

# Whose History Is It Anyway? And Other Questions Historians Should Be Asking. In This Case about the Cotton and Silk Thread Factory Women of Meiji Japan

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# WHOSE HISTORY IS IT ANYWAY? AND OTHER QUESTIONS HISTORIANS SHOULD BE ASKING. IN THIS CASE ABOUT THE COTTON AND SILK THREAD FACTORY WOMEN OF MEIJI JAPAN

E. Patricia TSURUMI

*University of Victoria, Canada*

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This paper calls for more weight to be given to how Meiji textile factory women perceived their own lives. Were they aware of the roles they played in Japanese industrialization or in maintaining landlord-tenant relationships in the countryside. If so what were their views of these roles? In what ways—if any—did they see themselves as victims? Did they see themselves as belonging to a group called factory workers? How did they define themselves?

*Keywords:* WHOSE HISTORY, FACTORY WOMEN, INDUSTRIALIZATION, MEIJI

## *Introduction*

For more than a decade, I have been studying the lives and work of female factory operatives in the silk and cotton industries during Japan's first industrial revolution during the Meiji era (1868-1912). My research has benefited enormously from the findings of Japanese scholars. Thanks to historians and economists in Japan, we have long known of the central contributions that female operatives in Meiji cotton-spinning and silk-reeling mills made to modern Japan's first phase of industrialisation. Beginning in the 1880's, the chief weapon in the arsenal of Japanese silk manufacturers waging economic war in international markets was the low wages they paid their operatives. As Ishii Kanji has shown us, it was the fingertip skill of the young women bending over the cocoon basins, not efficient machinery or a high grade of raw materials that made possible the silk manufacturers' profits.<sup>1</sup> As early as 1948, Nawa Tooichi demonstrated that the low cost of predominantly female labour in the Meiji cotton plants was central to the cotton industry's rapid rise to prominence in both domestic and foreign markets.<sup>2</sup> And others have shown that as well as serving as front line troops in Japan's first industrial army, textile factory women also sustained the old agrarian world of lord and peasant because they enabled tenant-farming families to continue paying high rents to rural landlords.<sup>3</sup> Other authors have given us classic descriptions of the victimization of female workers in the mills.<sup>4</sup> Still others have written about these textile women as initiators of and participants in some of the first labour strikes in modern Japanese history.<sup>5</sup> Recently Toojoo Yukihiko has published a detailed study of silk reeling employers trying to control their mill women through a system of worker

registration.<sup>6</sup> At first glance it looks like we know a great deal about the women and girls who worked in the Meiji thread mills.

Yet only a small portion of this fine work is at all concerned with telling the Meiji women's own stories. We are just beginning to seriously look for the female operatives' own versions of their own past. Were they aware of the roles they played in Japanese industrialisation or in maintaining landlord-tenant relationships in the countryside? And if so what were their views of these roles? In what ways did they see themselves as victims—if they saw themselves as victims at all? At any time work stoppages and strikes are extraordinary, usually rare events, but by the early 1890's structural changes in the textile industries had made such organized walk-outs enormously difficult. But what about the small acts of everyday resistance that are much more frequent than a factory shut-down? What "ordinary" forms did factory women's resistance take? What was the meaning of such everyday resistance for them? Scholars have studied them as a group, calling them "textile *koojo/jokoo*" ("textile factory women/factory girls"). Did they see themselves as belonging to a group? How strong was their sense of identity as female textile workers compared to other identities that they might also claim? In what ways was their definition of themselves as factory women or factory girls different from definitions proposed by outsiders like employers, state, and "respectable society"? Such questions remind us that we still have a long way to go to learn the textile women's own history.

Inspired by the efforts of Hosoi Wakizoo, Yamamoto Shigemi, and Nakamura Masanori, I sought in *FACTORY GIRLS: WOMEN IN THE THREAD MILLS OF MEIJI JAPAN*—with varying degrees of success—answers to these sorts of questions. I think this book is a start, but there is still a long way to go before the *koojo's* own history is returned to her.

Of course there is an inherent contradiction in an historian seeking to help the people she studies "write their own history"—because she interprets with every word she writes. Still I believe it is important to seek the factory women's own versions of their past. One way to try and do so is to search for sources that contain these women's points of views. A few autobiographical memoirs are extant.<sup>7</sup> There are the recorded memories of elderly, retired mill workers—like the oral histories of former thread-factory women collected by Yamamoto Shigemi and others. While it is important to check the contents of such memoirs against other kinds of sources, these recollections have important things to tell us both about those doing the recalling and about what the women remember. Other testimony from female factory operatives can be found in the words of silk and cotton thread operatives spoken at a time when they were working in or running away from the Meiji mills. We have such records because, at the turn of the century, government investigators who interviewed these women and girls wrote down without alteration what they were told. Other words directly from the mouths of Meiji factory women are in the thousands of verses of the songs about their working lives that they sang. Although these too must be approached with care, they are a very rich source.<sup>8</sup> I emphatically agree with Yamamoto Shigemi that the endless verses of such work songs—sung and composed by the (few) literate, the barely literate, and the illiterate—many of whom

“wrote neither letters nor diaries”—are vital historical records.<sup>9</sup> In their songs they tell much of the history that has been denied them. I am grateful to the investigators of the Meiji era and of later times who recorded the songs they heard factory girls and ex-factory girls singing, including the anonymous lyrics in their reports and published works. Foremost among such investigators were the individuals who gathered data for the detailed study of factory workers conditions published as SHOKKOO JIJOO (FACTORY WORKERS’ CONDITIONS) by the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce in three reports and 2 appendices in 1903.<sup>10</sup> Factory girls’ songs were also recorded by friends of the poor like journalist, Yokoyama Gen’nosuke, who visited factory girls in their workplaces during the late nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> Another friend of the factory girls and women who wrote down the songs he heard them singing was Hosoi Wakizoo, who from the last years of the Meiji era until his death in 1925 was himself a cotton-spinning mill hand and the spouse of a cotton-spinning hand. He included songs he had collected—which date back to at least the 1880’s—in his classic study of female cotton factory workers, JOKOO AISHI (THE PITIFUL HISTORY OF FACTORY GIRLS). Later Yamamoto Shigemi followed Hosoi’s example and included in his study of silk factory women, AA NOMUGI TOOGE (AH! THE NOMUGI PASS), the songs sung for him by elderly women who in their youth had worked in silk mills during the last decades of Meiji. Many of these are strikingly similar to the verses Hosoi collected.

