At the limits of New Middle Class Japan: Beyond "mainstream consciousness"

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I

Middle class or mainstream?
Class structure without class talk

It is one paradox of class in Japan through the second half of the twentieth century that class consciousness has been high among academic social scientists but seemingly low within official talk and everyday discourse. In this regard, class talk has the same standing as in the United States, the other advanced industrial society least willing to formulate structured social inequality in the idiom of socioeconomic class. In both countries, there is a central and sophisticated concern with class analysis among social scientists, but a disinclination among public officials and ordinary people to talk about themselves and others in terms of class position.

As observed by many analysts and commentators, from de Tocqueville through Veblen to the present, the American Way is to dissolve class into the vagaries of consumption tastes and lifestyles. "Middle class" is constantly used by Americans to talk about such matters as individual identity, community type, lifestyle matters, and voting patterns, but we use the term much more frequently to index consumption orientation or moral positioning than economic location. From the 1930s Depression onwards, upwards of eight out of ten Americans have located themselves within the middle class when asked on many different kinds of polls to choose among lower, middle, and upper locations. Poll self-identification has remained invariant in spite of widening income and asset inequalities since the late 1970s.

A similar pattern, although different dynamic, is true for Japan. Class has been a prominent topic of social science research for the last fifty years, and it is still deployed by intellectuals and what remains of the organized labor movement. In the first postwar decade,
scholars like Tsurumi Shunsuke debated just how independent was “popular culture” from “mass culture.”2 By the late 1950s, scholars divided sharply on how to interpret the first Social Stratification and Social Mobility (SSM) Survey, which was undertaken in 1955 by the Japan Sociological Society, and whose design was greatly influenced by survey programs in American sociology. One of the contested findings of the first SSM Survey was a growing new middle class.3 Disputes about the surveys continued among social scientists through the 1960s, for example, between Odaka Kunio and Yasuda Saburō over mobility and class identification arising from the second SSM study.4 In the following decade, both scholars and journalists took up the question of whether the annual Prime Minister's Office poll demonstrated a broad middle “class”-ness or middle “mass”-ness.5 Then, as a speculative “bubble economy” overheated in the 1980s, controversy centered on the expansive postwar middle, however defined, was now fragmenting into widening differentials between what some warned were the "new rich" and "new poor."6 The sustained recession of the 1990s at least reigned in many of the “new rich” and defused the commentary about “kakusa,” or a wealth gap. Rather, academics have turned to other kinds of stratification debates, such as between sociologists Tominaga and Imada, who propose modernist versus postmodernist interpretations of stratification and status perception.7

These debates about class and mass, and the research agendas behind them, have significantly influenced academic formulations of contemporary Japan. Despite their often sharp differences, however, they collectively demonstrate that socio-economic inequalities have persisted, in one form and degree or another, and that class continues to be a salient analytical distinction. There is broad agreement, for instance, that from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s, aggregate economic growth and state policies to enhance personal income and expand welfare significantly equalized income, assets, and educational attainment across the Japanese population. But since the mid-1970s, there has been an equally significant widening of income, asset, and education differentials. Ishida Hiroshi, in a rigorous test of several competing hypotheses about class structure and status hierarchies, found strong support for the importance of firm size in explaining differential benefits and status. Income and prestige were more closely correlated with the size of one's company than with one's occupation or education.8

However, the ambition of this chapter is not to join this sociological literature but rather to
unpack a term of more popular than academic currency, a notion that has denoted social inclusiveness rather than categorical differentiation. This term is *chûryû*. Its usual English gloss is "middle class," although we should understand it more accurately as "mainstream." Its most frequent compound, "*chûryû ishiki,*" is mainstream consciousness. The significance of this term and its compound, I will argue, is in signaling the ways in which the Japanese population has generally assented to the post-1960s societal order.

This assent was neither predictable nor passive. The assertion of a social contract frequently emphasizes the efforts of political and economic leaderships to incorporate and accommodate broad segments of a national population. The Japanese establishment, in particular, is often seen to have been particularly successful in co-opting people as citizens, workers, and consumers into a national compact. The initiative, however, may well have come from below, especially if one begins, with Kent Calder and others, from a premise of official equivocation and establishment uncertainty:

"Across the long decades of growth, an increasingly stable and affluent Japanese society confronted a fractious political system, the unsettling pluralistic heritage of occupation, and an economy with little tolerance for political instability, due to its ambitious, risky, and highly leverage economic growth strategies."  

