1 The Japan Phenomenon and the Social Sciences

I Multicultural Japan

1 Sampling Problem and the Question of Visibility

Hypothetical questions sometimes inspire the sociological imagination. Suppose that a being from a different planet arrived in Japan and wanted to meet a typical Japanese, one who best typified the Japanese adult population. Whom should the social scientists choose? To answer this question, several factors would have to be considered: gender, occupation, educational background, and so on.

To begin with, the person chosen should be a female, because women outnumber men in Japan; sixty-five million women and sixty-two million men live in the Japanese archipelago. With regard to occupation, she would definitely not be employed in a large corporation but would work in a small enterprise, since only one in eight workers is employed in a company with three hundred or more employees. Nor would she be guaranteed lifetime employment, since those who work under this arrangement are concentrated in large companies. She would not belong to a labor union, because less than one in five Japanese workers is unionized. She would not be university educated. Less than one in five Japanese have a university degree, even though today nearly half of the younger generation gains admission to a university for a four-year degree. Table 1.1 summarizes these demographic realities.

The identification of the average Japanese would certainly involve much more complicated quantitative analysis. But the alien would come closer to the 'center' of the Japanese population by choosing a female, non-unionized, and non-permanent employee in a small business without university education than by choosing a male, unionized, permanent employee with a university degree working for a large company.

When outsiders visualize the Japanese, however, they tend to think of men rather than women, career employees in large companies rather than non-permanent workers in small firms, and university graduates rather than high school leavers, for these are the images presented on

Table 1.1 Japan's population distribution in millions

Variable	Majority	Minority
Gender[a]	Female: 65.40 (51%)	Male: 61.93 (49%)
Employees by firm size[b]	Small firms[e]: 47.99 (85%)	Large firms[f]: 8.3 (15%)
Education[c]	Without university education: 70.8 (80%)	University graduates: 17.7 (20%)
Union membership[d]	No: 45.3 (82%)	Yes: 9.9 (18%)

Sources:

[a] Population estimates (final) as of 1 March 2013, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2013.

[b] Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications in 2012. The data cover all private-sector establishments except individual proprietorship establishments in agriculture, forestry, and fishery.

[c] Population census conducted in 2010. University graduates do not include those who have completed junior college and technical college. Figures do not include pupils and students currently enrolled in schools and pre-school children.

[d] Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in 2012.

[e] Less than 300 employees.

[f] More than 300 employees.

television and in newspaper and magazine articles. Some academic studies have also attempted to generalize about Japanese society on the basis of observations of its male elite sector and have thereby helped to reinforce this sampling bias.[1] Moreover, because a particular cluster of individuals who occupy high positions in a large company have greater access to mass media and publicity, the lifestyles and value orientations of those in that cluster have acquired a disproportionately high level of visibility in the analysis of Japanese society at the expense of the wider cross-section of its population.

Since the 1990s, a fresh trend – possibly a new stereotype – has spread, with images of Japanese obsessed with *manga* and *anime* and their associated merchandise, and with the portrayal of Japan as the land of fanatic consumers of pop culture. *Manga* stands out within Japan's diverse pop culture through the diffusion of *manga*-based images around the world. Although no reliable information about the exact numbers of *manga* readers in Japan is available, Table 1.2 shows findings related to the question. Given that some figures include readers of non-*manga* magazines and books, it is far from the case that *manga* readers can be classified as a representative majority of the Japanese at large, let alone as typical. In spite of worldwide awareness, they are most likely a minority of the population. Furthermore, as Figure 1.1 exhibits, the consumption of *manga* magazines and *manga* books in Japan has declined over time, even while their visibility has increased abroad.

[1] See Mouer and Sugimoto 1986, p. 150.

Table 1.2 *Manga* readership in Japan

Category of reader	% of population
Those who read books (including *manga*) as hobbies (2011)[a]	39.7
Those who read magazines, *manga or* books for more than fifteen minutes per day on weekdays (2010 and 2005)[b]	17.9 and 18.3
Those who read one or more *manga* books per month (2011)[c]	31.5

Sources:
[a] Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2012, Questionnaire A.
[b] NHK Hōsō Bunka Kenkyūsho (NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute) 2011, p. 190, and 2006, p. 214.
[c] Nihon Shoseki Shuppan Kyōkai (Japan Book Publishers Association) 2011, p. 125.
Note: The third survey above is based on online non-random samples.

