

## 8 *Yoseba and Ninpudashi: Changing Patterns of Employment on the Fringes of the Japanese Economy*

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### **Introduction**

The 'collapse of lifetime employment' has become one of the clichés of the Great Heisei Recession. Far from enjoying the security of a job for life, many Japanese face a struggle to stay in work from year to year or even from month to month. Low unemployment was one of the great achievements of the post-war Japanese economy, but unemployment edged up through most of the 1990s and rose to 4.8 percent for the year 1999, climbing above the U.S. level for the first time since just after World War II. Some economists argue that differences in statistical practice mean that in reality the rate has been higher still.

The 1990s were a decade of stagnant growth and faltering markets, played out in the shadow of an American economy that boomed on relentlessly. In the 1970s and 1980s there had been serious talk of Japan overtaking the United States as an economic superpower, and the 'Learn from Japan' movement gained a considerable following among pundits around the world. In the 1990s the tide was reversed completely. Intellectual trends followed the pattern of American economic dominance, and the U.S. economy became the sole model for Japan and other countries to emulate. This meant less regulation, more privatization, and remuneration systems increasingly governed by principles of merit rather than fairness. The special relationship of trust between employer and employee became an unaffordable luxury: henceforth workers would get pay rises if they were productive, the sack if they were not. For some observers, the ever-rising rate of unemployment

was not so much a symptom of malaise as a positive sign that the strong medicine of monetarism was taking effect.

Yet of course, for some workers the old pre-1990s regime had never been the bed of roses depicted by some admirers of Japan. Norma Chalmers' book on the peripheral workforce (Chalmers 1989) was one of many works drawing attention to the pyramidal hierarchy in the Japanese labor force. One of the reasons why big Japanese corporations were able to maintain excellent standards of job security for their employees was because they maintained relatively small workforces. Compared with other capitalist countries, a much larger portion of production was out-sourced: entrusted to smaller companies that stood in a variety of relationships to the main company. Some were wholly- or partially-owned subsidiaries, some were nominally independent companies that were tied to the main company by ties of custom, obligation or personnel.

Collectively these chains of related companies were known as *keiretsu*, a Japanese term that has become part of the global economic vocabulary (see also Chapter 6 by Bishop). Some industries had horizontal *keiretsu*, as in the related banking, trading and manufacturing companies in major combines such as Sumitomo or Mitsubishi. But construction *keiretsu* were generally vertical: the smaller companies acted as a kind of safety valve for the main company. When times were hard, the main company could avoid laying off its own staff. Instead it would scale down orders to suppliers in the *keiretsu*, or enforce price-cuts that the suppliers were seldom able to resist because of their heavy dependence on a single client: the main company. The peripheral workforce of the supplying companies had a far lower level of income and job security than the elite workforce of the assembler.

The *keiretsu* system is chiefly associated with the manufacturing sector, as a structure linking small makers of parts to the giant companies assembling the finished product: cars, machinery, computers, consumer electronics etc. But as we shall see, much the same hierarchy of elite and peripheral workers may be observed in the construction industry. At the very bottom of this hierarchy are day laborers. They are unaffiliated men who are sometimes employed literally by the day to help out on building sites. In this chapter I propose to address the question of how these marginal

workers live and what happens to them in a time of prolonged recession and climbing unemployment. My investigation will focus on two important institutions: the *yoseba*, or casual labor market, and the *ninpudashi*, or workers' boarding house. Let us start our inquiry, however, by visiting a building site.

## A tunnel in Yokohama

They are building a tunnel in Yokohama. It is a water drainage tunnel, for use in the event of a major flood in Yokohama – the kind that occurs roughly once in ten years.

It is a massive tunnel, about ten meters high, and already several kilometers long. It will discharge floodwater into the sea somewhere near the port, and they are tunneling back inland from the sea end. The contract is worth ¥5 billion, and was originally won by a consortium led by a corporate behemoth, Kajima Construction. Kajima 'voluntarily' renounced the contract, as it had to with many others, after its leading role in a series of bribery and bid-rigging scandals emerged in the media. The contract was re-advertised and went to a new consortium led by Tōkyū Construction, a somewhat smaller but still substantial company.

Around the entrance to the tunnel stand various temporary buildings associated with the project. Just inside the main entrance are four flagpoles from which flutter the corporate logos of the prime contractors – Tōkyū Construction (the leading contractor or 'sponsor' in Japanese-English), Nissan Construction, Kyōwa Construction and Ishida Construction. The first three are large general contractors with nationwide operations; the fourth is a small local company. The client, which is the government of Kanagawa prefecture, specified that consortia tendering for the contract should include one business from within the prefecture, with a view to stimulating the local economy.

