e-ISSN

Inequalities
Vol. 1 – May 2024

The Japanese Myth: A Middle-Class Society or a Reality Overwhelmed by Global Social Polarisation?

Nicola Costalunga
Università del Salento, Italy

Abstract Japan has historically considered itself immune to social polarisation dynamics. The Japanese have also traditionally self-perceived as a homogenous middle-class society. Contemporary Japanese social reality is however quite different. The last 25 years have seen several structural changes, like the increase in inequality between regular and non-regular workers. Along with growing disparities, Japanese society's self-perception as a homogeneous middle class has started to be challenged. Nowadays, inequalities generate an exploitative relationship involving five distinct social classes. This paper attempts to analyse the social polarisation issue in Japan while taking into account the serious structural-demographic transformations that it has been experiencing over the last 40 years.

Keywords Japan. Homogeneous middle-class society. Shakai kakusa. Social polarisation. Income inequalities.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2023-12-30
Accepted 2024-02-22
Published 2024-05-20

Citation Costalunga, N. (2024). "The Japanese Myth: A Middle-Class Society or a Reality Overwhelmed by Global Social Polarisation?". *Inequalities*, 1, 73-98.

DOI 10.30687/INQ/9191-9002/2024/01/004

1 Introduction

Japan has historically (self-)considered itself immune to the social polarisation dynamics that have determined the inequalities and strong class division present in many European countries and the United States. This unique Asian country, after a 'late' process of industrialisation (Dore 1973) and a rapid late-comer effect in the last century, quickly joined the highest ranks of the economically advanced countries. Despite this transformation, Japan, and the Japanese, have continued to perceive themselves as a homogenous middle-class society,[1] both socially and culturally, as well as ethnically (Chiavacci 2008).

Contemporary Japanese social reality is however quite different. The last 25 years have seen structural changes in the income distribution of Japanese households: the median income across all age groups has been decreasing, partly due to the average ageing of households (from 20% to 36%) and the increase in single-income households (from 26% to 38%). The same process occurred for low-income households, which increased for all age groups except for the 55-64 one (Cabinet Office 2022). Wage inequalities[2] have worsened since the 1990s, in parallel with the deterioration of the employment situation as a result of the structural population ageing and the increase[3] in non-regular workers.[4] Confirming this progressively growing disparity trend are the OECD data on the Gini coefficient of initial income (10th among OECD countries), the poverty rate (10th) and the Gini coefficient of disposable income (11th). Indeed, many countries ranked above Japan are developing countries (OECD 2023d). Besides the increase in inequality between regular (*seiki rōdōsha*) and non-regular (*hiseiki rōdōsha*) workers, gender inequality (*jendā fubyōdō*) remains an important factor of social disparity.

Along with these growing disparities, the over-emphasised self-perception of Japanese society as a homogeneous middle class has

1 *Ichi oku sōchūryū*, literally "100 million all in the middle class".

2 In this case, household income gaps and individual wage differentials. Variables considered relevant for a study of inequality growth are income distribution and inequalities in opportunities and outcomes (employment and career advancement, educational attainment), while other related issues may be inequality reduction policies and the relationship between equity and efficiency. Other indicators may be consumption and wealth levels, although less precise than income (Tachibanaki 2006, 1-2).

3 The exponential increase of non-regular workers can be considered the most important transformation in Japan's working life since the 1960s. See Gordon 2017, 9.

4 Shinozaki 2006; Komamura 2008. The term encompasses a wide variety of employment types, i.e., part-time workers, contract workers, dispatched workers, part-time students (*arubaito*), etc. For a more in-depth look at the different types of so-called 'bad jobs', see Kanbayashi, Takao 2016.

started to be put into question. Indeed, *shakai kakusa*[5] has become increasingly prominent in recent decades,[6] starting with the wave of neoliberal structural reforms (*kōzō kaikaku*) of the then Prime Minister Koizumi in the first half of the 2000s, which led to a staggering increase in inequality[7] and poverty,[8] and an 'intra-competitive' molecularisation of labour. The Japanese homogeneous middle-class self-perception has *de facto* been gradually broken down, to the point that more than half of the population perceives itself as "living lower than a middle-class life".[9] This perception first came into the public domain during the 2007-08 global economic crisis,[10] reaching full maturity in 2010 with the recognition of a socially divided society with growing economic inequality (Hashimoto 2018; 2021), and finally achieving a new peak of awareness in the latest OECD survey on inequality perceptions (OECD 2021a).

It is also important to consider the Japanese social polarisation process in its structural mechanisms. Feeding disparities and inequalities in contemporary Japan generate an exploitative relationship involving – at least – three distinct social classes. According to a Marxist perspective, the Japanese working class is still subaltern to the capitalist class and the 'broader' middle class. However, this subalternity affects the lowest areas of society the most, including non-regular (low-wage) workers, the unemployed, female workers (Hashimoto 2018; 2021) and immigrants, resulting in a new underclass subject to the dynamics of social polarisation. It is precisely the latter who are positioned at the lowest end of the country's social hierarchy (Shipper 2008), involved in a broader process of reproduction of class stratification recently amplified by the pandemic and post-pandemic period, which has affected low-income groups the most (Kikuchi, Kitao, Mikoshiba 2020).[11]

The questions this paper seeks to answer are: is social polarisation a current process in today's Japan? In what forms is it present,

5 Literally 'social disparity'. It is interchangeable with the terms *kakusa no kakudai* (social and economic disparity) and *kakusa to fubyōdō* (economic disparity and inequality), which are commonly associated with the concept of *bundan* (division).

6 As early as the late 1990s, inequality in Japan began to be assessed at a higher degree than in the US (Tachibanaki 1998).

7 Two types of inequality were the sharp internal division between different categories of workers (regular, non-regular, etc.) and citizens (standard and socially vulnerable), and the marked imbalance of power between capital and labour in favour of the former. Both have led to an increase in inequality that goes beyond the simple analysis of income differentials. Ninomiya 2006.

8 Ninomiya 2006; Komamura 2008, 67-8; Gordon 2017.

9 JILPT 2022; 2023, 35; NHK 2022.

10 Although it was already partially perceived earlier (Kosugi 2008).

11 In particular women in non-regular workers' positions (JILPT 2020).

and how has it escalated over time? And, lastly, how does the variable of migrant workers, but more generally of the wider underclass, possibly increase the distance between an unreachable capitalist class and an increasingly poor working class (blue-, and white-collar workers, alike)? The answers to these questions will also have to take the serious, and now seemingly irreversible, structural-demographic transformations that Japan has been experiencing for at least the last 40 years into account.

The structure of this work is as follows: the first section aims to describe the transformative processes that Japan underwent during the phase following the end of WWII, leading it to become an economic power and a society based on social, cultural and ethnic homogeneity; the second section, through the analysis of the available data, aims to report on the current reality of Japanese society and on the internal transformations taking place; the third section investigates the theme of the perception of inequality experienced by the population, linking it to the socio-economic dynamics of recent years; the fourth section tries to make a comparison between the two antithetical visions of a Japanese society characterised by marked overall homogeneity and, negatively, by clear tendencies of polarisation and inequality; the fifth section deals with the theme of class and how it can be found within Japanese social structure; the conclusions envisage a synthesis of what has been presented during the paper, while taking structural demographic changes brought about by the rapid population ageing into account.

This paper's methodology is based on primary and secondary sources analysis. Part of the data is derived from calculations already elaborated in other papers, while the statistical datasets are taken from various published Japanese and international institutional sources. Although social polarisation and stratification topics have already been extensively dealt with in Japanese and international literature, this paper attempts to systematise these issues by cross-referencing past and present data and sources.

