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978-0-521-11494-3 - Undermining the Japanese Miracle: Work and Conflict in a Coalmining Community

Matthew Allen

Excerpt

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Introduction

It is said that it is the peculiar quality of time to conserve fact, and that it does so by rendering our past falsehoods true.

(Gene Wolfe, *The Shadow of the Torturer*, 1981, p.121)

This is a book about a Japanese coalmining community. In particular it is a book about the people of the coalmines, and their struggle to achieve a dignified identity in a rapidly changing society that has no use for coalminers. Although coal is no longer mined in Chikuho, the region where the study was conducted, the legacy of the coal years is omnipresent. People still live in rundown coal villages (*tanjū*), where slag-heaps abound (many now covered with vegetation), and poverty and isolation are still characteristics of the existence of those who worked in the coalmines. In some of the older *tanjū*, where the *naya seido* (the barn-like 'long houses') still stand, the neighbourhood structure has remained intact, and although newcomers move into the villages as former residents die or move away, the social cohesion of the coal years endures to some extent within this system.¹ This is reinforced by the impression, transmitted to locals and outsiders alike, that the coal villagers are different to the rest of society. In turn, this is reinforced by the geographical isolation of the villages.

At the present time the mining communities are populated by a cross-section of urban poor. Not only coalminers and their families, but also welfare recipients, relatives of miners, and some minorities inhabit the *tanjū*.² The economic decline of the region since the end of the coalmining era has had the effect of gradually transforming the community from a close-knit, hard-working, carousing, lively population to

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a more diversified and impoverished community with a high degree of welfare dependence. The contemporary dependence on welfare is directly related to both the type of work that the miners performed and the attitudes of government and coal companies when the latter withdrew from the region in the 1960s and 1970s. This book asks why, compared to the rest of Japan, Chikuho is materially impoverished. In order to establish the relationship between coalmining and welfare, it is necessary to examine in some detail the history of the region.

The construction of history is an eclectic process, as Robertson (1991) and others have observed; something that is not the preserve of written sources alone. Attempts to reconstruct history to emphasise certain events, and de-emphasise others, provide alternative understandings not only of the past, but also of the present. In Chikuho, where this study was conducted, the process of reconstructing the past is being undertaken with enthusiasm by a number of people and institutions, each with their own political agenda.

In order to delve into the past, I have asked the question: how do local people, academics, government officials and company employees perceive the past and, through understanding the past, deal with the present and imagine the future?

It became clear to me that issues of powerlessness and dependence are of some importance in understanding how the region changed following the closure of the coal industry. I argue that the region's decline and the limited capacity to provide alternative working opportunities for the population are linked closely to the institutionalised political powerlessness of the miners. A culture of violence dominated relationships between mine management and miners; thus the status quo was maintained and challenges by miners to power-holders and their agents forestalled. The relations of dependence that were fostered by this system removed the capacity of the miners to challenge, with any measure of success, either the legitimacy of the mine-owners during the mining days or the government in the period following the closure of the industry. Only the influence of a group of dedicated philanthropists has provided relief from what was otherwise an almost totalitarian regime. This book explores the ways in which the state, its citizens and private capital have attempted to change and improve these conditions.

Alternative views of history

After the industry ceased operations, many protests emerged about the nature of coalmining work, and the management–labour relations that existed in the industry. Revelations about violence employed by the labour overseers, company corruption, police co-operation with

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criminal gangs in controlling the labour force, and government–big business collusion in escaping responsibility for their part in the economic destruction of the coalfields clearly illustrate alternative views of Japan’s economic development and labour relations. These views, which are becoming more articulate over time, stress the importance of the power relationship of management over labour, and the state over the individual. They challenge the formalised and often-described view of Japanese labour–management relations as harmonious, and of sociological structures as classless. Generally, these views are informally expressed, rarely appearing in mainstream publications or in the mass media. Rather they are articulated in discussions between concerned local scholars, ex-miners and leftist activists. They have limited access to the general public, and presumably limited appeal.

