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The anime industry is thriving more than ever before. The market suffered ups and downs for the past twenty years, but this situation changed in 2022. According to data from the annual report by the Association of Japanese Animation (AJA), the anime industry reached record profits, a feat that had not been reached since 2002. According to the AJA, the Japanese animation industry presented a growth of more than 13% between 2021 and 2022, generating a profit of US\$ 20.6 billion.

The AJA report also states that the sector grew 96.7% in its recovery from the pandemic in 2020, with the return of “live entertainment”: theatrical screenings, concerts, and events. In Japan, *One Piece Film Red*, *The First Slam Dunk*, *Jujutsu Kaisen 0*, and *Suzume no Tojimari* were the highest-grossing anime films of 2022.



Overview

The anime industry [saw] an increase of about 65.91% in 2022. In spite of not specifying the reasons for the growth, the same report names Netflix and Amazon Prime Video as big players in this increase. Also, Disney has been investing massively in the anime market, not only in productions but also because it became responsible for licensing and distribution of important anime series outside of Japan.

At the same time, just as the anime industry is thriving, why is the situation dark for so many artists and workers in the industry, who have been facing difficulties that include *karoshi*, low pay, and overall dissatisfaction?

What Is *Karoshi*?



While not exclusive to Japanese people, Japan actually has a specific term for “death by overwork”, *Karoshi* (過労死). Japanese are known for working a lot, but that carries a lot of negative implications, as evidenced by the massive number of tired passengers on trains. Because they had been working until very late at night, or because they got drunk after work, in search of stress relief, many of the workers do not even return home to sleep. Reports of Japanese professionals dying after exhaustive working hours have been on the news for decades now. The dismal statistics confirm that this is a real problem.

Karoshi is a social phenomenon that was initially identified in 1987 when the Japanese Ministry of Health started to record data after the sudden death of a series of high-level executives. Many Japanese workers are known to work more than fifteen hours a day and spend about four hours commuting. This problem is so common that if death is considered *karoshi*, the family of the victim receives compensation from the

government of about US\$ 20,000/year, in addition to an indemnification from the company. For the death of a worker to be deemed *karoshi*, the victim needs to have overwork of more than one hundred hours in the month before said victim's death, or overwork of eighty hours for two consecutive months or more within the time period of the six months before the victim's death.

Karoshi is a major concern in Japan. Actually, the phenomenon that leads to death from diseases and mental disorders caused by overwork is on the rise worldwide. A joint WHO/ILO estimate for 2021 suggested that long working hours might be killing more than 745,000 people a year. The heavy duties, disproportionate quotas, and hard-to-achieve targets force workers to work illegal overtime, pushing them to extreme mental and physical limits. In Japan, the sudden deaths and the constant health issues of manga artists and animators has raised many concerns regarding their working conditions. Even if death by overwork is not exclusive to Japan or other Asian countries, the statistics are alarming.

Death By Overwork — Not Exclusive To Japan



The term *karoshi* was officially coined in 1978 when an increasing number of people suffered fatal strokes and heart attacks attributed to overwork. Chinese people have a term for that too, *guolaosi* (過勞死／过劳死). A content moderator at the Chinese video streaming website Bilibili died in February 2022 while working a Lunar New Year holiday shift. South Koreans have also coined a term for “death by overwork” — *gwarosa*, alternatively romanized as *kwarosa* (hangul: 과로사). The death of 37-year-old Jang Sun-rak in 2022 following an unexpected health problem also raised concerns in the webtoon industry regarding the webtoon artists' inadequate and harsh conditions.

He had been the illustrator for the worldwide popular fantasy action webtoon series *Solo Leveling*.

With webtoons becoming the next big thing on a global level, readers are naturally seeking more quality illustrations and stories, and the anime and k-drama industries, which have been adapting webtoons into these media, such as *Lookism*, *Tower Of God*, and *Tomorrow*, also have their eyes on the most popular productions, which results in the artists having workloads that are more excessive than ever. This month, the Korea Occupational Agency Report confirmed that webtoon creators have been suffering physically, mentally, and emotionally from this industry that has its artists overworking on a routine basis.

Gloomy Past, Present — And Future?



While *karoshi* is not exclusive to these sectors, it is also not the single major problem that affects the anime, manga, and webtoon industries. But then, if the anime industry is thriving, why are the situations of animators and other professionals in this sector still so gloomy? Is there any chance of change for the better?

Death by overwork is a negative product of rapid economic growth, and indicators point to the problem only worsening, since revenues and profits continue to rise. It is important for consumers to be aware of the problems faced by those who create the beautiful and sometimes high-grossing anime products and films we love so much. The paradox is real — while anime films such as *One Piece Film Red*, *The First Slam Dunk*, and the most lucrative anime series, such as *Jujutsu Kaisen*, *Tokyo*

Revenagers, *SPY X FAMILY*, and *My Hero Academia* infuse money in the industry, this same industry does not repay most of its creators with the same love AND money.

Root of Evil



Nonetheless, the roots for this dreadful situation the animators find themselves in can be found in Japanese cultural behaviors too. Being people who value selflessness, it can be easily turned into self-sacrifice and self-flagellation at the office. The mindset that teaches “you need to work harder or the project will fail and you will let other people down,” is the very reason why Japan reached such prominence and produces tons of anime series and films. However, even with increases in salaries since 2015, those in their twenties or early thirties in the anime industry are still paid below the national average. Allegedly, Osamu Tezuka’s groundbreaking series *Astro Boy* (1963) set a precedent for low pay in the industry, but even if that is true, it is not an excuse for low pay and poor working conditions that might cause an exodus from the anime industry six decades later.

In 2010, a 28-year-old animator killed himself shortly after quitting his job, after having worked hundreds of overtime hours without pay for several months, documented in his online journal. It was also documented that he had taken only three days off in ten months and used to work as late as four in the morning. Since most animators are self-employed or freelancers, they receive their wages on a pay-per-project basis, meaning the companies can refuse to pay them if they do not complete more work. Even then, many animators are making below minimum wage, often as little as ¥500 per hour.

The infamous rule of capitalism applies — growth in demand, increased working hours, more occupational health issues, low pay, and the cycle repeats itself. Now that Chinese

and South Korean animations are starting to get more fans abroad, some Japanese animators found out that they can earn more money working for the Chinese animation industry. In 2022, veteran animator Jun Arita claimed he was offered a hundred times the Japanese market price to supervise a Chinese project. The politician Hiroyuki Moriyama confirmed that wages for animators in China can be an order of magnitude higher than in Japan. Some animators can even work from their homes in Japan for the Chinese animation industry, which means the Japanese industry is losing experienced staff. Other artists, who still want to work on Japanese productions, can end up working for both the domestic and the Chinese industries, or other international animation producers, to make ends meet and possibly join the dreadful statistics of *karoshi*.