But all is not as it seems at this construction site. Ishida Construction, which gets 10 percent of the value of the contract, i.e. ¥500 million, or roughly \$5 million, is in fact a front for a gang of *yakuza* (the Japanese mobsters described by Herbert in the following chapter). Mr. Watanabe, my on-site informant (not his real name), says he has never met a person from Ishida Construction at the worksite; their contribution to the project exists only on

paper. The portions of the project allocated to Ishida in fact have to be shared out among the other three companies, which have to shrug their shoulders about the consequent reduction in profit margin.

They put up with this because they have to – meaning that certain politicians, policemen etc. want it that way. Either a portion of the money is passed on to them by the *yakuza*; or the *yakuza* have some relevant blackmail material. The other contractors can afford to shoulder this burden because the profit margin on tunneling is considerably bigger than on other kinds of construction work. This is because it is much harder to estimate the cost of a tunnel project accurately than it is for a road or a dam or a building, because one never knows, until one starts boring, what technical problems may arise. So the original estimate is made on the assumption that there will be no problems, and when these problems do arise, extra demands for payment are submitted to the customer in the name of *sekkei henkō* (changes to plan). At the end of the day, a substantial profit margin somehow emerges from this procedure.

None of the actual boring is done by the prime contractors themselves. That work is sub-contracted to a company based in Shizuoka prefecture that specializes in tunneling. This company in turn uses labor supplied by a pair of sub-sub-contractors, both based in Tokyo. And when the project is in an especially busy phase, they may look to midget construction firms in Yokohama for extra help. These firms may have no more than three or four regular employees. The rest they will pick up as required from the casual labor market at Kotobuki. Mr. Watanabe showed me around the site headquarters of the prime contractors, which was pretty well built and comfortable for a temporary building. It had air-conditioning. He also pointed out a smaller, humbler, prefabricated building, for the use of the sub-contractors. He says the sub-contractors do well over half of the actual physical labor on the project, yet their efforts go unacknowledged. Their flags do not fly alongside those of Tōkyū and the rest, while that of Ishida Construction, which does not actually do any work at all, but still collects 10 percent of the money, wafts proudly in the breeze.

‘Isn’t life unfair,’ I said.

‘It certainly is,’ he said.’

**Figure 8.1** *A day laborer of Osaka, photographed in his tiny doya room. The graffiti on the wall says "One-shot gamble" – a gambling reference.*



Credit: Nakajima Satoshi.

### **Day laborers at the *Yoseba***

*Yoseba* are open-air casual labor markets. Most major Japanese cities have a *yoseba*, and the biggest ones, in descending order of size, are Kamagasaki in Osaka, San'ya in Tokyo, Kotobuki in Yokohama, and Sasashima in Nagoya. Among minor *yoseba* are Takadanobaba in Tokyo, Chikkō in Fukuoka, Shinkaichi in Kobe, Uchihama in Kyoto, Don in Hiroshima, Tenmonkan in Kagoshima and Shūri in Naha, Okinawa. There is a massive Japanese-language literature on *yoseba* and an academic society devoted to their study.<sup>2</sup> There is also a fast-growing *yoseba* literature in English, including de Barry (1985) and Fowler (1996) on San'ya, and Ventura (1992) and Stevens (1997) on Kotobuki, while Matsuzawa (1988) provides a useful brief overview of the institution. The *yoseba* at Kotobuki is the main source of casual labor for the

construction industry in Yokohama. It also supplies warehouse and longshoring labor to the docks at Yokohama and other ports, but containerization has greatly reduced this sector of the market for casual labor. Other once-significant employers, such as transportation and manufacturing, have all but disappeared.

*Yoseba* have a long and complex history, which I discuss elsewhere (Gill forthcoming 2001). The word literally means a 'gathering place,' and denotes an open-air labor market, where men gather early in the morning to negotiate employment for the day with street-corner labor recruiters known as *tehaishi* ('arrangers'). There are many kinds of *tehaishi*: some are independent small businessmen, while others are employees of the companies that use the labor, or have a special association with one or several of those companies. Some are themselves *yakuza*; those who are not will generally be paying off the *yakuza* in some form for the right to operate unmolested in the *yoseba*. These protection payoffs are called *shobadai*.<sup>3</sup> *Tehaishi* tend to have specialties: some will specialize in dock-work, others in construction. In Kotobuki, which has far more foreign workers than most other *yoseba*,<sup>4</sup> some *tehaishi* specialize in recruiting Korean, Chinese, or Filipino laborers. The day wage varies with degree of skill and the balance of supply and demand, but by the time the *tehaishi* has taken his cut, popularly estimated at 25 to 30 percent, the unskilled laborer will likely have roughly ¥10,000, or \$90, in hand. Men who do skilled or dangerous work may get up to twice that amount.

