

# WORKAHOLISM: IT'S NOT IN THE BLOOD

*The argument that the Japanese are by nature diligent is not supported by historical facts. Quite the reverse, in fact.*

BY TETSURŌ KATŌ

**K**ARŌSHI (death from overwork) is a new word in the Japanese language, and one which might be said to symbolize Japan's workaholic society. It is most often used in applications for compensation, especially in cases of cardio-vascular disease brought on by excessive work and occupational stress. The Japanese government does not keep statistics on karōshi per se, but a survey by the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper found that the Ministry of Labor had compensated 196 cases of work-related deaths between 1987 and 1994. The National Defense Council for Victims of Karōshi argues that the figures are considerably higher than that.

In 1993, in its *World Labour Report 1993*, the International Labor Organization addressed the problem of karōshi and workaholism for the first time: "The Japanese," it said, "work longer hours than most other industrial nations: officially 2,044 hours in 1990 (compared with 1,646 in France, for example). In fact, the working year is generally much longer because of unpaid 'service overtime.'" There are no accurate statistics, but most karōshi victims are believed to have logged more than 3,000 hours a year on the job—roughly twice the annual working hours of people in France, Germany, and Sweden.

Not only do Japanese have longer normal working hours than people in most other countries, they put in more overtime too. Statistics prepared by the Ministry of Labor show the average worker logging 1,920 hours on the job in 1993, which is roughly on par with Americans or Britons, but, as the ILO takes pains to point out, that does not include "service overtime," for which no wages are paid. The statistics prepared by the Ministry of Labor only count paid overtime, but the Management and Coordination Agency has done its own surveys, talking to working families directly. It finds that real working hours a year are about 350 more than the Ministry of Labor statistics suggest. One can assume that the discrepancy represents average unpaid "service overtime." There are also major differences in the hours worked depending on one's



A 1903 report by the then Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce describes the forced 15-18 hour work shifts of women in the spinning factories. The report portrays the men as work shy.

gender and the size of one's company. Most of the big companies have gone to a five-day workweek, but it is still common for smaller firms to require their employees to come in on Saturdays. Women account for 40% of the working population, but most are employed in part-time jobs and so log fewer hours. The Ministry of Labor statistics include these part-time workers in the averages. By contrast, the Management and Coordination Agency found that full-time male workers aged 25-49 put in more than 2,500 hours a year. That means they work four months longer each year than do their German and French counterparts. Further-

more, the official statistics do not factor in commuting time (on average over two hours a day to and from the Tokyo suburbs) in Japan's infamously crowded trains.

The average Japanese business person takes only half his paid holidays. Ostensibly this is because he does not want to inconvenience his fellow workers and would like to save up a bit of a cushion in case of illness, but the real reason is that people who use all their holiday allowance are seen as less committed to their jobs when personnel reviews are made.

Long working hours translate into little free time. "Long" holidays are gener-

ally less than a week—including Saturday and Sunday—and most tend to be spent in horrendous traffic jams, bumper to bumper with the thousands of others going home to visit their parents for the New Year and *O-bon* summer holidays.

The *Yomiuri Shimbun* newspaper polled the Japanese public on the problem of *karōshi* and found that 48% replied "yes" to the question, "Are you concerned that *karōshi* might hit either you or a family member?" One might rightly ask, therefore, if they are so concerned about dying, why do they continue to work the long hours the company demands? Often, the answer is that the Japanese by nature like to work and work hard.

#### NATURALLY HARD-WORKING?

At the dawn of the modern era the Japanese were not the workaholics we like to believe they were. Our ancestors sang the praises of leisure.

During the Edo Period (1603-1868), merchants and craftsmen would generally take the 1st, 15th, and 28th of each month off. They also had numerous other holidays and festival days as determined by their industry or guild. One indication of the working rhythms of Edo-Period craftsmen comes from the 1794 *machibure* (local public ordinances) of Osaka. From this one can infer that the craftsman began work at 8:00 in the morning and knocked off at 6:00 in the evening. At 10:00am and 2:30pm he had scheduled breaks, plus an hour for lunch. Between April 8 and August 1, the lunch break was extended by another hour. Regular holidays were taken on the 1st and 15th of each month, plus the *Gosekku* holidays (five, seasonal one-day festivals). Work also shut down from December 25 to January 9 for the New Year holiday, and from July 11 to 20 for *O-bon*.

