

Do Traditional Values Have a Place in Modern Industrialized Japan?

By Lars-Hendrik Greiwe



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In 1969, a worker of the largest newspaper company in Japan died of a stroke at the age of 29. His death marked an important moment in the working world in Japan. It is considered to be the first case of *karoshi* — literally translated as “death from overwork”. Since that incident, *karoshi* has become a social phenomenon among the Japanese workforce. Estimates suggest that nearly 10,000 workers die every year due to too much work-related stress.

Dying as a result of too much work seems to be a peculiar event when regarded from a Western perspective. When confronted with too much work, the so called “burn-out” syndrome seems to be a more common consequence in Western countries, usually leading to work suspension rather than carrying on one’s work until death. Although heart attacks and strokes account for the major medical causes of *karoshi*-related deaths, the meaning of *karoshi* already suggests that the origin of these bodily malfunctions actually lies within the great workload Japanese workers are willing to take. This social characteristic on such a large scale is thought to be found only in Japan, and therefore needs to be explained by analyzing

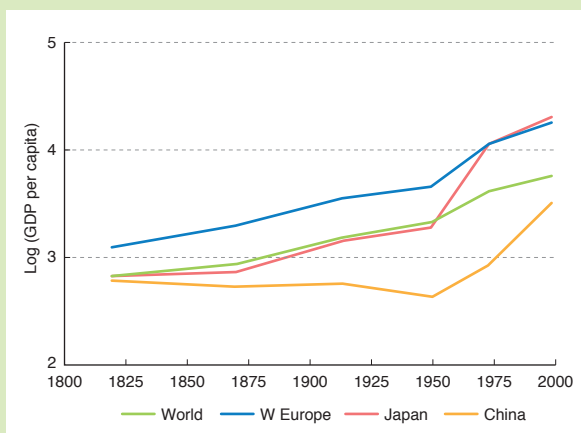
current processes in Japanese society.

Efficiency as a reason for overworking can already be excluded as an argument, as Japan’s productivity is the lowest among the G7 nations, ranking 9th among the 30 OECD countries (“*Karoshi (Work to Death)*” in Japan by Atsuko Kanai, *Journal of Business Ethics*, 84, 2009). Economic interests could play a role, but as “[p]eople work to live, not to die”, as Kanai says, it seems peculiar that Japan in particular has such a well-identified problem with employees dying from their workload. Cultural influences in Japan might be an explanation as to why Japanese workers deliberately risk their health and in many cases work until they are no longer capable, either due to illness or death. The history of Japan provides an important foundation to understanding the cultural development of Japanese society during the last 400 years.

Historical Development

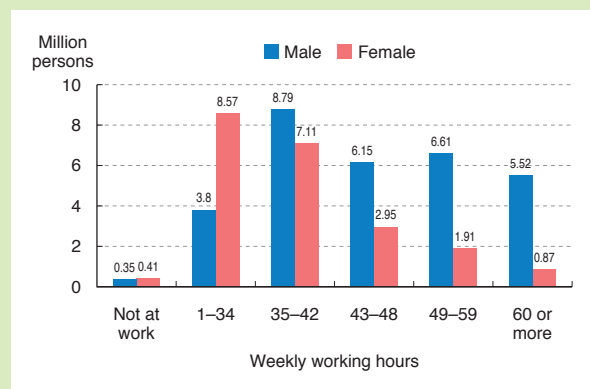
In order to protect itself from the negative effects of international trade, Japan became a closed country during the

CHART 1
Japan’s GDP per capita in the global context, 1820-1998



Source: “Japan’s alternating phases of growth and outlook for the future” by K. Fukao & O. Saito.
<http://www.uq.edu.au/economics/cepa/docs/seminar/papers-nov2006/Fukao+Saito-Paper.pdf>

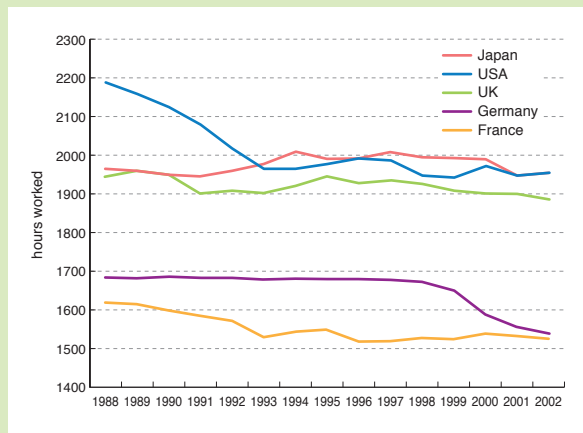
CHART 2
Numbers of non-agricultural employees by weekly working hours in Japan



