Men Under Pressure

Representations of the 'Salaryman' and his Organization in Japanese Manga

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Abstract

In this article we analyse representations of the Japanese salaryman and Japanese organization in Japanese manga, or graphic novels, during the turbulent decades from the mid-1980s to the present day. We argue that manga presents salarymen protagonists in a sympathetic yet not uncritical light, and that it displays support for and criticism of both the Japanese and American organizational models. We describe how these manga offer important critical challenges from the world of popular culture to the direction of change in Japanese business organizations since the 1980s. In addition, we suggest that the manga may also provide salarymen with opportunities for critically re-evaluating their own working situations and for developing methods for surviving and thriving under the pressures of working within contemporary Japanese business organizations.

Men Under Pressure

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Introduction

It is April 2002, and just as Japan's Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare welcomes participants

to a symposium on unemployment among middle-aged workers, 54 year old Hamasaka Gen,[1]

ex-General Manager of Hatsushiba Electric's Nara factory, is approaching the company's Tokyo

head office on foot. At the symposium Nishizawa Shūhei, an academic from Sōkei University,

begins with an address on the rising number of suicides among middle-aged men while Hamasaka,

arriving at the ground floor reception, requests the receptionist usher him into the company

president's office. Denied entry, Hamasaka draws a ceremonial sword from a sports bag slung over

his shoulder and demands the receptionist 'Call the president!' Back at the symposium,

Hatsushiba's managing director, Shima Kōsaku, is recalled to the head office and as he arrives at

the back entrance, the unfolding drama is being broadcast live on the midday news. Hamasaka,

seated on the floor with jacket off and shirt unbuttoned, sword pointing towards his stomach,

laments to Shima of his poor treatment by the company. After 32 years of unbroken service,

Hamasaka has been 'restructured' out of the company under its 'voluntary' early retirement

programme. Being a member of the same April 1970 entry cohort as Shima, Hamasaka rues their

subsequently different fates, and suddenly plunges the sword deep into his own chest. Three days

later, while convalescing from his injuries, Hamasaka jumps to his death from a hospital window.

Despite the above scenes having been taken from the *Shima Kōsaku* series (Hirokane 1985, Series 3, Volume 1: 107-158), one of the most popular and enduring Japanese adult manga of the 1980s-2000s, it is almost certainly no coincidence that the story very nearly replicates real events that had occurred three years earlier at the Bridgestone tyre company's Tokyo headquarters. On 24 March 1999, 58 year old manager of golf equipment purchasing, Nonaka Masaharu, had burst into the company president's 9th floor office to complain about the firm's restructuring plans and at being asked to step down from his post. In a letter of complaint he wrote that, 'loyal workers are being discarded like torn up rags' and, producing two long fish-carving knives, he sliced open his own belly in a ritual self-disembowelment, or *seppuku*. Dubbed 'Japan's first corporate hara-kiri' (BBC 2000), Nonaka's suicide received worldwide media coverage as his actions were assumed to articulate the deepest anxieties of millions of Japan's eponymous salarymen; that under the pressures of globalization and a deep recession, the organizational system that for so long had given people stability and identity in their work, was being abandoned.

This article investigates representations of contemporary Japanese salarymen and their company organizations in manga, or Japanese graphic novels. In particular, we will examine representations of salarymen's roles in and responses to the turbulent years of the past two decades, and the ongoing globalization of Japanese business organizations. We will explore these issues with reference to the two most popular contemporary manga series depicting male white-collar workers,

Sarariiman Kintarō (Motomiya 1994-Present) and the *Shima Kōsaku* series (Hirokane 1985-Present).[2]

We will show how this ubiquitous popular cultural medium has represented the triumphs and miseries of the salaryman through this period in Japan's recent history in a sympathetic, though not uncritical, manner. In contrast to representations of the male white-collar worker in mainstream American popular culture, where he is regularly portrayed as a sad, lonely, desperate, greedy, or cruel figure in films;[3] in the business and academic literature, where he is depicted as an inflexible drone (Kanter 1989; Peters 1982); or as faint-hearted bureaucrats serving out time in soulless environments (Mills 1953; Whyte 1960); salaryman manga illustrates both the strengths and weaknesses, the heroism and the tragedy, of Japanese office workers and middle managers. In these stories, the authors reveal the human being that inhabits the grey suit as he faces up to and – almost always – overcomes near-impossible challenges.