Day laborers tend to be single men. Some are lifelong bachelors, others are divorced or separated. Many of them live in cheap lodging houses called *doya* – a slang reversal of the word *yado*, standard Japanese for an inn. *Doya* charge anything from ¥1,000 to ¥3,000 a night for rent of a tiny room just big enough to lie down in. This makes them very cheap compared with most other kinds of hotel, but surprisingly expensive compared with small apartments rented by the month. Their appeal to day laborers stems from the fact that unlike apartments, they do not require a major non-returnable down payment or letter of guarantee from a responsible citizen, or even proof of identity. In Kamagasaki, San'ya and Kotobuki, there are concentrations of a hundred or more *doya*: hence these places are sometimes referred to as *doya-gai* (lodging-house towns) as well as *yoseba*. These locations are associated with

gambling and heavy drinking, and are sometimes compared with the American skid row (Caldarola 1968; Giamo 1994; Marr 1997).

Government attempts to regulate the day labor market date back to the mid-seventeenth century (Leupp 1992: 160–4), and still persist today, in the form of public casual labor exchanges that have been set up in each of the four main *yoseba*. Kamagasaki, San'ya, and Kotobuki actually have two casual labor exchanges each, one run by the Ministry of Labor and the other by the local authorities. The Ministry of Labor also runs a system of unemployment insurance tailor-made for day laborers. The worker carries a handbook, in which revenue stamps are affixed and franked by employers for each day worked. So long as a man has the stamps to demonstrate 26 days' work done in the previous two calendar months, he is entitled to a payment of ¥7,500 (roughly \$65) per day of weekday unemployment in the following month. As well as the *tehaishi* and the labor exchanges, the modern day laborer can also seek work through personal connections or by responding to job advertisements carried in sports newspapers. A few of the most efficient men even have mobile telephones with which they can swiftly ascertain demand for labor at several different building sites on any given morning.

Although *yoseba* workers are often referred to as 'day laborers' (*hiyatoi rōdōsha*), they do not necessarily work only on one-day contracts. Some *tehaishi* come looking for men to work for periods ranging from a week to several months, often on large-scale rural construction projects. Among these men are some who have been exposed to radiation while being employed to do dangerous work at nuclear power stations. The topic of the 'nuclear gypsies' (*genpatsu jipushii*) is one where fact and street-myth mingle, but there certainly have been some cases of this. Tanaka (1988) has a valuable account of subcontracting and day laboring in the nuclear power industry. Another *yoseba* myth is of sick men being allowed to die by hospitals because they lack health insurance, or even being given lethal doses of medicine and then being sold as cadavers to medical schools or for illegal organ transplants. Once again it is impossible to guess how much truth there may be in these rumors, but enough cases have surfaced to suggest that the answer is not zero.

But besides these extreme cases, there are plenty of other everyday threats to the lives of the day laborers. *Bentō to kega wa*

*jibun mochi* ('Your lunch-box and your injuries are your own affair') is a popular *yoseba* saying. It can be very difficult to make construction companies take responsibility for worksite accidents, especially where the end employer is separated from the worker by a chain of subcontractors such as I described above. A further serious issue is the safety of the on-site dormitories where men are housed during major construction projects. In eastern Japan these dormitories are referred to as *hanba*, a term which confusingly enough is used synonymously with *ninpudashi* in western Japan. They tend to be thrown up with scant regard for safety, and cases of fires at them are regular minor news items. Several occurred during my own *yoseba* fieldwork (1993–5). One was at a very dangerously designed worker's dormitory in Ebina, 20 miles from Yokohama, where eight men died in a nocturnal fire on July 6, 1994. Most of the 53 men staying there were migrant workers from Hokkaido and Tohoku. Press reports said the dormitory belonged to a small construction company called Komuro-gumi.<sup>5</sup> In fact it belonged to Tōkyū Construction, the same company that was in charge of the tunnel project described above. Tōkyū was using Komuro-gumi as a subcontractor. Komuro took the blame: Tōkyū may have had to make a quiet payoff to its subcontractor, but the firm escaped negative publicity. Life is indeed unfair.

### Day laborers at the *ninpudashi*

In sharp contrast to the very extensive literature on *yoseba*, relatively little attention has been paid by academics and journalists to the *ninpudashi*.<sup>6</sup> Yet this is an institution which is arguably every bit as important as the *yoseba* in contemporary Japan, if not more so.

