

# Individual, National, General – Obscuring Poverty in Post-Pandemic Japan

Matthew Penney

***Abstract:** This article looks at three recent Japanese mass market works about poverty, arguing that each is representative of a different mode of depicting economic disparity and want in contemporary Japan – individualization, nationalization, and generalization. These modes of representation contribute to a comparatively low level of awareness of poverty as a major social problem as well as political inaction. Following Raymond Williams’ interrogation of social “keywords” as well as critical discourse analysis to identify the interplay of absences and presences in these accounts, this article will argue that even empathic approaches toward poverty can obscure its complex interconnections, disparities such as its disproportionate impact on Japanese women, and block the thinking of social and economic alternatives.*

**Keywords:** poverty, economy, neoliberalism, capitalism

## Introduction

Japan has a poverty problem. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Japan’s poverty rate is the worst among developed countries, higher than Spain, the United States, and regional rival South Korea (Oyama, 2023). One in six Japanese live in poverty. Japan’s Gini coefficient, a measure of distribution of wealth as well as income, is now little different from South Korea or England, countries often perceived as very unequal (Nakamura, 2023). If we look at particular groups in Japanese society, the situation seems even more grim. The rate of relative income poverty among the elderly in rapidly aging Japan is almost 20% compared with the OECD average of 12.6%. Japan’s rate is around twice that of Italy or Germany, which share similar demographic challenges (McCarthy, 2015). Poverty hits women particularly hard. A third

of all woman living alone and nearly half of single women over 65 are in poverty (Abe, 2020). At the same time, about one in seven Japanese children is in poverty—in single parent homes, overwhelmingly headed by single mothers, that number is almost 50% (Nihon Kodomo Shien Kyokai, 2018). These rates of child and single parent poverty are also the worst among OECD members (Japan Foundation Children’s Support Project, 2019).

Japan’s poverty numbers appear dire and show not only high rates compared to other wealthy countries, but significant disparities within Japan, with women, children, and the elderly more likely to be in circumstances of need. This is partly due to the patriarchal structuring of the Japanese economy around male “breadwinners,” while women, sometimes by choice within a system of ideological and other constraints, and sometimes because of the compulsion of economic want, are far more likely to be in precarious and poorly remunerated contract and part time positions. Compared with Japanese men at around 20%, over 50% of women workers are in these jobs (Fuwa, 2022).

Despite the numbers outlined above, poverty has not emerged as a central social issue. Research carried out between 2009 and 2013 revealed that only 50% of Japanese claimed to believe their society is economically unequal (Murata, 2013). This number has increased since the 1990s, but was still one of the lowest rates in the world.

“Poverty” is virtually absent as a major electoral issue and mainstream economic reporting seldom allows it to intrude on the celebration of the Nikkei’s

march to record highs (Kyowa Kirin, 2021). Between January 1 and December 1, 2023, substantive discussion of poverty in the Diet took place fewer than a dozen times (Kokkai Kaigiroku, 2023). The context was nearly always the same. The opposition, in a historically weak position with the largest center-left Constitutional Democratic Party holding fewer than 100 of more than 460 seats in the lower house, or outside experts, pointed to high wealth disparity, poverty rates, the “vicious cycle” of generational poverty, or child poverty and its ripple effects in social alienation and “educational collapse.” Lawmakers from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) largely responded with their time-worn refrain—to beat poverty, Japan must grow faster and raise incomes, and this means following conservative policy. The Liberal Democrats and Japanese conservatives more broadly have a history of focusing on “personal responsibility,” a neoliberal discourse that places the blame for poverty on the poor, ignores structural factors, and exhorts poor Japanese to work harder, often in unstable jobs for less than a living wage, all the while shifting responsibility wherever possible for care work and the broader labor of social reproduction for the state to individuals and families (Reitan, 2021).

Japan has one of the lowest income tax rates among major economies (Ohmura, 2022b). Welfare spending is also proportionately low and local bureaucrats are pressured to turn needy applicants away to keep rates down (Shukan Josei PRIME Henshubu, 2021). Discriminatory measures against welfare recipients like a ban on attending university, framed as a “luxury” rather than a way of escaping poverty or a social good, discourage many from even applying (Ishikawa, 2022). In this context, the Japanese government has elected to increase the regressive consumption tax, which has a disproportionate impact on people in poverty. Japan also has a very low minimum wage at under six dollars. While social democratic and workers movements in the United States and elsewhere have turned the US\$15 minimum wage into a call to action, the minimum in fourteen of Japan’s forty-seven prefectures hovers around 900 yen—under US\$6 at current exchange rates (Ministry of

Health, Labour and Welfare, 2023). The national average is only 70 cents higher.

There were always other options, from social democratic Keynesianism to worker cooperatives and attention to the unremunerated labor of care work and other forms of social reproduction. Mainstream responses to the poverty problem at a time of conservative hegemony, however, often stop at the exhausted idea that all that is needed to “solve” poverty is a higher rate of economic growth. As Stuart Hall argued in his writing on the rise of Thatcherism, the focus on growth as a solution can soon become calls for “efficiency” through austerity, the erosion of the safety net at a time when it is already stretched to the limit (Hall, 1988).

In this context, how have normative understandings of poverty in Japan been constituted? Fifteen years on from Hakenmura (temporary workers’ village), a precarious workers’ protest camp in Tokyo’s Hibiya Park in 2008, and NHK’s “working poor” reportage, this article will assess how poverty is being represented in some of the mainstream media venues in post-pandemic Japan. It will also ask how poverty emerges through discursive structuring of social norms and expectations as well as labour relations (Toshikoshi Hakenmura Jikko Inkai, 2009; NHK Special ‘Working Poor’ Shuzaihan, 2007).<sup>1</sup>

With low levels of recognition of the extent of poverty and inequality and political stasis on the issue as a starting point, this article will follow the approach of Raymond Williams’ classic works *The Long Revolution* and *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, in which he took key terms relating to politics, the economy, and society and examined their evolution over time into a kind of “common sense” that can block thinking of political, social, and economic alternatives (Williams 1985, 2012). “Poverty”

<sup>1</sup> Toru Shinoda offered a powerful piece, “Which Side Are You On?: Hakenmura and the Working Poor as a Tipping Point in Japanese Labor Politics” about the Hakenmura protests in *The Asia-Pacific Journal* in 2009. I shared his hopes at the time, but Hakenmura did not emerge as a tipping point, and poverty instead became an issue marginalized in discourse and political practice through a decade of strengthening conservative hegemony. This piece is partly a response to the dashing of those hopes of 2008 as well as forces of impoverishment becoming even more powerful through the COVID-19 pandemic and after.

