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Carrying the Nation on Fragile Shoulders: Female Textile Workers in a Modernizing Japan

Max R. Bouchard
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

During the period from the early Meiji era to the end of the Second World War in which Imperial Japan sought to modernize the nation's economy by investing heavily in mechanized labor industries, cotton and silk textile manufacturing was the lead sector in this industrialization process. One of the most distinctive features of this vitally important industry was that Japanese women, mostly of relatively young ages and from rural communities across the country, constituted the majority of the workers employed in textile factories. Throughout this era, the treatment of this predominantly female workforce on the part of both textile companies and the imperial government was informed by traditional beliefs regarding women's ascribed roles within Japanese society, exhibited in recruiting process, restrictive management practices, and educational initiatives that manufacturers imposed on workers. Despite government actions reforms to this industry later on in this time period, these gendered beliefs continued to prevail in shaping this relationship between textile employers and their female employees.

Carrying the Nation on Fragile Shoulders: Female Textile Workers in a Modernizing Japan

By Max Bouchard

Following the overthrow of the Tokugawa shogunate and reestablishment of imperial authority under Emperor Meiji in 1868, Japan initiated a comprehensive process of reforming and modernizing the country in an effort to gain the respect of the United States and European nations of the time. This process was intended to improve their political standing internationally by helping to motivate western political powers to renegotiate the “unequal treaties” that Japan had been forced to sign in the 1850s. In addition to reforming the nation’s military and political system around these new Westernized standards, an important facet of Japan’s modernization was industrializing its economy by investing heavily in mechanized labor industries, thus transitioning the country away from the predominantly agrarian society that it was at the end of the Tokugawa period. Amongst the many different industries that came to prominence in Meiji-era Japan and continued to develop during the early-twentieth century, cotton and silk textile manufacturing was the lead sector in this industrialization process. One of the most distinctive features of this vitally important industry was that Japanese women, mostly of relatively young ages and from rural communities across the country, constituted the majority of the workers employed in

textile factories. From the early Meiji period to the end of the Second World War, the treatment of this predominantly female workforce on the part of both textile companies and the imperial government was informed by traditional beliefs regarding women's ascribed roles within Japanese society, exhibited in recruiting process, restrictive management practices, and educational initiatives that manufacturers imposed on workers. Despite government actions reforms to this industry later on in this time period, these gendered beliefs continued to prevail in shaping this relationship between textile employers and their female employees.

During the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century, many scholars who specialized in Japanese history have taken a variety of approaches towards analyzing this topic. In his 1976 article "Country Girls and Communication among Competitors in the Japanese Spinning Industry," Gary R. Saxonhouse analyzed the high level of turnover amongst female factory workers in the cotton textile industry from an economic perspective, primarily using unpublished documents from the Kanegafuchi Spinning Company as empirical evidence. He concluded that prior to the Second World War major textile firms in Japan, such as Kanebō, did not differ "significantly among themselves with respect to management experiences and education, worker experience and education, age of capital, and working conditions *in a way that*

would have consequences for productivity.”¹ Saxonhouse describes various methodologies for analyzing labor strategies of textile companies and the productivity of the Japanese cotton textile industry at the time.

Scholars have also approached this topic by documenting the cultural history of Japanese female textile workers during this era. In her 1990 book *Factory Girls: Women in the Thread Mills of Meiji Japan*, historian Patricia Tsurumi studied the importance of female workers in the cotton spinning and silk reeling industries to the history of the Japanese working class, focusing on how these workers responded to the urgings of government officials and textile companies to perform their duties “for the sake of the nation.” She argued that female textile workers’ “own goals and loyalties helped shaped their growing view of themselves as a distinct group with a distinct identity” as a result of their “unprecedented experiences as Japanese factory workers.”² Historian Barbara Molony extended the chronology of Tsurumi’s work on this topic beyond the Meiji period in her article “Activism Among Women in the Cotton Textile Industry.” She similarly argued that female textile workers’ shared experiences as “farm

¹ Gary R. Saxonhouse, “Country Girls and Communication among Competitors in the Japanese Cotton Spinning Industry,” in *Japanese Industrialization and Its Social Consequences*, edited by Hugh Patrick, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976), 67.

