

# Nation-centric academic communities

*Academic Nations in China and Japan* is a critical study of the bias caused by state- or nation-centric approaches in the social sciences, based on case studies of scholarship conducted at the International Research Centre for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken, in Kyoto) and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in China (CASS, in Beijing).

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For a clear overview of the approach and contents of the book I recommend the reader consult the concluding chapter 'Core themes and an outlook for future research' (pp.153ff). The book aims to point out the evil effects of the bias induced by a state- or nation-centric research approach on the social sciences in general: 'I have used examples of academic theory in China and Japan to illuminate the theme of framing the nation, although social science elsewhere could have served the same purpose' (p.160). Despite this universalistic claim, the introduction on the cover emphasizes that 'this book will appeal not only to Asianists, but also those with research interests in cultural studies, Japanology and Sinology'. Indeed, there are numerous references to sources in Japanese and Chinese, but few to previous research on general themes treated in the book, including definitions of academics/intellecuals, (the structure of) discourse and debate among academic communities, and the institutionalization of academic research and its links to policy-making. True, there are references to writings by Edward Said, Nicholas Luhmann and others, but these are insufficiently related to the author's own methodology. There is no discussion of theories on the structure and impact of (academic) discourse on society and politics. The author establishes a classification of factors used by academics/intellecuals to define group identity, group markers, national identity (p.12) and the impact of social-political context on the nature and quality of scientific research, but the research methodology needs to be further elaborated.

Neither the title nor the subtitle of the book, *Academic Nations in China and Japan: framed in concepts of nature, culture and the universal*, supports the claim for universality. Sleeboom explains that China and Japan have 'illustrative value' in her attempt to 'understand various forms of categorizing groups', and adds that the main emphasis is on presenting an approach with universal applications: '...I am convinced that a similar study can be conducted in other parts of the world'. (p.4) 'The examples are not representative of, but a selection from, the construction of group identity in academic debate in China and Japan. They serve to illustrate the ways in which groups are built and shaped in space and time'. (p.99)

After a general introduction that includes a discussion of the 'nation's symbolic dimension over the creation of knowledge and the ways in which the two are linked together through the state' she discusses in detail 'the nature of boundary markers in identity construction'. Part three elaborates on previous arguments and uses the case studies of CASS and Nichibunken to 'illustrate the inherent handicap of nation-centric social science in attaining national self-knowledge, its tendency to conservatism, its failure to imagine alternative views of the nation and its political predictability'. (pp.15-16)

The copious bibliography lists primary and secondary sources in English, Japanese and Chinese. The book contains three appendices on research activities by the Nichibunken and a very short 'Glossary of frequently used Japanese and Chinese terms and persons' of rather limited usefulness. Source references are provided within the text, often without specific page references. There are twenty-seven pages of notes, many containing explanations or references essential to an understanding of the book's argumentation that should have been included, or at least summarized in the main text. Generally speaking, the book suffers from poor presentation and language editing.

The book draws on previous publications and doctoral research by the author; three articles were previously published in *Nation and Nationalism*, *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, and *Japan Forum* (now chapters two, three and eight). It also benefited from stays at CASS in Beijing and the Nichibunken in Kyoto where Sleeboom conducted field research. Since she visited both places for longer periods, it is disappointing that the book does not explicitly draw on insights gained from personal experience and contacts with local scholars or interviews. We learn little about policies linking CASS and Nichibunken with government beyond the author's interpretation of several publications by leading members of both

institutions, though both have been subjects of previous scholarly inquiry in East Asia and beyond.

## Intellectuals and the state

There is a vast literature on the changing nature of the state and state-society relations in general, and for Japan and China in particular. Jean-Louis Rocca, for instance, has succinctly pointed out why we can no longer follow previously accepted 'traditional' notions of the 'state', which he discusses for the Chinese case ('Is China becoming an Ordinary State?' in Beatrice Hibou, ed. 2004. *Privatising the State*. London: Hurst. The book appeared first in French in 1999). Sleeboom does not refer to such changes, nor does she enter into discussions of the role(s) of intellectuals and academics in policy-making (pp.16-19). She does not discuss in more detail different definitions of academics/intellecuals and their roles in both societies - a pity, since we are in clear need of understanding their different, and changing input in Japanese and Chinese policy-making.

Sleeboom includes several analyses of symbols used in China and Japan that have a bearing on research in the field of social anthropology, such as the 'dragon' in China and monkeys in Japan. The author discusses 'interpretations of the dragon... related to its symbol meaning for the East'. (p.20) True, some Chinese and Japanese academics engage in more or less sophisticated discussions on the origins and possible symbolism of these animals, but in research on the impact of academics on general notions of state, nation and identity we would like to hear more about the actual influence these discussions had/have on politics and public opinion. I would also have welcomed an analysis on how different academic viewpoints can be classified in the context of Japanese and Chinese politics.

## An approach with universal application?

Since Sleeboom emphasizes the universal applicability of her approach, the reader would expect at least passing references to other (large) countries such as the US, India, and EU member states, which remain conspicuous by their absence. The virtually exclusive reference to Japan and China creates the impression that features mentioned here are characteristic of these two countries, in particular when parallels are emphasized.

On the second to last page Sleeboom summarizes her attack on nation-centric research: 'A major impediment to social science research and factors inherent to framing the nation are the confused presentations of the description of facts and prescription of national behavior. It is expressed in political innuendo, a scholastic inability to generate fresh views and research problems, and in the failure to imagine the ways in which the Other views the nation, and leads to the loss of capacity to deal with conflict'. This reviewer remains wondering whether Sleeboom's book has been able to escape similar weaknesses. It abounds in vague generalizations imputing attitudes and approaches to unnamed academics accompanied by the frequent use of phrases such as 'often assumed', 'widely accepted', 'usually' and 'generally'. Having read this book the non-specialist will find it difficult to construct an unbiased image of 'academic nations in China and Japan'. The specialist is left wondering how to relate Sleeboom's research and methodology to previous and current research. ◀

- Sleeboom, Margaret. 2004. *Academic Nations in China and Japan: Framed in concepts of nature, culture and the universal*. London: RoutledgeCurzon. pp. 220. ISBN 0-415-31545-x

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