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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1327t18h>

Journal

Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review, 1(18)

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Publication Date

2016-03-01

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

REVIEW ESSAY

Rethinking Borders in Japan: Internal, Cultural, and Geopolitical

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Christopher Bondy. *Voice, Silence, and Self: Negotiations of Buraku Identity in Contemporary Japan*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015. 184 pp. \$40 (cloth).

Koichi Iwabuchi. *Resilient Borders and Cultural Diversity*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015. 137 pp. \$75 (cloth/e-book).

Akihiro Iwashita. *Japan's Border Issues: Pitfalls and Prospects*. New York: Routledge, 2016. 144 pp. \$160 (cloth).

The books reviewed here address three different borders in present-day Japanese society: internal, cultural, and geopolitical. It is rare for three different authors to concurrently publish monographs on Japanese borders from three different angles. This may be a sign of increasing consciousness within Japan on the issues of diversity, multiethnicity, old and new forms of discrimination, and continuing border conflicts with neighboring countries. As Christopher Bondy clearly delineates in his book, most Japanese remain “silent” about the internal borders—that is, the social (i.e., status and class), ethnic, and racial divisions with invisible or sometimes geographically demarcated borders drawn within Japanese society in order to differentiate one group of human beings from another. Koichi Iwabuchi, however, posits that the cultural border in Japan is more severely attacked by conservatives and political extremists than the internal borders that are demarcated by socioeconomic classes, gender, and ethnicity. As cultural borders are intended to open up Japan to embrace diversity and multiculturalism, the nationalist internal borders remain firmly shut against the non-Japanese groups that migrate in and out of Japan with their own local cultures and identities. Finally, Akihiro Iwashita suggests that local Japanese,

specifically residents of Okinawa, Hokkaido, and Shimane, are the victims of foreign aggression by Russians, Koreans, and Chinese who have either demanded or “illegally” occupied Japanese territories since 1945 and created postwar territorial disputes (*ryôdo mondai*) based mostly on untrue historical interpretations and unrealistic territorial claims. To resolve the postwar atrocities inflicted on “local” Japanese residents by neighboring countries, Iwashita suggests that negotiations between concerned parties must remain ahistorical and apolitical with regard to the territorial issues in order to focus only on the economic interests of each country, which can lead to rationalist solutions that resemble egalitarian pie sharing.

There are three things that distinguish the books under review here from the extant works on Japanese borders. First, the issue of the *burakumin* (or social outcasts) addressed in Bondy’s book is studied ethnographically by a non-Japanese outsider who works in Japan as a secondary school teacher. Anthropologists George De Vos and Hiroshi Wagatsuma (1967) first used the phrase “ethnographic studies” in their study of *buraku* people; however, their study relied heavily on public documents and statistics instead of in-depth participant observation or interviews that could analyze, as Bondy tries to do in his book, how the outcasts actually lived their daily lives from their own point of view. Yet Bondy’s book is not a novel attempt. June Gordon (2008), who also served as a teacher in Japan, was the first to tackle the issue of internal borders there, especially the invisible problem of the *zainichi* (ethnic Koreans in Japan) and the *burakumin*, by collecting and analyzing ethnographic data gathered from her experiences in Japanese primary and secondary schools. In order to differentiate his book from Gordon’s, Bondy deliberately excludes the ethnic Korean issue from his ethnographic study of the outcast group. Focusing on the nature of social “silence” and not ethnic discrimination per se, he stresses that the *burakumin* issue is a social problem of keeping the whole issue silent in Japanese society, even among *burakumin* themselves, rather than “speaking out,” as in the case of ethnic discriminations against the *zainichi* (2). To Bondy, “silent” *buraku* people are analogous to American homosexuals who hide their gender identity in order to survive in a silently homophobic society and are categorically different from the *zainichi*, who seem to openly debate their identity problems in Japan.

