

## YOUTH NATIONALISM IN JAPAN DURING THE LOST DECADES

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### **Overview**

With the bursting of the “bubble economy” in the early 1990s, Japan has been experiencing deflation for more than two decades—known as Japan’s “Lost Decades.” What has been the impact of this prolonged economic stagnation on Japan’s youth? In particular, how has it influenced and shaped their national identity and, accordingly, their nationalism? Looking from a constructivist approach and guided by the experiential theory of social generation, this study examines how Japanese in their 20s have come to mediate and respond to economic stagnation and reconstruct national identities different from those of Japanese youth in the 1970s and 1980s.

It suggests that without inheriting the previously established national identity and homogeneous economic nationalism of the prior generation, yet with their constant aspiration to ensure Japan’s global competitiveness, current Japanese youth have tried to identify Japan with various other social institutions rather than simply with economic development. They have, therefore, exhibited a high level of heterogeneity in their nationalism, signifying a similar transition from homogeneity to heterogeneity in many other sectors of Japanese society during the Lost Decades.<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

Commonly viewed as a modern phenomenon, nationalism was argued to be associated with all kinds of social, cultural and historical institutions like political and economic power, social class stratum, ethnic identity or historical memory, etc. In different nations, due to particular social and historical context, nationalism can be specifically subject to different institutions. In the case of Japan, as argued by Liah Greenfeld (2001, 326), “owing to the circumstances of its emergence, Japanese nationalism from the outset was focused on the economy and developed as economic nationalism in the first place.” In the postwar era, nationalism also played a key role in motivating the Japanese people to revive Japan through its “Economic

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<sup>1</sup> Author’s Note: I thank Professors Hidetoshi Taga, Brian Bridges, Shalendra D. Sharma and Liah Greenfeld for their help with this article.

Miracle” (Johnson 1982; Woo-Cumings 2005). Clearly, Japanese nationalism has been closely related to the country’s economic development. But what about Japanese nationalism during the Lost Decades? With economic deflation lasting more than two decades, is Japanese national identity still closely tied to Japan’s remarkable economic achievements? Do the Japanese still believe and hold faith in their country’s ability to reclaim the glorious economic mantle it once enjoyed over other nations?

There have been long debates about the origins, nature, types, causes and therefore definitions of the term—“nationalism”. The theory behind the scholarship on nations and nationalism, as Spillman and Faeges (2005: 411) argue, has resulted in a definitional proliferation in the field. Traditionally, scholars of nationalism have crafted their own definitions specifically for their empirical or case studies, making nationalism one of the terminologies most notoriously difficult to define (Smith 2013). Being aware of such a definitional proliferation on nationalism and using a constructivist approach, I define nationalism in this study as a continuous construction of people’s political identities in regards to their nation, which is fundamentally motivated by people’s constant aspiration to ensure their nation’s equality or superiority over other nations.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, according to the experiential theory of “social generation”, it is suggested that what youth experience during their formative years (17–25 years old) is critical to the formation of their identities and attitudes throughout later life stages (Mannheim 1952; Rintala 1963). This study, thus, focuses on the experiences of Japanese youth in their 20s during the period of high economic growth in the 1970s and 1980s and the period of economic stagnation since the early 1990s. Through examining and comparing Japanese youth’s experiences in these two different periods, this study addresses how those experiences during the Lost Decades have shaped their national identities and, accordingly, their nationalism.

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<sup>2</sup> Liah Greenfeld argues, “Nationalism, among other things, connotes a species of identity, in the psychological sense of the term, denoting self-definition.” Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992), 20. In her later book, she also noted that “...because of the members’ investment in the dignity of the nation – that is, its prestige – which is necessarily assessed in relation to the status of other nations, nationalism implies international nationalism.” See Liah Greenfeld, *The Spirit of Capitalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2001), 22.

**Debates Over the Seemingly Rising “Conservative” Nationalism Among Japanese Youth**

In sharp contrast to their active participation in peace movements in the 1960s and the widely condemned nihilism among them in the 1970s and 1980s, growing nationalistic phenomena have been observed among Japanese youth since the late 1990s (Honda 2007). Scholars have been warning of a resurgence of a more strident and “conservative” nationalism among Japanese youth in recent years after witnessing their fanatical support of the national team and singing of the national anthem, *kimigayo*, in unison in the World Cup Soccer Tournaments in 2002, the increasing online conservative criticism and street protests against foreign immigrants, and their growing support for a stronger Self Defense Force as well as their rather hostile attitudes towards China and South Korea (Kayama 2002 & 2004; Pyle 2006; Takahara 2006; etc.).

