Oguma Eiji and the Construction of the Modern Japanese National Identity

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1. Introduction

With the publication of two books that have been well received in Japan, Oguma Eiji (b. 1962) has established himself as a leading authority on the social construction of the Japanese and the intellectual history of contemporary Japanese identity. Both Tan’itsu Minzoku Shinwa no Kigen (The Origin of the Myth of Ethnic Homogeneity)¹ and ‘Nihonjin’ no Kyōkai (The Boundaries of the ‘Japanese’) are essential reading for scholars of the history of Japanese self-images and of the historical background of Nihonjinron (theories of Japaneseness). They also shed light on the intellectual history of one aspect of the colonial policies of imperial Japan—the changing conceptualizations of ethnicity and nationality, and what it meant to be Japanese within the context of empire.

2. Tan’itsu Minzoku Shinwa no Kigen

In the first book, Oguma examines the self-identity of the Japanese as developed by an extensive range of writers from the mid-Meiji until the post-war period. His major conclusion is that the ‘so-called “myth of ethnic homogeneity”’ did not establish itself during the Meiji period, nor even during the “Great East Asia War”, but only after the end of the Pacific War’ (Daigo 1996: 263).

In arguing that ethnic homogeneity is a post-war myth, Oguma pays particular attention to Japan’s colonial policies. He also covers a wide range of areas—archaeology, (ancient) history, linguistics, anthropology, ethnology, folklore, eugenics and philosophy—to produce an overview of how a wide variety of authors dealt with the theme of ethnicity.

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¹ The title is translated as The Myth of the Homogeneous Nation, but the version given here is closer to the original.
The book is a counter-argument to the claim that the Japanese have believed that they are a homogeneous nation since the Meiji period, examining how this (post-war) myth was established, and how the peoples of such Japanese colonies as Korea and Taiwan were viewed and treated in the (pre-war) literature on ethnic identity. Oguma traces the chronological development of Japanese self-images, and shows that there was a relationship with changes in the international environment—notably the birth and collapse of the Japanese Empire.

He begins with two citations, both dated 1942, one from a general-interest magazine and the other from a book published by the Ministry of Education, both of which unequivocally deny the homogeneity of the Japanese. He then goes on to ask how these relate to the belief held by many progressive Japanese intellectuals from the second half of the 1970s onwards that the Japanese people have believed in the myth of homogeneous ethnicity since the Meiji period, and that this myth was the fountainhead not only of the war, of colonial rule and of pre-war discrimination against Asian peoples, but also of discrimination against minorities and the ostracism of foreign workers during the post-war period. The answer will hardly surprise anyone (although Oguma is not so undiplomatic as to put it in these terms): progressive intellectuals frequently have no understanding of history and are perhaps less interested in historical facts than in being perceived as ‘progressive’.

Oguma notes that the pre-war Japanese Empire was multi-racial, and that after the annexation of Taiwan in 1895 and Korea in 1910, fully 30% of the subjects of the Japanese Emperor were not ‘Japanese’. Although there has been extensive criticism of the myth of ethnic homogeneity, there has been virtually no documentation of how and when it arose. Critical analysis has assumed that it became part of state ideology during the Meiji period, but this assumption is false: the Japanese Empire was not only multi-racial, but was perceived as such by the Japanese.

The book examines the origin of this dominant self-image of the Japanese and analyzes its sociological function. It investigates the genealogy of the self-identity of those people who see themselves (and are usually seen) as ‘Japanese’. Since the Japanese saw their nation as multi-racial for most of the period that he examines, Oguma concentrates for much of the book on theories that argued against ethnic homogeneity. In a sense, then, the title of the book is somewhat misleading. Since it mainly deals with the pre-war period, the myth of ethnic homogeneity itself is not the main focus of the work.

