

# [Introduction] Mining Grass-Roots Archives: The Japanese Experience

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History-writing depends on record-keeping. The creation, selection, maintenance, distribution, and interpretation of records – of archives – defines what is possible for historiography. These processes do not occur in a vacuum. Social, political, economic, and technological environments influence the evolution of “archives.” Rather than take archives as neutral sources, we need to understand the historical conditions in which they formed.

In the following articles, we try to explore possible strategies to write histories about archives. We focus on collections of historical documents kept by mining communities in postwar and contemporary Japan. In mining towns, local communities – including labourers, activists, teachers – often built their own collections of documents as challenges to the formal documents archived by corporate mining interests. This urge toward archive-building is not unique to coal-mining communities in Japan. Many local and private preservation efforts have facilitated regional histories in Japan. Such collections shaped the historical imagination of local communities, and non-elite actors played significant roles in their creation. In the case of mining communities, these broader trends toward archiving exist alongside concerns that are pronounced in coal-mining communities: the lack of formal archives that include the perspectives of the human laborers, including evidence of conflict between labor and management; the disproportionate power of corporate interests to archive and restrict access; and, in the case of Japan in the period our articles discuss, an urge to preserve a history of a community built around a strong identification with mine work in a time of mine closures.

Our four case studies center on questions about the creation of grassroots mining archives in Japan, how those archives enabled people to form their own political strategies, and how those archives related to public record-keeping institutions. In short, the essays examine how the communities improvised their own “archives,” sometimes while appropriating the archives of formal record-keeping institutions.

## Coal Mining in Japan: Historical Framing of the Articles

Large-scale coal mining began in Japan after the Meiji Restoration (1868). Although there were a few attempts at mining coal during the earlier Edo period (1600-1868), demand for coal skyrocketed as the “black diamond” became the industrializing nation’s principal energy source. The five largest coal mines were the Ishikari mines and Kushiro mines in Hokkaidô, the Jôban mines across Fukushima and Ibaraki, the Chikuhô mines in Fukuoka, and the Miike mines across Fukuoka and Kumamoto [Fig. 1]. Labor demands drove mass migration to these areas. In particular, developing these mines in their early years required cheap labor, and *shujikan*, central prisons for long-term convicts, were established around some of the major mines: Kabato Shujikan in Ishikari, Kushiro Shujikan in Kushiro, Miike Shujikan in Miike.

The production of coal increased in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Although the recession after the First World War reduced demand for coal, the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) drove demand upward again in the mid-1930s. After peaking in 1943, nation-wide production dramatically declined as the war intensified.

Coal again became the major source of energy in postwar Japan (1945-). The Korean War (1950-53) increased demand as well. At the same time, laborers unionized under the democratization policies of GHQ and the Allied Occupation (1945-1952) which expected them to collaborate with the authorities. However, unions instead played a key political role in the 1950s, spearheading strikes and demonstrations. A strong organized labor force also meant

that coal mining companies that sought to reduce the size of their labor force in response to a national policy shift away from domestic coal toward cheaper imported oil were met with strong resistance from workers, especially at the mines with strong labor unions, such as those at Miike.

Indeed, Miike became the site of a dramatic and protracted battle between labor and capital in 1960. Coal mines at Miike had originally been under central government control, but were handed over to the pre-existing company of Mitsui in 1889. Possession of the mine made it possible for Mitsui to diversify and grow into one of the nation's largest *zaibatsu* – influential family-controlled vertical monopolies that played a key role in the building of the Japanese Empire. The mines remained in Mitsui's control through the colonial period, during which the labor force included not only free workers but also convicts, indentured laborers from Yoron island, forced laborers from Korea, and Allied POWs. In the postwar period, a number of repatriates from the former colonies of the collapsed Japanese Empire moved to Miike to find work. When the Miike Labor Union formed in 1946, the presence of these repatriated workers, many of them relatively well-educated, contributed to the strength of organized labor at the Miike mines. By 1960, the mine union at Miike – the largest in the industry – was also renowned as the most powerful local union in the nation.

