Expectations of Failure: Maturity and Masculinity for Freeters in Contemporary Japan

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Work and masculinity are inextricably linked in post-war Japan. Although the employment system has changed in the last 20 years it appears that social attitudes of what men should do and be are changing at a slower pace. Men and women of varied ages continue to stress that men should be responsible breadwinners, husbands and fathers. Male freeters, many of whom are attempting to pursue and create alternative lifestyles, are often unable and unwilling to fill this normative role. This paper explores how male freeters negotiate dominant discourses of work, masculinity and maturity in their attempts to create alternative lifestyles whilst simultaneously expecting to fail. Furthermore, it argues for a deeper analysis of women’s effects on the construction of masculinities in Japan.

I’ve been a freeter for seven years now, since I was seventeen. When I started this job I was nineteen years old and I thought that working here would be really good, but these days I don’t feel that. The pay is really low and the job is not so secure. A couple of months ago I had an accident and had to take some time off and of course I couldn’t get paid for the time I wasn’t here, so I had a hard time paying my rent and bills. It was really stressful. This month I took the exam to become a full-time employee but I failed it again. They have a set number they can accept and I’m the youngest to take it so far so each time they pass me over. Anyway, I had to take time to study for the exam so this month I only earned 76,000 yen so it’s really tight again. I’m starting to think I should try something else instead. I want to get married and have a family in the future but working like this it’ll never be possible…

Interview with K-san, July 2007

1. Introduction

Freeters—part-time workers aged between 15 and 34 years who are not students or housewives—are the poster child of today’s structural precarity. It is well documented that since the recession of the 1990s the Japanese employment environment has significantly changed. With the deregulation of labour laws, particularly the Labour Dispatch Law in 2004 by the Koizumi government, companies have been able to hire increasing numbers of irregular workers in their bid to remain globally competitive in a progressively neoliberal global market.¹ Youth employment in Japan (and elsewhere) has been significantly affected by these changes and is ever more precarious (Brinton 2010; Furlong 2007; Honda 2004a, b; Inui et al. 2007; Obinger 2009). Today’s youth must therefore make their way in an employment market that is markedly different from their parent’s generation. Freeters (and other irregular workers) are thus in a perilous position—forced to negotiate a new employment market that for all its ‘new’ flexibility remains remarkably rigid. Full-time jobs continue to be advertised with age limits of 34 and moving from the irregular employment market to regular remains difficult.

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¹ In 2009 the percentage of irregular workers rose to 37.8% in Japan (Weathers 2009). Since 2011 the figure purportedly hovers at around 35% (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2012).
because companies often continue to prefer younger (cheaper) workers than those who have worked ‘irregularly’ (Kosugi 2003). At the same time, work and life course expectations have not changed at the same rate. With limited skills, support or understanding male freeters often struggle both financially and socially as they move into their late 20s and 30s.

This paper, drawing on two main periods of ethnographic research in 2006–2007 and 2010 in Hamamatsu city, Shizuoka Prefecture, explores why male freeters often felt that they would fail no matter what they did; be it either failing themselves by giving up on their dreams or failing to become a full adult member of society in the eyes of those around them and wider society. Importantly, however, this expectation of failure applied only in cases where men wanted to marry and have families. It is thus argued that enduring life course expectations, gender norms, plus their own and women’s expectations combined to significantly affect male freeters’ life trajectories and contribute to what can be called the ‘freeter failure dilemma’.

So much has been written on freeters in Japanese that it is impossible, within the scope of this paper, to present an exhaustive survey and analysis of it. Most research has emerged in psychology, education, and sociology and the focus has been on defining, understanding and ultimately preventing others from becoming freeters (Murakami 2006; Tarōmaru and Toshirō 2006). Much of the stress is on individual choice, and on how individuals become freeters (Goto 2003) alongside analyses of the failing school-to-work transition (Honda 2004a; Kariya 1991; Kariya et al. 2000), the changed economic environment (Genda 2005; Higuchi 2001; Ōtake 2005; Tachibanaki 1998), and a hostile employment sphere (Miyamoto 2002). Studies from the perspective of gender are, however, largely absent from the freeter scholarship. Notable exceptions are Honda (2002); Murakami (2006); Tarōmaru (2007), yet the emphasis in their work rests mostly on female freeters. This paper contributes to and broadens that work by exploring male freeter’s trajectories from the perspective of gender and intimate relationships.

It is pertinent to ask why, with so many other types of irregular workers such as *baken shain* (temporary employees), *hiyatoi rōdōsha* (day labourers), *keiyaku shain* (contract employees) etc., we should continue to look at freeters. It is important to note that not only are freeters the only category of worker defined in the terms of youth (aged 15–34), none of these other employment categories has been singled out and made such a nationwide splash. The emergence of increasing numbers of male freeters, many of whom are now entering their late 20s and early 30s, does not account for the level of interest they have garnered. Yet, despite this they have come to overwhelmingly represent a generation of youth who have come of age in a time of significant economic and employment changes. Part of the answer lies in how freeters have been represented.