Interpretations of Chikuho’s mining history that differ so greatly from local government historical accounts, however, require attention. If these accounts are even partially accurate, then surely there is a need to investigate the circumstances in which they arose. It is here that the miners’ dependence on the coal companies, and the culture of violence and intimidation that prevented them from airing their grievances is of importance. Only after the mining industry ceased operations did widespread condemnation of the industry appear, and in some former coalmining villages there is still reluctance to discuss the past with outsiders, even though close to 30 years have passed since many of the mines were closed.

Although there are formalised outlets for stories of the coal era,³ most of the stories are anecdotal, informally and orally expressed. It was my intention to collect a series of reminiscences by coalminers and their families to provide some balance to the official historical accounts that portray a benevolent and philanthropic industry. Although I started researching with this aim in mind, it soon became apparent that storytellers had a traditional role in the coalfields, and that many of these raconteurs had the capacity to influence large numbers of people. The existence of the so-called *uwasa shakai* (rumour society) provided the structure through which stories were transmitted to others in towns and villages; that is, through informal gatherings at the wells to collect water for drinking and washing (the *idobata kaigi*), women from the *tanjū* passed on gossip and stories that in turn were passed on to families and other acquaintances. The *kami shibai* men, typically itinerant *burakumin*,⁴ regaled villagers with stories of the coal industry, complete with cartoon-like drawings. They were also sources of information about the happenings in other coal villages on their route. Travelling coalminers, either fired from or escaped from some of the more violent mines, passed on stories of their experiences to whoever would listen. The bars were full of gossip, as were the communal baths

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and *shokudō* (dining-rooms). In the absence of outside knowledge and given the low literacy rate of Chikuho coalminers,⁵ the importance of the storytellers in transmitting information to the miners and their families cannot be overlooked, and I emphasise their role in the reconstruction of local history.

Isolation, powerlessness and dependence

The geographical isolation of the mines and the company-provided housing enabled the coal companies to exercise considerable control over the miners. Situated in a basin surrounded by mountains, the coalfields were isolated from the major cities and towns in Kyushu. In a frontier-like environment, which has been likened to Texas in the white pioneer days,⁶ a culture that shared some values with mainstream Japanese society, yet possessing a highly esoteric character, arose. Social order in the coal villages was administered not by the police, who preferred not to interfere in 'private' matters, but by the company that owned the housing, stores and bars, through their *rōmu kakari* (labour control office) and their *yakuza* (organised crime syndicates) connections. *Yakuza* organisations were independently active in the villages, towns and cities, providing gambling facilities, protection for bar and club owners, establishing brothels, selling drugs and providing an informal police force with strong mining company associations. The facilities were well used, and the reputation of miners as hard-drinking, heavy gambling, fighting men was often vindicated.

Within this society, values that were distortions of mainstream Japanese social values emerged. Young men aspired to become *yakuza*; the unfettered power, the money, and the status and respect that the job generated contributing to the alluring image. 'It is better to be holding the stick than being hit with it' was how it was explained to me by one *yakuza* informant.⁷ Certainly, working for the power-holders was better than working as a miner. Violence was a way of life for most people of the coalmining communities, extant in their work, their entertainment and their social lives. In that anticipation of conflict and inevitable violence dominated many of their social and vocational relations, it is not surprising that miners were themselves inclined to be aggressive, and that violence became a social norm. In stark contrast with the theory of the Japanese vertical society painted by Nakane (1970), which is organised around consensus and avoidance of conflict and confrontation, the coalmining communities were organised around the tenets of conflict and violence.

In the absence of a formal juridico-legal apparatus that could arbitrate in disputes between management and labour, and indeed in the

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absence of formal social controls, a culture of violence arose within the coalfields. The isolation of the communities from mainstream society contributed to the situation. Although the coal companies supplied employment, housing and living facilities for their miners, they also provided the social control mechanisms already mentioned. In fact, the virtual incarceration of miners in company housing allowed the mine-owners to exert tight social, financial and vocational control over the workforce.

