

*AN ANALYSIS OF 21ST CENTURY JAPANESE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS AS  
THEY RELATE TO THE FURĪTĀ PHENOMENON AND THE GLOBAL PRECARIAT*

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## A Note on Terminology

The following study utilizes the Japanese convention of given name following surname when referring to Japanese individuals exclusively. I use the accented romanization of *furītā* for the purposes of this project, though there are several spelling variants including the more Western variant, *freetee*, or *furiitaa*, as well as the Japanese variant, フリーター the Japanese variant being conceived in the written form of the Japanese syllabary generally reserved for foreign words known as *katakana* (lit. ‘fragmentary kana’). Throughout various academic and popular literatures all four variants can be seen. I have chosen to abide by these variants when citing publications but will stick to the accented romanization in all other cases.

## Abstract

This study attempts to resolve issues surrounding the Japanese phenomenon of the *furītā*, and will critically explore comparisons which are being drawn between *furītā*, other segments of the Japanese “irregular” economy and the global precariat. Through a mixture of archival research, statistical analysis, media studies and from accounts of personal experience living and working among *furītā*, I conclude that the *furītā* crisis has been overexaggerated. Despite media sensationalism, the *furītā* are far from the greatest upheaval to 20<sup>th</sup> Century Japanese employment paradigms. And, this manufactured moral panic has deflected attention from more pressing concerns. The most prominent statistical changes are occurring among women and the elderly, both categories of which are seeing marked increases in employment insecurity. These groups are earning a lower salary than the young male “*furītā*” they are replacing, causing a defunding of the public pension system and moving this “super-ageing” society further towards a “Gap Society.”

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## Dedication

For my Family, and for Yuri.

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## Introduction

The following work examines neoliberal socio-economic trends that can broadly be seen affecting long-term employment across several developed countries such as the United States, Germany, and, in this case, Japan (JILPT Report No.10, 2011). Arguably, similar concerns around the growing number of precarious workers and an increasing ‘gap society’ in Canada could also hold true. Primarily, I will focus on the idea that many educated young workers are unable to find stable or long-term employment, or choose not to because of changing vocational paradigms, and that many of these youth also want to see their individuality expressed in their employment somehow. Paying close attention to what drives these changing values and attitudes towards work. I am particularly interested in how they have come to express themselves in the Japanese cultural construct of the *furitā*. This study will contribute to a better understanding of the *furitā*, both historically and contemporarily, and across its various incarnations, and will attempt to deconstruct unproductive connotations surrounding the term (Cassegard 2013, Hommerich 2007, Ciavacchi and Hommerich 2017).

Neoliberalism, like the *furitā*, is a weighty concept that deserves some unpacking as it is implicated in the identities explored in this text including *furitā*, precariat, and irregular worker. As noted by Kathleen Buddle, in her work “Tagged and Turfless: Neoliberal Justice and Youth Crime in Winnipeg” (2014), Neoliberalism is a term for which “...there exists no singular critical conception...within the social sciences. As Wendy Larner (2000) instructs, neo-liberalism is unevenly deployed as a policy paradigm, a hegemonic ideology and as a form of governmentality. Its conceptual elaboration in anthropology focuses on the ways in which it serves as a process” (304). In her own work

Buddle primarily engages in the viewpoint of geographer David Harvey, which I will also utilize, and who conceptualizes it as follows:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices...But beyond these tasks the state should not venture. State interventions in markets (once created) must be kept to a bare minimum because, according to the theory, the state cannot possibly possess enough information to second-guess market signals (prices) and because powerful interest groups will inevitably distort and bias state interventions (particularly in democracies) for their own benefit (Harvey, 2005:2).

While the neoliberalization of the labour force takes a variety of shapes globally depending on geography, politics, demographics and culture, in Japan it is exemplified at the national level in the *furitā*, or alternatively freeter. This is a trend which is perhaps more accentuated in Japan where there have traditionally been more rigidly defined hegemonic norms geared towards conformity and uniformity within their social and political systems, and where the irregular working class has historically had little formal access to the public sphere. The term *furitā* is used in Japan to refer to a subculture, the use of “subculture” in this text builds on Blackman’s understanding of subculturalist

theory outlined in his work “Subculture Theory: An Historical and Contemporary Assessment of the Concept for Understanding Deviance,” (2014). In this piece, Blackman outlines a history of subculture theory emerging from the Chicago School, informed by Emile Durkheim and the field of anthropology, which reduces subcultural process to reactionary resistance and effectively removes or reduces the potential for inherent agency by its participants. Blackman argues that many past subcultural, and present post-subcultural, studies fail to “consider the lived reality of those under study” (505). He pursues subcultures as “collective social formations within wider social, political and historical moments, responding to their material experiences [which are] understood as representing a creative challenge to bourgeois order through forms of resistance” (508). I will show how what started as a subculture, emerged into a social movement which combine elements of past labour and activist movements with post-materialist concerns.

The *furitā* subculture is comprised of more than a generation of educated, mostly male, youth who have become disaffected by the decline of lifetime corporatized employment, and who for one reason or another chose to take on part-time jobs or run small entrepreneurial businesses in order to make ends meet. Initially the term *furitā* was reserved for categorizing middle-class male economic “drop-outs.” Over time, however, it has become conflated with a wide range of the Japanese irregular working population -- a demographic spectrum which has come to be referred to globally as the “precariat.”<sup>1</sup> In part it is this conflation which I intend to address as it has, in my opinion, muddled the issue by introducing a false equivalency. In addressing this issue, I will hopefully come to

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<sup>1</sup> Building on the definition put forth by Guy Standing in “The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class” (2011), the precariat are workers who experience some form of economic insecurity as a result of their employment. This insecurity has expanded beyond the traditional “underclass” to include additional groups now subject to economic precarity as a result of emergent neoliberal employment policies favouring a flexible workforce.

a better understanding of the relationship between contemporary *furitā* and the broader Japanese precariat.

As an emergent demographic group the *furitā* have managed to capture the attention of the media and popular culture, in part as a result of their differential access to the public sphere in comparison with the broader precariat. In turn, through their activism and knowledge of the political landscape they have also garnered consistently increasing attention from the Japanese federal government since the early 1990s. Quite often the *furitā* are compared to the homeless population and defined in terms of a national crisis. As a result, over the past 30 years, a fair amount of government funding has been allocated towards this “issue”, though it is generally directed towards those in danger of class precarity as opposed to actual economic precarity. At the same time, much of the academic literature and coverage by the news media has framed the movement in terms of its recent activism, often engaged in under the mantle of the global precariat, which in Japan is exemplified in the irregular working class.

Recent estimates by the Japanese Labour Ministry put as much as 40% of the population within the category of “irregular” labourer (*The Japan Times*, Editorial, January 5, 2016), and while that rate of increase has been slowing over the past few years, if these trends were to continue much longer, eventually more than half of the population will fall within this category. An “irregular labourer” is a political category established by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare which encompasses the broader precariat class, and which includes those who identify, or are labeled, as *furitā* along with part-time, contract, temporary, and dispatch workers and several other marginalized categories of employment. For those who took on the mantle of *furitā*

voluntarily in the 1980s, the jobs they take or do not take, while lacking stability, also tend to provide them the freedom to explore non-normative pursuits within Japanese society. They can also be more expressive of their own individuality in what outwardly appears to be a very unified and conformist nation, particularly when it comes to employment.

At the same time Japanese society, encultured and informed by the authoritative dictates of the Japanese government, is attempting to define and redefine the *furītā* in the new millennium and eliminate, or at least ameliorate, what is viewed as a growing problem in terms of economic contributions in a country already burdened by an aging population<sup>2</sup>. I would argue that this modern categorization also serves as an attempt to reconcile the shifting class and social boundaries which for essentially the first time in the post-war era no longer allows for boundless upward mobility and has in fact come to relegate those whose former lot was to be regularly employed in the category of irregular worker. There is also a large gap conceptually and ideologically between the original *furītā* of the 1980s bubble years and the modern day *furītā*, who are seen as a product of economic stagnation instead of socio-economic liberation, and I think it is important to have a better understanding of the relationship between these incarnations of the phenomenon

As more and more workers enter into what could be considered occupational precarity within the Japanese economy, it is increasingly becoming framed less as an issue of lack of conformity on the part of *furītā*, and more an issue of occupational and social security that threatens to endanger Japanese national ideals. As Hommerich notes:

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<sup>2</sup> Sometimes now referred to as a “super-aging” population, 2009 statistics put roughly 23% of the population above 65 and estimate that by 2030 roughly 33% of the population will be over the age of 65 (Muramatsu and Akiyama 2011: 426).

Both Germany and Japan can be seen as societies in which the majority of the population defines themselves through their employment. One's position in working life becomes an indicator of social status and plays an important role in shaping individual identity (2007:480).

I would suggest that the broader motives of the Japanese government have less to do with the occupational security of the irregular worker class (themselves now considered a segment of the broader precariat). This class has always existed in Japan. Instead, the government is more concerned with the fact that lower-middle class Japanese males are having increasing difficulty finding stable employment immediately out of high-school or university.

One of the concerns is likely that the social instability could result from unchecked downward class mobility in such a strongly class-stratified and career centric society. Another concern is the increasing stress that is being placed on the social welfare system as young middle-class males are not contributing to the national pension plan in enough numbers to support the aging population. This in turn is forcing more and more seniors into economically precarious positions as companies are stepping back from the previously held tradition of providing lifetime economic security for their long-term salaried employees.. There is little mention of, or consideration given to, the existing precariat which has been and still is a relatively faceless and invisible issue. The two extreme ends of the precariat spectrum, homelessness and "freeter-ism" are viewed as a sort of national crisis. This is owing to a crisis of identity as well as a crisis of social welfare. Consequently, while there is growing government aid, much of it is concentrated on addressing the needs of the extreme ends of the spectrum (homelessness and "freeter-

ism”) while leaving little left over for the bulk of irregular workers, who make up the largest portion of the precariat in Japan.

The *furītā* still largely see themselves as middle-class despite as being perceived as experiencing growing precarity, and still expect the ascribed status accorded the middle-class within the public sphere in Japan, a domain which is largely off limits to the existing Japanese precariat. This gives the *furītā* differential access to the public sphere, and influence within it unknown to those whose lot has always been among Japan’s blue-collar working class. A consequence of this is that they are able to bring light to some of the issues facing the modern precariat in Japan, in part leading to social and political reforms which have increased governmental aid through a variety of channels. Conversely, they are also receiving the lion’s share of this funding and political attention with little left for the broadest demographic groups of irregular workers. In Japan this phenomenon has been classified, studied, and debated since the 1980s, and received unrelenting media attention during that time. To date, the majority of research available on the subject of *furītā* is Japanese, though in the past few years more and more scholars have been taking interest in, and writing on, the phenomenon in English language texts (Cassegard 2014, Hommerich 2007, Honda 2005, Chiavacci and Hommerich 2017, O’Day 2013).

It has now been 30 years since the idea of the *furītā* first came into the popular Japanese consciousness. This study intends to provide a more expansive understanding of what it means to be a *furītā* today, as well as define some of the ways in which ideas about “freeter-ism” have evolved over the past 30 years. As Yutaka Asao put it in his report, an *Overview of Non-Regular Employment in Japan* (JILPT Report No.10, 2011),

which compares articles surrounding non-regular employment in Japan, the United Kingdom, Germany, The United States, France and the Netherlands:

It is believed that developed countries in their economic maturity see in common an increase or non-regular employment and share the same challenges. Given this, it is particularly meaningful for such countries to exchange experiences in this regard taking into account country-specific difference (27).

While it would have been interesting to include a section comparing and contrasting unemployment issues in Canada with the *furītā*, the broader Japanese precariat, and Japanese trends towards neoliberalization, it was beyond the scope of this study.

