

# From coal miner's wife to historical actor: The personal archive of Matsuo Keiko

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the building and preservation of a personal archive, that of MATSUO Keiko (松尾薫虹). Matsuo became an activist after her husband suffered from carbon monoxide poisoning in a 1963 explosion at a Mitsui Miike coal mine. Her father had also been a coal miner, and had been involved in the pivotal strike of 1960. Matsuo's life story demonstrates one case of how an "ordinary" woman became launched into a national activist network, and how her understandings of her experiences and their connections to history prompted her to build and preserve her own archive.

Based upon examining the materials that Matsuo saved and that local volunteers helped her catalogue, and also upon oral histories with Matsuo herself, I consider what we can learn from her archive. I discuss how her specific experiences of postwar cultures of life-writing and particularly of union activism encouraged her to think of herself as a historical actor and trace how Matsuo's personal story illuminates many of the networks between labor and environmental activism in postwar Japan by discussing how connections she first made through Minamata activism resulted in the formal cataloguing of her archive.

## Introduction

This paper focuses on the building and preservation of a personal archive, that of MATSUO Keiko (松尾薫虹). Matsuo became an activist after her husband suffered from carbon monoxide poisoning in a 1963 explosion at a Mitsui Miike coal mine. Her father had also been a coal miner, and had been involved in the pivotal strike of 1960. Matsuo's life story demonstrates one case of how an "ordinary" woman became launched into a national activist network, and how her understandings of her experiences and their connections to history prompted her to build and preserve her own archive.

Based upon examining the materials that Matsuo saved and that local archivists and volunteers helped her catalogue, and also upon oral histories with Matsuo herself, I consider what we can learn from the formation of her archive. Here I discuss how the Matsuo Keiko archive developed in a postwar culture that mistrusted centralized authority and emphasized local knowledge and histories.

I consider how the personal archive of Matsuo Keiko's materials developed in this context by considering how the wider culture influenced Matsuo to save her materials and archivists to create the institutional infrastructure to preserve her materials. For this to take place, both Matsuo and archivists needed to understand Matsuo as a historical actor. I argue that Matsuo Keiko's experiences of a wartime to postwar transition persuaded her to think of herself as a historical actor, and encouraged her to participate in activism and to preserve her version of events. The development of a formal archive of Matsuo Keiko's collected documents and objects also illuminates many of the networks between labor and environmental activism in postwar Japan, and also how smaller regional libraries were thinking about their role in preserving local histories.

## A Life History

Matsuo Keiko was born Noda Keiko in August 1931. She married Matsuo Osamu in 1954. The couple had two daughters, and lived in company housing. Osamu had begun working for Mitsui at the age of 14, in 1942. In January 1944, he moved to work in the Mitsui Airplane Factory (in colonial Korea), but with the end of the war and the col-

lapse of the Japanese Empire, he returned to Ômuta in 1946 to work in the Mitsui coal mines there.<sup>(1)</sup>

In 1963, Matsuo Keiko's husband, Osamu, was one of 1,403 miners in the Mikawa pit when it was rocked by an explosion. 438 miners died in that accident, while 839 suffered from carbon monoxide poisoning. Matsuo Osamu was one of the latter.

At the time, Matsuo Keiko was 32 years old, a mother to two young daughters (aged eight and five). The injuries Osamu sustained were considered light, and he was not admitted to a medical institution. Instead, Keiko was supposed to care for him at home.

It became clear to Keiko and to other families of survivors that the supposedly "light" injuries of those who inhaled carbon monoxide while escaping and helping others escape the collapsed mine were accompanied by dramatic changes in memory, mood, and personality.

As she challenged the Mitsui authorities' interpretation of her husband and other survivors' injuries, Matsuo Keiko became a key figure organizing to recognize the lingering after-effects of severe carbon monoxide poisoning, which included memory impairment and changes in emotional stability.

The fight for legal recognition of the injuries done to the survivors and the damages done to their families' livelihoods stretched over decades: In 1967, about eight families organized a mine sit-in, while other families petitioned authorities in Tokyo. The Miike Labor Union sued Mitsui with a "mammoth lawsuit" of 422 people, but that group reached an agreement with Mitsui in 1989 that Matsuo and a few others rejected. Matsuo and three other families continued to wage a legal battle with Mitsui on two grounds: 1) They sought recognition of the wives' injuries as caretakers and dependents; 2) They found the payment for damages to be too low.

In April 1996, the Fukuoka Higher Court threw out the case, and their appeal to the Supreme Court was also unsuccessful in 1998.

## A Historical Life

The above is a catalogue of "just the facts" of Matsuo Keiko's life. But her long life and legal battles are preserved in fine-grained detail in the Ômuta Public Library. The Matsuo Keiko archive, also indexed and available on microfilm, includes mass media reports, legal documents, family photographs, daily planners, fliers, Matsuo's library, and personal letters.

