EXPLORING YOUTH IRREGULAR EMPLOYMENT IN JAPAN DURING COVID-19: A QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

by

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Irregular employment, contrast to the expected regular (fulltime and long-term) employment, has made up a significant part of Japan's work force since the 1990s. By examining quantitative and qualitative data showcasing historic and current mistreatment and devaluation of irregular workers and displaying them as inferior to regular workers, one can observe the lack of urgency by both business leaders and policy makers towards assisting irregular workers in a situation like COVID-19 that has negative impacts on all.

Through the visible disparities between these types of workers, this thesis argues how societal and political views of irregular workers overall, of young irregular workers in particular, along with the resulting decisions made in combatting labor related issues, are harmful to the wellbeing of individuals during COVID-19 and are detrimental to making major long-term changes to Japan's work styles and labor force. It is especially important to address these issues during a time of prevalent feelings of precarity and uncertainty towards the current labor force crisis during national discussions of what to do about Japan's "hyper aging society" and about crises caused by the COVD-19 pandemic.

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Introduction

In this thesis, I will highlight the situation of irregular employment among young individuals in Japan. I argue that there are policy level and societal barriers that cause disparities between irregularly employed individuals and regularly employed individuals. I will substantiate my argument through four chapters highlighting: background on the different types of work in Japan; the effects of COVID-19 on irregular workers; and cultural and societal level issues and government and corporation level issues that relate to irregular work. Through these four sections, I will argue how the societal and political views of irregular workers overall, and especially of young irregular workers in particular, along with the resulting decisions made in combatting labor related issues, are harmful to the wellbeing of individuals during COVID-19 and are detrimental to making major long-term changes to work styles and the labor force in Japan.

Methods

This thesis will utilize several different types of sources and data to make my argument including, data sets from recent studies on COVID-19, surveys, ethnographic data, and even film and television. Additionally, while it is never appropriate to overgeneralize an entire population based solely on assumptions and observations of cultures and cultural norms, studying these can lead to insights to understanding general trends and reasoning for groups of people. As I am engaging in research that pertains to Japan, and I do not consider myself to be fully of Japanese culture, looking at commonly present beliefs, values, and behaviors can be helpful to understanding

situations on a deeper level. To do so, I will also include an overview of Geert Hofstede's intercultural dimensions and how Japan scores compare to the United States. This will be followed by a brief exploration of some specific cultural themes that relate to Japan, in addition to a look into how youth employment and irregular employment, and the issues associated with them, are portrayed in popular culture and popular media. Moreover, I will include some mainstream television dramas and films surrounding the topic of irregular work, and, although Japanese television dramas and films are works of fiction, as they are heavily consumed by Japanese viewers, they provide an indication of overarching cultural attitudes towards the situation exist in Japan. The usage of irregular employment and avoidance of regular employment in film and television as a form of conflict is reflective of societal norms but also can serve as an indicator and warning of the uncertainty that taking up positions in irregular employment can create.

For the sections other than the culture and societal values section, I also analyze several sources of qualitative and quantitative data. I do want to point out that most data sources with age breakdowns in labor participation identify the youngest group to be between the ages of fifteen and thirty-four as youth. While this is the case technically, for this project, I am primarily considering youth in employment aged twenty or older. My reasoning for this focus is that as twenty is the legal age of adulthood in Japan, and many people below that age are high-school students working part-time jobs, those under the age of twenty are seldomly living on solely their own incomes.

Had this project not been affected by COVID-19, I planned for my data to appear in the form of surveys and interviews conducted on my own in Japan, but this

was not a possibility due to the pandemic. I initially intended to focus entirely on the aspect of stigmatization of irregularly employed and unemployed youth and wanted to interview both "normal" workers and irregular workers to gain insight on the matter. In retrospect, accessing these individuals, even if I had gone to Japan, may have also posed difficulties, so I presume that my methods would have still changed regardless. Nonetheless, given my current situation, I have shifted my focus to specifically how COVID-19 plays a role in the lives of these individuals and how they may be more vulnerable than normal workers during this time. I will use quantitative and qualitative data produced mostly by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (MHLW), the Japanese Institute of Labor Policy and Training, and ethnographic papers produced by Dr. David Slater and his colleagues affiliated with Sophia University in Tokyo.

Overview of Quantitative Data Sources

The use of qualitative data in this thesis will help me to answer the questions of how big of a population irregular workers make up, as well as what specific reasons for working in irregular work exist, and what the impacts of COVID-19 have been. I look at quantitative data in the form of statistics from surveys conducted by the MHLW, as well as the Statistics Bureau of Japan. An additional survey I examine for this project targets specifically what effects COVID-19 had early on in the months of April, May, and August 2020. This survey, titled the "Survey on the Impact that Spreading Novel Coronavirus Infection has on Work and Daily Life," was conducted by the Japanese Institute for Labor Policy and Training and gives insight to working conditions during

COVID-19, as well as changes experienced by employees, both regular and irregular, in terms of income, income expenditure, and working hours.

Overview of Qualitative Data Sources:

I will analyze the annual White Papers on the Labor Economy presented by the MHLW to understand how the labor force and ideas of systems and structure in work environments have changed. These White Papers will help me answer my question about what Japan can do, and has been doing, to encourage more participation of unemployed and irregularly employed individuals in the labor force, as the document indicates what techniques in workplaces are working and not working to create suitable environments for employees. Because annual White Papers highlight what the major concerns in the workplace are every year, I plan to present this data to see how irregular groups are discussed or if they are instead swept under the rug. I analyze White Papers for 2019 and 2020, focusing on the condensed PowerPoint presentation documents. By looking at the condensed versions, one can gain a clearer view of the key points the MHLW considered most important.

Moreover, the next crucial component of my research questions is how the pandemic plays a role individually in the lives of irregular workers and unemployed individuals, and in Japan as a whole. Professor of Anthropology at Sophia University (Tokyo, Japan), David Slater, has been putting a set of ethnographies together about vulnerable populations in Japan during COVID-19 and publishing them in the *Asia Pacific Journal*. Out of the different sets of articles that have published through the *Asia Pacific Journal*, I have selected four articles regarding different irregular workers to

discuss and utilize some quotes from the individuals the authors were able to interview. The four focus groups will include freelancers, sanitation workers, restaurant workers, and red-light district entertainment workers.

Additionally, there are increasing numbers of videos produced by Japanese YouTubers who self-identify as unemployed or irregular workers. These videos shed light onto their situations and what the pandemic has meant in their lives. Because YouTube is a public outlet and there are no requirements about sharing one's identity as a content creator, it can be difficult to use YouTube videos of people claiming to be sharing truth from their lives. For this reason, while I was able to find many YouTube videos from different individuals who shared how COVID-19 had impacted their work, or simply shared experiences as irregular and unemployed workers as a whole, for this project, I have chosen to focus on one particular individual and the channel he has created surrounding his life as a self-identified freeter. This individual shares the physical paper copies of his bills and bank statements and documents his experiences of making payments and the like that lend to the credibility of the videos on his channel as accurate representations of his life. Additionally, as this individual began his YouTube channel in June of 2020, right during the first wave of COVID-19 in Japan, and uploads several videos a week, the content is effective in maintaining relevancy to this project by showcasing changes in his life in conjunction with changes in the pandemic. In general, the qualitative data that I analyze is useful to answer my questions of how the individuals view their own situation during the pandemic, as well as how they are represented in Japanese society.

Limitations

One of the major limitations to my methods and the data that I am analyzing is that my project is COVID-19 specific, and research regarding the economic effects of the pandemic and how different groups have been affected by it is still being conducted and published. While this makes for an extremely relevant thesis project, it also requires me to thoroughly keep up with the research component while I write my thesis. Additionally, as many people in Japan view irregular employment more negatively than they do normal employment, the survey data available about the workforce does not always go into depth about irregular workers. However, by using the mixture of both quantitative and qualitative data that I have identified above, I believe that I can fill in some gaps in the quantitative data and present a more complete picture of the situation than what the Japanese government and related organizations choose to reflect in the collection and presentation of their data statistics. I also believe that seeing what ideas official organizations cover and what ideas they do not, is imperative to discuss what kind of steps may be helpful for both Japan's goals of strengthening the workforce and improving the wellbeing of irregular workers.

Another limitation to my project that I encountered while attempting to collect demographical data about youth in irregular employment is that much of the data about the youth category fully encompasses the fifteen-to thirty-four age range, instead of the twenty to thirty-four age range that I am considering. Information that does not include irregular workers aged fifteen to twenty may have been more representative of my arguments, as data for fifteen to thirty-four-year old's may be padded with young high

school age part-time workers. This is not to say that irregular employment in high-school age individuals is not important to consider, but one can assume, and hope, that working and earning their own living are not the primary concerns of high-school students.

Chapter 1: What is Youth Irregular Employment and What is the Current State of Youth Irregular Employment During COVID-19

Types of Employment in Japan and Youth Irregular Employment

At the end of World War II, Japan began to globalize and industrialize much more extensively which shifted the working dynamic of Japan. This shift resulted in a new norm of employment in Japan, and "salarymen," the Japanese term for businessman and a job that had been around since the beginning of the twentieth century, came to represent of the Japanese workforce. These employees were mostly men in full-time positions in careers and companies where they would remain in for the rest of their employed lives, or so-called "lifetime employment" (*seishain*) (Dasgupta 2017).

Later on, in 1991, the crash of Japan's bubble economy resulted in the restructure of employment and the workforce. Many already established salarymen and other fulltime workers faced hardship, losing jobs. Others, mostly young college graduates entering the job hunting (*shūshoku katsudō,* or *shukatsu*) process, encountered difficulty in trying to find fulltime long-term positions and were often unable to find a job at all. Temporary employment, and more specifically, private temporary staff agencies, was not fully legal until 1999, although temporary employment was able to gain momentum in becoming legal in 1984, when the Special Committee on Temporary Help Industry was established to highlight the merits and benefits of shifting to utilizing temporary employment. Also, in 1984, the Temporary Work Services Association (TWSA) was created by eight major companies, and once temporary work was

approved, they joined an international organization for temporary work and renamed themselves the Japanese Staffing Services Association (Coe 2011).

