

A Critical Analysis of Japanese Identity Discourse: Alternatives to the Hegemony of *Nihonjinron*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the dominant Japanese identity discourse of *nihonjinron* through Laclau and Mouffe's Discourse Theory. Arguing that *nihonjinron* has been undertheorized in Japanese studies, this article critically analyzes the processes by which *nihonjinron* achieves, maintains, and challenges social dominance. It conceives of *nihonjinron* as a social imaginary which constructs nodal points such as *kokoro* (heart or soul) and provides a totalizing identity for Japanese culture and society. In recent years, however, newly created nodal points, such as *kosei* (individuality) and *kokusaika* (internationalization), have emerged as alternatives to the hegemonic, discursively created identities of Japanese society. While Japan's elites attempt to limit the meanings of these signifiers in ways advantageous to themselves, they have not been able to prevent these signifiers from taking on new meanings from the field of discursivity. Detailed textual evidence shows how *kosei* and *kokusaika* have become "floating signifiers" for competing discourses, potentially putting the social imaginary of *nihonjinron* at risk.

Keywords: *Nihonjinron*, Japanese society, *kokusaika*, *kosei*, Japanese identity

Introduction

This paper offers a critical analysis of the pervasive Japanese identity discourse of *nihonjinron* (theories of Japaneseness), and describes discursive challenges thereto. *Nihonjinron* characterizes Japan as a homogeneous nation built on a unique set of collectivist and harmonious social values, unlike those in other cultures. It has been comprehensively analyzed as a hegemonic ideology in Japanese studies (Mouer and Sugimoto 1986; Befu 2001; Liddicoat 2007; Yamamoto 2015). However, the discursive processes by which it has gained and maintained dominance until the present have been undertheorized. As a result, there has been no clear analytical framework to examine potential threats to its hegemony. To understand how competing discourses in contemporary Japan might threaten this dominance, we need a theoretical foundation for understanding discourse and discursive struggle and change.

Laclau and Mouffe's Discourse Theory (1985) provides one such foundation. The first part of this paper argues that *nihonjinron* has created and maintained hegemony in modern Japan by appropriating certain key lexical concepts, or "nodal points," which structure a web of discourses around them. *Nihonjinron* can be conceived as a chain of interrelated discourses centered on such nodal points, which constitute a "social imaginary" that constructs the identity of the Japanese people. For instance, the nodal point of *kotodama* (spirit of the language) structures the discourse of *Nihongo*, the Japanese language, attributing to it a unique spirit not enjoyed by other languages and accessible only to native Japanese speakers (Miller 1986; Liddicoat 2007). *Kotodama* connects the Japanese language to wider myths of homogeneous Japanese identity and race. "Japanese race and nationality are *Nihongo*, and *Nihongo* is Japanese race and nationality" (Miller 1986, 216). Another nodal point, *ie* (family or house), discursively links traditional rice farming values with the modern organization of Japanese companies and their supposedly family-like bonds of kinship and loyalty (Nakane 1967; Payne 2003).

A third nodal point—*kokoro*—is arguably of even greater discursive power. It is employed widely today in writings that specifically pertain to

Japanese identity, in everyday speech, in media discourse, and even in official policy documents, especially in education. *Kokoro*—a term of broad metaphoric extent that may be rendered as “mind,” “spirit,” or “heart” depending on the context—has been described as “an example par excellence of the Japanese ethos” (Befu 2001, 32). Appearing in numerous nihonjinron texts, it also structures a discourse of “moral conservatism” (Rear 2011) within education policy texts which foreground “traditional” Japanese values such as collectivism and self-sacrifice. Significantly, it is also used in the title of the official Ministry of Education textbook for moral education (*dōtoku kyōiku*)—*Kokoro no Nōtō* (*Notebook for the Heart*). This paper will focus on kokoro, examining its significant and continuing role as a nodal point of nihonjinron.

The second half of the paper examines two alternative discourses to the hegemony of nihonjinron in contemporary Japan. These pertain to different meanings of individuality (*kosei*) and internationalization (*kokusaika*), which emanate from social and economic terrains inside and outside Japan. Like kokoro, kosei appears as a key indicator of a widespread discourse within education policy, pushing for greater variation and flexibility within the school system. *Kokusaika*, along with similar but less commonly used terms such as *tabunka kyōsei*, also features in education discourse, most frequently within the context of foreign, specifically English, language education. Both kosei and kokusaika were formulated by Japan’s elites to push an educational agenda suited to state and business interests. As such, they often served to reinforce rather than threaten nihonjinron ideologies (Nakamatsu 2002; Kubota 2002; Burgess 2004; Chapman 2006; Liddicoat 2013; Yamamoto 2015).

However, Laclau and Mouffe emphasize that discourses, and language in general, are fundamentally mutable and unstable. In recent times, the semantic ranges of kosei and kokusaika have become less easy to confine, taking on meanings from other, potentially competing discourses. Thus, apart from being nodal points of elite, conservative discourses, they have also become, in Laclau and Mouffe’s terminology, “floating signifiers” in the struggle between rival discourses. This struggle

over the alternative meanings of *kosei* and *kokusaika* poses a potential threat to the hegemony of *nihonjinron*. Whether one discourse will succeed in fixing the meaning of floating signifiers, at least temporarily, is difficult to say. However, the process and outcome of the struggle will certainly have important effects on many aspects of Japanese culture and society.

