

# Some New Directions for the Study of Coal Mining History and Heritage

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Throughout 2019, coal mining researchers, heritage practitioners and former miners and residents of mining communities interested in the history and heritage of coal mining in the UK and Japan came together in a collaborative international research network.<sup>1</sup> Across two weeklong trips in the north of England and in Tokyo and Kyushu, network members engaged with emerging research in both contexts and learnt from each other about different approaches to studying coal mining and its legacies and conserving its heritage.

This project emerged in the context of a revitalised public interest in coal mining history after the decline of the industry. Tourism and educational initiatives around mining have grown rapidly, such as sites related to the Meiji-era industrial transformation of Japan, including Hashima (Gunkanjima), where I have done some site-based and archival research, and Miike coal mines.<sup>(1)</sup> Mining museums in the UK continue to grow visitor numbers and educate young people and the general public.<sup>(2)</sup> Diverse representations of coal mining communities also continue to appear in popular culture from popular British films like 1996's *Brassed Off*, 2000's *Billy Elliot* and 2014's *Pride*, to classic coal mining literature like Itsuki Hiroyuki's *Seishun no mon*, or the 2015-16 NHK morning drama *Asa ga kita*, which focused on the life of late nineteenth century mine owner Hirooka Asako.

This has coincided with renewed interest by scholars in writing histories of coal mining and in how these pasts are engaged with by the public. Researchers have explored the development of the coal industry, workplace cultures, industrial identities, politics and individual and collective experiences, including mining communities, miners' family lives, education and social mobility, through re-examining official records; uncovering previously unexplored archives, including grassroots and ephemeral collections; and creating new archives through oral history and other methodologies.<sup>(3)</sup> The 'On Behalf of the People' research project, which several of our network members are part of, seeks to capture the complex experience of coal nationalisation across the British coal industry from the coalfields up, through over 100 oral history interviews and extensive archival research. In the Japanese case, scholarship has focused increasingly on labour and trade union organising, solidarity campaigns, gendered experiences in coal mining communities, and Japanese coal mining in a global context. This has largely been driven by the work of members of the Japan Association for the Study of Former Coalfields (JAFCOF), which also joined our network.



(1) Deborah Dixon, Mark Pendleton and Carina Fearnley, "Engaging Hashima: Memory Work, Site-Based Affects, and the Possibilities of Interruption", *GeoHumanities*, 2, 1 (2016): 167-187.

(2) Colin Griffin (2006) "'Instead of Manufacturing Goods, We Are Manufacturing Heritage': the National Coalmining Museum for England", *Labour History Review*, 71 (3): 289-302. See also <https://www.ncm.org.uk/>

(3) A small selection of relevant works just from network members include, in English: Ben Curtis (2013) *The South Wales Miners, 1965-1985*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press; Andrew Perchard and Keith Gildart (2015) "'Buying brains and experts': British coal owners, regulatory capture and miners' health, 1918-1946," *Labor History*, 56 (4): 459-480. And in Japanese: Nakazawa Hideo and Shimazaki Naoko (eds) (2018) *Tankō to 'Nihon no kiseki': Sekitan no tamensei o horinaosu*, Tokyo: Seikyusha; Shimanishi Tomoki (2011) *Nihon sekitan sangyō no sengoishi: shijōkōzō henka to kigyō*, Tokyo: Keio University Press.

In both countries, decline has also brought increasing attention to localised experiences of deindustrialisation, which nevertheless have transnational commonalities. Scholars have argued that we need a truly global approach to writing the histories and contemporary experiences of deindustrialisation.<sup>(4)</sup> Existing scholarship has tended to have a largely north Atlantic orientation, so a key priority for researchers in this network is to ensure that East Asian experiences of industrialization and deindustrialization are also included in these increasingly global histories. As a network, we were particularly interested in comparing the post-closure experiences of those who lived in mining communities, to explore what Sherry Lee Linkon has argued in the US context is the ‘half-life of deindustrialization’ and the extent to which these sites and communities experience, in Avery Gordon’s terms, ‘social haunting.’<sup>(5)</sup>

These themes remained in our discussions as we focused on the new resources and arguments emerging from our own network members’ scholarship. My contributions also focused on how these histories speak to themes of transnational exchange, productive and reproductive labour, and how we should consider histories of coal in a time shaped by anthropogenic climate change.

