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Why Does Japanese Sociology Lack Global Influence? A Study of Pseud-Indigenization via Imported Scholarship

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ABSTRACT

Despite Japan's long academic history, its sociological research has maintained limited global influence. This paper investigates why Japanese sociology has struggled to contribute to the global development of the discipline, examining this issue through the framework of "pseudo-indigenization via imported scholarship." The study first identifies key characteristics of Japanese sociology through a literature review: a scarcity of international citations, a predominance of Japanese-language publications for a domestic audience, and a heavy emphasis on "theoretical studies" (理論・学説研究) that analyze Western theories in isolation from international academic discourse. While some scholars describe these tendencies as "indigenization," this paper argues that the term does not fully capture the Japanese context. Instead, the author adopts the concept of "pseudo-indigenization" to highlight a historically entrenched pattern where Western theories and methodologies are assimilated and cultivated within Japan through "translated" or "imported" scholarship. By analyzing the distinctive ways in which this domestic orientation is emphasized, this paper seeks to elucidate the unique trajectory of Japanese sociological research from the perspective of a researcher experienced in international academic environments.

1 | Introduction

Despite Japan's significant development and long-established academic institutions, Japan's sociology has had unfortunately limited global influence. Why has sociological research produced in Japan failed to generate studies, theories, or concepts that contribute to sociology as it has developed globally? This paper addresses this question by examining it through the framework of *the pseudo-indigenization* via "imported scholarship". By doing so, it seeks to elucidate the distinctive characteristics of Japanese sociological research from the perspective of a Japanese sociologist who has long conducted sociological research abroad.

Both in English and in Japanese, numerous attempts have been made by Japanese sociologists to reflexively articulate the self-image of sociology in Japan (Oguma 2021; Nakano 1998; Ochiai 2025; Takigawa 2019; Saito 2015; Nishihara 2016; Tominaga 2004; Akimoto 1979). One recurring feature identified in these studies is the scarcity of research cited in international literature, despite the large number of sociologists active in Japan. The reverse side of this situation is that most sociological studies in Japan are written in Japanese and published for a primarily Japanese audience (Oguma 2021). Correspondingly, histories of Japanese sociology that emphasize a strong domestic focus on Japanese society have also frequently been written (Oguma 2021; Nakano 1998). Furthermore, analyses of article titles and keywords used in major academic journals have been conducted to trace shifts in Japanese sociologists' research interests. A consistent finding—despite differing conclusions regarding recent trends—is that what is categorized as "theoretical studies (理論・学説研究)" has long constituted a major research domain among Japanese sociologists (Nakano 1998; Nishihara 2016; Takigawa 2019). Much of such "theory" research has dealt with the theories of Western sociologists and social theorists.

Yet, the overwhelming majority of these studies are written in Japanese, and little communication takes place with the original theorists themselves or with international researchers working on those theories.

Oguma suggests certain tendencies in Japanese sociology can be understood as a form of indigenization, which he describes as having two directions: domestic orientation (analysis of Japanese society) and the publication of a vast volume of general audience-oriented sociological books in Japan, especially since the 1970s (Oguma 2021, 687). The domestic orientation in sociology is a widespread phenomenon that is commonly observed across numerous societies. It has been argued that it is a natural phenomenon for sociologists to conduct research on their own societies. Nonetheless, previous reviews of Japanese sociology have identified this as a distinctive characteristic of the discipline. In this context, the argument will be made that the distinctiveness of Japanese sociology does not lie in its domestic orientation per se, but rather in the manner in which this orientation is emphasized, a topic that will be explored in greater depth subsequently.

In consideration of the concept of indigenization as developed in post-colonial theories, it is argued that this concept does not fully apply to the Japanese case. Consequently, this paper adopts the term pseudo-indigenization instead. This underscores a historically entrenched tendency whereby Western theories and methodologies were assimilated and subsequently cultivated in Japan through translation scholarship. The present paper employs the analytical lens of "translated scholarship" or "imported scholarship" in order to extract and conceptualize the inward-looking character of Japanese sociology as pseudo-indigenization, with a view to elucidating its defining features.

2 | Indigenization or Pseudo-Indigenization?

Oguma's article identifies two characteristics of Japanese sociology: an extremely domestic focus preoccupied with the study of Japanese society (Oguma 2021, 686, 687), and the large volume of research published for a general domestic readership. Oguma notes that the size of the Japanese publishing market makes this possible. The combination of these two features has resulted in scholarship that remains within Japan, framed in the Japanese language, and focused on Japanese society. A key consequence, he argues, is the disproportionately small number of articles published by Japanese sociologists in Western-language academic journals, despite the large number of sociologists working in Japan (Oguma 2021). The following figures cited by Oguma illustrate this point:

> Despite the fact that the Japan Sociological Society (JSS) had about 3600 members, which accounted for about 10% of sociologists in the world, the number of academic articles with authors with Japanese names which appeared in 23 sociology journals in Western languages between 1990 and 2009 stood at only 0.91% of all papers published in those journals (JSPS 2011, 67)

Oguma cites the JSPS report's finding that the minimal value placed on publishing in international journals stems from the fact that abroad publication provides little reputation within the Japanese community of sociologists (Oguma 2021, 686). Oguma interprets these tendencies in Japanese sociology as a sign of indigenization. According to the OED, indigenization refers to "the action or process of adapting to or being brought under the control or influence of Indigenous people." However, once we consider the concept's more substantial meaning as developed within postcolonial theory, certain problems emerge in applying it directly to the Japanese case.

