

(Final Project) Hikikomori: The Dark Shadow Cast by American-Led Globalization on Postwar Japan's Male Youth

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On one Friday afternoon in Kyoto, Japan, a woman named Yoshimi Kawakami made her way to a doorstep matching one of the addresses on her highly particular to-do list. Despite not holding her breath for any kind of response, she nonetheless stands there for two hours, talking through the door, hoping that perhaps this time, she might be proven wrong. In a separate instance involving a different "client," she would continue to be denied conversation, prompting her to remind him that it was snowing outside, adding that she might be forced to spend the night at his doorstep unless he agreed to talk to her. Such occurrences are not uncommon in Kawakami's life—after all, it was an unavoidable part of her job as a "rental sister." [1]

A rental sister (or brother in its less-common form) is a mental health professional tasked with making initial contact with individuals reported—usually by their parents—to be suffering from a condition known in Japan as "hikikomori." [2] According to Japan's Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, three essential conditions need to be met before someone may be considered hikikomori. First, the individual in question is not currently engaged in education, training, or employment. Second, the person is socially withdrawn, spending nearly all of his/her time at home—especially within the confinements of own rooms; they have no close ties with anyone outside their immediate family members, and show a gravely concerning degree of anti-social behavior. Third, symptoms must last for at least six months, with no apparent pathological cause. [3]

What makes the case of hikikomori particularly interesting is how pervasive it is within a limited set of coordinates: geographical location, time period, and the affected demographic. Though hikikomori behavior has been observed in various locations around the world, only in Japan is it considered an alarmingly problematic societal phenomenon. As of 2006, it has been estimated by leading psychiatrists that more than 1 million confirmed cases of hikikomori exist in Japan. [4] In fact, the American Psychiatric Association's DSM-V makes no mention of the matter altogether, implying that it is merely a culture-bound syndrome. Even in Japan, a great deal of debate still exists as to whether hikikomori should be regarded as a mental health condition or as a social problem. [5]

This disagreement among public officials, sociologists, and health professionals regarding how the subject should be approached seems to stem at least partly from the fact that the issue is relatively recent. One of the earliest professionals to ever encounter the condition was Dr. Saito Tamaki, psychologist and medical director at Tokyo's Sofukai Sasaki Hospital. "I didn't have a name for it," he recounted as he explained how he began to notice one patient after another in his office in the mid 1980s, all of whom reported shutting themselves in their own rooms because, for one

reason or another, participating in society seemed no longer possible for them. [6]

Another predominant pattern Dr. Tamaki noticed was that most of such patients were male, either in their teenage years or early twenties. In 1998, Dr. Tamaki would publish his first study on the subject, "Hikikomori: Adolescence Without End." [7] Two years later, the issue would make its debut on Japanese media, after a series on sensational incidents involving hikikomori; it was only then that the topic of hikikomori finally became a matter of public interest, albeit a highly stigmatized one. This paper aims to provide a historical account on the possible causes of the issue, weaving together interconnected psychological, social, economic, and cultural elements into a tightly-constructed narrative. In doing so, this paper hopes to show the keys to any civilization lie in its history.

Taking all the above into account, this paper puts forth the following argument: Centrally "hot," peripherally "cool," overall lopsided market reactions [7] to shifting circumstances within the international landscape, which had been set into motion first by the end of World War II in 1945—which enabled the postwar recovery process to take place—and then by the advent of the second wave of globalization in the early 1970s, bringing along with it dramatic changes that largely altered the long-term trajectory of capitalist economies across the globe, and Japan was no exception. [8]

It was precisely this kind of response from the Japan's political and financial powers that be—and in which they essentially sought to preserve long-standing, extremely bureaucratic institutions and protect the core of the status quo, even at the cost of dimming the future prospects of younger generations who were yet to enter the workforce—that had ultimately left the latter in a paradoxical situation in which they were forced to live up to societal expectations of postwar prosperity and collective participation in an economy that no longer presented adequate opportunities for doing so, resulting in the economic marginalization of many young people who were left virtually defenseless against a tsunami of cultural stigmatization that ruthlessly confined them outside the bounds of full-time employment. In the case of hikikomori, this particular context led them, voluntarily or otherwise, to adapt via embracing the avoidance-based approach promoted in their native culture, so as not to lose any more face. [9]