Two major views of freeters in scholarship (echoed in the media and wider public) are apparent; the first that youth today are parasitic, ambitionless, irresponsible, plagued with little perseverance, and lacking a work ethic. Their indulgent parents (the postwar baby boom generation; *dankai sedai*) are said to have worked hard to pull Japan out of the ashes to create an affluent society in which these soft ungrateful youth have grown up in and take for granted. In this view parents are also held accountable (e.g. Yamada 1999). The second view is that freeters are not to blame for their

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2. With thanks to the editors of SSJJ who proposed this apt phrase.

3. NEETs (youth who are Not in Employment, Education or Training) have also been big news in Japan; however, given that they are not employed they did not form a significant part of my study and are not discussed here.

4. In 1997 there were 490,000 male freeters and just over 1 million female freeters. In 2003 the number of male freeters had almost doubled to 980,000 whereas female freeters had only increased slightly to 1.19 million. In 2007 the numbers dropped slightly and were almost equal with 920,000 male freeters and 950,000 female freeters (Centre of Business Development Ability Association 2007).
current predicament (or that of Japan) but are rather victims of the economic recession, company restructuring, and the increasingly neoliberal economy (Genda 2005; Kosugi 2003; Miyamoto 2005; Tarōmaru and Toshirō 2006). It is important to note that whilst most of this work is gender neutral, studies of freeters only began to burgeon after increasing numbers of male middle-class youth began to enter irregular employment (Slater 2010).

With respect to male freeters, Honda (2002) argues that they have three tendencies: a) they have specific aspirations, for example, to be famous or to be self-employed; b) they are avoiding joining corporate society because they do not have enough confidence to work with and for a company. Moreover, they feel annoyance at having to adjust themselves to a corporate environment so have decided to do something else; and c) they have a negative self-image which is exacerbated by women and non-freeters because of the knowledge that their ability to form a family is limited. Consequently, as long as they remain a freeter they will not be able to become ichininmae (full adults).

Discussions pertaining to male freeters are not, however, just about young men avoiding corporate society and having less self/social responsibility than previous generations (cf. JILPT 2004), nor only about concerns over the future of the economy or the pension and welfare system, but rather are imbued with a moral discourse of what it is to be a productive citizen and an adult Japanese man. The links between salaried employment, maturity and masculinity are not new and have been acknowledged by a number of other authors (e.g. Dasgupta 2003, 2004; Itō 1996, 2002; Roberson 2003; Tanaka 2009). Tanaka (2009), for example, suggests that if salarymen refuse to cooperate with workplace demands of long hours and overtime, they cannot be considered to be full adults. Other authors such as Dasgupta (2005) and Lunsing (2001) have argued for the importance of marriage and stable employment in the attainment of full adult manhood. This work all focuses on expectations on and of men. I argue in the latter part of this article, however, that we need to move beyond only male experiences and begin to also explore the ways in which employment, ideals of masculinities, and maturity are intertwined and drawn on by both men and women in the construction of adult manhood. The largely negative discourse that surrounds freeters in the public imagination combined with the insistence of girlfriends that marriage to a freeter would be impossible is often a significant motivator for men to change their work status after reaching their late 20s. This simultaneously, however, contributed to a failure dilemma for many.

After a brief discussion of research methods this paper turns to an analysis of gendered ideologies of masculinity and adulthood and the ways in which freeters are positioned in relation to the two. We then explore two male freeters’ aspirations, their feelings of resignation and looming failure and how educational background played a role in the types of aspirations that the men held and likewise the kinds of failure they expected. In the final section of the paper we turn to marital aspirations and explore how male freeters’ expectations of marital roles and responsibilities combined with women’s expectations of marriage and their position in the labour market significantly contribute to feelings of pressure and expectations of failure.

2. Research Methods
This article is based on interviews of 38 freeters (aged from 19 to 34 years), 29 non-freeters (aged between 22 and 64 years), and in-depth participant-observation that was carried out for eight months when working with freeters, students, and full-time employees at a local nine-screen cinema in 2007. Follow-up interviews were subsequently conducted during 2010. Interviews were carried out in Japanese, loosely structured, lasted approximately two hours and covered individual life histories,
present lives, employment, relationships, marriage, friendships, their feelings about freeters and being a freeter, and their future aspirations. Everyone was interviewed formally at least twice and I met with them on informal occasions and at work in the case of cinema interviewees. The vast majority of interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. For those that were not, extensive notes were taken during the interview and afterwards.

