

## SŌSHOKU(KEI) DANSHI: THE (UN)GENDERED QUESTIONS ON CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

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### Abstract

*Japanese civilization has been challenged by social, economic and cultural upheavals that caused the young men to question the patriarchal roles they had to play in society.*

*The nowadays generations are slowly losing their sense of masculinity or trying to get rid of the heavy, ostentatious maleness. Consequently, new types of gendered identities have been assumed in the past years: femi-otoko-kun (the smooth skinned, slim, feminine boy who displays growing aesthetic tendencies) in 2000, Akiba-kei (the otaku boys in Akihabara district in Tokyo with a strong interest in fantasy world, anime, manga, idols and games as part of a techno-subculture) in 2005 and the relatively recent sōshoku(kei) danshi (herbivore men/grass eating men) in 2010. The term was first coined by Maki Fukasawa in a series of articles in the Nikkei Business online website in October 2006, but it was not until 2009 that the term really took root. The sōshoku(kei) danshi is a young man (in his 20s or 30s) who earns little, takes a keen interest in fashion and appearance and believes in platonic relations among men and women. This phenomenon is regarded by the Japanese government as a possible cause in the nation's declining birth rate, motivating the government to provide incentives for couples that have children, including payouts and free health care. Whereas in other foreign countries men might become frustrated or even antisocial, the sōshoku(kei) danshi is the Japanese response to the tremendous social pressures: he chooses not be bothered by romantic relations or work responsibilities, he is not assertive or goal-orientated and career is not among his top priorities. In other words, the old archetype of puer aeternus is now restored in the psyche of young Japanese generation.*

“Don't grow up. It's a trap” are Pater Pan's words that invoke the juvenile psychology, warning us of the dangers of becoming an adult and thus, being trapped in the clockwork of society, with full responsibilities, dull duties and rigid roles to fulfill. But the “trap” of adulthood can sometimes be avoided, or, at least, delayed and the longer the postponement, the greater the carefree joys of everlasting games, non-commitment and relief.

The reluctance of growing up has been defined by the psychologists as the *puer aeternus* paradigm for selfhood. In *Metamorphoses*, Ovid addresses the child-god Iacchus as *puer aeternus*, praising him for his role in the Eleusinian mysteries. Later on,

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the child-god was identified with Dionysus, god of wine, vegetation and resurrection or with Tammuz, Attis and Adonis, the oriental gods of divine youth. *Puer aeternus* stands for eternal youth and in psychology points to a person who remains too long in the adolescent stage and is afraid to be bound to anything, to be pinned down or to be caught in a situation from which it may be impossible to slip. This feeling primarily touches on the fear of entering time and space completely. Manifesting a rather strong mother complex, the *puer aeternus* longs for the maternal woman who will satisfy his every need, but the girlfriend is never quite the right woman: she is nice, but –. There is always a “but” which prevents marriage or any kind of definite commitment. (von Franz, 2000, pp . 7-8).

In his paper *An Aspect of the Historical Psychological Present*, James Hillman identifies two polarities: *puer* (young age) and *senex* (old age); *puer* is potential and *senex* is experience, or the wisdom that should accompany experience (Hillman 2005, p. 35). At society level, *puer* is the element of chance and the embrace of change while *senex* is the accumulated wisdom of culture as embodied in its institutions and laws (Jensen, 2009, p. 6).

In the Yasujirō Ozu’s film *Tokyo Story* (1953) two old friends, the protagonist, Shukichi Hirayama (starring Chishū Ryū), and Sanpei Numata (starring Eijirō Tōno), meet in a bar and take up the *senex* roles. They talk about the young generation, openly, expressing their disappointment with the fabricated success of their sons. Their high expectations for the younger generation forecast the winds of change that are to come.

Sanpei Numata: I’m afraid we expect too much of our children. They lack spirit. They lack ambition. I’ve told that to my son. He said that there are too many people in Tokyo. That it’s hard to get ahead. What do you think?

Shukichi Hirayama: But Numata...

Sanpei Numata: You don’t agree with me? You’re satisfied?

Shukichi Hirayama: Of course not, but -

Sanpei Numata: You see? Even you’re not satisfied. I feel so sad. [...]

