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**PARALLEL STREAMS: CLASS, STIGMA, AND INVISIBLE
DIVISIONS IN JAPANESE SOCIETY**

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“The journey is long and full of terror. Yet I inch forward” - let this funny quote, found on an anonymous internet graphic, be the motto of this entire research journey that is now being presented and laid in front of you. This dissertation is the culmination of a six-year research journey, a process of continuous re-evaluation and refinement, sometimes almost unbearable as well.

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Abstract

In this dissertation I critically examine the dominant discourse of homogeneity in Japanese society, with a particular focus on its class dimension, and the construction of symbolic boundaries in everyday life. The central research questions explore how mainstream Japanese define themselves against “others”, with a specific emphasis on the Burakumin minority, and how these symbolic divisions sustain the “myth of homogeneity” and reinforce exclusion. My primary aim is to investigate how cultural codes, practices, and implicit norms create and reproduce persistent boundaries.

Using qualitative research methods, fifteen in-depth semi-structured interviews with non-Burakumin Japanese citizens, mostly middle class, were conducted, and data processed using thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis. This enabled identification of the key narrative patterns and examination of the discursive and cultural mechanisms through which boundaries are maintained. To build the theoretical framework theories of Max Weber (class and status divisions), Pierre Bourdieu (habitus, capitals), Michele Lamont (symbolic boundaries), Mary Douglas (cultural classification), and Norbert Elias (shame and social control) were employed.

The findings indicate that the discourse of homogeneity in Japan coexists with lived experiences of subtle yet persistent distinction between groups. Education appears as both a vehicle of mobility, and a mechanism of status reproduction, while cultural codes such as *kuuki wo yomu* (reading the air) and notions of morality define the “normal.” Shame operates as a central regulatory mechanism reinforcing conformity. The Burakumin blurred identity, invisible and hypervisible at the same time, continues to act as a symbolic “other” that stabilizes the sense of national sameness. Interestingly, generational differences reveal new tensions: older respondents emphasize stability and attachment to collective norms, while younger ones highlight insecurity, risk, and individual aspirations, exposing fractures in the “100 million middle class” narrative. This dissertation demonstrates also that symbolic boundaries in Japan are not fixed, but are continually renegotiated through discourse, silence, and everyday practice.

Key words: Japan, social class, symbolic boundaries, Burakumin, sameness, otherness

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....	2
Abstract.....	4
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	5
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION.....	7
1.1. Problem Introduction.....	7
1.2. Scope of the Study.....	12
1.3. Methodology.....	13
1.4. Conclusion.....	13
CHAPTER 2: HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF JAPANESE SOCIAL STRATIFICATION.....	15
2.1. Introduction.....	15
2.2. Historical Foundations of Japanese Social Stratification.....	18
2.2.1. The Status System and Its Implications.....	19
2.2.2. Origins of Special Status People.....	22
2.2.3. Social Segregation and Status-Marking Practices.....	29
2.2.4. Abolition of Statuses and Its Effects.....	34
2.2.5. The Meiji era, Moral Ideals, and emergence of Burakumin.....	37
2.3. Scholarship on Burakumin and their origins.....	40
2.3.1. Who are Burakumin today?.....	48
2.3.2. Ascribed vs. Achieved Status.....	50
2.3.3. Social invisibility.....	51
2.3.4. Secrecy and Silence Surrounding Burakumin Status.....	53
2.3.5. Institutional and Local Efforts for Burakumin Emancipation and Counter-Narratives.....	57
2.3.6. Social and Discursive Boundaries Reflected in Mainstream Attitudes and Media Representations.....	60
2.4. Research Gaps and Contribution.....	64
CHAPTER 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	67

3.1. Introduction.....	67
3.2. Class - Definition and Its Significance for Social Studies and Humanities.....	69
3.3. Caste - Definition and Significance.....	78
3.4 Class, Caste and Social Inequalities in Contemporary Japan.....	83
3.5. Symbolic Boundaries.....	97
3.6. Constructing Homogeneity and Difference in Japan.....	101
3.6.1. Modernization and the Western Gaze.....	102
3.6.2. The Discourse of Japanese Uniqueness: From Orientalism to Nihonjinron.	104
3.6.3. Homogeneity, Heterogeneity, and Uchi/Soto Opposition.....	105
3.6.4. The Social Regimes of Shame and Stigma.....	108
3.7. Conclusion.....	109
CHAPTER 4. METHODOLOGY.....	111
4.1. Introduction.....	111
4.2. My Research Journey.....	112
4.3. Research Philosophy.....	114
4.4. Research Design.....	116
4.5. Analytical Strategy.....	121
4.6. Ethics.....	130
4.7. Methodological Limitations.....	130
4.8. Conclusion.....	134
CHAPTER 5. RESULTS.....	135
5.1. Introduction.....	135
5.2. The King's Way.....	136
5.3. Universal Obedience of Norms and Values as the Glue That Keeps the Japanese Society Together.....	142
5.4. Parallel Social Streams.....	146
5.5. Education as a Key that Locks and Unlocks Different (Status) Doors.....	150
5.6. Symbolic Geography as a Boundary Making Tool.....	152
5.7. Mechanisms of Boundary Maintenance: Shame, Stigma and Silence.....	155

5.8. No Single Denominator to Identify a Burakumin.....	157
5.9. Conclusion.....	159
CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION.....	162
6.1. Introduction.....	162
6.2. Middle-Class Sameness: Parallel Streams, Weberian Lens, and Moral Economy. 163	
6.3. Uncertainty and Risk.....	173
6.4. College as a Great Equalizer?.....	178
6.5. Shame as a Powerful Social Regulator.....	183
6.6. Symbolic Role of Burakumin Otherness: Transgression, Fluidity, Temporality.... 188	
6.7. Invisibility - Hypervisibility.....	194
6.8. Conclusion.....	197
CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION.....	198
7.1. Introduction.....	198
7.2. Key Findings in the Context of Research Questions.....	198
7.3. Limitations and Future Research Recommendations.....	204
REFERENCES.....	206
APPENDICES.....	232
1. Dictionary of Key Terms and Concepts.....	232
2. Semi-structured In-depth Interview Scenario.....	240
3. Informants Demographic Data.....	244

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Problem Introduction

While reading and researching on Japan, one can realize that there are two popular perspectives on the state of Japanese society. One (*nihonjinron*) claims that Japan is an ethnically and culturally homogeneous society, united by unique customs, original traditions and one language. This is all supported and enhanced by the both image and self-image of Japanese society, for decades a champion of economic development, as a “general middle class society” of economic equity and equal opportunity, where the whole society is flourishing and profiting financially from the steady growth.

The second one, probably a bit less popular, at least in the eyes of the general public, favours the image that Japan is indeed a heterogeneous society (Weiner, 2005; Chiavacci, 2008), dominated by ethnic Japanese, yet with a significant space occupied by different minorities having a certain influence on Japanese culture and economy. This heterogeneity is also visible in the social stratification, especially through the new perspective of “gap society”, where economic crisis and stagnation, as well as demographic changes lead to declining stability and growing inequalities of the “general middle class society”.

This dissertation builds on the tension between these two perspectives. Following other researchers (Kobayakawa, 2021; Amos, 2011), I approach the politically constructed narrative of Japanese societal homogeneity as a dominant representational framework that does not simply obscure social complexity, but actively shapes how distinctions and divisions are produced, perceived, and managed. These divisions are not always institutionalized or visible, but are continuously reproduced and maintained through symbolic boundaries. In this sense, homogeneity is treated not as an empirical condition, but as a historically situated and contested discourse.

In this context, the Burakumin are approached not as a clearly bounded social class or solely as a minority group, but as an analytically productive site through which these processes can be examined. As an “invisible minority,” their social position highlights the interplay between visibility and invisibility, knowledge and silence, and past and

present forms of differentiation. Rather than treating Burakumin as a fixed object of classification, this study mobilizes the category as a perspective through which broader mechanisms of boundary-making in Japanese society become observable.

In my analysis I adopt a Weberian perspective on stratification, focusing on class, status, symbolic boundaries, and the role of discourse. It is further grounded in a critical realist framework, which assumes that social structures exist independently of individual perceptions, while being accessible only through their empirical manifestations. From this perspective, symbolic boundaries are understood as socially constructed, yet consequential mechanisms that shape inclusion, exclusion, and the distribution of power.

The study therefore examines how members of mainstream Japanese society perceive, construct, and negotiate class and status distinctions between themselves and others. Particular attention is given to the categories, narratives, and everyday practices through which these distinctions are articulated. By focusing on perceptions rather than institutional classifications, the dissertation aims to uncover how social differences are made meaningful and reproduced in contemporary Japan. Ultimately, in this research I seek to contribute to the understanding of the cultural dimension of social stratification by showing how symbolic boundary work operates within a society commonly described as homogeneous.

To address this problem, the dissertation approaches the question of Japanese social homogeneity on three interconnected levels:

First, it acknowledges that Japanese society has historically been and remains socially differentiated. Those divisions and social structures, including those that gave rise to the Burakumin, can be understood as social facts “general over the whole of a given society whilst having an existence of its own, independent of its individual manifestations” (Durkheim, 1982).

Second, the study examines how the narrative of homogeneity has been actively constructed and maintained, particularly in the context of modern state formation. Rather than treating this narrative as a mere description of reality, it is approached as a

social and political project that continues to shape how differences are understood and expressed.

Third, the dissertation focuses on empirical data drawn from interviews, which provide insight into how these broader structures and narratives are reflected in everyday perceptions. In particular, the analysis explores how individuals reproduce, negotiate, or challenge symbolic boundaries in their own accounts of social difference.

By linking these three levels: structural, discursive, and empirical, my primary inquiry, therefore, is to delve into the mechanisms and structures by which mainstream Japanese individuals actively construct, maintain, and utilize symbolic boundaries to define themselves in relation to other Japanese groups. This research is grounded in a critical realist paradigm, which assumes that social facts exist as real underlying structures and mechanisms (Durkheim, 1982) that influence the creation of symbolic boundaries. This reality is mediated by powerful cultural classification mechanisms (Douglas, 1966), and as such, mainstream Japanese construct and perform symbolic boundaries (Lamont, 1992) that, while socially constructed, have very real consequences due to how they interact with existing power structures and different forms of capital (Bourdieu, 2022).

In this context, the Burakumin are approached not as a clearly bounded social group or as a distinct social class, but as a particularly revealing case through which broader processes of social differentiation can be examined. Often described as an “invisible minority,” their position is marked by a specific tension: they are not immediately identifiable in everyday interactions, yet they remain socially recognizable through indirect markers such as family background, place of origin, or social knowledge. It is important to add that although some Japanese scholars analyse Burakumin primarily through the framework of minority studies (e.g. Uesugi, Saitō, Tsukada), and while I find this perspective valuable, in my dissertation I focused primarily on symbolic boundary work and stratification processes.

This creates a dynamic in which the Burakumin are simultaneously present and absent in social perception, rarely openly discussed, yet persistently embedded in social awareness. Rather than treating this as a fixed characteristic, the dissertation approaches it as a relational and situational phenomenon, emerging through everyday practices of classification and boundary-making.

In particular, attention is given to the interplay between knowing and not knowing, speaking and silence, which structures how difference is perceived and managed in social interactions. Through this lens, the Burakumin category becomes analytically useful not primarily as an object of study in itself, but as a point of entry into understanding how symbolic boundaries are constructed, negotiated, and maintained in contemporary Japan.

Furthermore, in this dissertation I examine the cultural dimension of social stratification in contemporary Japan by focusing on the ways in which symbolic boundaries between various social classes and statuses are constructed, maintained, and negotiated in everyday life. Rather than treating categories such as class, caste, or the Burakumin as fixed or self-evident, I approach them as socially constructed and historically contingent.

The analysis centres on the perceptions of mainstream Japanese individuals and explores how distinctions between “self” and “others” are articulated through discourse, everyday practices, and implicit social norms. In an effort to resist the historical pattern of social exclusion, this study integrates the Burakumin case into a wider analysis of Japanese symbolic boundaries. My intention was to avoid 'ghettoizing' the research topic, which often reinforces the very segregation it seeks to study. This aim was only partially realized, as the context surrounding Buraku identity created significant recruitment challenges, making it difficult to find informants willing to engage in the project.

The aim of the study is not to provide a comprehensive account of social stratification in Japan, nor to definitively explain the position of the Burakumin as a social class or category. Instead, it seeks to offer an empirically grounded contribution to understanding how symbolic boundary work operates in a context often described as homogeneous and middle-class.

By combining insights from critical realism and interpretivist approaches, the dissertation analyses how underlying social structures and culturally embedded classificatory schemes are reflected in individual perceptions and narratives. In doing so, it highlights how symbolic distinctions, although socially constructed, have tangible consequences for inclusion, exclusion, and the reproduction of social inequalities.

The study also engages with existing scholarship on Japan and broader sociological debates on class and stratification, with the aim of situating the findings within a wider theoretical context. Rather than proposing a general theory, it offers a focused analysis of boundary-making processes that may contribute to a more nuanced understanding of social differentiation in contemporary societies.

To achieve this aim, the study pursues the following objectives:

- To clarify how key concepts such as class, caste, and social strata are understood and applied in the Japanese and Western context.
- To identify the categories and criteria used by mainstream Japanese individuals to distinguish between themselves from different types of “others”, as well as to delineate social classes within a seemingly "middle-class society."
- To examine how symbolic boundaries are constructed and maintained in everyday perceptions and discourse.
- To analyze the role of the Burakumin category as a reference point in these boundary-making processes.
- To explore how historical narratives shape contemporary understandings of social difference.

Drawing directly from the aims and objectives, this dissertation addresses the following core research questions:

1. How do mainstream Japanese individuals construct and interpret symbolic boundaries within Japanese society?
2. What categories and criteria are used to define social difference and “otherness,” including in relation to the Burakumin?
3. What role does the Burakumin category play in contemporary boundary-making processes?
4. How are these perceptions shaped by broader social discourses and individual experiences?

I believe that these questions will guide the empirical investigation and subsequent analysis, aiming to provide a nuanced understanding of symbolic boundary construction in contemporary Japan.

1.2. Scope of the Study

This study will primarily focus on understanding contemporary discourses on social classes in Japan through the lens of mainstream Japanese perceptions of other Japanese including Burakumin. Data collected throughout the study allows me to further examine how symbolic boundaries operate within this specific social context, particularly concerning social stratification in Japan, and how these boundaries manifest through normative interdictions, cultural attitudes, practices, and patterns of preferences. I will also explore how these mechanisms contribute to social inequality and the exercise of power by classifying and differentiating social groups.

This research aims to move beyond invoking theoretical categories by focusing on the lived experiences of my interviewees. Using a phenomenological approach, I will explore how individuals navigate unspoken social rules and how boundaries are created through mechanisms of avoidance, naming, and signaling differences. In this analysis, I follow Douglas (1966) and Elias (1939) and treat shame as a collectively organized mechanism that is structuring individual comportment, enforcing conformity, and delimiting group belonging. By analyzing how shame circulates in discourse about different social classes, I will show how social boundaries are produced and maintained, often without explicit rules, through the subtle tools of “reading the air,” silence, and rumor. The main focus of my dissertation is on the perceptions and boundary-making processes among mainstream Japanese individuals. As such, it will not provide a comprehensive historical account of Burakumin discrimination, nor will it directly elicit the experiences of Burakumin individuals themselves. The primary goal is to understand how these mechanisms of classification and differentiation contribute to social inequalities and the exercise of power.

1.3. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative methodology, using abductive reasoning for a more in-depth and comprehensive analytical process. I find use of in-depth, semi-structured interviews as particularly suited to exploring the nuanced perceptions and subjective understandings central to the study of symbolic boundaries, allowing for the extraction of rich data required for thematic and discourse analysis. I will follow and combine critical realist paradigm with interpretivist paradigm, acknowledging the core differences between them, especially that while social facts exist independently, their understanding requires interpretation of human experience and meanings. The research will combine in-depth, semi-structured interviews with mainstream Japanese individuals as its primary data collection method, complemented by desk research of relevant scholarly literature. The primary data analysis techniques will include thematic analysis and discourse analysis to interpret the rich qualitative data gathered.

1.4. Conclusion

All the above mentioned elements are structured into a dissertation consisting of seven chapters. Chapter II focuses on critical literature review and discusses existing scholarly work on the historical background of Japanese stratification and Burakumin history, identifying research gaps. Chapter III discusses symbolic boundaries, social stratification, and the social construction of reality. It also delves into the theoretical understanding of social stratification particularly in the Japanese context, and western influence on Japanese sociology and understanding of terminology. Chapter IV details the chosen research design, philosophical underpinnings, practical research choices (e.g., sampling, data collection, data analysis techniques employed), and acknowledges methodological limitations. Chapter V focuses on the presentation of results – the findings of the thematic and discourse analysis, showcasing the patterns and insights derived from the interview data. Chapter VI contains interpretation of the results in relation to the literature, answers the research questions, and discusses the implications of the findings. Finally, Chapter VII offers concluding remarks, where I summarize the study's contributions, acknowledge limitations, and suggest avenues for future research. By adopting this detailed approach, this dissertation seeks to provide novel insights into the cultural construction of social hierarchies in Japan, thereby contributing to a deeper

understanding of symbolic boundary work and its implications for social inclusion and exclusion.

CHAPTER 2: HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF JAPANESE SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

Motto: "In the domain of thought, certain important advances are comparable to the displacement of volumes from one bookstack to the next: displacements are accomplished even if nothing allows us to think that the new position will be the one that will remain." (Lamont, Fournier, 1992, p. 90)

2.1. Introduction

One of the greatest challenges of writing is to remain faithful to the facts and avoid being influenced by cultural sympathies and biases and one's personal worldview. It is natural to stand on the "right" side of a discussion, to support the weak, and seek to restore justice. Yet it is not our task as researchers. As Clifford Geertz observed: "The trick is not to get yourself into some inner correspondence of spirit with your informants. Preferring, like the rest of us, to call their souls their own, they are not going to be altogether keen about such an effort anyhow. The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to. In one sense, of course, no one knows this better than they do themselves". (Geertz, 1983, pp. 56-58) Following this ethos, the aim of this chapter is to create space for diverse voices and opinions to be expressed in relation to social stratification, the self-images of the Japanese, and the Burakumin. In this part, I will situate my research within the key academic debates and revisit the theories, categories, and paradigms that have shaped discourses among both Japanese and Western scholars.

This chapter is dedicated to several topics and themes crucial for understanding the sources and background of modern Japanese society in terms of social stratification and symbolic boundary-making. I assume that the key context for understanding modern Japan lies in its early modern era (or the Tokugawa period, 1600-1868) and how the foundations of contemporary society were built from there during the Meiji period (1868-1912). Without first taking a step back to understand the early modern status system and how the shogunate (Japanese military government) ruled and created societal divisions, we are unable to fully grasp how contemporary society functions. In the next sections, I am going to recollect common misconceptions about Japanese status

system (*mibunsei*) and the division of the society into four main groups (*shi-nō-kō-shō*, 士農工商), that is peasants, samurai, merchants, and craftsmen. I will present how the concepts of class and caste function in modern Japan with reference to the broader discourse on social stratification. A significant section will be dedicated to the category of Burakumin, including its definition, meaning, and specific historical background. I will also explore how the discourses created by researchers, government agendas, and the media actively shape and maintain the reality of how the Burakumin exist as a group. Finally, I will focus on the topics of Western influence on Japan's self-image and the ongoing debate between homogeneity and heterogeneity.

This study will not provide a comprehensive historical account of Burakumin discrimination, nor will it directly elicit the experiences of Burakumin individuals themselves. This is a deliberate choice. My primary focus is to understand how the mechanisms of classification and differentiation contribute to social inequality and the exercise of power by examining the boundary-making processes of the mainstream Japanese majority. This perspective on how the dominant group constructs and maintains difference offers a crucial and often-overlooked insight into social stratification.

The methodological challenge addressed here lies in reconciling the belief in an existing, knowable reality with an abductive approach that combines the primary theoretical assumptions and intuitions, while enriching them with novelty threads coming from the dataset. My philosophical choice leans towards critical realism, which assumes social facts exist as real underlying structures and mechanisms (Durkheim) that influence the creation of symbolic boundaries. I use interpretivism as a complementary method for qualitative research, as it is grounded in exploration and understanding and is well-suited for grasping how individuals experience and ascribe meaning to life events. My approach thus avoids the limitations of a purely subjectivist perspective, which might reduce social facts to psychological phenomena, as well as a purely positivist one, which might fail to capture the nuanced, socially constructed nature of these phenomena.

My overarching aim is to discuss and analyze how mainstream Japanese, in a seemingly homogeneous and middle-class society, perceive and construct symbolic boundaries to

differentiate themselves from other Japanese, including the Burakumin. The concept of the "classless society" is a myth, and to understand the reality of growing inequalities in contemporary Japan, it is essential to explore the cultural and symbolic dimensions of social stratification.

I believe that the language we use to describe these social categories is not neutral. As Ludwig Wittgenstein noted, "The limits of my language, mean the limits of my world" (Wittgenstein, TLP 5.6). While this phrase may be a cliché, it conveys a deep truth about the relationship between language and meaning. Naming the Burakumin an "issue," for instance, is not a neutral act. It creates a very tangible and visible symbolic boundary, placing the group in a specific, objectified context. The aim of my research is to move beyond such limiting language and to explore the discursive and practical mechanisms through which symbolic boundaries operate to define and exclude the Burakumin, and to clarify what the continued use of this category reveals about underlying social structures and power dynamics today.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will proceed by exploring key concepts and themes in the scholarly literature. First, I will establish the historical and structural foundations of modern Japanese society. These bases contribute to how social differences, including those related to the Burakumin, are conceptualized, articulated, and maintained through language and social practices.

This leads to a dedicated section on Burakumin scholarship, which examines how this minority group is portrayed in existing literature and identifies the dominant paradigms and perspectives in the field. I pay particular attention to the specific terminology and concepts researchers employ to shape our understanding of the Buraku position within Japanese society. Furthermore, I also analyze how the Burakumin have been historically perceived and described, a process that reveals 'boundary-work' in action. This discursive practice effectively creates a 'cyst' on the Japanese social body: a group that is of the same blood and flesh, yet remains separated, distanced, and inherently uncomfortable. This metaphor illustrates the conceptual treatment of the Burakumin as an 'indigenous other', integral to the social body, yet structurally encysted. In my view, this image captures the profound and paradoxical nature of their exclusion and offers a

clearer lens through which to understand the complexities of social marginalization in Japan.

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This chapter will be concluded by showing how these terms, theories, and concepts helped build a theoretical framework that will be presented in the Theoretical Chapter.

2.2. Historical Foundations of Japanese Social Stratification

Japan is often described both in academic literature and popular commentary as a middle-class society. Many researchers have argued that there are no stark visible borders between people, that conspicuous consumption is rare, and that most individuals share a similar lifestyle. In this narrative, the main differences seem to be matters of degree: one family might take an overseas holiday, another a domestic trip. On the surface, revolutionary social changes after both the Meiji Restoration of 1868 and Japan's postwar reconstruction in 1945 appear to have produced a highly egalitarian, homogeneous society in which everyone wears similar clothes, commutes by public transport, and participates in corporate life.

Yet, a closer look reveals persistent, if subtle, social distinctions. Urban residents often viewed rural (*inaka*) people with condescension, drawing on stereotypes about language, customs, and lifestyle. Blue-collar and white-collar divisions remain

embedded in the social imaginarium, even if less visibly marked. Using Pierre Bourdieu's perspective, this shift from a prewar population that was 80% rural to today's 80% urban raises key questions: How did such a transformation occur? Do people consciously recognize and value their rural or urban heritage? And how do historical patterns of social stratification continue to shape contemporary perceptions of belonging? Is it important at all for the modern Japanese?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to look beyond present-day appearances and investigate the deeper historical structures of Japanese society. In particular, understanding the status system of the Edo period is of importance. This system, which organized people into rigidly defined classes, provided both a historical precedent for social boundaries and a lens through which we can examine the persistence of group-based distinctions. By combining historical analysis with sociological theory, we can situate the current debate on Japanese homogeneity and heterogeneity within a broader perspective of continuity and change.

2.2.1. The Status System and Its Implications

This part of the chapter draws on the works of Chie Nakane, Japanese anthropologist, and Robert N. Bellah, who was deeply influenced by Parsons and Weber .. While I am fully aware of the contemporary debate regarding the 'anachronism' of their frameworks, my intention here is, rather than adopting their models as static descriptions of national character, to utilize them as heuristic tools to indicate the persistence of symbolic boundaries in Japan. Following recent scholarship (Ushiyama, 2025; Borovoy, 2016), I treat Bellah's focus on the stability of values and Nakane's 'vertical' structures as specific epistemic stakes in the study of modernity. By situating these 'classics' alongside the institutional theories of Mary Douglas and the symbolic boundary work of Michèle Lamont, in the next chapters I aim to show how these older analytical categories can be repurposed to explain the contemporary, subtle, and often unarticulated mechanisms of social differentiation.

Bellah argued that Japan should be understood not as an absolute "other" but within a comparative framework, identifying both its similarities and differences with other modern societies. Bellah described Japan as particularistic where relational context

takes precedence over abstract, universal principles and achievement-oriented, where individuals are evaluated more for what they can do than for their inherited status. His core contribution for this study lies in his emphasis on the stability of values. He argued that values persist longer than economic or class arrangements; when economic change occurs, it is filtered through these pre-existing value structures. In Japan's case, loyalty to the Yamato (Yamato period 250–710) ruling family, and the regulation of groups according to their service to the state shaped both ancient kinship-based units (*uji* and *be*) and later feudal warrior (*bushi*) structures. Over time, these values: particularism, performance, and group loyalty, were embedded not only in samurai-vassal relations but also in merchant-clerk and village hierarchies, such as the *dōzoku* networks, based on the traditional extended family structure (Nakane, 2008, Bellah, 2003).

One of Bellah's most important insights is that while specific status systems (such as the *uji-be* or Tokugawa class system) could be abandoned, the underlying value pattern of group loyalty over individual self-fulfillment persisted. Groups were not eternal; they were justified by performance and could be replaced if they failed. But they were always nested in vertical chains of loyalty leading to the national polity, making Japan highly mobilizable from the top down. This structure limited the development of universalism and individualism, with major social transformations typically triggered by the wholesale importation of rationalized foreign models that took place, for instance, in the 7th–8th and in the 19th–20th centuries.

Bellah also highlighted the *uchi/yoso* ("inside/outsider") distinction and the tendency toward factionalism, where tightly knit subgroups within organizations compete with each other. These patterns of inclusion and exclusion, sometimes so strong that outsiders were seen as less than human, are essential for understanding historical discrimination and its lingering effects. Chie Nakane's (2021) theory of Japanese social structure complements Bellah's value-centered approach by focusing on the organization of group membership. Nakane distinguished between two modes of belonging:

1. Qualifying membership – based on a specific quality or status (e.g., caste, clan, occupation).
2. Situational membership – based on shared position within a particular context (e.g., membership in a village, company, or school).

Whereas India's caste system is an example of qualifying membership rooted in occupation and inherited status, Japan emphasizes situational membership, in which the framework (the village, the company, the institution) comes first, and individual qualifications are secondary.

Nakane also argued that while social organization in Japan can, for example, change rural villages into modern cities, the underlying social structure remains constant. This is a form of Japanese essentialism that helps explain the resilience of group-oriented patterns of belonging. Whether in a Tokugawa village or in a contemporary corporation, the primary reference point for identity is the group context, not the individual's intrinsic attributes.

Bellaah and Nakane's frameworks help explain why the Edo period (1600-1868) status system, despite being formally dismantled in the late 19th century, remains relevant for understanding modern Japan. Both scholars emphasize that Japanese social life is anchored in group-based belonging, vertical loyalty, and the prioritization of context over universal principles. In the Edo period, these values were expressed through rigid status categories that regulated marriage, residence, occupation, and religious practice.

Studying the Edo era social structure provides more than just historical background; it helps to understand how certain ways of thinking about social differences have developed and continue to shape how they are perceived today. Rather than suggesting a simple continuity of social structures, it is more useful to see these patterns as forms of classification and interpretation that may persist even as Japanese society has undergone significant social and institutional change.

Looking at these processes makes it possible to better understand how contemporary Japan can maintain representations of homogeneity while still reproducing various forms of inclusion, exclusion, and hierarchy. In this sense, the persistence lies less in unchanged structures than in durable ways of perceiving and organizing social difference.

2.2.2. Origins of Special Status People

The Edo period's status system (*mibunsei*) was a formal structure of social stratification. The roots of Japanese identity lie in the diversity of groups, which perceive themselves and their identities through status (*mibun*): "through socially recognized honor, esteem, and privilege. The positive connotation of these terms, however, is misleading since such a description of a status system is the work of an outside observer who perceives grades of more or less honor, esteem, and privilege and relates to the whole hierarchy at once. This structuralist gaze is of a different quality than the experience of those who occupy a position within the status system" (Ooms, 1996, p. 5).

Status holders always relate to the system differently, from a specific position that determines the scope and intensity of their interest in other positions, especially neighboring ones. One can at least say that, while they enjoyed public social honor and esteem from those below them (and private envy and resentment as well), status holders must look down upon occupants of lower positions (with fear perhaps) as undeserving of such recognition, as embodiments of dishonor. The reality is obviously more complicated than this dichotomy indicates. Even in a rigidly stratified society like Tokugawa Japan not all of the aspects of social interaction were patterned on status prescriptions. For instance, the "outcastes," too often still referred to by the pejorative term *eta* (full of dirt), were not treated as unclean/polluted in every social encounter. A status system is always also a system of socially sanctioned dishonor (Ooms 1996).

Historians such as Herman Ooms have emphasized that the discrimination faced by "outcastes" was not solely the result of cultural prejudice. Research over the past two decades has revealed that economic, political, and functional factors also shaped their marginalization. The Edo period excluded groups of *eta* (full of dirt) and *hinin* (nonhuman) that were embedded in the broader Tokugawa order, but their position evolved significantly over time, reflecting both state policy and shifting economic needs.

Who were those "outcastes", or "special status people" (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1989), and how did they appear in Japanese history? This part I find especially important for this thesis, as it illustrates how processual and fluctuating the changes on the margins of

Japanese society throughout the ages. It also reveals how Japanese people dealt with the subject of their own and others' statuses and social positions. Historians do not agree on what was the special status people in ancient times. However, in his ground breaking work "Rethinking Japanese History", Amino Yoshihiko offers a re-interpretation of ancient Japanese society and the origins of certain status groups, challenging previous historical assumptions about "outcaste" status. Another historian, Kuroda Toshio was convinced that it was a status outside the status system, an existence that was completely alienated from society. On the other hand, Oyama Kyohei had a different opinion on that topic: essentially they had the same status as villagers (*hyakusho*).

Understanding how these excluded groups came to exist is not perfectly clear, as Amino himself sees them as: "different from both common villagers and bonded servants, and that they possessed the same status as the shrine and temple purveyors [...]" and "they also shared certain characteristics with skilled tradesmen". This nuanced stance acknowledges that certain groups were neither entirely marginal nor wholly integrated, but occupied a hybrid social position. Finally, Niunoya Tesuichi was convinced that the state and religious organizations (Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines) had control over nonhumans and riverside dwellers (*kawaramono*) (Amino, 1998, p. 172), and this classification raises questions about the original meaning of "human" and "nonhuman" in this historical context.

To understand the emergence of such groups, Amino first tries to trace the status system back to the Ritsuryō state (ancient Japanese legal system), which divided the population into "good people" (*ryōmin*) and "base people" (*senmin*). Among the latter were the so-called "five colors of baseness" (*goshiki-no-sen*). Four of them: public slaves (*kunuhi*), government slaves (*kanko*), private slaves (*shinuhi*), and domestics (*kenin*) were true slaves, state or privately owned, who had lost their freedom through crime or debt. They were "unfree people," though not necessarily laboring slaves like those of Greece or Rome. The fifth category, the *ryōko*, were guardians of imperial tombs. Although legally classed among base people, *ryōko* were different: they were close to officialdom, had special rights, and were often engaged in commerce. Their ambiguous status may have derived from the religious significance of tomb sites associated both with death and pollution as well as with sanctity.

The *ryōko* embodied a paradox. On one hand, proximity to graves brought them into contact with pollution, a source of potential stigma. On the other hand, they were sanctified guardians of imperial sites, often possessing military skill and even prestige earned through participation in campaigns against the Ezo (historical name of Ainu minority) in northeastern Honshū. Their role fits what Rudolf Otto (1924) termed the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* objects or beings that evoke emotions of both fear and fascination. Amino suggests that the *ryōko*'s status in official records may have been a bureaucratic borrowing from the Chinese Tang model, not an accurate reflection of their local prestige. This duality service to the sacred, implying lowliness, combined with special privileges implying high status, made their position socially ambiguous, and Amino even speculates that they may have been the ancestral source of the later Burakumin stigma.

In the ancient era (6th to 12th centuries), the category of *genin* indentured servants and slaves persisted, yet neither they nor earlier slaves were necessarily stigmatized. Medieval "nonhumans" did not descend from the base people of the *ritsuryō* system, and discrimination against them appears to have been driven by magico-religious factors rather than inherited legal status. Amino identifies two fundamental distinctions in ancient status discrimination: first, between slaves and "good people"; second, between ordinary people and those serving sacred beings whose powers exceed those of humans.

Several historical developments reshaped these groups' social positions. The crisis of the 8th century brought increased numbers of people suffering from disease, orphanhood, and other misfortunes. The state established hospices (*hidenin*, *seyakuin*) alongside the provincial temple system (*kokubunji*), ostensibly for relief, but also as part of a larger strategy to register and tax the population. Those raised in hospices were eventually placed on normal household registers and granted homes, though their new surnames, such as Maraji, marked them as having hospice origins, a potential source of later discrimination.

By the 9th century, economic and political instability displaced many artisans, courtesans, and tradespeople from government patronage into independent associations. People from hospices, except those with severe illness, often had to form similar groups

to survive. A devastating famine around that time further stratified society: hospice dwellers were assigned to the removal and burial of bodies, a task later extended even to low-ranking officials, reinforcing the association between hospice origin and pollution work.

The concept of pollution (*kegare*) was central to ancient Japanese attitudes toward status. Pollution could stem from death (*shi-e*), birth (*san-e*), disease, disasters, criminal acts, or large-scale alterations to nature. Pollution was understood as communicable in primary, secondary, and tertiary degrees, all requiring purification rituals. Even the emperor and deities could be polluted, which would halt vital ceremonies and endanger the balance between the human and divine worlds.

By the 11th century, the category of *Hinin* (nonhumans) had emerged, organized under leaders such as the *hinin no chōri* (chief of nonhumans). These groups specialized in purifying polluted spaces, a skill much in demand in a society deeply concerned with spiritual and physical contamination. They were heterogeneous in composition, and their settlements often lay on riverbed spaces considered free of pollution and exempt from taxation. Here, religious beliefs about pollution, economic functions, and legal status converged to create a complex web of marginality and necessity.

Several centuries later, in a completely different political situation, a new model was born, borrowing or integrating certain parts from the Ritsuryō state. However, it is necessary to remember that the above mentioned classifications were neither rigid nor very strictly implemented. The new official Edo social classification was called *shinōkōshō*, meaning: samurai (*shi*), peasants (*nō*), artisans (*kō*), and merchants (*shō*).

Adopted from China, modeled on the Neo-Confucian ideas, this four occupation structure was idealized as a moral and functional order: samurai at the top as rulers and moral exemplars; peasants as providers of food and the main taxpayers (in rice); artisans as producers of useful goods; and merchants as morally suspect traders in money and commodities. In practice, this model oversimplified Japan's far more complex social reality. It blurred economic disparities, ignored certain groups entirely, and masked the fact that some of the supposedly "lowest" groups, especially merchants held considerable economic power, often eclipsing even the samurai in wealth. This led to a curious and paradoxical situation where the samurai (especially in Edo city), who had

power and prestige, were often deprived of capital and financially dependent, through credits and loans, on the merchants. That led, in the course of history, to a particular situation (and solution).

The profits from commercial trade in large cities such as Kyoto, Osaka, and Edo exceeded the profits the shogunate obtained from agricultural production. The townspeople became richer than the *bushi* (warriors). Additionally, for about 100 years, until the mid-19th century, Japan was plagued by droughts, which led to peasant discontent and local conflicts with the authorities, and the long-suppressed social conflicts between the estates began to manifest. This ultimately led to the creation of The Satsuma–Chōshū Alliance, whose leaders (who were, importantly, mid-rank samurai, not feudal lords) overthrew the shogunate and restored the imperial rule.

But the most important thing about *shinōkōshō*, often repeated, is that it was not a social hierarchy. Categories of peasants (*nō*), artisans (*kō*), and merchants (*shō*) were in fact not subordinate to *shi* (*samurai*), but under their control, so that the typical pyramid representation of Japanese order of that time is not an adequate depiction of the social dynamics of the era (Totman, 2000).

At this point, it might be helpful to analyze and admire the bureaucratic beauty of "container society" (Hall, 1974). This container could be seen as a prison, with rigid rules and obligations, but on the other hand it was a specific social contract, where if one fulfilled their role resulting from their status, they could expect protection by the law. The division of the society into a system of statuses enabled the government to administer large groups and areas bureaucratically and impersonally (Hall, 1974). And that, in turn, was possible thanks to the complicated, yet efficient power structures in the Edo period, which operated on four basic levels (Totman, 2000), that allowed self-maintenance of the system:

- The symbolic power of the Emperor, who was politically subordinate to the shogun, but his power was intact;
- Actual, military power, exercised by the samurai at the behest of the *bushi* (warriors), who in turn acted on the command and order of the shogun. Local military officials (urban and rural) were subordinate to dignitaries who reported directly to the feudal lord residing in a given castle. Military power was based

on strict control of the actions of civilian officials in fulfilling tax obligations and respecting the regulations issued by the shogunate and local lord, *daimyō*;

- The civil power of urban officials (district chiefs) and rural officials (a family/clan chosen by the feudal lords), who were directly responsible to (and controlled by) local/regional military official

The direct power of the samurai (or even local *daimyō* in castle towns) over the Eta/Hinin groups. These groups were also subject to civil administration, although their tasks and obligations were often set directly by the military or by local elders. In the countryside, settlements occupied by the *eta* (full of dirt), *hinin* (nonhuman), and *kawata* (lowly people) were adjacent to a peasant village and were managed through the village administrators. They did not have their own self-governance. For example, in Edo period, the power over the Eta/Hinin was exercised by Danzaemon, a leader selected from among Eta/Hinin by the ruler, who came directly from one of the *kawata/hinin* families, at the command of the feudal lord. Importantly, this role grew and changed over time and encompassed increasingly different professions and occupations. By the 1720s, Danzaemon had jurisdiction over *hinin* and entertainers across much of eastern Japan. Additionally, as Herman Ooms writes: *First, in the case of the kawata in the Kinai region, which was beyond Danzaemon's jurisdiction, decisions on penalties and their execution were entrusted to the elders of the kawata community [...]" which shows that the bakufu [Japanese military government] actively and cleverly ruled the subordinated groups.* (1996, p. 332).

As it was already mentioned, *shinōkōshō* did not include all the groups existing in Japan at that time. Outside the *shinōkōshō* system stood the *kinsei kemmon*, or elite, comprising the imperial court (*kuge*), major shrines and temples, the shogun, high-ranking samurai, wealthy merchants, and literati. These groups operated outside the formal status order and often wielded influence disproportionate to their official position. Apart from the four main categories were the excluded or marginal groups:

Monks: employed in Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. They managed the temples, but also cultivated land, often combining both functions;

Day laborers: poor villagers who earned a living working away from home (*dekasegi*). Legally, they were considered villagers temporarily away from home and subject to the jurisdiction of the local elders. If their stay outside their home village was prolonged, they were obliged to work under the direction of foremen, heads of work teams, who had appropriate licenses from the *bakufu* to conduct such activities. Day laborers were engaged in various physical jobs and the transport of goods and people - they were porters, laborers, workers in sake breweries, oil presses, rice mills, etc.

Eta/Hinin (in the Edo/Tokugawa era): people whose legal and social position was defined by fluidity, restriction, segregation, and growing stigma. The position of the *eta* and *hinin* was shaped primarily by economical and bureaucratic necessity. The prejudice and stigma came later. (Ooms, 1996, Amino, 1998). Functionally, these groups carried out indispensable but stigmatized tasks, such as leatherwork, prison guarding, and executions, but also tasks difficult to measure and operationalize like: begging, monkey training, tending zen gardens, street performing etc. It can be said that *eta* and *hinin* gathered all the tasks and jobs that did not fit the mainly agricultural profile of the country (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1989, Hane, 2003). Leaders within these communities, such as the *kawaya sogashira* or *kawata toryo*, or Danzaemon (traditionally the leader of the leatherworking families and later on the official leader of Eta/Hinin communities in the Kanto area) could receive privileges like sword-bearing rights or tax-exempt land, creating internal hierarchies.

Over time, however, the labels *eta* and *hinin* became more prominent, particularly from the 1660s onward, often coinciding with heightened economic competition and state efforts to regulate "lowly occupations." Segregation was reinforced through laws that restricted clothing, footwear, and social contact with other classes. Prohibitions against "mingling" with *kawata* communities became increasingly common in the late 18th century, signaling a shift from mere occupational difference to entrenched social exclusion. The origins of these prejudices predate Tokugawa rule, with ancient and medieval references linking *eta* to notions of ritual pollution from blood or meat consumption. Some theories framed them as people of "different stock" or "different parentage," underscoring the ways status distinctions could slide toward proto-racial thinking. From a socio-anthropological perspective, Edo period rulers whose own power derived from violence and bloodshed projected notions of pollution onto these

marginal groups, effectively outsourcing symbolic impurity to maintain their own prestige. In the absence of foreign enemies during the Sakoku period (1633–1854), the Eta/Hinin may have served as an internal "other", a living reminder of the consequences of transgressing the social order.

2.2.3. Social Segregation and Status-Marking Practices

From the Edo period onward, the shogunate formally institutionalized a social group subject to entrenched discrimination. While belonging to the Eta category was both permanent and hereditary, belonging to the Hinin was neither. The new government edicts combined these two into one social category, with the intention of reducing these people to scapegoats in order to release broader social tensions. As historian Mikiso Hane notes, "Just as the rulers allowed the samurai to abuse the townspeople, they also allowed the townspeople to abuse the Eta." (Hane, 2003)

The shogunate's legislation systematically reinforced poverty and marginalization among the Eta and Hinin. Edicts were crafted to encourage animosity between them and other groups: settlements were deliberately placed near peasant villages to heighten tensions, and employment as executioners further entrenched social hostility. Even within the outcaste population, divisions were deepened as some Hinin were permitted to move into the peasantry, creating resentment from the Eta, and the two groups were eventually formalized as distinct social classes.

The relationship between eta and hinin in the Edo period remains a subject of debate among historians. John Donoghue (1977), drawing on Ninomiya, describes the Hinin as occupying a relatively higher and more fluid status position. In this interpretation, Eta status was hereditary and effectively immutable, whereas Hinin status could, under certain circumstances, be entered or exited.

The Hinin population itself was internally stratified into three categories: (1) individuals with hereditary Hinin status; (2) townspeople who entered the group following legal or moral transgressions, such as illicit sexual relations or attempted double suicide; and (3) individuals compelled into begging due to poverty, disaster, or illness. Of these, only the

latter group was considered capable of reintegration into mainstream society. (Donoghue, 1977, p. 28)

However, other scholars, including Ohnuki-Tierney (1989) and Murakoshi & Yoshino (1977), propose an inverse hierarchy, in which Hinin were positioned below Eta. As Murakoshi and Yoshino note, “During the feudal period, the socio-economic class of the nonhuman group was below that of the Burakumin, but they were not always considered an exclusive category” (1977, p. 41). Their usage of the terms hinin, eta, and Burakumin, sometimes interchangeably for the latter two, also highlights the instability and retrospective ambiguity of these classifications.

More broadly, social dynamics within outcaste groups during the Tokugawa period varied significantly across time and locality, and no single hierarchical model commands scholarly consensus. While this debate is analytically significant, a detailed reconstruction of intra-group hierarchies falls beyond the scope of this study and will not be pursued further here.

As Groemer writes (2001, p. 276): During the early years of the capital, the kawata/eta and hinin constituted two largely independent groups. In other cities, such a situation prevailed for the entire Tokugawa period.” In the city of Edo, both Eta and Hinin were subject to oversight by their local bosses, respectively Zenshichi and Matsuemon for Hinin, who in turn answered to the hereditary Eta leader in Edo, Danzaemon (Amos, 2011; Lowell, 2005). Contrary to the myth of a monolithic and ancient status system, the institutionalization of outcaste relations was a dynamic process driven by state agency. In early modern Edo, the *bakufu* leveraged contentious litigation between Eta and Hinin leaders to solidify its authority. Rather than adjudicating these cases with impartial fairness, the government systematically twisted the claims of the litigants to impose a hierarchical structure between two groups. This demonstrates that the specific “outcaste” social order was a byproduct of legal actions rather than pre-existing prejudice (Groemer, 2001).

Based in the Asakusa district, Danzaemon wielded legal and administrative authority over all Eta/Hinin in the Kanto region, which numbered some 7,720 households by the mid-18th century. His duties included mediating disputes, interpreting government

edicts, and protecting occupational monopolies. In exchange for tax exemptions, both groups were required to perform tasks for the shogunate, including executions, prisoner transport, corpse handling, and police work. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the *bakufu* also used Eta to suppress peasant uprisings.

The enforced division between Eta and Hinin extended into professional life. The Eta monopolized trades such as leatherworking, zōri and geta making, drum production, grave digging, bamboo craftwork, and tatami mat weaving. The Hinin, meanwhile, were limited to occupations including blind massage (*zatō*), acting (*mai-mai*), plastering (*kabenuri*), monkey training (*sarubiki*), stonemasonry (*ishikiri*), umbrella making (*kasanui*), ferry work (*watashi-mori*), mountain guarding (*yama mori*), dyeing (*aoya*), brush making (*fude tsukuri*), straw raincoat making (*mino tsukuri*), puppeteering (*kugutsu shi*), and brothel management (*keiseiya*) (Murakoshi & Yoshino, 1977, p. 41). However, those divisions cannot be taken for granted, as they depended very much on the regional traditions, habits, policy of the local daimyo, and even more on the year of Tokugawa era, as with time the rules and segregation were enhanced.

The Edo period saw a relatively stable overall population in Japan, but the Eta/Hinin population grew markedly during this time. Historical census estimates show that Japan's total population hovered around 26.5 million in 1726, rose slightly to 27.2 million in 1852, and reached 33.3 million by 1872. In contrast, the Eta/Hinin numbers almost doubled, from an estimated 145,000 in 1715 to approximately 280,000 in 1872 (Neary, 1989). Compared to other rural settlements, Eta communities expanded more rapidly, suggesting that this increase was not purely organic but also the result of deliberate classification policies. As Ian Neary argues, the shogunate increasingly categorized people as outcasts, thereby expanding the pool of cheap, stigmatized labor. Initially, impurity was linked only to the practice of certain "unclean" professions, and did not extend to an individual's family. However, over time particularly after the re-issuance of the ban on meat consumption and the policy of assigning Eta to separate temples, social boundaries hardened. This process drew more people into the outcaste category. Economic shifts also deepened their marginalization: with the Edo period's cessation of warfare, demand for leather armor and related goods fell, undermining the Eta's traditional economic base. Consequently, the shogunate's policies both restricted

the Eta's livelihood options and ensured a supply of inexpensive labor for specific purposes.

In rural contexts, economic necessity sometimes blurred status lines, but only temporarily. Since peasant taxation was levied on villages collectively, population losses from famine or disaster created urgent labor shortages. In such cases, *kawata* (leatherworkers usually regarded as part of Eta) were employed to cultivate fields and became known as *kawata hyakushō* ("unclean farmers"). Yet, despite performing the same agricultural work and paying taxes, they remained socially segregated, subject to distinctive restrictions on dress, behavior, and residence.

