Unveiling the enigma of culture: Reflections on gendered precarious work in China and Japan

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Chapter 16

UNVEILING THE ENIGMA OF CULTURE:

REFLECTIONS ON GENDERED PRECARIOUS WORK IN CHINA AND JAPAN

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Abstract

Drawing on fieldwork studies in China and Japan, this chapter foregrounds the role of culture in the prevalence of precarious work often characterized by gender and its intersections with other social inequality variables. While a burgeoning body of existing literature offers compelling structural-institutional explanations for the causes and nature of precarious work, how core values and assumptions impact institutions and individuals remains relatively understudied. By unpacking culture and its entrenched yet malleable manifestations, the chapter aims to contribute to a more integrated and nuanced understanding of gendered precarious work, with a view to revisiting the symbolic power of culture and its possible contestations and implications for social change.

INTRODUCTION

Under neoliberal globalisation, intensified by technological revolution, a proliferation of temporary and gig-economy jobs, in its various bewildering forms, has become a prominent trend across the global north and south. While the lure of flexibility and

freedom is often put forward to explain the trend, many traditional temps and new giggers share the key characteristics of precarious work, i.e. the *uncertainty*, *instability* and *insecurity* of work in which workers bear the risks of work, as opposed to businesses or the state, and receive limited social benefits and statutory protections (Kalleberg and Hewison 2013; Hewison 2016; Vosko 2010; Fu 2023a). It is worth noting that precarious work is not a novel development; it has existed since paid employment became a major source of sustenance. Nevertheless, the growth and ubiquity of precarious work since the 1970s has crystalized an important concern (Kalleberg 2009:2). Under neoliberalism, precarity has emerged as an acute expression of precariousness — which has historically been an inescapable feature of working class life — and as a key concept in a burgeoning body of scholarship centered on modernity and social marginalization. Some scholars are at great pains to expound a new hegemonic mode of governance that systematically tilts the balance of power more firmly in favor of capital and against labour. Others seek to identify interrelated structural forces, namely *de-unionization*, *financialization*, *globalisation* and *digital revolution*, which have converged to erode the post-war Fordist or "standard" employment (Kalleberg and Vallas 2018: 4-6). As summarized cogently by Harvey (2005: 168):

> The powers of trade unions and other working-class institutions are curbed or dismantled within a particular state (by violence if necessary). Flexible labour markets are established. State withdrawal from social welfare provision and technologically induced shift in job structures that render large segments of the labour force redundant complete the domination of capital over labour in the market-place. The individualized and relatively powerless worker then confronts a labour market in which only short-term contracts are offered on a customized basis.

The institutional-structural forces alone, however, cannot fully grasp the nature and consequences of precarious work. In the ascendency of neoliberalism, appeals to traditions and cultural values figure prominently. Individualism, the archetype of western culture and the ideological companion of capitalism, has been reconstructed with a new emphasis on the entrepreneurial and competitive individual, so as to fit in with the neoliberal 'free-market' logic seen as a guide for all human action (Hann 2006). Popular languages such as 'flexibility', 'freedom', 'individual choices', and 'personal responsibility' have become influential discursive ingredients in the public sphere. Equipped with apparent explanatory power, they play an important role in facilitating political consent, nurturing spurious expectations, and deflecting attention from (increasingly) unequal social conditions. The cultural integument of neoliberalism, therefore, merits close scrutiny, not least when it comes to probing the ways and extent to which it penetrates 'common-sense' understandings across many parts of the world.

Against the broad backdrop, this chapter sets out to explore the relationship between precarious work and gender in China and Japan, with a view to highlighting the oft-hidden pervasive effects of culture. While existing studies abound in political-economic structural analyses, few have delved into the impact of culture and traditional values on the prevalence of precarious work and widening social inequalities. In this respect, China and Japan offer a prime example, especially because their cultural traditions are distinct from western ones, thereby making us aware of the situatedness and limitations of neoliberal assumptions that equate marketization with the furtherance of individual freedom, choice, and flexibility.

Moreover, a comparison of the two Confucianism-influenced East Asian powerhouses, despite their drastically different political-economic trajectories, enables a more context-sensitive understanding of culture and its role in engendering iniquitous patterns of precarious work and its surrounding institutions — ranging from state policy, social welfare, and legislation to industrial relations and corporate management. Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork, the chapter also draws attention to the importance of empirical research on everyday life in concretizing the meaning and practice of precarious work (especially among disadvantaged and vulnerable groups), in mapping nation-specific institutional and cultural dynamics, and in remaining mindful of their 'complex, contested, and often-contradictory consequences' (Kalleberg and Vallas 2018: 9).