(*hinkon*) has meant very different things in different periods of Japanese history. In the “high-growth” decades, it was mostly discussed as a problem of development, where central planning and shaping of a productive form of society would see Japan grow beyond poverty (Iwata, 2017). This did not happen as material and structural limits to growth became the context of the poverty statistics outlined above being taken as “normal.” Low growth, however, is not the only cause of poverty, as limited redistribution, the patriarchal structuring of the workforce, exploitation, and other factors play significant roles. This piece will explore how different modes of representation position poverty at present, drawing on Williams’ approach along with critical discourse analysis to assess what is included and excluded from the discursive framing of poverty as a term of social understanding and the role it plays in making present social relations comprehensible (van Dijk, 1998). Examining meaning-making around poverty can shed light on not only poverty’s place as a social and political issue, but the added problem of half of the Japanese public failing to recognize inequality.

I have surveyed mass market non-fiction and reportage on poverty published since the 2008 financial crisis and identify three problematic modes of representation that I term individualization, nationalization, and generalization. In order to examine these modes and in an attempt to understand how they can render poverty as something “normal” (perhaps regrettable, but not a focus of social and political struggle), I identify three works, each representative of one of the dominant modes. Masuda Akitoshi’s *お金がありません 17人のリアル貧困生活* [*I’m Broke – 17 Stories of Living in Poverty*] represents the mode of individualization. The work’s personal stories of poverty based on interviews can be moving, but the lack of social, structural, and other context can make poverty seem a matter of misfortune, rather than something deeply intertwined with Japan’s current system. Nakafuji Rei’s *安いニッポン「価格」が示す停滞* [*Cheap Japan – Stagnation through Prices*] represents the mode that I call nationalization. Japan’s economic downturn is understood as stagnation compared

with other countries or high wage, high wealth locations like Silicon Valley. This mode follows a prevailing neoliberal logic in asserting that Japan needs significant cultural change to increase national competitiveness and thus national power—more coders, “personal responsibility” for retraining to work in growth industries, higher salaries for “talent” and restructuring for the rest, and consumers willing to pay higher prices instead of hunting for bargains. But it fails to acknowledge structures of poverty that would only be exacerbated by the pursuit of neoliberal “efficiencies” conceived of as a form of national strengthening, and the experiences of poverty by individuals and families is obscured from view. Finally, Kobayashi Miki’s *年収443万円 安すぎる国の絶望的な生活* [4,430,000 Yen a Year – *Living Despair in a Cheap Country*] represents the third mode—generalization. Poverty is understood as common feelings of want, but as a result, high income professionals foregoing their daily Starbucks because they are “squeezed” economically are grouped with those enduring abject poverty. Poverty’s specificity as a social experience slips from focus. In this article, I will describe these modes through an analysis of these three works and seek to explain how they obscure more than they reveal about poverty in contemporary Japan.

### “Broke” Japan – Poverty’s Individualization

Akimoto Tomomi, twenty-five years old. A pseudonym. She works the window at a pachinko parlor in Tokyo’s Sumida Ward, taking the “prizes” and handing cash to the players, the last stage in the elaborate charade that separates pachinko from gambling. Her pay is 1100 yen an hour, just over seven US dollars, well above the minimum nationally, but a “working poor” number in the capital. Akimoto suffers from untreated depression, a condition that limits her ability to work. She makes about 110,000 yen (around \$700 US) a month, about half of which goes to rent (Masuda, 2023, 128–129). Akimoto’s story is one of 17 that feature in Masuda Akitoshi’s *I’m Broke*, a mass market paperback from publisher Saizu-sha. This is a mainstream mode of representation that individualizes poverty. Such

works make personal stories of depravation and want visible, but do so without structural context that might point to causes and potential solutions.

Akimoto graduated from a two-year college in her native Gunma Prefecture. She quickly landed an office job at a manufacturer specializing in hair products for barbers and salons. Hired on a temporary contract with the promise of a full-time position in the future, Akimoto was let go after three years. She then went back and forth between the municipal employment office, also called “Hello Work,” and local job fairs, but was unsuccessful. This left her feeling blamed by the local bureaucrats and recruiters and eventually by family for being cut at her first job; she eventually had to turn to a string of precarious part time jobs in order to get by.

Failing on the job market time and again and experiencing structural inequity as self-loathing, Akimoto began to suffer from insomnia and digestive problems. A diagnosis of depression followed. As her savings drained away, Akimoto could no longer afford train fare to get to the employment office and her depression symptoms got worse. She landed at the pachinko job, one which required little direct contact with people and could accommodate her odd, irregular sleeping hours caused by her health problems. She began to withdraw 20,000 yen (\$130 US) from her savings account each month just to reach the poverty line.

Masuda’s telling of Akimoto’s and others’ stories throughout the book is a moving example of giving “voice” to Japanese at society’s margins. The work lacks, however, structural engagement or critique of policies which have incentivized the hiring of workers in irregular positions and set the minimum wage at poverty level (Ishiguro, 2008). Without this context, poverty seems to appear as a form of misfortune. We hear Akimoto’s story, but Masuda stops short of the broader context of what “flexible” employment across the service industry, which employs around three-quarters of Japanese workers, as well as much of manufacturing, can look like. Full time, well compensated employment turns

out to be an unreachable dream for many. Hyper-competition around shifting consumer desires, cycles of bankruptcies and startups around fads that quickly disappear or come roaring back as nostalgia, the decline of legacy industries structurally necessitating a “churn” in employment—all of this leads to the disruption of stable employment. At present, 40% of Japanese employees are non-permanent (Seimei Hoken Bunka Center, 2022). With low wages being the norm, there is a social reliance on part-time and temporary labor that, as part of the fundamental structure of this economic form, is cycled from one low-paying industry to the next, meeting the demands of short-term profits over social stability (Ishiguro, 2008).

