

Exploring Women Workers in Meiji Japan:  
The Underclass of Japanese Industrialization with a Chinese Comparison

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## **1. Abstract**

The present research discusses the working conditions of Japanese women during the Meiji period, along with a Chinese comparison. It compares and contrasts the demographic situation of the Empire of Japan and China, introduces the level of industrialization in both countries, and analyzes the working conditions and lifestyles of both Japanese and Chinese women during the late nineteenth century. Japan, during the Meiji Period, became a country where industrialization gained momentum, and as such, the Japanese government needed women to provide the industries with the much-needed workforce. Therefore, the present research also elaborates on certain micro studies, as well as anecdotes from both Japanese and Chinese women workers employed in factories both in the Empire of Japan and China. In this sense, this research aims at revealing the position of Japanese women in terms of gender roles with a comparative view. It also includes articles and related book chapters discussing how family sociology perceived women workers of the late nineteenth century in Japan and China. Finally, the analysis responds to the question, “Is fleeing from small villages to urbanized cities a captivation or liberty for Japanese and Chinese women?”

## **2. Keywords**

*Japan, China, Meiji Restoration, women workers, working conditions*

## **3. Introduction**

The present research suggests that developments related to Japan’s industrialization and the country’s rapid economic and industrial growth in the aftermath of the Meiji Period brought about a gap in the Japanese workforce. To lessen this gap, many Japanese women—either forcibly or voluntarily—fled their scarcely-populated, small villages and moved to urbanized cities such as Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya, and others. Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya, along with Kyoto,

were the main industrial hubs of the Japanese market—where rapid industrial growth existed during the post-Meiji Period.<sup>1</sup> As was the situation for many industries, the Japanese factories were also in need of workers—preferably women since they had more subordinate rights and demands than those of Japanese men. Yet, there existed another justification for why Japanese companies primarily employed women workers. “Although Japan’s agriculture [...] remained less developed than the country’s industry,”<sup>2</sup> it recapitulated to be a part of Japan’s economy. In other words, despite Japan’s rapid economic extension, Japan’s agrarian culture did not vanish; it co-existed with machinery and industrialized factories as Japan’s economic sources. In this view, Japanese men principally continued to work in the agrarian sector(s).

Women, as shall be discussed in the following chapters, were not able to work under favorable conditions. The Japanese women working in factories, for instance, had to work for longer hours, had shorter breaks, and little access to sanitation facilities. Moreover, they were deprived of proper accommodation and received a far less amount of wage allocated from the company budget compared to male workers. Huffman states that “The day’s norms dictated that men be household heads and they be paid more.”<sup>3</sup> However, despite all these unfavorable working conditions of the Japanese women workers, the issue of *liberty* still existed. In other words, fleeing to big cities to work for Japanese factories was a way of *escaping* for many Japanese women from their monotonous, patriarchy-oriented lives. Therefore, it is plausible to discuss a *dichotomy* in the lives of Japanese women during the late nineteenth century. In his article titled *The Social Position of Working Women*, Koyama elucidates the payment gap between women and men in Meiji Japan in the following explanation: “In those days, the difference between men’s wages and those of women was very great—a woman’s wage was roughly one-third that of a man. Nurses, telephone operators and even women teachers—who

<sup>1</sup> Carl Mosk, “Japanese Industrial History: Technology, Urbanization and Economic Growth”, 2001: p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph R. Barse, *Japan’s Food Demand and 1985 Grain Import Prospects*, 1969, 16.

<sup>3</sup> James L. Huffman, *Down and Out in Late Meiji Japan*, 2018, 97-98.

were then regarded as the highest class of working women—were paid at rates far below those to which their qualifications and training entitled them.”<sup>4</sup>

During the pre-Meiji Period, it is indisputable that Japan acquiesced to Western influence to open to foreign trade, whereas China rebuffed opening its borders to the Western world and maintained its closed policy. Consequently, Japan successfully developed while China did not accomplish to industrialize itself swiftly.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, it is incontrovertible that China did not become as successfully modernized as Japan did throughout the late nineteenth century. The difference in Japanese and Chinese experiences of industrialization purports that the analysis for women workers in China varies in environment and circumstances for the present research. When it comes to Chinese women, nevertheless, a similar image to that of Japan arises in terms of how the Chinese society perceived them and what employers expected from them throughout the late nineteenth century. To put it more explicitly, women in the late nineteenth century China, obeyed gender norms, as well as Japanese women. Just like the women in Meiji Japan, Chinese women followed the “three obedience” exacted by the Confucian teaching.<sup>6</sup> In this view, the corresponding idea that moving from small suburban areas to urbanized cities is an opportunity for women is also accurate in China. However, to what extent Chinese women could flee their settlements and family-related compliance during this period is a matter of debate, for China was not an as an industrialized entity as Japan was during the late nineteenth century. For the present analysis, nevertheless, the verdict is that although Confucian teachings imposed the same values on both Japanese and Chinese women, the Japanese had higher chances of altering the currents by becoming workers in industrialized cities.

<sup>4</sup> Takashi Koyama, “The Changing Social Position of Women in Japan”, 1961: p. 99.

<sup>5</sup> Giulia Valentini, “China and Japan’s Responses to the West in the nineteenth Century”, 2013: p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Karilyn Moeller, “Chinese Women Unbound: An Analysis of Women’s Emancipation in China”, 2003: p. 2.

## 4. The Empire of Japan and China in the Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century

### 4.1. The Empire of Japan

#### 4.1.1. An Outlook

With the Meiji reformers seizing control in 1871, a period of reformations that would go much further than that of Russia began in the Empire of Japan. The Meiji Restoration included reforms such as the abolishment of feudalism and the centralization of political power. In the aftermath of the fall of the Tokugawa Shogunate, Japan witnessed rapid industrialization thanks to the adoption of Western technology and know-how. Beyer elucidates the issue of taxation by stating that “Modern Japan arose with the Meiji Restoration of the late nineteenth century. Japan’s modern taxation system also dates from this period. Japan introduced taxation of income in 1887, although traditional land taxes remained the main source of revenue until 1908.”<sup>7</sup> Besides, the Industrial Revolution in Japan resulted in various other advancements. The Japanese army started to utilize updated armaments, and this new technology created the modern Japanese Navy. The Land Reform, through which the Meiji government gave peasants the right of land ownership, took place—which, as a radical advancement, granted the Japanese citizens the right of private enterprise.

#### 4.1.2. Demographics

The population of Japan at the time of the Meiji Restoration was estimated to be 34,985,000 on January 1, 1873,<sup>8</sup> while the official original family registries (本籍, *honseki*) and *de facto* (or present registries (現住, *genjū*)) populations on the same day were 33,300,644 and

<sup>7</sup> Vicki L. Beyer, “The Legacy of the Shoup Mission: Taxation Inequities and Tax Reform in Japan”, 1992: p. 389.

<sup>8</sup> Population of Japan after Meiji 5 compiled by the Cabinet Bureau of Statistics of Japan in 1930.

