

Voices from the Past: Primary Source Packet

Document A: Farmers

Among the laws designed to modernize Japanese society in the late Meiji period was the 1898 Meiji Civil Code. Among its many provisions, the Code gave landlords the right to buy, sell, and lease land. Tenant farm families who had farmed the land for generations were not protected and were often displaced by these reforms. According to historians, only 28 percent of Japan's farm families in the late 1800s owned the land they farmed. A variety of factors caused agriculture to become even more difficult. Development of synthetic fabrics undercut the market for silk, a major agricultural product in Japan. When the Japanese government allowed rice to be imported, income for rice farmers went down. Whether they owned or rented the land, farm families suffered. Some farm families turned to other jobs, sold their daughters into prostitution, or migrated to Japan's colonies in Asia or to the Americas.

Farmer Voice #1: Shiuya Teisuke was a young farmer in the Kanto region. In the 1920s, he became involved in the fight for agrarian rights. He reflected on his experiences in his journal.

Working in the rice paddy with his ox, he noted in his diary of late May 1925: "The ox is so tired he barely moves. Red leeches cling to his and my legs. . . . My ankles are painful with holes made by the leeches, which suck my blood." . . . Again in mid-June, he wrote, "My younger brother and I hoe the rice paddy. The rain beats on our bodies from all directions. . . . Soon we are soaking wet. Both of us began to feel stomach pains. My youngest brother complains, almost in tears. I feel like crying too. Ah, such hard work! What kind of life is this? The way we work is full of contradictions. . . . At four-thirty the whistle of the silk mill blows. My brother and I leave the rice field and go [to collect the] human waste [from the mill]. . . . We transport four carloads. By the time we return the buckets to the [railroad] station, it is eleven at night."

Farmer Voice #2: A The following reflection is from a farmer active in the agrarian reform movement:

I used to get up early in the morning to go to the rice field and work all day, then come home and sleep. This was my daily routine. I would work day after day, and yet my condition did not improve at all. I began to think that to spend my whole life like this would be like being in prison all my life. I began to feel keenly how miserable a farmer's life is. I kept wondering if there wasn't anything I could do about my life. I was twenty-one then. In those days the schools emphasized Ninomiya Sontoku's basic principles [that is, the virtue of hard work and frugality] and the concept of enriching and strengthening the nation. In the fifty households in our village, I was the only person who had gone to school two years beyond the six years of compulsory education.

Source: Mikiso Hane, *Peasants, Rebels, and Outcasts: The Underside of Modern Japan* (New York: Pantheon, 1982: 32-33. Used by permission.

Document B: Burakumin

The *burakumin* [hamlet people] are a minority who make up about 2% of the population of Japan. Unlike the Ainu people of northern Japan, this minority group is not seen as racially different. Instead, it is set apart by the occupations of its members. During the Tokugawa period, when class distinctions were a foundation of social organization in Japan, *burakumin* worked in jobs society considered the most menial and unsanitary, such as butchering animals and preparing products, such as leather, from dead animals.

As Japan modernized, *burakumin* continued to work in the same traditional occupations, and prejudice against this group of people persisted—even though modern laws prohibited discrimination against them. Despite these laws, prejudice locked the *burakumin* into the lowest work even as the economy grew. This group was segregated in slum housing typically located near garbage dumps, slaughterhouses, jails, or human-waste disposal sites.

Burakumin Voice #1: The author of the following passage was a young boy in the 1920s. His family lived in the *burakumin* ghetto in Kure, in Hiroshima prefecture. This is his description of where he lived:

[It] was a ravine surrounded by hills, and through the middle ran a clear brook. Houses surrounded the brook. This was the *buraku*, and our house was located along the edge of the brook. The house, owned by the city, consisted of one four-mat room and a two-mat kitchen. It was a very small house into which our family of seven was crammed. . . . At the entrance to this section of the city there was a naval penitentiary. Across from the bridge was a place where animals were slaughtered, and nearby was the tannery. Slightly beyond that point was a large kettle where animal fat was processed. There were also mounds of oxen bones, refuse piles, a place to dispose of stray dogs, a crematorium, a graveyard, and a shop where objects were made from dog hides. Who would bother to hire people like us, living in such an odious environment? Not only did they not hire us, they treated us like subhuman creatures. They called the bridge at the entrance to our section the “Bridge of Hell.” Parents told their children, “Don’t go across the bridge or you’ll get into terrible trouble. . . . The people who live there kill oxen and dogs and eat the meat. . . . You can’t tell what they’ll do to you.”

