

## THE ROLE OF *ONGAESHI* IN THE FORMATION OF JAPANESE IDENTITY AND WORK ETHIC

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### ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji pentingnya konsep Jepang tentang *ongaeshi* (恩返し) dan dampaknya terhadap identitas serta etos kerja orang Jepang. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif untuk menganalisis konten media. Penelitian ini didasarkan pada gagasan Ruth Benedict tentang *ongaeshi* dan teori pertukaran sosial. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa di Jepang, pekerja menggunakan jam kerja yang panjang dan pergantian pekerjaan yang minim untuk membayar "on" mereka kepada pemberi kerja. Sebagai imbalannya, perusahaan memberikan gaji yang kompetitif dan stabilitas kerja yang terjamin. Di kalangan pekerja Jepang, *ongaeshi* menonjol sebagai konsep kunci yang menumbuhkan rasa kewajiban, loyalitas, dan timbal balik yang kuat. Interaksi ini memperkuat budaya organisasi yang solid dan etos kerja kolektif. Selain itu, studi ini memberikan wawasan baru tentang bagaimana *ongaeshi* tidak hanya mempengaruhi tindakan individu tetapi juga memperkuat etos organisasi yang lebih luas di Jepang dengan berfokus pada hubungan-hubungan yang rumit ini. Keseimbangan yang rumit antara tanggung jawab dan imbalan ini menyoroti cara unik di mana nilai-nilai budaya merambah ke lanskap profesional, menciptakan budaya kerja yang unik dan tangguh.

**Kata kunci:** Etos kerja Jepang; kewajiban; *ongaeshi*; pertukaran sosial

### ABSTRACT

*This study examines the significance of the Japanese notion of *ongaeshi* (恩返し) and its impact on Japanese identity and work ethic. This study uses qualitative method to examine media content. It is based on Ruth Benedict's idea of *ongaeshi* and social exchange theory. The research findings show that in Japan, workers use extended work hours and minimal job turnover to pay back their employers. The company provides competitive pay and guaranteed job stability in exchange. Among Japanese workers, *ongaeshi* stands out as a key concept that fosters a strong sense of obligation, loyalty, and reciprocity. A solid organizational culture and a collective work ethic are reinforced by this interaction. Moreover, this study provides new insights into how *ongaeshi* not only impacts individual actions but also strengthens Japan's broader organizational ethos by focusing on these nuanced relationships. A unique and resilient work culture is fostered by the intricate balance between responsibility and reward, which highlights the unique ways in which cultural values reach the professional landscape.*

*Keywords: Japan work ethic; obligation; ongaeshi; social exchange*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Japan is a country renowned for its strong identity and high work ethic. Japan's success in building a prosperous and advanced nation is attributed to various factors. One of them is the influence of *Ongaeshi* (恩返し). Its meaning is distorted when translated from Japanese into English by a wide range of terms, including "obligations," "loyalty," "kindness," and "love." "On" signifies a range of obligations, from minor to major debts, that an individual is duty-bound to fulfill to the best of their capability. A person who receives "on" is required to fulfill their obligations and repay their debts as a way of reciprocating the "on" they have received, which is referred to as "ongaeshi".

Benedict (1946) categorizes two important forms of fulfilling "on" in Japanese culture. Firstly, *gimu* involves the repayment of "on" without limitations on quantity or duration. This type of obligation includes *chuu*, obligations towards the emperor, and *koo*, duties towards parents and ancestors. Secondly, *giri* is the repayment of "on" in an amount equal to what was received, with a specified deadline for payment.

The concept of *ongaeshi* can be understood through a Japanese folklore titled "Tsuru no Ongaeshi." This story narrates the tale of a young man who rescues a crane that has been pierced by an arrow. After being healed by the young man, the crane feels indebted (on) to him. To repay this kindness, the crane disguises itself as a woman and subsequently becomes the young man's wife. As his wife, the woman (crane) does everything for her husband. One day, she weaves a garment

for him and asks him to sell it at the market. The garment fetches a very high price. This event repeats several times until the husband becomes curious about how his wife can weave without using thread. Driven by curiosity, the husband spies on his wife while she is weaving. To his great surprise, he discovers that his wife, who is actually the crane, uses her own feathers to create the valuable garments. The story signifies that when someone receives a benefit, they should repay it in kind, much like the young man who saved the crane's life and was subsequently rewarded with wealth by the crane.