### *Victimization*

The victimization is familiar enough to students of Japanese labour history: the monotonous, strenuous labour, the long working hours, the often dangerous working conditions, the fines, the forced savings that could be and were confiscated by the companies, the crowded, locked dormitories are all well known. Hosoi’s book title “*Jokoo aishi*” has entered the Japanese language as a now familiar phrase that can be translated as “a working hell for females”. Looking back at these Meiji textile workers from our time, we certainly see them as victims. And some of their contemporaries, like Ishihara Osamu the medical doctor who during the last years of the Meiji era studied the death toll and damage of tuberculosis and other diseases prevalent in the mills, saw them the same way.

Who did the victimizing? The answer is obviously those who had power over them. Specifically who? As Michel Foucault has emphasized, power is not a monolith separate from and above those it dominates but is imbedded in the social body from the lowest local levels all the way up to the top of the nation-state.<sup>12</sup> With hindsight we clearly see the Meiji state as a victimizer. This state, as Mariko Asano Tamanoi reminds us “was by no means a humanless institution...[it] included not only politicians and bureaucrats at both levels of central and local governments but also...journalists, intellectuals, and public figures.”<sup>13</sup> But what about the Japanese parents who sent their daughters to the mills? Were they also victimizers? It is easy for us to see the companies as victimizers: in human form victimization by companies was often embodied first in the labour recruiters who worked directly or

indirectly for the textile firms and then in individual supervisors and other employees who had power over the mostly young operatives, but it extended right up to owners and stock-holders. But what about the few female thread labourers who became top workers with high production rates that made impossible demands on the less skilled or less healthy operatives? Did they victimize their fellow workers? These are questions we might ask about *koojo* victimization, but if this is to be—as much as possible—the *koojo*'s own story, we must try to discern if they saw such individuals as their victimizers. And while we are doing this, we might try to explore whether or not they tended to see themselves as victims. And if the answer is even partially yes, we might try to find out if the ways in which they saw themselves as victims were different from the ways scholars have presented their victimization.

Questions about the Meiji state as a victimizer are what historians of modern Japan should put to each other and perhaps to the Japanese people today. Such questions are extremely relevant in Japan today where we witness harsh exploitation of foreign workers that looks suspiciously like the treatment of female factory women during Japan's early industrialisation. However, abstract questions about the Meiji nation-state's role as a victimizer of factory women cannot be baldly put to the factory women of Meiji themselves. Let us come back to the question of *koojo* attitudes towards the state after we have examined some of their responses to possible victimizers who played more visible roles in their lives. Closest to them, of course, were their families.

Certainly the women in the textile factories did not usually think that their families victimized them. Very rarely a stanza like the following appears in a work song:

Their [family/parents'] letters say they are waiting for the year's end.  
Are they waiting more for the money than for me?<sup>14</sup>

But the vast majority of the stanzas described appreciative parents lovingly waiting for daughters who eagerly returned to family havens. All the evidence suggests that parents usually asked their daughters if they would like to go to the mills and seldom sent them against their wishes. I found many records of young women claiming that they had been eager to go to the mills, some of young women explaining that they had run away to a mill because their fathers or both parents denied them permission to go, but only one case of a young woman saying "I came to this city in May of last year. I didn't come because I wanted to. I was only doing what my mother told me to do."<sup>15</sup> The verses of their songs are full of parents who surely would sympathize with their daughters' pain and toil if only they knew the difficulties that the daughters faced.

Someday I'll tell my parents back home  
The bitter tale of the factory;  
And move us all to tears.<sup>16</sup>  
How bitter, how bitter I think, but  
When I remember my parents it's not bitter.

Let the year's end come quickly,  
I want to tell my parents  
About this cruel factory.<sup>17</sup>

Even the twelve-year old who did not want to go to the silk mill quoted above longingly thought of her mother: "Constantly I think of my mother at home in my native place. When you are treated badly your great longing to see your mother grows even stronger."<sup>18</sup>

But the recruiter, who came to their villages, told them fantastic tales of easy work, big money, educational opportunities, and leisure-time activities in the mills, and then took them off to the realities of grim assembly line life many kilometers away, factory girls saw as their victimizer. Over and over again, *kojo* bitterly noted the difference between what the recruiter had promised them and what they found in the factories. The following cotton worker's experience was typical.

Everything Mr. \_\_\_\_ [the recruiter] said was a lie. The day after I came to \_\_\_\_ [the mill] a person who looked like an official told me that my travel and lodging fees amounted to so much; the train cost so much; the horse carriage, so much. We said that if we had known from the start that the travel costs would be so high we would not have come... The person who looked like an official said, "It will be taken off your pay, a little each month until four yen have been deducted."<sup>19</sup>

I didn't know  
I would end up in such a company;  
I was fooled by a recruiter.<sup>20</sup>

And in another song the anonymous composer depicts the recruiter as the cunning deceiver they all knew: "I was fooled by a fox without a tail."<sup>21</sup>

Recruiters were tools of the companies. Did the factory women view the companies—represented by owners or seen as large entities with unclear faces at the top—as their victimizers? Some of them certainly did.

Factory work is prison work  
All it lacks are iron chains.

Like the money in my employment contract,  
I remain sealed away.

