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The 'Illusion' of Homogeneous Japan and National Character: Discourse as a Tool to Transcend the 'Myth' vs. 'Reality' Binary 単民族日本という"幻影”と国民性——神話対現実の二項対立を超える手立てとしての言説

Chris Burgess

The ‘Illusion’ of Homogeneous Japan and National Character: Discourse as a Tool to Transcend the ‘Myth’ vs. ‘Reality’ Binary[1]

Chris Burgess

One feature of contemporary writings on Japan is the framing of a ‘false’ homogeneous Japan ‘myth’ against the ‘reality’ of a mixed or multicultural Japan. One problem with this approach is that it ignores the fact that these positions represent (largely) indigenous discourses which, at different points in Japan’s history, have had – and, in the case of the former in particular, continue to have – a key role in structuring both national identity and social reality for many Japanese. This paper uses the notion of discourse, together with associated theories such as invented tradition, imagined communities, and the social stock of knowledge, to re-evaluate the myth vs. reality binary. A number of concrete examples are presented – both historical and contemporary – to illustrate how those discourses which resonate with popular lived experience can successfully take root in the popular psyche and become part of the Japanese world-view. The argument is that rather than dismissing such popular assumptions, perceptions, and beliefs as ‘illusory’, it would be more useful to closely examine their role in constructing and maintaining social reality and public policy in Japan.

> [M]ost national groups could be shown to be the variegated offspring of a number of peoples. Indeed they can. But it is not *what is*, but *what people believe is* that has behavioral consequences…(Connor 1994: 75)

Introduction

In January 2009, a second edition of Michael Weiner’s popular *Japan’s Minorities: The Illusion of Homogeneity*, was published (Weiner 2009). Although twelve years had passed since the original, in a largely unchanged *Editor’s Introduction* Weiner continues to refer to ‘the dominant paradigm of homogeneity’, ‘a master narrative/myth of racial and cultural homogeneity’ as justification for the present volume. It is unlikely Weiner is referring to the academic discourse on Japan. Since Mouer and Sugimoto (1986) wrote about – and deconstructed – what they called the ‘Great Tradition’ of homogeneous Japan, which they saw as the dominant model or image of Japanese society at that time, a veritable mountain of scholarly works on multicultural/transcultural/multi-ethnic Japan and its minorities has appeared.[2] Rather, Weiner seems to be referring to the *popular* and *political* discourse on national identity that Japanese society ‘remains wedded to’. This is clear from his (2004a) three volume edited collection entitled *Race, Ethnicity and Migration in Modern Japan*. There, he (2004b: 2-4) slams Japanese ‘pundits, politicians, and newsmagazines’ for reaffirming ‘commonsense understandings of Japan as a homogeneous and mono-cultural polity’ and for trying to ‘compress differences into a single set of national traits’.

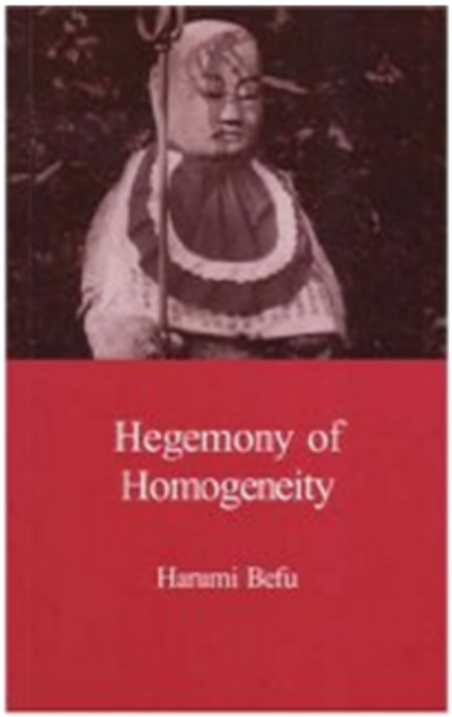
The problem is that the modern nation-state, whether Japan or anywhere else, relies for its very existence on the construction of a coherent set of national traits, traits that allow countries to function as ‘imagined communities’. Certainly, there are many possible types of imagined community, and not all stress ethnic or cultural homogeneity. Nevertheless, as Gluck (1990: 1) has described, each country weaves a national ‘mythistory’, a myth of common descent which forms a potent mix of stories and history “in which the myths are as important as the history and both are continually reworked.” Importantly, these ‘invented traditions’ are never completely invented; rather, they almost always need to resonate with the inherited experiences and memories of ordinary people if they are to be accepted and internalised (Notehelfer 1999: 436). This paper attempts to challenge the use of ‘myth’ in the pejorative sense of having no basis in fact and instead shows how, over time, various discourses have contributed to the construction of a Japanese world view, a view that is not ‘false’ or ‘illusory’, but rooted in everyday lived social reality and which holds significance and meaning for many Japanese.

The paper begins by revisiting Nihonjinron, writings on Japanese identity that have been accused of being the prime purveyor of national ‘myths’. Then, terms such as discourse and ideology are defined and explored. Since a national culture is itself a discourse, the following section examines nationalism and national character, particularly the notions of invented tradition and imagined communities. The central part of the paper focuses on the key ‘myth’ vs. ‘reality’ binary and asks whether it makes sense to dismiss these dominant and pervasive images as ‘invented’ or ‘false’, separate from the ‘real’ Japanese culture. Finally, a number of concrete examples are presented which illustrate the role of discourse in constructing and maintaining social reality and public policy in Japan.

Nihonjinron[3]

Nihonjinron is an extremely diverse genre of writing discussing Japanese (cultural) uniqueness. If defined broadly as “a discussion on national identity” (Dale 1986: 119), many of its major themes can be traced back to the Tokugawa period, although these only really begin to take hold during the period of nation-building following the Meiji Restoration (Kawamura 1980: 44; Pyle 1969: 53-55). Defined narrowly, however, Nihonjinron is a post-war product (Oguma 1995),[4] one shorn of the imperialistic symbolism found in pre-war discussions (Befu 2001: 140). This post-war reconstruction of Nihonjinron reflected not only the need to recover a sense of identity and pride amongst the Japanese after the loss of empire and the experience of occupation but also the increased visibility of the ‘Other’, particularly resident Koreans. The central premise of post-war Nihonjinron writings, most of which were published in the 1970s and 1980s, is that the Japanese are a homogeneous people (*tan'itsu*

minzoku) who constitute a racially unified nation (*tan'itsu minzoku kokka*) (Mouer and Sugimoto 1986: 406).



