A Sociology of Work in Japan

What shapes the decisions of employees to work in Japan? The authors of this comprehensive and up-to-date survey of the relationship between work and society in Japan argue that individual decisions about work can only be understood by considering the larger social context. Many factors combine to affect such choices, including the structuring of labor markets, social policy at the national and meso level and, of course, global influences, which have come increasingly to impinge on the organization of work and life generally. The analysis asks why the Japanese work such long hours, and why they are so committed to their firms, if this is indeed the case. By considering labor markets, social policy, and relationships between labor and management, the book offers penetrating insights into contemporary Japanese society and glimpses of what might happen in the future. Underlying the discussion is a challenge to the celebration of Japanese management practices which has dominated the literature for the last three decades. This is an important and groundbreaking book for students of sociology and economics.

ROSS MOUER is Professor of Japanese Studies in the School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics at Monash University. His publications include *Images of Japanese Society: A Study in the Construction of Social Reality* (1986).

KAWANISHI HIROSUKE is Professor of Sociology at Waseda University, Tokyo. He is the author and editor of many books including *Enterprise Unionism in Japan* (1991) and *The Human Face of Industrial Conflict in Post-war Japan* (1999).

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A Sociology of Work in Japan

Ross Mouer
Monash University

and

Kawanishi Hirosuke
Waseda University

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Preface

This project began nearly ten years ago. At that time a huge literature existed in English on Japanese-style management. Most of it was favorably disposed to what was seen as being an approach to human relations and personnel management that had gone beyond the division of labor and regimentation associated with the Fordist paradigm. In particular there was an interest in how Japanese-style management had produced a highly motivated work force with an exceptionally strong work ethic and commitment to the firm and its goals. To get a better idea of the extent to which work was carried out autonomously in Japan, we felt it would be useful to shift attention from the cultural or ideational domain to the structuring of work choices at both levels, paying special attention to the consequences of not working "hard" for long hours. To provide a better understanding of the work ethic and the reasons for the long hours of work registered in Japan, we felt it was necessary first to set firm-level arrangements and choices about work in the context of the larger social parameters: the way external labor markets were structured, the overall mosaic of stratification and the provision of various kinds of social services, and the power relations between the labor movement and management at the national level. In our view these were the major structures which limited choice with regard to work at the firm level.

In our minds was the anecdote of the Japanese researcher who had traveled to Australia to investigate the country's unemployment insurance scheme in the early 1990s just as the unemployment rate in Japan was climbing to over 3 percent for the first time in nearly forty years. It soon became obvious that the researcher was looking for ways to tighten the system in Japan. His assumption was that tougher treatment of the unemployed would motivate them to resume work at a quicker pace. The assumption was perhaps reasonable, as Australia itself had had very low rates of employment until the early 1970s, and had then engaged in a discourse which referred to the unemployed as "dole bludgers" as the unemployment rate rose.

When he asked about the length of time for which unemployment benefits could be received, which at the time was only six months in Japan, he was greatly surprised to find that there was no time limit on receiving the benefits in Australia. Having ascertained that he was indeed being informed about the dole and not pensions or ongoing compensation for an incapacity owing to a work-related accident, he scratched his head and concluded that the work ethic in Australia was actually quite strong if roughly 90 percent of the labor force was still willing to work "voluntarily" without the compulsion of starving, whereas 3 percent of Japanese (or even more, considering disguised unemployment) chose not to work even with a very strong financial inducement to do so (i.e. to work or to starve after six months). This incident confirmed in our minds the need to tie ideas about why employees work as they do to broader structures limiting the conditions of possibility which confront each worker as he or she wrestles with several discourses about work in order to make decisions about where, when, and how hard to work.

