

Group Characteristics Based on “Place” (1967)

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1. Keys to Group Analysis: “Qualification” and “Place”

Defining “Qualification” and “Place”

Considered at a highly abstract level, there are two different factors primarily determining the creation of social groups: qualification and place.¹ In other words, the first condition for the formation of a group is either a common *qualification* (*shikaku*) shared by the individuals that compose it, or the individuals’ coexistence within the same *place* (*ba*).

Qualification here refers to a much wider range of criteria than the usual sense of the word, describing any social *attribute* of the individual that qualifies it as belonging to a particular group. For example, there are attributes obtained through birth, such as family name and hereditary status, as well as those acquired after birth, including education, social position, and occupation. There are economic distinctions such as between employer and employee or landlord and tenant. Then there are social distinctions based on biology, such as male and female, young and old. Each of these can be understood as qualifications.

Whenever these attributes are used as the basis for distinguishing between individuals within a group and those excluded from it, we can say the group is formed based on qualification. Examples include specific occupational groups, patrilineal groups based on blood relations, and groups based on caste.

In contrast, groups “based on place” are determined by individuals’ presence within the frame of a particular area or affiliation, irrespective of differences in their individual attributes. For example, we could imagine a group composed of the members of Village X. In the context of industry, “lathe workers” would be a group based on qualification, whereas “personnel of Corporation P” would be a group established through location.

Similarly, “teachers,” “office clerks,” and “students” refer to groups based on qualification, whereas “R University Affiliates” describes a group based on place.

Variation Between Societies

In any society, individuals belong to social groups based on qualification and place. There may be some instances where a single social group is formed through an exact correspondence between both factors, but in most cases they overlap, allowing an individual to belong to different types of group at the same time. What I find interesting here is that some societies prioritize either groups based on qualification or groups based on place, while others give equal weight to both types.

Which criteria are prioritized is closely related to the values of a given society, and this method of analysis presents a way to clearly examine how a society is constructed. The societies of Japan and India provide the sharpest contrast. That is to say, the group consciousness of the Japanese is heavily oriented toward *place*, whereas in India, to the contrary, group consciousness emphasizes *qualification* (symbolized above all by caste, a social group decided by occupation and social standing). I do not have the space to fully consider Indian society here, but from the global perspective of social anthropology, there is no greater theoretical opposition in social structure than between Japan and India. In this context, the societies of China and Europe are not as polarized and can be positioned somewhere in the middle (and if anything, fall closer to India).

2. Japanese Society’s Emphasis on “Place”

Company Name Emphasized Over Job Description

We will now turn to the main focus of this analysis, the emphasis on *place* found in Japanese social groups.

When Japanese situate themselves in relation to others, they tend to prioritize place over qualifications. Before describing themselves as a journalist or an engineer, they will first claim to be from Corporation A or Corporation S. What their listener wants to know first is likewise whether the speaker is from Corporation A or Corporation S, and only subsequently whether they are a journalist or a printer, an engineer or an office clerk.

Sometimes someone will say “I am from Q Television Station,” and people will assume they work as a producer or a cameraperson, whereas in reality they actually serve the company as a driver (in Japan nowadays everyone wears suits, so it is often difficult to tell at a glance what kind of work someone does).

To put it simply, in these situations *place*, that is to say a *frame (waku)* like a company or university, plays a large role in the composition and imagination of social groups, whereas an individual’s personal qualifications are of secondary importance.

This form of group consciousness also appears in the frequent use of collective expressions like “our [group’s]” (*uchi no*) when a Japanese person refers to his or her

own workplace, company, government office, or school, and “your [group’s]” (*otaku no*) when referring to those of someone else.

As these expressions symbolize, the “corporation” here is not simply a business to which an individual is contractually tied, an object distinct from the self. Rather, it becomes part of the individual and is referred to as *mine* (*watakushi no*) or *ours* (*wareware no*). In many cases this group membership serves as the entirety of a person’s social existence, becoming strongly imbued with emotion as if it were the very foundation of life itself. From this perspective, Corporation A is not simply the property of its stockholders, but belongs to the group members as a whole. This deeply ingrained way of thinking, specific to Japan, is something more modern forms of identity have had to come to terms with.