Depression, in addition to poverty, appears as a human cost of a mode of life Nancy Fraser has called “cannibal capitalism”: the destabilization of life as part of a basic instability of the system itself (Fraser, 2022). Akimoto’s story is a powerful one, told in personal terms that nevertheless touch different parts of the social field. Masuda’s major focus, however, is more limited—how Akimoto gets by with so little money. “My food budget stops at 18,000 yen a month. I absolutely avoid spending much more than this... When I shop, I buy cheap things. This is an absolute necessity” (Masuda, 2023, 133).<sup>2</sup> She hunts for bargains and buys damaged goods like dented cans on sale. Her chapter begins to read like an inventory. 99 yen tinned fish. 28-yen bags of bean sprouts. Three packs of natto for 68 yen. In a grim way, Akimoto is lucky. Her parents send basics like rice, miso, and soy sauce, which allow her to get by.

Akimoto is giving an account of what it feels like, day to day, to live in poverty and struggle to meet basic needs. Author Masuda ties her story to others, attempting to spark empathy in readers. This is an important impulse. There is a strong sense of lived reality at the margins in Akimoto’s account. But Masuda’s overall framing pushes this in the direction of the book’s title, not labor, certainly not “structure,” but what a world ordered by

<sup>2</sup> All translations are by the author unless otherwise indicated.

consumption looks like “without money.” In other words, how the “broke” get by. The interviewees are given voice, but Masuda’s very brief framing lacks specifics. Understanding poverty becomes limited to its consequences in practice. This can be moving and is a necessary interjection in public discourse, where the voices of the poor are too often reduced to silence. Poverty, however, is made into something without evident structural causes and thus without solutions other than empathy with those suffering from misfortune. It is an interjection that lacks a more layered consideration of the many reasons someone can fall into poverty, from patriarchal social norms to regressive taxation alongside low social welfare spending, to a trend toward local bureaucrats being pressured to turn away deserving applicants to keep expenditures down, to historically low rates of labor organizing, and lack of adequate resources devoted to mental health.

Bad luck replaces personal responsibility, but this way of framing poverty also obscures possible solutions to it. Writing about poverty in this way, though sympathetic, can still contribute to poverty being something that appears self-evident, but remains unclear in wider social understanding. If “fixing” the economy and “returning” it to normal growth is the solution that emerges, this can easily become part of the hegemonic “common sense” way of thinking that sees further neoliberal policy as the only option. Redistributive reforms or more radical rethinking of what the economy could look like become dangerous deviations from an expected and sought after norm.

“Theories” of poverty can emerge organically from the first-person accounts, even if they lack framing as such. One of the interviewees is a 53-year-old salaryman who lost his job and could only find work as a delivery driver (Masuda, 2023, 70–71). Paid by the package, he works with haste under grueling conditions, carrying cases of water or beer, or 10kg bags of rice up stair after stair until his body begins to break down. Injury in intense physical labor like delivery work can result in immediate economic insecurity and a poverty spiral emerging from

reduced income and debt. This poorly compensated and strenuous work has allowed companies like Amazon, Rakuten, and Yahoo! Japan to reap large profits. Similarly, speculative financialization’s meeting with “urban redevelopment” is only possible through the construction industry, home to some of Japan’s most dangerous workspaces, with high rates of on-the-job injuries and deaths. Construction and related industries have historically used mob ties to marshal labor from the “reserve army” of the homeless and itinerantly and precariously employed, and from structurally marginalized places like Okinawa and Japan’s north (Mizoguchi, 2011).

There is a “balance” in this imbalance of economic forces—laborers move the commodities that are the lifeblood even of the electronic economy and throw up new property “assets,” tearing down the old through a seemingly endless cycle of “renewal” in the logic of capitalist accumulation. For these profits to be realized, there is a structural need for low wage workers in often dangerous jobs. Japan’s labour market has been shaped around this need, and thus around poverty as something socially central (Amin, 2014).

For Japan’s domestic milieu, nostalgia is one of the discursive anchors of the idea that poverty can be lifted by a “return” to growth. This idea believes that movement toward collective prosperity is somehow normal, and that poverty is an aberration. Poverty can appear in this way as it is represented in unidirectional terms—a singular absence of the resources for a prosperous life, namely money—and not as structural. This understanding of poverty takes a social form through the intersection of innumerable factors such as patriarchy and other fundamental relations, both in the domestic context and in Japan’s position in the capitalist world system in which the modalities of the Japanese economy are only comprehensible in their regional and global integration. Some are impoverished while others take a larger share of the surplus of social production and reproduction. Japan is a country of “lows”—low income tax on one side and a low rate

of welfare provision on the other (Ohmura, 2022b). Poverty is made conceivable through the very system that produces poverty as it is experienced, as a “normal” consequence of the organization of the economy. In this way, a book like Masuda’s *I’m Broke* can present detailed and often moving stories of people experiencing hardship of various degrees, particularly by the conditions of much temporary and part-time work including poverty wages and daily indignities on the shop floor, at the retail counter, or construction sites, or the piece by piece casualized jobs in delivery and tech platforms. The problem is that these stories in *I’m Broke* and similar works form a collective lament, not a call for collective action or rethinking of the fundamentals of organization of the economy and distribution of surplus.

The Japanese public has largely spent (lost) decades waiting for someone, normally corporate or political elites, to address poverty and growing inequality. Works like Masuda’s draw attention to the fact that many Japanese just “don’t have the money” and illustrate the personal consequences, want, stress, depression, and consumption experienced as desperation, but are vague on causes in a way that ends up making poverty into something normal in its abnormality. Poverty becomes simple absence—of money, of prosperity, of national power—rather than the presence of structural inequalities, such as between permanent and part-time or contract employees, between men who are statistically far more likely to be in high earning jobs than women, who are more likely to be in poverty, especially if living alone or in single mother households, and other contexts of poverty in contemporary Japan.

### “Cheap” Japan – Poverty’s Nationalization

Nakafuji Rei’s *Cheap Japan* is representative of a mode of depicting poverty that I describe as “nationalization.” The lives of individuals in poverty are unimportant in this mode and go unreferenced in Nakafuji’s book. Poverty rates, exploitation, disparities in economic marginalization between men and women, and similar problems in Japan’s

social landscape do not enter into his arguments. Instead, Nakafuji describes Japan as becoming “cheap” on a national level. For him, low growth means that Japan’s prominence will decline along with the drop in its globally circulating capital. This is seen as poverty of the nation. Nakafuji does highlight some important problems – how is Japan to secure necessary imports if its economy is mired in low growth and its currency is tanking? The solutions Nakafuji suggests, however, are in line with a neoliberal understanding of the economy and create a simple economic imaginary rooted in nostalgia for the high-growth era and its peak in the 80s “bubble” economy.