Farmers and fishermen also had a number of festivals and rites to perform to propitiate the gods of the harvest. Their working hours were, at any rate, shorter than those of today's corporate warriors. Seasonal and weather factors limited the number of days that could be worked, and lack of electricity meant that work ended when it was dark. Local communities had their own holidays ("village play-days") that went by such names as *shōgatsu* (New Year), *kamigoto* (Shinto ritual), and *dontaku* (from the Dutch word for Sunday, *zondag*). In the early Edo Period, these village play-days accounted for perhaps 20 to 30 days a year, but by the time the period was ending they had expanded

to 60 to 80. Improvements in agricultural techniques and productivity gave farmers more days off, days that gradually lost their religious significance and became leisure time. The holidays were for the village or the family, and attendance at weddings, funerals, and festivals was a duty.

The ordinary warrior (*samurai*) in the Edo Period had it even easier. The country was closed off to the rest of the world so there were no security threats from overseas, nor were there any domestic wars to be fought. Work consisted of



Push: For most Japanese businesspeople, the long working day begins on the trains.

*sanban-zutome* at the lord's castle, essentially a 24-hour shift once every three days. After that, the warriors were free to pursue learning and art as they wished. Some did not even do that much. Asahi Bunzaemon, a lower-ranked samurai of the Nagoya area left a detailed journal of life in the Genroku Period (late 17th and early 18th centuries). He had castle duty only once every nine days and after that was free to enjoy himself as he wished (the euphemism of the time, "train at home").

In the Meiji Period (1868-1912), self-employed craftsmen and merchants generally worked an eight-hour day beginning at 8:00am and ending at 4:00pm with short breaks at 10:00, 12:00, and 3:00, though there were some seasonal variations. When the Meiji government took over in 1868, it set up the "1-6 holiday" system, under which all dates

ending in a 1 or 6 were off. There were also 10 holidays a year for rites associated with the imperial family (1873-1878). The 1-6 system was reformed when the Western calendar was adopted in 1873. Workers under the new seven-day week had all day Sunday and half of Saturday off, a practice that eventually became the norm at government agencies and schools. The 1-6 system provided a minimum of six holidays a month, which is more than today's children get since most schools only give one full Saturday a month off (from April, two). And even

after the switch to the Western calendar, there were still the imperial rites to take off, along with local and occupational festivals, so the total number of holidays each year did not change all that much. For a long time, it was customary to take time off during the heat of the summer, too, since work tended to slow anyway. Like the samurai of Edo, the bureaucrats of Meiji believed in short hours. Records from 1892 show that they worked from 8:00 to 4:00 in the spring (April-June), half days from 8:00 to 12:00 in the summer (July-August), and from 9:00 to 5:00 in the fall and winter (September-March). They also had about 20 summer vacation days.

The objective of the Meiji government in adopting the 1-6 system was to standardize holidays, which up to that point had differed according to locale and class. However, during the process of modernization and Westernization, vacation days were cut and working hours grew longer. In 1922, the bureaucracy lost

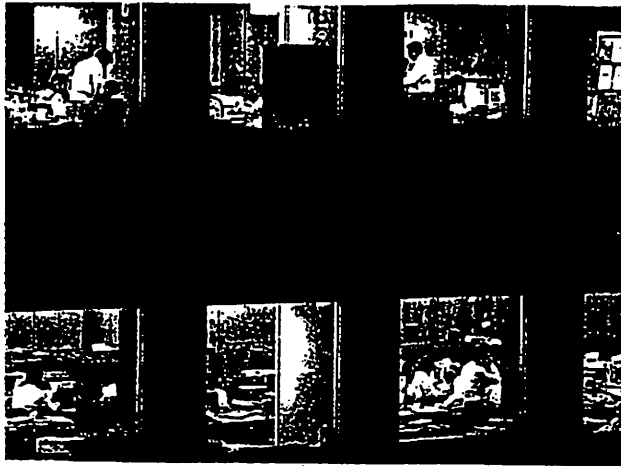
its summer vacation and was required to work until 3:00 rather than going home at noon. Even that was lost in 1938 as Japan was gearing up for war and government employees were told to put in full days even during the summer. The loss of vacation and leisure time was a direct result of Meiji policies to build a "rich country and strong army" and "foster industry," as well as the accompanying military-style discipline and the rise of factory work. In education, the idea that "time is money" took over and modern time constraints became the norm. During the Showa Period (1927-1989), the Edo Period "samurai's time" with its abundant leisure, the "farmer's time" with its gearing to natural rhythms, and the "merchant's time" with its traditional 1-6 holidays gave way to "military and war time," "factory rhythms," and "company time."