Whether defined broadly or narrowly, Nihonjinron has a number of key features. First, it attempts to portray a *holistic* picture of Japan, particularly through generalisations about national character, although this 'whole picture' (*zentaishō*) changes over time in response to Japan's relations with the outside world (Aoki 1990: 23). Second, as a discussion on national identity, Nihonjinron is not unique to Japan, but rather a species of cultural nationalism which is found everywhere (Befu 2001: 14; Yoshino 1992: chapters 3, 4, 10).[5] Third, Nihonjinron represents a (largely, but not exclusively) genuinely indigenous body of writing which has much in common with those nationalisms adopted by other regions or states previously dominated by the West as a means of reclaiming their own identities (Clammer 2000: 205; Moeran 1989: 183-4; Sugimoto 1999: 90-91). As Sugimoto (1999: 94) notes, Nihonjinron can form a balance or 'corrective' against a position which emphasises differences within society and minimises differences between societies, resulting in insensitivity to Eurocentric and other forms of 'external' cultural imperialism.[6] Fourth, Nihonjinron is a hugely popular consumer item (*taishūshōhizai*), one that has been so widely disseminated, embodied, internalised, and regurgitated by ordinary Japanese that it has contributed to the creation of a particular worldview (Goodman 1992: 5). One study found that over eighty percent of respondents were interested in the genre and had read about it in newspapers, estimating that at least one-quarter of the Japanese population have read one or more books in this category (Befu and Manabe 1990: 125, 126). Perhaps the most widely read is Ruth Benedict's *Chrysanthemum and the Sword* which has sold around 2.3 million copies in Japanese (Ryang 2005a: 29, chapter 2).[7]

Unfortunately, the influence of Nihonjinron on constructing social reality in Japan has often been overlooked by scholars more interested in trampling the 'bleeding corpse' (Gill 2001: 577) of a genre of writing that has come to represent something of a straw-man *par excellence*. As Reader (2003: 111) suggests, the central problem is that critics, perhaps "beguiled by the self-defining rhetoric of uniqueness that pervades nihinjinron", have come to see such discourses as 'unique' to Japan while, at the same time, underestimating the particularities of Japanese culture. In fact, as the following sections illustrate, the opposite is in fact true: Nihonjinron, in the narrow sense of a discourse on national identity, is not unique but the historical materials it draws on and the national culture it helps to (re)create are.

Amaterasu, the sun goddess emerging from a cave to bring light to the universe

Discourse and Ideology

Although typically referred to as a 'discourse', Nihonjinron (at least in the broad definition) appears to lack the unity or internal coherence to qualify as a single system of knowledge. Hall (1992a: 291) defines a discourse as follows:

> A discourse is a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – *i.e.* a way of representing – a particular kind of knowledge about a topic. When statements about a topic are made within a particular discourse, the discourse makes it possible to construct the topic in a certain way. It also limits the other ways in which the topic can be constructed.

Within Nihonjinron, there exist a number of discourses about Japaneseness, each of which take a different but internally unified and coherent perspective on the issue. These discourses may overlap, reinforce, or contradict each other, but together they limit what we are able to say or even think about the topic. Oguma (2002: 15) identifies two key currents – discourses – of the Japanese nation:

> One was the mixed nation theory which argued that the Japanese nation consisted of a mixture between a conquering people and a previous aboriginal people and others, while the second was the homogeneous nation theory, which argued that the Japanese nation had lived in Japan since time immemorial and that their lineage had been handed down to contemporary 'Japanese'. It is no exaggeration to say that the theories of the origin of the Japanese nation from time to today have scarcely moved a step beyond a number of variations on this framework. As was the case then, so today the two currents sometimes oppose and sometimes support one another, and have reflected the international status of Japan and the state of Japanese nationalism in each of the major periods from the 1880s to the present

Today, we may highlight the existence of a third discourse, that of 'multicultural Japan' which stresses tolerance and cultural autonomy as epitomised by the slogan *tabunka kyōsei shakai* (multicultural co-existing society) (Burgess 2004).[8] It is important to distinguish between this discourse and the mixed nation theory of imperial Japan outlined by Oguma above. Askew (2001: 113) observes that the assimilatory mixed nation theory actually provided the justification "for a wholesale assault on local traditions and customs" in the pre-war period. Ryang (2005b: 92) notes how Japan's imperial subjects, while ostensibly equal to their Japanese counterparts, were marked as *gai'chi* (literally, 'outlanders') in the household registry, a fact which worked to exclude them from attaining equal civil status. As Askew (2001: 114) concludes, those located on the periphery of Japan were frequently "defined as Japanese in terms of obligations, but as non-Japanese in terms of rights."

Together, such discourses comprise Japanese people's 'common-sense' or 'everyday knowledge', their 'taken-for-granted' image of national character. They reflect and determine social reality or what a people know about their world. Importantly, discourses are neither 'true' nor 'false'; rather, historically, "effects of truth are produced within discourse", with the dominant discourse defining the 'truth' of the situation at any particular moment (Foucault 1980: 118). As Hall (1992a, 292: 293) points out, statements are rarely ever simply 'true' or 'false' and the language we use distorts the process further; moreover, because people act on discourse, descriptions – definitions of reality – can become 'true': they have a self-fulfilling potency. Discourses are not only descriptive but prescriptive, providing a model or 'identity kit' (Gee 1989: 6, 7) for people in terms of how they say they (ought to) act and often how they do in fact act.[9] This is as true of the multicultural Japan discourse as the homogenous Japan discourse.[10] "[A]ny description that gains recognition will be destined to form part of the thing it describes", writes Neiburg (1998: 72) quoting Bourdieu, "…[w]e are dealing here not simply with notions and discourses but also with objects and practices."

Some writers prefer the term ideology to discourse (e.g. Befu 1987). The main problem with this is that 'ideology' carries certain nuances that can hinder our understanding of how these systems of knowledge work. Most problematic in the context of this paper is the association of ideology with false consciousness, specifically the traditional distinction between true ('scientific') statements and false ('ideological') statements (Hall 1992a: 292-3). But, as Ryang (2005a: 45, 60) points out, ideology is better seen not as 'false consciousness' – not as something separate from a 'genuine' Japanese culture – but rather as a real system of thought which creates its own reality.

