Editorial: Focus on Japan

In July this year thousands of international sociologists will be travelling to Yokohama in Japan to attend the 18th World Congress of International Sociology. In more than half a century of its existence it is the first time that the International Sociological Association has held its World Congress in East Asia. This is despite the economic and sociocultural importance of the region and the fact that Japan has one of the world’s largest and longest established communities of sociologists. The Japanese Sociological Society founded in 1924 today has some 4000 members. Despite this, knowledge of Japanese sociology outside Japan is extremely limited. The World Congress will do much to overcome this gap through the development of personal contacts and by providing opportunities to learn about the work of our Japanese colleagues.

For many of the participants at the Yokohama congress this will be their first visit to Japan. For them, and for many others who are not able to participate, it may involve their first encounter with Japanese society and sociology. To contribute to the development of a fruitful dialogue with our Japanese colleagues I am very pleased that in this and the next issue of International Sociology we are able to publish a number of significant articles which variously examine the development of sociology in Japan and a variety of key issues relevant to understanding contemporary Japanese society. In organizing these articles I am particularly grateful to my Japanese colleagues Shujiro Yazawa and Koichi Hasegawa for the help they have given me in contacting their colleagues.

The first article in this issue, by Yoshio Sugimoto, is entitled ‘Japanese society: Inside out and outside in’. It provides a masterfully succinct and coherent overview of the changing perceptions of Japanese society among the international social science community since the end of the Second World War. In doing so, it highlights the links between popular images of Japan, paradigms of Japanese society and the major domestic and international structural changes affecting Japanese society. This constitutes an important contribution to developing an understanding of Japanese society from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, as Sugimoto continues to show by discussing the tensions confronting the development of sociology in Japan. Family is typically seen as the cornerstone of social life and institutions. Images of Japanese society and, in particular, Japanese gender relations are all too often shaped around images of the beautiful and compliant geisha. In our next contribution, ‘Leaving the West, rejoining the East?: Gender and family in Japan’s semi-compressed modernity’, Emiko Ochiai outlines the changing nature of gender relations in Japan and discusses the impact of modernity in a wider comparative perspective by setting the Japanese experience against developments in a number of industrialized and more recently industrializing Asian countries. The final
article in this set of papers focusing on Japan is another comparative study which also examines issues of gender relations in Japan by comparing the nature of the gender gap in Japan, Korea and Taiwan. In ‘Understanding intra-regional variation in gender inequality in East Asia: Decomposition of cross-national differences in the gender earnings gap’, Young-Mi Kim and Sawako Shirahase provide a more fine-grained comparison of the specific nature of the gender gap in earnings in three contemporary societies which have had close cultural and political ties for more than a century.

These three articles clearly illustrate the need for sociologists to lead the way in developing a more nuanced understanding of Japanese society. They point to the value of comparative work in highlighting areas for more detailed comparison. Furthermore, they raise key questions surrounding international and indigenous influences on the forms and institutions characterizing national sociological communities. Together with articles which will appear in the next issue of International Sociology I hope they will provide all our readers with the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of Japanese society and sociology and to consider its implications for the further development of sociology internationally.

Christine Inglis, Editor