Freeters and the Search for Meaningful Work in Post-Bubble Heisei Japan*

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One evening, not long after I had arrived in Tokyo in the summer of 2003 to begin my fieldwork, I was invited out for drinks by a few Japanese friends of mine. We met in Shibuya, one of the major train and subway hubs linking the Western suburbs with the core of the city. A center for shopping and dining, a place to see and be seen, Shibuya is often associated with teenagers and those in their early twenties, but throngs of older people, like my friends who worked in the area, gather there as well.

We met at an izakaya off of Dougenzaka.1 One of my friends had brought along an acquaintance of hers, an accountant for NHK, Japan’s national television network. After being introduced, I told him I was doing research on the new economy and young part-time workers—known as furitaa (フリーター), or freeters in English. He lit up and said “now that’s interesting!” I asked him why he thought so, and he replied:

“It’s interesting that there are so many people who don’t want to work in corporate jobs and aren’t really thinking about their future. They go and get jobs as staff in restaurants and cafes in places like Shibuya. They don’t really have a good work ethic. They quit easily if they don’t like the job. And they get away with it because they sponge off their parents” He went on to say that they’re going to be in big trouble in the future, though they don’t seem to realize it right now. “What are they going to do?,” he asked rhetorically.

Happy to talk about my research, I plied him for more information. “It’s common knowledge,” he said. “You can read about it in the papers, but I came to form my own opinion from seeing them every time I go to a shop, bar, or place like this. You can see their attitudes. They don’t smile at customers; they bang the plates and glasses on the table when they serve you. Some just stand around looking like they’re in a daze,” he said with an exaggerated expression of disgust on his face.”

Whenever I met new people in Tokyo, I always mentioned my research and paid close attention to their reactions. Almost everyone had something to say about these young part-time workers. Beyond my research and academic life at the University of Tokyo, I socialized with white collar sarariman (salarymen,サラリーマン), kyariaūman (career women,キャリアウーマン), and office ladies (オフィスレディー) employed by large companies, people who are considered (if somewhat erroneously) to make up the mainstream of Japan’s urban middle class society.2 I soon found that while many people shared the NHK accountant’s view of freeters, they also elicited much excitement, fascination, and, at

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1 Izakaya (居酒屋) can be thought of as a Japanese style pub. Dougenzaka (道玄坂) is one of the major thoroughfares cutting through Shibuya.

2 Salaryman is a Japanese word that refers primarily to white collar workers who are paid a salary, but also to any kind of salaried worker. Career woman is the female equivalent of the salaryman. Office lady is another Japanese neologism that refers to women in low level office jobs, who perform clerical work and usually quit on marriage or having children.
times, envy. As they pursued their own interests and hobbies, freeters were imagined to be leading more relaxed and meaningful lives than those of the company man or woman.

The Problem of Freeters

In 1999 young part-time workers came to be viewed as a societal “problem” by the Japanese government. Their numbers had been increasing rapidly over the previous ten years and by the late 1990s had reached more than 1,500,000. Comprising about 10% of the youth population, this was cause for alarm. That year the Japan Institute of Labor (JIL, now called the Japan Institute for Labor, Policy, and Training: JILPT), an organization affiliated with the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW), initiated a study of their conditions and attitudes (JIL 2000).

The term, freeter, was coined in 1987 by a job information magazine called From A (フロムエー), a subsidiary of the Recruit Corporation. It’s a contraction of free arbeiter (furii arubaitaa, フリーアルバイター), from the English free, and the German word for worker. There is no hard and fast definition of freeters; and who is and is not a freeter varies depending on whom one talks to. From A originally portrayed them as hip young urbanites who had forsaken career track jobs to pursue music, painting, photography and other forms of art and entertainment. In labor market terms, one might think of them as young people, from their late teens to their early thirties, who are not in school, and who are relying on part-time work to make ends meet. They are concentrated in the service industries in major cities, especially Tokyo, Yokohama, Osaka, Nagoya and Fukuoka; and some, including at least one government agency, would include dispatch workers (haken shain, 派遣社員), or what in the United States are called “temps.” The government does not include married women, however, since housewives employed in part-time work already exists as a labor category.

JIL published its first report on freeters in 2000. The findings showed a marked difference between the freeters of the late 1980s and those of the late 1990s. The artistic freeter (芸能型) which From A had originally promoted were now in the minority (14% of the sample). Most freeters (47%), far from having artistic ambitions, were unsure of what they wanted to do with their lives, and were stuck in what JIL termed a “moratorium stage” (モラトリウム型). The second largest group (39%) were what the JIL researchers called the “no-choice type” (やむを得ず型) (JIL 2000). This last grouping is somewhat misleading for while it sounds like it is made up solely of freeters who cannot find full-employment, it actually subsumes a diverse range of people, including those who don’t like the idea of working as a regular employee, those who want or need a flexible work schedule, those who are experimenting with different kinds of jobs to find one that suits them, and those who simply say that they became freeters for “no reason in particular” (なんとなく) (JIL 2000, 2001). This last group is often erroneously interpreted by many in the news media as being forced into part-time work by a poor job market.

The freeters of yesterday and today are both departing from the dominant path of the school to work transition, which is to find full-time employment upon graduation; the difference lies in their reasons and numbers: the freeters of the late 1990s seem to be lost or stalled. Problematic from the government’s point of view is the attitudes of the majority of these new freeters as well as the sharp increase in their overall numbers.

3 This comes close to 10% of people between the ages of 15 and 34, who are unmarried and not in school. By 2000, the number had surpassed 2,000,000 by the most conservative estimates, and 4,000,000 according to the Cabinet Office’s report, which includes temporary workers and contract workers in the definition of freeters.
The news media quickly picked up the JIL findings and made freeters into a major news story overnight. Anecdotes of lazy, ambitionless, spoiled, and parasitic dropouts abounded as journalists and cultural critics decried the poor work ethic of the younger generation and pointed to the burden freeters will become on the country’s resources.4

An article, titled “Freeters will be the ruin of Japan” (フリーター亡国論), from the popular weekly news magazine, Sunday Mainichi (サンデー毎日) (2002), is fairly representative of the tone taken in the news media. It profiles several freeters. One, a 21 year old from a suburb of Tokyo who quit his job to become a freeter says, “My dream is to open the best ramen shop in Japan. . . . Working part-time at a bento delivery shop (弁当屋) and a family restaurant (ファミリーレストラン), I can make close to 200,000 yen a month. Am I worried? I’ve been told off by many people around me, but I say, if you’re not scared, you’ll never succeed. Ramen is a service industry so you have to deal with various kinds of people. That’s what I’m learning to do through my part-time job. I should see and experience as many things as possible right now. . . . If I can apply the experience from my part-time job to my career, then this freeter experience won’t be disadvantageous.”

