4 THE TWO-FOLDED DISCOURSE ON JAPAN

People in Japan have themselves been preoccupied, and sometimes obsessed, with defining and preserving something called ‘Japanese-ness.’ This has been the case at least from the nineteenth century through the present [...] Many aspects of so-called Japanese tradition, it turns out, were invented as myths of the modern era. On some occasions ‘Japanese traditions’ were seen as obstacles to progress; at other times they were put forth as a model to the world. - Andrew Gordon (2003, p. xiii)

The analysis to this point has revealed a widespread discourse on Japanese-ness, which appears to be patriotic and is being promoted by elites in media. Its evident aim is to evoke in Japanese people the unique qualities and traditional social ties they are supposed to have in order to use such national spirit to lessen the different crisis Japan is facing. This kind of ideological promotion may appear harmless and even positive by itself; however, it has been said that this happened amid the manifestation of a neo-nationalism trend in the power sectors. It has been argued, as well, that in a less obvious but reiterated flagging, traditional gender roles that keep women in a submissive social position are present in this campaign. Other controversial features regarding the discursive formations that are being contended in Japan about the nation are the myth of Japanese homogeneous society and the derived double face discourse on internationalization. In this section, I will debate over these issues based on the analysis of a broad range of media texts – not exclusively those related to the sample phenomena - and my own experiences, observations and interactions during field work in Japan.

4.1 A HETEROGENEOUS JAPAN LIVING THE MYTH OF A HOMOGENEOUS SOCIETY

It has been said that according to the nihonjinron, Japan is a homogenous society. Even though there are noticeable Korean, Chinese, Brazilian Nikkei (Japanese descendent) and other diasporas permanently residing in Japan – and thousands of long-term residents from all over the world who come and go - the myth of the Japanese homogeneous society appears to have been naturalized. As Burgess (2012) argues, even if in academic circles there has been an awakening consciousness of this multicultural Japanese landscape, the idea of homogeneous Japan is still a key element in the construction of national identity and social reality inside the country. In media also, although the presence of non-Japanese has increased considerably during the last decade, the dominant discourse remains the same precisely
because they are not treated or presented as Japanese, but as *gaijin* or *half* - meaning foreigners and ‘hybrids’ of Japanese and non-Japanese.

In real life is the same. A Japanese *salaryman* may talk about the latest national sport news everyday with Kim-san, the owner of the Korean restaurant who was born and raised in Osaka and has never left Japan, but still consider him a Korean; a Japanese housewife may see Maria-chan, the girl who works at the supermarket, who was born and raised in Tokyo, whose father is Peruvian and her mother Japanese, and still not think of her as Japanese as herself; the Japanese faculty director of a university may discuss everyday about the best teaching-learning techniques with Smith-sensei, the England-born social sciences professor who speaks perfect Japanese, has been living in Japan for more than twenty years, is married to a Japanese woman and has ‘half-Japanese’ children, and still think of him as a foreigner who does not understand Japanese culture. This is how the myth of homogeneity has been naturalized and works in contemporary Japan, refuting to acknowledge as part of the society those people who are not purely and completely Japanese.

*Gaikokujin* – lit. ‘person from a foreign country’ – is the proper word to refer to foreigners in the Japanese language; however, *gaijin* – lit. ‘outsider’ – is the most commonly used by Japanese when they speak informally and think no foreigner is listening or understanding. *Baka gaijin* – ‘stupid outsider’ – is also a common expression that can be heard when a foreigner does something that is considered to break Japanese etiquette – even if Japanese break it too. In this category are included all those residents who do not fit in the Japanese archetype, who have to face discrimination at different levels every day.

