VULNERABLE SELVES: THE LONG DECLINE OF JAPANESE MASCULINITY

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Based on 36-month empiric-phenomenological fieldwork in the elusive area of virtual interactions as well as in-depth literature research on new media, masculinity studies, and the entertainment industry with a specific focus on Japan, this chapter aims at clarifying some of the major – and to a certain extent, central – themes recurrent in the obsessive, radicalized consumption of virtual leisure practices among Japanese men: online dating, video games, and digital pornography seem to have slowly, steadily, quietly conquered the Internet, involving large segments of the male population. Previous academic research on the digital space and its relation to masculinity, particularly the seminal studies of Azuma Hiroki (2000, 2001) and Morikawa Kaichirô (2008), deal mostly with the *otaku* ("nerd") phenomenon classically linked to the cyber-industry and digital culture. The current chapter analyzes two additional paradigms of masculinity in Japan framing the *otaku* social appearance – the salaryman ("corporate samurai") and the "herbivore men" – in a historical-comparative perspective while highlighting the complex gender dynamics in late-modern Japan, in the dialectical interplay of power, (cultural) consumption and state-driven reproduction politics. It eventually suggests some possible strategies towards a more social-friendly future of the digital universe and of the challenges masculinity is facing currently, in a global perspective.

Keywords: Japan, masculinity, salaryman, *otaku*, herbivore men

1. Introduction: when unhappiness becomes the socially promoted and accepted norm

Recently, there has been an increasing amount of debates on the role played by men in the current development of historical events related to violence in the public space, to competitiveness and efficiency in the workplace as well as to

the overwhelmingly dysfunctional family patterns coming to light within intimate settings. Labeled "toxic masculinity," the classic prescription of "what a man should be" in his three primary functions – to provide, protect, and procreate – is mercilessly dismantled. An equally powerful counter-model of masculinity is not being issued, however, in either academic circles or by means of mass-media proliferation. This leaves millions, if not billions, of men wondering where they actually belong and what they are supposed to do. While the feminist arena has offered, throughout the past few decades, alternative lifestyle models for women in opposition to traditional existential trajectories, this has not been so far the case for men. Abandoned in the real space of inter-human exchanges and lacking the support of social-intellectual networks able to offer them orientation and validation, a vast majority of men in the prime of their lives – that is, aged 18–65 – find themselves isolated, lonely, confused and ultimately deeply unhappy. Without the neurophysiological ability and the socio-educational background to connect to and analyze their emotions, as women commonly do, most of these male citizens find it impossible to locate themselves in the present-day world, and consequently choose to withdraw into the virtual one. The stronghold of such a historical situation is Japan.

In a society that tacitly encourages double-standards as long as the officially imposed status quo is not challenged, online dating, video games, and digital pornography have slowly, steadily, quietly conquered the cyberspace, increasingly populated by notably large segments of the male population, from kindergarten kids, neurotic teenagers, cool hipsters, ambitious CEOs, progressive intellectuals, secluded NEETs (persons described as "Not-in-Education-Employment-or-Training"), middle-aged employees of large corporations or governmental agencies, retired businessmen – and the list goes on. While academic research on the digital space, without being specifically focused on its economic success, is still in an incipient phase with the remarkable writings of Azuma Hiroki (2001) and Morikawa Kaichirô (2008) which deal mostly, though, with the "nerd" (*otaku*) phenomenon classically linked to the cyber-industry and digital culture, in this chapter I attempt to find answers and explanations to the above-mentioned situation. I also suggest some possible measures toward a more social-friendly future of the digital universe and of the current struggles of masculinity in a global angle. The two additional paradigms of masculinity in Japan framing the *otaku* social appearance – the salaryman ("corporate samurai") and the "herbivore man" – are analyzed in a historical-comparative perspective, while highlighting the complex gender dynamics in late-modern Japan, in the dialectical interplay of power, (cultural) consumption and state-driven reproduction politics. As to be shown further below, they are deeply ideological constructions, imposing specific behaviors and thinking patterns, more often than not emerging as a consequence of the social

"downward mobility" epically mentioned by sociologists since the late 1990s, when referring to the rise of the network society.

In adopting this dialectical approach, I first delve into the twofold problematic of tackling masculinity – or masculinities – in present-day Japan and its social mechanisms with their meticulously programmed reproduction strategies and disturbingly administrative intrusion into individual intimacy. As it turns out, stunning coping mechanisms seem to be employed by men in their everyday life in order to survive their own sense of loss and crisis and to move beyond social neglect and judgment. It takes courage and commitment to change, once the deepest core of one's identity threatens to implode, for instance, when basic needs such as sexual intercourse or the innate sense of belonging are rejected. The alternative is a life based on lies, towards oneself and others, set-up in or-der to keep the delusion of safety and comfort – lies which very often lead to a point-of-no-return, where depression followed by imminent suicide respectively by incredible violence towards others become the only possible outcomes (see Kimmel 2012, 2015).

The seclusion into the digital world of virtual encounters appears as an in-termediate means to cope with newly emerged historical practices. In time, it undermines the traditionally transmitted self-evidence of male superiority and unquestioned power. Simultaneously, however, it seems to display a carefully crafted surrogate image of what a "man should be," while offering to male par-ticipants in the cyber-universe a gate to a parallel space, in which the access to recognition and validation comes without the often inevitable by-product of failure and rejection – or at least, not openly, publicly humiliating.

In their work *Evil Media* (2012), Matthew Fuller and Andrew Goffey argue that, as a consumer of digital information in the proliferation of the all-encompassing media, one can either become an instrument of a multitude of "Big Brothers" dispersed across virtual spaces or an agent of change (Fuller and Goffey 2012, 25). There is a profoundly disturbing dimension in this ethical challenge which each of us, quotidian consumers of digital media, face every day: comfortable submission and indifference or respect and compassion for "absent others"? As Michael Kimmel puts it in *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era* (2015), from an early age, and not only in the highly prosperous, post-in-dustrialized nations of the G-8 group, men are educated and socialized to compete and win, which harnesses the biological drive to provide, protect, and procre-ate. Accordingly, it creates a socially determined compulsion to overcome and achieve – which is still the paramount model of masculinity promoted by the mainstream media and by prevalently acknowledged role-models (Kimmel 2015, 31). It is this clash of two opposite flows in the existential formation and ongoing information that confronts men, and which leads, inevitably, to what Kimmel

labels "aggrieved entitlement," so typical for the so-called "toxic masculinity" of late modernity within the "patriarchal, white-hegemonic framework" (Hooks 2000). There is the natural, biologically ingrained instinct to protect and provide and there is the permanent input of violence and rage, motivated or not, which permeates the daily experience of boys and men. I argue, however, that most men, instead of directly targeting those around them as possible outlets for their pent-up anger and frustration, prefer to withdraw from the real world into the virtual universe, where the three main competitors women face nowadays are located: online socializing, porn/pornography and video games. These three huge industries employ the virtual space and the digitalization of human lives as catalysts for financial growth, regardless of the impact they have on individual well-being and, even more so, on social structures.