Crucially, salaryman manga also cleverly critiques salarymen and their corporations. In doing so, it reflects onto Japanese society the sharp ambiguity of two conflicting wants – the wish to preserve the stability and cultural integrity of Japanese-style organizational management, while appreciating the desire to engage in substantive reforms to that system. Indeed, we argue that salaryman manga is a reflection of the feelings of trauma and change that Japanese salaryman experience in their working lives and which they often associate with globalization, financialization, and

Americanization. However, this genre also depicts the strength and resilience of the local, domestic features of the successful Japanese organization. Consequently, this portrayal of Japanese organizational styles is not simply a self-destructive burying of heads in the sand. Rather, and importantly for the salaryman, it refracts and thereby suggests strategies for maintaining cultural coherence and a personal masculine self-identity within a globalizing workplace (see also Dasgupta 2000).

Following this section, and to provide some real-world contextual background, in the next section we will briefly introduce manga and the manga industry before evaluating the substantial literature on Japanese corporations. The third section and main body is divided into two parts. First, we look at how the Japanese organization is depicted in 1980s and 1990s salaryman manga. In these, our salaryman protagonists uphold the codes of the post-war corporate warrior in order to save their organizations from corrosion from within, as Japan's success begins to turn in on itself. In the second part we show our protagonists taking on external forces, with globalization being represented as a subordination and feminization of Japanese organizational culture to a more brutal, American, form of capitalism.

In the concluding section, we round up by arguing that these manga offer important critical challenges from the world of popular culture to the direction of development of Japanese capitalism since the 1980s. In so doing, we argue that the manga also refract onto salarymen

opportunities for re-evaluating their own working situations and for surviving and thriving under

the pressures of working within contemporary Japanese business organizations.

Manga and the Manga Industry

Manga is big business. With an estimated 1.268 billion copies sold in 2006 generating 481 billion

yen (USD4.5 billion) in revenue,[4] it is hard to believe that paper sales are approximately 50

percent down from their peak in the mid-1990s when, as the immensely popular *Dragonball* series

was reaching its climax, the 20 December 1994 issue of the weekly anthology *Shōnen Jyampu* sold

a whopping 6.53 million copies (RIP 2007; Ito 2005: 469).

The recent drop in paper sales is almost certainly not an indication of any decline in manga's

popularity, however, but is a reflection of the steep drop in the population of younger people since

the 1990s combined with the increasing accessibility of publications on the internet (RIP 2007),

mobile telephony, and via conversions to anime, cinema, and television live action drama formats.

Thus, both Kintarō's and Kōsaku's enduring popularity and commercial value can also be

demonstrated in this way. For his part, Kintarō has appeared in a feature film (Dir. Miike Takashi,

1999), a 20 episode live action television drama series aired on TBS in 2001, and as a high quality

anime production – again 20 episodes – which was shown on satellite TV (Dir. Katsumata

Tomoharu 2001), and which became popular among aficionados in the United States when an

English subtitled version was released there in 2005-6 (Sarudama 2006). Kōsaku, also, has

appeared in a feature film (Dir. Negishi Kichitaro 1992) and as a live action television drama (1993-98).

As a visual and literary medium, manga has a long history and is deeply embedded in Japanese life. Schodt (1997: 28) traces its graphic and satirical roots back to the 11th century, while experts agree that manga-type pictures first achieved broad popularity in the Edo period through the mass distribution of woodblock prints of the 'floating world', or *ukiyoe*; a genre of folk art depicting scenes from the urban amusement quarters of Edo (Ito 2005: 459).[5] Since then, and especially after the Second World War when manga cartoons were complemented by cinematic techniques and the diffusion of American culture and consumption patterns, manga has become a mainstay of Japan's publishing industry (Ito 2005). There is now a huge variety of manga series, satisfying every conceivable market segment and demographic group. Some of these, such as salaryman manga, tend towards fictional realism, while others deal with political satire, romance, science fiction, and extreme sexual fantasies.

Although it is impossible to prove with any precision what role manga plays in Japan in the formation of knowledge, culture, attitudes, and even behaviour, we know that its impact is not trivial. Ito (2005: 473) tells of criminals who testified in court that they gained their ideas from manga, while manga cartoons and their author artists have also been at the centre of international political disputes. One of these concerned Motomiya Hiroshi, the author of *Salaryman Kintarō*,

when his pacifist-revisionist historical manga *Kuni ga Moeru* (The Country is Burning), portraying

society in the years surrounding the Nanking Massacre in 1937-8, was serialized from 2002, and

caused a political uproar that 'engaged manga into the discourse of historical revisionism' between

Japan and China (Rosenbaum 2006: 9 and 12). Motomiya himself recognised the impact that

manga can have when he acquiesced in both the expression of apology and withdrawal from

publication by Shueisha of the offending cartoons on Nanking (Rosenbaum 2006).

Thus, while appreciating commercial requirements, manga are also a means to a literary end for

their authors and more serious aficionados. Although discussion of comics in western countries is

beyond our scope, we must emphasise this dual nature of the manga cartoon in Japan by

comparison with North America and Europe, where mainstream comics have been fair pegged into

the realms of children's works, science-fantasy, and comedy. While many manga titles in Japan

also fulfill these roles, manga as a mainstream visual and literary medium can also be serious

high-brow commentary or, as with series such as *Kintarō* and *Kōsaku*, might overlap into art,

literature, education, and entertainment.