In his summary of the symposium, entitled *Universalism* versus *Indigenization in Sociology* at the 1982 World Congress of Sociology in Mexico City, Akinsola Akiwowo characterizes indigenization as "the process of seeking to multiply insiders' views" (Akiwowo 1988, 157). Akiwowo (1988) goes on to summarize the claims of two symposium participants:

> Whereas Peter Park sees indigenization as a form of 'emancipatory sociology' which seeks to return *anima* to nature in the course of scientific study, there is reason to believe that Loubser sees the emancipatory role of the indigenist view in the implicit and explicit freedom of social scientists in the Third World from their intellectual dependency status in relation to social scientists in Europe and North America. (Akiwowo 1988, 157)

The key term here is *emancipatory*. Indigenization, in this sense, involves liberation from intellectual dependence on Western social science. However, as the subsequent section will demonstrate in detail, the tradition of Japanese sociology does not clearly exhibit such a form of emancipatory sociology. Instead, the features of it are proposed as "pseudo-indigenization" in this article.[1]

3 | Japanese Sociology as Imported and Translated Scholarship

Oguma notes that the two characteristics of Japanese sociology mentioned earlier—namely, its pronounced *domestic focus* and the large volume of sociological works written in Japanese for a general audience—emerged out of a particular historical background. He argues that sociology was introduced to Japan at an exceptionally early stage (Oguma 2021). Similar observations are made in other historical accounts of Japanese sociology (Fukutake 1953; Akimoto 1979). Yet one important issue has received comparatively little attention: the introduction of sociology from the West was conducted almost entirely through translation. The present study seeks to explore the impact of the aforementioned phenomenon on the subsequent development of Japanese sociology. While the translation and publication of foreign scholarship is a common occurrence in many non-Western countries, Japan is distinctive in three respects. First, translations appeared with minimal delay after the publication of the original works. Second, the sheer volume of Western sociological texts translated into Japanese was remarkably large. Third, the importation of Western ideas followed a deductive learning process.

TABLE 1 | Years of publication of the original works and their Japanese and English translations.

Author	Titles	Year of the publication of the original	Year of Japanese translation published	Name of the translator	Year of the publication of the first English translation
K. Marx	Das Kapital, Bd. 1	1867	From 1920	Takabatake, M.	1887
H. Spencer	Principles of Sociology	1876–1896	1882	Noritake, K.	—
L. Ward	Applied Sociology	1883	1913	Endo, T.	—
Le Bon	Pshchologie des foules	1895	1910	Ohyama, I.	1895
E. Durkheim	Les formes elementaires de la vie religiuse	1912	1931	Furuno, K.	1915
E. Durkheim	De la division du travail social	1893	1932	Ii, G.	1933
E. Durkheim	Sociologie et philosophie	1924	1925	Yamada, Y.	1953
F. Tonnies	Gemeinshaft und Gesellshaft	1887	1927	Imori, M.	1940
G. Simmel	Grundfragen der Sociologie	1917	1921	Oda, H.	1970

Source: Akimoto (1979).

Table 1 shows the years in which several sociological "classics," originally written in various Western languages before the Second World War, were translated and published in Japanese. For works originally written in languages other than English, the year of their English translation is also included. What becomes clear from this table is that a considerable number of sociological works deemed important were translated and published in Japanese without a long delay—roughly within 20 years of their original publication. It is true that, for the works listed here, translations from Western languages other than English tended to appear in English earlier than in Japanese. However, given the linguistic distance involved, the speed with which Japanese translations were produced is remarkable and unlikely to be matched in other non-Western linguistic contexts. Some works were even translated into Japanese earlier than into English—for instance, E. Durkheim's *De la division du travail social*, F. Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, and G. Simmel's *Grundfragen der Soziologie*. This is an impressive demonstration of Japan's commitment to imported and translated scholarship.[2]

Thanks to the rapid translation of these Western sociological works, the next generation of sociologists gained easy access to major studies in Western sociology through Japanese translations. This pattern continued in the postwar period. In this way, studying sociology—an imported academic field—in the Japanese language naturally strengthened scholars' motivation to publish their own research findings in Japanese. This is not all. According to several papers analyzing the trends in the research content of past Japanese sociology, until very recently, research categorized as "theory research (理論・学説研究)" had for many years been the main research area for Japanese sociologists (Nakano 1998; Saito 2015; Nishihara 2016). Moreover, many of these theory studies discussed the theories of Western sociologists and social theorists, and most of it was written in Japanese. Table 2 shows the top 10 most frequent sociologists who appeared in the titles of contributed papers published in *the Japanese Sociological Review* (社会学評論), the official journal of the Japan Sociological Society, between the 1950s and 2009, as compiled by Nishihara (2016). From Max Weber in the first position and Émile Durkheim in the second, down to Michel Foucault in the tenth, all positions are occupied by Western sociologists or thinkers. These papers were written in Japanese. This table also includes the representative works of the sociologists who were studied, alongside the years of publication of their works and their Japanese translations, which I have added. This further demonstrates that Japanese translations followed without a long delay and that most representative Western sociological works have been translated into Japanese. It is not the case that these same Japanese sociologists were writing about those theories in Western languages and debating theory with sociologists in the Western sphere. In other words, these studies were aimed at a Japanese readership and did not presuppose communication with the original theorists or with theoretical sociologists outside of Japan. Admittedly, many Japanese sociologists studying Western 'theories' read the original texts in Western languages. Yet most readers accessed Western theories through Japanese translations without necessarily consulting the original works. Moreover, the dissemination of Western sociological theories to younger generations of sociologists has been facilitated by Japanese researchers, primarily through

TABLE 2 | Top 10 authors who appeared in the Japanese Sociological Review, by year.