Although foreigners in general are “excluded from full participation in Japanese society simply by virtue of their foreignness” (Befu, 2001, p. 76), White people do not usually suffer the same kind of discrimination than those belonging to other racial groups. As Russell (1991) correctly argues, this is mostly due to the fact that Japanese racial and ethnic stereotypes are an extension of Western ethnocentrism. The discourse of the *nihonjinron* established a type of racial/ethnic/national hierarchy in which Japanese were below White Westerners belonging to the powerful nations admired by Japan, but everyone else were assumed to be below Japanese.
There is no doubt that Black people – regardless of their nationality - are the ones who suffer the most obvious discrimination in Japanese territory; in trains, on the street, at public spaces in general, when a Black person approaches, some Japanese stare with curiosity, others make their children move away, some others just go. Certainly, this is not the reaction of everyone, but, as Ngoro (2004) and Russell (1991) argue, the average Japanese citizen has built his/her ideas about Black people from Japanese media representations, which are at the best condescending and exoticize them, and at the worst consider them as inept and dangerous. In media entertainment contents, just a few Black tarento appear; from these, only some are identified as regular comedians. These tarento usually exploit their bigger physiques – in contrast to most Japanese – and act childishly or foolishly to create a boke\textsuperscript{147} character that people can make fun of; although Japanese comedy typically has boke characters, the Black comedians are a different kind of boke, as they build their silly images on the Black stereotypes that Japanese have, perpetuating them. On the other hand, most of the very few Black tarento are faceless and nameless, they appear from time to time as unidentified and exchangeable bodyguards or merely as part of the background setting at shows to put the international – better said exotic - touch. In other type of media contents, the references to Black people are marginal and have been heavily related to the declarations of Japanese right-wing politicians, who have called them primitive, uncivilized and having inferior genes than White people (Ngoro, 2004).

On the other side of the spectrum are the ethnic Koreans, the major community of non-Japanese in Japan. The geographical, ethnic and cultural proximity Koreans have with Japanese people is counterbalanced by the historical weight, the unceasing diplomatic conflicts among the countries, and the stubbornness of the dominant discourses of both parties to recognize the similarities between the two groups. Although many of the permanent resident Koreans have been born and raised in Japan and may be from a third or fourth generation living there, they are still not considered Japanese, but Zainichi – literally ‘living in Japan’ – a term that refers to those Koreans who belong to families that arrived during the colonial era. Zainichi’s legal status in Japan is complicated, as many may retain their Korean nationality while holding a special permanent resident status permit and others have acquired

\textsuperscript{147} Funny, silly.
the Japanese citizenship by naturalization. Whichever the case, the majority remain in the close circle of the Zainichi, going to Korean schools and marrying within the community; this is, living in Japan, but not being part of Japanese society.148

Chinese and other East and Southeast Asian groups - as Vietnamese, Singaporeans, and Philippines - are similar cases of diasporas that share many traits with Japanese that could ease the integration of their people to Japanese society, but instead keep themselves in very close communities that remain disconnected from the national community. This situation has many roots and it does not depend only on discrimination, but also on the strong ties that those communities have and their own desire to preserve their own culture.149 The relevant point for this discussion is that these people live and are part of the Japanese context, but the dominant domestic discourse keeps ignoring them, cutting them off from what is sanctioned as Japanese.

As a major foreign presence in the country, Korean and Chinese have a considerable representation in media; nevertheless, they are specifically symbolized as such, highlighting stereotypes that work to strengthen the denial of these communities as part of Japanese society. Both ethnic groups are represented as noisy, rude and troublesome, characteristics that contrast with the promoted ideal of Japanese quietness, cordiality and avoidance of conflict.

Korean image improved considerably among some sectors of Japanese society – mainly middle-aged and young women – due to the Korean Wave phenomenon (Ogawa, 2010). Nonetheless, these sectors, although economically powerful, have proved to lack the social power to push an actual change in the dominant discourse about Korean people – those living in Korea or those residing in Japan. In Japanese media there was a limited, but considerable improvement in the representations of both Korea and Korean people through entertainment contents, but as soon as the Wave lost strength around the year 2011, derived from the support that Japanese culture received from all elites, those improved images were relegated and the typical ones were reinstalled. After the passion for everything Korean

149 See Han (2008), Lie (2001).
decreased in Japan, the critiques to the Korean pop acts and Korean society appeared in media. In variety shows, it has become a common topic to discuss the artificiality of Korean idols and the average Korean women, who base their beauty in countless aesthetic surgeries to attain absolutely different appearances than those naturally Korean; in talk shows, hyōronka regularly accuse Korean cultural producers of copying American models, saying that in the aim to be recognized by Americans, Korean artists are forgetting they are Asian. In this sense, Japanese media seems to discredit Korean cultural policies as treacherous to Asia at the same time that emphasize Japanese are the rightful representatives of the region.