This study will build on the research of Carl Cassegard and his recent field work on the subject of Japanese subcultures of resistance and alternative space, conducted from 2004-2012 which is chronicled in his work, *Youth Movements, Trauma and Alternative Space in Contemporary Japan* (2014). In developing his studies of *furītā* unions, Cassegard sees contemporary *furītā* less as itinerant youth and more an amalgam of various types of precariously employed workers focused around a counter-cultural activist-led movement. He views the developing *furītā* labour movement as a re-emergence of a previously strong history of post-war activism which saw a decline beginning in the 1970s with the political and social defeats of the Japanese New Left movements. Cassegard argues the defeats suffered by the Japanese New Left created a socio-cultural trauma within the context of Japanese society, leaving it unsure as to the efficacy of activism and political protest (Cassegard, 2014). Also contributing to this was the increasing productivity of the Japanese economy, which created a strong middle-class

that endured until the end of the bubble era in the late 1980s, and in many ways defined many of the post-modern values and ideology surrounding the salaryman identity which persists today. Cassegard notes that “the [current] rise in protest against precarity among freeters today was not only a reaction to the deterioration of economic conditions but also a kind of comeback of radicalism in a new guise” (Cassegard, 2014:13). I hope to build on Cassegard’s work and to promote a better understanding of the relationship between the ‘original *furītā*’ phenomenon, which I would describe as ‘the dreamer,’ and subsequent incarnations of ‘the *furītā*,’ which I denote as ‘the activist’ and ‘the precariat.’

Also important for this project is the work of Carola Hommerich, and in particular her paper entitled, “Japanese “Furītā” and German “Generation Internship”: The “Precarious Post-materialist” as an Extension to Inglehart’s “Theory of Value Change” (2007), wherein she attempts to introduce Inglehart’s theory of value change and thereby to define *furītā* in terms of precarious post-materialists. Herein, I use post-materialist in the sociological sense proposed by Inglehart (1977), as opposed to the materialist concept of history as proposed by Marx and Engels, or the strictly philosophical sense. In this case material concerns can be seen literally in terms of food, shelter and safety, non-material concerns such as aesthetics. Individualism or freedom are defined within a post-materialist value set which can occur under circumstances in which a group’s immediate material concerns have been satisfied.

In his work, “The Silent Revolution” (1977), Inglehart saw that as the affluent post-war generation felt greater economic security, they began to take their material security for granted, and, in turn, transferred some of that importance towards non-material pursuits. Hommerich uses Inglehart’s notion in her comparison of Japan’s *furītā*

culture with Germany's "Generation Internship," noting the similarities that are present between the two groups as a result of broadening neoliberal policies in developed countries who have, as Cassegard sees it, entered into a post-Fordist economic model (Cassegard, 2014:30). Hommerich defines the connection between attitudes towards work and the values behind them, with values representing the possibility for choice between alternatives as informed by the social system in place. Hommerich specifically notes that she will draw upon the definition of values as "...the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action" (481), whereas "attitudes and motivations will be defined accordingly as measurable manifestations of an underlying set of values" (481). In other words, following Hommerich's lead, the underlying values of Japanese society either as a whole or part directly inform the attitudes of the society or sub-sets thereof.

Hommerich argues that examining "attitudes towards work allow[s] for an analysis of the more abstract construct of underlying work values" (481). In some ways, this mirrors the Japanese government's own view of *furitā* and salarymen, wherein they perceive a loss of societal values and traditions and a resulting change in attitudes surrounding employment. Additionally, this exemplifies how the underlying salaryman values which are hegemonic within Japanese society inform the attitudes of the *furitā* who accommodate, resist and/or subvert these values in idiosyncratic ways that change from one iteration to the next. Hommerich concludes cautiously, that while:

Inglehart assumes that change of social values is closely linked to socio-economic development and through economic regression a modernization of values is simply reversed. This assumption does not

seem to hold true, as post-materialist orientations showed a high importance even under worsened economic conditions. Instead of a step back from post-materialist to materialist values, a combination of both seems to be possible and plausible, as seen by the value combination of the precarious post-materialist” (496).

Insofar as the *furītā* is concerned, this concept of the precarious post-materialist combines the dominant social overtones felt by Japanese youth of the late 20<sup>th</sup> with those of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The *furītā* were historically an economic boom based social movement which focused on post-materialist ideals. They were secure post-materialists. However, over time, and as a result of dramatic economic and legislative changes, they have become a recession based socio-economic movement promoting the right to social security, and post-materialist ideals, regardless of profession or class. They have become precarious post-materialists as Hommerich suggests. In what follows, I provide a better understanding of how this shift, from the original *furītā* incarnation of dreamer came about, and how that early, very different kind of *furītā* eventually transformed into the *furītā* as activist identity, and finally emerged as the voice of the Japanese irregular worker cum precariat.

Additionally, I plan to outline how the *furītā* constitutes a viable subculture, as per Thornton’s definitions (Gender and Thornton, 1992), and how, over time, these diverse subcultural units have evolved into communities, much in the same way that Amit sees “imagined communities” as forming (Amit, 2002). *Furītā*, I will argue, is not simply a “scene,” nor a “neo-tribe,” but as a result of its conflation with the precariat/irregular worker category is becoming an increasingly visible aspect of

mainstream Japanese society, or at least one which must be acknowledged as engaging a broad demographic within the population of Japan. Exploring the notion of value change within the Japanese political economy relying on Hommerich's definitions of societal values and attitudes towards work.

I will do this by examining culturalist narratives that are documented in academic and popular literature, various news sources and media, and in particular a popular television drama, *Freeter Ie o Kau* ('Freeter, Buy a House;' or alternatively 'Part-Timer, Buy a House,' or "A House for My Family"). I contend that these narratives serve a variety of socio-cultural purposes, they acknowledge the cultural need for demographic representation in popular media, and they subtly reinforce traditional societal values such as filial piety and male responsibility for the household. As well, I compare and contrast the series against '*Saboriman Amata Ni Kantaro* ('Kantaro the Sweet Tooth Salaryman'), a "dramady" focused on a salaryman trying to find free time to meet his personal needs, in this case, indulging his taste for sweets. From these, I draw out how Japanese society has created both the need for, and the restrictions on, the salaryman and *furītā* subject categories. I employ a critical anthropological lens and incorporate my own experiences living and working as a *furītā*<sup>3</sup> in the late 2000s and early 2010s.

The study aims to provide a better understanding of some of the complex and multifaceted social, cultural, and economic forces which have contributed to the formation of the *furītā* identity over the past 30 years. While most, if not all literature tends to focus on the modern incarnations of *furītā* as activist and precariat (or at least the

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<sup>3</sup> This is according to a revised definition that was designed to include other workers affected by neoliberalism and precarity, published by the Tokyo General Freeters Union on their website [www.freeter-union.org](http://www.freeter-union.org), as early as 2004. This definition is only held by the union and normally foreign workers are not included in official and academic definitions unless as a product of the irregular worker class.

voice thereof), I intend to bridge the gap between these modern forms and bubble era *furītā*, whose economic “freedom” allowed for post-material concerns never before experienced by such a large swath of Japanese youth, and whose post-materialist identity continues to influence the ideology of the modern *furītā* today.

## The Salaryman and the Growth of the Irregular Worker- *Cum*-Modern Precariat

### The Journey Towards the Modern Salaryman Identity

The modern precariat, including those labeled as *furītā*, exist in a state of social transience, largely appropriating alternative spaces either as a result of choice or necessity, and with reduced access to the public sphere. In contrast to this, the salaryman, as an ideological concept, is a nationally recognized, socio-politically constructed identity, which has very few socio-spatial boundaries in Japanese society. In terms of national narratives and the general public the two identities are often seen in opposition, and as antithetical, to one another. In order to understand the *furītā* and its relationship to the salaryman I will present a brief synopsis of pertinent history related to the development of the identities and the ideologies which inform it.

Despite that its genealogy dates back only to the modern industrial era, the salaryman is today defined by devotion to tradition<sup>4</sup>, revolving around a politically defined socio-economic corporate-family dynamic and well-defined values and attitudes towards work. Outwardly the salaryman is marked by his almost ever-present business suit, his long work hours, and a life-long devotion to a single corporation; generally having been hired by this company directly out of high-school or university (Honda, 2003). They can often be seen catching up on sleep on trains or in restaurants, and in many cases spend more time at the office, out drinking with co-workers, and commuting, than at home. Some have so little free time that they are forced to stay in the city away

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<sup>4</sup> Bushido is a term used to encompass the ideals of the Japanese samurai class, while introduced as early as the 17th century, the definition was reworked to incorporate invented traditions in 1899 by the author Nitobe Izano, in his work *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*. See page 27 of this text for more information on the invention of the tradition of bushido and its relationship to modern socio-economic ideologies.

from their families during the week, with the lucky ones having second residences while the majority sleep in internet cafes which have taken the place of the stereotypical capsule hotel, effectively leaving the salaryman in a cubicle basically all day and night. The life of a contemporary salaryman is generally perceived as one of long work hours and stressful deadlines with a strong reverence for hierarchical work structures combined with an unquestioning need to meet the vocational and personal requests of one's superiors.

As a result of the intense social pressures on the salaryman, there have been numerous deaths in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century attributed to overwork and stress associated with the role of the salaryman, leading to the invention of the term *karōshi* (lit. “overwork death”). It is important to note that *karōshi* does not take into account the overrepresented suicide rate amongst salarymen, in a country with one of the highest suicide rates in the world. The first reported death from *karoshi* occurred in 1969. The deceased, who died of a stroke, was a twenty-nine year old male labourer in the shipping department of Japan's largest newspaper company (Nishiyama and Johnson, 1997:2). However, the term itself was not coined until 1978, and it was not until nearly a decade later that “the Ministry of Labor began to publish the statistics on *karoshi* starting in 1987, as public concern increased. The major medical causes of deaths attributed to *karoshi* are heart attack and stroke, including subarachnoidal hemorrhage (18.4%), cerebral hemorrhage (17.2%), cerebral thrombosis or infarction (6.8%), myocardial infarction (9.8%), heart failure (18.7%), and other causes (29.1%) (ibid.). All but the last, are factors which can be directly attributed to overwork, stress, and poor physical care. It is also worth noting that the Ministry of Labour began to see a concern in this issue just

as the economic bubble broke and the “problem” of *furītā* also came to their attention. This was a critical point in the transition from a middle-class dominant to a precariat labour pool. The pressures involved with it were manifested in the health and welfare of salarymen and across middle-class Japan.

In spite of the enormous stress and social pressures involved in the role of salarymen, particularly as it relates to their devotion to their company and attitudes towards work, their identity is still viewed as stable, whereby the patriarch of the household steadily supports his family comfortably for a lifetime. Decades of reinforcement of these ideals both by the government and schools, combined with massive post-war industrialization to solidify these views. Industrialization lasted for decades, and for many it may have seemed like a never-ending utopia represented by inter-class upward mobility. Honda Yukio notes that:

Japan’s post-war society has been characterized by close links between three key social systems – the family, school, and company. Families offered strong financial and motivational support for their children’s schooling. Schools actively sorted and distributed young people in conformity with companies’ labour demands. Companies employed people immediately after completion of their schooling and provided intensive in-company training. What made these relationships possible were companies’ strong demands for a young labour force based on the steady growth of the economy (Honda, 2005:5-6).

Looking back to the 1960s the role of a salaryman was in large part an extremely enviable one, as it still is for many Japanese today. However, the growing stress that

would become commonly associated with the role was already beginning to show. In Edwards Norbeck's 1964 work, "Changing Japan" (Norbeck, 1964) he chronicles the dramatic shifts in society occurring as a result of the urbanization of Japan, particularly in and around Tokyo and Kyoto. A single firm might hire the entire graduating high-school class. University graduates were selected according to the school they attended rather than the grades they received and were then put through rigorous interview processes before being awarded with "lifetime employment and security." Often the hiring process included moving newly hired employees into large company dormitories close to the corporate office or manufacturing plants.

