
Female Workers in Japanese Silk Factories: Did the Costs Outweigh the Benefits?

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Overview: The Industrial Revolution arrived in Japan more than a century after its arrival in Europe and about 70 years after the first textile mills were built in the United States. In building their cotton mills and silk factories, the Japanese borrowed many ideas from England, Italy, and America. It probably should be no surprise that Japanese mill workers, especially female Japanese mill workers, would experience some of the same benefits and hardships as young women in the West. Those benefits and hardships are the focus of this Mini-Q.

The Documents:

- Document A: Gender and Age (photo and chart)
- Document B: Work Hours in Okaya
- Document C: Average Daily Wages (chart)
- Document D: Government Report on Working Hours
- Document E: Employment Contract
- Document F: Silk Worker Survey (chart)
- Document G: "My Two Parents" (song)

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

Hook Exercise: Your 70-hour Workweek

Directions: During the early years of the Industrial Revolution, the workweek for workers in cotton mills and silk factories was long. For example, female mill workers in New England in 1839 averaged 73 hours a week. Ellen Wooten, a nine-year-old mill worker in Wigan, England in 1840, worked a 74-hour week. In Japan, as we will see, the hours could be even longer.

Below is a summer work schedule. You are a 15-year-old girl beginning your third year of work in an English cotton mill. The mill owner, Mr. Wilson, is thinking about changing the work schedule. Surprisingly, he has asked a few girls, including you, for their opinion. There are four things you must take into account:

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1. To have adequate light in the mill, it is important to know that full daylight hours are roughly 6:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.
2. Workers must work at least 70 hours per week.
3. Any reduction in hours will result in a reduction in pay.
4. As things stand now, your family is living close to the edge of poverty.

Your Task: Below is the current work schedule. What revisions will you suggest to your supervisor?

Monday through Friday:

5:30 a.m. - 8:00 a.m.	Work
8:00 a.m. - 8:30 a.m.	Breakfast
8:30 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.	Work
1:00 p.m. - 2:00 p.m.	Dinner (lunch)
2:00 p.m. - 8:00 p.m.	Work

Total working hours each weekday: 13 hours

Saturday:

5:30 a.m. - 8:00 a.m.	Work
8:00 a.m. - 8:30 a.m.	Breakfast
8:30 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.	Work

Total working hours Saturday: 9 hours

Sunday:

No work

What changes would you make to the schedule above? Remember, you must work at least 70 hours and meals are not included in that time. Good luck!

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The **Industrial Revolution** had a quiet beginning but by the mid-1800s the movement from farm to factory was producing an all-out ruckus – steam engines belching, gears grinding, conveyor belts slapping. This was true in Europe, in America, and beginning in the 1880s, it was true in Japan.

Our mental picture of this revolution is often filled with smokestacks and machines. What is sometimes missing are the workers themselves, a coal-blackened underground miner in Wales or a barefoot **bobbin girl** in Massachusetts. This Mini-Q will look at one particular group of this industrial worker population – women and girls in the silk factories of Japan.

Silk factories are part of the **textile** industry. Textile is simply another word for cloth. Textiles can be made from a number of materials including wool, cotton, and silk. In each case the fiber must be drawn out from a raw material like sheep's wool, a cotton ball, or a silk cocoon. It is then twisted into yarn or thread in a process called spinning. The spun thread is then woven on looms to make cloth. Before the Industrial Revolution, spinning and weaving were done by hand in homes or cottages. But with the invention of the **spinning jenny** that could fill several spools of thread at once and the **power loom** which speeded up the weaving process, textile manufacturing moved from the cottage to the factory.