Nakafuji’s overall assertion is that a rise in wages can only follow rising prices. This framing places the burden of economic growth on the ordinary consumer. It ignores other potential policies like a minimum wage increase. Since 2022, a global wave of high consumer price inflation has significantly outstripped wage increases in most of the world. In Canada, for example, wages took a “major hit,” rising in number but declining in actual purchasing power (Barghiel, 2024). The types of consumer price increases that Nakafuji calls for as an economic solution have made people poorer. By placing the main demand for change on consumers who are told that they must accept higher prices before they can expect higher wages, a promise that may never come to pass, Nakafuji absolves the government and Abenomics of responsibility for Japan’s poverty problem, which is obscured by this mode of “nationalization.”

Some things are indeed very cheap in Japan. Ramen, a quick five-dollar lunch in most of Japan, costs \$25 overseas. Stainless steel bowls at Japan 100-yen shops (the equivalent of dollar stores), fetch five times that in Seoul. The Tokyo park is the least expensive of the world’s Disneylands. Japan, it seems, is a cheap place to live, and if Nakafuji is to be believed, this is the major cause of Japan’s decades-long stagnation. Where the interviewees in Masuda’s *I’m Broke* give powerful accounts of life in poverty, Nakafuji’s *Cheap Japan* focuses instead

on what he sees as the poverty of the nation. Wages of 14,000,000 yen (about \$95,000 US) a year are, in his view, “low income,” a term that is not defined in the work and is instead taken as a simple measure of national economic vitality (Nakafuji, 2021, cover). He gets there with roundabout arguments comparing Tokyo’s Minato-ku to San Francisco. Comparing a part of central Tokyo to San Francisco obscures issues of demographics and many other social factors in and around employment, the conceptualization of subsistence, and the constitution of what makes a basic wage behind a national growth project. This becomes the genuine “crisis” of Japanese poverty. In this way, “cheap” tickets to Tokyo Disneyland become a symbol of lacking national competitiveness, as well as national decline and poverty.

Nakafuji’s book is a key example of an argument that runs through Japan’s business and economy focused media—Japanese consumers are too spendthrift, too apt to chase bargains, too vociferous in demanding low prices; in short, they are “cheap” compared to consumers in other wealthy or fast-growing economies.<sup>3</sup> To meet this market, companies have participated in a decades long race to the bottom. As they cut costs to reduce prices, businesses slash wages and rely on a “flexible” workforce of part-time and contract employees. Money-grubbing consumers bear most of the blame for Japan becoming “cheap,” for their own stagnant wages, and for the economic doldrums of the three, going on four, lost decades. Nakafuji, however, ignores outsourcing and offshoring of production—80% of cars sold overseas by Japanese companies are not exported by Japan but rather are manufactured elsewhere—and how Japanese companies, making substantial profits in the Abenomics era, have elected to hoard cash rather than raise employee wages (Katz, 2023a; Katz, 2023b; Yasui, 2021).

3 Other recent examples in book form include: 加谷 瑠一, 日本はもはや“後進国”, Tokyo: 秀和システム, 2019. 永濱 利廣, 日本病 なぜ給料と物価は安いままなのか, Tokyo: 講談社, 2022. 武者 陵司, 「安いニッポン」が日本を大復活させる!, Tokyo: WAC, 2022. Musha, especially, sees low wages as a way of instrumentalizing Japan’s workforce toward productivity and business profits.

An “expensive Japan” is not so much a policy goal as a presumed natural state that has been deviated from because of the outlandish demands of the ordinary consumer. The book does not adequately place these demands in the context of stagnant income or low GDP growth or Japan’s proximity to Chinese manufacturing networks, which have made many commodities cheaper for consumers. Instead, they become the *cause* of Japan’s economic problems. What does this “do” to poverty as it is constituted in discourse? In basic terms, it becomes the fault of the poor. This fits with the book’s overall framing of the economy in terms of “competitiveness” set apart from social relations of production, subsistence, and reproduction. Poverty is not a problem—*teizai* (stagnation) from the subtitle of the book, is. The solutions he poses are more “flexibility,” code for making it easier to fire employees, and to work on consumers to get them to accept high prices as a way to “fix” Japan’s economy and with it its global economic position, a point made in Nakafuji’s interview with stock analyst Konomi Jun (Nakafuji, 2021, 71). Poverty, in his definition, is the well-to-do Japanese no longer being able to benefit from access to inexpensive commodities on the global market as they did in the 1980s. In an important sense, this line of argument is a product of a general refusal to reckon with deindustrialization. Decline of national competitiveness and consumption, of which prices stand in as a marker, takes precedence. The hollowing out of productive relations that were constitutive of lifeworlds goes overlooked.

In this pattern, the fundamental economic problem is reduced to a simple formula, “if companies cannot raise prices, they cannot make profits, and if companies cannot make money, they cannot raise wages” (Nakafuji, 2021, 38). This becomes a “common sense” apprehension of social form, but is it really true that Japanese companies have not “made profits”? Or simply that they have not raised wages? Corporate profits have been nominally robust through the last decade, but they largely went into stock buybacks and similar schemes as wages remained glacial (Katz, 2014; Inoue and Mizuhata,

2018). In claiming 14,000,000 yen, the equivalent of \$95,000 US, as low income and this as a marker of national economic decline, Nakafuji separates wages from meaningful measures of poverty. Doing so, he also overlooks factors like the large number of Japanese over the age of 65 who, dependent on pensions and savings, would be left facing higher prices without higher incomes.

The effects of poverty on individuals and families end up hidden from view as Nakafuji takes an economic nationalist line and frames poverty in terms of a kind of national decline, with self-interested consumers' deflationary behavior making Japan "cheap." In addition, he suggests that this makes it an easy target for foreign capital, especially Chinese, which is envisioned as coming to "snap up" Japan and buy out the nation by taking up everything, from companies to infrastructure to resort areas and technology, at bargain prices (Nakafuji, 2021, 152–193). Picked apart by foreign investors from "high income" countries, Japan would supposedly be run for the benefit of others. These fears could be assuaged by regulation, such as laws against types of foreign ownership, which already exist. This would, however, go against the "free market" push of the work. The crisis of cheap Japan that emerges in the work ends up focused on national power relative to rivals, not the individual or social consequences of poverty.