The paper will begin with an outline of the theories of Laclau and Mouffe and their relevance to the situation in Japan. It will provide a brief historical background on *nihonjinron* from the 1850s to the present. The three nodal points—*kokoro*, *kosei*, and *kokusaika*—will be examined through textual examples that illustrate the discourses they structure. To trace the articulation of these nodal points, the paper will analyze educational policy texts produced by the Ministry of Education, the Office of the Prime Minister, and the Japanese business group, *Nippon Keidanren*. The discussion focuses on the 1980s, when *kosei* and *kokusaika* first grew prominent. Texts from 2000 onwards will then be analyzed to show how the meanings of the terms have somewhat destabilized. The paper will then discuss the significance of the findings, particularly with regard to possible future directions of Japanese social identity.

Floating signifiers, myths, and social imaginaries

In their influential book, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) advanced a poststructuralist theory that offers conceptual tools that can help identify and interpret discourses. As Rear and Jones (2013b, 5) point out, “Laclau and Mouffe argue that, due to the fundamental instability of language, discourses....compete to achieve dominance or *hegemony*.” Through this ongoing struggle, perceptions of society and identity are always open to new representations, as meanings are constantly altered and reconfigured.

For Laclau and Mouffe, the constitution of a discourse involves the structuring of signifiers into certain meanings and the exclusion of others. This reduction of possibilities is thus an “exercise of power” (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000). All possible meanings excluded by a

discourse are known as the *field of discursivity*. Discourses attempt to fix webs of meaning by constituting central privileged signifiers, or *nodal points*. Nodal points bind a particular system of meaning or *chain of signification*, assigning meanings to other signifiers within that discourse in a process called *articulation*. Through articulation, a discourse establishes a closure or a temporary halt to the fluctuations of meaning. Signs that have had their meaning fixed by a discourse are called *moments*.

Hegemony is achieved when a discourse or set of discourses expands into a “dominant horizon of social orientation and action by means of articulating unfixed elements into partially fixed moments in a context crisscrossed by antagonistic forces” (Torfing 1999, 101). When discourses become hegemonic, the social practices they structure can appear so natural that we fail to see that they are the result of political hegemonic practices. They become “common sense,” their origins and intrinsic contingency forgotten (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Deetz 1992).

No discourse, however, can completely hegemonize a field of discursivity. Thus, the dominance of a particular discourse is never permanent. “The transition from the ‘elements’ to the ‘moments’ is never entirely fulfilled” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 110). Elements, or nodal points, particularly open to different ascriptions of meaning, are known as *floating signifiers*. A floating signifier is an “empty” sign which becomes an object for struggle between competing discourses that fill it with meaning corresponding with their specific values.

Floating signifiers which refer to society as a unified whole (such as “Japan” or “the Japanese”) are known as *myths*. A myth which achieves hegemony and imposes a particular vision of social order, can be called a *social imaginary*, which is “a horizon” or “absolute limit which structures a field of intelligibility” (Laclau 1990, 63). Social imaginaries are constituted through *logic of equivalence*, which blurs the divisions between social groups by “relating them to a common project and by establishing a frontier to define the forces to be opposed, the ‘enemy’” (Mouffe 1993, 50). Nowhere is this clearer than in the construction of national identities, or “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983). The constitution of national

identities takes place, not around any common quality or essence, but around an empty nodal point, which “represents the pure and perfect but impossible identity of the community, and defines an antagonistic boundary defining their limits” (Glasze 2007, 662). By contrasting Us with an alien Other, a single collective identity can be formed from a diverse national community.

Nihonjinron as social imaginary

Nihonjinron has been called “Japan’s dominant identity discourse” (Befu 2001, ix). It is the subject of thousands of (mostly popular) books and articles in Nihongo and other languages. Though the loss of national confidence after Japan’s high economic growth has reduced the appetite for nihonjinron, works on the topic continue to be published. Several principal tenets of nihonjinron can be summarized as follows:

- Japan is a homogeneous country and its culture and people are “uniquely unique.” Japan’s unique culture can be considered superior to that of other nations.
- Japanese people have strong group consciousness in contrast to the individualistic values in Western cultures.
- Japan is a vertical society in which social obligation, indebtedness, and shame take precedence over the Western values of individual rights, duties, and conscience.
- Japanese culture values harmony over conflict and emotion over rationality.
- These cultural traditions originate from Japan’s wet-rice farming roots. They are so embedded in Japanese consciousness that they have formed the basis for numerous social practices, including those of the modern Japanese corporation.