The author’s response to this is, “Young people’s straight way of talking has a lot of persuasive power, but in the real world, no one knows what tomorrow will bring. . . . Holding onto a dream is the privilege of the young. But for them, that doesn’t seem to be the only reason for being a freeter,” he says, implying that freeters are using dreams as excuses to put off adult responsibility. He quotes a high school teacher to support his point of view: “Freeters depend on their parents for their lifestyle. Parents are also waiting for their children to find success, but one wonders if the young can or should depend on their parents under such economic conditions.”

To really appreciate how significant a departure from mainstream middle class society freeters represent, one must understand how powerful the idiom of the salaryman has been as a marker of identity. Two generations ago, as Japan was faced with recovering from the ravages of the Second World War, poverty made virtually any full-time job a necessity. By the late 1950s and 1960s, during Japan’s period of high economic growth, there was less urgency than in the immediate postwar years to find full-time employment, but finding it, preferably with a large and well-known company, had become an ideal and the anchor of identity for the new middle class salaryman (Vogel 1963). Today at the turn of the 21st century, this is still considered the ideal for the majority of the population, including those who enter shokunin (職人), or artisanal, work (Kelly 1986, 1993, 2002, Kondo 1990). In short, for most people it doesn’t make sense to go into a part-time job out of high school, vocational school, or university.

As I hope to show in this chapter, freeters’ departure from mainstream paths since the 1990s are more complex than hackneyed categories like “dropout,” or “parasite” convey. To better understand the nature of this departure, I explore the ways in which freeters understand and make choices in their economic and

4 The sociologist, Yamada Masahiro, has been particularly influential in this regard. He coined the term “parasite singles” to refer to young adults who continue to live with and depend on their parents after graduating from school (Yamada 1999). Many of the people he refers to are freeters, who he sees as a generation of idle dreamers spoiled by their parents who indulge their desires to live a life free of adult responsibility. In his depiction, many of them speak of big plans to start careers in music, acting, or modeling, but like the societal dropouts they are lazy and feckless. Others, especially women, are just waiting around for a rich man to marry them. Yamada points out that because these young people are living rent free and don’t have many other expenses, they can work in part-time jobs and still keep up the sort of consumer lifestyle that someone making several times more than they are can buy. But since they have more free time than their peers in full-time jobs they are actually leading a richer life. Taking up a full-time job would thus be a step down for them. Ultimately, though, they are living in a fantasy world because one day they will wake up to find that their parents cannot support them forever, and that they will have a hard time finding employment without any full-time job experience (Yamada 2001).
sociocultural environment. I ask how it makes sense for freeters to go into part-time work, and what cultural meanings they draw on to explain their decisions and positions in society. The answers to these questions reveal a strong discontentment with, and critique of, mainstream paths from school to work, as well as with the dominant cultural idioms of work that are rooted in the salaryman and office lady. The increasing number of young people working in part-time and temporary jobs today marks a significant shift away from basing one’s identity in a company or other organization. Through the search for alternatives to the salaryman ideal, and negotiating one’s way through a changing economic landscape shaped by neoliberal economic policies and a prolonged recession, freeters are creating new social identities and pathways from late youth to early adulthood that are centered more on work and lifestyle than on identification with an organization.

The Search for Meaningful Work

Because freeters come from all sorts of socioeconomic backgrounds and take up part-time work for a multitude of reasons it difficult to speak of them in general terms. As I mentioned above, the JIL reports classify freeters into three basic groups, but their classification scheme is misleading; it makes it look like most freeters are aimless or disoriented, when only 47% of the sample indicated that they became freeters because they were unsure of what they want to do.

JIL has also shown that the largest percentage of them come from what JIL researchers term lower income families in which the fathers work in lower status jobs and generally have high school educations at most. About 40% of the freeters in their studies have a high school education, another 40% have attended junior college or technical schools (専門学校), and 20% have attended university. Yet, because JIL did not use strict definitions of socioeconomic class, and did not ask for more precise measures of affluence, the class backgrounds of the freeters in their study are ambiguous.

A separate study by the economist, Genda Yuji (2000, 2001), has persuasively argued that the elementary cause behind the rise in number of freeters is due to the changing labor market. Japan’s neoliberal economic policies coupled with a prolonged recession have had an immense impact on corporations. In order to save costs, companies have slimmed down by scaling back recruitment of new graduates, which far outweighed the number of veteran employees they were firing. The jobs that are available are often undesirable ones which young people end up quitting. Rather than parasites, freeters are victims of corporate restructuring in the face of recession, deregulation, and foreign competition. It is a matter of supply and demand.

Genda’s argument quickly found favor with the mass media and academics. But the assumption that freeters are uninterested in working, are sponging off their parents like children, and have passive attitudes persists. Moreover, there is something which puzzles those who would like to explain the freeter phenomenon in terms of a bad job market. While there are people who reject jobs because of poor working conditions, at least 61% of the freeters who participated in the JIL study did not cite the poor labor market as the reason for going into part-time work. This raises the question, then, of why more and more young people are going into part-time work instead of into career track jobs.

In a recent study, Gordon Mathews (2004) concluded that one of main reasons why freeters are going into part-time work is because they abhor the life of the salaryman. As he put it, “some young people may fully understand the economic odds against them, but may feel such repugnance at the lives their fathers have led that they are willing to abandon the pursuit of regular employment in order not to have to live such a life themselves” (129). One of his interviewees summed up this attitude with the following quote.
“The oyaji (middle-aged salaried worker) has no attractiveness now—books and movies depict him as a miserable figure, just following his boss’s orders and then getting thrown away by the company, and having no place to go, certainly not home. Children see their fathers and think, ‘Why should I study hard and become like that’” (130).

