

Tabunka kyōsei and the ‘politics of translation’¹⁾

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Tabunka kyōsei (“multicultural coexistence”), a specifically Japanese concept of multiculturalism, has been adopted as a policy orientation by the country’s central and regional governments. The development of this concept has been significantly influenced by international trends in the concept of multiculturalism. Above all, attention has been focused on developments in Canada and Australia, which both introduced multiculturalism as a national policy in the 1970s. However, Japan’s appropriation of the concept has been selective, involving a process of filtering overseas trends to retain only the most convenient elements. As a result, while Japan may appear on a cursory overview to be making a transition towards a “multicultural” orientation, in actual fact this has entailed virtually no change to the fundamental structure of the nation.

Tessa Morris-Suzuki has termed this phenomenon “cosmetic multiculturalism” (Morris-Suzuki [2002]). In her view, cosmetic multiculturalism celebrates cultural diversity, but restricts its scope to ensure that it will not threaten vested interests or promote the fundamental rethinking of existing institutions (Morris-Suzuki [2002] p.156). Implicit in this formulation is the suggestion that multiculturalism does promote (and has promoted) the reform of existing institutions. By contrast, Japan’s concept of “*tabunka kyōsei*” represents a zone of safety which protects the nation from the anxiety provoked by change by sealing off the orientation towards social transformation.

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What precisely, then, are the transformative elements which have gone missing from Japan's concept of multiculturalism, and how has "multiculturalism" been absorbed into the Japanese context and re-envisioned as the "non-threatening" concept of *tabunka kyōsei*. These are the questions that I will consider in this article.

1 Multiculturalism as a subversive concept

As is well known, the concept of multiculturalism is today criticised from both right and left, and the term is frequently used with an extremely negative connotation. On the one side, the concept is often held to present the danger of promoting social fragmentation; on the other, it is dismissed as little more than a deceptive new guise for nationalism. Despite the fact that these criticisms emerge from antagonistic standpoints, they have a mutual resonance and have produced an anti-multiculturalism discourse which has gained general credence. Advocacy of multiculturalism is today apt to be regarded as anachronistic. Nevertheless, I will venture to cast some light on the actual significance of multiculturalism, seeking to clarify the issues inherent in the Japanese concept of *tabunka kyōsei*.

While severely criticising multiculturalism as a policy and ideology concealing the intention to control immigration to "immigrant nations" which had previously been colonies of the British empire, Nagao Nishikawa also positions the concept as a self-imposed "subversive concept" (Hamacher [2007]) which seeks to resolve conflict and realise social justice, thus reforming the status quo (Nishikawa [2011]). The advent of the concept of multiculturalism produced such controversy in the academic and political realms because it was hoped (or feared) that it possessed a transformative power that would challenge existing theories, institutions, and frameworks of value.

What transformations, then, has multiculturalism brought with it in

practice? I will consider the example of Australia in answering this question. What should be borne in mind is that in Australia, the concept of multiculturalism made its appearance in the context of a situation in which the conventional idea of the unity of the people, based on racial and cultural homogeneity, was losing validity. In other words, its context was a crisis of the nation state. Naturally, this is not to say that the concept of multiculturalism resulted in fundamental change in the nation state, but it did at least provoke extensive re-questioning of existing institutions. Three changes can be pointed to as resulting from this process.

The first of these was a redefinition of the concept of "the people". The introduction of multiculturalism in 1970s Australia followed on from the scrapping of the White Australia Policy. This meant a fundamental transformation in the concept of the nation from a "White Australia" to a "Multicultural Australia", a movement away from a concept of "the people" based on "Anglo-Celtic"²⁾ racial and cultural unity. It is no doubt apparent to most observers that the hegemony of the dominant culture and system of values remained firmly in place. However, the change in the concept of the people was, at least, backed up by ongoing revision of Australia's citizenship laws, and the legal concept of "Australian citizen" was transformed from one of cultural unity based on the White Australia Policy to one based on an institutional recognition of the cultural diversity of Australian society³⁾.

