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Asian nations consider shortening workweeks, raising overtime pay

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By **Connie Yan, USA TODAY**

HONG KONG — Burned-out Asian workers are finally getting relief from the drudgery of long days and short weekends.

Wealthy Asian societies are beginning to rethink the all-work, no-play ethos that helped them rise from poverty after World War II. Consider:

- The Japanese government plans to force companies to pay more generous overtime and to give comp time to workaholics.

Specifically, overtime bonuses would rise to 50% from 25% for anyone who works more than 30 hours of overtime a month, under a proposal by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare.

Anyone who puts in more than 40 hours overtime a month would get a day off the following month. The ministry hopes to see the proposal become law next year, according to the *Nihon Keizai* newspaper.

- South Korea, where workers long toiled six days a week, last year started giving them two days off on the weekend.

The National Assembly is considering legislation to establish two more paid holidays, bringing the total to 17 a year, according to *The Korea Times*.

- Hong Kong government employees will start working five-day weeks in July. Civil servants have had to put in a few hours on Saturdays, as do most Hong Kong workers.

The Hong Kong government hopes to set an example for private employers and, according to an official statement, "to reduce the pressure of the working population and to improve the quality of their family life."

Paul Yip, who sees plenty of stressed-out workers as director of a suicide prevention and research center at the University of Hong Kong, says people "are crying not for more pay but for more time."

Japan, famous for its workaholic salarymen, even has a term, *karoshi*, for death by overwork. Sleepy workers cost the Japanese economy \$30 billion a year because of accidents, tardiness and lethargy, calculates Makoto Uchiyama, a neuropsychiatrist at the Nihon University School of Medicine in Tokyo.

In Hong Kong, 67% of employees put in more than 50 hours a week, and 43% of companies report increasing worker burnout — the highest figure in Asia — according to a survey this month by the recruitment firm Hudson.

No wonder they sound thrilled about the government's push for a five-day workweek: 83% of Hong Kong workers surveyed by the Clerical and Professional Employees Association support the idea

Employers are less enthusiastic. Eddy Li, president of the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Association, doubts that many private employers will follow the government's example and give workers Saturday mornings off.

"They are still paying seven days of rent and getting five days of product," Li says.

Then again, Grace Chung, who puts in 48 hours a week at a Hong Kong trading company, says: "A lot of those overtime hours are fake, so you look like a hard worker."

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