

**Perception of Inequality in East Asia:  
Some Empirical Observations from AsiaBarometer**

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***Importance of Studies on Perception of Inequality in Asia***

In the discussion of Asian integration or East Asian Community building, it is often pointed out that Asia needs “problem-solution-type network.” Amako (2007:74), for example, maintains that we are strongly in need of “cooperative network for the solution of poverty and social inequality among Asian countries.”

In order to establish “cooperative network”, however, we have to evaluate what kind of social inequality we are facing is on top priority for the governmental treatment so that we can improve efficacy of the cooperation. In particular, it is strongly necessary to see civic views on inequality issues because they have an initiative to decide the types of cooperation in democratic societies.

This short paper explores people’s perceptions of inequality in East Asia by using the data of AsiaBarometer 2006 and 2007.

***Related Research***

Though a lot of researches have been conducted on people’s perceptions of inequality in East Asia, most of them are simply domestically oriented without comparison with other countries.

International Social Justice Project (1991), which conducted large scale surveys on people’s perceptions on social justice twice, covers only one Asian country, Japan. Denki Rengo’s (2001) research on members of labor union includes Japan, Korea, China, and Taiwan, asking how large social inequality in each society, but they are lacking in Southeast Asian countries’ data. Sonoda’s (2006) analysis deals with social inequality and social justice in China and Japan, but, again, it is lacking in other country’s data.

In this sense, the data of AsiaBarometer is really precious.

***Data of AsiaBarometer***

Though AsiaBarometer started its collection of data from 2003 (Inoguchi, 2005), it is only in 2006 that it started to put the question on the perception of social inequality.

The 2006 survey includes Japan (1,003 samples), South Korea (1,023 samples), China (2,000 samples), Hong Kong (1,000 samples), Taiwan (1,006samples), Vietnam (1,000samples), and Singapore (1,012 samples).

The 2007 survey includes the Philippines (1,000 samples), Cambodia (1,012 samples), Laos (1,000 samples), Thailand (1,000 samples), Malaysia (1,000 samples), Myanmar (1,000 samples), and Indonesia (1,000 samples)

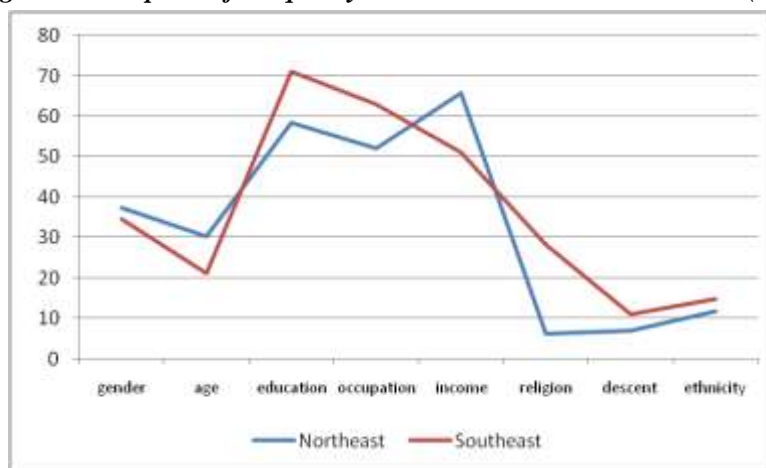
In Q27, we put the question, “In which of the following areas do you think equality should be most eagerly promoted in your society?” and prepared eight options from “gender” to “ethnicity” and asked each respondent to choose at most three options.

***Regional Characteristics of the Perception of Inequality***

In order to have a general picture, we compared Northeast Asia (Japan, Korea, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan) and Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Philippines, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Myanmar).