33,416,939, respectively. These figures were tantamount to the population census of the United Kingdom (31,000,000), France (38,000,000), and Austria-Hungary (38,000,000).<sup>9</sup>

#### 4.1.3. Culture: How were women perceived during the early Meiji years?

Culturally, Japan borrowed its technology from the West, yet it maintained close supervision on the type of reforms admitted, for the Meiji government also aimed at retaining the Japanese culture. In terms of women during the Meiji Restoration, however, Sugano elucidates how Confucian ethics shaped the perception of women in the Meiji Japan

The reception of the “Onna Daigaku” style of Confucian ethics (which controlled and defined women throughout the Edo period), appears to have changed due to the impact of several factors. These were the introduction of western culture in the first half of the Meiji period as well as the resulting reevaluation of Confucian ethics due to the influence of this introduction of western culture and by the writings of Fukuzawa, which were put together between the 1870s and 1890s. The change was due to a critical attack, which renounced the existence of the old household system.<sup>10</sup>

It is plausible to observe the shifts seen throughout the Meiji Period as to women’s duty, lifestyle, and perception with the introduction of the Western world and Fukuzawa Yukichi’s contributions to the Japanese modernization. However, as a counter-argument to that of Sugano, another scholar, George, advocates how the emergence of Neo-Confucianism kept Japanese women bound to their household, their family and villages in the chapter titled “Post-Meiji Enlightenment of Women” of his book *Enlightenment of Women and Social Change*

The Tokugawa ideology, which upheld the preservation of the male-dominated society in the lines of Neo-Confucianism, was the guiding spirit which perfected the early Meiji society also. Although the new Meiji government introduced various progressive policies to modernize the society by abolishing the age-old feudal system based on class and hierarchy, it gave little importance to the uplift and emancipation of women in the early years of Meiji. Same as Tokugawa rulers, Meiji rulers also upheld the Confucian view that women were destined to serve and obey men, to be gentle and meek, pure and clean, and accomplished in housework. The mastery of these virtues was the ultimate aim of womanhood.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Statistics Bureau, MIC, Population of Japan (Final Report of The 2000 Population Census, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Noriko Sugano, “Gender, Modern Japan, and the Reception of Confucianism”, 2005: p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> P. A. George, *Enlightenment of Women and Social Change*, 2006, 53.

After contrasting the two works in the literature, it is conceivable to recognize two opposing patterns as to the Meiji women of the late nineteenth century. On the one side, Sugano emphasizes a shift due to a critical attack on the long-lasting Confucian household customs. On the other faction, George underlines the emergence of Neo-Confucianism and advocates a tendency towards the old, patriarchal traditions of womanhood in the late nineteenth century Meiji Japan. These contrasting views, as well as the situation of Japanese women during the post-Meiji Period, is of tremendous significance if one is to comprehend the altering currents and evolving dynamics in terms of women's lives in Meiji Japan. Therefore, the statements (*vide supra*) should lay the foundation for the argument that moving to industrialized cities as factory workers can also mean liberation for Japanese women despite their adverse working conditions in the factories, industrial settings, and urbanized centers. Another work by Takashi Koyama, on the other hand, regards the Meiji Period as a transformational epoch for Japan and establishes the framework as follows

Over the span of some seventy years, from 1871 to 1940, Japan emerged from being a society based on agriculture *per se* to become one based on a capitalistic economy. This was a period of an epoch-making industrial and social upheaval. During this period, machines were introduced, and the means of transportation and communication were revolutionized; the movement of people and goods became easy. There was also an unparalleled development of commerce and industry and the proportion of the population living in villages dropped from 80 percent to below 50 percent. In such a radical social change, what transformations have occurred in the mode of life of rural women?<sup>12</sup>

This *epoch*—as mentioned by Koyama—bestowed women numerous challenges in such a rapidly industrializing environment. However, as a topic discussed in this article, it presented women with a diverse motive, and appended an unconventional turn to their lives as well, for, previously, the majority of the Japanese women barely left their hometowns throughout their lifetimes. The present research, notwithstanding, also includes a similar outline for China, for only then can it be possible to provide a comparative and comprehensive analysis for the working conditions of both Japanese and Chinese women. Consequently, the following section

<sup>12</sup> Takashi Koyama, "The Changing Social Position of Women in Japan", 1961: p. 77.



deals with the outlook on China during the late nineteenth century and compares women's situation in both the Chinese society and workforce to be able to discuss women's roles more effectively.

## **4.2. China**

### **4.2.1. A Time of Rebellions and Conflict**

If one is to observe late nineteenth-century China, it is incontrovertible that it is a contrast to Japan. It is possible to state that Chinese history in the late nineteenth century is full of rebellions. Japan had witnessed some remarkable uprisings as well. However, they were—mostly—in the form of contests. Therefore, it is of immense significance to infer Japan's objectives behind it becoming an exceptionally industrialized nation, for Japan mainly wanted to abstain from becoming taken over or becoming a colony like India. China, on the other hand, finds its traditional power relationship with Japan reversed in the late nineteenth century, especially after its defeat by the Empire of Japan in the aftermath of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 over influence in Korea.<sup>13</sup>

### **4.2.2. Demographics**

The demography of China, on the other hand, showed a tremendous difference from that of Japan. “Having remained at 100 million through much of its history, under the peaceful Qing Dynasty, the population doubled from 150 million in 1650 to 300 million by 1800 and reached *450 million* [emphasis added] by the late nineteenth century (cf. population of the U.S. was 200 million in the 1980s).”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, it is plausible to observe an immense variation between the

<sup>13</sup> The Japanese, after witnessing the treatment of China by the West and its own experience of near-colonialism in 1853, successfully established Japan as a competitor with Western powers for colonial rights in Asia and special privileges in China.

<sup>14</sup> Asia for Educators, “Reading: China in the 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries”, 2019.

demographics of the Empire of Japan and China during the late nineteenth century. Such a contrast is of vitality, given that China did not respond to the technology and know-how introduced by Western civilizations as amicably as Japan did.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, combined with a 450 million population census, China's falling behind Japan in terms of its industrial development did not change the currents for China—therefore, the Chinese women as much as it did for Japan and Japanese women. Furthermore, China mostly remained an agrarian country, basing its economy mainly on agriculture—and rice cultivation. The most remarkable development, with an exception, was China's industrialization in silk manufacturing. In this view, the present research discusses the working conditions of Chinese women within a different framework.

#### **4.2.3. Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism and the Concept of “Women”**

Analyzing Chinese women in the late nineteenth century, a similar pattern with that of the Empire of Japan emerges. “Three obediences,” along with the long-lasting patriarchal and hierarchical order, creates womanhood that is passive, obedient, and invisible. Li Yu-ning, in his pivotal work *Chinese Women Through Chinese Eyes*, discusses the perception of the Chinese women—again—through Chinese eyes. Bringing a new perspective to the argument, however, Li handles the issue within the framework of the imperial state and imperial Confucianism of the Han and later dynasties. He describes the atmosphere for the Chinese women of the late nineteenth century as follows

The oppression suffered by Chinese women in premodern China was largely by men for the advantage of men (the well-known tyranny of mothers-in-law over daughters-in-law notwithstanding). Yet, as early as the nineteenth century, and increasingly from the late nineteenth century, men played leading roles as advocates of women's equality, especially in promoting women's education and the abolition of footbinding.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Chih-Yu Liao, “A Comparative Analysis of the Differences between Chinese and Japanese Modernization in the Mid-Late Nineteenth Century, with Particular Regard to the Idea of ‘Rich Nation and Strong Army’”, 2006: p. 108.