TOWARDS A HOLISTIC UNDERSTANDING OF PRECARIOUS WORK: BRIDGING CULTURE AND INSTITUTIONS

Precarious work, in anthropological terms, can be construed as a simultaneously political, economic, and cultural phenomenon, i.e. a "total social phenomenon" (Mauss 1954). The conceptualization is premised upon that society is not divided into disparate and discrete units, but rather a relatively "seamless" and "organic" whole where all facets of human existence are interconnected in a dynamic fashion (Ortner 1984: 148). This theoretical basis, along with its methodological companion ethnography, is known as anthropological holism, which responds to the familiar limits of disciplinary division. Holism strives to collapse old yet persistent dichotomies, for example, between cultural and institutional forces, between individual and collective levels of analysis, between

powerful representation and embodied experience, and between localized realities and globalizing effects.

The anthropological approach can, therefore, make a distinctive contribution to the understanding of precarious work and social inequality, especially in terms of bridging the customary divide between institutional and cultural debates. Despite an outpouring of scholarly research on precarious work, the relation between precarity and long-standing social stratification systems has remained 'shrouded in ambiguity'; much more attention needs to be paid to how social inequalities impinges on the reconfiguration of employment (Kalleberg and Vallas 2018: 6). The same can be said about intersectional research, notably Collins's "matrix of domination" (1990); little progress has been made in demonstrating, for example, how the intersection of gender with other axes of oppression (such as rural-urban provenance, age, class, ethnicity, and race) creates distinct contours of precarious work in concrete social milieus.

These and other research gaps, to a great extent, require that we pay close attention to the overlooked or understudied role of culture and its interconnectedness with institutional-structural forces; the latter, as mentioned earlier, have been well discussed in the existing literature. Social inequalities, particularly based on gender, are influenced and perpetuated by deeply entrenched cultural values, beliefs, and norms, which are also embedded in, and appropriated by, policy and institutional frameworks. Furthermore, the somewhat enigmatic and elusive cultural dimension necessitates in-depth, context-sensitive empirical links with real people's perceptions and experiences in real-world situations. The micro-level lens, particularly in ethnographic research, is of valuable importance in not only scrutinizing institutional-structural forces, but also

exploring agential opportunities and potential. As argued by Mathews and White (2004: 199), it is often "in the intimate and individual settings of people's lives" where social change accumulates through "a vast array of individual choices and micro-interactions" that will probably not come about through organized public protests.

PRECARIOUS WORK, GENDER, AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN CHINA AND JAPAN

In China and Japan, precarious work is manifested predominantly in the form of non-regular or non-standard employment (NRE), including a bewildering variety of temporary, part-time, and fixed-term contracts and agency-mediated labour dispatch. In both countries, the size of NRE has enlarged drastically since the 1990s; more than 60% of the Chinese urban workforce and nearly 40% of the Japanese national workforce are now engaged in NRE (Cooke and Brown 2015; Shibata 2023)[1]. The trend is further strengthened by the emergence of gig or platform economy, which has generated a host of non-traditional self-employment opportunities that share the key characteristics of precarious work (Fu 2023a).

It should be emphasized that the expansion of traditional temps and new giggers goes hand in hand with the intensification of pre-existing labour market dualism and social stratification. In China, rural migrants are the quintessential embodiment of precarious work; their second-class rural citizenship, combined with traditional gender role norms, subjects them to an overarching system of discrimination, exploitation, and alienation. By contrast, in Japan, women bear the major brunt of precarious work; they have long been relegated to the margins of political-economic life as part-time wage workers and

full-time family caregivers. The contrasting demographic features in China and Japan lend credence to the importance of the intersection of key social stratification variables, notably gender, rural-urban provenance, age, family background, and education attainment, in shaping the contour of precarious work. Significantly, these variables are imbued with nation-specific, deep-seated cultural values and practices that often elude policymakers and popular perceptions. What follows is a brief comparison of fieldwork-based studies on China's migrant domestic care workers and Japan's temporary agency-mediated dispatched workers, with the aim of illuminating the role of culture in understanding the unequal nature of precarious work.

China's rural-urban dualism

For over half a century, *hukou* (household registration) has played a key role in internal rural-urban migration processes that have fueled China's meteoric rise to global economic superpower[2]. Despite their enormous contribution, hundreds of millions of rural or peasant workers (*nongmin gong*) have been deprived of equal opportunities to settle in the city where they engage in income-generating activities — what Pun and Lu (2010: 513) describe as an "unfinished process of proletarianization" where industrialization and urbanization are "highly disconnected" (Smith and Pun 2018: 607).

