



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Women and the Labour Market in Japan's Industrialising  
Economy: The Textile Industry before the Pacific War  
(review)

Barbara Molony

Monumenta Nipponica, Volume 60, Number 1, Spring 2005, pp. 115-118  
(Review)

Published by Sophia University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mni.2005.0010>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/182363>

lic (*kōsai, shakō*). At the time, the widely reported, lavish parties at the Rokumeikan as well as the new women's associations demanded a public role of women, who had to relate to men outside their family and close acquaintances. Another question that future researchers might investigate is how the ideas of Western-influenced writers like Iwamoto compare with the views of educators of women who have so far been neglected as supposedly conservative and less interesting. One, Miwada Masako (1843–1927), published her views on female education in the 1890s and early 1900s and expressed similar ideas about men's and women's equal value but different “natural” roles; she stressed women's responsibility to society and the need for female education beyond the elementary level.

Based on a doctoral dissertation and (presumably) published without major structural revisions, this book at times threatens to overload the reader with factual details, and there is also a fair amount of repetition. But Kischka-Wellhäuser has produced a sound piece of scholarship, which adds significantly to our understanding of the Meiji discourse on women and the roots of the women's movement.

*Women and the Labour Market in Japan's Industrialising Economy: The Textile Industry before the Pacific War.* By Janet Hunter. London: Routledge Curzon. 336 pages. Hardcover £65.00.

BARBARA MOLONY  
Santa Clara University

Janet Hunter's numerous articles on the textile industry and its female workers have, since the 1980s, offered tantalizing hints of the issues she develops in this fine monograph, which will be the standard treatment of the Japanese textile industry and its workers for years to come. Hunter leaves virtually no stone unturned, and even those topics that she claims to set aside for other studies benefit from her keen analysis. Hunter synthesizes the narratives of labor conditions, workers' characteristics, historical dimensions of labor migration, wages, recruitment, development of silk reeling, cotton spinning, and weaving technologies, business decision-making, government policies, social reformers' actions, labor activism, and legal and social constructions of gender.

Presenting all that material in a single 300-page work is itself a major contribution to the fields of labor and gender history. But what makes this book unique are the multiple bridges Hunter builds—between cultural and economic approaches to the study of women and girls in textiles, among the silk, cotton, and weaving industries, between discourse and economic conditions, and between gender history and labor history. As she notes in her introduction, “an understanding of economic considerations must be combined with analysis of institutional and cultural factors if we are fully to comprehend the pattern of Japanese development. Rhetoric, attitudes and perceptions exist side by side with economic considerations, and influence, and are influenced by them” (p. 3). While covering so much territory and breaking free of traditional single-discipline approaches, Hunter writes with a commendably accessible style.

Hunter's command of the historiography is impressive. She weaves her commentary on previous authors' contributions seamlessly into her descriptive narrative. While

discussing the connection between rural Japan and the textile industries, she addresses the various Marxist and non-Marxist approaches to this issue, both contemporaneous with and subsequent to the decades of the flourishing of those industries, and finds each wanting because it failed to integrate gender into its analysis. If rural areas had so much surplus labor that unskilled farm workers could migrate and become the poorly compensated workforce of the newly industrializing sector and, through their remittances to their families, allow the perpetuation of exploitative tenant farming, then why was it so hard for textile employers to recruit workers? Why were the transaction costs so great that the overall cost of textile industry labor in Japan remained high in spite of the puny wages earned by workers themselves?

To address these questions, Hunter discusses the ways in which girls and women were recruited. Most came from areas with long experience in sending young people out to work. Many migrated for reasons other than poverty. Although the lump-sum payment many workers' fathers, brothers, or other male guardians received upon signing the female workers' contracts often contributed greatly to their families' usable cash, not all workers' families were destitute. Other types of work, including farm work, might have served the family's economic needs better. Moreover, 30 to 40 percent of the textile workers did not originate in farm or fishing villages. Although some scholars contend that a family's economic status determined whether a girl or woman worked in weaving (stereotypically attracting the poorest girls), silk reeling (drawing in somewhat less destitute girls), or cotton spinning (supposedly the best-off of the three), Hunter finds no evidence to support this. Rather, she stresses the diversity among factories in each of these three sectors. Some cotton spinning factories paid well and had better conditions, while others did not. Similar differences were apparent among factories involved in silk reeling. Hunter thus rejects the idea that economic factors alone determined recruiting practices.

What factors did affect recruiting and the labor market? As other scholars have noted, and as mentioned above, textile workers frequently were from regions with a long history of labor migration by young women and men. Silk workers often came from areas near the filatures, which tended to be relatively close to the farms that produced the perishable cocoons. In many cases cotton-spinning workers traveled greater distances—although, interestingly, Hunter finds that few originated in northeastern Japan, the poorest region at that time. The most notable common factor among workers in the thread trades was their gender. Because of her stress on gender as a category of analysis, Hunter convincingly argues that all three textile industries must be considered together as they drew from the same labor market. (In an earlier article, I argued that the technological differences between silk and cotton production made it impossible to discuss their work forces together; Hunter's work has persuaded me to abandon that position.) At the same time, the very diversity of technology, factory size, and urban or rural origin of the workers within each industry makes universal statements about all workers in a particular industry imprecise. This then foregrounds the major commonalities among workers—their sex, social and official rhetoric about gender, and limitations due to gendered legal restraints on freedom of mobility and contract.

