



AN INTRODUCTION TO
JAPANESE SOCIETY

SECOND EDITION

YOSHIO SUGIMOTO

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An Introduction to Japanese Society
Second edition

In the second edition of this book, which has become essential reading for students of Japanese society, Yoshio Sugimoto uses both English and Japanese sources to update and expand upon his original narrative. In so doing, he challenges the traditional notion that Japan comprises a uniform culture, and draws attention to its subcultural diversity and class competition. The author also examines what he calls “friendly authoritarianism” – the force behind the Japanese tendency to be ostensibly faithful to particular groups and companies. *An Introduction to Japanese Society* offers a wide-ranging approach to all aspects of Japanese society, with chapters on class, geographical and generational variation, work, education, gender, minorities, popular culture and the establishment.

Yoshio Sugimoto is Professor of Sociology at La Trobe University, Melbourne.

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Second Edition

Yoshio Sugimoto
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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521821933

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First published in print format 2003

ISBN-13 978-0-511-07699-2 eBook (EBL)

ISBN-10 0-511-07699-1 eBook (EBL)

ISBN-13 978-0-521-82193-3 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-82193-2 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-52925-9 paperback

ISBN-10 0-521-52925-5 paperback

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Preface to the first edition

The images of Japanese society both in Japan and abroad have fluctuated over time under shifting intellectual contexts. Subjected to changes in Japan's political economy and international status, the portrait of Japan has swung back and forth like a pendulum between adoration and antipathy. The theoretical framework of Japan analysis has also fluctuated between two poles: particularistic characterizations and universalistic generalizations. Conscious of these competing perspectives, one inevitably has to be selective in producing a general textbook. In writing this book which delineates such a wide range of aspects of Japanese society as generation, occupation, education, gender, minority, and popular culture, I attempted to restore three balances in the study of contemporary Japan.

The first of these concerns the degree of homogeneity of Japanese society. The view that Japan comprises an extremely uniform culture continues to be both dominant and pervasive despite several studies which questioned and challenged this perspective in the 1980s and the early 1990s. The competing multicultural paradigm which highlights the internal variation and stratification of Japanese society remains peripheral and does not appear to have received the attention it deserves. This book makes a modest attempt to rectify this imbalance by focussing on subcultural diversity and class competition within Japanese society.

The second bias pertains to the continuing dominance of the so-called group model of Japanese society, which maintains that the Japanese are essentially faithful to their groups and uniquely oriented to their consensual integration. While the Japanese undoubtedly show group behavior in many situations, many questions remain unanswered as to whether Japanese groupism is uniquely high in comparison with other countries. It also continues to be debatable whether the Japanese act in a groupist way in all spheres of life, whether different social groups in Japan exhibit different levels of groupism, and whether the Japanese behave in groups on the basis of voluntary commitment or under the constraint of ideological manipulation. This text underscores

the significance of these reservations and presents a countervailing perspective against the group model.

Finally, this book endeavors to strike a reasonable balance between Japanese- and English-language publications as sources of information and inspiration. Though designed as an introductory text, it invites readers to familiarize themselves with contemporary debates and controversies among Japanese analysts who write in Japanese. Many students in the English-language world would find it difficult to read Japanese publications in Japanese, though they can pursue their interests in reading books and articles in English. Students just beginning in Japanese studies will benefit greatly from having a balanced understanding of both insiders' and outsiders' views of Japanese society. For this purpose, I have introduced a number of Japanese *emic* concepts and propositions to demonstrate Japanese perceptions and self-images.

Financial support from the Australian Research Council enabled me to collect and examine data for this study. Thanks to the ARC grant, I have been able to travel several times between Melbourne and Tokyo, live in Japan for about half of the last three years and exchange views with Japanese academics on various issues. A fellowship from the Japan Foundation was also instrumental in implementing the initial phase of the study. I am grateful for the support of these organizations.

The multicultural environment in Australia where I have lived for nearly a quarter of a century has influenced my views of Japanese society. I am deeply indebted to the intellectual vitality of my colleagues in Melbourne and Canberra. My partner, Machiko Sato, who has published several books for the Japanese readership, has given me continuous encouragement, thoughtful criticism, and invaluable insight, for which I am most thankful. I have also benefitted from many lively discussions with my students at La Trobe University (Melbourne), Universität Heidelberg (Germany), and the University of Tsukuba (Japan) on the points contained in this study.

