Students, Slackers, Singles, Seniors, and Strangers:

Transforming a Family-Nation

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To complement the other chapters in this volume that assess new forms of engagement between Japan and Asia and the ways in which processes of Japanization have overtaken processes of Americanization in the region, we look here within Japan itself to identify domestic sites of social institutional reorganization. Given over a decade of economic stasis and retrograde politics, it may seem odd to foresee significant societal changes. Nonetheless, we do believe that there are potentially far-reaching developments emerging in today’s society, driven by domestic, regional, and global forces and with consequences not only for Japan but for its influence in other parts of Asia. And many of these developments are enabled by the break that the decade of the 1990s has created from the mass middle-class society, the conservative politics of prescriptive familism and cultural nationalism, and a government-corporate-led economic agenda of aggregate growth that marked the post-WWII decades.¹

The events that roiled Japan over the decade of the 1990s surprised most analysts. We all witnessed—but few had foreseen—the decomposition of central elements of both the international system and the domestic arrangements that had sustained Shōwa Japan through its postwar decades. The breakup of the Soviet Union, the death of the Shōwa emperor in 1989, the collapse of the 1980s bubble economy into a prolonged economic stasis and recession, the continuing disarray of the post-1955 political system—these and other developments present us in 2004 with a far
more chastened and anxious object of contemplation than the confident Japan of
the late 1980s. What many Japanese have taken to call the “lost decade”
(ushiareta jūnen) now stretches into a new century.

Many argue in retrospect that Japan was only able to recover and prosper in the
near half-century between 1945 and 1990 because it was nurtured by a special and
now-defunct hothouse international political economy that included an undervalued
yen in a dollar-denominated world economy; a U.S. security umbrella in a bipolar
superpower struggle; and an edge in high-value manufacturing technologies in an
era of industrial capitalism. Such analysts conclude that the disappearance of these
conditions precipitated the malaise and crisis in which Japan now lingers. While it is
undeniable that these fundamental shifts had structural consequences, we would
add three further developments that are more domestic in location but equally
significant in shaping the conditions of daily life and individual behavior.

First, mid- to late-twentieth century Japan was ideologically marked by a
historically unique generation, the so-called single-digit Shōwans, those born in the
first nine years of the Emperor Shōwa reign, between 1926 and 1934). This
generation, set in a demographic profile with a youthful bottom-heavy age pyramid,
with stable but low fertility, was marked as rooted in but not responsible for Japan's
fifteen-year Pacific War, and it came of age in a society made youthful by the
immediate postwar baby boom. As the single-digit Shōwans die off, that age
pyramid has begun to reverse, and the larger portion moves up into retirement.
We are still seeing gaps between generations, even as most of the population was
born or mainly raised in the postwar period and even as consumer culture tends to
blend rather than distinguish generational experiences.

Second, in important respects the societal arrangements and inducements that
were consolidated by the mid-1960s have, ironically, proven too successful for their
own good. They have produced what William Steslicke (1987) once called the
"dilemmas of success." The educational arms race (that is, the continuing
escalation of parental investment and student effort to win in the battle for the
limited number of prestigious educational credentials) and the hyper-concentration of resources and population in metropolitan Tokyo are two examples of the power of this mono-centric urban society to focus on one locale—be it an educational apex or a geographical center—as the source of power and value.

Third, many argue that Japan's present arrangements cannot accommodate its present realities. Their own contradictions and resentments have surfaced publicly, and private discontents become public critiques. The population has had enough of an economy that produced "rich Japan, poor Japanese" and a political system that combined Confucian welfare and its stringent demands on families with corrupt cronyism. The government's sloganeering about "expanding leisure," "promoting privatization," "internationalization," and "our beautiful family culture" draws wry smiles from an increasingly cynical citizenry. Of course the rhetoric of social policies has never well matched the lives of the constituencies they claim to serve, and discontent has broken through the polite veneer of official representation, revealing families and individuals who never approximated the "unique and beautiful social culture" politicians extol. These people have found that the unconventional may be the only way ordinary people can survive, convention having served them poorly.

Japan is thus at a moment both of residual dysfunction and of emergent understandings and arrangements. Still, even these three domestic developments do not themselves specify the shifts in people's lives and actions that might actually be producing these restructurings, and that is what we wish to speculate on here. In particular, we want to propose five tendencies of the present that are challenging seriously the social formation of contemporary Japan:

- Among the students, (a) the increasing success of private secondary schools with six-year middle and high school programs to place their students in elite universities and (b) the declining ability of public high schools to find jobs for those of their graduates going to work through the formal job placement procedures that have operated so successfully in recent decades.
• Among young workers, the increasing numbers who choose or are forced to accept part-time and/or temporary employment.
• The rapidly rising percentage of women who are postponing marriage and parenting, many of whom remain living with their parents while continuing to work.
• Among the elderly population, the rising percentages who are living alone or with a spouse for longer periods of their later years.
• Among the large numbers of non-ethnic permanent residents and ethnic Japanese return migrants, a new visibility and assertiveness that are making these “strangers” to the mainstream more familiar in daily life and more effective testament to the fallacy of ethnic homogeneity that centered twentieth-century Japan’s cultural nationalism.