The dimensions of this phenomenon in Japan are horrendous, with the male population increasingly disappearing from the dating and marriage market with women in real life towards the cyberspace populated with dating sims [dating simulation apps], virtual girlfriends, VR [virtual reality] sex/porn and digitally reinforced intercourse, relationships and marriages with manga/anime characters, etc. Statistically speaking, as of September 2016, 42% of heterosexual men aged 18-34 were virgins, compared to 44.2% of women in the same age group, according to Japan's National Institute of Population and Social Security Research. Virginity is defined as "lack of intercourse with a person of different gender and in real life." Furthermore, according to an analogous research of the Japan's Family Planning Association published in February 2017, over 47.2% of marriages in Japan are sex-less ("sexless" being defined as "no intercourse between spouses during the past month and without expectation for that to change in the future"), an increase of 2.6% compared to similar data from 2014, and impressively higher than the 31.9% recorded when such a survey was conducted for the first time in 2004 (Kobayashi 2017, 18; Tsuji 2018; Schad-Seifert 2018, 83–88).

In the course of the statements outlined further below, a deep longing for connection to "real humans in the real world" lingering in the emotional-mental outfits of the male netizens populating the virtual world becomes palpable and visible. There is, however, an even deeper and stronger fear of inadequacy and awkwardness when interacting with "real humans in the real world" – to that fear, the cyber-environment responds with a stable, safe space of friendly, even if volatile, encounters. The refusal to listen and empathize displayed by female citizens, who, for better or for worse, have come so far to control and determine the dynamics of the "real world," plays, in my opinion, a fundamental role in the withdrawal tendency of male citizens towards the online "floating world" of present-day Japan.

2. The "dating apocalypse" and the seductive dynamics of hope

> I come home late [...] the company implements strategies to cut-down the overtime [...] but honestly, what should I do if I come home earlier? [...] The [two] kids are old enough now, my wife has her own life, with friends and shopping, and does not want to have me around [...] anyway, not too long and not too "present" [...] so I go online, and talk to some women, they are single and want to meet an available man, to get married and to have children [...] I tell them I am single ... earlier, I had told them I am divorced, but then they would lose interest because they thought the wife had taken all the money in the divorce ... and before that, I had told them I am living separated, but they discarded me immediately because they thought I was only looking for sex outside of my marriage [...] so I tell them, I am single, and looking for a girlfriend, and they talk to me, and listen to me [...] I avoid meeting them face-to-face, because then they would want to push for further interactions and for a deeper relationship, and this is troublesome [...] when one gets too pushy for meeting in real life, I just vanish [...] I have not met anyone online yet who would make me want to really get to know her personally [...] I have been doing this for 5–6 years now [...] I have never thought whether it was bad for the women I talked to online, I mean, they do not really exist, do they? [...] I mean, you are an exception, you are not quite real, right? (TK, 45, married, one daughter, one son)[1]

I encountered numerous similar statements, though generally less articulated and less coherent, in informal discussions with various male netizens during my fieldwork which took place over a time-span of 36 months (May – October 2013, in Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany, and February 2014 – July 2016, in Nagasaki, Japan). I was based in those cities at the time, but the research took place globally. A netizen in this context is someone who spends an average of 4 hours a day and 200–500 USD a month on online activities. Based on their own words, it seems that entering the cyber-community gives them a sense of belonging, with friendship and liberation compounded by a sort of playful competitiveness.

During my fieldwork, I pursued "applied anthropology," as promoted, among many others, by Anne Allison (*Nightwork*, 1994) and Christine Kondo (*Crafting Selves*, 1990), and more recently Simon Sinek (*Leaders Eat Last*, 2014). It is a research endeavor in which the investigator serves as the main subject of his/her own scientific pursuit. In order to avoid the artificiality of staged experiments,

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[1]   Unless otherwise mentioned, all statements originate from men I had initially encountered online. Unless otherwise noted, all married men mentioned hereafter were living with their families. Finally, unless otherwise explained, all the wives of the quoted men were stay-at-home housewives (*sengyô shufu*, or "professional housewives").

the researcher might exert caution in disclosing his/her function and very carefully anonymize the information as well as the identity of the research project's participants. In this particular situation, I have randomly revealed the purpose of my activities to ca. one third of the men I have encountered in real life, and the reactions were diverse, from astonishment to anger and from admiration to full retreat in panic. More classically, "applied anthropology" was named "participatory observation," with the main difference that the observed phenomena occurred usually in groups of humans belonging to a different cultural circle or geographical sphere than the researcher's and took place without a prior theoretical formulation of the expected results and impact on further areas. In cases of "applied anthropology," the point of departure serves as a clear orientation entity and incorporates considerable amounts of prior preparation, both theoretical and methodological, so that the results, while not being entirely predictable, are to a certain extent estimated in terms of their relevance for larger segments of human life and activity.

The phenomenological approach consisted of personal observation on roughly 45–50 social network sites and dating apps (e.g., Match.com, eHarmony, OkCupid, Tinder, Plenty of Fish, Zoosk, Paarship, Bumble, Badoo, Mingle2, EliteSingles, Flirt.com, as well as more niche-sites such as JDate, JapanCupid, JapanDate, AsianDate, Sentimente, etc.) and communication with over 2,000 men (it very much depends on the counting paradigm). Apart from Bumble (designed for the woman to initiate contact), the communication started always with the man sending some sort of first message – generally, a very convenient "Hi!" or "Hello!," mostly without the exclamation mark –, and me replying. After the initial message coming from a man and my response, usually within 24 hours, the rate of those sending a second message sunk to under 10%: that is, less than 10% of those who had sent the initial message would follow up after my response. In case we would not meet in real life, the online communication would end quickly, the latest after 5 weeks (14–16 cases). Most often, though, it ended after 5 to 8 days. I almost got scammed two times (once by a Nigerian, once by an American), and in three cases (all three American), I chatted for 7–9–11 months with no meet-up, respectively with two meet-ups.

