

The myth of “Nihonjinron”, homogeneity of Japan and its influence on the society

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Introduction

According to the United Nations' Report on racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and all forms of discrimination (Commission of Human Right, 2006), Japan's population is 127.7 million, out of which 98.45 per cent are Japanese nationals in 2006. This includes one indigenous population, the Ainu, and the foreigners, which occupy only 1.55 per cent of the population. The reporter examined whether racism and xenophobia exists in Japan, and found that it does. They say that minority groups in Japan are socially marginalized, ignored in political nature, and there are serious historical and cultural factors, which are ignored, but lead to the discrimination in reality. In 2014, the UN reported that “racism in Japan is still deep and profound, and the government does not recognize the depth of the problem” (Brincrest and Gannon, 2014). They also mention the ignorance of the Japanese Government and media about the race issue in Japan. The Japan Times Herald wrote, that no news and report showed up in Japanese media after the UN released its report on Japan.

On the contrary, the Japanese Government insists that racism does not exist in Japan. Because the definition of “race” in the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination does not fit the minority groups in Japan (Maeda, 2010). Against this government's opinion that they deny the existence of racism in Japan, the committee warns that Japan has to recognize the problem and define “race” and racism in the Japanese Constitution. And they demand the Japanese Government to create laws and regulations to prevent and punish discrimination in the country (the committee, 2014).

From these distinct statement differences on race and racism between the Japanese Government and the UN, it is apparent that there is deep misunderstanding or mis-recognition of race. Although Japan entered into a treaty of International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in 1995, it can be argued that it does not improve the situation as long as they do not fully understand that racism exists in Japan. The problem is more difficult to deal with, because the government does not have a definition of race and does not admit the existence of racism in Japan.

In order to correct this gap of understanding race and racism, it is necessary to understand “Nihonjinron (Japan's theory)”, which is the widely accepted idea that Japan is a homogeneous country. People say that those who live in Japan are racially and culturally homogeneous. Therefore, their view is this; racism does not exist in Japan, because there is no minority group in Japan. The Japanese Government's denial of racism is based on this concept. It can be argued, therefore, understanding and correcting “Nihonjinron” is the most important way to talk about racism in Japan. Hence, in this report, I focus mainly on the problems of “Nihonjinron”; how this has been created through history, how this idea leads to “not-racism” racism in Japan, and speculate upon what it means to be a Japanese.

Racism in Pre-modern History in Japan (~1868)

Before they encountered the concept of race and racism, of which the Japanese Government is denying the existence of, racism actually existed in Japan, as in the form of invasion of the north or “Buraku” discrimination. Moreover, it is difficult to say that Japan is racially and culturally homogeneous throughout its history. Until Japan underwent the modernization of the mid-1800s, the foundational features of “Nihonjinron”, which is the Emperor system based on mythology, group-oriented culture and collectivism, was

gradually created in the society.

In 1989, the Japanese Government reported that there is no ethnic minority in Japan officially; however, the country has its history deeply related to foreigners from continental Asia. For instance, there are the evidences of migrant workers in the pre-historic period, and that of a Chinese group officially admitted by the government under Edo dynasty (Asano, 1993). Moreover, Ishiro (2002) said that it is quite recent that Japan had become a country, which contains all the regions, which it has today. For instance, Tohoku region, the north region, was not included in an ancient country centering on the south part, and Okinawa and Hokkaido were only integrated after 19th century. So this implies that there should be some variation between cultures in different regions. Therefore, it cannot be said that Japan is a homogeneous country with only one culture and one ethnic group throughout its history.

This does not mean that Japan was multi-cultural, or a multi-racial country, because there was racism throughout the history, which people does not recognize as “racism” today. Discrimination against “Buraku” people is considered to have started from the feudal era of the Edo Period(1603-1867), under the caste-like system which put the humble people who were called *eta* or *hinin* at the bottom of the hierarchy(the committee, 2006). Maeda (2010) says that the Japanese government does not admit the existence of racism because the discrimination in Japan does not fit the definition of race, which they consider as biological features such as skin colour. However, this “Buraku” discrimination is racism because it is discrimination based on people’s social and cultural significance and their lineage which was considered to be different, and this matches the definition of racism today (Law, 2010).

