

The Chorus of the Forgotten:
Silk Worker Songs from Meiji and Taishō Japan

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Amid the rhythm of heavy machinery and the stifling heat of steaming cocoons, faint voices rose above the factory clamor. “Working in a mill is like working a prison. The only difference is that we don’t wear metal chains” sang female silk operatives at the Yamaju Silk Mill in Okaya City, Japan during the late Taishō period (1921-1926).¹ These haunting lyrics, from a song titled “Prison Lament,” capture the deep sense of confinement and hardship experienced by female factory workers. While this single song offers a glimpse into the lived experience of silk spinners, its meaning expands when read alongside the broader collection of songs composed and sung by these women. Factory songs create an oral history archive, documenting not only the complex emotions and daily hardships of silk operators but also expressing subtle forms of resistance, resilience, and solidarity through music.

Factory songs serve as a window into the broader historical forces reshaping Japan. Following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japan rapidly transformed from a feudal society into a modern industrial state, a shift that accelerated through the Taishō period.² The government-initiated industrialization policies, to compete with Western powers. Through policies that promoted infrastructure, education, and industrial growth, the state actively encouraged the development of key sectors such as textiles, especially silk, which became Japan’s leading export and a vital source of foreign revenue.³ This economic restructuring disrupted traditional class and gender roles. The collapse of the feudal system created new, although limited, opportunities for social mobility, while industrial capitalism generated a large demand for cheap labor. Women

¹ Sandra Schaal, *Discovering Women’s Voices: The Lives of Modern Japanese Silk Mill Workers in Their Own Words* (Brill, 2022), 93.

² The Meiji Restoration of 1868 was a political revolution in Japan that ended feudal rule, restored imperial authority, and initiated rapid modernization and Westernization. The Meiji period lasted from 1868-1912 and was followed by the Taishō period from 1912-1926. During the Taishō period, Japan was ruled by Emperor Taishō, and under his reign the country experienced a shift towards democracy and liberalism. Dasa Mortensen, “Tokugawa Era (1603-1867)” Class Lecture, Davidson College, February 17, 2025.

³ Janet Hunter, *Japanese Women Working* (Routledge, 1993), 1.

and girls from rural areas in particular became central to the workforce in silk-reeling factories, under extremely exploitative conditions.⁴ These shifts not only fueled Japan's economic rise but also redefined labor, gender, and class dynamics in the modern era.

Prior to the Meiji period, women had long played a central role in Japan's silk industry. Historical records show women receiving wages for their labor in silk production beginning in 1766.⁵ They were deeply involved in every stage of the process: raising silkworms (sericulture), harvesting cocoons, and reeling silk thread by hand.⁶ This work was traditionally conducted within rural households and communities. However, the Meiji era brought significant structural changes to this centuries-old system. As Japan rapidly industrialized and entered the global market, the demand for silk surged. Production became more mechanized and segmented: sericulture and reeling, once intertwined processes, were divided into separate, specialized occupations. Large-scale silk reeling factories emerged to streamline production and boost exports. Historian of Japanese women, Gail Lee Bernstein, notes that by the end of the 19th century and into the 1920s, "silk thread was the major Japanese export commodity," bringing in foreign capital that supported state-led industrial development.⁷ This rapid expansion of the industry drove an equally dramatic rise in the female labor force: the number of women working in textile factories grew from roughly 269,000 in 1902 to over 863,000 by 1912, with female silk operatives comprising the overwhelming majority.⁸

⁴ Janet, *Japanese Women Working*, 68.

⁵ Gail Lee Bernstein, "Women in the Silk-reeling Industry in Nineteenth-Century Japan," in *Japan and the World* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1988), 55-57.

⁶ The silk reeling process is strenuous, beginning with unraveling the single silk filament of a silkworm, removing the filament from the cocoon, and combining it with other filaments to create a thread. Bernstein, "Women in the Silk-reeling Industry," 56.

⁷ Bernstein, "Women in the Silk-reeling Industry," 54.

⁸ E. Patricia Tsurumi, *Factory Girls: Women in the Thread Mills of Meiji Japan* (Princeton University Press, 1990), 3.

The shift to factory-based production in Japan was accompanied by a reorganization of labor, with factory owners and recruitment agents aggressively targeting young girls from impoverished rural areas. Promising good wages, room and board, and opportunities for a better life, recruiters used deceptive tactics to entice poor families to send their daughters into the silk trade. According to Yasue Aoki Kidd, a scholar of Japanese women's labor history, "recruiters resorted to exaggeration, depiction, and outright lies...also known to bribe village heads...with presents or money to win their cooperation."⁹ By fabricating the realities of working conditions, payment systems, and life in the mills, recruiters exploited the hopes of rural families and their economic vulnerability. As the demand for factory labor grew, employers increasingly targeted younger girls, "even children of 10 years of age were enticed into the mills," as noted by Bernstein.¹⁰

For many families, this arrangement was a financial necessity. Though exploitative, factory labor offered young women wages that exceeded what they could earn in their home villages. Many workers sent a portion of their earnings home, supporting their households and contributing to rural survival.¹¹ However, these wages came at a steep cost, as working conditions inside the silk factories were grueling. Silk operatives worked twelve to fifteen hours a day in suffocating environments filled with heat, steam, and the smells of boiling cocoons. Poor ventilation, unsanitary conditions, and constant exposure to hazardous machinery led to widespread health issues, including respiratory illness, skin rashes, and limb loss.¹²

⁹ Yasue Aoki Kidd, "Women Workers in the Japanese Cotton Mills: 1880-1920," (Cornell University, 1978), 10.