Note: The total number of non-agricultural employees was 53.19 million in 2004.
Source: “Numbers of non-agricultural employees by weekly working hours in Japan” by K. Iwasaki, M. Takahashi & A. Nakata (2006). *Health problems due to long working hours in Japan: working hours, workers’ compensation (karoshi), and preventive measures*. *Industrial Health Kawasaki*, 44(4), 538. Retrieved from: http://www.jicosh.gr.jp/old/niihen/indu_hel/2006/pdf/indhealth_44_4_537.pdf

CHART 3

Comparison of total annual hours worked by country



Source: “*Karoshi (Work to Death) in Japan*” by A. Kanai, *Journal of Business Ethics*, 2009, Vol. 84, 209-216. DOI: 10.1007/s10551-008-9701-8

Edo Period. The samurai at the time formed the predominant social class, effectively establishing the era’s social and moral order. These morals were embodied in *Bushido* — literally “the way of the warrior” — which describes the samurai code based on the seven virtues of justice, courage, kindness, politeness, honesty, honor and loyalty. These virtues were intended to guide the samurai in times of peace. Due to the importance of the samurai, the assumption can be made that their moral principles set a great example for Japanese society as a whole. Especially when regarding the issue of *karoshi*, the principles of honor and loyalty play a significant role. These two principles obliged the samurai to stay loyal to their lord, and serve or fight in his name until death, if necessary.

After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the shogunate had to hand over administrative power to the emperor, who during the rule of the shoguns had solely ceremonial functions. With the opening of the country, Japan had to catch up with the industrialized world in terms of development. As Japanese society was traditionally an agrarian society, rapid modernization followed, adjusting the national workforce to work in the manufacturing sector and to meet the standards of developed nations. But as *Chart 1* shows, it was not until after World War II that Japanese economic development could reach the same level as in Western Europe. Whereas the 1950s and 1960s were a time of great economic growth, this upward trend seemed to slow down drastically in 1973, as Japanese per capita GDP came to equal that of Western Europe.

Japan managed to adjust its economic standards to the European level within one century, while most of its economic growth actually occurred within the last 60 years. Despite being surpassed by China as an economic power, Japan still has the third-largest economy in the world. The sociologist Max Weber argued that the more modern a society becomes and the further

it develops, the less it will rely on cultural elements, naming religion as a prime example. Additionally people tend to rationalize their actions and start to calculate which measurements need to be taken to achieve a certain self-determined goal (“Max Weber” by Sung Ho Kim, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2008). This theory would very much exclude any influence of *Bushido* on the current working behavior of employees in Japan. Before accepting this application of Weber’s theory as a fact, it is necessary to more thoroughly investigate the actual origins of *karoshi*.

Karoshi in Detail

Although the first case of *karoshi* was reported in 1969, it was not until the early 1980s that the term first appeared as describing an illness or condition. The following description was used in order to define *karoshi*:

[A] condition of being permanently unable to work or dead due to acutely attacking ischemic heart disease such as myocardial infraction [sic], or acute heart failure caused by cerebral vascular diseases[.] (Kanai)