Over the intervening years a number of correctives to the Japanese model began to emerge. As a result, many observers of Japanese-style management came to appreciate that, for whatever post-Fordist elements there might be, there were also ultra-Fordist features as well. More attention also came to be paid to the nature of the tiered subcontracting which was central to the functioning of just-in-time schemes and rested on a disaggregation or Balkanization of the labor market. Those inter-firm relationships injected into the organization of work another set of power relationships external to the firm. There was a growing appreciation that a large proportion of the labor force worked outside the large-firm sector in which the features commonly associated with the Japanese model were normally found. Rather than absorbing the casuals, part-timers, and subcontracted workers over time, it became clear that the large firms actually existed in a symbiotic relationship with them, dependent upon their very existence. A literature also emerged on attempts to implement Japanese-style management abroad, and other structural features began to be highlighted in terms of the considerable extent to which members of the core work force were regimented within the model companies themselves. While some writers attributed any friction which emerged to differences in cultural orientations, commenting that a managerial style suited for a conformist- or consensualist-oriented society would have difficulty in many of the more individualistically inclined societies of the West, the structural features designed to discipline the labor force still loomed large. From a slightly different perspective, the situation of working women had also become a popular topic for foreign researchers, and much of the English-language literature which resulted from this pointed to the structural weaknesses of Japan's 1986 Equal Employment Opportunity Law, which lacked the teeth to force change. In Japan itself attention was being given to the problem of *karoshi* and to the reasons employees felt compelled to overwork. With that there was a much broader concern with work patterns associated with the model which severely limited the opportunities for some of Japan's best-educated and dynamic male employees to be with their families and to take a greater interest in community affairs.

While valid, these critiques did not seem to present an integrated overview of the larger structural context in which workers made choices about work. Many of the critiques were set within a normative framework, albeit in critical terms which have no doubt served to nurture the belief that Japan needed to change. Few dealt with the changing power relations that shaped the structural context. Much of the change occurring in Japan was put down to the inevitability of universal forces or global patterns emerging elsewhere and explained in terms of how Japanese culture was "catching up." It seemed to be taken for granted that the collapse of Japan's union movement, especially in terms of its commitment to leftist political goals, was a logical outcome of having new levels of affluence. If there was a structured element, it was in the collapse of socialist regimes that heralded the end of the cold war (even while the Japan Communist Party continued to receive a healthy 10 percent of the popular vote at national elections). Many descriptions of work in Japan came to be characterized by a set of assumptions bound up in the view that the end of history as we knew it was now in sight in terms of the tensions produced by ideological and cultural differences.

The original idea for this volume was to present an alternative account which explained Japanese-style management not in terms of any uniqueness in cultural or ideological terms, but as a means of expropriating surplus within a specific superstructural framework that severely limited the choices available to workers and potential workers at the macro level. During the 1990s Japan drifted into a prolonged recession with rising unemployment and a growing awareness that the world outside was changing, as other nations were rapidly moving to find niches in the newly emerging global economy. In considering those changes, it seemed to us that a new superstructure was emerging which would increasingly shape the way work is organized in Japan. There was an awareness that the recession of the union movement was not unique to Japan. The aging of the population, the impact of Japan's affluence on the attitudes of its young people to work, the widening gap in the distribution of income, and many other changes in Japanese society could also be seen as universal phenomena. Successive financial scandals invited comparisons with

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the situation in other similarly developed societies. At the same time, out of those comparisons emerged a sense that international standards were coming increasingly to influence the way societies organized their economic, political, and social affairs (and, ultimately, their very cultures). Moreover, the north–south issues and Japanese investment overseas underlined ways in which the world is stratified and structured in terms of the global economy.

Given the above perspective, it became apparent to us that a full understanding of work in Japan would need to consider the labor process at three levels: the way work was organized in individual firms, the way societies were structured to allocate work through more broadly based labor markets, and the way the international division of labor was decided. The growing prominence of the extra-territorial factors has caused us to think of the global as a new world order that is now the macro level. To better articulate that way of sorting through our thoughts about work in Japan, we have come to use the term "meso level" when referring to structures, ideas, and events at the societal (particularly the national) level.

In considering the dynamics which result in decisions being made about the organization of work at each of these three levels, it seemed to us that the key variables relate to inequality of one type or another. The forces for change and those for the status quo can be found in the collectivities that have come to be organized in reference to those inequalities. The inequalities are most commonly defined by gender, occupation, organizational size, age, educational background, and spatial location. The role of these factors in accounting for inequalities will be obvious to most readers. Widened beyond a certain point, inequalities reveal objective contradictions. It is the awareness of those contradictions that produces tensions and creates pressure for change. In other words, it is the subjective assessment of those involved in working and in organizing work that is critical. In the past, unions have played a central role in influencing how workers felt about the objective inequalities which bounded their lives, and much of the employment relationship revolved around the attempts of labor and management to influence the way workers perceived the importance of those inequalities in their lives, the choices they had in managing inequality, and the tradeoffs that arose when inequality was multidimensional. Over time, other forces also came into play as the standard of living rose, and these seem to have become noticeably more conspicuous as Japan moved through the 1980s and 1990s.

