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Toward a Full History of Coal Mining:
Korean Miners in the Japanese Coal Industry, 1910s–1930s

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Abstract

This report examines the presence and role of Korean laborers in Japan's coal mining industry following the annexation of Korea, dividing the period into three phases: the WWI period (late 1910s), the 1920s, and the 1930s. The Chikuhō region of Fukuoka Prefecture, Japan's largest coal-producing area and the site where the greatest number of Korean miners worked, serves as the central focus of this study. This paper introduces the characteristics of Korean miners in each period and provides perspectives on how historical experiences up to the 1930s connect to wartime labor mobilization.

When the "Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution" were inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2015, UNESCO's advisory body, ICOMOS, included in its recommendation for registration that the plan should also provide an understanding of each site's "full history". This paper demonstrates that the relationship between Japan's coal mining industry and Korean miners, which began in the 1910s, is an indispensable element in understanding the full history of the coal mining industry—whether the coal mine sites have been registered as World Heritage or not.

Keywords

Coal Mining Industy in Japan, Korean Coal Miners, Chikuhō coalfield, Technological Innovations, Residential Area, Female Coal Miners od, Samhan Unification, historical terms

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Introduction

In 2015, when the "Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution" were inscribed on the World Heritage List, ICOMOS, a UNESCO advisory body, made several recommendations. One of them was as follows:

> Preparing an interpretive strategy for the presentation of the nominated property, which gives particular emphasis to the way each of the sites contributes to OUV and reflects one or more of the phases of industrialisation; and also allows an understanding of the full history of each site; industrialization; and also allows an understanding of the full history of each site;[1]

It is a well-known fact that the focus of discussion at the time centered on the issues of Korean, Chinese, and POWs from allied countries forced to work during WWII. However, a consideration of the "full history" of Japan's coal mining industry—including several coal mines designated as World Heritage sites—cannot be achieved by looking only at the wartime period. Japanese coal mines had long relied on marginalized labor groups, and the employment of Korean laborers became more established during the period of World War I.

This report examines the relationship between coal mines and Korean laborers that developed well before WWII. Such an inquiry is essential for understanding the "full history" of Japanese coal mining. Moreover, this study demonstrates that the history of Korean miners prior to WWII is also crucial for analyzing labor issues during the wartime period.

Research on coal mining labor history in Japan has accumulated a substantial body of work.[2] However, the primary subjects of these studies have been Japanese male laborers. Separate from this research trend, studies exist on marginalized labor groups who worked in coal mines,

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1 Advisory Body Evaluation (ICOMOS). https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1484/documents/

2 Representative studies are as follows: Tanaka 1984; Ogino 1993; Ichihara 1997.

such as members of historically discriminated communities (Buraku communities), Koreans and Chinese mobilized during WWII, and Allied prisoners of war. Yet these two research streams have not necessarily been fully integrated[3]. It is necessary to reconstruct coal mining history by incorporating these marginalized groups[4].

1. Overview of the Japanese Coal Mining Industry in the Prewar Period

The major coal-producing regions of Japan are located in Hokkaidō and Kyūshū. The Chikuhō (筑豊) coalfield, located in Fukuoka Prefecture in Kyūshū, was particularly large, producing half of Japan's coal in the prewar period. The Chikuhō Coalfield had over 100 coal mines of various sizes located within a short distance from each other. This was a defining characteristic of Chikuhō, significantly different from Hokkaidō, large-scale mines were scattered, or the Miike coalfield in Fukuoka Prefecture [Mitsui Miike (三井三池) Coal Mine], where a single mine monopolized an entire coalfield.

The number of miners engaged in the coal mining industry is shown in Graph 1. The graph shows that the number of coal miners varied greatly from period to period, and the following characteristics can be noted.

- The number of coal miners increased rapidly during WWI, forming a peak.
- The number of coal miners declined sharply due to the depression that followed the end of WWI, and remained stagnant during the 1920s.