Institutionally, *hukou* has legitimized two classes of citizenship; state-sanctioned reforms over recent decades notwithstanding, many social welfare entitlements, ranging from health insurance and pension to education and housing, continue to be conferred upon urban local workers while denying them to rural migrant workers. Since the reform era, the state's neoliberalism-informed discourses have often endorsed rural

migrants' second-class citizenship by problematizing rural masses as lacking civility, disturbing social order, and hindering development. Migration is seen as a solution to rural poverty and backwardness; rural migrants are expected to be "modernized" in urban cities, acquiring so-called *suzhi* or "human quality"— something akin to a "quasi-eugenic" discourse or a "cultural fixation" that plays an important role in China's modernization endeavors (Anagnost 1997)[3].

Since the early 2000s, in response to heightened social tensions — as evidenced by a growing number of public protests among rural migrants — the state has enacted a series of new laws and regulations under the banner of "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui*)[4]. However, the regulatory frameworks are primarily geared towards strengthening individualized employment relations, cellularizing labour conflicts, and defusing working-class formation. This is further compounded by China's distinct pro-growth development model based on the central-local government division, which, among other things, nurtures close alliances between local governments and businesses — aided by *guanxi* (personalized connection) networks, a fundamental aspect of Chinese culture[5]. The resulting lax enforcement and differential implementations of national laws at the local level, coupled with the absence of independent unions, have a profound impact on migrant workers' everyday struggles (Friedman 2014; Friedman and Kuruvilla 2015; Gallagher et al. 2015).

The *hukou*-based citizenship divide speaks of the persistent influence of age-old Confucian values (notably hierarchy, harmony and *guanxi*), which are embedded and recreated in the making of new political and economic institutions and in the reconfiguration of old and new inequalities (Fu 2023b). As the largest and longest

exploited group of the working class, rural migrants are disproportionately concentrated in the informal, private, and labor-intensive sectors of economy with least autonomy, protection, and dignity. The *hukou* system is widely used by employers to segment workers by different employment contracts and terms, even though they undertake similar tasks. In the mass media, rural migrants are often blamed for all manner of urban ills, from increased crime rates to urban unemployment, as well as being the personification of the bad-mannered, uneducated class.

China's gendered care migration

It is against this context that domestic care workers, the overwhelming majorly of whom are rural migrant women, have emerged as one of the fastest growing precarious labour forces. The global pattern of gendered care migration (see, e.g., Hochschild 2000; Yeates 2009; Murphy 2014) is manifested in China's "intranational care chains" shaped by the long-existing rural-urban *hukou* divide. As China's wealthy and middle class has expanded explosively over the past two decades, the demand for domestics and caretakers has soared, especially in large cities. This has led to a great mushrooming growth of domestic care businesses (legal or illegal), ranging from individual brokers and small businesses to large corporations. The rampant industrial growth, combined with the absence or weak enforcement of regulation, is one of the key factors that account for increasing exploitation and abuse of care workers in private homes.

More importantly, migrant women working as domestic care workers have to contend with the double socio-cultural stigma of being a peasant and a domestic servant. In other words, their emotional labour in the sphere of social reproduction is not only inscribed

with the inferior rural identity, but also undervalued by the subservient nature of domestic care work associated with women. Lacking a formal care infrastructure to assist households, China has long embedded within its social policy an assumption of "gendered familialism" (Baird et al. 2017:12) that care is predominantly a woman's responsibility in the family. The assumption is deeply rooted in the Confucian doctrine of womanhood and family, which prescribes women's socio-centric, self-sacrificing roles as a devoted mother, a dutiful wife, and a filial daughter. To be sure, traditional patriarchal values are influential in buttressing state policies, normalizing women's altruistic contributions, and widening existing inequalities among Chinese women. As affluent urban women pursue commodified, nonfamilial forms of additional care, an influx of migrant women from impoverished rural areas are turned into "obedient servants" (Yan 2008).

In a participant-observation study of nannies (*ayi* or *baomu)* employed by a Shanghai domestic service firm (Fu et al. 2018), traditional gendered values assumed considerable significance in the firm's training sessions. "Service mentality" (*fuwu xintai*) was frequently invoked by training instructors to highlight the importance of creating positive relationships with clients. This abstract term, although not consistently defined, reflected a gendered, familial approach to the relationship between care giving and care receiving. As explained by Instructor Zhang:

> Professional knowledge and skills alone would do no good if they ignored the importance of service mentality … You need to 'feel for others' (*jiang xin bi xin*), understand clients and their needs and make efforts to build good relationships. It is important you deal with setbacks by 'feeling with one's heart' (*yongxin ganshou*).