Norbeck analyses the growing phenomenon of the "urban salaryman" at this time, through the eyes of "Jiro," a young man from a poor family in a small village in rural Okayama Japan. After leaving his village for university, Jiro lived a frugal life, staying in the small six foot by nine-foot dormitory in Osaka he shared with his aunt while attending the University of Kyoto. In the summers Jiro was able to find a job at a small firm, not technically a salaryman due to the size of the firm<sup>5</sup>, but a job nonetheless (Norbeck, 1964). As Norbeck noted, at the time the employees of this and other small firms:

...were nearly all young... hard working employees of any age were not easy to find because of competition from large firms that offered more. Middle-aged men were few and they all held positions of responsibility that required long experience. There were no old men.

Retirement came at the age of fifty-five when the retiring employee

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<sup>5</sup> While codified under the rubric of salaryman, a salaried position is not in and of itself a defining aspect of the identity, the size of the firm one works at as well as the employee's position in it also plays a role.

received a lump sum equal to two years earnings – and promptly sought some kind of employment elsewhere as a temporary employee at lower wages. These were matters of business frugality...as wages rose with years of service and numbers of dependants (Norbeck, 1964:63-64).

Jiro had worked hard and continued to live frugally. While he was not a “distinguished” student he knew that “the degree rather than individual performance ... was the important thing... [and] campus gossip had told him long ago that the biggest and best firms limited hiring to graduates of two Tokyo schools, Tokyo University and Hitotsubashi University, and his own Kyoto University” (Norbeck, 1964:65).

Upon his graduation, Jiro was interviewed and employed as a company salaryman at the *Asahi* corporation, one of the largest conglomerates in Japan<sup>6</sup>. Jiro’s appointment at the company would have been a great accomplishment for both himself and his family. Norbeck states that even his starting salary was double that of his unmarried aunt who had been working most of her life in Osaka, and he would receive a bi-annual bonus which was nearly half a year’s pay (Norbeck, 1964:66). In this regard the economic gap between precariat or irregular workers and salarymen has not shifted all that much over the years, as even Jiro’s 1960 starting salaryman wage at *Asahi* was roughly four times the rate of pay of his precariat aunt when considering his bi-annual bonuses. Working conditions for the salaryman and the population demographic of the precariat, as opposed to regular workers, have therefore dramatically shifted over time.

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<sup>6</sup> They are primarily known as one of, if not the, largest alcoholic beverage companies in Japan, with premium beverages such as “Asahi Super Dry” which is sold in every convenience, grocery, and liquor store around the country, along with a variety of other forms of alcohol such as chūhai. In a 2014 Wall Street Journal article, Kachi Hiroyuki noted that “...with a market share of 38%, [in 2014] Asahi maintained the No. 1 position in the Japanese beer market over rival Kirin in terms of shipments for the fourth straight year” (Kachi:2014). Their current website states that they “Asahi Group Holdings is a global beer, spirits, soft drinks and food company that continues to create new values in order to share impressive moments with people around the world,” they also note that “Although the uncertainty is increasing in some parts of the global economy as a whole in the future, various “risks and opportunities” are expanding” (Asahi:2018).

At the beginning of his career Jiro found little to no stress surrounding the life of a salaryman:

...work went well and was far from difficult...strict seniority prevailed.

A lifetime of following rules and without demur found Jiro well prepared to accept the order of things...Work proceeded at a leisurely pace, with ample allowance for tea and rest...[and] the leisure hours were unalloyed pleasure. Saturday and Sunday were completely free, and there were many other holidays during the year” (Norbeck, 1964:66).

This stands in sharp contrast to the modern salaryman, wherein by 1988 a study by the Japanese Ministry of Labour found that the average Japanese salaryman unofficially worked as many as sixty hours or more per week, while the official work week was 48 hours, meaning Japanese workers put in an average of 2100 hours annually -- one of the longest work schedules in the world (Nagamachi and Yugami, 2015:624). This left little time for leisure, especially when considering the longer commutes many salarymen now face. When I first worked in Chiba prefecture from 2007-2008 and would take the train out to the country for work in the evening, it would be common to see various salarymen commuting home from Tokyo, sleeping or sipping on a beer as they traveled sometimes three hours or more each way. It was also not uncommon for some of these individuals to choose to spend most of the week in the city instead of travelling home, sometimes sleeping in the chairs of internet cafes to save on expenses and time. These salarymen and precariat workers alike are sometimes referred to as “Net Café Refugees.” Some net cafes now cater to long term occupants, while most provide at least

some minor conveniences and possibly a communal shower. For many, they no longer put in long hours and endure a stressful work environment for the social and economic rewards associated with the salaryman identity as those perks are no longer assured, but simply to maintain the prestige of the identity itself in the face of growing precarity.

Coming back to Jiro, by his third year at the company as his responsibilities began to grow he was starting to experience the stress of maintaining a salaryman role. The company request that that Jiro become a patent lawyer. When getting ready for an exam, Jiro worked himself to the point of collapse. Norbeck notes that “...when [the] examination time came in September, Jiro was thin from exhaustion and nervous. The last week before the exam saw him studying nightly until two or three in the morning, when he [would fall] asleep fully dressed” (Norbeck, 1964:68). Jiro passed the exam and eventually was moved to a prominent position in Tokyo years later, but not without experiencing some serious financial difficulties and stress along the way. In the last few years he and his wife spent in Osaka before moving to Tokyo they were forced to apply for public housing, or *danchi*<sup>7</sup>, to help with the costs of raising a new baby (Norbeck, 1964:76). Still the evidence of growing vocational and financial stress on the salaryman could clearly be seen as early as the 1960s, even though at that point there was still a rapidly growing number of “regular” workers or salarymen, compared to the present where close to the half of the population falls within the precariat categorized as irregular workers or *furītā*.

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<sup>7</sup> *Danchi* were a post-war innovation in lower cost public housing that, more-so than to meet the needs of the poor, were created to meet the needs of a growing urban population.



## The Post-War and the Female Precariat

One of the most statistically relevant changes to the post-war model in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century related to female participation within the labour force. While male participation (by age-set) has remained relatively stable over the years, female participation has been on the rise since the 1970s. The story of female labour participation is often underrepresented, or in some cases arguably ignored, in comparison to that of men in Japan, even in the case of *furūtā* studies, originally definitions of which squarely focused on men<sup>8</sup>. The following section intends to provide a brief introductory understanding of certain aspects of female labour force participation and its relationship to the irregular worker, the precariat and the *furūtā*.

In the initial post-war model Japanese men, excluding those relegated to the lower classes, were expected to obtain regular employment as salarymen. Japanese women were expected to take on the role of a devoted spouse and housewife by their early to mid-twenties, occasionally entertaining a part time job to keep themselves busy, or in some cases supplement the income of their regularly employed spouse prior to retirement. This is evident in the statistical analysis of female participation in the labour force, which was on average highest between 18-25 in the post-war period and even into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century with participation amongst women 25-55 only really beginning to increase in the mid to late 1970s (See appendix, tables 1-2).

For the most part women, if they took jobs after high school or university, were generally in secretarial positions and were expected to marry and move on within a few

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<sup>8</sup> The original definition only included unmarried women and men who had actively conformed to the definition of *furūtā* for more than 5 years. See page 33 of this text for the complete 1991 definition as approved by the Japanese Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare

years. In the case where women did not marry they were often relegated to the existing post-war precariat<sup>9</sup>, working low paying or irregular jobs and living in small *apaato*<sup>10</sup>'s or dormitory style apartments where in some cases they had to share facilities like kitchens and bathrooms. In a 1992 paper entitled "The Effects of Japanese Income Tax Provisions on Women's Labour Force Participation," Shibata Aiko presents some interesting statistics on women's workforce participation during the bubble years of the late 1980s. Shibata noted that, based on data obtained by the Japanese Ministry of Labour in 1987 at that time:

...the rate of participation in the labour force was 48.6% for women, and 77.3% for men...Among Female employees the number of part-time employees...represent[s] a 72.1% share of overall part-time work...[while] one-third of all female employees earned less than the minimum taxable income" (Shibata, 1992:169-70).

It is plain to see from these figures that historically, there has been an overrepresentation of women within the part-time labour pool. There was also a direct correlation between female workforce participation and age-set, whereby "...the labour participation rate for females between the ages of 40 and 50 was the highest for all age groups of women" (Shibata, 1992:170). Sixty per cent of those in that at age range were engaged in some form of regular employment (regular employment in the common sense, not the categorical) (Ibid). Shibata notes that:

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<sup>9</sup> In the sense that they experienced economic insecurity, though they did not actively identify as precariat, which itself had not been defined terminologically.

<sup>10</sup> An *apaato* is a very small apartment by western standards, it usually consists of one small room possibly with some closet space, and generally a hallway or recessed area containing a small cooking space and bathroom, though sometimes these facilities are shared.

...among married male employees 48% had wives who were also employed. Among married women, their husbands' levels of income strongly influenced labour force participation... [with] the general tendency [being] that the higher the husband's income, the smaller the proportion of wives working (Ibid.).

According to a *Japan Times* report in 2016, 65% - 75% of those who fall within the category of irregular labourer are either women (64%) or elderly people on post-retirement reemployment contracts (11.9%). Irregular workers make up as much as 40% of the nation's workforce, or almost 20 million people (*Japan Times*, Editorial, January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016). As Cassegard (30) notes, citing Slater:

In Japan, lowly-paid, insecure work has long been carried out by women and people with a lower-class background and, to them, precarity is certainly not new. Slater observes that the moral panic about freeters in Japan only started when middle-class youth started taking these jobs, which the working classes had always expected to do (Slater, 2010:162f).

Even as recently as a few years ago in their analyses of the subject, many Japanese labour scholars ignore the lower-class precariat despite the fact that an underclass has always existed in Japan. It was commonly assumed that prior to the 1970s, the precariat was comprised by migrants and day-labourers. Scholars also largely ignored the issues surrounding female labour when compared to male labour. In a 2011 report by the JILPT entitled, "Overview of Non-regular Employment in Japan," it is noted that:

While issues surrounding non-regular employment in post-war Japan were mostly related to migrant workers and day labourers, since around 1970 the issues of part-time workers have gradually attracted public attention. Initially this trend evolved slowly from a combination of changes in both the workforce and business establishments amidst the move towards a service economy and expansion of tertiary industries. While business establishments saw fluctuations in their daily or weekly work volume and needed to provide more customized services, differentiation of jobs that required fewer skills was made possible in the so-called distribution revolution. Meanwhile, women, in particular housewives, began entering the labour market (JILPT Report No. 10, 2011:13).

There have been statistical changes in the demographic makeup of Japan's working female population in the post war period, with initial trends showing a sharp drop-off in labour force participation among those aged 15-19. Urbanization and modernization as well as progress in women's rights meant that more teenage girls were attending high-school instead of working. This was subsequently followed by a less dramatic and more prolonged decrease in labour force Participation starting around 1990 among those aged 20 – 24 (See appendix, tables 1-2). More women began going to university after high-school as the job market slowed following the burst of the real-estate bubble in 1989. Between the 1960s and the 1980s female labour participation between 25-29 never broke the 50% mark. Employment among 20-24 years was around 70% in 1968. That dropped off sharply as they were expected to marry by around the age

of 25, with less than 50% of women remaining in employment after 25 in 1968. But since the 1980s that has been steadily on the increase to the point where labour force participation among women age 20-24 is reaching over 80% and has been steadily climbing by a little over ½ of a percent per year since the year 2000. Otherwise LFP among females has seen a broad uptake among adult age-sets since at least the mid-1970s, with a particularly sharp increase among those 65+ for both females and males since the Mid-2000s (See appendix, tables 1-4).

In summary, women are joining the labour force later in life as a result of prolonged schooling but are remaining in higher numbers than previously has been seen after they reach 25 years of age. Elderly women in particular are having to take up work to support themselves a result of the primary breadwinner's pension being too little to cover post-retirement living expenses. Both of these statistical changes are more significant than any statistical changes in the active male labour force, but in turn are a product of it. As more middle-class young men enter into stable employment later in life, more women come to fill the so-called flexible employment needs of companies at a lower wage rate. Both of these factors mean that households are contributing less on the whole to their pension plan, leaving a greater burden on a failing national pension plan. This in turn is leading to an increase in employees 60 and over, who also earn at a diminished rate.

