

WHEN PILLARS EVAPORATE

STRUCTURING MASCULINITY ON THE JAPANESE MARGINS

By Tom Gill

Mobility: Stasis: Men

People desire to be dynamic, to travel, to be free, to be alone. People desire to settle down, to be loved, to have family and security and certainty in their lives. Men and women alike must negotiate these conflicting desires, but the unbalanced nature of gender relations has often excluded women from the issue. As Enloe (1989: 21) puts it: "in many societies being feminine has been defined as sticking close to home. Masculinity, by contrast, has been the passport for travel." Enloe's principal subject is international travel, but I would extend her observation to include more mundane forms of mobility, such as the simple journeying between home and workplace. To stay, or to go; to keep still or to move: these are issues for both genders, but the history of gender relations has perhaps made the issue of mobility/stasis more marked for men than for women.

In Japan masculine fantasies frequently stress the mobile: the sportsman, the traveler, the man of action, the magically endowed superhero. Traditional Japanese images of masculine mobility include wandering mendicant monks and pilgrims, roaming leaderless warriors, and traveling actors. In contemporary Japan, the romanticized wandering vagabond lives on in the movies in the person of Tora-san, a loveable traveling peddler who roams Japan, aging through the decades but always unmarried.¹ More extreme media images of masculine mobility include the running, jumping, flying men seen in health-drink commercials (Roberson 1999) and the supersonic, jet-propelled heroes of children's TV

dramas and animations targeted principally at boys (Gill 1998).

But alongside these images of men in motion, another set of cultural tropes, many of them very ancient, stresses the reverse theme. of immobility, expressed as solidity, endurance, and strength. The Zen monk, achieving enlightenment by sitting still and emptying his mind; farmers staying on their ancestral lands across the generations; sumo wrestlers who should not be moved.

Perhaps the most telling traditional metaphor of static Japanese manhood is that of the *daikoku-bashira*, meaning the great central pillar that supports a house. In traditional farmhouses, there is a real *daikoku-bashira* holding up the roof, and the man of the house sits in front of that wooden pillar, in the place of honor around the *irori*, the square hearth set into the floor of the main living and dining room. In the image of the *daikoku-bashira*, man merges with pillar. It is an image of reliability, of strength, of stasis. The pillar that supports the household has honor, represented in its/his dominant central position, but also bears a heavy load -- supporting the roof/supporting the family. The pillar is always there: male succession, ideally by the oldest son, is supposed to make the role of *daikoku-bashira* permanent even if the individual playing the role changes with the years.²

The modern, legalistic equivalent of the *daikoku-bashira* ideology is the *koseki* system under which the father of the house is designated as head of household in 98% of Japanese families, and continues to be legally designated as such even after his death (Sugimoto 1997: 136-138). This system, along with the whole ideology of the male-centered family, is frequently and correctly denounced as deeply sexist and patriarchal (*ibid*). Note, however, that as well as disempowering women, this ideology also puts a heavy stress on men, who carry the weight of traditional expectation and legal obligation to support both their parental and marital families.

Two images of modern manhood

Modern fantasies of masculine mobility have a powerful appeal to ‘salarymen’ – men whose lifestyles are generally static and intellectual, who inhabit a world alienated from physicality, where the permanent is valued over the temporary, and brainwork over bodywork. Lifetime employment with a single employer and a steady home life with a wife and two kids are still the socially sanctioned ideals for Japanese men, even if the decade-long Heisei recession has made them increasingly difficult to attain. When men *do* move, it may well be involuntarily, in the form of forced *tanshin funin* transfers to distant branches of their company, which may separate them from their families.³ For most men in Japan today, masculine mobility is an escapist fantasy; immobility, or involuntary mobility, is a dull, immovable reality.

The reader may object that this characterization of mainstream masculinity is (1) unrepresentative and (2) overly laden with negative value judgments. On the first issue, people are well aware these days that white-collar workers at large companies – the popular image of the salaryman – only account for a small minority of the working population, albeit one that has come to dominate the popular discourse on Japan “as representations of a hegemonic masculinity in Japan” (Roberson 1998:55). The salaryman has undoubtedly dominated images of Japan out of all proportion to his role in real-life society, but I think it is fair to say that the imposed immobility and involuntary mobility are facts of life for most men in regular employment, whatever the color of their collar.

As for the second issue, the meanings attached to the salaryman figure in Japanese culture are far from being unequivocally positive, as Matsunaga (2000) points out. There is also a large element of self-doubt, and a frustration and nostalgia for lost autonomy, in the

salaryman discourse. Younger people often despise salarymen as lacking in independence and creativity. Salarymen are frequently derided in popular culture, and the discourse has darkened in recent years with the protracted recession in the Japanese economy and the dramatic rise in the male suicide rate.⁴ Salarymen themselves may view their lives with a wry, self-deprecatory humor that acknowledges the limitations of personal agency in a corporate setting (Nakamaki 2000; see also Roberson 1999). More drastic are views such as that from the diary of salaryman Yagi Toshitsugu, who asks: “And can’t it be said that today’s armies of corporate workers are in fact slaves in almost every sense of the word? They are bought for money. Their worth is measured in working hours. They are powerless to defy their superiors” (quoted in Smith 1997:121).

