Selected bibliography on labor in Japan
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A senior American historian once told me that there were hardly any books on Japanese labor. His perception was understandable; indeed, there have been far too few English language books on labor and the working-class in Japan. Yet, I was chagrined to discover that he, along with many other labor historians, have based their understanding of Japan on a very small number of books published in the 1980s.

This selected bibliography, organized in reverse chronology, lists no books published earlier than 1990. Regrettably, the two dozen-plus books listed still reflect the majority of English language scholarship, and the only way to get a good bead on the field still is to read the Japanese literature. Years of intensive language study not-withstanding – a path that I strongly encourage all current and future graduate students to consider – I hope the following book list will provide a solid base of recent scholarship for those wishing to broaden their understanding of the history of work and labor in the first non-Western industrialized nation.

By a quick survey of titles in this list, most readers easily will recognize many tropes made standard by scholarship on labor in Europe, Australia and the USA. Not all the books selected, however, necessarily fall into the conventional rubric of labor history. James Roberson’s and Nobue Suzuki’s Men and Masculinity in Contemporary Japan, for example, is an edited collection of essays examining the extent to which popular notions of the Japanese ‘salaryman’ have over-determined how many Japanese men themselves think of their lives as male white-collar workers and family men. Yuko Ogasawara’s Office Ladies and Salaried Men, however, examines the extent to which pink-collar workers navigate a workplace structured to discourage their advancement by collectively working (in a distinctly white-collar variation on John Scott’s theory of peasant foot-dragging) to bolster, or undermine, the careers of the salaryman generally credited with Japan’s postwar economic success.

Readers also will note the number of works on women and labor. This is in part the result of my particular interests as a labor historian and also is due to a specific trend in English language studies of Japanese labor since 1990. Indeed, the past 15 years of scholarship have shown how the story of industrialization in Japan can be told through the experiences of the wage-earning women who, until 1930, comprised the majority of Japan’s factory workers. This list starts and ends with works on female textile workers, and I think there is no better way to understand the history of work and labor in Japan as well as the trajectory taken by scholars in the field.

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Notes on contributor

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