

世界かWomen, Overseas Sex Work and Globalization in Meiji Japan 明治日本における女性、国外性労働、海外進出

Bill Mihalopoulos

Sex in Japan's Globalization, 1870-1930, from which the following discussion is adapted and developed, deals with poor rural women who migrated overseas to work as sex labourers. The core of the book is a historical study of the gendered and class impact of Japan's first encounter with globalisation that began in the 1860s. The women who worked in overseas brothels, I argue, must be first understood as peasants liberated from the land by Meiji land and tax policies, who became "free labour" searching for work in the colonial cities of Asia. Prostitution was one form of labour in the integration of Japanese women into the global work force. However, sex work as "labour" clashed with the simultaneous modernization goals of the Meiji state and social reformers who sought to embed cultural standards of ideal womanhood throughout Japanese society and to project the image of Japanese modernity internationally.

The book analyses the structural contradictions inherent in the efforts of Meiji Japan to incorporate Japan into a global economy. Toward this end, poor farmers were offered to the global market in the form of government-sponsored migration to work the plantations of Hawaii and Australia as "free labourers" from the mid-1880s. Simultaneously, the government implemented laws to prevent Japanese women going abroad as itinerate vagrants and prostitutes. This double move was driven by two contradictory goals. One aim was the quest for "freedom" crystallized around government efforts to promote Japanese trade and industry in a global economy and to secure the "free" movement of Japanese labourers to places of work abroad in the face of race restrictions

placed on coloured labourers in North America, colonial Australia and the Dutch East Indies to name a few locations. The other aim was "restrictions," which coalesced around administrative endeavours to demarcate acceptable and unacceptable forms of work that Japanese women could pursue abroad: It was acceptable to work as a cook or domestic servant, but not as a sex worker.

To talk about the history of prostitution—specifically attempts to control it—as a history of state building and emigration policy allows us to approach the topic of sex work from an entirely different angle. Young poor women, often sold into prostitution by their families, suffered tremendous hardships and found few ways to express agency. Existing scholarship (James Warren, *Ah and Karayuki-san: Prostitution in Singapore 1880-1940* and Yamazaki Tomoko, *Sandakan Brothel #8: an episode in the history of lower-class Japanese women*) strongly emphasize the oppression and harsh circumstances under which young women engaged in prostitution laboured.



Karayuki in Singapore, Meiji era

Sex in Japan's globalization asks a different set of questions: what was the state's investment in promoting, prohibiting or controlling overseas prostitution by Japanese women? But it also goes on to locate prostitution in relation to Japan's nation-building agenda and to assess the nature and possibility of women's agency under conditions of international prostitution.

*The book shows how these women became a target of stigmatization and corrective action as the Japanese state sought to harmonize modern nation building and personal conduct. Where other scholarship emphasises moral concerns, *Sex in Japan's Globalization* weaves the migration of rural poor Japanese women engaging in sex work abroad into such wide ranging issues as the state's attempts to foster national commerce and trade, Japan's relations with other nations, and the framing of forms of proper feminine conduct considered appropriate to the newly established social order created by government reforms to industrialize Japan. The visibility of Japanese prostitutes abroad came to be seen by Meiji elites as detrimental to the progress of modern Japan.*

Sex in Japan's Globalization deals directly with the Meiji state's development policies and the attitudes of key intellectuals and social welfare

*organizations towards women, workers, prostitution and what it meant to be a virtuous Imperial subject. Japan's industrialization required a new form of politics that aimed to train and transform Japanese peasants into good workers, not only in the obvious sense of acquiring new production skills and attitudes, but also targeting inter-family relationships in order to replace existing customs with conduct that supported nation building. The duties of parents and children were to be realigned so as to inculcate the habits of industry necessary for a disciplined industrial labour force. The gendered reconfiguration of rural poor women as *kaigai shugyofu* (disreputable women abroad) emerged when Meiji Japan become imbricated in new political battles and new economic strategies aimed at building a militarily strong industrial nation-state. Their classification by Japanese consuls and journalists as "disreputable women" cloaks a desire to regulate the behaviour of the poor. The reform agendas of government officials, journalists and Christian philanthropists, based on maintaining premarital chastity, strict monogamy, and the obligation to work for the good of the nation, came at the expense of lower-class women whose sexuality did not conform to their sensibilities.*

*In terms of Japanese history, the manuscript is situated between studies on rural class formation with Japan's first encounter with globalism from the 1860s (Stephen Vlastos, *Peasant Protests and Uprisings in Tokugawa Japan*) and research that looks at how rural women provided the labor for Japan's earliest drive for industrialization (see the works of Elyssa Faison, Janet Hunter, Helen Macnaughtan, and Patricia Tsurumi, to name a few). It also speaks to, extends and critiques the work of Sheldon Garon (*Molding Japanese Minds: The State in Everyday Life*) on how social groups and individuals, seemingly the recipients of state interventions, often joined forces with political officials in ways that confound a simple division between state and*

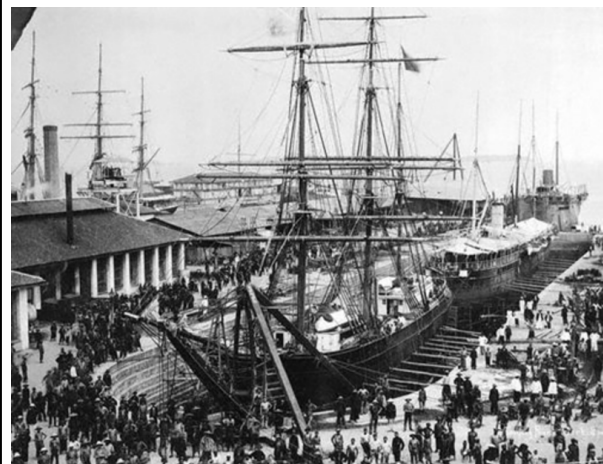
society. The focus of analysis falls on the connections between morality and the details of the life of the gendered rural poor to explain (rather than justify) the origins and motives of nation-building, developmental policies and state-sanctioned moral codes.

Lastly, and most importantly, it tries to give the poor dignity, sadly, a quality which is often lacking in research dealing with issues of development and industrialization.

This paper takes up the challenge to write the history of poor rural women leaving western Kyushu without reducing their lives to one of abject domination and exploitation. The task at hand is complicated. How does one convey knowledge of little understood value systems and the fulfilment sought by the rural poor in western Kyushu at the end of the nineteenth century to an audience in the early twenty-first century that more or less sees prostitution as resulting from male domination and poverty, and which effectively robs women of their humanity. To that effect, the focus will fall on a whole series of local, economic, and cultural practices, long disqualified and forgotten. The aim here is to describe the strategies that the rural poor drew upon as they adapted to the rapid social and economic changes occurring in Japan from the early 1870s, and the local social institutions, practices and knowledges that informed the decision by young women to gamble with migrating overseas to engage in sex work.

On a “macroscopic” level, the women’s ability to travel overseas was made possible when Kyushu coal emerged as the dominant energy source in East and Southeast Asia. Ports such as Nagasaki, Kuchinotsu, and Moji were junction points where the different contingencies that enabled Kyushu women to travel abroad met: the global energy market in coal, sea travel by steamship, and the local, socially prescribed practices of labour and migration. Around these port towns, a complex

and informal network of social relations emerged that informed and redistributed—in terms of work, economic, and cultural possibilities—strategies for the karayuki for life overseas as a means of survival, maintenance, and material gain. On a “microscopic” level, finding work overseas was a practical solution to particular problems of life faced by the women themselves and by their immediate communities. The suggestion here is twofold. Firstly, in the case of rural northwest Kyushu at least, contemporary sexual mores differed greatly from those present in Japan today. Secondly, the gender relations of the rural communities the women originated from were in direct conflict with the diffusion of new techniques of government aimed at redefining the relationships between men and women under the rubric of “modernization” and social progress.



Victoria Dock, Singapore, 1890s

Historically, the migration of Kyushu rural women to Singapore and Hong Kong to engage in sex work presented the greatest difficulty for the Japanese government, not in terms of numbers—more Japanese women worked as prostitutes on the Asian mainland—but in terms of visibility and the inability of Japanese authorities to find ways of curbing their movement.¹ A communiqué sent by Oga

Kamekichi, Japanese consul in Singapore, to Tokyo in September 1902 gives a glimpse into a transient Japanese female population migrating to Southeast Asia looking for work. In his communiqué, Oga informs the foreign minister that William Evans, head of the Chinese Protectorate, paid a visit to inform him of the rapid increase in the number of young Japanese women arriving in Singapore. According to Evans, in the past eight months twenty to thirty young Japanese women had alighted from every ship coming from Japan, looking for work. Most of the women had fallen into “pitiable circumstances. They were burdened by a \$500–600 debt to local brothel owners who had paid for their passage in advance, and were compelled to work as licensed prostitutes for four to five years to redeem money owed. At present, Evans’s office had registered 618 Japanese women to work in the 83 licensed Japanese-run brothels in Singapore. Of these, 458 of the women were new arrivals, having landed in Singapore in the last eight months. Moreover, from the registry, the Chinese Protectorate could tell that the largest number of the women came from western Kyushu: 107 women from Nagasaki prefecture and 96 from Kumamoto prefecture.