Identification with a societal mainstream took place in spite of and not in terms of objective differentials that sociologists and economists continued to recognize and register as those of social class. *Chûryû* has been a potent construct for organizing life and valuations of life in Japan of the last several decades, and any effort to understand the real differences in socioeconomic position and life chances that have and continue to exist in Japan must take seriously this term. Significantly, the term does not feature prominently in sociological surveys such as the decennial SSM, but it has been the key term in the annual Survey on the People's Life-Style that the Prime Minister’s Office has conducted since 1958. The poll asks respondents to place themselves in one of five positions relative to the wider population (much above, just above, the same as, just below, and much below an average well-being; see Table 1). Since at least the late 1960s, about ninety per-cent of the respondents placed themselves in the
middle, upper-middle, or lower-middle strata, leading Government White Papers and media commentary to interpret the results as demonstrating contemporary Japan has a broad mainstream population. Japan as a “ninety per-cent middle class society” has been the consistent claim for three decades, although the real effect of this “mainstream” identification has been to "declass" and "massify" debates about social stratification.

Mainstream consciousness became a popular phrase in the 1960s, as the domestic economy was heating up, as corporate managers were trying to defuse leftist labor unions, and as the ruling Liberal Democratic Party tried to be more inclusive. For example, the media of the decade made much of what was termed "the mass mainstream of 100 million people" (ichiokunin sóchûryû), which resonated for most adult Japanese of the time in powerful and prideful contrast to the phrase that was the national self-characterization just after World War II: ichiokunin sókyodatsu, "100 million people in a state of trauma." It is not hard to imagine how establishment interests were served by this rhetoric of mandarin planners and commentators. A Japanese sense of exceptionalism became a cultural nationalism of homogeneity and hard work. Economically, such an image both promoted and responded to new patterns of savings and spending. Politically, it restated societal consensus at a time of student unrest, environmental protest, the "oil shocks," the "Nixon shocks," and other serious perturbations.

Yet an orientation towards the mainstream also deeply conditioned everyday life by the 1960s. It is true that, it was only in that decade that middle-class occupations (conceived expansively as not only managers and professionals but also white-collar employees and urban old middle-classes) increased rapidly, and even now, they have never engaged a majority of the working population. Nonetheless, this was the moment when certain key elements of middle-class life and location became nationalized into a model of "mainstream" life that has since represented powerful designs for living.

Like "middle class" in post-World War II United States, then, the Japanese use of "mainstream" does not refer a class category but to a category that works to transcend class. It is this notion of "mainstream" life or consciousness that is often said to have had hegemonic force over the last thirty years, at least symbolically from the Tokyo Olympic year of 1964.
through the death of the Shôwa emperor in 1989 and into the 1990s. And it is this folk term, mainstream consciousness, and not class structure per se that is the focus of my concern in this chapter.

My argument is that this orientation towards mainstream definitions of lifeways and life chances has had directive force not because it has been touted rhetorically by officials and media but more significantly because it has been embedded in a particular matrix of public discourse and institutional fields. It is this embedding that has promoted an extension of certain social forms and cultural meanings of middle class location to wider salience. To demonstrate this argument, the next section of this chapter outlines how the course of societal development from World War II forward has been one of restructuring and standardizing differences around new axes rather than homogenizing lifestyles and equalizing life chances.

If the postwar social contract has been shaped and sustained by the conditioned and conditioning participation of the population, this same population can effect systemic change. This is indeed the importance of several trends of the last decade, which portend a serious weakening of the lineaments of this social contract. The third and final section of this chapter identifies three such vectors of change that signal turbulence in the mainstream.

II
"Mainstream consciousness" and the restructuring of difference: the social formation of new middle class Japan

My suggestion then is that the force and meaning of mainstream identity must be understood as mutually conditioned by several other rubrics of public talk and by a particular institutional grid that was characteristic of post-1960s Japan. In my own writings, I have used the term "new middle class" social formation to characterize structurally and situate historically Japan of the four decades from roughly the early 1960s through the 1990s. There are, of course, other constructs for these decades—such as "managed society," "company-ism," "the educational credential society," and "information capitalism." Each has been valuable in permitting a line
of analysis that is often more complementary than alternative to the others.¹¹

For me, new middle class (henceforth, NMC) Japan is a distinctive "social formation" in the sense, for example, that Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron use the concept to mean a two-dimensional "system of relations of power and relations of meaning between groups and classes."¹² More than class structure or society, the concept of social formation captures some of the fractious dynamism of autonomous but linked fields. It more clearly problematizes the degree and nature of integration, and the term itself is constructively ambiguous (formation connotes simultaneously forming, formed, and formative). A social formation is a concatenation of discourses and institutions through and by which lines of power are drawn and certain propositions and values are endowed with a naturalizing authority.

Analytically, then, NMC Japan emerged in the decades since the early 1960s as a reticulation of certain thematics of public talk and several central social fields. In earlier articles, I have outlined at least six such loosely-bounded sets of public talk and three such institutions, which collectively served to both incorporate and differentiate the population, by discursive location and social position. Here I only sketch them cursorily.

