In the midst of transition: Salaryman *senryū* poems and the perception of workplace change

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Abstract

This paper analyzes a set of 9,035 salaryman senryū poems over an eighteen-year period (1990–2007) in order to track salaryman reactions to workplace transition from an organizational behavioralist perspective. Major findings include: (i) the number of submissions and votes for the major poetry competition, Salaryman Senryū, have been falling since 1994, suggesting a decline in shared salaryman mentality; (ii) there has been a shift in the relative importance of broad themes, so that the workplace as a category of senryū poems is of less centrality in 2007 than it was in 1990; (iii) within the workplace category, (negative) interpersonal relations, especially with supervisors, still dominate; and (iv) workstyle is also a strong subtheme, with workers showing more interest in work processes than actual work conditions. The analysis also shows that the years 1996 and 1997 are a watershed where poems shift from a more jocular to strident tone. The overall implication of the study is a potential breach of the social contract between Japanese employers and regular employees, which will require the assiduous application of supportive employment practices (SEP) in order to ensure a high level of employee performance and engagement.

Keywords: Japanese management practices; salaryman senryū poems.

過渡期の中で：サラリーマン川柳と職場の変化の認識

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本論文は、1990から2007年までの18年間に投稿されたサラリーマン川柳9,035句を分析し、職場の変化に対するサラリーマンの反応を組織行動学的視点から追跡するものである。

主な研究成果は次の通りである：(i) 川柳コンテストの中でも主要な「サラリーマン川柳」の投稿数と一般投票数は1994年以降減り続けており、それは共有していたサラリーマン・メンタリティの低下を示唆するものと思われる。(ii) 話題となるテーマの比重に変化が生じ、2007年には「職場」は1990年に比べ以前ほど川柳の中心的な題目ではなくなっている。(iii) 「職場」を主題とした川柳には相変わらず(否定的な)人間関係、特に上司との関係を題材としたものが圧倒的に多い。(iv) ワークスタイルも根強いサブテーマの一つであり、社員は現実の労働条件よりもワークプロセスに関心を示している。分析の結果、1996/1997年がユーモラスな川柳から不快感を表す川柳に転じる分岐点であった。

この研究から導かれるインプリケーションは、日本人雇用者と正社員との間では社会契約違反の可能性があり、社員の高いレベルの業績とエンゲージメントを確保するには、支持的雇用施策を講じ、きめ細かく対応することが求められている。

Senryū to / itte warau na / honne da zo (2000)

‘Don’t laugh it off as a mere *senryū*. It’s what I really think’

1. Introduction

The past twenty years has seen significant change in both the Japanese economy and the Japanese workplace. From economic boom to prolonged recession, there have been substantial shifts in types of employment, with jobs becoming increasingly precarious. What do these changes mean for the workers themselves? How do they perceive change? What are the implications for employers? These are all key questions in the search for effective corporate management.

Since 1987, many Japanese employees have used an annual poetry competition, called the Salaryman *Senryū*, to write about their daily lives and their work experiences (in this paper, “Salaryman *Senryū*” with capitals refers to the competition, while “salaryman *senryū*” refers to the genre). The author has chosen to analyze these poems in order to explore workers’ perceptions of the changes they have experienced. The genre covers a wide range of subjects. After providing a brief outline of this poetic form and general trends, the analysis will focus on work-related themes.

2. A brief introduction to *senryū*

Originally an offshoot of the haiku form, the *senryū* is a Japanese style of three-line verse whose meter comprises seventeen syllables in a five-seven-five format. *Senryū* are stylistically much freer than the elegantly refined haiku and tend to be ironic or humorous in tone. Often dealing with human foibles or presenting pithy commentaries on social circumstances, *senryū* date from the eighteenth century and are embedded in the poetic life of the nation alongside the haiku, *tanka*, and *waka* poetic forms. Also today, *senryū* remain a popular form of expression in Japan in a way that is perhaps unparalleled by any given poetic form in English-language societies.

Attesting to the versatility and popularity of the *senryū* form is the wide range of themes available in Japan today, including *jiji senryū* ('current affairs *senryū*'), *eko senryū* ('environmental/ecological *senryū*'), a collection of *senryū* on underwear published by Triumph International Japan (TIJ 2006), a collection of *kamisan senryū* ('missus *senryū*') (published by Mitsuhashi 2008), as well as salaryman *senryū* – to be analyzed in this paper (see also Bitō 2007; Fukuoka 1999). While there is no academic definition of a salaryman *senryū* per se, it is generally accepted that the term refers to *senryū* entered into the poetry competition of the same name run by Dai-ichi Life Insurance Company since 1987. Initially an in-house event, its popularity quickly led to the contest being opened to the public, one hundred finalists out of many thousands of submissions selected in December each year, and the best ten poems selected in the following February by a panel of experts. The competition itself is extremely well known and its results are widely reported in the popular press as one of several annual contests aimed at identifying current social trends. Winners are published each year in book form, further evidence of the competitions' mainstream social appeal. Today the poems can also be accessed on Dai-ichi Life's Web site (Dai-ichi 2010) from the fourth competition in 1991 onward. In 2008, a first volume of English translations was published by Kodansha Ltd.