Second, Iwabuchi’s is the only book by a Japanese author to emphasize the sociological link between cultural borders and ethnic minority groups in Japan, especially the *zainichi*. The impact of the Korean Wave on the Korean-Japanese¹ has only been addressed by a couple of

edited books compiled by ethnic Koreans in Japan (Kang, Ôta, and Park 2006; Seo, Hwang, and Anzako 2007). The Korean-Japanese study of the Korean Wave phenomenon emphasizes the continuing effects of postcolonialism and racism against them in Japan, even as Korea and Japan, as independent political unities, have increased regional and global cooperation through cultural exchanges that include the Korean Wave and Japanese pop culture. In this sense, Iwabuchi distinguishes himself from other mainstream cultural pundits in Japan by openly underscoring how national borders are reinforcing invisible ones within Japan that intend to demarcate the Korean-Japanese apart from mainstream Japanese, despite increased cultural exchanges between Korea and Japan (3–5). Iwabuchi doesn't concern himself too much with the question of silence, as he wants to shed light on the question of cultural borders that remain invisible despite their incessant tension with political and geographical borders that were erected with nationalist ideals.

Third, no one from the conservative camp has acknowledged the pitfalls of Japanese solutions to the territorial disputes until Iwashita's book, even as they have emphasized the importance of local people's own perceptions, including those held by Ainu people regarding their lost homes in the northern territories [*hokuhô ryôdo*]. Although liberal Japanese historian Haruki Wada (2012) openly asked the Japanese government to return Dokdo/Takeshima to Korea, Iwashita argues that many Japanese scholars are in fact far more objective and neutral than their counterparts in Korea, who are mostly irrational, obsessed with history, and chauvinistic (7–8). Whereas it is almost impossible for Chinese and Korean scholars to argue, like Wada does, that China and Korea should return Senkakus/Diaoyu and Dokdo/Takeshima to Japan, Iwashita's book suggests that a sizable number of Japanese scholars are in fact criticizing Japanese governmental and/or nationalistic solutions to the dispute, while encouraging rational (i.e., ahistorical and non-nationalistic) negotiations among concerned parties.

Despite the novel elements outlined above that these three books present on the issue of internal, cultural, and geopolitical borders of Japan, all of them are fraught with problems in terms of their main theoretical concepts, implications, and methodologies. Bondy's main issue is that he lacks a proper theoretical basis for his main concept of “silence,” underlined so many times throughout his book, in order to justify his exclusion of other silent minority groups in Japan, including Chinese, Korean, Ainu, and Okinawan minorities, who prefer either to remain

silent about their discriminated status or to bracket their identities, as they're indistinguishable from mainstream Japanese once they are fully naturalized as Japanese citizens.

Bondy uses Anthony Giddens' concept of "identity formation" as an interactive and proactive process of individual effort at realizing a desired social identity and "protective cocoon" that provides the institutional space to initiate the process of identity formation (11–12). However, throughout his book, he fails to convince readers that Giddens' concept should be applied only to *buraku* people, and not to other minority groups in Japan. One could argue that silence, cocooning, and bracketing are applicable to the Ainu, Tōhoku, Okinawans, Koreans, and Chinese as well, although this would only draw readers' attention to Bondy's own silence about these groups by not explaining why the *buraku* people are treated separately from similar groups. In fact, the *buraku* people have proactively sought alliances with ethnic Koreans in the formation of their liberation movements not only in their own neighborhoods but in mainstream Japanese society as well (Lie 2001; Gordon 2008; Ryang and Lie 2009). Both Koreans and *buraku* people were pivotal in the propagation of postwar *yakuza* (mob organizations), akin to the formation of mob organizations in the United States and other countries (Gordon 2008). Furthermore, Bondy remains silent about the *burakumin's* active participation in Sōkagakkai (or Nichiren) [Buddhist religious sects] and its political ally Kōmeitō [Clean Government Party]. In fact, many academic readers would naturally expect Bondy to explore the *burakumin's* religious and political activities through ethnographic investigation in each neighborhood. However, his book mainly focuses on a comparison between two secondary schools in Kuromatsu and Takagawa, failing to distinguish itself much from Gordon's earlier study of her schools.

