This paper is an overview of the shifts in discourses of masculinity in Japan at a particularly crucial period in that country’s recent history—the 1990s and the early 2000s. It contends that without a proper appreciation of the significance of these years, it is next to impossible to get a sense of the socio-cultural, economic, and political dynamics of Japan today. Japan’s “Lost Decade” (ushi-nawareta jûnen, in Japanese) pertains to a period of economic slowdown, corporate restructurings, and rising unemployment rates, coupled with a growing sense of collective socio-cultural insecurity and anxiety (Shimokawa, 2006, pp. 3-11). These years followed in the wake of several decades of consistent economic growth from the 1950s until the “bubble” economy boom years of the 1980s, during the course of which Japan had emerged as a major industrial superpower, and in many respects had become something of a global economic role model for developing nations. The bursting of the largely real estate and speculation-driven “bubble” boom in the early 1990s, however, put an end to these economic “glory years” and ushered in a period of prolonged economic

1 The stylistic and spelling conventions used in this paper include the use of macrons for extended vowels in Japanese (“jendâ” instead of “jendaa”), and for Japanese names the use of a surname followed by personal name order (“Taga Futoshi” instead of “Futoshi Taga”).
stagnation, accompanied by a sense of social and cultural dislocation. In many respects, despite some signs of recovery in the mid-2000s, Japan has yet to emerge out of this torpor—the brutal impact the current (2008/9) global financial crisis is having on the Japanese economy being evidence of this.

At the same time, the uncertainty and apparent loss of national confidence of the 1990s and early-2000s also brought to the surface some very significant socio-cultural shifts. These had been in gestation over preceding decades, but only became significantly articulated in the public arena in the post-Bubble economy years. This included a growing visibility in the public domain of debates about societally dominant discourses of gender, specifically dominant expectations of men. It was really during these years that masculinity as an object of scrutiny really emerged, both in academic and non-academic spaces. Moreover, as a consequence of the changes occurring over these years, the equation of Japanese masculinity with the middle-class, white-collar, work-defined “salaryman” splintered, allowing for numerous different masculinities to emerge into public visibility. Today, imaginings of Japanese masculinity are increasingly likely to be signified by the stylish “funky” youth masculinities exemplified by Japan’s male pop icons, or the otaku “geek cool” associated with Japanese visual culture products like anime and computer graphics.

This paper will start off with a brief overview of the historical significance of Japan’s “Lost Decade.” It will then look at the ways in which discourses about masculinity unfolded against the backdrop of the wider social, cultural, economic, and political shifts and cross-currents of these years. The paper will then conclude by reflecting on implications for contemporary Japanese masculinities.

THE 1990S “LOST DECADE” YEARS

Future historians will likely interpret the 1990s as one of the watershed decades in Japan’s capitalist modernization and post-modernity. An emerging body of literature addresses the significance of the shifts and upheavals that occurred during these years (Harootunian & Yoda, 2006; Iida, 2000; McCormack, 1998; Nakanishi, 2008; Shimokawa, 2006). Significant in these various discussions is a sense of collective anxiety characterizing this decade. This stands in stark contrast to the heady optimism of the preceding decade, when, in the context of the prosperity of the “bubble” economy boom, it seemed that Japan had finally attained the socio-economic affluence it had been striving for ever since it, in the late nineteenth century, embarked on its project of nation building and modernization.

The bursting of the speculation-driven “bubble” in the early-1990s, put the brakes on the growing confidence of the preceding years, and ushered in a prolonged period of economic stagnation from which, in many respects, Japan has yet to recover—the fallout from the most recent global financial crisis of late 2008, seems to have erased any sign of the a tentative resurgence the Japanese
economy had started showing in recent years. In contrast to the corporate prosperity and close to full-employment conditions of the 1980s, the 1990s was marked by corporate bankruptcies, with even seemingly solid financial institutions and banks collapsing in succession (Yoda, 2006), as well as growing unemployment rates. In 1992, just after the economic collapse, the official unemployment rate had been 2.1 percent. However, by the end of the decade, in 1999, it has risen to 4.7 percent, reaching 5 percent by 2001 (Japan Institute of Labor, 2003).