This is a key point that applies to the freeters pursuing careers in art and entertainment as well as many in the so-called moratorium and no-choice groups created by JIL. And this is something that the interview data from the JIL reports bear out. (Editor’s Note: add statistics here on what percentage of interviewees said they don’t want to become salarymen or office ladies).

But more than just expressing discontent with the salaryman ethos, I would argue that the majority of freeters are also employing what might be called an alternative “cultural logic” to make sense of their lives as they leave school and enter early adulthood. Rather than just trying to enter a prestigious company, or any company for that matter, and defining themselves in terms of their association with that organization, freeters are searching for work that is personally meaningful for them. While some truly are suffering from a poor job market, the majority are trying to figure out what it is they are interested in, and using part-time work either to free up time for this search, or working in part-time jobs in fields which they might find interesting. Those trying to become artists or entertainers or freelancers, already have clear goals in mind, but they too have rejected the salaryman or artisanal path.

Moreover, what many of them have in common is a way of constructing identity that is not rooted in a company or other organization. Contrary to what some like Richard Sennet (2000) have argued, work is still important for crafting selves in neoliberal, information and services-based economies. Many freeters are searching for work that is not only interesting to them, but which also will form a part of the lifestyle they wish to lead, and which is an expression of themselves. This is summed up in two key phrases which many freeters use to explain why they’ve become freeters, and, perhaps not incidentally, which are found in many advertisements directed at freeters: *yaritai koto o shitai* (やりたいことをしたい), and *motto jibun rashiku hatarakitai* (もっと自分らしく働きたい). These might be translated as, “I want to do what I want to do,” and “I want to work in a way that is more like myself.”

In the following section I illustrate this search for meaningful work and the construction of identity through work with portraits of three freeters I interviewed and spent time with through the course of my fieldwork in Tokyo.

**Scenes from the Freeter Life**

**Junko**

I first met Junko one cold night in early January when temperatures in Tokyo were hovering just above the freezing point. A friend of mine had organized a dinner party in Shibuya and invited several of his friends from the financial and life insurance worlds. A female acquaintance of his, whom he had met at a previous party, had invited several of her friends and co-workers, all of whom were office ladies for big companies. Junko sat across from me at the dinner table and immediately stood out as the friendliest and most talkative of the women. She was tall, slender, and fashionable. Her long hair, parted in the middle, draped over both sides of her face in one of the popular styles of that year. My friend, the host, told her

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5 This kind of party, where a male host and female hostess agree to bring an equal number of people of the opposite sex together, usually at a restaurant, for the purpose of meeting new people, and perhaps a future boyfriend/girlfriend, is known as a goukon party, or just goukon (合コン), for short.
that I was in Tokyo studying freeters. She turned to me and said, smiling a little embarrassedly that she was a kind of freeter, a *haken shain*.

As we talked about my research and her dispatch worker experiences, the others were drawn into the conversation. Her companions were all envious of the free time Junko had, and one said that she wouldn’t mind quitting her job as an Office Lady (OL) to work as a temp so she could study interior design. Another remarked that she’d just like to finish work at 5:00 so she could get home early and relax. Junko said she doesn’t plan on being a temp forever. “You don’t get a bonus, the company doesn’t pay for your transportation, and there might be long stretches between assignments when you won’t be paid,” she added. We quickly became friends and she agreed to speak to me about her experiences. We met several times over the course of a year.

On one particularly hot and humid day in August, Junko and I were cooling off in a trendy Nakameguro café specializing in fruit tea. “I could design fabric for a living!,” she exclaimed. We had just been browsing through several antique shops, vintage clothing stores and the avant-garde Mizuma Art Gallery in the area bordering Daikanyama and Ebisu.

I noticed through the café’s soft lighting that the other customers and staff were all young twenty-somethings; piping through the speakers was something which could only be described as experimental jazz. Junko was telling me about a fabric-making class she was taking at Musashino Bijutsu Daigaku (Musashino Art University). She showed me photos of designs from fabric books which she had taken in a bookstore with her cell phone camera. “Of course, the bookstore doesn’t appreciate people photographing the contents of their books. So you have to be very quick about it, but at the same time act casual, when pulling out the cell phone so as not to attract attention. Everyone does this, you know,” she said grinning widely.

When I first met Junko at the party in January she had been studying art history at Musashino through a correspondence program for the past three years. She already had a B.A. in English Literature from a prestigious women’s university in Yokohama, and was working towards this second degree in the hope of getting a job at a gallery or museum. She knew, though, that she was getting into a field that is immensely popular, but which has few positions. In addition to the fabric-making course, which was one of her electives, she had recently started taking dress-making classes on Saturdays. The positive feedback and encouragement she was getting from both teachers piqued an interest in design, and she seemed to be at a turning point. The day I met her in Nakameguro, in fact, she showed up wearing a white summer dress she had made herself with a large LeSportsac, dress making materials poking out of it, slung over her shoulder.

“I’m not so sure about studying art history anymore. It’s much more difficult than I had imagined, and you know, I found having to memorize all those details of paintings and sculptures to be a bit tedious. I might just be more interested in creating art than studying it. Maybe I’ll take up dress making and design full-time,” she said with a chuckle.

This was not the first time Junko questioned the direction she was taking with her life. Let us back up a little to her graduation from university. After graduating in 1998 at the age of 22, Junko went to work for a venture capital firm in Tokyo. Seeing it as an excellent place to begin a career, she was very excited, but the work proved to be too demanding and eventually took its toll on her health. She worked from 10:00 am to 11:00 pm nearly everyday, including weekends and national holidays. She found herself running periodically to the bathroom with dry heaves; her shoulders ached, her face was pale, and she caught colds easily. After two years, she quit, with little resistance from her boss.
For many years she had wanted to study Spanish, and since she had a little money saved, she decided this was a good time to do it. She traveled to Central America and enrolled in a language school. She spent most of her free time walking around with a camera, taking pictures of the local people, and hanging out in cafés, people-watching and thinking about what to do with her life. She decided in the end that rather than returning to a slower-paced but dull white collar office job, she would do something related to art or design. On returning to Japan, after three months abroad, she enrolled in Musashino and started working part-time. She insisted on paying for her second degree herself even though she continued to live with her parents in Yokohama.

