

# The Stories Japanese Clothes Tell: Introduction

**Horikiri Tatsuichi**

**Translated and introduced by Rieko Wagoner**

The two chapters presented here are taken from *The Stories Clothes Tell*, a translation of the Japanese book *Nuno no Inochi: Hito no Kokoro, Kurashi Tsutaete* by Horikiri Tatsuichi published in 2016 by Rowman & Littlefield.

Horikiri was born in 1925 in Kagoshima, Japan. Trained as a civil engineer, he was sent to work in northern China, and within a year was conscripted and sent to the front. He returned to Japan in 1946 to a career in construction. During these years, Horikiri traveled throughout Japan, collecting vast quantities of used clothing and furnishings, all the while recording their stories to illuminate and contextualize them. Horikiri is a respected authority on the history of everyday clothing in the Meiji (1868–1912), Taishō (1912–1926), and Shōwa (1926–1989) periods, having published nine books and museum catalogues as well as articles on the items in his collection.

All of these works examine the clothing and history of “the common people” (*shomin-shi*) during the first half of the twentieth century. The book offers captivating accounts of clothing and cloth as well as social customs and practices surrounding them and illuminates a broad range of topics including gender, family life, labor history, colonialism, war, poverty, and race relations. Weaving together oral history and his own memoirs, Horikiri vividly depicts the everyday lives and experiences of the poor and deprived members of society in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Japan.

## Female Coal Miners

From the beginning of the Meiji period until some years after WWII, coal was just about the only source of energy fueling Japan’s economy – whether for manufacturing, transportation, or electric power generation. The major center of coal production then was at the Chikuhō Coalfield in Kyūshū. The coal mines there were the stage for many dramas and tragedies, which seem inevitably to go hand in hand with the coal industry, and it would not be exaggerating to say that coal mining impacted every aspect of people’s lives in that area.

There have been many publications on the subject of coal miners – fiction, non-fiction, photographic compilations, and so forth. Some of these are invaluable and deserve to be widely read and handed on down to posterity. Most of the fictional accounts I find unsatisfying, however, because even though they are based on historical facts, they are all too often over-dramatized so as to emphasize their author’s point of view. In contrast, there are a handful of titles in the non-fiction category, in many cases written by relatively unknown authors, which have the power to affect the reader profoundly. These are for the most part oral histories, compilations of accounts related by people who had direct, personal experience living and working in Chikuhō. It is because of their factual basis, I believe, that these books speak so compellingly to readers. One such gem is Idegawa Yasuko’s *Hi o Unda Haha-tachi: Onna-kōfu kara no Kikigaki (Mothers Who Gave Birth to Fire: Stories Told by Female Coal Miners)*.<sup>1</sup> As the title indicates, this book is a collection of

unadulterated accounts by female coal miners who were employed at the Chikuhō Coal Mine, painstakingly collected by Idegawa over a period of ten years. The number of these women who are still alive continues to decline every year, which further increases the value of Idegawa's work. I can attest to the validity of the records in her collection from my own exposure to coal miners. Shortly after the end of WWII, I lived near the Hokushō Coalfield in Nagasaki Prefecture. There were several mines nearby and we had a number of miners, both male and female, living in our neighborhood. Coming from a poor but relatively peaceful farming and fishing village, I remember being in total disbelief at times when listening to their stories.

The following are some highlights from my interviews with these women in their 60s and older. At the time of my interviews, all of them worked in the Chikuhō coal mines. One woman relates:

After we were defeated in the war, young Japanese women started imitating the way American women dressed, and now everyone wears a "breast-cover" (brassiere). But back when we were working in the mine, we all had our breasts exposed, both us who were married, and those young ones, not yet married. Down inside the mineshaft, it was so hot year-round, and besides, you couldn't work properly if you were wearing regular clothes – they were too restrictive. In any case, after a hard day's work, we would come back up to the surface and we would be all black, covered in coal dust – so why should we even bother to wear anything?

Who can argue with what this woman is saying? I am not sure about unmarried women,

but it must have been a common enough practice in those days for women to leave their breasts uncovered in rural areas. In fact, I can remember from my own childhood that women customarily went around the house in their *koshimaki* skirt and open-fronted *hanten* jacket during the summer months. Frequently, I can even recall seeing them take off their *hanten* and relax completely bare-breasted.

Here is another woman's account:

At one point in my life, I had to go get a job, even though I had a baby I was still nursing. My husband was becoming a compulsive gambler and it got so bad that he stopped working. Even with two incomes, it would have been difficult enough to manage. But with him losing his job, we were doomed! So I had no choice but to ask my five-year old son to look after the baby, so I could take a job at the mine. After spending half the day down there, my breasts would become completely engorged. Do you even have any idea how painful that is? It is truly torturous! But no matter how uncomfortable you are, you cannot leave your post in the middle of the day.

She added that it was not just the physical pain from her engorged breasts, but also the emotional pain that came from feeling that she was neglecting her baby. Her older child would have to wander around the neighborhood looking for "milk donations" for his sibling. Fortunately, finding the baby a source of mother's milk was relatively easy, since at any given time there were enough nursing mothers at home in the miners' housing area. What was more difficult was finding a way to relieve the mother's pain. She continues:

At every coalmine, there were

always one or two talented men who were good at things that others could not do. Well, at my mine there was one guy who could skillfully suck the milk out of an engorged breast. This isn't as easy as it might seem – it takes real skill, in case you didn't know. Babies don't just suck the milk with their lips holding onto the nipple. They use their tongue, curling it up at the tip. So, this guy was really skilled with his tongue, and he would come around during the break to suck the milk out of my breasts. It was such a welcome relief. He used to boast that he would never need lunch if he could go around and relieve three women per day.

According to today's sexual norms, allowing a man other than your own husband to put his mouth to your breast would be condemned as adulterous behavior. But as this old woman, in her mid 80s, simply put it, "when your breasts are engorged, it is really excruciating. What else can you do? Every woman with engorged breasts called on him to ease the pain. When he was not around, boy, were we ever in trouble!"