Let us begin by discussing the socioeconomic climate in Japan shortly after the Second World War in 1945. Needless to say, the first order of business was to redirect resources from toward economic recovery and social prosperity. As a direct result of the events of the WWII (1939-1945), the Korean War (1950—3), long-winded American occupation (ended in 1952), Japan would do this under the umbrella of American protection as part of the Western bloc in the Cold War that would soon ensue. Throughout this relatively brief span of time, sharp political and economic disagreements would emerge as Japan's leaders in both public and private sectors differed in determining the postwar vision the country should pursue. [10]

Consequently, between 1955 through 1960, large-scale partisan alliances and opposition would

form. On one side, the socialist parties merged into a single political entity. In response, the Liberal and Democratic parties would also unify against their new common enemy, establishing The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)—and in doing so, managed to get the majority. Much like to two—party system in the U.S., this “one-and-a-half” party system would come to preside over Japanese politics till the 1990s, hence being chiefly responsible for enacting into legislation the kind of socioeconomic policies that largely facilitated the present situation.

In all fairness, however, their job was not easy. (And, perhaps to their credit, they did pass a number of democratic reforms in the recovery period that represented a divorce from legacy in favor of the future, including an anti-monopoly law enacted in 1947 and the Trade Union Law of 1945.) For one, virtually every reformation bill they proposed was met with sharp opposition from the socialist party as well as the labor unions who vehemently opposed the renewal of the ANPO treaty, seeing it as a symbol of a westernization (not to be confused with modernization) process they were not quite sold on as yet, among other reasons. An emblematic event for this would perhaps be the labor strike at the Miike coalmines in 1960. (This continual dissatisfaction with the political establishment soon led to the removal of the LDP’s leadership. As a silver lining, they did shortly thereafter refine their approach towards labor rights and passed a remarkably successful “income-doubling” plan.) Ironically, the increasing amount of political influence granted to unions during this brief time period (despite the greatly influential Dodge Line legislation), which aided them in having major corporations embrace the lifetime employment system, a victory to be relished by the middle class at the time, was also—albeit unintentionally—a key factor in undermining the opportunities available for younger workers decades later. [11]

Moreover, the aftermath of WWII left the country with an acute shortage of resources and a resulting hyperinflation in the economy. To combat this, the Japanese government found it necessary in the years 1945—9 to preserve many of its prewar and wartime legacies so as to maintain stability—and they did so using the program mentioned below as a viable conduit. Additionally, they had to embrace plans that some might deem as necessary evils, most exemplified perhaps by their adoption of the popular yet somewhat controversial “priority production program,” which had a profound impact on the postwar economy. Overseen by a cadre of esteemed economists, the program focused its efforts on prioritizing production above all else, including consumption and long-term sustainability, most notably in the industries of coal, iron, steel, and fertilizers. In addition, it sought to undermine the concept of social class in favor of nationwide unity in a time of crisis.

Naturally, the coexistence of both reforming and conservative trends with ardent supporters on each side of the policy isle sparked heated continuity vs. discontinuity debates in the public sphere. However, considering that the war had left in its wake the loss of Japan’s colonies—and therefore their access to cheap labor and natural resources; the destruction of much of its infrastructure; an economy that in 1946 could only produce 20 percent of the production level in 1937 in the face of rapidly increasing demand from postwar population booms and the return of millions of Japanese military officers from overseas; not to mention the resulting hyperinflation in which the wholesale

price index for Japan's major industries in 1948 was about 105 times greater than that of 1937, it would not be unreasonable to assume that the government did not have much of a choice.[\[12\]](#)

Having stated all of that, the project was far from a mere temporary economic solution and spelled far greater implications, most important of which perhaps is that as result, the political establishment had greater say in guiding fiscal policy than they ever had during the war. Also, as stated above, a good number of institutions maintained during the war were hence protected and preserved via their incorporation into the program. Another important result was the establishment of the Economic Satiability Board (ESB), which only grew stronger beginning from mid-1947 onward. [\[13\]](#) (It may be worthy of mentioning that the one of the reasons they were actually able to attain such of degree of influence was by politically eliminating powerful businessmen on grounds of the connection they had with the military during the war.)

