OTSUKARESAMADESHITA!:
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF JAPAN'S TOXIC WORK CULTURE

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Japan is known for its excessive work culture and dedication to work, which led the world to view the country as a 'workaholic'. The 'white collar heroes' or locally known as the 'salary man' have been credited with boosting the Japanese economy, at the expense of their own lives. Approximately 1,949 work-related deaths and suicide attempts were recorded in 2019, all due to overwork. This paper analyses the Japanese work culture from the bio political power relations and discourse theory using an ethnography approach and participant observation methodology.

Key words: work culture, Japan, bio political power and discourse, salary man, suicide

INTRODUCTION

The word *ganbaru* or hard work defines the Japanese work culture where employees there are known for their strict work ethics and discipline, enthusiasm and organisational skills. Loyalty and reputation are traits much valued and respected in traditional Japan from Edo Period until now. The country has a long history of loyalty and slavery where both citizens and slaves are bound by the Bushido code of conduct that is premised on obedience, which has led the latter 'to live in conditions that border on poverty'.[1] People faced economic hardships, and their daily needs were not met save for the basic necessities of life. Nevertheless, the people were urged to "sacrifice for the country" as an expression of their loyalty so that the country can advance. This generation is known as the generation that "owns", and their nature of loyalty and self-sacrifice are passed on to the next generation[2].

Many employees still feel guilty if they leave their workplace on time especially if their boss is still in the office.[3] Mr. TS, a 28 year old worker at a well-known automotive company in Japan, said in an interview that a Japanese first life priority is work. He admitted that the legacy of the older generation that places emphasis on work was admirable but it was very difficult to emulate. As he was unable to voice his opinions, he adhered to the inherited pattern of work culture which is supported and cherished by the Japanese community at large.[4]

Japan's rise as a global power is a result of its appreciation of its national values by its citizens. During the Edo period where the samurai leadership reigned supreme, for

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[1] Behrooz Asgari, "Karoshi and Karou-Jisatsu in Japan: Causes, Statistics and Prevention Mechanisms,"*Asia Pacific Business & Economics Perspectives*, Winter, 2016, p.49.

[2] Behrooz Asgari, "Karoshi and Karou-Jisatsu in Japan: Causes, Statistics and Prevention Mechanisms,", p.49

[3] Hiroshi Ono, "Why Do the Japanese Work Long Hours? Sociological Perspectives on Long Working Hours in Japan," *Japan Labor Issues*, 2018.

[4] Author's interview with TS, Osaka, August, 2019.

example, this value has brought glory to Japan that had a more lasting legacy r than any other samurai period, which spanned 250 years [5] Loyalty and total submission of followers to their superior who sacrifice for the sake of hierarchy have shaped and produced a strong Japanese cultural character. Furthermore, during the Meiji era, that spirit allowed Japan to catch up with the West and inspired it to surpass the West, and which gave birth the famous slogan "*Datsuo Nuo*" namely "live Asia go to West"!.[6] After World War II ended, the Bushido derivative values became a tool for the State to encourage its people to rise from adversity. Japan's transition into a full industrialist nation at the same time marked many changes that took place in Japan that transformed it into a modern state.

Japan's national values and culture have been discussed by researchers outside of Japan, and one of the famous great works titled "Japan as number one" by Ezra Vogel, helped the creation of "Miracles Japan " , which was an advertisement for Japan's capability not only in Asia but also globally.[7] The book described Japan's position in the international world and the author eulogised and approved its national values which embodied the character of Japanese society. Japan also emerged as a role model for developing countries who wanted to emulate its success story.

During the Meiji Restoration period, the state played a strong role in its modernisation process. It implemented sound economic policies which helped speed up the country's economic development. Japan was able to meet its domestic needs and achieved peak success in the global economic arena.[8] It emerged as an economic force to be contend with. Post war Japan was given the leeway by occupying forces of United states to complete the process of building its country under the supervision of the latter.

METHODOLOGY

In order to examine the characteristics of Japanese working culture, an ethnography approach was deemed most suitable for data collection and therefore, this study adopted a qualitative method using narrative inquiry. The inquiry focuses on how people express their feelings to make sense of their experience, and in understanding the phenomenon from the perspective of people who experience it.[9] Oral interviews were conducted with four male Japanese workers employed in a famous automotive company in Kansai area. One female academician was also interviewed to gain her perspective on this issue.

Semi-structured and unstructured interviews and participant observation were the main methods of oral narrative inquiry and the sessions were conducted in 2018, 2019 and 2020. Both individual and group interviews were conducted. Participants' initials were used to protect their privacy. The questions focused on the participants' priority and goal in life, their views of the work culture in Japan, its challenges and obstacles, and how they deal with them, and also, on how the authority use culture as a tool to control and shape the modern day Japanese work culture.

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[5] Andrew Gordon, "A Modern History of Japan From Tokugawa Times to the Present," Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.

[6] Gordon, "A Modern History of Japan From Tokugawa Times to the Present.

