

An aerial photograph of a traditional Japanese neighborhood, showing several houses with tiled roofs. A utility pole is visible on the left side of the image. The entire image has a warm, orange-yellow tint.

# CITY LIFE in JAPAN

A STUDY OF A  
TOKYO WARD

---

R.P. DORE

*From the Introduction to the 1999 edition:*

‘So, equilibrium in some things, but in matters of material, a quantum leap in the technological and organizational productiveness and sophistication of the economy; an immense improvement in housing, public transport, nutrition, health-care, longevity; an enormous quantitative increase in commercial entertainment and in education. Not just change, but progress, then; change, almost anyone could agree, for the better. But has it brought greater happiness? in 1950, there was little propensity enviously to compare standards of living in Japan with those of the affluent West. Japan had lost the war, after all, and in any case was a backward country. Although there was a sense that things had improved immensely in the five years since the defeat, nobody thought himself entitled to expect American levels of living. Now, however, that economically powerful Japan has become a member of the rich nations’ club, one tends to hear more complaints; Japanese housing standards are well below those elsewhere; Japanese towns are sadly lacking in parks and open spaces; the ‘stock’ of social capital in museums and art galleries still has to be built up, etc.’

R.P. DORE



**Routledge**

Taylor & Francis Group  
[www.routledge.com](http://www.routledge.com)

an informa business





# CITY LIFE IN JAPAN

A STUDY OF A TOKYO WARD

R.P. DOORE



ROUTLEDGE

# CITY LIFE IN JAPAN

*A Study of a Tokyo Ward*

R. P. DORE

With New Introduction

TOKYO 1950 REVISITED: AN ASTONISHING  
HALF-CENTURY OF CHANGE



**Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group

LONDON AND NEW YORK

CITY LIFE IN JAPAN  
A STUDY OF A TOKYO WARD

First published 1958 by  
University of California Press &  
Routledge and Kegan Paul

Published 2013 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxfordshire OX14 4RN  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017 USA

First issued in hardback 2017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informabusiness*

© 1958 & 1999 R.P. Dore

All rights reserved. No part of this publication  
may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or  
transmitted in any form or by any means,  
without prior permission in writing from the Publishers,  
except the use of short extracts in criticism.

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A CIP catalogue entry for this book  
is available from the British Library

ISBN 13: 978-1-138-16464-2 (hbk)

ISBN 13: 978-1-873410-82-0 (pbk)

CITY LIFE IN  
JAPAN

## Acknowledgements

**T**HIS book was made possible by the generosity of the Treasury Committee for Studentships in Oriental Languages and Cultures, which supported the author during an eighteen months' stay in Japan, and also of the Central Research Committee of the University of London which provided a grant for the machine-sorting of some of the material obtained. The author is also greatly indebted to many friends without whose help this book could not have been written; to Professors K. Aoi, K. Iwai and T. Tsukamoto for their invaluable advice concerning the preparation of questionnaires; to the interviewers for their long and conscientious labours; to Mrs. R. Enoki, Mrs. K. Omori and Mr. H. Takagi for help in copying and tabulation; to Mr. Y. Kawashima and Professor Y. Yamada for many useful discussions and suggestions concerning additional material; and to Professor W. G. Beasley, Miss Carmen Blacker, Mr. Anthony Christie, Mr. F. J. Daniels, Miss Machiko Kubo, Mr. W. R. MacAlpine, Professor M. Maruyama, Professor W. J. H. Sprott, and Mrs. Sybil van der Sprekel for reading the whole or parts of the manuscript and making many valuable suggestions. Finally, grateful thanks are due to the people of Shitayama-cho, whose kindness and friendly co-operation made the work of collecting the material here presented a personal as well as an academic pleasure, and in particular to Mrs. Kiyoko Nishitani who not only provided her lodger with a strict, if hilarious, training in the niceties of Japanese etiquette, but also suffered her house to be turned into an interviewers' centre and bore all the attendant inconveniences with something more than the usual human allowance of patience and good humour.