There were a number of reasons why Hamamatsu, a city of around 800,000 people, was chosen as the site for this research. The first was that I had previously lived and worked there for four years from 2001–2005 and had a number of contacts in place. I was funded by the Japan Foundation for twelve months of fieldwork and thus deemed this prior contact to be critical (Bestor et al. 2003). In addition, most of the research regarding freeters that had been done prior to my fieldwork was carried out in large metropolitan cities such as Tokyo, and as wide-ranging quantitative studies (e.g. Honda 2002, 2005; JIL 2000, 2001; Kosugi 2003). I anticipated that ‘place’ would be an important factor to explore when investigating individuals’ experiences of being a freeter and it was therefore my aim to explore freeter experiences, aspirations, and gendered identities in a smaller city such as Hamamatsu where individuals remained within kin networks and local neighbourhoods.

The following section turns to an exploration of normative ideals of masculinity and adulthood in Japan to provide necessary background to situate the discourses that freeters and non-freeters alike were drawing on in their understandings of work, life course and masculinity, and subsequently in freeter narratives of failure.

2.1 Power of Gendered Ideologies: Masculinity and Adulthood

Masculinity studies in Japan have been gaining ground since the 1980s. This trend began when female feminist researchers began to look at the conflict that men face as a result of gender oppression, and much of the early research conducted on masculinities in Japan is in the field of psychology. In an early study Sekii (1989), for example, focused on how men may feel oppressed as a result of a gap between individual desires and social norms. This gap continues to be an important feature in studies of gender and identity formation in Japan. In the 1990s Itō Kimio, following this theme, was instrumental in disseminating information about the constraints that men feel as a result of gender norms to not only the academy but also to a public audience in books such as Dansei-gaku Nyūmon (Introduction to Men’s studies (1996) and Otokorashisa toiu Shinwa (The Myth of Manliness (2003).

In the early works, masculinity was taken to be natural and homogenous and was taken for granted. More recent research, however, has focused on the instability of gender identities and seeks to show diversity within masculinities (Taga 2005) with research focusing on homosexual masculinities (Lunsing 2001; McLelland 2003); transgender identities (Aoyama 2005; Lunsing 2005); and marginalised masculinities (Gill 2003; Roberson 2003). Despite this increasing diversity much research continues to focus on notions of hegemonic masculinity embodied in the figure of the Salaryman (Dasgupta 2004, 2005; Hidaka 2010; Itō 2002; Tanaka 2009). As a result, most authors working on Japanese masculinity draw on Connell’s influential theory of hegemonic masculinity. In

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5. In July 2005 the city population jumped from around 600,000 people to 800,000 when it merged with eleven surrounding towns and cities to become a ‘designated city’ (daiichi toshi) (http://www.city.hamamatsu.shizuoka.jp/foreign/english/outline/profile.htm).

6. Connell (1995, 2009) suggests that there are four overlapping dimensions that constitute hegemonic masculinity: power relations (which refers to the dominance of men via the subordination and oppression of women and other men); production relations (the gendered division of labour); emotional relations; and symbolic relations which express gender attributes (see also, Hidaka 2010).
the case of Japan, Itō (2002) suggests that hegemonic masculinity has three orientations which consist of: a) superiority, b) possession and c) power. For Itō, men are the sole possessors of power: men have power over women, and they dislike it when other men (superiors) have power over them. The possibility of women having any kind of power is not considered. This constitutes, however, a significant blind-spot in the literature of Japanese masculinities. Overwhelmingly, discussions are based on the perspective of individual males only. However, as I will illustrate in this paper, to understand how individual men are making their choices vis-à-vis identity construction as men we need to include an analysis of the perspectives (and affect) of women on the construction of adult masculinities.

Before doing this, however, it is pertinent to ask what makes a masculine adult man in Japan. Dasgupta (2000, 2003, 2004) has illustrated that normative ideals of salaryman masculinity have clear links to those related to samurai ideals. ‘Masculine’ men must physically act, have an ability to focus on and discipline the self, be diligent, tenacious, honourable, loyal, devoted to duty, and have the ability to endure. Indeed, when discussing what a masculine man is, my informants would often echo these ideals. In particular they emphasised that masculinity is the ability to persevere and overcome difficulties, to be decisive and responsible. Men who were considered unmasculine (otokorashi-kunai) were often described as lacking a sense of responsibility to others, of being weak emotionally/spiritually (seishinteki ni yowai), and of lacking the ability to make decisions without help. Changing jobs because of not being happy was considered negatively and was thought to exemplify an inability to endure and to represent selfishness. Male freeters, the antithesis of the salaried regular employee, were often harshly criticised in such terms. However, these critiques were not only about a perceived lack of masculinity among young male freeters but also about a lack of maturity. Indeed, many of the themes embodied in the image of a masculine man also constitute core components of adulthood (ichininmae), which perhaps helps explain why the dominant discourse of the salaryman remains so strong. For it is not only about being a manly man but about how to be a proper adult man.

