

JAPANESE CULTURAL IDENTITY

AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION OF *NIHONJINRON*

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Nihonjinron, also known as *Nihon bunkaron*, *Nihon shakairon*, *Nihonron*, etc., is a body of discourse which purports to demonstrate Japan's cultural differences from other cultures and Japan's cultural uniqueness in the world and thus tries to establish Japan's cultural identity. It is said to be the world view of the middle class and the ideology of Everyman.

While some *Nihonjinron* is serious academic discourse, a great bulk of *Nihonjinron* is discoursed in popular genre – in newspapers, television, radio, magazines and popular books. It is this popular version of *Nihonjinron* that we wish to examine here.

The popularity of this subject is reflected in the large number of books being published in this genre. The Nomura Research Institute's compilation of books published between 1945 and 1978 in this genre, for example, lists some 700 titles (Nomura Sōgō Kenkyūjo 1978). By now, the total has reached at least 1,000 titles in this category. A great many of these books have gone through multiple printings. For example, Doi Takeo's *Amae no kōzō* (1971) has seen more than 130 reprintings. Some of them have made the bestseller list and even attained long-seller status. Other examples are Ruth Benedict's *Kiku to katana* (1949) – a translation of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946) – and Watsuji Tetsurō's *Fūdo* (1935).

One of the problems of *Nihonjinron* is that except for a very few studies, such as the so-called *Study of the Japanese National Character* (*Kokuminsei chōsa*, Tōkei Sūri Kenkyūjo Kokuminsei Chōsa Iinkai 1961, 1970, 1975, 1982, 1992), *Nihonjinron* arguments lack quantitative demonstration. That is, *Nihonjinron* arguments have been offered without telling us whether all Japanese espouse the tenets of *Nihonjinron*, or whether only some of them do; and if only some of them espouse the tenets of *Nihonjinron*, what kind of people are they and what percentage of the total population do they represent?

To rectify this near absence of empirical studies, Kazufumi Manabe and Harumi Befu conducted a questionnaire survey in the summer of 1987 to determine the extent to which *Nihonjinron* tenets are espoused by Japanese and to identify the characteristics of those who do and those who do not uphold these tenets. The questionnaire was distributed to a random

sample of 2,400 adults in the city of Nishinomiya, which is basically a “dormitory town” feeding office workers to the nearby cities of Ōsaka and Kōbe. We collected 944 returns or 39.3% of the sample.

For the first time in the history of the study of *Nihonjinron*, we have been able to establish the extent of its popularity.

(9) To what degree are you interested in Nihonjinron (also called Nihon bunkaron, Nihon shakairon, etc.) – explaining the characteristics of the Japanese, Japanese culture and Japanese society – in the following media?						
	Very interested	Considerably interested	Somewhat interested	No very much interested	Not at all interested	
	1	2	3	4	5	
A. Newspaper						
B. Television						
C. Radio						
D. Magazine						
E. Book						
(10) Do you think that there has been increase or decrease in the discussion of Nihonjinron in the media?						
	Increased		Can't say one way or the other	Decreased		Don't know
	a lot	somewhat		somewhat	a lot	
	1	2	3	4	5	6
A. Newspaper						
B. Television						
C. Radio						
D. Magazine						
E. Book						
(11) Do you think that Nihonjinron discussion will increase or decrease in the media in the next several years?						
	Will increase		Can't say one way or the other	Will decrease		Don't know
	a lot	somewhat		somewhat	a lot	
	1	2	3	4	5	6
A. Newspaper						
B. Television						
C. Radio						
D. Magazine						
E. Book						
(12) Do you think it is a good thing that there is a great deal of Nihonjinron discussion in the media? Or a bad thing?						
	A very good thing	Somewhat good	Can't say	Somewhat bad	Very bad	Don't know
	1	2	3	4	5	6
A. Newspaper						
B. Television						
C. Radio						
D. Magazine						
E. Book						