Shukichi Hirayama: However, until I came up to Tokyo, I was under the impression that my son was doing better. But I’ve found that he is only a small neighbourhood doctor. I know how you feel. I’m as dissatisfied as you are. But we can’t expect too much from our children. Times have changed. We have to face it.

Indeed, times have changed. Kenneth Henshall highlights the sense of lost masculinity in the younger generation by contrasting it to the post-war hardworking type, perceived as a latter-day samurai:

Though younger males in Japan may not be in decline numerically, they are in serious decline spiritually in the view of many older Japanese males. The disciplined hardworking types in the immediate postwar period, the supposed latter-day samurai whose selfless efforts helped Japan rise to superpower status, despair that they are being succeeded by a generation of weak and selfish wimp. Women for their part, seem to send mixed signals to the new male. (Henshall, 1999, p. 2)

In the meantime, a whole range of masculinities emerged to challenge the patriarchal values of the past. For instance, the *femi-otoko-kun* phenomenon heralds the particular type of “in-between” sexuality that seems to appeal to a certain feminine audience. The word derives from the English loan word “feminine” combined with the Japanese word for man (*otoko*) and *-kun* (Mr.), the respectful title used when addressing to a man, and it can be roughly translated as Mr. Feminine Boy. *Femi-otoko-kun* refers to boys with smooth skin rather than hairy males, kind boys rather than hard or strong men, slim boys rather than muscular men (Castro-Vasquez, 2007, p. 61). Furthermore, young men gradually realized that the male way of living in the labour market was more monotonous and oppressing than the female way of living as human rapport and kindness were about to be discarded from male culture (Itō, 2010, p. 177).

Another “in-between gendered term” is *bishōnen*, meaning “beautiful teenager<sup>1</sup>” in Japanese; it refers to a style of depiction of male characters in *manga* for adolescent girls. The character *bi* means “beauty” and can be found in a series of phrases such as *bijin* (beautiful woman), *bichūnen* (beautiful middle aged man), *biseinen* (beautiful young men)<sup>2</sup> and *bishota* (a beautiful, pre-pubescent male child). *Bishōnen* are slim, with huge eyes and features recognizably male, but nearly as delicate and beautiful as a female character, their unparalleled beauty transcending the boundaries of gender or sexual orientation. Although the term has deeper roots in the Japanese culture, it gained popularity in 1970 due to the androgynous rock bands, a strong manifestation of Japanese pop culture. In 1848, the writer Bakin used the word in a title of a book about the young, effeminate partners in the homosexual romances in the Edo literature, but by that time the term was in common usage because of the Yoshitsune<sup>3</sup>'s roles in Kabuki theatre often played by *onnagata* (male actor of female robes). In 1954, Tezuka Osamu began the serialization of *Ribon no kishi* [Princess Knight] in which the heroine, princess Sapphire, had both a male and a female heart

<sup>1</sup> Boys under 18 years old (middle and high school age)

<sup>2</sup> Men who are of age, including those who have entered or completed higher education

<sup>3</sup> Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159-1189) was a general of the Minamoto clan in the late Heian and Kamakura period. A brave and skilled swordsman, he was also famous for his slender almost feminine beauty and his military leadership.

and was prepared to fight and dress like a man if the situation required (Buckley, 2002, pp. 45-46).

In 1980s another slang term referring to a certain type of Japanese masculinity, Akiba-kei, (Akihabara<sup>4</sup> style) started to be used. The Akiba-kei exploits another feature of *puer aeternus*: the eternal fascination with games and sports and it refers to men who have a keen interest in video gaming industry, *anime*, *manga* or electronics. Many of the shops in Akihabara are run by Akiba-kei in *cosplay* and offer a wide variety of goods and services: from ornamental weaponry to unconventional or innovative foodstuffs.

The word *otomen* is a pun made of the Japanese word *otome* (young lady, mistress) combined with the English word “men”. The “history” of *Otomen* officially began in 2006, when the *manga* artist Aya Kanno designed a romantic comedy *manga* called *Bessatsu Hana to Yume*, which concluded in 2012. The main character, Asuka, is a *otomen* who excels in *judo* and *karate*, but tries to hide his love of sweets, cute things, cooking, *shōjo manga* and sewing, that might reveal his *anima* side. The series have been later adapted into a live action TV drama that puts forward a funny protagonist with feminine hobbies (cooking, sewing and cute things).