The assessment of inequality is also tempered by an assessment of its relative importance in terms of the overall level of rewards received in the relevant society. Hence, a commonly heard argument from those seeking to justify having some measure of inequality is that it is better to be poor

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in a rich society than to be in the middle of a poor society. This view is often presented by those at the top of wealthy societies, and goes against the notions of mateship, comradeship, and to each according to his or her needs.

Once a view has crystallized about the dimensions of inequality and its overall importance in the larger scheme of things, the decision to act will be based on an assessment of the likely chances that change will occur and the likely sanctions that will be imposed should the push for change fail. Here the role of the state is central. Our search for the meaning of work in Japan is set in this context of objective inequalities, visions of inequality and the realities of power.

This volume seeks to examine how these three elements interact at the meso level. One of our working hypotheses is that individuals have already made an assessment of their chances and opportunities in the larger society before entering the world of work in a particular firm, and that a good deal of their behavior in the firm will result from decisions significantly shaped by that world view. This is a hypothesis we cannot test here, but the volume is written in part as a preparation for making such a test. While the media, increased travel, better education, the internet, and aspects of global consumption (e.g. international advertising) have served increasingly to draw individuals to the global level and have opened up opportunities to know more about the international division of labor and associated inequalities, and about local phenomena which are universal, it is our feeling that the minds of workers have been imprinted from that vantage point, but not yet to the extent that those impressions outweigh their impressions of the world from the meso level in shaping their assessment of the meso- or micro-level realities. This is another hypothesis to be tested, but not in this volume.

The major aim in writing this book was to draw a picture of the terrain on which work is organized at the meso level in Japan. There seems to be a general recognition that the old paradigms for organizing work in Japanese firms no longer hold. As the Japanese struggle to find ways to reinvigorate their economy, there is an active search for a model to replace that currently used for organizing work. There is a common recognition that the Japanese model – with all its structural features, as an important component of the Japanese economy (indeed, of Japanese society) – contributed immensely to the economic achievements of the 1960s and 1970s. The energy focused in accomplishing those achievements carried Japan forward to an economic apex during the "bubble years" of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when huge balance-of-payments surpluses were recorded and unrealistically high levels of lending occurred to finance further growth and non-growth projects alike. There is now a serious

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realization, however, that a replacement model is needed as one of the cornerstones, if not the keystone, in the building of a new Japanese economy. A study of the dynamics shaping labor process at the meso level will go some way toward highlighting the parameters likely to define the paradigm which emerges for work in Japan.

In trying to assess the way work is organized at the meso level we have sought to tell a story about how various objective facts relate to the way employees might see the world in subjective terms. We have tried to utilize a wide range of material, including academic opinion and some reference to scholarly research findings, government statistics, popular views in the media, and expositions in some of the popular encyclopedias. In the end we wanted a volume that would communicate not only to readers across several societies (i.e. an English-reading audience and a Japanese-reading audience), but also to those working at different levels in either society. Only time will tell whether we have been successful in doing this.

Note on transliteration, romanization, and translation

A large number of Japanese terms are introduced in this volume. Several considerations have led us to their introduction. One is to overcome the tendency to think in terms of universals. The introduction of the terms, usually in parentheses following an English explanation, serves to remind us that many of the concepts used in writing about work in Japan have cultural *emic* dimensions (i.e. a set of connotations peculiar to the Japanese setting). The word *rodo kumiai*, for example, refers to an organization for and by workers in a generic or *etic* sense. However, when the term is used in Japan, its connotations for most Japanese suggest a particular approach to union organization, trends in unionization rates, a history of ideological struggle between left-wing and right-wing groups, an association with a broad range of citizens' movements, and a specific approach to organization at both the national level and the grass-roots level. The term is also used to refer to a range of other self-help or mutual-help organizations, including credit unions and agricultural, consumer, or insurance cooperatives. Japanese terms are liberally inserted as a subtle reminder that there are real differences in meaning between the Japanese and English terms and the context in which people in different societies talk about similar matters.

