Home alone: the individualization of young, urban Japanese singles

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Received 7 April 2008; in revised form 21 July 2008; published online 23 February 2009

Abstract. Social life in Japan has been historically orientated towards hierarchical networks of social integration starting in the family home and extending to the neighborhood, company, and nation. In the postwar period, households and life courses were largely fixed, mediated by company society, a standard breadwinner family model and an ascent up an owner-occupied housing ladder. The bursting of the economic bubble two decades ago, and the subsequent ‘lost decade’, disrupted established flows into employment, family life, and owner-occupation. We examine recent restructuring of life courses around the home which has become characteristic of social changes and a medium of individualization. The home, once ingrained with notions of the eternal Japanese family, has become a conduit of atomization for younger generations who have experienced radical shifts in social and economic conditions. Since the 1990s numbers of single-only and couple-only households have ballooned while marriage and fertility rates have declined. Although homeownership norms have persisted, new patterns of renting and single living in the city, or remaining in the family home as a ‘parasite single’, are increasing. We consider how the reconstitution of ‘home’ under more insecure housing and employment conditions is embedded with the reshaping of life courses, housing pathways, and patterns of urban space and living.

Introduction

The culture of owner-occupied housing consumption that emerged in Japan in the postwar era, in alignment with the company system, rapid economic growth, and ‘developmental state’, promoted a social mainstream system orientated around the nuclearization of families and the formation of a homogenized urban middle class (Hirayama, 2007). Life-course and household patterns increasingly revolved around a standard male breadwinner model, a predictable housing and occupational ladder, and considerable socioeconomic stability. However, the economic recession that Japan entered in the 1990s, following the collapse of the ‘bubble economy’, augmented a period of destabilization. This era, now known as the ‘lost decade’, instigated a fragmentation of the social mainstream and diversification of housing pathways and life-course trajectories. Critically, new household and urban patterns have emerged, and the home, historically a symbol of stability and permanence, has become a feature of social transformation.

The generation born in the 1970s who entered adulthood during the ‘lost decade’ have experienced a more unstable socioeconomic environment, labor-market casualization, and deterioration in housing-market conditions. This group, known in popular discourses as the ‘lost generation’, is following different pathways into adult life, demonstrating new sets of values and more variegated and unstable patterns of household formation. The outcome has been a sharp increase in single and couple-only households and a marked decline in marriage and fertility rates. Indeed, it has been argued that many of the lost generation are reticent about entering the adult social order and have become more individualized (Mathews and White, 2004).
We explore emerging patterns of individualization among young people in Japan with particular reference to shifting socioeconomic conditions and the reorganization of dwelling and urban space in terms of the home. In recent years social fragmentation and individualization have been central to Japanese social debates, reflecting an emergent schism between older generations and new cohorts of more self-orientated and socially isolated younger people. Compared with the global proliferation of risk featured in theories of late modernity and postmodernity (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990), however, Japan's society and urban structure have mediated a particularly localized form of individualization and destabilization from which to reflect upon the interaction of global and local features in international contexts. Processes of social and urban reproduction appear to be in disarray, although new forms of household formation and routes into adulthood are emerging that continue to reflect peculiarly Japanese social and urban features. We address how these new forms have come about and begun to generate transformations in domestic spaces involving greater fragmentation, atomization, and isolation within the home as well as the structure of urban neighborhoods. Essentially, we draw on an emerging indigenous and international literature as well as secondary survey data in order to identify and illustrate patterns of transformation.

We begin by looking at specific features of, and intergenerational differences in, Japanese modernity. We then address the origins of social and household formation in Japan, identifying key drivers and periods of consolidation and fragmentation. Focus is then turned to the homes, households, and life courses of younger people in Japan, which have been increasingly atomized and fragmented, and markedly different to the generation that preceded them. Growing numbers of young people are living alone, renting compact single apartment units, or staying indefinitely in the parental home. These transformations in the homes and households of younger people appear to be strongly influencing urban life and the spatial organization of dwelling in cities.

### Japanese modernity and intergenerational differences

There have been substantial differences between Japan's postwar generations. Each new cohort has been seen as deviant in some way. The first postwar generation, who experienced impoverished social conditions followed by remarkable economic growth, was considered less disciplined and more hedonistic than their elders. In the 1980s a 'new breed', or shinjinrui, of young people were identified who had not experienced postwar poverty and who seemed even less selfless or hardworking. These generational differences have been explained as embedded features of Japanese life courses rather than historic shifts. For Foner (1984), inequalities between young and old are built into the very fabric of many societies and generate generational conflict, seen as a feature of the life course. The tensions and rebellions that inequalities create do not necessarily lead young people to form a society that is different from their elders'. Rather, as young people get older they become like their elders, and eventually replace them. For Mathews and White (2004) the life-course approach seems to have been valid through most of Japanese postwar history, and "young Japanese critical of their elders have for the most part eventually become very much like their elders" (page 5).