Burakumin Voice #2: The author of this passage was a woman born in 1913. She lived in an Osaka *buraku*. Here are his recollections:

I cannot forget the discrimination I underwent in school. Often other children would tell me, “Go away, you stink”; or they would say, “That girl is from *that* village,” and would not include me in whatever they were doing. They would not let me join in when they were playing jump rope. They would block my way and sneer at me. Whenever something got lost, they would pick on *buraku* children saying, “You must have taken it.” Once a teacher, that had just returned from the army, told us, “It’s you kids’ fault,” when something disappeared. It made us so mad that we spent a week looking for the real culprit.

Source: Mikiso Hane, *Peasants, Rebels, and Outcasts: The Underside of Modern Japan* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 151, 157. Used by permission.

Document C: Factory Workers

The textile industry was one of the earliest successes of Meiji industrialization. Most of the workers in this industry were women and children. These workers generally enjoyed few benefits from their new roles as wage laborers in the Meiji economic miracle. The conditions in which they worked were harsh. Machinery was dangerous, safety precautions were uncommon, and work hours were long. As in many new industries, workers lived in dormitories near the factories, and their freedom to leave the site was limited. These dormitories were crowded, damp, and dirty. Infectious diseases such as tuberculosis were common among textile workers. At the beginning of the 20th century, historians estimate, 20-25% of children aged 12-15 working in Japan's wool mills died after less than three years. Workers sent the small pay they received back home to pay off the work contract. A common saying of the time was, "A dagger is not needed to kill a girl worker. Just choke her to death with the texture and fineness of the fiber."

Factory Worker Voice #1: A 1906 government report on conditions in the factories includes the following dialogue between the investigators and women factory workers.

Q: Do you get scolded?

A: We are taken to a room next to the office and are reprimanded there. We are also beaten. And, until we show a change of heart, we are kept there in the dark for several days.

Q: Are you fed?

A: No.

Q: Are there other forms of punishment?

A: If anyone steals something she is stripped naked and marched around the factory with a flag attached to her shoulders. They then take her to the dining hall and report her misdeed to everybody. . . . This spring a girl in the next room took *geta* [wooden clogs], which her roommate purchased for 70 sen. She was stripped naked, had the *geta* and a red flag bearing the words "*geta* thief" strapped to her shoulders, and was then marched around the factory.

Q: Do youngsters of seven and eight work only during the day or do they work at night, too?

A: They work at night, too. Since the supervisors are strict during the day, the children clean up the plant. But at night things are less closely supervised, so they don't do much cleaning. Even in the winter we wear only one unlined kimono. . . .

Q: Do they fall asleep in the factory?

A: If they fall asleep they are scolded and beaten.

Q: Do they get paid?

A: They are paid 8 sen. Then 7 sen is deducted for food, so they get only 1 sen.

Q: Are children charged 7 sen, too?

A: They are charged the same amount [for food as the adults].

Q: Are there many young children?

A: There are about ten workers who are seven or eight. There are many who are ten years old.

Source: Mikiso Hane, *Peasants, Rebels, and Outcasts: The Underside of Modern Japan* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 186. Used by permission.

Factory Worker Voice #2: Women textile workers created songs to record their experiences and feelings. This is one example.

“In the Midst of Mountains Everybody Knows”

In the midst of the mountains everybody knows,
Where the sound one hears is the sound of waterfalls
One finds the Fuji Cotton-Spinning Company of Suruga

I came here as a punishment for defying my parent
Now I toil at Suruga,
Never to defy my parents again.

People come to Suruga,
Thinking they will save money,
But one cannot make any money here.

We don't sleep at night, we work the evening shift.
Our life spans are shortened.
All of the us are wretched, all....

Though the regulations are unjust,
This factory was a built on regulations.
And if they are broken it's an offense....

Stealthily I creep to the gate
To be abused by the gatekeeper.
Weeping, I flee to the dormitory.

The full moon is in the shadow of the clouds,
My parents in the shade of the mountains;
And I in the shadow of the factory's cotton.

Source: E. Patricia Tsurumi, *Factory Girls: Women in the Thread Mills of Meiji Japan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 159. Reproduced by permission of Princeton University Press.

Document D: Prostitutes

Historian Mikiso Hane has studied and written about the experiences of prostitutes in the early 1900s. He has captured many of their accounts in his books. Hane points out that many young girls were sold into prostitution both in Japan and abroad. The numbers were especially high in years when crops failed. Although the girls had no choice in the matter, the public had little sympathy for them, assuming they chose this way of life. When society recognized that poverty was forcing girls into prostitution, it actually put pressure on them to become prostitutes in order to help their families. That is, becoming a prostitute was a way of showing filial piety.

