

# Hello Work, Sayonara *Koyō*? Less Secure Employment and the *Zeitgeist* of Japan's Lost Decade

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## What Was Lost during Japan's Lost Decade?

During Japan's long 'Lost Decade' (roughly 1990–2004), construction cranes piercing the skylines, shiny new cars travelling the highways, and well-heeled, well-travelled, citizens gave the appearance of prosperity. Foreign visitors frequently remarked, 'If this is a recession, then I hope we have one soon'. But underneath the façade of undiminished growth, a certain measure of security was being lost. For ordinary Japanese, perhaps the most important manifestation of this loss was a shift in employment patterns.

The purpose of this paper is to specify how growing uncertainty in the Japanese employment system coincided with the expansion of twin deflationary threats. The first was deflation in the real economy and its socio-economic consequences. Following close behind came deflation in the interpersonal, emotional economy. Put simply, in the collapse following Japan's 'Bubble Economy' (roughly 1985–1990), reductions in 'permanent' employment and the corresponding rise of temporary jobs meant degraded labour for increasing numbers of Japanese, who also suffered a loss of self-esteem as their market value and future prospects declined. The increased polarization of the labour force simultaneously undermined middle-class stability and stimulated the expansion of what might be termed an economic and emotional underclass.

### *Influence of Global Trends*

These developments were not uniquely Japanese. During the 1990s, industrial nations' strategies for organizing work and economic activity increasingly imitated the 'rightsizing' practiced in the United States. For example, the factory closures that revived Nissan under Carlos Ghosn, had parallels in Germany, where Volkswagen threatened to move a factory to Eastern Europe if workers did not grant working hours concessions. GM announced its intention to layoff tens of thousands in Europe, cuts Germans called 'Wild West' style,<sup>1</sup> although they were really no more radical than measures taken by Toyota to become the world's most profitable manufacturer.<sup>2</sup> In Spain, the siesta declined as customary Spanish working practices were reformed to fit the demands of global competition.<sup>3</sup> Investor-class demands homogenized cultures of work across borders and time zones, while language and culture, time and distance remained obstacles to the formation

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1 Landler 2004.

2 Kamata 2004.

3 Nash 2004.

of a corresponding global working class.<sup>4</sup>

In Japan, the imperative of faster, cheaper production meant that cherished, local employment traditions waned at a faster pace. As a cultural ideal, work in post-war Japan was long-term employment, with salary and benefits awarded variably over the life course of *male* workers, in proportion to the likely needs of their families.<sup>5</sup> This long-term Japanese employment system and its accompanying seniority based wages were possible because of continuous corporate growth. But that growth attenuated when the Bubble Economy collapsed.

During the heyday of this employment system, the Japanese name for the unemployment office was *shokugyō antei kyoku* 職業安定局: the office of employment stability. During the Lost Decade, as if in recognition of the fundamental changes in the Japanese employment system, the name changed to *Harō Wāku* (Hello Work) ハロー・ワーク. The happy-sounding neologism attempted to put a cheerful face on a grim shift: from employment (*koyō* 雇用), with its connotations of stability and long-term rewards, to work, with its connotations of hourly remuneration and limited-term contracts. Japanese workers who said 'hello' to work and 'sayonara' to *koyō* joined industrial workers elsewhere in saying good-bye to the predictable lifestyle stability that had generally accompanied long-term employment.

### Contingent Employment in the Post-bubble Japanese Employment System

Employment in Japan was always contingent on the health of the economy. Restructuring in hard times was common, with female part-timers the first to go. Despite recent economic stagnation and narrower use of long-term employment, when compared to Europe and the US, long-term employment and seniority wages remain characteristic of the Japanese employment system.<sup>6</sup> What changed was the unprecedented way that post-bubble restructuring ate into the core of permanent male workers. Coming on the heels of a period of explosive growth and inflated expectations, the psychological impact of this unexpected decline was great. But it should not have come as a surprise.

Even at its most robust, the system furnished the benefits of long-term employment only to a minority of Japanese workers, perhaps 30 percent of the total if public sector employees are included.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, as a social ideal and an individual goal, long-term employment was a powerful motivating force behind Japan's postwar economic competitiveness. It legitimated labour market competition as a meritocratic structure, one that particularly rewarded academic achievement.

After the Bubble, each of the four foundations of the Japanese employment system was compromised to some extent. These foundations were: 1) balanced age composition of the workforce; 2) high economic growth; 3) expectations of the continued existence of firms; and 4) stable industrial structure.<sup>8</sup> Large cohorts of low-paid young workers once

4 Silver 2003.

5 Rebick 2005.

6 Sato 1997, Kato 2001.

7 Castells 1996, p. 269.

8 Hattori and Maeda 2000.

gave their youthful energy and productivity to subsidize older cohorts' higher salaries. This sacrifice was seen as fair because the young workers expected to benefit similarly as they aged and their family needs grew. It was also supported by presuppositions about the naturalness of generational succession. But the ratio of youth to age lost its pyramid shape because the birthrate plummeted after 1974.

