
Book Review

Carola HOMMERICH/*German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ)*

Nihonjin no Kaisō Ishiki (Class Identification of the Japanese), by Naoki Sudo. Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2010, 246 pp., ¥1600 + tax (ISBN 978-4-06-258476-0)

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Much scholarly discussion has focused on class identification in Japan, trying to explain the apparently strong self-assessment of a majority of the population as middle class. In spite of a shift of the dominant societal model from a homogeneous middle class society to that of a ‘gap’ society, the annual public opinion surveys of the Cabinet Office on the Lifestyle of the Japanese (*Nihonjin no Seikatsu ni kan suru Yoron Chōsa*) show no apparent change in subjective class affiliation since the mid-1970s, with still close to 90% of the Japanese identifying themselves as middle class.

In this publication, Sudo investigates whether this can be interpreted as a shared class consciousness or whether other social processes lie hidden behind what, from a macro perspective, looks like a stable phenomenon. A major part of his argument concentrates on the way an individual is unconsciously influenced by society in his/her seemingly subjective opinions.

Relying mainly on the data of three waves of the survey on Stratification and Social Mobility (SSM) from 1985, 1995 and 2005, Sudo focuses on the two main questions of (a) how subjective class status is assessed by an individual and (b) how this subjective assessment is influenced by time and space. Differentiating by time and region, Sudo shows that there has been more variation in Japanese class identification than suggested by merely looking at the percentages on the national level. Sudo adds regional variation to similar investigations by other authors (i.e. Shirahase 2010), trying to show how an individuals’ class identification differs not only by his/her own level of education, occupation and income, but is also influenced by the distribution of these three variables in his/her surroundings. The latter here refers to developments over time, such as an individuals’ social background, his/her past experiences and future expectations, as well as spatial setting (namely the region in which an individual lives or has grown up, or the part of society it has information about to use as a point of reference for his/her own class identification).

Sudo gives various ostensive examples to illustrate the way an individual is influenced by socio-economic settings over time and in space when assessing his/her own place in society. For example, he suggests that an individual with a high level of education who comes from a family with high educational background and who lives in an area which has a high transition rate into higher education will not see his/her own educational level as something special and might therefore identify him/herself as middle, rather than upper class, even if a high level of education was rare and connected to higher status in society as a whole. Similarly, a person whose educational level is lower, but higher than his/her parents and higher than that of the people living around him/her, might also place himself/herself in the middle class, even though objectively he/she might be grouped as upper lower class. This kind of class identification leads to a ‘diverse middle class’ (as previously described by Hara

1990). The point Sudo wants to emphasize in particular seems to be that an individual is unconsciously influenced in his/her opinions by the society he/she lives in. He calls this an ‘invisible border’ (*mienai kyokai*) which groups individuals by a certain shared consciousness without their knowing. As these borders are invisible at the micro level of society, we are unaware of the fact that our opinion might be less individualistic than we think. Instead, it is influenced by socio-economic circumstances as well as by comparisons with other individuals living around us, and our knowledge of the society we live in.

Sudo turns to value preferences to further develop his argument that our self-placement in society is invisibly framed by socio-economic settings and their temporal development and spatial dispersion. Using the distribution of wealth as an example, Sudo explains that an individuals’ opinion of whether certain social inequalities are legitimate or could/should be avoided depends on the distribution system the individual him/herself favours. Referring to John Rawls’ ‘veil of ignorance’, Sudo claims that an individuals’ experience within the distribution system dominant in the society he/she lives in will influence this value orientation, as it is not possible to make decisions apart from one’s own individual situation. What looks like a myriad of individual differences adds up to something more than its parts at the macro level. As a result, individuals with the same class identification will share experiences within a certain distribution system and have shared value orientations, even though they themselves might be unaware of it.

To this point, Sudo’s argument oftentimes remains rather theoretical, relying mostly on thought experiments to illustrate his hypotheses of class identification. Data are used only sporadically, analysing relationships between education, occupation and income with class identification over time. Using the relationship between an individuals’ own level of education and that of the area he/she lives in (operationalised as the transition rate from high school to university at the prefectural level) with class identification over time, Sudo explains how a gap in class identification appears at the prefecture level only since 1995. Finding a negative (albeit rather weak) relationship between the level of the transition rate and class identification until 1985 (meaning that an individual with a high level of education would identify him/herself in a lower class in a region with a high transition rate than in a region with low transition rate, and vice versa), Sudo claims that this effect cancelled out a stratifying effect educational level could have had on class identification in regional comparison. After 1995, however, this relationship becomes positive, and—together with the explanatory power of an individual’s own educational level rising—results in individuals in prefectures with a high educational level to identify as higher classes and individuals in prefectures with lower educational levels to identify as lower classes. This leads to regional differences in class identification. In this way, Sudo states that the overall picture of class identification might not seem to have changed, although there have been various shifts underneath the surface.

Sudo returns to the interpretation of this specific result towards the end of the book, taking up the question of why the vast majority of the population’s identification as middle class seems to remain unchanged, in spite of a social discourse moving away from a strong self-image as a homogeneous middle class (*ichi-oku sōchūryū*) towards that of Japan as ‘gap’ society (*kakusa shakai*). As his conclusive argument, Sudo attributes the unchanged picture of overall class identification to a shift of reference point for the self-assessment of class status on the individual level, explaining that until the mid-1980s, what was interpreted as the ‘one million middle class’ was made up of individuals in very different objective settings, who all identified as middle class, relying on different reference points for class status. He argues that due to an insufficient knowledge of society as a whole, until 1995, individuals could only rely on their own experience over time and on other individuals in their immediate surroundings for comparison. This point of reference, however, changed since the 1990s from an

individual's immediate surroundings to comparison with society as a whole. This shift, he claims, was triggered by an increasing knowledge of society as a whole through education and a wider spread of the mass media. This is an interesting interpretation, which, however, remains rather hypothetical and is only indirectly supported by data findings. For instance, Sudo shows no support for his hypothesis of a change in societal knowledge.

Last, but not least, I feel compelled to point out that one should first read the afterword of this book, in order to comprehend it on the author's terms. Only there does Sudo point out that his book does not address an academic audience. Indeed, for readers who are familiar with the sociological discourse on social stratification in Japan, this publication might not hold much new information. As an introductory book to processes of social stratification and the discourse on social stratification in Japan, however, it is recommendable. Readers without a background in sociology will profit from the very detailed explanation of processes of status reproduction and social mobility included in chapters 1 and 2. However, as a book addressed to readers without any scholarly background, more data would have been desirable. More descriptive data, i.e. on the regional distribution of class identification, level of education or occupation over time, might have been helpful for non-academic readers in getting a basic understanding of regional disparities and changes over time, before turning to more complex correlations or regression analysis.

Personally, I would be eager to read about Sudo's hypotheses in a more condensed and academic format, as it seemed he let himself be held back by the self-imposed challenge of writing for a non-academic audience.

References

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