Matanle et al. (2008: 653) note that Japanese comics "are stories designed to appeal on a gut, emotional level." Much the same applies to the salaryman genre of *senryū*, which has at times been reviewed by *senryū* purists such as Takeda (2007) and not always in a flattering light due to their propensity for puns and lack of "poetic" quality. While successful submissions to Salaryman *Senryū* all comment to a varying degree on the nature of the salaryman's lot in life, it is their critique on management, organizational, and collegiate practices that are of paramount interest to the organizational scholar. Just as Matanle et al. (2008: 641) see salaryman manga as "a reflection of the feelings of trauma and change that

Japanese salaryman experience in their working lives” as well as depicting “the strength and resilience of the local, domestic features of the successful Japanese organization”, so too do the salaryman *senryū* resonate with pride and dejection, bravado and disappointment in a complex interplay of subjective emotion and pithy social commentary.

Regarding the use of *senryū* for analysis of an academic nature, *senryū* have been used as a vehicle for exploring attitudes in other contexts, for example Takagi-Kitayama’s (2008) study on first-generation women in Hawaii. Other innovative work using unusual sources can also be found in the aforementioned study by Matanle et al. (2008), which examines the representation of salarymen in two popular adult comics to shed light on responses to turbulent workplaces, and in Meyer-Ohle’s (2009) use of Internet blogs and diaries to examine worker perceptions of contextual changes.

3. Research aim and scope

The aim of this paper is to track salaryman reactions to workplace transition from an organizational behavioralist perspective. In order to do so, it analyzes a set of 9,035 salaryman *senryū* from 1990 to 2007 to identify broad thematic patterns of change and to consider the possible managerial or organizational implications thereof. The basic question is: do salaryman *senryū* show a change in Japanese workers’ perceptions of social life, especially the workplace?

There is an increasing number of studies on change in Japanese society at large, especially in the post-Bubble era from the early 1990s. Such research includes a collection of studies edited by Yoda and Harootunian (2006) as well as Leheny’s (2009) writing on contemporary Japanese society and politics. More work is also emerging from both academics and practitioners on transition in the workplace and Japanese organizational models, including changing work patterns, evaluation and pay schemes, as well as hiring practices (see, e.g. Chūma and Suruga 1997; Conrad 2010; Nohara 1999; Yamanishi 2009).

As an organizational behavioralist, my questions of interest in this paper are how do Japanese employees perceive the ongoing changes in their workplaces? And what are the implications of such perceptions for management? Given the importance of organizational climate, context, and relational transactions in Japanese organizations (Cangia 2010; Cappelli 1999), this is a topic of major importance. These transactions are also underscored by the shift to a knowledge-based economy, where employee engagement and/or organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) are increasingly seen to be key ingredients to a firm’s success (Hodson 2002). OCB is frequently operationalized as including cooperation, com-

mitment, pride in work, extra effort, and peer training – all behaviors that have long been associated with so-called Japanese management practices.

It should be noted that salaryman *senryū* have not yet been analyzed in the context of workplace change. They are used because they offer “an interesting and thought-provoking snapshot of the state and concerns of a society and economy in a challenging period of transition” (Meyer-Ohle 2009: 8).

4. The analytical context

Before analyzing the actual *senryū*, it is necessary to briefly describe the social, political, and economic backdrop against which the poems are actually penned. The eighteen years from 1990 to 2007 represent a period of enormous political, economic, and social change in Japan (see, among others, Leheny 2009; Yoda and Harootunian 2006).

The coronation of a new emperor in 1990 heralded the start of a new era both literally and figuratively, insofar as the reign of the previous Showa Emperor was as long as Queen Victoria’s and equally a symbol of stability despite encompassing great sociopolitical vicissitudes and warfare. On the political front, the once formidable Liberal Democratic machine started to breakdown, leading to a temporary loss of power in 1993 and subsequently “strange bedfellow” coalitions, one of which gave Japan its first Socialist prime minister in 1995 and an LDP–Kōmeitō coalition government in 1999, as well as the rise of a self-proclaimed “maverick” prime minister, Koizumi Junichiro (Wehrfritz and Takayama 2001). Political mistrust grew in the wake of funding scandals and self-serving political alignments (*BBC News*, 5 February 2001). Whereas low expectations for politicians were traditionally offset by a firm belief in the competence of the bureaucracy, blatant incidences of bureaucratic ineptitude during this period, such as the mismanagement of the national pension scheme (Lewis, 3 July 2007), seriously eroded this complacency.

