7. 'JAPANESE' ACCOUNTS OF AUSTRALIA

A PLAYER'S VIEW

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It is awkward and uncomfortable to be the subject and the object of research at the same time. I have published two popular Japanese books on Australia, one of which (Sugimoto, 1991) went into 10 printings and is probably the best-selling book about Australian society on the Japanese market in the past few decades. I also contribute a regular column to the *Asahi Shimbun*, with a nation-wide circulation of eight million copies a day, and, for the past six years, have appeared fortnightly on a nation-wide radio program, *Rajio shinya-bin (Late Night Live)*, on Japan's NHK Radio One, with a few million listeners. It is therefore difficult for me to be an objective investigator into how 'others' see Australia, because I am one of the players in the field — one of those 'others' — rather than a detached and disinterested umpire.

In the highly competitive Japanese publishing market, only a small segment of the market has any interest in reading about Australia: Americans — and to some extent Europeans — form the 'significant others' for most Japanese.¹ In this

environment, it is not easy to produce publications on Australia which attract many readers. In the very broad field of non-academic, socio-cultural writings, two key dimensions stand out. First, the general objectives of writing — ranging from general entertainment purposes to more serious analyses of social structures. Second, is whether the target audience includes those who wish to travel to Australia or not. Combining these two variables, Figure 1 shows a four-fold diagram of socio-cultural writings about Australia for a Japanese readership (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Typology of Japanese socio-cultural writings about Australia

<i>Type of Information</i>	<i>for entertainment</i>	<i>for lifestyle and value change</i>
<i>Potential visit to Australia</i>		
No	(A) Accounts of exotic animals, sporting events	(D) Writings on civic practices
Yes	(B) Publications for tourism/hospitality	(C) Books and articles on education, working visa, migration and settlement

Cell A consists of the most popular representations of Australia which the entertainment industry disseminates chiefly via TV. Exotic animals, sporting events, the vast space and environment are cases in point. Cell B is also a huge sphere, as some 7,000 Japanese tourists visit here every year and they consume a large amount of entertainment images of Australia, which the hospitality industry propagates. Cell C concerns the domain of serious information for those who are interested in getting education, working and settling in Australia. Japanese migrants in Australia differ from other ethnic groups in coming here mainly for lifestyle reasons, not for economic or political reasons, with most intending to go back to Japan in the end.² In this context, books on Japanese

expatriates, sojourners and long-term residents in Australia provide practical facts, data and advice about their life conditions and lifestyles here and have gained popularity as the number of Japanese desiring to settle overseas has increased.

My own work is primarily in Sphere D, addressing those who do not necessarily intend to visit but are interested in our civic practices. Many who read about the social systems and cultural practices of foreign countries are looking for clues that might lead to improvements in their own society — a society with which they are dissatisfied with some aspects. So, for example, Japanese read books about Australia's welfare system not to examine how deficient and awful it is, but to find inspirations about how to improve the Japanese counterpart. Japanese read books about Australian Aboriginal affairs not only to learn how depressing the Aborigine's situation is, but for a fresh perspective that might help to ameliorate the conditions of the indigenous Ainu population in Japan. Some Japanese writers produce case studies of schools and families in Australia as a mirror against which the Japanese readership can examine the Japanese situation.³ When written with careful provisos and thoughtful qualifications, some of these books may reveal aspects of Australian civil society that can inform Japanese efforts at reforming their own civil society.

With this in mind, the topics on my radio program that received the greatest listener feedback can be classified into six categories as shown in Figure 2. For the past several months, debates in Australia have attracted some attention, including the Australian position on war with Iraq, Aboriginal history, asylum-seekers and their detention, and Arabs in Australia.