Like his Minato-ku to San Francisco comparison, the solutions Nakafuji offers are misapplied. In his analysis, if consumers are to blame for companies chasing after casualization of labor, now these consumers, also the victims of casualization, need to be not only willing to pay more, but the government must make it easier to casualize to create the profits that will supposedly lead to the wage increases that will allow consumers to pay the higher prices. This is trickle-down all over again, where the social pain is demanded before national economic regeneration can occur. However, it is by no means a given that companies will offer higher wages after raising prices. Only in some ill-defined future will profits allow for the promised wage increases, and poverty

in this framing comes to exist only as a sort of metaphor for the decline of national power.<sup>4</sup>

But prices and power, and certainly high prices and better lives, are not so easy to relate. The connection between high prices and better lives is not apparent. Although presumably seen by Nakafuji as national high performers, expensive economies worldwide have created life spaces where a majority of young people can't afford a house or often even a small apartment in a big city. This is even said to be causing a new wave of "offshoring" with remote work and the shift of work to international locations happening as a response to towering rents, partly a result of real estate speculation, pricing out even high earners in the tech industry (Castillo, 2017; Sheyner, 2017). What can be taken as success, a suitably "pricey" economy, begins to look like another type of crisis, that of financialized accumulation over life, social and population reproduction, and the possibility of care of self and others.

The limits of Nakafuji's approach, which omits individuals suffering poverty, are evidenced by some of his spectacular claims, such as: "In America, rents increase in pace with economic growth" (Nakafuji, 2021, 83). Instead, there are many places in which rent is out of line with both general economic growth and wages. This statement makes sense if it is only a small stratum of high earners who "count" in the analysis. Making the poor invisible in this way is a discursive side of the general forces of impoverishment in Japan at present and it structures views of the global in important ways. These problems appear most clearly in Nakafuji's handling of India: "In India, with its large wealth disparities, making arguments based on the 'average' is meaningless" (Nakafuji, 2021, 122). Instead, only high-earning tech workers factor in and Japanese salaries are compared with the very small number of Indians making hundreds of thousands of US

4 Real wage stagnation is not a problem unique to Japan. Real wages have been stagnant or slow to grow in most of the world. This point is downplayed in Nakafuji's exceptionalist account. The "real wages in Japan have not risen in 20 years" (cover) is presented as a crisis in international competitiveness without really engaging with international examples and similar contexts of stagnation.



dollars a year, ignoring endemic poverty there and its equivalent in Japan, where subsistence may look different, but many still struggle. This is a direct example of poverty being made invisible, a side itself of the ideological force of impoverishment in the current hegemonic array. Social despair is cleared away, hidden behind a small number of high salaries thought to guarantee “trickle down” effects, and the rising prices, another force of despair, that supposedly prefigure them. By putting the burden of responsibility on consumers, Nakafuji places the cart before the horse, poverty comes from Japan being too cheap, thus undermining a “proper,” “natural” expression of national economic form. If they would spend like it was 1985, Japan could return to an era of growth and economic primacy. What emerges here is an elaborate version of neoliberal “personal responsibility.” Nostalgia for the 1980s economy, the self-image of Japan as a world beater and global economic powerhouse, color imaginings of the economy at present and the place of poverty within it. Poverty is not understood as a structural facet of economic relations, but rather of the economy as a whole being something other than the norm of the 1980s economic height. With the 1980s dominating thinking in this way, solutions to poverty end up thought in terms of “return,” not in seeking after different economic practices, be they redistributive or more radical alternatives. Return is half nostalgia, half wishfulness. Poverty is secondary, it ends up hidden in the background, as if the way beyond it is simply for things to be more expensive.

Nakafuji’s book can also be criticized in normative economic terms.<sup>5</sup> He largely ignores examples where commodities, services, and leisure activities are more costly in Japan than in the United States or gives them throwaway mentions as exceptions that prove the rule. For example, movie tickets are much more expensive in Japan than in America, most of Western Europe, Hong Kong, and Singapore.

Many factors go into the price of a ticket, but they

<sup>5</sup> There is a lot more to do in Tokyo, the world’s largest metropolis, than in, say, South Florida. The lower price for Tokyo Disneyland can be understood in a context of overheated competition. In addition, because of massive crowds at the park at key times, Tokyo Disneyland visitors can expect to wait in line for hours for popular rides and access fewer attractions than at other parks, making a ticket an unequal “value proposition.”

are priced according to demand and anticipated competition with other forms of entertainment. In short, Nakafuji might be broadly correct that deflation and changes to the exchange rate have made Japan less expensive or “cheap,” but he gets to this point through cherry-picked examples that fail to acknowledge competition particular to Japan and areas in which Japanese consumers pay considerably more—a reality that can be harsh for those living in poverty. If the poor, among other consumers, are to be blamed for demanding low prices, this phenomenon has to be seen in the context of survival. Movie tickets aside, there are other things that are much more expensive in Japan than in nearly all wealthy countries: home renovations, moving, apartment deposits, mobile phone data, and some basic food staples like fresh fruit, among many others. These have the particular effect of making moving in search of work and necessary communications much more difficult, a significant social effect in “cheap Japan,” and a contribution to both lack of mobility and isolation from social networks that push people into living off of poverty wages.

Nakafuji also glosses over some complex dimensions of economic connection. In his discussion of *kaiten* (revolving) sushi shops, a marker of the race to the bottom when it comes to prices, Nakafuji laments the fact that relentless consumer pressure on prices brought about by corporate response to consumer demands has led to the rollout of automation technology—robots shape the rice, touch panels and computer calculations take care of ordering and billing, and it is possible to eat in one of these restaurants without crossing the path of a single employee (Nakafuji, 2021, 30). This is understood as the “decline” of retail and the restaurant industry in a race to the bottom, but these innovations and accompanying research and development in aggregate across the Japanese economy are also tied to a surviving “high value added” manufacturing sector that does enormous two-way business with China, much more to the benefit of Japan in balance of trade than for most other wealthy countries. These trans-sector

connections, in this case between automation infrastructure in retail and service and production of robots, are an export commodity.