Population growth among the Eta was also shaped by social and cultural factors. Their occupations, particularly animal slaughter and leather production, provided ready access to meat, making them less vulnerable to famine than grain-dependent farmers. Furthermore, they did not adhere to the Buddhist meat prohibition, which deepened perceptions of impurity. In addition, unlike much of the Japanese population, the Eta generally did not practice common forms of birth control such as abortion or infanticide. The result was sustained population growth even during times of hardship. This pattern is reflected in regional trends; for example, in Fukuoka Prefecture, the number of Eta settlements rose from 26 in 1602 to 130 by the end of the Tokugawa era.

The social and legal discrimination faced by the Eta and Hinin was pervasive, affecting nearly every dimension of life. Although these groups held monopolies over certain trades and occasionally benefited from government protection, they were systematically dehumanized. As one person recalled, "[They] were not treated as human beings. They were not allowed to wear any footwear but had to go about barefoot. They could use only straw ropes as belts, and only straws to tie their hair. They were forbidden to leave their hamlet from sunset to sunrise. [...] They were not allowed to associate with other people. When it was necessary to see others, for some business reason, they had to get on their hands and knees before they could speak." (Hane, 2003, p. 142).

Restrictions on personal life and mobility were especially severe. Marriage between outcastes and members of other classes was strictly prohibited, with severe punishments for transgressors. Residential segregation was enforced through designated ghettos often

on the urban periphery, sometimes marked by conspicuous signs such as animal skins. Clothing rules reinforced visible differences: bright colors, patterns, and certain materials were banned; Eta were sometimes required to sew leather patches onto their clothing or wear yellow collars; umbrellas were forbidden to women. In public spaces, they had to yield the road or kneel before higher-status individuals, and curfews prevented them from entering cities after sunset (Donoghue, 1977, Ooms 1996, Teraki & Kurokawa 2019).

Economic and property restrictions further entrenched their exclusion. In some prefectures, Eta were barred from buying or selling land, and their settlements were omitted from official maps and geographic records. Even within religious life, they faced exclusion. Although many Eta belonged to the Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist sect, temples for outcastes known as *aji* were segregated spaces, and discriminatory posthumous names were given to Eta/Hinin deceased, such as "female beast" or "male beast."¹ They were either denied entry to mainstream temples, shrines or confined to designated seating areas (Teraki & Kurokawa, 2019)

Official documents reveal the contempt embedded in state policy. An edict from 1778 complained that Eta and Hinin were "behaving very badly" by dressing like farmers and visiting taverns, and called for stricter control. In 1859, the killing of a young Eta boy for attempting to enter a shrine in Asakusa was dismissed by magistrates on the grounds that "the life of one Eta is worth about one-seventh of the life of an average person." Likewise, an 1871 edict from Wakayama Prefecture imposed rules dictating where outcastes could walk, when they could be in the streets, and even what kind of footwear they could wear (Teraki, 1986; Kobayashi, 1981; as cited in Ooms, 1996).

Underlying these measures was a political strategy rooted in Confucian hierarchy, Buddhist notions of ritual pollution, and Shinto concepts of purity. By reinforcing the Eta's position as outsiders, the shogunate preserved the ideological "harmony" of the status system, pushing what did not fit outside its bounds. This discrimination intensified in the shogunate's final years as state control weakened and social unrest grew. While a small proportion of Eta (perhaps 10%) benefited materially through collaboration with local daimyō, the majority suffered deepening poverty, deteriorating

¹ https://blhri.org/old/blhri_e/Buraku_Reality/006.htm

health, and declining morale. Discrimination thus became self-perpetuating: exclusion led to hardship, which in turn reinforced prejudice and further exclusion, a cycle set in motion during the Tokugawa era and perpetuated well into modern Japan.

Within all social groups there were rigid standards and expectations, and they were noticeably more severe for Eta/Hinin. All groups had to adhere to the expectations set to them, and for instance, a samurai could not pose as a townspeople (and the other way round). Still, there were cases (not that infrequent) with individuals changing from one group to another - Japan was a heterogeneous society, as different people spoke differently, wore different clothes, practiced different customs etc. Status symbols were clearly visible, so it was immediately clear to which group a person belonged. State policies regarding Eta/Hinin stemmed from the rulers' decisions, rather than from social sentiment - especially towards the end of the Edo period, when the shogunate began to lose control over the society and decided to introduce more decisive measures in an attempt to remain in power.

2.2.4. Abolition of Statuses and Its Effects

The abolition of the status system in the early Meiji period (1868-1912) unfolded against a backdrop of profound social and economic transformation. The Meiji Restoration marked the rapid dismantling of the feudal order, the consolidation of political power, and the modernization of state institutions. Economic reforms including the creation of a national market, the development of industrial capitalism, and the introduction of land-tax reforms touched every Japanese citizen. This was also the era of large-scale migration from rural areas to the cities, as Japan's urban-industrial economy expanded and the foundations of its modern capitalist system were laid. While these changes fueled economic growth, they also created widespread turmoil: small farmers in particular suffered from the land reforms, often falling into deep poverty, which in turn heightened social tensions and resentment.

Against this turbulent background, on August 28, 1871, the Council of State issued the so-called "Emancipation Edict":

"The titles Eta and Hinin are hereby abolished. From now on, people belonging to these classes should be treated the same as ordinary people, both in terms of social criteria and occupational matters."

According to Ian Neary, the edict was driven as much by political and economic imperatives as by humanitarian considerations. Politically, it supported the creation of a unified national system by removing visible remnants of the feudal hierarchy. Economically, it aimed to establish a free labor market and abolish monopolies previously protected under the shogunate. Practical concerns also played a role and, for instance, Eta villages were often absent from official maps, making it difficult to calculate distances between towns.

As part of Japan's efforts to "enlighten" its people and present itself as a modern nation among the powers of the West, open discrimination against the Eta came to be viewed as a national embarrassment. An 1871 article explaining the edict argued that contempt for the Eta stemmed from historic prohibitions on meat consumption: those who killed and ate animals were seen as aberrant, a custom allegedly introduced by Korean immigrants. By contrast, European nations held up as models of modern civilization embraced meat-eating as healthy and scientifically justified. In this new light, continued classification of people as Eta or Hinin appeared anachronistic and untenable.

Following the abolition of the feudal class system, a new classification of citizens was introduced:

- *Kazoku*: former aristocracy
- *Shizoku*: descendants of samurai
- *Heimin*: commoners
- *Tennō*: Emperor
- *Kōzoku*: Imperial family (Totman, 2000)

In 1872, the first modern nationwide family register (*Jinshin koseki*)² was introduced, recording surnames, residence, and origin, and in some cases also religion, property, and occupation. Ostensibly a demographic tool, the register also codified the new class

² The first family registration system (*koseki*) was introduced in Japan in 645 as part of the Taika Reforms (*Taika kaishin*).

labels *Heimin*, *Shizoku*, *Kazoku* while replacing the old Eta/Hinin terms with *Shinheimin* ("new commoner"). However, because the register was public, an individual's origin remained easily traceable, and this information could be used for social exclusion. Even well into the 20th century, it served as a powerful discriminatory instrument in employment and marriage decisions. Families could (and often did) check the background of a prospective spouse and end an engagement to avoid the stigma of marrying into a former outcaste family (Hendry, 2003; Sugimoto, 2014; Bondy, 2010).

The edict's implementation also provoked significant unrest, particularly among peasants who feared that their own status would now be equivalent to that of the Eta. Between 1868 and 1878, Japan saw 548 uprisings, of which roughly 11 directly targeted the Eta. In these cases, former Eta/Hinin communities were attacked, homes burned, property destroyed, and people killed. One major incident occurred in May 1875, when 26,000 peasants in Okayama Prefecture demanded the restoration of the Eta's previous status; during the riots, around 400 homes were destroyed and 18 people killed. The following month, 100,000 peasants in Fukuoka Prefecture launched a similar uprising, resulting in the destruction of some 2,200 homes (Hane, 2003).

Even outside such extreme incidents, hostility toward them persisted. In 1874, after a devastating fire in a Nagano Buraku settlement, residents borrowed money from village authorities but were later forced to sign a humiliating statement acknowledging their past as Eta and promising to "follow the village leadership in all matters" without overstepping their position. The central government also entertained relocation schemes: at one point, Parliament debated moving all former Eta/Hinin to newly annexed territories such as Hokkaido.

Official discourse continued to reinforce prejudice. An 1880 Ministry of Justice guide described former Eta as "the lowest of all people, resembling animals." Local government documents likewise trafficked in stereotypes portraying them as immoral, lazy, criminally inclined, and resistant to authority. In 1919, an entire Buraku in Nara Prefecture was ordered to relocate because it faced the tomb of the legendary Emperor Jimmu; in another case, a village was destroyed under the pretext of criminality when in fact it stood in the way of an imperial procession. These examples, while extreme, reflected the wider atmosphere of the period. As Howell (2005, p. 108) observes:

"The land-tax reform both undermined agriculture as an occupation and, through its corollary practice of household registration, created a roster of potential victims of the draining of blood and fat. Thus, violence against Burakumin can be seen as a way to reinstitute the normal balance between occupation and livelihood by forcing outcasts back into their proper place, thereby alerting the authorities to the errors of their ways."

In short, the abolition of formal status distinctions during the Meiji era, rather than eradicating discrimination, catalyzed a broader social transformation. This process disrupted traditional livelihoods, generated deep rural poverty, and intensified the marginalization of various groups, drawing both from previous Eta/Hinin statuses and from new marginalized populations that emerged during the nineteenth century. It was these groups that would later come to be known as Burakumin (literally, "people of the settlements"). While the Tokugawa system relied on formalized, legal status distinctions, the Meiji transition reconfigured these divisions, transforming the ways in which they were articulated and justified. Ultimately, the formal abolition of status categories marked a significant legal shift, but it did not result in the disappearance of prejudice. Instead, institutionalized distinctions were internalized and continued to operate in less visible, yet socially persistent and exclusionary forms.

2.2.5. The Meiji era, Moral Ideals, and emergence of Burakumin

The Meiji era (1868-1912) was not only a political revolution but also a sweeping moral and cultural project. At its heart was the conviction that all citizens should be "enlightened" and made equal under a modern, centralized state. This vision was shaped by several dominant political slogans and doctrines of the era. The concept of *bunmei kaika* ("civilization and enlightenment") encouraged rapid Westernization in every sphere of life, while *fukoku kyōhei* ("Enrich the Country, Strengthen the Armed Forces") stressed economic growth in the service of national power. The notion of *kazoku kokka* ("Family State"), articulated by thinkers like Goh Dagoro, placed the traditional family hierarchy at the center of Japan's moral structure, binding society together through clearly defined obligations. A further guiding principle was the phrase *wakon yōsai* ("Japanese spirit, Western science"), which subordinated all aspects of life from education and science to public morals to the blending of Western technical expertise with a supposedly neverchanging Japanese essence.

The intellectual climate of early Meiji reinforced these ideas. As historian John W. Hall noted, individuals were encouraged to pursue personal aspirations, but only within the framework of a state whose interests were paramount, and traditional customs would be abandoned in favor of new, Western-inspired patterns. Thinkers such as Amane Nishi broadened the meaning of morality beyond legal or philosophical theory, linking it to aesthetics: good people were associated with justice and beauty, while bad people were linked to injustice and ugliness, and these standards were meant to guide not just art, but everyday life. In this way, the civilizing mission of the state was moral as well as institutional, aimed at reshaping personal behavior in line with modern ideals.

Importantly, this modernization drive coincided with profound economic transformation. Industrialization, new infrastructure, and urban growth drew millions from the countryside to the cities. This was the formative moment of Japanese capitalism, but it also generated deep turmoil. Land reforms disrupted traditional agriculture, causing severe hardship for smallholders. Many tenant farmers faced crushing taxes and debt, while rural communities saw traditional safety nets erode. For former Eta and Hinin, who had relied on shogunate monopolies in leatherwork, bamboo goods, and animal slaughter, the end of feudal protections was disastrous. These trades were opened to free-market competition, and larger companies often backed by wealthy investors or foreign capital quickly took control. Without their former monopolies, many people were driven into low-paid, hazardous jobs or forced back into farming on marginal, flood-prone land.

Urban life offered little relief. As Taira observed (1969, p. 157): *"After the Meiji government emancipated all classes of people from the feudal restrictions, the traditional poor-quarters were used by the poor in general, regardless of their social origins. The sheer size of these ghettos was astonishing. The largest of the three, Yotsuya Samegabashi, harbored more than a thousand households, or nearly 5,000 persons. Even in the smallest one, Shiba Shin'ami-cho, there were more than 500 households or more than 3,000 persons."* In cities, they clustered in rapidly growing settlements such as Bancho in Kobe, whose population increased from 388 in 1867 to 4,452 by 1915. These neighborhoods were usually located near slaughterhouses,

garbage dumps, crematoria, infectious disease hospitals, or prisons areas marked by neglect and lacking basic infrastructure.

Employment options were few and degrading: street cleaning, garbage collection, casual construction work, or the most dangerous factory jobs. Discrimination meant that hiding their origins was difficult, often resulting in dismissal. In some cases, Burakumin were segregated even at work, housed in separate dormitories. A survey of Kyoto in 1886 found that out of 1,100 Buraku households, 750 were living on the edge of poverty, 450 were selling off possessions to survive, and 350 had nothing left to sell, relying solely on neighbors' charity. Desperation sometimes drove families to sell their daughters into prostitution.

By the 1930s, the living conditions in these urban Buraku were appalling: in Kyoto, 90% of homes were unfit for habitation, up to 60% lacked sunlight or sanitation, and infant mortality reached 31%. The occupational breakdown reflected their marginalization: 50% worked in agriculture, 12% as peddlers or small shopkeepers, 15% as temporary laborers, 8% in crafts, and 13% in various other low-status jobs. In coal-mining areas such as Tagawa-gun in Fukuoka, Burakumin communities expanded rapidly from 10% of the population in 1852 to 40% by the mid-20th century. Nationally, the number of Buraku was recorded at 5,294 in 1919 and 5,368 in 1935, a testament to the persistence of social segregation despite the promises of equality at the dawn of the Meiji era (Suginohara, 2002, Hane, 2003, Watanabe 1975).

Japan was often portrayed as a middle-class, homogeneous society, but historical and contemporary sociological research prove otherwise and focus on the inherent heterogeneity, not only in terms of culture and stratification, but also ethnicity. Robert Bellah and Chie Nakane scholarship might offer useful analytical tools to explain how group loyalty, vertical hierarchies, and situational membership shaped Japanese society from the Edo period to the present. The Edo status system (*mibunsei*) divided people into rigid categories (samurai, peasants, artisans, merchants), while leaving outside many other groups like aristocracy, monks, daily laborers and *eta* and *hinin*. Those two last groups were subject to increasing segregation and social dishonor, with their numbers growing as shogunate political decisions formed the "outcastes." The 1871 Emancipation Edict abolished formal statuses, but discrimination persisted, reinforced

by family registers and social prejudice. The Meiji Restoration's modernization policies dismantled old monopolies, worsening poverty and forcing many into newly emerging urban ghettos, creating a new group called Burakumin.

2.3. Scholarship on Burakumin and their origins³

Burakumin (Japanese: 部落民, literally: people from the settlement) are a Japanese social minority group who are ethnically, culturally, and linguistically indistinguishable from other inhabitants of Japan. For this reason, they are often referred to as the "invisible minority". However, to this day, they remain subject to discrimination. The historical origins and continuity between present-day and pre-modern communities are marked by a certain degree of ambiguity.

In this dissertation, building on previous research (Amos, 2019; Kobayakawa, 2021; Teraki & Kurokawa, 2019), I assume that Burakumin, as a social group, are a product of Japanese modernity and the modernization discourse. In this sense, their identity can be considered an "invented tradition," as defined by Hobsbawm and Ranger. This tradition, while undeniably real in its consequences, has a constructed relationship between its signifier and signified. However, this modern Burakumin category was profoundly influenced by the oppressive political system of the Tokugawa period, which, in a bid to stabilize the country's political unity, inspired and supported internal conflicts and social hierarchies.

Contrary to Tsukada (2012), Donoghue (1977, p. 6): "In this volume, Burakumin is used to refer to the class of people previously called eta, etori, eta-hinin, and hinin, among others.", Murakoshi & Yoshino (1977, p. 18): "Burakumin were known as Eta, written with two Chinese characters translated 'much filth'", or June Gordon (2008, p. 3): "Burakumin has become the accepted term for persons legally designated during the Tokugawa period (1603-1867) as efa (impure), persons who were placed outside of the four-tiered traditional hierarchy of samurai (warriors), farmers, artisans, and merchants that had developed over hundreds of years in the settling of Japan", I understand Burakumin as a modern concept.

³ In this part contents from the author's unpublished bachelor's thesis were used, and can be found in the reference list under Korzeniowska (2008).

The term Burakumin itself is distinct from historical terms used during the Tokugawa period like *eta* ("full of dirt") or *hinin* ("nonhuman"). Coined in the twentieth century, it now serves as an umbrella term for most topics related to Burakumin and Dōwa (a program of social subsidies aimed at equalizing the Burakumin situation with the rest of the society). Although among older generation researchers there were the tendency terms Eta, Hinin and Burakumin interchangeably, this approach failed to acknowledge the multi-layered nature of these phenomena. Following more recent studies (Neary, 2021; Muller, 2025, Amos, 2019) I believe that these concepts do not define the same people and are built on different philosophical grounds, and there is not enough data to support such interchangeable use.

A general view among researchers is that discrimination against the Burakumin was regarded in Japan as a taboo⁴, or at least a sensitive topic, as noted by Weiner (2005). The mechanisms of social silence have significantly influenced how this topic has been discussed, both by the general public and within the academic community. Although contemporary discrimination is more socio-economic in nature, Burakumin remain victims of prejudices and stereotypes rooted in the deep past. These prejudices stem mainly from their historical association with jobs considered "unclean" or "contaminated" in pre-modern times. These professions included, among others and not exclusively, animal slaughter, tanning, armor and saddle making, falconry, guarding prisoners, conducting executions, and grave-digging. Social exclusion was further cemented by a negative attachment to the Buddhist precept of not taking life and reinforced by Shintoist concepts of taboo (*imi*) and contamination (*kegare*), which were associated with disease, death, menstruation, blood, and birth. Interestingly, while both Buddhism and Shinto employed effective purification rituals, only these outcaste groups were subject to sanctioned discrimination in early modern Japan.

The issue of naming, social position, and professions performed during the Tokugawa period is significant because, based on collected materials, it is difficult to conclude that there was one universal model for the formation of Burakumin settlements. The largest

⁴Even during my own personal discussions both with Polish researchers of Japanese culture, and my Japanese friends about my idea on this thesis was commented: "But no one will talk to you about this topic."

Buraku settlements, districts, and villages inhabited by Burakumin were located in the present-day prefectures of Osaka, Kyoto, Hyogo, Fukuoka, Hiroshima, and Tokyo, which were and remain the cultural centers of Japan. In contrast, Okinawa and Hokkaido, which were annexed to Japan in the 19th century, have no such settlements, and social awareness of the Burakumin issue is relatively low (Lowell, 2005; Muller, 2025; Geiger, 2011). As Akira Kobayakawa (2021) points out, it is also crucial to note that new Buraku were created after the formal end of discrimination in 1871 through the Emancipation Edict, known as *kaihō-rei* (解放令) or *senshō-haishi-rei*. From that moment, the government stopped using the terms *eta* and *hinin* and "dismantled connections between statuses and occupations or social duties." Today, there are about 4,442 officially recognized Buraku communities⁵, and although this number is an estimation, only about one-third of them have roots reaching back to the Tokugawa period.

Furthermore, according to many scholars, including Akira Kobayakawa, no tasks or professions in Japanese history were performed exclusively by historical groups of *eta* and *hinin*. To complicate this history, David L. Howell introduced an important distinction between occupation and livelihood. For him, in the Tokugawa era: *"economic relations were given social expression through the status system, then subsumed within it. For example, although a compelling economic imperative hunger drove the original gomune into the streets to sing and dance for a few coppers, once the gomune were imbued with an identity as such and placed under the authority of outcastes, the strictly economic nature of their activities was thoroughly subordinated to their social identity as members of a particular status group. Their livelihoods as performers, in other words, could be comprehended only in the context of the status system."* (Howell, 2005, p. 45) This distinction is crucial because in the Tokugawa period, a person's identity was primarily defined by their ascribed social status, and their occupation was understood as an economic obligation to the country and its rulers. Livelihood, on the other hand, referred to the tasks and jobs taken to support daily life, which were often not directly connected to one's status. For instance, a samurai had their obligatory administrative tasks but might also cultivate land to make ends meet. In

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<http://www.bll.gr.jp/en/index.html#:~:text=According%20to%20a%201993%20government,with%20over%203%20million%20population>

the same way, merchants had governmental obligations but could engage in other economic activities to build their wealth.

Crucially, as Herman Ooms (1996) highlights, in the Tokugawa period, *kawata/eta* individuals did not necessarily self-identify as polluted or inherently inferior. Instead, in moments of conflict or dispute, they would often appeal to the fact that they were "the same as their neighbors," emphasizing their specific social obligations and duties, and arguing that performing these tasks did not make them "bad people." This indicates a different social logic of identity and stigma compared to later periods.

This distinction became even more interesting with the social and economic changes of the Meiji era, when the separation of occupation and status opened the market to anyone who wished to participate. New capitalist entities emerged and took over the leather and shoe markets, which had previously been typical monopolies of the *eta* and *kawata*. Notably, this process was not followed by the stigmatization of these new businesses or their owners. Conversely, during the Meiji and Taishō periods, the government needed a new workforce for the military and coal industries. People, driven by economic coercion, migrated and settled in nearby areas, started being called Burakumin, and their settlements became Buraku. They thus gained a new social identity without any prior ties to the *eta* or *hinin* statuses. What is more, if an older settlement did exist, newcomers were positioned in the local hierarchy lower than the *eta* and *hinin* descendants, creating a visible distinction between the two groups in terms of class, wealth, and power. This phenomenon of a new, two-tiered hierarchy was well-described by Wagatsuma and DeVos in the 1960s.

It is also important to recognize that in some parts of Japan, the historical "problem" of Burakumin was largely unknown, and people engaged in activities like dealing with carcasses, dead bodies, or crafting armors were not uniformly prosecuted or stigmatized across the archipelago. There were also several documented occasions when individuals from the "regular" population entered *eta* or *hinin* status groups due to certain economic profits, further demonstrating the complexity and fluidity of these historical categories beyond simple ascription.

There are several approaches toward historical and social origins of the Burakumin among researchers that should be taken into consideration in this Chapter. The scholarship on the Burakumin offers various and sometimes mutually exclusive definitions, using subjective, objective, and structural criteria. Burakumin are also called a minority group, a social minority (Weiner, 2005), or even a race in a non-racial society (Debito Arudou, 2015; Siddle, 2011), though this issue has not been resolved unequivocally by researchers.

Some researchers, like Sugimoto, describe them as descendants of outcaste groups from Japanese history, constituting a "fundamentally inferior class" whose ancestors were below ordinary citizens during the feudal period. Sugimoto argues that the "wide range of nasty discriminatory practices against Burakumin reflect an invisible caste system in Japanese society" (Sugimoto, 2014). This perspective is shared by others who view Burakumin discrimination as being caste-like (Gordon, 2017; De Vos, Wagatsuma, 1964; Donoghue, 1977).

Herman Ooms also sees a caste-like quality but connects it to racial theories. He notes that while Burakumin are indistinguishable from other Japanese, "explicitly racial theories, which differentiate, and racist theories, which discriminate, have developed since the Tokugawa period to explain the origin of the kawata in order to justify discriminatory practices against them" (Ooms, 1996, p. 246). This is in line with Gerald Berreman's observation that ~~"all systems of birth-ascribed stratification seem to include a claim that the social distinctions are reflected in biological (i.e. 'racial') differences"~~. "all systems of birth-ascribed stratification seem to include a claim that the social distinctions are reflected in biological (i.e., "racial") differences revealed in physical make-up or appearance. This is true in Japan, where no actual physical differences can be detected between the pariah Burakumin and other Japanese;" (Berreman, 1981, p. 14)

In the following section, I present three distinct approaches to the Burakumin origin debate developed by Japanese historians and two contemporary researchers: Okiura Kazuteru associated with the Buraku Liberation League and the Japan Socialist Party; Hatanaka Toshiyuki, linked to the Japan Communist Party; Timothy D. Amos, and Ian

Neary. Together, these perspectives illustrate the diversity of interpretations regarding the origins and persistence of Buraku discrimination.

According to Okiura (as cited by Neary, 2003), in the 1970s activists of the Buraku Liberation League adopted the so-called “early modern political origins theory” (*kinsei seiji kigenron*). This approach framed the Burakumin primarily as a group historically excluded from the sphere of productive labor, which in turn led to their marginalization within civil society. In this view, their position has also had broader structural consequences, including fragmenting the working class and reinforcing divisions within the labor market. Okiura emphasizes that contemporary discrimination is rooted less in economic structures than in culturally embedded patterns that operate on both conscious and unconscious levels. Importantly, he rejects explanations that locate the origins of discrimination in occupation or religion, instead highlighting the role of Tokugawa state policies in producing and institutionalizing social divisions.

By the 1980s, however, this interpretation began to compete with what became known as the “medieval social origins theory,” which shifted the focus further back in time. As noted by Ian Neary (2003), this perspective gained traction partly because of its political implications: if discrimination was historically produced by ruling elites, it could, at least in principle, be addressed through governmental policy interventions. At the same time, scholars such as Okiura argued that discrimination cannot be understood solely as a top-down imposition. Rather, it gradually acquired moral and intellectual legitimacy, supported, in part, by religious institutions, which helped embed it within everyday social practices. In this sense, discrimination became difficult to locate clearly as either imposed by the state or generated within local communities, as both dimensions were mutually reinforcing.

A contrasting position is offered by Hatanaka Toshiyuki, who approaches the Burakumin issue primarily as a modern social problem rather than a historically continuous one. For Hatanaka, it is neither necessary nor analytically useful to position the discussion exclusively in premodern history. Instead, he argues that Buraku discrimination should be understood as a form of status inequality produced within the structures of modern Japanese society, particularly under the imperial system and within the context of capitalism. While acknowledging that earlier status groups existed, he

emphasizes that modern discrimination differs qualitatively from its early modern forms, and that would be a mistake "to assume an automatic link between the social function of a pariah community in two distinct epochs even if a 'blood link' can be proved" (Hatanaka, 1998; as cited in Neary, 2003, 281). Crucially, he also notes that, unlike categories such as gender or disability, Burakumin status lacks a stable or universally applicable objective marker, making it highly dependent on specific social contexts. From this perspective, the persistence of discrimination after World War II reflects not historical continuity per se, but the reproduction of inequality within changing social and economic structures.

A different approach is offered by Timothy D. Amos (2011) who puts forward some interesting theses about Burakumin that are worth considering and analyzing. It also draws attention to aspects that are eluded by other researchers: the Burakumin as a social group are similar in some respects to the class, in some respects they are also similar to the caste, but they do not meet all the conditions necessary to fully belong to any of these categories. They are therefore something third. According to him Burakumin is not so much a historically appropriate term, but a "great narrative", which is a term encompassing all groups that have been marginalized and/or discriminated against in Japan for various reasons and at different times.

Amos further traces the roots of modern discrimination to the premodern system of *mibun* (status), in which individuals belonged to locally organized status groups defined by specific rights and obligations. These groups, such as *kawata* or *eta*, were not part of a single unified national structure, but rather existed as regionally differentiated formations. Their social roles, including occupational specializations such as leatherwork or execution duties, shaped both their relationship to authorities and their position within local communities. In this context, status was less about individual activity and more about collective identity and inherited roles. It is also important to note that the similar view, already presented in this thesis, was also shared by David L. Howell (2005).

From this perspective, the emergence of the term *buraku* in the late Meiji period reflects broader transformations in how social difference was conceptualized and categorized. Amos emphasizes that earlier terms of exclusion were based either on spatial separation (outcast communities located in specific places) or temporal and moral distinctions

(states of inherent inferiority): *“Historical words like kawaramono as well as modern terms like buraku, for example, reflect a state of outcasteness which lays primary emphasis on a spatial dimension: outcastes are people who reside in a particular outcaste place requiring the construction of a physical cordon sanitaire. Abnormality however, can also be expressed through a lens that emphasizes temporality. Old words like eta, hinin, and senmin all reflect this other dimension of outcasteness. They refer to people who are in a particular state of outcasteness because of a supposed inferior quality of their humanity and who therefore need to be placed in a kind of social lock-down or solitary confinement (reclusion solitaire).”* (Amos, 2011, pp.71-2). This by contrast, reflects a shift toward new ways of identifying and managing difference within an increasingly standardized social order.

Building on this, it can be argued that the position of the Burakumin also needs to be understood in relation to broader processes of social boundary-making. Rather than being a fixed remnant of the past, the category emerges through changing historical conditions in which societies define themselves against internal “others.” In postwar Japan in particular, the growing emphasis on social homogeneity and national unity coincided with the marginalization of groups that did not fit this ideal, including the Burakumin, but also ethnic minorities, the poor, and people with disabilities.

These processes were further reinforced by the development of a new capitalist structure of Japanese society and a new class order that was introduced after the Second World War. With the dynamic shift from ideology of status-occupation, to individual effort to support livelihood on a free market, the government's push towards modern civilized society had unexpected results for the less lucky ones, including Burakumin: *“freelance ideologues were only too happy to offer guidance in the form of moral suasion and the denunciation of barbarism, but ultimately civilization was a matter of individual agency. The individual bore responsibility for being civilized or not because of the modern emphasis on livelihood. The poor were barbarous because they did not have the ambition or ability to embrace a productive livelihood and the markers of civilization that went along with it. Yet, barbarism in fact transcended livelihood in ways that the Meiji regime was often unwilling to face head-on. The poor were told that their customs made them barbarous, when in fact it was their poverty that placed them into that category.”* (Howell, 2005, pp. 170-171). As a result, modern Japanese society became increasingly structured around a divide between those who successfully integrated into

the new economic order and those who did not, a division that has had lasting consequences for the Burakumin and other marginalized groups.

2.3.1. Who are Burakumin today?

Although this significant minority, totaling 1 to 3 million people in Japan (Sugimoto, 2021; Kobayakawa, 2021; Buraku Liberation League, 1993⁶), has been researched by many both Western and Japanese scholars, their position in Japanese society remains complex and often misunderstood. Burakumin are often regarded as the poorest group in Japanese society, holding low-wage and low-prestige jobs, and living in ghetto-like areas (Neary, 2010; Weiner, 2005). However, this image is too simple and raises more questions than it answers.

Since Japan has not published updated official nationwide Burakumin statistics in more than 30 years (Sugimoto, 2021), in order to establish the most current numbers of Burakumin population today, in January 2024 I contacted the The Buraku Liberation and Human Rights Research Institute (BLHRRI) by email looking for more accurate data. The answer I was given is quoted in English, and in the original Japanese version below:

“We do not hold the data you requested. We apologise for not being able to meet your expectations. Please note that the background to the Dowa Measures Programme and an overview of the ‘Survey on the Actual Conditions of Dowa Districts’ conducted in 1993 are available at the link below. No nationwide surveys targeting Buraku communities have been conducted since 1993.

https://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/jinken/sankosiryu/1322791.htm

Furthermore, in December 2016, the ‘Act on the Promotion of the Elimination of Discrimination against Buraku Communities’ came into force, with the aim of eliminating the discrimination against Buraku communities that persists to this day. Based on this Act, a nationwide ‘Survey on the Actual State of Discrimination against Buraku Communities’ was conducted, and the following were identified:

- ① *Cases of discrimination identified by the Ministry of Justice’s human rights protection agencies,*
- ② *Cases of discrimination identified by local authorities and other bodies,*

⁶<http://www.bl.gr.jp/en/index.html#:~:text=According%20to%20a%201993%20government,with%20over%203%20million%20population>

③ *The actual state of discrimination against Buraku communities on the internet,*

④ *Public awareness among the general population.*

The results of this survey are available at the link below.

*https://www.moj.go.jp/JINKEN/jinken04_00127.html*⁷

This information suggests that what the researchers have, in terms of data, are mostly estimations that differ greatly in numbers. Sugimoto writes that: *“The survey focused upon localities which the government had designated as entitled to benefit from public projects aimed at the elimination of discrimination. There were at least 1,000 localities whose status was the subject of dispute between the government and community groups. Taking these factors into consideration, some researchers have gone as far as to claim that the number of communities amounted to 6,000 and that of burakumin 3 million.”* (2021, p. 205). What is more, in accordance with the guidelines of Article 6 of the 2016 Law, Japanese state authorities have moved away from Buraku censuses to monitoring specific cases of discrimination (差別事例 - *sabetsu jirei*) and social awareness surveys (意識調査 - *ishiki chōsa*). The Japanese administration has been obligated to exercise "special caution" when collecting data. The official government position is that the improperly maintained statistics can "generate new discrimination". This explains why researchers rely on estimates rather than censuses. The above might also suggest that the Japanese government fears that creating an official list of people with Buraku ancestry (even for aid purposes) would become a ready-made "catalog" for detective firms checking family origins before marriage⁸. To avoid those issues, in my dissertation, I focus on discursive and qualitative mechanisms, which is consistent with the current methodology of Japanese experts.

⁷ “リクエストいただいた内容のデータは、当研究所でも持ち合わせておりません。ご期待にそえず申し訳ございません。なお、同和対策事業の経緯と、1993年に実施された「同和地区実態把握等調査」の概略については、下記に掲載されています。1993年以降は、部落を対象にした、全国規模の実態調査は実施されていません。

https://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/jinken/sankosiryō/1322791.htm

また、2016年12月に、今日も残る部落差別の解消を目的に、「部落差別の解消の推進に関する法律」が施行されました。本法にもとづき、全国規模の「部落差別の実態に係る調査」が実施され、①法務省の人権擁護機関が把握する差別事例、②地方公共団体等が把握する差別事例、③インターネット上の部落差別の実態、④一般国民に対する意識状況が把握されました。

それらの結果については、下記に掲載してあります。

https://www.moj.go.jp/JINKEN/jinken04_00127.html

⁸ <https://www.moj.go.jp/content/001322291.pdf>

2.3.2. Ascribed vs. Achieved Status

The question of whether Burakumin status is ascribed (based on birth) or achieved (based on individual effort) is central to understanding the complexities of the issue. As Robert K. Merton notes, identity movements are often based on "ascribed rather than acquired statuses and identities, with eligibility for inclusion being in terms of who you are rather than what you are" (Merton, 1972, p. 11). This was similar for Eta/Hinin groups in pre-modern times. For the Burakumin, both factors appear to be at play simultaneously. One can be identified as Burakumin by others, and also possess a specific family tradition and background.

A significant factor in Burakumin studies is "passing," which involves both invisibility of Burakumin stigma and escaping Burakumin identity and integrating with the general society. It is, however, very difficult to assess the number of people who have chosen to pass, as research only accounts for people who identify as Burakumin, and the act of passing assumes one is leaving their Burakumin identity behind (Neary, 2003).

The concept of a person's identity being defined by their group membership is also explored by Gerald Berreman, who contrasts the "hidden injuries of class" with the "all-too-apparent injuries of caste and race". He argues that low-status individuals in a class system might blame their own failure to achieve high status, but those in a caste system commonly blame the evaluation put upon them by others "by virtue of their birth". They resent and resist what they regard as "unjust and iniquitous consequences of birth" (Barreman, 1979, p. 246). This sheds light on the psychological burden of a stigmatized identity.

A crucial development in the 20th century was the influence of European thought, particularly socialism and Christianity, which profoundly inspired Burakumin leaders to unite and forge a new self and a new collective identity. This transformation is vividly visible in the "Suiheisha Declaration" from 1922, a powerful declaration that moved beyond individualistic shame to collective pride and demands for recognition. This manifesto, rooted in modern Western concepts of human rights and equality, provided a philosophical bedrock for the emancipation movement, allowing Burakumin to articulate their grievances and aspirations within a universal framework, thus actively

reshaping their identity as a unified group fighting for justice rather than merely being a dispersed collection of stigmatized individuals. This external intellectual influence played a pivotal role in the "invention" of a modern Burakumin identity that could mobilize and advocate for change.

2.3.3. Social invisibility

The central paradox of the Burakumin issue is that they are invisible, yet they are simultaneously hypervisible, standing out the more we want to hide them. The historical construction of their identity as an "invisible minority" is constantly contradicted by the fact that they are still recognized and subjected to discrimination in various social situations, such as marriage, work, and education. No one can explicitly recognize them, yet almost everyone can. They are said to have no distinctive features or characteristics, yet it is easy to find strongly emotionally charged descriptions and labeling that mark their difference.

It seems that the boundaries between Burakumin and non-Burakumin are increasingly blurred. Since the Burakumin category is treated as a social construct, and not an ethnic or racial issue, it should be understood and treated within the context of modern Japanese society. As the data suggests, one does not have to have Burakumin background - it is enough to live in Buraku to be recognized as a Burakumin. The performative act of recognition by other people, requires a "third-party certification of a social status that has no objective existence outside the particular social situation" (Hatanaka, 1998, as cited in: Neary, 2003, p. 285). This is why, in contrast to issues such as disability or ethnicity, there is no objective criterion that transcends this social structure. This has led some to claim that a person can reject this identity, using something called by Hatanaka "positive rejection": *"I am not a burakumin if I say I am not. I might even recognize that my father was a burakumin but claim that I am not"*. (Hatanaka, 1998, as cited in: Neary, 2003, p. 285). This social ambiguity makes the issue of Burakumin identity a difficult one.

Figure 1.

Table 7.6 Five types of *buraku* communities

	Residence	Genealogy	Occupation
(1) Traditional	+	+	+
(2) Residential and genealogical	+	+	-
(3) Residential	+	-	-
(4) Occupational	-	+	+
(5) Dispersed	-	+	-

Source: Based on Noguchi 2000, pp. 106–17, and adapted from Aoki 2009, p. 193. A few possible analytical types are not listed here because they are nonexistent in empirical reality.

Source: Sugimoto, Y. (2014). *An introduction to Japanese society*. Cambridge University Press. p. 207.

A particularly strong example of how this invisibility hypervisibility works is a story about a man trying to pass as mainstream Japanese. It is also a story about how intersectionality theory by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) works. Crenshaw said that different forms of discrimination and disadvantages overlap and cumulate creating a more difficult daily life environment for people and groups experiencing this phenomenon. Although she was referring mostly to her, and not only her, experience as a black woman in the USA, the theory of intersectionality might be a useful theoretical tool to understand the difficulties and challenges that Burakumin experienced in modern Japan.

The story is of a Buraku man trying to pass into mainstream society. While entering a hotel, his behaviour is a bit insecure, he feels awkward, and all the mistakes he makes, he attributes to being a Burakumin. And what is more, his internalized outsider gaze tells him that everyone understands and immediately recognizes that his behaviour comes from being a Burakumin, and thus he will be soon recognized as one (Bondy, 2010). The man's attempt to pass is complicated by the intersection of his Burakumin identity and his low socioeconomic status. His poverty denied him access to the social spaces where he could have learned the unwritten rules of etiquette, leading to social awkwardness. Crucially, he did not interpret this awkwardness as a consequence of his

low income. Instead, his deep-seated fear of being identified as Burakumin leads him to perceive these social missteps as telltale signs of his stigmatized identity, demonstrating how poverty becomes a performative marker of an unrelated social stigma. The lack of cultural fluency stemming from poverty is not perceived as a class issue, but as a Burakumin trait, easy to recognize, and this story is a powerful example of how intersectional stigma operates.

Presently, there is no convincing evidence that all the inhabitants of Buraku are actually people who identify as Burakumin. According to research by the Buraku Liberation League, the percentage of inhabitants who considered themselves Burakumin in traditionally inhabited districts declined from 71.9% in 1971 to 41.4% in 1993 (Weiner, 2005). This is partly because non-Burakumin move to these areas when they are forced to change their place of residence for economic reasons, such as economic crises, lower wages, and an unstable employment market. There has also been a notable movement of Burakumin outside their communities. But it is important to note that the Buraku itself was a visible social mark. Even if a person was "invisible", the Buraku was, not only in a visual sense of a separated or poorer district, but also in a sense of smell. Slaughterhouses, tanneries, leather factories all can be recognized by a distinctive olfactory sensations (Muller, 2025).

Finally, there is overall reputation to consider - a survey taken in Sakai City in 2015 produced this result: "42.3 per cent of respondents answered that they would avoid the Dōwa district when choosing a home. Of those answering that they would avoid the Dōwa district, a 37.7 percent plurality gave their reasoning as "Because the area has a scary image." (Mueller, 2025).

2.3.4. Secrecy and Silence Surrounding Burakumin Status

The social position and status of Burakumin in Japanese society are defined by a complex web of social relations with mainstream Japanese. Despite claims that the Burakumin issue is a remnant of the past, data and individual experiences suggest a more complex reality: "The absence of physical properties to distinguish them from "majority" Japanese (hence "invisible" differences) and the construction of a racial theory (hence a different "race") have combined to produce a particular kind of

intra-race racism, one based exclusively on descent. Genealogies, however, are known only to those who literally know the record. Without that knowledge, discrimination against Burakumin would be impossible. This is where the state plays a crucial role." (Ooms, 1996, p. 246) In this passage Ooms focuses on racism as a main driver of the discrimination. Although this perspective has been criticized by other authors, like David L. Howell, Ooms is right about the state-driven actions that have enabled the development of Burakumin discrimination. In effect, in contrast to issues such as disability or ethnicity, there is no objective criterion that transcends this social structure. To be a Burakumin, one needs to be somehow recognized as such by other people.

Research from various sources, including a 2015 Sakai City human rights survey, confirms that Burakumin continue to be subject to discrimination and prejudice. Over 60% of respondents in the survey agreed that "in order to eliminate Buraku discrimination, it is better to be quiet about it." (Mueller 2025) The survey also raised concerns that some respondents learned about Buraku discrimination through informal routes such as family members or the internet, through which "false knowledge based on discrimination or prejudice may be conveyed." (Mueller 2025) This demonstrates how silence, shame, rumor, and secrecy have become common mechanisms for boundary-making and maintenance. Shame and silence are emotional and discursive strategies that appear repeatedly in the documents and statements of both Burakumin and non-Burakumin. For Burakumin, silence about their origins might be a useful tool, as it gives them the power to share this information with chosen people, but they also might be afraid of being exposed without their consent. On the other hand, being open about one's Buraku origin is a way of letting society know upfront, but it also exposes individuals to the risk of open rejection. It is here that one can observe the striking, yet very elusive, distinction between words and actions that are socially appropriate and inappropriate in the context of Burakumin. One does not have to speak directly; one simply needs to "read the air" to grasp this subtle, yet powerful, boundary.

While legal discrimination was abolished in the Meiji era, Burakumin continued to face hardship, primarily regarding marriage, education, and the military. The disgrace associated with accepting someone from a Buraku family was the main reason for rejecting a partner. Such a marriage essentially meant joining the Burakumin, and what's more, this stigma extended not just to the spouse but to their entire family. The

fear of ostracism, branding, and rumors often caused families to try to break up such relationships, sometimes with catastrophic consequences, including double suicides. People often tried to hide their origins, and even after many years of marriage, this hidden identity could lead to divorce. A prominent case from the 1930s involved a husband who had hidden his roots from his wife and was sentenced to a year in prison. This sparked massive protests from the Burakumin community, and as a result, the man was freed. Another story, cited by Mikiso Hane, tells of a young postal worker. When she decided to marry a Burakumin, her boss, at her father's request, told her: "If you, as an employee of this office, marry someone like that, it will bring shame to this post office. So give up on this idea." (Hane, 2003)

The tension between Burakumin and non-Burakumin was so high that people who married a Burakumin often either migrated to the Buraku with their partner or entirely cut ties with family members who did not accept the marriage, leaving them isolated. This phenomenon is deeply connected to the traditional Japanese concept of *ie* (family), a patriarchal system that bound individuals with inalienable ties and a series of social obligations. Historically, an individual without the support of the *ie*, who renounced it voluntarily or under duress, became an outcast, deprived of a point of reference (Bellah, 2003). Thus, fleeing a Buraku and attempting to "pass" into mainstream society meant severing all contact with one's family.

This is also a recurring theme in the novels that deal with the fate of the Burakumin. The paralyzing fear of being recognized and the anxiety of an unexpected encounter with old acquaintances is one of the main threads in novels like Shimazaki Toson's *The Broken Commandment* and Summi Sue's *River with No Bridge*, which depict the constant struggle for survival for those attempting to conceal their Burakumin identity. This deeply personal and psychological dimension of managing a stigmatized identity highlights the pervasive nature of symbolic boundaries beyond formal legal frameworks.

The political and social dimensions of this issue are further illustrated by the famous case of Ishikawa Kazuo, accused of murdering a teenager in 1963. Ishikawa became a typical scapegoat. A Burakumin without permanent employment or a reliable alibi, he was arrested on charges of theft, which were later changed to murder. Ishikawa did not

admit his guilt for a month but was eventually forced to do so. Despite obvious errors in the investigation and human rights violations during the trial, the man was sentenced to death, later commuted to life imprisonment. Prolonged protests by BLL members and human rights defenders led to a retrial in the 1990s and Ishikawa's release. In its demands, the BLL proposed changes to the legislation known as the "Fundamental Rights and the Buraku Problem," which were intended to prevent further discrimination. The demands include forcing the government to take organized and official action on behalf of the Buraku, prohibiting discriminatory practices, and creating a council responsible for prosecuting those practices. However, both the government and two political parties, namely the Liberal Democratic Party and the Japanese Communist Party, considered this idea misguided. Legislative changes will not improve the situation, and as government representatives said, "To root out discrimination it is necessary to reform the psychology that gives birth to it. This can only be done by enlightenment. Not only can it not be done by punishment ...punishment will drive discriminatory consciousness underground and harden it." (Upham, 1993, p. 331)

The level of social awareness of this issue varies significantly depending on the many variables including region and age. As for the Ministry of Justice report of 2018 the awareness of Buraku case is: *"as many as 82.3% responded that they "know the issue," and for the question on what occasion a respondent first got to know the issue, common responses were "learned in a class at school" (22.9%) and "heard from a family member (grandparents, parents, siblings, etc.)" (19.6%). The percentage of those who responded that they "learned in a class at school" was 37.3% among respondents aged between 18 and 29, 39.1% among respondents in their 30s, 35.0% among respondents in their 40s, and 28.9% among respondents in their 50s."* Uneven regional distribution, connected with the historical location of Buraku, combined with the continued existence of prejudices and stereotypes, especially in marriage and work, highlights the persistent and varied nature of the issue. Many Burakumin tried to "pass" into mainstream society and break away from their communities. This was particularly difficult due to the existence of the *jinshin koseki* (family registry), which made it easy to identify a person and their origins. Furthermore, given the low social mobility at the time, a person's address was often enough to reveal the truth. The psychological toll of hiding one's origins was also immense, leading to a constant, paralyzing fear of being recognized.

Some could not endure this state and returned to the Buraku, while others managed to survive, a testament to the powerful and enduring nature of this form of social stigma.

2.3.5. Institutional and Local Efforts for Burakumin Emancipation and Counter-Narratives

The early 20th century saw the emergence of emancipation movements organized by the Burakumin themselves. In 1903, the "Dai Nippon Dōwa Yūwakai" (The Greater Japan Fraternal Appeasement Association), or simply Yūwa, was inaugurated, advocating for moral discipline and improved living conditions. While gaining conservative support, this movement largely failed due to its tendency to blame Burakumin behavior for discrimination.