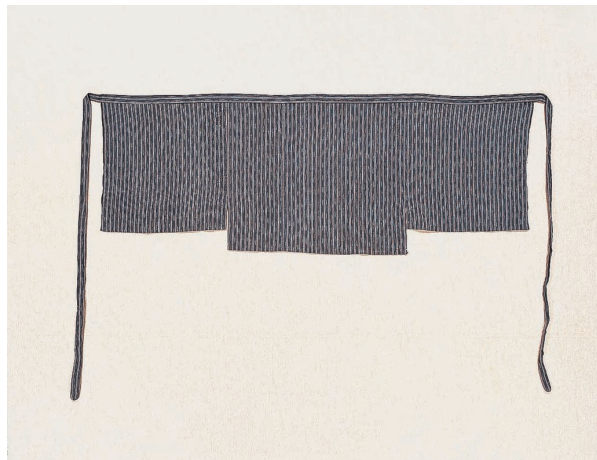
Even if we assume that back then women's breasts were not so directly associated with sexuality – as evidenced by my own observation that breasts were often left exposed – most people today would still feel uncomfortable with this picture. But who are we to castigate this behavior as indecent or adulterous? No, we need to imagine their lives in the dark and dangerous depths of the earth, often without anyone else to talk to, endlessly repeating the same motions of picking and digging the coal ore. How can we, who enjoy all the comforts of modern life, ever even begin to comprehend what their lives were really like? How can we possibly blame those female miners if they do not seem to live up to today's standards? The

old women confirmed in unison that there was nothing sexual or illicit about this activity, certainly not for them with their babies at home and a full day of work as hard as any man's. The woman who had been telling the story assured me emphatically:

Let me tell you – in a household where the mother had no doubts about what was right and what was wrong, no child ever went astray, no sir! You might not care much about what your husband thought of you – but you certainly wanted to make sure your children knew you were a good mother!

These words of the old woman ring true for what they reveal about her dedication to principle and her devotion to upright conduct in her everyday life. No matter how poor she and others like her might have been, they all strove to be mothers of the kind that their children could look up to. Certainly, we have no right to condemn them for whatever they had to do to relieve their engorged breasts.

Returning to the clothing of these mining women—we have seen that they rarely covered their upper bodies while working down in the mines. What, then, did they wear on the rest of their body? The typical outfit for a female miner consisted of a "mining-skirt" (*mabubeko*), a cummerbund (*haramaki*), and a pair of thin towels (*tenugui*).



**Mabubeko.** Women made their own *mabubeko* according to their size. The middle panel of this particular specimen is 52 cm (20.8 inches) high, Kitakyūshū Museum of Natural History and Human History

At one point when I was visiting Ms. Idegawa, the author of *Mothers who Gave Birth to Fire*, mentioned above, I had an opportunity to see a rare specimen of a *mabubeko* preserved in her collection. It is a *heko* (equivalent of *koshimaki* or wrap-around) that women would wear in the *mabu* (coal mine). At first glance it looks something like an apron in three unequally sized panels, the middle one being slightly wider and longer (22" wide and 20.8" in height) than the other two (16" wide, 13.4" in height, each). The garment would be wrapped around the waist so that the central panel covered the woman's rear, and the other two would be overlapped in front and tied off with the attached strips of cloth. The difference in the length of the front and back panels is to make it easier for the wearer to work squatting all the time; the front panels can be shorter but the back one has to be longer to keep the wearer's rear covered while working. Illustrations of women wearing precisely this type of outfit can be seen in the book of illustrations, *Living in the Mine*<sup>2</sup> by Yamamoto Sakubei.<sup>3</sup> There were no set requirements for the material from

which *mabubeko* were made. It seems *kasuri* or striped cloth was most common, but most likely whatever was available and within the reach of these women was used.

It would appear that the *mabubeko* was viewed not as underwear (like an ordinary *koshimaki*) but rather as a specialized kind of work garment. Even so, those mining women typically did not wear anything else under their *mabebeko*. In other words, their private parts would have been exposed as they squatted and crawled through the mineshafts. It was really not that long ago that hundreds of women slaved away in this humiliating outfit, making their contribution to the energy production needed for the developing nation. We tend to focus more on its conspicuous, monumental signs above ground, and remain blind to the effort and sacrifice of these invisible women working in the mines below.

In addition to the *mabubeko*, the mining women wore a *haramaki* – that is, a length of cloth made of *sarashi momen* (bleached cotton) – which was folded in half lengthwise and then bound around the waist. It had several different purposes. On the one hand, it functioned like a cummerbund, supporting the abdominal muscles during heavy physical exertion, and on the other, it helped to absorb all the rivulets of sweat that would cascade down from their upper bodies. Additionally, it was handy in the event of an accident, as it could also be used as a bandage to cover bleeding. Like anything else down in the mine, this *haramaki* would become blackened from the coal dust and would have to be washed daily. Unlike the *mabubeko*, however, this cotton wrap was replaced somewhat more frequently, even before it became totally worn out. This may seem surprising, given that this was a time when cloth was scarce and the money to purchase it was even more so. But the *haramaki* had an almost ritual significance for these women. This was the very first garment they would put on before starting for work, and maybe because of

that they may not have wanted to jinx their safety by seeing stains and rips.

In other contexts, I have seen many cases where women would make a conscious effort to incorporate something of beauty in their field jackets or other work clothes, regardless of their humble status. The *haramaki* functions in a similar way for the female miners, revealing their sense of pride and grace, through such details as the manner of tying the cloth. After wrapping the *haramaki* around her waist several times, the woman would tie it on the left, often making elaborate knots, such as a flamboyant bowknot or a samurai-like straight knot.<sup>4</sup> “We knew darn well that after ten minutes down in the mine, we would be totally covered with black dust. I wonder why we even bothered about what kind of knot to tie!” Thus did my informant reminisce about the old days, adding with a chuckle that at one point in her youth she was known as “the beauty queen of the mine.”