In addition, as the bubble collapsed, Japan's exposure to competition from lower-cost foreign producers grew. Companies moved to reduce burdensome fixed labour costs associated with long-term employment. Layoffs and bankruptcies, even in large firms thought immune to them, as well as increasing offshore production, signaled that workers could not rely on firms' continued existence or benevolent commitment to 'permanent' employment. Workers and firms alike reconsidered the implicit contract in which long-term employee loyalty was rewarded in the long run.

As the cost of developing human capital within firms rose, retaining labour became a risk. Firms consequently began replacing seniority wages with merit based pay systems in an effort to attract skilled workers who could boost competitiveness. This stood in marked contrast to long-term employment, wherein internal development of human capital was seen as a major Japanese business advantage.<sup>9</sup>

Thus shorter-term work began to displace long-term employment.<sup>a</sup> In temporary and contingent labour, firms found flexibility for coping with the global competition. Prior to 1990, contingent labour was overwhelmingly female. Sociologist Manuel Castells hypothesized, that the 'occupational subservience' of such a highly educated group of people would not last. He wrote, '[I]t is just a matter of time until the hidden flexibility of the Japanese labour market diffuses to the core labour force, calling into question what has been the most stable and productive labour relations system of the late industrial era'.<sup>10</sup> By the turn of the century, the transformation predicted by Castells on the basis of data from the late 80s and early 90s was well underway, although not for the reasons Castells predicted. Some women gained access to long-term, career employment,<sup>b</sup> but the more ominous development was increasing numbers of men joining women on the periphery.

#### *A Growing Minority of Marginal Workers*

In 1982, about 90 percent of Japan's labour force was employed full-time. Ten years later, sixteen percent of Japanese workers were temporary, contract, or hourly employees.<sup>11</sup> By 2002, these non-regular workers were a third of the labour force, known collectively in common parlance as '*furitā*'.<sup>12</sup>

The term *furitā* was coined in the late 1980s. A combination of the English word 'free' and the German word for worker, 'arbiter', *furitā* designated people who were neither students nor regular (*seiki* 正規), full-time employees. For the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, *furitā* specified young people (15–34) doing *arubaito* (part-time

9 Dore 1973.

10 Castells 1996, p. 272.

11 Houseman and Osawa 1995.

12 *Nikkei Weekly*, 6 January 2003, p. 1.

work) and those temporarily unemployed after leaving such work, rather than contract workers of various kinds.<sup>13</sup>

However, many researchers disagreed with this narrow definition, for it obscured the breadth of changes in the employment system and the attendant social consequences. Genda and Maganuma<sup>14</sup> identified a new group of people, especially young people, whom they called NEET, an acronym for ‘not in employment, education, or training’. In the view of one analyst, NEET should be counted as latent *furitā*.<sup>15</sup> Such broader definitions emphasized the practical similarities between contract workers and *furitā*. The contingent employment available to these non-regular workers did not support families or life-plans as reliably as regular, long-term employment.

During the bubble years, increasing demand for labour made the *furitā* lifestyle a viable alternative to a life course circumscribed by corporate demands. For a brief historical moment, the increase in *furitā* represented the emergence of an employment strategy that promised greater individual freedom.<sup>c</sup>

But when the bubble popped, *furitā* ceased to represent choice. Instead they symbolized the downside of globalization’s impact on the opportunity structure of Japanese society. Japan’s employment system had long had a dual structure, with divisions between regular and non-regular workers and different tracks for men and women. The gaps grew after 1975<sup>16</sup> and, in the post-bubble era, the class division between permanent and temporary workers became the rigid basis for the widening gap between the new middle class and the working class.<sup>17</sup> The sociologist Yamada<sup>18</sup> famously characterized this as a ‘hope gap:’ those who lost the social competition for fulltime jobs were left hopeless.

For companies, the various kinds of *furitā* represented savings of forty percent or more over regular employees. The rapid growth of the *furitā* minority after 1990 symbolized how inequalities of wealth, opportunity and spirit grew at a fast pace and seemed certain to continue to expand. As a third of the workforce, the *furitā* presence was becoming visible enough to challenge long-term employment as a mainstream expectation.

#### *Inside the New Culture of Contingent Work*<sup>d</sup>

Increased use of temporary labour and simultaneous decline in permanent full-time positions was contemporaneous and integrated with several other evolving social trends. These included deflation and changing consumption patterns, birthrate decline, broken school to work links, change in gender norms, and social welfare finance problems.

