Salaryman *Senryu*: A Poetic Perspective on Changing Worker Mentality in Japan

Wendy A. SPINKS     Yasunari MASUI     Yuka SAKAMOTO
Dept. of Management Science, Tokyo University of Science (RIKADAI)

川柳と 言って笑うな 本音だぞ

*Don’t laugh it off as a mere senryu. It’s what I really think (2000)*

The Japanese “salaryman” is firmly entrenched in modern Japanese culture much like Whyte’s Organization Man, as attested to by such hit works as Shima Kosaku (cartoon in print from 1983 and more recently, a television series) and *Salaryman Senza* (long-running cartoon and film series), as well as academic studies (e.g. Skinner 1979; Kinmouth 1982; Palumbo & Herbig 1993; Ogasawara 1998; Matsumoto 2002; Roberson & Suzuki 2002;). According to the *Encyclopedia of Japanese Business* (2002), the salaryman is “both an image and an occupational category” (p.390) and is a term that “embodies all the stereotypical images associated with Japanese corporate employees: loyalty, commitment and obedience to the firm in exchange for security, protection and rewards” (ibid. p.390). The ups and downs of this “ideological reference group” (ibid. p.390) dovetail closely with the vicissitudes of the Japanese economy and, in the author’s view, how the salaryman is portrayed acts as a barometer of the changing tenor of the relationship between corporate Japan and individual employees. This paper, therefore, explores the changing perception of work, commitment and values over sixteen years of salaryman poetry.

1. Outline of Salaryman *Senryu*

Like the better-known *haiku*, the *senryu* is a Japanese style of three-line verse whose metre comprises 17 syllables in a five-seven-five format. Dating from the 18th century, *senryu* tend to be more ironic or humorous in tone than the more serious, elegantly refined *haiku*, and often deal with human foibles or present pithy commentaries on the status quo.
As a distinct genre, salaryman senryu date from the first competition run by the Daiichi Life Insurance Company in 1987 (results announced in 1988). Initially an-in-house event, its popularity quickly led to the contest being opened to public submission and voting, 100 finalists out of many thousands of submissions selected in December each year, and the best ten poems selected in the following February. Published annually in book form, today the poems can also be accessed on Daiichi Life’s website (from the 4th competition in 1991). A volume of English translations were first published in 2008 by Kodansha.

2. The Data Set and Analytical Framework
The data comprised 8,015 senryu published between 1990-2005. Content analysis was used in keeping with the following framework. Three Level 1 categories were first assigned: Workplace, Family, and Society. Each category was then assigned secondary and tertiary levels as depicted in Chart 1. If a given poem overlapped two categories, it was counted in both categories although such examples were few (85 poems, representing approximately 1% of the total).

![Chart 1. Content Analysis Framework](image-url)
3. The Prevailing Japanese Climate

3-1. Society at Large

The sixteen years from 1990 to 2005 represent a period of enormous political, economic and social change (Table 1). On the political front, the once formidable Liberal Democratic machine started to breakdown, leading to a temporary loss of power, strange-bedfellow coalitions, and the rise of a self-proclaimed maverick prime minister in Junichiro Koizumi. Economically speaking, Japan went from boom to prolonged bust, prompting high unemployment levels and a reassessment of hitherto successful business models. Socially, although Japan did well on the international stage in both sporting and intellectual pursuits, unprecedented natural and manmade disasters at home combined to create a deep sense of malaise akin with the fin-de-siècle mood. Dubbed the “Lost Decade”, the 1990s were especially painful.

3-2. Corporate Japan

The sixteen years from 1990 also saw immense 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. Worker evaluation shifted from a somewhat lackadaisical seniority-based system to a more stringent performance-based one, and in-house welfare programs were pared back ruthlessly. Large-scale retrenchments were no longer a rarity and Japanese workers themselves increasingly “voted with their feet”, an ever larger number choosing to switch jobs mid-career. Meanwhile, corporate scandals ranging from “cooking the books” 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 towards much of corporate Japan.

