Restructuring Youth: Recent Problems of Japanese Youth and its Contextual Origin

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ABSTRACT Since the mid 1990s, the youth transition from school to work for youth in Japan has been changing radically. Youth unemployment and the number of part-time employees are increasing rapidly, as is the participation rate in higher education. The transition process has been prolonged, and the pattern has become diverse and complicated. It seems that ‘youth’ is being restructured profoundly. The change is similar in many aspects to what occurred in European countries in the 1980s and 1990s. However, it also has some particularities, notably very weak state intervention. This paper will examine the similarity and particularity of the recent change of Japanese youth transition, and examine its contextual origin.

Introduction

Since the mid 1990s, the youth transition from school to work for youth in Japan has been changing radically. The change is partially a process of a longer social change affecting youth. However, the recent process is rapid and profound, influenced by the socio-economic restructuring of Japanese society in the 1990s. Youth unemployment and the number of part-time employees are increasing rapidly, as is the participation rate of full-time education of those older than 18 years of age. The transition process has been prolonged, and the pattern has become diverse and complicated. Not only the transition from school to work, but also other transitions have been changing. It seems that ‘youth’ is being restructured profoundly.

The change is similar in many aspects to what occurred in European countries in the 1980s and 1990s. However, it also has some particularities, notably very weak state intervention. Despite the increase in the proportion of part-time employees and the unemployed among youth, which risks marginalizing a part of youth, there are few state policies to cover the change. This particularity has originated from the historical context that has constructed modern youth in Japan. This paper will examine the similarity and particularity of the recent change of Japanese youth transition, and examine its contextual origin.

Japanese Youth Change: Its Similarity and Particularity

Prolonged and Complicated Transition: The Similarity between Japan and Europe

In early-industrialized countries, the youth transition has changed substantially in the past few decades. Roberts argues that, among European youth
researchers, there are at least a few broad agreements about the change in the youth transition in the past 30 years (Roberts, 1997). One point is that, for the majority of young people, transitions now take longer. Not only has the mean age at which young people enter their first ‘proper’ jobs risen, but the typical age at which other transitions (e.g., into marriage and parenthood) has also increased. The other point is that the transition experiences have become more varied in aggregate and more complicated at the individual level. These two points are almost similar to the situation in Japan.

**Prolonged transition.** One factor is the rise in the participation rate for higher education. In 1976, 40.9 per cent of 18 year olds entered higher education after high school. The ratio has increased to 63.1 per cent in 2000 (Fig. 1). The ‘degreeocratic’ pressure in Japan had been stimulating young people (with their parents) to pursue longer educational career for long time (Dore, 1976). Until the end of the 1980s, that pressure had been the main factor raising the rate. However, the pressure has been decreasing in the 1990s. The main reason is the fall in the number of 18 year olds, which has made it easier to enter university and college. The main factor that has raised the participation rate since the mid 1990s is rather the rapid decline of regular employments for high school graduates.

Job offers for high school graduates, which were about 1,670,000 in 1992, slumped to 240,000 in 2002, about one-seventh that of 1992 (Fig. 2). Japanese high schools start the placement procedure for students in July, eight months before their graduation. In the mid 1990s, the national average of the ratio of job offers to job seekers among high school students fell to around 1.0, and in 2000 it eventually fell to 0.6. In the early 1990s, almost all those who sought jobs got some type of regular employment. However, at the end of the 1990s, one-quarter of those who sought jobs in July could not find any type of regular employment, and a portion of them shift their destination to college or university or to part-time work or unemployment.

The increase in part-time and temporary employment among young people is the other factor prolonging the transition. In 1975, 41.0 per cent of 18–19 year
olds were already in the labour force (84.3 per cent of whom were regular employees) while 58.8 per cent of 20–24 year olds were in the labour force (85.3 per cent of whom were regular employees) (Population Census). By contrast, in 2000 34.3 per cent of 18–19 year olds were in the labour force, and only 48.5 per cent of them were regular employees. The proportion of 20–24 year olds in regular employment was 70.1 per cent and this scarcely reached 80 per cent in the cohort of 25–29 years olds.