Insecure employment mirrored other changes in social structure and led to increasing competition on the one hand and altered (lowered) expectations on the other. While

13 Kosugi 2003, p. 1–3.

14 Genda and Maganuma 2004.

15 Maruyama 2004, p. 31–32.

16 Hashimoto 2000.

17 Watanabe and Sato 2000.

18 Yamada 2004.

many young people of means redoubled their efforts to gain entry to the shrinking number of career track jobs, a growing minority of young people were compelled by circumstances to pursue other life goals, leading to increased pluralism in Japanese society. Increasingly ubiquitous, the presence of the contingent minority was an implicit critique, undermining the *doxa* of long-term male employment and sending psychological shock waves rippling through the society.<sup>19</sup> In the long run, this shake-up may promote innovation, but the immediate consequence of the division of labour between permanent and temporary workers was to promote social fragmentation and economic insecurity. Several manifestations deserve mention.

*Deflation.* Falling prices and asset values tend to increase unemployment and lower wages. Deflationary pressure on Japan's economy after 1990 damaged the job prospects of young job seekers and led to falling wages for many of those who remained employed. Companies reduced workforces largely through attrition, not hiring replacements for older workers who retired, and by dumping costly middle-aged, middle managers on affiliates. When circumstances compelled firms to add labour, they hired lower-cost, short-term and part-time workers.

*Consumption.* Low-wage workers have less to spend. Declines in Japanese consumption reduced demand for products and added to the pressure on firms to cut costs. The drop in consumption was especially sharp for households headed by younger people (aged 20–40), those most likely to be *furitā*.<sup>20</sup> Although prices fell as retailers competed for consumers, price cuts spurred the deflationary trend.

Consumers grew conservative after 1990 due to uncertainties about wages and employment and fears about retirement. Joy about a mild, relative upturn in consumption after 1999 was tempered by reports in which 50% of households admitted to drawing on savings to finance increased consumption.<sup>21</sup> In 2004, the Central Council for Financial Services Information found that 22% of households were without savings, the highest level since 1963.<sup>22</sup> This was indicative of growing class polarization and the reemergence of an 'underclass' living payday to payday, with little to fall back on in emergencies. One in five households had less than two million yen in yearly income.<sup>23</sup>

Consumers who bought homes during the bubble were also saddled with high interest rate loans, which further depressed consumption. Low interest rates and falling home prices could stimulate consumption, but the scarcity of good, long-term jobs reduced the number of prospective buyers. Still, in 2004, for the first time in 14 years, land prices rose in some urban locations, suggesting that the deflationary floor was near.

*Broken School to Work Links.* When companies increasingly rely on temporary workers, young people who cannot find full-time jobs soon after graduation are likely to experience significantly lower lifetime earnings. The links between school and work, which long legitimated school rankings and social stratification based on education, were broken by the changed climate for hiring. Yamada symbolized school-to-work as a system

19 Roberson and Suzuki 2003.

20 Prime Minister's Office 2003, p. 28.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 43.

22 *Japan Times*, 21 September 2004a.

23 Lopez 2006.

of pipes that once smoothly sorted and delivered students to appropriate locations in the labour force, but from which *furitā* now increasingly leak.<sup>24</sup> Without the payoff of stable, full-time work and the social membership it conferred, many students lost the desire to compete or the hope of success. The situation was so dire, that a group of scholars of *furitā* and youth organized a conference to argue for the need to establish a new field of study, which they called 'hopeology'.<sup>25</sup>

The majority of graduates dripping from the mainstream into *furitā* type jobs desired full-time work, but could not find it. Furthermore, those who did find full-time work immediately out of school were often dismayed by long working hours arising from reliance on the shrinking number of full-time employees expected to bear an increasingly heavy burden of responsibility.<sup>f</sup> Separation rates for young employees rose, with nearly half of high school graduates and 35% of university graduates quitting their jobs inside three years of being hired.<sup>26</sup>

Whether they quit or were unable to find full-time work in the first place, a direct consequence was that young people found it difficult to start families of their own. A growing number remained *furitā* beyond the age of 30, although their initial ambitions were the same as classmates who found long-term employment. It was predicted that regular workers' average salaries would be nearly double those of their part-time employed contemporaries by age 50.<sup>27</sup> Such forecasts only increased *furitā*'s sense of being betrayed by the system.

*Changing Gender Norms and Population Trends.* One emerging strategic response to the changing employment climate was to modify gendered behaviour norms. To cushion the possibility that their husbands might be laid off, or to maintain the family standard of living in an era when men's jobs had stagnant or falling wages, or to counter the lack of benefits common to most part-time jobs, Japanese wives worked more and took less time out to have and raise children. Because men willing to share housework and childcare were scarce, young women increasingly avoided marriage altogether. These strategies, in combination with older, continuing traditions, such as not having children out of wedlock, meant continuous decline in the birthrate.<sup>g</sup>

A related new strategy for young men frustrated by labour market conditions was to drop out of the Japanese dream. Instead of striving to realize the salaryman provider ideal, a small number of young male workers sought, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, to accept hourly-wage jobs and seek satisfaction outside work, sometimes in family life.<sup>28</sup> Although men's family work participation exhibited a slow rise, it did not keep pace with the growth of the care deficit caused by women's increased work force participation.