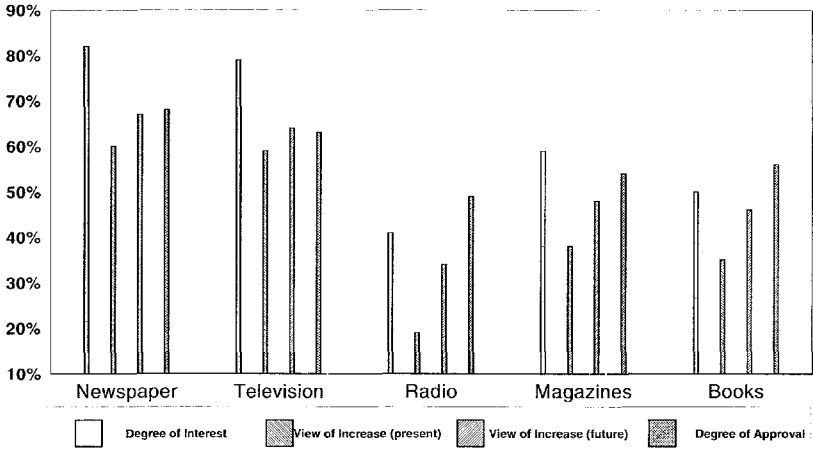


Figure 1: Degree of interest, view of increase in, and degree of approval of increase in *nihonjinron*

Figure 1 shows that:

1. With regard to the level of interest in *Nihonjinron*, over half of the respondents expressed interest in *Nihonjinron* in magazines and books, and for newspapers and television the interest level approached 80%.
2. With respect to the perceived desirability of the increase in *Nihonjinron* in the various media, respondents expressing their approval of this trend numbered roughly 50% with regard to radio, over 50% with respect to magazines and books, and nearly 70% with respect to television and newspaper. It can be conjectured that this high level of interest in and approval of *Nihonjinron* is what supports the *Nihonjinron*-boom phenomenon.
3. In all five media, we see that respondents feel that *Nihonjinron* will grow with time. Especially with respect to television (over 60%) and newspaper (nearly 70%), respondents predict that *Nihonjinron* will increase even more in the future.

In our survey we chose 21 *Nihonjinron* books currently in circulation that have gone through a comparatively high number of printings and asked respondents 1) whether they have heard of the author, 2) whether they have heard of the book title, and 3) whether they have read the book. These books are:

- A) Aida, Yūji (1977): *Omote no ronri – ura no ronri.*
- B) Benedict, Ruth (1949): *Kiku to katana.*
- C) Suzuki, Takao (1975): *Tozasareta gengo – Nihongo no sekai.*
- D) Reischauer, Edwin (1979): *Za Japaniizu.*
- E) Doi, Takeo (1971): *Amae no kōzō.*
- F) Kahn, Hermann (1970): *Chō-taikoku Nihon no chōsen.*
- G) Hamaguchi, Eshun (1977): *Nihon rashisa no sai hakken.*
- H) Wilkinson, Endymios (1980): *Gokai.*
- I) Itasaka, Gen (1971): *Nihonjin no ronri kōzō.*
- J) Brzezinski, Zbigniew (1972): *Hiyowana hana Nihon.*
- K) Kamishima, Jirō (1975): *Nihonjin no hassō.*
- L) Keene, Donald (1973): *Aoi me no Tarō Kaja.*
- M) Minami, Hiroshi (1953): *Nihonjin no shinri.*
- N) Vogel, Ezra (1979): *Japan azu namba wan.*
- O) Nakane, Chie (1967): *Tate shakai no ningen kankei.*
- P) Clark, Gregory (1977): *Nihonjin: Yuniikusa no kigen.*
- Q) Toyama, Shigehiko (1973): *Nihongo no ronri.*
- R) Lee O-Young (1984): *Chijimi shikō no Nihonjin.*
- S) Kindaichi, Haruhiko (1975): *Nihonjin no gengo hyōgen.*
- T) Bonnet, Paul (1978): *Fushigi no kuni Nippon.*
- U) BenDasan, Isaiah (1970): *Nihonjin to Yudayajin.*

A graph of the responses is shown in Figure 2.