How I wish the dormitory would be washed away,  
The factory burn down,  
And the gatekeeper die of cholera!

Neither silk-reeling maids nor slops  
Are kept for long.<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, some silk and cotton operatives expressed grateful feelings towards the companies that allowed them to earn money to help their families. Yamamoto Shigemi documents the case history of a young woman named Masai Mine, a former top reeler in her factory in the Suwa silk district, who was discharged in 1909 when she became mortally ill. She reproached the elder brother who had come to carry her home to die for his anger at the company who had used and discarded her. "Brother, don't say bad things about our factory!"<sup>23</sup> And indeed, many others seem to have felt that such illness or even accidents that occurred in obviously unsafe environments were not any fault of their employers; serious sickness was just something that unfortunately happened to some people; what they thought about the hazards on the factory floor, we do not know. When Sakanoue Jitsu, one of the retired silk workers Yamamoto got to talk about life in late Meiji times, recalled the company she had worked for getting rid of ill workers, she expressed no criticism of the firm.

Right after I went to work in the Yamaichi silk plant in Shinshuu, my younger sister Aki came to work in the same factory. Maybe she worked for about two years. Then she got peritonitis and was in bed at the factory. At that time, there were about thirty sick people. Those who clearly had lung disease were quickly sent home. The song "Takao and Namiko" was a hit tune then so everybody was afraid of TB and wouldn't go near [sick people]. It wasn't long before my sister Aki was also sent home and she died shortly afterward. She was thirteen. She had come determined to become a hundred-yen factory girl and make our mother happy. I will never forget her pallid face and sad eyes when she left the factory. I saw her off as far as the gate but no words came out of my mouth. Surely this sick person cannot cross the Nomugi Pass and walk more than thirty miles! That's what was in my mind. But they wouldn't let her stay at the factory. There was no money to send her to the hospital. There was nothing else but for her to go home.<sup>24</sup>

Attitudes towards the foremen who directly supervised the women's work on the factory floor were equally ambivalent. Such supervising employees were often defined as victimizers.

To kill a factory girl  
 You don't need a knife;  
 You just strangle her  
 With the weight and denier of the thread.<sup>25</sup>

It was supervising foremen who did such strangling. Songs mentioned "the demon overseer" and "the devil accountant". They testified to bosses' tendency to use the factory's countless, vaguely-worded regulations to penalize workers monetarily and in other ways.

If you look through the regulations,

You see that not one in a thousand lies unused.

We must follow the regulations ;  
We must look at the foreman's nasty face.<sup>26</sup>

When a factory girl thought of "regulations" she immediately thought of "fines" because most companies had a long list of rule violations that made a worker liable for monetary fines to be deducted from her wages. The Mie Cotton-Spinning Company, for instance, had a list of nineteen regulation violations that might incur fines. Some of these were quite vague: Violation number three in the list was "improper behaviour", number four was "bad conduct stemming from laziness", number ten was "negligence or lack of endurance at work", twelve was "lack of attention to detail that sets a bad example to others".<sup>27</sup> Management and supervisory personnel had a great deal of discretionary power with which to enforce regulations and levy fines—improper behaviour could be the way a girl looked at her boss. Fining was frequent and harsh. (It was a major means by which companies avoided paying wages that were due.) Thus regulation-wielding supervisors were quite reasonably feared as major victimizers.

Glared at by the manager and section head,  
Used by the inspector.  
How wretched we are!<sup>28</sup>

But other songs treated factory superiors contemptuously, portraying them as beings not worthy of being taken seriously because despite their higher positions it was the factory girls and not the bosses who did the work that produced the precious thread.

The demon supervisor,  
The devil from the office,  
They're no help at all.  
Come on, silkworm!<sup>29</sup>

In both silk and cotton plants, the dormitory supervisors were veteran workers whose backgrounds were similar to those of the young women over whom they had petty power. To their faces, operatives had to treat them respectfully but at least in song these little tyrants could be dismissed as inconsequential.

The dormitory supervisors strut about,  
But look closely at them and you'll see  
They are only persimmon seeds.<sup>30</sup>

Female operatives who rose to junior supervisory positions told of company pressures upon them to punish the women under them. If they did not fine, strike,



and scold those assigned to them into ever greater production (and lower wages because of the fines), their own superiors would make their lives miserable and they might lose their positions. But if they did punish and berate, those under them and mill women in general would single them out as especially hated victimizers, probably because the position these female bosses occupied was only a slender rung above those of the rest of the women in the mill. In the words of a female cotton operative who stopped being a floor supervisor, "The job of a supervisor may be easier on the body; but in order to be praised by your superiors you have to make the people under you hate you. If you treat those below you well you are reprimanded by your superiors."<sup>31</sup>

In cotton-spinning, as soon as a female operative gained some skill she was usually put on piecework and paid wages according to the quantity and quality of the work she produced. (Unlike most male cotton workers who were paid fixed wages according to wage classifications.) Since a woman performed her tasks in cooperation with other women, within work groups there was great pressure upon the less skilled and the less healthy not to hold up the more skilled and more energetic. And there was pressure upon everyone not to take even a few minutes off to rest or eat. If an exhausted novice paused when the morning whistle signaling a "rest period" blew, her mates would scream at her to keep on going. It was common for women to eat while their machines were running. In the "relative wage-classification system" widely used in silk reeling, each day the production of every woman in the factory was measured and "average production" (quantitatively and qualitatively) for the factory was established. From this average, management fixed wage classifications, moving both upward and downward. The highest classification was awarded the plant's top producer and the rest of the workers would be assigned lesser ranks up to as many as fifty classifications. A major management goal was to move the factory average upward—and of course when it did go up a worker would have to produce more just to maintain the wages she was presently getting and slower workers would be paid even less than before. While fines and poor cocoon quality could actually reduce wages to zero or less, the high productivity of the top workers put enormous pressure upon the less skilled, less healthy, and less docile.