Figure 2. Some specific items which received much feedback from Japanese radio listeners

1. <i>Multiculturalism</i>	4. <i>Civil society</i>
Point system for migration	Prohibition of cigarette smoking in buildings and restaurants
Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission	Euthanasia
Mabo ruling	HECS system
Dual citizenship	
	5. <i>Legal framework</i>
2. <i>Gender issues</i>	Compulsory voting
Intervention orders to protect victims of family violence	Methods of name change
In-school crèches for teenage mothers	Absence of capital punishment
Marriages between homosexuals	
	6. <i>Welfare and health issues</i>
3. <i>Work and leisure</i>	Free public hospitals
Long-service leave	Separation of dispensary from medical practice
Do-it-yourself house renovation	Seeing-eye dogs

Every description of a foreign country contains implicit comparable propositions about the writer's home country. From the Japanese point of view, Ruth Benedict's renowned study, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1947), reads as her statement about American society by revealing the set of assumptions she makes about Japan.⁴ Similarly, a number of books by Japanese authors about Australian multiculturalism assume — albeit implicitly — that Japanese society is not multicultural — or at least, not *as* multicultural — and can thus be read as statements about the authors' 'self-images'. The notion popular among Japanese business executives that Australia's industrial relations are conflict-ridden assumes a contrastive image — which they cherish — that Japan's labour relations are conflict-free. And when Japanese writers refer to the Australians' relaxed lifestyles, they reflect their own

vision of the stressful and tense Japanese life. Regardless of whether these underlying images of Japan are correct or incorrect, the point here is that how 'others' see Australia reveals how they see their own society.

Since a majority of Japanese readers of books about Australian society are not looking for descriptions that preserve academically acceptable proportion, the challenge for a writer is to strike a balance in at least three areas. The first of these involves an understanding that good things come with bad, and vice versa: one must maintain a balance between the desirable and undesirable aspects of any given practice or convention. For example, what is perceived — with praise — to be the relaxed work attitude among Australian workers is closely connected to the often frustratingly inefficient standards of service and delivery. Some aspects of multiculturalism enable ethnic lobby groups to make claims about the homogeneity of fictitiously constructed ethnic cultures and can lead to ethnic groups forming their own ghettos. It might even be argued that the comfortable life conditions of some sections of the Australian community are to some extent derived from the exclusion and even exploitation and repression of certain types of refugees. Accounts of Australian society would be one-sided unless correlations between its bright and dark sides were taken into consideration.

The second challenge lies in the presentation of the particular and universal elements present in any society. Presumably unique Australian characteristics are rendered comprehensible through the use of functional alternatives and universalist terminology, thus avoiding the pitfalls of occidentalism and exoticism. Japanese readers can understand the significance of Vegemite in Australia when they think of their own *natō*. The practice of sending Christmas cards in Australia is functionally equivalent to that of mailing New Year's cards in Japan. Ned Kelly's story makes sense to the many Japanese readers familiar with the story of Nezumi Kozō Jirōkichi, a folk figure in feudal Japan, who reportedly stole money from the mansions of feudal lords in Tokyo and

distributed it to poor people. Australian legends of half-man and half-animal yowies remind some Japanese of *yukionna* legends, popular narratives of snow fairies in various parts of Japan. Communications across national boundaries are often facilitated by apparent commonalities and resemblances shared by people with different backgrounds, rather than through an emphasis on cultural differences and divergences.

Thirdly, authors describing the social and cultural characteristics of a given society must be clear about the representativeness of their samples, and the extent to which it is fair to generalise the patterns apparent in a given sample to the society at large. National stereotyping is the enemy of comparative analysis. For example, it would be wrong to define Australia as a health-conscious society on the basis of observations restricted to the educated urban middle class. It would be equally incorrect to categorise Australia generally as a racist society only on the basis of the current Aboriginal situation.