Another type of irregular work besides temporary contract work that began to gain in popularity among younger Japanese individuals was working part-time jobs as a main source of income. During the late 1990s and the early 2000s, these individuals were given the title of "freeter." The term was first used in the magazine *From A,* which featured ads for people looking for part-time work. While readers wanted to be "free" from the constraints from fulltime, corporate jobs to pursue freelance careers, others were looking for part-time work out of economic necessity. While the term freeter is still used in Japan today, there is much less emphasis on the term and the individuals associated with the term than there was in the 1990s and early 2000s. Some people have used freeter with derogatory connotations, as they believed that freeters were not motivated or qualified enough to pursue long-term fulltime jobs and actually receive these offers from companies. However, some people have used the term in a general fashion, as freeter can refer to any individual working in part-time labor as their main income, regardless of their desire to be in that position or not. There are cases of freeters who are satisfied with the lifestyles they are able to have with the income they receive from part-time, even if it is significantly less than what they would earn as *seishain*. Other so-called freeters are in the process of job hunting and are engaging in part-time labor just as a means of survival until acquiring a fulltime job (Coe 2011). Another group that rose in numbers at the same time as freeters was NEETs, which can be defined as those "Not in Education, Employment, or Training." To put it simply, some

NEETs have been interested in finding work or education while others do not actively seek employment or education (Rahman 2006).

A new term and group of irregularly employed individuals that has become increasingly popular in recent years is freelancers. According to an article by *The Bridge* from January 2018, Japan really began to see its freelancing boom through a Tokyo-based startup company called Lancers. In December 2017, Lancers announced that it had raised an equivalent of $9 million from Persol Holdings and Shinsei Bank. Partnerships with these two companies was part of a new strategy by Lancers to initiate a financing business for freelancers. The article also states that Lancers reported that the “number of freelancers in Japan [was] 11.22 million comprising 17 percent of the entire working population, showing a 5 percent increase from last year [2016]” (Hirano 2018). Lancers’ business would go on to operate by providing loans to freelancers seeking to start new businesses which would be used for investing in necessary equipment and education and/or training. A Japanese website with resources for freelancers and those considering becoming freelancers, Freelance Start, put together a report based on data from Lancers, suggesting that Japan’s number of freelancers for 2020 is 10.34 million. While this number is a decrease from 2018, the report also indicated that the reason for the decrease in freelancers is that the number of freelancers aged sixty and older, decreased and led to an overall decrease in the number of total freelancers in Japan (Freelance Start 2020). (Sixty used to be the mandatory retirement age in Japan.)

From this brief background of the history of irregular employment in Japan since the 1990s, it is clear that irregular employment is a component of the workforce that is still important today, with the ongoing rise of irregular employment through

freelancing. As the use of “regular employee” in translation for *seishain* already begins to suggest, and will be expanded on later in this paper, regular employment tends to be seen in a much more positive light than irregular employment. With this being the case, one might wonder why irregular work exists and why people may even voluntarily choose to take up irregular employment.

Some Reasons Why Young People Do Not or Choose Not to Work in “regular” employment

In the late 1990s and early 2000s when the terms freeters and NEETs became popular, discussing these individuals in scholarly discourses, from political, economic, and even psychological perspectives also became popular. There has been some research done to understand why individuals become NEETs or freeters or engage in other types of irregular employment instead of taking up long-term fulltime jobs that were more popular with the generations before them, and conclusions from the studies often have conflicting views of the situation. Moreover, it is important to note that becoming an irregular worker is not always a choice, and for some it comes as a result of other underlying factors outside of desire and motivation to become a regular worker.

One of the most prominent scholars on the subject of NEETs and freeters in the early 2000s, Genda Yuji (professor specializing in labor economics at the University of Tokyo Institute of Social Science) stated that, “There have been many published opinions about the NEETs in Japanese media in 2005 and 2006. Some described NEETs as lazy, spoiled, and undisciplined, while others emphasized that they face obstacles to employment” (Genda 2007). Genda further noted that these assumptions were not backed by any real fact or research and took to examining micro-level data from the

Employment Status Survey (*Shūgyo*) to get a deeper understanding of who "jobless youth" in particular were and possibilities for why they did not become *seishain*. Based on his data analysis, Genda was able to conclude that there were many commonalities among jobless youth regarding educational backgrounds and family backgrounds that suggest exterior causation rather than just simply lack of motivation. Genda was able to identify three main types of jobless youth: (1) "job seekers," or those wishing to work for earnings and are actively searching for jobs; (2) those who have stopped looking for jobs while expressing that they would like to have a job; and (3) those who do not want a job and do not look for one whatsoever. Genda explained that it is the Type 2 and Type 3 jobless youth that typically make up what is referred to as NEETs in Japan. The *Shūgyo* data that Genda analyzed went into depth on why Type 2 jobless youth no were no longer looking for work with the most popular reasons being: illness/injury (24 percent), inability to find a job (12.6 percent), lack of confidence in knowledge or skill (9.9 percent), "poor prospects of being able to find a job" (9.6 percent), and housekeeping and children (3.2 percent). However, the same breakdown was not available for Type 3 jobless youth which left little to work with to understand Type 3 jobless youth and their reasons for not entering the workforce (Genda 2007).

Through looking at Genda's interpretations of the situation and the lack of thorough research done on irregularly employed and unemployed youth, one is able to get a sense of the invalidity of the prejudgments that exist about these individuals. Genda's work also shows the irony in the characterization of these irregularly employed individuals as problematic when opportunities for organizations to better understand the individuals to better assist them are blatantly ignored. Although this particular study by

Genda only focused on NEETs, this is accurate across many forms of irregular employment and unemployment in youth.

Another view of youth in Japan avoiding working in regular employment can be found in a 2011 article by Tuukka Toivonen et al, titled "Unable to Conform, Unwilling to Rebel? Youth, Culture, and Motivation in Globalizing Japan," which showcases the effects of globalization in Japan and more specifically Japan's youth. The authors state that they focus on youth "because it can be reasonably expected that, lacking labor market experience and related resources, young adults in their twenties are likely to feel the pressures of globalization more directly and acutely than many other age groups" (Toivonen et al 2011). In stating this, the authors argue that young adults are caught in the gap of what has been considered normal by the age group that raised them as well as the views of their peers. Additionally, in a time dominated by social media and ease of global interconnectedness, it is much easier for youth to have globalized opinions that may contradict the dominant views of their own nation.

Shūgyo **Employment Status Survey 2017**

Moreover, since 1997, the Statistics Bureau of Japan has been conducting the Employment Status Survey to get an understanding of the breakdown of the labor force. The most recent survey was conducted in 2017, with the next survey planned for 2022. Looking at the data presented in the summary of results, the employment status survey showed figures of those engaged or not engaged in the work force by age and sex. Overall, the survey identified that the ration of persons engaged in work in Japan rose by "0.4 points for males and 2.5 points for females" in the period between 2012 and

2017, indicating an overall growth in the labor force in the time period, although much more for women and men (Statistics Bureau 2017).

The Employment Status Survey also looked into certain conditions for workers: providing childcare, taking care of elders, working hour adjustments, starting businesses, having a second job, being irregular employees, and double income households, to name a few. Pertaining to my project, I will focus on the section about irregular employment, while dipping into some other sections where irregular employment is mentioned. For the section of irregular workers, it was noted that, by averaging all prefectures in Japan to get a percentage of irregular workers among "Employees, excluding executive of company or corporation," the percentage had not changed from 2012 to 2017 and remained at 38.2 percent of employees. Moreover, the survey also noted that percentage of the irregular workers who were considered young persons, aged fifteen to thirty-four years old, had actually decreased from 2012 to 2017 overall, going from 35.3 percent in 2012 to 32.9 percent in 2017 (Statistics Bureau 2017). These numbers were also shown in a breakdown based on prefecture which highlighted some disparities in the numbers of irregular employees depending on geographic locations that may indicate differing levels of opportunities for regular work in various urban and rural regions. Although there was a decrease in youth irregular employment in Japan from 2012 to 2017, irregular employment was shown to make up almost 40 percent of the work force, with a little over 30 percent of the irregular employees falling into the youth category (Statistics Bureau 2017). This indicates that irregular employment makes up a significant amount of all employment in Japan, which promotes the merits of discussing this topic. Additionally, based on the recent

popularity of freelancing that has since the boom began in 2018 (Hirano 2018), if it were not for COVID-19, I would otherwise have felt confident in hypothesizing that the number of those engaged in irregular employment would grow in the 2022 results of the Employment Status Survey.

Moreover, the survey also tried to understand the main reasons why irregular workers were working as irregular workers. The options available for respondents to choose as reasons included: “For working at convenient times,” “For supplementing family income or earning school expense,” “For housework, child-rearing or nursing care,” “For short commute time,” “For utilizing specialized skills,” and “Not obtaining a job as a regular employee.” The responses overall for Japan for each category were 27.8, 20.3, 10.8, 4.9, 7.3 and 12.6 percent, respectively, suggesting that flexibility in terms of working time as well as providing for family income or paying for school were the most popular reasons for choosing to do irregular work (Statistics Bureau 2017). Furthermore, prefectural breakdowns for this data were also made available showing some geographic differences.

Based on the responses from the Employment Status Survey and the views presented in the works by Genda and Toivonen et al., one can get the sense that, while in some cases, there may be individuals who lack motivation to get a long-term and fulltime jobs, there are many other factors for which irregular employees and prospective employees work in irregular employment.

Chapter 2: How Have Irregular Workers in Japan Been Impacted by COVID-19

Utilizing data from the Statistics Bureau of Japan database, focusing on the months of October 2019 through March 2021, I would first like to highlight the most recent changes in employment since the pandemic. For changes in the unemployment rate for all genders, although while still relatively low from a global perspective, Japan's unemployment rate began to increase since the lowest rate of just above 2 percent in December of 2019, rising to its highest (as currently reported), at 3.1 percent in October of 2020. The unemployment rate has since decreased from the peak of 3.1 percent but did see another peak at 2.9 percent in January of 2021. The most recent update to this unemployment rate as reported by the Statistics Bureau stands at a rate of 2.7 percent. It is worth pointing out that the peaks in the unemployment rate seem to loosely follow the different waves of COVID-19 that I will mention later on (Statistics Bureau 2021).

JILPT COVID-19 Survey

The Japan Institute for Labor Policy and Training conducted the "Survey on the Impact that Spreading Novel Coronavirus Infection Has on Work and Daily Life" initially in April and May 2020, following up in August of 2020. The survey included 4,307 "Employees of private enterprises" and 574 freelancers. The abstract of these results stated that:

> "The main effects associated with the novel coronavirus infectious disease COVID-19 have shifted from "decrease in workdays and working hours (including temporary leave) to "decrease in income." More than 60 percent of employees and 70 percent of freelance workers responded that they have anxiety attributable to "difficulty in daily life associated with decreased income." Household income and expenditures for May to July 2020 showed many households with a deficit, with 40 percent of freelance workers falling into the red." (JILPT 2020).