The word *ninpu* is a fairly coarse Japanese term for a navy or manual laborer. *Dashi* derives from the verb *dasu*, to produce, give, or supply something. Hence *ninpudashi* are navy-suppliers, businesses that specialize in supplying casual laborers. It is a crude term, considered downright insulting by the people who run these businesses. They prefer the term *rōdō geshuku*, or 'workers' boarding house,' or better still *jinzai hakengyō*, or 'personnel supply business.' I use the term '*ninpudashi*' here because it is the standard term used by the day laborers who patronize them.



I first came across the word in the summer of 1994, on a fieldtrip to northern Kyushu. In retrospect it is amazing, not to say shameful, that I had not become aware of the institution during over a year of fieldwork with day laborers before then. But in Fukuoka and Kitakyushu, even the most insensitive fieldworker cannot miss the *ninpudashi*, for they dominate the casual labor market in these two neighboring industrial cities on the north coast of Japan's southernmost main island. The *ninpudashi* combine the roles of the *yoseba* (casual labor introductions) and the *doya* (cheap, low-grade accommodation). The owner of the *ninpudashi* supplies the worker with a room, either a small *doya*-like individual room, or a larger room shared with several other workers. Meals will generally be provided, though probably at extra cost. He also supplies the worker with employment, activating a network of contacts to find casual work around the city or neighboring cities. Very often he will also supply transportation, having his own minibus, or even a fleet of minibuses, to get the men to the worksites.

The attractions for the worker are manifest: a roof over his head, two or three square meals a day, and no need to get out of bed at half past four to look for a *tehaishi* and negotiate a contract with him. But at the same time, the *ninpudashi* is potentially a powerful tool of exploitation. Wages are generally paid to the *ninpudashi*, not directly to the worker. At the end of the month, the *ninpudashi* will calculate how much the man has earned, then subtract the cost of room rent, meals, and sundries. Some will charge extra for TV-watching and showers, for example, or will supply alcohol and tobacco on credit at higher prices than in the shops. Nor will the wages necessarily be paid immediately at the end of the month. Payment may be delayed, typically until the 15th or 20th of the following month, sometimes even later. Since day laborers are often short of money, they may be unable to wait that long for payment – in which case the *ninpudashi* may lend him an advance against wages, often with high rates of interest attached. Combining the roles of landlord and recruiter gives the *ninpudashi* decisive advantages over both these *yoseba* figures. In the *yoseba*, the *doya* manager must always calculate how likely a man is to get enough work to pay the room rent, and how many days he should allow arrears to mount up before cutting his losses and throwing the man

out. In contrast, the *ninpudashi* owner determines the man's level of employment himself and gets the money directly, passing it on only after he has taken off what he determines the man to owe him. And whereas the *tehaishi* must compete against other *tehaishi*, offering higher wages or better terms at times when labor is scarce, the *ninpudashi* owner can monopolize the labor of the men working for him through the hold he has over them as their landlord.

Perhaps most significantly, *ninpudashi* do not guarantee to find employment for their tenants every day. There may be 40 men staying at the boarding house, but only enough work available for 20. In that case men will be 'rested,' on average, every other day. But not all men will necessarily conform to the average. Troublemakers who complain about conditions may find themselves 'resting' considerably more often than their more docile brothers. Hence the *ninpudashi* is in a strong position to erode solidarity between workers and stimulate mutual competition among them in its place. Rent is payable every day, whether a job is supplied or not. Hence it is all too possible that after a prolonged lean spell, some of the men may find that far from earning money for their own use, they are grappling with a steadily mounting debt owed to the *ninpudashi*. Many men voiced suspicions that *ninpudashi* would deliberately take on more men than they could find work for, because filling the rooms and keeping many of the men idle was more economically advantageous to the *ninpudashi* than having their men fully employed and some of their rooms empty. In the worst cases, day laborers can get so deeply into debt that they are effectively stripped of their human rights and reduced to the status of rather literal wage slaves. In such a situation the worker's one recourse may be to do a runner – or a *tonkō* as it is known. Unions of *ninpudashi* owners maintain blacklists designed to avoid employing men who have absconded from other *ninpudashi*, however, and in some cases the ultimate sanction against abscondence may be the threat of violence, by *yojimbō* – hired bully-boys.

