

# Comparative Sociological Research in the Field of Japanese Studies in Bulgaria

Maya Keliyan

## Introduction

Over the last two decades, since 1994, I have examined Japanese society in a comparative transnational context. There are three aspects to my research. First, I began my work in the field of Japanese studies with comparative research on Japanese and Bulgarian modernization, middle strata, rural communities and farming systems.<sup>1</sup> My study was sociological in that I employed methods of rural sociology and social stratification theory. Second, I continued my research focusing on a comparison of Japanese and Bulgarian social stratification systems and socio-structural changes, middle strata patterns of development, consumption patterns and lifestyle, and local community resources and development. Third, since 2006 I have included post-reform Chinese society and since 2014 Taiwan in this Eastern societies comparison, studying Japanese, Bulgarian, Chinese and Taiwanese trends of post-modernization, globalization, glocalization and internationalization, through changes in their middle classes formation, recruitment, composition, socio-structural boundaries, consumption patterns, leisure, and lifestyle.

What is the value of such an approach? On the one hand, I am following my belief that when Japanese studies are conducted using a comparative method, fresh insights into Japan can be uncovered, and new discoveries revealed. On the other hand, this research is important for better understanding the societies and cultures with which Japanese society and culture are compared, as well as for fuller comprehension of contemporary society and culture in general.

## Basis for and Significance of Comparison

As a result of my research I arrived at the conclusion that despite the obvious differences in civilization, culture, economy and geography between Japanese and Bulgarian society, there are also more than a few important shared traits. More precisely speaking, firstly,

---

1 The comparison made is between separate social structures, processes, and phenomena in Japanese and Bulgarian societies, but without entering the territory of those comparative investigations that use specific statistical methods, analyses and verification of statistical hypotheses.

in Japan and Bulgaria, the processes of modernization have been similar in nature, orientation, and objective; moreover, these changes occurred simultaneously in the two countries in the third quarter of the nineteenth century and again after 1945. In their development one observes certain features common to late modernization: state policy and state priorities prove a particularly important factor in the direction of social development, in the achievement of preset goals, and in the final result of changes. The Japanese and Bulgarian experience proves the importance in periods of great social-economic transformations of the specific morals of the political, economic and cultural elite, of the elite's capacity to merge its personal interests with the overall goals of society, and of its willingness to assume moral responsibility (Keliyan 1999: 64–67).

Secondly, another similarity in the two countries is the new middle class patterns of recruitment and growth during the 1950s and 1960s. During the two country's post-war modernization and industrialization, the agricultural sector was the main yielder of material and human resources for the development of industry. The proportion of the working class and of the new middle strata grew at the expense of the decreasing number of people occupied in the agrarian sector. An analysis of the middle strata in Japan and Bulgaria shows that in both cases state policy has had a decisive impact on their status characteristics and the recruitment patterns of these strata. The chosen aims and directions of post-war modernization have also defined the development trends of the working class on one hand, and of the place of the new middle strata on the other, in the changing system of social stratification (Keliyan 2012b).

Thirdly, identical processes have occurred in agriculture, and rural communities and farmers in these two societies have shared similar moral values and norms. In Japan and Bulgaria alike, land ownership is small-scale in structure, the average age of those occupied in agriculture has increased, and the agrarian sector relies foremost on a female labor force and on people around and above retirement age. Most Japanese farmers work part-time in agriculture, and the same economic strategy is widespread in Bulgaria as well. The economic resources of farmers in Japan and of agricultural producers in Bulgaria are mostly those of households rather than of separate individuals. In both Bulgaria and in Japan, agriculture is assessed not only in terms of economic profit and as a business undertaking, but is also linked to the traditions and values of rural communities. In both countries, there still exists the tradition of mutual help and exchange of products and labor among farming families and some of their relatives and friends in urban areas:

people occupied in agriculture give them part of their yield as a gift, and in exchange, they rely on the help of the latter in seasons of intense farm work (Keliyan 1996).

### **Japanese and Bulgarian Consumption Patterns from a Comparative Perspective**

Japan has a developed postmodern society, and is a leader in modern-style consumption. Its consumption patterns are exemplary for postmodern lifestyle in an age of growing globalization (Keliyan 2008: 22–27). Ever since its opening to the world in 1868, Japan has looked to the West as a model to be emulated in all respects. Today, as concerns the sphere of consumption, the Japanese have succeeded in surpassing their teachers in some respects. Japanese influence and leadership in the area of postmodern consumption culture and lifestyle has even become not only a source of economic recovery and strengthening but also one of the sources of its contemporary soft power.<sup>2</sup> Just as developments in US consumer society in the first half of the twentieth century were indicative of changes to come in the rest of the world, the case of Japan can now suggest the trends in consumption models that may be expected to come about in other societies, including those of Bulgaria and its other European counterparts.