Writing a book is always a liberating experience for me. I hope that readers share some of my delight in treading the paths outlined in this text.

Yoshio Sugimoto, 1997

Preface to the second edition

Five years is a long period in the social sciences. So many changes have taken place in Japanese society since the publication of the first edition of this book in 1997 that I felt obliged to update factual data and statistical information for it to reflect Japan's contemporary landscape with accuracy. The structure and organization of the book remains unchanged since there was no need to alter the framework of analysis.

Most government ministries changed their names because of the amalgamations that took place at the beginning of 2001. In citing government publications in the References and Endnotes, I have used the names of the ministries at the time of publication.

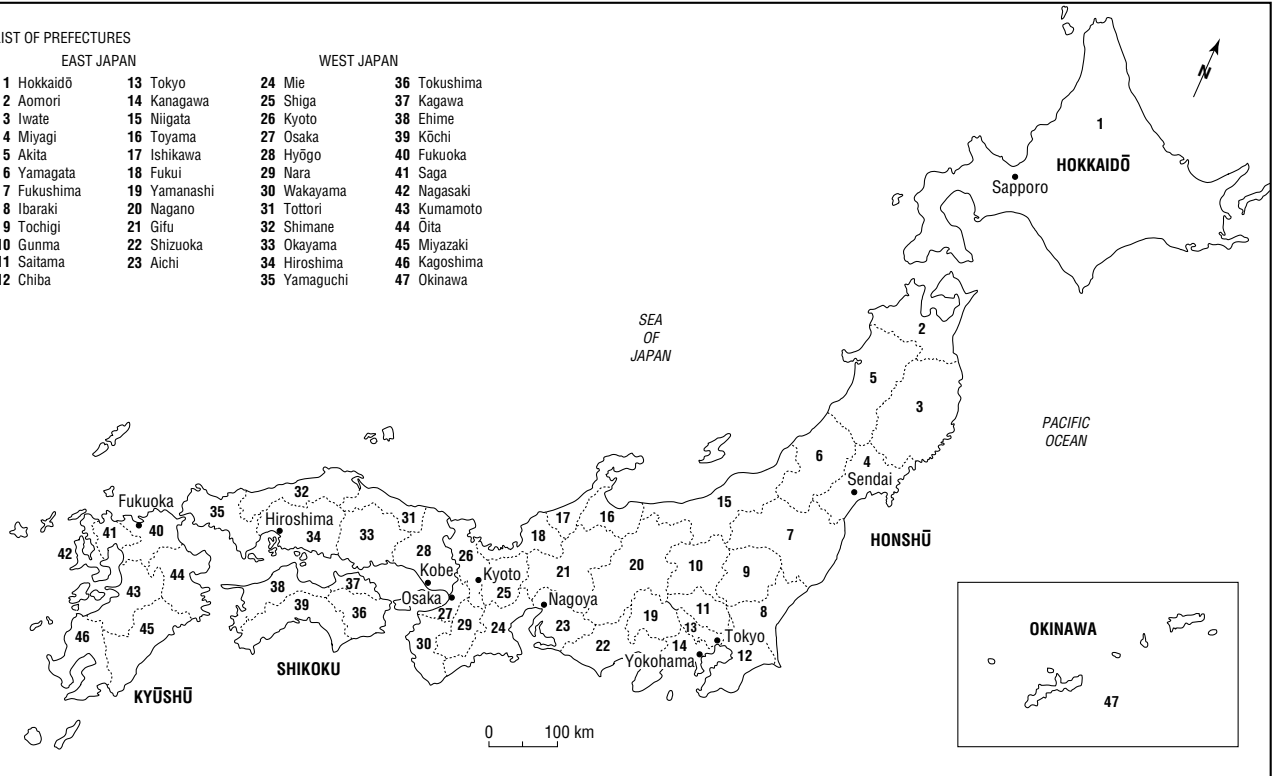
For this edition, special thanks are due to two copy editors, Justine Norton and Karl Smith, who have kindly paid scrupulous attention to every detail of the text.

To my pleasant surprise, this book has been used in an unexpectedly large number of university courses around the world. I would be happy to receive feedback from readers to improve the quality of future editions.

