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Expanding the ‘Third Space’ between Western and non-Western knowledge: Nakane Chie’s *Japanese Society* as anti-Eurocentric theory

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sor**Rin Ushiyama** 

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Abstract

Decolonial theorists have frequently employed dichotomies such as North–South, East–West, White–Black and Metropole–Periphery to characterise the exclusion of knowledge produced by marginalised populations around the world. This article argues that such dichotomies overlook a body of knowledge that lies in the liminal space between these polarities: the Third Space of ideas. It proposes that a more diverse history of sociological thought requires an acknowledgement of thinkers who developed putatively ‘Western’ ideas towards anti-Eurocentrism. Through a case study of the Japanese anthropologist Nakane Chie and her 1970 book *Japanese Society*, this article shows how concepts of ‘hybridity’ and ‘contamination’ are essential for reconstructing how so-called ‘non-Western’ scholars innovated Western theories in anti-Eurocentric directions. This article shows how the sociological canon could be expanded through an attention to how different schools of thought have evolved transnationally.

Keywords

decolonising, East Asia, Japan, postcolonial theory, social theory, structural functionalism

In recent years, sociology and social theory have come under robust criticism for their allegedly Eurocentric, colonial and male-centric origins and practices that have excluded intellectual contributions made by women, colonised populations and people of colour (Alatas, 2003; Burawoy, 2008; Go, 2013, 2020; Meghji, 2021). In the wake of such seismic shifts in the academic landscape, it now seems inadequate to narrate the history of

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sociology solely with reference to the ‘founding fathers’ of Marx, Weber and Durkheim and their legacies; it has become necessary to be alert to developments that have taken place outside of ‘professional sociology’ (Burawoy, 2005). In this respect, the meaning of the word ‘sociological’ has shifted away from the *academic field* of sociology and towards sociological *issues*, such as class, gender, race, sexuality and social reproduction (Caillé & Vandenberghe, 2016). Scholars have proposed different solutions to these historic and continuing imbalances, ranging from an introduction of influential thinkers from adjacent disciplines such as postcolonial studies, development studies and women’s studies to the centring of ‘Southern’ epistemologies in opposition to ‘Northern’ knowledge.

At the same time, some of these bold categorisations have come under criticism for reinforcing – rather than dismantling – the dichotomy of the ‘West and the rest’. Such binaries tend to offer a reductionist global history, separating the world into white oppressors and non-white oppressed; for instance, certain postcolonial definitions of ‘empire’ as an exclusively Western creation proceed from a categorical exclusion of non-Western empires (Fiskejō, 2017; Inglis & Almila, 2020).

This article contributes to these emergent debates through a case study of a body of scholarship that has arguably been overlooked in discussions around ‘decolonising’ sociology and social theory: ‘Western’ scholarship as produced by ‘non-Western’ scholars throughout the twentieth century to the present day. Whilst the social sciences originated in the European academy, their development certainly did not end in the West, nor were they developed exclusively by ‘white men’. There were – and are – innumerable thinkers and ideas that lie *between* the dichotomies of North–South, East–West, White–Black and Metropole–Periphery. I argue that ‘decolonising’ sociology cannot satisfactorily proceed without an exploration of what Bhabha (2004) calls the Third Space: a space of cultural exchange and mixture. Building on arguments originally articulated by Bhabha, Appiah (2006, 2018) and Gilroy (2003) among others, the Third Space approach suggests that attention towards cultural contamination, hybridity and transcultural exchange is essential for reconstructing a more inclusive history of sociology. I identify three features of sociological ideas emanating from the Third Space as an abstract discursive space, rather than a geographical region. First, the Third Space responds to specific disciplinary developments in the ‘West’ (disciplinarity); second, the Third Space takes Western ideas as objects to be revised and changed as necessary for specific contexts, rather than treating them as *doxa* (mutability); and third, Third Space ideas seek to apply indigenous/local concepts as explanations (*explans*), rather than objects to be explained (*explanandum*), thereby reversing the flow of knowledge from the metropole to the periphery (reversed directionality).

The goals of this article are twofold. Firstly, I demonstrate that Third Space ideas have long existed in different forms, despite their relative obscurity in contemporary debates around sociological canon formation. Secondly, I explore the Third Space as an epistemic strategy for overcoming the impasse of a mutually exclusive choice between East–West and North–South. To elaborate this approach, I discuss the Japanese social anthropologist Nakane Chie (1926–2021) and her most popular work, *Japanese Society* (Nakane, 1970). The work represents a unique development of structural functionalism and British structural anthropology which challenges the Western ethnological gaze over Asian societies in general and Japan in particular by drawing on native concepts of *ie*

(household/family) and vertical relations. Much critical discussion around Nakane's work has centred on its position within Japanese studies as an iteration of cultural essentialist theory, otherwise known as *Nihonjinron* (theory of Japanese-ness) (Goodman, 2005). By contrast, I seek to reassess the value of Nakane's work in relation to broader and recent debates around decolonisation and sociology of non-Western societies. I suggest that Nakane's proposition for an indigenous-centred analysis of social structure, modernisation and social order is germane to ongoing sociological debates around Eurocentrism, Orientalism, epistemic exclusion and decolonising sociology.¹

In what follows, I discuss Nakane Chie's book *Japanese Society* both as an exemplar of Third Space thinking as well as a useful example for reconstructing the transnational trajectories of Western thought which have been hitherto largely rendered invisible by Eurocentric accounts of social theory, on the one hand, and Southern-oriented decolonial theory, on the other hand. Nakane's theory in some ways reflects Japan's ambivalent standing in global politics which defies these binaries. In the Western imagination, Japan has been subject to racialised and Orientalised discourses of inferiority, otherness and exoticism. However, at the same time, Japan was never formally colonised by a Western power except under the American occupation (1945–52) and is economically part of the Global North. Moreover, as colonisers, Japan's settler colonial empire spanned vast swathes of Asia and the Asia-Pacific, rendering the coloniser–colonised dynamic more complex than can be captured in terms of North–South or East–West.