The image above was part of the campaign released by the JFA to promote the support for the Japanese male national squad in Thailand, during its participation in the 2014 FIFA World Cup. As it can be seen, it tries to appeal to the idea that the Japanese team represents all Asia, even though Japan was not the only team of the region competing – South Korea and Iran were also there.

150 Many reports on the popularity of aesthetic surgery in Korea show the way Korean women and men try to erase typically Korean physical features as wide jaws, narrow eyes or low noses.
In the middle of the *non-Japanese-but-evidently-part-of-Japan* spectrum are White people from highly developed countries - United States, England, Germany, Canada, Australia. Although they are a smaller number than Asians, they are relatively more integrated to Japanese society. One reason has to do with the same dominant discourse on *Japaneseness*, which has made Japanese people more willing to interact with them, as they are considered to possess some admirable qualities and ‘better genes’; also, they tend to go to Japan in order to interact with Japanese, not to remain isolated with their own people. Nevertheless, even if a comparatively higher number of Japanese people is willing to befriend or even marry these Westerners, Japanese society as a whole hardly accepts them as part of it and they keep been look at as outsiders.

In media, it is common to see White people; they appear as nameless extras who just add a cosmopolitan feeling to a content, or as guests who talk about Japan. Japanese television has many shows that revolve around the topic of foreigners and their interest in Japan; in these shows, White Westerners are a big part of the discourse, as they praise Japanese culture and Japanese people (Image 13). Nonetheless, at the same time, they are often represented as *otaku*, this is, as obsessive fans of *anime, manga*, video games, and other media culture products related mostly to the Cool Japan phenomena. In this way, they boost Japanese pride, but also create an image of White people as foolish in some way.
Another community with a significant presence in contemporary Japan is that of Latin American Nikkei, descendants of Japanese, but most having also Latin American ancestry. In 1989, lacking blue-collar workers amid the Bubble economy, Japan enacted a New Immigration Law that allowed Latin American people of Japanese ancestry to have access to working visas. Because during this period Latin American countries were hit by economic crisis, a large number of people with such characteristics moved to Japan under the working visa program.151 The first flow of immigrants was mainly from Brazil and Peru – countries

151 For studies focused on Latin American Nikkei communities in Japan, see Castro-Vázquez & Tarui (2006), Green (2008), Reyes-Ruiz (2005), Sueyoshi (2011).
with significant Japanese diasporas; they were working class people, not ‘purely’ Japanese, with minimal or none knowledge of the culture and language, thus, easily spotted as non-Japanese. The difficulties derived from such situation made Latin Americans to build communities to support each other. Because they could relatively understand their languages and had some other common cultural traits as religion, many of these groups were centered on Catholic churches, which even offered masses in Spanish and Portuguese and helped immigrants to cope with the psychological problems resultant from the cultural shock. By the end of the 1990s, people from other Latin American countries, not Nikkei, and without legal working visas began to arrive to Japan, adding themselves to the Nikkei communities and working in less secure and sometimes plainly illegal fields.