Coal and Gendered Labour Networks: Nagasaki, Hong Kong, and Singapore

As Evans indicated, a large percentage of the women migrating informally from Japan to the Strait Settlements were from Nagasaki and Kumamoto prefectures. The following sections address two questions: what historical contingency drew the women to the British colonial ports of Hong Kong and Singapore; and, why were the largest number of women from western Kyushu?

Colonial Singapore and Hong Kong

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, Singapore and Hong Kong became important for British trade routes and military might between Europe, Southeast Asia, and Northeast

Asia. The centre of the Straits Settlements, a flourishing British colony established in 1867, Singapore became a prized open commercial port (no import or export duty) after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, which made the distant regions of Asia more accessible to European trade. The result was rapid growth in the European, Indian, and Eastern trade to Singapore as shipping costs become economical. By the end of the nineteenth century, European and American banking houses and shipping companies had established offices in Singapore, which was important as a hub for the entire region of Southeast Asia. The rest of the colony became a significant site for plantations in rubber, sugar, coffee, tapioca, and rice. Hong Kong too was a prized British mercantile and trading colony. Established in 1840, Hong Kong offered British interests a secure commercial foothold in the China Sea and access to South China. Both ports were also the major centres for a British military presence in the Pacific, operating as outposts for the British army and as major coaling stations for the British navy.²

The evolution of Singapore and Hong Kong from mosquito-infested swamps and barren rocks to British centres of commerce and rule could not have happened, however, without the presence of a new social group: a proletariat made up of single, male labourers mostly from south China and India. This new class of migrant labourer, the so-called coolie, provided the muscle and sinew to construct the roads, wharves, godowns, and buildings that made Singapore and Hong Kong into functional military and commercial centres. Migrant labourers from India and China also supplied the energy that kept the flow of goods circulating freely from the dock to the ship, and from ship to dock, in both ports.

Well into the twentieth century, young, single men comprised around 90 per cent of the labouring population in Singapore. The ratio of men to women in the port was 10:1 in 1900.

The disproportion between men and women was not as acute in Hong Kong; the 1872 census showed a ratio of five men to one woman among white colonialists and seven to two among the Chinese population.³ The concentration of a large, single male population at Singapore and Hong Kong encouraged the introduction of working-class houses of prostitution. These brothels introduced a culture of male pleasure that differed greatly from the codified areas of the East Asian city set aside for sexual encounters. Traditionally, the pleasure quarters of East Asian cities were spaces of gratification *and* sociality. Men could go as often as they wanted, usually in the company of friends, walk about, meet other acquaintances, eat, drink, discuss, and if they felt like it, take their pleasure. In contrast, the British authorities in Hong Kong and Singapore negated the sociability of the brothel and attempted to sanitize and control spaces of public sex. The colonial authorities licensed the brothel, registered the women working in the brothel, and introduced hygiene regimes into the brothels with the aim of preventing the squalor of temporary dwellings and the venereal disease epidemics that followed unregulated prostitution.⁴ The rules of registration also attempted to bring bourgeois domestic order into the brothel. Inside the brothel, the madam was given the function of social matron. She was required to have her eye on everything, and to exert discipline by directing the personal hygiene, movements and time of the women working in her house.⁵ As a further hygiene precaution, the colonial masters of both Singapore and Hong Kong confined brothels to certain designated localities, with separate districts catering to Europeans and non-Europeans. The purpose of this segregation was to prevent the diseases and infections of the menial “Asiatic” labourers from being communicated to Europeans.⁶

Japanese and Chinese brothel owners aligned with the British colonial authorities to negate the sociability of the brothel. It was in the

interest of the brothel keeper to restrict all contact between women and clients to casual and quick encounters, to stop lasting relationships from developing. Intimate relationships held the risk that the women would abscond from the brothel with the help of the client-turned-lover. There was also an added economic incentive. Quick sexual interludes between the women and their clients meant that the women took more men per day, thus assuring more profit for the proprietor of the brothel. A major frustration faced by the single, male, migrant labourer was the lack of opportunity to establish lasting relations with a woman and start a household.⁷

Nagasaki, Kuchinotsu, Coal, and Migration Routes

Nagasaki was one of the largest urban centres in Japan during the Tokugawa period. Its size and prosperity were due to the monopoly it held over official trade between Edo and other kingdoms/countries. From 1698 the *Nagasaki kaisho* (Nagasaki Meeting Place), a semi-official merchant organization, controlled the flow of nearly all goods brought by Chinese and Dutch traders to Japan. It was also responsible for overseeing the foreign exchange in gold and silver and the financial administration of the city. The majority of people who lived in Nagasaki were involved in some kind of craft or trade. They made their living around the shogunate administrators and large numbers of foreign and Japanese merchants who resided in the city, the only point of entry for foreign trade to Japan. The commercial base of the city is best indicated by the fact that the residents of Nagasaki paid their taxes to the shogunate in fixed monetary sums (*unjo*) rather than in kind.

Nagasaki’s commodity trade economy and higher standard of living attracted migrant labourers from other areas of Kyushu. Local histories have identified a tradition of men and women migrating to the city from the adjacent Shimabara peninsula and Amakusa Islands as

early as the eighteenth century.⁸ The prevalent form of migration was the *nenki boko* or term service type. In the case of women, the work taken up in Nagasaki was largely domestic, in such capacities as household servants or child care-takers.⁹ The opening of Nagasaki port to all international trade in 1858-59 transformed the traditional migration routes between the Amakusa Islands, Shimabara peninsula, and Nagasaki.

From the 1850s onward, innovations in marine technology in the form of steam-driven ships and the expansion of land and submarine telegraphic communications firmly incorporated Japan into the European-based networks of power and exchange.¹⁰ The Tokugawa authorities signed commercial treaties under duress with the United States, the Netherlands, Russia, Britain, and France in 1858. As a result, the ports of Kanagawa, Nagasaki, and Hakodate were opened to foreign trade. Trading privileges were extended to foreign merchants in 1863 to include the ports of Niigata, Hyogo, and the cities of Edo and Osaka. The increase in steamers calling to ports in Japan also saw the demand for coal soar.¹¹ Encouraged by the demand for coal by energy-hungry steamers, the Japanese government investigated ways in which Kyushu coal mines could be exploited for nation-building.¹² The Meiji government invested heavily in the development of the Takashima and Miike mines in western Kyushu on the calculation that coal exports were a lucrative source of badly needed foreign exchange.



Nagasaki port 1871 with British and American ships, Felice Beato photograph

Geographic location played a key role in the Japanese government's success in integrating Japanese coal into the Asian coal market. Kyushu coalmines were favourably located along the major maritime routes in East Asia. Low cost, labour-intensive coal mines and low freight rates gave Kyushu coal a competitive edge over imported coals from Australia and Wales. By the mid-1870s Kyushu coal controlled close to 60% of the Shanghai coal-market. The dominance of Kyushu coal exports spread southward in the next twenty years, with Kyushu coal gaining the greatest share of the Hong Kong coal-market in the mid-1880s and the Singapore market by 1893-4.

