Some Manifestations of Japanese Exclusionism

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Abstract
The Japanese subscribe to ethnic nationalism, which is an ideology with the aim to develop an ethnically exclusive and homogeneous nationhood. One manifestation of ethnic nationalism is the belief that Japan is, or should be, a mono-ethnic society. Ethnic nationalism is manifested in the exclusionary attitude or opinion of the Japanese. In the context of foreigners living in Japan, the exclusionary attitude or opinion of the Japanese often translates into the insistence that foreigners should do things the Japanese way. This is unfriendly to foreigners living in Japan, to say the least. This article illustrates how unwelcoming and inconvenient Japanese exclusionism can be by using two examples that directly affect foreigners: housing and discrimination against foreigners.

Keywords
Japan, foreigners, housing, discrimination

Introduction
Japan is a country that emphasizes its people’s ethnic homogeneity. The Japanese subscribe to ethnic nationalism, which is an ideology with the aim to develop an ethnically exclusive and homogeneous nationhood (Kashiwazaki, 2011). One manifestation of ethnic nationalism is the belief that Japan is, or should be, a mono-ethnic society. In other words, everyone who has Japanese nationality should be ethnically Japanese, or Japanese citizenship should be exclusively for the ethnic Japanese.

In addition to the ethnocultural conception of nationhood, ethnic nationalism is manifested in the exclusionary attitude or opinion of the Japanese. This is illustrated in the following quote by the former director of the Tokyo Immigration Bureau:

The native Japanese have lived as a single ethnic group for nearly 1000 years and it will be a difficult task for them to build friendly relationships with other ethnic groups. There will likely be many who would prefer to deal only with other Japanese people rather than foreigners with different customs and ideas. (Sakanaka, 2005)

Sakanaka explains that given Japan’s history as an island populated by people with a shared culture and common outlook, developing close relationships with people of different cultures will not be easy. We will see in “Housing” and “Discrimination Against Foreigners” sections that the Japanese do “prefer to deal only with other Japanese people rather than foreigners” in housing and customer service.

In the context of foreigners living in Japan, the exclusionary attitude or opinion of the Japanese often translates into the insistence that foreigners should do things the Japanese way. In addition, because the Japanese are privileged and foreigners are at a disadvantage in ethnic nationalism, foreigners have fewer rights:

It’s natural that foreigners who come to Japan should do things the Japanese way. It’s strange that we provide special services for them. We should not give them any special treatment. (Nagy, 2012, p. 133)

In addition to insisting that foreigners should do things the same way as the Japanese do, the Japanese respondent above from Nagy’s study in Shinjuku, Tokyo, seems to be against the provision of multilingual services. In other words, the Japanese may have the right to have government services offered to them in their native language but foreigners do not, even though foreigners pay taxes too. The following quote is from a foreign resident in the Nagoya area:

I know that, in Nagoya, when I transgress a system even when that system is simply advisory like the date to pick up at the dry cleaners... they have been very confrontational. I assume this...
is based on the fact that I am foreign and must comply with
Japanese rules to the very letter, but the exact rationale isn’t
clear to me as I find it hard to see their point of view on this.¹
(Morita, 2015, p. 18)

The respondent above was unhappy about the dry cleaner’s insistence on his suits being collected on a specified day, a practice seen in some parts of the country. From the respondent’s point of view, he is the paying customer and should therefore have the right to pick up at his convenience (Respondent 1, personal communication, September 1, 2014).

The number of foreigners in Japan is increasing. The number of foreign residents has doubled to 2.2 million over the past 20 years (Kingston, 2013). Signs of transformation are evident in rising numbers of foreigners gaining permanent residency and foreign wives (many from low-income countries) playing a key role in rural areas. In some sectors facing a shortage of skilled workers such as information technology, the government has initiated a new fast-track permanent residency program that targets the relevant foreigners. Globalization, intensified internationalization, and the aging and declining Japanese population all point toward the presence of more foreigners in Japan.