It is risky to speculate on vectors of change, and we certainly do not claim that these five diagnostics exhaust the possibilities. We are intrigued by them, however, because each poses alternatives and exposes contradictions that cannot be easily contained by present arrangements. Students, slackers, singles, seniors, and strangers: five social types whose actions, certainly constrained, rarely collective, and seldom animated by political objectives, nonetheless are harbingers. We must remember of course that they are categories of actors, not social groups; that they differ widely in their room for maneuver and range of choices; and that all five are marginal categories to the ideological mainstream, though less marginal in economic or political terms. But to anthropologists such as ourselves, who have long been concerned with the nature of Japan’s “new middle class” modernity, they signal the waning power of a "mainstream consciousness" to channel aspirations and effort.

I. Japan in a Family Way

We also focus on these particular emergent actions because they all bear on the official representations and everyday realities of families in present-day Japan. It is a truism of any society that families are critical in framing individual lives, but this
point repays attention here because the family has played an especially strategic role in modern Japan, in policy, discourse, and action. That is, even more than other advanced industrial nation-states, twentieth-century Japan has officially and popularly represented itself as a family-nation, in political, economic and social terms and forms (Ochiai 1997). Over the century, these formulations have had different ideological tones (from the aggressively political to the economically stolid) and family has been located in various locations (e.g., the family emperor-state, the corporation as family, and family as social bedrock of the state). Formulations and exhortations of family have even been fundamentally contradictory; sometimes the family form exhorted has been the multi-generational ie and at other times it is the family as nuclear unit (e.g., White 2002).

Family talk however has often been paired with family critique, as increasingly, new motivations, actions and realities among students, singles, slackers, seniors, and strangers send cracks through the bedrock of the ideologically approved family. To protect an image of the family most useful for social policy, the critiques have focused on those who appear to deviate from the model, and thus, in themselves, seem to break up the unit into components, errant or deviant ones. Thus often the critiques tend to ignore the unit of the family itself as a social force and focus on elements of families – youth, women, and the elderly in particular – as paradoxically putting the families to which they belong at risk. The Good Family, the social service institutions, media and politicians agree, should take care of its own, and in doing so, take care of the nation.

For instance, one problem that critics locate in the family is steady downward trend in birthrates, which is affecting the national demographic profile, the economy, schooling, and family life itself. To some, it is evidence of women’s self-sufficiency and power to choose, but to critics it signals a decline in family values and a serious risk to the future of society. The rising rate of the elderly and their increasing dependency on family and society are framed within the falling birthrate as a real burden on revenue-deprived social services in the future. The increase in temporary employment among the young, called “furiitaa” in the press, is taken as a lack of
broader commitment to social responsibility among youth, rather than as produced by the job shortages in the permanent employment sector. And, continuing the theme of selfishness among the young, the “parasite singles,” unmarried young people who live with their parents past the usual entry into marriage or bachelor independence, shout “Immaturity! Lack of self-sufficiency!” to some observers. As for the husbands and fathers in such families, they alone appear immune from most criticism: hard-working and selfless, they continue to provide the resources to maintain at least the image of family, or so it is said.

Among the student youth, the supposedly meritocratic link between schooling and occupation is attenuating as more of them seek out private secondary schools that have better placement records in elite universities and thus in elite employment than do the public high schools, whose graduates represent the larger percentage of school-leavers, in ordinary jobs. The premise in the past was that the student’s hard work would assure success; increasingly, it is the family’s ability to pay for educational enhancements that makes some children more “equal” than others (Kariya 2001).

For those young adults whom some might call slackers, the entry point into lifetime employment has narrowed even further than in the 1970s, when “examination hell” and the “credential society” were first noted. Many youth who previously would have been slated for assured futures in white collar work are now forced into part-time or temporary employment. It is true that many call themselves “fureetaa” (combining the English “free” and the German “arbeiter,” or side-job worker) as a choice rather than a necessity, but, as one young man noted, “it’s not a life-style choice; it’s all there is for me.”

The point of entry into work has become especially problematic for young women. While in the past women graduating from middle school or high school were seen as “golden eggs,” desirable as well-trained, docile low-wage clerks or factory workers, now they have a harder time finding work. Those with higher education, in
fact, now see an “ice age” in employment chances as they are frozen out of the market for desirable jobs even harder and faster than males.

Family forms and relations are further affected by the increasing numbers of young women beyond school age who remain living with their parents and staying with their jobs (however dead-end) longer, thus delaying marriage and child-bearing. While the popular press and government officials may say that women are on a “birth strike” and selfishly putting Japan’s future at risk, women (married or unmarried) who delay mothering for the most part need to work rather than “choose” to work. Indeed, the cost of raising a middle class child is so high that much of the paid work done by married women is devoted to paying costs of education. And the choice to have only one (leading to the much-discussed “hitori-ko mondai” or one-child problem) is most often explained by this fact.

For women, too, the care of the elderly looms as a burdensome prospect. With families bearing most of the cost and time for supporting dependent elderly, and with ever-lengthening life spans, more women find themselves in middle age or even old age caring for their husbands’ or their own parents. Of course, as people have fewer children, the care of the elderly cannot be shared among several siblings any more. The family member whose work is seen as most disposable and who is seen as having the most free time is the housewife and it is she who finds herself doing the caregiving.

