

Multiethnic Japan: Nation-building and National Identity

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1. Introduction

Japan is often described as an ethnically, racially, and culturally homogeneous nation. The readings presented here challenge this notion by examining the origins and multi-ethnic character of the modern Japanese nation-state. The readings explore how “minority” groups are defined in different historical periods and how the state has tried to assimilate them through the reform of language and customs. Furthermore, the unit examines how marginal groups define themselves and come to terms with what are often dual or competing national and ethnic identities.

2. Audience and Uses

This unit lends itself to a general discussion of the rise of the nation-state and the construction of ethnic and national identities. It is appropriate for undergraduate classes in a variety of disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and history. It would fit well in thematic courses on nations and nationalism and race and ethnicity, as well as classes on Japanese history or modern Japanese society class. For example, the unit has been used in the first year seminar course “Japan and Globalization” (available at <http://www.exeas.org/syllabi/japan-and-globalization.html>). Even though the context may be new to students, many seem to be able to relate to the conceptual issues raised based on their knowledge and understanding of ethnic groups and identity struggles in the US.

This unit can be used by itself, taught in conjunction with the unit “Okinawa: Beyond the Ethnic Other” (<http://www.exeas.org/resources/okinawa.html>), or in combination with the following other units on race, ethnicity, and nationality in East Asia:

- Nationalisms in East Asia (<http://www.exeas.org/resources/nationalisms.html>)
- Race and Ethnicity in Asian America (<http://www.exeas.org/resources/race-ethnicity.html>)

- Race, Ethnicity, and National Identity: America, Korea, and Biracial Koreans (<http://www.exeas.org/resources/korean-race-ethnicity.html>)
- Nationality, Nationalisms, and Identity in Contemporary China
- Race, Ethnicity, and National Identity in Contemporary China: Redefining “Chineseness” (forthcoming on the ExEAS website)
- “Chinese” Perspectives on Identity Before the Nation (<http://www.exeas.org/resources/chinese-perspectives.html>)

For summary information on each of these units, see “Not Color Blind: Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in East Asia” (<http://www.exeas.org/resources/race-ethnicity-intro.html>.)

3. Historical background

In order to teach this section, the instructor needs to know something about the 1868 Meiji Restoration. This event marks the overthrow of the Tokugawa regime that held power for over two hundred years, and the “restoration” of the Japanese emperor (named Meiji) to a position of putative power and authority by a group of reform-minded middle-ranking samurai. This occurred at a time of national emergency, after the nation had been forced to sign a series of unequal treaties with the United States, Russia, Britain, France, and other European nations. The Meiji Restoration ushered in a period of national reorganization and rapid modernization. Reforms included the abolishment of samurai status and the class system, the reorganization of hundreds of semi-independent fiefs into “prefectures” under the central authority of the government in Tokyo, the creation of a national, compulsory educational system, the creation of a modern army and navy and initiation of general conscription, the creation of modern legal codes, a national constitution and national representative assembly (the Diet). The Meiji Restoration is widely considered the beginning of the “modern” period of Japanese history. (This paragraph is from the unit “Nationalisms in East Asia” available at <http://www.exeas.org/resources/nationalisms.html>.)

Japan is not a homogeneous nation. Japan includes ethnic “minorities” such as the Ainu, Okinawans, resident Koreans, and recently, resident foreign workers from a variety of countries. Generally speaking, while the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were marked by efforts to get these groups to forget their native languages and customs and to assimilate, in recent years, many of these groups have sought to recover ethnic identities, languages, and customs — a process which has also involved the invention or reinterpretation of tradition.

In Japan, national unification efforts during the Meiji period included not only the inclusion of Okinawa and Hokkaido within its national borders but also efforts to make the peoples of those places assimilate as Japanese nationals.

4. Reference Works for Instructors

Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan. Tokyo: Kodansha Ltd., 1983.

[Available online through subscription: www.ency-japan.com]

See articles on “Tokugawa Shogunate,” “Edo Period,” and “Meiji Restoration.”

HUNTER, Janet. *Concise Dictionary of Modern Japanese History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

Good basic textbooks on modern Japan include:

- DUUS, Peter. “The Fall of the Old Order” and “Revolution from Above.” Chs. 4 and 5 in *Modern Japan*, ed. 2. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998. Pages 61-102.
- GORDON, Andrew. *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- PYLE, Kenneth B. *The Making of Modern Japan*, ed. 2. Lexington, M.A.: D.C. Heath and Company, 1996. Pages 41-95 (chapters 4, 5, and 6).

5. Student Readings

This unit can be taught in one three-hour session or in two class sessions over the course of one week. If the readings are divided, the first session could cover history (Lie or Gordon or both), and the second could discuss Morris-Suzuki and Christy or only Morris-Suzuki. If you prefer to assign a smaller amount of reading per session, select readings according to the star* system:

*** Most important

** Recommended

* Optional

***Morris-Suzuki, Tessa. 1998. “Becoming Japanese: Imperial Expansion and Identity Crisis in the Early Twentieth Century.” Pp. 157-180 in *Japan’s Competing Modernities: Issues in Culture and Democracy 1900-1930*, edited by S. A. Minichiello. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press (26 pages).

This article discusses the inclusion of Hokkaido and other northern islands within Japan’s national borders in the late nineteenth century and the corresponding re-classification of the Ainu and other native peoples as citizens of the Japanese realm. The article takes the position that the incorporation of these islands was an act of colonization and uses as proof the differing conditions of citizenship between these

peoples and people from “Japan proper.” Good for exploring and theorizing the fluid category of citizenship during the colonial period.

***Christy, Alan S. 1997. “The Making of Imperial Subjects in Okinawa.” Pp. 141-169 in *Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia*, edited by T. Barlow. Durham: Duke University Press (29 pages).

This article works well with the Morris-Suzuki piece above. It describes a similar process of incorporation but this time of the southern Ryūkyū islands which became Okinawa prefecture. Christy describes how many people in Okinawa envisioned themselves as occupying a superior position vis á vis subjects of Japan’s colonial empire in Taiwan or Korea, while they themselves were discriminated against within “Japan proper.” Good for thinking about how “assimilation” efforts often function to accentuate rather than erase difference.

**Lie, John. 2001. “Modern Japan, Multiethnic Japan,” *Multiethnic Japan*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Chapter 4

Lie argues that Japan, as a modern nation state, is by definition multi-ethnic, because of its efforts in state building, colonial and territorial expansion, and the pressures generated by capitalist industrialization. Briefly discusses all major groups within Japan, including Ainu, Okinawans, Burakumin, Taiwanese, Chinese and Koreans in Japan. Also a useful resource for instructors.

*Gordon, Andrew. 2003. *A modern history of Japan: from Tokugawa times to the present*. New York: Oxford University Press. Part 2

Provides a general introduction to the historical period, covering social, economic, and political developments during the period covered by the above readings. May be useful for the instructor.

6. Discussion questions

Why, according to Lie, are modern nation-states by definition multi-ethnic?

National identity is about membership in a national community. How was national identity defined and differentiated during the Japanese Empire? What were the necessary ingredients for “becoming” Japanese according to Morris-Suzuki and Christy?

Both Morris-Suzuki and Christy discuss the process of assimilation. How did discourses on Japanese identity affect how Ainu and Okinawans defined themselves? Why would one group celebrate difference and another assert its Japanese identity? Which approach do you think might be more empowering?

To what extent do you think these questions are relevant to contemporary US society?