¹⁰ Bernstein, "Women in the Silk-reeling Industry," 60.

¹¹ Bernstein, "Women in the Silk-reeling Industry," 61.

¹² Bernstein, "Women in the Silk-reeling Industry," 60.

Beyond the workroom, conditions remained harsh, offering workers little escape. Bernstein discusses how the food lacked in nutrition and was “inadequate for the harsh labor demands made on the workers.”¹³ Many of the workers experienced stunted growth and weight loss.¹⁴ Moreover, they lived in overcrowded and unsanitary dormitories, often housing up to fifty workers in a single room with shared bedding. These conditions facilitated the rapid spread of illnesses like tuberculosis and pleurisy.¹⁵ Additionally, supervisors closely observed both labor and rest, turning the factory into a tightly controlled and surveillance-oriented environment. Silk factories operated as institutions, regimenting workers’ bodies, time, and behavior.

Yet within this tightly controlled environment, women found ways to express themselves, cope with their realities, and even resist. One of the most powerful forms of expression was song. Workers composed and shared verses that captured their daily experiences, grievances, and aspirations. Factory songs served not only as emotional outlets but also as a form of oral history, preserving women’s voices in an era where their contributions were often overlooked or erased. I argue that the songs composed and sung by silk workers in Meiji and Taishō era Japan function as powerful forms of oral history, capturing not only the resilience and resistance, but also the everyday realities and emotions of working-class women. More than personal expressions, these worker’s songs operate as cultural metaphors that both reflect and critique the broader transformations of the Japanese state in its industrial development, economic restructuring, and construction of gendered moral narratives.

¹³ Janet, *Japanese Women Working*, 88.

¹⁴ Janet, *Japanese Women Working*, 90.

¹⁵ Bernstein, “Women in the Silk-reeling Industry,” 63.

Sandra Schaal's *Discovering Women's Voices: The Lives of Modern Japanese Silk Mill Workers in Their Own Words* is my primary source for this project.¹⁶ Schaal offers the most comprehensive analysis of the lives of female silk workers in early 20th-century Japan, examining their experiences through thread-reeling songs and interviews with former workers. Schaal moves beyond the conventional narrative that portrays silk mill workers solely as victims by highlighting the women's own voices and capturing the complexity of their experiences. Using oral history, she centers the perspectives of female silk operatives, challenging dominant historical narratives, and recognizing the cultural value of these women's lived experiences. Building on Schaal's framework in this paper, I conduct an analysis of four of the forty-five songs she examines, as these are fully translated into English in her book.

Scholars typically frame female silk workers as victims within broader narratives of industrialization, economic, and labor history. Gail Lee Bernstein emphasizes how rural women's longstanding involvement in sericulture made them a vital but vulnerable workforce during Japan's industrialization, arguing that their labor was foundational to the nation's economic transformation while also exposing them to systemic exploitation. Janet Hunter, as editor of *Japanese Women Working* (1993), compiles historical research that examines the experiences of women workers in Japan, challenging prevailing narratives and highlighting the economic and social constraints faced by women workers in Meiji and Taisho Japan. Additionally, her book, *Women and the Labour Market in Japan's Industrializing Economy: The Textile Industry Before the Pacific War* (2003), examines the complex labor markets of Japan, providing critical background about women in the textile industry. While much of the

¹⁶ Sandra Schaal, *Discovering Women's Voices: The Lives of Modern Japanese Silk Mill Workers in Their Own Words* (Brill, 2022).

scholarship has focused on structural exploitation and economic conditions, a smaller body of work focuses to the voices of the workers themselves, through their songs, as a means of recovering their lived experiences and agency. Most notably Patricia E. Tsurumi, Mariko Tamanoi Asano, and the aforementioned Sandra Schaal, have offered new perspectives to the understanding of female factory workers. Tamanoi expands upon on her earlier work of *komori* songs by examining factory worker songs, legitimizing them as oral historical evidence and interpreting them as subtle forms of resistance.¹⁷ Tsurumi critiques dominant narratives that depict workers as passive victims of exploitation, arguing instead that factory songs reveal a more nuanced reality of the women's lives, thereby contributing to a more accurate and complex historical understanding.

These scholars provide essential groundwork for my analysis, which will contribute to the scholarship by reframing factory songs not only as records of individual experience but also as cultural metaphors for Japan's broader social and economic transformations. My analysis unfolds in three parts. First, I emphasize the importance of these songs as forms of oral history, building upon Tamanoi's and Tsurumi's recognition of their historical value. Second, I examine the nuanced meanings within the songs to uncover what they reveal about the daily realities, thoughts, and emotions of silk operatives. Finally, I aim to fill a crucial gap in the historiography: using the songs as lenses to explore the broader forces shaping Japan's modernization, and examining how themes of labor, control, and aspiration embedded in the lyrics reflect the evolving dynamics of the nation-state, industrialization, economic shifts, and moral narratives.