<sup>16</sup> Yu-ning Li, *Chinese Women Through Chinese Eyes*, 1992.

Supporting his evidence with the opinions of Lin Yutang, a prominent journalist, writer, and scholar, Li reveals the role of influences from India, especially Buddhism, in the perception of Chinese women

[Li] provides some clues to why some Chinese men were sympathetic toward Chinese women. Like many other critics in China and abroad, then and now, Lin blames Neo-Confucianism, along with hypocrisy, for the double standard that held women to be morally inferior to men while at the same time demanding that they live by higher moral standards than were expected of men. Lin is careful to distinguish between the Neo-Confucianism of the Sung and later dynasties and original Confucianism, which he sees as more humanistic and tolerant. He attributes the harmful changes in women's status under the influence of Neo-Confucianism not to indigenous Chinese ideas but to influences from India, especially Buddhism. Not surprisingly, the three male writers he identifies as early "feminists" were men who in general abhorred the narrow restrictions of Neo-Confucianism. Lin indicates, however, that they were exceptions, even eccentrics, and therefore not to be taken as representatives of any broad indigenous current for reform.<sup>17</sup>

Approaching the issue from a psychological viewpoint in the following sentences, Li also brings up a different perspective as to why the Chinese society viewed their women during the late nineteenth century this way. Li consults Tseng's work and elucidates as follows by stating that "Tseng traces the limitations to women's freedom to the imperial state and the imperial Confucianism of the Han and later dynasties, formulated in the *Li chi* (Book of propriety) and other texts. The disintegration of the imperial system in her own day was thus a cause for optimism about improving women's status," and "Tseng's explanation for the protracted subordination of women is psychological"<sup>18</sup>

The stunted growth of Chinese womanhood may be said to owe its origin to the psychological suggestion of society that a virtuous woman should be obedient, quiet, self-effacing, and ignorant, devoting herself only to the service of the family. There is no actual persecution or suppression of feminine activities. A woman under such hypnotic suggestion really does feel that only by striving after such an ideal can she find her true self.<sup>19</sup>

The book titled *Current Perspectives on Asian Women in Leadership: A Cross-Cultural Analysis* gives place to excerpts from the article titled 'Revolution Postponed: Women in

<sup>17</sup> Yu-ning Li, *Chinese Women Through Chinese Eyes*, 1992.

<sup>18</sup> Yu-ning Li, *Chinese Women Through Chinese Eyes*, 1992.

<sup>19</sup> Yu-ning Li, *Chinese Women Through Chinese Eyes*, 1992.

Contemporary China' by Margery Wolf. In the selections, Chinese women in the late nineteenth century are handled culturally within the framework of family sociology

Women's rights were also limited in educational opportunities, according to the traditional culture. From a child, girls were taught to be subservient to men in the house and to learn the virtues of being docile and obedient. The skills that women learned were limited to cooking, sewing, knitting, cotton spinning, and housekeeping. Women's emancipation and right for education did not become a prominent issue until the late nineteenth century (Wolf, 1985).<sup>20</sup>

Comparing the scholars stating their views as to China, and Chinese women's situation with that of Japanese women, it is possible to draw a parallelism between two countries. In other words, both Chinese and Japanese cultures handled their women from a similar perspective—deriving their cultural and sociological roots from Confucianism. Hence, despite the industrial, economic, and demographic differences, it is manifest that neither women were liberal, nor did they harbor freedom over their lives.

## **5. A Comparison of Industries in the Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

### **5.1. The Empire of Japan**

China did invest in the beginnings of the twentieth century in the heavy industrial complex materials to improve its machinery. The Japanese state investment, on the other hand, focused on iron and steel industries as the core of industrial labor. As noted earlier, raw silk was the top export commodity throughout Meiji and beyond. The cotton industry was the most dynamic emerging manufacturing industry in Meiji; it achieved import substitution triumphantly. The machinery industry was taking root but still weak. During Meiji, Japanese machines were cheaper but in low quality; they had no competitiveness against American or

<sup>20</sup> Yonjoo Cho, et al., *Current Perspectives on Asian Women in Leadership: A Cross-Cultural Analysis*, 2017: 21-22.

European products. Compared to the development of machinery in China, nevertheless, the Japanese manufacturers demonstrated a noteworthy ascent in the expansion of machinery.

Dating back to ancient times—roughly 4th or 5th-century—silk production was Japan’s traditional industry. Unable to operate and sustain commerce relations with other nations throughout its 200-years *sakoku* (closed country) policy, Japan opened up its ports and extended its foreign trade in the mid-nineteenth century. In the aftereffect of Japan’s opening up, Japanese silk swiftly found an enormous overseas demand. The most leading interest, for instance, came from the United States. This silk boom had a few mattering effects, increasing the gap between the Japanese and Chinese levels of industrialization.<sup>21</sup> The first consequence states that “naturally, silk production (mulberry cultivation, silkworm raising, silk spinning) was greatly stimulated and expanded all over Japan, especially in the eastern regions. Virtually all farmers and villages which could produce silk tried to do so. Such a situation raised rural income significantly. Today, you can hardly see mulberry trees or silk production in Japan. But back in those days, they were everywhere.”<sup>22</sup>The second impact, as to the emerging of a new class is as follows

Second, the new class of merchants emerged. As foreigners were confined to the designated foreign settlement and its surrounding area (the most important foreign settlement was Yokohama), they could not build their own distribution network in Japan (violating national treatment of the GATT Agreement, but there was no WTO at that time...). Thus, they had to rely on Japanese merchants to procure silk and tea for export and sell British clothes to local markets. Japanese merchants who played this role were often new people, unconnected with big merchant families in the Edo period. They communicated price information, provided short-term trade credit, established marketing channels, and even assisted in installing new machines and learning new technology. Those who did business directly with foreigners were called *Yokohama merchants*, but there were other types of new merchants as well. Renowned silk-producing localities included Nagano, Yamanashi, Gunma and Tohoku Region (all Eastern Japan) and merchants played critical roles in restructuring these producers. If successful, Meiji merchants made huge profits. Quick and spontaneous emergence of a merchant class with productive functions (instead of simply exploiting producers) was a unique Japanese feature not always visible in other countries. But Meiji merchants were far from perfect. Foreigners often bitterly complained about the dishonesty and corruption of some Japanese merchants. Silk was sold by the weight, so water was often added before weighing. Foreigners had