## Tokyo 1950 Revisited: An Astonishing Half-century of Change

I have always thought myself lucky in the accidents that formed my career, and never more so than now, re-reading – for the first time in many years – *City Life in Japan*, the book which marked its beginning. For all the slightly pompous formalities of my 1950s' style – the 'it would seem preferable that. . .' rather than 'better that. . .'; the 'we may briefly list' where a colon would do; and the careful Misters of the acknowledgements – I hope there comes through to modern readers, as there certainly comes back to me, a sense of the fascinated excitement of my first eighteen months in Japan. Every day brought some new discovery about the way in which the language I had been learning for eight years was used in the business of daily life. Round every corner there was new evidence of how different that daily life could be from that of the England in which I had spent my first two-and-a-half decades.

But also how similar. The institutional constraints which surrounded their lives, and their choices, might be different, but it rarely seemed to me difficult to empathize with the citizens of Shitayama-cho. I always felt fairly confident that I could – as I put it in the first paragraph – reconstruct what people thought and felt from what they said and did. And with the empathy mostly went sympathy. (With the emphasis on 'mostly': *tout comprendre est tout pardonner* is an overstatement.) There were a few of my neighbours and interviewees whom I disliked, some quite intensely, but I disliked them for the same characteristics and in the same way as I disliked many of my fellow-countrymen. For most I felt a generally reciprocated friendliness; for those I got to know best, a warm affection. I suppose it was that which led me, knowing that I was writing for an audience whose image of Japan was a mixture of memories of war-time atrocities and depictions of a national character alien to the point of incomprehensibility, to take apart some of Ruth Benedict's assertions about the 'essentially Japanese' notions of *on* and *giri* and 'shame-culture' and try to show how these were simply reorderings of elements familiar enough to ourselves.

At the same time – most obviously in the discussion of class for instance – I frequently adopted an explicitly ethnocentric, or at least ethno-benchmarked, mode of explanation. I cannot count how many times since then I have had occasion to make the same elementary, but often over-looked point, that any generalization



about whole populations – ‘the Japanese are very polite’ or ‘they pay great attention to detail’ – invites the question ‘compared with whom?’ And it is best to make one’s standard of reference explicit. The other point I always find myself making about such ‘national character’ generalizations – that they refer only to the modal tendency in the distribution of certain characteristics among varying individuals; no society is entirely homogeneous – I do not see explicitly stated in the book. I suppose I thought that it was so amply demonstrated among the citizens of Shitayama-cho as not to need saying.

But is the degree of individual variation – in life-styles, tastes, ethics, political views – any greater today than it was in 1950? Leafing through these pages the obvious question which poses itself is: what has changed and how much?

The material change is astonishing. It is hard for anyone who has been to recent affluent Japan – even Japan in the midst of its worst post-war recession – to grasp how modest was the standard of living of these Shitayama-cho families. For most of them savings were something you built up to spend on basic furniture and clothing; fridges and washing machines were still distant dreams beyond immediate aspiration. (Still in 1957, only 2.8% of Japanese homes had fridges; 99% by 1978.) I suppose it was partly because I marvelled at the degree of self-respect and self-sufficiency some of these families managed to maintain – sometimes a couple and three children in a single-room apartment – that I went into living standards in such detail. Or perhaps it was just that having collected those family budgets in a fit of extravagance – a £150 research grant went a long way in yen in those days – I was determined to use them. I remember, at any rate, that in the end I became a little self-conscious about all this detail which I feared might bore the reader, because it had started to bore me. I included an item in the index: ‘kitchen sink, *passim*’. But in those days publishers actually edited books. They solemnly removed it.

#### SOCIAL MANAGEMENT

I suppose it is some excuse for all that detail that it was a prelude to the more subtle issues which are dealt with – a bit ponderously, it seems to me now – in Chapter 7: what does an increase in ‘rationality’ (I see from the index that this is the one chapter in which the name of Max Weber appears), together with a shift from village community to urban anonymity, do to consumption patterns? It seems a long way from the Japan of today to the Japan of the Reformed Living Campaign, when no-one questioned the role of the ‘nanny state’ working down through ward associations and *tonari-gumi* to mobilize disapproval of ‘irrational’

patterns of status-seeking expenditure. Since then we have been through the decades in which the weekly magazines took over the job of telling the citizenry what they should do with their money (the age of the 'three cs' – car, cooler and colour TV – already seems a long time ago). The Reformed Living Campaign died a natural death in the late 1950s. Still, though, in 1998, 17 October is National Savings Day – a day for promoting thrift at a time when the main economic *problem* is that the Japanese insist on doing over 20 per cent of the world's savings. There is an excess of capital everywhere except on bank balance sheets, the bank rate is 0.25 per cent, and still people insist on saving and simply will not spend!