2 The Japanese Rise: The Transformation into a Homogeneous Middle-class Society

Japan has been steeped in rhetoric, used since the second half of the last century, that identifies it as consisting of a homogeneous, mono-ethnic society,[12] generically middle-class, and characterised by a strong component of social mobility determined by a meritocratic (education) system (Chiavacci 2010, 48; Chiavacci, Lechevalier 2017, 300). However, Japanese society, as well as its self-perception, was not always like this. Looking at its recent history, the early post-war years were the scene of intense class struggles and grassroots labour activism (Gordon 1998). Before the Meiji Restoration (1868), Japan was characterised by a rigid hierarchy,[13] where social mobility or marriages between people of different statuses were impossible (Lie 2003, 70-1).[14] This system, albeit to a lesser extent, remained partially active during the first half of the last century. Before WWII, a class system was in force where the hereditary elite were positioned at the top and the population below them (Lebra 1993, 57-60). More recently still, the country was commonly described as a *tate shakai* (vertical society) (Nakane 1970, 87), and a class-stratified one (Steven 1983, 319). As far as inequality is concerned, the Gini coefficient at the end of the 19th century first saw a gradual improvement until the late 1930s, and then worsened significantly in the post-war period, in a context of already strong income differentiation between cities and rural areas (Minami 2008, 7-9) and intra-labour wage gaps (11-12).

This was until the 'official' political and social paradigm shift in the mid-1960s (Chiavacci 2008, 6; 2010, 48). From there arose the strongly self-perceived idea of a general middle-strata[15] and middle-class society (Kosugi 2008, 2; Tachibanaki, Urakawa 2008, 21), free of class divisions (Lie 2003, 70-3), especially in comparison with European socio-economic systems (Dore 1987). This 'success' came about due to a series of progressive reforms initiated in the post-war period that legally erased status divisions and forced the dissolution of family-owned monopolistic conglomerates (*zaibatsu*). Extensive land

12 Literally *tanitsu minzoku shakai*. The concept of *tanitsu minzoku* (culturally homogeneous population) covers language, ethnicity/race and religion, while implying the uniqueness of the Japanese people. Lie 2003; Kowner, Befu 2015, 391-3.

13 The so-called *shinōkōshō* model, consisting of a fourfold caste structure (in order samurai, peasants, artisans, merchants), in addition to an 'outcaste' sub-level (Caroli, Gatti 2017, 101).

14 A subdivision-based on 'class' and 'race' was already present in this hierarchy, and saw the presence of an initial underclass composed of racialised minorities (Baber 2023).

15 Literally *chū kaisō* (Murakami 1984, 167).

reforms against agricultural monopolies were implemented,[16] while taxes on personal wealth that directly affected previously existing inequalities were imposed (Minami 2008, 13). Structurally, this balance was underpinned by a strong division of gender roles (Gordon 1998; Ochiai 2003), which was fundamental to achieving economic growth and societal harmony (Lebra 1984).

Japanese growth in the second half of the last century, itself not supported by a redistributive welfare system but by a developmental productivist model centred on economic growth and (shared) productivity, was the basis of an extremely egalitarian and affluent society,[17] also due to fair and meritocratic opportunities for social mobility (Chiavacci, Hommerich 2016, 1-2). This model, which required a constant commitment of the individual,[18] was called the 'Japanese way of life' (Chiavacci 2007, 41-5; Chiavacci, Hommerich 2016, 3). It was embedded in an industrial relations system delineated by the 'three sacred treasures',[19] composing the so-called 'Japanese-type capitalism' (Albert 1991; Gordon 1998), itself characterised by a distinct component of social cohesion and income equality (Chiavacci, Hommerich 2016, 23). At the same time, it was a very young and numerically expanding society, thus relying on a large workforce (6). The vision of a corporate-centred and gender-divided society had become the standard, partly due to a strong cultural bias (Gordon 1998, 200). If a minimal presence of inequality was perceived by the population, it was considered a necessary sacrifice in the name of efficiency and economic growth (Tachibanaki 2006, 1).

The strong division of gender roles, consistently with a corporatist and familist welfare state model, attributed to men the duty of the country's economic prosperity, while women necessarily had to be responsible for family management. This welfare model was centred on the 'replacement' role of women in care and was embedded in a social 'pact' that served to balance social mechanisms during the last century's economic growth. According to a functionalist perspective (Spencer 1863; Durkheim 1895; Parsons, Bales 1955) of the gender role, it was this initial division that had a persistent impact on the subordinate position of women in contemporary Japanese social stratification, as well as the resulting structural gender inequality.

A systemic equilibrium – however internally 'unequal' – was thus acquired, both in social and labour market spheres. All this was

16 Completely transforming the tenant farming system through confiscation in 1946 of farmland from large and absentee landowners (Lie 2003, 72; Minami 2008, 13).

17 A mass society (*taishū shakai*). Choi 2013.

18 The so-called *risshin shusse*.

19 Namely lifetime employment, seniority wage, and enterprise unions systems, in addition to harmonious labour-management relations. Nakamura 1993.

underpinned by the extraordinary Japanese economic growth that began in the second half of the 1960s,[20] indicating that Japan's harmony model was efficient and potentially durable. At the same time, however, the Gini coefficients on household income (divided into initial[21] and equivalent redistributed[22] income), together with various indicators of wage differentials (gender, enterprise size and industry type), showed that since 1952 income disparity has progressively increased. This trend shows that economic inequality has been present since before the historical crises of the Japanese economic system, albeit to an insufficiently significant extent (Hashimoto 2021, 164-5).

3 Japanese Social Reality: Preliminary Data and Ongoing Transformations

The first half of the 1990s, with the beginning of the 'lost decade' (1992-02)[23] following the bursting of the speculative bubble in the real estate market, marked the outset of perpetual economic stagnation[24] and social decline (Funabashi 2015). These transformations have been accompanied by a steady population reduction process, which was also caused by a sharp decrease in the fertility rate (OECD 2023ba). The decline in the working-age population, which started in the 1980s, has in turn increased the proportion of population groups (divided by age) affected by wage and income dispersion (Ōtake 1999, 12).

What was surprising, however, was the tardiness in recognising the structural inequality that permeates Japanese society. The political interest in the issue started in 2006 (Chiavacci, Hommerich 2016, 2), including the 'public' perception of the problem. The effects of the long economic stagnation were belatedly perceived in terms of socio-economic inequality, overshadowed by the demographic crisis and the recognition of its transformation into a structural fact (Schoppa 2006). Despite this, the perception of society's precariousness and socio-economic vulnerability has affected all social strata,

20 Uninterrupted at least until the 1973 oil crisis, then resumed until the early 1990s (Lie 2003, 73).

21 This is income before tax, before adjustments of social insurance payments.

22 Income calculated after subtracting tax payments, and social insurance and social benefits to pensioners and households in need.

23 In Japanese *ushinawareta jūnen*.

24 That, together with low real wage growth, has led to a sharp deterioration in the population's economic conditions. Wage growth stood at 1.05 times greater from 1991 to 2021, far below many OECD countries. Cabinet Secretariat 2023.

with serious consequences on the perceived security of the population (Chiavacci, Hommerich 2016, 23; van Houwelingen 2016).

The scholarly community has been active on the subject since the 1990s, which has been further revived during the first lost decade (Lise et al. 2013, 583; Chiavacci, Hommerich 2016, 7-14). Scholars have split into two strands: those who have considered inequality as already present in Japanese society, with slight changes from an already present stratification (Hara, Seiyama 2005; Sato 2007), and those who have identified actual breakpoints with the country's egalitarian past (Allison 2013; Kariya 2013). However, the literature agrees that, at least since the 1990s, there was no longer a perfect symmetry between economic growth and middle-class society (Chiavacci 2008).[25] In particular, Tachibanaki's (1998) work on income distribution and Satō's (2000) work on social mobility had a lasting impact on the public debate (Chiavacci 2010, 56-7; Chiavacci, Hommerich 2016, 7). Despite being criticised from a methodological point of view (Hara, Seiyama 2005; Ishida 2008), they made the limits of social upgrading of Japanese society at the expense of the already existing middle class clear. Indeed, the focus at the time was on the middle class, not yet identifying the issues of social polarisation and the various underclasses.

Economic stagnation and the demographic crisis were responded to by politicians who, in contrast to the egalitarianism principles adopted so far, opted for mechanisms of liberalisation, deregulation and competition, not only between companies but also between workers (Tachibanaki 2006, 6). As a consequence, the harmonious system of industrial relations was also changed founded on a performance-based wage system (which, however, preferred rewards to employees rather than wage increases), especially in large companies, also changing the paradigm of wage compensation principles (Shinozaki 2006, 6; Tachibanaki 2006, 5). Unemployment (especially of young people and workers close to retirement), until then very low (2% in 1991), increased substantially by starting to affect particular segments of the population, – reaching 8% of people between 60 and 64 years in 2001, and 10% of people between 20 and 24 years in 2003 (Chiavacci, Hommerich 2016, 12-14).[26] This phase can be considered a prelude to real social polarisation, at least as the public recognition of the problem in the 2000s revealed.