Although the proportion of part-time employees had been increasing since the 1970s as the service sector has developed, they were mainly students and married females until the 1980s. However, in the 1990s, part-time employment among young people—not only students, but also non-student—increased rapidly (Fig. 3). For most young people from the 1960s to the 1980s, their first job just after their educational career was regular employment. However, those who can find only part-time or temporary employment increased in the 1990s and the rate among 15–19 year olds reached 36.5 per cent in 2000 (Fig. 4). Since the early 1990s the unemployment rate among young people has also increased (Fig. 5).

Figure 2. Job offers seekers (high school graduates) (Kousei-roudou-shou, 1985–2001).

Figure 3. Number of part-time employees of 15–24 year olds (×10,000) (Soumu-shou Toukei-kyoku, 1950–2001).
Not only the transition from school to work, but also other transitions have been prolonged. Leaving home and getting married have also been delayed in these decades. One-half of males and four-fifths of females aged 25–29 were already married in 1975. However, in 2000, only one-third of males and less than one-half of females of the same age cohort were married (Fig. 6). Miyamoto et al. (1997) argue that more young people stay unmarried and live with their parents even after they find a job.

Complicated and individualized transition. Since the 1960s, the ‘new graduate recruitment system’ has dominated the school to work transition. Under this system, employers send job offers to schools and colleges/universities under the regulation of Employment Security Law, and schools and colleges/universities offer employment to students in their last academic year. Until the end of the 1980s, 70–80 per cent of young people obtained regular employment just after their graduation (Fig. 7) [1]. However, since the early 1990s, the sharp decline of job offers for new graduates along with the rise of part-time employment and unemployment have been shaking the structure of the system. In 2001, only one-half of 22 years olds were estimated to move to regular employment through this system.

Figure 4. Proportion of part-time employees among new graduates (Kousei-roudou-shou, 1985–2000).

Figure 5. Unemployment rates (Soumu-shou Toukeikyoku, 1950–2001).
For others, the transition process is varied and complicated. A report by the Japan Institute of Labour indicates that 36 per cent of young people in Tokyo have at least once experienced part-time employment after school and college/university, and the transition process has become more varied in the past decade (Japan Institute of Labour, 2001). This survey covers about 2000 18–29 year olds in Tokyo. Among those whose last academic career was high school, 54 per cent of who graduated from 1988 to 1992 found regular employment and 19 per cent found part-time employment, whereas only 35 per cent of those who

Figure 6. Unmarried rates (Soumu-shou Toukei-kyoku, 1950–2000).

Figure 7. Rates of new graduate recruitment (1) (Monbu-kagaku-shou, 1952–2000).
graduated from 1997 to 2000 found regular employment and 45 per cent found part-time work. The rate of unemployment just after graduation was 0.3 per cent in the 1989–92 cohort, but rose to six per cent for the 1997–2000 cohort. This survey also indicates that 73 per cent of males and 53 per cent of females of who experienced part-time employment had tried to find regular employment, and 72 per cent of males and 43 per cent of females succeeded. Twelve percent of those who left part-time employment moved to colleges and universities.

Therefore, the standard model of transition is disappearing and the movement from school to work is getting more varied. More young people are moving along individualized processes. Some graduate from high school and, once they have saved money from part-time jobs, then enter college. Some experience various kinds of part-time work and interim unemployment before getting regular employment.

Weak State Support: The Particularity of Japan

Although the change in the transition in Japan is similar to that of European countries, state intervention to support youth is very weak in Japan. Many European countries have various kinds of support systems for youth (e.g., unemployment benefit, state training system with some allowances, housing support, etc.), although some have receded with the neo-liberal policies by governments—new systems (e.g., New Deal and Connexion in Britain) have been reconstructed.

However, in Japan, there are few state support systems for youth. Those who graduate to become unemployed directly or have only part-time employment do not qualify for unemployment benefits because Japanese Employment Insurance is mainly for regular employees and it needs particular terms of contribution for one to eligible. The state’s training institute covers a very small portion of young people. Most job training that takes place outside companies is provided by private colleges of special training, which have high fees. As unemployment increased in the 1990s, the government started some projects to support the unemployed, most of which are for middle-aged adults. Although the Liberal-Democrat Government has rapidly inclined to neo-liberal policies and has been unwilling to provide any new social support policies, the weak intervention of the state to address the youth problem in Japan has socio-historical origin.