	Total	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000–2009	Representative work and the year of publication	Year of Japanese translation
M. Weber	32	3	8	9	7	5	0	Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus, 1904–1905	1939
E. Durkheim	23	3	5	3	4	8	0	Le Suicide, 1897	1968
T. Persons	19	5	4	3	4	2	1	The Social System, 1951	1974
A. Schütz	13	0	0	0	8	3	2	On Phenomenology and Social Relations 1970	1981
K. Marx	9	0	2	5	2	0	0	Das Kapital, 1867	1920
J. Habermas	8	0	0	0	5	2	1	Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit, 1962	1973
N. Luhmann	8	0	0	0	5	3	0	Rechtssoziologie 1972	1977
M. Mead	8	1	0	2	2	3	0	Coming of Age in Samoa, 1928	1976
G. Simmel	6	1	1	0	1	2	1	Grundfragen der Sociologie, 1917	1921
M. Foucault	4	0	0	0	2	1	1	Surveiller et punir, naissance de la prison, 1975	1977
Total	130	13	20	22	40	29	6		

Source: Nishihara (2016).

the medium of textbooks and the introduction of sociological thought, with these theories being published in Japanese.

Here a problem arises: to what extent were Western concepts and theories accurately understood when mediated through translation? More specifically, to what extent were the contextual conditions in which these Western theories and concepts originated understood—conditions essential to constructing the cognitive frameworks on which Japanese sociology, as imported scholarship, came to be based? This is fundamentally a problem in the sociology of knowledge in order to understand the development of Japanese sociology as a discipline of pseudo-indigenization.

In this regard, a relevant insight is offered by Yanabu Akira, one of Japan's leading scholars of translation studies. According to Yanabu, the history of Japanese thought is a "history of the reception of foreign culture," and translation has been part of this reception process. The problem, he argues, lies in the following:

> Because the filtering mechanisms inherent in this mode of reception have become so ingrained in us, we tend to overlook the process itself. For example, the common assumption that a translation has the same meaning as its original, irrespective of how it is rendered, rests on the fundamental belief that foreign cultural elements enter our world unchanged. In other words, the filtering process is ignored. (Yanabu 1972 [2003], 335)

The persistent problem is that the "filtering process" is often overlooked in the cultural reception of translated terms. Yanabu also argues this oversight encourages a deductive mode of understanding via Western concepts. This mode is especially likely when addressing phenomena previously absent in Japanese society, such as modernity, industrialization, class structure, and sociology itself.

Much of the Japanese language used in sociology consists of translated Western terms. If the rooting of sociology in Japan transmitted embedded modes of thought, an important question arises: what kinds of thinking were disseminated through Japanese sociologists' "theory" research? Providing an empirical answer is far from straightforward.

The following claim is based on inference: my experience reading Japanese sociological literature, particularly empirical studies, suggests that Western concepts (as translated terms) are seldom applied with adequate consideration of their original social contexts, while there are indeed exceptions to this. This decontextualized application seems made possible by the predominance of a deductive mode of reasoning. If this inference captures the situation, and if Japanese sociological research has proceeded largely through translated terms within a primarily deductive cognitive framework, one must ask: to what extent have Japanese sociologists been able to fully use both inductive

and deductive reasoning—to engage in retroduction—while drawing on findings of empirical studies on Japanese society?

An answer can be found in Nakano's discussion of Japanese sociological research. Nakano notes, "Japanese sociologists generally see the benefit of applying theoretical approaches formulated in foreign countries to their own society" (Nakano 1998, 509). However, interaction between sociologists focused on "theory" and those engaged in empirical analysis has been limited. As a result, Nakano argues:

> Japanese sociology would benefit from a closer consolidation between theory and research, both by formulating theories into verifiable propositions and by using theory to inform empirical research designs. (Nakano 1998, 514)

The implication, conversely, is that such closer consolidation has not taken place. This observation indicates that the capacity of Japanese sociology to generate concepts and theories of broader sociological significance is constrained not solely by linguistic factors, namely the practice of writing almost exclusively in Japanese, but also by its historical development as a form of translated and imported scholarship, a process which has fostered the deductive mode of reasoning and learning. These limitations have constrained efforts to build generalizable sociological knowledge through retroductive thinking grounded in empirical studies of Japanese society.