The idea of *ongaeshi* is frequently represented in Japanese work ethics through the values of devotion and sincere appreciation for the employer. Workers are expected to work hard, be loyal, and respect the firm's principles in order to repay the company for the opportunities and assistance it has given them. This emphasizes the tight bond that exists between employees and the company, where gratitude and loyalty are the cornerstones of sustained production and stable working conditions.

Furthermore, Takahashi (2015) mentions that the seniority system in Japan is not based on the size of salary compensation for completed work, but rather on the allocation of new responsibilities as a reward for successfully finishing tasks. In essence, completing one task leads to larger responsibilities, and completing those larger tasks can lead to even greater responsibilities. In this context, "larger responsibilities" can be interpreted in two ways. First, in terms of budgetary scale and second, in terms of the number of people involved. It should also be noted that

the wage curve in Japan has been designed from the perspective of ensuring a living wage, which implies it is already quite promising.

The form of responsibility in the form of continuous job assignments as a reward for "good work" that must be continually repaid is a manifestation of *ongaeshi*. This cycle will never end because one must continually strive to fulfill their obligations, and time does not diminish their debt. In other words, the eternal nature of "on" is akin to the proverb that says 'one never returns one ten-thousandth of an *on*'.

The core idea of *ongaeshi* aligns with reciprocity, a key principle in social exchange theory. It emphasizes the exchange of benefits and obligations between individuals or groups (Homans, 1961; Cook et al., 2013, p.62). Workers give devotions and loyalty to the company, and the company provides opportunities and assists in return. Both sides have an obligation to fulfill their part of the exchange. Through the lens of social exchange, *ongaeshi*'s influence on workplace motivation at work can be examined. Workers may be driven by the need to uphold a fair trade (paying back the corporation) or by the possibility of benefits (such as greater responsibility and recognition) from carrying out their duties. Within the context of social exchange theory, it is also possible to examine the potential drawbacks of *ongaeshi*, such as burnout or a lack of work-life balance.

By analyzing various case studies from reliable media sources, this research aims to identify how *ongaeshi* is applied in real-life situations and how this practice shapes organizational dynamics and individual motivation in the workplace. The study will provide deeper insights into how traditional Japanese values remain

relevant and function within the modern work environment, as well as how these practices can be adapted or applied in a global context.

## **METHOD**

Due to limitations on time, a document methodological approach was used for this research. This approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to compile and analyze relevant information from a range of previously published sources. In certain circumstances, using documents that are accessible to the social researcher is less time-consuming or more practical than gathering primary data, or even the fact that papers are free of issues (Bryman, 2012). Therefore, media content is used as a data source in this study. However, interpreting the meaning of the discovered materials requires a significant amount of interpretive abilities. Four standards are proposed by Scott (1990) for evaluating the quality of documents: authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

There is no direct equivalent for the concept of "on" in Japanese thought. Benedict himself acknowledges the difficulty of comprehending from a Western perspective. For Japanese society, the kindness inherent in *on* is more akin to a debt that must be repaid, rather than affection, and is often perceived as a burden. The benevolence associated with *on* is a debt that needs to be settled. This is known as "ongaeshi." Japanese people will diligently repay the *on* they receive, such as when borrowing money that must be returned with the exact amount. But, once again, it should be reiterated that *on* does not concern monetary matters.

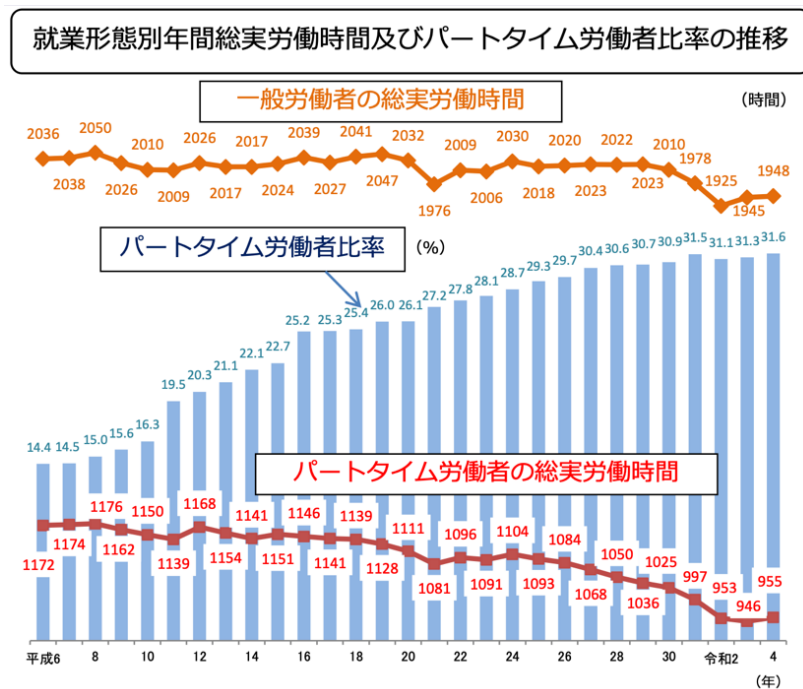
The concept of *ongaeshi* manifests in the Japanese work ethos, where employees dedicate themselves fully to their companies due to the sense of obligation ("on") they uphold. This work ethic encompasses long working hours, a strong loyalty towards the company, and lifelong employment expectations. Additionally, the concept of *ongaeshi* is evident in Japanese management styles. Both managers and employees endeavor to reciprocate the loyalty they receive by offering maximum dedication to the company, maintaining the trust bestowed upon them, and fostering harmonious workplace relationships. This principle is also reflected in practices such as collaborative decision-making, emphasis on long-term career development, and enhancing alignment between individual and organizational interests.