Among seniors, there is a recent trend to live apart from family, or to live in housing dedicated to elderly, as long as it is possible to do so. Seniors increasingly have available community services, such as senior centers, adult day care, activity groups in ward offices and the like for either occasional respite activities or as more fulltime hobbies and passions. Volunteer work for and among the elderly has increased and NGO provisions are now trying to fill the gap left by social policies (Nakano forthcoming). These emergent patterns can offer rewarding alternative routines and satisfactions to a family-embedded old age, but because most are only available for elders who are physically fit, they do not resolve, but perhaps only
postpone the intractable issues of who is to care for the infirm and the dependent elderly.

Thus, each of the trends we identify is grounded in and is reshaping both the official representations and the everyday realities of family that stand at the heart of contemporary Japan. In specifying these emergent actors, we are also mapping new tensions and new connections between publicly sanctioned typifications of Family and popular forms of families.

To be sure, even the distinction between such conventionalities and the multiple realities in which people live is often difficult to draw because people themselves are drawn to use the rhetoric of—and even the desire for—typifications of family form and school success and work careers, and endeavor to conform to their promise and demands. But those of the Japanese population enumerated by our alliterative title (and others) are not blind to that difficulty, and in their own ways they are challenging the present conventions of their society. They are seldom unconstrained by the force of social norms, rarely collective in their actions, and hardly animated by political objectives, but they are nonetheless harbingers of new alliances and strategies that may well break up of what has long been considered a mass society. At the very least, these trajectories may signal the waning power of a “mainstream consciousness” to channel aspirations and effort and force a revision of the Family talk that has been so literally and metaphorically central to official talk about private lives, economic activity, and national representations for so long. We turn now to a more detailed look at each of these five new fields of social action before concluding with a broader assessment of their collective potency.

II. The students: Private shortcuts to academic success and failed expectations in the school-work link

The severe recession throughout the 1990s intersected with a shifting population profile to pose serious threats to tertiary education and the school-to-work transition. The entry-level hiring scale of major corporations shrank dramatically in
that decade. The newspapers were full of anecdotes about elite graduates in "job shock" accepting ever-lower entry positions as overqualified recruits to gain entrance to first-tier corporations, or resigning themselves to less prestigious company openings, with ripple effects on down the educational prestige ladder. At the same time, the number of eighteen-year-olds in the population was declining sharply, from 2.05 million in 1992 to 1.51 million in 2000, putting enormous pressures on the already shaky finances of lower-tier, tuition-dependent private universities and junior colleges, and encouraging some to strategize on services to offer to non-traditional students, companies and the elderly.

Declining job opportunities and a shrinking college-age cohort have combined to exacerbate the competition for elite universities. The consequence may well be the collapse of the tense balance between public- and private-sector secondary education that has held for the last three decades. A complement to public high school education thought to be sufficient for elite university entrance was a heavy dose of after-school cram classes, home tutoring by college students or faculty, and possibly a postsecondary year in a private examination-prep school. In only the last five years or so, the more assured—and expensive—route is through the emerging tier of elite private high schools offering six year secondary programs. Some are attached to private universities, access to which is all but assured by attendance in the high schools. In 1993, the percentage of applicants who were admitted to the various faculties of Tokyo University, the pinnacle of the top tier, from private high schools reached 50% (1984 of the 4010 admitted). Of the top thirty placement high schools, twenty-one were private institutions. (More figures to be added)

After admitting their students by highly competitive exams at the end of their sixth-grade year (somewhat analogous to the fateful "eleven-plus" exams in Britain) these schools, in effect, combine the three years of junior high school with the three of high school. They move their students through the Ministry of Education secondary curriculum in four and a half to five years, leaving the balance for preparation for specific university entrance exams.
The particular school-to-work transitions of contemporary Japan have depended on the tight calibrations of school and work prestige hierarchies (Rosenbaum and Kariya 1989). For several decades, the widely discrepant outcomes of the individuals moving through school into workplaces have been accepted without public outcry or collective resistance (though sometimes frustration, grief and personal tragedy receive public attention). In large part, the successful have claimed legitimacy and the failures have been cooled out through the public image that the process is egalitarian. Ostensibly, secondary facilities are equally funded, the national curriculum is equally distributed and the exams are for the most part equally demanding and equally "fair." The present school-to-work complex is however threatened by the increasing privatization of the system and the increasingly inegalitarian streaming of students with more family resources into the most prestigious establishments.

The effect is to more starkly reveal what the long-supposed meritocracy has never been able to provide: reward for ability. The sociologist Ishida Hiroshi has shown that elite higher education did not have a statistically significant social mobility effect in the last thirty years (Ishida 1993, 2001). Government policies, teachers' union agitation, public opinion and private expectations notwithstanding, children of advantaged parents were consistently overrepresented in elite universities. The word "elite" itself, which used to mean equal opportunity prestige, now means reproduced parental social status among the advantaged. Private secondary students have disproportionately filled the ranks of Tokyo University's entering classes at least since the early 1970s, a result of the 1967 Tokyo metropolitan university reforms (Rohlen 1977). Indeed, what Kariya and Rosenbaum (1999) call "bright flight," the exodus of better students from public secondary schools to private secondary schools has been most advanced in those prefectures like Tokyo that implemented deliberate "detracking" policies. Clearly, public education has been "misrecognized" as meritocratic for a long time, and it is possible that a thoroughgoing privatization of the upper tier of secondary education will neither fundamentally shake the institutional linkages nor challenge the legitimacy of school outcomes or workplace destinations. This is unlikely, though, and if the
present tendencies become future trends, a very different public-private tension will develop. The stage will be set for a whole new educational arms race on much more transparently unequal class and regional terms.

