

The Remaking of the Japanese Working Class

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The Remaking of the Japanese Working Class

Michael Lewis

Kazuo Nimura, *The Ashio Riot of 1907: A Social History of Mining in Japan*, ed. Andrew Gordon; trans., Terry Boardman and Andrew Gordon (Durham and London: Duke University Press 1997).

Yuko Ogasawara, *Office Ladies and Salaried Men: Power, Gender, and Work in Japanese Companies* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1998).

THE ASHIO RIOT OF 1907 and *Office Ladies and Salaried Men* are two works that appear to have little in common. Kazuo Nimura's historical study considers the world of tough Japanese copper miners, all of them men, who rioted nearly a century ago while Yuko Ogasawara's sociological exploration of contemporary Japanese clerical workers focuses on the corporate "office flowers," women usually described as defenceless and perennially exploited. But these differences in time, place, and subject should not divert us from appreciating the common themes and preoccupations evident in these engaging case studies. Indeed, together these works suggest much about where Japanese labour studies have been during the postwar period and where they are headed today.

Of the two works, Nimura's is the most self-consciously revisionist. His study of the three-day Ashio riots explicitly challenges the ideas of three influential shapers of Japanese labour history. Nimura claims that the first, Maruyama Masao, presented a distorted image of Japanese workers as so thoroughly atomized that they were "not human beings acting on their own volition ... but mere bodies, acted upon from without." (43)

Nimura assails his second target, the labour historian Okochi Kazuo, for espousing a similarly static "migrant labour theory." According to Nimura, Oko-

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chi's influential analysis is just plain wrong in formulaically decreeing that Japan's traditional workforce possessed a particular and unchanging character and that this quality prevented the emergence of a progressive Japanese labour movement once industrialization began in the mid-19th century. This criticism resembles Nimura's condemnation of Maruyama's denial of workers' autonomy and rejection of their capacity to act in their own interests. But it goes further in faulting Okochi's notion of an unchangingly traditional workforce as key to a single-factor analysis that ignores labour's interaction with company management and the state. According to Nimura, this imbalance yields an interpretation of Japan's past that fails to account for "historical change." (5)

Nimura's third target, although represented by a single historian, Yamada Moritaro, is actually the entire "lecture school" (*koza-ha*) of Japanese Marxism. This scholarly faction, one of the most authoritative among academics and intellectuals in both the prewar and postwar periods, argues that "feudalism" or "semi-feudalism" persisted in prewar Japan and can be seen in such unchanging social structures as the "parasitic" landlord system and high agrarian rents. These pre-modern features, according to lecture school adherents, forced farmers from their lands, created surplus labour and cheap wages, and thereby stunted the growth of a modern Japanese workers' movement. As he does in criticizing Maruyama's and Okochi's ideas, Nimura derides lecture school Marxism for treating workers as atom-like factors in a closed system operating by its own elegant rules that is essentially "of no use in understanding historical realities." (4)

Nimura is right in his criticism of Maruyama, Okochi, and lecture school Marxism. But his revisionism comes a few decades too late. Many historians, including this one, have amply and repeatedly demonstrated that collectively viewing labourers as an unconscious, elemental force in Japanese history, spontaneously if futilely rising up in reaction to the crushing movements of the distinctive and unchanging structures of Japan's version of capitalism, is simply untenable. To challenge the ideas of Maruyama, Okochi, and the lecture school on labour history is to tilt at windmills bulldozed long ago.

There is no mystery about why Nimura's critique of an older school is itself dated. He originally wrote the chapters in this book as individual essays that appeared in Japanese between 1959 and the early 1970s and has not significantly revised them for this English translation. Although Nimura's views may have been innovative when he first wrote them, since then historians in Japan and abroad have covered similar territory to arrive at similar destinations (see, for example, works by Narita Ryuichi, Nakamura Masanori, and Kaño Masanao).

In fact, the "new" social history of Japan is no longer so new. Japanese publishers produced translations of George Rudé's work years ago and social historians are sufficiently numerous in Japan to support journals and conference panels dedicated to exploring issues in their sub-discipline. More recently, alternative approaches have begun to vie with those of the social historian in explaining

Japan's past. Although social history does not yet seem as passé as the Marxist "lecture school," journals carrying articles self-consciously postmodern in approach have appeared on bookstore and library shelves usurping space previously held by Japanese works resembling those of E.P. Thompson and Herbert Gutman that "privileged" the working classes and social conflict.