The first thematic of public talk centered on culture. It is much remarked that, after Japan's defeat in World War II, official and mainstream versions of national identity shifted from the explicitly Shintō religious foundations that underwrote the prewar imperial doctrine of kokutai to more overtly ethnic bases of "Japaneseness." By this sanitized mono-ethnic nationalism, Japaneseness became a matter of psyche, not politics. A Japanese "culture" was imagined by the stereotypic extension of personal traits to unique national "character"; thus, "treatises on Japanese culture" (Nihon bunka-ron), "treatises on Japan" (Nihon-ron), and "treatises on the Japanese people" (Nihonjin-ron) have been virtual synonyms of the media and popular literature. This move had the clear advantage of personalizing and naturalizing membership in the national community for a state whose own political character has been accused of everything from aggression to ineptitude. At the same time, by further associating culture as character with culture as heritage, this public talk exacerbated the dichotomies of modernity and tradition as they were mapped onto genders, regions, and neighborhoods.¹³
Japanese cultural exceptionalism not only offered a broad channel for notions of a mainstream, but also mitigated some of the frictions of another contemporary discourse, that of the center and the regions. The concentration of population, resources, and influence in metropolitan Tokyo is a long-term process, but it was greatly accelerated from the mid-1950s. Japan now has a uni-polar geography akin to a number of European nations, and the ladders of success and opportunity in education, media, politics, and corporate employment all tip upwards toward Tokyo. The subordination of much of the rest of Japan as "regional" has been ideologically outset by the grounding of much Japanese culture as "tradition," which is sentimentally felt to remain vibrant in the rural heartland. Regional Japan is valorized nostalgically as it is depleted economically.14

Modern Japan has had a special fascination for typologizing and stereotyping historical "generations" which we might more precisely consider to be cohort talk. The focal point of commentary in the postwar decades has been the so-called Shôwa hitoketa, the "Shôwa single-digit" cohort born in the first nine years of the era (that is, 1926-34). This cohort has been a departure and a measure for much of the subsequent generational talk, even more definitively than its rough United States equivalent, "the children of the Depression," defined postwar America age-grades.15 The single-digit Shôwans are the cohort whose childhood and youth spanned the "dark valley" of the Depression and the war. It is the generation that was old enough to have suffered but young enough not to have inflicted suffering. It managed the psychological divide and social chaos in the war's aftermath, to become the bedrock of postwar recovery and boom. In the early postwar decades, the single-digit Shôwans became, in the popular imagination, the "workaholic company men" and the "education mamas," whose selfless efforts on behalf of corporation and children insured present and future prosperity. They are now poised as Japan's first mass senior-citizen cohort, the first wave of an aging society. Throughout their lives, then, they have stood at the peak of an age-graded moral cline, by which judgments of the postwar population are often cohort-stratified. For decades, commentators have wrung their hands anxiously over each succeeding youth cohort, among whom they always find dangerous portents of weakening social commitment and rising personal indulgence.
Finally, a focus on life cycle—or "life course"—gained widespread currency in the 1970s, somewhat later than the above notions, although the rhetorical normalizing of life transitions had already been a part of public talk in modern Japan (for instance, there were public conventions about an "appropriate age" for marriage, *tekireiki*). From political, economic, and social motivations, however, a more comprehensive discourse was elaborated around the notion of the "eighty-year life span,"¹⁶ which periodizes life courses linked to institutional positions (as student, worker, spouse, parent, etc.).

The rhetoric of life cycles is not surprisingly strongly gendered; indeed, gender inflects each of these public discourses and has constituted its own discursive field.¹⁷ In contemporary Japan, the discourse of gender has privileged an obligatory marital heterosexuality and a mutual social dependency at home, at work and at play. The male and female life cycles have been structured in a way that emphasize differential natural endowments and limitations that channel normal energies towards separate sets of complementary commitments in both public and domestic spheres.¹⁸

Thus, projections and claims of "mainstream consciousness" have only gained currency and definition in relation to these and other thematics of public talk.¹⁹ Even this is not sufficient, however; mainstream consciousness has also required social grounding as well as the mutual conditioning of these ideologically potent discourses. This social grounding has been found in the key institutional sectors of the NMC social formation. By this, I mean that the reorganization and wider reach of certain institutions have patterned lifeways in the last four decades, especially in the three key sectors of work, family, and education.

**Work.** The twin images of the late Shôwa economy were those of a uniquely "Japanese company" model of lifetime commitment, bottom-up recruitment of school-leavers, promotion and pay primarily by years of service, and enterprise unions, and of a "dual economy" of a modern, large-firm sector dominating a traditional, small-firm sector. However, it is more accurate to say that the workplaces of these decades have been girded the double hierarchies of an industrial structure of large and small firms and regular and non-regular employment statuses. The former is actually a continuum from large corporations and government bureaucracies to
subcontractors, entrepreneurs, independent artisans, and small retailers. The latter, occupational hierarchy ranges from male white-collar managers (the "salaryman"), professionals, and skilled blue-collar workers down through female clericals and part timers to seasonal and casual labor.