The dominance of Kyushu coal in East Asian markets made Nagasaki the coal exporting centre of Japan between 1867 and 1880. During this period some 97% of all coal exported from Japan was from the Takashima mine, five nautical miles from Nagasaki. The mined coal was transported to Nagasaki in a row of 60 to 80 barges towed by a small tug steamer.¹³ In 1878, the volume of Kyushu coal exports increased with the establishment of Kuchinotsu, situated at the tip of the Shimabara Peninsula, as a special coal-

exporting port for coal extracted from the Miike mines in Omuta, Fukuoka prefecture, and the Arao mines in Kumamoto prefecture. In 1880, coal from the Miike mines began to be shipped directly from Kuchinotsu for sale in Hong Kong. By the mid-1880s, Miike coal replaced Takashima coal as the major energy source available on the Hong Kong market. As a result, Kuchinotsu, along with Nagasaki, emerged as one of the major coal-export ports in East Asia. During this period of Kyushu dominance in the Asian coal market, it was common practice for companies such as Jardine, Matheson and Co., Butterfield and Swire, and the China Merchant Steam Navigation Company to have ships call on Nagasaki or Kuchinotsu and carry coal to Hong Kong or Singapore when they could not find any suitable return cargo.¹⁴

Nagasaki and Kuchinotsu maintained their status as the major coal export centres until the mid-1890s. At that juncture, there was a shift of the main coal exporting centres from Nagasaki and Kuchinotsu to Moji and Wakamatsu in northeast Kyushu. The Chikuho coalmines in northwest Fukuoka prefecture suddenly became profitable when developments in coal utilization widened the market for lower grades of coal. Heavy investment by Mitsubishi mechanized some of the better mines in the Chikuho area and output increased tremendously. By 1897 the Chikuho mines were producing 50% of Japanese coal exports. Domestic politics also contributed to the shift of exporting coal from southwest Kyushu to the northeast part of the island. The abolition of the export duty on coal in 1888,¹⁵ the establishment of Moji as a special export port in 1889, and the completion of a railway between the Chikuho mines and Moji in 1893 all contributed to the relocation of the major coal-export ports in Kyushu.¹⁶

The export of coal from the ports of Nagasaki, Kuchinotsu, and Moji provided the rural poor of western Kyushu with the means to seek work

abroad. Informal practices of migration sprouted in tandem with the development of the coal industry in Kyushu. For example, the opening of Kuchinotsu as a special coal-exporting port in 1878, unlocked new possibilities for migration overseas. Miike mines in Fukuoka transported their coal by rail and sea to Kuchinotsu for export to Hong Kong and Singapore. The development of regional transport nodes such as railways and harbours attracted people from neighbouring villages to the port with the intent of traveling abroad to escape the poverty that surrounded them. Local Kuchinotsu lore often refers to frequent outbreaks of fires in the hills surrounding the harbour when it was a major coal exporting port. It is said that people purposely set the fires, diverting the attention of the harbour police so that they could secretly board the coal ships anchored in the harbour.¹⁷ Miyagawa Kyujiro, vice-consul at Hong Kong, made a direct correlation between Kuchinotsu, the number of Japanese women informally leaving Kyushu, and the increase in the number of Japanese prostitutes in Hong Kong. In a missive sent to Tokyo in 1890, Miyagawa states that from the intelligence gathered, it is his opinion that:

The increase in the flow of foreign ships entering and leaving recently opened special export ports such as Kuchinotsu and Karatsu¹⁸ for the purpose of exporting coal, has also increased the opportunity [for women] to slip secretly abroad.¹⁹

The same opportunities for overseas travel were available in Nagasaki. The linkage between Kyushu coal exports and Nagasaki as the starting point for rural poor women to migrate informally abroad is visible in the following example. In early February 1894, the British owned *SS Macduff* laid anchor in Hong Kong. Forewarned by the governor of Nagasaki, the Japanese consul requested the

local colonial authorities to organize an inspection of the vessel for thirty Japanese women allegedly hidden onboard. An extensive search by the Hong Kong harbour authorities revealed thirty-eight stowaways: six men and thirty-four women. In his statement to the marine magistrate and master attendant, Edward Porter, the master of the *SS Macduff*, confessed to having personally taken ten women and three men on board once the ship had left the harbour of Kuchinotsu:

[A]fter we had got out of the Harbour, one of the men came and said to me he had a boat outside with some girls in it. Would I pick them up? I said yes! We passed close by the boat and stopped and picked them up. The men had arranged to pay \$30.00 each for the passage.

The women and the procurers used stealth to go abroad to evade the numerous measures the Japanese government implemented to prevent them from leaving Japan or taking up work abroad.

Japanese consuls also attempted to place controls on the women's movements. In 1885 Minami Sadatsuke, Japanese consul for Hong Kong, came to an informal agreement with the Hong Kong register general to restrict the number of Japanese women working in registered public brothels to fifty-two women at one time.²¹ The Japanese consul and colonial authorities had an informal agreement that when Japanese women put in an application to work as a licensed prostitute, the general register's office would notify Minami, who in turn, would summon the women to his office. During their meeting, the consul would instruct the women that they were prohibited from registering as prostitutes and that the best course of action would be to return home. The consul would then proceed to ascertain if the

women had any legal guardian in Hong Kong so that they could be informed of their circumstances and returned to their care. In cases where the women interviewed had no legal guardian, and lacked money for a return fare to Japan, Minami placed them temporarily in the Wanchai Lock hospital, while he tried to identify family members in Japan who would pay repatriation expenses.²² The expenses became the liability of the household head, who was legally responsible for all other members of the family.²³ However, by 1887 it became obvious to successive Japanese consuls in Hong Kong that placing a ceiling on the number of Japanese women working as licensed prostitutes was not having the desired effect of stemming the number of Japanese women arriving at the port looking for work. The Japanese consuls noticed that the Hong Kong colonial authorities were reluctant to intercept and search ships unless they were almost certain that they would find women hidden abroad. The colonial authorities did not want to obstruct the movement of ships entering and leaving the harbour unless necessary.²⁴ Moreover, unless Japanese women stowaways came forward and stated that they were brought to Hong Kong against their will, the register general would not take any action to repatriate them to Japan.²⁵ The Japanese consul also lacked the cooperation of the majority of Japanese residing in the port in stopping Japanese women from alighting in Hong Kong. Japanese-run inns, restaurants, and taverns relied on the flow of Japanese women coming through the port for their livelihood.²⁶

Commercial Shipping

Ships departing from Kyushu carrying coal from the Takashima and Miike mines and bound for city ports in Southeast Asia were not the only means of travel available to the women. By the turn of the century, the increase in postal, passage, and cargo services between Japan and the rest of the world had generated new migratory routes. In his petition dated 15

September 1892, requesting the expulsion of Japanese prostitutes from Thursday Island, Sasaki Shigetoshi, a former samurai and community leader of the Japanese labourers on the same island, informed the Japanese foreign ministry that Japanese men and women connected with prostitution

manage to board foreign vessels that call on the ports of Nagasaki, Kuchinotsu, Karatsu, Shimonoseki and Kobe. Many of these unseemly women (*shūgyōfu*) and their intermediates often board a pilot boat and intercept and board the foreign vessels, particularly the ships that service the area between Kobe and Shimonoseki, such as the French Mail (Société des Messageries Maritimes).²⁷

With the expansion of shipping routes from Japan to Southeast Asia, the means by which the women migrated overseas also changed. It was common to see groups of young Japanese women traveling in the third-class section of Japanese ships en route abroad.²⁸ Tanaka Tokichi, the Japanese consul in Singapore, attests to this in a report sent to Tokyo in 1906. In May-June of the same year, with the assistance of the local colonial authorities, Tanaka investigated the means by which women travelled to Singapore. Tanaka found that over one thousand women had made their way to Singapore in the last year with the aim of working as prostitutes, an average of around twenty arrivals per week.²⁹ Tanaka summarized the main routes and means used by rural poor women to reach Singapore:

1) The method where women secretly board steamships entering and leaving such ports as Moji and Kuchinotsu, and cross either to Hong Kong or Singapore.

2) Instances when women buy a ticket [of travel] at Moji, passing inspection by the Harbour and Marine Police and come to Hong Kong and Singapore.

3) The procedure whereby women buy a ticket at Kobe for travel to Shanghai, and just before berthing in Shanghai, they buy a further ticket for Singapore.³⁰

Tanaka elaborated on his findings. The first method of transporting women to Singapore had been the most prevalent. Recently, however, there had been a decline in this type of practice. The authorities in Singapore attributed this decline to a combination of reasons: the danger of being discovered, the considerable inconvenience and distress of hiding in the hold of a ship, and the high costs involved in bribing crew members. Tanaka, on the other hand, believes that the cause was more the marked decline in the number of ships carrying coal from Japan to Singapore, as Japanese coal was now channelled to the domestic market to meet the energy demands of a rapidly growing post-Russo-Japanese War economy. Accordingly, the second method was the most common and had the highest rate of success. Tanaka suggests that this was due to the laxity of harbour officials in screening passengers. The third practice was allegedly a recent development that was used mainly by women from the *Kishu* region (Wakayama prefecture). Tanaka concludes his report by stating that the information collected by the British colonial authorities identified Moji as the port from which the highest number of women began their journey to Singapore, followed by Kuchinotsu and Kobe. The number of women leaving from Nagasaki, on the other hand, had reportedly fallen.³¹

Diagram of a Journey

Social Knowledge: Working Maps of an

Informal Kind

The new routes of informal migration to destinations outside of Japan were made accessible by the formation of a new class of brokers, namely “traffickers” or “procurers” (*zegen*). Their role was to guide others to overseas locations in exchange for money. To do this successfully, the procurer had to be familiar with things, people, and events in dispersed and often distant geographical locations. The procurer’s social capital lay in her or his ability to draw upon information concerning where ships berthed, what times they left or arrived, as well as alliances with those who worked in the harbour or on the ships. The procurer’s knowledge of the intended destination, how to reach it and what might happen on the way, gave her/him power over those being led. People seeking work overseas depended on the procurer for direction on two levels: guidance as to the correct route of travel, and instruction in terms of the appropriate action required to reach their destination.