Because Bondy's ethnographic study of identity socialization is limited to local schooling, it is difficult to derive substantial theoretical implications from his work. Moreover, unlike In Michael Burawoy's seminal work (1979) on the formation of working-class consciousness and identity, in which Burawoy disguised himself as a participant observer in order to control the problems of validity and the reliability of his qualitative data, everyone in Bondy's two schools knew that he was studying the *burakumin* issue, making students and teachers react to his observations and questions in untrustworthy ways (i.e., the Hawthorne effect). Based on this unreliable qualitative data, Bondy arrives at a comparative truth that silence as a social mechanism of establishing one's social identity has two contradictory functions: either (a) protecting minority youths from potential discrimination or (b) devastating

them as a boomerang after their departure from the protective cocoons in which they were taught to be proud of their marginalized identity (144–145). However, silencing/bracketing versus voicing/coming out become blurred in his two cases, but Bondy fails to provide much sociological information as to why such blurring occurs and what would happen to these young people if they did not know how to distinguish between these two seemingly contradictory strategies of identity negotiation. In addition, readers are left unsure how the Japanese or *burakumin*'s experience of silencing/bracketing in Japan differs from similar experiences in other countries or on the part of other similar groups in Japan. If the *burakumin* and Chinese chose silence/bracketing during Bondy's observation, whereas Okinawans and Koreans usually choose to speak out about their stigmatized selves, is it because of their different schooling? Or is it because of the cultural difference in their protective cocoons? In a similar vein, neither China (including Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore) nor Korea has a *burakumin*-esque problem, although they both have similar historical backgrounds to Japan. Why does only Japan, and not China or Korea, have this problem? Is this again a difference of culture or socialization? It is difficult to discern theoretical implications from this study.

Iwabuchi's problems are also theoretical and methodological. In fact, and to be fair, he has no methodology, as his book is a personal essay on his thoughts about globalization (which he calls "internationalism"), brand nationalism, and multiculturalism. If his book represents his own personal insights about the current and future problems of global mass media, espousing internationalism, brand nationalism, and multiculturalism, our focal concern is whether his intuitive insights can produce sound theoretical implications for future studies about global mass media. His messages in this book, though written elegantly, are baffling, however. On a theoretical level, Iwabuchi posits that cultural borders exist in tandem with geopolitical ones in order to argue that these cultural borders are as nationalistic as geopolitical borders and are being consolidated against (a) increased people's movements and (b) multiplying cultural movements. The reason why cultural borders are being consolidated instead of slackened is because of the persistent power of nationalism, which is tightly coupled with global capitalism (3). Furthermore, Iwabuchi ambitiously expands his intuitive insights to an upgraded argument that these cultural borders are now internationally administered. By using the postmodern word "inter-national," Iwabuchi argues that in both national and inter-national administrations of cultural diversity, an unknown capitalist and nationalist power lets in selected types of cultural

diversity while suppressing others that are deemed not “national” or “inter-national” (4). Therefore, his entire argument remains on the level of conspiracy, as it is based on unknown agents who control national and inter-national cultural management except for such vague and functionalist concepts as government, capitalism, and global mass media.

The case studies that Iwabuchi highlights to support his intuitive insights are Japan and East Asia (namely, Greater China and Korea). The choice of these cases is cultural (and functional at the same time), and does not take into account the vast differences rampant among these countries. First and foremost, Japan is the only core nation in the world system that Iwabuchi considers to be run by capitalist and nationalist regimes that wield gargantuan power over people, organizations, media, and institutions all over the world. As such, many difficulties arise when one proposes to compare Japan with a developing country like China. Although Iwabuchi assumes that the cultural management of East Asian countries is similar all over due to their cultural and geographical proximity, Japan’s cultural resources, military power, and capitalist economic power are much greater than those of either China or Korea. It is simply impossible for these two neighbors to compete with Japan in terms of soft power and national branding.