Coal mining existed in Japan for hundreds of years but developed industrially with the drive to modernise in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This required energy and technology, which Japan, having been largely closed to the outside world for a couple of hundred years, was well behind on. In 1854, Admiral Sir James Stirling, the Commander in Chief of Royal Navy’s East Indies and China station concluded the first treaty of friendship between the UK and Japan, which opened up Nagasaki and Hakodate to British trade. Stirling’s crew reported coal diggings on the nearby island of Takashima, which ultimately became the site of Japan’s first modern coal mine.<sup>(6)</sup> A commercial Takashima mine was developed a few years later by the Scottish entrepreneur Thomas Blake Glover, in association with the Hizen clan.<sup>(7)</sup> Several sites associated with Glover and coal mining have been registered on the UNESCO World Heritage Register since 2015, as part of the Sites of Meiji Industrialization in Kyushu and Yamaguchi.<sup>(8)</sup> That UNESCO bid was developed with reference to international industrial heritage projects, particularly in the UK, and supported by key British heritage figures, including the late heritage consultant Stuart Smith.

Interest in coal mining history has also worked the other way too – our network member Paul Darlow is the archivist at the National Union of Mineworkers in Barnsley. In preparing for this project, he came across a photography collection from the miner and photographer Honda Tatsumi – how it made it to South Yorkshire is unknown.<sup>(9)</sup> Another partner on this project – the Tagawa City museum in Fukuoka prefecture – hosts 585 paintings by the coal miner and artist Yamamoto Sakubei (1892-1984), which are now part of the UNESCO Memory of the World. These toured the UK in 2019-20 as part of the UK-Japan Season of Culture, attracting good audiences.<sup>(10)</sup>

Yamamoto’s painting of everyday life in coal mining communities are now globally recognized, but his early life was not easy. In 1899 at the age of just 7, Yamamoto went down the mines with his father and older brother. This was not an unusual pattern of work for coal mining communities in Kyushu in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Mining had been for some time a familial job, with all members of the family contributing.<sup>(11)</sup> This included

(4) Steven High, Lachlan Mackinnon and Andrew Perchard (eds) (2018) *The Deindustrialized World: Confronting Ruination in Postindustrial Places*, Vancouver: UBC Press.

(5) Sherry Lee Linkon (2018) *The Half-Life of Deindustrialization Working-Class Writing about Economic Restructuring*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; Avery Gordon (2008) *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

(6) Brian Burke-Gaffney (2009) *Nagasaki: The British Experience, 1854-1945*, Folkestone: Global Oriental, pp. 12-14.

(7) Burke-Gaffney, *Nagasaki*, 51-3.

(8) <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1484/>. See also Takazane Yasunori (2015) “Should ‘Gunkanjima’ Be a World Heritage site? - The forgotten scars of Korean forced labor,” translated with an introduction by Tze M. Loo, *The Asia Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, 13, 28 (1): 13 July, <http://apjff.org/2015/13/28/Takazane-Yasunori/4340.html> [Accessed 15 August 2017]

(9) Honda Tatsumi (1999) *Tankō ōsai*, Tokyo: Renga shobō.

(10) <http://www.y-sakubei.com/english/sakubei/index.html>; [https://www.uk.emb-japan.go.jp/SeasonCulture/event/2019/201909/Sep-Aug2020\\_BridgeTogetherProject.html](https://www.uk.emb-japan.go.jp/SeasonCulture/event/2019/201909/Sep-Aug2020_BridgeTogetherProject.html)

women, which was a surprise to international observers who traveled in Japan in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, including Marie Stopes (1880-1958).

Stopes is a very familiar name in the UK, but perhaps less so in Japan. A prominent birth control advocate and eugenicist, her name continues to be associated with reproductive health clinics. Before she opened her first clinic in London in 1921, however, Stopes was a paleobotanist specialising in coal seams and their role in preserving plants, particularly ancient ferns. Between 1907 and 1908, Stopes spent 18 months at the Imperial University in Tokyo as a visiting researcher, traveling all over Japan collecting specimens from coal mines and documenting her travels along the way.<sup>(12)</sup>

As part of these travels, she witnessed everyday life in coal mining communities, such as this description of a small familial coal mining unit operating in Habu, a hamlet in Yamaguchi prefecture, in October 1907.