The work of such agents, which involved canvassing people in one place and transporting them by sea over great distances to another destination, has been documented in the (sensationalist and unreliable) biography of Muraoka Iheji dealing with his role in shipping Japanese women across Southeast Asia through international networks of “slave-trading.”³² The feminist inspired writings of Yamazaki also focus on the procurer and justifiably point out the significance of this agency whereby men and women were bound up in relations of power in which women were dominated, highlighting the effects of the subordinate position women were placed in.



Karayuki in film. Sandakan 8.

I do not contest these arguments, but do wish to modify them. What I argue is a more complicated story. The localized knowledge that circulated in rural communities in western Kyushu—in the form of rumour, hearsay, gossip, and letters from relatives abroad—was formative in grounding the experience of living abroad in truth claims that made travel to locations overseas plausible and attractive. The oral nature of this localized knowledge means that it has no formal archive or discernible events to mark its existence—but this does not mean that this knowledge was inconsequential. To recover this knowledge, I turn to contemporaneous narratives of observers who deplored the procurement of the young women of these rural communities, but who also reveal them to have been agents and not merely victims. These forms of oral transmissions point to forgotten social practices steeped in the world of the everyday, which allowed the possibility of finding work abroad.

Procurers, female as well as male, based overseas, generally avoided returning to Japan if they could find a third party to do their bidding. Only when they were unable to mobilize or lost their connections in Japan would the procurers return, usually to their place of origin, where they would wander from village to village. If that proved unfruitful, the

procurers would relocate to the nearest large port or railway hub town, where they would loiter in the streets, soliciting and enticing any young women willing to take up his or her offer of a “better” life overseas.³³ Noma Seiichi, Japanese consul in Hong Kong, reported to Tokyo how Moji had become a harbour where hardly any ship left without Japanese women concealed aboard. According to the testimonies of the women Noma repatriated to Japan, procurers were constantly loitering in or around Moji railway station, waiting to ply their “crafty tricks” upon any young female passengers alighting from inbound trains.³⁴

Procurers were able to win over young women by speaking from experience when they made claims about life overseas. The women did not undertake travel overseas innocently; they entertained various assumptions—some of which were valid and some not—concerning what life was like abroad, which prompted them to leave Japan. The successful procurer spoke to those assumptions. A pamphlet written in 1895 by a Japanese Christian organization aimed at eradicating Japanese prostitution abroad hints at how, in rural areas where many of the women originated, the local women were highly informed about what—in terms of work, economic, and cultural possibilities—might be available to them in specified destinations overseas. The pamphlet argued that women working as “prostitutes” abroad would return to their native villages dressed in gorgeous clothes with gold pins in their hair in the style of “gentlewomen.” Seeing this display of abundance, young women of the village, seeking to emulate the riches of the returned women, were willingly lured overseas by the promise of wealth.³⁵ An instance of this strategy of procurement was the return of Yokoyama Kikuno to her native village in Nagasaki Prefecture, after an absence of six years working in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Yokoyama returned home well dressed and claiming to be the owner of a successful “Japanese restaurant” (*nihon ryōriten*).³⁶

Yokoyama canvassed several houses during her stay in the village and managed to convince a twenty-year old woman to accompany her. It seems that she persuaded the woman by assuring her that she could make “easy” money working in Hong Kong as a hotel maid, earning as much as 25 *yen* per month, and much more in a brothel. The monthly wage Yokoyama promised was an enormous amount for the rural poor when one considers that a male day labourer would earn less than half this amount in a month.³⁷ The only reason Yokoyama’s movements remain recorded for posterity is that her endeavours ended in failure: the Nagasaki authorities brought charges against her for trafficking in young women.³⁸

Due to expense and the danger of being caught, whenever possible, brothel owners tried to establish stable connections with third parties to ensure a constant supply of women to replace those who had ended their term of contract, became ill, or died. One ploy was to use former employees, such as Yokoyama Kikuno, returning to Japan on the completion of their contracts, to recruit other women.³⁹ Another ploy was for the owners to write directly to parents offering substantial financial rewards if the parents agreed to send their daughters to work in their brothels.⁴⁰ The most common ploy however, was to recruit young women through the services of *kuchi-ireya* (employment agencies), which existed in all of the large ports of Japan. In return for a handling charge, certain agencies would mediate for young women in finding employment overseas in such positions as domestic servants, waitresses, and child carers. Households and families living on the periphery of these ports, alerted by the gossip of the returnees and the numerous stories found in newspapers concerning the money to be made overseas, would send their daughters to these agencies to find work.⁴¹ Benefiting from such publicity, the *kuchi-ireya* directed a great number of young women to overseas brothels. A report filed in 1912 by Imai Shinoburō,

Japanese consul general in Hong Kong, states that, without the establishment of a stricter set of regulations between the Japanese and the local colonial government, brothel owners in Hong Kong would conspire with the *kuchi-ireya* to recruit women to work in their brothels.⁴² A variation of this practice had been registered in the daily newspaper *Fukuoka Nichinichi* several years earlier. An article in the newspaper reported on how a procurer obtained women through a *kuchi-ireya* and “lulled them into a false sense of security,” only to smuggle them overseas and sell them into brothels.⁴³

Resourceful Nobodies

Women from Kyushu did not migrate overseas blindly but tactically, following the footsteps of those who preceded them, with the aim of making the best of a bad situation, finding work, making money, and hopefully striking it rich. A case in point is Onio, a native of Nagasaki who was found hidden aboard the SS *Tetartos* when it docked in Hong Kong in March 1888. In her statement to the Hong Kong authorities, Onio revealed that at strategic points along the route she took to Hong Kong, she gained new social knowledge through exchanges with other intermediaries that helped her to proceed. For instance, Onio had to win the help of the washerwoman who worked at the harbour and the ship’s boy in order to get onboard ship without being noticed.⁴⁴

The point to note here is that the forms of knowledge Onio accessed and utilized in her efforts to migrate overseas points were steeped in the world of the everyday. Letters from relatives or conversations with people who had been overseas, were formative in grounding the experience of living overseas in truth-claims that made travel to such locations plausible and attractive. Moreover, the presence of coal-ships in the harbour, and the many groups of people who worked at the harbour loading, cleaning,

or maintaining the ships, formed an ensemble of local, but, nonetheless, effective and practical allies with the knowledge and resources to enable the women to migrate overseas.

Subterranean Economies

The dynamics of the underground economy revolving around the brokering of Japanese women was revealed in detail by an investigation compiled by Hong Kong consul Inoue Kizaburo in the summer of 1900. The impetus for the investigation was allegations made by local Japanese businesspersons against the Nagasaki police force accusing them of abetting the trafficking of Japanese women to Hong Kong and the Straits Settlements.⁴⁵ In his findings, Inoue reported that seven out of ten “unsightly women” (*shugyofu*) arriving in Hong Kong did not have the appropriate travel documents. Furthermore, six of these seven women came with the consent of their parents. Only one out of ten women was deceived into taking the journey by the “seductive words” of the procurer, without parental consent. As for the three women out of ten who did possess proper travel documents, they had been obtained by bribing prefectural officials. The price of a passport was reported to be about ¥15–20.⁴⁶

In cases where the women had no travel documents, the procurer used stealth to board the women on outbound ships, or to bribe the harbour police with approximately ¥20 per person. Once onboard a Japanese or foreign vessel, the procurer would give the ship’s captain or ship’s pilot around ¥10 per head to take them to either Hong Kong or Singapore. On arriving in Hong Kong, the women were sold to the brothel owners for about ¥200–300.⁴⁷

It was customary for the procurer to reach an agreement with the respective parents in advance over the amount of money they were

to collect for the sale of their daughter. The amount was determined according to the woman's estimated physical appeal.⁴⁸ The general convention was that if a woman was sold for ¥200 for example, then around thirty to fifty *yen* was due to the woman's family. The procurer usually collected between seventy and one hundred *yen* from each sale, as commission for having guided the women during their journey out of Japan. The procurer also took out the following expenses from the sale of the women: ten *yen* for lodging expenses, three *yen* for two sets of night clothing, five *yen* for two *yukata* (cotton summer *kimono*,) three *yen* for a head dress, three *yen* for *geta* (raised wooden sandal) and *tabi* (ankle-high socks worn with thonged footwear,) six *yen* for a blanket and small wardrobe or chest. A further fifteen *yen* was deducted for traveling expenses.⁴⁹

