



Today we are thinking about multiculturalism in Japan, with a focus on minorities and prefectural characteristics. But first, think for a moment about the images that come into your head when I say “Japanese person”. I will give you a few seconds to think about it.

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How many of you came up with these sorts of images? Quite a few, I imagine.

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But how many of you came up with these images? At the top left are the Brave Blossoms, the Japanese rugby team who did so well in the 2019 Rugby World Cup. At the top right is Naomi Osaka, the US Open Tennis champion born to a Japanese mother and Haitian father. At the bottom left are three women in Okinawa. At the bottom right is an Ainu man from Yaunmosir, a place which you probably know as Hokkaido. All of them are Japanese, but perhaps not conforming to most people's initial impressions of "a Japanese".

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Today's Lecture

- Nihonjinron and the "myth of homogeneity"
- Minority issues faced by Zainichi Koreans, Ainu, Okinawans, mixed race ("hafu"), Nikkei, naturalized foreigners, LGBT, burakumin, subcultures (yakuza, otaku etc.), the disabled, refugees.
- Lifestyle diversity: prefectural characteristics (*kenminsei*).

Philip Seaton, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

Today we are thinking about the very slippery concepts of nation and culture, internationalism and multiculturalism. As we will see, defining someone as "Japanese" is a lot more difficult than you might initially think.

We will start with discussions of *nihonjinron*, or theories of the Japanese, and tackle the myth of homogeneity that swirls around so much discussion about Japan.

Then we will look at some of the issues faced by Japan's minorities. When I talk of minorities, I am not only thinking of ethnic minorities, but all sorts of other minorities who, for whatever reason face various challenges in being accepted as "typical Japanese", whatever that is.

Finally, we will think of lifestyle diversity. In particular, this relates to the very different forms of regional culture that we can see in Japan. I will also discuss *kenminsei*, or regional characteristics, which is a regular topic in Japanese media.

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Nihonjinron

- *Nihonjinron*: “theories of the Japanese”. The urge to define and categorize “the Japanese”. Engaged in by both Japanese (often nationalist romantics) and non-Japanese authors (who write “how to survive in Japan” manuals).
- Academics tend to focus on Japan as “relatively homogenous” and with “some multiculturalism”.
- For example: Chris Burgess, “Multicultural Japan? Discourse and the ‘Myth’ of Homogeneity”

Philip Seaton, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

Let’s start with the genre of *Nihonjinron*. *Nihonjinron* literally means “theory of the Japanese”. It is a style of writing that aims to define and categorise “the Japanese” and their culture. It is rooted in a strong urge to distinguish Japanese people from other cultures. This type of writing is done by both Japanese and non-Japanese alike. Japanese authors tend to be nationalist romantic types, who give their idealised vision of what makes Japan special and unique. There is often a juxtaposition between Japanese and *gaikokujin* - although *gaikokujin* here most commonly refers to Westerners. *Nihonjinron*-type works written by foreigners are often based on their experiences of adapting to life in a very different culture.

Much *Nihonjinron* writing is out of date now. In fact, I feel the whole idea of national characteristics is stuck in the 1970s or 1980s. This was when many of the most famous works were produced, largely as a way of explaining the cultural underpinnings of Japan’s fast economic growth. These days, most academic researchers are very careful about putting lazy generalisations and stereotypes about Japanese culture into their writing. The trend is to say how Japan is “relatively

homogenous”, backed up with statistical data to show exactly what is meant by that. Researchers also tend to focus on the extent and nature of multiculturalism in Japan. An example of this kind of writing is Chris Burgess’ article, “Multicultural Japan?”. This article can be read as part of the Active Learning Hours Assignment.

Essentialist Thinking

- **Essentialist thinking:** The assumption that categorization as a member of the group (in this case “the Japanese”) inevitably leads to the possession of particular characteristics.
- Almost any essentialism runs the risk of criticism for over-generalization and obscuring heterogeneity.
- E.g. If the Japanese are “law-abiding”, why is there still crime in Japan?
- And essentialism can foment prejudice. It identifies and excludes outsiders.

Philip Seaton, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

Nihonjinron-type books have been heavily criticised by researchers, even though they tend to sell quite well in both Japanese and English among members of the public. The primary problem is the essentialist nature of their arguments. Essentialism is the assumption is that categorisation as a member of the group (in this case “the Japanese”) inevitably leads to the possession of particular characteristics.