25 Already in the 1980s, economic inequality began to be a relevant trend, stimulating scientific debate at the time. Hashimoto 2021, 165.

26 Currently, Japan's unemployment rate remains one of the lowest among OECD countries (2.7%), well below the OECD average (4.8%). OECD 2023f; 2023g.

4 Inequality Perception and Social Transformations

In the first half of the 2000s, the term *shakai kakusa* came into the public domain, coinciding with the neoliberal structural reforms during the three consecutive terms of Prime Minister Junichirō Koizumi's LDP government (2001-06). Indeed, concomitant economic growth has resulted in a general growth of inequality, benefitting only the upper class (Matsubara 2005). In 2006, inequality gained traction in the scientific and political debate (Shinozaki 2006, 4; Chiavacci, Hommerich 2016, 2; Hashimoto 2021, 163) and became even more important since the global economic crisis of 2007-8 (Kosugi 2008). At the same time, Japanese society was invested in the relatively conscious transformation from a 'general middle-class society' to a 'gap' or 'divided' society,[27] along with growing polarisations in the labour market and social integration (Chiavacci 2010, 57; Chiavacci, Hommerich 2016, 14). In 2010, the awareness of having become a divided society, particularly from the point of view of income differences, reached full maturity (Hashimoto 2021, 163).

In this context, there was a marked division between regular workers, placed in the primary segment of the labour market,[28] and outsiders[29] who were in the secondary one, where the demand for labour consisted mainly of flexible, low-cost and low-skilled workers, easily dismissed during economic fluctuations. Moreover, the latter group has increased constantly since the 1980s. Extending segmentation beyond the labour market dimension,[30] the former group can be placed in the group of the so-called *kachigumi*, i.e. the winners, while the latter is in the group of the *makegumi*, i.e. the losers.[31] This stratification process was not dissimilar to what was taking place, through liberalisation policies, within Western economic systems (Minami 2008, 14). In addition to these mechanisms, the hinge of socio-economic differences between rural periphery and urbanised areas became wider (Higuchi 2008), remaining unaltered to this day.

27 A *bundan shakai*. Ishida, Slater 2009; Chiavacci, Hommerich 2016; Ide, Furuichi, Miyazaki 2016.

28 Japanese labour market characteristic is its distinct segmentation into regular and contingent occupations (*seiki koyō* and *hiseiki koyō*, respectively), the former solidly protected by legislation and various forms of employment adjustment. Kikuchi, Kitao, Mikoshiba 2020, 6. The second group of workers tends to be more susceptible to displacement and dismissal during economic downturns and business cycle, especially in the case of foreign workers. Endoh 2019, 327-8; Kitao, Mikoshiba 2020; Yokoyama, Higa, Kawaguchi 2021.

29 Mainly non-regular workers, but the concept was extendable to new categories such as neet, 'freeter' and atypical workers.

30 For example, to social citizenship. Saitō 2006.

31 Ishida, Slater 2009, 7-8; Chiavacci, Hommerich 2016, 15-16; Chiavacci, Lechevalier 2017, 302.

Although public awareness of inequality has increased, the long-standing population's perception of being a middle-class society has remained partly intact. In the recent *NHK/JILPT Joint Survey on Lifestyles and Attitudes* (2022),[32] more than half of the respondents stated that they perceived themselves as "living lower than a middle-class life",[33] while less than 40% will not be able to reach their parents' standard of living. One of the paradigms of Japanese success in the last century, the *risshin shusse*, now seems to be over, as one of the main perceptions of respondents is that it is no longer possible to become affluent through hard work.[34] At the same time, despite the perception of general economic hardship, 55.3% of the respondents indicated that they felt themselves to be between the 'upper-middle' and 'lower-middle' class,[35] indicating a yet persistent self-recognition of belonging to the broader middle class (JILPT 2023, 38).

In turn, the growing inequality perception does not match the concern. Inequality in Japan has increased dramatically, but concern about it is below the OECD average (2021a). This discordance might be explained by the population's strong belief in opportunity equality and a perceived less importance of external factors (such as family background, etc.), albeit declining in recent decades (OECD 2021a, 1). The policy's part in reducing inequality is generally seen as secondary (2),[36] de-emphasising the government's role and relegating this task to the very nature of Japanese society and its innate perceived 'meritocracy'.

This difference between perception and concern creates a short-circuit between perceived reality and the signs of social polarisation within Japanese society, the subject of the next section.

32 The complete file, in Japanese, can be found at: `https://www.jil.go.jp/press/documents/20220916.pdf`.

33 Middle-class life means, at least in the perception of the majority of respondents, an annual income of "more than 6 million yen", or approximately USD 57,000. While this may not seem high, the absence of economic growth since the 1990s should be considered. Hashimoto 2021, 174; JILPT 2022; 2023, 35.

34 65.6% of the total (JILPT 2023, 41). The perception of inequality is indeed more pronounced in contexts where there is a devaluation of the association between hard work and sufficient quality of life, as well as characterised by economic inequality and low intergenerational mobility (OECD 2021a).

35 The results are lower for the 20- and 40-year-old age groups, while among non-regular workers the consideration of not being able to live well at present was prevalent (64.2%). JILPT 2022, 17; 2023, 38.

36 This is not the case for the idea of the need for government intervention to support the unemployed and for progressive taxation. The popular demand for such policies is, respectively, almost equal and well above the OECD average (2021a).

5 Social Polarisation and Inequalities in Japan: *ichi oku sōchūryū* vs. *shakai kakusa*

Social polarisation, and socio-economic inequalities, are determined by the strong differentiation of wages, which vary according to labour frameworks. These differences in wages[37] are caused by a combination of factors, such as global economic competition (external pressure), demographic and skills recruitment issues, and, above all, by the polarisation between regular and non-regular workers (Shinozaki 2006, 7; Zhiyong, Kohei 2023, 3) in an already extremely segmented context by the presence of many small and very small enterprises, thus causing a marked differentiation of starting employment conditions (Lechevalier 2016).

If social polarisation has become structural, it is normal to ask whether and how social mobility in Japan, supported by its meritocratic education system, has changed.[38] Indeed, the school system, extremely selective in terms of results, but at the same time considered very egalitarian, has also undergone a strong liberalisation process, giving greater weight to individual choice and market opportunities.[39] Even though socioeconomic starting conditions and family social capital have always been determinants of educational achievement (Bourdieu 1986; Israel, Beaulieu 2004), a loss of meritocratic filtering as a function of the market has occurred, with the consequent creation of further inequality and social class reproduction.[40]

At the same time, the ageing of the population has created an extremely elderly society, with major difficulties caused by inadequate pensions and a meagre welfare system. The social pact of the second half of the last century is not currently suited to safeguarding the population from the current social transformations. The combination of the structural population ageing and the increase in the number of non-regular workers, in parallel with the progressive deterioration of the macroeconomic situation (Tachibanaki 2006, 5) since the 1990s, have been decisive determinants of economic and wage

37 At the same time, strong wage differentials have been used instrumentally to maintain a low unemployment rate. Ōtake 1999, 11.

38 This, in turn, offered a particular perception of the creation of 'non-status', especially in the form, considered objective, of entrance examinations. Lie 2003, 72.

39 A relevant fact is the enrolment ratio in private vs. public institutions, which is extremely significant in pre-school and post-secondary levels, although low in primary and lower secondary levels. Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology 2016; Saito 2016. Notably, tertiary education sees 79% of students enrolled in a private university, compared to the OECD average of 17%. Public spending on education also stood at 7.8% (2019), below the OECD average (10%). OECD 2022.