It may well be argued, as Pyke (1996) does, that middle-class men are not under the same pressure as working-class men to assert their masculinity, and that when salarymen portray themselves as slaves of the company, they can afford to do so because their masculinity is not, in fact, under serious threat. However, perspectives that discount the complaints of salarymen as the ironic disclaimers of an unthreatened elite may risk naively equating an affluent middle-class lifestyle with contentment.

The men I shall discuss in this chapter constitute only a small minority of the Japanese male population, but they are of interest as instances of what happens when a man declines or breaks that contract of permanence and stasis that dominates the lives of so many of their brothers. Day laborers (*hiyatoi rôdôsha*) have a long, complex socio-economic history dating back at least to the 16th century, and at times have made up a substantial portion of the Japanese workforce (Leupp 1992:4 etc.). Today, casual labor has become greatly diversified in Japan, and men living the traditional day laboring lifestyle form a small and dwindling minority. These men look for casual work at early-morning street labor markets called *yoseba*,

and tend to live in cheap lodging houses called *doya*, often concentrated in areas called *doya-gai*. In three famous cases (Kamagasaki, in Osaka; San'ya, in Tokyo; and Kotobuki, in Yokohama), the recruitment function of the yoseba coincides with the residential function of the *doya-gai*.⁵ There is a massive Japanese-language literature on these places, and a fast-growing English-language literature too (e.g. Ventura 1992, Fowler 1996, Stevens 1997, Marr 1997, Gill 1999 and 2001). Along with the street labor market, these districts also have public casual employment exchanges, reflecting the authorities' attempts over the years to regularize casual labor. Even so, the great majority of jobs are still negotiated on the street. Other major cities have yoseba without *doya-gai*, meaning that the men must find a room somewhere else and come to the yoseba by 5 or 6 in the morning to try and get work.

Day laborers are of interest in the discourse on masculinities in Japan because, as stereotypes and to some extent in reality too, they are antithetical to salarymen.

Figure 1: Two models of manhood.

"Salaryman"	"Day laborer"
Lifetime employment	Employment by the day
Attached to large corporation	Unaffiliated
Substantial job security	No job security
Usually married by middle-age	Usually single, separated or divorced
Intellectual labor	Manual labor
Generally seen as middle-class	Working class or underclass

I have just discussed the lament for lost freedom that is part of the salaryman discourse. Day laborers, in contrast, sometimes celebrate their freedom and autonomy:

SAKASHITA⁶ did dangerous high-level construction work. 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'd 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."

Narratives like this may fairly be read as a resistance strategy in response to marginalization (Day, Papataxiarchis and Stewart 1999), or as an attempt to rationalize day laborers' essentially weak, low-status position in society. But when we attempt to move from the stereotype to the wide variety of human beings actually living in and around the yoseba, we find that libertarian themes form only one part of a complex day laborer discourse that in turn stands in complex relationship to the actual lives of day laborers.

Double Detachment

Most day laborers today are (a) aged in the 45 to 65 range; (b) from rural rather than urban

backgrounds; and (c) of working-class origins, with a relatively low level of formal education.⁷ However, the really definitive characteristic of day laborers is detachment: from the family and from the workplace.

First, detachment from the family. Only six of 76 day laborers in my study combined day laboring with married life. The few that do this tend to have better qualifications than most, and even then it is no easy matter for them:

AOYAGI had just turned 60, but was still a tough and competent worker, with a sheaf of qualifications proving his ability to operate forklifts, large trucks etc. These, and an encyclopedic knowledge of the various kinds of benefit that could be extracted from the social services, made him one of the few day laborers capable of supporting a family. He had a house, a wife and two grown-up children. He had a bleak outlook on life, which he described as an endless struggle to sustain the household economy, and was especially bitter about the heavy costs he would have to bear when his daughter got married.

The overwhelming majority of day laborers are single men, perhaps roughly equally divided between life-long bachelors and those who are separated or divorced from their wives. This has not always been so: pre-war accounts of doya-gai life show that there were many day laborers who managed to sustain family life, often with whole families living in tiny doya rooms. As late as 1964, a large survey of several doya-gai found as many as 23% of day laborers married (Caldarola 1968). Thus day laborers' detachment from family is not a culturally ordained constant, but the product of social and economic change. Marriage to a day laborer and life in a doya room is no longer an acceptable prospect to Japanese women. Doya-gai are increasingly becoming slum districts populated by single men, and comparisons with American skid rows are numerous (Tsuchida 1966; Caldarola 1968; Aoki 1989; Giamo

1994; Yoshida 1995; Marr 1997).