The problem with essentialism, therefore, is that it is weak at explaining any kind of diversity within Japanese society. It leads to over-generalisations about what “the Japanese” think, say, or do. It obscures heterogeneity, or diversity, within the Japanese population.

So, for example, we might have an image of Japanese people as law abiding. There are many stories about wallets dropped at train stations that were handed in to lost property with none of the cash and credit cards removed. The grateful owners of these wallets who get back their valuables often conclude that Japan is a low crime society. Statistics show this

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is indeed the case. But Japan is not a crime free country. There are Japanese gangsters, murderers, fraudsters, rapists, and other criminals. So, if the Japanese are law abiding, why does such crime exist? Essentialist arguments give us no good answers to such questions.

Furthermore, essentialism can lead to prejudice, by excluding those people who are slightly different from the perceived standard Japanese. People are quickly labelled as outsiders. Or, people get labelled as “un-Japanese”, or “not true Japanese”, even though they are completely Japanese.

Stereotypes

- **Stereotypes:** Ian Littlewood writes in *The Idea of Japan*:
- “[I]t is not my intention to suggest that stereotypes are necessarily foolish or valueless. As a rule, in spite of aberrations, they have gained acceptance because there is a basis of truth to them. [...] Western visitors to the country are often struck by how reliably it confirms their expectations. [...] One by one, the time-honoured images turn out to be true. But in doing so, they obscure all the other things that are true - which is why [stereotypes] are dangerous. They teach us what to look for, and that is what we find; everything else becomes a background blur. We are left with a reality selected for us by our stereotypes.” (pp. xii-xiii).

Philip Seaton, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

But, the reality is that we all make use of generalisations about groups of people in our daily lives. Such generalisations are important because we cannot always give great detail about the exceptions to the basic rules. So, we just talk about the Japanese being polite, even though we know there are some extremely rude Japanese people out there.

Such generalizations may also be called stereotypes. Writing about stereotypes in his book *The Idea of Japan*, Ian Littlewood says: [on slide]

What we must do in our study and writing about Japan is to find a sensible balance between generalisations and specifics, between explaining basic rules and the exceptions to those rules.

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Deconstructing the “Japanese”

- In *An Introduction to Japanese Society* (4th edn., pp. 198-200), Yoshio Sugimoto presents an interesting way of considering who is “Japanese”.
- There are seven key indicators: 1) Nationality, 2) ethnic lineage, 3) language competence, 4) place of birth, 5) current residence, 6) subjective identity, 7) level of cultural literacy.
- Let’s try out the framework on a few people.

Philip Seaton, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

Let’s now move onto the very complex question of defining actually who Japanese people are. This is much more difficult than it sounds. In his book *An Introduction to Japanese Society*, Yoshio Sugimoto presents seven key indicators of somebody’s Japaneseness. They are nationality, ethnic lineage, language competence, place of birth, current residence, subjective identity, and level of cultural literacy. Rather than explaining these points one by one, I will just give some examples to show that between what we might call “unambiguously Japanese” and “unambiguously not Japanese” there are many shades of grey. In this grey zone we see the heterogeneity of Japan and gain insights to Japan as a multicultural society.

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Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru								
	Ishiba							
Nationality	⊙							
Ethnic lineage	⊙							
Language competence	⊙							
Place of birth	⊙							
Current residence	⊙							
Subjective identity	⊙							
Level of cultural literacy	⊙							

Philip Seaton, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

Let's start with the prime minister (for a few more days at least ...!), Ishiba Shigeru. I think everyone will agree that he is unambiguously Japanese. His nationality is Japanese. This is a legal issue. It means he holds a Japanese passport. His ethnic lineage is also Japanese. He comes from a political family long involved in Japanese politics. He has language competence, which means that he speaks the Japanese language as his mother tongue. He was born in Tokyo, although his family hails from Tottori, so he is also Japanese by birth. He currently lives in Japan. His leadership of the nation indicates clearly that his subjective identity is Japanese. In other words, he strongly identifies as a Japanese person. Finally, he has cultural literacy, which means he understands intimately the customs of Japan. In short, Ishiba is a good example of someone unambiguously Japanese. Let's go to our next example ...