Before moving on to examining manga representations of Japanese business organizations and the

salarymen that work within them, we must provide a real-world organizational context for those

discussions. Thus, we now turn to the literature on the Japanese firm.

Performance, Restructuring, New Thinking

Coinciding with the Asian financial crisis of 1998, the years 1997-99 will be recorded as one of the

bleakest periods in Japan's post-war history, and as the moment when it seemed possible that the

entire economy might go into meltdown. This was when some of Japan's most respected

corporations either collapsed altogether (Sanyo Securities, Yamaichi Securities, and Hokkaido

Takushoku Bank, in November 1997), were nationalised to prevent financial contagion (Long

Term Credit Bank in 1999), or were rescued from bankruptcy by a foreign competitor (Renault's

acquisition of Nissan in March 1999). Perhaps the most memorable media images from those years

were the televised pictures of the chairman of Yamaichi Securities crying uncontrollably as he

bowed in apology for managerial misdeeds and pleaded for other companies to hire his employees.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that reports appeared in the media and in academia describing

the transformation of the Japanese organization. Scholars referred to the 'abandonment of lifetime

employment' (Richter *et al* 2000: 13), and argued for a 'shift from remuneration based mainly on

seniority and ability to new systems emphasizing management by objectives' (Suehiro 2001: 159).

Indeed, at the beginning of 1997, the *Financial Times* wrote of the 'Death of the Salaryman'

(Nakamoto 1997: 1). Predicting the effects of corporate restructurings on employees' careers in a

book with the ominous title *Sarariiman Hōkai* (Fall of the Salaryman), Utsumi (2000) argued that

changing jobs will become commonplace and that salarymen should re-evaluate their relationship

to their employer. From the management side, authors contributed to the discourse either by

exhorting companies to adopt 'global' standards of corporate governance (Shibata 1999), or by

counselling employers to nurture 'independent-minded employees' who can thrive in fluid

employment markets (Udagawa 1998).

We have been here before. As early as 1958 Abegglen speculated about the convergence of

Japanese organizational forms on the American system as indigenous traditions would give way to

modern efficiencies (Abegglen 1958). On the Japanese side, Ujigawa and Uemura (1970), in their

Marxist *Sarariiman Kakumei* (Salaryman Revolution), urged salarymen to discard their

over-dependent attitudes or face being consigned to the scrap heap of history. Yet, recent years

have seen the most severe pressure yet being placed on the Japanese management system, and

commentators have not been reluctant to predict its transformation into a version of the American

corporate and financial system (Cerny 2001).

The story of how the Japanese organization came to be described thus is an interesting one.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Japanese businesses cornered markets in lucrative export streams

and Japan's success was attributed to various features – superior manufacturing (Oliver and

Wilkinson 1988), committed and able workers (Dore 1973), cooperative industrial relations (Koike

1988), inter-firm coordination (Fruin 1992), patient capital (Dore 1987), and sound industrial

policy (Johnson 1982). Japanese companies were the model of stability and growth, possessing

deep wells of comparative advantage (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995). Many scholars even predicted

that western firms would converge on their Japanese counterparts (Dore 1973; Porter 1990: 731).

Nevertheless, more sceptical voices have also striven to be heard. Others have argued that Japanese workplaces are not – and perhaps never were – high-trust, high-performance factories with cooperative industrial relations environments (Kamata 1983); that lean manufacturing rests on worker surveillance (Kumazawa 1996); and that the transference of Japanese management practices to Europe and North America has been less widespread than imagined (Elger and Smith (eds) 1994). Mehri (2005) suggests, for example, that Toyota possesses an authoritarian culture at least as strict as Ford's.

Just as the US and UK economies rebounded in the 1990s, Japan fell into its 'Lost Decade'. The sources of post-war socio-economic strength were suddenly criticised as dysfunctional millstones (Carlile and Tilton 1998; Porter *et al* 2000). Globalization and changing consumer tastes demanded flexible organizations and the Japanese system, geared by long-term planning and incremental innovation, appeared unable to deliver. Although similar problematic phases have been experienced elsewhere, in particular in France (Hancke 2003) and Germany (Streeck 1997), Japan's halting response was condemned as symptomatic of managerial failure.