Nevertheless, following more recent social, economic, and technological revolutions, newer generations have had to negotiate transition into adulthood under qualitatively different conditions. Only if society retains continuity over generations does generational conflict remain a matter of life course. If it is a matter of 'history', social change can be understood as a process by which the young reshape the world which they inherit. Rapid economic growth and advancing technology may have thus given a new meaning to the generational conflict. Mead (1970) proposed that societies across the globe are becoming more 'prefigurative' with young people's mastery of technology giving
them an advantage over their elders that continues to grow as long as capitalism continues to generate new technologies. Indeed, the latest generation in Japan is markedly different in terms of technological capabilities. However, young people of the ‘lost generation’ have been disadvantaged in other ways compared with older cohorts who formed families and took jobs during a period of increasing affluence. Young people have had to accept diminishing employment prospects and intensified economic risk following the ‘lost decade’.

Mathews and White (2004) suggest that the generation gap in Japan marks a more historic shift, the impact of which has been intensified by the stability and rigidity of the previous order. In Western societies there are pluralistic paths into adulthood with multiple opportunities or ‘second chances’, which serve to diffuse the tension of entering the ‘adult social order’. In comparison, the Japanese order has been inflexible and orientated around institutionalized life-course schedules. There are key windows into higher education and in particular to corporate ‘salaryman’ employment. There have always been those who do not follow this course and young people have “long chaffed at demands of the adult social order” (page 4). Nonetheless, the ‘standard path’ has been the Japanese cultural ideal and rigidly enforced in institutional practices. While the social order raised the standard of living, there was little justification to do anything but follow. Conditions of economic growth and social stability have, for almost a generation, however, been in reverse.

Our contention is that the changing orientation of young people around the family home and housing ladder, once a bedrock of social formation and aligned to the lifelong corporate employment system and Japanese family welfare practices, is becoming a conduit of social transformation that is generating new social and spatial relations. Specifically, the fragmentation and destabilization of employment, housing markets, and family life in the wake of the ‘lost decade’ have diversified pathways into and through adult life, which may represent a different stage of modernity. A particular feature has been the appearance of large groups of young people ostensibly inhibited in adopting, or resistant to, established adult middle-class roles and forming their own family homes. Of course, many young people still aspire to mainstream life courses but have to negotiate more markedly hazardous socioeconomic conditions compared with their predecessors, which has impacted the formation and meaning of home. Young people are becoming increasingly individualized, socially, and atomized, spatially, within either their parent’s homes or single apartment units.

While the emerging life trajectories of young people in Japan are increasingly individualized and laden with risk, Japanese society is not necessarily following the same paths of late modernity, or ‘risk society’, that have been identified in Western societies (Beck, 1992). The deepening of economic globalization leading to the destabilization of labor markets and the rollback of social-welfare safety nets in postindustrial countries have been associated with social and ontological processes of individualization. These involve intensified self-reflexivity and consumption-orientated identification practices that align with the fragmentation of social life and the break-down of family and community. Japan, however, has historically challenged universalistic notions of modernity and formed a distinctive pattern of urbanization and modernization (Clammer, 1995; Sugimoto, 1997). Japanese modernity has seen a synthesis of capitalist materialism with an overarching concern with social harmony and intergenerational continuity. Indeed, there has been a ‘socialist’ characteristic to Japanese capitalism, pervaded by rhetoric of social utility and concern for the protection rather than destruction of sociality, and the reduction of alienation and risk rather than its intensification (Kenrick, 1990).
Japanese modernity retained substantial capacity for the management of risk, and the negative, individualistic subjectivities associated with Western modernity have not erupted in the same way. Clammer (2000) is thus resistant to the transfer of Western categories of the ‘self’, as the individual conjured by Japanese modernity remains more bound to collectivity. Nevertheless, there is some acceptance that, in recent decades, structures of Japanese modernity have begun to unravel. Since the mid-1990s, companies have dismantled lifelong employment security and welfare practices, while the government has reacted to public funding crises. In the wake of institutional restructuring, the standard family system, built on this framework, has also come increasingly undone. Subsequently, the social solidarity which epitomized postwar modernity has dissipated and public discourses have increasingly addressed social fragmentation, growing inequalities, and individual insecurity (see Shirahase, 2006; Tachibanaki, 2006). While Japan appears to have begun a period of radical social change characterized by individualization and risk, young people are adapting less predictably than assumed by Western modernity and under very different conditions to those experienced by previous generations in Japan.

The Japanese home and the social mainstream
In Japan’s modern era, discourses concerning the home have revolved around an ideal of family life that has been resistant to radical shifts in family relationships, the changing composition of households, and transformations in the spatial organization of housing units and cities (Ronald, 2007). The home, as a conduit of social identities and relationships, has played a significant role in maintaining social integrity during periods of rapid modernization and urbanization. The word *ie*, meaning home in Japanese, also denotes the family house and household inside, as well as the ‘house’ as a paterfamilias system with roles and responsibilities passed down and across generations (see Koyano, 1996). During industrialization and urbanization, the social and spatial organization of the home was dominated by two ideological forces. On one side was an ideal of a mythical, premodern *ie*, and on the other side was *katei*, a more Western notion of household associated with intimate nuclear families and modern family life (Sand, 1998). The early-20th-century housing and architectural forms that emerged reflected both, with rapid migration to the cities stimulating the expansion of family rental dwellings.