*Femi-otoko-kun*, *bishōnen*, Akiba-kei or *otomen* could be considered several possible cultural antecedents that led to the emergence of *sōshoku(-kei) danshi* (the herbivore man/grass-eating man). The word was first coined by Maki Fukasawa in an article called *U35 Danshi Māketingu Zukan* [U 35 men Marketing – An Illustrated Guide]<sup>5</sup> posted on the online magazine *Nikkei Business* in October 2006, but it was not until 2009 that the term really took root and began to be used widely. In December of 2009 it made the top ten list of nominees for the “Buzzword of the Year” contest sponsored by U-CAN and has changed the way people look at young men (Morioka, 2013, p. 1). *Sōshoku danshi* are young men who are not assertive in relationships (although they do care about romance and sex) and are not aggressive in their romantic conquest (which does not mean that they are unpopular with women). They could spend a night with a woman without having engaged in any sexual activity. In the TV interview *Imadoki no wakamono wa uchimuki de sōshoku na no*

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<sup>4</sup> Akihabara is a major shopping center for household electronic goods in Tokyo, considered to be the techno-cultural center for people interested in video games, *anime*, *manga* and computer goods. In early 2008, a project was undertaken to merge some aspects of Akiba-kei culture with Shibuya-kei (Shibuya style), Japan’s chic internationalist music, fashion and design movement that began in Japan in the 1990s. The result was a bold combination between the highest technology and the latest fashion trends. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akiba-kei> retrieved on 10.06.2014)

<sup>5</sup> <http://business.nikkeibp.co.jp/article/skillup/20061005/111136/?rt=ncnt> retrieved on 12.06.2014

*ka* [Are the nowadays young men introverts and herbivore?]<sup>6</sup>, Maki Fukasawa explained that she coined the word *sōshoku danshi* because she associated it with the dietary practices of the Buddhist monks who refrained from eating meat and that the word was primarily intended to express the idea of high spirituality (*seishinsei ga takai*).

Various terms have arisen to define consumers by what they eat. A herbivore (*herba*, meaning plant in Latin and *vora*, from *vorare*, meaning to eat, to devour) is an animal adapted to eating plants therefore it has a lower rank in the food chain because it finds food almost without effort and it does not have to hunt and kill its prey. The food is within grasp. The metaphor of *sōshoku(-kei) danshi* refers to a placid, non-assertive person with low-survival instincts who has almost no interest in fleshly desires (including sexual intercourse). The *Story of Ferdinand*, written by Munro Leaf and adapted by Walt Disney into a short animated film called *Ferdinand the Bull* (1938, Academy Award for Best Short Subjects, Cartoons) depicts a bull that would rather sit and smell flowers than fight, giving prominence to the delicate relationship between placidity, tranquility and happiness.

Yet the world is not always for the happy-go-lucky people, the peaceful grass-eaters, motivated by few, modest desires and needs. In Tim Burton's *Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber* (2007), Sweeney Todd (starring Johnny Depp) kills his first victim, Pirelli – the barber who recognized him under his guise – and then muses about the way of the world while chatting with Mrs. Lovett (starring Helena Bonham Carter), a genius of recycling.

Sweeney Todd: For what's the sound of the world out there?

Mrs. Lovett: What, Mr. Todd, what, Mr. Todd, what is that sound?

Sweeney Todd: Those crunching noises pervading the air?

Mrs. Lovett: Yes, Mr. Todd, yes, Mr. Todd, yes, all around.

Sweeney Todd: It's man devouring man, my dear, And who are we to deny it in here?

<sup>6</sup> Fukasawa Maki, Interview *Imadoki no wakamono wa uchimuki de sōshoku na no ka? 01*, “Business Breakthrough Ch. Business Breakthrough Inc.”, 12/09/2012. <http://bb.bbt757.com/about/>; <http://www.bbt757.com/svIBOS/user/airsearch?query=%E3%82%A4%E3%83%9E%E3%83%89%E3%82%AD%E3%81%AE%E8%8B%A5%E8%80%85%E3%81%AF>; retrieved on 26.05.2014

<sup>7</sup> “All the other bulls who had grown up with him in the same pasture would fight each other all day. They would butt each other and stick each other with their horns. What they wanted most of all was to be picked to fight at the bull fights in Madrid. But not Ferdinand- he still liked to sit just quietly under the cork tree and smell the flowers”. (Munro Leaf, *The Story of Ferdinand*, New York, Puffin Books, 2011)

Sweeney makes quite clear that we live in a “man devouring world”, ruled by a predator-prey dynamic, where *homo homini lupus* is the only law that applies. Both the way of the world and the *sōshoku(-kei) danshi* are defined by metaphors involving eating and consuming, but their vectors seem to move in opposite directions.