Using Discourse Theory, nihonjinron can be understood as a social imaginary constituted through several nodal points webbed together in a

chain of signification. It seeks to articulate Japanese society as a totality and to constitute Japanese identity into a single representation. As Laclau (1990) said of the emergence of myths, the beginnings of nihonjinron dates to a period of social dislocation. In Japan's case, it was induced by the forced opening of her borders by Western gunships and the subsequent Meiji Restoration of 1868. The Restoration put the emperor back to the center of political life and formally ended the feudal system of the Tokugawa shogunate. Forced to confront their own impotence in the face of superior Western power and technology, the new Japanese oligarchy began to define their country in contrast to the outside forces that confronted it. Early nihonjinron was strongly denigrative of Japanese culture, with influential thinkers like Yukichi Fukuzawa, the founder of Keio University, deploring what he saw as the outmoded feudal mentality of Japanese institutions. Befu (2001) calls this process of self-denigration "auto-Orientalism."

Despite its negative outlook, auto-Orientalism did have the important effect of defining Japan as one nation and people. Scholars generally accept that Japan did not enter the Meiji Period with a strong sense of national unity. Identity is generally fashioned at the level of local clans (Vlastos 1998). The sudden emergence of a hostile Other, however, provided a platform upon which Japanese elites could discursively construct an identity for the whole nation. This parallels the histories of other nations. For example, the British after 1707 came to define themselves as a single people "not because of any political or cultural consensus at home, but rather in reaction to the Other beyond their shores" (Colley 1996, 6).

As the Meiji Period progressed and Japan's self-confidence increased, discourses of Japanese identity altered and acquired overtly nationalistic qualities centered around the person and institution of the emperor. The Imperial Rescript on Education of 1890 encapsulated this new discourse, calling for the nation's youth to "offer yourselves courageously to the State" and "guard and maintain the prosperity of Our Imperial Imperial Throne." When this nationalistic fervor ended in

the devastating defeat in World War II, another period of social dislocation ushered in. Japanese institutions were scrapped wholesale by the Allied Occupation and were replaced by democratic and meritocratic systems based on those of the United States. Nihonjinron reverted to the denigrative auto-Orientalism of the early Meiji Period. But Japan's miraculous rise from the ashes from the 1960s onwards prompted yet another turn-around as business leaders, politicians, and academics in and outside Japan sought to explain Japan's unprecedented economic success. The traditions of nihonjinron provided a convenient, readily available discursive structure. Hence was born the overwhelmingly positive and largely dominant discourse of Japanese identity.

Despite the changes in nihonjinron over the years, the representation of Japanese society as a homogeneous Self diametrically opposed to an equally homogeneous Other in the form of the West has not altered. The most recent popular work of nihonjinron, *The Dignity of the Nation* (Kokka no Hinkaku), was written by a mathematics lecturer, Masahiko Fujiwara. The book, the Japanese version of which was the bestselling book in the first six months of 2006, is based on this dichotomization of the world into two antagonistic camps.

The whole mental structure of Westerners is based upon conflict. For Westerners, nature is something that has to be subjugated to secure the happiness of the race, while other religions and different value systems are there to be eradicated. For the Japanese, by contrast, nature is something divine, and humans are integrated into it as one part of the whole. This different view of nature is a fundamental difference between Western and Japanese people. It is because the Japanese have always lived in harmony with nature that they have never sought to wipe out other values and religions, barring the Anti-Christian Edict of 1614. (Fujiwara 2007, 229)

With a dominant logic of equivalence, the West is articulated as one entity, a single race with identical characteristics. This despite an earlier statement in the book based on the author's experiences of living in the USA and the UK, where he noticed fundamental differences between the two.

The British may be Anglo-Saxons like the Americans, but their national character is entirely different. In the UK, customs and traditions, and on an individual level, sincerity and humor are considered of greater value than logic. (Fujiwara 2007, 9)

The deliberate discounting of statements that dispute the author's thesis—even when explicitly mentioned, as in the Anti-Christian Edict in the excerpt above—is a hallmark of nihonjinron.

Kokoro as a nodal point for national identity

Kokoro is “an example par excellence of the Japanese ethos” (Befu 2001, 32). Many nihonjinron texts bear the word, kokoro, in their titles: in *Nihon no Kokoro* (The Heart of Japan), *Nihonjin no Kokoro* (The Heart of the Japanese) and *Nihongo no Kokoro* (The Heart of the Japanese Language). Illustrating the emotive appeal of the word, *Nihonjin no Kokoro* by Karaki Junzō went through five printings in less than three months. All these books appeal to a unique sensibility supposedly possessed by all Japanese—an appreciation of culture and tradition; of simplicity in aesthetics (*wabi-sabi*); of harmony with nature and one's surroundings (*wa*); and of old-fashioned morals like filial piety (*oya kōkō*), respect for one's elders (*nenchosha e no keii*), self-sacrifice (*jikō-gisei*), and the samurai spirit (*bushido seishin*). This sensibility—an innate feeling of what it is and what it should mean to be Japanese—can be truly understood only by a Japanese. Kokoro “conjures up the essence of the culture and satisfies the nostalgic and primordial feelings of the now modernized, urbanized Japanese living in a technologized, internationalized, and globalized world” (Befu 2001, 33)