Shortly after World War II, *ninpudashi* were made illegal under article 44 of the Employment Security Law, a piece of legislation inspired by the leaders of the allied Occupation. This article outlawed the practice of taking money for job introductions in any form, and hence criminalized the *tehaishi* at the *yoseba* as well as

the *ninpudashi*, and indeed more conventional temporary employment agencies as well (as discussed by Bishop in Chapter 6). Kamata (1971) contends that illegality just made the boarding house business more brutal, while the police usually turned a blind eye. In 1986 the government of Nakasone Yasuhiro passed the Labor Dispatch Business Law (*Jinzai Hakengyō-hō*), which legalized the practice of agencies taking money from an employer and paying their own, lower wage to the worker. This, I believe, was a major factor favoring the renaissance of the *ninpudashi* business, which had been going through some lean times with the decline of the coal and steel industries that spawned it in northern Kyushu.

During the mid-1990s I gained the impression that there was a pattern to casual employment practices in Japan, with *yoseba* tending to predominate to the east of Osaka and *ninpudashi* to the west, especially in Kyushu. Osaka itself has Japan's biggest *yoseba*, in Kamagasaki, but also a concentration of boarding-houses at the nearby district of Taishō, estimated by day-laboring activists to be home to some 7,000 workers.

The dominance of *ninpudashi* in Kitakyushu was explained to me by local labor activists as being related to the district's traditional association with the iron and steel industry. Kitakyushu is an artificially constructed city, formed by the union of five formerly independent cities – Kokura, Tobata, Wakamatsu, Yahata, and Moji. Moji was a port city, while Yahata and Tobata were both dominated by a single employer – Nippon Steel, formerly known as Yahata Steel. The area was naturally suited to steel production, having a plentiful water supply and coal from the nearby Chikuhō coalfield. During the 1970s and 1980s, however, Japan's steel industry was steadily supplanted by rivals in South Korea and elsewhere. Today the once mighty plant at Yahata is long closed, and Nippon Steel has built an amusement park, Space World, on part of the disused site. The Tobata plant continues to operate at a reduced scale, while the closure of the Chikuhō coalmines in the 1970s left Chikuhō as one of the most economically depressed areas in all Japan (Allen 1994).

Nippon Steel used to employ something like the subcontracting system that I described above for the construction industry. Like construction, iron and steel is an industry highly sensitive to

changing economic trends, and the advantages of a flexible workforce are obvious. So rather than relying entirely on its own directly-employed workforce, the company would delegate parts of the smelting operation to bosses (*oyakata*), who would be entrusted with supplying the required amount of labor on each day. The *oyakata* would run their own boarding houses, where they would provide board and lodging for men who were effectively their own private workforce. Their wages would be paid by the *oyakata* rather than by Nippon Steel, and hence the company had no responsibility to provide them with 'lifetime employment' or anything like it. Meanwhile, there was a constant struggle for control of the casual workforce among rival labor racketeers – a struggle that was bloody and sometimes murderous.<sup>7</sup>

The boarding houses peaked in 1960, when there were nearly 200 of them. When the steel industry went into decline, the owners of the boarding houses gradually shifted their attention to construction, and today they are the prime suppliers of casual labor to building sites in the Kitakyushu area. Meanwhile, the notorious pre-war *yoseba* at Harunomachi ('Spring-town'), a slum district in the lee of the Yahata steelworks, is long gone. The main post-war *yoseba* was at Senbō, just next to the Tobata steelworks. However, when I got to Senbō in the mid-1990s I found that the *yoseba* had virtually withered away, with no more than a couple of dozen men standing in the street. In the neighboring city of Fukuoka, there is a small *yoseba* located at Chikkō, very close to the Hakata docks, reflecting the fact that like Kotobuki in Yokohama, it used to supply labor principally to the longshoring industry. Even today some 40 percent of work is at the docks, the remainder in construction. In the mid-1990s there were only about 200 day laborers looking for work at Chikkō on the average morning, whereas a day laborer union activist estimated that there were some 10,000 day laborers in the city as a whole. The rest were mostly staying at *ninpu-dashi*, which for all their drawbacks still represented a surer way of keeping oneself housed and fed than the uncertain prospects of the daily hunt for work on the street corner. Several day laborers said that they would use the *yoseba* when employment prospects were good, retreating to a *ninpu-dashi* when they were bad. During the 1990s they were usually bad. The small *doya-gai* in Fukuoka was

*Figure 8.2 Volunteers check the blood pressure of day laborers at Kotobuki, Yokohama, during the annual summer festival. The portable shrine (omikoshi) can just be seen in the background.*



Credit: Kagoshima Masa'aki.