*Social Welfare.* Low-wage work reduced tax revenues for pensions and other social welfare programs. The imbalance in government revenues and payments grew in tandem with the rapid aging of the population. The social welfare system was designed for families with a full-time, male breadwinner and a full-time housewife available to provide

24 Yamada 2004, p. 88.

25 Declaration of 'Hopeology' Symposium. 15 July 2005. Tokyo Women's Plaza Hall.

26 Prime Minister's Office 2003, p. 71.

27 Ibid., p. 69.

28 Ito 2003.

care to elders and children. Even at their peak, such households were a minority of families. ‘The social security system constructed in the period of high growth was designed on the questionable assumption that one-third of society defined the norm’,<sup>29</sup> as one critic of the system put it. The system’s inadequacies became obvious in the post-bubble period.

In sum, the socio-economic consequences of degraded employment were a worsened hiring climate, falling wages and slumping consumer demand, which spurred further expansion of part-timers and a decrease in hiring new full-time workers. The social consequences included a decrease in social capital and productivity caused by the decrease in training that accompanied long-term employment. Furthermore, less secure work had a negative effect on household finances, marriage and birth rates. Young people without secure employment found it harder to become independent from their parents, resulting in delayed marriage and fewer children. The long-term effects of deflation and contingent employment were weaker families and heavier burdens on under-funded social services.

#### *Japan’s New Emotional Underclass*

By 2050, 50% of young people 15–34 may be *furitā* of some kind.<sup>30</sup> What sort of lives are they likely to have and what impact will the *prospect* of such lives have? The economic and demographic trends can be calculated. Equally important, but far less often appreciated, are the emotional consequences of deflated expectations.

In the early 1960s, Japanese economic growth was hailed as a ‘miracle’. Ezra and Susanne Vogel, social psychologists from Harvard University, wrote a book about this period called *Japan’s New Middle Class*.<sup>31</sup> In it they detailed the ‘bright new life’ of salarymen and their families in the Tokyo suburbs. The Vogels described the advantages of salaryman life and how it provided stability that made salarymen more desirable marriage partners than other men. Salarymen could predict with some certainty the arc of their careers and earnings, as well as when they would have time off. Salarymen’s wives did not need to work. Thanks to the long-term employment system and seniority wages, they could concentrate on consumption and socializing their children for entry into the salaryman world, either as salarymen or their wives. Family, company, schooling and community were the pillars upon which this trustworthy world rested. The images the Vogels captured in the 1960s became the idealized stereotype of Japanese family life into the boom years of the late 1980s.

Forty years after the Vogel’s book appeared, Kanehara Hitomi’s novel, *Hebi ni piasu* 蛇にピアス<sup>32</sup> shared the Akutagawa Prize for best first novel. The story and characters of *Hebi ni piasu* caused a small storm of controversy, for the novel intimately portrayed the social and familial decay that conservative critics like Hayashi Michiyoshi<sup>33</sup> claimed was sapping order and vitality from Japanese society. Although based on her own

29 Osawa 2002, p. 266.

30 Maruyama 2004, pp. 85–88.

31 Vogel 1963.

32 Kanehara 2004.

33 Hayashi 1996.

experiences growing up in Tokyo's post-bubble *furitā* subculture, Kanehara denied that her book was a comment on contemporary Japan. Rather, she said, it was a story about the heart.<sup>34</sup> Taking her at her word, what kind of heart did her book describe?

In this story of a trio of young Tokyoites and their *furitā* subculture, we see a wretched urban world of emotional poverty and inarticulate emptiness. Rui, Ama and Shiba, a sadist who runs a tattoo parlor named 'Desire', are the protagonists. Shiba pierces body parts and sells hardware for stretching the piercings into gaping holes. He helped Ama, a *furitā*, split his tongue into a snake-like fork, with which he could hold a cigarette. Ama is heavily decorated with tattoos, including a wondrous dragon. His wild, spiky hair is dyed red. 'Punk' in appearance, Ama's tattoos and piercings are more than mere fashion. The split tongue is extreme, but still consistent with the recent body modification practices of young Japanese who reject notions of ethnic homogeneity and filial obligations to live with the bodies their parents gave them.<sup>35</sup>

Another *furitā*, Rui, Ama's girlfriend, narrates. Entranced by Ama's lingual dexterity and repeated viewings of a video of the process of getting a split tongue downloaded from the internet, Rui starts down that road herself. As the novel rushes toward a morbid end, the hole in the centre of Rui's tongue expands in tandem with the widening gap between Rui and herself and society. The piercing is a kind of penetration, which, like sex, is her only way of feeling existence. She is frequently drunk, out of touch and unable to recognize or accept her feelings.