I went to 188 first-time encounters, sometimes as many as 3 meet-ups a day, which were followed by second time (43) and third-time (7) "dates." 32 men were non-Japanese, the rest were Japanese. The turning point in all these encounters in real life was the man's request for sexual intercourse, which happened in most cases during the first meet-up. Essentially, I would accept any invitation to a meeting in real life, always in a public space (such as a museum or a coffee shop), except for cases where the guy seemed weird or dangerous (when I declined, politely). In the beginning, I ran the risk 5 or 6 times of getting involved with a stalker, but with experience, this risk diminished fast. As awkward as it might seem, during those

encounters I could pursue highly informative qualitative interviews, during which it became obvious that there are far less women online than men (the official policy of online distributors is an equal number of subscribers) and that, while women online are, indeed, looking for stable, long-term relationships, men are rather searching for virtual companionship and quick sex, in this order. From this point of view, all participants were unexpectedly uniform and predictable. Furthermore, most of the male participants I dealt with (97%), regardless of whether I ever met them in real life or not, were actually married, but consciously lied about it. Out of the 188 subjects I met in real life, only 8 disclosed from the very beginning of the online exchange that they were married, of whom 5 wanted a purely platonic exchange, which quickly turned into "sexting" (see further below), and 3 wanted a "secret affair with sex." The remaining 180 revealed during the first real-life encounter their "married" status, mostly without me asking, presumably in order to annihilate any further expectations on my side. Despite this intensive activity, none of those interactions resulted in any form of long-term friendship or contact.

Parallel with this fieldwork, I pursued an intensive literature research in two areas: feminist literature (an updated version of my thorough analysis of the feminist phenomenon in the years 2002–2007) and self-help literature, mostly released as popular sources for confused citizens who could not find their way in the late-modern (dating) world. While most of the self-help books are as transient as the vast majority of media products released for the pure sake of consumerist entertainment, among those self-help books which dug more deeply than the superficial level of fashionable speed-dating and swipe-right, a couple of common themes and questions could be observed: how to protect oneself from narcissists and psychopaths/sociopaths and toxic human interactions; how to be happy and content alone; how to build durable stable friendships; how to thrive professionally; how to set-up boundaries, especially with family members; how to follow one's deep femininity and core identity; how to manifest compassion and healthy self-esteem (both as self-evaluation and self-respect) without coming across as bossy and intimidating. The prevalence of these topics showed to me, in time, how profoundly wounded society is and how fragmented in its essential humanity, and that the increase of "human waste" (a derivation of Bauman's conceptualization from 2010) is a far more malignant phenomenon than originally estimated.

Finally, the hermeneutic interpretation based on fieldwork and literature research allowed for a nuanced analysis of online encounters, mostly with some sort of romantic or sexual tendencies or expectations. On the one hand, there was the micro-level of the actual interaction between humans separated by a smartphone or laptop/computer followed or not by a direct meet-up in real life. On the other hand, there was the macro-space of online platforms, with their very existence depending on the sheer number of subscribers. In-between the micro-surface

of the digital medium and the macro-industry of capitalist merchandizing, the humanity of the social actors involved is mercilessly crushed. Desire turns into a weapon, and yearning into an addiction.

3. Digital worlds and the neo-conservative ambivalence of the media

> Sometimes, I just want to release the whole tension of the work. I live together with my wife, in a normal flat in Tokyo, which means I have hardly any space for myself. We have not had intercourse in more than 5–6 years now, we have been sleeping in different rooms. I tried to get a girlfriend or some sort of sex outside of marriage, but good women want proper relationships, with dates, dinners, sleep-overs, and avoid married men like the plague, and I cannot stand the less-good women, who are up for anything, just like that [...] because I do not have so much money [...] my wife controls my income, and gives me some pocket-money every month, but this is not enough to go out and have fun with women. I tried to get a divorce, but she refuses it, and asks for huge amounts of money as compensation, and I cannot afford paying it, given that she has been controlling the money all along anyway [...] I am stuck, I feel trapped, and watching online porn is the only thing which helps me sleep at night [...] for a few hours, then I have to work hard the next day [at a big IT company in Tokyo area], again. (TE, 43, married, no children)

The perceived isolation of male netizens populating the online dating world is compounded by a deeply seated sense of unhappiness and lack of orientation, summed up in what Michael Kimmel calls "aggrieved entitlement" (2012). The role played by education and the pervasiveness of mainstream media – TV, cinema, popular music, fashion, advertisement, news – are also fundamental in creating specific role-models based on structures of power, hierarchy, and domination. Meeting-up face-to-face in real life as well as the negotiation terms of monogamy and (serial/simultaneous) polygamy seem, more often than not, to be factors determined by male protagonists due to classic courtship rituals in which the man is pursuing the woman. Generally, the interaction follows one of the following scenarios (the list being not exhaustive), profoundly anti-social, but increasingly turning into socially acceptable.

1. "Love-bombing:" is a highly seductive strategy. It happens when lavish demonstration of care and attention, presents (mostly virtual), plans, and promises about the future, huge amounts of messages, are displayed by one part (usually male) during the initial phase of the courting ritual. It leads to the quick build-up of whirlwind romances, and it is extremely addictive for the receiving part (usually female). It serves to manipulative goals for the perpetrator. The situation cannot last, naturally, and is shortly followed by

subsequent behaviors such as ghosting, benching or breadcrumbing (or a combination of them).

2. "Ghosting:" is the sudden interruption of all communication in a romantic interaction, without informing the other part of the decision. It is often argued that the main goal of "ghosting" is not to hurt the other person, but to leave her the possibility to understand the hint and move on; the reality is that it has a very negative effect on the person being "ghosted."

3. "Benching:" happens when, in a dating scenario, one of the persons thinks the other one is quite cool, but not the perfect number, so he puts her in a sort of "if I do not find anyone better, she is fine too" mental folder, and keeps on checking further dating options. Of course, the person being "benched" is not informed of this happening to her. (Apparently, the term originates in sports.)

4. "Breadcrumbing:" is the act of sending little flirtatious messages to someone, or to several persons, when no one else is around for more significant exchanges, at random times and without any emotional investment.

5. "Zombieing:" refers to the act of "repeated ghosting," that is, after "ghosting" someone, resurfacing in her life without any warning and, very often, without any explanation or excuse, because one feels lonely, isolated and probably horny. It is pursued via small, insignificant messages to test the waters, which then usually stop immediately, as soon as a better option comes along.

6. "Cushioning:" is a rather cruel dating technique, in which one partner flirts and texts with several other persons "just in case" the main relationship might end (so that he has some back-up plan). Neither the current partner nor any of the "others" are informed of what is going on.