Second, without carefully controlling for errors of comparison, Iwabuchi nonetheless thoroughly analyzes the Japanese mass media, which espouses both cultural diversity and nationalistic border control. Key to Japanese cultural management is national branding and soft power, which seems universal in all East Asian countries, as Iwabuchi forecasted (26–27). Although Japan’s brand and soft power have been enormously improved throughout the world due to sophisticated cultural management using the national icons permeated in the symbols and characters of popular Japanese anime or manga content, Iwabuchi correctly points out that Japan’s soft power management created deep-seated hatred among Chinese and Koreans against Japan and the Japanese (35). However, this is a gross oversimplification based on superficial quantitative data analysis based on journalistic reports. For example, in soft power analysis, especially between rival countries such as Japan and Korea, we need to look at the variables of ethnicity and gender more closely than Iwabuchi does in his book. Especially during the rise of twenty-first-century popular culture movements in Asia and beyond, gender plays an important role to the extent that femininity in cultural consumption sometimes overcomes nationalistic barriers, eventually leading female fans in rival cultures to truly appreciate the former enemy’s

culture. This contrasts with the attitude of many male consumers of Japanese manga, who actually hate Japan and, more specifically, Japan's nationalist border control (Oh and Lee 2014).

Third, Iwabuchi's case study of Korea and its cultural management of Hallyu (or the Korean Wave) remains the most problematic aspect of his book. Initially, his intention to situate this new Korean media phenomenon in the context of "inter-national" cultural management, where the Hallyu boom in Japan is expected to resolve the age-old Korean-Japanese problem in Japan, was a welcome gesture. However, the Korean-Japanese are such a diverse group (Lie 2008) that it is hard to ascertain whether the Korean Wave has been devastating to the entire *zainichi*. *Pace* Iwabuchi's pessimistic judgment, *zainichi* enjoyed a sensational business boom in Japan due to Hallyu until it was ravaged by frequent right-wing racist demonstrations. Although some of the North Korean (or Chosen)-Japanese were perplexed by the sudden boom in popularity of Hallyu in Japan and in fact harnessed their hatred against South Korea, many of them changed their attitudes and began to appreciate South Korean culture (Oh 2012). Even as anti-Korean hatred has been augmented over the intervening years among Japanese right-wing fanatics due to Hallyu, the overall communication and cultural exchange between South Koreans and the Korean-Japanese, on the one hand, and between South Koreans and Japanese, on the other, has increased during the same period.

Iwabuchi's main weakness in his treatment of Hallyu in the book is his unbalanced reliance on his research associates, such as Sun Jung, who mindlessly copied and used Iwabuchi's concept of *mukokuseki* (lack of national identity) in explaining Hallyu's appeal not only to Asians but also to non-Asians in the world. To the minds of Japanese and other Asian fans, Hallyu is very Korean, and different from their local or Western pop culture content, whereas Europeans find Hallyu very Western (Lie 2015). The real basis for the universal appeal of Hallyu to fans from all over the world is not *mukokuseki* but its gendered melancholia, which successfully motivates female fans for either forward or retrospective learning (Oh 2009, 2011). I am not saying that gendered melancholia is the only factor in Hallyu's appeal, although I am critical of any attempt to explain Hallyu without empirically testing various competing hypotheses against concrete qualitative or quantitative data. Iwabuchi's stance is to quote and accept his associates' arguments without due process or proper validation.

Iwashita's monograph is the most problematic of the three. In his book we don't find theoretical discussions of internal or cultural borders in the era of globalization and

multiculturalism, even as nationalistic borders now increasingly conflict with both internal and cultural borders. Unlike during the Cold War years, national borders are no longer determined by geopolitical interests; global and transnational interests constantly challenge such political and national borders, as the current mayhem created by the Islamic State indicates. Internally, we have Chinese and Korean minorities in Japan, whereas culturally, Japanese cultural diversity welcomes the inflow of Chinese and Korean culture. Although Iwashita sympathizes with the Ainu people who lost contact with their relatives in the four lost islands off the coast of Hokkaido and Sakhalin, he neglects other minority populations, including Chinese and Koreans living in Japan, who might have been deeply influenced by the territorial disputes between the three countries. In his book these Chinese and Korean minorities remain invisible insofar as they support their motherlands' claim over the disputed islands either vociferously or silently. Furthermore, Iwashita mindlessly assumes that Okinawans are all but content with the return of their island to Japan in 1972 after nearly thirty years of U.S. occupation and centuries of ruthless Japanese colonization (105). He wrongly insinuates that Okinawans would also support the Japanese possession of the Senkakus/Diaoyu, as they fully enjoy being Japanese. This signifies blatant racism against Okinawans, who are currently waging "silent" internal border wars with the mainland Japanese for political independence, as the mainland government refuses to relocate U.S. forces to Guam from Okinawa (Lin 2009).