**GETTING USED TO WORK**

Factories may have propelled modernization, but the Japanese did not suddenly become diligent workers just because they had factory jobs. To Western observers in the Meiji Period, the best adjective to describe Japanese workers was not "diligent" but "lazy." In the *Journal of Japanese Studies* (Vol. 14, No. 2, 1988), Austrian Japanologist Sepp Linhart has this to say: "To Western observers of the Meiji Period, the Japanese exhibited none of today's stereotypical characteristics of a diligent, hard-working

people. Karl Scherzer, a member of the first Austro-Hungarian delegation to the Far East, wrote in his diary shortly after the Meiji Restoration that the Japanese seemed much more cheerful, pleasure-seeking, and given to drink and showed more aversion to work than the Chinese he had observed. Similarly, at the turn of the century, a number of German missionaries and others who had stayed in Japan for several years had little respect for the diligence of the Japanese worker." Among the period observations that Professor Linhart cites are: "Constant work has hardly been known in Japan" and, "The Japanese worker is hardly willing to submit himself to the military discipline which according to our standards must rule the modern factory. He takes his holiday whenever he likes, he comes and goes as he pleases, and if he is scolded for such behavior, he leaves the company."

Native records also support this image of the work-averse Japanese. The Meiji Era Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce (the predecessor of today's Ministry of International Trade and Industry) published a report on working conditions in 1903 that gives a detailed picture of what life was like for Japanese laborers in the early 20th century. While it does describe the deplorable 15 to 18-hour forced-labor workdays of young girls in the spinning factories, it also depicts workmen who are anything but the diligent corporate warriors of modern Japan. Among its descriptions: "they have no desire to save," "most take the day after payday off," and "few give any thought to a lifelong career." Most of the workmen of the period were unskilled and had been on the job less than three years. About half the workforce quit in any one year. Mitsubishi Nagasaki Shipyards, one



Still slaving away: Lights that never go out.

ROBORU HASHIMOTO

of the key industries of the time, had an attrition rate of 6% a month (1898) and absenteeism of 21% (1908). Absenteeism was low during the winter months between November and January, but predictably high during July and August. Everybody came to work on the 5th of the month—it was payday—but heavy pockets made for lazy workers and lots of hooky playing between the 6th and the 9th. After the 9th, when most of their wages were gone, workers began to get serious about their jobs again. All the workers would work most hard on the 20th, which was when the books were closed for wage calculations. The report understandably describes this as a "cavalier attitude towards work." (NIRA, *Research into the Diligence of Industrial Workers*, 1985).

Lest we present a distorted picture we should note that industrial workers represented a small percentage of the population (only 15% of employed workers in 1900). Wars with China and Russia and the beginning of the Taisho Period (1912-1926) saw job retention rates and years on the job rise, with a corresponding decline in absenteeism. Between rigid educational systems and compulsory military service, "military-style discipline" finally began to make headway in the factories.

One cannot look much beyond the modern period for the historical roots of the "diligent, hard-working Japanese." As the report from the NIRA (National Institute for Research Advancement), Japan's largest private think tank, concludes: "With the exception of a few core workers, the industrial workers of the Meiji and Taisho periods had poor attitudes towards their work.... They were unstable and usually absent for 10% to 20% of prescheduled work." It also notes that

workers "had little sense of belonging to their companies; attrition rates were high, retention rates low." Finally, "it was not until after WWII, from between 1950 and 1955, that diligence emerged and played a visible role."