For the nannies, however, the relationship with clients in everyday realities was fraught with emotional conflict. Instructor Zhang encouraged them to first "imagine" (*xiang xiang*) how they would treat their own children and families and then apply the same treatment to the client. This so-called "transpositional thinking" (*huanwei sikao*) was regarded as an essential step in cultivating highly prized professional morals. Significantly, in exercising the imagination of pseudo-familial relationships, Confucianism-informed traditional values were exalted as attitudinal and behavioral models. For example, a nanny during a class discussion complained she felt deeply insulted that her client let her eat only leftovers and had her use separate eating utensils. Instructor Zhang did not pass judgement immediately and instead spoke to the whole class:

> Let's think how we will treat our own family members as a mother and a wife … We will give the best first to the child, then to the husband, and last to ourselves, right? It is only natural for clients to prioritize themselves.

These and other transpositional-thinking techniques were effective in transmuting frequently occurring labour conflicts into what were normally considered everyday trivialities in the private sphere of the family. They brought women's inferior position, self-sacrificing obedience, and perseverance to bear upon the regulation of the emotional labor process. Rather than being "paid labor" in capitalist employment relations, the nannies were trained to see "motherhood" as their primary identity, with the crucial corollary that structural conflicts and inequalities were hidden from the public eye.

However, in private homes, the nannies' professional pride and dignity, derived from the utilization of either newly acquired knowledge or pseudo-familial relationships, began to crumble. Not infrequently, urban clients dismissed the nannies' scientific motherhood practices and insisted on their own beliefs or expectations about what it meant to be a good mother. For example, Nanny Li, who was keen on improving her professional skills and had earned an official child nursing certificate, recalled her frustrations:

> According to the training, the baby needed 90 ml milk, but the mother forbade me to feed that much. She let me feed only 60 ml. Two hours later, the baby started crying. She then asked me why the baby was crying. I said 60 ml was not enough. "What a load of crap!" she swore and yelled at me like crazy.

Most of the nannies gave in to their clients' demands because of the inherent asymmetrical power in the "master-servant" relationship. There were also various insidious form of control over nannies' everyday interactions, which made them acutely aware of their stigmatized identities as rural citizens and domestic servants. Some clients used digital cameras and compartmentalized time-space arrangements to monitor and mechanize nannies' daily activities (e.g., when and where to eat, rest, and sleep); others made disparaging remarks about nannies' rural origins, accents, manners, clothing, body types, or even zodiac signs. As described by Nanny Kai,

> "Your speaking and behavior are so 'rustic and uncouth' (*tu li tu qi*)." "You have such a bad taste in clothing and embarrass my child and my family." . . . The client

> constantly sneered at me and treated me with utter contempt. I couldn't imagine them as my families.

From the domestic service firm's training sessions to the care-giving activities inside clients' homes, the nannies were alienated from much of the dual employer control over their emotional labour processes. Nevertheless, they were not completely deprived of agential capabilities; there were a range of resistance strategies, especially by voting with their feet, the most popular way to regain autonomy and control. Many admitted that they were after all "those-who-work-for-bosses" (*dagong de*) and had to put up with their bosses' whims and caprices, which was a far cry from the "family-like" feelings that the training firm took great pains to evoke. While engaging in everyday negotiations, the nannies strove to remain resilient in the face of social disadvantage and adverse conditions. They often felt ambivalent about both the countryside and the city; while the countryside remained their home but held no future, the city was alluring but frustrating and alienating. Even among those who had become accustomed to urban lifestyles, there existed a prevalent feeling of isolation or rootlessness, which reinforced their attachment to rural communities and networks.

Despite the resistance strategies against the employers, the nannies showed little hesitation in embracing the state's promotion of neoliberal modernity. They not only became producers of wage labour, but also aspired to be the state's ideal consumers. For examples, the younger nannies were particularly eager to adopt urban chic and perform alternative identities through purchases such as clothing and makeup to belie their low-class status and bolster their self-confidence. Unfortunately, the reliance on consumption would neither enable rural migrant women to discard peasant origins nor

aid their integration into urban communities (Zhang 2023). Moreover, gift-giving and remittance practices were widely used as a tool for maintaining rural networks — the kind of social capital that they lacked in the city. They also helped to assuage the nannies' feelings of uneasiness or guilt towards their own children, who were left behind in rural homes and communities with meagre care resources. Such material flow and exchange reinforced the home as a unit of consumption, rather than an emotional haven.