On top of this, a great deal of what is being described as “cheap” in Nakafuji’s work is also aptly described as “efficient,” “rational” use of resources in line with the priorities of capitalist production favored by Nakafuji. Nakafuji describes the chain Kura Sushi’s sophisticated system. They buy the entire catch of fishing vessels sight unseen (Nakafuji, 2021, 31). “Good” (valuable) fish from the point of view of the sushi operation is sent to where company data indicates it is most likely to be consumed without waste. “Bad” fish—parts of the catch unappealing to diners—are processed into fertilizers and other secondary products, opening up a completely different line of business that cuts waste and maximizes profits. Kura Sushi has thus become a restaurant chain-industrial hybrid. They typically pay low wages to the front-line employees and engage in automation wherever possible. These are connected to poverty but not so easily to economic inefficiency or a lack of competitiveness. “Cheapness” can appear as that very competitiveness, but works in this mode tend to insist on expense as a marker of national pride, a one-sided vision of national vitality. The problem is these forces of production are leaving social relations and their reproduction behind. How long before restaurants without employees become restaurants without customers as structural penury pushes subsistence to an ever-lower line?

In the end, Nakafuji marvels at the fact that wages in California went up by 20% in a five-year period before the pandemic (Nakafuji, 2021, 33). For him, this is mainly a matter of economic vitality, of consumers willing to pay more, bringing economic “heat” which allows for higher wages. What he does not highlight, however, is that California has consistently had the highest poverty rate in the US, with endemic poverty and an *increase* in this period in housing precarity and similar expressions (Walters, 2023). Wages, for example, can ride on the back of a speculative housing bubble, as

they arguably did in Japan in the 1980s, but as in Canada at present this is not a “solution” for poverty as full-time work at or even considerably above minimum wage does not cover rent for a one-bedroom apartment in *any* large city, leading to a cascading array of problems such as homelessness and widespread despair, even among the well-to-do (Landau, 2023). While it is technically correct that an income of over 10,000,000 yen would be “low income” at the center of the American tech industry, his shorthand marker of “poverty” fails as multi-sided analysis. In this way, Nakafuji compares San Francisco to Tokyo’s Minato-ku, but misses the world. The end result is poverty made “invisible” through excessive “nationalization” in a lament that the bubble did not continue forever and calls for more “deregulation,” the standard neoliberal panacea.

### “Squeezed” Japan – Poverty’s Generalization

If *I’m Broke* makes poverty too particular, losing the opportunity for structural critique in what are nonetheless powerful and often moving personal stories, Kobayashi Miki’s *4,430,000 Yen a Year* generalizes poverty. The cover lists examples of want that set out the work’s orientation—“holding off on Starbucks,” “passing on buying an onion if they cost more than 80 yen each,” or “waiting for bargains” (Kobayashi, 2022). They grab the attention of potential readers as practices shared across income brackets and social strata in contemporary consumer society. Grouping them together and placing stories of “getting by” on 4,430,000 yen a year alongside examples of abject want becomes a “generalization” of poverty, conflating serious deprivation with what can be called a middle income “squeeze.” In Japan, as in much of the Global North, people are feeling this squeeze which can be summed up by the book’s subtitle – both “too cheap” and “too expensive.” Wages and many objects of casual consumer desire appear cheap, while healthcare, even in broadly socialized systems, and the cost of education necessary to ward off downward mobility but offering no guarantee, are too expensive. The squeeze is a lived

sense of anxiety in common, or even despair amid plenty, something common to lifeworlds under neoliberalism.

The squeeze comes partly with creeping expressions of cost in the neoliberal socio-economic form. While a television, a computer, or a bottle of whiskey may be relatively cheaper, sometimes much cheaper, than in decades past because economies of scale, production in China or elsewhere, supply chain connectivity, automation technology, and myriad other factors, “social costs” are being relentlessly shifted to individuals and their immediate families. One of the interview subjects recounts, “Requests from [my children’s] school for money for textbooks and educational materials and for PTA fees are distributed every month. This is a monthly reminder that public education in Japan is not free” (Kobayashi, 2022, 48–49). The cost of attending university has also increased, just as degrees have become more and more necessary for pursuing the dwindling number of “good jobs” and as student debt, reaching crisis proportions in Japan, can be all but impossible to pay back with the low starting salaries that are the norm (Clane, 2023).

With this “squeeze” as “feeling” as an overall frame, *4,430,000 Yen a Year* freely mixes discussion of serious want of the basic necessities of life and bare maintenance of socio-economic place with the stories of people forced to replace their daily Starbucks with “green tea in a thermos.” This is a form of economic pain better called discomfort but is nonetheless a socially meaningful experience which has the potential to form a bridge of empathy between those experiencing forms of want primarily around consumer desires and those facing structural impoverishment in more absolute terms. Couples making over 10,000,000 yen a year can share with people below the poverty line a sense of the squeeze in their daily life, but the work as a whole fails to reconcile feelings of depravation with its experience, in the total sense, of impoverishment in a country where a third of households are mired at a quarter of that income or lower. In the book, the squeeze frequently appears not in structural terms,

but simply as not getting by and not knowing why. “What went wrong so that households like mine had to come to this? The state? The system? I have no idea why we’ve had to go into debt [just to get by]” (Kobayashi, 2022, 123). And while the generalized collection of these accounts can be powerful at points, the reader is left with the same sense of confusion as this interviewee, no closer to the relationship between poverty and social structures.

One line of analysis that is largely missing, resulting in conflation around shared effects of the squeeze, is neoliberal austerity. Austerity appears as lack, but seldom as clearly defined policy or as part of an abiding social form and organization of priorities. Even the nominally well to do are hit by rising medical costs, the result of “welfare” and “care” shifted more and more from the collective to individuals. The expansion of medical possibilities with changes in technology and techniques does not only appear as a social good, but as an opportunity for private profits, and in this way “progress” can also be experienced as anxiety and even feelings of despair when procedures are not easily available or for which “users” must go out of pocket, limiting them to the affluent. Kobayashi discusses fertility treatments, which put a massive burden on families despite the rhetoric of successive LDP governments about reversing the decline of Japan’s birthrate, something they are far more comfortable wielding as a form of personal responsibility discourse than paying for through a more robust welfare state. One interviewee laments, “When I read the newspaper, it said that there is one municipality offering 400,000 yen a year for fertility treatments. Where I’m living it’s zero. Some companies give good support, like 100,000 or 200,000 yen, or make it easy to take time off. What great companies! Makes me jealous” (Kobayashi, 2022, 63). Of course, these treatments, while a burden for some, can be impossible for others living below the poverty line. For some, even public transportation to and from hospitals and clinics is a prohibitive cost. Others simply cannot take the time off work lest they risk hunger.