[7] Donald S. Zagoria and Ezra F. Vogel, "Japan as Number One," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 57, No. 5, 1979, .p.1187, acessed December, 2019.

[8] Robert Wade, "*Governing the Market*," Princeton University Press, 2018, p.25, accessed on December 2019.

[9] Barkhuizen, G., Benson, P., & Chik, A. (2014). "Narrative inquiry in language teaching and learning research". New York, NY: Routledge, p.2

Table 1: List of Participants

NAME	SEX	AGE	WORK CATEGORY	YEAR OF INTERVIEW
HMD	M	35	Car Desain Exterior	2019
MTS	M	50	Production Leader	2018
KG	M	37	IT Technician	2019
TS	M	28	Engineering	2019
NS	F	50	Academician	2020

Source: Author's own compilation

FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

Biopolitical Power and Discourse Theory

In Foucault's study of the origins of the prison, Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison, he discussed the invention of the Panopticon, a way for a guard to see others without being seen himself. In the case of Japanese work culture, an integrated control system based on hierarchy is created by the employer to control and supervise their employees. Discipline is essential in this. According to Foucault, the Panopticon way is where discipline is instilled to ensure everyone is watched. Further, power is implemented through special permits that influence each other, and that orders do not come from outside but from inside. The power exercised via certain rules and systems produce chain links. Foucault explains the relationship between authority and knowledge. According to him, power and knowledge have a very close and unacceptable relationship. Power produces knowledge, whereas knowledge has authority. Power according to Foucault is not an authority to order people physically and via dictatorship. Power in modern times is where the rules are disguised, hidden and saved so that it appears invisible. Power no longer works through oppression and physical strength. It is exercised by promoting regulations that are voluntarily implemented and obeyed in an organisation, institution or country.[10]

The realisation that power governs and controls culture, and more broadly, life, is called Bio power by Negri.[11] This bio power idea referred to by Michel Foucault is a result of the change from a disciplinary society to a society of control. In the first form of society, institutions and security devices play a significant role in controlling society through regulation and structuring habits (custom) and daily behaviour (habits) and activities. The systematisation of the set of rules and sanctions, as well as their realisation, has been strictly ignored. In the second form or community control, mechanisms of control and control over habits and behaviour emerge from within citizens as individuals and groups. The control and control mechanism has been 'interiorised' in the consciousness and body as a person and as a collective (as mentioned in the above quote). The result is that each individual or community

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[10] Joko Priyanto, "Wacana, Kuasa dan Agama Dalam Kontestasi PILGUB Jakarta Tinjauan Relasi Kuasa dan Pengetahuan Foucolt,", *Thaqafiyyat: Jurnal Bahasa, Peradaban Dan Informasi Islam*, Vol.18 No.2, 2017.

[11] Stepanus Djunatan, "Antonio Negri: Revitalisasi Kultur Silih Berbagi", *Melintas*, Vol. 29 No.2, 2013, pp.144-162, file:///Users/testuser/Downloads/893-1773-1-SM.pdf.

automatically controls their behaviour and habits of everyday life. Communication systems and information networks are very useful to further establish control and control mechanisms in each individual and in the community. In this case, this form of control is the realisation of bio power. Bio power, further, according to the state, is a manifestation of power from above: the power of multinational corporate capital and international politics that 'conquer or colonise' all aspects and realms of life.[12]

In this context, the exploitation and manipulation of life are carried out to the fullest. Exploitation and manipulation of life is a logical consequence when the power that drives transformation and renewal, commodification and production has been compared in such a way that there is no need for external agents or coercive devices. Each individual then only follows the rules of the game and the systemic arrangement that is demanded so that all aspects of life are focused on commodity and production. In this case, activity through the body will be valued as high as possible if and only if the activities of daily living increasingly increase the added value of aspects of the body. In other words, the exploitation and manipulation of capital power is carried out through consciousness and our bodies to become an ideology.[13]

In the context of the Japanese work culture, it can be seen that the internalisation of work values is normalized by structured power relations, and which becomes part of societal norms. Additionally, in the workplace, the concept of "forced" or "voluntary" has no clear boundary as it is considered "national value" to be hardworking and dedicated to one's job. When an employee displays behaviours that are outside national values and norms prevailing in society or what Foucault who calls a "social prison", they will be judged based on consensus. The next section examines work related values in Japanese society

LITERATURE REVIEW

The History of Japanese Working Culture

Japan is society based on a strict hierarchy which governs peopel to people relations . The nation holds the view that establishing a hierarchical system is not easy and therfore, every human being must know where they belong.[14] Traditional values regulate the behavioural norms and ethics of Japanese society sourced from various teachings, namely Confucianism and Buddhism. This can be seen in Japan's first law called 17 Articles or *Jyuu Nana Kenpou* and its contents regulate various aspects of Japanese people's life, including their obligation to society and the state.[15] Additionally, maintaining a good name or honour is very important in Japanese society whereby its culture emphasises "shame".[16]

> The culture of sin is actually the awareness of wrongs
> based on virtue, while the culture of shame is actually
> coercion based on outward virtue. Shame is a response
> to criticism from others.