² Patricia E. Tsurumi, *Factory Girls: Women in the Thread Mills of Meiji Japan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 5.

girls created a shared consciousness of class and gender” that facilitated their support of labor organizing protests for improved working conditions in textile factories.³ Mikiso Hane discussed a much broader range of subtopics within this aspect of Meiji and Taisho-era Japan in *Peasants, Rebels, Women, and Outcastes: The Underside of Modern Japan*, including the wages of Japanese female textile workers, the restrictions and various abuses endured by them, instances of workers running away from the plants or committing suicide, the dormitory system in textile factories, and labor disputes between the workers and textile companies.⁴ In contrast to Molony, he deemphasized the effectiveness of activism on the part of female factories workers against textile companies, asserting that despite some pieces of legislation passed by the Japanese government aimed at reducing harsh labor practices, these strikes and labor disputes failed to significantly advance their working conditions due to the nation’s political leaders being aligned with the textile companies and the workers themselves being poorly organized.⁵

³ Barbara Molony, “Activism Among Women in the Taisho Cotton Textile Industry,” in *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945*, edited by Gail Lee Bernstein (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 218-219.

⁴ Mikiso Hane, “The Textile Factory Workers,” in *Peasants, Rebels, Women, and Outcastes: The Underside of Modern Japan* (Blue Ridge Summit, PA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 151-166.

⁵ Hane, “The Textile Factory Workers,” in *Peasants, Rebels, Women, and Outcastes*, 168-175.

Elyssa Faison took a more specific approach to the topic by examining the gendered labor-management practices of textile companies in pre-World War II Japan and how female workers reacted to them in *Managing Women: Disciplining Labor in Modern Japan*. In this 2007 book, she argued the “managers actively constructed female factory workers as ‘women,’ rather than as ‘workers,’ inculcating moral and civic values” that made femininity “a boundary marker within a swiftly urbanizing and industrializing society.”⁶ This “‘woman ideal’ promoted by textile companies produced a counter discourse by female textile workers themselves, who sometimes acquiesced but at other times rejected employers’ claims of parental benevolence and related demands for filial obedience.”⁷ Lastly, Faison argued “ethnicity rather than gender stood as a privileged signifier” within these factories as “the feminized bodies of Japanese women workers stood in contrast to the highly ethnicized bodies of colonial women workers” from Korea and Okinawa.⁸

A third category of scholarship on this topic that has emerged is that of historians who have attempted to analyze both the economic and cultural history of Japan’s textile industry during the early twentieth century. Historian Janet Hunter wrote her 2003

⁶ Elyssa Faison, *Managing Women: Disciplining Labor in Modern Japan* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 1-2.

⁷ Faison, *Managing Women*, 2.

⁸ Faison, *Managing Women*, 2.

book *Women and the Labour Market in Japan's Industrializing Economy: The Textile Industry Before the Pacific War* with the notion in mind that “an understanding of economic considerations must be combined with analysis of institutional and cultural factors if we are fully to comprehend” this specific topic.⁹ By analyzing the agricultural-industry connection within the Japanese economy “as mediated through textile workers,” the complexity of the labor market, and the character of labor management and industrial relations, she argued that significant changes in the management strategy of textile companies towards labor did take place prior to the First World War. These changes, however, were only implemented in large-scale cotton industry and “were not instigated by changes in the construction of gender roles in Japanese society.”¹⁰ Hunter concluded instead that “the assumptions held in prewar Japan about the social role of women” shaped the operation of the textile industry.¹¹

In reinforcing these different fields of scholarship, I argue that the relationship that these workers had with the imperial Japanese government and the textile companies themselves during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century was shaped by the

⁹ Janet Hunter, *Women and the Labour Market in Japan's Industrialising Economy* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 3.