The journey, as broken down by Inoue's report, is of interest for reasons besides the details of the costs involved in the brokering of women from Japan to Hong Kong. It also maps out an informal economy, which profited the predominantly male actors who participated: the procurer, the low-ranking civil servants and harbour officials, the seamen who worked the ships, and the Japanese merchants who sold the women their clothing and furniture on arrival. The financial benefits gained in tacit cooperation were substantial in view of the fact that in 1900 the average daily wage for a ship's carpenter was 53 *sen*, 34 *sen* for a printer, and 37 *sen* for a day labourer.⁵⁰ Sometimes the allure of big money proved too much for the people responsible for preventing the informal migration of Japanese women abroad. There are recorded instances of the constabulary giving up their work and turning their hand to smuggling women overseas.⁵¹

The arrangements for financing the journey were organized in such a way as to work against the woman. The cost of the voyage became the woman's liability.⁵² Until the woman repaid this debt, her labor in service

became the property of the brothel owner who purchased the debt the woman "owed" to the procurer. Similar to other forms of property, the ownership of the debt, and the women's labor, were transferable. The reason for this seems to be connected with the credit of the procurer. Most brokers had to borrow heavily to finance their operations, often at high rates of interest.⁵³ To cover their initial outlay, the procurers or brothel owners offered women as collateral. An example is the dealings of Takada Tokijirō of Osaka. In August 1888, Takada brought five Japanese women from Hong Kong to Port Darwin, Australia, whereupon he promptly sold one woman to a Malay "hairdresser" for £50 and two other women to a Chinese man for £40. As for the remaining two women, he "kept" one for himself as a concubine and put the other to work as a prostitute.⁵⁴ The practice of selling women was very prevalent because British, Chinese, and Malaya men in the Straits Settlements were eager to gain access to concubines in order to constitute a patriarchal domestic space privileging themselves. A missive by Miyagawa Kyujiro, Japanese consul of Hong Kong, to the foreign minister provides testimony to this fact. In his letter, Miyagawa reports of the stories emanating from the Straits Settlements regarding Japanese women being sold to Chinese and Malays, who would "lead them off to wild and savage lands where they suffered unimaginable hardship."⁵⁵

Know No Border: See No Boundary

The subterranean economies and social practices involved in the informal migration of Japanese abroad hint at another aspect of the world inhabited by the rural poor. The women were members of a larger transient community that transgressed linguistic and national boundaries, shaped by the rhythms of abundance and scarcity found in agricultural production. In the social territory occupied by the rural poor, the labor of children was a resource to be sought during cycles of

abundance and shed when the consumption of the household had to be reduced during times of scarcity. The logic of preserving the household and propagating its patriarchal lineage morally obliged the child to supply the labor to ensure the household's survival.⁵⁶ The child-parent/child-adult relationship was not a black-white relationship of exploitation, but more one of reciprocity implied by mutual utilization and the initiation of children into the adult world through social circulation, as seen through the custom of placing children in other families as apprentices or domestic servants. This preindustrial form of labor and all the social controls that accompanied it was transmuted by Japan's entry into a money economy.

As previously mentioned, as early as the eighteenth century the rural poor of the Amakusa and Shimabara regions migrated to Nagasaki in search of work. This practice of migrating for work extended beyond the nation's borders once Japan was incorporated into a global capitalist money economy. The strategy of migrating abroad to escape dire poverty was asserted in an interview by a woman from the Shimabara region who had migrated overseas to find work at the turn of the twentieth century. In an interview taped in 1961 by Miyazaki Kōhei, owner of the Shimabara Railroad Company and "gentleman" historian, S-san gave the following description of her life working overseas.⁵⁷

A native of Shimabara village, S-san's father was mentally ill, and had turned, in her terms, into a "dithering idiot," devoting himself to worship. He sustained himself and family by the little money his wife and children brought in, and from the increasingly resentful benevolence of his relatives. The social ambitions the father nourished for his family were limited. His only demand on his wife and children was work. To make ends meet S-san was sent to work as a domestic servant to a local merchant in her early teens. She

continued working there until she was sixteen, the year her mother died. The wages she received were not enough to sustain her father, three younger siblings, and herself, let alone pay for any repairs to the house they were living in, which was more like an open hovel than a house, hardly offering any protection from the elements. Overwhelmed by the daily destitution her family faced, S-san and her sister took up the offer of a stranger dressed in a black coat loitering in the village to work in a "far off place" for an advance sum of money.

The following night, S-san and her sister were smuggled onboard different ships anchored in Kuchinotsu. After spending a gruelling week hidden in the hold, S-san's ship berthed in Singapore, whereupon she was immediately auctioned off to a Japanese brothel on Malay Street,⁵⁸ the heart of the Japanese red-light district in Singapore. On her arrival at the brothel, she was placed in the care of an older woman a native of a village just east of Shimabara, with whom S-san was faintly acquainted. The woman was the eldest daughter of a well-to-do peasant family. She and her two younger sisters had left their village to work as sex labourers in Singapore. After working for two years in the brothel, S-san was bought out of her debt by a young English man working for a big rubber plantation company on the Malaysian peninsular. She spent the next eight years as his concubine/domestic housekeeper.

The other interview was carried out in the summer of 1992. The subject was K-san, a resident of Ushibukai, Shimo-Amakusa.⁵⁹ I met with K-san at her home at the introduction of my informant. K-san was born around thirty years later than S-san, but as her life narrative reveals, the older forms of labor organized around the reproduction of the household still persisted. K-san first left her home at the age of twelve or thirteen to work in the spinning mills in Osaka. After five years of service at the mills, she returned home. Within a few months, she

obtained a job as a child-carer (*komori*) in Nagasaki through an intermediary in the village. Two years later, around 1935–36, at the age of about twenty-one, she left for Shanghai, together with five other women. In Shanghai, she worked as a chambermaid at a Japanese hotel located in the Japanese settlement. In contrast to the experience of S-san, K-san had little or no contact with people of other nationalities because the Japanese community in Shanghai was both well established and insular.⁶⁰ When I asked if she was afraid at leaving Japan for the first time, she replied, somewhat mystified, that she had no reason to be, for she knew the people she travelled with, and other acquaintances from her village were already working in Shanghai at that time. To her, the trip to Shanghai was not a frightening journey to the “unknown.” The communal networks of solidarity she had recourse to in her village in Amakusa extended to her new destination.

Amakusa, Migration, and Sex Work

In his classic text *Wasureareta Nihonjin* (The Forgotten Japanese), folklorist Miyamoto Tsuneichi tells of the practices of his own rural household in Yamaguchi prefecture and the transmittance of wealth along matrilineal lines.⁶¹ Miyamoto goes as far as to argue that western and eastern Japan transmit wealth and culture in very different ways. In eastern Japan, the father is the key figure in transmitting culture and wealth. In western Japan, familial (and communal) authority is commanded more by age than gender, thus offering women greater authority in the household and the possibility for the matrilineal transmission of wealth.⁶²

It seems that in Shimabara and Amakusa regions at least, in the construction of social personage for the women from these areas, becoming a migrant labourer was one of the prescribed forms of conduct. In both regions, village leaders did not try to prevent the local

women from leaving. Indeed, in some circumstances they encouraged the women to find specific forms of work overseas.⁶³ In 1920 a field study of the Amakusa area funded by the Japanese Women’s Christian Temperance Union discovered that over 5,400 people had left the island searching for work abroad. A majority of them were women who engaged in sex work.⁶⁴ The study was surprised to discover that, regardless of economic need, it was a requirement of marriage for the local women to work for a period of time away from the Islands (*onago no shigoto*: literally, women’s work in the local dialect.) Women of the Amakusa region were required by cultural convention to produce half of their dowry. A woman without a dowry remained “out of the running,” and under the domestic control of her family or whoever might want to use her for domestic and agricultural labor. The perceived social value and marriage potential of the women increased directly in relation to the amount of money they earned and remitted. Moreover, the social status of the family itself within the local community increased according to the wealth and status of the employer and the amount of remittance received: the more affluent the employee, the higher the prestige of the family in the village social hierarchy.⁶⁵

Although there were many women from the Amakusa Islands who were not fully informed by their parents - or persons recruiting them for work abroad - that they were being indentured into overseas brothels, many others evidently understood the nature of the work required. There is evidence that, at times, the parents mediated in these negotiations.⁶⁶ This practice was still prevalent in the early 1920s. A young schoolteacher sent to a village on the Amakusa Islands for practical experience wrote that:

An evil custom of this village is that they do not see prostitution as shameful. In the surrounding

villages too, prostitution is regarded as a vocation. Moreover, what is extraordinary is that people with a good living follow this practice. If anything, these people treat those who do not engage in prostitution with scorn and ridicule.⁶⁷

