

# “I Don’t Mind Being Poor”: Capitalism, Music, and Youth Culture in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Japan

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## “I don’t mind being poor”

In a song from 2014, the Japanese rapper Kohh offers an intriguing perspective on youth culture in Japan’s “lost decades” (*ushinawareta nijyūnen*).

貧乏なんて気にしない  
目の前にお金が無くても幸せな事がいっぱい  
あるから大丈夫 色んな事もっとしたい  
大金持ちでも心の中が貧乏じゃ意味無い  
わざわざ見栄張って値段が高いルイ グッチ ヴェルサーチ  
本当に必要な物以外全く必要じゃない  
何かあったら周りのいい友達が助けてくれたり  
ありがとう ごめんなさい  
っていうより行動が大事  
みんな言う お金よりも愛

I don't mind being poor  
Even without money, I'm fortunate in many ways  
I'll be OK, and there's lots I want to do  
It's meaningless to be rich, if your heart is poor  
I don't need to show off with expensive Louis Vuitton, Gucci or Versace  
Really, unnecessary things, I can do without  
If I have trouble, I'll get help from my friends  
Actions are more important than  
Saying “Thank you” and “I'm sorry”  
Everyone says, love is more important than money

Kohh, “*Binbō nante ki ni shinai*” from his album *Monochrome* (2014)

Such a view likely echoes the feelings of many young people who have grown up during the years of Japan’s economic malaise, and it is small wonder that young peo-

ple are looking for satisfaction beyond economic success. As such, the song offers a view of youth culture increasingly divorced from the vacillations of economic growth and decline, focused instead on peer-group support, generosity, and sharing. How widespread are these views? It's impossible to know from a single song. But what's intriguing is that this view, which moves away from individualistic, rational self-interest as a defining motivator, also echoes some developments in the emerging industries around music.

Music provides an intriguing perspective on industry transition, both in Japan and beyond. In particular, in some realms of popular culture, social value within communities leads to the possibility of extracting economic value by businesses. By this I mean, if we want to see how new industries can develop, and which ones offer models of more inclusive forms of capitalism, we might first attend to creative communities driven by passion and commitment. These spaces form the foundation upon which new business models can develop, even amidst a continuing decline in recorded music sales. Music is particularly intriguing because we are witnessing a variety of new businesses that depend on a balance between social and economic value, whether through merchandising pop idols or crowdfunding as a means to gain capital for artistic production. Such new business models offer a new perspective on contemporary issues around income inequality.

Recently, we see a growing interest both in the public and the academic literature regarding worsening income inequality, a topic that extends from questions of precarity, for example in new "gig economies" (Berlant 2011), to historical and contemporary understandings of economic inequality (Piketty and Goldhammer 2014). Music is particularly interesting as an industry in transition, "hollowed out" by both technological and cultural shifts, and yet demonstrating a remarkable vibrancy in adapting to new socio-economic contexts. The variety of responses are resulting in a panoply of business models. From J-pop idol culture to underground DJ culture, from global tech companies' work in streaming music such as Spotify and YouTube to crowdfunding initiatives for supporting new music projects through sites like Kickstarter and Patreon (Palmer 2014). This diversity of approaches gives us a chance to assess what this variety of efforts at achieving sustainable livelihoods within music can tell us about the dynamics that can lead to more inclusive forms of capitalism, as opposed to reproducing the exceeding concentrations of wealth. Can music alone solve inequality? I don't think so. But music can allow us to see and compare different social-economic assemblages—an awkward term but meant to signal something more than "business models"—for their inclusiveness or lack thereof.

Focusing on creative communities as the harbinger of new businesses reminds us,

as many scholars have argued (Miller 1997; Graeber 2011), that capitalism is not a single, monolithic system, but a diverse mix of socio-economic relations. Even so, the French economist Thomas Piketty, in his 2014 book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, identifies a troubling trend in which those who have extreme wealth have been able to capture a growing share of the economy, eating away at economic growth from labor productivity. Put simply, the super-rich extract "rent," a term that refers not only to real estate rentals, but more broadly financial extraction based on a power relationship (e.g., monopoly rents) in contrast to productive labor. Piketty calls this relationship  $r > g$ , where "r" is the rate of return on capital, historically since the late 1800s around 5 %, and "g" is the growth rate from gains in labor productivity, historically about 2 %. Since "r" is greater than "g," each younger generational cohort is being used as a means to further enrich a historically already-very-rich cohort. Thus, Piketty's main finding is that over time the super-rich, many of whom achieved their wealth from inheritance, are able to extract income from those who are working now. Put simply, "the past devours the future." That's why I think it is reasonable to call this dynamic "zombie capitalism," because, figuratively at least, the dead are eating the living.