The media reports on illegal Latin American immigrants or on humble and not completely Japanese Nikkei residents, adding to the reduced knowledge about the region by the average Japanese and the importation of the Latino stereotypes from the United States, contributed to the poor image Latin Americans have in Japan. I had the opportunity to experience everyday life in different Japanese cities and observed two patterns of attitudes from locals. In Okazaki City, Aichi Prefecture, a small city with a significant community of Peruvian, Brazilian, Colombian and Ecuadorian blue collar immigrants – Nikkei and not – I went to local non-profit associations that gave free Japanese lessons and to a local Catholic Church and could talk with some members of this community. Most had many years living there and still could not communicate with Japanese people freely, so they continued to get involved only with other Latin Americans and the very few Japanese they met at the associations and the church. At the same time, I noticed that the discrimination against them and other Latin American people – even if these were tourists or students - was not very different to that suffered by Black people: people in stores kept looking all their steps with a nervous look, some moved away at trains or buses, and others just refused to talk if approached. The reason I was given when asked some Japanese contacts was that Latin Americans were responsible of many of the criminal acts in the area: shoplift, prostitution, drug dealing, gang violence, etc.

On the other hand, in Tokyo and Osaka, where it is common to cross everyday with all types of foreign tourists and Latin American immigrants are not as noticeable as other
minority groups, the discriminatory attitudes were less common, and Latin Americans were mostly ignored as are most foreigners. Nonetheless, talking with some of the resident Latin people, they revealed their suffering when trying to live as a regular citizen; most of these problems related to bullying at regular Japanese schools and workplaces or to the denial of access to public services or Japanese civilian groups.

Other non-Japanese and Japanese minority groups – those of other foreign origin or the *burakumin*, the Okinawan and the Ainu – also live inside Japanese society, but remain mostly disconnected from it because they do not fit in the imaginary of a homogeneous Japan. Thus, even if on paper there have been policies destined to support their acculturation, elites have consciously cut them apart from the dominant discourse destined to flag in Japanese society the national identity, perpetuating the myth of homogeneity among Japanese and just allocating those who are different in the *gaijin* or *Zainichi* or *half* or *Nikkei* or any other category that clearly sets them apart from *truly Japanese*.

4.2 THE INTERNATIONAL-FRIENDLY JAPAN

Japan has many faces; the elite promoted discourse about Japan and Japanese internationalization does too. As in the video-message from the *Japan. Endless Discovery* campaign after the 2011 earthquake (Image 14), the official discourse for the exterior emphasizes Japan as a welcoming country eager to show its traditions and spirit to the world.
As it has been mentioned, since 2010, the Japanese government has been implementing a campaign aimed at the promotion of an attractive image of Japan amid the international public for economical and soft power related reasons. Through the tourism campaign specifically directed to the exterior and the promotion of Cool Japan products and phenomena internationally, Japanese governmental, economic and media elites have been using a discourse focused on the syncretism of Japanese contemporary culture – the coexistence and importance of both traditional and modern elements – the strong and sublime spirit of Japanese people, the peacefulness and security of Japan, its role as representative of Asia and the openness towards foreigner visitors.

The media tourism campaign has been aimed mostly towards Asia, where people already consider Japan a likely tourist destination, and are directed to public with a high level of disposable income; they emphasize the cultural elements that appeal to other Asians, such as diversity of shopping malls and high-end products and brands, hot springs and resorts, temples and shrines, gourmet food, etc. This campaign does not rely on subculture phenomena to attract people, on the contrary, it uses tarento, public figures or even fictional characters that are regionally acknowledged and can relate to wide sectors of population – i.e. Arashi, the football players, or a classic Japanese character as Doraemon. However, besides this, the Japanese government has kept a relatively low profile regarding the country’s cultural promotion internationally and has relied on the economic elites to exploit the already existent niches of foreign enthusiasts of Japan.\(^{152}\)

Cool Japan phenomena have been the flag of Japanese culture in Western countries since the 1990s; not because Japanese government or producers specifically aimed to, but because the globalization forces in media worked to take some products to countries around the world and some people got deeply attracted by the exotic images, music and storylines, which contrasted with the hegemonic American media culture of the time. As internet was

