

The Whiteness of Internationalization in Japanese Higher Education: Examining the Contradictions

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Abstract—The ongoing project of internationalization (*kokusaika*) in Japan’s higher education sector has been examined from numerous different perspectives and agendas over recent years. However, one seemingly overlooked (or hidden) focus of study is that of the role of whiteness. Against the backdrop of recent moves to accept Ukrainian international students, this paper attempts to shed light on the role of whiteness in Japan’s internationalization in the field of higher education in order to see what effects – if any – it has on stymying the process as well as its potential impact on students, staff and society at large. Drawing on ethnographic data and the authors’ own experiences, it concludes by highlighting some of the contradictions present that impede progress towards greater internationalization and more open acceptance of diversity in Japanese education and society.

Keywords—Higher Education, Internationalization, Japan, Whiteness

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept and notion of internationalization in higher education is fraught with variety and means different things to different stakeholders in different spaces (Stier & Börjesson, 2010) making it a process of change, tailored to the individual needs and interests of each higher education entity with no ‘one size fits all’ model (Knight, n.d.). Consequently therefore, internationalization is at times used (or usurped) to take on different guises or agendas in different situations where conditions, institutions or needs so require it. In the case of Japan, for example, internationalization (known as *kokusaika* in Japanese) in higher education has been closely associated with ‘language’ (internationalization = Englishization) (Kubota, 1998) as both a means of trying to improve or alter the teaching of English (implementing more EMI programs, for example) (Shimauchi, 2018) as well as a way of ensuring a buffer exists to ‘protect’ or maintain “Japaneseness” (Hashimoto, 2000) in the face of mounting globalizing pressures. However, amongst the various external and internal goals of internationalization, there are also some apparently ignored (or hidden) factors, one of

which we have identified is the role of whiteness. This paper attempts to shed light on the hitherto overlooked role of whiteness in Japan’s internationalization in the field of higher education in order to see what effects – if any – it has on progress as well as its potential impact on students, staff and society. Starting with a brief examination of whiteness in Japan, it explores how it – and the role of the English language – frame interpretations of *kokusaika* in Japan through an examination of whiteness and its associated linguistic capital (Koshino, 2019). It does so by examining the backdrop of recent moves to accept war-displaced Ukrainian international students, and by drawing on ethnographic data and the authors’ own experiences of being white academics and students. It concludes by highlighting some of the contradictions present that impede progress towards meaningful internationalization and more open acceptance of diversity in Japanese education and society. We attempt to frame our critique of internationalization as being at the crossroads of a “liberal” and “critical” discourse orientation (Andreotti et al., 2016, p. 91). The former focuses on ideas of equity, inclusion, and the “public good” (e.g. Huang & Horiuchi, 2020; Marginson, 2014) whereas the latter rests upon post-colonialist/post-capitalist assumptions and challenges notions of the university as an “elitist space” (Andreotti et al., 2016, p. 91). Standing at this crossroads, Japan now has a choice to make; once again to blindly follow the white West, or finally emerge as an independent and open society confident in its own identity and role in Asia and the world.

II. *KOKUSAIKA* – INTERNATIONALIZATION ‘OUR WAY’

It is impractical here to explain in entirety Japan’s *kokusaika* discourse nor even attempt a general definition of such a term, the meaning of which is “far from clear” (Goodman, 2007, p. 72). However, a brief overview is useful to set the scene and illustrate its links with the English language. As mentioned, institutions of higher education (HE) worldwide have attempted to gain acceptance and improve their standing and prestige by subscribing to a doctrine of internationalization. Japan is no exception. On the surface, the process of *kokusaika* appears not dissimilar to actions and efforts made elsewhere in the world: active recruitment and mobility of international students, foreign faculty, exchange programs, internationalization of the curriculum, dual/double degrees, etc. in an attempt to obtain “excellence” (Oba, 2008; Yonezawa & Shimmi, 2015) by

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association. However, upon closer examination, certain differences become apparent.

One such difference is the seemingly antithetical link between internationalization and nationalism. Seen in response to international criticism of Japan during its economic renaissance of the 1970s, *kokusaika* plans were implanted to move toward more cosmopolitan values, but it was also used “to indicate a kind of neo-nationalistic push beyond the shores of Japan” (Sugimoto and Mauer, 1989, p. 19). More recently, we can find examples of *kokusaika* being employed as a unique type of barrier to ensure Japanese are able to become “international” (*kokusaijin*) while carefully keeping their Japanese identity intact, a process Hashimoto (2000) refers to as “Japanization” (p. 49).

