Class – “middle class Japan”, wealth and poverty

• Social Class: History and Concepts
• The Myth of the Japanese “Middle Class”
• Egaliitarian Japan? The Superrich vs Superpoor
• Active Learning
• The “Japanese Dream”
• Happiness as Wealth
• The “Kanji” of the Year
• Consumerism and the Environment

Class in Macro Historical Context

• Hunter-gatherer society: Warrior status. Ended by the formation of kingdoms and ability to tax.
• Feudal: Royalty, aristocracy/landowners, tenants, the destitute. Ended by revolutions.
• Imperial: State (nationalist), aristocracy/landowners, military, capitalists, workers/tenants, colonial subjects. Ended by world wars.
• Post-colonial: State (capitalist or socialist), the middle/working classes, social safety nets. Ended by the neoliberal turn.
• Neoliberalism: The “one percent”, the political classes, the squeezed middle class, the precariat. Will be ended by … the climate crisis.

Class in Japan

• Feudal Japan (Edo period): Shogun, samurai, farmers, artisans, merchants, outcasts.
• Prewar Japan: Emperor, aristocracy, military, capitalists, subjects/workers.
• Postwar Japan: Emperor, old families (ex-aristocracy), civil servants, myth of the “middle class”.
• Contemporary Japan (kakusa shakai): Emperor (ex-aristocracy), political class, the super rich, the have, the have nots.

What is Social Class?

• A complex concept (“He is middle class” + “She has class”) combining the following:
  • Lineage: status of one’s parents and wider family.
  • Wealth: savings, property, ownership of rights etc.
  • Income: earnings through labour, rent, property rights.
  • Profession: status derived through one’s job.
  • Education: status derived through institutions attended.
  • Cultural: cultural interests and tastes, particularly “high”, “mass”, and “low” cultural pursuits.
  • Social network: the company one keeps.

Myth of the Japanese Middle Class

• Class consciousness surveys typically reveal that around 90% of Japanese people self-identify as “middle class”.
• Sugimoto: “Class and Work in Cultural Capitalism: Japanese Trends”
• “The assertion that Japanese society has suddenly become a kakusa society raises much skepticism. There is much well founded argument that Japan has always been a class-divided and stratified society and was never a uniquely ‘middle-class society’ as described by the Nihonjinron model. From this perspective, an abrupt shift took place in public awareness and sensitivity, not in empirical substance and reality.” (from Sugimoto).
Family tree of the Imperial Family

What do you notice about the Imperial Family Tree?

If marrying a “commoner” is an issue, what are the marriage options for the imperial family? The nobility, of course.

Many families have heirlooms as reminders of samurai heritage.

The farsighted Yoshichika had, however, been concerned about the Tokugawa families’ fortunes long before World War II, having noted what befall many prestigious samurai families after 1868. As early as 1931, he set up a public foundation to which he donated most of the Owari branch family’s cultural assets. He even donated his own mansions and land to the municipality in Nagoya.

As a result, all the Owari family’s treasures were preserved, and are now displayed at The Tokugawa Art Museum in Nagoya. This houses more than 13,000 items ranging from swords and armor to scrolls and pottery, and including many designated national treasures, important cultural properties and important art objects. Yoshinobu Tokugawa, 68, the current head of the Owari Tokugawa, is president of the museum and foundation.

From The Japan Times (Reiji Yoshida, 15 Sept 2002), “Where are they now?”

Amidst the socio-economic image of Japan as predominantly “middle class”, lineage clearly counts.

Both at the “upper class” end (royalty, nobility, old merchant and political families) ...

... and at the “discriminated against classes” end (burakumin, hibakusha).

The role of the koseki / ie in giving marriage a strong meaning of “the joining of houses”.

For the “middle classes”, these ideas are visible in the practices of omiai.

Japan’s superrich. Most are owners of business empires built during their own lifetimes.

Quiz Question: Who do you think is Japan’s richest man?

Yuriko Koike (current governor of Tokyo) argues regarding “Why inequality is different in Japan”.

“Japan, however, has lower levels of inequality than almost every other developed country. Indeed, though it has long been an industrial powerhouse, Japan is frequently called the world’s most successful communist country. Japan has a high income-tax rate for the rich (45%), and the inheritance tax rate recently was raised to 55%. This makes it difficult to accumulate capital over generations.”

