The Invention of Minzoku
A Reflection on the History of Racial and Ethnic Identities in Japan

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1. An Identity Politics in Japan

(Topic Setting of this Presentation)
Is Japan a Homogenous Country?

• The population of Japan is 123 million, the territory is 378,000 square kilometers.

• Measured in this way, Japan exceeds both Malaysia and the Philippines in size.

• Nevertheless, Japan is considered a homogeneous country, not a multi-ethnic country.

• But is there no cultural or linguistic diversity in Japan?

• Indeed, in Japan, there live about 30 thousand Ainu, about 1.3 million Okinawans, and about 600 thousand Koreans.
Is “the Japanese-Japanese” Homogeneous?

• According to a 1966 survey by the National Institute of Population Research, 90.9% of men and 92.6% of women had married partners coming from the same prefectures as themselves. (Shinozaki 1967: 49)

• This suggests that most people in Japan had married within local relationships and maintained their local cultures or dialects at least until the 1960s.

• In 2008, a sociologist who migrated from Tokyo to Kyushu, said "people in this area do not think the Japanese are homogeneous even without referring to the existences of Ainu or Okinawans." (Okamoto 2008: 83)
Nevertheless, when the sociologist asked his students about their ethnicity, they all replied that they had not thought about which ethnic group they belonged to. (Okamoto 2008; 83) They had never been asked such a question.

The people in Japan are not homogeneous. In fact, they are not in the habit of thinking about or reflecting on their own ethnicity.

The Japanese government has never conducted surveys on the ethnic composition of their people.

Herein lies a politics of discourse that has constructed a framework for ethnic recognition and non-recognition.
Since the 1960s, the Buddhist organization Soka Gakkai has consistently garnered the support about 7% of Japanese voters while its political affiliate (Komeito) held 54 seats in parliament in 2021.

In Japan, however, and unlike the Jews in Europe or the Druze in the Middle East, such groups are not regarded as ethnoreligious communities.

The Japanese government has not surveyed the religious composition of people in Japan.

Again, herein lies a politics of discourse that has constructed a framework for ethnic recognition and non-recognition.
What is the Name of the Majority in Japan?

- The Japanese government’s use of the term “Japanese” to define the people of Japan, including the Ainu.
- In 2001, the Japanese government replied to the Ainu Association of Hokkaido that an official name of the majority group in Japan dose not exist. (Okamoto 2008: 85)
- Writing in 2018, an African-American writer lamented that many of Japanese believed that there was no racial discrimination in Japan because they simply regarded most people in Japan including minorities as “Japanese” (McNeil 2018).
- Again, herein lies a politics of discourse of that has constructed a framework for ethnic recognition and non-recognition.
The Topic of this Presentation

- These facts suggest the following.
- First, as a matter of fact, the Japanese are not homogeneous.
- Second, a political discourse has constructed a powerful social and cultural framework that conceals or denies diversity in Japan in terms of race or ethnicity.
- Race and ethnicity are historical and political frameworks that have been constructed in the modern world history.
- This speech will investigate the evolution of this discourse in Japan since the initiation of the modernization started in 1868.
2, Socio-Historical Construction of Race
The Invention of the Concept of Race

• In Europe, categories based on physical characteristics such as skin color were not important until the 18th century. (Malik 1996)

• Prior to the mid-18th century in North America, categorization by religion or property was more important. (Smedley, 1993)

• The modern concept of race as a framework of recognition was constructed within a specific historical context and drew both inspiration and justification from biology, anthropology, and linguistics.
The Concept of Race Spread Across the World

• Europeans colonizers associated slimness of facial features with racial superiority, while rounder faces, as were common in Asia and Africa, were regarded as markers of inferiority.

• Thus, in the case of India, Europeans concluded that the taller and, therefore racially superior Aryans had conquered the wide-nosed, black skinned Dravidians. (Trautmann 1997)

• In the Belgian Congo, which would later gain independence as Rwanda, the white colonizers favored the Tutsi people over the Hutu, whose inferiority was defined on racial frameworks. (Prunier 1995)

• Censuses carried out by colonial governments, school education by missionaries, and Western-inspired textbooks and other forms of literature all served to internalize these forms of classification among indigenous peoples. (Bale 2002)
The Concept was Imported to Japan

- In 1883, the German physician Elvin Baelz claimed that Japanese could be classified as belonging to either the upper class "Chōshū type" with a slender face, or the lower class "Satsuma type" with a round face. (Baelz 1883)
- Even after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, people of different feudal domains could communicate with each other only by writing in Chinese characters.
- Four major clans actually monopolized the new Meiji-government, while several other clans rebelled against the government in the 1870s.
- If Japan had been colonized, and if racial census were applied, these conflicts might have been represented in the framework of race or ethnicity.
3, The Invention of *Minzoku*
What Japanese Intellectuals Concerned

• The principal concern of the Japanese ruling class at that time was to avoid colonization by the West.