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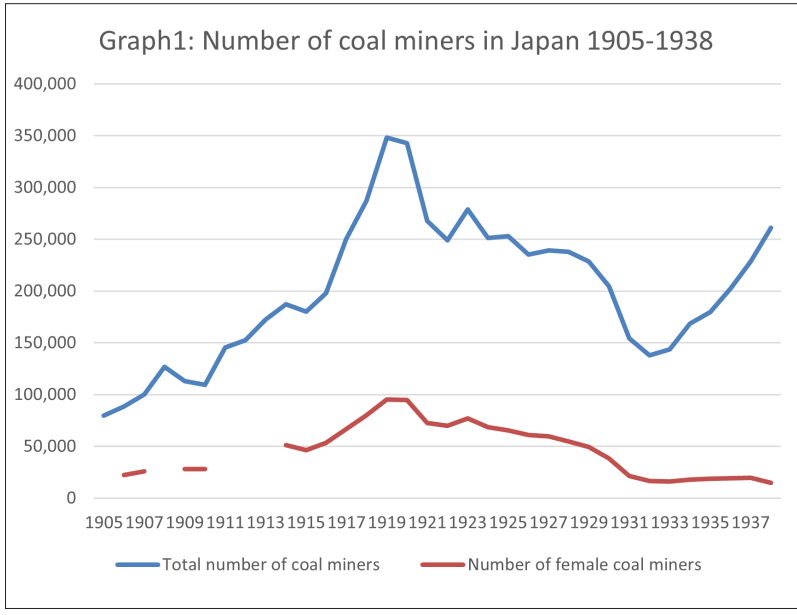
3 A recent study attempting a historical narrative of the Miike Coal Mine (Fukuoka Prefecture) while considering labor diversity is Ikai 2025.

4 One outcome of that endeavor is Sagawa 2021, on which much of the content of this report is based.

Fig. 1. Major coalfield locations in Japan

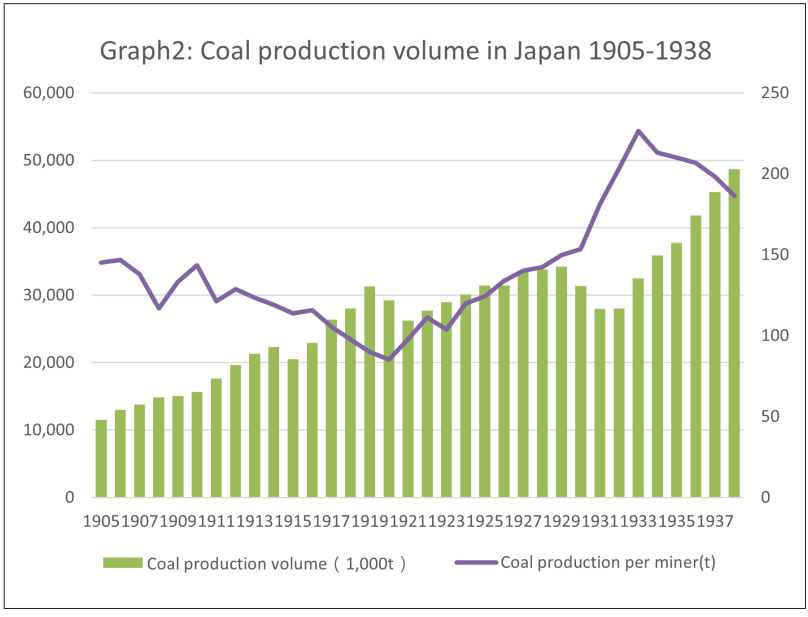
- The number of coal miners further declined sharply during the Showa Depression around 1930, and then rapidly increased as business conditions recovered after the Manchurian Incident.

Another characteristic of the coal mining industry in Japan is the large number of women miners, especially in Chikuhō and Miike in Fukuoka Prefecture, where many women went into the mines with men to engage in coal extraction labor.



Graph. 1. Number of coal miners in Japan 1905-1938
Source: Research and Statistics Division, Ministry of International Trade and Industry 1963.