A further problem with using the term ideology is that it gives the impression of manipulation and control from above. For example, Gluck (1985: 6-9) gives an excellent summary of ideology as theory, but focuses solely on the role of the elite or the establishment in the inculcation of nationalist ideologies during the late Meiji period. Garon's (1997) study of 'social management' during the twentieth-century appears to avoid a purely top-down perspective, but in the end his 'middle-class groups' simply cooperate and collaborate with the state. Finally, while McVeigh (2000), in his discussion of ideology and education, does look at individual resistance, it is resistance to "oppressive state" and corporate ideologies. Certainly, much of the literature attacking Nihonjinron paints a picture of dominant state actors and other ruling elites systematizing and diffusing ideas and ideals to a general population in order to enhance their own interests.[11] In actual fact, in the post-war period at least, the state has played a minimal role in the dissemination of Nihonjinron discourses (Befu 2001: 140). As Goodman (2002: 6-7) argues, it would be a mistake, especially given the education level in Japan, to suggest that the state can unilaterally impose policy on a passive population. Aoki (1990: 45) makes a similar point, noting that Nihonjinron writings, which are often published in popular *keimoshō* paperback form and contain hypotheses on Japanese society, are popular precisely because they are attractive, even tempting, to the average consumer.[12] Thus, in contrast to the term ideology, with all its Marxist 'top-down' associations, the notion of discourse is explicit in acknowledging the agency of individuals to choose (within certain parameters) to identify partly, wholly, or not at all with the various discursive positions "to which they are summoned" (Hall 1996: 14).[13] In terms of understanding nationalism, of which Nihonjinron is but one example, the point is that nations, although constructed essentially from above, "cannot be understood unless also analysed from below, that is in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings, and interests of ordinary people" (Hobsbawm 1992: 10).

Nationalism, National Identity, and National Character

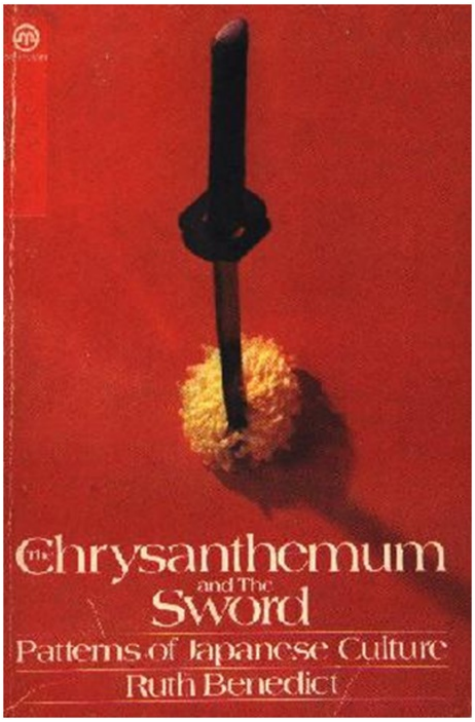
One notable – and rather ironic – feature of much that has been written about Nihonjinron is the underlying assumption that 'ideological' processes at work in Japan are unique to that country. For example, Henshall (1999: xix, 177) argues that Japan is more normative then most (Western) societies, noting that for 'Westerners' the country seems an "unappealing normative social context, one filled with prescriptive rules of conduct and form, one that discourages differences." Similarly, Garon (1997: xiv, 234, 237) contrasts the American ideal that government should not/could not mold the values of citizens with a Japan characterised by practices of social management and regulation which "seem foreign to Americans." The problem here, as Berger and Luckmann (1966: 13, 27, 37) point out, is that we take our every-day reality and knowledge as common-sense and very much for granted, so much so that it takes a significant effort to doubt that which is 'self-evident' in our own society. It is only when an individual – such as a foreigner – does not participate in this knowledge that they are able to see the discursive processes at work. Thus, while the Westerner looking at Japan may see "a powerful pattern of governance in which the state has historically intervened to shape how ordinary Japanese thought and behaved" (Garon 1997: xiv), they are unlikely to see the same processes at work in their home society.[14]

The tendency to see the discursive processes at work in Japan as unique has, somewhat ironically, gone hand in hand with a shift away from holistic Nihonjinron views of Japan that emphasise differences between (and minimise differences within) societies to a view of Japan that emphasises variation within (and minimises different between) societies. Certainly, the acknowledgement of diversity and social variation in Japan is an important development. But, as Henshall (1999: x) points out, by claiming that Japanese society is really no different from any other society we lurch to the other extreme:

> recent works during the late 1980s and 1990s have over-reacted against this holistic simplification and exaggeration [characteristic of Nihonjinron] by an excessive focus on diversity and conflict. They have also tended to water down the

> particularity of Japan by overly stressing elements of universality, in their cause of proving that Japan is really nothing special

Smith (1989: 715) goes further back in time, tracing the attack and rejection of the concept of national culture to the *Chrysanthemum and the Sword* which "offered an analysis so exclusively cultural that a corrective reaction was inevitable." Like Henshall, Smith (1989: 716) argues that the move to jettison the 'troublesome' concept of culture has gone too far, precluding any possibility of historical continuity and avoiding the common-sense notion that a country's culture shapes its systems and institutions.



The problem is how to reconcile unease towards a Nihonjinron style holistic account of Japan with the recognition that Japanese society is (and its members are) in many ways different to (those in) other societies. Ryang (2005a: 45) sees discourse as offering a way of out of this 'national character' dilemma:

> In a way, the persistence of discourse indeed preserves national character as a real substance, no matter how ideological such a substance may be. Discourse, as it were, both reflects and constitutes the reality. Just as no nation is free from nationalism, national myth, and self-righteous *raison d'etre*, the discourse of national character is inevitably fed back to the everyday life of individuals in a given nation. In this sense, we must treat national character as an ideological discursive formation – real it may be, but perhaps not entirely true…As long as we attribute a reality to ideology – ideology not as false consciousness but as a real system of thought – and insofar as there is a broad milieu of production, reception, and exchange of ideas and discourses about 'who we are and what makes us such and such a nationality', national character, understood as an ideological discursive field in which scholars and lay-people alike widely participate – that is, an historical product of the national-state system – does exist.