This survey tackled some major issues including working hours and income and the data was separated for regular and irregular employment. Overall, regardless of regular or irregular employment, when asked about what adversities individuals were facing for each month (April, May, and August), respondents could choose eight options for their answers in April and twelve in May and August. They were allowed to choose more than one option. The initial eight options included: "dismissal from the company," "termination of employment in expiration of the contract term," "change in job content," "decreased workdays and working hours," "increased workdays and working hours," "decreased income," "none applicable," and "do not want to answer." Due to a high response in the "none applicable" category, an additional four options—"unemployment as a result of employer's business suspension/discontinuation or bankruptcy," "change of type of employment," "increased income," and "voluntary resignation" —were included to try to gain more insight into the responses. Overwhelmingly, "decreased workdays and working hours" and "decreased income" were the most popular responses by the respondents, and the results in both May and

August for these two options were higher than the results in April, indicating that, while some employees were able to return to work, as was indicated in other labor surveys, the normalcy in terms of work hours and income had not returned (JILPT 2020).

Work hours were covered more extensively in the following pages, with data of what normal work week hours were for regular employees, non-regular employees, and all employees, separated into different graphs. Overall, the data indicated that, for both regular and non-regular workers, the second week of May seemed to bring the most significant change in work hours compared to pre COVID-19 times. Moreover, regular workers, although still experiencing significant changes in work hours, did not experience nearly as big of a shift in working hours as non-regular workers. While regular employment data showed that at its highest 7.2 percent (up from 1.9 percent originally) of regular workers were in the lowest hour bracket, “less than fifteen hours (including did not work)” while non-regular employees reached 31.2 percent in the lowest bracket, up from 10.5 percent during normal times. Additionally, another major point that was made was the increase in “work from home/telecommuting” days. For the before COVID-19 data, 73.1 percent of respondents said they did not work from home or telecommute, but this dropped all the way to 5.7 percent during the second week of May (JILPT 2020). Before the pandemic, telecommuting was rare in Japan, where face-to-face interactions and teamwork are valued, and employees are expected to put in “face time” at their companies and be seen by their coworkers while at work.

In terms of income, it was stated that “more than one in four responded that their most recent monthly income “decreased,” and about 30 percent said that their summer bonus “decreased.” Paid leave was also affected, as about half of those who were

ordered to stay home, 54.1 percent stated that at least half of their days at home were paid, and 21.9 percent stated that a portion of the days absent (less than half) were paid. Around 24 percent of respondents, said they were not paid at all.

The survey also focused on freelance workers and indicated that, as of the end of July 2020, “more than 40 percent responded that they continue to feel an ‘impact on business performance’ (decrease in net sales/income).” Additionally, part of the survey asked whether employees were having to cut back on food expenses at home, and, while most regular employees were in the “surplus” of income and not having to cut back as much on food, over one third of irregular employees answered that they were “in the red,” meaning they were facing major difficulty in being able to pay for necessary expenditures. Freelancers also had a very high percentage of deficit. The percentage of those who needed to “cut back” rose by 14.1 percent points. These difficulties in “daily life” due to financial hardship from the pandemic have also translated into rising anxiety. Findings from the survey suggested that “anxiety with respect to difficulty in daily life associated with decreased income” is felt by a higher percentage of non-regular employees (65.6 percent) than regular employees (61.3 percent). Among freelance workers, the percentage rose to 71.1 percent. Although it is clear that regular employees are still experiencing anxieties, the results also seem to show that it is taking more of a toll on irregular employees and freelancers (JILPT 2020).

This data is incredibly important to my argument as it highlights that, while the burden of the pandemic has been felt by all, there are clear hour and wage decreases that have been affecting irregular employees significantly more than regular employees.

Column – "Diminished Non-regular Employment, Solid Regular Employment: What Impacts Did the "Wave" of the COVID-19 Pandemic Have in Japan" by Takahashi Koji

Takahashi Koji, a Vice Senior Researcher at JILPT whose research focuses on irregular work, presented his personal views of how COVID-19 has affected both regular and non-regular employment by analyzing the Labor Force Survey as well as the survey I analyzed above. Particularly, the labor force surveys that Takahashi focused on were from the months of January through June, showcasing the early impacts of COVID-19. Takahashi highlighted three main points in his analysis of the data: (1) irregular employment was first to be affected by the pandemic; (2) regular employment has "remained solid"; and (3) it seems that companies will not move toward more irregular employment as a result of the pandemic.

Takahashi noted that there was a difference in the impact of the pandemic depending on employment type stating that "non-regular employees were more likely to separate from their jobs in April and May than regular employees," and "non-regular employees had larger decreases in their working hours that regular employees" (Takahashi 2020). He mentioned that, for data in the labor survey, irregular employees made up the bulk of the number of "employed persons not at work," and the number of non-regular employees in general decreased by 970,000 in April 2020 compared to April 2019. Takahashi also stated that in the next month's survey (May), "The number of non-regular employees not at work decreased while the numbers of employees at work and employed persons increased based on real numbers, and there were signs of recovery in non-regular employment" (Takahashi 2020). Although May's results made

it seem like there was a recovery, June's data indicated that, compared to before COVID-19, "the size of non-regular employment decreased." (Takahashi 2020).

Moreover, Takahashi claimed that irregular workers at companies had been used as an "employment buffer" for companies and the regular workers at those companies because they delayed employment adjustment by bearing the burden first. Takahashi referenced the JILPT survey and how management within companies responded to how they would adjust employment within their companies. The data indicated that 16 percent of respondents said they "will raise the percentage of regular employees"; 5.1 percent said they "will raise the percentage of part time workers, temporary workers, and contract employees"; 1.3 percent said they "will raise the percentage of dispatched workers"; and the remaining percentage of the companies said they did not know what changes would be made. From this information, Takahashi drew the conclusion that increasing regular employment was the most desirable for companies in the future, even though it has been clear that having irregular employees during the pandemic has lessened the blow of the situation for regular employees and companies overall. This is a very interesting point to note as the desire of companies to raise numbers of regular employees was also expressed in the MHLW White Papers that will be discussed in Chapter 4.

"Just a Freeter" (*Tada no Furita*)

Just as freelancers highlighted in the ethnography written by Satsuki Uno, a global marketer and localizer for a gaming company in Japan, and Robin O'Day, an "Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of North Georgia, shared their frustration with unfair treatment during COVID-19 by taking to Twitter as an outlet, a

number of young individuals have taken to YouTube to share their experiences with employment or lack thereof during the pandemic. Many of these individuals self-identify with some of the terms that I outlined at the beginning of this paper. There are a variety of different approaches that these individuals take to sharing these experiences, whether it be for what seems to be comedic or entertainment, or claiming they want to share their experiences for others who are going through similar situations. Nonetheless, there appears to be many more individuals taking to YouTube to share very personal issues and talk about their employment type or lack thereof which can be sensitive to stigma and critique overall by Japanese society. Keeping a cautious outlook to themes of identity and the Internet, after careful consideration, I have decided to highlight one particular individual who has shared his experiences through his YouTube channel.

With the channel name of *Tada no Furita/Jinsei Dokyumento*, or "Just a Freeter/Life Document," a thirty-six-year-old man who goes by the name Kōsuke, originally from Aomori prefecture in northern Japan, began to document his life as a freeter with his first video published on June 17, 2020, during the first wave of COVID-19 in Japan. According to the "About" section of his channel, he is single and looking to marry and completed high school as his highest level of education. He wrote that in 2003 after graduating high school he "wanted to do the things he liked and with that in mind moved to the capital. While being a freeter, he pursued his plan of becoming a musician or famous comedian, and failed" (*2003/ kōkō sotsugyōgo, sukina koto o shigoto ni shitai to omoi jōkyō. furi-ta- o shi nagara myu-jishan ya owarai geinin o kokorozasu mo zasetsusuru*). He then claimed that in 2019 "for the sake of finding his reason for being (*ikigai*), he started to go full-out with YouTube at the age of thirty-

five” (*2019/ ikigai o tsukuru tame, 35-sai de YouTube o honkakuteki ni hajimeru*). As of May 2021, the channel has 12,700 subscribers with over two hundred videos published and has had 4,305,140 views on his videos in total. (Sakashita 2020)

As Kōsuke has indicated in his “About” page, he has had an interest in becoming a comedian over the years, and the more recent videos that he has been posting have been reflective of this and are more entertainment driven, in light of his growing popularity. However, I would like to highlight some of his earliest videos where he discussed how he lives as a freeter and his response to the impacts of COVID-19.

Starting with his very first video on the channel titled “Poverty—10,000-yen allowance that I would die without and a single freeter’s meal alone” (*Hinkon nai to shinu kyūfukin 10-man yen to dokushin furita no ichinin meshi*), posted on June 18,2020 with 52,608 views, Kōsuke gave an idea of how he lives paycheck to paycheck with his part-time work and paying his bills, while physically showing the balances in his bank account as well as his bills to viewers. He noted that he was able to receive a 100,000-yen (roughly $1,000) benefit from the government due to COVID-19 that allowed for him to survive until his next paycheck, as before receiving the benefit, he only had about 20,000 yen (roughly $200 USD) left. (“[Poverty] 10,00yen” 00:02:10-00:02:48). About receiving the COVID-19 aid money, he stated, “For a freeter like me, 100,000 yen is an extremely large amount of money, and I am extremely grateful. I will carefully use it for my living expenses.” (*furita no boku nitotte 10-man en nante mechakucha taikin nande, mechakucha ureshii desu ne. Kore wa daiji ni seikatsuhi ni kai detai to omoimasu*) (“[Poverty] 10,000 yen” 00:03:30-00:03:45).

Moving on from his trip to the bank and paying his bill, he then had a meal and explained to viewers that on that day, his meal cost 1,209 yen, which was expensive for him, as ideally, he limits his spending to 500 yen a day (around $5). As it was his first video, he continued by introducing himself and his story and why he decided to start a YouTube channel, similar to his description in the abovementioned "About" page of his channel. Kōsuke stated, "It's not just me living like this. People having a goal or dream that did not work out and end up in irregular work, just living quietly. There's many people like me out there, but we never get the chance to have the spotlight on us, so with YouTube I want people to understand that people like us exist" ("[Poverty 10,000 yen" 00:15:05-00:15:59).