Although Nakane was not a sociologist, she addressed many themes that continue to be relevant to social theory today including modernisation, social order and social reproduction (Nakane, 2019). Her positionality as a social anthropologist writing on contemporary social issues in Japan is also useful for understanding the historical boundaries between sociology – which historically grew out of interests in European modernisation and industrialisation – and anthropology, which developed out of a study of 'primitive' and 'non-Western' societies. Her approach therefore arguably constituted a way of practising 'sociology' at a time when existing disciplinary boundaries had siloed the study of non-Western societies into fields such as anthropology and Oriental studies.

In developing her approach, Nakane treated Western theories as mutable objects to be revised to explain non-Western societies (mutability). She proposed a hybrid theoretical model that combines structural functionalism (disciplinarity) with indigenous concepts of social order (reversed directionality). To this end, Nakane analysed different facets of Japan using the logic of the vertical society to explain contemporary social problems such as corruption, bullying and workplace harassment.

At the same time, some of Nakane's arguments raise difficult questions about the extent to which she relies on Orientalist and essentialist stereotypes of Japanese culture in a bid to defy Eurocentric thinking. Despite these shortcomings, Nakane's indigenous-centred approach serves as an important reference point as an example of Third Space thinking which sought to reverse the global flow of knowledge from the West to the rest.

'Decolonising' the sociological canon?

The argument that sociologists have failed to adequately theorise non-Western societies or to acknowledge the central role of colonialism in the development of modern societies

is now well-established (Bhabra, 2007; Bhabra & Holmwood, 2021). Although there are many iterations of such critique, they converge upon a shared agreement that ‘Western epistemologies’ are inextricably rooted in Western colonialism and that Western perspectives systematically devalue non-Western epistemologies, leading to ‘epistemic exclusion’ (Go, 2020) and ‘epistemicide’ (De Sousa Santos, 2016). According to this argument, Western knowledge systems silence alternative forms of knowledge and being through a dichotomy of the ‘West and the rest’, which is enforced in all areas of social life and renders invisible alternative knowledge systems from the East/Global South. Describing this ‘abyssal line’, De Sousa Santos (2007, p. 45) argues that “‘the other side of the line’ vanishes as reality, becomes nonexistent, and is indeed produced as nonexistent’. Grosfoguel (2011, pp. 9–11) identifies 15 intersectional dimensions of this ‘power matrix’ in which the West dominates over the rest: (1) class; (2) economies; (3) military and political organisations; (4) race; (5) gender; (6) sexuality; (7) religion; (8) epistemology; (9) language; (10) aesthetics; (11) pedagogy; (12) media; (13) age; (14) ecology; and (15) space.

These global inequalities are reflected in canon formation in sociology and the social sciences more generally. For example, Connell (2007a) highlights how the selection of Marx, Weber and Durkheim as sociology’s ‘founding fathers’ arose out of contingent and specific struggles among early- and mid-twentieth century American sociologists, which subsequently spread to other cultural contexts. Furthermore, inequalities are sustained not just through exclusion of non-white scholars from the academy, but through subtler forms of boundary work, in which thinkers from outside Western, white and male academia are treated as exogenous to sociology and social theory due to their career backgrounds and arguments (Bacevic, 2021; Collins, 2008). According to Hountondji (1995, p. 2), global disparities in knowledge production are sustained through an extractive model in which the relative scarcity of ‘theory-building infrastructures’ in the Global South – itself a legacy of colonialism – sustains an extractive and exploitative model of academic production wherein institutions from the South supply data for Northern researchers but remain marginal in data analysis and theory-generation. Moreover, in a process of ‘extroversion’, status disparities between research institutions located in the North and South encourage researchers from the South to seek recognition from the North, thereby reinforcing these status inequalities (Hountondji, 1995, p. 4).

Some proponents of postcolonial and decolonial theory have argued that foundational premises of the sociological canon must be challenged, through means such as the canonisation of anticolonial thinkers including Du Bois and Fanon (Bhabra & Holmwood, 2021; Burawoy, 2021; Go, 2020), and non-Western social scientists such as Ibn Khaldun and Ali Shariati (Alatas, 1995; Meghji, 2021). Some, like Grosfoguel (2011, p. 3), have dismissed earlier generations of postcolonial theorists for their reliance on European thinkers like Foucault, Derrida, Gramsci and Guha, which ‘betrayed their goal to produce subaltern studies’.

Whilst agreeing with the diagnosis of present global inequalities around knowledge production, my argument differs somewhat from these propositions. If sociology is to ‘decolonise’ through a broader recognition of ideas generated outside Western ‘professional sociology’ (Burawoy, 2005, p. 9), then it is equally limiting to subscribe to decolonial thought as the *exclusive* solution towards greater diversity of sociological thought.

Two questions are pertinent for complicating the oppositions of East–West, North–South and coloniser–colonised. Firstly, are these binaries useful for tracing the development of knowledge *everywhere*? Secondly, is it imperative to abandon *all* forms of Western knowledge as oppressive?

Concerning the first question, the division of the world of ideas into binaries of North–South, East–West, White–Black and Men–Women oversimplifies and obfuscates the complex histories of intellectual thought (Lehmann, 2022; Moosavi, 2023; Susen, 2020). An abstract idea does not have an intrinsic race or gender: ascriptions of ‘whiteness’ or ‘maleness’ to a particular theory, idea or school potentially excludes and erases intellectual contributions made by non-white and female scholars to these schools of thought. For instance, Connell, de Sousa Santos and Go do not devote much space to scholars that have developed conventionally ‘Western’ social scientific disciplines in non-Western countries. Yet, schools of thought – such as Marxism or Bourdieusian sociology, for example – have evolved transnationally in multiple national fields to address varying political and institutional concerns in different national contexts (Smith, 2022; Thorpe & Inglis, 2022).