### **Long Working Hours Commitment**

In Japan, the concepts of hard work, dedication, and loyalty to one's employer are highly valued. This may result in a work environment where staff members feel under pressure to put in long working hours in order to show their dedication to their positions. It's not unusual for employees to work overtime, and even after finishing their daily tasks, many of them are inclined to remain late at the office.

According to the publication by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW) on February 21, 2024, concerning the status of the working hour system in Japan, there has been a decrease in working hours for Japanese workers since 2018 (see Graph 1). However, this does not imply an improvement in the culture of

long working hours in Japan; quite the contrary. Graph 1 below illustrates the trend of total annual working hours and the ratio of part-time workers by job type. From this data, it is evident that the ratio of part-time workers has increased significantly. Therefore, if it is stated that working hours in Japan have decreased, this is due to the influence of the number of part-time workers who contribute fewer working hours compared to full-time workers. In reality, full-time workers continue to work around 2000 hours per year. The observed decrease in the working hours trend is a result of the sharp increase in the number of part-time workers, who spend less than 1000 hours per year working.



**Graph 1. Trends in total annual working hours by employment type and the proportion of part-time workers**  
Source: Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare of Japan, 2022

The working hours of Japanese workers shown in the data above appear normal and within reasonable limits, with an average of 40 minutes of overtime per day. Therefore, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) notes that the

graph above does not account for overtime hours but is instead calculated based on scheduled working hours. A survey conducted by OpenWork Inc. from January to March 2023 shows an average of 23.9 hours of overtime per month. Meanwhile, a survey by Persol Career conducted from April to June 2023 indicates that monthly overtime hours reached 21.9 hours. This data differs from that presented by the MHLW. Yet, the discrepancy is not significant.

Due to limitations in data collection methods, it is challenging to find original statistical data that includes calculations of unplanned overtime hours. This difficulty arises because such practices involve violations of Japan's Labor Standards Act, which only permits 8 hours of work per day and 40 hours per week. As evidence that some Japanese companies still engage in long working hours, a random survey conducted by the YouTube channel Asian Boss in 2022 can be referenced. Since the survey was voluntary, it garnered fewer than 100 participants. The surprising result of the survey revealed that 25% of participants worked between 60 to 80 hours per week.

「日本人は…あのう、なんでしょう。サービスジャンルことのでそういうブラックなところがやっぱ多い。もともとの人種だって言いますし」  
“Japanese people sometimes work overtime for free which can be exploitive, and that’s been going on for a while.”

The quotation above is an expression from one of the participants in the Asian Boss survey. As stated by the informant, Japanese people often work overtime without it being counted or doing it for free. To understand why some Japanese workers put in extra hours without getting paid, one must grasp the cultural concept of *ongaeshi*, or the repayment of favors. Reciprocity and paying back kindness or



support gained from others, especially from employers are highly valued in Japanese society. Working long hours is not so much a practical duty as it is a sign of commitment and respect for the company (Ono, 2018). Employees may go beyond the requirements of their formal jobs out of a sense of obligation and gratitude to their employers for their *ongaeshi*. Although this practice is based on a positive cultural value, businesses can take advantage of it, leading to circumstances where workers feel pressured to work long hours without sufficient compensation. Thus, despite the potential for exploitation, a work environment where unpaid overtime becomes customary might be influenced by the deeply ingrained cultural expectation of *ongaeshi*.

