

Toward an Ethnography of Reading: Nakane Chie in the Japanese Intellectual Marketplace

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Abstract:

This article offers a re-reading of the book that did much to establish social anthropologist Nakane Chie as a well-known Japanese intellectual, her 1967 *Tateshakai no ningen kankei* (Human relations in a vertical society). Rather than revisiting the book in terms of its ideational content, which has already been much discussed, however, the present article focuses on the specific type of text that the book was and how it was accordingly packaged, stylistically, as a work belonging to a peculiar textual genre in the Japanese intellectual marketplace. In so doing, the article provides a fuller understanding of the context in which *Tateshakai* was produced and consumed, and lays the groundwork for a more ethnographically based understanding of how such texts as Nakane's *Tateshakai* are read and have lives in society outside of the realm of "pure" academic discourse.

Introduction

Born in 1926, social anthropologist Nakane Chie first studied Oriental history as an undergraduate at the University of Tokyo and, after a period of further study in anthropology at the London School of Economics, she went on to become—in 1970—Tôdai's first-ever female professor.¹ While this was no small accomplishment, Nakane had in fact already become well known in Japan even before this thanks to her 1967 book *Tateshakai no ningen kankei* (Human relations in a vertical society). Published as a small paperback, the book revolves around the premise that Japan is a vertical society: that is to say, unlike India or Western societies, with their characteristic horizontal stratifications such as caste and class, it is organized around vertical divisions that constitute barriers between one group and another and yield a strong group mentality that permeates Japanese society. The book attracted a wide

1. Sources of biographical information on Nakane include Kondô & Nakane (1958), Iizawa & Nakane (1970), Amano (1978), and Kida et al. (1984).

readership, and even a decade after its initial publication, it was still selling some 30,000 copies per year (see Yamazaki, 1978). The book's standing as what is described in Japanese publishing lingo as a "long-seller" helped give Nakane a degree of extended public recognition matched by few, if any, other Japanese anthropologists.

In the years to follow, *Tateshakai* would come to be dismissed by critically minded academics—in Japan and abroad—as a representative work in the boom in so-called *nihonjinron* treatises on Japanese distinctiveness that reached its peak in the 1970s. Befu (1980) offered one of the earlier social-scientific criticisms of "the group model of Japanese society," and numerous other works followed suit in critiquing *nihonjinron* on empirical, theoretical, and ideological grounds (e.g., Befu, 1987; Mouer & Sugimoto, 1986; Aoki, 1990). In this line of criticism, Nakane's book was assailed for, among other things, conveniently ignoring contradictory evidence in its effort to present an overly neat view of Japanese society.

While much has thus already been written about Nakane's *Tateshakai* and its merits as a work worthy of serious academic consideration, in this paper I wish to indulge in a re-reading of the book. But rather than reading *Tateshakai* in terms of the more common focus of analysis—namely, its denotational content—I wish to examine a much less frequently discussed aspect of it: the *type* of text that it was, and how it was packaged stylistically as part of a peculiar textual genre. My aim here is not to consider the book in terms of how other academics have read it, but to take a step toward a more ethnographic approach to understanding how non-academic, "lay" Japanese might have engaged with the text.

Reading is by degrees and in varying ways social, involving not only different types of texts, but also culturally shaped contexts of reading and categories of persons involved in reading and being read to (see Boyarin, 1993; Rutherford, 2000; Engelke, 2004). As well, all texts presuppose a certain relationship between author and readers, and this is certainly true of texts authored by academics, with their presuppositions about the knowledge and expertise of the author vis-à-vis readers, and about how and for what purpose the author is to "speak" to them. In this article, I look at Nakane's *Tateshakai* as a complexly constructed cultural product or text-artifact (Silverstein, 1996), written for and sold in a well-established marketplace for intellectual knowledge that exists outside of academia proper. It is hoped that this more situated analysis (Mahon, 2000) will help shed some light on how texts written by academics can and do have lives in society that extend well beyond the restricted realm of "pure" academic discourse.

Japanese intellectuals and their audiences

Certainly most contemporary scholars of Japan are well aware that many academics and other intellectuals in Japan not only publish scholarly books and journal articles and contribute pieces to the more “highbrow” monthly journals, but also have a highly visible presence in popular magazines and other such media. Indeed, although Nakane was without doubt a successful academic, as indicated by her tenure at what is generally regarded as Japan’s top university, she was by no means a cloistered one. She was able to present herself to audiences in Japan that extended well beyond narrow academic circles, through a variety of forums: lengthy interviews and discussions in popular weekly magazines such as *Shûkan yomiuri* and *Shûkan gendai* (e.g., Kondô & Nakane, 1958; Iizawa & Nakane, 1970; Kôbô & Nakane, 1978), contributions to more highbrow journals like *Shisô no kagaku* and *Chûô kôron* (e.g., Tsurumi & Nakane, 1969; Nakane, 1977), presentations at corporations and “conversations” with business executives (e.g., Nakane, 1971), not to mention a string of paperback books on Japanese society published since 1967.