That Nimura's revisionism ends up beating horses about which few historians any longer bother does not detract from his monograph's value as a case study. His essays provide a richly detailed description of the copper miners' way of life and the broader social, political, and historical circumstances that gave rise to protest. Through the microcosm of a single brief conflict he illuminates how Japan's mining system changed over time and untangles "pre-modern" influences and "modern" practices in the shaping of Japanese industrial relations. His treatment of the decline of the traditional lodge boss system whereby contracting intermediaries recruited, paid, and controlled miners and the emergence of more direct company supervision of workers clarifies a complicated historical issue. His discussion of this transition and its part in instigating the 1907 riots also gives a nuanced sense of how workers, legally banned from striking, negotiated by other means and how management responded to their tactics.

Yuko Ogasawara shares Nimura's concern with demonstrating how labourers who appear to be weak and disorganized actually have an abundant arsenal of weapons that they intentionally use in skirmishes with management. Unlike Nimura's copper miners, Ogasawara's women clerical workers ("office ladies" or "OLs" in the Japanese-English neologism coined in the early 1960s), have the legal right to strike. *But postwar social customs and corporate practices make exercising that option even less likely than it was for prewar industrial workers.* Nevertheless, Ogasawara argues, this circumstance does not make corporate Japan a man's world in which women workers generally feel victimized, oppressed, or even particularly deferential to male colleagues, their putative superiors.

Her brand of revisionism claims that the office flowers resemble steel magnolias whose "access to informal means of control is not necessarily a temporary arrangement that can be easily redressed if men choose to do so." Furthermore, men "cannot deprive the women of their weapons without inflicting serious damage on their own power base. The men must therefore accede to the women's use of manipulative strategies if they are to exercise their power." (9-10)

Ogasawara describes a system in which OLs are important not only as individual helpmates to male colleagues, but by collectively contributing to keeping Japan's corporate world smoothly humming. Women account for 40 per cent of total Japanese employees and a third of these, the largest segment of the female labour force, are OLs who carry out simple, repetitive, but essential day-to-day clerical chores. Although Japan's 1986 Equal Employment Opportunity Law avowedly makes work gender-neutral, women perform this critical assistance within a dual structure that is essentially segregated. Men do little clerical work and

women do little else. In fact, only 1 per cent of all women workers are managers or officials. (19)

Treatment in this two-tiered, gender-segregated world is separate but by no means equal. Despite the comparable educational and other qualifications with which men and women enter the corporation, men typically join a major firm for life while women are expected to quit within a decade to marry and raise a family. That does not mean that the working lives of OLS are finished. After quitting in their late twenties, many return to work in their forties after child-rearing duties are over, creating the second peak in an "M" pattern of women's working years. The work they resume, often as "part-timers" and almost always at a smaller firm than the one they left years before, consists of the same simple clerical tasks. But by this time the male counterparts with whom they began their working lives have usually pursued uninterrupted careers to attain salary and benefit levels significantly higher than the OLS.

The compensation gap actually begins to open even before women leave their first position. Higher pay reflects the greater responsibilities given to men and the corporation's investment in their training for life-long careers. OLS are typically called "girls" whatever their age but paradoxically considered remaindered goods if not married and out of the company before they are 30. They do not receive training for serious work or responsibility or recognition for contributions to such projects. In contrast, men are granted self-control and identity within the firm. Their futures are entwined with that of the company as symbolized by their use of official business cards that confer affiliation. OLS, who usually do not receive business cards, typically work as easily interchangeable members of a section team headed by a male and, adding insult to injury, must still serve tea.

Ogasawara attempts to revise our understanding of what seems like a blatantly gender-segregated and inequitable system by examining several factors that enable OLS to tolerate their positions. Among these are acceptance of their jobs as "only for now." She cites statistics indicating that 75 per cent of OLS enter companies intending to leave work after finding a marriage partner within a few years and that only 15 per cent desire to work after marriage and childbirth. (25-26) The intention of a majority of OLS thus matches the expectation of corporate management and male colleagues and fosters a sense of the women's role as being different but equal.

