

Multiethnic Japan. By John Lie. Harvard University Press, 2001. xv + 248 pages. Hardback \$35.00.

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The old canards of *nihonjinron* have been flayed by a whole generation of scholars, and nowadays hardly any serious observer sees Japan as an entirely homogeneous, monocultural, or monoethnic society. Homogeneity is now routinely described as a “myth” (Stephen Murphy-Shigematsu, “Multiethnic Japan and the Monoethnic Myth,” *Melus* 18:4 (1993), pp. 63–80; <http://user3.allnet.ne.jp/yosha/murphy-shigematsu/>), or an “illusion” (Michael Weiner, *Japan’s Minorities: The Illusion of Homogeneity*; London and New York: Routledge, 1997). The present work, however, takes the argument to untenable extremes in portraying Japan as a multiethnic society.

The critical problem lies in the author’s failure to make any distinction in terms of *degree*. Obviously, in a banal sense, the moment you have two or more people of differing ethnicity in the same place, you have a multiethnic society. But equally obviously, the numbers of people of differing ethnicities will materially influence how people lead their lives in that society. On page 1, John Lie takes Roger Buckley to task for stating that “no other major industrial society has anything approaching the racial homogeneity of Japan”—yet by the end of the book, Lie cannot be said to have disproved the assertions of Buckley and others that Japan is *relatively* monoethnic. Instead, he merely draws attention to various minorities, asserting that since Japan is not monoethnic, therefore it is multiethnic.

Of course, Japan does have ethnic minorities. But their *smallness* is a crucial fact of life for their members. For the foreseeable future at least, Japan’s ethnic minorities will not be able to exercise a substantial influence on national politics, like blacks, Hispanics, or Jews in the United States; they will not be able to control a substantial share of the economy, like the Chinese in Malaysia or the Philippines; and they will certainly not be in a position to fight for independence, like Basques, or East Timorese. That Japan is far closer to monoethnicity than to multiethnicity colors every aspect of life for its minorities, yet Lie ignores this point almost entirely in his attempt to prove that Japan is a multiethnic society.

In struggling to make the claim stick, Lie takes notable liberties with population statistics and definitions of ethnicity. There is no serious attempt to calculate the number of ethnic minority people in Japan; instead (p. 4) he simply takes the upper and lower figure for various groups given in other books. For example, is it really acceptable, in a book on ethnicity, to give the number of foreigners in Japan as “150,000 to 700,000,” the upper figure apparently deriving from the 700,000 “foreign workers” cited in an introductory textbook on Japan, which certainly includes some of the Chinese and Koreans whom Lie counts separately? Lie adds all these figures together to give a total of 4 to 6 million “non-Japanese Japanese” in a country of 125 million, then states that this proportion is comparable to that of Great Britain for 1992 (p. 4). This, I have to say, is simply not true.

In terms of nationality, Ministry of Justice figures—not apparently consulted by Lie—showed some 1.56 million registered foreigners living in Japan in 1999. These included 637,000 Koreans, 294,000 Chinese, 224,000 Brazilians, and 116,000 Fili-

pinos (<http://www.stat.go.jp/english/zuhyou/1612.xls>). The rest of Lie's 4 to 6 million are made up mainly of Ainu (25,000 to 300,000), Okinawans (1.6 million), and burakumin (2 to 3 million). For Ainu, 25,000 is close to regularly published government statistics; the figure of 300,000 is not explained and can only have been derived by counting just about anybody with a drop of Ainu blood. I have no objection to the figure for "Okinawans," though I think "Ryukyuan" is a more suitable term. Personally I am happy to view Ryukyuan as an ethnic minority, though many, especially those living on the mainland, have largely assimilated Japanese culture and would resent the appellation. As I will discuss shortly, burakumin are not an ethnic minority at all. Hence a true figure for ethnic minorities in Japan would be 3 million, or 2.5 percent of the population, at the very most.

In contrast, Britain's 3 million ethnic minority people (5.5 percent of the population, as of the 1991 census) consist mainly of Indians (840,000), Caribbeans (500,000), Pakistanis (475,000), Africans (200,000), "Black other" (180,000), Bangladeshis (160,000), and Chinese (160,000). These figures do not include some 300,000 Jewish people, who would certainly fall into Lie's all-embracing definition of ethnic minorities, nor 120,000 refugees and asylum-seekers (<http://www.cix.co.uk/~jsb/etac/chapter2.htm>). Bearing in mind that Britain has roughly half the population of Japan, it is obvious that Britain is far more racially mixed than Japan. Indeed, if Ryukyuan and Ainu are to be counted for Japan, one would also have to count the Scottish, Welsh, and Irish people of Britain, who account for roughly 15 percent of the U.K. population, turning the gap between the two countries into a canyon. Yet Britain is not a particularly heterogeneous society. Compare Japan with most other industrialized societies and she looks even more homogeneous.