¹⁰ Hunter, *Women and the Labour Market in Japan's Industrialising Economy*, 3-5.

¹¹ Hunter, *Women and the Labour Market in Japan's Industrialising Economy*, 5.

gendered beliefs of women's roles in Japanese society at the time. These types of labor relations were manifested in the recruiting process, restrictive management strategies, and educational initiatives directed towards female workers in textile factories. Therefore, the reforms that were implemented into this industry beginning in the Taisho period did not represent an expansion of women's rights and were instead measures aimed at facilitating these worker's fulfillment of the preexisting gendered societal roles for women. In order to present this argument, I will first provide greater detail on some of the most noteworthy characteristics of this group of workers. I will then analyze how the common business practices by the Japanese textile companies at the time and the rhetoric and legislative actions by Japanese state that related to the textile industry perpetuated gendered assumptions about female workers roles in Japan. Most of the primary source documents utilized for this essay include quotes from Japanese government officials.

The defining characteristics of the textile industry's workforce as young, unmarried women from rural communities solidified during the early Meiji period. The importation of cheap manufactured goods destroyed indigenous handicrafts industries and created a large negative trade imbalance in the economy. The government, in turn, decided to revitalize this industry by opening government-run mills, such as the Tomioka Silk Mill in 1872, and subsidizing private textile factories that embraced Western-style

machinery and methods of production which would produce products that would appeal to foreign markets.¹² In these new models for textile factories based on large-scale mechanized production, 70% of workers in the cotton-spinning industry from the 1880s to 1914 were female. More accurate estimations of the gender division in the workforce in the interwar years demonstrate that over 80% of workers in the silk industry, 70% of workers in the cotton industry, and 70% in the weaving industry were female.¹³ Despite men and women of the former *shizoku* samurai class making up the majority of the workforce in factories in the earliest urban textile factories, mills located in industrial centers such as Nagano, Tokyo, and Gunma mostly hired women from impoverished farming families in rural prefectures such as Niigata, Shimane, and Ibaraki by the 1890s.¹⁴ In terms of age profile, data also confirms that female workers in cotton, silk, and weaving factories were relatively young throughout the prewar years. Despite a decrease in the number of very young workers under 14 years old being employed in these factories, the majority of

¹² Janet Hunter and Helen Macnaughtan. "Japan." In *The Ashgate Companion to the History of Textile Workers, 1650-2000*, edited by Lex Heerma van Voss, Els Hiemstra-Kuperus, Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, 305-332 (Farnham, UK: Routledge, 2010), 311-316; Tsumuri, *Factory Girls*, 23-26.

¹³ Hunter, *Women and the Labour Market in Japan's Industrialising Economy*, 45-47.

¹⁴ Hunter, *Women and the Labour Market in Japan's Industrialising Economy*, 51-59.

workers remained between the ages of 14 and 25 from the late 1890s to the early 1920s.¹⁵

One manifestation of the relationship that this workforce of young, unmarried women from rural communities had with the Japanese state and private textile companies that was based in gendered beliefs regarding women's societal roles in Japan prior to the Second World War was the recruiting process for textile workers. In order to meet the growing labor demands for the textile industry, many companies hired recruiters to travel to remote rural villages and sign up new employees. These recruiters included salaried employees of the factories, agents under special contract with mills, agents paid on commission based on how many workers they hired, and mill workers.¹⁶ In addition to making numerous false claims that exaggerated the amenities companies provided to workers and downplayed the harsh working conditions inside factories, many recruiters, particularly independent agents, appealed to young women and their families by granting advance payments on wages to their fathers.¹⁷ These loans became vital sources of income for many poor tenant farmers, with some payments amounting to 200 to 300 yen for a one-year advance on

¹⁵ Hunter, *Women and the Labour Market in Japan's Industrialising Economy*, 60-64.

¹⁶ Molony, "Activism Among Women in the Taisho Cotton Textile Industry," 231.