Asano (1993), in his article, says the concept of a “nation” and “nationals” as Japan and Japanese emerged after the modernization in the late 1800s , hence, before that period, there was not a strong theory on Japan’s race. However, Paku (2002) says that an emperor has been a key figure in the society and a key factor of the Japanese people’s identity throughout the history. The ancient literature, “Kojiki” written in the 6th century, says that Japan is a country where the emperors, who are the direct descent of god (*Amaterasu*), rule over the people who are also in the lineage of the god. Therefore, all the people in Japan ruled by the emperor are considered to be of the same consanguinity, the same race. At this point, it can be said that Japan’s racialization of themselves as a different race from other people had already started.

In addition to this racialization, Japan already had a foundational feature of "Nihonjinron" before the modernization and the emergence of nationalism along with it. The Japanese society, according to Ruth Benedict “The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture”, was based on the culture of “group-orientation” and “embarrassment”. These elements of Japanese culture encourages the ideas of racial and cultural homogeneity because this idea is oppressed over the Japanese people.

Therefore, racism existed in Japan in the pre-war period. And although the idea of homogeneity exists, Japan has not actually been a homogeneous country with one race, culture and ethnicity. Throughout the history, the country has been, rather diverse cultural and ethnical region. However, the idea which Japan has been a homogeneous country from the beginning, as some anthropologists still insist, was encouraged by mythology and cultural factors in the pre-modern period. And it has still remained in the society today. In the post-modernization period, Japan developed this idea further extremely under its imperialism, and the idea also motivated Japan to be more nationalistic and invading army to other Asian countries.

Racism and Imperialism through Modernization of Japan: Meeting Western Racism (1868~1945)

The influence of the Western idea of race was huge in Japan. The Japanese Government was desperate for getting the country modernized and industrialized, in order to resist invasion by European countries, and they tried to learn how to do so from them. Therefore, Japan had a turning point then, being exposed to the new ideas of race and culture. They had met the idea of race, which is based on physical features such as skin color, and developed eugenism along with socio-darwinism. As a result of mixing the new knowledge, and its pre-modern context about race, they developed their own new form of racialization and race categories within the country to protect its national sovereignty and to

justify its invasion and discrimination to other Asian populations under the imperialism.

In 1868, the Meiji Restoration, which restructured the government from its traditional system to the new system, started. This restoration occurred due to the demand of strengthening the country, in order to avoid being colonized by European countries. During this period, many Japanese scholars were sent abroad. They studied the politics, society, and culture in Europe, and brought the knowledge back to Japan in an attempt to modernize Japan like those countries. Hence, a large amount of efforts were made during this period to absorb Western culture and science, and they had gotten huge influence from the West. Therefore, it is an important time period when people faced the new idea of “race” in European context, which the Japanese government uses now as a tool to justify their racism in Japan.

This new idea of race, which was different from what Japan had used to have in the pre-war period, was brought to Japan by some scholars (Weiner, 2009). This idea of race, which mainly was based on people’s physical features, was completely new to them. This was because that these scholars faced cultural, ethnic and racial diversity while studying in Europe, and also because Japan openly started to trade with other countries. One of the key figures during this time is Yukichi Fukuzawa, one of the most famous Japanese enlightenment thinkers. He lived during the period of Meiji restoration, and visited many European countries, Hong Kong, and the U.S. His reports and books about these countries were widely read by people. He wrote books on how to make the country stronger and civilized (Higuchi, 1985). He introduced five different races in his book, which were white, yellow, brown, black, red. He says that different races have distinct features, white as intelligent, yellow as hard-working, red as aggressive, black as lazy, and brown as wild (Lin,). These simple and typical attributions to different racial groups were mentioned in his books and implying that yellow race, which Japanese people belong to, should be able to achieve the same development as Europeans had done. This idea of races came to Japan during this period and has remained in today’s society too.