Seen through Rui's eyes, the three live outside social norms. She coldly describes sadistic violence, alcohol abuse, sexual experimentation and murder. By the story's end, Rui's voice is flat-lining. The warmth of the human heart has been extinguished. Not yet twenty-five, there is nothing left to anticipate but death.

Far removed from the Vogel's salaryman households, Kanehara's semi-fictional portrait of depravity and despair had real life equivalents. Between 1990 and 2003, Japan's suicide rate nearly doubled, exceeding 30,000 people per year. The majority of the victims were young men (15–24) and those in their prime (45–54) whose suicide rate was 5 times that of women the same age.<sup>36</sup> It was assumed that many fell into despair because their businesses had failed or they had lost their jobs. Unable to meet obligations to their families or employees due to the recession, they took their lives in the time-honored display of sincerity that grants a measure of redemption.

Most disturbing, perhaps, were the group suicides of young Japanese. Meeting in online chat rooms devoted to the topic, young people with no other connection to one another choose to end their lives together, often by carbon monoxide poisoning in sealed cars on lonely, remote roads. These death pacts seemed to be last attempts at finding community.<sup>37</sup>

Meanwhile, many other young people remained isolated in their homes, some not venturing out for months at a time. These recluses, estimated to be as much as one percent

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34 Onishi 2004.

35 Miller 2004.

36 Desapriya and Iwase 2003, p. 284.

37 Harding 2004.



of Japan's population,<sup>38</sup> suffered from 'social withdrawal syndrome', or *hikikomori* 引き籠り. One account viewed their behaviour as a rational response to the loss of certainty about the future caused by diminished employment opportunities that would cause a sizable proportion of the young generation to fall below the living standards of their parents.<sup>39</sup>

The Vogels' account of suburban life was a proud view of the new middle class during the period of high-speed growth. Kanehara's story and characters, however, symbolized an emotional underclass devolving on the crumbling edges of that earlier middle class dream. It was a development that many Japanese wished to ignore. In the words of George Bernard Shaw, 'The worse sin toward our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them: that's the essence of inhumanity'.<sup>40</sup> The *furitā* subculture Kanehara depicted was rife with this indifference and it inspired frosty contempt from the mainstream. All three characters internalized society's indifferent gaze and it became the lens through which they saw themselves and others. Society was to Rui what the sun is to a snake. But there was no blame in her account, only inevitability. Like the *hikikomori* and the suicide victims, she can't find her way out of the darkness. Indeed, she and her friends welcome it, for it gives them a place to hide.

#### *Tracing Links between Contingent Employment and Emotional Deflation*

While scholars and bureaucrats concerned with the *furitā* phenomenon quickly calculated the alarming socio-economic consequences of contingent work, the equally worrisome consequences for the less easily quantified emotional economy received less attention. How can the effects of less stable work on the emotional economy be understood?

One place to start is Mauss's idea that exchanges of feelings are the currency of daily life, the gifts that animate reciprocal social action.<sup>41</sup> As the ranks of *furitā* and temps swelled, troublesome gaps in income, health and outlook grew between full-time employed, full-fledged members of society and part-time employed, partial members. During the Lost Decade, Japan's Gini coefficient, a measure of income inequality, grew rapidly. Depending on who was measuring, it rose to either 0.32<sup>42</sup> or 0.498<sup>43</sup> by 2004, up from 0.27 in 1980.

As in other societies, growing income inequality in Japan creates increasing social distance: the greater the gap, the weaker the flow of emotional exchanges and the greater the deflation in the interpersonal and societal emotional economy. What deflationary consequences may be expected to spread as non-standard work increases?

*Diminished Physical and Mental Health.* Biologists know that lower ranked members of animal social hierarchies die sooner and live less healthy lives. Human society is

38 Zielenzinger 2006.

39 Jones 2006.

40 Shaw 1901, *The Devil's Disciple*, Act II.

41 Mauss 1954.

42 Economist 15 June 2006.

43 Lopez 2006.

no exception. The Whitehall Study, a two-part longitudinal assessment of the relationship between status location and health in a well-paid hierarchy (the British civil service), in which all members had government provided health care, found that the lowest-ranked members had 2 to 3 times higher rates of mortality than highest ranked bureaucrats. Rank alone explained more of the variance in mortality rates than all other risk factors combined.<sup>44</sup>

Other studies outside Japan also showed that low-income contract workers with low levels of co-worker support had poorer health prospects than permanent, well-supported workers,<sup>45</sup> that low-income people were more likely to be in denial about the health risks they faced as a result of their disadvantaged status,<sup>46</sup> and that socioeconomic status was tightly correlated to differences in stressor-health relationships.<sup>47</sup> All these findings were consistent with the notion that socioeconomic inequalities will be reflected in physical and mental health. Furthermore, there is evidence that the 24/7 economy and associated proliferation of non-standard schedules has negative effects on children's wellbeing, regardless of socioeconomic status. For example, in the eighty-four percent of dual-earner households in Australia that had at least one worker on a non-standard schedule, children manifested more problematic behaviours than in families with two parents working on standard schedules.<sup>48</sup>

The links between work and wellbeing are supported by studies of the links between work and personality. Deskilled work, such as is common in temporary jobs, tends to degrade the workers who do it.<sup>49</sup> Less complex work and diminished occupational self-direction appear to reduce intellectual flexibility throughout the life course,<sup>50</sup> although there is still much we do not know about these processes.