It is against such a backdrop that Japanese firms, like their counterparts around the globe, struggled to hire the best, engage their hearts and minds and retain the knowledge and skill base these workers represent. As the formidable motivation scheme once created by conventional Japanese management practices (lifetime employment, seniority-based promotion, regular job rotation, on-the-job training etc.) erodes, motivation, skill development and retention are becoming key management issues. As an example, a survey by the Japanese Productivity Center for Socio-Economic Development
(September 2008) saw the number of companies citing a drop in productivity jump 20 points on the previous year to 34.7%, while improving employee motivation was cited as a top management issue in the future. The following section will explore what light the salaryman *senryu* throw on these and other issues. Overall trends will first be explored, followed by several specific themes.

**Table 1. A Social Chronology 1990-2005**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>POLITICS</th>
<th>SOCIO-ECONOMIC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Emperor’s coronation; Japanese taken hostage in Iraqi invasion of Kuwait;</td>
<td>Osaka Flower World Fair records 230 million visitors;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Metropolitan Tokyo Government moves to new Shinjuku offices;</td>
<td>Economic expansion breaks post-war record; Unzen Fugendake volcanic eruption;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sumo frenzy;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Self-Defence Forces sent on UN PKO in Cambodia</td>
<td>Economic bubble bursts; Barcelona Olympics;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Liberal Democrats’ lose power for first time in post-war era; Crown Prince</td>
<td>11 city banks post ¥3.4553 trillion in bad debt; Launched of professional soccer league;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>wedding;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Product Liability legislation passed; Kim Jong Il North Korea’s new leader;</td>
<td>Minor sarin gas attack; Japan’s first female astronaut in space; Japan wins Nobel Prize for Literature;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>World Trade Organisation launched;</td>
<td>Bank of Japan lowers interest to 0.5%; Kobe-Awaji Earthquake; Major sarin gas attack; Windows 95 triggers IT frenzy;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Guerrilla occupation of Embassy in Peru; Liberal Democrats regain power</td>
<td>Tokyo-Mitsubishi merger creates world’s largest bank; Atlanta Olympics; mass food poisoning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Government raises consumption tax from 3 to 5%; Organ transplant bill passed;</td>
<td>Takushoku Bank, Nomura Securities fail; Tokaimura nuclear accident; Tamagochi boom;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td></td>
<td>Nagano Winter Olympics; Russian devaluation triggers global financial crisis;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>LDP/Komeito coalition government formed; Equal Employment Opportunity bill revised; 1st revision of Worker Dispatch Law (enlarged)</td>
<td>iMode mobile phone launched; Unemployment hits 3 million; Launch of the Euro;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Start of Elder Care Insurance scheme;</td>
<td>Sogo Department Group folds; Sydney Olympics; Japan wins Nobel Prize for Chemistry;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Prime Minister Koizumi takes office; Princess Aiko born;</td>
<td>911 US terrorist attack; Agriculture Ministry announces BSE;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>North Koreans apologize for Japanese abductions at first bilateral summit;</td>
<td>Japan-Korea host World Cup soccer; Japan wins Nobel Prizes for Chemistry, Physics;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Emergency defence legislation passed; Ban on US beef imports imposed;</td>
<td>SARS outbreak in Hong Kong/Vietnam; Rice imports; Japanese film director wins Oscar;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Land SDF sent to Iraq; 2nd N.Korean visit by PM Koizumi leads to return of 5</td>
<td>Mitsubishi Automotive recalls 116,000 cars; Chubetsu Earthquake; IT firm Rakuten creates new pro baseball team; Athens Olympics;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>abductees; 2nd revision of Worker Dispatch Law</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>PM Koizumi leads LDP to historic Lower House victory; Postal services privatization bill passed;</td>
<td>Amagasaki railway accident; Falsified anti-earthquake reporting scare escalates; global terrorist attacks increase;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N.B. Compiled mainly from *35 Years of the Japanese Economy*, Nikkei Business DVD
4. General Trends

4.1 Shifting Level 1 Patterns

Looking first at overall trends across the sixteen years under study, the first pronounced change is the respective shares of Level 1 categories (Chart 2). Whereas Workplace and Family accounted for an equal share in the first year of analysis, their subsequent trajectories are juxtaposed, Workplace themes more than halving and Family themes increasing by almost half. At a less pronounced rate, Society themes have steadily climbed during the sixteen-year period, accounting for the same volume as Workplace themes in 2005.