She started off working as a campaign girl, a part-time job which she did in college. Campaign girls are hired to help introduce and promote new products or events. But at only 1200 yen per hour, it was the lure of higher pay which drew Junko to become a dispatch worker, even though she knew it would lead her back into the corporate world.

She registered with ten dispatch companies, and had two assignments in her first two years, both involving low level clerical work. The volume and intensity of dispatch work varies by assignment. So does the prestige and monotony quotient. As is the case for people on the full-time job market, dispatch workers are more attracted to “big name” companies than “no-name” ones. Though not all temps are interested in finding full-time jobs, many are, and there’s always the chance that an outstanding temp will be asked to join the company full time. Junko, however, wasn’t too particular about what she did, as long as the hours left enough time in the day for her studies, and in fact she took the first assignment that came her way.

It was at Mitsui Bussan, one of Japan’s largest and most prestigious trading companies. Like many large companies struggling with the prolonged economic recession, Mitsui Bussan has stopped hiring ippan shoku (一般職) employees and is relying more and more on dispatch and contract workers to fill low level clerical and secretarial positions. It goes without saying that Mitsui Bussan, located in the Ōtemachi section of Tokyo, is a desirable company to work for, whether as a temp or a regular employee. But Junko was fortunate to work there for reasons that had nothing to do with the company’s symbolic capital.

“Every day is easy!,” Junko exclaimed to me once over dinner in Shirube, a nouvelle Japanese restaurant on Shibuya’s Kouen Doori (“Park Avenue”). Mitsui Bussan had hired Junko as part of a small team of dispatch workers for a seven month data entry and filing assignment, but to the surprise of the management, the women succeeded in finishing the job two months ahead of schedule. Because they were bound by contract, Mitsui Bussan could not cut it short or ask the temps to perform work not stated in the contract. But the women were also obligated to show up to work everyday, Monday through Friday, at 9:15 and leave at 5:00.

In between bites of maguro and avocado sushi wrapped in a spring roll, Junko explained: “Every morning, I ask the manager or other full-time workers if there is any work for me to do. My boss looks like a typical oyaji (middle aged man), but he is such a kind man, and he encourages me in my studies. He lets...

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6 There are different grades of campaign girls (キャンペーガール), ranging from poorly paid girls passing out flyers on the street, to the elite companions (コンパニオン) gracing exotic cars at auto shows, but they usually wear flashy uniforms and promote new products. They work at showrooms, shopping malls, and one can often see and hear them on the street in front of shops in places like Shibuya and Shinjuku. As Junko once said to me, “The hardest part of being a campaign girl is having to stand and look pleasant all day long. All in all, though, the job is easy, and sometimes it’s fun to learn about new products, like computers or digital cameras.”

7 Ippan shoku is often translated as “standard track,” and is what women are encouraged to go into, and expected to resign from on marrying or having children. Office Ladies are typically ippan shoku. In contrast, men and career women are hired into sougo shoku (総合職), or general track (cf. Brinton 1993).
me use the company’s computers to work on my school essays since there isn’t anything else for me to do. That’s incredible, isn’t it? The other women on my team surf the internet or look at magazines.”

The last time I met Junko, in December, we were walking down Omotesandou towards Harajuku. Issey Miyake, Tod’s, Louis Vuitton, Christian Dior, Gucci, Chanel. The left side of the avenue is a gallery of high fashion. Junko pulled me down a side street, and led me to a “select shop” that sells hand bags.

“I didn’t tell you this before, but when I was in college, I worked in a shop like this in Ginza. I love fashion, but I never thought of continuing in the store after I graduated because I thought at the time that I didn’t care to be on the sales end of it, and besides, I had a job offer from that venture capital firm. But now I think I could get back into something fashion related.”

We had dinner at Kaffir Lime, a cheap but popular Thai restaurant in “Ura-Harajuku,” the adult side of Harajuku. I took the opportunity to ask her how her temp assignment was going. After Mitsui Bussan finished, Junko accepted an assignment at a large engineering firm in the Minato Mirai area of Yokohama, close to her parent’s house. The pay was a little lower, but she saved time and money on the commute. “I am sooo bored,” she cried. “The people there are nice, and at first I enjoyed interacting with people from so many different countries, but all I do is answer the telephone, make photocopies, and do data entry. I feel numb at the end of the day.” She was still having second thoughts about finishing her art history degree and working in a museum.

After dinner we went for a walk around the back streets of Harajuku. “I think I’ve about had it with temp work. It’s time for me to move on. At the rate I’m going, I won’t finish my program at Musashino for another year and a half. I’m getting impatient. Of course, if I had a chance to work as a curator or in a gallery that paid well, I’d take it right now. But this seems unrealistic considering I’ll be in my early thirties by the time I get my degree, and I’ve got zero job experience in that area. When I started this I didn’t think the job market for galleries and museums would be so tight. Nor did I think it would take me so long to finish the degree. But it’s difficult to study when you’re working seven hours a day, five days a week. I have no energy at the end of the day.”

I asked her what she plans to do next. “The good thing is that I’ve learned a lot about art history. This is an opportunity not everyone can have. I’ve also realized that I’m more interested in fashion and fashion design than I am in art.” I asked her if she thought she could get a job in fashion.

“Oh of course it’s too late for me to become a fashion designer or even work for one. I’ll certainly continue it, but as a hobby. Besides the training and talent, it takes a lot of money just to set up a studio. I think I’ll have to settle for working in a fashion-related job. Working at a select shop doesn’t pay enough money, so I won’t go back to that. But I think I could work in the office of a company that produces or sells fashion, textiles, or art. This is settling for second best, but after all, I am going to be 30 next year. At least I would be working for a company that’s in an industry I have an interest in.”

I asked her what her family thinks about her situation. “It’s really no big deal,” she replied. “My father has always told me to work hard, but that it’s also important to find a job that suits my ability and interests.” Her father is a white collar manager for a large firm in Tokyo, while her mother is a professional housewife (専業主婦). She indicated though that her parents seem worried about her getting married. “They’ve never said anything to me directly, but I know they’re worried. I’m not in any hurry to get married and have children, but at the same time I’m lonely. If I met the right guy tomorrow, sure I’d probably marry him.”

