Introduction to the feature articles Studies on Japanese labor history and a developing base of oral histories

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The focus of this volume's feature section articles is on oral histories from Japanese labor history, a fertile, growing base of sources that scholars are now using to shed valuable light on the past. An "oral history" is a recorded narrative or dictated account of an event by a person who experienced it firsthand, collected via an interview between the speaker (the person telling the narrative) and a listener.

In the realm of positivist history, researchers have concentrated on using documentary evidence to speak for itself—oral accounts have always played supplementary roles. The tendency toward empirical sources is starting to shift in some fields, however, as oral histories gradually draw more and more interest.

Documentary evidence is susceptible to sampling bias, as the samples of written sources available for scholarly study obviously favor people and organizations that have had the ability to create and preserve written material. Recent technological developments have also created another problem: according to Mikuriya Takashi, a pioneering force in the field of Japanese oral history, widespread digitization has left a shortage of actual historical documents to study, especially when it comes to topics from recent years (Mikuriya 2002). With modern-historical research facing a dearth of sources to probe, the emergence of oral histories in Japan holds substantial promise for filling that void and sparking new inquiries.

However, the world of Japanese oral history still has a long way to go. While scholars have now started to amass and utilize oral histories in Japan, the environment for propelling that research forward pales in comparison to certain countries—the United States and United Kingdom, for example—where oral histories have been part of the historical picture for longer periods of time (see Umezaki 2016 for more on the conditions in the United States). One of the biggest factors behind that gap is the level of infrastructural support for gathering testimonies. In Japan, the task generally falls to individual researchers or small teams of scholars; the organizational framework for facilitating the process of obtaining oral histories is far from complete. There are no dedicated oral-history centers at universities or public libraries for collecting and compiling oral histories. Due to that lack, individual scholars have no choice but to gather their own oral histories for their own research purposes, release materials at their own discretion, and maintain their own collections. For other parties outside of those individual researchers, then, accessibility to Japanese oral histories is extremely limited.

What researchers need most at the current juncture are lists of past oral histories and a structure for organizing and preserving the resources. When those infrastructural pieces fall into place,

scholars will be able to find and distributed information on who has done oral-history interviews with whom, what kinds of records are available, and where interested parties can access the information. The oral histories will turn from scattered artifacts into real historical resources, providing a solid foundation for the future. Just as present-day scholars examine centuries-old historical materials, scholars hundreds of years from now could have the ability to explore the oral histories now at our fingertips.

The first feature article, Umezaki Osamu's "Labor Oral History in Japan," classifies and profiles the various available oral histories in the field of Japanese labor history. While not necessarily comprehensive, the article provides a basic visualization of labor-related oral histories from Japan to a global audience. The paper's incomplete coverage might actually serve as an impetus for further research: it could inspire other researchers and organizations to carry on the author's efforts to develop a full database of the relevant oral histories.

The purpose of collecting oral histories goes beyond filling an empty space in primary-source availability, however. Oral histories can also give rise to novel analyses in historical research.

One of the distinguishing features of an oral history is its process of capturing a firsthand narrative through dialogue. As Umezaki noted, oral histories naturally include much more contextual content than official documents and other forms of documentary evidence tend to—variables like the interviewer, choice of words, and tone of voice all affect the meaning of the recollection (Umezaki 2012). An interviewee might help flesh out the deeper significance of a given action, a given rule, a given system, possibly framing it within an HR philosophy. Through oral histories, then, researchers can interpret their subjects through the subjective lens of a specific individual or from the intersubjective perspective of a specific group. Documentary evidence, on the other hand, often provides the non-contextual elements that remain independent of personal interpretation: proper names, dates, actions, and conditions, for example.

Following Umezaki's survey of the available historical resources, the papers by Suzuki Makoto and Nagumo Chiaki use oral histories—an area of specialization for both authors—to weave together fascinating reinterpretations of labor history.

Suzuki's article, "The formation of job- and competency-based human-resource management in Japan: The steel industry, 1947–1973," analyzes the development of competency-based management at Japanese companies in the iron and steel sector by examining changes in personnel systems from the prewar context to the postwar years. The idea of "competency," by nature, defies objective measurement; companies thus need to establish a consensus on the requisite competency levels and approaches in order to handle human resources properly. If Suzuki were to have limited his focus to institutional specifications, documentary evidence would have most likely provided a more accurate, by-the-book understanding of the systems in place. However, his focus centers on how the actual human-resources employees behind the designs of the systems saw the concept of competency at their respective firms and communicated those ideas to their targets. Over the course of the paper, Suzuki traces and illuminates the processes by which the different sides of the management-labor balance formed a shared awareness of job performance in an interactive fashion.

In "The Formation Process of Mutual-Trust-Based Industrial Relations in Japan: The Logic of Persuasion," meanwhile, Nagumo delineates the formation of the "mutual-trust" concept that many labor historians have associated with Japanese-style labor relations. In addition to detailing the activities of the Japan Productivity Center and the spread of labor-management consultations, the paper also gives readers a look behind the scenes at how management and labor were able to move from opposition to trust and what shaped that harmonization. Nagumo's findings show that the

people behind the systems, adopting neutral, objective standpoints, navigated labor strife by explaining the benefits of increased productivity for both management and labor.

Suzuki and Nagumo root their analytical interpretations in the relatively abstract ideas of competency, persuasion, and trust, using oral histories as their primary routes to understanding. Moving forward, the growing base of oral histories could offer scholars valuable insights in analyses of other broad, social concepts like fairness, solidarity with labor movements, and friction between laborer culture and corporate culture. As that new oral-history research continues to emerge, the existing understanding of Japanese labor history could very well take on new dimensions and undergo transformative changes.

References

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