The socio-political structure of the communities was based on the company housing arrangements, the people separated into *kumi* (blocks of eight to sixteen houses facing each other in the *naya seido* (barn-like system)) in which there was an elected *kumi-chō* (head person). The *kumi-chō* was required to meet with the *ku-chō* (the community head person, always a man) and other *kumi-chō* once a month to discuss company directives about maintaining housing, organising community chores and so on. The system enabled the company to monitor the activities of its workforce. Each miner and his family were noted in the company register, and any person could be found at short notice. This was particularly useful in company attempts to track down and deal with 'trouble-makers', especially unionists.

This highly regulated and tightly controlled existence promoted dependence and powerlessness within the miners' ranks; dependence on the company for their livelihood, accommodation and other needs, and powerlessness to improve their standard of living and the conditions of employment. The companies were able to ban independent unions in the (mainly small) mines and invoke physical sanctions against protesters. Either way, the mine-owners were able to forestall challenges to their control of the forces of production. In chapters 6, 7 and 9 I examine this issue in some detail.

The emergence of labour conflict

While the miners endured arduous working conditions, tight social and financial controls, and a regime of violence, the industry was going through a crisis, and this contributed to the stepping up of violent and repressive management methods. By the late 1950s it was recognised by both coalmining companies and the government that there was only a limited future for coal in Japan; the future lay with oil. By the early 1960s most companies had made preparations to withdraw from the industry under favourable conditions provided by the government. It was the closure of the industry more than the repressive working and living environment that led to labour unrest in Chikuho in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

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The miners' unions, once totally submissive, became active in disputes to save the mines. A new-found ability, born of desperation, to articulate grievances led to further disputes about violent management methods, the right to organise independent unions, compensation payments to the families of miners killed in accidents, better wages and working conditions, and superannuation and redundancy pay issues. Of these issues, the most pressing became the fight to save the industry, although by this stage their actions were destined to be ineffective.

The revival of independent unions in the late 1950s⁸ empowered the miners to disrupt production, and to display openly their dissatisfaction with the status quo. Unfortunately for the unions, because their rise in the late 1950s followed the beginning of the decline of the industry and the subsequent over-supply of miners, the threat of the withdrawal of their labour was easily dealt with by the coal companies. They simply employed redundant coalminers from other regions in the place of the dissident miners and then encouraged all new employees to join company unions, which had been established by companies with precisely this purpose in mind.⁹ Miners from independent unions, united under the National Coalminers' Union (*Tanrō*), resorted to opposing the companies physically. The violent confrontations between the miners and company hoodlums supported by the police became the stuff of folklore, especially in the M-san Miike Riots in 1960–61.

For all their efforts, unions were unable to halt the withdrawal of coal companies from the industry or bring about any positive changes in working conditions. In fact, when the actions were over, miners' working conditions had materially deteriorated. Company unions gained ascendancy when the extent of *Tanrō's* failure was recognised by the majority of the remaining miners. Most miners, it appeared, preferred to work for reduced wages rather than have no work at all. Gradually, militancy was replaced by a conservative resignation about the end of the industry and of coalmining employment. However, the twilight of the industry and the conflict between labour and management led to the involvement in the region of activists from outside Chikuho. Often from politically aligned radical groups, these people took on the roles of ideologue, organiser and motivator within certain mining communities, in keeping with the role that Gramsci (1972) suggested was appropriate for the intellectual in class-based action.

The revivalists

The political activists were first attracted to the region following the increase in the mining-accident rate. Many surmised that the accident rate was indicative of the priorities of the companies in running their

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operations. While they had no doubt that the mines should remain open, the revivalists, as I refer to the political activists, believed that there was still a need to redress many of the grievances articulated by disaffected miners. In particular, the revivalists were concerned that companies were not spending adequate amounts of money on maintaining safety standards within the mines. Moreover, they were exploiting their workforce, and applying unhindered violence in order to discipline their workers, free from official intervention or sanctions. In short, the revivalists believed that the human rights of the miners had been ignored, and that the mining companies abused their human capital (*jinzai*) to make a profit, even at a high cost measured in human lives.