When we came to the mine, we found the owner to be a common working man, and we saw his wife going into the mine to work like the rest of the peasant women! ... In the mines I have often come across women, naked to the waist and up to the knee, working underground with the men. To-day I saw such a pretty girl, and her beautiful rounded body was far too sweet to be smeared with coal.<sup>(13)</sup>

Nowadays when many people think of a coal miner, they think of someone hardworking and strong, but poor, and definitely male. This image is not entirely untrue of course, as men have predominated in coal mining work. At various points in history, both in Japan and the UK, there have also been laws enacted to prevent women from working in coal mines. In Japan, the most significant of these passed in 1947. However this was more than a century after the UK's Mines and Collieries Act of 1842, which banned labour provided by women and boys under 10 years old in coal mines. This perhaps explains Stopes's surprise at coming across women miners over sixty years later. This surprise has been replicated over the last couple of years as Yamamoto's paintings toured the UK.

But in fact, when Stopes was traveling in Japan, the number of female colliers was expanding rapidly; between 1909 and 1919, the number tripled to almost 100,000, or about 27 per cent of the workforce.<sup>(14)</sup> After the First World War the numbers abated due to an economic downturn. New labour laws, which came into force in 1933, also limited the capacity for women and children to work underground. Women remained a significant share of the workforce, however, constituting a majority of the drawing and coal-sorting labour force, and significant minorities in several other areas of work. Japanese women returned to the mines as the wars in Asia and the Pacific escalated, alongside forced labourers from Japan's colonies.<sup>(15)</sup>

Work conditions, pay and so on had also been differentiated by gender, with men typically earning much more than women. In addition to this heavy labour, women were also expected to conduct a range of domestic duties beyond their paid work; this un- and under-paid labour became increasingly pronounced after women were prevented from working at the coalface. The anthropologist Sachiko Sone has suggested that a typical workday for women in the Chikuhō region where Yamamoto was also from would be a 3am rise to burn coal and prepare breakfast and lunch for their husbands, followed by a long shift in the mines, a quick bath, and then all the reproductive functions of cleaning, cooking, hauling of water and so on.<sup>(16)</sup>

In the postwar, gendered divisions of labour in mining communities became much more similar to wider norms

(11) Regine Mathias (1993) "Female labour in the Japanese coal-mining industry," in *Japanese Women Working*, ed. Janet Hunter, London and New York: Routledge; Shindō Toyoo (1974) *Chikuhō no jokōfutachi*, Kyoto: Buraku mondai kenkyūsho.

(12) Marie Stopes (1910) *Journal from Japan: a daily record of life as seen by a scientist*, London: Blackie & Son.

(13) Stopes, *Journal from Japan*, 48.

(14) Mathias, "Female labour," 104.

(15) For evidence of forced labour in mining, see Takeuchi Yasuto (2013) *Chōsa Chōsen kyōsei rōdō 1 – tankōhen*. Tokyo: Shakai hyōronsha.

across Japan, with a more formalized division between the masculine work of coal mining and the perceived feminine work of social reproduction. This can be seen in a recent boom in representations of postwar life on the coal mining island of Hashima, and across other heritage contexts. Photographs of women shopping for food for families or caring for children proliferate.<sup>(17)</sup> Scenes of domesticity also abound in text and image.<sup>(18)</sup> While the hard underground labour may have been no more, expectations around under- or unpaid labour for women persisted, albeit in a form more aligned with wider postwar expectations of women's work in Japan. These expectations also infuse the way in which these pasts are represented now in heritage settings, popular texts and educational materials.