In essence, kokoro as a nodal point draws together signifiers that connect modern Japanese identity to an idealized, and arguably invented, past. Symbols add power to this identity. Kokoro is associated with images of a classic, romanticized Japan—the cherry blossom, the changing seasons, *haiku* poetry, and traditional arts and crafts, among others. In *The Dignity*

of the Nation, Fujiwara (2007, 179) connects cherry blossoms to the samurai code of *bushido*, which he interprets as a moral code that guides a unique Japanese proclivity to protect the weak and do what is right. Personalities from Japan's past are also often used to embody the ideals of *kokoro*. In *Nihonjin no Kokoro* (1965), Karaki discusses famous figures such as Matsuo Basho, the *haiku* poet; the Buddhist priest, Ippen; Suzuki Daisetz, the Zen teacher; and the author, Natsume Soseki. In *Nihon no Kokoro* (1973), Goi introduces Saigo Takamori, the revered samurai who rebelled against the Meiji government and committed suicide upon his defeat; and Prince Shotoku of the seventh century C.E., credited with the first mention of *wa* (harmony) as the prime virtue for politics and human relations.

The books do not explain exactly how these characters exemplify "Japaneseness," but certain commonalities can be inferred. All are from the mainly feudal past, who distinguished themselves through their art, philosophy, or principles. Saigo Takamori is a particularly powerful exemplar, sacrificing himself and his followers to protect samurai values from being eradicated by the modernizing Meiji government. Herein lies the power of *kokoro* as a nodal point. Its emptiness of meaning allows it to connect with any element conjuring up nostalgic and positive feelings. Thus, the soul of modern Japan, and of modern Japanese people, is powerfully linked to that of a largely whitewashed past. Moving away from the ideals of *kokoro* by, for example, behaving in a manner construed as individualistic or self-serving, is a betrayal of what it truly means to be Japanese. There is also no room within the discourse for variations within Japanese culture or society. *Kokoro* is a discourse of homogeneity in which differences based on gender, ethnicity, age, or religion are ignored and excluded.

A speech on education reform by right-wing Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori in 2000 illustrates this conceptual linking of *kokoro* with nationalist values.

Still, our performance in terms of instilling our people with compassion for others, a spirit of dedication to the betterment of others (*hōshi no seishin*), respect for the culture and traditions of our nation and other elements of what it takes for us to be rich in spirit as Japanese (*nihonjin to shite motsu beki yutaka na kokoro*), as well as the fostering of principles and ethics, has not necessarily been as exemplary. This in turn may have led to recent serious issues such as class disruption and violence at school. (3)

The richness of *kokoro* here is tied to positive elements such as “compassion for others,” “a spirit of dedication,” “respect for the culture and traditions of our nation,” “principles and ethics,” and being “rich in spirit as Japanese” (“spirit” being the translation of *kokoro* in this extract). A lack of *kokoro* is blamed for juvenile delinquency and school violence, albeit with the hedging modal of “may.”

It can be no coincidence that *Kokoro no Nōtō* (Notebook for the Heart) is the textbook used for moral education in schools. Produced by the Japanese Ministry of Education in 2002, it connects, through its title alone, modern morality with that of the past, tacitly intimating that values are immutable and immemorial. There are four versions of the textbook—three for elementary and one for junior high. Unlike textbooks for compulsory subjects, *Kokoro no Nōtō* is regarded as a supplementary reading material which obviates the need for public verification of appropriateness. Although its use is not compulsory, the Ministry of Education sends the textbook to each school and requests reports on how frequently it was used.

Divided into four topics—about oneself, one’s relations with others, one’s relations with nature, and one’s relation with society—*Kokoro no Nōtō* gives the appearance of a discussion-based text, with spaces for students to write thoughts and reflections. Each space is, however, preceded by a narrative strongly suggesting a “right answer” for the reflection. *Living as a Member of Society* (*shakai ni ikiru ichi-in to shite*), the longest chapter in the junior high version of the textbook, discusses the importance of

living in a group and the social dangers of selfish behavior. It then asks the following discussion questions:

What does it mean to fulfill your role within a group? (82); Discuss a time when you felt that fulfilling your role within a group was hard but good (84); How can you improve group-centered life (*shudan seikatsu*)?; How can you cultivate human relationships so that each person can shine within a group? (85); and Don't you think more people are getting selfish these days? (90)

Questions about possible drawbacks of group loyalty (What does one do if the direction the group is taking is wrong?) are excluded.

The final section of the book discusses the importance of patriotism, exhorting students to “love our country and pray for its development” (*wagakuni o aishi sono hatten o negau*) [114]. It lists examples of Japan’s “superlative traditions and culture” (*sugureta nihon no dentō to bunka*) and asks students to think of ways to continue them. Symbols associated with kokoro abound in these pages—cherry blossoms, *ikebana* flower arrangements, temples, thatched cottages, *mochi* rice-making, *Noh* theatre, and traditional pottery-making. Moreover, people in the book are depicted as having one skin color. No images of cultural or ethnic diversity appear, except on a single page which deals with Japanese people who have contributed to the world. Those living in other countries have a different skin color. The message of the book is that there is only one set of morals and values for Japan. It attempts to reinforce a single national identity for Japanese people in the face of a rapidly changing social world.