Aside from the economic woes, the 1990s were also characterized by a lackluster politics seemingly mired in indecision and bickering, and significantly, a growing national psycho-cultural despondency that stood in stark contrast to the collective smug self-satisfaction of the 1980s. The particular historical significance of the 1990s is underscored the most by this sense of a rupture with the past, a rupture symbolized through the succession of misfortunes and incidents that plagued Japan through these years. One such incident was the 1995 Hanshin earthquake that killed several thousands and destroyed large areas around the city of Kobe, and which brought to light the ineptitude of the Japanese state in dealing with a sudden crisis (Leheny, 2006, pp. 34-38). Another psycho-culturally traumatic event, also occurring in 1995, was the poison gas terrorist attack by the doomsday religious cult Aum Shinrikyô on the Tokyo subway system. Added to these a succession of often extremely bizarre, and seemingly random acts of youth crime committed by ostensibly normal, everyday teenagers who suddenly snapped (kireru), punctuated these years. These attention-grabbing incidents occurred against a backdrop of a collective anxiety, much of it centered around youth, about the impending social and cultural collapse. Frenzied media discussions about such social issues as Japan’s falling birthrate, the growing visibility of the enjo kôsai phenomenon (“compensated dating,” teenage girls going on paid “dates” with much older men), or the growth in the freeter (“freelance” temporary/casual workers) sector of the economy (related either to the inability of young people to find permanent employment, or their lack of desire to commit to a stable job) all seemed emblematic of this impending social implosion and fragmentation.

Viewed through the lens of these successive financial and social crises, the closing decade of the twentieth century comes across as a period of economic, social and moral disintegration, as popularly reflected in the “Lost Decade” narrative. However, at the same time, the 1990s may also be conceptualized, not in terms of decay and loss, but in terms of renewal. In some respects, these were years when important socio-cultural changes, in gestation for much of

---

2 According to figures from the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, youth unemployment rose sharply through the 1990s and early-2000s reaching close to 10 percent in 2003 for those in the 20-24 years age group. By 2004, the number of freeter (generally those below 35 years of age, who had completed their education, but were engaged in part-time or temporary work) had climbed to over 2 million (Ministry of Health Labor and Welfare, 2005).
the post-WW II period, set in and started to be collectively acknowledged in the public sphere. For instance, it was really during the 1990s that social and cultural diversity became visible—indeed in some situations, celebrated—in the public arena, far more than had been the case in preceding decades. This diversity was best symbolized through the growing visibility and assertion of their rights by a range of ethnic, cultural, and sexual minorities, as well as a range of citizens’ groups, NGOs, and NPOs (see Kingston, 2004).3

Foregrounding many of these changes was the questioning of the socio-cultural, political, and economic underpinnings of the postwar Japanese nation-state: the dominance of the political landscape by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP, which had governed Japan almost continuously during the post-war period); the scandal-prone partnership between the LDP, big business and the bureaucracy; an education system stressing conformity and stifling individual creativity; as well as a public discourse of gender that simultaneously discouraged women from entering the public/work sphere, and men from participating in private/family spaces. It is true that the questioning of these ideological pillars of the Japanese state had been in effect as far back as the 1960s—the anti-establishment student movement of the 1960s is one example of challenge to the status quo. However, it was really in the 1990s that a combination of factors, including demographic shifts and the emergence of a post-industrial, late-capitalist society with an increasing emphasis on diversity and individuality, not to mention the fallouts of the corporate downsizings and financial scandals of the post-Bubble years, enabled these underlying interrogations to find expression in the form of specific policies and enunciations.

THE EMERGENCE OF A DISCOURSE AROUND “MASCULINITY”

The context of contradictory socio-economic and cultural shifts and pulls highlighted masculinity as a focus for questioning and interrogation. Over much of the post-World War II period Japanese masculinity had come to be signified by the figure of the be-suited urban, white-collar “salaryman” loyally working for the organization he was employed by, in return for benefits such

