese customers. Thus, *Nihonjinron* is used to make these manuals and help business people communicate well with non-Japanese people.

The close examination of different purposes and social environments by *Nihonjinron* writers, readers, and re-distributors reveal how the ideology is created and spread to the masses. The conclusion is: "intellectuals write *Nihonjinron* as prescription for

behavior. The government turns it into a hegemonic ideology, and the corporate establishment puts it into practice” (Befu, 2001, p. 81).

Some say that *Nihonjinron* serves as a modern moral textbook outside of the classroom. The convenience of *Nihonjinron* positioned as a moral textbook in society lies in that it can escape from any criticisms of moral education and education in general due to being unofficial literature (Befu, 2001). In the next section, the focus of the paper moves to a new moral education sub-teaching material which in fact features patriotic narrations and the mono-ethnic view of Japanese society related to the *Nihonjinron* discourse. The sub-teaching material is under huge controversy in terms of the similarity of war-time moral education books called *shushin* (morals).

### **The Political Nationalism with Culture in Schools**

Kedourie (1960) states:

The purpose of education is not to transmit knowledge, traditional wisdom, and the ways devised by a society for attending to the common concerns; its purpose rather is wholly political, to bend the will of the young to the will of the nation. Schools are the instruments of state policy, like the army, the police, and the exchequer (as cited in Yoshino, 1992, p. 65).

This sentence explicitly explains that policies and goals of the national government affect the school curriculum, student’s learning environment, and school disciplines. In this

section, a new moral education textbook, *kokoro-no-noto* is used as a recent state intervention for nationalism in schools.

*Overview of Kokoro-no-noto (the Notebook for the Heart)*

In 2002, the Ministry of Education distributed a moral education sub-teaching material entitled, *Kokoro-no-noto* to all elementary and junior-high schools. The material has three versions for elementary schools (the first one for 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> graders, the second for 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders, the third for 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders) and one version for junior-high schools. Unlike official textbooks, this book is regarded as a sub-reading material which does not require any citizen's verification of appropriateness for using it in schools. Despite being sent to each school as a printed text, the Ministry of Education requested a report on how frequently a school used it in summer, 2002. Thus, Miyake (2003) argues that this book is a *de-facto* national textbook published by the Ministry of Education without authors' names. It can be also interpreted that the goal of the state, namely creating ideal Japanese citizens, is directly brought into schools (Itsumi, 2003). Moreover, according to discussions at parliament and the Ministry of Education Report, the purpose of this book is to diffuse national canons through children and spread these canons to parents, families, and communities.

The book consists of four topics: 1) about him/herself, 2) relation with others, 3) relation with nature and life, and 4) relation with groups and society. These topics are in

accord with the guideline for teaching moral education in elementary and junior-high school: mainly 1) about him/herself, 2) about relation with others, 3) relation with nature and something divine, and 4) relation with groups and society. Thus, this book aims clearly at using it as a moral education teaching material (Itsumi, 2003).

This book is a workbook in which narrations lead each student to fill out his or her reflection about these topics. By filling out blanks, each student attempts to find her or his own answers freely. However, narrations between one blank where a student writes his or her essay, definitely limits an answer due to the context of the narrations. In other words, by reading these narrations before filling out a blank, proper answers become somewhat clear. Furthermore, the answers are suggested to be shared with parents and teachers (Itsumi, 2003). Therefore, the goal of the nation in enhancing cultural nationalism is indirectly taught to children through *kokoro-no-noto*.

A major issue related to cultural nationalism is the “Love for Japan and Hope for its Progress” section of the book which had been distributed to junior-high schools. The section begins with these sentences:

In our nation, there are four distinct seasons (spring, summer, autumn, and winter) and beautiful climate. In each season, there are impressive scenes, sounds, colors, and winds which make our heart touched. When we expand our love of our homeland, our love connects to the love of Japan. It is

natural to hope for further progress. But, how much do we know about our country? Now, we are going to learn about Japan steadily and re-recognize our great tradition and culture. (*Kokoro-no-noto: Shakai ni ikiru ichiin to shit---shudan ya syakai tonon kakawari* [the Notebook for the Heart for junior-high school: As a member of society---the relation between groups and society], 2002, *Translated by author*)