<sup>21</sup> Excerpts from the lectures of “Meiji: major industries: silk, cotton and machinery.”  
[https://www.grips.ac.jp/teacher/oono/hp/lecture\\_J/lec05.htm](https://www.grips.ac.jp/teacher/oono/hp/lecture_J/lec05.htm)

<sup>22</sup> Excerpts from the lectures of “Meiji: major industries: silk, cotton and machinery.”  
[https://www.grips.ac.jp/teacher/oono/hp/lecture\\_J/lec05.htm](https://www.grips.ac.jp/teacher/oono/hp/lecture_J/lec05.htm)

to check if the merchandise was dry inside. At one time, the quality of Japanese silk became so low that its demand and price fell, and the government had to impose quality standards.<sup>23</sup>

The third, and final consequence signified that continued silk exports were accompanied by the transformation of production method and organization. Manual labor was gradually replaced by machine spinning. At first, silk production used to be farmers' side jobs, but later it was undertaken by factories. More precisely, silkworm raising remained family-based and decentralized across the country, but silk-spinning became automated in big factories. Consequently, silk remained the top export item for nearly a century. Silk exports were a stable source of foreign exchange for Japan, contributing to industrialization. Therefore, the gap between Japan and China increased significantly in terms of industrial development in the course of the late nineteenth century.

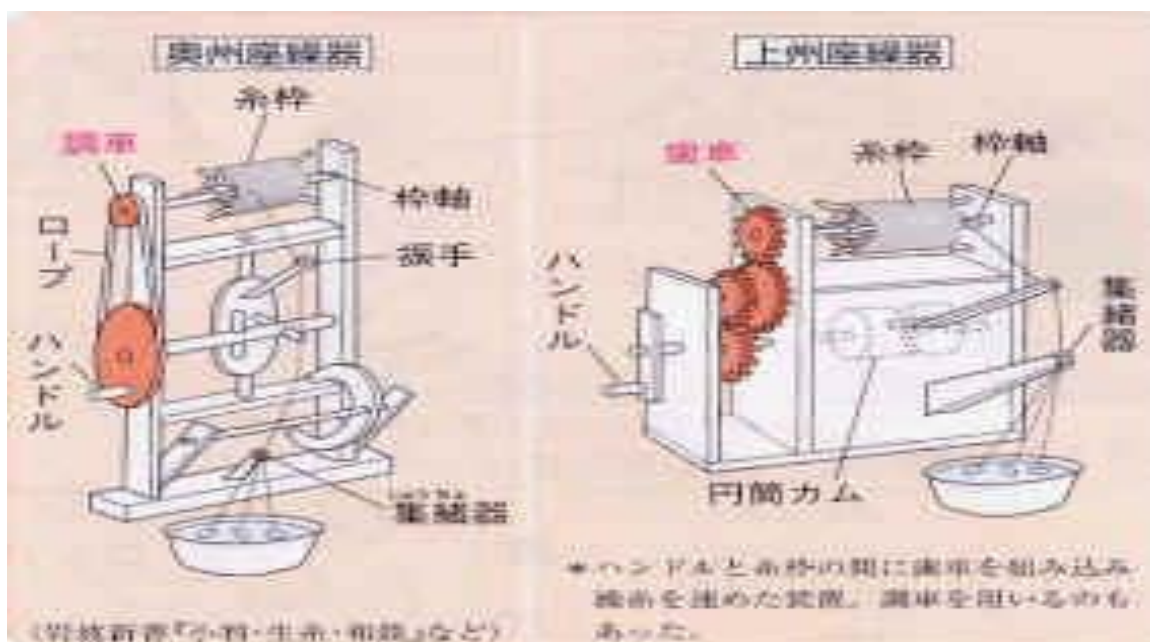


Figure 1: Wooden tools for manual silk spinning (zakuri) were used from the late Edo period until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>23</sup> Excerpts from the lectures of “Meiji: major industries: silk, cotton and machinery.”  
[https://www.grips.ac.jp/teacher/ono/hp/lecture\\_J/lec05.htm](https://www.grips.ac.jp/teacher/ono/hp/lecture_J/lec05.htm)



*Figure 2: Machine spinning of silk at Okaya Spinning Factory, Suwa. Nagano Prefecture became the center of the silk industry.*

## 5.2. China

It is plausible to define the Chinese industrialization through its twentieth-century campaigns. China has a deep history that contextualizes its proto-industrial efforts and explains the reasons for the delay of industrial growth and development in comparison to Western nations, as well as Japan. In 1952, for instance, 83 percent of the Chinese workforce was employed in the agricultural sector.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, it is not challenging to outlay the fact that in the course of the late nineteenth century, China remained an agricultural society where industrialization made less than 10 percent of the total workforce.

As mentioned above (see page 8), “the political and financial weakness of the Qing state made matters worse.”<sup>25</sup> The political turmoil that the Qing Dynasty undergo are as follows

“Internal rebellions and the repeated onslaught of foreign imperialism diminished the power of the imperial court in Beijing and forced provincial officials to choose how best to allocate limited tax revenues. Heavy military spending left relatively little money to deal with major ecological crises. In 1855, the Yellow River overflowed its banks in Henan and switched

<sup>24</sup> Cheremukhin, et al. 2015, “The Economy of People’s Republic of China from 1953”, 2015: p. 12

<sup>25</sup> Peter Lavelle, “The historical roots of China’s industrial revolution,” 2017.

course, causing devastating flooding. From 1876 to 1879, drought in northern China led to a famine that killed millions.”<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, it is not plausible to talk about industrialized China during the late nineteenth century. Furthermore, the gap in the level of industrialization between the two countries also increased dramatically, for Japan opened up to the Western world and became acquainted with Western technology and know-how, whereas China was too busy trying to fix its domestic conflicts. Topped with natural disasters and catastrophes, China, contrary to Japan, remained a highly agricultural society, with the silk industry only industry in which it could excel back in the late nineteenth century.

## **6. Women’s Working Conditions**

### **6.1. Japan’s Industrialization: A New Epoch for Japanese Women**

The Meiji Restoration was a stage for a shift in the history of both Japan’s and Japanese women. Throughout the Meiji Era, the life of women evolved in diverse aspects. The Empire of Japan, for instance, employed a vast quantity of female workers from small villages or various suburban districts to decrease the gap in the Japanese industrial workforce. During the initial steps of Japanese industrialization, accordingly, Japanese women worked in factories, facilities, and industrialized localities under poor conditions. The bottom line here is, however, is that the factory managers—or employers in a more general term—continually exploited women employees and disregarded any freedom of theirs. During the industrialization of Japan, women made up 80 percent of the workforce in the booming textile industry.<sup>27</sup> The standards of the factories these women worked in were low. Women employees were overworked, over crowded, and underpaid. Due to poor treatment and unhygienic work conditions, workers would

<sup>26</sup> Peter Lavelle, “The historical roots of China’s industrial revolution,” 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Janet Hunter, “Japanese Women at Work, 1880-1920”, 1993: p. 1.



often get sick, making them take time off and causing them to lose pay. To make things worse, some employers would trap the women inside and forbid them to leave to make more money.

