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978-0-521-12600-7 - *Lost in Transition: Youth, Work, and Instability in Postindustrial Japan*

Mary C. Brinton

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## Lost in Transition

*Lost in Transition* tells the story of the “lost generation” that came of age in Japan’s deep economic recession in the 1990s. The book argues that Japan is in the midst of profound changes that have had an especially strong impact on the young generation. The country’s renowned “permanent employment system” has unraveled for young workers, only to be replaced by temporary and insecure forms of employment. The much-admired system of moving young people smoothly from school to work has frayed. The book argues that these changes in the very fabric of Japanese postwar institutions have loosened young people’s attachment to school as the launching pad into the world of work and have loosened their attachment to the workplace as a source of identity and security. The implications for the future of Japanese society – and the fault lines within it – loom large.

Mary C. Brinton is Reischauer Institute Professor of Sociology at Harvard University. She has also held professorships at the University of Chicago and Cornell University. She is the author of *Women and the Economic Miracle: Gender and Work in Postwar Japan*, the editor of *Women’s Working Lives in East Asia*, and the co-editor of *The New Institutionalism in Sociology* and *The Declining Significance of Gender?* Her work has appeared frequently in journals, including the *American Journal of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review*, and *Sociology of Education*.

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# Lost in Transition

*Youth, Work, and Instability in  
Postindustrial Japan*

MARY C. BRINTON

*Harvard University*



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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,  
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press

32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521126007](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521126007)

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First published 2011

Printed in the United States of America

*A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data*

Brinton, Mary C.

Lost in transition : youth, work, and instability in postindustrial Japan / Mary C.  
Brinton.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-19914-8 (hardback : perm paper) – ISBN 978-0-521-12600-7

(paperback : perm paper)

I. Youth – Employment – Japan. I. Title.

HD6276.J3B75 2010

331.3'470952-dc22 2010031209

ISBN 978-0-521-19914-8 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-12600-7 Paperback

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## Preface

Foreign visitors arriving in Tokyo can be forgiven for not immediately sensing the havoc wreaked on individual lives by the economic recession and dramatic employment restructuring of the late twentieth century. The bursting of Japan's financial and real estate bubble in the early 1990s led in the ensuing decade to the highest unemployment rates and greatest economic anxieties experienced in the country since the early post-World War II years. And while the country was still struggling to recover, financial crisis hit once more in the fall of 2008 – this time striking down postindustrial economy after postindustrial economy and sending unemployment rates up once more. Even so, a walk down the street in Tokyo's central business districts reveals sidewalks full of middle-aged *sararimen* (male office employees) rushing to their next appointments. A stroll past upscale coffee shops in Tokyo's major shopping districts provides glimpses into an elegant world populated by clusters of upper-middle-class housewives enjoying lunch and gossip together. These sights, so familiar from Japan's period of sustained economic growth prior to the 1990s, can make it seem that not so much has changed after all during the subsequent years of recession.

There is a reason these scenes mask the impact of economic recession and employment restructuring: Those most affected are not the middle-aged and not the elite. Instead, the people who have been “lost in transition” as the Japanese economy tries to restabilize itself in the early twenty-first century are people in the younger generation, especially the non-elite among them. This book tells the story of these individuals. I analyze why so many of them became lost in the transition from school to work and, in a larger sense, lost in Japan's transition to a

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mature postindustrial economy with a labor market ever more bifurcated between “good” and “bad” jobs.

#### LOST IN TRANSITION: A SOCIETY AND A GENERATION

I originally began the research for this book to answer the question of why Japan’s highly praised school-work system operates so well. Many English-language reports and publications in the 1980s and early 1990s pointed to Japan’s unique and efficient school-work transition process with admiration. Japan in the 1980s had low unemployment rates among youth and did not seem to be suffering from many of the youth labor market problems that other countries faced. Given my long-standing fascination with how institutions structure individuals’ opportunities and constraints and lead to patterns of inequality across social groups, I embarked on in-depth research on Japan’s high school–work system. Why did this system seem to be so much more effective than anything we had in the United States, especially in terms of smoothing the transition into full-time work for lower-educated youth? This group corresponded to the population in the United States for which the school-work transition was so poorly orchestrated by our existing social institutions.