What can be done? Piketty's response is to call for a global tax on wealth, an idea widely ridiculed for being impossible to achieve. But Piketty's aim may be more important than the policy itself. Such a tax would not be aimed at substantial redistribution, Piketty argues, but rather at achieving greater transparency, which, he hopes, will lead to a stronger political movement to do something significant about income inequality. He also calls for more cooperation among the social sciences, and he criticizes Economics departments for leveraging elite privilege and going it alone rather than working more closely with other academic disciplines.

The truth is that economics should never have sought to divorce itself from the other social sciences and can advance only in conjunction with them. The social sciences collectively know too little to waste time on foolish disciplinary squabbles. If we are to progress in our understanding of the historical dynamics of the wealth distribution and the structure of social classes, we must obviously take a pragmatic approach and avail ourselves of the methods of historians, sociologists, and political scientists as well as economists. We must start with fundamental questions and try to answer them. (Piketty 2014: 32-33).

In reading Piketty's book, I was struck by how anthropologists too can contribute to this work on inequality, especially by asking, what would constitute more inclusive

forms of capitalism and how might they develop? What forms of social value lead to economic value? In other words addition to identifying the super-rich and their extractive ways, it seems to me that we must also identify what kinds of investments can lead to more productive, less extractive, economic forms. It is here that an ethnographic approach to different ways of achieving livelihoods in music can offer a window on a diversity of socio-economic models and outcomes. Fieldwork is particularly well-suited to this kind of investigation because there is nothing like “being there” as a means to evaluate what kinds of events, collectives, and happenings are “where the action is.” This essay is an early attempt to explore some of those possibilities.

I would argue that in contrast to zombie capitalism we can observe a counterveiling tendency towards what might be called “cyborg capitalism.” The image in my head is drawn from the “Ghost in the Shell” manga and anime series, in which, in the future, a person’s living consciousness (or “ghost”) can be ported to a technological body (the “shell”) which is also connected to a wider information network, both static data and person-to-person communication. In this context, a cyborg is characterized by a symbiosis between humans and technology, embedded in, but also enlivening the networks of relations that are physical, social, technological, political and economic.

It is this idea of “community and network symbiosis” that lies at the heart of I propose calling “cyborg capitalism,” and offers a contrast to “zombie capitalism,” whereby the dead devour the living (i.e., inherited wealth increasingly extracts income from productive labor). Of course, there are not only two kinds of capitalism, but this contrast is meant to highlight some of the distinctions that can help us evaluate different forms of social-economic assemblages. Cyborg ideals are clearly evident in Kohh’s song, which emphasizes an alternative vision of value, beyond the purely economic. As he says, “love is more important than money,” and “I don’t mind being poor” because if necessary, I can get help from friends. This move away from an instrumental, rational actor individualism is characteristic, I would say, of a sensibility that is more cyborg than zombie. Before turning to this distinction, let’s consider how Japan’s lost decades look in terms of inequality.

### **Japan’s lost decades seen through the lens of inequality (not so bad)**

Another aspect of viewing youth culture during the lost decades in Japan involves considering how varieties of capitalism are related to government policies. In some ways, the lost decades of Japan look less worrisome when compared with developments in the US. This reminds us that “zombie capitalism” and “cyborg capitalism” are just ways of evaluating different processes of economic development and change.

In his 2015 book, Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz collected a range of his essays viewing recent economic developments through the lens of inequality. Contrary to my understanding of Japan's lost decades, he highlights contrasts that make Japan look better than the US in measures of inequality since the 1990s. He identifies the time when the expansion of inequality takes off, in the 1980s, with the reforms of government leaders like Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and Yasuhiro Nakasone. Stiglitz (2013: 416) explains: "The 'reforms' that were part of the zeitgeist of the 1980s" contributed to the growth in inequality in country after country, "including tax changes that were of enormous benefit to the very rich and the liberalization of financial markets." So, inequality worsened in advanced nations, including Japan, the US and many European countries.