It is difficult to generalize about day laborers and marriage. There were cases where a man could not find a marriage partner because of the stigma or low economic status associated with being a day laborer, or had rejected marriage as part of his personal ethos. However, a common pattern is for men to arrive in the yoseba with one or more marriages or significant relationships behind them. Japan's divorce rate has doubled in the last three decades, but remains relatively low compared to other industrialized countries.⁸ This may reflect the relatively strong disapproval with which divorce is viewed in Japan. To some men, the yoseba was a masculine refuge following the failure of these relationships:

SHIGERU was born in Iwate. He always wanted to become a bar tender in a smart hotel. He got married and had a son, but his bar-tending career got bogged down – he reckoned because he couldn't master the foreign languages needed in international hotels. His wife got fed up, mainly because of years of low income, and left him. He found he could make better money as a tekkin-kô -- building the frameworks of steel rods used to reinforce concrete -- and became a semi-skilled day laborer. He had not seen his wife or son for some ten years. He said he never sent them money: he spent what he earned, and looked for work again once he was cleaned out. He was based in San'ya but came to Kotobuki occasionally, usually when he had made some money to use on the services of the Yokohama prostitutes, who charged less than their Tokyo sisters.

Many day laborers are also detached from their parental family. Some feel ashamed to go home, having acquired a criminal record or failed in business. A marriage that ends in divorce or separation can lead to alienation from parents as well, so that links are severed with marital and parental families at the same time. Some younger men left home after

getting into fights with their parents over their social behavior, career plans, etc. ‘Kuriyama,’ below, is an example. A more frequent motif of day laborer narratives, however, was that of gradual alienation. Many day laborers have rural origins, and started their working careers as migrant laborers (*dekasegi rôdôsha*), supporting their impoverished parental family by sending money home (*shiokuri*). The cash remittances may gradually dry up, perhaps as a result of over-indulgence in drinking and gambling, leading to a slowly mounting embarrassment and a severing by degrees of relations with home.

There was a rather high proportion of eldest sons among my day laborer informants: some 40%, slightly higher than a random distribution would predict (Gill 2001: 115-122 and 215). Given that these were men with largely rural backgrounds, born before, during or just after the war, this was a surprising result. In the households where they grew up, there would have been a strong expectation that they would inherit and maintain the household and its occupation under the principle of primogeniture⁹ – to be the *daikoku-bashira*. By living away from their families and away from mainstream society in general, these first-born sons were flouting convention even more than the 60% who were junior sons.

In some cases it is doubtless true that the man would not be welcome home; but in many other cases the family feel the loss of the son keenly. The *chôba-san* -- concierges of doya -- are frequently visited by mothers, fathers and siblings of missing men, carrying old photographs and asking if they ring a bell. In any case, the fact remains that in the doya-gai, as in skid row, the permanent and powerful ties of kinship give way to ties of friendship, usually less permanent and less powerful, and chosen by the individual on the basis of personal preference. Sometimes, however, men would attempt to model their friendships so as to resemble the kinship ties they had left behind:

KURIYAMA was still unmarried at the age of 40. He had been thrown out of his parental home after his irascible father, a career civil servant, lost patience with his heavy drinking. He had also lost his job as a short-order cook after getting into a fight. In the yoseba he recreated the seniority-based hierarchy of mainstream family and working life by taking up with two older men, whom he called his 'father-figure' (*oyabun*) and 'grandfather-figure' (*ô-oyabun*). These two men helped him to build his own shack, in a shrubbery next to the Nakamura River, which runs past Kotobuki. He tended to loneliness and adopted a stray cat. He was an only child, and once told me he had lost all interest in women after an intense love affair in his youth had ended badly.

Now for workplace detachment. Day laborers are the radical antithesis of the stereotypical salaryman. Lifetime employment? As the term suggests, these men often work on contracts that last just one day. Single-day contracts in fact account for roughly half of the work done by day laborers, the rest being done on contracts typically lasting between one week and one month. Work is negotiated formally at a public casual labor exchange or informally with a yoseba street-corner recruiter known as a *tehaishi*. The informal street market still dominates recruitment today, though overall job availability has fallen to disastrously low levels. There used to be a range of employing industries across the manufacturing, transportation and warehousing sectors. Now the construction industry is the only significant employer, although longshoring work at the Yokohama docks continues to provide a small but useful secondary category of employment in Kotobuki.

Workplace relationships are different when you work by the day or week rather than for decades. The powerful bonds of obligation between employer and worker, and between senior and junior workers, go out of the window. Day laborers can quit any time and frequently do. By the same token, they are the first to lose employment when recession

reduces the demand for manpower -- as they know from the bitter experiences of the Heisei recession. Just as some day laborers had come to the masculine community of the yoseba after previously trying married life, most of them appeared to have experienced more regular work arrangements before becoming day laborers. Often they would describe personal characteristics that made it difficult for them to fit in to the ordered hierarchy of working life at a company:

OKADA was an elderly but well-built man who worked as a tobi-shoku -- a construction worker specializing in high-level work. He was a self-styled individualist, and said that he had quit a steady job at Mitsubishi Electric because he couldn't stop getting into fights with the management -- a frequent item in day laborer narratives. In his cups, he would claim to be a descendent of Hannibal and Sitting Bull.