Another video, posted almost a week later on June 24, 2020, titled "Single impoverished freeter's delayed loan debt repayment negotiations. What will happen with stopping payments due to income decrease from the Coronavirus? Poverty Documentary" (*Dokushin hinkon furita shakkin no chien songaikin kōshō. Korona shūnyūgen de hensai sutoppu dō naru? Hinkon dokyumento*), highlights a specific situation occurring in Kōsuke's life as a repercussion of COVID-19. Kōsuke explained how he had to delay his loan payments due to losing his side job as a result of COVID-19. He was eventually able to make ends meet thanks to his manager at his main part-time job allowing him to increase his hours. He documented his call with the loan company to work on being able to resume his delayed payments on his loan. ("Single impoverished freeter")

The *Tada no Furita* channel is an important example of an individual involved in irregular employment who has faced some major difficulties, both financially as well

as being viewed as contributing less to society for his participation in irregular work. Again, I want to avoid over-generalizing, as Kōsuke is just one irregular worker Japan and all experiences are different, but Kōsuke documenting his experiences and sharing his own values, allows, as he stated in his first video, for irregular workers to "take the spotlight.". Additionally, it is worth noting, that by starting a YouTube channel, he has both been able to take a step forward in his dreams of comedy and fame, continuing to gain popularity through his channel, which can generate more income. Additionally, as Kōsuke reveals his finances and how he would not have been able to survive without the $1,000 COVID-19 relief payment and his difficulties paying his loans and other bills, he is able to show the reality of the anxieties that he is facing which can be reflective of sentiments held by many other irregular workers who have experienced decreases in wages and hours or have been fully let go from their jobs. Additionally, as was briefly mentioned in the introduction section, Kōsuke, through his channel *Tada no Freeter* is not the only irregularly employed individual who has taken to YouTube to share his experiences, as there are dozens of different irregular workers who have shared their situation within the last year. While I chose to highlight Kōsuke's channel for its higher level of credibility compared to other channels and their creators, the growth in irregularly employed individuals opening up about their situations is an action that can be viewed as desire by the irregularly employed population to be understood as well as to hopefully and ultimately spark the sense of urgency in key stakeholders like the government and companies, to push for changes that can improve conditions for irregular employees, that can be beneficial to all.

Ethnographies from David Slater

Professor David H. Slater of Sophia University has created a set of ethnographic papers with colleagues also related to Sophia University. As in the case of the YouTube videos of *Tada no Furita*, these ethnographies have been able to capture real people and their real experiences during COVID-19 in Japan.

Freelance Workers

The first paper in the collection overseen by David Slater that helps illustrate my arguments of the disparities existing for irregular workers, is titled "Japanese Freelance Workers Struggle during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Social Media, Critique, and Political Resistance" by Uno and O'Day. As of September 15, 2020, when the series of articles was published, Uno and O'Day noted that freelancers in Japan have been struggling due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Uno and O'Day cited a survey conducted by a crowdsourcing service company for freelancers and suggested that "more than 30 percent of freelance workers have reduced their income about 50,000 JPY per month while more than 15 percent report that their monthly income has reduced by at least 100,000 JPY" (Uno, O'day 2020). They also noted that work for freelancers has not been necessarily completely disappearing but instead the kinds of jobs that are available have been changing: "often ones with more direct personal risk are increasing."(Uno, O'Day 2020). This means that if freelancers want to continue to earn incomes, they have to adjust to these new jobs and often put themselves at risk. Furthermore, the results acknowledged that, prior to the pandemic, the ability to work remotely was one of the biggest advantages for freelancers. While this may make it seem like freelancers would not bear the burden of the pandemic, in reality, freelancers have still been at risk with their jobs because, as

Uno and O'Day state, "fulltime employees (*seishain*) for big companies transition to telework from home."(Uno, O'Day 2020). These fulltime employees as well as some mid-sized and small companies are using their own employees for telework, which has reduced opportunities available for freelancers because they are not affiliated with these companies. Uno and O'Day make the important point that "the pandemic has rapidly revealed freelancers' fundamental employment insecurity and lack of safety net." (Uno, O'Day 2020).

Uno and O'Day note that there has been a significant increase in freelance work in Japan and cited another crowdsourcing service that has forecasted that over half of the Japanese population will be engaged in freelancing by 2027 and that lifetime employment will shift to no longer be the norm. Moreover, especially since 2016, there has been an effort by the Japanese government to reform labor, resulting in the creation of "The Action Plan for the Realization of Work Style Reform," largely promoting flexibility in work settings and regulations. While the government has used this in an effort to encourage all citizens to work, irregular work like freelancing still is not seen in an equal lens to regular employment. This is apparent in MHLW's COVID-19 relief "efforts" (double quote marks because many people view these efforts as insufficient). Uno and O'Day state, "The Ministry compensated companies up to 8,330 JPY per person per day from employment insurance. However, freelancers, ineligible to receive subsidies through companies, could apply to the government to receive only up to 4,100 JPY per person per day, and up to 200,000 yen in emergency loans." (Uno, O'Day 2020). As part of their ethnographic data, Uno and O'Day selected several direct quotes and tweets from freelancers to illustrate the opinions and reactions that freelancers had

in response to the disparities in government assistance. Many who defended the disparities believed that freelancers have "self-responsibility" (*jiko sekinin*) and needed to understand that they chose this style of employment and needed to deal with whatever consequences would occur. (Uno, O'day 2020). Meanwhile, many freelancers felt that this treatment was not reflective of true efforts to encourage all Japanese citizens to participate in the workforce and that their work did not have the same value simply because they were not attached to a company like regular employees (Uno, O'Day 2020). Some media coverage of the issue also represented freelancers as underserving of equal assistance, prompting response from freelancers like one of the tweets used in the article stating, "Today's Abema TV[online television network] program described 'freelancers as the people who pursue dreams,' and debated whether their struggles are justified by 'self-responsibility.' Freelancers are now just a group of ordinary workers and not some group of dreamers. I'm shocked to see that the media coverage is too divorced from reality." (Twitter: @konno_haruki, April 21, 2020 as cited in Uno, O'Day 2020). Other respondents noted that in a normal situation they would not expect any assistance, but a global pandemic, like a natural disaster, is something unavoidable regardless of one's employment status (Uno, O'Day 2020). Uno and O'Day compared the backlash from freelancers over COVID-19 relief, to backlash from freeters in the early 1990s and 2000s as the former seems to echo the same themes of work exploitation and bearing the burden through themes of "self-imposition" cast onto vulnerable irregularly employed populations.

Restaurant Workers

Restaurant workers were another vulnerable population identified in Slater and his team's series of articles. In the article titled "How are Tokyo's Independent Restauranters Surviving the Pandemic" by James Farrer, Professor of Sociology and Global Studies at Sophia University. Because they had to resort to operating through takeout only, business has been difficult for many Japanese restaurants. Farrer noted that restaurants faced different situations. On one hand, a lot of local "mom and pop" restaurants have been surviving thanks to personal connections among communities, friends, and family. On the other hand, many larger chain restaurants have had to close down locations, and other local independent restaurants were not so lucky to have heavy support (Farrer 2020).

Farrer noted that, at the time of collecting data and writing the article, it was not clear what the long-term impact the pandemic would have on the fulltime employees and owners of restaurants, but "some of the first people to be affected were the part-time and temporary employees at restaurants, particularly service staff." (Farrer 2020). One individual who was interviewed was a student from South Asia who had been working at an Indian restaurant in Tokyo. The student said that her hours were cut because she was no longer needed with the restaurant's takeout operations, even though business had been strong. The student expressed that she was seeking out work at a grocery store, putting herself at more risk for contact during COVID-19, in order to make money (Farrer 2020). This student's experience is reflective of that of many other young people in Japan working temporary and part-time jobs in the service industry. Many are being let go, even while businesses have been surviving the pandemic.

Cleaning and Sanitization Workers

Written by Makiko Deguchi and Matsumoto Chie, the article "Voices of Sanitation Workers in Japan amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic," highlights the physical vulnerability of sanitation workers, another irregularly employed and vulnerable population. The authors interviewed six older men, all in their forties to seventies, working in sanitation and garbage collection to get their views of the situation. Deguchi and Matsumoto identified seven major themes based on these interviews: (1) alerting overseas news of potential dangers; (2) fear of contracting Covid-19; (3) negotiated for safer protocols and gear; (4) increased workload; (5) experience of discrimination and stigma; (6) increased public attention and awareness; and (7) "our Work Goes Beyond Garbage Collection." (Deguchi and Matsumoto 2020). Overall, the authors identify these workers as extremely essential but also extremely underappreciated individuals. While it is important to note that the scope of my paper is in regard to irregularly employed youth and vulnerabilities they face in relation to the pandemic, I find value in mentioning these other older groups of irregularly employed individuals as they, too, face hardship due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The workers interviewed stated that, not only has their work become more dangerous due to COVID-19, but their work has also become busier because more people at home means more waste and garbage produced at home that the sanitation and garbage workers must take care of (Deguchi, Matsumoto 2020).

Deguchi and Matsumoto also found discrimination and stigma toward sanitation workers. They write, "Stories in the media include, for instance, sanitation workers overhearing mothers telling their child, Study hard so you don't become like them'

(Fujii, 2019, quoted Deguchi, Matsumoto 2020). Another important aspect of the article deals with how garbage collection has become privatized, and, instead of having fulltime workers, they hire many temporary workers or those who otherwise work on a short-term basis. One union official who was interviewed stated, “I don’t think they have the same level of commitment and devotion that we do, and they can’t. This affects whether or not they can act quickly in emergency situations.” (Deguchi, Matsumoto 2020). With these statements, the union workers and other fulltime sanitation workers seem to view short-term and otherwise more irregularly employed individuals as harmful to the long-term operations of sanitation, which can also highlight sentiments of less loyalty to companies from irregularly employed workers in comparison to regular workers.

COVID-19 as a Nighttime Virus

Valentina Giammara, a Ph.D. candidate at Sophia University, took to writing about “COVID-19 in Japan: A Nighttime Disease,” focusing on how COVID-19 had an effect on Kabuki-chō, the red-light district located in Shinjuku, Tokyo, and the workers associated with those in the *settai* (business entertainment) industry. Giammara first noted the initial response by the Japanese government in regard to mandates on the population and identified how Japan’s government “requested,” instead of insisted, that Japan minimize close contact and stay home (Giammara 2020). Some businesses closed temporarily in accordance with the request, but business owners ultimately were able to make the decision on their own of whether to stay open or not regardless of COVID-19 risks. Giammara observed that, at any time of day and with any demographic of the population, Japanese people were not fully following the requests and had varying

meanings of *jishuku* (self-restraint) that was suggested by the government and could be seen travelling, going out to eat, going out in public without masks among other behaviors. However, those affiliated with "nightlife," like host and hostess bars, were the ones vilified by the public and by the media. Giammara also noted that the vilification by some went as far as to "the extent of suggesting that [*settai* workers] did not deserve the 100,000-yen compensation bond that every other resident received" (Giammara 2020).