In the eyes of my non-freeter informants, male freeters were failing to embody both norms of masculinity and the attributes of adulthood: they had neither achieved set role transitions (such as by successfully completing the school-to-(full-time)-work transition), nor did they display adult character qualities, especially with respect to notions of responsibility. As Sayuki, a pāto7 who worked at a café with a number of freeters, described:

Responsibility, they have it, but less than full-time workers…I think this is because they are young, and because their motivation is different to full-time workers; they put more emphasis on their private lives than on work … For example, when there is a coffee tasting session sometimes the store manager asks us to work an extra (paid) thirty minutes. However, often freeters say ‘Erm… I have plans already…I can’t’. It looks like they don’t want to do it and that it is ‘troublesome’ (komaru)… Even if something is not good, I think many freeters try their best, but, that kind of aspect – spiritually/mentally - they depend on others (amae). They don’t do it strictly, but they do it, without meaning to I guess … There is a good side too [to freeters] but of course, in Japanese society, now there are many freeters and as they get older… They have not much sense of responsibility I suppose. More often than a regular full-time employee they tend to think it is ok to quit…

For Sayuki, having and displaying responsibility and putting the workplace’s needs before one’s personal desires are core components of a mature person. Furthermore, she suggests that people who work as freeters are depending on others (amae) and this indicates that, for her, freeters are not mature persons regardless of their age.

It has long been suggested that maturity in Japan is the ability to control selfish desires and give up, or submit to, the demands of society (Smith 1983). Lebra (1976: 167), for example, states: “One’s capacity for *akirame* [resignation] is often taken as proof of maturity and wisdom.” Kinsella (1995: 242), meanwhile, suggests that for young people adulthood is not so much about the individual but rather about society and consists of having responsibility towards society, family and to the organisation in which one works. Conforming to expectations and working hard are thus core elements. At the same time, however, we should not take this to mean that the individual and his/her desires are not important. Plath (1980) reminds the reader that so long as an individual does not become selfish or self-centred the individual and individualism are valued. Consequently, maturity in Japan is (at its simplest) about the ability to navigate social expectations and personal desires. It is clear, however, that this is not the only factor at play. Other key components, as Sayuki points out, are having responsibility, having the ability to endure and overcome, being persistent, trying one’s best, and selflessness (Kondo 1990).

Whilst these themes are important irrespective of gender men and women are expected to achieve them differently: for men it is via stable employment and becoming a breadwinner, whereas for women marriage and childbirth continue to be stressed (Edwards 1990). Yet, age is a crucial factor in these expectations, as Sayuki’s comment above highlights: to a certain extent her co-workers’ lack of responsibility is excused due to their youth. As I’ve argued elsewhere (Cook 2012), freeters in their early 20s are going through a time of social becoming: a liminal period of transition through which they become increasingly aware of social expectations regarding their work and lifestyle choices, whilst also trying to make space for their desires and aspirations. Importantly, they are given the space to do so without being overly pressured. However, as male freeters age the pressures and expectations to start acting in a more responsible way increase, and the space to pursue individual desires constrains. Aspirations related to lifestyle, employment, and family creation become important arenas of negotiation, both in terms of what would be possible given education and employment backgrounds, and in terms of what partners expect and desire. Male freeters in their late 20s onwards most often negotiated these expectations by beginning the process of ‘giving in’ and starting to look for stable employment whilst narrating strong feelings of resignation and pending failure.

### 2.2 Aspiration, Resignation, and Failure

Whilst failure and resignation is, of course, a part of everyone’s lives irrespective of income and employment type, the precarity that many male freeters felt, coupled with their need, especially as they aged, to justify what they were doing to those around them, often resulted in many feeling strong pressure and a certainty that they were bound to fail in one way or another. Giving up on their aspirations was considered to be a failure to the self. Yet, at the same time many wanted to lead ‘regular’ lifestyles (*futsū na seikatsu*) in the future as the married breadwinner and father, which they felt was incompatible with pursuing their aspirations. The ways men imagined their futures and their failures were broadly related to education level.

Among university-educated men there were generally two opposing possibilities that male freeters raised for their futures. They would either (a) continue to work as a freeter whilst attempting to realise their aspirations (which did not include becoming a salaryman); perhaps not get married (unless they became financially successful); and have the door of full-time regular employment slam shut in their mid-30s. Or, (b) at some point give up on achieving their aspirations and attempt to find stable, regular work, thereby most likely (they felt) being able to get married and live a secure, regular life. In both of these scenarios a sense of failure was endemic. In the first, by continued pursuit of their
aspirations into their 30s men felt they would be failing to be ‘proper’ adult men because they would be unable to achieve the expected (and in most cases desired) adult role transitions, particularly with respect to marrying and having families. Yet in the second scenario they felt that they would have failed themselves by shelving their aspirations and succumbing to a way of working that many had been seeking to move away from.