But if narratives of messy divorces were paralleled by tales of violent clashes with management, more positive narratives of life as a single man also had their parallel in accounts of day laboring as a positive, strategic choice. Day laborers can make slightly better money than men doing similar work as regular employees, provided they can get regular work and do without job security and non-wage benefits. A substantial number of building workers and carpenters quit steady employment to work as casuals in Kobe after the 1995 earthquake there, taking advantage of the higher rates of pay caused by the special post-disaster circumstances.¹⁰ Some day laborers stress the merit of flexible working arrangements:

KÔHEI was in his fifties, a diminutive but tough and resourceful man and a skilled

worker -- he was a ship's carpenter. He said he'd quit a previous job working at a Nissan factory many years before when he realized that he could make better money as a day laborer in Kotobuki. He was well connected with the street-corner labor recruiters, and enjoyed the challenge of selling his labor to the highest bidder every morning. He cultivated many recruiters, to maximize his chances of getting work each day. He believed in developing bonds of reciprocity: he would help out recruiters when they were short-handed, in hopes that they would favor him when demand for casual labor declined.

Physicality, immediacy, mobility

Detached from the family and the workplace – the two dominant institutions in the lives of many Japanese men – day laborers construct their identities in other ways. Three categories seem especially important: physicality, immediacy and mobility.

Looking first at physicality, day laborers like to stress that unlike the despised pen-pushing salaryman, to whom they like to conceptually oppose themselves, they work with their hands and bodies (cf. Connell 1987, 1995). As construction workers they make things, they leave their mark on the landscape. “We built this city,” they will tell you. That is a gross exaggeration, but not without a grain of truth. They sometimes express macho proletarian physicality visually, by wearing clothes clearly designed for physical labor – blue or gray boiler suits, and occasionally the more traditional baggy trousers (*shichibu-zubon*) and split-toe boots (*tabi*) – and by carrying leather bags of tools. Macho identity is linguistically expressed in especially heavy use of marked masculine language such as the first-person pronoun *ore* and the sentence final particles *zo* and *ze* (Sturtz 1999). ‘Talking straight’ is valorized; some men told me that within the *doya-gai* there was no need for the complex shades of politeness used by many Japanese: everyone was in the same boat. To

borrow Dorinne Kondo's term (Kondo 1990), there was no need to 'craft selves' – day laborers liked to present themselves as uncrafted nuggets of selfhood.

These postures may be read as a form of resistance to the mainstream, similar to that that described by Pyke (1996) for working-class American men: "(M)en on the shop floor reconstruct their position as embodying true masculinity, an alternative to the hegemonic form associated with managers... whom they ridicule as conforming 'yes-men' and 'wimps' engaged in effeminate paper-pushing kinds of labor" (Pyke 1996: 531; see also Collinson 1992).

An extension of straight talking was fighting, a common enough sight in the doya-gai. Sometimes physicality took the form of bullying – the raw expression of power over one's fellow man:

RON-CHAN looked to be in his thirties. He said he was the youngest of five siblings, all brothers. The rest had gone to university and got good jobs, but he had joined a gang of yakuza. He quit his gang after a few years but still had a magnificent dragon tattoo. He used to boast that it was easy to make money day laboring, and that he would soon save up enough money to set up his own little restaurant and leave the yoseba. In fact he very seldom worked, often slept rough, and mostly acquired money and food by bullying it out of older, weaker men. He had an aggressive manner and was given to sudden violent outbursts. Several times I saw him beat and kick weaker men to the point where I feared for their lives.

A second theme is immediacy, an orientation to the present moment (Gill 1999a). Postponement of reward – monthly salaries paid in arrears, and pay withheld for later transfer as bonuses and retirement payments – is an integral part of salaryman life, binding worker to

employer. For day laborers, immediate payment implies both freedom and insecurity. A day's work is done; a day's pay is received. Very often it is spent that day as well. Shigeru, for instance, told me that he didn't want a steady job because he couldn't afford to wait until the end of the month for his paycheck.

A third key theme is mobility. With no household or workplace to anchor their lives, day laborers are often on the move. They may move in search of work, or simply because they desire a change. Some travel cyclically from yoseba to yoseba; others spend periods working on rural construction sites; a few even travel internationally.¹¹ In any case the decision to move is made autonomously, not in response to an order from above as in the case of the *tanshin funin* salaryman. This positive view of mobility also has a long history -- consider Andrew Gordon's account of deliberate job switching by Japanese shipbuilding workers around the turn of the century (1985: esp. 33-36), or Okamoto (1993) for a similar case in the Meiji era textile industry.

KIRIMOTO was a perpetually cheerful man with a slight speech impediment who hailed from Nago, Okinawa. He was 42 when I met him in May 1994, and had just arrived in Kotobuki from Sasashima, the Nagoya yoseba. He was politically aware, supporting the day laborer unions and believing in the importance of comradeship. He had spent roughly three years based in Sasashima, two in San'ya and one in Kotobuki, but frequently traveled between the three. He would also return to Okinawa every couple of years to see his family and visit the family graves. I once asked a mutual acquaintance why Kirimoto was always on the move. "He just has too many friends to visit," was the answer.

Activism and Passivism

I hope I have sketched the outline of an alternative narrative of Japanese masculinity, one very different to that focused on the *daikoku-bashira*, on which day laborers can call when constructing their own identity. These themes of physicality, immediacy and mobility are grounded in proletarian tradition, and they come together in two key words for day laborers: *genba* and *genkin*. Literally these words mean ‘actual/present place’ and ‘actual/present money.’ They describe the construction worksite and the cash payment received by the worker. The idea is that real work is done, and real pay received -- as opposed to the unreal, pen-pushing work that they associate with salaried men, rewarded by future bank transfers. The terms imply transience too: the workplace is temporary, lasting only until the building is finished, or the worker moves on, and the cash will soon be spent.