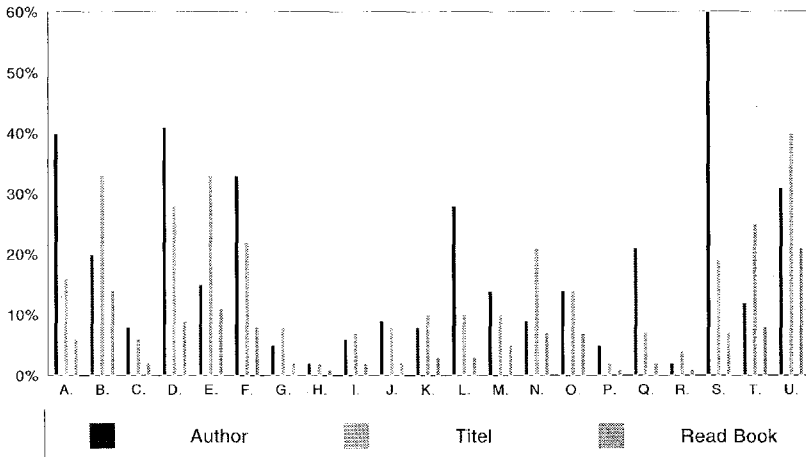


Figure 2: Familiarity and contact with *Nihonjinron* authors and books

The following points can be noted from the graph:

1. Familiarity with author's name:

60%-70% – Kindaiichi Haruhiko

40%-50% – Aida Yūji, Edwin Reischauer

30%-40% – Ruth Benedict, Donald Keene, Toyama Shigehiko

10%-20% – Doi Takeo, Minami Hiroshi, Nakane Chie, Paul Bonnet

The percentage of respondents familiar with other authors were all less than 10%.

2. Familiarity with book titles:

40%-50% – *Nihonjin to yudayajin*

30%-40% – *Kiku to katana, Amae no kōzō*

20%-30% – *Za Japaniizu, Chō-taikoku Nihon no chōsen, Japan azu namba wan, Fushigi no kuni Nippon*

10%-20% – *Omote no ronri – ura no ronri, Nihonjin no hassō, Aoi me no Tarō Kaja, Nihonjin no shinri, Tate shakai no ningen kankei, Nihonjin no gengo hyōgen.*

The percentages of respondents familiar with other titles were all less than 10%.

3. Whether or not respondents have read the books

20%-30% – *Nihonjin to yudayajin*

10%-20% – *Kiku to katana, Amae no kōzō*

5%-10% – *Omote no ronri – ura no ronri, Za Japaniizu, Chō-taikoku Nihon no chōsen, Nihonjin no shinri, Japan azu namba wan, Tate shakai no ningen kankei, Nihonjin no gengo hyōgen, Fushigi no kuni Nippon.*

The percentages of respondents who have read other books were all less than 5%.

From these results it turns out that roughly half of the 21 books we asked people about have been read by over five percent of respondents. If we were to extrapolate this percentage to the whole of Japan's population, we would arrive at a figure of more than five million people. Of course, it is possible that these figures reflect the peculiarity of Nishinomiya City, the area in which the survey was conducted. Even so, it is difficult to deny that awareness of and contact with *Nihonjinron* is high.

A preliminary report of this survey has been published (Befu and Manabe 1987). It is clear from this report that none of the basic tenets of

Nihonjinron is espoused by anywhere near 100% of the sample. These tenets may be grouped into four major categories:

1. Homogeneity: Japanese are a homogeneous and unique people (*dōshitsu shakai*, *tan'itsu minzoku*, and *yuniiku na bunka*).
2. Blood: Japanese "blood" is essential for mutual communication, mutual understanding, understanding of the culture and appearance as Japanese.
3. Cultural competence: Foreigners are incapable of fully understanding Japanese culture or mastering the language.
4. Social participation: The sociocultural territoriality of Japan should be defended and foreigners excluded in the areas of marriage, employment, teaching, and political and artistic leadership.

The following tables indicate the percentages of those who agree/disagree with the *Nihonjinron* propositions in these four categories.