As Figure 1 shows, the pattern of perception of inequality in Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia is different. Roughly speaking people in Northeast Asia more worry about “age” and “income”, while people in Southeast Asia more worry about “education” and “religion”

***Figure 1 Perception of Inequality in Northeast and Southeast Asia (%)***

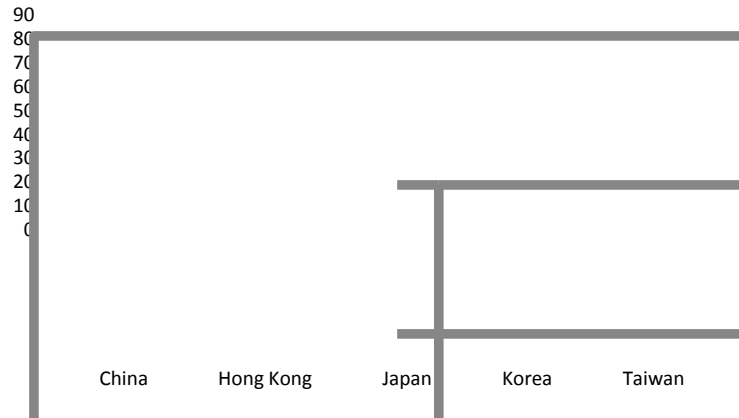


It is needless to say, however, we can find differences as well as commonalities among Northeast Asian societies in terms of their perception of inequality.

Religion, descent, and ethnicity are not regarded as serious causes of social inequality while people are more worried about inequality of education, occupation, and income.

It is interesting to see that people in Hong Kong are outstandingly worrying about inequality of “age.” We can easily speculate that their worry about “age” comes from the fact that they are worrying about pension. In fact, people in Hong Kong don’t care much about economic inequality caused by market economy, but they, especially those who are older than 60 years old, do find it necessary for the government to spend more money on pension, which results in remarkably strong concern about inequality of “age.”

**Figure 2 Perception of Inequality in Northeast Asian Societies (%)**



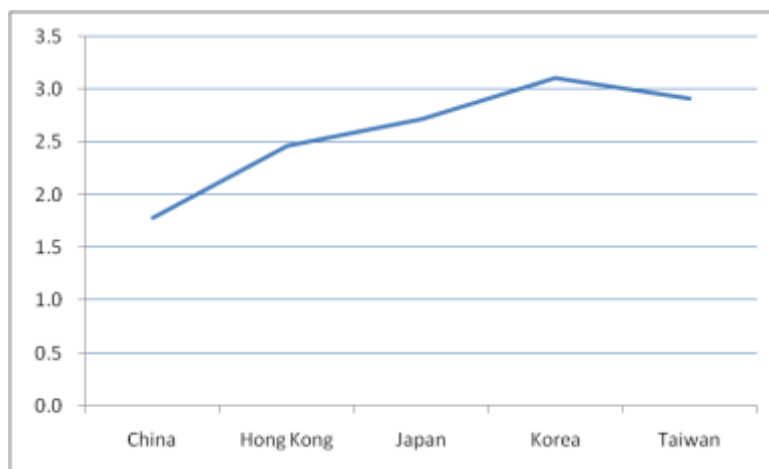
**Why People in Japan Do Not Perceive Inequality of “Income” So Seriously?**

Then, why people in Japan don’t worry about income inequality in comparison with other Northeastern societies?

We tentatively prepared three hypotheses.

The first one is “Distrust with central government” hypothesis. We thought the main cause of the low concern of income inequality in Japan is their distrust with central government which is expected to function as a “redistributors of social resources.” Figure 3, however, tells us that Japan’s distrust with central government is not high compared with Taiwan and Korea where they are much dissatisfied with central government’s performance at the time of data collection.

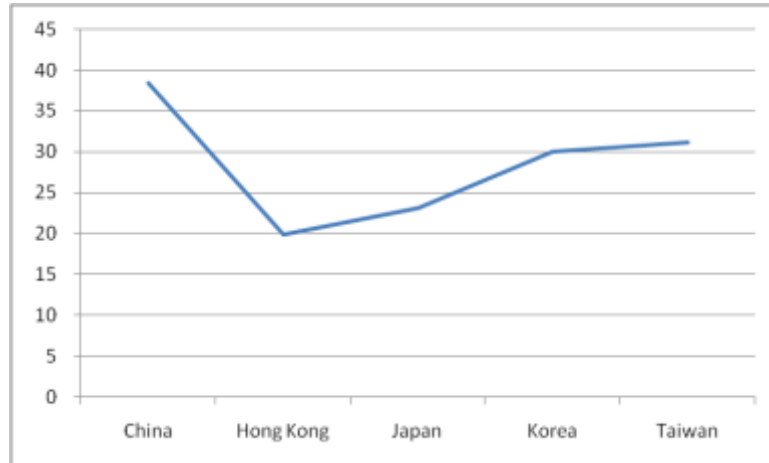
**Figure 3 Distrust with Central Government (5 Point Scale)**



Note) The larger the figure is, the more distrustful people are with central government.