Yet, scholarly works dealing with the intellectual scene in Japan have drawn overwhelmingly from texts of a more scholarly or highbrow nature rather than publications of the more popular variety. As an example, consider Masao Miyoshi’s essay on the “conversationalism” that he finds so prevalent in the Japanese print media. Speaking of the numerous interviews, one-to-one discussions (*taidan*), panel discussions before an audience, and roundtable discussions (*zadankai*) involving intellectuals that appear frequently in print, Miyoshi writes:

To open a magazine or scholarly periodical is to come across at least one of these conversational forms of exchange. (For example, the August 1990 issue of *Sekai*, one of the few remaining journals of opinion, contains four *zadankai*, four interviews, and one *taidan*.) There is hardly any ‘writer’ who does not practice this form of group talk-think. In fact, more and more books now being published in Japan are merely collections of transcribed conversations, usually packaged under some imaginative or even provocative title. (1991, p. 218)

While this hints, at least, at the vast range of print material in which such commodified, “purchased talk” appears, Miyoshi’s critique of conversationalism in “Japanese intellectual life” (1991, p. 219) draws its examples solely from more highbrow intellectual publications like *Sekai* and *Bungakkai*. This academic predilection is, of course, entirely understandable from a certain point of view, given

that publications of this sort are more likely to contain discussions that—as Miyoshi puts it— “we wish we could have joined” (1991, p. 223). And yet, one result of this routine privileging of certain types of texts over others has been to reveal far more about the ways that Japanese intellectuals have communicated with each other, to the neglect of how they address themselves to other audiences as well.

***Shinsho* in the middle-brow knowledge industry**

This is an important point because the market for discoursing intellectuals in weekly magazines and other texts aimed at a wider audience is not merely incidental to the more highbrow-intellectualist variety. Indeed, in Japan there is a well-established *industry* for producing works that are aimed not at academics and “serious” intellectuals—a group once identified with the label “Iwanami culture” (Iwanami *bunka*) because of its close association with texts produced by the Iwanami publishing company² – but at a broader audience of “lay” readers. Nakane was one of countless academics and intellectuals who produced texts of this type, which Katô (1957) described as “*chûkan bunka*” or “middle-brow culture.” This broader context of the production and consumption of knowledge, developed in Japan after World War II and wherein intellectual knowledge is mediated, through commodified forms, by academic-intellectual figures like Nakane, can be thought of as a middle-brow knowledge industry (cf. Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944).

What makes *Tateshakai* a revealing example here is neither its basic argument (which, according to some, was hardly original³) nor its substantial sale figures. Rather, it is something much more ordinary about the book: namely, that it was published as a *shinsho*. *Shinsho* are a kind of small, slim, affordably priced paperback that are published in series that continually grow, year after year, as more and more titles are added by different authors. They are a ubiquitous feature of bookstores in Japan; indeed, one can hardly go into even the smallest of bookstores without coming across different series of *shinsho* on the shelves, each series with its own title and cover design, comprised of dozens or hundreds of volumes arranged sequentially according to the number printed on the spine of each book. By one accounting (Kawai,

2. On “Iwanami culture,” see Arase (1983), Kakegawa (1983), and Maruyama (1969, p. 63).

3. Kawamura (1980) suggests that Nakane’s main thesis in *Tateshakai* was strikingly similar to prewar sociological work by Aruga Kizaemon. See also Mouer & Sugimoto (1986, pp. 43-44).

1985), in 1981 there were no fewer than 62 different *shinsho* series being produced by 34 different publishing companies, accounting for nearly 14% of all book sales.

The format was established in Japan in 1938 by the Iwanami publishing company, with its “Iwanami Shinsho” series.⁴ Unlike the older Iwanami Bunkô (Iwanami Library) series, which had been launched a little over a decade earlier and whose staple was established classics in such fields as literature, philosophy, and religion (everything from the Bible to Rousseau to Fukuzawa Yukichi), the Iwanami Shinsho series made as its centerpiece works that were “new,” written by intellectuals of the present era, on a wide variety of topics thought to be of contemporary relevance. Titles published in the series between 1938 and 1950 included, for instance, works such as *Bêtoven* (Beethoven, 1938), *Gendai Shina-ron* (Theories of contemporary China, 1939), *Tetsugaku nyûmon* (Introduction to philosophy, 1940), *Uchû to hikari: chôninenteki shakudo* (Space and light: super-human measurement, 1942), *Meiji ishin: gendai nihon no kigen* (The Meiji Restoration: the origin of modern Japan, 1946), *Ningen no jiyû ni tsuite* (On human freedom, 1949), *Sekai-seifu no shisô* (The idea of world government, 1950). Hence, as established by Iwanami, “*shinsho*” (“new writings/books”) came to suggest a kind of running inventory of contemporary knowledge.