Another interesting anomaly of Japan’s *kokusaika* is the lack of intercultural interaction dimensions being incorporated into higher education policies (Whitshed & Wright, 2011). In their examination of metaphors used by foreign teachers in Japan to explain their experiences working there, words like *uchi/soto* [inside/outside] emerged, illustrating that barriers were erected or stubbornly maintained to stymie interaction and ultimately derail the internationalization project. This is most likely because Japanese HE internationalization policies lack an “ethos” perspective, which emphasizes the creation of a culture or climate that values or supports international/intercultural perspectives (Qiang, 2003). Without an “ethos” approach, there can be little hope of the process leading to any fundamental change since the incorporation of an intercultural dimension has not been secured into pedagogical goals from the start.

However, perhaps the most striking difference is the overwhelming association of internationalization with Westernization. As early as 1983, Befu (1983) characterized *kokusaika* as “predominantly pointed towards the West, as Western cultures remain... Japan’s reference point” (p. 233). Here, of course, “West” refers directly to the English-speaking Anglophile USA, Canada, Great Britain, etc. and hence, the link with English becomes apparent. For example, while not writing solely in regard to Japan, a recent article by Galloway (et al., 2020) entitled “The ‘internationalisation’, or ‘Englishisation’, of higher education in East Asia” equates the process of internationalization with English in Medium of Instruction (EMI) classes in universities, which is undoubtedly a major feature of Japan’s HE *kokusaika*. While clearly images associated with internationalization are of being cosmopolitan, progressive and open-minded, more often it is represented by the “ability to speak English” (Koshino, 2019, p. 53). This is hardly surprising in Japan as Tsuneyoshi (2005) has commented, for a country whose language is used only within its boundaries, English in higher education has certain internationalization effects. However, what many commentators fail to grasp is that this act of combining internationalization with English by default makes the process an overwhelmingly ‘white’ one.

III. WHITENESS IN JAPAN

Despite its apparent simplicity, whiteness is in fact an extremely elusive concept, it’s “visibility” dependent on perspectives and societies (Fujikawa, 2008). The term whiteness does not describe any concrete thing, but a set of social and power relationships where “white” is seen as the “racially un-marked” standard or norm, in contrast to which other “marked” racial identities, such as “black” or “Asian,” are constructed (Garner, 2007). “Whiteness is normalized through imagery leading to the naturalization of Whiteness and alienation of other racial groups” (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2021, p. 5). In the context of Japan, Russell (2017) describes whiteness similarly as an “un-marked” yet “deracialized” notion, which has largely eschewed critical scrutiny and is widely regarded as the norm (p. 23). In other words, along with the seemingly natural association of *kokusaika* with the (English-speaking) West, the concept of whiteness is also quietly left unquestioned in a process we term ‘visible invisibility.’ Despite this, it is clear – as others have written – that the impact of whiteness on Japanese society and institutions has been enormous. “Whiteness naturally came to be accepted, normalized, and instilled through the process of re-appropriation and reproduction of the ideology in both institutional and individual practices in Japanese society,” writes Koshino (2019, p. 50). Thus, whiteness is an aspirational ideal to strive for, which is also affectively associated with notions of “the global” and “the world,” or what Tsukada (2013) calls the “Western imaginary.” It must also be noted, however, that in the process of *kokusaika*, “white” is assumed to refer to “Westerners” and “*gaijin*” (foreigners) (Koshiro, 1999; Russell, 1996) and, also, that they all naturally speak (or understand) English. Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that the complex issues of race, ethnicity, discrimination, imperialism and so forth are conveniently omitted or overlooked in any debate.