40 Kariya 2010; 2013. Kikkawa (2009) defined the *gakureki bundan-sen* (dividing line based on people's educational background) as decisive in the formation of socio-economic gaps in Japan.

inequalities, i.e. household income gaps and individual wage differentials of Japanese workers (Ōtake 1999; Shinozaki 2006; Chiavacci 2010, 57) and the labour-related growth in the poverty rate (Kosugi 2008, 4; Tachibanaki, Urakawa 2008). These processes have led to the emergence of a growing pool of working poor.[41]

The role of women is also peculiar in the labour market. Despite the steady increase in female labour market participation since the 2000s and paradigm shifts in the Japanese family structure,[42] structural difficulties [43] remain evident. First of all, the increase in women's participation has not led to a reduction of gender gaps in employment conditions. The presence of women in corporate management is still extremely low (OECD.Stat 2023d), while gender pay and employment gaps remain wide.[44] Part-time work is still the most common form of female employment (OECD.Stat 2023c).[45] Two-thirds of the non-regular workforce are women, further fuelling the duality of the already highly divided domestic labour market (OECD 2017; OECD. Stat 2023c; Watanabe 2018). Gender segregation is also evident in work and class categorisation: marked differences in the same job category and position (authority, possibility of promotion, assigned duties, etc.) can lead to different class positioning, which is almost always lower for women (Hashimoto 2018; 2021, 10).

41 Komamura 2008; Sekine 2008. Assuming that the unofficially defined poverty line in Japan is ¥2,000,000 per year, i.e., a public assistance worker's salary level, in 2022 there were about 17.5 million of them (including regular and non-regular workers), i.e., about 30.7%. Statistics Bureau 2023a.

42 As income earners in households increased through the growth of female labour market participation, there was a parallel decrease in the number of household members and an increase in single-income households. This transformation has exacerbated income differences between household types. Tachibanaki 2006, 5.

43 In 2015, it reached 64.7%, above the OECD average (58.5%). However, the hours worked remained more or less the same, with only part-time job hours increasing. OECD 2017.

44 In 2022 it ranked fourth among OECD countries (OECD 2017; 2023b; OECD.Stat 2023a; 2023b). The combination of class and gender in the difference in individual income reveals how a man in the highest social class earns on average more than four times a woman in the working class annually (¥7,850,000 vs. ¥1,844,000 in 2015), showing how economic inequalities are trans-dimensional (SSM 2015). In this sense, as the difference is more than double in favour of men and greater than the sum of the difference between different social classes (see later sections), the gender problem in Japan, including female labour exploitation by male labour, appears to be deeper than class differences (including inter-class exploitation) (Hashimoto 2018; 2021, 13).

45 Originally, part-time work emerged as a requirement of employers in the 1960s-70s, and not as a direct result of the transformation of women's lifestyles during the Japanese reconstruction and economic growth of the second half of the last century. If part-time work for women constituted around 10% of the national workforce in the 1970s, this was mainly due to market demands – particularly labour shortages – and was an *ad hoc* form of employment for women. The categorisation and differentiation of labour coexisted with Japan's multiple economic and socio-cultural demands (Ueno 1987, 80).

Current data indicate that Japan experiences *shakai kakusa* even more clearly when compared to other OECD countries. Social indicators (OECD 2023e; OECD.Stat 2023e) such as the poverty rate (10th highest),[46] the Gini coefficients on initial income (10th), and disposable income (11th) show that the country is in an unenviable position (top 20% of the lower bracket), especially when compared to Western countries (Hashimoto 2021, 165; OECD 2023e; OECD.Stat 2023e). The Gini coefficient, which for Japan stands at 0.334, only finds developing countries such as Brazil, China, South Africa, Mexico, Chile, Costa Rica and Turkey, or special cases such as the U.S., in a worse position.[47] The significant income inequalities in Japanese society, which Tachibanaki identified more than two decades ago (Tachibanaki 1998; 2006; Tachibanaki, Urakawa 2008), have become even more structural. The poverty rate, in contrast to the low unemployment rate, is now a persistent problem in the working-age population (Zhiyong, Kohei 2023, 2) and the post-retirement group. Even more serious is the poverty risk of single-parent households, especially single mothers, who are both economically and socially vulnerable (Sekine 2008, 55-6; Tachibanaki, Urakawa 2008, 37-8; Abe 2021, 23). The high level of economic disparity is first reflected in the Japanese gender disparity (Hashimoto 2018; 2021, 13). These disparities are linked to the type of employment that determines the wage gap (Sekine 2008, 55), which in turn expands the polarisation between regular and non-regular workers – mostly women – and, thus, between different classes.

The upper classes (capitalist class)[48] have an income almost two and a half times[49] higher than the lower classes (working class),[50] although it barely reaches the 6-million-yen threshold perceived as the minimum to lead a middle-class life (JILPT 2022; 2023, 35). Even more serious is the difference between individual and household income within the working class, where regular workers earn, respectively, 3,698,000 yen and 6,303,000 yen annually (2015), non-regular workers 2,269,000 yen and 3,908,000 yen (about 1.6 times less than regular workers), with a poverty rate, in order, of 7.0% and 27.5%.[51] The pandemic also hit non-regular workers the hardest (Nakamura 2023). These social class differences, inter- and intra-groups, are the subject of the next section.

46 Japan's relative income poverty rate is 0.16, equal to Mexico, Latvia and Korea, and lower than Chile (0.17) and the United States (0.18). OECD 2023e; OECD.Stat 2023e.

47 South Korea is also slightly worse, with the Gini coefficient at 0.339(OECD 2023e; OECD.Stat 2023e).

48 The poverty rate of this social class stood at 4.2%, which is not the lowest among Japanese social classes. See the next section for the class breakdown.

49 ¥6,044,000 (2015). SSM 2015.

50 ¥2,626,000 (2015). SSM 2015.

51 38.7% overall. SSM 2015.

6 Contemporary Japan: A True Class Society?

So far, the social and economic inequality present in Japanese society has been analysed. The use of official national and international data corroborates the fact that Japan is an unequal and polarised society. The situation is summarised by describing the country as a *shakai kakusa*, or disparity society. However, the term *shakai kakusa* only describes an unequal distribution of social resources (Hashimoto 2021, 165), without explaining the actual structure of social polarisation and its production and reproduction mechanisms.

Hashimoto (2018; 2021), used the concept of class to give analytical clarity to these issues. Through a Marxist perspective applied to social theory involving units of analysis at different levels (macro,[52] meso[53] and micro)[54], he identifies the 'class' unit as the most important intermediate component for social, economic and political investigation in capitalist societies.[55] Therefore, Hashimoto used an analytical and structuralist Marxist theoretical approach to establish the Japanese society class structure, while developing a method for operationalising and measuring the national class system (Hashimoto 2021, 166). This theoretical method is based on the division into four classes (Hashimoto 2003; 2018; 2021), a method followed in turn by the analysis of the class theories of Poulantzas (1974), Wright (1978), and Roemer (1982). These classes are bourgeoisie (capitalists), new petit bourgeoisie (new middle class), proletariat (working class), and old petit bourgeoisie (old middle class), which represent the classes of contemporary capitalist societies divided by two types of coexisting modes of production, simple commodity production[56] and the capitalist mode of production.[57] The former is represented by the old middle class (disconnected from the dynamics of capitalist exploitative relations), while the latter includes the capitalist class, the new middle class, and the working class, positioned respectively according to their effective[58] capacity to control the means of production and in the various relations of mutual exploitation (Hashimoto 2021, 166-8). The capitalist class is clearly at the top of capitalist society,

52 National level, e.g., the country's economy.

53 Intermediate level.

54 Household or individual level.

55 Other intermediate units, such as gender, ethnicity and social groups, are not independent of the concept of class. Mann 1986; Hashimoto 2021, 166.

56 Characterised by a low value of organic composition of capital.

57 Characterised by a high value of organic composition of capital.

58 By this term both the power to dispose of or use the means of production and the legal possession of those means is meant (Hashimoto 2021, 167).

despite having the lowest numerical value.[59] The new middle class is in second place, tending to be less conservative than the capitalist class and characterised by high degrees of well-being derived from better occupations than other workers.[60] The old middle class[61] and the regular working class[62] can be compared in income levels, making them vertically close. However, while the former are gradually decreasing, the latter tend to increase. These archetypal demarcations fully correspond to the class divisions present in contemporary Japan.