Did the less able and less lucky in the silk and cotton trades feel that their more successful sisters were victimizing them? This is a difficult question to answer. Most of the voices we have access to at present are the successful survivors, those who fared quite well in the mills. The voices we have not yet found are those of the workers whose textile employment was terminated because they had become mortally ill or because their bodies had been mangled in cotton machinery, or because behind locked doors they had perished in fire. Other missing voices belong to young women who despairingly committed suicide, ran off to the demimonde, or otherwise disappeared and wiped their factory memories from their minds. Yamamoto Shigemi's oral histories are of women who proudly remembered being top workers.<sup>32</sup> We need to hear from the hundreds of thousands of poor-to-middling producers who never became top earners but nevertheless remained in the mills for substantial lengths of time. Sakamoto Koo, a silk-reeling veteran by the end of the Meiji era

describes some of these workers.

Once I took on the training of five new workers at the same time. At the end of a year, two out of the five had become good factory girls but the other three just didn't get the knack of it. When I think back over the long years I spent as a silk worker, I can say that out of ten, two or three workers were really good. Then there were three or four more who managed because they were enthusiastic and made great efforts. But as for the remaining two or three, no matter how many times you taught them, or got angry at them, or beat them, these people didn't have it in them to be reelers.<sup>33</sup>

How did "the remaining two or three" or the ones "who managed because they were enthusiastic and made great efforts" feel about the top reelers whose achievements were used by employers to make their lives miserable? Did they feel victimized by their skilled coworkers? We do not know. Hopefully future researchers will be able to find ways to search for their voices. One can understand the silence of the less skilled. Within the mills the top producers were the stars. There is no resentment against these stars in women's songs. And, in the appendix to SHOKKO JIJOO that is full of government inspectors' conversations with angry factory girls who had run away from their mills, there is no condemnation of the skilled worker elite as victimizers. Future researchers must look for clues to the reasons behind this silence. Perhaps they will find that the unskilled internalized the low repute in which they were held by employers and by fellow workers who were proud of their own acquired skills. Perhaps they will find that some such workers really had strongly negative opinions of their successful coworkers.

### *Sexual Harassment*

One specific kind of victimization that is a conspicuous part of the *koojo's* own sources for their history is what we now recognize as sexual harassment. I found that sexual harassment by supervisors and managers was a major grievance in almost all of the silk and cotton mill strikes in the 1880's and the 1890's.<sup>34</sup> The sexual harassment may have included rape and violence but what the strikers focused on was bosses who arbitrarily gave easier and more pleasant jobs and slightly higher wages to the single, sexually compliant, and fair of face while treating harshly women who were married, resisted their advances, or were plain looking. This "favouritism" as they called it, angered and united female operatives: they walked out of their mills, found meeting places (such as shrine or temple grounds) large enough to accommodate their numbers, where they encouraged each other to maintain solidarity in their ranks and they elected representatives to be sent to negotiate with employers. They not only saw such company officials as sexual harassers but they were not afraid to fight back.

After the 1890's, structural changes in the industries often made large-scale strikes extremely difficult. By the turn of the century, both silk and cotton factory owners

were enthusiastically exploiting the advantages to be gained by seeking employees in areas distant from mill locations among young women who would not have local friends or relatives to provide support during a strike. They sent company employees to different regions or engaged employment agents in remote rural districts to recruit young females. Textile companies began to build dormitories to house the girls that were hired: living in such accommodation workers could get from dormitory to factory floor within minutes and their non-working hours could be spent entirely under the watchful eye of personnel loyal to the company within the locked doors of the dormitory. As competition for skilled workers intensified towards the end of the nineteenth century, silk manufacturers increasingly formed area-wide alliances and signed agreements designed to prevent workers from changing employers easily. Before 1889, "contracts" between employers and mill hands in cotton-spinning had usually been oral agreements.<sup>35</sup> From the 1890's on, cotton-spinning companies used written contracts that legally bound young women to work for them for a fixed period of employment of three or five years. Such contracts stated that any infringement of the factory regulations or of the contract would lead to forfeiture of wages earned and of other money owing from the company. In both cotton and silk, employers fashioned wage-payment systems that made the cost of leaving an employer enormously high. For instance, expansion of the practice of extending advances (with high interest and other charges) on future wages to poverty-stricken parents of female operatives produced debts that forced many to renew contracts that had expired; and introduction of the practice of deducting from daily wages forced savings that the companies kept until the contractual term had been completed and then only handed over (with little or no interest) if the worker's conduct had been deemed "appropriate"—confiscation was not uncommon—deterred assertive behaviour in others.<sup>36</sup>

After such structural changes occurred in the industries, often the only places *koojo* could fight back were in their songs. They sang warnings to each other about harassers and seducers within the factory—who in the cotton trades included male workers as well as superiors—expressing solidarity against such would-be victimizers.

It's no good to fall in love.  
The winding boss only  
Cares about wound thread.  
He's heartless.

Don't become infatuated.  
The male workers in this company  
Will throw you out afterwards  
Like used tea leaves.<sup>37</sup>

Yet the women did not completely blame all the men who exploited them. They recognized that their own participation was not always forced.

This company is like a brothel ;  
We are whores who live by selling our faces.<sup>38</sup>

Recognition of their own “complicity” did not mean they necessarily felt any less antagonistic towards their victimizers. Women knew they were being treated as playthings and resented this even when they could not resist it.

The boss and I  
Are like spinning-machine thread ;  
Easily tied but easily broken.<sup>39</sup>

What their victimizer got out of a liaison seemed much greater than any benefits they received.

In Suwa geisha get thirty-five sen.  
Common prostitutes get fifteen sen.  
Silk reelers get one potato.<sup>40</sup>

While often implying that they were on the receiving end of sexual harassment, their song verses did not always depict them as helpless prey of male predators.