The relationship between past and present (and potential futures) has always been a concern for historians. At this moment in time, there is no more urgent question than how we relate to serious, and possibly irreversible, anthropogenic climate change. In a landmark essay published a decade ago, Dipesh Chakrabarty argued that: "As the crisis gathered momentum in the last few years, I realised that all my readings in theories of globalisation, Marxist analysis of capital, subaltern studies, and postcolonial criticism over the last twenty-five years, while enormously useful in studying globalisation, had not really prepared me for making sense of this planetary conjuncture within which humanity finds itself today."<sup>(19)</sup> In arguing for a realignment of the humanities away from a singular focus on human agency, Chakrabarty says that we "should think of humans as a form of life and look on human history as part of the history of life . . . on this planet." This move from the micro to the macro, from the local to the planetary, and from the human to the post-human was a marked shift for Chakrabarty and signals a significant challenge for historians, particularly historians of coal.

In a recent article entitled *Coal and Climate Change*, geographer Gareth Edwards mapped the changing contemporary political economy of coal.<sup>(20)</sup> Edwards argued that given its centrality to global systems of energy production and consumption, we are not going to be rid of the need to place coal at the heart of our discussions over how to address climate change any time soon. This is particularly acute as over 77% of the world's imported coal in 2019 was from Asian countries, with Japan importing the highest dollar value worth of coal. As Amitav Ghosh wrote in 2016: "The continent of Asia is conceptually critical to every aspect of global warming: its causes, its philosophical and historical implications, and the possibility of a global response to it" and yet "the discourse around the Anthropocene, and climate matters generally, remains largely Eurocentric."<sup>(21)</sup> While our research network was primarily focused on the history of coal production in Japan and the UK, and the communities that formed around that, we cannot forget the continued impact of coal on how we understand those histories and on our contemporary politics, particularly around climate change.

In coming to a conclusion, I want to return to Marie Stopes whose travels in Japan at the turn of last century were not primarily driven by an interest in humans and their agency – instead she was interested in the products of the slow movement of geological time, the developmental forces that undoubtedly shape human existence but, at least for most of their own histories had occurred largely without our direct influence. The coal of Stopes's inquiry emerged from millions of years of slow change as material that humans later took and made use of, both produc-

(16) Sone, Sachiko (2006) "Coal Mining Women Speak Out: Economic Change and Women Miners of Chikuho, Japan" in J. J. Gier and L. Mercier (eds) *Mining Women: Gender in the Development of a Global Industry, 1670 to 2005*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 153-180.

(17) See Minagawa Takashi (2013) *Anogoro no Gunkanjima: ima mo koe ga kikoeru*, Tokyo: Sangyō henshū sentaa, 36-7; Itō Chiyuki and Akui Yoshitaka (2010) *Gunkanjima: Kaijō sangyō toshi ni sumu*, Tokyo: Iwanami shoten.

(18) See Kurosawa Hisaki (2013) *Gunkanjima nyūmon*. Tokyo: O Projekuto, 66, 78; Gunkanjima o sekai isan ni suru kai (ed.) (2011), *Gunkanjima: Sumikata no kioku*, Nagasaki: Gunkanjima o sekai isan ni suru kai.

(19) Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) "The Climate of History: Four Theses", *Critical Inquiry*, 35 (2): 197-222, p. 199.

(20) Gareth A. S. Edwards (2019) "Coal and Climate Change," *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 11 (2).

(21) Amitav Ghosh (2016) *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 87.

tively and, as we know now, destructively.

Nevertheless, Stopes's privilege allowed her access to spaces in which she observed the lives of other women, many of whom struggled to balance gendered expectations around productive and reproductive labour in places like coal mines. Did these observations shape her later turn to thinking about reproductive control? It's possible. We can certainly see similarities with other birth control advocacy, with the prominent Japanese advocate Ishimoto Shizue, a close ally of Margaret Sanger, also spending several years in and around Japanese coal mines.<sup>(22)</sup>

The study of coal mining history and heritage, then, is important in its own right – these communities were essential places where identities were formed, struggles forged and cultures created. Our network members explored these themes highly productively. But studies of coal mining also speak to other big questions. Can we address the legacies of coal mining in ways that honour and value those workers and communities; recognise the inequalities in histories of production, development and deployment across time; and use these pasts to understand and intervene in the politics of the present? My hope is that through collaborative projects such as our UK-Japan network, we can.

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<sup>(22)</sup> Aiko Takeuchi-Demirci (2018) *Contraceptive Diplomacy: Reproductive Politics and Imperial Ambitions in the United States and Japan*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.