Ogasawara further contends that OLS see themselves as more free than their male counterparts who upon entering the company must begin struggling up the corporate ladder. True, women may be bereft of responsibility, interesting work, or acknowledgment of their contributions. But they are also liberated from vying for promotions, demonstrating constant obedience to superiors or otherwise currying favour, and uncomplainingly accepting overtime for the good of the company. OLS not only own their after-hours time but also enjoy greater access to disposable income. As they typically live expense-free with their parents, they have ample money for shopping, movies, tourism, and to put away in preparation for marriage.

The fact that OLS have time and money has made them the trend-setters of Japan's consumer society.

According to Ogasawara, however, more than just a slacker-like attitude toward essentially temporary employment or free rein over one's time and money keeps OLS from rebelling. Even more important are workplace gambits that enable women clerical workers to maintain a sense of autonomy and relieve feelings of oppression and unhappiness. She devotes the bulk of her study to describing the empowering strategies and effectiveness of "OL resistance" (the expression Ogasawara actually uses for the title of her Japanese version of this work).

Ogasawara hints at the contents of the OLS' arsenal in chapters titled "Gossip," "Popularity Poll," "Acts of Resistance," and "Men Curry Favor with Women." Some of these tactics are self-explanatory and common to many modern business workplaces. But the OLS' practice of giving Valentine's Day chocolates described in "Popularity Poll" is probably unusual outside Japan. Gifts to favoured and disliked male colleagues (the latter receive fewer boxes and the contents are sometimes even intentionally broken) have powerful symbolic weight as a public ranking of esteem. But even more worrisome to career-track men is that everyone understands that few chocolates means that something is lacking in a man's managerial skills. To be able to reach the top, aspiring males must be able to control the "girls."

In addition to terror by candy, Ogasawara observes that "to annoy and trouble a man, OLS can refuse to take the initiative to help him, they can decline to do favours, they can refuse to work for him, they can inform the personnel department of his disagreeable behaviour, and they can shut him out with *sosukan* (that is, by cutting any social or work-related interaction with the target of their displeasure to an absolute minimum). (134) These methods make higher ranking male colleagues pleasant and tractable. They also encourage men to provide women with gifts and to tolerate willful OL behaviour, anything from sulkiness to refusal to do requested work, that would be condemned as unprofessional if committed by a career-track employee.

Ogasawara's revised view of OLS in Japan's corporations, a perspective that enables us to see them as empowered rather than exploited, refreshingly breaks from the old stereotypes of the weak-willed woman worker. But her revisionism is ambivalent in describing strong women acting in their own interests while suggesting that OL resistance can accommodate a larger structure that refuses women genuine careers in Japan's corporations. She makes this latter point by mentioning that the OLS' resort to office guerilla warfare reinforces traditional stereotypes about women's childish, emotional, and generally unprofessional workplace behaviour. Ogasawara recognizes the contradictory themes of empowerment and accommodation in her analysis and explicitly seeks to "reconcile" such questions as: "Are Japanese women oppressed, or not? Are they powerless, or powerful?" (2-3) But throughout most of the book, excepting her thoroughly qualified conclusion, the

reconciliation seems elusive as she devotes herself to explaining the empowering side of OL culture.

One cannot fault Ogasawara's hopeful depiction of the OLS' effective use of the weapons of the weak. But in so doing she neglects the strategies of the powerful that force recourse to such methods. It is only because women are such utter outsiders that management tolerates their "ironic indifference to office hierarchy." (92) The salient point that Ogasawara skirts is, despite OLS' ability to occasionally make men feel powerless, men are persistently powerful. The male-career-track employee will not be nudged toward the door should he decide to marry. Nor will he be locked in a permanently subordinate and ultimately disposable temporary position regardless of educational qualifications or innate intelligence or be required to spend his working life at simple repetitive tasks. True, the "salaryman's" life may be exhausting and lonely as consistently putting the company first abrades his autonomy and corrodes family bonds. The men in the dark blue suits also undoubtedly feel as if in a vise, beset by those above and periodically victimized by the OLS whom they ostensibly outrank. But probably few of them would ever consider changing positions with their women colleagues.

