

**The Masculinity Crisis in Contemporary Japan: Comprehensive Analysis of the
“Disadvantaged Men” Phenomenon**

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Introduction

Men in Japan are not thriving. They are pressured to pursue traditional manhood while living in a society where no resources or environments to enable it are available. This frustration is creating a masculinity crisis among Japanese men. This circumstance became so common that the term 弱者男性 (*jyakusya dansei*; disadvantaged men) appeared on the internet in the 2010s to refer to those men who are struggling with their “disadvantaged” status, conditions, and abilities. Although the term “disadvantaged men” lacks a definition as it is an internet slang, Masaaki Ito, a sociologist who specializes in media studies, describes *jyakusya dansei* as men in Japanese society who have “the elements to be a *jyakusya* [weak person; marginalized person],” such as having irregular/part-time job, adjustment disorders, and no girlfriend (Attorney JP News, 2024).

The emergence of insecure men questioning what it means to be a man is a global trend, as observed in the surging popularity of hypermasculine figures such as Donald Trump and Andrew Tate among the incel communities in the United States (Mahdawi, 2024).

However, Japanese men are experiencing their identity crisis for reasons specific to Japan, such as the so-called “lost decade”— an economic recession that started in the 1990s— and the sharply declining marriage rate.

Moreover, whereas “disadvantaged men” are a social phenomenon regularly provoking debates on social media platforms in Japan, there is a limited number of studies written in English that specifically mention “disadvantaged men.” Therefore, this paper aims to provide the background, reality, and problems regarding “disadvantaged men” in English to non-Japanese speakers studying gender and sexuality.

This paper starts with a discussion about the impact of the “lost decade” on the disenchantment of “salarymanhood” and its connection to masculinity. Then, it will expand the argument into the subsequent emergence of *haken* (dispatched) workers and “freeters”—part-time workers between 15 and 24 years who are not students or housewives (Cook, 2013). Second, this paper will explore the reasons behind the disadvantaged men’s tendency to remain single which are often economically incited by their “failure” to follow the traditional manhood. Moreover, it will cover their search for the new manhood that created “herbivore men /masculinity.” Lastly, this paper will examine disadvantaged men’s misogynistic and anti-feminist traits that can be found in their rationale in which they blame women for being single.

Discussion

The “Lost Decade” and Salarymanhood

In the 1990s, the Japanese economy experienced a collapse of the “bubble” economy—the economic boom that offered many Japanese people stable jobs and middle-class lifestyles. With the end of economic growth that helped Japan gain a global presence as a rich and industrial country, Japan entered a long period of economic downturn called the “lost decade.” (or “decades” since Japan’s economy has yet to recover). The prolonged economic stagnation brought about the reformation of cooperate culture, the increase in unemployment rates, and collective socio-cultural insecurity and anxiety (Shimokawa, 2006 as cited in Dasgupta, 2009).

Especially men, many of whom associate their identity with “salarymanhood,” the beginning of the “lost decade” and the subsequent job insecurity meant a threat to their self-worth or even the meaning of their existence. Frühstück (2022) describes a salaryman as a male corporate worker whose job does not apply to “3K”—*kitsui*, *kitanai*, *kiken* (tough, dirty, and dangerous)—and receives the salary that enables him to enjoy a middle-class lifestyle. Salarymen are required to be loyal to their bosses and sacrifice themselves for their companies, thus their work is demanding and both physically and psychologically

exhausting, as the fact that *karoshi* (death from overworking) is a social issue symbolizes.

Regardless of the harsh reality of salarymen, many men still aspired to be them because once they belonged to a company, “lifetime employment” and the “seniority principle” were guaranteed (Schad-Seifert, 2007). In other words, it was worth working almost like corporate slaves in exchange for income stability and respected social status.