Perhaps more strikingly, many of the nannies' coping mechanisms mirrored and reinforced the Confucian ideals of gendered familialism. Few voiced opposition to women's subordinated positions and self-sacrificing obligations either in the emotional labour process or in the family relationship. It could be argued that working in the city could contribute to migrant women's economic independence and reconfigure wife-husband and intergenerational dynamics in the rural home. Nonetheless, the nannies acted more or less in compliance with the conservative socio-centric woman as a devoted mother, a dutiful wife, and a filial daughter. Significantly, the state appropriated this cultural representation in its care policy framework, as did the domestic service firm in its professional training regime. While the embrace of such patriarchal values could be potentially used as "a conscious strategy" (Hoang 2016) to obtain some degrees of material or symbolic advantage, this embrace attested to the depth and extent of gender embeddedness in both political-economic processes and personal lives.

Japan's gendered dualism

In Japan, women have long shouldered a disproportionate burden of precarious work and its concomitant sufferings, despite their high levels of tertiary education and labour force participation. Compared to many industrialized nations where gender-based segmentation takes place largely along occupational lines, Japan is characterized by the distinct gendered division within occupations along the lines of precarious employment status. This is particular evident among small and medium-sized firms, by far the largest segment of Japan's national workforce whose working, earning, and bargaining environment for the peripheral majority is profoundly different from that of core, male regular workers in large firms (Chalmers 1989). Since the 1990s, the already gendered dualism has worsened as the government and businesses have adopted a series of neoliberal policies and practices that focus on labour market flexibility (Shibata 2023).

In contrast to the Chinese state's "visible hand", the Japanese power apparatus is notoriously elusive, with party politicians, ministry bureaucrats, and businesses composing a cohesive power triumvirate where employers exert a strong influence on state policy (Wolferen 1989)[6]. For Japanese workers, it is the employer, rather than the state, that provides most social protection — what Lincoln and Kalleberg (1990) dub "welfare corporatism".[7] Industrial relations in Japan is characterized by employer-dominated "enterprise unionism" (*kigyo kumiai*) — or decentralized bargaining at the enterprise level — where employers have historically cultivated a harmony-based, cooperative relationship with labour unions, with the aim of ensuring that the firm's performance is regarded as the most important determinant.[8] Yun (2010) argues that that the Japanese industrial relations reflects a kind of "conservative corporatism" where employers, labour unions, and the state collude to protect employment security of a shrinking labour aristocracy of (male) regular workers. Consequently, the burdens

of job insecurity and cost reduction are shifted to the expanding labour market periphery occupied by temps, giggers, and, more insidiously, "second-tier" regular (female) workers whose unfavorable terms of employment share much in common with those of long-term temps (Gordon 2017).

Like the *hukou*-based dualism in China, the gendered core-periphery dualism in Japan is underpinned by traditional cultural values, especially those derived from the patriarchal family (*ie*) where women's familial roles as "good wife wise mother" (*ryōsai kenbo*) are sharply delineated and rigidly formalized, as opposed to men's breadwinner responsibilities as "a central supporting pillar" (*daikokubashira*). This distinct "reproductive bargain" (Gottfried 2015) has been a long-standing yet oft-hidden cultural pillar, which explains much of Japan's post-war economic "miracle" and is consequential for defining the contours of precarious work. Gender patriarchy lies at the heart of the Japanese employment system and corporate management, as evidenced, for example, by a customary division between women's "auxiliary" employment track (*ippanshoku*) and men's "comprehensive" career track (*sōgōshoku*) leading to management positions. The male-breadwinner female-dependent family model is also embedded in a range of existing and new state policies, welfare provision, and regulatory frameworks. The institutional embeddedness in effect exclude the majority of non-regular workers from mainstream social protection and deter women from pursuing ambitious full-time career (Roberts 2011, 2016; Osawa et al. 2013; Marshall 2017)[9].

Since 2013, Prime Minister Abe's government has put forward a new policy, popularly known as "womenomics", which pledges to create "a society that enables all women to

shine" (*subete no josei ga kagayaku Nihon*). Despite its high-profile promises, the policy is aimed mainly at tackling Japan's low fertility rates or labour shortage by persuading women of reproductive age to have children, boosting women's workplace participation (continuously as non-regular workers), and encouraging those who already work to put in longer hours (MacNaughtan 2015). Indeed, wthout dismantling "the "ideal of core regular employment" (and its entrenched cultural assumptions) and "offending" the governing Liberal Democratic Party's "key constituencies", genuine progress for gender equality will be impossible to achieve (Crawford 2021).

Japan's dispatched workers (haken)

The Japanese term '*haken*' is an abbreviation for 'dispatched workers or employment', referring to a relatively new category of non-regular workers in temporary agency work (TAW). TAW, in global terms, is distinguished from traditional types of temporary employment, due to its institutionalized triangular structure where workers are typically employed and dispatched by staffing agencies while working at the facilities, and under the authority, of user firms (Fu 2015). Since the broadcast of a highly acclaimed TV drama series called *Haken's Dignity* in early 2007, *haken* has become one of the most popular buzzwords in Japan and triggered intense media interest and political debate surrounding such controversial issues as "working poor" (*wākingu pua*) and "gap-widening society" (*kakusa shakai*) (Fu 2011; Kojima 2015).