Ken, a 24-year-old man, felt this particularly keen. He wanted to be a successful musician: he loved music and felt that it was a core part of who he was. He played gigs in Tokyo and occasionally Nagoya, made CDs of his music to sell when he played, and had profiles on Mixi and MySpace. He seemed driven to succeed. However, he gave himself a strict time-limit—if he was not successful by the age of 26 he would quit and search for a regular job despite the fact that he also had other options:

I love music; it’s really my dream to become successful. My mother is a folk musician and she understands my music. My father and uncle run a couple of restaurants, one of them overseas. They really want me to ‘be more serious’ and take over one of them and for the last few years I have worked in the summer months at the one overseas. I feel a lot of pressure from them and feel they are disappointed that I haven’t joined them, but I really don’t want that life. But at the same time I have to be realistic. I can’t keep trying to make it big forever, so we’ll see what happens…If I don’t start getting successful by the time I’m 26 I’ll have to start looking at regular jobs.

Ken was concerned about a number of things: a closing window of time in which he felt free to pursue his aspiration to become a musician; pressures he felt from his father and uncle who want him to be more responsible and help continue the family business; the feeling that he has disappointed them; and a strong desire to not work like they do.

Despite the fact that the option of taking over a profitable and exclusive restaurant was available to him Ken suggested that he would have to quit being a musician in his mid-20s as a result of the difficulty of finding a regular job as a man becomes older. In a later interview he inferred that he would be able to keep his identity as a musician more easily if he worked in an office job and continued to play in his free time than he would if he were to take over the family business. Whilst Mathews (2002), in his discussion of contemporary artists, suggests that many men were unwilling to compromise and bend to the pressures from parents, friends and partners to bring home a good income and lead a ‘normal’ life, Ken anticipated having to conform, at least with regards to making a stable income. Yet, when we consider that for his uncle and father a ‘normal’ life is running the family business, it is also possible to suggest that Ken is indeed, like Mathew’s artists, resisting the ‘normative’ expectations of him, at least at the familial level.

In his narrative Ken clearly follows social norms in suggesting that there comes an age where a man must put aside his personal aspirations and become more responsible. He iterated a worry that came up repeatedly in interviews with male freeters: the regular employment market continues to have clear age-grades and cut-off points despite the increased precarity of youth employment, making it difficult for freeters in their late 20s and 30s to find full-time work (Kosugi 2003). Recent reports support this feeling: the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare recently reported that 40% of companies negatively evaluate a candidate who has had experience working as a freeter, with only 2% giving a positive evaluation of someone with such experience (MHLW 2011). Ken was therefore

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8. The report states that approximately 68% of male freeters between the ages of 25–29 have previously sought regular employment, compared to approximately 16% of 18–19 year olds and 46% of 20–24 year olds. For individuals who had worked as a freeter for more than three years roughly 50% were successful in finding a full-time position. It is not clear, however, what the ages of these 50% were (MHLW 2011).
resigned to finding regular work in the future, but he remained invested in maintaining his musical identity whilst conforming to social norms of adult manhood. Many men did not, however, have the kind of good education and profitable family business to fall back on if they failed to achieve their aspirations.

2.2.1 Aspiring to White-Collar Work

Whilst men from middle-class backgrounds tended to have strong aspirations to become musicians, artists, and entrepreneurs, those men who had junior high and high school educations tended to actually aspire to finding a regular full-time white-collar post. Most, however, were not holding their breath as to the possibilities of successfully finding such work. Yoshio, for example, thought that he would be unable to find a full-time job because he was already in his early 30s, had no high school diploma, and a varied employment history that consisted of him having been a bookseller, working for a removals company and most recently, a host. Companies, he thought, would not look twice at him. Yet he was desperate to find such work, largely as a result of a serious romantic relationship he was in.

During our encounters it was clear that Yoshio was strongly conflicted regarding his future work life and his ability to both get and then subsequently maintain a full-time position due to his previous work experiences:

The best job I had was working in Book Off. I really enjoyed working with the customers, most of whom were young, and the relationship amongst staff was really good. My boss and supervisor were good people who were happy to listen to staff’s opinions. I felt free to express my thoughts and opinions about work and that made the working environment much better … I felt free (jiyu na kanji). It was really enjoyable, and it was a constructive place to work (kensetsuteki ni). I stopped working there because I was mentally/emotionally weak (seishinteki ni yowai kara). My mother had become ill with cancer. I was very busy at work and my body got weak. Then I got mentally/emotionally weaker. In the end my physical condition was destroyed (taichō kuzushitatte). I became unable to work and so handed in my resignation.

