

# Social Inequality in Japan

Sawako Shirahase

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Sawako Shirahase



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# Social Inequality in Japan

Japan was the first Asian country to become a mature industrial society and throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, was viewed as an “all-middle-class society”. However, since the 1990s there have been growing doubts as to the real degree of social equality in Japan, particularly in the context of dramatic demographic shifts as the population ages whilst fertility levels continue to fall.

This book compares Japan with America, Britain, Italy, France, Germany, Sweden and Taiwan in order to determine whether inequality really is a social problem in Japan. With a focus on the impact of demographic shifts, Sawako Shirahase examines female labour market participation, income inequality among households with children, the state of the family, generational change, single-person households, and income distribution among the aged, and asks whether increasing inequality is uniquely Japanese, or if it is a social problem common across all of the societies included in this study. Crucially, this book shows that Japan is distinctive not in terms of the degree of inequality in the society, but, rather, in how acutely inequality is perceived. Further, the data shows that Japan differs from the other countries examined in terms of the gender gap in both the labour market and the family, and in inequality among single-person households – single men and women, including lifelong bachelors and spinsters – and also among single-parent households, who pay a heavy price for having deviated from the expected pattern of life in Japan.

Drawing on extensive empirical data, this book will be of great interest to students and scholars interested in Japanese culture and society, Japanese studies, and social policy more generally.

**Sawako Shirahase** is Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Tokyo, Japan.

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# Preface

## **Sawako Shirahase: *Social Inequality in Japan***

The Nissan Institute/Routledge Japanese Studies series was established in 1986 and has published since then almost 90 books. It set out to foster an informed and balanced, but not uncritical, understanding of Japan. One aim of the series has been to show the depth and variety of Japanese institutions, practices, and ideas. Another has been, by using comparisons, to see what lessons, positive and negative, may be drawn for other countries. The tendency in commentary on Japan to resort to outdated, ill-informed, or sensational stereotypes still remains, and needs to be combatted.

The latest volume in this series, by Professor Shirahase, meets all of these objectives admirably. The key question that it seeks to examine is a simple one: Why is economic inequality in Japanese society getting worse? The answer, inevitably, is much more complicated. For a start, what exactly do we mean by inequality? And what do we mean by Japanese society, where “Japaneseness” is a relatively recent invention and its boundaries are porous? How do we examine the issue of inequality in a society where debate about class has been, at best, muted and often absent? If data on class are absent in much of the debate, how do we know if inequality really is rising in Japan? If it is increasing, is it increasing more or less than in other societies?

Sawako Shirahase is a superb guide through this complex maze of questions. She traces the history of inequality from Plato and Aristotle up to the contemporary debates in Japan subsumed under the general title of “*kakusa*” (literally meaning “a gap in ordered rating”). She shows how debates around inequality have, in Japan, been in recent years as much about definition as measurement. Inequality is both absolute and relative. It is both about the current generation and the potential for mobility in future generations. It needs to be related to issues of industrialization and the demography of a society. In respect of this last point, Japan offers an excellent case study. It has moved from being a pre-industrial, to an industrial, to a post-industrial nation faster than any other society in the world. It also has the fastest ageing and the most rapidly shrinking population in the world. Both of these

latter factors have had a major impact on *inter*-generational inequality, which has been as much a focus of debate in Japan as *intra*-generational inequality.

But, unlike most studies on inequality in Japan, this is not just a story about a single country. It is an account of how Japan fits into the wider context of changing patterns of equality in all advanced societies faced by the same problems of moving into a post-industrial age with ageing populations. The Japanese case is compared with the cases of the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, and, perhaps most interestingly, Taiwan, which is another society that has rarely been placed in a comparative perspective, but has tended to be studied *sui generis*. Professor Shirahase is fully aware of the methodological problems of undertaking such comparative studies but, as we will see, the pay-offs are manifold. There are as many differences between the so-called “Western” societies as similarities between some of them, and Japan, and Taiwan. For example, the similarities that the study brings out between Japan, Taiwan, Italy, and (to a lesser extent) Spain, in all of which the family plays an extensive role in providing social welfare and social solidarity, are particularly intriguing and talk to many of the issues raised by Gøsta Esping-Andersen (1999) in his classic work, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Blackwell), first published in 1990.

Amongst the many variables that the author examines in her search for the underlying causes for growing inequality in Japan are female participation rates in the labor force, the situation of single-person as opposed to dual- and multi-person households, the effects of education for women, and the impact of the increasing proportion of the elderly in the population.