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[12] Stepanus Djunatan, "Antonio Negri: Revitalisasi Kultur Silih Berbagi", *Melintas*, Vol. 29 No.2, 2013, pp.144-162, file:///Users/testuser/Downloads/893-1773-1-SM.pdf.
http://journal.unpar.ac.id/index.php/melintas/article/download/893/881 , accessed on December 2019.

[13] Stepanus Djunatan, "Antonio Negri: Revitalisasi Kultur Silih Berbagi", *Melintas*, Vol. 29 No.2, 2013, pp.144-162, file:///Users/testuser/Downloads/893-1773-1-SM.pdf.
http://journal.unpar.ac.id/index.php/melintas/article/download/893/881, accessed on December 2019.

[14] Ruth Benedict, *"Pedang Samurai dan Bunga Seruni"*, *Sinar Harapan*, Jakarta, 1982, p29

[15] Sonoda Kōyū and Delmer M. Brown, "Early Buddha Worship," in D. Brown, *The Cambridge History of Japan*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 360.

[16] Kōyū and Brown, "Early Buddha Worship."

Shame is based on external criticisms of one's behaviour that is embedded in the self and soul of the Japanese people. "Shame (in Japanese is called" Hajj "), is a reaction to criticism or the views of others, and this influences one's behaviour. Shame is something that is deeply embedded in the Japanese national psyche.[17] The loss of honour is reflected in shame which is the worst punishment. Carlyle in Nitobe said, *"Shame is the soil of all virtue, of good manners and good morals".*[18]

This cultural reproduction of shame can be seen in various stories, both novels, drama, and films to this day. For example, *Bushi no ichibun* is a film set in the Edo period during the heydays of the samurai [19] and it tells the story of a low-class samurai who worked as a food taster before the food was eaten by their highest leader. The climax is when one of them tasted the *fugu* fish, known to be poisonous, causing him to lose his eyesight. This incident of course reflects a failure for the person in charge of the kitchen who monitors every dish served to their leader. Therefore, in order to make amends and to handle the shame, he ended his life in an "honourable way", according to the values prevailing at the time of the samurai, namely with seppuku.[20]

Thus, the primacy of shame in the lives of Japanese people means that everyone respects public opinion regarding certain behaviours, and this is very closely related to the concept of *Honne* and *Tatemae* inherent in the Japanese culture in which shapes its social environment. *Honne* or *Kokoro* means heart, and the feeling that emanates from it is forbidden to be expressed if the expression has an adverse effect on harmony or balance. *Tatemae* or *kao* refers to face which appears to be appearance created to ensure a balance. This means that "shame" is closely related to interactions between members of the community and the group or the environment in which it is taking place.

The drama titled "Tokyo Sonata"[21] tells the story of a family man who lost his job in 2008 due to the global economic crisis. The father covered up his situation by pretending he still had a job and left for "work" every day and coming home late. This was to ensure he retained the respect of his wife and family as being unemployed is considered a disgrace in Japanese society. The film successfully portrays the essence of Japanese society that glorifies traditional culture where work is everything. Desperate to avoid the humiliation of admitting his unemployment status to his wife, he preferred to leave the house every day in his suit and spending his time queuing for free food from a charity cart and applying for unattainable jobs. Japanese society places group interests above individual interests. Therefore, each individual has a big responsibility in maintaining the good name of the group as seen in various stories that recount Japanese heroism. As expressed by Rice,

> In trying to analyze the essence of Japan, we always come back to the idea of the group and the relationship between people. Japan society is a long search for *wa*, a desire to find harmony in everything and in every action. Bowing to the needs of the group before satisfying one's[22]

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[17] Useem and Benedict, "The Chrysanthemum and the Sword", pp.104-106.

[18] Inazo Nitobe, "Bushido: The Soul of Japan, G.P. Putnam's Sons", 1906, pp.74, accessed on July 2019.

[19] See movie by Yoji Yamada, *Bushi no Ichibun*, Japan, 2006.

[20] *Seppuku* is (self-disembowelment) also called *hara-kiri*, the most honourable method of taking one's own life practised by men of the samurai (military) class in feudal Japan. The word *hara-kiri* (belly-cutting), though widely known to foreigners, is rarely used by Japanese, who prefer the term *seppuku* (written in Japanese with the same two Chinese characters but in reverse order).

[21] See a movie by Kiyoshi Kurosawa, *Tokyo Sonata*, Japan, 2008.

[22] Jonathan Rice, "Behind the Japanese Mask", 2004, p. 143.

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear the norms and beliefs of the Japanese have been formed hundreds of years ago and clearly still have a big impact on modern day Japanese society. Cultural reproduction also plays a role in perpetuating these values that are internalised in their daily lives. The internalisation and normalisation of these values is greatly influenced by the role of the Japanese government in shaping the discourse of these traditional values so that they become a 'national value' (in order to achieve the goals of the state).