¹⁷ Tsumuri, *Factory Girls*, 60-62, 120-122; Hane, "The Textile Factory Workers," 153.

the wage for these workers.¹⁸ Through this system that exploited workers' connections to their families in the countryside by having these young women work long periods of time to pay off the heavy debts that their fathers incurred, these companies retained the family-like structures that existed in the agrarian economies of Tokugawa Japan where women played prominent roles in the domestic work of handicraft manufacturing.¹⁹ The content of these contracts that recruiters distributed to young women, which included many provisions that penalized workers for disobedient behavior and required young women's families to sign-off as legal guardians, illustrated how textile companies portrayed themselves as standing in for the parents of these families, "so that respecting their will meant honoring one's natal family, and spinning silk or cotton for the nation meant honoring the emperor, patriarch of the national family."²⁰ These aspects of the industry's recruiting system, therefore, connected traditional virtues of filial piety to the national interests of modernizing Imperial Japanese economy.

This prevailing conception on the part of the government and textile companies regarding women's roles in Japan's industrializing economy during the late-nineteenth and early-

¹⁸ Tsumuri, *Factory Girls*, 15-19.

¹⁹ Tsumuri, *Factory Girls*, 63; Sharon L. Sievers, "The Textile Workers," in *Flowers in Salt: The Beginnings of Feminist Consciousness in Modern Japan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1983), 58.

²⁰ Faison, *Managing Women*, 12; Hunter, *Women and the Labour Market in Japan's Industrialising Economy*, 79-83.

twentieth century was expressed by the Director of Factory Inspection for the Bureau of Social Affairs, Shunzo Yoshisaka, in his 1925 article “Labour Recruiting in Japan and its Control.” In describing the background and content of the most recent legislation by the Japanese government aimed at regulating the recruitment of workers that came into effect in March of that year, Yoshisaka claimed that the two principal reasons for the emergence of labor recruiting in Japan were the “uncontrolled expansion of industry and the fact that Japanese industry is very largely dependent upon female labour.”²¹ He characterized the young women recruited in remote agricultural districts for work in the textile industry as “mostly unmarried girls who look forward to becoming ‘good housewives and wise mothers.’ They take wage-earning employment partly to help their families and partly to save for their marriage.”²² Because of the importance of recruiting as the primary means of obtaining labor for textile companies, Yoshisaka said that improvements must be made in both the working conditions of factories and “the quality of recruiting agents,” whom he claimed mistreated prospective workers in rural communities. The new Ordinance that he helped create for the Bureau of Social Affairs addressed this issue by “ensuring the protection of workers who apply for employment through

²¹ Yoshisaka Shunzo, “Labour Recruiting in Japan and Its Control,” *International Labour Review* 12 (October 1925): 485.

²² Shunzo, “Labour Recruiting in Japan and Its Control,” 486.

recruiting” and “placing industry on a sounder basis and facilitating the work of management.”²³ While Yoshisaka does condemn the many dishonest practices utilized by recruiting agents in listing the details of these reforms, he appears to focus less on the moral obligations of respecting these workers’ individual rights and more on the ability of female textile laborers to function as a vital workforce in the nation’s economy and to fulfill their familial responsibilities later on in life.

Another aspect of female textile workers’ relationship with the Japanese state and textile companies that reflected prevailing beliefs regarding women’s role in Imperial Japan were the various management strategies utilized by textile manufacturers to control this workforce. In order to account for the emergence of new issues in the textile industry in the 1890s such as more women from remote rural areas entering the workforce in larger numbers, the increased competition within the textile industry to recruit workers, and the tendency of many workers to run away from plants due to strenuous working conditions, textile companies imposed tighter restrictions on workers’ personal lives.²⁴ One of the main features of these restrictions was the dormitories within factory complexes used to house workers from rural villages. In addition to their unsanitary facilities that enabled the spread of diseases throughout

²³ Shunzo, “Labour Recruiting in Japan and Its Control,” 489.