Housing discrimination and discrimination against foreigners are contemporary phenomena in Japanese society, and this article identifies the discourse of Japanese homogeneity and ethnic nationalism as main factors shaping this exclusion. Discrimination against foreigners in many parts of the country is documented in works such as Lee, Murphy-Shigematsu, and Befu (2006) and Willis and Murphy-Shigematsu (2008). Discrimination against the Ainu and Zainichi Koreans² is discussed in Maher and Macdonald (1995). Fukuko and Tsujiyama (2011) also focus on Zainichi Koreans. The experiences of Nikkeijin³ are described in works such as Noguchi and Fotos (2001), Green (2010), Takenoshita (2013), and Takenoshita (2015). This article is consistent with and contributes to the existing literature.

Ethnic nationalism, particularly in the form of exclusionary attitudes or opinions of the Japanese, is unfriendly to foreigners living in Japan, to say the least. This article illustrates how unwelcoming and inconvenient Japanese exclusionism can be by using two examples that directly affect foreigners: housing (“Housing” section) and discrimination against foreigners (“Discrimination Against Foreigners” section). Many foreigners looking for housing have had the experience of being refused service by estate agents, and even after having found a willing estate agent, many find the guarantor requirement challenging. Discrimination against foreigners is not illegal in Japan, and racist incidents are fairly common, especially in the form of refusal of service by businesses.

Housing

“Open and blatant housing discrimination against foreigners is common in Japan” (Befu, 2006, p. 3). Refusal of service by estate agents is widely reported in the literature. Most

estate agents refuse to rent out their properties to foreigners. A recent case of a Belgian student in Kyoto who was told he could not rent a flat because he was a foreigner was reported in The Japan Times (Scott, 2013). Recently, a colleague of the author who was looking for housing was turned down by 9 out of 10 estate agents, citing “Japanese only” as the reason.

Ruru mamoranai (“to disobey rule(s)”) is often cited by estate agents as the reason for refusing to rent out properties to foreigners. The rules in question can be the correct days for putting out the correct rubbish or minimizing noise. Estate agents sometimes simply state that foreigners do not understand the Japanese language or do not know Japanese culture and, therefore, they do not want to rent out properties to foreigners. Befu (2006) points out that most Japanese regard these as reasonable excuses for not renting to foreigners, regardless of the foreigner’s actual grasp of the Japanese language or culture.

After having found estate agents who are willing to serve them, foreigners are still not out of the woods. Guarantor or co-signers are usually required of renters in Japan. Guarantors pay the rent if tenants fall behind or cause damage to the property. Landlords prefer relatives as guarantors, especially parents who are still working. One option is to have employees serve as guarantors, but this only applies to those with jobs lined up and companies willing to commit. Even then, using an employer as guarantor is potentially problematic. Changing jobs can be difficult. If the tenant loses his or her job, he or she could have nowhere to live. Another option is shared houses or dormitories for foreigners, but group living has its drawbacks. Some companies specialize in short-term rentals for foreigners with no guarantors, but these properties are often not centrally located. There are companies that offer to act as guarantors for a fee, but some of them require their clients to provide guarantors before they agree to provide the service (Lewis, 2013).

The guarantor system has existed in Japan in various forms since feudal times. In the Edo Period, tenants needed caretakers who managed properties for landlords to act as guarantors for them if they wanted to rent, marry, or travel through official checkpoints. The current law concerning guarantors dates back to the Meiji Era, when the Civil Code was written in 1896. Some aspects of the Civil Code are currently being reviewed but the guarantor requirement for renters is not one of them. This requirement and the vertical relationship between landlord and renter persist to this day (Lewis, 2013).

Many foreigners do not know anyone in Japan when they first arrive, making it almost impossible to find a guarantor. According to one of the respondents in Morita (2015) who found the guarantor requirement challenging,
apartment. The guarantor issue was the biggest hurdle for me. I had to wait for my application for guarantor to be approved by the university. So for 3 months, I stayed at Freebell apartments which do not require guarantor or deposit. It was a bit expensive staying there, though. (p. 10)

The respondent above had to wait for a period of time for his request for his employer to serve as his guarantor to be processed. While he waited, he paid a premium for accommodation that did not have a guarantor requirement. When his application to his employer was finally approved, his employer took out 2 months’ rent from his salary as collateral (Respondent 2, personal communication, September 1, 2014).