The final item in a female miner’s outfit was the pair of *tenugui* (lit. “hand-wipe or towel”) that they would wrap around their head. They would go down with at least two separate pieces of *tenugui*—one for keeping the hair tied in place while down in the shaft and the other for cleaning off the face when they come back out, and these two towels were never interchanged. The way they wore the *tenugui* on their heads was also varied. My informant proceeded to show me two of the different manners of wearing it. One way was purely practical, simply an effective means of holding the hair in place. The other way was more stylish, and incorporated the hair tied in topknot. Mind you, these women had never heard of “hair salons” nor for that matter did they have any real choice of hairstyles.

“Why did we bother with such things when in fact nobody ever even looked at us?” the old woman reflected out loud with some amusement. I think the answer is clear: it was

their sense of femininity that inspired them to be as beautiful as they possibly could within the limits of their situation. And that, in my view, is the definition of “gracefulness,” which has nothing to do with “embellishment.”

In the early Shōwa era, younger female miners eventually started wearing hand-sewn underwear under their *mabubeko*. Most of those girls had never finished elementary education, but many had attended school for at least a few years, which was long enough for them to become acquainted with the idea of wearing underwear. They sewed their own underwear (what may be called ‘bloomers’), using old lining material from their futon covers. Probably they could not even dream of purchasing new material for such a purpose. At any rate, even after underwear was becoming the new trend, the older women remained naked under their *mabubeko*, not willing to change.

We can be glad that the *mabubeko* has become a thing of the past. The female miners who wore them are also dwindling in numbers, but I hope that we will not allow our memory of them to fade away as well. May the *mabubeko* serve as a reminder of the sacrifices of those rugged women, and of their willingness to risk their lives working in so dangerous an environment, hundreds of feet below ground.

What has often struck me when visiting the homes of the few women miners who are still with us is that their houses are all so clean and tidy. I doubt that these women are in any way exceptions in this; in fact, I suspect it is their ideal, if not their obsession, to keep their own living space as clean as possible, after having spent so much of their lives down in those dark and dusty holes. The woman who told me about the milk-sucking male miner had a severely hunched back, so much so that I wondered if she could even rise from bed by herself. However, she told me proudly that all of the flowers blooming in her yard were the result of

her meticulous gardening. I could not help noticing that there was not a single weed anywhere in that garden.

### **Hanten Story**

When the Pacific war ended with the defeat of Japan, millions of Japanese in the colonies and occupied areas began to make the difficult trip back to their homeland, leaving everything behind – their assets, their social status, and the friendships they had worked for decades to cultivate. All they could bring with them was what they could carry on their backs or in their hands. This is the story of one such returnee, from among the many who came home from Manchuria. She came home with just one small pack, and yet what she carried in it may have been the heaviest thing imaginable, in terms of the extremity of human experience. For the *hanten* she carried had witnessed a woman's journey to hell and back.

At the construction business I started after the war, one of the employees was a man from western Kyūshū who worked for me for over 20 years. I very much appreciated his unassuming personality as well as his skill as a carpenter. As such, we formed a long-lasting friendship that continued even after I closed my business. I had been asking him if he might be able to help me locate old items of clothing in the area where he was from. At one point he invited me to go with him on a visit to his village. His parents were deceased, but his eldest sister still lived in the house having succeeded as the head of the family line. Alas, however, as we went around his village from house to house, I was unsuccessful in finding a single item of interest. If people had anything to offer at all, it turned out to be some relatively new machine-woven items, hardly worth collecting. More often than not, the old clothes from the era I was interested in had already been disposed of by then. I ended up purchasing a few pieces just to be polite to those who had gone to the trouble of bringing old things out from storage.

By then it was getting dark. Although I had been careful not to get my hopes up too much, I must admit that I was very disappointed at my bad luck. He, his sister, and her husband all felt bad for me. I tried to assuage them, telling them that instead of old clothing, I was fortunate to have received ample good will, and I was ready to start my one and a half hour trip back home. Suddenly, one of them mentioned a woman's name. "She may have something of interest for you," they suggested. "She lives right on the way out of town. Why don't we stop there?" I had given up all hope, but nonetheless I followed them to her house to be polite.

The woman was in the front yard, tending her vegetable garden. She greeted us by taking off the thin towel she had draped over her head to keep her hair in place. In the setting sun, her silver hair sparkled attractively. She was very courteous and elegant, which I felt was probably the reason why my friend and his sister had insisted that I come meet her. When I explained what I was looking for, she shook her head and apologized, as I had expected. "I came back from Manchuria with nothing", she explained. "I'm afraid I won't be of much use to you. I'm sorry you had to come from so far only to go home empty-handed. Please let me offer you some tea, at least." Bowing deeply, she invited us into her house. She appeared to embody the pure, genuine graciousness of days past. Needless to say, we apologized profusely for showing up at her house without prior intimation, thanked her for her time and for the tea, and eventually took our leave. After parting from my friend and proceeding a short distance on my way out of town, I realized that I still had one last gift box of sweets in my bag. I thought I should give it to her for her hospitality, and so I headed quickly back to her house.

She looked puzzled at first, and when I presented the box, she refused to take it saying there was no reason why she should receive

such a nicety. I insisted and left the box at the door. As I was about to leave again, she suddenly looked up at me and said, “Actually, there is something I can show you. As you can see, this is a humble abode, but if you do not mind, would you like to stay overnight?” I detected an air of determination in her refined facial features, so I decided to accept her invitation. She led me to the six-jō room<sup>5</sup> at the back. It was a small room, roughly 12 feet wide, but it housed a Buddhist altar,<sup>6</sup> far more elaborate and expensive-looking than one would expect in such a humble dwelling. In front of the altar were two large vases full of seasonal flowers, which cascaded out of them.

She treated me to a wonderful feast of rice and *miso* soup, apologizing all the while for the meagerness of the meal. The soup was full of vegetables, all cooked thoroughly and full of *miso* flavor, reminding me of the way my mother used to make miso soup every day and night. I told her this and kept asking for more. She looked genuinely pleased by my healthy appetite. After the meal, she asked me why I liked old clothing. I told her all about my background – where I was born, how I grew up – and I explained how much I appreciate the way people live earnestly, with respect and care for others. I explained my belief that old clothing contains the distilled traces of the emotions, thoughts, and experiences of those who had worn them. I said that, on occasion, I was sure these old clothes had witnessed happiness and joy, but more often than not, their experiences were those of sorrow and lamentation. I concluded by confiding in her that it was my life’s ambition to convey to people, through the voices of the actual clothes themselves, the nature of the trials and tribulations undergone by their owners in the past, however outrageous this might sound.