This problem is not new. A point articulated by Fukutake Tadashi, a preeminent sociologist in the post-war period in Japan, ~70 years ago, continues to resonate in the present day. Fukutake notes:

> The first condition we must raise is that Japanese sociology has long been preoccupied with attending to new theories arriving from abroad. Moreover, the fact that this pursuit of new theories focused primarily on German sociology—particularly epistemological strands—made this condition even more decisive. There is absolutely no reason to underestimate the importance of learning from Western sociology by constructing an easy notion of a so-called 'Japanese sociology'. Rather, what must not be overlooked is that Japanese sociology has failed to refine these theories by applying them to practical empirical foundations. (Fukutake 1953, 176)

In my view, the characteristics of "theory" research described above continue to shape Japanese sociology even today. Furthermore, Fukutake left the following testimony regarding the relationship between "theory" research and empirical research that focused on Japan.

> Second, as the mainstream of the academic world became absorbed in the glamorous introduction of new theories, theoretical researchers and empirical researchers became separated, and exchanges between them were limited. Moreover, there was a tendency to regard the latter as less important than the former. A theory becomes a genuine theory only when it is grounded in empirical research. (...) (I)t seems that the leading scholars representing the highest level of theoretical sociology in Japan paid relatively little attention to this point. Furthermore, no organic division of labor was formed between these scholars and those devoted to empirical research; rather, it may even be said that—albeit unconsciously—they tended to disregard one another. (Fukutake 1953, 177, 178)

This observation is consistent with Nakano's earlier findings. A persistent divergence exists between theoretical and empirical research, and the view prioritizing theoretical work, especially regarding its status as an imported body of knowledge, continues to prevail among Japanese theorists. This attitude indicates a form of self-colonization, failing to distance itself from the prevailing Western sociology or adopt a relativistic perspective.

Consequently, as long as works are written in Japanese under this mindset, Japanese sociology is anticipated to face significant challenges in generating theories or concepts with broader applicability. Research in Japanese certainly reflects an aspect of Oguma's indigenization of sociology. However, it does not exhibit an emancipatory sociology. Instead, one can discern an attitude of self-colonization that follows "their intellectual dependency status in relation to social scientists in Europe and North America" (Akiwowo 1988, 157). In this paper, I argue that the notion of pseudo-indigenization, advanced through the translation of foreign scholarship, is a more appropriate characterization of this condition.

4 | An Example of a Problem in Translation Studies: The De-Classified Sociology of Inequality

As previously noted, a defining characteristic of imported academic disciplines developed through translation is their deductive understanding, often detached from their original social contexts. Western social science concepts were frequently applied deductively to Japan, the filtering processes of translation often forgotten. Consequently, sociology in the indigenous language (Japanese) had fewer opportunities for direct academic interaction internationally.

As an example, this section analyzes how the concept of "class" disappeared, or was made to disappear, in Japan, drawing on discourse data from Japanese sociologists regarding social mobility research. This analysis yields two salient points. First, the characteristics of Japanese society, which modernized differently from many Western societies, were closely connected to the temporal disappearance of the class concept. Second, the distinctive nature of Japanese stratification and mobility studies—shaped by tensions with Marxism and grounded in a modernist orientation—becomes apparent.

To anticipate the conclusion: the translated term for "class", *kaikyu* (階級), failed to take root in Japanese sociology due to social circumstances and transformations that differed from those

in the West. Ideological conflicts further contributed to this outcome. Japan had the potential to generate original concepts and theories based on its unique reality, but this opportunity was not fully realized. The following discussion examines how and why this potential was left unexploited.

When we examine international trends, class is frequently employed as an analytical concept in English-language social mobility studies. A substantial body of empirical research has explored class mobility (cf. Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992). More broadly, class theories often explain inequalities in intergenerational social mobility. For instance, Bourdieu's theories of various capital forms are often invoked in educational inequality research. As the notion of capital presupposes a capitalist social order, discussing various forms of capital in relation to class as a fundamental analytical concept is logical. However, based on my extensive experience reading Japanese sociological literature in both English and Japanese, I have observed a curious phenomenon: when Japanese sociologists write in Japanese literature, they tend to use *kaiso* (階層) rather than *kaikyu* (階級), the direct translation of "class." Yet, these same scholars employ the term "class" in English literature.

Both are translations of Western concepts. Literally translated, *kaiso* corresponds to "social stratum" and conceptually is closer to "socioeconomic status (SES)." Yet, whereas SES is primarily applied to individuals, *kaiso* designates social categories classified on the basis of individuals' occupation, and/or education, and income. In this sense, it ought to be expressed as "class" in English.

Nonetheless, although *kaikyu* (階級) has long been established as the standard Japanese translation for "class," it is rarely used. In contrast, the more recently translated term *kaiso* (階層) from social stratum is to be preferred. Is this simply a matter of instability in translation terminology? Or have Japanese sociologists intentionally avoided the concept of *kaikyu* (class) and favored *kaiso* (stratum)? This question is closely related to the characteristics of Japanese sociology as a discipline developed through translation. Even in one of the most internationally standardized fields of empirical research, we observe a divergence in the treatment of key concepts depending on whether Japanese society is written about in English or whether the intended audience is Japanese readers in the Japanese language. This phenomenon is indicative of the characteristics of Japanese sociology's pseudo-indigenization—its development within the indigenous language (Japanese) without, however, moving toward an emancipatory sociology, which aims to relativize the dominant influence of sociology in the West.

