



## Inequality in the Media: How is income inequality discussed and portrayed in newspapers in East Asia

Income inequality has become a topic of intensive public discussion in recent decades. In the West, the financial crisis in 2008-09 and the subsequent “Occupy Wall Street Movement” with slogans such as “1% versus 99%” and “We are the 99%” brought the issue of distribution to the center of social attention. East Asia is no exception in this regard. This project examines how income inequality is discussed and portrayed in three societies: Hong Kong, Japan, and Taiwan.

### Background

- East Asia has been known for its “shared growth” during earlier periods of growth, i.e., combining strong economic growth and equality.
- Taiwan and Japan remain relatively egalitarian societies in Asia, whereas Hong Kong is known for its high level of inequality among advanced economies.
- Inequality has been a prominent social issue in Japan at least since the 2000s, and in particular after 2006 when “unequal society” (kakusa shakai 格差社会) became a buzzword.
- Inequality (especially income inequality) has also been a focal point of social discussion in Hong Kong and Taiwan from mid- to late-2000s.
- The current project analyzed the trend of articles published in leading newspapers containing the relevant terms (“rich and poor” (貧富) and “unequal/inequality” (不平等) in Hong Kong and Taiwan; “inequality/disparity” (格差) and “redistribution” (再分配) in Japan) from 2001 to 2024 and performed content analysis on articles from 2016 to 2023.


### What the research says

- Discussion of inequality in Japan is much more nuanced, partly because of the flexibility of the term “格差” that can be attached to a lot of things (eg gender, status), allowing for a more diverse discussion.
- Even if we limit to economic inequality, Japan is most likely to portray inequality as a generational phenomenon. Frequency of mentioning inequality in Japanese media is also affected by election cycles
- Coverage of inequality is the most negative in Hong Kong as compared to the other two societies, prioritizing the rich/poor dimension. Although Hong Kong mentions youth/elderly similarly as Japan, the generational gap/conflict is never explicitly mentioned. Hong Kong is less likely to associate inequality with taxation than with welfare.
- Taiwan is the least likely to suggest state intervention as a solution to inequality, which might be due to its lower level of inequality. Yet Japan also sees the state as a main actor in inequality issues.

### Implications for policy

- Establish a multi-dimensional policy framework for analyzing inequality, broadening the perspective beyond income to include gender, intergenerational issues, regional disparities, and education levels.
- For Japan, further refine inequality-related policies, especially in terms of intergenerational inequality. Introduce welfare policies for different age groups, such as employment support for young people and incentive systems for active aging.



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- For Hong Kong, strengthen the use of progressive taxation as a supplementary tool to welfare policies. Improve the welfare system by expanding coverage, raising benefit levels, and enhancing the promotion and implementation of welfare services.
  - For Taiwan, promote soft interventions such as corporate social responsibility and community-based mutual support. Strengthen the monitoring and research of inequality data to identify potential problems and enable preventive measures.

## Implications for practice

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- Introduce the concept of multidimensional inequality in the context of government reports, school textbooks, and media discussions, replacing the single expression of "rich-poor gap".
- For Japan, encourage the public from different social and generational backgrounds to participate in policymaking and discussion, especially discussions on intergenerational inequality.
- For Hong Kong, guide public discussions on inequality toward a constructive and solution-oriented perspective, which helps reduce the negative emotional impact, strengthens social cohesion, and avoids increasing social tensions. Encourage public engagement at multiple levels to explore the feasibility and public acceptance of tax reforms, such as wealth tax, inheritance tax, and capital gains tax.
- For Taiwan, enhance public understanding of the government's role in addressing inequality through education and media, thereby strengthening public recognition of the legitimacy and feasibility of government intervention.
- Establish the cross-regional platform for dialogue on inequality, facilitating mutual learning and policy innovation among Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

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