Now these three themes, of physicality, immediacy and mobility, carry in them the seeds of their own destruction. Physical power and mobility wane with age, and the aging process is faster when hard manual labor is combined with a low standard of living, and sometimes with heavy drinking, heavy smoking and periods of living rough. As for immediacy, a culture based on living for the day will perish when tomorrow comes... and sooner or later, come it does. A doya-gai proverb puts it this way: *Dokata korosu nya hamono wa iranu. Mikka no ame mo fureba ii.* (‘You don’t need a knife to kill a day laborer. Three days of rain is all it takes.’) The idea, of course, is that you can’t get work at a dock or building site on a rainy day; and that a stereotyped day laborer lacks the resources to last more than three days without income. Where salaried men can expect their income to gradually rise with age, day laboring careers tend to follow the opposite pattern: earning-power declines with age. Meanwhile the drinking and gambling pleasures of youth gradually become inescapable addictions, and the man eventually becomes unable to pay the rent on his doya room and takes to the street. The solitary lifestyle loses its intoxicating elements of

freedom and autonomy and instead points the way to a lonely old age and unmourned death. Average age at death for day laborers is informally estimated at not much more than 60, some 15 years below the national male average. As employability falls, strategies based on playing off multiple labor recruiters in search of better terms may give way to clientalistic dependency on a single boss.

MASAYOSHI was 58 and had been in Kotobuki several decades. He started in construction, then switched over to dock work because it was better paid. He ran out of work there and moved back to construction, but now can't even find work there. He used to play the day laboring game: working for various companies, through various tehaishi, going where the terms were best. In recent years he has found it more effective to stick with a single boss (oyakata). Nowadays the oyakata is unable to provide him with much work, but he does his best to take care of Masayoshi: for example, he will put employment stamps in his handbook and rubber-stamp them, even when no actual employment has occurred – enabling Masayoshi to claim the day laborer dole.

What happens to day laborer identity as decline sets in? For some men, the discourses of physicality, immediacy and mobility give way to a pervasive fatalism. Rather than accounting for their lives in terms of willed personal decisions, they present themselves as passive victims of inescapable tides that sweep them to their fate. These tides may be characterized in economic terms (bursting of the bubble economy, decline of the construction industry etc.), in sociobiological terms (survival of the fittest, inevitable decline with old age etc.), and not infrequently in metaphysical terms (some people are fated to hard lives and early deaths). For some, persistent long-term alcohol abuse appears to take on the character of slow suicide. Radical activists, alarmed at the quietism of many day laborers, struggle to

goad them into action with slogans such as *yararetara yarikaese* (if they get you, get 'em back) and *damatte notarejину-na* (do not be silent and die in the gutter).¹²

The fact is that even today many day laborers *do* die in the gutter. Until quite recently, there was little alternative. With no pension rights, no money saved, and no family support networks to fall back on, social welfare (*seikatsu hogo*, literally 'livelihood protection') is the only way to escape that fate for many day laborers -- and this has not been easy to acquire. Many city authorities have refused to authorize welfare payments unless the applicant can prove his inability to work, through old age (at least 65) or physical incapacity (attested to by a doctor's letter). These conditions are not stipulated by law -- they are instances of ad hoc, ground-level regulation by local government officials who, motivated by the ideology of the *daikoku-bashira*, have often seen unemployment as shameful, rather than unfortunate.¹³

However, with sharply rising unemployment and vigorous campaigning by day laborer unions, some city authorities have gradually eased their traditionally hard line. Yokohama has moved faster and further than most, so that 80% of doya rooms in Kotobuki are now occupied by welfare recipients -- a figure that has doubled in the last six years. Meanwhile it has become increasingly difficult for the traditional wandering day laborer to get a room in Kotobuki. In contrast, San'ya and Kamagasaki have more empty rooms and also far more homeless men around them.

So the ageing and weakening day laborer today is faced with a genuine but difficult choice. He can stubbornly maintain a self-image of tough, libertarian self-reliance to the bitter end, or he can find some way of justifying the decision to apply for welfare. Some choose the former, or attempt the latter but are turned away. Their homemade shacks can be seen on riverbanks, under railway bridges and in parks all over Japan. Some shacks are quite stoutly constructed: exemplars of the construction worker's craft *in extremis*. Again,

masculinity is an important part of the cocktail of characteristics that contribute to homelessness: well over 90% of all homeless people in Japan are male, reflecting in part the sexist attitude of welfare officials, to whom a homeless woman is a more disturbing prospect than a homeless man. Women are not expected to support themselves and so are more likely to be granted state support.