• For them, national unification would be achieved through the denial of clan consciousness.

• Fukuzawa Yukichi, one of the prominent intellectuals, argued that: (Fukuzawa 1958-64: vol.4, 639, vol.10, 183)

  "The most urgent thing is internalizing the idea of nation (Kuni) in the brains of the people of the whole country"

• “They (the people) do know only old clans and do not understand the new Japan”
The Rise of the National Polity Theory

- In the 1880s, the national polity theory 国体論 advocating that Japan had been the family state emerged.
- Inoue Tetsujirō and Hozumi Yatsuka, advocates of this theory, claimed the following:
  - “Japan is a very small country, and surrounded by rapacious enemies on all sides (...) we will have nothing to depend on but our 40 million compatriots” (Inoue 1891: 3, 5)
  - “Given the state of things in the world today, it is clear that now is not the time to criticize patriotism as narrow-minded intolerance, not to weaken our power of solidarity.” (Hozumi 1943: 913)
The Minzoku Nationalism

• Inoue and Hozumi also claimed the following:

• “The Japanese Empire consists of a great nation (民族Minzoku) of one race (人種Jinsyu) that shares the same history and the same pure blood,” and “the ancestor of the Emperor is the earliest ancestor of all Japanese” (Hozumi 1897: 4, 5).

• “Japan has never been conquered in the past thousands of years.” (Inoue 1899: 165)

• Thus, the Minzoku nationalism, founded upon notions of shared ancestry arose as a response to the threat posed by Western imperialism.
Anthropologist Takezawa Yasuko proposed the concept of RR (Race as Resistance) to understand the function of racial identities in Asia and Africa.

According to Takezawa, “Race as Resistance (RR) is race as created and reinforced by minorities themselves as agents who mobilize racial identities in order to fight against racism.” (Takezawa 2011: 9)

She included Afrocentrism, the Negritude movement, and independence movements in Asia as examples of RR. (Takezawa 2005: 44-8)

The national polity theory in Japan, which incorporated a sense of victimization by the West can be categorized as yet a further example of RR.
Nation, Race, and *Minzoku*

- *Minzoku* was a coined word compounding two Chinese characters, "民min" meaning common people and "族zoku" meaning clan.

- The first appearance of the word *Minzoku* in a Japanese publications was the translation of French "L'assemblee nationale" as "*Minzoku* assembly" in 1882. (Nishikawa 2002: 96)

- However, another word, "Kokumin" ultimately became the official translation of (Japanese) national, while "*Minzoku*" occupied a unique position between nation and race.
What was the **Minzoku**?

- The word *Minzoku* was popularized in magazines like "The Japanese," which launched in 1888. (Weiner 1994)
- An article in the magazine in 1890 contained the following: (Kuga 1969-85: vol.2, 371)
  - “There is a difference between white, black, and yellow people. Among these yellow, black and white people, there are various countries of various Minzoku. But these various countries of various Minzoku have each their own history, custom and territory. (…) That is why national consciousness has been established.”
- Here, *Minzoku* was a group having its own history and customs even if skin color might be the same as others. In that respect, it resembled the concept of ethnic groups.
- However, *Minzoku* was also assumed to possess its own territory and should, thus develop as an independent state. In that sense, it was close to the concept of nation.
Minzoku as a Tool of Unity and Independence

- In order to differentiate Japan from China and Korea losing independence, the concept of race which emphasized skin color or physical characteristics was useless.
- In order to retain territory and form an independent state, the concept of ethnicity was, for their purposes, insufficient.
- Civic nationalism does not help to create a unity that shares history and fate without political consensus or social contracts.
- The invented word Minzoku, however, was sufficiently flexible to satisfy the requirements of constructing a Japanese nation.
German Volk and Japanese Minzoku

• Some scholars have argued that the concept of Minzoku resembled that of the German Volk (Weiner 1994: 19).