Ryang, like Hall (1992b: 292), recognises that a national culture is a discourse. In this sense, the Nihonjinron literature reflects a process common to all nation-states, namely:

> the use of history in order to construct and legitimate a sense of a commonly shared culture…there is not much difference between the manner in which the national identity is constructed in Japan and how it is constructed in other nation-states… What, of course, is unique is the material each can draw on to construct its sense of national identity' (Goodman 2005: 69)

When seen as a form of cultural nationalism – as a form of (national) culture (Smith 1991: 71) – the reason for Nihonjinron being holistic in nature becomes clear. Thus, when Hata and Smith (1983) criticise Nakane for painting a 'utopian' portrait of Japan, they are missing the point. As Benedict Anderson (1983) has pointed out, nations are 'imagined communities' which became possible on a mass scale only relatively recently when individuals living in a region came to be able to construct a collective and unified image of themselves through the printed word. These 'imagined communities "are established through the telling of common stories, the formation of communal myths, the shared sense of participating in the same daily narrative of life" (Keen 2007, 80). In other words, without 'national character' – that is, some sense of a common culture, shared values, and similar traits – the modern nation-state could not exist. And while nationalism does not necessarily entail cultural homogenisation, it does demand a single public culture with autonomy, unity, and identity (Smith 1991: 73: 146; 1995: 151). As a form of nationalism that constructs a coherent sense of national identity, the fact that the Nihonjinron literature typically paints a picture of Japan as ahistorical, uniform, harmonious, and monolithic should be entirely unsurprising.

Invention, Myth, and Reality

National character, in the sense of an imagined community, is sometimes referred to as 'myth'. However, Anderson (1983: 6) takes pains to debunk what he calls the 'falsity/genuineness' dichotomy.[15] As seen above, Anderson argues that a nation is socially constructed and ultimately imagined by the people who perceive themselves to be part of that group. Yet, this notion of 'imagined communities' is not supposed to suggest that such cultural units are not real; rather, despite never having met, it emphases that members possess a deep mental image of their communion. That the nation is a 'form of narrative' makes the idea of nation more, not less, powerful, "[a]n idea whose cultural compulsion lies in the impossible unity of the nation as symbolic force" (Bhabha 1990:2).

Books and newspapers – and, more recently, electronic media – create, maintain, and reinforce these discourses or narratives, creating what Appadurai (1996: 8) calls 'communities of sentiment', groups that begin to "imagine and feel things together."[16] Importantly, these mental images are more than mere internal perceptions: as Berger and Luckmann (1966: 13, 27, 37) argue, subjective meanings become objective facts, i.e. form the building blocks that compose social reality:

> The man [sic] in the street inhabits a world that is 'real' to him…and he knows…that this world possesses such and such characteristics…It is precisely this 'knowledge' that constitutes the fabric of meanings, without which no society could exist… Common-sense knowledge is the knowledge I share with others in the normal self-evident routines of everyday life. The reality of everyday life is taken for granted as reality.

For Berger and Luckmann, participation in what they call the 'social stock of knowledge' permits the location of individuals in society and individuals take quite different realities for granted between one society and another. There will be multiple realities (versions of knowledge) circulating both inside and outside a society at any one time, some dominant, others not. Perhaps more significantly, participation in the social stock of knowledge is based not on citizenship but on membership of a society. In other words, in a discursive framework terms like 'Japanese' refer not to nationality but to individuals who have been brought up or at least lived for some time in Japan who have internalised (*i.e.* become literate in) the relevant discourses.[17]

As Goodman wrote above, nations draw on different material for the images, narratives, and stories used in the construction of national identity. Hobsbawm (1983) describes this process of social construction as the 'invention of tradition', arguing that many cultural practices, customs, and values which were thought to be old are actually of quite recent origin. The 'invention of tradition', which Hobsbawm points out is more likely at times of rapid social change, is useful in understanding modernisation, the increasing importance of social cohesion, and the emergence of the modern nation-state. One of the main drawbacks with Hobsbawm's model, however, is his sharp distinction between (fixed) 'tradition' mobilised by elites and (variable) 'custom' created by ordinary people (Vlastos 1998: 4, 5). This makes little sense from a discursive point of view which stresses how identities are constructed interactively, in dialogue, a process of 'push and pull' between external discourses and individual subjectivities. The use of 'invention' is also potentially misleading as it again suggests the existence of some kind of false/genuine dichotomy. "To say that all tradition is invented", writes Ivy (1995: 21), "is still to rely upon a choice between invention and authenticity, between fiction and reality, between discourse and history." Notehelfer (1999: 433, 437), in a review of Hobsbawm, also highlights the pitfalls of a term like 'invention', stressing the importance of recognising that 'tradition' is created not in isolation by elites but rather in collaboration with 'ordinary people':

> While it is possible to conceive of contemporary Japanese inventing a tradition based on rice, or rice production, and even sake… it is hard to imagine that an invented tradition could be constructed for "ketchup" or "french fries" within the modern Japanese context…In the language of this book, what one needs is at least some element of linkage ("genealogies") to the past…. [H]istory…could never be a pure invention. It had to deal with evidence that was often deeply rooted in the lives and experiences of people. This is precisely where invented traditions run into resistance. Pure invention as history simply cannot work.

In the context of nationalism, Notehelfer's position has much in common with 'historicists' like Anthony Smith. Yoshino (1998) contrasts 'historicists' – those who see the nation as having deep roots in history – with 'modernists', like Hobsbawm, who see the nation as an exclusively modern phenomenon. Smith acknowledges that we may not find 'nations' as such in pre-modern epochs. However, he (1995: 57) does identify a number of looser collective cultural units which he calls 'ethnies': "named units of population with common ancestry myths and historical memories, elements of shared culture, some link with a historic territory and some measure of solidarity, at least among their elites." Smith (1991: 26-27, 45-46) sees Japan as a good example of an ethnie or ethnic nation and Yoshino (1998: 151-2) concurs, noting the existence in pre-modern Japan of a sense of Japanese identity based on a perception of cultural distinctiveness, albeit one restricted by class and geographical area.[18] What this means in the case of Japan is that the Meiji elites had a lot of material to utilise – material which came from both above and below – in the process of reconstructing a fragmented ethnic community into a cohesive modern state (Smith 1991: 105). In examining the way ethnic forms and content shape individual experience, Smith (1986 15, 16) lays special emphasis on the 'vital' role of myths and symbols which, far from being 'false' or 'illusory', generate an emotional attachment real enough for members "to fight and die for" (Anderson 1983: 7).

