Asia's Transformations

Coal-Mining Women in Japan

Heavy burdens

W. Donald Burton

ROUTLEDGE

Coal-Mining Women in Japan

In the years between the Meiji Restoration in 1868 and the beginning of Japan's war mobilization boom in 1930, collieries in Europe and America embraced new technologies and excluded women from working underground. In Japan, however, mining women witnessed no significant changes in working practices over this period. The availability of the cheap and abundant labor of these women allowed the captains of the coal industry in Japan to avoid expensive investments in new machinery and sophisticated mining methods; instead, they continued to exploit workers and markets intensively, making substantial profits without the burdens of extensive mechanization.

This unique book explores the lives of the thousands of women who labored underground in Japan's coal mines in the years 1868 to 1930. It examines their work, their family lives, their aspirations, and their achievements and disappointments. Drawing heavily on interview material with the miners themselves, W. Donald Burton combines translations of their stories with features of Japanese society at the time and coal-mining technology. In doing so, he presents a complex account of the women's lives and provides a keen insight into gender relations and the industrial and labor history of Japan.

Coal-mining Women in Japan will be welcomed by students and scholars of Japanese history, gender studies, and industrial history alike.

W. Donald Burton has taught in Canada at the University of British Columbia, St. Mary's University, McGill University, and the Open University of British Columbia.

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Heavy burdens

W. Donald Burton

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To E. Patricia (Paddy) Tsurumi, my mentor and inspiration

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Contents

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W. Donald Burton
January 2014