In the Marxist tradition, the concept of class[63] is linked to the group of people who share the same place in the social production processes and, consequently, the same relationship to the means of production. Class relations of production and power are thus determined by distribution and consumption. These mechanisms determine more or less extensive groupings, consisting of social structures in which shared values and interests are present, which in turn are determined not by income or status, but by property relations. Shared interests subsequently determine a series of social behaviours, causal for further, new, social processes. Hashimoto sees the concept of class as fundamental to analysing Japanese society as it underlies all its current disparities and inequalities (2021, 165), while it helps to describe Japan as a real class society. In doing so, he expanded the initial four-class classification (Hashimoto 2003), adding one[64] directly from the working class, the 'underclass' (Hashimoto 2021, 168).[65] Made necessary by the transformations of the no longer organic working class through its precarisation and fragmentation, it is mainly composed of non-regular (low-wage) workers, the

59 It is also gradually declining, from 6.2% in 1992 to 3.5% in 2017. Statistics Bureau 2017. Hashimoto summarises this class as "economically privileged, contented, and politically conservative" (2021, 182).

60 It, unlike the capitalist class, is numerically increasing, rising from 18.3% in 1992 to 22.8% in 2017. Moreover, its poverty rate is the lowest of all classes, standing at 2.6% in 2017. Statistics Bureau 2017. Hashimoto defines this class as "affluent and contented", but not "politically conservative" (2021, 184).

61 This class is mainly composed of small entrepreneurs. Like the capitalist class, it too saw a gradual decrease from 1992 to 2017, i.e., from 19.0% to 9.9%. The poverty rate stood at 17.2% in 2017. Statistics Bureau 2017. It is defined by Hashimoto as a "traditional and conservative middle class", albeit one that is constantly changing in "political character" and in a constant process in which it is "decomposing and shrinking in size" (2021, 186).

62 Hashimoto defines this class as "satisfied with their lives to some extent", denoting a "certain level of income" and "standard of living" (2021, 184).

63 For explanations of the concept, see Marx, Engels 1976; Satgar, Williams 2017.

64 With this division into five different classes, Hashimoto's work overlaps with the division used later in the NHK/JILPT survey (2022). See section 4.

65 For more on the meaning of the term, see Crompton 1993, Edgell 1999, Esping-Andersen 1999. In the Japanese case, 45.4% of the members of this group are employed in manual work, while 18.4% in the service sector (Hashimoto 2021, 180).

unemployed,[66] female workers[67] and immigrants, whose wages and living conditions are significantly lower than those of regular, working class, labourers. Subordinated in the dynamics of capitalism just like the rest of the working class, but due to the neoliberal policies of the 1990s and the progressive decline of trade unions, they are a section of workers lacking the generational reproductive capacity typical of Marxist theory and particularly weak concerning their ability to 'sell' their labour power regularly and at fair value.[68] The underclass represents the bottom of the hypothetical pyramid (Minami 2008, 14) which, in the Japanese case, is represented by the highest levels of poverty rate and lowest individual and household income. The levels are even lower in women[69] as well as in the cases of immigrants.

The results from quantitative analysis of annual individual and household incomes were, first and foremost, confirmation of a real division into classes, reflected in a clear separation in status and the relationship to the means of production. The underclass is the weakest and most vulnerable to poverty, in addition to being in constant growth (from 6.1% in 1992 to 14.4% in 2017; Statistics Bureau 2017). The working class, at the same time, is the quantitatively largest one, although the regular part has been declining slightly in recent years.[70] However, it does not experience the same exploitative dynamics as the underclass.

These last two social classes fully represent the contemporary Japanese transformative pattern. Although there has been virtually no major change in the country's overall social stratification since 1955, as noted by the latest National Survey of Social Stratification and Social Mobility (SSM)[71] conducted in 2015, the transformations within the

66 Young people tend to be among the non-regular workers. A large proportion of the unemployed are young people in the 15-24 age group (5.2%), almost twice as large as the prime-age and older workers (25+, at 2.4%). OECD 2023f, 9.

67 Hashimoto excluded part-time housewives from his schematisation, as they were less vulnerable due to their husbands' salaries (2021, 168-73). Moreover, he also decided to exclude members of the underclass over 60 years old, as they are often retired and whose poverty index is relatively low (181-2).

68 Marx 1867; Marx, Engels 1887; Hashimoto 2018; 2021, 8-9.

69 Men's individual and household annual income amounted to ¥2,130,000 and ¥3,838,000 respectively in 2015 (poverty rate 28.6%), and women's to ¥1,603,000 and ¥3,028,000 respectively (poverty rate 48.5%). SSM 2015. These data indicate that both groups are positioned at the lower end of Japan's social polarisation, but placing women in a worse socio-economic status.

70 It decreased, at least for regular workers, from 41.1% (1992) to 34.5% (2017). Over the same period, the entire working class (regular and non-regular) increased slightly from 56.6% to 61.9%. Statistics Bureau 2017.

71 In Japanese *2015-Nen SSM chōsa kenkyūkai*. It is a survey conducted every ten years (since 1955), the seventh survey of which was completed in 2015. It collects data to allow researchers to examine the mechanisms that generate social inequalities and

social classes have led to a new overall paradigm. While the working class has numerically declined, there is a relative improvement in incomes (individual and household), including an improvement in poverty rate levels. At the same time, as the number of non-regular workers increases, their incomes progressively decline, along with an overall socio-economic deterioration, including greater difficulty in horizontal and intergenerational social mobility (SSM 2015). From a perpetual division between classes, the most relevant transformations appear to be intra-class. Despite the evidence of inter- and intra-class polarisation, Japanese capitalism appears to be more notably imbalanced, and relatively exploited, by gender than by class, especially in subordinate labour categories (Hashimoto 2021, 175). The high gender gap in Japanese society thus reflects not only the marked differences inherent in different areas of society (work, family, welfare, social and political participation) but also how it fuels economic disparities and class divisions, to the point of being considered a class attribution[72] peculiar to the traditional social structure (Araújo Nocedo 2012, 158).

Ultimately the division in the model into (at least) five classes is confirmed, possibly adding the part-time housewife working class as it has its characteristics – which can be associated, if unrelated to family income, to the underclass –, and in general taking the different position of women compared to men into account. Thus, Marxist class categories are relevant in describing contemporary Japan, which may be defined as a class society – or new class society –, seeing the relevance of the underclass (Hashimoto 2018; 2021, 24-6).

The question remains as to whether to place migrants in a subclass as opposed to the underclass, regarding the Japanese peculiarities on this issue. There is no doubt that the majority of migrant workers in Japan belong to the underclass. However, the relatively small, albeit growing, number of migrants and their top-down categorical differentiation (Shipper 2008) undermines a possible re-location analysis. The same argument can be adapted to racialised minorities,[73] phenotypically indistinguishable from the Japanese population, but also embedded in a process of dialectical intertwining of race and class that involves the production, and reproduction, of socio-economic inequalities (Baber 2023). Just like the native underclass, immigrants and racialised minorities have limited access to material and immaterial resources, which are monopolised by the

to see how they have changed over the years on a large scale. For more, see: `http://www.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/2015SSM-PJ/index.html`.

72 Although differentiated according to the social class of belonging, creating a further class verticalisation within a category already generally subordinate to men. Uno 1993.

73 These are the Ainu, Okinawans, and *burakumin*, but the concept could be extended to the Korean and Chinese *zainichi* and partly to the South-American *nikkeijin*. For more on the topic, see Weiner 2009; Baber 2023.

upper classes (Weber 1978). The only certainty is that, excluding high-skilled workers and a few other categories, the foreign labour force in Japan is functional in feeding the pool of low-skilled, low-cost non-regular workers,[74] and consequently decisive in widening the social polarisation already present in the country. Conclusively, women, migrant workers and racialised minorities constitute the most recent and flexible functional 'reserve army' for the Japanese labour market, with no prospect of imminent change.

