

## Taking Advantage of Innocent Girls

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Japan rose to the status of an industrialized nation late in the 1800s through its international textile market. The manufacture and sale of high quality products needed in every day life, such as cotton, produced a great deal of revenue, and silk, a luxurious commodity, earned even higher profits. "When the Meiji government launched its program to 'increase the wealth of the nation' (*fukoku*), first among the industries that it sought to foster and build was the silk industry."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Japanese industries offered low prices to undercut competition in dominating nations like the United States and Great Britain. This tactic was lucrative; "by 1914 Japan was dominating world cotton manufacturing,"<sup>2</sup> and "by 1912, the last year of Meiji, Japan led the world in the export of silk."<sup>3</sup> The incoming funds were directed towards building "both heavy industry and military strength without extensive borrowing."<sup>4</sup> These improvements were crucial to unleashing Japan from the dated depths of the Tokugawa era and laying the foundations for a modern state.

To build this thriving enterprise, Japanese industries resorted to a cheap labor force to sustain low costs without degrading the actual product. Such means were attainable by the recruitment of women. The Confucian philosophy that "respected the male, despised the female" (*danson joki*)<sup>5</sup> created an environment in Meiji that was "heavily male oriented."<sup>6</sup> Even hard-working, "women's work"-associated with housekeeping and handicrafts-was valued less than was work done by men.<sup>7</sup> Factory owners used such perceived inferiority to their advantage when they were seeking out predominantly female members of families to be their employees.

The initial factories in Meiji Japan were established by the new government after 1868 with employment mainly fulfilled by the daughters of the dissolved samurai class. Yet, as the earning potential of the textile industry was realized, a profit-oriented mindset replaced the

charitable effort to lift the financial burdens of the displaced samurai. Simultaneously, a shift from publicly owned factories to private ownership occurred during the 1880s with companies "adapting expensive, large-scale operations to a smaller, less costly enterprise."<sup>8</sup> To further reduce wages, factory owners preyed upon the financially unstable agricultural areas to fill their ranks at low wages and in subhuman conditions. This paper will prove that filiality and rural conditions made the Japanese daughters vulnerable to manipulation by this rising textile industry.

Agricultural areas provided an abundant resource of young women, and the widespread poverty of farm families created an even more advantageous situation for factory owners. Evidence that agriculture workers were utilized in textile mills is demonstrated in historian Yukihiro Kiyokawa's claim that "80 percent of the cases, the occupation of the female workers' parents was agriculture or a related job."<sup>9</sup> One reason for this lay in the training girls received at home. Typically, the daughter was responsible for both work around the house and cultivating the crops. "Farm girls and those of poor families were often believed to be needed more in the home and fields"<sup>10</sup> than in attendance at school to earn an education. The lack of emphasis on schooling indicates that their primary roles were execution of manual chores that required minimal skill. Priority was placed on the success of the family unit as opposed to the individual girl. The Japanese custom of filial piety instilled obedience in daughters, emphasizing a passive attitude towards parental authority.<sup>11</sup> Servitude to the maintenance of the family household made the farm girl accustomed to constant and heavy labor, and thus a candidate for large-scale manufacturing.

Additionally, "during the 1890s the famous deflationary policies of Finance Minister Matsukata Masayoshi drove large numbers of

independent and tenant cultivators into extreme destitution<sup>12</sup> and thus vulnerable to promises of income for their daughters' work outside the home. The obligation of tenant farmers to "pay the exorbitant, oppressive tenant fees, which could amount to 50 or 60 per cent of the yearly crop"<sup>13</sup> left minimal earnings to support a household of several family members on top of maintaining the land. Since the daughter was the functional unit of the household, her commitment to assisting her family in this dire situation involved earning an income from an outside source. "Farmers of Japan around the end of the nineteenth century were so poor that they had to decrease the number of their dependents, so they wanted their daughters to earn any amount of money in just about any walk of life."<sup>14</sup> The arrival of factory recruiters to this desperate scene often was at a most convenient time. Under the contract system, "companies hired labor recruiters, who went through the countryside encouraging parents to sign their daughters to a one- to five-year contract with a distant mill."<sup>15</sup> In drumming up recruitment of young girls, recruiters cunningly exaggerated their concern to provide monetary aid to the family. Farm owners could simply not resist the immediate possession of money from the factory. With little hesitation to consider the welfare of their daughter, possibly due to their illiteracy and inability to comprehend the crafted contract, farm families viewed such a proposition as a blessing. "The advance payment they received to send their daughters out to work as virtual indentured servants enabled them to pay their rent and defray their daily living expenses."<sup>16</sup> To further assist the family, wages earned by the daughter while at the factory were sent home. The loyalty of girls to the domestic sphere made them readily available to textile mills once their contributions were no longer beneficial at home.

