

In our lecture today, we consider issues of social class, wealth and poverty. We think about whether the image of Japan as predominantly middle class is accurate or not. And by contrasting the people at both extremes of Japan's social spectrum, the imperial family and the homeless, we will think about what this tells us about "the middle classes".

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**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, artisans/traders, 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. Increasing oligarchy and tech feudalism. Will be ended by ... *the climate crisis*.
- **Post-neoliberalism:** Realignment to ??? as we deal with the full implications of climate breakdown.

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But first let's think about what social class means and where it came from. For this we need to look back over history and understand the macro historical context out of which Japan's stratified society emerged.

The people who lived in the Japanese archipelago thousands of years ago did not have any conception of being in Japan. Japan did not exist then. Humans lived in hunter-gatherer societies in small family communities. But, the introduction of rice cultivation during the late Jomon and early Yayoi period gave communities a sense of land ownership. Warrior society emerged to defend one's cultivated land, and hunter gatherer society disappeared when warrior kings learned how to create political units beyond the boundaries of localized communities and to tax people within their areas of control.

This led to the feudal era in which wealth and power became associated with control of land and its productive capabilities. Class stratification emerged, with royalty and aristocracy at the top, landowners in the middle, and tenants and the destitute at the bottom. A mercantile class of artisans and traders also emerged. Ultimately, extreme concentration of wealth led to popular revolutions and the emergence of popular government.

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The idea of states as political units had emerged by this time. Many class stratifications remained, and the state's control over a centralized military was an increasingly significant characteristic of political life. States also sought to project their power outside their immediate zones of control. This was the age of empires, which culminated in the two world wars of the twentieth century.

After the Second World War, there was a period of decolonization. The world divided into two main approaches to the state: capitalist and socialist. The advanced industrialized economies had growing middle classes who made greater demands for social safety nets, such as health and pension systems.

But with the fall of communism in 1989 came the entrenchment of neoliberalism as the dominant global ideology. Under neoliberalism, wealth inequality has opened up to levels seen in the feudal eras. The so-called "one percent" extracts unbelievable levels of wealth from the remaining 99 percent. The middle class is being squeezed, and more and more people have join the ranks of the precariat: in other words, people who have little wealth and security. At the moment I think we are in the latter stages of neoliberalism. This is characterized by populism, resurgent ethnonationalism, and a return to openly imperialist behaviour by some. We are increasingly seeing references to this oligarchy or tech feudalism as obscene levels of wealth are concentrated in tech barons who effectively extract tithes or taxes from everyone for the smartphones and cloud storage we all need.

The neoliberal system will crash in the next decade or two as climate breakdown, and perhaps even a major international conflict, forces humans to quickly and radically reorganize their societies. This post-neoliberal era might be achieved peacefully with a technological and lifestyle shift to more sustainable practices. Or it might be achieved with great bloodshed as humans fight over the remaining parts of the planet that are inhabitable. The classes of the future will depend greatly on how peaceful or violent our transition to a world of rising sea levels, desertification, violent storms, and melting ice.

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**Class in Japan**

- **Feudal Japan (Edo period):** Imperial court, 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 haves" (including the permanently employed), "the have nots".

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So, that's the very basic global overview. Let's now turn to Japan.

Let's start in the Edo period, by which time Japan had four main classes: samurai, farmers, artisans and merchants. I think it is appropriate to add two other classes to this: the imperial court and outcasts.

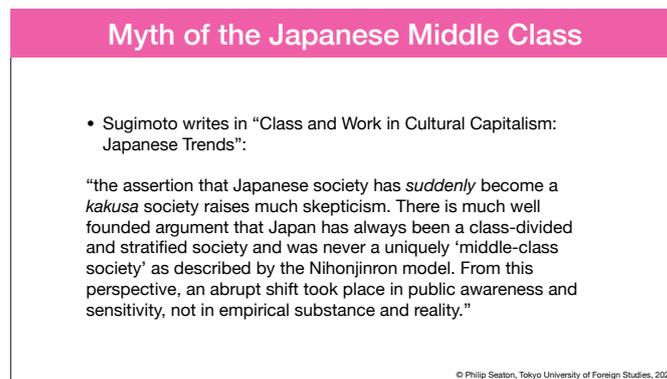
After the Meiji Restoration, the emperor became the centre of the modern Japanese state. The samurai class may have been swept away, but much of the aristocracy remained, and many samurai moved into the new elites of the military and political ruling classes. The people all became imperial subjects in the thinking of the Meiji Constitution.

After Japan's defeat, the emperor lost his divine status and became a symbolic figurehead. The old aristocratic families largely disappeared from public view, too. Salarymen and civil servants became the new face of postwar democratic Japan. Everyone working long hours to turn Japan from defeated nation into economic superpower is the predominant image of postwar Japanese society in the twentieth century.

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However, with the bursting of the economic bubble, more attention became focused on Japan as a fundamentally unequal society. The discourse now is of *kakusa shakai*, divided between the haves and the have nots. The haves include the prominent super rich, such as the founders of Uniqlo, Softbank and Rakuten, or highly-paid celebrities. And then there are the unknown rich, who understand that in the neoliberal world order what matters more than anything is ownership, whether of land, real estate, intellectual property rights, or corporate ownership in the form of stocks and shares. I would also include those people in stable lifetime employment within “the haves” in the context of Japan. They have access to so many benefits via their employment, such as access to mortgages and comprehensive healthcare, that others do not have. The “have nots”, by contrast, struggle to pay the rent from month to month in insecure jobs paying Japan’s paltry minimum wage. They are the working poor.