Scholars working on the issues of consumption have noted the close linkage between consumption and morality. “Almost every aspect of consumption is laden with moral value and meaning, so that attitudes and values towards consumption are shaped by moral and often religious values. Eating as a metaphor puts the human at the center, with the impersonal forces of the economy and nature providing the fuel and carting away the waste” (Wilk, 2004, pp. 11-12). Revealing unexpected similarities with their referent, the eating metaphors actually gave birth to many other classifications, applying to the plural masculinities within Japanese society<sup>8</sup>:

- *nikushoku danshi* (**carnivorous men**) refer to men who are active in seducing women. Young Japanese women are said to be attracted to this type of guy whom they find strong and reliable.
- *sōshoku danshi* (**herbivore men**) are passive types who are shy about relationships. Many do not have a girlfriend and are content just to be friends.
- *gyoshoku danshi* (**fish-eating men**) are not as aggressive as *nikushoku danshi*. They tend to be very patient and will wait until the woman they are attracted to starts to love them. They are usually smart and calm. There are various sub-categories for *gyoshoku danshi*, men who have bit of a wild streak are called the “grilled fish with salt type”; men who think of themselves as all-knowing are the “*teriyaki* type”; men who are patient are the “boiled fish type”; while the narcissists are the “Meuniere type”
- *rōru kyabetsu danshi* (**rolled cabbage men**) look like *sōshoku danshi* and have a low-key fashion style and appearance (they like to wear cardigans and sneakers). However, their personality is actually *nikushoku danshi*, like a

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<sup>8</sup> Besides the eating references encompassed in the expressions referring to Japanese men, there are further categories such as: *rikei danshi* (**science men**) think things out logically like scientists; *biyō danshi* (**beauty men**) are fastidious about their hairstyle and skin; *karucha danshi* (**culture men**) are defined as bookworms, like indie films and minor things, they are not good in public, and care about their individuality; *fashon danshi* (**fashion men**) are narcissistic and love brand new trends and rare items; *ryōri danshi* (**cooking men**) are defined as perfectionists, and love to cook meals or prepare *bentō* (boxed lunches); *auto doa danshi* (**outdoor men**) are fond of outdoor activities and being in touch with nature; *otaku danshi* (**geek men**) are maniacs about their hobbies and pay little attention to their appearance; *otomekei danshi* (**girly type men**) have a neutral appearance, are mild-mannered and love sweets and pretty things, just like a girl. (<http://www.japantoday.com/category/lifestyle/view/from-carnivores-to-herbivores-how-men-are-defined-in-japan> retrieved on 14.06. 2014)

hamburger in a cabbage roll. When women get close to them and they go out for a drink together, the men turn into *nikushoku danshi*

- ***kurīmu danshi* (creamy men)** have a sweet smile, beautiful skin and mainly black hair. They are hard workers, care about a woman's feelings. They are good listeners and give good responses. Though their appearance is soft and sweet, they have a masculine personality also, so they can be relied upon to support women if something happens. They “heal” women like sweets, hence the term *kurīmu danshi*<sup>9</sup>.

The act of eating could be rather ambiguous because it draws a thin line between necessity and luxury, the needs-driven, and the wants-driven. It is a biological activity, triggered by hunger, as well as an act of volition, cultivating our tastes to the status of an art. In eating we must all face the boundary between nature and culture, and recognize that we have both basic needs and aesthetic pleasures in the same activity (Wilk, 2004, p. 23).