Long working hours represent an investment of dedication and loyalty. Employees who put in long hours might feel they are fulfilling their obligations and building a secure future within the company. According to social exchange theory, social exchange refers to voluntary actions of individuals motivated by the expected benefits that can be obtained from others. Similarly, Japanese workers engage in long working hours with the intention of gaining promotion opportunities and job security.

### **Employee Loyalty and Lifetime Employment**

Social norms within a community link employee behavior with their loyalty towards the organization, brand, and community or country. Employee behaviors that demand guaranteed future working conditions and demonstrate a commitment to long-term organizational improvement are supported by their loyalty to their position (Nakagawa, 2021). Employee loyalty to the organization positively

impacts organizational justice and procedural justice, thereby encouraging them to exhibit the aforementioned behaviors.

One of the biggest HR and PR firms in Japan, Mynavi Corporation, carried out a poll in 2023 regarding the frequency of full-time employee job changes. The results were released on March 14, 2024. According to the poll, the rate of change in jobs between 2016 and 2023 was not even close to 8%. In contrast, the job change rate in the United States ranged from 17.3% in 2022 to 2023 (Mercer LCC), while in European countries it was 20% as of 2022 (PWC Survey). In South Korea, next-door neighbor, the percentage was approximately 11% (Saramin HR). Therefore, the job change rate in Japan is relatively low.

But as graph 2 below illustrates, Japan likewise saw adjustments beginning in 2018 when the rate was still 5% but rising to 7%. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, there were very few employment changes because of the limited mobility that was in effect at the time, which caused a sharp decline to 4.9%. The years 2021 to 2023 saw a return to normal.



**Graph 2. Job turnover rate for full-time employees**  
Source: MyNavi Corporation, 2024

Since Japan relied so largely on lifelong employment until the 1990s, there was not much job turnover in the Japanese labor force. The nation still lacks flexibility in labor market mobility, even after the economic crisis forced a transition to a contract-based labor market. Both businesses and employees will be negatively impacted by this rigidity since it makes it more difficult for people to grow in their careers and adjust to shifting market conditions. As a result, the labor market in Japan continues to be unique in that it resists the high rates of turnover that are seen in other industrialized nations.

The complete dedication of employees to their company, when viewed through the concept of *ongaeshi*, reflects their gratitude for the opportunities and assistance provided by the company. This cultural principle fosters a sense of loyalty and reciprocal obligation, where employees feel morally compelled to repay the company's support through their hard work and commitment. As Benedict noted, this sense of indebtedness requires individuals to express their gratitude through acts of reciprocity. In the corporate environment, this translates to employees demonstrating their appreciation for the company's investment in their careers by exhibiting unwavering dedication and effort.

### **Japanese Management Style**

The goal of the Japanese management style is to cultivate a sense of togetherness and enthusiasm among workers, with the ultimate aims being high production, quality, and profit. To achieve these objectives, the Japanese management style is characterized by several key elements designed to foster a motivated and cooperative workforce. This approach differs from the more

individualistic western style, which may emphasize personal achievement and shareholder value.

*Ongaeshi* is demonstrated in the workplace through maintaining mutually beneficial connections, being devoted to one's work, and showing devotion to one's employers. For instance, workers frequently express their gratitude to their employers by working hard and going above and beyond expectations in exchange for career possibilities and job stability. Case studies from businesses like Sony and Honda show how workers' work ethic and dedication to the company's success are fueled by their sense of *ongaeshi*.

Based on Sony's Benefits & Total Rewards program (Sony Jobs, 2024) the rewards provided by Sony can be interpreted as a manifestation of *ongaeshi* extended by the company towards its employees. Through competitive compensation, comprehensive health and wellness initiatives, and retirement savings plans, Sony demonstrates appreciation for its employees' diligent efforts and dedication. Consequently, employees may feel a sense of indebtedness to reciprocate this goodwill by maintaining allegiance to the company and striving for optimal performance. Moreover, the emphasis on retirement savings and enduring financial well-being reflects a forward-thinking approach to employee welfare, resonating with traditional Japanese values of sustained relationships and commitments. This strategic focus serves as an investment in employees' futures, encouraging them to adopt a long-term outlook and foster enduring ties with the company. By offering tailored programs and abundant resources, Sony acknowledges and values the diversity within its workforce. This personalized

approach has the potential to bolster employee engagement and motivation, fostering a perception among employees that their individual needs and contributions are recognized and appropriately rewarded.

