When it comes to creative companies,
Pressure-relief valve

In one of the most rigid and pressure-filled societies in the world, drunkenness and dependence on alcohol are considered an acceptable release valve, experts say.

"Unlike Americans, Japanese people don't regard alcohol as a drug," said Tsukasa Mizusawa, an alcohol counselor who treats the families of Japanese alcoholics. "Among doctors and social workers, we really think this alcoholism is a big problem, but I think most people don't care. Society isn't interested. Denial is very strong."

Alcohol consumption is decreasing in most of the industrialized world but still rising in Japan. Over the past four decades, per-capita alcohol consumption has risen fourfold in Japan, according to the National Institute of Alcoholism.

Official data suggest Japanese drink about as much alcohol per person as Americans do, about 1.74 gallons a year per person. Since many Japanese women are teetotalers, however, recent studies estimate that Japanese men in their 50s drink more than twice as much as Caucasian American contemporaries.

While many American corporations are aggressively battling alcohol abuse among their employees, in Japan, the bosses are often the ones forcing their subordinates to drink.

"In feudal times, only the super-rich could make and drink sake, so to drink sake was a rare honor," Mizusawa explained. In contemporary society, "to refuse to accept sake from someone, especially from your boss, is a terrible insult. So if you don't accept a drink from your boss, it can really damage your career chances. And often he keeps on pouring."

In response, the Japanese have coined a new term — alru-hara, or alcohol harassment — for times when a company worker is forced to get drunk against his will.

Drunken behavior accepted in Japan

Drinking with boss, year-end parties make inebriation a common sight during this season.

By Michael Zielenziger
KNIGHT RIDDER NEWSPAPERS

TOKYO — It is 12:25 a.m., and as they stagger through Shinjuku station goggle-eyed and plastered, the people who seemed so genteel and well-mannered by day have become a drunken, boisterous mob.

Near one stairwell, a well-dressed woman vomits in front of a vending machine. At another entrance, a 50thh salaryman in a trench coat falls on the steps leading up to the railway platform. A drunken colleague flails wildly, trying to help him.

Welcome to the end-of-the-year boronkai season in Japan, where getting desperately drunk is part of the festivities. Booze remains a key social lubricant in this commerce-focused, group-oriented society, where whom you know in business and government counts far more than how well you perform.

Cementing relations over a bottle of sake is always considered appropriate. Red-faced drunks careening down the street late at night swinging their briefcases, or swaying uncontrollably in the train, are a fairly common site year-round in Japanese cities. Wining and dining are an important part of the job.

But in December, when employees get their bonus checks and company boronkai — "forget the year" — parties are in full swing, hundreds of thousands of exuberant drunks crowd city watering holes. Then these roaring, lubricated masses pour into giant stations like Shinjuku just before 1 a.m. to cram and push their way into the last train home to their distant suburbs.

"Every night I work here I'm scared," said a policeman posted inside Shinjuku station as the raucous mob of about 75,000 passengers poured through the turnstiles, the din reverberating along distant concourses.