The landscape shifted significantly after World War I. The 1918 Rice Riots, in which many Burakumin participated, demonstrated the ineffectiveness of the Yūwa's appeasement approach. This led to the government's first allocation of funds for Buraku improvement in 1920. A pivotal moment came on March 3, 1922, with the inauguration of the Zenkoku Suiheisha (The All Japan Levelers Association). Their "Suiheisha Declaration" powerfully called for self-liberation through dignity and self-respect, rejecting the notion of being passive victims. The declaration read as follows:

"Tokushu Burakumin throughout the country: Unite!

Long-suffering brothers!

Over the past half century, the movements on our behalf by so many people and in such varied ways have yielded no appreciable results. This failure is the punishment we have incurred for permitting ourselves as well as others to debase our own human dignity. Previous movements, though seemingly motivated by compassion, actually corrupted many of our brothers. Thus, it is imperative that we now organize a new collective movement to emancipate ourselves by promoting respect for human dignity.

Brothers! Our ancestors pursued and practiced freedom and equality. They were the victims of base, contemptible class policies and they were the manly martyrs of industry. As a reward for skinning animals, they were stripped of their own living flesh; in return for tearing out the hearts of animals, their own warm human hearts were ripped apart. They were even spat upon with ridicule. Yet, all through these cursed nightmares, their

human pride ran deep in their blood.

Now, the time has come when we human beings, pulsing with this blood, are soon to regain our divine dignity. The time has come for the victims to throw off their stigma. The time has come for the blessing of the martyrs' crown of thorns. The time has come when we can be proud of being Eta. We must never again shame our ancestors and profane humanity through servile words and cowardly deeds. We, who know just how cold human society can be, who know what it is to be pitied, do fervently seek and adore the warmth and light of human life from deep within our hearts.

Thus is the Suiheisha born.

Let there be warmth in human society, let there be light in all human beings.”⁹

From 1922 until its dissolution in 1942, Suiheisha was the leading organization defending Burakumin rights, primarily through direct confrontation and condemnation (kyūdan tōsō). These methods, involving pressuring discriminators to admit guilt and apologize, continue to be a fundamental tool for the Buraku Liberation League (BLL) today.

Following Japan's defeat in World War II, the American occupation (1945-1952) introduced a new constitution in 1947 that guaranteed fundamental human rights and equality, explicitly prohibiting discrimination based on race, creed, sex, social status, and origin:

"Article 14: All people are equal before the law. Race, creed, sex, social status, and origin shall not affect political, economic, or social relations.

Article 22: Everyone shall have the freedom to choose their place of residence or movement, and to choose their occupation.

Article 26: Everyone shall have the right to education, according to their individual ability.”¹⁰

⁹ <https://imadr.net/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/SuiheishaDeclaration-English.pdf>

¹⁰ https://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/en/laws/view/174#je_ch3at5

Despite these legal changes, the situation in Buraku communities remained critical. In 1946, the National Committee for Buraku Liberation (NCBL), composed of former Suiheisha members, was formed. A shocking 1951 story, *Tokushu Buraku* (Special Buraku), published in *All Romance* magazine, highlighted the persistence of pre-war discrimination, describing Buraku areas as "Hell on Earth." In response, the NCBL successfully pressured the Kyoto city office to investigate, revealing that all underdeveloped and unsanitized areas in the city were indeed within Buraku, leading to financial assistance from the city.

Throughout the 1950s, the NCBL vigorously challenged discrimination, evolving into the Buraku Liberation League (BLL) in 1955. Their efforts culminated in the establishment of The Dōwa Policy Committee in 1958 and the adoption of The Law on Special Measures for Dōwa Chiku in 1969. This law recognized the need for comprehensive measures to improve living conditions, strengthen welfare, stabilize employment, support education, and protect human rights. This aid project, which aimed to integrate Burakumin into mainstream society, was periodically renewed until its official conclusion in 2002, with 13.88 billion yen spent by 1993.

Beyond these organized efforts, actions for social recognition and respect have also been undertaken, primarily through Japanese Buraku and human rights museums. Lisa Mueller's research (Mueller, 2025) on five such museums identifies regional differences in their understanding and definition of the Burakumin. In Western Japan, "being Burakumin" is often associated with residency in a historically "stigmatized space", regardless of genealogical or occupational links. In Eastern Japan, the focus shifts more to discrimination related to specific "polluted professions" like meat production, leather making, etc.. This means stigma can be attached to either space or occupation, both being ascribed categories. While institutions agree on the importance of education to correct prejudices, they differ on the very definition and essence of "Burakuness" and how it is performed, which paradoxically might align them with mainstream Japanese commitments to certain values. This regional variation illustrates the localized and contested nature of symbolic boundaries, even within a seemingly unified national discourse.

These institutions often employ two distinct communication strategies: in the West, they focus on fostering face-to-face relationships to dispel negative images of Buraku areas, replacing them with positive ones derived from direct contact. In the East, communication efforts are persuasive, aiming to reframe meat and leather production as noble acts of self-sacrifice rather than polluting or degrading occupations. Significantly, the narratives presented by these museums avoid the typical academic categories of class, caste, and race, treating Burakumin discrimination as a "self-evident category" a phenomenon that is intersectional, multi-layered, and thus unique and resistant to rigid definitions. This fluidity, in my opinion, contributes to the ongoing emotional debate surrounding the Burakumin issue, as blurring boundaries can sometimes reinforce tension. Furthermore, this performative categorization of Burakumin can be understood as a specific expression of *nihonjinron* ideology, reinforcing the conviction of Japanese uniqueness, where even cases of discrimination are portrayed as incomparable with similar groups elsewhere.

2.3.6. Social and Discursive Boundaries Reflected in Mainstream Attitudes and Media Representations

The existence of social and discursive boundaries is clearly reflected in mainstream attitudes and media representations of Burakumin. A significant quote from reporter Nishida Masaya "You're so smart, even though you're from a buraku community"¹¹ illustrates the tough nature of inherited stigma. For Nishida, this casual comment from a friend's grandmother served as a reminder that the "Buraku issue" was not merely a "story of the past" but a persistent, anxiety-inducing reality. His experience impersonates the ongoing struggle to navigate through a social world where invisible differences are constantly being signaled and reinforced through subtle, yet powerful, linguistic and social cues. Such narratives are crucial for understanding how the social imaginary of Burakumin is constructed and maintained for both the Burakumin themselves and the non-Buraku majority.

Over the past 50 years, scandals related to the printing of the so-called "Burakumin List" (*Chimei Sokan*) have regularly erupted in mass media. For example, in November 1975, the Buraku Liberation League in Osaka uncovered the existence of such a list,

¹¹ https://www.pressnet.or.jp/publication/kisha/220614_14669.html

leading to investigations that revealed nine more over the next five years. These lists, often magazine-sized and containing about 200 pages, included sensitive information such as names, addresses, household numbers, and employment types, likely sourced from the government's 1935 "General Buraku List". Buyers of these lists included influential companies (e.g., Nissan, Toyota, Kubota, Yasuda Trust Bank), universities, and private individuals, who used them to reject candidates during recruitment or to check the backgrounds of prospective spouses. Detective agencies also widely distributed copies for similar purposes.

Although contemporary media activity is still event-based, bringing the subject of Burakumin to public attention during significant occurrences, there has been a notable shift from collective to individual narratives. The rise of social media has empowered individuals of Buraku origin to share their personal voices and perspectives, a phenomenon virtually unheard of in the past. This challenges the dominant narrative, supported by some mainstream and Burakumin Japanese, that silence is beneficial for the Burakumin cause (Bondy, 2010; DeVos, 1968). Similarly, Mitsukawa Yūsaku's movie *Watashi no hanashi, buraku no hanashi* [私の話 部落の話, My story is a Buraku story]¹² openly presents an individual Burakumin's fight against discrimination and their search for peace and understanding, criticizing the arbitrarily of the "discriminated Burakumin" narrative and emphasizing the outsiders' (discriminators') viewpoint.

Another significant development shaping the contemporary Burakumin media presence is *The Act on the Promotion of the Elimination of Buraku Discrimination*¹³, enacted on December 9, 2016¹⁴. Notably, while the terms Burakumin or "Buraku" do not appear in Japanese legal documents or the Constitution, this new law is the first to explicitly use the name "Burakumin Discrimination," thereby officially recognizing its continued existence in contemporary Japan. The law promotes the elimination of Buraku discrimination in line with constitutional guarantees of fundamental human rights and establishes a comprehensive framework for coordinated efforts by national and local authorities through legal, educational, consultative, and research initiatives. The aftermath of this law's implementation has been a rise in court cases, often covered by

¹² <https://fenetres-japon.fr/?p=1143>

¹³ <https://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/en/laws/view/4080/en>

¹⁴ <https://www.city.asakura.lg.jp/www/contents/1582013857054/simple/burakusabetukaisyouuisinnho>
u.pdf

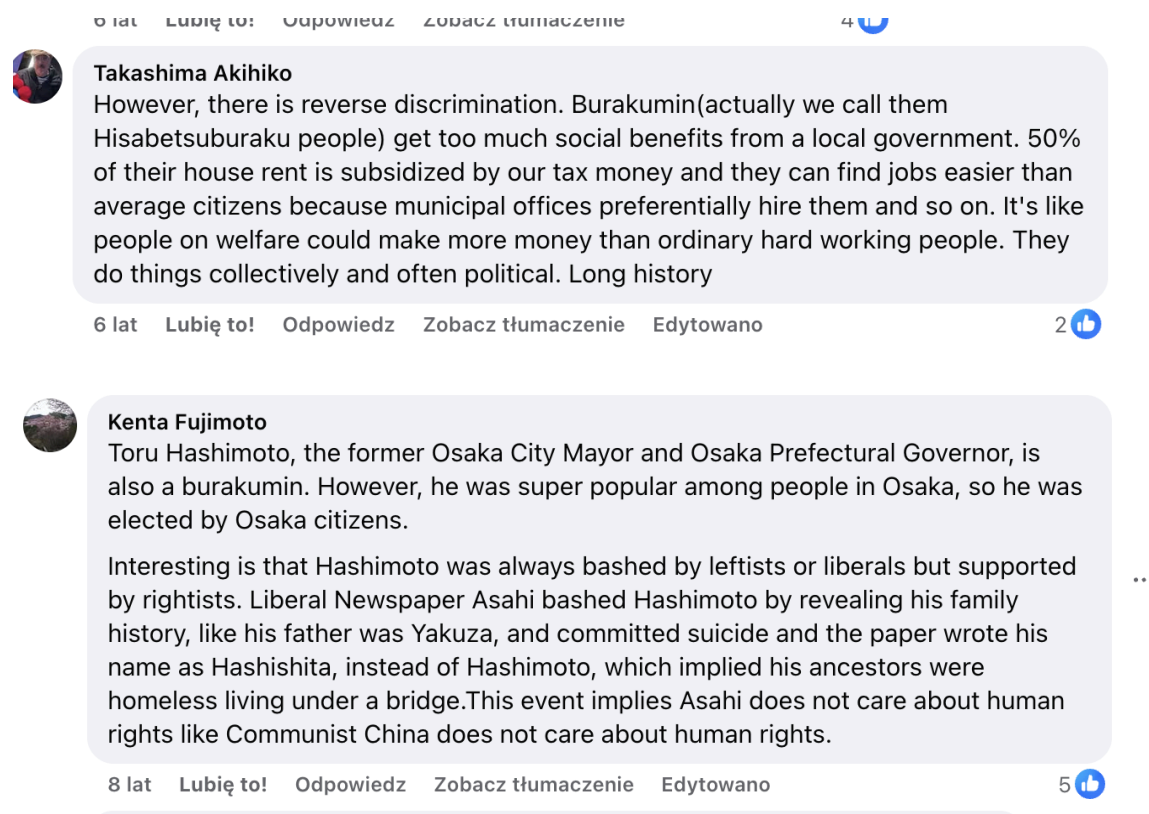
mass media, leading to verdicts that refer to "infringement of personal rights". This legislation was deemed necessary due to popular cases of public slurs, hate speech, and denunciations of Buraku origin, including a prominent case involving the former Osaka mayor: *"Shukan Asahi's article last month delved into Hashimoto's family background, noting his father was a yakuza. But it also added his father was a descendant of the feudal period Burakumin social outcast class, which was traditionally shunned in Buddhist society because its members engaged in jobs considered unclean: butchers, tanners, undertakers."*¹⁵.

Even today, comments and discussions on the internet and popular social media platforms often include opinions and comments on Burakumin's social role as "social welfare queens", a negative stereotype depicting them as a collective group living on governmental subsidies rather than through "hard work" like other Japanese people (Ramseyer, 2020). According to a report from the Ministry of Justice, Burakumin are still a subject of discriminatory and problematic behaviour. The document notes that verbal hate is dominant, and about half of incidents involving discriminatory language occur online. This is followed by discrimination in marriage and employment (*koyō*). Still one of the most problematic activities is disclosing the location of settlements (identification) and defaming specific individuals, which takes place on the internet platforms. Thanks to school education on Burakumin the knowledge about discrimination and human rights violations is widespread in the country, however it is noticeable that the psychological prejudice still exists, especially in the context of marriage, and sometimes in employment¹⁶.

¹⁵<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2012/11/03/national/hashimoto-likens-weeklys-slur-to-hate-speak/>

¹⁶ <https://www.moj.go.jp/content/001322291.pdf>

Figure 2.



Source: Facebook threads, acquired on June 18, 2025.

This multi-layered depiction of the Burakumin in the media underscores the complex and often ambiguous nature of their position in Japanese society, intertwining both positive and negative symbolic connotations. It presents how social and discursive boundaries continue to be actively constructed and contested in the public sphere. Museums, regional initiatives, and individual voices increasingly challenge prejudices, reframing Burakumin identity as a fluid and deeply modern social category, while making efforts to cultivate Burakumin's positive image for both the in-group and the broader public. Rooted in historical social constructs and government policies, this marginalization persists within contemporary Japanese society; yet, while its form is unique to Japan, it reflects broader global mechanisms of exclusion. Ultimately, it is important to note that a more comprehensive analysis of traditional and social media discourses remains a promising avenue for future research.

2.4. Research Gaps and Contribution

This dissertation addresses a key gap in the literature by focusing on the micro-level processes through which class and status social boundaries are produced and maintained in everyday life. While existing research has extensively examined the historical and structural dimensions of stratification in Japan, less attention has been paid to how these distinctions are reproduced in practice, through routine interactions, perceptions, and unspoken norms.

My study's aim is to demonstrate how boundary-making operates as a dynamic process linking micro-level practices and macro-social conditions. It presents how everyday actions, often subtle and performed without explicit awareness, are shaped by broader historical and social structures, while simultaneously contributing to their ongoing reproduction. In this sense, the dissertation moves beyond descriptive accounts by analyzing the feedback loop between lived experience and structural conditions.

Empirically, the research provides a qualitative account of how symbolic boundaries are constructed in contemporary Japan. It examines how individuals navigate unspoken social rules and how distinctions are enacted through practices such as avoidance, indirect naming, and the signaling of difference. Particular attention is paid to mechanisms such as *kuuki wo yomu* ("reading the air"), silence, and rumor, which function as key tools in maintaining social boundaries without formal articulation.

A central contribution of this study lies in its attempt to reconnect macro-historical legacies with micro-social processes. The Burakumin are approached not as a clearly bounded social category, but as a case that reveals the complexity of social differentiation. Their position can be understood as simultaneously invisible and hypervisible, a paradox that becomes most apparent through the interplay of "knowing" and "not knowing" in everyday interactions. Rather than treating this as a fixed identity, the study uses it as an analytical lens through which broader mechanisms of boundary-making can be observed.

In this context, I also attempt to revisit the legacy of the early modern status system (*mibunsei*), not as a direct continuation, but as a historically embedded framework that continues to shape how social differences are perceived and reproduced. This approach avoids deterministic claims, instead emphasizing how past forms of distinction-making might be rearticulated in contemporary settings.

The dissertation further contributes to the literature by critically engaging with narratives of Japanese homogeneity. Rather than treating homogeneity as a social fact, it is understood here as a discursive and conceptual framework that interacts with underlying patterns of differentiation. By analyzing how such narratives are reproduced in everyday discourse, I intend to show how they can dim, but also indirectly sustain, social inequalities.

Methodologically, the research is grounded in a combination of critical realism and interpretivism. While social structures are treated as real and causally significant, their effects are accessed through the interpretation of lived experience. This allows for a research design that connects subjective meanings with broader social mechanisms, using qualitative data to infer the operation of underlying structures.

Finally, the dissertation offers a distinctive perspective by examining how members of the majority population perceive and reproduce boundaries toward a marginalized group. This “second-hand” perspective on marginality remains relatively underexplored, as most studies focus either on the experiences of Burakumin themselves or on quantitative analyses of inequality. By focusing on how mainstream Japanese individuals interpret and navigate social differences, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the cultural dimension of stratification.

Taken together, this research demonstrates how symbolic boundaries of class and status are reproduced and maintained through everyday practices, and how these processes are embedded in broader historical and social contexts. In doing so, it contributes to both Japanese studies and comparative sociology by offering a framework that links discourse, practice, and structure in the analysis of social inequality.

In the next chapter, focused on theoretical basis for class and social boundaries analysis,

I present how key concepts like class, status, and homogeneity are understood in the both in Western and Japanese context, and then I will use those distinctions to build a framework for analysing how social boundaries are produced and reproduced in everyday life.

CHAPTER 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Introduction

This research draws upon various theoretical frameworks and employs specific methodological approaches to explore social dynamics in Japan. In the remaining parts of this chapter I recall theories that help me interpret and understand the gathered qualitative data in the next two chapters.

The aim of this section is to analyze how the terms "class" and "caste" have been represented in Western and Japanese intellectual traditions, and scholarly literature. After establishing the definitions of terms: "caste", "class" and "strata", the following chapters will examine how class and class distinctions are understood in modern Japanese society, in order to provide a deeper perspective of its relevance today. This part also considers whether and how the Japanese understanding of class issues depends on concepts derived from Western social sciences, and how these concepts have been interpreted and implemented in the Japanese humanities and social sciences discourse.

To place this discussion in context, the major class and caste theorists will be introduced: Karl Marx, Max Weber, Erik Olin Wright and Pierre Bourdieu, and caste: Louis Dumont and Stanisław Ossowski. This approach provides a bridge between specific Japanese settings in the next part, and helps to explain how the subjects of class and social stratification have been operationalized.

I begin with Erik Olin Wright, whose integrative framework enables to manage other theories, like Marx's, Weber's and Bourdieu's, not as competing, but as complimentary. This proposal also aligns with my own approach in this study, which is an analysis of differences, but focuses on how the plurality of perspectives and voices shape social reality in Japan.

For many ideological, cultural, political reasons, for a long time Japan was not considered an interesting case for the study of social classes. Instead, scholarship often emphasized the uniqueness and distinctiveness of Japanese society (*nihonjinron*) and its

individual development path. This led to some misinterpretations and issues in this topic. While emphasizing the uniqueness and originality of Japan, it was forgotten that Japan and its society are subject to the same social phenomena as other countries and nations. For several decades, Western and Japanese researchers focused on emphasising the incompatibility of Japanese conditions and psyche with Western patterns of behaviour. The unique nature of social organization, hierarchy in the workplace, and special relations in the family were put in the spotlight, and eventually that led to Japan being described in an exotic and orientaling way. Yet Japan, like any other society, can and should be subjected to systematic academic analysis.

Discourses highlighting features like the unique structure of Japanese society, avoiding confrontation, collective thinking, focus on community (including subordinating individual decisions to the common good), honesty, and caring for the feelings of others, reinforced the image of Japan as an unified, homogenous national and cultural entity. However, shifting dynamics in international relationships, including with the USA and Western European countries led to the criticism and deconstruction of discourse of uniqueness, homogeneity, and concurrence of Japan and the Japanese. So much so that in the 1980s and 1990s numerous studies focused instead on the heterogeneity of Japanese culture, the influence of various local cultures, the multiplicity of ethnic origins, displacement of local traditions, and constructed nature of social and ethnic unity. This allowed Japanese minorities (e.g., Burakumin, Koreans, Ainu), to reappear in this discourse, and provided new ways of interpreting and analyzing their place in Japanese culture. It also helped to build strategies for protecting the interests of these minority groups, and finally gave the majority of Japanese a chance to create a different, more diverse, and understanding attitude towards those groups.

For decades the narrative of "Japan is a classless society: 90% of Japanese consider themselves to be representatives of the middle class" has been present in the public sphere (Ishida, 2022, Shirahase 2022, Kikkawa, 2022). However, even within the middle class itself differences in wealth and lifestyles were significant enough to distinguish lower middle class, middle class, and upper middle class. The idea of classlessness of the Japanese seems to be a narrative, rather than a social fact. Moreover, Japanese sociologists have argued that since the late 90s economic crisis, Japan has become a "gap society" (Chiavacci, 2017), a society with growing inequalities,

decreasing income, problems caused by changes in the famous Japanese work model of "*salariman*" (a person working for a Japanese corporation) and a rapidly aging population. This trend, visible in data gathered by sociologists like David Chiavacci, influenced the self-perception of the Japanese class position. In this context, the case of Burakumin cannot be addressed without clarifying the conceptual differences between class and caste. It is therefore necessary to begin with establishing meanings and definitions of those terms, and investigating how they are used.

3.2. Class - Definition and Its Significance for Social Studies and Humanities

According to the encyclopedic definition, the term class "refers to a stratification system that divides a society into a hierarchy of social positions. It is also a particular social position within a class stratification system: lower class, working class, middle class, upper class, or other such class designations. It is a method of social ranking that involves money, power, culture, taste, identity, access, and exclusion. Conceptualizations of class belong not only to sociology, but also to the popular press, the marketplace, the political process, and to those who perceive themselves as being located within a particular class position. People who do perceive class distinctions are "class conscious" and may feel the impact of class in powerful ways. Others barely notice it or refuse to concede its existence despite living with its effects. To some people, class connotes differing economic circumstances, lifestyles, and tastes; to others it is about social status, esteem, and respect." (Vitt, 2009, p. 533). The word class itself comes from ancient Roman censors that introduced the term *classis*, which was used to divide people into tax groups like: *assidui* - rich in assets, and *proletarii* - whose only possession was their children - the *proles*. There were also *lumpenproletariat capite censi*, the poorest group, that had nothing that could be taxed, so they were counted only as numbers (Dahrendorf, 2008).

Historically, in the 18th century Adam Ferguson and John Millar used the concept of class as a term that was meant to distinguish social strata based on their wealth,

ownership, or rank. Millar (1787, after Dahrendorf, 1959, p. 5) said: "depending on the random differences between individuals in terms of wealth, a hierarchy of ranks is gradually introduced, and individuals unopposedly assume a different scope of power and authority, or give them the voice of society". Everything changed with the beginning of the industrial revolution. In the nineteenth century, this concept began to be used differently, distinguishing between the capitalist class and the working class, bourgeoisie and proletariat, poor and rich class, etc. Ralf Dahrendorf wrote: "Rank and position gave way to more severe divisions. As a capital, property was transformed from a symbol of rank into an instrument of power, with time becoming more and more powerful and effective." (Dahrendorf, 2008, p. 5)

In this sense, the word class can be used as a certain category of description, and according to Ralf Dahrendorf a layer would be: "a category of people occupying a similar position in the hierarchy of certain features, such as income, prestige and lifestyle. "Layer" is a descriptive category. The concept of a class, on the other hand, is an analytical category that has meaning in the context of a theory class. "Classes are collectives with common interests that arise under certain structural conditions that act as such and trigger structural changes."

The old feudal order was not based simply on the fact that someone had land, money or prestige. That alone was not a source of power. Power came from being a landowner or a master craftsman from time immemorial. Tradition made it legitimate, and it was a relatively static social order. The transition from feudalism to an industrial society is associated with the gradual collapse of the traditions of the agricultural society.

Class Theories of Wright, Marx, Weber and Dahrendorf

This part of the Chapter is dedicated to the discussion of the class theories by four important theorists: Erik Olin Wright, Karl Marx, Max Weber and Ralph Dahrendorf. Each one of them comes from a different philosophical approach, but as Erik Olin Wright wrote: "To the extent that a typology of theories identifies the distinct mechanisms that are the focus of different theories, it might be possible to integrate at least some of the different approaches to class into a more general framework of analysis organized around the interconnections among these different mechanisms. Rather than mainly see alternative approaches as competing with each other, perhaps

they could potentially be seen as complementary. One can be a Weberian for the study of class mobility, a Bourdieusian for the study of class determinants of lifestyles, and a Marxian for the critique of capitalism." (Wright, 2015, p. VIII).

I treat this approach of integration, rather than confrontation, as my guideline thought, the discussion of class and their implications on social life in general, and specifically in Japan. This also aligned with what Karl Marx said about societies and individuals: "Society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of interrelations, the relations within which these individuals stand. As if someone were to say: Seen from the perspective of society, there are no slaves and no citizens: both are human beings. Rather, they are that outside society. To be a slave, to be a citizen, are social characteristics, relations between human beings A and B. Human being A, as such, is not a slave. He is a slave in and through society" (Marx, 1857–1861/1973, Notebook II, "Product and capital. Value and capital. Proudhon" section). None of the social facts exist in a vacuum, and class relations are relations for a reason. We might treat this discussion as purely academic one, but Seymour Martin Lipset and Reinhard Bendix (1951, p. 50) pointed out an important aspect of what class and conflict mean, they are about "real conflict about political orientations". And this phrase relates well with the political conditions and factors that played an important role in the creation of both Japanese status groups in the Edo period, and the new capitalistic order of the Meiji period.

For Wright the integrative model for class analysis is crucial for understanding this term. According to him, there are three different levels of causal mechanism in which the class traditions are anchored: "stratification approaches to class define class in terms of individual attributes and conditions; Weberian approaches define class in terms of a variety of mechanisms of opportunity hoarding; and Marxist approaches define class in terms of mechanisms of exploitation and domination. Each of these causal mechanisms plays a key role in particular streams of causal processes. The task of the essay was to clarify these focal mechanisms and then try to integrate them into a broader explanatory model of class analysis." (Wright, 2015, p. IX)

Figure 3.

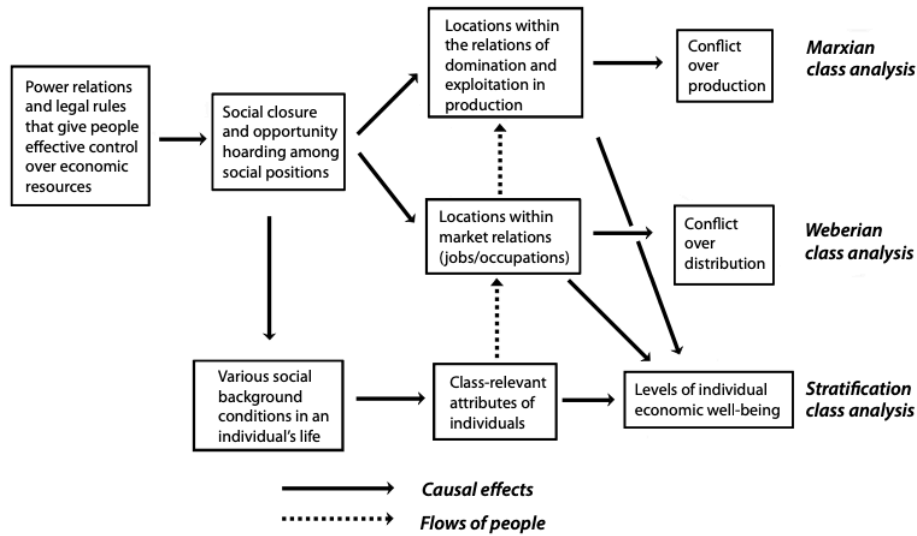


Figure 1.4. Combined Class Analysis: Macro and Micro Processes

Source: Wright, E. O. (2015). *Understanding Class*. London: Verso. p. VIII.

In the mainstream Japanese and Burakumin case, not only the class division and their class position seem to be an interesting challenge, but also power structures, which I will also describe briefly in the part devoted to Dahrendorf’s class theory.

In the class division and power division there is visible a dichotomy that Wright introduces: difference between opportunity hoarding mechanism and domination/exploitation approach: “The inequalities generated by opportunity hoarding require the use of power to enforce exclusions, and the inequalities connected to exploitation require supervision, monitoring of labor effort, and sanctions to enforce labor discipline. In both cases, social struggles that challenge these forms of power potentially threaten the privileges of people in the advantaged class positions.” (Wright, 2015, p. 11). The main issue connected to the opportunity hoarding mechanism is the feedback loop, a causal connection between being rich and being poor: the things that rich do to keep/maintain their wealth and position of advantage, make the poor stay poor. On the other hand, there is also the individual attribute mechanism, where the poor are poor because they lack certain advantages, and rich are rich because they have them, but there is no causal relation between those two. Therefore all the activities that might

help the poor: education, eliminating poverty on a cultural level, empowering human capital - all this is not harming the rich and their privileged position and advantages in any way. It is not the case of the opportunity hoarding mechanism, where Wright says: "eliminating poverty by removing the mechanism of exclusion potentially undermines the advantages of the affluent within the existing system." (Wright, 2015, p. 171)

The domination/exploitation approach works differently. There are those who own the means of production, and also control them - capitalists, and there are workers, who are hired by the capitalists to use the means of production. In this case, there is the dual relation between both groups: exploitation and domination over workers by capitalists. There are certain differences on some levels: i.e. CEOs and top managers can develop ownership of corporate stakes, and become closer to capitalists, and while managers are capitalists' subordinates, they can express certain levels of domination from their position. Finally, it is true that skilled workers and highly educated professionals have some control over highly demanded skills and knowledge, which gives them a degree of autonomy from both domination and exploitation. Wright focuses much on causal processes and how they are interconnected: "class should neither be identified simply with the individual attributes nor with the material conditions of life of people, but with the interconnections between these two." (Wright, 2015, p. 4). He highlights three clusters of class approaches:

- Stratification tradition - individual attributes approach: class is identified with material conditions and attributes
- Weberian tradition - opportunity-hoarding approach: social position gives control over economic resources, while restricting/excluding others from access to resources
- Marxist tradition - domination and exploitation approach: when economic position gives some people control over activities and lives of others (Wright, 2015, p. 12)

The class itself, the class conditions in the modern societies are created on the crossing between education, social connections, cultural resources and motivations. Those factors shape the social possibilities and chances that are available for their members, as well as the expected income that they can acquire, and the housing or medical care they can afford. Wright does not identify class simply with individual attributes nor material

conditions, but when those are combined together they create bigger clusters called classes:

- "Middle class" within this approach to the study of class, identifies people who are more or less in the broad middle of the economy and society: they have enough education and money to participate fully in some vaguely defined "mainstream" way of life.
- "Upper class" identifies people whose wealth, high income, social connections, and valuable talents enable them to live their lives apart from "ordinary" people.
- "Lower class" identifies people who lack the necessary educational and cultural resources to live securely above the poverty line.
- "Underclass" identifies people who live in extreme poverty, marginalized from the mainstream of society by a lack of basic education and skills needed for stable employment. (Wright, 2015, p. 4)

Although Wright based his observations on American society, this model can be applied universally, including Japanese society. This will be further discussed in later parts of this study.

Focus on Marx and Weber Class Theories

At the beginning of this project I started with a strong conviction that the class approach that describes the Japanese class situation best is that of conflict and confrontation, and it led me to the important thread of subordination, status and slavery. As eta/hinin were regarded as a special status people, outside of the beforementioned mibunsei (status system) my research started with the dwellings on the fundamental differences between Marx and Weber, and what were their main focuses in regard to class outcomes. Below I will briefly explain the historical backgrounds of this discussion, which allow me to go back later to the main theoretical differences between Marx and Weber.

For Marx, the most important thing is how class determines chances for exploitation, as well as life chances in general. Conversely, for Weber the crucial question is how class position determines life chances on markets, which he calls "highly rationalized forms of economic interactions" (Wright, 2002, p. 843). Marx and Weber represent two distinct conceptual perspectives, and the differences between them are visible, as in a

lens, in the example of slavery. Marx focused on exploitation as a key concept for societal divisions, class relationships are based on exploitation. Although capitalism brought about modern classes: capitalists and workers, before that there were different groups whose interests were often antagonistic: in feudalism, lords and serfs, and in slavery, slave-owners and slaves. Lifestyles, prestige and differences in spending free time are not important for Marx: “the crucial issue is their differences in mechanisms of exploitation - the ways in which labor effort is appropriated from one category by another.” (Wright, 2002, p. 847).

Weber, on the other hand, does not consider slaves a class in the technical sense of the term. Because a slave's fate is not determined by the chance of using goods or services for themselves on the market. They are deprived of the possibility to operate freely, and are therefore excluded from the market dynamic that defines class. As Weber wrote: "Those men whose fate is not determined by the chance of using goods or services for themselves on the market, e.g. slaves, are not, however, a class in the technical sense of the term. They are, rather, a status group." (Weber, 1978, p. 937). Status groups, including occupational and ethnic groups, differ among themselves by lifestyles, social honor or prestige. Their stratification is based on “the principles of their consumption of goods as represented by special styles of life.” (Wright, 2002, p. 846), and not solely on an economic basis.

Wright calls both Weber’s status groups and Marx’s class as a “general theoretical category”, and this distinction between an exploitation-centered class concept of Marx, and a market- and honor-centered status concept of Weber, proves to be highly relevant to this study. Mainly because it provides the necessary framework for analyzing the class perceptions of modern Japanese, with special consideration for Burakumin, who could experience issues on the intersection of class and status trajectories. This way of perceiving class theory gives more chances to capture dynamics of class discourse in Japanese society.

For both Marx and Weber concepts of class are relational, it is never about the simple hierarchical levels. Instead classes are generated by interactions between social actors, and therefore the primary references are not names of classes: upper, middle, lower, etc., but the more qualitative references like capitalists, workers, creditors, related to people’s

positions in relations to others (Wright, 2015). Marx and Weber treated property ownership as a root cause of class division in capitalist society. Relationship to the means of production, control and ownership of the resources, is by far the most important one for Marx, and this is how he defines classes. Although he did not finish Chapter 52 in the third volume of *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, it is widely understood that Manifesto of Communist party reflects more or less clearly what Marks wanted to say:

"The history of all hitherto-existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight. . . .

In the earlier epochs of history, we find almost everywhere a complicated arrangement of society into various orders, a manifold gradation of social rank. . . .

Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinctive feature: it has simplified the class antagonism. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat." (Manifesto of the Communist Party', ME, Vol. I, pp. 33-34.)

Marx saw the class position in relation to the ownership of means of production, and as a great dichotomy of two antagonistic groups: bourgeoisie and proletariat. Control and ownership, this marks the dividing line between the oppressor and the oppressed, and life chances are inextricably connected with exploitation.

Weber offered a bit more nuanced view on the topic of class as a "description of the way people are related to the material conditions of life under conditions in which their economic interactions are regulated in a maximally rationalized manner." (Wright, 2002, p. 836). He focused on the "market situation", an "economic position narrowly conceived" (Weber, 2009) which includes income (its size and source), job security, and work situation. Those who do not have any property are forced to sell their labour or its products. Class is created as a result of "unambiguously economic interest, and indeed, only those interests involved in the existence of the market". He assumes that people

will act in line with their material interests coupled with their class situation, however he allows the thought that sometimes individuals will behave in a deviant way.

Apart from class, there is already mentioned above the distinction of status groups (Stände), defined by "social estimation of honor" and "styles of life" (consumption of goods), and functioning as communities. Status situations might or may not be connected with the class situation, and it is determined by "positive or negative, social estimation of honor" (Weber, 1979). This very vividly corresponds with the situation of Burakumin, where not everyone in one (material) class shares the same status and prestige, as class and status distinctions can be linked in many different ways.

Status groups might succumb to the process of closure, resulting in creating a "caste", where acquiring dignity guarantees conventional and legal state division, but there is also a ritual guarantee: any physical contact with a member of a caste deemed "inferior" is for a person belonging to a higher caste as ritual uncleanness, requires religious penance. Exclusiveness of status honor is based on access to different material monopolies: "the privilege of wearing special costumes, of eating special dishes taboo to others, of carrying arms-which is most obvious in its consequences-the right to pursue certain non-professional dilettante artistic practices, e.g. to play certain musical instruments." (Weber, 2009, p. 191). In consequence this leads to giving a priority to certain groups to fill specific positions and creating exclusive monopolies, however: "this monopolization occurs positively, when the status group is exclusively entitled to own and to manage them; and negatively when, in order to maintain its specific way of life, the status group must not own and manage them."

Dahrendorf: Class, Authority and Conflict

The next major theory is one of Ralph Dahrendorf, who shifted his focus from property to power. Inspired by Marx he defined classes as "conflict groups generated by the unequal distribution of authority in such "imperatively organized associations" (Max Weber's Herrschaftsverbände) as the state, industry, the army, the church. (Mayntz, 1960). The conflict is based on the distribution of authority and there are always two antagonistic groups in this model: those who have authority and those who don't. Dahrendorf replaces the conflict of ownership and non-possession, arguing that classes are independent of property, economic conditions, and social stratification. For him, the

most important criterion is sovereignty, that is, the relationship of domination and subordination: "in most societies, therefore, there is a clear, if not complete, correlation between the distribution of sovereignty and the social reward system that underlies the stratification." (Dahrendorf, 2008, p. 140) The relations of authority are understood here as aspects of social organization and a common element of the social structure, that is, occurring in every society, and there is no correlation between class structure and social stratification.

3.3. Caste - Definition and Significance

It is crucial for this study to correctly understand the relationship between class, caste, and other forms of social stratification. As Stanisław Ossowski observes, certain historical traces connect modern class hierarchies such as lifestyle and manners with earlier forms of social organization, including estates or castes. He writes: "Estate privileges and relationships gave way to a system based in principle on purely economic relationships; but certain estate traditions did not lose their vitality or were revived when the new system attained stability. Descent as a determinant of social status is a relic of an estate or caste system." (1998, p. 51)

Ossowski defines caste and estate as "closed groups whose membership is determined by descent or through magical rituals with indestructible social consequences." (1998) Economic changes such as the enrichment or impoverishment of individuals can occur within these systems, but without crossing estate boundaries. Furthermore, economic differences may arise within estates themselves, producing class distinctions that operate alongside estate divisions. Thus, medieval accounts of social gradation may apply not only between estates (e.g., nobility and peasantry) but also within them, as in the case of the bourgeoisie.

Ossowski's approach bears some resemblance to Pierre Bourdieu's in that both evaluate social prestige through a combination of factors: wealth, expenditure, education, occupation, and descent, alongside the traditions of the higher estate. From the perspective of Burakumin research, Ossowski's insight is crucial: not all societies determine social functions and class roles primarily by wealth or income. In systems of

"closed classes" estate or caste systems group monopolies over certain types of property or occupation play a decisive role. There is also another similarity between the two theorists. Ossowski states that lifestyle, which is an important differentiator in class hierarchies, is a remnant of the estate system that has been consolidated in modern societies.

In such societies, the individual's role is not the determinant of their social position; rather, their position determines the role they are allowed to perform. In the Burakumin case, this would suggest that their lower status as a social stratum dictated the kinds of work they performed. Yet historical exceptions complicate this view. Falconers, for example, once held high prestige in the Japanese court, but with the rise of stronger religious influences, their position declined. As their functions came to be regarded as inferior, those performing them were also degraded.

Ossowski emphasizes that caste and estate structures rest on religious and/or legal rules, with strata reinforced by tradition and ritual. This framework is applicable to certain discriminated groups in medieval and early modern Japan, where religious sanctions barred participation in specific rituals. For Ossowski "an inferior caste is not inferior because its members perform inferior functions, but simply because it consists of people of inferior descent who for this reason perform inferior functions." (1998, p. 64) This raises the question of how estate and caste structures intersect with class systems. Do they overlap, or is class stratification confined within each estate? Ossowski offers two possibilities: a synthetic gradation that allows comparison across descent, privilege, and property, or separate, non-comparable ladders of status.

The question of whether Japan constituted a caste society has drawn significant attention from Western scholars in the 20th century. William H. Newell, in his study of caste in Japan, identifies several key differences from the Indian model. If we look at the full caste system, in Japan there are only two castes, *heimin* (commoners) and Burakumin, with the latter not more than 2 percent of the total Japanese population. In India, however, some experts claim that deprived castes could be regarded as high as 60 percent of the whole population. Secondly, there are no degrees of ritual impurity in Japanese society. One is either Burakumin or one is not, whereas even the lowest caste in India always regards itself as superior to some other. In the past there was a system in

Japan known as the *oyabun-kobun* which is sometimes translated as a parent-child relationship. Although in certain respects it was similar to the *jajmani* system in India, there are also certain fundamental differences which prevent an exact parallel being drawn. Caste is found more or less all over India, but in Japan there are strong regional differences with caste being strongest in the older settlements of Japanese civilization in the west and in the oldest cities. Thus the form of caste in Japan is regionally much more varied. For example in Tokyo there is no feeling against anyone who wishes to become a shoemaker and there is no close correlation between leather work and being a Burakumin. But in some areas such as around the edges of Lake Suwa one can almost be sure that any bootmaker one sees is a Burakumin. There is no Japanese national philosophy of caste, but in India a Brahmin is a Brahmin whether he is found in the south or the north (Newell, 1961).

To deepen the class/caste discussion, Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* (2009) offers a contrasting view. Dumont treats caste as a uniquely Indian institution: a coherent system of ideas and values grounded in hierarchy. Society is a whole in which every element takes its right place. The following are the most important rules of the division of castes:

1. No possibility of contact and marriage between castes,
2. Specific division of labor, professions and traditions,
3. Hierarchy manifested in the pure / unclean dualism,
4. Endogamy and exclusivity,
5. Affiliation is hereditary.

To speak of caste, first there must be a comprehensive, coherent caste system encompassing all members of a given community. The existence of groups that we tend to call caste is in no way synonymous with a society entirely made up of a set of castes. The second element indicative of the presence of a caste structure is separation of status and power - in the caste system they are separated and contained within castes. However, historically in Japan the emperor was identified with the supreme shinto deity, Amaterasu, and is her direct heir. But when the shogunate took control of the country (turn of the 16th/17th centuries) the emperor was deprived of any actual power, leaving him on the throne as a symbol of the continuity of power coming from Amaterasu. The

emperor had a lot of prestige and the highest, sacred status, but did not wield any real influence.

In Dumont's view, the Japanese case does not constitute a full caste system, as the societal hierarchy was relational, networked, and shaped by historical and religious factors rather than a pan-community institutional framework. The full caste system's defining features include endogamy, occupational specialization, ritual hierarchy (pure/impure), hereditary membership, and strict social separation. Crucially, Dumont sees caste as an all-encompassing system and something Japan, in his view, lacked. Japanese society, however, contained other hierarchical principles such as the *senmin/ryomin* ("base/commoners") division and the pervasive clean/unclean dichotomy embedded in relational and network-based thinking.

As Joy Hendry (2003) notes, social positions in Japan are shaped by webs of reciprocal obligation, and defined relationally, such as employees in relation to supervisors, therefore hierarchy may exist independently of natural inequalities or power distribution. This relationality complicates the application of Dumont's caste model to the Burakumin, whose official status was low but whose actual influence may have varied historically. For instance, their monopolies in leather goods and their use by *daimyō* suggest pockets of practical power, though by the Tokugawa era such influence was likely symbolic or tied to coercive functions such as executions and prisoner transport. What is more, even though the Tokugawa shogunate limited the possibilities of interstatus marriages, such events were not that rare.

This complexity makes it difficult to classify the Burakumin/non-Burakumin relationship as a straightforward caste division. Moreover, historical literature on Tokugawa society often conflates "class," "caste," and "status" without precise definitions, further muddying the waters. Conrad Totman's *History of Japan*, for example, does not use the term "caste" when describing the *ritsuryō* social order, reserving it instead for discussions of *Eta/Hinin* during the Tokugawa era, when the population was divided into four groups under the *shinōkōshō* system. While this system bore some resemblance to caste, it was officially described as a feudal group hierarchy.

An important contribution to the Japanese caste debate comes from George DeVos and Hiroshi Wagatsuma's *Japan's Invisible Race: Caste in Culture and Personality*. Gerald D. Berreman, in this volume, adopts a broader definition of caste: a birth-based hierarchy of groups found across cultures. He criticizes Dumont's India-specific approach, arguing that it limits the concept's analytical usefulness. Berreman's perspective allows cross-cultural comparison of caste-like systems, including pariah groups in Korea and Thailand, societies culturally close to Japan, though notably not China, where no Burakumin-like group emerged.

Other scholars, such as Edward B. Harper, stress the centrality of ritual purity to caste. In India, caste divisions are maintained by both the avoidance of pollution and systems of ritual interdependence. Harper outlines a theoretical model in which gods, ritual specialists, and variously pure or impure castes interact in a mutually dependent order. Here, kinship plays a key role, as purity (and pollution) is inherited:

"One of the important rationales for caste separatism (their refusal to intermarry, eat with one another, or touch one another) is that some castes are more ritually pure than others, and that impurity may be transmitted from one caste to another through these acts. But on the other hand, castes are also brought together and integrated into a system of ritual interdependence by the belief that they differ in the degree to which they are ritually pure or impure. Some actions are thought to be ritually too defiling for certain castes to perform, and some castes are thought to be too impure to perform certain other activities. These beliefs are basic to the concept of a division of labor by castes and to the ideal that each caste plays a part in a larger mutually interdependent system." (Harper, 1964, p. 151)

Ritual purity and kinship play central roles in caste systems, and that caste is as much about religious conceptions of the sacred as it is about social boundaries. Nur Yalman's (Yalman, 1963) study of Ceylon and Malabar emphasizes the interdependence of castes through ritual pollution and the transmission of purity across generations. Concerns with the purity of women's lineage, for example, are integral to maintaining caste integrity, and these concerns cannot be safeguarded by legal means alone, they require ritual maintenance. In these models, social hierarchy is reinforced through kinship networks and ritual obligations, demonstrating how caste operates as both a social and religious system. Yalman further notes that caste concerns are not exclusive to Hindu

societies; similar dynamics appear among Buddhist groups, where women's purity is closely tied to social status.

Finally, Ossowski's work invites comparison between the Burakumin in Japan and African Americans in the United States, where descent-based divisions intersect with parallel class systems. In such cases, wealth cannot compensate for birth, and class hierarchies operate within rigidly separated social orders. This analogy underscores the challenges of applying a single, clear-cut definition of caste to the Japanese case.

3.4 Class, Caste and Social Inequalities in Contemporary Japan

The Beginnings of Japanese Sociology

The development of Japanese sociology is deeply shaped by its modernist and Western intellectual roots, as well as by two interrelated processes: the Orientalization of Japan by Western scholars and the auto-orientalization by Japanese researchers themselves. These dynamics are directly relevant to how the Burakumin minority has been studied, particularly through the conceptual lenses of class and caste.

For a combination of ideological, cultural, and political reasons, Japan was long considered an unpromising case for the study of social class. Instead, discourses such as *nihonjinron* (Oguma, 2002) emphasizing the uniqueness and distinctiveness of Japanese society and its supposedly singular historical path encouraged omissions and distortions in this field. In celebrating Japan's originality, many scholars overlooked the fact that Japanese society is subject to the same structural and cultural processes as other societies.

For several decades, both Western and Japanese researchers advanced the view that Japan's social organization and collective psychology were fundamentally incompatible with Western models. Workplace hierarchies, family structures, and communal values were presented as uniquely Japanese, reinforcing an exoticized image that discouraged comparative analysis. In this framing, Japan was not analyzed as a society governed by

universal social dynamics, but as an exceptional case requiring exceptional explanations. This portrayal, or narrative, of Japanese society as uniquely structured, valuing conflict avoidance, collective thinking, community orientation, the prioritization of the common good, honesty, and emotional sensitivity helped produce a discursive construct often referred to simply as "Japan."

