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WRTG 1160

4/30/23

Animators or Animals? Working Conditions in Japan’s Animation Studios

**Author’s Note**

My intended audience with this article are avid fans of Japanese animation. It is important for these consumers to be aware of these issues, as they often comment on the large gaps in time between seasons of their favorite shows, or why the releases of movies they were looking forward to are delayed. Raising awareness on this subject will not only help to educate the primary consumer base in regards to why they might be frustrated with the inconsistency of media releases, but also to encourage a change in how animators are treated within the industry.

I chose an opinion/editorial as my genre because of how strongly I feel about this topic. This genre is the best suited to allow me to combine my arguments regarding how Japanese animators are treated with evidence from well-known animators and associates in the industry.

My goal is to convince the readers that this is a problem worth attempting to solve.I want to appeal to the audience’s passion for Japanese animation and their appreciation for the hard work and dedication that goes into making it.

The Japanese animation industry, also known as “anime,” is one of the most well-known entertainment industries in the world, producing countless beloved series and films that have captured the hearts of audiences of all ages. According to **Marco Pellitteri and Heung-wah Wong,** a cultural sociologist and specialist in mass media at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University and Program Director of the Global Creative Industries at the University of Hong Kong respectively, the industry consists of about 36 major studios and some 586 small and medium-sized companies, displaying just how popular the genre has gotten. However, behind the bright colors and captivating stories lies a harsh reality for many animators who are often mistreated and overworked.

The anime industry is notorious for its grueling production schedules, which often require animators to work long hours with little to no breaks. Due to Japan’s emphasis on a “hard work” culture, media within Japan itself rarely covers the issues that the industry and its animators face. However, due to the rapid diffusion of anime to other countries, several media firms outside of Japan have investigated the working conditions for the laborers in the industry. **Tim Westcott,** the director of Channels and Programming at IHS Digest, a media analyst firm, states that the industry is an increasingly competitive industry as popularity and competition within Japan has transformed their funding model.

Many animators are forced to work 12-16 hour days, 7 days a week, with no overtime pay or benefits. This intense workload takes a toll on their physical and mental health, causing them to suffer from exhaustion, stress, and burnout. Yet, they labor on, and many continue to work, hoping that their passion for animation will pay off eventually.

In addition to the demanding schedules, animators are often paid very low wages. According to **Kenta Yamamoto,** a professor at the Graduate School of Media and Governance at Keio University, entry-level animators earn as little as ¥120,000 ($1,100) per month, which is barely enough to cover their living expenses in expensive cities like Tokyo. This means that many animators are forced to work multiple jobs just to make ends meet.

The poor working conditions and low pay have led to a high turnover rate in the anime industry, with many animators leaving the industry after just a few years. This results in a shortage of experienced animators, which further exacerbates the problem by putting more pressure on those who remain. However, the industry continues to operate with such conditions due to the constant supply of young talent with dreams of becoming the next prominent animator in the industry scene. **Kubo Masakazu,** an executive film producer in Japan, claimed early on that the newfound success of certain industries distributing animated media in the west has prompted fierce competition for the expansion of japanese animation distribution outside of animation itself, prompting most industries to frequently hire new employees throughout the work year.

One of the main reasons for the mistreatment of animators is the production committee system, which is unique to the anime industry. Under this system, anime productions are financed by a committee of investors, which often includes anime studios, TV networks, toy manufacturers, and other companies. The committee members have a say in the creative decisions and budget of the production, which can result in clashes with the creative team.

The committee system also puts a heavy emphasis on meeting deadlines and maximizing profits, which can result in rushed production schedules and low budgets. This puts animators under

even more pressure to work quickly and efficiently, often sacrificing quality for speed.

The mistreatment of animators in the anime industry has been well-documented, with many former animators speaking out about their experiences. In 2014, the hashtag #BlackCompany (#ブラック企業) went viral in Japan, with many animators using it to share their stories of being overworked and underpaid.

In response to the outcry, some studios have made efforts to improve working conditions for their employees. Kyoto Animation, for example, offers its employees regular working hours, paid vacations, and bonuses. However, these efforts are still the exception rather than the norm, and many animators continue to suffer.

It's important to note that the mistreatment of animators is not limited to Japan. The animation industry in other countries, such as South Korea and China, also suffers from similar problems. However, the anime industry has a particularly unique set of challenges that make it difficult to address these issues, primarily their intense work culture and unique freelance labor laws. **Hamaguchi Keiichiro,** the Research Director General of the Japan Labor Law Association, Japan’s freelance labor laws prior to 2021 did not require animation studios to provide freelance employees with benefits, monthly salaries, or paid overtime, allowing studios to minimize costs by exploiting this legal loophole.

So, what can be done to address the mistreatment of animators in the anime industry? One solution is for the industry to adopt a more normative hiring approach, employing full-time workers instead of burning through freelance workers on a bi-annual basis. As suggested by **Shintaro Matsunaga,** an associate professor at the University of Nagano, one way to resolve the precariousness of freelancers is for companies to place animators under their instruction and treat them as employed workers. Matsunaga argues that such a decision would fit well into Japan’s employment market as it is the standard for most hiring processes and would give animators more stable work.

Japanese animation has become one of the most popular forms of entertainment in the world, and will likely continue to capture the interest and hearts of millions of people worldwide. However, with the current state of how its workers are treated and how studios are exploiting holes in Japan’s labor laws, Japanese animation is being held in a vice grip. If these conditions continue for workers, employers might finally run their supply of young passion dry. By holding the industry accountable and raising awareness about the issue, Japanese animation consumers can help to create a more sustainable and equitable future for anime production.

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