‘Freeters’: Young Atypical Workers in Japan

Yuki Honda
Associate Professor, Interfaculty Initiative in Information Studies, Graduate School of The University of Tokyo

Introduction

‘Freeter’ is a label attached to young atypical workers in Japan. There has been a remarkable increase in the number of ‘freeters’ in Japan since the mid-1990s. The estimated total number of ‘freeters’ has quadrupled over the last two decades, amounting to over two million at the turn of the century (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare 2003). According to another estimation by the Cabinet Office, based on a broader definition of ‘freeters’ that includes those who are seeking regular jobs, the total number of ‘freeters’ numbered more than four million in 2001(Cabinet Office 2003).

The word ‘freeter’ first appeared in Japanese society in the late 1980s when young people enjoyed abundant labor opportunities brought about by the ‘bubble economy’. The marked increase in the number of ‘freeters’, however, took place after the bursting of the ‘bubble’. During the prolonged recession from the early 1990s up to the mid-2000s, many youths have been shut out of regular employment and have chosen to become ‘freeters’.

But it is too simplistic just to view ‘freeters’ as the victims of the economic recession. A careful examination of the social factors—both macro and micro—behind their increase reveals that the growing discrepancies in the relationships between social systems in Japanese society are directly related to this phenomenon.

Japanese post-war society has been characterized by close links between three key social systems—the family, school and company (Inui 2003). Families offered strong financial and motivational support for their children’s schooling. Schools actively sorted and distributed young people in conformity with companies’ labor demands. Companies employed young people immediately after the completion of their schooling and provided intensive in-company training. What made these relationships possible were companies’ strong demands for a young labor force based on the

steady growth of the economy, even after the oil crisis of the 1970s.

This inter-system scrum continued through the latent permeation of the post-industrialization of Japanese society until about 1990. Since then, however, the harmonious relationships between these three systems came to a standstill. ‘Freeters’ are the people who fell into the widening chasm between these systems, losing their former support and facing the uncertainty common to post-industrial societies. At the same time, they are latent objectors to the mainstream structure of Japanese society. A significant percentage of ‘freeters’ have refused the life of the ‘company-man,’ which has become the negative symbol of mainstream Japanese society. In this sense, ‘freeters’ can be seen as the potential pioneers of the coming society. Their present lives and future prospects, however, tend to be bleak, with little possibility of achieving economic and social independence.

This article aims to describe these observations, based on empirical data and research on ‘freeters’. The next two sections examine the macro and micro factors behind the rise in the number of ‘freeters’. The last section gives an outline of present discourses and policies about ‘freeters’ and analyzes their limitations.

Macro-level factors behind the increase in ‘freeters’: accidental shock and structural change

The most direct cause for the increase in ‘freeters’ can be attributed to the fact that employers have refrained from recruiting young people as regular workers under the prolonged recession, which started with the collapse of the ‘bubble economy’ in the early 1990s. In Japan, case law rules and social norms have been constructed on the basis of the long-term employment system, which accords workers comprehensive employment security. Therefore, the main way for companies to regulate employment is to restrict hiring of new regular workers, the main source of which has been new high school and university graduates.

The biggest impact was on the labor demands for new high school graduates. The total number of job openings offered to new high school graduates drastically declined from 1,343,000 in 1990 to 643,000 in 1995,

and then to 272,000 in 2000. In place of new high school graduates, Japanese companies began to hire more and more atypical workers—part-timers, dispatched workers and contract workers—with lower personnel cost and higher employment flexibility. A substantial number of 'freeters' could not find adequate regular jobs upon leaving schools and university and thus chose to become atypical workers.

In order to fully understand the reason for employers' reluctance to employ new workers in the 1990s, however, it is necessary to take into consideration factors other than economic ones. These non-economic factors functioned as a kind of accidental shock that accelerated the companies' restriction of hiring new workers.