The hierarchies intersect at their higher ends with the privileged, permanent, and mostly male regular employees of the large firms and ministries. The "Japanese company" model originally suggested that a bedrock of traditional values upheld the organizational features of this core. Labor historians, however, have taught us that the elements of large corporate organization were forged during several contentious periods of struggle during this century. One result has been a considerable white-collarization of male blue-collar workers in large firms. At the same time, to protect this core and to minimize corporate exposure to downturns, these companies remain flexible by externalizing their expansion and contraction with non-regular workers and chains of subsidiary affiliates.20

**Family.** Legal reform (the postwar Constitution and new Civil Code), demographic changes (rising longevity and declining fertility), and economic transformations (employment shifts, urban expansion, consumer marketing) combined in the postwar years to promote and valorize a conjugal couple and a nuclear household organized by the strict role complementarity of a rice-winner husband-father and a caregiver wife-mother. What is important to emphasize is that the family has not become a "haven in a heartless land," a refuge from social engineering. Rather, its roles and routines have been reorganized in ways that lend critical support to the more "public" institutions of schools and workplaces.21

**Education:** For virtually every Japanese born after World War II, twelve years of formal education have become the link between home and work, childhood and adulthood. Postwar Japanese education has managed to combine mass schooling of a literate citizenry with a rigorous culling for elite positions in society.22 The rigor and quality, the broad, uniform curriculum, and the equitable funding of the overwhelmingly public elementary and secondary schooling have been rapturously described by journalists and academics alike. At the same time, the funnel of the school credential society narrows quickly. Late Shôwa Japan quickly became a rather strict meritocracy, but this is largely measured by educational achievement.
Educational prestige is in turn determined by school reputation, which is indexed by entrance exam competitiveness. And increasingly, exam success required extracurricular private study in the shadow sector of the infamous cram schools and prep academies.

What I am emphasizing here is how these dominant yet shifting constructs formed unifying frames for people’s experience but also created new categories of distinction among the population. The institutional fields that came to reorganize life ways in the post-World War II decades standardized but did not homogenize patterns of life. What was produced was thus a structured differentiation of workplaces, family forms, and school outcomes. This is the sense in which "mainstream consciousness" could come to represent both a broadly inclusive but also sharply stratified sense of social identity.

At the same time, it is imperative to understand these ideologies and institutions, which frame much of everyday life and consciousness, are themselves structured over time. How did they come to take shape, how have they been reproduced, and what is the potential for their transformation into something else? Ideologies and institutions, in distinct ways, have a powerfully directive force to coopt alternatives and to make those who talk and act—the people of late Shōwa Japan—complicit in structuring their lives. And even as they set limits and "normalize" lives, they depend precisely on those actors, who move within, through, and sometimes against these boundaries of the feasible and the desirable. Subject positions shape but are also reshaped by positioned subjects.

Much of the anthropological literature of postwar Japan can be read as ethnographic representations of the emergence and reproduction of this social formation. Our many studies show that this sense of the differences-that-standardize lies at the core of folk notions of the contemporary "mainstream." And it is this discursive and institutional formation, and not the broadening and contracting of a middle income stratum in straight-forward socioeconomic terms, that is essential to appreciating the postwar social contract in Japan.

Such a formulation of the sources and nature of public support for societal arrangements also suggests how such arrangements may be challenged. In the third section of this chapter,
then, I turn to the possibilities for ways out of and beyond the NMC social formation. What are the kind of actions that are both intelligible within the logic of NMC but which we may identify as now reforming its patterns and loosening the hold of "mainstream consciousness"?

### III

**Beyond "mainstream consciousness"**

Events over the decade of the 1990s surprised most Japan analysts at every turn. We have all witnessed but few had foreseen the decomposition of central elements of both the international system and domestic arrangements that had sustained Shôwa Japan through its postwar decades. The breakup of the Soviet Union, the death of the Shôwa emperor, the collapse of the 1980s bubble economy into a prolonged recession, the continuing disarray of the post-1955 political system--these and other developments present us with a far more chastened and anxious object of contemplation than the confident Japan of the late 1980s.

Retrospectively, it is widely argued that postwar Japan was dependent on a special hothouse international political economy that is no more—including an undervalued yen in a dollar-denominated world economy; a United States security umbrella in a bipolar superpower struggle; and an edge in high-value manufacturing technologies in an era of industrial capitalism. This is undeniable and consequential to me, but I prefer to locate my own speculations within three other general claims about the present moment.