Despite radical changes, or perhaps because of them, the house and home remained symbols of social integrity and continuity, and a locus of socialization processes (Hendry, 1992). The domestic ideal, however, was increasingly modern and middle class. New gender roles (of homemakers and breadwinners) and domestic practices (such as family meals) emerged which provided substance to images of modern Japanese families and homes (see Koizumi, 1979; Nishikawa, 1995).

Following postwar economic rebuilding, housing became a focus of urban and social reconstruction. The restructuring of the urban and residential system through the establishment of the Japanese Housing Corporation (JHC) and the Government Housing Loan Corporation (GHLC) in the early 1950s, along with rapid economic growth, promoted the formation of a ‘social mainstream’ orientated around the achievement of middle-class identities, family self-reliance, and economic productivity (Hirayama, 2007). The expansion of homeownership was central in this orientation and became a key mechanism by which to place and normalize nuclear families in and around middle-class lifestyles. While GHLC loans provided a means for young households to get on the property ladder, Japan’s ‘company system’ of employment provided income stability for families as well as housing loans for older employees, which reinforced the owner-occupied housing ladder.
According to housing surveys, by 1955, 52% of families aspired to buying their own home, rising to 74% in 1966 and 90% in 1969 (Tamaki, 1974). ‘Social mainstream society’ was organized around a ‘social flow’ of people moving from the outside to the inside, with the housing ladder as an important conduit in this flow (Hirayama, 2007). People were encouraged to move from a rental dwelling to an owner-occupied dwelling and from a condominium to a single-family home. The subsequent aggregation of moves up the ‘housing ladder’ swelled the ‘homeowner society’, and by the end of the 1960s urban homeownership rates had settled at over 60%, compared with 22% in 1941 (Hayakawa and Ohmoto, 1985). Those inside the owner-occupier, social mainstream accumulated substantial housing assets along with rapid economic growth and the augmentation of house prices.

A spatial transformation was also involved in the postwar modernization of families, homes, and cities. The construction of modern, concrete multifamily apartment blocks (danchi) by the JHC created domestic spaces with individual private bedrooms, which replaced mixed sleeping arrangements. Dining kitchens (DKs) with tables and chairs also replaced traditional cha-no-ma family rooms. The popularity of modern family living in such spaces drove the transformation of neighborhoods and the expansion of suburbs. The construction of new homes reflected a particular image of the modern nuclear family, with a breadwinning father and homemaking mother. Long commutes became normal with the growing popularity of suburban communities where modern apartments and houses could be constructed. DK arrangements gave way to living, dining, and kitchen (LDK) arrangements with the expansion of living rooms as well as the number of bedrooms.

The postwar housing system consolidated the social mainstream, the standard family model, and standard life courses. Pathways into adulthood and parenthood were also embedded in company society which followed very rigid practices concerning the age of recruits, speed of progress through the company hierarchy, and the pace of wage increases. Growing affluence and an emerging culture of consumption also helped reinforce a unified sense of middle-class status among regular workers and their families. By the mid-1970s more than 90% of Japanese ranked themselves in the

![Figure 1. Self-ranking of social class in Japan 1958–2004 (source: Hirayama, 2007, page 22; Cabinet Office public opinion survey).]
middle classes (figure 1). For Murakami (1984) this marked the collapse of social classes and the rise an ‘affluent society’ made up of a huge, homogeneous ‘new middle mass’, although others suggest that the ‘feeling of middle-classness’ had become a surface feature rather than an end of social class (Kishimoto, 1978). More critically, the system orientated toward company employment and homeownership embedded a sense of solidarity and insulated families from risk.

The fragmentation of the social mainstream
Japan’s introduction to post-Fordist socioeconomic conditions was extremely abrupt. During the 1980s the Japanese economy formed a speculative bubble. By 1990, driven by overinflation in land and stock values, the bubble reached its limits and subsequently burst. The ‘lost decade’ began with a sharp decline in economic values followed by a sustained recession. The stock market shed more than 80% of its value between 1989 and 2003, while housing property values declined by around 40%. Owner-occupiers experienced major capital losses, undermining the asset security of homeownership. The corporate sector was also thrown into disarray as the scale of postbubble losses became evident, undermining lifelong employment practices. Families faced not only harsh new economic realities, but also a new social context where the certainties of the Japanese system began to unravel. This next decade reforged relationships between families, companies, and society with younger households in particular adopting new, more fragmented and atomized shapes, and following less predictable pathways.

The homeowner society unravels
Once owner-occupied housing began generating capital losses, the number of homeowners trapped in negative equity ballooned along with increases in mortgage defaults. In terms of asset accumulation and mortgage burdens, a sharp contrast developed between cohorts who entered the homeownership market before, and those who purchased at the height of the bubble (Hirayama and Ronald, 2008). Older people who bought their homes earlier retained considerable housing equity. Younger homeowners, however, found themselves in expensive properties with little expectation of capital gains.