According to this observer, whom we can assume to be knowledgeable, in the case of the women of the Amakusa and Shimabara regions, it seems sex work was perceived as just another form of labor, without the attachment of stigma.⁶⁸ Moreover, the same occupation, by virtue of its economic outcomes, provided the island women with a relative degree of independence on their return to their native villages, which differentiated them from those women who remained under the aegis of family and local men. To illustrate this point, I turn to Sasaki Shigetoshi, a former low-class samurai involved in a Japanese migrant labor enterprise on Thursday Island, Queensland. In his 1892 petition to Tokyo, Sasaki describes how he appealed to the better nature of the brothel owners and women to cease working the brothels and how his best intentions came to nought. It is worth quoting at length:

At times, we turn to the [brothel] owners and remonstrate, exhorting them to cease their occupation and to change to another line of work. Not only do they turn deaf ears to our remonstrations, it often happens that they turn around and rebut those giving advice, saying things such as:

You boors do talk a lot of rubbish. From the time we left Japan, let alone now when we are standing on foreign soil, you have no grounds to point an accusing finger even if you had the authority

of the Japanese government behind you. What's more, if the [Thursday] Island authorities continue to find no fault with our business, why restrain our activities? I see no particular reason why I should change what I do. Haven't you caught on yet? Now, money talks in the world. No matter how base the occupation, if I can live the rest of my life in my own home in comfort, why should I concern myself? What matter to me the fortunes of the nation? We don't ask much. Yet, you demand a lot. What you advise, we will not do.

Then, there are those amongst us, who turn to the women and advise them to become upright and honest, and to return to their homes in Japan as quickly as possible. The majority of these women are extremely simple and know no honour. Hardly any of them listen to the advice given. They feign unconcern and reply:

Thank you for your gracious concern. Your words are fit for the innocent girls living back home who know nothing about the world. However, for ignorant women such as us who have crossed the open seas and have come to a foreign land thousands of miles away, your sermons are useless—like chanting sutras to a scarecrow. In Japan, poor people like us have sweat on our brow night and day working like beasts of burden. Far from having the wherewithal to cook our daily meals, we barely have that to rinse our mouths. Now that we are living overseas and engaged in such a profession, as for things heavy we pick up nothing more

than a knife or fork. What's more, we wear gorgeous clothes and have our fill of fine food. All our wishes are respected. We have all that we desire. What could add to our happiness? We do, alas, regret most profoundly not to have been born daughters to such gentlemen as you.⁶⁹

The major point of interest for me about this "dialogue" is the silent battle raging between two codes of conduct organized around competing values of work and "economic" interest. What underlies Sasaki's lament concerning the frivolous and unseemly nature of the men and women making a living from sex work on Thursday Island is a distinction between productive and unproductive labor. For Sasaki, the "unsightly behaviour" of the women is intolerable as he links the fortunes of Japan with the wealth of the nation defined as the aggregate of all productive labor. Sasaki vehemently objects to the existence of the brothels as it indicates a hatred for hard toil and a delight in relaxation, which erodes social order, and as such, the polity of Japan, for without the latter the former could not exist. In Sasaki's thinking, economic order is not a simple matter of accumulating wealth, but consists of reproducing and reinforcing the constituent elements of the state. As Sasaki laments, it is not only the humiliation, but

Also, in relation to overseas commercial, agricultural and other enterprises, in political comparison to the Chinese, we Japanese are exceedingly inferior now because of the display of the likes of these filthy women... If we [Japanese] want to exaggerate [our superiority over the Chinese] by means of our Japanese nation being the England of the East, the first thing that should be initiated

is the eradication of unsightly women of this sort.⁷⁰

In his objections, Sasaki formulates a direct equation where good economic order is the prerequisite of political power. The ordered and continuous labor of his fellow migrants fosters the strength of the state in ways that will enable Japan to become the "England of the East," a highly industrialized naval power capable of maintaining its autonomy within a framework of interstate rivalry.⁷¹ On the other hand, the prodigal pursuit of pleasure Sasaki envisages the women enjoying behind closed doors implies leisure and the dangers that come with it: outright hedonism and stagnation.

For the brothel owners and the women, the acquisition of money was an end in itself if it ensured the maintenance and continuity of the household. The labor of household members was organized around the need for the household to ensure its survival.⁷² As related by various contemporary observers, and consistent with the logic of the household economy in the Amakusa-Shimabara regions, in the eyes of the women, sex work was another form of labor that, foremost, made possible their maintenance and survival and, furthermore, secured the continuation and material development of their patriarchal household. For them, work as a prostitute abroad was inherently undifferentiated from work as an agricultural labourer in Japan: sex work was neither unproductive nor immoral but one available tactic for their maintenance, survival, and material comfort. In this instance, sex work was preferred, portrayed as being physically easier and more amenable to daily existence as far as food and clothing were concerned.

In fact, I did not find compelling evidence that the stigma of a moral and religious nature that the women wanted to avoid was related to premarital or commercial sex, but rather, with

the failure to secure the prosperity and longevity of the household, the ultimate disgrace to one's parents and ancestors. The obligation to ensure the continuity of the household points to intimate and integral relations between daily existence and forms of worship and customary belief.⁷³ The concept of time followed by the women was of a different kind than the temporal discipline of a twelve-hour workday followed by Sasaki and his fellow labourers who harvested pearl from the seas of Thursday Island. In the cosmology inhabited by the women, time and work were informed by duties of the living toward the dead. The household was an inheritance transmitted by the ancestors to the present, and the continuation of the household by the present generation to the next was an expression of worship and respect.⁷⁴ Bound by links to things unseen, the household occupied a world that was immutable and permanent. Work that secured the permanence of the household in the temporal order of the living was also an activity that continued the collective work of generating life in the future, and as such, an act of respect and fulfilment of obligation to parents and ancestors.

Following Sasaki, it is reasonable to assume that in the social arrangements and cultural dispositions of the Amakusa and Shimabara regions, there appears to have been no "spiritual" milieu with a distinctive moralizing rationale concerning sex work. On the level of the individual, the lay Buddhist beliefs common in the region of Amakusa Islands did not see commercial sex as eternally polluting the soul. The experience of selling one's body for commercial gain was seen as morally redeemable if it was an act of filial piety, and spiritually redeemable through repeated prayer to Amida Buddha.⁷⁵ Women could move out of sex work and in and out of marriage without carrying the heavily stigmatized social status associated in some cultures with the category of "prostitute." Illegitimate children conceived by the women while working overseas were, in

general, readily accepted by the community and potential spouses.⁷⁶ On the collective level, the monies remitted by women engaged in sex work abroad were seen as an essential component for the physical maintenance of temples and shrines, the spiritual centres of their communities. In the 1920s, it was still exceedingly common to see, lining the walls of the shrines and temples of Amakusa Islands and Shimabara peninsular, in large numbers, the names of the local women working overseas who had remitted donations specifically for the upkeep of their family temple or shrine.⁷⁷

It would be overly simplistic to assert that the rural women who engaged in prostitution did not feel ambivalence about the sexual and moral conduct prescribed by Sasaki Shigetoshi or the young schoolteacher that came to teach in the Amakusa region. Rather, the issue at hand is the rediscovery of a struggle between two competing sets of social beliefs about what it means to be a woman and a member of a community. On the local level, the women gained greater social capital and responsibility through the fulfilment of their duties in the maintenance and the survival and material development of their households and local communities. The conflict, though, lay at the general and collective level of the nation. In state-led programs of nation-building, which emphasized values of chastity and female adolescent dependency as the general rules of progress to which all Japanese had to adhere if Japan was to meet the dictates of social advancement, there was no leeway for the women of Amakusa and Shimabara to continue working as migrant sex workers abroad.

End of Story?

This paper has tried to bring to the fore the disqualified knowledge—in the face of popular knowledge—of the history of the *karayuki-san* as overseas migrant labourers. It has traced how localized cultural conventions and practices shaped the women's immediate

communities and gave meaning to everyday life. It affirms that, at the level of their immediate communities, the women who took on sex work were not stigmatized as morally flawed individuals, or as a group found on the margins of local society. They were recognized as a legitimate component of village life, economically, culturally, and socially.

The rediscovery of this disqualified knowledge raises a question concerning Japanese “modernization” as social experience in the specific context of peasant women from western Kyushu. The history of the Japanese women migrating abroad to engage in sex work points to a whole series of local economic and cultural practices that informed the women of the expectations of their community and, at the same time, also endowed the women with the capacity to integrate themselves fully into the social arrangements of their communities on their return. This body of local economic and cultural practices however, was constantly in struggle with the more formal and general body of knowledge *cum* social interventions filtering into the region through the institutions and individuals representative of a “better” or “more effective” way of undertaking daily life: teachers, public servants, and planners of economic development. The programmes of education and work introduced into the region under the rubric of “modernization” looked at every opportunity to eradicate the local knowledge that made overseas migration plausible and the regional economic and cultural practices that located and gave status to women who engaged in sex work abroad in their communities. This provokes the question: by which historical process did female migrant laborers who sought work overseas for the maintenance and survival of their households and communities, come to be designated as unsightly overseas prostitutes? How do we explain the refusal by people and institutions distanced from the Amakusa Islands and Shimabara peninsular to understand the women in the terms they understood

themselves? Why was the work of the women denigrated as “prostitution”?