When I asked Matsuo Keiko recently why she saved all her materials, she framed her urge to preserve around her experience of war. As a child, she recalled continual repression and urging to "gaman" [endure, self-control, self-repression, tolerate]. She says that she hoped that saving her materials would leave a trail, a sense of other voices that countered the authorities.<sup>(2)</sup>

As a historian, I understand Matsuo Keiko's actions in the historical context of postwar Japan, in which many people were encouraged to think of themselves as historical actors. Rooted in the lessons of wartime authority and repression, and subjected to a dramatic shift in ideas of truth, authority, and justice in the wake of defeat and occupation.

Matsuo Keiko was also most likely influenced by a broader postwar culture that emphasized "people's history." This was a trend in academic circles (the work of Yasumaru Yoshio sought to disrupt a monolithic history of the Japanese state with historical studies of popular movements, thought, and religion), and activist circles (in coal mining communities in Kyushu, cultural actors encouraged workers to tell their own stories and create their own art and literature).<sup>(3)</sup> But it also became part of a historical vernacular, as groups formed to write local histories, which became known as the People's History Movement. C.A. Gayle has written at length about how various re-envisionings of history-writing as it related to "local" histories and people's histories informed such groups as the Tokyo-based and

(1) Matsuo Osamu rejuime. B31-16-2 File: 松尾けいこファイル Envelope SHK 567.9: 松尾修

(2) Matsuo Keiko. Personal correspondence. 4 June 2018.

(3) For example, Yasumaru Yoshio, *Nihon no kindaika to minshû shisô [Japan's modernization and popular philosophy]*. Aoki shoten, 1974; Araki Yasutoshi, *Saakuru mura no jiba [Circle village's atmosphere]*. Kaichosha, 2011. 安丸良夫「日本の近代化と民衆思想」青木書店 1974; 新木安利「サークル村の磁場」海鳥社 2011.

Marxist-influenced Women's History Research Society, the Nagoya Women's Historical Research Society, and the Ehime Women's History Circle.<sup>(4)</sup> These genealogies, a mixture of academic and amateur historians, intellectuals and activists, formed the larger context in which Matsuo came to believe that her materials were of historical importance.

Unlike the women who formed and felt empowered by such groups—and many others—Matsuo Keiko did not attempt to write her own history, but conserved the documents of her life, hoping it would offer a counter-narrative of its own.

In addition to a more general atmosphere in which many “ordinary” people were encouraged to think of themselves as historical actors, Matsuo Keiko grew up in a family with a history of labor activism. Matsuo Keiko's father, a union member involved in the protracted and aggressive strike of 1960, offered a family example of an activist. Interestingly, however, Matsuo Keiko didn't feel like her father adequately explained his activism to her. And, although Matsuo Keiko attempted to always explain her activism to her daughters, it's unclear how much they supported (and still support) her efforts.

Matsuo Keiko's mother was not a union activist, but also documented her own life story. In 1995, it was made into a film (消えゆくカンテラウの灯 筑豊・三池炭鉱に行きた女) as part of the “human drama documentaries” (ドキュメンタリー人間劇場) made by Terebi Tokyo in the 1990s, many around the theme of “50 years after the war.”<sup>(5)</sup> It was directed by Mori Kôta (森弘太), who also wrote about the 1963 explosion at the Miike Mine and was involved in Matsuo's trial.

Matsuo Keiko's mother had been adopted by a poor Chikuho miner, and the family lived a life on the run as his health declined and he could no longer fulfill his contracts and pay his debts.<sup>(6)</sup> In the late 1950s, the activist and labor-movement-influenced activities of Tanigawa Gan and Ueno Eishin's “Circle Village” drew attention to the conditions of workers in the coal mining communities of Japan, and the work of Morisaki Kazue from 1961 onward introduced people to the particular challenges of women who worked in the impoverished Chikuho region.<sup>(7)</sup>

Matsuo Keiko grew up during an epistemological shift that encouraged local and personal histories, with a father involved in a strike that had garnered national attention, and a mother with a personal history that resonated with activist-scholars from the 1960s onward. This context was important, not only to understand Matsuo Keiko's own activism, but also to understand her compulsion to save materials related to that activism.

## An Archived Life

While postwar cultures of local history writing influenced Matsuo Keiko's understanding of herself as a historical actor, her transformation into a public figure and of her materials into an archive required the existence of people and networks that recognized Matsuo and her actions as socially and historically important.

Matsuo Keiko's husband was injured at a time of rising sympathy for victims of industrial diseases and accidents. Her circumstances as a victim of an industrial accident and subsequently of a corporate malfeasance fit within other narratives then taking shape about victims of postwar Japan's economic high growth. The gendered context of postwar activism, in which wives and mothers became the faces of various movements – for consumer's rights, for peace, against pollution – also amplified Matsuo's message.