• Indeed, Hozumi and Inoue studied in Germany.

• However, German Volk tended to refer to the lower common people, whereas Japanese Minzoku did not. The emperor was the chief of Japanese Minzoku in the national polity theory.

• The concept of Minzoku was invented in the specific political context of late nineteenth century Japan.
4. The Expansion of Minzoku
Japan’s Expansion

• Japan won victories in both the first Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) leading to the acquisition of Taiwan in 1895 and the annexation of Korea in 1910.

• The indigenous peoples to the north (Ainu) and the Ryukyu Kingdom to the south had been incorporated within the Japanese state as early as 1879.

• Japanese Government imposed Japanese nationality on Koreans, Taiwanese, Ainu, and Okinawans, as well as an education of Japanese standard language and loyalty to Japanese emperor.
Japanization and Russification

• The Japanese assimilation policy might have been close to the “Russification” project that imposed the Russian language and culture on all subject populations within the Russian Empire in the 1880s and 90s.

• The objective of the “Russification” project was “that all subjects of the empire should consider themselves Russians, and should owe allegiance not only to the monarch but also to the Russian nation.” (Seton-Watson, 1977: 85)

• It was an attempt of “stretching the short, tight, skin of the nation over the gigantic body of the empire.” (Anderson 2006: 86)
The Expansion and Victim Consciousness

• On the one hand, Japanese government and intellectuals continued to suffer from a strong sense of victim consciousness in the face of an anti-Japanese immigrant movement.

• Japanese intellectuals and politicians criticized Western racial discrimination and imperialism, and they had to justify Japan’s treatment of colonial subjects.
The Inclusion into the Japanese *Minzoku*

- After the annexation of Korea, what became the major discourse of Japanese politicians and intellectuals, including Hozumi and Inoue, was to expand the concept of "Japanese *Minzoku*" to include Korean and Taiwanese.

- They claimed that ethnic groups from various parts of Asia who arrived in Japanese archipelago millenia earlier had been assimilated within the Japanese *Minzoku* through the benevolence of the Emperor (Oguma 2002).

- It was assumed that this expansion of *Minzoku* would solve the contradiction between inducing preaching loyalty to the Emperor among Koreans and Taiwanese while criticizing Western racism.
5. The Boomerang Effect
Minzú in Chinese

- The Japanese term Minzoku also spread to China as "Minzú" and to Korea as "Minjog" using the same composition of Chinese characters.
- Sun Yat-Sen, the founding father of the Republic of China, developed San Min Chu-l (Three Principles of the People) composed of Minquán (democracy), Minshēng (welfare), and Mínzú.
- Sun stayed in Japan in the 1890s and he was hosted by Japanese nationalists.
- The concept of Minzú in Sun’s texts is difficult to express in English. (Maekawa 2015: 238-45)
What is Minzú?

• Sun argued that the “Han Mínzū” should end the oppression of the alien Qing Dynasty of Manchurians. Here the conceptualization of "Mínzū" was close to that of an ethnic group.

• However, Sun also argued that Han, Mongols, Tibetans, Manchus, and the Muslims (such as the Uyghurs) should have merged into the “Zhonghua (Chinese) Mínzū” to fight against Western colonization.

• Sun also insisted that all Chinese states had been composed of a single Minzú since unification by Qin Shi Huang in the 3rd Century BC. Thus, Mínzú possesses both history and territory.
Minzú as RR (Race as Resistance)

• Sun further argued that Minzú were communities formed by harmonious natural process, whereas states were collectivities aggregated by armed power, artificial politics, and social contract.

• Ultimately, Sun has conceived the “Chinese Minzú” as a group that had maintained territorial sovereignty from ancient times, was characterized by the absence of domestic conflict, was unified against aliens, and should develop to an independent state.

• Herein we see that the concept of Minzoku as RR could be applied to political situations in other parts of Asia.
Minjog self-determination

- Woodrow Wilson’s advocacy of self-determination for colonial peoples at the Paris Conference in 1919 triggered the Korean independent movement.
- In Wilson's speech, the political entity of self-determination was nation or people, not a race or ethnic group.
- Initially, Japanese newspapers translated the entities of self-determination as Kokumin (nation) or Jinmin (people).
- However, the January 10, 1919 edition of the Tokyo Asahi Shimbun translated Wilson’s self-determination as “Minzoku self-determination民族自決.”
- This translation then appeared “Minjog self-determination” in the January 23 edition of the Korean language newspaper Shinhan Minbo.
- On February 8, Korean students studying in Tokyo published a statement demanding freedom from colonial rule using the word "Minjog self-determination." (Ono 2017: 8-18)
The Boomerang Effect

- On March 1st 1919, Korean activists in Seoul, encouraged by the students in Tokyo, issued a declaration of independence in Seoul, triggering demonstrations throughout Korea.