Economically speaking, Japan went from boom to prolonged bust, prompting high unemployment levels and a reassessment of hitherto successful business models. Interest rates languished at zero or near-zero levels (Bank of Japan 2010) and according to OECD figures, falling tax revenues saw the national debt almost quadruple between 1990 and 2007. In the immediate aftermath of the bubble bursting, Japan’s top-tier city banks posted just under 3.5 trillion yen in bad debts (*Nikkei Business* 2005) and high-profile financial failures such as Yamauchi Securities and the Hokkaido Takushoku Bank in 1997 and the Sogō Department Store in 2000 were not uncommon.

Socially, Japan did well on the international stage in both sporting and intellectual pursuits, garnering several gold medals at the Barcelona Olympics in 1992, co-hosting the soccer World Cup in 2002, and winning the inaugural World Baseball Classic in 2006, as well as a Nobel Prize for Literature in 1994, Chemistry in 2000 and 2002, as well as Physics in 2002. Despite these sources of national pride, a series of unprecedented natural disasters (the Unzen Fugendake eruption in 1991, the Kobe-Awaji Earthquake in 1995, the Chūetsu Earthquake in 2004, the Noto Peninsula Earthquake in 2007) and manmade disasters at home (sarin poison gas attacks in 1994 and 1995, mass food poisoning in 1996, the Tokaimura nuclear accident in 1997, the Amagasaki railway accident in 2005) combined to create a deep sense of malaise. Aging as well as falling marriage and birth rates also hinted at a kind of demographic collapse (NIPSR 2010). Dubbed the “Lost Decade” by the popular press and in policy papers (e.g., Makin 2008), and indeed the “two lost decades” by *The Economist* (30 December 2009), the 1990s were an especially painful period.

Turning to the corporate world, Matanle et al. (2008: 643–645) offer a thorough overview of changes in the climate surrounding Japanese firms from near economic meltdown in the 1990s to changing attitudes on the part of the young. These events have been (confusingly) interpreted as either heralding drastic Western-style change (Shibata 1999; Utsumi 2000) or incremental Japanese-style organizational change (Inagami and Whittaker 2005; Matanle 2006). Undeniably, the period 1990–2007 is one of significant change in the Japanese corporate environment. The share of full-time employees dropped sharply and a series of legislation hastened more diversity in the workplace (see, e.g., JILPT 2006). Worker evaluation shifted from a somewhat lackadaisical seniority-based system to a more stringent performance-based one (Spinks 2006), and in-house welfare programs eroded (Nippon Keidanren 2009). Large-scale retrenchments were no longer a rarity and Japanese workers themselves increasingly began to switch jobs mid-career. For example, results from the most recent government survey on job switching found 21.3% of all workers aged 25–29 had changed jobs, 20.3% of those aged 30–34 and 13.4% of those aged 35–39 (MHLW 2007), and a fairly stable 10% of the workforce express a desire to change jobs (Statistics Bureau 2010: table 8). Meanwhile, corporate scandals ranging from improper accounting practices to out-and-out embezzlement and cover-ups were paraded in the media on an almost daily basis, resulting in deep-rooted consumer suspicion and cynicism toward much of corporate Japan. Employees struggled for their own survival in embattled firms they were no longer proud to work for.

5. The analytical framework

Following Krippendorff's (2004) method of content analysis (i.e., identify and define the data, indicate the population from which drawn, outline the analytical context, and set the analytical boundaries and the target of inferences), my dataset comprises all salaryman *senryū* poems published between 1990 and 2007 by Dai-ichi Life Insurance Company, that is, a total of 9,035 poems. Each poem forms a naturally bounded coding unit and the dataset is interpreted in the context of the period in which the poems were published. The poems are analyzed from an organizational perspective and inferences will be drawn regarding human resource management in Japanese firms.

Aiming to capture longitudinal changes or patterns in the poems as a body, an overarching coding scheme was developed (see Figure 1) comprising the three broad main categories of Workplace, Family, and Society. Each category was broken down into a number of subordinate thematic units (e.g., Human Relations, Workstyle). Where required, a third level of subthemes was also used to classify individual poems (e.g., Evaluation, Hours, Pay under Work Conditions). If a given poem overlapped two categories, it was counted in both categories, although such cases were rare (85 poems, representing less than 1% of the total sample) and were confined to lower category levels.

Figure 1. Content analysis framework.

After a short discussion of the overall pattern of submissions, this paper will focus on the Workplace category, with its subcategories of poems on human relations (supervisors, colleagues, subordinates, female workers), workstyle (meetings, *nemawashi*, etc.), work conditions (evaluation, work hours, pay), information and communication technologies, and restructuring/downsizing.

A final methodological note is that a body of over 9,000 salaryman *senryū* does allow for quantitative analysis. In fact, the tracing of thematic shares over time is a key contribution of the study to the field of organizational behavior studies, as any shifts will indicate changing employee concerns and, therefore, can be useful for the analysis of organizational climate.