This raises questions about how certain types of non-Western knowledge should be recognised as valid or useful for decolonising sociology. If only certain forms of Southern or decolonial knowledge are worth defending, it means that a large corpus of social scientific knowledge produced outside the Western/Anglophone sphere risks being subjected to a double erasure to the extent that many of these theories lie outside Anglophone debates as well as mainstream postcolonial or decolonial thought.

For instance, oppositions of East–West and North–South serve a limited purpose for understanding the complex history of sociological thought in East Asia, and it is perhaps because of this that East Asia appears only in passing in Connell’s sweeping account of ‘global sociology’. Formal social science developed in East Asia in the late nineteenth century through contact with Western thought, albeit not in the context of Western colonisation. In China, sociology was initially imported as a response to China’s military defeats and domestic social upheavals in the face of declining power (Xu et al., 2019). Western-educated scholars like Fei Xiaotong were among the first to innovate Western theories to explain indigenous cultural patterns (Sinha & Lakhnopal, 2022). By contrast, Japanese academic sociology was explicitly tied to the aims of modernisation and state building under the Meiji government to compete with Western powers; this would later provide ideological support for Japanese imperialism (Yazawa, 2014). Japan’s historical position as both a non-Western imperial power and part of the Global North is vital for understanding how Japanese scholars produced self-understandings of Japanese society before, during and after the Second World War. From the early twentieth century onwards, Japanese intellectuals produced various essentialist theories to prove Japan’s uniqueness and its military and economic prowess whilst simultaneously making racialist claims about Japan’s cultural superiority over its colonies.

Going beyond these essentialist characterisations, many East Asian scholars have since explored the ambivalent positions of East Asian societies as both non-Western and increasingly part of the economic Global North. Funabashi’s (1993) ‘Asianization of Asia’ thesis argues there has been growing regional interdependency and interconnectedness of Asian countries through a strengthening of economic, cultural and political ties.

Chang's (1999, 2010) 'compressed modernity' thesis captures the dramatic pace of social change in South Korea from the late twentieth century onwards. Drawing on Jeffrey Alexander's strong program, Ku's (2007, 2019) research on the civil sphere in Hong Kong has examined how civil actors use narratives and cultural codes to stake political claims, while Elliot et al.'s (2012) 'new individualism' explicates how individualism has accelerated in Japan to a new form which emphasises reinvention of the self through quick fixes and instantaneous transformations. Numerous works have developed concepts of collective memory and cultural trauma to examine the lasting legacies of Japanese colonialism and the Asia-Pacific War amidst deepening economic and political ties within the region (Hashimoto, 2015; Kim, 2016; Saito, 2017; Ushiyama, 2021).

Each of these theories has innovated 'Western' sociological and social theoretical traditions with reference to their respective cultural contexts without reproducing Western categories and stereotypes. In doing so, they have reversed the flow of knowledge from the centre to the periphery. Nevertheless, these knowledge claims – grounded in orthodox sociological theories and methodologies – would be disqualified as properly 'decolonial' or 'Southern' knowledge owing to their indebtedness to Western social theories. In other words, the decolonial presentation of North–South and East–West as trapped in a relationship of domination and resistance results in a selective understanding of what kind of knowledge from the East or South can be considered genuinely decolonial and emancipatory. This approach consequently risks creating a new 'abyssal line' and a logic of 'epistemic exclusion', in which certain forms of 'indigenous knowledge' are considered legitimate for challenging Western/Northern hegemony, while 'non-Western' knowledge (i.e. knowledge emerging from outside the geographical West) which does not conform to an explicitly decolonial stance is considered irrelevant, harmful or non-existent.

This double erasure is compounded by the fact that calls to decolonise sociology themselves tend to rely on, and reproduce, Northern-centric and Anglophone-centric institutional and linguistic hierarchies that characterise the sociological field today (Dirlik, 1994; Hanafi, 2020; Hanafi & Arvanitis, 2014; Jacobs & Mizrachi, 2020). Invocations to decolonise often gravitate towards thinkers who are already well-known among Western, Anglophone academics and institutions. For instance, Burawoy's (2021) proposition to canonise Du Bois uncritically reproduces the American-centric and Anglophone-centric dynamics of canon formation that Connell identifies: the introduction of Du Bois into the sociological canon may signify a further Anglicisation or Americanisation of sociology as much as the diversification of sociology. In this sense, Burawoy's exaltation of Du Bois is in tension with his earlier invocation to explore multiple sociological traditions around the world (Burawoy, 2008). Furthermore, Puwar (2020, p. 542) has highlighted how 'luminaries' who champion knowledge from the Global South could be complicit in the 'extraction of research' by importing well-known postcolonial authors from the periphery. A charitable reading of this dynamic is that it is a form of Northern generosity to act as an 'ambassador' by amplifying marginalised voices; a more critical reading might suggest that calls to re-introduce thinkers from the margins constitutes a form of academic 'Columbusing' – proclaiming to have discovered ideas which have long existed in non-Western societies. This article, too, is certainly not immune from such criticism.

The second question concerns whether all forms of Western epistemology should be rejected in favour of decoloniality; some decolonial theorists have argued or implied that Northern/Western epistemology is inescapable from its own cognitive biases that perpetuate global inequality (Connell, 2007b; De Sousa Santos, 2007; Grosfoguel, 2011). In some iterations of this argument, researchers cannot escape their Northern, white, male, colonial gaze to the extent that truly subaltern knowledge can only emerge through a wholesale rejection of Western epistemology and an incorporation of Southern standpoints. This position, however, neglects cultural and value pluralism that emerged from within Western humanities and social sciences. For instance, Vico and Herder both stressed that all cultures and peoples were unique, but not inferior: their work subsequently formed the foundation for Berlin's (2013) philosophical pluralism. In a similar vein, Needham (1954) demonstrated that scientific advances in China had preceded Europe's by centuries. Following Needham, Goody (2006) refutes a Eurocentric model of progress in which technological, economic and philosophical innovations have diffused from Europe to the rest of the world. Showing that many features of 'civilisation' such as capitalism, feudalism, science, technology and philosophy originated in different parts of Eurasia – often travelling from East to West – Goody debunks a teleological account of the world in which progress emanated from Europe.