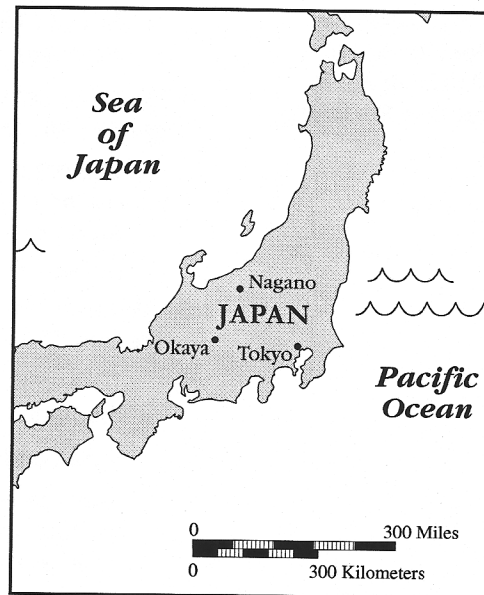
In Japan, this shift from cottage to factory happened about 100 years later than it did in Europe. The reason for the late start was political. From 1603 to 1868 the Tokugawa family

that ruled Japan did not want contact with Europe and America. This changed when the **Meiji period** began in 1868. Under new leaders Japan launched a campaign to catch up economically and militarily with the West. Playing catch-up was made easier by the fact that Japan used machinery like the spinning jenny and the power loom that had already been invented. Also, for reasons that included nimble fingers, Japan followed the European and American example of hiring women and young girls to do much of the mill work. By 1902 one quarter of a million Japanese females were working in textile mills, and most of these were working in silk factories.

It is clear that Japanese women made a huge contribution to the Industrial Revolution in general, and to the textile industry in particular. But what did they get back? Historians continue to debate this question. On the positive side, when young girls and women left home and went to the factory they became wage earners. For some of the women wage earning was

an important step towards independence and freedom from the poverty of farm life. On the negative side, some young women were taken advantage of. They could be overworked and underpaid. It is true, for example, that Japanese mill workers received only about half the pay received by mill workers in France and Italy.

At this point you are asked to examine the seven documents that make up this Mini-Q. Weighing the evidence on both sides, develop your answer to the question before us: *Female workers in Japanese silk factories: Did the costs outweigh the benefits?*



Document A

Source: Photo, circa 1910.



Note: Workers in a silk factory in Nagano district. They are pulling threads off silkworm cocoons that are floating in hot water basins in front of them.

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Source: E. Patricia Tsurumi, *Factory Girls: Women in the Thread Mills of Meiji Japan*, 1992.

Gender and Age in the Silk Factories, Nagano, Japan (1901)					
Gender of Workers in 205 Mills			Ages of Female Workers in 205 Mills		
Males:	1,109	(8%)	14 and under	2,184	(18%)
Females:	12,519	(92%)	15-20	5,999	(48%)
			Over 20	4,235	(34%)
			Totals	12,519	(100%)

Note: In 1902, there were 25 million people gainfully employed in Japan, mostly in farming. About 1% of these Japanese workers worked in textile mills, many in silk factories.

Document B

Source: Noshomusho Shokokyoku and Shokko Jijo, *Condition of the Factory Workers*, 1967.

A study by the government in 1900 revealed that a normal working day in a plant in Okaya was thirteen to fourteen hours. During the busy season, the workers were roused from their beds at 4:05 a.m., sent to work from 4:30 to 6:00, given fifteen minutes for breakfast, and sent back to work by 6:15. They were allowed fifteen minutes for lunch, between 10:30 and 10:45, and a ten-minute break from 3:30 to 3:40. Otherwise they were kept on the job till 7:30 p.m. for a total of fourteen hours and twenty minutes. When the plant was particularly busy, the workers were kept until 10 p.m.

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Note: In the late 1800s, a Japanese textile worker averaged one holiday off every two weeks. The Western-style weekend did not exist.

Document C

Source: James L. McClain, *Japan: A Modern History*, 2002.

Average Daily Wages for Selected Occupations (Japan, 1892)

Occupation	Gender	Average Daily Wage
Cotton mill worker	male	17 sen
Seasonal agricultural wageworker	male	16 sen
Carpenter	male	27 sen
Cotton mill worker	female	9 sen
Seasonal agricultural worker	female	9 sen
Silk factory worker	female	13 sen

1 yen = 100 sen

Note: In 1900,
a pair of ladies' indoor sandals cost 7 sen
a bunch of radishes also cost 7 sen
one pound of sugar cost about 15 sen

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Document D

Source: Statement and data from a Government Report on Mill Workers in Japan, 1909.