²⁴ Hane, “The Textile Factory Workers,” 160-168; Hunter, *Women and the Labour Market in Japan’s Industrialising Economy*, 89-114.

factories, dormitories “circumscribed women’s movements and in most cases involved elaborate systems of surveillance, including the employment of vigilant dormitory supervisors and a highly monitored pass system” that restricted “workers’ freedom to leave the factory compound.”²⁵ The construction of these dormitories illustrated this purpose of restricting workers movements, with many buildings being encircled by eight-foot high fences fitted with “sharpened bamboo spears and barbed wire” and water bridges.²⁶ The progressive extension of working hours in cotton-spinning and silk-reeling factories, which by the 1880s entailed two twelve-hour shifts with workers usually changing at 6 AM and 6 PM, worked in conjunction with the dormitory system to more intensively manage female employees. Even after reforms were made to dormitory conditions following the First World War and night shifts in factories were made illegal in 1929, textile workers still worked over 11 hours per-day, placing tremendous constraints on women's time and freedom. Many large textile companies also used the practice of wage retention known as “forced savings,” which entailed depositing a portion of a worker’s wage into a saving account that could only be accessed by the worker after completion of her contract, to restrict these women’s freedoms within factories. Throughout this era, textile managers often justified these practices by arguing that they were “protecting their

²⁵ Faison, *Managing Women*, 14.

²⁶ Tsurumi, *Factory Girls*, 132-133.

youthful workforce from the wicked world” by functioning as surrogate parents for these young women.²⁷

Iwao F. Ayusawa, an official for the Japanese government during the early twentieth century, reflected the state’s support of these paternalistic labor management policies implemented by textile companies. In the third part of his 1929 series of articles “The Employment of Women in Japanese Industry,” published in the *International Labour Review*, he described the origins and contemporary conditions of the dormitory system. Ayusawa claimed that the dormitory arose in response to Japan’s factory industry and the nation’s modernization process. In addition to the common practice of night work and the high rates of labor turnover in the textile industry, he cited the recruitment of workers “from distant districts... in the remotest corners of the country” as one of the main factors that necessitated this system.²⁸ He claimed that this was the case because when workers, “particularly young and unmarried women, have been brought from distant places in large numbers, they must be looked after, and provided first of all with eating and sleeping quarters.”²⁹ Even though he acknowledged the need for new pieces of legislation such as the Factory Act of 1911 and 1927 aimed at curbing the exploitation of female and juvenile

²⁷ Hunter, *Women and the Labour Market in Japan’s Industrialising Economy*, 112-113, 171, 107; Faison, *Managing Women*, 14.

²⁸ Iwao F. Ayusawa, “The Employment of Women in Japanese Industry: III,” *International Labour Review* 19 (1929): 512.

²⁹ Ayusawa, “The Employment of Women in Japanese Industry: III,” 512-513.

labor, he argued the system “cannot be changed rapidly” due to many inherent characteristics of the textile manufacturing and Japanese industry in general at the time.³⁰ He also stated that workers’ agrarian background has partly allowed them to serve textile companies admirable despite these strenuous working because of “such virtues as patience, diligence, fidelity,” and sacrifice being “systematically inculcated in them.”³¹ This article illustrates how both government officials and textile companies alike justified their restrictive management strategies through paternalistic beliefs of young women loyally serving Japan’s industrializing economy in the same fashion that they had previously done in the country’s agrarian economy prior to the Meiji-era.

A third manifestation of the relationship that female textile workers had with the state and textile companies in late-eighteenth and early-twentieth century Japan was the educational initiatives implemented within these factories. Since the establishment of the earliest large-scale textile factories in Japan during the 1870s, the “significance of general education for industrial growth and economic change, as well as for political and social purposes, was recognized by prewar Japanese governments.” The state, in turn, put pressure on “employers to provide classes for very young workers, or for those who had received inadequate formal

³⁰ Ayusawa, “The Employment of Women in Japanese Industry: III,” 515-519.