### **6.1.1. Testimony from Women Workers and Government Inspectors**

Janet Hunter, in her thorough article, consults micro studies as to women's working conditions and discusses first-hand evidence reported by either the factory workers or the government inspectors. Before delving into such testimony, she lays the framework as to Japanese women's working conditions and how factory managers did not take even the fundamental safety measures until 1914

The conditions were extremely unhealthy. The air was permeated with dust and fumes and the atmosphere was intensely humid. In the silk reeling mills, reelers' hands were constantly exposed to the boiling water in which the cocoons were placed to soften them. Safety conditions were minimal at least until around 1914, and toilets and other hygiene facilities totally inadequate. Workers were frequently penalised for not paying sufficient attention to their work, for taking time off to go to the toilets or for talking to other workers. In the early days many workers were not permitted meal breaks, having to eat their meals next to their machines, often keeping them running.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, Hunter, then, concludes by stating the statements reported by government inspectors also show parallelism to those of women workers in Meiji Japan. One aspect to focus on is the emphasis on the fact that Japanese factory managers—or employers in a more general term—did not take even the basic sanitation, safety, or privacy measures until the government inspectors' thorough visits that took place in the course of 1903. In this view, it is evident that Japanese women suffered extensively in many spheres of their lives throughout the early Meiji years. Hunter commences by stating, “Many of the dormitories in which workers lived were equally grim. In the following sentences, furthermore, she describes the statements by the women worker as follows

The dormitories for women workers can be described in a single word - pigsty. With the progress of the times and the growth of the [cotton] industry dormitories do appear outwardly to have undergone a complete change. The external appearance of the dormitories and company housing of companies such as *Toyobo* and *Kanebo* [two of the largest spinning companies] suggest that inside as well they

<sup>28</sup> Janet Hunter, “Japanese Women at Work, 1880-1920”, 1993: p. 3.

must be superior to a middle-class residence. However, this is like saying that someone is a gentleman or lady just because they are wearing beautiful clothes.

Many workers slept together in one room, often sharing bedding. One mill reported a single room for over 700 girls as late as 1926. Light and ventilation were usually inadequate, and residents suffered from extremes of hot and cold in summer and winter. The nutritional standard of the food provided was invariably very low.

Employers, particularly in times of expansion like the late 1890s, sought to restrict worker mobility by confining workers to the factory compound and retaining part of their wages.

The statement that goes as “Employers, particularly in times of expansion like the late 1890s, sought to restrict worker mobility by confining workers to the factory compound and retaining part of their wages,” by the woman worker reported her statements to reveal to what extent the situation for women workers in the late nineteenth century was. In the following paragraph, Hunter moves on to the accounts by the government inspectors of the Empire of Japan in 1903, which draws a similar line with the woman worker’s statement. Hunter elucidates

Government inspectors in 1903 reported that in the silk areas:

Girls are not at all free to go out of the mill. In the Suwa region, for example, they are normally banned from doing so. If permission is granted because of some mishap, the worker is supervised by an official who accompanies her. When a mill does have fixed times when workers can go out, it is usually for only one hour after the evening meal, with no more than five girls allowed out on anyone evening. In mills lacking a bath girls are sometimes allowed out together at a specified time to go to the bath house, but in all cases exit permits usually have to be handed over.

Depicting women’s working conditions thoroughly and describing the situations under which women workers had to live during the late nineteenth century, Hunter bases her evidence on first-hand testimony, reports, and statements by woman worker/women workers. Moreover, consulting the regulatory inspection in 1903, Hunter raises her reasoning to another level and exposes how adverse, inhumane, and unsettled the conditions of women workers in Meiji Japan used to be. Therefore, embarking on the discussion “Did fleeing to urbanized cities mean liberalization for the Japanese women during the late nineteenth century,” Hunter’s argument acknowledges that the answer is a “no.”

### 6.1.2. *Jokō Aishi* and *Victimization* of the Japanese Women Workers

It is plausible to commence by stating that scholars have studied these factory women as a group, calling them “textile *kojo/joko*—meaning textile factory women/factory girls. Discussing the analysis of other scholars, E. Patricia Tsurumi, in her article “Yet to Be Heard: The Voices of Meiji Factory Women,” poses various questions discussing “whether women workers of the Meiji Japan saw 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, and 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.’”<sup>29</sup> Tsurumi also emphasizes the fact that such questions remind the readers that there is still a long way to go to learn textile women’s history. While some scholars—like Hunter—emphasize the unfavorable working conditions of the women workers in Meiji Japan during the late nineteenth century, there also exist contesting and opposing views as to whether Japan’s rapid industrial growth created despair or opportunity for Japanese women. For the present research, the following section will include the critical discussion of the sources that put women workers’ positions from different perspectives. The sources, furthermore, will examine some anecdotes from Japanese women of the late nineteenth century to reveal whether they perceived industrialization as an opportunity or a further burden left on their shoulders.

<sup>29</sup> E. Patricia Tsurumi, “Yet to be heard: The voices of Meiji factory women”, 1994: p. 18.



Figure 3: A painting depicting Meiji era women at work. (Source: © OldPhotosJapan.com).

As mentioned, there are diverging views as to the lifestyles and working conditions of Japanese factory workers during the late nineteenth century. For instance, Tsurumi discusses the victimization of Meiji factory workers. Individually dealing with the women factory workers in the textile industry, Tsurumi focuses on the lyrics of the songs sung by the factory workers as the primary source. Before delving into the analyses of the songs, she describes the working conditions and the atmosphere of the Japanese factories and emphasizes the adverse living conditions under which the Japanese women had to survive as follows

The *victimization* [emphasis added] is familiar enough to students of Japanese labor history: the monotonous, strenuous labor, 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.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, Tsumuri also discusses Wakizō Hosoi's 1925 book titled *Jokō Aishi*.<sup>31</sup> “*Joko Aishi* by Wakizō Hosoi, himself a textile worker for fifteen years, was published in 1925. This book was significant in exposing to the general public the squalid conditions in the factories and dormitories, the cruel treatment suffered by factory girls, and the high rate of

<sup>30</sup> E. Patricia Tsurumi, “Yet to be heard: The voices of Meiji factory women”, 1994: p. 20.

<sup>31</sup> In English: *The Pathetic History of Female Factory Workers*.

disease and suicide”<sup>32</sup> among women workers. Another scholar David John Lu, following Tsumuri, also gives place to Wakizō Hosoi’s book in his pivotal work *Japan: A Documentary History (Volume II)*. A product of rapid Japanese industrialization, Lu compares the labor conditions of Japanese women to the protagonists of a Charles Dickens novel—emphasizing despair and suffering that Japanese women had to undergo

Organizers of the *Yuaikai* and subsequent unions were the elite among workers, coming as they did from the ranks of skilled workers. Below them there was a distinct underclass of less skilled workers who manned textile and other industries. They were forced to work in factories whose squalid working conditions could almost have come from the pages of Charles Dickens. Women workers suffered most, as they were forced to complete their three-year terms of service like indentured servants, with severe restrictions placed on their personal freedom. Hosoi Wakizo (1897-1925), a textile worker, wrote a book entitled *Joko Aishi* (Lamentations of Female Factory Workers). It was based on his personal observations as well as those of his wife, who was a textile worker.<sup>33</sup>

“The Document 8” of *Japan: A Documentary History (Volume II)* also contains excerpts from *Jokō Aishi*. The book manifests it was against the wretched conditions of the Japanese women workers in detail. Therefore, it is plausible to consider it as a first-hand source in terms of witnessing under what conditions Meiji women worked—and accommodated

Now a few words about facilities and working conditions.... Exits and other emergency evacuation facilities are extremely inadequate. There may be only two or three fire escapes in a factory with five to six hundred workers. And these exits are not only bolted but also padlocked.