(14C)	Do you agree or disagree with the idea that Japanese are a homogeneous people?
	1. Totally agree
	2. Somewhat agree
	3. Can't say one way or the other
	4. Somewhat disagree
	5. Totally disagree
	6. Don't know
(15C)	Do you agree or disagree with the idea that Japanese society is homogeneous (<i>dōshitsu</i>)?
	1. Totally agree
	2. Somewhat agree
	3. Can't say one way or the other
	4. Somewhat disagree
	5. Totally disagree
	6. Don't know
(16C)	Do you agree or disagree with the idea that Japanese culture is unique?
	1. Totally agree
	2. Somewhat agree
	3. Can't say one way or the other
	4. Somewhat disagree
	5. Totally disagree
	6. Don't know

	Agree	Disagree	Other
Are Japanese a homogeneous people (<i>tan'itsu minzoku</i>)?	38%	23%	39%
Is Japanese society homogeneous (<i>dōshitsu</i>)?	36%	6%	58%
Is Japanese culture unique?	49%	9%	42%

Table 1: Japan's homogeneity

With regards to respondents' level of agreement with these three propositions, the percentages of those who felt that these propositions were accurate was 38% for "Japanese are a homogeneous people," 36% for "Japan is a homogeneous society," and almost 50% for "Japan is a unique culture." This result shows that less than 50% of the sample believe in the idea of the homogeneity of Japanese people and society or in the uniqueness of Japanese culture. Yet, as everyone knows, the concepts of homogeneity and uniqueness occupy a central place in *Nihonjinron*.

The idea that the Japanese share "blood" and that this sharing constitutes the basis of the exclusiveness of Japanese is generally submerged in the sub-consciousness of the Japanese people, though from time to time it comes to the surface of consciousness. We see in Table 2 responses to the question of the importance of blood. As can be seen, the influence of shared blood is acknowledged mostly with regard to physical dimensions, followed by its perceived role in communication, and, finally, its role in social, cultural and linguistic competences. It would seem that even in Japan today a deterministic view of the role of blood is alive and well.

(19) Please circle the opinion which represents yours the closest							
		Totally agree 1	Somewhat agree 2	Can't say 3	Somewhat disagree 4	Totally disagree 5	Don't know 6
1.	Those who share the Japanese blood can understand each other						
2.	Those who have the Japanese blood can speak Japanese						
3.	Those who have the Japanese blood can understand Japanese culture						
4.	Those who have the Japanese blood can be part of the Japanese society						
5.	Those who have the Japanese blood have the appearance of the Japanese						

	Agree	Disagree	Other
For physical appearance as Japanese	52%	17%	31%
For mutual understanding	39%	18%	43%
For becoming part of the society	26%	30%	44%
For understanding Japanese culture	24%	34%	42%
For speaking Japanese	20%	41%	39%

Table 2: Importance of “blood” for the Japanese

Another proposition of *Nihonjinron* to date is a deliberate emphasis on how foreigners differ from Japanese. This hypothesis involves a particularistic way of looking at Japanese culture (as opposed to a universalistic way of thinking). In order to investigate this hypothesis, we included five statements in our survey and asked people to respond to them. As to foreigners’ cultural competence, as Table 3 shows, 63% of the respondents said foreigners are incapable of completely understanding Japanese culture. As to assimilation into Japanese culture, mastering the Japanese language and achieving mutual understanding with Japanese, again, less than one half of the respondents thought foreigners lacked these particular competencies. From these results we can see how strong the particularistic way of thinking about Japanese culture is in modern Japan.