---

3 This visibility of diversity was in turn related to conditions of a late-capitalist socio-economy. This included the rapid diffusion of new media, including the internet, cable and satellite television, and mobile telephone mediated communications (see Gottlieb & McLelland, 2003). Another consideration was the “commodification” of diversity, whereby non-mainstream identities became another fashionable “brand” to be consumed through the capitalist marketplace. An example of this was the “gay boom” of the 1990s, when a variety of mainstream media (glossy magazines, television serials, movies) featured and celebrated male gay lifestyles. This “boom” was driven primarily by young, heterosexual female consumers, rather than sexual minorities themselves. However, while there may have been elements of trivialization and tokenism at work, the “gay boom” did work toward bringing sexual minority identity into the public arena (for further discussion of the “gay boom” see McLelland, 2000, 2003).
as secure lifetime employment and almost automatic promotions and salary-increments linked to length of service. Notwithstanding the fact that large sectors of the male workforce never did have access to the salaryman model of corporate paternalism, the discourse of masculinity associated with the salaryman and his lifestyle came, in many respects, to dominate both Japanese corporate culture and Japanese masculinity, over the period from around the 1950s until the 1980s (Amano, 2006, pp. 18-24). In this regard the discourse of salaryman masculinity, premised on the notion of the male as breadwinner and provider for a dependent family, could be considered the hegemonic discourse of masculinity in Japan for these decades.

However, in the wake of the corporate restructurings and economic slowdown of the 1990s outlined in the previous section, this discourse of masculinity started to unravel and lose its hegemonic grip. As even large elite corporations abandoned practices such as lifetime employment guarantee, leaving increasing numbers of middle-aged salarymen without job security, questions about the cost to men and their families of subscribing to a discourse of masculinity prioritizing work above all else started to become increasingly audible in the public arena. Since the 1980s there had been already considerable media attention to topics like karōshi (sudden death related to work-related physical and mental stress, in particular excessively long working hours), kitaku-kyohi (inability or reluctance to go home, partly due to a lack of communication between the salaryman and his family), tanshin funin (workers forced to live away from their families, sometime for years, due to job transfers), and madogiwa-zoku (literally, “window-sill tribe” —middle-aged salarymen automatically promoted up the corporate escalator to junior management posts, but due to either personal inefficacy or a lack of available jobs commensurate with their status, being sidelined and relegated to the desks by the window, passing time staring at the outside scenery). At the same time, for growing numbers of younger men, subscribing to salaryman masculinity was not an option, either out of choice, when opting for more flexible arrangements such as working in the casual/temporary freeter economy, or as a consequence of un-

---

4 As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), discussing the initial application of the concept of hegemonic masculinity point out, while “hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it . . . it was certainly normative,” in that “it embodied the currently most honoured way of being a man [and] it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it” (p. 832).

5 See, for instance, Okifuji (1990) and Itô (1996) for a discussion of this phenomenon, as represented in the popular press.

6 By 1992, the estimated number of tanshin funin men had exceeded 250,000 (Gill, 2003, p. 158, n. 3). Of the various factors causing salarymen to lead a tanshin funin life, not wanting to interrupt children’s schooling seems to be the motivating factor for an overwhelming number—85.1 percent in one survey (Fôramu Josei no Seikatsu to Tenbô, 1994, p. 21).
availability of regular, permanent employment to new graduates as corporations cut back on hiring, in response to the economic slowdown.

The corporate restructurings of the 1990s also had consequences for the men who would embody the salaryman model—fulltime, middle-aged, middle-management, white-collar employees of private organizations. Many of these men had entered the workforce during the peak years of economic growth in Japan, in the 1960s and 1970s. This was a time of rapid economic expansion, and organizations needed a large pool of young white-collar (and blue-collar) workers, who could provide the necessary backup support to middle- and upper-management. The implicit assumption was that the economy would keep growing. Hence, the expectation was that as this cohort moved up the ranks, organizations would keep expanding, and there would be sufficient middle-management positions available to absorb them once they reached the middle years of their careers. However, their transition into mid-career coincided with the economic slowdown of the 1990s with organizations now encountering excess capacity, particularly in human resources. This cohort of middle-aged, middle-management salarymen was particularly troublesome for corporations—given the seniority-based organizational structure, these men were now a costly layer of “excess fat.” At the same time (partly due to this burden), organizations were increasingly forced to cut back on their new staff intake. One of the consequences of these cutbacks was that the work load and pressure on middle management to “come up with the figures” became even more intense, further exacerbating negative dimensions of salaryman masculinity, such as karōshi and the tanshin funin phenomenon, referred to above. Furthermore, as part of the restructuring that many corporations embarked upon, large numbers of middle-management staff found their very jobs under threat. As organizations sought to cut costs growing numbers of lower- and middle-management staff found themselves being shunted off to branch offices and subsidiaries, or even being “out-sourced” to other firms.7 Others were asked to take extended leave, or to only come in to work a few days a week, or, contravening everything lifetime employment supposedly stood for, were laid-off (see Roberson & Suzuki, 2003).