7. "Roaching:" occurs when a person is seeing, romantically speaking, several persons at the same time without letting them know about it. (the term comes from "cockcroaching" and refers to the fact that "where there is a cockroach, there are more which you do not see [yet]."). The shock emerges when the situation is getting more serious, probably with physical intercourse involved, and an honest and open discussion becomes inevitable. Like cockroaches, this type of behavior seems to be very common "and very nasty," followed oftentimes by "ghosting" on the side of the "roacher."

8. "Orbiting:" a relatively new trend, refers to distant methods of digital observation – e.g., likes on Facebook, views on Instagram, etc. – in which the "pursuer" ("orbiter") does not ever directly start communicating with the "pursued" ("orbited"). However, the "orbited" is aware of the "orbiter's" activities due to technological settings. This situation can be unsettling

and frustrating, regardless if the "orbiter" is a potential romantic prospect, a former partner, or an unrequited love-interest.

9. "Scamming:" this is a financially driven dating strategy, in which one person claims to be someone different, mostly from a distant geographical area, and at some point in the interaction asks for money to be able to come and meet the other partner in real life. Most scammers pretend to be single fathers, widowed, either American servicemen stationed somewhere in a developing country or American engineers on ships stranded penniless on some exotic shores. In fact, they are in ca. 85% of cases Nigerian citizens living in Nigeria (Illouz 2013, 53–78; see Fisher 2004, 158). The financial losses of scamming activities are estimated at several million USD every year worldwide.

10. "Catfishing:" is the same as "scamming," but not for financial reasons and mostly without financial losses. The emotional hurts are correspondingly high though.

11. "Trolling:" is one level of cruelty and malignancy over "catfishing;" it consists of purposefully hurting and leading someone on, very often under the disguise of good intentions. Generally speaking, trolls are a very nasty product of the Internet galaxy.

12. "Pigging:" is a more individualized version of "trolling." It specifically refers to an online dating practice in which the perpetrator chooses one trait which he feels might be an issue for the female person (such as body weight, hair color, freckles, glasses, teeth), and then uses this to humiliate her. According to various sources, some men deliberately target women they find unattractive, purely to sleep with them and laugh about it afterwards, or in some cases, continue to humiliate them for several months before dramatically rejecting them: apparently, extra-points are awarded for a particularly demeaning denouement.

13. "Sexting:" is a combination of "sex" and "texting," and refers to that activity of exchanging sexual contents via text-messaging. It can happen at any level of the online interaction, depending on the personality and the boundaries of the female participant involved, as, from my observation, male participants would try to push for sexting very soon in the online interaction.

14. "Dick Pic:" is the crown behavior of online interactions. It refers to a picture of an erect penis, sent via instant messaging to a woman who, most often, has not asked for it (I still have to meet a woman who has ever asked for a "dick pic" – or who would admit asking for one). They are sent randomly by virtually any man with whom the text exchange has evolved beyond the initial greetings. In rare cases, the man would ask if he can send a "dick pic," but the very real fear of rejection prevents them from asking – they just send it.

Arguably, the overwhelming presence of mainstream media and its educational function replace the direct or extended family, the immediate community, an effective schooling system, in which boys turn into men by following valid role-models and learning the subtle art of compassion and reciprocity. The popular image of a man who feels threatened by women and whose ego is so fragile that he gets off on humiliating them, has long become a reality in the cyberspaces. It haunts the romantic efforts of women seriously searching for a reliable life-partner. This trend of resurgent "toxic humanity," rather than "toxic masculinity" as there is nothing masculine in the activity of purposefully hurting and deceiving other human beings, is a by-product of what Bauman labeled as the rise of "human waste" (Bauman 2010), due to the large availability of digital devices and of media entities to human beings unable to grasp the responsibility which comes from the freedom to come in contact with – and to impact – other human beings on the other side of the screens of their devices. I believe the tendency is unstoppable – what can be done is to find ways to diminish its calamitous effects through awareness, education, and by providing valid powerful alternative role-models.

4. When loneliness and anger turn into despair and cruelty

> I live together with my family [wife and three kids]. I sleep in a different room than them, I have done this for years, maybe 10–15, and by now they also sleep in different rooms, I believe. My whole salary goes to my wife, I receive a small amount of pocket-money every month, but it is much more than most of my coworkers or friends receive. She puts the money in an envelope at the beginning of the month, in the kitchen. We do not talk, it is too troublesome. I meet online lots of women, I tell them I am divorced for 10 years or so, and that I am looking for a new partner, to share my life with until death. It is very easy, there are so many desperate women in their late 30s and early 40s, they all want to marry and have children [...] They are from all over Japan. I talk to at least 8–10 at a time, and it is them that make it possible to meet [...] they come to Tokyo, for vacation or business-trips, and then we meet, and have sex, and if they push for more (like me going to their place, or visiting me at my place, or some dinner, shared weekends away, etc.), I just cut them off. No idea if this is fair to them or not [...] hahaha [...] never thought of that, I mean, who cares, really? (KS, 49, married, two sons, one daughter)

It has been repeatedly observed that classic children's games create a sense of competitiveness and aggressiveness in male kids, which is transcended in real-life adulthood, while for female kids, they usually inspire attributes of cooperation and compromise, nurturing and caring. As Michael Kimmel points out, classic (Western) masculinity is traditionally constructed as a juxtaposition of specific

elements – overcome and achieve (financially, sexually, mentally, physically, materially), but also protect, provide, and procreate (the three "Ps" of the typical Alpha male image of a powerful leader). They are, in turn, combined with the society's requirements for men to bury their emotions and move forward relentlessly on the quest for new territories, new adventures, new accomplishments (see Figure 1). This, again, constitutes the very core of the three main areas of expression of un-bent masculinity in late modernity, reflected in three huge industries with yearly turnouts of billions of USD: online dating/socializing, video games, pornography (Howes, 2017).
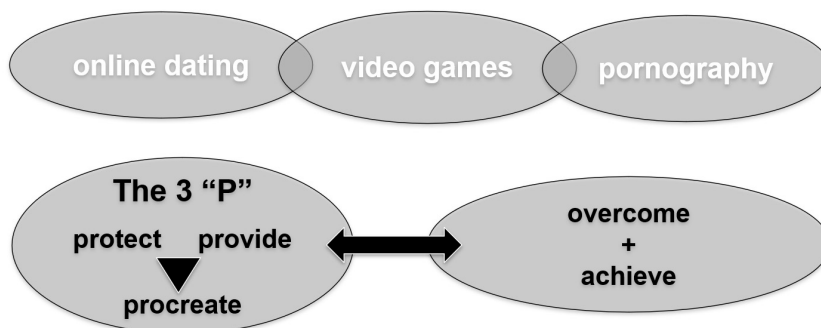