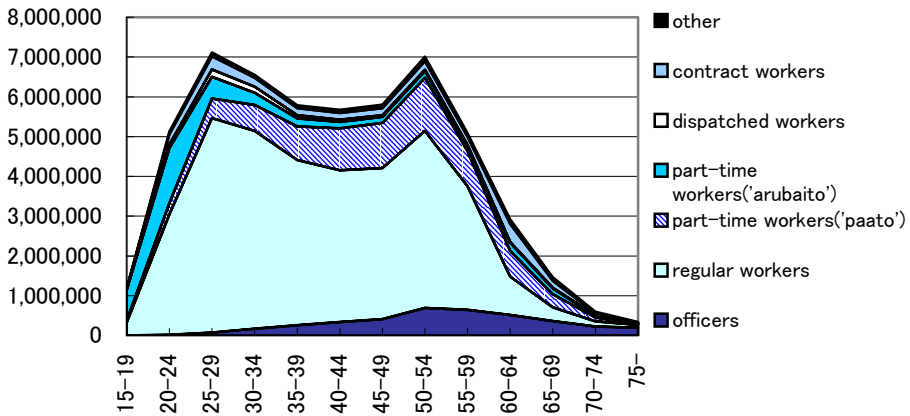
Demographic structure

First is the demographic factor. The present Japanese population structure by age has two sharp peaks. One is the first generation of baby-boomers born just after the World War II and the other is their sons and daughters born in 1970s, the so-called second generation of baby-boomers. The former left schools and universities during the period of high economic growth in 1960s and successfully found regular jobs. The latter also reached school-leaving age around 1990, when companies were quite eager to hire youth coming out of schools and universities at the height of economic prosperity. As a result, two huge groups of regular workers came to exist in the Japanese labor force in the late 1990s (Figure 1).

Both of these age groups encumbered the hiring of school leavers in the late 1990s and the early 2000s. Because of the seniority-based wage system of Japanese companies, the personnel expenses for the older first baby-boomers, now middle-aged, imposed a heavy burden on the companies' financial structure. It has been empirically demonstrated that the more middle-aged regular workers a company has, the fewer new young regular workers it hires (Genda 2001a). The second baby-boomers employed as regular workers around 1990, whose number is even larger than the first group (see Figure 1), also affected companies' hiring of successive generations of school leavers in the shrinking economy (Nitta 2003:144-146). The marked increase of 'freeters' in 1990s was partly a

result of these demographic factors.

Figure 1 Numbers of Employed Workers (by age, type of employment, in 2002)



Source: Basic Survey on Employment Structure (2002)

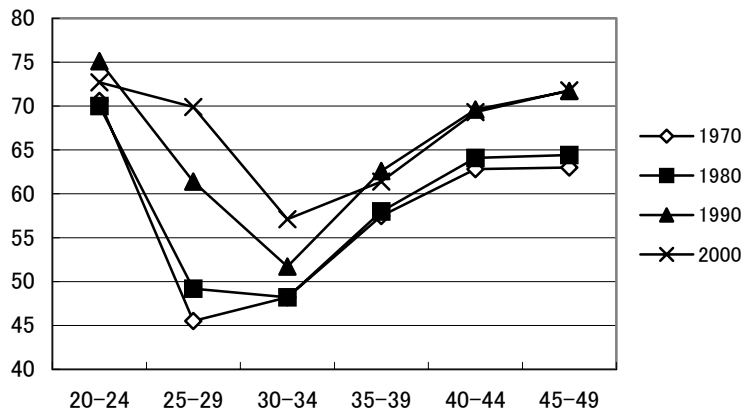
Labor Participation of Women

The second non-economic factor affecting the restriction of hiring new workers is the change in the life pattern of young women, which occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. This change intensified the effects of the demographic factor described above. The former typical lifestyle of Japanese women had been characterized by an M-shaped pattern of labor force participation according to age. In other words, the labor force participation rate for women was high in their early-to-mid-twenties, declining considerably in their thirties, and then rising again in their forties. The reason for the decline in their thirties is that many women chose to stop working when they got married or had a baby.