*Effects on Time Demands and Family Psychology.* Speed, low cost and flexibility are what businesses seek to gain through contingent employment. Workers, however, lose stability. Stability is needed for leisure, for love, for time to listen to children and spouses, to create, to eat, to promote personal and community health.

Scholars of family life know that the demands of modern economies alter the shared flow of time that comprises family life. Time together is replaced by individual, seldom complementary, flows of time. It is common for family members to meet fleetingly in the interstices of work schedules, which dominate both physical and emotional needs. Through phone, fax and email workers are never really away from work, even at home. Life is thus experienced as 'a frustrated sense of continual interruption'.<sup>51</sup>

Punctuated by the demands of the profit motive, this interrupted stream of human emotion pollutes rather than replenishes the common emotional aquifer that society draws from. Future generations are affected, too. Less affluent families tend to have worse

44 Marmot 1994.

45 Liukkonen, et al. 2004.

46 Macintyre, McKay and Ellaway 2005.

47 Grzywacz et al. 2004.

48 Strazdins et al. 2004.

49 Braverman 1974.

50 Kohn 1997.

51 Ventura 1995.

health. Their children become parents sooner, and are less prepared for work, parenting and social responsibility. Thus, the cycle of neglect and ignorance starts with parents too pressed for time (due to low wage jobs that are inadequate to make ends meet) to attend to their children's needs. Children not well cared for may have difficulty caring for others.

Children not adequately validated by overworked or absent parents are more likely to miss out on gaining recognition as students because of behaviour problems related to not getting enough affection at home. But the chain of indifference can start at any age. Adults who are denied the social honor of stable, full-time employment will be less able to marry or to raise children due to income or time pressures. They are likely to contribute less to the circulation of positive emotion that promotes social stability. Instead, the divisions between winners and losers, first-class and second-class citizens, insiders and outsiders become social fault lines.

*Emotional Economies.* Sociologists of emotions find that these fault lines correspond roughly to divisions between three types of emotional economies. The 'economy of gratitude'<sup>52</sup> is the meeting place of larger social changes and personal relations. The phrase economy of gratitude implies positive emotional exchange, mutual obligation and respect. But it also has a negative moment, which might be called the economy of resentment. This second form is, however, still an exchange of feelings, although they are sour ones. The most dangerous type is the economy of indifference, a kind of emotional trade embargo or withdrawal of one's currency from the emotional circulation, which forestalls the possibility of maturation. This is the type of heart described by Kanehara, the suicide statistics, or the *hikikomori* tales.

A few, highly skilled *furitā* may benefit from part-time work by gaining more control of their time, but unskilled, second-class workers see the value of their time deflated. In modern life, the price of one's time indexes the value of one's life. When we work only part-time, our value is only some fraction of that of the full-time norm.

In the less privileged parts of the 'faster-cheaper' economy, mindfulness has been replaced by mindlessness. Rui did not mind if Shiba abused her, did not much mind if she died or was killed. Her heart was dry and she lacked even traditional cultural identity to sustain herself. The environment she grew up in—the periphery of post-bubble Japanese society—did not teach her to value her feelings or appreciate their signal function. Emotions have been called 'a messenger from the self'.<sup>53</sup> Rui tried killing the messenger, for the message, 'You are not happy. Your life is empty. You have no purpose', was painful to hear.

According to Christopher Lasch,<sup>54</sup> people like Rui, narcissists lacking an autonomous, well-defined self, represent the neurotic personality of the age of advanced capitalism. Raised in families weakened by the pull of market demands, they are denied the experiences of parental love and discipline, 'optimal frustrations', 'transitional objects' and daily contact with the father required for sublimating authority and thus achieving maturity. Such children remain in psychic infancy, the prisoners of fantasies of omnipotence and fears of annihilation.

52 Hochschild 2003.

53 Hochschild 1983, p. x.

54 Lasch 1977.

Would Rui and Ama, *hikikomori* or suicide victims recognize this argument? It is part of the insidious nature of contemporary capitalist domination that people do not notice its effects on their social relations. In addition, the dominant Japanese cultural strategies train people to revere disciplinary practices that enable the speedup in production to continue indefinitely, even glorifying the suppression of physical or emotional needs as virtue.