I stopped talking. The old lady was listening quietly and intently without uttering a word. A hush of silence fell over the room. We sat there without words for what felt like a very long

time. Then she finally broke the silence, speaking in a low, quiet voice, but very clearly and deliberately. “Please do stay here tonight. I have a story to tell you, and something I would like to give you.” The voice felt as though it was coming from somewhere far away, emanating from some larger being, and I sat there in total stillness, listening intently. “My son and his wife, and my grandson and his wife all live together in the main house. They may come later to check on me, but otherwise, there should be no interruptions. Just make yourself comfortable and listen to an old woman’s story.” She smiled, looking a bit more relaxed.

At this point, the old lady reached into a storage compartment under the Buddhist altar and pulled out a *yanagi-gōri* trunk.<sup>7</sup> She opened the lid and took out a bundle wrapped in layers of paper. Out came a well-laundered *hanten* jacket. It must have been left in the trunk for a long time; its deep creases would not relax even after being flattened and spread out. The protective mothballs wrapped with it had long since evaporated, and the dried up cellophane packets that once contained them were all empty and fell to the *tatami* floor one after another, making a rustling sound. The jacket had light blue pinstripes against a dark navy blue background. The lining was dyed with an indigo blue. I could tell right away that it was hand-woven cotton from the Meiji era. It was not a particularly uncommon item. However, something unusual about it caught my eye immediately: it bore several cuts in its fabric, as if it had been slashed by a sharp knife.



**A men's *hanten* jacket, similar to the one in the text, Kitakyūshū Museum of Natural History and Human History**

I learned that the old lady had been born in Meiji 32 (1899), in a small mountain village right around the border of Nagasaki and Saga Prefectures. There were about 30 families living there, all of them very poor. As villagers commonly did back then, they cultivated tiny pieces of land up in the hills, and to augment their livelihood, some would come down in summer to do odd jobs in town, or they would supplement their income in winter by making charcoal. Simply by being the first-born daughter, her fate had been sealed, since it fell to the first-born child to bear the brunt of the household duties. There was no questioning this, and one was not able to refuse. That was just the way things were up to the 1940s or so. Sisters and brothers followed in due course, but then, when she was 10, her mother died because she had gone back to work too soon

after having another baby.

Her family had no land of their own. Her father grew some crops on rented land, but the family's main income still came from his work as a day laborer. When he would leave home to go to work, the 10 year old girl would be left at home to take care of her four younger siblings, including a newborn and one child who was still wearing diapers. The father soon took a second wife, a divorcee from the next village. The girl knew that this would change her life forever, and not for the better. In order to bring in more income for the struggling family, she was sent out to work as a live-in baby sitter at a merchant's house in town. Her yearly salary was only 20 yen. She did not mind working in someone else's house, but she was quite anxious about the welfare of her siblings. She remembered begging her father to be sure to take good care of her little sisters and brothers.

The work was hard, though fortunately the lady of the house was kind and treated her well. Back at home, more children were born from the stepmother. The family had less and less with which to manage. Soon the younger brother, after finishing grade school, was sent out to work as a farm hand. He came to visit her the day before he was to leave. "We have to earn money for the younger ones," he said, trying to cheer her up. However, the family's financial situation did not improve at all, not even with two children contributing to the income. Several years went by, and the father became sick. When a day laborer is ill, it means that there is no income. The stepmother started complaining incessantly, blaming the father and lamenting her bad luck in marrying him. She vented her anger by being mean to the children from his first wife. The family situation grew steadily worse.

In due course, the daughter was promoted from baby sitter to housemaid, although her salary did not become much higher. In 1918, when

she was 18, she heard that much money could be made by working in the textile mills in Nagoya. There was a recruiter who would come around every so often, and he was trying very hard to talk her into coming to work at the mill. She was so excited about the prospect of being able to send home twice as much money that she was just about to follow this man.

In the meantime, however, an unsavory merchant called Yorozu-ya found out about her plan. This character was from a few towns away and would come around regularly to sell his goods. He was an old, devious looking man with a small frame and deep-set eyes. He was a smooth talker, well informed, and he was known for his shrewd business skills. He started frequenting her parents' home for no apparent reason. Rumor had it that he was running a side business of taking girls from poor families to work in brothels. To their credit, her parents knew his reputation, so they paid no attention to what he had to say. But alas, he was too crafty and persuasive. He would tell various exaggerated tales, all dramatic and quite effective. "The textile mill is a horrible place!" he would proclaim. "Girls are locked up there with no air and ventilation. The food they provide is unhealthy and of terrible quality. In fact, the place is a den of tuberculosis! Once so-and-so's daughter contracted TB and got thrown out of the factory. She came home sick and then the whole family died shortly thereafter! Another girl, simple-minded country girl that she was, was deceived by a wicked man in town, got pregnant, and had a child out of wedlock. She eventually disappeared." Then he would repeat his mantra at the end of his stories that they should all be grateful just for being alive.