Despite the warnings and criticisms noted above, there have also been counterarguments suggesting Japanese youth’s weak commitment to aggressive nationalism. Japanese scholar Akihiro Kitada (2005), for example, has suggested that the current youth’s embracing of nationalism, if there is any, is simply a resurgence of the romantic reflections (*hansei*), while “simplistically projecting the identity of ‘me’ onto the nation” and “reassessment of one’s relationship with the world” (Honda 2007, 283), which were passionately embraced by youth in the 1960s, but purposely avoided as protest by youth in the 1970s and 1980s. He notes that the recent rise of nationalism among young people is nothing new or harmful and should not be interpreted as necessarily negative. Drawing on worldwide surveys and placing Japanese youth in comparisons with youth in other industrialized societies, Tadokoro (2011, 68) also argues that despite their pessimistic economic outlook, having grown up in one of the most affluent societies in the world, Japanese youth are increasingly attracted to peaceful pursuits such as arts and culture, rather than to the enhancement of national prestige through riches – be it via winning gold medals in the Olympic Games, or via military conquest and supremacy.

Thus, views about Japanese youth’s nationalism in the Lost Decades are varied and seem contradictory.<sup>3</sup> However, which of these competing

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<sup>3</sup> In addition to the studies mentioned above, there have been discussions on how a range of factors such as global context, media and conservative intellectuals, as well as the decline of leftist parties, nationalist manga, the

viewpoints hold greater salience regarding Japanese youth growing up during the Lost Decades? To answer this question, we need to closely look at the exact socioeconomic circumstances which current youth have faced. Looking from a constructivist approach, which suggests that national identity is socially constructed, a close examination on what youth have experienced in different time periods can shed light on their nationalism. To make sense of the distinguishing experience that current Japanese youth have, moreover, we need to compare their experience with that of the prior generation growing up in the high growth period of postwar Japan. The following thus provides such examinations and comparisons.

### Japan's "Lost Generation"

Since the bursting of the economic bubble in the early 1990s, more than two decades of economic recession have negatively impacted Japan in many ways, including unprecedented socioeconomic consequence for Japanese people in different age cohorts. During hard economic times, however, youth who encounter challenges in transitioning from schools to workplaces with little social capital are particularly vulnerable (Brinton 2011; Toivonen 2013).

#### *Higher Unemployment Rate and Two "Employment Ice Ages"*

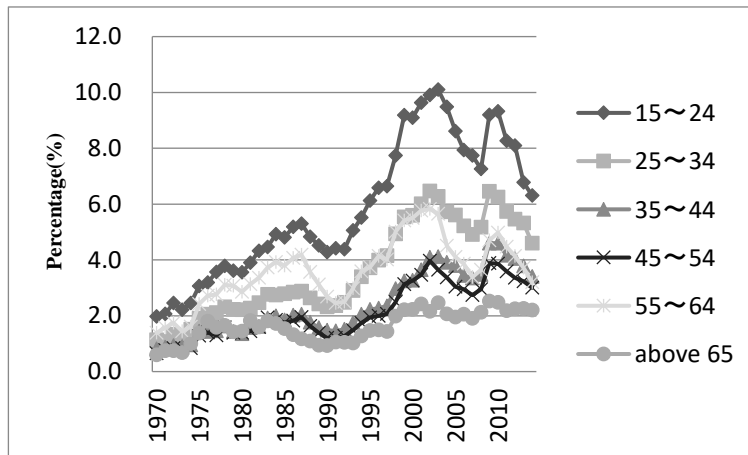
Due to the traditional employment practices of Japanese firms, which tend to be rigid on age and favor new-graduate hires (so-called *shinsotsu saiyou* in Japanese), it was once taken for granted that the middle-aged workers in Japan would face more difficulties during economic recessions (Kambayashi and Kato 2011). Empirical studies, however, unexpectedly find that young Japanese workers, especially those educational non-elites,<sup>4</sup> have suffered more from the economic recessions than prime-

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internet, and international sporting events have contributed to the rise of nationalism among Japanese youth. See Hironori Sasada, "Youth and Nationalism in Japan," *SAIS Review* 26/2 (2006): 109–122.

<sup>4</sup> Mary C. Brinton focuses on the employment situation of young Japanese people who graduated from junior or senior high schools (including general and vocational ones) and benefited from the schoolwork institutions of the high-growth period. To compare them with college graduates, especially those who graduated from top universities and have faced a more stable and better employment environment, Brinton named them "educational nonelites." Brinton, *Lost in Transition: Youth, Work, and Instability in Postindustrial Japan* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2011), 29.

aged employees (Yoshikawa 2001; Genda 2005; Mitani 2008; Brinton 2011). According to official statistics (see Figure 1), the unemployment rate of youth, particularly those aged 15-24, has risen precipitously since the early 1990s compared to all other age groups. The impact from the financial crises of 1997 and 2008 saw the unemployment rate of young people rise to two new highs – up to 10% – respectively in the early 2000s and early 2010s, marking the two well-known “employment ice-ages” (*hyōgaki*) in postwar Japan.