Before we caught our trains, Junko told me how she’s often worried about her lack of accomplishments. It’s not just a matter of little full-time work experience, and none at all in the field she now wants to go
into. When she looks around at her friends and sees that they’ve been with the same company for so many years and have been promoted to such-and-such a position, or that they have earned such-and-such a certificate or degree, she gets anxious. Because she’s changed jobs so many times and has been working as a temp, and has not completed her correspondence degree, she feels that she has yet to prove herself. She feels that she hasn’t really completed anything.

Her boyfriend once said something to her that drove this home to her. “I was late to meet him once, by about 30 minutes. This put him in a bad mood. He started criticizing me for being irresponsible and self-centered, and then he said that because I haven’t accomplished anything, it might make some guys wonder if I’m capable of sticking to anything.”

Tanake

I met Tanake midway through my second summer in Tokyo. He was waiting for me in front of Ikenoue station on the Inokashira line, one stop from Shimokitazawa, another hip area for youth fashion and music, and the former center for underground theater in the 1960s. He was wearing slim dark pants that didn’t quite reach his white Chuck Taylor All Stars, and a T-shirt with a window pane short sleeve shirt over it. A black rimmed hat sat on his head, and thick black glasses framed his eyes, and strapped over his shoulder was a bass guitar in a vinyl case. One of the bands he plays in had a gig at a live house called “Bob Tail,” and I had been invited by a mutual friend to check out his show and be introduced to him. We descended the steps and entered a small one room bar. It had wood paneling which gave it a warm effect. There were pictures of English country scenes, and then on the wall behind the area where the bands play, was an old advertisement from the 1950s. Two others from Tanake’s band were rehearsing and setting up the “stage” for the evening’s show.

In many ways, Tanake is the classic freeter that From A had in mind when they coined the term in the late 1980s. But as we’ll see, he is not the happy-go-lucky person that is often featured in advertisements directed at Freeters in the pages of From A. Though his friends envy him, he knows he’s taken a big risk by becoming a freeter.

Tanake joined an in-house advertising firm for a major electronics company right out of college. He worked an odd schedule of 12 hour days, four days a week, with the weekend and another day, usually Wednesday, off. At first this was one of the attractive features of the job as it allowed him three full days a week to concentrate on his passion, music. He belonged to ten different bands at the time and had four to five performances a month in “live houses” (ライブハウス) in Shimokitazawa, Shibuya, and Kichijoji. Balancing work and music, however, proved to be harder than he bargained for. The three days off a week turned out not to be enough time to compose, rehearse, perform and recuperate from the previous day’s work. And when he returned home at night, he had little energy to do anything more than zone out in front of the TV. His music suffered as a result.

“It was frustrating because I didn’t particularly enjoy the job, but there I was devoting most of my time to it at the expense of what I really wanted to do. Even when I was at the office I was thinking about the music. I kept asking myself, what am I doing here? I wanted to make a life of music rather than stay in advertising. It’s not a bad profession at all, but I just didn’t have enough of an interest in it.”

He realized that he had to make a choice, and though he knew it would be risky to quit a stable and well-paying, career-track job, he decided that the music mattered that much to him.

“One day, after three years of working for the company, I told my boss I wanted to quit. He was surprised, naturally, and with a concerned look on his face, asked me if I was sure I was making the right
choice. But after I explained my reasons to him he seemed to understand and wished me the best of luck.”

His friends had mixed reactions. Some, particularly those who were still in college, thought it was a brilliant move. Others, who had been working in jobs as long as he had, were less understanding, and he heard over and over again that he had a difficult road ahead of him. At the same time, though, they admired him for it. When he was in college, he and his friends watched the popular TV show, Denpa Shounen (電波少年), which was about Japanese youths who were dropped off with no money in a remote location, like the tip of South Africa for example, and had to work in part-time jobs to pay their way to their destination in Egypt. A friend of Tanake told me once that this TV show may have given an adventurous and romantic image to freeters to many people in their generation.

His parents supported his decision. “My father is a typical salaryman. I mean, he works in an office and has life time employment. He actually works for an advertising firm,” Tanake said with a smile. “He always told me that I should do as I please, so he just asked me if I had given it a lot of thought, and then said all right.”

Many freeters I spoke with also told me their parents were generally supportive of their decisions. I was always surprised to hear this because it is their parents’ generation that seems to be most vocal about criticizing freeters in the mass media. By going into part-time jobs, freeters risk getting stuck in them, and thus also the socio-economic status they grew up with. Parental support indicates that it is not just the current generation of youth that has changed its attitude about success, happiness, and work.

After quitting his job, Tanake had the luxury of six months of unemployment insurance. He devoted the time to composing, rehearsing, and arranging more gigs for his bands. He was in seven at the time, playing a diverse range of genres including jazz, rock, funk, and gospel. He averaged about 12 gigs a month, usually at “live houses” in Shibuya and Shimokitazawa, but also in many less well known venues, including as a back up bassist for a band which played at weddings. The two bands which I saw him play in, however, were quite good. The first time I met Tanake I was expecting a self-taught and unrehearsed garage band, but it was clear that all had had much experience and professional training in their instruments. Nevertheless and needless to say, the gigs are not enough to live off of. He’s on such a tight budget that he’s often reduced to eating instant noodles and gyudon ("beef bowls," 牛丼) at Yoshinoya. He can’t afford to drink much, even cheap beer, and he can never go out to nice restaurants.

Once his employment insurance ran out, he reluctantly took up a job answering a telephone for the customer service department of a company. He found himself working four days a week again, but this time it was only for eight hours a day. The job was dull, but he kept telling himself why he was doing it.

Once, after finishing a set in a smoky Shimokitazawa club, Tanake sat down to have a drink with me. I went to order, but the bartender said they were on the house—“otsukaresama da kara.” Tanake explained how much work is actually involved.