*Furītā* are anything but a homogeneous category and *furītā* lives are varied. But lack of full membership, being temporary and only partially valued, is a shared aspect of the *furītā* experience. Membership is a major component of the link between contingent employment and emotional deflation. Low status in the workplace or in society damages self-esteem and confidence. Not being a full member is a continuous insult. While being a *furītā* seems initially to make people slightly happier with their working lives than regular employees because they are at a remove from the pressures of long-term employment, it would seem that this small, short-term gain obscures a large, long-term loss. Marx argued that making long-term losses look like a short-term gains was the distinguishing trick of capitalism. Although the local Japanese ideal of long-term employment was for a time a partial bulwark against such trickery, now the trick has become global.

Long-term employment gave people a sense of enduring membership in an emotional community that was worth striving for. To the extent that labour became contingent, this was lost. The ideology of corporate familism was exposed as a lie: no firm is willing sacrifice itself for its workers, while the sacrifice of workers is simply a cost of doing business. Temporary workers, and those who spend their days wondering if they will be next to be made temporary, are easily manipulated.

### Summary

Starting from the question of how changes in the employment system transformed the lives of Japanese workers during the 'Lost Decade', this paper has argued that the rising tide of global neo-liberal capitalism undermined the stability of Japan's employment practices. Waves of restructuring eroded long-term employment, leaving behind temporary and contingent work. Temporary workers came in many varieties, but whatever they were called, their part of the labour force was growing at a rapid rate. As a consequence, the gap between regular and temporary employees grew into an increasingly wide and rigid social class gap. Widely acknowledged trends and social problems associated with the employment gap included price and wage deflation, declining consumption, falling savings rates, later and less marriage, fewer children, broken links between education and work, and predicted shortfalls in pension funds and social welfare programs.

Another critical effect was the deflation of the emotional economy that accompanied expansion of the temporary labour force. When juxtaposed with the rising expectations and stability of Vogel's *Japan's New Middle Class*, recent statistical and anecdotal evidence revealed the deflated expectations of today's youth, how tenuously they were linked to major social institutions, and how frigid the emotional *zeitgeist* of the *furītā* subculture was. Transformed employment directly affected workers' ways of life, expectations, self-images and capacities for intimacy.

The reduced and degraded flow of feelings in the emotional economy was a latent link between class and employment gaps and negative physical and mental health outcomes. Unstable, non-permanent work contributed to family fragmentation. Underappreciated, temporary workers had less to contribute to the economy of gratitude. Instead, they added to the negative economies of resentment and indifference, helping thereby to reproduce cycles of ignorance and neglect.

### **Contingent Employment: A Common Disaster?**

The materialist tradition holds that as humanity transforms nature to meet human needs, so shall humans become. The social relations of production that arise out of the production of material life are the foundation of both the political and emotional economy. Indifference toward the environment and human needs are symptomatic of an impoverished understanding of how the two are related. By routinely suppressing and ignoring emotional messages in the pursuit of faster, cheaper production, humanity is, in fact, suppressing and ignoring itself. Depression and anxiety are signals that crucial needs are not being met, but these emotional signals need to be taken seriously. We may recoil at the hopelessness of Rui's tale, but we should realize that people like her are more than statistics, although birthrate statistics tell the story: the conditions for human reproduction deteriorated rapidly in Japan during the Lost Decade.

Anxiety is rife in the developed world and Japanese workers are not alone in their fears about the future. A recent Hakuodo Institute of Life and Living report states that Japanese consumers' emotional states are dominated by growing feelings of 'anger, anxiety and misery'.<sup>55</sup>

The 'fear of falling' out of the middle class has been a motive force in the US for more than 30 years.<sup>56</sup> Two-income families in the US earn more today than single-income families a generation ago, but they have much less disposable income.<sup>57</sup> They fear bankruptcy, are angry at the outrageous salaries of chief executives, and worry that their children will not be able to have middle class lives because jobs are being exported to countries with lower labour costs.

Japan, too, is heading in this direction because her economy is tied to that of the US and also because Japan is a global competitor. As in America, dual-income couples are the norm now and the social contract in which loyal service assured one lifetime membership in the middle class is under stress.<sup>58</sup>

The American strategy has been offshoring. American workers cost ten to thirteen times as much as workers in Mexico or Shanghai. A worker in GM's parts subsidiary noted how that cost difference threatens job security, saying, 'You can't count on 30 years of work anymore'. Highlighting the links between insecure employment and emotional apathy, another said, 'People think it doesn't matter, a lot of times, what you do. You had

55 Hakuodo Institute 2004.

56 Ehrenreich 1989.

57 Zuckerman 2004.

58 Zunz, Schoppa and Hiwatari 2002.

pride. Not now. It tears your heart out'.<sup>59</sup> The loss of secure jobs has destroyed American communities, such as Flint, Michigan, shown dramatically in Michael Moore's 1989 film *Rodger and Me*.

