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Wage Hunting at the Margins of Urban Japan

Tom Gill

Japanese industrial relations have long been associated with close, long-term relationships between employer and worker, and metaphors describing the stereotypical company in paternalistic and familial terms have been commonplace.¹ The model was never true for more than a minority of Japanese workers, and in recent years discourses centered on the “core and periphery” model (Chalmers 1989) have been steadily gaining acceptance. A core of elite workers enjoys the security of long-term contracts, whereas a periphery of increasingly easy-to-dismiss workers gives the employer the flexibility needed to vary the workforce in tune with changing economic conditions.

Day laborers (*hiyatoi rōdōsha*) are on the outermost rim of the peripheral workforce. As the name suggests, they are typically hired by the day and can be laid off the next day if not required. Their chief employer is the construction industry, which is especially vulnerable to changes in economic conditions, tendering outcomes, and the weather. It is a highly hierarchical industry, with a few giant general contractors at the top manipulating a long string of subcontractors, sub-subcontractors, and sub-sub-subcontractors, to whom work is passed on at increasingly unfavorable terms. The small companies toward the bottom of the chain may have no more than half a dozen regular employees. When big contracts come along, they will supplement that workforce by taking on day laborers.

Day laborers operate in various ways, and depending on which definition one employs, they may be numbered at well over a million in the Japanese economy.² However, my own research has focused on those—perhaps 100,000 in total—who maintain the traditional day-laboring lifestyle and who are currently suffering from severe unemployment. This traditional orientation entails finding work at a *yoseba*, an urban casual labor market. Work is transacted very early in the morning, either informally by street-corner recruiters called *tehaishi* or formally

at the casual labor exchanges that are run by the government in a rather unsuccessful attempt to legalize, organize, and control casual labor.³

Yoseba day laborers usually stay on their own, in cheap lodging houses called *doya* (a slang inversion of *yado*, standard Japanese for an inn). A *doya* room is typically only just big enough to lie down in, and the cheaper ones tend to be very dirty. Toilets are shared, and there are usually no baths. The rent is very cheap compared with any other hotel but remarkably high compared with a small apartment, especially when the cost of using public baths is factored in. Often these lodging houses are concentrated in places called *doya-gai*. This term—which can be derogatory, depending on usage—carries associations similar to those of the American “skid row.” In three famous cases, the *yoseba* and *doya-gai* are in the same place: Kamagasaki in Osaka (ca. 20,000 men), San’ya in Tokyo (ca. 12,000 men), and Kotobuki in Yokohama (ca. 8,000 men).⁴ Other smaller *yoseba*, such as Sasashima in Nagoya and Chikko in Fukuoka, do not have *doya-gai* and the men must commute from lodgings elsewhere.

Marginal Geography

Yoseba are very clearly defined zones with perceptible borders setting them apart from the surrounding cityscapes. They tend to be located in fairly central city districts with good rail and road access, reflecting their original *raison d’être* as a convenient supply of instant disposable labor to city industries.⁵ Entering the *yoseba* is almost like arriving in a foreign country. One crosses a road and immediately becomes aware of the change in atmosphere and in behavior. People sleep in the gutter, piss in the street, wander around rather than walking in a straight line, have plenty of time, and talk to strangers—modes of behavior seldom seen in the rest of the city, except late at night. There are wrecked cars abandoned in the street and shacks built by homeless people in the hedgerows. Kotobuki is the one part of Yokohama where you can park illegally with little risk of having your vehicle towed away by the police.

The marginal status of the *yoseba* is encoded in its proximity to other places inhabited by marginalized groups. Thus there is a marked tendency for *yoseba* to be located adjacent to *baishungai*—red light districts. San’ya, for example, is next door to the Yoshiwara, Tokyo’s most famous pleasure district; and Kamagasaki is next door to Tobita, which like Yoshiwara has a history of licensed prostitution dating back several hundred years.⁶ Nowadays at least, day laborers cannot afford to patronize prostitutes on anything like the scale that would justify this proximity. Rather the patrons of Yoshiwara and Tobita are mostly mainstream males. My impression is that the proximity of *yoseba* and *baishungai* has more to do with shared outcast status than with a patron-client relationship between the two.

Yoseba also tend to be next to, or to overlap with, Burakumin districts. The Burakumin are a despised outcast group within Japanese society with a long and contentious history (see DeVos and Wagatsuma 1967; Yoshino and Murakoshi

1977). They are another marginal group in Japanese society, but one with markedly different characteristics than day laborers. Their identity is hereditary, whereas that of day laborers is acquired; they maintain family life, whereas day laborers generally do not; they tend to be sedentary, whereas day laborers are mobile. In my thesis (Gill 1996:35–40) I discuss the possibility that Burakumin and day laborers may be the cultural descendants of the Eta and Hinin, two contrasting outcast groups of the Edo period. For now, suffice it to point out that these two groups are often to be found in roughly the same part of town.

In some *yoseba* one also finds various facilities for people with mental or physical disabilities. This is especially so in Kotobuki, where there are workshops for blind people, people confined to wheelchairs, and people with learning difficulties. This stems from the difficulties faced by local authorities in locating such facilities in more “respectable” districts, where the residents invariably complain. The *yoseba* is a more tolerant area and hence tends to become a dumping ground for people who, for virtually any reason, do not fit into mainstream society.