Of course, the issue is moot because men need never really consider swapping places. The reason that they need not, and this is a point that Ogasawara disregards perhaps because it is so obvious, is that corporate strategy, the strategy of the powerful, has created the role of the OL as one of several bulwarks protecting the prerogatives of career male employees in corporate Japan's present life-long employment system. In times of economic slowdown, such as Japan's present recession, companies not only cut back on hiring OLS, but will also shed those already employed before firing career-track males who are considered a family's prime earner.

Given the disparities that divide the gender-segregated world of OLS and male colleagues, one marvels that men do not feel guilty as well as occasionally powerless. After all, their privileged position is nursed along by women workers who rarely enjoy the man's freedom of choice to pursue a corporate career. By the time career-track men begin attaining the bittersweet rewards of company life the OLS who have contributed to that success will have long left the firm whether they wanted to or not.

Ogasawara's emphasis on OL empowerment rather than exploitation also risks exaggerating their thrall over male colleagues. Just as Nimura justifiably doubts historians who consider only a single factor in examining the prewar industrial workforce, questions may be raised about Ogasawara's examination of postwar clerical workers. Although OLS may influence management's evaluation of male colleagues in Japan's major corporations, career-track men depend on other factors for their rise in company ranks. Simply put, it is hard to imagine a truly incompetent man being promoted only because of popularity among the OLS or a competent worker dismissed because of OL gossip. Although the capacity to manage OLS and

get along with colleagues is undoubtedly important, successful completion of projects, good relations with male superiors, and special expertise and skills also count. Admittedly, Ogasawara's *Office Ladies and Salaried Men* places women before men as her primary subject. But if we are to accurately understand OLS' place in corporate society we need to understand the broader male-dominated context in which they work.

We must also assume that new strategies of the powerful will emerge to counter the OLS' weapons of the weak. In fact, this appears to be already happening. To overcome the present economic lean times, some major Japanese firms are moving away from hiring in-house OLS in favour of genuine temps who have even fewer benefits than regular employees and virtually no job security. This "modern" practice not only resembles the tactic used by Western corporations that rely on contracting intermediaries to supply tractable workers at a lower cost, but is reminiscent of Nimura's description of Japan's middle-man lodge boss system of a century earlier. Although the source is anecdotal, a former OL now married to career-track executive recently informed me that firms have also attempted to separate the weak from their weapons by curbing Valentine Day gift-giving activities to check its disruptiveness. Such corporate counter-measures indicate that the OLS' workplace struggle is far from one waged against an unresponsive paper tiger.

Although neither Nimura's nor Ogasawara's works are without weaknesses, these engaging case studies provide a contrast between the past and present orientation of Japanese labour studies. In general, they suggest a rejection of formulaic theory in favour of careful research into actual historical conditions. In Nimura's study this includes giving workers a voice in explaining their own past through records of speeches and miners' testimony; in Ogasawara's work, in which participant observation served as the principal research method, OLS are extensively quoted to elucidate their present circumstances.

Giving voice to past and present labouring groups also serves to break down stereotypes. Nimura's treatment of copper miners makes clear that they were not unreflective factors of production, elements malleable to the ends of industrial managers in 1907 and to scholars later, but self-conscious actors. Their resort to riot, a prewar weapon of the weak, demonstrates not spontaneous "rebellions of the belly," but the pursuit of interests to the extent doing so was possible within the prewar legal and social contexts. Ogasawara's depiction of strong willed, calculating women workers similarly debunks the view of woman workers as passive victims.

These studies also demonstrate the trend toward a conversion of history and sociology/anthropology in Japan and elsewhere in recent decades. Borrowing methods and approaches across once compartmentalized disciplines attests to the cosmopolitan approaches evident in labour studies. Nimura may be arguing with prewar and early postwar Japanese scholarly interpretations, but his views have

been informed by familiarity with the more recent works of Thomas C. Smith, E.P. Thompson, and scholars outside Japan. Ogasawara similarly refers repeatedly to James Scott and his concept of weapons of the weak throughout her study and shows the influences of Mary C. Brinton, Erving Goffman, and others. Yet, while she and Nimura demonstrate an awareness of Western scholarship in their respective disciplines, they do not take an uncritical or overawed attitude toward non-Japanese theory. Instead they use it where it seems appropriate to their case studies; where it does not fit, they question its utility. As with the move away from stereotyping workers and rejection of mechanistic theory, this critical use of "imported" interpretations and approaches to understand labour's past and present is yet another positive development within Japanese labour studies.