What we do get here is an analysis of the debates about the origins and composition of the Japanese nation and attitudes towards ethnic minorities within Japan. Oguma tracks the historical changes, and analyzes the perceptions of the self and others as revealed in the various discussions of the Japanese nation. In his examination of the birth of theories of the Japanese nation until the 1880s, he charts the emergence of a ‘mixed nations’ (kōgō minzoku) theory, which held that the Japanese were formed by a ‘mixture’ between various Asian peoples, or between the original inhabitants of the Japanese isles (either the Ainu or a people who later disappeared) and a conquering people who arrived afterwards. This view was hotly disputed by nationalists who argued that the bloodline of the Japanese nation had continued from time immemorial, and advocated a theory of ethnic homogeneity. All subsequent theories, Oguma claims, are variations of these two main opposing ideas.2

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2. These two basic positions still form the nucleus of contemporary debate in Japan about the origins of the nation. For example, Fukuoka (1997: 4) states that ‘[a]lthough the matter of blood or race is a sensitive issue in Japan, historical records clearly reveal that various peoples have come to live on the Japanese archipelago. They have come from the Korean peninsula, from the Chinese mainland, and from still further afar. The “pure Japanese” is actually a blend of these different groups of people. In other words, Japan is, in a very real sense, an early prototype of the multi-racial society’. Also see Fukuoka (1993: 6, 2000: xxv–xxxvii).
In his account of the changes in theories of the Japanese nation from the Meiji period through to post-war Japan, Oguma argues convincingly that the pre-war era was dominated by a belief that Japan was a multi-ethnic state, and that it was only after the end of the war that the myth of a homogeneous ethnicity took root. This was a time when the number of non-Japanese living within Japan’s borders suddenly plummeted as Japan was stripped of its empire, and thus to a large extent of its ethnic diversity. This link between national borders and national identity is analyzed in greater detail in Oguma’s second book.

3. ‘Nihonjin’ no Kyōkai

In this book, Oguma develops many of the themes seen in the first work. Again, he uses an enormous range of authors to examine the debate over the past hundred years on Japanese national identity, and links changes in the international environment to changes in perceptions of what it was to be ‘Japanese’. Since he focuses particularly on the treatment of ethnic minorities, the time frame extends from the expansion of ‘Japan’ in the early Meiji period to incorporate Okinawa and Hokkaido, at which point the ‘Japanese’ category came to include the occupants of these regions, through to the colonization of Taiwan and Korea from the mid-Meiji period, the collapse of the Empire and finally the ‘return’ of Okinawa in 1972.

As with his first work, Oguma analyzes the political implications of history, archaeology, ethnology and linguistics, and in doing so examines fluctuations in the definition of the ‘Japanese’ with special regard to the peoples most affected—the residents of Okinawa, Korea and Taiwan, together with the Ainu. This allows him to attempt to delineate the ‘boundaries’ of the Japanese. Echoing an argument in Tan’itsu Minzoku Shinwa no Kigen, his main claim is that these minorities have been treated and defined differently to reflect changes in the national interest as defined by the government of the time. When they have been needed, minorities have been defined as Japanese and assimilated. When not needed, they have been rejected as non-Japanese. Underlying the book is a sense that the concept of being Japanese—the boundary between Japanese and non-Japanese—has shifted, and that an examination of the fortunes of the peoples located, both geographically and socially, at the periphery of Japan will shed light on the central issues of Japanese identity. ‘Nihonjin’ no Kyōkai thus tells the story of Japanese national identity as seen from the periphery.

Analyzing an extensive range of writings, Oguma divides the debate in Japan into two basic camps. One consisted of assimilationists, who viewed the periphery as part of an expanding concept of Japan and argued for treating the colonies as part of the nation. The other group were the non-assimilationists, who viewed the periphery as non-Japanese colonies that lay outside a stable concept of the nation and argued for drawing a line between Japan and the non-Japanese colonies. One of the ironies of modern Japanese history is that assimilation was advocated by the egalitarian members of the Japanese enlightenment, thus providing a justification for a wholesale assault on local traditions and customs, while it was the racist social evolutionists who argued in favour of a low-cost form of colonial rule which entailed local autonomy and respect for local customs. Examples of the first group include Ume Kenjirō, who argued in favour of equal treatment and equal rights, and authors such as Fukuzawa Yukichi and Hozumi Yatsuka, who argued for assimilation without a recognition of equal rights. The second group included authors such as Tōgō Minoru.

Two of the central concepts in the debate about where to draw the boundary between Japanese and non-Japanese are ‘acceptance’ (hōsetsu) and ‘exclusion’ (haijo). Various peoples located on the periphery of Japan were either accepted as Japanese (when wanted, for instance, as a resource) or excluded as non-Japanese. These peoples occupy the ambiguous status of what Oguma calls ‘Japanese
but non-Japanese’. It may be only a slight exaggeration to say that Oguma believes they were frequently defined as Japanese in terms of obligations, but as non-Japanese in terms of rights.