Day laborers who do apply for welfare justify the decision in a variety of ways. Some men see no contradiction in applying for welfare: unlike the salaryman, who predicates so much of his identity on his company, the man who works by the day is threatened only materially, not psychologically, by the loss of his job. Morgan correctly draws attention to the risk of making assumptions about the effects of unemployment on male psychology, particularly assumptions about the “centrality of the male breadwinner role” (1992: 100). For other day laborers, welfare payments are just part of the natural abundance of the post-modern city, no different from the pay for a day’s work: it is a survival game and one must take what one can get. More politically inclined men see success in obtaining welfare payments as a kind of revenge against the state, which has done them no favors in the past. Yet other men abstain from both employment and welfare:

LAZYBONES would not tell me his name. I met him in the street one winter morning in Nagoya. He said he had not been in the mood for working “for 25 years.” He said he slept rough and lived off food past its sell-by date thrown out by supermarkets. He had enough futons to stay warm in winter, which was his favorite season because there were fewer people making a noise in the street. He claimed to be living entirely outside the cash economy. He appeared to be in good health and good spirits. He said it was easy to live without cash in Japan, so long as one avoided alcohol. “Once you start drinking, that’s it -- you’re dead in a year or two. “

Activists and day laborer unionists also show a variety of approaches to this issue. The Kotobuki Day Laborer Union (Junichirô) has campaigned long and hard for improved access to welfare for day laborers, whereas their counterparts elsewhere have tended to view welfare as demeaning to the workers' pride and accordingly have campaigned for jobs, not welfare. Junichirô has sought to resolve the psychological dichotomy of the self-reliant homeless man versus the weak and helpless welfare claimant by recasting the passive acceptance of government assistance as an active pursuit of one's legal rights. Union negotiations with the local authorities in Yokohama and Kawasaki, for example, were conducted with calculated, table-thumping aggression. These tactics have helped win a series of important welfare concessions, besides encouraging solidarity among the men and showing them that the struggle with the authorities is not necessarily a Kafkaesque battle against impossible odds.

Even so, getting welfare does inevitably affect one's personal identity. Solitary day laborers have already abandoned or rejected the image of the *daikoku-bashira* as a man supporting a household; once they apply for welfare, they effectively admit that they cannot even support themselves. Their lifestyles have to change as well. For example, the bid for financial security necessarily entails sacrificing a large degree of mobility. One must maintain a permanent address in order to continue claiming. Again, welfare claimants, more than day laborers, must mind their behavior. A brush with the law can lead to suspension of payments, not just a night in the cells. Few day laborers would admit to being on welfare, but I gradually became aware of cases where men were lying about the matter, apparently out of shame. Thus themes of strength and weakness, independence and dependence, mobility and immobility, twine themselves around the day laborer's career and changing identity.

Protean Passivity at the Margins

These ambiguities are expressed in some of the language associated with day laboring. They often describe themselves as having “drifted” (*nagareru*) into the *doya-gai*, a term that elegantly combines the concepts of mobility and passivity. The imagery surrounding these drifting day laborers is often liquid and piscine. They are called ‘angler-fish’ (*ankô*) as they wait on the seabed of society for a job to come along. They may be caught in abusive labor camps called ‘octopus traps’ (*tako-beya*). When a man is mugged while sleeping in the street they call the incident a ‘tuna’ (*maguro*), likening the victim to a tuna helpless on a sushi chef’s chopping board. Day laborers who fail to get a job say they have ‘overflowed’ from the market (*abureru*); if depressed they may ‘drown themselves’ (*oboreru*) in vice; and when troubles appear insurmountable, they may disappear overnight, or as they put it, ‘evaporate’ (*jôhatsu suru*).

The image of the evaporating day laborer is about as far as one can get from the solidity and permanence of the *daikoku-bashira*. I believe it is this polarization of lifestyles and their associated imagery that accounts for the mixture of romantic fascination and visceral hatred with which mainstream Japanese society views day laborers. The former is expressed in popular songs, novels and conversation,¹⁴ the latter in violent attacks on homeless day laborers, which have been well documented for decades. When a day laborer is kicked to death by schoolboys, or thrown into the river by a drunken salaryman, the transformation from macho construction worker to helpless victim is complete.

Two other key *doya-gai* similes portrayed the *doya-gai* as an *ubasute-yama* ‘mountain of abandonment’ or as a *kakemi-dera* ‘temple of sanctuary’. Both connote detachment from mainstream society, the former in terms of expulsion, the latter in terms of escape. But it is interesting that both terms originally applied to institutions for women: in Japanese folklore,

old women unable to work any more would be abandoned at the *ubasute-yama*, while in Tokugawa times, *kakekomi-dera* were nunneries to which a woman seeking a divorce could escape from her husband.

Thus, at some level, day laborers are perhaps associated with women, as people who are abandoned by, or who must or can escape from mainstream masculinity. There may be evidence here to support Pyke's argument that class and gender hegemonies tend to "enhance, legitimate and mystify the interpersonal power of privileged men relative to lower-status men and women in general" (1996:527). It is very striking that the main yoseba district is adjacent to the city's most famous prostitution district in both Osaka (Kamagasaki adjoins Tobita) and Tokyo (San'ya adjoins Yoshiwara), and that districts with populations of *burakumin* and ethnic Koreans also rub shoulders or overlap with yoseba districts (Gill 2001: 172-175). Parallels between day laborers and prostitutes were acknowledged by several informants: the term *tachinbô* (literally "one who stands") may be used of both day laborers and prostitutes since both stand in the street hoping to sell their labor. Day laborers use the term *nikutai rôdô* (physical labor, more literally "bodily labor") about their own work, but occasionally also ironically about that of prostitutes.