**Discrimination Against Foreigners**

When United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) Doudou Diene visited Japan in 2005, he reported the existence of racism, racial discrimination, and xenophobia. In his report (UNHCHR, 2006), he called on the Japanese government to acknowledge the existence of racial discrimination and show the political will to combat it. He also recommended that a national anti-discrimination law should be passed and implemented, which to this day, has not.

The Japanese Constitution prohibits discrimination, but the degree to which this can be enforced in practice is unclear. According to Article 14, “All of the people are equal under the law and there shall be no discrimination in political, economic or social relations because of race, creed, sex, social status or family origin.” The traditional view of a constitution is that it protects an individual from the government, but it does not necessarily extend to discrimination by private individuals. There is also a lack of sound legislation to ensure these protections are upheld. This is in sharp contrast to countries such as the United States in which it is spelled out explicitly in legislation that discrimination is illegal. The lack of a statutory regime to enforce constitutional principles means that Japan takes a soft line when it comes to discouraging discrimination. It may be possible to challenge a particular incident through the courts or by bringing a complaint to a human rights committee, but neither may lead to a concrete result in terms of remedies (Scott, 2013).

Japan is unique in that there are no laws protecting the livelihoods or rights of non-Japanese. One hundred twenty-six cases of discrimination toward foreigners were reported to the Bureau of Human Rights in 2007, which include refusal of service by estate agents, hot springs, and hotels. The Bureau only has the power to issue *setsuji* (“explanation” or “warning”), not redress measures.

The Japanese government ratified the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) in 1995, which is one of the most widely ratified human rights conventions in the world. Despite ICERD’s recommendation to the Japanese government in 2001 to adopt specific legislation to outlaw racial discrimination, the Japanese Civil or Criminal Code still has no law specifically outlawing racial discrimination. Racial discrimination is unconstitutional and unlawful under the ICERD, yet not illegal (Arudou, 2010).

Ana Bortz, A Brazilian journalist living in Japan, took to court the owner of a jewelry shop who refused to serve her because of her nationality. She won the case on the basis of the ICERD. In 1999, the judge ruled that she had suffered discrimination and ordered compensation.

Refusal of service to foreigners is fairly common in Japan. In the high-profile Otaru onsen (“hot spring”) case (1993-2005), “Japanese only” signs barred entry to foreigners in Otaru, Hokkaido. The following respondent in Morita (2015) had similar experiences:

Once or twice I haven’t been allowed into a Japanese onsen or a Japanese bar/izakaya because I wasn’t Japanese. (p. 7)

Sakanaka’s (2005) prediction, that “there will likely be many who would prefer to deal only with other Japanese people rather than foreigners with different customs and ideas,” has come true, particularly in customer service. Businesses would rather forgo the profit they could potentially make from foreign customers than to serve foreigners. In March 2014, the “Japanese only” banner displayed at the Urawa Reds football match received negative publicity all over the world.

Refusal of service comes in more subtle forms, too:

I have popped into a few small Japanese women’s clothing stores where they used one English word to insult me and chase me off “laaah-gie janai” [No large—I presume] they said this 3 syllable phrase over and over tittering with their friends who were in the shop. It was very absurd. In another similar case the woman followed me around and pointed out all the clothes to insist they were not large—I presume they didn’t want me to try their clothes on, nor to frequent their shop!5

The respondent above is a medium-built Caucasian who would be considered a Japanese size *Large*. It is possible that the shops she visited stocked clothes up to *Medium* only. In any case, it is clear that the shops wanted her to leave, and the way they conveyed their message is unacceptable. The same method would never be used with Japanese customers.

There is a lack of awareness among the Japanese that foreigners in Japan do not enjoy the rights and privileges of the Japanese (Willis, 2006). In a Cabinet survey in 2011, 59.3% of the respondents answered “yes” to the question “Should foreigners have the same human rights protections as Japanese?” (Arudou, 2011). According to Saga Prefecture public prosecutor, Hiroshi Ichikawa, he was taught that foreigners had no human rights. Even the Japanese Constitution speaks of defining equality and fundamental human rights as being conditioned on nationality rather than being human. A 2008 Supreme Court decision made it clear that citizenship is essential to enjoying constitutional and human rights in Japan. There are different standards in civil and criminal courts for citizens and
non-citizens. The government has repeatedly claimed through explicit exceptions and caveats made when signing treaties that non-citizens do not qualify for protection against racial discrimination or for equal civil and political rights (Arudou, 2011).

A Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC; 2006) report admits that previous efforts to tackle the inequalities faced by foreign residents have been insufficient: “It is hard to say that the corresponding actions of the ministries and government offices have been adequate, nor can it be denied that there has been a lack of comprehensive, cross-cutting measures” (p. 2).

There is some differentiation and stratification within the category of foreigners on the basis of country of origin and occupation. According to Kobayashi (2010), the Japanese discriminates against foreign residents of the same or darker color or English speakers with an “accent” (i.e., non-native speakers of English). In her study, she refers to a survey in which half of the Latin American respondents (n = 115) experienced discrimination due to their skin color or nationality. A similar differentiation can be found below:

From my peers I learned that the image of “foreigner” associated with the term gaijin is of Caucasian, blue-eyed, fair-haired people. They are generally seen as more intelligent and financially better-off. . . . But there’s also a non-Caucasian image, referring to other Asians. They’re regarded as lower status than Japanese: poor, unintelligent and badly educated . . . I used to be told that Kankokujin (South Koreans) were OK, but Chosenjin (North Koreans) were really low status, along with Chinese, Filipino and other Asians. (Maher & Macdonald, 1995, pp. 252-253)

Discussion

Prioritizing the protection of the perceived ethnic homogeneity of Japan does not always lead to the best solution. Japan holds dear the principle of not allowing unskilled migration because of its perceived negative consequences for Japanese society. In the revision of the Immigration Act in 1998, the government allowed the migration of unskilled nikkei Brazilians, granting them unrestricted working visas of various lengths based on their presumed Japaneseess. This is based on the rationale that the Japanese blood in the nikkei Brazilians meant the homogeneity of Japan would be preserved. However, this line of reasoning proved to be flawed. These Latin Americans, even though of Japanese descent, turned out to be more different and foreign than workers from neighboring Asian countries, neither speaking the Japanese language nor practicing Japanese culture.

Holding dear Japanese exclusionism is not always in Japan’s best interests either. Japan has Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with Indonesia, the Philippines, and, more recently, Vietnam. The EPAs provide the regulations for the migration of nurses and caregivers from these countries. Despite the acute shortage of registered nurses and caregivers, a problem particularly pressing in the face of a growing elderly population, the EPAs are described as “a window-dressing to a strong, clear, and prevailing no to opening Japan’s borders to an international workforce” (Vogt, 2013, p. 18). The Japanese government would rather alleviate the shortage by increasing the labor market participation of youth and women and the use of care robots and technology. This reflects the difficulties Japan has in coming to terms with accepting and welcoming international labor migrants in large numbers. Japanese exclusionism is also manifested in the fact that the nurses’ and caregivers’ previously acquired skills are not fully acknowledged. Regardless of their work status in their respective countries, they have to work as nursing assistants and assistant caregivers in Japan until they pass the national examination (Vogt, 2013).

The national examination is a major obstacle to nurses and caregivers from Indonesia and the Philippines. The examination is in Japanese, and passing it is a necessary step for being employed as certified nurses and caregivers as well as being granted long-term residency in Japan. An Indonesian nurse praised the efforts of a Japanese doctor who helped her with her medical vocabulary for 2 hr every evening for a year. She passed the national examination in her second attempt. However, she reported she was bullied by Japanese nurses, who considered her more of a burden than an equal coworker (Vogt, 2013).

When the Japanese government started campaigning for internationalization in the mid-1980s, insularity and tendencies toward exclusionism were criticized and regarded as obstacles in the process of globalization. According to a Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA; 1985) Blue Paper, “It is necessary to overcome our insular/exclusionary quality by developing the ability to tolerate and accept differences” (cited in Kashiwazaki, 2013, p. 38). Not only does the government acknowledge Japanese exclusionism, it is aware that exclusionism can be a hindrance. More recently, politicians have accepted the fact that welcoming foreigners is necessary given the aging and declining population. It is regarded as a necessary step to ensure Japan’s future competitiveness (Ministry of Justice [MOJ], 2010, cited in Yamamoto, 2012).