6. Results

6.1. Falling submissions and votes

A first point of interest is that both submissions and votes for the contest have decreased since 1994, dropping by almost two-thirds until 2007 (Figure 2). Harder economic times may have reduced the psychological leeway to indulge in poetic pursuits. Writing poetry is, after all, a leisure activity. The decrease in participation may also reflect a drop in the absolute numbers of regular employees. It may, however, also indicate a drop in shared salaryman mentality as lifetime employment erodes and lifestyles diversify, in line with Matanle et al. (2008: 654), who find that “by 2006 it seemed that even referring to the salaryman and to Japanese style management had become passé.” Or as one *senryū* puts it:

Figure 2. Salaryman *senryū* submissions and best 10 votes (1990–2007).

Figure 3. Year-on-year change in main *senryū* category shares (%).

(1) (1995)

Risutora de / sarasen ōbōsha / inakunari

‘Downsizing. No one left to send in salaryman *senryū*’

In this last case, the implications for human resource management would indeed be profound. In other words, if not only the workplace as a center of self-identity and work colleagues as a source of positive interpersonal relations are of diminishing importance, but also a shared mentality of salaryman “oneness” can no longer be counted upon, management will have to find new ways of re-establishing loyalty to the employer, colleagues, and the workplace (see Kochan and Schulman 2007; Mintzberg 2009; Towers Watson 2010).

6.2. Overall thematic patterns

The existence of a body of poems submitted annually over an eighteen-year period presents an opportunity to identify change in thematic patterns over time. The first pronounced change is a shift in the relative importance of broad themes. As the thematic trajectories in Figure 3 show, the popularity of the Workplace as a topic for *senryū* submission fell from a peak of 48.9% in 1990 to fewer than 19% in 2007. In contrast, the share of Family-related poems has remained fairly constant around the halfway mark throughout the period. Albeit from a low base, Society themes have climbed steadily during the eighteen-year period, accounting for the same volume as Workplace themes in 2005 and subsequently outstripping them after 2006. Insofar as the winning *senryū* are concerned, then, the figures show a clear shift away from the workplace as a primary object of concern and a growing interest in sociopolitical topics.

Figure 4. Year-on-year Workplace subcategory changes (%).

Even though the data prevents drawing causal conclusions, these results clearly show that the workplace no longer dominates the minds of workers to the same extent it did when the Salaryman *Senryū* contest began. This drop can be attributed to a falling sense of identification with one's employer, a heightened sense of political citizenship, or more positive engagement with family life. An in-depth examination of the verses themselves, however, reveals no support for the last two factors, while Tanaka's (2008) study on workplace collapse provides evidence for a drop in workplace identification. From a human resource management point of view this implies that supportive employment practices (SEP) are in order to stimulate employee motivation and ensure a high level of employee performance and engagement (Collins 2001; Eaton 2000; Hodson 2004).

Patterns within the Workplace category show that preoccupying themes have changed over time (Figure 4). Whereas the subcategory of Human Relations accounts for the largest share throughout almost all of the eighteen years, its relative share falls consistently from 1990, swings sharply from 1999 to 2005, and falls to a similar level with other themes in 2007. Poems in this category deal with supervisors, subordinates, colleagues, and female staffers. This drop would seem to reflect either a certain social distancing in the workplace (i.e., a lack of interest in others) or confusion over how to interact, both a significant departure from traditional in-house relations. Research reporting a drop in worker willingness to engage with work partners (Cabinet Office 2007) supports this interpretation. If traditional patterns of office interaction based on loyalty and knowledge transfer through seniority are indeed felt to be obso-

lete, a very different approach to in-house skill formation needs to be taken.

Albeit to a lesser extent, Workstyle is also a strong subtheme, especially during the first half of the period. Covering topics such as meetings and general managerial and/or organizational competence, its solid share of Workplace poems suggests that while workers are first and foremost concerned with *whom* they are working (Human Relations), their second concern is *how* the work gets done (Workstyle). Surprisingly, this concern appears to be even more important than actual work conditions, which cover such controversial issues as evaluation, pay, and hours worked. The implications for human resource management are to foster in-house communication and build up effective work practices. This seems to be most important for a positive workplace climate. Given the number of companies citing a lack of *nattokusei* ('convincingness') as a major reason for reforming performance evaluation systems from the mid-1990s (Spinks 2006) and several surveys indicating employee skepticism toward performance-based systems (see ILA 2004; JPC-SED 2004), this is an important finding and one that should be confirmed through more rigorous empirical work.

As white-collar workers only became the target of downsizing from the mid-1990s (Capelli 1999), it is not surprising that *senryū* dealing with *risutora* (literally: 'restructuring', effectively downsizing) were rare at the beginning of the period under study. The threat of losing one's job emerged as a strong topic from 1997 and its subsequent share closely mirrored the rise and fall of economic growth and unemployment rates. Assuming that authors submitting poems about *risutora* are those who have survived downsizing (Meyer-Ohle 2009: 69) implies human resource management needs to respond to the issue of post-downsizing stress syndrome (PDSS) (Appelbaum et al. 1999; Travaglione and Cross 2006), a syndrome affecting survivors of organizational downsizing and a process which is associated with a workplace cycle where high stress leads to low productivity, which in turns leads to further downsizing.