The implications of these shifts in corporate ideology, in the discourse surrounding the salaryman and what he stood for, as well as in terms of the changed day-to-day reality for large sections of the population, were manifold. First, as mentioned above, the unemployment rate continued to climb through the 1990s as a consequence of companies being driven into bankruptcy, or as a result of corporate restructuring. While the group impacted the most was males in the 15-24 age bracket, these figures also reflected a rise in jobless rates among middle-aged men, many of whom were the victims of corporate re-

---

7 The total number of “dispatched workers” (haken) for instance increased from just over 500,000 in 1992 to close to 1.5 million by 2001 (Japan Institute of Labor, 2003, p. 40).
structuring and lay-offs. The unemployment rate for men in the 45-54 age group had been a mere 1.1 percent in 1990; by 2002 it had climbed to 4.3 percent, and for those in the next age category (55-64), the rate was 7.1 percent, up from 3.4 percent in 1990 (Japan Institute of Labor, 2003, p. 44). For middle-aged men, the implications of being retrenched were particularly acute. Not only did they have to contend with the economic strain posed on them and their families, but given the centrality of work in defining their identity up until that point, their very masculinity was compromised. One corollary of this was a marked increase in the male suicide rate, particularly among middle-aged men (Itô, 1996; Roberson & Suzuki, 2003; Taga, 2006b). For a significant proportion of salarymen in this age group, even among those who had not been laid off, there was a heightened sense of anxiety, stress, and a feeling of having been betrayed by the corporate ideology and system into which they had invested so much (see for instance, Nakamura, 1996).

It was against this background of economic uncertainty, coupled with other socio-cultural and demographic shifts, that “men” and “masculinity” as a category in its own right started coming under scrutiny, both in academic and non-academic forums. As Taga Futoshi notes in his comprehensive review of men’s studies/masculinities studies in Japan, although there were some exam-

---

8 As Roberson and Suzuki, drawing upon Ministry of Health and Welfare statistics, point out, the number of men killing themselves in 2000 was over 2.5 times the number in 1970. Among men in the 25–39 age bracket, suicide was the leading cause of death in 2000, and second for men in the 40–49 category (Roberson & Suzuki, 2003b, p. 14, n. 7; also Nakamura, 2003, pp. 165, 166). Significantly, from the mid-1990s, problems at work and/or economic hardship started showing a significant increase as a cause of suicide (Yuzawa & Miyamoto, 2008, pp. 196, 197).

9 The complexities at stake in discussing terminology across languages (specifically, Japanese and English) need to be unpacked a bit. As Jennifer Robertson points out, among feminist and gender studies scholars in Japan, sex, gender, and sexuality “have been distinguished in principle since around 1970” (1998, p. 18). Sex in the biological sense is denoted by the term (and corresponding kanji Chinese character) sei. As far as reference to gender is concerned, the transliterated term jendâ has become widespread in recent years (see Amano & Kimura, 2003; Itô & Muta, 1998; Taga, 2001). However, gender is also sometimes expressed using either sei, or, seibetsu or seisâ (“sex difference”) particularly in formal pre-feminist academic or scientific literature. Moreover, references to specific genders continue to be linked to the word sei. Thus, the word dansei, comprised of dan, the Chinese reading for the Japanese word otoko, prefixing sei, connotes either male sex, or male gender (see Robertson, 1998, p. 18). In terms of everyday parlance, otoko is used more commonly than the more formal, academic-sounding dansei, as a noun to denote a “man.” Gender in terms of attributes is described by adding the suffix rashii, with, as Robertson points out, “its allusion to appearance or likeness” (1998, p. 18). Thus, otokorashii could denote physical appearance, or behaviour, or attributes (such as tone of voice) considered “manly” or “masculine,” measured against the hegemonic ideals of “masculinity” and “manliness.” An equivalent term for mas-
ples of writing focused on masculinity dating back to the 1980s and even earlier, it was during the 1990s that a distinct area of academic and non-academic inquiry around men’s lives and masculinities started to take shape (Taga, 2005). It was a combination of three interrelated socio-cultural and economic dynamics that worked in concert to foreground this visibility—the impact of the bursting of the bubble economy on the employment sector (discussed above), demographic changes, and, importantly, the shift toward a focus on gender at the government policy-making level, with the enactment of a series of legislative developments from the mid-1980s into the 2000s.