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Philip Seaton								
	Ishiba	Seaton						
Nationality	⊙	✕						
Ethnic lineage	⊙	✕						
Language competence	⊙	△						
Place of birth	⊙	✕						
Current residence	⊙	⊙						
Subjective identity	⊙	△						
Level of cultural literacy	⊙	△						

Philip Seaton, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

Me. I know most people will not think of me as Japanese, but according to Sugimoto's categories I am more Japanese than you think. I do not have a Japanese passport, but I could get one if I wanted. It is possible to become a naturalised Japanese citizen. My ethnic lineage is not Japanese: I was born to British parents. Language competence: I can speak Japanese pretty well, although having started at the age of 22 I will never be as fluent in Japanese as I am in English. Place of birth, no. I was born in the UK. Current residence, yes. In fact I have lived in Japan longer than I have lived in the UK and have permanent residency here. Indeed, I have lived in Japan longer than anyone else in this room, including the Japanese students! For subjective identity I give myself a triangle. I consider Japan to be my home and am happy with that choice. Obviously this means I feel a strong connection to Japanese people and have chosen to live my life within Japanese society. And finally, my level of cultural literacy is high. I am very aware of how much I do not know about this country, but you don't become a professor by knowing nothing! ... OK, that's enough about me, let's move on to our next example ...

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Third Generation Japanese-American								
	Ishiba	Seaton	J-Am					
Nationality	☉	✕	✕					
Ethnic lineage	☉	✕	☉					
Language competence	☉	△	☉-✕					
Place of birth	☉	✕	✕					
Current residence	☉	☉	✕					
Subjective identity	☉	△	△-✕					
Level of cultural literacy	☉	△	☉-✕					

Philip Seaton, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

A third generation Japanese-American. She is the grandchild of somebody who migrated to the United States. In other words, she was born in the US to parents who were also born in the US. She has American nationality, but her ethnic lineage is completely Japanese because both her parents were Japanese-Americans. The language competence of Japanese Americans varies greatly. Some speak no Japanese, while others are quite fluent. Let's assume our example Japanese-American speaks English as her first language. She identifies as American but knows about and is interested in her Japanese roots. However, other Japanese Americans can range from highly literate to virtually illiterate when it comes to Japanese cultural behaviours.

Our Japanese-American example is important because ethnic lineage is considered to be very important not just in Japan but also across Asia. In the West and other multiethnic societies, ethnic lineage can be a weak indicator of what it means to be from that nation. America and Brazil are obvious examples here, with indigenous people living in the same space as the descendants of the people of many different skin colours who migrated there in the last five centuries.

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“Hafu” (“Bicultural”) Teenager								
	Ishiba	Seaton	J-Am	Hafu				
Nationality	☉	✕	✕	☉				
Ethnic lineage	☉	✕	☉	△				
Language competence	☉	△	☉-✕	☉-✕				
Place of birth	☉	✕	✕	☉ / ✕				
Current residence	☉	☉	✕	☉ / ✕				
Subjective identity	☉	△	△-✕	☉-△				
Level of cultural literacy	☉	△	☉-✕	☉-△				

Philip Seaton, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

And so to our next example, a boy who is known as a “half”. His father is Japanese and his mother is Filipino. The image of “half” created by the Japanese media is probably a child born in a marriage between a caucasian Western father and Japanese mother, but given that around three quarters of international marriages involving Japanese are between Japanese men and foreign women, who are mostly from Asia, the combination of nationalities I have used is statistically quite common.

We should also note that many people, including myself, strongly object to the term “half”. It can easily be interpreted as discriminatory because it suggests that the person is lacking half of what is necessary to be a whole Japanese person. I much prefer the term bicultural person, or child of an international marriage.

Let's get back to our imaginary boy. He has Japanese nationality, although he has to make a decision about whether to keep it on his twentieth birthday. His ethnic lineage is part Japanese, part Filipino. He is fluent in Japanese, but also has

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strong Tagalog and English taught to him by his mother and practiced on trips to family in Manila. He was born and lives in Japan, which strengthens his subjective identity as a Japanese considerably compared to children in international marriages born and raised outside of Japan. Likewise, having gone through Japanese school, our Japanese-Filipino boy has strong cultural literacy and in terms of cultural behaviours differs little from his classmates.

