An Introduction to Japanese Society
Second edition

In the second edition of this book, which has become essential reading for students of Japanese society, Yoshio Sugimoto uses both English and Japanese sources to update and expand upon his original narrative. In so doing, he challenges the traditional notion that Japan comprises a uniform culture, and draws attention to its subcultural diversity and class competition. The author also examines what he calls “friendly authoritarianism” – the force behind the Japanese tendency to be ostensibly faithful to particular groups and companies. *An Introduction to Japanese Society* offers a wide-ranging approach to all aspects of Japanese society, with chapters on class, geographical and generational variation, work, education, gender, minorities, popular culture and the establishment.

**Yoshio Sugimoto** is Professor of Sociology at La Trobe University, Melbourne.
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An Introduction to Japanese Society
Second Edition

Yoshio Sugimoto
La Trobe University
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Preface to the first edition

The images of Japanese society both in Japan and abroad have fluctuated over time under shifting intellectual contexts. Subjected to changes in Japan’s political economy and international status, the portrait of Japan has swung back and forth like a pendulum between adoration and antipathy. The theoretical framework of Japan analysis has also fluctuated between two poles: particularistic characterizations and universalistic generalizations. Conscious of these competing perspectives, one inevitably has to be selective in producing a general textbook. In writing this book which delineates such a wide range of aspects of Japanese society as generation, occupation, education, gender, minority, and popular culture, I attempted to restore three balances in the study of contemporary Japan.

The first of these concerns the degree of homogeneity of Japanese society. The view that Japan comprises an extremely uniform culture continues to be both dominant and pervasive despite several studies which questioned and challenged this perspective in the 1980s and the early 1990s. The competing multicultural paradigm which highlights the internal variation and stratification of Japanese society remains peripheral and does not appear to have received the attention it deserves. This book makes a modest attempt to rectify this imbalance by focusing on subcultural diversity and class competition within Japanese society.

The second bias pertains to the continuing dominance of the so-called group model of Japanese society, which maintains that the Japanese are essentially faithful to their groups and uniquely oriented to their consensual integration. While the Japanese undoubtedly show group behavior in many situations, many questions remain unanswered as to whether Japanese groupism is uniquely high in comparison with other countries. It also continues to be debatable whether the Japanese act in a groupist way in all spheres of life, whether different social groups in Japan exhibit different levels of groupism, and whether the Japanese behave in groups on the basis of voluntary commitment or under the constraint of ideological manipulation. This text underscores
the significance of these reservations and presents a countervailing perspective against the group model.

Finally, this book endeavors to strike a reasonable balance between Japanese- and English-language publications as sources of information and inspiration. Though designed as an introductory text, it invites readers to familiarize themselves with contemporary debates and controversies among Japanese analysts who write in Japanese. Many students in the English-language world would find it difficult to read Japanese publications in Japanese, though they can pursue their interests in reading books and articles in English. Students just beginning in Japanese studies will benefit greatly from having a balanced understanding of both insiders’ and outsiders’ views of Japanese society. For this purpose, I have introduced a number of Japanese emic concepts and propositions to demonstrate Japanese perceptions and self-images.

Financial support from the Australian Research Council enabled me to collect and examine data for this study. Thanks to the ARC grant, I have been able to travel several times between Melbourne and Tokyo, live in Japan for about half of the last three years and exchange views with Japanese academics on various issues. A fellowship from the Japan Foundation was also instrumental in implementing the initial phase of the study. I am grateful for the support of these organizations.

The multicultural environment in Australia where I have lived for nearly a quarter of a century has influenced my views of Japanese society. I am deeply indebted to the intellectual vitality of my colleagues in Melbourne and Canberra. My partner, Machiko Sato, who has published several books for the Japanese readership, has given me continuous encouragement, thoughtful criticism, and invaluable insight, for which I am most thankful. I have also benefitted from many lively discussions with my students at La Trobe University (Melbourne), Universität Heidelberg (Germany), and the University of Tsukuba (Japan) on the points contained in this study.

Writing a book is always a liberating experience for me. I hope that readers share some of my delight in treading the paths outlined in this text.

Yoshio Sugimoto, 1997
Preface to the second edition

Five years is a long period in the social sciences. So many changes have taken place in Japanese society since the publication of the first edition of this book in 1997 that I felt obliged to update factual data and statistical information for it to reflect Japan’s contemporary landscape with accuracy. The structure and organization of the book remains unchanged since there was no need to alter the framework of analysis.

Most government ministries changed their names because of the amalgamations that took place at the beginning of 2001. In citing government publications in the References and Endnotes, I have used the names of the ministries at the time of publication.

For this edition, special thanks are due to two copy editors, Justine Norton and Karl Smith, who have kindly paid scrupulous attention to every detail of the text.

To my pleasant surprise, this book has been used in an unexpectedly large number of university courses around the world. I would be happy to receive feedback from readers to improve the quality of future editions.

Yoshio Sugimoto, 2002