



PROJECT MUSE®

*Coal-Mining Women in Japan: Heavy Burdens* by W. Donald  
Burton (review)

Swee-Lin Ho

*Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, Volume 15, Number  
4, December 2018, pp. 132-134 (Review)

Published by Duke University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/712731>

## Coal-Mining Women in Japan: Heavy Burdens

W. Donald Burton

London: Routledge, 2014

xxii + 256 pp., \$180.00 (cloth); \$49.95 (paper); \$45.00 (ebook)

*Coal-Mining Women in Japan: Heavy Burdens* by W. Donald Burton is a compilation of interviews and detailed accounts of women miners' lives that have been documented in the published works of several Japanese authors, namely *Hi o Unda Haha-tachi* (*Mothers Who Spawned the Fires*) by Yasuko Idegawa, and *Makamura: Jokōfu kara no Kikigaki* (*Pitch Black: Interviews with Women Miners*) by Kazue Morisaki.

The book details the difficult conditions experienced by women working in several coal mines located in Fukuoka prefecture in southern Japan between the beginning of the Meiji era in 1868 and the early years of industrialization in the 1930s. Burton sets the tone from the outset in saying that the book is “a story about the exploitation of human labor,” and that it “aims to pay tribute both to the women who worked underground” and also to the two Japanese authors Idegawa and Morisaki “who became recognized scholars on the exploitation of women in the Japanese workforce” (1).

While the volume is among many that have used the two Japanese authors' works extensively, it nonetheless presents a comprehensive, well-organized, and detailed account in English that brings to life the experiences of an understudied sector of the population in Japan whose significant labor contributions would otherwise be ignored, and the harsh conditions they encountered misunderstood. By giving voice to these mine workers, the book becomes an important addition to diverse bodies of literature on labor, modernization, Japan, and East Asia.

Women's participation in Japan's labor force has historically been rather high, in excess of 70 percent of the total national workforce. While many works have documented women's participation in the agricultural sector of the economy since the Meiji period, little is known about the everyday challenges and difficulties encountered by women working in the mining industry, despite the increasing availability of sophisticated machinery and mining methods.

The themes and discussions are organized thoughtfully. The book begins with an overview in the introduction of the key issues to be elaborated in subsequent chapters. It explains that the coal-mining industry was managed by labor gangs that “notoriously underpaid” miners (4), “arbitrarily cut” wages (4), and made life for the miners “an unrelenting struggle” (6). In addition to highlighting the grouping by Idegawa and Morisaki of women miners from “ordinary” backgrounds and those who were “outcasts” known as the *burakumin* (8), the chapter also distinguishes the tasks performed by women in extracting coal from the seam—such as hewing, digging, and hauling—from general underground work. These distinctions serve to draw the reader's attention to the possible underreporting of the number of female miners, and also to the degree of difficulty in the women's work.

A meaningful account of the broader political, economic, and sociocultural backgrounds is clearly laid out in the next chapter, in which the author explains the gender disparity in the coal-mining industry, the age and marital profiles of female miners, and the racial and social discriminations that pervaded the industry during the period of the study.

Burton devotes the next two chapters to the most important topics in the book: the types of work, wages, and working conditions of the women miners. He pays close attention to how miners were forced by gang bosses to work in man-and-wife teams for a “piece-rate family pay package” (29), which at times involved having their children help without additional remuneration. Many women miners were said to work half-naked in hot, narrow underground tunnels, having to crawl on all fours while hauling immensely heavy baskets of coal from underground despite limited lighting. Other heart-wrenching accounts include accidents due to gas fires and explosions, and the lack of welfare systems to provide adequate medical care and compensation to women who were injured or seriously ill.

The dark and gloomy world of women miners above ground is the subject of the next chapter. It was a world characterized by poor marriage prospects, high mortality rates, and frequent incidents of abortion. Many mobilized the labor of their children in mining, while others experienced marital conflicts, domestic violence, and even “indebtedness incurred by the husband’s drinking, gambling, and whoring” habits (121).

The focus then shifts to the women miners’ daily routine, which involved little relaxation, recreation, study, or entertainment. The final chapters present social relations in the mining community as divisive and disharmonious, and acts of resistance against authorities as futile.

Overall, the book offers an insightful account of the everyday realities of women miners during the period under study. Meticulous details show how the women had to cope with the demands of their work alongside their domestic duties, as well as the conflicts and frustrations they experienced in managing their own personal expectations against the difficulties imposed by their broader environment. The women were also portrayed as having limited hope as workers in an industry that was undergoing rapid mechanization and technological developments that offered the women little comfort or reprieve.

One noticeable weakness of the book is the obvious bias toward the women miners who are cast compassionately, and an equally strong bias against Japanese men, including employers. State actions and motives are described with cynicism and even contempt. The book does indeed state its aim in the beginning to tell a story of the exploitation of human labor. It is also evident from the narratives throughout the book that many female miners suffered from the exploitative actions of employers and at times from negligent or abusive husbands. The author’s disapproval of and contempt for those whom he regards as guilty of victimizing the women miners results in a highly polarized account. This may reflect one of the common difficulties experienced by scholars, who may at times sympathize overwhelmingly with the struggles of the people they study.

Yet as a volume with rich, comprehensive details about the lives of female coal miners during the early years of industrialization and modernization in Japan, the book

fits well into the existing, and expanding, collection of studies on the hardships women and other marginalized groups experienced in their working lives in pre- and postwar Japan. These include *Nightwork* by Anne Allison; *Japanese Women: New Feminist Perspectives on the Past, Present and Future* by Kumiko Fujimura-Fanselow and Atsuko Kameda; *Friendship and Work Culture of Women Managers in Japan: Tokyo After Ten* by Swee-Lin Ho; *Identity and Ritual in a Japanese Diving Village: The Making and Becoming of Person and Place* by D. P. Martinez; *Staying on the Line: Blue-Collar Women in Contemporary Japan* by Glenda S. Roberts; and *The Women of Suye Mura* by Robert J. Smith and Ella Lury Wiswell.

A paperback edition is timely, as it makes the book more accessible to a wider readership, particularly given the growing interests in women's labor contributions in Japan amid debates on the potential effectiveness of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's economic policies to improve working conditions for the country's female workforce. The book would be useful to those concerned about the exploitative implications of today's flexible labor environment, in which neoliberal economic policies have exacerbated the precarious conditions of skilled and unskilled workers within Japan and elsewhere.

Swee-Lin Ho, *National University of Singapore*