![Chart 2. Year-on-year Change in Level 1 Category Shares](chart2.png)

4.2 Shifting Level 2 Patterns

Turning to Level 2 trends, it is clear that preoccupying themes in the Workplace category have also changed over time (Chart 3). Whereas Human Relations registers highly throughout the sixteen years, it fails to recapture its 1990 prominence and swings sharply in the last five years under observation. This may be due to a reported drop in worker willingness to engage with work partners (Cabinet Office 2007). Nevertheless, it is the supervisor who remains of paramount interest within the Human Relations category (Chart 4).
To a lesser extent, Workstyle also dominates the category in the first half, but is bunched with other themes in the latter half of the period. The popularity of Work Conditions appears to be more cyclical in nature, Restructuring rivalling it closely from 1996 on as Japan’s so-called Lost Decade started to bite deeper. Information Technology in the workplace has a surprisingly low share, enjoying a slightly higher presence in 1996 and 1997 in the wake of the 1995 launch of Microsoft’s operating system in Japan (Chart 3).

Lifestyle emerges the clear winner in the Family category, more than half of the poems dealing with emotional themes such as dashed hopes, simple joys and most fittingly for
the sardonic *senryu*, self-mockery (Chart 5). The dip in 1999 may be related to that fact that this was the year Japanese unemployment topped the 3 million mark, prompting a corresponding jump in Restructuring themes in the previous Workplace category. Poems bemoaning (or more rarely, praising) spouses maintain a consistent pace, but interestingly, take an upward swing in the last three years to 2005. Retirement themes also show a slight increase as the Baby Boomers (officially those born in 1947-49) approach the sixty years of age threshold.

![Chart 5. Year-on-year Family Sub-category Changes](chart)

Trends in the Society category are much more ambiguous, but an increase in political themes can be discerned especially in 2002-2003 (Chart 6). This may partly be due to the unprecedented theatrical tenor of the Koizimu Prime Ministership (2001-2006). The jump in economic themes in 2003 is largely attributable to the poor rice harvest that year, which prompted emergency imports of Japan’s dietary and psychological lodestone, rice. Poems dealing with Fads show a steady upward trend despite a certain amount of volatility that is partially accountable by Olympic years and the huge wave of popularity for Korean entertainment dating from around 2000.
4.3 Falling Submissions

A final striking overall trend is the change in the absolute number of poems being submitted to the competition. As Chart 7 demonstrates, after climbing fairly steadily from 1990, the number of both submissions and votes has been falling consistently since a 1994 peak, both dropping to almost a third by 2006. While this may be due to harder economic times and less emotional leeway to indulge in poetic pursuits, it also suggests a drop in shared salaryman mentality as lifetime employment erodes and lifestyles diversify.
4.2 Specific Themes

Given the richness of the data, the following can at best provide only a thumb sketch of the thematic sway of the salaryman senryu. Nevertheless, in order to provide a window onto changes in worker mentality, themes closely linked to well-known features of Japanese management practices are explored in a narrative style below.

4.2.1 Helter Skelter

As shown by such best sellers as *Japan as Number One* (Ezra Vogel, 1979) and *Theory Z: How American Business Can Meet the Japanese Challenge* (William Ouchi, 1981), Japanese management practices were highly acclaimed in the 1980s for having created Japan’s economic superpower, and their emulation was widely encouraged in the management field. With the burst of the Japanese Bubble in the early 1990s, however, the Japanese management model was increasingly scorned, a sentiment mirrored by the many senryu dealing with in-house competence, or rather lack thereof. By and large, this group of poems deal either with organisational incompetence, managerial incompetence or, to a lesser extent, individual incompetence. The indisputable dominant theme for organisational incompetence is the futility of meetings (45 out of 89).