Moreover, this situation limits the possibility of generating theories or concepts that, while differing from those of Western societies, could nonetheless have broader applicability outside Japan through a process of retroduction—a dialogue between inductive reasoning grounded in empirical research on Japanese realities and deductive reasoning derived from foreign theories.

In what follows, drawing on research on social mobility in Japan, I analyze how the concept of class disappeared—or was made to disappear—based on discourse data produced by sociologists. Through this analysis, the distinctive character of stratification and mobility research within Japanese "modernist" sociology, which developed against the backdrop of conflict with Marxism, becomes apparent.

To illustrate the intentional differentiation between the concepts *kaikyu* (class) and *kaiso* (stratum), I first examine the discourse of Tominaga Ken'ichi, a leading researcher on social stratification in Japan during the 1970s and 1980s. Tominaga defined *shakai kaiso* broadly as the unequal distribution of socioeconomic resources. He argued that the units of this stratification should be designated according to historical development: *mibun* (estate) in the pre-modern period, *kaikyu* (class) in the early modern period, and *shakai kaiso* (social stratum) in the late modern period. Accordingly, Tominaga maintained that prewar Japan was a class society, but postwar Japan became a more egalitarian mass society. In this later period, the boundaries between *shakai kaiso* blurred, effectively leading to the disappearance of social classes (Tominaga 1990, Chapter 11).

Tominaga's basic claim is that the social categories used to analyze the unequal distribution of socioeconomic resources should differ in accordance with the developmental stage of society. In his view, postwar Japanese society formed an egalitarian mass society, thereby obscuring the boundaries between social strata. As a result, social classes disappeared.

Tominaga's observation is partly echoed by Takatoshi Imada, who argues that the concept of *kaikyu* (class) had lost its analytical relevance in Japan by the 1970s and 1980s. Imada notes:

> In the past, the (new) middle-class theory served as an antithesis to Marxist class theory, which emphasized a divide between the capitalist and working classes. Yet the 'middle-class fantasy game' ultimately contributed to the collapse of middle-class identities themselves. As a result, it has become doubtful whether a class, as an entity, even exists in Japanese society in the first place; the very boundaries that distinguish different classes have become blurred. Inequalities certainly persist. However, the clear differences in lifestyle, values, and culture that once demarcated classes have for the most part disappeared. Today, the use of class terminology is little more than a jest—if not outright anachronistic. (Imada 1989, 148)

According to Imada, by the 1980s, class boundaries in terms of lifestyle, values, and culture had blurred—a view shared by Tominaga. Based on this, like Tominaga, Imada rejects the validity of the class concept in Japanese society during the 1980s. Indeed, he suggests that using the class concept today would be a 'jest' or 'anachronistic.'

These discourses are informed by the postwar experiences of rapid economic growth in Japan, accompanied by a transformation of the occupational structure, rapid expansion of education, and significant changes in lifestyles, values, and culture. During this period, Japanese society became far more affluent

than before the war. Over the 1970s, Japanese people came to identify their society as an "all-middle-strata society" (*so-churyu shakai*). Regardless of objective conditions, people increasingly perceived everyone as belonging to the "middle" in their subjective consciousness.

Reflecting this major social transformation, the economist Yasusuke Murakami argued that the concept of class—particularly the notion of the "new middle class"—had lost its applicability. To describe these developments, he proposed a new concept that was neither a class concept nor a status concept. Murakami writes:

> These enormous numbers of people who occupy the middle part of Japanese society cannot be captured by conventional analytical concepts. They are not middle class in the sense that they are not just people occupying middle positions on a lineal scale of social strata. (...) They include not only white-collar workers but also many blue-collar workers, farmers, and self-employed people. It is almost 'mass' itself in terms of its composition. But at the same time, it is not the 'masses' in the mass society theories, which defined masses as subordinates opposed to the elite as superiors and leaders. In all these meanings, I would like to call this enormous group the 'new middle mass'. (Murakami 1984, 194)

In other words, it was not a "new middle class" but rather a "new middle mass." Murakami explains the rationale for this terminology by referring to Giddens's structuration theory of class:

> It seems that the mechanisms of the structuration of class society are generally collapsing in advanced industrial societies. What emerges from this is the collapse of the so-called 'middle class,' and the dissolution of the clear boundaries of the 'new middle class' in the ordinary sense of the term. (...) Instead, we saw the emergence of a 'new middle mass' (Murakami 1984, 172)

The perceptions of these sociologists and economists stem from Japan's rapid postwar economic growth experience. This contrasts sharply with societies where industrialization and modernization occurred earlier and gradually, and where intergenerational transmission of class positions took place over a longer period. It can thus be argued that the applicability of the class concept is contingent on the specific social transformations (or structuration of the class system) that a society has undergone, particularly the magnitude of structural mobility, both forced and absolute.[3] From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, the concept of the class can be considered as a representation of the reality of a specific transitional period captured by the public and sociologists in Japan, which could be applicable to other non-Western societies.