The same can be said of certain strands of sociological thought, which are not straightforwardly as Eurocentric as some critics allege. As Kurasawa (2004) argues, thinkers including Marx, Weber, and Durkheim engaged with non-Western societies not as inferior versions but instead used knowledge about these societies to de-centre – one might say to provincialise – the Western experience as atypical rather than paradigmatic. In doing so, they took critical distance from existing norms to critique 'the social order established in their own times' (Kurasawa, 2004, p. 21). Moreover, where these authors' arguments have been shown to be problematic, piercing critique has emerged from within Western sociology itself; as Bhambra and Holmwood (2021) discuss, Mommsen's (1990) biography of Weber demonstrated that he was an unequivocal defender of German nationalism and imperialism. Likewise, Turner (1992, p. 59) refutes Weber's Orientalist characterisation of Islam as a martial religion to be inconsistent with historical evidence, arguing 'Weber's factual assertions about the social carriers of both Islam and Christianity are highly dubious'. While some authors categorically dismiss Western thought as antithetical to the goals of decolonisation, such an argument misses the critical function that so-called 'Western' scholarship has served to challenge Orientalist arguments of earlier generations of thinkers. Foundational figures in sociology may hardly be excused for their conceptual and ethical shortcomings; however, it would be equally misleading to state that anti-Eurocentric critique has *only* emerged from the East/South. As shall be shown below, Nakane's work should similarly be read as an attempt to overcome the limitations of Euro-American anthropology from simultaneously *within* Western scholarship and *outside* of it. Nakane innovated structural functionalism in an alternative direction to that envisioned by Durkheim or by his successors such as Talcott Parsons, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown and E. E. Evans-Pritchard: one which emphasised the importance of native concepts of hierarchy for explaining social order and in-group/out-group interactions.

An alternative strategy beyond choosing an allegiance to one side of the North–South, East–West divide is to reconstruct and retrace a broader range of intellectual developments across multiple national and transnational contexts. As Modood and Sealy (2022, p. 438) suggest, the next step of decolonisation entails moving beyond a ‘Eurocentric myopia’ in which white Europeans always appear as oppressors and perpetrators, and to consider alternative social patterns that have occurred outside of colonial relations between the West and the rest. In this vein, studying historic thinkers like Nakane opens doors towards a further provincialising of the West by broadening understandings of putatively ‘Western’ theories and ideas that have subsequently travelled and developed under various linguistic, geographical and historical conditions.

Expanding the ‘Third Space’ in sociology

A more capacious history of sociological thought can be reconstructed with reference to an alternative strand of postcolonial theory to decolonial theory. Rather than reifying the binaries of North–South, East–West, White–Black and Metropole–Periphery, it looks at what lies in between these opposites, and what emerges out of an interaction of these polarities. This ‘Third Space’, a term coined by Bhabha, is a liminal space characterised by ambivalence that is neither fully Northern nor Southern, neither fully White nor Black, neither fully Eastern nor Western, but created out of an interaction of both polarities.

In the influential book *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha (2004, p. 28) poses a question: can ‘the aim of freedom of knowledge be the simple inversion of the relation of oppressor and oppressed, centre and periphery, negative image and positive image?’ His answer is ‘no’. For Bhabha, postcoloniality is a hybrid product of contact between coloniser and the colonised, not available in its ‘pure’ form. Hybridity, in Bhabha’s definition, refers to ambivalence and mixture as default features of colonised societies, resulting in an emergent Third Space: ‘all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation’ (Bhabha, 2004, pp. 54–55). Bhabha argues that the Third Space contains characters of both coloniser and colonised cultures, carrying with it a destabilising potential to subvert colonial knowledge.

Complementing Bhabha’s approach, Gilroy and Appiah’s postcolonial cosmopolitanism highlights intercultural contact and exchange as integral features for the development of human cultures. They caution against the representation of ‘pure’ non-Western or Southern cultures, as it risks homogenising the inherent plurality and diversity of these societies. Gilroy warns that broad categories such as ‘blackness’ obscure the fact that non-Western cultures are ‘internally divided: by class, sexuality, gender, age, ethnicity, economics, and political consciousness’ (Gilroy, 2003, p. 32, emphasis in original). Similarly, Appiah holds that transcultural encounters characterised by ‘contamination’ form the basis for writing a cosmopolitan history. If cultural purity is a myth, then social and cultural change must be reconceptualised as ‘a gradual transformation from one mixture to a new mixture’ which occurs through ‘conversations that occur across cultural boundaries’ (Appiah, 2006, p. 37). Taken together, the authors draw out an alternative history of the world which explores – and celebrates – hybridity, synthesis and transnational exchange as the basis for the evolution of cultures without downplaying the harmful legacies of colonialism and racism.

Building on Bhabha's original formulation, I operationalise the Third Space through three dimensions of sociological ideas that have been produced outside the West: disciplinarity, mutability and reversed directionality. Whereas Bhabha conceptualises the Third Space as a space of contact between coloniser and colonised, I suggest a broader definition to include ideas from societies which had contact with the West but were not colonised. In this definition, the Third Space is primarily a discursive and abstract space which describes an orientation and a mode of thinking, in which geography plays an important but not the only role. Many examples of Third Space thinkers discussed below are geographically mobile non-Western scholars who received formal education in the West or from Western institutions, but the definition need not include or exclude authors based on their nationality, race or gender. Moreover, this definition encompasses iterations of anticolonial thought which converse with Western epistemology, such as Frantz Fanon's development of psychiatry and Steve Biko's articulation of Black Consciousness as a development of existential philosophy (More, 2004). This definition is intentionally and necessarily capacious to avoid ascribing Western-ness or non-Western-ness to a particular idea or thinker.