³¹ Ayusawa, “The Employment of Women in Japanese Industry: III,” 520.

education.”³² But as girls of young age groups were phased out of the workforce and literacy rates among workers in general grew, “the content of education offered to mill workers shifted towards domestic skills and moral injunction.”³³ In factories such as the Kanegafuchi Cotton Spinning Company founded in 1889, employers provided these women with skills deemed appropriate for running farming families through a six-year compulsory elementary education system, which consisted of classes in ethics (*shushin*) and a three-year optional course that taught female workers “the modalities of proper Japanese womanhood.”³⁴ While these and other educational measures, such as company songs, lectures on moral themes, and ethics texts, may have had an economic purpose of creating an obedient workforce, “it also acted to reinforce current rhetoric regarding the role of women in Japanese society.”³⁵ These roles included furthering the national interests of modernizing Japan and future responsibilities as “Japanese wives and mothers.”³⁶

³² Hunter, *Women and the Labour Market in Japan's Industrialising Economy*, 135.

³³ Hunter, *Women and the Labour Market in Japan's Industrialising Economy*, 136.

³⁴ Hunter, *Women and the Labour Market in Japan's Industrialising Economy*, 135; Faison, *Managing Women*, 14-18.

³⁵ Tsurumi, *Factory Girls*, 92-102; Hunter, *Women and the Labour Market in Japan's Industrialising Economy*, 139-141.

³⁶ Tsurumi, *Factory Girls*, 92; Hunter, *Women and the Labour Market in Japan's Industrialising Economy*, 139-140.

Many forms of education that motivated women to adhere to their traditional domestic roles within the family structure of Japanese society and display loyalty towards the nation through their work in textile plants persisted past the Meiji period. Following the First World War, many textile companies began to frame the educational and cultural amenities that they offered to female workers as opportunities to attain the emerging ideal of the well-educated, middle-class housewife “by designating female textile labor a temporary condition and promoting the womanly values of motherhood and domesticity within the factory itself.”³⁷ This reconfiguration of their paternalistic business practices meant to instill the ideology of “good wife, wise mother” in female workers coincided with the abolition of night work in large-scale textile factories that went into effect in 1929. In an effort to manage the negative activities that women would potentially engage in during the increased amount of “free time,” or *yoka*, that they were afforded through this development, plant managers coerced workers to participate in company-organized activities for employees during off-work hours.³⁸ While they still relied on readings materials such as newsletters and brochures to disseminate values of womanly virtue, many companies preferred non-literary activities such as calisthenics to instill these values

³⁷ Faison, *Managing Women*, 9-10.

³⁸ Faison, *Managing Women*, 27-28.

“because their content could be carefully controlled.”³⁹ Unlike previous attempts to address health issues amongst factory workers such as the spread of tuberculosis, calisthenics programs were part of a new “emphasis on the scientific management of workers and their physical fitness” that was based in concerns over women’s reproductive capacity as future mothers.⁴⁰ Thus, workers “previously considered disposable had come to be seen as a capital investment” in the nation as a whole. In addition to maintaining workers’ health, company programs offering training in home economics to female employees promoted public morals such as chastity, which many factory owners believed these women lacked due their rural origins. This set of activities, therefore, exhibited textile companies “efforts to inculcate a gendered national subjecthood” of women.⁴¹

One of the mechanisms that most exhibits this intent on the part of factory managers to instruct young female textile workers on performing their gendered duties was short textbooks and magazines distributed to them. In the first article printed in the 1911 didactic text *Factory Girls’ Reader*, entitled “Working for the Sake of the Country,” the author reminded female mill employees that “if you all work to the utmost of your abilities from morning

³⁹ Faison, *Managing Women*, 37.

⁴⁰ Faison, *Managing Women*, 45-47.

⁴¹ Faison, *Managing Women*, 28, 37-39.

to night, there can be no loyalty to the country greater than this.”⁴² Because not entering the textile industry would both hinder the nation’s modernization process and burden their parents, he concluded that all factory girls must embrace “loyalty for the sake of the country” and “filial piety for the sake of the family” in order to work to “the utmost of her abilities.”⁴³ In the book’s third chapter, the author elaborated on the reverence that young women were supposed to have for their superiors in textile mills, stated that, similar to their own father and mother, “the company president, then office officials, engineers, supervisors,” and “section heads... are your elders.”⁴⁴ Passages such as these in ethics textbooks distributed to female textile workers illustrate the connected values that factory managers attempted to instill in these workers of serving their parents’ economic needs through their wage labor and Japan as a whole by acting as a vital workforce in the nation’s industrialization process.

