



WASEDA INSTITUTE OF ASIA-PACIFIC STUDIES COLLOQUIUM SERIES

Presented by:

*The Waseda Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies &
The Contemporary Japan Study Group*

“Precarity and Labor in Japan”

Date and Time: November 1st 6:30pm-8:10pm (California)
9:30pm-11:10pm (New York)
November 2nd 10:30am-12:10pm (Tokyo)
Registration form: <https://forms.gle/cbVD2k35AA1USkp9A>
The symposium audio will be recorded and uploaded online.

1. “Precarity from Within”: Anthropological Analysis on Japan’s Changing Corporate Welfare and Elderly Workforce



Nana Okura Gagné (PhD, Yale) is a cultural anthropologist and Associate Professor at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her research explores how global capitalism impinges upon local ideologies and existing sociocultural relations, including gender relations, family relations, and socio-economic relations. She is the author of *Reworking Japan: Changing Men at*

Work and Play under Neoliberalism Japan (Cornell University Press), and she has published in *American Ethnologist*, *Anthropological Theory*, *Ethnography*, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, etc.

2. Inequality of Security: Precarious Regular Jobs as an Illuminating Case



Yuki Asahina is an assistant professor in the Graduate School of International and Area Studies at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul, South Korea. He received his PhD in sociology from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa and was previously a postdoctoral fellow at the Reischauer Institute of Japanese Studies at Harvard University. He specializes in inequality and right-wing movements in East Asia. Currently he is working on a book manuscript analyzing precarious youth in Korea and Japan.



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Abstracts of the presentations

“Precarity from Within”: Anthropological Analysis on Japan’s Changing Corporate Welfare and Elderly Workforce

Nana Okura Gagné

In the postwar period, Japan developed a welfare system that linked citizens’ access to welfare with corporate employment, and workers and their families came to enjoy economic and cultural prosperity based on long-term employment. This postwar social contract of “corporate welfarism” also became a “psychological contract” by offering employees the ontological security of life planning. Globally, long-term employment presented an alternative to the social risks and personal career uncertainties of a fluid labor market and came to be the “sacred cow” of Japan’s employment system. However, the governing of risk through employment-based security has been destabilized by structural reforms since the 1990s, and Japan’s “sacred cow” has been sacrificed in favor of the neoliberal promise of competitive labor mobility by creating precarity within companies.

Based on long-term research on corporate restructuring and interviews with Japanese employees, this paper focuses on mid-career and senior managers whose expectations of long-term employment were directly affected by restructuring. What are the various mechanisms companies are using to “manufacture precarity” among employees? What do these reforms mean to experienced workers, whose lives have been built on and planned around the postwar social and psychological contract? Specifically, resonating with Doogan’s concept of “manufacturing uncertainty,” the paper analyzes the meanings of employment/unemployment by showing how expanding precarious employment mechanisms are producing a sense of social and emotional precarity among regular workers, while normalizing the “culture of risk” taking root in the labor market.

Inequality of Security: Precarious Regular Jobs as an Illuminating Case

Yuki Asahina

While social theorists are wary of prevalent economic uncertainty and job insecurity that allegedly erode everyone’s sense of the self, empirical studies tend to single out hardship experienced by a particular group of people, such as men without a college education. Neither of these accounts fully captures the complexity of the inequality of security that young workers face today. Drawing on interviews with 43 young adults, this talk offers a typology of various ways young workers in contemporary Japan manage precarity. Then, I will focus on the experience of precarious young regular workers as an illuminating case that sheds light on the limits of the existing accounts of precarity. These jobs take the form of standard employment, but workers are often subjected to even more precarious and exploitative working conditions than non-regular workers. This talk calls for a thick explanation of how young adults understand and come to terms with precarity, which is indispensable to forge a meaningful critique of skewed neoliberal narratives of individual efforts and talents.