At any rate, the government used its newfound power to retain two major practices that were heavily used in the wartime period. One of those pertained to using "annual resource mobilization plans" to surgically allocate scarce resources to various divisions. For the reasons stated above, this decision seemed imperative even after the war. Secondly, tight government regulations over the flow of resources after devising the aforementioned plan was also a matter of critical importance. Even into the 1950s and beyond, it would appear that the latter practice came to acquire an influence of its own, continuing to reflect itself in expansionary industrial policy on the behalf of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), and its espoused philosophies were largely accepted by the Ministry and Finance and Bank of Japan during the explosive growth period soon to follow. This was key in fostering strong connections between corporations and banks, permitting vast sums of capital to flow easily between the two as the economy grew exceedingly in magnitude and became extremely competitive.

It is next to impossible to overstate the impact of the previous statements, especially not when a sizable chunk of Japanese economic specialists assert that even fifty years later, even today, much of the ideological and institutional mechanisms by which the Japanese economic system functions is derived from this "1940 system," which was all but obscure before the wartime period. Even more important, this system is what laid the groundwork not only for the economic boom we outline below, but for the economic regression immediately following it—and the repercussions of both. [\[14\]](#)

Finally, before we move on to the "high growth era" of the Japanese economy, one last observation needs to be made as to why such fiscal policy was put into place from a more global perspective, one that transcends the concomitant assumptions of interpreting this course of action purely in terms of the war and its aftermath—though it may be very important and relevant to the matter at hand, the perspective it offers, however rich, is still rather myopic, as it does not take into account a handful of other important factors that are essential for providing the bigger picture. Indeed, for if we were to view it from an alternative lens, we would notice that some of the aforementioned policies had been discussed prior to the Second World War, or even the invasion of China in 1937. Ergo, and as we have previously stated, this recovery period had to also be seen

in terms of a long-term evolutionary economic process during which the nation responded in its own way to the two waves of globalization. From this point of view, we notice that these quasi “big government” strategies were also devised in order to supply a social safety net to curb the effect of “negative market forces” witnessed mainly by first-world, industrialized nations at the time as a result of having to compete on a global stage.

But in addition to competitive necessity, there was also an ideological element, as it has to be mentioned that a prevailing political science theory in the U.S., the leader of the Western bloc of which Japan was a key member, was that countries would linearly evolve as they strove to emulate US-led values of democracy and capitalism, not taking into account the many other aspects critical to the progression of different nation. Though there is no explicit mention of this in either the peace treaties of 1951 or 1960, it may be very well be taken for granted as a tacit assumption on part of Western ideology. In name, we may call it the “Anglo-Saxon model of liberal capitalism.”

Moreover, from this we can also see a plausible explanation as to why governmental intervention does not necessarily entail tight regulation. If preserving certain prewar and postwar policies may be seen as the continuity, then there had also been other facets representing discontinuity. That is because, whether it liked it or not, the country had to respond to external events with far-reaching consequences, beginning with the first wave of globalization falling from grace with the dethronement of the gold standard in 1914, well before the Great Depression and WWII placed the last few nails in its coffin. Also, the country had to adapt itself the new economic order rising from the ashes of the war, namely the U.S. led form of international trade. [15]

We now move on to the second, loosely defined period of socioeconomic importance, and by that we mean the period of economic boom and rise in affluence that took place roughly between the 1950s through the 1980s. Mapping it out statistically, the annual growth rate of the economy in the years 1956—73 was a whopping 9.3 percent. Furthermore, Japan’s GDP went from \$3,500 to \$13,500 per capita (inflation not accounted for). In the years between 1975 and 1991, the average growth rate of the economy was still an impressive 4.1 percent. This time period highlights more than anything else the influence of the economic policies adopted by the Japanese government and the effects it had in shaping the long-term development of the Japan’s economic system and what set it apart from liberal capitalism mainly practiced in Western economies—and by that we mean a “distinctive set of economic philosophies and ideologies that constituted the foundation of Japanese developmentalism.” More specifically, this entailed the following:

"[Japanese developmentalism] was sustained by nationalism and held a strategic view of the economy. It had a strong orientation toward promotion of exports, which became the backbone of the East Asian model of economic development. Studies on the characteristics of Japanese economic institutions indicate that the Japanese economy was governed by various non-market mechanisms, which clearly distinguished it from liberal market capitalist economies...Major manufacturers relied heavily upon subcontractors and also forged long-term relationships with each other. Cartels were used an important means to protect sunset industries and weather downturn in

business cycles. Banks not only practiced cross-shareholding with corporations, but were also the major source of industrial capital for Japanese corporations." [16]

This period of economic boom reached its peak in the early 1970s and lasted through the mid-1980s, coming to be known by some as a "new stage of affluence and tighter centralized control." [17] This staggering rate of growth sparked a great deal of scholarly interest, particularly in the 1980s. It is of great importance to state here that there was much nuance regarding the forces that shaped the Japanese economic system during this time period and the one prior—which is intricately linked to it; there is no straightforward answer concerning whether the direction it took should be attributed to the government or to the private sector.

Though unlike the U.S. government, which primarily concerned itself with setting the rules and staying away from the game itself, the Japanese government took great interest in the structure of the economy and leveraged its industrial policies to exercise control over its trajectory. However, the degree of subtle influence the private sector had over the government is still unclear, which makes some analysts contend that the primary reason behind the boom should be credited to the ambitions of the private sector and the unique characteristics of the Japanese management system, which was greatly influenced by Japanese culture and values inherited from the Shinto religion (cultural grounds) and the practice of delegated monitoring (economic grounds). Still, from the policies we previously delineated it cannot be denied that the Japanese government did not leave its economy at the mercy of the whims of the market, and hence was a significant contributing factor to the present economic situation in Japan.

New research on the high growth period emerged later on in the 1990s, during the "globalization debate," offering new insights by exploring it not only from a domestic standpoint, but an international one as well. As it happens, international factors also played a key role in spurring it, highlighting how Japan profited greatly from the Bretton Woods system and the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT). The resulting dynamic from this economic system and Japanese economic policy was a fixed exchange rate in the government was able to simultaneously implement expansionary policy and stimulating growth while simultaneously incorporating safeguards from inflation by adjusting capital flow. Furthermore, the US-Japan semi-one-sided relationship in trade (including other allies) was such that Japan could flood international markets with exports while encapsulating its domestic markets, which enabled the private sector in Japan to be seen as source for providing the citizenry with social security.

This scholarly investigation also yielded another interesting insight, namely that the upshot of Japan's economic strategies, the impressive rate of growth in particular, was more of an unintended byproduct rather than a deliberately planned outcome. This may be exemplified by the fact that the highly competitive atmosphere ignited in the economy triggered high savings and high investment rates as a side effect—whereas the chief goal of Japanese government in conducting such policy was to ensure that there were safeguards if when things got out of hand. [18]

The 1990s and early 2000s marked a downward spiral in the Japanese economy. This was caused on the one hand by two main domestic factors: the rise and inevitable burst of the Japanese stock market and real estate bubble in the second half of the 1980s, as well as the radically reformist policies pursued by the government in the late 1990s. On the international side, drastic changes in the global economy with the advent of the second wave of globalism in the early 1970s, accompanied with the collapse of the Bretton Woods system, causing Japan to lose a precious advantage, since the international market since then replaced fixed exchange rates with floating exchange rates and began to further (neo)liberalize financial practices.

We begin with the real estate and stock market bubble. In 1985, the same year in which the Plaza Accord was introduced, the Nikkei index was 12,775. That number was doubled only two years later. In the former year, the daily average of shares traded was 414 million. By the latter, it was 946 million. By 1988, the market cap on Japanese stocks was 346 trillion yen, 30 percent greater than that of the U.S. stock market, making it also the largest stock market in the world. The same goes for the Japanese real estate market. By 1998, the total value of land in Japan was 1,673 trillion yen, almost three times as much that of the U.S. In the years comprising the 1980s, the total amount of loans granted by banks to all industries surged by 120 percent, while the loans given to the real estate industry increased by 300 percent—not to mention that the majority of loans to non-banking industries were invested into real estate speculation.