Disciplinarity

Firstly, the Third Space responds to (without necessarily agreeing with) specific disciplinary developments in the 'West'. Third Space ideas are distinct from decolonial knowledge to the extent that they are not outright refutations of existing social scientific theories and methodologies, but offer rebuttals, revisions and refinements of disciplines, methodologies, concepts and schools of thought. To this end, Third Space thinking does not contest the disciplinary boundaries and conventions of Western social sciences *in toto*.

Chang (1999), for example, contends that South Korea's structural transformation has been qualitatively different to Western economies, with dramatic political, economic, social and familial changes taking place at an accelerated pace over decades rather than centuries. Building on, rather than rejecting, earlier theories of modernisation and reflexive modernisation, Chang offers an alternative and context-specific theory of modernisation which is nevertheless rooted in classical and contemporary social theory. Similarly, Baert et al.'s (2022, 2024) existence theory develops existential philosophy to sociologically analyse individual pursuits of lifegoals ('existential milestones') and the normative struggles surrounding these goals across different parts of the world.

Mutability

Secondly, Third Space ideas problematise straightforward applications of 'Western' theories to other cultural contexts. Instead of treating Western knowledge as *doxa* to be defended, Third Space scholars urge revisions and modifications of analytical concepts and go beyond merely using non-Western societies as laboratories from which to extract data. In *Japanese Society*, Nakane questions whether Western units of measurement are suitable for studying non-Western societies. Using the metaphor of a kimono, Nakane points out that measuring a kimono using the Western metric system inevitably creates

'odds and ends' (Nakane, 1965, p. 197), whereas using native Japanese units does not result in fractional numbers.² Applying this logic, Nakane urges that there needs to be 'a measure which is appropriate to the structure of Japanese society' (Nakane, 1965, p. 198). In another example, Lo and Fan (2010) argue that Western norms which emphasise 'liberty' as the primary axis for civility are not immediately transferable to non-Western societies, especially relatively young postcolonial democracies with internally divided civil societies. Through a study of civil codes in Hong Kong and Taiwan, they demonstrate that feminist civil society actors have developed new positive civil virtues, which have emerged out of 'hybridization between the dominant code of liberty and an alternative, feminized code of caring' (Lo & Fan, 2010, p. 188) that align with existing norms and gender roles.

Reversed directionality

Thirdly, the Third Space develops indigenous concepts as valid standpoints from which to construct general social scientific knowledge. It means to use indigenous concepts as legitimate explanations (*explans*) for social phenomena, rather than objects to be explained (*explanandum*). In an illustrative example, Qi (2013) takes the Chinese concept of *guanxi* as a starting point for generating new sociological insights. *Guanxi* describes particularistic ties or personal networks, encompassing meanings which are difficult to translate and take multiple forms. It includes both close, emotional bonds and moral obligations as well as long, stable relationships; both are distinguished by 'favour-seeking' and 'rent-seeking' (Qi, 2013, p. 310). Qi's innovation is not simply to highlight the importance of *guanxi* for Chinese cultures, but to theorise *guanxi* as a general form of social capital which is potentially applicable in other global contexts. Qi argues that *guanxi* captures aspects of interpersonal ties such as informality, implicit obligations and emotional attachments that existing definitions of social capital do not adequately address. This is not to suggest *guanxi* necessarily exists in non-Chinese societies: such an argument would be no more than another form of conceptual imperialism. Instead, as Qi argues, *guanxi* helps to refine existing theories of social capital and trust beyond wholesale characterisations of cultures as either individualistic or collectivistic.

The three characteristics of the Third Space identified here complement Mignolo's (2010) 'decolonial cosmopolitanism' in which indigenous concepts are used to challenge Eurocentrism without recourse to essentialist representations of non-Western 'Natives'. At the same time, this approach rejects the condescending view that non-Western scholars practising Western scholarship 'betray' (Grosfoguel, 2011, p. 3) indigenous interests or that they are trapped in a 'captive mind' (Alatas, 1995, p. 90) or a state of 'dependency' (Alatas, 2003). Instead, acknowledging that the Third Space exists means writing a pluralistic history of sociology and social theory in different national and transnational contexts (Hanafi, 2020; Puwar, 2020) and casting a wider net of what constitutes valid sociological knowledge beyond the Anglophone-centred academy. Moreover, the Third Space expands the scope of theoretical critique – which often focuses on originators of intellectual traditions – to examine the long-term trajectories of schools of thought on transnational and global levels. Such an approach could lead to more nuanced understandings of how certain theorists and theories enter a particular national academic field

and develop in different directions to those envisioned by their originators (Santoro et al., 2018).

Japan as a ‘vertical society’

Nakane Chie (1926–2021) was born in Tokyo to a well-to-do family. Her father was a lawyer with liberal views who was invested in her education at a time when women’s access to education was restricted (MacFarlane, 2010). Having spent part of her childhood in Japanese-occupied Beijing in the early days of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45), she returned to Tokyo during the Second World War and graduated from Tsuda University, a prestigious private women’s university. Following Japan’s defeat, the American-led occupation opened higher education to women. Nakane became one of the first cohorts of women to be admitted to Tokyo University, where she graduated with a bachelor’s degree in Oriental history (MacFarlane, 2010). Typical of up-and-coming academics of her generation – but atypical for women – she continued her studies abroad, conducting fieldwork in India for several years. A peripatetic scholar, Nakane cultivated an international network with leading anthropologists including Raymond Firth, Edmund Leach and Sol Tax, taking up visiting positions in London, Chicago and Rome before returning to Japan where she continued her fieldwork on rural communities (Hendry, 1989). Later, Nakane became the first female professor at Tokyo University, and the first female academic to be elected to the Japan Academy. Nakane’s breakthrough work was *Tate shakai no ningen kankei* [‘Human relations in vertical society’] (Nakane, 1967), which was translated into English in 1970 as *Japanese Society* (Nakane, 1970) following its domestic success.³ Nakane recalls that at the time there was a dearth of books ‘by Japanese writers, and I felt uneasy about the presentations of Japanese society so far produced by Western (mostly American) specialists on Japan’ (Hendry, 1989, p. 645).