Situating in the wider context of precarious work in Japan, *haken* are a predominantly female phenomenon and concentrated in the category of relatively unskilled office clerical work (*jimukei*). The number of *haken* workers and the scale of the industry have

grown exponential since the Koizumi government's neoliberal deregulation reforms that drastically liberalized the regulation in the early 2000s. In tandem with the labour market reforms, popular languages such as "flexibility", "individuality", "diversity", and "self-development" have been frequently invoked in the public discourse to redefine what it means to be the ideal Japanese person — or personhood in anthropological terms that entails a context-sensitive investigation of the relationship between the self (*moi*) and the social (*persona*) (Mauss 1985). In their efforts to further legislative relaxation of government regulations, leading *haken* agencies play an important role in managing public expectations, shaping firms' human resource strategies, and influencing the choices and constraints of individual workers. Professionally qualified, self-activating individuals with marketable, specialized skills have been widely exalted as "ready fighting power" (*sokusenryoku*) befitting Japan's changing economic conditions (Imai 2009).

The neoliberal market-oriented person, vigorously championed by the state and employer associations, bears importantly on the Japanese concept of *kosei* (individuality or self). While previous interpretations focus on the subordination of individual interests to collective concerns within a firm (Hendry 1992), the new discursive emphasis reconstructs the Japanese personhood by embracing self-acting qualities beyond the firm-centered context (Fu 2011, 2016). As a result, the culturally valued *kejime* (differentiation) has been redrawn, with the pendulum of preference swung more to the self and away from the social[10]. Such powerful representations, however, merits close scrutiny, not least when it comes to the embodied experiences of those "targeted" groups, whose voices are often muted, ignored, or reduced to simplistic assumptions conducive to political maneuvers.

To be sure, the experiences and perceptions of real people in real-world situations are far more complex and multifaceted, as evidenced in an ethnographic study of *haken* (Fu 2011). The study findings reveal that dispatched workers were neither a homogenous group, nor were they Weberian "ideal" types contesting or conforming to the newly endorsed expectations, in a mechanical manner. Rather, their everyday negotiations were full of equivocations, ambiguities, and discontinuities, which were mediated by their gender, age, marital status, educational attainment, family circumstances, workplace and industrial sector, and personality. Nevertheless, traditional gender norms appeared to be the most prominent factor affecting dispatched workers' perceptions and practices in everyday life. For example, Natsumi, a single Japanese woman in her mid-thirties who was a veteran *haken*, aspired to be *yamato nadeshiko* (the traditional sophisticated Japanese woman):

> Work is after all a male world (*otoko no sekai*). I don't think seriously about my work. … I wish to marry the right man and would love to be a professional housewife who takes good care of her husband and children. I have asked my line managers to introduce someone from their circle of friends, but they seemed to think I was only joking.

Such high expectations of married life were, however, not simply the result of cultural effects. During lunch breaks and informal 'Saturday-or-Sunday lunch gatherings' (*donichi ranchi kai*)), Natsumi talked a great deal of how she envied those female regular workers in the same workplace who had a much fuller remuneration and benefits package. The tremendous difficulty in securing a regular employment and the looming prospect of being a "permanent temp" filled her with a deep sense of insecurity

and anxiety[11]. Another pertinent factor was that she had a quite difficult relationship with her mother, who treated her like "a complete stranger" (*aka no tanin*). Lacking job security and financial and emotional support from her family, Natsumi was hoping that marrying well might improve her life.

In today's Japan, more and more women, especially those of younger generations, regard a career as a vital part of womanhood, which is no less meaningful than a woman's domestic roles. Among the studied *haken* women, some considered regular employment as an essential prerequisite to successful professional and personal development; others were toying with the idea of juggling a full-time career and family life; and still others were keen to learn specialized skills, develop friendships, and foster social bonds. In everyday realities, women's enthusiasm and aspirations are, however, often dampened by the persistent male-dominated corporate culture. As shown in Roberts' account (2011), hierarchy, long working hours, and career progression based on continuous employment pose serious challenges to career-oriented women who dare to defy normative gender expectations. In addition, gender-based bullying, (sexual and power) harassment, and discrimination are rife in the Japanese workplace; women in precarious forms of employment such as *haken* are particularly vulnerable to such abuse — which in Japan often takes various subtle forms.