The second change emerging from multiculturalism was a rejection of the doctrine of cultural assimilation which had previously been taken for granted. The principle of respect for the right of Aboriginal Australians and migrants to maintain and practice their own cultures, including their own languages and religions, was explicitly declared. However, the cultural rights of migrants were exclusively individual rather than extended to

2) Anglo-Celtic Australians are Australians who ancestrally originate in the countries of the England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

3) For the transformation of the legal concept of "Australian citizen", see Iizasa [2007] chp.1.

groups, and were granted only within the framework of the principles and institutions of Australia's liberal democracy. In this context, the extension of land rights and indigenous rights to Aboriginal Australians as a group represented an unprecedented and fundamental challenge to the Australian legal system.

The third change was a recognition of the issue of injustices committed by the state against minority groups and the urging of reparations. This was not necessarily an explicitly stated goal of the introduction of multiculturalism, but it had an important meaning in terms of restoring dignity to minorities and generating increased recognition of their rights. The Mabo Decision handed down by Australia's Supreme Court in 1992 represented one aspect of this trend⁴⁾. This decision, extending back to the country's history prior to colonization, rejected the legal doctrine of *Terra Nullius*, which stated that the Australian continent had had no owners before the British declared sovereignty, and represented a landmark event that shook the legitimacy of the Australian state.

Viewed correctly, these three changes resulted from a combination of diverse elements and dynamic factors both within the country and outside it, rather than from multiculturalism exclusively. Nevertheless, we should not ignore the fact that at the time, the concept of multiculturalism provided a motive force that encouraged change in the status quo.

2 *Tabunka kyōsei*: safe and innocuous?

The Japanese concept of *tabunka kyōsei*, however, has not demonstrated any power to change existing institutions as described above. Why is this?

In the 1990s, as Japan was facing an unprecedented increase in the number of so-called "newcomers" arriving and taking up residence in the

4) The Mabo decision, named after Eddie Mabo, recognised Aboriginal ownership of land before European settlement (native title) and recognised that some Aboriginal groups may have inherited this ownership.

country, *tabunka kyōsei* was developed as a measure to provide them with settlement support. Long-term Resident visas without employment restrictions were newly established as a category in the 1990s, with the main recipients being second- and third-generation overseas Japanese and their spouses. These people arrived from South America as unskilled laborers to fill the labor shortage during the bubble era, and took up residence in the main in the Tokai region, drawn by its extensive manufacturing industry. Despite the fact that most of these “newcomers” were the descendants of Japanese, they entered Japanese society as “residents” with a culture that clearly differed from that of the Japanese majority. The various measures implemented to resolve social problem by the municipalities in which they concentrated were initially positioned within the framework of the “internationalisation” of Japan’s municipalities being promoted by the Ministry of Home Affairs. When “internationalisation” measures were no longer able to respond adequately to the needs of this group, the term “*tabunka kyōsei*” came into use.

These were not the only initiatives targeting foreign residents in Japan. From the 1970s, certain regional municipalities had introduced limited measures for long-term Korean residents of Japan (Yamawaki [2003]). However, as municipalities began to make extensive use of the term *tabunka kyōsei*, it became strongly linked to support measures targeting Japan’s “newcomers” exclusively.

Ironically, therefore, measures centering around the concept of *tabunka kyōsei* were stimulated by an increase in the number of people of Japanese ancestry entering the country, people who the Japanese government would have expected to share elements of Japanese culture. The fact that longer-term foreign residents of Japan such as the *zainichi* Korean population, whose cultural difference had been rendered less obvious by years of assimilation measures, were excluded from the remit of *tabunka kyōsei* is another, this time extremely grave, irony. Again, despite the increasing vigor of the movement towards the promulgation of the Act on the

Promotion of Ainu Culture in the 1990s, the concept of *tabunka kyōsei* was not extended to the Ainu.