It is not possible to welcome foreigners if they are perceived as agents disrupting the homogeneous social fabric of Japan. Issues pertaining to foreigners are often referred to as gaigokujin mondai (“foreigner problem”). The choice of the word mondai reflects the perception that foreigners contribute little to Japanese society, and that they have come to Japan to make money and have brought problems with them. An example of a gaigokujin mondai discussed in the media is education for foreign children. Many Japanese do not see provision of education for foreign children as the responsibility of the host society that benefits from the economic contribution made by foreigners. Sakanaka (2005) shares this view:
We do not often see Japanese people praising the work of foreign residents and warmly welcoming them as friends and colleagues. . . . It is far more common to hear of problems—problems adjusting to society, problems with children’s education, problems of discriminatory treatment, housing problems, social insurance problems—the list goes on and on. (Sakanaka, 2005)

Foreigners are also perceived as “a burden,” “disrupters of the traditional patterns of Japanese life,” and “causers of problems.” In Shinjuku, Tokyo, one of the reasons why Japanese language classes, cultural classes, multilingual advisory services, and publications are provided is so that foreigners do not cause any intercultural friction or become a burden to the local government and Japanese residents. Shinjuku’s multicultural coexistence practices have a strong focus on preventing intercultural friction between the Japanese and foreign residents. According to the managing director of International Exchange at the Shinjuku Foundation for Culture and International Exchange,

Multicultural existence practices are not about creating a municipality that minorities want to come to; rather, it is about maintaining the integrity of the Japanese community, ensuring that the foreigners that do settle temporarily or for the long term don’t disrupt the traditional patterns of Japanese life. Multicultural coexistence programs provide foreign residents with knowledge about Japanese customs and manners so they can avoid causing problems with Japanese residents. (Nagy, 2012, p. 132)

Foreigners can be invaluable assets and should be acknowledged as such:

. . . international migrants themselves—as part of border-crossing flows—can be invaluable assets to each country’s innovative potential, and should be acknowledged as such. By solely contemplating about the risks international migration poses to social stability and wage levels, we forfeit an opportunity to embrace their vibrant and diverse input to our societies, politics, and economics. (Vogt, 2013, p. 37)

Japanese exclusionism and the insistence on maintaining the perceived ethnic homogeneity of Japan has prevented the Japanese from embracing foreigners’ contribution to the country. Sakanaka (2005) suggests that Japan needs to move away from valuing homogeneity.

In the face of a rapidly aging and declining population and global competition, Japan’s future will depend on whether it can accept and welcome foreigners:

Japan must recognize that globalization is here to stay, and should stake its very survival on accepting people elsewhere in the world as its brethren, and transforming itself into a much more multicultural, diverse society. It will be a large task, but Japan is past the point where easy solutions will do. (Sakanaka, 2011)

Stopping the tide of globalization is impossible. The Japanese can no longer live in a “Japanese only” world. Regardless of personal preference, the Japanese will have to live with immigrants in some capacity (Sakanaka, 2005).

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1. References to many sources are used to support the claims made in this article. The quotes from Morita (2015), which are drawn from responses to questionnaires administered in September 2014, function as illustrations. Morita (2015) is a study of discrimination against foreigners based on a sample of 17 foreigners working in two universities in the Nagoya area. The sample consisted of seven Americans, four Britons, two Canadians, one Australian, one Filipino, one Romanian, and one Singaporean.
2. Zainichi (“in Japan”) Koreans are descendants of former colonial subjects of the Japanese empire, which brought them to Japan as forced labor before the end of World War II. Those who were brought up and socialized in Japan opt for naturalization in increasing numbers. (Vogt, 2015)
3. Nikkeijin (“descendants of Japanese emigrants”) are descendants of the Japanese who migrated to Brazil and to a lesser extent, Peru, in the 1950s.
4. This quote comes from a response to a questionnaire which is part of data collected for a study on communication between the Japanese and foreigners in April 2015. The sample is made up of 12 foreigners working in three universities in the Nagoya area and consists of four Americans, four Britons, one Australian, one Canadian, one Romanian, and one Ukrainian.
5. Studies such as Maher (2005) show that younger Japanese feel more positive about members of other ethnicities.

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