

# Flexibility or Inequality? Japan's Dispatched Workers in a Neoliberal Era

Huiyan Fu

## Abstract

The paper is based on an original, fieldwork-based research that examines 'dispatched workers' (*haken*), an emerging non-regular labour force in Japan, who bear much resemblance to those involved in temporary agency work (TAW) in many industrialised countries. Since the burst of the bubble economy in the early 1990s, Japan has been mired in its worst post-war economic recession and its non-regular workers have increased exponentially; the latest figure shows that one out of three in the national workforce is identified as a non-regular worker. It is widely observed that the swelling 'peripheral' labour as opposed to the shrinking 'core' labour is the single most important change that is taking place in the Japanese labour market and corporate human resource management.

Among a wide-ranging and bewildering variety of non-regular labour arrangements, dispatched workers are a newly legalised and fast-growing category of non-regular workers. They have received great importance in the state's neoliberal deregulation reforms which celebrate free-market principles and prefer more flexible and informal employment contracts. At the same time, they have also assumed considerable symbolic significance in public debate, especially with regard to a heightened sense of social divide or 'widening gaps' (*kakusa*). By contrasting official debates, which invest dispatched workers with a blend of positive and negative values portrayed as either benefiting or besetting the Japanese way of life, with an intimate look at complex and diverse individual experiences, the aim of the paper is to draw heuristic comparisons between forces of ideological discourse and individual workers' incentives, choices and decision-making in everyday life.

## Author biography

Huiyan Fu (DPhil, MPhil, University of Oxford) is the author of *An Emerging Non-Regular Labour Force in Japan: The Dignity of Dispatched Workers* (Routledge 2011). Her main research interest lies in HRM, political discourse and everyday work life in contemporary Japan. She was born and grew up in China, has studied and worked in Japan for more than 5 years, and is currently a visiting HRM professor of International Business at Aalen University of Applied Sciences in Germany.