However, unfortunately, being a full-time salaryman became a less attainable dream at the beginning of the “lost decade” for two main reasons. First, to survive the economic recession, companies conducted a retrenchment of human resources. They implemented layoffs of workers with middle-management positions and started to hire more *haken* (temporary, dispatched) workers instead (Dasgupta, 2009). The second factor is the progressive corporate restructuring. Takurō Morinaga (2003), a renowned Japanese economist, argues that *seikasyugi* (merit-based system) — a more competitive, individualistic, and efficiency-driven Western operation of companies — which was facilitated under former prime minister Junichiro Koizumi from the Liberal Democratic Party exacerbated the income disparity between those who successfully adapted to the remodeled corporate culture and those who were exploited by the profit-hungry companies as cheap and replaceable labor. Furthermore, the Koizumi administration enacted the Labor Dispatch Law in 2004, legally encouraging companies to employ *haken* workers whose wages were much

cheaper than salarymen.

The effect of the corporate reform was immense, but not necessarily in a positive way for the employees. According to the Japan Institute of Labor's 2003 data, the unemployment rate among men of 45-54 years old increased to 4.3%, showing a 3.2% rise from 1.1% in 1990 (Dasgupta, 2009). The same report also found that the population of *haken* workers in 2001 (1.5 million) grew approximately three times bigger than in 1992 (500,000). As this data indicates, the harsh and overwhelmingly competitive corporate structure introduced in the "lost decade" shut many men out of the opportunities to secure a full-time office job and join the middle class.

For Japanese men, the unavailability of white-collar/full-time jobs was not only an economic problem but also sociocultural turmoil that threatened their *otokorashisa* (masculinity). Japan is a country that incorporates Confucianist values in every corner of society, including the workplace. Most Japanese people are substantially more collective beings than people in the Western hemisphere; hence their identity is more socially structured. In addition, the rapid economic growth post-WWII and the "bubble economy" made Japanese society more capitalistic and added an economic contribution to society to their social obligation.

Thus, salarymanhood served as an ideal and respected social status that many men aspired to be during those periods. In other words, being a salaryman was more than a job. It was a symbol of a functioning member of society and a requirement to be acknowledged as an *ichininmae* (decent adult) man.

In summary, the “lost decade” was a culturally impactful event that caused a masculinity crisis in Japanese men by bringing about instability to salarymanhood—a modern icon of masculinity.

“Failed” Masculinity, Romantic Relationships, and Marriage

After the Japanese economy entered the “lost decade,” more and more Japanese men became single. According to the longitude analysis by a research group, from 1992 to 2015, the number of single men between the ages of 18 and 39 increased by about 10% and reached 50.8% in 2015 (Ghaznavi et al., 2020). Because “heterosexual patriarchal family ideology” is an indispensable element that consists of “salaryman masculinity,” economically “disadvantaged” men —*haken* and other types of irregular workers — were no longer able to start their own families due to their unstable job and low income (Dasgupta, 2000).

As a result, they pivoted to either isolation from women or search for new manhood

to survive with no conventional masculine appeals. In Emma E. Cook's ethnographic study (2013), one interviewee whom she calls "K-San" said, "I want to get married and have a family in the future but working like this [working as a freeter and being underpaid], it'll never be possible." As K-San's case exemplifies, although many Japanese men wish to date and eventually have a family, they choose to remain single. In other words, they withdraw from romantic relationships and marriage because they are insecure and think they are not "qualified" to be a husband or father.

Then, what are the "qualifications" for men to start a family? In Japan, manhood and adulthood have strongly been characterized by having a stable job (ideally as a salaryman) and being a breadwinner (Cook, 2013). Prior to the "lost decade" with stable supplies of full-time salaryman positions, most men could find a wife to be *ichininmae* (decent adult) as long as they had a financially sustainable job. However, now that an increasing number of Japanese men work irregularly, their path to marriage is harder than ever not only because they label them as unattractive and unqualified but also because women, in fact, expect them to be the *daikokubashira* (main pillar, breadwinner) of their families due to the gender roles and social expectations, and the gendered wage gap.