located some way from the *yoseba*, and the casual labor exchange was in yet a third part of the city. Hence there was no concentration of facilities for day laborers to compare to the *yoseba/doya-gai*

labor exchange package at Kamagasaki, San'ya, and Kotobuki. Life is less convenient, and the potential for solidarity far lower, than in cities with major *yoseba*. As for the boarding houses, they varied greatly in style. Some were shabby little buildings resembling *doya*; others were smart new multi-story buildings, with covered forecourts where fleets of minibuses stood ready to take the men to work. In Fukuoka and Kitakyushu, the going rate for unskilled casual labor in the late 1990s was in the region of ¥8–9,000 a day, compared with ¥12–13,000 in the major *yoseba* cities of Osaka, Tokyo, and Yokohama. Regional variation in standard of living accounted for some of this differential, but the relative weakness of labor *vis-à-vis* capital was undoubtedly a factor too. All the big *yoseba* have day laborer unions; there are none active in *ninpudashi* districts.

### **The widow Kawamoto and a sad tale from Kyoto**

One common factor which links the *yoseba* at Kotobuki, Yokohama, with the workers' boarding houses of northern Kyushu is that they are both largely owned by ethnic Koreans. Contrary to the stereotyped liberal view of Japanese society, which insists on seeing ethnic minorities as the brutalized victims of a racist, authoritarian state, the Korean ethnic minority in fact includes some very successful, wealthy businessmen. That does not mean that they are not subject to discrimination: they are. However, rather like Jews in medieval Europe, who responded to prejudice by finding a niche in the financial industries, they have carved out sectors of the economy spurned by the ethnic majority and made them their own. *Pachinko* (Japanese-style pinball, with a strong gambling element) and *yakiniku* restaurants (serving Korean-style grilled meat) are the most famous examples of this. However, in some parts of Japan ethnic Koreans have also carved out a niche in the management of casual labor – another sector of the economy low in status but potentially lucrative.

Virtually all the *doya* at Kotobuki are owned by Koreans, and the Yokohama branch of Chongryun, the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan, an organization sympathetic to North Korea (cf. Ryang 1997), is located in the *yoseba*. The *doya* owners are divided among those who support Chongryun, those who favor

Mindan, the equivalent organization loyal to South Korea, and independents. This lack of political unity, coupled with a drastic fall in land prices during the 1990s, has probably saved Kotobuki from being knocked down to make way for a 'Koreatown' modeled on the nearby Chinatown which is arguably Yokohama's premier tourist attraction. To the best of my knowledge, however, there is no significant Korean presence among the *doya*-owners of San'ya and Kamagasaki.

Down in Kitakyushu and Fukuoka, practically the entire boarding house industry appears to be in Korean hands. Both Chongryun and Mindan had branches in the *ninpudashi* district of Kitakyushu, and the former was a sumptuous new building. No one I asked could name a Japanese-run boarding house. The widow Kawamoto was a Korean lady using a Japanese name, and she ran a *ninpudashi* in Tobata called *Shin'ei Kōgyō* (Shin'ei Industries), a name which made it sound like a construction company.<sup>8</sup> One worker said it was embarrassing to admit to fellow workers that one was with a *ninpudashi*, and better to simply mention this respectable-sounding name. It was a sizeable operation: when I visited in 1994 it was dispatching 90 to 100 men to worksites in Kitakyushu and neighboring cities every weekday morning, in a fleet of 20 vehicles. It was semi-residential, with 30 men living on the premises and another 60-odd showing up for work. The company paid ¥8–10,000 a day, rising to ¥12,000 for more skilled work. It charged ¥900 a night for a three-mat room (including a ¥100 TV charge) and ¥300 for breakfast (optional). The final employers were billed monthly in arrears, and the widow said the company's margin was ¥1–2,000 per person-day.

When work was short, some men might be asked to 'rest' for a period. The widow said that residents of the boarding house would generally be given preference in job allocation, but if they were laid off for some time and ran short of cash, they would be allowed credit against their room-bill. She also said that she looked after ill workers and helped them to get compensation and social welfare in serious cases. She stressed that the business was run like one big family (*katei-teki*) and was providing shelter and gainful employment to men who would otherwise be sleeping in the street. Certainly I noticed only one possibly homeless person while in Tobata.

Wages were paid in cash, at the end of each day's work. I observed this happening. The widow said this was the usual practice in Tobata, but mentioned some larger, more impersonally run boarding houses in nearby Kokura where wages were withheld for a week or ten days. She had heard of many cases of abuse at these places, such as deliberately forgetting about overtime, or refusing to pay a worker's wages if he wanted to leave before payday.