I've always associated Japan's lost decades with the idea of "anemic growth," measured in terms of gross domestic product. But Stiglitz adds an important layer of nuance to this common understanding.

Japan's slow growth does not look so bad under close examination. Any serious student of economic performance needs to look not only at overall growth, but at growth related to the size of the population. Japan's working age population (ages 15–64) shrank 5.5 percent from 2001 to 2010, while the number of Americans that age increased by 9.2 percent, so we should expect to see lower growth. (Stiglitz 2013: 335)

This means, Stiglitz adds, "Japan's real economic output, per member of the labor force, grew at a faster rate over the first decade of the century than that of the United States, Germany, Britain, or Australia" (Ibid.). America's millennial decade was worse than Japan's when measured in terms of this more nuanced analysis of growth.

Japan is also better than the US in addressing inequality. Consider the Gini coefficient, a standard measure of inequality, with zero as perfect equality, and 1 for perfect inequality. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the Gini coefficient for both countries before taxes and transfer payments is about the same for the two countries: 0.499 for the US, and 0.488 for Japan (Stiglitz: 336). But the US does less to mitigate inequality than Japan, bringing it down to 0.38 for the US and 0.33 for Japan. Or, consider another measure of inequality: the average income of the top 10% is 15.9 times that of the bottom 10 percent in the US, compared with 10.7 times for Japan (Ibid). Such variation reinforces our understandings that differences in inequality are related to political decisions, not economic inevitability.

On still other measures of inequality, Japan does better than the US as well, even if there is still work to be done. Stiglitz notes that Japan needs to do better in caring for its “older old,” those over 75. In 2008, the OECD estimated that 25.4% of Japan’s “older old” lived in relative poverty, that is, with incomes less than half of the national median, which is still marginally better than the US (27.4%), but far worse than the OECD average of 16.1%. But Japan does much better than the US in terms of childhood poverty: Some 14.9% of Japan’s children are poor, compared to a shocking 23.1% of American children. It’s hard to know how directly to relate this to Japan’s globally successful, youthful popular culture, but it does indicate that there should be a higher percentage of young people in Japan with spare money to spend, thus being consumers who support new businesses.

### **Where do new jobs come from?**

For both Japan and the US, a common concern, especially for the younger generation, is what new industries might emerge to replace formerly good-paying jobs in manufacturing. Will there be sufficient economic growth to support new jobs? Piketty points out that even relatively low growth rates, for example of 1% or 1.5% per year can still mean large changes when measured over the course of a generation. Over a period of thirty years, he says, a growth rate of 1% per year corresponds to cumulative growth of 35%, and 1.5% growth corresponds to cumulative growth of 50% (Piketty: 95). Piketty adds that such changes will have a powerful impact on the structure of employment: “when output per head increases by 35 to 50 percent in thirty years, that means that a very large fraction—between a quarter and a third—of what is produced today, and therefore between a quarter and a third of occupations and jobs, did not exist thirty years ago” (Piketty: 95–96). You can’t work in bridge repair until bridges are built. Those who maintain the Internet, hardware and software, are in jobs that didn’t exist before the Internet. While some scholars focus on the various jobs that are lost (Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2014), we should also turn our attention to the possibilities for future industries to emerge. It is here that I think anthropology can provide useful insights into where new jobs can come from, through the advantages of research by fieldwork and ethnography.

I learned from doing ethnographic research into cultural production that fieldwork can give one a very clear sense of which groupings have a kind of positive energy, a forward momentum. By “being there,” we can see where the action is. Although there many types of “action,” and defining once and for all what that means is impossible, nevertheless, I would say that there would be wide agreement on where the action

isn't, where negative social forces conspire to limit the possibilities for creative production. Furthermore, anthropology provides a way of thinking about the democratization of social research. By living among the people, learning their language, and to some extent participating in their worlds, ethnographers can learn about the things that matter to people, their daily struggles and aspirations. If we take a more democratic and open approach to observing what people value, this can provide insight into where new industries can and should emerge. This would be a contrast to beginning discussions of new jobs from the perspectives of short-sighted elites who try to maintain older, exploitative systems, just like zombies that devour the living.