"Herbivore men" are a category of men emerged and spurred a public discourse in

the aftermath of the collapse of the “bubble economy” in the 1990s as a strategy to overcome their “disadvantage”—an absence of salarymanhood. Even though there is no standardized scholarly definition, Ghaznavi et al. (2020) argue that herbivore men are understood as young men whose desire to have sex or find a girlfriend is little or absent (it is called “herbivore” because Japanese people commonly think of sex as a carnivore or animal-like activity where men “eat” women). Their characteristics are unconventional in that their attitudes toward intimate relationships and marriage do not coincide with the traditional masculinity in which men actively seek a heterosexual partner to start a family. Hence, their emergence can mean the birth of an alternative masculinity model.

However, it is important to note that herbivore men are those who enjoy their “soft masculinity” or single life by focusing more on their private lives such as body grooming and hobbies (Charlebois, 2013) because they liberated themselves from the curse of masculinity and salarymanhood (I also personally believe that gay men often pretend to be herbivore men who are uninterested in romantic relationships, but I found no data available to back up my hypothesis as Japan is an extremely anti-homosexual society). In other words, they are the men who succeeded in discovering the new manhood suitable for the “lost decade”.

Their success in adapting to the catastrophic era of masculinity crisis by finding a

way to enjoy being single leads to my conclusion that those who are involuntarily single cannot be called herbivore men because they wish to find a girlfriend and get married. In fact, Ghaznavi et al. (2020) point out that a lack of interest in an intimate relationship could be a result of compromises or an excuse for their despair, given their socioeconomic status or psychological capabilities to engage in one. The fact that they feel “disadvantaged” when trying to engage in a heterosexual intimate relationship due to their lack of financial resources and sexual appeals reflects the depth and complexity of the “disadvantaged men” phenomenon.

In conclusion, the employment instability and the collapse of salarymanhood triggered an increase in the population of single men. While some men discovered new manhood — herbivore masculinity — to escape from social expectations and enjoy their lives with their limited resources and opportunities, others remained frustrated between their aspiration to find a heterosexual partner to eventually have a family and their “disadvantaged” status quo. In the next segment, I will further explore the social problems with the latter, heterosexually disadvantaged men.

Loneliness, Resentment, and Misogyny

Amongst *kyakusya dansei* (disadvantaged men), perhaps the most delicate and controversial are the men who are disadvantaged in romantic relationships. In Japan, unwillingly-single men are often called 非モテ (*himote*; not romantically/sexually attractive or popular), and many Japanese sociologists agree that *himote* are almost equivalent to incels (involuntary celibates) in the Western culture (Nishii, 2020).

As discussed in the previous section, adulthood is associated with having a middle-class (preferably salaryman) job and a family to foster (Cook, 2013). Therefore, those heterosexually disadvantaged men with none of the criteria above are often stigmatized by society, especially by the men who successfully fulfill those social expectations.

Another noteworthy factor that jeopardizes disadvantaged men's insecurities and struggles is the self-responsibility theory. This neoliberalist idea was promoted by the dominant LDP in the early 2000s and consequently took a part in isolating or even demonizing “disadvantaged men” for their “lack of abilities or efforts” while, in reality, they were victimized the patriarchal system (Ishida, 2020).

This idea matched well with the hierarchal Japanese society and was welcomed and adopted by the successful mass—men who lived a middle-class life with their own families.

To elaborate, the self-responsibility theory served as a perfect facilitator to make them appear as hardworking men who survived the competition in the corporate domain and the dating market, socially outcasting the poor single men. Being unjustly labeled as incompetent, disadvantaged men's sense of guilt, inferiority, and humiliation exacerbated (Tietjen & Tirkkonen, 2023).

Additionally, their hesitation or refusal to share their feelings or struggles due to the curse of masculinity escalated their insecurities even more (Ohba, 2021). Men are socialized into believing that they have to be physically and mentally strong as they grow up in Japanese society. Therefore, the majority of disadvantaged men choose to suffer in silence because exposing their vulnerability is not "masculine" and thus embarrassing.