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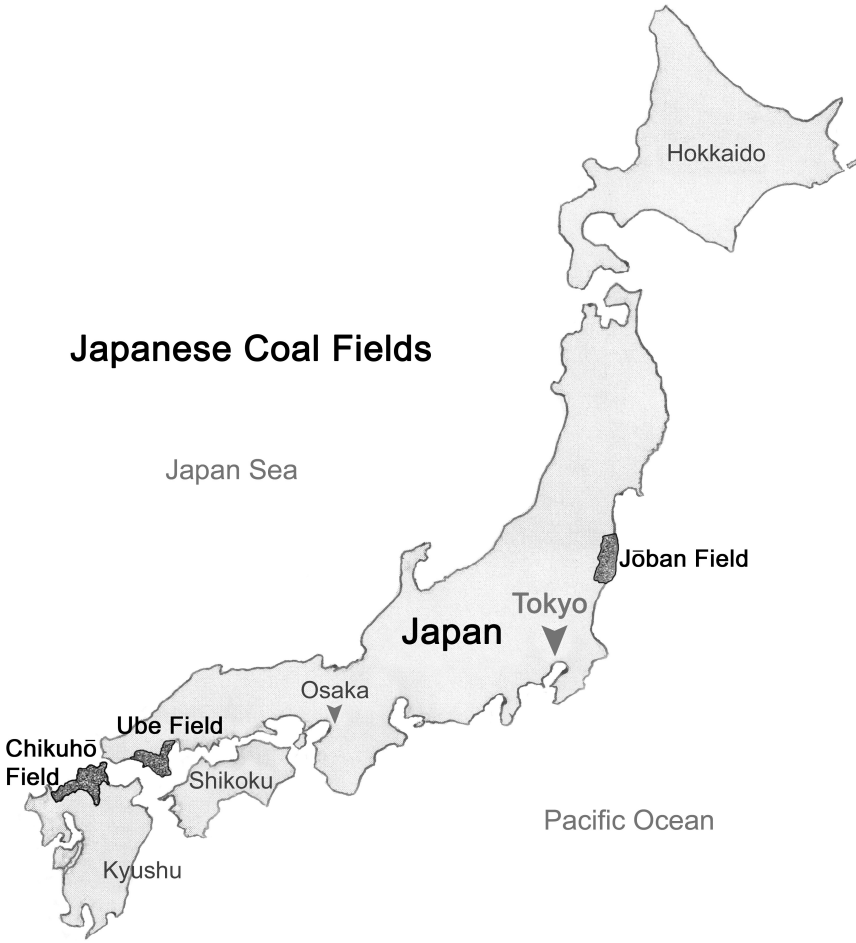
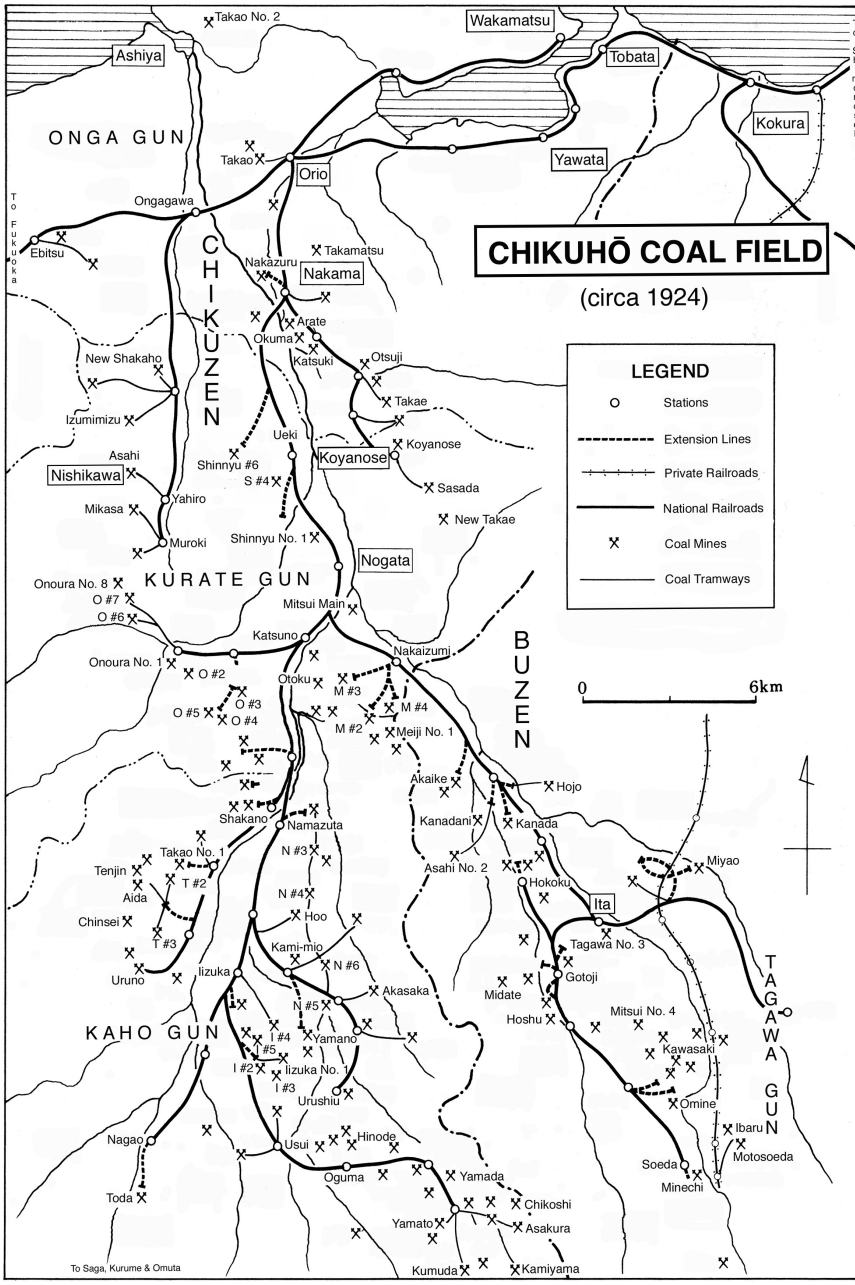


Map of Japan with locations of Chikuhō, Ube, and Jōban coalfields. (Sketched by author.)