Giammara interviewed several *kyabajo* (woman working in a hostess bar) and male hosts, all in their twenties and early thirties, to get an idea of how the pandemic has affected their work. Host and hostesses at their respective bars, work to serve drinks to and provide entertainment through conversation to mostly those of the opposite sex. One of the male hosts, K., stated that he had not been working and had not earned any income since the end of March. His club also did not give any allowance to the employees as his salary is based on hours spent at the club with clients (Giammara 2020).

A thirty-two-year-old *kyabajyo*, A. stated that she has not received any money from the club since it closed at the beginning of April. However, "she keeps in touch with her clients daily, something that all *kyabajyo* do as part of the unpaid effective labor that comes along with job."(Giammara 2020). A. noted that she "refuses to meet her clients personally because she "heard from the news that three-quarters of the infected people in Japan contracted the virus in nightclubs" (Giammara 2020). Although A. refused to meet her clients in person, many hosts and hostesses do so to make money privately to survive putting them at risk. Additionally, Giammara explains the

vilification of nightlife and the workers associated with it. She noted that K. and A. had not heard of any friends contracting COVID-19 in nightclubs, and both had only heard of these contractions on the news and social media (Giammara 2020).

In looking at these ethnographic papers, Kōsuke's experiences, and some of the data that has become available concerning irregular workers, it is evident that there are disparities that irregular workers must face in times of crisis. Moreover, in each of the ethnographies I read, researchers discuss individuals feeling as though they had no value and were almost dehumanized by many non-irregular workers who refused to sympathize with them. Especially in the article about the freelancers, the fact that the point needed to be made by one of the freelancers that they would not expect assistance during a time that was not an emergency situation like COVID-19 also shows that there may be pressure from irregular workers to constantly prove themselves. It is also important to note, that even within irregular work, there is a wide variety of different types of jobs, and each has been impacted in a different way from COVID-19, and these ethnographic papers work to highlight just a few different jobs and experiences of irregularly employed individuals in these specific jobs.

Chapter 3: How Societal Views and Issues Have Relevance to Youth Irregular Employment and Contribute to the Disparities that Exist Between Types of Employment

In previous sections, I explained what irregular employment is, how it pertains to the younger generation, and, on the basic level, how irregularly employed individuals have been impacted by COVID-19. This chapter will transition into the second part of the argument of this thesis. In the previous section, I discussed how irregular employees have been bearing more of a burden during COVID-19, and I briefly touched on how irregular employment has been seen as inferior to regular employment. To try to gain some understanding of why some of the distaste for irregular employment may exist, and why there seems to be less urgency to assist irregular employees, in this section, I will examine some basic understandings of Japanese cultural values and representations in society through media and popular culture about irregular workers.

HOFSTEDE's Intercultural Dimensions

A notable place to start when looking at a specific nation's values and social norms is through the Intercultural Dimensions developed by Geert Hofstede. While Hofstede's intercultural dimension cannot precisely narrow down the thought process of every individual in Japan, it can give a sense of general background and, in relation to other countries, what values are important to many Japanese people and what characteristics make up the general norms of Japanese culture. There are six dimensions that make up Hofstede's intercultural analysis: power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long term orientation, and indulgence. For the

purpose of this project, I will compare the scores of the dimensions (Figure 1) for both Japan and the United States to better illustrate the spectrum of how values are weighted differently in each country.

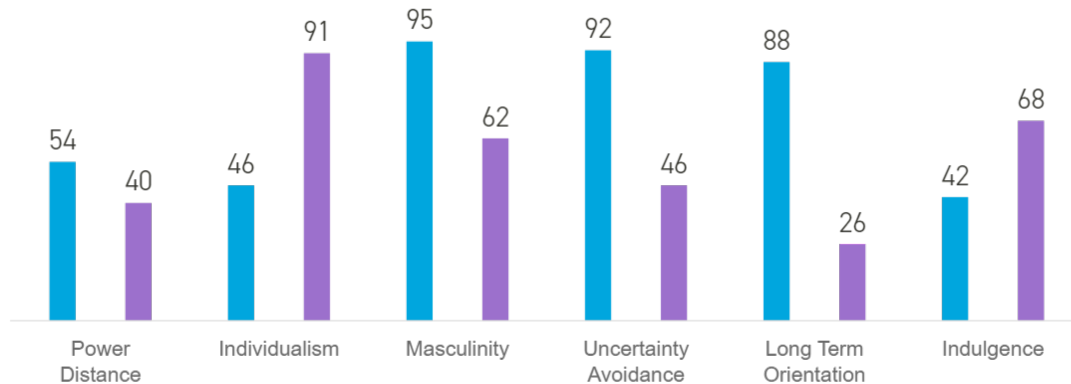

Figure 1: Hofstede's Intercultural Dimensions, Comparison of Japan, and the United States. Scores for Japan are in blue, and scores for the United States in are in purple ("Country Comparison").

The first dimension, power distance represents how levels of power are seen within the country. The United States has a score of forty (out of one hundred), while Japan has a score of fifty-four. The debrief on the Hofstede website generalizes, "Japanese are always conscious of their hierarchical position in any social setting and act accordingly" ("Country Comparison"), indicating that clear differences in power are marked in Japanese society.

The category of individualism reflects a nation's tendency to put more emphasis on the individual rather than more emphasis on the whole. Japan tends to be more group-oriented with a Hofstede score of forty-six, while the United States tends to be extremely individualistic with a score of ninety-one ("Country Comparison"). Japanese culture, tends to score heavily toward selflessness and humility, in addition to avoiding

being shameful by doing one's best not to be an inconvenience to other people. These scores indicate that many people in Japan value harmony and believe in following tradition. Often times, many people might feel that getting along with colleagues and other individuals in other group settings can be more important than one's actual technical skills. This relates to the theme of *ibasho* that will be discussed later on and shows the importance of belonging in social groups, which can also be in the workplace.

The next dimension, masculinity, reflects a nation's competitiveness and value of what is considered "quantity of life," as opposed to "quality of life." Japan has an extremely high score of ninety-five, while the United States has a moderately high score of sixty-two. This score shows that Japan is seems to be extremely competitive country, and youth are exposed to competition from an early age, for example, with public class rankings from exams in school and difficult placement tests when entering high school and universities. Moreover, the job-hunting experience in Japan can be extremely difficult and stressful for many, as often there are some strict qualifications that must be met to be offered a position. Additionally, the survey data indicates that Japan still promotes the patriarchal idea that the man of the household is the one to earn an income, while the woman in the household is supposed to stay home to take care of the home and the family.

Uncertainty avoidance is the next dimension, and it reflects a nation's willingness to take risks with unknown outcomes. Japan scores very high for uncertainty avoidance at ninety-two. The score for uncertainty avoidance can be representative of the precarity existing in Japan. Japan's high level of uncertainty

avoidance, combined with long-term orientation (the next dimension), can partially explain the reasons why the majority of Japanese individuals pursue, or encourage pursuing, becoming *seishain* instead of engaging in irregular work, as becoming a *seishain* creates a decrease in uncertainty towards one's future.

The next dimension is long-term orientation, which represents whether a country is more concerned about short-term outcomes or long-term outcomes. For Japan, planning for the long-term is displayed in the scores as a very important cultural value, with a score of eighty-eight. As discussed above, one's career is often a decision for the extreme long-term in Japan, as it is not as common to change jobs and careers throughout life in Japan as it is in other countries.

Finally, the last Hofstede dimension is indulgence. Japan scores somewhat lower than the United States with scores of forty-two and sixty-eight, respectively. This dimension can loosely relate to the concepts of employment in the sense that, according to the Hofstede Insights, "Restrained societies do not put much emphasis on leisure time and control the gratification of their desires."("Country Comparison"). It has been noted that Japanese workers, especially in *seishain* positions, are extremely dedicated to their jobs and work extremely long hours. Also reported are instances of work-related stress, even of suicide, as a result of individuals taking up these positions ("Country Comparison").

These scores are not completely indicative of Japan's culture, as, just like with any other culture, all Japanese people do not have the exact same values and cannot be put under the same umbrella for all values. However, one is able to get a reasonable understanding that commonly, ideas surrounding "masculinity," "uncertainty

avoidance," and "long-term orientation" are integral to a general idea of Japanese culture and society in comparison to at least the United States in this case. With these in mind, one can also make a basic argument that irregular employment which, in most cases, is not for the long-term, can be looked down upon, as it is not in alignment with the strong drive for thinking of the long-term that is seen in the Hofstede scores. Moreover, and going along with long-term orientation, the prominence of uncertainty avoidance can also highlight a reflection of the disapproval by many of irregular employment, due to many unknown outcomes being associated with those types of positions.

Other Japanese Cultural Themes

Ibasho or "Place Where I Belong"

Ibasho, meaning the "place where one belongs," is deeply connected to employment and workplaces. Since *ibasho* can be any place where a person feels comfortable and at home, Duke University Professor of Anthropology, Anne Allison, in her 2012 article in the *Cambridge Journal of Anthropology,* argues that *ibasho* often is the workplace for *seishain,* people engaged in regular employment. The concept of *ibasho* is a concern for young people because, if they are not respected and appreciated in a workplace setting, they may feel that they do not have an *ibasho*. Also, the workplace provides a regular income and economic structures of care.

Allison extends the topic of *ibasho* into a greater argument of what she calls "My-homeism." She writes that, following World War II, Japan became an "enterprise society" in which workers worked for themselves and were encouraged in terms of

consumerism (Allison 2012). Many people viewed owning a home, that was new, in a neighborhood, with wonderful appliances as the goal, which can also be the case in the United States and other countries. Allison discussed how "My-homeism" was crippling for those engaged in irregular work as this societal dream was not something they could easily achieve. As a result, many irregular workers felt ashamed. Allison theorizes that, during the summer 2007, individuals committed acts of violence out of frustration and anxiety of not being able to achieve this goal(Allison 2012). Allison states that the incidents of violence led to much discussion and prejudice against young temporary workers in general (Allison 2012).

Allison's perspectives on *ibasho* and "My-homeism" add to the discussion of general societal pressure on irregular employees to find where they belong. If someone's *ibasho* is assumed to be their workplace, university graduates and otherwise technically "capable" young individuals should be able to find the place where they belong within the confines of a regular job as a *seishain.* Although the true definition of *ibasho* means "a place where one belongs," it seems that *ibasho* is more reflective of a space within society and functioning with other people, rather than simply a physical space. I would like to question why *ibasho* in employment cannot mean finding one's place on one's own.

Popular Culture Representations of Irregular Employment among Youth

Analyzing popular culture, particularly films, television dramas, literature, and the mass media, that are heavily consumed in Japan, can provide some insight into commonly held ideas and values in Japan. I have identified a few popular sources that I believe effectively do so, but I do want to again note that the films, television drama,

and novel that I analyze are works of fiction. Although they are fiction, I believe the content reflects the values of the people who created them and offer ideas for their viewers and readers to consider.