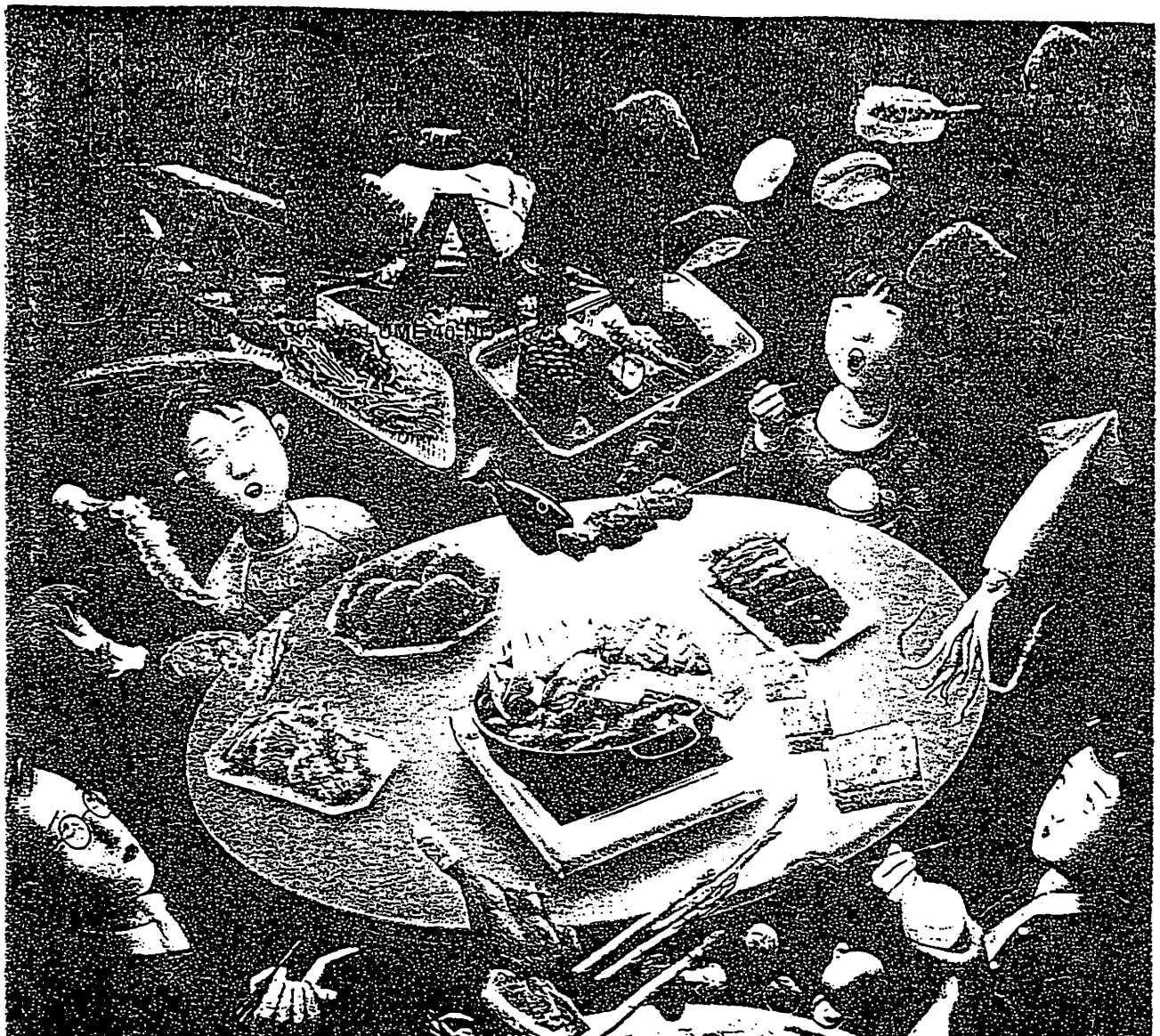
The idea that diligence is something that comes naturally to the Japanese is a myth that was created after WWII. How hard a country works is dependent on history, on the emphasis it places on freedom, human rights, and welfare. Witness Germany, once famed for its diligence and now one of the foremost proponents of the

shorter working hours and greater leisure. In Japan, the diligence myth came about because of the long work hours required in the catch-up game of the high growth period. During the "bubble" period, the myth led to such popular expressions as the jingle for a (caffeine-laden) tonic drink that went, "Can you keep up the fight 24 hours a day, Japanese businessman working full blast beyond national borders?" Japanese-style growth and Japanese-style management take "service overtime" for granted. They are at once the power behind our affluence and a land mine of accumulating physical and mental stress for our overworked people.

Japanese used to understand the need to rest when tired, and after we were rested we took the time to enjoy life with our families and friends. In the post-bubble year of 1994, the Economic Planning Agency finally decided to deal with *karoshi* head on in a report titled *Overwork and Health Problems*. It urges the businessperson to adopt "healthy values" and to change his or her thinking from "loyalty to the company" to "sincerity towards the job" (*Economic Analysis*, Vol. 133.) These values are making some headway among the younger generation and it is only a matter of time before the myths of the "economic animal" and the "hard-working Japanese" also meet their demise. ©

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# WHAT'S FOR DINNER?



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