The Construction of Japanese Modern Youth in the Post-War Period: Contextual Origin of the Particularity

Youth as a social category emerged along with modernized society. Wallace & Kovatcheva (1998) argue that ‘youth’ is a product of particular kinds of advanced societies, which is now at risk of disappearing along with postmodernization. The development of wage labour and a labour market is the first factor of modernity that constructs ‘youth’. A second is the development of universal education, which introduced a system for distinguishing unsocialized children from fully socialized adults to complete in the labour market. The third and most important factor, they argue, is the development of the modern state system. ‘In most advanced industrial societies there gradually evolved a system of social support for students, young unemployed and trainees’ and ‘youth came to be increasingly recognised a part of welfare state’ (Wallace & Kovatcheva, 1998, p. 12). Jones & Wallace (1992) also argue that the time relationships
between various strands in the transition to adulthood (starting work, leaving home, getting married and having children) were connected at the middle of twentieth century as ‘youth’ was constructed.

These authors argue mainly in a European context. ‘Youth’ in Japan is also a product of a modernity. Youth as a social category in Japan was mainly constructed in the post-war period. As youth was constructed, various transitions connected and a standard model of transition emerged. However, the construction in Japan has some particularities. The most particular aspect is the very weak intervention of the state, except for the school system.

**Construct of Youth in the Post-War Period**

Modern youth in Japan, constructed in the post-war period, is framed by family, school and company. There is little state support. As students, families cover their financial needs, and school and families protect them. The normal educational career had extended to high school by the end of the 1960s, and school covers the early half of youth. When they finish education, although they are regarded as grown-ups and leave their parents’ guardianship, companies offer not only job and training, but also dormitories, social skills, and guidance for their life-course. Therefore, companies cover a considerable portion of the late half of youth. ‘New graduate recruitment’ articulates the early and the late halves of youth. It does not consist only of the transition from school to work, but also of other transition such as home leaving.

Although the post-war educational reforms raised the age of compulsory education to 15 years, at the beginning of the 1950s about one-half of those who left junior-high school to enter the workforce were engaged in primary industry, mainly as the family workers of peasants. According to the Population Census, about one-half of young working people were family workers in 1950. Therefore, until the early 1950s, many young people remained with their families to work, although some of them left home later to become employees. At that time, the participation rate for high school was less than one-half.

As high economic growth started at the mid 1950s, the participation rate of high school as well as employees increased for young people. The proportion of employees among young working people was 64 per cent in 1955, and rose rapidly to reach 80 per cent in 1965 (Fig. 8). By the beginning of the 1960s, the proportion of the first industry workers among those who left junior-high school to workforce had fallen to less than one in 10, and the participation rate for high school had risen to over six in 10. The participation ratio of high school eventually surpassed 90 per cent in the mid 1970s.

Fig. 9 shows the destination just after education of those who graduated junior-high school in 1952, 1962 and 1970. Among the cohort of 1952, 48 per cent got jobs just after junior-high school; one-half of them were agro-forestry family workers and the other half was employees. Another 48 per cent went to high school and 17 per cent became employees just after high school. Ten percent went to college or university and seven per cent became employees just after higher education. In total, 48 per cent of this cohort became employees as new graduates.

Among the cohort of 1962, the proportion of agro-forestry family workers just after junior-high school decreased to three per cent and that of employees increased to 30 per cent. Another 64 per cent went to high school and the
proportion of those who became employees just after high school also increased to 35 per cent. In total, 76 per cent of this cohort became employees as new graduates.

Among the cohort of 1970, the proportion of agro-forestry family workers were very slight and that of those who became employees just after junior-high school also decreased to 15 per cent. The largest group (39 per cent) consisted of those who became employees just after high school. The percentage of those who became employees just after higher education increased to 21 per cent. In total, 76 per cent of this cohort became employees as new graduates.

Therefore, the pattern of leaving school to become an employee was normalized by the end of the 1950s, and the normal stage for leaving school had risen to high school graduate by the end of the 1960s.
The ‘new graduate recruitment system’ provides the main framework of ‘the standard model’ of transition. In Japan, most students had been able to find regular employment before their graduation, and they started their working life just after graduation (on 1 April in general). This system consists of two parts, a core part and a peripheral one. The core of this system is that schools, colleges and universities place their students with employers. Some students rely on personal acquaintance to find job; however, schools also guide them to find employment before their graduation. They form the peripheral part. Junior-high schools and high schools still place most students who leave in regular employment, and universities and colleges placed most of those until the end of the 1970s, although recently more students from university and college have applied themselves.