Nakane’s work must be read as a response to, and a reflection of, increasing domestic concerns about discovering ‘Japanese-ness’ in the post-war period, as well as a response to Western anthropology, dominated by white academics writing about non-Western societies, including works such as Benedict’s (1967) influential book *Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, an ethnological account prepared for the Allied Occupation in Japan (1945–52) but which became a catalyst for numerous works within Japan on its supposed cultural distinctiveness (Robertson, 2005). During this time of sustained economic recovery and optimism about the future, domestic discourse soon turned to questions such as how Japan had become economically successful after its complete defeat in the Second World War and what made Japan different from ‘the West’ (itself an imagined, homogeneous entity). *Nihonjinron* – essentialist theories of Japaneseness – became a dominant topic of discussion until being subjected to systematic critique in the 1980s (Goodman, 2005). As Shimizu (2022, p. 159) writes, Nakane’s intervention was a rejection of an ‘inferiority complex’ that Japan was at a lower stage of social evolution and that it must follow a Euro-American model of civil society to develop.

Japanese Society, written for a general audience, provides an accessible account of contemporary Japan using anthropological theory and a wide range of personal anecdotes, vignettes and imagined scenarios. The book follows the British structural functionalist method of identifying underlying rules of social structure, especially kinship

groups and organisations (Radcliffe-Brown, 1958). However, Nakane departs from her British mentors as she urges a distinctly anti-Eurocentric approach for studying her own society. Nakane (1965, p. 197) observes that ‘social science has its background in the “West”. . . . However, when these theories are applied to a different society, different in history and background . . . there is naturally a considerable discrepancy between the extracted theory and its reality in social phenomena.’

Nakane appears to implicitly critique American cultural anthropological accounts of Japan such as Benedict’s (1967) depiction of Japanese culture as driven by a desire to save face. Instead, Nakane argues that Japan is unique in its *social structure*, not its *culture*, and she is presenting a ‘structural, not a cultural or historical explanation’ (Nakane, 1970, p. x).

Nakane’s thesis is that while *types* of social organisation have changed in modern Japan, underlying *principles* for group formation and group membership have fundamentally remained unchanged. Nakane’s arguments concern the identification of in-group and out-group relations – which is characterised by mutually exclusive membership and cultural homogeneity – on the one hand, and inter-group and intra-group social dynamics which are defined primarily by strong vertical ties and weak or non-existent horizontal ties, on the other hand.

Nakane begins by separating the ‘frame’ (*waku/ba*), one’s relational location with reference to a group, and ‘attribute’ (*shikaku*), a marker of one’s rank and qualification. The social ‘frame’, rather than one’s attributes, defines how an individual interacts with others from a different organisation. Individuals tend to introduce themselves by their affiliation, not rank: ‘Rather than saying, “I am a type-setter” or “I am a filing clerk”, he is likely to say, “I am from B Publishing Group” or “I belong to S Company”’ (Nakane, 1970, p. 3). Because individuals primarily identify with the organisation to which they belong rather than their role, there is relatively little interaction between individuals in similar occupational positions across different organisations.

To explain this phenomenon, Nakane argues that all forms of social organisation – including modern corporations, which inform the bulk of her analysis – are grounded in the patriarchal concept of the traditional, rural family unit known as *ie*, ‘a concept which penetrates every nook and cranny of Japanese society . . . [and] has implications beyond those to be found in the English words “household” or “family”’ (Nakane, 1970, p. 4). *Ie* functions as a master metaphor for social relationships and organisational structures, pervading all forms of modern organisations and relationships such as bureaucracies and corporations even after traditional rural lifestyles have declined.

The metaphor of organisations as *ie* establishes vertical relationships of superiors and subordinates. One’s relative social position is determined by figurative parent (*oyabun*) and child (*kobun*) ties which permeate all forms of social organisation, such as schools, corporations and political parties. One’s status is largely determined by age and cohort; one’s rank ‘is applied to all circumstances, and to a great extent controls social life and individual activity’ (Nakane, 1970, p. 29). For example, corporations use the metaphor of the family to demand unquestioning loyalty from employees in exchange for lifelong employment and various benefits. Within such organisations, seniority is determined primarily by age (*nenkō joretsu*), hence, ‘cohorts’ – older cohort (*senpai*), younger cohort (*kōhai*) and same cohort (*dōki*) – become integral to intra-organisational interactions.

Thus, Nakane holds, 'without either "frame" or "vertical links", it seems to be almost impossible for the Japanese to form a functional group' (Nakane, 1970, p. 59); this leads Nakane to characterise Japan as a quintessentially 'vertical society' (*tate shakai*).

Nakane points out that vertical relations typically create very weak or non-existent horizontal ties among subordinate strata at both intra-group and inter-group levels. According to Nakane, the basic structure of a group is a triangular shape without the base, or an 'inverted V' (Nakane, 1970, p. 40). Larger organisations are made possible by expanding chains of command between superiors and subordinates across multiple layers without creating horizontal ties among subordinate strata. This results in weak ties across different parts of an organisation, such as between departments in a corporation or factions within a political party, often resulting in intra-organisational rivalries.

Status symbols such as capital, prestige and age are also important in interactions between organisations, as they rank each other relationally in terms of their perceived prestige. For example, older and bigger corporations are held in higher esteem than newer, smaller firms. This kind of inter-group competition provides groups with a strong sense of internal coherence and solidarity, as 'the enemy is always to be found among those in the same category' such as competing firms in the same industry (Nakane, 1970, pp. 87–88). At the same time, competition over prestige serves to establish 'tiers' of organisations within a given industry or field such as corporations, government ministries, schools and universities.