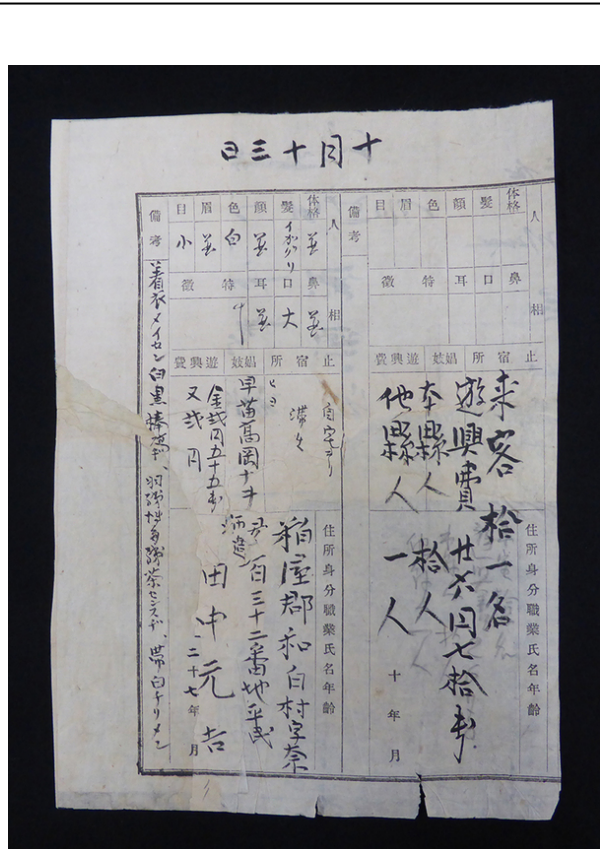
What he was suggesting to her parents at these visits was that he could get the daughter a job at a restaurant in a town by the Kishima Coal Mine.<sup>8</sup> The work would be easier, the food better, the pay bigger, and after a set amount of time, she would be free and able to save

money. He must have figured that the parents would eventually be persuaded because he kept coming every so many days. The clincher was a gift he brought for the stepmother. She was brought over to the pimp's side, and a contract was agreed upon without the girl knowing anything at all about it.

One day, she was called back home. Seeing how cheerful her stepmother was and how fidgety her father was acting, she knew she had been "sold." She thought only about her brothers and sisters, and about her father - she didn't mind sacrificing herself for them. She had no choice, anyway. Yorozu-ya had paid 400 yen for the two-year contract. He boasted that it was thanks to his reputation that he was able to offer such a large sum. She knew it was going to be a horrible life, yet the reality would prove to be far worse. It would truly turn out to be a living hell.

Back in those days, the miners at Kishima were not direct employees of the mining company, but rather laborers contracted through the *naya* system.<sup>9</sup> They were rough and rowdy men from all over the country, some of whom flaunted tattoos all over their bodies. The old lady described the unbearableness of her condition:

Day after day, those men would come, assaulting me and crushing my body until I felt like it would crumble. How I wished I had chosen to die working in a textile mill instead! I lived in regret and despair every single day. The man who ran the brothel was a real reptile. Of course, he had to be—how else could he have been a brothel owner? Even so, he was unusually cruel. He would spitefully declare, "prostitutes are the lowest of the low, not even human."



**Party Order Record.** A document kept at an entertainment establishment. It contains the date of the event, the number of guests, the cost, the names of the serving women, the name and the address of the guest, and interestingly his physical description—possibly in case of his skipping the scene. Author's collection

alley with only a small piece of old straw matting over her face. Her legs were covered with mud and her body was exposed. It was indeed a chilling sight! Certainly this was not the way the dead should be treated. Even a criminal would be regarded as a Buddha once he has died! Eventually, some relatives came to take the body. The brothel owner never spoke to them, but all the while he kept haranguing us about what a nuisance and financial loss she had caused by killing herself.

We were treated far worse than cats and dogs. The system of servitude worked in such a way that your indebtedness would never be reduced. It seemed as if dying was the only way you could get out of this hell. There was nothing else left for me. Every night, I would curl up waiting for the dawn that never came. I had no desire to go on living; my mind was an empty blank.

Shortly after I started there, one of the older workers went mad and committed suicide by hanging herself. She had been suffering from a terrible disease that the women of this trade would contract. After the police report was filed, the owner dragged her body to the back door, pulling it by the rope around her neck, and threw it out unceremoniously. She lay there in the dirt of the back



Most likely used by a prostitute. Cotton. A design of flowers, including chrysanthemum and cherry, together with pine and bamboo motifs and four different Navy flags appears in white on a bright red background. From a port town of Sasebo, Saga Prefecture in Kyūshū. Kitakyūshū Museum of Natural History and Human History

In the fall of my second year there, I started to be visited by an evil man who was a guard at one of the dormitories for the *naya* laborers. These guards were no better than gangsters, and they were charged with catching escapees, punishing undisciplined slackers, and exercising control in general. I hated this man with all my heart. Just hearing his voice would give me the shudders. The brothel owner often relied on this man to help keep things under control in the brothel, and for that reason was trying to stay on good terms with him.

Right around that time, the Great Spanish Flu Pandemic<sup>10</sup> struck This devastating disease quickly spread

throughout the world, claiming more than twenty million lives. In Japan, it was reported that roughly 1,420,000 souls fell victim to the disease, of which 60,000 died in 1919 alone. In our brothel, we lost some of the women to this disease. Of course, we were never treated or given medicine. We knew that contracting this flu would be a very serious matter. However, despite all the precautions we took, I ended up becoming ill anyway: I had a fever, I could not eat, and felt deathly ill. Cursing the whole time, the brothel owner put me under quarantine in a room called the *andon-beya*,<sup>11</sup> the purpose of which was to keep the sick away from those who were still healthy.

Most customers would not even consider hiring an infected prostitute, but, one night, that thug of a guard came in to see me. He insisted that he had to have me. He raided the *andon-beya* to find me, kicked away my pillow, peeled off my cover, and jumped on me. I screamed for help, but nobody would dare enrage either the thug or the brothel owner by stopping him. I pleaded with him. "What's so fun about having sex with a sick prostitute? If you wait till I am better, I will be able to do more for you. So please spare me tonight—please have mercy! My body and my mind are just not working right tonight." I begged him in tears, but still he would not heed my plea.