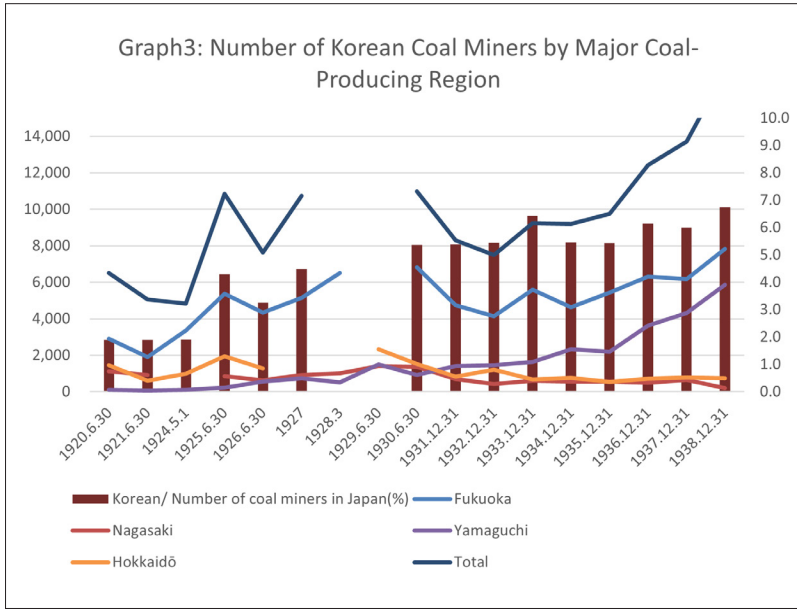
Graph 2 shows coal production and coal output per capita. While coal production generally continued to increase steadily, the trend in coal output per capita and the number of coal miners is not necessarily proportional. Coal output per capita declined during WWI, when the number of coal miners increased rapidly (below 100 tons per year from 1918 to 1921). At that time, coal extraction labor was performed manually, and it was necessary to increase the number of miners in order to increase the amount of coal produced. At the same time, however, skilled labor was essential for coal extraction. In the booming economy brought about by WWI, the coal mining industry increased the number of miners to increase coal production, but the number of unskilled laborers increased, resulting in a decline in coal output per worker. On the other hand, coal output per worker reached its highest level during the prewar period from the Showa Depression to the early 1930s (more than 200 tons were re-



Graph. 2. Coal production volume in Japan 1905-1938
Source: Research and Statistics Division, Ministry of International Trade and Industry 1963.

corded from 1932 to 1936). During this period, the major coal mines were proceeding with reduced coal miners, while technological innovations led to the widespread use of machinery for coal extraction, replacing the traditional manual extraction of coal by skilled miners. This technological innovation led to a significant improvement in the efficiency of coal extraction. However, in the wartime period, the shortage of labor and supplies led to the mobilization of large numbers of Koreans and others unfamiliar with coal mine labor to work in the mines, and the efficiency of coal extraction continued to decline.

Next, the number of Korean miners is reviewed. The presence of Korean miners in Japanese coal mines can be seen even before the annexation of Korea, with Chōja (長者) Coal Mine in Karatsu, Saga Prefecture in 1897 and Furukawa Shimoyamada (古河下山田) Coal Mine in Chikuhō, Fukuoka Prefecture in 1898 attempting to introduce Korean



Graph. 3. Number of Korean coal miners by major coal-producing region.
Source: Sagawa 2021, 34.

workers from the Korean Empire[5].

However, the Japanese coal mining industry did not begin to fully utilize Koreans until after Japan annexed Korea in 1910. The outbreak of WWI in 1914 served as a major catalyst for the employment of Korean laborers. The bar graph shows the percentage of Korean miners among all miners. The bar chart of Graph3 shows that the percentage of Korean miners gradually increased, from 4% in the late 1920s to 5–7% in the 1930s. Looking at regional trends, Fukuoka Prefecture consistently employed the largest number of Korean miners throughout the entire period. In the 1920s, Nagasaki Prefecture and Hokkaidō also employed many Korean miners. However, by the 1930s, the number of Korean miners in

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[5] Tōjō 1994.

Nagasaki Prefecture and Hokkaidō decreased, while it increased in Yamaguchi Prefecture.