However, shifting geopolitical and cultural relations, particularly with the United States and Western Europe, began to undermine this fascination with homogeneity. By the 1980s and 1990s, a growing body of scholarship challenged the narrative of cultural uniformity, emphasizing instead the heterogeneity of Japanese society: the influence of diverse local cultures, the multiplicity of ethnic origins, the displacement of regional traditions, and the constructed nature of ethnic unity. This shift created a new space for critical engagement with minority groups including the Burakumin, Koreans, and Ainu and for exploring their position within Japanese culture (Weiner, 2005; Bondy, 2010; Sato 2007, Eades et al., 2000). In turn, these discussions informed strategies aimed both at protecting minority interests and at fostering among the majority population a more inclusive, pluralistic understanding of Japanese society.

The Challenge of Studying Social Classes in Japan.

Within this broader intellectual and political context, the study of social classes in Japan requires careful attention to conceptual precision. A key objective of this thesis is to reconstruct the contemporary discourse on social classes in international scholarship, with a particular focus on works on Japan (Gill, 2000; Stevens, 1997; Ishida, 2022; Kikkawa, 2022). How class is approached depends greatly on how concepts derived from Western social science have been interpreted and adapted within Japanese academic discourse. This dependency raises several methodological problems. In historical and sociological studies of Japan, and especially Burakumin, the terms class, caste, stratum, and state are often used interchangeably by both authors and translators. Such terminological fluidity complicates the analysis but also reveals important underlying assumptions.

Another layer of complexity stems from the fact that much of the international academic literature on Japan has been produced in the United States, where the concept of social class has developed differently than in Europe. For instance, Max Weber's works central

to European class theory alongside Karl Marx were not translated into English until the 1950s, but were translated and adopted in Japan in the 1920s (Roth, 1999). One of the earliest American definitions, by E.T. Hiller (1933, pp. 36-37), described a social class as "any relatively permanent division of society that is distinguished by persistent rank differences and is separated from other strata by social distance". Such definitions have shaped a relatively loose approach to the use of terms such as class, caste, and stratum in European and American studies of Japan.

In the case of Burakumin, analyzing Japanese class society inevitably leads to broader questions: How do Japanese researchers define social class? What are the implications of adopting Western methodological frameworks and terminology? And how do these choices influence the studies of historically marginalized communities? From the perspective of recent research, two dates are particularly significant for understanding social classes in Japan.

- 2002 – The termination of *Dōwa chiku* subsidies, which had aimed to reduce disparities in living standards between Buraku and non-Buraku communities.
- 2008 – The onset of the most severe financial crisis since the 1980s, which generated visible social and economic changes and reignited debates about inequality and stratification.

Both events, domestic policy shifts and global economic events, have influenced Japanese society, opening the way for new analytical frameworks such as those that foreground status, symbolic boundaries, and the lived experiences of minority groups. The first one was important, as since 2002 there are no governmental official statistics reflecting on Burakumin class position or earnings, as this category is not indicated in i.e. SSM survey (Yamagishi & Sato, 2022).¹⁷

Class System of Modern Japan

To begin with, the concept of “class” requires careful qualification in the Japanese context. The term *kaikyū* (階級), commonly used as a translation of “class” in Western sociology, is strongly associated with Marxist theory and is rarely used in contemporary everyday discourse. Instead, Japanese social research more often employs the term *kaisō* (階層), referring to social strata, which captures differences in income, education, and prestige without implying marxian class conflict. This term is used in Japanese

¹⁷ Interestingly the authors refer to Burakumin as a class throughout the paper.

nationwide Social Stratification and Social Mobility Survey. Additionally, there is also the historical concept of *mibun* (身分) referring to premodern status groups, which were hereditary, legally defined, and socially enforced. However this term was broadly discussed in the previous chapters.

In contemporary discourse on Japanese society, one statement appears with striking regularity: Japan is a classless society, and around 90% of Japanese people identify themselves as middle class. This perception has been so pervasive that many researchers have, at times, accepted implicitly or explicitly the possibility that a modern industrial nation could exist without a class structure (Sugimoto, 2014). Yet, in his works he describes a three-tier division: upper, middle, and lower each with further subdivisions.

However, closer examination of empirical data reveals a very different reality. Like all late-capitalist societies, Japan exhibits significant wealth stratification, comparable to the United States. According to OECD data from 2015, 15.7% of Japan's population lived in a state of relative poverty defined as having a household income at or below half of the national median household income (Sugimoto, 2021).

The abovementioned simplified class model has been criticized as insufficient for capturing the complexity of Japan's class structure. Hashimoto Kenji, in his article *Class Structure in Contemporary Japan*, argue that the class scheme developed by Ryuken Ohashi, while widely used and popular in Japan, oversimplifies reality:

"The first problem is that the class structure scheme assumed a priori that there was a bipolar division between the capitalist class and the working class. The Ohashi Method divides society into three main categories: the capitalist class, the self-employed, and the working class. However, (1) it does not recognize the existence of certain classes or strata such as the new middle class between the capitalist class and the working class, and (2) it does not recognize the existence of specific classes such as the old middle class, but rather regards the self-employed, which is made up of farmers and independent workers, as a 'subordinate class' just like the working class. Given the acceptance of these two characteristics, the Ohashi method is strongly colored by polarization theory" (Hashimoto, 2000, p. 39).

In addition to its conceptual limitations, the Ohashi method was also subject to political influences. Class categorizations could shift in response to ideological agendas. For example, in 1968 Ohashi published a revised class composition table that, for the first time, included the "new middle strata" as the businessman stratum of the working class. This reclassification was politically motivated: following the Japanese Communist Party's adoption of a new program in 1961, the working class was redefined to include a broad spectrum of employees, including professionals and clerical workers.

From the perspective of these authors, the popular thesis of Japan's classlessness collapses under empirical scrutiny. In response to the shortcomings of the Ohashi framework, Hashimoto proposed a more nuanced class model, building on Ohashi's method but grounded in empirical findings from the Social Stratification and Social Mobility Survey (SSM):

- The capitalist class: Executives and directors of enterprises with five or more employees; self-employed proprietors and family workers in businesses of the same scale.
- The new middle class: Employees engaged in professional, administrative, and clerical work (excluding female clerical workers).
- The working class: Employees other than professional, administrative, or clerical workers (but including female clerical workers).
- The old middle class: Executives and directors of enterprises with fewer than five employees; self-employed proprietors and family workers in businesses of the same scale.

He also argued that we "cannot deny that classes are homogenized to a certain extent in social consciousness. However, class is still an important factor in determining social consciousness and it should be used as a basic concept of primary importance to analyze social consciousness. In contemporary Japanese society, class location continues to be an important factor in determining income and social consciousness" (2000, p. 61). This framework, while not without its critics, offers a more differentiated view of contemporary Japanese society, one that undermines the image of homogeneity and highlights the persistence of stratification.

However, more contemporary research on Japanese social structure has shifted from analyzing temporary "gaps" to identifying a more rigid and entrenched class structure. Hashimoto (2018, as cited in Sugimoto, 2021) argues that Japan has transitioned from a *kakusa shakai* (gap society) into a rigid class society where interclass mobility is increasingly restricted. Central to Hashimoto's thesis is the emergence of a distinct "underclass", segment composed primarily of non-regular workers who exist near the poverty line with minimal assets and low work satisfaction. Notably, Hashimoto highlights that this stratification even manifests physically, with members of the underclass showing lower average height and weight compared to the "capitalist class," suggesting that socioeconomic status in Japan has profound biological and lifestyle implications.

Figure. 4

Table 3.3 Class distribution (%), based on Hashimoto's model of Marxian categories, 2012

Class	Total	Male	Female
Capitalist	4.1	5.4	2.2
New middle	20.6	24.2	15.6
Working	62.5	55.4	71.9
Regular employees (<i>seiki shain</i>)	35.1	40.7	27.6
Non-regular employees (<i>hi-seiki shain</i>) ^a	14.9	14.7	15.0
Housewife part-timers	12.6	n/a	29.3
Old middle	12.9	14.9	10.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Adapted from Hashimoto [2018a](#), p. 67. The figures were calculated from Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications [2012](#).

^a Excludes housewife part-timers.

Source: Source: Sugimoto, Y. (2021). *An introduction to Japanese society*. Cambridge University Press. p. 154.

Complementing this macro-analysis, Kikkawa Tōru (2022) provides a more granular intersectional approach while creating his eight-segment model, which classifies the Japanese population based on generation, gender, and educational background. Kikkawa emphasizes that the educational divide is the most fundamental source of social disparity in Japanese society today. His model places "middle-aged male graduates",

who benefit from the privileges of lifetime employment and seniority-based pay, at the pinnacle of success. Conversely, he identifies "young male non-graduates" as the most marginalized and isolated group, labeling them "LEGs" (Lightly Educated Guys).

Figure. 5

Table 3.5 Population composition, based on Kikkawa's eight segments, 2015

Segment	Workforce (20–60 years, <i>N</i> = 60.25 million)		Income (¥ '0,000)		Employee status (%)	
	No. ('0,000)	%	Individual	Household ^a	Non-regular	Blue-collar
1. Middle-aged male graduates	649	10.8	659.4	886.9	5.3	16.4
2. Middle-aged male nongraduates	1,011	16.8	466.6	650.0	7.6	57.4
3. Middle-aged female graduates	582	9.7	222.1	854.2	35.1	10.3
4. Middle-aged female nongraduates	1,062	17.6	152.5	606.6	40.8	27.0
5. Young female graduates	682	11.3	179.5	683.8	24.4	6.9
6. Young female nongraduates	652	10.8	140.2	514.6	35.5	20.7
7. Young male graduates	711	11.8	378.4	652.0	9.2	20.6
8. Young male nongraduates	676	11.2	322.0	500.8	14.0	64.3

Sources: Adapted from Kikkawa [2018](#), pp. 123–48. Workforce columns are based on the 2015 census. Income and employee status columns are based on the 2015 SSP project.

Source: Sugimoto, Y. (2021). *An introduction to Japanese society*. Cambridge University Press. p. 155.

A critical point of convergence between Hashimoto and Kikkawa is the observation of class reproduction. Kikkawa notes that educational backgrounds are firmly entrenched across generations, with the offspring of non-graduates likely to remain in the same segment. However, the reason behind this situation is not because of the intellectual skills of the second-generation graduates, but the so-called "incentive divide" that replaced "mass education society". Both scholars conclude that the most marginalized groups in contemporary Japan are those characterized by low education and non-regular or manual labor. This scholarly consensus underscores that modern Japanese inequality is no longer a transient economic issue but a structural reality where social segments are increasingly isolated from one another in their workplaces, communities, and private lives.

Social Crisis, the "Classless Society", and the Rise of the "Gap Society"

For decades, a dominant refrain in public discourse claimed that Japan is a classless society, with surveys regularly reporting that around 90% of Japanese people considered themselves middle class. Yet even within this "middle class," significant differences in wealth and status make it possible to distinguish between a lower, middle, and upper middle class. Far from a classless reality, Japan's social structure exhibits clear stratification.

Since the late 1990s economic crisis, Japanese sociologists have increasingly characterized the country as a gap society (*kakusa shakai*) marked by widening inequalities, declining real incomes, the erosion of the "salariman" employment model, and the pressures of a rapidly aging population. These changes have also altered how people perceive their own class position (Chiavacci & Hommerich, 2017).

The ideal life-course of the 1970s centred on education as the pathway to stable employment and personal fulfillment. Kariya Takehiko (Kariya, 1995, after: Chiavacci & Hommerich, 2017) noted that: *"One attends a first-class juku [private cram school], passes through first-class middle and high schools and enters a top university. If one has achieved this, then one can enter a first-class company and have a happy life. Good education → good job → fulfilled life. In the Japanese post-war society this success*

story has been drummed into the people and spread as a life plan into every last corner of society."

However, the prolonged economic stagnation of the 1990s undermined this model. Sato's (2000) influential, though initially contested, study argued that Japan had transformed into a "closed society" in which status attainment depended more on family background than individual achievement. Later data from the mid-1990s onward supported this conclusion: average household income declined steadily, while youth unemployment surged. Chiavacci and Hommerich trace this shift to the broader post-1990s "post-growth" era, in which structural economic and demographic change reshaped both material realities and self-understanding. Japan's once-vaunted homogeneous middle-class identity gave way to the perception of an "unfair" society, fractured into *kachigumi* ("winners") and *makegumi* ("losers"). New marginalised groups emerged *freeter* (youth in precarious employment), the working poor, and NEET (not in employment, education, or training) each reflecting new forms of social exclusion.

Statistical indicators confirm these structural changes. The share of non-regular employees rose from 15.3% in 1984 to 37.4% in 2014, stabilising around 36.7% in 2022. Both the Gini coefficient and the relative poverty rate have shown persistent increases. Hommerich's findings highlight a pronounced gap between people's ideal vision of society and their perception of reality, producing a generalised sense of vulnerability across all social strata. My own interview data corroborates this diagnosis, revealing nostalgia for the more stable past and growing efforts both personal and political to counteract these shifts.

Japan's post-war political economy has historically been described not in terms of redistribution between social classes, but between rural and urban areas often to the advantage of rural voters. Yet the combined forces of economic stagnation, demographic ageing, and labour market precarisation have made class inequalities harder to ignore. Those processes have been named by Hashimoto (2021) "new class society", as based on quantitative data, it was possible to separate a new, fifth class: "underclass" out of the working class: "is fundamentally different from other classes in terms of its extremely low income, vulnerability to the risk of poverty, difficulties in

marriage and family formation, and large differences from other classes in consciousness and living conditions. Therefore, from the perspective of whether or not it is possible to maintain the general standard of living, the class structure of contemporary Japan can be regarded as being divided into underclass and other classes” (2021, p. 26)

Meritocracy and Education in Japan

Post-war Japan’s educational system was long held up as a textbook case of meritocracy (*gakureki shakai*), supposedly offering equal opportunities regardless of social origin. This system, with its highly competitive entrance examinations, was credited with ensuring upward mobility and a relatively open class structure. However, reforms such as *yutori kyōiku* (relaxed education policies) increased the influence of social background on educational achievement, thereby strengthening the intergenerational reproduction of class (Chiavacci & Hommerich, 2017, p. 18). Kariya’s research confirms this trend, showing that the loosening of strict meritocratic selection mechanisms has allowed parental resources both economic and cultural to play a greater role in determining educational outcomes. The stratification system, once considered relatively open, has thus become less permeable.

As for mechanisms of social inequality, Chiavacci and Hommerich (2017, p. 20) distinguish between two primary forms:

1. Self-organising inequality: emerging from within-group dynamics that shape aspirations and behaviours, producing unequal outcomes without formal exclusion. For example, Nabeshima (2003) documents lower university attendance rates among high-school graduates from segregated Buraku communities, linked to local worldviews that downplay education as a means to occupational success.
2. Institutionally generated inequality: created by structural features of systems such as education, labour markets, and welfare, which distribute opportunities unevenly.

These mechanisms interact under Coleman’s (1990) micro–macro framework, existing institutions first determine individuals’ access to resources and shape their beliefs about

opportunity. Actors then make decisions within these constraints, often aiming to avoid downward mobility (Breen&Goldthorpe's "relative risk aversion" model). Over time, these micro-level decisions accumulate into persistent macro-level stratification.

Subjective perceptions can further reinforce inequality. Media discourses on declining educational mobility may lower working-class students' confidence in their chances of success, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1972). For Burakumin individuals, Wagatsuma describes how subtle social cues, speech patterns, behaviour, awkwardness may "unconsciously, unintentionally" reveal their background, linking this process to Goffman's theory of stigma.

Finally, Berreman's (1979) distinction between the "hidden injuries" of class and the "apparent injuries" of caste or race helps clarify the Burakumin case. While lower-class individuals may internalise their status as personal failure (Sennett & Cobb, 1972), caste-like discrimination fosters a collective awareness of injustice rooted in birth status, prompting different patterns of resistance and identity formation.

The analysis of class, caste, and social inequalities in contemporary Japan demonstrates that social differentiation is neither marginal nor incidental, but structurally embedded within Japanese society. However, the existence of such divisions does not automatically determine how they are perceived, articulated, or addressed.

In order to understand how these forms of inequality coexist with persistent representations of social coherence and unity, it is necessary to move beyond structural analysis and examine the ideological and discursive frameworks through which Japanese society is interpreted. The following section therefore shifts the focus from the organization of social differences to the processes through which homogeneity is constructed, maintained, and negotiated as a meaningful social reality.

Burakumin in Japan's Modern Class Structure

In this part, rather than attempting to definitively classify the Burakumin within existing categories, I assume that it may be more analytically productive to examine the processes through which such categories are constructed and maintained.

Burakumin are often categorized within the lower or lower-middle strata, either because of the enduring discrimination of a "hidden caste system" rooted in feudal-era hierarchies or because of marxian type discrimination specific for the working class (Yamagishi & Sato, 2022). This ambiguity between class and caste is not merely semantic, but it also shapes both scholarly interpretation and Burakumin self-perception.

Hatanaka Toshiyuki (Neary, 2003) traced Buraku discrimination to status hierarchies embedded in the modern emperor system, which adapted earlier forms of status-based exclusion. He saw the Burakumin as a purely social problem, a social construct that exists only in a certain context, and for him it is unnecessary to always start the discussion with relation to history. Being focused on the present rather than the past, he consciously chose the context of Japanese capitalism as the most important one. Although post-war reforms dismantled many structural supports for this discrimination, its social residues persist. The first Burakumin emancipation groups, such as the Levelers Association (Suiheisha) and its post-war successor, the Buraku Liberation League, framed their struggle in Marxist terms, emphasizing shared class interests and solidarity with the broader labour movement.

While Burakumin are overrepresented among Japan's poor, poverty itself is not exclusive to them. With 18.3% of Japan's population living below the poverty line in 2012, the majority of the poor are non-Burakumin (Sugimoto, 2014). This complicates attempts to define their position solely in terms of income or occupation. Importantly, while postwar Dōwa policies significantly improved material conditions in Buraku communities, contemporary research suggests that inequality persists in more indirect forms. Rather than manifesting primarily as higher unemployment, disadvantage is now more visible in patterns of precarious employment, limited upward mobility, and subtle forms of discrimination in hiring practices and marriage.

Employment data from the Buraku Liberation Research Institute (1982) showed distinct patterns: higher rates of self-employment (20% vs. 16%), greater involvement in temporary or day labour (23.4% vs. 8.4%), lower representation in professional or managerial positions (9.9% vs. 13.5%) (Murakoshi & Miwa, 1986), and a concentration in small enterprises. Many Burakumin also engage in part-time farming. These

indicators suggest that Burakumin are concentrated within the working class and small capitalist class (independent proprietors, family workers), but with a structural bias toward precarious and small-scale employment.

However, such occupational data captures dispersion but not power or class consciousness. More importantly, Burakumin might not be a class *per se*, but their position produces and reinforces class-like inequalities. Here, Ralf Dahrendorf's theory emphasizing authority relations and social conflict may offer a more precise analytical tool than purely economic definitions of class: "the differential distribution of authority invariably becomes the determining factor of systematic social conflicts" (Dahrendorf, 1959, p. 165). In this understanding Burakumin would be the group deprived of authority, and continuously fighting for it. Combined with Bourdieu's focus on relational positioning and symbolic power, this approach can reveal not only where the Burakumin stand in Japan's class system, but also how their position is reproduced through habitus, recognition, and categorical boundary maintenance.

Bourdieu, the Japanese Class System, and Burakumin

This section examines how a relational approach to inequality, grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's theory, can cast a light upon the case of the Burakumin in Japan. As Tom Gill (2000) and others have noted, the Burakumin, despite some integration into mainstream society, statistically earn lower incomes than the general population and still face segregation in certain contexts, such as in *yoseba* job markets for day labourers.

Historically, the stigma attached to Burakumin identity has been sustained by theories that framed impurity as foreign in origin, thereby reinforcing Japan's self-image as ethnically homogeneous. In the context of the *soto-uchi* (outside-inside) paradigm in Japanese culture, the Burakumin occupy an "outer" position that is symbolically impure and socially distant. This spatial and symbolic divide operates across scales: within households and communities, in interpersonal relationships, and at the macro level in Japan's engagement with the outside world.

Charles Tilly's (1999) framework for "durable inequality" provides a useful bridge to this analysis. Tilly argues that categorical inequalities such as black/white, male/female, or citizen/foreigner are maintained through social closure and boundary-making, not

merely through individual differences in ability or achievement. These boundaries are rarely complete but remain functionally effective in allocating resources and opportunities. Applied to Japanese society and Burakumin, this suggests that their marginalization is less a function of individual attributes and more the product of persistent categorical distinctions embedded in Japan's social and institutional arrangements. From this perspective, Burakumin identity can be seen as performative: it is enacted and reproduced in social situations, much like class in Bourdieu's relational theory. Recognition by others whether or not the individual self-identifies as Burakumin can be sufficient to activate the category, as Goffman's work on stigma suggests. This raises the question: how does the Burakumin experience map onto Bourdieu's theory of social space, capital, and habitus?

Bourdieu himself visited Japan and included it alongside the UK and France as a model case in his comparative sociology. However, in Japan his work has been interpreted predominantly through the lens of elite culture, with emphasis on cultural domination and capital among higher classes. The application of Bourdieu's work to the study of underclasses and especially the Burakumin remains underdeveloped.

Bourdieu's theoretical apparatus rests on four key elements: capital, habitus, fields, and symbolic power. Capital may be economic (income, assets), cultural (education, cultural goods), or social (networks, connections). Habitus refers to the internalized dispositions that guide perception, appreciation, and action, shaped by one's position in social space. Crucially, Bourdieu defines social classes not as fixed entities but as positions within a relational social space existing "in a state of virtuality" and materializing only through collective action and recognition. In this study, I will employ this theory to gain a deeper understanding of boundary-work between social classes in Japan, and to explore the "otherness" of Burakumin.

In Japan, the reception of Bourdieu's ideas has been shaped by the selective appropriation of Western theory. As Kie Sanada (2016) notes, Japanese social thought has long been entwined with Western modernism, but often in a fragmented form, stripped of its original intellectual context. This has produced an analytical environment where components of theories function as tools without necessarily engaging with their broader critiques. Tessa Morris-Suzuki warns that attempts to conceptualize "Japanese

culture" in opposition to the West risk remaining trapped within the logic of Western modernity: *"Analyses which try to use the category "Japanese culture" as a means of escaping the grasp of the Modern western worldview seem therefore to be destined to find themselves, after many speculations and struggles, still trapped within the extended hand of a self-defined "western modernity"* (Morris-Suzuki 1995, p. 775)

Within this context, the Burakumin case represents a particularly revealing analytical problem. It does not fit neatly into existing frameworks of class, caste, or status, thereby exposing the limitations of these categories when applied to the Japanese context. This ambiguity is not merely a classificatory difficulty, but constitutes a key site for investigating how symbolic boundaries are constructed, negotiated, and maintained in contemporary Japan.

3.5. Symbolic Boundaries

Symbolic boundary theory, as developed by Michèle Lamont and others (Bourdieu, Fournier, Weber, Durkheim), offers a crucial lens for understanding the cultural and symbolic mechanisms that underlie social inclusion and exclusion. Symbolic boundaries are the conceptual lines individuals and groups draw to categorize people, objects, and practices distinguishing those deemed to belong from those who do not. These distinctions manifest in taboos, cultural attitudes, everyday practices, and patterns of preference. By shaping perceptions of legitimacy and worth, symbolic boundaries play a central role in the production and maintenance of social inequality and the exercise of power (Lamont et al., 2015).

In this study, symbolic boundary theory will be used to examine how such distinctions are enacted in Japan's social stratification, particularly in the context of shifting class identities and Burakumin "otherness". This approach complements institutional and structural analyses by focusing on the "micro-cultural" processes through which inequalities are reinforced, contested, or transformed in everyday life.

Historical Roots and Theoretical Development

The concept of symbolic boundaries has been deeply rooted in sociological and anthropological scholarly works. Marcel Mauss said that: "The domain of social life is essentially a domain of differences" (Lamont, 1992), and quite accurately explains the focus or interest on this topic. With the development of modern sociology, especially class theories, there appeared a need to truly understand and grasp how people of various backgrounds, ethnicities, or groups differ from each other, and why those differences are necessary in human interactions, and how they can be explained.

Émile Durkheim, one of the fathers of modern sociology, started with an approach of viewing symbolic boundaries as objective. He argued that human beings classify things and people, creating labels through contrast and inclusion. For Durkheim, culture was primarily a way of knowing, and symbolic classifications were often organized around binary oppositions. He emphasized the importance of sharing a common definition of the sacred and profane, common rules of conduct, and compliance with rituals and interdictions as the most crucial factors defining internal bonds within a community. For Mary Douglas the sacred vs. profane distinction was also important. She emphasized that while classifications play a growing role in social life, their production is increasingly the responsibility of specialists and professionals who define institutional criteria for labeling individuals. (Lamont, 1992).

Durkheim focused on the ingroup cohesion perspective, while Max Weber made honour a heart of his theory, and he stressed the importance of creation of social inequality, rather than social solidarity. In his eyes human beings were engaged in a continuous struggle over scarce resources, forming status groups whose superiority is defined in relation to other groups. These groups "cultivate the sense of honor, privilege relationships with group members, and define specific qualifications for gaining entry to the group and for interacting with lower status outsiders (e.g., opposing miscegenation)". Weber also highlighted that classes and status groups compete for the monopolization of resources, and political groups mobilize to promote their members' interests, with boundaries between them being cultural or symbolic.

Michèle Lamont, a crucial author for this study, considers symbolic boundaries to be subjective. She argued that boundaries existing in sociological theory, when applied to everyday life, are often arbitrary. Lamont views symbols as "expressions of a group

desire to concentrate themselves, separate themselves from others". A key challenge is to "displace and transgress such boundaries and develop a multidimensional conception of culture". She also notes a shift in research from describing social construction "why" things happen, to explaining "how" they happen, marking a revival of symbolic interactionism and phenomenology. Which at the end allowed for a research method that sees a processual side of the social reality, and is interested in how people make sense of the boundaries between themselves. There is also another important concept connected with boundaries and their making, it is "boundary work" introduced by Thomas Gieryn and defined as "the discursive attribution of selected qualities to scientists, scientific methods, and scientific claims for the purpose of drawing a rhetorical boundary between science and some less authoritative residual non-science".

Each scholar focused on different aspects of boundaries. Howard S. Becker and Erving Goffman (labeling theory and symbolic interactionism) analysed the social processes that lead to identity constitution. Becker stated that "Deviant acts lead to social exclusion only when these acts are socially defined as such", which may play a role in defining how societies treat and categorize acts as deviant or not. Alan Wolfe pointed out an important distinction, that boundaries are not always imposed by "the other" and that boundaries chosen by individuals, especially those resulting from a "moral passage" (informed decisions), should be respected.

Goffman on the other hand said that the "distances of boundaries that separate individuals are never, even in total institutions, purely physical. They are symbolic representations that most often take the form of stigma". Similarly Pierre Bourdieu emphasized the "logic of distinction", as for him, violence can be symbolic, not just physical. Boundaries are symbolic and political, serving to "freeze a particular state of the social struggle, i.e. a given state of the distribution of advantages and obligations". Consumption patterns reflect different relationships people have with cultural objects, helping to understand domination.

For Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault identity was rationally defined and shaped by power relations among groups, asserting that "semiotic always with politics!", shifting the discussion from the groups and individuals, to performance of power and overwhelming discourses. Finally, Louis Althusser and Nicos Poulantzas stressed the

role of ideological state apparatuses in conceptualizing boundaries that divide individuals, groups, and collectives as products of domination and exploitation (Lamont, 1992).

Alan Wolfe (1992) said that groups are by nature exclusive, not inclusive, and they protect themselves and function in the most effective way, when they keep others out (Coser, 1956). The boundaries that are necessary are of different types: some are rituals, some require official membership, some are demarcation lines, suggesting the impassibility for others. If we investigate the functions and properties of symbolic boundaries we could assess how they operate socially considering the following factors:

- Permeability: how easily individuals cross them.
- Salience: the degree to which they shape social interactions.
- Durability: how persistently they endure over time.
- Visibility: the extent to which they are recognized explicitly or operate subtly.

Boundaries are naturally crossed in the course of individuals and groups lifetimes. Some of them are more stable than others, some of them change with time. If we consider caste boundaries, we realize that they are rather durable, visible and socially important. Class differences might be more difficult to recognize at the first sight, especially in a homogeneous society, but they might be less influential in terms of social interactions. In the example of Burakumin, the official barriers (law, official and institutional regulations) might vanish with time, the boundaries might not be obvious in a casual setting, but they often are permanent and their salience might be striking especially in a situation of crossing them: marriage, job interview, revealing long lasting processes of differentiation.

Boundaries are also important in- and outgroup building factors. They are used in the process of identity formation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979): “Social identity theory explores the phenomenon of the 'ingroup' and 'outgroup', and is based on the view that identities are constituted through a process of difference defined in a relative or flexible way depends on the activities in which one engages.” (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). People define themselves by identifying with different groups through their lives, which creates a positive sense of belonging. Boundaries are a key element, as they define group belonging and reinforce group-specific self-images. In terms of social stratification

boundaries are often used in order to naturalize distinctions and legitimize inequality, especially when differences are attributed to biological or genetic aspects, like in the case of racism.

Inequalities and in-group favouritism impact the ways how boundaries are maintained and reinforced, which in turn determine who has or does not have access to vital resources or opportunities. These processes might be moderated by use of different forms of capitals: cultural, symbolic or economic, where certain groups privilege those with the “right” taste, or level of wealth, or those who engage in social activities regarded as highly desired. Through the social acceptance of norms and divisions groups establish and reproduce standards of beneficial or acceptable behaviours. This rigidity however leads to tensions within the social structure itself. Robert K. Merton defines it as: "a network of norms and values concentrated in the form of social roles, around distinguished social positions (statuses), and in the form of institutions, around essential social functions." (Sztompka, 2005). Importantly, he noticed that internal contradictions that exist within a structure lead to phenomena like role conflict and normative antinomies. Such structural states compel various types of deviant reactions: innovation, ritualism, retreatism, or rebellion. With time, when social structure undergoes constant change, through normative innovations and "institutionalized circumvention of norms," lead to slow erosion and disappearance of old boundaries.

3.6. Constructing Homogeneity and Difference in Japan

An important factor in the analysis of social stratification in Japan concerns the conceptual inconsistency between Western sociological categories and Japanese classificatory systems. While the concept of “class” occupies a central place in Western sociology, its Japanese equivalent (*kaikyū*) carries strong Marxist connotations and is rarely used in contemporary Japanese discourse. Instead, terms such as *kaisō* (stratum) operate within distinct analytical and historical frameworks by Japanese scholars writing both in Japanese and English.

A similar conceptual complexity applies to the notion of homogeneity. Rather than constituting a singular and stable feature of Japanese society, homogeneity emerges as a

layered and historically shifting discourse. Different terms, such as *tan'itsusei* (ethnic or national homogeneity) and *kinshitsusei* (perceived social uniformity), refer to distinct dimensions of sameness. These discourses intersect with narratives such as *ichi oku sōchūryū* (“a nation of middle-class citizens”), which mask social differences without necessarily denying their existence.

In order to understand how different forms of inequality coexist with narrative representations of social coherence, it is necessary to move beyond structural analysis and examine the ideological and discursive frameworks through which Japanese society is interpreted and interpret itself. The following section therefore shifts the focus from the organization of social differences to the processes through which sameness and difference are constructed, maintained, and negotiated.

3.6.1. Modernization and the Western Gaze

The Meiji period is often described as a moment of rapid engagement with Western ideas; however, rather than simple Westernization, it involved selective adaptation, translation, and reinterpretation of external *stimuli* within existing political and cultural frameworks. A great contributor to this shift was Fukuzawa Yukichi, a philosopher and educator who, while advocating for modernization, opposed the blind imitation of the West. He envisioned a civilized society composed of independent and self-aware individuals who would use Western science and technology to build a modern, self-respecting Japanese culture. Main sources of inspiration for social reforms came from France, Germany, and the USA. As John W. Hall explained: "*The individual is to be free to pursue personal aspirations, the interests of the state are to be considered superior to all others, the "basic customs of the past" will be rejected in favor of new patterns drawn from the West*". (Hall, 1979, p. 224)

In the second half of the 19th century, universities modeled on European ones began to be established in Japan, inviting Western lecturers and bringing in works of European philosophers. Young Japanese people were sent to schools in the West to be trained in European sciences and introduce ideas of progress in their country. Early works in

social philosophy and politics included those by John Stuart Mill, Auguste Comte, and Charles Montesquieu. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* played an important role. Empiricism, idealism, and positivism became subjects of discussion among the elite. Translations of Hobbes's *Leviathan* and Rousseau's *Social Contract* also garnered interest. Fukuzawa Yukichi, openly condemned absolutism and questioned the permanence and immutability of hierarchy between people (a position that challenged established social hierarchies of the times). Works by Herbert Spencer and the theory of social Darwinism also found supporters, mainly among members of the Min'yusha (Friends of the Nation Society).

The problems that tormented Japanese philosophers then concerned primarily the search for identity in the new reality. Some completely rejected Japanese heritage and turned to European thought, considering traditions and customs that shaped social relations as barbaric and uncivilized. Certain intellectual circles debated radical reforms, including language and social organization, though these remained limited and contested rather than widely adopted positions. This attitude is visible in a fragment by Sakuma Shōzan, writing about the five pleasures of a noble man: *"That (a noble man) was born after opening our eyes to the teachings of Westerners and thus can understand principles unknown to the sages and wise men of old times - this is the fourth pleasure. The fact that he practices the ethics of the East and the scientific technique of the West, without neglecting the spiritual and material aspects of life, and combining the personal with the non-personal sphere, which benefits people and allows the nation to be served - this is the fifth pleasure"*. (Blocker & Starling, 2008, p. 140)

These developments contributed to the emergence of competing frameworks through which modern Japan could be imagined, negotiated, and governed. Within this emerging modern framework, discrimination against Burakumin became increasingly difficult to harmonize with the image of a modern, civilized nation. This tension did not simply lead to its disappearance, but rather contributed to processes of reframing, marginalization, and selective silencing.

However, it must be emphasized that the emergence of the Burakumin as a modern category was a systematic consequence of state-led political and ideological shifts. During the Meiji period, the social construction of identity was tied to a new national

project where civilization and modernity became the primary criteria for belonging. As Howell (2005, pp. 203-204) observes, this era established a rigid ideological loop: “being Japanese was to be civilized, and to be civilized was to contribute to the national project of attaining modernity”. Within this framework, those who could not be seamlessly integrated into the 'civilized' modern subject were institutionally marginalized, effectively creating the Burakumin as a necessary 'other' for the burgeoning Japanese nation-state.

3.6.2. The Discourse of Japanese Uniqueness: From Orientalism to Nihonjinron

Japan has often been positioned within Orientalist discourse (Said, 1978) as a culturally distinct and coherent entity. This positioning, however, should be understood not simply as an external imposition, but as part of a broader set of interactions through which knowledge about Japan has been produced. Those processes contributed to the creation of *nihonjinron* (discussions of the Japanese), a set of influential discursive formations emphasizing uniqueness of Japan, its people, and its history. As Peter N. Dale argues, many strands of *nihonjinron* rely on assumptions “*that the Japanese constitute a culturally and socially homogeneous racial entity, whose essence is virtually unchanged from prehistoric times down to the present day*” (1995, Introduction, para. 2). He notes that *nihonjinron* presupposes that the Japanese differ radically from all other known peoples and is reserved to any analysis derived from non-Japanese sources.

The rules governing this discourse are manifold and have had a profound impact on social identity. Firstly, being Japanese is understood in racial terms, by stressing the fact that Japanese islands are isolated and that geographical location resulted in racial and genetic distinctiveness. The Japanese were cut off from the currents of historical events that happened on the continent. Secondly, as Japanese are distant from other nations, so is their language, which has a unique grammatical structure, and living together as a one group caused the creation of specific mindframes, language and symbolic patterns that are not universal, but rather local and not comparable to other linguistic phenomena. Dale (1995, Introduction, para. 2) describes this: “*nihonjinron may be defined as works of cultural nationalism concerned with the ostensible ‘uniqueness’ of Japan in any*

aspect, and which are hostile to both individual experience and the notion of internal socio-historical diversity”

This conceptual framework, while internally coherent, relies on a set of recurring assumptions and simplifications, has created a complex double lens through which Japan views itself, is viewed by others, and views others. Acknowledging my own positionality as a Polish scholar allows me to bring a unique perspective to this discussion. Coming from a country with its own history of grappling with external hegemonic influences, gives me a unique perspective and maybe even the capability to hear the nuances of Orientalism and its internalization, which may help mitigate some of the typical Western biases that might otherwise inform this research.

The *nihonjinron* discourse, with its emphasis on Japan’s ethnic and cultural homogeneity, introduces a productive tension when considered in relation to the Burakumin. While this discourse foregrounds images of cultural and social coherence, it can also be interpreted as contributing to pressures for formal equality by positing a singular Japanese identity. Within such a framework, the existence of a discriminated group appears difficult to reconcile with claims of national unity.

3.6.3. Homogeneity, Heterogeneity, and Uchi/Soto Opposition

This section analyzes the ideological frameworks through which social reality in Japan is interpreted, organized, and made meaningful. The Burakumin case cannot be viewed as an isolated phenomenon; it is deeply embedded in the historical and social conditions of a country that has undergone profound transformations. While Japan is often shrouded in a halo of uniqueness, a country seen as distant, magical, and fascinating from Western perspective, this romanticized framing can structure the conditions under which knowledge about Japan is produced and circulated, both within and outside the country. This phenomenon makes it often difficult to transmit reliable information about Japan, both for researchers outside the country and within it.

The distinction between perceptual, discursive, and practical dimensions of homogeneity provides a useful framework for situating the Burakumin within broader processes of social differentiation in Japan. Rather than approaching them as an

exception to an otherwise homogeneous society, this study treats the Burakumin as an analytically productive site through which the layered nature of homogeneity becomes visible.

At the level of perception (*kinshitsu*), homogeneity operates as a widely shared sense of social coherence that does not depend on the absence of internal diversity, but on the ways in which such diversity is backgrounded, minimized, or rendered socially irrelevant. Images of a “homogeneous Japan” persist not because they accurately describe social reality, but because they are continuously reproduced as common-sense understandings. Within this perceptual field, the Burakumin occupy a position that is structurally present yet often socially muted, known, but not openly articulated.

At the level of discourse (*tanitsu, nihonjinron*), homogeneity is articulated as a principle of ethnic and cultural unity. As Befu (2001) argues, the construction of Japan as a “mono-ethnic nation” does not simply erase difference, but incorporates it into a broader narrative of cohesion. From this perspective, the marginalization of groups such as the Burakumin can be understood not as a contradiction of homogeneity, but as one of the conditions through which this narrative is stabilized and maintained.

These perceptual and discursive dimensions are closely tied to the level of lived social practice, where homogeneity is continuously enacted through relational structures, symbolic classifications, and everyday interactions. Nakane’s (1970) emphasis on group-based belonging and situational membership highlights how inclusion and exclusion are organized within social life, while Ohnuki-Tierney’s (1989) analysis of symbolic systems of purity and impurity points to the cultural logics through which boundaries are reproduced within an apparently unified social body. In this context, the Burakumin emerge not as an external “other,” but as a socially constituted boundary category that contributes to the organization of distinctions within the wider society.

It is precisely at this level of social practice that mechanisms of shame and stigma become particularly significant. Drawing on Douglas (1966), impurity can be understood as a relational category that marks the limits of social order. Within this framework, the positioning of the Burakumin is not reducible to fixed attributes, but is produced through processes that associate them with transgression, disorder, or

symbolic “pollution.” These associations are not merely descriptive, but operate as mechanisms that regulate visibility, speech, and social interaction.

Shame, in this context, functions as a key modality through which these boundaries are internalized and maintained. The reluctance to openly address the Burakumin issue, the social sensitivity surrounding their identification, and the projection of stigmatized traits can all be interpreted as practices that sustain both the perception of homogeneity and the differentiation it depends upon. Rather than indicating a simple opposition between a homogeneous majority and a marginalized minority, these dynamics point to a more complex configuration in which sameness and difference are co-produced.

This perspective allows us to move beyond framing Japanese society in terms of a dichotomy between homogeneity and heterogeneity. Instead, it highlights how homogeneity operates across multiple levels, as perception, discourse, and practice, and how the figure of the Burakumin can be understood as a lens through which the processes of boundary-making, differentiation, and social ordering become analytically visible.

This discourse of homogeneity, however, exists in tension with a powerful, ingrained narrative of heterogeneity, most notably the *uchi/soto* (insider/outsider) paradigm. This distinction is a fundamental aspect of Japanese social relations, defining the boundaries between groups with which an individual identifies (*uchi*) and those with which they do not (*soto*). As an organizational principle, it allows for the simultaneous presence of a dominant narrative of homogeneity and a reality of internal divisions, as seen in the Burakumin issue.

This dichotomy is echoed in Chie Nakane’s influential theory of Japanese social structure. Nakane emphasizes continuity in underlying patterns of social organization, a position that has often been interpreted by later scholars as suggesting a form of structural continuity. She distinguished between two types of social group belonging: identity based on common qualification (e.g., a clan, a caste) and identity based on common membership (e.g., a village, a situational position). In this framework, the Burakumin can be read as a particularly illustrative case, a group defined by a common qualification that positions them as permanent outsiders, or *soto*, despite the official

discourse of national unity.

However, Nakane's own theories, including "vertical society" (*tate shakai*), has been subject to extensive re-evaluation in recent years. Her central claim, that Japanese social organization is structured primarily through hierarchical, situational relationships rather than horizontal class affiliations, was highly influential in shaping both academic and popular understandings of Japan. Nakane's framework has been often critiqued for its essentialist and homogenizing tendencies, associated with the *nihonjinron* discourse itself, raising concerns about her role in reinforcing narratives of cultural uniqueness and internal homogeneity. But surprisingly, contemporary redefinitions of the sociological canon (e.g., Ushiyama, 2025) suggest that Nakane Chie's work should be read not as a static, outdated account of national character, but as an epistemic strategy within the so-called "Third Space ideas seek to apply indigenous/local concepts as explanations (explains), rather than objects to be explained (explanandum), thereby reversing the flow of knowledge from the metropole to the periphery (reversed directionality)." (Ushiyama, 2025, para. 3). Her approach, employing local concepts (i.e., verticality) to revise Western structural functionalism, provides an early and crucial example of the decolonization of social theory and the reversal of knowledge flows from the periphery to the center. That is why the presence of her works in this thesis is not merely an incident, but a strategic decision.

3.6.4. The Social Regimes of Shame and Stigma

The ideological discourses of homogeneity and heterogeneity are enforced on a social level through powerful mechanisms of shame and stigma. Drawing on the work of Mary Douglas, who defined impurity or "dirt" as a disruption to social order, this research conceptualizes Burakumin positioned as a symbolic counterpoint to mainstream Japanese identity. While mainstream Japanese are perceived as pure, conflict-avoidant, and harmonious, Burakumin are stereotyped as loud, dirty, poor, and aggressive. This fear of dirt and transgression, so central to Douglas's theory of purity and danger, can be interpreted as one of the mechanisms through which symbolic boundaries are maintained.

In this context, shame and shamelessness emerge as a pivotal pair of categories for understanding Japanese social control. This internalized social control manifests in three distinct ways:

- Shame of receiving governmental aid: mainstream Japanese society, which values self-reliance, projects a sense of "shamelessness" onto the Burakumin for their historical reliance on state support, even as the government created the conditions for their poverty.
- Shame of discussing Burakumin: the topic itself is often relegated to whispers and gossip, reflecting a deep-seated social reluctance to openly acknowledge the existence of a discriminated group within the homogeneous national body.
- Projection of negative traits: negative or shameful traits are projected onto the Burakumin, allowing the dominant group to maintain a sense of superiority and avoid confronting its own social contradictions.

This positioning gives rise to a dynamic in which Burakumin may appear as an "invisible minority" who are simultaneously hypervisible, playing a role (Goffman, 2007) of a "cyst" within the social body, familiar yet alien and separated. Their ambiguous, "fuzzy" identity, which cannot be clearly defined by race, class, or location, evokes a deep-seated fear of transgression and unpredictability in a society that highly values rules and social harmony. This makes them a quintessential "trickster" figure always on the margins, unsettling and ambiguous, yet integral to the construction of mainstream identity.

3.7. Conclusion

In this part, I reviewed key Western and Japanese approaches to class, caste, and social stratification, establishing the theoretical foundation for the analysis in the following Chapters. Rather than treating these concepts as directly transferable, I have highlighted the importance of understanding how different forms of social differentiation: economic, cultural, and symbolic, intersect in the Japanese context.

Building on these perspectives, I have argued that social boundaries should be understood not only as structural divisions, but also as socially produced and maintained distinctions that shape both collective organization and individual experience.

The second part of this chapter focused on discourses of homogeneity and their role in structuring perceptions of Japanese society. In particular, I discussed that narratives of homogeneity do not simply describe social reality, but actively shape how differences are perceived, articulated, and often obscured. This is especially visible in the coexistence of the ideal of homogeneity with enduring mechanisms of differentiation, such as the *uchi/soto* (insider/outsider) distinction. Within this framework, the Burakumin emerge not simply as a marginalized group, but as a particularly revealing case through which these boundary-making processes can be observed. Their position as an “invisible minority” highlights the interplay between visibility and invisibility, inclusion and exclusion, as well as knowledge and silence.

Taken together, these observations suggest that homogeneity in the Japanese context should be approached as a discursive and ideological construct, which coexists with, and often conceals, persistent forms of social inequality.

The following chapters build on this framework by developing the methodological tools necessary to examine how such symbolic and social boundaries are produced and maintained in the everyday lives of mainstream Japanese individuals.

CHAPTER 4. METHODOLOGY

Motto: "Generally speaking - the researcher discovers that every cultural system exists for certain conscious and active historical subjects, i.e., in the sphere of experience and activity of a certain defined people, individuals and collectivities, living in a specific part of the human world in a specific historical epoch. In this regard, for the scholar, this cultural system is really and objectively such as it was (or is) given to those historical subjects when they experienced (or experience) it, actively dealing with it." (Znaniecki, 2008, pp. 67-68).

4.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I will outline the methodological foundation of my research, which aims to answer a series of specific questions about social divisions and symbolic boundaries that shape social life in Japan, a country often perceived as homogenous. In this thesis I do not assume that Japanese society is objectively homogeneous. Rather, I decided to examine the widespread cultural narrative of homogeneity and how this narrative shapes the perception of social differences, focusing especially on social boundaries.

My study is situated within a critical realist paradigm (Bhaskar, 1975), as it is aiming to explain, not just describe, how symbolic boundaries and mechanisms of classification are enacted in everyday discourse. While recognizing that all social knowledge is mediated by interpretation, I assume the social facts exist independently. The core of my research uses a qualitative case study strategy to explore symbolic boundaries and minority-majority relations. This methodology provides a crucial framework for understanding how abstract social concepts manifest in everyday life.

This chapter serves as a road map for the reader, detailing the process I will follow to address my research questions and objectives. It will cover my research journey, including the philosophical and theoretical foundations, research design, data collection methods, and analytical approach. I will begin by discussing the initial ideas that shaped this thesis, followed by a detailed justification of my methodological choices.

Specifically, this chapter will discuss and argue for:

- The alignment of my methodology with my research aims and questions.

- The rationale behind my chosen research paradigm.
- The selection of my specific research design and methods.
- The approach to data collection and analysis.

To achieve my research aims and objectives, I decided to reject radical constructivism in favor of a critical realist view. This allows me to move beyond mere description to explain how social mechanisms are enacted in everyday discourse. It provides the tools to connect informants' discourses and practices to underlying mechanisms, such as the regulation of shame and the maintenance of social hierarchies.

My research is conducted using a qualitative research design, specifically employing an abductive approach. This design aligns with my goal to be open to the unexpected, and to start with certain theoretical intuitions, but also to allow the empirical data to speak, therefore capturing the richness and complexity of human experience.