Just then, a young man, named Kichizō, a casual patron who was visiting another woman, must have heard my voice and came rushing

into the *andon-beya*. Quickly comprehending what was going on, he challenged the thug. "Are you even a man, to be torturing a sick woman like that? Shame on you!" This young man then pulled the thug away from me and threw him against the wall. The thug was taken by surprise, but once he got re-oriented, he pulled out a knife and lunged toward the young man. Hearing the commotion, the other people in the brothel came rushing into the room and eventually managed to separate the two. But that was only the beginning. The thug had lost face by losing like that in a fight with an ordinary guy. Soon his underlings gathered in the room and started harassing the young man. Naturally, the brothel owner sided with the gang members. The manager of the *naya*, who had so much political power in town, was called in to mediate and attempt to find a solution. He got the gang members to agree to back off and leave, if someone would sever the young man's right arm from his shoulder. Since this was the *naya* manager's idea, the thug could not refuse; however, the young man surprised all of us: he declared that he was going to buy me out of bondage! He said, in front of everyone, that he had wanted to marry me all along and that he was going to pay up for me. He said that he had planned to do so for a long time. He asserted, "what crime is there in a husband's trying to save his wife when she is in danger?"

I imagine that anywhere and at any time it would be a huge taboo for a respectable man to marry a woman

from a brothel. Prostitutes were not considered to be human beings, but only "playthings" for men's entertainment. The *naya* manager must have been impressed by this young man's reckless courage! He declared that in consideration of the young man's earnestness and young age, he would let this incident go and that no one would threaten the young man any longer. What a deal, dropped in his lap by a chance meeting! Other people were amused as well, saying that an arm would have been cheaper than paying off for me. As for me, I begged the young man to forget about me. People would not allow a prostitute to become a respectable wife. It would affect not only the man but also his family and relatives. The more I pleaded, the firmer Kichizō became in his resolve. "I will make enough money to pay off your debt. You have nothing to worry about. Even if the whole world goes against it, I will make you my wife."

When his family and relatives got wind of his marriage plans, all hell broke loose. They threatened to cut him off from the family and never again receive him into the house. His mother begged him in tears, crying "I did not give birth to you so you could marry a prostitute!" No matter what, however, he would not change his mind. Somehow, he managed to borrow enough money to pay off my debt and bring me out of bondage. He kept telling me that he was not doing it out of sympathy, but rather because he had fallen in love with me. He

reassured me and said that there was nothing to worry about.

The old lady uttered a heavy sigh, remembering the hard times and suffering. “We prostitutes were treated like animals, or outcasts from human society. There was not a single woman among us who had wanted to become a prostitute. We were all forced.” As if possessed, the old lady continued her story:

This is the very *hanten* jacket Kichizō was wearing when he saved me from the thug. The cuts in its fabric are the slashes made by the knife during the thug’s attack. This jacket was my will to live. Many things happened after we got married, but as long as I had this *hanten*, I felt safe and protected.

Then she pulled out a few sheets of paper from the bundle and placed them before me. I could see that there was some notation written in big, hurried letters on the thin *Mino-gami*<sup>12</sup> paper.

This is the cancelled contract document. It shows how women were bought and sold, just like animals. When my husband paid off my remaining debt, the brothel owner gave these papers to him. My husband told me to burn everything from the brothel, but somehow I couldn’t bring myself to do it and so I have saved these papers ever since.

She handed me the sheets of paper, which themselves appeared to share in the anguish and misery of the woman who had been sold. The first sheet was the letter of agreement signed by her father. It stipulated that the family would not cause any trouble during the period of indenture, and that if this condition should ever be violated, the family would

compensate the brothel owner for any losses thus incurred. The second sheet was a printed document listing all the rules with regard to things like renting clothes and bedding, and maintaining bodily hygiene, especially so as to prevent venereal disease. It bore her signature. The third sheet was the pimp’s acknowledgment of receipt of payment by the brothel owner. “Do you see how this *hanten* gave me my will to live? You can understand why I held onto these documents?”

These documents may have been instruments that helped solve the family’s money problems. At least her family had been relieved, however temporarily: her younger siblings may have benefited somewhat; their stepmother may have felt a bit warmer towards them on account of the sacrifice their elder sister had made. The price for these modest gains? The personal hell endured by a young girl being crushed and tormented by circumstance. No matter how much she fought back, there was no way out. Those three sheets of paper might just as well have been steel shackles chaining her to a life of servitude. My host went on:

My savior fought like an Asura<sup>13</sup> against those who opposed the marriage. I have to say, though, that it was not all opposition. His elder sister spoke up on our behalf, saying “Kichizō must have a reason for this. We should respect his feelings.” She was the only one who was at all sympathetic. It must have taken real courage on her part to support us in the face of such heavy opposition. Every member of the clan started pointing fingers at her as well, saying that she was just as tainted as Kichizō for being in cahoots with a prostitute. Despite all the pressure and accusations, she stood firm along with Kichizō. She was my savior, my Buddha. If

it were not for her, I would have...

She paused for a moment and then continued:

We got married. We could not stay there near his family, but we needed to earn money to pay back the debts. So we decided to immigrate to Manchuria. He was a good miner, so he would certainly be able to find a job there.

Back then, the Fushun mine<sup>10</sup> was said to be the biggest in Asia. Japan was expanding its power in Manchuria and Inner Mongolia. The demand for coal was at a historic high, and

there was a severe shortage of labor at the mines there.

In year 10 of the Taishō era (1921), our first son was born. Two years later, a second son, and then a daughter in 1926. I was in bliss. I never dreamed I would experience such happiness as when I became a mother. I even worried that this may only have been a trial to see if I deserved an ordinary life. It was like being in heaven, having finally crawled out of the hell of brothel life. It was my husband and my sister-in-law who gave me this happy life. In my mind, I would bow in reverence to both of them, over and over everyday.

Just once, I made a passing reference to my previous existence. My husband reacted with anger and hit me hard repeatedly, as if I was telling some preposterous lie. As I crumpled down under his blows, I was in tears, but they were tears of joy and happiness at realizing the success with which he had erased my past in his own mind. I was overjoyed that he had done this and to realize that he wanted me to do the same. Since that day, I have never once said anything more about those days, nor did I ever

even think about them until I began telling you this story now.

When our first son was in third grade, in the fall of Shōwa 5 (1930), my husband contracted a serious cold and died. All along he had been very healthy and had never suffered from any illness. It was so sudden and unexpected. I felt as though I had been thrown into the abyss, and was now surrounded by total darkness. My mind was a blank – I could not think about my children, about the funeral, about anything, and all I could do was cry my heart out for three full days, writhing around all over the floor. Afterwards, the neighbors told me they were amazed to realize just how much liquid a human must retain in her body, in order to be able to keep crying for such a long time. Someone took care of the family, the house, the funeral. I sat through it all, absolutely lifeless. The neighbors also told me that they took turns keeping an eye on me, so I wouldn't follow him in despair, taking the lives of the children as well. They were not totally wrong to worry like this, because the thought did cross my mind more than once.