Yoshio Sugimoto, 2002

LIST OF PREFECTURES

EAST JAPAN		WEST JAPAN	
1 Hokkaidō	13 Tokyo	24 Mie	36 Tokushima
2 Aomori	14 Kanagawa	25 Shiga	37 Kagawa
3 Iwate	15 Niigata	26 Kyoto	38 Ehime
4 Miyagi	16 Toyama	27 Osaka	39 Kōchi
5 Akita	17 Ishikawa	28 Hyōgo	40 Fukuoka
6 Yamagata	18 Fukui	29 Nara	41 Saga
7 Fukushima	19 Yamanashi	30 Wakayama	42 Nagasaki
8 Ibaraki	20 Nagano	31 Tottori	43 Kumamoto
9 Tochigi	21 Gifu	32 Shimane	44 Ōita
10 Gunma	22 Shizuoka	33 Okayama	45 Miyazaki
11 Saitama	23 Aichi	34 Hiroshima	46 Kagoshima
12 Chiba		35 Yamaguchi	47 Okinawa



Map of Japan

1 The Japan Phenomenon and the Social Sciences

I Multicultural Japan

1 Sampling Problem and the Question of Visibility

Hypothetical questions sometimes inspire the sociological imagination. Suppose that a being from a different planet arrived in Japan and wanted to meet a typical Japanese, one who best typified the Japanese adult population. Whom should the social scientists choose? To answer this question, several factors would have to be considered: gender, occupation, educational background, and so on.

To begin, the person chosen should be a female, because women outnumber men in Japan; the 2000 census shows that sixty-five million women and sixty-one million men live in the Japanese archipelago. With regard to occupation, she would definitely not be employed in a large corporation but would work in a small enterprise, since fewer than one in eight workers is employed in a company with three hundred or more employees. Nor would she be guaranteed lifetime employment, since those who work under this arrangement amount at most to only a quarter of Japan's workforce. She would not belong to a labor union, because only one out of five Japanese workers is unionized. She would not be university-educated. Fewer than one in six Japanese have a university degree, and even today only about 40 percent of the younger generation graduate from a university with a four year degree. Table 1.1 summarizes these demographic realities.

The identification of the average Japanese would certainly involve much more complicated quantitative analysis. But the alien would come closer to the "center" of the Japanese population by choosing a female, non-unionized and non-permanent employee in a small business without university education than a male, unionized, permanent employee with a university degree working for a large company.

When outsiders visualize the Japanese, however, they tend to think of men rather than women, career employees in large companies rather than non-permanent workers in small firms, and university graduates

Table 1.1 Japan's population distribution

Variables	Majority	Minority
Gender ^a	Female: 65.0 million (51%)	Male: 61.9 million (49%)
Employees by firm size ^b	Small firms – less than 300 employees: 44.5 million (78%)	Large firms – 300 or more: 12.5 million (22%)
Educational background ^c	Those without university education: 81.4 million (85%)	University graduates: 14.5 million (15%)
Union membership in labor force ^d	Non-unionists: 42.3 million (79%)	Unionists: 11.5 million (21%)

Sources:

- a Population census conducted in 2000.
- b The Establishment Census conducted by the Management and Coordination Agency in 1996. The data cover all private-sector establishments except individual proprietorship establishments in agriculture, forestry and fishery.
- c Population census conducted in 2000. University graduates do not include those who have completed junior college and technical college. Figures do not include pupils and students currently enrolled in schools and pre-school children.
- d Labor Union Basic Survey, conducted by the Ministry of Labour in 2000.

rather than high school leavers, for these are the images presented on television and in newspaper and magazine articles. Some academic studies have also attempted to generalize about Japanese society on the basis of observations of its male elite sector, and have thereby helped to reinforce this sampling bias.¹ Moreover, because a particular cluster of individuals who occupy high positions in a large company have greater access to mass media and publicity, the lifestyles and value orientations of those in that cluster have acquired a disproportionately high level of visibility in the analysis of Japanese society at the expense of the wider cross-section of its population.

2 Homogeneity Assumptions

While every society is unique in some way, Japan is particularly unusual in having so many people who believe that their country is unique.² Regardless of whether Japan is “uniquely unique” in sociological and psychological reality, the overwhelming preponderance of Japanese publications arguing for its uniqueness is, in itself, unique. The so-called group model of Japanese society represents the most explicit and coherent formulation of this line of argument and remains the most

influential framework for interpreting the Japanese and Japanese social structure. Put most succinctly, the model is based upon three lines of argument.