The treatment of burakumin is perhaps the most problematic aspect of Lie's book. The idea that members of this former outcast group are ethnically different from other Japanese is now believed only by a handful of ultranationalist crazies. Yet Lie casually redefines these people as an ethnic minority on the grounds that "there is a considerable identification as members of a distinct group, and many other Japanese continue to recognize and then discriminate against them in marriage and employment. Identification and discrimination offer, therefore, good grounds to consider them as an ethnic group" (pp. 3–4). (The sense of "therefore" in this sentence is obscure.) Lie admits that burakumin themselves do not believe that they constitute an ethnic group, but puts this down to "ethnic denial" (p. 139)—apparently some kind of psychological disorder.

Frankly, this argument simply does not hold. By Lie's definition, gay people, blind people, people from Osaka, women, train-spotters, and just about any other group could be defined as an ethnic minority. Burakumin are not an ethnic minority; they are a cultural, or social minority. The book should have been called "Multicultural Japan," and perhaps it would have been, had not Denoon et al. already bagged that title (see Donald Denoon, Mark Hudson, Gavan McCormack, and Tessa Morris-Suzuki, eds., *Multicultural Japan: Paleolithic to Postmodern*; Cambridge University Press, 1996).

One might argue that whether a minority is defined as ethnic, cultural, or whatever does not really matter. But it does. In another remarkably casual assertion, Lie says of Japan's ethnic minorities that "their existence is not recognized by the government" (p. 5). That is debatable in general, and it is certainly untrue of the burakumin, whom

Lie would include in that statement. On the contrary, as he fleetingly admits elsewhere, the government has spent many billions of yen on so-called "Dōwa projects" designed to improve the educational and living standards of burakumin, to the extent that their lives have been radically transformed over the last two or three decades. The government has not carried out any comparable program for, say, Koreans. Why? At least in part because it has viewed burakumin as Japanese, and has therefore accepted the argument that they should not be made to endure worse conditions than other Japanese. The buraku liberation movement, too, has stressed that burakumin are ethnically Japanese, causing considerable friction among other minority groups, since its campaigns sometimes seem to imply that discrimination against nonethnic Japanese is somehow acceptable (on these points see John Davis. "Blurring the Boundaries of the Buraku(min)," in J. S. Eades, Tom Gill, and Harumi Befu, eds., *Globalization and Social Change in Contemporary Japan*; Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2000). In his determination to lump all minorities together under an ethnic label, Lie misses these nuances of minority relations in contemporary Japan.

The fact that burakumin are not an ethnic minority has a further important implication overlooked by Lie. Max Weber laid stress on shared pride in a common origin as a definitive characteristic of ethnic groups, yet burakumin cannot take that kind of pride in their common origin, since it was invented and imposed upon them by a discriminatory mainstream. Many burakumin do not wish to be part of a burakumin community—indeed, many wish that the category of "burakumin" did not exist. However much they may be persecuted by the mainstream, surely few Koreans, Chinese, or Ainu wish that their ethnic category did not exist. That is not to say that it is impossible to feel pride as a burakumin, but it is an identity that is complicated in ways that do not apply to those of real ethnic minorities. Tellingly, there is no evidence that Lie has discussed his eccentric notions of ethnicity at any length with any real live burakumin.

Simplistic argumentation mars the book throughout. The degree of foreign influence during various periods of Japanese history is exaggerated irresponsibly; the bleeding corpse of nihonjinron is trampled on at length, often by reference to low-grade books by travel writers and journalists; and the presence of a number of foreigners in the worlds of sports and entertainment is taken to prove that these fields are multiethnic, with no discussion of the overwhelming majority of ethnic Japanese heroes in these fields. This last failing is characteristic: throughout the book there is virtually no quantitative data. Finally, the book assumes throughout that Japanese society consists of a massive, uniform, ethnic majority that has persistently trampled on a substantial, uniform, ethnic minority. Distinctions between the varying experiences of different minorities are swept away. In his conclusion, Lie warns us to "beware of people who draw social boundaries and declare people on one side of the line to be typologically distinct from those on the other" (p. 182). Alas, he is guilty of this misdeed himself: in his exaggerated depiction of this allegedly multiethnic society, he has created a new kind of nihonjinron: only this time we have two caricatured groups of people instead of one.