It is generally possible to trace the formation of the *yoseba*, and its proximity to other despised districts, to deliberate state policy. For hundreds of years, central and local governments have dictated where casual workers will gather through zoning regulations. These dictate where cheap houses and lodging places may be built, just as licensing systems have been used to restrict prostitution to particular districts and discriminatory legislation has been used to confine Burakumin to specified places, typically near rivers, where the land is not well suited to human habitation.⁷

Thus the *yoseba* may be despised by the mainstream, but it also has its value, both economic (supply of cheap, flexible labor) and social (dumping ground for misfits). A senior Yokohama police officer told me that, despite Kotobuki’s high rate of crime, he and his colleagues had no intention of trying to clean the place up or shut it down: “Given that human nature, and therefore cities, are not perfect, it’s not a bad idea to concentrate the problems in one place. The relatively high rate of crime in Kotobuki must be seen in the light of the lower rates in other parts of Yokohama. The two are surely connected.”⁸

A leading activist in the Kotobuki day laborer union once compared Kotobuki to an *ubasute-yama*—in Japanese history, a mountain where old women would be left to die when they had outlived their economic usefulness. The police officer quoted above compared the same place to a *kakekomi-dera*, or temple of sanctuary. Actually the *kakekomi-dera* were Buddhist nunneries to which married women would escape if they wanted a divorce. Three years of religious observances would automatically dissolve the tie of marriage.

It is interesting that both these similes refer to institutions designed for women. Perhaps this is another instance of different categories of social discrimination being lumped together, like the concentration of polluted zones around the *yoseba*. Anyway, the distinction between mountain of abandonment and temple of sanctuary is that between involuntary victimhood (stressing the *yoseba*’s

usefulness to the mainstream) and deliberate escape (stressing the *yoseba*'s usefulness to the people at the margin). I found a similar ambivalence among day laborers themselves. Some would curse the day they entered the *yoseba*; others, perhaps a majority, were glad it was there. It was, after all, a community.

Solitary Men

Some day laborers are skilled. The *tobi*, or spiderman, who does dangerous high-level construction work, is a traditional day laborer category. So is the *daiku*, or carpenter. However, most day laborers do work requiring physical strength rather than acquired skills. Even for unskilled workers, wage levels are quite good compared with, say, British casual wages, or indeed with Japanese wages for manual work done on a more regular basis. On the other hand, demand for labor fluctuates violently in response to economic trends, seasonal cycles, the weather, and so on. Also a man's employment prospects decline steadily as he gets older. Since social security is rather inadequate in Japan, many day laboring careers end in homelessness, illness, and early death. Life expectancy for day laborers is reckoned to be some twenty years shorter than for the general male population of Japan.⁹ These factors make it almost impossible for day laborers to sustain family life: Nearly all are bachelors or divorced/separated, and many, perhaps a majority, are also estranged from their natal family.

Apart from a few working in shops, restaurants, and so on, there are very few women in the *yoseba*. It is an almost exclusively male society. It has not always been so. As late as the 1960s whole families sometimes lived in tiny *doya* rooms, and there were quite a few female day laborers, sometimes called *yoi-tomake*. But during the 1970s and 1980s, Japan's economic growth gradually made marriage to a day laborer ever less attractive to women, besides furnishing easier work in service industries that made hard manual labor a steadily more avoidable occupation.

As a result of these two factors, it is fair to say that in contemporary Japan nearly all *yoseba* day laborers are single men. They do not reproduce, and it follows that people are very seldom born into the *yoseba* as they may be born into a ghetto. Rather, they come to the *yoseba* in the course of their working career. I found that the great majority of *yoseba* day laborers had rural backgrounds. Some had come to the *yoseba* temporarily in the first instance, as migrant laborers making use of its function as a convenient temporary labor market. Others had been fired from previous employment, acquired criminal records, got divorced, become addicted to alcohol, or in some other way been disqualified from mainstream society. For them, the anonymity of the *yoseba*, where false names pass unquestioned by recruiters and landlords, is a great attraction in a society that usually insists on identification for everything.

Out of all the men who drift into the *yoseba*, a certain percentage end up staying. They may find that the longer they stay, the harder it is to get more regular

employment, as the blank on their CVs gets longer. They may be unable to return to the mainstream life of family and company because of an addiction, typically to alcohol or gambling. A few of the skilled workers may judge that they are better off selling their skills to the highest bidder every day, rather than working permanently for a single employer, and some of these people may actually live away from the *yoseba* and simply use it for work contacts. Then again, some people stay in the *yoseba* because they cannot think of anywhere else to go, or just because they like it.

Present Orientation

During the two years I spent doing fieldwork in Kotobuki and other *yoseba* (1993–1995), the most striking attitude I encountered among day laborers was a powerful orientation to the present moment. This is captured in day laborers' conceptualizations of space and money. *Genba*—literally, “present place”—signifies the workplace, typically a building site, which may be different every day. The word has proletarian machismo: It suggests that actual work, in the here and now, is being done—as opposed to meaningless, unreal pen-pushing work. *Genkin*, “present money,” means “cash in hand,” as in *genkin shigoto*, a cash-in-hand job, usually meaning a single day job for which you are paid on the day. This is not the only kind of job transacted at the *yoseba*: Period contracts of seven days to a month or so are also available. Period contracts offer greater security of income, though usually at a somewhat lower rate of pay. I observed that during the recession of the early 1990s, when jobs were very scarce, the take-up rate for one day contracts at the labor exchanges was virtually 100 percent, whereas a substantial proportion of period contracts failed to find takers.¹⁰

My impression was that the length of delay was a direct function of the balance of power between capital and labor: When unemployment was high, as it was during the recession, one day cash-in-hand contracts declined more rapidly than period contracts, and the net result was that day laborers were made to wait longer for their money. This delay was resented; like the London sex workers described by Day in this volume, day laborers insist on freely spending their earnings and object when the small rewards from everyday drudgery are denied . . . , channeled into welfare funds, rents, insurance and so forth that give a false promise of future security.