If there has so far been an absolute rule in history, perhaps it would be that after the rise, comes the inevitable fall. In the case of the Japanese economy, this meant a decade-long stagnation after the bubble had burst. Between 1989 and 1992, Japan had already lost 800 trillion yen in those two markets, and in turn capital losses from that reached 1,330 trillion yen. By 2003, land prices fell by a staggering 55 percent. Between 1997 and 1998, the Japanese economy found itself ensnared in a liquidity trap. Further more, annual bankruptcies rose from 14,000 by the end of 1995 to 19,171 in 1998.

Multiple explanations had been provided so as to explain this unexpected fall, including an aging financial infrastructure, the very structural nature of economic cycles and bubbles, the end of the one-and-a-half party system and following regime change, and technological innovation cycles. To be sure, those were indeed important contributors that expedited the process, but as we had previously stated, they were not the chief causes. [19]

By now we have went through Japanese socioeconomic history since the end of WWII and into the early 2000s. Doing so was important because this story highlights a struggle between reform and recovery, featuring an ongoing continuity vs. discontinuity debate in the midst of conflicting pressures stemming from different sources—domestic circumstances, international shifts, etc. We present and highlight this conflict because, as we shall explain below, it largely contains the roots of the contemporary hikikomori issue. Before we get to that however, there remains one final event we need to discuss, as it provides us the vital link from this lengthy past narrative to the present situation—namely the governments attempts at reforming policies in the latter part of the 1990s.

In 1996, the Japanese government put into legislation deflationary fiscal policies in addition to the “Big Bang” banking policy. As far as the macroeconomics went, total central and local budget deficits were restricted to 3 percent. They also lowered then national debt by 4.3 trillion yen, and increased consumption tax from 3 to 4 percent. The “Big Bang” demanded that banks follow certain procedures when their self-capital was low. [20]

These numbers, however, do not reflect what took place on the micro- and individual-levels as a result of this ongoing dilemma between restructuring the economy to adapt to globalization versus focusing on recovery. While the former required moving towards a neoliberal economy or liberal market economy (LME) for the reasons we mentioned above, the latter on the other hand required building on a coordinated market economy (CME). Because reforming deflationary policies increased uncertainty in Japanese markets, investments tended to nosedive. As we all know, there could be no economic growth or recovery without investments. It would also be important to state here that the uncertainty went beyond economic factors. For one, a good portion of the Japanese public still found neoliberal ideology distasteful, and the more the market went in that direction, the less likely they were to spend more money. For another, the Japanese financial district did not take too kindly to disruption. Regardless, this continuity/discontinuity trend did not bode well for younger generations.

Let us get into more detail as to how that happened, how these large-scale battles had an impact on Japanese youth. The forces of globalization forced the Japanese economy to adapt itself to Western models, which carried along with their market labor systems the values of individualism and competitiveness, and light regulation. However, the institutional forces in Japan were highly reluctant to reform the core of the permanent employment system—which represented a core cultural symbol in Japan. Therefore, their way of adjusting to pressures of globalization and post-industrialization has been to expand periphery employment so as to cut labor costs and stay competitive while simultaneously preserving the financial status of the financial elites and those who were already in employment.

This, however, also meant that younger generations would largely be denied entry into that core, because there was no place for them. In this context, it can be said that Japan’s response to globalization was more of an asymmetric structural “reregulation” than deregulation: the core of the employment system remained the same—long-term employment, seniority-based status, etc.—while the limbs were altered in the form of expanding part-time contractors to reduce wage and benefit costs. As markets continued to cut off opportunities for stable, full-time employment, Japanese youth still in education were left with the stark realization that failing to secure full-time employment immediately after graduating could very possibly mean being permanently blackballed from it.

This “hot” reaction to globalization on part of the Japanese business elites left Japanese youth during the 1990s and 2000s in the unenviable position of having to conform to mainstream values—for Japan is particularly hostile to acknowledging success in any alternative form compared

to Western countries—in an economy that no longer offered such opportunities. Despite the economic changes, dominant cultural attitudes and expectations remained largely the same: graduate from high school, enter a prestigious university, secure a full-time job at a large corporation, and gradually climb up the corporate ladder in that corporation over a long period of time. As one gained promotions over the years, access to seniority-level wages would permit starting a family. Economically and culturally, this was only viable method for thriving in the Japanese economy. [21]

For these reasons, pressures were extremely high for young people to do well in high school so that they could enter a prestigious university—the biggest single basis for being hired by a respectable company. This pressure was most keenly felt by young males, because failure to secure full-time employment status would render them as failures on cultural grounds. Women, on the other hand, were generally expected to work part-time to add supplementary income for the family, so the pressures were not as high. That said, they were still required to get good grades and graduate from a respectable university to do so. However, because full-time opportunities were limited, Japanese youth were forced to find some way to cope with the situation.