Stiglitz offers a striking insight for thinking about where new jobs come from. Rather than pointing to the super-rich as "job creators," he argues instead that consumers, especially those who have the wherewithal to purchase things, are the real drivers of new job creation.

Around the world there is a wealth of creativity, an abundance of entrepreneurship, *if there is adequate demand* (and if certain other preconditions are satisfied, such as access to capital and adequate infrastructure). In this view, the real "job creators" are consumers; and the reason that American and European countries have not been creating jobs is that stagnant incomes mean stagnant demand. (Stiglitz 2013: 415)

This perspective reinforces the idea that creative communities, as they build audiences and participants, can drive the creation of new industries. We can see this in many ways, notably in history of the animation industry and in the phenomenon around Hatsune Miku (初音ミク), Japan's leading virtual idol. First, animation.

A century ago, animation was just being invented as a ludicrously labor-intensive media form, merging cartoon drawing with film, such that frames of film would need to be drawn, and then filmed, one frame at a time, to create the illusion of movement. It is an insane idea, and very few people can get rich in such a field. Yet animation has become a multi-billion dollar industry. Why Japan? Because it had a consumer base that was broader and more engaged than in the US. By some estimates, 60% of the world's TV broadcast cartoons are Japanese in origin (JETRO 2005). In simple terms, I would argue that Japan's success highlights Stiglitz's notion that consumers are job creators. Again, a comparative study is instructive.

Both Japan and the US had vibrant comic book publishing in the early 1950s, but publishers in the two countries took different paths in the mid-fifties. In the US, the research of psychiatrist Frederic Wertham and his sensationalist book, *The Seduction*

of *the Innocent*, led to widespread concern that American comic books were harming children through their violent and sexy content. The research was later debunked when Wertham was found to have distorted his findings and misrepresented his interviewees. At the time, however, congressional hearings were held, and American publishers, feeling the pressure, acted by developing the Comics Code Authority in 1954, which screened American comic books for offensive content (Hajdu 2008). US comic authors were required to produce works suitable only for children. In Japan as well, there was outcry against violent and salacious comic books, but manga publishers were able to keep producing works for a larger and older audience, in addition to works for children. This meant a much broader fan-base for manga, the most successful of which were then turned into anime. Anime's global success, in other words, hinges in part on the broader audience for manga in Japan. Consumers were job creators, just as Stiglitz argues. Because Japan has a comic fandom that spans all generations and well represents content for both men and women, this group of consumers underpins the later globalization of anime. The social value of manga characters is what lays the foundation for economic value in business models. The large and varied audience for manga characters is further reinforced through fan-made manga (*dōjinshi*) and the annual Comic Market, which draws upwards of half a million people to its largest summertime convention.

### **Hatsune Miku as Cyborg Capitalism**

Another example of this principle of “community first, business second” can be seen in the case of Japan's leading virtual idol, Hatsune Miku.<sup>1</sup> In a video of a concert in Japan, we see about a thousand fans packed into a Tokyo music club, many with glow sticks in the shape of green leeks, eagerly anticipating the arrival of the star of the show. As the music starts, suddenly Miku appears, as if rising through the stage. There is a live band behind her, but all the focus is on Miku herself, a life-size animated cartoon image of a teenage girl with long blue ponytails and enormous anime eyes, singing and dancing on stage. As she waves her willowy arms, she belts out the first words to her song “World Is Mine” (*Wārudo izu main*):

世界で一番のお姫さま  
 そういう扱い心得てよね

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1 These sections on Miku are adapted from an essay in the *Japanese Popular Culture Reader*, edited by Alisa Freedman and Toby Slade (forthcoming from Routledge).



I’m the number one princess in the world  
And you’re going to treat me that way. Right?

Then she coquettishly wags a finger, and the crowd goes wild.



I saw Miku perform at a concert in New York City in October 2014, and earlier in Los Angeles at the fan convention Anime Expo in July 2011. The Los Angeles show sold out within days of going on sale, with one commentator saying 6,000 tickets were sold. In the concert hall, before the show began, the air was festive and electric. I overheard a fan sitting next to me, speaking to her friend, both in costume. “We’re making history,” she said, and her friend nodded solemnly.