The initiatives implemented by the Imperial Japanese government that were meant to reshape various aspects of the country’s textile industry were predicated on similarly gendered beliefs regarding women’s in Japanese society. Despite many early-Meiji bureaucrats’ concern over textile employers’

⁴² Takenbou Toshihiko, ed. *Joko tokuhon* (Tokyo: Jitsugyo kokumin kyowa kai, 1911), 1-3, in Tsurumi, *Factory Girls*, 94.

⁴³ Takenobu, *Joko tokuhon*, 7-8, in Tsurumi, *Factory Girls*, 94.

⁴⁴ Takenobu, *Joko tokuhon*, 95-96.

exploitative business practices, the first piece of factory legislation to include significant protective features for workers was the Factory Law of 1911, which “imposed minimum health and safety standards in factories employing fifteen or more workers” and limited the amount of working hours to twelve per-day, none of which were to take place between 10 PM and 4 AM among other benefits for workers.⁴⁵ Almost all of the regulations within this comprehensive piece of legislation, however, were not accepted by most textile companies until the First World War, in which increased activism within manufacturing industries and new international bodies such as the International Labour Organizations (ILO) pressured the government to pass a revised version of the Factory Act in 1923.⁴⁶ This revised law expanded many of the previous provisions pertaining to textile mills, including minimum age limits, length of daily working hours, and the ban on night work, and was eventually enforced in most factories by 1929.⁴⁷ While these new regulations created significant improvements in working conditions for women, they were often based in scientific research of the era that connected the productivity of textile plants to improved worker welfare. Many bureaucrats, therefore, asserted

⁴⁵ Hunter, *Women and the Labour Market in Japan's Industrialising Economy*, 196; Sheldon Garon, *The State and Labor in Modern Japan* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987), 18-23, 27.

⁴⁶ Hunter, *Women and the Labour Market in Japan's Industrialising Economy*, 198.

⁴⁷ Hunter, *Women and the Labour Market in Japan's Industrialising Economy*, 200-201.

that because women could not cope with their domestic burdens while also enduring the harsh workings conditions of cotton and silk factories at the time, “legislation was needed to protect workers ‘for the sake of the nation.’”⁴⁸ This belief on the part of government officials is reflected in the maternity protection benefits of the second Factory Art. Despite the law’s substantial benefits to female workers such as allowing all women “up to four weeks off before childbirth, and six weeks afterwards,” the general profile of the textile workforce being unmarried women resulted in a small percentage of women actually taking advantage of these benefits. This reflected how government officials generally categorized textile workers “as future rather than current mothers” and it was in this context that “their health and welfare was of significance to the national authorities.”⁴⁹

In addition to legislation pertaining to textile factories, many state-sponsored cultivation groups helped reinforce the values of domesticity that textile companies attempted to instill in their female workers. These organization first emerged in rural districts of the country following the Russo-Japanese War to help foster a strong sense of nationalism and “aid in the economic development of an agrarian sector seen as backward.” By the

⁴⁸ Hunter, *Women and the Labour Market in Japan’s Industrialising Economy*, 218-220.

⁴⁹ Hunter, *Women and the Labour Market in Japan’s Industrialising Economy*, 211-212.