First, New Middle Class Japan was ideologically marked by a historically unique generation (the single-digit Shôwans), and it was dependent on a particular demographic profile (a youthful age-structure together with low but stable and sustainable fertility). For fifty years, Japan was a distinctive combination of a generation rooted in but not responsible for the prewar past and a society made youthful by their immediate postwar baby boom. As this generation begins to die off and the demographic profile ages, one can expect serious repercussions.

Secondly, in important respects, the New Middle Class arrangements and inducements that
were consolidated by the mid-1960s have, ironically, proven too successful for their own good. They have produced what William Steslicke once called the "dilemmas of success". The educational arms race (that is, the continuing escalation of parental investment and student effort to gain an edge in school admissions), and the hyper-concentration of resources and population in metropolitan Tokyo are two examples of the fatal attraction of certain values and standards in drawing more seekers of success in their terms than could be accommodated.

Finally, in part for this very reason, many argue that New Middle Class Japan is quickly exhausting itself through its own contradictions and resentments. The population has had enough of "rich Japan, poor Japanese," and the decade of the 1990s produced much skepticism and cynicism about the official sloganeering: “raising the quality of life,” “expanding leisure,” “promoting privatization,” “a dawning age of culture,” and the "internationalization" of Japan.

Each of these three claims is a compelling predisposing condition for expecting an incipient punctuation of the existing social formation. Still, they do not specify the shifts in people's actions that foreshadow such a restructuring. What I would like to outline in this section are three tendencies of the present that seem to challenge seriously the social order of New Middle Class Japan. They are the increasing tendency of the elderly population living alone or with a spouse; the rapidly rising percentage of women who are postponing marriage; and the growing percentage of entrants to elite public universities who have graduated from private and national schools with six-year middle and high school programs rather than from public high schools. These three diagnostics hardly exhaust the possible shifts that have the potential to restructure, but each of them poses alternatives and exposes contradictions that cannot be easily contained by present arrangements. They suggest the waning power of a "mainstream consciousness" to channel aspirations and effort.

(1) old age and eldercare

We have heard so much about Japan as an "aging society" that the phrase itself is a bit long in the tooth. Still, preemptive crisis-talk has proven an effective technology of power in postwar Japan, and visions of an "aging society" may rank among the most effectively
preemptive of all. Official talk about aging began in the early 1970s, when Japan still had the most youthful population profile in the OECD. Only now, finally in the 1990s, is Japan's broad-base population pyramid becoming a tall, thin rectangle (see Table 2).

Geometric images are backed by a barrage of arithmetic. The number of youth, 10-19, has declined 25% in this decade. People over sixty have increased 35%. Nineteen ninety-five marked the first-ever decrease in the total labor population (i.e., the number of workers, 15-60-years old). By 2013, about a quarter of the population will be older than sixty-five (making Japan the "oldest" nation in the world), and it is estimated that pensions, social insurance, and medical costs will require 23% of GNP (over half the elderly population at that point will be older than 75).26 The birthrate in metropolitan Tokyo is projected to fall to 1.1, pushing the "dependency ratio" of workers to non-workers to unsustainable heights. And so on.

Japan's aging society is envisioned as resting on the twin pillars of private care and public resources, and both are already showing signs of reaching the limits of personal and political tolerance. Now entering their seventies, the Shôwa single-digit cohort is graying into Japan's first "mass longevity" elders. For the moment, the moral stature of this particular historical generation is extremely significant in mitigating resentment about escalating costs of an aging society. As these "honorable elders" pass, however, it becomes much less likely that public entitlements and private care giving can and will be extended adequately.27

There are two features that are distinctive about the present Japanese situation. The first is the relatively high rate of employment for Japanese men (and to a lesser extent, women) over sixty-five, some of whom want to and others of whom must keep working after mandatory retirement to remain financially independent. The second is the government efforts to promote three-generation families and to privatize elder care (where privatization refers to the family, not to the marketplace!). This is borne out statistically. About 60% of those over the age of sixty-five live with children (and two-thirds of those households also include their grandchildren); one in four elderly lives as a spouse couple, and only 15% live alone. Thus, Japanese elderly live with children at four to five times the rate in US and eight times the rate in Great Britain. Their roles include caring for grandchildren, cooking, housework, laundry, home
These two features seem to be at cross purposes—high rates of working to remain financially independent and of living with children. However, they are very possibly the distinct patterns of the young-old and the old-old; that is, the high rate of elderly employment reflects the need to supplement limited pension income and the strong desire to remain financially and residentially independent of children—for as long as they remain healthy. The high rate of living with children reflects the lack of public and private sector long-term care facilities and the legal and ideological presumptions of family responsibility.

Together, though, these characteristics of Japan's elders have kept the burden of responsibility on individual and family means, with public facilities and resources only providing back-up. Yet neither independent living nor family care is accomplished easily, and both test the often subtle distinctions between preference and necessity and the varying perspectives of the younger and older generations.