The dedication of females to their families was exhibited even in the midst of exploitation by the factories. "The fact that they were working for the good of the household made their sacrifices worthwhile."<sup>17</sup> Far away from home, the filial relationship remained strong and a majority of girls were intent on executing their responsibilities regardless of hardships. One worker's

recollection captures her dual emotions, with her devotion to her family persevering above all else:

I don't know how many times I thought I would rather jump into Lake Suwa and drown. Even so, when I went home with a year's earnings and handed the money to my mother, she clasped it in her hands and said, 'With this, we can manage through the end of the year'...Whenever I thought of my mother's face then, I could endure any hardship.<sup>18</sup>

The immense feeling of pride gained by preventing the collapse of a household was enough to keep workers progressing through the daily toil and inhumane conditions. Furthermore, strict financial retributions placed on the family for unwarranted absences of the worker discouraged thoughts of running away or suicide. The employment of girls deeply entrenched in family ties accomplished the labor commitment desired by the textile industries.

Factory owners used filial piety to appease any anxieties parents may have had about sending their daughters to the factory mills. The contract system not only stipulated monetary benefits resulting from the young women's toil to fulfill filial piety, but also promised a substitute figure to insure the "young girls' moral virtue."<sup>19</sup>

The contract system...could not have worked without the accompanying facade of traditional paternalism erected by the mill owners and their recruiters. The illusory relationship created between daughters, parents, and factory management was based almost exclusively on the verbal promises of recruiters and the willingness of mill owners to loan badly needed cash to the families that signed the contracts on their daughters' behalf.<sup>20</sup>

This fabricated guardian provided comfort in the minds of parents that the company would act in the best interests of their daughters. To easily fool poorly educated farmers, one contract even blatantly referred to the factory grounds as a "house."<sup>21</sup> A home-like environment at the factories was contrived so that parents would assume the continuance of a nurturing atmosphere that would encourage their

daughters' maturation into respectful and hard-working individuals.

Parents were also deceived into thinking that their daughters would receive an invaluable education beyond the resources available at home. The distant location of factories was justified as a mean for providing girls with a taste of culture from another area of the country. "They [were] told of the beautiful sights to be seen, theaters to be visited, the regular Sunday rest, and even of the splendid care and education they [would] receive from the factory."<sup>22</sup> Poor and uneducated farm families deemed the factory life suitable preparation for girls into womanhood. A civilized individual would result from the knowledge acquired from skilled labor in the textile industry coupled with night classes on etiquette and the proper manners of a lady. Ideally, their daughters would be groomed into quality marriage material and efficient house wives.

Some filatures opened the night classes for general ducation, and others provided optional lessons in needlework, calligraphy, or flower-arrangement. It is broadly accepted that the management side also obtained the benefit from providing such off-duty classes in the better work discipline and the fostering of identity as a member of 'factory family.'<sup>23</sup>

Yet, the reality was quite different for most girls. In truth, the residence of the girls at far-away factories served as a method to regulate their work schedule and ensure regular attendance on the production line. Most workers did not have access to the classes, as they were commonly limited to girls from ex-samurai or comparable backgrounds. Moreover, the fatigue resulting from a grueling workday of twelve hours inhibited their ability to properly absorb information from night classes. It is quite possible that girls simply sacrificed learning an additional craft in order to sleep. Furthermore, the main purpose of the courses was not necessarily for the benefit of the workers. Instead, they were a method of improving the worker's skills and bolstering camaraderie. These factors augmented efficiency in the production of textiles, which corresponded to increased expectations and pressure on the workers. Education was also a

means of grooming the girls to the ways of the factory, preventing uprisings by creating a uniformly obedient mass. A booklet was even distributed to the workers emphasizing, "together with the Confucian virtue of filial piety, the virtue of loyalty (*chūgi*) towards the master"<sup>24</sup> even under harsh circumstances. Clearly, factories replaced the cherished bond between father and daughter with tyrannical authority.

Although a majority of girls strongly detested the conditions at the textile mills, the presence of a satisfied minority needs to be addressed if we are to fully understand the relatively inhumane rural conditions and the factory situation. It is crucial to comprehend the standard of living these girls abandoned prior to entering into a national enterprise. Most girls came from tenant farms that had been plunged into extreme poverty by the overwhelming financial demands of national policies. Besides the maintenance of the fields, farmers had to support households of several children. While all hands relentlessly reaped the harvest to its maximum potential, there was little progress out of debt and often a hearty meal could not be furnished. One girl recalls a typical family diet:

In the old days we used to put a big pot of tea on the fire, and the whole family would ladle the tea out and pour it on sorghum powder. That was our staple. Some families added bran to increase the volume. Then we had a little millet rice.<sup>25</sup>