Evidence

Historically, nation-building 'myths' needed to be believable and imaginable – embedded in memory and experience – if they were to successfully take root. Gluck (1985: epilogue) contrasts the success of late Meiji ideology, "a process in which suasion outweighed coercion", with the coercive ideological formulations of the twenties and thirties which, because they seemed to be at odds with lived experience, required increasing 'artifice and force' to maintain. It is also probable that discourses are more likely to be successfully adopted if they possess a certain prestige or status, as is the case of norms associated with a powerful class or elite *in that society*, even though the ways of that group may be "of another world entirely" (Befu 1971: 50). For example, in Japan, one of the main processes through which modern Japanese identity came to be accepted as social reality was known as 'samuraisation'. Through this process, characteristics such as loyalty, perseverance, and diligence said to be held by a small (but elite) segment of the population – the samurai – were gradually extended through propaganda, education, and regulation to cover the whole of the population:

> Japan's modernization coincided with the samuraization process – the spread of the ideology of the ruling warrior class. Through introduction of the warrior ideology in a modified form in the Civil Code and through incorporation of this ideology in a modified form in the school curricula, the prestigeful warrior…customs began to supplant the local peasant forms...the values and institutions of the warrior caste permeated the common people (Befu 1971: 50, 52).

Of course, it was no coincidence that the traits associated with the samurai highlighted loyalty and obedience; in other words, samuraisation imposed a model of behavior – a discourse – on peasants and workers that, in the name of national unity, made control and coercion easier. This sometimes had terrible consequences, as with the compulsory mass suicides (*shūdan jiketsu*) of 1945, something that earlier would have been expected only of samurai.

In similar vein, Kinzley (1991, xiv) describes the 'myth-making' process that saw the emergence of a Japanese style industrial ideology, one

which “resonated with broadly accepted moral ideas and was couched in traditional moral language”. Thus, when Fujitani (1993: 79, 84) expresses astonishment that commoners took up emperor and Shinto myths that were “completely alien” to the majority, he is missing the point: these ‘inventions’ were workable “precisely because they were seen to have been part of the fabric of Japanese life in the past and could thus be so again” (Kinzley 1991: xv, xvi). These historical examples illustrate how myth and reality interact, with myth used as the basis for policy and policy creating myth.

Yamato-takeru, mythical warrior who appeared in the Kojiki and Nihongi

One ‘myth’ which has had a significant impact on public policy in modern times is the ‘myth’ of homogeneity discussed earlier. Even those who deride this discourse as ‘illusory’ acknowledge its influence on postwar Japan; Ishi (2005: 271) describes it as “a master narrative that has not changed drastically even today.” Of course, ‘homogeneity’ can mean different things; however, when the Japanese are referred to as a *tan’itsu minzoku* (homogenous people) living in a *tan’itsu minzoku kokka*, the meaning is typically one nation, one race, and one language/culture. Much like the leaves of a clover, the three elements are portrayed as part of a whole (Burgess 1997: 99). The key term is *minzoku* which, like a modern day equivalent of Smith’s ethnies, encompasses more than just race or ethnicity. Morris-Suzuki (1998: 32, 87) defines it as the Japanese version of the German *Volk*, a term combining cultural and genetic aspects which emphasises the organic unity of the Japanese people/nation as a community “bound together by ties of language or tradition.” Over the years there have been a great many statements by the Japanese political elite referring to the Japanese as a *tan’itsu minzoku*:

Table 1: *Tan’itsu Minzoku* (Homogeneous People) Statements by the Political Elite in Japan

Year	Name (Position at Time)	Statement
1986	Nakasone Yasuhiro (Prime Minister)	Because Japan is a *tan'itsu minzoku* it is able to maintain high educational standards; however, because America, in contrast to Japan, is a multicultural society, this is difficult
1988	Nakajima Gentaro (Education Minister)	It is right that textbooks describe (Japan) as being composed of the Yamato race. According to Ministry of Education thinking, Japan is mostly (*hobo*) a *tan'itsu minzoku*
1995	Yamazaki Taku (Defence Agency Director General)	The fact that Japan is a country of one race, one nation, and one language has made it strong. This was demonstrated by the consideration shown by Japanese to other Japanese during relief efforts following the Great Hanshin Earthquake
2001	Suzuki Muneo (Diet Member)	There are no other countries like Japan with such a high degree of *tan'itsu minzoku*
2001	Tanaka Makiko (Foreign Minister)	Japan is a *tan'itsu minzoku*
2005	Aso Taro (Minister for Internal Affairs & Communications)	Japan, a country with one culture, one civilization, one race, and one language, is a country like no other
2007	Ibuki Bunmei (Education Minister)	That the Yamato race has long-ruled Japan is a historical fact. It is a very homogeneous country…since time immemorial, the Japanese people have governed Japan
2008	Nakayama Nariaki (Minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism)	Japan is very inward-looking, what can I say, tan-itsu minzoku? It does not have much to do with the rest of the world, so tends to be insular. First, in order to open up Japan, Japanese people must open up their hearts.

Notes: Statements gathered from various media sources. Translations are the author's.

Although such remarks typically come in for heavy criticism from (mostly) non-Japanese journalists and academics, it is significant to note that they generally spark little controversy in the domestic sphere. For example, then Prime Minister Nakasone's 1986 remarks that Japan's high standard of education was due to its racial homogeneity went largely unnoticed locally; the Japanese press only picked up the story after it had started making waves in the American media (Burgess 2007a). In contrast, DPJ leader (and now Prime Minister) Hatoyama's April 2009 statement that 'the Japanese archipelago is not only for the Japanese' generated a 'firestorm' on internet bulletin boards in the form of over 60,000, mostly negative, comments (*Sankei Shimbun* 2009).

