

## **Issues in Contemporary Japan**

Instructor: Kenji Ishida

### **Course Description**

This course aims to understand what social issues in Japanese society exist and how they occur. Japan had experienced rapid industrial and economic developments until the 1980s. The Japanese systems of education, labor markets, and social security, which have continued until today, were established by this period approximately. Although people at that time suffered from problems like harsh entrance examinations for secondary and higher education, long working hours after they started a job, and gender inequality, they accepted these problems in exchange for their economic flourishing.

However, it is tougher to expect growth on the upside in one's economic life today than before; meanwhile, many social problems in Japan persist. For example, an increasing number of Japanese youth and middle-aged people must have unstable career trajectories. Accordingly, the low prospect for one's socioeconomic situation has been another serious issue in Japan nowadays. This problem is also relevant to the increasing number of unmarried people and the declining birthrate.

In addition, Japan has been facing rapid population aging. The aging society undermines the sustainability of the Japanese social welfare system and poses problems like social isolation and poverty for older people. The aging and declining population resulted in the opening of a door for migrant workers, but Japan cannot deal with the social integration of immigrants so far.

As we can see, there is a wide range of issues surrounding contemporary Japan. However, putting differently, the Japanese experiences can provide some lessons for other societies that may have similar ones. In this course, we will discuss the contexts of the current issues in Japan with relevant literature and data.

### **Course Objectives**

The primary objective of this class is for attendees to develop their understanding of current Japanese society. In particular, the attendees should be able to think and explain the following questions by the end of this course (there are not always perfect answers.):

- (1) What are the characteristics of the Japanese educational, labor market, and social security systems, and how have they worked?
- (2) What problems do Japanese young and middle-aged people confront now?

- (3) What is going on under population aging in Japan, and how is it problematic?
- (4) Why have the Japanese systems, considered to have strengths, been regarded as dysfunctional these days?

### **Course Requirements**

Participants in this course are expected to work on the following requirements, which have different weights on grades respectively:

#### (1) Class Participation (25%)

Students are to participate, raise any questions, and discuss actively in each class. You should read course materials in advance, provide comments on them, and ask questions.

#### (2) Notes on the Reading Assignments (35%)

This course will ask you to read the articles relevant to each issue we will discuss. Each reading assignment will be a part of a book or a paper published in an academic journal. You are to write what you think about it, whether a summary, analysis, or opinion, in no more than 500 words. Based on this note, you should participate in the discussion section and send it to the instructor after each class.

#### (3) Term paper (50%)

I will ask students to write the final term paper about one of this course's topics. In addition to the reading assignments this course provided, you should find relevant articles and sources beneficial to completing your paper.

### **Course Schedule (Reading assignments are tentative)**

#### **Part I: Introduction and the Japanese society until the 1980s from the post-WWII**

- (1) Introduction: What do you think about Japan? (No readings)
- (2) Japan as a Latecomer Industrialized Society (Dore 1976; Vogel 1979)
- (3) A Mass Middle-Class Society (“ichioku so churyu syakai”) (Hara and Seiyama 1999[2005])
- (4) Gender Inequality in Japan (Brinton 1993)

#### **Part II: Labor Market Change in Japan since the 1990s**

- (5) Expanding 'Non-regular Employment' (Imai 2010)
- (6) Changes in the Japanese System of the School-to-Work Transition (Brinton and Kariya 1998; Brinton and Tang 2010)
- (7) The Instability of the Japanese Young and Middle-aged Workers (Genda 2007; Brinton

2010)

(8) Persistent Gender Inequality (Yamaguchi 2019)

### **Part III: Life-course Issues of the Youth and Middle-aged**

(9) Marriage and Fertility Issues in Japan (Fukuda 2016, Raymo and Iwasawa 2017)

(10) Division of Household Labor and Work-life Balance (Fuwa 2004; Yamaguchi 2009 in Japanese)

(11) Social Isolation / Withdrawal (Genda 2019)

(12) Poverty in the Youth (Allison 2013)

### **Part IV: Demographic Change and Social Welfare**

(13) Demographic Change in the Japanese Population (Shirahase 2011)

(14) Issues in the Japanese Social Security System (Long ed. 2012; Osawa 2013)

(15) Adapting Migrant Workers without Policy (Komai 1995; Sellek 2001)

### **Readings**

The following books are relevant to each topic we discuss in this course and will be reading assignments in each class, but these are tentative. In the case of books, students do not have to read all these books, but I will ask you to read a part of them (equivalent to one chapter). I may add or change reading assignments as the course attendees' interests and necessities.

Allison, Anne, 2013, *Precarious Japan*, Duke University Press.

Brinton, Mary C., 1993, *Women and the Economic Miracle: Gender and Work in Postwar Japan*, University of California Press.

Brinton, Mary C., 2010, *Lost in Transition: Youth, Work, and Instability in Postindustrial Japan*, Cambridge University Press.

Brinton, Mary C., and Takehiko Kariya, 1998, "Institutional Embeddedness in Japanese Labor Markets," In Mary C. Brinton and Victor Nee (eds.), *The New Institutionalism in Sociology*, Russell Sage Foundation, 181-207.

Brinton, Mary C., and Zun Tang, 2010, "School-work systems in postindustrial societies: Evidence from Japan," *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, 28: 215-32.

Dore, Ronald P., 1976, *The Diploma Disease: Education, Qualification, and Development*, University of California Press.

Fukuda, Nobutaka, 2016, *Marriage and Fertility Behaviour in Japan: Economic Status and Value-Orientations*, Springer.

Fuwa, Makiko, 2004, "Macro-level Gender Inequality and the Division of Household Labor in

- 22 countries," *American Sociological Review*, 69: 751-67.
- Genda, Yuji, 2007, "Jobless Youths and the Neet Problem in Japan," *Social Science Japan Journal*, 10(1): 23-40.
- Genda, Yuji, 2019, *Solitary Non-Employed Persons: Empirical Research in Japan*, Springer.
- Hara, Junsuke, and Kazuo Seiyama, 1999[2005], *syakai kaiso: yutakasa no naka no fubyodo*, University of Tokyo Press (= *Inequality amid Affluence: Social Stratification in Japan* (translated by Brad Williams), Trans Pacific Press).
- Imai, Jun, 2010, *The Transformation of Japanese Employment Relations: Reform without Labor*, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Komai, Hiroshi (translated by Jens Wilkinson), 1995, *Migrant Workers in Japan*, Kegan Paul International
- Long, Susan Orpett (ed.), 2012, *Caring for the Elderly in Japan and the US: Practices and Policies*, Routledge.
- Osawa, Mari, 2013, *Social Security in Contemporary Japan*, Routledge.
- Raymo, James M., and Miho Iwasawa, 2017, *Diverging Destinies: The Japanese Case*, Springer.
- Sellek, Yoko, 2001, *Migrant Labour in Japan*, Palgrave.
- Shirahase, Sawako, 2012, *Demographic Change and Inequality in Japan*, Trans Pacific Press.
- Vogel, Ezra F., 1979, *Japan as Number One*, Harvard University Press.
- Yamaguchi, Kazuo, 2009, *wa-ku raifu baransu: jissyo to seisaku Teigen (Work-life Balance: Evidence and Policy Implication)*, Nikkei Publishing. (in Japanese)
- Yamaguchi, Kazuo, 2019, *Gender Inequalities in the Japanese Workplace and Employment: Theories and Empirical Evidence*, Springer.