(17) Please circle the opinion which represents yours the closest							
		Totally agree 1	Somewhat agree 2	Can't say 3	Somewhat disagree 4	Totally disagree 5	Don't know 6
1.	Foreigners cannot understand Japanese culture completely						
2.	Foreigners cannot completely master Japanese language						
3.	Japanese culture cannot be understood completely in foreign languages						
4.	Foreigners cannot totally assimilate into Japanese society						
5.	Total mutual understanding between Japanese and foreigners is impossible						

	Agree	Disagree	Other
Japanese culture can't be understood completely in foreign language	66%	14%	20%
Cannot understand Japanese culture completely	63%	17%	20%
Cannot totally assimilate into Japanese society	41%	32%	27%
Cannot completely master Japanese language	36%	43%	21%
Cannot achieve total mutual understanding with Japanese	30%	40%	30%

Table 3: Foreigners' cultural competency

The results are similar for the social participation of foreigners.

(24A) Are you in favor of or opposed the following?						
		Very much in favor 1	Somewhat in favor 2	Can't say 3	Somewhat opposed 4	Very much opposed 5
1.	A Japanese marrying a foreigner					
2.	A foreigner employed by a Japanese company					
3.	A foreigner employed by the Japanese government					
4.	A foreigner becoming a regular faculty member of a public college					
5.	A foreigner becoming a regular teacher of a public high school					
6.	A foreigner becoming a regular teacher of a public middle or elementary school					
7.	A foreigner serving as a leader in traditional arts and crafts					
8.	A foreigner becoming a political leader in Japan					
9.	A foreigner living in Japan permanently					
10.	A foreigner taking out Japanese citizenship					

	Approve	Disapprove	Other
Have regular appointment at a public school	74%	4%	22%
Regular teacher at a high school	71%	5%	24%
Regular teacher at elementary or middle school	62%	11%	27%
Live permanently in Japan	58%	4%	38%
Employment in Japanese company	57%	6%	37%
Gain Japanese citizenship	53%	7%	40%
Employment in government	39%	21%	40%
Marriage with a Japanese	35%	9%	56%
Leadership in traditional arts/crafts	33%	23%	44%
Political leadership	8%	62%	30%

Table 4: Social participation of foreigners

As we can see from Table 4, the domain in which acceptance of foreigners is highest is education (with the highest level of acceptance at the college level, followed by high school, then junior high and elementary school); next comes the domain of private companies and the general principle of foreigners living in Japan permanently and, further along the same line, taking Japanese citizenship. More than 50% of respondents expressed approval of foreigners in these general areas. However, when it comes to the domains of government and politics or the private domain of marriage, the degree of approval becomes exceedingly low.

Thus, when we refer to those who espouse the tenets of *Nihonjinron*, we should be well aware that we are not speaking of the entire population of Japan, but of only a segment of the population, whose size varies depending on the question at hand.

Obviously some Japanese believe in the tenets of *Nihonjinron* more than others, some less than others. Who are the believers and who are the non-believers? In order to answer these questions, we correlated six variables concerning the basic tenets on *Nihonjinron* with the variables of sex, age, education, professed standard of living, whether or not the respondent has traveled abroad, and whether or not the respondent has a foreign friend. The resultant coefficients or correlation are shown in Table 5.

	(Low → High)	Sex (Female → Male)	Age (Young → Old)	Education (Low → High)	Liv'g stand. (Low → High)	Trav'l abroad (No → Yes)	Foreign friend (No → Yes)
Homogeneity	Japanese are a homogeneous people	-.0197 (.681)	.1415 (.690)	-.0779 (.667)	.1630 (.688)	.0078 (.676)	-.0158 (.687)
	Japanese society is a homogeneous society	.0743 (.530)	.0883 (.537)	.1101 (.520)	.1086 (.536)	.0487 (.529)	.0696 (.536)
	Japanese culture is a unique culture	.0244 (.656)	.1222 (.663)	-.0118 (.640)	.0129 (.661)	-.0409 (.649)	.0258 (.665)
Blood		.0821 (.833)	-.4147 (.840)	-.1852 (.819)	.0310 (.840)	-.0524 (.823)	-.0944 (.838)
Social participation		.0512 (.862)	-.1078 (.870)	.1737 (.845)	.0509 (.867)	.1972 (.851)	.1842 (.868)
Cultural competence		.0354 (.816)	.1873 (.823)	-.0313 (.801)	.0384 (.822)	-.0244 (.808)	-.0627 (.823)

Table 5

What we see here most prominently is a consistent correlation of age with *Nihonjinron* tenets: the older the respondent is, the more likely he or she espouses *Nihonjinron*. In terms of sex, men tend to believe in the efficacy of “blood” and women do not; for the other variables, too, positive correlations are obtained with sex, although the significance level is not very high. Education is negatively correlated with the espousal of *Nihonjinron* tenets: the more education a respondent has, the less likely he or she is to believe in *Nihonjinron*. Those reporting a higher standard of living tend to agree with the homogeneity and “blood” theses of *Nihonjinron*.