Poems on managerial incompetence are more varied, but strong contenders are the manager as hindrance; inept instructions; and a failure to “walk the talk”.

---

**Meeting to decide the next meeting’s date** (1990)

**Why a meeting when the outcome’s already known?** (1992)

**Salaryman, sees “meeting”, reads “waste of time”** (1997)

**No overtime, they say, then set the meeting for 5pm** (1999)

**Yet another meeting that won’t conclude a thing** (2003)

**The agenda’s making good progress when the section chief pops in and we’re back to Square 1** (1994)

**Let’s get on with it! Today the boss is off.** (1996)

**The minute the boss joins us, negotiations break down** (2000)

**Please, Section Chief, don’t help…** (2001)

**Handing a customer complaint to the boss is like pouring oil on fire** (2001)
If I followed your instructions, nothing'd get done.

Give me instructions that meet your expectations.

What exactly are those instructions trying to say?

This, that, and that. Even the boss doesn't know what he's saying.

"You’re in charge, then." Tell me what first!

"Change how you think." The pigheaded’s stock phrase

Take a break, says the boss as he dumps a pile of papers

Hang in there! Don’t overdo it! Don’t rest!

Even tho’ I’ve given flextime notice, “Why’s he late?”

Don’t tell me on Friday night you want it by Monday morning

Put off, shelved, dropped in someone else’s lap, left for later

Strikingly similar poems in different years suggest that certain managerial traits are quite ingrained.

“Just a sec” It’s never “just” a sec,,, 

“Just come here” It’s never “just”...

“Do it quickly!” Well, say so quickly

Tell me sooner. If that’s what you wanted, I’d have finished in no time!

Another well-documented feature of Japanese management is the legendary commitment of its workers and smooth teamwork. Once again, the salaryman senryu tell a different story. In fact, it is hard to recognize famed Japanese workplace in the poems below. Whereas only 9 poems indicating strong commitment were identified, and none after 1996, some 114 were interpreted as expressing low commitment, a further 20 directly mentioning quitting. Attitudes to holidays neatly reveal this commitment gap.
Caught a cold, three days off, come back tanned
Tried to catch a cold, took three days off, and came back taned.

Took a sickie, next day really sick
Took a sick day off, and the next day was really sick.

Slept in again. No more relatives alive
Slept in again. No more relatives are alive.

A sneak day off. Catch up on the showbiz news
A sneak day off. Catch up on the showbiz news.

In direct contrast to the renowned diligence of the Japanese salaryman, a further rich vein concerns being late to the office, slow to start actually working and quick to leave.

There was also a small, but consistent group of spiteful poems, which either express glee for example at a supervisor’s illness or suggest bosses should be wary of drinking the tea their assistants make. Subordinate frustration seems to have reached a peak in the mid-nineties with 1993, 1995, 1997 and 1998 each featuring nasty poems about putting the boss’s photo or likeness in the company shredder.

Workplace spitefulness, however, is not confined merely towards supervisors, but also evident towards colleagues. Bitter rivalry, hypocrisy, free riding as well as spite are all to be found, although rivalry is less pronounced after 1996 and collegiate hypocrisy more pronounced from 2001.
Elsewhere, there are clearly generational issues at play, especially bewilderment at or disparagement of the so-called “new race”. While such poems can be found in every year under study, they are more frequent in the Bubble years of 1990-92, also making a comeback after 2001.

Part of veteran salaryman stupefaction at the lack of a sense of propriety in 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, but there are many other suitably restrained indictments of the poor lot that now befalls the hard-set “corporate warrior”.

And replacing the old order,

is a brave new world, which emerges surprisingly early in the wake of the Bubble bursting, but accelerates with the new Millenium:
Now a chick, in ten years’ my boss
You’ve got to be kidding, I mean, you’re supposed to work under me
The department manager tapping me on the shoulder, I trained him
The worry of having an assistant sharper than yourself
Sucking up to 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 the in-house “deadwood”, but increasingly seen as a grateful refuge after 1997.