When making comparisons with factories in Western countries, one must take into consideration certain unique facts regarding the extremely long working hours in factories in our country. In our country's factories, many women are employed. Single, they stay at the factories several years before marriage; but when they wed they leave the factories. Thus for them factory labor is only temporary employment; it is not work done throughout their lives. Moreover, since they do it while in the lusty vigor of their youth, they can endure what by comparison are extremely long working hours. In the countries of the West, however, since factory labor is a lifetime job done both before and after marriage, they (female workers) cannot possibly endure the extremely long hours of labor.

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Reasons Female Mill Workers Left Their Jobs (Japan, 1909)

	Number	Percent
Illness*	1,677	24
Related to work	393	5
Released from employment	1,001	15
Family reasons	2,041	29
Marriage	438	6
Blood relation's illness	413	6
Other reasons	983	15
Total	6,946	100

* "Illness" includes those who died of serious illness after they returned home. "Released from employment" may include some who were too ill to work.

Document E

Source: E. Patricia Tsurumi, *Factory Girls: Women in the Thread Mills of Meiji Japan*, 1990.

Contract for Employment of Young Silk Worker With Girl's Parents

Amount _____, being the earnest money for the employment of _____ (Name),
silk worker (born _____ year _____ month)

We confirm that in return for contracting the above person employed as a female operative at your filature in the _____ year of the Meiji, we have received the said earnest money in full. Moreover, she shall commence work from the coming spring in _____ month, _____ day, or the coming summer in _____ month, _____ day without further notice and shall work without lapse until the cessation of plant operations. And no matter what unforeseen circumstances may arise, during this term we will not have her work for any other silk manufacturer. If there should be any infringement of this contract whatsoever, as reparations we will pay without question a sum of (20x) the said earnest money. In witness whereof we set our seals to this contract, accepting joint responsibility.

Prefecture _____ District _____ Hamlet _____ Number _____
Meiji _____ Year, _____ month, _____ day.

Name _____

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Note: When a long-term contract like this one like this was signed, the parents of the hired daughter often received a large cash advance called earnest money. One elderly former silk factory worker remembered that her father accepted 100 yen each for his two daughters and sent them to work in Kawagishi. In 1906, 100 yen could build a two-story house.

Document F

Source: Mikoso Hane, *Peasants, Rebels and Outcasts: The Underside of Modern Japan*, 1982.

Japanese Silk Worker Survey

Survey of 580 older women who had been silk-filature workers* in their younger years. The survey was conducted by Yamamoto Shigemi.

	poor	average	good
Food	0%	10%	90%
Nature of work	3%	75%	22%
Pay	0%	30%	70%
Treatment when sick	40%	50%	10%
	harrowing	average	easy
Inspection	90%	10%	0%
	positive	average	negative
Overall experience	90%	10%	0%

* Silk filature workers wound silk on spools after removing the silk from cocoons.

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Document G

Source: Song by a Silk Worker circa 1900.

Note: Many silk factory girls knew their wages were an important help to their family but they longed for home. The following are words to a song probably written in the nighttime hours by such a girl.

My Two Parents

When I left home my parents
Told me always to behave myself.

On days when the rain falls.
On nights when the wind blows.
I remember my parents....

Let the year's end come quickly.
I want to tell my parents
About this cruel factory.

We don't cross the Nomugi Pass* for nothing,
We do it for ourselves and our parents.

When the season of painful reeling is over
The world will be bright again,
And maybe I'll be able to get married.

* Mountain pass that separated the village from
the silk mill

Because I am poor, at age twelve
I was sold to this factory.

When my parents told me, "Now it is time to go"
My very heart wept tears of blood.

Let the year end. Let the year end,
I want to fly to my parents' side.

Mother! I hate the season in the silk plant;
It's from 4:00 p.m. to 4:00 a.m.

I wish I could give my parents rice wine to drink,
And see their happy tears fall into the cup.

In the troubled world
I am just a silk-reeling lass,
But this lass wants to see
The parents who gave her birth.

Their letter says they are waiting for the year's end.
Are they waiting more for the money than for me?

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