The bottom end of the secondary education hierarchy is similarly changing rapidly. Educational officials and researchers have long highlighted not only the quality of training in Japan's technical and commercial high schools but, more importantly, the extensive job counseling and placement of school leavers by their schools, who maintain direct connections with employers and actively broker their students into jobs (Dore and Sako 1989, Okano 1993). What Mary Brinton and others now document is a serious and rapid shrinkage of such school-work links, which have underpinned the stable labor force entry for vast numbers of blue-and pink-collar workers at least since the early 1970s (Brinton 2000, Tang and Brinton 2003, Honda 2003). This shrinkage, combined with the shrinkage of the school-age population, may mean that the collapse in the present sense of the equity and utility of public education is possible across the spectrum.

III. The slackers: Youthful furiitaa in the ice age of employment

At the height of Japan’s speculative frenzy in the 1980s, the notorious temporary work agency Recruit coined the neologism "furiitaa" to designate and valorize the very category of temporary worker whose supply and demand the company brokered so profitably. These workers were the job hoppers, the fast labor of fast capitalism, and part of the media spin was to attribute a hip lifestyle to these insecure and inconstant workers. Software developers, anime illustrators, and other independent knowledge workers were glamorized, while their resume-free counterparts in fast food and other less prestigious service industries seldom seemed trendy.

Interestingly though, the uses of the term survived, indeed proliferated, after the Bubble collapse. By the late 1990s, furiitaa had become a media buzzword of more complex connotations, an official category of labor for the Ministry of Labor, and a
term of self-identification (and sometimes self-deprecation) for large numbers of twenty- and thirty-somethings. In March of 2002, the Japan Institute of Labor (JIL) estimated that the number of furiitaa had reached 1.9 million, largely in the tertiary service sector. In its survey of 18-28 year olds - half of whom were furiitaa - the latter were polled about their hours and income. They worked on an average 40 hours per week, with monthly earnings of 100,000 to 150,000. The JIL survey also indicated that fully 70% had never been employed as regular employees since leaving school.

There may be little that is novel about this phenomenon except the term. Irregular workers of all varieties have always been crucial to the labor force. Temporary workers (usually women) in the past provided a cushion for industries; they could expand in good times, contract in bad, and not endanger the positions of "permanent" employees. The 1990s, though, saw a significant increase in the casualization of the labor force; Ōsawa (2001) cites government figures showing that in 1990 roughly 20% of all employees, including 38% of female employees, were in some form of "irregular employment" (that is, non-fulltime employment); by 1999, those proportions had increased to 25% of all employees, including 45% of all female employees (see also Goka 1999, Nishitani 2003, Weathers 2001, Satō 2001). This has been accompanied by a proliferation of categories of the irregular: beyond what Ōsawa calls the fulltime part-timers (pāto proper), there are contract workers (shokutaku and keiyaku sha’in), fixed-term workers (kikankō), dispatch workers from temp agencies (haken), side-jobs (arubaito).

It is in this workscape of para-employment that those whom the government now defines as furiitaa are distinguishing themselves—by their youthful age profile, educational backgrounds, job categories, and career aspirations. No doubt the numbers are inflated by the sustained serial recessions of the past twelve years, creating an "Ice Age" of hiring freezes, downsizings and bankruptcies, "chilling" applicants out of regular line employment. But the furiitaa are not a simple consequence of economic forces. To be sure, in the 3/2002 JIL poll, 40% reported that they had no choice, and 45% reported no particular reason for opting for free-
lance jobs, while 15% said they were working towards their ultimate goal with this kind of employment. Most expressed the desire for regular employment. However, the longer one is a furiitaa, the less likely is regular employment. The JIS poll indicated that roughly half of furiitaa who sought regular positions were successful within the first year, but after two or more years, the possibility dropped to 28%. There are of course other variables affecting this drop besides time alone.

The furiitaa and other irregulars portend changes to work place relations, corporate human resource policies, and individual career tracks. What now is changing is the view of the labor force: no longer can it be said that one’s life chances are determined by one’s educational achievement; no loner can adulthood be confirmed with a permanent job (as corporate warrior or professional housewife); no longer can workplace relationships, corporate training, and the configuration of advancement and hierarchies be predictable and stable. What was always the case for some, from day laborers to women doing piece work at home to job-changers who have always offered flexibility to the corporations, is now true for more people. The issue is not whether greater numbers of job transfers are of positive or negative value (what is mobility and freedom for some is insecurity and low wages for others—"fast" labor is cheap labor). Rather, it is whether the recruitment, training and retention of a growing spectrum of semi-skilled, skilled and professional workers are destabilizing the enterprise structures that have obtained for the past several decades. The evidence to date—including cut backs in in-house training programs that are less useful for stimulating corporate loyalty, restructured pay and promotion scales to favor performance over seniority, and early retirement programs to shed older core managers—suggest they are taking their toll on the images and claims of existing large enterprises.

IV. The singles: “Women who can say no!”

Two developments of the 1980s have been frequently assayed for their subsequent effects on marriage, family and gender relations in the 1990s and after. First, for much of that decade, the growing labor shortages in blue-collar, clerical and low-
level technical work opened up opportunities for women as companies sought to
avoid hiring foreign guest workers. The heated controversies over the Equal
Employment Opportunity Law and its subsequent passage in 1986 led to only
indirect effects on women's employment. Women had jobs, not careers. Women
who had completed a four year university program were strongly affected in the
1990s by the "ice age" in employment: the more education, the higher the
aspirations and the more they were likely to be dashed. Most women who work,
and that includes most housewives by the 1990s, say that they need to work,
either to sustain their households or to provide for the costs of children's
educational preparations. Few see it as a choice, especially the kind of choice that
male officialdom deems selfish.