Bill Mihalopoulos is Visiting Fellow Research, Centre for Asian Studies, University of Adelaide and the author of *Sex in Japan's Globalization, 1870-1930. Prostitutes, Emigration and Nation Building*. This article draws on and adapts material from chapter one of the book.

Recommended citation: Bill Mihalopoulos, "Women, Overseas Sex Work and Globalization in Meiji Japan," The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol 10, Issue 35, No. 1, August 27, 2012.

Notes

¹ According to the research carried out by Kurahashi Masanao, the 1910 Japanese Consular Population Survey of Expatriate Japanese by Occupation recorded 19,097 women working abroad in unsightly occupations. Of these, 14,254, or 75 percent, plied their trade on the informal frontier of the Japanese colonial empire; 7,928 (42%) Japanese women engaged, directly or indirectly, in sex work in the Kwantung Leased Territory; and 4,275 women (22%) worked in southern Manchuria. The consular survey indicated that 20 percent, or 3,745 women, made a living in “unsightly occupations” in Southeast Asia. See Kurahashi M., *Kita no karayuki-san* (Tokyo: Kyoei Shobo, 1989), p. 73.

² S. Sugiyama, *Japan's Industrialisation in the World Economy, 1859-1899: Export Trade and Overseas Competition* (London: Athlone Press, 1988), pp. 30-33.

³ P. Levine, *Prostitution, Race and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 25, 28.

⁴ The examination of women working in Hong Kong house-brothels for venereal disease and the licensing of brothels by the register general was first introduced in 1857. A similar law was

put into effect in Singapore in 1872. P. Levine, "Modernity, Medicine, and Colonialism: The Contagious Disease Ordinances in Hong Kong and the Straits Settlements," *Positions* 6, no. 3 (1998), pp. 676–78. In Singapore, compulsory medical inspection for all licensed prostitutes was abolished along with the Contagious Disease Ordinance in 1888.

⁵ The Contagious Disease Ordinance regulations prohibited men from running or owning a brothel.

⁶ J. F. Warren, *Ah Ku and the Karayuki-san, 1870–1940* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1993), 91–121; N. Miners, *Hong Kong under Imperial Rule, 1912–1941* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 191–206.

⁷ J. D. Kelly, "Gaze and Grasp: Plantations, Desires, Indentured Indians, and Colonial Law in Fiji," in L. Manderson and M. Jolly (ed.) *Sites of desire, economies of pleasure; sexualities in Asia and the Pacific* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 74–75.

⁸ Mori K., *Jinshin baibai - kaigai dekasugi onna* (Tokyo: Shibundo, 1966), chapter two; Higaki M., "Kinsei amakusa no jinkomondai to sono haikei," *Kyushu bunkashi kenkyusho kiyo* 2 (1951), pp. 1–12; Nakamura M., "Tokugawaki amakusa ni okeru dekasugi no shoso," *Kumamoto daigaku kyoiku gakubu kiyo* 5 (1957), pp. 38–49.

⁹ *Nihon Kirishitan Fujin Kyofukai, Kaigai shugyofu mondai: dai ichigo—Amakusa no bun* (Kyoto: Nihon Kirishitan Fujin Kyofukai, 1920), p. 27.

¹⁰ Japan was connected to the network of submarine telegraphic communication in 1871, when a line was laid between Shanghai and Nagasaki by a Danish telegraphic company. See Tsunoyama S., "Introduction," *Nihon ryōjihōkoku no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Dōbunkan shuppan, 1986), p. 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 172–73.

¹² See Harry Parkes to Lord Stanley, 11 September 1867, "Reports Received from Her Majesty's Secretaries of Embassy and Legation respecting Coal" in *British Parliamentary Papers* 79 (1867–1868), p. 1075; Sugiyama, *Japan's Industrialisation*, p. 171.

¹³ *Nagasaki Rising Sun*, 6 July 1878.

¹⁴ Sugiyama, *Japan's Industrialisation*, p. 189.

¹⁵ Sumiya M., *Nihon sekitan sangyō bunseki* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1968), p. 245.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 226–27, 245–46.

¹⁷ *Nagasaki ken keisatsushi*, ed. Nagasaki ken henshu i-inkai, 3 vols (Nagasaki: Nagasaki ken keisatsu honbu, 1976), vol. 1, p. 1361.

¹⁸ Karatsu is located in Saga prefecture, Kyushu.

¹⁹ Miyagawa Kyūjirō to Aoki Shūzō, Confidential Dispatch no. 19, 27 November 1890, "Nihon fujin mikkō bōatsu no ken nitsuki utagai" *Honpōjin fuseigyō torishimari kankei zakken*, 7 vols., Diplomatic Record Office, Gaikō shiryōkan, Tokyo, Code No. 4.2.2.34. vol. 1. Hereafter *HFTKZ*.

²⁰ Edward Porter, Master of the British SS *Macduff* before C.Q.S. Crawford, 10 February 1894,. Porter also claimed innocence as he did not know that taking the women onboard was a violation of any kind. *Honpōjin kaigai e mikkō kankei zakken*, Diplomatic Record Office, Gaikō shiryōkan, Tokyo, 7 vols., Code No. 4.2.2.27, vol. 1. Hereafter *HKMKZ*.

²¹ In November 1885 there were 46 Japanese women licensed to work as prostitutes in the public brothels. Minami Sadatsuke to Inoue Kaoru, Confidential Dispatch no. 28, 17 September 1885, *Honpōjin fuseigyō torishimari kankei hōki zassan*, Diplomatic Record Office,

Gaikō shiryōkan, Tokyo, 2 vols. Code No. 4.2.2.99, vol. 1. Hereafter *HFTKHZ*; Minami Sadatsuke to Inoue Kaoru, Confidential Dispatch no. 31, 7 November 1885; J. H. Stewart Lochart to Fredrick Stewart, 2 November 1885, *HKMKZ*, vol. 1.

²² Lock Hospitals were hospitals that specifically treated VD patients. Men were treated as outpatients. It was compulsory for licensed prostitutes who contracted VD to enter the hospital as an inpatient. The women could only leave the hospital by official consent. The compulsory requirement and strict daily regime often led the women housed in the hospitals to compare them to prisons. Levine, *Prostitution, Race and Politics*, pp. 70–72.

²³ Under the family registration law (*kosekihō*) enacted in 1873 all details of family were registered under the name of the head of the household. The oldest male member of the family effectively became the sole legal entity of the household and exercised legal control over all other members, especially women and children, who were not legally recognized persons and therefore had no access to rights.

²⁴ Miyagawa Kyūjirō to Aoki Shūzō, Confidential Dispatch no. 19, 27 Nov. 1890, “Nihon fujin mikkō bōatsu no ken nitsuki utagai,” *HFTKZ*, vol. 1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.* Singapore consul Nakagawa Tsunejiro made a similar statement to Aoki Shuzo, Confidential Dispatch, no. 4, 25 March 1889, *HFTKZ*, vol. 1.

²⁷ The Société des Messageries Maritimes began providing a regular service between Yokohama and Shanghai in 1865. Receipt no. 12758, 25 September 1892, Petition sent by Sasaki Shigetoshi along with the signatures of 36 Japanese laborers to the foreign minister of Japan, via the honorary Japanese consul in Australia, Alexander Marks. The petition is

titled “Shugyofu kuchiku no ken ni tsuki seigansho,” *HFTKZ*, vol. 1.

²⁸ Yamamuro Gunpei, *Shakai kakusei ron* (Tokyo: Chūō kōronsha, 1977), pp.255–58. Yasui T., “Kaigai ni oite nameta nigai keiken,” *Kakusei* 3, no. 2 (1913), pp. 14–15.

²⁹ Tanaka Tokichi to Hayashi Tadasu, Receipt no. 12571, 13 June 1906, “Shugyo toko torishimari no ken,” *HFTKZ*, vol. 2.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² See Kawai Y., *Muraoka Iheiji jiden* (Tokyo: Nanposha, 1960). In a series of interviews compiled and edited by Kawai Yuzuru in 1960, Muraoka, a native of Shimabara, paints himself as being the boss of procurers (*zegen*) responsible for kidnapping young Japanese women and selling them to brothels abroad. Mark Driscoll relies heavily on Muraoka’s biography to show the connection between Japanese imperial expansion and trafficking in women. See M. Driscoll, *Absolute Erotic, Absolute Grotesque: The Living, Dead, and Undead in Japan’s Imperialism, 1895–1945*.