Adding moisture to cotton fiber adds strength to it. It makes work on the fiber easier and contributes to the efficiency of the work process. So, it is normal for a cotton spinning mill to maintain a high degree of moisture without considering the health of its workers. This practice is even worse in a textile mill where one’s vision is hindered by the mist created because of moisture. A sprayer is installed at ten feet above the floor for each thirty-two square yards of floor space. From its nozzle, called the ball duct, water comes through opening, which are either one thirty-second or one-sixteenth inch, at the high-water pressure of one hundred pounds. The water is sprayed constantly and becomes like mist saturating the air. It creates an insufferable condition for workers.

Female workers in textile-weaving divisions whose workstations are placed under a sprayer get the worst from the excessive moisture. If the machine is operating constantly, the situation can be tolerable. But if it stops even for an hour, it begins to rust. Their hair and clothing are constantly wet as rusty water drips on them.

Female workers have a saying: “Winter is heaven and summer is hell.” This exaggerates the warmth of winter months in their factory just a bit. Whichever factory one visits, one will find an average winter temperature of over sixty-five degrees, and even on the coldest day, the temperature seldom

<sup>32</sup> Joy Paulson and Elizabeth Powers, *Women In Changing Japan*, 1977: 112.

<sup>33</sup> David John Lu, *Japan: A Documentary History (Volume II)*, 1997, 389.

goes under fifty degrees. When one works hard it is still easy to sweat. So, a single layer of work clothing will suffice. Of course, when one steps outside, the cold is difficult to bear.

They can work during the winter months without experiencing cold thanks to the heat maintained. But in the summer months, temperatures rise to an extreme level. There is body heat from the people who are working in close quarters. There is heat from the machines, to which heat from the sun is added. It is literally hell with heat. Cotton fibers like goose feathers fly around and stick to workers' faces. It is terribly uncomfortable. At starch stations steam heat is applied, and at gas drying stations, open flame gas is used. There is no word adequate enough to describe the suffering of these workers. At the starch stations, temperatures rise above one hundred and ten degrees. It is so hot [and dehydrating] that hardly anyone has to use the bathroom...<sup>34</sup>



Figure 4: Japanese women at work feeding silkworms in a factory, circa 1904. (Source: © OldPhotosJapan.com)

<sup>34</sup> David John Lu, *Japan: A Documentary History (Volume II)*, 1997, 394.

Hosoi's descriptions exhibit the adverse, and inhumane *physical* conditions of women workers in Meiji Japan. Going back to Tsumuri's article, she also draws parallelism with what Hosoi elucidates. Furthermore, as mentioned, Tsumuri also brings up the notion of *victimization* as a consequence of women's living standards during the late nineteenth century

Hosoi's book title *Joko Aishi* has entered the Japanese language as a now familiar phrase that can be translated as "a working hell for females." Looking back from our time at these Meiji textile workers, 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.<sup>35</sup>

### 6.1.3. A Voice to be Heard or a Gate to New Experiences?

As investigated in the preceding section, it is undeniable that the Japanese women in the late nineteenth century had a chance to escape from Confucian-based teachings, which dictated their obedience to (1) father, (2) husband, and (3) son(s). The industrial developments taking place in Meiji Japan disseminated news all around the country, and women and girls raised in low-income families perceived it as an *opportunity* to establish a more *independent* experience for themselves—detaching themselves from Confucian-based, family-related subservience. They wanted to become more visible, invincible, and self-sufficient. However, the working conditions of the newly industrialized factories of the late nineteenth century Japan brought about new obedience and subservience for the Japanese women. They had to obey their employers, abide by the harsh rules of the management officers, and their employers even confiscated their money at times. Therefore, to what extent working as factory workers meant liberty for the Japanese women is still a malleable and contested argument, for the evidence (*vide supra*) reveals that the working conditions of the Japanese women in the late nineteenth century were not complimentary at all. Therefore, the dichotomy as to the Japanese women's experiences prevail. As a scholar mentioned above (see pages 4 and 7), Koyama draws criticism by comparing the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth century Japan. He states, "Women of the

<sup>35</sup> E. Patricia Tsurumi, "Yet to Be Heard: The Voices of Meiji Factory Women", 1994: p. 20.

younger generation, in particular, are no longer satisfied with the self-sacrifice of their mothers and grandmothers.”<sup>36</sup> However, while he mentions the mid-twentieth century in his statement, Koyama also advocates such a shift did not exist back in the late nineteenth century Japan when women still felt inferior and subservient to men in all spheres of life. Therefore, it is plausible to see that such a perception of the Japanese women culminated in the later years of the Meiji Period. Previously, however, it is not possible to discuss *liberty* or *enlightenment* that the Meiji women experienced due to the already existing norms and customs—which manifested themselves in the working lives of the Japanese women as well

The village in the Edo era was an almost completely closed community—legally, economically and spiritually. In this circumscribed area, however, women had various opportunities to participate in social activities through their work for the community. In running errands for the village, giving assistance in treading out barley plants, helping in thatching, participating in the celebration of mourning and in annual festivals, and holding intimate intercourse with members of *k6*, or a subgroup of *buraku*, as a neighbourhood association, women were always in close contact with other villagers and unconsciously tried to be good villagers. Since their lives were circumscribed by *iye* or *buraku*, they had no relations with and no knowledge of society outside the village. But within the village they were fully acquainted with all the family and social relations of other villagers.

In the present century, some women have had greater opportunities for coming into contact with other cultures through the development of the textile and associated industries. But most women who were engaged in agriculture were still confined within the village community. Today, however, even if they stay in the home, they can always maintain at least an indirect contact with outer society owing to the development of mass communication media, such as newspapers, magazines, radio and television. Nevertheless, the criticism is still heard that rural women today are apt to confine themselves within the small area of the village, being occupied with farm work and with the household, and that, therefore, their vision of society at large is still limited.<sup>37</sup>

The shift—mentioned as awakening in Koyama’s explanation—did not exist in the early periods of Meiji Japan, which is the late nineteenth century. As is evident in his words, what he means by awakening is a transformation in the lifestyles and perception of women thanks to the introduction of mass media, cultural reforms, and other associated constructions of the Meiji Restoration. However, before such a revolution took place, Koyama mentions how the concepts of *iye* and *buraku* confined women in their lifetimes.