Examples in Television Drams and Films

Perusing lists of films and television dramas and watching some that had relevance to irregular work, I came up with a few different examples to highlight. The first is a fall 2010 Japanese television drama titled *Freeter, Buy a House* (*Freeter, Ie o kau*), starring popular singer and actor Ninomiya Kazunari, as the freeter in question. The series was widely popular and won the Series Drama Grand Prix at the Tokyo Drama Awards of 2011. Ninomiya won an award for best actor. *Freeter, Buy a House* is based on a novel of the same title by Arikawa Hiro. It is the fictional story of Take Seiji, a recent university graduate who had finally gotten a fulltime job but then quit said job and became a freeter. The show helps dispel freeter stereotypes. Seiji is as a very apathetic character who is unable to fit-in to the working style and demands of a regular fulltime job. While the show is fictional, viewers can gain a sense of how freeters, other irregular employees, and unemployed individuals are viewed in Japan through Seiji's conversations and relationships with his family, friends, and other coworkers. Because Seiji is not motivated to work in a regular fulltime position, his relationship with his father becomes extremely hostile to the point where the only conversations between the two are arguments. As some other issues in the family arise, Seiji ends up deciding that he will save money and find a suitable new home for the family. Thus Seiji becomes a sort of hero as a freeter who can exceed societal expectations and raise enough money

to find a home and be happy without conforming to expectations for fulltime employment in Japan.

To sum up some takeaways from "*Freeter, Buy a House,"* I interpreted the show as presenting three main assumptions about irregular employment: (1) irregular employees lack motivation and are unable to fit in; (2), irregularly employed individuals can and should change; and (3) irregular employed individuals cannot succeed. While the end of this drama shows irregular employment in a positive light, by illustrating how an irregular employee could be able to provide for his family, it still, at the core, seems to promote the stereotype that irregular employees are lazy and that they need to change or develop some motivation and succeed in some way to show that they are as worthy as regularly employed individuals. In noting this, I hope to illustrate again, that some irregular workers choose to work in irregular employment due to the convenience of flexible working hours and having families among other needs. Thus I challenge if it is fair to place this expectation for change and "doing better" onto irregular employees, when even in regular employment, there will always be workers who do not seem to work as hard as others.

Tamako in Moratorium

In the 2013 film *Tamako in Moratorium* (*Moratoriamu Tamako*), Tamako is a recent university graduate who returns home to live with her father and proceeds to enter a year-long moratorium. Her disheveled appearance and laziness, once again, is a portrayal of the stereotypical characteristics typically associated with unemployed and irregularly employed individuals in Japan. She faces some pressure from her father to start the job-hunting process, but it is interesting to note that the degree to which this is

expected of her is nowhere near as high as was present in *Freeter, Buy a House* for the male character Seiji. Both are fictional stories, so it is difficult to compare due to differences in what the writers may have wanted to convey, but one can assume that, if instead of Tamako, it was a son portrayed in the film, that the expectation to find a job would be much higher. This is due to the continuity of the patriarchal belief that women should prioritize marrying and becoming housewives.

Additionally, the film shows a different type of irregular employment. At one point, it appears that Tamako is attempting to audition to be a part of an music idol group. With the number of idol groups in Japan, it is difficult to reach a level of stardom that is suitable to sustain one's life. Additionally, the fact that she is a university graduate and should be qualified for a range of other jobs is another representation of how this is irregular. One can also see the importance of age and appearance, as she believed to be too old to actually become an idol.

The film continues to illustrate her "moratorium" in terms of her behaviors in life, which are not limited to her job-hunting related action but also include her socialization. When seen by her former classmates and friends in her hometown, she tries to ignore them and does not want to attend any gatherings with them. Although not blatantly stated in the film, the viewer can assume that it is because Tamako feels shame in having to talk about what she has been doing since she graduated from university and returned back home.

Tamako in Moratorium also depicts stereotypes of irregular employees, and, in this case searching but unemployed individuals, as lazy, apathetic, and lost in life. Different from *Freeter, Buy a House,* film does not end with Tamako succeeding and

getting a job, among other "ideal" results, and instead, ends just as abruptly as it started. This can be interpreted as showing how "static," or unchanging, Tamako, and by extension other irregularly employed and unemployed youth, may be.

Somebody

The 2014 *Somebody* (*Nanimono*) follows the story of a group of university graduates entering the job hunting (*shūkatsu*) process. The film shows how the process of finding a job is troubling in the sense that young graduates have to compete with their friends and acquaintances in order to secure spots in the workforce. This process can set up individuals for how the rest of their life will play out. The film takes many critical approaches towards the matter, first by showing how limited job applicants are at illustrating their qualifications and worthiness of positions. One translated quote from the film about the interview process stated, "What we can say in one minute is as limited as the 140-character limit on Twitter. Expressing yourself as concisely as possible is everything during job hunts."("Somebody" 2014). This quote also reflects the weight that resumes have over interpersonal interactions during the process, which can lead to senses of dehumanization among applicants and make them feel merely like names and faces on paper.

The film also depicts conflict between two characters with different views on regular and irregular employment. One character argues that Japan is entering an age of individualism. The character remarks, "It seems like everyone who is job hunting has lost their compass. Swept away by the tide, they've lost sight of their goals. What are they working so hard for? And for whom?" The other character calls him arrogant for

making this remark and says that thinks he is too good for everyone else and the companies that he refuses to apply for ("Somebody" 2014).

Overall, the film displays the anxieties youth commonly face, regardless of whether they choose to pursue regular or irregular work. Especially in the abovementioned scene, the film seems to promote conflicting views on individualism versus fitting into the model of regular employment. It also seems to reflect a desire among young people to follow their own passions instead of working for companies where they could potentially lose sight what it means to be themselves. Although it was not directly stated in the film, it can be interpreted that this film is also making an argument for a need for structural changes within the job-hunting process and for companies to ensure that their employees have a sense of fulfillment through their work. (I will discuss the latter issue in more detail in the next chapter.)

Popular Literature: Example of Convenience Store Woman

Murata Sayaka's 2016 novel, *Convenience Store Woman*, (Konbini ningen) won the Akutagawa Prize, one of Japan's most prestigious literary awards, and has has been translated into global languages, including English. Convenience Store Woman is just one of Murata's works that showcases experiences of women in modern Japan including her most recent 2020 novel titled *Earthlings.* Convenience Store Woman is notable as a novel about a freeter, as Murata herself worked at a convenience store as a freeter.

Convenience Store Woman is the fictional story of a woman named Keiko, who feels that she has never fit into the norms of those around her. It was not until Keiko started to work at the convenience store that she felt like she had a place where she fit

in. *Convenience Store Woman* brings out the "regular" in what is considered "irregular" work, by reference to how Keiko is also a metaphorical cog in the machine that is Japan's workforce and, even more specifically, the convenience store Keiko works at. This theme is present as early as the fourth page as Murata writes: "The morning period is passing normally in the brightly lit box of the convenience store, I feel. Visible by the outside windows, polished free of fingerprints, are the figures of people rushing by. It is the start of another day, the time when the world wakes up and the cogs of society begin to move. I am one of those cogs, going round and round. I have become a functioning part of the world, rotating in the time of day called morning" (Murata 2016).

Moreover, Murata writing about a woman who is a freeter is worth noting, as although women make up a large number of freeter in Japan and in many cases, are mothers who want to work part time jobs. Additionally, women older than college age are often not included in freeter data even though they are also freeter. The lack of representation of women older than college age in data for freeter, seems to be indicative of the common assumption and expectation that women will become housewives.

Media Representations of Irregular Employment

A non-fiction article from 2020 written by Kawai Kaoru, a health sociologist published in the *Nikkei Business Magazine* tells the story of two sisters from similar educational backgrounds but lead different lives because one sister is a *seishain* and the other is an irregular, contract worker. This article shows the struggles of being an irregular worker, in Japan and starts with both sisters graduating from a private university. After graduation, one became employed regularly, while the other became

an irregular worker. The article mentions how the two sisters are very unequal in terms of wages and also discusses how irregular workers are often told they will have opportunities for promotion but are never actually rewarded with those opportunities. This article highlights the disparities between regular and irregular workers as well as introduces a new development: that a lawsuit about the inequities has been taken to the Japanese Supreme Court in an attempt to ensure that irregular workers are fairly compensated for their labor (Kawai 2020).

Looking further into this matter, it appears that there have been two cases filed in the Japanese supreme court, about adequate compensation, with the cases reaching their conclusions in February of 2019 and October of 2020. The lawsuits were both filed by women and were filed against Tokyo Metro Co. and Osaka Medical College respectively. (Kyodo 2020). Although it was noted that there were equality laws put in place for irregular employees in 2013. The results of the cases did not result in a manner which followed the laws against inequalities, and was disappointing for many irregular workers in Japan, (Kyodo 2020).

By looking at some fictional and non-fictional representations of irregular employment, one can observe that there are some specific cultural norms and expectations that put irregular workers in a place considered inferior to regular workers, and, therefore, as less ideal. By looking at Hofstede's scores, it can be generalized that many people in Japan value the long term over the short term and avoid uncertainty, or as I often refer to (in the words of Anne Allsion, as "precarity". Meanwhile, being an irregular worker, or having difficulty with finding an ideal long-term, fulltime job is theme and source of conflict in the film, television dramas, and literary works discussed

above. These themes are also reflected in the other sources I have analyzed, including ethnographic studies and social media posts and videos decrying that irregular workers have less access to financial aid under Japanese government COVID-19 response efforts. These government responses to irregular employment , as well as those of companies, will be highlighted in the next section, and will consider both pre-COVID-19 situations as well as current COVID-19 situations.

Chapter 4: Business and Government Level Policies that Interfere with Opportunities for Change for Irregular Employment and Structure of the Workforce

Major structural changes to labor policies made by Japan's Prime Ministers and their Cabinets have played a role in how irregular employment as it currently stands has taken shape. Koizumi Junichiro served as Japan's Prime Minister from 2001 to 2006. Many policy reforms in Japan that led to changes in the workforce for irregular work can be tied to structural reform policies during the Koizumi era. One aspect that Koizumi covered was strengthening the safety net for unemployment to give better aid to unemployed individuals and provide support for small and medium sized companies. Moreover, Koizumi introduced the "Front Loaded Reform Program" in October 2001, which was a plan to generate one million jobs in a three-year span. These new jobs would be created in new public services, in newly growing areas, and for assisting with reemployment. Additionally, Koizumi implemented internships for the younger generation (Mulgan 2013) .