The pervasiveness of whiteness in Japan is considerable. Russell (2017), in an article examining the representation of whites in Japanese media and popular culture, cites several studies suggesting that over 70 percent of foreigners in Japanese commercials are white. He also notes that whiteness in Japan ultimately finds expression in “an idealized, fetishized, cosmopolitan Westernness” (Russell, 2017, p. 23), or what could also be termed “social imaginaries.” This is not surprising since it is through global mediascapes that aspirations for whiteness in global HE are fueled. These imaginaries are “image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality” (Appadurai 1996, p. 35). Fujimoto (2002), for example, bluntly describes the process of internationalization in Japan as a form of “Whitenization” (p. 2), constructed through a discourse of “the myth of Japan’s homogeneity” (p. 19), a unique combination of seemingly incompatible themes. The notion that in Japanese society whiteness is related to a Western-centered and a commercialized variant of a form of “cosmopolitan” imaginary makes more sense when we examine the role of whiteness in internationalization in the following section.

IV. WHITENESS IN INTERNATIONALIZATION

White privilege in higher education in the West has been well documented through the field of critical whiteness studies which can be traced back to the work of early Afro-American scholars such as W.E.B Du Bois (Garner, 2007). While to date, “there has been insufficient attention paid toward whether white privilege also exists in East Asian universities” (Moosavi, 2021, p. 107), we posit that in Japan’s case, white privilege is tacitly included and accepted in internationalization policies. This can be seen in several areas, but perhaps most blatantly in regards to global university rankings (GUR). While functioning as a useful barometer of internationalization, Japanese institutions are aggressively striving to improve their global standing. Since, as Shahjahan (2021) points out, GURs are oriented around and towards “white bodies” and that to become a “global subject” means to become “white,” Japanese institutions are clearly complicit in following the Western handbook in this regard.

V. WHITE BODIES IN JAPAN’S HIGHER EDUCATION INTERNATIONALIZATION

Internationalization in Japan is intricately intertwined with the concept of whiteness, with both working in tandem to sustain each other. Japanese universities often employ images of white-skinned foreign students on promotional posters and adverts to create imaginaries of ‘international’ which further emphasizes the role of whiteness in the process of internationalization there. In our fieldwork, we visited 3 middle-sized universities (all located in metropolitan Western Japan) and gathered data on the cosmetic aspects of whiteness in internationalization. We also conducted interviews with both students (n=20), staff (n=13) and faculty (n=10). This data set (see Table 1), in combination with our own personal experiences, is briefly summarized here.

TABLE I
DESCRIPTION OF DATA SUBJECTS INTERVIEWED

	University A	University B	University C
Faculty	5	2	3
Students	7	6	7
Administrators	5	5	3

Firstly, our data shows that whiteness is a major factor in advertising. Posters, websites and other such cosmetic advertising portals at the universities we visited often celebrated whiteness and English as epitomes of “the globalized individual,” marketed to the Japanese consumer as the ultimate object of cosmopolitan desire. The taken-for-granted nature of these beliefs allows us to place them under the broader theoretical umbrella of the “Western imaginary” (e.g., Tsukada, 2013). As mentioned before, the English language plays a pivotal role in the construction of cosmopolitan whiteness. Content-wise, none of the English catchphrases we encountered were related to education; most nothing more than empty slogans with a very vague ‘cosmopolitan’ feel-appeal (e.g., ‘Less Borders More Bridges,’ ‘Link to the world, and Future’ or ‘Discover the world’). Moreover, while these same phrases

could be found on the Japanese version of each university’s homepage, none of the promotional slogans appeared on their respective English home pages, implying that the English slogans were explicitly targeted towards a Japanese audience.

Similar to the skin-whitening adds in woman’s magazines described in Saraswati (2020), the image of a “cosmopolitan” university was constructed by “exhibiting” white foreign students to the Japanese public and domestic students, irrespective of their actual impact on the university’s core educational activities. Furthermore, exchange students were positioned “as guests” (Hiro, faculty member, University B), i.e., welcomed but *temporary* visitors rather than full members of the university community. Another case in point in this regard is the use of the common term *ryūgakusei* for all non-Japanese students, including exchange, full-time undergraduate, and even doctoral students, which constructs them as a separate category to Japanese domestic students. However, above all, white skin is “clearly a defining factor” in publicity policy (Taka¹, administrator, University C).