NATIONAL VALUE DISCOURSE IN JAPAN

Japan's economic success is a result of the close relationship between the government and people's which is integral to the nation's success story.[23] Post-World War II Japan witnessed a tremendous growth in technology and industrialisation. Japanese products are found all over the world and the country is renowned for its steel industry, oil refining, petrochemicals, cars, airplanes, electronic and electrical equipment including computers.

Developmental State, in general, describes the role and intervention of the state or government in the development process of its country, especially in economic development. Economic development is considered national interest and the state is the main actor in encouraging and achieving economic development goals. According to Loriaux, a developmental state is uses state-intervention to promote investments in achieving the national economy.[24] This interventionist policy later became a key Japanese feature in constructing society, and Foucault refers to it as a bio-political power.

This concept was first coined by Chalmers Johnson when he studied the phenomenon of economic growth and the process of rapid industrialisation in East Asia, especially Japan and the factors that influenced Japanese success. Johnson argues that the core of the concept of a developmental state is based on the government's dominant role in the development and economic progress of the country by its direct influence and involvement. The government also actively intervenes in the process by providing guidance and direction through the provision of subsidies and incentives to support the development of certain industries, provide protection from competition from other countries, administrative guidance and so forth.[25] This shows that the state is directly involved in the process of economic development and it has a strong influence on every economic decisions.

The main characteristic of Japan's developmental state is its orientation on development and economic growth arising from its political-economic thought. Specifically, Japan is a plan-rational or purpose-governed system that concentrates its substantive objectives on the economy by prioritising its industrial policies. This is reflected in the nation's very famous title during the Meiji period, namely *fukoku-kyōhei* (rich country, strong military). In addition, from 1955 to 1960, Japan's main objectives were: *shokusan kōgyō* (increasing industrial production), *fukoku_kyōhei* (rich country, strong military), *seisanryoku kakujū* (developing productive capacity), *yushutsu shinkō* (encouraging exports), *kanzen koyō* (rich country, strong military; large employment opportunities) and *kōdō seichō* (rapid economic growth). For almost more than 100 years, Japan has prioritised consistent economic development. Thus, the concept of developmental state strongly emphasises the

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[23] Bradley M. Richardson, "The Political Economy of Japan", Ohio State University, Working Paper No. 81, http://www.icps.cat/archivos/WorkingPapers/WP_I_81.pdf?noga=1, accessed on December 2019.

[24] Michael Loriaux, "The French Developmental State as Myth and Moral Ambition." In Meredith Woo-Cumings (Ed), *The Developmental State*, State Cornell University Press, 1999, p.24, accessed on July 2019

[25] J. W. C. Tomlinson, "Japanese Economic Development by Yoshihara Kunio," *Pacific Affairs*, 1981, p.51, accessed on December 2019

development and economic growth as the basic goals of a country measured in terms of their growth, productivity and competitiveness.

A defining feature of the developmental state is its intervention and intrusion in the lives of its citizens. It is undeniable that Japan historically has regulated and continues to regulate its people and this can be also seen in the conflicts and wars between regional leaders from the samurai class or known as the Shogun. It is therefore clear from the above discussion the Japanese government uses discursive ways to regulate its society and ensure strict hierarchy defined by obedience, loyalty and the responsibility of its people to the state. National values are adhered by the society though they are not written law.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Consequences of "Work Culture Value" in Japan

Japan's work culture encapsulated as its national value has had an impact on its growth and economic progress. Japanese products are recognised worldwide due to their quality. However, this recognition comes at a price There were and continue to be hundreds of cases of its workers dying from work exhaustion, known in Japan as *karoshi*, suicide, and depression. Hiroshi Ono, a Professor from Hitotsubashi University explained how cultural values morphed into 'national strength values' that have driven the old work culture in Japan:[26]

According to him, Japan is an input-oriented society, where productivity is measured as follows: "output = input × productivity," where input is represented by several units of labour, such as the number of workers and long working hours; long working hours are said to reflect an input-oriented society. Coupled with a seniority-based salary system, which is one of the pillars of the Japanese employment system, wages increase automatically according to the length of service. Compared to output and performance, this system provides rewards to the employer in the form of commitment and loyalty to the company. Ono described an important characteristic of Japanese workers: their superiority in company-specific skills. However, compared with general skills, firm-specific skills are less marketable and less transferrable. The low fluidity of the Japanese labour market is largely due to its workers' lack of understanding of their own market value. Many Japanese workers "don't know how to change jobs" due to the limited skills they have, Ono explained. If the evaluation system is based on input, then the consequence is that there is an incentive to increase input. In a workplace environment where business symbolisation is important, workers try to amplify signals/symbols that show how much effort they are putting in, rather than increasing their own productivity.