However, Japan did not want to accept this race categorization as it was told. In this theory of 5 different races, Japanese people belong to the yellow race, which includes many other Asian populations. In the imperial Japan, nevertheless, people tried to differentiate the Japanese race from other populations, which belong to the yellow race too. At this time, anthropology was encouraged in order to prove Japan’s distinctive racial and cultural potential as a country, and to study Japan’s origins (Itano, 2013). What worked with anthropological evidences to prove Japan’s “purity” and superiority to other Asian populations was eugenism. We can tell that Fukuzawa was one of those thinkers who had this idea. In his writings, he had suggested, for example, the control of marriage and birth, in order to improve the race and strengthen the country (Ameda, 2000). His eugenism also was based on socio-darwinism. He introduced the concept of “civilization” and its three steps; undeveloped, developing, and civilization (Lin, 2011). And he believed that because the Japanese people are as superior as Europeans, it should be possible that Japan would reach to “civilization”.

Scientific racism, which increased during this period, helped the Imperial Japan to have a eugenic theory and justification for its invasion of other Asian countries. Those studies aimed at proving Japan’s racial superiority. In 1924, before Japan went to wars, a professor of Kyoto University, a very influential academic organization in Japan, published a report about human biological features and racial relationship (Miyamoto, 1924). He called his work as a report of modern science to prove the superiority of the Japanese race. In the report he examines the brain size and the amount of brains of people from different regions in Japan, of the Ainu, Okinawa, Korea and China. By comparing them, it is concluded that the Japanese people’s brain is bigger and better depending on where people are from, and this shows that the Japanese race is biologically superior to others. He also mentions about “purity” of the Japanese race, and this is the strengthen of the country too. Therefore, scientific racism, which boosted the idea of eugenism, was actually active in Japan especially during the war period, and it was even studied officially by significant organizations. Shimazono (1995) says that the imperialism had become popular during this period, encouraged by its pre-modern context about the Emperor in Japan, as a country was “where the god’s direct descent, Japanese emperor rules”. Ishiro (2002) says that this ideology worked as oppressively in the country, over its nationals and the movement of assimilating on the former colonies of Imperial Japan.

Therefore, onwards the 1868 as Meiji Restoration and Japan's modernization started. The Japanese Government and the Japanese people's encounter with the new racial concepts, which were based on biological features while the Japanese people had used to racialize people with bloodline. And they developed the new eugenism along with scientific racism, in order to prove their biological superiority to other Asian populations and catch up with European civilization. Socio-Darwinism also helped this eugenic idea that there are developed and undeveloped in the world, and developed people have the obligation to rule over the undeveloped and help them. This ideology was one of the biggest motivation of the Imperial Japan for the war. In other words, by integrating the new racialization and eugenic idea, they had created a strong and extreme right nationalistic viewpoint, which fell on the extreme right, and resulted in made Japan going to wars.

The Representation of Racism in the Society and New Nationalism after the War (1945~)

Although Japanese nationalism seemed to have disappeared after the war in 1945 along the end of imperialism, it still remains in the society as myth of racial and cultural homogeneity in Japan. As mentioned in a previous paragraph, this myth of homogeneity worked as Japanese nationalism during the imperial period, which oppressed Japanese citizens to be able to be controlled under the myth of homogeneity and tried to assimilate "other races" mainly in the former colonies (Asano, 1993). Shimazono (1995) says that this idea survived underneath of the occupation and political and social reconstruction by the US, and has become "Nihonjinron". He says that it is what national identity is based on, like religions in other countries. In Japan, this takes the form of "Nihonjinron", and this "myth" complicates and creates a gap in the Japan's correct understanding of race and racism. The facts that the Japanese constitution does not have a precise definition of race and racism, and that they do not have any regulations to prevent and punish racism are the evidence of Japan's unchanged belief in its homogeneity.

The problem about this "Nihonjinron" is that they confuse the ideas of race, nation, and culture. In the theory of "Nihonjinron", "Japanese" means people who share the same culture and blood line. Oblas (1995) says in his book that Japanese-English high school dictionary explains the meaning of the word "minzoku" as people, race or nation. This misconception of the idea of race confuses people and allows them to use the word in a wrong way, as students are taught Jews as a "race".