Breaking down the poems on Human Relations into subcategories shows that the supervisor remains of paramount interest (Figure 5). This comes as no surprise bearing in mind the significant impact direct supervisors have on the quality of working life (Hodson 2008; Nippon Keidanren 2010).

To sum up, the workplace is a theme of less centrality in 2007 than it was in 1990. Interpersonal relations – including negative ones and especially with supervisors – still dominate as a workplace concern, and workers are more interested in work processes than actual work conditions.

Figure 5. Year-on-year change in the Workplace subcategory of Human Relations (%).

6.3. Specific workplace themes

The winning poems in Salaryman *Senryū* that speak to workplace themes tend to either scathingly depict the incompetence of top management, immediate supervisors, and colleagues, or to bemoan the arduous conditions under which they work. While the lack of authorship details prevents us from knowing with absolute certainty the gender of authors, it is clear that the vast majority of the *senryū* speak to the masculine salaryman stereotype. In the following, two specific thematic areas — organizational incompetence and arduous workstyle — are used to present a more in-depth analysis of the poems themselves. Actual poems will be quoted as illustrations of these two perennial themes.

6.3.1. Organizational incompetence

As shown by such best sellers as *Japan as Number One* (Vogel 1979) and *Theory Z: How American Business Can Meet the Japanese Challenge* (Ouchi 1981), Japanese management practices were highly acclaimed in the 1980s and their emulation was widely encouraged in the management field. With the burst of the Bubble, however, the Japanese management model was increasingly spurned (Meek 2004; Woronoff 1991), a sentiment mirrored by the many *senryū* dealing with in-house competence, or rather lack thereof. By and large, this group of poems deals either with organizational incompetence, managerial incompetence or, to a lesser extent, individual incompetence. The indisputably dominant theme for

organizational incompetence is the futility of meetings, as shown by the following examples:

- (2) (1990)
Kaigi shite / tsugi no kaigi no / hi o kimeru
 'A meeting to decide the next meeting's date'
- (3) (1997)
Sararīman / kaigi to kaite / muda to yomi
 'Salaryman, sees "meeting", reads "waste of time"'
- (4) (2007)
Kaigi-go no / uchiage koso ga / honkaigi
 'The "job well done" drinks after the meeting are the real meeting'

Poems on managerial incompetence are more varied. Strong contenders are the manager as hindrance, inept instructions, and a failure to behave consistently with given organizational goals and policies. Criticism of supervisor competence is scathing in all of the following poems, the last two also being a strong indictment of the ulterior motives entertained by organizations. Poems of this tenor suggest that the salaryman is not just an obedient participant in workplace practices, but is a shrewd judge of work contexts.

- (5) (1994)
Susumu giji / kachō tobikomi / mizu no awa
 'The agenda's making good progress when the section chief pops in and we're back to Square 1'
- (6) (2001)
Onegai da / te o dasanaide / kachōsan
 'Please, Section Chief, don't help ...'
- (7) (1992)
Shiji dōri / ugokeba shigoto wa / hakadorazu
 'If I followed your instructions, nothing'd get done'
- (8) (2003)
Makaseta zo / makaseru mae ni / shiji shiro!
 '"I'll leave it to you, then." Tell me what first!'
- (9) (2006)
Shireitō / kyō mo shorui o / surūpasu
 'There goes our forward, through-passing the files again'
- (10) (1991)
Yasumeyo to / itte jōshi ga / shorui oki
 'Take a break, says the boss as he dumps a pile of papers'

- (11) (1999)
Kengen o / ataete sekinin / oshitsukeru
 'They give us authority only to pass the buck'
- (12) (2004)
Sakiokuri / tanaage marunage / atomawashi
 'Put off, shelved, dropped in someone else's lap, left for later'

Another well-documented feature of Japanese management is the legendary commitment of its workers and smooth teamwork. However, only nine poems showed high commitment and none after 1996. Two of them are:

- (13) (1990)
Mikkame wa / yaru koto mo nashi / san-renkyū
 'Long weekends. Nothing to do on the third day'
- (14) (1992)
Shigoto yori / renkyū konasu / muzukashisa
 'Handling a long weekend, much harder than work'

Some 114 poems, on the other hand, were interpreted as expressing low commitment, a further 20 directly mentioning quitting. Attitudes to holidays neatly reveal this commitment gap and suggest that, according to Allen and Meyer's (1997) classic model, Japanese commitment is more continuance or normative based than affective:

- (15) (1998)
Mata nebō / kinō wa sōshiki / kyō wa isha
 'Slept in again. Yesterday a funeral, today the doctor'
- (16) (2005)
Zuruyasumi / geinō neta ni / tsuyoku nari
 'A sneak day off. Catch up on the showbiz news'

In direct contrast to the renowned diligence of the Japanese salaryman, another rich vein concerns being late to the office, slow to start actually working, and quick to leave. The three poems cited next, which neatly span the period under study, hint at a lack of collegial spirit in the workplace. They also evocatively highlight coping strategies for chronically long work-hour demands.