**Figure 1. Unemployment rate for different age cohorts in Japan (1970–2014)<sup>5</sup>**

Before the early 1990s, Japan was envied for its low unemployment rate in all age groups (Brinton 2011). Compared with the low unemployment rate of youth in the 1970s and 1980s, the precipitous rise in their unemployment rate since the early 1990s is particularly noticeable. Japanese youth’s rapidly climbing unemployment rate during the Lost Decades is even more conspicuous when contrasted with the relatively steady unemployment rate of other age groups during the same period. All these contrasts confirm the fact that when facing economic recessions, Japanese youth have been far more vulnerable than any other age groups.

<sup>5</sup> The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication (*Sōmusho*), “Kanzen Shitugyo Ritu” [The Complete Unemployment Rates], 2015.

*Increasing Non-regular Employment*

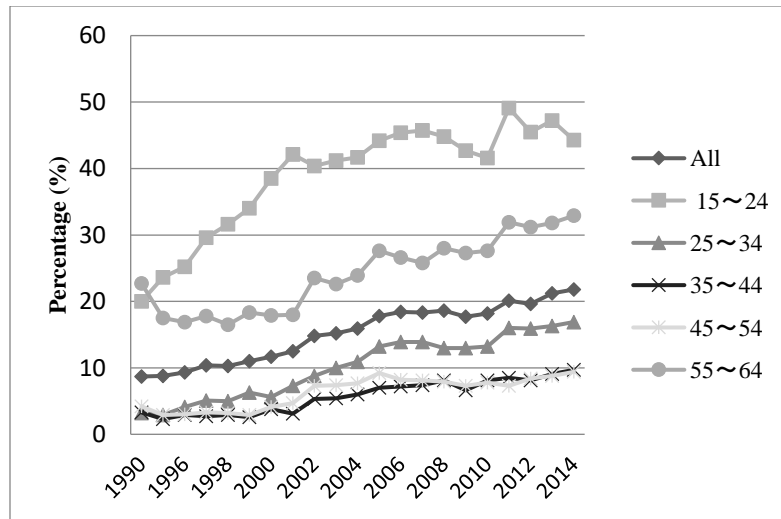
During the Lost Decades, what accompanies the rapidly mounting unemployment rate of Japanese youth is a significant increase of non-regular employment (*hiseiki koyō*) among them. Traditionally, regular long-term (full-time and life-long) employment was one highly valued component of the three special characteristics of the way Japanese men worked.<sup>6</sup> Since the early 1990s, unfortunately, this practice is only preserved among prime-aged workers. The irregular employment rate of young Japanese men aged 15-24, as shown in Figure 2, has more than doubled since 1990.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout this high-growth period, legal protections were set up to ensure life-long employment for most employees in Japan. These legal protections remain effective in protecting the benefits of current prime-aged employees who continue being employed under the life-long employment system. With continuities of both legal protections and employment practices favoring prime-aged employees, regular employment for new employees has been severely cut. Facing economic recessions and forced to reduce labor cost as much as possible, many Japanese companies have chosen to recruit new employees in non-regular forms. In addition, under the Koizumi Cabinet's reform package, the Japanese government started deregulating the labor market to allow employers to hire non-regular employees on a long-term basis since 2004. This has further worsened young workers' job prospects in Japan's regulated labor market. Consequently, many young workers have been pushed into the non-regular job market. In postwar Japan, while regular employment equates to job security, income stability, on-the-job skill training, high and stable pension and other kinds of benefits, non-regular employment promises none of these. The significant increase in non-regular employment among youth, therefore, also points to their economic vulnerability, especially during recessions.

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<sup>6</sup> The other two are the seniority-based wages and company unions. See Yuji Genda, *A Nagging Sense of Job Insecurity: The New Reality Facing Japanese Youth*, trans. Jean Connell Hoff (Tokyo: Kokusai Bunka Kaikan, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Most of the non-regular work has been taken by Japanese female workers, particularly those above middle age. Since the early 1990s, while middle-aged women are still taking most of the non-regular work, more young Japanese women under 35 have taken non-regular work as well. See data in The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication (*Sōmushō*), "Rodoryoku chōsa" [Surveys on Workforce], 2015.



**Figure 2. Irregular employment rate among Japanese men (by age, 1990–2014)<sup>8</sup>**

In the Japanese labor market, moreover, due to the continuities of other traditional employment practices like the periodic mass recruitment (*teiki saiyō*) and the preference to recruit new university graduates (*shinsotsu*) at schools, the mobility between regular and non-regular employment has been strictly limited (Genda 2005; Toivonen 2013).<sup>9</sup> This also indicates that youth who fail to be regularly employed when they first transition from schools to workplaces are unlikely to be regularly employed afterward. Social security based on regular employments, therefore, has become out of reach for many Japanese youth as a consequence of the Lost Decades.