The arguments that flare up around what David Plath called the "intimate politics of co-residence" much more frequently concern social relations than financial abilities. For that reason, I think an important diagnostic is the rising rate of elderly who live alone or with only their spouse. In 1980, these were only 6% of all households, but by 1992, the figure had risen steadily to 11% of all households (and fully 40% of the over-65 population). I do not know what threshold would portend a fundamental challenge to the uneasy balance of public and private responsibilities, but it has already reached a level that threatens to open a chasm between the two.

(2) women and marriage, crisis and resistance

Two developments of the 1980s have been frequently assessed for their subsequent effects on marriage, family, and gender relations in the 1990s. First, for much of that decade, businesses faced growing labor shortages for a broad spectrum of blue-collar, clerical, and
low-level technical positions that opened opportunities for women as a way for companies to avoid foreign guest workers. The heated controversies surrounding and the divided evaluations subsequent to the passage of the 1986 Equal Employment Opportunity Law were significant, but the law had only indirectly impact on the majority of working women, who were choosing and/or constrained by jobs, not careers.

Secondly, it was much ballyhooed by the end of the decade that Japan's men faced a marriage crisis and the society at large faced a fertility collapse. Indeed, the numbers in the cohorts of marriageable men exceeded those of marriageable females (in both absolute numbers and in regional distribution), and for that and other factors, the fertility rate which had stabilized around the replacement rate for much of the past three decades, did fall steeply to 1.57 in 1990. In this year of what the media tagged as the "1.57 shock," the title of Tanimura Shiho's best-selling novel, Kekkon shinai ka mo shiranai, was appropriated to express a broad syndrome; the title may be translated as "maybe I won't get married after all"!29

This proved to be more than just media hype, as it became evident around that time that large numbers of women in the 30-35-year cohort were in fact remaining unmarried. By 1995, a stunning 48% of women and 67% of men in the 25-29 age cohort were unmarried, and in metropolitan Tokyo well over half of women were turning 30 without having married. Even those who married were delaying having children; in 1997, 40% of couples married for four years did not yet have children. In that year, the fertility rate dropped below 1.40.30

The postponement of marriage and the correlative sharp decline in the fertility rate has provoked some government response, such as a four-ministry "Angel Plan," set flight in 1994 to great fanfare but few funds. There has also been much chauvinistic hand wringing by (male) bureaucrats about female obligations and maternal urges, but what was "crisis" for men was read as "resistance" by women. Countless talk shows, magazine columns, and books have been fueled by debates about the motivations of such resistance and whether it represents procrastination or refusal. Perhaps the most common interpretation is that more tertiary education and expanding employment opportunities for metropolitan women have offered them goals and satisfactions that would be compromised by marriage responsibilities as well as the
income to pursue them. Polling data continue to report a desire by women to eventually marry but a preference to wait for the right circumstances.\textsuperscript{31}

However, I am dubious that the pull factors are so decisive. No doubt, metropolitan women have been delaying marriage because they have found the job front to be improving and the home front not improving, but I suspect that they are more frustrated by the latter than encouraged by the former. It is less the pursuit of opportunity than escape from constraint. I find support for this in the extended depressed economy of the 1990s. It is women—and especially university-educated women—who have been the first to feel the job freeze and the workforce reductions. And yet, this has not driven them down the aisle into the arms of waiting husbands. Age at marriage has continued to climb and fertility continues to fall. It is not so much an attitude of "I don’t want to get married" but "I don't want to get married just yet" or "I don't want to get married until I find the right guy."\textsuperscript{32}

The larger point for me about female marriage resistance is that women who postpone marriage appear to have understood that the most effective way to beat the social logic of Japan's boom decades, by which the home was caught between work and school, is simply to avoid (re)entering one—to "exit" the system, or else to linger outside the domestic door long enough before going back in as to create panic within.

I suspect, too, that a good part of the motivation is the aging population. Even more than the United States, care for those elderly who cannot care for themselves is overwhelmingly treated as the responsibility of a female relative. Indeed, surveys frequently find that the major concern of women over forty in Japan is aging—not their own, but that of their parents, their parents-in-laws, and their husband. It is often said that a woman experience’s three old ages: in her fifties, she must care for her parents (and/or her spouse's parents); in her sixties and seventies, she must care for her husband; and in her seventies and eighties, she must finally care for herself. Marriage, many fear, involves sole responsibility for managing the household for an absentee husband, for raising the children, and eldercare of parents and in-laws.