Throughout the book, Nakane emphasises cross-cultural differences between Western societies and Japan. Nakane consistently invokes Orientalist tropes to describe Japan's organisational structure as fundamentally irreconcilable with Western norms. Nakane adopts and reproduces oppositions of East and West by describing Japan as collectivist (e.g. 'Action should be always for the group, not calculated in terms of the individual') (Nakane, 1970, p. 83). Nakane characterises Japanese organisations as fundamentally emotional, rather than driven by rational interests. As such, decisions must be made on emotional factors towards achieving consensus. This results in a fundamentally irrational, anti-meritocratic and anti-charismatic impetus within groups which values group harmony above individual leadership; the quality of leadership is determined not by one's charisma but 'his [*sic*] ability to understand and attract his men' (Nakane, 1970, p. 70). Moreover, given the Japanese proclivity towards social harmony, Nakane sees Western principles of democracy based on oppositional politics as 'extremely difficult' (Nakane, 1970, p. 147).

Nakane's analysis has implications for broader debates on theories of modernisation and industrialisation. Nakane explicitly rejects the 'stereotyped view that modernization or urbanization weakens kinship ties, and creates a new type of social organization on entirely different bases' (Nakane, 1970, p. 8). Despite Nakane's and Parsons' shared intellectual debt to Durkheim, Nakane challenges the Parsonian theory of modernisation in which pre-modern societies increasingly shed rural traditions through industrialisation and urbanisation (see also Nakane, 1965). Instead, Nakane argues that modernisation did not fundamentally change the nature of Japanese social structure: Japan 'imported many western cultural elements, but these were and are always partial and segmentary and are never in the form of an operating system . . . the basic social grammar has hardly been affected' (Nakane, 1970, p. 149). Furthermore, Nakane rejects the Marxist proposition

that economic base determines the cultural superstructure; contrary to Marxist teleological accounts of industrialisation, Nakane holds up Japan as ‘an example of industrialization and the importation of western culture not effecting changes in the basic cultural structure’ (Nakane, 1970, p. 149). Upending the Marxist base–superstructure dichotomy, Nakane places the cultural structure (that is, the *ie* system) as the base upon which economic superstructures are built.

Nakane Chie as a Third Space thinker – innovations and limitations

Japanese Society proved to be extremely popular in Japan, seemingly providing an intuitive explanation of how ordinary Japanese people navigated organisations and social hierarchies. It sold over a million copies and is still in print more than 50 years later (Nakane, 2019). The concept of Japan as a vertical society has become a touchstone for both lay and academic discussions about ‘Japaneseness’ (Goodman, 2006; Hata & Smith, 1986).

Although the theory contains limitations which will be discussed below, Nakane’s book is an exemplar of the Third Space. Firstly, Nakane offers a novel theory of Japanese social structure, using anthropological methods established by British structural anthropologists to discover underlying patterns of social groups and organisations. Employing an (auto)ethnographic approach, Nakane presents her findings both as an insider (as a Japanese person) and outsider (an ethnographer with specialist skills and knowledge) to present a novel conceptualisation of Japanese social structure. In this sense, Nakane remains in fundamental agreement about the goals of social science and does not reject it as inherently oppressive or exclusionary. Instead, Nakane suggested that one should approach ‘Western works as the common properties of colleagues on a worldwide scale, rather than as products of another camp’ (Nakane, 1974, p. 71), as Sztompka (2011) similarly argues. Nakane supported an interaction of ideas between East and West as a productive exchange leading towards more complex and sophisticated comparative research, rather than as agonistic struggle between oppressive and oppressed knowledge.

Secondly, in challenging the general applicability of Western-derived theories, Nakane insisted that true universality is not possible without modifying Western theories to reflect different cultural contexts. Demonstrating that *ie* is much more expansive than the English translations of ‘household’ or ‘family’, Nakane highlighted the uniqueness of Japanese culture, urging that theories of industrialisation and modernisation must be modified to explain specific cultural and historical contexts. Rejecting the teleology of modernisation theory, Nakane refutes that cultural norms are merely ‘pre-modern’ relics destined to disappear when modernisation is complete; rather, these values ‘are deeply rooted and aid or hinder . . . the process of modernization’ (Nakane, 1970, p. ix).

Thirdly, Nakane’s book contributed to reversing the direction of knowledge production from the metropole to the periphery. The book is notable for developing anthropological theories which make Japanese society and culture intelligible for Japanese audiences using emic concepts, instead of simply confirming or denying existing etic accounts of Japanese society. Her interventions responded to a collective uneasiness that Japanese and ‘anthropologists of other Asian countries experience a tension between the

methodological concerns of Western anthropologists and the overwhelming complexity of their own cultures' (Nakane, 1974, p. 70). Nakane challenged this Eurocentric bias throughout her career and called for fellow researchers in Japan to 'have a wider scope extending to neighbouring areas, particularly the Far East and Southeast Asia' (Nakane, 1974, p. 69) for developing comparative perspectives.

Despite the deep and widespread impact of her works, Nakane's writings are not without flaws, and they have been the subject of critical debate. For instance, in adopting a structural anthropological approach, Nakane presumes the existence of a stable society over several centuries, which in turn assumes cultural homogeneity and continuity (Hata & Smith, 1986). Reflective of Japan's ambivalent position as a non-Western Northern economy and a former coloniser, certain aspects of Nakane's functionalism reproduce the perspective of the coloniser, rather than the colonised. Nakane's representation of Japan as a fundamentally harmonious society does not include histories of conflicts within Japan or Japan's expansionist history of imperialism and settler-colonialism, nor does it discuss its racialist policies against Chinese, Taiwanese and Korean colonial subjects. While Nakane does discuss the Japanese military in passing, the discussion is limited to intra-group and interpersonal relations and does not extend to its military campaigns across the Asia-Pacific (Nakane, 1970, pp. 25, 44–45, 70). Similarly, Nakane neglects to consider how ruling classes from the Meiji era onwards mobilised the metaphor of *ie* to repress dissent and justify Japanese imperialism (Jensen, 1980; Lo & Bettinger, 2001). Consequently, Nakane's use of native concepts is more specifically an extension of the Japanese ethnic majority perspective as it responds to the Western gaze, and does not acknowledge the existence of other Indigenous peoples such as Ainu and Ryukyuan who were unilaterally incorporated into Japanese territories in the nineteenth century (Goodman, 2005).