In a three-year series of surveys conducted among Okinawans who support independence, Okinawan specialist Lin Senchû (2009) found that the most important factor in their desire for independence from Japan was that Okinawa had had different historical experiences from those of mainland Japan, in addition to the fact that Okinawans were not Japanese, nor had Okinawa been part of the Japanese territory historically. In all territorial disputes, ethnic identity plays a pivotal part in the struggle to restore old or occupy new territories, when such identity cannot be constructed separately from the collective memory or history of the ethnic group. Iwashita agrees with this last statement, although he argues, surprisingly, that history should be completely omitted from the minds of those who sit at the negotiation tables of territorial disputes, saying "borders do not believe in nationalism" (130). Iwashita's view is a pragmatic one, and is in fact deeply sympathetic with the local Japanese, who have direct interests in contested territories, such as that of the Ainu and fishermen in Shimane Prefecture, who might therefore act according to their local economic interests. If this

hypothesis is true, the local Japanese who live on the border with South Korea may as well welcome Korean tourists to their small island of Tsushima, despite the fear and anxiety of possible “invasion” by Koreans, which was widely expressed and reported by central newspapers and the digital mass media in Tokyo. However, Iwashita’s optimism is marred by his own inattention to nationalism, the very cause of the erection of geopolitical borders to begin with.

It is simply unimaginable that Koreans and Chinese would forget the tragic history of their relations with Japan, which invaded their putative territories many different times, despite the fact that neither China nor Korea have ever attacked Japan. Imperialists and colonialists always want to forget their history of inflicting atrocities on the victims of their aggression. However, victims of imperialism and colonialism find it utterly impossible to accept the option of historical oblivion when it comes to negotiations with former aggressors, unless the belligerents make full reparations for the carnage they instigated, along with sincere apologies and promises not to repeat said transgressions again. Due to Cold War exigencies, the United States has awarded an easy pardon to Japan that was neither admonitive nor apologetic. To China and Korea, the entire territorial issue is about overcoming the Cold War mentality and creating a new era of equal partnership between the three countries, founded on the firm belief that Japan won’t cause any further mayhem to its neighbors. This requires recognizing and destroying internal borders within Japan that are intentionally drawn against Koreans and Chinese, while opening up the cultural border for cultural and ethnic diversity in all three.

Although it is likely that all OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) nation-states face problems of internal, cultural, and geopolitical borders, few of them have hammered out an attractive solution acceptable to most concerned parties. The twenty-first-century world system defies nationalism and its geopolitical borders. The wars fought by the Islamic State against the non-Muslim world validate the fragile nature of national borders. Instead of national borders, we need to start recognizing and highlighting internal and cultural borders to resolve the problems created by the Cold War or nationalistic borders. Although it seems that nationalism and its borders are self-reinforcing throughout the OECD countries, it is also true that they’re quickly being dismantled in the face of transnationalism and internal movements to demolish the bases of social discrimination. As the massive exodus of refugees from the Middle East and other parts of the world are lining up along the borders of the European Union, North America, Japan, and her rich East Asian neighbors, the primacy of

national or regional borders are temporarily fortified again. However, the nationalistic and racist citadel drawn all over the rich OECD countries will soon be shattered by the increasing chaos that twenty-first-century global capitalism is creating every day. We therefore need concerted efforts to imagine a generalizable thesis about this new phenomenon in the twenty-first-century world system.

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Notes

- 1 Instead of Korean “residents” in Japan, I use “Korean-Japanese” to include not just special permanent residents (*tokubetsu eijûkensha*) but naturalized Japanese as well.

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