- This declaration was issued in the name of “Representatives of Korean Minjog” and was dated “March 1st of 4251 years after the Foundation of Korean State.”

- It also contained the following: “For the first time in several thousand years, we have suffered the agony of alien suppression for a decade, becoming a victim.” (Lee, de Bary, and Ch’oe 2000: 338, 339)

- Thus, the Japanese conceptualization of Minzoku as RR had become an ideological tool of resistance to Japanese colonial rule.
Other Boomerangs

• The Burakumin, the “untouchables” of Japan, for example also claimed status as a Minzoku.
• In 1921, a flyer issued by a Burakumin group, "Minzoku self-determination brigade" contained the following:
  “The ancestors of our Minzoku were the most eager cravers and practitioners of freedom and equality. And they were the greatest victim. We are the Minzoku who inherited the blood of the ancestors.” (Moriyasu 2012: 129-30)
• In 1911, Okinawan linguist Ifa Fuyū argued for the existence of a Ryukyuan Minzoku. Ifa had studied in Tokyo and learned how Japanese linguists were using linguistics to define ethnic groups and applied the identical method and the concept of Minzoku to Okinawa. (Oguma 2014: 84-7)
• This form of Self-racialization by peoples who were the victims of external racialization can also be found in the discourses of some early 20th century Zionists (Glad 2011).
Denial of the “Minzoku-ness”

- On the contrary, Japanese intellectuals denied the Minzoku-ness of these minorities and continued to support Japanization policies.
- Japanese media, intellectuals, and politicians normally called Koreans "朝鮮人 Koreans," not “朝鮮民族 Korean Minzoku.”
- The historian Kita Sadakichi, for example, reasoned that Burakumin were not a separate Minzoku but people who had failed to assimilate with the majority, and argued that Burakumin, the Ainu, and Koreans should be assimilated to the Japanese.
- In 1919, Kita criticized both Korean independence activists and Japanese discriminators as "mistaken patriots." (Kita 1919, 54)
6, Cultural Nativism
Integration by the Mighty Emperor

- Contemporary government-designated textbooks in primary education taught that Japan was composed of many ethnic groups, and some junior high school textbooks described the Japanese as a mixed *Minzoku*. (Oguma 2002: 134-5)

- That said, the government-designated textbooks in primary education before 1945 preached loyalty to the Emperor, but they included little description of a Japanese common culture.

- For the government and national polity theorists, it was the Emperor, not common culture, which was important for integration of the nation.

- It was left to the intellectuals of the 1920s to argue that the Japanese people shared a common culture, different from that of China and Korea.
“Culture" as a buzzword

- In the 1920s, male universal suffrage was introduced, an urban middle class was on the rise, and "culture" became a buzzword in contrast with "armed power."

- In this context, the discourse distinguishing ethnic-nationalism (*Minzoku syugi*) from state-nationalism (*Kokka syugi*) emerged.

- Thus, ethnic-nationalism was a collective consciousness rooted in common culture and history, opposing state-nationalism based on arms and power. (Doak 1996: 82)
The founder of Japanese folklore studies Yanagita Kunio, and the philosopher Watsuji Tetsurō, argued that the Japanese shared a unique Minzoku culture being different from China, Korea, and the West.

For both of them, the Emperor does not need to be a powerful monarch because the Japanese had already been integrated by common culture.

Both of them criticized the mixed-origin theory of the Japanese and did not support implementation of assimilation policy to Korea.

Watsuji wrote that: "the divinity of the Emperor is a notion that emerged from the foundations of the Japanese national community, and should not be forced on to alien Minzoku." (Oguma 2002)
Nativism vs. Empire

• Parallels can be drawn with Soviet Russia, where Russian cultural nativism contradicted the integrationist policies of the Communist regime.