The rapid development, expansion, and stabilization of the middle strata in Japan after World War II, especially the new middle strata, was a factor that contributed to the country's economic success. These are the active and innovative postmodern consumers, and a model for the study of the role of the middle strata as an important social-structural formation in modern consumption. To compare the Bulgarian middle strata accurately with their Japanese counterparts enables us to assess the proximity (or distance) of the Bulgarian middle class with respect to the corresponding position, role, and importance of its counterpart in developed consumer societies.

- 
- 2 It is no coincidence that to foster industries the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) created the concept of “Cool Japan.” (According to part 2.) Summary of the report of the Proposal of the Public- Private Expert Panel on Creative Industries states like this, “The Panel focused on overseas expansion strategies mainly for six sectors in the first half of the term: (1) apparel and fashion, (2) *mono zukuri* and regional products, (3) food, (4) content, (5) tourism and (6) home. In later half, discussions were held in greater depth on Japan's fundamental sense of values and sense of beauty, including the basic notions and lifestyles constituting the ‘Cool Japan’ concept.” In other words, the most important aspects of this strategy are famous Japanese products and practices, consumption and lifestyle values, and attitudes. For more details see the METI website: [http://www.meti.go.jp/english/press/2011/0512\\_02.html](http://www.meti.go.jp/english/press/2011/0512_02.html) (last accessed on 6 July 2015).

Japan and Bulgaria share certain common traditional consumer values, such as thrift and self-restriction. The two societies' traditional moral systems condemn conspicuous consumption, assessing it to be something "disgraceful" and even "immoral." In both societies egalitarian values and attitudes are important and strongly influential. In separate periods of their development, the two societies have followed the leading trends in consumption and lifestyle associated with the developed Western, particularly European, models. The latter have been the object of imitation above all of the high and middle strata, who thereby strive to assimilate themselves to what are considered to be world models of emulation as regards consumption and lifestyle.

From the very start of my study of Japanese society, I was impressed by the leading position held by modern Japan in the world with respect to consumption and lifestyle. Observation of Japanese consumers shows very clearly the importance of consumption in today's global world, and the need for using the sociological concept of "consumption patterns." Japanese society is a goldmine for studying these patterns: due to the exceptionally great significance of social-group status in Japan, consumption models there are distinctly and quite visibly status-oriented (Keliyan 2008: 73–105). In Japan, due to the great variety of consumer opportunities, it is much easier to distinguish the differences in consumption models of separate social groups, categories, and strata. The Japanese consumer is known for all sorts of extravagance and bizarre whims; Japan is a leader in avant-garde consumption, but which social groups and categories embody these trends, and who are the adherents of specific fashionable tendencies, movements, phenomena, for which Japan has become famous?<sup>3</sup>

Japan is a world leader in youth consumption: in contemporary Japanese society, there are numerous, varied, and dynamically changing youth subculture groups; their lifestyle and consumer culture<sup>4</sup> makes up the biggest and most influential "products" of Japanese "cultural exports" and is an example of rising soft power in East Asia and the world in recent times (Keliyan 2011).

---

3 For instance, do all Japanese women own or carry women's designer handbags like Louis Vuitton, and which social groups are consumers of such luxury brands?

4 For example *otaku* and *kogyaru*.

In the sphere of consumption, globalization is much more rapid, more encompassing, and more penetrating than it is in other spheres of social life, and similarities, differences and inequalities with respect to consumption are distinct and easily observable. Analysis of Japanese and Bulgarian consumption patterns goes beyond the field of regional studies. It is not limited to conclusions on their similarities and differences, but, on the basis of these conclusions, attains a more comprehensive understanding of the very concept of contemporary consumer culture, and of its glocalised characteristics and manifestations in various contemporary societies. Similarities and differences are trends of growing internationalization, of convergence or divergence, and of globalization and at the same time of localization, not only in consumption but also between separate societies and their cultures (Keliyan 2012a: 18–21).

This comparative approach places Bulgaria in a comparative context not only with Japan, but with other European societies as well; the above-mentioned global perspective is directed not only at the consumption patterns of Bulgarian society, but also European societies. The aim of this comparative sociological research in the area of Japanese studies is definitely *not* to limit itself to outlining the “particularities of the geography of consumption and the network of cultural differences” (Clarke 2003: 11), but to compare these in order to reach a fuller understanding of transformations of contemporary societies and cultures.