Since the 1980s, however, several changes in this pattern can be observed. As shown in Figure 2, the most remarkable change is the rise in the participation rate for women in their mid-to-late twenties from 49% in 1980 to 70% in 2000. The participation rate in the early-to-mid thirties has also risen from 48% in 1980 to 57% in 2000, pulling up the bottom of the M-shape. These figures show that more and more young Japanese women have come to remain in the labor force during the 1990s. This trend

magnified the effect of the second baby-boomers upon companies (Nitta 2003:147-148). Indeed, the number of women in the 25-29 age bracket at work increased by almost one million in just a decade, from 2.5 million in 1990 to 3.4 million in 2000.

Figure 2 Labor Market Participation of Women by age (%)



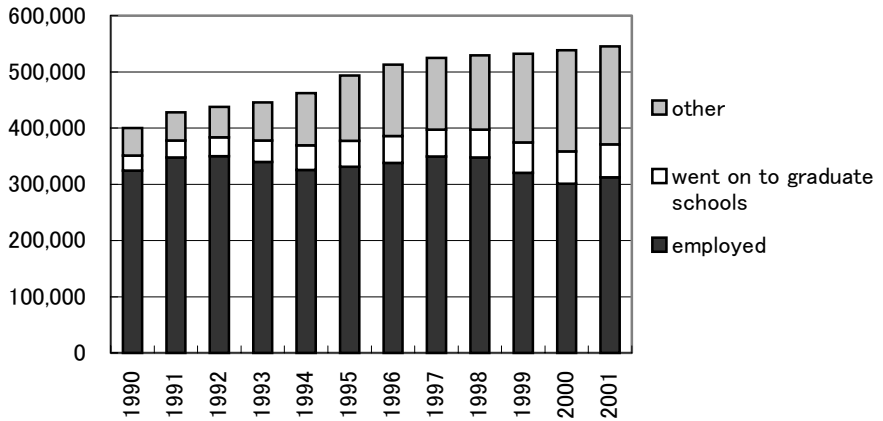
One of the reasons for young women's' preference to continue working might be the enactment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (Danjo Koyou Kikai Kintou Hou) in 1985. This law is often criticized for its limitations, a typical example of which is that it brought about the introduction of the double-track personnel system—namely the career-oriented *sogo shoku* (comprehensive course) and the non-career-oriented *ippan shoku* (general course). However, survey data on the work experience of female university graduates shows that, at around age 30. The difference in labor force participation rate between these two tracks rapidly shrank during the 1990s. Just as many of the *ippan shoku* women stayed in the workforce as the *sogo shoku* women (JIL 1999:99).

Expansion of Post-secondary Education

The third non-economic factor that influenced the youth labor market in the 1990s is the expansion of post-secondary education. As described at the beginning of this section, the labor demands for new high school graduates drastically decreased in the 1990s. Thus, the rate among new high school

graduates of those neither fully employed nor going on to post-secondary educational institutions increased from 5% in 1990 to 10% in 2003.

Figure 3 Number of University Graduates (by destination)