Although Yoshio’s job was satisfying to him he came under increasing pressure and was unable to balance the demands of work and his mother’s illness. After taking some time off and recovering he decided not to rejoin the bookstore because he felt unsure about his physical condition. Although he was sure they would re-employ him he did not want to cause them any trouble (meiwaku) if he were to get sick again. When recounting his illness and subsequent resignation he seemed ashamed that he had been unable to balance the stressors and referred a number of times to his weakness. For example, after recovering he took a job at a removals company because he thought it would make him stronger. However, after two days on the job he quit:

It was exhausting. I had to move big boxes and furniture all day, and I don’t have much muscle. By the end of the first day my body was so painful. At the end of the second day I couldn’t take it. I realized that this was not a job for me. I am not strong enough.

His most recent job had been as a host. He worked for just over a year but then quit due to feeling an unsuitability to the role:

It was a really difficult job because I prefer to listen rather than speak. And in that job it is necessary to speak a lot and make conversation with women. I also had to drink as part of the job, but not get drunk…that was really hard. But we had to drink to keep the women company and to sell them more alcohol. I worked six days a week, usually from 10pm to 7am, but when it was my turn to open I had to be there at 8pm. Also, we often didn’t finish at 7am – if customers wanted an extension we’d stay open longer, so usually I got home by about lunchtime. I worked there until I broke my body (karada wo kowashita). Before I quit I was
talking to two of my co-workers who had second jobs at a convenience store. I was thinking about taking a second job to earn more money as many of my co-workers were doing. Anyway, immediately they told me that I wouldn’t be able to do it because it was too exhausting.

Here Yoshio again draws on his physical weakness as his reason for quitting. However, it’s also clear that his ‘weakness’ was also recognised by his co-workers who advised him that he would be unable to cope with two jobs. When discussing wanting to find a regular job, he was unsure if he would be able to remain in such a job for the long-haul, and worried that he would quit. Yoshio does not only suggest that he will fail but he also exhibits a sense of failed masculinity. Whilst Hidaka (2010) notes that young salarymen often discuss male freeters as ‘failed men’; here we see that men working in the same way as Yoshio also perceived him to be weaker than they were and thereby placed him in a subordinate and failed position (Connell 1995).

So why, given that Yoshio was well aware of the difficulties of finding a regular job and his uncertainty as to whether physically he would be able to handle the stress of a full-time job, did he aspire to finding such work? Why was he setting himself up to fail? From his narrative it is clear that his motivation was strongly influenced by his romantic relationship:

I want us to live together and get married, but it is impossible now because I am not really working … I think we can only go to the next step after I am on a stable path (antei na michi). But I worry, because I think that it will be difficult for me to get on a stable path. Companies want people with experience, and I have none. So I don’t know if I can ever get such a job. But if I study design and get some experience then maybe I will be able to find a position in a small company…maybe…

Yoshio is clearly concerned about the repercussions that his work background may have on his desire to further his relationship. He also clearly states a prevalent attitude among my informants: that to get married, one has to be on a stable path already.

2.2.2 Marital Aspirations

In contrast to Mathews and White (2004), who suggest that freeters (and other non-conforming youth) collectively represent a refusal to enter the adult social order, it is clear that the majority of freeters, in smaller urban areas at least, are not rejecting the adult social order. Many, once they reach their late 20s scramble to enter it through giving up on their aspirations in order to participate in stable work and forming families despite an expectation of failure. Marriage was consequently a cornerstone of men’s feelings about their futures.

Marriage as a signifier of full social adulthood in Japan has long been acknowledged. For example, a number of authors such as Edwards (1990), Lunsing (2001), Dasgupta (2005) and Hamabata (1990) explore the widely-held belief of the importance of marriage in the attainment of ichininmae (full adult status). Despite the fact that increasing numbers of people choose to postpone or not marry at all (cf. Nemoto 2008), marriage is still considered important, ‘natural’ (atarimae/shizen), a part of common sense (jōshiki), and an important transition to adulthood. Opting out of, or being unable to marry, therefore often carries the implication that a person is both strange (hen) and is not a full adult (Edwards 1990; Lunsing 2001). Murata (2000), illustrates how this can have significant repercussions on single middle-aged men in the workplace, and Lunsing (2001) has discussed a variety of strategies that individuals develop to deal with or avoid these normative demands. For example, whilst some gay men and women marry and attempt to ‘pass’ for straight in order to conform to expectations, other individuals ridicule the system and avoid situations where people might ask their marital status. Some younger men reject expectations outright. For example, Hideki, a 25 year old working in a brand clothing store, stated:
I’m not interested in marriage at all. I’ll never get married. I’m gay and that’s me. To be honest, I am happy that I won’t have that pressure. All my friends know. The only person that doesn’t know is my dad. He couldn’t handle it, so I’ll probably never tell him, well, maybe only on his deathbed! But anyway, I’m glad I won’t have that pressure.