She confirmed that Koreans ran the entire industry. Asked if there were also Koreans in the workforce, she said there were very few: the Koreans in Tobata could get better work. At the very least they could get steady employment at a cousin's *pachinko* parlor. She said the recession had damaged her business, but there seemed to be plenty of activity, and her father appeared to be driving a Bentley in British racing green.

Men working for this boarding house confirmed most of the above, and said it was one of the better places. One of them claimed, however, that the cozy, family-style relationship between employer and workers only lasted for as long as the latter was fit enough to generate income for the former. The boarding house would dump anyone who was reckoned to be past it. The widow did say that she never employed old people, and that the average age of her workers was about 45.

She repeatedly described her workers as 'diligent' (*majime*) and 'obedient' (*sunao*). She contrasted them with the workers in Senbō, who she said were sometimes very badly behaved.

Later that summer, I met a man in Kamagasaki who told me that he had recently finished a stint at a *ninpudashi* in Kyoto. He was so angry about the conditions at this *ninpudashi* that he borrowed my notebook and wrote them out in great detail. The following is a direct translation: note that he uses the term *hanba*, which in the Kansai region around Osaka and Kyoto is used in the same sense as '*ninpudashi*.' Only the dollar conversions are added by myself.

Wages: ¥12,500 [c. \$115] a day. Payment to *hanba* (including room, meals, TV, electricity etc.): ¥3,300 [c. \$30] a day. The payment to the *hanba* is payable even on days when one is made to rest because it suits the convenience of the owner, and on Sundays and public holidays.



From January 1994, my days worked and payments to the *hanba* were as follows:

Month	Days worked	Payments to <i>hanba</i>
January	9 days	¥3,300 × 31
February	8 days	¥3,300 × 29
March	9 days	¥3,300 × 31
April	2 days	¥3,300 × 30
May	0 days	¥3,300 × 31
June	2 days	¥3,300 × 30

Total income in 6 months:	30 × ¥12,500 = ¥375,000	[c. \$3,500]
Total expenditure:	182 × ¥ 3,300 = ¥600,600	[c. \$5,500]
Net loss:	¥225,600	[c. \$2,000]

[Also employed through the *hanba* are] workers who live in their own places in Kyoto and come to work on bicycles, motorbikes, etc. When the prime contractor or leading sub-contractor which is the end employer only needs a few people (1 or 2), the labor supply business (*hanba*), because it does not use the workers who stay at the *hanba* (and whose wages are about ¥1,000 higher than for general workers) and does not supply a light van or minibus, gives priority to the above-mentioned workers who come to work on bicycles and motorbikes. Because of this the 22 people staying in the boarding house are all (by order) made to take the day off work.

He then bitterly complained that prostitutes were better off than day laborers in the *hanba* – at least they didn't have to pay rent on the rooms where they worked and slept. They also had their clothes and make-up paid for, etc. He and his fellows actually had to pay for the privilege of being exploited, he said. 'Both psychologically and economically we are below them,' he said.

### The changing patterns

The bursting of the speculative bubble at the start of the 1990s sent the Japanese construction industry into a drastic decline. Real

estate prices collapsed, housing starts plummeted and heavily indebted companies cut back on investment in new plant. The bloated construction industry, which a 1998 OECD report found to account for a portion of the economy roughly double the figure for most industrialized countries, was forced into a contraction which saw layoffs even at the big general contractors, while thousands of smaller companies were forced into bankruptcy.

Naturally, the first workers to feel the pinch were day laborers. Employment at all the big *yoseba* collapsed. For example, the number of person-days transacted at the Kotobuki Labor Center, which accounts for over 90 percent of formal labor contracts transacted in Kotobuki, fell from 154,574 in 1986 to 38,348 in 1999. This was a crippling 75 percent fall, which had all but killed off the system of state-mediated casual labor by the end of the century. The *tehaishi* do not supply statistics for the informal labor market, but by the end of the 1990s a lot of familiar faces had disappeared from the morning streets of Kotobuki, as many *tehaishi* simply withdrew from the market. With the market so weak, freelance manual work out of a *yoseba* ceased to be an option for the young working-class men that had once formed a large part of the population. Consequently the *yoseba* population aged dramatically – far faster than the rate for the general population. The mean age of workers using the Kotobuki Labor Center rose from 39 in 1975 to 45 in 1985 and then to 52 in 1997.