“It’s not just the rehearsing and composing. Organizing a show is a big operation. Many clubs expect the band to bring in a certain number of customers, and if they can’t, then they have to pay the difference out of their own pockets. This means that we have to contact as many of our friends as possible and convince them to come. Of course our friends do come, but one can’t expect them to show up to each and every show.” I know that Tanake’s bands also advertise their shows and maintain websites, which can also be time consuming.
Many deride freeters for being unconcerned about their future. Tanake thinks about his all the time. “If there’s one thing I’m worried about, it’s making it as a professional musician. I love what I’m doing, but let’s face it, it’s scary. My goal at this point is to be able to support myself by the time I’m 30.” Tanake was 26 when we had this conversation. It’s worth noting that freeters often give 30 as a cut off age for them to achieve their goals or give up and take any reasonable full-time job they can get. When he looks at his friends who graduated from university at the same time, he said he sometimes feels a pang of envy. “They’re able to save money, buy nice clothes, go on vacation to Thailand and China, and live in bigger and nicer apartments. But, you know, living poorly is part of being an artist, and one has to accept that. And I know that some of my friends admire and even envy what I’m doing with my life.”

I asked him what he’ll do if 30 rolls around and he’s still struggling to get by on a combination of part-time jobs and gigs. “I can’t even think about that right now,” he replied, as if to imply that having a back-up plan would weaken his determination to succeed.

Naoki

Naoki is someone who at first glance appears to be the freeter everyone loves to hate. He comes across looking shiftless, parasitic, ambitionless, lost, and not giving much consideration to his future. He has a slight build, short hair, and a youthful appearance. He was 25 years old when I was introduced to him through an American friend of mine who rented DVDs from the shop where Naoki was working. He studied economics in university, and unlike most students, did not do shuushoku katsudo in his third year.

“There were a lot of jobs that didn’t interest me at all. And I didn’t know what kind of work I wanted to do, so instead of going on the job market, I decided to continue working at the video shop. There used to be a full-time position there, but I was told that because of the recession they turned it into a part-time job. What do I do there? I’m the guy who works at the register, who takes your money and checks out your movies. I also make “special corners” (特別コーナー). If there’s an actor or director who’s really hot, I’ll grab all his movies, find some information about him, maybe from a magazine or just from my own knowledge, and write a little bio about him, and put it all together on a rack. I love film, especially dark comedies, like American Beauty, but, yes, it’s not really a well-paying job. I work from 6:00 in the evening till 2:00 in the morning, about five days a week. I make only ¥800 an hour, and ¥1000 an hour after 11:30. Nor is it a particularly interesting job. Let’s just say it’s convenient for me at the moment.”

“Everyday my parents tell me to get a job.” Naoki lives with his parents in Yokohama. Although they nag him, they want him to find a career that interests him. And they will continue to let him live at home rent-free until he does. His father in particular is lenient because he was pressured into being a sushi chef when he was young. He had no interest at all in the profession, but his father had been one himself, and he was expected to take over the family trade. Curiously, Naoki told me that he can’t stand the taste of raw fish.

Naoki knows he can’t work in the low-paying video store job forever. “Every morning I wake up and say I will go to Hello Work (a public employment agency), but I’m just too busy right now. But, to tell the truth, this has been going on for the last two years. I keep finding excuses, like studying for the TOEIC (an English proficiency test), or getting involved with the film festival.”

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8 Shuushoku katsudou (就職活動): “going on the job market.” Normally, university students start job hunting and interviewing in their third year.
Naoki was referring to the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) International Film Festival held in Tokyo every July. It is the biggest one in Asia, and he’s been working as a volunteer staff member in their office in Nakano for the past four years. He spoke with much enthusiasm about the festival and it seemed to be at the center of his life when I knew him. It’s held in the über-chic Spiral Hall on Aoyama Doori, near Shibuya. The day I went it was extremely crowded and I had to call him on his cell phone to locate him in the crowd. We went to the café and sat down with a couple of his friends. He is usually a very sedate person, but that day his eyes were animated and he seemed in particularly high spirits.

“Preparation for it takes an entire year. It’s almost like a full-time job. I have to contact foreign film companies and arrange the terms for showing the movies. At the office we have to sit down and watch all the movies that are sent to us and select the ones that will be shown in the festival. Honestly, many of the movies we get are not very good, so this is a harder job than it sounds.”

I asked him if this is the sort of job he’d like to do full time. “Yes, of course. For me this is more like play than work. I’m good friends with my co-workers. It gives me something to look forward to. I don’t go to concerts or to movie theaters, I don’t eat out much. I don’t have any money. I’m a freeter. So I go to the office nearly everyday. That’s the same as hanging out with my friends. But it’s a non-profit organization, and it’s been in the red for a while, so they can’t afford to pay us.”

I asked him why, if he’s so interested in film, he didn’t try to find a job in the industry when he graduated from college. “If I had the chance to work at a film studio, I’d take it right away. I’d even start in a part-time position. But to begin with, they don’t do much recruiting, and the entry level positions they do have are usually reserved for those coming out of the top universities like Waseda and Keio. I just didn’t think it was possible for me.”

“For me to fit into a company, into Japanese society, I’d have to lie constantly. I hate lying. Human relations are so important in companies, and I just don’t want to have to hide anything. With Japanese companies, you have to go out for drinks after work with colleagues, or you have to take clients out for drinks. I really don’t like doing that. Then the company will also give you pressure to get married, but I’m not really “out” yet, so it’s difficult to do that. It’s difficult to live in that kind of society.”

Working at a company where other gay people work didn’t seem to be much of an option for him either. He told me that many gay men work in fashion, but that he had no interest in it whatsoever. He added that “LGBT” companies don’t seem to do well financially.

And yet, Naoki knows there is no alternative to finding employment. “I’d like to get a job where I can use English. I have a high TOEIC score, but I can’t speak well, so I’d have to go abroad for a year or so to improve my spoken English. Working at a foreign firm, especially an American or European one, might be better for me because they tend to be more open minded. But regardless of which company I’m in, I wouldn’t want to do sales or anything where I’d have to go out and meet people. I’ve been thinking of accounting, bookkeeping, actually. It’s something that can be done at any kind of company, and I already have a certificate.”

But it’s easier said than done. As Naoki himself pointed out to me at another meeting at a coffee shop in the Minato Mirai area of Yokohama, there are many constraints on even getting a full-time job. “If I were to go abroad for a year, I’d be 28 when I returned, which is a difficult age to start a career in Japan. But, even now, at 26, with no full-time work experience, and poor English, it’s equally bad.”