In particular, *ganbaru* or "hard work" has been referred to as a symbol of Japanese behaviour traits, as pointed out by Stegger (2003) who explained that Japanese people have an abnormal obsession with *ganbaru*, rather than emphasising on results. This reinforces the tendency to judge poor results not because of a lack of ability but because of a lack of effort. This means employees must display their talent and commitment in their work to the fullest extent (or are expected to do so) until they achieve the desired result. This is known as "self-sacrifice", and it symbolises loyalty to the company and motivation to work (Nemoto, 2013; Tsuru, 2010). In addition, corporate cultures emphasise teamwork, and hence, it makes it difficult to measure individual contributions and thereby, symbols of effort (hard work)

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[26] Hiroshi Ono, "Why Do the Japanese Work Long Hours? Sociological Perspectives on Long Working Hours in Japan", *Japan Labor Issues*, Vol. 2, No. 5, February-March 2018, pp.39-43
https://www.jil.go.jp/english/jli/documents/2018/005-03.pdf, accessed on December 2019.

become important in evaluating employee contribution.

According to Ono, the hierarchical pattern of relationships in Japan perpetuates long-hour work culture. . According to him, "many employees are worried about the atmosphere at work even after they have finished their work, or are reluctant to go home because their boss is still in the office." Leaving the office on time even though their work has been completed is considered unacceptable. Group awareness and consciousness has become dominant and hierarchical relationships too rigid and these contributed to Japan's punishing work culture. The custom of *tsukiai zangyo* (being a sport by working overtime because others are doing it), where leaving for home on time makes employee feel bad because their co-workers are still in the office.

Ono explaines a characteristic of the work culture pattern in Japanese companies is the existence of an internal labour market that assumes a long-term working relationship, where employees are trained and vacancies are filled internally and therefore, the company does not depend on external sources. Career employees go up the ranks in an upward spiral through job rotation in different divisions of the organisation. However, as employee job descriptions are not clearly defined, they respond flexibly to various job assignments within the company. The absence of clear job descriptions also means that there is little specialisation and division of labour within the firms.

Patterns of Japanese work styles related to support staff make job descriptions unclear. According to Ono, the implicit nature of the Japanese employee-employer relationship is very different from the explicit nature of the Western-style employment relationship. In an implicit contract, the job description and range of responsibilities are not clearly defined, and any direction from the company must be followed even if the tasks involved are not directly related to one's job". Hence, an ambiguous job description makes the worker immersed in many different tasks that are not even their main task which are time consuming.

It is clear cultural values are romanticised and gradually they symbolise the nation's power and are echoed by the government as an economic motivation. Ono describes cultural values that are the 'values of the nation's strength' which, among other things, have contributed to encouraging the culture of long hours working in Japan. This has proved to be tragic for the country whereby in April 2019, 1,949 Japanese killed themselves due to work-related stress. [27] According to the statistics, dozens more suffered from cardiac arrests, strokes, and other conditions related to work pressure and spending too much time at work. This shows that Japanese employees work far longer than their counterparts in the US, UK, and other developed countries. Additionally, many Japanese workers do not take advantage of their leave rights. According to a report in South China Morning Post, Japanese workers on average use only 8.8 days of their annual leave in 2015, less than half of their allowance while the rate is100 percent in Hong Kong and 78 percent in Singapore.[28] Graph 1 indicates that Japanese men work longer than women. Gender imbalance is another feature of the Japanese employment service with men being overworked as they are the main breadwinners of the family.

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[27] Julia Engelmann, "Number of suicides related to problems at work in Japan from 2010 to 2019," *Statista*, 6 April, 2020, https://www.statista.com/statistics/622325/japan-work-related-suicides/#statisticContainer, accessed on June 2020.

[28] "Japan's punishing work culture back under the spotlight as broadcaster reveals woman died after 159 hours of overtime," *South China Morning Post,* 5 October, 2017, https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/east-asia/article/2114180/japans-punishing-work-culture-back-under-spotlight-broadcaster, accessed on December 2019.

Graph 1: Working hours based on Gender

Employees Working 49+ Hours/Week

Source: ILO
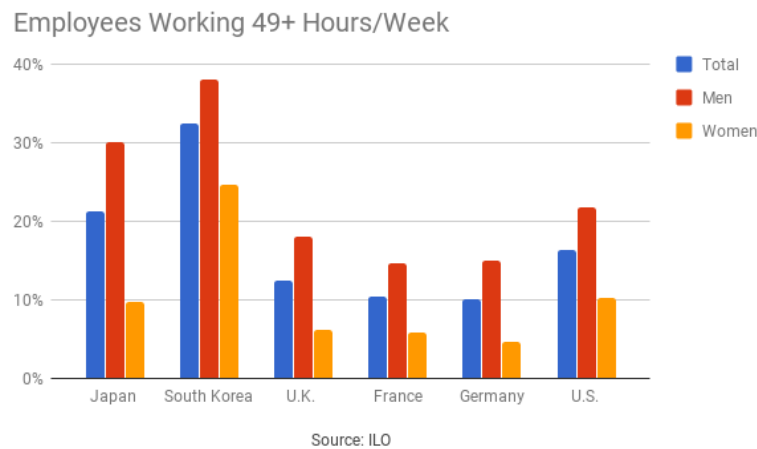
Source: Timinsky, "The Nation That Never Rests: Japan's Debate Over Work-Life Balance and Work That Kills" p.1.