Finally, I explain the reasons for applying thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify patterns and themes within the qualitative interview data. These themes will then be interpreted through the theoretical lenses of symbolic boundaries (Michèle Lamont), purity and classification (Mary Douglas), and class theory (Max Weber). The analysis will proceed via retroduction, allowing me to uncover the underlying social structures and power dynamics that shape the discourse around otherness and sameness in modern Japan.

4.2. My Research Journey

This part of the chapter outlines my research journey and the circumstances both personal and global that have shaped it. It is a story of how micro- and macro-histories intersect, influencing the direction and outcome of my work. One of the earliest and most defining factors was the decision to pursue my PhD studies while working full-time. Although my professional role was unrelated to my research, it was the only feasible option at the time. This path was demanding, but it instilled resilience and persistence, keeping my academic goals in sight. Some challenges I could anticipate; others were entirely unforeseen. Researching another culture is inherently complex, but undertaking it during a global pandemic, with travel restrictions in place, adds another

layer of difficulty. At the same time, it forced me to focus more deeply on reading, reviewing literature, and refining my methodological direction. The pandemic also brought a profound personal loss: the death of my supervisor, Professor Wojciech Burszta. His passing left me with uncertainty and the daunting task of finding a new mentor. After a difficult period, I was fortunate to begin working under Professor Mikołaj Cześniak, whose guidance prompted me to shift from a primarily theoretical project to one grounded in empirical research.

This transition required learning new approaches, designing interview scenarios, and planning data collection - steps I had not anticipated when beginning my PhD. It was at this stage that I encountered another major obstacle: gaining access to my chosen research group. Despite my academic background, time spent in Japan, and language proficiency, attempts to connect with scholars and institutions on the subject of Burakumin and social class were repeatedly met with silence or rejection. These experiences, which I came to understand through the concepts of gatekeeping and in-group/out-group dynamics, made it clear that my original plan of interviewing Burakumin individuals in Japan was unattainable. This realization marked the most challenging moment in my research, forcing me to rethink my strategy. With my supervisor's support, I shifted focus from direct access to Burakumin communities to an indirect approach: exploring attitudes toward social boundaries among mainstream Japanese individuals. Since professional obligations prevented travel to Japan, I concentrated instead on Japanese residents in Poland, a group that, due to their experiences abroad, I expected to be more open to discussion.

Given the sensitivity of the Burakumin issue, I also adjusted how I presented my project. Directly framing it around this community risked immediate refusal, as the topic remains taboo and tied to strong convictions. Instead, I posed broader questions about symbolic boundaries, social positions, and group relations. From these conversations, I aimed to identify patterns and attitudes that could indirectly illuminate dynamics between the majority and minority groups in Japan. Through this reframing, I gathered material that not only broadened my scope but also revealed how individuals understand and act upon symbolic boundaries in their everyday lives. By reading between the lines of these narratives, I sought to uncover deeper cultural patterns shaped by both personal perspectives and broader social discourses. This shift ultimately

provided the foundation for the methodological approach outlined in the following section.

4.3. Research Philosophy

In philosophy, it is said that one is either supporting Aristotle or Plato in the broader discussion on how the world exists and how we can know it. This is crucial for establishing the research paradigm and situating oneself in the ontological discussion, as it grounds and anchors further explorations. The most popular or common paradigms that can be used in qualitative research projects are: (post)positivist, interpretive, poststructuralist, and radical (Grant & Giddings, 2002; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Moreover, as Braun and Clarke (2024) stated, new ones are emerging, including: post-qualitative inquiry or posthumanism or new materialisms (Brinkmann, 2017; Lather, 2016; Lather & St. Pierre, 2013; Lupton, 2019; St. Pierre, 2021; Ulmer, 2017), allowing the researchers to open up to new perspectives and theoretical combinations. Lincoln and Denzin define paradigm as "basic belief systems" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p.107) and "value systems that encompass meta-theoretical – the ontological, epistemological, and methodological – assumptions in which our research practice is embedded" (Braun & Clarke, 2024). My dissertation adopts a critical realist philosophical stance complemented by an interpretivist approach. Critical realism derives from realism, a position that assumes the objective reality does indeed exist. However, with the development of constructivism, this straightforward approach seems to be discussed and criticized by many modern researchers for being insufficient and inflexible in comprehending and encompassing the interpretative and discursive nature of qualitative data (Lincoln, Denzin, Braun, Clarke).

From a philosophical standpoint, where everything is constructed and subjected to interpretation, realism seems to be a 19th-century concept at its core and too positivist for the variability of human experience (Bhaskar, 1975). At that point, critical realism found its supporters (Sayer, 2000; Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 1975) who perceived it as a middle-ground between those two opposing views. Following Braun and Clarke (2024), I assume that it is *"a philosophical/meta-theoretical tradition that assumes that a material reality exists independent of our ideas about it, but that our experiences and representations of reality are mediated by language and culture."* This, I would argue, is

the basis of this entire thesis, acknowledging the fact that while a stratified social reality exists independently of our perceptions, our understanding of this reality is nonetheless mediated by subjective meanings and interpretations. What is given in the data is not a "clear and direct reflection of reality", but a "mediated reflection of reality" (Braun&Clarke, 2024). Carla Willig, on the much the same note, calls critical realism "a perspective that combines the realist ambition to gain a better understanding of what is 'really' going on in the world with the acknowledgement that the data the researcher gathers may not provide direct access to this reality." (Willig, 2013, p.13). The informants I am interviewing bring with them their perceptions of reality, which are rooted in their cultural and linguistic context and shaped by their personal experiences, narratives they have been exposed to, or aspirations they have been subjected to. Attitudes and behaviors are socially and contextually shaped within a given environment, and these norms, attitudes, and values can vary across cultures and social classes (e.g., habitus in Bourdieu).

The data is never pure; it is already interpreted through informants' perceptions and then again, by mine, as a researcher, mediated by the use of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2024). We cannot see and uncover the reality as it is. It is impossible to reach the Kantian noumena, what we know is the phenomena, always mediated by certain forms of cognition like language or culture. Critical realism states that there is the truth, but it cannot be accessed in a direct way, so I use interpretivism (or relativism, following Braun and Clarke) as an epistemological tool to gather rich qualitative data on lived experiences and symbolic boundary work, which will allow me to infer and analyze the underlying causal mechanisms and real social consequences that shape the perceptions of sameness and difference in Japan, in line with critical realist principles and the insights of scholars like Douglas and Lamont.

However, one important thing must be noted: the data and the interviewees' perspectives are never "pure," and neither is the perspective of the researcher. We are entering projects being shaped by our language, past experiences and convictions. This is also true for myself, as a Polish national who has certain experiences with Japanese culture, but still remains an outsider. The emphasis needs to be placed on reflexivity, which is my ability to understand my position, points of view and standing points, as coming from a specific context, and thus influencing my interpretation. To ensure the quality of

this analysis, I will use both methodological and theoretical triangulation as an approach allowing me to cross-check my own assumptions and enhance the credibility. Although the results of qualitative research cannot be extrapolated to the entire population, by using different data sources and combining various theoretical perspectives I will be able to evaluate if my interpretations align with the broader scope of studies on Japanese social stratification and symbolic boundaries.

4.4. Research Design

Given that I focus on a specific group of people - mainstream Japanese and their understanding of class and symbolic boundaries - this research would be best outlined as a qualitative case study, using thematic analysis within a critical realist paradigm. While drawing on interpretive traditions, I aim to understand and explain the mechanisms underlying symbolic boundary work in contemporary Japan. To ensure the best quality of this project, I employ multiple sources, including interviews, historical accounts, theoretical frameworks and quantitative data, to build a solid and reliable explanatory account.

To manage the diverse and ambiguous topics of class and status boundaries, and blurred definitions of Burakumin identity, I adopt the abductive approach. According to the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce: *“Abduction is the process of forming an explanatory hypothesis. It is the only logical operation which introduces any new idea; for induction does nothing but determine a value, and deduction merely evolves the necessary consequences of a pure hypothesis. Deduction proves that something must be; Induction shows that something actually is operative; Abduction merely suggests that something may be.”* (CP 5.171, 1935) This framework is particularly suitable in a situation of research focused on mainstream - minority relations, symbolic boundaries and stigmatized minorities, where categories like class, caste, and stratum, often fail to grasp the complexity of people's lived experiences.

Abduction, as an approach, differs from both induction, which moves from specific observations (i.e. interview data) to broader generalizations and theoretical insights, and deduction, which begins with a thesis or hypothesis and then tests it against prior assumptions and data. My aim in this study is to present the phenomena I am examining

in different, yet complementary ways. Given that I understand the diversity of Japanese society as a "surprising fact" I am going to search and generate the explanations that are most likely. Following Timmermans & Tavory (2012, p. 170), my aim is to enter *"abduction refers to an inferential creative process of producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence. A researcher is led away from old to new theoretical insights."* In order to seek the best explanation for observed phenomena in the initial phase of coding and analysis, I will provide several theoretical frameworks, i.e., Mary Douglas' concepts of purity and pollution, Michele Lamont's symbolic boundaries, Max Weber notions of life chances, status and prestige, and Pierre Bourdieu's ideas of capitals and symbolic power. This will allow me to navigate through data with a sense of clarity, but without predetermined findings. I keep an open mind to new themes that might emerge from the interviews, and am prepared to integrate additional theories and frameworks to provide complete interpretation.

This leads to the statement that, aligning with the abductive logic, I place the more nuanced and layered theoretical considerations to the Discussion Chapter. The delayed introduction of these perspectives, including Goffman's stigma theory, Elias's sociology of shame, and Geertz's thick description among others, might be treated as evidence that theories are not only applied but also discovered and adapted in light of empirical findings. Finally, the choice of thematic and discourse analysis, and their ability to uncover underlying patterns, narratives, and power dynamics within the interview data, will strengthen the explanatory power of my analysis of symbolic boundaries in contemporary Japan.

Sample collection

As discussed in the previous section, due to various reasons both the scope of my work and my target group had shifted. Initially, I was interested in recruiting Japanese of Burakumin origin, but due to the limited access to this group, I decided on interviews with mainstream Japanese. To do that I changed my research questions and research perspectives as well. My interest in the class divisions and symbolic boundaries in Japanese society stayed, but I completed this by exploring their understanding of class position and boundaries between majority and minority groups. I wanted to analyse symbolic attitudes and deep patterns and in order to do that I had to read between the lines of interview responses to identify implicit messages stemming from individual

predispositions, social standpoints, or broader Japanese societal discussions.

In interviews I used the everyday language of social differences rather than technical sociological terms such as *kaikyū* or *kaisō*, precisely to capture respondents' own interpretations of social hierarchy. However in English interviews, if necessary, I did use the term “social class”, in Japanese ones either I or the translator used *kaikyū*, as it is used in Social Stratification and Social Mobility Survey¹⁸.

Between February 2024 and June 2025, 15 cross-sectional interviews were conducted. The data was collected at a single point in time, offering a snapshot of current experiences and perceptions of my interviewees. For my research I used the non-probability sampling type called snowball sampling. It seemed the best choice for gathering a group to discuss topics regarded as difficult or tabooed, and it proved to be the most effective method of reaching hard-to-access groups. In terms of objective factors that might influence the research outcome my group was unique, consisting mainly of highly educated individuals holding respected social positions, primarily expatriates and their opinions and beliefs might not be representative for the whole Japanese population. However, I am going to explain and justify those choices in the Methodological limitations section.

The method of gathering Japanese expats was through my own network, including academic, professional, and family, as well as through my own social media posts and those on fan pages related to Japanese culture in Poland. Some individuals were also recruited by my other interviewees, which greatly assisted in gathering a reasonable sample for a qualitative research project. In a total of 15 interviews conducted, there were 6 females and 11 males, as one interview was conducted in a dyad and one in a triad. One person eventually decided to send the answers to the questions in the written form, instead of a personal interview. Another has agreed to discuss the topic, but without using the content directly, however this discussion was really valuable and inspired many topics covered in the study. I am deeply grateful to all my informants for taking part in the research and being open enough and willing to answer my, not always easy or intuitive, questions. Out of the informants during the interview time frame, 11 were staying in Poland, with 2 being students, and 6 were staying in Japan, with 2 more being students as well. All were Japanese citizens.

¹⁸ <https://ssjda.iss.u-tokyo.ac.jp/Direct/gaiyo.php?eid=1508>

My interlocutors were mostly either long-term residents in Poland with families here (the majority have settled) or students on one-year scholarships. The settled group, mostly married to Polish citizens, fluent in Polish, with children and jobs in Poland, repeatedly expressed a lack of or weak connection with their country of origin. They tended to express more attachment to Polish culture and distanced themselves from Japan at first contact. However, they provided many important information and insights about the culture of their origin, thus enriching the data and allowing for more complex interpretation. Expat interviewees demonstrated diverse language knowledge, mostly were fluent in two or three languages (Japanese, Polish, English, Russian), which is not a common skill set among Japanese people. Interviews themselves were conducted in Japanese, Polish, and English, the choice was based on the interlocutor's most suitable language. This approach, though complex, allowed for fuller expression and deeper understanding of cultural and linguistic nuances, especially regarding age-related differences in communication.

As for socioeconomic background, considering educational context, current employment, and social position, most interviewees were part of the middle-class, with some exceptions from the upper-middle class. I did not have a chance to speak with anyone from a working-class background. This information might be crucial for interpreting the results and the entire study, as these are not "ordinary" Japanese people but a very specific, exceptionally well-educated group who occupy or aspire to high social positions (implicitly or explicitly). Additionally, they are expatriates (possessing specific qualifications), not economic migrants (seeking any job abroad), and they work in highly skilled professions, such as academic lecturers, translators, businesspeople, artists, and lawyers.

Interviews were conducted online and in-person, depending on current location and time constraints¹⁹. To accommodate informants, I decided to conduct interviews in the language most natural for each interlocutor. When needed, I could rely on help from my other interviewees as translators. This approach, though somewhat chaotic and irregular, allowed everyone to express themselves fully. An additional advantage was the specific Japanese cultural and linguistic context, as informants often expressed themselves in

¹⁹ Full transcripts of interviews are available upon request.

Japanese and then explained certain phrases or phenomena in English. My knowledge of Japanese language allowed me to better understand their statements and helped me grasp the important differences in thinking, speaking, and discursive messaging between Europeans and Japanese, especially concerning age differences.

The study primarily employs a qualitative approach, focusing on in-depth understanding of social phenomena through IDI interviews. This allowed for a deep exploration of informants' perspectives, emotions, and behaviors, which was crucial for understanding socially constructed realities and symbolic boundaries. Additionally desk research provided crucial contextual and background information, using both qualitative and quantitative data.

The semi-structured interview method was employed, based on my initial assumption that I needed to ask specific questions and guide the discussion, while also allowing interlocutors the freedom to express their views. When creating my scenario, I also considered biographical interviews. However, given my very specific topic, I feared losing control over the interview flow and that informants might focus on topics closer to their personal tastes and life experiences, and for me it was particularly interesting to obtain the information on topics of class, differences and symbolic boundaries. The multicultural environment of the interviews compelled me to adjust questions and style of the conversation to my informants.

Thematic analysis and discourse analysis were employed to analyze the collected data. The goal was to understand how individuals comprehend what they discuss, why they make sense of it in a particular way, the various ways they assign meaning to a topic, and how "common-sensical" or socially normative this understanding is. I also reflected on my own feelings in similar situations and examined the assumptions made when describing the world. The analysis involved familiarizing myself with the data, developing deeper questions, and assigning meaning to the world presented in the data. Thematic analysis seems to be a particularly suitable method for this type of analysis, as it makes it possible to search for deeper meanings and patterns in the data, by coding them according to research questions, recording and finally creating comprehended themes emerging from the data. Moreover, as I am interested in the lived experiences of my interviewees, I complement those methods with techniques such as searching for

essential meanings and deep immersion in the data, which are associated with phenomenology. While discourse analysis focuses on language use and power, and thematic analysis on patterns across the data, a phenomenological lens would serve as a way to enrich my comprehension of the meaning-making process in which my informants are involved. This allows me to reveal informants' emotions, perspectives, emotions, attitudes without any prior assumptions or stereotyping.

To sum up, the qualitative approach, using interviews and desk research, is chosen to provide a deep, nuanced understanding of the complex and often sensitive topic of symbolic boundaries and otherness in Japan. This allows for exploration of the meanings that individuals attribute to these phenomena. Thematic and discourse analysis use are justified by ability to uncover underlying patterns, narratives, and power dynamics within the interview data.

4.5. Analytical Strategy

To understand the complexities of social life, especially in cultures different from our own, Clifford Geertz's concept of thick description (Geertz, 1983) comes in and might prove to be useful. Geertz views culture as "webs of significance" (Lubowicka, 2017) that humans themselves have spun, making anthropology not a search for laws, but an interpretive practice aimed at unveiling meaning. Culture is not a causal force but a context within which human behavior, institutions, and interactions become comprehensible. The anthropologist's task is therefore one of translation and dialogue: capturing not only what people do, but how they themselves understand and interpret their actions and lives. As Paul Rabinow (1977) notes, anthropology studies humanity as an "interpretive science," where both researcher and informants are entangled in culturally mediated worlds.

For Geertz, the aim is not to merge with the consciousness of one's informants but to uncover "what they think they are up to" by analyzing the symbolic forms through which they define themselves. Thick description thus entails grasping people's experience-near concepts, ideas bound tightly with lived realities, and situating them within broader cultural systems to reveal patterns of meaning.

In this part of the study, I operationalize a set of complementary theoretical perspectives presented in Chapter 3. Weber's concept of status groups and life chances allows me to situate symbolic boundaries within broader structures of social stratification. Bourdieu's ideas of habitus and symbolic capital provide analytical tools for tracing how inequality is reproduced through everyday practices and discourses. Additionally, Lamont's and Douglas's work on boundary-making offers a structure for identifying the cultural repertoires, evaluative criteria, and moral distinctions that my interviewees mobilize in speaking about Burakumin and social difference. I think about those perspectives not as competing, but rather as mutually reinforcing. It is also necessary to mention works by Merton, Berreman, and Bellah, which enable me to place the discussion on past structures influencing present situations in the broader context of philosophical and sociological considerations. Finally, I utilize the perspectives of Oguma and Nakane as tools for examining the concepts of sameness and otherness in Japanese culture. Together, they aim to capture both the structural and discursive dimensions of boundary-making and to connect interview data to broader theoretical debates about class, stigma, and social closure.

My main theoretical framework is that of symbolic boundaries theory by Michele Lamont. The most important question is: what are we exactly asking about when talking about symbolic boundaries? Lamont herself defines them as *"the type of lines that individuals draw when they categorize people"* and *"the lines that include and define some people, groups, and things while excluding others. These distinctions can be expressed through normative interdictions (taboos), cultural attitudes and practices, and patterns of likes and dislikes. They play an important role in the creation of inequality and the exercise of power. The term 'symbolic boundaries' also refers to the internal distinctions of classification systems and to temporal, spatial, and visual cognitive distinctions in particular."* (Lamont et al., 2015). Not only do boundaries exist, they also work in our social world, they influence, often in a very invisible or unknowing way, our behaviour, what we say, and how we say. The concept of symbolic boundaries started in modern sociology with Emile Durkheim and his inquiry into what makes a community a community, and how it is possible that groups, consisting of people with quite a variety of distinct characteristics can be coherent and working. For him it was exactly: *"Sharing of a common definition of the sacred and profane, of similar rules of conduct and a common compliance to rituals and interdictions that*

defines the internal bonds within a community" (Lamont et al., 2015). For Mary Douglas, another influential thinker, boundaries were something that divided what is sacred and profane, what is organized and acceptable and disorganized and not acceptable (Douglas, 1966).

Michele Lamont theory creates an integral structure of the analytical phase of my research. By using her, and other boundary explorers, conceptual tools I am able to interpret how respondents narratives were firstly constructed and later on maintained by often undefined or unconscious norms and distinction. Boundary work is not a case of individual or collective declarations, but a case of deeds and actions.

In the data, acquired through semistructured individual in-depth interviews, I am going to search for traces of specific types of symbolic boundaries, including: linguistic markers, moral judgments, economic and status distinctions and narratives of difference, important especially from the Burakumin perspectives. For linguistic markers, the most crucial categories, and later on codes, are phrases and words suggesting:

- dichotomies, creating divisions or distinctions "us" vs. "them," "normal" vs. "different," "inside" vs. "outside" (e.g., *uchi no mono* vs. *yosomono*, what is ours/inside and what is not).
- euphemisms and avoidance of the topic: the absence of directly naming Burakumin (e.g., using terms like "those people," "that issue," "a historical matter") or using euphemism for levels of wealth, like "people whose livelihoods are not financially viable" or "economically well-off", which might indicate the existence of a boundary or a taboo, not easy to cross openly.
- negative connotations: words using negative associations (e.g., "difficult," "problematic," "poor") in reference to other status groups or classes.
- descriptions of behavior: phrases describing behaviors attributed to others that are perceived as "different" or "undesirable" (e.g., "they behave like that," "that's typical of them").

Here also I follow Lamont's lead when she explains that words *"both denote object and convey attitude. For example, words such as freedom and democracy do not merely describe forms of government and legal status; they also tell us the attitude to take*

toward these forms. Similarly, woman's work does not merely tell us what women do; it tells us that that work is not for men. And unskilled work clearly connotes a form of work inferior to that which is skilled." (Epstein, 1992, p. 252). In order to deepen the level of linguistic markers I will utilize Michel Foucault's discourse analysis to explore how discourses (media, state, private) shape imagination and perpetuate divisions, even without direct experience, leading to the "social distinction" of the Burakumin-non-Burakumin divide.

Next, for this study two particular statements regarding the "narratives of difference" and "moral judgements" are especially important. Firstly, Mary Douglas notions that the categories purity-impurity, although adopted from the religious life, apply to our social life as it is, and that the production of classifications and boundaries is a responsibility of "specialists and professionals who define institutional criteria for labeling individuals as rational or criminal" (Lamont, 1992, p. 8), meaning that in every society the boundaries, although they are the natural consequences of forms of social organization, are sustained and constructed as a result of somebody's decision and making. This is especially visible in the context of Burakumin exclusion and boundary maintenance. For the category of moral statements, I focus on:

- evaluative comments: statements that attribute specific moral traits (positive or negative) to Burakumin or other groups of Japanese.
- normative expectations: descriptions of how things "should" be in relations with other people, or how they "should" behave to be accepted.
- shame, silence and stigma as a mechanism of social control.

Drawing on Elias (1939) and Douglas (1966), I conceptualize that shame is not only an individual emotion but also an organized social regime: a mechanism employed for producing, maintaining, and policing symbolic boundaries in Japanese society. For Elias, shame has a practical value of learning what is normal and what is not from early childhood. For Douglas, although her focus is more on the division of purity-impurity, silence regarding certain topics, like Burakumin, might be a sign of an existing boundary. And for Scheff shame acts as a mechanism regulating and reinforcing group membership or exclusion (Scheff, 2000). Shame is used to enforce conformity, and delimit the boundaries of group belonging. It is essential to analyze and explain how shame circulates in discourse about "others" (either class or status), often without

explicit rules, through “reading the air”, silence, and rumor. In this context the phenomena of the crucial cultural concept of "reading the air" signaling "understanding the situation without words" or "sensing someone's feelings," might be used as an interpretive key for understanding the subtle communications and unspoken norms within Japanese society, particularly evident in interview contexts.

Another aspect is, recalling again Howard S. Becker, *"that deviant acts lead to social exclusion only when these acts are socially defined as such"* (Lamont, 1992, p. 3), which leads to a question that appears in my interview scenarios of what behaviours or actions are denoted as "other", "different", or "not normal". Moreover, this is also connected to Erving Goffman's labeling and the analysis of the social/societal process that makes the constitution of a certain "labeled" or "stigmatized" identity possible. Adapting this approach allows me to explore the Burakumin "otherness" and how it was created in relation to the historical and social conditions present in the writings by Chie Nakne, Robert N. Bellah, and Eiji Oguma. Those traits lead to narratives of difference:

- stories of "discovery" of identity: how someone learned that someone else was Burakumin and the reactions this provoked (their own, family, environment).
- narratives of "pollution": whether echoes of historical associations with ritual pollution or exclusion appear.
- explanations of "why" they are different: how respondents explain what distinguishes poor, Burakumin or else (e.g., "different origin," "different mentality," "they live differently").

I expect that the abovementioned theories will enable me to examine how Japanese individuals define "insiders" and "outsiders" in everyday life and trace the cultural logic underpinning exclusion, beyond purely economic or institutional mechanisms. And in the case of Burakumin, it will help me to capture the interplay between enduring symbolic boundaries of Buraku status, and newly emergent ones in the post-growth era. The discourse of "sameness and otherness" has been discussed at many levels, starting with Edward Said "Orientalism" (Said, 1978) and the feedback loop that has been created by two opposing perspectives: how Japan has been perceived by the West and how it has, in turn, constructed its own image. This allows me to delve on the topic of Nihonjinron (uniqueness of Japan) as a discourse of uniqueness and homogeneity, which might be perceived as a form of self-orientalization that reinforces stereotypes,

prejudice, and simplifications (Oguma, 2003) ingrown into the modern Japanese society and self-image. There are also statements that paradoxically support Burakumin emancipation by asserting that "Burakumin are no different than the other Japanese" (Geiger, 2011, Mueller, 2024), conversely stating that a paradigm of heterogeneous Japan could reinforce internal divisions based on the soto/uchi (outsider/insider) distinction.

Additionally, Robert Merton's work on social ambiguity (Merton, 1972) provides a critical lens to understand the contradictions inherent in Japan's narratives of homogeneity and the lived experiences of marginalized groups such as the Burakumin, and Berreman's analysis (Berreman, 1979) of caste and social organization extends this by historicizing such boundaries as both formal and informal mechanisms sustaining social order and exclusion. Taken together, this layered discussion applied to the analysis of the social perception of sameness and otherness helps to answer the question of the nature of modern Japanese identity, as perceived between the spectrum of homogeneity and heterogeneity.

Finally, I analyze how my interviewees understand and discuss the economic and status distinctions for people of different than their class, wealth or prestige, through their language, especially:

- descriptions of inequalities: perceived differences in access to resources, education, employment, housing etc.
- social limitations: difficulties in forming marriages, making friends, or entering specific social circles.
- understanding of class: what is class in modern Japanese society, what are class self-images of the Japanese and themselves in their own eyes, what makes the class difference: is it wealth, power or maybe lifestyle?

In this regard, I find Max Weber's distinction between status (social honor) and class (economic position), complementary with Bourdieu's views on distinction, capitals and habitus, particularly interesting for my data analysis. The questions prepared for the interviews focused not merely on the wealth and material symbols of position, but also on social standing, reputation, and how individuals perceive their own place and the places of others within their social networks. Max Weber also searched for the theoretical explanation of inequality and the in-group/out-group mechanism, although

he focused on honor in the creation of social inequality rather than social solidarity. In his view, human beings engage in continuous struggle over scarce resources and as a result they form status groups whose superiority is defined in relation to other groups. As status, prestige, wealth and prosperity seem to be the important features in Japanese society, I combine Lamont's perspective with Weber's while analysing the issues of class and status. I aim at establishing what the class-related concepts mean for my interviewees, and how they see the class distinctions at work.

The Weberian model's emphasis on prestige and status allows for a deeper understanding of Japanese social stratification, which cannot be adequately captured through purely economic analysis. I assume that the Japanese status system historically resembled Weber's *Stände* more than a class or caste system. This is because it was structured around social power rooted in status honor rather than only economic capital or rigid hereditary restrictions. The *Stände*-like characteristics included the monopolistic control of certain resources or professions, the deliberate avoidance of certain occupations deemed "beneath" one's status, and the cultivation of symbolic and cultural boundaries to maintain group identity and privilege. Weber's analysis of status groups is particularly valuable here. He observes that status groups often reveal themselves through:

- Endogamy and restrictions on social interaction outside the group
- The sharing of food, benefits, and privileges within the group
- Status conventions and traditions that regulate conduct
- Monopolistic acquisition of certain economic opportunities, or the conscious avoidance of others

When a person is regarded as socially superior, that recognition grants them the potential to exercise power over others, since respect and deference can translate into compliance. Yet, as Weber cautions, "not all power entails social honor": some forms of purely economic or "naked" money power do not confer prestige. This distinction is crucial for understanding Japanese society, where wealth and power may exist without high status, and conversely, where high-status groups may preserve prestige without economic dominance. Between classes, status groups, and political parties, competition for resources is constant, and the boundaries, often cultural or symbolic, reinforce inequality. These boundaries are not merely economic divides; they are maintained

through rituals, customs, and rules of exclusion that affirm group superiority and cohesion.

It is important to note that status distinctions surrounding the Burakumin involve both material disadvantages and deeply rooted symbolic boundaries, and the maintenance of these distinctions depends on cultural codes, historical narratives, and honor-based perceptions that persist even in the absence of overt economic segregation. Such dynamics align more closely with Weber's *Stände* model than with either Marx's class-based economic determinism or the rigid immobility of a caste system. Finally, a Weberian framework, especially its emphasis on status honor, symbolic boundaries, and the interplay between class, status, and party, offers a richer analytical lens for my study. It captures the nuances of prestige, group-based exclusion, and social power that emerge from my data, and it situates the Japanese case within a broader comparative understanding of how societies stratify themselves beyond purely economic terms.

Education holds a particular place in maintaining Japan's postwar self-image as a homogeneous "classless society" (Costalunga, 2024). Although this view is increasingly challenged by the figure of "gap society" (*kakusa shakai*), symbolic boundaries in Japan operate not only along class lines but also through historically established distinctions such as Buraku status, gender norms, and educational pedigree (*gakureki shakai*). These boundaries are both institutional, embedded in education, labor markets, and political structures, and self-organizing (Nabeshima, 2003), sustained through community interactions, shared narratives, and perceptions of legitimacy. Educational reforms and the decline of strict meritocracy have increased the influence of family background, reinforcing class-based boundaries (Okada, 2016).

In the context of question what is education's role in social mobility and securing better life chances for an individual, using Nabeshima's theory of self-organizing inequality, I analyse how cultural ideals of respectability, diligence, and conformity shape who is perceived as belonging to the "mainstream" and who is excluded (e.g., NEETs, freeters, or non-regular workers). As persistent Buraku discrimination illustrates, symbolic boundaries can endure even when formal legal barriers are removed, with stigma operating through subtle cues and community knowledge. So there is the question of what role education plays in this process. By situating these processes within both

historical legacies and contemporary transformations, symbolic boundary theory will cast light upon how inequality in Japan is not merely a question of material resources but is deeply embedded in cultural classifications, moral evaluations, and everyday interactions.

These boundaries are both institutional embedded in education, labor markets, and political structures and self-organizing, sustained through community interactions, shared narratives, and perceptions of legitimacy. For example:

- Educational reforms and the decline of strict meritocracy have increased the influence of family background, reinforcing class-based boundaries.
- Persistent Buraku discrimination illustrates how symbolic boundaries can endure even when formal legal barriers are removed, with stigma operating through subtle cues and community knowledge.
- Cultural ideals of respectability, diligence, and conformity shape who is perceived as belonging to the "mainstream" and who is excluded (e.g., NEETs, freeters, or non-regular workers).

Analytical Contribution: integrating symbolic boundary theory into the analysis allows this study to:

- Examine how Japanese individuals define "insiders" and "outsiders" in everyday life.
- Trace the cultural logics underpinning exclusion, beyond purely economic or institutional mechanisms.
- Capture the interplay between enduring symbolic boundaries (e.g., Buraku status) and newly emergent ones (e.g., "winner/loser" dichotomy in the post-growth era).

By situating these processes within both historical legacies and contemporary transformations, symbolic boundary theory will cast light upon how inequality in Japan is not merely a question of material resources but is deeply embedded in cultural classifications, moral evaluations, and everyday interactions.

4.6. Ethics

As my research required conducting interviews with Japanese people, I needed to consider ethical implications. While preparing my in-depth interview scenario, considering the problematic and often taboo nature of my inquiry, I recognized the need to ensure the safety and comfort of my potential interviewees. First, I prepared invitation letters to be sent to groups that would be of my interest, where I clearly state the aim of the project and its social implications. Secondly, I prepared consent forms that outline the key ethical principles I followed during my research. All the interviewees were informed that the participation in the project is voluntary, the personal data and information are confidential and the interviews will be anonymized, and I also explained about the study's purpose. They all gave their informed consent in writing or verbally (if the writing form was not possible). The informants were also informed about potential risks and benefits of the project, also because the size of the Japanese community in Poland is rather small and counts about, depending on the resources, between 3,000 to 5,000 people²⁰. The ethical concerns were important here not only because of revealing personal opinions on social issues, but also due to the potential risk of being recognized by other members of the minority.

4.7. Methodological Limitations

This part of the Chapter will be devoted to the topic of methodological limitations. The aim of every researcher is to present the most detailed and comprehensive take on their project. We believe that our work "makes a difference", that we bring something good to the world, not only by spending months and years of our lives on a certain problem, but also by changing the world - we want people to understand things better, we want to provide them with new solutions or perspectives on old problems. And finally, we want others to learn, draw inspiration from, and be inspired by the novelties we present to the academic and professional community. Although the aim of science itself is completely non-practical (Kant, 2004), it does not and should not serve any utilitarian purposes, but we all have this deep conviction in our hearts that it should be cherished by others.

²⁰https://www.statista.com/statistics/1083583/japan-number-japanese-residents-poland/?srsltid=AfmBOor_Fe_AwKX9_fD4SwlqZUB-BDQnkJqOd0EpBvXAkHFbM2ou77Ax

As we develop our skills and master the craft, we strive for excellence in the quality of our results. Those sleepless nights should be balanced by delivering work that exceeds expectations and sets new standards. But we are only humans, and to be human means to be faulty, and by making mistakes, we enable ourselves to learn and therefore become better.

In the case of this dissertation, it is essential for me to acknowledge and address methodological limitations, propose mitigation strategies for other researchers and myself to draw informed conclusions, and aim for a more comprehensive analysis in the future. I will focus on the most important limitations: time, sampling, analysis methods, and cross-cultural research.

- **Time restraints:** the cross-sectional nature and the timeframe for interviews (February 2024 - June 2025) might limit the depth of longitudinal insights or the ability to track changes over time. Also, the amount of time that passed since the beginning of the project, plenty of changes and shifts over time, made conducting the interviews challenging, as my original ideas were not suitable to the research at the moment of the fieldwork.

Mitigation: I would definitely clearly define the scope to fit within the timeframe. However, focusing on capturing the current state of symbolic boundaries and social constructions for my interviewees, have enabled me to gain an in-depth understanding and experiencing of the discussed categories at specific points proved to be more valuable than a superficial longitudinal study given the constraints.

- **Sampling issues (non-probability, convenience/snowball):** non-probability sampling limits the generalizability of findings to broader populations, and convenience and snowball sampling can introduce bias. Those are facts. What is more, the unique characteristics of the respondent group (mostly highly educated expatriates) might also influence the findings. It was more than difficult to get to the group I was interested in in the first place - the Burakumin minority, and due to those objective limitations I was forced to follow a very specific group of people with mostly migratory experience and middle-class status. Their specific life experiences and time spent abroad might influence their views on Japanese contemporary reality and inequality. I have already explicitly addressed this in

the methodology section to demonstrate awareness of the sample's specificity and its potential impact on their perspectives.

Mitigation: the non-probability sampling strategy (convenience and snowball sampling) means the findings may not be generalizable to the wider Japanese population, but this also not the main goal of the qualitative research method. Although I acknowledge that the findings are not statistically generalizable, they provide rich, contextual insights on the topics of social inequality and hierarchical relations among the Japanese people. What is more, my goal was to gain a deeper understanding of specific experiences rather than statistical representation. To mitigate this risk, the saturation criterion was used to ensure sufficient data is collected. After the first several interviews a preliminary data analysis was conducted, and it was concluded that specific themes (patterns) occur in the interviews. After that, when the recurring topics became visible, I stopped recruiting new informants. To overcome the challenges that my sample brought, in the next chapter I am providing rich descriptions and quotations from the interviewees themselves to allow readers to determine if the findings are applicable to other contexts as well.

- **Analysis methods limitations:** it is understandable that the interpretative nature of thematic and discourse analysis, although they are powerful tools, can be seen as subjective to researcher interpretation. Despite those potential limitations, I believe that the chosen design is the most appropriate for exploring the complex social phenomena under investigation, providing rich, in-depth insights that quantitative methods might miss. My research perspective and focus is on the lived experiences of my interviewees, rather than the statistics. Finally my findings are shaped by the data, which believable and accurately reflect the informants' perspectives.

Mitigation: the credibility of the results will be ensured through reflexivity, transparent reporting, and triangulation. Reflexivity, one of the researchers most powerful tools, implies my critical approach towards my own role and position in the research process. Following the method of "insider knowledge, skill, or understanding" (Lofland, 2006) I tried to look at things from the perspective of my interviewees, rather than my own, and to focus on how certain categories work and make sense for them. To mitigate the risk of potential individual bias, I approached my data from various angles, theories, data sources, and methods. I believed that thanks to this I was able to achieve a more

comprehensive understanding and positively enhance the reliability of my results.

- **Cross-cultural challenges:** Since Malinowski's Trobriand expeditions, we are more aware than ever of the challenges associated with cross-cultural projects, including power imbalances between the researcher and the researched, "lost in translation" events, ethnocentrism, and language and cultural barriers. In my research journey, I encountered all of the above, including the "gatekeeping" on the part of the Japanese, exemplified by the difficulty in accessing information or the uncooperative stance of institutions and individuals when attempting to gather research samples. This experience led to a complete shift in the project's assumptions.
- **Cultural and linguistic distance:** A significant challenge, particularly when interviewing Japanese informants living in Japan who spoke only Japanese (for example, elderly interviewees in their seventies), was confronting my own embedded Western ways of perceiving society. Questions framed through Western social science concepts, such as those drawn from Marx or Weber, often proved mute, silent, or simply irrelevant to my informants. This underscored that even in a highly Westernized country such as Japan, deeply rooted cultural frameworks remain, and specialized terminology does not always translate meaningfully across contexts. As a result, answers were sometimes paradoxical, indirect, or resistant to straightforward interpretation.

Mitigation: in order to keep the balance in this dissertation and to be able to successfully proceed with the project, I implemented several solutions. Firstly, I attempted to focus on contextual accuracy and understanding the data within the specific context of Japanese culture. Secondly, my interviewees were my guides, and while conducting the interviews, I followed their lead, and became Kvale's (1996: 3–5) traveler, who *"wanders through the landscape and enters into conversations with the people encountered. The traveler explores the many domains of the country, as unknown territory or with maps, roaming freely around the territory... The interviewer wanders along with the local inhabitants, asking questions that lead the subjects to tell their own stories of their lived world."* Finally, multi-language interviews allowed me to source data in three different languages and to compare three distinctive perspectives and mindsets, which enriched my understanding of the topic.

4.8. Conclusion

This methodology chapter outlines the philosophical underpinnings and practical choices that guide my research. By adopting a critical realist and abductive approach, coupled with qualitative data collection through in-depth interviews and analysis via thematic and discourse analysis, this study aims to provide a deep understanding of how symbolic boundaries contribute to the social construction of class and otherness in contemporary Japan. The use of complex methodological frameworks is thought to generate rich, nuanced insights into the creation and impact of symbolic boundaries. I also addressed potential methodological limitations and outlined strategies for ensuring the trustworthiness of the findings.

CHAPTER 5. RESULTS

5.1. Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the cultural dimension of social stratification in contemporary Japan, specifically by analyzing the symbolic boundaries constructed between mainstream Japanese individuals and the Burakumin group. The overarching aim of my research is to understand how this seemingly homogeneous, middle-class society perceives, constructs, and maintains social difference in its discourse. To achieve this, I addressed a series of core questions, including how non-Burakumin Japanese speak about the others in Japanese society, including Burakumin, what discursive categories they use, and whether these categories reveal socioeconomic, cultural, or moral symbolic boundaries. It also explores the discursive role of the Burakumin category and the mechanisms used to either perpetuate or challenge the stigma.

While Japanese society is widely perceived as homogeneous (Costalunga, 2024), a significant tension exists between this ideal and the lived reality of difference. Academic literature, media discourse, and even historical lineage indicate that social distinctions, though subtle, are present and actively managed. The Burakumin group, in particular, has historically served as a stigmatized and excluded category, providing an essential "other" against which a mainstream Japanese identity could be defined. My aim in this chapter is to explore the specific language and discursive strategies through which symbolic boundaries are constructed and maintained in contemporary social interaction.

The methodological approach for my research was centered on a qualitative analysis of in-depth-interview transcripts. The empirical data was analyzed using a combination of Thematic Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). This approach allowed me for the systematic identification of recurring patterns, themes, and perceptions in the interviewees' language (according to the research strategies advocated by Braun & Clarke in *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*), while also critically examining how that language is used to construct meaning and perpetuate social distinctions.

This chapter is dedicated to the presentation of the study's findings. I begin by outlining the key themes that emerged from the data. Next, each major theme is defined and described in detail, supported by verbatim quotes from the informants. This method was intended to "show, not tell," allowing the reader to see the raw evidence before any interpretation is made. The interpretation of the findings and their discussion in the language of social theory (i.e. contribution to the discipline and suggestions for further research) are addressed in the subsequent chapter.

5.2. The King's Way

When I started my interviews, my first point was to come up with an ideal first question, something that would not only sound interesting, but would also give a chance to my speakers to speak their minds freely and to allow me and them to think about the Japanese reality in a less stereotypical way than usual. As my intention was to investigate the issues of homogeneity and heterogeneity, I asked them to imagine the mental map of Japan and think of any groups they could see. This question, although seemingly easy, enabling the free play of imagination, proved to be rather difficult and unintuitive. However, after a round of side questions the wheels were put into motion, and the most fascinating part of the research began. After several first interviews I was greatly surprised how the answers differed, how some perspectives seemingly excluded others, and how rich and detailed the picture I was presented. Finally, when I finished, I realized that I was given a fairly coherent and multilayered view of Japanese society today, despite the differences in age, gender, status and residency.

Some of the interviewees talked about the losers, other people referred to the winners, yet others talked about rules and norms, others put the emphasis on the Ichi oku sōchūryū, literally "100 million all in the middle class". The older ones stressed the generational shifts and differences, the younger ones spoke more of instability and hardships of the modern day economical situation. But what was common to all of the voices: even if declaratively they did not perceive the differences among Japanese society as very visible or powerful, they all observed and indicated progressive diversity and social changes that make no one indifferent.

Secondly, it was repeatedly stated that Japan had been a more homogenous society, but that has now changed, both because of economic and generational reasons. What is more, the differences between groups and people, albeit subtle, are visible and socially legible. And if you have an ability to "read the air" (空気を読む), and as a well socialized Japanese citizen you should have (Davies & Ikeno, 2002), your understanding of the complexity of Japanese society gives you the ability to better navigate through it. "If someone acts differently but still within an acceptable range, it can be tolerated. [...] Japanese people, unlike in other countries, don't need to say things aloud. It's already understood." (F4).

In the eyes of my interviewees Japanese "general middle class society" was not a myth, but a reality of stability and safety, the basis for the "King's way":

"I think there is a like in this phrase called ōdō (王道). Ōdō means like in a king's way and that means that like you know very stereotypical quote right unquote way in in the way like, for example, go to university, go to get a job, marry with a good family, having a kid, put the kid in a good university, and like no problem, no hassle, nothing. That's considered as the most idealized life in many parts of Japan I would say. And when you have dramatic life and if you are going to say 'oh I love this kind of drama' many people consider this was an excuse because you couldn't be in this King's way." (M4)

However, in today's Japan even a good university education, working hard, and having a "good" family background do not guarantee life stability and financial resources necessary to multiplication of wealth and reproduction of status. The vision of a society where everyone can advance and move upwards, depending on the individual effort and hard work was shared by one of the older interviewees who made his career in the 1960s: "I grew up in a poor family and wanted to go to university. I couldn't, but I worked hard, studied on my own, and became a company director." (M9), "Even without a university degree, I read economic theory books and studied on my own. With effort, I advanced to senior management." (M9). This is strongly contrasted with the stories and voices of much younger generations struggling with the reality of declining standards of living. As one of my younger interviewees observed:

"I observe and like a lot of people, more and more people, have difficulties finding their life stable, financially stable, even though they didn't do anything wrong. [...] I know that even this like 40 percent of population who went to the university did okay job like

um studies normally did prep and job normally participated in nasarco like a club activity like most of the university students in Japan, but they are finding it difficult to have a stable in a financial life and that's the part that I personally consider that is a huge problem because it's not like they were, came out of very poor family financially poor family or they didn't study enough or they didn't go to the university. They get everything yet and they are worrying normally full-time, they have the job that is kind of stable that no worries of being fired soon or something, or they are not like working in a super tiny like a company. But still like they don't have enough money to go abroad, they don't have enough money to go to the restaurant whenever they like, so this part of the society, in my opinion, I think it's growing, it's getting bigger and i if you're also asking if it's a i think problem or not, I of course think that it's a problem and and of course those people who are not like for example affording um perhaps several kid, I think this kind of like part of the society, it's also growing and also a lot of people, not like they don't want to have children, but they cannot have children basically. Maybe this is the part that they, it's not only because of the financial reasons, but because of the circumstances that they don't have a appropriate support provided by the family nearby or from the government." (F1)

In the past, having a university education, being employed by a huge Japanese company, and following a certain set of rules and norms, especially regarding the gender based division of duties - male working and providing for the family, and female taking care of home, children and their education, was considered the norm by the interviewees. The norm was also considered working in one company from the graduation until the retirement, following an age- and experience-based company's promotion path, and taking part in nomikai culture, obligatory outings with your superior at work. Long working hours, unpaid overtime, putting all your efforts into fulfilling company's expectations, were seen as an understandable and acceptable individual sacrifice that enabled the creation of *ichi oku sōchūryū*, literally "100 million all in the middle class". and was the reason for the Japanese economic boom. However, as time changes, and Japan is as influenced by globalization as other countries, the younger generations are not as willing to set on this journey into the known without at least mixed feelings:

"[...] In the Japanese society the harmony with the group is quite important and uh also like i'm young i'm young group so like i can understand what they [EK: young people avoiding nomikai] are feeling, but at least like i'm feeling like they should, can, reach to

the peace in, like, a workplace and like it makes them easy to work. So in the workplace, so in my opinion like they should, but at the same time, I insist, like they don't, like, sacrifice themselves so if they don't want to of course like they should refuse [...] The boss also shouldn't, like a, compel the subordinates to go with them so actually the nomikai is like a very terrible and sad cultures in Japan." (M5)

Being a part of the "middle class" also gives a sense of safety and security, because everyone speaks the same language: "Japan has been a single-ethnic nation since ancient times. We are not a melting pot like the U.S., so everyone thinks in the same way." (F4). Safety (*anshin*) and comfort are streaming from visible sameness. Being surrounded by people similar to you in terms of living the way of life gives you peace. The difference, however, might be unsettling.

Middle class life is also a life without hardships, a life where you can afford a holiday, buy necessary and unnecessary things, and also provide your children with a good, or even the best, education. Like M10, a Japanese expat living in Poland describes his experiences: "*Because I didn't have any difficulty to live. If I asked my parents, I could buy... Of course, not just for you or something. If I asked, I could buy something like PC or something. If I asked, I could go to university. And then... Like this. So I didn't have any difficulties. But I don't think my home was rich.*" Being middle class is the psychological comfort of living without tension and constant worries.

Among the voices of my Japanese interviewees there were various perspectives and strategies related to maintaining or upgrading their class position. First, there is the need for advancement - creating a strategy for your family to gain a better social position, here we could observe efforts to enter the competition to gain a higher status through work, either by internal promotion in one's company or by finding a better position in an outside company in a bigger city. Second, there is the need to enable your child an access to the top universities and, therefore, best job opportunities, setting their career path by choosing a selected kindergarten and paying for private education. This is a path determined and carefully planned from an early childhood. But it requires a prior knowledge of where such opportunities lie, and skills of how to efficiently use them in order to gain the advantage.