In the ethnographic study, Sayuri, a young woman in her mid-twenties, worked hard and showed a highly professional attitude towards her job. She often put in long hours and suffered work-related stress, which she ascribed to the difficulty in understanding the psyche of the salarymen:

> A middle-aged salaryman, who sits right next to me, would write a rambling email over something urgent instead of explaining to me in person. And I am often the one who is to blame for misunderstanding things. … I am not interested in cultivating a good working relationship here. … I just want to do my job properly and professionally so that those arrogant men won't assume that my work is sloppy simply because I am a woman and a *haken*!

Compared to their female counterparts, male *haken* were relatively underrepresented in the public sphere and tended to keep a low profile in the workplace. Being a *haken* meant they had to confront their inferior masculinities, low social standing, and emotional pain. This was particularly the case if their work was of an auxiliary nature; for example, a young male *haken,* who was struggling to carve out a niche in a harsh working environment, was often seen being regularly bullied by some ill-natured manager who deliberately ignored his small requests. There was another male *haken*, Hayato in his middle 30s, who was hired as a technical expert and well respected in the same office. Not only did he advise senior managers, but he was also asked to supervise new recruits and go on important business trips abroad. When asked whether he had tried to apply for a regular position in the firm, he said:

> The firm's personnel system is not flexible. … Now that non-regular hiring is the norm, mid-career direct hiring could become more difficult. … It is unfair to have such differential treatments based on employment status. Many of my frustrations come from the fact that no matter how much I contribute to the firm, the part I am allowed to play in the big picture is always limited. The management keeps certain corporate information secret from me.

Although feeling frustrated with the exclusion from such "members-only" privileges, Hayato quickly turned to what he perceived as the positive side of being a *haken*:

> I can take advantage of what a big firm can offer: learning new things, trying out professional skills, and building up experiences. At least, work at the current firm is never boring. I am grateful to have the opportunity to focus on my skills and self-development. … My wife is a *haken* too, so our financial situation is not good. If we want to have children, I need to have a regular job.

Throughout the ethnographic fieldwork, this somewhat ambivalent attitude resonated with many of the studied people, who neither completely resisted nor simply accepted without demur *haken* and other forms of non-regular work — rhetorically designated as "flexible work" in the furtherance of self-development and the excise of individual choice[12]. To a significant degree, the male-breadwinner female-dependent family model constituted a key element in individual micro-negotiations where gender intersected with other stratification variables (including age, marital status, family background, educational attainment, and personality) in ways that were revealing for the complexity of everyday life. Embedded in such fundamental institutions as policy and regulatory frameworks, social welfare, industrial relations, and corporate management, the gendered cultural norms pose significant challenges to the materialization of neoliberal ideals of individual liberty, responsibility, and freedom.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown the importance of culture and its interconnectedness with social institutions in comprehending precarious work, which tends to be associated with the

most disadvantaged groups of people in society, including women, migrants, young people, and minority groups. Compared to institutional frameworks, implicit cultural values, especially those of antiquity, appear elusive and enigmatic yet pervasive and powerful. As demonstrated in Chinese and Japanese contexts, Confucianism-informed age-old gendered, hierarchical values permeate almost every aspect of society. They are highly instrumental in constructing political discourses, legitimizing institutional arrangements, and perpetuating iniquitous patterns of precarious work. The symbolic power of culture may also lie at the heart of labour countermovements and resistance struggles (Fu 2021).

Moreover, the cursory comparison of China's migrant nannies and Japan's *haken* or dispatched workers draws attention to the necessity of empirical research, especially based on ethnographic fieldwork. The lens of everyday life is particularly useful for interrogating the cultural integument of the institutional apparatus, unpacking the limitations of dominant discourses, and revealing the tension between globalizing effects and localized realities. Only by bridging cultural and institutional forces and by combining macro-structural scrutiny and micro-agency empiricism can we begin to reimagine what is really at stake when grappling with the nature and consequences of precarious work.

NOTES

1. In China, there are no national statistics to accurately capture the size of precarious employment, popularly known as "informal employment". Existing figures are estimations calculated in different ways; for example, according to Zhou (2013), over 60 per cent of the

workforce were engaged in "informal employment" by the mid-2000s (Cooke and Brown 2015).