<sup>8</sup> The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication (*Sōmushō*), “Rodoryoku chōsa” [Surveys on Workforce], 2015.

<sup>9</sup> In Japan, most corporations tend to open most full-time positions to new graduates nationwide at certain periods of time. While it used to be for the months of October, November and December of each year, after 2015, it has shifted to July, August and September. Beyond these time periods, full-time job opportunities are rare. See Genda, *A Nagging Sense of Job Insecurity*.

*High Job Turnover Rate, Freeters<sup>10</sup> and NEETs*

Up until the early 1990s, Japan was also famous for its effective institutions which mediated well between schools and companies and helped new graduates to transit smoothly from schools to work.<sup>11</sup> Due to the long-term economic recessions, however, many Japanese companies can no longer offer the same amount of regular jobs as they did previously. These institutions have thus become dysfunctional (Brinton 2011). Without effective institutional support students are much more likely to encounter employment mismatch, resulting in an unprecedented high job turnover rate—known as “seven-five-three” among new graduates at different levels.<sup>12</sup>

As mentioned previously, it is very difficult for Japanese employees to find regular employment during the fixed recruitment period each year.

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<sup>10</sup> Freeter, a Japanese neologism derived from the English word “free” and the German word “Arbeiter” (laborer), refers to young people who are not regularly employed but who work at one or more part-time jobs or at one short-term job after another. Genda, *A Nagging Sense of Job Insecurity*, 52. It can be equally taken as “permanent part-timer” in English. See the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, “Provision against Young People [‘Freeter’ (Job Hopping Part-Time Workers), NEET]” (accessed February 28, 2018, [https://www.mhlw.go.jp/english/dl/Overview\\_eng\\_04.pdf](https://www.mhlw.go.jp/english/dl/Overview_eng_04.pdf)).

<sup>11</sup> During the high-growth period, through the effective mediation between schools and companies (so-called *jisseki kankei*), those institutions like the *shinro shidōbu* (school academic and career guidance office), *shokugyō anteijo* (local public employment security offices), and *shokugyō nōryoku kaihatsukō* (vocational training school) were once able to work effectively to guarantee most of the new graduates a suitable job and ideal workplace. See Naoki Mitani, “Youth Employment in Japan after the 1990s Bubble Burst,” in *Young Workers in the Global Economy: Job Challenges in North America, Europe and Japan*, Gregory DeFreitas, ed. (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> The high job turnover rate among Japanese young people is known as “seven-five-three,” which means the percentages of new graduates who quit their jobs within three years of their employment are respectively 70% in the case of junior high school graduates, 50% for high school graduates, and 30% for college graduates. See Genda, *A Nagging Sense of Job Insecurity*, 53. See also the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2010 (accessed February 20, 2018, <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/topics/2010/01/tp0127-2/dl/24-01.pdf>).



Having turned over one or more jobs (no matter if it is regular or not), new graduates are unlikely to be regularly employed at further stages. As a matter of fact, many of them later end up changing different part-time and short-term jobs. Without being regularly employed, similarly, these new graduates are also bereft of social security from which they are supposed to accumulate human capital through on-the-job training or further education opportunities.

Lacking these opportunities, many of these youth consequently turned into the so-called NEETs, who are not in education, employment or training. What is worse, due to the low salaries of part-time and short-term jobs,<sup>13</sup> many non-regularly employed youth simultaneously fall into another social group called “working poor” (*wākingu puā*) whose income is lower than Japan’s poverty line. Official statistics show that the numbers of both Freeters and NEETs (aged below 35) have actually increased over the 1990s and reached a peak in the early 2000s (see Figures 3 and 4).

Despite some slight decrease, these numbers, sustained at a high level throughout the 2000s, still remain high (Pesek 2014). From these persistently high numbers of Freeters and NEETs, it is reasonable to conclude that the loss of regular employment and social security has resulted in enduring negative consequences for the young workers. Specifically, due to persistent economic recessions as well as the lack of mobility and flexibility of the employment system, Japanese youth have been consequently trapped in a vicious circle from which they find no way out. They have faced and continue to face more daunting challenges and a more unfortunate fate compared with Japanese youth who grew up in the high-growth period and who enjoyed much smoother transitions between different life stages. The fact that current Japanese youth have encountered such unfortunate circumstances during their formative years has actually made them into Japan’s “Lost Generation” (Zielenziger 2006; Brinton 2011).

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<sup>13</sup> On average, the part-time employees are paid only 40% as much as full-time employees per hour. See Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), “Economic Survey of Japan 2006: Income Inequality, Poverty and Social Spending,” 2006 (accessed March 5, 2018, <http://www.oecd.org/eco/labour/economicsurveyofjapan2006incomeinequalitypovertyandsocialspending.htm>).