The Miike union resisted Mitsui's efforts to layoff workers as a response to national restructuring of energy policies and resulting financial trouble. A 1953 strike successfully prevented Mitsui from implementing mass layoffs, but the company sent dismissal notices to 1,278 workers in December 1959 and locked out workers on January 25th, 1960. The union went on strike, and Sôhyô, initially reluctant to support what seemed to be a dying industry, finally reached out to its entire membership, collecting donations from members working elsewhere to support the striking miners and arranging for labor activists nationwide to travel to stand with the strike, making the year-long miners' strike at Miike an event of national import. However, as the strike dragged on, workers split off from the original union (now called the First Union) and began to bargain separately with Mitsui as a new union (the Second Union). The strike ended in August in the same year and the operations were resumed in December. However, shortly thereafter, a 1963 explosion in the Mikawa pit of the Miike mine killed 458 workers and hundreds of survivors suffered from carbon monoxide poisoning, prompting litigation that would continue for decades. These events – the hostilities between the first and second unions and the physical and mental effects of the explosion and subsequent legal battles – strongly shaped the socio-political landscape of Miike until the closure of the mine in 1997, and define the character of individual grassroots efforts to archive their histories of Miike.

From the 1960s onward, the general narrative of coal production and of coal-mining communities has been one of steady decline, as small scale mines closed down, and major mines took over their operations. When heavy government subsidies that had sustained domestic production expired in 2001, it effectively ended coal mining in Japan by the early 2000s. As of 2018, only one coal mining company remains in operation in Japan, the Kushiro Coal Mine.

The context of coal mining in Kushiro differed from that of Miike in significant ways. Large-scale mining began at Kushiro during World War I, when Mitsui Mining and Kimura-gumi started their operations in this region in 1916 and 1917 respectively. Due to the recession after the war, the two companies agreed to merge their businesses in the region and the Taiheiyo Coal Mine was formed in 1920. So, unlike the mine at Miike, the mines at Kushiro were not entirely *zaibatsu*-controlled, and production was defined by large-scale mechanization from the late 1930s onward. When mining began again after World War II, a labor union also formed. In 1945, workers organized as the Harutori Labor Union, and the union reorganized as the Taiheiyo Coal Mine Labor Union in 1946. The Taiheiyo Coal Mining Company continued to mechanize and introduced various workers' benefits programs. Unlike the layoffs and labor-management conflicts that defined 1960 in Miike, in 1960 the mines at Kushiro recovered their early-1940s' levels of production. In 2002, the Taiheiyo Coal Mine closed, and a new company, Kushiro Coal Mine, took over the downsized business. Generally speaking, the laborers union maintained good relationship with the management throughout its history. The intimacy between laborers and management, and the position of the Kushiro Coal Mine as Japan's last operating mine, employing only 300 full-time workers, influence the production of archives on coal mining there.

While the human relationships between laborers and industry define the context in which not only coal mining

work but also archival work takes place, there are other fundamental relations between humans and mining work that make coal-mining archives sites of contention. Recognition of workers' rights to economic security sit uneasily alongside the inherent dangers of mining work; while dramatic industrial accidents and tuberculosis attract more attention and present challenges but also solutions, the deadliest occupational disease in the mining industry was both unavoidable, and yet also elusive in the archival record. Silicosis, and pneumoconiosis more generally, is a chronic disease that progresses slowly, often over a miner's lifetime, thus garnering less attention in narratives of miner victimization, and also presenting a challenge to those who seek official recognition from mining companies. In attempting to write a social history of silicosis, then, the historian must read against the archival grain.

In Japan, it was not until the post-WWI period that social reformers, influenced by international discussions, began to take up the issue of silicosis. While officials of the Home Ministry also started paying attention to the problem of silicosis, these discussion did not result in any compensation programs. After WWII, in 1947, Labor Standards Act and Industrial Accident Compensation Insurance Act were enacted, and the Ministry of Labor began discussing a bill to compensate silicosis patients in 1948, but large businesses reacted sharply against the move and the prolonged discussion continued until 1954-55. Legal battles subsequent to the 1960 Pneumoconiosis Law depended upon archives. And, in the cases in which official archives are restricted, there is a limit not only to legal recourse but also to a full historical accounting of the role of silicosis in labor history in general.



Figure 1: Major coal mines of Modern Japan  
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## Historical Vernaculars: The Miike Experience

Chelsea Szendi SCHIEDER and MIYAMOTO Takashi both focus on individual efforts to create personal archives related to the Miike Coal Mine that extended across the cities of Ômuta and Arao in Kyushu. Schieder explores the building of a personal archive created by MATSUO Keiko (1931-), an activist and wife of a miner at the Miike coal mine. Matsuo's husband was one of the mine workers who was injured by carbon monoxide poisoning in the 1963 explosion. She was involved in litigation against the Mitsui company filed by the First Union, and later parted ways with the union. In the course of her activism, she collected and preserved a large amount of materials. Schieder shows that there was a postwar movement of historical vernaculars that mistrusted master narratives told by centralized authority and emphasized local knowledge and histories. Schieder argues that this was the context in which Matsuo's personal collection evolved into an archive, and made it possible for Matsuo and others to see her as a historical actor and her materials as historical sources.