Making Sense of Freeterhood
As I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the large number of freeters in Japan is seen as a societal problem by the government as well as by a good many people. Part of this is due to economic reasons. Many freeters, for instance, don’t pay into the national pension scheme, which has become a major issue as Japan’s population ages. Furthermore, if young people become stuck in part-time jobs they will contribute to the widening economic disparity in society (Sato 2000). I suspect, though, that much of the ridicule that peppers the criticism of freeters in the mass media also has to do with how difficult it is for most Japanese to fathom why so many young people would go into part-time work in the first place when for decades the prevailing wisdom has directed the majority of school leavers into shops, factories, and offices as full-time employees.

Let us then consider how it does make sense for Junko, Tanake, Naoki, and other freeters like them. Finding a job that has personal meaning has come to take on more importance than affiliating oneself with, and rooting one’s identity in, a company or other organization that offers the security of “lifetime employment” (終身雇用). This applies to many of those JIL puts into both the moratorium group and the no-choice group. For some of these moratorium and no-choice freeters, working as a salaryman or office lady is truly an unappealing proposition, as other researchers have also noted (JIL 2000, Mathews 2004). For many of the moratorium group, however, it is more a matter of wanting to do work that is suited to them rather than taking up a job for stability or company prestige. Some aren’t sure yet what such suitable work might be and want some time to think about things, while others are actively searching for it. Unfortunately, this has been interpreted to mean that they are lost, disoriented, or ambitionless. Some no doubt are, but looking at my own informants and reading through JIL’s macro data, I would say that they are a clear minority. For many of the no-choice freeters, they have gone into part-time work because they want to study for a license or degree, as in the case of Junko. Others don’t need to work full-time, or need part-time work because they have other responsibilities (as in the case of one of my informants who helped out with the family business and taking care of her home-bound grandmother). The artistic freeters who have clear career goals are in part-time jobs because such jobs either free up enough time for them to pursue their artistic careers, as in the case of Tanake, or they are directly related to their careers. In most cases, freeters are looking for meaningful work, and their decisions to take this path go against conventional beliefs about the proper course out of school and into adulthood. Becoming a freeter is a way of working out of this contradiction.\(^9\)

After being shaken up by an exhaustive work routine at a profitable firm which left her ill, Junko took some time to reflect on her life and decided to pursue her interest in art. Rather than going back into a less demanding but ultimately dull job, she took the opportunity to do what she thought was more interesting and meaningful. Going back to school to study art history, and supporting herself through temp assignments was her solution. For Tanake, working in advertising wasn’t such a bad job, as he pointed out, but it was getting in the way of his music. The company did not matter enough to him to continue on. The meaning and value of being a salaryman did not have as much weight for him and other

\(^9\) Lest I be misinterpreted, I would like to point out that clearly not all freeters become freeters by choice. Some are shut out of the job market because many companies have scaled back recruitment of school leavers. The expanding service sector, which relies on flexible labor, is also contributing to the rise of freeter jobs. However, because many of the responses to the JIL surveys are ambiguous in regards to whether they chose to become freeters or had no choice in the matter, it is difficult to determine the percentage of freeters who were forced into part-time work by a poor job market. Furthermore, defining choice itself presents endless complications. If someone is asked by their family to help out with the family business and look after her sick grandmother, does she have a choice? If someone wants to work for a production company in entertainment, but the only jobs available are part-time ones, does it mean that he or she had no choice but to take the part-time job even if full-time, but less desirable jobs, in other industries were available? The point I want to make is that while different freeters become freeters for different reasons, most of them, rather than killing time, goofing off, getting lost, or getting victimized by the job market, are searching for work that is meaningful and fulfilling to them. I chose to present Junko, Tanake, and Naoki in this discussion because they illustrate this trend.

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freeters like him than it has for most other Japanese. Naoki also faced a situation where his interests and feelings conflicted with dominant meanings and practices. He abhorred the idea of working for a company as a salaryman. He didn’t like the idea of having to go out on settai\textsuperscript{10} or even having to interact much with other people. It is not that he is anti-social, as his involvement in the LGBT film festival attests, but rather that he does not relate well to mainstream Japanese, and does not expect that they will understand him, especially his sexual orientation. These are only three individuals. But something of a phenomenon emerges when there are so many individuals who feel and reason in similar ways.

The decision to overcome discontent with the standard pathway through late youth and early adulthood makes sense to freeters, but it often also makes sense to their friends and family as well. All three of these freeter’s parents supported them in their decisions. Junko’s father said to her that it was important that she do what she wanted to do with her life. What he and Junko’s mother were most worried about was seeing Junko happily married. They did not make any connection between marriage and her work. Tanake’s father, who works in advertising as Tanake did, also gave his consent to Tanake, saying that he should do as he pleases. Naoki’s parents did pressure him to find a job, indeed they nagged him everyday, according to Naoki, but because Naoki’s father had been pressured into his shokunin occupation by Naoki’s grandfather, he wanted Naoki to have the leeway to do what he wanted to do. Furthermore, both Junko’s and Tanake’s friends expressed envy at their working in part-time jobs to pursue their interests and passions.

It is easy to exaggerate the difference between freeters and mainstream Japanese society. One of the illusions about freeters which the JIL reports dispelled was that freeters don’t want to work in full-time jobs like “normal” Japanese. On the contrary the JIL interviewers found that most freeters do eventually want to find full-time employment. Following Yamada Masahiro’s (1999) stinging critique of parasite singles, it was assumed that many freeters, buoyed by parental care, had no intention of moving out and finding full-time employment to support themselves. It was also commonly assumed, that freeters were hopping from one part-time job to another to avoid being chained to a company and the responsibility of full-time work. Some do want to become freelancers or business owners, and some do say they want to avoid being a salaryman or a fully employed shokunin, but they make up a clear minority (JIL 2000). For most young people working in part-time jobs, though, freeterhood is only meant to be a temporary departure from full-time work.

In Junko’s case, she went into part-time work so she could have enough time to study art history. Her plan was to work full-time in a museum or gallery. Later as her thoughts turned to fabric and fashion, she began to think, more realistically, of working for a company that deals with fashion. This of course is not the same as being a designer, but it is a compromise that she knows she will probably have to make. Even so, she isn’t sure that she wants to make a career of it. Indeed, she indicated that any kind of OL work will be boring, and though she once told me she thinks that she’d like to continue working after marriage, she also said that she’d most likely quit after having children, and then perhaps find fashion-related part-time work. Choosing temporary work was a way of resolving a contradiction, but it led to further contradictions which she hasn’t yet resolved.