- (17) (1990)
Yoku nonde / yoku nete kesa mo / chikoku suru
 'Drink well, sleep well, arrive late'

- (18) (1995) *Asa chikoku / hiru pachinko de / gogo sōtai*
 ‘Arrive late, pachinko at lunch, leave early’
- (19) (2001)
Asa chikoku / goji no chaimu de / mō inai
 ‘Arrive late, nowhere to be seen at the 5 o’clock chime’

Elsewhere, there are clearly generational issues at play, especially bewilderment at or disparagement of the *shinjinrui* (literally: ‘new race’; that is, the Japanese Generation Y). While such poems can be found in every year under study, they are more frequent in the Bubble years of 1990–1992, also making a comeback after 2001. The first example here is a very cynical assessment of how useful the new hires will be and resonates with a certain resignation of having to train them. The second evokes a negative reaction of sheer disbelief at what the younger generation of workers is capable of.

- (20) (1992)
Aotagai / nyūsha sasete mo / mada aoi
 ‘Harvested early, they’re still green when they arrive’
- (21) (2004)
Shimatsusho ni / emoji tsukau / nyūfēsu
 ‘Our New Face. Uses smilies in his misdemeanour report’

Part of veteran salaryman shock at the smiley-using antics of the New Race can be traced to their sense of personal betrayal as they see the passing of corporate paternalism and the familiar seniority system. The first poem cited below is a poignant illustration of this sense of loss. The second is an ode to the glacial pace of promotion, while the third is a beautifully ironic depiction of changing evaluation patterns that also encapsulates a morbid sense of always being on the wrong side of change throughout an entire career.

- (22) (1996)
Hitosuji ni / aishita kaisha wa / kataomoi
 ‘The unwavering love I gave the firm, unrequited’
- (23) (1990)
Ni mētoru / saki no isu made / jūgonen
 ‘15 years to move the 2 metres to that chair’
- (24) (2002)
Nōryoku o / dashiteta koro wa / nenreikyū
 ‘Back when I was able, they paid us by seniority’

Replacing the old order is a brave new world, where seniority is no longer a given and veteran salarymen suffer the indignity of working for younger supervisors. This, of course, directly contravenes an implicit workplace understanding and deftly expresses older workers' sense of loss and confusion.

(25) (1993)

Ima hiyoko / jūnen tateba / waga jōshi

'Now a chick, in ten years my boss'

(26) (1998)

Kata tatau / buchō wa ore ga / sodadeta ko

'The department manager tapping me on the shoulder, I trained him'

(27) (2005)

Musuko yori / wakai jōshi ni / goma o suru

'Currying favor with a boss younger than my son'

The changing order is also illustrated by the poems that mention "window seats", a term once used to disparage in-house workers who were no longer productive, but would not be fired under the lifetime social contract, as in the first poem below. As business became more ruthless after 1997, however, such positions are increasingly seen as a grateful refuge. By 2002, the sense of relief is almost palpable in the third poem that the organization still has the capacity to maintain the old social contract and keep its not wholly productive members of staff in an increasingly cut-throat world.

(28) (1991)

Madogiwa wa / akarui dake no / kurai basho

'The window seat, a gloomy spot whose only saving grace is the sunlight'

(29) (1997)

Madogiwa e / korareta buji ni / kanpai su

'Toast my good fortune at safely making it to a window seat'

(30) (2002)

Madogiwa ga / mada aru to kiki / hohoemu

'Perked up to hear we still have window seats'

A change in atmosphere can be detected through the poems prompted by the rising incidence of in-house downsizing, a theme that features in almost every year under study, but which gains prominence from 1997.

The first poem here is clearly talking about the downsizing of others, the author still believing him/herself not a target. By the start of the new century, however, it is very clear that the first person is not free of the threat of redundancy and that expectations of employment stability are low.

- (31) (1993)
Kubikiri no / meibo mo shirazu / shaka utau
 ‘Singing the company song in ignorance of the downsizing list’
- (32) (2001)
Taishoku wa / jibun no ishi de / shitakatta
 ‘If only the decision to resign had been mine’
- (33) (2004)
Sasen da zo / tsuma yo yorokobe / kubi de nai
 ‘Wife of mine, rejoice! I’ve only been demoted, not fired’
- (34) (2005)
Madogiwa o / urayamu watashi wa / deguchi giwa
 ‘I envy them over by the window. I’m almost out the door’

As already mentioned, the prominent topic of the threat of downsizing shows the growing feelings of mistrust toward the employer. This is a topic of major importance when considering how to re-establish loyalty toward the company, a topic that is also discussed by Meyer-Ohle (2009: 69) and Matanle (2003).

6.3.2. Arduous workstyles

Apart from the erosion of long-standing hierarchy, the nature of workplace interaction engendered by the lifetime employment system seems to be assuming a different guise. Whereas the first half of the 1990s provides ample evidence of the need to curry favor with supervisors (and others) in time-tested settings and in a dogged but gently self-mocking fashion, the latter half of the period under survey brings with it a more brutal tone. For example, whereas keeping your opinions to yourself is portrayed as a way of preserving equanimity in the workplace in 1990, by 1999 it is seen as saving you from being fired.