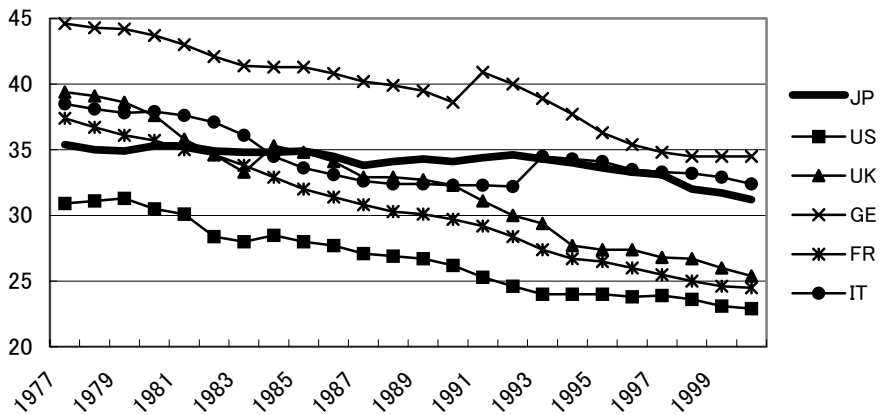


Among university graduates, however, the corresponding rate has increased much more markedly from 12% in 1990 to 23% in 2003. This figure gives the impression that Japanese companies are even more reluctant to hire new university graduates than high school graduates. But the reality is different. The critical point is the total numbers of new university graduates. As shown in Figure 3, the numbers of new university graduates have increased by nearly 150 thousand during the last decade. Throughout the same period, the numbers of new university graduates who found jobs upon graduation were almost constant, being slightly over 300 thousand. Therefore, the critical reason for the rising rate of new university graduates neither in employment nor in education has not been the decline in labor demands for university graduates, but rather the excess of its supply. The obvious worsening of employment conditions for new high school graduates drove them to seek higher education, in cases where their household economy and their academic achievement made this possible. The rate of among new high school graduates of those that went on to universities and colleges increased from 31% in 1990 to 45% in 2001. This educational pattern resulted in a massive generation of ‘freeters’ with university degrees.

Change in Industrial Structure

The above three factors pertaining to the macro-level situation behind the increase in 'freeters' in the 1990s—demography, women and higher education—are not economic but sociological. One economic factor, however, should not be overlooked. This is the longitudinal change in the industrial structure. Figure 4 shows that, different from other OECD countries, an obvious decline in the manufacturing sector did not occur in Japan until the early 1990s. Since the mid-1990s, however, the manufacturing sector began to reduce its presence in the total labor force, while the service sector gained in importance. The percentage of the labor force in the service sector was 58.7% in 1990, 61.0 in 1995 and 64.2 in 2000.

Figure 4 Rate of Labor Force in Manufacturing Sector (by year and country, %)



Source: OECD (2001) Labour Force Statistics 1980-2000

The manufacturing sector has traditionally welcomed less-educated youth as regular workers, particularly junior high and high school graduates (Brinton 2000:300). The service sector, on the other hand, relies heavily on various types of workers other than regular workers with secondary education. Financial, insurance, real estate and business services are areas that usually require workers with university education. Retail, food services and consumer services are areas that frequently utilize irregular workers.

Moreover, the service sector has to come to depend even more heavily on irregular workers during the last decade. The rate of part-time workers in wholesale, retail and food services has almost doubled from 18.1% in 1990 to 35.3% in 2000. The reason for the preference for irregular workers in these areas is their low cost and flexibility of working hours. Different from factories in the manufacturing sector that can operate production lines constantly, shops and restaurants must arrange their staffing flexibly according to consumers' behavior during a day, a week, or a year. Thus, the increase in the service sector has reduced the total labor demands for young regular workers and has boosted the demand for irregular workers, a part of which consists of 'freeters'.

Among the various macro-level factors described above, the demographic factor is transitory and its effect will diminish as time passes. Around 2015, when the first baby-boomers will be retiring from the labor market and the second baby-boomers will be aging, Japanese companies may increase their demands for young regular workers. The effect of the industrial factors, however, will continue in the future. It is difficult to imagine that Japanese companies will give up the hiring of irregular workers. Therefore, the severe condition of the youth labor market will not readily be improved at least not in the next several decades.

Micro-level factors for choosing to be 'freeters'

The previous section reviewed the macro-level factors acting on the increase of 'freeters' based on statistical data. In this section, using qualitative data, I will review micro-level factors behind individual choice to become a 'freeter'. The Japan Institute of Labor (JIL) conducted semi-structured interviews with 97 'freeters' in 1999 and published all of the recorded discourses as a research report (JIL 2000). Through the reexamination of this data, micro-level factors in three social systems are identified as critical reasons for becoming a 'freeter' (Honda 2004a). These systems are family, education, and the labor market. The individual personalities of youths are affected by changes in these systems. Young people in Japan facing such changes choose to become 'freeters'.

Family: Household Living

Firstly, the most important factor within one's own family is the For example, if the head of the household is tired or his/her salary is cat, or he/she suddenly gets ill or dies, then a young member of the family immediately loses the financial support necessary to continue schooling, and must contribute to the household, usually by engaging in part-time labor.