The point is that ruling elites in Table 1 drew on a conventional popular discourse which views Japan as (relatively) homogeneous.[19] Hatoyama's remarks, on the other hand, violated conventional wisdom. Public surveys and opinion polls provide some evidence that 'homogeneous Japan' is indeed the dominant discourse amongst the average Japanese. For example, the 2003 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) on national identity – the second survey of its kind following the initial 1995 survey – contained a number of questions which shed light on Japanese attitudes concerning homogeneity and ethnic identification.

Table 2: How Important is the Japanese Language, Feeling Japanese, and Having Japanese Ancestry for being truly Japanese?

	Very important	Fairly important	Not very important	Not important at all
Japanese Language	45.8% [39.4%] (57.4%)	32.6% [31.0%] (29.1%)	16.1% [21.9%] (8.2%)	5.5% [7.8%] (3.1%)
Feeling Japanese	53.3% [56.2%] (56.0%)	34.3% [32.8%] (31.2%)	9.7% [8.8%] (7.3%)	2.6% [2.2%] (2.7%)
Having Japanese Ancestry	42.1% (33.4%)	30.0% (28.8%)	19.8% (21.9%)	8.1% (12.7%)

Source: (GESIS 1995: II-16, 19; 2003: II-23, 24, 29, 30, 31, 32)

Notes: Percentages do not add up to 100 because 'can't choose' and 'refuse' are omitted from the table. Figures in square brackets show the percentage from the 1995 survey (although the ancestry question did not appear in the previous survey). Figures in round brackets are the average for all countries in the survey. I am indebted to Nagayoshi (forthcoming) for bringing my attention to the ISSP and for hints on data analysis.

Table 2 suggests that language, feeling Japanese, and ancestry are considered key aspects of being Japanese; however, whereas language and country identification are considered important both inside and outside Japan, more importance is attached to ancestry (blood) in Japan, with 42.1% considering this a very important component of being Japanese, compared with an average of 33.4% internationally. With regard to change over time, while the importance of feeling Japanese showed little change, in the more recent survey more importance was attached to being able to speak Japanese. If Table 2 reveals something about Japanese attitudes towards linguistic and racial homogeneity, Table 3

suggests that cultural homogeneity is of equal or greater importance to the Japanese, although a significant minority disagree strongly with the majority position:

Table 3: It is Impossible for People who do not Share Japan's Customs and Traditions to become fully Japanese

	Agree strongly	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Disagree strongly
…impossible	28.3% [27.2%] (19.5%)	25.5% [25.1%] (32.2%)	17.9% [18.7%] (15.9%)	10.6% [12.7%] (22.3%)	17.6% [16.4%] (6.0%)

Source: (GESIS 1995: II-42; 2003: II-89, 90)

As discussed earlier, Japanese attitudes towards homogeneity are inextricably tied to the concept of *minzoku*, a term which means much more than race or ethnicity. One of the few ISSP questions to directly address this concept (Table 4) showed that almost 95% of Japanese feel close or very close to their *minzoku*, more or less unchanged from 1995, a finding which suggests that homogeneity can only be understood in Japan in terms of a collective or holistic representation rather than individual elements such as language or culture.

Table 4: How Close do you Feel to your *Minzoku*?

	Very close	Close	Not very close	Not close at all
…how close?	52.0% [67.7%] (34.8%)	42.2% [29.1%] (41.5%)	5.2% [3.0%] (10.8%)	0.6% [0.2%] (4.3%)

Source: (GESIS 1995: II-80; 2003: II-149, 150)

Notes: This question was not asked in nineteen/ten countries in the 2003/1995 surveys respectively.

The strong sense of identification with a homogeneous group results in an 'us' vs. 'them' mentality which manifests itself in resistance to migration and migrant settlement. For example, 88.9% of Japanese (up from 85.1% in 1995) thought 'it is better for society if groups maintain their distinct customs and traditions' as opposed to 11.1% who thought it 'better if groups adapt and blend into the larger society' (1995: II-44; 2003: II-93, 94).[20] Tables 5 and 6 reveal attitudes towards legal and illegal immigrants respectively:

Table 5: Do you think the Number of Immigrants to Japan nowadays should be…?

	Increased a lot	Increased a little	Remain the same	Reduced a little	Reduced a lot
…immigrants should be…	2.9% [3.5%] (2.7%)	10.3% [12.1%] (7.2%)	34.9% [42.1%] (29.2%)	27.3% [26.2%] (25.0%)	24.6% [16.1%] (24.7%)

Source: (GESIS 1995: II-49; 2003: II-105, 106)

Table 6: Japan Should Take Stronger Measures to Exclude Illegal Immigrants

	Agree strongly	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Disagree strongly
…exclude…	65.8% [51.5%] (40.0%)	20.4% [22.4%] (32.7%)	8.7% [16.4%] (11.7%)	2.2% [4.2%] (7.4%)	2.9% [5.6%] (3.0%)

Source: (GESIS 1995: II-85; 2003: II-128, 129)

As Tables 5 and 6 show, Japanese attitudes are more negative than global attitudes towards migration.[21] And just as attitudes towards migration in Europe, America, and Australia have hardened in recent years (Burgess 2007c: 53-55), so have those in Japan. The ISSP findings are supported by domestic polls. For example, a 2000 Cabinet Office Survey (2000) revealed that less than one in ten Japanese have opportunities to speak or interact with foreigners; over 40% say they hardly ever had the chance to even see foreigners. United Nations data backs this up: figures show that Japan is one of the few industrialised countries not to have experienced the tremendous inflow of international migrants characteristic of other developed countries (Burgess 2007b: table 1). This is not to say that minorities[22] do not exist; rather, as Gill (2001: 575) points out, their relative *smallness* is central. Thus, the 'myth' of homogeneity persists because it both resonates with and seems true to people *and* can be verified statistically. In turn, this discourse – the perceptions that form the 'truth' of the topic at any one time – serves to limit the kind of political solutions actually possible, in this case the continuation of what Pak (1998: 140-42) calls Japan's 'no (unskilled) immigration' policy.