¹⁷ *Komori* directly translates to "nursemaid" in English. This role will be expanded upon throughout the paper.

While traditional histories have often silenced the voices of working-class women, their songs offer candid, emotional testimonies that challenge the dominant narratives. During Japan's modern imperial period (1868-1945), *komori*, young girls from working class families that were hired out as childcare workers, used songs not simply to pass the time, but to voice the pain and experiences of their daily lives.¹⁸ These girls, many of whom were indentured for years, denied education, and scorned by society as poor and promiscuous, utilized songs to express their reality.¹⁹ Though the creators and lyricists of these songs are unknown, historian Mariko Asano Tamanoi, who studies songs as forms of oral history, notes that "many songs seem to have originated in pre-Meiji peasant song," reflecting a long-standing oral tradition.²⁰ Carried through generations of working women, these songs evolved over time, adapting to reflect the individual experiences of each singer. One counting song, altered from an educational song promoting female morality, explicitly lists their sufferings:

"One, we are all bullied.
Two, we are all hated.
Three, we are all forced to talk.
Four, we are all scolded....."
Five, we are all forced to carry babies who cry a lot....."²¹

These lyrics reveal a world where abuse, poor working conditions, and exploitation were everyday realities. More than songs, they were the *komori*'s weapons: tools of resistance and truth-telling in a society that denied their experiences.²² As Tamanoi

¹⁸ Although *komori* translates directly to "nursemaid" in English, its meaning is broader, typically referring to young girls who served as childcare providers in villages and small towns. These girls came from working-class families and often began working at a young age to help support their households, frequently caring for both their employers' children and their own younger siblings at the same time. Mariko Asano Tamanoi, "Songs as Weapons: The Culture and History of Komori (Nursemaids) in Modern Japan," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 50, no. 4 (1991): 798.

¹⁹ Tamanoi, "Songs as Weapons," 798.

²⁰ Tamanoi, "Songs as Weapons," 808.

²¹ Tamanoi, "Songs as Weapons," 798.

²² Tamanoi, "Songs as Weapons," 812.

emphasizes, “the language of *komori* is oral: it was not written,” it resisted formal power structures and preserved the lived realities of marginalized girls.²³

Crucially, the tradition of song did not end when these girls left domestic service. Many *komori*, driven by poverty and limited opportunities, became laborers in Japan’s expanding silk factories. There, they carried their familiar songs with them, and “changed the verses of their songs to reflect the thoughts and emotions of their new situation.”²⁴ Cramped inside the mills, they sang of their exhaustion, fleeting hopes, and keeping the memory of factory life alive.

The continuity between *komori* and factory songs illustrates how oral tradition functioned as a bridge between different forms of female labor, and a tool for survival amid exploitation. The songs of the silk workers, like those of the *komori*, are invaluable historical sources, rich with meaning about the lived realities of Japan’s working women. Yet, like all oral histories, they have advantages and limitations. Factory songs not only illuminate the emotional and social worlds of silk workers but also underscore the challenges of interpreting oral traditions as historical evidence.

In the case of factory songs, most surviving lyrics have been translated from Japanese to English, and in this process, some of the original nuance and meaning may have been lost. Certain songs relied on rhyme schemes or dialectal expressions in Japanese that do not fully carry over in translation.²⁵ Furthermore, because these songs were passed down orally, often altered across regions and generations, they are difficult to precisely date or geographically

²³ Tamanoi, “Songs as Weapons,” 809.

²⁴ Tamanoi, “Songs as Weapons,” 808.

²⁵ Schaal, *Discovering Women’s Voices*, 91.

locate. Scholars can only estimate their origins by analyzing the dialects in which they were sung and tracing references to factory technology.²⁶ Some of the factory songs were original compositions by the workers themselves, while others were adaptations of popular or educational songs, with lyrics cleverly altered to reflect the specific realities of factory life.²⁷

Despite these challenges, the songs remain an essential historical source. In a world where those in power shape the dominant narratives, these verses offer forms that are honest, deeply personal, and directly from the voices of marginalized women. They speak vividly to working conditions, food quality, emotional distress, and daily life, as described by Historian Sandra Schall, these songs “tell much of the history that has been denied them.”²⁸ These songs do not complement the historical record; they challenge it, prompting a reconsideration of labor, resistance, and women’s voices in Japan’s modern era.

Analysis of song lyrics reveals that they are simultaneously laced with irony and personal reflection while offering powerful insights into the resistance and resilience of the women who worked in Japan's silk mills. These songs are not merely a reflection of victimhood; rather, they serve as an essential outlet for expressing frustrations, critiquing harsh working conditions, and asserting women’s sense of agency in a rigid and oppressive system. Through these songs, women created a space for subtle resistance, one that allowed them to navigate the complex balance between survival and protest in their everyday lives.

²⁶ Schaal, *Discovering Women’s Voices*, 57.