Figure 2. Homeownership rate by age (source: Hirayama, 2007, page 29; Statistics Bureau housing survey of Japan and housing and land survey of Japan).
Even though housing values dropped in the 1990s, home purchase still requires taking on substantial debt, while job security and seniority-based wage increases, necessary for servicing mortgage debt have been undermined. Consequently, there has been substantial divergence between young and old in rates of homeownership, which fall sharply among the young (figure 2). Many young people appear to have become more cautious about becoming owner-occupiers. Market entry is increasingly being delayed in the lifecycle or avoided, even among those who are better off or in more secure positions.

Family and household shifts
Along with the impact of the long-term recession and transformations in the housing system, household formation and life courses have rapidly diversified in recent years. Rising marriage ages, falling fertility rates, and increasing longevity have become characteristic, and have begun to strongly influence intimate relationships and the organization of the home. The propensity is for increasing numbers of single households and couple-only households without children. According to the population census the proportion of nuclear households (married couple and children) dropped below 30% in 2005, while the number of single and couple-only households has almost doubled since 1980 and now accounts for half of all households (figure 3). In Tokyo it has been estimated that, in 2006, 43% of households contained just one person (IPPS, 2008), the majority being under 40 and unmarried.

As generations of Japanese have developed expectations of home purchase as a necessary step in starting a family, problems in the housing system appear associated

![Figure 3. The number of households by household type (percentage) (source: population census).]
with delays in family formation. Mulder (2005) argues that societies with a strong homeownership norm combined with low accessibility to owner-occupied housing impose greater restrictions on couples in forming marital or nonmarital partnerships, in bearing children, or even just moving out of the parental home.

In many societies a plentiful supply of good rental housing stock at affordable rates provides a means for couples to form their own households outside the parental home, as well as the stability necessary for child rearing. Despite Japan’s considerable stock of rental housing (around 39% nationally), the structure of the rental sector has impeded family formation. The size and quality of rental housing is largely inferior to owner-occupied housing. Owner-occupied homes have an average floor space of 124 m$^2$ per unit, whereas rental homes have 46.3 m$^2$. This compares with respective ratios of 124 m$^2$ and 76 m$^2$ in Germany, 114 m$^2$ and 76 m$^2$ in France, and 95 m$^2$ and 75 m$^2$ in Britain (Oi et al, 2007). The majority of rental housing in Japan is constituted of small units designed for single or couple-only occupancy. There are few units suitable for families and consequently a rather low turnover in this type of accommodation. There is an estimated shortfall of 2.5 million units of suitable family rental housing (with 25 m$^2$ or more per person) in the major cities (MLIT, 2007). Although public rental dwellings (around 7% of housing) provide some housing suitable for families, it is a largely residualized and stigmatized sector.

Younger people appear to be increasingly delaying or avoiding marriage and consequently the formation of independent households. Average marriage ages have increased from 26.9 years old to 29.6 years old for men and from 24.2 years old to 27.9 years old for women between 1970 and 2005 (figure 4). The proportion of still-unmarried people in their early thirties has almost doubled since 1980. There is also evidence of a significant shift in attitudes towards marriage, with a substantial decline in the consensus around the inevitability of marriage and having children (NHK, 2004). Moreover, while in many Western societies cohabitation of nonmarried couples is common it is rarer in Japan [fewer than 2% of unmarried women of reproductive age live with a partner (IPSS, 2008)]. Female-headed, single-parent families are also relatively uncommon and only constitute 4% of households with children.

The demographic distribution of the Japanese population has become increasingly distorted since the ‘lost decade’ which has further exacerbated conditions for younger people.

![Figure 4. Average first-time marriage age (source: Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare).](image-url)
Fertility has become a central issue in Japan's aging society. Fertility rates peaked in 1947 with 4.3 children born on average to every woman. In 2004 this figure had dropped to 1.29. The proportion of working to dependant population has thus grown with more than 20% of the population now over 65. Moreover, while postwar generations had stable jobs, could build up considerable owner-occupied property assets, and witnessed substantial economic improvements, postbubble generations have experienced destabilizing labor markets, limited access to independent family housing, and volatile economic conditions.

Although younger generations have experienced difficulties ascending the property ladder, increasing numbers are expected to inherit housing assets in line with a high rate of homeownership among older generations and declining fertility (Hirayama and Hayakawa, 1995). Nevertheless, they are not likely to inherit housing property until they are considerably older due to expanding longevity, with property inheritance flowing from the 'old old' to the 'young old'. Moreover, the location of inherited homes is often not desirable for inheritor households. The housing and asset situations of younger generations are thus more likely to be determined by specific family conditions: whether or not their parents own a house; whether they can inherit it or not; and whether or not they can obtain financial support from parents when purchasing a home (Hirayama and Ronald, 2008).

The restructuring of the lost decade appears to have detached young people from the established routes into household and family formation. While they may inherit housing in the long term, procuring what is considered an adequate home for starting a family, or even an intimate partnership, has become challenging. The adversity of conditions is clearly reflected in declining marriage and fertility rates, and the growing numbers of single households. However, young people may also be actively choosing not to adopt adult roles and established life paths. Breakdown in the social order of the company system, increasing risk, and the growing precariousness of adult life may well be subjectively reorienting young Japanese around new expectations and ideals of the home.