Connected to the homogeneous Japan discourse is one which sees rising migration and foreign crime as a threat to public security. In the most recent ISSP survey, 71.7% of Japanese respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that 'immigrants increase crime rates', up from 65.3% in 1995 (GESIS 1995: II-45; 2003: II-95, 96). Domestic polls show similar results: in a recent Cabinet Office survey (2006), 84.3% thought public safety had worsened over the past ten years, with the largest number (55.1%) putting this down to "a rise in crimes by

foreigners visiting Japan." In recent years, this 'foreign crime' (*gaikokujin hanzai*) discourse has become so widely promulgated by the media that it has come to drive policy, specifically the targeting of foreigners by the police (Hamai and Ellis 2006). The resulting increase in arrests can be used as 'proof' that non-Japanese are more likely to commit crime: in this way, the image, to some extent, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that influences and reinforces actual policy. The interesting thing about the *gaikokujin hanzai* discourse is that a detailed content analysis of the data relating to foreign crime actually shows many of the statements to be empirically false (Shipper 2005; Yamamoto 2004)[23] As a result, despite statistical tricks and sensationalist reporting, there are signs that the discourse is losing the 'believability' necessary for it to be accepted as 'truth'.[24]

Conclusion: From a Sociology of Error to a Sociology of Truth

Connor (1994: 75), whose quote opened this paper, asks why scholars have been so slow "to discover what the masses have felt and what political leaders have recognized." For Connor, a key factor has been the tendency to ignore the fundamental distinction between fact and perceptions of fact. This tendency can be clearly seen in Japanese studies, as epitomised in the work of Weiner and many others who seek to challenge the 'popular', 'common-sense', or 'conventional' view of Japan as homogenous and contrast this 'myth' with the 'reality' of multicultural Japan. In the process, notions of national character and culture have been given short shrift, dismissed as emblematic of a Nihonjinron responsible for disseminating the 'illusion' of a homogeneous Japan. What is striking in all of this is the (often patronising) way popular representations tend to be dismissed as 'false', 'inaccurate', or 'illusory', even while acknowledging that they constitute a widespread assumption that many Japanese believe form a key part of the experience of being Japanese (for one more example of this, see Martinez 2005: 186). This is not to say that most scholars of Japan are unaware of the pitfalls of simplistically dichotomising Japanese society into something illusory/homogenous versus something real/heterogeneous. But many do forget the central truth that the nation that is Japan – or any other nation for that matter – is a discourse, an imaginative construct held together by 'myth' and 'tradition'. Also easily forgotten is that bureaucrats and policy makers often act on these deep-seated beliefs, with very concrete results.

The notions of myth and discourse, being concerned with collective meaning-making, would appear to be an ideal tool for the sociologist; however, as Wasson (2007: 3137) notes, few have risen to the challenge of studying such processes. Two individuals who did rise to the challenge, albeit employing different terminology, were Berger and Luckmann. Writing forty years ago, they (1966: 22) outlined an approach they called the 'sociology of knowledge', one they forecast would become "an important aid in the quest of any correct understanding of human events." The key questions for this sociology of knowledge was to ask *what* passes for knowledge in society and *how* these realities (and not others) have come to be taken for granted. Although a little late, this paper has attempted to breathe new life into Berger and Luckmann's proposal by providing a preliminary framework for a sociology of knowledge for 21st century Japanese society. Specifically, the hope is that future research will concern itself less with 'myth' versus 'reality' binaries – the 'validity' or 'invalidity' of knowledge as Berger and Luckamann (1966: 15, 24) put it – and instead produce more in-depth and detailed case-studies which illustrate the role of discourse in the construction of social and political reality in contemporary Japan.

What are the practical implications of the arguments presented here for researchers? Specifically, what forms might future research take? Certainly, as the ISSP data has illustrated, questionnaire and survey data can be a valuable source of information on what ordinary people (say they) think and believe. Statistics too, such as numbers of non-Japanese in Japan (Burgess 2008: Table 2), can be useful in building a picture of everyday lived experience. Moreover, given the importance of 'print capitalism' in the construction of an 'imagined community', an analysis of popular books, magazines, comics, and newspapers can provide a discursive snapshot of social reality at a particular moment in time (see, for example, the analysis of minority-related themes and keywords in daily newspapers in Japan in Burgess (2008: Table 1)). Perhaps more importantly, we need to take into account how the electronic media – 'electronic capitalism' – has, in recent years, transformed everyday discourse by offering 'new resources for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds' (Appadurai 1996: 3). Indeed, the need to consider the role of the media in Japan is particularly acute given the country's high literacy rates, unrivalled print circulation and consumption, and rapid adoption of new media, across all ages.[25] Advertising is another area which, in recent years particularly, has become highly influential in reinforcing cultural stereotypes (Moeran 1996: 108). Finally, Connor (1994: 76) recommends analysing speeches of national leaders (*c.f.* Table 1) together with pamphlets and programmes of political and other organizations to gain insights into the 'emotional and psychological dimensions' of nationalism.

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Notes

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[2] See (Burgess 2007b) for a list of some of these 'multicultural' texts.

[3] For a more detailed overview of Nihonjinron, see Burgess (2004).

[4] Although Oguma's central argument seems to be that the homogeneous nation theory was a postwar phenomenon, elsewhere he (1995: 31-32) states that this *tan'itsu minzokuron* was one of two ideologies that had been around since the 1880s. The other was the mixed nation theory (*kongō minzokuron*).

[5] Most countries have cultural models or systems of ideas about what it means (and, even more importantly, what it does not mean) to be a national. The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), which was active until 1975, is probably the most obvious example. A more recent example is the use of terms like 'un-American' or 'un-Australian' to describe anti-globalisation or anti-war protestors. Interestingly, such phrases (phrases which suggest a firm image of national character) appear much less common in contemporary Japan, although in the early twentieth century terms such as *han-nihonjin* and *hikokumin* were reportedly used towards citizens who did not express sufficient patriotic fervor (Morris-Suzuki 1998: 105).

[6] Although there has been a flood of writings attacking the Nihonjinron genre, few of those writers pause to reflect on the 'precariousness of

their position' (Spivak 1988: 271) or of the continued presence of Orientalism in the Western tradition of Japanese Studies (Minear 1980; Susser 1998).

[7] Other examples include Nakane's *Tate Shakai* and Doi's *Amae no Kōzō*, both of which figure in the Japan Foundations list of the 100 most influential books for understanding Japan. (link).