Maintaining economic stability is indeed important, not only as a national interest but also to protect the welfare of the people. However, worker safety is vital and therefore, it is essential for Japan to reform its work culture and reduce overtime to ensure the mental and physical health of its workers. In June 2014, the Overwork Death Prevention Act was passed, but the country to date, is still struggling to prevent a mental health crisis among its workers where working long hours led to depression and even death of employees.[29]

The current study had interviewed 4 male workers in their 30s and 2 middle-aged managers and directors in their 50s. When asked 'what are their priorities in life?' and their answers were identical whereby their first priority was Work and country, while Family and Religion comes second and third place respectively. An interesting interview finding was the younger generation is tired of the image of Japan's harsh working culture. A 28-year-old interviewee, TS (initial name), stated that he was very disturbed with the Japanese work culture that continues to be glorified as a national value. His concern peaked when a worker committed suicide after working more than 100 overtime hours a month. He confessed that many of his colleagues were also overworked. When asked how to end this work culture, he responded with pessimism "it is almost impossible ... because we would be considered as lazy people and not working, and of course, it would bring shame to ourselves".[30]

There is plenty of documented evidence that signals of input are valued in the Japanese work environment. As explained above, long working hours and longevity of service are more highly valued than individual ability, performance, or output. Survey findings such as 'Individual and Company Surveys on Work-life Balance' conducted by the Cabinet Office in 2014, showed 'positive impressions' exemplified by 'people who work hard' or 'people with a strong sense of responsibility,' conversely far exceeding the 'negative impressions' of 'people who work too slowly' or 'people who want to earn overtime pay.' Therefore, it is clear that overtime is equal to working hard is a valued virtue and it is strongly rooted in the Japanese psyche which has become a symbol of being a Japanese.[31]

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[29] Sugeno, Kazuo, "Labor Situation in Japan and Its Analysis: General Overview 2015/2016," *The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training*, 2016.

[30] Author's interview with TS, Ikeda Osaka, 2018.

[31] Sugeno, Kazuo, "Labor Situation in Japan and Its Analysis: General Overview 2015/2016," *The Japan*

An article in Asahi *Shimbun* reported Matsuri Takahashi, 24 years old, committed suicide. She was an employee of Dentsu company and she had been working there since April 2015 named. She killed herself on December 25, 2015, and was considered to have committed suicide due to overwork after spending 105 hours in overtime every month. According to Takahashi's lawyer, her workload has increased since October 2015. Before committing suicide, she had hinted to her friends that she wanted to take her own life.**[32]**

The Japanese government had tried to tackle this issue of overwork and its tragic consequences. It instructed companies to pay overtime to their employees and provide them with paid vacation. However, these measures did not produce significant results. The following describes some of the policies carried out by the Japanese government in an effort to tackle the culture of overwork:

Publishing names of the companies having long working hours policy

The Ministry of Manpower has made efforts to be more effective in overcoming the problem of excessive work hours e by publishing the names of companies that officially have employees working long hours as a way to embarrass them. Efforts were made by Ministry of Health, Manpower, and Welfare in 2016 to carry out unannounced inspections of companies that had been ordered to improve their work environment. This was called an anti-karoshi measure. The move came after the government in late September confirmed that the suicide of Matsuri Takahashi, a 24-year-old employee of advertising company Dentsu Inc., in December 2015, was due to karoshi.

The ministry has revised overtime standards for companies with employees who had committed suicide or attempted suicide after illegally working more than 80 hours of overtime per month. If found guilty, the ministry will publish the names of the companies and by sending a letter of complaint to the prosecutor's office for allegedly violating the Labor Standards Law and other restrictions. This Standard overtime policy was changed in May 2015 so that from then on the names of large companies that have over 100 hours of illegal overtime a month will be reported. Under this new system, the labor standards office will conduct inspections and it will summon senior company officials who violate labour laws. Officials will be given a warning and random checks are done to see if the company had improved its working conditions. If the company is found to continue to overwork its workers, its name will be disclosed to the public. The labor ministry also took steps to strengthen measures to improve the mental health of workers and prevent abuse of power by company managers. Employers are urged to make plans to improve working conditions that meet labor standards.[33]

Reducing overtime working hours

A plan was introduced by the government to set overtime hours to prevent deaths from overwork. Under the current plan, the maximum allowable overtime is 720 hours a year, or 60 hours per month. The introduction of the upper limit of overtime was a key theme in the government's plan to reform the way the Japanese worked, especially given the recent major

Institute for Labour Policy and Training.

[32] Osamu Uchiyama, **"**Youngsters in stressful media jobs at high risk of *karoshi*" *Asahi*, 2 October, 2019, http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201910020058.html, accessed on December 2019.