When day laborers work by the day and are paid by the day, they come about as close as one can in an industrialized society to practicing “immediate return,” as defined by Woodburn in his analysis of African hunter-gatherers (see, for example, 1981). Perhaps, like the Gujarati laborers described by Bremen (1994:133–287), Japanese day laborers may be characterized as “wage hunters and gatherers.” Although, of course, cash is itself a store of value and hence introduces an element of delayed return absent from traditional hunter-gatherer societies, the delay is rarely very long for a day laborer. Money is soon spent, and



*A day laborer in a lodging house. He averts his face to avoid identification. Note the very sparsely furnished room with minimal possessions. This man can leave tomorrow (Nakajima Satoshi). (Originally published in *Tanshin Seikatsusha* by Nakajima Satoshi. Osaka: Kaifu-sha, 1990.)*



*A different lodging house. Some day laborers live in the same room for decades (Nakajima Satoshi). (Originally published in *Tanshin Seikatsusha* by Nakajima Satoshi. Osaka: Kaifu-sha, 1990.)*

many day laborers have the principle of not working again until they are broke—a practice long ago observed among casual workers in other industrialized countries.¹¹ Several day laborers quoted to me a proverbial saying dating from the Edo period: *Yoigoshi no kane wa motanai*—“Money is not something you keep overnight.”

Gambling is a major *yoseba* institution—illegal bookmakers take bets on horse, bicycle, and power boat races, and there are other games as well: dice games, one-armed bandits, mah-jongg for cash stakes, and *pachinko* (a Japanese version of pinball, played for cash prizes and hugely popular). This is a particularly effective way of preventing the accumulation of money and inequalities of wealth within the *yoseba*, since the nature of the odds means that ultimately excess wealth owned by gambling day laborers is transferred to the coffers of the gambling establishments.¹²

Day laborers very seldom gamble against each other, preferring forms of gambling that pit the punter against a professional house. Solidarity is expressed by *not* creating debts among friends (see Chapter 8 of this volume). At the same time, the *yakuza* (members of the so-called “Japanese mafia”) who run most of the gambling establishments, may perform a similar role to that of the out-of-town professional gamblers in the Greek case who ensure that the community remains a net loser.¹³

A lot of money is also spent on alcohol in the *yoseba*, though there are sturdy minorities who neither drink nor gamble. Drinking practices also express solidarity and present orientation. The copious American sociological literature on skid row includes numerous references to “bottle gangs,” semiformal groups of drinkers who contribute to the costs of buying a bottle and among whom some kind of record is kept to ensure that participants get a fair deal.¹⁴ I found no such institution in the *yoseba*; rather, people would share alcohol with more or less anyone who rolled up. Some people were always giving, whereas others always took. There appeared to be no sense that drinks given were to be repaid at some time in the future.

Most day laborers have very few possessions other than some basic clothes and occasionally a few tools. Indeed, possessions are widely viewed as an annoying encumbrance, since they hamper mobility. The few men I knew who *had* acquired a roomful of possessions complained that they had to pay the rent on their *doya* room even when they were away working on period contracts or at other *yoseba*.

The disadvantage of a lifestyle oriented to the present is that it renders people extremely vulnerable to bad weather, bad luck, and aging. This vulnerability is characteristic of day laborers, as has been all too obvious during the Heisei Recession.¹⁵ Without savings, they are very soon in trouble when jobs dry up. They may be forced to leave the *doya* for want of money to pay the rent and be reduced to sleeping rough. Even this is romanticized in the slang word *aokan*, a contraction of *aozora* (blue sky) and *kantan* (simple). It is a simple life, under a blue sky. But

day laborers also describe their position more bluntly with another proverbial expression: *Hiyatoi o korosu ni wa naifu ga iranai, mikka ame fureba ii-yo* ("You don't need a knife to kill a day laborer. Three rainy days in a row is all it takes").

This powerful orientation to the present—getting the reward for one's labor immediately and spending it immediately—recalls Orwell's observation in *Down and Out in Paris and London* that "when you are approaching poverty, you . . . discover the great redeeming feature of poverty: the fact that it annihilates the future. Within certain limits, it is actually true that the less money you have, the less you worry . . . You think vaguely, 'I shall be starving in a day or two—shocking, isn't it?' And then the mind wanders to other topics" (Orwell 1986:16).