Figure 1: Classic traditional masculinity I, Virtual spaces and the attributes of classic (Western) masculinity
(Source: Author)

The "playfulness" many of my informants referred to, however, appears rather as a regress into the delusional certainty of cyber-practices, a "natural" reaction so-to-say to social pressures lacking stable, reliable reward systems (or at least, as in the past, reward systems perceived as stable and reliable): when the real, physical world does not offer the opportunity for individual self-actualization and for acquiring the skills necessary for survival and evolution, the human be-ing withdraws into the safe space of the familiar – even if that "safe space of the familiar" might prove lethal. A fundamental reason, for example, for Japanese video games and pornographic products to be disproportionately popular among Western consumers is the fact that they are more "comfortable and re-assuring" than the ones produced and released in the West. As one gamer explained to me: "[in Japanese video games] the characters and hardships are close to everyday life, as if they might happen just outside the multistoried building in the over-crowded neighborhood in which you are living in your overpriced tiny apart-ment – not some inter-galactic world-wars in which I lose myself." Likewise,

Japanese (or Asian) pornography, both solitary and intertwined in the network of the virtual community, is sensed as a secure space to express one's sexuality and aggressiveness, of claiming one's birth-right of choosing "the best" (mate), and of repeatedly asserting one's dominance and superiority – without the fear of rejection, disclosure, shaming or failure.

Lewis Howes' groundbreaking book *The Masks of Masculinity* from 2017 outlines nine major characteristics (or "masks," as he calls them), which define classic, traditional masculinity (see Figure 2). These "masks" are educated during a long, arduous process of inscribing norms and social behaviors. They are not naturally in-born. They are, however, the reasons behind the greatest part of the challenges men are facing nowadays. They are key features of the "toxic masculinity," amounting to being an "Alpha male" carrying the "Alpha mask." The Alpha male situates himself above everyone and everything, he exists exclusively to fulfill his three major functions (to provide, to protect, to procreate), and he never questions his position in the world – regardless of how lonely or isolated he might feel at times. When those emotions of doubt arise, they are swiftly pushed down in a reflex-like move to avert inner accountability for the misdeeds his highly self-centered existence and vision of life might create around him. Each of the "nine masks" covers a specific areas of classic "toxic" masculinity, such as perfect physical prowess ("the athlete mask"), the ability to suppress, repress and generally not show any emotions ("the stoic mask"), the unlimited unbridled sexual appetite which allows the conquest of as many as possible women without emotional-mental commitment ("the sexual mask"), the appearance of being victorious at all times and of showcasing a larger-than-life domineering stature ("the invincible mask"), the pretense of all-encompassing knowledge ("the know-it-all mask") and of funny attire at all times ("the Joker mask") as well as the pursuit of never-ending financial gains ("the material mask") by means of a well-calculated, controlled belligerence, assertiveness and when necessary straightforwardly displayed hostility ("the aggressive mask").

Clearly, this vision of masculinity is bound to fail incurably, both on an individual and on an over-individual level. It is not only extremely alienating and promiscuous in its construction of the human being as a social entity, but it is fundamentally unreasonable in the detachment mechanisms which it triggers: a continuous struggle for external validation. Nevertheless, imageries actively, seductively promoting this type of masculinity abound. It takes commitment and effort to find credible alternatives: realistic, fulfilling, providing existential significance.

In present-day Japan, while the social contract of family is largely regarded as the "socioeconomic unit of reproduction" (Yamada 2017, 9) and is still firmly based
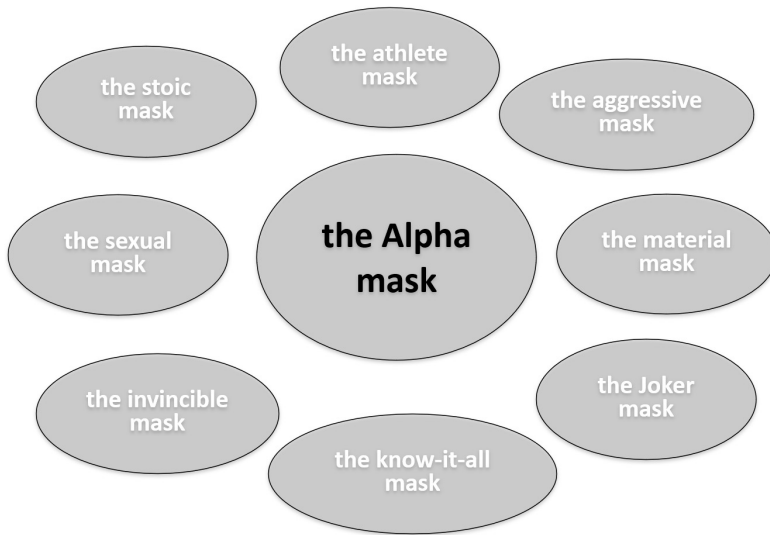
Figure 2: Classic traditional masculinity II, Nine masks of Western masculinity
(Source: Author inspired by Howes 2017)

in the paradigm of good wife, wise mother (*ryôsai kenbo*)[2] established by Meiji technocrats in the second half of the nineteenth century with roots in the Western

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[2] The alternative to the "hegemonic femininity" of the stay-at-home housewife is the *shôjo*: Literally, *shôjo* means "young unmarried woman;" as a concept and social phenomenon, the *shôjo* has emerged since the late 1960s in Japan in the historical context of female em-powerment as a consumerist appearance, and has become popular in the West as "girl power made in Japan" since the mid-1990s (Ôtsuka 1991, 26). While individualism and aggressiveness seem the main characteristics of the phenomenon in the West, the ambivalent *shôjo* figure undermines the generality of cultural and discursive minimal pairs such as male-female, Western-Japanese, innovation-tradition, mass-elite and individual-collective. The concept of *shôjo* in its strict significance as "girl," a delimited social group, emerged, however, at the dawn of the twentieth century in Japan with the purpose of preparing adolescent girls to becoming "good wives, wise mothers;" a range of *shôjo* magazines aiming mostly at educational goals via comic strips were published as early as 1902 Girls' World (*Shôjo-kai*, 1902), Girls' World (*Shôjo sekai*, 1906), and Girls' Friend (*Shôjo no tomo*, 1908), for more see Figure 3. As WWII progressed, magazines containing comics, and especially those referring to *shôjo* readership, perhaps regarded as frivolous, began to disappear. In the postwar era, the *shôjo* concept underwent an abrupt revitalization followed by a spectacular re-semantization process in domestic subcultures, in the course of which it was loaded with the current meaning of "liberated, empowered young unmarried woman." This gradually evolved towards the more recent term of "carnivore women" (*nikushoku-kei joshi*) who take the lead in their romantic pursuits and dominate the dating process rather than submitting to prevailing social norms of ambiguity and expectation, in all likelihood as a polarizing reaction to the passive, reserved attitude of "herbivore men" (see Fukasawa, 2008). The *shôjo* was originally represented in anime and manga works and subsequently migrated to other fields of (popular) culture(s).