It remains uncertain whether Murakami's "new middle mass" concept meaningfully applies to other societies, particularly those with rapid occupational changes akin to Japan's. Nonetheless, the concept offered a comparative perspective for analyzing social stratification and mobility, emphasizing the speed and magnitude of changes in Japan. Comparisons with Western societies, where class reproduction was well established, could have prompted Japanese sociologists to reconsider fundamental concepts. Murakami's "new middle mass" represents one such endeavor. However, failing to provide a broader theoretical framework, it did not gain traction outside Japan.[4]

In this regard, Chang's notion of "compressed modernity" in Korean sociology offers a more comprehensive framework (Chang 2010, 2022). This concept helps us understand how East Asian industrialization and modernization occurred remarkably quickly, producing large-scale, simultaneous transformations across multiple domains, including occupational structure, demographics, family, and education. Had Japanese sociologists conceptualized these macro-level social transformations and disseminated their findings beyond Japanese, they might have theorized Japan's own modernization experience and presented it globally even before Chang's notion of 'compressed modernity'. Furthermore, they might have developed concepts for social categories that, even if temporary, differed significantly from the Western sociological notion of class, thereby potentially facilitating the revision of Western-derived class structuration theories applicable to societies experiencing compressed modernity.[5]

It is unfortunate that no such conceptual breakthroughs emerged from Japanese sociology, with only a few exceptions. This raises a new question from the sociology of knowledge perspective: what factors impeded these developments, and what knowledge was embedded within Japanese sociology? Addressing this requires further analysis of sociologists' discourses. An important approach is to consider research on social stratification and mobility in relation to the context of Marxism, which had a profound influence on post-war Japanese intellectuals.

As a representative sociologist explicitly positioned in opposition to Marxism, this study focuses on Kazuo Seiyama, who led Japanese stratification and mobility research from the 1990s to the 2000s. Seiyama deliberately rejected the class concept. His rationale was that class had been strongly associated with Marxism, and the perspective of viewing class as an agent of social change had become entrenched in Japan. According to Seiyama:

> Quantitative stratification research, which flourished after the war, placed a great deal of weight on analyzing 'mobility tables,' and mobility research came to represent stratification research. This obscured the 'anti-class analysis tradition' in stratification research, however, because stratification categories had to be used in analyzing mobility tables, and, on the surface, it is impossible to distinguish between the use of stratification categories and class categories. (Seiyama 2000, 8–9)

Seiyama emphasizes that the concept of class is sharply distinguished from the concept of stratification by the inclusion of one additional theoretical premise: the notion of "class as an agent." He continues:

> This premise means that an individual's objective class position in the social structure regulates his/her consciousness, worldview, values, and, therefore, various actions ranging from consumption and academic achievement to social and political activities. In a stronger sense, the final action is linked with the formation of history. Thus, class as an agent is responsible for the development of history. The 'death of class' argument includes the rejection of 'class as an agent.' (Seiyama 2000, 11)

The core of Seiyama's argument lies in his rejection of the Marxist notion of class as an agent of social change or revolution. This perspective is further reinforced by the historical context of the post-Cold War era, which reshaped the intellectual and political environment in which Japanese sociology developed.

Against such "modernist" sociologists, criticism was directed from the standpoint of Marxism, though the number of such critics was relatively small. Although not specifically aimed at Seiyama, one Marxism-influenced sociologist, Masao Watanabe, interpreted the rejection of class concepts by modernist sociologists as an ideological rebuttal:

> The ideological motive of criticism against Marxist was the real political intention of the rejection of substantivism... (w)e hear again the chorus of sociologists' banishment of the concept of class. (Watanabe 2004, 69–71)

Watanabe highlights that many modernist sociologists denied the use of the class concept, interpreting this as politically and ideologically motivated. Because the concept was strongly connected with Marxism and socialism in intellectual and political terms, modernist sociologists distanced themselves from Marxist intellectuals.

This raises a new question: sociologists could have used Weberian class concepts. It is unlikely that those who rejected class as an analytical category were unaware of other theories. Yet, apart from exceptions, this did not occur. A plausible explanation is that in Japan, the term "class" became strongly associated with Marxist ideology. To clearly distance themselves from Marxism, "modernist" sociologists continued to reject the concept. This caution was particularly evident in inequality studies, where ideological or political dimensions were viewed with suspicion.[6]

As a result, research on social stratification and mobility in Japan often relied on the term *shakai kaiso* (social strata) in Japanese, an ambiguous category when translated into Western terminology. Alternatively, analyses of socioeconomic inequality avoided social categories altogether, substituting individual-level SES measures. This reflected a modernist "value neutrality" approach emphasizing the avoidance of political "bias." Nevertheless, using *kaiso* concepts impeded engagement with overseas studies that employed the class concept (while distancing themselves from Marxism). More precisely, Japanese scholars often used "class" when writing in English. Yet this raises further questions: how consciously did they distinguish between the Japanese concept of *kaiso* and the English term "class"? To what extent did they manage the dual usage? Pursuing this leads directly to how key terms shape the conceptual frameworks through which we perceive social inequality. It concerns the social construction of inequality described through the relatively ambiguous notion of *kaiso*, compared with the more clearly defined concept of class. This issue will be discussed later.