#### *Did Factory Women Tend to See Themselves as Victims?*

Their feelings about other kinds of victimization seem similarly mixed. They said nothing about the state; their parents and family members were definitely not ill-using them; but their attitude towards companies and company employees was more complex. Individual superiors were seen as abusers, and companies could be blamed for difficulty or dangerous conditions, although they were not necessarily so blamed. Those women whose skill and health brought them substantial earnings thought of themselves as successes not victims. Over all, the women do not appear to have thought that they had been singled out for special victimhood. Their stories stress that the kind of experiences they encountered were quite ordinary for women of their class and time. As elderly Ariga Kono, a former silk worker, told Nakamura Masanori in 1975, “For poor people going out to work (*dekasegi*) was the thing to do. One was happy if one thought one was able to help one’s family.”<sup>41</sup> To gain some understanding of how Meiji silk and cotton mill workers viewed their circumstances we need to look at those engaged in alternative occupations open to thread mill workers. How does the “victimization” of going to a textile mill compare with the “victimization” of staying at home in a desperately poor family in an equally poor village or with the “victimization” of the girl in the small weaving house or the “victimization” of young women sent to brothels?<sup>42</sup> Such comparisons may not yield clear-cut answers but they will hopefully help us understand why so many textile factory workers did not see themselves as the kind of victims that today we tend to picture them to have been.

*Everyday Resistance*

Foucault, who drew our attention to the “multiforms” of power and domination, also stressed that “there are no relations of power without resistances ;” he insisted that resistances “are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised....”<sup>43</sup> And in *WEAPONS OF THE WEAK ; EVERYDAY FORMS OF PEASANT RESISTANCE*, James C. Scott has given us rich illustrations of “real and effective” resistances that are so often carried out on an almost daily basis as petty acts of sabotage by people with very little power over their lives.<sup>44</sup> More recently he has argued, in *DOMINATION AND THE ARTS OF RESISTANCE, HIDDEN TRANSCRIPTS*, that subordinates may resist even the most powerful of dominators by adopting a pose or “public agenda” that does not contradict the demands of the dominant group, while covertly maintaining a “hidden agenda” offstage—in the slave quarters, serfs’ hovels, peasants’ homes, labourers’ dormitories.<sup>45</sup> Scott’s “everyday forms of resistance” reminds us of the importance of looking at a wide variety of resistances by such groups as Meiji factory women ; and his “hidden agendas” offers a possibly fruitful approach to Meiji *koojo* resistance, especially after structural changes in the thread industries made worker-initiated work stoppages almost impossible. Both before and after walkouts and strikes became difficult, factory women’s everyday resistance was conspicuous. From cotton mills, they ran away in such large numbers that even during the years immediately following the Meiji period “running away” was the most prevalent method of ending one’s employment as a female operative in a cotton mill.<sup>46</sup> Silk workers also ran away ; as the folk wisdom of the silk-producing districts put it : “The day may come when the cock ceases to crow but never the day when factory girls stop running away.”<sup>47</sup> When operatives absconded, they often left forced savings and unpaid wages behind or made their fathers’ liable for immediate repayment of loans advanced on future textile wages as well as heavy monetary penalties levied on runaways’ families. And they often had to escape from locked dormitories or sneak out of guarded factory gates. This “voting with their feet” was serious resistance. As was suicide of the despairing who felt they could neither run away or carry on. And surely the “hidden agendas” in many of the songs quoted in this essay was resistance for many who gritted their teeth and endured in the mills. Scott suggests that a hidden agenda often only emerges from the shadows in extraordinary moments and, sure enough, it was an angry runaway who sang to a government investigator :

Go up to the gate  
Of that hateful company  
And you’ll hear the voices  
Of fiends and demons.<sup>48</sup>

What they could not say to their bosses’ faces, factory women and girls could often sing about ; material conditions that had to be endured could be verbally rejected in

the endless verses they composed to keep themselves awake at their machines and amuse themselves when at last they had evaded the ever-watchful eyes of superiors.

### *Resisting the Meiji State*

By the early twentieth century the textile companies had become worried enough about this kind of resistance to begin seeking ways to curtail it. Recognizing that a workforce composed of individuals who sang about being prisoners was conducive to neither productivity nor profit, they made special efforts to raise the morale of their female employees. They taught the women and girls company songs and arranged for them to hear uplifting lectures on moral themes under the rubric "moral education". We know something of the content of the latter because printed books, that provided reference material for employers' instant lectures and for study guides to be sold or otherwise distributed to the few who could read, have survived. The central message in these texts of so-called moral education was that while working in the factory was a boon to the *kojo* herself and to the family she came from, far more important was the fact that it was essential to the rising nation of Japan.<sup>49</sup> The young women are told that the honour and prosperity of their country depended upon their noble efforts. The lowly work they were doing was described as beautiful *because* it was work done for the state. Over and over again, attempts were made to link the interests of the factory girls and their families with the interests of the company that was presented as a mere instrument of family and state happiness. As some lines in an anthem of the Tooyoo Cotton-Spinning Company put it :

If day after day we work  
Without loathing,  
Then day after day the company will flourish.