By way of comparison, full-time (mainly Asian) international students were described as not exactly excluded, but somewhat peripheral and “marginalized” from the mainstream university community (Peter, faculty member, University B). They were also increasingly made objects of “surveillance” (*kanshi*) following the disappearance of 700 foreign students at a low-ranked university in Tokyo in March 2019, and the government’s call for tighter control (Kakuchi, 2019). As Okunuki (2017) claims, most foreigners coming to Japan from Asia as “international students” come primarily with the aim of engaging in cheap labor. Far from recruiting high-level human resources, most foreign students coming to Japan are a source of “backdoor immigration” for the government to counteract Japan’s serious labor shortages (Okunuki, 2017). Perceived to lack the highly desirable attributes of whiteness and English fluency, notions of “cosmopolitanism” are disassociated from Asians and other non-white groups, who are instead “imagined” as potential criminals and subjected to surveillance. In either case, therefore, the image of the “foreign/international student” (*ryūgakusei*) is constructed as inherently different, either essentialized and placed in the role of English language buddies for the satisfaction of the Japanese students – who are the universities’ actual customers – or marginalized from the Japanese mainstream university community and carefully monitored if non-white. Sadly, as reflected in student examples, within such a context, whiteness signals superior intellect, particularly when it comes to English speaking ability (Koshino, 2019) as well as perceived “status value.” Japanese students commented:

“I want to see more foreign faces on campus, I want to talk to them in English” (Yumi, student, University A).

“It’s fun to hang out with the exchange students and talk to them in English about their dreams. I want to visit their countries (Canada) too” (Miki, student,

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

University B).

“I was surprised when I heard there are so many foreign students here at (University C). I hardly see them on campus” (Akiko, student, University C).

The final comment implying that Asian international students do not count as they cannot be “seen” as easily on campus as white students.

Secondly, from discussions we found whiteness is also a factor in the treatment of faculty. Koshino (2019), writes that “White instructors were routinely hired with lesser credentials than their Asian colleagues” (p. 54), a point also corroborated in conversations with faculty. Two interviewees (Mark, University A, Steve, University C), revealed that some (native English-speaking) colleagues had undergone less stringent employment procedures due to either necessity (the need to find someone at short notice) or lack of competition. Similarly, just like white students in advertising, white faculty are also regularly featured predominantly on pamphlets and website advertising. In each of the institutions we visited, pictures of white faculty were conspicuous. As revealed by John (University B), “I have repeatedly been asked to pose for photos or have camera shoots in my classes. Proportionally my face is seen more than almost anyone here I think.” When administration staff were questioned in relation to such comments, one confided that “prospective students are attracted to Western faces. That is why we ask them to front for pictures and demonstration classes during open days” (Yuri, University B). This dovetails with numerous other scholars such as Chen’s work on the “promotional” aspects of foreign faculty in Japan, what Brown (2019) referred to as the “propaganda benefits” of visible “token” foreign faculty, or Brotherhood (et al., 2019)’s portrayal of them as “tokenized symbols of internationalization” (p. 497).

Against this backdrop, fast forward to 2022 and it hardly comes as a surprise that several universities in Japan have begun to announce plans to accept Ukraine students displaced by the recent Russian invasion of their homeland. While we are certainly not denying the need nor belittling the institutions for their generosity in such a difficult time, such actions raise questions and appear intrinsically linked to the notion of whiteness in internationalization. The Government is also careful to note that these students are not “refugees” in the official sense, preferring the term “evacuees” and announcing a bill to create a new “quasi-refugee” status for them (The Japan Times, 2022).

Firstly, there are of course serious allegations of hypocrisy which could be levelled at the West in general in regards to this situation. As Doyle (2022) writes:

Syrians... might question where the outrage is when Russian planes have been bombing them, flattening their civilian infrastructure, and targeting their hospitals; in fact, Syria was the testing ground for the weapons systems Russia is using in Ukraine.

Perhaps the reason can be found in comments like those expressed by Daniel Hannan, a member of the British House of Lords and a leading member of the governing Conservative Party: “They seem so like us. That is what makes it so shocking” (quoted in Doyle, 2022). While the “us” here are white Europeans, Japan’s *kokusaika* agenda has made the acceptance of evacuees on campuses seemingly natural. Accepting these Ukrainian students works to strengthen Japanese self-perceptions as “unique” (i.e., phenotypically different from the incoming Ukrainians) but also on par with other Western countries (i.e., not *exactly* Asian, but so-called “*honorary whites*” – a term originating from the Apartheid regime in South Africa).