A number of American sociologists have also discussed "present orientation" in association with lower social class, juvenile delinquency, and mental illness. As Murray puts it: "Deviant behavior is related to deviant time orientation" (Murray 1984:155). He also quotes Wiseman (1970), who suggests that skid row alcoholism programs often fail because the counselors are oriented to the future and the alcoholics to the present. Liebow argues that the present orientation of his street-corner informants is in fact a realistic orientation towards a future that is "loaded with trouble" (1967:68–69).¹⁶

Yoseba naturally attract the attention of the social services and of well-intentioned volunteers. As in Wiseman's case, the relations between helpers and day laborers may be characterized as a dialogue between future and present orientation. For example, in an attempt to inculcate the saving habit among day laborers, the Yokohama social services have set up a special bank in Kotobuki. It has no computers or cash machines, just old-fashioned ledgers. However, it stays open until 8:00 P.M. in recognition of the fact that day laborers are often away at work during usual banking hours. It is lightly patronized. The people running it told me that one of their principles was to allow any number of transactions on an account in a day. Some savers would deposit a day's wage on getting back from work and then withdraw it at intervals of hours or even minutes in the course of the evening—so even was the struggle between long-term security and present gratification.

The majority of volunteers are Christians, for whom future-orientation takes on an existential dimension.¹⁷ They give out food and blankets to homeless men, and some of the groups attempt to make converts. The idea is that the men should look after their physical health in the present life and look to their spiritual well-being in the hereafter.

As with the special bank, the battle with this orientation to the present is a tough one for the Christian volunteers. The number of converts appears to be rather small, and when it does happen, the meaning of conversion may differ for the missionary and the convert. Consider the following field note, recording an encounter in front of a liquor store around 5:30 A.M. on a mid-winter morning:

There was a thin little old man drinking *shōchū* (strong barley-based liquor), face lined with grey dirt. Said he was diabetic and had a dicky heart. "You need to be care-

ful," I said. "I'm already sixty so it doesn't matter if I die," he replied. "I've been a Catholic for ages so I'll go to heaven. I go to church properly, every Sunday. They give you wine and bread, you know, just like this"—and he stuck out a twitching little tongue. (Field notes: Wednesday, 5 January 1994)

Ironically, this man's avowed acceptance of the Christian concept of an afterlife has become a justification for self-destructive behavior in the here and now.

Death in the *Yoseba*

The other marginal groups discussed in this volume also show strong elements of an orientation to the present, but there is always some modification: The Greek gamblers must not lose so much as to ruin their families or spend their wives' dowries (Chapter 8); the London sex workers veer uneasily between the pleasure of immediate consumption and the delayed gratification of long-term plans for businesses and families (Chapter 7); for Vezo fishing people, death and the need to erect expensive funeral monuments puts a brake on the prevalent short-termism (Chapter 4). Yet, none of these factors is present in the *yoseba*. The men are mostly bachelors or divorcees; for the former the shame of failing to sustain a nuclear family is not an issue; for the latter the shame has come already, usually long in the past. It is widely recognized that very few people emerge from the *yoseba* to make exciting new careers, and most men are resigned to permanent residence. As for death, the absence of kinship ties means that there is no obligation to maintain graves or other monuments.

Nevertheless, death is a subject of consuming significance to Japanese writers who study the *yoseba*. The short life expectancy mentioned above, and the fact that dead bodies are sometimes found in the street in the *yoseba*, are unavoidable facts of life: hence such books as Aoki Hideo's *Yoseba Rōdōsha no Sei to Shi* (*The Life and Death of the Yoseba Worker*), an academic work that sees the early death of day laborers as the ultimate form of capitalist exploitation, and Funamoto Shuji's collection of militant tracts, *Damatte Notarejinu-na* (*Do Not Be Silent and Die in the Gutter*), a call for day laborers to abandon quietism and take action against their capitalist exploiters. Furthermore, Ifunke (1991) and Higa (1993) focus on the untimely deaths of particular day laborers.

The day laborers I knew showed a variety of attitudes toward death. A substantial proportion was frightened of dying without known kin. People who die in this way are called *muen-botoke* or "unconnected Bodhisattvas." It is the post-mortuary equivalent of the detachment from family characteristic of many day laborers, and it seems to bother them more than their this-worldly predicament. Some men may permanently break off all contact with their natal family but still keep a scrap of paper on them with an address or telephone number, so that next of kin can be contacted in the case of their own death. Notification of their death may be the first their relatives hear of them for decades.



Scene outside the Welfare Center in Sanya, Tokyo, February 1991 (Morita Ichiro).
(Originally published in *Tokyo Streets* by Ichiroh Morita. Tokyo: Sanichi Shoboh, 1993.)

One man told me that he fully expected his family to put his ashes in the family grave after his death, although he was equally certain that they would not welcome him home alive. Because of the collapse of his marriage and his subsequent spendthrift ways, it would bring shame to his family if he returned to their small rural village alive. Once dead, however, the situation would be reversed: It would bring shame to the family if they did *not* inter him in the family grave. I suspect that as well as shame such behavior would also carry a risk of supernatural pollution (*kegare*), which Namihira (1977:47–52) associates with the failure by the kin of the deceased to conduct elaborate post-mortuary rituals.

How prevalent such attitudes may be I do not know. But it may be significant that although Buddhist priests take little or no interest in day laborers while they are alive—leaving volunteer activities to Christians and various left-wing groups—when men do die as *muen-botoke*, Buddhist temples will provide the equivalent of a pauper's burial. When this happens in Kotobuki, it is customary for the monks of Tokuon-ji, a nearby Buddhist temple, to cremate the corpse and perform the appropriate ceremonies. The monks also hold *kuyō* memorial services at a small Buddhist altar behind the employment exchange in Kotobuki during the sacred periods of mid-summer and new year, commemorating the souls of those who died with no one else to say sutras for them.

