

## Japanology bashing

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***Images of Japanese Society.* ROSS MOUER and YOSHIO SUGIMOTO. London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986. xxii + 552 pp., tables, figures, appendix, notes, references, index. \$59.95 (cloth).**

***Nihongo: In Defense of Japanese.* ROY ANDREW MILLER. London: Athlone Press, 1986. 262 pp., notes, index.**

***The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness.* PETER N. DALE. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986. 233 pp., tables, notes, index \$29.95 (cloth).**

*Nihonjinron* are "treatises on Japaneseness." The term refers particularly to a publishing boom of national character studies in Japan that has engaged academic scholarship and the mass media for the last 30 years. "Who are we Japanese?" the *Nihonjinron* literature asks, and it answers the question not for the historical moment but for all time. Its drumbeat is the coherence, continuity, and, above all, the uniqueness of an entity variously hypostatized as Japanese society, or the Japanese personality, or the Japanese brain, or the Japanese language, or Japanese sensibility. It includes the serious and the outrageous—familiar constructs like Nakane's "vertical society" and Doi's "indulgence and dependence"; farfetched notions like "the hollow onion" society and "the spirit of the language" (*kotodama*); and Kuki's notion of Japan as a culture of "chic" (*iki*), which he paraphrased to Heidegger as ". . . the sensuous radiance through whose lively delight there breaks the radiance of something suprasensuous" (Dale, p. 69). As one may imagine, such a fixation lends itself easily to cultural nationalism. Newspapers and opinion journals are filled with articles such as those of a prominent government minister, Naohiro Amaya, who argued recently that strict antimonopoly laws were unnecessary and undesirable in a society like Japan whose elemental unit was the harmonious group, not the competitive individual. Uncanny resemblances to prewar fascist propaganda of racial supremacy and national mission raise suspicions about the intentions and extensions of this literature.

Like Euro-American obsessions with national character, *Nihonjinron* varieties depend heavily on the use and misuse of anthropology and anthropologists. Distinctive values, a unique language, and a national psychology are among the terms by which the analyses are framed. What the three books under review have in common is a close scrutiny of the claims of *Nihonjinron*. Like their subject, they are alternately pedantic and polemical. They find little to praise, but their judgments are ambivalently couched in fear and derision, concerned about its ideological implications and caustic about its intellectual pratfalls.

The sociological rendition of "Japaneseness" stresses group affiliation, vertical relationships, consensual decision making, and social obligations. For some time now, Mouer and Sugimoto

have organized conferences and volumes to attack this so-called group model, whose perpetrators include both *Nihonjinron* writers like Nakane and Doi as well as foreign specialists. Much of *Images of Japanese Society* is devoted to detailing exhaustively the logical and methodological difficulties of the model's features. I suspect that specialists and nonspecialists alike will regard this as belaboring the obvious; in fairness to Mouer and Sugimoto, of course, it was their earlier efforts that have made the model's shortcomings so apparent.

More usefully, the authors use their own research—Sugimoto on the incidence and typology of conflict in Japan and Mouer on income distribution—to document the significant range of dissent and differences within postwar Japanese society. This is fleshed out with further chapters on “the autonomous individual,” “the contractual relationship,” “social control,” and “social stratification” in Japan. Another set of chapters then outlines a “multidimensional stratification framework” that they believe can represent the empirical reality of present-day Japan—individuals spread widely and unequally across the society's intersecting scales of multiple rewards.

*Images of Japanese Society* is thus intended to be a useful compendium of critical scholarship and a platform for a new research program. Unfortunately, it is so overwritten and poorly organized that it will defeat all but the most dedicated reader. It shows no sign of having crossed an editor's desk. Long on jargon and short on style, it bludgeons its target with ponderous prose and undercuts its proposals with often vacuous pronouncements: for instance, “culture may affect the definition of income” (p. 329) and “some Japanese do have a sense of self-interest” (p. 356). The authors' own modest assessment is all too accurate. “Raising doubts about the methodology of those in that [group model] tradition, [the book] offers no alternative, aside from a bland proposal for eclecticism” (p. 95).

Roy Andrew Miller, a noted linguist of Japanese, is anything but bland. *Nihongo* is literally “the Japanese language,” although Miller prefers to gloss it as “Japan's modern myth,” the title of his 1982 diatribe against the Japanese linguistic establishment. By my count, *Nihongo* is in fact his third book-length assault (plus numerous scathing reviews) on the linguistic standard bearers of *Nihonjinron* and certain foreign fellow travelers. This most recent study is ostensibly about several topics of potential interest to anthropologists: grammar, semantics, cognition, and translation. However, his habit of personifying any disagreement turns the book into a harangue against three groups of wrong-thinkers.