The Household as a Shared Living Space

This distinctive group consciousness is clearly expressed in the traditional idea of the *ie*, or household, a concept found in every corner of the country. The *ie* has been extensively theorized by legal scholars and sociologists under the guise of the “*ie* system.” It is generally believed that through the effects of modernization, and particularly under the new constitution, the *ie* system no longer exists. These scholars approach the *ie* as an ideological construct shaped by a feudalistic moral logic. However, this analysis fails to give adequate consideration to the fundamental structure of the *ie* as a social group.

In my view, the most fundamental element of the *ie* is not the cohabitation of the eldest son and his wife with the eldest son’s parents, nor is it a structure of authority based around some form of patriarchal rights. What is fundamental is that the *ie* is a unit of communal living, and, in the context of something like agriculture, a managerial institution as well. It constitutes a well-defined social group made up of “*ie* members,” based around the family of the eldest son in most cases, but also including additional members with no immediate family ties. In other words, the *ie* is a social group formed through the frame of a *residence* (a location for communal living) and/or an *administrative* structure.

Daughter-in-Law and Son-in-Law: More Valued Than Siblings

The important point here is that human relationships within the *ie* group are prioritized over all other relations. For example, wives and daughters-in-law who have married into the family are considered incomparably more important than daughters who are blood relatives but have married out into other families. Similarly, male siblings who move to another *ie* will be thought to belong to a different family, and given less importance than someone who was once a complete stranger but joined to become “one of the family” (*ie no mono*). This makes for a startling contrast with Indian society, where sibling relationships (based on the shared qualification of being born from the same parents) continue to be important up until a person’s death.

In theory, we would expect that the more important sibling relationships are, the weaker the social independence of the *ie* (as a residential unit) should become. In fact, this is evident in India, where unlike Japan a household system resembling the *ie* has not developed at all (needless to say, the Japanese practice of adopting the son-in-law into the family does not exist in Hindu communities, nor in European ones). In other words, the social strength of groupings based on *qualification* (including the clear distinction between people of different blood lines) is strongly opposed to the influence of groups formed on the basis of a spatial *frame*.

The formation of groups based on frame, so clearly evident in the case of the *ie*, theoretically has the potential to include members who by nature carry different qualifications. In reality this is quite common. Not only can individuals entirely unrelated by blood become heirs to an *ie*, but in many cases domestic servants and business employees are readily included as *ie* members and acquire equal status to members of the household head's own family. Without this emphasis on frame, an employee marrying the daughter of his boss and inheriting the *ie* as a son-in-law would be unthinkable.

The *ie* presents in concentrated form the frame-based logic of social group formation in Japanese society as a whole. Shared by the entire population of Japan (or at the very least among all rural villages from the middle of the Edo period onward), the *ie* construct allows us to grasp the particular features of Japanese frame-based social group formation.

“Family and Retainers” as a Frame Group

The medieval concept of “family and retainers” (*ichizokurōdō*) refers to a unit even larger than the *ie* and provides another illustrative example of group formation through frame.

In this type of group, there was no division between the family (those with the same blood, or connected by other familial ties) and the family's retainers. Instead, they were lumped together as a single “family and retainers” social group. As time passed, differences between the two subgroups often became indistinguishable due to intermarriage between family members and retainers. This merger functions much like the inclusion of clerks and servants alongside family members within the *ie*.

The same type of people who once formed *ie* and “family and retainers” groups now create groups like the “National Railroad Family” (*kokutetsu ikka*). Associations include both managerial staff and workers, and focus is on cooperation between labor and management. Even today, when the *ie* system is said to have collapsed, there is a strong tendency to always think of an individual as part of a family (as in expressions like “together as a family” [*kazoku gurumi*]), and to consider an employee and their family together as a single unit.

The social consciousness of this kind of *framing* unit is, in every age, underwritten by moralistic slogans. These slogans, along with traditional mores, enable social groups to form and enhance their structural stability.

3. Members' Complete Participation

Two Ways to Strengthen Group Solidarity

It is now clear how different types of individuals can be incorporated into the same group by structuring the group around a shared place and a set frame. The next question is how group solidarity is achieved in such qualitatively diverse groups.

In situations where groups are formed based on shared qualifications, the members' homogeneity is in itself enough to establish a distinct and exclusive frame, without the need for any additional measures. Of course, as the social situation changes, the dynamics may shift. Regardless, in these cases homogeneity itself plays the decisive role in group formation, while other factors are only secondary.