Matsuo's personal story illuminates many of the networks between labor and environmental activism in postwar Japan. Matsuo traveled extensively (the only places in Japan she has not been are Nara and Okinawa), and she spoke at all kind of events. In 1976, she spoke at a Kyushu medical student seminar hosted at Kumamoto University because the student audience that invited her was interested in how to democratize medicine and ensure that industries did not define disease and treatment.<sup>(8)</sup> Her personal materials include a photograph of her sharing a meal with

(4) Curtis Anderson Gayle. *Women's History and Local Community in Postwar Japan*. Routledge, 2010.

(5) *Kieyuku kantera no hi* [The lantern's light is going out: A woman who lived in the Chikuhô and Miike coal mines] (Dir: Mori Kôta) Tokyo terebi: dokyumentarii ningen gekijo 1995. 「消えゆくカンテラウの灯 筑豊・三池炭鉱に生きた女」(監督: 森弘太) 東京テレビ: ドキュメンタリー人間劇場 1995.

(6) Matsuo Keiko. Interview. Ômuta. 3 March 2018.

(7) Morisaki Kazue, *Makkura*. San'ichi shobô, 1977. 森崎和江「まっくら」三一書房 1977.

farmers in Sanrizuka in 1979 who were fighting the authorities who sought to displace them to build an international airport. Her daily planners document events with various youth groups, consumer activist groups, environmental groups, and etc.

While Matsuo Keiko's self-recognition of her materials as important led her to collect materials, it was a relationship forged through activist networks that created the Matsuo Keiko archive. As Matsuo told me, she felt privileged to have been surrounded by so many people who were interested in her opinions and stories.<sup>(9)</sup> When Matsuo's grandson, now in his 20s, scolded her for putting herself and her story out there publicly, she apparently protested to him: "But I didn't ask them to come. They came to listen, and so I talked."<sup>(10)</sup> Without people interested in listening to Matsuo's life story, her collection of documents would have been little more than a hoarder's accumulation collecting dust.

Connections she first made through national-level activism resulted in the formal cataloguing of her archive. Ôhara Toshihide (大原俊秀), now retired, but formerly working for the Ômuta government and the public libraries, first met Matsuo when he was involved in activism to support the victims of Minamata Disease as a university student in Tokyo.<sup>(11)</sup> Minamata Disease was the result of industrial pollution in Minamata Bay, Kyushu—a city about 140 kilometers from Ômuta—and it became a cause célèbre in Japan in the early 1970s. The protracted battle for public recognition by the Chisso company of its role in creating the conditions for mercury poisoning began in the late 1950s, but was revitalized when the so-called "Minamata Disease" emerged at other sites in Japan in the mid-1960s.<sup>(12)</sup>

Ôhara himself, born in 1950, came from Ômuta. He'd been interested in problems of industrial pollution as a high-school student as well, but began to participate in sit-ins and other protests as part of the movement to recognize victims of Minamata Disease from 1970, as a university student. He first recalled seeing Matsuo Keiko at events related to Minamata activism, in both Kumamoto and in Tokyo.<sup>(13)</sup>

In 1973, Ôhara returned to Ômuta to take a job related to the public libraries in the city government. In 1975, he became in charge of the local history archives. Although the staff didn't have many resources, he noted that they were quite motivated, and also influenced by the 1963 document known as the "Chûshô report" (officially: "Administration of community libraries in mid- and small-sized cities"). That document, the result of idealistic ambitions of young librarians nation-wide, led by Ariyama Takashi, the then-head of the National Library Association, advocated for "public / community / communal" libraries as links between local society and "the people" (民衆).<sup>(14)</sup> The librarians who published that report in the early 1970s saw themselves as combatting a hierarchal system of knowledge preservation and dissemination, one that had reigned in the prewar and that they feared would be replicated by a postwar system with the National Diet Library at the top of an archival and epistemological pyramid.

Ôhara's archival impulse was thus part of a national trend with roots in the 1950s toward localization and democratization of library science as a service to communities. But Ôhara also recalled the influence of one individual staff member at the Ômuta Public Library who began to collect and archive fliers from the Miike Strike of 1959-1960 while the strike was underway. Ôhara later reflected, "I wonder if there were any staff at any other local public libraries who recognized strike fliers as local archives in 1960."<sup>(15)</sup>

(8) "Dai-ichi Kyushu ikei gakusei seminaa hôkokusho [First Kyushu medical student seminar report]" October 16 and 17, 1976. Kumamoto University. (Matsuo Keiko's private library) 「第一九州医系学生セミナー報告書」1976年10月16・17日

(9) Matsuo Keiko. Personal correspondence. 4 June 2018.