²⁷ Schaal, *Discovering Women’s Voices*, 59.

²⁸ E. Patricia Tsurumi, “Yet to Be Heard: The Voices of Meiji Factory Women,” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 26, no. 4 (1994): 20.

The conditions these silk operatives faced were harsh: poor food, long hours, constant surveillance, and unrealistic production quotas. The song “Inspections” reveals the constant fear of master inspections, where workers were scrutinized for their performance:

“Wish the inspector was blind.
Especially if his eyes are big.
More than the master, fineness is scary.
You get penalties, and you’re scolded...
You don’t need a knife to kill a mill girl.
Just strangle her with thread
weight and fineness...”²⁹

The line “Wish the inspector was blind” conveys workers’ anxiety under relentless surveillance, while the lyric “fineness is scary” reveals the challenging nature of the silk production and the quality standards they were held to. Moreover, the phrase “You don’t need a knife to kill a mill girl. Just strangle her with thread weight and fineness” serves as a metaphor for the physical and mental toll these workers endured. Strangling is a slow and painful process, one that breaks down the body, similar to the effects of their laboring. This song serves as a form of resilience, turning the pains and pressure of factory life into dark humor.

Moreover, the lyrics of “Homesick” reveal the emotional complexity of factory women’s lives, blending longing, endurance, and quiet resilience:

“On rainy days and at twilight time,
I remember home...
I can’t wait to cross Nomugi at the end
of the year.
I want to hear the folks say
“Has our girl come home?””³⁰

²⁹ Song 1, Primary Source Appendix, Schaal, *Discovering Women’s Voices*, 77.

³⁰ Song 2, Primary Source Appendix, Schaal, *Discovering Women’s Voices*, 81.

These lyrics capture a deep sense of nostalgia and emotional displacement. The mention of “rainy days” and “twilight time” evokes moments of reflection, when homesickness becomes the most intense. The desire to “cross Nomugi at the end of the year” suggests both a physical journey and an emotional return, symbolizing the hope of reuniting with loved ones. The imagined greeting, “Has our girl come home?” emphasizes the worker’s longing for recognition and belonging. While this song acknowledges the pain of separation, it also affirms the enduring strength of memory and the importance of familial identity as a source of resilience.

Women also recognize their crucial role in Japan’s economy, discussing their importance to the silk industry in the "Silk Reeling Mill Song":

“Silk mill girls are extremely cute.
They are birds in a cage you don’t see anywhere else...
Don’t give us that, “Mill girl, mill girl.”
When we get home, we’ll be treasured.
Don’t disrespect us, calling out “Mill girl, mill girl.”
We’re the ones that bear sons that’ll be strong and tall.”³¹

The lines, “Silk mill girls are extremely cute. They are birds in a cage you don’t see anywhere else” acknowledges worker’s exploitation but also highlights their indispensable contribution to Japan’s production of wealth. The metaphor of “birds in a cage” captures both the perceived value of these women and their lack of freedom, highlighting how the state exploited their labor while keeping them confined. Moreover, the final lines claiming, “Don’t give us that ‘Mill girl, mill girl.’ When we get home, we’ll be treasured” offers an interesting juxtaposition. While the term 'mill girl' was often used in a derogatory sense to imply poverty, for rural women, mill work was regarded as an honorable opportunity. This tension serves as an example of

³¹ Song 3, Primary Source Appendix, Schaal, *Discovering Women’s Voices*, 79.

resilience: whether by explicitly demanding respect or by highlighting their sacrifices, not only as workers but as future mothers who will “bear sons that’ll be strong and tall.”

The lyrics from “Ah, The Way Things Got to Be (Parody)” use humor and irony to critique the poor conditions in the silk mill, particularly the inadequate food provided in the chow hall:

“The worst food in the world
Is found at Ōmi Silk Mill chow hall.
You eat and eat, but it doesn’t stick to you.
Even if that’s the way it is—
the way things got to be,
You’ll get thinner and thinner.
Wouldn’t you agree”³²

The phrase “you’ll get thinner and thinner,” appears multiple times throughout the song, highlighting not only the lack of nutrition, but a satirical commentary on the physical toll of factory life. It reflects the very real impact of malnutrition and overwork on the women’s bodies. By making light of such a serious issue, the song functions as a form of parodic resistance. The silk operatives acknowledge their suffering, but through humor and sarcasm, they subvert the official narrative of order and prosperity promoted by the state and factory management.

Across these songs, resilience emerges not simply as endurance, but as a deeply embedded form of resistance. The metaphors in “Inspections”, the quiet emotional strength in “Homesick,” the pride in labor expressed in the “Silk Reeling Mill Song,” and the use of humor as critique in “Ah, The Way Things Got to Be (Parody)” all challenge the conditions imposed upon these silk operatives. In a system that sought to exploit their labor while limiting their autonomy, the act of

³² Schaal, *Discovering Women’s Voices*, 91.

asserting dignity, through collective song, became a means of pushing back. This resilience was not passive; it was an active, everyday form of resistance. These songs give voices to these women offering a deeper, more nuanced understanding of their experiences.