## Changing Attitudes and Values in Post-War Japan and Modern Japan

Jiro's attitudes towards work were informed not only by his experiences of moving from rural to urban Japan and seeing the immense possibilities found in a burgeoning middle class, but also by broader societal values surrounding the then emergent salaryman identity. I see these as a combination of materialist and post-materialist values, in Jiro's case bringing together materialist values from his rural upbringing with the emergent post-materialist values of burgeoning middle class that he was exposed to in the city, which provided ample opportunity for the modern urbanite to engage in post-material concerns. The following section will outline the associations between Hommerich's contributions to the study of the modern *furītā* and my own project.

I would also note Hommerich's conclusions regarding Inglehart's theory of value change that "a one-dimensional distinction of "materialist" versus "post-materialist" values does not suffice to also encompass pluralizing value patterns" (Hommerich, 2007:496). These values, some materialist, some postmaterialist, provided a foundation for Jiro's attitude toward work which in turn mirrored, and were informed, by the broader societal values of the growing urban middle class in Japan. As well, they were guided ideologically by the Japanese government and large and influential firms who entrenched these concepts into the educational and vocational systems.

The salaryman is in many ways the antithesis of the *furītā*. While the former was socially engineered by the state, the latter developed largely in response to the concerns of the people, or the grassroots, as opposed to state overtures, and in response to changing socio-economic structures and values in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The salaryman, on the other

hand, is a purposefully and tactically engineered subject position promoted by a government-corporate agenda, which emerged amidst efforts to industrialize and modernize Japan during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>11</sup>. The salaryman identity transferred essentialized values of filial piety and strict, somewhat class-based, hierarchical seniority from samurai mythology into a corporate setting. This came about in part as a result of managerial and political lobbying for these value sets in the workplace.

Though there are certain comparisons that can be made between the salaryman and feudal Japanese archetypes, this is a result of intentional construction and, constitutes a form of revisionist history. In 1900 Japanese tradition was redefined for the modern era using a mixture of fact and myth put forth in Nitobe Inazō's "Bushido: The Soul of Japan" (Nitobe:1900). According to Oleg Benesch, in his article, "Bushido as an Invented Tradition: A Uniquely Japanese Ideology" (2004) Nitobe took:

...certain exceptional historical incidents involving the samurai, which [he] then universalized by applying them to all samurai in all ages. The resultant ethical system had remarkably little connection with the actual warrior class which was eliminated in the wake of the Meiji Restoration, and placed far more emphasis on the virtues of loyalty, honor, and self-sacrifice than any of the historical samurai. Bushido, therefore, was one of many "invented traditions" that appeared in all parts of the world throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Although Nitobe's

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<sup>11</sup> Though codified in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, early references to the ideology which would become associated with the salaryman began to develop as early as the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century., around the time Nitobe Inazō published his work describing and defining the modern concept of "bushido," "Feudal and Modern Japan" (1896) (Vogel:1963).

original ideology focused more on the supposed ethical aspects of the samurai than the military, Bushido later became a useful tool for Japan's nationalistic and militaristic leadership, who used it to instill loyalty and obedience in both the imperial army and citizenship in general. Unlike many other invented traditions, however, Bushido is still thriving both in Japan and abroad, and has been adopted by Japanese industrialists, foreign economists, as well as writers and other artists. (Benesch, 2004:1)

The Japanese government was a powerful force in the construction of the salaryman identity, which in many ways formed a key structuring principle for Japanese society as a whole and had a strong basis in Nitobe's invented tradition of *bushido*. As a result, the government has a vested interest in the salaryman, and as such in constructing an antithetical and often pejorative view of *furītās*, which it often juxtaposes against the salaryman ideal of the fully contributing member of Japanese society.

The burst of the bubble and increasing socio-economic "problem" demographics (which often overlap one another), like *furītā*, NEET, *hikokimori*<sup>12</sup>, and the homeless are shifting the attitudes that Japanese people have held towards work for nearly 50 years. This is shaking the value structure for certain individuals and in particular the now shrinking middle class. Increasingly, Japan is moving from a *kanri shakai*<sup>13</sup> (managed

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<sup>12</sup> Neet are those individuals who are Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET). A Hikokimori is a NEET who has over time become a recluse, sometimes rarely leaving their room. Both are considered "youth issues", and are seen to affect teenagers and young adults, though as the Japanese population ages these labels may be applied in older age-sets.

<sup>13</sup> Managed Society refers to the orderly and structured qualities of post-war Japanese society.

society) to a *kakusa shakai*<sup>14</sup> (gap or income gap society). If this trend continues we will see a point where these two values intercept one another as the number of irregular workers exceeds the number of regular employees (Pulvers, 2012).

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<sup>14</sup> Gap, or income gap, society. Referring to the growing income inequality in Japan and the pressure put on the salaryman class.

## The Bubble Era *Furītā* as Free Vs. The Post-Bubble *Furītā* as Precariat

### Enter the *Furītā*

The next section will provide a more detailed understanding of the term “*furītā*”, which is in fact a relatively modern construction, and as a categorically defined demographic or socio-political sub-culture only dates back to the late 1980s. The term itself is a portmanteau coined from a combination of the English word “free” or “freedom,” and the German word “*arbeiter*,” meaning labourer. It came to popular use in 1987 after being published in a job recruitment magazine known as *Furomu A* (From A) (Cassegard, 2014:4). Later, the *furītā* phenomenon became politically and academically defined in subsequent White Papers published by the Japanese federal government on the subject of current labour conditions, and in part the growing decline of corporate “salaryman” positions.

There are actually a variety of reasons that individuals may be classified as a *furītā*, not all of which focus on the rejection of traditional social norms such as the salaryman lifestyle or changing economic conditions. Some *furītā* see the label as a choice while others see it as a burden; still others see it merely as a transitional period in their life or their career path. Others may not even consider the mantle at all. There are also various institutional, academic, and social definitions. I intend to expand on the various definitions of *furītās*, while focusing on a specific subgroup. I will consider the initial social definition of *furītā* as individuals who, generally speaking, can be said to be taking on that mantle by choice (whether consciously or not), by rejecting social norms, and using alternative spaces to explore non-normative pursuits and express their own

individuality. I will contrast this early definition with the modern neoliberal construction of the *furītā* identity which has broadened in the 21<sup>st</sup> century following the inclusion of large numbers of the precariat working class and homeless into the *furītā* identity.

Historically speaking, the definition of *furītā* was much narrower than its current incarnation which variably encompasses traditional *furītā*, part-time workers, student employees, foreign workers and a host of other marginalized categories, often lumped together under the rubric of “irregular workers.” Following an economic boom beginning in the 1970s Japan continued to exist within an “bubble economy” throughout most of the 1980s. At the same time many middle-class disaffected, mostly male, Japanese youth began to consciously turn away from traditional salaryman roles and company associations. These individuals were the first *furītā*. Choosing instead to opt for more itinerant or entrepreneurial work which they felt was more expressive of their individuality, with few initial social or economic pressures to do otherwise they wanted to enjoy what they saw as “freedom” from traditional roles (Johnstone 1991, Wehrfritz 2001). Perceiving a potential in this trend for the disruption of the Japanese economy and a strong middle-class society, which was already demographically aging (now often defined as super-aging), the Japanese government chose to label this subgroup and attempted to marginalize its status within broader Japanese society. Hommerich notes that the Ministry of Health of Welfare published the the first academic definition of *furītā*:

According to this definition Furītā: are between 15 and 34 years of age,

work in non-regular employment (arubaito<sup>15</sup>, patā) [irregular or part-time], or are currently unemployed, but looking for non-regular employment, and are neither in education nor responsible for a household fulltime. Only men who have worked up to a maximum of 5 years as Furītā and unmarried women are included in this definition (Hommerich, 1991:484).

These efforts were largely effective at connoting the term *furītā* as a pejorative one from the early 1990s until the early 2000s, with *furītā* remaining largely perceived as middle-class male youth who were opting out of the system for their own selfish reasons. It also lends strength to the argument of a fairly large pre-existing precariat class as anyone who had been working longer than five years prior to the burst of the bubble was automatically eliminated from this category, as well as unmarried women.

However, as the post-bubble years continued with little sign of economic relief, academic and socio-political perceptions surrounding this growing subset of Japanese society began to evolve. By 2000, in a paper by Katsuma Yukiko entitled, “*Japanese social security measures to support the retiring aged: From employment insurance and public pension,*” *furītā* were already being positioned as a prevalent problem both politically and economically, comparable to the homeless. She also noted the scant social support systems that were in place to deal with either issue, indicating in the report that “...both homeless and *furītā* are not eligible under statutory measures [for social

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<sup>15</sup> A part-time job which is usually taken on by students while still in high-school or university; can be compared to patā, which is a less temporary or more regular part-time position taken on by adult labourers.

assistance and that] [w]ithout appropriate social assistance measures or family support, they have no means to survive (Katsuma, 2000:17)<sup>16</sup>.

As the economic boon of the 1970s and early 1980s -- which had initially spawned the *furītā* -- faded from memory, and a post-bubble recession (which began at the end of the 1980s) started to sink into the public consciousness, an increasing number of neoliberal policies began to broaden the scope of workers falling within the category of *furītā*. As a result, in 2002 the Japanese government redefined *furītā*. They did this because the number of irregular workers working as *furītā* longer than five years was increasing. This permitted the government to statistically reduce the growing number of *furītā*. Beginning in 2002, men who had been in irregular or part-time employment for more than five years were no longer considered within the official government definition of *furītā* (Hommerich, 2007:484). Even though greater attention was being paid to the issue, the problem was not resolved, and the issue of irregular workers, which the *furītā* have brought attention to, is only growing. As of 2016, nearly half of the country, consists of irregular workers, according to a survey by the *Japan Times*.

At the corporate level, the recategorization of the workforce to allow for greater flexibility also allows employers to avoid paying benefits, committ to provide a minimum of hours, and providing job security. for a side effect of which is increased profits and shareholder returns and rising executive salaries and bonuses. Socio-economically it has relegated increasing numbers of the lower-middle class population to the working class. With much of the Japanese union infrastructure now absorbed within corporations, and

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<sup>16</sup> Despite these early indicators, and efforts to improve middle-class stability and reduce the number of Japanese precariat by 2016 "...only 67.7 percent of irregular workers were covered by unemployment insurance compared with 92.5 percent of full-time workers, 54.7 percent versus 99.3 percent in public health insurance, 52 percent versus 99.1 percent in the public pension scheme for corporate workers, 9.6 percent versus 80.6 percent in retirement allowances and 31 percent versus 86.1 percent in bonuses" (*The Japan Times*, Editorial, January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016).

independent unions so underfunded that they cannot realistically compete with a major corporation, there very few legitimate legal means of petitioning or taking legal actions against one's employer. In part by chance and in part by design, *furitā* have now become nationally and internationally associated with the global precariat movement. This is largely as a result of their engendered affinity towards the Japanese working class and is afar cry from the early *furitā* who were more comparable to upper-class bourgeois.

## A Brief History of Japanese Activism and Labour Movements

Although there was comparatively little attention paid to labour movements in Japan in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century compared to the first three quarters, Japan actually had quite a strong labour movement in the post-war era, which only faded out in the 1970s<sup>17</sup>. With youth protest and cultural movements only beginning to experiment with “new forms of protest and organization” in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Cassegard, 2014:46). Cassegard sees this decline in part as a result of the cultural trauma experienced by the violent actions and subsequent defeat of the “Japanese New Left” (Cassegard, 2014:33-37). The following section will summarise a very brief history of the Japanese labour movement, focusing on aspects which can be seen influencing the contemporary *furītā* identities of activist and precariat.

Mirroring new left movements in Western societies, Japanese movements of the 60s and early 70s were largely student lead movements promoting Western social idealism surrounding issues of equality and civil rights. But this was not always the case, May Day workers’ marches have taken place in Japan since 1920, with only a brief period from 1936 to 1945 when no marches were organized. As early as 1946, labour unrest began to emerge with general strikes taking place, organized by one of the first post-war national labour unions -- *Sanbetsu*, or *Zen Nippon Sangyo-betsu Rodo Kumiai Kaigi* (All Japan Congress of Industrial Unions) which had recently formed in 1945 (Crosscurrents, 2003).