The window seat, a gloomy spot whose only saving grace is the light
Flight ticket. Miffed by “A window-seat, sir?”
Toast my good fortune at safely making it to a window seat
Perked up to hear we still have window seats

This change of heart is undoubtedly prompted by the rising incidence of in-house downsizing, a theme which features in almost every year under study (92 direct mentions), but which is especially prominent and expressed in ever cynical terms from 1997.

Convinced it was a 3-year secondment, but no return
They sing the company song in ignorance of the downsizing list
“Window seat” a thing of the past thanks to downsizing
Get motivated, use your smarts, sweat, move on!
Wife of mine, rejoice! I’ve only been demoted, not fired
I envy them over by the window. I’m right by the door

4.2.2 A Hard Day’s Night
Apart from the erosion of the long-standing organisational order, the long-nurtured and well-accepted salaryman practice of sycophancy engendered by the lifetime employment system seems to be assuming a different guise. Whereas the first half of the nineties provide ample evidence of the perceived need to curry favour 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 tinge.

For example, in the time-honoured tradition of biting one’s tongue:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>作者</th>
<th>(年份)</th>
<th>中文注释</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>史重言</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>The older I get, the more make-up it takes to hide my spots and true feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>巴卡五郎</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Damn you, I whisper out of earshot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>正論</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Not preaching the high ground keeps me in a job</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Or hindered by the corporate welfare chains that bind:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>作者</th>
<th>(年份)</th>
<th>中文注释</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>運動会</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Sports meet. No, don’t beat that kid. His dad’s the Section Chief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>騎馬戦</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Mock cavalry battle. Pull him off, kick him, the boss’s kid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>社宅では</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Company housing. Even marital squabbles are done by sign language</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fearful of the supervisor’s evaluation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>作者</th>
<th>(年份)</th>
<th>中文注释</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>時短の日</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Short working day. The boss stays, so we all do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>無礼講</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>An “informal” party, more trying than work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>上役の</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Muff my shot worrying about the boss’s score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>上司には</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Not to be disliked, or liked, by the boss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>メモ帳に</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Write the boss’s name in my diary. Skip the honorific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>可愛いと</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>“So cute” Pat the boss’s kid’s head with my fist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Or collegiate loss of face:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>作者</th>
<th>(年份)</th>
<th>中文注释</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>さあ帰り</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>“I’m off home now” I said it an hour ago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>さあ五時だ</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>It’s 5 o’clock. Who’s going to be first to leave their seat?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>新人に</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>I ask the new kid to do a job using the polite form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>気にするな</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>“Don’t worry” The two most worrying words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>内示あり</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>A private nod that I’m moving, hide my joy, make a sour face</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the client front:
Elonm, workplace stress is palpable from the following *senryu*, although the salaryman seems adept at both bottling up and letting off steam - the early favourite means being drinking, the latter food, which is perhaps an indication of a growing professional female presence.

*Nor do onerous commutes or arduous work hours make the salaryman’s lot any easier. Long commutes are a perennial favourite, crowded commutes also becoming an annual feature from 1996.*
Don’t glare at me. You’re pushing someone too.

The daily commute. Both arms raised. I’m not a groper.

Long hours and demanding work schedules are also regular features, as evidenced by the following.

Don’t sit. You mustn’t sit. This is the last train.

The common upshot of this daily slog, of course, is the salaryman’s estrangement as father:

If There’s Anything That You Want

To add insult to injury, it is not only the workplace that is becoming more of a pressure-cooker. Changing gender roles are also taking their toll on Japan’s harried male employees, especially from the mid-nineties.
Earned less than the wife, so I’m a house-husband now

I’m better known at the super than the wife

The salaryman’s two-day weekend: two days of housework

Rubbish bags on the way to work, shopping bags on the way home

An aired futon. That thwacking sound, definitely a man

Self-service everywhere today: in the shops, at home

Had to wait till retirement for my first managerial post: Chief House Cleaner

Only the dog and the vacuum cleaner follow my lead

Things that strike fear in the heart: earthquakes, lightening, housework, child-raising

Senryu referring to who makes the tea neatly illustrate the changing tenor over the years.