To deal with loneliness, stigmatization, and insecurities, many of them try to defend their singleness by blaming or even attacking women (Nishii, 2020). Blaming women for not having a girlfriend offers them therapeutic effects because, if it was women's fault, they can protect their pride as men and maintain their self-esteem (Tietjen & Tirkkonen, 2023).

Positioning women lower than themselves redeems their ego because, by doing so, they can experience a sense of superiority they crave as men in a patriarchal society (Yap, 2019). Their misogyny arises from their lack of awareness of the actual cause of their

conditions and struggles, which is patriarchy. They might be “disadvantaged” in dating due to their socioeconomic status, but they are still men —the privileged majority. In other words, they do not realize that the real problem is in the system which is made by/for men because they neglect to understand the roots of their situation, one of which is socially structured manhood.

The absence of their systematic analytical thinking leads to their direct hatred of women. They simplify the reason for their singleness that women simply do not choose them as a boyfriend or a wife because they are not generous enough to accept their low socioeconomic status. Nishii (2020) theorizes that those single men disadvantaged in the dating market tend to create an ideal type of woman who is unconditionally kind to them in their imagination as a coping mechanism for their loneliness and singleness.

Of course, they rarely can date a woman like her who meets their hyper-romanticized standard. This disappointment that stems from the gap between their ideal and reality serves as a justification to blame and attack women. In other words, their unrealistically high expectations of women and reliance on them for their self-worth create an aggressive antagonism once they realize their dream women will not magically appear and take care of them.

Many Japanese men today self-proclaim as *himote* (heterosexually/romantically disadvantaged men) and suffer from insecurities, stigma, pressure to be “masculine,” loneliness, shame, and self-hatred for not having a girlfriend. While they are indeed victims of patriarchal norms and toxic masculinity, I want to emphasize that they should not be considered innocent. For instance, on social media platforms especially on X (former Twitter), many “disadvantaged men” post hateful or threatening comments on women every day out of animosity and anger toward them, especially feminists.

They particularly resent feminists because, first, their advocating for women’s empowerment and independence further distances them from opportunities to get a girlfriend and impairs their pride according to their rationale (Tietjen & Tirkkonen, 2023). Second, they often equate feminists’ criticism of patriarchy with attacks on themselves, not on the male-dominated society. This demonstrates men’s strong association of their identity with their communities or society.

In 2021, a man named Yusuke Tsushima stabbed 10 passengers on a train in Tokyo because he wanted to kill women who “looked happy” (The Associated Press, 2021). Not only for the *himote* (heterosexually disadvantaged men)’s well-beings but also for women’s safety from them, further analysis of them as *kagaisya* (perpetrators) is awaited.

Conclusion

This paper explored social, economic, and cultural contexts surrounding the “disadvantaged men” phenomenon in Japan, which started amid the “lost-decade” in the 1990s. As discussed, the prolonged economic stagnation resulted in drastic sociocultural changes in the ideal of salarymanhood, adulthood, and masculinity.

First, the collapse of salarymanhood led many men to an identity crisis as a man due to job insecurity because it accounted for a significant part of their self-worth. Second, an increasing number of Japanese men became single because of the loss of their masculine appeals—middle-class status and economic resources. Consequently, herbivore men appeared as an alternative for salaryman adulthood to survive the “lost decade.” Lastly, the lowered socioeconomic status, social expectations, patriarchal norms, and toxic masculinity incited the emergence of the so-called *himote* (heterosexually disadvantaged men) who cannot have a girlfriend or a wife while having the desire to date and eventually get married. They often cope with their loneliness and misery by having delusions, hostility, and even grudge against women.

Although the public dismisses their conditions and struggles as personal problems, their “disadvantaged” circumstances are socioeconomically and culturally created. The media

and academia should discuss and study this phenomenon before their pain turns into a grudge against society.

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