Hatsune Miku is Japan’s leading virtual idol. She began life as voice synthesizer software released in 2007 by Crypton Future Media Inc., a company based in Sapporo in northern Japan. Crypton sells the software, but takes a more open-source approach to the use of Miku’s image, generally allowing fans to use the image for free. Over time, an enormous fan community has emerged around Miku, primarily in Japan but extending worldwide.

In Japan, Miku’s world is recognizable as part of a *dōjin* (pronounced “dough gene”) culture populated by fans who create derivative works, such as comic books, figurines, illustrations, and so on, based on their favorite 2D characters. The term *dōjin* uses the characters “same” and “person,” implying a peer but also an amateur, generally more than a consumer, someone who makes things, usually in a group. Fan “circles” (*sākuru*) are the groups that make *dōjinshi* (fan comics), *dōjin* music, *dōjin* games, and so on. For lack of a better term, I would propose “fan-made” as the translation for *dōjin*, with “fan” representing the active amateur aspect and “made” referring to the circles and creators who churn out projects.

How did the Miku community emerge, and what does it tell us about the mix of social and economic values involved? In 2007, the Miku voice-synthesizer software gave desktop musicians a new instrument: a woman's singing voice. This was Crypton's business, namely, selling digital sounds and software to be used in audio production. But as music creators began sharing their songs online, others in the online (and offline) world participated in other ways, making illustrations or animated dance videos to go with the songs. With the explosion of this online production, a crowd of audience members also emerged through commenting—positively, negatively, sometimes seriously, often irreverently—and in the process lent moral support, engaged in aesthetic criticism, or just aimed to have fun. In the first couple years, the business of Miku was Crypton selling the software, and all the other fan activity was in a largely non-commercial space. I mean “non-commercial” in the sense that fan producers pay, but do not get paid for their productivity.

Creative communities are spaces where social value takes precedence over economic exchange. It was through the interactions of fans—creating lyrics, fashion styles, dance movements, and in the process her personality—that Miku changed from a vocal instrument into a “vocal character,” as Crypton calls her. The crowd of amateur creators and active audiences became a kind of foundation upon which economic activity would later develop. And businesses did develop, with a popular videogame for arcades and handheld devices, songs popular for karaoke singing, and CDs that have become bona-fide hits, including the “World Is Mine” song mentioned above.

The larger significance is that we can see how new areas of the music world are developing new audiences and in the process new models of support at a time when the market for recordings is in steep decline. Though it's worth noting that spending for other aspects of music are increasing, such as for live shows and musical instruments. In contrast to record companies, might Miku offer a more equitable and democratic realm of popular culture? It's too soon to tell, but there are some promising signs. Miku illuminates the ways that creative communities, often energized by non-economic motivations, can form the basis for the emergence of new businesses, indeed, whole new kinds of industries. The significance of those industries depends not only on their capitalization but also on the social dynamics that underpin the economies. This is not to say this “foundation” is devoid of exploitation, discrimination, and excess, but, as we will see, what is interesting is how the maker of Miku software, Crypton Future Media, has attempted to deal with the challenges of mediating between the social communication aspect of Miku and the businesses that are emerging around the phenomenon.

Music journalist Shiba Tomonori describes the effect of Miku as nothing less than

"*sekai o kaeta*" (changing the world). He notes, for example, that everyone can be a *kuriētā* (creator) and, more importantly perhaps, can connect with like-minded creators.

With the Internet of the twenty-first century, anyone can make a name for his or herself by becoming a creator. Nowadays, it's become normal for amateur creators, not only professionals, to make various kinds of content and have it consumed. Moreover, the Net is giving rise to creators making relationships among themselves. A new culture is blossoming, nurturing collaborations across fields. Put simply, this is an entry to an era of "100 million creators" (Shiba 2014: 4)

In the case of Miku, according to Crypton's website, over 100,000 songs have been produced by "Miku-P" (that is, Miku producers), and over 170,000 videos have been uploaded featuring her songs. By far the largest participation is the over one million fan-made artworks that are in circulation as well.