7 Conclusions

Over the past 70 years, Japan has undergone a constant transformation process. It has gone from post-war misery to the prosperous 1970s-80s, only to fall back into almost perpetual stagnation. Within this transformative framework, inequality in Japan is strongly linked to the process of population ageing,[75] the degree of which is precisely more marked in older age groups (Ōtake 1999, 9; Shinozaki 2006, 5; Tachibanaki 2006, 5) due to their greater exposure to the risk of falling into poverty (Nakamura 2023) and social isolation (Sekine 2008, 51).

The rapid ageing of the population,[76] already with the highest proportion of elderly people among the OECD countries (2024), has put extraordinary pressure on the Japanese pension system as well as on the health system (Siripala 2023), as the overall social safety net is set to grow from 2030 onwards (Moriyama 2022, 21). The risk of worsening living conditions (NHK 2022), and consequent further accentuation of social inequalities, is very real. The employment rate among pensioners is the second highest in the world[77] and the highest average effective retirement age among OECD countries. This trend is driven more by maintaining the same economic living standards rather than improving them (Moriyama 2022, 20-1), often reflecting pre-retirement socio-economic status (23), but also by a decrease in social security programmes since the mid-1980s (Oshio, Usui, Shimizutani 2019). This age group is (historically) at high risk of poverty (Tachibanaki 2006, 18; Tachibanaki, Urakawa 2008, 22), especially in this context

74 For a more detailed discussion, see Costalunga 2023.

75 In addition to the labour force ageing (Ōtake 1999, 12).

76 Projections indicate an increase from the current 29% (2022) of citizens aged 65 and older (out of the total population) to 30.8% (2030) to 37.1% (2050). Statistics Bureau 2023b. Their employment rate was 25.2% in 2022 (Statistics of Japan 2023).

77 For citizens aged 65 and over Japan ranks fourth, after Iceland, South Korea and Indonesia (OECD 2023c; Siripala 2023). In 2017, the ratio of persons engaged in work in the age groups 65-9, 70-4 and 75 and above were, for men, 56.3%, 37.5%, 16.3% respectively; while for women were 35.4%, 21.6%, 6.6% (Statistics Bureau 2017).

of difficult pension financial sustainability.[78] The elderly group's poverty risk is at 20%, and incomes are less than half the median household disposable income (OECD 2021b, 1). Even in the case of work after retirement, the greatest disparities are between regular and non-regular workers, and in the economic and social accumulation of gender – in this case even widening it –.[79] The old-age period becomes a mere extension of the income inequalities experienced during the previous working career. 48.5% of the population aged 60 or older fall into the underclass, becoming non-regular workers after a career as a regular one (SSM 2015; Hashimoto 2021, 179-80).

As for the issue of migrants in Japan, although the positioning of most of them is clear, it requires further investigation in light of the fluidity of the subject's political management. The discourse on national identity, adamantly linked to the notion of homogeneity and mono-ethnicity, has so far only been partly shaken by events that are spatially separate and temporally suspended from everyday life. Japanese self-perception, in this case referring to the concept of 'Japaneseness' (Lie 2003), has experienced attempts at re-branding its socio-nation ideas through sporting events (such as the 2019 Rugby World Cup) or the positioning of 'winning' athletes (as in the case of tennis player Naomi Ōsaka), without going beyond individual situations. This immobility is also attributable to the socio-economic and, consequently, class positioning of migrants, while society is incapable of disentangling ethnicity from cultural racial categorisation (Arudou 2015) and top-down politics on the part of the Japanese government (Shipper 2008).

Given these considerations, Japan can be regarded in all respects as a class society, at once immobile and progressively changing. The Japanese middle class has not only shrunk internally, but its decline is proportionally higher than the OECD average (Shinozaki, Takahashi 2023, 26-7). The myth of the *ichi oku sōchūryū* now seems to have come to an end in favour of an increasingly pronounced *shakai kakusa*, in which social polarisation and class division have become the norm. In today's Japanese society, not only is the initial class position important in determining the future citizen's positioning given the lack of real interclass mobility (Hashimoto 2018), but the apparent structural immobility has produced new sub-classes with the effect of exacerbating the internal societal division (Hashimoto 2021). From this point, it remains necessary to assess whether other transformations, such as

78 The estimated net future replacement rate is 39%, calculated on the average salary of a full-career worker (compared to 62% of the OECD average). Fujiki, Reilly 2021, 1; OECD 2021b.

79 Japan's gender pension gap is the widest among OECD countries, increasing the risk of old-age poverty for women. Moriyama 2022, 23-34.

the increase of foreign presence in the country, and new forms of consciousness on social (and potentially class) issues can lead the new underclasses towards revamped common 'emancipatory' actions.

Bibliography

2015-Nen SSM chōsa kenkyūkai (2015). *2015-Nen SSM chōsa kenkyū 'kenkyū hōkoku-sho'*. http://www.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/2015SSM-PJ/report.html.

Abe, A. (2021). *Nihon no aitaiteki hinkon-ritsu no dōtai: 2019 Kokumin seikatsu kiso chōsa o mochiite. Hinkon tōkei HP*. https://www.hinkonstat.net/.

Albert, M. (1991). *Capitalisme contre capitalisme*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

Allison, A. (2013). *Precarious Japan*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Araújo Nocedo, A.M. (2012). "The 'Good Wife and Wise Mother' Pattern: Gender Differences in Today's Japanese Society". *Crítica Contemporánea. Revista de Teoría Política*, 2, 156-69. https://www.colibri.udelar.edu.uy/jspui/bitstream/20.500.12008/7431/1/CC_Ara%C3%BAjo_2012n2.pdf.

Arudou, D. (2015). *Embedded Racism. Japan's Visible Minorities and Racial Discrimination*. London: Lexington Books.

Baber, Z. (2023). "Class and 'Race'... The Two Antinomic Poles of a Permanent Dialectic': Racialization, Racism and Resistance in Japan". *Current Sociology*, 0(0), 1-19. https://doi.org/10.1177/00113921231166146.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). "The Forms of Capital". Richardson, J. (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. New York: Greenwood, 241-58.

Cabinet Office (2022). *Wagakuni no shotoku shūgyō kōzō ni tsuite*. https://www5.cao.go.jp/keizai-shimon/kaigi/minutes/2022/0303/shiryo_04-1.pdf.

Cabinet Secretariat (2023). *Atarashī shihon shugi jitsugen honbu/atarashī shihon shugi jitsugen kaigi*. https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/seisaku/atarashii_sihonsyugi/pdf/ap2023.pdf.

Caroli, R.; Gatti, F. (2017). *Storia del Giappone*. Bari: Laterza.

Chiavacci, D. (2007). "The Social Basis of Developmental Capitalism in Japan: From Postwar Mobilization to Current Stress Symptoms and Future Disintegration". *Asian Business & Management*, 6(1), 35-55. https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.abm.9200207.

Chiavacci, D. (2008). "From Class Struggle to General Middle-Class Society to Divided Society: Societal Models of Inequality in Postwar Japan". *Social Science Japan Journal*, 11(1), 5-27. https://doi.org/10.1093/ssjj/jyn022.

Chiavacci, D. (2010). "Divided Society Model and Social Cleavages in Japanese Politics: No Alignment by Social Class, But Dealignment of Rural-urban Division". *Contemporary Japan*, 22(1-2), 47-74. https://doi.org/10.1515/cj-2010-005.

Chiavacci, D.; Hommerich, C. (2016). "After the Banquet: New Inequalities and their Perception in Japan Since the 1990s". Chiavacci, D.; Hommerich, C. (eds), *Social Inequality in Post-Growth Japan: Transformation during Economic and Demographic Stagnation*. London: Routledge, 3-26.

Chiavacci, D.; Lechevalier, S. (2017). "Japanese Political Economy Revisited: Diverse Corporate Change, Institutional Transformation, and Abenomics".

Japan Forum, 29(3), 299-311. https://doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2017.1284147.

Choi, Y.J. (2013). "Developmentalism and Productivism in East Asian Welfare Regimes". Izuhara, M. (ed.), *Handbook on East Asian Social Policy*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 207-25. https://doi.org/10.4337/9780857930293.00018.

Costalunga, N. (2023). "Selettività del mercato e persistenza differenziante nelle politiche migratorie: il caso giapponese tra necessità economica e dicotomie culturali". *Diritto, Immigrazione e Cittadinanza*, 1, 206-32.