It is people like Tanake who hope never to return to being a salaryman. But this does not mean they want to work as freelance artists or entertainers forever. Tanake hopes that one of his bands will become popular enough to land a contract with a major recording company. Failing that, he would accept a full-time job as a musician if he could find one. Compared to the others, Naoki is perhaps in the tightest spot.

\textsuperscript{10} Settai (接待) in the business world refers to entertaining clients. It may take place at hostess clubs, on golf links, and more frequently, since the bursting of the economic bubble in 1990, at restaurants. It was not unusual for companies to have corporate expense accounts for settai, but many have scaled them back. See Anne Allison’s (1994) account of Tokyo hostess clubs in the 1980s for more information.
He knows what he wants to do, but realizing that getting a job for a film studio is highly unlikely, he’s put himself in a holding pattern. Working for the LGBT film festival is likewise impossible because he can’t get paid for it. He is horrified by the thought of becoming a salaryman, but, with much resignation, he has already taken the first step by passing the exam to become a bookkeeper.

One thing which struck me as I met more and more freeters during my fieldwork was how many of them were interested in art, mass media, fashion, design, and other lines of creative work. I was also surprised to find that many freeters who were interviewed by the JIL researchers also indicated that they were interested in such occupations (JIL 2000). To be sure I met plenty of freeters who wanted to be teachers, who wanted to set up their own cafes, or work as professional bar tenders. But the frequency I came across freeters, both in person and in reports by other researchers, who wanted to be writers, actors, comedians, musicians, tattoo artists, hair stylists, manga artists or who wanted to work for shops and companies that dealt with fashion or popular culture suggests that there may be something to this trend that deserves further examination.

**Conclusion**

I have tried to show how Junko, Tanake, Naoki, and other freeters like them make sense of their departures from mainstream paths. And I have tried to do so in a way that differs from dominant explanations that tend to be either overly negative or overly positive. As I mentioned in the beginning of this essay, common sense says that freeters are deviants and dropouts because they are not following the “normal” or “correct” path from school to work and adulthood. By using Junko, Tanake, and Naoki as illustrative examples, I demonstrated how “deviant behavior” can be understood as expressions of discontent with long-standing norms and values having to do with the salaryman ideal, particularly the pressure to enter a company straight out of school and identify one’s self with it. And moreover, that becoming a freeter is a way of resolving this contradiction.

This is not, however, a simple matter of rejecting full-time work, or the salaryman ethos altogether. While there are some freeters who want to become freelancers, and some who may even stay in part-time work indefinitely just to avoid the bondage of full-time employment, most freeters do eventually want to be gainfully employed (JIL 2000, 2001). The desire for full-time employment stems not so much from identification with a large and well-known firm or other institution as it does from the prospect of a higher salary and more benefits than part-time work can offer.

Freeters, then, can be seen as part of a broader critique of the salaryman ideal. But also, by way of parenthesis, of the *shokunin*, or artisanal identity, which has been on the wane much longer (Kondo 1990). Even among the salarymen and career women, there is a trend away from so-called lifetime employment and towards changing jobs to advance one’s career. More emphasis is placed on leisure and personal interests even for salarymen, a trend which began perhaps with the *shinjinrui* generation (新人類) in the late 1980s.

Junko, Tanake, and Naoki were all willing to work full-time if they could find a company that suited their interests. For these freeters and many like them, personal interest has become more meaningful than becoming a company man or woman. But even here there are limits, as with Naoki who realizes that he will have to join a company and perform a task which has no real meaning for him because he cannot find a job that does. Junko is already thinking about going back to the corporate world. What is surprising, then, is how little freeters depart from mainstream values of Japanese society. This is not to underestimate the significance of the number of people now working in part-time and temporary jobs, however. This is the first time in decades where the identities of millions of young adults are not rooted in companies or government organizations, throwing the centrality of companies and organizations as
sites for “crafting selves” into doubt for younger generations (Kondo 1990). Orienting one’s life in terms of personal interests represents a big change. But it is not a complete break from the corporate world of the salaryman or the factory world of the blue-collar salaried worker.

One question which the freeter phenomenon raises is whether we are witnessing the making of a new class of low paid workers. It is uncertain as of this writing whether this is merely a temporary phenomenon or whether it will become a permanent fixture of the Japanese political economy. Some have pointed out that if, or when, Japan pulls out of its recession, there will still be a high demand for freeters in the job market because companies have discovered how beneficial it is to have a flexible labor force which is easily recruited, trained, and discarded. And the longer this goes on, the more likely it will become a “natural” pattern that people will accept.

It is also too early to tell if this is a temporary stage on the way to full-time work or other careers such as being a professional housewife, or if it is a final destination. Studies by JIL and Recruit show that the longer one works as a freeter, the harder it is to move into full-time work. Most companies simply don’t respect part-time work, and don’t count it as real work experience. Moreover, they view job applicants who have been working in a series of part-time jobs as having a poor work ethic. Right now it appears that about 60% of freeters are able to get out of freeterhood, but this is a tricky statistic. For the women, a good many of them solve the freeter problem by getting married, which is not quite the same thing as finding full-time employment, becoming an artist or entertainer, or becoming a freelance professional. In addition, many freeters move in and out of full-time work. If the latest statistics are accurate, then not only is the number of freeters increasing, so is their age, which suggests that people are spending more time in part-time work than before.

If these trends continue, it is quite possible that in the future we may look back on this period and ask ourselves how the transition to a class of flexible workers, who have given up job security and put up with low pay, went so smoothly. How did this happen with relatively little fuss on the part of the workers themselves? Leaving economic changes, such as the recession and the transition from an industrially based economy to one based more on services, aside, I would argue that it seemed to make good (cultural) sense to many people at the time. It was informed by notions of freedom, flexibility and self discovery, and by a soured image of the full time office worker as a living a staid and constrained life, and the full-time blue collar worker as doing something distasteful. Now, how this cultural sense or logic developed is another question which requires delving into.
References