Prime Minister Abe Shinzō served as Prime Minister from 2006-2007 and 2012-2020 and became Japan's longest serving Prime Minister. Abe implemented many policy reforms in an attempt to stabilize the economy, under a program often referred to as "Abenomics." A few of the major policies included in "Abenomics" are stimulus packages intended to improve infrastructure and a structural reform program that was proposed to deregulate employment and push for more diversity in the workplace. In the latter part of Abe's time as Prime Minister, specifically in 2015, when Abe announced

his “Abenomics 2.0,” Abe turned to focus on the pre-existing issues of the birth rate and social security (McBride and Xu 2018).

The issue of a hyper aging society that Abe attempted to address has relevancy to irregular employment as well. Japan has seen an issue in the balance of the population in terms of age groups. Japan has the fourth highest average life expectancy at birth in the world (84.65 years, total for both men and women). However, 2021 estimates for population growth rate and birthrates, -0.37 percent and 7 birth/1000 population respectively, rank Japan 224th in the world. The number of individuals over the age of sixty-five is extremely high in Japan with 29.18 percent of the population falling into this age bracket (Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) 2021). Meanwhile, Japan has seen a downward trend in population growth since 2009 (World Bank 2021), with fertility rates hovering mostly between 1.3 and 1.4 for over twenty years (lowest at 1.26 in 2005 and highest at 1.45 in 2015) (World Bank 2021). Fewer young people are having children, and those who do are having fewer children than past generations. This decrease in birthrates can be connected to precarity and uncertainty faced by younger individuals, both in terms of feeling confident in engaging in romantic relationships, and once in relationships, whether or not the couple will be able to support raising a child or multiple children. Younger individuals being involved in irregular employment also has an impact on this. As Allison and Baldwin (2015) write, “Not only attaining work but attaining sustainable work has become difficult for young people as the putative norm of career-long tenure with a stable employer is becoming replaced by a labor force sharply divided between those with and those without regular employment.” When young individuals do not have stable employment, it is incredibly difficult for

them to be willing to risk starting a family. Moreover, when looking for a partner for marriage, and ultimately to have a family, employment status and the long-term outlook of employment are heavily considered and having an uncertain outlook on employment can be detrimental on how someone looks as a prospective marriage partner (Allison, Baldwin 2015).

Abe announced his retirement during 2020 and was replaced by the current Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide, which also creates new changes and uncertainty in Japanese society for what decisions Suga might make in the future although Suga had a decent approval at over 70 percent before taking office (Herskovits, Yokoyama 2020), although the same cannot quite be said now in May of 2021.

COVID-19 Effects and Responses

Table 1: "The COVID-19 pandemic in Japan and main measures taken by the government"

Table compiled with information presented in the "Survey on the Impact that Spreading Novel Coronavirus Infection Has on Work and Daily Life" (JILPT 2020)

	Event
Mid- January (2020)	"Confirmation of the first COVID-19 cases in Japan."
January 30	"Confirmation of the first COVID-19 cases in Japan"
February 13	"Compilation of the government's "emergency measures concerning the novel coronavirus infectious disease" (followed by a second round of emergency measures on March 10) and implementation of special measures for the Employment Adjustment Subsidy (EAS), etc."

February 25	"Formulation of the government's "basic policy for countermeasures against the novel coronavirus pandemic" (later revised into Basic Policies for Novel Coronavirus Disease Control on April 7)"
February 27	"Request for temporary closure of all elementary schools, junior high schools and senior high schools as well as special needs education beginning on March 2"
Mid-March	"Number of cases in Japan reaches 1,000."
March 13	"Passage and enactment of a reform bill for the Amendment of the Act on Special Measures for Pandemic Influenza and New Infectious Diseases Preparedness and Response (enforcement from the following day)"
End of March	"Number of cases in Japan surpasses 2,000."
April 6	"April 6: Number of cases in Japan jumps above 4,000."
April 7	"Issuance of a "declaration of state of emergency" for 7 prefectures based on Article 32 (1) of the aforementioned act, and expansion of the declaration to all prefectures on April 17"
April 7	"Approval of "Emergency Economic Measures to Cope with COVID-19" by a Cabinet decision (with subsequent amendment approved on April 20), which includes expanded financial measures and payment of "sustainability benefits" for SMEs as well as cash handouts of 100,000 yen to all citizens, etc."
May 14	"Lifting of the declaration of the state of emergency for 39 prefectures"
May 21	"Lifting of the declaration of the state of emergency for 3 prefectures in the Kansai area"
May 25	"Complete lifting of the declaration of state of emergency"

According to the World Health Organization, Japan's first official COVID-19 case was confirmed on January 13, 2020, and cases remained minimal until April, when Japan first saw daily cases in the hundreds. The number of cases reported by the Japanese government dwindled for a while appearing to no longer be a concern until picking up again in August, and eventually staggering upward with the current peak number of daily cases being at 7,855 confirmed cases on January 9, 2021. As of May 6, 2021, Japan has had 616,233 confirmed cases and 10,517 deaths (World Health Organization 2021). Also as reported on the WHO website, graphs of the cases showcase four major waves of COVID-19 cases to date, the first peaking in mid-April 2020, the second peaking in the first week of August 2020, the third peaking in the second week of January 2021 and one currently at its peak at the time of writing this paper, from the end of April 2021.

In terms of the response to the pandemic, Table 1 highlights some of the key actions made by the government during the first wave of COVID-19 in Japan. Abe, and from a global perspective, Japan, were both criticized for the handling of COVID-19, as Abe prolonged the decision-making process to postpone the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, (Osaki 2020). Abe was criticized by the Japanese people as prioritizing the Olympics over the wellbeing of the Japanese people. He came under more criticism and in Japanese society for his implementation of what the public referred to as "Abe no mask" (translating to "Abe's masks"), when Abe decided to provide two reusable face masks to each Japanese household instead of providing other forms of financial relief or health assistance. Obviously two cloth masks per household would not be sufficient to

promote a healthy lifestyle during the pandemic that does not seem to be going anywhere after almost a year (Osaki 2020).

Moreover, with recent spikes in COVID-19 cases in Japan, and the ongoing presence of the pandemic globally, COVID-19 appears to maintain itself as a long-term hindrance to the world and its economies and people. Now in May 2021, Prime Minister Suga also faces the decision again of whether to hold, cancel, or postpone the Tokyo Olympics again.

These historical points help to layout the ideas of that there are mixed feelings about Japanese leaders, which can be the case for leaders in many other countries as well. These leaders can be key stakeholders to making policy changes that could improve opportunities and treatment of irregular workers, but it seems as though while some of the issues that the recent Prime Ministers have tried to focus on have relation to irregular employment, specific action in the direction of changes for irregular employment has not been clearly seen thus far. It also helps to showcase the different changes and crises that Japan has encountered in the recent past, which seems to affect irregular workers faster and to a greater extent than regular workers. Transitioning now from the overview of the Prime Ministers who have had influence on the work force as well as a basic overview of the general timetable of COVID-19 in Japan and decisions made in relation, in the next section I will now highlight some points made by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare. I will explain some major concerns for labor and welfare, especially in the 2019 White Papers, which showcase some concerns and responses taken by management of large companies, who also act as stakeholders in opportunities and treatment of irregular workers.

White Papers About Managerial Concerns

Currently only the White Papers for years 2003-2005 and 2012-2019 are posted for public view on the English version of the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare's Website. The 2020 White Paper was just made available on the Japanese website on February 24, 2021, but only the general complete report of all three components, health, labor, and welfare. I also looked at the Labor Economy specific White Paper for 2019.

Takeaways for Japan and the Future as Outlined by the 2020 MHLW White Paper

Looking through the condensed Power Point version of the around 500-page White Paper by the Ministry of Labor, Health and Welfare, it was interesting to note how little focus was directly on COVID-19. The title of the presentation can be loosely translated to "Thinking about Social Security and Work Styles of the Reiwa Era" (Reiwa jidai no shakai hoshō to hatarakikata o kangaeru), which already seems to draw little attention to the pandemic. (The Reiwa period started on May 1, 2019.) In the presentation, while there was some mention of how the pandemic has greatly impacted many aspects including employment and economics, there was little mention of exactly how this was being seen. Although it is understandable that in the holistic report, there is less of a focus on the economic and labor related aspects, it was interesting to see how the MHLW instead chose to focus on the long-term outlook of the Reiwa era, specifically pointing to the year 2040, twenty years into the future, instead of reflecting on the hardships being faced at the moment as a result of the pandemic.

It is important to note that one of the major points for discussion raised in the condensed version was the idea of a new sense of connection and community that has been noticeable in Japan following the pandemic. The presentation illustrated that the utilization of Zoom to maintain holding community meetings, including parenting seminars as exemplified in the papers, as well as actively supporting others through the use of free meal services to those in need. Additionally, isolation at home was said to have led to more domestic violence and abuse and help hotlines have commenced to assist those in said situations. This resource was identified as something that can be continued long after COVID-19 and is an example for other support services that the MHLW suggests that Japan work harder to implement. With more acceptance for aid to those in need and a better sense of community, this can also generate a sense of hope that irregular workers could also potentially be able to access some sort of aid in the future and be more accepted in Japanese society. This is certainly not so much the case now, as we saw in the ethnographic paper on freelancers that freelancers were being criticized for needing financial aid.

Considering Actions of Companies Towards Irregular Employees and Employment Overall, as Outlined by the 2019 MHLW White Papers titled "Challenges Facing Japan" Work Styles and Labor Shortages"

The report opened with positive remarks that the unemployment had hit a "twenty-six-year low of 2.4 percent in FY2018" (MHLW 2019) and that the number of regular workers had increased for the fourth year in a row. While in the bullet points, it was only noted that the number of regular workers was increasing, the graph below the text showed that the number of "non-regular" employees was also still increasing. The

MHLW also found it important to mention that the increases in nominal wages for fulltime workers and the hourly wages of part-time workers both had been increasing over the past few years.

One of the first major concerns that was identified in the White Papers was the status of labor shortage in Japan, particularly in small and medium-sized companies. According to the graphs, companies of all sizes had been suffering from labor shortages since 2013 (MHLW 2019). In response to these shortages, the MHLW claims that "companies are trying to hire more workers by, for instance, offering better employment conditions and boosting their recruitment strategies. But few companies are making efforts to improve their employment management and enhance the levels of workers' fulfillment at work" (MHLW 2019). This statement is important, as feeling like one does not belong in the workplace and management issues in the workplace has been an important reason why irregular workers do not seek employment as *seishain*, and why many who are *seishain* experience high levels of stress among other issues at work.