The first of these developments was the 1985 Equal Employment Opportunity Law, which aimed to encourage gender equality in the workplace. The enactment of this law was prompted by Japan ratifying the United Nations’ Convention for Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women marking the end of the UN Decade for Women (1975–1985). While the initial legislation lacked teeth in many respects (for instance, the lack of penalty clauses), it was subsequently strengthened in the 1990s. The 1991 Childcare Leave Law (ikuji kyôgyô hô), furthermore, allowed both male and female employees to take parental leave. This and other policies were reinforced at the grass-roots level by a series of official campaigns encouraging men to take a more active role in childrearing. One that generated particular attention was a poster campaign featuring the male partner of the popular female musician Amuro Namie holding the couple’s child with a caption declaring that a male parent who did not take part in childcare could not be called a father (Nakatani, 2006, pp. 94, 95; Roberts, 2002, pp. 76-78; Taga, 2005, p. 156).

The shift in government policy was not necessarily prompted by genuine commitments to challenge dominant gender paradigms. Rather, it was driven more by the economic and demographic realities (and projected implications) of falling birth rates and an aging population. The birthrate had been decreas-

10 As Taga notes, there were some early precursors dating back to the 1970s and 1980s (Taga, 2005, p. 154). Also it was during the 1980s that some of the academic research on gender started incorporating “masculinity” as a category of problematization. There were a number of titles, but Watanabe Tsuneo’s 1986 Datsu-dansei no jidai (The post-male age) was perhaps the most noteworthy. It was Watanabe, as Taga observes, who first talked about “dansei gaku” (men’s studies) as a category for academic study (Taga, 2005, p. 155; Watanabe, 1986). For a list of some of the other early works on masculinity, see Nakamura and Nakamura (1997).
ing steadily since the early 1970s, and by the late-1990s had fallen to 1.34, well below the population replacement figure (Roberson & Suzuki, 2003b, p. 10; Taga, 2005, p. 156). At the same time, because of improvements in health, nutrition, and overall living standards over the postwar decades, the proportion of elderly within the population had been increasing steadily over the postwar decades (Yuzawa & Miyamoto, 2008). These trends generated considerable concern among government and community leaders and opinion makers about the future economic and socio-cultural implications for Japan. While there was the inevitable criticism on the part of conservative social commentators about the supposed selfish individualism of younger women (referred to as “Parasite Singles”) postponing or refusing marriage in favor of leading a carefree, consumption-centered lifestyle (see Dales, 2005; Roberson & Suzuki, 2003b, pp. 10, 11), there was also a growing recognition on the part of policy-makers that unless men were factored in, there could be no effective way of redressing the declining birth rate.

**Men’s Movement**

It was in this context that voices seeking to interrogate “masculinity” as a construct became increasingly audible in the public arena. There had, as pointed out earlier, been groups engaging with aspects of masculinity as far back as the late 1970s, however these earlier groups tended to be concentrated on single issues, particularly related to child rearing and the gendered division of housework (Taga, 2006a, pp. 170, 171). Groups emerging in the 1990s, while still engaging with key issues like child-rearing, were rather concerned with a broader interrogation and deconstruction of “men” and “masculinity” as categories. The first of these men’s group, Menzu ribu kenkyû kai (“Men’s liberation research association”), was established in Osaka in 1991 by a small group of academics and concerned community members, many of whom had connections with other progressive social movements. This group was instrumental in the subsequent establishment of Japan’s first Men’s Center in 1995 (Shibuya, 2001, p. 450; Taga, 2005, p. 157), which played a key role in providing grass-roots support and information, including the provision of a counseling hotline service.

---

11 In 2006 the elderly accounted for 20.8 percent of the total population, putting Japan ahead of all other industrialized countries, in terms of the percentage of the population above 65 (Yuzawa & Miyamoto, 2008, p. 21).