One of my colleagues at the University of Chicago at the time was William Julius Wilson, a preeminent scholar of the working poor in the United States. The research of Wilson and others pointed out the severe difficulties faced by American urban high school graduates and dropouts in trying to find jobs.<sup>1</sup> They lack assistance from their schools or from public policies that help match new graduates with employers. In contrast, Japan in the 1980s looked remarkably different, and well worth understanding better.

In my initial research I focused on urban public high schools in Japan that had traditionally sent large numbers of students into the labor market. I visited twenty low-ranking public high schools one after another in two urban areas of Japan – the densely populated Kawasaki-Yokohama area bordering the southwestern edge of Tokyo, and the much smaller city of Sendai in Miyagi prefecture, two and a half hours north of Tokyo by bullet train. In those twenty high schools I conducted long, semi-structured interviews in Japanese with the *shinro shidōbu no sensei*, the teachers in charge of advising and guiding students into jobs or into higher education.

<sup>1</sup> See particularly William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Vintage, 1997).

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Fourteen of the schools I visited are general academic high schools and six are vocational ones. None of them send very many graduates to university. Instead, they are schools from which large numbers of graduates have traditionally entered the labor market, through the coordination of the *shinro shidōbu* (the school's guidance department), local employers, and the *shokugyō anteijo* (local public employment security offices, about which I will have more to say in Chapter 2).

What I discovered in these interviews and in accompanying research in Japan in the mid-1990s was so fascinating that I continued the research over several years, moving back and forth between Japan and the United States. Much of what I heard in the early interviews with Japanese high school teachers and principals surprised me. At one school I was taken in to meet the principal, who had been assigned to the school only recently. He introduced himself and gave me his old *meishi* (name card), with the name of his former high school crossed out and the name of his new high school written above it. As we talked, he explained that he had previously been the principal at one of the top high schools in Kanagawa prefecture. Now, he said ruefully, it feels like “I have descended from heaven into hell.”

Of course, the existence of high schools in Japan where discipline problems are difficult and teachers and principals experience considerable frustration is hardly new, and should not be surprising.<sup>2</sup> But as I visited more and more high schools in the mid-1990s I sensed that there were new phenomena emerging that were not yet being fully discussed in Japanese society. That is, not only were the English-language writings that praised the effectiveness of the Japanese school-work system becoming out of date, but the increasing frustration of teachers and students at low-ranking high schools seemed to be almost invisible within Japanese society as well.

When I was invited to present my research at a number of Japanese universities and research institutes in the mid-late 1990s, I discussed the results of the interviews I had conducted with high school guidance teachers. Many members of the highly educated Japanese audiences at these seminars looked at me as if I were talking about the moon rather than Japan. My audience reacted as if I were talking about a place so foreign that it could not possibly be Japan. This made me realize that I was seeing and describing things that did not sound familiar to them.

<sup>2</sup> In his classic *Japan's High Schools* (University of California Press, 1983), Thomas Rohlen discussed a range of discipline problems in two of the five schools in Kobe where he conducted ethnographic research.

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What I described were high schools where as many as 30 or 40 percent of graduating seniors went into neither jobs nor higher education (nor did they become *rōnin*, students “sitting out” to study for an additional year before university). I visited schools where teachers coached students intensively on how to interview for a job but where, after two or three failed interviews, students simply gave up and took themselves out of the running for either jobs or higher education. I described schools where teachers faced a classroom of students sleepy from having come to school from their nighttime *arubaito* (part-time jobs) at local *conbini* (convenience stores, ubiquitous in urban Japan) or other workplaces. I discussed schools where teachers said things were going well if they were able to cover even one-third of the pages of the required curriculum.

While scholarly Japanese audiences were surprised and even shocked at what I described, the schools I had visited did not fit the images of Japanese high schools that average Americans hold either. One such image is that of a high school full of students intent on getting into a top-ranked university. In that image, students who are not in the forefront of the university exam competition enthusiastically turn to participation in school club activities, pursuing judo, baseball, or debate practice. Another common image that occasionally appears in the American media is Japanese schools where bullying among students is so rampant that some students simply reject school entirely and refuse to attend.