Following the Second World War, the *shinsho* format as cultivated by Iwanami was seized upon and replicated by numerous other publishing companies. Beginning in the mid-1950s, a growing number of companies launched their own *shinsho* or *shinsho*-like series which, while based largely upon the Iwanami model, have been pitched to varyingly “lower” grades of intellectualism. The well-known Kappa Books series, for instance, was launched by Kôbunsha in 1954. Taking its name from the *kappa*, or water imp, of Japanese folklore, which is depicted in a blurb in each book as “a fiction born from the common people of Japan” and as “friends of our hearts,” the series was created as a kind of “common people’s” counterpart to the Iwanami prototype. A number of other series launched since the mid-1950s—Chûkô Shinsho, Kôdansha Gendai Shinsho, and NHK Books are well-known and widely available series today—were generally situated somewhere between the austerity of Iwanami and the lower parameter of Kappa. The Kôdansha series, for instance, in which Nakane’s *Tateshakai* was published and which is one of the most widely available *shinsho* series today, is indicative. A one-page statement—included in every Kôdansha

4. For general information on *shinsho* and their history, see Kawai (1985), Arase (1968), and Arase (1983).

Gendai Shinsho—about the vision supposedly behind the founding of the series, explicitly makes an appeal to potential readers’ sense of need or desire for their own “enlightenment” (*keimō*). It proclaims, in somewhat inflated rhetoric, that educated refinement (*kyōyō*) is “something that all people should cultivate and create,” and at the same time it tries to distance itself from snobbish intellectualism by denouncing what it calls “*amakudari* [‘descent from heaven’] from the lecture-platform.” In identifying its intellectualism thus, the Kōdansha series tries to convey a vision of a kind of populist enlightenment, evoking Iwanami Shinsho and Kappa Books without explicitly mentioning either one.

There are surely numerous factors that contributed to the proliferation of this type of publication following the Second World War—the end of the U.S. Occupation in 1952 and the lifting of the censorship atmosphere, Japan’s famously high literacy rate, the respect “traditionally” accorded to teachers and teacherly figures (as well as learning itself), even the marketing choice of going with the small paperback format.⁵ But one factor that cannot go overlooked is the rapidly growing number of university-educated Japanese after the war. This was made possible, of course, by the reorganization of the entire education system under the American Occupation: the old system, whereby students who went beyond grade six were then channeled into distinctly different educational “tracks” and only a tiny fraction could ever make it to university, was effectively dismantled; the new, American-style system, whose “single-track” approach made higher levels of the system more accessible, prompted a dramatic expansion of higher education in Japan on the whole (see Passin, 1982; Nagai, 1971). According to statistics compiled by the Japanese government, for instance, the number of university students in Japan (excluding junior-college students and graduate-school students) more than doubled between 1950 and 1955, and increased more than six-fold between 1950 and 1970.⁶ This growing, higher-educated middle class, it is reasonable to assume, has been the primary target of the middle-brow knowledge industry that itself blossomed in the 1950s.

5. One might consider as well Nakane’s own characterization of Japanese intellectuals: “The intellectuals, who are at once powerless and antipathetic to political authority, find their role largely limited to educating and enlightening the public, a role which satisfies their elite feelings” (Nakane, 1974, p. 204).

6. In 1950, the total number of university students (*daigakusei*) was 224,923 (or roughly 2.8% of all 19-23 year-olds), and in 1970 it was 1,406,521 (12.5% of all 19-23 year-olds). These were predominantly male: the percentage of all university students who were female increased over these two decades from 7.7% to 18.0%; the number of female junior-college students (*tanki-daigakusei*), over this same period, swelled from 5878 to 217,668 (Sōrifu Tōkeikyoku, 1975; Sōmuchō Tōkeikyoku, 1995).

***Shinsho*-style packaging of knowledge**

An important—indeed, crucial—point to bear in mind about *shinsho* is that although they are frequently written by university academics, they are not scholarly texts. Instead, the majority of the texts which make up the various *shinsho* series mentioned above belong to a genre known as “*keimôsho*,” a term glossed by Hata & Smith (1983) as “books for the enlightenment of the public.” Texts of this sort purport to offer edification or “enlightenment” (*keimô*) in the knowledge they present, but they are designed specifically so as to be accessible to a broader range of non-academic readers.