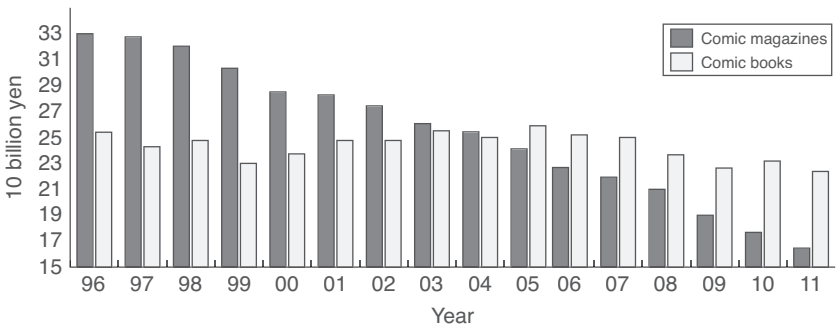

Figure 1.1 Estimated sales of comic books and comic magazines in Japan (1996–2011)
Source: Research Institute for Publications 2010, p. 230.

2 Homogeneity Assumptions and the Group Model

Although a few competing frameworks for understanding Japanese society are discernible, a discourse that is often labeled as *Nihonjinron* (theories of Japaneseness) has persisted as the long-lasting paradigm that regards Japan as a uniquely homogeneous society. The so-called group model of Japanese society represents the most explicit and coherent formulation of this line of argument, although it has drawn serious criticism from empirical, methodological, and ideological angles.[2] Put most succinctly, the model is based upon three lines of argument.

First, at the individual, psychological level, the Japanese are portrayed as having a personality which lacks a fully developed ego or independent self. The best known example of this claim is Doi's notion of *amae*,

[2] Befu 1980; Sugimoto and Mouer 1980; Dale 1986; Sugimoto and Mouer 1989; Yoshino 1992. See also Neustupný 1980.

which refers to the allegedly unique psychological inclination among the Japanese to seek emotional satisfaction by prevailing upon and depending on their superiors.[3] They feel no need for any explicit demonstration of individuality. Loyalty to the group is a primary value. Giving oneself to the promotion and realization of the group's goals imbues the Japanese with a special psychological satisfaction.

Second, at the interpersonal, intra-group level, human interaction is depicted in terms of Japanese group orientation. According to Nakane, for example, the Japanese attach great importance to the maintenance of harmony *within* the group. To that end, relationships between superiors and inferiors are carefully cultivated and maintained. One's status within the group depends on the length of one's membership in the group. Furthermore, the Japanese maintain particularly strong interpersonal ties with those in the same hierarchical chain of command within their own organization. In other words, vertical loyalties are dominant. The vertically organized Japanese contrast sharply with Westerners, who tend to form horizontal groups which define their membership in terms of such criteria as class and stratification that cut across hierarchical organization lines.[4]

Finally, at the inter-group level, the literature has emphasized that integration and harmony are achieved effectively *between* Japanese groups, making Japan a 'consensus society'. This is said to account for the exceptionally high level of stability and cohesion in Japanese society, which has aided political and other leaders in their efforts to organize or mobilize the population efficiently. Moreover, the ease with which the energy of the Japanese can be focused on a task has contributed in no small measure to Japan's remarkably rapid economic growth during the post–World War II period. From a slightly different angle, Ishida argues that intergroup competition in loyalty makes groups conform to national goals and facilitates the formation of national consensus.[5]

For decades, Japanese writers have debated the essence of 'Japaneseness'. Numerous books have been written under such titles as *What Are the Japanese?* and *What Is Japan?*[6] Many volumes on *Nihon-rashisa* (Japanese-like qualities) have appeared.[7] Social science discourse in Japan abounds with examinations of *Nihon-teki* (Japanese-style) tendencies in business, politics, social relations, psychology, and so on. Some researchers are preoccupied with inquiries into the 'hidden shape',[8] 'basic layer', and 'archetype'[9] of Japanese culture. These works portray Japanese society as highly homogeneous, with only limited internal variation, and

[3] Doi 1973. [4] Nakane 1967, 1970, and 1978. [5] Ishida 1983, pp. 23–47.
[6] For example, Umesao 1986; Yamamoto 1989; Sakaiya 1991 and 1993; Umehara 1990.
[7] For example, Hamaguchi 1988; Watanabe 1989; Kusayanagi 1990.
[8] Maruyama, Katō, and Kinoshita 1991. [9] For example, Takatori 1975.