The core of the system originated, legally, from the post-war reform. The Employment Security Law, which was enacted in 1947 and amended in 1949, authorizes school, university and college to collaborate with employment office to place their students with employers. For junior-high and high school, students’ application is restricted to be mediated by the school (Inui, 1990; Kariya et al., 2000).

Although established by legal regulation, the system did not cover the whole youth transition from school to work until the middle of the 1950s. In 1952, the core system covered only 32 per cent of those who left junior-high school to work (if we exclude those who entered agro-forestry, the figure was 59 per cent). The figure rose to 60 per cent in 1960 (69 per cent excluding agro-forestry) and surpassed 70 per cent in 1969. The proportion of those high school graduates covered by the core system covered was 59 per cent in 1956, rose to 74 per cent in 1960 and surpassed 80 per cent in 1970. The proportion of those who were employed as new graduates was 48 per cent among the cohort of those who graduated junior-high school in 1952 (graduated university in 1959) and it rose in the late 1950s. The proportion of male surpassed 80 per cent and that of female surpassed 70 per cent among the cohort of 1960 (graduated university in 1967) (Fig. 10).

In large companies, ‘Japanese-style employment’ was constructing from the mid 1950s and the ‘new graduate recruitment system’ was linked to it (Inui, 1993). Not only non-manual, but also manual core workers of large companies were internalized in the long-term employment (so-called ‘life long employment’) and seniority wage/promotion systems. Although there were more workers in small companies, which consisted of the external labour market, the core workers of large companies in the internal labour market had many advantages over them, such as higher wage, more job security and various fringe benefits. Companies, not only large ones but also small ones, preferred young workers rather than adults because young workers were more flexible and could be paid lower wages than adults. In the 1960s and early 1970s, labour demand, especially for young people, was extremely high, and large companies had many advantages. Large companies mainly recruited core workers from new graduates through that system and, without this route, joining the internal market was difficult. As becoming a core worker of a large company was preferable for most students (and their parents), more students were applying through this system. The proportion of a large company’s (more than 500
employees) employees among those who graduate high school to become employees was 17.3 per cent in 1957, rose to 41.8 per cent in 1965 and increased further to 47.8 per cent in 1975. Most large companies shifted their recruitment of manual workers from junior-high school graduates to high school graduates partly because, as the production process was innovated, more educated workers were required, and partly because as more young people went to high school, employers could scarcely get excellent workers from among junior-high school graduate (Inui, 1990).

By the end of the 1960s, ‘new graduate recruitment’ had become the normal model of youth transition from school to work. The system covered nearly 80 per cent of each cohort from the middle of the 1960s to the end of the 1970s and the figure was still nearly 70 per cent (if we add graduates of colleges of special training [2], they were still nearly 80 per cent) in the 1980s. From the 1970s to the 1980s, about 45–50 per cent of those who moved to regular employment by this system were high school graduates.

Strong Family Support and Weak State Support

Families contributed financial support to raise the average length of the educational career. In the first half of the 1960s, the number of high school students increased explosively, because not only did the participation rate rise, but the population of that age also increased due to post-war baby boom. The number of high-school students, about 3,100,000 in 1961, surpassed 15,000,000 in 1965, and much of the addition was covered by private high schools. The national average of those students who went to private high schools was 28 per cent in 1961 and rose to 33 per cent in 1965, while in the metropolitan area more than one-half went to private high school. Only a few local governments slightly subsidized private schools then [3], and most private high school financing was based on students’ fees. Although a state high school charged students some fees, a private high school charged much more. Furthermore, those students of lower social background were apt to go to private high school because most

Figure 10. Rates of new graduate recruitment (2) (Monbu-kagaku-shou, 1952–2000) (excludes family workers of primary industry).
private high schools, although their position in the league table rose in the 1980s, were ranked lower and easier to enter for lower achievement students. In the 1960s and 1970s, the participation rate of higher education also rose rapidly. The rate, 10.3 per cent in 1960, reached 23.6 per cent in 1970. In higher education, many more students studied in private universities and colleges. The proportion of those who went to private universities, 66 per cent in 1960, rose to 74 per cent in 1970. Although there are state scholarships, they cover very few students. Therefore, the expansion of higher education was also covered financially by the family and by students’ part-time jobs (‘Arbeit’ in student slang).