Most of the women sold into prostitution could not read or write. Thus, only a few written accounts of their experiences exist.

Prostitute Voice #1: In the early 1900s, the author of this passage was a young girl whose family sold her sister into prostitution. This is part of their story.

When my older sister fell into the pathetic world of prostitutes, I was too young to know what had happened. When I woke up one morning, my gentle sister was gone. When I asked my mother where she was, my mother told me: "Your sister has gone to a far-off place in order to save all of you. Poor thing! When you grow up you must be kind to her. You must not forget the debt you owe her." In the spring of my seventeenth year, I was invited to stay with my sister. I used to hide behind the stairway, where my sister was on display in a shameful fashion, and weep. I felt tremendous hatred toward the men who came and made lewd, insulting remarks to her. . . . My sister sacrificed her life to save our family from poverty. During the course of ten years of slavery, she surely committed many sins. If only this kind of system did not exist; if only the government would ban it, then no one could enter this way of life even if she wanted to. Since the system exists and the government permits it . . . human flesh is sold and people sink into the pit.

Prostitute Voice #2: The following diary excerpts were written by a young woman who became a prostitute to help her family in the 1920s.

What a fool I've been! I can cry and wail about what happened to me, but there is nothing that I can do to undo what has happened. Whose fault is it that I am in this despicable state? It is the broker's fault! He took advantage of my naivete and slyly talked me into this situation. But I am also disgusted at my own stupidity. I hate myself!

After I came to this place and, as the true state of things became clear to me, I realized that what I had feared . . . was in fact a reality. I then tried to leave, but it was no longer possible. I had already accepted a loan from them. And the money disappeared as quickly as water thrown on burning stone. So I can't leave. I can't run away. It's impossible. I'd be arrested by the police. I tried to resign myself to the situation by telling myself that this was my fate. But I couldn't resign myself to my plight. I became desperate. I tried to kill myself. But I held back because I had to think about my feeble mother and young sister. . . .

Source: Mikiso Hane, *Peasants, Rebels, and Outcasts: The Underside of Modern Japan* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 215-216. Used by permission.

Document E: Miners

No matter where it is undertaken, mining has always been back-breaking and dangerous work. In Japan prior to and into the early Meiji period, coal mining was undertaken by the government, using convict labor. But as industrialization expanded, mining grew as a private industry, requiring paid laborers. Men, women, and children all found work in the mines.

Miner Voice #1: After her father died, the author of this recollection went to work in the mines. Only 13 at the time, the miner describes the hard work women and girls did in the mines.

The mines were a dangerous place. . . . A cave-in might occur at any moment. There were times when gas came out. Then a blue ball of fire would shoot through the mines. . . . the water was always seeping in. . . . and it was hot. The women's job was to transport the coal that had been mined. The coal was loaded onto a 4 foot square wooden box. The bottom of the box had metal runners. We had to pull this box with a sash over our shoulders. . . . Where it was uphill, there were wooden logs that served as rails to make it easier to pull the box. Going downhill, when the angle of the slope was over thirty degrees, we would get on our hands and knees, grab the log railings firmly, hold back the box with our heads, and slowly crawl down backwards. With a lamp in our mouths and with our heads holding back the box full of coal, we would feel our way down, inch by inch . . . If you slipped, it wouldn't be only you who got hurt because there were others ahead of you. Some of the women had babies on their backs . . . Once a friend of mine was coming down the slope with her daughter. We were going up. All of a sudden the boxes began to tumble down and her daughter was killed . . .

Source: Linda K. Menton, Noren W. Lush, Eileen H. Tamura, and Chance I. Gusukuma, *The Rise of Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 75-76.

Miner Voice #2: A female miner and mother reflects on work in the mines.

I raised my children while working in the mines. It was really rough going into the mines then. I would get up at two in the morning and quietly prepare breakfast. . . . I would then wake my child up when it was still dark. The child would rub his eyes and complain. I would yell at him and take him to the nursery. They used to take care of him for 8 sen a day. I would leave him there, wondering if I would ever see him again. . . . "Will today be the day he is going to lose his parents?" I would wonder. So I was able to see my children only at night.

Source: Mikiso Hane, *Peasants, Rebels, and Outcasts: The Underside of Modern Japan* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 235. Used by permission.