give it an all-embracing label. Hamaguchi, for example, who presents what he calls a contextual model of the Japanese, maintains that the concept of the individual is irrelevant in the study of the Japanese, who tend to see the interpersonal relationship itself (*kanjin*) – not the individuals involved in it – as the basic unit of action.[10] Amanuma argues that the Japanese core personality is based on the drive for *ganbari* (endurance and persistence), which accounts for every aspect of Japanese behavior.[11] Publishing in Japanese, a Korean writer, Lee, contends that the Japanese have a unique *chijimi shikō*, a miniaturizing orientation which has enabled them to skillfully miniaturize their environment and products, ranging from *bonsai* plants, small cars, and portable electronic appliances to computer chips.[12] The list of publications that aim to define Japanese society with a single key word is seemingly endless, and, although the specific appellation invariably differs, the reductive impulse is unchanged.

At least four underlying assumptions remain constant in these studies. First, it is presumed that *all* Japanese share the attribute in question – be it *amae* or miniaturizing orientation – regardless of their class, gender, occupation, and other stratification variables. Second, it is also assumed that there is virtually no variation among the Japanese in the degree to which they possess the characteristic in question. Little attention is given to the possibility that some Japanese may have it in far greater degree than others. Third, the trait in question, be it group-orientation or *kanjin*, is supposed to exist only marginally in other societies, particularly in Western societies. That is, the feature is thought to be uniquely Japanese. Finally, the fourth presupposition is an ahistorical assumption that the trait has prevailed in Japan for an unspecified period of time, independently of historical circumstances. Writings based on some or all of these propositions have been published in Japan ad nauseam and have generated the genre referred to as *Nihonjinron*. Although some analysts have challenged the validity of *Nihonjinron* assertions on methodological, empirical, and ideological grounds, the discourse has retained its popular appeal, attracting many readers and maintaining a commercially viable publication industry.

The notion of Japan being homogeneous goes in tandem with the claim that it is an exceptionally egalitarian society with little class differentiation. This assertion is based on scattered observations of company life. Thus, with regard to resource distribution, some contrast the relatively modest salary gaps between Japanese executive managers and their employees with the marked discrepancy between the salaries of American business executives and their workers. Focusing on the alleged

[10] Hamaguchi 1985 and 1988. For a debate on this model, see Mouer and Sugimoto 1987, pp. 12–63.
[11] Amanuma 1987. [12] Lee 1984.

weakness of class consciousness, others point out that Japanese managers are prepared to get their hands dirty, wear the same blue overalls as assembly workers in factories, and share elevators, toilets, and company restaurants with low-ranking employees.[13] Still others suggest that Japanese managers and rank-and-file employees work in large offices without status-based partitions, thereby occupying the workplace in an egalitarian way. Furthermore, public opinion polls taken by the Prime Minister's Office have indicated that eight to nine out of ten Japanese classify themselves as middle class. While there is debate as to what this figure means, it has nevertheless strengthened the *images* of egalitarian Japan. A few observers have gone so far as to call Japan a 'land of equality'[14] and a 'one-class society'.[15] Firmly entrenched in all these descriptions is the portrayal of the Japanese as identifying themselves primarily as members of a company, alma mater, faction, clique, or other functional group, rather than as members of a class or social stratum.

3 Diversity and Stratification

The portrayal of Japan as a homogeneous and egalitarian society is, however, contradicted by many observations that reveal it is a more diversified and heterogeneous society than this stereotype suggests. Two frameworks, one emphasizing ethnic diversity and the other stressing class differentiation, appear to have taken root around the turn of the twentieth century that challenge *Nihonjinron* images of Japanese society.

(a) Minority Issues and the Multi-ethnic Model

The notion of Japan as a racially homogeneous society has come under question as a consequence of the growing visibility of foreign migrants in the country. The shortage of labor in particular sectors of Japan's economy has necessitated the influx of workers from abroad for the past quarter of a century or so, making the presence of various ethnic groups highly conspicuous. Throughout manufacturing cities and towns across the nation, Japanese Brazilians, descendants of Japanese migrants to Brazil, work in large numbers. At many train stations and along major city roads, multilingual signs and posters, including those in English, Korean, Chinese, and Portuguese, depending upon the area, are prominently displayed.

In rural Japan, a significant number of farmers marry women from other Asian countries in order to help with farm and domestic work

[13] White and Trevor 1984. [14] Tominaga 1982. [15] De Roy 1979.

because of a shortage of Japanese women willing to share a rural lifestyle. Women from neighboring Asian countries also form indispensable support staff in medical institutions, nursing care centers, and welfare facilities. International marriages peaked in 2006, with some 6 percent of all marriages in Japan being between Japanese and non-Japanese nationals.[16] The ratio is nearly 10 percent in Tokyo.