Hunter links these commonalities persuasively. The status of women as legal minors during the half century under consideration in this book parallels the cultural importance of the family as a factor that, to some extent, limited women's abilities to perform as independent economic actors. Hunter finds plenty of evidence that women

and girls were not passive either in the decision to go to work in the mills or in participating in actions for better working conditions. The scope of their activism was, however, somewhat constrained by law and custom that affected workers across all textile industries. Companies also tried, not very successfully, to limit that scope by forming employers' associations to regulate terms of employment and prevent poaching of workers within each industry. Their counterparts on the labor supply side were employee supply unions and protection unions, which were set up by families and local notables to regulate the employment of the region's daughters and wives. These unions were grounded in notions of controlling and protecting women and girls. Officials and social reformers also increasingly spoke of protecting women from diseases like tuberculosis that could be carried back to their villages and from long work hours that exposed future mothers to physical debilitation and to sexual compromise by a textile firm's male workers. In these and other ways, notions of gender influenced the labor market.

Contemporaries widely believed—and some scholars perpetuate the notion—that textile workers were all young, unmarried, of rural origin, poor, intending to return to the countryside following a brief period of employment, passive in the workplace and in their attitudes toward being recruited, and of poor quality as employees in terms of training, work ethic, and “loyalty” to their employer. Hunter meticulously analyzes these assumptions and shows that, while many were true in the aggregate, universalizing explanations of textile workers were riddled with inaccuracies. Indeed, while most workers were young, their ages varied from firm to firm and went up over time. Most workers were unmarried, but some factories employed a significant number of married women. A large minority of workers were of urban origin, or if they were from the countryside, they did not return to their villages after finishing their contracts. Many were not from destitute families. Besides, Hunter notes, the idea that girls worked due to poverty contradicted the equally commonly held idea that female wages could be kept low because they merely supplemented the main income of the head of household. And many workers were not passive in recruitment or workplace activism. If workers were so diverse, as Hunter suggests, how can gender be used as a category uniting workers across the textile industries?

Hunter makes a compelling argument that employers, and to a lesser extent reformers both inside and outside government, constructed the gendered female worker. Hunter's greater emphasis on employers, rather than on officials and others, in the construction of gender and gender rhetoric arises from her contention that employers were not likely to make choices that were unprofitable. It may appear counterproductive, Hunter notes, to spend so much on recruiters' fees, dormitories, food, and other labor costs while underpaying workers terribly and challenging government regulations and worker protections. Why not pay workers better and treat them better to get a more enthusiastic work force of higher productivity? Hunter stresses that employers would make changes when those changes would pay off, if forced to do so by government or international pressure, or if confronted with a highly competitive international market. Clearly, then, the retention of certain employment practices must have appeared profitable to employers. They appeared so because the employers took for granted a gendered view of “the short-term employment of young females, housing them in quasi-family dormitories, and providing them with bridal (*hanayome*) training rather than work skills” (p. 143). In the Meiji period, entrepreneurs had required of these women workers “loyalty and obedience pledges as part of the

contractual relationship [that] evolved into one facet of the ‘reinvention’ of tradition” (p. 81). So, female workers were constructed as short-term employees working for pin-money and susceptible to regulation under a paternalism believed to be traditional. As Hunter notes, this became something of a self-fulfilling prophecy as employers “institutionalised a life cycle view of women’s work that would continue to characterise the Japanese labour market throughout the twentieth century” (p. 143).

This fine book should encourage much discussion about gender in Japan’s modern economic development. It should be welcomed by economic historians and economists less familiar with gender as a category of analysis and by gender historians seeking empirical grounding for cultural and social explanations of historical changes and continuities. Janet Hunter bridges the economic and cultural approaches convincingly.

*Colonizing Sex: Sexology and Social Control in Modern Japan.* By Sabine Frühstück. University of California Press, 2003. 270 pages. Hardcover \$50.00/£32.95; softcover \$19.95/£12.95.

SALLY A. HASTINGS  
Purdue University

In this history of state control of sexual knowledge in modern Japan, Sabine Frühstück invokes Michel Foucault’s notions of power to show how discussions of sexual knowledge constitute a “complex texture of debates” (p. 3). Her subject matter is not simply the question of what was known about sex and how the state controlled (colonized) such information, but also the more complicated issues of how knowledge was conveyed to the public. She focuses our attention on the strategies directed at certain contested bodies: physical examinations of military conscripts, health inspections of licensed prostitutes, sexual education of children, and eugenic instructions to potential parents. The experts on sex whose arguments Frühstück analyzes came from a wide variety of professions: scientists, bureaucrats, journalists, politicians, clergy, and social reformers. Their knowledge derived from modern methods of observation, measurement, documentation, and statistical analysis.

Frühstück’s topic is an important one, for although policies regarding health, sanitation, and sex were essential to the building of the modern Japanese state, heretofore the dominant historical narratives have not taken these issues into account. Save for passing mention of the health of conscripts, the individual bodies of the imperial army are scarcely visible in standard historical accounts until they suddenly perpetrate rapes at Nanjing in 1937. Frühstück shows that for early twentieth-century policy makers, bodies were a central concern. The depiction of the individual as “a miniature of the social, the national, and the imperial body” (p. 3) linked knowledge about sex to the national fate.

In the first chapter, Frühstück uses the term “modern health regime” to describe the policies that Meiji authorities directed towards soldiers, prostitutes, and children to promote the health of both individual bodies and the body politic. She identifies the modern national military as one of the central institutions for the development of hygienic thought and practice, especially with respect to the prevention of venereal disease. Knowledge about bodies was intimately linked with surveillance. The mod-