There is still, as Garon observes, a certain resiliency to these patterns of what he calls 'social management',<sup>1</sup> reinforced by the never perfectly coopted, always potentially obstreperous, cooperation of local dignitaries and voluntary bodies. (The ward meeting described in my appendix is an illustration of the subtleties he describes.) Less resilient though, less taken for granted, than in 1950. One might trace the change through the annual numbers of the *White paper on the nation's livelihood* (*Kokumin seikatsu hakusho*) which the Economic Planning Agency started in 1956. (Can there be another country with so many annual government white papers? I can claim some minor responsibility. In a lifetime of writing agitated 'letters to the editor' and advocacy articles, the only evidence I have of ever having had the least scintilla of influence on any government's behaviour was when a manifesto drafted with some friends on the chaotic nature of Japanese government publications got to the Ishibashi cabinet and led to the setting up of the present government publications system. We offered as a model the British Stationery Office on whose exemplary finances at the time I did some research. Now, of course, the British Stationery Office is cruelly privatized and unfriendly to all but money-spinning users, while its Japanese equivalent, with its 72 branch shops all over Japan, goes from strength to strength.)

But to return to resilient social management and the 'nation's livelihood' white paper: over the years its tone has become steadily more drily factual and less exhortatory. The 1997 version's subtitle: *The working woman: In search of a new social system* certainly has an ameliorative flavour. And there are tables (with the message-carrying heading 'International comparisons show Japanese men do less housework') showing that the time husbands give to housework on weekdays has remained unchanged since 1970 (it has increased slightly on Saturdays and Sundays, but nothing like as much as the decline in weekend male work hours). And the section on working couples points out that with 50 per cent of husbands refusing to do any housework at all, marriage is becoming less and

less attractive for the working woman. As a future looms in which there will be only two, not as now four, people of working age supporting each old person, one would have expected from a traditional Japanese government, more active concern to support a pro-natalist policy, but today, says the report, 'when individual lifestyles have become much more diverse, institutions must be neutral with respect to the variety of individual choices',<sup>2</sup> and it contents itself with saying that, 'in the light of the extremely important long-term consequences of the lowered birth-rate, social support is considered necessary to enable child-caring to be combined with a work career'.

The often noted 'decline of industrial policy' has its counterpart in the social policy field too. And on the recipient end as well. The concerned, public-spirited citizen is somewhat less content to 'cooperate' with officialdom, and more concerned to criticize than in 1950. And better organized to do so, even if the new groups cannot match the enthusiasm of the first great wave of citizen protest after the peak event of post-war popular political involvement, the anti-Security Treaty demonstrations of 1960. The government has organized a system of ombudsman and suggestion boxes. It even held an international conference of ombudsman organizations in the mid-1990s, at which it presented a paper boasting of a number of changes – opening hours of post offices, changes to pension payment systems – which citizen remonstrance had brought about. But the scandals of *kankan-settai* ('government-to-government, (i.e., local to central) entertaining') gave rise to an entirely non-official, better anti-official, national league of 'citizen ombudsman' dedicated to exposing abuse of power and waste of money in local government – mainly boondoggles for spuriously public purposes by local councillors and officials. It mobilized some 300 people from 37 prefectural organizations for its third annual conference in 1995, and has won some notable court cases forcing disclosure of local government accounts.