Another Japanese scholar who took up the issue of *sōshoku danshi* was Masahiro Morioka who published a book entitled *Sōshoku-kei danshi no ren'aigaku* [Lessons in Love for Herbivore Men] (2008). Designed by Inio Asano, the cover picture, representing a skinny young man wearing black-rimmed glasses and a loose-fitting shirt with horizontal stripes ended up in influencing the image of *sōshoku danshi* in general. The aim of the book was to provide guidance to kind-hearted young men who are late bloomers when it comes to love (Morioka, 2013, p. 5). Actually, the first features of the herbivore men were chiefly connected with their love life. In a later paper published in 2013, Morioka enumerated the advantages and disadvantages of becoming romantically involved with herbivore men: 1) herbivore men place a low priority on sex and thus will not use a woman for her body, 2) they are interested in the human qualities of a woman such as how pleasant and interesting she is, and 3) when it comes to romantic relationships they desire stability; the disadvantages are 1) romantic relationships develop slowly, 2) the standards they use when choosing a female partner are difficult to understand, and 3) you cannot expect a dramatic, passionate romance (Morioka, 2013, pp. 3-4).

At the end of 2008, the Japanese magazine *DIME*<sup>10</sup> interviewed Megumi Ushikubo, a marketing researcher, and Masahiro Morioka on *sōshokukei danshi*. At the

<sup>9</sup> *From Carnivores to Herbivores: How Men are Defined in Japan*, “Japan Today”, 16/02/2012 <http://www.japantoday.com/category/lifestyle/view/from-carnivores-to-herbivores-how-men-are-defined-in-japan> retrieved on 14.06. 2014

<sup>10</sup> *Hyottoshite anata mo!?* *Chūmoku sareru shinjinshu* <*sōshokukei danshi*> *ga fueteru tte honto!?* (1), “DIME”, 23/2008 <http://xbrand.yahoo.co.jp/category/lifestyle/2035/1.html> retrieved on 20.05.2014

beginning of the article, the readers could determine their own “herbivore level”, by checking a few typical features of *sōshokukei danshi*:

- ✓ don't understand the appeal of combative sports
- ✓ when drinking out with friends / colleagues they often drink *oolong* tea instead of alcohol
- ✓ when someone confessed their feeling to them, they would definitely seek advice in that matter
- ✓ enjoy reading comics for young women
- ✓ even when staying at a woman's place (or vice versa) they do not necessarily initiate anything sexual
- ✓ always check for new items at the *konbini* (convenience store)
- ✓ have a reserve of sweets at work
- ✓ talk to their parents at least once a week

As the concept gained popularity, the media tried to explain and categorize the *sōshokukei danshi*. In 2009 *Yomiuri Shinbun*<sup>11</sup> wrote a report, generalizing the features of the *sōshoku danshi*. Their image came to encompass their approach to love and relationships, money and ecology, their looks and taste in food, drink and literature. Therefore, a herbivore man

- prefers his favorite drink over a beer
- is slim and does not eat much
- loves sweets
- is fashion conscious
- is enthusiastic about ecology
- has a good relationship with parents
- is inseparable from its mobile
- splits expenses even for hotels .

In 2010 *Sōshoku-kei danshi* movie was released in pair with another one, *Nikushoku-kei joshi* [Carnivore Women]. The name of the protagonist (starring Hiromi Sakimoto), a sensitive 23 year old web designer, was carefully selected to suggest, from the very beginning, a herbivore man: 草野羊一 Kusano Yōichi [Grassfield One-sheep]. The trailer presents Yōichi in several hilarious life situations, each of them tagged with a brief conclusion. First, he is being interviewed in a park while walking with a girl and he answers in a reassuring voice: “we are not together; we are just friends”. Another scene is set in his bedroom where he prepares to sleep on the floor while a girl sits up in the bed nearby, looking puzzled as he replies:

<sup>11</sup> <http://archive.today/Qw65W> retrieved on 30.05.2014



“don’t forget to switch off the light before going to bed”. The scene is tagged: “a man who does not do anything inappropriate even if he spends the night with a girl”. In another situation he answers promptly when his advice is required on a matter of dieting. The scene is labeled: “a man who seldom turns down the women’s invitation to drink together”. Moreover, in a bar he is the only one who toasts with orange juice, while his mates are drinking beer. The cut scene is tagged consequently: “a man who orders orange juice”. After work, he declines the invitation of several colleagues to a night club because he feels uncomfortable in such a place. The label reads accordingly: “a man who is ill at ease in a *kyabakura*<sup>12</sup>”. Another situation shows Yōichi engaged in a lively conversation about sweets, enumerating all sorts of fancy deserts, but his female conversational partner seems to have no idea what he is talking about. The brief conclusion to the scene is: “a man who knows everything about sweets”. One sunny day he explains his friend how to sort out medicine in a pill box, leading to the conclusion: “a man who always has his portable pill box”. He is also very thorough, packing the sewing set, the dental care set, underwear etc. He is, therefore, “a man who has a lot of luggage”, as the label puts it. Some other day, Yōichi is engrossed in reading a magazine, while next to him a young girl, produces an undergarment, crying out: “brassiere!”. Yet he does not wince and keeps on reading. The scene is summarized: “a man with an unbelievable power of concentration when absorbed in something”. Another funny scene presents Yōichi shouting his lungs out on the top of his bed, as a young woman points at an invisible insect. The tag comments ruthlessly: “a man who cannot stand bugs”. Yōichi is also a saver because he collects coins in a daily ritual. The scene is tagged: “a man who knows how to save 500 yen coins”. Actually, all the above-mentioned tags summarize ironically the general opinion on *sōshoku-kei danshi* as a tenderhearted, shy, thrifty, young man who has a sweet tooth and who is not very pro-active about romancing and sex.

Sadly enough, the romantic relationships are apparently stalled for people in their 20s or 30s and falling in love with each other seems increasingly difficult for young Japanese. In a BBC interview<sup>13</sup> in January 2012 a young Japanese man confesses that building a relationship takes too much effort. “To get her to like me or me to like her, I’d have to give up everything I do, for her. I don’t want to do that”. Nevertheless, one of the main reasons for not engaging in a romantic relationship might be the inborn shyness of the herbivore man, as well as his lack of self-esteem. Over centuries modesty and humbleness were common Japanese virtues, but now they seem to have somehow subverted the self-confidence in younger generation.

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<sup>12</sup> A combination of cabaret and club (host and hostesses clubs).

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-16500768> retrieved on 11.06.2014

Generally speaking, the discourse around herbivore men have centered around two main polarities: on one hand, their lack of concern about romantic relationships and consequently, married life and, on the other hand, not caring about full-time employment and career. The hegemonic ideal, placing the man as husband, father and provider to his family, embodied in the term *daikoku-bashira* (lit. the central supporting pillar of the house) is no longer functional (Deacon, 2013, p. 146). Borrowing Tom Gills<sup>14</sup> words the two pillars of Japanese social and economic stability – marriage and work – have started to evaporate.

Marriages rates in Japan are in decline, while alternative relationship structures (such as cohabitation without marriage) and singledom in middle-age are on the rise. Such ‘alternative’ relationships and bachelorhood are often heavily criticized, however. For man, the pressure to marry from their superiors in their workplace and from their families can be strong. As a result, younger people who have opted for such lifestyles sometimes hide this fact from their co-workers or even family members. (Deacon, 2013, p. 163)

In his book *Society Without the Father: A Contribution to Social Psychology*, written in 1963, Alexander Mitscherlich made a bleak prediction about a “fatherless society” in which real fathers or other structures that stand for paternal authority (secular and religious institutions) are going to be gradually ineffectual. It is perfectly true that his forecasting at that time referred to the Western world, but, nevertheless, it can be also extended to the Japanese society that started blaming the *sōshokukei danshi* for the declining birth rate, as a consequence of their reluctance to marry. In 2013, Japan recorded only 1.03 million births and it may lose one-third of its current population of 127 million by 2060, said the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research. By 2110, Japan is expected to have a population of only 42.9 million, which would be lower than the 50 million the country had in 1912<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, the “herbivorization” phenomenon motivated the government to provide incentives for couples that have children, including payouts and free health care<sup>16</sup>.

On the other hand, marriage and work are very much related in the Japanese society. Anne Allison puts it bluntly that a husband who does not work has no meaning in Japan (Allison 1994, p. 91). The transition from student to *shakaijin* (adult

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<sup>14</sup> Tom Gill, *When Pillars Evaporate. Structuring Masculinities on the Japanese Margin*, “Man and Masculinities in Contemporary Japan”, (ed. James Robertson, Nobue Suzuki), London, Routledge, 2005, pp. 144-161

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.ibtimes.com/japan-encourages-young-people-date-mate-reverse-birth-rate-plunge-it-may-be-too-late-1562867> retrieved on 11.06.2014