But the reason for this is at the end of the song :

Your labour is known to be precious.  
The treasure of our prosperous country  
Is produced by your working hands.<sup>50</sup>

In the factory women's own sources there is not a whit of evidence that they responded positively to such heavy efforts at ideological indoctrination regarding their sacred duty to the nation. They composed many verses expressing their affection and concern regarding their parents but their songs never mentioned the nation-state. Verses that expressed their reactions to their own fates never touched upon the fate of the country. When they changed the words of a company or patriotic song they had been taught, it was not to insert declarations of loyalty and self-sacrifice to firm or country. In Yamamoto Shigemi's portrait of women and girls struggling through the frozen Nomugi Pass between Gifu and Nagano on their way to the silk-factory district of Suwa, company representatives at the head of the

line lead the procession in song :

We don't cross the Nomugi Pass for nothing!  
 We do it for ourselves and for our parents.  
 Boys to the army,  
 Girls to the factory.  
 Reeling silk is for the nation too.<sup>51</sup>

In a silk worker's song called "My Two Parents" the words are somewhat different :

We don't cross the Nomugi Pass for nothing,  
 We do it for ourselves and for our parents.  
 When the season of painful reeling is over  
 The world will be bright again,  
 Maybe I'll even be able to get married.<sup>52</sup>

### *Identity*

Despite the "moral education" they were constantly subjected to, the women and the girls in the mills did not show signs of identifying with Japanese nationhood. On the other hand, their identities with their families and their rural villages were strong. This is clear both in their songs and in other words they have left us. What about their identity as a factory woman? Since many ran away from the factories as fast as their feet could carry them—and many more wanted to run home to their families than actually did—for many this identity appears far weaker than their identity as a daughter or a sister. Yet by the end of the Meiji period, it is highly possible that large numbers of female textile hands were conscious of belonging to a group called factory women. Not all operatives had families or villages to go back to and, in cotton especially, even after their contracts were over some women settled in urban areas and continued to work in the industry. And since an individual can have several identities, the group identity acquired through factory experience did not necessarily conflict with the sense of belonging to a family and village.

The songs suggest that women perceived their *koojo* identity both negatively and positively.

At two and three in the middle of the night,  
 The grass and the trees get to sleep.  
 Is it too much that I should be sleepy?  
 If the cotton-spinning maids are human beings,  
 Then the dead trees in the mountains are blooming.<sup>53</sup>

In a similar vein, another verse proclaims :

If cotton-spinning factory workers are human beings,

Then flowers are blooming on telephone poles.<sup>54</sup>

And another :

If a woman working in an office is a willow,  
A poetess is a violet,  
And a female teacher is an orchid,  
Then a factory woman is a vegetable gourd.<sup>55</sup>

If there is humor here, there is also self-depreciation. But there may also be anger at the fact that “respectable people” looked down upon daughters of the poor who worked in the mills, making little or no distinction between being “sold” to a textile mill or being “sold” to a brothel.

Don't look down on factory girls  
When factory girls go home  
They are treasured daughters (*hako musume*).<sup>56</sup>

Don't scorn machine factory girls!  
When they go home  
They are little princesses.<sup>57</sup>

And it was not only in the bosom of the family that they felt sure of their worth.

Don't sneer at us  
Calling us “factory girls, factory girls”!  
Factory girls are treasure chests for the company.<sup>58</sup>

This last verse definitely suggests that some *koojo* had an inkling of the economically important role they played. And certainly, even if they did not think in terms of landlord-tenant “systems”, they were well aware that it was their wages that enabled fathers at home in the villages to pay the land rent.

They may have felt no contradiction between their family identity and their factory girl identity, but for some at least there was tension between their consciousness of belonging to the *koojo* collectivity and their perceived connection to a company. The voices of the successful survivors stressed that their sense of pride as members of a group worthy of respect was closely aligned with their earning power and the confidence it gave them. If their employer recognized their value he was an ally and they might identify with him and his interests. This was the case for a silk worker who had returned home to Hida when her factory closed down during the cold season to be harassed by the local landlord, who tried to persuade her father to make her available for sexual services to the landlord's roofers. Angrily she told the landlord that she and her sisters had been praised as superior factory girls by the president of a big silk company who had called them “treasures of that company”.<sup>59</sup>



But if the employer or his subordinates refused to acknowledge the worthy identity of the factory woman, he and they might well become enemies, regardless of their positions of authority over her. Defiant factory girls could resist bosses on the factory floor as well as landlords at home in the village.

The defiant factory girl emerged as an heroine, for instance, in songs that celebrate a silk worker in Nagano named Iwataru Kiku. Iwataru had become famous because on 15 August 1907, while on her way home from shopping, she successfully fought off an attack by a man who had already killed several Suwa women in a ghastly fashion. She seized her assailant's testicles and pulled them so hard that her attacker lost his stranglehold on her throat and revealed his face. Since, unlike his earlier victims, she escaped not only with her life but also with the knowledge of who the would-be murderer was, the police swiftly captured him. In a song about this local heroine, *kojo* seem to be taking some of the wraps off their hidden agenda and moving it closer to center stage. Renown because she had survived battle with a long-sought murderer, in this melody Iwataru Kiku became a fearless fighter in quite a different context.

Don't scornfully say  
 "Factory girl, factory girl."  
 Iwataru Kiku is  
 A real factory girl.

Iwataru Kiku is a shining  
 Model of a factory girl.  
 Let's wrench the balls  
 Of the hateful men!

Mr. Overseer, Mr. Supervisor,  
 You'd better watch out!  
 There is the example of Iwataru Kiku.

Who dares to say that  
 Factory girls are weak?  
 Factory girls are  
 The only ones who create wealth.<sup>60</sup>

### *A Concluding Word*

Not all of the questions asked about Meiji factory women's views of their own lives at the beginning of this essay have been answered. Further explorations are needed. But at least it should be clear by now that the definitions others have tried to give to them—be these the repressive definitions of the Meiji state's moral educators or the sympathetic definitions of researchers who have documented their victimization—were not the definitions that they applied to their lives. While many of those who

have told their stories have presented them to us as passive victims, they themselves appear to have seen themselves in quite a different light. They often saw themselves as active, dynamic figures who had the power to make substantial contributions to their families' welfare. They sometimes saw themselves as the major force behind production of wealth in the textile industries. At least some of them saw themselves as worthy individuals with skills and achievements that should be respected. How else did they see themselves? If we really want to unravel their history we shall have to keep on listening for their voices.