The 1990s also overlaps with a certain boom in multiculturalism-related research in Japan, stimulated in response to overseas controversy over the topic. The increase in Japan's "newcomers" was also a purely domestic factor which provided further impetus to this trend. What should be noted in particular is the fact that in Japan, multiculturalism research developed in two streams, one involving theoretical research in the political philosophy tradition, and the other involving policy research, incorporating research on immigration and measures to support settlement. Both commitment by political philosophers to reform in the policy realm, as for example in the cases of Charles Taylor and Will Kymlicka in Canada, and exchange between political philosophy research and immigration- and policy-related research were rare in Japan. In general, there was almost no contact between research related to *tabunka kyōsei* and political philosophy-based research, and the former was conducted largely within the framework of immigration- and policy-related research, with issues involved in the settlement of Japan's "newcomers" as the main focus of research. Given this, there has been little fully-fledged discussion concerning the definition of *tabunka kyōsei*, or consideration of the concept from the perspective of critique of the nation state.

Another point that cannot be overlooked is the fact that immigration researchers, as if moving in tandem with the spread of the term *tabunka kyōsei*, emphasised the view that the model of multiculturalism current in Australia and Canada, countries with a historical background as immigrant nations, did not fit the Japanese context⁵⁾. But is this actually the case?

As is well known, Japan was a multicultural society long before its "newcomers" commenced their arrival. Exploiting the legal doctrine of *terra nullius*, as had been the case in Australia, the Meiji government

5) See, for example, Komai [2003].

absorbed the Ainu people into the Japanese state. In addition, the postwar presence of the specifically Japanese minority group *zainichi* Koreans originates with the colonial domination of the Korean Peninsula initiated by the Meiji government. The Ainu people and Japan's *zainichi* Korean population have not had their rights fully restored to them. Nor have issues of historical injustices committed against them by the Japanese state been resolved. In 2008, the Ainu were finally recognised as an indigenous people of Japan by the Japanese government, but this recognition did not extend as far as granting them the indigenous rights that they demanded. With regard to the *zainichi* Koreans, after the war Japan became the only former colonial power to unilaterally strip former colonial subjects of nationality which it had previously granted to them (under duress) . With this, Japan also became the only advanced industrial democracy to host a "foreign" population spanning four generations (Chan [2012] p. 62). Despite the differences in historical background, the example of Australia, in terms of granting indigenous rights and recognising multiple citizenship, can be highly suggestive for Japan in relation to these issues. To deny this is to be complicit in further turning attention away from the transformative power of multiculturalism.

At the working level, measures to support settlement instituted in Australia and Canada are still only the subject of fact-finding missions by Japanese municipal employees⁶⁾ . This process also is promoting the incorporation into Japan's concept of tabunka kyōsei only those elements which are safe and involve no social transformation.

It is worth noting, however, that in the 1970s, the word *kyōsei* began to be used by *zainichi* Korean activists in a context that sought change in existing Japanese institutions. Eika Tai, who has conducted a careful study of the positions of numerous commentators with regard to the concept of

6) For example, Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR) has such programmes.

kyōsei, focuses on an understanding of the term as one that “seeks to transform society by eliminating discrimination in the relationship between the majority and minorities” (Tai [2003] p.47). Those *zainichi* Koreans who used the term *kyōsei* saw it as a potentially subversive concept.

Nevertheless, when the Japanese government finally – for the first time – made its position regarding *tabunka kyōsei* clear in a report published in 2006 by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (Soumu sho [2006]), it avoided any orientation towards actual change in the status quo, and went no further than ratifying the usage of the term in relation to measures to aid the settlement of descendants of overseas Japanese already current among municipal administrations. Little mention was made of *zainichi* Koreans, and the document avoided dealing with issues related to these more-established foreign residents, whose presence in the country is a legacy of Japan’s colonial past.