12 It should be noted that despite the term “men’s liberation,” suggestive of a more conservative, anti-feminist, men’s rights agenda, along the lines of groups like the Promise Keepers in the United States, the Osaka group (and other “men’s lib” groups established in its wake) was quite unambiguously pro-feminist and progressive.

Over the course of the 1990s, following the example of the Osaka group, men’s groups were established in other parts of the country—starting with Men’s Lib Tokyo in 1995, and subsequently groups in Kanagawa, Fukushima, Okayama, Kyushu and elsewhere (Dasgupta, 2003a, pp. 112, 113; Shibuya, 2001, p. 450). These groups engaged in numerous activities: networking and collaborating with other groups working in gender and sexuality related areas, such as women’s organizations, as well as lgbt/sexual minority groups, like OCCUR;\(^\text{14}\) providing support and information services to individual men’s issues ranging from unemployment to getting men to talk about domestic violence;\(^\text{15}\) and providing information to and raising awareness within the general community (Taga, 2006a). This was effected by means of seminars and workshops (often in collaboration with local government authorities responsible for gender-related issues),\(^\text{16}\) publications such as newsletters and pamphlets known as \textit{mini-komi} (“mini-communication”), media releases, online information of activities and services through websites, and the like. For example, Men’s Center Japan put out a number of accessible booklets with titles like “\textit{Otokorashisa} kara jibunrashisa e” (From “manliness” to being yourself) and \textit{Otokotachi no “watashi” sagashi} (Men’s search for “own self”) containing articles on a variety of pertinent issues—self-reflection, friendship, work, fatherhood, intimate relationships, domestic violence, to list a few (Dasgupta, 2003a, p. 113; Men’s Center Japan, 1996, 1997; Taga, 2006a, pp. 175, 176).\(^\text{17}\)

The visibility and activism of the men’s movement, as well as the shaping of a sense of community received a significant boost in November 1996, when the first “Men’s Festival” was held in Kyoto, attracting over 160 male and female participants from across Japan (Shibuya, 2001, pp. 450, 451).\(^\text{18}\) These “Festivals” (akin to conference/workshops) continued to be held annually until the early 2000s, and played an important role in bringing together individuals from across the nation dealing with similar issues. This was particularly important for men outside the central Tokyo-Osaka-Kyoto orbit; regional groups were

\(^\text{14}\) For discussion of the growth in a visible queer identity and activism in the 1990s see Lunsing (1999, esp. pp. 302-316), and McLelland (2005, pp. 174-190).

\(^\text{15}\) For a discussion of awareness raising of domestic violence issues among men (including among perpetrators of the violence) see Nakamura (2003).

\(^\text{16}\) Taga (2006a, p. 7), for instance, notes that according to a survey carried out by the Fukuoka City Women’s Centre, between April 1993 and July 1995 around 1,033 workshops, seminars and public lectures on the theme of masculinity were organized across Japan.

\(^\text{17}\) The mainstream media also contributed to raising awareness. The popular men’s magazine \textit{Bart} ran a feature on men’s issues and masculinity studies in 1997, and even the English-language press picked up on the trend quite early on (Dasgupta, 2003a, p. 112). The national broadcaster, \textit{NHK}, ran a series on its education television channel on \textit{danseigaku} featuring Itô Kimio (Taga, 2005, p. 159).

\(^\text{18}\) See also the Men’s Center Japan website for details of the programmes of this first, and subsequent Men’s Festivals.
often established during periods of post-Festival optimism (Taga, 2006a, pp. 179, 180).

**MEN’S STUDIES**

The other significant outcome of the growing attention to “masculinity” was the emergence, in the 1990s, of danseigaku (men’s studies/studies of/on men, more loosely, masculinity studies) as a defined area of academic teaching and research. Once again, this was not an isolated development but rather followed on from the growth of research on women, and more generally on gender, in the 1970s and 1980s. Scholars including leading feminist scholar Ueno Chizuko, along with pro-feminist academics like Itô Kimio, started to focus on masculinity as a social category. Moreover, its emergence was situated within a wider global emergence of masculinities/men’s studies as a distinct area for academic research and inquiry, from the late 1980s onwards.