- (35) (1990)
Bakayarō / kikoenu kyori de / iikaesu
 ‘Damn you, I whisper out of earshot’
- (36) (1999)
Seiron o / iwanu gaman ga / kubi tsunagu
 ‘Not preaching the high ground keeps me in a job’

In the early part of the period under study, generous corporate welfare might extend the need to behave circumspectly from the workplace right into the home. Your career rested on your supervisor's opinion of you, and this was substantially influenced by your willingness to put in long hours. From 1997 on, more firms start experimenting with performance-based evaluation. The question that becomes increasingly pressing now is whether you will have a job and, if so, how arduous will it be.

- (37) (1990)
Undōkai / nuku na sono ko wa / kachō no ko
 'Sports meet. No, don't beat that kid. His dad's the Section Chief'
- (38) (1993)
Shataku de wa / fūfu genka mo / shuwa de suru
 'Company housing. Even marital squabbles are done in sign language'
- (39) (1991)
Jitan no hi / jōshi nokotte / mina nokoru
 'Short working day. The boss stays, so we all do'
- (40) (1995)
Saa goji da / dare ga saisho ni / seki o tatsu
 'It's 5 o'clock. Who's going to be first to leave their seat?'
- (41) (2006)
Gappei to / ukarete itara / seki ga nai
 'Excited at the news of our merger, find I have no seat'
- (42) (2006)
Sha no tame ni / te to nari me to nari / kubi ni nari
 'I was the firm's hands, its eyes, but I got it in the neck'
- (43) (2004)
"Daikyū" wa / shigo ni natteru / kono shokuba
 '"Day in lieu" Obsolete concept in this office'
- (44) (2006)
"Muri suru na" / honshin nara / kyūka kure
 '"Don't overdo it." If you really mean it, give me a day off!'

This shift from a more distanced and wry discourse in the first half of the 1990s to a more immediate and compelling tone from the latter half of the 1990s is well illustrated in the following two poems on stress. While the first poem still displays an ability to deride the stress felt, the second poem describes just how relentless it is, neither work nor home offering

an escape. Interestingly, this change in tone coincides with a reported increase in the number of psychologically related suicides, which subsequently prompted the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare to draw up several mental health guidelines for the workplace (MHLW 1999, 2000).

(45) (1996)

Sutoresu no / kaishōhō mo / sutoresu ni

‘Stress-relief techniques just lead to more stress’

(46) (2001)

Sutoresu ga / ie to kaisha o / ōfuku shi

‘Stress makes the round-trip between office and home’

Whereas there were very few poems describing work instability in the early years under study, job precariousness becomes more pronounced as the years go by. Some poems on mergers and job loss have already been cited above. Another marked feature of later poems is that they also comment on the nature of jobs available as well as the uncomfortable situations workers may find themselves in, which would have once been unthinkable. For example, the first three of the following poems clearly recount the harshness of an extreme form of salaryman reality: death from overwork (*karōshi*), estrangement from family and work, and economic vicissitudes. Nevertheless, the latter group of four poems is arguably much more forceful in that they describe a world where corporate longevity can no longer be relied upon, where escape from one workplace does not necessarily reward the protagonist, and where workplaces are divided into different classes of workers.

(47) (1991)

Karōshi to / ni-nin sankyaku / chōjukoku

‘Long-lived nation, a three-legged race with *karoshi*’

(48) (1992)

Madogiwa ka / tanshin funin ka / datsu sara ka

‘A seat by the window? Lonely out-of-town transfer? Self-employment?’

(49) (1995)

Shūden mo / sake no nioi no / senu fukyō

‘Recession. Even the last train no longer reeks of sake’

(50) (1997)

Saikoyō / saishuppatsu de / saitōsan

‘A new job, a new start, a new bankruptcy’

- (51) (1999)
Korya mazui / gappeisaki wa / yameta toko
 ‘Oh boy, this is bad. We’re merging with the company I left’
- (52) (2001)
Furūtā / yameta kaisha ni / haken sare
 ‘Turned freeter, dispatched to the company I quit’
- (53) (2004)
Miwataseba / seiki shain wa / ore hitori
 ‘Glancing around, I’m the only full-timer in sight’

7. Synthesis of marked trends

As this analysis of salaryman *senryū* from 1990 to 2007 has revealed, the years 1996 and 1997 emerge as a watershed where poems tend to shift from mischievous to more strident tones. These two years coincide with a rise in the consumer tax, which directly affected salaryman household finances, as well as major financial collapses and alarming manmade disasters, which called into serious question Japan’s economic and physical well-being. They are also the years when corporate Japan started to seriously embrace performance-based pay and discard other characteristic features of traditional Japanese management practices (*Works* 2002/2003).