As Japan underwent rapid industrialization, economic expansion, and social reordering, the lived experiences of female silk workers were inextricably tied to the nation's broader transformations. These historical shifts not only shaped the conditions of factory labor but also influenced the language and content of the workers' songs. Their lyrics reveal the hidden costs of modernization: long hours, low pay, harsh discipline, and the reshaping of gender roles. At the same time, factory songs also express pride, resilience, and a sense of contribution. In this way, worker songs both reflect and resist the ideological forces of the time, capturing how Japan's industrial and economic rise depended not only on technology and policy, but also on the labor, suffering, and voices of its most vulnerable citizens.

Therefore, the songs composed and sung by female silk workers offer more than personal reflection, they serve as powerful metaphors for the transformation of Japan. The silk mills, which initially developed in rural areas close to raw material production sites, became central hubs for industrialization as Japan's silk trade expanded into a major export.³³ Historian Schall notes that these mills were concentrated in regions such as "Nagano, Gifu, Yamanashi, Aichi, Yamagata, Saitama, Fukushima, and Gunma prefectures," with Nagano being the largest hub, referred to as the "Silk-Reeling Kingdom."³⁴ With the onset of large-scale mechanization in Japan's silk industry, factory owners sought to reduce costs by securing cheap labor, often hiring young women from "remote, impoverished areas, such as mountain villages and the snow

³³ Bernstein, "Women in the Silk-reeling Industry," 54.

³⁴ Schaal, *Discovering Women's Voices*, 42.

country.”³⁵ These women, coming from poor regional areas, had limited opportunities for employment in their home villages. Driven by financial necessity, many entered the silk industry as temporary migrant workers, often unmarried, since the factory system did not accommodate traditional family structures. The emotional toll of their separation from home is poignantly captured in the lyrics of the “Homesick” song: “On rainy days and at twilight time, I remember home.”³⁶ Such expressions of longing illustrate the deep emotional burden placed on workers who were far from their communities, highlighting the personal sacrifices involved in their migration.

Labor and political historian Andrew Gordon further highlights the role of industries, explaining that “private sector-heavy industries, which otherwise would not have emerged at this time or on such a scale, were integral to Japan’s industrialization.”³⁷ This economic structure was pivotal in Japan’s rapid development, with the state using financial support to promote both production and consumption. The industrialization of the silk industry reflects the broader shifts of the Meiji and Taishō eras. As the textile industry became more mechanized, it also shifted towards private ownership, which played a key role in Japan's rapid modernization. This transition brought about significant changes in labor, gender roles, and rural migration. These transformations were deeply intertwined with the experiences of young women workers in silk factories, whose voices, preserved in their songs, offer vital testimony to this era of transformation.

³⁵ Schaal, *Discovering Women’s Voices*, 42.

³⁶ Song 2, Primary Source Appendix, Schaal, *Discovering Women’s Voices*, 81.

³⁷ Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present*, 4th ed. (Oxford University Press, 2020), 100.

Female workers were paid significantly less than their male counterparts, a wage disparity that was systematic across all labor sectors but particularly stark in the silk-reeling industry.³⁸ These inequalities were not incidental, they reinforced the systemic exploitation of women in Japan's industrializing economy. As labor structures shifted, so too did payment systems. Most silk mills adopted multi-year contracts described by Bernstein as "advances, paid to parents as a kind of loan and earnest money."³⁹ Much of the wages these women earned were either sent home or "garnished to repay loans made earlier to their parents when they signed contracts with the mill."⁴⁰ Crucially, compensation varied widely. Separate from loans and advances, actual wages or pocket money were "based on the quality of work," and subject to "regional and temporal variation."⁴¹ The song "Inspections" reveals anxieties around fineness quality, claiming "More than the master, fineness is scary. You get penalties, and you're scolded."⁴² This fear is largely tied to the economic repercussions of poor-quality work, which led to decreased wages that not only affected the worker's income but also impacted her family's survival. In a system where workers were vulnerable to the evaluations of their supervisors, a worker's financial stability was always precarious, heightening stress and contributing to a culture of anxiety surrounding productivity.

These systemic inequalities left women with little agency to contest low pay or improve their conditions. As Japan industrialized, poor rural women became a cheap and expendable labor force, and their labor was devalued by broader societal norms that reinforced gender and class hierarchies. National progress, in this sense, was built on the sacrifice of its most

³⁸ Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan*, 102.

³⁹ Bernstein, "Women in the Silk-reeling Industry," 61.

⁴⁰ Bernstein, "Women in the Silk-reeling Industry," 61.

⁴¹ Bernstein, "Women in the Silk-reeling Industry," 61.

⁴² Song 1, Primary Source Appendix, Schaal, *Discovering Women's Voices*, 77.

vulnerable. Yet these same women formed the backbone of Japan's early industrial growth, a role they often acknowledged in their songs. In the "Silk Reeling Mill Song," factory workers assert their value to the Japanese economy calling themselves "birds in a cage you don't see anywhere else."⁴³ They simultaneously reference their physical confinement within the factories, while considering themselves birds in a cage, a metaphor for something precious to its owner. These oral expressions reveal both a sharp awareness of their contributions to the national economy and a quiet resilience in the face of marginalization. Their silk work was rarely a matter of personal choice; rather, it was a survival strategy in a society that offered rural women few other options. As the economy expanded, so too did its dependence on their labor.