³³ In 1901, Matsumoto Murakichi, a known procurer of women for overseas brothels was reported roaming Fukuoka, Kurume, and Nagasaki. See Fukano Kazumi to Kato Takaaki, Receipt No. 40008, 4 October 1901, *HFTKZ*, vol. 2.

³⁴ Noma Seiichi to Komura Jutarō, Receipt No. 366, 2 July 1902, “Mikkosha torishimarikata rinshin no ken,” *HFTKZ*, vol. 2.

³⁵ Aburatani I., *Keiteki - kōkoku no jiki ni saishi tsutsushinde waga dōhō ni keikokusu* (Okayama: Okayamakoji-in kappan-bu, 1895), pp. 7–8; Mori, *Jinshin baibai*, pp. 95–96.

³⁶ *Ryoriten* was the term commonly used to

refer to lower-class, unlicensed brothels in the Japanese colonies.

³⁷ In 1900 a day labourer earned 37 *sen* a day. There were one hundred *sen* in one *yen*. *Nihon chōki tōkei sōran*, ed. Nihon Tōkei Kyōkai, 5 vols (Tokyo: Nihon Tōkei Kyōkai, 1988), vol. 4, p. 230.

³⁸ *Kyushu nichinichi shimbun*, 10 August 1909.

³⁹ Imai Shinoburō to Uchida Yasunori, 29 February 1912, No. 75, Receipt No. 184, “Honkon ni okeru honpō shūgyōfujin no jōtai hōkoku no ken.” The actual report is found in an attached letter entitled “Honkon ni okeru honpō shūgyōfu no jōtai.” *Kaigai ni okeru honpō shūgyōfu no insū oyobi sono jōkyō nado nen nikai hōkoku kata kuntatsu ikken*, Diplomatic Record Office, Gaikō shiryōkan, Tokyo, Code No. B.7.10.0.1-1.

⁴⁰ Imai to Uchida, “Honkon ni okeru honpō shūgyōfujin no jōtai hōkoku no ken.”

⁴¹ *Kaigai shūgyōfu mondai*, p. 39

⁴² Imai to Uchida, “Honkon ni okeru honpō shūgyōfujin no jōtai hōkoku no ken.”

⁴³ “Fujin yūkai shūdan no ichirei,” *Fukuoka Nichinichi*, 29 October 1905.

⁴⁴ (Copy) 21 March 1888, Register General Office, Hong Kong, *HKMKZ*, vol. 1.

⁴⁵ Hattori Ichizō to Aoki Shūzō, Confidential Receipt No. 214, 6 August 1900, *HFTKZ*, vol. 1.

⁴⁶ Inoue Kizaburō to Aoki Shūzō, Receipt No. 2572, 1 September 1900, *HFTKZ*, vol. 1.

⁴⁷ Inoue to Aoki, Receipt No. 2572, 1 September 1900. The Singapore-based Japanese-language weekly *Nanyō oyobi nihonjin* recounted, in a retrospective piece on the Japanese community in the area, that on average, brothel owners in Hong Kong paid the procurers around \$250 to

obtain a newly arrived Japanese woman. The cost in Singapore was higher, with the asking price between \$300 and \$350. The newspaper went on to report that after deducting all expenses, the procurer made a profit of around \$200 per woman. Yashikoyama M., “Kagai no omoide—[part] 1,” *Nanyō oyobi nihonjin*, 1 January 1928, p. 46.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Nihon chōki tōkei sōran*, vol. 4, p. 230.

⁵¹ Such was the case of a patrolman, Seki, from Nagasaki prefecture, who in January 1901 brought seventeen women to Hong Kong to sell into Japanese brothels. Kato Motohiro to Kato Takaaki, Receipt 1561, 1 February 1901, *HFTKZ*, vol. 2.

⁵² Miyagawa Kyujiro to Hayashi Tadasu, Confidential Dispatch no. 7, 28 December 1892, , “Honkon ryojin yado eigyo Nishiyama Yuzo shugyofu shusen no gi torishirabe wo yosuru ken ni tsuki toshin,” *HFTKZ*, vol. 1.

⁵³ In 1890 the rate of a loan was around 25% per month interest, which was borrowed by the procurer but made liable to the women he or she brought to Hong Kong. Satō Miki to Aoki Shūzō, Confidential Dispatch 9, 20 February 1890, *HKMKZ* vol. 1; Miyakawa Kyūjirō to Hayashi Tadasu, Confidential Dispatch no. 7, 28 December 1892, “Honkon ryojin yado eigyō Nishiyama Yuzō shūgyōfu shūsen no gi torishirabe wo yō suru ken ni tsuki,” *HFTKZ*, vol. 1.

⁵⁴ 10 August 1888, H. Sato to A. Marks, *HKMKZ*, vol. 1.

⁵⁵ Miyagawa Kyūjirō to Hayashi Tadasu, 28 December 1892. Japanese procurers used Singapore as a clearinghouse from which to sell women to prospective buyers in the Malay Peninsula and Dutch East Indies. Ōga

Kamekichi to Komura Jyūtarō, Dispatch 85, 5 September 1902, "Singapōru kata ni honpō shūgyōfu torai no gi ni tsuki gushin," *HFTKZ*, vol. 2.

⁵⁶ T. C. Smith, *Native Sources of Japanese Industrialization, 1750–1920* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1988), pp. 206, 215–16, 218.

⁵⁷ I would like to express my gratitude to the Miyazaki family for access and permission to use the interview.

⁵⁸ Malay Street was also the heart of the Japanese community in Singapore until the start of World War I.

⁵⁹ My informant was convinced that K-san had engaged in sex work while abroad. Personally, I thought my informant might be jumping to preconceived conclusions. My aim in interviewing K-san was to try and gain insights into the motivations and logic of women undertaking migration abroad. The subject of sex work was not brought up.

⁶⁰ C. Henriot, "'Little Japan' in Shanghai: An insulated community, 1875–1945," in R. Bickers and C. Henriot (eds.) *New Frontiers: Imperialism's New Communities in East Asia, 1842–1953* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 151–57.

⁶¹ Miyamoto T., *Wasurerareta Nihonjin* (Tokyo: Iwanami bunkō 1987), p. 211.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 44–58, 305–6.

⁶³ The number of people leaving the island to find work in other parts of Japan was 600. Inokawa S., "Shimabara amakusa kenkyu," *Fujinshinpō*, October 1919, pp. 12–13; N. O. K., "Shimabara amakusa shisatsu," *Fujinshinpō*, September 1919, p. 12.

⁶⁴ Inokawa, "Shimabara amakusa kenkyu," pp. 12–13.

⁶⁵ *Kaigai shūgyōfu mondai*, pp. 18, 39, 41. See also "Nanyō no kusawake – Sandakan no Okunibaasan," *Nanyō nichinichi shinbun*, 13 August, 1915.

⁶⁶ Inokawa, "Shimabara amakusa kenkyū," p. 13.

⁶⁷ Cited from Kitano N., *Amakusa kaigai hattenshi* (Fukuoka: Ashishobō, 1985), p. 146.

⁶⁸ "Nyonin no kuni-III," *Fukuoka nichinichi*, 9 September 1926; Inokawa, "Shimabara amakusa kenkyu," p.13.

⁶⁹ Sasaki to Marks, 25 August 1892, "Shūgyōfujo kuchiku no ken ni tsuki seigansho."

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Inokawa, "Shimabara amakusa kenkyu", p. 14

⁷³ I am indebted to the work of H. D. Harootunian for these insights. See *Things Seen and Unseen: Discourse and Ideology in Tokugawa Nativism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 242–72.

⁷⁴ Smith, *Native Sources of Japanese Industrialization*, pp. 205–6.

⁷⁵ Inokawa, "Shimabara amakusa kenkyu," p. 13.

⁷⁶ *Kaigai shūgyōfu mondai*, pp. 18, 39, 41. This practice was not peculiar to Amakusa. Wiswell noted the presence of several married women who had children from different men living in Suye mura. R. Smith and E. L. Wiswell, *The Women of Suye Mura* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 152–53.

⁷⁷ *Kaigai shūgyōfu mondai*, p. 41. The women's names and amounts donated were written on

pieces of paper called *kifukin keiji* (literally, donation notice). A notable example is the Daishidō temple in the town of Shimabara. Inside the temple's enclosure is a tower called *tenshiyō*, which was built exclusively from donations sent by *karayuki-san*. Surrounding

this tower is a stone fence, with the name and amount donated by each woman. For the history of how the temple was built, see Kurahashi M., *Shimabara no karayukisan: Kiso Hirota Gonsho to Daishidō* (Tokyo: Kyohei Shobo, 1993).