As it happens, the only potential opening towards the possibility of redress for Japan’s colonial rule to date has been the debate concerning voting rights for foreign residents. However, every time that draft legislation has been tabled for debate by the Diet since 1998, the debate has been drowned out by overblown rhetoric from opponents, terming it “the road to Japan’s ruin” and “the dismantling of the nation”⁷⁾. What has ultimately been revealed by the fracas over voting rights for foreign residents is the extent to which the image of the Japanese nation as being centered on the “Yamato race,” i.e. an image of the nation stressing an assimilationist attitude that compels belonging to a single Japanese people, has been carried over from the colonial era and is still shared by many Japanese. As evidence, we may point to the fact that while the attitude that “If they want the right to vote, they should become naturalised” is strong, there has been no development whatsoever in discussion towards reconsideration of the concept of citizenship, for example with regard to

7) For the arguments for and against the voting rights for foreign residents, see Yoshizawa [2010].

the introduction of the principle of *jus soli*, or the recognition of multiple citizenship. And if I may make an additional observation regarding terminology, given that ex-colonial subjects formerly held Japanese citizenship and possessed the right to vote in Japanese territory, rather than referring to “naturalisation” and the “granting” of voting rights, we should be discussing the “restoration” of both citizenship and voting rights.

3 Nipping danger in the bud: a choice of words

There is significant academic interest in Japan in minority and migrant rights and the concept of multicultural citizenship espoused by Will Kymlicka (Kymlicka [1995]), particularly among political philosophers. At the same time, unlike debate over suffrage for foreign residents, rights of this nature are almost never put on the table for public policy debate. It is also surprisingly little known that the Japanese government has selectively interpreted the meaning of “cultural rights” as promulgated in the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, rewriting it in a manner that suits its convenience⁸⁾.

Article 4 of the Declaration states that “The defense of cultural diversity ...implies a commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms, *in particular the rights of persons belonging to minorities and those of indigenous peoples*” (emphasis added). Article 5 goes on to declare that “Cultural rights are an integral part of human rights...”.

A 2004 report published by a review committee of the Agency for Cultural Affairs looking towards Japan’s signing of the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity defined the protection of cultural diversity as the government’s protection and development of a diverse range of “cultural arts,” mentioning such art forms as animation and pop music in particular (Bunka shingikai bunka seisaku bukai [2004]). It is

8) For this issue, the work of Kazuo Fujino [2007] provided very valuable insights.

extraordinary that this document made no mention whatsoever of “human rights,” “cultural rights”, “indigenous peoples” and similar key concepts of the Universal Declaration. To take the place of the protection of minority rights and cultural rights, the main purport of the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, in this text the Agency for Cultural Affairs has artfully substituted an entirely different discourse, involving the promotion of cultural arts and the culture industry. It is as if cultural rights represent a danger to the state, and considerable care has been taken to conceal this concept from the readers’ attention.

We can turn to the formulation of Japan’s postwar Constitution for another example of such substitution of words. This substitution resulted in former colonial subjects of Japan being excluded from various rights, including the right to social security. It is worth giving particular attention to the fact that the words “the people (*jimmin*)” and “natural person (*shizenjin*)”, used in the General Headquarters draft of the Japanese Constitution (the MacArthur draft) , were replaced by “Japanese people (*kokumin*)” by the Japanese government. Being even more scrupulous in its vetting of the text, in addition to excising mention of the principle of equality between Japanese citizens and non-Japanese and a clause specifying the human rights of non-Japanese, which had been present in the MacArthur draft, the government went on to add Article 10, not present in the MacArthur draft, which states that “The conditions necessary for being a Japanese national shall be determined by law,” restricting membership of “the Japanese people (*kokumin*)” to holders of Japanese citizenship (Yoon [1995] p.52). As a result of this process, the new Constitution entered into force in 1947 in a form in which most provisions regarding non-Japanese had been excised. In addition, in the laws formulated under the new Constitution the phrase “Japanese people (*Nihon kokumin*)” was interpreted as expressing a restriction based on nationality, and residents who did not possess Japanese nationality were

excluded from various rights. This left Japan's former colonial subjects with no choice but to militate for the abolition of restrictions based on nationality in order to restore rights that were essential for their lives in Japan.

In this way, concepts which were inconvenient for Japanese society – non-Japanese residents' rights and minority rights – have been carefully substituted with others as if to avert danger before it manifested. The politics of translation can be clearly seen at work in this revised reading of multiculturalism as the safe and innocuous *tabunka kyōsei*, or in other words, its translation into “cosmetic multiculturalism.”

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