In the more isolated regions of Chikuho, where small mines were dominant, political activity traditionally had been almost non-existent. But, as the mines were closed down, resentment against the companies increased, and the arrival of the newcomers, with their political skills and acumen, helped focus some of the new-found tensions within the region, as the system of repressive management (and the mining operations) crumbled. Investigations were started into the causes of accidents, community solidarity in the face of company pressure emerged in some mines, and the immunity of companies to legal action was challenged by a conspicuously successful court case initiated by a group of mining-accident widows, with the assistance of outside, leftist organisations. This compensation case, in which the widows were awarded a substantial damages payment, demonstrated that companies were not immune from criticism, and were not omnipotent agencies. They too were required to act within the law.

A renaissance of local interest in coalmining occurred, initially driven by the actions of outsider activists, and then by local scholars, miners and some prominent citizens, as the outsiders moved on to other towns or settled down in the 1970s. The renaissance, or the revival (as I have termed it), is and was based on generating not only interest in Chikuho's coalmining past, but also pride in having survived a regime of terror and violence, and in having a strong, historical sense of community.

Especially targeted today by the revivalists are the young people of the region, the school-aged children, and the young working people, all of whom are too young to have experienced the coalmining days. There are many different political agendas involved in this movement, but across the range not only the cultural revival but also the economic revival of Chikuho is sought. In short, these people were, and are, actively involved in changing perceptions about the region, to make special, rather than stigmatising, the years of coalmining, and to engender dignity within the people. Although this movement has not

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been altogether successful in changing outsiders' perceptions of Chikuho, the image of the area *within* Chikuho is improving.

Welfare in Chikuho

The transformation of Chikuho from a coalmining community into a welfare community eventually attracted attention from academics and government agencies. These agencies investigated the coal industry, but only peripherally, as they saw it as an unfortunate precondition for the development of new and difficult social and economic problems. The necessity for an economic plan to absorb the unemployed miners, and to improve the material condition of Chikuho's industry was recognised, largely because of the publicity generated on the back of the welfare research being done in the region.

The erosion of living standards following the closure of the coalmines has left many Chikuho people with few options but to attempt to eke out an existence as unemployed people. The isolation of the communities and enforcement by the companies of cast-iron controls over the workforce during the coal era, and the culture of violence together led to relations of dependence and powerlessness in the coalfields, and this endures to some extent. That is, in the continued absence of strong social controls and given the disproportionately high concentration of welfare dependants, *yakuza*, inveterate gamblers and professional *pachinko* players, a strong undercurrent of violence is easily discernible. Few outsiders these days are tempted to intervene in the region, its reputation for 'rough-house' antics, *yakuza* involvement, and high crime rates offering strong disincentives. Yet locals have taken on the responsibility of articulating alternative understandings of the past, to educate other local people and to attempt to reverse the trend of discrimination to which Chikuho people are subjected from many city-dwellers. Today, rather than being dependent on the coal companies, the former mining communities are dependent on the government to provide the basic necessities of life; and once more the miners and their representatives are powerless to alter the situation.

The relatively recent phenomenon of welfare dependence is now being challenged by the establishment of a new welfare directive (the 123 Legislation), which was drawn up with the intention of reducing payments to welfare recipients, so as to curtail a rapidly increasing national welfare budget. Again the coalminers of Chikuho are under siege, as various government agencies attempt to reduce the welfare expenditure, to bring Chikuho's statistics more in line with the rest of the nation. As it stands, the overall region's welfare dependence rate is more than four times the national average, and some towns and villages

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display up to twenty times the national ratio (Fukuoka Prefecture Social Welfare Statistics, 1989). Chapters 14 and 15 deal with this issue in more depth.