The decline of company society

The organization of employment and family economic security in postwar Japanese society primarily revolved around 'company society'. Most large corporations adopted a lifelong employment and seniority system for wages and promotion, forming a model of 'company as a family', which enabled employees to assume a steady increase in income and substantial financial stability. The corporate sector traditionally provided employees with a range of occupational welfare and supported the owner-occupied housing ladder system through company housing welfare (see Sato, 2007; Tachibanaki, 2005). Company employment was thus a central component of the Japanese welfare mix. Moreover, regular salaried work, especially with larger corporations with the biggest benefits, has long been central to aspirations and life plans of young people and provided a route into the middle-class, social mainstream. To some extent, company society and lifelong employment have been a myth as a considerable share of the labor force is not employed by major companies or does not have access to full employment security and benefits. Nevertheless, in the rapid economic growth era the 'salaryman' of company society had an iconic status, at the heart of middle-class, breadwinning, adult male identities. Also important was the social contract between employer and employee where the worker's loyalty was reciprocated by the company's lifelong promise to take care of them and their families.

The 'lost decade' fundamentally weakened company society resulting in substantial casualization of the labor market. In the context of postbubble losses and an increasingly competitive business environment, the labor market has been reoriented towards more short-term contracts and part-time workers. While the government once protected
employment security, since the 1990s it has supported labor-market casualization (eg the Dispatched Labour Law amendment in 1999) in response to corporate pressures. The first waves of corporate restructuring took place in 1997 and 1999 signifying an end to the policy that, “whatever happens, corporations will maintain their employees jobs” (Yamada, 2002, page 128). Many corporations have also unloaded employee housing and discontinued housing loan schemes and employee benefit programmes.

Despite the initial promotion of early retirement, the position of middle-aged employees was not so undermined. It was primarily those in their 20s who were pushed out of the lifelong employment system. Among Japanese workers, the average rate of casual and part-time (nonregular) employees rose from 15.8% to 30.6% between 1982 and 2006. During the same period the rate of nonregular employees aged 20–24 increased sharply from 11.4% to 41.2%. The casualization of employment has also been related in Japan to unmarried rates. A recent government survey showed that the unmarried rate of men in regular employment aged 30–34 was 41%, while for those in nonregular employment it was 70% (MHLW, 2006).

Genda (2001) identifies how corporate restructuring has specifically eroded the conditions and opportunities of new company recruits. This is not simply motivated by economic downturn, but also because companies have devoted their budgets to sustaining the jobs and high salaries of older employees. Companies have thus tended to cut down on training of younger employees who they believe may not stay with the company. The response of young people has been greater individualism, and company loyalty has evaporated. It is estimated that some 30% of university graduates now quit within their first three years of employment (Asahi Shinbun 1999). Mathews (2004) suggests that the conservative rigidity of companies and discontent with employers now outweigh the financial risks for job hoppers. The ethos of most companies remains orientated around expectations of employee submission and sacrifice, which young individuals have found anachronistic with economic and social realities (page 127). The employment system, once a framework of security and inclusion, has thus become a driver of individualization. Moreover, the reciprocal social contract between company and employee has been reneged. The environment faced by those entering the labor market since the 1990s has thus been uncertain and risky.

The ‘freeter’ generation
With the decline in regular employment opportunities a new category of worker, and correspondent lifestyle, has emerged. A freeter (or furitaa) is a nonregular worker aged 15–34. They work in casual positions in places like convenience stores and restaurants, and follow irregular life courses. Because of the rigid structure of the labor market, their failure, or refusal, to enter regular employment may significantly undermine their ability to support a family in later life. Moreover, freeter violate the cardinal social expectation of Japanese middle-class adult society: that young people (particularly men) should embark on a stable career in a large organization. Freeters thus threaten the postwar social order, since they belong to neither company nor family (Mathews, 2004). Consequently, the emergence of freeters, along with their unemployed counterparts, NEETs (not in employment, education, or training), have been treated as a social problem. According to Labour Force Surveys, the number of freeters increased from 0.5 million in 1982 to 1.01 million in 1992 to 2.01 million in 2005. The number of NEET aged 15–34 rose from 440,000 in 2000 to 640,000 in 2005 (MHLW, 2006).

In 2000 it was estimated that 23% of new university graduates fell into the freeter category (Asahi Shinbun 2000). In the context of rigid employment practices where recruitment is open almost exclusively to only fresh graduates, not entering a career-track job on leaving university constitutes a considerable risk and many young people
become effectively shut out of the middle-class mainstream by taking this path (Genda, 2001). There is, nevertheless, evidence to suggest that many freeters are ‘choosing’ an independent path. Yamada (2001) found that, while 27% of freeters saw themselves in regular company employment in ten years, 32% dreamed of becoming some kind of freelance professional. Mathews (2004), too, found that freeters characteristically aspired after greater individual goals, such as one day ‘making it big’ with their band, rather than getting a secure job, starting a family, and joining the mainstream.