Building on the economic exploitation faced by female silk workers, their levels of education further underscore the intersection of gender, class, and labor in Meiji and Taishō Japan. While wage disparities trapped many workers in cycles of poverty, education, or the lack thereof, compounded these systemic inequalities. The Meiji government's educational reforms aimed to expand access to primary schooling, but for many young female workers in the silk factories, access to education was not a reality, as the economic need for labor took precedence over schooling. Scholar of economic history, Janet Hunter writes "government researchers...in 1903 found that over 40 percent of women in seven spinning mills surveyed had received no education whatsoever."⁴⁴ While the 1924 Labour Force Survey showed progress, as "66 percent of female factory workers had completed the standard six years of primary education and 7 percent had pursued higher levels," some women still entered the workforce before completing schooling due to economic hardship.⁴⁵ Parents often chose to educate sons rather than daughters,

⁴³ Song 3, Primary Source Appendix, Schaal, *Discovering Women's Voices*, 79.

⁴⁴ Janet Hunter, *Women and the Labour Market in Japan's Industrialising Economy: The Textile Industry before the Pacific War*, (Routledge, 2003), 127.

⁴⁵ Hunter, "Women and the Labour Market in Japan's Industrialising Economy," 129-130.

reinforcing gendered access to education. Interestingly, although literacy was not directly tied to work performance, the spread of education was associated with improvements in discipline and efficiency on the factory floor.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, in the realm of oral traditions such as songs, literacy was not required; these songs were passed down through generations and recorded later through oral testimony, preserving a working-class culture independent of formal education.

Furthermore, the economic and educational disparities faced by workers were reinforced through moral narratives promoted by factory owners and state discourse. Following the Meiji restoration, Japan sought to foster a unified national identity. Factory leaders framed their profit-seeking behavior in selfless and nationalistic terms, claiming that labor in the silk industry was for “the sake of society and of mankind as well as for the future of the nation, even if it means sacrificing oneself.”⁴⁷ This rhetoric not only justified exploitative labor practices but also sought to bolster worker morale.

This moral framing is evident in how silk operatives were reimagined within broader gender ideologies. For middle and upper-class women, the feminine ideal was a “good wife, wise mother,” who contributed to the nation through domesticity and moral virtue.⁴⁸ But for working-class girls and women, this ideal was unattainable. Instead, they were reimagined in factory discourse as “‘mothers’ in relation to their silkworms, silk thread, and silk cloth,” encouraged to center their lives around their “silkworm babies,” as a substitute to traditional motherhood.⁴⁹ This metaphor created the idea that their silk work was morally virtuous, and that their

⁴⁶ Hunter, “*Women and the Labour Market in Japan's Industrialising Economy*,” 127.

⁴⁷ Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan*, 101.

⁴⁸ Mariko Asano Tamanoi, “Factory Women,” In *Under the Shadow of Nationalism: Politics and Poetics of Rural Japanese Women*, (University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 89.

⁴⁹ Tamanoi, *Under the Shadow*, 92.

contributions were central to the lifeblood and prosperity of the nation.⁵⁰ In this way, factory work was presented not as a departure from feminine ideals, but as a state-sanctioned form of maternal sacrifice.

Women's entry into the silk industry, often as unmarried, temporary migrant workers, was embedded in the gendered structures of rural society. Sent to the mills by their families out of economic necessity, they were seen as contributors to household survival within the patriarchal family system. These women's roles were defined more by familial and social obligations than by individual agency. The factory system, organized around discipline, productivity, and rigid schedules, was fundamentally incompatible with marriage and family life. Rather than abandoning feminine ideals, national narratives reframed maternal identity onto their labor, using symbolic motherhood as a means of control and moral justification for exploitative practices.

However, factory songs expose and challenge the ideological manipulation embedded in Japanese labor discourse. While factory owners and the state portrayed women's labor as a selfless duty to the nation, these songs reframe that narrative. By transforming imposed moral frameworks, the songs subvert official rhetoric, asserting identities grounded not in service to the nation-state, but in personal experience, familial obligation, and collective struggle. In the "Silk Reeling Mill Song," the workers claim, "Don't give us that, 'Mill girl, mill girl.' When we get home, we'll be treasured... We're the ones that bear sons that'll be strong and tall."⁵¹ The workers redefine themselves, dismissing the limiting stereotype of 'mill girl' and recognizing their significance beyond the factory. They reclaim their maternal identity, and reject the passive

⁵⁰ Tamanoi, *Under the Shadow*, 92.

⁵¹ Song 3, Primary Source Appendix, Schaal, *Discovering Women's Voices*, 79.

role imposed by the state. Instead, they position themselves as active, whose labor is not self-sacrificial for the nation, but rather essential to the survival and well-being of their own families and communities. Through these lyrics, factory songs illuminate how Japan's industrial and economic transformation was inseparable from the reordering of social narratives, especially those tied to class, gender, and the evolving concept of national belonging.