How did Crypton nurture these creators? By developing a relatively open approach to copyright. In Japan (as of 2015), Crypton describes a three-tier system of copyright control, which they call the PiaPro Character License (PCL). (PiaPro is short for "peer production.") They have adapted this license for Japan's specific legal and cultural context, part of which includes a long history of *dōjin* works. In an online video, Crypton's describes their license like this:

- (1) If you are making images but not selling them in any way, you may do so without getting permission from Crypton.
- (2) If you are making goods and selling them, but only at a level to support the activities of your club or group (i.e., "non-profit" but enforced through an honor system rather than official legal designation), then you are asked to send a merchandise sample to Crypton and in return, Crypton will send a 2D barcode (QR code) that you can reproduce and affix to your goods to show that you are officially approved.
- (3) If your Miku goods sell profitably, Crypton expects to be part of the process, and there should be negotiations on a case-by-case basis (Crypton Future Media, Inc.).

This is a very interesting approach to creating multiple tiers of copyright depending on the users and their profitability, rather than on the type of work (i.e., original or derivative). These rules are shifting, and depend on the acceptance of the broader

community to exist. In some ways, this is not so different from the informal operation of music sampling for DJs. If you are an indie-level DJ, you can often get away with sampling famous artists and sometimes even selling the works. But if you are famous or backed by a major recording company, then the artists being sampled can expect (and are more likely to demand) payment for sampling. What's different about Crypton is that they are attempting to make this informal treatment of copyright something that is official and central to their business. For me, this is a perfect example of "cyborg capitalism," whereby Crypton prioritizes the ethics of the fan community, allowing fan production and sharing, and even some sales of derivative character goods, without requiring royalties to be paid. Rather than being zombie-like in extracting every bit of possible monetization, Crypton's practices more closely resemble a cyborg ethic of respecting its connection and reliance upon its fan community.

### **Conclusion**

As we struggle to reformulate our political economic sphere to combat the negative consequences of rising inequality, the question of where new jobs and new industries might come from becomes increasingly important. Over the past 20 years, my research has focused on forms popular culture, such as hip-hop in Japan and anime as a worldwide phenomenon, that can be described as globalization from below. They can also be seen as examples of emerging industries that, initially at least, generally lacked the support of elite power brokers, spreading instead through the efforts of passionate, somewhat underground communities. To me, this is cyborg capitalism because it illuminates the unseen synergies, what I've also called "dark energy," among fans as much as, if not more than, the marketing muscle of major corporations. In realms where the super-rich have more sway—such as expensive real estate and high-end contemporary art—we witness more extractive forms of economic exchange, that is, zombie capitalism, as the super-rich attempt to move assets and hide money from the prying eyes of tax agencies. In this essay, I've offered a picture of some forms of popular culture that demonstrate how creative communities can be the foundation of new business models, or better, new social-economic assemblages, in which valuing and nurturing fan communities is as important as figuring out how to monetize them.

To return to Kohh's song, we can see how the cultural underpinnings of ideas about restructuring the economy through new measures of value are already underway. Arguably, this has always been the case for every generation. Kohh's contemporary voice highlights that he worked hard to get to his position as an artist, "but without those around me, I wouldn't be here either." We are seeing new thinking

about value, and especially how social value can be more important than economic value. The lost decades, in both Japan and the U.S. are partly related to advanced economies in transition, as manufacturing jobs in both countries have disappeared, many people wonder what can replace them? A century ago, the U.S. faced a similar challenge in making the transition from agriculture to manufacturing, and arguably, it required a world war to mobilize resources and labor to fill factories. It seems plausible to me that today we are facing a crisis in employment on a similar scale, as advanced economies like Japan and the U.S. lose their manufacturing base on a scale not dissimilar to the loss of agricultural jobs in the early 1900s. The solution is not a fight to regain those jobs, but rather to work towards new, value-creating jobs and industries. Where can we find them and how can we support them? Last time it took a world war to bring about a sharp reduction in inequality, so the scale of the challenge is not trivial. However, if we could muster the political will to fight a war, it should be possible to mobilize for a reinvigoration, a "war," but one that is focused not on destruction and conflict, but rather on productivity and shared prosperity, for our children's future. It is a war, in other words, between zombies and cyborgs. Some new businesses, like Crypton, recognize that supporting consumers is as important to their business model as extracting payments. In this way, the experiments in new kinds of industries are happening now, and it is a question of how far such new ideas, and new approaches, can spread.

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