The financial limitations of the family have the biggest impact at the point of graduation from high school. Japanese high school graduates who fail their university entrance examination usually continue to study as *ronin* and try again next year. In the case where a family is not affluent enough to support him or her, however, the young person often must earn their own living or study expenses as a part-time worker during their *ronin* period. As it is a tough task for them to pursue both studying and working at the same time, some of them give up studying and never advance to university.

When I was a high school student, my parents told me that if I wanted to go on to a university, I must pay my own study expenses. After I failed in the entrance examination to a university, my mother suggested that I work at a hamburger shop near my house. At first, I expected to try to enter university again the next year. But as time passed, I became more and more wrapped up in the part-time job at the hamburger shop and lost the will to continue studying. (female, 21 years old)

The risk of giving up studying and being absorbed in part-time work is not limited to *ronin*. Even if one passes the entrance examination and successfully becomes a student at a university or a college, the same pressure to engage in both studying and working remains. The fact that they often become more interested in their part-time work than in studying at educational institutions points to a problem in the Japanese education system.

I entered the department of technology at a university but I felt uninspired. I began working as a part-timer at a restaurant and was happy while working. I worked hard and the manager appreciated my ability. I

respected him and he told me how interesting and important service work is. I decided to aim for working in a hotel, an ultimate form of service, and quit the university. (male, 23 years old)

Moreover there are, of course, many youth who cannot even think about going on to higher education from the start because of the financial limitations of their family. As a large part of the higher education in Japan consists of private institutions, the tuition expenses weigh heavily on the household economy. Although families have covered the costs of their children's schooling somehow or other when the employment and income of the head of the household were stable, nowadays a large number of them have lost their former financial capability.

Moreover, the problems within the family are not just limited to financial limitations. Japanese parents, who did not have much difficulty on the whole in finding 'good jobs' (stable and promising jobs) when they left school several decades ago, tend not to give honest and beneficial advice to their sons and daughters faced with today's severe labor market conditions. In some cases parents only put negative pressures to their children, blaming them for idling away their time. In other cases, parents spoil their children, not encouraging them to make realistic choices but rather leaving them indecisive and hesitant about their future.

These limitations of the family's role, both financial and advisory, are serious factors behind the increase in the number of 'freeters'.

Education: Guidance and Curriculum

Secondly, there are two problematic factors within the education system that relate to the increase of 'freeters': the guidance factor and the curriculum factor. The guidance factor is again divided into two dimensions: its lack and its rigidity.

By lack of guidance, I mean the insufficient provision of information about higher educational institutions and/or employers to students. For example, when she was in high school a young woman wished to go on to a technical college to study photography in Tokyo. However, being located in a region far from Tokyo, the high school did not provide any information and advice about the college. Thus, she had to collect information and to

apply to the college totally on her own. After she passed the entrance examination, she barely realized how demanding the expenses and the conditions of study would be, including the need for a residence with a darkroom for developing films. She quit studying at the college and chose to become a 'freeter' in Tokyo.

Recently, the lack of guidance has been observed in many high schools, especially in general/academic courses. Morota (2000) points out that in the late 1990s high school teachers in charge of career guidance showed three tendencies in their guidance practices: entrusting students with the career decision, refraining from enforcement of specific career choice, and failing to provide guidance for disobedient students. These tendencies have become apparent due to changes in Japanese educational policies in the 1990s. These changes began to place priority on students' individuality and diversity.

At the same time, these tendencies to value individual students' individuality and choice are based on the reformation of traditional guidance practices. Typically, Japanese high schools teachers used to strongly recommend individual students to take a job in a specific company or to go on to a specific educational institution after graduating from high school, based on the student's academic records. These kinds of guidance practices, characterized by rigidity, still survive in a significant number of high schools. This rigid type of guidance, however, tends to result in job mismatch and quickly dropping out from recommended companies or educational institutions (Brinton 2000, Honda 2003).