Acceptance and exclusion were mechanisms used as a symbolic boundary process that acted to differentiate between ‘us’ and ‘them’. The boundary approach discussed by Oguma emphasizes the spatial or geographical dimension of ethnicity as a major criterion for membership of the imagined community of the Japanese: peoples who inhabited certain spaces were defined as Japanese. A point he emphasizes about pre-war Japan in particular is the size of this space. Far from viewing themselves as a homogeneous nation, the Japanese actively propagated an inclusive concept of nationality that extended not only to Okinawa and Hokkaido, but also to Korea and Taiwan.

Oguma links the debate on national identity with the strong Japanese fear of the Western Powers, and Japan’s anxiety that it too might be conquered and colonized. He argues that these feelings played a crucial role in shaping Japanese colonial policy, leading Japan to ignore the economic costs of colonial administration, place a great weight on defence, and emphasize the importance of gaining the loyalty of the residents of its colonies. This provides an explanation for Japanese assimilationist policies. Although they triggered a deep unrest in the colonies, Japan was not confident enough to allow colonized peoples to maintain their languages and cultures. Rather, in Oguma’s words, ‘in order to resolve their lack of self-confidence and their anxiety, the Japanese felt that they had no choice but to make the peoples they had colonized prove their love and dedicated loyalty through self-sacrifices. This mentality is nothing less than sadism’ (p. 630; all quotations are translated by the reviewer).

Moreover, Japan was different from other imperialist powers not only because it came late to imperialism, but also because it moved into nearby regions. To a far greater extent than, say, the British in Africa, Japan had to come to grips with the question of whether to treat such regions as part of Japan. Assimilation became one of the characteristics of Japanese imperialism, and succeeded to the extent that Okinawa, for instance, is frequently seen today as merely another part of Japan.

Japan thus provides an interesting case study of colonial policy in a latecomer to imperialism. This book was written under the working title of ‘Coloured Imperialism’, and it does successfully develop the idea that the imperialism of a nation that has itself been a victim of imperialism is indeed different from other forms of imperialism. By focusing on the circumstances under which Japanese imperialism developed, Oguma demonstrates that these circumstances helped to determine the shape of the dominant discourse on ethnic identity in Japan.

4. Commentary

As we have seen, Oguma deals with similar material in both works, although in the first he analyzes the theory of the homogeneous nation, while in the second he focuses to a far greater extent on the fate of the various ethnic groups colonized by Japan.

The first work deals with an important subject. The changes in ethnic identity described are not only intrinsically interesting, but also challenge commonly accepted views. The possible links with policy make this a work that is both intellectually stimulating and politically important. In particular, the idea that the myth came to be widely popular only after the Second World War is well argued, and it will no longer be possible to claim that it was a product of Meiji state ideology. The various developments and changes in Japanese self-images are made clear and analyzed in the context of an impressive range of sources. Oguma’s main thesis is that during the pre-war period, when Japan as an imperial power was attempting to encompass a large number of non-Japanese ethnic peoples as subjects, the dominant view was that Japan was a mixed nation originating from a melting pot of
various Asian peoples, but that during much of the post-war period, when Japan re-emerged as an island nation stripped of nearly all its colonies, the dominant view was that the Japanese nation was and had always been ethnically homogeneous. This argument is convincing.

Oguma is critical of both main positions on Japanese ethnic identity. In *Tan’itsu Minzoku Shinwa no Kigen*, he argues that the dominant view of the origins of the nation transforms over time to reflect changes in Japan’s international status. When Japan is weak, ethnic homogeneity is dominant; when Japan is strong, mixed nationality is stressed. Japan’s recent rise as an economic superpower suggests that the homogeneous nation model will gradually disappear, and the multi-ethnic nation model could rise again. This possibility is linked with conservative figures (in particular with Umehara Takashi) who have in the past criticized the idea of ethnic homogeneity and advanced a multi-ethnic view of Japan.