In contrast to Sony, which offers high pay for hard work and devotion, Honda encourages *ongaeshi* among its employees by offering a secure and healthy work environment. Because there is less prejudice in this workplace, employees are guaranteed to feel convenient. Employees' commitment to the organization can be increased through campaigns that encourage genuine and healthy relationships among coworkers. This is also a result of the reality that not all companies are accommodating to workers who have the previously listed drawbacks.

Whereas Sony compensates employees indiscriminately as long as they achieve, Honda's compensation strategy focuses on loyal employees who hold management or higher-level roles. At Honda, a person's accomplishments are progressively taken into account based on their position, and their output at work increasingly mirrors the success of the company. As Honda explained, "the higher their positions are, the more their accomplishments and company performance are taken into consideration." (Honda Motor Co., 2024). This approach blatantly implements the social exchange idea, according to which workers who are given greater recognition are obliged to put in more effort. Employees that want to advance generally have to work hard for the company in order to get promoted. To achieve such promotions, employees are expected to build long-term relationships or loyalty.

This notion is consistent with the concept of *ongaeshi* in Japanese society, in which company executives bear a major moral weight or "on" to improve the company's standing and welfare. Executives are motivated to put in a lot of effort to secure the company's success and survival because they feel obligated to the company and its workers. In this framework, loyalty and hard effort are not only economically rewarded, but they also become part of a larger moral responsibility to meet social and ethical commitments. As a result, Honda's pay structure is in line with Japanese cultural norms, which place greater emphasis on moral obligation, reciprocal connections, and enduring loyalty to the company.

Based on the case studies, it shows that the influence of *ongaeshi* on work ethic is profound. It motivates workers to demonstrate traits that are highly prized in Japanese workplaces: diligence, perseverance, and loyalty. Japanese work ethics tend to be highly communal, emphasizing completing one's responsibilities to the group and returning the favors received. This is in contrast to work ethics in non-Japanese environments, where individualism may be more prevalent.

Collective decision-making, for example, is an organizational practice that reflects the reciprocal relationships that *ongaeshi* cultivates and promotes a cooperative and respectful culture. Maintaining *ongaeshi* customs in contemporary Japanese firms, however, presents a number of difficulties. *Ongaeshi's* prevalence and perception are impacted by globalization and shifting societal ideals, such as a rise in individualism among younger generations.

Companies might adjust their *ongaeshi* strategy to meet these difficulties. Redefining what reciprocity means is one strategy. *Ongaeshi* can develop into an

ideal scenario where both parties benefit rather than just one party being loyal to the other. Employers may make a significant investment in the well-being of their workforce by providing flexible work schedules, attractive benefits packages, and chances for career advancement. This illustrates the company's dedication to its workers, enhancing their sense of *ongaeshi* and encouraging unwavering devotion. Moreover, cultivating an environment that values open discussion can be essential. Companies can foster a culture of trust and show appreciation for each worker's unique contributions by empowering staff members to express their ideas and concerns. Through this two-way dialogue, *ongaeshi* can be preserved as a relevant idea for future generations, creating a sense of unity and group achievement.

Based on the aforementioned exposition, *ongaeshi* continues to exert a substantial influence on Japanese work ethics. However, it is essential to adapt its application in response to the changing social and economic landscape. By integrating traditional principles of diligence and devotion with a focus on individual growth, open communication, and mutual benefit, firms can sustain a robust and dedicated workforce. In this manner, *ongaeshi* continues to serve as a source of inspiration.

## **CONCLUSION**

The concept of *ongaeshi* behavior in Japan has a profound impact on both Japanese identity and work ethic. It is challenging to find an exact equivalent for *ongaeshi* because instead of being seen solely as a virtue, it is more accurately interpreted as repaying a debt of gratitude, thereby potentially burdening the

recipient of on. This cultural norm greatly influences individual behavior and organizational dynamics in Japan.

The study found that, despite claimed decreases in average working hours in Japan, full-time employees continue to work lengthy hours, with part-time employment skewing overall numbers. The cultural idea of *ongaeshi*, which makes workers feel obligated to repay their employers by working longer hours, frequently without receiving additional money, is what motivates this perseverance. The acceptance of long hours as standard is based on this deep-rooted sense of duty, which cultivates strong loyalty and dedication.

Japan has lower job turnover than other industrialized countries, which is attributed to the country's long-standing culture of lifetime employment and fosters employee loyalty. *Ongaeshi* strengthens this relationship by urging workers to put in a lot of effort as a token of appreciation for their employers' support and career chances. While this reciprocal relationship helps maintain a steady workforce, it makes it difficult to adjust to changes in the market.

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