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<sup>17</sup> This coincided with lessened economic pressures as the country’s economy began to ramp up and it further opened up its borders. Japan had seen travel, economic, and cultural exchange tightly restricted by the both the transitional American occupation and later the Japanese government between the 1940s and 1960s.

However, despite a strong start, anti-communist propaganda and government “red” purges of communist sympathizers weakened the union over time, positioning the companies to establish relations with more moderate unions, usually of their own construction (Crosscurrents, 2003). *Sanbetsu*<sup>18</sup> called off its plans for a national strike in 1947 and shortly thereafter its momentum faded, leaving public and private sector employees somewhat in the lurch and eventually increasing tensions to a boiling point. Post-war labour tensions reached their highest in 1952, when, on a day Japanese refer to as “Bloody May Day,” New Left protestors clashed violently with police. The police responded by releasing tear gas, then firing into the crowd with pistols resulting in at least three deaths, including one policeman, as well as over 400 injuries and over 1200 arrests. Japanese and foreign newspapers alike touted the protestors as violent communists at the time and attributed the deaths and injuries to the labour movement (*The New York Times*, 2002).

These types of violent and unruly protests became increasingly commonplace throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Over time, students began to lead the organizing, creating informal networks, operating on campuses and staging sit-ins and protests that often drew stern reactions from the police and the Japanese government. While labour protests were still an issue through the 1950s and 1960s, student lead protests began to revolve around government policy, particularly the US-Japan Mutual Cooperation treaty (Jesty, 2015), so-called “Anti-Japanese-ism” global military action and civil rights issues, amongst others. While New Left groups increasingly radicalized; tensions continued to rise and sectarian infighting became commonplace. This culminated in the murder of

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<sup>18</sup> A portmanteau of Zen Nippon Sangyo-betsu Rodo Kumiai Kaigi, the “All Japan Congress of Industrial Unions”.

several members of *Rengō Sekigun* (lit. The United Red Army) by fellow members for not expressing enough fanatical devotion to the movement in what became known as the *Asama sansō jiken* (lit. the Asama Mountain Retreat Incident) (Cassegard, 2014:35).

Extreme radicalization of the New Left coincided with the renewal of the US-Japan Mutual Cooperation Treaty, which in turn led to an economic resurgence within the Japanese economy and created the conditions for the economic bubble of the late 1970s and 1980s. As a result of these factors, other socio-economic changes, and a burgeoning middle-class, the labour movement saw a stagnant period for student and labour throughout most of the 1970s and 1980s, including decreasing numbers and as Cassegard sees it, a student protest movement which was increasingly viewed as shameful by both its participants and the general public. Cassegard notes “to explain the traumatic outcome of the defeat of radical protest movements in Japan, it is not enough to point to the magnitude of their failure... movements not only failed to achieve any substantial goals ... [such as] stopping the security treaty with the US or bringing down the government, but also lost public support though its unappealing behaviour” (Cassegard, 2014:36). Cassegard seems to see the 1980s as a relatively stagnant period for Japanese youth activism. While this may be true in certain cases, Cassegard notes the labour movement and student protest movement did see marked declines in activity as a result of radicalization during the 1970s. There were in fact a variety of protests movements still active in the 1980s, particularly the women’s rights movement as well as the Japan-Korea Solidarity Movement.

As Japan entered the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, more and more workers across the employment spectrum were feeling pressure to work longer hours for less pay and little-to-no job

security. These workers were increasingly marginalized by changing government and corporate policies, and, as a result, individuals began to organize. In 2004 the “General Freeters’ Labour Union,” more popularly known as the “General Freeters’ Union,” began to incorporate as a means of organizing and representing disparate groups of workers and unions alike within the world’s largest metropolis (General Freeters Labour Union, 2017). These groups included not only the traditional form of *furītā* as “dreamers, but also “activists”, as well as the homeless, long-term part-time workers<sup>19</sup>, foreign workers, and other marginalized groups.

As Cassegard points out, the issue of *furītā* both politically and academically was of little interest or concern when it was largely comprised of middle-class disaffected youth, but as more and more marginalized groups began to associate with the mantle and in turn organize, increasingly more political and social attention was paid. In part, this is possibly as a result of Japanese legislation which dictates that if even one employee from a company is a member of any union, the employer must negotiate with that union. Organizations such as the Tokyo Freeter’s Union or the Tokyo Water Trade Union represent employees from numerous and diverse companies, including several areas which often operate outside of the spectrum of unions such as non-profit organizations and brothels.

While not as violent as the movements of the 1950s and 1960s, Japan’s labour movement today has seen comparatively similar treatment since at least the early 2000s, as was evinced in the clash between protesters and police resulting in arrests on May Day 2006 (Reiko 2006, O’Day 2013). Beginning as early as 2004, groups identifying with the

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<sup>19</sup> Especially if a part-timer has spent five years or more in that position.

mantle of *furitā* began to organize their own May Day marches to draw attention to the growing pressures and precarious nature of employment in the country. Many of these early marches and events were organized by the Tokyo based “General Freeter’s Union” which organized a rally on May Day 2006 and arranged to have a DJ playing from the back of a truck at the party which would happen at the conclusion of the march. Following a confrontation with the police the DJ was eventually arrested on the charge of climbing onto the back of a truck for a purpose other than to unload cargo.

Similar arrests and harassment took place on May Day 2008 in Fukuoka city, the largest city on Japan’s South Island, *Kyūshū*. Protestor arrests have been effective at reducing dissenters’ ability to organize. The DJ arrested in 2006 turned down subsequent offers to play at demonstrations directly citing his fear of being fired from his current job if he were arrested again. This not only affects those who are arrested but has had ripple effects on others who fear the possibility of arrest for merely attending an event or demonstration, further marginalizing those who identify, or are identified, as *furitā* (Uchida, Schmidt-Altmann and Eswein, 2013). Despite these disincentives, marchers flocking to the *furitā* mantle continue to organize annual marches which continue to draw heavy police presence.

## The *Furītā* as a Subculture and then as a Community

The *furītā* as a cultural form has evolved since it first came into being in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Initially a disparate group aligned only by their shared values and attitudes to work, they eventually became a formally defined subsection of the Japanese demographic with initial academic definitions in the early 1990s. Since then, the *furītā* has become a well, if not overly, defined subculture as defined by Sarah Thornton (Gender and Thornton, 1992). As it grows to encompass an increasingly large population demographic it begins to border along the lines of a community as defined by Vered Amit (2002). The following section will further develop this notion and outline the growth of the *furītā* from a subculture towards a community.

Thornton sees subtle, yet significant differences between sub-cultures, communities, the public, and the masses; differences which when considered in relation to the *furītā*, show marked changes since the 1980s to the ways in which *furītā* can be defined within the broader context of Japanese society as a whole. It is hard to argue against the fact that, at least throughout the 1980s the freeter could be solidly placed within the category of a sub-culture. As Thornton notes:

...those groups identified as subcultures have tended to be studied apart from their families, and in states of relative transience [and] it is also assumed that there is something innately oppositional about subcultures... subcultures are often more characterized as appropriating parts of the city for their street (rather than domestic) culture (Gelder and Thornton, 1997:2).

*Furītā* of the 1980s were generally middle-class male youth who came from affluent families where the salaryman patriarch could support these youth to indulge in expressing themselves through fashion. This is a post-materialist sensibility as youth were not struggling to meet their material needs, but could “afford” to indulge in other activities, including consumerist self-expression. At the same time, they were increasingly viewed in a pejorative context by the Japanese public in part as a result of government initiatives, and in part because of the break from hegemonic roles which the *furītā* represented through their individualism and “freedom” from lifetime salaryman models.

This capacity for postmaterialist ideologies informed the “freedom” initially associated with the concept. But as the bubble burst and a deep recession engulfed the Japanese economy, Japanese companies began to abandon “tradition,” leaning towards a more flexible workforce with less responsibility on the employer to provide benefits such as a pension or sick leave. This falls in line with Cassegard’s analysis of changing perceptions and social constructs surrounding the 1980s and 1990s *furītā* identities and those in the 2000s, noting that:

...in the late 1980s, when a sense of affluence was widespread freeters tended to be looked upon as independent minded and perhaps spoiled young people valuing free time more than the drudgery of salaried employment... [though] over time the term increasingly came to connote cheap flexible and insecure labour lacking the security and benefits of regular work (Cassegard, 2014:4).

The breaking of the bubble also impacted individual identity as the term *furītā* began to be more broadly defined. While still often disparate individuals and

organizations appropriating alternative space and existing as an oppositional subculture, the attitudes to work stayed the same, yet the values behind them shifted. Instead of spoiled, selfish, itinerant youth, in ‘the dreamer’ era, depictions of the *furitā* by the media, public and government changed. This occurred as more and more irregular workers who were actively seeking full time employment and salaryman positions began associating with the mantle of *furitā*. Cassegard states that “during the 1990s freeter activism developed in a relatively submerged fashion with little open protest but much experimentation in style, ideology and in the use of alternative space” (Cassegard, 2014:7). *Furitā* culture continued and continues to exist in a sectarian fashion, however beginning in the late 1990s and 2000s *furitā* began to organize in different factions and incorporate large demographic varieties of Japanese irregular workers into their ranks.

As the demographic of *furitā* became an increasingly populous segment of the Japanese population, numerically if not statistically, I would argue that while the subcultural aspects remained the strongest element in the 1990s, by the 2000s, in certain areas around Japan *furitā* communities began to form. These communities were geographically local in the cases of large metropolises like Tokyo (Freedom and Survival House) or Fukuoka, but increasingly became dislocated and virtual as online communities and technology developed and grew at the same time. Vered Amit notes similar trends, first identified by Benedict Anderson (1983/1991), around evolving, geographically disparate, “imagined communities” in relation to nationalism and print media. The communities “relied on the capacity of a multitude of who would never meet face to face, or even know each other personally, to nonetheless imagine themselves

through mediation of mass printing a part of the same community” employing either official or social discourses (Amit, 2002:6).

While college campuses were still a common venue for organization as they had been in the 1960s and 1970s, local *furitā* unions also began to represent disparate groups of irregular employees and homeless individuals. Initially rallying under the mantle of PAFF (Part-Timer, Arbeiter, Freeter and Foreign Worker) they eventually evolved into a Tokyo based union FZRK, or *Furitā Zenpan Rōdō Kumiai* (*lit.* The *Furitā* General Labour Union), also known as the previously discussed “General Freeter’s Union.” Beginning as a loose collective in the early 2000s, the union began to organize meetings and rallies, including May Day marches, in and around the Tokyo area. At around the same time loosely structured, but geographically local and/or virtual communities also began to grow in other parts of Japan, particularly in Fukuoka city and the surrounding area.

As localized protests began occurring on a national level the government began to take notice and in an effort to categorize the phenomenon created a statistical demographic definition. In doing so, they opened the doors for the conflation of the term with a wide variety of irregular employees, who over time began to organize among their own worker cohorts and spread the ideas and ideals of the *furitā* and the precariat as one (General Freeter’s Labour Union, 2008). In doing so they began to take on qualities which emulate aspects of Marc Edelman’s New Social Movements (NSMs) (2001). Edelman states, citing Touraine (1988), that one of the main aspects that define NSMs is a “central conflict,” which, he feels, in post-industrial societies, has exceeded the Marxist struggle between labour and capital. The focus of NSMs instead, is on a struggle to affect

a “way of life” and in so doing, to “affect the relations of domination characteristic of the “way of life” (Edelman, 2001:288). However, Touraine excludes from social movements those which are directed at the state and feels that NSMs movements have put labour struggles behind. Both of these ideas conflict with the current *furītā* as precariat identity. Instead, it would seem that the contemporary *furītā* represents an amalgam of these forms, combining bubble era post-materialism with the material concerns of the precariat.