First, at the individual, psychological level, the Japanese are portrayed as having a personality which lacks a fully developed ego or independent self. The best-known example of this claim is Doi's notion of *amae* which refers to the allegedly unique psychological inclination among the Japanese to seek emotional satisfaction by prevailing upon and depending on their superiors.³ They feel no need for any explicit demonstration of individuality. Loyalty to the group is a primary value. Giving oneself to the promotion and realization of the group's goals imbues the Japanese with a special psychological satisfaction.

Second, at the interpersonal, intra-group level, human interaction is depicted in terms of Japanese group orientation. According to Nakane, for example, the Japanese attach great importance to the maintenance of harmony *within* the group. To that end, relationships between superiors and inferiors are carefully cultivated and maintained. One's status within the group depends on the length of one's membership in the group. Furthermore, the Japanese maintain particularly strong interpersonal ties with those in the same hierarchical chain of command within their own organization. In other words, vertical loyalties are dominant. The vertically organized Japanese contrast sharply with Westerners, who tend to form horizontal groups which define their membership in terms of such criteria as class and stratification that cut across hierarchical organization lines.⁴

Finally, at the inter-group level, the literature has emphasized that integration and harmony are achieved effectively *between* Japanese groups, making Japan a "consensus society". This is said to account for the exceptionally high level of stability and cohesion in Japanese society, which has aided political and other leaders in their efforts to organize or mobilize the population efficiently. Moreover, the ease with which the energy of the Japanese can be focused on a task has contributed in no small measure to Japan's remarkably rapid economic growth during the half-century since the war. From a slightly different angle, Ishida argues that inter-group competition in loyalty makes groups conform to national goals and facilitates the formation of national consensus.⁵

For decades, Japanese writers have debated on the essence of "Japaneseness." Numerous books have been written under such titles as *What are the Japanese?* and *What is Japan?*⁶ Many volumes on *Nihon-rashisa* (Japanese-like qualities) have appeared.⁷ Social science discourse in Japan abounds with examinations of *Nihon-teki* (Japanese-style) tendencies in business, politics, social relations, psychology, and so on. Some researchers are preoccupied with inquiries into the "hidden

shape,”⁸ “basic layer,” and “archetype”⁹ of Japanese culture. These works portray Japanese society as highly homogeneous, with only limited internal variation, and give it some all-embracing label. Hamaguchi, for example, who presents what he calls a contextual model of the Japanese, maintains that the concept of the individual is irrelevant in the study of the Japanese, who tend to see the interpersonal relationship itself (*kanjin*) – not the individuals involved in it – as the basic unit of action.¹⁰ Amanuma argues that the Japanese core personality is based on the drive for *ganbari* (endurance and persistence), which accounts for every aspect of Japanese behavior.¹¹ Publishing in Japanese, a Korean writer, Lee, contends that the Japanese have a unique *chijimi shikō*, a miniaturizing orientation which has enabled them to skillfully miniaturize their environment and products, ranging from *bonsai* plants, small cars, and portable electronic appliances to computer chips.¹² The list of publications which aim to define Japanese society with a single key word is seemingly endless and, although the specific appellation invariably differs, the reductive impulse is unchanged.

At least four underlying assumptions remain constant in these studies. First, it is presumed that *all* Japanese share the attribute in question – be it *amae* or miniature orientation – regardless of their class, gender, occupation, and other stratification variables. Second, it is also assumed that there is virtually no variation among the Japanese in the degree to which they possess the characteristic in question. Little attention is given to the possibility that some Japanese may have it in far greater degree than others. Third, the trait in question, be it group-orientation or *kanjin*, is supposed to exist only marginally in other societies, particularly in Western societies. That is, the feature is thought to be uniquely Japanese. Finally, the fourth presupposition is an ahistorical assumption that the trait has prevailed in Japan for an unspecified period of time, independently of historical circumstances. Writings based on some or all of these propositions have been published in Japan *ad nauseam* and have generated a genre referred to as *Nihonjinron* (which literally means theories on the Japanese). Although some analysts have challenged the validity of *Nihonjinron* assertions on methodological, empirical, and ideological grounds,¹³ the discourse has retained its popular appeal, attracting many readers and maintaining a commercially viable publication industry.