Public discourses in Japan have largely constituted freeters as lazy, spoiled by their parents, and sapping the nation’s economic vitality. An alternative argument is that, as there are not enough regular positions for young people, freeter employment serves to support the secure employment of their elders, or, as Genda (2001) puts it,

“In order to support the wages of middle-aged and older workers in the company, young workers employment prospects are reduced” (page 225).

Freeters are thus ‘dreamers’ who provide a source of cheap, disposable labor, and the dreams they hold for the future serve the purpose of getting them to accept their status as manual laborers (Yamada, 2001). Mathews (2004), however, found freeters to demonstrate much greater self-reflexivity:

“some young furititaas [sic] fully understand the economic odds against them, but may feel such repugnance at the lives their fathers have led that they are willing to abandon the pursuit of regular employment in order not to have to live such a life themselves” (page 129).

Loser dogs
The term dokushin kizoku appeared in the 1980s to describe urban unmarried people who purchase luxury goods, travel, and generally enjoy a life of dependence on their parent’s wealth. In the 1990s the ‘selfish life of singles’, particularly women, became associated with the ‘problems’ of delayed marriage and declining birth rates (Nakano and Wagatsuma, 2004). Single women over 30 without children have consequently been labeled makeinu, or ‘loser dogs’ (Sakai, 2003). While Sakai’s original work, ‘Howl of the Loser Dogs’, sought to highlight the plight of the growing number of unmarried, childless women, the term has been largely reappropriated in media discourses by those seeking to deride young single women considered responsible for Japan’s collapsing fertility.

For Tsuya (2000) women have become increasingly frustrated by the limitations of the breadwinner family model, with delayed marriage reflecting the growing ability of women to control their own lives through improved education and employment opportunities (page 319). Indeed, growth in female employment has been part of post-bubble corporate restructuring. However, increased female participation has enhanced neither equality nor security. Japanese working women make only 66.8% of the wages of employed men, on average, and more than 40% are part timers without company benefits (MHLW, 2003).

Ochiai (1994) suggests that, as economic growth has slowed, young people have been increasingly unable to imitate their parent’s marital choices. In the postwar period women’s middle-class status was achieved by making a ‘good marriage’ to a man in a regular salaried job. More recently, shifts in expectations of marriage have accompanied the decline in the security of marriage as a path to middle-class status and living conditions. Nakano and Wagatsuma (2004) identify a transformation in expectations between generations, suggesting that increasing numbers of women are seeking companions rather than wage earners. Young women have much more freedom and family support than previous generations, but also face more insecurity. Married life no longer promises material security while the labor market is also risky.
Home alone
Combined with breakdowns in the housing ladder and family formation, the erosion of employment pathways has reorientated many younger people in terms of networks of security and inclusion, and life courses. New lifestyle and life-course patterns are emerging that demonstrate new orientations to home life, constituting a radical transformation in the form and meaning of the Japanese home that is reshaping domestic spaces and urban neighborhood environments.

Parasite singles
A growing phenomenon which has drawn considerable attention since the lost decade has been an increase in the number of adult children living indefinitely in their parent’s home, known as ‘parasite singles’ (Yamada, 1999). Between 1980 and 2005 the rate of ‘parasite singles’ increased from 23.9% to 42.6% for those aged 25 – 29, and from 7.6% to 24% for those aged 30 – 34 (figure 5). With the historic promotion of homeownership, current generations of parents have largely acquired spacious homes and built-up wealth that enables the younger generation to live with them as a ‘parasite’. Many commentators attribute the parasite-single phenomenon to a peculiarly Japanese cultural tendency for parents to overprotect children and delay their transition to independence (Miura, 2005). Indeed, the willingness of parents to allow children to remain in the home, normally without paying any rent or bills or contributing to domestic tasks, has been a factor. It has been suggested that parasite singles may expect a decline in the quality of life should they become independent or get married (Hirayama and Ronald, 2008). In Western societies, too, parents are likely to support their children more where they feel that the economy no longer guarantees the class reproduction of all middle-class children (Ortner, 1998).

In light of the prolonged recession and the reorganization of the labor market, it is more reasonable to regard ‘parasite-single’ behavior as economically rational as much as a cultural phenomenon (Hirayama and Ronald, 2008). With economic instability and the casualization of labor markets, many young people may feel they have no choice but to stay in their parents’ home. The particular categories of youth who have resisted the established routes into regular jobs are strongly associated with this domestic

![Figure 5. Ratio of 'parasite singles' by age and sex (source: population census and second author's calculations).](image-url)
arrangement, implicating employment restructuring in this trend. Indeed, some 60% of freeters live with their parents (Freeter Kenkyuu Kai 2001). The reorientation of young people towards parasite singlehood may therefore function as a buffer against a decline in socioeconomic stability, but may also be stimulating declines in marriage or establishing new households.