### **A Broader Perspective: Middle Class Lifestyles in Japan, China, Bulgaria and Taiwan**

The internal logic of my studies led me to conclude that I needed to include China and Taiwan in my comparative sociological research on middle strata consumption patterns and lifestyle. Japan, Taiwan and China during some periods of their history have been regarded as examples of the implementation of successful reforms—Japan as the first successful modernized non-Western country and Taiwan as the first Chinese democracy; during recent years China has been held up as a model for fast economic growth. Towards the end of the 1950s Japan emerged as the second world economic power in terms of its nominal GNP and its rapid and high economic development, and until the early 1990s it was described as an “economic miracle.” From the 1960s to the early 1990s Taiwan emerged as one of East Asia’s quickly industrialized “Little Tigers” and its stunning economic growth was also seen as “miraculous” (Tsang 2012).

After World War II, both China and Bulgaria developed as communist countries under the dictatorship of their respective Communist parties. In 1949 martial law was enforced in Taiwan. In 1978 China declared a course of market-oriented changes and opened its economy; martial law was repealed in Taiwan in 1987 and the country developed democratic institutions. In 1989 Bulgaria commenced a transition to a democratic market society, joined NATO in March 2004, and since 1 January 2007 has been a European Union member state. During the 1970s Taiwanese political leaders, following the successful Japanese model from two decades before, realized that for guaranteed future prosperity a transformation from production of cheap consumer goods for export to competitive and qualitative high-tech electronics was necessary. As a result, a number of high-tech industrial parks have been opened. In turn, mainland China has used the same model since the middle of the 1990s to strengthen its economy.

Middle classes lifestyles in Japan, China, Bulgaria and Taiwan in recent years have been characterized by growing diversification, globalization, internationalization, digitalization, the increasing influence of youth cultures and subcultures, and the rising lifestyle power of women (not only as housewives, but also the influence of single new middle class representatives). The aging population and deepening socio-economic inequalities have been topics of intense discussion in these four countries. Bulgarian and Chinese middle class lifestyles are now moving through stages that Japan and Taiwan have long since passed, including “Westernization,” “MacDonaldization,” consumerism, malling, Americanization, and so on.

Although the rapidly developing Chinese economy has displaced Japan from second to third position in terms of nominal GDP, Japanese products remain desirable as status markers for Chinese and Taiwanese higher and middle classes, and Japanese consumption patterns and lifestyles are the preferred models for imitation.

A comparative study of Japan, China, Bulgaria and Taiwan makes it possible for both sociological research and Japanese studies to broaden its knowledge, methodology and perspective. This approach contributes to deepening our understanding of the nature of various contemporary Eastern societies and cultures and their experience in post-modernization, internationalization, globalization, and so on.

My sociological experience in the area of Japanese studies is not only theoretical—I have a strong background in fieldwork in Japan, where I have conducted 14 empirical

sociological surveys,<sup>5</sup> studying Japanese local community lifestyles, traditions, structures, initiatives, religious practices, rituals and festivals; middle strata patterns of development, consumption and lifestyle; and Japanese villages, rural communities, and farming systems.

My comparative study on Japanese, Bulgarian and other Eastern societies is focused not only on research, but also on publication,<sup>6</sup> and teaching. My lectures cover different aspects of contemporary Japan, its social-stratification system, socio-structural changes and post-modernization, such as a general course on “Japanese society,” “Japan social structures,” and “Japanese family lifestyle.” I teach Japanese society in a comparative transnational perspective, giving lectures on “Consumer Culture of Japan and China,” “Young People in East Asia,” “Consumption Patterns in Comparative Perspective: Bulgaria, Japan and China,” “Young People’s Lifestyle Diversification and Youth Sub-cultures in Contemporary East Asia,” and “Contemporary Chinese Society,” trying to teach students about the similarities and differences between Chinese, Japanese and East European (Bulgarian) approaches to modernization and post-modernization, globalization, glocalization and internationalization.

### **Conclusion: Practical Applied Significance of Comparison between Japan and Bulgaria**

Being both a Bulgarian and East European scholar places the subject of my study in the mirror of my own cultural tradition; looking at Japanese society and culture with the “eyes of the other” emphasizes basic similarities as well as crucial differences with other Eastern and Western societies. As a Bulgarian and East European sociologist-Japanolo-

---

5 The different empirical sociological surveys I have carried out in Japan include “The Contemporary Japanese Village: Economic Activity, Social Stratification and Values Systems,” “Religious Practices, Rituals and Festivals as the Basis of Identity and Solidarity in Japanese Local Communities,” “City Farming in Kyoto: Case Study in Ichijouji and Kamigamo,” “Local Communities in Kumano: Local Initiatives, Traditions and Protection from Natural Disasters,” “Informal Structures of Japanese Local Communities,” and “Traditional Forms of Mutual Help and Cooperation in Japanese Local Communities.” I conducted these surveys in different parts of Japan, including Shiga, Hyōgo, Aichi, Mie, Gifu, Toyama and Kyoto prefectures.