A Masculine Community

So far I have stressed the solitary, freelancing aspects of day-laboring life. However, there is also a kind of alternative masculine community in the *doya-gai*. While there are incidents of drunken brawling and occasional violent bullying, there is also genuine camaraderie. People can go and visit friends in their rooms to see if they have time for a conversation or a drink, whereas salarymen often live in different prefectures from their workmates. There are also general meeting spaces such as the bonfire in front of the Kotobuki Labor Center – a kind of

symbolic hearth that reminded me of the *irori* in front of the *daikoku-bashira* in the traditional Japanese farmhouse. It is this aspect of community, along with the strong identity with work and the day laborer lifestyle, that most distinguishes my informants from the young unemployed Australian manual workers described by Connell (1995: 93-119), who come across as more solitary, rootless and apathetic than Japanese day laborers, seeking the human connection in sex or motorbike gangs, if anywhere, rather than with workmates.

In the last 25 years there has been a conscious effort by activists and politically aware workers to enhance this community aspect of the *doya-gai*. Summer festivals and winter survival campaigns (*Ettô* – see Stevens 1997; Gill 2001: 134-140) replicate the traditional activities of the mainstream midsummer and new year festivals of *Bon* and *Shôgatsu*, from which so many day laborers are excluded. But Kotobuki is not just presented as a substitute home village at festival time: a free all-day rock concert and ethnic events showcasing the district's Korean and Filipino minorities highlight the more modern, international aspects of what really is an alternative, and not just a substitute, community.

Conclusion

Looked at a little more closely, the images of masculine mobility mentioned at the start of this chapter often turn out to gloss over the difficulties of living a free lifestyle as a Japanese man. The structure of a typical Tora-san movie, for example, entails our hero returning home to his parental family's household in the colorful Shitamachi district of Tokyo, getting involved in an adventure which takes him to some other part of Japan (virtually every prefecture has been featured), and falling in love with a much younger woman who likes him but ends up falling for a younger man, whereupon Tora-san returns home again. To me, one reason for this movie series' enduring popularity lies in the way it gives the audience the best

of both worlds: Tora-san can wander freely, but he can always come home to a cozy family situation. There is a poignancy in his inability to marry and settle down, but the parental family is always there for him.¹⁵

For non-fictional Japanese men, that balance is much harder to strike. Day laborers enjoy a degree of freedom of action that men in steady employment will admit to envying, but for most it comes at a high price. For many there is no welcoming parental family to go home to, and while some are lifelong bachelors like Tora-san, many others have abandoned marriage and family life. My enduring impression from a decade of studying day laborers is of the starkness of the choice confronting Japanese men. To truly fulfill the rôle of *daikoku-bashira* entails a heavy sacrifice of freedom. Despite gradual shifts in social and legal norms, custom and state institutions still tend to valorize the nuclear family centered on the male breadwinner; while in the workplace, the expectation of loyalty to the employing firm has arguably been strengthened by the decline of the union movement. Add to these socio-cultural factors the economic happenstance of inflated prices for housing and education and of increasing unemployment rates since the bubble economy burst at the start of the 1990s, and the web of family/work connections around the mainstream man start to appear as heavy shackles indeed. Men who reject that rôle, or who fail in it, may suffer social opprobrium and/or personal feelings of guilt.

Japanese men, it is true, continue to dominate Japanese society, industry and politics; but they are also more prone than women to alcoholism, homelessness, despair and suicide. To quote the title of the Tora-san movie series, “It’s hard to be a man” (*otoko wa tsurai-yo*). The predicament of mainstream men perhaps helps to explain why the yoseba, despite their own high rates of alcoholism, crime and early death, may be read as therapeutic rather than pathological: as niches in Japanese society where some men at least, can find a degree of

freedom without anomie. To the extent that researchers of Japanese society are themselves influenced by the salaryman paradigm, there is a danger of automatically pathologizing elements of the day laborer lifestyle. Some paradigms may see them as unemployed because they have no formal employer, and as homeless because they live in accommodation normally thought of as temporary – see Somerville (1992) on the debate on ‘rooflessness’ versus ‘rootlessness.’ Without minimizing the genuinely serious problems afflicting many day laborers, I think there is a risk of defining elements of their lifestyle as pathological when they may only be differing from middle-class norms.

It is an article of faith among yoseba activists that most yoseba men with dependencies on alcohol or gambling had developed those dependencies before they arrived: that the yoseba, far from being a socio-pathological environment, serves in part as a fracture clinic for the dysfunctions of mainstream masculinity. As for yoseba men themselves, they have many differing views of the place. Most, I think, would probably agree that life would be even worse if the place did not exist and men like themselves, outside regular employment and family life, had to improvise their lives and their identities without the company of fellow men struggling with similar challenges.

Notes

¹ Tora-san is the nickname affectionately bestowed upon Kuruma Torajiro, hero of a series of 48 films released by Shochiku from 1969 to 1995. I discuss him briefly near the end of this paper (see also Buruma 1984: 209-218; Shintani 1996).