Social and physical arrangements in Japanese homes themselves are also conducive to ‘parasite-single’ lifestyles, and facilitate substantial independence and privacy within family space. The increase in the number of independent rooms is a feature of modern housing and some units even include multiple entrances, with cohabiting grandparents and adult children having independent access to the family home. Daniels (2001) contrasts discourses on shared family space and the divided lives and personal projects of those who inhabit Japanese homes. She argues that, although much is made of family interaction and household harmony in relation to more competitive relationships outside the home, family members largely follow their own routines and interests. The rooms used by each household member to relax are strongly differentiated. Gender and generational divides are central to differentiated activities within, and orientations toward, the home. For Suzuki (2001) the advancement of media technologies (like mobile phones) is erasing family spaces and convivial gatherings in favor of more dynamic, atomized spaces. Young singles are therefore able to pursue more individualistic lives without having to establish separate households.

Resistance to the risks of independent adult life in the outside world have developed an extreme manifestation in the case of hikikomori. These are young people who refuse to ever leave their bedrooms, surviving on meals left for them on trays by their mothers (see Furlong, 2008; Shiokura, 1999). While the figure is debatable, some reports estimate as many as two million hikikomori in Japan (Asahi Shinbun 2002, page 56).

Social policy and net-cafè refugees
The postwar Japanese social policy system has been built on the assumption that the vast majority of people will form ‘standard, male-breadwinner households’ and lead ‘standard life courses’. State and company welfare systems have thus provided protection for family households, rather than individuals, while universal benefits have been limited. Consequently, younger, nonmarried people or single-person households have been increasingly disadvantaged as, while policies have failed to adjust to changes in households, economic restructuring has exposed them further to the risks of economic neoliberalization. In light of recent Japanese political realignment it seems that further neoliberalization is likely, making social conditions more uneven and precarious for younger people in particular.

Recently in Japan, on the margins of society, a new category of homelessness has appeared. The earlier rise in street living in the lost decade was characterized by middle-aged homelessness among single men employed as day laborers, who became major casualties of the recession. The new breed of homeless is characteristically younger and is arguably a product of the decline in state, family, and company mechanisms of support and inclusion for younger people. As they frequent 24-hour Internet cafés and fast-food restaurants, where they can both sleep and cheaply access basic facilities, they have become branded net-cafè-nanmin (net-café-refugees), or ‘Mac’-nanmin. There are estimates of more than 5000 homeless nanmin in Japan (Japan Today 2007). This group is largely made up of freeters and other victims of the lost generation who have no stable home or employment.

1 K'ers and single renters
Apartment units in Japan are normally categorized by numbers of rooms plus living rooms, dining rooms, and kitchens (eg 3 LDK). The smallest type of unit is the 1 K,
or even the ‘1’, constituted of a tiny floor area of sometimes less than 20 m² with, usually, a self-contained prefabricated bathroom and simple cooking facilities for one. With the growth of single-person and couple-only households, the construction and take-up of smaller rental units in mansion-apartment developments have advanced, especially in central urban areas. The number of 1 K units, designed to cater for the growing market of one-person households, now accounts for more than 40% of rented housing in Tokyo (figure 6). While small studio apartments are found across the world, the Japanese 1 K is arguably more individualized and isolated. The principle is to provide within the smallest possible living unit the facilities required for complete self-sufficiency. Hinokidani (2007) thus observes that

“it seems that lifestyles have been progressing along with the individualization of living units ... . Living in such a small dwelling without shared facilities adds to the increasing sensitivity to privacy and autonomy of individual life among urban residents” (page 118).

The architectural inspiration for these supercompact living units originates with the avant-garde Metabolism movement of the 1960s, which sought to reconceptualize the urban fabric. The urban dweller in his or her self-contained capsule was to be liberated from the family and set free in the city. In the course of the 1960s and 1970s, however, suburban growth of family housing became extensive and residential architectural forms more formalistic. In recent years the growing provision of one-room units has been largely a response to market demand from those on lower incomes seeking individual living spaces. For Suzuki (2001) this kind of residential life has been made possible by the development of a comprehensive and sympathetic urban infrastructure.

“Convenience stores (conbini) stock all kinds of groceries, alcohol and other beverages, underwear, sundry goods and books. They even provide facilities for paying bills. Thanks to conbini, one-room mansion dwellers have no need to cook a meal or launder their underwear. They are sophisticated consumers who do not require a living room, dining table or kitchen. The infrastructure dispenses with the necessity for family or local community” (page 25).

A public discourse has developed asserting that the proliferation of such units undermines family and community life and erodes convivial local resources (Takada, 2002). People living in these types of units are often regarded as benefiting from urban living at least expense to themselves. Neighborhood groups have reacted by organizing campaigns against the local construction of developments with small single units (see Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2004).

It has been suggested that, while residential living has been fragmented and atomized, family bonds remain. Psychological relations are argued to be more important than the spatial ones in the consolidation of family ties, and the presumption

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Figure 6. Floor area of rented houses (percentage), 2003 (source: Statistics Bureau, housing and land survey of Japan, 2003).

The individualization of young, urban Japanese singles
that home is a place exclusively for communal family life has progressively lost its salience (Kim and Omi, 1994). A form of ‘network living’ may possibly be evident among young singles in one-room apartments, and there may be some reconciliation occurring between individual living and the dominant family norm. At present it appears that sociospatial relations are, at least, in flux. Although there is evidence of aggregate changes in family formation, employment security, and household composition, and restructuring in housing markets and the built environment, considerably more research is required in order to establish how these changes are shaping, or shaped by, the changing nature of family and social relations.