Another strategy recalled in the interviews is maintaining the status markers/determinants in a highly competitive economic and social environment: "You can already see everything, because Japanese class, in my opinion, is very strictly defined class, you see. The entire Japanese nation, I'm not saying they need it, they like it. And they are dependent on class. They like to build some kind of wall between themselves." (M7). As the Japanese do not like to ostentatiously display wealth: "For rich people, I can't tell if they're rich or not. Well, there are, of course, obviously rich people, but sometimes they're not Japanese. Sometimes they're Chinese people, too." (F5), they are looking for other status markers, visible, but not garish.

M7 mentioned that the Japanese people express their social status and wealth by a prestigious address, car make, prestigious education - own or even future child, and employment. He called this kind of lifestyle a "virtual one" - based often on appearances, and covering the real hardship in presenting yourself as successful and winning. This is also a very powerful image of society broken and divided into two distinct parts: losers and winners.

The winners - those who follow the "King's way", do everything not to fall off the social ladder and keep their position. The losers - temporary employees, employed by agencies, for part-time contracts, a group created by political decisions, struggle to survive. Often unskilled or without higher education, they fell trapped into the "temporal workers" category and therefore became segregated, with little chance for improvement of living standards, marriage perspectives and safe retirement. They were called "*hatarakenai*" - unemployable by one of the informants.

In the unstable economic situation and rapid changes in Japanese society, it is the younger generation that is most prone to failure and exiting the "King's way". They are the people unsure and uncertain of their future, an occurrence that has not been present in Japan in the last 70 years, as the corporate employment system was the guarantee of stability and safety, with both sides delivering their part of the deal: Japanese men hard work, loyalty and lifelong attachment, and Japanese corporations stable employment conditions, father-like care and financial means to support the whole family. This is a world and social relationships that are gradually vanishing, and what is coming is new, unknown, and disturbing (i.e. M1 and M2 interviews). My younger interviewees,

although they acknowledge the structural and economical factors as forces creating the instability, were often attributing and explaining the young workers issues on the employment market to individual, psychological factors. Young people happen to be impatient, kind of selfish, they want to create their own life path, and this might be very risky today: "[...] they want to somehow realize their dream... they end up with like not achieving anything, and end up with like some kind of worse condition." (M2).

It is almost possible to feel the tension between the old, collective modes of behaviour, that although uncomfortable on an individual level and forcing the subordination of the individual to the group, still offer peaceful existence, and new, more individualistic and spontaneous ways of self-realisation. The latter, however, is tricky, as it depends on initial market position and the combination of structural and individual advantages that enables the individual achievement of assumed goals. And as the interviewees reported: the chances whether you land in a "white company", "black company" or as a temporary employee are determined mostly by socio-economical factors. In present day Japan, even the graduates of good universities do not have the assurance that their market advantages would be enough to lead a peaceful and prosperous life enjoyed by their fathers and grandfathers.

The third strategy, intersecting with the one just mentioned, might be called contestation or a silent rebellion against existing rules and dominating ideals of life. It is *ochikobore*, *hikikomori*, or NEET's (people not in education, employment or training). *Ochikobore*, mentioned by F3, are the ones that seclude themselves from society. They act against the accepted rules of groupness, communication and being engaged in societal endeavours. My interviewees emphasised the collectiveness and groupness of Japanese society. This tendency was explained by M5 as resulting from biological differences - the Japanese are smaller and weaker than the Europeans or Americans, and therefore have a natural tendency to build and team up in groups.

However, *Ochikobore*, a rather big population, in the view of F3, by their own choice decided to be outside of the group: "*Ochikobore* originally was used as a student and the school kids who failed in exams and to keep up with the school work. [...] And nowadays I would say it is not necessary to school kids and students, but in general there are people who failed to be in society and to operate. And they're not staying in

groups because they are almost individually staying on their own." They can be recognized or identified by other Japanese by the act of hiding and not interacting with the society, not talking, not engaging in any kind of conversation. However some of them choose to show their way of life on social media, "that they are living alone, and they are showing their life, how they spend every day. And they can have work, actually. They can have some kind of, but they're all kind of like distant from the society". (F3). The main trait of this group is that "They failed and they already cannot go out." Again, there is a visible tension between losers and winners in terms of normative order: "many of them are living with parents, and the parents can be normal people, they can be just working or they worked full time all their life and they were retired, but they could have lived like maybe rather normal life." (F3)

On the other hand, *kachigumi*, the winners, mentioned several times by different people, are the complete opposition to *ochikobore* (losers). They are those who are successful economically, wealthy, they are good at managing in the society, cooperating with others, and they maintain the positive mindset, "they just don't think about failing" (F3). This mental ability to succeed and bring good to the society is not only thanks to their hard work, but it also results from a good background of successful parents, and the element of luck of being at the right time in the right place, especially: "*This also I think affects, because Japan had kind of like a recession after 90s. And it is said that many children who grew up, who had a childhood during this recession, they tend to have, they are not good to be successful in society.*" (F3)

5.3. Universal Obedience of Norms and Values as the Glue That Keeps the Japanese Society Together

The image of the Japanese society emerging from the interviews is a powerful one, built around the tensions between visibility, invisibility and hypervisibility. Many of my interlocutors' first response to the question of social and class diversity in Japan, and how this diversity is being recognized and performed everyday, was to deny the existence of such, and emphasis on the Japanese unity and homogeneity, streaming from the common norms and values embodied in the society. Those norms and values are so obvious, like the air we breathe, that they are not even worth mentioning and being called out: "In Japan, even without words, people understand what is expected. If

someone says 'I love you', foreigners may say it directly, but Japanese men don't. It should be understood." (F4)

A crucial interpretative category for the interviews is *kuuki wo yomu* ("reading the air," or "understanding the situation without words", "sensing someone's feelings"). Interviewees often imply or signal things rather than stating them directly, placing the responsibility on the other party to interpret and understand their unspoken messages. The depth of understanding depends on one's ability to "read the air." But it is more than that, it is also, as indicated by several interviewees, a deeply ingrained cultural practice that creates a powerful, and at times burdensome, expectation for individuals to prioritize group harmony and public image over their own personal feelings and mistake: "I think it's too much thinking about others and they don't want to like be causing problems for other people because they would feel very bad". The speaker suggests this behavior stems from a fundamental tendency for Japanese people to be highly considerate of how others perceive them: "I think Japanese people tend to think more about other people and how they think about them" (F5).

This category also shows that social boundaries are often unspoken, maintained through a complex, unwritten code of conduct. Yet people inevitably make mistakes and behave imperfectly, which creates a tension between the pressure to maintain a flawless social image through self-control and the reality that identity in Japan is shaped less by who we are or think we are than by how others perceive us. It is also emphasized in another statement that: "it's more like the society that cares about the atmosphere, reputation of people, how people presume you." (F1)

There is, however, a certain level of tolerance and acceptance for failure and difference, but there needs to be a common understanding of what is appropriate and what is not: "If someone breaks a rule, it is tolerated as long as it's not too serious. People forgive within the acceptable range."(F4). And again, things are changing in Japanese society, as the view on mistakes coming from the younger generation adds a bit more detail to this picture. In the recent past, making mistakes was traditionally punished both in the education system and workplace culture, instilling fear and excessive apology. This "old way of thinking" was shared by the society, and led to hesitation, inefficiency, and fear

of action, but today people are becoming more open to mistakes and recognizing their positive value.

In the eyes of my interviewees, Japanese society is cohesive and built of many individual elements that work together smoothly. This perceived state of balance is achieved through everyone knowing their own position and social responsibilities connected with their status and position in society. The older interlocutor, F4, explained that this comes from the ancient buddhist rules of Prince Shōtoku, whose teachings of avoiding conflict, respect for each other, and maintaining society through harmony allows Japanese people a social life based on respect for other people, without engaging in open arguments and fights.

This harmony might be viewed and achieved everyday, especially in the workplace, by knowing other people, and getting to know them through i.e. *nomikai*, and having a shared awareness of being mutually connected and dependent on each other, which in result allows, and enables individuals to control and restrain their tempers: *"I don't like nomikai, but, like, I like it, I like the concept of it, because I could know the persons from the different department who whom I don't see often, and, like, but, like, making a good connection meaning harmony within the group makes the work easier to work, especially like in the emergency situations."* (M5). Although M5 is just in his twenties, he very clearly saw the differences between European and Japanese cultures and the difficulties emerging from the level of the individual self-sacrifice to the group and the tension between *giri* and *ninjō* (respectively obligation and compassion (Davies & Ikeno, 2002)): *"Like one for all or for one. Like this word. And so just because like be killing yourself can be beneficial by the fact that you're belonging to the group. So like in Japan it works in a good way. [...] But it's obvious, from, from the perspective of the Western way it is you shouldn't, and you should be respectful to yourself, so I guess that's why I don't want to work in Japan anyway."*

This focus on conformity and individualism being subordinated to collectivism has also other negative consequences explicitly stated in the interviews. There's a strong belief that certain things must be done in a very specific, rule-bound manner. As one interviewee put it: "There are the rules that you just follow, it's like a train. There is a track and you just keep going." (M4) If you stay on this well-defined path and collect

your "social markers of success" along the way, you're a winner. If not, you're a loser. This means that after graduating from Tokyo University, if you're not aiming high enough, i.e. to become a prime minister or at least a significant minister, you're considered a loser. This perspective allows the introduction of another crucial and recurring category: shame, which will be discussed further in part 4.7 of this Chapter.

There is another layer to the cultural concepts that dictate inclusion and exclusion. It posits that a society that acknowledges diverse groups has developed specific beliefs about what constitutes "sameness" and "difference.". These norms define who belongs, who stands out, and how similarity and difference are socially negotiated. In the entire body of interviews recurring strong normative categories and oppositions repeat, the most visible among them being:

- "Good family" vs. "bad family"
- "Normal job/occupation" vs. "not normal job" (primarily referring to job stability and contract type)
- "Normal employment" vs. "not normal employment"
- "Normal behavior" vs. "not normal behavior"
- "Stable" vs. "unstable"
- "White company" vs. "black company" (a company that cares for employees, pays overtime, offers permanent contracts vs. one that doesn't and disrespects employees)
- "Old" vs. "young", especially along the dividing line between responsible vs. irresponsible, and patient vs. impatient.

The category of "normal" appears mostly when people discuss what is known to them or observed, as regular and common in their nearest surroundings. Normal means going to high school, normal means going to a public, and not a private school, normal means a stable employment form (lifelong employment), and finally normal means that sometimes normal families will produce non-normative individuals of unusual behaviours i.e. ochikobore. All the examples above implies societal standards or expectation, and those who fall outside this standard are seen as anomalous.

In terms of the family background the difference between "good" or "bad" family is:

"For like I would say for maybe like 50 years ago it would maybe be like a good family might be of course they have money like maybe their like child's father is like a CEO of or runs a company or something or works in a good company or it's like they have stable money that's quite important maybe, and bad might be they don't like they're the person they're trying to marry is not having a job or they're like they have a bad rumor already or it's it's like it's like uh it's like It feels like a business, kind of. But nowadays, I would say, nowadays I think it's more of a, it's like, it's good that if they're not bad, kind of. If it's not bad, it's good. It's kind of more, it's much more casual way of thinking, lighter way of thinking, I think recently." (F5) The norm is also being a self-sufficient family that is able to support themselves without the help of other people, especially the government. Again, reliance on external support is explicitly recognized as shameful.

5.4. Parallel Social Streams

The metaphor of the parallel social streams is another powerful one, repeated in different forms and on different levels throughout the interviews, stressing the importance of "reading the air" and noticing hints suggesting the presence of subtle differences. It encapsulates the nature of invisible and ambiguous social divisions in Japan.

Considering class experiences, types of companies and their cultures, and the education background, Japanese society appears to function as streams or bubbles (Nowak, 1996) running parallel to each other, with limited opportunities for intersection. When intersections do occur, they happen under very specific circumstances (e.g., class advancement, relocation). These streams differ almost imperceptibly in appearance, behavior, location and language, yet the boundaries, despite being nearly invisible, are very rigid. The perceived differences create distinct "bubbles" where people primarily interact within their own class (or lifestyle), similar to Bourdieu's habitus (2022). This might contribute to the lack of understanding or empathy across social divides and can make systemic issues (like poverty or lack of social mobility) feel like individual failures, especially when viewed through the lens of individual responsibility and the "King's way". This approach is clearly visible in this quote: "People think instability is due to lack of effort rather than systemic factors." And applying the blame to yourself might come to the Japanese people quite naturally:

"Imagine that you are the one, you end up in the lower class because of the, because you didn't study during the university. You're going to have a hard time in a company or looking for a job. And many Japanese are going to accept that as the reality of life. But in a way, it's suffering in a sense. [...] If that happened in the States you know, it's going to be like a revolution there like I said no I'm you are not recognizing me because the whole world is fucked up, let's break everything, you know." (M4)

This rigidity of the "bubble system" makes the ability to *kuuki wo yomu* exceptionally important, especially when we are focused on noticing the subtle distinctions between people. This metaphor captures the invisible, but enduring segmentation of Japanese society, as in: *"So do the bubbles communicate? No! So back to you, can we actually talk about the class, because there's nothing to unite them? So I'm not sure if we are class society beyond the education, because there is nothing to identify denominator"*. In Japan, you do not feel the differences between people, because of the homogeneity of social networks, which is further enhanced by corporate practices that reinforce social stability and minimize perceived inequality. And even when structural differences do exist (e.g., between companies), the cultural and institutional mechanisms maintain a sense of sameness and reduce incentives for differentiation, which further blurs the perception of class distinctions. In this sense my Japanese speakers seem not to experience class as a coherent category.

What factors influence and reinforce the bubbles in Japanese society?

Groupness: in Japan, group belonging is not only preferred, but often seen as essential to one's existence. However, with adulthood, opportunities to find a community diminish - manifesting in practices like *nomikai* (company-enforced group bonding) on one end, and *kodokushi* (lonely death without social ties) on the other.

Constant contact with similar people: you primarily interact with people similar to yourself (excluding public elementary school), within the closest neighborhood.

Recruitment and leisure: this is enforced by school recruitment methods and programmed leisure activities (children's extracurriculars, clubs, university circles – you go where people similar to you are).

Economic barriers: universities are all fee-paying, requiring money. Money requires a good job, which requires a good university.

Work life: work consumes 30 years of life, forcing individuals to spend immense amounts of time with the same people, often selected based on their university's ranking rather than just their competence.

Perception of wealth disparity: the interviewees see economic differences and the resulting varying chances for prestige, recognition, and influence rather clearly. For those already at the top, these disparities are less visible: F5 recalls befriending people from different classes in university, where wealth didn't impact relationships, which were based on shared interests. My interviewees see and acknowledge the differences, usually stating at the same time, that those differences are minimal, but they are there: "because we can distinguish, because if you see this vehicle, like okay, well even in Japan also there is some difference." (F5)

Class divisions: statements like "In Japan, I usually don't use the word social class... everyone looks almost same." (F2), were often followed by contradictory opinions, clearly recognizing differences and class divisions (often understood in purely economic sense), and this trend appeared repeatedly throughout the interviews. Although sometimes it is really difficult to name the differences in terms of class or wealth, it is much easier to understand and share or disagree on dreams for the future: "The way they think about their life is kind of completely different...some friends...don't have ambitions to earn a lot..." (M8)

The apparent class equality in Japan is perceived as deceptive, while everyone might claim to be middle class, subtle differences in financial capacity are easily detected: *"I learned me uh my most of my friends house are really clean and really big and I heard a lot of solitaire travel a lot, like they went to the Tokyo Disneyland twice or third times per year and travel and buy something and buy new car. But I never heard, like, this story from my parents buying a new really expensive one. And also we did, we traveled somewhere with my family, but it's really small trip, not other prefecture only in the Fukushima prefecture or near the mountain or near really cheap restaurant. So, yeah, I usually feel the gap of the rich or poor from the daily conversation and their appearance and their stuff, what they have, maybe house, clothes and anything."* (F2)

Apart from the economic capital, one of the most important ways of both recognizing and maintaining class divisions is cultural capital: *"I think they all have just these differences in their traits, they behave differently, more... like, culturally, elegant. But*

those who didn't choose that kind of school, or didn't have a good teacher, a good school, then it's this physical work that stays for them, and then without that sort of education, they just behave a bit differently too. You can really see the difference between these various classes. [...] the way they speak, for example, right? [colloquial interjection] In Japanese there are different... words, forms, and so on. When they come to a tea ceremony, they bow nicely. It's hard to describe it like this, but their body language, their body language is different than people who just don't have the experience of those ceremonies, for instance." (M6)

Elites as "Another Planet": For many interviewees (with some exceptions), the Japanese elites are perceived as "another planet," not just a separate stream, but: "There are a lot of bubbles and there is a cloud in the castle in the sky that is our elite." Another example of a strict division between elites and the regular people is the elite's clannism and endogamy, which are the key strategies of building and maintaining the boundaries.

The common understanding throughout the material is identifying being "rich/upper class" with being able to send your children to very good private schools from junior high through university. And even if the graduates of "top tier" universities declare that the system is open, people from the lower stratas do not believe in this claim, therefore looking for alternative options, like studies abroad. However, most people don't personally know the very wealthy or elite, as they live separately (and location is a significant marker of prestige). And as for their place in the society, they are explicitly mentioned as a separate entity: "Others, such as the royal family, hold special positions in society." (F4)

Interviewees also acknowledged the existence of poverty, albeit on the margins of society. However, in comparison to being rich, it was easier for them to explicitly express both the differences and specific social markers indicating poverty, like having a lot of children, not owning a house, or having a small house, and being dependent on governmental support. There were many important morally charged statements, emphasising the boundary between us and them. Being poor, not financially stable, or homeless were mentioned as visible evidence of exiting the "King's way" and a symbol of personal failure. Being poor was sometimes regarded as something resulting from lacking moral and social capitals. Homelessness was linked with markers of otherness,

in this case being foreigners: "Many homeless people there, and I heard that many of them are... It's like... I'm not sure about if they're Japanese or not actually." (F5) Throughout the project, Japanese interlocutors did not spontaneously raise the topic of the Burakumin minority. When specifically asked, they said that this category is not important to them, not socially relevant in modern society, and a remnant of the past. Initially, most interviewees stated that recognizing Burakumin is nearly impossible without insider knowledge, mirroring their views on other subtle social distinctions. Yet over time, I was provided with rich content that revealed a set of implicitly expressed rules for maintaining and challenging these boundaries, suggesting that the category operates simultaneously as invisible and hypervisible.

5.5. Education as a Key that Locks and Unlocks Different (Status) Doors

Although there is general agreement among the interviewees that social mobility is possible in today's Japan, there are certain factors that make it more and more difficult. What is more, the conviction of Japanese society being open to change and class advancement is more visible among those of my interlocutors who experienced or are currently experiencing such a process. Like in the words of a retired M9, who "grew up in a poor family and wanted to go to university. I couldn't, but I worked hard, studied on my own, and became a company director." or F2, currently a university student, who herself stated that her family is rather poor, and was encouraged by her parents to make an effort and: "study hard and go to a good university and get a good job." (F2). This perspective is supported by M4, who, while identifying with the upper class, notes that the exam-based university entrance system enables students from diverse backgrounds (even the Burakumin) to enter the elite. At the same time he emphasizes that this seemingly meritocratic system is tightly constrained by the structure of the education system itself, which both enables and restricts mobility.

Firstly, education is a necessary element of the "King's way", and a factor that strongly influences your future professional and income opportunities. The better the university rank, the better the company you will land in. Therefore the competition to get to the best schools starts at the kindergarten level, and knowing how to get into the right school requires social capital and the strategy on how to use it: "So, basically, people

who know this and who doesn't. That's it. That's the hierarchy, first hierarchy is: do you know this or you don't, and if you don't then it doesn't matter." On the other hand, M5, being somewhere in between in terms class position, agrees indeed with the open opportunities for social mobility through scholarships and institutions that offer them and exam-based university system, but he is also convinced that the ability to use those resources is a form of social capital or social skills necessary for succeeding in life. He draws a very sharp line: "The poor people don't know, like even they don't know the existence of scholarships and they don't know like how to apply for that and it's like you know, like, this is like the socially smart like they should be because it doesn't relate to like a mathematics or language like they should they just should know like they should know like what the government offer what the school offer [...] They literally don't know because they don't have a source to know that.". Again, M5 uses the language of Bourdieu's (2022) distinction, suggesting that people differ based on the capitals regarded by their class as necessary and important.

Secondly, Japanese university attendance is fee-based, and this requires a certain amount of wealth and financial resources. And it is here that education is inextricably connected with economic capital and is a critical factor in social stratification: lack of funds effectively blocks avenues for development and material improvement (unless you're clever enough to resourcefully exploit the mechanisms or secure a good government scholarship through hard work). As F4 wrote: "Those who are economically well-off have relatively more opportunities to benefit in terms of education, employment as well as health.". M8, himself from an upper-middle class, reveals, quite frankly, that his, and his two brothers private education from junior-high school means that he is from a richer family, and that "costs a lot. I can imagine that's a hell of a lot of money." M8 is in his twenties, but he already knows from his experience that: "Definitely yes. [...] I think the, like, education system, educational systems reproduce the hierarchy I think."

Education and meritocracy, for my interviewees, can act as both a tool for upward mobility and a symbolic means of reinforcing conformity. Education systems reinforce and reproduce class boundaries, but offer narratives of meritocracy and mobility. It is especially visible in the voices underlying the education as an environment of ruthless competition and the preliminary rank system, that very early on in one's life it teaches

you that people are not equal, but they are organized in a hierarchical system: "In junior high, that kind of rivalry started up, just to get into the best high school. And then it's studying, everything is prepared for the final exams, so you can get the best score, so you can get into those best universities, that, in a way, guarantees your future." This view is also enhanced by what M4 is saying: "I think the education-based class exists. That is basically each class is made from the way the university is [...]." So not only is the social class and group distinctions in Japan, primarily driven by education (university and high school prestige) and occupation, but also there is the social awareness of those divisions. Depending on what high school graduated, which university attended, one might find itself in a completely different social reality.

5.6. Symbolic Geography as a Boundary Making Tool

A Japanese speaker in my study said, "I think that there is a significant relationship between location and social groupings." This observation was a key finding, as my interviewees consistently depicted spatial segregation as a tool for marking symbolic boundaries in Japan. In almost every statement, I was provided with a detailed description of specific locations identified by their wealth, prestige, or safety. They revealed very specific markers of how different locations are perceived and on what social level they operate.

Historical background and specifics of a place coming from the old times; including clear differences in culture, language, customs and attitudes. One example is the discussion on the contrasts between the biggest cities. Tokyo: a mixed city where people are new and their origins are often unknown. The city's atmosphere is open to new businesses and ideas due to this constant influx of people and foreign companies. On the other hand, there are the old, historical prefectures of Osaka and Kyoto. Kyoto, in particular, is regarded as conservative and closed, as opposed to the more open cultures of Osaka and Tokyo. As one interviewee put it: "Kyoto, so they like the the old chapter, they have more tradition, they have more tradition how to treat people, they have the specific way of saying something to tell the outsiders indirectly that they don't welcome them or something, and at the same time Osaka we consider them as a very flat, so let's feel our luck there, that some foreigners says that they like Osaka best because people are open there and it's easier to make friends." (F1) Osaka is mentioned as a region

connected both to Burakumin and to other minority communities (notably Korean immigrants). This reflects how the region overlaps with minority histories: Osaka appears as a site of layered marginalization (Burakumin settlements, Korean districts): "Although this is about Burakumin, but there are some areas somewhere near Osaka... a village that used to be a Korean people's [village]." Osaka, in the view of one of my interviewees, is also connected to the presence of homelessness and slums: "It's like an area. Yes, yes. It's like an area in Osaka but there's many homeless people here and I heard that many of them are... It's like... I'm not sure about if they're Japanese or not actually." (F5)

Distance from Tokyo, and Tokyo as a central point of reference in terms of social mobility and new trends, is regarded as "the ultimate location" - "it's a bit of fear, a bit of attraction, a bit of dream, all of it together, because it's a magnet, right?" - being an embodiment of prestige, aspirations and opportunities: "Why do they have to live in Tawaman, in such a luxury place? I mean, somewhere like, I don't know, for example, the Kōtō-ku, fifty minutes by train to the city center, you could live there perfectly fine. But then, of course, that depends on the person, it's an individual choice, but a lot of people want to live right in the center, and at the cost of living. I kind of understand why. Why? Because the best high schools, kindergartens, and, well, elementary schools are located right in Minato-ku, in the city center, right?" (M7). Middle and upper middle class's main motivations for moving out is providing better educational chances for the children, as education determines your marriage and job opportunities in the future.

The symbolic power of Tokyo, as a metropolis, influences the life of nearby cities by them performing metropolitan belonging through luxurious consumption of brands like Louis Vuitton. Residents of the nearby city of Mito who want to avoid being identified with provincial lifestyles and therefore, building a large Louis Vuitton shop, are creating a symbolic bridge connecting them, a periphery, with the center. This emphasis on blending and adopting the homogenous identity is visible also on the linguistic level, especially in the rejection of local dialects and pronunciation by residents of regions surrounding Tokyo, as they feel ashamed. Similar things happen with Burakumin identity, as expressed by one speaker "Those who went out, they are not Buraku anymore.", stigma markers are described as specific spaces: language/dialect or physical area, suggesting that there is this possibility to exit, to leave the stigmatized space

behind. Therefore, it is not people themselves who are the carriers of the stigma, but specific traits or features that are labeled as such (Goffman, 1963).

Urban vs. countryside division: countryside is perceived as an ultimate reservoir of old-fashioned ways of thinking, stereotypes, and prejudices, the countryside is "different". People in the cities do not do certain things, i.e. they do not discriminate, but the people in the countryside do, they are also less ambitious, and more reserved towards "others", including foreigners. Some phenomena, like prejudice towards others, might be stronger in the countryside: "In the village where my aunt lives, recently there have been many foreigners coming from South East Asia to work, and when a large number of pears, a speciality of the area, were stolen from the orchard just before they were harvested, the first rumour the residents spread was that people of South East Asian had stolen them." (F4) This quote presents the attitude where the foreigners are the rule-breakers, and the inappropriate behaviours are identified with "the others", not with the "us" group, yet building another symbolic division. My interviewees clearly stated the existing boundaries between their mindset and the mindset of countryside residents. What is also important, that they all perceive their lives, goals and desires through the perspective of a city person. There was no mention of alternative ways of life that could be led and enjoyed in the countryside. Stereotypical perceptions of regional differences, like "we have this image of the people in the north are lazy and they are not the typical Japanese" indicate and reinforce the cultural and social boundaries. Rural areas were also connected with stronger interpersonal and family relations, which, in the eyes of the interviewees, allowed for more informal means of social control and might influence more difficulties for i.e. Burakumin became part of the community.

Burakumin as a group is also a space phenomenon. There are segregated spaces bearing often marks of stigma and exclusion: "Certain areas are regarded as neglected, and their residents are socially excluded (e.g., Kyoto, Osaka)." or "Company rejects people based on address in Buraku regions ... unofficial yet real." (F1) The conversation highlights the theme of a fading identity and the dissolution of the Burakumin as a visibly distinct group. The speakers repeatedly state that the term "Burakumin" is "dying" and "rarely used.", and Buraku are gradually emptying. This might be linked to spatial and occupational changes, as Buraku residents moved to "normal towns and cities", and as a

group, they might be fading as well, as they are actively rejecting the inherited or spatial stigma, by leaving the Buraku and rejecting this identity. Some speakers also noted that "poor" living conditions historically associated with Burakumin areas are no longer accurate. Their lifestyles, including house and car ownerships are now comparable to the general lower class or lower middle class, making them less recognizable by outward signs of poverty. The economic and infrastructural differences, which in the past were easily recognizable and linked to specific areas, are no longer a reliable marker of Burakumin identity. However, association of "otherness" or stigma of certain districts or neighbourhoods in a collective memory might be still transmitted even if the original residents do not live there anymore.

5.7. Mechanisms of Boundary Maintenance: Shame, Stigma and Silence

The pervasiveness of shame: Since the belief in achieving success through effort and education is common within interviews, another theme emerges: shame. Falling off the "King's way" is perceived as shameful. Additionally, several interviewees mentioned the shame associated with receiving government aid (benefits, allowances), as it suggests an inability to cope and deviates from the "Japanese way of life" of self-reliance. It implies not taking matters into one's own hands, but relying on the government for help. One speaker highlighted that Japanese people are so ashamed of receiving state aid that they prefer cash over food vouchers, as vouchers are too visibly indicative of receiving assistance. Being poor or in poverty was also associated with the traditional gender-based division of responsibilities: "[...] men, they definitely are ashamed with their factor. Because of all the culture, all the culture of Japan, all the Japanese culture, the men have to provide for their family. Men have to work." Therefore, men not working or men receiving government financial support are regarded as "not normal".

The inability to achieve financial stability and success through stable employment, equally for mainstream Japanese and Burakumin, seriously limits marriage opportunities. Marriage, as a cultural institution, is in Japan associated with upgrading social status, and that creates a strong moral division of who is worth marrying, and who is not: "That's why everyone, especially before making the decision about marriage, looks at how much he really earns, especially women - the man." (M7)

Another speaker explained: "Parents of spouse may reject marriage because candidate has only temporary contract." (M2), precisely "due to low perceived social value and unstable income". Individual strategies focused on the search of a suitable job in the times of uncertainty, frequent job changes, and temporary contracts create a self-reinforcing spiral of moral assessment, as the Japanese society blames individuals for failures: "After you throw away your first job, your value is decreasing dramatically on the market. Because they are thinking you are the person who might be problematic, irresponsible. And who wants to hire someone who highly possibly quit the job?" (M2) Shame, silence and stigma are also the societal mechanisms of maintaining conformity, strengthening the rules of obedience: "The ideal social people is, can work and work and earn money and they can pay for their family and they can buy enough stuff. But if they cannot do that, people feel like they have to be ashamed. Because it's not normal."

For Burakumin, there used to be, and sometimes still is, a regime of shame and silence, clearly differentiating between "us" and "them". It was shameful to speak openly about Burakumin, as it was linked to categories connected with whispers, gossip, "we know who you really are" attitude. The unspoken social facts are that: "banks won't do business with anyone from a Buraku region" and that the students were instructed that the "Burakumin" word was not to be used. For one of interviewees: "if their ancestors were Burakumin, probably their grandparents would be so embarrassed to tell their children about it so they wouldn't even know about it", this feeling of embarrassment comes not from being Buraku itself, but from being perceived in a negative way and segregated by mainstream Japanese: "treated badly maybe or maybe just like they just want like better self-image or maybe it just might be pride but i think it's more of a they kind of want to get rid of this bad image of them like of their past and not like pass it on to their like children and their grandchildren." Burakumin is "probably a shame for the family, I think. That's how they think, I think. [...] they want to get rid of the fact that they were not treated well in the past I think." (F5) This might suggest shifting from a spatial perspective to a temporal one, where the Burakumin issue is so far in the past that it won't exist in the present. Shame is transmitted through the generation, and silence is a tool used to cut ties with the past, in an act of self-purification, and moving beyond the stigma. And in terms of marriage, ties with the Buraku community limit the possibility to marry well, as there is a certain "fear. But fear of what? Because if it turns

out that I come from this Eta/Hinin position, they may face social ostracism, exclusion to some extent." (M11).

5.8. No Single Denominator to Identify a Burakumin

Burakumin as "Something Completely Different": For my Japanese interviewees, this group isn't viewed as a social class, however, when asked, people often still place Buraku people in a lower-class category. But there were voices suggesting that the Burakumin have already blended in Japanese society, and that they have attained a certain level of wealth and possession. However, there still is "the ontological difference". When asked about this difference: if Burakumin are not visibly different, then why the distinction?, no one answered directly. There were mentions of significant places of residence, sometimes traditional occupations, and even less often specific surnames. One of the interviewees mentioned a Foucaultian-like theory that the rulers in the Edo period gained surveillance and control over Japanese people through the creation of divisions and groups to divert social discontent during crises, which implicates the political creation of this group. In the interviews, no one spoke about Burakumin in an openly dismissive or unpleasant way, not a single person refused to answer my questions, which might be surprising, considering that Burakumin topic is widely characterised as taboo. Interestingly, there was one particular statement critical of the western gaze: "[...] In my Japanese textbook: in India there's such a kind of hierarchy and I met an Indian guy in here in Poland and I asked him about that he was kind of mad at me "no, this is, like, all about Western textbook about us, and you're such a like such a, like stereotypical you have such a stereotypical idea about India, no we don't really know, like, we don't fucking care about such thing" like we, yeah, like maybe it's kind of same, yeah." (M8)

Unidentifiable and unrecognized: Most speakers said they didn't know anyone personally and wouldn't be able to recognize a Burakumin just by appearance. This highlights that the Burakumin category is blurred and ambiguous, and cannot be simply equated with the Edo period's Eta/Hinin categories. Even if they had met one, they wouldn't know it. Buraku is "somewhere else", but not here: not a lived experience, nor first-hand knowledge, many of the interviewees learned about Buraku through school text books, TV programmes or novels. Anecdotes and rumors played some role as well.

Sometimes, someone quietly mentions that a newly moved-in family was Burakumin - a testament to the power of gossip and the unspoken boundaries that are understood only when you "read the air". Or rumors that the government sent Burakumin to build the Fukushima power plant because their lives were "cheap," and no one else wanted to do the "dirty work", suggesting Burakumin were seen as disposable and were used as a political tool. The perceived opposition between "us" and "them" was evident as well in both social practice and linguistic patterns. The anecdote concerning a family checking Burakumin lists before a marriage demonstrated how marriage still acts as a powerful tool for maintaining social boundaries. This distinction was also consistently reflected in the use of the pronoun "they" when referring to Burakumin. People also often shifted to discussing Ainu, Koreans, or slums, implying that "others" still exist, placing Burakumin at the margins of Japanese society.

Interviewees emphasised that it's an expired issue in a blended society, a remnant of the past even, suggesting also that the modern Japanese population is "very mixed" due to the outcome of World War II, where everyone started from scratch: "I don't know exactly, but maybe after that, maybe they didn't care so much maybe everyone become poorer so then after after this war then they will be with each other together then maybe at this time maybe they didn't like have so much like difference each other" (M10). Many statements showed also progressing weakening memory and transmission of historical stigma, i.e while mentioning that young people having no notion about Burakumin, and a visible historical shift in language happened: in the past the term Buraku might be understood as a stigmatizing or derogatory, but today it means only a settlement, without an additional hidden notion. However, there still exists an element of symbolic distance: even if people don't understand Buraku, they imagine them as "second category. "Average citizens, they don't actually have the knowledge about Burakumin, but still, they look at them a bit, well, they treat them as people who are, you know, second-class." (M11) or "We have like um some real like regions in the cities where like those people who are being kind of neglected are living. So in the official society, it's not existing anymore, but it is." where the speaker explains that although the discrimination practices have officially ended, the spatial segregation and boundaries still exist. Buraku might also be identified as a sovereign "almost a small independent country [...] the North Korea which the freedom is allowed. But within this Buraku."

There is no single denominator to identify Burakumin: the content of the interviews' reveals that the visible paradox of invisibility and hypervisibility shapes the perceptions of Burakumin. My speakers state that Burakumin are invisible: "I don't know who is my friend is from Eta/Hinin", "I myself haven't met them, and I don't know, I don't know anyone from that kind of Buraku district. Maybe I do know them, but I just don't know that I do." but simultaneously they are hypervisible through specific markers: residential area, specific surname, if you know, you are able to recognize it, sometimes occupation, like dried skins of dead animals in Kanemachi district of Tokyo, that are visible. They are declared to be "totally different" or an "independent small country", which means that Burakumin are still perceived as different and separate, although it is not immediately clear to everyone. Overall, in the gathered material, there is the growing conviction of fading stigma and blurring differences. Jobs, social mobility, and social integration of Burakumin are treated as factual, however the interviewees openly stated that marriage or having close family relations might be a challenge, as: "Basically like a Buraku is like the place where there is nothing actually, so there is, it's a lot of Buraku, to be honest. So it never happened. There are no opportunities to come from Buraku, to be honest, in real life." In the meritocratic society being a Burakumin does not bring any merit for your counterparts. That is why, the social perceptions of Burakumin might work on two levels: declaring that social changes and integration are progressing is one thing, but navigating through implicitly transmitted hints of the stigma being still present, is something entirely different, and requires the contextual skill of "reading the air".

5.9. Conclusion

In this chapter I presented the data coming from my in-depth-interviews, where I divided the rich content into the key themes relevant to my research questions. The themes express the nuanced and multilayered nature of social and symbolic divisions in Japanese society, built around the most important analytical categories. To analyse the data I employed thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis that helped me to recognize patterns, schemes and power relations present in the interviews. The themes that were revealed helped me to address most of my research questions, which revolved around topics of how symbolic boundaries are built, maintained and negotiated in Japanese society today.

Although at first glance the answers and statements differed much between themselves, after a critical and deep analysis specific recurring themes became visible. The respondents articulated a strong sense of middle-class sameness, underlying the narrative of Japanese homogeneity. However, while many of them indicated that there is not much difference between people in Japan, subtle but visible differences and boundaries emerged. Homogeneity turned out to be a narrative that is constructed politically and maintained by two metaphors: social “bubbles” and parallel streams, that help people to sustain the feeling of sameness, and reduce the cognitive dissonance related to differences.

Secondly, education was considered as an important theme that was visible throughout all statements. Education plays the role of both a gatekeeper and a gateway in the process of social advancement and reproduction of status. Education is a key to financial and psychological stability later in life, but for many of the interviewees the meritocracy of the system was again perceived as a myth. The education success is possible for those who either possess certain capitals: social and economical, allowing them to fully understand and navigate through systems complexity, or for those who have a specific social smartness, that helps them to overcome systemic barriers. Education is the boundary-making mechanism that separates people into parallel streams or “bubbles”.

The third theme was moral codes and shame, which regulated feelings of belonging in a subtle yet powerful way. Not a lot has to be said in order for everyone to know how to behave and what kind of behaviour will be regarded socially as including or excluding. While social expectations of sustaining harmony and safety shape the interactional boundaries, exclusion is operationalized through tools of silence and gossip. Finally shame, as a strong emotion, operates as a collective framework that enforces in-group conformist behaviors. And on the individual level it works as a guardian of morality, reminding of a differentiation between “good” and “bad” families, jobs, and acts.

As for Burakumin, who are an important part of this study, they still emerge as a symbolic-heavy category in the narratives of my interviewees. Most of the speakers did not have personal and direct connections with the Burakumin minority, their perceptions

of this group were mediated by mass media, school curriculum and often gossip. Although Burakumin were seen as “a thing of the past”, something not important anymore, a remnant of the old system, but yet visible, proves that this category still functions as a symbol of inner “otherness”, that seems to be stabilizing the sameness of the mainstream Japanese. The paradoxical image of invisibility-hypervisibility returns in the observations, as Burakumin for most of the time are impossible to recognize, yet they became hypervisible in the context of employment, marriage or business.

Finally, yet another theme resurfaced, the topic of intergenerational tensions and differences, that divided my interviewees into two groups. Younger generations stressed the issues of uncertainty, precarity, bearing individual blame for systemic failures, they were also seeking the ways of coping between individual aspirations and attachment to the group. On the other hand, the older interviewees underlined the need of collective belonging, stability and in-group conformity. This gives a convincing image of shifting paradigms and norms, and also fluctuating symbolic boundaries, as the 100 mln middle class narrative is declining, and new types of inequalities are emerging. These broader observations help contextualize how social boundaries are perceived in contemporary Japan.

To sum up, those impressions, perceptions and lived experiences of my interviewees shape a multidimensional reflection on the fluidity and changeability of symbolic boundaries in Japanese society and lead to the next chapter, where the abovementioned themes will be discussed and framed into a broader analytic framework of, among else, Weber, Bourdieu, Lamont and Douglas.

CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION

6.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I presented the analytical data obtained through in-depth interviews with 17 Japanese citizens, focusing on the most important and profound themes that emerged from the collected material. The provided quotes showed the multidimensional perspective on how the Japanese think about class, otherness and sameness, how they perform those categories in everyday life, and what meanings they apply to those concepts. I also discussed with them their lived experience of many types of boundaries affecting their relationships with others.

The following sections will enable me to delve deeply into the nature of each theme introduced and presented in the previous chapter, discussing them within the broader context of the theoretical framework and my research questions. This way, I will be able to transition from basic themes to broader analytical categories. To maintain the reliability and quality of the interpretations, I will draw on and utilize several renowned theoretical lenses, including those of Max Weber, Mary Douglas, Michele Lamont, and Chie Nakane and Robert N. Bellah among others.

Each subchapter will also be discussed and compiled with the current academic publications presenting the state of the art on the topics of class, reproduction of status, meritocracy, and education, as well as the symbolic and real representations of others in Japanese society and culture. I will begin by presenting and deconstructing the topic of “middle class sameness”, followed by an analysis of education and shame as the primary mechanisms of boundary-making in Japanese society. The first one functions as an institutional organization of society, and the latter as a shared moral framework. Then I will move on to a section of this chapter devoted to discussing Burakumin and their symbolic position, arising from the historical context of underlying structures that governed, and still govern, social life. What will be the most important perspective for me to grasp is the processuality and fluidity of Burakumin status through the centuries, and a gradual change in the way they are perceived.

In a broader societal frame, I will also relate to Mary Douglas's grid-group typology, illustrating how social environments influence individual beliefs and behaviors, often unconsciously. The final part is dedicated to the topic of the current changes in Japanese society resulting from economic and demographic factors. In particular, it focuses on how the moments of insecurity and changeability of external conditions influence the lived experience of social anxiety, feelings of inadequacy, and gradual dissolution of the old ways.

6.2. Middle-Class Sameness: Parallel Streams, Weberian Lens, and Moral Economy

The homogeneity of social bubbles in Japan isn't a result of the Japanese people being inherently or genetically uniform (Aoki, 2021). Instead, it stems from the fact that individuals live and interact within homogenous social bubbles, giving them the sense of sameness. While Japanese people are diverse, they value being with others who are similar to themselves because it reduces the need for constant negotiation of social norms and behaviors. This creates a sense of *anshin* (security and peace of mind), allowing them to "read the air" within a familiar context, whether that context is middle-class, working-class, or any other. We can refer to this apparent homogeneity as a constructed political narrative. As my interviewees noted, this sense of unity and uniformity was a deliberate creation, a historical process that was essential for nation-building after World War II. Since different groups throughout history had distinct codes (e.g., samurai vs. peasants), an ideology of a singular, middle-class identity was created to unify people from not only different regions and backgrounds, but also from various areas outside the Japanese islands (Dale, 1986).

There are several layers to uncover here, first one being the observation by Robert N. Bellah who identified a paradigmatic Japanese value: the particularistic consideration of relational context over abstract, universal principles (Bellah, 1962, p. 208). For Bellah, this had two important results in terms of groups and values. He regarded values, as "*far more stable and persistent than economic or class factors, and change coming from economic and class causes will be channeled by the structure of values*", and assumed that the loyalty was always towards the group, not status oriented or idea oriented, which meant that the external structures could be dissolved, without changing the

important or unifying values. Additionally, there was always a lot of fluidity in the system, which allowed the groups to deconstruct or cease to exist, and then regroup if necessary. This particularism was understood implicitly within groups - through "reading the air", without unnecessary communication.

Groupness had also certain social implications. Takashi Takeuchi's (1995) observation highlights ambiguity in the relation of "us" vs. "others": while outsiders who are, for example, visiting by appointment are treated with courtesy, someone attempting to join the group uninvited will face a lack of warmth and potential exclusion. This again points to the importance of *shūdan ishiki* (group consciousness), which creates its own social codes of behavior and is thought to be one of the foundations of Japanese society. The vertical organization of Japanese society was based on the concept of *ba* (frame), where *ba* might be represented by a village, household, university, company, or other similar entities. Nakane claims that the historical and discursive persistence of *ba* is visible in the Japanese introduction modes of saying: "I'm from X company," rather than "I am a teacher." She also aligns with Bellah in the regard that the status might change, the social reality might change, but if one is a part of a village, then all the people in this frame would identify with the village first. This approach contrasts with India, where the organization is horizontal, and where people identify with their exact layer (i.e. caste), even if they live in the same place.

This loyalty to the group and its other members means that people's actions become meaningful and understandable only in relation to others (Matsumoto, 1988), and this concern for others is a sign of maturity. Again, this sort of framework is visible in one of the comments about the difference between young, impatient and self-centered people who enter the work environment: "*they should be kind of patient, because you know it's like the adult society [...] they need to sacrifice, they don't should sacrifice a lot but it's an adult world so they should know like at least to behave in such situations.*" implicating that the boundaries between individual and group are built on one's ability to restrain and conform.

Finally, there is the metaphor of parallel social streams or separate bubbles presented by one of the speakers: "*Because you're always with the same people [...] you're for 50 years in one company. Then you don't feel, you don't know that how other company is*

doing. If that's the kind of system, what's the natural thing for the companies to do? They are going to have more or less the same salary for any company there. So that as a company, do you want to offer better salary to destroy the status quo? No, that's not the Japanese way.”, which finds its explanation and historical context in the work by Chie Nakane (1967), who not only aligns with it, but also points on the boundary work and creation of otherness between seemingly ontological identical entities: *“Employees in an enterprise must remain in the group, whether they like it or not: not only do they not want to change to another company; even if they desire a change, they lack the means to accomplish it. Because there is no tie between workers of the same kind, as in a 'horizontal' craft union, they get neither information nor assistance from their counterparts. [...] Thus, in this type of social organization, as society grows more stable, the consciousness of similar qualities becomes weaker and, conversely, the consciousness of the difference between 'our people' and 'outsiders' is sharpened.”*

To explain better the cultural structure of the in-group / out-group relations in Japan, we can also refer to Douglas and Wildavsky's Grid/Group typology of worldviews. Mary Douglas, disappointed with the field of anthropology, was looking for a tool that would allow to compare different societies and their properties, feeling that this new shift in perspective might save anthropological studies. Douglas believed that the way our social reality looks and functions is not accidental, but structured into well-organized systems (6 & Richards, 2017). *“What people believed or expressed was the product of the dynamics of institutional ordering. Culture was the dependent variable. Modes of organization were the cause.”* (6 & Richards, 2017, p. X). In her view, social actions are meaningful, and can be explained by reference to social codes, patterns, and practices, often unconscious ones. (Douglas, 2003). In that context, the Grid/Group can serve us as a useful tool where we find the interrelated concepts of "group" (how clearly defined an individual's social position is inside or outside a bound social group) and "grid" (how clearly defined an individual's social role is within networks of social privileges, claims and obligations) (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982). Therefore, if we imagine the historical transformation of Japanese society in three different eras: Sengoku (civil wars) (1467–1573), Tokugawa (1600-1868) and today, and compare them on the axis we would see that:

- 1) Sengoku: low grid / high group, as in the time of war the state laws are disintegrating, and the in-group cohesion (clans in this regard) is increasing,

giving Factionalism: intra-organizational conflict (Kretschmer, 2013; Bellah 1985)

- 2) Tokugawa: high grid / high group, as there are rules and restrictions implemented by the shogunate, with high loyalty to the group, resulting in Hierarchy: stable and organized
- 3) Today: low grid / (less) high group, but in an entirely different political and normative context, resulting in Enclaves: individuals in a democratic environment, but still connected to their groups. I posit that in the context of this study, Enclaves can be identified as Bubbles.