In conclusion, the factory songs of female silk workers offer a powerful form of oral history, preserving the emotions, daily hardships, and lived realities of women whose voices are often excluded from historical narratives. Through vivid lyrics, these songs capture the complex emotions, daily struggles, and lived experiences that defined the female factory experience. As both a cultural expression and a coping mechanism, these songs allowed workers to assert their dignity, critique their conditions, and find resilience in shared struggle. These songs do more than document personal experiences; they serve as subtle forms of resistance, challenging the state's ideological narratives that framed industrial labor as a selfless contribution to national progress. While the state sought to portray workers' sacrifices as part of a unified national goal, these songs reframe labor as essential yet exploited, exposing the contradictions of Japan's industrialization. By offering a counter-narrative to the official rhetoric of sacrifice and unity, the factory songs provide insight into the intersection of gender, labor, and national identity in a rapidly transforming society. In this way, they not only give voice to the women who experienced these conditions firsthand but also serve as an enduring critique of the ideological and industrial forces that shaped their lives.

Primary Source Appendix:

Song 4: 「検査」

糸ひき検査人めくらならよかろ
 わけて検査人の目がでかい
 旦那さんよりテトロがこわい
 バツをとられて叱られる
 早く早くと気はせくけれど
 お手がにぶいか糸むらが
 工女殺すにゃ刃物はいらぬ
 糸目テトロでせめ殺す

糸は「信州上一番」よ
 お手がのろまではかどらぬ
 糸をとるなら程よくおとり
 ガラは十四で目は四十
 かわい主さんに検番させて
 十四—四十と読ませたい
 朝は早よからひと捻ひいて
 無賃糸とは胴欲な

“Inspections”

Wish the inspector was blind.
 Especially if his eyes are big.
More than the master, fineness is scary.
You get penalties, and you're scolded.
 “Hurry! Hurry!” If I rush and press,
 I get clumsy and my thread gets uneven.
You don't need a knife to kill a mill girl.
Just strangle her with thread
weight and fineness.
 Hey! This thread is “for Shinshū—No.1.”
 If your hands are slow, you don't get ahead.
 You better reel right!
 The standard's fourteen; the weight's forty.
 Hey! Let my sweet boyfriend supervise.
 Let him read “14” and “40” just for me.
Start early in the morning,
twisting and pulling,
Then cruel non-payment.

Song 1. “Inspections,” End of Meiji – Taishō?, Nagano Prefecture.

Song 7: 「望郷」

雨の降る日と日の暮れかたは
思い出します家のこと
工場閉って戻れば寄宿
蛙なく夜の故里思い

谷の狭霧か糸ひく湯気か

晴れりや寺の鐘ひるの鐘

思い出します日の暮れかたは
高山御坊の暮れの鐘

早く年明け野麦を越えて

娘こ来たかといわれたい

糸ひきしまえば野麦を越えて

アラキの初市夢に見る
飛騨を出る時や涙で出たが
今じゃ飛騨の風もいや
諏訪の湯の町出てくる時は
一度見返り二度戻る
伊那じゃなむほい
甲州じゃこすい
諏訪のならい(習慣)はございます
八重山吹の咲く頃は

越えて野麦に来ておくれ
秋は淋しく紅葉に暮れて
飛騨が恋しや月の影

わしは行きますあの家さして
いやな煙突あとに見て

“Homesick”

On rainy days and at twilight time,
I remember home.
Back in the dorm after the mill shuts down
I think of the frogs crying out,
in my old village.
The mist of the valley,
or the steam of the job site?
When the evening is clear,
I can almost hear the temple bell.
I recall the sunsets back home,
And the priest ringing the temple bell
at Takayama.

I can't wait to cross Nomugi at the end
of the year.
I want to hear the folks say
“Has our girl come home?”
When I finish this thread-reeling,
I'll cross Nomugi.
I dream of the first fair of the year at Araki.
I left Hida with tears in my eyes.
But now I hate its manners.
When I leave the hot-spring town of Suwa,
I'll look back once, and come back twice.
In Ina, it's “*namuhoi*” *
In Kōshu it's “*kosui*” *
This is what I learnt in Suwa.
When the *Yaeyamabuki*⁵ bloom
on Yae Mountain,
I'll hear the call to cross Nomugi.
Autumn is lonely when the red leaves fade.
I long for Hida under the shadows
of the moon.
I'm gonna leave and head for home
And I'll be leaving all the awful smokestacks
behind.

* *Namuhoi* and *kosui* are both dialectal terms which mean “sly.”

Song 38: 「器械製糸歌」

器械工女と雪持つ笹は
人目楽そで身は辛い

器械工女はかまぼこ育ち
日いい毎日板の上
製糸工女は可愛いてならん
どこも見られん籠の鳥

製糸工女は御殿の桜

御殿桜や見るばかり
板になりたや帳場の板になって
手紙の中みたい
工女殺すに刃物はいらぬ
糸目テドロでせめころす

旦那さんよりテドロがこわい
ばつを取られて叱られて
朝のはよから一捻ひいて

無賃糸は胴欲な
製糸工女と木挽きとねずみ
引かな食われん身じゃわいな

三度三度に菜っ葉たべて
なんで糸目が出るものか

四つ尾山から郡是を見れば
青い工女がしらめとる

“Silk-Reeling Mill Song”

The work of a mill girl may look easy,
Like grass holding up the snow.
But it's a life of toil and pain.
She's raised to be fish paste,
Trapped on the cutting board, day after day.
Silk mill girls are extremely cute.