"Non-regular" workers are directly mentioned on Page 8 in reference to how workplace environments should make employees feel more fulfilled. The MHLW noted that "among non-regular workers, involuntary ones and those feeling that they are unfairly evaluated in terms of job performance compared with regular employees tend to feel less fulfilled at work."(MHLW 2019). They went on to suggest that non-regular workers be treated better by making improvements like offering more opportunities for promotion for non-regular workers and a fairer compensation system to promote more motivation from non-regular workers. As many contact workers, temporary workers, and other irregular workers state in interviews and other media analyzed in this thesis,

they are promised opportunities for advancement to permanent positions as long as they work hard but are never actually rewarded for their work. For many irregular employees, a change in how companies offer promotions for irregular workers would help end the precarity of being in a temporary position and would reward them for their work. It could encourage more potential employees to take up temporary positions, and this could help Japan's labor shortage as well.

The MHLW identified that 86 percent of companies in Japan took steps to try to minimize the labor shortage over the last few years, but smaller companies have been less active then larger ones at taking these steps (MHLW 2019). They also noted that companies were putting more effort into their hiring processes and were changing workplace regulations to let retired age employees continue working after the former mandatory retirement age of sixty. While 38.1 percent of companies mentioned appointing non-regular employees to regular employees, the MHLW still felt the need to suggest to all companies (MHLW 2019).

Most of the companies surveyed stated that one of the biggest difficulties they faced was hiring of new employees. Data noted 60 percent of the time nobody would apply to temporary job openings. Additionally, 23.6 percent of the time, applications were received, but the applicants were not at the level the company was looking for; 5.6 percent of the time, there were qualified applicants, but the labor and working conditions that the applicants desired were not matched by the company. The remaining 9.9 percent were able to hire applicants but were unable to retain them (MHLW 2019).

In combination with discussion of fulfillment and confidence in one's job, the MHLW noted that, in terms of career visions for younger workers, there were very few

employees age thirty-nine and under who stated that they had role model employees at their workplace (MHLW 2019). Additionally, regarding fulfillment of non-regular workers, survey data indicated that "35.1 percent of non-regular workers recognize that they do the same work as some of regular employees at the company they work for" (MHLW 2019). With this in mind, the MHLW suggested that non-regular workers would feel more fulfilled in their jobs if they were evaluated more fairly on their work and were recognized when completing work matching that done by the regular employees (MHLW 2019).

From an international perspective the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), published a series called "Investing in Youth" examining the situation of youth and labor in many countries including Japan in 2017, and, more recently South Korea, Finland, and Peru in 2019. The report looks at the situation of Japanese youth in 2017 and gives specific policy recommendations to ensure that youth are given the right opportunities to become employed. When assessing Japanese youth (ages fifteen to twenty-nine, as defined by the OECD) in labor, the OECD found that the youth employment rate had declined in the ten years leading up to 2017 by about 1.5 million overall, but the decline was closely reflective of the overall decrease in the population of Japanese youth(OECD 2017). The OECD highlighted a bigger concern: "an increasing share of young workers in Japan work on non-regular contracts —43 percent of all employed fifteen-twenty-nine-year-olds out of education in 2014" (OECD 2017). The OECD seems to make the argument that lack of participation in regular employment is a result of the continuity of more irregular employment opportunities being available for younger individuals than regular employment opportunities (OECD

2017). While the MHLW White Paper from 2019 mentioned that businesses were hoping to increase the number of regular employees in their companies, the OECD in 2017 assessed the finding that 43 percent of youth out of school were working under "non-regular contracts" as indicating a mismatch between youth and companies looking to hire (OECD 2017). I also would like to challenge that 43 percent of youth working in non-regular contracts seems like a good target market for companies to recruit from if they are looking to hire new regular employees.

Moreover, mentioning differing attitudes towards support for irregular work, the MHLW has drafted a guide for supporting companies and business owners looking to shift irregular workers into long-term regular workers. This guide includes providing financial assistance for career enhancement for irregular employees and suggesting increases in minimum wage. Although as I noted when looking at the condensed 2020 White Paper, irregular employment was not mentioned, the existence of this guide showcases a continued display by the MHLW that irregular workers are in need of resources and opportunities.

Additionally, as Uno and O'Day found, freelancers have been experiencing unequal access to COVID-19 financial relief compared to regular workers; this was also pointed out by the JILPT surveys from April, May, and August regarding non-regular employees overall. At long last, some adjustments were made by the Japanese government in February 2021. As the JILPT survey reported, many regular and non-regular workers did not receive compensation for being the times when they were unable to work due to the pandemic. A major issue arose regarding companies becoming able to apply for subsidies to pay employees to comply with Japanese labor

laws that "require an employer to pay employees 60 percent or more of their salaries regardless of their working status in the event of eave ordered by the company" (The Japan Times 2021). Reports found that companies were not applying for subsidies because the application process was complicated, and many companies "refused to compensate employees, claiming they were not responsible for leave necessitated by the pandemic" (The Japan Times 2021). Once the survey data was released, the government sought to fix this issue by allowing workers to apply for the aid individually instead of leaving applications in the hands of companies. However, under labor laws non-regular workers were not eligible to apply individually, leaving many without a chance to be compensated until February 2021, almost 8 months after regular workers became able to access compensation (The Japan Times 2021). Although policy changes to accessing compensation were finally made, this time difference seems to indicate continued lack of appreciation and recognition of irregular employees as contributing individuals who deserve fair treatment and compensation for their labor. As I pointed out earlier in this thesis, there still seems to be a strong sense of irregular work being inferior under policies and labor laws, as well as in public opinion.

Relatedly, the White Papers for 2020, although not as devoted to the COVID-19, showed that the pandemic has significantly affected health, labor, and welfare, all components of the MHLW. The focus on 2040 and the shift from the last thirty years of Heisei era (1989-2019) to the new Reiwa era and what the outlook of the era would be, while inarguably important, does seem to support the notion of Japan being more long-term oriented as opposed to short-term oriented, as I mentioned in my discussion of Japan's score for that dimension of Hofstede's Intercultural Dimensions.

Understandably the White Papers are intended to be used to plan for the long-term, but it was slightly surprising to see how little of a focus the MHLW took on COVID-19 although the duration of the virus as a global issue has now lasted over a year. However, the White Paper presentation pointed out that COVID-19 has created some general changes in society, such as encouraging individuals to be more supportive of one another and creating a safety net for food security and hotlines for aid; measures are being taken to ensure these changes will be implemented for the long run. Likewise, the immediate effects and outcomes in terms of employment and specific employees is an indicator for what issues and inequalities exist in Japan for different types of work. As the 2019 White Paper pointed out, even when companies offered regular positions, there was a huge lack of applicants. With the many examples unfair treatment that has been explored through this paper towards irregular workers, it seems understandable that some individuals may not take up these jobs, as many companies do not seem to be adequately creating a welcoming working environment for employees.

Since the 1990's when irregular employment began to rise due to recessions, changes in social structures and the nature of jobs, companies, and laws, in addition to changes in general public opinions toward life-work balance, more university graduates became unable to find jobs in regular employment or found interest in pursuing careers in non-regular fields, taking up more irregular positions. Concurrently, the numbers of youths who did not have access to education and job training rose. These populations were vulnerable to precarity in terms of labor. Additionally, based on the data from the 2019 White Papers, many companies have been extending the retirement age to allow for older worker to stay as regular employees as Japan's population ages. While

providing opportunities for older workers is also important, because many Japanese companies are not spending as much energy on restructuring work environments to suit younger individuals, this could lead to younger workers not applying for or going through with jobs that these companies offer. Alternatively, structural reform to wages and promotion opportunities for irregular employees could also benefit companies in the long run by fostering a similar sense of loyalty to the company that companies believe that regular employees have.

Concluding Thoughts

In this thesis I argued that, through current events related to COVID-19, societal beliefs, and governmental and business level policies, that irregular workers in Japan have been subject to many disparities that harm their wellbeing during situations like COVID-19, as well as harm the ability to make major long-term changes to benefit Japan's workforce and economic situation overall. I also acknowledged some other major issues outside of COVID-19 such as the hyper aging society and the balance between work and life. I illustrated the effects of COVID-19 on irregular workers through the data presented by the JILPT survey, as well as the work through interviews conducted by David Slater and his team at Sophia University. Moreover, societal beliefs and values and representations of irregular work in Japan (while aiming to avoid overgeneralizing and essentializing Japanese culture), was illustrated by highlighting Japan's scores of Hofstede's Intercultural Dimensions, other Japanese cultural themes and values, and media and popular culture portrayals of irregular work. This section also included more recent developments related to COVID-19 and financial aid for irregularly employed individuals. Finally, I discussed government level and business level policy and structural issues, by referencing how the Japanese government and businesses handled COVID-19 relief payments for irregular workers and administering more dismissals and pay cuts to irregular workers than regular workers. This section also included the White Papers from the MHLW, that acknowledged concerns for the future in terms of the workplace in 2019 and overall, in 2020.

In establishing this argument, I also proposed that more emphasis should be placed on businesses creating more ways for employees feel fulfilled with their jobs and

go through with promises made to irregular employees in regard to opportunities for advancement. While the article by Takahashi, the White Papers by the MHLW, and the overall view towards irregular employment that I highlighted in my section on societal values, suggest that businesses would prefer to increase regular employment rather than irregular employment, the fact that freelancing has become extremely popular since 2018, as well as the other reasons that were found, like being able to work at times convenient for the employees and providing support to family, seems to suggest that, for the time being, irregular employment will still remain somewhat important to the Japanese workforce. However, by increasing employee fulfilment and working to target the young population of irregular employees, this may both benefit the long-term satisfaction of prospective employees who have been working towards becoming regular employees and improve conditions for companies who would like to hire regular employees.

At the most basic and short-term level, however, I propose that it is necessary to assist irregular employees in the same manner as regular employees during times of crisis. This is integral to not only to improve the wellbeing of irregular workers but also to promote a sense of mutual loyalty that could in turn also diminish the employment opportunities by companies that are left unfilled.

Finally, I would like to note that, COVID-19 still has a strong presence in Japan, as I mentioned, Japan entered its third COVID-19 related state of emergency in April 2021. Thus it has become difficult to find new information of the state of employment in Japan with relevance to COVID-19. Accordingly, the JILPT survey data collection still stands at the results that were presented in October, and the MHLW has had

opportunities to report on the current events, but there have been fewer publications than during the first two major waves of COVID-19. Especially as Japan prepares to potentially yet again, postpone or even cancel the Tokyo Olympics, it seems that Japan should approach COVID-19 as more a long-term issue for consideration as well.

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