

An Emerging Non-Regular Labour Force in Japan

The dignity of dispatched workers

Huiyan Fu

NISSAN INSTITUTE/ROUTLEDGE JAPANESE STUDIES SERIES

An Emerging Non-Regular Labour Force in Japan

Like many industrialised nations, the current employment trend in Japan centres on diversification of the labour market with an increased use of temporary labour. Among a wide range of non-regular labour arrangements, *haken* are a newly legalised category of non-regular workers who are typically employed by the employment agency while working at the facilities of and being under the authority of the client firm. They have recently expanded exponentially under the state's deregulation policy and assumed considerable significance in political debate, especially with regard to the nation's 'widening gaps' known as *kakusa*.

This is the first anthropological study of *haken* and temporary agency work (TAW) in Japan which combines both macro- and micro-level analyses. At the macro-level, *haken* are explored from a historical perspective with a view to showing the changing state policy and public perception of *haken*. At the micro-level, how TAW is experienced by real people in concrete situations is extremely varied and complex, often depending on intersecting structural variables including gender, age and class. The book therefore provides insight into the gap between powerful discourses and everyday life, as well as a better understanding of personhood in Japan's shifting landscape of employment.

This book will be of interest to students and scholars of Japanese Studies, Japanese Business, Asian Business and Asian Anthropology.

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To Michael

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Series editors' preface

For many years, the Japanese labour market has been characterised by duality; while the majority of employees were hired on permanent or semi-permanent contracts, a substantial minority were involved in a complex variety of temporary, casual and part-time arrangements. The former were regarded as a kind of labour aristocracy, benefiting from superior wages, bonuses and other perquisites of their status, whereas the latter, though often required to work as hard as the former, were less privileged, received fewer benefits and most crucially were relatively easy to dismiss (or not re-hire) at times of economic downturn or reduced fortunes on the part of the particular firm concerned. To a very considerable extent, duality in the labour market also reflected duality in the economy as a whole, between a relatively small number of enormous and prestigious companies and a myriad of firms in the small and medium sector. A further salient difference between the two types of employee was that whereas the former were overwhelmingly male, a high proportion of the latter were female, resulting in extensive gender discrimination in the workforce that in turn reflected (or was seen to reflect) embedded cultural norms of Japanese society.

The central position of permanently contracted workers in the Japanese labour market after the Second World War led to the widely publicised image of the '*salaryman*': an individual dedicated to loyal service for the company, sacrificing personal and family interests to the corporate interest, working assiduously for long hours during the day then socialising with colleagues (and sometimes also clients) until late at night in what need to be seen as long-term bonding exercises designed to cement and perpetuate company *esprit de corps*.

Over the past 20 years, there has been a gradual blurring of the previous clear lines of duality. In part, this has been because social values in Japan have gradually been evolving from those appropriate to a developing economy to those expected of a developed economy whose population has become used to relative affluence; formerly prevalent ideas of self-sacrifice to the interests of an organisation have been progressively overlaid by values emphasising personal satisfaction and individual advancement. In part, the blurring of the duality has been due to 20 years of economic stagnation since the bursting of the 'bubble' at the end of the 1980s; corporations and employers have been experimenting with a variety of labour practices which give them maximal flexibility in an increasingly globalised economy.

Huiyan Fu, who has Chinese nationality and speaks fluent Japanese, examines an interesting manifestation of this gradual change, namely the phenomenon of *haken* or 'despatched' workers as a particular form of non-permanent labour. She was herself a *haken* worker in the mid-2000s, working successively in two large companies where she undertook her anthropological fieldwork. Her analysis is therefore enriched by personal experience of this type of employment. The employment of *haken* workers has become regularised since changes in the law dating from the 1980s. They are 'despatched' to receiving firms on limited-term contracts (normally of a few months), by *haken* companies, which in aggregate constitute an important and influential industry in contemporary Japan. Even though *haken* workers remain a fairly small percentage of the total workforce, they have been granted much prominence in the mass media, and have become symbolic of a new type of employee, often but not only female, who is more concerned with self than with organisation, but more positively, brings new ideas and an innovative perspective to the work environment. Indeed, the analysis presented here suggests that the image of the '*salaryman*' has become significantly tarnished, as such permanently employed 'shock troops' have become perceived by some commentators as complacent and risk-averse.

The Nissan Institute/Routledge Japanese Studies series – which has now been running for over 25 years and produced over 80 volumes – seeks to foster an informed, balanced, but not uncritical understanding of Japan. The present volume adds substantially to one of the most important areas which the series has covered during its history. It not only illuminates many aspects of the Japanese labour market, its historical background, changing legal basis as well as economic and sociological effects but also brings an interesting anthropological angle to these debates by laying out from the experience and perspective of the front-line workers the gradual changes that have been taking place in the field of Japanese employment in recent years.

Roger Goodman
J. A. A. Stockwin

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‘Teachers open the door. You enter by yourself.’ This old Chinese proverb immediately springs to mind, when I look back on my student life at the University of Oxford. I want to thank, first and very much foremost, my supervisor Prof. Roger Goodman, who not only opened the door to an enthralling world but has always been a strict but caring mentor with unfailing support and tolerance throughout my entire anthropological training and research from 2004 to 2009. I am grateful to him both for having learned and benefited greatly from his scholarly insights and professional efficiency and for his profound influence in transforming me in such compelling fashion into a passionate devotee of anthropology.

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Note on transliteration and romanisation

To facilitate communication and emphasise nuanced meanings, a number of Japanese terms are introduced in this book. As is common practice, all Japanese words are italicized, often in parentheses following an English translation. For a list of key Japanese words pertinent to the topic under discussion, an effort was made to provide explanations and references that were as detailed as possible. The romanisation of Japanese terms follows the Hepburn style, with the macron or elongation mark indicating long vowels.

Abbreviations

| | |
|--------|--|
| CIETT | Confederation Internationale des Entreprises de Travail Temporaire (<i>Kokusai Jinzai Haken Jigyō Dantai Rengō</i>) |
| EFILWC | European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions |
| ILO | International Labour Organisation |
| JASSA | Japan Staffing Services Association |
| JCGF | Japan Corporate Governance Forum |
| JCUF | Japan Community Union Federation (<i>Zenkoku Yunion</i>) |
| JILPT | Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training |
| MHLW | Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare |
| MIC | Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications |
| MOL | Ministry of Labour (replaced by MHLW in 2001) |
| NHK | Nihon Hōsō Kyōkai (Japan's public broadcasting organization) |
| TAW | Temporary Agency Work |