I think the (job) guidance at high school is too practical. If a student dreams of becoming a singer, teachers just say, "Well, that is out of the question" or "No kidding!" They wanted to neatly push every student into some company or university. (female, 20 years old)

I had no future dreams when I was a high school student. The reason that I entered the department of technology at a university was because I was in the science course in high school and a teacher recommended it. But I soon found that the department did not suit me. (male, 23 years old)

The guidance at high school put terrible pressure on me! Teachers never considered what I wanted to do. They only forced me to make a choice. (female, 22 years old)

To sum up, recent career guidance practices in Japanese educational institutions, especially in high schools, tend to be split into two extremes: the complete lack of guidance or the excessively rigid guidance. Both extremes are important factors in the increase of 'freeters'.

Another problem in the Japanese education system is the irrelevance of the curriculum to the students' interests and willingness to learn. This gap leads to disinterest in studying and eventually to students dropping out of educational institutions without any concrete plans.

I entered the English literature department of a university because I was interested in foreign languages and I liked reading books. But the content of the curriculum was different from what I expected. Though I was willing to explore literature by myself, professors assigned the students boring works one after another and just told us to translate them into Japanese. I felt that it was a waste of time. (female, 20 years old)

As students were not very diligent, professors did not expect much from students and just continued talking at the front of the classroom with little regard for students' interests. It had no relevance to me. (female, 20 years old)

Until about 1990, the Japanese education market, especially higher education, enjoyed strong demand both at its entrance and at its exit. At its entrance, strong educational demands from households created a continual excess of applicants to the supply of opportunities to enter schools. At its exit, strong labor demands from employers resulted in a smooth transition of its graduates to the world of work. Because of these two strong types of demand, Japanese higher education expanded without any great effort to improve the relevance of its educational content, both for individuals and for industry.

Since the mid-1990s, however, the weakening of both household

consumption and of labor demands from industry has robbed the Japanese educational system of its former complacency. The entertainment industry and the consumption of technological products also pose problems for the education system as they distract students from studying. The sluggish education system, however, has not been able to adjust to these changes in the environment.

Thus, the gap between the educational system and society has been widening in terms of both its guidance practices and its curriculum content, resulting in the massive increase in 'freeters'.

Labor Market: regular, irregular, special

The third system that is directly related to the choice of youth to become 'freeters' is the labor market: the shrinkage of the labor market for regular workers, the expansion of labor market for irregular workers, and the increase in the allure of the 'special' labor market for liberal professions.

As discussed above, since the early 1990s the employers' labor demands for young regular workers declined significantly. The important point to note is that it was mostly the 'good' jobs for youth that disappeared. Even under the recent severe labor market condition, one can still find jobs if one does not care about labor conditions and job content. In reality, however, many young people have become hesitant to take whatever regular jobs they can find because working conditions for young regular workers are getting harder and harder. The working hours for regular workers in their twenties and thirties have been getting longer since the early 1990s. The volume of their workload is also increasing. At the same time, wage levels and company benefits are declining. As job vacancies in large companies are decreasing, most of the jobs that youth can find are those at small or unstable companies.

As a result, young people tend to avoid these 'bad' jobs in the private sector and apply for public sector jobs, in which the number of persons being accepted is also decreasing. Because of the intensification of the competition for these 'better' jobs, those who failed in the selection process tend to become 'freeters'. Therefore, the contraction of the regular labor market is exercising a 'pushing effect' on 'freeters'.

On the other hand, job opportunities for young irregular workers have been getting more and more abundant since the early 1990s. In addition, the contents of irregular jobs are sometimes more attractive to youth than regular jobs. As seen in the former quotation, certain types of personal service such as sales at retail stores and serving at restaurants, for example, may afford more satisfaction to young people than monotonous jobs at factories. The easy work, few demands from employers and superiors, and the freedom of entering and quitting are also seen as merits of irregular jobs. These 'pulling effect' of the irregular job market is an important factor behind the increase of 'freeters'.