This sampling question compels us to explicitly address the question of who we define as 'Australian'. The theme of this conference, 'as others see us', is problematic to the extent that the conceptual boundary of 'Australian' remains undefined. Since the criteria for defining 'Australian' would involve many dimensions — such as citizenship, residency, socialisation, language and self-identification — it is not always easy to include or exclude individuals such as Rupert Murdoch, who was born and raised in Australia but lives overseas and does not hold an Australian passport; an Italian migrant who has Australian citizenship but cannot speak English; or a teenage child of Australian parents who has lived in Japan since birth and does not see himself as Australian. The definition of Australian contracts or expands depending on whether it is based upon an exclusivist or inclusivist framework. I relish a kind of dual existence as a naturalised Australian citizen who is identified by others more often than not as ethnically Japanese. An inclusive approach, which I favour, compels me to think of 'how others see us' in terms of 'how I see myself'.

Finally, I would like to caution against an over-emphasis on textual analysis — the dominant methodology in contemporary studies of how 'others' see Australia. Writing is undoubtedly an exercise in image formation, category creation and theory construction, for which textual analysis remains indispensable. Publishing, however, is not simply editorial production; it includes commercial distribution and voluntary consumption, important variables that have received little attention compared with the intensity with which the contents and substance of each text are analysed. Little is known about which sectors of Japanese society consume which types of images of, and books about, Australia or of how these images are received. I therefore suggest that an examination of the sociological attributes of the widely varied Japanese readership of a range of books about Australian society would more fruitfully shed light on how 'others' see Australia — in particular, who 'cherishes' certain visions of Australia and why. Who are the enthusiastic consumers of images of Australian native animals? Which groups avidly read books about Australian multiculturalism? Which social strata tend to be interested in Australia's welfare systems?

Critical studies of *Nihonjinron* (writings about the 'essential qualities' of the Japanese) have established some precedents on similar issues. For example, a comparative analysis of readers of this genre of books has revealed that businessmen use them as tools to justify their international negotiating techniques, while school teachers study them to redress the 'negative Japanese qualities'.⁵ Other research has demonstrated that housewives generally have more universalistic and less nationalistic views about their own society than male company employees.⁶

These studies of consumer behaviour reveal that 'others' are not a uniform or homogeneous entity, but are varied in their social background and their interpretations of texts. So long as it is agreed that 'we' and 'they' are diverse and stratified, studies of how 'others see us' that do not consider the various material conditions of readers and their consumption patterns will remain deficient.

Footnotes

- ¹ In the 1980s, Keisō Shobō made a conscious effort to publish books on Australia and launched a series on Australia. The project proved a commercial disaster despite support from the Australia-Japan Foundation. Keisō ceased to publish the series after bringing several titles into print.
- ² Satō, Machiko. 2002. *Farewell to Nippon: Japanese Lifestyle Migrants in Australia*. Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press.
- ³ Satō, Machiko. 1987. *Onna-tachi no Ōsutoraria* (Women's Australia). Tokyo: Keisō Shobō. Satō, Machiko. 1994. *Gorei no nai gakkō: Ōsutoraria no kyōiku kankaku* (Schools Without Military Attention: Education Styles in Australia). Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō. Satō, Machiko. 1996. *Koara no kuni de kurashite mitara* (Living in a Koala Country). Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō. Satō, Machiko. 1999. *Bai ringaru Japānizu* (Bilingual Japanese). Kyoto: Jinbun Shoin.
- ⁴ Kuwayama, Takami. 2003. Reverse Ethnography. Chapter 5. *Native Anthropology: Japanese Challenge to Western Academic Hegemony*. Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press.
- ⁵ Yoshino, Kosaku. 1992. *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary Japan*. London: Routledge.
- ⁶ Mabuchi, Hitoshi. 2002. 'Ibunka rikai' no disukōsu: bunka honshitsu shugi no otoshiana (Discourse on 'Foreign Culture Understanding': Pitfalls of Cultural Essentialism). Kyoto: Kyoto University Press.

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- Sugimoto, Yoshio. 1991. *Ōsutoraria rokusen-nichi* (Six Thousand Days of Living in Australia). Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.
- Sugimoto, Yoshio. 2000. *Ōsutoraria: Tabunka shakai no sentaku* (Australia: Its Choice of Multiculturalism). Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.