Bohemian Tokyo:
Furiitaa and the Limits of New Middle Class Japan

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Problem Statement

After nearly forty years of spectacular economic growth and prosperity, Japan entered a period of political economic and social uncertainty in the 1990s (Allinson 1997). The bursting of the speculative bubble of the 1980s, the ensuing economic recession, political and corporate scandal, increasing juvenile delinquency, the Great Hanshin Earthquake, and a host of other shocks have called many of Japan’s postwar achievements into question and weakened the clout of major social and political institutions (McCormack 2001). Symptomatic of this uncertainty at the turn of the century is the growing number of people who appear to be rejecting mainstream ideals and life ways.

The proposed study focuses on young people in metropolitan Japan who are commonly known in the mass media as “furi arubaitaa,” or “furitaa,” for the alternative lifestyles they pursue and the sort of casual employment in which they are engaged. Rather than following the highly regarded and well trodden path to middle class status, upwards of two million in their twenties and early thirties are selecting part-time work over career track jobs, taking time off to travel abroad and pursue artistic ambitions, delaying marriage, sometimes leaving school early, and quite frequently, continuing to live with their parents (Otake 2002). Media depictions of furitaa have ranged from the critical to the celebratory, condemning their “lazy and spoiled” ways on the one hand, and praising their Bohemian-like existence on the other. Moreover, furitaa have been so variously defined by media critics and researchers that it is not only unclear what the “reality” of furitaa may be, but how media images are shaping that reality as well.

In addition to the media image-reality problem, what makes furitaa significant from a scholarly perspective is their potential impact on mainstream society. Because many furitaa come from middle-class backgrounds or families which aspire to middle-class status, they act as a “pressure point” on what scholars have termed “New Middle Class Japan,” which has been the dominant social formation and a central theme of anthropological and sociological scholarship on Japan since the 1950s (Kelly 1991, Lie 1996). As more and more of them opt out of this particular arrangement of work, family, and schooling, they begin to threaten its structural reproduction (Kelly 2002). At the same time, however, mainstream companies and institutions like the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare have a stake in encouraging the lifestyles and casual labor patterns of furitaa because they are a vital source of flexible labor in uncertain times and form a significant customer base for “lifestyle consumption.”

My research will address four central questions: 1) the extent to which furitaa represent a shift in subjectivity and what this spells for New Middle Class Japan; 2) the nature of the relationship between furitaa as a media category and furitaa as a reality; 3) how discourses on furitaa are affecting perceptions of the nature of Japanese modernity and the achievements of the postwar period; and 4) why furitaa have emerged at this particular juncture in Japanese history.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This project will contribute to three major bodies of research: recent work on global cities and flexible capitalism, the anthropology of consumption, and anthropological research on metropolitan Japan. Scholars like Henri Lefebvre (1991), Saskia Sassen (1991), David Harvey (1989), and Sharon Zukin (1982, 1995) have been central to the theorization of what has been variously termed “post-industrial,” “late capitalist,” and “postmodern” societies based in global or world cities. Their notions of the production of spatial scale; the pivotal role of the state in organizing supra and sub-state processes of capital accumulation; global cities as command centers in the world economy; time-space compression; and the increasing importance of symbolic economies for attracting capital to such cities have been of particular importance for understanding the political economy and “structures of feeling” (Williams 1977) of the

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1 Furii arubaitaa, from the English “free” and the German “Arbeiter,” or worker.
postmodern condition. They have tended, however, to overemphasize production processes to the neglect of individual agency, as though the late capitalist production of space and cultural aesthetics has been imposed from above on a passive urban populace.

The recent “turn to consumption” in anthropology offers a useful way of theorizing the role of consumer agency in the production of postmodern space and aesthetics. Scholars such as Daniel Miller (1995), Mike Featherstone (1991), and Arjun Appadurai (1996), for instance, have noted how lifestyle consumption is becoming increasingly important for identity construction, and how consumers often alter or make use of capitalist goods and images in ways unintended by corporate producers. The culture industries must constantly struggle to discipline consumers and contend with the subversion of meaning. This approach tempers the emphasis on production mentioned above by introducing the notion that meaning is not simply imposed on one group by another, but is rather the outcome of a process that involves constant negotiation or struggle between different “class fractions” (Bourdieu 1984).

Finally, the past two decades have seen a dramatic increase in research on urban Japan (e.g., Kondo 1990, Bestor 1990, 1999, Robertson 1991, Allison 1994). And while there has been a tendency to focus on life ways at the margins of society (e.g., Ryang 2001, Gil 2001), there have also been investigations of how mainstream ideologies and practices are changing (e.g., Ogasawara 1998, Kinsella 2000, Condry 2000). By examining the ways in which furiiitaa are affecting middle class patterns of work, family, and schooling, my research will add to this latter trend in the literature.

Methods and Research Design

The ethnographic portion of my dissertation will be conducted over a period of twelve months in Tokyo, which has the highest concentration of furiiitaa (Yamada 2000). The central component of my project will be to understand the processes by which the category of furiiitaa is defined. A major part of my data will be in the form of life histories, which I anticipate will reveal the reasons for defecting from middle class trajectories, but I will also pay attention to expressive modes of identity such as art and literature. Furthermore, I intend to spend much time observing and socializing with my informants beyond the structured interviews, and will be particularly interested in their practices of consumption. In addition to the furiiitaa themselves, I will also focus on scholars, journalists, and researchers for the Japan Institute of Labor (JIL) to gain a broader understanding of both how people are perceiving furiiitaa and how middle class dynamics are being affected by furiiitaa. I will also interview the employers of furiiitaa as well as counselors at temporary employment agencies, such as “Young Hall Hello Work” in Shibuya to get their perspective on the significance of furiiitaa to the economy and society. Similarly, I will endeavor to contact and interview writers and editors for magazines like From A and Travail, which not only provide help-wanted listings but contribute through their articles to the creation of the furiiitaa image and lifestyle as well. Archival research on the transformation of casual labor and the emergence of furiiitaa in particular will be carried out at the JIL.

Significance

By attending to the emergent subculture of furiiitaa and its impact on New Middle Class Japan, this project will make a significant contribution to research on global cities and globalization, flexible capitalism, postmodern lifestyle consumption and agency, and the changing dynamics of metropolitan Japan. Moreover, as a study that examines a reaction to economic success and modernization that may not be isolated to the boundaries of Japan in either its causes or its effects, it will also contribute to an understanding of how an evolving Japanese (post)modernity articulates with a more broadly conceived “global ecumene” (Hannerz 1996, Appadurai 1996, Harvey 1989, Mitchell 2000).
References