Japanese firms offshore, but their other response to global competitive pressure has been to expand the contingent labour force at home. The results of creating a low-wage labour pool, economic and emotional hollowing, are similar to the American experience. 'Term-employment', Toyota's euphemism for making insecurity sound secure, breeds a ruthless crisis mentality among temporary workers, who are paid only half of what regular employees make. The result of Toyota's single-minded focus on profit is a dramatic increase in mental health problems at the company.<sup>60</sup>

### What Might Be Done?

While pointing out the source of problems is important, it does not follow that there are simple remedies for either of the two kinds of deflation that threaten to expand Japan's emotional underclass. There are, however, things we might consider. First, it makes no sense to blame the victims. The majority of *furūtā* are not *furūtā* by choice and it is doubtful that compelling them to do military service, as a leading Japanese politician suggested,<sup>61</sup> would improve either their job prospects or the country. *Furūtā* are a symptom rather than a cause.

From the perspective of the young, the cause is corporate management, which is mired in the patriarchal idiom of the past. Elderly, out-of-touch managers cannot speak to present-day needs and will not listen to the voices of youth but only contrive to seem to be listening for the sake of appearances.<sup>62</sup>

Given the realities of global competition, Japan's employment system must change even more radically so that a true market for labour and talent can grow. Rather than preferring only school-leavers, employers should learn to respect later achievement so that there will be incentives for people to take risks and work at continuous self-improvement. There have to be opportunities for 'losers' to become 'winners', and for women and men to move in and out of the labour force as required to meet family needs without fear of losing the family home.

One way to simultaneously address both economic and emotional deflation is to reduce standard working hours and hire more people. The Kellogg Company in the United States pioneered this approach during the Great Depression. Sharing the work between more people allowed workers time for family, community and individual freedom. It was particularly attractive to women. The increased cost of hiring more regular workers was offset by a dramatic rise in productivity. The surprising finding of this great social experiment was that when people worked less, they did better work *and* led more fulfilling lives.<sup>63</sup>

59 Hakim and Peters 2004.

60 Kamata 2004.

61 Kajimoto 2004.

62 Mathews 2004, p. 126.

63 Hunnicutt 1996.

The government could help people understand the importance of a healthy emotional economy by incorporating alternative measures of progress into its assessments. The government of Bhutan, for example, has replaced Gross National Product (GNP) with Gross National Happiness (GNH), a measure that recognizes that the purpose of economic activity ought to be life satisfaction.<sup>64</sup> Maybe with that kind of government leadership, workers in Japan could discover in their lives a value independent of work.

But what is of the greatest immediate importance is to enforce the laws on working hours and overtime pay. When people work for free, they are telling their employers that their time is worth nothing to them. This custom of self-enslavement degrades employment by reducing the demand for labour as it reduces wages. It is an institutionalized manifestation of indifference to self that spurs deflation in the emotional economy. In combination with social pathologies such as suicide, *hikikomori*, school refusal, classroom collapse, increasing divorce and declining birthrates, working for free is an indicator of the extent to which the economy of gratitude has been replaced by economies of resentment and indifference. Such phenomena define the boundaries Japan's new emotional underclass. They also have a signal function that should stimulate imaginative approaches to achieving individual and social maturity.

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### ENDNOTES

a Average tenure for all workers rose from roughly 9.5 years in 1982 to just over 11 years in 1998. However, this was due primarily to the increased tenure of large cohorts of workers, aged 50 and above. Younger workers, between the ages of 20 and 49, had much lower tenure rates, a function of both age and an increasing tendency to quit more quickly than earlier generations (Hattori and Maeda 2000, 10 and 12, Charts 1 and 3).

b The percentage of women in career track positions was about 3 percent (*Asahi Shimbun* 5 September 2004, p. 9).

c Mathews and his team found that *furitā* still believe that their work style offers an escape from the Japanese mainstream. They said they were happier than regular employees. But Mathews also noted that only a small percentage of *furitā* will have the 'pluck and skill' to achieve success on the periphery. In the long run, regular employees are much more likely to be winners (Mathews 2004, p. 132).

d This section relies heavily on the 2003 *Kokumin seikatsu hakusho* 国民生活白書 published by the Prime Minister's Office. I have summarized its findings, without burdening the text with the comprehensive statistical data that interested readers can find in the pages of the White Paper for themselves.

e Average savings of the responding households was ¥13.98 million.

f Complaints about being forced to work unpaid overtime have increased. Professor Koji Morioka estimated that Japanese workers put in over ¥27 trillion worth of unpaid overtime in 2002, equal to 8.18 million full-time jobs. There was also a rapid rise in the number of companies disciplined by Labour Standards Inspection offices for failure to pay overtime, considered 'a sign of a deteriorating labor environment'. (*Japan Times* 13 August 2004)

g The birth rate has long been below replacement level. Estimates are that twenty-four percent of women born after 1974 will not marry in their lifetimes and forty-two percent will not have children (Linhart 2004).