Burakumin								
	Ishiba	Seaton	J-Am	Hafu	Burakumin			
Nationality	◎	×	×	◎	◎			
Ethnic lineage	◎	×	◎	△	◎			
Language competence	◎	△	◎-×	◎-×	◎			
Place of birth	◎	×	×	◎ / ×	◎			
Current residence	◎	◎	×	◎ / ×	◎			
Subjective identity	◎	△	△-×	◎-△	◎			
Level of cultural literacy	◎	△	◎-×	◎-△	◎			

Philip Seaton, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

Our next person is descended from the outcaste class during the Edo period. This group is known today as Burakumin and discrimination against them has continued into the present day. So while our Burakumin girl is just as Japanese as Ishiba Shigeru in terms of the seven indicators, she and her family have faced discrimination because of their ancestral lineage.

When I first started teaching in Japan in 1994, I taught at a junior high school in a town that had former Burakumin areas. One of my best students, who always tried really hard in English class, wrote me letters about her frustrations at having to take extra classes just because she was from one of the Burakumin areas. These extra classes were supposed to help students from disadvantaged areas, but actually reinforced discrimination. It marked the students as different, and perpetuated the exclusion that they faced as a community. This girl's story shows us that being completely Japanese does not necessarily ensure that one is accepted equally within Japanese society. Such discrimination has weakened over the years, but its continued existence demonstrates the perceived importance of lineage in Japan.

Zainichi Korean (non-naturalized)								
	Ishiba	Seaton	J-Am	Hafu	Bura-kumin	Z-Korean		
Nationality	◎	×	×	◎	◎	×		
Ethnic lineage	◎	×	◎	△	◎	×		
Language competence	◎	△	◎-×	◎-×	◎	◎		
Place of birth	◎	×	×	◎ / ×	◎	◎		
Current residence	◎	◎	×	◎ / ×	◎	◎		
Subjective identity	◎	△	△-×	◎-△	◎	◎-△		
Level of cultural literacy	◎	△	◎-×	◎-△	◎	◎		

Philip Seaton, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

Our next example is a Zainichi Korean man. His passport is Korean and his family lineage is Korean. He is in Japan because his grandparents moved to Japan before the war, when Korea was part of the Japanese empire. Our Zainichi Korean has never lived in Korea, speaks perfect Japanese, was born in Japan, lives in Japan and is completely culturally literate. He wants to self identify as Japanese, but the hostility shown towards the Zainichi Koreans by some sections of Japanese society means that he can never feel 100% part of the society. But, unless he tells you that he is Zainichi Korean, you cannot tell that he is.

For some interesting variations on this pattern, please watch the very interesting interviews with one American woman and one British woman born and raised in Japan. Omoshiroi yo!

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Ainu								
	Ishiba	Seaton	J-Am	Hafu	Bura-kumin	Z-Korean	Ainu	
Nationality	◎	×	×	◎	◎	×	◎	
Ethnic lineage	◎	×	◎	△	◎	×	△-×	
Language competence	◎	△	◎-×	◎-×	◎	◎	◎	
Place of birth	◎	×	×	◎ / ×	◎	◎	◎	
Current residence	◎	◎	×	◎ / ×	◎	◎	◎	
Subjective identity	◎	△	△-×	◎-△	◎	◎-△	◎-△	
Level of cultural literacy	◎	△	◎-×	◎-△	◎	◎	◎	

Philip Seaton, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

Our next person is an Ainu woman. The Ainu are the indigenous people of Hokkaido, which was only fully incorporated into the Japanese state in 1869. Before the policy to assimilate the Ainu in the late 19th century, Ainu were considered foreign by Japanese. Ainu language, customs and society were quite different back in the 19th century. Ainu culture was almost wiped out, but in the late twentieth century the emphasis shifted to preserving and reviving Ainu culture. In 2008 the Ainu were recognised as an indigenous people of Japan.

Our Ainu woman has Japanese nationality, but traces her lineage back to non-Japanese roots. However, in the century of assimilationist policies, many Ainu married Japanese. As a result, many people who self-identify as Ainu today have mixed heritage. By language competence, place of birth, residency and cultural literacy they cannot be distinguished from other Japanese. However, while some Ainu hide their roots and live simply as Japanese, others more openly self-identify as Ainu. Our Ainu woman is one such person. She introduces herself as Ainu and continues Ainu cultural practices such as learning the Ainu language whenever possible.