Second, the ballyhoo over the lack of marriage-prone women for men eager for
matrimony at the end of the eighties was at its most strident in its predictions of a
birth crisis. Japan became the incredible shrinking country and the fertility rate of
the week, prefecture by prefecture, became a television staple. The "1.57 shokku"
of 1990 was a media boom and the title of Tanimura Shiho's best-selling novel,
Kekkon shinai ka mo shiranai shōkōgun ("The 'maybe I won't get married after all!' syndrome") seemed to say it all. A popular magazine for young women, Croissant,
ran a series of profiles of popular and successful women singles in their thirties and
forties, and social critics derided its seeming support for female singlehood, calling
it the Croissant syndrome“ (White 2002: 137-140).

Croissant magazine soon went back to extolling housewifery and romance, but in
fact large numbers of women in this age group remained unmarried, most of them
highly educated middle class women. By 1995, 48% of women and 67% of men
aged 25-29 were unmarried, and in metropolitan Tokyo well over half of women
turning thirty had not yet married. Those who did marry seemed to be delaying
having children: in 1997 40% of couples married for four years did not yet have
children. And in 2003, the national birth rate is down to 1.32 (and much lower than
that in Tokyo), far below replacement rate.²
We must add a cautionary note about the data and their representation. The age group surveyed in the national birth rate study is "women of reproductive age," which is defined as those between 15 and 49. This is a much broader group than those married and of reproductive age, so naturally births measured against this broader base would be at a lower (and more alarming) rate since teen pregnancies and births are extremely low in Japan. There is no doubt, however, that married couples are delaying childbirth and that the consequent "only-child problem ("hitori ko mondai") is having an impact on families, schools and workplaces that will only increase in the future.

Government responses to this have included the four-ministry "Angel Plan" which took flight with a flourish of trumpets in 1994, but has been grounded by inadequate funding and halfhearted implementation. This program aimed to establish day care centers with convenient hours and locations so that women could work and raise children without having to rely on family members or expensive private facilities. One female day care teacher, in line with male leadership handwringing, told a mother "You should really raise your baby yourself at home; do you really need daycare?" Without support, the Angel Plan is faltering, but more day care centers are now being built. A more recent initiative, the "Plus One" campaign, asks parents to consider their reproductive plans and then "add one" child to the goal! While officials in the Ministry of Health deny active pro-natalism, they say "we don't need do have such heavy handed approaches... as they did in wartime with "umeyō, fuyaseyō" (give birth and multiply). We let the local areas (suffering from rural to urban population drain) do it for us." One young man in his thirties, eldest son of rice farmers in Okayama, lamented that "my brother and I must stay to work the farm but it looks like we cannot get married: all the young women go to work in Niimi (the nearest large town) and don't want to farm." The women who leave gain a degree of independence earlier in such urbanized areas and may be in fact less fettered than their brothers.

The sense of crisis (among the largely male officialdom) was met on the local level with calls for women to reproduce. Prefectural and municipal offers of stipends and
subsidies for housing and education for mothers who have more than one—with higher stipends for more than two—children were supported with posters such as one seen in Okayama, picturing a child with a tear running down his cheek, captioned "Is your only child lonely? Doesn't he want a brother or sister?" The model of family behind these campaigns was the middle class model of the economic boom decades—the separate spheres household of the corporate-employed husband and the housewife, woman managing the home and children.

Despite such official anxiety and crude propaganda, there is little evidence that it is children and child-rearing that women seek to avoid in postponing marriage. When wariness of family obligations shapes a woman’s resistance, it is much more likely these days to be nervousness about elder care than child care. Most families at some point must face caring for their elders, and it is rare that a family can slip smoothly into this function these days. What it takes, with increasing longevity and more years of potential disability, is a daughter or daughter-in-law who is willing to serve as the full-time family-based caregiver. David Plath (1975) refers to the stage of life when care of the young and care of the elderly are in the hands of women as the "middle-aged Confucian sandwich." More so than in Europe or the United States, the care for dependent elderly is overwhelmingly treated as the responsibility of a female relative. The major concern of women over forty is said to be aging—and even more than their own aging, it is that of their parents, in-laws, and their husbands. It is often said that a woman experiences three ages: in her fifties, the care for her parents and her husband's parents; in her sixties the care of her husband; and in her seventies and eighties, her own care. The other side of this picture is that men experience three childhoods: in their youth, nurtured by their mothers, in their middle years, dependent on the domestic arrangements created by their wives, and in their old age, on their wives' care-giving.

Care-giving responsibilities have never been easy and are exacerbated by the factors discussed here; mass longevity, state efforts to keep primary care a family responsibility, more nuclear households, fewer siblings with whom to share care of parents, and rising female workforce participation (now well over 50% for all
married women and about 70% for women in their forties). These factors ensure that a substantial number of women will face the dilemma of Akiko, the middle-aged woman protagonist in Ariyoshi Sawako's popular 1972 novel Kōkotsu no hito in which Akiko as daughter in law is pressured to quit her job to care for her senile father-in-law. She tries everything, but the social and community services available are not available to a person with advanced senility and after run-ins with police returning the errant man, Akiko resigns herself to care for him. This book is an indictment of the lack of institutional support for the elderly and their families and something of a celebration of Akiko's commitment to care for her father in law, a commitment met with cynicism by younger women today (Ariyoshi 1984).