Some men said they viewed death with equanimity. Nishikawa, a self-confessed alcoholic, put it this way:

My old man died at the age of sixty, and I expect to do the same. The liver won't hold out forever. But I've no regrets. So long as you live a life that's rich and interesting, it doesn't matter whether you live to sixty or eighty. Besides, salarymen don't live much past sixty either. They tire themselves out and die soon after retirement. There would be no rational point whatever in trying to stop drinking, or to drink less. (Field notes: 3 February 1995)

Sakashita, who did dangerous high-level construction work, had a slightly different view. He claimed that his lifestyle was designed to accommodate the possibility of sudden death:

I'm not afraid of death. I'm aware of the possibility. If you fall, that's it. It's all over in a flash. But I'm ready for death. I can go any time. I've designed my life that way: I've no wife, no kids, and no regrets that I have no wife or kids. If I'd started a family, I'd have to take more care of my own life, I would have to think of the others. I'm better off on my own. I can die any time and it won't bother anyone. That is real freedom. I'm that sort of guy and I can't change. (Field notes: 26 March 1994)

Oppositional Identity

Thus different men find different ways of dealing with the prospect of death. It may well be that at one level present orientation is a particularly prevalent mechanism for coping with death. But it is also the cornerstone of a group identity predicated on opposition to the mainstream.

The category to which day laborers most often contrast themselves is the "*salaryman*," the stereotypical white-collar worker at a big company. He must commute vast distances from his cramped family apartment to the same boring workplace every day, bow and scrape to a dictatorial boss all day long, work many hours of overtime (often unpaid) to display loyalty to the company, flatter the boss at drinking sessions and golf outings he would rather avoid; and when he finally goes home he has an equally dictatorial wife and demanding children waiting for him.

Against this caricature, some day laborers like to picture themselves as free, autonomous, transacting individuals. Their social relationships are based on choice (friendship) rather than obligation (kinship, workplace relationships), and they are in control of their working lives. The simple freedom to decide for yourself whether or not to get out of bed and go to work is often mentioned, and some men prefer to describe themselves as "free workers" (*jiyu rōdōsha*) rather than as day laborers. This mind-set has developed in opposition to an industrial culture in which companies have tended to intrude into their employees' lives far more than in most capitalist systems. In fact, many day laborers have lived a more conventional lifestyle in the past; their departure from it is variously represented as their rejection of it or its expulsion of them, according to circumstances and the man.

Certainly day laborers have to make larger choices and decisions about their work than salarymen do: when to work, where to work, whether to work, and what sort of work to do. These issues, which rarely present themselves to the regular employee, are an ever present concern to day laborers, who view themselves, again rather like the London sex workers, as freelance entrepreneurs. The terms on which they work demand strategy—for example, some day laborers will try to work for as many different *tehaishi* as possible, playing them off against each other to maximize the wage when casual labor is in demand and presenting each day's work as a personal favor, so that when the balance of supply and demand swings against them, they can call in favors from as many *tehaishi* as possible.

This strategy of limited engagement with numerous employers has a long history. Yokoyama Gennosuke, a social critic writing in 1899, says that day laborers of the time responded to exploitation by cultivating a relationship with their *oyakata* (boss), which he describes as “extremely weak.” The majority of them worked on different jobs in different places every day, and they would not hesitate to work for a different *oyakata*, if he was offering one or two sen a day extra. They had “no sincerity or compassion towards the boss,” Yokoyama rather quaintly observes ([1899] 1985:34). He further mentions that although bad diet has broken the spirit of the poorer day laborers, they are still apt to remark that they “wouldn't do something so stupid as to get a steady job” ([1899] 1985:40)—a comment that may still be heard in the *yoseba* today.¹⁴

Despite the sometimes highly competitive labor market, many day laborers did stress egalitarian relationships among themselves. There were of course unmistakable distinctions about the mastery of skills, the degree of workplace success, the standard of accommodation, and so on, but these were relatively small compared with the elaborate pyramidal hierarchy associated with the larger type of Japanese corporation. I mostly found that day laborers would share food and drink, even with strangers, on terms that resembled “sharing” more than “exchange” (Woodburn 1998). Street conversation, often accompanied by the free sharing of alcohol described above, helped to create something like the “imagined egalitarian community of shared moods and shared character” described in this volume by Papataxiarchis (see Chapter 8).

I have said that an orientation to the present is the cornerstone of the day laborer's oppositional identity. The “salaryman,” as conceived by day laborers, must be oriented to the future because he has his children to think of. They must have a stable home, so he must have a long-term loan. To pay the long-term loan he must have a long-term job, and to keep the long-term job he must avoid behaving in ways that might upset his employers or fellow workers. In addition, Japanese corporations have a range of systems for delaying the return to labor. About a third of annual remuneration is held back in the form of summer and winter “bonuses.” Likewise, retirement payments will build up over the years and will not necessarily be paid at their full value if the employee leaves the firm before retirement.

These factors, more than any culturally given sense of loyalty, bind workers to their employers and effectively oblige them to obey the company at the cost of sacrificing personal freedom. Samuel Butler once said that it was ridiculous to speak of a man having free will if he was in the jaws of a lion; the popular view among day laborers, and among some salarymen themselves, is that a man in the jaws of the company has just as little ability to exercise free will.¹⁹

Oppositional identity in the *yoseba* was not based only on occupation. Day laborers had to deal with the fact that they were outside that other dominant institution, the family, as well as being outside mainstream employment relations. Some would present this as a positive decision on their part, as in the case of Sakashita, quoted above. More often it would be presented in passive terms. For example, I noticed that men who admitted having been married in the past nearly always portrayed the breakup of their marriages in terms of being kicked out by their wives rather than in terms of having walked out.