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My Cousin in the UK								
	Ishiba	Seaton	J-Am	Hafu	Burakumin	Z-Korean	Ainu	PS' cousin
Nationality	○	×	×	○	○	×	○	×
Ethnic lineage	○	×	○	△	○	×	△-×	×
Language competence	○	△	○-×	○-×	○	○	○	×
Place of birth	○	×	×	○ / ×	○	○	○	×
Current residence	○	○	×	○ / ×	○	○	○	×
Subjective identity	○	△	△-×	○-△	○	○-△	○-△	×
Level of cultural literacy	○	△	○-×	○-△	○	○	○	×

Philip Seaton, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

And so to our final person, who I am including just to show someone who is unambiguously non-Japanese: my cousin. He is English, has no Japanese lineage, speaks no Japanese, was born in England, lives in England, identifies as English and knows very little about Japan, except that his cousin lives and works there.

In short, he gets a cross in every single category. But look back over the table and you will see that there are crosses for all seven indicators of Japaneseness at multiple places in the table. What we can conclude is that between the categories of “unambiguously Japanese” and “unambiguously not Japanese”, there are various shade of grey. These are the multicultural people who also have some claim to be called Japanese and to be part of Japanese society.

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The result is that while Japanese society has relatively high levels of ethnic and cultural homogeneity, Japan is also a multicultural society. Furthermore, the focus thus far has been on ethnicity and culture, but there are other groups excluded from the image of the “unambiguously Japanese” person. If you read *Nihonjinron* texts you are unlikely to hear much about the disabled community or people from sexual minorities, such as the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities. These people, their lifestyles and their identities do not fit the idealised visions of the Japanese race that nationalist romantics want to create. However, these people are all very real members of Japanese society. *Nihonjinron* also avoid certain subcultures, like yakuza gangs and otaku culture. These people, like Burakumin, are often treated as outsiders to Japanese society, even though on a nationality and ethnic level they can be 100% Japanese.

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Minority Group Issues

- **Hate Speech:** Article by Kim-Wachutka: "When Women Perform Hate Speech"
- **Legal Equality:** How does Japan compare on legal equality for groups such as Zainichi Koreans? What about LGBT issues?
- **Racism:** Debito Arudou, a naturalized Japanese who writes extensively on racism issues. Also an issue in the era of Black Lives Matter.
- **Discrimination:** Disability issues and the erosion of human rights.

Philip Seaton, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

Another way of thinking about the separation between mainstream Japanese society and minorities is in their different treatment by society and the state. In other words, the rights and respect given to "normal Japanese" are not given to minorities.

The first issue is hate speech. Hate speech is when people make insulting, hurtful, or prejudicial comments against others. The best known example of hate speech is against the Korean community in Japan. As described in Kim-Wachutka's interesting article, hate speech is done by both men and women. Racism and discrimination have existed for a very long time, of course, and not just in Japan. In the modern era the new frontier for hate is the internet, where people can attack people far away that they have perhaps never even met in person.

The next issue concerns legal equality. Again, Zainichi Koreans are an example. These are people who often were born and raised in Japan after their parents came to Japan as subjects of the Japanese Empire. In the postwar, these subjects

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of Japan were allowed to stay, but they became foreigners in Japan after 1945. They were fingerprinted, unlike Japanese citizens. There was a mass protest in the mid-1980s in which thousands of Zainichi Koreans refused to be fingerprinted. Eventually the fingerprinting of foreigners was abandoned in 1992, although it was reintroduced at airports as part of the global "war on terror" at the start of the 2000s.

Another example of different legal rights concerns the LGBT+ community. Gay marriage does not have the same legal status or benefits of heterosexual marriage in Japan, and there are other discriminatory differences, such as the right to donate blood.

Another minority issue is racism. A prominent writer on this issue is Debito Arudou, an American by birth who naturalised as a Japanese citizen. He launched famous campaigns against the onsen in Hokkaido that barred entry to foreigners. As a naturalised Japanese citizen, he had a Japanese passport and the same legal rights as other Japanese. But, he often found that he was treated according to the colour of his skin rather than by the nationality on his passport. This is a tale often heard regarding mixed raced children in Japan, particularly when one of the parents is black. In 2020, there was an explosion of anger and protest following repeated deaths of black people at the hands of the police in the US. The Black Lives Matter campaign had reverberations in Japan. Discrimination against black people is detailed in an article by John G. Russell that is linked from the class homepage, and also in the activities of *Japan Times* columnist Baye McNeil.

The next group to focus on is disabled people. There is a lot of attention in Japan given to barrier free access in public places, such as disabled toilets, lifts and yellow tenji blocks on pavements to help blind people. However, Japan has a patchy record on disability rights. For instance, in 2019 there was a victory in the courts for people who were forcibly sterilised under the 1948 Eugenic Protection Law. The particularly problematic issue here was that the Eugenic Protection Law denied the reproductive rights of people deemed disabled. This was in violation of Article 14 of the constitution, which reads: "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."