Today the term *furītā* is used to incorporate irregular workers of all kinds, representing from 2% to as much as 40% percent of the national labour force. depending on how the term is utilized. Given the vast difference in these percentages, a better understanding of the term is necessary to avoid confusion. If that latter percentile is indeed the correct, this would confirm the rapid emergence of a broad and perhaps the most populous demographic segment of the Japanese labour force. If *furītā* truly represent as much as 40% of the working population, they are well-situated to serve a critical role as advocates for Japanese irregular workers within the public sphere, and as such, as legitimate representatives of the precariat.

## Cultural Representations in Contemporary Japanese Media

Due to the constraints of this project<sup>20</sup>, which did not allow for travel to Japan to conduct a full ethnographic study, I have chosen instead to include a media analysis incorporating two programs which attempt to characterize both the salaryman and *furitā* identity respectively. Each program is broadly popular among the general public in its own right, one originating from a bestselling novel, which in turn became an immensely popular miniseries, and the other originating from a nationally bestselling *manga*<sup>21</sup> which was then developed into an internationally distributed television series. Each in their own way provides a sense of the popular perspective on the identities of the salaryman and *furitā* by the general public and by those whom the public has arguably deemed approachable and relatable by virtue of their economic success.

Japanese television drama's, or テレビドラマ (*terebi dorama*)<sup>22</sup>, are a serialized form of television shows which air on a seasonal basis during one of the four annual ratings seasons in Japan, mirroring the calendrical seasons. They have more similarity to the North-American mini-series format than they do to prime-time television dramas in the United States and Canada, and usually last one season only, not unlike some British television series. The subject matter of the Japanese *dorama* has shifted over the years to accommodate the changing values and attitudes of the broader Japanese viewing public, and the most popular are often referred to as *torendi dorama* (trendy drama). In this way contemporary *dorama* provides a window into the changing tastes of the Japanese

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<sup>20</sup> Time and funding.

<sup>21</sup> A popular Japanese form of graphic novel.

<sup>22</sup> For more on the history of the Japanese television drama see *The Dorama Encyclopedia: A Guide to Japanese TV Drama Since 1953* (2003), by Jonathan Clements and Motoko Tamamura.

majority, with ratings providing some insight into any given production's broader accessibility. In the following pages I analyse two contemporary Japanese dramas as they relate to changing values and attitudes surrounding employment and the salaryman ideology; *Freeter Ie o Kau*, and *Saboriman Amata ni Kantaro*. At face value, they represent two very different forms of *dorama*. The former delves deeply into the national crisis of identity Japan currently faces in relation to *furītā* as experienced and exemplified by the trials and tribulations of an otherwise non-descript lower-middle class family living in Tokyo. The latter focuses on an aloof salaryman named Kantaro, through whom we get a glimpse into the motivations behind the work ethic of the modern-day salaryman, while at the same time trying to reconcile that with traditional rhetoric surrounding employment.

*Freeter Ie o Kau* is an hour long *dorama*, based on the novel by the same name by author Arikikawa Hiro, which aired on Fuji-TV from October 19<sup>th</sup> to December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2010. It was followed roughly a year later by a special based on the hit series, which aired on October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011. It garnered exceptionally high ratings and won several awards which, in part, attests to its resonance amongst the Japanese viewing population. The novel itself was an assigned project by the author's publisher, who had wanted her to submit a work that would address the *furītā* trend which was attracting increasing governmental measures as well as public scrutiny. While it does not allow for autobiographic insight into the phenomenon, it does provide a critical response which is broadly representative of public conceptions of the issue, based on the research by the author.

The protagonist of the story, Take Seiji, is not a *furītā* by choice or ideology but is thrust into the role by his indifference towards work and is trapped in the role by a combination of neoliberal economic trends and socio-cultural tradition. The implication of the show, and its subtitle: “Putting the family back together,” imply that the traditional family model has been broken, in large part by the emergence of the son as a *furītā*. He is seen socio-culturally as unreliable as a result of his resignation from his first employer. In an economy where there are more applicants than positions, employers are able to disregard his application immediately as a result of having numerous equally qualified candidates. As a result, Seiji enters into a deep depression which has ripple effects throughout his family and causes him to become introspective about his new status and its meaning within broader Japanese society.

Seiji attended a decent university and was able to get an entry level position in a small firm in Tokyo but quits almost immediately when he finds that as a new employee, his advice is not wanted. This is not abnormal in a Japanese firm where new employees are expected to toe the line, and Seiji’s recommendations could be viewed by other Japanese firm workers, as selfish and not taking into account tradition and the wants or needs of the group. His individuality is viewed as selfish by his employees, as is exemplified in an early scene in the first episode where Seiji, who consumes less at the regular company after-work drinking gathering, suggests that monetary contributions to the groups social functions are equivalent to one’s consumption during those functions, an idea which is not looked upon kindly by his superiors. Unfortunately for Seiji it is not as easy to find another job as a salaryman, even in a small firm, and he is immediately relegated to the ranks of irregular employment in a variety of Japanese service positions

such as working in a convenience store, supermarket, or department store. Seiji manages to quickly run the gamut of contemporary Japanese socio-economic malaise as it relates to youth, moving from one menial position to another, showing no sign of corporate loyalty, and eventually becoming a *hikokimori*, or shut-in, itself a prevalent national problem perceived to be associated with Japanese youth culture. It is this final relegation to complete isolationism, alongside some judicious bullying by the neighbor, that pushes Seiji's mother over the edge into a state of psychosis. Seiji's father, Seiichi, blames his son for his mother's state and thus begins Seiji's journey of restitution. His goal is ultimately to bring his family together through the vehicle of his journey to buy a new house for his parents and himself.

Without digressing too far into the minutia of the show, much of which can be related metaphorically and allegorically to the fluctuating nature of contemporary Japanese socio-economic structures, there are two relationships I would like to draw attention to. One of these is the relationship between Seiji and his father, and the other is Seiji's relationship with his co-workers, with whom he works at the construction company where he finally finds his "corporate family." While there is ample allegory to draw from in this series, I chose these two aspects, as Seiji's relationship to his father demonstrates the socio-cultural and economic generational gap, but also provides, through the perspectives and advice of Seiji's father, an understanding of the contemporary expectations of the Japanese middle class as the lowest percentile of their class becomes socio-economically precarious. Seiji's relationship to his co-workers on the other hand, directly and indirectly demonstrates how the new social order must be enmeshed into the old. Each co-worker represents a cultural stereotype within Japanese

blue-collar society, whether that be the brash young Toyokawa Teppei, who was a lackluster student from a blue-collar family and felt that the trades were his only option in a myopically focused manner, or the secretary looking to marry her way out of her job, Karai Koshino, who one day dreams of marrying above her station and becoming a full-time housewife, even if that means partnering with a young lawyer who pays little, if any, attention to her.

The fact that each of Seiji's co-workers embodies a commonly found trope within the highly stratified Japanese socio-economic classes that make up Japanese society as a whole serves several purposes within the show. One purpose is that it allows a variety of demographics to "see themselves" in the characters on screen, thereby increasing relatability and viewership. However, it also allows for the reinforcement of expectations surrounding access to the public sphere, as well as promoting acceptable forms of personal expression. This point is exemplified in an afterwork scene which finds the group of employees at the construction company out drinking with one another at a local bar. One of Seiji's young coworkers, Shinji Tejima, takes offense at Seiji's middle-class elitism and disdain for the blue-collar trades. Shinji comes from a blue-collar background and is taking night classes in order to become a sort of qualified engineering technician, not exactly a university degree, but a professional certification which would improve his socio-economic station. He obviously dislikes Seiji from their first meeting and it is implied that this stems from Seiji's background and attitude, and unlike the other coworkers, he is resentful of Seiji's attitude that having to accept a job in the blue-collar class was a step down for him.

The antagonism felt by Shinji comes to a head in the afterwork scene, where Shinji begins to berate Seiji, extolling the virtues of a blue-collar existence and a worker's civil and social right to equality. However, instead of support from his fellow blue-collar colleagues Shinji is quickly silenced by the older workers in the group, who then remind everyone that it is the satisfaction of a job well done that should be reward enough and Shinji should be careful not to be too proud. He is quickly redressed, serving to remind everyone in the group of the nobility found in the unquestioning loyalty to company and vocation, with the message being that pride should only be found in a job well done not in individual achievement. This scene enforces the individual characters' tropes through exploration of their motivations, but it also serves to remind the viewer that in Japanese society the serving class, be they in retail, restaurants, labour, or any form of customer service, must defer to the consumer, particularly if the consumer is situated on a higher rung of the socio-economic ladder.

Seiji's relationship with his father is spelled out more directly and with far less subtext than that of the relationship between Seiji and his coworkers. It is evident from the outset that they have a strained relationship, and it is only through Seiji's vocational journey that he comes full circle to realize that his earliest ambitions, in so far as employment is concerned, saw him admiringly following in his father's footsteps. The journey to familial reconciliation is long, and at some points drawn out, peppered throughout with moments which demonstrated not only his father's detachment from his family as well as contemporary working conditions, but also his stubbornness which is matched only by Seiji's himself.

Throughout the early episodes Seiji's father initially presents a stern, taciturn figure who rarely voices his opinion openly and instead visibly demonstrates his dismay for his only son through his physical actions and reactions. His character is initially one which is emblematic of post-war middle-class Japanese values and traditions. Over the course of the series he manages to come around as Seiji independently realizes that his father's traditional notions, at least as they come to work, may not be so out of place in today's world, and that he too can take pride in his work in construction. At the same time his father comes around, albeit reluctantly and with a tempered approach, to some of the more basic facts of contemporary working life. In an uncharacteristic interaction Seiji's father actually states, not in so many words, that in today's economic climate it is advantageous for the family to have a second income to be provided by Seiji's future wife, a notion that would have been unheard of in Seiichi's day in a middle-class household and the invitation of such would have been seen as a socio-economic step down.

The show serves to reinforce past traditions and ensure their incorporation in the face of dramatically changing working environments pressed by neoliberal deregulation and negative economic forecasts. It serves to adapt engrained perspectives into a contemporary model in an effort to preserve the "Japanese way of life." At the same time, it does present some concessions about contemporary working life in the relegation of Seiji from the middle-class to the working-class as well as the resultant realization of Seiichi that in today's world one's wife may need to work longer or have a full-time career of her own to supplement her husband's income.

*Saboriman Amata ni Kantaro* is far from the alliterative sub-textual drama that is *Freeter Ie o Kau*. It does not attempt a broad approach but instead focuses securely on a comfortably middle-class salaryman who, while outwardly conforming to acutely typical norms, inwardly leads an emotive and literary double life. At the same time, it still manages to touch upon the malaise surrounding employment that permeates young Japanese working society, however, from a much more privileged position. There is almost a pervasive use of the idea of playing “hooky” from work, combined with an outwardly overpowering persona which attests to traditional norms in an effort to afford one’s secret personal, or individual, passions.

In Kantaro’s case his personal, and very secret, obsession is “sweets,” but more specifically Japanese sweets that in some way represent a traditional aspect of Japanese culture or history through their provenance, recipe, or locale, and which are exemplified through the vehicle of his quest to obtain whichever type of sweet is being showcased in each episode. The portrayal of contemporary Japanese working culture insofar as those whose occupations are still comfortably middle-class is presented in stark contrast to the hyper-stylized and surreal dreamscapes which are associated with his enjoyment of sweets. Through their consumption he is able to leave his hyper-typical everyday life and his consciousness is transported into the hyper-stylized dreamscape of that episode where he becomes an anthropomorphized version of that episode’s sweet. There are several common themes that run between the individual dreamscapes, which themselves are not connected from episode to episode with the exception of their stylization, but instead present individualized and conceptually bound universes for the exploration of flavour, texture and colour.