The conclusions that Professor Shirahase reaches in her account are both wide-ranging and, in several ways, optimistic. The perception of inequality in Japan may be greater than the actual degree of income distribution warrants. In part this is because it is such a novel topic of debate in Japan. On the other hand, gender inequality in the Japanese labor market is very high—reflecting the continuation of a highly gendered division of labor that has been prevalent in Japan since the end of the Second World War—but the type of work that women undertake does not map clearly on their educational experience, suggesting that we still have an imperfect understanding of this element of the labor force. The relationship between household composition and social inequality is also highly ramified, as indeed is the case in all the countries that are part of this study. Ultimately, though, as she says, Japan may be both the same as and different from other countries, but “(I)nequalities exist everywhere ... . The differences in the pattern of inequality (though) ... spring from the policy ideals and the institutional designs that have created those institutions ... (w)hich means that the degree of inequality is something under our control.”

Understanding social inequality in Japan is one of the most important contributions we can make to the debate about the changes that are currently taking place in society. This volume is full of insights about contemporary society that capture the essence of many elements of its institutions. Just to give one

example: The Japanese wife's control of the family purse is described "as a hired accountant, not as a substantive controller," which elucidates how domestic housekeeping operates in Japan, a relationship that has long puzzled Western observers. The Japanese original of this volume was published under the title *Nihon no Fubyōdō wo Kangaeru* (*Thinking about Inequality*) by the University of Tokyo Press in 2009. It was received with great fanfare and won the Grand Prize at the 8th CCIJ (Consumer Co-operative Institute of Japan) Research Awards in 2011. It could receive no greater endorsement, though, than the fact that it has been translated by Professor Ronald Dore, probably the best known scholar of post-Japanese society. Those who know Dore's oeuvre well will be able to see how he has brought his incomparable ability to translate not only Japanese words but Japanese ways of thinking to bear on this manuscript on almost every page. We are very proud to add this elegantly translated and completely updated and revised English language version to the Nissan/Routledge Series. We believe that it meets all of the objectives for the series that were first set out almost 30 years ago.

Roger Goodman  
Arthur Stockwin  
Oxford, July 2013

# Acknowledgements

This volume was originally published in Japanese by the University of Tokyo Press (UTP) in 2009. I would like to thank the UTP for granting permission to publish the English version. First, I have to show my gratitude to Ron Dore for his wonderful translation. There is no doubt that Ron is one of the most distinguished scholars specializing in Japan, and I have always been amazed at his comprehensive and deep knowledge of Japan and the Japanese language. I cannot find the words to express how much I appreciate that he translated my book. I was even able to find new perspectives through his translation into English. I feel extremely fortunate and honoured to have worked with him as my translator.

I thought about publishing this volume in English while writing it in Japanese, because the main framework of this book involves a cross-national comparison. I like having readers from various backgrounds and nationalities, and hearing their opinions on my research. However, it has been a long road with regard to having my book published outside Japan. I would most like to thank two editors, Roger Goodman and Arthur Stockwin, for encouraging me to publish the manuscript in the Nissan Institute/Routledge Japanese Studies. Without their understanding and support, I would still be struggling to find a publisher. I cannot express how much I appreciate them. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers whose comments led to the revision and improvement of the manuscript. Also, I want to thank Stephanie Rogers, Hannah Mack, Sabrina Lacey and Sheila Garrard for their strong assistance and support throughout the process of transforming the manuscript into a book.

In the late 1980s, when I was a graduate student at the University of Oxford, scholars and journalists from outside Japan focused their attention on Japan to determine what enabled her high economic growth and how such a small Asian country managed to become an economic giant. Roughly three decades later, Japan no longer attracts a great deal of attention from abroad. Japan remains peculiar to some extent, although the country now shares social problems common to advanced capitalist societies, such as high youth unemployment and poverty. Consequently, I feel strongly that I want to examine Japan's position compared to Europe and the United States based on rigorous comparable data analyses. Japan is a highly industrial society, and at the same

time, she is also one of the most aged societies. I would like to re-position Japan in a cross-national perspective within the theoretical framework of a social inequality and demographic transformation.

The research on which this volume is based was supported by the Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (S) (number 20223004) and Grant-in-Aid for Specially Promoted Research (Number 25000001) from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS). Permission to use data from the Comprehensive Survey of People's Living Conditions was granted under the project (permission number 1009-3). I would not have been able to conduct my research without their assistance. I would also like to thank the technical staff at Luxembourg Income Study. They were always efficient, and I owe them a great deal for helping analyze the LIS data.

Last but not least, I want to thank my family. In particular, this book would not have been possible without the support of my husband, Hiroshi. I always feel lucky to have a husband who happens to be a sociologist. I would like to dedicate this book to my family.

Sawako Shirahase



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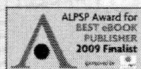
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