In speaking of this, we must keep in mind that Japan is an exceptionally conformist society, with strictly defined expectations regarding how the course of an individual's life should unfold. Though it would be a mistake to impose a monolithic, uniform model on entire civilization, research shows that virtually around 90% of Japanese people may be placed within the conformist model, more or less. Therefore, despite the fact that economic factors significantly decreased the rewards for conformity, it socially remained the basis for measuring success. Faced with this, Japanese youth fell into two coping categories: ritualists and retreatists. The exception here, of course, are those who were fortunate enough to find full-time opportunities, for they altogether managed to altogether escape the vicious cycle—hence there being no need to mention them.

Young people adhering to the ritualists category basically continued to follow the predominant model in spite of receiving fewer economic rewards from the process—rewards that for long had been taken for granted if one successfully adhered to the norm and did not go against the grain, which, again, was highly frowned upon. Though the increasing economic prosperity from the past periods allowed greater access to high education—more than 50 percent of high school students would now go on to graduate from 4-year universities, an entire fifth of this well-educated group would be forced to settle to low-paying, part-time jobs. As a matter of fact, during the 1990s, a whopping 25% of college-educated young people between the ages 25 and 34 could not find any full-time jobs.

The inability to secure full-time employment denied one access to a number of essential privileges—a decent and stable income; important professional skills (much of this training process in Japan happens only after one acquires a full-time position); complete social security benefit packages; the social status of being considered a true member of society, denied to part-time contractors; and the ability to build a family. It would be difficult to understate the amount of anxiety

and distress that could come as a result of this—or even conceiving it.

To further compound this, opportunities for innovation continued to be blocked by the institutional powers that be. To put it simply, “innovation” in an adaptive sense—entrepreneurship, independent content creation, etc.—was simply a virtual impossibility in Japan. Because of this, many young people were forced to work within the confines of the system despite decreasing rewards. Moreover, once one was trapped in marginal employment, moving to the rigid core proved extremely difficult. Surprisingly, a largely portion of the disenfranchised Japanese youth did not protest to this disparity between the need for accomplishing dominant cultural goals despite the clear lack for legitimate means for doing so. However, even if innovation were possible, mind you, we must remember that none of the Japanese youths had been adequately trained to thrive in such a context, which only exists in theory as far as Japan is concerned.

There was, however, another kind of response—the avoidance-based, retreatist response, in which some youth, disillusioned by these dimming prospects created by the aforementioned duality and feeling compelled by choice or necessity to opt out of the system altogether. This is the category that came to largely be known as hikikomori. Since the early 2000s, this phenomenon has received a lot of attention as a dramatic social problem in the public sphere due to its severity and potential future implications. By 2003, up to 10% of Japanese youth between the ages of 20 and 24 were out of work.

In many cases, it was found that many of these youths either simply stopped looking for a job after numerous futile attempts or quite going to school/college at some point because the pressure was too much to bear. In atmosphere where getting top grades and doing exceptionally well in high school and college entrance exams that emphasized a single correct answer for every question was the first and foremost priority, this is not particularly surprising.

There are a number of sociocultural “enablers” that allowed this to happen. Firstly, Japanese parents in particular are extremely unlikely to exercise coercion in the sense of forcing their children to return to school or keep searching for work. Additionally, they consider themselves responsible for not only taking care of their children, ensuring that they have enough food and money to survive despite opting out of society, but because they also see this as a failure on their part (not to mention the overwhelming sense of guilt, shame and stigmatization this brings due to cultural factors), they tend to accept the situation and are very reluctant to seek professional help. Though hikikomori may be fortunate enough to have their families support them in the present, the problem comes when their families are no longer able to do so, due to death or otherwise. When that happens, their fate of those “missing million” is all but uncertain.