At the same time the anthropomorphized sweet that is Kantaro often finds it/himself interacting with distorted versions of his colleagues from work, and in doing so, exploring his burgeoning love interest with one of his co-workers, Dobashi Kanako, portrayed by Iishikawa Ren. Ren presents both the love interest and antagonist Kanako, with her commitment to exposing Kantaro as the author of the popular online food blog “Amablo<sup>23</sup>” battling with her growing interest in Kantaro as a romantic partner as well as a kindred spirit. In his public life, Kantaro is an exceptionally dedicated salaryman with an overly keen attention to detail and planning. Unbeknownst to his coworkers, however, his work and life personas are part of a calculated plan to enjoy the maximum amount of sweets possible. Kantaro is vexed, amongst exclusively, by the idea of being unable to sample the wide variety of sweets available in Tokyo. Kantaro, in turn, documents these pursuits on his personal food blog. Kantaro, somewhat like Seiji, finds himself in the position of having recently quit his job to pursue his dreams. Unlike Seiji, however, he did so in a calculated manner in order to allow himself more free time to sample sweets by playing “hooky” during the sales calls he made at his new job at a publishing wholesaler. Never infringing on his work, Kantaro’s passion is instead managed within his employment in order to achieve that goal.

I feel that a part of what this show represents is the recognition of the growing predilection among young middle-class Japanese people towards prioritizing indulgence in individual pursuits for personal satisfaction and/or gain over concerns of lifetime employment. Kantaro’s story incidentally spells out how even though a workplace may seem outwardly traditional, even its older and more established employees have their

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<sup>23</sup> Another portmanteau, this time of *amai*, meaning sweet, and “blo” for blog.

own personal aspirations which in some cases they needed to sublimate in order to meet more traditional stereotypes. But the contemporary zeitgeist has even these older employees bending traditional stereotypes, such as when the department boss takes Dobashi out for coffee to introduce her to an associate who could fulfill her vocational dreams of being a creative advertising professional. In true filial fashion Dobashi sublimes these dreams in favour of working diligently for the boss who believes in her. This interaction all takes place while playing hooky from work, which the boss brushes off as a sort of offsite business meeting, further validating the notion of hooky which is present throughout the series. As well, it reinforces the concept that even though one's employer is still the beneficiary of filial piety and a dedicated work ethic, there still must be room in one's life for personal and/or individual pursuits and pleasures.

Together I think the shows both manage to reinforce traditional archetypes while at the same time permitting the most minimal of allowances in relation to changing attitudes towards work among Japanese young people. The salaryman is still seen as the ideal role for a young man, and the secretary/part-time worker to homemaker route still chosen by the majority of young women (albeit with a shift towards a longer career outside the home for young women). However, the idea of personal pursuits being an integral part of personal life is a dramatic change from the Japanese perspective, though it may seem a minimal one to a Western perspective.

There is also the introduction of the notion of increased female participation in the workforce, as seen in Manami Chiba's pursuit of a professional career as a project manager and technician as well as Dobashi Kanako's pursuit of a creative position within the publishing and advertising world. Both series manage to depict minor, through

arguably monumental changes (in terms of their precedence), within the 20<sup>th</sup> century including the notion of family which extends into the corporate world, “the corporate family” and employment projects as opposed to employment as an end in itself. This is accomplished with the introduction of the notion of changing careers in order to be able to accommodate non-work-related goals such as self-expression and self-indulgence, as well as the engagement of increased female labour participation outside of the secretarial pool.

## A Statistical Analysis of Changing Working Conditions in Japan

After a thorough review of relevant literature on *furitā* and related issues, for instance the Japanese precariat, female employment in Japan, Japanese labour movements, and the salaryman, as well as contemporary pop-culture representations of these groups, one might very easily come to the conclusion that the issue of the contemporary *furitā* was a national crisis, matched only in seriousness by the issue of homelessness in Japan. This extent to which this comparison has been repeated in the media demonstrates the shifting levels of “security” among members of Japan’s employed population, and may signal an emerging crisis of identity for many Japanese people. For the first time in the post-war period, the middle-class is beginning to shrink following decades of neoliberal reform. But the question I began to ask myself when I looked at the issue statistically was, do the *furitā* actually represent a significant change socio-economically. And the answer that I found in a historical analysis of the Japanese government’s own numbers, must be, no, they do not.

In point of fact the real socio-economic upheaval that has taken place in relation to the labour force is in the realm of the female working class, the self-employed and those who work in family businesses and in primary industries such as agriculture and forestry. The statistical variation in any of those three categories dwarfs the effect that a “stagnant” economic period has had on *furitā*, which demographically speaking are mostly exemplified in slight statistical changes among lower middle-class male Japanese between the ages of 15 and 25 (See appendix, tables 3-4). Ideologically speaking, the economic independence or security, which, in a simplistic sense, is at the heart of the *furitā* ideology, is actually itself quite traditional despite what most Japanese would tend

to think after years of indoctrination surrounding the salaryman. And, even as the economic conditions changed and neoliberal reforms took away the corporate social support networks, the views surrounding the salaryman have for the most part gone unchanged.

While it is true that the irregular working class is growing, the rate and sustainability of this growth is uncertain, with some indications that the trend may be stabilizing or even slightly reversing. After years of neoliberal reform and cultural indoctrination surrounding the salaryman ideal almost all Japanese participating in the labour force are now employees, with very few holdouts that own their own business or work in a family business. Another effect of these neoliberal changes is that executives in Japanese firms are bringing home more of the company profits than they have in the past, while “Japan’s average nominal income is largely unchanged from 30 years ago;” which is to say, the richest Japanese are much better off (Maygar and Dormido:2017).

This in and of itself has only become a problem following the period between 1989 and 1998 when companies were “reconsidering labour costs, including welfare” (Maygar and Dormido:2017). As a result of the rapid reductions in corporate welfare, which had offered all sorts of stipends and bonuses for salaried employees as well as pensions, increasing financial pressure is being placed on public social welfare systems. These systems were originally designed to provide old age benefits for those who were independently employed, primarily in agriculture, forestry and other rural based industries. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, as these sectors declined, and Japan emerged as a technology and manufacturing focused economy, ownership was consolidated in an elite class. As more Japanese moved from rural to urban environments, often leaving family

businesses behind and becoming employees in the process, more individuals became dependant on a corporate welfare system that they presumed would last a lifetime.

In the post war years, almost half of the population was what could be described as independently employed, made up of the statistical categories of those who were self-employed and those who were employed in a family business. Now, fifty years later, that category has all but winked out of existence and roughly 87% of the Japanese labour force is classified as an employee, meaning they work for some larger corporate firm or business (Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare, 2011). Ostensibly they have no personal stake in these firms, but the dominant cultural conceptions, co-defined by private industry, particularly the pre-war *zaibatsu* and post-war *keiretsu*<sup>24</sup>, and the post-war Japanese government, has engendered within them a sense of filial piety, or samurai-like devotion to their company. Post-war Japanese workers extended the notion of family into the corporate world, hoping that the business family would support them for a lifetime. For the first time in Japanese history, opportunities for upward class mobility seemed boundless as the middle class grew at unprecedented and unequalled rates. The predominant ideology held that salarymen were not entrepreneurs, and respectable, socially responsible Japanese boys should endeavour to grow up to be salarymen.

As a result, over the past 30 to 40 years unemployment has increased five-fold, though admittedly that is from roughly 1% to roughly 5%, while independently employed individuals have decreased by over 70%. Now, less than 13% of the Japanese public are independently employed as of 2009, with just 9.5% being self-employed and only 3.2% working in family businesses (Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare, 2011). This is

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<sup>24</sup> *Zaibatsu* were pre-war familiarly operated and organized companies which dominated the Japanese economy and held significant political weight, they were succeeded in the post-war era by the more corporatized conglomerates known as *keiretsu*.

compared to 1961 when nearly 23% of the labour force worked, or almost a quarter of the working population spent their day in a family owned business, while another 21.9% were self-employed and completely independent (Ibid). Only 55.1 percent of the working population, or just over half, was classified as employees, and unemployment rates stayed steady around 1.5% (Ibid). What this says to me, at least insofar as *furitā* are concerned, is that self-employment and entrepreneurship are actually traditional forms of employment that were largely extinguished over the past 50 years, first as a result of industrialization, urbanization, and economic boom, and then as a result of neoliberal economic deregulation spurred in part by the large conglomerates, known as *keiretsu* which employ vast swaths of Japanese salarymen.

## Conclusion

In the past, as today, most types of irregular work were the domain of women, students, foreigners, and those who held socially unpreferable jobs who were referred to as *burakumin* (lit. Hamlet/Village People), or others who were relegated to the depths of the well defined Japanese social hierarchy. This was and is a hierarchy where the most senior salarymen fill the top positions. One of the lowest social positions is held by the *burakumin* and while the translation most directly denotes one of rural origin, its meaning in urban settings is often used to refer those who either have a historical connection to, or currently are engaged in, “outcast” employment. This could consist of many occupations considered “tainted,” such as butchers, tanners, or executioners. While historically more common, discrimination of *burakumin* still exists today and many find work amongst the *yakuza*<sup>25</sup> with the former director of the Japanese Public Security Intelligence Agency estimating that nearly sixty percent of contemporary *yakuza* come from the *burakumin* class (Sugamura:2006).

In 2009 when I worked, albeit unknowingly, as a *furītā* I managed a small bar in the Higashiyama-Nijo area of Kyoto which sat right across from a *danchi* (lit. group land) populated largely by *burakumin*. My home, which sat above the bar, was over 400 years old with little renovation over the years, and there were no bathing facilities. Instead, I would make daily trips to the *sentō*, or public bath. Not wanting to spend 800 to 1000 yen per day on bathing<sup>26</sup>, I quickly discovered that there were much cheaper *sentō* in the area who charged less as they were generally older, but also allowed *burakumin* and Japanese

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<sup>25</sup> Yakuza are generally not allowed in most public bathing facilities know as *sentō* or spas known as *onsen*, ostensibly as the tattoos they sport are considered offensive in Japanese society, though more likely, it is class discrimination.

<sup>26</sup> This would have translated to roughly eight to ten Canadian dollars at the time.

organized criminals known as *yakuza* to frequent them. This class segregation relegated those of the precariat and “untouchable” classes to separate facilities, either as a factor of income or social status. It was impossible for me to tell as an outsider, but it may have been that the some of occupants or *burakumin* may have been retired businessmen with inadequate pensions looking for the same economic relieve that I was regardless, without concern for the company.

Views on the irregular working class in Japan have, at least since the *Meiji* period, been in a state of flux. This is particularly true of the post-war period, where there has been the greatest chance for upward mobility in Japanese history. Jiro is an extreme example of how in the post-war period, someone from a small fishing village could eventually rise to become a Tokyo executive through life-long dedication to one’s company. However, since at least the early 2000s the precariat/irregular worker class has grown exponentially, and the prospect of regular employment has declined. As a result, more and more Japanese individuals have begun to identify or to be labeled under the moniker. As well, as a result of the growing women’s labour and rights movements, and a declining birthrate (women do not have to leave work to care for children), more and more women are choosing to remain in employment past their early twenties. To varying degrees there have always been precariat workers in modern Japan. The primary difference today is the prominence of the issue demographically as Japan is at the point where more than half of the population will fall into this category.

When entering into this study I had imagined different conclusions. Emboldened by much of the popular and academic literature surrounding *furītā*, I entered into the project looking to situate this phenomenon, particularly in relation to the national ideal of

the ‘salaryman,’ as well as provide a more extensive statistical analysis of what at the time seemed to be an expansive and exponentially growing problem. The further I delved into the statistics and literature however, the more I began to see issues within the understanding of what exactly constituted a contemporary *furītā*, as well as a confounding lack of focus on what seemed to me to be the more immediate issues which were overshadowed by the excitement and fervour surrounding the *furītā* phenomenon.

What I found was that far from being a national crisis of employment, the crisis gripping Japan in relation to the *furītā* was one of identity. That is not to say that there are no ongoing issues surrounding employment in relation to the irregular workforce in Japan, or the broader “precariat,” but that these issues are being conflated with those surrounding the *furītā*. While it is hard to separate the social from the economic issues of the precariat, it could be argued that the issues facing the *furītā* are more social and post-material in origin, with economics being a less immediate concern. The *furītā*, who have the greatest ability to navigate the Japanese public sphere and garner the most media attention and social support, and whom the original definition was founded upon, are largely educated middle-class Japanese males. However, the mantle from which they have chosen to situate their activists’ movements appropriates the very real precarity of the longstanding Japanese underclass as well as the global precariat and academic and public literature which focuses on it.