In short, for Japan as a self-designated aging society, the increasingly public tensions between the genders are potentially even more significant than those between the generations. Women's organizations in Japan are far larger and more assertive than its national associations for older citizens. It is likely that future public policies and programs for older Japanese will have to accommodate the private choices that individual women are now making about marriage and children as much as they seek to address the needs of the burgeoning elderly population.

V. Seniors on their own: Independent lives or lonely hearts?

Many of the most demanding social issues facing Japan today cluster around woman-related crises that have strong causal linkages: women having fewer children → shrinking birthrate → diminished labor force → lowered tax base → insufficient funds for social services → women working longer → elders left without support. We have heard so much about Japan as an "aging society" that the phrase is itself a bit long in the tooth. Still, pre-emptive crisis-talk has proven in the past to be an effective technology of power and visions of an aging society may rank among the most effectively pre-emptive of all. Official talk about aging began in the early 1970s when Japan still had the most youthful population profile in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Only in the 1990s did Japan's broad-base population pyramid become a tall, thin rectangle.
Now there is talk of an inverted pyramid ("gyaku piramido"), in which the age ladder bulges at the top and not at the bottom. The Japanese press has trumpeted several doomsday narratives, by which in the year 2500 there will be only 50,000, or 10,000 or other unthinkably small numbers of Japanese left. One paper declared a Shaker scenario: that in the year 3000 there will be only two Japanese left, both old women!

Geometric images are backed by a barrage of arithmetic. The number of youth age ten to nineteen declined 25% in the 1990s. The number of people over sixty has increased 35%. The year 1995 marked the first-ever decrease in the total labor population (workers age fifteen to sixty). By 2013, about one-quarter of the population will be older than sixty-five, making Japan the "oldest" nation in the world, and it is estimated that pensions, social insurance and medical costs will require 23% of GNP. Over half the elderly population at that point will be over 75 years old. The birthrate in metropolitan Tokyo is projected to fall to 1.1, pushing the "dependency ratio" of workers to non-workers to unsustainable heights.

Japan's aging society is seen as resting on the twin pillars of private care and public resources and both are already showing signs of having reached the limits of personal and political tolerance. Now in their seventies, the single-digit Shōwans are graying into Japan's first "mass longevity" elders. For the moment, the moral stature of this particular historical generation is extremely significant, at least for their middle-aged children, in mitigating resentment about the escalating costs of an aging society. As these "honorable elders" pass, however, it becomes much less likely that public entitlements and private caregiving will be adequately extended (Campbell 1992).

Programs such as the “Golden Plan” (aimed at supporting caregivers with respite care and home services for elders within three generation households) and other incentives to maintain the elderly within a family environment are scarcely sufficient to provide what families need, which means, usually, what the daughter-in-law (now usually working at least part time) needs to maintain the high standard
of care expected for everyone in the household. In this generation of elderly at least, there is still a relatively high rate of living with children - about 60% of Japanese over the age of sixty-five live with their children (and two-thirds of those households also include their grandchildren). About one in four elderly live with a spouse, and only 15% live alone. Thus, Japanese elderly live with their children at four to five times the rate in the United States, and eight times the rate in Great Britain. And yet, it is difficult to distinguish between preference and necessity. For some, the high rate of living with children represents the clear superiority of families taking care of their own members; for others, it is forced by a shortage of quality public- and private-sector long-term care facilities and by the legal and ideological presumptions of family responsibility (Hashimoto 1996, Long 2000).

Families engage in a variety of strategies to cope with the gap between what they have and need (Long and Harris 2000). Their necessary and creative adaptations of normative family forms show the flexibility families require to accomplish what public systems will not. For example, patrilineality falls by the wayside in the need for bilateral care, and daughters are preferred by many elderly over their daughters-in-law. Relationships in those three-generation households may not always be smooth. The shock of a sudden move to live with children when care is needed is both physical and emotional. The former U-turn phenomenon, in which an adult child lives away from his/her natal home for work and family rearing and then moves back when parents need care has changed; now it is the dependent parents who move to what is to them a new home in a child's family, under the care and direction of a daughter or daughter-in-law. This "emergency Confucianism" leads to stress on all sides. What David Plath (1988) called the "intimate politics of co-residence" are much more frequently concerned with social relations than financial abilities. For that reason, an important diagnostic may be the rising rate of elderly who live alone or with only a spouse. In 1980 these numbered only 6 percent of all households, but by 1992 the figure had risen steadily to 11 percent of all households and fully forty percent of the over-sixty-five population.
Other strategies, clearly socially and emotionally unfortunate, include a kind of "tarai-mawashi," a rotation of the grandparents from sibling to sibling, over a year's time. In Ozu’s 1953 film "Tokyo Story," the famed director portrayed with pathos and sentiment the passive dependence of the older generation at the hands of their uncaring and even abusive married children. It need not be that harsh today. One family keeps its elderly parents in the natal home, and it is the sibling caregivers who in turn move to their parents' house for a few months at a time. Others help their active elderly relatives find group homes, some of which are very nice indeed, serving the interests of the residents in such programs as painting, gardening and cooking.

