

# Through a Concave Mirror: A Deconstruction of the American Myth of Japan

By Jessica Bayne

Japan is America's current obsession. On the surface, the American preoccupation with Japan is economic—a trade deficit—but our obsession with Japan is not limited to statistical analyses of American timber exports and Japanese automobile imports. The Japanese are a socio-cultural "other" as much as they are an economic competitor. Americans view Japanese economic success as a threat to the primacy of the American way of life—America as the "victor of the Cold War" and as the lone superpower. The economic power and success of Japan is the result of a Japanese social and historical experience that seems anomalous to many Americans. Japan is the symbol of a fate which permits and sustains the economic and social ills of American society.

This article can explore only a bit of the American ideology which is reflected in the current fascination with Japan, beginning with the premise that Japan has become an ideological image. What Americans understand of Japan (in popular rather than academic circles) is not contextualized as part of Japan's history, social hierarchy, or cultural system; rather, these symbols are used to define the Japanese as culturally and socially aberrant when compared to the American standard. Focal points in this discussion of the Japanese include emphasis on long work weeks, quiescence of Japanese labor, and the relative homogeneity of the labor force with the idea that prevailing American assumptions about Japanese labor do not present an accurate picture of the Japanese reality. Instead, they seem to expose an American preoccupation with American labor. The search for cultural reasons for Japanese success is obscure. To Americans, Japanese are the perverts of Michael Crichton's *Rising Sun*, while at the same time strange echoes of the 1950s in America. It is as if Americans can only accept the 1950s image of a successful Cold War economic power. The social structure, "family values," and work ethic of that past success were the basis of US economic success.

## The Japanese Work Force

The American media has lauded Japan for its innovations in labor management. Management experts tell Americans to be "more like the Japanese in our work habits," and Pete Harrill argues that "the Japanese don't need lessons in the work ethic... If a worker fails to do his part in the group enterprise, he usually plunges into a deep pool of personal agony and shame." (Harrill 85) Ironically enough, in an article

for *The Journal of Labor Research*, Andrew Gordon, a noted historian of Japanese labor relations, recalls an anecdote about a Japanese businessman who lauded American workers in the 1920s for their "work ethic" and condemned Japanese workers for their laziness and inability to save. (Gordon 239)

The "group enterprise" in Japan has a long history of labor-management conflict. The enterprise is protected by a paternalistic structure that includes stable employment which is assumed to be for a lifetime, seniority based promotion, re-assignment, "equitable" salary distribution between white and blue collar workers, and company (enterprise) unionism within the individual company leading toward white and blue collar participation, flexible work rules, and labor management councils. (Kawahito 232)

Women are not as highly represented in the Japanese work force. As Japan's society grays and the work force shrinks, "women have been recruited in greater numbers. (Neff 58) In the United States, women were highly represented in the early twentieth century textile industry. (Gordon 244) Women's participation in the paid work force declined between 1950 and 1976. (Osawa 625) When women did participate, it was between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five, before they were married. (Osawa 636) However, women did participate in "non-paid" or "self-employed" labor—what Americans recognize as "cottage" industries and agricultural work. In 1960, 46.5 percent of the Japanese female labor force was employed as "unpaid" workers, as compared to 5.6 percent for the United States. (Osawa 635) In 1979, this number had declined to 24.1 percent, evidence for increasing Japanese industrialization. In 1980, 29.5 percent of Japanese women were paid laborers which is 20 percent less than American women. (Osawa 631) The percentage of Japanese women who work, both paid and unpaid, hovered at around 45 percent in 1980. In order for this to be a meaningful number, it must be stressed that Japan is undergoing a transformation from a family based economy in which women could work within the home, to an industrial economy, in which women had difficulty integrating into the paid work force.

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longer hours than Americans. An article in *Esquire* magazine stated that "inventing excuses for not working is one of the finer American pastimes." (Harrill 85) Juliet Schor's, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*, explores the reality behind the myth of the "underworked" American. She turns common sense on its head by arguing that Americans work harder than the employees of most industrialized nations.

There is a continued assertion that Japanese employees dedicate more of their time to paid labor and work-related

activities. In 1990, the average Japanese worked roughly 2009 hours per year, or approximately 40 hours a week. (Weisman) The average American worked between three and six more hours per week. However, it has been suggested that Japanese labor statistics are incorrectly cited; "Japanese companies routinely underreport the hours their employees work. A recent survey found that 55 percent of employees worked unpaid and unrecorded overtime." (Weisman)

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their American counterparts in work-related activities and unpaid overtime. This is not possible because of the mythic "workaholic" Japanese mentality, but because women are not as highly represented in the Japanese workforce. The dynamics of the single salary household, where one partner has full responsibility for domestic duties, permits the dedication of additional time to work-related activities. "Coerced," or socially-necessitated, female labor includes company dinners, weekend conferences, and domestic tasks like child care, housework, and dinner preparation. As previously discussed, women are not as highly represented within the Japanese labor pool as they are in the United States. "Necessary labor" is vital to a description of the American labor pool. Americans are paid for more hours than the Japanese. In 1987, the average American man worked 46 hours a week. (Horrigan & Markey 13) The average American woman worked 43 hours a week in 1987, but she spent additional hours on "necessary work"—domestic duties which are as vital for full integration into the workforce as company dinners and weekend conferences. (Horrigan & Markey) Negligent mothers are not socially accepted as good workers in the United States. High representation of women, who work shorter hours cross-