Having said so, solving this problem is anything but simple. We already discussed the economic factors that contributed to creating an extremely rigid labor market such that, even if the hikikomori were to leave their rooms and begin job searching, there is no guarantee that they would end up getting hired. Not only that, but the odds are very much against them—the highly institutional

Japanese economy is not very open to providing second chances, and a hikikomori history is a big turnoff for many employers. [30]

But it is not only the external factors that must be taken into consideration, as the internal ones (namely the mental aspect) play a significant role as well. To highlight this, we must try to understand why those youths became hikikomori in the first place from a psychological and motivational standpoint. We do so by looking into models depicting motivational and behavioral patterns. Research suggest that Japanese society adheres to the model of an “interdependent cultural system” in which individual attention is mostly focused on individual shortcomings, whereas the U.S. can be categorized as an “independent cultural system” in which attention is mostly focused on one’s perceived strengths and what makes them unique. What this means is that Americans would double their efforts in response to successes rather than failures, whereas in Japan it would go the other way around.

In a series of studies conducted in Japanese universities, it was found that low-risk groups (i.e. those who were likelier to succeed in the Japanese-based motivational system) did indeed work harder in response to perceived failures to comply by the mainstream and scored low on independence-based feedback. By contrast, high-risk groups were found to adhere more to the independent motivational pattern, receiving lower scores on interdependence-based feedback and showing a greater likelihood to become “cultural dropouts.” Here is the kicker, though: while likely retreatist groups showed low scores in the interdependence-based motivational pattern, this did not necessarily translate to doing well in its counterpart. In other words, perceived failure to comply to the norm proves sufficiently discouraging such that the mostly likely outcome for such Japanese students was to give up on the system. And because of that, they remain in hiding.

What this shows is that retreatists’ behavior can be explained by the overall risk-averse motivational tendency in Japan, and this reflects in the strategies required for success in the context of different cultures. In the U.S. for example, having high self esteem is considered essential for success, because the benefits it offers outweigh the costs of standing out and disrupting social harmony. Meanwhile in Japan, social harmony is more important to be both functional and successful, and hence people tend to avoid standing out at any cost so as to not rock the boat. Similarly, the retreatists pattern shows that instead of trying one’s odds for the potential benefit of succeeding via institutional means, this behavior would translate to avoiding failure, because the cost-benefit analysis goes the other way around in this particular cultural context.[22]

On that note, this paper arrives at its conclusion. As we have seen, the hikikomori situation emerged from a paradoxical goals-means duality in which “hot” market reactions to globalization in the face of unchanging social expectations affected the ability of a significant subset of Japanese youths in successfully integrating into the labor market. We first analyzed the economic aspect and showed how the present economic situation came to be from the end of the Second World War and onto the present day.

The economic portion was divided into three timelines: the postwar recovery period, the boom period, and the subsequent crash. The first period provided the context for the existence of modern Japanese economic institutions. The second demonstrated why these institutions were reinforced, justified by the boom and empowered by the Bretton Woods system and the GATT. Lastly, third period demonstrated how the changes accompanying the second wave of globalization turned the tables against the favor of the Japanese economy, and in turn how Japanese youths in particular were most vulnerable and thus victimized by it.

By covering this, we delineated how the hikikomori situation emerged from an economic point of view and then proceeded to highlight the sociocultural elements that perpetuate it. In doing so, this paper hopes to have successfully combined and the economic and cultural aspects of the problem into a seamless blend that covers all important aspects of the problem and consequently proving its main argument. We believe this issue is of great importance to understanding the function of history as it goes to show how large-scale changes can have drastic, far-reaching, and unintended effects that show just how greatly our lives can be affected by global forces.

Endnotes:

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[13] Gao, "The Postwar Japanese Economy," 302.

[14] Gao, "The Postwar Japanese Economy," 304.

[15] Gao, "The Postwar Japanese Economy," 304.

[16] Gao, "The Postwar Japanese Economy," 304.

[17] Sasaki-uemura, "Postwar Society and Culture," 316.

[18] Gao, "The Postwar Japanese Economy," 304-305.

[19] Gao, "The Postwar Japanese Economy," 305-308.

[20] Gao, "The Postwar Japanese Economy," 308-311.

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[22] Toivonen et al., "Unable to Conform, Unwilling to Rebel?," 3-8.