Therefore, mainly families and partly students’ part-time jobs covered financially the rise of educational standard. Although the Government established Child Benefit in 1972 with means restriction, families had responsibility to cover their children’s cost of living and education as long as they were students. Instead of state support, the Seniority Wage System covered the financial needs of family considerably. Along this system, wages on average increased with families’ needs. Formerly, only large companies had a seniority wage system, but the system penetrated to smaller companies in the 1960s because of labour-market pressure. However, the seniority wage covered mainly regular male employees, most females were excluded, and furthermore it did not mean an automatic wage rise. There was severe competition among workers within a company to keep the standard (Watanabe, 1990: Kumazawa, 1995). The competition within a company, which made workers work harder, was an important factor for the high productivity of Japanese manufacturing in the 1970s and 1980s.

**Company Enclosure of Youth**

Eighteen years became a standard age of leaving home in the 1960s. Many young people graduated high school to become regular employees, which enabled them to become financially independent from their families. However, leaving home was facilitated not only financial resources, but also for locational reasons. Until the early 1950s, more than one-half of the population lived in rural areas. Most of the large factories were located in urban areas in the 1950s and 1960s. Therefore, many young people had to moved to urban areas by themselves to be employed. From the beginning of the 1960s to the early 1970s, the proportion of junior-high school graduates who moved long distance (to other Prefectures) remained at about 40 per cent, and the proportion of high school graduates stayed at about 30 per cent. Many companies had dormitories for young workers from rural areas. Seventy percent of companies that joined Nikkeiren (Japan Federation of Employers’ Association) had dormitories for young worker in 1958, and the proportion rose to 91 per cent in 1968 (Nikkeiren, 1965, 1971). Many of those who entered universities and junior colleges also left home, because most universities and many junior colleges were concentrated in urban areas.

Companies offered young employees not only in-house vocational training, but also various kinds of guidance, formally and informally, to prevent them from moving to other companies and to keep them away from leftist youth movements. Therefore, although young people who graduate school were regarded as grown-ups, companies covered and controlled their life to a considerable extent.
Small Social Policies for Youth

Social policies for youth were scarcely developed in the post-war period. As for the employment service, schools and colleges/universities placed most graduates. Youth unemployment was not so serious, because the ‘new graduate recruitment system’ covered almost all those young people who were newly entering the labour market. In addition, if they decided to move to other companies, it was easy to find another job because labour demand for youth was much higher than for adults, although there were much less chance to be employed by large companies.

Although Japanese high schools have been dominated by general education (Inui & Hosogane, 1995), state or public vocational training was scarcely developed. Most large and medium companies trained their employees within the company for house-specific skills. In the late 1950s, demands for vocational training increased because of the innovation of product process and the rapid expansion of manufacturing. Government had a policy to expand vocational education and training at the beginning of the 1960s. However, the government’s policy was implemented only partially [4], because most large companies developed their own in-house training system rather than following the government’s plan (Nikkeiren, 1965, 1971; Inui, 1990). Only a portion of the employees of smaller companies were trained in state and cooperative training institutions.

Some urban local governments established social education course for youth in the 1960s. They were mainly for younger working people who graduated junior-high school in the rural areas. However, most of these courses disappeared in the 1970s because, as the educational standard rose, there were few younger working people.

Summary: Features of Modern Youth in Japan

The construction of modern youth in Japan started in the mid 1950s and was almost completed by the end of the 1960s. It was constructed along with rapid industrialization of post-war society in Japan, and in particular it involved the development of the school system and the labour management system of large companies.

However, unlike European countries, the state took a far smaller role in Japan. The main actors who framed it were family, school and company. The costs of education beyond the compulsory level were covered by family, as well as the cost of living, and a part of those costs were covered indirectly by the seniority wage system of companies. It was different from most European countries, where states covered most of the educational cost beyond the compulsory level. In many European countries, states also facilitated students of higher education to be independent financially from families by providing various kinds of scholarship. Housing for youths to leave home in Japan was offered by companies and there was no state housing service for the youth. This was another difference from many European countries. School, college and university provided job placement for the youth. Although most of European secondary schools had some kinds of career education programme, other section of the state, such as Employment Office or Career Service, conducted placement. It was another difference between Japan and European countries.
Companies took considerable role instead of state. However, companies played their part not only for welfare. Their main purpose was labour management, fostering employees’ royalty to companies and countering against militant labour unions. With that style of labour management (so-called ‘Japanese style of employment’), Japanese companies involved employers in strong competition and succeeded in the global market of manufacturing in the 1970s and 1980s (Watanabe, 1990).