Miyamoto documents the creation of a personal online archive by MAEKAWA Toshiyuki (1952-), an individual born in Arao. His father was one of the workers who received a dismissal notice in 1959. His family moved to the Kansai region in the aftermath of the Miike Mine Strike of 1959-60. Later in 1997, Maekawa launched a website featuring the lives of common people in postwar Miike. He started his project as a personal practice to preserve memories of his hometown where he spent his childhood, but it gradually attracted the attention of a number of people who had connections with Ômuta but were now dispersed across Japan. Some of these people began entrusting documents and artifacts to Maekawa. The web-based nature of his digital archive opened up a possibility for the emergence of a community in the virtual sphere, a community defined by its imagined shared past of a coal mining community, even as the place they understood as their "hometown" disappeared as the coal industry disappeared. Maekawa's diasporic position and the polyphonic voices from his website give him a critical power, even as he understands himself as a stranger originally motivated from a personal sense of nostalgia.

## Conditions of Archiving: The Kushiro Experience

Naoko SHIMAZAKI examines the archiving activities, in which she was involved, during the closure of Taiheiyo Coal Mine in Kushiro, Hokkaido. Some of the dynamics at work in the Miike case also existed in the Kushiro case: namely, members of the community contributed to the building of an archive that included documents from both the company and the union. However, both the local government at Kushiro participated in preserving materials from Kushiro's mining past. While the archival process began with a group of former workers in Taiheiyo management, the local government also became involved by collecting whatever materials Kushiro citizens had saved. Finally, Shimazaki discusses the archive-building she has been involved in: an ambitious project to survey all former Taiheiyo miners, which not only documented over 3,000 miners' experiences and memories, but also employed redundant workers as archivists.

Rather than archives spearheaded by motivated individuals, the creation of an archive at Kushiro speaks to an effort that involved the entire community and the cooperation of local and national bureaucrats. This occurred in a mining community with a different history than that of Miike: Kushiro did not have *zaibatsu*-type capital, and relations between management and the laborers remained relatively good. The archival effort also occurred within a larger historical context in which the community in Kushiro became conscious of the historical importance of Kushiro coal mining as the last active coal mine company in Japan. This consciousness of the historicity of Kushiro and its mining industry is also a result of grassroots' attempts to build an archive. In recounting the conditions under which the archive at Kushiro developed, Shimazaki also illustrates how ideas about what counted as historical expanded as well to include the peripheral "everyday" activities of family life and non-waged workers in the community.

## Archives as Battlefields: Records on Occupational Health

Bernard THOMANN directs our attention to how archival materials have been used and interpreted by examining discourses on occupational health. Thomann points out the absence of silicosis in existing discourses of coal mining

history in Japan, in spite of its pervasiveness in the experiences of mine workers and in the medical literature. The tightly controlled access to sources from company archives on workers' health inhibits the work of the historian who seeks to construct a social history of silicosis and pneumoconiosis. In this piece, Thomann considers the restrictions on sources and the lacks in the archives from various angles to suggest how we can interrogate this lack and read archives against the grain. He presents archives as battlefields, and notes how those seeking recognition for occupational diseases and historians can read archives against the grain. Particularly through investigating the actual lived experiences of miners and their health over their entire lifetimes, Thomann finds that the historian may challenge standard narratives about coal mining work.

### **Towards a Historiography of Archives in Coal Mining Communities**

In the following collections of articles, we limit our scope to experiences of coal mining communities in Japan. We can, of course, widen our scope by comparing the historical paths in which archives evolved and functioned in different settings. The concluding piece by Dhiraj Kumar Nite, who served as our discussant at the AAS-in-Asia panel in New Delhi, puts our studies into discussion with wider theoretical and methodological debates that connect archives, historiography, and power.

Our proposition is that examining the historical configurations of archives can inform us about the conditions under which historical narratives come into being. There is much more to be said about the connections between preservation, power, recognition, and historical authenticity than can be contained here. What we seek to draw attention to here is the many ways that people have (and have not) created and utilized archives, particularly at a time in which issues surrounding authority and memory in preserving and telling history became critical in communities that gathered around an often contentious and disappearing industry.