#### Notes

- 1 Ishii Kanji, *NIHON SANSHI-GYOO SHI BUNSEKI* (Tokyo : Tokyo Daigaku shuppan kai, 1972). Of course banking arrangements made available to silk manufacturers by the Meiji government also helped to support the silk manufacturing industry. See Ishii.
- 2 Nawa Tooichi, *NIHON BOOSEKI-GYOO NO SHITEKI BUNSEKI* (Tokyo : Chooryuusha, 1948). This was acknowledged by Mutoo Sanji, general manager of the leading cotton-spinning company, Kanegafuchi, from 1894 to 1930, quoted in Nawa, 369-70. Both Freda Utley and Sung Jae Koh have demonstrated that computation of comparative labour productivity and costs in the cotton industries of Japan, India, and Great Britain is an extremely complicated task. But their thoughtful estimates support general conclusions drawn by Yamada Moritaroo (*NIHON SHIHONSHUGI BUNSEKI*, Tokyo : Iwanami, 1934) that Japanese wages in cotton were lower than those of other countries including India. See Freda Utley, *LANCASHIRE AND THE FAR EAST* (London : George Allen and Unwin, 1931) and Sung Jae Koh, *STAGES OF INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT IN ASIA : A COMPARATIVE HISTORY OF THE COTTON INDUSTRY IN JAPAN, INDIA, CHINA, AND KOREA* (Philadelphia : University of Pennsylvania Press, 1966). See also the comparison of cotton-spinning workers' monthly wages in Japan and in India during 1890 in Ooishi Kaichiroo, ed. *NIHON SANGYOO KAKUMEI KENKYUU*, 2 vols. (Tokyo : Tokyo Daigaku shuppan kai, 1975), II, 162.
- 3 See, for example, Nakamura Masanori, "Seishi-gyoo no tenkai to jinushi sei", *SHAKAI KEIZAI SHIGAKU*, 32.5-6, 1967.
- 4 The most famous of these is undoubtedly Hosoi Wakizoo's *JOKOO AISHI* (original 1925, Tokyo : Iwanami, 1954) written about women in cotton mills where Hosoi was a male operative. Building on his model, others wrote about the silk industry. See *SEISHI JOKOO GYAKUTAI SHI* (Nagano City : Shinano mainichi shinbunsha, 1981) by Sakura Takuji, one of the very few male workers in machine silk-reeling. See also Yamamoto Shigemi, *AA NOMUGI TOOGE* (Tokyo : Kadokawa, 1977) and *ZOKU AA NOMUGI TOOGE* (Tokyo : Kadokawa, 1982).
- 5 See Kajinishi Mitsuha, Tatewaki Sadayo, Furushima Toshio, and Oguchi Kenzoo, *SEISHI RODOOSHA NO REKISHI* (Tokyo : Iwanami, 1955 ; Yoneda Sayoko, "Meiji 19 no Koofu seishi jokoo soogi ni tsuite : Nihon ni okeru saisho no sutoraiiki", *REKISHI HYOORON* 105 (May 1959) ; *YAMANASHI RODOO UNDOO SHI* as reproduced in Akamatsu Ryoko, ed., *RODOO*, vol. 3 of *NIHON FUJIN MONDAI SHIRYOO SHUUSEI*, 10 vols. (Tokyo : Domesu shuppan, 1977-1980) ; newspaper articles about cotton and silk strikes collected in vols. 1 and 2 of *Roodoo undoo iin kai*, ed., *NIHON RODOO UNDOO SHIRYOO* 5 vols. (Tokyo : Tokyo Daigaku shuppan kai, 1968 ; Kitazaki Toshiki, "Bokkoo ki ni okeru waga kuni no booseki-gyoo to roodoo mondai : Meiji 22 nen no Tenma booseki ni okeru sutoraiiki o chuushin ni", *REKISHI HYOORON* 113 (January 1960).
- 6 Toojoo Yukihiko, *SEISHI DOOMEI NO JOKOO TOOROKU SEIDO* (Tokyo : Tokyo Daigaku shuppan kai, 1990).
- 7 The most famous of these is *TOMIOKA NIKKI*, the famous recollection of work and life during the 1870's at the government's model Tomioka filature and Rokkoosha filature of Nagano prefecture, written by Wada Ei, one of the first young women to go to "reel for the nation" in Tomioka at a time

when silk workers' working conditions were still good. Wada may have been able to draw upon short daily entries from the 1870's when she wrote TOMIOKA NIKKI more than three decades later, but its nostalgic descriptions warn the researcher to study this and other memories of former koojo critically. The recorded memories of other women at Tomioka during the same time period were not all so happy. See Takase Toyoji, KANEI TOMIOKA SEISHISHO KOOJO SHIRYOO (Tokyo: Taimatsu-sha, 1979).