2. Established in 1958 because of massive demographic pressure, *hukou* served as a *de facto* internal passport system, which restricted rural-to-urban migration and job mobility in order to improve the welfare of the existing urban population. The rigid system tied people to the household residential status that they attained at birth and created a dichotomy between the access to land for rural *hukou* holders and most state-provided social goods for urban *hukou* holders. As a result, rural workers were pushed down to the bottom tiers of a new rigid system of industrial labour stratification in post-revolution China (Walder 1984). Since it embarked upon economic reforms in 1979, China has lifted *hukou*'s mobility barriers and subsequently unleashed an unprecedented wave of cheap labour flowing from countryside to urban cities and industrial zones.
3. The Chinese term *suzhi* is a multi-faceted and malleable cultural concept that has many indigenous connotations. It was appropriated by the state as a prominent development policy and a discursive tool to adroitly place responsibility on individuals, rather than on existing social structures and conditions, for failing to acquire desirable qualities. The problematization of rural migrants reflects a drastic change in the public representation of peasants who were once Mao-era revolutionary heroes contributing greatly to the establishment of New China (*xin zhongguo*).
4. "Harmony" (*he*) is a fundamental principle of Confucianism that carries paternalistic and benevolent overtones and emphasises co-prospering, complementarity and hierarchical solidarity. While classical uses often denote loyal opposition and constructive disagreement, contemporary political interpretations focus predominantly on stability and order, which can be used as a convenient tool for suppressing dissent.
5. *Guanxi*, variously translated as "connection", "networking" or "relationship", is grounded in Confucian thought and can be briefly described as pervasive and intricate personal connections based on social exchange (in the form of, for example, gifts and favors) (see,

e.g., Fei 1992; Barbalet 2021). The operation of *guanxi*-based norms and values are of vital importance in understanding the specific reconfiguration of state-class-labour relations in the post-Maoist era, not least during China's tumultuous entry into neoliberalism-informed market modernization that allowed greater integration between the state and the market among the new rising capitalist class (Nonini 2008: 160).

6. Japanese employers are a formidable force; they have historically developed a cosy relationship with government ministries — as exemplified by *amakudari* (descent from heaven), an institutionalized practice where senior government bureaucrats retire to managerial positions in private firms.
7. An indication of this is that Japan spent only 0.24% of GDP on unemployment benefits, compared to an average of 0.58% for all OECD countries (OECD 2023). The power of employers goes, however, beyond the provision of welfare and social security. Traditional cultural values are instrumental in building institutions and constructing consent; as Goodman (1998) explains, the postwar "firm-as-family" employment in Japan was created by appealing to "invented" traditions that play a powerful role in keeping workers loyal to the firm, masking glaring inequalities, and boosting profits.
8. The close relationship is aided by, for example, a personnel cross-posting practice whereby union officials are not only employees of the firm, but often become managers at later stages of career after a temporary assignment in the union.
9. A good example is the existing spousal tax deduction system, which was introduced in 1961 to support housewives whose husbands worked long hours during the rapid economic growth period. The system exempts the second earner from tax if their income falls below a threshold. In practice, the threshold not only encourages employers to offer low-paid, non-regular jobs to married female workers, but also provides a disincentive for women to pursue regular employment over the course of their life cycle (MacNaughtan 2015). A recent survey shows that about 40 percent of married women who are working part time

take measures to ensure their annual incomes do not exceed the threshold of 1.03 million yen ($7,600) (The Asahi Shimbun 2022).

10. The Japanese personhood values a complementary relationship between self and social roles, with precedence given to fulfilling a role without negating self. To be a respectable "social person" (*shakaijin*), one needs to be adept at moving fluidly between spontaneous/intimate self and disciplined/distant persona according to *kejime* (differentiation) (Rosenberger 1992). The Japanese *kejime* is predicated upon a complex of (ever-shifting) values and beliefs prescribing how one should allocate self and roles separately and properly in different contexts, dimensions, and stages of life. As a result, the ideological making of personhood in Japan appears to be situational, multifaceted, and enigmatic, if not "chameleon-like" (Van Wolferen 1989).
11. Dispatched workers were prone to a number of manipulative and exploitative activities on the part of both *haken* agencies and user firms. For example, according to the law, user firms were obligated to "make efforts" to directly hire workers who had worked on the same job for more than one year, and had to offer direct employment to those who had worked on the same job for more than three consecutive years. Yet two customary practices were prevalent before the three-year period ended: one was to simply alter the job title so as to make it look like a different job assignment and the other was to move the worker to a different department or branch within the same firm.
12. The ambivalence and complexity in everyday life is also evident in Cook's account (2023), which shows both how male *freeters* or freelancer draw neoliberal ideas of entrepreneurial selfhood and self-responsibility to dispel their negative social positioning and how their goals and aspirations also simultaneously feed into post-war patriarchal family ideals. Similarly, Kojima (2023) brings the concept of "disaffected consent" to bear on the understanding of individual struggles, especially between strong feelings of dissatisfaction about precarious employment on the one hand, and self-doubt in the legitimacy and practicality of demanding better treatment on the other.

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