Condominium climbers

Rented one-room apartments are the main option for young unmarried people on leaving the parental home. Between 1983 and 2003 the number of independent households aged 25–29 renting in the private rental sector increased from 53% to 71%, while for those aged 30–35 the increase was from 33.5% to 55%. The number of homeowners among under-30s halved over the same period and decreased by around a third among 30–35 year olds (figure 2). Nevertheless, many younger people have maintained established pathways into regular employment and homeownership, although there is evidence that household patterns and housing preferences have shifted somewhat in response to changing conditions.

A particular feature in cities has been an intensified fragmentation of residential space. Since the mid-2000s housing prices have recovered in central urban ‘hot spots’, while property demand in the distant suburbs has continued to stagnate. Whereas, in the 1970s and 80s suburban houses were the preference for younger owner-occupier households, since the late-1990s there has been an upturn in the population of city centers with the condominium sector seeing strongest growth. There has been a particular expansion of high-rise condominium towers of twenty floors or more. This has also been facilitated by sponsorship of ‘urban renaissance’ policy since the late 1990s, with the aim of stimulating economic recovery (Hirayama, 2005). A series of measures promoting housing construction, urban redevelopment, and the deregulation of urban planning has been put into practice (Igarashi and Ogawa, 2003). A feature of tower condominium developments is their segregating impact. High-rise residential units are relatively new in urban Japanese neighborhoods and form gated enclaves with self-sufficient facilities. They tend to enhance the separation of the homes of the atomized households within and the communities without.

While construction used to target ‘standard’ nuclear families, there has been a growing trend among developers to provide more diverse housing types, particularly for singles and couples (Hirayama, 2005). One type which has proliferated is the compact condominium unit with just 30–50 m² of floor space. Another type is a SOHO (small office, home office), combining a small office and living space. The proliferation of smaller housing units for smaller households is more noticeable in the central city areas. A survey of condominium buyers in the Tokyo metropolitan area revealed a propensity for single people rather than nuclear households to purchase homes in the central ward districts rather than in other areas. The respective ratios of singles and nuclear households were 22% and 34% in the ward districts, and 9% and 51% in less central areas (Recruit, 2005).

Arguably, the changing practices and preferences of young urban homeowners reflect changing expectations following the lost decade. There appears a fundamental shift from the standard family housing pathways of the past and a significant atomization and individualization of households, both socially and spatially. There has been a notable impact on urban life and residential urban environments, with
a growing concentration of smaller households in compact apartment units dwelling in the city, separated from the communities surrounding them. The shifting structures of employment, family formation, and urban living may well be enhancing the ability of young singles to atomize and centralize in the metropolitan center, as well as pulling them towards it.

Conclusions
We have considered diverse aspects of social change in the postwar and postbubble eras that have fundamentally affected younger generations and their trajectories through adult life. There appears a significant gap emerging in values, security, and wealth between young and old. Traditionally, housing and homes have been conduits of continuity and mechanisms of integration between mainstream society and new members joining it. Since the lost decade, homes have become fragmented and atomized and the courses that young people take through life have become more unpredictable and hazardous. It seems that established routes into family life have been undermined by radical shifts in socioeconomic conditions. Furthermore, it appears that established expectations of home and community are declining and residential urban spaces are becoming even more fragmented, which may amplify experiences of isolation. The lost decade arguably marks a more historical fracture in experiences and expectations between young people and the generations that came before, characterized by a proliferation or deepening of atomization and individualization.

Some similar structural patterns can also be identified in Western contexts, specifically in economically liberal societies. Intense housing-market competition has unfolded along with economic restructuring and intensified labor-market casualization, which has particularly impacted the conditions and career and life courses of younger households. Countries like Britain, Australia, and America have subsequently experienced similar declines in young homeownership rates and an emerging generational gap in expectations of wealth and security in later life (Ronald, 2008). However, in Japan the situation seems particularly pronounced and, moreover, indigenous paternalistic institutions and networks, although in flux, continue to shape social transformations and specific experiences of risk and individualization. Younger people are developing different expectations of families, social relationships, and economic conditions. In response, the meanings and shapes of homes, households, and neighborhoods are being renegotiated and reconstituted.

While recent experiences of individualization in Japan mimic, in many respects, those identified in some Western societies, the historic and indigenous features of Japanese modernity remain markedly embedded and, arguably, continue to challenge universalist notions concerning (post)modernity and self-identity. Transformations in social relations appear to be forming around a particularly indigenous pattern of retreat of more collective mechanisms of inclusion and security, and to be shaped by the contours of a peculiarly Japanese urban and domestic landscape. Although aggregate outcomes in terms of life courses and household configurations, as have been addressed in this paper, are more opaque, understanding of the character and scale of subjective reorientations is less developed, specifically concerning the home. This constitutes a significant research question not only for those interested in contemporary Japan, but also for the understanding of the manifestation of individualization and its relation to the social, the spatial, and the local.
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