A second reason for using Japanese terms is to facilitate communication by supplying readers with a basic list of key words that will immediately be recognized by the Japanese with whom they may wish to discuss issues raised in this volume. Consequently, references to "labor union" (*rodo kumiai*) serve to indicate that we use the term "labor union" as a rough equivalent for what we are really writing about (i.e., Japanese *rodo kumiai*). Conversely, reference to "*rodo kumiai*" (labor union) is made to indicate that the *rodo kumiai* we are writing about are fairly similar to "labor unions" in English.

As is common practice, all foreign words, including the large number of Japanese words introduced in this text, are italicized. The exceptions include proper nouns and official titles. The personal names of Japanese are given in the Japanese order, with the surname first. Exceptions are made for Japanese who live and work abroad and are generally known abroad by their given name followed by the surname. There are obviously cases in the gray area; an increasing number of Japanese move back and forth or have significant careers abroad before returning home to Japan. The decision in such cases can only be arbitrary.

Japanese words have been romanized in the Standard or Hepburn style. However, the macron or elongation mark has been omitted in transcribing long vowels for ordinary Japanese words. This is in line with common practice as noted by Neustupny (1991: 8), who suggests it is always inserted "in texts addressed to specialized Japanese studies audiences" but generally omitted from "more popular writings" for a broader audience. While purists in the use of the Japanese language might object, several considerations led to this decision. First, in percentage terms, a brief count of Japanese words mentioned in the text suggested that fewer than 10 percent had elongated vowels, and of those few were words where confusion would occur. An example of such confusion might be the name "Ohashi," which could consist of either the two characters meaning "big bridge" or the two characters meaning "little bridge." However, our feeling was that the majority of readers would be reading in English only and not reading the references. Second, dictionaries such as Kenkyusha's list words in romanized script so that all words which differ only in terms of the short and elongated vowel are listed together, and the choice of the right term is easy given the context, and the fact that an English translation is supplied in most cases.

In recent years the Japanese have absorbed a large number of foreign words which are sometimes more difficult to decode or to look up than native Japanese words. The origin of such words is denoted in Japanese by writing them in a designated script, *katakana*. For those words, we have indicated the elongated sound by repeating the double vowel in the roman script. Thus, the publication *Shukan Rodo Nyuusu* is the "Weekly News on Work." In trialing this approach with a small sample of postgraduate students, who were asked to transcribe back into English from romanized Japanese, it was found that the error rate in transcription was negligible. The experiment suggested that personal names were more difficult than ordinary words to transcribe back into Japanese, and that more errors occurred in transcribing items in the list of references than in the text. However, the purpose of the list is to allow readers to locate cited sources, and there are a number of ways to do that even with partial information (e.g. by looking up the title of the publication rather than the author's name), and again the demerits of omitting the elongation mark seemed small. In this regard, an effort was made to provide a list of references that was as detailed as possible.

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This work has included small amounts of translation, mostly from the Japanese-language titles in the list of references for which both the romanized Japanese and an English translation are provided. Titles are short and tend to invite a direct translation. Because the direct translation is somewhat awkward or misleading in English when taken out of context, some liberty has been taken to provide a translation which best matches the overall thrust of each specific item. In translating longer passages, a number of arbitrary interpretive and stylistic decisions were made. These kinds of decisions rest on assumptions about the function the translation is to perform in the telling of the story. Which version is most appropriate can only be left to the reader's broader judgments about the story itself – judgments that are likely to vary from reader to reader. We can only ask for the reader's patience, tolerance, and understanding in this matter, and welcome all critical comments so that a better job of storytelling can be done next time.

Abbreviations

ASC	*Asahi Shimbun* (morning edition of a national daily newspaper)
CPI	Consumer Price Index
GHQ	General Headquarters (of the Allied occupation of Japan)
ILO	International Labor Organization
JCP	Japan Communist Party
LDP	Liberal Democratic Party
LSL	Labor Standards Law
MITI	Ministry of International Trade and Industry
MNE	multinational enterprise
MSC	*Mainichi Shimbun* (morning edition of a national daily newspaper)
MWL	Minimum Wage Law
NGO	non-government organization
NKSC	*Nihon Keizai Shimbun* (morning edition of the nation's leading financial daily)
NPO	non-profit organization
QC	quality control
SRN	*Shukan Rodo Nyuusu* (a weekly newspaper)
WHO	World Health Organization
WTO	World Trade Organization
YSC	*Yomiuri Shimbun* (morning edition of a national daily newspaper)