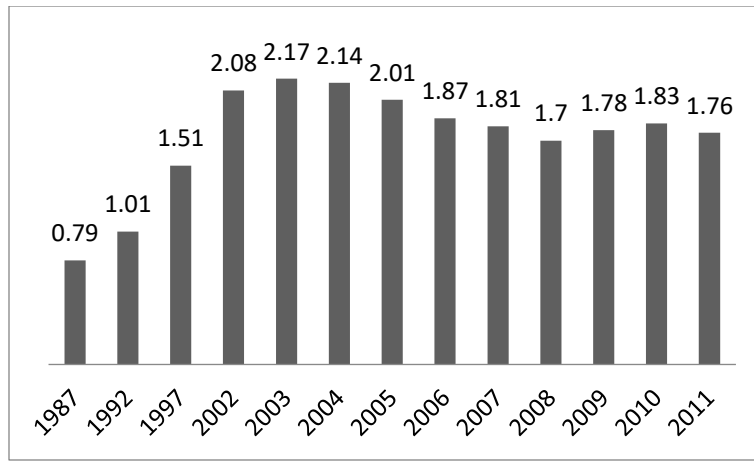


Figure 3. The number of Freters in Japan (1987–2011, in million)<sup>14</sup>

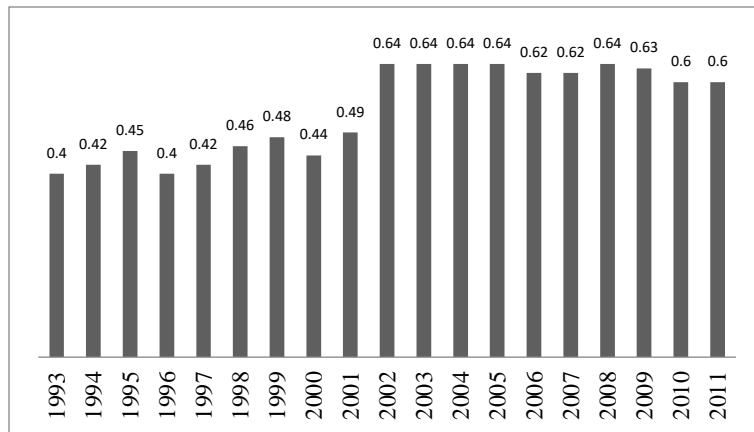


Figure 4. The number of NEETs in Japan (1993–2011, in million)<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication (Sōmushō), “Shugyō Kōzō Kihon Chōsa” (Basic Survey on Employment Structure), 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

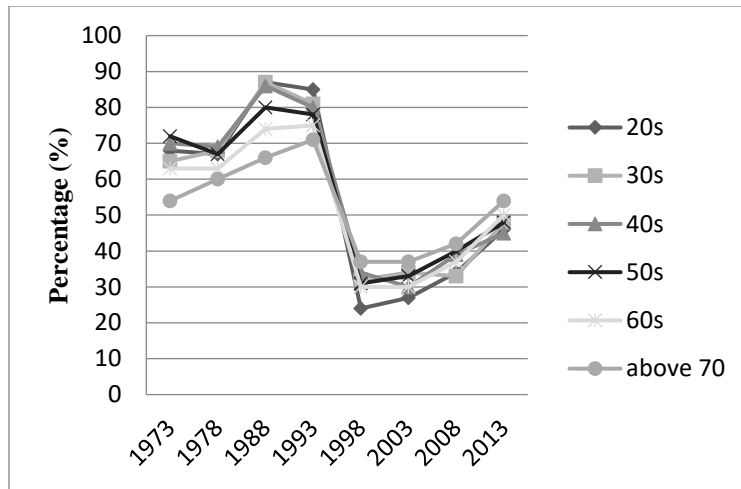
In the early postwar years, after facing total defeat and economic destruction in World War II, Japanese citizens were mobilized by the developmental state to contribute to the nation's economic recovery by working hard for Japanese corporations; creating a unique corporation style popularly known as "Japan Inc." (Johnson 1982 & 1995). In return, Japanese people were rewarded with an affluent economy and a growing homogeneous middle-class. According to various public opinion surveys, approaching the 1970s and 1980s, more than 90% of Japanese people would identify themselves as middle-class (Vogel 1971; Murakami 1982; Sugimoto 2010). During this period, Japan as a whole was known as a nation of *ichioku sōchūryū* (literally "all one hundred million in mass middle class").

Also characterized by the political iron triangle – Japan's Liberal Democratic Party, the business sector, and the bureaucracy – as well as by the unique socioeconomic structure in postwar Japanese society – lifetime employment, nuclear family structure,<sup>16</sup> and a stable and secure living community tightly connected with workplaces, Japan became an international model for other leading industrial societies (Vogel 1981). Proud of Japan's "No. 1" status in the world and as one of the "mass middle-class" societies, in the late 1980s, nearly 90% of Japanese youth held a positive view of Japan's economic power (see Figure 5).