Rigorous labor and empty stomachs were an inevitable reality with escalating financial anxieties heating tempers beyond a pleasant level in households. For most farm families, there was no hope for cessation of this dismal situation. So it was a relief for some girls to escape the miserable setting and accept the job offer of factory recruiters. "The girls who were left behind in the villages looked with envy upon the girls who were sent off to the city factories."<sup>26</sup>

Since conditions were often lowly on the home front, high standards did not have to be upheld in the factories for incoming girls. Therefore, little effort was required to provide accommodations that were better than on the farms. "...the typical factory diet, which looked

so good to the farm girls, consisted of rice, bean paste soup, pickles, or tofu, and occasionally bits of fish.<sup>27</sup> While there were no qualms from workers, meals at the factories were still below nutritional requirements for growing adolescents, particularly lacking in meats and other essential sources of protein. The girls also had to endure confinement, cramped and unsanitary living quarters, unjust punishment, and tedious labor. The reason that they were not keen to these poor conditions lay in their unawareness of a better lifestyle. It is fair to assume that a rural upbringing left most factory girls uneducated and unaware of the level of treatment that should be tolerated by a labor force. They had no expectations and were simply content to experience new surroundings and a different style of work in the hopes of bettering their lot in life.<sup>28</sup> In the opinion of Helen Mears, an American who observed Meiji factories and interacted with the young female workers, "now, 90% of these girl workers are happy and contented, and 10% discontented. But if propaganda and agitators got in among them, within 6 months, 90% would be discontented and 10% contented."<sup>29</sup> Unfairly

taking advantage of the unfortunate situation of their workers, textile mills were able to manage and profit from substandard operations.

The combination of their family values and destitute situations made farm girls susceptible to merciless textile owners. Persuaded by the embellished words of recruiters, families unknowingly committed their daughters to hardships. Factory owners could justify low wages due to their gender, poor standard of living back home, lack of education, and short-term commitment due to marital obligations. Furthermore, companies could avoid high quality facilities since girls were coming from a decrepit rural scene and had little knowledge of better ways. Yet, the industry could have not been a worldwide success without such exploitation. The profits from such a business endeavor afforded Japan the opportunity to compete with powerful nations. "The life of a family depends upon the delicate body of a woman' while 'the life of a nation depends upon the slender arms of women."<sup>30</sup> Alas, modernization of a nation was achieved at the sacrifice of its young citizens.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mikiso Hane, *Peasants, Rebels, and Outcasts: The Underside of Modern Japan* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 173.

<sup>2</sup> Sharon L. Sievers, *Flowers in Salt: The Beginnings of Feminist Consciousness in Modern Japan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), 56.

<sup>3</sup> Dorinne K. Kondo, *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 269.

<sup>4</sup> Sievers, 56.

<sup>5</sup> E. Patricia Tsurumi, *Factory Girls: Women in the Thread Mills of Meiji Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 16.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>8</sup> Sievers, 60.

<sup>9</sup> Yukihiko Kiyokawa, "The Transformation of Young Rural Women into Disciplined Labor Under Competition-Oriented Management: The

Experience of the Silk-Reeling Industry in Japan," in *The Textile Industry and the Rise of the Japanese Economy*, ed. Michael Smitka (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 94.

<sup>10</sup> Dorothy Robins-Mowry, *The Hidden Sun: Women of Modern Japan* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1983), 41.

<sup>11</sup> Gail Lee Bernstein, *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 223.

<sup>12</sup> Tsurumi, 22.

<sup>13</sup> Masanori Nakamura, *Technology Change and Female Labour* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 1994), 42.

<sup>14</sup> Toshiaki Chokki, "Labor Management in the Cotton Spinning Industry," in *The Textile Industry and the Rise of the Japanese Economy*, ed. Michael Smitka (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 8.

<sup>15</sup> Sievers, 62.

<sup>16</sup> Hane, 175.

<sup>17</sup> Vera Mackie, *Creating Socialist Women in Japan: Gender, Labour, and Activism, 1900-1937*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 117.

<sup>18</sup> Sievers, 55.

<sup>19</sup> Kondo, 272

<sup>20</sup> Sievers, 62-63.

<sup>21</sup> Nakamura, 43.

<sup>22</sup> Sidney L. Gulick, *Working Women of Japan* (New York: Missionary Education Movement of the United States and Canada, 1915), 77.

<sup>23</sup> Kiyokawa, 99.

<sup>24</sup> Nakamura, 53-54.

<sup>25</sup> Hane, 181.

<sup>26</sup> Hane, 180.

<sup>27</sup> Hane, 181.

<sup>28</sup> Allen K. Faust, *The New Japanese Womanhood* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1926), 67.

<sup>29</sup> Helen Mears, *Year of the Wild Boar: An American Woman in Japan* (New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1942), 281.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

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