The Japanese high schools that started me on the path of writing this book do not neatly fit either of these two stereotypes. Instead, they fall somewhere in between. They are in the middle or lower one-third of the ranks of public high schools in their districts. Their graduates have a variety of destinations – some graduates go directly to university or junior college, some to *senmon gakkō* (specialized two-year training schools), some into full-time jobs. But increasingly over the past fifteen years, some students simply go – they are out of school and out of work. They are not in full-time jobs or even part-time jobs that have a clear future.

When I first saw the situation for non-elite Japanese young people in the mid-1990s as it was beginning to get worse and worse, my vantage point was mainly through the eyes of the teachers with whom I spoke, teachers who were increasingly worried about what awaited their graduates in the labor market. It was their narratives that so surprised my Japanese audiences. Later I realized that what I was hearing was a prelude to what would develop by the early twenty-first century into a frenzied public discourse in Japan about unemployed youth, part-time employment, job-hopping, so-called parasite singles (young people who

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remain single and live in their parents' household into their late twenties or early thirties), and NEET (young people who are in neither education nor employment). But terms such as NEET were not commonly used before 2000, and neither the teachers nor I had any language we could easily call upon to describe the troubling phenomena that were appearing.

As we reach the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the situation that developed in Japan during the 1990s' "ice age of employment" may still not be immediately visible on the streets of Tokyo. But it is highly apparent when one walks into a Japanese bookstore. In the past several years the poor employment prospects for Japanese young people, especially the least-educated among them (particularly high school and junior high school graduates), have become a topic of intensive study and discussion in the media and among prominent Japanese economists and sociologists. So too have discussions of *kakusa shakai* ("unequal society"), NEET, and, most recently, the *wākingu puā* (the "working poor," a term borrowed from the books of sociologist William Julius Wilson and others who write about American urban poverty). The media attention in Japan being showered on these phenomena is staggering.

This book explains how and why a disproportionate share of the non-elite among Japan's younger generation has gotten lost in the transition from school into the workplace. This transition on the individual level mirrors the larger transition of the Japanese economy into a mature postindustrial economy with more insecure employment relations than were dominant in the high-growth period of the 1960s to 1980s. The young people I focus on are the ones who did not go to top high schools; who didn't enter an elite university such as Tōdai or Waseda or Keiō on the first try; who didn't become *rōnin* (high school graduates who could afford to study an extra year or two for the university entrance exam) in order to make it into even a second-ranked university of their choice. Instead, they finished high school and tried to enter the economy in the decade of the 1990s. In the process, many of them became lost in the transition from school to work. Having left the security of their high school, they are no longer students but neither have they moved on to the next set of affiliations that have traditionally defined Japanese adulthood: secure employment and marriage. One has only to talk to the "man on the street" and to read media and government reports to see how young people's lack of successful transition into these situations – what I will call in this book *ba* or social locations – troubles older Japanese and policy makers.

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I do not deny that young university graduates have also been hard hit by economic recession and employment restructuring, nor even that some middle-aged Japanese have lost their jobs as well. Even young Japanese who graduated from top-ranked universities in the 1990s and experienced a relatively smooth transition into the labor market are facing a much different set of realities from what their parents faced. Their everyday work lives and their patterns of transition among jobs are deeply affected by how Japan is changing. Underneath the difficult transitions facing all younger Japanese as individuals is a fundamental transition in the very fabric of Japanese society. It is no longer the case that people's lives get played out in a small number of secure *ba* or social locations. The very idea of a secure *ba* has begun to vanish.