Following this typology, the "bubbles" or "parallel streams" would be different social fields in which people operate, with distinct sets of rules, values, and forms of capital (Weber, 2009; Bourdieu, 2022), where *“There are classes and status groups that compete for the monopolisation of resources and political groups that mobilize themselves to promote the interests of their members. Between these groups there are boundaries that are cultural or symbolic in nature”* (Lamont, Fournier, 1992). The boundaries experienced by my interviewees are subtle, sometimes almost invisible, they are not legally sanctioned, but maintained through unspoken norms, overwhelming narratives and shared understanding. Yet, they are noticeable and rigid, and through the acts of speech, behaviour and collective memory they are repeated and reproduced.

Michele Lamont’s definition of symbolic boundaries, already mentioned earlier, is key to this study. According to her, symbolic boundaries are: *“the lines that include and define some people, groups, and things while excluding others. These distinctions can be expressed through normative interdictions (taboos), cultural attitudes and practices, and patterns of likes and dislikes. They play an important role in the creation of inequality and the exercise of power. The term ‘symbolic boundaries’ also refers to the internal distinctions of classification systems and to temporal, spatial, and visual cognitive distinctions in particular.”* (Lamont et al., 2015) In Japan, the distinctions are created and reproduced among “all middle class” and homogeneous society, which makes the task exceptionally difficult.

To fully understand both the boundaries and the boundary work, we first need to address the idea of middle class sameness: parallel streams that allow everyone to believe in

homogeneity. My interviewees are focused on ranks, wealth levels, status, prestige, and lifestyle, which we might understand as Weberian concepts. Weber claimed that one's position in the social hierarchy is not determined purely by wealth or power, but they are also mediated and influenced by prestige, honour, and membership to status groups characterized by a particular lifestyle. On the other hand, there are Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field, which prove to be convenient tools for the explanation of how social structures are internalized and how people compete over different types of capital. In the middle-class idealized way of life, there is the programmed path to success, which we might understand as a habitus specific to that class. Those who follow this path possess not only the desirable social and cultural capitals but also have the moral and intellectual capability to use their advantages. However, those who do not follow this path or exit it at the same point are, in the eyes of others, faulty.

Although in the collected material the interviewees stated that "class" as a term is not used by them often, or that they do not think of class issues on a daily basis, there are particular, observable patterns of expression. My interviewees usually stated that everyone is more or less the same, that there is "no difference", that they "cannot tell" on what basis people differ. Then, when asked to provide the definition, they were usually explaining the classes in Japanese society using strictly economic terms like: lower, higher, middle, etc, and explaining the differences between rich and poor, on the basis of material possessions, like house, car, but also private schools for their children. So at first they used and portrayed the social stratification by referring mostly to the level of wealth and power that allow people to secure life chances, which is the concept of the class proposed by Max Weber (1946): "*We may speak of a 'class' when (1) a number of people have in common a specific causal component of their life chances, in so far as (2) this component is represented exclusively by economic interests in the possession of goods and opportunities for income, and (3) is represented under the conditions of the commodity or labor markets.*" Class is not a community; it refers to any group of people that find themselves in the same class situation.

This is also in alignment with what Robert N. Bellah (2003) said about Japanese society, that is, "*Achievement oriented: people were evaluated more in terms of what they could do than of what status they occupied*". The middle class perceives a person as successful based on their material wealth and possessions, which serve as status

markers; again, these can be subtle but are well-read by others aspiring to or sharing the same class position. However, this class position is narrated and built around the myth of meritocracy and individual effort and skills that enabled this success, while in reality in Japan, the biggest factor contributing to one's class position is the father's class position and education (Shirahase, 2022), which allows the allocation of resources and securing the success path early enough to overcome the tight competition. The type of occupation is also discussed as a choice that either anchors you into a stable life or forces you to make impossible choices. The ideal job is a white collar, stable position in a big company, allowing you to earn enough to cover the expenses seen as obvious lifestyle choices suitable for your class and status, like foreign travels, eating out, being able to support your children's private schools, and buying commodities not based on the pure economical necessity, but own choice and taste. However, if this path could be seen as obvious for people graduating from the best universities (as most of my speakers were), for Japanese coming from less privileged backgrounds this could be way more difficult, as Sato (2016, p.36) argues: *“they cannot choose such a job freely because their choice is affected by their position in the labour market as well as by institutions in the labour market. This individual-level process is accumulated to the intra-generational mobility at the societal level, which can also be called mobility regime (DiPrete, 2002).”*

Access to the class in a Weberian sense might also be available to Japanese of minority background, as evident in the Burakumin at Tokyo Daigaku - Burakumin can be, and indeed become, part of a higher class in terms of wealth or financial resources. Burakumin can get to the position of power, including politics, like for example Jichirō Matsumoto, leader of *Suiheisha* and the “father of Buraku liberation” (部落解放の父, *buraku kaihō no chichi*). In this sense they can achieve what they want, because although the mobility system is open but stagnating, there are still “meritocratic rules” like exam-based university enrollment. Having a successful company or business is also an option for social advancement. However, being smart and successful, and having upgraded your market position, is not enough to secure a successful marriage. Marriage is an important form of status maintenance, as until recently, Japanese marriages were between people of the same social status, not necessarily the same wealth (Miwa, 2024). This is another powerful example of creating and maintaining boundaries, this time based on moral and cultural grounds, which leads us to the next part. Access to the class

is based on wealth, but there is a strong division between “my kind of rich” and “not my kind of rich,” which is drawn along the line of status differences focused on values, lifestyles, and capital (Bourdieu, 2022).

In the interviews, the speakers frequently mentioned that it is not only about wealth, but also about other important factors of maintaining sameness or recognizing differences, often based on lifestyle choices. This is in line with the fragments where my speakers explained a similar mindset, lifestyle, or hobby, which we can call the explication of different Bourdieu habituses. Different statuses are anchored in sharing common values and capitals, as seen in the statement where children from poor families were described as having no values, which can be interpreted as meaning that they do not share similar values with the speaker. The poor children could be aggressive in terms of behaviour and socially accepted norms. The boundary work here involves recognizing certain behaviors as not similar and assigning moral value (aggressive, therefore unacceptable). This creates an opposition - they are aggressive, whereas I am not; a difference exists, therefore we are not similar, and we do not belong together.

The discussion on capitals and distinctions based on wealth, was repeated in a different discursive manner. The abovementioned example was very explicit and straightforward, but other expressions of this kind of sentiment were discussed using a more elegant and sophisticated narrative. Through attentive observation of manners, tone of voice, vocabularies, and body language, one becomes aware of cultural and symbolic capitals, when performed socially, and analyzed through the lens of *kuuki wo yomu*. That allows for recognition of a different social position in relation to your own, and at the same time, offers insight into whether there is something to talk about or not, what language to use, etc.

On the one hand, there is the materialistic aspect in the relationships between bubbles/streams - subtle or less subtle marks of wealth. On the other hand, there is the Weberian status honour. *“They form status groups whose superiority is defined in relation to other groups. They cultivate a sense of honor, privilege relationships with group members, and define specific qualifications for gaining entry to the group and for interacting with lower status outsiders (e.g., opposing miscegenation).”* (Lamont, 2015)

In Japan, there is always a tension and interplay between class and status, and one cannot exist without the other. This tension was also visible to the Burakumin communities themselves, serving as a marker of in-group status differentiation for both the Burakumin elites and lower classes. That was especially visible in the 1950s and 60s, when De Vos and Wagatsuma analysed the internal homogeneity of Buraku communities, focusing on tensions between the local elites coming from the traditional Eta/Hinin occupations, and the less influential and lower both in terms of wealth and power, Burakumin “masses”, more numerous than the elites, but subordinate to them. The elites served as the managerial layer responsible for organizational tasks, communication with non-Buraku municipalities, and distributing job opportunities and financial resources. According to De Vos and Wagatsuma, it was the poorer strata of Buraku who had more motivation to move out and “pass” into mainstream society, as the elites not only enjoyed high relative prestige and wealth but also held power within the community. And this tension might also explain the problems with symbolic distinction that Burakumin experience up to this day - individual, academic or occupational achievement (meritocratic, perceived as based on effort and skills) might not erase the status and honor-based collective (and traditional) perception of an individual coming from a group that used to be perceived in a negative way.

For Weber (2009), the stratification of status groups is built around the crucial idea of honour, defined as “a specific style of life can be expected from all those who wish to belong to the circle”. This status can be estimated in a positive or negative way, and allows you to recognize whether you fit or not: “only the resident of a certain street (‘the street’) is considered as belonging to ‘society’, is qualified for social intercourse, and is visited and invited.” Weber also indicated that this specific understanding of honour may lead to a complete endogamous closure, which is also evident in some of the statements found in the interview. According to this perspective, a Burakumin can become an elite, but may still face challenges in marriage. And this is also explicitly repeated, and expanded to other groups, by other speakers who stated that being poor is indeed also a restricting factor in marriage.

Why this division might be so rigid and stable can be explained by Robert N. Bellah's theory that: “*(Values) are far more stable and persistent than economic or class factors, and change coming from economic and class causes will be channeled by the structure*

of values” (Bellah, 1962, p. 208). He makes a visible distinction between the class level and the values level, where values are more persistent and stable than class, and his view also aligns with Weber, for whom status distinctions are stronger than class ones. If we turn towards Burakumin, or the poor, as they were the most vivid examples, and try to understand why some of my speakers assessed that there is hardly any merit in marrying a person from such a background within the middle-class bubble, we can see two things. There are values (Bellah) and honor (Weber) that influence how groups are being seen in relation to others and how their value for the group is being assessed in terms of how their lifestyles are similar, how they differ, whether they are from a group that is worth marrying into, and this aligns with one of the observations: *“being a Burakumin might matter for the rich, if it is like a politician. Yeah, then I think they care, maybe. I don't know, but maybe like rich, or like high status families, like, maybe they care, but really it is like a really limited situation. I think they don't care about each other anymore. I think the middle class don't care like this, here I keep having it okay”*. A possible interpretation is that this matters most for people who either have a high social status, and they themselves practice marriage endogamy as a factor of consciousness emphasizing the distinction between themselves and the “others”. This is in line with the metaphor of Japanese elites as a “castle in the sky”, separated and always separating from the Japanese mainstream by marriage, spatial distinction (exclusive districts), and reproducing class and status distinction through the best education and hereditary positions²¹. Or, on the contrary, this is important for people who are aspiring for upward social mobility and want to distinguish themselves from the less privileged, and stress the distinction along the line of moral and intellectual advancement: being hardworking, self-sufficient and “normal”.

Statements provided in the interviews also show a strong attachment to social norms, and what is being treated in a society as an acceptable norm. If we perceive the normative order as a part of a complex society system that keeps the interconnected elements together (Durkheim, Parsons), then the norms are the essential tools sustaining order and stability. And if we think of Japanese society as group-oriented (Nakamura, 2005), then the transgression of norms, and therefore threatening the group stability, would result in exclusion and social sanctions. Those norms do not exist only in the

²¹<https://www.tokyofoundation.org/research/detail.php?id=103#:~:text=The%20biggest%20reason%20for%20the,%20LDP%20in%20the%201970s.>

form of legal codes and written regulations, but are also embodied and performed in everyday life (Goffman). In Japan, the high-grid society of the past (Douglas), where following rules and knowing one's place was an important element of harmonious social cooperation, was prevalent. Sugiyama Lebra (1976, p. 67) calls this a proper-place occupancy: *"I mean one's awareness of the place assigned to one in a social group, institution, or society as a whole; one's capacity and willingness to fulfil all obligations attached to that place, and one's claim to recognition of that place by others."* Harmony, *wa*, is considered one of the primary positive values in Japan, but it is not a static state; rather, it is a dynamic process that accommodates and manages ambiguity, which is mediated through rules and norms. The *wa* is also reinforced by group-building social rituals, like *nomikai*, which build trust and mutual interdependence.

The existence of norms would also require the existence of abnormalities that make sense only in conjunction with a particular system of classification. And those systems, according to Douglas, reflect the social structure in which we live. The ways in which we organize the categories into binary oppositions (good-bad, pure-impure) is not random: *"anomaly only makes sense within a system of classification. In turn, those systems of classification reflect the system of societal organization, if not directly, then as transposed into an ideal form that the religion defends. Classifications inevitably face anomalies, meaning things that are classified in two or more rival ways or that cannot clearly be classified at all. Recognition of such things as salient will be driven by conflicts in social organization."* (6 & Richards, 2017, p. 26). This is all reflected in the interviews, where the pattern of following the rules and fulfilling what is perceived as "normal" is also crucial on the level of depicting how class boundaries work. People are being judged by their family background, their dependency on social support or having a temporary contract. My speakers were representing mostly the middle class, suggesting the interpretation that behaviours or attitudes valued as "not normal" are not from the middle class normative order, and do not meet the criteria of idealized "way of life", creating a strong moral boundary between groups. However, from the lived experience of some of my interviewees, we may understand that their own ways of living, critical, reflexive, and individualistic, were also perceived as not regular, and therefore had an impact on choosing their expat life. But even considering those irregularities, the general outcome and contents of the interviews presented as coherent with each other, and with research on Japanese society.

6.3. Uncertainty and Risk

A recurring theme in the interviews was a generational crisis of identity, reflecting tensions between individualism and collectivism, old and new values, between the older generation and younger and different life chances that shape everyday reality. Although this topic was not considered as pivotal during the research planning and conducting phase, it turned out to be a meaningful one and definitely deserving a separate subchapter. Those broader observations help contextualize how social boundaries are perceived and at work in contemporary Japan.

In the statements there's a clear communication of a need for greater independence, a focus on self and family, and a departure from the traditional "work for a corporation until you die" model. Themes of women's equality emerged, along with a certain pessimism linked to the shift from stable employment to precarious, temporary work, worsening the personal and family situations of young people. This also reveals a clear class dimension: those from top-tier universities (top 10) have a chance at a stable life and "white company" employment, while those from average or poor universities struggle for a "comfortable life"="normal life". when you don't need to worry about anything daily. So your income, social status, and lifestyle decisions are not obscured by uncertainty.

Topics discussed by my interviewees might be divided into three categories. Firstly business models and attitudes towards risk and innovation, especially contrasted with corresponding phenomena in the Western countries. Secondly, there are visible signs and cracks in the traditional model of employment, work stability and uncertainty resulting from economic stagnation, aging population and migration crisis (Shirahase, 2022). Thirdly, there are noticeable fluctuations in attachment to values, role models, and approach to individualism and personal development. My interviewees, especially those younger ones, although they admitted the importance of group relations, discursively they looked at their future goals and ambitions from an "I" perspective, suggesting that they are pursuing, or want to pursue, paths of career that are beneficial for them, as individuals.

Opinions expressed in the interviews showed the existing boundaries between the Japanese and Western models of business-making. As one respondent noticed: *Structure is different [...] in America consultants are the ones who get paid to come up with a new idea [...] IN (Japan) like you know right, middle managers wanted to push his idea but senior executives were not going to say yes. What are you going to do? You hire the consultant and let them say what you want them to say and so then you can pass your idea. So those consultants in the consulting company working for the Japanese, usually Japanese, are not coming up with new ideas. They are just going to simply repeat what the client wants.*” In this example what is really striking is the emphasis on two aspects: conformity to the given status quo of a company, and implicit, multi-layered communications of ideas, that require employing outside company, to achieve inside goals. As a result the Japanese do not master innovation and do not come up with groundbreaking ideas, rather they keep perfecting things and their functionalities. This approach was well reflected in the words of Japanese philosopher, Nishida Kitarō; who said: *“Japan's attitude in adopting European culture was problematic in every respect. The Japanese did not try to transplant the roots of the plant, but simply cut off eye-catching flowers. As a result the people who brought the flowers were respected enormously, but the plants that could have produced such blossoms did not come to grow in our country.”* (Blocker & Starling, 2008, p. 148).

Innovations are thus producing too much instability, and need to be operationalized and tamed as a kind of necessity improvement. This again indicates that stability and harmonious persistence are rigid boundaries that make the system reliable, but at a certain cost: *“Kaizen is not everything because if you make kaizen the incremental change or incremental improvement of a candle you will never get a light bulb. But the Japanese will never understand that”*. Anthony Giddens explained well the attitude to risk taking in modern societies: *“there can be no question of merely taking a negative attitude towards risk. Risk needs to be disciplined, but active risk-taking is a core element of a dynamic economy and an innovative society.”* (Giddens, 2002, p. 35). Traditionally, this risk was also moderated by attachment to hierarchical norms at work, and sometimes still is, especially regarding the prevalence of age and number of years worked at one company over skills and ambitions of individuals. Those we can call markers of structural conservatism. Another example is that both at university and

company, the prestige and position of the entity is more important than the position of the individual, and its personal idea of a career path.

The discussion about risk and its avoidance was important for Ulrich Beck, who although more interested in environmental dangers, suggested that: *“Some people are more affected than others by the distribution and growth of risks, that is, social risk positions spring up. In some of their dimensions these follow the inequalities of class and strata positions, but they bring a fundamentally different distributional logic into play. Risks of modernization sooner or later also strike those who produce or profit from them.”* (Beck, 1992, p. 23) This approach is convergent with the experiences of younger Japanese, who fear the future and the unpredictability of social order, especially visible in the below quotes:

- *“Nowadays the middle class is more like they're looking , they are more like surviving. That like a bigger part of Japanese society is not like enjoying life but more like surviving”;*
- *“But the problem is, especially my generation, right now, people who are around 30s or 40s... mostly have this kind of like butt contract [temporary contract]”*
- *“if they work until their retirement, they don't know what happened after retirement, right? So the answer will be no after 20 years old. But more or less, we have only a negative image.”*

Here we look at the “discrepancy between what kind of society is wished for and what is perceived as social reality.” (Chiavacci & Hommerich, 2017) on a micro-level of ordinary people's lives, and a *“high share of Japanese feels threatened by new social risks and worries about whether they can keep their standard of living in the future. Such feelings of vulnerability spread across all social strata indicating a precarisation of Japanese society. (p. 23).* Observations from the interviews aligns with the theory, but what is more there is still some kind of yearning and nostalgia and maybe even hope for things to become as they were. Thus the speakers make an active effort to counteract those changes, to jump them over, to overcome the instability: *“Nowadays the middle class is more like surviving... they afford a place to live and food, but they budget for tuition and occasional trips. They still see themselves as middle class, not poor.”.* Situations that are threatening for the assumed or initial social position, require risk

management and focus on strategies (relative risk aversion) that will help avoid downward mobility. The decisions need to be taken now, but the outcome is yet unknown. This generates a huge individual burden, and stress, especially in the society where the failures are seen as individuals own faults and lack of stamina, competences or capabilities. People therefore fight to keep up appearances.

Finally, in terms of values and social and gender roles, and social positions it is noticeable that the changes are obvious, but at the same time they are mitigated by moral restrictions and boundaries. The interviewees stated that Japanese companies are in the process of transformation: less rigid work hours, more relaxed outfits at work, contracts are more flexible. At the first sight it was perceived as beneficial by the young employees, overwhelmed by the typical Japanese work environment and culture, but: *“for a while, young people were happy, like, 'oh, I can work longer; I'll work when I want to, and when I don't want to, I won't.' But that period didn't last long, for example, those freeters became people in their 30s and 40s, still being freeters. No limit, no social security contributions, etc. So now they also feel like they've lost out compared to others. Left somewhere there, they're still doing part-time jobs, even being 50 years old.”* Political decisions influence lives of the regular citizens bringing disengagement and disillusionment in the political agency of individuals. Young Japanese feel they do not have any influence over politics and therefore engage less and less in politics and voting processes.²² Politics is also not a topic to be discussed during a family dinner or meeting with friends, this might of course be a result of cultural differences and the tendency to avoid presenting antagonistic views (Lebra, 1976). However, research confirms that Japanese youth are currently highly interested in social issues (Gumasing et al., 2024), but also disengaged in institutional politics: *“young people are underrepresented in political and social institutions, are less likely to vote, and are increasingly disengaged from identifying with certain social groups and communities.”*²³ As for gender roles, there is visible trend in women being more active on a job market, reaching 74 percent in 2022, from 63 percent in 2012, but still most women work part-time: *“54 percent of female employment is in non-regular jobs with lower wages, poor job security, limited training, and inadequate career advancement opportunities which limits their opportunities for senior managerial roles.”* (Asao, 2024). This finds

²² <https://www.asiamediacentre.org.nz/japan-s-politics-get-messy>

²³ https://www.hurights.or.jp/archives/focus/section3/2023/06/youth-empowerment-and-the-human-rights-agenda-in-contemporary-japan-and-asia.html#_edn1

confirmation in the interviews as well, but the respondents emphasised that before, in the middle-class, male salary was enough to support the whole family. It is not the case anymore, and the women's precarious job situation also influences their social stability in case of divorce. Some of my female speakers suggested that women in such situations sometimes choose sex-related occupations as a way to support the family. But there is the boundary for women with no turning back: *“this is very appealing for those who, for example, get divorced in 30s, that if they don't try to get normal work, but get into this thing, because it seems easier and the solution for them, because they get money, cash on the spot that they will completely lose the possibility even to have the minimum life having that normal career, because it's like for normal people without a very strong personality, it's like kind of end if they go into such industry, they are no longer be back in the normal industry.”* The chances for career jobs are closed, and if one chooses to seek work in a lower position, like in a supermarket, would likely remove the sex-related job from the resume, in order to avoid stigmatization.

On the other side of the spectrum is the phenomenon of “The Minato-ku Joshi Girl”:
“we have this saying called Minato-ku Joshi [...] so like a Minato word girls, and it's now nowadays I think this term is used negative and positive to describe the girl who is like, um, trying to be prestigious, but i think it's originally it came from the hierarchy that those people who are living in the Minato world, is like um it's it's like a high ranked in the hierarchy”, which in my interviewees story refers both to the features of a young woman, but also to the specific and prestigious Tokyo area Minato-ku. But if we look at how this is read by the mass media, we can see a new type of feminine ideal, as it: *“refers to a growing trend of young, affluent women in Tokyo's most exclusive ward who **prioritize personal ambition, luxury brands, and individualism**. Some experts view this trend as a positive development for women in Japan, as it represents a shift in gender roles and expectations. However, others argue that it perpetuates gender stereotypes and reinforces social hierarchies based on beauty and status.”*²⁴

²⁴ <https://www.myjapanwiki.com/2023/04/minato-ku-girl-phenomenon-revealed.html>

6.4. College as a Great Equalizer?

In the interviews, one phrase was repeated by my interviewees: about studying hard, going to university and getting a good job. Those statements reflected the belief shared by the general Japanese society (Ishida, 2024) that your own effort into education will secure your future and allow you to lead a proper and financially stable life. Those are the two aspects that are inextricably linked for my speakers: education and social position. The right education path, and particularly the choice of the top university, enables you to get well-paid corporate positions, with benefits and slow, age-based promotions at work, allowing you to accumulate financial resources over the years, and securing your own and your family's future.

But education is not only dependent on one's own intellectual capabilities and a belief that hard work will grant him/her a better future (this I would call the liberal ideology of education), it is also dependent on the structural and systemic factors that are state-organized, and are completely independent of our will, power, and character traits. This duality is well expressed in two very sharp opinions that will allow me to dwell into the topic of Bourdieu reproduction of class through education, and to consider education as a mechanism that reproduces social boundaries (Lamont), which often is not perceived as systematical or conscious. Following Mary Douglas, it is the institutions that shape what people believe in, and if the common social narrative is that the education role is to equalize social inequalities and to allow people to advance socially, it will be seen as such. However, what was clearly visible in the interviews is that people distinguish between the ideology and reality. There was a strong belief that Japan is, in general, a meritocratic society, and education is a mechanism of making success real, and that, despite economic stagnation, there is still openness for social mobility. But these views were mediated by the lived experience of my speakers, people in their environment and the information shared by the media, and pointed to the fact that there are specific barriers that restrict this meritocratic process, and that education is a such barrier itself (Bourdieu). There were 5 important beliefs expressed in the interviews, which I will analyze in the next sections:

- 1) *“Economic disparity practically determines the way of life. It also lead to disparities in education”*
- 2) *“My mother is more proud of my high school than my PhD from Oxford”*

- 3) *“Graduating university or not is quite big for me. Japanese society they emphasize the school background.”*
- 4) *“Top tier? No. Top tier. You can approach closely to the top tier, but you cannot reach top tier.”*
- 5) *“I think the education-based class exists. That is basically each class is made from the way the university is [...] so company or type of job determine the class, then university usually corresponds with it, and within the class high school is used as a differentiator”*

To summarize: education is an important factor influencing your quality in life later on. Education is also tuition-based, both for private and public universities, which requires financial resources from the parents. However, it is not the university that influences your class position most - it's the high school. High schools operate on an application system based not only on test results, but also on a broad spectrum of skills that are capital-related (Bourdieu, 2022), like personality, aptitude, self-presentation, future plans, etc. This mechanism restricts members of the non-elite to enter the elites. This approach, combined with the societal focus on individual merit, allows the Japanese education system to replicate status and class. Moreover, it conceals its ultimate dependence on social and cultural capital (Bourdieu). In meritocracy, university education is perceived as a guarantor of securing social position and is based on the belief that everyone has equal chances, despite their origins, leading to Japan as *gakurei shakai* - society based on educational qualifications. Interestingly, in my interviews, those who have socially advanced believe it's possible to climb the ladder and improve one's position through hard work and diligent study. The upper class, however, often claims that everything is determined from kindergarten; those "in the know" understand this, while others do not. They acknowledge opportunities for advancement (e.g., written university exams), but perceive them as minimal, and view the education system (and therefore class system) as almost completely closed.

Those individual views and perceptions find their confirmation in empirical research by Kikkawa Toru (2022, p.136) who observed a phenomenon called “educational descendant aversion”, where people with higher education experience a strong fear that their children will not repeat their educational success. In this case a child's college education is not an "option," but an "absolute necessity" to maintain a family's status. Therefore there is a gap growing between the second generation graduates and the rest

of the population. However this growth is not caused by the fact that people without degrees have started to dislike education. Their attitude has stayed mostly the same, but it is the top tier that is moving ahead faster and with more commitment, based on their already built educational and cultural capitals. This creates a psychological barrier, an “incentive divide”, where the possibility of obtaining higher education is directly correlated with your parents having a degree. Thus in the case of Burakumin (and not only them), whose parents had less chances for university degree, it creates a solidifying effect, an invisible wall, that is difficult to overcome.

It is also important to note that in Japan, thanks to its rapid economical and industrial development after World War II (Totman, 2000) there was a noticeable upward movement resulting from mass migration from the countryside and with the speedy growth of urban managerial class (Ishida,). Therefore, in the time period from 1950-2000 there was an objective and real social movement up, which formed the basis for the “100 million middle class Japan”, and this view is supported by data and research on class stability in Japan provided by SSM Survey. What is more, the study by Ishida (2022) showed that there was a rapid increase in the professional/managerial class during the high growth period: from 10% in 1955 to 29% in 1985, and further to 40% in 2015. Even if we consider recent and significant changes in Japan's social structure, the relative mobility rates, and the chances of moving up or down, have remained stable. According to Ishida, education continues to play a significant role as a factor mediating social mobility, and its influence has remained relatively stable over the last 50 years (Ishida,). However, there are other factors that somewhat disrupt this optimistic image. First, the growing economy and the noticeable, massive social advancement in the recent past gave way to the opportunities of upward mobility. Today it is still higher than downward mobility. However, since the 1990s crisis, and the stagnation of the managerial class, upward mobility rates decreased (when compared with the past years). At the same time, downward mobility rates, stable at 10% in 1965-1995, rose up to 17% in 2015. This is the social reality that might be visible for the Japanese people, who feel that their current position is not that secure anymore. These figures are also confirmed in the interview statements emphasising how much effort the current middle-class need to undertake in order to keep up with the appearances and lifestyles innate to this strata.

The second factor is educational attainment serving as a gatekeeping mechanism defining social mobility and inclusion into elite, or at least upper spheres. According to a study by Fujihara and Ishida, in Japan college education does not act as a great equalizer, like in the USA or Europe where: *“once people obtain a college education, social origin no longer seems to affect socioeconomic attainment”* On the contrary, in Japan: *“social background continues to play an important role in allocating occupational positions among the college educated in Japan. College education does not seem to eliminate the effect of social origins”* (Fujihara & Ishida, 2024, p.1) The system itself reinforces the already existing boundaries and creates inequalities, which are institutionalized on two levels. The first is the relationship between universities and the job market and companies, and the second is the high school environment. College seniors enter the job market at a very specific moment, when companies search for candidates within a single age cohort, with a unified set of skills, and with the entire process governed by the university. As the companies prefer to train necessary skills inhouse, the grades and educational results are not the most important factor for employability, the trainability and “reading the air” are. What really matters are the interview performance, attitude and social skills, which can be trained, of course, but at this level they are cultural and social capitals and networks related to the family background.

Moreover, there is a possibility that the families, leveraging their connections, may attempt to pressure the company to select the indicated candidates. So, families already familiar with the job market train their children early on to develop and reproduce a very specific set of soft skills that will grant them better job opportunities. The universities in Japan, as anywhere else, are also ranked, and being a Tokyo University student gives much better chances for employment in a top-tier company, because those companies will be interested in obtaining candidates having a mindset shaped not only by university values and codes, but also by those of their family home. As my interviewee said, *“Money and values are quite important to make the personality of the child”* which shows the belief that life outcomes are largely determined by inherited values and socio-economic capital. So differences in lifestyle and wealth create distinct "bubbles" where people from a very young age primarily interact within their own class, or more precisely, status group.

Another type of inequality built into the system is high school enrolment. As the Japanese enrolment procedures are a bit stiff and bureaucratic, to make pupils' lives easier, the government moved (Kariya, 2017) from *senbetsu*, a strictly meritocratic exam system that valued academic achievements, to *sentaku*, a choice-based system, where also personality or character traits are valued. The idea was to relax the rigidity of the system and give students more freedom of choice and individual expression. Before, in the exam-based system, the influence of family background was rather restricted to financing private lessons to enhance the academic performance. But *sentaku* allowed for mobilisation of many of the family's resources, like education, self-presentation skills and understanding the complexity of the system, in order to make their children's applications unique and choosable. Kariya Takehiko stated also that this process strengthens the chances and advantages of students not only from families with high cultural capital levels, but also with highly educated mothers. This complex situation had two paradoxical results: it deepened the inequalities, disadvantaged further those who already were disadvantaged, and decreased their satisfaction with chosen high school, but it improved the situation and satisfaction of the already privileged students, also in terms of advancing their efforts to enrol to the best universities in the next step. And that is why the mother of one of my interviewees was more proud of his high school, than of his Oxford PhD. Because in the social perception, hers and others' in her "bubble", she secured her child's "King's Way" access and fulfilled the societal expectations of a "good mother".

Although my speakers in general shared the belief that Japanese system of education is a meritocratic one, when asked to provide more details, their statements clearly pointed to the fact that this is rather a socially constructed and maintained narrative based on the past achievements, rather than a factual and open system, allowing people to advance. However, education is understood as a key to at least maintaining origin class position, as without it there is the actual threat of spiraling downwards. For the better-off individuals a setback in academic achievements will not have such an influence on their career, as some of it might be covered by family connections and networks. For those from poorer backgrounds the only way to move up is to graduate from the best university possible through hard work and resilience, or through more individualistic modes, like searching for opportunities, scholarships and the like, all to be able to secure the most stable life possible in the unstable times. Still there might be "high

possibility of widening the divide between college graduates and non-graduates in future generations. The reproduction of a favorable social status would be tightened by guaranteeing the intergenerational inheritance of higher education.” (Shirahase, 2022, p. 5)

6.5. Shame as a Powerful Social Regulator

- *"And in Japan it doesn't work like this, so the person who are receiving it (financial aid) is **feel shameful** because they failed "The King's Way"*
- *"I think it's mostly like probably they have this maybe experience that they were maybe like treated badly maybe or maybe just like they just want like better self-image or maybe it just might be pride but i think it's more of a they kind of **want to get rid of this bad image of them like of their past** and not like pass it on to their like children and their grandchildren"*
- *"Being nice to others because it's... I like this way of thinking, you **should admit the other people's wrongful works, because you also make the wrongful works** and you make you you're gonna bother someone, so you also should like admit like when you are like being disrespectful like you are treated you are bothered by others you should forgive them, like I'm living by this way of thinking."*

There is a long and heated discussion over the difference between guilt and shame, and the prevalence of one or the other in different countries and cultures. Ruth Benedict (Benedict, 1954) in the famous and highly criticised "Chrysanthemum and the sword" addresses this issue and provides the distinction between "guilt cultures" in the West, and "shame culture" in the East, especially Japan. For Benedict shame induced by the wrongful act is brought upon one's group, family and oneself, and is not related with the sense of sin, internalized in Western cultures. However, Benedict's interpretation was highly criticized, especially by Takedo Doi who explained and introduced a more nuanced interpretation of both guilt and shame. For Doi (1981, p. 53) they are interconnected, and one does not exist without the other: *"In short, one experiences shame most of all, just as in the case of guilt, in relation to the group to which one*

belongs; just as betrayal of the group creates guilt, so to be ostracised by the group is the greatest shame and dishonor. For this reason to have a sense of shame is extremely important for someone belonging to a group.” In Japan, one cannot explain or interpret those phenomena without relating to the group and their interactions. We can assume, based on the above examples, that shame operates as a subtle, but powerful mechanism for maintaining symbolic boundaries, structuring both individual behavior and collective belonging.

What is then regarded as shameful in the interviews and what other emotions those experiences and histories bring? There were several threads strongly related to shame, repeated throughout many statements and I analyzed them using the theoretical frameworks of Mary Douglas and Erving Goffman. Although Douglas did not focus on shame directly, her research discussed how societies implement and maintain order by drawing symbolic boundaries between behaviors and acts that are regarded as acceptable or unacceptable, pure or impure. Crossing those boundaries by an individual results not only in one's pollution but also by polluting others, and therefore violating the social order. As Douglas focuses on social classifications more than on the individual side of action, the function of shame is to protect the symbolic integrity of the group, and it is a mechanism of social control, activated whenever the boundary crossing occurs.

In Goffman's eyes shame is an external mark of disgrace, a “an attribute that is deeply discrediting within a particular interaction” (Goffman, 1963), that reduces the whole individual to a “reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (Goffman, 1963). Goffman also recalls the case of poverty and mentions stigmatizing labels like “passive burden”, “undeserving” which are placed by society on the poor. Shame is also connected with an individual feeling worthlessness or disgrace, as a result of internalizing the stigma. There are two sides of the coin, however, as the labelling and internalizing are both happening while experiencing a situation of being seen through the eyes of others, and at the same time of imagining how we and our actions are being perceived and seen by others. This is one of the most recurring elements in the interviews: being judged by others, the fear of how we will look in the eyes of others, how our behaviour will be labeled by them. In this understanding shame is a social emotion or force that has a power to compel the

individuals to conform to social expectations or norms. And on the contrary, on the individual level shame and the fear of being excluded or ostracized restrain people from crossing the symbolic boundaries.

And in Japan shame is more linked to the group and to our responsibilities towards the group, especially in relation to “face loss” (Goffman, 1959), which means losing someone's social standing or good name. Lebra (1983, p. 195) underlines the fact that *“stress aroused by gaze is processed foremost into haji. Furthermore, exposure sensitivity for Japanese is so intense that imaginary gaze alone tends to suffice to generate haji. This tendency is derived from the allocentric empathy with which the Japanese actor is prone to take the role of audience and to stare at his own action as if he were an object of attention.”* And this is in fact represented in the excerpts in the interviews, where my speakers do not simply imagine how a certain situation will be perceived by others, they also project this imagination onto others, envisioning how those others, in turn, might imagine being perceived by yet another audience. Like in this example: *“I think it's the bad image [...] it's the fact that they were kind of segregated, I think, because they are... Burakumin is probably a shame for the family, I think. That's how they think, I think. So, it's just yeah it's it's like a yeah the fact they want to get rid of the fact that they were not treated well in the past.”*

In the many situations that were regarded as shameful or embarrassing, the most important contexts mentioned in the interviews are: being a Burakumin, rumors about it, marrying a Burakumin, marrying into a “bad family”, so a family about which rumors are being spread, being poor, taking financial aid from the government, being in any way related to the governmental help and support, and paying with food stamps, leaving “The King’s Way”, not being proactive and self-reliant in crisis moments, not fulfilling societal expectations and roles: men not working at all or not having a stable job. This all aligns with what Doi said, that shame originates from the awareness of how the outside world perceives you, leading to inward-directed negative feeling towards yourself (Doi, 1983). What is more, it is not only coming from Burakumin minority that might be socially stigmatizing, but in case of Burakumin we can see the intersectionality of disadvantages (Crenshaw, 1991), where being labeled once helps to accumulate other labels and thus gradually and significantly worsens one’s social position and social perception by others as well.

In the interviews we can observe a strong relationship between what is normal and what is not normal, and immediately excluded and avoided, as bringing negative consequences. Therefore, it is important to conform to the rules and pay attention to our actions and how they will be perceived by others, in order not to be ostracized. This of course brings a lot of pressure and stress on the individual to deal with in everyday life. That is why it is important to surround yourself with people that give you the feeling of *anshin* - safety and peace of mind, stemming from the fact that people will know how to behave and will not cross the rules and boundaries that are necessary to maintain *wa* - social harmony.

As poverty and being poor is seen as a burden, it is also advised to separate oneself from this unfavorable state. Lister (2003) calls poverty a “social relationship of othering” where the poor are not only marginalized, but also blamed for their condition. They are the problem, they do not fulfill the social obligations towards groups, and external and structural sources of inequalities, instead of being the explanation, are the root of internalized stigma. This in effect brings strong feelings of disgrace, embarrassment, and humiliation (Scheff, 2011), causing further withdrawal from social activities. In Japan in particular, there is a stigma related to welfare (Nishio, 1994), *Seikatsu Hogo* (public assistance), that is embedded into the social services system as a mechanism of labeling, where the family is required to help their relatives in need: *“thus, benefit receipt becomes not just the shame of the individual recipient but the family that failed to support them. It is also clear that receipt of public assistance more specifically is stigmatised as disreputable, and associated with approbations of laziness, with such views stemming from a traditional work ethic that regards poverty to be the result of a lack of personal effort (for example, Kudomi, 1993; Nishio, 1994).”* (Sutton, 2014, p. 146). And again those narratives and convictions are provided in the interviews as rational and logical explanations for one’s social and individual failures. The blame connected with failure is understood as resulting from one’s inferior moral, intellectual or other deficits. That is why the rumors about either poor or Burakumin, waiting for government help or accepting government help, might result in seeing them as shameless, not conforming with the common rules.

Burakumin have "shamelessly" received billions of yen in government aid through the

“Dowa” program for community infrastructure and employment support. In one of the interviews there was a story of Japanese people rebuilding Kobe themselves 5 months after an earthquake, while Fukushima residents (Burakuness implied) waited passively for government aid: *“People are saying, many people, not openly but saying like ‘oh why those people don't try to you know rebuild the city by themselves’, ‘why don't they take initiative by themselves’ why then they don't try to work, yeah they're from Buraku people’. That's the image people have. Because you're going to get that for free, but you know that if you sit down and complain the government do that for you, then why would you do it right? [...] With the Kobe earthquake, we finished rebuilding the whole city within four or five months. I remember that. And so that was like: ‘look at Osaka people, you know, they came up clean and they rebuilt it without the government. Why can't you do the same thing?’ So then we have this image of the people in the north are the lazy, and they are not the typical Japanese.”*

Japanese informants are as well ashamed of being poor: *“So if people get the money from the government, it's that people feel like they don't have enough skill to get the job and it makes... they cannot float of their self with this with the factor like getting the money from the government yeah because the social ideal.. people can work and work and earn money and they can pay for their family and they can buy enough stuff. But if they cannot do that, people feel like they have to be ashamed. Because it's not normal.”*

There is also another important reason of why shame as a disciplinary mechanism is so well rooted in Japan: *“shame and stigma are key disciplinary features of all capitalist societies which serve to legitimate the unequal distribution of resources and power by promoting discourses of fecklessness and individual failure in ways which serve to obscure the structural antecedents of poverty and exclusion.”* (Sutton, 2014, p. 150) Apart from the specific societal understandings, it was the Meiji period invention (Howell, 2005) to make Japanese people being individually responsible for their societal and economic well-being, but without removing deeply rooted in-group orientation, forcing the unlucky ones to take on their shoulders both individual and collective blames. Finally, as the regime of shame controls and penetrates all the strata of society, it brings the most permanent damage to the most disadvantaged areas. This reinforces and perpetuates the vicious circle of negative perceptions, also contributing to the persistent exclusion of Burakumin. Communities being perceived negatively by

outsiders were further marginalized and excluded as a result. (Lupton, 2003; Hooper et al., 2007, as cited in Sutton, 2014). This influences back the already stigmatized areas by harming the residents through reducing access to opportunities ((Lupton, 2003, as cited in Sutton, 2014)) and their own self-image, causing “corrosive effects on people’s self-perceptions and confidence, particularly when moving beyond the security of their own communities.” The existence of such processes was also confirmed in Japan in Kudomi’s (1993, as cited in Sutton, 2014) study of public housing, where stigma resulted in the exclusion and isolation of vulnerable groups in certain areas (Sutton, 2014). This dynamics works also for the Burakumin community, as is it possible that a very strong group identity developed within their communities due to historical persecution and forced segregation. My interviewee commented, "Their world is way too small. Their world ends within this field," suggesting that the Burakumin communities might have become insular and conservative, acting as a reservoir of traditions. But this was not the consequence of any hereditary features, but of persistent labeling and reproduction of stigmatizing narratives that influenced further isolation and exclusion of Burakumin communities.

6.6. Symbolic Role of Burakumin Otherness: Transgression, Fluidity, Temporality

Although Eta/Hinin status groups that were present in Japan of the Tokugawa period cannot be regarded as identical with the modern phenomenon of Burakumin (Kobayakawa, 2021), the fate and stigmatization they experienced have influenced the present-day situation. To understand the challenges the Burakumin face and the narratives observed among mainstream Japanese, I will begin this section by providing the relevant historical context.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the *bushi* (samurai) who ruled Japan in the Tokugawa period gained their ultimate power and social position through the repeated acts of violence: coups, bloodshed, and killings, which directly violated the core Buddhist commandment of not killing and not taking a life. What they achieved through those means, however, was significant. The samurai managed to seize control of wars that had devastated Japan in previous centuries and provided rules and laws that built

stability in the country, both economically and culturally. The introduction of the *mibunsei* status system allowed the shogunate to efficiently manage the hierarchical relations in society. That was also a time when state-enforced segregation and discrimination began.

What is also important to mention is that the shogunate modified the relationships with foreign countries. It was the era of *Sakoku* (鎖国), or the "chained country," which symbolically closed Japan off from most foreign contact between 1633 and 1854. Scholars have argued that Japan was never truly "closed" but was under a policy of *kaikin* (海禁), or "maritime restrictions", which allowed to maintain active, but limited, trade and cultural exchange through four posts: Nagasaki, Satsuma Domain, Tsushima Domain, and Matsumae Domain. This nuanced understanding of *Sakoku* shows that the perceived isolation of Japan was, in itself, a narrative of internal control rather than a universal reality. The best example is the creation of Dejima, an artificial island built for the Dutch residents, which allowed the shogunate to engage with the outside trade and economic exchange while symbolically keeping foreigners at a distance, preventing them from officially entering Japan.

With no major external enemy to rally against, the shogunate needed a way to unify the nation. As nothing unites people better than a common enemy, an internal, imaginary one was created: the *eta* and *hinin*. These groups, a "floating population of *senmin* [low status people] who were neither samurai nor peasants, craftsmen nor merchants," became the designated carriers of social and symbolic pollution. Positioned as the source of all evil and problems, they served as a constant warning that there was a worse place to be if you did not conform to the rules. This strategy reflects a core theme in the analysis: the deliberate, state-controlled nature of this segregation. Ooms said: "*racism is not merely one type of discrimination, but an effect that all forms of discrimination produce.*" (Ooms, 1996) While one might hesitate to call this racism in the modern sense, the Edo system was undeniably a state-managed project of segregation, designed to harden symbolic and material boundaries between groups of people. It was a deliberate means of control, keeping society under the firm grip of the *bakufu*. In this context, the shogunate's actions were a calculated form of biopower (Aoki, 2021) way to control the entire population by tightening social norms and maintaining rigid categories. Interestingly, there is some evidence that the society in

general seems to have treated “the others” with more dignity than the state apparatus prescribed.

Ultimately, we might interpret the symbolic position of Eta/Hinin using two models, both rooted in Mary Douglas’s (1966) theory of purity and pollution and the binary oppositions of Levi-Strauss (1963, 1966). In a society without the foreign enemies close enough, and Ainus far enough, there might appear the need of creating an unifying force that would glue the population together. As Étienne Balibar (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991, p. 60) noted “*the racial-cultural identity of the ‘true nationals’ remains invisible, but it is inferred from (and assured by) its opposite, the alleged, quasi-hallucinatory visibility of the ‘false nationals’.*” The “other” embodied the negative features like impurity and pollution, while “we” kept our natural purity. By creating this internalized *otherness*, the feudal lords secured symbolic power and domination over the minds of the Japanese people.

Another possible interpretation of “othering” the Eta/Hinin, was the fear of transgression and justification and legitimacy needed for the shogunate reign to maintain. Levi-Strauss in his theory of binary oppositions came up with the idea that between the opposite poles, there is always a mediator - *a trickster*, who does not belong to either category and who can cross boundaries. The figure of the Emperor, a crucial one in Japanese culture, is symbolically responsible for maintaining the balance between the human world and the world of *kami* (gods, nature) (Amino, 2012). Disruption of balance may have real and noticeable effects in our world. If we think then of impurity as a phenomenon that disrupts the symbolic or social order (Douglas), we might then think of shogunate actions of taking power from the Emperor's hands as an act of impurity and an act of transgression. It is possible that the samurai were themselves deeply fearful of the pollution coming with those acts. Moreover, their common use of leather goods, saddles, armors, and such, provided by part of the Eta community, involved them in yet another level of pollution. Therefore, maintaining their “unpolluted” status, in terms of being symbolically and factually perceived as the legitimate source of power, required a symbolic transfer of pollution elsewhere, a process that created and cemented the fate of the *eta* and *hinin*. In this three-element system, we have the Emperor, representing the divine, symbolic power; the Shogun, representing the factual power, derived from the transgression; and Eta/Hinin as mediators, absorbing the pollution and allowing the Shogun to purify himself.

Whether or not we support the otherness theory, purity theory or symbolic antithesis to the mainstream Japanese identity (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1989; Oguma, 2002), the strict boundaries and strong rules that govern social groups in Japan must serve a purpose. Japan's history is marked by periods of radical, systemic change, yet society as a whole has maintained its coherence. From this, one might deduce that the very essence of Japanese society is transgression and the fascination with rules and limitations is a defensive mechanism, a way to anchor a society whose fundamental nature is one of constant flux and change. The strict boundaries, discriminatory systems, and stigmatizations are not simply a result of prejudice; they are a means of social control and preservation. They hold the system together, preventing it from fragmenting each time the country undergoes another 180-degree shift and establishes a new set of rules and norms. This is the continuous, transforming cycle of harmony and transgression that defines social dynamics in Japan.

So how is this otherness sustained by the society, and why are Burakumin still “different”? On the more practical level to understand those processes we may refer to the theories of ascribed/achieved status by Merton and Berreman. The status system of the Tokugawa period was based on ascription, assigned either at birth, or by law or through social identity. The achieved status is gained or earned based on personal effort or accomplishments and skills. Ooms noted that Eta/Hinin did not accept (at least some part of this group) the labeling and stigma, and that they were rejecting them on the basis of being as Japanese as other Japanese, thus referring to concepts of unity and homogeneity, especially in terms of norms, culture and customs. But with time and challenges and transformations of Japanese society, the sense of pride, sense of being a useful and beneficial part of the group (albeit segregated) was transformed into a feeling of shame for not conforming to the rules of modern civilized Japanese way of life in the Meiji era. With an influx of people of no Eta/Hinin origins into the locations historically connected with those groups, a new category (Burakumin), bearing parts of the older stigmatized identity, was ascribed onto those people.