Another recurrent theme in my conversations with day laborers was about the *yoseba* as a place where the conventions and distinctions of mainstream society did not apply. Thus, one could make friends instantly, because all were in the same boat. The *uchi/soto* (insider/outsider) distinction, portrayed as central to Japanese social relations by virtually all observers (e.g., Doi [1973] 1981:40–44; Nakane [1970] 1984:125–127; Hendry 1989:39–42), was thought to have little significance within the *yoseba* because everyone there was an outsider anyway. Likewise people would talk straight all the time, rather than using *tatemae* (saying things for form) for outsiders and *honne* (saying one's true feelings) for insiders. Sometimes, however, overly direct speech led to outright fistfighting.

Yoseba friendships were very variable. I met men who claimed to have known each other for several decades, and chance encounters between people who greeted each other as old friends happened frequently. Sometimes one partner in a friendship would drift off, destination unknown, and the other partner would do no more than shrug his shoulders. Among the more alcoholic men it was virtually impossible to judge the age and depth of friendships. For example, people would insist they had known complete strangers (such as myself) for many years. Sometimes a friend would take on a role usually associated with kin, such as escorting a sick man to the doctor or helping in negotiations with social services. However, I never felt I was in the presence of a friendship that carried the sheer weight of obligation associated with kinship.

Autonomy and Dependence

Death on the street is no longer necessarily the final act of the present-oriented lifestyle. Most day laborers remain excluded from the state pension system because they do not keep up their contributions and there is no universal minimum pension. However, in recent years, central and local government have finally begun to extend welfare benefits to elderly day laborers. It is one of the ironies of

yoseba life that men who set great store by independence and autonomy sometimes become completely dependent on the state for their livelihood in old age.

In theory, any Japanese citizen who cannot support himself or herself is eligible for welfare (*seikatsu hogo*, sometimes translated as “livelihood protection”). In practice, social welfare is not easily granted by the Japanese authorities, and simply being unemployed is not usually admitted as sufficient grounds for eligibility. Most city governments will put people on welfare only if they can prove that they are physically incapable of working, even though this is nowhere stated in the official criteria. However, the city of Yokohama is more liberal than most in its interpretation of the criteria, and in recent years has tended to attract would-be claimants from other cities with harsher regimes. This tendency, at a time of a prolonged recession in the construction industry, where most day laboring jobs are found, has resulted in a steady increase in welfare recipients in Kotobuki: the number of recipients finally passed half the population (about 4,000 men) by the end of 1994. As Stevens puts it: “This *yoseba* has changed from the macho day laborers’ settlement to the ‘welfare town’” (Stevens 1997:244).

Attitudes to welfare vary widely. To some, going on welfare is the ultimate admission of failure: a *de facto* admission that all the talk of freedom and the rejection of conventional lifestyles was just so much drunken bragging. These men would sooner die on the street than take money from the state—and it is convenient for local administrators to exaggerate their numbers. To others, welfare is just another form of income, part of the “natural abundance” (see the Introduction to this volume) of Yokohama’s relatively liberal postindustrial environment; there is no contradiction in going on welfare, since, unlike the despised salarymen, they do not predicate their identity on work. Yet others take the pragmatic view that they will work while they still can but will apply for welfare when necessary. Whether they will be *granted* welfare is of course another matter.

By encouraging day laborers to demand welfare as a right guaranteed by the Japanese constitution and earned by long years of debilitating and under-rewarded labor, the day laborer union in Kotobuki is attempting to change the perception that claiming welfare is an un-masculine, helpless form of behavior.²⁰ They lead day laborers in negotiations with local authorities, sometimes staging protest marches and sit-ins. Hence “receiving welfare” (passive) is rewritten as “getting welfare” (active).

The fact is that changes in the Japanese economy have sharply reduced job openings for day laborers in recent years. Technical developments, such as the increasing use of container transportation at the docks and of prefabricated units on construction sites, have been accompanied in the 1990s by a severe slump in the construction industry, which is the major employer of day laborers. At the same time, the day laborer population has been aging rapidly, to the point where the average man is now in his fifties. It has become steadily harder to maintain the old day laboring lifestyle, and its more positive aspects have been whittled away. It may be that Kotobuki’s change in character from “worker’s town” to

“welfare town” is part of a broader trend that makes the day laboring lifestyle increasingly hard to sustain. That is not to say that casual labor is going to disappear. On the contrary, unemployment is rising in Japan, and casual labor is rising with it. But it has been culturally repackaged: It is done in different industries, by different people, and with different descriptions. Nowadays, casual labor is increasingly done in the service sector by younger people, many of them female, and the grimy industrial associations of “day laborer” have been replaced by the feel-good connotations of *frītā* (a contraction of “free arbiter”) or by other more neutral terms. Recruitment is handled by large, legal companies that nevertheless take just as large a cut of the casual wage as the *tehaishi* standing on the street corner. Casual labor is alive and well; solidarity and community are dying on their feet.

Notes

1. Abegglen (1973) and Vogel (1979) were influential in establishing the familial image of the Japanese company. The concept is interestingly problematized by Kondo (1990).