[33] Jocie Kox, "Japan names and shames companies putting employees at risk of death by overwork," *Independent*, 12 May, 2017, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/japan-company-overwork-employees-risk-of-death-names-shames-dentsu-karoshi-panasonic-a7731731.html, accessed on December 2019.

cases of "karoshi" or deaths due to overwork. The government has plans to revise the Labor Standards Law to clarify overtime limits and resolve the karoshi problem.

The Labour Standard requires companies to allow their employees to take leave one day a week. However, the Law is designated to non-working days (Sundays). For this reason, it would be possible for companies to make their employees work overtime for 80 hours a month. Ministry of Labour had indicated that it was theoretically possible to increase working hours on non-working days above the 720-hour limit. If that happens the company must pay as much as 35 percent or more additional wages. But in reality, the company did not do it. A lawyer Shunji Suga explained that working on non-work days has not been discussed legally and the maximum limit of overtime hours has not been a substantial limitation in the real sense.[34]

Create a "Premium Friday" campaign to combat overtime working hours

In addressing the social problem of suicide due to long working hours, the government launched a campaign called "Premium Friday". In this campaign, employees are free to leave work early every last Friday of the month. The purpose was to encourage them to spend money on shopping and recreation.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe government supported the move to reduce working hours following the suicide of an employee at the Dentsu advertising agency. Excessive work hours have become a big problem. Etsuko Tsugihara who is corporate public relations chief of Sunny Side Up Inc said the company offered its employees 3,200 yen in cash if they finish work by 3 pm as an incentive for them to leave early. Many companies have implemented campaigns to reduce overtime work by implementing the 6pm ruling whereby the employees have to leave office by 6pm. The regional government in Tokyo also participated in implementing this effort by turning off its office lights at 8 pm. A leasing companies Orix Corp has begun offering 50,000 yen to employees who take a day off work after working 5 days in a row. All these showed the government's effort to reform the work culture.[35]

A company in Shinjuku implemented a creative way to end long working hours by playing theme song from the movie "Rocky" at 6pm daily as a sign that work has ended. This was done to encourage employees to go home early.Employees also help each other to finish their work early. Efforts to play music in the office that was implemented in October 2014 have succeeded in reducing overtime hours by about 20% to 30%. An employee named Takuro Kato from the Department of General Affairs 34-year-old claimed to be very happy with the music and no longer lingered around after work.[36]

Jeff Kingston, a professor in Asian Studies at Temple University's Tokyo campus, also stated that : "There is a samurai work culture in which employees are expected to be totally dedicated and willing to sacrifice their time and health for their employers". (Insider,

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[34] Yusaku Kawashima, "*Karoshi* and Japan's Work Style Reform," *A Harvard Kennedy School Student Publication,* 2 August, 2018, https://ksr.hkspublications.org/2018/08/02/karoshi-and-japans-work-style-reform/, accessed on December 2019.

[35] Tomoko Otake, "Adjusted Premium Friday: Government eyes moving up campaign aimed at boosting fun and spending," *Japan Times*, 26 September, 2018, https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/09/26/business/adjusted-premium-friday-government-eyes-moving-campaign-aimed-boosting-fun-spending/#.XghQeiOF4y4. accessed on December 2019.

[36] Ibby Caputo, "Japan's shrinking labor force is finding new ways to fight *karōshi* — 'death by overwork," *The World*, 10 January, 2019, https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-01-10/japan-s-shrinking-labor-force-finding-new-ways-fight-kar-shi-death-overwork. Accessed on December 2019.

2017)[37] The international journal health services in 1997 stated that the first case of *karoshi* was recorded in 1969 when an unnamed 29-year-old employee at a Japanese newspaper company died of a stroke [38]. The victim was reported to have experienced poor health and an increased workload prior to her death. In the 1980s, most of the *karoshi* victims were middle-aged men in white-collar jobs. However, this has changed in recent times. According to Hiroshi Kawahito, a lawyer and secretary-general of the National Defense Adviser for Karoshi Victims, "Today, nearly one in five *karoshi* victims are women".[39]

It appears that various efforts government efforts in tackling Japan's toxic work culture by building new discourses have not shown significant results. The building of Japanese economy was based on the principle of "chasing and exceeding the West" from the heyday of the Meiji era, and which has continued to drive Japanese economic development. Katsuo Nishiyama suggested the main reason for *karoshi* is rooted in Japanese culture and management and the corporate society which has been infused with Japanese production management /JPM ideology in such a way that working 24-hours a day is seen as exemplary behaviour. This social atmosphere is best described in an television advertisement by a pharmaceutical company promoting its new beverage with its theme song "can you fight 24 hours for your corporation?". This has become a daily mantra and a normal habit for the Japanese.[40]

The Japanese corporate ideology is a result Japanese social construction built and nurtured over hundreds of years through cultural discourse and reproduction that continues to be perpetuated to this day whereby the behaviour of the people are supervised. Foucault refers to this as "social prison". Additionally, a bio political pattern of power was primarily aimed at economic pursuit and economic progress.