First there are the Chomskyites, the “transformational generative school.” Although Miller gleefully reports that its “recent self-destruction” has been a “fortunate accident,” he is nonetheless determined to rout any last survivors still holding out in the Japanese hills, those Lt. Onodas who don't know that the struggle is over and their cause lost. Victorious is the redoubtable Leonard Bloomfield, epigrammatic quotations from whose *Language* head each chapter; reinstated is Bernard Bloch's account of Japanese grammar, which Miller has championed for 20 years and which he summarizes quite usefully in a lull between barrages (pp. 49–59).

He is equally venomous about our most eminent translators of Japanese literature, including Seidensticker, Keene, and Miner, while reserving special disparagement for Ivan Morris. However, here too, everyone's scholarly veracity and linguistic competency is so thoroughly impugned that one soon questions Miller's ability and intentions in interpreting the interpreters. These doubts are reinforced by his quite curious explanation for why most of our translations of the last 40 years are allegedly so “badly done,” “careless,” and “ultimately misleading” (p. 217): it seems that these senior academics still think they are in uniform. Having learned their Japanese in military language schools during the war, “these men and women still almost invariably treat all texts as if they were reading captured military intelligence documents” (p. 217). Miller's own crypto-logic here is at best well disguised.

For his third target, he turns on Japan's leading linguists, the “modern mythologizers.” Takao Suzuki, Haruhiko Kindaichi, and Susumu Ono all return from earlier books to take obligatory dives for their misunderstanding of the nature of the Japanese writing system, their misrepre-

sentations of its foreign origins, and their phony and self-serving descriptions of Japanese as vague and imprecise. Again, sensible criticism is overtaken by fulminating accusations of “pseudo-linguistic paltering” (p. 244) and worse.

In effect, Miller’s rogues’ gallery approach turns *Nihongo* into a series of potshots rather than an engagement of ideas. Late in the book, for example, he turns on a leading political scientist, Shumpei Kumon, who argued in a rather breezy recent essay that Japanese are holists, or contextualists, by cognitive predilection (*Journal of Japanese Studies* 8(1):5–28, 1982). Miller seizes upon a representative paragraph in that essay about the Japanese verb “to understand,” and subjects it to an excruciating 11-page demolition (pp. 226–237). He is right; Kumon’s glib pseudo-philosophizing deserves to be called out. But at best Miller comes off as a tiresome crank; at worst, he verges on the sadistic, dripping sarcasm over the hapless victim.

Shrill overkill has a further casualty. Miller is so busy fragging everyone else in the field that he leaves himself apparently neither time nor energy for anything more than pallid alternatives. His theory of semantics amounts to the commonplace notion of “arbitrary segmentation by lexical item” (p. 128), his sociolinguistics, to the proposition that lexicons adjust to changing social patterns and technological developments (for example, pp. 132–133). His advice about translation is to be reliable and accurate—as unassailable a principle as it is unhelpful.

All of this is quite unfortunate because Miller is a scholar of enormous erudition. For example, his passages on Old Japanese color terms (pp. 129–139) and time conceptualization in Old Japanese (pp. 161–174), his discussion of Heian literary style (pp. 101–115), and his own translations of fragments of Bashō (pp. 184–195) and the Man’ yōshū (pp. 197–208) are fascinating and compelling. If he would choose to focus more directly and synthetically on the semantic and discourse structures of Old Japanese, he could contribute greatly—and uniquely—to a historically grounded appreciation of the linguistic shape of Japanese cultural domains.

After Mouer and Sugimoto’s bludgeon and Miller’s rack, one appreciates even more keenly the cut-and-thrust of Dale’s rapier-like exposure of the *Nihonjinron* pretensions of Japanese harmony and homogeneity. To be sure, his judgment is no more charitable: “conceptual counterfeiting” (p. 17), “ideological mendacities” (p. 140), and “Oedipal shadow-boxing (p. 184) are but a few of his more colorful descriptions of the work of some of Japan’s leading scholars. Yet, perhaps because he is an outsider (apparently trained in classics and European literature), he retains a sense of proportion and of humor that we specialists—and certainly the other authors here—often lose. Compare, for instance, Dale’s treatment of Kumon (pp. 220–221) with Miller’s. Despite being an outsider, he displays an impressive command of the Japanese language and literature requisite for his ambitious critique. It is the broadest of the three studies and the most useful for anthropologists generally.