Map of Chikuhō coalfield in the Onga River Valley region showing major coal mines. (Adapted from Nakamura Masanori, *Rōdōsha to Nōmin, Nihon no Rekishi* series vol. 29, p. 134, and Tajima Masami, *Tankō Bijin*, p. i.)

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Introduction

Hito ni kiite morau gena ii hanashi wa, hontō, nai bai.[1]
I certainly have none of the kind of stories that people would like to hear.

The story of the working lives of the coal-mining women of northern Kyushu in the period when the coal industry of Japan is thought to have been modernizing must be told. Between the Meiji Restoration in 1868 and the beginning of the war mobilization boom in 1930, new technology was being developed and used in the collieries of Europe and America, where women had long since been excluded from working underground. But the working methods of Japanese mining women did not change substantially in this period. Before the attempted exclusion of women from underground work in the late 1920s and the 1930s, the availability of the cheap and abundant labor of these women, in conjunction with the labor of their male partners, allowed the captains of the coal industry in Japan to avoid expensive investments in the new machinery and sophisticated mining methods that were being developed in the West. Instead, these Japanese "entrepreneurs" continued to reap substantial profits without the burdens of extensive mechanization.

This is a story about the exploitation of human labor, the back-bending labor of thousands of Japanese women, particularly those who worked underground. Most of these women were doing the hauling work done by the men and the boys in the West with more assistance from steam-driven windlasses, horse-driven railway equipment, and, later, electric-powered conveyors. Insofar as feasible, the story is told by the women themselves. Many told their stories to Morisaki Kazue and Idegawa Yasuko, sympathetic authors and interviewers who recorded their accounts faithfully and accurately while raising their own families in the coal-mining region of Fukuoka Prefecture.

This book aims to pay tribute both to the women who worked underground and to Morisaki and Idegawa, who became, after the publication of the two works used here, recognized scholars on the exploitation of women in the Japanese workforce. But neither they nor Mashio Etsuko, who lucidly recorded the life of underground haulier Fujisawa Maki in the Joban region of northeast Japan, regard the women's stories as merely an integral part of a larger history of modern development in the Japanese coal industry. In addition, this book

attempts to show that what "modernization" did occur in the industry prior to the 1930s did not substantially affect the way the women worked and lived in the Japanese coalfields.

Because the women had few modern aids in the form of mechanized equipment, they were forced to rely upon their strength and wit to do the always-strenuous work of hauling in the most efficient manner available. And because their remuneration was in the form of piece rates—so much per wagon of coal put out by the team—they might work with little supervision from company representatives or gang bosses. However, because the piece rates were low, they could not take advantage of the absence of surveillance to "take it easy" or "goof off," although they often allege that their husbands did just that. The women had to work all-out to make a decent living. And because they had to try to keep up with the hewing, or cutting, of the coal from the coal face, which was mostly done by their male partners, they often worked harder and longer than the men. If the men took it easy or left after digging an amount of coal that they thought adequate but that the women could not haul out while the men were still there, the women were obliged to stay behind and work extra hours. Thus, they often worked very long days. The women invariably recall a harder workload for women than for men, even without the added burden of family care, in which the men did not take an active part.

The conditions in which the women worked were anything but salubrious. In the darkness of the underground caverns, carrying primitive lamps, they contended with moisture and uncontrolled running water, heat that varied from hot to unbearable, and coal or rock dust, which of course made breathing anything but easy. These conditions, endured over long periods of time, contributed to diseases and illnesses that could be fatal. The dangers of the work were omnipresent, and accidents and casualties often kept women from earning adequate sustenance for their families. Cave-ins, runaway coal wagons, congestion along narrow passageways, and slippery slopes all took their toll. Methane gas leaks and subsequent fires could be lethal, particularly if the fires set off an explosion of the pervasive coal dust in the air. Less frequent, but always dangerous nonetheless, were leaks of carbon monoxide. Even if the women were not close to the leaks, they could still suffer painful burns or asphyxiation. Given all these perils, it is not surprising that there was a higher incidence of casualties in Japanese coal mines than in the mines in England. And even with mechanization later there remained many dangers.