traditional model of the "3K" from the German *Kinder, Küche, Kirche* ("children, kitchen, church"), with women at the core of the procreative act through their biological configuration (see Figure 3), what struck me in all the discussions I had with Japanese women along the past 20 years was a complete lack of awareness as to what a man, in himself, might mean. There were socio-economic expectations from men, vaguely reminiscent of the *bushidô* ideology ("the way of the warrior:" in itself, a highly idealized paradigm after the abrupt dissolution of the samurai class in the early Meiji period by the mid-nineteenth century), generally speaking, but there was almost no insight into what a man might want, might desire, might dream of and for himself, how he might want to be treated – and most importantly, why. In other words, there was no interest on the side of women in why a man is the way he is, and what a woman could do to move closer to him as himself (not as the hard-working provider) on his journey through life, to fulfill his needs for intimacy and companionship.
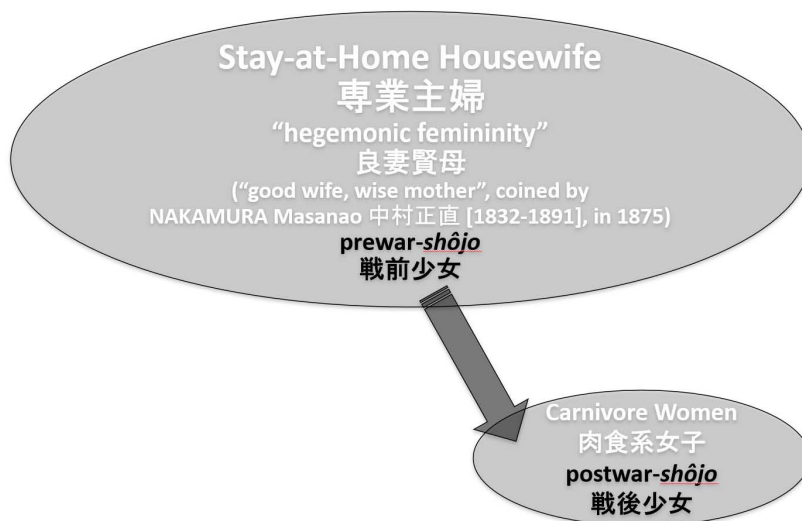

Figure 3: Paradigms of Japanese femininity
(Source: Author)

This absence of emotional warmth and understanding, in Japan and elsewhere, leaves men lonely and unhappy (Yamada 2017, 9; Bauman 2003; Kristeva 1989). Occasionally, they might flirt, awkwardly, with some foreign lady who happens to roam the neighborhood or who just sits closely by in the coffee-shop – or, for that matter, who rents a cheap room in the countryside or becomes a temporary researcher in the same academic environment. They are thrilled by the warmth

and the attention she offers, naturally, which they recognize, distantly, vaguely, from movies to which their girlfriends – now their estranged wives – had taken them in their youth, "Titanic" or "Romeo and Juliet." More often than not, however, they withdraw into cyberspace, which, like compulsive overtime-work or after-work drinking, is just another method to distract oneself from and to fill the void within, to cancel any emotional subscription to the human dimension of the potential partners on the other side of the smartphone's screen, while lying to themselves that they are doing their best.
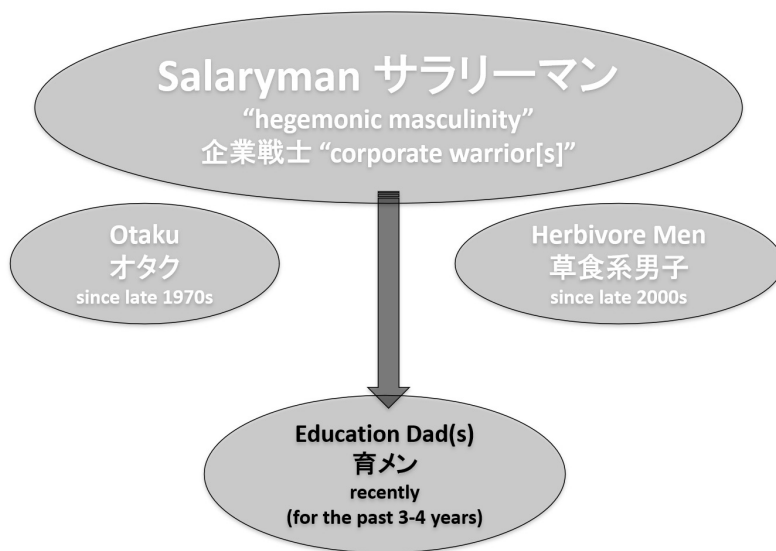

Figure 4: Paradigms of Japanese masculinity in postwar-Japan
(Source: Author)

As shown in Figure 4, the salaryman is the symbol and carrier of Japan's postwar impressive, steady economic growth – until the late 1980s. Typically employed in large corporations, working long hours and commuting long distances, they are known as "corporate warriors" (*kigyô-senshi*), who spend most of their time in the workplace and in work-related activities (such as commuting, golfing, drinking with coworkers) and are generally detached from their families (Amano 2006; Taga 2006). This totality of men's engagement in paid work, which even exhausted some to death (resulting in the infamous *karôshi* [death from overwork] phenomenon), was complemented by the women's role of sole responsibility for reproduction and homemaking, their unpaid domestic work supporting the wellbeing of children and employed men. However, "professional housewives"

(*sengyô-shufu*) have been having absolute control of the financials, deciding upon domestic expenditures and giving their husbands a small allowance every month as pocket-money. Thus, while men's exclusive involvement with work was compensated by a social order that promised stable, life-time employment and became the foundation of a welfare policy that advocated the ideological view of the corporation as a family, the workplace turned into a distinctively masculine place, where Japanese men typically constructed their everyday experience, and was virtually the sole source of men's identity and status. In contrast to it, women's involvement in paid work was limited; they were excluded from labor unions and were employed mostly in low-wage, part-time jobs, i.e., with non-regular employment relations. Moreover, university education, life-time employment, marriage and children were all assets of Japanese masculinity, climaxing in the concept of being a *daikoku-bashira*: this is the cultural concept traditionally denoting the big black wooden pillar that used to support the whole construction of a house. It has been used in postwar Japan to denote the "main breadwinner" or "head of the family," referring naturally to the man in the family: the traditional core of "hegemonic masculinity" (see Connell, 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) in Japan, as largely promoted by conservative media and socio-political ideologies.