Other 'pulling effects' for 'freeters' come from the 'special' labor market, which refers to jobs requiring unconventional routes of entry other than the usual entrance selection processes by companies. JIL's interview data contains examples of 'freeters' aiming at getting these kinds of jobs, such as musicians, actors, fashion designers, photographers, illustrators, scriptwriters, nail artists, professional athletes, patissieres, etc.. These jobs require special talents and skills and are usually pursued not in the form of full-time workers, but as freelance professions. The autonomy and artistry of these jobs attract a large number of youth, especially in metropolitan areas. In order to get these jobs, however, one needs to muddle through a lengthy period of trials and selections: auditions, apprenticeships and contributions of examples of one's works, for example. Even if a young person can successfully find their way to the job they are aiming for it is often difficult to earn a living based solely on earning from such kinds of jobs. Thus, one usually has to work as a part-timer while pursuing or engaging in these jobs, further contributing to the growth in the number of 'freeters'.

Individual personalities of youth: vocational attitudes

Recent changes in the three systems described above, namely family, education, and labor market, are forcing youth to confront more complicated and risky choices regarding their future careers. Faced with this difficult situation, the vocational attitudes of youth tend to split into two extremes: too vague or too precise.

Some youth, whose vocational perspectives are quite vague, postpone

their choice until after leaving school. They often do not take any action toward making career decisions while they are at schools and universities, applying neither for job vacancies nor for entrance examinations for other educational institutions. They graduate from schools and universities without any concrete aspirations and prospects, engaging in part-time jobs in most cases. Many of them, however, far from being insincere and easygoing, are quite serious and prudent about their future. But their prudence makes them hesitant to choose from the enormous variety of potential future jobs, while realistic options for them are more and more limited by labor demands.

When I was in high school, I was interested in fashion, cooking and art. I couldn't decide which to choose and did not want to go on to an upper school while I was still hesitating. I needed more time to make up my mind. I also felt that I would be able to discover something more appealing to me. (female, 19 years old)

I wanted to go on to a technical college. But I didn't find what I wanted to study. I decided that I could not put up with studying at a technical college if the course was not the one I really wanted to do. (female, 22 years old)

Some youth point out the lack of experience in decision-making during their younger days as the reason for their indecision.

I did not know what to do after graduation. I had never decided my own future before. Well, so far I've only followed the advice of my parents. Now I must find a job, but I can't choose which job to do. (female, 24 years old)

On the other hand, there are some young people whose vocational attitudes are quite specific, or in other words, whose targets are too restricted. They tend to stick to specific jobs or schools. When they fail to realize their 'dreams', they often give up all other possibilities and lose interest in developing their future careers.

I intended to go on to a technical college for fashion but I failed the

entrance examination. I didn't try to get into other technical colleges, because the only college I wanted to go to was the one I didn't get into. I preferred becoming a 'freeter' to putting up with going to another college. (female, 18 years old)

I wanted to find a job related to movies in the future and I tried to get into a movie course at a university. But when I failed the university's entrance examination, I wanted neither to try next year as a *ronin* nor to go to another university. I chose instead to become a 'freeter'. (female, 19 years old)

Though it is often pointed out that the vagueness in the vocational attitude of youth is the principal cause of the increase (Ministry of Labor 2000: 158, for example), it is important to remember that the rigidly specific or limited vocational attitude, while being the exact opposite of the vagueness, also tends to lead youth to 'freeters'. Both vagueness and too much rigidity are forms of maladjustment of the youths' personality to their vocational environment, and this is becoming more and more complicated and unpredictable. The rapid deterioration of the 'normal' pattern of career courses is forcing Japanese youth either to stand at a loss or to adhere to some hasty decisions. The formation of 'proper' vocational attitudes, often advocated in recent youth policies in Japan, has become a far more difficult task in today's situation than in the recent past.

The micro-level factors behind the increase of 'freeters' in Japan are principally observed in dysfunctions within and between these three social systems—family, education, labor market—and individual personality. As described at the beginning of this chapter, Japanese youth have been protected by the harmonious network among the three social systems. Since the early 1990s, however, the respective conditions of the family, education and labor market have changed and each system is facing its own problems and limitations. Japanese youth have lost their way, without a readiness to confront their difficulties.