In addition to physical dangers, there were conditions that made it difficult for the women to maintain their dignity and self-respect. Because of the oppressive heat they were obliged to work half-naked, stripping to the waist and wearing only the miner's skirt, or *mabu-beko*, which revealed more of their "private parts" than they would have liked. Of course, they got used to the lack of clothing over time and even made jokes about it later, but when new recruits were first confronted with both naked men and women, they felt uncomfortable working alongside them. The reputation of coal miners as unsavory characters who might have criminal backgrounds also made newcomers leery of their new workmates.

Their wariness contributed to friction and misunderstandings in the new milieu. Furthermore, the characterization of coal miners as a lower class, often labelled "vermin" by their bosses, colored the self-perceptions of the women as well as the men. In their reminiscences, they often attempted to overcome their feelings of unworthiness by claiming expertise at their work and success at raising their families. But the bosses did little, if anything, to promote these positive self-perceptions and in fact more often castigated and denigrated them in harsh terms, echoing the unfavorable perception of them by the outside world.

Uprooted from their rural homes in order to work in the mines, the women suffered a displacement that could be particularly hard for Japanese people, who strongly identified with their birthplaces and communal villages. Because the many smaller mines in the Chikuho region closed often because of flooding, cave-ins, or the working out of easily accessible seams, the rudimentary housing at the pit mouths inevitably had a temporary quality that did not persuade the women that it made good homes for their families. At larger mines the housing was not much better, and the constant attempts of miners to find better working conditions at other mines—rarely satisfied, it should be noted—could not promote a feeling of belonging to a colliery home. The women expressed some nostalgia for their rural birthplaces and feelings of rootlessness in the northern Kyushu mountains and plains. The physical separation between rural towns/villages and mining camps, which managements worked to preserve, also helped to divide miners and farmers and impeded any solidarity in what had previously been a relatively homogenous agrarian class.

In addition to being displaced from their homes and estranged from their relatives, the women also found themselves in a competitive work situation, contending for hauling equipment, good coal faces and haulage ways, and better working conditions. Some nurtured hard feelings toward other miners who were members of the same gang but who strove to best their rivals in putting out more coal. At times, the women felt obliged to please overseers who had the power to assign them to good faces, and this too could lead to abuse and friction in interpersonal relations. Although not subjected to the same degree of abuse as female textile workers by male overseers in the burgeoning textile mills because they usually worked in family groups, the mining women had to rely on their wits to gain favors in working conditions without offering favours in return. And single women, although still protected to some extent by their families, were nevertheless vulnerable in the underground world, where machismo men tried to assert their superiority.

In this competitive world, some of the women declared their independence by proclaiming that if their husbands proved incapable of working hard and efficiently enough to contribute sufficient income for their families, they would take up with someone who could. And sometimes they did. Others worked harder to compensate for inadequate mates, complaining but making the best of bad situations. By many of their accounts, their husbands were lazy wastrels who spent as little time as possible at work and wasted precious family resources on drinking, gambling, and whoring. Yet while the women endured much frustration and

anxiety, they often related incidents both above and below ground with humour, acceptance, or quiet resignation. Only one woman indicated that she fully understood the source of her husband's frustration and indolence: the harsh conditions of the work underground. But any empathy she may have felt was tempered by the fact that she was subjected to the same working conditions and was not expected to react in the same way.

Although the underground work often put the women into competition with each other, life above ground, although much shorter because of the length of working days, was somewhat better in that it involved considerable sharing of limited resources and a modicum of social exchange. Although the women's recollections may have been shaped by the post-World War II ethos when they were interviewed, they remembered sharing food, cooperating in the preparation of meals, looking after neighbors' children, and even lending money back and forth, often without expectation of reimbursement and always without charging interest. For people with such few resources, many were remarkably generous and charitable. This mutuality was expressed more prominently among people recruited from the same prefecture, often to the same labor gangs, but it seems to have extended to others as well because they were considered to have come from similar circumstances of poverty and alienation.