A very distinct category from the salaryman is the *otaku*, who has come so far as to being regarded as emblematic for the so-called crisis of masculinity in late-modern, post-industrialized, service-based societies – such as Japan is par excellence. The term itself appeared in the early 1980s, identifying young single men who absorbed themselves in Japanese popular subcultures, i.e., cartoons (anime), comics (manga), computer games, live-action movies and TV programs as well as the development of computer software (Okada 2008; Ôtsuka 2004; Dasgupta 2013; Condry 2011). Members of the *otaku* category tend to neglect their appearance, dressing much like nerds while focusing on narrowly defined and im-balanced consumption, which has inspired the thriving of new cultural industries. Although *otaku* citizens refrain from involvement in other life domains than their immediate interest and are generally reluctant to deal with other people, some willingly work in the digital industries for low wages, compensated by comparably flexible work schedules. A further characteristic of the *otaku* grouping is that they usually live in isolation and are keen to communicate only with those who share the same interests in the cyber-community.

Interestingly enough, contrary to the established cliché, those described as *otaku* seem to have once been ambitious boys who were particularly affected by the loss of faith in science and technology in the 1970s, as Morikawa Kaichirô (2003, 86) observes. The virtual space presents a credible counter-image to all current relativizing social and gender roles, positions as well as sexualities and identities. To the disempowered masculinity represented by *otaku* in Japanese

parlance, the popular culture and its reinforcement in video games and online pornography reacts with romantic masculinity clinging to classic elements of male existence (Azuma 2001, 33). *Otaku's* reality is the reality of his own hand-crafted metaphorical work, not the reality of general society. It is indeed a romantic, friendly, metaphorical work, softly melting fantasy and substantiality into one, and turning itself into a desire object and a projection site – from a pariah cliché into a hero, a figure of longing and, paradoxically, belonging.

A third category of masculinity in Japanese society is the recently coined term of "herbivore men" (*sôshoku[kei] danshi*): this seems to be a direct post-bubble-era rejection of traditional hegemonic salaryman masculinity. The term "herbivore men" is used to classify a new growing population of young Japanese men (Fukasawa 2009). The most conspicuous characteristics shared by "herbivore men" are the lack of active association with women (including sex), the refusal to adhere to old-generation masculinity and the accommodating engagement in typically feminine acts, such as cooking and eating sweets. Like the *otaku* lifestyle, "herbivore masculinity" is seen as a "funky youth culture" which emerged with the simultaneous questioning of the salaryman's mode of life (Chen 2012, 295), and increasingly displayed an innovative form of "new man" as opposed to the out-dated salaryman typology: permanent employment is not always a contextually available masculine resource (Charlebois 2013, 96). From this perspective, more leisure-oriented "herbivore masculinity" does not necessarily represent an authentic transgression, but instead follows broader socio-cultural trends. Accordingly, "herbivore masculinity" is constructed from alternative gender practices such as narcissistic body-management (the preoccupation with cosmetics and physical beauty), the primacy of consumption and the formation of intimate opposite-sex friendships (Chen 2012; Charlebois 2013), which result in a high focus on body aesthetics and effeminate looks, even using makeup and fashionable goods. It is still unclear whether the effeminate look of "herbivore men" might mean that they are not interested in pursuing a sexual relationship with women, or whether it is patterned upon changing tastes of women, and thus it is turning into a mirror image of a more suitable husband as the ultimate goal.

The two newly emerged alternative types of Japanese masculinity, challenging and, to a certain point, threatening to dissolve the "hegemonic masculinity" embodied by the salaryman reflect different versions of economic transformation and render various gendered geographies surrounding the concepts of home and family. "Herbivore men" present a mirror image to the "corporate warriors" of older generations, who focused almost exclusively on their jobs, rejecting domestic involvement completely. Their great emphasis on appearance and their estrangement from the stressful career of paid work find a counterbalance

in their high engagement in domestic affairs and the fascination with which they cultivate their houses (while their motivation for coupling or making families remains rather ambiguous). Their choices indicate a flight from, and a "feminization" of, traditional masculinity. The *otaku* category, on the other hand, is defined by its members' focus on consumption. Soaking up the entertainment of (mostly online) socializing, game-playing and virtual pornography, and neglecting their looks, they appear introverted and selfish, escaping from a commitment to real others. Instead, they place themselves in imaginary homes, either in cyberspace or in commercial maid-cafés, where fictional relations are pursued. From this perspective, it can be said that both "herbivore men" and *otaku* representatives are social consequences of the exploration of potentially different masculinity tracks. They generated alternative masculinities, which clash against the hegemonic image – and will at some point replace it, in spite of social inertia. These alternative phenomena of masculinity are symptoms of battles currently occurring in the invisible depths of the cyberspaces, both individually and socially.

While admittedly, comparable movements of alternative masculinities as a reaction to the hegemonic matrix represented by Japan's salaryman, such as *otaku* and more recently the "herbivore men," have emerged in the Western world as well, e.g., the "incels" (involuntary celibats) or MWGTOW (Men Who Go Their Own Way), the fundamental difference between the Japanese and the Western versions of alternative masculinities is that the Western versions are characterized by a deep-sense of "aggrieved entitlement" (Kimmel 2012, 2015) and the Japanese version is rather passive (or passive-aggressive), very much constructed around the idea of "endurance" (*gaman*) and "hard-work" (*doryoku*). In recent years, the socio-political construct of *ikumen* has emerged: "education dad," referring to that new model of masculine citizen who is both a breadwinner and a fatherly figure (Bienek 2018, 199–203; Kumagai 2012, 159; Vassallo 2017, 58–67). Nonetheless, the politico-economic model of *ikumen* is bound to fail due to the highly contradictory loyalties these men are facing in their everyday lives. On the one hand, the strong responsibilities at the workplace, with strictly reinforced relationships of hierarchy and obedience, and, on the other hand, the critical skills required at home, with a wife being, by the very nature of her socio-cultural background, more able to deal with children, household and communitarian duties. The focus on "home" seems to represent the opposite side of the work-home dichotomy, which echoes the traditional gender binary and expresses disappointment from and resistance to the world of work.