Asano (1993) also mentions that this idea of homogeneity, "Nihonjinron", actually works as "myth" in the society today. The problem of this idea is, because they do believe in that there is only one race and culture which everyone shares in the country, there is a confusion between "nation" and "race or ethnicity". This confusion appears in other kinds of regulations such as citizenship system, which gives citizenship depending on people's blood line. Also national identity is unconsciously based on bloodline and "common" culture.

In the late 20th century, a new-form of nationalism started to be emerged as a result of its rapid economic growth. For example, Yukio Mishima, a thinker, wrote a book called the "Discussion on the Defense of Culture". In his book, he argues that there should be a basis, upon which every national can share as an absolute ethical value, which is an emperor. Also, Shoichi Saeki talked about the revival of Shindoism in Japan for the country's reunion. On the contrary, there were some people who criticised the emergence of a new nationalistic environment in Japan. Shichihei Yamamoto mentions that what he calls "Japanism", which is based on the idea of homogeneity and group-orientalism, should be abolished because this is not ubiquitous.

And this scientific racism, the idea that the Japanese people are biologically different from other races, still remains in today's society. The evidence is visible in Omoto's report (1996) about the Japanese people's origin from the perspective of molecular anthropology. He says that there are three different biologically categorizable races; Japanese, Inu, and Okinawan, and that when it speaks of Japanese "people", it does not include Koreans and Chinese because of cultural difference. It is apparent that he divides "cultural anthropology" and "physical anthropology", but when they combine these two, Japanese race means "physically categorizable and culturally unique people who have lived in Japan for the longest time" (Omoto, 1996).

Therefore, “Nihonjinron” remains as a social myth and keeps encouraging new-nationalism in today’s Japanese society, and works as the basis for the denial of racism in Japan. Hence, this “Nihonjinron” is the key factor for understanding the conceptual gap of racism in Japan.

Discrimination against “Mixed-blood” People and the Meaning of “Being a Japanese”

Hence, what groups are the targets of racism based on this theory? The problem of Japan’s racism issue is that the Government and people do not recognize what they have as racism. Under these misunderstandings, who is suffering?

There are many minority groups in Japan which are suffering from discrimination, such as the Ainu, Koreans and Okinawan people. They are often picked up as the center of Japan’s racism issue, that the Japanese government does not recognize discrimination against these groups as “racial” minorities. As well as these groups, “mixed-blood” people are the target of racism in Japan. Discrimination against this group is called xenophobia, however, it is also one form of racism since it is based on the racialization of “Japan’s race” and “others” in “Nihonjinron”.

In 2015, there was a controversy discussion in Japan surrounding the issue of what it means to be “Japanese”. In a beauty contest, one woman was chosen to be Miss Japan, a representative of Japan. The woman, Ariana Miyamoto, a half African American and half Japanese, was criticised for not being “Japanese” enough. Mailonline reports that, “Many in the country have expressed hostility to Ariana’s title win as they expected the award to go to a ‘pure’ Japanese woman and not a ‘hafu’, meaning half Japanese, which has echoes of the discredited term ‘half-caste’”. She has grown up in Japan, speaks Japanese, share the same culture as other Japanese children, and has citizenship; however, she is still considered to be “different” from Japanese.

According to Weiner (2009), “mixed-blood” people have been categorized as different group and discriminated against throughout the history. Until the Edo period (1603-1868), because Japan had limited contact with other countries, the number of these people was so little that they did not have any significance or influence on the society. Also, for the same reason, the stereotypes or negative attribution against them did not develop in the society. Therefore, the group was not well studied, and they did not remain in many contexts of the history. However, it was obvious that they had never been treated in the same way as Japanese, because during that time period, there was already the idea of division between “Japanese” and “others”.

In the post-war period after 1945, the issue surrounding these people had become serious around these people, mainly because the number suddenly increased, and many of them were of lower socio-economic born status (Weiner, 2009). However, he say that this group is most neglected group among minority groups in Japan. This is because; firstly they are the only one group which is discriminated based on their phenotype; the treatment varies from rejection from the society to acceptance into the community; and they are actually “Japanese” in a broad definition. However, as the use of words such as “mixed-blood” or “Hafu”, which means a half Japanese, rather than the use of the words like “multi-ethnic” shows, they remain as the target of discrimination in Japan. And many of them are treated unfairly, for with the stereotypes or negatively referring to them as “others”.