#### STABLE FAMILIES

Moving on to the substantive issues raised in the 'women working' paper, these *White Papers* may not preach so much as they used to, but they do offer a good deal of factual information about social change and non-change. (Such curious facts, for example, as that, whereas the sale of Folk and Rock records has steadily increased from 370 million in 1981 to 1.5 billion in 1996 and that of traditional Japanese popular music equally steadily declined over the same period (110 to 42 million), Western classical music was sharing the fate of Japanese pop as long as the bubble lasted (148

million in 1981 to 52 million in 1989) but since then has undergone a revival – to 270-300 million in 1995-6 – thanks, I gather, to a growing popularity of opera.) What it shows about marriage and fertility trends, however, is that family patterns would seem to have stabilized after the anxious questioning and rethinking of the immediate post-war period that this book records. In 1950 the revolution in fertility patterns was already well under way; it was almost the middle of the half-decade in which the crude birth rate nearly halved. What the 1997 *White Paper* makes clear is, the – to a Northern European astonishing – resilience of the nuclear family. The age of marriage for both men and women, the age of first birth, second birth and third birth have all risen, slowly and steadily since 1950, by approximately three years. But (like husbands' willingness to do housework) since 1970 there has been little change in completed family sizes, and even less change in the surveys of the number of children planned, or desired. The three years delay has slightly lowered fertility, but in the long run more important is the slow increase in women who do not marry at all – 10 per cent still unmarried in their late thirties in 1995, compared with only five-and-a-half per cent in 1980. In private firm management, as distinct from the public service which has a fair number of married mothers in managerial positions, 60 per cent of women are unmarried. And almost all are childless. Single motherhood is still very much a rarity. Babies are what married couples have, and the private firms, which deter managerial women from marriage, still pay men family allowances on the assumption that they support wives which, by and large, when the children are young, they do. The M-pattern of female employment – with peak employment in the pre-marital early twenties, a trough in the child-bearing early thirties, and another peak after return to (much less well-paid) work in the early forties – is more strongly entrenched in Japan than anywhere else.

#### AFFLUENCE, PROGRESS AND HAPPINESS

So, equilibrium in some things, but, in matters material, a quantum leap in the technological and organizational productiveness and sophistication of the economy; an immense improvement in housing, public transport, nutrition, health-care, longevity; an enormous quantitative increase in commercial entertainment and in education. Not just change, but progress, then; change, almost anyone could agree, for the better. But has it brought greater happiness? In 1950, there was little propensity enviously to compare standards of living in Japan with those of the affluent West. Japan had lost the war, after all, and in any case was a backward country. Although there was a sense that things had improved immensely in the five years since the defeat, nobody thought himself entitled to

expect American levels of living. Now, however, that an economically powerful Japan has become a full member of the rich nations' club, one tends to hear more complaints; Japanese housing standards are well below those elsewhere; Japanese towns are sadly lacking in parks and open spaces; the 'stock' of social capital in museums and art galleries still has to be built up, etc.

#### SCHOOLING AND GETTING EDUCATED

One of the areas where the quantity/quality, change/progress question clearly raises itself is education. Shitayama-cho was undoubtedly ahead of Japan as a whole in proportions of the age-group going beyond compulsory education; of the boys, two-thirds in high schools and a third in universities, compared with one-third and eight per cent in Japan as a whole. Nowadays, the national figures are around 95% and 40%. And out of this expansion, in a society with strictly meritocratic ideas about fairness, has grown the whole set of institutions which has made Japan a byword for the intensity of cramming for competitive examinations. There are the coaching cram school chains franchised all over Japan with their batteries of mock tests, their computers which churn out the 'standard deviation scores' of each aspirant to higher education. There is the arcane jargon like *sansha-kon* – the triangular consultation of pupil, parent and teacher who pore over these scores and decide what 'level' of university the pupil should try for. And as to what 'level' should mean, there is the constant feedback of information through the schools and cram schools and weekly magazines which maintain a pecking order that individuals defy at their peril; a university faculty's prestige ranking depends on graduates' job chances (measured by the jobs that last year's graduates got) and that determines the competition for and hence the difficulty of passing the entrance examination.

The Central Educational Council, special Prime Ministerial Advisory Committees, every writer on educational matters, can repeatedly deplore the tendency of the system to promote uniformity, write brave declarations about the need to promote individuality and creativity, advocate diversification and choice in the high school curriculum, call for multiple routes into university education, but all to little avail. Top universities want to make sure they get the top students, and are not convinced that there is a better way than testing performance in maths, science, Japanese and foreign languages as a means of deciding who the top students are. So those are the tests that high schools prepare their pupils for, with the broader purposes of intellectual awakening and cultural enrichment pushed aside.