They are birds in a cage you don't see
anywhere else.

They're like cherry blossoms in a lord's
residence,

Only there to be seen.

What's going on at that counter?

I'd like to see what's in that letter.

You don't need a knife to kill a mill girl.

**Just strangle here with thread weight and
fineness.**

More than the master, fineness is scary.

You get penalties, and you're scolded.

**Start early in the morning, twisting and
pulling.**

Then cruel non-payment.

Silk reeling mill girls, sawyers and mice

**If you don't grind away,
you're nothin' and you don't eat.**

Eating skimpy greens every meal,

And you wonder why I don't get any thread
weight.

If you look down on Gunze from Mt. Yotsuo,

You'll see a pale mill girl picking at lice.

Song 3, “Silk-Reeling Mill Song,” End of Meiji, Kyoto Prefecture: Yamaju Silk Mill.

Continues on Next Page

鬼の片山エンマの波多野

地藏ボサツか新庄さん
鬼の片山いぬ山のせんぼ
しぶてこまこて食われせん

故郷にいるとき噂にきけば
綾部郡是はよいところ
来て見りや噂とまるきりちがう
いまじゃ会社で苦勞する
丹波綾部の郡是の製糸

娘やるなよ繭を売れ
ほんに憂世じゃ糸引女

こんな子をうんだ親みたい
いやな糸取りやめたいけれど
ケンネルさまにはギリがある
切れてよいもの切れてはくれず
にくい糸めがまた切れた

工女、工女と見下げてくれな
家へかえれば箱入娘
工女、工女とけいべつするな

五尺男はだれが生む

The demon Katayama,
the Devil King Hatano,
And Shinjō-san—our savior?

That demon Katayama
He's an Inuyama green persimmon
no one would eat.

Back home folks say
Ayabe's a wonderful place.
But try working here at the Gunze Mill.
And now I'm having a hard time here.
Don't sell your daughters to Tanba Ayabe
Gunze Silk Mill!

Sell cocoons instead.

In this hard world I am a
thread-reeling woman.

What kind of parents sold their child into this?
I want to quit this rotten job,
But I owe too much to the twisting machine.
We can't break away or ditch these machines.
Once again I haven't produced
that damn weight.

Don't give us that, "Mill girl, mill girl."
When we get home, we'll be treasured.
Don't disrespect us, calling out
"Mill girl, mill girl."

We're the ones that bear sons that'll be
strong and tall.

**Song 44: 「『ああそれなのに』
替歌」**

近江絹糸の食堂は
世界で一番まずいもの
食べても食べても身につかん
ああそれなのにそれなのに

ねえ やせるのはやせるのは
あつたりまえでしょう
朝めし御飯をがぶがぶと
食べて工場に入ったら
運転つけよと笛が鳴る
ああそれなのにそれなのに

ねえ やせるのはやせるのは
あつたりまえでしょう
寮にかえれば寮長さん
部屋にかえれば部屋長さん
休むに休めぬ義理の中
ああそれなのにそれなのに

ねえ やせるのはやせるのは
あつたりまえでしょう

A silk-reeling song:

“Ah, The Way Things Got to Be” [parody]

The worst food in the world
Is found at Ōmi Silk Mill chow hall.
You eat and eat, but it doesn't stick to you.

**Even if that's the way it is—
the way things got to be,**

You'll get thinner and thinner.

Wouldn't you agree?

You gobble down your morning meal.

Tramp off to the mill.

The whistle blows, the machines start up.

**Even if that's the way it is—
the way things got to be,**

You'll get thinner and thinner.

Wouldn't you agree?

Return to the dorm, you greet the dorm boss.

Return to your room, you greet the room boss.

You want to rest, but your duties never end.

**Even if that's the way it is—
the way things got to be,**

You'll get thinner and thinner.

Wouldn't you agree?

Song 4, “Ah, The Way Things Got to Be [parody],” Beginning of Shōwa, Shiga Prefecture.

Primary Source Chart:

Song Title	Primary Source Song and Page Number (out of the primary source collection of 45)	Sung in/Lyrics by a Native of	Estimated Time Period	Original Source
“Inspections”	4, pp. 77	Nagano Prefecture	End of Meiji – Taishō?,	Nomugi Pass, 393
“Homesick”	38, pp. 79	Nagano Prefecture, (Suwa Area)	End of Meiji?	Nomugi Pass, 395-396
“Silk-Reeling Mill Song”	7, pp. 81	Kyoto Prefecture, Gunze Silk Mill, (Ayabe City)	End of Meiji	Tanba no min.yō, 63-66
“Ah, The Way Things Got to Be [parody],”	44, pp. 91	Shiga Prefecture, Ōmi Silk Thread	Beginning of Shōwa	Minshūshishū,m 196-197

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