The notion of Japan being homogeneous goes in tandem with the claim that it is an exceptionally egalitarian society with little class differentiation. This assertion is based on scattered observations of company life. Thus, with regard to resource distribution, some contrast the relatively modest salary gaps between Japanese executive managers

and their employees with the marked discrepancy between the salaries of American business executives and their workers. Focusing on the alleged weakness of class consciousness, others point out that Japanese managers are prepared to get their hands dirty, wear the same blue overalls as assembly workers in factories and share elevators, toilets, and company restaurants with low-ranking employees.¹⁴ Still others suggest that Japanese managers and rank-and-file employees work in large offices without status-based partitions, thereby occupying the workplace in an egalitarian way. Furthermore, public opinion polls taken by the Prime Minister's Office have indicated that eight to nine out of ten Japanese classify themselves as middle class. While there is debate as to what all these figures mean, they have nevertheless strengthened the *images* of egalitarian Japan. A few observers have gone as far as to call Japan a "land of equality"¹⁵ and a "one-class society."¹⁶ Firmly entrenched in all these descriptions is the portrayal of the Japanese as identifying themselves primarily as members of a company, *alma mater*, faction, clique, or other functional group, rather than as members of a class or social stratum.

3 Diversity and Stratification

The portrayal of Japan as a homogeneous and egalitarian society is, however, contradicted by many observations that attest to it being a more diversified, heterogeneous, and multicultural society than this stereotype suggests.¹⁷ This book presents these facets of Japanese society in some detail, examining the country's regional, generational, occupational, and educational varieties as well as gender and minority issues. It does not try to claim that Japan is unusually diversified or exceptionally stratified in comparison with other industrialized societies, but challenges the view that it is uniquely homogeneous and egalitarian. The central idea here is simple and modest: Japan does not differ fundamentally from other countries in its internal variation and stratification, though some of its specific manifestations and concrete forms may contrast with those in Western societies.

The image of multicultural Japan may sit uncomfortably with the relatively homogeneous racial makeup of Japanese society, yet subcultures do proliferate on a number of non-racial dimensions, such as region, gender, age, occupation, education, and so forth. To the extent that subculture is defined as a set of value expectations and lifestyles shared by a section of a given population, Japanese society indeed reveals an abundance of subcultural groupings along these lines. As a

conglomerate of subcultures, Japan may be viewed as a multicultural society, or a multi-subcultural society. Furthermore, most subcultural units are rank-ordered in terms of access to various resources, including economic privilege, political power, social prestige, information, and knowledge. In this sense, Japan is a multistratified society as well. Let us now take a preliminary look at some concrete illustrations of these multicultural and multistratified features of Japanese society. Each point will be scrutinized in more detail in later chapters.

(a) *Subcultural Diversity*

Contrary to the widely held view, Japan has an extensive range of minority issues, ethnic and quasi-ethnic, which proponents of the homogeneous Japan thesis tend not to address. One can identify several minority groups in Japan even if one does so narrowly, referring only to groups subjected to discrimination and prejudice because of culturally generated ethnic myths, illusions, and fallacies.

In Hokkaidō, the northernmost island of the nation, over twenty thousand Ainu live as an indigenous minority. Their situation arose with the first attempts of Japan's central regime to unify the nation under its leadership around the sixth and seventh centuries and to conquer the Ainu territories in northern Japan. In addition, some three million burakumin are subjected to prejudice and many of them are forced to live in separate communities, partly because of an unfounded myth that they are ethnically different.¹⁸ Their ancestors' plight began in the feudal period under the Tokugawa shogunate which ruled the nation for two and a half centuries from the seventeenth century and institutionalized an outcast class at the bottom of a caste system. Though the class was legally abolished after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, discrimination and prejudice have persisted. Some six hundred thousand Koreans form the biggest foreign minority group in Japan. Their problem originated with Japan's colonization of Korea at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the Japanese importation of Koreans as cheap labor for industries. A similar number of foreign workers, both documented and undocumented, live in the country as a result of their influx into the Japanese labor market since the 1980s, mainly from Asia and the Middle East, in their attempt to earn quick cash in the appreciated Japanese yen. Finally, over 1.2 million Okinawans, who live in the Ryukyu islands at the southern end of Japan, face occasional bigotry based on the belief that they are ethnically different, and incur suspicion because of the islands' longstanding cultural autonomy.