However, this view dropped steeply during the recessionary 1990s and could not return to the level of the early 1970s since then; despite recovery of this figure in more recent years. While youth viewed Japan's economic power positively for most of the time leading up to the early 1990s, they have come to view Japan's economic power least positively in the late 1990s. Why have the youth changed their perceptions of Japan's economic power so dramatically? The fact that those in their 20s have encountered severe challenges during the Lost Decades may offer hints to this question. To address it thoroughly, however, we need to further explore the formation mechanism of Japanese people's national identity in the postwar era and to understand the national identity formation of youth in the Lost Decades in contrast with that of youth in Japan's high growth period.

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<sup>16</sup> Nuclear family refers to a family characterized by a father working, a mother at home not working, and approximately two children. See Emiko Ochiai, *The Japanese Family System in Transition: A Sociological Analysis of Family Change in Postwar Japan* (Tokyo: LTCB International Library Foundation, 1996).



**Figure 5. Japanese positive view on Japan's economic power (by age, 1973–2013)<sup>17</sup>**

After WWII, as is argued by many sociologists and anthropologists of contemporary Japanese society, most Japanese adults tended to derive their sense of well-being and social status from a social security network based on their permanent workplaces (Wilkinson 1962; Nakane 1970; Vogel 1971; Reischauer 1977; Nathan 2004; etc.). So-called *shokuba* a permanent workplace is not simply a place for work for many Japanese. It is more like a second home where both the workers and their families are connected with other families, the Japanese society and even the world outside Japan (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Mobilized by the developmental state to realize their personal value and to make social contributions through working hard for big corporations under the lifetime employment system, indeed, not only did most Japanese individuals before the early 1990s gain their sense of well-being and social status from their workplaces, they also tended to connect themselves with the nation by becoming a permanent member of the “Japan Incs.”

<sup>17</sup> Based on the Institute of Statistical Mathematics, “Nihonjin No Kokuminsei Chōsa,” National Character Survey, 1973–2013 (accessed July 8, 2018, [http://www.ism.ac.jp/kokuminsei/table/data/html/ss9/9\\_12/9\\_12\\_all.htm](http://www.ism.ac.jp/kokuminsei/table/data/html/ss9/9_12/9_12_all.htm)).

However, the doors of “Japan Incs.” closed for youth in the Lost Decades. As discussed above, facing high unemployment and increasing non-regular employment, many Japanese in their 20s have been trapped in a vicious circle caused simultaneously by persistent economic recessions as well as the lack of flexibility of the Japanese labor market. They have been bereft of the unique social security network taken for granted by youth in the 1970s and 1980s (Brinton 2011).

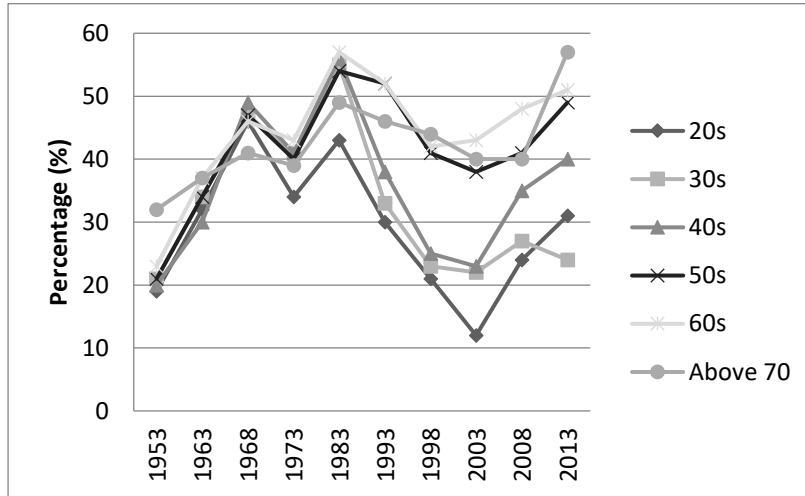
Having lost the likelihood to enter the middle-class stratum, ironically, current youth are still taught by their parents to compete for the monolithic postwar Japanese middle-class goals of good diploma, good job at a big company, and good marriage, and to be focused on institutions such as homes, schools, and corporations that used to socialize individuals into national subjects in postwar Japan (Yoda and Harootunian 2006, 39). Youth in the Lost Decades are thus torn between what they have encountered – irreconcilable contradictions between the inherited postwar Japanese middle-class goals and the hopeless realities under the prolonged economic stagnation. What is worse, these irreconcilable contradictions exist both in reality and at a psychological level and usually come to reinforce each other, resulting in a fundamental destruction of the monolithic postwar Japanese middle-class goals among current youth (Takahara 2006). Empirically, therefore, we have observed that the positive view over Japan’s economic power is no longer prevalent among those in their 20s since the early 1990s even though it is far better preserved among the elders.

