

Meet Japan's beaten generation

By GEOFF BOTTING

Spa! (May 1-8)

The economy is in its longest period of expansion in postwar history, university grads are being hired at levels not seen since the bubble economy of the late 1980s, and the price of a square meter of land in Ginza is at its highest level in 14 years. Yes, the newspapers are again brimming with good news about Japan's economy.

So why isn't today's generation of young adults smiling? According to Spa!, twenty- and



thirty-somethings are wracked by a host of anxieties. They fret about job security, in addition to what they see as ominous trends in sports, entertainment, the Internet, the environment and so on.

Many in this beaten generation view themselves as members of a downtrodden class, locked in a hopeless battle against their more powerful and financially secure elders.

Nothing hardened that belief more than the trial of Takafumi Horie, who was handed a 2 1/2-year jail sentence in March for accounting fraud. Horie, 34, a maverick in the stuffy world of Japanese business who did away with neckties at the office, founded the Internet company Livedoor.

In his bid to take over Fuji Television, he was seen as an inspiring symbol of the new style of business: young, ambitious and posing a direct challenge to the old guard who ran Fuji TV.

The violation he was found guilty of usually results in

suspended sentences. But Horie got jail time. Many young people saw the case as a symbolic victory for the establishment.

But for many young working adults, the sense of malaise comes from factors much closer to home. Just ask Ikke Ikeda, 27, who considers himself a member of the growing number of Japan's "working poor." Though a university graduate, he is among the roughly 2.5 million people who work as temps. Ikeda's full-time job at a factory of truck maker Hino Motors earns him 223,000 yen — in a good month.

It's not easy money. In summer, temperatures inside the factory rocket to more than 40 C and in winter they drop near freezing.

But what concerns him most is job security. "I'm always afraid of being laid off," Ikeda confides. "My contract is only for one- or two-month periods. Even though I work really hard, I'm in a state of fear every month."

The plight of Ikeda and others might not be so bad if they could expect upward mobility at some point in their careers. True, the number of grads getting career-entry positions right out of college is increasing. Yet at the same time, many of those who in previous years were forced to work as "freeters"—unemployed young people or workers lacking full-time jobs—have found themselves stuck indefinitely in a rut, research suggests.

A survey of 2,000 freeters in Tokyo aged 18-29 shows that in 2001 about three-quarters of the men had made some attempt to become employed on a salaried basis. In 2006, only about half bothered to do so. What's more, three-quarters of those who aspired to become regular employees were successful in 2001, compared to only 59 percent during 2006, according to the survey conducted by the Japan Institute for Labor Policy and Training.

As Yukie Hori, a researcher at the institute, concludes: "If you can't get regular work at the point you finish school, then getting it later on will prove difficult."

With so many people suffering such bleak prospects, perhaps it's no wonder that a new type of depression has emerged. Psychiatrist Rika Kagawa refers to it as "30s depression."

It's main symptom that differentiates it from common forms of

depression is that its sufferers blame other people or society rather than themselves for their problems. "They complain about their companies or their bosses," Kagawa says.

"Whenever there are more successful or positive people around, you also get a backlash, where the sense of, 'How come it can't be me?' just grows stronger."

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