Alongside the slowdown appeared societal shifts that became associated with the maturation of the economy (Lincoln 1988), involving a move towards a prosperous, consumer-based society, and

which has invoked widespread questioning of younger Japanese people's changing attitudes

(Watanabe 2007). This implies a long-term shift from community to individual goals, from

self-sacrifice to self-realisation (Hamada 1998), and change has occurred in Japan, confounding

the view that the country is moribund (Kingston 2004). Although the restructuring measures of

Nissan CEO Carlos Ghosn support the argument that Japanese firms need outsider thinking, the

Japanese approach has been steady and considered, and firms have avoided 'slash and burn'

policies (Matanle 2003; McCann *et al* 2006). Arguably, as Japan recovers, the gradualist approach

may prove successful, despite calls for more radical action. To quote Ghosn: 'It's slow, it's very

pragmatic. One would expect a quicker kind of resolution' (BusinessWeek 2002). Nevertheless,

firms have outsourced manufacturing overseas; banks have written off non-performing loans; and

cross-shareholdings are unravelling (Katz 2002). As companies restructure, new corporate forms

spring up, based around information technologies and financed by venture capital. Market analysts

have started to emerge as executives and the media are paying more attention to share performance

(Dore 2000).

Others argue that the Japanese organizational form has not been transformed (Inagami and

Whittaker 2005). The long term focus on internal personnel development has stayed in place

(Matanle 2006), and large insider-dominated corporate boards are still the norm (Robinson and

Shimizu 2006). Furthermore, many large Japanese firms are still resistant to overseas influences.

According to Jacoby (2005: 67-8) '[a] sure way to get a laugh out of these managers is to ask what

they think about the growing number of management consultants plying their services in Japan.

[...] Someday, foreign consultancies may find themselves doing a thriving business in Japan, but

they haven't yet'.

In the next section we examine how the above described events, and the feelings of participants,

have been represented in Japanese salaryman manga. We argue that a popular Japanese medium

has engaged critically in the discourse of organizational change and has reached out to Japanese

working men struggling under their daily anxieties. Below we will show that salaryman manga

offers a powerful cultural marker for urban Japanese males seeking to maintain their masculine

self-identities within the confusion and insecurity of the contemporary Japanese business

organization.

Men Under Pressure: Internal and External Threats

This section is divided into two parts. First we introduce the two manga series of *Sarariiman*

Kintarō and *Shima Kōsaku*, and we examine depictions in these of the Japanese salaryman

working in his business organization during the 1980s and 90s. In these years, the stories are

primarily inward looking and organization-centred, and the narratives deal with the malign

consequences of Japan's industrial success – corruption, *amakudari*,[6] inter-generational conflict,

and factionalism. Kintarō and Kōsaku are presented as idealized masculine role models who strive

to uphold the values of Japan's post-war corporate warriors – the men who built the economic

miracle and whose efforts are often perceived as being undone by a culture of selfish individualism that threatens to erode organizational strength from within. Kintarō and Kōsaku, despite being 'ordinary' salarymen, are both very different but extra-ordinary men, as they repeatedly restore the primacy of Japanese working values and, thus, save their companies and colleagues. In this way they provide a motif that neatly plays to the anxieties and vulnerabilities of the 'real' contemporary salaryman as he struggles to maintain his indispensibility to the corporate community.

In the second part, we concentrate on salaryman manga from the 2000s and, especially, on the second series of *Sarariiman Kintarō*, because this series in particular takes the genre forward into a new domain – that of the lone Japanese salaryman battling against an external enemy; the expansion of American capitalism and its globalization into the Japanese organizational milieu. We will show how these stories project globalization as a neo-liberal subordination to a more brutal form of capitalism; one that threatens to destroy the organic cultural embeddedness of the Japanese business organization. We will argue that this is presented as a 'feminization' of the Japanese salaryman with his threatened submission to 'masculine' American capital. Although this series has yet to reach its conclusion, just as in the first series, Kintarō struggles to 'save' the Japanese salaryman and the Japanese organization, this time from external predators. In so doing, he reconfirms the integrity of the Japanese salaryman's masculine identity and once again demonstrates the salaryman's indispensability.

The 1980s and 1990s

Motorcycles hum below a corporate monolith in downtown Tokyo. Hundreds of cloaked gang members congregate menacingly outside the building's entrance, arguing and gesticulating aggressively with a female officer of the company. A police car arrives, and quietly deposits a young man towards the rear of the throng. Moving to the front, and clad in the grey uniform of the business world, he seems to represent all that the bike riders have rejected – or have failed to achieve – in their passage through Japanese society. Yet, these bikers are not here to assail a solitary middle-class drone, but to greet one of their own. This is Kintarō, rebel bike gang leader turned corporate warrior who, adopting the unconventional approaches of the street, has come to the rescue of the salaryman that works within the monolith.

Figure 1. Hailed by his bike gang, Kintarō arrives for his first day of work at Yamato Construction.
© Copyright Motomiya Hiroshi/Shueisha.