Japan is a country where the primary social safety net is the household or extended family rather than the state (not very “Communist”).

Japan’s inequality is relatively pronounced, but well hidden from public view.

Class matters, despite 90% of Japanese considering themselves to be “middle class”.
Active Learning

My “Japanese Dream”

- What are some of the things that make us happy to be in Japan? What makes us unhappy?
- Some of my answers (of course, happy exceeds unhappy or I would have left long ago):
  - Happy: Good place to be an academic, job security, an interesting challenge (linguistically, intellectually, culturally), history, the food, peace/safety, reliability of service, politeness, convenience.
  - Unhappy: Certain social issues (esp. regarding discrimination), shallow consumerism, politicians ... but they would probably be worse if I was in the UK. And a few truly Japanese ones: "o-saki ni shitsurei shimasu" (long work hours), endless "be careful" announcements, wasteful packaging, and Kawaaiii! 😍

Rethinking Wealth as Happiness

- Let’s think of wealth and poverty beyond “money”. In what ways are the Japanese “rich” and/or “poor”?
- Is there a “Japanese Dream”? What would it have been in:
  1800
  1870
  1910
  1950
  1980

The “Japanese Dream”

- Quiz Question: Which gender is happier in Japan?
- Quiz Question: Which ages are happiest in Japan?
- Let’s look at the graphs on page 14 and conclusions on pages 17-18.

This Year's 漢字・感じ

- We can think of “This Year’s Kanji” as a barometer of Japanese happiness across time. Past winners are:
  - 雨 食 柴 隅 金
  - 戦 婦 虎 災 愛
  - 偽 変 新 昼 続 緋
  - 輪 税 安 金 北 災

The Kanji Museum, Kyoto
Environmental Issuesを感じる漢字

- 1995 直 Hanshin earthquake and sarin gas attack
- 2008 欧 Obama and “change” in the US, but also climate change
- 2010 炎 Record hot summer
- 2011 告 The “bonds” forged after 3/11
- 2013 跳 Getting the Olympics, but also a powerful typhoon season
- 2019 ?? But we had another bad typhoon season …

The environment and vulnerability in the face of nature as a powerful part of the national mood.

Class, Happiness, Environment

- We discuss the environment more on 23 December, but today these three topics come together in “consumerism”.
- Consumption as status: Brand goods as signifiers of “upper class” … or conformity (“middle class”)? The endless Louis Vuitton bags …
- The juxtaposition of branded goods and gekiyasu (super cheap): 100 yen shops, Don Quixote, Uniqlo. Where does it leave “middle class” consumption?
- As the environmental crisis deepens, we need consumption that a) is durable and b) does not go out of fashion.

Macro Historical Context (Part II)

- Late 1940s: Postwar consuming to survive.
- 1950s-1960s: “In Japan, as elsewhere, providing for necessities in the early postwar period gradually gave way to creating affluence for all and, eventually, by the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, consumer society was promoted as an end in itself rather than a specific means of improving lifestyles. Consuming became less about rationalization and more about personal transformation. The politics of rationalization and thrift promoted by the lifestyle improvement movement was about creating a shared morality and a communal consciousness during a time of hardship. The announcement of the consumer as king in 1960 shifted the focus to individual subjectivity and the promotion of waste and abundance.” (Martyn David Smith, Mass Media, Consumerism and National Identity in Postwar Japan, p. 8).
- 1970s-1980s: “Japan as Number One” (Vogel). Hedonistic consumption and acquisition of assets result in the bubble economy.
- 1990s-2010s: The “lost decades”. Attempting to escape stagnation and deflation through government and consumer spending. But, depopulation kicks in. The Koizumi administration’s neoliberal reforms pull back regional redistribution. Regional and individual disparity (kakusa) gets noticed.
- 2010s: Abenomics is a departure from the historical means of stimulating the economy via public works. Belief in “trickle down economics” amidst growing precarity. The “last hurrah” of consumerism.
- 2020s: The climate crisis makes consumerism a dirty word. Plastic shaming, flight shaming, waste shaming … as Japan belatedly attempts to reduce its carbon footprint before Osaka faces its sea-level rise fate.

Next Time

- Education – compulsory education, higher education, qualifications and training
- Suggested Reading: Handbook Chapters 8 & 16; Sugimoto Chapter 5; Hendry Chapters 3, 5; Kingston Chapter 18.