A crisis of hegemony? Kosei and kokusaika as floating signifiers

Ultimately, it is impossible for the discourse of kokoro to forge a single identity for Japanese people by assigning them into particular subject positions. As Jørgensen and Philipps (2002, 17) put it, Laclau and Mouffe emphasize that social actors are “ascribed many different positions by different discourses.” In addition, the hegemony of a particular discourse—or social imaginary—can never be complete or permanent. In

contemporary Japan, the hegemony of nihonjinron is under threat from competing forces such as changes in values and globalization. Two discourses that represent such forces, particularly in education, are *kosei* (individuality) and *kokusaika* (internationalization).

These nodal points were originally articulated by Japan's political and business conservative elites to restructure, to their advantage, Japanese social practices in light of globalized economic competition. Brought to the forefront of political and economic discourse, however, *kosei* and *kokusaika* became open to different meanings, not all of them desirable to various interest groups that form Japan's elites (who themselves are not always in alignment). As nodal points, these meanings are also floating signifiers, which are contested by a plurality of competing discourses.

In the case of *kosei*, it has become semantically linked with another, more recent discourse of identity—*jibun rashisa* (being oneself). *Jibun rashisa* articulates individuality in a much wider and freer sense than the narrow, elite-driven definition of *kosei*. As such, it poses a threat to nihonjinron's central tenet that Japan is a society governed by a strong sense of group consciousness. *Kokusaika*, meanwhile, has become a site of struggle between a discourse of exclusivity which articulates Japan as a distinct homogeneous culture, and of inclusivity which promotes social and cultural diversity within Japan to bring in new talents and viewpoints from around the world.

Kosei as a nodal point and floating signifier

Kosei (individuality) was introduced into mainstream political discourse in the mid-1980s in the reports of the Ad-Hoc Council on Education (*Rinkyoshin*) organized by Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone. Composed of senior bureaucrats, business leaders and academics, the Ad-Hoc Council published four reports from 1985 to 1987 calling for the liberalization (*jiyūka*) and flexibilization (*jūnanka*) of Japanese education so that it could cope with the economic and social challenges of the twenty-first century. The discourse of the reform plans was centered on the phrase, “respect for individuality” (*kosei jūshi*). The Ad-Hoc Council, under the

sway of neoliberalism, reinterpreted the term to refer to the differing aptitudes and abilities of students stifled by a system based on equality and egalitarianism (Takayama 2009). They employed this new interpretation to push for a more diversified and flexible education system. *Kosei* was articulated in a strategically ambiguous manner to stretch its meaning into several interpretations, allowing it to appeal to differing interests and positions. Two excerpts from the 1987 report illustrate this deliberate accommodation of different meanings. The report proposed radical reforms that were aimed at

the rejection of standardization, inflexibility, closedness and ethnocentrism and a new emphasis on respect for the individual and his freedom, autonomy and responsibility, in other words an emphasis on individuality (*Kyōiku Seisaku Kenkyūkai* 1987, 68)

developing creativity, the ability to think clearly, judgement and the power of expression... creativity is closely related to individuality. (*Kyōiku Seisaku Kenkyūkai* 1987, 138)

Through this ambiguous use of *kosei*, conservative political and business interests were attempting to neutralize the opposition of left-wing groups to their neoliberal reforms (Takayama 2009). Just as neoliberalism in other discourses has been able to neutralize opposing ideologies through its successful appropriation of the word “freedom”—for who could possibly argue against freedom? (Harvey 2005)—so did *kosei* deny opponents the discursive space to put forward contrary perspectives. *Kosei* was so successful as a nodal point that it came to hold “a virtually absolute position in debates about the state of Japanese education” (Fujita 2001, 85).

For conservative elites, *kosei* is a quality akin to a talent or skill that can be harnessed for the good of the nation, as Prime Minister Koizumi made clear in a Diet speech in 2002.

I will do my utmost to realize “A Society That Nurtures the Dreams and Hopes of its Children,” to imbue our children with pride and self-awareness as a Japanese national (*nihonjin to shite no hokori to*

jikaku) so that they can grow up as individuals (*ningen*) with abundant individuality and talent (*yutaka na kosei to nōryoku*), who can shoulder the work of new nation building. (Koizumi 2002, 9)

Koizumi ties *kosei* to pride and self-awareness as a Japanese citizen, which will drive people to use their “individuality and talent” for the nation. *Kosei*, in this discourse, is articulated as a utilitarian attribute, learnable through the right kind of education. Similarly, the moral education textbook, *Kokoro no Nōtō*, also places *kosei* in the context of societal roles by invoking the metaphor of an orchestra in which each individual player “makes use of their individuality” (*jibun no kosei o ikashinagara*) to “thoroughly fulfill their role” (*jibun no yakuwari o shikkari hatasu*) [82] within the group. As in an orchestra, nobody must play too slowly or too quickly as this will break the harmony of the whole. The use of one’s individuality is defined by one’s role in society.