Figure 2. Maeda and Ishikawa rediscover their physical self-confidence in a brawl with some yakuza hoodlums. © Copyright Motomiya Hiroshi/Shueisha.

Figure 3. Kintarō persuades the yakuza to back off. © Copyright Motomiya Hiroshi/Shueisha.

Figure 4. Kintarō confronts his amakudari bosses in typically forthright fashion. © Copyright Motomiya Hiroshi/Shueisha.

Everything about Yajima Kintarō speaks of rebellion when he appears in the first volume of *Sarariiman Kintarō*. He is the violent former leader of the notorious 10,000 man strong Hasshu *bōsōzoku* gang[7] and, with his young son Ryūta in tow, every day in his new life in Tokyo is an uphill and contradictory struggle, as he drags himself out of the modern day *kawaramono*[8] life which he had grown up within. Marking the pair as outsiders, the manga simultaneously evokes sympathy for the spirited underdog, which is further enhanced when Kintarō is shown saving the life of the chairman of *Yamato Kensetsu* (Yamato Construction),[9] who had become stranded in his fishing boat. Perhaps in recognition of his own – and his generation's – dismissive approach to Kintarō's class and generation, the chairman offers the young 'punk' a gift of his choosing as thanks. Kintarō, remembering his promise to his dying bride Akemi to foreswear violence and raise Ryūta honourably, asks for a job at Yamato.

It is towards the end of this first volume that the foundational themes of *Sarariiman Kintarō* are deployed, as the company's background is revealed to Kintarō. The chairman invites him on a fishing trip and asks Kintarō to be his adopted son. One of Japan's three most prestigious residential housing general constructors, Yamato Kensetsu had been founded by the chairman during the chaos of the immediate post-war years and had been a comfortable place to work until the mid-1980s. It was then that Chairman Yamato had invited retired bankers and government bureaucrats onto the board to make use of their connections and acumen. They in turn had secured bank lending and government housing construction contracts, which had led to Yamato's

spectacular growth during the bubble years. However, we learn that the chairman's policy has

brought with it some unintended consequences.

As Kintarō's introduction to the company's culture deepens, the scene is set for a complex struggle

for the spirit of Yamato Construction and, we learn later, by implication Japan too. The kindly

chairman and his fearsome number two, Managing Director Kurokawa, are the original post-war

corporate samurai who, through their determined will and honourable ambitions, built the original

company and thereby helped raise Japan out of the ashes of defeat. Facing them is the 'amakudari'

generation of corrupt government bureaucrats and their allies. It is their self-interested

complacency that threatens to undo Yamato's and Kurokawa's achievements. Then we have the

third generation of salarymen, whose self-confidence and energy have been shattered by Japan's

recent failures, and who feel powerless to reverse the slide. Finally, and an outsider from the start,

there is Yajima Kintarō, scion of the lost youth of the 1990s. Scorned by his immediate superiors,

Kintarō is a cat set amongst a group of fat and prosperous pigeons, and he sets about them, just as

the old chairman suspects he might.

The principal narrative thread for volume one of the first series concerns a chance encounter

between Kintarō and three colleagues – Maeda, Tanaka, and Ishikawa – and some yakuza crime

syndicate hoodlums in a drinking club, which had resulted in a brawl. Next day the yakuza come

calling at Yamato Construction to extort protection money, but Kintarō saves the day because the

yakuza leader, Shiina, turns out to have been one of Kintarō's trusted lieutenants from his former

bike gang days. Nevertheless, the company president Ohshima, an 'amakudari' bureaucrat

formerly of the Ministry of Construction, fires Kintarō and his colleagues, on the pretext of having

lost the company money and prestige, but mainly because Kintarō poses a threat to Ohshima's

nefarious conspiracy to wrest control of the company from the chairman's clique. Kintarō's

instinctive reaction is to crash his foot onto Ohshima's desk and shout:

> What have you done? Where were you hiding when the enemy was at the door? Did you
>
> disappear, leaving the trouble with the footsoldiers? You're a shit who ran away when
>
> your children were crying. Then you bully the children when everything is over.
>
> *Sarariiman Kintarō*, Series 1, Volume 1: 182.[10]

Realising that Kintarō is a determined fighter who would be an asset in an industry where yakuza

and venal bureaucrats are occupational hazards, Chairman Yamato pulls rank on the president and

reinstates the four salarymen. In so doing he neatly sets up the series for the battles to come.

Kintarō is thus established as the affective pivot upon which is balanced the three-way factional

struggle for the spirit of Yamato, and of Japan, and it is Kintarō's everyman appeal that

re-invigorates the energy and masculinity of a generation of vulnerable and disoriented Maedas,

Tanakas, and Ishikawas. Moreover, while *Kintarō* is not the first manga to employ an elder figure

calling on the young sword, it was the first salaryman manga to suggest that the overall problem facing Japanese industry was that companies remained in the operational hands of the bureaucrats and their cronies who had brought about the economic collapse and, as a result, they were unlikely to be the ones to restore Japan's fortunes.