In contrast, in cases where a diverse assembly of people create a group based on *place*, the group at first simply takes the form of a *gathering (mure)*, an assortment of people in one place. Simply gathering in itself does not fulfill the essential conditions for the formation of a social group, however. For a social group to form, a more robust and permanent frame is necessary. For example, this could be a residence, an *ie*, or a neighborhood created due to economic factors, or a frame based on external criteria like a business or bureaucratic organization.

There are two ways for the frame to be strengthened. The first is to work toward a feeling of group solidarity. The second is to create and then strengthen the internal organization of the group in a way that ties individuals together. In practice these two methods often overlap, but for the sake of theoretical clarity we will consider them separately. Here we will focus on the feeling of unity.

All of Life Takes Place Within the Group

An emphasis on being part of "our" group, set against other similar groups on the outside, creates solidarity among those with different qualifications. In addition, this creates affection for other members who share the same group identity. This empathetic approach helps to eliminate rational distinctions between different individuals that might otherwise undermine group unity.

What enables this empathetic foundation to grow is the nearly constant contact between group members. This allows member relationships to readily enter into personal territory, with no distinction between private and public. In this way, the power of the group comes to shape not just members' actions but also their ideas and attitudes. Under these circumstances, it frequently becomes impossible for members to distinguish between their own (public) social life and (private) personal life. While some feel this encroaches dangerously upon the dignity of the individual, others derive a sense of security from this deep sense of camaraderie. What probably matters most here is that the latter are in the vast majority.

People in Japan often discuss their families and love affairs with colleagues, and you often hear of marriages between people of the same village or workplace. It is

common to hear talk of family members coming along on company-organized holidays. At the same time, sociologically speaking, the sphere of activity seen here is narrow and one-dimensional, containing no social life beyond a unilateral affiliation with a single village or workplace. All personal problems must be settled from within this single frame alone.

The Contrast Between Japanese and Indian Daughters-in-Law

The *ie*, discussed above, is the prototypical form of this type of group. In Japan, problems between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law must be resolved entirely within the *ie* context. A tormented daughter-in-law must fight singlehandedly, receiving no help from her parents, siblings, relatives, or neighbors.

In the course of my research I was amazed to discover that in Indian villages not only is it possible for a daughter-in-law to return to her parental home for long periods at a time, siblings will also regularly come to visit and help out. Quarrels between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law are carried out in spectacularly loud voices, and on hearing this neighboring mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law (of the same caste) will drop by to lend their support. Daughters-in-law who came to the village through marriage will band together to help each other out. This is something Japanese women, for whom such a thing is unimaginable, can only look upon with envy.

This shows the social utility of people with a shared qualification (in this case, the role of daughter-in-law) banding together to transcend the frame of the household. This practice is in stark contrast with the situation in Japan, where, as the saying has it, “parents get involved in their children’s battles,” regardless of individual roles.

Patriarchy Is Sustained by the Strength of the Ie

In India, alongside general household responsibilities there are widely varying rules based on a person’s status within the family. For example, a wife may not show her face or speak to her husband’s older brother or father. However, these rules refer only to socially expected behaviors. They do not differ from one household to the next, but are common to the whole society (or to be more specific, to those of the same caste). Moreover, unlike Japan, household members are rarely constrained by customs unique to their own household. Each member of the family has distinctive thoughts and feelings, and a surprising amount of freedom.

In contrast, moralistic ideas in Japan such as “the wife should obey the husband” and “the husband and wife are one” are clear examples of the Japanese emphasis on group solidarity.

The patriarchal authority in Japan that characterized the so-called *ie* system in the past extended to the actions, thoughts, and feelings of the household members, and in this respect we can say it was more powerful than the type of patriarchy now found in India. Due to modernization, and particularly after World War Two, it became

possible to point to the widespread abuse of this kind of patriarchal authority in Japan. The *ie* system came to be understood as an element of feudal corruption and an obstacle to further development.

While this patriarchal authority tends to be thought of as a type of power held by the head of the household as an individual, in actuality it is the unity of the *ie* social group itself that restricts the minds and bodies of its individual members.

Why Is the Ie Corrupt and Harmful?

While the household system in India may have served as an economic and moral obstacle during the modernization of Indian society, because it left individual thoughts and feelings completely untouched it never came to be seen in a negative light the way the traditional *ie* system has been in Japan.

An Indian who had studied abroad in Japan for a long time once asked me the following with a puzzled look on his face:

Why do Japanese consult with everyone individually over even the smallest thing, and then have to gather everyone to make a final decision? In India, members of a household or other group have a clear and obvious set of rules they can consult when they are wondering what they should do. There is no need to consult with the head of the family or other members of the group. If it is a matter that isn't covered by the rules, they are free to do whatever they wish. The only time they have to ask for advice is when they feel they must do something that goes against the rules.