Individual solutions can be expensive, however, and economic resources govern the possibilities for comfort in old age. Where there are local voluntary groups and "time banks," there are meals on wheels and other supports for people in their homes. The time banks promise that for every hour you volunteer to help an elderly person, you will receive one in return when you yourself need care. Time itself will tell if these can provide sufficient support and reassurance.

Life expectancy in Japan is now highest in the world for both sexes—84.93 years for women and 78.07 for men. Those considered "old" now fall into several "cohorts": the young elderly, fit enough for work or hobby activities and travel (and a prime target for marketers), the middle elderly, able to maintain themselves alone but not quite as actively, and the old elderly. The rate of "old elderly" is increasing, including the bedridden elderly among them. Confucian justification for home-based care, insufficiently supported by the Golden Plan emphasizing home care of elderly, wears very thin, especially when programs have scant resources or are unreliably staffed. Families complain that the choices programs make for admission are idiosyncratic and that there should be better and more available nursing homes as well as staged care living facilities. Good nursing homes have long waiting lists; one must apply before the care is actually needed, which again puts emotional and tactical strains on families. People who place their elderly relatives in such places are often tagged as "selfish" and unfilial, as children who "throw away Granny." Old
peoples' homes are sometimes indeed dismissed as "obasute-yama" after the legend in which old people are taken to the top of a mountain to endure a "good death" by exposure to the elements.

**VI. Strangers in the midst: Unveiling the myth of ethnic homogeneity**

If the first "shock" of an aging population profile is the stress it is putting on the country's social welfare system, the second shock that looms is in the prognosis for the workforce. Now that the number of over-65 elders exceeds the number of persons 15 and under, policymakers are bracing for an eventual labor shortage. This seems a perverse statistic in the face of the current job shortage, but few doubt that recovery from the recession will expose the inevitable demographic future.

One solution officially and popularly debated is to import foreign labor, but as it even as it addresses an economic need it exposes a central prop of national political ideology. For much of the twentieth century, Japan believed itself to be ethnically homogeneous, but the Japanese population and its leaders must now face the reality of heterogeneity, both at the present and, if they seriously embrace increased labor migration, for the future (Douglass and Roberts 2000). Of course Japan's labor force has long been ethnically plural; legal and illegal migrant laborers have been in Japan for over a century. The largest numbers of non-Japanese ethnics are the resident Koreans who now exceed three million; their "ethnic enclaves" center on the Kansai area, but they live throughout Japan (Ryang 1997, 2000; Fukuoka 2000). In 2000, 335,575 Chinese were registered as foreigners in Japan, with perhaps another 30,000-40,000 illegally in the country. Tsuda Takeyuki (2003: x) estimates the Japanese-Brazilian return migrants to number 280,000, with another 45,000 migrants of Japanese descent from other South American countries. These persons, considered Japanese by race, often do not speak Japanese and do not share much of Japanese culture. Still, they are considered Japanese enough to be suitable employees, often in work that most young Japanese would not choose (Tsuda op. cit., Roth 2002). There have also
been large groups of people from Southeast Asia (Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and elsewhere), and in the 1980s and early 1990s, many men from the Middle East, Bangladesh, Iran and Iraq. Many of these were people without work visas who entered Japan on student visas and slipped from view, becoming illegal laborers. Sex workers also arrive on student or training visas brought by agents (often connected to organized crime) who provide some Japanese language training in their home countries before they come. It is estimated that there are over a million illegal workers in Japan. Obviously, needed labor must become regularized and recognized labor: social services, schooling for children and health insurance must be provided — and their wages taxed to provide more revenue for such provisions. Japan has been praised for long-term planning; will it demonstrate the political will to apply it to its diversifying labor force?

The larger question is what pluralism will mean in Japan as a society. Among the largest population of non-Japanese ethnics, the permanent Korean residents, faced with continued discrimination for their Korean-ness and using hard-won legal avenues to opportunities in the mainstream, the trends have been strongly for assimilation. But assimilation, even with full legal equality, is the erasure of all difference, not the forthright embrace of plural ways of living. And if new foreign laborers continue to grow in numbers, will it mean classes of workers and residents going to the bottom of the social ladder, adding ethnicity to the stigmata of poverty? The challenge of pluralism, therefore, is whether differences in personal identity and lifeways are respected within the mainstream.

Are there other routes to pluralism? One possibility is that intermarriage, producing acculturation, or even assimilation, of people of non-Japanese origins, will become more frequent. In rural Okayama and elsewhere, wives for farmers come from Southeast Asia, Taiwan, and elsewhere in Asia, making mixed marriages when local women refuse a farm life; will this route to multiculturalism make a difference in the profile, and the consciousness, of society (Suzuki 2003)? Others foresee changes as alternative families begin, slowly, to include gay and lesbian cohabitation, as elderly begin to create their own group homes, and as young and old
live alone in greater numbers. One accommodation that brings generations together in a novel way is the assisted-living/nursery school residence in which elders participate actively in the nursery school attached to the home for the elderly, bringing “grandparents” together with children who rarely see their own, and providing the older people the feelings of family that they no longer can experience in their own (Thang 2001).