Kintarō, therefore, becomes a beacon of hope for a brighter future for Yamato Construction, and thus an exemplar of such for Japan, and this is demonstrated by his relationship with Mita Zenkichi, Madam Nakamura, and Suenaga Misuzu, who are power-brokers and fixers inhabiting the shadowy 'iron triangle' at the apex of politics, the bureaucracy, and business, and who represent those who steered Japan through its post-war economic expansion. Mita is a classic political fixer, while Nakamura is a fantastically rich lady who has successfully played the markets, and Suenaga is the beautiful proprietress of an upscale drinking establishment who retains excellent connections due to her being the ex-lover of the late-prime minister. Through a series of somewhat implausible coincidences Kintarō meets and becomes an apprentice and ally to all three of them, each recognizing his potential for reaching the top of the company and for saving it – and Japan – from implosion. Interestingly, and despite two of these characters being female, Kintarō is able further to assert his masculinity when he is first introduced to Suenaga by Mita; and immediately she falls in love.

The narrative of the first series of *Salaryman Kintarō* is often painfully transparent, and could be

criticized for having an over-stated and simplistic agenda, with Kintarō's naive honesty shaming

his opponents into submission. However, this would misunderstand the narrative purpose of

writing for Japanese comics. These are stories designed to appeal on a gut, emotional level. In this

way, *Sarariiman Kintarō* depicts what might be if salarymen should actually stand up and resist

their 'villainous' bosses. Yet it also critiques salaryman culture. Indeed, Kintarō himself comes in

for this towards the end of volume seven of the first series when first Igo, the chief of Yamato's

Kahoku City branch, beats Kintarō for calling on his former bike gang colleagues to fight

Yamato's war against competitor Hokuto Construction and, later, Chairman Yamato gives Kintarō

a tearful dressing down because he behaves too much as a loner. It is at this moment that Kintarō

demonstrates for the first time that he is becoming a '*shakaijin*', or mature adult member of society,

when he admits, 'I am not alone. I'm not living alone, am I?' Accordingly, the manga gently

satirises the salaryman and his apparent 'never say die' spirit because, underlying the text is the

shared knowledge that real salarymen are so rarely prepared – and neither are they equipped – to

challenge the established status quo.

Shima Kōsaku takes a different approach to the post-slump environment, due to the manga being

established in the midst of the hubris of the late-1980s bubble. The protagonist is the smoothest of

smooth operators, as he carves out a niche for himself within his company, and plays a central role

in its growth into one of Japan's premier electronics manufacturers.[11] But, more pertinently, the

manga's style is bound up by author Hirokane writing from the perspective of the people with

whom Kintarō is often at loggerheads – mid- to higher level management. Here Hirokane's

narrative, while scathing of factionalism and financial mis-management, is sympathetic to those

who shouldered the post-crash blame and assures them that they would be responsible for turning

Japanese business around. In doing so, they would also be first in line to receive the spoils of

success, with these being status promotion, the juiciest company assignments, and women. Thus, it

is Kōsaku who sets up his company's crucial venture into China and who adeptly manages the

vicissitudes of corporate globalization, and it is Kōsaku who demonstrates his sexual potency and

restores the masculinity of the Japanese salaryman manager by luring countless young women –

from New York (Hirokane 1985-present: Series 1, Volume 1) to Shanghai (Hirokane 1985-present:

Series 3, Volume 2) – into bed. Yet, here again, the reader is guided subtly into recognizing the

sub-text that belies the glamour of Kōsaku's work; and we are left to ponder the gap between this

and the reality of the urban Japanese manager's life.

While *Shima Kōsaku* has neither the visceral power of *Sarariiman Kintarō*, nor its mass appeal, it

would be an error to overlook this series, especially with regard to the way it seems to have

affected the development of *Sarariiman Kintarō* itself. In the end, Kōsaku continued successfully

through the post-bubble era because author Hirokane responded to Kintarō's assertions and

provided alternative perspectives. Like Kintarō, Kōsaku struggles against double-dealing. But,

unlike Kintarō's violent outrage, it is Kōsaku's sophisticated demeanour, and his sympathetic but

uncompromising approach, that enables him to climb the corporate hierarchy to join the board of directors. The method of Kōsaku's rise is thus deployed as a foil against which to lay bare the infantile defensiveness of 'ordinary' salaryman Kintarō's self-righteous indignation at the cruelty of his 1990s fate.

The 2000s

Figure 5. 'Nippon sarariiman Yajima Kintarō desu.' © Copyright Motomiya Hiroshi/Shueisha.