Crompton, R. (1993). *Class and Stratification: An Introduction to Current Debates*. Oxford: Polity Press.

Durkheim, E. (1895). *The Rules of Sociological Method*. New York: Free Press.

Dore, R.P. (1973). *British Factory, Japanese Factory: The Origins of National Diversity in Industrial Relations*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Dore, R.P. (1987). *Taking Japan Seriously: A Confucian Perspective on Leading Economic Issues*. London: The Athlone Press.

Edgell, S. (1993). *Class*. London: Routledge.

Endoh, T. (2019). "The Politics of Japan's Immigration and Alien Residence Control". *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 28(3), 324-52. https://doi.org/10.1177/0117196819873733.

Esping-Andersen, G. (1999). *Social Foundations of Postindustrial Economies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fujiki, Y.; Reilly, A. (2021). *OECD Pensions at a Glance 2021. How Does Japan Compare?* https://www.oecd.org/japan/PAG2021-JPN.pdf.

Funabashi, Y. (2015). *Kenshō Nihon no "Ushinawareta 20-nen": Nihon ha naze Teitai kara Nukedasenakatta no ka*. Tōkyō: Tōyō Keizai Shinpōsha.

Gordon, A. (1998). *The Wages of Affluence. Labor and Management in Postwar Japan*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/ssjj/jyw042.

Gordon, A. (2017). "New and Enduring Dual Structures of Employment in Japan: The Rise of Non-Regular Labor, 1980s-2010s". *Social Science Japan Journal*, 20(1), 9-36.

Hara, J.; Seiyama, K. (2005). *Inequality Amid Affluence: Social Stratification in Japan*. Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press.

Hashimoto, K. (2003). *Class Structure in Contemporary Japan*. Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press. https://doi.org/10.1080/2329194X.2021.1943685.

Hashimoto, K. (2018). *Shin Nihon no kaikyū shakai*. Tōkyō: Kabushiki Kaisha Kōdansha.

Hashimoto, K. (2021). "Transformation of the Class Structure in Contemporary Japan". *The Japanese Political Economy*, 47(2-3), 163-89.

Higuchi, Y. (2008). "Circumstances Behind Growing Regional Disparities in Employment". *Japan Labor Review*, 5(1), 5-35.

Hommerich, C. (2016). "The Gap as Threat: Status Anxiety in the 'Middle'". Chiavacci, D.; Hommerich, D. (eds), *Social Inequality in Post-Growth Japan: Transformation During Economic and Demographic Stagnation*. London: Routledge, 37-53.

Ide, E.; Furuichi, M.; Miyazaki, M. (2016). *Bundan Shakai o Owarasesu: Daremo ga Juekisha to iu Zaisei Senryaku*. Tōkyō: Chikuma Shobō.

Ishida, H. (2008). "Sedaikan idō e no saizon bunseki apurōchi". Watanabe, T. (ed.), *Sedaikan idō to seidainai idō. SSM chōsa shirīzu*, 3. Sendai: The SSM Research Committee, 55-74.

Ishida, H.; Slater D.H. (2009). "Social Class in Japan". Ishida, H.; Slater D.H. (eds), *Social Class in Contemporary Japan: Structures, Sorting, and Strategies*. London: Routledge, 1-29.

Israel, G.D.; Beaulieu, L.J. (2004). "Investing in Communities: Social Capital's Role in Keeping Youth in School". *Journal of the Community Development Society*, 34(2), 35-57. https://doi.org/10.1080/15575330409490111.

JILPT (2020). *Shingata koronauirusu to koyō kurashi ni kansuru NHK-JILPT kyōdō chōsa kekka gaiyō — josei no kibishī koyō jōkyō ni chūmoku shite —*. https://www.jil.go.jp/tokusyu/covid-19/collab/nhk-jilpt/docs/20201113-nhk-jilpt.pdf.

JILPT (2022). *Kurashi to ishiki ni kansuru NHK-JILPT kyōdō chōsa' (ichi-ji shūkei) kekka no gaiyō*. https://www.jil.go.jp/press/documents/20220916.pdf.

JILPT (2023). "Findings from the Results of the *NHK/JILPT Joint Survey on Lifestyles and Attitudes*". *Japan Labor Issues*, 7(41), 35-46.

Kanbayashi, R.; Takao, K. (2016). "Good Jobs and Bad Jobs in Japan: 1982-2007". *Center on Japanese Economy and Business Working Papers*, 348. https://doi.org/10.7916/D8WQ03W7.

Kariya, T. (2010). "From Credential Society to 'learning Capital' Society: A Rearticulation of Class Formation in Japanese Education and Society". Ishida, H.; Slater, D.H. (eds), *Social Class in Contemporary Japan: Structures, Sorting and Strategies*. London: Routledge, 87-113.

Kariya, T. (2013). *Educational Reform and Social Class in Japan: The Emerging Incentive Divide*. London: Routledge.

Kikkawa, T. (2009). *Gakureki Bundan Shakai*. Tōkyō: Chikuma Shobō.

Kitao, S.; Mikoshiba, M. (2020). "Females, the Elderly, and Also Males: Demographic Aging and Macroeconomy in Japan". *Journal of the Japanese and International Economies*, 56(4), 101064.

Kikuchi, S.; Kitao, S.; Mikoshiba, M. (2020). "Heterogeneous Vulnerability to the Covid-19 Crisis and Implications for Inequality in Japan". *Crepe Discussion Paper*, 71. https://www.crepe.e.u-tokyo.ac.jp/results/2020/CREPEDP71.pdf.

Komamura, K. (2008). "The Working Poor, Borderline Poor, and Developments in Public Assistance Reform". *Japan Labor Review*, 5(4), 67-94.

Kosugi, R. (2008). "Introduction. Disparity, Poverty and Labor". *Japan Labor Review*, 5(4), 2-4.

Kowner, R.; Befu, H. (2015). "Ethnic Nationalism in Postwar Japan: Nihonjinron and Its Racial Facets". Demel, W.; Kowner, R. (eds), *Race and Racism in Modern East Asia,* vol. 2. Boston: Brill, 389-412.

Lie, J. (2003). "The Discourse of Japaneseness". Douglass, M.; Roberts, G.S. (eds), *Japan and Global Migration: Foreign Workers and the Advent of a Multicultural Society*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 70-90.

Lise, J.; Sudo, N.; Suzuki, M.; Yamada, K.; Yamada, T. (2013). "Wage, Income and Consumption Inequality in Japan,1981-2008: From Boom to Lost Decades". *Review of Economic Dynamics*, 17(4), 582-612. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.red.2014.01.001.