(10) Matsuo Keiko. Interview. Ômuta. 21 May 2017.

(11) Ôhara Toshihide "Minamata to Miike, soshite watashi to toshokan" [Minamata and Miike, and now me and the library] Gonzui [published by Soshisha, the Center for Supporting Minamata Disease] (No. 146, August 2017): 3-5. 3. 大原俊秀「水俣と三池、そして私の図書館」*ごんずい* (146): 3-5.

(12) Andrew L. Jenks, *Perils of Progress: Environmental Disasters in the Twentieth Century*. Pearson, 2011. 21.

(13) Ôhara. 3.

(14) *Chûshô toshi ni okeru kôkyô toshokan no unei—chûshô kôkyô toshokan unei kijun iinkai hôkoku [Administration of community libraries in medium and small cities—report of the medium and small community library administration standards committee]*. Nihon toshokan kyôkai, 1973. 「中小都市における公共図書館の運営—中小公共図書館運営基準委員会報告」日本図書館協会 1973.

It is thanks to Ôhara's efforts, which lasted beyond his retirement in 2012, to collect and index the 100 boxes of materials related to Matsuo's life and trial that Matsuo's documents are preserved and available to researchers, on-site and on microfilm (and, we hope, soon digitally).

## Conclusions and Questions

As a historian "using" the Matsuo Keiko archive as a source, I feel it is important to historically contextualize the formation of that archive. The archive developed in a culture that emphasized local knowledge and histories as potential counter-narratives to a master narrative structured around power and authority. This culture was formed as a self-conscious reaction to what were seen as the authoritarian excesses of wartime Japan. The development of the archive also reflects the networks formed between activists and archivists in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and how many smaller, local libraries were encouraged to think of themselves as preservers of knowledge to counter a top-down hierarchy of centralized archives.

In examining how the person affects of one women became a formal archive, I wanted to consider what made a person who in many ways considers herself to be an "ordinary woman" into an activist and a historical actor. I have many more questions about this process, particularly regarding the gendered reception of women's individual histories and activism in the postwar period, which I believe contributed to Matsuo's profile as a coal-miner's wife turned activist. But what is clear to me is that the creation of a personal archive like Matsuo Keiko's requires a self-understanding by a person (in this case, Matsuo) of herself as a historical actor, as well as a context in which others (activists and archivists) found her story important and worth preserving, and an even larger context in which the Miike coal mines at Ômuta fit into larger narratives about modern Japan and modern democracy.

### Images:

1) Matsuo Keiko in front of the Japan Coal Miners' Union (*Tanrô*)



(15) Ôhara, 4.



2) Matsuo at a General Council of Trade Unions of Japan (*Sōhyō*) event before the mine explosion



3) Matsuo Keiko with a youth activist and a local farmer activist at Sanrizuka in 1979



4) A flier for a 1984 event in Tokyo that Matsuo saved



5) Matsuo in front of Osamu's *butsudan* (household altar)



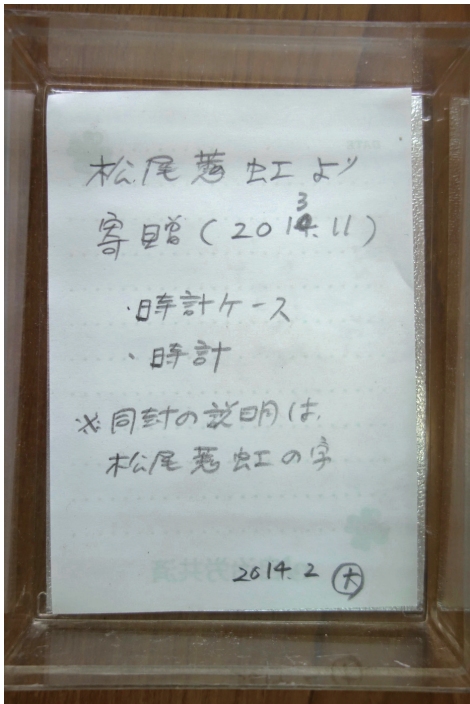
6) Osamu's watch and watch case.

[Caption: Matsuo's archive includes many objects. This watch demonstrates also how these objects became historically contextualized through Matsuo Keiko and Ôhara Toshihide's efforts. Outside the watch is a note by Ôhara about when the watch came to the collection and that Matsuo wrote an explanation about the watch. Enclosed with the watch is Matsuo's]



6a) Ohara's writing about watch

[“From Matsuo Keiko on November 2014. Clock case. Clock. The explanation inside is written in Matsuo Keiko's handwriting. February 2014. Ohara.”]



6b) Matsuo's writing about watch

[“The copper case to protect his watch in the mine is something my husband thought of himself and made. He also made many for other people. He attached from his belt and then entered the mine.”]