As Katô (quoted in Yamazaki, 1978, p. 38)—himself the author of numerous *shinsho*—once characterized this type of text, *shinsho* are “guerrilla-like” in approach in that they are problem-centered without getting bogged down in scholarship. Typically around 200 pages in length, *shinsho* present knowledge in a highly schematic fashion: numbered chapters are divided into numbered sections, which are in turn broken into numerous sub-sections, so that readers need not labor through a long, visually dense text, but can instead proceed through the book one small, bounded parcel at a time. In Nakane’s *Tateshakai*, for instance, the smaller subsections appear every one or two pages, such that the next parcel—often comprised of a single illustrative example or anecdote—is never far away. Moreover, texts of this sort are kept largely free of footnotes, references, bibliographies, and indexes, the presence of which would give them a more cluttered, more “academic” feel.

This kind of stylistic packaging suggests, in part, a certain kind of mediation of knowledge. In this regard we might consider the use to which one of the few footnotes in Nakane’s *Tateshakai* is put: here, Nakane states that as *Tateshakai* was aimed at “general intellectuals” rather than being “pure scholastic research,” the book “merely shows one part of the author’s expertise” (1967, p. 20). She then proceeds, still within the same footnote, to refer readers to what she describes as a “more elaborate study of Japanese society”: her own *Kinship and economic organization in rural Japan* (1967). Clearly, this reference is not made with the expectation that readers will actually seek out and consult the book, since it was in English, for one thing, and probably not at all easy to obtain in Japan anyway.⁷ In this manner, the text thus does not invite

7. Similarly, later printings of *Tateshakai* also include – in place of a bibliography – a formal, bibliographic-style listing of the English and French versions of *Tateshakai*.

readers to engage with “pure” knowledge; it instead serves only to emphasize that this knowledge has already been worked out, elsewhere, by the intellectual herself. As Hata & Smith (1983) aptly point out, a text like Nakane’s *Tateshakai* does not set out to prove its assertions about Japanese society in the manner of, say, a more scholarly social-scientific text; it instead seeks only to explain its conclusions in a concise manner, to *make them understandable* to readers (see also Befu, 1987). It is constructed, in this manner, so as to be authoritative yet accessible.

Although here I have focused my discussion on the example of *shinsho*, I believe that this type of text offers a revealing glimpse at the broader, “middle-brow” context of knowledge production and consumption in Japan, and the place occupied within it by academics and other intellectuals. That is to say, if there is a project of “enlightenment” associated with the knowledge industry in Japan, it is one that is *presupposing* of a certain division of intellectual labor: it presupposes that the knowledge which it offers, in commodified forms like *shinsho*, is knowledge that has been worked out somewhere else, by someone else; readers are not invited to even know how this knowledge was arrived at, but merely to grasp it in a highly distilled, reader-friendly form. The texts themselves thus do not represent the working-out of knowledge, but instead its conveyance, its delivery, indeed its handing-down from a figure of intellectual authority.

Conclusion

The points outlined above could be taken to indicate a trajectory for the middle-brow knowledge industry in Japan not unlike that envisioned by Adorno (1982) for the culture industry in United States. As Adorno would have it, the nature of popular music—as a commodified product aimed at the masses—has the effect of producing a regression in listening: increasingly atomized listening works against understanding and hearing a work of music as a complex, contextually rooted whole, and the result, he argues, is a diminished capacity to listen carefully. For Adorno, the consequences of the culture industry have to do with far more than a diminished capacity to listen to music; at stake is a more profound diminishing of the critical capacity of the individual overall. One might be tempted to read the middle-brow knowledge industry in Japan in a similar light: namely, that even though texts like Nakane’s *Tateshakai* purport to offer enlightenment, the peculiar manner in which knowledge is packaged in forms like *shinsho* may in fact inhibit a careful or critical reading of the content of

the texts themselves.

Of course, one key problem with Adorno's view of the workings of the culture industry is that it rests too much on the premise that the social effects of texts (or of mass culture in general) can be read from the texts themselves. This position expects nothing of "the masses" and takes for granted that there is little to be gained from inquiring into how people, as differentially situated social actors, might receive, understand, question, or otherwise engage with the ideational content of a given text (cf. Ahmad, 1992, p. 172). This is precisely where an ethnographically oriented approach to how texts are read—given an "uptake" in specific contexts of social practice—has an important role to play. The present article by itself does not provide an ethnographic account of Nakane's *Tateshakai* in this sense, but by clarifying some of the key ways in which the book was constructed as a cultural product in the first place, it lays the groundwork for inquiring into how the text may have been read and recontextualized in the years since it was first published.

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