Many heterosexual male freeters, however, want to ‘opt-in’ but are unable to without changing their employment status. They were adamant—though often conflicted—that on marriage men have to become the main breadwinner. For example, Masao was 32 years old and had been a freeter for most of his adult life. In his early 20s he had joined an IT company but soon quit, having not liked the company. His girlfriend, Sumiko, had been working as a freeter since graduating from high school and was working seven days a week. They had been together for six years and felt that it was time to get married. Masao was searching for a full-time job but seemed relatively unenthusiastic about it. On one occasion when I met them both together Masao said: ‘I should get a seishain position. I have to really. I will need one if we get married: it will be my responsibility to be a breadwinner. I accept that. But I feel a lot of pressure about it…’ Sumiko interjected: ‘I don’t want to work seven days a week anymore. I want to get married. I want to be a housewife and work part-time, two or three days a week. It is not my responsibility to keep earning all the money.’ At this Masao just sighed and it’s fair to deduce that they have had this conversation before. The pressure he felt from Sumiko was exacerbated by the fact that his IT qualifications were 10 years out of date and he had, as of yet, had no luck getting any interviews for a position. A mutual friend confided later that he felt that Masao would not be searching for full-time employment if it were not for Sumiko’s insistence that it was not her responsibility to earn the money.

Male desire (and expectation) to marry is therefore only part of the story. Most women I knew, unlike Sumiko, made it clear that whilst they might date a man in irregular employment they would not marry or live with him unless he found stable work, regardless of their feelings. Not only did working as a freeter say something negative about his character, but moreover, they felt that the risks of marrying someone who was not being financially responsible, or who might be fired at any moment, would just be too great. In addition, most suggested that their parents would not allow such a marriage to take place.

Honda (2002) notes that female freeters also strongly critique and reject male freeters as a marriage partner. Young women I worked with added a caveat. For example, a 22-year-old female freeter stated:

I think that freeters don’t work much; they work only when they want and however much they want… I would not want to date or marry a freeter … Freeters are okay when they have an aim they are trying to achieve. I suppose if I met a freeter who had a very strong drive to achieve his purpose I would date him, but if he did not know what he wanted to do that would be impossible (zettai muri da yo) … working properly (chanto) is important.

Her point was echoed by the majority of my informants. Whilst generally male freeters are not considered marriageable, one that has a particular (and achievable) dream is understandable, and therefore not to be ruled out entirely. The desire to not marry a freeter, whilst rooted in strong postwar gender norms regarding male/female roles and from (continued) demands on women to attain full adulthood through marriage and motherhood, also derives from women’s own precarious position in the employment market.9

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9. Women have long operated as the main low paid reserve temporary labour force in post-war Japan (Broadbent 2001). Government statistics illustrate that women continue to constitute approximately 70% of the irregular labour market (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2011).
For women in secure employment the issue was somewhat different. Aya, a married 30-year-old woman working in a career-track job commented:

I could not have married a freeter. I would compare my freeter husband to my friends’ husbands and I would be worried about what they would think … If I had to say my husband was a freeter, I would feel embarrassed … also, if I was with a freeter there might be problems because I am a full-time salaried employee at a good company. So a male freeter would probably feel inferior (hikeme) because my salary would be higher than his. … If we got married we might not be able to do well in the relationship because I could earn a lot and feed him (tabesasete), and I think I might bring up in arguments that his wage was lower than mine, and that would cause problems in the relationship.

Within her narrative, Aya very clearly suggests not only that status is important (she would be ‘embarrassed’ if her husband were in such a job) but that men should earn more than their wives in order not to feel inferior to them. Despite being a committed career woman and on numerous occasions recounting that men and women should not only have equal rights, but in reality, be treated equally, she also here suggests that she felt that her husband earning more than her was how it should be and that if he were not she would likely also resent and use this fact in arguments.

The economic maintenance of masculine identity is not then only about male pride, but is a fertile negotiation point and potential battleground even when women have the capability to be financially independent. This is not, however, limited only to freeters. Hidaka (2010: 93) posits that for couples who both work full time, what may sustain (or undermine) a sense of masculinity may be who earns more. A few of my participants (male and female) professed a belief in equality and wanted their households to be ‘fifty-fifty’ when they marry, but at the same time they suggested that realistically this would be unlikely given that men (in full-time jobs at least) earn considerably more than their female counterparts. Consequently, it is unsurprising that most men felt that if they were to marry, then the responsibility of earning would be theirs.