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-16500768> retrieved on 11.06.2014

member of society) does not take place at his twentieth anniversary marked by the coming of age ceremony, but rather in his first day of full-time job (Deacon, 2013, p. 145). During the bubble period in the late 1980s large companies recruited from the high school leavers and university graduates, but the smooth transition from education to work was disrupted in the 1990s, when schools or universities could no longer provide job offers for their students. After the bubble burst in the early 1990s, the *salaryman*<sup>17</sup> model crumbled and the features associated with this model, such as permanent employment and seniority-based promotions, became less appealing. The word *freeter*, coined in the late 1980s, referred to people who were not permanent employees and instead engaged in part-time or temporary work (Deacon, 2013, pp. 159-160). Affected by the economic downturn, most of the herbivore men became *freeters*, who declined any kind of duty to stick to rigid, traditional norms: “I have dreams”; “I do not want a job with lots of overtime”; “I do not want to drink with colleagues after work”; “I do not want to be a *salaryman*”. Instead they preferred more individualistic jobs such as hairdresser, yoga instructor, café waiter or clothing shop assistant (Deacon, 2013, pp. 136-137).

Another minor criticism of the herbivore men was their keen interest in their own appearance and their dislike in making expensive purchases, in other words, beautification and consumption. Herbivore men pay as much attention to their appearance as women and also make use of the accessories (rings, earrings, hair dye, barettes, oil-removal sheets etc.) (Morioka, 2013, p. 6). Laura Miller perceives the male beauty practices as part of the women’s validation of the opposite sex.

I believe that men’s beauty consumption is linked to two intertwined forces: it is informed by female desire, while it concurrently symbolizes resistance to the ‘*salaryman*’ folk model. The model of masculinity being opposed is age-graded, and is associated with an older generation of *oyaji* (‘old men’) de-eroticized by a corporate culture that emphasized a ‘productivity ideology of standardization, order, control, rationality and impersonality’. *Oyaji*-rejection also surfaces in women’s popular media, where we find expressions of derision and dismissal for old-style *salaryman* types. An emphasis on male appearance counters the *salaryman* reification of men as workers, while women appreciate these new styles because they are aesthetically pleasing and erotically charged. (Miller, 2005, p. 38)

Moreover, in 1999 young women answered several questions, ranking the most obnoxious things about the male body (*Rankingu Daisuki* 1999). The first five most detestable attributes, in descending order, were: 1) chest hair; 2) body hair; 3) leg hair;

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<sup>17</sup> A person whose income is based on a regular salary.

4) beards 5) fat body. (Miller, 2005, p. 42). Hence, “the masculine beauty contests” became, more or less, a prerequisite for getting women’s attention.

As a counterattack, older male commentators on TV made their move and expressed their concern for the future of Japan that had to face the emergence of herbivore men who were “too sissy to be considered real men” (Morioka, 2013, p. 6) and who lead selfish lifestyles rather than living for the sake of a company or a family. This is how, little by little, *sōshokukei danshi* have acquired pejorative connotations and started to be blamed for impacting the economy negatively because they rather concentrate on smaller, aesthetic treatments and items, thus the poor consumption rate. Indeed, herbivore men could not afford a car, in contrast with their fathers’ generation whose *status quo* was determined by the fact of owning a car, *maikā* (my car). In 2008 the sales of cars dropped in Japan, and both the media and industry representatives were in the need of a scapegoat. They blamed the new generation of *sōshokukei danshi* for the low sales; and shortly after that, the decreasing sales of alcohol and other goods became their fault too, as a result of their frugal lifestyle. Maki Fukasawa explains that young men are now spending their money on more practical things, such as rice cookers, while their fathers’ generation purchased “show-off products” (*mie shōhi*), just to display their social status<sup>18</sup>.

A large proportion of what we now understand as the *sōshokukei danshi* is actually a media construct. Framed in sensationalist contexts by a range of newspapers, magazines and television shows, some features of *sōshokukei danshi* gradually shifted away from Fukasawa’s main ideas concerning the lifestyle and values of the new generation. It comes to no surprise that the media would focus only on the spectacular aspects of this social phenomenon, reporting new fashion trends as men’s bras<sup>19</sup>, men’s skirts<sup>20</sup>, young men’s new-found fondness for desserts<sup>21</sup> or