The question remains what other factors contributed to this long-term persistence of the phenomena of segregated locations, and stigmatized people. I will follow the intuitions of Nakane and Bellah, where they focus on the extremely strong division between “us” and “them”, resulting from the tight group structure, loyalty and. Nakane noticed that:

“An extreme example of this attitude in group behaviour is the Japanese people's amazing coldness (which is not a matter just of indifference, but rather of active hostility), the contempt and neglect they will show for the people of an outlying island, or for those living in the 'special' buraku (formerly a segregated social group now legally equal but still discriminated against). Here the complete estrangement of people outside 'our' world is institutionalized.” (Nakane, 2008, p. 20). This emphasis on symbolic boundaries between what is ours (*Uchi no*) and yours (*Otaku no*), shaped everyday life relations in Japan, and was particularly visible in comparison of India and Japanese models of belonging to a social group: one is identity based on common qualification, where membership of a clan, caste, etc. and position are derived from a special quality social stratum, the second is common membership, where situational position (i.e. membership of a village) is derived from membership common to all persons of a social group. In India there is emphasis on the qualifying membership, which is a caste system based on occupation and status, while in Japan, situational membership, where the focus is on situation, for instance, company A or B as a point of reference. In Japan, the situational membership was a kind of bottom up situation, something that people have worked out through the centuries, but in the Edo period, as Howell (2005) explains, the status-first orientation was a political top-down action of dividing the society, imposed on people and their lives. Although Nakane's framework works well for the mainstream groups, it does not in the case of Burakumin. In a hypothetical situation where a person, after the Edo period, for example in the Meiji period, introduces themselves and says, "I am from village A or B." Due to the enforced social divisions of the Edo period, that place would be immediately identified by the former status. It means that the situational membership, when we added, enforced by law, status element, for a certain part of the population transformed permanently into qualifying membership. This shows how even Japanese-based models fail to take into account the specific symbolic position of Burakumin.

And if we combine this, with another Howells claim that in Meiji - being civilized, being modern was identified with searching new, more individualistic ways for social advancement, and being focused on contributing good to the society. This mixture of old and new factors: rapid capitalistic transformation, abolition of traditional eta/hinin monopolies, creation of slums at the suburbs or near the new industrial sites caused the social tension: *“outcastes who thought they were commoners, Ainu who thought they*

were Japanese, women who thought they were free to cut their hair: such people were the obvious casualties of modernization, but the same uncertainties and ultimately ephemeral promises affected all Japanese to at least some degree." (Howell, 2005, p. 168)

The rigid social structure of the Edo period, based on ascribed status, underwent a dynamic transformation during the Meiji era. For some citizens, this ascribed status evolved into qualifying membership, and this change acted as a catalyst, leading to the creation of a new, distinctively discriminated group: the Burakumin. This new status was not solely based on a person's origins from the Edo-period groups (Eta/Hinin). Many individuals were assigned to the Burakumin category simply by association, due to living or moving in a particular area or being related to someone within the group. This created a form of stigma that was not physically visible or "in the blood," but was instead discreditable: hidden and only revealed through specific markers. These signs could include a person's dialect, address, or their family background. When a marker was recognized, the stigma was activated. The ambiguous nature of this stigma also allowed for the possibility of "passing" or "exiting" the group. Because the stigma was tied to external markers rather than an inherent quality of the person, it could be managed or even shed: *"Those who went out, they are not Buraku anymore."* This underscores the idea that the Burakumin stigma was a set of characteristics or traits, not an unalterable aspect of a person's identity. On the other hand, thanks to being rooted into the collective memory and identified with notions of failure, impurity and seclusion, it was also more difficult to abandon, as in the Japanese capitalism the notion of Berreman's hidden injury of the class finds its way: "because their source in the shared experience of economic position may not be apparent to those who suffer them. They may instead perceive the problem as their own failure to meet the criteria for high status. The fault, they often believe, lies in themselves." (Berreman, 1979, pp. 304-305).

Buraku is an ascribed status, and this allows at least three things to happen: to add an achieved status of an upper class due to someone's merits, to shed the Burakumin status and obtain a new one, or to be subject to someone else's ascribing this status onto us (Hatanaka, 1988), and therefore making it impossible to reject. Those processes led to the development of a positive identity, achieved by accepting this ascribed status and creating a sense of belonging and pride associated with being a Burakumin. Using the Hegelian dialectic, this transformation allowed the stigma to become something

positive, changeable, and meaningful. A narrative that could possibly break the invisibility-hypervisibility dichotomy, and transform it into regular visibility.

6.7. Invisibility - Hypervisibility

The Burakumin emerge in the interviews not as a stable, easy to grasp identity, but more as a symbolic category that keeps broader social transgressions under control. The common depiction of Burakumin in the academic literature serves as a symbolic/structural opposition to mainstream Japanese identity. Japanese people are pure, avoid conflict, follow rules, are not loud, and handle matters harmoniously due to a shared self. Burakumin are presented as the antithesis: loud, dirty, poor, animalistic, breaking rules, aggressive, confrontational, and possessing insatiable sexual desires. Such images are also present in the works of Kenji Nakagami, a known Burakumin writer (Nakagami, 1999). However, in the conducted interviews the picture is more ephemeral and probably layered. As most of my speakers have not consciously met anyone of Burakumin origin, their narratives were more of a social image or social perception of this group, shared nation-wide. People declared that they only know about Buraku from books, media, school, or anecdotes, but have never been there, don't know anyone, and haven't spoken to them personally.

This lack of contact and personal interaction might be also an ambiguous sign of existing symbolic boundaries between them; there is no visible denominator of Burakuness. There is nothing in the outside appearance or blood, or ethnicity that would make Burakumin different. On the contrary - they share the same cultural traits as other Japanese. Jenkins (1996) while explaining the boundary creation between groups noted two important aspects of this process. The members of the in-group need to feel that they belong to the group, feeling some sort of sameness, and at the same time understand that they differ in certain regards from other groups. This process must be complemented by a similar one among out-group members, so people not belonging to the group, who also need to recognize it as unique and separate. This other group should be seen by others as distinct and having their own and separate identity. Only when both sides of this equation are present, a strong group identity is present. That means that in Japanese history there must have been a moment of factual creation of the Burakumin

group based on possessing specific features, different from the features of the mainstream group.

In the interviews the use of discursive "They" was used, while referring to Burakumin, *marking the division between us and them*. When asked about the "ontological difference", as Burakumin are not visibly different, then why the distinction?, no one answered directly. There were mentions of characteristic surnames, significant places of residence, traditional occupations or families. People often shifted to discussing Ainu, Koreans, or slums (implying "others" still exist). They are also "something completely different", and although usually seen as a lower class, they never fit quite right. This is the social representation of what Mary Douglas wrote about purity and pollution. Burakumin, through the qualifying membership of their socially constructed identity, carry a specific type of "pollution" or "impurity" linked to historical occupations and status. And as Howard S. Becker stated: "*Deviant acts lead to the social exclusion only when these acts are socially defined as such*" (1973) Burakumin entering the mainstream space transgresses the very concept of a "pure" and "harmonious" Japanese social body.

Burakumin and Buraku in general were identified with different features: mostly with the specific location in the area, a recognizable one, sometimes by occupation or name. These voices align with Lisa Mueller's (2025) research on Japanese museums' discourse about Burakumin. Her content analysis of five institutions shows that those in western Japan focus on stigma is related to specific locations (regardless of occupation or genealogy), while eastern institutions discuss specific types of occupations (e.g., leather tanning, animal slaughter) as stigmatizing, even for those not identifying as Burakumin but simply performing these jobs currently. Which leads to the conclusion that there is no one single denominator of Burakuminess, but as the Goffman's stigma is not attached to the person ontologically, it is attached to specific markers identified or connected socially with Burakumin. The normally invisible features of Burakumin become hypervisible at key social moments, like marriage, promotion at work, contact with institutions, and effectively block the possibility of integration and inclusion in mainstream life. So although the stigma and feeling of "otherness" might be fading in the social perceptions, or that people are not consciously acting in a discriminatory way towards Burakumin, the traces of the otherness are being found in the collective

memory, and thus being preserved for next generations. And as the category is blurred, reading it requires activating "reading the air": whispers, gossips, "have no proof", can't point fingers, and ultimately we know "who is who" – because they're dirty, poor, impure, etc.

Furthermore, both academic literature and media articles often rely on "standardized" statements when discussing Burakumin, presenting rigid definitions that emphasize their historical and ongoing discrimination, while stressing that such practices particularly in marriage are unacceptable and outdated (for instance, in videos on the Japanese Ministry of Justice website²⁵). At the same time, social media circulates narratives including tropes such as "pathology on welfare", "lazy freeloaders living off the state," or "Burakumin = yakuza" (Ramseyer, 2020). Individuals can internalize these discourses in different ways, depending on their social background and social conditioning, which leads to a self-perpetuating dynamic of social "bubbleness" that reinforces boundaries rather than dissolving them. These modes of speech and thought, operating at a level beyond conscious individual reflection (Foucault), become mechanisms for sustaining the Burakumin/non-Burakumin divide. Even those who claim not to know, who never discriminate, and who have no personal encounters with Burakumin still reproduce these divisions through entrenched classificatory schemes (Douglas). The paradox lies in how the issue is simultaneously silenced and spoken about: people insist it is "embarrassing" to mention, yet whenever it is raised, it is framed as shame, lack of moral navigation and independence. Those socially performed practices do not dissolve the stigma; they preserve it intact. Thus, even in a hypothetical future where no Burakumin communities remain, merely asking about them would summon this collectively memorized images of an aunt whispering in secret, of a cousin checking lineage, of an imagined slum, which leads to statements like: "*Better not go there, I don't really know, but that's my image.*" Therefore, Burakumin of today are somewhat a group suspended in the Turner's purgatory of liminality, they do not belong to the old society that created them, but are not yet reintegrated into the present one. But with the social changes that affect the whole society, including the Burakumin, this might be a chance to observe and listen to what this community is experiencing, as with

²⁵ MOJchannel. (2015, march 6th). 人権啓発ビデオ 人権アーカイブシリーズ「同和問題 未来に向けて」 [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TqRMVdVtoss>

its odium of otherness and separatedness it might reflect, like in the mirror, the future of the whole Japanese society in the time of crisis and change.

6.8. Conclusion

This chapter draws from the sociology and anthropology of stratification by demonstrating that Japanese symbolic boundaries are fluid, situational, and discursively sustained. Brought together theoretical insights from Weber, Bourdieu, Lamont, Douglas, and Elias, allows to show how narratives of sameness coexist with mechanisms of exclusion. I aimed to illustrate that homogeneity in Japan is not natural or given but it is a socially, and politically, produced discourse that is being constantly negotiated and reproduced through everyday practices.

The symbolic boundaries in Japan are not static, but dynamic mechanisms of control, negotiation, and identity-making. They are reproduced by particular narratives: homogeneity, meritocracy, shame, the “King’s way”, and Burakumin symbolic otherness. “Middle-class sameness”, that at a first glance appears to be a uniform and rigid entity, proves to be structured by almost invisible and subtle, yet real divisions. The boundaries do not function explicitly as exclusion mechanisms, but they keep working in order to produce and sustain the narrative of homogeneity. This feeling of sameness is therefore obtained by boundary work, which blur and negotiate the divisions between what is different and what is similar.

In the final chapter, I reflect on the broader implications of these findings for the study of Japanese society and social stratification more generally. I am also going to validate if the obtained results of this study answer previously posed research questions.

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION

7.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I conclude and summarize the most important aspects of this study. The first part is dedicated to answering the research questions that were crucial for the development of my thesis and presenting the key findings that this project brings to the sociological and anthropological study of symbolic boundaries. The final part is dedicated to discussion of limitations of this work, and future implications and recommendations for other researchers, students, and other readers interested in exploring the topics further.

7.2. Key Findings in the Context of Research Questions

At the beginning of this research journey, I had four questions focused on the nature and characteristics of societal divisions in contemporary Japan. I will revisit them one by one and provide the answers that emerged from the findings of this thesis. My aim for this study was to explore how cultural and social divisions in contemporary Japan are formed, maintained and reinforced.

I started with analyzing how mainstream Japanese individuals use symbolic boundaries to define themselves in relation to others, with a specific focus on the perceptions of the Burakumin community, as a “symbolic other”. To develop that framework, I followed my theoretical guide, Michele Lamont's concept of symbolic boundaries, which is used to explain how subtle, unspoken norms create and maintain social divisions. I also applied and synthesized various theoretical frameworks, including Max Weber's concepts of class and status stratification by showing the interplay of class (life chances) and status (honor, values) in Japan, Pierre Bourdieu's ideas of habitus and capital, and Mary Douglas's Grid/Group model to reinterpret Japanese homogeneity as constructed bubbles rather than natural sameness. The final part of the study introduced shame (Douglas, Goffman) as a central mechanism of boundary maintenance.

From the methodological point of view, I combined thematic analysis with critical discourse analysis, showing how everyday acts of speech both reflect and construct boundaries, and used abductive reasoning to generate new hypotheses on symbolic otherness and sameness. The qualitative data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 17 Japanese citizens, providing a multidimensional perspective on how Japanese people perceive and enact class, otherness, and sameness in their daily lives. The findings can be grouped into four interrelated dimensions, corresponding to the research questions outlined below:

- 1) How do mainstream Japanese, in a seemingly homogeneous and middle-class society, perceive and construct symbolic boundaries to differentiate themselves from other Japanese, particularly the Burakumin?

The answer to this question is multilayered. Firstly, the findings reveal a tension between homogeneity as a social narrative and heterogeneity as lived experience. While Japanese society presents itself as homogeneous, interview data reveal subtle yet rigid symbolic boundaries that structure daily life. Japanese homogeneity is not inherent but a constructed political narrative that stems from individuals interacting within "social bubbles" or "parallel streams." This creates a sense of security and a shared understanding of social norms. However, this perception of uniformity also has its cost: anyone who is not sharing the common norms and values might be labeled as the "other" or "outsider." This creates apparent sameness but sustains hidden boundaries.

Second, in regard to middle-class sameness, informants often stated that class is not a frequent topic of discussion and that "everyone is more or less the same," and they use wealth and material possessions as indicators of social stratification when asked to define class. Informants' initial verbal denial of "class" consciousness should not be interpreted as the absence of social differentiation, but rather as a reflection of the limited use of class concept in contemporary Japanese discourse. This aligns with Max Weber's concept of class as a group with shared economic interests, but this vision is also broadened by elements of status: prestige, lifestyle and morals, that might influence why persons of Burakumin origin might achieve high-class position without being valued in terms of status, and therefore have restricted marriage options. The "100

million middle class” ideal persists as a narrative, and it seems well rooted in Japanese society, but cracks are visible. Younger generations face instability (temporary contracts, risk society), pushing a shift from collective loyalty toward individualistic aspirations, though this creates tensions with norms of harmony and conformity. Then, new inequalities undermine stability, influencing the self-perception of one's worthiness in society, where exiting the “King’s way” is seen as an individual failure.

- 2) What are the specific discursive categories and criteria (e.g., morality, economic status, historical legacy) that constitute the perceived "otherness" of the others, including Burakumin, in the eyes of mainstream Japanese?

There are three main categories of differentiation that help maintain boundaries at work. First, education as a gatekeeper: education is both a vehicle for mobility and a mechanism of class reproduction. High school and university systems reinforce class distinctions, mediated by cultural and social capital from a very early age, with special emphasis placed on high school as a gatekeeping mechanism due to the admissions process that values "capital-related" skills beyond just test results, such as personality and self-presentation. This benefits students from families with high cultural and social capital. Although education is still perceived by my informants as a means of achieving social mobility and securing a stable future, the study suggests Japanese people are aware of its restrictive function. This results in treating the elites as a “different planet”, a distant reality, completely separated from regular life. Exploring education as a boundary gives valuable insights into how Japanese institutions (education, corporations) reinforce inequality under the guise of meritocracy.

Second, cultural codes and moral values: *kuuki wo yomu* (reading the air) is a central, unspoken code that requires individuals to intuit the thoughts and feelings of others in order to maintain harmony and avoid conflict. It is worth remembering however, that although the concept itself is culturally specific, similar mechanisms of implicit norm recognition are present in many societies.

This mechanism ensures that social divisions are not openly discussed but are felt and respected nonverbally. There is also a strong belief in morality and appropriate behavior as determinants of belonging to a "normal" society. My interlocutors mentioned "good families" and "bad families," as well as "normal vs. abnormal behavior." Conformity is

achieved through concepts such as *wa* (harmony) and *anshin* (safety), which are deeply ingrained in Japanese culture. The desire to fit in, "to have the same car or house as everyone else," provides a sense of security and belonging while marginalizing those who deviate from the norm.

Finally, shame functions as a key mechanism of boundary maintenance, linking moral evaluation with social position. It serves as a mechanism of conformity, framing poverty or reliance on aid as a moral failure, often linking it to a group's reputation and the fear of "face loss." Shame is connected to behaviors that are considered "not normal" by the middle class, such as being poor, relying on government assistance, having a temporary job, or being a subject of discrimination, as happened in the case of Burakumin. In the eyes of my speakers, distinction from the "other" is maintained through silence and gossip, not overt discrimination. Silence reinforces division, and shame has a subjugating effect. Group conformity and cohesion are achieved in this way, as there is no greater fear than being perceived by the internalized gaze of in a profoundly negative way.

- 3) What is the social and discursive role of the Burakumin category for mainstream Japanese society today, and what does its continued use reveal about underlying social structures and power dynamics?

Burakumin Symbolism: The Burakumin identity remains simultaneously invisible and hypervisible, continuing to serve as a symbolic "other." Japanese society, by casting a part of itself as "different" (invisible yet hypervisible, excluded yet present), symbolically stabilizes the sense of homogeneity in the rest (Oguma, 2002). According to my interviewees, Burakumin are perceived as distant, and rarely known from first-hand experience, but still evoking certain images of people who are rather poor, a thing of the past, but living in certain spaces, often perceived as dangerous, culturally and environmentally. Indistinguishable, yet hypervisible in social situations and interactions like marriage, promotion at work, or contact with institutions. Hypervisibility is activated, and as a result, it enables symbolic boundaries to manifest, blocking the possibility of integration and inclusion in the flow of life. It is also an example of how a group's enforced isolation can lead to its self-imposed separation and the development of a distinct, resilient, but closed identity.

Burakumin, in the eyes of the Japanese middle class, are Turner's (1969) liminal being, suspended between separation and reincorporation, betwixt and between. As there is no single denominator of being a Burakumin, and the category is fluid, it may suggest that, after gradual changes, the Burakumin identity becomes something new. We can read this story through the old symbolic (Oguma, 2002; Ohnuki-Tierney, 1989) division of Burakumin, representing the "-Japanese", and the mainstream Japanese, representing "+Japanese". Today's Burakumin are exploring and emphasizing the positive aspects of their identity, creating a "+-Japanese". Looking through Hegel's (PhG, 2018) lens of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, which are inextricably linked with each other in the dialectic process leading to the development of absolute self-consciousness, we can realize that identity in Japanese society is not fixed, but continually renegotiated through social perception, activism, and historical memory, as the sum not equal to 0. The system generates new levels of understanding, self-awareness, and cultural sophistication. The synthesis creates a new reality that becomes the thesis for a new, future antithesis, and so on. Therefore, the struggle is not for the Burakumin to "dissolve" into the mainstream, but to create a new, more inclusive definition of what it means to be Japanese.

- 4) How do broader societal discourses and individual experiences, such as the migrant experience, class background, or generational differences, influence the perception and maintenance of these symbolic boundaries?

Broader societal discourses and individual experiences shape symbolic boundaries in Japan by providing both the language and the frameworks of interpretation through which difference is understood. The dominant discourse of homogeneity ("general middle-class society") coexists with persistent narratives of stigma (e.g., around Burakumin), which are reproduced through silence, avoidance, or subtle cues rather than explicit exclusion. These discourses create the cultural "background noise" against which individuals interpret their own and others' social positions.

While individuals may claim that class is not a frequent topic, wealth and material possessions are used as symbolic markers of social stratification. Middle-class representatives often internalize the idea of sameness and "not seeing" difference, but

interviewees from poorer backgrounds were much quicker to recognize and evaluate it. In terms of class and status, there are two powerful narratives shaping the realities of the Japanese middle class: meritocracy and “King’s way”. The conviction that success depends on individual effort and that education serves as the pathway to achievement was widespread. Yet, my interviewees’ lived experiences, shaped by their social environment and media narratives, revealed that this meritocratic ideal is constrained by structural obstacles, with the education system itself emerging as one of the key barriers. But in Japan, good education means, or meant, a good job and financial security, and this mindset was connected with a narrative of “King's way”: an idealized life and career path, consisting of good education, a good job, a good marriage, and a good, stable life as a result. Departure from it is stigmatized as an individual failure, winding up yet another narrative, where individuals, instead of questioning the system, attribute their failures (e.g., financial instability) to a personal lack of effort rather than systemic factors. This approach reinforces the systemic status quo and discourages rebellion.

Generational differences are crucial, as older interviewees tend to emphasize stability, collective norms, and traditional employment systems, whereas younger ones describe fluid, uncertain conditions marked by individual responsibility and risk. This generational shift intensifies tensions between collectivist and individualist values, making symbolic boundaries less about fixed categories and more about navigating instability.

In all cases, discourses and lived experiences intersect, either reinforcing stigma by framing poverty or Burakumin status as “faulty” or, occasionally, challenging it by questioning the relevance of these distinctions in modern, mobile, and globalized Japan. In the interviews, respondents admitted to having no direct experience with Burakumin, knowing of them only through books, school, or the media. This absence of personal contact suggests that the boundary is discursive and symbolic, weaker than before, but still present. Interviewees also consistently used the discursive “they” while referring to Burakumin, reproducing a sense of otherness despite lacking clear denominators of difference. In the present, their identity appears ambiguous, ephemeral, and symbolic.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that symbolic boundaries in contemporary Japan are not maintained through explicit exclusion, but through subtle, everyday practices embedded in shared norms, moral expectations, and unspoken social rules.

7.3. Limitations and Future Research Recommendations

Limitations

The biggest limitation of this study was that I was unable to reach my primary target group, the Burakumin. Problems with gathering the research sample led me to a complete shift in the project's scope. Within the new sample group, my interviewees were mostly middle-class and well-educated, which may have resulted in the impossibility of gathering a broader spectrum of perspectives, especially from members of other social classes or marginalized groups, as Burakumin voices were absent. Secondly, while some generational differences are highlighted, the relatively small sample may not reflect wider regional or socioeconomic diversity. Finally, the reliance on qualitative self-reports: although the informants seemed honest and straightforward, there is always a chance that interviewees' accounts may understate or obscure stigma due to taboo, social desirability, or the interviewer's error. It is also important to note that the informants' conscious encounters with people of Burakumin origin were almost nonexistent; therefore, their narratives and stories were based on a "social image" and mediated through various forms of communication, rather than firsthand personal interactions and lived experiences.

Future Research Recommendations

There are several ways in which future researchers could continue this work developing this project to different levels. It would definitely be beneficial to directly include Burakumin and other minority groups to balance the mainstream-centered perspective. Especially so in the context of current social changes and "gap society", and the exploration of the "invisibility-hypervisibility dichotomy" of the Burakumin community and its possible transformation into regular visibility. As my interviewees also mentioned Korean and Chinese minorities, it could be interesting to compare Japanese symbolic boundary-making with that of other "homogeneous" nations (e.g., Korea, Poland) to test transferability. And finally, to enhance the accuracy and scalability of the results, to use quantitative methods, like surveys (e.g., SSM survey framework) to test

prevalence of symbolic boundaries in larger samples. What I find particularly interesting in the context of current events is investigating the intergenerational trajectories in a form of longitudinal research on how boundary work changes between younger and older cohorts, especially under a demographic crisis.

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APPENDICES

1. Dictionary of Key Terms and Concepts

Achieved Status: a social position earned through personal efforts, skills, and accomplishments. It can be acquired over a person's lifetime (e.g., occupation, education, marital status) (Merton, 1972).

Agency (in Social Inequality): the capacity of individuals to act independently and make their own free choices. There are two types of agency: operating under the constraints of institutions (maximizing utility within existing structures) and agencies that actively change institutions (social movements, legislators) (Sato, 2016, p. 33).

Ascribed Social Relations: social relationships that are established without an individual's conscious decision or choice, either through birth or by the decisions of others (Sztompka, 2002)

Ascribed Status: social position assigned at birth or through social identity (e.g., race, gender, age, family lineage). It is generally fixed and difficult to change, often having lasting effects on life chances (Merton, 1972).

Burakumin: “People from the settlements”, historically marginalized social groups in Japan, often associated with occupations considered "unclean" (e.g., tanning, butchering). In modern context, their identity is complex, potentially ascribed or achieved, and exists more as a socially constructed category and a subject of discourse. They are often perceived as symbolically "other" by mainstream Japanese society (author's own definition).

Caste: a system of rigid social stratification characterized by birth-ascribed status, endogamy (marriage within the group), and often a hierarchical division of labor based on ritual purity or pollution (Ooms, 1996, Berreman, 1979).

Class (Weber's Definition): social divisions based on an individual's position on the market. Classes are an analytical category, are connected to economic interests and do not necessarily form a community; they are analytical categories. Weber distinguished them from "states" or "status groups" and "political parties" (Weber, 2009).

Coleman's Framework (Micro-Macro Link): a theoretical framework that explains social inequality by linking individual-level actions (micro) to societal-level structures (macro). It posits that prior institutions determine actors' positions, influencing their resources and beliefs, which in turn shape their rational choices, ultimately accumulating to create social stratification (Coleman, 1990).

Community Solidarity: a social bond, a sense of collective "we" identity, among people who share a similar social situation, especially in terms of profession (Sztompka, 2002).

Conflict Between Social Positions (Role Conflict): the incompatibility of expectations associated with various social positions simultaneously occupied by the same person (Sztompka, 2002).

Conflict within a Social Position: the incompatibility of expectations from various partners with whom anyone occupying a single social position typically interacts. Also referred to as conflict between segments of one's social role (Sztompka, 2002).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): non-linguistic social practice and linguistic practice shape one another and focus on investigating how societal power relations are established and reinforced through language use (Fairclough, 1995).

Deviant Reactions (Merton): responses by individuals to internal contradictions and tensions within a social structure. These can include innovation, ritualism, retreatism, or rebellion (Sztompka, 2002).

Discrimination: refers to the differential, and often unequal, treatment of people who have been either formally or informally grouped into a particular class of persons. There are many forms of discrimination that are specified according to the ways in which

particular groups are identified, including race, ethnicity, gender, marital status, class, age, disability, nationality, religion, or language (The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology, 2009).

Discourse: a method of communication that conforms to particular structural and ethnographic norms and marks a particular social group by providing a means of solidarity for its members and a means of differentiating that group from other groups (The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology, 2009).

Discriminating Positions: social positions that hinder or even block further progress in a sequence of positions (e.g., professional career, promotion) (Sztompka, 2002).

Durkheim's Social Fact: *“any way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising external constraint upon the individual; or otherwise: such as is general over the whole of a given society, whilst having an existence of its own, independent of its individual manifestations.”* (Durkheim, 1982).

Eta/Hinin: historical outcast groups in pre-modern Japan, from which modern Burakumin are partly descended. The term "eta" (meaning "defiled") is considered pejorative (author's own definition).

Figurational Sociology: sociological perspective (Norbert Elias) that views social phenomena not as static "structures" but as fluid, constantly changing "figurational" processes of interconnected human actions (Sztompka, 2002).

Functional Imperatives: the four essential needs or functions that all social systems must fulfill to maintain stability and equilibrium: Adaptation, Goal Attainment, Integration, and Latency (Pattern Maintenance) (Parsons, 1956).

Gakureki shakai (学歴社会): a "credential society" where educational attainment and academic credentials are decisive for one's life course and social mobility (Nakamura, 2002).

Gatekeeping: the process of controlling information as it moves through a gate.

Activities include among others, selection, addition, withholding, display, channeling, shaping, manipulation, repetition, timing, localization, integration, disregard, and deletion of information (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008),

Hidden Injuries of Class: the subtle, often internalized psychological burdens experienced by individuals in lower social classes, who may attribute their difficulties to individual failure rather than systemic economic position. (Contrasted with the more apparent injuries of caste/race) (Berreman, 1979).

In-group / Out-group (Uchi/Soto relations): social groups with which an individual identifies (in-group, uchi) versus groups with which an individual does not identify (out-group, soto). These relations involve dynamics of inclusion, exclusion, and boundary maintenance, particularly strong in Japanese culture (Nakane, 2000).

Intra-race Racism: a specific type of racism where discrimination occurs within what is ostensibly the same racial group, based exclusively on descent or perceived origin rather than distinct physical properties (Ooms, 1996).

Invented Tradition: a set of practices, symbols, or rituals, often seemingly ancient, that are actually relatively recent in origin but are presented as having historical continuity to foster group cohesion, identity, or legitimacy (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1992).

***Kaisha* (会社):** Japanese term for a company or corporation, often used colloquially to refer to corporate life and culture in Japan (author's own definition).

Kawata: historical term referring to people involved in occupations related to leather-working (e.g., tanning, butchering), who were subject to discrimination and formed a basis for the eta designation (Ooms, 1996).

***Kuuki wo yomu* (空気を読む, "Reading the Air"):** Japanese cultural concept referring to the ability to understand the situation without words, or to sense someone's feelings and the unspoken dynamics of a social environment. It signifies tacit understanding and sensitivity to non-verbal cues

Latent Positions: social positions that are not being actively performed or realized by an individual at a given moment and are therefore not directly visible to others (Sztompka, 2002).

Meritocracy: a social system in which individuals are advanced and rewarded based on their talent, effort, and achievements rather than on their social background or other ascribed characteristics. The text notes a strong belief in this in Japan, though challenged by recent educational reforms (Okada, 2016, p. 172).

Nihonjinron (日本人論): a genre of Japanese texts that discuss the unique characteristics of the Japanese people, culture, and society. Often posits Japanese exceptionalism, homogeneity, and isolation, sometimes with racist undertones (Oguma, 2002).

Phenomenology: a research and theoretical tradition centred on the study of first-person lived experience; treats subjective experiences as a valid and meaningful focus of inquiry (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Purity/Pollution: a cultural and ritualistic concept where certain objects, people, or actions are deemed clean or sacred (pure) while others are seen as contaminated or profane (polluting). This idiom was central to discrimination against kawata (later eta) (Ooms, 1996).

Race/Racism: the concept that social distinctions can be reflected in biological (racial) differences, leading to discriminatory practices. In the context of Burakumin, it refers to an "intra-race racism" based on descent rather than observable physical differences (Berreman 1979; Ooms, 1996).

Rational Choice (Action) Model: a sociological model (e.g., Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997) that explains social phenomena by assuming individuals make choices to maximize their utility, often in response to perceived risks (e.g., avoiding downward social mobility) (Sato, 2016, p. 33)

Reflexive Thematic Analysis: an approach to TA, located within a qualitative paradigm. Foregrounds the active role of the researcher in coding and theme development, the inevitable subjectivity of these processes, and the importance of the researcher reflecting on their assumptions and practices, and how these might shape and delimit their data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 294)

Relative Risk Aversion: a concept within rational choice models, where actors try to avoid negative outcomes, particularly downward social mobility, when making decisions (e.g., about education or career paths) (Sato, 2016, p. 33)

Save Face: a concept, particularly important in East Asian cultures, referring to the maintenance of one's reputation, honor, or social standing, often by avoiding embarrassment or perceived disrespect (Goffman, 1959).

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: a false definition of a situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come true. In this study, it relates to the subjective feeling of being identified as Buraku, which, through subtle behaviors, unintentionally confirms others' perceptions (Merton, 1972).

Self-Organizing Inequality: a type of social inequality that emerges from the interactions within groups, where shared worldviews and behaviors (e.g., peer pressure) contribute to unequal outcomes, even in the absence of explicit institutional barriers (Nabeshima, 2003).

Social Closure: processes of drawing boundaries, constructing identities, and building communities in order to monopolize scarce resources for one's own group, thereby excluding others from using them. Society is not a homogenous entity but is instead internally structured and subdivided by processes of social closure. Some social formations, such as groups, organizations, or institutions, may be open to everybody, provided they are capable of participation, while access to most others is limited due to certain criteria that either allow people to become members or exclude them from membership (Oxford Bibliographies, 2012).

Social Organization: a pattern of relationships between and among individuals and groups, characterized by elements like sexual composition, spatial-temporal cohesion, leadership, division of labor, and communication systems. It refers to the everyday patterns of human interaction (Nakane, 2000; Sztompka, 2002).

Social Position (Status): a distinguished and named typical place in society that many different people can occupy (e.g., a profession) (Sztompka, 2002).

Social Role: a set of rights and obligations binding everyone who occupies a given social position, regardless of personal characteristics (Sztompka, 2002).

Social Stratification: the allocation of individuals and groups according to various social hierarchies of differing power, status, or prestige. Although divisions are often based on gender, religion, or race and ethnicity, the present entry focuses largely on socioeconomic inequalities, for the most part leaving other forms of social inequality to other entries (Oxford Bibliographies, 2011).

Social Structure: the aggregate of patterned social arrangements in society that both emerge from and determine the actions of individuals. It refers to the framework upon which a society is established, influencing larger systems (e.g., economic, legal). Society is grouped into structurally related roles with different functions and meanings (Sztompka, 2002).

Social System: a patterned network of relationships constituting a coherent whole that exists between individuals, groups, and institutions. It represents the formal structure of roles and statuses within a group, where individuals may belong to multiple systems simultaneously (e.g., family, community, nation) (Sztompka, 2002).

Sociological Ambivalences: inherent contradictions and conflicting expectations embedded within social structures, leading to tensions for individuals (Merton, 1972; Sztompka, 2002).

Status System: system of stratification based on socially recognized honor, esteem, and privilege. Individuals relate to it differentially from their specific position, and it

inherently includes socially sanctioned dishonor for those in lower positions (Ooms, 1996).

Stigmatization: the process by which individuals or groups are marked as socially unacceptable or inferior, leading to their devaluation and exclusion (Goffman, 1963).

Subjective Probability: an individual's personal assessment of the likelihood of an event, which may differ from objective probability and can be influenced by social discourses and interactions (e.g., media portrayals of inequality influencing students' self-assessment of academic success) (Sato, 2016, p. 34).

The Stranger: a sociological concept describing an individual who is geographically near but socially distant, a member of a group whose internal position also includes a moment of exclusion. The stranger is an element of the group but possesses attributes of mobility and "lack of a proper place." (Simmel, 1975).

Thematic Analysis (TA): TA is a method for developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset, which involves systematic processes of data coding to develop themes – themes are your ultimate analytic purpose. TA is – more or less – a method for data analysis, rather than a methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 4)

Thick Description (Geertz): a concept in anthropology and social sciences referring to a description of human social action that goes beyond mere physical behaviors to include the context, meanings, and interpretations provided by the actors themselves. It aims to make complex cultural phenomena understandable to outsiders by delving into the "webs of meaning" that constitute culture (Geertz, 1983; Lubowicka, 2017).

Transgression: violating a formal rule and/or moral principle, crossing a boundary of acceptable conduct, or exceeding a social limit, is central to understanding social life in general and deviance in particular (Jenks 2003). In the context of Burakumin, their ambiguous identity represents a potential for unregulated transgression, which can be unsettling in a rule-bound society.

Visible Position: social position that is activated in a given social context, highly

important for actions and interactions, and readily perceived by others (Sztompka, 2002).

Yutori kyōiku (ゆとり教育, "Relaxed Education"): a series of Japanese educational reforms in the early 2000s aimed at reducing academic pressure and fostering a more relaxed learning environment. While intended to alleviate stress, the reforms were criticized for potentially lowering scholastic abilities and increasing the impact of social background on academic achievement (Okada, 2016, p. 152).

2. Semi-structured In-depth Interview Scenario

Opening quote: Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. The purpose of the interview is to gain knowledge about the ways of thinking about Japanese class society nowadays, including class position of Japanese minorities i.e. Burakumin. The interview will be recorded and will be used as research material in the qualitative study for my dissertation. Based on the obtained research results, my doctoral thesis will be created. The interview will be in English, but the questions will be available in Japanese. As an interviewee you will remain completely anonymous. Please do not hesitate to ask any questions during the interview, I will be happy to answer and clear things out.

Image of Japanese Society

- Can you draw a picture of Japanese society? What groups can you see? Can you describe them or name them?
- In your opinion is there any hierarchy among those groups? If yes - what is the base of this hierarchy?
- How different groups exist in Japan? What is their relationship with each other?
- I want to ask how you see the differences between different groups in Japan. Can you describe any of the differences? What kind of differences would you notice?

Class society and Japan

- Considering Japanese society: what social class do you represent? If you were asked about your own class self-identification, how would you define yourself? Please explain your choice and reasoning behind your answers?
- What is a social class for you? How would you describe it in your own words?
- Is Japan a class society? There are different types of social orders in the world: caste, class, social stratum. Can you tell me how you see Japan in this regard?
- Social class in Japan, what does it mean to you? Can you describe the most important factors that influence your class position?
- Are there any visible differences between classes? Can you describe them?
- How would you recognize someone from the upper/lower class? Can you think of any specific characteristics?

Social class and your own family background

- Considering your family history: what social classes/class they were from? If you have mixed class origin, what class heritage do you think is the most important and why?
- What is your own class identification?
- If you had two grandfathers: one from farmers class one from upper class family, which heritage would you consider most important and why? Can you describe that briefly?
- In case you had a Burakumin ancestor: would you know that fact, and would that influence your class position currently?
- If Burakumin would be your ancestor, how would that influence your social status in Japan?
- What do you think determines belonging to a particular class in Japan?

Burakumin and Japanese class system

- Have you ever heard about Burakumin in Japan?
- If yes/no, can you say something about this group? Who are they?
- How would you define this group?
- Is this category clear to you?
- Why would you know (say) someone is a Burakumin?
- What characteristics/features would make you know that someone is a Burakumin?

- What conditions must be met for someone to be called Burakumin?
- Can you describe those conditions?
- Burakumin - do they belong to one social class in your opinion? To which one?
- Does it make sense, in your opinion, to make that distinction?
- In your opinion, can a Burakumin belong to the upper class? Do you know any examples?

Burakumin and invisibility

- Who is Burakumin to you? Can you define that in your own words? This is a question about your own personal view on the subject.
- Burakumin are called invisible, but somehow this category exists. What are the features that make you Burakumin? Who would you recognize as a Burakumin?
- How would you know that someone is a Burakumin?
- Is there any other group in Japanese society that you could compare to Burakumin in terms of “invisibility”? Can you think of any? If yes, please describe, if no, can you state what makes Burakumin special in this regard?
- What does it mean to be a Burakumin for you?
- What makes Burakumin a group? What are the social and symbolic foundations of being a Burakumin? What is the boundary between Burakumin and non-Burakumin?

Social class and relationships

- Regarding social and personal relations: does the class background of another person matter to you?
- Does social class status mean anything to you in terms of everyday relationships with other people?
- Do you see any differences between people from different class backgrounds behaving or interacting with others?
- Based on your observations and everyday interactions could you describe any differences between groups of people in Japan? Is it easier for you to interact with some people more than with others?
- Would you have anything against marrying someone of higher social class? In terms of marriage: who would you consider as a marrying type in Japan? How would you describe the potential candidate and his/hers qualities?

- Would you have anything against marrying someone of lower social class?
- What characteristics would be regarded by you as problematic?
- Would you have anything against marrying someone of a higher social class, and of Burakumin origin?
- Would you have anything against marrying someone of a lower social class, and of Burakumin origin?

Additional questions

- What we talked about today: do you think that other people in Japan think about class issues the same way you do?
- Is there anything else you want to talk about? Anything you want to ask before we finish the interview?
- Would you like to add something? Complete a statement? If yes, we can do it right now.

3. Informants Demographic Data

Code and gender	Place of origin	East / West	First association while asked about Burakumin	Buraku nearby?	Castle town?	Age	Resident / Expat	University education	Occupation	Class autoidentity	Parents went to university	Meeting to format	Language
M1	Osaka, Osaka Prefecture	West Japan	"Burakumin, Burakumin. It's totally different."	Yes	Yes	40s	Expat	Momoyama Gakuin University	Academia	Middle Class	No	Online	Polish /English /Japanese
M2	Osaka, Osaka Prefecture	West Japan		Yes	Yes	70s	Japanese resident	none	Retired, Before: Own Business	Middle Class	No	Online	Polish /English /Japanese
F1	Kanagawa, Kanagawa Prefecture	East Japan	"On the other side we have like um some real like regions in the cities where like those people who are being kind of neglected are living. So in the official society, it's not existing anymore, but it is. Those people who have been living there are kind of neglected. They are not considered as part of the society."	Yes	No, by the Edo period it was a temple town and pilgrimage site.	40s	Expat	Tokyo University	Business	Upper Middle	Yes	Online	English
F2	Fukushima, Fukushima Prefecture	East Japan	"I'm not sure for me I never feel influence of historical stuff with burakumin because there are no one as a burakumin around me. And I never heard and seen like that stuff. So I think there is still some culture that discriminates the Burakumin. The people who are...origin with Burakumin, but it's really specific region or specific area. So for me in Fukushima, in my city. I never heard of it and I never seen it. So I didn't care about it."	Yes	Yes	20s	Expat (student)	Sendai University	Student	Middle Class, But Poor	No	Online	English

F3	Miyazaki Prefecture, Kyushu	West Japan	<p>"I would say they fit in this lower class. However, they are not that poor. They just... It's not... These places... I don't exactly know... I've never been to such villages or towns. I just read or saw in the documentary or something. I don't know how... I haven't checked lately how these places are. I saw them many years ago. But I would imagine they're not living an extremely poor life."</p>	Yes	Yes	50s	Expat	University Washington	Stay-At-Home-Mom, Later On Education	Middle Class	No Data	Online	English
M4	Hamamatsu, Shizuoka Prefecture, later in Tokyo	West Japan/ East Japan	<p>"As I said, it's exam-based. If you're exam-based, if you get in, nobody say anything. You can be a Buraku and for example, there is one classmate of mine, from his last name, we suspect he is from Buraku, but he got the exam he passed it and he came to the he came there then he's in upper class he's gonna be a ruling class and it doesn't matter, because he may have a problem with a marriage, but for the job he will never have a problem. So you're gonna have a problem with the marriage, but you won't have any problem with anything else. And the government will employ you? Of course. And the top companies will employ you? Of course. And they will not do this tricky thing with the background check? No, of course not. Once you get into the company and so on, then who's going to get promoted and so on, this kind of politics is there, that's a different story and that might be different story and it might be difficult, but in terms of hierarchy - same."</p>	Yes	Yes	40s	Expat	Keio University, Oxford University	Academia	Upper Class	Yes (Father Did)	In Person	English

M5	Kamakura, Kanagawa Prefecture	East Japan	<p>"So it's because, like, as I told you it's like a country, small, almost a small independent country [...] because it's like a... there is kind of sovereignty in the Buraku, by the head of the Buraku. It's like North Korea almost. It's very free... like North Korea, which the freedom is allowed. But within this Buraku. So like, it's one big community."</p>	Yes	No, by the Edo period it was a temple town and pilgrimage site	50s	Expat (student)	University of Warsaw	Student	Middle Class, Poor	Indicates Yes, But Not Sure If That Is Entirely True	In Person	English
M6	Oita Prefecture, Kyushu	West Japan	<p>"In elementary school, we had ethics classes and were taught that even that word simply wasn't allowed. Apparently, there was a neighborhood in my town that used to be called Buraku. But I don't know where it is, where it was."</p>	Yes	Yes	50s	Expat	University of Koga-shi, ASP	Academia, Arts	Middle Class	No Data	Online	Polish
M7	Mito, Ibaraki Prefecture	East Japan	<p>Yes, you've defined it correctly, because it's nearby. So they're invisible to society. Why? Because, for example, the Burakumin live in Kanemachi, Tokyo, right? In the town of Kanemachi. And you can see it, because that's where I live, I used to live, right? Mito, right? And you can get there in an hour by shinkansen. And through Kanemachi, that's the northern part of Tokyo. And you can see it there, because the burakumin are there, because you often see dried skins of dead animals, a tannery. They do specific work in their profession.</p>	Yes	Yes	50s	Expat	Keio University, University of Warsaw	Academia	Upper Class	Yes (Both)	In Person	Polish
M8	Tokyo	East Japan	<p>"Because I think they don't really care, like even if you were from like, eta/hinin names, you're from such a kind of Buraku, maybe no longer really cares about this. They no longer really cares about this. And like I also don't, I don't know either like where I came from like maybe some samurai samurai is, like, kind of the top hierarchy uh maybe some kind of merchant maybe at the beginning. I don't know like I have no idea. And also like</p>	Yes	Yes	20s	Expat (student)	Keio University, University of Warsaw	Student	Upper Class	Yes (Both)	In Person	English

M9	Kavagoe, Saitama Prefecture	East Japan	<p>this is very interesting, like in my Japanese textbook, in India there's such a kind of hierarchy and I met an Indian guy in here in Poland and I asked him about that he was kind of mad at me "no this is like all about Western textbook about us and you're such a like such a, like stereotypical you have such a stereotypical idea about India no we don't really know like we don't fucking care about such thing" like we yeah, like maybe it's kind of same yeah."</p>	Yes	Yes	70s	Japanese resident	none	Retired, Before: An Ceo. At Oil Trade Company	Upper Middle	No	Online	English /Japanese
M10	Chiba Prefecture	East Japan	<p>"No, I don't know. I think maybe a small percent was eta/hinin. Maybe in that old Japanese society. But I don't know who is my friend is from eta/hinin. [You wouldn't know?] No, no, completely no."</p> <p>"I don't know exactly, but maybe after that [WW2], maybe they didn't care so much maybe everyone become poorer so then after after this war then they will be with each other together then maybe at this time maybe they didn't like have so much like difference each other."</p>	Yes	Yes	40s	Expat	yes, but did not indicate which university	Retired, Before: An Ceo. At Oil Trade Company	Middle Class ("Because I Didn't Have Any Difficulty To Live.")	No Data	In Person	English
M11	Tokyo	East Japan	<p>"I only know this story from schoolbooks. They butchered animals and so on. They were butchers. That's all I know. And what does it turn out to be? Average citizens don't know anything about them, but they look at them like... they treat them like they're, kinda, second rate people, right? Because that's society's awareness, right. That's how it's prepared."</p>	Yes	Yes	30s	Expat	Dokkyo University, UAM	Business, Academia	Upper Middle	No	In Person	Polish

F4	Kanagawa Prefecture	East Japan	<p>“With regard to Buraku people, although I have read about them in Kenji Nakagami's novels, I may not have had the experience of actually interacting with them. I am not aware of who are Burakumin and who are not, nor do I have any feelings of discrimination.”</p>	Yes	Yes, Odawara castle	40s	Expat	Waseda University, University of Warsaw	Academia	Upper Middle Class	No Data	Email	English
F5	Tokyo	East Japan	<p>“It's like a slum, kind of. It's not a slum, but it's like people would say it's kind of dangerous, I would say. [...] But I think it's not bad as like a few years ago, I think. Yeah, and I think there are several places like this in Japan, I think. And yeah, this is what I kind of imagine when I hear the Buraku and stuff.</p> <p>I don't know how to say, well like like culture discrimination, maybe it's in the past but nowadays, i think it's not like too much culture but it's more of like, like it's like somewhere that people don't try to think about, I think even it exists.</p>	Yes	Yes	20s	Japanese resident	Geidai	Academia, Arts	Middle Class	Yes (Father)	Online	English
M12	Nagano Prefecture	East Japan		Yes	Yes	60s	Japanese resident	no data	Academia	Middle Class	No Data	Online, Email	Japanese /Polish