1920s, the Shuyodan, initially conceived of as a rural male youth cultivation group, had expanded its operations by setting up branches in textile factories. In this specific setting, the practice of *shuyo*, translated as “self-cultivation,” used by these groups to integrate “individual interests with state interests” emphasized “filial piety and the cultivation of morally upright wives and mothers who, after producing cotton and silk for nation, would reproduce healthy and obedient imperial citizens.”⁵⁰ This organization worked in conjunction with textile companies to achieve this moral injunction by organizing mandatory training retreats (*koshukai*) for workers, “which consisted of rigorous discipline in physical endurance and moral purity, including national citizens’ calisthenics (*kokumin taiso*) and purification ceremonies (*misogino*), lectures on filial piety, cleaning rituals, and the singing of patriotic and uplifting songs.”⁵¹

The role that the imperial government played along with textile companies in reinforcing women’s gendered domestic responsibilities in Japanese society is articulated throughout Japanese diplomat for the International Labour Organization Iwao Y. Ayusawa’s three-part series of articles “The Employment of Women in Japanese Industry,” published in 1929. In providing a statistical survey of the percentage of women within various sectors of Japanese industry, he stated that “the presence of many

⁵⁰ Faison, *Managing Women*, 51-55, 58-59.

⁵¹ Faison, *Managing Women*, 65.

women workers in mining work, which involves hardship and many physical dangers, is in itself a problem, whose seriousness is intensified by the fact that these are many women... employed in underground work.”⁵² He, in turn, asserted that “it should be remembered that these girls are future mothers, who need protection physically as well as morally” and the “social effects of the presence of many young women in mines... must be seriously considered.”⁵³ As part of his subsequent articles in which he discussed the general workings conditions of large-scale Japanese industries and the relative legislation meant to address these industries, Ayusawa regarded the provisions within the revised Factory Act of 1923 relating to maternity protection and more generally improving standards of health and hygiene and shortening workers’ hours as being necessary measures due to the relatively high rates of infectious diseases and fatal accidents amongst the female workforce.⁵⁴ He concluded that because the textile industry “depends to a very large extent on the employment of vast numbers of young women workers,” the problems created by Japan’s industrialization are “essentially a problem affecting women, and therefore also the future well-being of the Japanese

⁵² Iwao F. Ayusawa, “The Employment of Women in Japanese Industry: I,” *International Labour Review* 19, no. 2 (1929): 204.

⁵³ Ayusawa, “The Employment of Women in Japanese Industry: I,” 204.

⁵⁴ Iwao F. Ayusawa, “The Employment of Women in Japanese Industry: II.” *International Labour Review* 19, no. 3 (1929): 385-395; Ayusawa, “The Employment of Women in Japanese Industry: III,” 510.

race.”⁵⁵ Ayusawa demonstrated in these articles how the impetus for many of the Japanese government’s initiatives to intervene in the nation’s textile industry was allowing women to remain productive workers within textile plants while also having them fulfill their domestic obligations as future mothers.

Between the early Meiji period and the end of the Second World War, the treatment of the predominantly female workforce of Japan’s textile industry on the part of both cotton and silk textile companies and imperial government officials was based on women’s designated roles in Japanese society at the time. First, the recruiting system textile companies utilized to hire young women from rural farming families throughout Japan demonstrates how these companies often portrayed themselves as surrogate parents of these workers and as such used the family-like structure of traditional Japanese society to demand workers’ loyalty to both their employers and the nation. Second, textile companies’ wide array of business practices used to restrict workers’ personal lives, such as the dormitory system, extensive working hours, and “forced savings” imposed on wages, further illustrate the sense of paternalism cotton and silk manufacturers exhibited in managing these workers based on assumptions relating to their youth, gender, and rural background. Third, the educational initiatives instituted by textile companies also promoted female factory workers’

⁵⁵Ayusawa, “The Employment of Women in Japanese Industry: III,” 520.

current roles as vital components of the nation's industrializing economy as well as their domestic responsibilities as both filial daughters and future mothers. The various actions by the imperial government that directly impacted the nation's textile industry, which included specific pieces of legislation as well as state-sponsored organizations, ultimately supported the same gendered roles for these women in Japanese society in how these initiatives promoted domestic values of motherhood along with the national interests of modernizing the economy. The state and the textile industry in Imperial Japan, therefore, worked collectively to impose these specific gender roles on young women in an effort to facilitate the nation's modernization process.

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