Taga (2001, 2003) has suggested that love can be a significant motivating force for some men to change the way they think about gender, leading to constructions of alternative masculinities. However, as can be seen in some of the narratives presented above, male informants often felt pressured into conforming to normative ideals of masculinity rather than being brought around to alternative ways of thinking and living. This significantly contributed to their feelings of being caught in a Catch-22 of either failing to achieve their aspirations or failing as adult men. The effect (and affect) that women have on the construction and negotiation of male gendered identities in Japan is thus substantial; both in terms of women’s voiced expectations and in terms of what men expect women to want.

3. Conclusions
Throughout all of the narratives was the clear sense that male freeters’ desires to create alternative lifestyles collided with normative ideas of adult manhood. Intertwined with this was a moral discourse of what constitutes a productive adult citizen: being a (male) freeter is considered to be not only an antithesis to normative ideals of productive adult manhood but an increasing risk to the future competitiveness and profitability of the Japanese state in years to come (Driscoll 2007; Hook and Takeda 2007). However, considering that up to a third of the workforce are now employed on

10. Comparing full-time salaried employees, women earn two-thirds of their male counterparts (OECD 2007), however, when comparing female part-time workers to male full-time workers women earn roughly 50% less compared to men (Broadbent 2003).
irregular contracts and the clear indication that more employers want increasing numbers of irregular workers (Weathers 2009), there is now a fundamental contradiction between gendered life course ideals and contemporary working styles. Despite these changes (or perhaps because of them) normative ideals of masculinity remain vested in the figure of the regular salaried worker, a position that is increasingly difficult to attain.

Although ideas of gendered adulthood, social expectations and norms infused all the narratives as each male freeter grappled with the ideals of what adult men should do and be in Japan, this does not mean that they decided to uncritically conform to expectations. Indeed it was in exploring their choices and alternative ways of working that they were most buffeted by societal norms and made most aware of what many young male students just assumed to be the regular life course and part-and-parcel of life. Whilst freeters are structurally limited—as a result of their limited education or lack of the right kind of work experience—they are not just victims without any control. They sought to have more than was expected of them: the high school graduates who seemed set for blue-collar work often wanted stable, white-collar work; the university graduates wanted freedom from white-collar work: they wanted to set their own hours, have financial and work-life independence, and to carve out their own lifestyles instead of having them dictated by a company.

The desire to marry was, however, a critical part of freeters’ decisions as to just how far, and how long, they would pursue their personal aspirations before resigning themselves to giving up and pursuing a more stable path. Most of the men I knew clearly ascribed to the ideology of being the provider and they sought to achieve, or felt that they needed or were expected to at least strive to achieve a stable job with a stable salary. Many felt that marriage would be impossible without such financial stability and the women/girlfriends in their lives concurred: women wanted and expected their future husbands to be providers, as a result of both their own precarity in the labour market and their continuing expectations related to marriage and motherhood. This significantly contributed to a freeter-failure dilemma where men expected to fail. Only men who were adamant that they did not want to marry felt able to transcend social expectations of appropriate adult manhood. Whilst non-conformity to dominant ideals is often suggested as a route by which new forms of lifestyle and gender norms may be created (e.g. Lunsing 2001; Mathews and White 2004), it seems clear that while youth continue to hold to rigid postwar gender norms, and whilst women reject male freeters’ ability to form families, there is little chance that these youth, at least, will be the vanguard of a new gender order (cf. Mathews and White 2004).

To conclude, there are two aspects in particular that I suggest need further consideration. Firstly, the role of women in facilitating and generating heterosexual masculine identities needs greater exploration. It is clear that women, in the role of girlfriends, play a strong role in the choices that men were making or felt that they had to make in their futures. The construction and negotiation of gendered identities between men and their girlfriends is a complicated dance within which it is possible to explore the inherent instability of gendered identities and the various ways in which gender norms are negotiated and replicated. When exploring masculinities we need to therefore move away from the individual and his subjectivity and pay more attention to romantic relationships, the peer group, family, and community relationships.

Secondly, whilst academics of Japanese masculinities (myself included) have begun to explore in more depth the complex entanglements between the demands of adulthood and constructions of masculinity, I increasingly question whether exploring masculinities in and of itself takes us far enough. While common sense ideas of gender and maturity prevail, it seems that we are unable to go much beyond discussions of normative ideals of masculinity, and I question whether this gets us any closer to a fuller understanding of the conflicts, strategies and negotiations that go into identity
conception in contemporary Japan. Perhaps it is time we shift our focus away from the ‘masculine’ to an analysis of embodied personhood, of which masculinity is just one part.

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