Recruitment, for most of our period at all but the largest mines, was a matter of induction into a labor gang rather than employment by a mining company. The women did not join the gang except as adjuncts of their husbands or fathers, however, so their sense of belonging and being subservient to a gang boss was not as strong as the men's. At the same time, since the gangs were often the successors of family teams led by a skilled miner with contractual connections to mine operators, the women's sense of parity with male gang members could create expectations for equal treatment at work and an equitable division of wages. The gang boss received the whole wage packet for the gang and took a cut for his "services" (recruitment loans, other debt servicing, room and board for bachelors, provision of household goods and bedding for families, working tools, lamps, etc.). The women did not know the amount of the rakeoff and had to make do with the amounts passed on to them from their husbands, often after their husbands' accounts for drinking and gambling had been settled, at least partially. Although they recalled average rates for wagon loads of coal and sometimes claimed to have received pay equal to that of the men in the earlier period (Meiji and early Taisho), they do not divulge information about the division of the wage packets between hewer and haulier to support their claim.

While their incomes were claimed by the mine operators and bosses to be sufficient to provide adequate, even plentiful, food for their families, during frequent illnesses or injuries when they could not work or economic downturns when rates of pay were arbitrarily cut, they could only sustain themselves with loans from the gang boss. Their incomes were, on average, better than those of agrarian workers and laborers on construction and public works, although such workers were notoriously underpaid in the initial stages of modern capital accumulation in Japan. And women working underground earned substantially

more than the mostly female sorters or "pickers" at the pit mouth. But sorters were predominantly single women without families to support (although many no doubt helped families they left behind in rural areas). Nearly all of the underground workers spoke of difficulties in making ends meet and of constant indebtedness to the gang boss or the company store. It was unusual for a woman to be able to set aside a nest egg—even in good times. And when she did succeed in accumulating modest savings, the bigger companies often required that they be deposited in company accounts that acted as security against the women's families quitting.

If coal miners had enough to eat during most of the period under consideration, they were never sheltered in adequate housing. Japanese scholars have labeled the labor gang system in Kyushu the *naya-seido* after the shanties and dormitories in which the families and bachelors were accommodated. Elsewhere in Japan it was called the *hamba-seido*, referring to the dormitory halls where unmarried gang members were fed. In both cases accommodation was rudimentary. The women all complained about the lack of living and storage space, the permeability of walls and roofs to inclement weather, the drifting of cooking fire smoke between family units, and the difficulty of keeping the *naya* clean. Although some bureaucrats, journalists, and scholars supported management claims that housing had been improved in the Taisho period, the women speak of no substantial improvements.

Outsiders from the elite establishment also claimed that childcare facilities improved over time, but it was only the large companies that provided for preschool children. At other companies, there might be a simple shack at the pit mouth where infants could be breastfed by mothers coming out between stints underground. And creches for weaned infants and toddlers might be staffed by caregivers at the *zaibatsu* mines. But caring for children was always taxing, and at most collieries preschool children were left with grandparents, older siblings, or others not employed underground. For the siblings, this could mean large gaps in their schooling, and the vaunted literacy and education programs of the modernizing government were not effective in most coal-mining areas. Since many girls went underground to help their parents at early ages and started work as adults at around age 14, their education was sorely deficient. Many of the girls had been "farmed out" as child-minders and maids to better-off farmers or townspeople for a couple of years before age 14; child labor was accepted as a fact of life among coal miners the same as it had been and was among farmers. The children of miners could be described as being schooled in tradition and custom rather than in the new "enlightenment."

Courting and coupling were certainly haphazard matters that were in no way subject to the careful matchmaking of middle-class Japanese society. Although parents and even some of the young girls themselves tried to arrange engagements with males who could make a decent living at mining, other liaisons were made casually and did not always turn into marital relations. It seems that many young men were recommended to parents as sober and hardworking prospects, only to turn out to be hard-drinking gamblers after marriage and the advent of