² See Fukuzawa (2000:40-41) for a moving description of a real *daikoku-bashira* by a homeless man who had himself abandoned the *daikoku-bashira* role. He recalls how his mother and grandmother would polish it assiduously every evening until it gleamed. Matsunaga (2000: 150-154) also has interesting material on the tensions inherent in the *daikoku-bashira* role and associated salaryman lifestyle.

³ The number of men practicing *tanshin funin* passed 250,000 in 1992 (Shiina 1994; see also Wiltshire 1996). Hamada observes that “it seems that the Japanese ‘cultural’ norm of stressing children’s education, female (maternal) nurturance, and filial piety, all support the male’s departure from the household” (1997:6).

⁴ In 1998 the suicide rate for Japan shot up by 34.7%, to 32.863 (National Police Agency 1999). At 26.0 per 100,000 people, the rate was second in the world behind Finland. Men accounted for 70% of the total, with those in their 40s and 50s registering especially high rates. In March 1998 came the first court ruling that a company had driven an employee to suicide by overworking him. Death by overwork (*karôshi*) ranks alongside *tanshin funin* as a recognized salaryman problem. Of course not all men who kill themselves are salarymen, but it is interesting that the domination of Japanese male stereotypes by salarymen extends to this grim area of society too.

⁵ Regularly or frequently working day laborers probably number no more than a few thousand in San’ya and Kamagasaki, and a couple of thousand in Kotobuki. In Japan as a whole some 40,000 men carry the white handbook needed to claim the Ministry of Labor’s unemployment payments for day laborers. Probably about the same number again work as day laborers without benefit of the handbook, while broader definitions of casual or insecure labor will generate much bigger head counts.

⁶ Some names of the men discussed here have been changed in the interests of privacy. Ages are as of the mid-1990s. Some of these men are introduced in greater detail in my book (Gill 2001).

⁷ In 1998 the average age of the 2,770 day laborers registered at the Kotobuki Labor Center was 51.4, with 33% aged 40-49 and 52% aged 50-59. A 1992 survey by the Kotobuki Day Laborer Union (Junichirô) found that the major urban prefectures centered on Tokyo, Yokohama, Osaka, Nagoya and Fukuoka accounted for just 29% of the men surveyed (sample size was unfortunately not available), although Kotobuki is located in the center of Yokohama. Out of 56 men who told me their occupation prior to coming to Kotobuki, 45 mentioned working-class jobs and only 11 middle-class jobs – the latter including vague terms such as ‘engineer’ and ‘salaryman.’ I lack statistical data on educational background, but most day laborers I knew had got as far as junior or senior high school.

⁸ Japan's divorce rate was 0.93 per 1,000 people in 1970, and had risen to 1.94 by 1998 (Ministry of Health and Welfare 1999). Figures from the late 1990s for other countries include: 4.3 for the United States, 2.9 for Britain and Australia, and 1.9 for France.

⁹ See Dore 1978, esp. 133-142, for a highly readable discussion of the traditional household system and the role of first-born sons within it.

¹⁰ Ministry of Labor interview, March 1995. The Kobe earthquake caused a sudden 65% increase in single-day contracts at the formal casual labor market in Kamagasaki, the nearest yoseba to Kobe (*Asahi Shinbun*, 3 February 1995, evening ed., p.3).

¹¹ I met several day laborers in Kamagasaki who said that they were taking advantage of the strong yen to divide their lives between Japan and other Asian countries with lower costs of living. One man said he spent half a year in the Philippines, where he had a house and a long-term girlfriend whom he was thinking of marrying. A man I met in Kotobuki was just back from several years working as a sushi chef and casual laborer in the United States.

¹² Both these venerable slogans have become book-titles: *Kama-kyôtô* and *San'ya Gentô*'in 1974; Funamoto 1985.

¹³ On 20 January 2001, the *Asahi Shinbun* reported (evening edition, p.14), that the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare was concerned about the tendency of regional welfare offices to refuse welfare payments to homeless peoples for the ad hoc reasons mentioned here, and was drafting a formal directive to this effect.

¹⁴ Popular songs about day laborers and their haunts include Mitsune Eiji's sentimental ballad of the 1950s, *Kamagasaki Ninjô* (Kamagasaki Kindness) and Okabayashi Nobuyasu's celebrated '80s pop ballad *San'ya Burûsu* (San'ya Blues). The film *Dokkoi Ikite-iru* (Living Tough), directed by Imai Tadashi and released by Toei in 1951, is among several that sympathetically portray the lives of day laborers within an atmosphere of grim realism.

¹⁵ On the basis of a few pages of Burma's 1984 book, Gilmore characterizes Tora-san as "a classic father figure of the retiring, lovable sort" (1990: 197) despite the fact that he is the most famous confirmed bachelor in Japanese popular culture. When Gilmore concludes that "whether he chooses the battlefield or the office or wanders about the countryside doing good like Tora-San, the Japanese man is an engaged group player..." (ibid. 198) one can only gasp at the sheer ignorance displayed in this, one of the most widely read general anthropological studies of masculinity.

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