To Dale, the fundamental premise of *Nihonjinron* is “radical alterity,” an Occidentalist version of the Orientalist illusion. His first four chapters are an extended discussion of the ways in which the double fictions of radical alterity—identity and difference—have produced the ideological dichotomy of a singular Japan set against the mirage of a radically different but equally unitary West. The permutations of such a dichotomy are multiple: Japan as homogeneous, relativist, contextualist, non-litigious, vertical, and so forth, versus the West as heterogeneous, absolute, individualist, contentious, horizontal. To Dale, what gives the *Nihonjinron* literature such a superficial range and such a closed logic is a pervasive “lexical one-upmanship” (or, more charitably, keyword analysis). This is the tendency of analysts to single out a word that is felt to condense the essential nature of Japaneseness, a word they then use to spin out a web of secondary terms and idioms and to subordinate other analysts’ pet constructs. Thus, for example, Doi fastens on *amae* (“passive love” is one of his glosses); from this he generates a lengthy list of related terms, and to this he reduces other master concepts like Nakane’s “vertical society” (p. 137).

Dale quite clearly believes that ideological extensions of *Nihonjinron* are as potent as its supporting scholarship is weak. Much of the remainder of his book dissects a series of *Nihon-*

*jinron* studies—as scholarship and ideology. Three chapters (5–7) deal with pronouncements about language and silence—the Japanese language as ineffable and untranslatable and a supposed cultural preference for a tacit “intuiting the other”; Dale draws here in part on Miller’s work. Three more chapters (8–10) take up Japanese psychology and psychoanalysis, while another chapter scrutinizes claims by natural and neural scientists for allegedly unique Japanese bees, brains, and monkeys! Among the individuals Dale treats are several familiar to Western scholars: the linguist Takao Suzuki, the novelist Tanizaki, the psychologist Takeo Doi, the psychotherapist Morita, and the primatologist Imanishi.

Throughout, he is particularly effective, if a bit extreme, in tracing the fierce and convoluted intellectual scavenging among writers. His genealogy of Eshun Hamaguchi’s proposal for a Japanese form of “psycho-social homeostasis” is typical:

Here Doi’s erroneously constructed theory of ‘coaxing’, which arose out of his critique of Kosawa’s abortive theory of Oriental guilt and the matricidal complex (wherein, however, each radically misunderstands Freud), has in turn been reabsorbed back into Kosawa’s position, as modified by Okonogi (under the influence of Klein and Erikson), then subject to a pseudo-phenomenological critique by a scholar influenced by Dōgen’s Buddhism and Watsuji’s fascism, namely Kimura. This conceptual farago is then reharmonised once again by Hamaguchi by means of Francis Hsu’s notion of psycho-social homeostasis, originally developed for Chinese character, and then once again conflated with Watsuji Tetsurō’s theory of *aidagara* (relationship) which. . .was itself a neo-Confucian attempt to exploit Heideggerian notions for the construction of a peculiarly Japanese kind of Fascist state ethics [p. 154].

In sum, Dale suggests that the twin rhetorical processes of cultural nationalism in 20th-century Japan have been endogenization and externalization. On the one hand, the foreign is continually made familiar; by plagiarism or osmosis, Western ideas are (often mistakenly) appropriated, transposed, and asserted to be uniquely Japanese dispositions. On the other, by a kind of “cultural exorcism” (p. 40), internal tensions are projected onto an external and inauthentic Other—the contentious, meat-eating, patriarchal, loquacious, alienating West. For a state that was aggressively militaristic and is now aggressively mercantilist, the political utility of such a mode of reasoning is obvious: valorizing interdependence, racial purity, silence, and obligation is an effective apologetic for national pride and self-repression. It is in this sense, Dale concludes, that *Nihonjinron* serve, occasionally by intent, but usually by naiveté and sloppy thinking, as agitprop for social stability and economic growth.

Here Dale is long on implication and short on demonstration. In his final chapter, he shows how early 20th-century writers were influenced by European nationalism at its most conservative and imperialist. He correctly notes the complicity of prominent thinkers like Watsuji in the fascist charter of a “national polity” and a “national essence.” To be sure, the present-day nostalgic inventions of a unique Japan are often blind to the disturbing parallels to this prewar past. But it is a gross oversimplification to insinuate so much of contemporary social science into the *Nihonjinron* rubric. Polemic, even in Dale’s adept hands, often borders on parody, and he (unwittingly, I believe) indulges the Orientalist conceit that only the Western observer is capable of careful thinking and accurate understanding. There are genuine alternatives to national narcissism and pseudo-science in Japan, and these three books point all the more to the need for a broader study of this field of debate, in which the search for Japaneseness is but one of the positions.

What Dale has done, however, has been to raise pointed questions about the production of knowledge and the reproduction—and reformulation—of state authority in 20th-century Japan. These conjunctions of scholarship and power have continually turned on the cultural construction of “the Japanese people.” Dale’s wry critique, and those of Mouer and Sugimoto and Miller, should provoke us Western specialists to reflect on our own ways of interpreting and representing Japan. Dale’s study in particular should be valuable to all anthropologists concerned with the cultural characterizations of nationhood.

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