**VII. Japan’s future: In a “families” way?**

Japan is at a moment when social problems have created circular name-calling and when conservative officials and policymakers have tended to lay these issues at the feet of families —most particularly at those of the women of the family who are accused of not acting “in a family way.” The political scientist Steven Reed (1993:8) has used the phrase "commonsense" to describe the ordinary understandings of life in Japan as a sense that belies the constructions of policymakers and observers and that incorporates the idea of internal diversity and change. If one takes the commonsensical and plural families as units of inquiry, and if we can allow unorthodox and unscripted units to be called "families," two revelations follow: one, that the failures of public policy to support people are the result of a unitary construction of family seldom met in reality; and two, that families, truly supported in their own plural, flexible and cobbled-together choices, have the ability to be families still, embracing students, slackers, singles, seniors, and strangers all.

Structurally, it is ironic that generational cohorts, gender roles, and educational outcomes are among the axes of difference that are helping to unbind Japan's postwar social contract and restructure relationships and expectations. After all, the moral force of the single-digit Shōwans, the complementarity of gendered role dichotomies and the fairness of educational outcomes were key ideological tenets of the "mainstream." These have now become fault lines that expose the tenuousness of the mainstream arrangements.
Will these new trends in social behavior (students taking new directions, women not marrying, young adults seeking or being forced to seek new work, etc.) bring about new institutional forms of educational pathways, work structures, and families? T.J. Pempel’s chapter on politics and economics during this same decade concludes that there has yet been no transformation in these sectors, despite significant procedural reforms in the electoral system, in the organization of the national bureaucracy, and in the financial industry. He finds instead that entrenched political and economic interests muddled through the decade and up to the present, inhibiting rather than initiating implementation. He suggests, however, that the institutional and procedural reforms may well have laid a foundation for inevitable "regime shift." We too are proposing a parallel argument about new social behaviors that are anticipating a society that may well come to reflect and support that behavior. As yet, there is no societal "regime shift," in part because those who are acting in new ways have not yet mobilized as interest groups or as collective political voices, and their frustrations have no been addressed. If they do so mobilize, change is ever more certain, but even if they do not, it is nonetheless likely.

The formulation of social action underlying our approach demonstrates that each of the five social diagnostics we have described represents a point where private action rubs against and begins to unravel the delicate skein of ideologies and institutions. And there need not be organized activism to collectivize such individual decisions. Indeed, in all five dimensions, structural change is resulting from the cumulation of disparate, parallel, personal actions in quite understandable, "commonsense" realities governing choices and options. This is not a claim premised on a rational choice voluntarism, which takes individual intentionality as the independent causal agent of structural outcomes and a universal rationality as the presumed basis of that intentional choice-making. Rather, the recursive structuring of individual agency, cultural meaning and institutional form, as well as the multilayered consciousness and historical experience of actors, produce the actions we have described, performed under varying constraints and with subtle
degrees of reflective knowledge, discursive articulation and tacit understandings—withal, effective actions.

Most public commentary, domestic and foreign, about Japan in the new millennium, paints a dark picture of a nation adrift, plagued with social malaise, political sclerosis and economic stagnation. We have mapped social trajectories that lend support to such pessimism. But Japan is transforming—along the lines and as a consequence of the actors and actions we have noted. And the adaptability, creativity, and flexibility shown in these emergent forms are cause for some optimism that many in Japan have envisioned and are enacting new lifeways that may yet produce a society whose vibrancy is based on pluralism and inclusion.

The thin shell of ideologically supported convention, we suggest, is about to crack—and when it does, and institutions are forced to recognize make-shift and novel social engagements as within the range of “normal,” the actual diversity of life strategies and choices will become more apparent in Japanese society. Moreover, the struggles of people to do more than get by will have to be addressed in social policy whose framers have heretofore comfortably ignored them. The new Japanese “normal” in all its non-consensual diversity will be seen in the rest of the region as perhaps a sign that Japan is no different from its neighbors.

As a result, Japanese influence in the region may in fact increase; not through policies aimed at doing so, but through changes made to accommodate the diverse range of youth, women and elderly and their needs. After all, many of the phenomena we have described for Japan (an aging population, a shrinking birthrate, changing and diversifying education, labor force and expectations for women and families) also obtain in other nations in the region. When Japanese leaders can demonstrate their willingness to create an adaptive set of social policies supporting its own changing population, they may well help to provide models for others.
Footnotes

1 This chapter has been jointly and equally prepared by the two authors. Both of us have drawn on, revised, and updated several recent publications, especially Merry I. White 2002 and Kelly 2002.

2 Ministry of Public Welfare, ed., Shōshi shakai o kangaeru. The most recent reports put it at 1.31. The most recent government population projections are available online at http://www.ipss.go.jp/Japanese/newest02/newest02.html. In English, James Raymo (2003a, 2003b) offers the most recent statistical analysis of marriage patterns. Japan is hardly alone with its rapid fertility rate decline; Krause 2001 is an anthropological study of struggles precipitated by a similar drop in Italy.

3 Even some of the staff proved counter-effective. One female daycare teacher, in line with male leadership hand-wringing, told a mother "You should really raise your baby yourself at home; do you really need daycare?"

4 The United Nations definition of an aged population is when at least 7 percent of citizens are 65-years-old or above. It took the U.S. 70 years for the percentage of elderly to climb from 7 percent to 14 percent; the same increases took 45 years in Great Britain and Germany, 85 years in Sweden, but only 25 years in Japan. These and other statistics are drawn from Ministry of Public Welfare 1998.

5 Campbell (2000) does however take an optimistic view of the potential of the new Long-Term Care Insurance program instituted in 2000.

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