Lebra, T.S. (1984). *Japanese Women. Constraint and Fulfillment*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Lebra, T.S. (1993). *Above the Clouds: Status Culture of the Modern Japanese Nobility*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lechevalier, S. (ed.) (2016). *The Great Transformation of Japanese Capitalism*. London: Routledge.
Mann, M. (1986). "A Crisis in Stratification Theory?". Crompton, R.; Mann, M. (eds), *Gender and Stratification*. London: Polity Press.
Marx, K. (1867). *Das Kapital*. Band I. Hamburg: Verlag von Otto Meissner.
Marx, K.; Engels, F. (eds) (1887). *Capital*, vol. 1. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
Marx, K.; Engels, F. (1976). "The Ruling Class and the Ruling Ideas". Marx, K.; Engels, F. (eds.), *Collected Works*, vol. 5. New York: International Publishers, 59-62.
Matsubara, R. (2005). *Bundan sareru Keizai: Baburu to Fukyō ga Kyōzon suru Jidai*. Tōkyō: NHK Books.
Minami, R. (2008). "Income Distribution of Japan: Historical Perspective and Its Implications". *Japan Labor Review*, 5(4), 5-20.
Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (2016). *Statistical Abstract 2016 edition*. https://www.mext.go.jp/en/publication/statistics/title02/detail02/1379369.htm.
Moriyama, T. (2022). "Why Does the Older Population in Japan Work So Much?". *Japan Labor Issues*, 6(39), 20-6.
Murakami, Y. (1984). *Shinchūkan daishū no jidai: Sengo Nihon no kaibōgaku*. Tōkyō: Chūō Kōronsha.
Nakamura, M. (1993). "Japanese Industrial Relations and International Business Environment". *North American Journal of Economics & Finance*, 4(2), 225-51. https://doi.org/10.1016/1062-9408(93)90018-Z.
Nakamura, Y. (2023). "Japan Records Its Second-worst Income Disparity as Society Ages". *The Asahi Shimbun*. https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14987598.
Nakane, C. (1970). *Japanese Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
NHK (2022). *Kiki ni tatsu "chūryū"*. https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20220920/k10013819331000.html.
Ninomiya, A. (2006). "Shinjiyūshugi-teki kakusa shakai-ka no kōzō to sono kokufuku shiten". *Chingin to Shakai Hoshō*, 1427, 4-22.
OECD (2017). *OECD Employment Outlook 2017*. Paris: OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/empl_outlook-2017-en.
OECD (2021a). *Does Inequality Matter? How People Perceive Economic Disparities and Social Mobility. How Does Japan Compare?* Paris: OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/3023ed40-en.
OECD (2021b). *Pensions at a Glance 2021: OECD and G20 Indicators*. OECD Publishing, Paris. https://doi.org/10.1787/ca401ebd-en.
OECD (2022). *Education at a Glance 2022: OECD Indicators*. Paris: OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/3197152b-en.
OECD (2023a). *Fertility Rates (indicator)*. http://doi.org/10.1787/8272fb01-en.
OECD (2023b). *Gender Wage Gap (indicator)*. http://doi.org/10.1787/7cee71aa-en.
OECD (2023c). *Labour Force Participation Rate (indicator)*. http://doi.org/10.1787/8a801325-en.
OECD (2023d). *Oecd Income (idd) and Wealth (wdd) Distribution Databases*. https://www.oecd.org/social/income-distribution-database.htm.
OECD (2023e). *Poverty Rate (indicator)*. http://doi.org/10.1787/0fe1315d-en.

OECD (2023f). *Statistics News Release: Labour Market Situation*. https://web-archive.oecd.org/2023-04-12/654944-labour-market-situation-oecd-04-2023.pdf.
OECD (2023g). *Statistics News Release: Unemployment*. https://www.oecd.org/sdd/labour-stats/unemployment-rates-oecd-updated-september-2023.htm.
OECD (2024). *Elderly Population (Indicator)*. http://doi.org/10.1787/8d805ea1-en.
OECD.Stat (2023a). *Employment: Gender Wage Gap*. https://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?queryid=54750.
OECD.Stat (2023b). *Employment: Labour Force Participation Rate, by Sex and Age Group*. https://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?queryid=54750.
OECD.Stat (2023c). *Employment: Share of Employed in Part-time Employment, by Sex and Age Group*. https://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?queryid=54746.
OECD.Stat (2023d). *Employment: Share of Female Managers*. https://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?queryid=54746.
OECD.Stat (2023e). *Income Distribution Database*. https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=IDD.
Ochiai, E. (2003). "Post War Transition in the Japanese Family". Le Grand, C.; Tsukaguchi-le Grand, T. (eds), *Women in Japan and Sweden: Work and Family in Two Welfare Regimes*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 137-66.
Oshio, T.; Usui, E.; Shimizutani, S. (2019). "Labor Force Participation of the Elderly in Japan". Coile, C.C.; Milligan, K.; Wise, D.A. (eds), *Social Security Programs and Retirement Around the World: Working Longer*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 163-78.
Ōtake, F. (1999). "Aging Society and Inequality". *Japan Labor Bulletin*, 38(7), 8-17.
Parsons, T.; Bales, R. (eds) (1955). *Family Socialization and Interaction Process*. New York: Free Press.
Poulantzas, N. (1974). *Les Classes Sociales dans le Capitalisme Aujourd'hui*. Paris: Les Éditions su Seuil.
Roemer, J.E. (1982). *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Saitō, T. (2006). *Bundan sareru Nihon*. Tōkyō: Kadokawa Shoten.
Saito, Y. (2016). *Private School in Japan*. National Institute for Educational Policy Research. https://www.nier.go.jp/English/educationjapan/pdf/201703PSIJ.pdf.
Satgar, V.; Williams, M. (2017). "Marxism and Class". Korgen, K. (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Sociology: Specialty and Interdisciplinary Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 41-50.
Satō, T. (2000). *Fubyōdō shakai Nihon: Sayōnara sōchūryū*. Tōkyō: Chūō Kōron Shinsha.
Sato, Y. (2007). *Deciphering Stratification and Inequality: Japan and Beyond*. Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press.
Schoppa, L.J. (2006). *Race for the Exits: The Unravelling of Japan's System of Social Protection*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
Sekine, Y. (2008). "The Rise of Poverty in Japan: The Emergence of the Working Poor". *Japan Labor Review*, 5(4), 49-66.
Shinozaki, T. (2006). "Wage Inequality in Japan, 1979-2005". *Japan Labor Review*, 3, 4-23.

Shipper, A.W. (2008). *Fighting for Foreigners: Immigration and Its Impact on Japanese Democracy*. New York: Cornell University Press.

Siripala, T. (2023). "Surviving Old Age is Getting Harder in Japan". *The Diplomat*. https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/surviving-old-age-is-getting-harder-in-japan/.

Spencer, H. (1863). *First principles*. London: Williams and Norgate.

Statistics Bureau (2017). *Employment Status Survey: 2017 Survey*. Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications. https://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/shugyou/index.html.

Statistics Bureau (2023a). *Rōdōryokuchōsa (shōsai shūkei) 2022-nen (ryō wa 4-nen) heikin kekka. Shigoto kara no shūnyū (nenkan), koyō keitai betsu koyō shasū*. Tōkyō: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications. https://www.stat.go.jp/data/roudou/sokuhou/nen/dt/index.html.

Statistics Bureau (2023b). *Statistical Handbook of Japan*. Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications. https://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/handbook/index.html.

Statistics of Japan (2023). *Labour Force Survey. Basic Tabulation Summary: Employment Rate by Age Group*. https://www.e-stat.go.jp/en/stat-search?page=1.

Steven, R. (1983). *Classes in Contemporary Japan*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Tachibanaki, T. (1998). *Nihon no keizai kakusa: Shotoku to shisan kara kangaeru*. Tōkyō: Iwanami Shinsho.

Tachibanaki, T. (2006). "Inequality and Poverty in Japan". *The Japanese Economic Review*, 57(1), 1-27. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5876.2006.00355.x.

Tachibanaki, T.; Urakawa, K. (2008). "Trends in Poverty Among Low-income Workers in Japan Since the Nineties". *Japan Labor Review*, 5(4), 21-47.

Takahashi, T.; Shinozaki, Y. (2023). "The Shrinking Middle Class in Japan". *Japan Labor Issues*, 7(44), 3-29.

Ueno, C. (1987). "The Position of Japanese Women Reconsidered". *Current Anthropology*, 28(4), 75-84. https://doi.org/10.1086/203592.

Uno, K.S. (1993). "The Death of Good Wife, Wise Mother". Gordon, A. (ed.), *Postwar Japan as history*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 293-322. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520911444-013.

van Houwelingen, P. (2016). "Societal Pessimism in Japan, the United States, and the Netherlands". *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, 17(3), 427-50. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1468109916000177.

Watanabe, H.R. (2018). "Labour Market Dualism and Diversification in Japan". *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 56(3), 579-602. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjir.12258.

Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and Society*, vol. 1. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Weiner, M. (ed.) (2009). *Japan's Minorities: The Illusion of Homogeneity*. New York: Routledge.

Wright, E.O. (1978). *Class, Crisis and the State*. London: New Left Books.

Yokoyama, I.; Higa, K.; Kawaguchi, D. (2021). "Adjustments of Regular and Non-Regular Workers to Exogenous Shocks: Evidence from Exchange Rate Fluctuation". *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 74(2), 470-510.

Zhiyong, A.; Kohei, A. (2023). "Options to Strengthen the Social Safety Net in Japan". *IMF Selected Issues Paper* (SIP/2023/033). Washington, D.C.: International Monetary Fund. https://doi.org/10.5089/9798400242380.018.