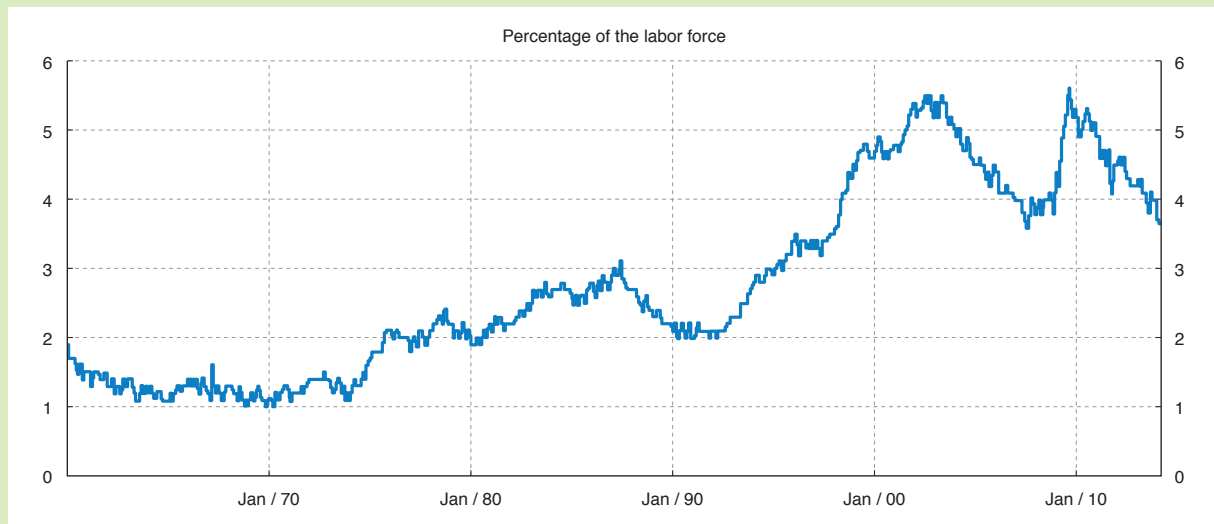
While there are also female workers that suffer from negative health effects leading to *karoshi*, the main share of workers experiencing these is made up of males. In particular during longer weekly working hours the share of women decreases, leaving comparatively more men working in the hour ranges that are most susceptible to health impairments (49-59 hours and 60-plus hours).

The Japanese Labor Market

These long working hours are often explained as the need to adapt to the working situation that Japan has undergone after economic growth slowed down in the 1970s. Whereas during Japan’s economic boom, workers were usually employed for life under the so-called “seniority wage system”, their employment now is more closely linked to the results of their work, adding greater performance pressure to their working lives and leading to greater physical and psychological pressure than during times of economic growth. This development is underlined by the redistribution of jobs — in 2001 there were 1.29 million fewer full-time jobs and 1.7 million more part-time jobs in the Japanese labor market than in 1995, which points to the trend towards “non-regular employment”.

The total percentage of workers unemployed has also increased drastically since the 1970s. Whereas the unemployment rate fluctuated between 2.5% and 3% in the 1980s and later even decreased up until 1993, it reached its highest level in October 2002, as well as at the end of 2009 with

CHART 4

Japan unemployment rate

Source: <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/japan/unemployment-rate> (select "1960 TO 2014" as time span)

more than 5.5% of male Japanese workers unemployed, according to Kanai. Although this rate dropped back to around 4% in 2014, it is still considered a high unemployment rate in Japan.

It is also worth noting that younger male workers in the 20-40 age bracket generally face the highest rates of unemployment, which is coincidentally in the range of workers with the longest working hours, making the fear of unemployment one possible originating factor.

Possible Origins of *Karoshi*

Arguing, however, that the fear of unemployment drives employees to risk their own death while working does not seem to be a sufficient reason, as unemployment is an issue that many other countries face as well. John Levy, professor at the University of New Jersey, argues that people are less likely to accept risks when aiming for a "gain" but become more risk-taking when facing a "loss" ("Applications of Prospect Theory to Political Science", *Synthese* 135(2), 2003).

With regard to Japanese workers, it is therefore understandable that in times of economic growth and job security a worker is rather unlikely to risk his health in order to achieve an economic gain. In times of crisis, though, the worker would go as far as to accept the risk of death, in order to avoid the loss of his job.

The economic development of Japan underlines this observation, as overworking became a problem only when growth nearly stagnated in Japan and great changes in the labor market took place. Although there are reports of death by overwork in countries other than Japan, there is little evidence that any other country is affected by such deaths on the same

scale as Japan.

The assumption can therefore be made that traditional values passed on in Japanese culture from the era of the samurai are responsible in part for Japanese workers, mainly male, to go as far as to sacrifice their lives for their jobs. Although not clearly visible at first, it seems to be obvious when regarding the issue in greater detail that it must be the values of loyalty and honor that force workers today to go beyond their physical and psychological limits.

This observation nevertheless does not contradict Max Weber's theory. Cases of *karoshi* only started occurring when economic growth in Japan slowed down and most of Japan's modernization had taken place. It can therefore be concluded that workers, although originally turning away from cultural influences during modernization, started to feel more drawn back to their traditional culture in times of economic hardship. Traditional values, therefore, do indeed have a place in a highly modernized society such as Japan. The issue of *karoshi* yet remains an unresolved conflict between tradition and modernization. **JS**

Lars-Hendrik Greiwe is a senior undergraduate student at Amsterdam University College in the Netherlands. He spent the past semester at Keio University on an overseas exchange program and plans to find internships and community service projects before going into a Masters program.