2. According to the Ministry of Labor (MoL), there are fewer than 50,000 day laborers in Japan, whereas the Labor Statistics Bureau of the Management and Coordination Agency (MCA) says there are about 1.2 million. The MoL only counts people carrying the official handbook issued to day laborers to enable them to use the special unemployment insurance system for day laborers; the MCA uses a much broader definition, including everybody working on contracts of less than thirty days’ duration. A majority of day laborers as defined by the MCA are women, many of them home-workers. My own figure of 100,000 *yoseba* day laborers covers the MoL definition plus those (a roughly similar number, in my semi-informed opinion) who do not carry the handbook for various reasons.

3. A few of the *tehaishi* are themselves day laborers or former day laborers. Others are representatives of particular shipping or construction companies; others are small time entrepreneurs; and yet others are *yakuza* (gangsters) or the employees of *yakuza*. Where the *yakuza* are not directly involved in labor recruitment, they usually take a daily or monthly payoff from the non-*yakuza* *tehaishi*.

4. For recently published monographs on Japanese day laborers, see Fowler 1996 on San’ya, and Stevens 1997 on volunteer activities in Kotobuki.

5. Note that the American skid row, too, was originally associated with casual labor rather than with social failure. It is a corruption of “Skid Road,” deriving “from the skidways on which lumberjacks in the Northwest transported logs.” (Bahr 1973:32) Bahr says that the original Skid Road was a line of “lodging houses, saloons and establishments . . . contiguous to the “skid road” running from the top of the ridge down to Henry Yesler’s mill” in Seattle. He does not put a date on the emergence of the name. In any case, the term “on the skids,” meaning “down on one’s luck” is a later back-formation.

6. Sometimes the same language is used to describe day laborers and prostitutes: the word *tachinbo*—“one who stands” (on the street corner)—is applied to both professions, for instance, and *nikutai rōdō* (physical labor) describes both kinds of work. In both cases the worker has nothing to sell except his/her own body. The strategy of the divided self described by Day (Chapter 7) is common among day laborers. They will characterize their

custom of working and resting on alternate days as being necessary to preserve the strength of their body as a tool for doing work; and they will see no contradiction between this and their habit of getting very drunk on their days off, which is something they do to their "selves" rather than their "bodies." One day laborer even compared his body to a car—it ran on alcohol just as a car ran on petrol (Field notes: 7 March 1994).

7. Kotobuki, the Yokohama *yoseba* where I did most of my fieldwork, is the most modern instance of this zoning policy. After Japan's defeat in World War II, large numbers of day laborers gathered at Sakuragi-cho, close to the Yokohama docks, where there was much casual work to be had unloading supplies brought in by vessels servicing the allied occupation. The workers lived in *doya* and in old ships moored near the docks, known as "floating hotels." In 1956, the city government, influenced by complaints from shopkeepers at Sakuragi-cho, made a conscious decision to shift the *yoseba* a mile or so east and inland to Kotobuki. The *doya* at Sakuragi-cho were torn down; the floating hotels sunk; and their owners were compensated and given permission to build *doya* in Kotobuki, which at the time was an empty piece of land, having just been released from requisition as a transport depot by the departing allied forces. The first *doya*, appropriately named the Kotobuki-so, opened there in October 1956; the casual labor exchange was shut down at Sakuragi-cho and reopened at Kotobuki in April 1959; and in 1961, despite local protests, the blood bank was also moved to Kotobuki (selling blood used to be an important source of emergency income for day laborers).

Thus in just a year or two, the whole scene was shifted east and inland to its present location. Within five years (1956–1961), sixty-three *doya* had been built (Saito 1994:131). They were filled immediately: The high growth economy had spawned a large population of day laborers. Here, then, is a modern example of how the state can locate and control a *yoseba* without needing to force individual people to go there.

8. Field notes: 1 February 1994.

9. Officials of Junichiro, the Kotobuki Day Laborer Union, estimated the average age at death of day laborers in Kotobuki at 56 (Field notes: 24 February 1995). Life expectancy for Japanese males was recorded as 76.36 years in 1995 (Ministry of Health and Welfare).

10. For example in 1995, the Kotobuki Labor Center advertised 26,012 person days of work on one day contracts, and 25,662 contracts were taken, for a take-up rate of 98.7 percent. It also advertised 35,564 person days of work on period contracts, of which 27,076 days were filled, for a considerably lower take-up rate of 76.1 per cent. For the ten years from 1986 to 1995, the average take-up rate was 95 percent for one day contracts and 77 percent for period contracts (Kotobuki Labor Center statistics).

Partly this difference is due to the bad reputation of some employers, who are said to keep workers in barrack-like dormitories and to feed and pay them badly. On the other hand, period contracts at dormitories save one the cost of renting a *doya* room and are generally recognized as being the only way to save money: being away from *yoseba* society, and often with one's wages withheld, prevents one from spending them.

11. In his classic prewar study of American casual laborers, Carleton H. Parker notes that most of those he knew would stop working as soon as they had enough to live on (1920:78–79). R. Williams makes exactly the same observation about British casual dock workers (1912:31–32).

12. The Kotobuki bookmakers use the same odds as those used at the courses and at legal off-course gambling centers. These odds are calculated by a computerized totalizer to

factor in a 25 percent margin to the house. This substantial margin goes to the government as a betting tax at legal establishments and into the pockets of *yakuza* at illegal ones.