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<sup>18</sup> Fukasawa Maki, Interview *Imadoki no wakamono wa uchimuki de sōshoku na no ka? 01*, “Business Breakthrough Ch. Business Breakthrough Inc.”, 12/09/2012. <http://bb.bbt757.com/about/> ; <http://www.bbt757.com/svIBOS/user/airsearch?query=%E3%82%A4%E3%83%9E%E3%83%89%E3%82%AD%E3%81%AE%E8%8B%A5%E8%80%85%E3%81%AF> retrieved on 26.05.2014

<sup>19</sup> Maeda Toshi, *Bra for the boys an online bestseller in Japan*, “Reuters”, 21.11.2008, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/11/21/us-men-bra-idUSTRE4AK20620081121> retrieved on 16.06.2014

<sup>20</sup> Maya Kaneko, *Some men swapping pants for dresses*, “The Japan Times” 24/05/ 2010, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2010/03/24/national/some-men-swapping-pants-for-dresses/> retrieved 16.06.2014

<sup>21</sup> Louisa Lim, *In Japan, 'Herbivore' Boys Subvert Ideas Of Manhood*, “NPR” 25/11/2009, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=120696816> retrieved on 16.06.2014

Japanese men sitting down on the toilet to urinate<sup>22</sup>. While the importance of such news is blown out of proportion, it shows the underlying trend to focus on things that would make the *sōshoku(kei) danshi* look “unmanly” by associating their behaviour with typically feminine traits, while also comparing them to the more traditional masculinity of the *salaryman* (Nemeth, 2014, p. 52, 55)

The need to challenge the cultural construction of masculinity has been an imperative of gender-sensitive research as well as of cultural studies. In his book *Masculinities and culture*, John Beynon differentiates between the discourses of maleness, centered on the physiological differences and those of masculinity, perceived as a complex set of cultural constructions (Beynon, 2002, p. viii). Masculinity is therefore shaped by factors such as class, ethnicity, age or sexuality. Within the matrix of masculinity, we should make further distinctions between ‘masculinity-as-experienced’, ‘masculinity-as-enacted’ and ‘**masculinity-as-represented**’, the latter referring to depictions of what it is to be a man in media texts (such as films, literature, magazines, advertisements and television) (Beynon, 2002, p. ix), as in the case of *sōshoku(kei) danshi*. According to this approach, the so-called ‘crisis in masculinity’ is a concept partly untenable since we cannot speak of a fixed, single and unified masculinity, but of plural masculinities. At the beginning of the 20th century, George Simmel noted that the identities will be more fragmentary the more the individuals will be included in different social circles. A century after Simmel’s insights, a series of concepts came to the surface, pointing to the transformation of contemporary social identities: liquid (Bauman 2004), fragmented (Craib 1998), reflexive (Giddens 1991), contingent (Dubar 2000) or patchwork-based (Beck 2000). (Abonim, 2010, p. 1). If individualities are fragmented and pluralistic, then masculinities should follow the same pattern.

“*Sōshoku(kei) danshi* always existed”, said columnist Maki Fukasawa, “but the bursting of the bubble and the collapse of lifetime employment contributed to their increase”<sup>23</sup>. Japanese have always tended to turn more inward, therefore the herbivore phenomenon might embody a silent protest against the older generations, patriarchal values and devouring consumerism. The herbivore men do not feel the constant “hunger” that makes them climb the walls of society higher and higher. The affluent society, even though partly troubled, has annihilated their predator instincts. The metaphorical triad of hunger-desire-ambition has little power over the *sōshoku(kei)*

<sup>22</sup> Justin McCurry, *Wayward aiming Japanese men take a seat in smallest room*, “The Guardian” 13/12/2007, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/dec/13/japan.justinmccurry> retrieved on 16.06.2014

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/07/27/us-japan-herbivores-idUSTRE56Q0C220090727> retrieved 3.06.2014

*danshi*: their sexual desire is kept at bay by their inborn shyness and their career-driven ambition is moderate. They do not want to be burdened with responsibilities and hate the emotional pain of hurting or being hurt. Through their black-rimmed glasses they are looking back on a centuries-old archetype. Nowadays *puer* is renewed in Peter Pan syndrome, a psychological concept of a socially immature adult, usually male. This very syndrome is now haunting the psyche of young Japanese generation, producing new mutations with gendered overtones: *bishōnen*, *otomen*, *Akiba-kei*, herbivore men or ...

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