In another context, however, *kosei* is used in ways closer to individualism rather than individuality. In the 1980s during the Ad-Hoc council, progressive camps, represented by the Japan Teachers’ Union (*Nikkyōso*) and left-wing political parties, saw *kosei* as referring to the differences in personalities and interests of individual students, who needed more opportunities for self-expression in a less-demanding school environment (Fujita 2001). Individualism, of course, poses a challenge to the dominant nihonjinron discourse of Japan as a collectivist society, as well as to the conservative interpretation of individuality as a talent that can be used to serve the country. In this more recent discourse, *kosei* is associated with a different nodal point emphasizing individuality not as an ability that can be used for economic purposes but as character or personality that represents an individual’s unique, perhaps even eccentric, nature. This nodal point is *jibun rashisa*, which can be translated as “being oneself” or “being true to oneself.” As the English translation suggests, *jibun rashisa* conveys the importance of making personal choices about lifestyle, career, relationships, and fashion that do not clash with one’s own tastes, desires, and personality. Given its “informality”—outside

government discourse—it is a word used in everyday conversations, as well as commercials and media. A straightforward search on Google yields more than 32 million hits, from song and book titles to magazine articles, lifestyle and career sites, and personality tests.

It is not uncommon to find *jibun rashisa* appearing side-by-side with *kosei*. On a lifestyle website called Simple Life, *jibun rashisa* is featured, amongst other places, in the headline, “*honto no jibun rashisa to wa? kosei o ushinau riyū to suteru koto no taisetsusa*” (What is being true to oneself? The importance of getting rid of reasons for losing your individuality). The article discusses ways in which one can be true to oneself within the strictures of Japanese society. Another lifestyle website, proFlyaway, features an article titled, “*jibun rashisa*” “*kosei*” *o mitsukeru hōhō*” (how to find one’s “uniqueness” “individuality”). A third example appears in a job advertisement from a large engineering company, *minasan no kosei jibun rashisa o misete itadakitai* [we want you to show us your “individuality” and “uniqueness”], which Rear (2013) analyzed. Although *kosei* here could still be interpreted as a talent that can be used in the workplace, placing it so closely with *jibun rashisa* blurs the distinction between the two signifiers and expands the meaning potential of *kosei* beyond the narrow confines of skill.

This discussion shows how *kosei* functions as a floating signifier among several discourses. While conservative business interests attempt to fix its meaning as an attribute that can be used for the economy, and right-wing politicians tie it to nation-building and citizenship, its association with the freer and looser term, *jibun rashisa*, extends its meaning potential into a broader field linked to personal choices over lifestyle, relationship, and fashion. *Jibun rashisa* may be seen as a nodal point in discourses of individualism as well as individuality, encapsulating the generational value changes occurring in Japan over the past twenty to thirty years. It poses, therefore, a direct challenge to the notion of Japan as a collectivist society in which individuals voluntarily place the needs of the group above their own selfish desires. If *jibun rashisa* is a desirable objective of social life, it is hard to see any distinction between Japan and her supposed Other, the individualist West.

Kokusaika as a nodal point and floating signifier

Like *kosei*, the term *kokusaika* (internationalization) also entered mainstream political discourse with the reports of the Nakasone Ad-Hoc Council on Education in the 1980s. Early on, *kokusaika* was loaded with different meanings. An economic aspect underpinned *kosei*, with the supposition that the Japanese would need a global outlook to maintain their competitiveness in the world. They would need to be communicate fluently in foreign languages, particularly English, and broaden their perspectives beyond Japan. In the following excerpt, also previously quoted, *kosei* and *kokusaika* are strategically linked together in a reform proposal aimed at

the rejection of standardization, inflexibility, closedness and ethnocentrism and a new emphasis on respect for the individual and his freedom, autonomy and responsibility, in other words an emphasis on individuality. (*Kyōiku Seisaku Kenkyūkai* 1987, 68)

“Ethnocentrism” and “closedness” are collocated with other negative signifiers, such as “inflexibility” and “standardization,” and contrasted with positive signifiers such as “freedom, autonomy and responsibility.” At the same time, the Ad-Hoc Council introduced a nationalist connotation to the term by emphasizing that a Japanese individual could not truly understand and respect foreign cultures without a deep knowledge and respect for her own.

It must be understood that a “good world citizen” (*yoki kokusaijin*) is also a “good Japanese” (*yoki nihonjin*) and our education must teach people “love for the country” (*kuni o aisuru kokoro*) and a firm sense of the individuality of the Japanese culture, as well as deepen the knowledge of the culture and traditions of all foreign cultures. (*Kyōiku Seisaku Kenkyūkai* 1987, 72)

Hood (2001) argues that this nationalistic construction of the term allowed the Council to satisfy the demands of its more hawkish members while maintaining its utilitarian, business-focused proposals. *Kokusaika*

also helped propagate nihonjinron, particularly with regard to the homogeneous nature of Japanese society and its inherent uniqueness (Kubota 2002; Burgess 2004; Liddicoat 2007; Seargeant 2009). Prime Minister Nakasone himself was an active supporter of nihonjinron, establishing the International Research Centre for Japanese Studies in Kyoto in 1988 (Sugimoto and Mouer 1989). Kokusaika maintained and strengthened the notion that Japan is fundamentally different from other nations. It was, therefore, “less about transcending cultural boundaries and more about protecting them” (Burgess 2004, 3).