Takahashi (2003) warns that these sentences describe as if the presence of the nation and patriotism is natural, although these are socially created. There is a gap between a hometown we can see and a nation we cannot see; however, it is linked as if it is naturally connected (Miyake, 2003). Moreover, by emphasizing “great tradition and culture,” the narration intentionally excludes other things, including the history of wars, conflicts, and oppression of minority groups (Miyake, 2003). Then, the question of who is included in “we” in the narration is critical. If “we” include those possess Japanese nationality, the narrations need to explain diversity among Japanese citizens due to the existence of minority groups, including *Ainu*, *Okinawan*, Korean-Japanese, and so on. However, the narration failed to enable readers to imagine cultural diversity within Japan. It is described as if each reader shares the same tradition, culture, background, and hope for the nation. In sum, the identity as Japanese people has already been taught in these narrations before each child tries to identify who he or she is in the process of writing her or his reflection

(Miyake, 2003).

Then, the narration continues as follows:

When we see the greatness of this country, and try to continue its greatness, loving Japan should not exclusively praise our nation [because we are] a member of the international society and are global citizens. Love for this country connects with love for the world. (Kokoro-no-noto: Shakai ni ikiru ichiin to shit---shudan ya syakai tonon kakawari [the Notebook for the Heart for junior-high school: As a member of society---the relation between groups and society], 2002, *Translated by author*)

In these sentences, the combination between the love for hometown and patriotism is similar to the tendency for the war-time education whose model was Nazi German's educational policy. As the Nazis did, the strategy of nurturing love from home town to the nation was actually used during World War II in Japan. However, by emphasizing the phrase, "loving Japan should not exclusively praise our nation [because we are] a member of the international society and are global citizens," some would say that patriotism is the natural result after we become aware of difference with foreigners and identity as Japanese in the international society (Takahashi, 2003).

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed why and how the national identity is created in the name of “Japanese culture,” “homogeneity,” and “uniqueness.” *Nihonjinron* helps explain how the uniqueness of Japanese culture is repeatedly stressed. The process of the diffusion of *Nihonjinron* discourse reveals that the state and *Nihonjinron* writers make it into an ideology in order to unite the nation. By providing light reading and simplistic expressions, readers seem to believe the discourse. In another point of view, *Nihonjinron* writers provide practical and useful information for readers who are concerned about occupational and cross-cultural matters in daily life. This is how the uniqueness and homogeneity of discourse is consumed. Furthermore, these ideas are reproduced by making cross-cultural communication manuals, stating these values as the philosophy of a company, and so on.

In contrast, the examination of the moral education workbook, *kokoro-no-noto* illustrates how the image of ideal Japanese citizens is described in narrations. By writing narrations in a way that hides patriotic nationalism in the narration, the moral textbook tells stories to readers with soft tone and ambiguous words. The state leads students to therefore become loyal and submissive citizens. Despite a different domain, the narration of the moral education book is very similar to the *Nihonjinron* discourse, such as the mono-ethnic view of Japanese people linking with the land, tradition, and culture. Furthermore, despite not being included in an analysis of the book, the way in which the state made, distributed,

and requested reports of the material is intrusive and a top-down approach to the masses.

Such exclusive discourse of Japaneseness has played a role in keeping minority groups and foreign residents separate from the ethnic Japanese. And, this is how Japanese identity has served for national unity and allowed the Japanese to “import and incorporate foreign cultural elements at will, since [its] process does not threaten their racial identity” (Befu, 1983, p. 243). Unfortunately, “Japanese internationalization [within and abroad] compels [the Japanese] to *draw a sharper line* than ever before between themselves and outsiders” (Befu, 1983, p. 244).

Stronach explains the Japanese society as follows:

Japanese society has always been extremely conservative in that maintaining the status quo has had greater salience than progress for progress' sake.

Japanese society, forms of behavior, and institutions do not change rapidly, 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 (1995, p. 46).

This statement was made over a decade ago, but I feel that the fundamental values and social system have not changed much since Stronach wrote the previous statement. As

mentioned in the introduction, Japan has been more multicultural than ever due to the increasing number of foreigners. Thus, the mainstream Japanese, need to be more critical and proactive about what they are told to believe for the benefit of the powerful elite.

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