Travel experience abroad and having foreign friends seem to have a salutary impact on belief in *Nihonjinron*. Those who have traveled in a foreign country and those who have foreigners as friends tend to believe less in the tenets of *Nihonjinron* than those without foreign experience or foreign friends. Befu (1983) has once suggested that the trauma of having to adjust to foreign customs and to negotiate in a foreign language would have the effect of convincing Japanese to believe in *Nihonjinron*. Data shown here demonstrate that this hypothesis does not hold.

We were also interested in the general outlook of respondents toward other aspects of *Nihonjinron*. We found, for example, that those espousing *Nihonjinron* tenets tend to:

1. be interested in the media coverage of *Nihonjinron* (which is hardly surprising);
2. believe that the *Nihonjinron* discussion has been increasing and will continue to increase – perhaps an expression of wishful thinking;

3. believe that media coverage of *Nihonjinron* is a good thing rather than a bad thing;
4. believe that in comparison with the rest of the world Japan has a higher level of technological, artistic and economic achievement;
5. believe that *Nihonjinron* performs a positive function for them in the sense that it helps them to know themselves, satisfies their self-pride and their pride as Japanese, satisfies their intellectual curiosity, helps them think about Japan's role in the world, etc.

In conclusion, then, *Nihonjinron* is the world view of the older male with a higher standard of living, that is, those in the mainstream and those in power, and the older men with higher incomes tend to be upbeat about the tenets of *Nihonjinron* and the role it plays. They are also upbeat about their *Nihonjinron*-based self-identity. *Nihonjinron* is thus the world view and the ideology of the establishment. It may be espoused by less than a majority in a numerical sense, but those who espouse it are in the majority in the political sense.

However, there are data in our survey that predict a weakening of *Nihonjinron* in Japan. First, younger generations have doubts about *Nihonjinron*. As they grow older, there is a possibility that the hold of *Nihonjinron* on Japanese will weaken. Second, belief in *Nihonjinron* is negatively correlated with education, travel abroad and having foreign friends. All three factors are likely to increase over time. Given the strong concern of Japanese with education, the general level of education in Japan cannot help but rise. Also, given the strong economic position of Japan in the world, more and more Japanese, with higher incomes are likely to travel abroad in connection with academic or business assignments. As this happens, Japanese will make more and more foreign friends. Our data shows that all these developments will have the tendency to weaken the hold of *Nihonjinron* on the general populace of Japan.

On the other hand, there are two countering tendencies which need to be observed. One is that as a person becomes older, he or she tends to become more conservative; thus, the younger generation in years to come will tend to behave more and more like the older generation. The reason for this conservative tendency is that the conservative values of the society are not just accidentally associated with the establishment, rather they are there because they buttress the existing economic and political institutions. These institutions are slow to change. As they persist, the value system supporting them is also likely to persist. As younger Japanese join established economic and political institutions, they are likely to become more conservative in outlook and espouse more conservative values, in short, the tenets of *Nihonjinron*.

Which of these two sets of opposing forces will have the upper hand in future, no one can say. One scenario would have Japan become more internationalized and less oriented toward *Nihonjinron*. The other would forecast a more conservative Japan increasingly favorably oriented toward *Nihonjinron*. Still a third scenario would see both trends continue, with increasingly divergent and polarized public opinion, where conservatives in the establishment upholding tenets of *Nihonjinron* will continue to guard the establishment while the liberals, disenchanted with *Nihonjinron*, will gain in numerical force without being able to capture political power.*

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