In the interview, KG and HMD, two white-collar salary men (*sarariman)* stated that "the main principle of Japanese society is to maintain a balance called harmony or *wa".* According to them in work relations, the concept of harmony is also used. For example in resolving conflicts in the world of work, the concept of *nemawashi* or consensus is used which respects the views of each worker. This is so that the working atmosphere is harmoniously established so that it will not have a negative impact on the company's production. They further explained during an interview in 2019 that,[41]

> The concept of *wa* is the basis of rule in the Japanese interaction culture, and in the workplace, this concept plays a role in maintaining the harmony of the group, so it's not appropriate if we express our disagreements with others, like the example you cannot, tells others about your political view, and even your sports club's favourite because it could bring clash with other.[42]

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37 Alexandra Ma, "Japan's toxic culture of overwork drove a 31-year-old woman to death and it looks like there's no end in sight," *Insider*, 25 October, 2017, https://www.insider.com/karoshi-how-overwork-in-japan-killed-miwa-sado-and-hundreds-like-her-2017-10, accessed on December 2019.
38 Katsuo Nishiyama and Jeffrey V. Johnson, "*Karoshi* - Death from Overwork: Occupational Health Consequences of Japanese Production Management" accessed on December 2019.

40 Nishiyama and Johnson, "Karoshi - Death from Overwork: Occupational Health Consequences of Japanese Production Management", Work Health Organization, Vol. 27, No.4, 4 February, 1997, pp 625-41. https://web.archive.org/web/20090214232217/http://workhealth.org/whatsnew/lpkarosh.html, accessed on December 2019.
41 Author's interview Result with KG and HMD , Osaka, November, 2019
42 Author's interview HMD, Osaka, November, 2019

Interview findings also revealed that the principle of harmony applied in a holistic manner, meaning workers are not allowed to openly express their views if it leads to imbalance; for example, workers are not allowed to express their disapproval of a work culture, a legacy which is hundreds of years old. According to the interviewees, the disagreement will cause conflict if they are expressed, hence they prefer to follow the existing pattern, even though the employees hope to be a happier generation than the generation before them. Two interviewees' remarks indicates their thoughts. They are as follows:

> I want to be a happier generation, everyone knows that the Japanese work culture must be reformed, and it is no longer suitable for the current condition but as a junior, it is just something hard to express.[43]

> Basically I really like work, even my life goal is for work, but the conditions of work culture in Japan are glorified or be exaggerated, which of course is in line with the goals of the national interest of the country, and we must follow it as a form of service to the country. For example, workers must be ready to be sent abroad as a *tanshin funin* (transfer to other country), some must be prepared with conditions apart from their families although it is not an easy thing.[44]

From the above, it is clear that post World War Two economic reconstruction was boosted by nationalism. It became a national ideology to drive the country's economic growth. Phrases and slogans, such as *fukoku kyohei*, *wakon kansai* and *wakon yosai* were used by the state to boost economic growth and secure national interest. NS, an academician who was interviewed in the study, observed that,

> The Japanese government historically has always wanted to control everything including how their people think. They control society through regulation and structuring habits and people's daily behaviour and activities, and this is a legacy from the pre-war period of Japan, and Japan's work culture today is one of the proofs.[45]

CONCLUSION

Culture plays a major role in contributing to stress and long working hours in Japan. Thus the Japan national value in work culture can be said to be the realization of the power that controls the culture, and more broadly, the way of life which Negri called Bio power. The bio power idea is also referred to by Michel Foucault which describes the transformation from a disciplinary society to a society of control. In the disciplinary society, institutions and

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[43] Author's interview Result with TS, Osaka, November 2019
[44] Author's interview with KG, Osaka, November 2019
[45] Author's interview with SN, Kyoto, July, 2020

security devices play a significant role in controlling society through regulation and structuring habits (custom) and their daily behaviour (habits) and activities.

This is how biopower works. During World War II, civilians and soldiers were given stimulants to help them complete double and triple shifts." and after the war, the push for war reconstruction as an effort to generate the economy was intensified. The result is that each individual or community automatically controls the behaviour and habits of their daily life. *Otsukaresamadesu* or thank you for your efforts is phrased often used to appreciate each other's hard work and efforts, which normalises exhaustion due to work or thank you for sacrificing your life. The company praises workers who leave the office late and socially punishes those who leave early by labelling them as lazy. The social construction of cultural values during the feudal heyday of the past to pursue modern day economic progress has resulted in many personal tragedies such as death and mental health crisis.

"White-collar heroes" in every drama, film, song story as well as novel storybooks and others continue to be romanticised, and it has consolidated the myth of Japanese work culture. The efforts by the government to tackle the culture of long work hours have not produced much tangible result and workers are continued to be exploited and manipulated. Exploitation and manipulation of life is a logical consequence when the power that drives transformation and renewal, commodification, and production has been compared in such a way that there is no need for external agents or coercive devices. Each individual follows the rules of the game and the systemic arrangement that is demanded so that all aspects of life is dominated by commodity and production.

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