Note that gambling is just as much a part of Japanese popular culture as saving is. Although the average Japanese household saves 15 percent of its disposable income—a high figure by Euro-American standards, but lower than it used to be and far behind South Korea and Taiwan—Japan as a whole spends some 5.7 percent of its GNP on gambling. This latter figure is probably the highest in the world, at least for industrialized countries. Per capita sales of betting slips are 2.3 times higher than in the U.S. and four times higher than in Britain. Japan also has *pachinko*, a multi-trillion yen gambling enterprise that dwarfs race-betting and lotteries and is not shared by any other country to any significant degree. (Sources: On savings, Bank of Japan statistics for 1993; on gambling, AERA magazine, vol. 7 no. 30, 25 July 1994:32–39.)

13. Day laborers certainly feel an affinity for romantic losers, as evidenced in the widespread support within the *yoseba* for the Hanshin Tigers—a very popular but notoriously unsuccessful baseball team, comparable to the Chicago Cubs in the United States, or perhaps to Manchester City in English football.

14. The bottle-gang debate of the 1950s and 1960s is summarized in Bahr (1973:157). Some observers stress flexibility, others formality. The most formalized account is by Rooney, who compares the bottle gang to a business corporation: “The management of the capital is handled by a leader who acts as general chairman. Each member is a stockholder and maintains rights to consumption of the communally purchased bottle of wine” (Rooney 1961:449). Giamo (1989:182–183), visiting the Bowery at the end of the 1970s, finds the same institution with the same name, twenty years and the width of America away from Rooney’s study.

15. Official government records state that Japan was in recession for thirty months from 1991 to 1994. In the *yoseba* the recession is generally thought to have started in 1990 and still to be in progress at the time of writing (1997).

16. Murray himself trumps everybody by arguing that time in skid row is cyclical, rather than linear. He gives two reasons: (1) “One’s primary goal is survival, a goal which must be re-achieved every day”; and (2) “the cyclic schedules of the institutions which affect the homeless” (Murray 1984:157). In the *yoseba*, the first point applies to some of the older, weaker inhabitants; the second point does not apply in terms of the one-day cycle, since the vast majority of residents are not in the kind of regimented shelters common in U.S. skid rows, which chuck the men out every morning and let them back in the evening. (Homeless shelters are still rare in Japan, and they tend to limit residence by specifying a maximum number of weeks rather than by limiting hours of residence in the day.)

In my own view, all sorts of conflicting conceptualizations of time coexist in the *yoseba*, as they do anywhere. The cycle of the seasons is very important to day laborers, some of whom abandon their spendthrift ways as winter approaches and attempt to save money to tide them over this most difficult time of the year, when jobs are scarce and conditions harsh. I met one who practiced a form of hibernation, taking on tough period contracts through November and early December and using the money to live in a sauna/cinema complex for a month or so over New Year (Field notes: 19 October 1993). A few others were saving money towards their retirement. They were, however, a very small minority.

17. According to the Annual Survey of Religions published by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, Christians made up only 0.7 percent of the Japanese population at the end of 1994.

However, the strength of the charitable imperative in Christianity makes them a major presence in the *yoseba*.

18. One could go back still further. In the late sixteenth century the warlord, Hideyoshi, banned day laboring because he saw it as a threat to the feudal relationship between master and man (Leupp 1992:16). The term became almost synonymous with escaped peasants, who illegally fled the rural rice fields to work for cash in the cities of Tokugawa Japan (Leupp 1992:160). After various other attempts to control and regularize casual labor, the shogunate started to build labor camps called *ninsoku yoseba* (literally, “navvy gathering places”) in the late eighteenth century, which were essentially forced labor camps for people who hadn’t actually committed any crime (Leupp 1992:165–175). The term [*i*]ninsoku yoseba[*i*] appears to be the origin of the modern word [*i*]yoseba[*i*].

19. In recent years, the terms *karōshi* (death by overwork) and *tanshin funin* (forced relocation by the company, leading to separation from one’s family) have made frequent appearances in the media, and there have been several highly publicized legal actions attacking companies for inflicting these evils on their permanent employees. These factors must be set against the early deaths, mostly from rough living, of so many day laborers.

20. The mainstream unions in Japan have no interest in day laborers, whom they tend to view as nothing more than possible threats to their members’ livelihoods. However, there is a history of left-wing activists trying to organize *yoseba* unions, and today there is a National Federation of Day Laborers (*Hiyatoi Zenkyo*, in its Japanese acronym), grouping unions from the *yoseba* in Tokyo, Osaka, Yokohama, Nagoya, Fukuoka, and Naha (Okinawa). Annual conferences have been held since 1984.

The Kotobuki union, Junichiro, seemed to operate more like a pressure group campaigning for day laborers’ rights than a union in the conventional sense. Its leaders were a mix of present and former day laborers and middle-class activists; rather than collecting dues they defined all day laborers in Kotobuki as *de facto* members. The union negotiated with employers over unpaid wages, industrial injuries, and so on; and with the local authorities over policy on public works employment, social security, homelessness, and such. It also attempted to raise political consciousness among the workers and provided a certain amount of food, shelter, and so on to those who needed it during the colder months. My impression was that day laborers respected the efforts of individual unionists on their behalf but seldom felt more than a fleeting sense of solidarity with the union itself.

The official English translation of Article 25 of the Japanese constitution states: “All people shall have the right to maintain the minimum standards of wholesome and cultured living. In all spheres of life, the State shall use its endeavors for the promotion and extension of social welfare and security, and of public health.”