Demographically speaking, *furītā* make up a small percentage of the irregular labour force, less than 2% (Hirano, 2005), and an even smaller percentage of the overall precariat which additionally includes those who are homeless and unemployed. The broader precariat in the form of irregular labourers, on the other hand, now make up

almost 50% of the Japanese workforce (*Japan Times*, Editorial, 2016), and they have seen the stability of their employment sharply decline as a result of both neoliberal reframing of their employment since the 1980s as well as several economic downturns or recessions. This underclass has always been present in Japan, a country which is still rigidly socially stratified, with some preconceptions around certain types of employment dating back to feudal times such as the concept of *burakumin*, the untouchable class within the workforce which still exists to this day, though to a lesser extent than in the past. Instead large castes of *burakumin* have been replaced by hoards of irregular workers who have possibly less employment stability than the untouchables of the past, are often unable to contribute to the national pension scheme, and in many cases have to work more than one job to make ends meet.

What all of this says to me is that while in some ways the *furītā* movement is a cyclical extension of past labour and youth activist movements, as well as a direct extension of the 1980s, post-materialist *furītā*-as-dreamer social movement, the effort to define and sanitize this issue has pushed those boundaries by broadening demographic and statistical categorization. As a result, the *furītā* movement has had little trouble in appropriating the mantle of the precariat where few (statistically) *furītā* are actually precarious in the same way that existing irregular workers are, and the majority of the precariat do not fall into the government definition of *furītā*. In doing so they have managed to bring greater attention to the issue of employment equity in Japan, but in turn have had the majority of government aid directed at the lower-middle class instead of among the constant precariat which have a history of being relegated as servants to broader Japanese society. This was accentuated in the post-war boom years as the middle

class grew in an exponential fashion and labour relations and unions became internal to the largest corporations. Union and labour movement activism was at its lowest in the 20<sup>th</sup> century after decades of often violent labour strikes and protests throughout the first half continuing through the post-war years.

The contemporary *furītā*, on the other hand, are demographically made up of lower middle-class male youth from stable families. Most find regular employment, this simply occurs in life than it used to for some males. The biggest changes seem to be occurring among women 25 to 40 and the elderly, both male and female aged 60 plus where statistical increases have been occurring steadily for almost two decades. Both of these factors relate to the neoliberal deregulation put into place following decades of economic recession which has led to corporations abandoning previous familial frameworks and no longer providing stable lifetime employment. Many salarymen have conceded their regular salary increases, either in amount or regularity, and young men are being brought into regular employment positions roughly 10 years later in life on average (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications: Statistics Bureau, 2018).

To fill that gap women are increasingly staying in the workforce longer, and at lower pay than their male counterparts. This is also influencing traditional family household dynamics. As young men find regular employment later, and women work wage-gapped positions, less money is being contributed to the national pension system per household. As that system becomes underfunded, and more and more adults who have not been able to regularly contribute or to maintain a national pension account for other reasons enter into retirement age (in an aging population no less), more and more retiree households are becoming single or dual income irregular work households.

While the two major focuses of social support in relation to employment, the homeless and the *furītā*, are no doubt deserving of public support and continued attention, there are more prevalent issues surrounding employment. This includes the underfunding of the pension system and the increase in female and elderly irregular employment, both of whom statistically experience a wage-gap. As for the situation of the *furītā*, the conflation of the *furītā* ideals in popular and academic literature with the broader precariat and the irregular working class in Japan has muddled the term in my opinion. The original definition was founded in an economic boom and unprecedented social prosperity which may never be experienced in Japan again. The aspect of following one's dreams, I would argue, still holds true when examining the lower-middle class males and females who risk precarity to do so, despite other more, pragmatic options, while still meeting bureaucratic/academic definitions used to categorize an individual as a *furītā*. It is also in these individuals that we see a continuation of the labour and socio-civil rights activism that has managed to bring the issue of *furītā*-ism squarely into the sights of the ruling government. Where is it ranked as a prevalent socio-economic problem as is homelessness. This was accomplished in part owing to a tradition of activism, whereby contemporary activists apply what they have learned from past labour activists.

Appendix: Tables

Table 1 & 2: Female Labour Force Participation (by age-set as a percentage). Charts compiled from data obtained from the Japanese Ministry of International Affairs and Communications: Statistics Bureau, and published on their website under Labour Force Survey Data.

Table 1:

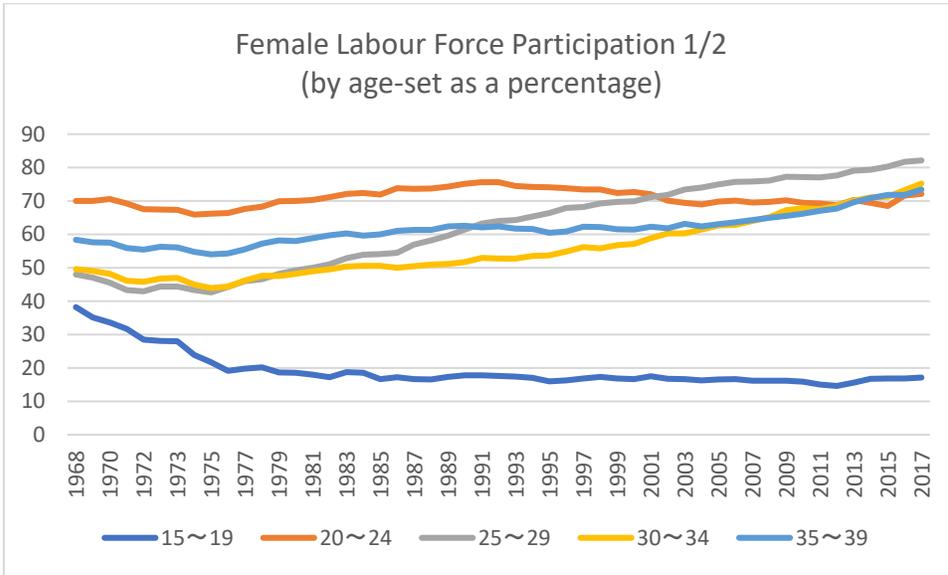


Table 2:

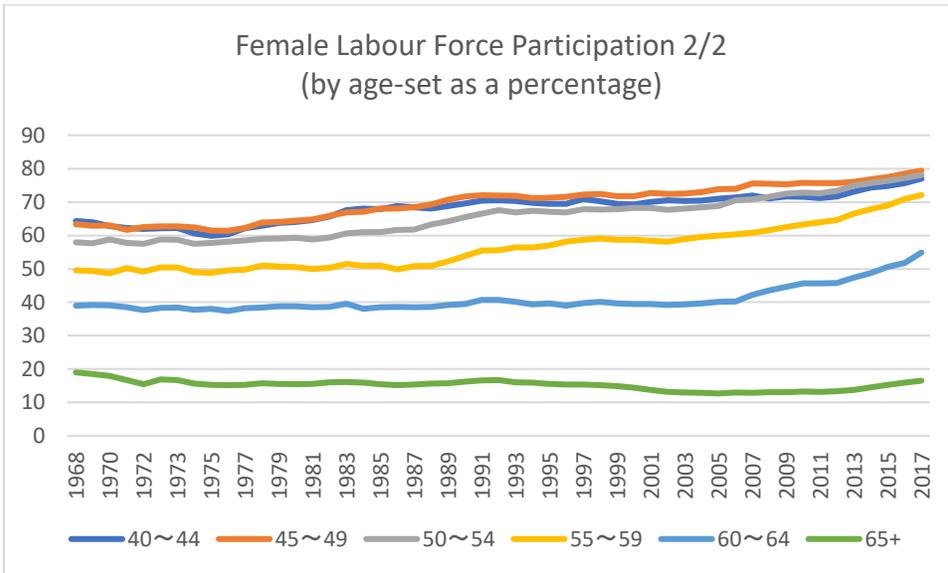
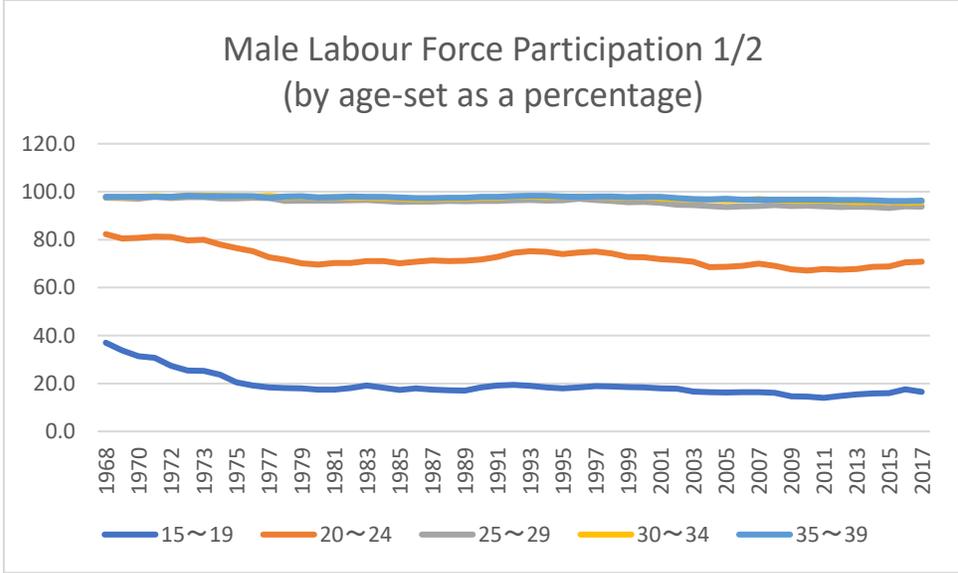
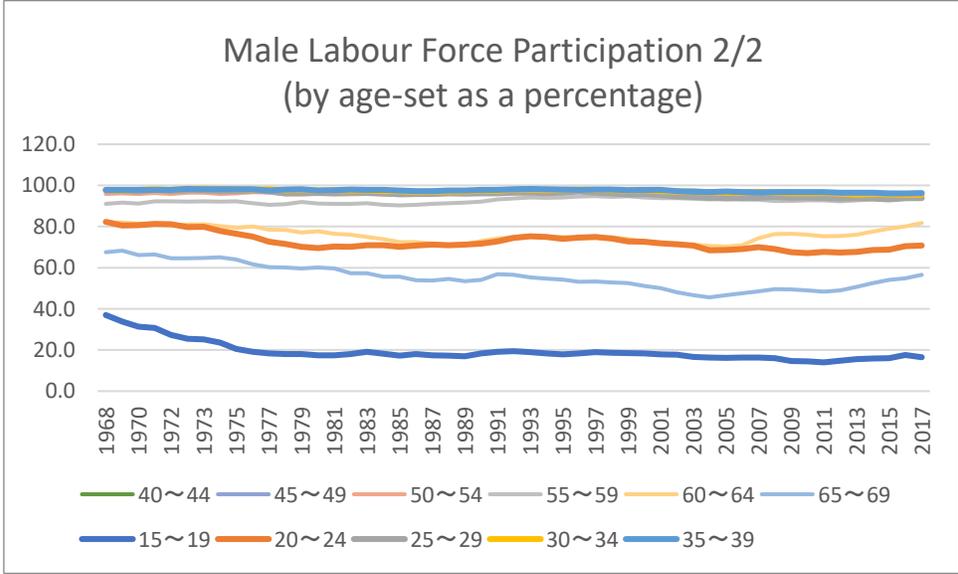


Table 3 & 4: male Labour Force Participation (by age-set as a percentage). Charts compiled from data obtained from the Japanese Ministry of International Affairs and Communications: Statistics Bureau, and published on their website under Labour Force Survey Data.

**Table 3:**



**Table 4:**



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