A neoliberal structuring of distribution of surplus in

the economy means that high earners are normally able to access better health services. *4,430,000 Yen a Year* does not discuss this and the disparity appears as simple “luck”—some wind up at “better” companies or are in “better” municipalities that subsidize care, as if the earnings of residents and related tax revenue have nothing not do with availability of care. This is a generalizing effect; systemic factors remain in the background while the “unlucky” across economic strata face a generalized squeeze.

*4,430,000 Yen a Year* is effective at pointing to ways that some interviewees associate pressures around money and employment with their mental health struggles (Kobayashi, 2022, 43–44). Unemployment or poor working conditions can lead to depression, which can leave individuals trapped in structures of impoverishment. Workplace norms, with punishingly long hours and mercenary and instrumentalized relationships, can be experienced as violence. They manifest situationally as coercion, but also take on a structural drive as seeking out less violent workplaces leads to lower pay. Japan’s convenience stores, kitchens, food processing and preparation shops, and factories may become a temporary refuge in one mode, but in another they gain their “flexible” labor through a process of attrition that plays out in the “good” jobs. While *4,430,000 Yen a Year*, like *I’m Broke*, may not carry through on this type of analysis, it does have the potential to leave the reader with the feeling that something is not right with the “common sense” of the economy. This is a mode of social organization that forces those suffering into a downward, fundamentally different economic position amenable to accumulation in the massive retail and service sectors, whose employees undergird speculative accumulation and megaprofits elsewhere in the economy. In this way, impoverishment appears as a conflux of compulsive forces through which individuals are placed outside of a “normal” productive and reproductive society, marginalized, shamed, and considered unworthy of aid. Kobayashi’s book shares the voices of Japanese in these positions, but without relational contexts that show how some benefit from the economic

expression of this suffering.

“Good,” or at least stable, work can leave little time for care. One interviewee with a child struggling with chronic illness describes staying in a bad factory job, “Even then I couldn’t quit because even if they docked my pay I could still get a day off when my child was sick. There really aren’t many other jobs that will allow this, so I had to stay” (Kobayashi, 2022, 114). Forms of exploitation that wear on life, on family relationships, on health and the health of children, and are a punishing burden on mental health, are what allow the prevailing economic form to function. Middle income and managerial and adjacent wages may be squeezed, but these jobs and the accompanying lifestyle possibilities of the 10,000,000 yen a year household are buttressed by low wage earners at the base of the economic pyramid in the most common types of jobs in the economy—retail, food preparation, moving commodities around—that are necessary for the realization of profits. This is lost in the comparisons that generalize poverty. Everyone feeling the squeeze settles for a 500-yen lunch, but that lunch is only possible because of the poverty-level wage paid around its production. If elite knowledge workers, for example, save time by not having to prepare their own food, and can rely on inexpensive prepared foods, it is because that time saved is being served out by the working poor. On the whole, Kobayashi’s *4,430,000 Yen a Year* tells some powerful stories, but also conflates feelings and experiences of want with those of need, a form of generalization that muddies the meanings of poverty for contemporary Japan.

### **Conclusion – Poverty, Patriarchy, Specificity**

Individualization, nationalization, and generalization, the three different modes of representation of poverty that I have identified with three recent books on poverty, are by no means limited to those titles. Attention grabbing, almost panicked reporting finds that Japanese salaries are no longer competitive enough to attract “top” job applicants from elsewhere in Asia, shredding already glacial plans to address Japan’s low birthrate

and declining workforce by drawing in “elite” migrants (Himeda, 2018). As GDP per capita has fallen behind South Korea, recent accounts place starting salaries for university graduates in Japan closer to “developing countries” than the United States or most of Europe (Musha, 2021). With these developments have come new or renewed narratives of “crisis,” but also claims that sky-high stock values, which appear to have left the economy of daily life and subsistence far behind, indicate a return to form, to Japan as a global player. In this milieu, where crisis is envisioned as something national and those whose lives are in crisis vanish from view, frank discussion of poverty in Japan is often lost amid nostalgia for the high-growth era and the myopic view that maybe this time around, yet another round of neoliberal reforms will finally succeed. Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval describe this logic, pervasive globally: “If austerity creates fiscal deficits, a supplementary dose is required. If competition destroys the industrial fabric or lays waste to regions, more of it must be introduced... If tax reductions for the wealthy or corporations do not yield the expected results, they must be amplified” (Dardot and Laval, 2019, xii).

“Abenomics” failed to end wage stagnation and its successors “Suganomics” and now “Kishidanomics” have done little better. As the “-nomics” branding nears parody, comparative poverty statistics like those discussed at the beginning of this article appear to have become normalized. The dominant view of poverty, which is subject to critique in Japan’s public sphere, but reigns in mainstream economics reporting and conservative politics, makes neoliberal policy appear as the only solution, as if poverty is something discrete and not relational—the “object” of analysis, the monoform “social problem,” or “moral panic” over national productivity.<sup>6</sup> Beverly Best writes, “The

presently dominant convention of perceiving and representing ... different geographical locations, moments in history, institutions and fields of activity, and experience as fragmented and atomized is an obstacle to understanding how the social world actually works in capitalist societies, that is, in a more complex, holistic and interconnected way” (Best, 2010, 3). This article has tried to assess the representation of poverty in this limited form in contemporary Japan and also attempted to understand the prospects for action amid discursive ossification and political stasis.