Methodology

Over recent years the links between anthropology and other disciplines have become more substantial, reflecting the anthropologist's concern with a wider range of issues, not necessarily within traditional paradigms. Clifford and Marcus (1986), for example, have concerned themselves with the links between anthropology and literature. I have attempted to link ethnography with history, both oral and written. Further, by imposing a necessarily selective interpretation of events and ideas I have thrust myself into the text, with the aim of documenting the past and the present-day attempts of miners and ex-miners to resuscitate their future.

Rather than employing a conventional class analysis, I have employed an approach that owes a debt to, among others, Walter Benjamin (1977). His concept of the storyteller enables us to understand how people see themselves in society and how they remember the past. Doubtless there are apocryphal elements involved in many of the stories I was told, but it is important to bear in mind that these stories are validated within the community. The tradition of storytelling in Japan is well established, and the role of storytellers in performing a cohesive, binding community function is widely accepted, particularly within coalmining communities, where technology was always slow to penetrate. Within the text I have introduced a number of character portraits of storytellers, each with different, specialised stories to tell. This is to create an effect of montage, in a similar way to Taussig's (1987) book on the South American rubber traders.

The story I present reveals some aspects of Japanese society largely ignored by other writers. It attempts to extract concepts of power that underlie the accounts of the actions of people from the coalmining communities, and of the consciousness that developed from this. It attempts to isolate ideas, thoughts and a sense of purpose that pervaded the region in the wake of the revivalists.

By investigating the circumstances surrounding four flashpoints in the industry, I hope to illustrate the chronology of change in the industry. Moreover, by highlighting instances of conflict between management and labour, I intend to draw out the nature of the work, the environment in which work was performed, and the powerlessness of individuals to change positively their position in society. This leads to an analysis of welfare based on the historical and material conditions of

the miners; that is, I examine the proposition that the welfare dependence endemic in Chikuho is a legacy directly traceable to the coal industry's performance and closure. I suggest that the imposition of a culture of violence, and the intimidation of miners prevented challenges to the hegemony of the mining companies (in the Gramscian sense), at least until the industry itself was threatened and mining companies loosened their controls. In the post-mining period the ideological and material conditions in which the miners live and subsist are predicated on this culture of violence. I concentrate on the actions and thoughts of the revivalists to provide critical insights into how the welfare situation developed in Chikuho.

I hope that I will be able to offer some insights into extremes of behaviour within an extreme industry. Just as most positive actions have, at some stage, a negative reaction, Chikuho mining stands out as an example of the manipulation of raw power in an environment that itself was totally manipulated. Like the angel who can no longer beat its wings and fly against the storm of progress in Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*,¹⁰ the coal industry was swept towards the future, leaving debris in its wake. This human debris and their children have become the new poor, the welfare dependants of the present.

From a wider perspective, this book deals with some of the issues which mark the other side of the economic miracle. By focusing on the destruction of an industry for relatively short-term gains, and looking at the outcome in terms of human capital losses, the book presents an alternative to interpretations of Japanese society that stress conformity, consensus, vertical integration, homogeneity and the attendant lack of conflict. Further, by exposing the processes of capitalism in the mining industry, and the extremes to which mine-owners were prepared to go in order to maintain their control over the workforce, a picture of regional under-development emerges, one that is considerably different to other studies on Japan. Most importantly I hope to convince the reader that there is a need to reappraise the monolithic representation of 'Japan Inc.' and to galvanise further discussion and study of the phenomenon of Japan's rapid economic growth and of the cost at which it was achieved. Like all other nations, Japan's economy consists of the activities of people. It is critical not to forget the role of the people when attempting to measure the economic changes that take place in any nation.

NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

- 1 The housing is decrepit and crowded, the facilities negligible, and the monthly rent is extremely low, ranging from 500 yen to about 5,000 yen. The housing provides newcomers with the same rights as the long-term residents to move into new, subsidised, low-cost housing when it is constructed.