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, 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 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 amount at most to only a quarter of Japan's workforce. She would not belong to a labor union, because less than one out of five Japanese workers is unionized. She would not be university-educated. Fewer than one in six Japanese have a university degree, and even today only about 40 percent of the younger generation graduate from a university with 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 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 television

Table 1.1 Japan's population distribution

Variables	Majority	Minority
Gender[a]	Female: 65.40 million (51%)	Male: 62.15 million (49%)
Employees by firm size[b]	Small firms – less than 300 employees: 47.21 million (87%)	Large firms – 300 or more: 6.97 million (13%)
Educational background[c]	Those without university education: 80.8 million (85%)	University graduates: 14.7 million (15%)
Union membership in labor force[d]	Non-unionists: 45.6 million (83%)	Unionists: 10.1 million (18%)

Sources:
[a] Population estimates (final) as of 1 June 2009, provided by the Statistics Bureau of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Statistics Bureau 2009.
[b] Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications in 2006a. The data cover all private-sector establishments except individual proprietorship establishments in agriculture, forestry and fishery.
[c] Population census conducted in 2000. 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 2008a.

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.

2 Homogeneity Assumptions and the Group Model

While 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, though it has drawn serious criticism from empirical, methodological and ideological angles.[2] Put most succinctly, the model is based upon three lines of argument.

[1] See Mouer and Sugimoto 1986, p. 150.
[2] Befu 1980; Sugimoto and Mouer 1980; Dale 1986; McCormack and Sugimoto 1986; Sugimoto and Mouer 1989; Yoshino 1992. See also Neustupný 1980.

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*, 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 half-century since the war. From a slightly different angle, Ishida argues that inter-group competition in loyalty makes groups conform to national goals and facilitates the formation of national consensus.[5]

For decades, Japanese writers have debated on 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

[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.

'archetype'[9] of Japanese culture. These works portray Japanese society as highly homogeneous, with only limited internal variation, and give it some 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 a genre referred to as *Nihonjinron* (which literally means theories on the Japanese). 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

[9] For example, Takatori 1975.
[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.

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 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 work-place 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 all these figures mean, they have nevertheless strengthened the *images* of egalitarian Japan. A few observers have gone as 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 last 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, descendents of Japanese migrants to Brazil, work in large numbers. At many train stations and along major

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

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 are married to women from other Asian countries in order to help with farm and domestic work because of a shortage of Japanese women willing to share a rural lifestyle. Asian women also form indispensable support staff in medical institutions, nursing care centers, and welfare facilities. International marriages are on the rise, 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 other. 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, over 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 form the biggest foreign minority group in Japan. Their

[16] Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2007.
[17] This is why some observers called them 'Japan's invisible race' (De Vos and Wagatsuma 1966).

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 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, over 1.3 million Okinawans, who live in the Ryukyu 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.

The estimated 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 1.2 lists some of the nations whose ethnic minority groups constitute less than 11 percent. Given that the Japanese figure is 5 percent, Japan's position would be somewhere in the second band; it is certainly difficult for it to be in the top band. To be sure, different groups 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

[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.

Table 1.2 Estimated proportions of ethnic and pseudo-ethnic minorities in selected countries

Level	Minority groups in the total population	Specific countries
Band 1	0–3%	Austria, Bangladesh, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Greece, Iceland, Korea (North), Korea (South), Libya, Portugal
Band 2	3–6%	Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Haiti, Japan, Lebanon, Liberia, Netherlands
Band 3	6–11%	Albania, Cambodia, China, Egypt, Mongolia, Romania, Sweden

Note: Calculated from Famighetti 1994.

of minority issues, but in the decisiveness with which the government and other organizations attempt to ignore their existence.

For the last 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 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 a variety 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' strengthens 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 upon the fluctuations in 'Japanese' identities and shows that Japan has had multiple ethnic presences in

[20] Befu 2001. [21] Oguma 2002. [22] Weiner 2009.
[23] Lie 2001. [24] Fukuoka 2000, p. xxx.
[25] Denoon, Hudson, McCormack, and Morris-Suzuki 1996.

one form or another over centuries. The accumulation of these scholarly studies has now led to a discourse that can be labeled as the multi-ethnic model of 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

On the other front, 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 second largest economy in the world experienced a further downturn as a consequence of the global financial crisis. While job stability used to be the hallmark of Japan's labor market, one out of three 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, on the 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. On the

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

other end of the spectrum are the unemployed, the homeless, day laborers and other marginalized members of society who are said to form *karyū shakai* (the underclass), revealing a discrepancy which gives considerable plausibility to the imagery of *kakusa shakai*. In regional economic comparisons, affluent metropolitan lifestyles often appear in sharp contrast with the deteriorated and declining conditions of rural areas.

Comparative studies of income distribution suggest that Japan cannot be regarded as uniquely egalitarian. On the contrary, it ranks roughly middle among major advanced capitalist countries with the medium level of unequal income distribution. Table 1.3 confirms this pattern, with the international comparative analysis of the Gini index, which measures the degree to which a given distribution deviates from perfect equality (with larger figures indicating higher levels of inequality).

Japan's relative poverty rate, an indicator of the percentage of low-income earners, was 14.9 percent in 2004, the fourth highest among the OECD's thirty member nations, and rose to 15.7 percent in 2007 (see Table 1.4). The relative poverty rate represents the percentage of income

Table 1.3 Gini index of some OECD countries in 2000

Countries (above average)	Gini index	Countries (below average)	Gini index
USA	0.357	Australia	0.305
Italy	0.347	Canada	0.301
Greece	0.345	Germany	0.277
New Zealand	0.337	France	0.273
Spain	0.329	Austria	0.252
UK	0.326	Sweden	0.243
Japan	**0.314**	Denmark	0.225

Source: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2008.
Note: The values are based on the distribution of household disposable income among individuals in each country.
The mean average of the Gini indices of all OECD countries in 2000 was 0.310.

Table 1.4 Relative poverty rates in some OECD countries

High rate countries	Relative poverty rate	Low rate countries	Relative poverty rate
Mexico	18.4	Denmark	5.2
Turkey	17.5	Sweden	5.3
USA	17.1	France	7.1
Japan	14.9	UK	8.3
Australia	12.4	Germany	11.0

Source: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2008.