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**Myth of the Japanese Middle Class**

- Sugimoto writes in “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.”

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So, what then are we to make of the image of Japan as predominantly middle class that you will often hear about in discussion of Japanese society?

Yoshio Sugimoto writes in his article “Class and Work in Cultural Capitalism”: [see slide]

In other words, Japan was never equal. It was only ever good at looking like it was equal.

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## What is Social Class?

- **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.

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So, I think it is important to consider Japan as a society where class really matters, but it is relatively easily hidden. Social class is a very complex concept. But we can consider the key components as follows:

**Lineage:** This is the status of one's parents and wider family. To a large extent, class is a matter of the family you are born into. This is not only about bloodline. It is also a question of nurture. The family surroundings in a person's early years greatly shapes their perceptions of the world, and others' perceptions of them.

**Wealth:** This is the amount of savings, property and rights that one has. Leading an upper class lifestyle is not possible without lots of money. In the long run, it is not possible to be destitute and high class, although old upper class families might go through periods of financial hardship. However, it is possible to be superrich and have no class, in the sense of having no taste, style or dignity. These people are often derided as *nouveaux riche*, or *narikin* in Japanese.

**Income:** This is not quite the same as wealth. Income is what comes into your bank account on a weekly or monthly basis,

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while wealth refers more to the value of the assets that you own. It might be possible to have a high class lifestyle while earning a salary. But generally speaking, you cannot reach the highest classes by working for other people.

**Profession:** Class also connects to the type of work that you do. White collar professionals such as lawyers, doctors, academics and so on are considered upper middle class. Manual jobs are considered working class. Some professions are more difficult to categorize. Sportsmen and women, however wealthy they become, will not derive social class purely from being world champion. A ballerina, however, might be considered higher class despite earning a much lower salary.

**Education:** People's educational records and the institutions they attend are also significant markers of class. The graduate of a prestigious private school or university and the dropout from a rough inner city school are perceived to have very different levels of class via their education.

**Cultural:** This relates to people's interests and cultural pursuits. If you aspire to be high class then you might cultivate an interest in opera, modern art, or horse racing. Being a football fan or listening to the latest pop music marks you more as middle or working class.

The final component of class is your social network. Who are you hanging out with? Do you count celebrities and the wealthy among your circle of friends? Do you keep in touch with old boy and old girl networks from prestigious schools? Or are you cut adrift from society with few people to help you apart from charities and Non-Profit Organizations that help people in your difficult circumstances?

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## Summary

- The image of Japan as predominantly “middle class” is clearly important but ...
- Japanese people are good at hiding social class. Everyone can put on the appearance of being middle class.
- Lineage clearly counts, for both the upper and lower classes. Legacies of the practices of *omiai* (arranged marriage).

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How does this all work in practice in Japan? Well, I think that public perceptions are important and cannot be dismissed. If large numbers of Japanese people think that they are middle class then this self-identification is important.

Japanese people also tend to be quite good at presenting themselves as middle class. They do not want to stick out. So, when you walk around town, most people seem to be relatively affluent. Everyone has a smartphone and is smartly dressed. People are very good at the external appearance of affluence. The real difference can be seen by looking in their wardrobes and cupboards at home. Do they have one set of clothes and one designer bag for show, or a whole closet full of designer brand clothes. Did they buy their household items at a department store or at the 100 yen shop? In Japan, the realities of class, wealth and poverty are often only revealed when you enter someone's home, and there is less of a custom of inviting people to one's home in Japan than in many countries. Hence, class can be more easily hidden.

But under the surface, social class, and particularly lineage, still clearly counts in Japan. This is obvious at both the upper class and lower class ends of Japanese society, particularly when the discussion turns to marriage. Note the controversies

over the choice of Princess Mako's marriage partner a few years back. He seems like an earnest, hardworking man who works in the legal profession, but his mother's financial affairs caused significant media debate and a long delay before the couple could eventually marry. Or note the ongoing resistance among many ordinary families to be joined via marriage with a family of *burakumin* descent. While *omiai*, or arranged marriage, is much less common than it used to be, the most important principle of *omiai* remains, namely that families hope for a good class match, not just a love match. Marriage is one of the occasions in Japanese society when issues of class quickly rise to the surface and become very obvious.

## From the Imperial Family to the Homeless



To finish this short lecture, let me make the following point. I think you will get a good sense of the range of social classes in Japan by looking at two sets of people at polar opposites of the social scale.

At the highest point in the Japanese social spectrum is the imperial family. In terms of lineage, wealth, education, cultural aspects and social networks, they have no equals. We will watch a short video of the coronation in 2019.

Then we will watch one of the videos about the working poor, and the first part of the documentary series “Homeless in Japan”, which features extensive interviews with Professor Tom Gill, who is the leading academic authority on this topic in English. As he describes, the homeless are people who are often escaping their backgrounds in an attempt to disappear from society. Whatever education or networks they might have had in the past are largely gone. They also typically have very little money and social capital.

Everyone else in Japan comes somewhere between these social poles on a spectrum of upper class to middle class to

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working class, from extremely wealthy to extremely poor, from highly cultured to lowly cultured. The middle classes may well be the largest group. But for today, our conclusion is that viewing this largest group from the perspectives of the social extremes allows us to see that largest middle class group in an interesting new light.

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