However, more calm, dispassionate observations, detached from ideological concerns, were also present. Toshiki Sato, who led research on social stratification and mobility in Japan during the 2000s, argued that the Japanese term *kaiso* should be understood as equivalent to the English term "class." Sato notes:

> A major problem with the concept of '*kaiso*' is the way in which it is concretely categorised (i.e., the classification of occupational categories). The English word for '*kaiso*' is 'class', while the English word for '*bunrui*' is 'classification'. The classification of occupational categories itself already defines a '*kaiso*': *kaiso* is not discovered from a social mobility table, but the very table is built on the assumption of a specific '*kaiso*' classification. (Sato 1998, 7)

According to Sato, the Japanese term *kaiso* corresponds to the English "class." Yet few Japanese sociologists explicitly recognized this equivalence when using the term *kaiso*, revealing an issue of translational ambiguity. Had Japanese sociologists consistently clarified that *kaiso* referred to "class," it might have allowed a reexamination of the concept of class or *kaikyu* (階級) in Japan.

However, in the absence of such explicit awareness, continued use of the *kaiso* concept may have led Japanese sociology to miss the opportunity to theoretically scrutinize the basic social categories used to analyze social stratification and mobility. In the development of Japanese sociology as a "translation discipline," *kaiso* was often employed ambiguously, at best as a convenient occupational classification suggested by Sato. This allowed empirical research to proceed deductively, applying concepts formulated methodologically rather than derived inductively from Japanese social realities.

Beyond the choice of terminology, one contributing factor to the scarcity of internationally recognized concepts or theories from Japan may have been the dominance of this deductive, translation-based reasoning—a lack of retroduction. Furthermore, the ambiguity of *kaiso* concepts and a certain confusion regarding the relationship between *kaiso* and class

concepts, which are written differently in English and Japanese by Japanese sociologists, can also be said to be the very factors that created such flaws. While verifying this claim empirically is difficult, it highlights a characteristic feature of Japanese sociology: its tolerance of ambiguous social understanding arising from translational practices.

5 | The Consequences of Lacking a Concept of Class

As background knowledge for the following discussions, we refer to an observation offered by a British historian regarding the characteristics of the English concept of *class*. Comparing it with the concept of *mass*, historian Asa Briggs highlights the distinctive features of *class* as follows:

> Thinking of the parts', as Hamilton recognised, involves thinking about relations. So does all social history. Use of the word 'class' necessarily involves an understanding of critical social relationships: use of the word 'mass' or 'masses' frequently involves a failure to understand and to communicate. Real people are turned into abstractions. (Briggs 1979, 76)

In contrast to 'mass', British English "class" entails "critical social relationships." This observation helps situate the concept of *kaikyu* (class) vis-à-vis *kaiso* (stratum), which in Japanese research functions as an analytically defined category. As an analytical unit, *kaiso* indicates the unequal distribution of socioeconomic resources, but unlike English "class," it is weaker as a concept that incorporates understanding of the relationships among those categories.

That said, it is questionable whether English "class" translated into Japanese *kaikyu* retained the understanding of critical social relationships Briggs pointed out. Translation processes may detach a term from its context. Even so, *kaikyu* in Japanese was introduced through Western Marxist and socialist thought, and thus came to be understood as involving one specific social relationship: class struggle. Precisely for this reason, *kaikyu* was rejected as an agent of history, as a bearer of the class struggle Seiyama dismissed.

However, the relational dimension here does not refer only to relationships among agents of class struggle. Even without designating a clear collective subject of historical change, a concept can capture various interests and cooperative relationships highlighted by "class" in English. This is what *kaiso* lacks. Consequently, although *kaiso* allows an objective description of social inequalities, it has far less capacity to generate questions about the relationships among categories that produce such inequalities. Much like English 'mass', it remains at the level of abstracted relational understanding. The theoretical implications become clear when contrasted with Bourdieu's various forms of capital, which provide a theory of inequalities among classes. Both his concept of capital and his notion of class rest upon an understanding of critical social relationships in a capitalist world.

In contrast, the Japanese concept of "*kaiso*." can be used without encompassing an understanding of such relational dynamics. Consequently, when seeking to understand social inequality, it provides little incentive to actively focus on the interests and power relations—potential or actual—that constitute one of the acute critical social relationships between "*kaiso*." In terms of comprehending conditions of inequality, it functions more as a euphemism. For this reason, its capacity to frame social inequality as a socially constructed problem is limited.

In practice, Japanese research on social mobility and social stratification often operationalizes elements of the *'kaiso'* concept through variables such as the size of an employer. However, whether these variables are used merely as operational constructs to define categories, or whether they are employed to examine critical social relationships—such as power dynamics and interest conflicts between employees of large corporations versus independent workers or workers in middle or small-sized companies—is rarely addressed.

It is also noteworthy that the term *hubyodo*, which directly denotes inequality in Japanese, is less frequently used. Instead, the more ambiguous term *kakusa* ("gap" in English) is preferred.[7] While *hubyodo* implies unfairness in resource distribution, the *kakusa* concept lacks such connotations; this can be seen as a form of euphemism. If social relationships produce unfair distributions of resources, the phenomenon should be described as inequality (*hubyodo*), rather than *kakusa* (gap). This tolerance of ambiguous terminology is, I argue, rooted in the *kaiso* concept not fundamentally deriving from an understanding of critical social relationships, including interests and dominance dynamics.