In November 2008 I added my voice to the cacophony of viewpoints offered by Japanese scholars and the media on the roots of economic insecurity in the young generation by publishing *Ushinawareta ba o sagashite: 'Lost generation' no shakaigaku* ("Searching for the Lost Place: The Sociology of the 'Lost Generation,'" NTT Press). The present book is significantly revised from the Japanese in order to provide more context and background for American and other English-speaking readers and to present a more theoretical framework for a scholarly audience, but my analytical approach is basically the same as the one I used in the Japanese publication. I employ a comparative and distinctly sociological perspective and set of methodologies, placing me somewhere between the labor economist who argues from numerical data on large numbers of people and the ethnographer who does intensive study of one site such as a school or a workplace. The book explains how and why youth employment problems in Japan have become so severe and analyzes the implications for youth themselves and for Japanese society. Using information and viewpoints from high schools, employers, and young people, I analyze how Japanese schools and firms have become disconnected from one another and show how young people are trying to make a successful transition from school into the next phase of their lives.

Why have high schools traditionally been such a pivotal launching pad for Japanese young people into their adult lives? What unique issues are being raised for Japanese youth and for Japanese society itself as the ties between high schools and employers crumble? I report what high school teachers have to say about changes in the Japanese system of launching young people into the labor market, and I tell the stories of individual young people to show how their work lives are forming as they enter their twenties and move through them. Are they landing on their feet by

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the time they are thirty, even though they finished school during the ice age of employment? Who is having a soft landing and who is having a hard landing? Why?

I argue that the possibilities of entering an economically secure social location or *ba* are disappearing in the lives of many young Japanese. We can see this as we watch the relationship between schools and the workplace undergo a transformation. Youth are caught in the context of a fundamental realignment and reorganization of what I have elsewhere called Japan's distinctive "human capital development system."<sup>3</sup> This is the system of institutions within which individuals develop their skills and abilities. This institutional transformation has produced new economic and employment problems for youth, as well as psychological problems related to how they develop their sense of identity and their ability to trust society. These are not just problems for individual youth. They are developing into central problems for Japanese society as well.

More than my previous research, working on this book has unexpectedly led me to think more deeply about my own society. While Japan and the United States are in many ways unlikely cases for comparison, the fact remains that the close relationship between the two countries means that many Japanese continue to look to the United States to see how things are done here. And the fact also remains that no matter how cosmopolitan this author may think herself to be, American society is ultimately the one she knows best. With these provisos in mind, I hope readers will understand why the book occasionally utilizes some comparisons between Japan and the United States. I turn to such comparisons especially in the analysis of job search strategies and levels of interpersonal trust – two areas that have profound implications for how young peoples' lives play out.

Note on Japanese names: Consistent with common practice, Japanese names are listed with surname first and personal name second except in cases where reference is made to Japanese scholars' publications in English. In that case, American usage is followed, with first name preceding the surname.

<sup>3</sup> This is developed in my work on gender inequality in Japan. See especially "The Social-Institutional Bases of Gender Stratification: Japan as an Illustrative Case," *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (1988): 300–334; *Women and the Economic Miracle: Gender and Work in Postwar Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

## Acknowledgments

Most social science books follow a circuitous path that leads out of the author's imagination and into a rocky terrain filled with arguments and stories that ultimately are built into a finished piece of research (although it goes without saying that scholars almost never feel "finished" with anything). So it was with this book. Along the path where I collected the many sources of data from which I draw in the following chapters, I received tremendous help from several people. Hirata Shūichi of the Japan Institute of Labour Policy and Training deserves my deep thanks, as he was charged with the difficult task of making cold calls on my behalf to the high schools in Kanagawa prefecture at which I would show up to do in-depth interviews. Hirata-san helped write the letter of introduction for me from the Japan Institute of Labour Policy and Training and thus helped break the ice before I set off on the train to various urban and suburban locations in and around Kawasaki and Yokohama to meet high school teachers, many of whom were initially puzzled and nervous at the prospect of meeting a foreign researcher. The mutual feelings of nervousness virtually always dissolved within the first ten minutes or so, and I am deeply indebted to all of the teachers who shared their insights and experiences with me. Some of them did so during multiple visits over the years, and I appreciate their time and patience in opening up their knowledge base to me. I especially appreciate the help and friendship of Arita Yoshie. I thank Professor Akinaga Yūichi for providing introductions to high schools in Sendai. My graduate students at the University of Chicago were tireless in the tasks of coding the job-opening announcement data used in Chapters 4 and 5 of the book. (You all have jobs now so I won't embarrass you by mentioning your names, but I want you to



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*Acknowledgments*

know how much I appreciated your help.) Zun Tang, then at Cornell University, was an outstanding research assistant and was instrumental in implementing my theoretical ideas in the crafting of the network analysis discussed in Chapter 5.