Social and Political Discourses on 'Freeters'

With the presence of 'freeters' becoming more and more apparent, social and political discourses on 'freeters' have increased in Japan. Although some prudent recognition that the main reason for this increase lies in the employer's side can be found, the dominant view is that the principal problem is the vocational attitudes and abilities of young people, such as a lack of eagerness to work and their insufficient communication skills.

Under these circumstances the Japanese government launched a comprehensive program for promoting the employment of young people titled 'Plan to Foster a Spirit of Independence and Challenge in Youth' in 2003. The focuses of this plan are: the introduction of a Japanese-type dual system, the establishment of regional employment support centers targeting youths, the promotion of career education in elementary and secondary schools, the stationing of 'job-supporters' and career-counselors at employment security offices, and the provision of strong support to business start-up projects. The aim of these measures is to rectify the current situation of the youth labor market by bolstering human resource development programs targeting young people and by encouraging their vocational independence.

As Inui (2003) points out, state intervention to support young people's transition from school to work has been very weak in Japan. Therefore, this plan is groundbreaking as it is one of the first attempts by the Japanese government to reconstruct the youth labor market.

This plan, however, has serious limitations. First, its quantitative coverage is too small compared to the volume of 'freeters'. The target numbers of each program are tens of thousands at most, far below the total number of existing 'freeters', which number in the millions. Second, the plan does not give careful consideration to those most at risk among the youth population. High school dropouts, those who refuse to engage even in part-time jobs, and *hikikomori* (young people confining themselves to their own room for several months or years) are at the highest risk of failing to establish economic and social independence. Although they need special attention and support, the plan makes little reference to them. The targets of

the plan are limited to those who are relatively active, are highly qualified, and have high potential as workers. Finally, and most importantly, is the fact that the plan concentrates on invigorating Japanese youth and does not intend to persuade employers to give proper chances to youth. If the increase of 'freeters' originates mainly in the employers' reduction of the recruitment of new regular workers, the most effective countermeasures to 'freeters' should be to appeal to and stimulate employers to increase their employment of youth. Of course, as the employers' reluctance to employ new young regular workers is due to the demographic and industrial structure, the encouragement of employment recovery by public policy may have little practical effect. The policy mainly targeted at the youth, however, can only have a harmful effect in that it shifts the responsibility onto the individual youth. This kind of policy is even apt to exacerbate the widely accepted view in Japanese society that youth are incompetent and ill prepared for working life.

In this sense, the plan should be understood as just the very first step in Japanese youth policy. If it is not to be a mere pretence at justifying the current political arrangement, it must be amplified both quantitatively and qualitatively in order to make an earnest effort to alleviate the youth employment problem as it claims to be doing.

Conclusion

According to the estimates by the Cabinet Office, 'freeters' now count for one out of every nine people among those 15-34 years old in Japan. Now that they are so numerous, it would be misleading to look for some inherent peculiarities within individual 'freeters' as the cause of their increase. The lengthening of the adolescent transition and the growing diversity in adolescence and the paths to adulthood have been reported in many other post-industrial societies (Mortimer and Larson 2002). The 'freeters' in Japan can be understood as a variant of this prolonged and disordered adolescence. The special feature of Japan is the abruptness of the social change. The dysfunction of the usual inter-system relations has become apparent just in a decade from the early 1990s. This rapid change has intensified even further the confusion of Japanese society and youth

within it. Japanese youth, with neither sufficient financial resources nor political voices, are directly subjected to the severity brought about by the widening gaps between social systems. At the same time, they are bearing the brunt of the problems inherent in the existing social and economic structure.

What is needed is a drastic reorganization of systems and inter-system relations to empower future generations. Japanese families, schools and companies should no longer entertain their typical mutual collusions and apathy. The task of re-designing these systems has just started limping along (Honda 2004b). The future of 'freeters' will be the touchstone of the path for Japanese society hereafter.

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