The estimated total membership of these groups is about five million, which represents some 4 percent of the population of Japan.¹⁹ If one

includes those who marry into these minority groups and suffer the same kinds of prejudice, the number is greater. In the Kansai region where burakumin and Korean residents are concentrated, the proportion of the minority population exceeds 10 percent. These ratios may not be as high as those in migrant societies such as the United States, Canada and Australia,²⁰ but they seem inconsistent with the claim that Japan is a society uniquely lacking minority issues. These issues tend to be obfuscated, blurred, and even made invisible in Japan partly because the principal minority groups do not differ in skin color and other biological characteristics from the majority of Japanese.

In international comparison, Japan does not rank uniquely high in its composition of minority groups which exist because of their ethnicity or the ethnic fictions that surround them. Table 1.2 lists some of the nations whose ethnic minority groups constitute less than 10 percent. Given that the Japanese figure is 4 percent, Japan's position would be somewhere in the second band; it is certainly difficult for it to be in the top band. To be sure, different societies define minority groups on the basis of different criteria, but that is exactly the point. Japan seems to be unique, not in its absence of minority issues, but in the decisiveness with which the government and other organizations attempt to ignore their existence.

Regional variation is perhaps the most obvious form of diversity in Japan. The nation is divided into two subcultural regions, eastern Japan with Tokyo and Yokohama as its center, and western Japan with Osaka, Kyoto, and Kobe as its hub. The two regions differ in language, social relations, food, housing, and many other respects. The subcultural

Table 1.2 Estimated proportions of ethnic and pseudo-ethnic minorities in selected countries

Level	Minority groups in the total population	Specific countries
Band 1	0–3%	Austria, Bangladesh, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Greece, Iceland, Korea (North), Korea (South), Libya, Portugal
Band 2	3–6%	Czech, Finland, Germany, Haiti, Japan, Lebanon, Liberia, Netherlands
Band 3	6–11%	Albania, Cambodia, China, Egypt, Mongolia, Romania, Sweden

Note: Calculated from Famighetti (1994).

differences between the areas facing the Pacific and those facing the Sea of Japan are also well known. Japan has a wide variety of dialects. A Japanese from Aomori Prefecture, the northernmost area of Honshū Island, and one from Kagoshima, the southernmost district in Kyūshū Island, can scarcely comprehend each other's dialects. Different districts have different festivals, folk songs, and local dances. Customs governing birth, marriage, and death differ so much regionally that books explaining the differences are quite popular.²¹ The exact degree of domestic regional variation is difficult to assess in quantitative terms and by internationally comparative standards, but there is no evidence to suggest that it is lower in Japan than elsewhere.

Japanese language is a diversity-conscious tongue. Even if one does not assume any direct correlation between language and culture, one must acknowledge that Japanese, which is sensitive to diversity, reflects Japan's cultural patterns to a considerable extent. Japanese is a sexist language, differentiating between male and female vocabulary, expressions, and accents. The male language is supposed to be coarse, crude, and aggressive, while the female language is expected to be soft, polite, and submissive.²² Even at the level of self-identification, the male expressions for "I", *boku*, *ore*, and *washi*, differ from their more formal and refined female counterparts, *watashi* and *watakushi*. Japanese is also a hierarchy-oriented language. Honorific expressions are essential ingredients of everyday Japanese conversation, in which one must always be attentive to the social status of the person to whom one talks, noting whether the addressee is higher or lower in the social hierarchy. Without assuming that Japanese is exceptional in these regards, it can be postulated that the Japanese are at least heedful of a variety of status groups and their respective cultural orientations.

Conscious of the lifestyle differences of various groups, the Japanese often refer in everyday vocabulary to a variety of subcultural groupings using the term *zoku*, a suffix that literally means a tribe. Cases in point include: *shayō-zoku*, those employees who have the privilege of using company expense accounts to enjoy drinking, eating, playing golf, and other entertainments with their clients after working hours; *madogi-wazoku* (the window-gazing tribe), those company employees who have come to the end of their career in middle age, have few tasks to perform, and sit near the window away from the center of activity in a large, Japanese-style, non-partitioned office; and *bōsō-zoku*, the bikers who produce noise pollution in a quiet neighborhood.

In addition to these long-standing variations in Japanese society, there are strong indications that its degree of diversity is rapidly increasing in some areas. Specifically, the patterns of Japanese consumer behavior became diversified in a fundamental way in the 1980s. Previously,

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