<sup>36</sup> Takashi Koyama, “The Changing Social Position of Women in Japan”, 1961: p. 95.

<sup>37</sup> Takashi Koyama, “The Changing Social Position of Women in Japan”, 1961: pp. 96-97.





Figure 5: Japanese women at work in a bamboo basket factory, circa 1904. (Source: © OldPhotosJapan.com)

Taking into account the working conditions of the industrializing factories of Meiji Japan, the restricted lifestyles, and the lack of freedom of the Japanese women during the late nineteenth century, one may assume that becoming a factory worker may function as a gateway for Japanese women. However, based on the first-hand testimony extracted from Hosoi's publication titled *Jokō Aishi*—which depicts the Japanese factories as “working hells”—the summing-up strengthens the conclusion that no matter how fleeing to urbanized cities meant a unique opportunity for the Japanese women, it, nevertheless, did not imply a genuine *liberalization*. On the contrary, the traditional norms justified by the Confucian teachings found its replacement in the industrial captivity. In such a captivity, unfortunately, no concept

subsisted to champion women's inferiority and inequality before men workers—except for women's being and acting, secondary, and subservient to men throughout the ages. Consequently, the industrialization brought about more extended confinement for Japanese women under the pretext of granting them a distinct consciousness than that of what they had experienced throughout their history. However, as the evidence reveals, no such circumstance transpired for the women workers of Meiji Japan.

## 6.2. Chinese Women Workers: Rural or Urbanized?

To analyze Chinese women's working conditions, one should commence to what extent China transformed into an industrialized nation during the late nineteenth century. As a response to this question, the silk industry as the dominant industry of China during the late nineteenth century gives us a clue as to how much industrialization took place in China throughout the late nineteenth century. While it is indisputable that China was not as immensely industrialized as Japan during Japan's Meiji years, the most prominent developments in China were in the textile, or more specifically in the silk industry. The following remarks reveal the situation of the silk industry in the late nineteenth century. Towards the end, it is inferable that silk factories employed women, as well as men, to benefit from their workforce. Therefore, women working in silk factories are subjects of the discussion for this research

Cheap machine-spun cotton yarns from Britain and India in the nineteenth century totally undercut commercial hand-spinning in China. In silk production, however, Chinese investors operated mechanized silk spinning mills or filatures for export in the late nineteenth century, employing rural Chinese women and replacing traditional hand-reeled silk. Local rural elites legitimized the shift in women's traditional work by recruiting the help of lineage organizations along male bloodlines. Silk spinners centred in Shanghai also laboured in farming areas, where these women were the first to work on textiles outside the Chinese household. By the mid-twentieth century, the workforce in cotton and silk textiles, even in the male bastion of skilled silk weaving, was overwhelmingly feminized.” As in Lancashire, when men and women weavers shared factory work, joint labour activity followed.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, Els Hiemstra-Kuperus, Lex Heerma van Voss, *The Ashgate Companion to the History of Textile Workers, 1650–2000*, 2013.

The remarks (*vide supra*) reveal that women took place mainly in the textile industry, and it is plausible to conclude that the textile industry was the principal hub for Chinese industrialization throughout the late nineteenth century—which stems from China’s resistance against Western influence and introduction of Western technology and know-how as mentioned in the previous section on China (see page 9).

### **6.2.1. Chinese Women’s Working Conditions: An Industrialized China?**

Before embarking on analyzing the working conditions of the Chinese women in the late nineteenth century, a significant point to note emerges. An American historian of Modern China who holds the Distinguished Professor of History Chair at the University of California, Gail Hershatter emphasizes the importance of the sources written in English throughout the nineteenth century. Hershatter reveals that Christian missionaries wrote most of the works written throughout this period, and they handled the Chinese women in a work-oriented way—which gives a hint as to the sources on the Chinese women of the late nineteenth century

Many of the English-language books about nineteenth-century China were written by missionaries.” The texts they produced for their home audiences—aimed in part at garnering financial support for their work—emphasized the benighted condition of Chinese girls and women. They described and denounced infanticide (as discussed earlier in this chapter), footbinding, concubinage, and arranged marriage. Their writings profoundly shaped worldwide perceptions of the status of Chinese women.<sup>39</sup>

Discovering Chinese women’s working conditions throughout this period, as stated before, it is evident that the most remarkable developments took place in the silk, cotton, and garment industries in China. In the late nineteenth century China, concerning the garment industry, for instance, manufacturers provided contractors with bundles of cut cloth and paid them to assemble the pieces into clothing. From the 1890s to the late 1930s, contractors’ stores and home workers produced approximately half of all manufactured clothing. Contracting gave textile companies tremendous flexibility to expeditiously increase or reduce their production as

<sup>39</sup> Gail Hershatter, *Women and China’s Revolutions*, 2018, 43-44.

the market demanded. Moreover, it let them undeviatingly examine the most economical means of production. With manufacturers and contractors all competing against their counterparts, wages sojourned depressed, and working contingencies remained poor.

Women factory workers are known as “*dagongmei*” (working girls).<sup>40</sup> They are traditionally young women migrants who experience a segmented labor market in informal and low-wage employment sectors.<sup>41</sup> Workers in export-oriented factories receive minimum wage and minimum overtime pay, they pay for meals and lodging at the factory, and they pay fines for breaking factory rules. However, it is evident that as the industrialization gained more momentum only after the beginnings of twentieth century, there is not as much data as there is for the Japanese women workers during the late nineteenth century. Therefore, drawing a timeline for both countries, it is plausible to conclude that Chinese women workers’ working conditions—focusing precisely on the late nineteenth century—can be analyzed by investigating cotton mills, textile and silk factories, and rice paddies of rural families. The reason for this is that China persevered its agrarian culture even after its commencement of industrialization. For the present study, however, the review will not include women working in the agrarian sector, given that it would divert the scope of analysis and alter the focus of research. Consequently, as far as Chinese industries of the late nineteenth century are concerned, women’s working conditions are adverse, as is the case in Meiji Japan throughout the late nineteenth century. What is striking, however, is that there is plenty of essays, articles, and books published in terms of Japanese women’s working circumstances, whereas there is not sufficient data as to China. Moreover, there is a higher number of works in the literature examining the working conditions and lifestyles of the Chinese women migrating to different countries—chiefly the United States, as the 1800s and 1900s were the centuries when a vast

<sup>40</sup> Ngai Pun, *Made In China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace*, 2005.

<sup>41</sup> Arianna M. Gaetano, *Out To Work*, 2015, 60.

number of Chinese women migrated to other countries to work in several industries and flee poverty which was widespread in pre-modern China.