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culturally in the American work-force, lowers the total average of hours worked by women and men. Just as it is nearly impossible to document the hours spent by Japanese employees on work-related activities, it is also difficult to document the unpaid "necessary labor" hours of American employees. "Work," for the purposes of cross-cultural comparison, must imply "paid" work because the dynamics of "necessary labor" are culturally determined.

It is very difficult to measure how much Americans and Japanese workers are paid comparatively. In terms of

buying power, comparisons are dependent on the relationship between the yen and the dollar. The most recent data seems to imply that Japanese manufacturing workers are paid two dollars an hour more than their American counterparts; however, any comparison between Japanese and American pay scales is full of difficulties. Japanese workers have different and, in many cases, better benefits than American workers. The proportion of Americans engaged in manufacturing has been in a steady decline since the 1970s. The US Secretary of Labor under the Reagan administration, William Brock, argued in a symposium on US/Japanese Labor Relations that "Conventional wisdom has always told us that American workers make more money than Japanese workers do, but it simply isn't true. Japanese workers make more money per hour, and so do Italian, German, and French workers." (Brock 227)

Cross-cultural comparisons of Japanese and American labor are not contextualized. The American media displays a superficial understanding of the dynamics of Japanese work force in which additional time is spent on the job but benefits are larger and the one-salary household is the primary means of consumption. American labor suffers from similar misconceptions. The American media stresses the "unpaid" labor of the Japanese and ignores the necessary labor of Americans. Comparisons of Japanese/American pay scales do not take into account the relative units of consumption of the one-salary household in Japan, versus the two-salary household and the increasing numbers of single parent households in the United States. American perceptions of Japanese labor are nostalgic and narcissistic. Peter Harrill writes,

*Tokyo is a city that always reminds me of the America in which I grew up. The language and faces are different, but the mood, spirit, and lack of menace are like New York in the 1950s. . . I do wish that there would be a major outbreak of karoshi [death from overwork] in the cities of the United States. (Harrill 83,85)*

*Karoshi* typifies, in the minds of many Americans, the Japanese work ethic. Though Japanese culture instills a strong work ethic, it also marks them as deviants from traditional American values.

### A Look at Japanese Culture

The *New York Times* stated that Japanese men are ashamed to show affection to their girlfriends. Vending machines sell bouquets to "let young men avoid the embarrassment of having to admit to shopkeepers they [are] buying something for a sweetheart, an unaccustomed gesture in Japan." (Steingold A12) Along these lines, "In 1987, the [Japanese] government asked for some radical changes in male work habits: Cut down on overtime, take your wife to dinner. The government even designated November 22 as National Couples Day." (Harrill 85) Although there may be significant cross-cultural differences in the relationships

between men and women, these articles give the false impression that Japanese men are reticent about expressing love to their wives. Based on such reports, Americans perceive the Japanese as inhuman and unloving. These cultural differences fall into a long standing racist image of Asians and foreigners as exotic and aberrant.

Michael Crichton's *Rising Sun* is a "masterpiece of American xenophobia" which describes the Japanese as sexually perverse and attributes Japanese economic success to the decline of American "family values." (Taylor 51)

*It's completely natural to them... I won't let anybody cut me.. Hone of those things with knives or swords. ..A lot of them, they are so polite, so correct, but when they get turned on, they have this... this way. (Crichton 64)*

If Crichton's book were not a *New York Times* bestseller, one could dismiss his work as racist pornography. Crichton's novel centers around the murder of a beautiful American woman by the Japanese. Readers are subjected to a vivid account of her brutalization and death. Cheryl Austin is a "prostitute" for the Japanese, but for the Americans she is a wayward Texas orphan who really wants "the ring on the finger and the kids and the dog in the yard." (Crichton 63) Crichton reaches beyond the conspiracy theories or loose comments of the *New York Times* and *Esquire*, who claimed that Japanese men do not love their wives.

#### A New Perspective

Our obsession with Japan is not only inaccurate and perverse, it is unhealthy. Cultural constructions of an "other" will not reduce the US trade deficit, but cultural evaluations of the American labor force may help the United States design a labor strategy which is more appropriate to the American social system. A recent *Time* magazine cover story polled both

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Japanese and Americans and asked what they thought about each other. Unfortunately, this is the wrong question. The question should be, "what do Americans think of themselves?" A long hard look at the American reality will disgust those who thought the American family including white male workers, was the cause of our success, and not an educated, well-paid, stable work force. Unless America is able to look away from its "Japanese reflection," it will be embroiled in a series of misapprehensions about its own national identity. As in the myth of Narcissus, America will drown in its own blurry reflection.

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