In the national sport of professional sumo wrestling, overseas wrestlers, particularly those from Mongolia, Eastern Europe, and Hawaii, occupy the summit levels of the top sumo ranks of Grand Champion, Champion, and others. In the popular sport of professional baseball, American, Korean, Taiwanese, and other international players have become familiar public faces. On national television, many Korean soap operas attract exceptionally high ratings.

These casual observations have drawn attention to the reality that Japan has an extensive range of minority issues, ethnic and quasi-ethnic, which proponents of the homogeneous Japan thesis tend to ignore. One can identify several minority groups in Japan even if one does so narrowly, referring only to groups subjected to discrimination and prejudice because of culturally generated ethnic myths, illusions, and fallacies, as Chapter 7 will detail.

In Hokkaidō, the northernmost island of the nation, more than twenty thousand Ainu live as an indigenous minority. Their situation arose with the first attempts of Japan's central regime to unify the nation under its leadership around the sixth and seventh centuries and to conquer the Ainu territories in northern Japan. In addition, some two to three million *burakumin* are subjected to prejudice and many of them are forced to live in separate communities, partly because of an unfounded myth that they are ethnically different.[17] Their ancestors' plight began in the feudal period under the Tokugawa shogunate, which ruled the nation for two and a half centuries from the seventeenth century and institutionalized an outcast class at the bottom of a caste system. Though the class was legally abolished after the Meiji Restoration, in 1868, discrimination and prejudice have persisted. Some four hundred thousand permanent Korean residents without Japanese citizenship, called *Zainichi*, form the largest long-term foreign minority group in Japan. Their problem originated with Japan's colonization of Korea at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the Japanese importation of Koreans as cheap labor for industries. More than two million foreign workers, both documented and undocumented, live in the country as a result of their influx into the

[16] Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2013f.
[17] This is why some observers called them 'Japan's invisible race' (De Vos and Wagatsuma 1966).

Table 1.3 Estimated proportions of ethnic and pseudo-ethnic minorities in selected countries

Band	% of total population in minority groups	Countries
1	1–4	Bangladesh 2011, Egypt JL, Hungary 2011, North Korea JL, South Korea JL
2	5–8	Czech Republic 2011, Greece 2011, Japan 2013, Iceland 2013, Mongolia 2010, Portugal 2007
3	9–12	Austria 2001, China 2012, Denmark 2012, Finland 2010, Netherlands 2013

Sources: National census data or government estimates produced in the years specified in subscripts.
JL: Lehmeyer 2006.

Japanese labor market since the 1980s, mainly from Asia and the Middle East, in their attempt to earn quick cash in the appreciated Japanese yen. Finally, more than 1.4 million Okinawans, who live in the Ryūkyū Islands at the southern end of Japan, face occasional bigotry based on the belief that they are ethnically different and incur suspicion because of the islands' longstanding cultural autonomy.

As a conservative estimate, the total membership of these groups is about six to seven million, which represents some 5 percent of the population of Japan.[18] If one includes those who marry into these minority groups and suffer the same kinds of prejudice, the number is greater. In the Kansai region, where *burakumin* and Korean residents are concentrated, the proportion of the minority population exceeds 10 percent. These ratios may not be as high as those in migrant societies, such as the United States, Canada, and Australia,[19] but they seem inconsistent with the claim that Japan is a society uniquely lacking minority issues. These issues tend to be obfuscated, blurred, and even made invisible in Japan, partly because the principal minority groups do not differ in skin color and other biological characteristics from the majority of Japanese.

In international comparison, Japan does not rank uniquely high in its composition of minority groups which exist because of their ethnicity or the ethnic frictions that surround them. Table 1.3 lists some of the nations whose ethnic minority groups constitute less than 12 percent of the population. Given that the Japanese figure is 5 percent, Japan's position would be somewhere in the second band. Admittedly, different groups

[18] De Vos and Wetherall 1983, p. 3, provide a similar estimate. Nakano and Imazu 1993 also provide an analogous perspective.
[19] These societies are perhaps 'unique' in their high levels of ethnic and racial diversity.

and societies define minority groups on the basis of different criteria, but that is exactly the point. The boundaries of ethnic and racial groups are imagined, negotiated, constructed, and altered over time and space. In defining them, administrative agencies, private institutions, voluntary organizations, individual citizens, and marginalized groups themselves have different and competing interests and perspectives. Furthermore, international numerical comparisons of ethnic minority groups are complicated and compounded by the fact that the government of each country has different criteria for defining and identifying ethnic minorities. The case here is not that each figure in the table is definitive but that Japan seems to be unique, not in its absence of minority issues, but in the decisiveness with which the government and other organizations attempt to ignore their existence.