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\(^{152}\) I am not considering the cultural and academic exchange programs because these were not a consequence of the policies of the 2000s and are not media-related, although in my fieldwork experiences I observed that those programs have been involved in the discourse. As I mentioned in the introduction, one of the aims of The Japan Foundation’s program for foreign academics and diplomats is to give the participants the Japanese experience, thus, during the conferences and cultural visits, the same imagery and discourse of the media campaigns destined to the outside is present. Nevertheless, these programs existed before the policies and they just have aligned with the official trends.
just becoming available for individual use in developed countries, the Western *otaku* culture began to flourish having as main characteristic the fervor for everything Japan-related, as those foreign consumers – most of them young and without actual experience living in or visiting Japan - perceived Japanese culture to be through *anime, manga, videogames* and some movies they could have access to. They took the label from the *otaku* culture in Japan, which actually had – and still has - a bad reputation inside the country; as Kitabayashi (2004, p. 2) puts it:

What image does the word *otaku* evoke? Somewhat bizarre individuals - idol enthusiasts who devote almost all of their time and disposable income to [follow] their favorite idols […] without caring for their own everyday life, or hi-tech enthusiasts who wander around the back streets of Akihabara, a famous electronics retail district in Tokyo, with a back-pack full of junk PC parts.

Still, for foreign fans, being an *otaku* was a choice - not an imposed label as for Japanese *otaku* subculture - and became something to be proud of, as it set them apart from the mainstream-American-culture fans. They began to idealize Japan, finding deep values, traditions and emotions in the simplest contents and contrasted them with what they considered shallow, commercial and senseless Western culture. As it was argued, Japanese elites noticed this and, consequently, the government responded with the policies of Cool Japan and Japan Brand. Nonetheless, more than aiming to reach new segments of consumers, Japanese companies and creators have been just relying on the already rooted ideas Western *otaku* have and promoting this subculture by means of international conventions and exhibitions of *anime, manga*, fashion, and so forth, sending J-pop rock bands, female idol groups or other personalities related to this kind of products.153

For example, in an episode of the Japanese wide show *Mr. Sunday* (Fuji TV) broadcasted in 2012 (Image 15), there was a special report on the Japan Expo held in Paris. They dedicated more than fifteen minutes on air to present the French "Japan experts"154 and their opinions and enjoyment of Japanese popular culture and products. The *half-Japanese half-French* reporter interviewed people in the event about their fondness for Japanese pop culture and the responses broadcasted were those concurrent with the dominant discourse: “American music is very commercial, but Japanese music is not like that;” “The expressions

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153 For a complete study on *otaku* culture inside and outside Japan, see Sasaki (2011).
154 *Nippon-tsū.*
in Japanese are rich in sentiments, they are beautiful and painful, in French language this cannot be done;” “[Referring to the female idol group performing at the expo] They are kind and graceful, this is also the Japanese spirit.”

Image 15. Mr. Sunday (Fuji TV, 2012, July 8). Source: Fuji TV. Images taken by the author from the open broadcasting in Japanese television.
After showing French fans enjoying karaoke competitions, posing with Hello Kitty, proudly showing their *cosplay*,\(^{155}\) and enthusiastically yelling and dancing along with the idol group, it was presented the interview with a business rep from one Japanese apparel company – Uniqlo – participating at the event. He said that even before the application of the policies of Cool Japan, the company had begun to focus its attention on exploiting the market of Western ‘Japan experts’ by producing clothing with Japanese media culture images that sent the clear message of such products originating in Japan, not just in any Asian country. Evidently, Japanese media has been making use of this foreign enthusiasm to reinforce the internal discourse to boost Japanese self-esteem, as it was argued in the previous section.

By these two strategies, through controlled media discourses, Japanese elites have been working to propagate an international image of Japan as a friendly country that can offer significant and unique experiences through its culture to visitors from around the world. The key term in this discourse is ‘visitor’, as it has been argued that Japan is not exactly friendly to the ‘outsiders’ who try to be part of its society. Thus, there is a two-folded discourse regarding Japan’s internationalization: for domestic audiences, elites promote the Japanese homogeneous society ideal, which intrinsically rejects the inclusion of those who are different; on the other hand, for the international community, the discourse invites foreigners to visit a nation that is welcoming and eager to share its cultural richness.

\(^{155}\) Costume play. Fans personifying some fictional character or popular artist.