Consequently the 1990s saw a succession of both theoretical and empirical work engaging with the theme of masculinity, including a 1995 volume dedicated to danseigaku, in an authoritative multi-volume series on feminism in Japan (Nihon no feminizumu), edited by leading feminist scholars including Ueno Chizuko and Ehara Yumiko, as well as a number of monographs and edited volumes by leading pioneer of academic men’s/masculinity studies, Itô Kimio.19

Another aspect of this crystallizing of a distinct men’s/masculinity studies area, was its extension into the domains of teaching and community education. In addition to collaborative community-level efforts, following a 1992 course by Itô Kimio at Kyoto University (Taga, 2006a, p. 14), men’s/masculinity studies started to appear in university courses, either as a separate course or as an element of “gender studies” courses. Taga (2006a, p. 14), drawing on data from the National Women’s Education Center, notes that in 2002 across the 531 tertiary institutions in Japan, there were 2,068 classes on gender, of which 61 dealt specifically with men’s/masculinity studies. Taga himself was the first researcher at a Japanese university to complete a doctoral thesis using a men’s/masculinity studies framework. He subsequently published quite extensively in the area, in both Japanese and English, thereby enabling Japanese research to reach a wider global audience. Taga’s English-language publications (e.g., 2003, 2005) contributed to a small but growing body of international academic literature on Japanese masculinities published since the early 2000s. This includes Kam Louie and Morris Low’s 2003 edited volume, *East Asian mas-

19 Itô’s works included such titles as “Ototorashisa” no yukue (Tracing “manliness/masculinity,” 1993), Danseigaku nyûmon (Introduction to men’s/masculinity studies, 1996), and a co-edited volume (with Muta Kazue), *Jendâ de manabu shakaigaku* (The study of sociology through gender, 1998). For a comprehensive overview of the various academic works published through the 1990s and early-2000s, see Taga (2005, pp, 158-163).

This emerging body of English-language scholarship on masculinity in Japan contributed in two ways. First, it provided a specific analytic lens through masculinity (and more generally, gender) for the field of global Japan studies, particularly in the West. Second, it contributed to a “de-westernization” of men’s/masculinity studies, which, at least in its initial years as an emergent field of research, had been heavily slanted toward Euro-American cultural contexts.

**Outlooks: The Legacy of the “Lost Decade”**

The discussion in the preceding section underscores the degree to which, within the space of a few years, men’s lives, and indeed masculinity as a cultural rubric, became available for scrutiny and discussion in Japanese public discourse. While, as I have argued, there were external influences at work—the emergence of men’s/masculinity studies over the 1980s-1990s in the West, and its influence on Japanese researchers and activists, for instance—the conditions foregrounding this visibility were overwhelmingly internal. The “Lost Decade” of the 1990s, as highlighted, represents a socio-economic and cultural watershed in Japan’s contemporary history and has a bearing on any discussion of masculinity and men’s lives in Japan today.

Ten years down the track, the legacy of those years continues to have implications for men’s lives and thinking about masculinity. It is, however, a mixed legacy. On the one hand, there is no doubt that the critical attention to gender in the 1990s has had a significant influence on the way increasing numbers of men (and women) think about issues such as men’s involvement in activities previously considered “un-manly/un-masculine” like housework, cooking, and childcare. The hegemonic hold of the work-focused, white-collar salaryman as the icon of Japanese masculinity, has definitely loosened since the 1990s, allowing for greater visibility of multiple masculinities in the public domain challenging and re-shaping the ideological expectations of hegemonic masculinity (for instance, the need for a father to be seen as actively involved in parenting is increasingly becoming a normative expectation).

At the same time, certain assumptions that had defined pre-1990s hegemonic masculinity continue to operate, albeit in less intense ways. Despite the compromised status of the salaryman model, work in the public sphere continues to be instrumental in defining masculine self-identity and self-worth, both at the collective societal level and at the level of the individual. If anything, in the context of the harsh economic and employment conditions of the past two
decades, the pressure to perform for those men who succeed in the increasingly competitive work environment seems more intense. Moreover, despite the growing *visibility* of diverse masculinities, the power gap between those men who “make it” into hegemonic masculinity (exemplified today by a new generation of more cosmopolitan, tech-savvy entrepreneurs and salarymen) and those who do not (growing numbers of *freeters* well into their thirties, even forties, unable to find stable employment) may well be getting more intense. Indeed, in the wake of the current (2008/9) global financial meltdown and its impact on the Japanese economy—in particular the large-scale lay-offs of contract and temporary workers—the gap between hegemonic masculinity and marginalized masculinities will more than likely further intensify in coming years.