There is a lot to be said for the system: it stocks a lot of minds



with useful knowledge, develops useful abilities, strengthens a lot of mental muscles, and – as compared with societies where the route to the top depends clearly on class and influence – it provides acceptable claims to legitimacy in the distribution of the jobs which carry power and prestige. And since universities rarely fail their students, and since getting into the right university is far more important for job chances than anything you do when you are in it, the absence of pressure ought to lead, for university students, to the full unleashing of intellectual curiosity. But everything I hear about the reading habits of the young, about the atmosphere of university seminars, suggests that this is not the case. A friend who has recently retired from a lifetime of teaching at Tokyo University at the pinnacle of the system, wrote the following after his retirement:

I've heard older civil servants complain that the new graduate intakes are a different kind of people. Whereas they themselves, in their younger days, would be constantly getting hold of somebody a bit senior to themselves and arguing the toss about policy, today's youngsters show not a bit of interest in doing that. And so they fail to develop either the bonds of collegueship which grew out of such encounters, or the powers of argument which a civil servant so much needs.

I can't say that I'm surprised. I too have been struck by the extent to which the generations of students since the student disturbances of the late 60s have lost the taste for – and consequently the ability for – arguing. Get them in a seminar class and try to get them to take positions and argue among themselves, and the odds are, however you stoke the fires, that they just sit there in silence. At the most you will get a few desultory exchanges, like beginner's tennis; no rallies.

I think back to our younger days when the arguments went on late into the night. That was how you cemented friendships; that was how you established a sense of your own unique identity. Today's students seem like a different kind of people.<sup>3</sup>

In 1950, as I think several passages in the book reflect, society was in ferment. There was a sense of a whole new world opening up; a flood of foreign films to be seen, the whole canon of Western literature – especially the Russian and French nineteenth-century novelists – to be caught up with; the arguments of Sartre and his friends in *Le temps moderne* to be rehearsed in Japan's widely read monthly journals. There was often a naïvety in the eagerness of this 'thirst for culture', but it seems to me a good deal more admirable than what has replaced it, if my recent browsings in the magazines and comics of the convenience stores – and the decline in the

readership of serious monthlies, and in the proportion of the students in the élite Tokyo University dormitories who take newspapers – are any guide. This interaction between curiosity awakening and ritual schooling, between learning for personal development and learning for career placement, was later to become one of my major preoccupations,<sup>4</sup> but I do not see anything in the chapter on education in this first of my books that seemed to foreshadow it.

### CLASS

The other thing about the changes in the educational system of the last half century which needs watching is the way in which it has affected what I see I devoted nearly half of my short chapter on politics to – the reality of, and perceptions of the reality of, social class. Growing up in England as a grammar schoolboy who learned in his teens to ‘speak proper’ and acquire the accents of the middle class, I was bemused by this ‘hierarchical’ society in which people did not class-label themselves as soon as they opened their mouths, where class differences in family patterns and leisure pursuits and child-rearing habits were not a dominant preoccupation of sociologists because they did not seem large or important. The vast majority of my fellow-students at Tokyo University, which then occupied an even more dominant élite position than it does today, were first-generation: children of farmers, teachers and small businessmen. They were rarely from poorer households of the urban working class or from tenant farmer families because their children were under a stronger compulsion to start earning at 15 (and so produced a generation of extremely bright trade union leaders), but rarely, also, from the families of the still quite restricted metropolitan professional and commercial middle class. Meritocracy was for real: social mobility was not a fringe phenomenon; it was taken for granted.

Today the situation appears to be quite different. The proportion of Tokyo University students at least one of whose parents graduated from Tokyo University has been steadily rising. The degree of hereditary transmission of class status seems clearly to be increasing. Cultural stratification – differences in television channels watched, magazines read – seems more marked. Compared with even Italy, or Germany, and *a fortiori* with Britain, Japan is still a more cohesive society; less crime, smaller pockets of anti-society counter-cultures, a more general willingness to support welfare systems, public health and education. ‘This is in the national interest’ still carries some clout as an argument in convincing those who are going to lose personally from some new policy change. But the tendency among the younger generations of professionals,

officials and businessmen – what I call the *churyu-nisei*; the second-generation middle class<sup>5</sup> – is away from such social and towards more self-interested concerns. The slogans of the neo-liberal revolution – consumer choice, free market competition, equality of opportunity not of outcomes, individual self-sufficiency – are embraced with enthusiasm.