Conclusion: Recent Difficulties of Youth in Japan

The modern style of the school to work transition in post-war Japan remained until the beginning of the 1990s with some minor changes. One of the minor changes was the rise of the average educational attainment. The participation rate for higher education increased and high school graduation turn from a standard to a minimum. Another change was a decrease in the number of youths leaving home at 18 years of age, because more young people did not need to move their residence anymore when they became employed or entered universities. Many factories moved to rural areas in the late 1970s because of lower wages, and many new universities were established in rural areas because the government regulated the concentration in urban areas from the mid 1970s. Furthermore, in the late 1970s, more families already lived in urban areas.

While most West European countries suffered a restructuring of youth in the 1980s, it eventually occurred in Japan in the late 1990s. The reason why it was delayed for a decade from European countries is mainly the economic circumstances in Japan. Japanese high-competitive manufacturing with ‘Japanese style employment’ enabled export-oriented economic development until the 1980s. However, since the beginning of the 1990s, when the ‘bubble economy’ collapsed, the circumstances have changed radically. Most Japanese manufacturing companies have adopted a global production system, which decreases the demand for domestic workers and depresses labour demands for young people. Development of the service sector partially substituted for the decrease, but much of the additional employment in the service sector involves part-time and temporary jobs. Companies have shifted the labour management system from seniority to merit. It is becoming difficult for many families to cover young people’s costs of education and living. As part-time and temporary employments displace regular jobs, training within companies is becoming poorer.

As the company’s role recedes, the families’ role to support youth transition is becoming relatively heavier, while the seniority wage is fading. This means that families’ social background influences young people’s transition more. We have a little evidence that the chance to get regular employment is unequally distributed to young people according to their families’ social background (Mimizuka, 2000). The longer they are in a part-time job, the more difficult it is for them to get regular employment. Although companies are increasing their recruitment of experienced workers along with the decrease of new graduates, they are unwilling to recruit those who have been in part-time job for a long time because those people do not have enough skills and experience.

Although many European countries still have much more developed social policies to support youth than Japan, some European researchers argue that the family has more influence on young people’s destination due to the decline of welfare state (Ball et al., 2000). There might be some similarities with Japan. We
need further comparative studies within advanced countries that have different cultural and historical backgrounds.

Notes

[1] The following calculation provides the estimated figures. The denominator is the number of junior-high school graduates of seven years before. The numerator is the sum of those who graduate junior-high school to move to regular employment directly seven years before, who graduate high school to move to regular employment directly four years before, who graduate junior college and technical college to move to regular employment directly two years before, and who graduate university to move to regular employment directly (Monbu-kagaku-shou, 1952–2000). Estimated figures may have a little difference from actual ones because some university students graduate older than the standard age, as also do some high school and junior college students. In a normal year, the difference would be small, but in a few particular years the difference is larger than usual. The figure of the 1968 cohort (Fig. 10) may be a little higher than actual because they were born from April 1945 to March 1946, the most difficult period of wartime and post-war, and they are about 20–30 per cent less than those of adjacent years. That in Fig. 7 for 1989 is similar. The cohort who were born from April 1976 to March 1977 is about 10–15 per cent less than those of adjacent years (because the year was considered a bad year for giving birth according to the Chinese 12 horary signs—Hinoe-uma).


[3] The Government started to subsidize private high schools indirectly (through local governments) in 1970, and private universities and colleges directly in 1975. However, they still cover a small portion of school/university finance, and this is decreasing now.

[4] They were mainly within the state school system. A remarkable change was the increase of technical high school, and another was establishment of the College of Technology. However, as far as vocational skill formation is concerned they had less effective than expected, because they were involved in the unified competition within the school system, and technical high schools were ranked at lower positions in the league table (Inui, 1990, 1993).

References