• Indeed, some Russian cultural nativist intellectuals were highly critical of official assimilationist integration policies. (Seaton-Watson 1986: 25-27)
7, Victimized Pacifist
The Loss of Colonies and Armed Power

- As a consequence of its defeat in 1945, Japan was occupied by the US military. Korea, Taiwan and Okinawa were separated from Japan.
- Democratization and the word “culture” re-emerged as a buzzword, while “armed power” lost popularity.
- The Emperor was stripped of political power and became the symbol of national integration.
- In this situation, it was the theories of Yanagita and Watsuji that became the foundation of a new conservative discourse.
The Cultural Community

- According to Watsuji, the Japanese Emperor had played no role in "imperialistic invasions", but was inseparable from the Japanese cultural community. (Watsuji 1989-92: vol.14, 337-8)

- This argument not only influenced the National Moral Guidebook issued by the Ministry of Education in 1951, but future conservatives such as the novelist Mishima Yukio and Nakasone Yasuhiro, Japan’s Prime Minister during the 1980s. (Oguma 2002)
Anti-US Movement and *Minzoku*

- Defeat and occupation by the U.S. military renewed a sense of victim consciousness in Japan and the rise of RR (Race as Resistance) among Japanese leftists.
- Marxists of this era supported the independence movements in Asia and Africa.
- The Japan Communist Party (JCP) claimed that Japanese *Minzoku* had been effectively colonized by the U.S. Military and started an anti-U.S. military base movement. (Oguma 2014: 215-217)
- The opening address at the annual meeting of the Japanese Society for Historical Studies in 1952, a Marxist historian stated that: (Naramoto 1952: 1)
  - "Through its present descent into a U.S. colony, the once-glorious history of our *Minzoku* is about to be trampled under American military boots".
- They claimed that Japanese people and soldiers who were mobilized to the war were victims of the Emperor and the government.
The Victimized Pacifist Nation

• In 1957, Marxist historian Inoue Kiyoshi asserted that: (Inoue 1957: 171)

• “We, the Japanese Minzoku, were created from an almost homogenous race. (…) this same Japanese race has lived together in the same place for 2,000 years, and has grown into a Minzoku. (…) Long before the emergence of the Emperor, that is, at least from 4,000 or 5,000 years ago, the Japanese enjoyed a peaceful, liberal and completely democratic society on these islands.”

• This tone, a victimized pacifism, shaped the self-consciousness of the “Japanese” in the leftist discourse in the 1950 and 60s.
The Invention of Tradition

- That said, it was the economic boom in the 1960s that actually created the common culture in Japan.
- The diffusion of home appliances and other consumer goods homogenized living culture of Japan, while increasing television ownership contributed to the rapid diffusion of standard Japanese.
- Most consumer goods were of Japanese manufacture due to the loss of access to international markets due to the World War Two. It was not until 1964 that trade restrictions were lifted.
- The spread of refrigerators transformed sushi, which had been a local food in coastal areas, into "Japanese cuisine".
- Likewise, economic growth recast the Shinto style wedding ritual, which was invented in 1909 and had previously only been available to the wealthy, as a part of mainstream "Japanese culture".
The Myth of the Homogenous Nation

• In the late 1960s, conservatives such as novelist Mishima Yukio and politician Ishihara Shintaro claimed that Japan was a homogeneous nation.

• They argued that the Japanese had been a homogeneous grouping since ancient times, sharing a unique character.

• This discourse was supported by established scholars, such as anthropologist Nakane Chie and historian Masuda Yoshiro. (Oguma 2002: 317-8)

• Some of them argued for vigilance against the West, denied the existence of both racial discrimination in Japan and a history of Japanese colonial expansion. (Oguma 2002: 318)
8, Conclusion
Identity Politics of Non-Recognition

- Japan is not a homogeneous country, even without referring to the existences of Ainu or Okinawans.
- However, the Japanese government has never conducted surveys on the ethnic and religious composition of their people, which might reveal the diversity in Japan.
- Japanese conservative intellectuals and the government have concealed the division within the people and, with a strong victim consciousness, represented Japan as a harmonious country.
- Herein lies a politics of discourse of that has constructed a framework for ethnic non-recognition.
- The concept of Minzoku was invented for the identity politics.
Is it Specific to Japan?

- However, this history might not be specific to Japan.
- Claims to a unique culture, domestic harmony, unity against powerful enemies, victim consciousness, and the denial of racism and external aggression may, in fact, be the features of RR (Race as Resistance) in general.
- The Japanese experience has revealed a variant of RR, but...
...others may exist elsewhere.
Thank you for your attention

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