[8] A fourth discourse, which I tentatively call 'individual Japan', can perhaps also be identified. This is epitomised by popular figures such as Koizumi and Horiemon, as well as Fujiwara's (2005) runaway bestseller *Kokka no Hinkaku* (Style of a Nation). Advertised on the cover as 'epoch-making' (*kakkiteki*) Nihonron, *Kokka no Hinkaku* emphases, bushido-style, the importance of *individual* (rather than group) feeling or spirit (*jyōcho*), This shows that Nihonjinron, though necessarily holistic, does *not* necessarily have to paint Japan as a collective and group-oriented society.

[9] See (Befu 2001: 78-80) on Nihonjinron as a prescriptive model. Area studies itself is discursive, offering a particular worldview that is both holistic and prescriptive: "area studies promoted descriptions", writes (Harootunian 2000: 46), "masking prescriptions."

[10] For example, Graburn *et al* (2008: 1) make it clear that 'new Japan' in the title of their book is prescriptive as well as descriptive. For more analysis on this point see Burgess (2007b: footnote 16; 2008: footnote 2).

[11] For examples, see Weiner (1997: inside front cover), Yoshino (1992), and Dale (1986). Goodman (1992: 12) notes that this 'top-down' stance is "closely aligned to the Marxist concept of 'false consciousness' – the inability to recognise what is in their own best interests – of the majority of society."

[12] Aoki mentions a number of times that Benedict's ideas are simply hypotheses (*katei*). This is echoed by Goodman (1992: 5) who notes that the theses published by anthropologists in their attempt to *explore* the way Japanese see their world can lead to the creation of a particular worldview. Presumably this is only possible if they capture the imagination of their audience or 'strike a chord'.

[13] For Goodman (1992: 12; 2005: 67), the overly mechanistic connection drawn in the anti-Nihonjinron literature between dissemination of 'ideology' and its acceptance disregards ordinary people's ability to accept or ignore discourse. As Hall's quote makes clear, people are subject to the pull of a variety of discourses including class, age, gender, region, and ethnicity. Although this paper focuses on discourses of national identity because they are argued to be 'fundamental' (see footnote 16), this does not mean that everybody in Japan behaves and lives the same way; on the contrary, individual agency is central to any understanding of the discursive process.

[14] Note also van Wolferen's (1989: 8) comment that truth in Japan is 'socially constituted'. Herman and Chomsky's (1994: xi) argument that the subtle propaganda system operating in the 'democratic' US is far more effective in putting over a patriotic agenda than one with official censorship highlights the naivety of a position which portrays Japan as the more 'normative' and socially managed society.

[15] Clifford (1986: 6), in his discussion of ethnographic 'fictions', makes a similar point: "the word as commonly used in recent textual theory has lost its connotation of falsehood, of something merely opposed to truth."

[16] The communities need not necessarily be national ones. Groups within a nation may also form 'communities of sentiment'. Moreover, as Appadurai points out, there are increasing numbers of transnational communities which operate beyond the boundaries of the nation, a point also made by Anderson (1998) in his discussion of long-distance nationalism. Here, however, I limit the discussion to national communities because, as Smith (1991: 143) argues convincingly, national identity remains the most 'fundamental' identity.

[17] This addresses Ryang's (2005a: 199-200) criticism of what she calls the 'nationalization of Japanese culture', "the privileged assumption that equates Japanese culture with Japanese nation."

[18] Of course, even if we accept the existence of pre-modern looser cultural collectivities ('ethnies'), these would not necessarily result in a stronger sense of national identity. Ethnic identity, despite often having a longer history, is no more solid or natural than national identity: both forms of identity can be fabricated, altered, and manipulated (Vervoorn 2006: 43). Indeed, one could equally argue that it is those nations with a weak historical footprint and heterogeneous populations (like America) that found/find it necessary to employ more explicit forms of nationalism. The question is why texts such as, say, Obama's January 2009 inaugural speech or his wife's 'One Nation' speech, do not elicit the same form of scrutiny as similar pronouncements by Japanese politicians (on the question of unequal scrutiny, albeit in a different context, see Cave (2002)).

[19] I say 'relatively' because few, if any, actually believe that Japan is *completely* homogeneous. For example, Aso later clarified his remarks saying that he had meant that Japan was *relatively* homogeneous. However, such qualifications are generally ignored by anti-Nihonjinron writers who stress only "strenuous government and nationalist led attempts to argue that Japan is a totally homogeneous culture"(Clammer 2001: 146).

[20] Of course, this could be interpreted as support for multiculturalism; however, as I (2004) have argued elsewhere, the Japanese brand of multiculturalism is exclusionary and essentialising rather than accepting of difference. As evidence for this, Nagayoshi (forthcoming) demonstrates a strong correlation between ethno-nationalistic feelings and endorsement of 'multiculturalism'; she argues that Japanese people regard their own brand of multiculturalism not as conflicting with but rather as strengthening homogeneity. She concludes that since many Japanese are indifferent to multiculturalism it is unlikely to spread.

[21] Critics who argue for the 'inevitability' of increased migration based on demographic and other factors fail to understand that policy is often discursively driven: elite predispositions and public perceptions play an important role in the political decision-making process (Itoh 1998). The result is frequently, to the outsider, policy that appears irrational or even contrary to the national interest.

[22] On the definition of the term 'minority', see Burgess (2008).

[23] To take one example, despite the fact that one of the key statements in the foreign crime discourse is that *rising* numbers of illegals has made Japan less safe, government estimates on numbers of illegal migrants – mostly overstayers – have *fallen* significantly in recent years (Burgess 2008: table 2).

[24] Of course, the fact that few Japanese have contact with foreigners means that the issue for most is beyond their personal experience.

Nevertheless, the *gaikokujin hanzai* discourse does appear to be losing its appeal, while a new discourse, that of *kōrei(sha)hanzai* (elderly crime), is gaining popularity. For example, a search of Japanese sources in the Factiva database for 2008 produced 94 hits for the former and 42 hits for the latter, a dramatic change from 2003 when the number of hits were 453 and 2 respectively.

[25] Surveys (e.g. telecomasia.net 2007) have shown that older Japanese spend as much time online as the young, with blogging reportedly increasingly popular among housewives. In fact, according to a 2006 survey, despite the fact that Japanese is only spoke by 1.8% of the world's population, Japanese was the most common language used in blog posts (37%), eclipsing English (36%) (Daily Yomiuri 2008).

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