A major role in all this has been played by the development of élite private schooling. A decade ago, over a third of the students in Tokyo University came from just 28 schools which admitted, at the age of 12, only pupils with test scores at least one-and-a-half standard deviations above average, and I have little doubt that the imbalance has become even greater since. Some of the 28 were state schools – the ‘attached’ schools of the education departments of major state universities. Most of them were private. But what they all had in common was, first, that they took pupils out of the normal state system of six years primary, three years junior secondary schools, into six-year ‘all-through’ schools at the age of 12, and secondly that they all had highly competitive entrance examinations. So, whereas the generation of officials and managers who are just retiring from their second post-retirement job or from the chairmanship of their companies, did not get recognition of their élite status until they got to their old-system high school at the age of 18, their successors get on the top track at the age of 12, and have little to do with those on lower tracks thereafter. When I was looking for a carpenter in Kyoto some years ago, I was taken to one by an economics professor friend; they had been at middle school together and still met regularly at their class reunions. Such network ties across class lines, the kind which hold societies together, are attenuating.

How far this hardening of the class system, this shift to hereditary transmission of class status, will go, is a question that one needs to be both geneticist and social scientist to take the measure of. Clearly bright men are more likely to marry bright women and they are likely to have bright children. Since researchers tend to shy away from such questions, it is anybody’s guess how much that accounts for differential success in the entrance examinations. Or how much it depends instead on *cultural* factors, (more books around the home, more intelligent TV programmes, parents who maintain the learning habit in their daily work lives, more interesting conversation at the breakfast table, more effort because ‘not doing worse than Dad’ provides stronger incentives than ‘doing better than Dad’). Or how much it depends on having the *financial* means to pay for the extra coaching that helps you to get on the top track at the age of 12 and to pay the higher fees when you are on it. For what it is worth the *White Paper* cited earlier

estimates that the cost of putting a child through to university, using the private system beyond the first six years of elementary school, is some ¥19.6m. – equal to one-year's top-end managerial salary, about \$140,000 at today's exchange rates – if they live away from home while at university. If you stick to the state system and commute to university from home, you can get away with ¥9.3 million: about \$65,000. It is not clear that this includes what can be the very expensive item of out-of-school coaching for the entrance exams.<sup>6</sup>

I do not suppose the prospect of this sort of 'post-modern' rigidification of class structure ever occurred to me when writing this book. For me, class questions were the classical Marxist questions. I was fascinated to find less real class feeling than in Britain, but a more Marxist language to express it – both among my fellow students at Tokyo University and among the Shitayama interviewees who were more likely to use words like 'proletarian' and 'petty bourgeois', than 'working class'. The chapter on work was written on the assumption – which seemed a very reasonable one to a newspaper reader of the day – that, however paternalistic a lot of employers were, there was no gainsaying an underlying conflict between the profit-taking bosses on the one hand, and, on the other, workers who needed unions to get them decent wages and restore some balance in the employer/employee distribution of power. And with that went the corresponding assumption that politics were a mirror reflection of that dichotomy – the Liberals and Democrats being by and large parties of the bosses, and the Socialists and Communists champions of the workers.

#### DEFINING MOMENTS

This was intended to be a home-and-neighbourhood-centred grass roots kind of a book, but I was still surprised to find so little in it about national politics or industrial affairs – even though I wrote my first article on Japanese politics, an analysis of the language used in the 1956 election, during the four years between my finishing the manuscript and the book's seeing the light of published day. It was an analysis of the boo-words and hurrah-words used in election addresses, I suppose continuing the preoccupation with underlying attitudes shown in the discussion of *kokka* in the present book. But as for the grand picture, not even the name of the then Prime Minister, Yoshida, appears in the index. Apart from the throw-away line about the only 'true believers' left in post-defeat Japan being the America-worshippers and the Communists, there is hardly a reference to political parties.

This was, however, in retrospect a crucial moment in both Japan's political and industrial history. It was the time of the