Oguma is also critical of some aspects of the progressive point of view. In his first work, he argues that the ‘idealised’ model of an ‘egalitarian multi-ethnic state’ may in practice produce the ‘pre-war multi-ethnic empire’ (p. 395). Oguma argues that ‘the idea that it will not be possible to overthrow the emperor-system and solve the problems of Japanese society unless Japan internationalises, overthrows the consciousness of pure-blood, and becomes a multi-ethnic state, is an idea that is based on a false understanding of the Great Japanese Empire, and is not only mistaken but also dangerous’ (p. 399). Oguma has an important message here. A historical understanding of the various concepts of what ‘Japanese’ means is required, and many criticisms of the myth of ethnic homogeneity have been developed from the baseless optimism that its destruction will be a panacea for Japan’s problems.

‘*Nihonjin’ no Kyôkai* is also an impressive work. The main limitation is Oguma’s decision to discuss only debates on the ‘Japanese’ that were triggered by changes in Japanese borders. As a result, he overlooks the issues posed by the *kikoku shijo* (children returning to Japan from abroad), Japanese war orphans, foreign workers, Japanese-Koreans, and the descendants of Japanese migrants who have begun to return to Japan. It would not be as easy to stress the role of the Japanese State and its responsibility for accepting or rejecting various peoples if account were taken of the existence of various ‘non-Japanese Japanese’ whose ambiguous status is (at least sometimes) caused by private decisions. A second weakness is that, as in the earlier book, Oguma is less than convincing when he tries to link intellectual debate with the perceived needs of the Japanese government of the time.

Oguma obviously believes that there is a direct link, if not a relationship of cause and effect, between the dominant self-image of the Japanese and the size of Japan’s territory. This is certainly an interesting point of view and, although Oguma has not succeeded in proving it, the relationship between mythology and policy is a stimulating topic, as is the role that history plays in the construction of social order. The major question is whether myth causes policy, or whether policy creates myth. In his first book, Oguma argues in favour of the latter. In his second, he similarly argues that the definition of ‘Japanese’ and ‘non-Japanese’ is related to the requirements of the State. The argument that the needs of policy determine the direction of the discourse on national identity is a terrible indictment of Japanese thinkers, since it implies that they served the purposes of current national policy rather than those of scientific truth.

One criticism that must be made of Oguma is his habit of dividing a debate into two groups, and then criticizing both. In his first book, Oguma sees the theory of ethnic homogeneity as opposed to the theory of multi-racialism. He is unhappy with the former because it is historically false, but also has serious misgivings about the second, not because it is false, but because it can be ‘dangerous’. The historian would reply that every human being has to come to terms with the ‘real’ past and accept it, and that it is more dangerous (at least in the long term) to found policy on a lie than to discover the truth and live with it.
Oguma’s inability to go beyond declaring a plague on both houses results from an over-simplistic definition of the debate, which reduces all shades of opinion to two positions. One solution might be to distinguish between two different definitions of multi-racialism. The first would follow the definition of imperial Japan: a plurality of ethnic peoples joined by a common destiny. The second would stress not only the coexistence of a number of peoples, but also the right of the individual to decide whether and to what degree to interact with others, with no common destiny (or good) implied. Another solution might be to distinguish between the descriptive and normative aspects of the pre-war multi-ethnic theories, discarding the latter, and linking the former with a new norm (tolerance and multi-culturalism being the obvious examples).

Oguma faces a similar quandary in his second work. Here he argues that ethnic minorities were either accepted or rejected according to Japan’s national interests, and sees the ‘acceptance’ advocated by the assimilationists as a form of domination just as oppressive as the ‘rejection’ advocated by the non-assimilationists. This tactic of criticizing all options ultimately lends itself to a total rejection of history. However, there seems to be little point in using the standards of the present to mount a full-scale assault on the past.

After examining the various changes in the self-images of the Japanese in Tan’itsu Minzoku Shinwa no Kigen, Oguma states that ‘each time there has been a change in the relationship between Japan and other nations in international relations, the self-image, that is the theory of Japanese ethnicity, has also shifted’, and that what is claimed to be ‘a history of the Japanese race’ is in fact nothing more than ‘a reflection of each author’s Weltanschauung and sub-conscious’ (p. 402). If that is the case, then what are we to make of Oguma’s own work? There is no doubt that ethnic homogeneity has increasingly come to be condemned as a myth in Japan. Does this reflect a desire to establish a multi-racial society in Japan? A strong belief in objective truth? Or perhaps the birth of a capitalistic, market-driven ‘co-prosperity sphere’ in East Asia? Whatever the case may be, Japan is undoubtedly searching for a new self-identity, and this new identity, once discovered, will have a profound impact on both Japan and the world.

References