These responsibilities have never been easy, and they are only exacerbated by the factors
discussed above, including mass longevity, state efforts to keep primary care a family responsibility, more nuclear households—and rising female work force participation (now well over 50% for all married women and about 70% for women in their 40s). This insures that a substantial number will face the dilemma of Akiko, the young middle-aged woman in Ariyoshi’s immensely popular 1972 novel, *Kôkotsu no hito.* Akiko was pressured by her family to quit her legal secretary position to care for her father-in-law when he became senile. She accepted her caretaking with doleful resignation, and by the novel's end, expressed satisfaction with the nurturing role she played in her father-in-law's last days. More than twenty years later, she remains a sympathetic figure—and the book continues to sell—but skepticism about such quiet resignation is strong among younger women.

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

(3) school competition and the education arms race

The severe recession throughout the 1990s intersected with a shifting population profile to seriously threaten tertiary education and the school-to-work transition. As any reader of the Japanese press knows, the entry-level hiring scale of major corporations shrank dramatically in that decade. The papers were full of anecdotes of elite graduates in “job shock” (*jobbu shokku*) accepting ever lower entry positions to gain entrance to first-tier corporations, or resigning themselves to less prestigious company openings, with ripple effects down the educational ladder. At the same time, the number of 18-year-olds in the population was been declining sharply, from 2.05 million in 1992 to 1.51 million in 2000, placing enormous pressures on the already shaky finances of lower-tier private universities and junior colleges.

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Declining job opportunities and a shrinking college-age cohort have combined to exacerbate the competition for elite universities. The consequence may well be the collapse of the tense balance between public and private sector secondary education that had held for much of late Shôwa, by which a heavy dose of after-school private cram academy, supplemented if necessary by a post-secondary year in a private exam prep school, was thought to be a sufficient complement to public high school education for elite university entrance success. Very quickly, in the last five years or so, the more assured route has become an emerging tier of elite private high schools that offer six-year secondary programs. Symptomatically, in 1993, the percentage of applicants who were admitted to the various faculties of Tokyo University from private high schools reached 50% (1984 of 4010 acceptants). Of the top thirty placement high schools, twenty-one were private institutions, led as usual in recent years by 171 successful students from the elite Kaisei Academy.

In effect, such schools combine the three years of junior high school and the three years of high school, admitting their students by highly competitive exams at the end of their sixth-grade elementary year (somewhat analogous to the fateful “eleven-plus” exams in Britain). They move their students through the Ministry of Education secondary curriculum in four-and-a-half or five years, leaving the balance for specific preparation for university entrance exams.

The particular school-to-work transitions of late Shôwa Japan have depended on the tight calibrations of school and work prestige hierarchies, and for several decades the widely discrepant outcomes of individuals moving through school into workplaces have been accepted without widespread public outcry or collective resistance (though certainly with much private frustration and grievance and occasional personal tragedy). In large part, the successful have claimed legitimacy and the failures have been cooled out through the public-ness of the process—the ostensibly equal funding of secondary facilities, a national curriculum, and a rigid entrance exam criterion. If private high schools continue to attract more and more of the top university-bound students, this clearly threatens the rationale of the entire present school-work complex.
The sociologist Ishida Hiroshi has shown, conclusively to my mind, that elite higher education did not have a statistically significant social-mobility effect in the last thirty years. Children of advantaged parents were consistently over-represented in elite universities—government policies, teacher union agitation, public opinion, and private expectations notwithstanding. Moreover, private secondary graduates have disproportionately filled the postwar entering classes at Tokyo University at least since the early 1970s, an effect of the 1967 Tokyo metropolitan educational reforms. Clearly, misrecognition of meritocracy has been pervasive, and it is possible, I suppose, that a thoroughgoing privatization of the upper tier of secondary education will not fundamentally shake the institutional linkages nor challenge the legitimacy of school outcomes or workplace destinations. I doubt it. If indeed present tendencies become future trends, this represents a very different public-private tension and sets the stage for a whole new educational arms race on much more transparently unequal class and regional terms.

IV
Final contentions

It is certainly not my contention that these are the three most decisive statistical indicators of societal change in late twentieth-century Japan. But I do believe that they are measures of a fundamental social restructuring now occurring in Japan. And their significance is dual—both for social structure and social action.

Structurally, it is ironic that generational cohorts, gender roles, and stratified educational outcomes were among the axes of difference that are helping to unbind Japan’s postwar social contract, here at the turn of the new century. After all, the moral force of the single-digit Shôwans, the complementarity of gendered role dichotomies, and the fairness of educational outcomes were key ideological tenets of the "mainstream." These are now becoming structural fault lines that expose the tenuousness of the mainstream arrangements.

The other point is the formulation of social action that underlies my approach. Each of
these three social diagnostics is a point where private action rubs against and begins to unravel
the delicate skein of ideologies and institutions. And there need not be organized activism to
collectivize such individual decisions. Indeed, in all three dimensions, structural change is
resulting from the cumulation of disparate, parallel, personal actions—of middle-age and elderly
generations to distance themselves from one another, of women to delay marriage, of youth and
their parents to move entirely to private sector education.