One factor that has allowed this situation is that the *kaiso* concept was a translated term, far removed from everyday language. Unlike the concept of class in English or even *kaikyu* in Japanese, it was created primarily for statistical operations (Sato 1998). Although employed in empirical research, it was not a concept inductively derived from Japanese realities. Rather, it remained a concept applied to Japanese data focused on fitting a translation to the context. In this sense, it was a concept detached not only from the Western context but also from the Japanese context. This illustrates the predominance of deductive reasoning over inductive thinking.

As a result, despite experiencing social changes and a "structuration of class system" distinct from Western societies—providing the opportunity to generate concepts and theories grounded in empirical analysis that diverged from Western sociology—Japanese sociology did not produce such homegrown concepts or theories. Instead of developing a form of sociological knowledge conscious of Western intellectual dominance and attempting to escape its influence, the discipline prioritized alignment with Western sociology. Likely at play here was what Kariya (2023, 2024) describes as a "catch-up and post-catch-up" mindset as a form of self-colonized sentiment: a combination of a sense of superiority in being part of the developed world and an ambivalent awareness that academically, Japanese scholars still operated theoretically and methodologically under Western intellectual authority.

6 | Conclusion

This paper examines the distinctive character of Japanese sociological research, framing it as a discipline shaped by Western scholarship importation and conceptual translation. It exhibits a form of indigenization, defined by Oguma as focusing on domestic issues and publishing primarily in Japanese. Yet Oguma's framework does not fully capture its dynamics. Unlike postcolonial indigenization notions, which emphasize knowledge production through awareness of Western intellectual dominance, Japanese sociology has often developed under a self-colonized mindset. Accordingly, this paper conceptualizes researching domestic society in an indigenous language as "pseudo-indigenization", lacking an "emancipatory sociology" mindset.

A key factor behind this pseudo-indigenization is that Japanese sociology developed early as a translation-based discipline. Translation necessitated deductive reasoning and learning when importing Western concepts, as the described social phenomena frequently did not exist in Japan and were difficult to express in everyday Japanese. Consequently, imported sociological concepts and theories likely limited efforts to generate internationally resonant theories and concepts from Japanese empirical research. Even in studies focusing on Japan, analytical frameworks largely relied on imported scholarship. Conversely, attempts to construct a theory of Japanese society through empirical research tended to overemphasize Japan's uniqueness (*Nihonjin-ron*), constraining their broader applicability. Considered as a whole, these patterns underscore Japanese sociology's self-limiting characteristics, providing a critical lens to comprehend its constrained contributions to global sociological research.

How can Japanese sociology move beyond its state of pseudo-indigenization shaped by a self-colonized mindset? This special issue of the journal was perhaps conceived with such a goal in mind. Yet, a critical observation regarding the journal itself is warranted.

According to Ochiai (2025), the change in the journal's name from "International Journal of Japanese Sociology" to "Japanese Journal of Sociology" gave rise to a debate surrounding the journal's primary focus on Japanese society. Ochiai notes that she argued: "The research focus of Japanese sociology is not, and should not be, limited to Japanese society. The journal should also serve as an international platform for research on societies outside Japan" (Ochiai 2025, 354).

If the journal continues to prioritize research focused mainly on Japan despite such objections, it risks missing meaningful exchange with the broader international sociological community, particularly with collaborative work with other non-Western sociologists, even though it now provides a platform for English-language publication. Without such engagement, Japanese sociology may remain trapped under the influence of a self-colonized mindset and continue in a state of pseudo-indigenization. Including research that focuses on societies beyond Japan would allow the journal to adopt a reflexive perspective on Japanese sociology itself. This lack of scholarly communication and community likely contributes to the persistence of pseudo-indigenization.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

[1] Japan has never experienced colonization. However, Japanese sociology has relied upon Western-centric scholarship and has not actively pursued a global relativization of this framework. Indeed, in the case of sociology, one might even say it has contented itself with remaining under Western influence. In this sense, it could be said to have cultivated a consciousness of self-colonization.

[2] This table does not include Max Weber. This is because while his works were published in a large book which included many themes, the translations were published separately. This meant that some of the themes were chosen, so it is difficult to identify the years of the translations.

[3] According to Ishida (2018), Japan experienced high absolute mobility rates over Japan's economic growth period during the 1960s and 1970s due to a huge decrease in the farming population.

[4] To be fair, Tominaga introduced a concept of status inconsistency from his empirical analysis to characterize what occurred over the economic growth period. This concept could challenge the Western understanding of class structure.

[5] As among important exceptions, Ochiai (2014) proposed the concept of "semi-compressed modernity" to describe a different path from either Western or other Asian societies in her research on family and demography. Koto (2006) proposed the concept of "hybrid modern" to theorize the Japanese experiences of modernization, a work which is written exclusively in the Japanese language.

[6] As a notable exception, Kenji Hashimoto employs the concept of class in a persuasive manner to address social and economic inequalities (Hashimoto 2025). Another significant work on the concept of class is that of Nakazawa (2022), in which the author posits that the concept remains important for the description and analysis of differences in class structures among various regions in Japan. Furthermore, the author contends that sociologists of local communities continue to utilize the concept as a pivotal analytical concept, a position that contrasts with that of sociologists of social mobility and stratification.

[7] Manabe (2025) conducted a study on the frequency of occurrence of the terms "hubyodo" and "kakusa" in the abstracts of articles published in the Japanese Sociological Review and found that *kakusa* is more frequently used.

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