“Oi, tea!” At my place, just talking to yourself

“Oi, tea!” Just a thought. I pour myself

“My next words: “Ready, dear”

How do the vexed doyens of corporate Japan deal with their increasingly fractured experiences in the workplace and the world at large? Despite gender role changes, one source of relief is the home, particularly for older salarymen despite their self-depreciation at having to cook or being lowlier in status than the pet dog.

As already mentioned, poems dealing with family/home life increase gradually, their prominence jumping sharply after 2000. Whereas very few positive poems were identified before 1998, as is probably apt for the pithy senryu genre, a theme of gratitude especially to wives is evident from 1999. This would suggest that the home is more and more seen as a refuge or source of comfort in increasingly bewildering times.

Cheered by my wife’s words: It’ll work out somehow

I can say it to my soundly sleeping wife, Thank you

Once complete strangers, we’ve done well to reach our silver anniversary

My dear wife looking after my sick mother, I join my hands in prayer behind her back
Although, one should not entertain the false impression that all is well in the Japanese heartland as the following senryu impishly suggests.

4.2.4 Hello, Goodbye
What, then, emerges from this foray into the poetic outpourings of Japan’s salaryman? Chart 8 is an attempt to conceptually map the interplaying landscape laid before us by the preceding narrative on the salaryman senryu. It shows how factors in both the organizational and social domains combine to engender low job commitment, which in turn triggers worker resignations and/or dismissals. In the organizational domain, a two-pronged interplay between low organizational competence and reverse paternalism/generation gaps lead to poor teamwork as well as low job commitment. In the social domain, changing gender roles are deemed to trigger low job commitment, especially when combined with the long work hours, arduous commutes and the lone transfer of married workers (tanshin funin 単身赴任) that conceptually fall into the organizational/social borderland. And as indirect mediators, spite, sycophancy and stress abound. The end result from both fronts is lost employ or lost manpower depending on vantage point.

Chart 8. Conceptual Representation of the Interplay Between Senryu Factors
Judging from the preceding discussion, the famed Japanese salaryman is perhaps no longer as secure in his identity as in earlier periods. And yet, Japan’s salarymen are a robust lot able to laugh at themselves and yet, cast a critical eye in surprising directions.

5. Try To See It My Way

A number of senryu can be found that sum up, sometimes in heart-wrenching form, sometimes with a belly laugh, the major shifts in the salaryman’s day-to-day reality as well as their mental outlook. This paper will conclude with a selection of what to the author are some of the most provocative or evocative of the 8,000 or so senryu that have been reviewed.

Many of the all-embracing senryu up to 1996 articulate the perils of the salaryman condition, while those after 1997 tend to depict the endangered nature of Japanese-style employment per se.
Long-lived nation, a three-legged race with karoshi

A window seat? A lonely transfer? Quitting paid employ?

Recession. Even the last train reeks of sake no more

A new job, a new start, a new bankruptcy

Too much now of the free time I wanted back in the Bubble

A Development Division that can’t come up with a single senryu!

Salaryman senryu. A generation that asks, “What’s that?”

Salaryman senryu, only if you have a place of work

Salaryman senryu echo with the sounds of corporate ruthlessness

6. Concluding Remarks

This paper has reviewed winning salaryman senryu from 1990 to 2005 in terms of both general trends and specific themes. Necessarily narrative in nature and open to subjective interpretation, it is difficult to draw robust conclusions. Nevertheless, the years 1996 and 1997 emerge in all segments as a kind of watershed where poems tend to shift from mischievous to more strident tones. These two years coincide with a rise in the consumer
tax, major financial collapses and alarming manmade disasters. 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).

Needless to say, senryu after 2006 may show different trends. For example, a far more scathing tone can well be expected for the 2008 submissions, given Japan’s political embroilment and the devastating scale of the global financial crisis that year. In any event, the Salaryman Senryu will no doubt continue to provide a rich if somewhat unconventional source of data for taking the pulse of Japanese corporate life.

References