This is not a claim premised on a rational choice voluntarism, which takes individual
intentionality as the independent causal agent of structural outcomes and a universal rationality
as the presumed basis of that intentional choice-making. I presume rather the recursive
structuring of individual agency, cultural meaning and institutional form and the multi-layered
consciousness of actors, who act under varying constraints and with subtle degrees of reflective
knowledge, discursive articulation, and tacit understandings—but who act effectively
nonetheless.

High school students and their parents, the elderly and their children, and the metropolitan
marriage resisters of the late 1980s and 1990s are positioned subjects, who are maneuvering
within and around that which they find meaningful, desirable, and/or necessary. They may act
with only partial and contingent understanding of their own actions and these actions may be
private and pragmatic. However, the effects of their actions are no less consequential for these
qualities. Most public commentary, domestic and foreign, about Japan at the millennial turning
point paints a dark portrait of a nation adrift, plagued with social malaise, political sclerosis, and
economic stagnation. The trends on which this essay has focused would seem to lend further
support to such pessimism. However, firing off national obituaries and revolutionary
manifestos maim the authors’ feet as often as they penetrate the intended target. One can safely
conclude though that, whatever the shape of the emerging social formation, it will be a
transformation, not a reproduction, of the New Middle Class Japan of the last thirty years.

1 Recent examples include Benjamin DeMott, The Imperial Middle: Why Americans Can't Think
Straight About Class (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1990) and Brackette F.
Williams, “A Class Act: Anthropology and the Race to Nation Across Ethnic Terrain,” Annual


10 For a powerful evocation of that period, see John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: New Press, 1999), especially chapter two, which is titled “Kydatsu: Exhaustion and Despair.”


19 Although I have been referring to these thematics as “discourses,” to be more precise, we must understand them both as discourses—the procedures for and the substance of situated talk which fashions social identities—and also as ideologies—representations of knowledge and experience that articulate interests in a way by which compliance may be both secured and

Ôsawa Mari discusses this in detail in her contribution to this volume. See also Kathleen S. Uno, “The Death of ‘Good Wife, Wise Mother’?” in Postwar Japan as History, ed. Gordon, 293-322.

A recent useful characterization is Okano Kaori and Tsuchiya Motonori, Education in Contemporary Japan: Inequality and Diversity (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

It is important to note that however closely articulated these institutional arenas had become, their emergence was uncertain, fitful, and distinct. For instance, the rapid drop in fertility, from over four children per family to two per family, took place quickly in the first half of a single decade, the early 1950s, underwriting a family form that persisted for forty years. See Yamamura Kozo and Susan B. Hanley, “Ichi Hime, ni Taro: Educational Aspirations and the Decline in Fertility in Post-War Japan,” Journal of Japanese Studies 2 (Winter 1975): 83-125. Subsequently, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, concessions in self-determination that workers bargained for more secure work conditions and wages eroded union autonomy but promoted mainstream allegiance among blue-collar workers (Gordon, The Wages of Affluence). Simon Partner has shown that the consumer revolution that embraced the electrical goods industry was not complete until the late 1960s, while the participation of youth in secondary and tertiary education did not reach high levels until the mid-1960s. See Partner, Assembled in Japan: Electrical Goods and the Making of the Japanese Consumer (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), and on education, Thomas P. Rohlen, Japan's High Schools (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).


The United Nations definition of an aged population is when at least 7 percent of citizens are 65-years-old or above. It took the U.S. 70 years for the percentage of elderly to climb from 7 percent to 14 percent; the same increases took 45 years in Great Britain and Germany, 85 years in Sweden, but only 25 years in Japan. These and other statistics are drawn from Ministry of Public Welfare, ed., Shōshi shakai o kangaeru (Thinking about a society with few children),


30 Ministry of Public Welfare, ed., *Shōshi shakai o kangaeru*. The 1999 rate has dropped further, to 1.34.

31 The polling data are from Ibid., 37, 59.

32 In a 1997 survey by the Prime Minister’s Office, two-thirds of female respondents delaying marriage cited their increased economic resources through employment and over half also cited the freedom of independent living. In another government survey that year, over half of unmarried female respondents aged 25-34 cited not having yet met an appropriate potential spouse; the second most common reason was an unwillingness to give up the freedom and pleasures they were currently enjoying. See Ibid., 37. “Independence” is apparently more a measure of personal disposable income and not independent living. Fully 80 percent of unmarried women in their twenties still live with their parents; even for those in their early thirties, the figure only falls to about 70 percent!

33 Ariyoshi’s novel was translated into English by Mildred Tahara as *The Twilight Years* (Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International, 1984).


35 Ishida, *Social Mobility in Contemporary Japan*.