Diversity and multiculturalism in Japan: what is called into question?

Jie Qi

Abstract This study explores the different ways in which the notion of multiculturalism in Japan has been influenced by various social and historical trajectories. Since the Japanese government started to promote “internationalization” in the 1980’s, slogans such as “international exchange,” “cultural exchange,” and “understanding of other cultures” have become the most popular expressions among policy makers and educators. This article demonstrates that the notion of Japanese multiculturalism is intricately and deeply embedded in the society, culture, and education system of Japan. It also points out that this particularly Japanese style of multiculturalism excludes some immigrants who have lived in Japan for generations, and that this exclusion is not the result of ideological products, but rather the effect of multiple power relations.

Keywords Multiculturalism · Diversity · Social attitudes · Language education

1 Introduction

This study illuminates the politics of multiculturalism inscribed in its system of reasoning in Japan. The Japanese notion of multiculturalism is not conceptualized by ideological products, but the effect of multiple power relations. This study also indicates that discourses on multiculturalism and multicultural education in Japan engender inclusion and exclusion at the same time. Multiculturalism has become the buzzword of contemporary Japanese society. Since the Japanese government started to promote “internationalization” in the 1980’s, slogans such as “international exchange,” “cultural exchange,” “understanding of other cultures,” etc., have become the most popular expressions among policy makers and educators. This article demonstrates that the notion of Japanese multiculturalism is intricately and deeply embedded in the society, culture, and educational system of Japan, and that this type of multiculturalism tends to exclude some immigrants who have lived in Japan for generations.
Firstly, my intention in this study is to challenge the assumption that Japan is a homogeneous nation. This assumption has been accepted in Japanese educational discourse since the end of World War II. I assert that Japan is not a homogeneous nation, rather a society with diverse cultural groups. Secondly, this article traces the path of past notions of multiculturalism as embodied in Japanese political, social, and cultural conditions. In undertaking this, I will first look at how a new image of cultural studies emerged in the 1980’s. In Japanese, this new aspect of cultural studies is known as “ibunkaron (the study of other cultures)”. I argue that this type of “ibunkaron” has discursively constructed the notion that Japanese culture is superior to other cultures. Secondly, I will look at a second wave of cultural studies that occurred in the late 1990’s when Japanese scholars began to use the term, “tabunkaron (multiculturalism).”

Thirdly, this article explores the way that the present notion of multiculturalism in Japan has been limited to such things as “cultural exchange” and “international exchange.” The Japanese notion of “cultural exchange” and “international exchange” tends to be associated with newcomers, foreign people, and foreign cultures. Ethnic groups, e.g., Ainu, Korean, Chinese, and so on that have been living in Japan for generations are not included in this “cultural exchange” and “international exchange.”

Furthermore, this article demonstrates that the purpose of special Japanese language classes for the children of newcomers is to “Japanize” foreign students by introducing Japanese culture and norms—although this approach has appeared to help students with various cultural backgrounds succeed in Japanese society. I argue that in the context of Japanese politics, “multiculturalism” as employed by Japanese institutes, has in fact conceptualized the notions of “anti-multiculturalism.” It is dangerous to be deluded by the literal sense of the words. We have to read the documents historically, not only rhetorically.

Finally, skepticism is what we need when we read these institutional discourses on multiculturalism and multicultural education. I argue that the notion of multiculturalism was conceptualized not by ideological products, but the effect of multiple power relations. It is also important that this study indicates that discourses on multiculturalism and multicultural education in Japan engender inclusion and exclusion at the same time, for example, the aforementioned multicultural discourse on Japanese language education for immigrant children, which inversely promotes anti-multiculturalism. Through careful textual analysis, we are able to perceive that “multiculturalism” as employed by the Ministry of Education of Japan has in fact conceptualized the notions of “anti-multiculturalism.”

2 Theoretical framework

The theoretical orientation of this study is Michel Foucault’s conception of power and history. The consideration of Foucault’s theory in this study is a political strategy. I use Foucault as one of multiple theorists who strive to open new possibilities for rethinking systems of reasoning. Reason or unreason is associated with particular forms of knowledge which are considered to provide insights into multiple power relations (Smart 2002). As Backer (2001) suggests, Foucault has two main foils in terms of theories of power: one is contractual power and the other is economic-functional power. Foucault argues that the former can involve oppression—the social contract is broken by one side or the other when contractual power breaks down. Foucault further suggests that the latter can involve repression when economic-functionalist power is excessive. For Foucault, power is neither an ideological concern, nor a domain dominated by one social group over others, but exists only as it is exercised. Foucault (1978) has indicated: