

Down and Out in Late Meiji Japan

By JAMES L. HUFFMAN

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Reviewed by Daniel A. Métraux



Author James L. Huffman begins this study of the daily lives of Japan's massive impoverished population around the turn of the last century by recounting an epigram he found on the wall of an old slave castle in Africa that said: "Until the lion has his historian the hunter will always be the hero." Huffman's point is that no history of Japan's Meiji period (1868–1912) can be complete without the inclusion of an in-depth discussion of

Japan's huge underclass (*kasō shakai*) and the hundreds of thousands of urban poor (*hinmin*) who lived in slums in Tokyo, Osaka, and other Japanese cities in the last three decades of the Meiji era.

Most histories and courses on modern Japan focus on the country's incredible transformation from an isolated agricultural state into a modern world industrial and military power in four short decades. Emphasis is generally placed on Japan's amazing economic growth, led by a new class of political modernizers and entrepreneurs who fostered the modern education of Japan's enlightened citizenry. Coverage of Japan's poor, many living in urban areas, is rare or nonexistent. Huffman, a widely published and respected scholar of modern Japanese history and a Professor Emeritus of History at Wittenberg University in Ohio, has provided us with a very impressive groundbreaking depiction of poverty in early modern Japan.

Huffman stresses that one must not ignore the role of Japan's massive underclass in Japan's Meiji modernization:

The urban poor of the late Meiji years performed most of the tasks that made Japan's modern transformation possible. They turned out the factory goods that clothed people and propelled Japan onto the international market; they built Ginza's brick town and Osaka's 250-foot Tsutenkaku Tower; they prevented epidemics by removing human wastes from the cities; they pulled the rickshaws that got people to work and to play. And they did more than really support the modern forces: they shaped them through activism that held down streetcar fare increases and toppled prime

ministers. They also provided much of the color and hubbub that observers found so appealing and irritating in modern city life: the clickety-clacks of rickshaw wheels on pebbled streets, the hawking and squawking in public markets, "the smell of roasting pike" and yet-to-be collected urine on "poor back streets," the flickering paper lanterns and "indecent pictures" in Ryōgoku's entertainment byways, the temple acrobats and festival storytellers. If Meiji modernity was a cacophony, the urban poor made it so. (259)

Huffman quotes George Orwell: "Poverty... You thought it would be quite simple; it is extraordinarily complicated." Much of the poor population in Tokyo and elsewhere came from impoverished households on the farm. The combination of high central government taxes and natural disasters throughout the Meiji era forced large numbers of poor farmers off their land with no place to go but the big city. In many cases individuals in large rural families found themselves pushed out by families too desperate and poor to feed them.

Huffman goes into great detail to describe what each major poor neighborhood looked and smelled like, and what their residents did to earn a living. There were rickshaw drivers, textile weavers, matchbox makers, deliverymen, rag pickers, factory workers, railway men, postal employees, night soil collectors, sex workers, restaurant workers, a variety of entertainers, and much more. Huffman takes each job category and describes in detail how a factory worker or a match maker would both work and live. We even have the opportunity to meet individual families and learn unique details on how they lived and worked.

Coming to the city, however, could be a harrowing experience for any poor man or woman. Their surroundings were both unfamiliar and uninviting. Jobs were hard to find and paid pathetic wages. Huffman points out that the key to urban poverty were the starvation wages that the poor received for long hours of work. The monthly wage of a shoemaker or bricklayer was just over ¥7 a month, while living costs (low-quality food; small, filthy rooms for a whole family; and other necessities) were higher. The simple fact of the matter was that it took the work of an energetic family, including a wife and several children, for any of the urban poor to survive. The husband/father would bring in the core income, while the wife would earn a few *sen* (at that time, 100 *sen*=¥1) by doing piecework and the children would earn a few extra coins that would allow the family to survive.

Housing conditions were horrific. Buildings were crowded, shabby, and unsafe, with no modern utilities. The average family in Tokyo's Shin'ami-chō slum lived in a poorly ventilated room of two or three *tatami* mats (thirty-six to fifty-four square feet) with as many as six or seven

persons of both sexes, from a grandmother down to the newest-born child, living together in a tiny space. Even larger apartments allotted less than 100 square feet of space for a family.

Each family also had to crowd all their personal possessions in these apartments. These included bedding, tools, jackets, shoes, cooking implements, a wash basin, and a hi-bachi-like cooking stove. Cooking was often done in a crowded alley behind the buildings. Since many families could not come up with enough cash to pay the monthly rent, they paid daily fees with all the coins they could muster. Unmarried itinerant workers and day laborers as well as travelers would rent sleeping space each night in badly deteriorated flophouses that offered no amenities.

The buildings, often owned by uncaring factory owners in the neighborhood or private entrepreneurs, were made of wood and deteriorated rapidly. A contemporary writer noted in 1898 that such abodes had “walls crumbling, a decaying threshold whose doors will not shut, and a worn roof that does not keep out the rain and dew—a place like a pigsty.” (41) Another survey made in 1905 found these apartment buildings consisted of rows of three-mat apartments that housed four to six people, each facing a dirt corridor with a common toilet at the end of the block. Over 70 percent of families still lived in a single room in Tokyo as late as 1912, with a mere 1.2 percent occupying three or more rooms.

Life at the best of times was a struggle for each of these families, but any disruption in their lives could bring a major crisis. There was no health care to speak of, so if a family member, especially the main wage earner, got sick or became injured, the family’s survival was at stake. There was also the threat of natural disasters. The buildings were badly made wood constructions, so an accidental fire started in one house could very quickly destroy a large neighborhood, killing or injuring a large number of people. Since several slum neighborhoods were built along fast-flowing rivers such as the Sumida River in Tokyo, floods could also wipe out many slum houses, especially during the summer rainy season.

Today all Japanese have some basic safety nets: schools to educate their children, modern health facilities, public utilities, and old age pensions. Few if any of these protections existed during the Meiji period—meaning that life back then for the poor was always a precarious proposition.

Although life was hard, there were opportunities for the poor to enjoy themselves throughout the year. There were frequent street festivals and festivities at local Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines. Drinking establishments where workers could meet their friends after work existed. There were local entertainment venues, as well as readily available brothels for those who could afford them.

Although Huffman focuses on the poor residents of large urban areas, he also includes a very detailed chapter on

rural poverty. By 1900, a little over a decade before the Meiji period’s end, a vast majority of Japan’s forty to fifty million people (1900) still lived in the countryside. A typical farm family’s total holdings amounted to no more than four acres, and most farmers grew one crop—rice—that required at least a hundred days annually of back-breaking labor. Farm incomes were comparable to those of families in cities, but residents of fishing villages often earned less. Farm productivity rose during the Meiji period, but only a smaller percentage of families were able to rise out of poverty.

Starting in the 1880s, sugar plantation owners in Hawai‘i were in urgent need of field workers and made an active attempt to recruit Japanese farm workers. Huffman’s final chapter, “Poverty Abroad: Hawai‘i’s Sugar Fields,” is a detailed history of this very early phase of Japanese emigration abroad. Surprisingly, however, Huffman makes no real mention of the tens of thousands of Japanese who emigrated to California and other parts of North America during this same period.

The Association for Asian Studies in 2017 gave its Distinguished Service Award to James L. Huffman to honor his outstanding scholarship and service to the field. The high quality and great depth of research evident in *Down and Out in Late Meiji Japan* demonstrates the validity of this award. His staggering depth of research provides the author with the opportunity to present many hundreds of personal experiences of people who constitute a major segment of Japan’s population. Huffman is fortunate that a large number of late-Meiji-era Japanese writers and journalists investigated the lives and abodes of the poor; his frequent use of their work helps make the late Meiji hinmin come alive for the reader.

This book should be useful, not only for scholars but for teachers of modern Japanese history who want to present a more comprehensive view of Meiji society. Although a superb background for teachers, Huffman’s book is not appropriate as an assigned work for an advanced high school or undergraduate general education course because of the great depth of the author’s research and analysis.

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