Growing numbers of day laborers were forced into homelessness, and throughout the later 1990s Yokohama City Hall (located a ten-minute walk from Kotobuki) was surrounded by over a hundred cardboard boxes in which homeless people would spend the night. Shanty towns and tent cities spread out in every major city – at the west exit of Shinjuku station and along the left bank of the Arakawa river, to name but two famous Tokyo locations, and around Tennōji Park in Osaka<sup>9</sup> and in Wakamiya Park in Nagoya, among many others. The great majority of these homeless people were unaffiliated men of middle age and above – the kind of people who used to be able to make a living as day laborers. The fast-rising numbers of homeless bore testimony to the important role that the day-laboring system had played as the employer of last resort in the Japanese economy, and the degree to which the system was being eroded.

The inescapable fact of rising homelessness, coupled with vigorous campaigning by day laborer unions and homeless support groups, has led to a gradual softening of attitudes toward *yoseba* on the part of city governments. For many years it was virtually impossible for men based in the *yoseba* to acquire welfare payments, largely because of an unwritten rule made up by bureaucrats, to the effect that one had to have a fixed address to apply for welfare, and that a *doya* room did not constitute a fixed address. In Yokohama that rule has been relaxed to the point where some 80 percent of the region's 6,500 *doya* rooms are now occupied by welfare recipients, a figure that has doubled in the last five years or so. Kotobuki is now well on its way to completing the transition from 'workers' town' to 'welfare town' discussed by Stevens (1997), and it has in fact become very difficult for the traditional wandering day laborer to get a room in Kotobuki. Other city governments have been slower to move, and consequently there are far more empty *doya* rooms in San'ya and Kamagasaki than in Kotobuki, and far more homeless men in Tokyo and Osaka than in Yokohama.<sup>10</sup>

Right at the end of the 1990s, the Tokyo government finally started to show signs of relaxing its hard line on welfare for *doya* occupants, and started to approve a number of applications. Some *doya* owners responded by making slight cuts in room rents to meet the ¥2,300 maximum that the metropolitan government had set for nightly accommodation expenses for welfare recipients. Even so, the *doya* population of San'ya is a fraction of what it used to be, and the place has something of the atmosphere of a ghost town. Rising numbers of homeless and of welfare recipients, and a high mortality rate, account for some of the disappearances, but not all of them.

According to activists with a day-laborer union called the San'ya Dispute League (*San'ya Sōgidan*), quite a large part of the day-laboring population of San'ya has disappeared into *ninpudashi*. The word has been much less common in the Kanto region around Tokyo and Yokohama, and has tended to be used in a different sense to that understood in the Kansai: as a straightforward job introduction agency, without the residential component. However, *Sōgidan* activists say they have clear and mounting evidence of a new wave of residential *ninpudashi* cropping up in Tokyo's four main satellite prefectures: Kanagawa, Saitama, Chiba, and Ibaragi. Rather than looking for workers in the *yoseba* – which are invariably located in

fairly central urban places – employers keep them in boarding houses in quiet, out-of-the-way places, where land is cheap and few prying government officials or journalists are likely to show their faces. They are bussed into construction sites in the Tokyo-Yokohama region and bussed out again at the end of the day.

It would appear, then, that a sea change is coming over the unobserved outer margins of the Japanese economy. The old way of life associated with day laboring out of the *yoseba* is crumbling away, and the *yoseba* working population is draining away in three directions: toward welfare, toward homelessness and early death, and toward the *ninpudashi*. *Ninpudashi* are far more resilient than *yoseba* to changing economic forces, because of the system described above, of rotating under-employed workers while deducting their board and lodging from their pay packet at source. They have remained viable at levels of economic activity so low that the *yoseba* have steadily lost their function as labor markets, metamorphosing into slum districts for single men like the U.S. skid row, or in Kotobuki's case, into a vast economy-class welfare institution.

One reason why *ninpudashi* have attracted far less attention than *yoseba* from academics and journalists is because they are far less noticeable, and also far harder to study. A *yoseba*, by definition, is a gathering place: a concentration of largely unattached men with little to lose in terms of possessions or social status. As such they have always had a certain rebellious potential. While the *yoseba* have never fulfilled the quixotic hopes of utopian Japanese Marxists, that they might be catalysts for the revolution, they do have a history of street-rioting<sup>11</sup> and far higher rates of alcoholism and crime than other urban districts. They can be studied by anyone who chooses to walk into them. By contrast, *ninpudashi* are closed environments that are very difficult for researchers to penetrate, especially foreign researchers. They are also strictly controlled environments, in which much smaller groups of men are concentrated, and where the balance of power is far more decisively on the side of the recruiter/landlord. The gradual shift from *yoseba* to *ninpudashi* represents a small, barely noticed, yet decisive defeat for labor in its never-ending struggle with capital on the fringes of the Japanese economy.