6 Publications include four monographs, the first two of which were published with financial support from the Japan Foundation. I wrote the first three monographs in Bulgarian: *Japan and Bulgaria: Modernization, Middle Strata and Rural Communities* in 1999, *Japan and Bulgaria: Stratified Consumption Patterns* in 2008, and *Local Community Lifestyle in Contemporary Japan* in 2010. The fourth monograph was published in English in 2012: *Consumption Patterns and Middle Strata: Bulgaria and Japan*.

gist, I provide another viewpoint and approach to teaching and understanding Japanese society and culture: that of a cultural background and civilization situated between the Eastern and Western worlds, where Japan, with its history, culture and social development and achievements, is an exemplary case to follow. Contemporary Japan, like other parts of our postmodern global world, is suffering from various social, economic, and cultural problems, but from the standpoint of my cultural background, it is still a society that can be described as achieving (or proving itself capable to achieve) success. In my years of comparative study of Japanese and Bulgarian society, I have constantly pondered the root of Japanese success in the post-war years, and wondered why Bulgarian society has not managed to emulate that success. In the third quarter of the nineteenth century, and later in the middle of the twentieth century, Japan and Bulgaria embarked upon their drive to modernize from a similar starting point, at approximately the same level of development, but the results achieved by both countries could not be more different.

Since the 1990s, Japan, along with the rest of the world, has undergone periodical recessions and financial crises. On 21 March 2011, the country was devastated by a catastrophic earthquake, *tsunami*, and nuclear power plant meltdown. In the last few decades the political parties of Japan have proven incapable of forming stable governments, of following successful economic policies, and of dealing with corruption and scandals. Japanese society is rapidly aging and the future looks increasingly insecure. Japan no longer perceives itself as a successful society, but rather as an “ailing” one. However, from a Bulgarian perspective, things look somewhat different. Despite the difficulties it faces, Japan is continuing to seek solutions to its problems, and is still among the most developed countries in the world. Hence, Bulgaria can safely follow Japanese social practices that have proven successful.

The Japanese experience in the last two decades demonstrates that in our contemporary postmodern world, a society cannot be looked upon as “successful” in the same way that this was possible in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Today’s postmodern societies do not assess themselves as “successful”; rather, “success” is looked upon as an illusive dream typical of the second half of the twentieth century. In our world here in the middle of the second decade of the twenty-first century, it is more appropriate to say that certain practices and experiences have proven their efficacy and can be followed and relied on for positive results.



## REFERENCES

Clarke 2003

David B Clarke. *The Consumer Society and the Postmodern City*. London: Routledge, 2003.

Keliyan 1996

Maya Keliyan. "Farm Culture and Rural Development in Bulgaria and Japan: A Comparative Perspective." *Swiss Journal of Sociology* 22:2 (1996), pp. 385–411.

Keliyan 1999

Maya Keliyan. *Yaponiya i Bulgaria: Modernizatsiyata, srednite sloeve i selskite obshtnosti* [Japan and Bulgaria: Modernization, Middle Strata and Rural Communities]. Sofia: M-8-M, 1999.

Keliyan 2008

Maya Keliyan. *Yaponiya i Bulgaria: Razsloenite modeli na potreblenie* [Japan and Bulgaria: Stratified Consumption Patterns]. Sofia: Valentin Trajanov, 2008.

Keliyan 2011

Maya Keliyan. "Kogyaru and Otaku: Youth Subcultures Lifestyles in Postmodern Japan." *Asian and African Studies* XV:3 (2011), pp. 95–110.

Keliyan 2012a

Maya Keliyan. *Consumption Patterns and Middle Strata: Bulgaria and Japan*. University of Bologna; Italy: PECOB (Portal on Central Eastern and Balkan Europe), 2012. <http://www.pecob.eu/Consumption-patterns-middle-strata-Bulgaria-Japan>.

Keliyan 2012b

Maya Keliyan. "Postmodern Japan Middle Class Related Mythology and Nostalgia." *Slovak Journal of Political Sciences* 12:2 (2012), pp. 91–107.

Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry

*Proposal of the Private-Public Expert Panel on Creative Industries*. Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. [http://www.meti.go.jp/english/press/2011/0512\\_02.html](http://www.meti.go.jp/english/press/2011/0512_02.html) (accessed on 6 July 2015).

Tsang 2012

Steve Tsang. *The Vitality of Taiwan: Politics, Economics, Society, and Culture*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.