A similar duality was added to statements about foreign language fluency, which was necessary for Japanese to express their views and offer perspectives that help foreigners understand Japan (in the 1980s, Japan-bashing was a prominent issue). Fluency in a foreign language was not primarily for cultural and social engagement with the world but for the promotion of Japanese perspectives abroad. As a result, English was the only foreign language promoted under the banner of ‘internationalization’ and the West—specifically America—was the only region from which cultural exchange appeared necessary.

Kokusaika essentially blends Westernization with nationalism, failing to promote cosmopolitan pluralism. In other words, kokusaika tends to promote convergence to predetermined norms rather than divergence towards cultural and linguistic multiplicity. (Kubota 2002, 14)

It was even suggested that knowledge of foreign languages would deepen the respect and appreciation of the Japanese for their own mother tongue, connecting the term with other key signifiers of nihonjinron such as kotodama (Liddicoat 2007; Seargeant 2009).

Furthermore, kokusaika was used to refer not only to the spread of Japanese people and Japanese ideas abroad but also to the movement of foreign people and ideas into Japan. Again, this “inward” kokusaika

serves to maintain the notion that Japan is a homogeneous country by emphasizing the “internationalness” (foreignness) of immigrants who have settled there (Burgess 2004). Thus, the widespread use of terms such as *kokusai kazoku* (international family), *kokusaiji* (international children), and *kyōshitsu no kokusaika* (internationalization of the classroom) “has the effect of homogenizing cultural differences, confining subjects to a narrow, stereotypical, and superficial identity,” while simultaneously excluding them from the mainstream cultural identity of the Japanese (Burgess 2004, 10). Internationalization, in this respect, stresses the importance of making newcomers “blend in” and adapt to “Japanese culture” (Nakamutsa 2002, 148). Here, it closely mirrors discourses of *tabunka kyōsei*, which is “preoccupied with homogeneity and the containment of identity to prevent the feared destruction of social cohesion” (Chapman 2006, 494).

While *kokusaika* in that sense seems to reinforce *nihonjinron*, it has in recent years become the nodal point for a more inclusive discourse that emphasizes the importance of bringing more diverse viewpoints and sets of values into Japanese society. The driver of this discourse is, once again, the business community who appear to recognize that the deep economic and demographic crises facing Japan can only be solved with a large and sustained increase in immigration. When the discourse of *kokusaika* became prominent in the 1980s, the proposed opening of Japan to foreign people, goods, and services was largely a result of outside pressure from abroad, termed as *gaiatsu* (Hook 1992). In the early twenty-first century, however, the pressure is coming from within Japan, which potentially makes it a far more powerful force.

In their Japan 2025 report published in 2003, Nippon Keidanren set out a vision of Japan’s future in which “diversity” (*tayōsei*) featured as a key signifier. One example came under the heading, “Vibrant Diversity.”

It is not only Japanese citizens who will help to bring these choices to our society. Non-Japanese who come to live in this country will bring diverse viewpoints and talents. Japan must create an environment

where foreigners can actively participate in economic and social activities. On an individual level, this will require greater tolerance toward diversity; on the administrative level, the government must open Japan's doors to people from around the globe so that they can display their ability in this country. (Nippon Keidanren 2003, 7)

Diversity is associated in the report with the need to base Japanese society on the lives and interests of individuals, a viewpoint seemingly at odds with the groupist discourse of *nihonjinron*.

Japanese society in the postwar era has been shaped by companies and the role they play in peoples' lives. As Japan moves forward, though, it will have to shift society's center of gravity from the interests of corporations to the lives of individuals. The Japanese will identify themselves less with the companies for which they work and more with their own personal talents and interests.... In short, the Japan of 2025 will be powered by individuals and the communities they form. And these communities need not be bound by national borders—foreigners in Japan and Japanese active overseas will be a key element of this diverse, vigorous society. (Nippon Keidanren 2003, 6)

Nippon Keidanren's concern here is practical. The notion of individuals identifying themselves by their skills rather than their company can be viewed as an attempt to loosen the discursive hegemony of *nihon-teki keiei* (Japanese-style management) on the issue of lifetime employment. It can be read as a code for deregulating the labor market to make labor laws more flexible—in the corporations' favor. Moving society's center of gravity from the interests of corporations to the lives of individuals is, ultimately, in the interests of corporations. Nevertheless, the inclusion of non-Japanese in this idealized view of the future is highly significant. Non-Japanese are to be welcomed into "communities," where they will contribute to a "diverse, vigorous society." Far from immigrants having to adapt to Japanese culture, Japanese culture must adapt to them.