As this statement makes clear, in India the rules are well-defined and generalized to apply to society as a whole, rather than contextual and specific as they are in Japan. While each *ie* in Japan may have its own specific customs, the rules in India do not differ from one group to another. Moreover, unlike the *ie*, the participation of the individual household member is not all-encompassing. The family home (or jointly-owned estate) is not a closed-off world. Inhabitants remain strongly tied to social networks outside the household, formed between those who share the qualification of kinship.

4. Employment Involves the Whole Family

“Total Care” Prominent in Large Corporations

The characteristics of Japanese groups visible in the *ie* are also prevalent in large business institutions. Due to the lifetime employment system, employees dedicate themselves entirely to their jobs and stable social groups are established. Newly hired employees are in a position similar to newly born family members, or rather in the position of someone who has just married into the family. Moreover, as is clear in the case of company housing, employee family outings, and financial gifts from employers

on occasions like weddings, births, and funerals, the role of the company extends even into the private lives of its employees and their families.

The interesting thing is that these tendencies are pronounced even among the most cutting-edge Japanese businesses, those said to have the most modernized and advanced approaches to corporate management.

From the Meiji era (1868-1912) up to the present, Japanese administrators have consistently operated from the perspective of “a business is the sum of its people.” Rather than consisting of a contractually mediated relationship between management and workers, the employer-employee relationship consists of (as employers often say) “the close ties of those bonded together by fate.” This person-to-person relationship is comparable to the relationship of husband and wife.

In this way, employees become members of the corporate family. As in the expression “everything is taken care of” (*marugakae*), the company looks after all aspects of the employee’s needs. The relationship extends beyond the job description to embrace the person’s entire existence. This includes, of course, the employee’s family, which is incorporated as a kind of accessory. This leads to two characteristics of Japanese businesses: first, as social groups they are in themselves “family-like,” and second, they reach into the private lives of the employees and their families. The latter is a natural consequence of the former.

This text was originally published as “Ba’ ni yoru shūdan no tokusei,” Chapter 2 of Nakane Chie, *Tateshakai no ningenkankei* (Human Relationships in a Vertical Society) (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1967), 25-43.

Notes

1. There have already been various attempts in the field of sociology to understand the formation of social groups. Ferdinand Tönnies’ now-classic distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) is one representative example. Compared with a philosophical examination into the definition of society, this kind of social typology seeks to define social models based on a series of fundamental propositions. However, this is not a useful approach for the comparative study of various societies as they actually exist.

Recent theories related to social

groupings by scholars like Talcott Parsons and George Homans have a deservedly strong reputation, including in Japan. However, these approaches also give insufficient consideration to the important questions raised by comparative research, which seeks out ways to interpret qualitative differences that distinguish one society from another. The direct use of these theories for the structural analysis of Japanese society and its comparison with other societies appears to this author to have considerable limitations.

After carefully considering the most appropriate method for the

structural analysis of Japanese society, I decided to develop the new analytical concepts of *qualification* and *place* introduced here, and use them to develop my ideas. Accordingly, the theory introduced here is not something borrowed, but something I myself have created. The intent of this study is not to descriptively explain Japanese society, but to use Japanese society as material to develop a distinct theoretical approach to the study of social groups. The founding premises are thus necessarily highly abstract, in order to make them useful for the comparison of various societies beyond Japan.

On the Author

Social anthropologist Nakane Chie was born in Tokyo in 1926. She spent six years in Beijing as a child, where she first developed an interest in Central Asia. She studied Tibetan History at the University of Tokyo, followed by fieldwork among the hill tribes of Assam and Sikkim, India from 1953-56, and conducted

graduate work in social anthropology at the London School of Economics. Kōdansha published *Human Relationships in a Vertical Society* (Tateshakai no ningen kankei) as an inexpensive paperback in 1967. The book went on to become a long-running bestseller and a central text in debates surrounding so-called *Nihonjinron* (theories

of Japaneseness). In 1970 Nakane joined the faculty of the University of Tokyo as the first female professor in the institution's history. In subsequent decades, she returned to India regularly to continue her research on Tibetan refugee communities. Nakane was awarded the Order of Culture by the Japanese government in 2001.