The study about the stereotypes of foreigners in Japanese media (Shibuya and Hagiwara, 2003) shows that many audiences have typical stereotypes and negative feelings against foreigners. They say that the negative image and stereotypes are attributed to the word “Gaikokujin (foreigner)”. This is based on the idea that those people are different from “Japanese”, so that they feel fear or rejection against them. Also, when people use the word “foreigner”, they are not likely to recognize the difference among them depending on their race, ethnicity and culture, but focus on their distinction from being Japanese. Therefore, the word is naturally used in a negative feelings. They also say that although Japanese people have now more opportunities to encounter other cultures, races, ethnicities, still many of them are not aware of the danger of the misunderstanding.

Therefore, “mixed-blood” people are also one of the targets of racism in Japan. The number has not been so large that they have been neglected; however, people have been suffering with their unfair treatment as “others” although they share the common culture, nationality, and lineage. What it means to be a Japanese, then, is very narrow in the context

of “Nihonjinron”, since they do not admit any differences among people. The victims, therefore, feel marginalized or isolated from the society or community.

Conclusion

Despite the Japanese Government’s denial of racism, racism exists in Japan. The reason for that denial is that the victims of racism in Japan do not fit the definition of race, which the Japanese Constitution sets. However, in the broader meaning of race, the victims of racism, such as the Ainu and Buraku people are race which is considered to have a different lineage. And discrimination against these people is racism. The situation which the Government and people still do not recognize the existence of racism should be dealt with as soon as possible. The main cause of these racism is “Nihonjinron”. This idea of the racial and cultural homogeneity of Japan existed in pre-war period of Japan, as in a form of the emperor system based on mythology, and group-orient and collectivistic aspect of its culture. Before they started to use the concept of a nation-state, they had already had division between “Japanese” and “others”. From 1868 and, the Meiji Restoration, the concept of the nation was also reflected. Additionally, they learned new knowledge from European countries in order to resist invasion. They were desperate to protect the country. As a result, the new idea of race based on physical features, eugenic idea and scientific racism with the aim of proving the superiority of Japan’s race were developed. From what they learned, Japanese people were supposed to be included in “yellow” race but they denied their inferiority and developed “Nihonjinron”. They emphasized distinction from other Asian populations and the significance of Japan’s race, and this led to imperialism during that period. It encouraged the racial idea of superiority showed which manifested as invasion to and massacre of other Asian populations. From 1945, nationalism was decreased along with the end of imperialism, however, it remained as “Nihonjinron”. In the late 20th century, there were groups of “new-nationalism”, which insisted upon Japan’s homogeneity, based on the emperor or Shido. It is apparent that this “Nihonjinron” is the main factor of racism in Japan, and the denial of the existence of racism by the government. Discrimination against “mixed-blood” people, therefore tend to be ignored or neglected. However, the problem is profound. They are mainly discriminated based on their physical features and treated as foreigners. Also, they sometimes get bullied or treated badly by stereotypes or negative attribution towards them as “others”. To be a Japanese person, is a very narrow way to pass through. They need to be “Japanese race”, have a Japanese parent, share the culture, look like Japanese, and so on. However, since the definition of a “Japanese” is confusing in the Japanese context, no one can perfectly define what it is to be a Japanese and what they need. The identity, then must depend on the individual’s judgment. But “Nihonjinron” and its oppression do not allow people to call themselves “Japanese”. “Nihonjinron” is, therefore a theory which is actually causing racism in Japan. The myth remained throughout the history and still affects the Japanese people’s idea of race, identity, and negative feelings about foreigners. Therefore, efforts to change regulations or anti-discrimination movement would have failed without understanding this theory. It is required for the Japanese Government and the Japanese people to have an idea that it is socially and historically constructed “myth” due to the need to unite and control the country in the past. And they need to overcome the pre-existing idea of themselves.

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