In addition to Nakane's empirical observations, her characterisation of Japanese culture illustrates the difficulties of insisting upon using native concepts as automatically valid sociological theories. Throughout the book, Nakane reproduces Orientalist archetypes to show that Japanese modernity is qualitatively distinct from Western counterparts. Nakane characterises Japan as emotional, collectivist, anti-meritocratic and consensus-based – opposites of an undifferentiated 'West', which is rational, individualistic, meritocratic and driven by competition. As discussed above, Nakane's book belongs to a genre of popular non-fiction known as 'theories of Japaneseness' (*Nihonjinron*) which flourished in the 1960s and 1970s, and which made various ethnocentric and essentialist claims about Japanese society and people. As Goodman (2006, p. 70) notes, 'works such as those produced by Nakane . . . did more to *construct* Japanese culture than to *explain* it – they rarely addressed the issue of the *consumption* of these images'. Whatever Nakane's original intentions within Japan, her ideas indirectly contributed to a culture of nationalist (and often right-wing) discourses which situated Japan as unique from – and often, superior to – other cultures. For Western readers, the book also potentially confirmed pre-existing exoticised stereotypes about Japanese society and people. Nevertheless, the arguments contained in *Japanese Society* continue to have contemporary relevance. Until her death in 2021, Nakane (2019) continued to illustrate the pervasiveness of the vertical logic in Japanese organisations. Foregrounding the tight-knit and often stifling vertical relations in schools, bureaucracies and corporations, she argues

that many contemporary problems, such as cronyism and corruption, death from overwork (*karōshi*), status disparities between permanent and temporary contract employees, and bullying in schools, can be explained through dysfunctions created through the prioritisation of the frame/place (*waku/ba*) over individuals' rights and wellbeing.

Conclusions

The under-representation of non-Western knowledge and scholars in global academic discourse remains a pressing issue. Reflecting on the experiences of sociologists of China, Xu et al. (2019, p. 403) write that they 'may feel the constant pressure of giving satisfying answers to questions like "Why China?" while their European or American colleagues are less frequently asked to justify their case choices'. This is likely a common experience for sociologists researching non-Western societies in general. To practise decolonised sociology is to ask back, 'why not?'

I have argued that a more diverse history of sociology and social theory is made possible through an exploration of putatively 'Western' knowledge as it developed against Eurocentrism. Nakane Chie's *Japanese Society* is an exemplar of the conceptually rich and empirically varied Third Space between the dichotomies of North–South, East–West and Metropole–Periphery. As Bhabha argued, through the Third Space 'we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves' (Bhabha, 2004, p. 56). I have discussed Nakane's theory of vertical society as an instructive case of hybridity and contamination in which intercultural contacts cross-fertilise to create new insights and perspectives.

Nakane's innovation of structural functionalism demonstrates that it is counterproductive to assume that 'pure lines of North and South can be drawn to expunge scholarship of the former' (Puwar, 2020, p. 552). Nakane's development of functionalism for explaining social order in Japan is a reminder that while structural functionalism began with Durkheim and developed in Europe and North America, it certainly did not end with Parsons or Radcliffe-Brown. Imposing an impermeable wall between North–South, East–West, White–Black and Metropole–Periphery means to epistemologically exclude certain ideas and philosophies that lie in the interstices of these dichotomies, resulting in a distorted account of a global history of sociological ideas.

Works like Nakane's raise questions about the extent to which Western theories are applicable to non-Western societies, and whether or not indigenous concepts can be used to revise and improve upon existing theories and thereby reverse the direction of the flow of knowledge. In this respect, *Japanese Society* remains a sociological classic, not just about Japan but about modernisation, corporate culture and families. It represents a landmark attempt to negotiate the differences and presumptions of both 'Eastern' and 'Western' knowledge. Although Nakane's reliance on essentialist and Orientalist stereotypes is unfortunate, her argument that the Western gaze should not supersede indigenous perspectives and that anti-Eurocentric thinking should not be driven by nationalist allegiances holds value today. Nakane saw Western theory not as a site of oppression or complicity, but as another tool to grasp social reality more accurately. To this end, it is equally important that Nakane's ideas are not 'exoticised' as being exogenous to Western knowledge. Instead, Third Space ideas could be utilised for

re-imagining and re-evaluating the purpose of the existing sociological canon as a global heritage to address contemporary sociological issues and questions, and for developing *longue durée* histories of sociological schools across the globe. This need not be constrained to a historical exercise in reconstructing these hidden trajectories of schools of thought in non-Western contexts. Instead, the Third Space could serve to destabilise what constitutes legitimate sociological theory and social theory and to reflect on which geographical regions can serve as the basis from which to generate theories. As decolonial authors have forcefully and convincingly argued, re-examining heterodox ‘classics’ outside the Anglophone canon can contribute to ongoing debates on what should be included or excluded as sociology; to this end, Third Space authors like Nakane open new possibilities to re-imagine alternative histories – and perhaps more importantly, alternative futures – of social scientific thought.

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Notes

1. I use ‘indigenous’ here as a descriptive term for peoples native to a particular geographical location rather than to refer to colonised and oppressed populations (that might be grouped as ‘Indigenous’). In the Japanese context, the ethnic Japanese are indigenous to the main islands of Honshu, Kyushu and Shikoku. In the nineteenth century, Japan colonised and settled in present-day Hokkaido and Okinawa, which are home to the Ainu and Ryukyuan Indigenous peoples respectively.
2. The kimono metaphor, which appears in the introduction of the Japanese edition of *Vertical Society*, is absent in the English translation. However, the same metaphor appears in a shorter magazine article published in English in 1965. See Hata and Smith (1986).
3. There are numerous differences in the Japanese and English versions, with the English version taking on a more academic tone. See Hata and Smith (1986) for a detailed discussion.

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