At the same time, while the elders still sustain their self-confidence against the West due to the enduring generational impacts from positive views and psychology formed in their early formative years in the high economic growth period, the self-confidence of those in their 20s have correspondingly dropped most severely. As seen in Figure 6, they have come to the bottom in thinking Japanese are more excellent than their western counterparts almost throughout the Lost Decades.

### **Nationalism in Transition: from Homogeneity to Heterogeneity**

As Japan successfully rose to be the world’s second biggest economy following its defeat in WWII, with Japanese people being a major force behind this astonishing success, there was no doubt that both the ascendance of national pride and the construction of a national identity largely relied on Japan’s great economic achievement in the early post-war period. Having witnessed Japan’s rise in economic prowess, the prior generation growing up in the high-growth period had indeed homogeneously

identified Japan as a strong economic power and asserted strong economic nationalism against other nations, including the West (the U.S. in particular), during the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>18</sup>



**Figure 6. Japanese people who thought Japanese are more excellent than westerners (by age, 1953–2013)<sup>19</sup>**

However, if economic achievement before the early 1990s was intrinsic to the ascendance of Japanese national pride and the construction of a Japanese national identity after WWII, economic downturn after the early 1990s must be the key to the perceived decline and destruction of the established national pride and national identity over the Lost Decades (Jain and Williams 2011). From survey data, the decline of national pride and destruction of a national identity were most evidently perceived among

<sup>18</sup> Ishihara Shintaro's xenophobic rhetoric in his popular book, *Japan can say "No"* was one example. See Shintaro Ishihara and Akio Morita. *"No" to Ieru Nihon (The Japan That Can Say "No")* (Tokyo: Kobunsha, 1989).

<sup>19</sup> Based on the Institute of Statistical Mathematics, "Nihonjin No Kokuminsei Chōsa," National Character Survey, 1973–2013 (accessed July 8, 2018, [http://www.ism.ac.jp/kokuminsei/table/data/html/ss9/9\\_12/9\\_12\\_all.htm](http://www.ism.ac.jp/kokuminsei/table/data/html/ss9/9_12/9_12_all.htm)).

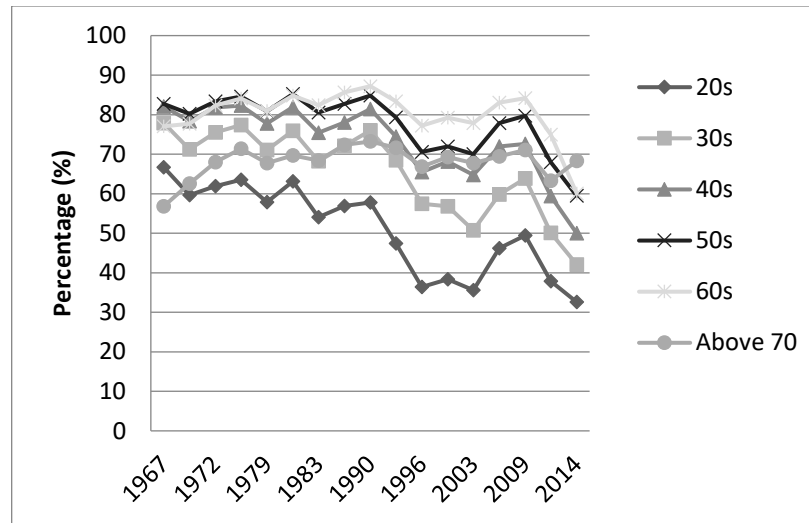
current youth who have never had a chance to experience or to directly benefit from Japan's postwar economic growth. Having suffered from tremendous loss compared with the prior generation, clearly, current youth have not embraced strong economic nationalism as the prior generation did. Yet, with the aspiration to strengthen Japan's competitiveness in the world, they have somehow started searching for new national identities and have accordingly re-asserted nationalism of other various kinds.

Drawing from the global popularity of Japanese culture that began in the 1990s, scholars have argued the recessionary 1990s was the decade of "return to J" (*J kaiki*), in which "J" referred to J-Pop instead of Japan (Starrs 2004). By inventing unique Japanese popular cultures – such as J-Pop, video games, animations and other sub-cultures like *otaku*, Japanese youth have had Japan's uniqueness and superiority appealed through cultural products rather than purely economic prowess.<sup>20</sup> They are more of cultural nationalists and tend to derive national prestige from Japan's cultural uniqueness, if not, superiority.