Figure 6. Much to Kintarō's dismay,Janet Taylor suggests that he sleep with her. © Copyright
Motomiya Hiroshi/Shueisha.

Figure 7. Janet Taylor puts her clothes back on after lecturing Kintarō, the Kintarō rushes off to save Takimoto. © Copyright Motomiya Hiroshi/Shueisha.

Figure 8. After, literally, licking Taylor's shoes, she accuses Kintarō of abandoning his pride as a Japanese salaryman. © Copyright Motomiya Hiroshi/Shueisha.

By 2006 it seemed that even referring to the salaryman and to Japanese-style management had become passé, as the ongoing globalization, and Americanization, of the Japanese organization appeared to be encountering little resistance. However, 2006 also saw the return of our unlikely hero with the publication of the second series of *Sarariiman Kintarō*. This time, however, he works at an American financial giant's (INB Bank) Tokyo branch office and is forced to confront the possibility of a subordination to a more brutal form of capitalist organization.

In this new series, named *Manee Uōzu* (Money Wars), we meet Kintarō as he announces himself at his employment interview. 'Nippon sarariiman Yajima Kintarō desu! (I'm Japanese salaryman Kintarō Yajima!)' he bellows, to the discomfort of the interview panel. The lead interviewer, whom we later learn is the Japanese boss of the Tokyo office and whose role is to be the actual and symbolic intermediary between Japanese and American capitalism, looks at Kintarō and chuckles ironically, 'Japanese salaryman, heh?' Yet, it is not until later that Kintarō meets his real nemesis, a shapely blonde female supervisory manager named Janet Taylor. It is the relationship between Kintarō and Taylor which forms the fulcrum of the story from here on; for it is Taylor who invites Kintarō for dinner and suggests – perhaps even orders – that he sleep with her that night. Although Kintarō manages to avoid this particular difficulty, we are left in no doubt that here is a peculiar predator. Later we see Taylor again, stripping down to her underwear and lying on a desk in the open-plan trading floor, as she lectures Kintarō on the realities of contemporary financial trading, while Kintarō ponders how to save his Japanese team leader Takimoto, who is attempting suicide

after having lost the bank five billion yen. The message is frank. Either capitulate to the

unchallengeable logic of global (meaning American) capital – and thereby renounce your dignity

and humanity – or you leave; or die.

This second series has a darker and more complex atmosphere than the first, where subterfuge,

treachery, and infidelity reign; and where all is done with panache, flattery, and a devious smile.

Inevitably, given the motifs that permeate the story, it is the Japanese side, because of its apparent

compassionate humanity, that becomes the source of its own subordination and which, ultimately,

threatens to 'feminize' the salaryman. Positive attributes are turned on their heads as honesty

becomes naivity, dignity becomes self-importance, and human kindness is self-destructive. From a

Japanese salaryman's perspective the humiliation is compounded because the origin of this

feminization is herself a woman; a curiously unattractive one that possesses all the physical

attributes that a man could hope for but who exudes no sexual allure, no tenderness, and no desire

for companionship. She is cold, selfishly individualistic, and ruthlessly cruel.

Here we can begin to untangle Motomiya's representative Japanese critique of American

neo-liberal capitalism. It is a critique which is understood by anyone familiar with Japanese society,

where hierarchy and mutual affective loyalty are deeply embedded in organizational life. To many

Japanese, America is insufferably sanctimonious over its self-image of being founded on the

principles of individual freedom and equality. In this view, the competitive regime that seems to

have been unleashed there has not created a society where men and women, and black and white, can work freely with each other on the basis of mutual respect and equality. Instead, American egalitarianism and liberty are revealed as self-deceptions that conceal a society of selfish, isolated, and alienated individuals competing aggressively against one another, and where the consequence is simply a new, more savage, hierarchy of winners and losers. Consequently, many Japanese are persuaded that Americans have been compelled by their competitive regime to cross the threshold of civility into a society where everyone is at war with everyone else. Of course, Motomiya gives Kintarō the task of re-asserting the cultural integrity of the Japanese organization and of rehabilitating the Japanese salaryman's masculine identity; hence his proud self-introduction at the start.

Although Kintarō battles an external enemy in this new series, the loyal reader is also encouraged to look back to the messages from the first series. Since the 1980s, one of Japanese society's principal conceits – because it is so rarely achieved in practice – has been the image of the Japanese organization as *unmeikyōdōtai*, an organic 'community of fate' authentic to the fellowship of individuals that comprise it. In the first series, Motomiya had exposed this ideal as being compromised by the temptation for management to exploit the affective loyalty that employees develop for each other and their *kaisha*,[12] and for the Japanese organization to descend into despotism; hence the villainous machinations of ex-Ministry of Construction president Ohshima and his gang (Motomiya 1994-present, Series 1, Volume 1), or the foetid stench of

corruption permeating the *dangō* tendering process in Kahoku City (Motomiya 1994-present,

Series 1, Volume 7). Motomiya's brilliance has been, through the mass appeal of manga, to lay

bare the internal contradictions of both the Japanese and American organizational forms to an

audience that, ordinarily, might not have such opportunities to ponder the nature of their own work

regime and their relationship to it as individuals.