I was fortunate to receive funding from several sources to support the research reported in this book. An Abe Fellowship from the Center for Global Partnership funded my initial year of fieldwork on Japanese high schools as well as comparative work on high schools in Seoul, South Korea. I benefited greatly from being able to devote part of the year I spent at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University working on the initial framing of the book. A Spencer Foundation Mentor Network Award helped fund some of the data coding and interview transcription costs, and later a Spencer Foundation Grant was instrumental in the collection of survey data from a sample of high school graduates in the Yokohama-Kawasaki area and in Sendai. This survey, introduced in Chapter 3, also helped generate a subsample of young men to be interviewed in depth. Additional time in Japan was supported by a grant from the Social Science Research Council and, most recently, by a Fulbright Research Fellowship. I am deeply grateful to all of these funding sources for making it possible to initiate and delve deeper into this research over time.

The first version of this book was written for a Japanese audience. Although I wrote the original text in English, I did so with the explicit purpose of finding a Japanese translator and publisher as soon as I finished the writing. The audience to which I addressed my thoughts, arguments, and explanations was not so much an academic one, but rather the broader reading public interested in contemporary social issues. Through support from the Japan Foundation's Center for Global Partnership as well as Harvard University's Reischauer Institute for Japanese Studies, in March 2007 I held an author's workshop to get comments and suggestions from a small group of scholars on drafts of the first five chapters. It was an international and interdisciplinary group that included Fujihira Shinju (political scientist, associate director of the U.S.-Japan Relations Program at Harvard), Genda Yūji (economist, Tokyo University), Hirao Keiko (sociologist, Sophia University), David Slater (anthropologist, Sophia University), and Yamamoto Yoko (educational sociologist, Brown University). I am very grateful for the input I received from these colleagues, all of whom read my draft chapters with care and contributed valuable suggestions that helped me refine my arguments as I completed the book.

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The biggest gift of all from the book workshop was the opportunity to receive input from Genda Yūji, who inspired not only me but also all of the others in the room to move forward in our respective projects with intellectual passion. I am extremely indebted to Genda-san for taking it upon himself to shepherd my manuscript into the world of Japanese publishing by introducing me to the translator Ikemura Chiaki and to Miyazaki Shino, my editor at NTT Publishing. It is only because of their guidance and care that I was able to publish the Japanese book. Because I had wanted very much to share my research with a broad reading public in Japan, I endeavored to produce a book that used less academic jargon than the scholarly books American social scientists (including myself) usually write. I am grateful to have been able to realize that goal. I will be doubly satisfied if readers find the present volume even slightly easier and more interesting to read as a result.

I am very grateful to Lew Bateman at Cambridge University Press, who so skillfully shepherded the book through the acquisition process. Margarita Estévez-Abe was the reader for the final draft I sent to Cambridge. She pushed me to undertake yet more revisions and to reorganize and bring to the forefront the theoretical ideas that I had underplayed in the more “popular” version published in Japan. Her advice was extremely helpful. My faculty assistant at Harvard, Laura Thomas, turned data tables into figures and was relentless in checking and rechecking every detail there and elsewhere. Working with her was sheer joy.

As I finished the final editing of this book, I realized that I have never thanked in writing two of the professors who first inspired me to pursue a PhD and join the community of Japan scholars. Susan Hanley and Kozo Yamamura, I thank you after all of these years. (Kozo, I still think I was right to spend additional years in graduate school studying sociological theory and methods. I hope I’ve changed your mind on this by now. If not, it will never happen.)

Finally I want to extend apologies and great thanks to my daughter Emma and the rest of my family for putting up with my work on this seemingly interminable project, and to my friends – especially those in Five Fields – who were never too tired of the project to ask me how it was coming along. It’s done now. At least I think so.

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