In fairness, Japan has accepted limited numbers of people from trouble spots in the past, notably 150 Syrian students (<https://www.jica.go.jp/syria/english/office/others/jisr.html>) displaced due to war. However, the conditions were stricter, numbers fewer and speed considerably slower than this time. Generally, Japan has failed to welcome any significant number of refugees² from other humanitarian conflict zones, such as Yemen, South Sudan, or Afghanistan, and surprisingly even those from places in Asia such as Rohingya refugees from Myanmar or Uyghur or Tibetans escaping persecution from China. While it can be argued that the situation in those countries is domestic in nature, it is hard to deny the role of race. In fact, strikingly, Japan has failed to recognize the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar as a genocide at all, despite many other nations (for example, America, France and Canada) having already done so (The Mainichi, 2022).

To date, several hundred Ukrainian students have, or will be, welcomed at universities in Kyushu, Kyoto, and Tokyo along with other vocational and Japanese language schools in various other cities. Universities accepting the students are generally offering them existing English-taught courses, once again highlighting the link between *kokusaika* and English. In most cases, fees have been waived and scholarships are being created to support the students.

It is useful here to contrast this situation with Japan’s attitude towards diversity within its own border, specifically the discriminatory treatment afforded to Ainu, Ryukyuan, and *Zainichi* Koreans, etc.³ If whiteness is not the potent driving force behind higher educational internationalization in Japan, then surely the acceptance and cultural diversity represented by Japan’s own minorities should be prioritized – or at the very least acknowledged – if not respected. Sadly, it appears the nation’s “imagined” version of internationalization (a neo-liberal, Western and white one) is different to a genuine embracing of diversity in all its manifestations.

² In 2020 alone, for example, Japan accepted just 47 applications for refugee status out of a total of 3,936 applications. Prior to that, just 841 out of 85,479 were approved. See: <https://www.worlddata.info/asia/japan/asylum.php>

³ For more information regarding the situation and treatment of Japan’s minorities, see, for example: Weiner, M. (1997). *Japan’s Minorities: The Illusion of Homogeneity*. New York: Routledge.

VI. DISCUSSION

Internationalization speaks English, English is whiteness, and so Japan’s HE internationalization policies are mostly modelled on white, English-speaking, Western ideals. The target nations of the international “others” are English-capable and presumably white, whereas most Asian nations are overlooked (Toyosaki & Forbush, 2017) at best, or looked down upon. While it may seem financially prudent or expedient for Japanese institutions (in particular) to adhere to internationalization policies briefly outlined here, more focus needs to be drawn towards issues of whiteness and its associated privilege in HE and the potential damaging impact it can have on domestic students in institutions and society in general.

Rather than clinging to nationalistic ideas of Japanese-ness while playing “catch-up” with the West (Rappleye & Kariya, 2011), it would be more beneficial for Japan and its HE institutions to re-frame or realign their identities and purposes in the context of the broader Asia-Pacific region, but this time on an equal footing with their Asian neighbors. Without such changes, we can conclude that internationalization in Japan is not inherently about accepting diversity and communicating across a wide ethno-linguistic spectrum (e.g., Lincicome, 2005) but rather maintaining an outdated status quo which fails to serve the stake holders it proports to support, and meet the expectations of educating globally informed, critical citizens.

For Japanese society to capitalize on profound, meaningful or “true” (Brown, 2019) internationalization, *kokusaika*, with its racial hierarchies and one-sided colonialist ideological intimations with the West, needs to be re-imagined as it does not allow for the creation of genuinely inclusive places that – we are led to believe – exist in “the myth of academic tolerance” (Moosavi, 2021, p. 119). Only once HE institutions in Japan have included those henceforth “left behind” (*soto*) others (both abroad and within its own national borders) and fully implemented best practice methods can they truly begin to earn the prestige they seek through a policy of internationalization. Japanese HE institutions should accept Ukrainian, or any other deserving displaced people, as a matter of humanitarian and academic ethics, not quasi-ideological beliefs. This in turn, requires yet another look at the nation’s “schizophrenic” sense of identity, what its role in the world – and Asia specifically – is, and how it wants to encourage future student graduates to further that. Contradictory cosmetic changes will no longer suffice nor will trying to “white-out” difficult debates. Only by openly facing and addressing the institutionalized educational inequalities in our systems can we create a useful process of internationalization for all.

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