For the past couple of decades, studies that undermine the supposed ethnic homogeneity of Japanese society have amassed. Befu, who challenges what he calls the hegemony of homogeneity,[20] shows how deeply seated 'primordial sentiments' spelled out in *Nihonjinron* are and reveals how they play key roles in hiding the experiences and even the existence of various minority groups. In tracing the origin of the 'myth of the ethnically homogeneous nation', Oguma demonstrates that this notion started to take root only after Japan's defeat in World War II; in prewar years Japan was conceptualized as a diverse nation incorporating a mixture of Asian peoples with which the Japanese were thought to share blood relations. The transition from the prewar mixed nation theory to the postwar homogeneous nation theory is a rather recent conversion.[21] Weiner argues that the alleged racial purity of the Japanese is an illusion and discusses the realities of minority groups subjected to prejudice and discrimination.[22] Lie, in his aptly titled book *Multiethnic Japan*,[23] argues that Japan is a society as diverse as any other and discusses the ways in which the 'specter of multiethnicity' haunts the hegemonic assumption of monoethnicity. Building on his studies on *Zainichi* Koreans, Fukuoka suggests that there are several types of 'non-Japanese' on the basis of lineage, culture, and nationality, the three analytical criteria that sensitize us to multiple dimensions of what it is to be Japanese.[24] Covering a significant time span, from the archaeological past to the contemporary period, historians and sociologists put together a volume titled *Multicultural Japan*,[25] which focuses on the fluctuations in 'Japanese' identities and shows that Japan has had multiple ethnic presences in one form or another over centuries. The accumulation of these scholarly studies has led to a discourse that can be labeled as the multi-ethnic model of

[20] Befu 2001. [21] Oguma 2002. [22] Weiner 2009. [23] Lie 2001.
[24] Fukuoka 2000, p. xxx. [25] Denoon et al.1996.

Japanese society. It is still a moot point as to whether this new framework has wide acceptance at Japan's grassroots level.

Though regions themselves do not constitute ethnic groups in the conventional sense, regional identities are only one step away from that of the nation.[26] Japan is divided into two subcultural regions, eastern Japan with Tokyo and Yokohama as its center, and western Japan with Osaka, Kyoto, and Kobe as its hub. The two regions differ in language, social relations, food, housing, and many other respects. The subcultural differences between the areas facing the Pacific and those facing the Sea of Japan are also well known. Japan has a wide variety of dialects. A Japanese from Aomori Prefecture, the northernmost area of Honshū Island, and one from Kagoshima, the southernmost district in Kyūshū Island, can scarcely comprehend each other's dialects. Different districts have different festivals, folk songs, and local dances. Customs governing birth, marriage, and death differ so much regionally that books explaining the differences are quite popular.[27] The exact degree of domestic regional variation is difficult to assess in quantitative terms and by internationally comparative standards, but there is no evidence to suggest that it is lower in Japan than elsewhere.

(b) Social Stratification and the Class Model

The image of Japan as an egalitarian society experienced a dramatic shift at the beginning of the twenty-first century with the emerging claim that Japan is *kakusa shakai*, literally a 'disparity society', a socially divided society with sharp class differences and glaring inequality, a point which Chapter 2 will examine in some detail. This view appears to have gained ground among the populace during Japan's prolonged recession in the 1990s, the so-called lost decade, and in the 2000s when the then second-largest economy in the world experienced a further downturn as a consequence of the global financial crisis. Although job stability used to be the hallmark of Japan's labor market, two in five employees are now 'non-regular workers' whose employment status is precarious. Even 'regular' employees who were guaranteed job security throughout their occupational careers have been thrown out of employment because of their companies' poor business outcomes and the unsatisfactory performance of their own work. In mass media, at one end of the spectrum, the new rich who have almost instantly amassed vast wealth in such areas as information technology, new media, and financial manipulation are celebrated and lionized as fresh billionaires. At the other end of the spectrum are the unemployed, the homeless, day laborers, and other

[26] Anderson 1983. [27] For example, Shufu to Seikatsusha 1992.