Corporate housing, sports meetings, send-off parties for colleagues, client entertaining, good-natured collegiate rivalry, capricious organizational and managerial behavior, all these and more can be found in the early *senryū*, combining to form an image in keeping with some of the more stereotypical features of the Japanese workplace. This somewhat jocular portrayal of the salaryman condition, however, takes on far more urgency and edge after 1997 and the poems tend to depict the endangered nature of Japanese-style employment per se. Corporate mergers abound, regular workers are increasingly isolated as contingent workers surround them and performance-based evaluation exacerbates collegiate rivalry. A gradual but steady rise up the corporate ranks can no longer be relied upon as seniority goes by the board and older salarymen increasingly find themselves working for men the age of their sons.

What are the implications of these general thematic patterns for Japanese management? Although the focus of this paper has been limited to poems dealing with Workplace themes, Figure 6 attempts to synthesize all of the patterns observed. Obviously, this is a highly conceptual exercise. Nevertheless, the salaryman *senryū* as a body of work indicates the existence of a vicious circle vis-à-vis workplace commitment and behavior. For example, in the organizational domain, low organizational com-

Figure 6. Conceptual synthesis of *senryū* factors.

petence that many *senryū* describe on the one hand (wasteful meetings, poor management skills, and so on) and the generation gap/reverse paternalism expressed (layoffs, young bosses, different values) on the other hand, combine to create an atmosphere of poor teamwork (sloth, collegiate rivalry). This, in turn, engenders low job commitment, which, when mediated by spite, sycophancy, and stress (not directly treated in this paper but evident in the dataset) culminates in worker resignations and/or dismissals.

At the same time, these workplace tensions are exacerbated by tensions in the social domain, such as changing gender roles, or topics that relate to or even cross the border between organizational and private sphere such as the arduous commutes, long work hours, and out-of-town job transfers (*tanshin funin*) mentioned in many *senryū*. These all intrinsically comprise potential sources of stress that can lower job commitment because of physical demands and/or psychological impacts.

An interpretation of *senryū* will necessarily be subjective and the analytical parameters in which their discourse is framed have a significant impact on the conclusions drawn. Nevertheless, the analysis presented in this paper has shown that these verses point to a growing estrangement of the salaryman from both workplace and work colleagues. They also hint at a growing sense of social divide of “them” and “me”, incompetent managers and retrenched workers, corrupt businesses and maltreated consumers, as well as hypocritical parents and isolated fathers. They no longer speak to us of what Matanle and his colleagues (2008: 658–659) term the “hierarchy and mutual affective loyalty [...] deeply embedded

in organizational life” but of “a new, more savage, hierarchy of winners and losers”.

If Japan is, in fact, witnessing the breach of the traditional social contract between Japanese employers and their regular employees, or at the very least an erosion of trust, the poems have a far-reaching meaning for human resource management. Japanese companies have long promoted an image of the firm as *unmei kyōdōtai* ‘shared destiny’ or “an organic ‘community of fate’ authentic to the fellowship of individuals that comprise it” (Matanle et al. 2008: 659). Unfortunately, the vast majority of the salaryman *senryū* fly in the face of recent, repeated employer calls for a new level of employee engagement (often phrased as *jiritsu shita jū-gyōin* ‘autonomous employees’) or the promotion of *ittaikan no jōsei* ‘fostering a feeling of oneness’ between employees and the organization (see Nippon Keidanren 2010: 4). They neatly echo, in fact, the observation by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (2004) that workers are displaying a stronger propensity for stability and that downsizing in recent years has eroded organizational trust.

Another inference, which needs further research for clarification, is the possibility that the verses here may represent the viewpoint of less successful members of the workforce. Ever since McKinsey, the international consulting firm, coined the phrase “the war for talent” followed by a book of that title, which was written by Michaels et al. (2001) and published in Japanese translation in 2002, both human resource management as a discipline and as a practice has been obsessed with managing top-level performers. Yet it is the average worker who abounds and – as Creelman (2010) points out – enhancing the performance of the largest group of employees should matter. Here is ample material to probe the expectations and needs of the average worker.

8. Concluding remarks

The body of *senryū* poems is an extremely rich source of data through which to examine workplace changes and most of all changes in individuals’ work attitudes over a period of eighteen years. These poems provide a timely and non-sanitized snapshot of a challenging period of transition in the Japanese workplace. They are also a poignant ode to the erosion of the once stable, paternalistic Japanese firm, even if this stereotype only ever applied to a minority of Japanese workers.

The old social contract in employment was born out of Japan’s period of high economic growth from the 1960s. Since then, family composition, levels of education, and consumption patterns have changed, as have working conditions and management practices. Further change is still underway. As economic globalization and emerging technologies continue

to have an enormous impact on how we work and contribute to perceived as well as real job insecurity, the salaryman *senryū* will no doubt continue to provide a rich if somewhat unconventional source of data for taking the pulse of both Japanese life as experienced by its workers and the underlining changes in Japan's social values and lifestyles.

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