The second one is “Lack of worry about economic inequality” hypothesis. We attributed low concern about income inequality to their subjective evaluation of economic inequality. But as Figure 4 tells us, Japan is second to Hong Kong in terms of their worry about economic inequality.

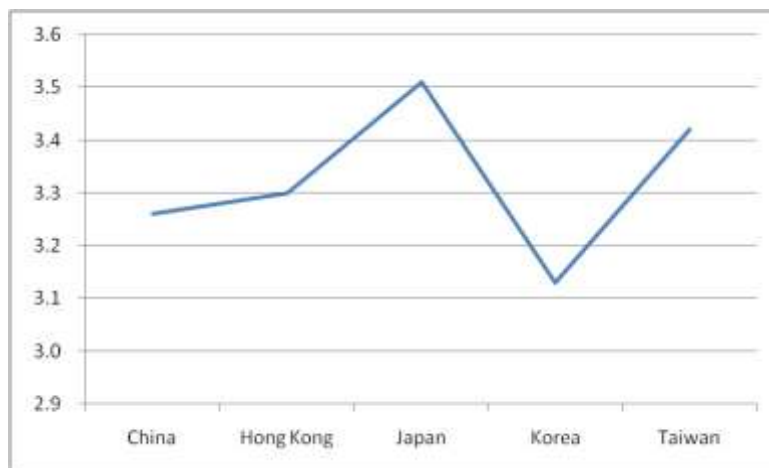
**Figure 4 Worry about Economic Inequality (%)**



Note) Figure shows the percentage who answered that they worry about economic inequality

Third and the last one is “Satisfaction with standard of living” hypothesis. This hypothesis presumes that economic prosperity in Japan causes people to be satisfied with their standard living which dulls their concern about income inequality. In fact, satisfaction with standard of living in Japan is comparatively high, followed by Taiwan (Figure 5).

**Figure 5 Satisfaction with Standard of Living (5 Point Scale)**



Note) The larger the figure is, the more satisfied people are with their standard of living.

**Uniqueness of Japan?**

In order to verify three competing hypotheses, however, we need to conduct logistic regression

analysis to identify which one is more persuasive explanation.

The result is shown in Table below.

**Table Result of Logistics Regression Analysis:**  
**Dependent Variable= Perception of Income Inequality**

	B	S.D.	Beta	t	Sig.
Constant	0.695	0.025		27.573	0.000
Distrust with Central Government	-0.022	0.006	-0.043	-3.463	0.001
Worry about Economic Inequality	0.039	0.013	0.038	3.033	0.002
Satisfaction with Standard of Living	0.024	0.007	0.041	3.260	0.001
Japan (Dummy)	-0.359	0.016	-0.282	-22.470	0.000

Though three hypotheses were verified, we have to admit that the factor being Japanese (dummy variable) is more powerful determinant of low concern about income inequality.

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

According to preliminary analysis, it seems to be very difficult for Asian societies to establish “cooperative network” for joint action for social inequality due to their different perceptions of social inequality. We are concerned with the fact that Japan, which is the largest economy in Asia, shows low concern about income inequality issues.

Speaking of social theories, on the other hand, there has been a serious discrepancy between area study and social sciences in general. Sociology, a part of social sciences, tries to use social theories in explaining social phenomena, but we cannot help taking “uniqueness of the country” seriously as the analysis of perceptions of social inequality in East Asia suggests.

Comparative sociology, though needs more efforts and collaboration among researchers, would be a breakthrough for understanding Asian commonalities and uniqueness of each society.

### **References**

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