Similarly, despite an apparent whittling away of traditional gender role expectations, with women no longer expected to be primarily fulltime homemakers and men seemingly more involved in household and parenting responsibilities, the situation continues to be complex. Men, especially younger men who grew up being exposed to increasingly progressive civil discourses on gender equality, may well express a desire to share household and childcare responsibilities with their partners. For instance, surveys conducted by the Office of Cabinet on attitudes to the gendered division of labor, reveal that the percentage of respondents disagreeing completely, or to a large degree, with the statement *the husband should work outside the home and the wife should look after the household* rose from 20.4 percent in 1979 to 48.9 percent in 2004 (Taga, 2006a, p. 122).

Yet, reality continues to lag behind the articulated ideal of shared household responsibilities. In 2006, even for households where both partners worked, the husband’s share of household labor was still only around 10 percent (up from slightly over five percent in 1986) (Yuzawa & Miyamoto, 2008, p. 31). Moreover, Yuzawa and Miyamoto point out that the increase in the time men spend on housework related activities tends to come from increased participation in activities like shopping, as opposed to tasks like cooking and cleaning. Similarly, while it might appear that men’s participation in childcare has increased, the nature of childcare tends to revolve around playing with children, rather than childcare tasks such as feeding or changing diapers (p. 30). This disconnection between men’s stated ideal of greater involvement in the household and reality is compounded by the greatly intensified pressures at work mentioned above—official rhetoric about family-friendly workplaces, notwithstanding (see Taga, 2006a, pp. 116-118). Indeed, work conditions seem to be getting worse for younger men. Fujimura, in a 2002 survey of gender concepts among young adult men, notes that the proportion of male employees

---

20 Japan fares poorly in international comparisons—whereas in Sweden the male partner in households with children where both partners work, does an average of 3.19 hours of housework per week, in Japan that figure is just 1.18 hours per week (Yuzawa & Miyamoto, 2008, p. 31).
working in excess of 60 hours per week was greatest for men in their twenties and thirties (Fujimura, 2006, p. 209). What this points to is the need for a radical and far-reaching rethinking of the very concept of work, something which the 1990s men’s group activists and academics strongly emphasized.

Regarding the emergence of men’s/masculinity studies and the efforts of activist groups, the legacy of the 1990s/early-2000s is similarly mixed. The academic literature on men’s/masculinity studies has continued to grow and diversify. However, the fate of men’s groups and community activism has been less promising, with much of the enthusiasm and vibrancy of the 1990s dissipating in recent years. Many of the groups, established in the 1990s have shut down, or persist in name only, or consist of just a handful of individuals. This includes even groups like Men’s Lib Tokyo, which in the 1990s had been very active, but closed down in 2005. Even the Men’s Festivals, although continuing to be held regularly, have seen a drop in participants from the high-point of 500 in 1997 (Taga, 2006a).

As Taga points out, the reasons behind this tapering-off of interest are varied. Factors range from differences among members about the direction of the movement, to the reality of issues addressed in the 1990s by men’s groups, including changing attitudes toward housework and parenting, and the stigma of showing weakness and emotion, are far less relevant or urgent for younger men today. Ironically, the very success in getting men to talk about their feelings, or to re-appraise relationships with their partners, as well as the inroads made in legislation, may well have contributed to a lack of “burning issues” for group members to unite around. It may be just that, unlike for instance sexual minority status, “masculinity” may be too broad and nebulous a category to sustain a social movement around. Nevertheless, this does not detract from the important contributions made by groups and individuals during the “Lost Decade” years to changing entrenched social and cultural attitudes, and making Japan a more inclusive and socio-culturally dynamic society today. In this sense, the historical significance of the emergence of the discourse around masculinity needs to be taken into account in any comprehensive study of post-war Japan.

REFERENCES


Amano, M. (2006). “Otoko de aru koto” no sengoshi: Sarariiman, kigyô shakai, kazoku [The postwar history of “being male/being a man”: The salaryman, corporatist soci-

---

21 Works published since the early 2000s, such as Abe, Obinata, and Amano (2006), Amano and Kimura (2003), Kaizuma (2004), Saitô (2003), and Taga (2006a, 2006b), have all contributed to the intellectual maturing of the discipline.