- 8 Ensuring that a song from earlier times is placed in its proper context can be problematic, but the rewards are so rich they are well worth the risks. For productive examination of songs in two different historical contexts, see Lawrence W. Levine, "Slave Songs and Slave Consciousness", in ANONYMOUS AMERICANS: EXPLORATIONS IN NINETEENTH CENTURY SOCIAL HISTORY, ed., Tamara K. Hareven (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1971 and Vic Gammon, "Folk Song Collecting in Sussex and Surrey, 1843-1914", HISTORY WORKSHOP 10 (Autumn 1980).
- 9 AA NOMUGI TOOGE, 169
- 10 Nooshomu-shoo, shookoo-kyoku, ed., SHOKKOO JIJOO vol. 4 of SEIKATSU KOTEN SOOSHO (Tokyo: Kooseikan, 1971).
- 11 Yokoyama's newspaper articles were later published and republished in book form. See his NAICHI ZAKKYO NO NIHON (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1954) and his more famous NIHON NO KASOO SHAKAI (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1949).
- 12 Michel Foucault, POWER/KNOWLEDGE, SELECTED INTERVIEWS AND OTHER WRITINGS 1972-1977, ed. by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980).
- 13 Mariko Asano Tamanoi, "Songs as Weapons: The Culture and History of *Komori* (Nursemaids)", THE JOURNAL OF ASIAN STUDIES 50.4 (November 1991), 795-796.
- 14 AA NOMUGI TOOGE, 391.
- 15 SHOKKOO JIJOO, appendix 2. The quotation is in appendix 2, 600.
- 16 Hosoi, 413.
- 17 AA NOMUGI TOOGE, 390.
- 18 SHOKKOO JIJOO, appendix 2, 601.
- 19 Ibid., 535.
- 20 JOKOO KOUTA quoted in Nagoya josei shi kenkyuu kai, ed., HAHA NO JIDAI: AICHI NO JOSEI SHI (Nagoya: Fuubaisha, 1969), 59.
- 21 Hosoi, 409.
- 22 AA NOMUGI TOOGE, 388-389. These are some of the verses in a song entitled "The Prison Lament".
- 23 ZOKU AA NOMUGI TOOGE, 16.
- 24 AA NOMUGI TOOGE, 149.
- 25 Nakamura Masanori, ROODOOSHA TO NOOMIN (Tokyo: Shoogakukan, 1976), 98.
- 26 AA NOMUGI TOOGE, 391.
- 27 Dai Nihon menshi booseki doogyoo rengoo kai, ed., BOOSEKI SHOKKOO JIJOO CHOOSA GAIYOO SHO (Osaka: Dai Nihon menshi booseki doogyoo rengoo kai, 1898), 168-169.
- 28 Hosoi, 411.
- 29 ROODOOSHA TO NOOMIN, 98.
- 30 Ibid., 166.
- 31 SHOKKOO JIJOO, Appendix 2, 497.
- 32 The archives of the village offices in the region these women came from often told Yamamoto another story. For instance, the records in the village of Kokufu in Gifu prefecture show that, during 1900, of 458 females who left Kokufu to work elsewhere in silk mills only one made a high enough wage to be called a top, hundred-yen worker. Most of the others earned from ten to thirty yen, with some earning as little as two to five yen. AA NOMUGI TOOGE, 405-409.
- 33 Ibid., 124.
- 34 At least for all the strikes for which I could find records. The only exception was the Tomioka Silk Mill strike of 1898. See FACTORY GIRLS, especially Chapters 3 and 6 and Sharon L. Sievers, FLOWERS IN SALT, THE BEGINNINGS OF FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS IN MODERN

- JAPAN (Stanford : Stanford University Press, 1983), Chapter 4.
- 35 Yokoyama, NIHON NO KASOO SHAKAI, 200.
- 36 See FACTORY GIRLS, especially Chs. 4, 7, and 8 for descriptions of these and other structural changes that made it difficult to plan and organize work stoppages after the 1890's. Companies freely used police and anti-worker legislation against those who took part in strikes or walk-outs.
- 37 Both verses can be found in Hosoi, 331.
- 38 AA NOMUGI TOOGE, 394.
- 39 Hosoi, 333.
- 40 AA NOMUGI TOOGE, 395.
- 41 ROODOOSHA TO NOOMIN, 84.
- 42 See FACTORY GIRLS for the beginnings of such comparisons.
- 43 POWER/KNOWLEDGE, 140.
- 44 James C. Scott, WEAPONS OF THE WEAK ; EVERYDAY FORMS OF PEASANT RESISTANCE (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1985).
- 45 James C. Scott, DOMINATION AND THE ARTS OF RESISTANCE, HIDDEN TRANSCRIPTS (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).
- 46 See FACTORY GIRLS and also Gary R. Saxonhouse, "Country Girls and Communication among Competitors in the Japanese Cotton-Spinning Industry", in Hugh Patrick, ed., JAPANESE INDUSTRIALIZATION AND ITS SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1976).
- 47 AA NOMUGI TOOGE, 97.
- 48 SHOKKOO JIJOO, appendix 2, 617.
- 49 I was able to locate four of these printed books in the National Diet Library : Kato Tomotada, KOOJO KUN (no place of publication or publisher, 1910); Takenobu Toshihiko, ed., JOKOO TOKUHON (Tokyo : Jitsugyoo kokumin kai, 1911); Seishi orimono shinposha, ed., SHUUSHIN KUNWA KOOJO NO KAGAMI (Tokyo : 1912); Uzumi Yoshimasa, SEISHI KOOJO NO KAGAMI (Nanasato village, East Yamanashi gun, Yamanashi prefecture, 1912). For a detailed discussion of their contents see FACTORY GIRLS, especially Chapter. 5. To my knowledge no other researcher has analyzed these texts in the context of Meiji jokoo history.
- 50 The entire song can be found in Hosoi, 287.
- 51 AA NOMUGI TOOGE, 16.
- 52 Ibid., 390.
- 53 Quoted in Yamanouchi Mina, YAMANOUCHI MINA JIDEN ; JUUNEN SAI NO BOOSEKI JOKOO KARA NO SHOOGAI (Tokyo : Shinjuku shoboo, 1975), 20.
- 54 Hosoi, 406.
- 55 AA NOMUGI TOOGE, 395.
- 56 Hosoi, 406.
- 57 AA NOMUGI TOOGE, 396.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 ZOKU AA NOMUGI TOOGE, 106-112.
- 60 AA NOMUGI TOOGE, 142-143.

明治時代の繊維工場の女工

パトリシア・ツルミ

要旨：この論文は明治時代、繊維産業に働いた女工たちが自分たちの人生をどう認識していたかということに重点を置いて書かれたものである。彼女たちは日本の産業化において、また地方で地主、小作人間の関係維持のために自分たちが果たした役割に気付いていた

ろうか。そうならば彼女たちの役割に関する考え方は何であろうか。自分たちを犠牲者と思っていたらどうか。自分たちをグループに属していると思っていたらどうか。女工としてのアイデンティティはいかほど強かったか。彼女たちは自分自身をどう定義づけていたらどうか。