### **6.2.2. Women's Working Conditions: Hershatter's Elaboration**

Mentioned above (see page 22), Hershatter reveals the situation of Chinese women by stating, "Most girls and women were rural, poor, and vulnerable in particularly gendered ways to catastrophe."<sup>42</sup> However, different than the other works mentioned in this article, what Hershatter emphasizes as to the Chinese women of the late nineteenth century are not Confucian values. But preferably, she underlines the rebellions that took place in the Chinese records, brings up the famine that emerged due to the very scarce rainfall in the North China provinces of Shanxi, Shaanxi, Zhili, Henan, and Shandong. She calls this famine as "the most calamitous famine in Chinese history, which lasted until 1879. What is striking and remarkable as to Hershatter's book is that it approaches women's working conditions from an immensely different perspective. Hershatter handles the Chinese perception of their women as evolving in a negative direction, for the Chinese blamed their women for the famine. Incited first by a scarcity of food and then by draught, the Chinese grew undeviatingly repugnant towards their women, and regarded them as the underlying reason for such a disaster, Hershatter unveils that

Observers assigned different meanings to these reports. Conservative moralists argued that a decline in filial piety and a rise in women's extravagant consumption and unchaste actions had offended Heaven and caused the famine. Opinion in the Qing court was divided between officials who saw famine relief as a primary imperial responsibility and members of the Self-Strengthening Movement who believed that meeting the foreign threat with military and economic projects had to be the top priority. To missionaries, the reports proved that women would never see an improvement in their status, and would always be vulnerable to being sold, unless China was Christianized.<sup>43</sup>

Putting the Christianity argument aside, it is plausible to lay the ground for the mistreatment of Chinese women during the late nineteenth century. Explaining the causal

<sup>42</sup> Gail Hershatter, *Women and China's Revolutions*, 2018, 50.

<sup>43</sup> Gail Hershatter, *Women and China's Revolutions*, 2018, 50.

relations of famine and drought, the Chinese perceived women as “greedy beings.” When Chinese women diverged from *filial piety*, nature would experience catastrophe. Delving more into their working conditions, Hershatter emphasizes to the discrimination as to Chinese women as follows

Not all women in the sex trades were courtesans. Lower-class prostitutes, many of them rural migrants who sold sex to the Chinese transport workers, craftsmen, and dock workers of Shanghai, were known colloquially as “pheasants.” They were portrayed as voracious monsters or as pitiful victims of trafficking and abuse. Warning that men could easily be assaulted or victimized by such women, illustrators and writers also conveyed their concern that respectable women, such as women workers in a silk filature, might be harassed on the streets by men who mistook them for prostitutes.<sup>44</sup>

Hershatter also elaborates on the duties expected from Chinese women and distinguishes the Chinese “boys” and “girls” as to which sectors they can work in

In Tianjin, merchants originally from Jiangnan worked with government authorities to establish the Hall for Spreading Benevolence (*Guangren tang*) (see box 2.3). At the Hall several hundred widows, trafficked girls, adolescent women, and some boys (mainly orphans and sons of widows) could find simple lodging, basic clothing, and food. Boys were given vocational training, and girls and women were expected to work making towels, textiles, and embroidery. Strict limitations on their mobility aimed at ensuring that they would remain virtuous. Men unable to afford a bride could petition for a wife from among the orphan girls and daughters of widows, if they provided a guarantor and had the means to support a marriage. To a growing community of Chinese reformers, the trafficked women moving south were embodiments of China’s weakness and the Qing dynasty’s inability to protect and provide for its population. Up to this point, the sale of a woman by her family or traffickers had not generally been regarded as a problem, unless one party was misrepresented or deceived, or a woman was kidnapped or severely abused.<sup>45</sup>

While it is possible to draw an outlook of the Chinese women’s working conditions analyzing various factors such as famine and drought, how the Chinese mindset associated it with their women, and how such an association impacted Chinese women’s working conditions, the verdict remains the same. It is incontrovertible that Chinese women suffered similar, yet different, hardships than those of Japanese women during the late nineteenth century.

While it is rare to observe linear and gradual industrialization in China, it is still undeniable that Chinese women had their challenges stemming from China’s state and

<sup>44</sup> Gail Hershatter, *Women and China’s Revolutions*, 2018, 50.

<sup>45</sup> Gail Hershatter, *Women and China’s Revolutions*, 2018, 51-52.

economic structure during that period. Moreover, it is not plausible to draw an exact conclusion of the working conditions of the Chinese women within, for instance, a factory, industrial site, or an urbanized city, since the country remained agrarian while Japan rapidly industrialized. However, Chinese women had their unique challenges, among which the discrimination of the workforce existed. In other words, as is evident in Hershatter's remarks, Chinese women had to work as sex workers, or they could only work in the silk or cotton industries while men workers could find a suitable spot for their employment with a more diverse option of sectors. Apart from such issues, women trafficking and marriage constraints existed—captivating Chinese women within their family life and obedience. Such challenges were yet to overcome both for rural and urban Chinese women, before embarking on a new journey in, for instance, an urbanized setting where they could have more freedom and liberty, as could have been the case for Japanese women had their working conditions been better throughout the late nineteenth century.

As a final remark, it is author's opinion that the reason why there does not exist much—or even enough—work in the literature as to *physical* working conditions of Chinese women in the late nineteenth century is because China was not as industrialized as Japan, which makes the starting point of the comparison between two countries during the same period. In other words, Japanese women's primary struggle was their severe, adverse and even inhumane working conditions in their everyday experiences, whereas, for the Chinese (women), the real challenge lied behind famine(s), drought(s), women trafficking, obligatory prostitution, and tremendous discrimination in work, as well as in payment. In conclusion, Japanese women had much more liberty than Chinese women in the late nineteenth century, for they had a far vaster number of chances to shape their journey.

## 7. Conclusion

When comparing the working conditions of both Japanese and Chinese women in the late nineteenth century, a clear image appears as to how the Japanese perceived their women throughout this period. In case they wanted to escape their obedience and family-related, patriarchy-based duties, the Japanese women would face new challenges, hardships, and problems to overcome during their lives while working as factory workers in more urbanized cities. However, the dichotomy remains: Does it still mean a right of choice for the women in Meiji Japan over their lives? The response to such a question, for the present research paper, is affirmative. Notwithstanding their truly adverse working environment, Japanese women still had higher chances of altering the currents of their lives than those of Chinese women during the late nineteenth century. The present research does not present a thorough comparison of the *physical* accommodation, sanitation, and working conditions of factories both in the Empire of Japan and China due to the lack of sources as to China in the late nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the verdict suggests that Chinese women had other dynamics they were experiences in that period due to the conflicts and natural catastrophes taking place in China. Contrary to Japanese women, the Chinese (women) had to work as sex workers, were under the threat of human trafficking, faced customs signifying their inferiority such as *footbinding*, and did not have any other opportunity to work in industries other than cotton and silk. Therefore, comparing the dynamics of the two women's working conditions, women workers in Meiji Japan had more elevated flexibility and a more enhanced voice over their destiny. It is also possible to conclude they had more modern problems, such as the working conditions of the facilities. For the Chinese, however, it is clear that they had to overcome more traditional challenges, let aside making decisions as to their lives. While it is undeniable that both women suffered immensely, Japanese women's suffering resulted from industrialization, whereas the



Chinese women paid the price of natural disasters and historical and economic conflicts taking place in China throughout the late nineteenth century.

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