I did nothing but cry for the first 49 days<sup>15</sup> but it eventually became apparent that I had to do something to support my children. I came to believe that raising his children to their full potential would be the only way I could possibly ever repay him. All I was good at was ordinary house chores. Someone found me a job at the company cafeteria as a dish washer. There were two shifts open, so I requested them both. I had to work long hours everyday, but I never thought it was difficult. In fact, it was so easy compared to the work I had once performed in the distant past. My children never complained about my not being able to spend much time with them; they never got into trouble, and they were all very supportive. I am sure they must have understood the difficulty of my situation.

Then came 1931 and the Manchurian

Incident.<sup>16</sup> Soon after, there were more and more Japanese immigrating to Manchuria, and the labor force at the Fushun mine grew rapidly. The cafeteria was owned not by the mining company but by an outside contractor, and business was booming. The owner was quite happy with the way I worked and he also knew the difficulty of my situation, and so he offered me the chance to manage the place. This was unbelievable good fortune for me—instead of being a hired worker, I was now able to hire my own workers! My income rose accordingly.

My father and stepmother were long gone by then. My only surviving family member back in Japan was my sister-in-law, who was now a widow with young children, and was barely able to make ends meet on her own. I wrote to her regularly, about life and about the details of my job. I told her how much I would love to have her come and live with me. She could not take up my invitation, however, since she had to take care not only of her young children but of her aging mother-in-law as well. I sent her a set amount of money every month. Now that my husband was gone, my sister-in-law was the only person left in the world who had helped me escape my hell. The money I sent would not even count for one thousandth of what she did for me. Each time, she wrote back a thank-you letter, detailing how grateful she was and how generous I was. Yet, it was nothing at all compared to what she had done for me. I would have happily dedicated my entire fortune to her, the one and only person who had supported her brother when he married a prostitute, and who had protected that prostitute by standing in front to deflect all the attacks and taunting.

The business of running the employee cafeteria grew steadily, and by the fourth year, I had opened another one. My oldest son joined the Manchurian Railroad after finishing middle school. My second son entered Manchurian Electric after graduating from an engineering

high school. They were both excellent at school!

When my daughter entered girls' middle school, I was reduced to tears to think that the daughter of a prostitute was now a schoolgirl! I had barely gone to grade school myself. For me, middle school was something magnificent, like a palace up in the clouds! The day before she started, I laid her head face-down on my lap to shave the soft downy hair on the nape of her neck.<sup>17</sup> The soft hair shone golden in the sunlight pouring in from the window. It was so beautiful and pure, almost divine! I was beside myself crying, missing my husband who had made it possible for me to have such a beautiful girl! On the first day of school, she stood at the door dressed in her sailor-style student uniform made of wool twill, wearing black leather shoes on her feet, her braided pigtailed dangling over her shoulders. I could not believe this was my own daughter. I was so happy. It was spring of 1938.

She went on to explain that, before long, her elder son was drafted. The second son, who was a little more delicate and smaller framed, was not drafted immediately, but was placed in a stand-by category for the draft. She was hoping that he would be spared, but fate dictated otherwise. He was called up at the very end of the war, sent to Siberia, and, as she later learned, he died on the battlefield there. She continued:

In the early summer of 1948, I returned to Japan. It had been 27 years since my husband took me to Manchuria. This time, my daughter accompanied me. The other returnees on the boat had whatever they could carry with them, on their back or in their arms. My luggage was small. All I had with me was my husband's ashes, the *hanten*, and the three sheets of paper. All along the long

way home, I did not let anyone else carry my luggage, not even my daughter.

A happy surprise was waiting for us back in Japan: my older son, whom I had long ago given up as dead, had returned in one piece from the southern front and was waiting for us. My sister-in-law took care of us. Her daughter was a kind-hearted girl, just like her mother. After consulting with my sister-in-law and with the young man and the young woman, all happily decided that the two should be married.<sup>18</sup>

My sister-in-law never told anyone about my past, not even her own children. She was such a thoughtful person and so dedicated to protecting me, that she never revealed my secret to anyone.

The *hanten* was my life. I draped it over my husband's coffin during the funeral. Then I kept wearing it myself all through the mourning period. People asked what that was for, but I never explained; I wanted to keep this a secret between my husband and me. My sister-in-law passed away eight years ago. Once she became bedridden, I asked every one of her children to let me take care of her. She told them herself that she wanted me to be there in her last moments. I was so honored. I put the bedding right next to hers and slept beside her. Before she took a turn for the worse, I had a chance to show her the *hanten* and the documents. She looked up at me and said "Kichizō would be so happy to know that you took such care to keep these things all along. I have to thank you, too." She stayed with me about a year, and then departed from this world.

After pausing for a while, she turned to me and said:

Earlier this evening, you started to leave, but then you came back. There must be a reason for this. When you said what you did about old clothes carrying the sorrows

and desperation of their owners, I knew that you were the one to whom I must entrust this *hanten*. That is why I asked you to stay. If you have some sense of what my husband, my sister-in-law, and I have been through, you must relieve me by taking the *hanten* and the documents.

At this point, the old lady bowed deeply towards me. The sky was beginning to get lighter. I had completely lost all sense of time, listening to her story all night long. When I realized the gravity of her entreaty, I hesitated: it felt totally inappropriate for someone so unseasoned as I to bear the responsibility of protecting such profoundly charged items. I kept telling her I was not worthy. These items were perhaps the choicest examples of what I had been looking for – vehicles bearing the sorrows and the hopes, the desperation and the joy, the suffering and the compassion of those who owned and wore them. No doubt I would feel tremendously honored and grateful if they were to come into my possession. Yet, I did not believe that I deserved such an honor, and I was not sure I could endure the horror of her life experiences. In the face of such extremity, I became numb and speechless. I should mention that, in recounting her story above, it was I who referred to her father's second wife as her stepmother. She never used the word "stepmother" in her own narration, and in fact, she never expressed any resentment or blame towards her father, stepmother, or her in-laws. This alone reveals how high-minded she was. I was awed by her magnanimity. She resumed speaking:

I am offering you the *hanten* and the papers because I think you can appreciate their true value. You can do whatever you want with them. Please take them.