Conclusion

In this article we have analysed how two popular Japanese manga series have represented Japanese

salarymen, their roles in Japanese business organizations, and their responses to the events and

processes that have taken place in Japan's economy during the turbulent decades from the

mid-1980s to the present day. These two series have presented their salarymen protagonists in a

sympathetic yet not uncritical light, displaying support for and criticism of both the Japanese and

American organizational models.

Since the mid-1980s these manga series have refracted back onto salaryman society the sharp

ambiguity of Japanese capitalism in a globalizing economy. While the manga present a defence of

the cultural integrity of this ideal-type of community firm, the authors also present a sharp critique

of how these ideals are manifested in contemporary Japanese organizations and their business

practices. Looking inward we find corruption, double dealing, factionalism, and a gnawing culture

of selfish individualism that, together, threaten to corrode the corporation from within. Later, and

looking outward, we find a feminization of the Japanese salaryman under a new more brutal form

of globalizing capitalism. While author Motomiya Hiroshi brings us Yajima Kintarō, the everyman

hero who battles to inspire honesty, pride, integrity and sheer grit back into the battered Japanese

salaryman's self-identity, Hirokane Kenshi brings us Shima Kōsaku, the sophisticated, intelligent,

and creative manager whose calm and surefooted leadership steers his firm beyond troubled waters.

Accordingly, each series asks its readers to critically re-evaluate their companies, their work, and

their self-identities and, thereby, provides opportunities for salarymen to enact strategies for

surviving and thriving under the pressures of working in contemporary Japanese business

organizations.

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[1] Japanese names, except when used to cite scholars, are arranged in the Japanese fashion, with family names preceding given names.

[2] There have been six series of Shima Kōsaku: *Kachō Shima Kōsaku* (Section Chief Shima Kōsaku) (1985-1992, 17 Volumes), *Buchō Shima Kōsaku* (Division Chief Shima Kōsaku) (1992-2002, 13 Volumes), *Torishimariyaku Shima Kōsaku* (Director Shima Kōsaku) (2002-2005, 8 Volumes), *Jōmu Shima Kōsaku* (Managing Director Shima Kōsaku) (2005-2007, 6 Volumes), *Senmu Shima Kōsaku* (Executive Director Shima Kōsaku) (2007-present, 3 Volumes so far), and *Yangu Shima Kōsaku* (Young Shima Kōsaku) (2003-06, 4 Volumes). There have been two series of Sarariiman Kintarō: *Sarariiman Kintarō* (Salaryman Kintarō 1994-2002, 30 Volumes) and *Sarariiman Kintarō: Manee Uōzu* (Salaryman Kintarō: Money Wars) (2006-Present: 5 Volumes so far).

[3] See, for example, *Glengarry Glen Ross* (James Foley 1992), *Falling Down* (Joel Schumacher 1993), *Wall Street* (Oliver Stone 1987), and *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes 1999).

[4] This information was provided to the authors in an e-mail dated 22 January 2008 from the Shuppan Kagaku Kenkyūjo (Research Institute for Publications).

[5] The Edo, or Tokugawa, period (1603-1868) was a period of self-imposed isolation and marked Japan's transformation from a medieval to a pre-modern society. After the Restoration of the Meiji Emperor in 1868, the city

of Edo was officially designated as the capital of Japan and renamed Tokyo.

[6] Literally, 'descent from heaven', a process where elite bureaucrats and bankers 'descend' into comfortable retirement posts in large organizations. See Colignon and Usui (2003).

[7] *Literally 'The Wild-Running Tribe', bōsōzoku* are motorcycle gangs consisting of various disaffected Japanese youth. Among other things, they race their motorcycles together late at night in urban areas, waking residents and harassing motorists. Like Shiina in *Sarariiman Kintarō*, some members 'graduate' to join Japan's yakuza organized-crime syndicates. See Sato (1991).

[8] Literally, 'people of the riverbank', or social outcastes.

[9] The name 'Yamato' evokes feelings redolent of a mythical ancient Japan, rather like 'Albion' when used in reference to a mythical pre-medieval England.

[10] English translation taken from *Sarariiman Kintarō*, Anime Version, DVD 1, Episode 2, and then rechecked against the original manga version.

[11] Prior to becoming a prominent manga artist, Hirokane worked for four years as a salaryman at Matsushita Electric Industrial, Japan's largest manufacturer of consumer electronics.

[12] Lit: company.