So, while Japan might well be “relatively homogeneous”, these well documented examples of discrimination point clearly to the existence of disadvantaged minorities within Japanese society. In other words, Japan is multicultural in both ethnic and lifestyle meanings of the word culture. But you will probably not read about these issues in *Nihonjinron* type books in Japanese, or those books aimed at foreigners who want to unravel the mysteries of the Japanese.

Kenminsei, aka, Regionally-Diverse Japan

- Stereotypes about people from a particular prefecture. But if these exist, how can there be a single, national explanation of who the Japanese are?
- Surveys about *kenminsei*, regional statistics, media representations (*Himitsu no kenmin show*, *President* magazine)

Philip Seaton, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

But perhaps the biggest problem for *Nihonjinron* writers is the parallel discourse about *kenminsei*, or prefectural characteristics. The idea of *kenminsei* is that people from the different prefectures of Japan have particular characteristics. People in Tokyo are cold and humourless, but people in Osaka are warm and have a great sense of humour, and so on. If these stereotypes exist about people from different regions of Japan, how can there be a single, national explanation of who the Japanese are?

There are even surveys to measure the different characteristics of people. Sofue Takao's article, linked from the class webpage, talks about such surveys when the *Nihonjinron* movement was at its height in the 1970s-1980s. It cites geographical, historical and other reasons why people in different prefectures might have very different values. On a more lighthearted note, the differences between prefectures, particularly their food culture and humour, are explored in the popular television programme *Himitsu no kenmin* show. You can watch excerpts via their YouTube channel linked from the class homepage. There is plenty of other evidence online that the prefecture is considered a good unit for describing

group characteristics. See also the link to the website of *President* magazine, which gives the *kenminsei* for all 47 prefectures in Japanese.

“Kenminsei” or “Kenminron”?

- *Kenminsei*: sounds more “objective”. But actually, it’s “*kenminron*” and subject to the same critiques as *Nihonjinron*!
- Or maybe it “disproves” *Nihonjinron*: “these prefectural character-types are so diverse, and often contradictory, that one can hardly speak of the national character of the Japanese as though it were cast from a single mold” (Sugimoto, *An Introduction to Japanese Society*, p. 66).

Philip Seaton, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

Actually what we are seeing here is not *kenminsei*, prefectural characteristics, which sounds somewhat objective and based on evidence. What we are really seeing is “*kenminron*”. In other words, it is a set of stereotypes about people in particular prefectures. These stereotypes may well have an element of truth to them. But *kenminsei* discourse may be criticised in exactly the same way as *Nihonjinron* as an essentialist approach to explaining people’s culture and behaviours.

Most importantly, *Nihonjinron* and *kenminsei* discourse simply disprove each other! Writing about *kenminsei*, Yoshio Sugimoto concludes, “these prefectural character-types are so diverse, and often contradictory, that one can hardly speak of the national character of the Japanese as though it were cast from a single mold”.

What Kind of Multicultural Japan?

- “Ethnic multiculturalism”: societal diversity in physical characteristics and national identity.
- “Lifestyle multiculturalism”: diverse cultural practices among people of the same ethnicity.
- Our goal: To understand the commonalities that create “Japanese culture”, and the diversity within “Japanese society”.

Philip Seaton, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

I will finish the lecture with this thought. When talking about multiculturalism, we have to think on two levels.

The first is what we might call “ethnic multiculturalism”. This is about societal diversity in physical characteristics (such as skin colour) or in national identity. Japanese society might be relatively ethnically homogeneous, but it is getting more internationalised as children of international marriages and long-term foreign residents increase in number amidst a declining overall population. And there have long been substantial ethnic minorities in Japan, particularly Okinawans, Ainu, Koreans, Chinese and others.

The second is what we might call “lifestyle multiculturalism”. This refers to the range of cultural practices among people whose ethnic or physical appearance has little significant variation. Whether the issues relate to sexuality, disability, *kenminsei*, personality type, or social class, there are clearly many cultures and sub-cultures within Japan.

Our goal, therefore, as observers of Japan, is to understand both the commonalities that give us a clearly distinguishable thing called “Japanese culture” and the ethnic and cultural diversity that exists throughout this society of 126 million people.