She continued bowing to me, renewing her

plea. By this point, I could not resist any longer, and so I nodded in acceptance. In the end, I no longer had any sense of hesitation – this was just the right thing to do. The old lady folded the *hanten* carefully, put the papers back in the packet, and bowed to me again in thanks. One last time, she embraced the packet, crying quietly for the first time since she had started her story the night before. “How heavy it has been, how terribly heavy it has been ...” I let her cry for a long time.

I left her house in the light of morning. But before I departed, she fed me with leftover rice and *miso* soup from the night before, with a few more vegetables added. I can still remember the wonderful aroma and flavor of that soup! I accepted the *hanten* and the papers, fully aware of the responsibility that was being entrusted to me, and it seemed that I was now carrying a substantial weight on my shoulders.

A couple months later, almost at the beginning of summer, I had an opportunity to visit the old woman again. We had set up this visit when I left her house that day. But when I approached her house, it appeared to be empty and quiet. I stood for a while in the yard, thinking about what I would say to her when she returned. After a while, a young woman came by, looking at me suspiciously. Once I told her who I was, a look of recognition played across her face. With a warm smile, she greeted me. “My grandmother passed away last month. She told me about you. Before she died, she made me promise to tell you that she was really happy to have met you.”

There was freshness in the early summer air, but I felt empty inside. Without even paying my respects at the Buddhist altar in the main house, I turned around and left. I simply could not bring myself to see her name inscribed on a tablet on the altar.

In 1987, I published a book titled *Ranru-tachi no Henreki (The Journeys of Scrap Clothes)*. This publication is a reference tool for different

kinds of textile, and gives detailed accounts of each of the 400 samples of old cloth. I tried my best to be accurate and informative in my analyses, placing the emphasis on the oral history component. While I was working on this project, I hesitated to include the material from the old lady’s *hanten*. Eventually, the day came for me to pick the 400<sup>th</sup> piece. Facing the *hanten*, I could not help hearing the desperate cry of a soul that had been violated and exploited for no fault of its own. I was afraid it might be sacrilegious towards the old lady to detail the history of this piece. For a long time, I vacillated. The weight of the *hanten* and the papers was indeed too much to endure. I begged for advice from a friend, to whom I had told the whole story previously. This is what he said:

I believe that the soul can be resurrected when one is able to see a ray of light in the midst of inhumanity. The old lady was perhaps the luckiest person after all. Not too many people are so fortunate to be supported by someone as full of love and care as her husband and her sister-in-law. She had certainly found the ray of light! Among the readers of your book, there will certainly be some who would be deeply moved to read her story. You should by all means include this item—that would be the best tribute you can make to the memory of the deceased.



A poster of the play, *Hanten Story*, adapted from this chapter. Scripted and directed by Shimauchi Junsusumu, performed in 1986 in Kokura, Kitakyūshū. Translator's collection

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Idegawa Yasuko. *Hi o Unda Haha-tachi: Onna-kōfu kara no Kikigaki*. Fukuoka, Japan: Ashi Shobo, 1984.

<sup>2</sup> Yamamoto Sakubei. *Collection of Illustrations and Notes: "Living in the Mine."* Tokyo: Kodansha, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Yamamoto Sakubei, (1892-1984) born to a poor family in the Chikuhō region, Fukuoka Prefecture in Japan, started to work in coalmines at the age 7. At 60, he started to illustrate coal miners' lives with annotations. The collection of his works was included in the UNESCO's Memory of the World Register in 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Though these two specific methods of tying are not illustrated, other variations of sash-tying can be seen in Liza Dalby, *Kimono: Fashioning Culture*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993, 46-47.

<sup>5</sup> Six-jō room. Room with six tatami mats.

<sup>6</sup> *Butsu-dan*. A Buddhist altar, typically made of wood, housing a memento of the deceased,

such as a tablet inscribed with the person's Buddhist name and photos as well as offerings to the deceased.

<sup>7</sup> *Yanagi-gōri*. Box-shaped wicker basket with a matching lid, typically woven with willow reed. Used to keep clothing in for storage.

<sup>8</sup> Kishima Coal Mine. Located in around Ōmachi-chō, Saga Prefecture. Mined from late 19<sup>th</sup> century to its closing in 1969, with its hey days around 1925–1950.

<sup>9</sup> A system of bonded labor through which workers were recruited, paid a lump sum in advance, and kept until their advance had been paid up through their labor.

<sup>10</sup> The Influenza Pandemic of 1918-19. A world-wide pandemic and the most devastating in recorded world history, which according to one estimate left between 20 and 40 million dead. Since it was first officially recognized in Spain, it is commonly referred to Spanish flu.

<sup>11</sup> *Andon-beya*. *Andon* is an oil lamp. *Andon-beya* is a small room for storing extra bedding and furniture, typically in inns, brothels and such.

<sup>12</sup> Mino-gami. A kind of Japanese rice paper produced in Gifu Prefecture. Has been in production since the early 8<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>13</sup> Asura: a deity of wrath in Buddhism, derived from the Hindu pantheon.

<sup>14</sup> Fushun, situated in Northeast China, was under Japanese control between the Treaty of Portsmouth (1905) and 1945.

<sup>15</sup> Buddhist belief that the soul of the deceased would part from this world on the 49th day after death.

<sup>16</sup> In 1931, the Japanese military invaded Manchuria, which led to the establishment of the puppet state of Manchukuo under the control of Japanese Imperial government.

<sup>17</sup> This was customarily done as part of grooming for young women.

<sup>18</sup> Marriage between cousins was not an unusual practice in the past in Japan, partially to keep assets within the clan and also because the families knew each other well.