In *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*, Michael Taussig describes ‘capitalist folklore’ in the financial section of *The New York Times*, “We read of the ‘economic climate;’ the ‘sagging dollar,’ of ‘earning booming ahead.’ ... of ‘money growing’ in accordance with investment, of how ‘your investments can go to work for you,’ and so on... capital and workers’ products are spoken of in terms that are used for people and animate beings...” (Taussig, 2010). Poverty in post-pandemic discourse in Japan takes on a similar “external” character, as something outside social relations and forms of government: something that just “is”. At the same time, it takes on a life of its own outside of normal social thinking as something immutable through forms of individualization, nationalization, and generalization. There is a common separateness, but also differences with Taussig’s examples in that poverty in Japan can become an “object,” something simply *inanimate* and separate from other social forces. In this way, something that is the norm for a large part of the population is commonly thought of as an exception. These three books, each representative of a different mode of situating poverty, show how poverty as a conflux of social forces is rendered simple—a basic lack of money, a result of low prices, or as a generalized economic squeeze.

This article has sought to analyze and respond to these discourses critically while highlighting both their ties to the neoliberal social imaginary of “personal responsibility” and how neoliberal

<sup>6</sup> There are always alternatives. Important example is, Saito Kohei, *Zero kara no Shihonron*, Tokyo: NHK Shuppan, 2023. There are a plethora of specialist and activist works discussed in the conclusion of this piece which focus on the specific problem of women in poverty and gendered experiences of impoverishment, many of which look at the specific intersection of labour, discrimination, and poverty that is often missing in recent mass market publications. For an English language account, see Anne Allison, *Precarious Japan*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.

governance and policy can appear as calls for “return” to past economic success which becomes a static norm and defeats attempts to think about poverty differently. These assumptions are integral to something as basic as the “lost decades” framing. At what point are they not “lost” so much as they are in the continued grip of a social logic that holds that the best response to poverty is more impoverishment, as in the claims that inflation itself is a cure to Japan’s nationally conceived economic woes or that mass layoffs are the first step to common prosperity, with individuals and families vanishing into the background? Understanding poverty as relational, as intimately connected to distribution of society’s surplus, tied to factors like low income taxes and low social spending, can help to bring into focus the causes of poverty that affects so many Japanese today.

While the three modes of representation outlined in this article are the most prevalent, they are contested. About a decade ago, there was a slate of works from the media mainstream, NGOs, and academic researchers focusing on women’s issues that brought a needed specificity to considerations of social relations around poverty. Japanese women made and still make up about 80% of part-time, temporary, and irregular workers. Patriarchal assumptions around housewives and “correct” social place continue even as the labour force participation rate for Japanese women is rivalling that of the United States. This situation of Japanese women as low-wage, precarious workers at the point of intersection between culture, capital, and policy, creates rippling ramifications for many women, but especially for single-mother households, contributing to child poverty rates that place Japan near the bottom in the Global North. My survey of works on poverty published since the 2008 financial crisis identified a number of important, focused works published between 2014 and 2016, the aftermath of the dual disasters of March 11, 2011 and the first years of Abenomics, including NHK’s investigative 女性たちの貧困 – “新たな連鎖の衝撃” [Women’s Poverty – ‘The Shock of a New Cycle of Poverty’], 2014], Iijima Yuko’s ルポ 貧困女子 [Report on

*Women in Poverty*, 2016], Suzuki Daisuke’s 最貧困女子 [Women in Absolute Poverty, 2014], Sawaki Aya’s 貧困女子のリアル [The Reality of Women in Poverty, 2016], Minashita Kiryu’s シングルマザーの貧困 [Single Mothers’ Poverty, 2014], and Hida Atsuko’s 女性と子どもの貧困~社会から孤立した人たちを追った [Women and Children in Poverty – Tracing People Isolated from Society, 2015]. These books, among others, drew attention to the specificity of poverty for women, addressing their roles as productive and social reproductive workers often ignored in the mainstream (Dalton, 2017).

There are signs that the constellation of critique evident between 2014 and 2016 may be returning. The pandemic—led to criticism of government and also of conservative social stewardship more broadly, but also concealed different social results like accessibility of care and the ability to quarantine behind a “we’re in this together” discourse.—Now that it is no longer at the center of debate in Japan’s public sphere, new critical voices are reemerging. There is a renewed specificity against discourses of individualization, nationalization, and generalization in the form of writing about the social context of women in poverty and how intersecting lines of discrimination and instrumentalization in the economy become forces of impoverishment. Works from academics and smaller publishers like Hida Atsuko’s コロナと女性の貧困2020–2022~サバイブする彼女たちの声を聞いた [Corona and Women’s Poverty 2020–2022 – Listening to the Voices of Women Survivors, 2022] and Iijima Yuko’s ルポ コロナ禍で追いつめられる女性たち 深まる孤立と貧困 [Report – Women Backed into a Corner by the Pandemic – Deepening Isolation and Poverty, 2021] take the pandemic as a starting point for critique of social complacency around poverty’s particular effects on Japanese women. They do not offer easy answers, but in raising questions about why particular groups in Japanese society face forces of impoverishment in different ways, they point to the potential for a more nuanced consideration of poverty’s causes, and thus to potential solutions in new ways of thinking about the economy in a society that has tremendous social

wealth, but for which the 1980s growth and regional primacy are unlikely to return.

Fifty percent of Japanese still fail to isolate inequality as a significant social problem and individualization, nationalization, and generalization are still the mainstream among non-fiction publishing and reportage. 53.7% of Japanese of the economic “middle middle class” and higher believe that people go on welfare because of a lack of personal effort, not systemic or structural factors (Yamada, 2016). Poverty, despite statistics that show its seriousness, is not a central issue at election time. But resistance to individualization, nationalization, and generalization is here, and other modes of representation of poverty, always contesting the stasis around poverty in Japan’s public sphere, have the potential to combat the normalization of poverty and start a more robust public debate about real social alternatives.

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**Matthew Penney** is an Associate Professor at Concordia University in Montreal and an Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus board member. He is currently conducting research on the far right and historical representational Japan as well as deindustrialization and poverty. He is the author of numerous articles, including “Rising Sun, Iron Cross – Military German in Japanese Popular Culture,” in *Japanstudien*, “Far From Oblivion – The Nanking Massacre in Japanese Popular Writing for Children and Young Adults,” in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, and “Right angles: Examining accounts of Japanese neo-nationalism” (with Bryce Wakefield) in *Pacific Affairs* as well as a number of research articles and shorter pieces for *Japan Focus*.