Elsewhere, the report talks of the need for a "third opening" of modern Japan to the world (the previous two was in 1852–4, with the arrival of the Black Ships of Commodore Perry, and in 1945 at the end of

the Second World War). This is fleshed out in more detail in a report issued the following year, *Recommendations on Accepting Non-Japanese Workers*. It complains that despite the projected fall in Japan's population from 2006, "accepting non-Japanese workers into the country is not yet being considered as a viable option for filling this gap" (Nippon Keidanren 2004). The report calls for the establishment of an Office for Accepting Non-Japanese Workers within the Cabinet with a corresponding Cabinet-level ministerial position. This office would be expected to lay down "concrete policy measures on definite three-year and five-year timetables that address acceptance of non-Japanese workers," while tackling issues such as the control of the quality and quantity of immigrants and the guarantee of their "human rights and dignity" (Nippon Keidanren 2004). Once again, diversity is used in the report as a key signifier, with a call for "restoring socioeconomic vitality in Japan through the dynamism of diversity" (Nippon Keidanren 2004).

While the objective of Nippon Keidanren is clearly utilitarian and economic, the explicit linking of *kokusaika* to significant levels of immigration, and of immigration to social diversity introduces a new element into the meaning potential of the term. As a nodal point for a discourse of homogeneity, *kokusaika* serves to maintain the status quo, excluding non-Japanese from full and equal participation in Japanese society. As a nodal point for a discourse of diversity, however, it is a banner for radical social change—the acceptance of large numbers of immigrants whose diverse values and viewpoints must be accepted and put to use. As such, it directly challenges the *nihonjinron* ideal of Japan as a single race tied together by blood and language, in which minorities are rendered invisible. The discourse of diversity not only gives such minorities a presence in Japan; it also constitutes them as a crucial aspect of the country's social fabric.

Conclusion

This paper did not aim to provide a comprehensive analysis of all the discourses comprising *nihonjinron*. Rather, it attempted to illustrate

the processes by which nihonjinron has hegemonized discursive space in Japan and from there, to show how these same processes have yielded alternatives in recent years. Arguing that discourse has been undertheorized in Japanese studies, it advanced Laclau and Mouffe's Discourse Theory (1985) to analyze the processes by which discourses achieve, maintain, and challenge social dominance. Laclau and Mouffe emphasize the link between discourses and social reality, offering conceptual and analytical tools that help uncover the crucial role of language in shaping social identities. Of particular relevance to the articulation of Japanese identity are the notions of social imaginary, nodal points, and floating signifiers.

Social imaginary refers to a discourse that has totalized the discursive space within a particular terrain, while nodal points are the means by which discourses create and stabilize meanings within that terrain. The paper argued that nihonjinron can be conceived as a social imaginary which, by constructing nodal points such as kokoro, kotodama, or ie, provides a totalizing identity for Japanese culture and society. It showed how the nodal point of kokoro, and the elements it structures, has been hegemonized through the articulations of Japan's elites. Its ubiquitous use assigns individuals into subject positions that maintain the dominance of nihonjinron.

At the same time, however, Laclau and Mouffe's theory also emphasizes how hegemonies can be challenged due to the fundamental instability of language. When meanings of words become sites of struggle between competing discourses, they become floating signifiers. This paper argued that two floating signifiers of importance in Japan today are kosei (individuality) and kokusaika (internationalization). These terms were articulated by political and business elites pushing nationalist agendas to strengthen Japan's economic and diplomatic power in the 1980s. Conservative groups defined kosei as an economic attribute that can be put to the service of the nation, and used kokusaika to reinforce notions of homogeneity and Japanese uniqueness.

As these nodal points have grown in prominence, however, they have appropriated new meanings from the field of discursivity. Kosei is

commonly associated with another nodal point, *jibun rashisa* (being oneself) which stretches its meaning potential beyond a narrow utilitarian sense, incorporating notions of personal freedom and choice. *Kokusaika*, meanwhile, is used by business interests to pressure the government into accepting large levels of immigration. They associated it with the nodal point of *tayōsei* (diversity) which powerfully undercuts the discourse of homogeneity. As floating signifiers for different discourses, these terms potentially put the entire social imaginary of *nihonjinron* at risk.

The struggle between discourses in contemporary Japan illustrates a key, but sometimes overlooked, aspect of hegemony. Hegemonic nodal points do not interpellate only those without power in society. They interpellate those in power too, often the very groups that instituted the nodal points in the first place. The urgency with which business groups such as Nippon Keidanren still push the discourse of *kosei* even thirty years after it first grew prominent in the 1980s suggests that breaking the stranglehold of traditional conceptions of Japanese-style management is fraught with difficulty. What was once advantageous to management is now a millstone. Furthermore, through everyday articulatory practices, nodal points can begin to work against the interests of their creators, as arguably in the association of *kosei* with *jibun rashisa*.

Japanese corporations would like to fashion a new image of the firm, in which employees develop their own specialties and work under their own initiative and direction while still willingly putting in the long hours they are famous for. However, they are also faced with a culture in which individuality and individualism are becoming discursively merged. The most common tendency for university students was “inclination toward personal interests” (Adachi 2006, 29). Adachi’s study included a questionnaire with items such as “I want to maintain my character in doing my job;” “I want to make a career out of what I like;” and “I want to be in an environment where I can do what I want to do” (31). Defining *kosei* as a talent or attribute works in favor of corporations. If it becomes a rallying cry for individual freedom and choice, however, it could destroy one of the very things that made Japanese companies great.

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