5. Conclusion: from misery and isolation to radical individual responsibility

> I separated from my wife seven years ago, when she caught me ex-changing messages with another [Japanese] woman. At that point, we had not had sexual intercourse for more than 4–5 years, more precisely, since my second child [a boy] had been conceived. Every time I had approached her, she rejected me, at first with reasons, then simply by turning away. I had heard from friends and coworkers that the situation was the same everywhere. But I could not take it anymore. I went online, and it was easy to find someone to talk to. We only talked. After my wife found out, I had to move out, and for more than two years, her father controlled my salary, and gave me a small amount to cover my rent and my daily expenses. She, her family and my family, threatened that they would go to my workplace [an important governmental institution in West-Japan] and tell them to fire me for moral misconduct. They did not agree to a divorce. In the two years that followed the separation, I got to know [online] a French lady, who was teaching French in the area. She became my girlfriend, and she gave me the strength and the courage to go to a lawyer and pursue an official divorce. It was complicated, but it worked out, it lasted more than two years and I had to pay 10,000,000 JPY [100,000 USD] compensation, and I did a loan for that, but in the end, I got back control of my salary. Now I am married to the French lady and we have baby-twins. My employer was very supportive, particularly be-cause this is no rare situation. I am a happy man now. (TH, 45, divorced once, re-married, one daughter and one son from the first marriage; two baby-daughters from the second marriage)

Globalization and the liberalization of the Internet has had an unprecedented impact on the social lives of men in Japan. The Japanese sex industry, arguably accounting for 2–3% of its current GDP, particularly since the late 2000s, but in the glorious past of the economic miracle, notably in the 1980s, having been much higher, has been largely regarded as the most dynamic and "fulfilling" in the world. In addition to the "real-life" sex industry, the virtual space has started to offer, in-creasingly after the Internet had become an affordable commodity and strongly influenced by the rise and proliferation of the smartphones, valid alternatives to it. Online socializing and dating, pornography, video games are presently viewed as just another place where men can find an outlet for releasing the tension and frus-tration accumulated during long hours of work and mandatory family activities, compounded by an ongoing lack of affection and interest, both from their kids and their spouses. Recent years have seen an alarming surge in virtual communities of male netizens, willing to disengage from traditional forms of interacting in the real, physical world and replace them with digital versions. Specific elements such

as the anonymity provided by the cyberspace, the illusion of a huge availability of potential environments, a clear absence from daily participation, have been said to be the reasons for the digital zone to quickly turn from a leisurely activity tolerated by prevalent norms into a subversive clock-bomb for social engineers and family politicians.

The resulting insights from my informal conversations with the subjects, specifically when they unfolded in the natural rhythm of isolated voices allowing themselves to be heard, possibly for the first time in their lives, and to be at ease with someone who was genuinely, authentically listening to them, were astounding. In time, and with a great amount of patience on my side, these voices migrated from the virtual space with conventional small-talk into the real, physical one; it was during face-to-face encounters that the crushing volume of repression, of alienation and of frustration actually came to be expressed, performed, released from the dark depths of individual suffering. Keeping emotional distance and providing a mental environment of safety for those men who did dare to leave the virtual universe in order to talk to me, were fundamental strategies in bridging the unknown, and in giving the faceless actors an identity and a voice – for which they were both grateful and relieved. Their sense of self had been increasingly shattered in the course of their attempts to align with social expectations of fulfilling their duties (at the workplace, in the family, in the immediate community), but there was no reward in the form of gentle, honest appreciation. The slow loss of confidence and energy can be explained solely by the term "to be taken for granted" – and it was a slow, painful death, rather than a sudden lethal shock.

The access to international masculine role-models, made possible by the unfiltered Internet connection since the late 2000s, allowed the confrontation with alternative lifestyles and the promise (as elusive as this is in consumption societies) that romantic happiness and marital bliss can be achieved with the right woman on one's side, that competence (instead of blind obedience) and ambition (instead of passive aggressiveness) are permitted, and that love and existential fulfillment are birthrights. Learning to live alone, finding goals and life trajectories which relate to oneself, and then seeing along the way if he can find the right partner (that is, someone who accepts him for who he truly is, flaws and dreams included), are clear tendencies among men under-30, who only cautiously enter life-long commitments with women. The experience of previous generations shows that the most charming and dedicated women can radically change for the worse after the marriage papers are signed and the extremely expansive weddings ceremonies are finished. A man in his early 40s, father of three little kids, put it this way: "You know that story about a girl kissing a frog, which turns afterwards into a charming prince, and they marry and live

happily ever after? Well, I kissed and married a charming princess, who turned afterwards into an ugly, asexual frog."

For those already in unhappy, sexless and/or loveless marriages (also known as *katei-nai rikon*, literally "divorce [de facto] within marriage"), separating and getting a divorce is a radical step, carefully ignored as a social phenomenon by mainstream media. More importantly, divorces are scrupulously avoided by Japanese (house-)wives, because "the difference between a well-off woman and a poor one is a certificate of divorce," as a sociologist-colleague put it bluntly (and informally). An under-category has been the surge of the *jukunen-rikon* since the mid-2000s ("divorces in adult age," referring to those divorces occurring among citizens in their 50s or, more frequently, in their 60s): this type of divorce, overwhelmingly filed by women, occurs after the retirement of the husband, when the wife realizes that she has now to deal with an ever-present person who had, in fact, never been at home all their married life. Described as "oversized garbage" (*sodai-gomi*) or "wet fallen leaves" (*nure-ochiba*), growing numbers of retired men find themselves abandoned, lonely and poor after a life of hard-work and emotional scarcity.

As it turns out, *otaku* is neither a threat to the hegemonic masculinity in Japan posed by the salaryman, nor is the paradigm of "herbivore men" an attack on its apparently almighty existential model. In fact, the salaryman model is challenged from within, by men questioning the prevalent status quo and searching for answers beyond the official public discourse. Educated and socialized in the feminist era with its specific gender-related upheavals, but in social structures still firmly anchored in patriarchally traditional settings, men find themselves torn between biological wiring and societal pressure, reinforced daily by mainstream media and personal experiences. The virtual space and its main promoter, the digital media represented by smartphones and dating apps, SNS (social network sites) or dating sites, are solely an outlet for releasing anger and frustration, pent-up emotions and incomprehensible feelings of inadequacy, loneliness, vulnerability, exhaustion, and powerlessness. The victims of this approach (unknowing women on the other side of the apathetical screens) turn, more often than not, into bitter, jaded, angry persons, deeply wounded by never formulated rejections, never acknowledged humiliations and never enunciated apologies.

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