On the other hand, the aspiration to strengthen the global competitiveness of Japan also serves as an impetus for some youth resuscitate certain national symbols (Oguma and Ueno 2003; Yamada 2009). As was mentioned earlier, the early 2000s witnessed their fanatical support of the Japanese national team and singing of the national anthem, *kimigayo*, in unison at the World Cup Soccer Tournaments, and their sudden increasing passion for Japanese traditional cultures as well as attachment toward the imperial family (Kayama 2004). Despite the rising nationalistic phenomena among Japanese youth, survey results (see Figure 7), on the other hand, released a rather contradictory picture showing the particularly low turnouts of Japanese youth in elections since the early 1990s, rendering them, on the contrary, criticized for their political apathy and nihilism (Kayama 2002; Oguma 2002). Their nationalism, therefore, has been simultaneously seen as rather weak and superficial and labeled as "petit nationalism" by Rika Kayama, a psychiatrist and popular commentator of Japanese society.

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<sup>20</sup> Originally referring to people with obsessive interests, commonly in anime and manga. A vital non-Western intervention in postmodern culture and theory, "Otaku" is also an appealing and perceptive account of Japanese popular culture. See Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).



**Figure 7. Japanese people's turnout in the elections for House of Representatives (by age, 1967–2014)<sup>21</sup>**

According to worldwide surveys, when compared with youth in other nations, Japanese youth are found to be relatively more reserved in expressing their patriotism and pride of being Japanese.<sup>22</sup> Throughout the Lost Decades, it was also found that there had been consistently more than

<sup>21</sup> The Association for Promoting Fair Elections, “Chronological Voting Rates of the Elections of House of Representatives (By Age),” 2016 (accessed July 8, 2018, <http://www.akaruisenkkyo.or.jp/070various/071syugi/693/>).

<sup>22</sup> Ever since 2000, public opinion surveys conducted by Japan’s Cabinet Office have shown a majority of “don’t know” responses (above 50%) among youth when they were asked to be feeling patriotic or not, see the Cabinet Office of Japan, “Shakai Ishiki Ni Kansuru Seron Chōsa” [Survey on Social Thinking], 2000–2014 (accessed July 28, 2018, <https://survey.gov-online.go.jp/index-sha.html>). The World Value Surveys also found that Japanese youth in particular, have ranked almost the lowest to feel proud of being their nationality, see the World Value Surveys, 1983–2014 (accessed July 28, 2018, <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp>).



80% of Japanese youth showing high concerns about international issues ranging from environmental protections to the needs of developing countries.<sup>23</sup> A majority of them have also revealed their support for Japan's peaceful constitution although there have been more youth expressing simultaneous support for a stronger defense policy against potential military threat over the past decade.<sup>24</sup> Most recently, when Prime Minister Shinzo Abe pushed to enact a more robust defense policy, thousands of students formed groups called the "Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy (SEALDs)" to protest in front of the National Diet Building, chanting slogans ranging from "Give Peace A Chance" and "Our Future, Our Choice" to "Fight For Liberty" (*Japan Times*, 21 July 2015).

Neither being simply conservative nor liberal yet remaining nationalists in various ways, current Japanese youth's nationalism can hardly be generalized in dichotomic terms. Compared with the homogeneity of youth's national identity and nationalism in the high growth period, the above contradictory and somewhat chaotic picture of youth's nationalism during the Lost Decades genuinely shows a high level of heterogeneity in their newly formed national identity. With this picture of youth's heterogeneous national identity/nationalism, it is rather safe to conclude that what current youth – the "Lost Generation" – have lost and now embrace is not exactly any certain type(s) of national identity/nationalism. Given the fact that there is not yet a clear sign showing any national identity/nationalism becoming the mainstream, what has been true and will continue to be true in the near future is the current generation's loss of the homogeneity that has been long standing among prior generations in pre-1990s postwar Japanese society.

In all, while the recessionary decades have catalyzed a wide-reaching transformation in Japanese society and cut deeply into the core of postwar Japanese social compact, the monolithic postwar Japanese middle-class goals and stratum are collapsing (Yoda and Harootunian 2006; Kingston 2013). Heterogeneity instead of homogeneity are, therefore, more

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<sup>23</sup> See the Institute of Statistical Mathematics, "Nihonjin No Kokuminsei Chōsa," National Character Survey, 1993–2013 (accessed July 28, 2018, [http://www.ism.ac.jp/kokuminsei/table/data/html/ss9/9\\_16/9\\_16\\_all.htm](http://www.ism.ac.jp/kokuminsei/table/data/html/ss9/9_16/9_16_all.htm)).

<sup>24</sup> See the Cabinet Office, "Jietai Ya Boeimondai Ni Taisuru Kanshin" [Concern over the Self Defense Force and National Defense Issues], 1999, 2003, 2006, 2009, 2011 (accessed July 28, 2018, <https://survey.gov-online.go.jp/h26/h26-bouei/2-1.html>).

likely to be the key feature of Japanese society in the future. In this light, with the uncertain prognosis of Japan's economic future, youth nationalism in Japan seem unlikely to lead to clear directions. What is clear, however, is a patent transition from homogeneity to heterogeneity in youth nationalism and more broadly, in many other sectors of Japan.

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