Based on the above overall trends, we will confirm the actual situation and characteristics of Korean miners' employment during the WWI period, the 1920s, and the 1930s.

2. World War I Period

The Japanese coal mining industry sought to increase coal production by hiring more miners in the economic boom during WWI. As Japan's domestic labor force was depleted, attention was focused on the people of Korea. Various coal mines throughout Japan began to recruit workers on the Korean Peninsula, and many mines expanded their use of Korean miners. It was not only zaibatsu-owned mining companies such as Hokkaidō Colliery & Steamship Co., Ltd. (北海道炭礦汽船株式会社) and Mitsubishi Mining Company Ltd. (三菱鉱業株式会社), or major local mining companies such as Kaijima Coal. Mining Co., Ltd. (貝島鉱業株式会社) (Fukuoka Prefecture), that recruited Korean miners. Smaller-scale mines such as Kamishiro (神代) Coal Mine (Fukuoka Prefecture) and Matsushima (松島) Coal Mine (Nagasaki Prefecture) did the same. Many Korean miners were engaged in coal extraction and other underground labor, but they did not perform as well as the mines had hoped. According to a survey of several coal mines in Chikuhō, Fukuoka Prefecture, published in May 1919, the performance of Korean miners was reported to be lower than that of Japanese miners by a maximum of 0.6 points for coal miners, 0.1 to 0.6 points for carriers, and 0.4 points for miscellaneous laborers, when Japanese miners were given 1.0 points[6]. Newspapers and surveys at the time sometimes explained that the reason for the poor performance of Korean miners was due to the ethnic characteristic of the Korean people. However, the main reason for the poor performance of Korean min-

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[6] *Fukuoka Nichinichi Shinbun* (福岡日日新聞) June 28, 1919.

ers was that coal extraction labor at that time required skilled techniques. Most Korean miners were from rural areas and had no previous experience in coal mine labor. It was difficult for Korean miners to quickly achieve good results because it took about one year to acquire the necessary skills for coal mining. There were also a series of brawls between Korean miners and Japanese supervisors, and between Korean miners and Japanese miners. 25 brawls involving Korean miners occurred between August 1918 and March 1920[7]. The majority of these incidents were between Japanese and Korean miners. The background to these incidents was the growing dissatisfaction and anxiety of the Korean miners and the ethnic contempt of the Japanese. Some coal mines stopped using Korean miners after the brawl. A newspaper article in August 1918 discussed the use of Korean miners in coal mines in the Kyūshū region, saying that "the results were close to failure" due to their poor performance and hostile relations with the Japanese[8].

3. The 1920s

Despite a temporary decline in the number of Korean miners after WWI, the number of Korean miners increased in the 1920s, as confirmed earlier. This was due to the intensive use of Korean miners by certain major mining companies, such as Mitsubishi Mining Company Ltd. and Hokkaidō Colliery & Steamship Co., Ltd.. In particular, at the end of the 1920s, Mitsubishi used about 40% of the nation's Korean miners. Specifically, in 1928, 625 Koreans worked at the Bibai (美唄) Coal Mine in Hokkaidō, 341 at the Takashima (高島) Coal Mine in Nagasaki Prefecture, and 3,434, or 27% of the total number of miners at Chikuhō Kōgyōsho (筑豊礦業所), which consisted of four coal mines in Chikuhō,

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7 Ogino 1993, 191–196, 226–229.

8 *Kawakita Shinpo* (河北新報) August 5, 1918.

Fukuoka Prefecture[9]. This 27% ratio is comparable to the levels seen in individual coal mines after wartime mobilization policies began during WWII.

Viewing the phenomenon of people traveling from the Korean Peninsula to Japan from a broader perspective, the Rice Production Expansion Plan (産米増殖計画) beginning in 1920 led to widening disparities in Korean rural areas and an increase in impoverished people. Furthermore, the decline in rice prices in the late 1920s dealt a blow[10]. As a result of such Japanese colonial policies, increasing numbers of people reluctantly chose to go to Japan as migrant workers. Among them were those who eventually came to stay for extended periods. The population of Koreans residing in Japan changed over time, increasing from approximately 40,000 in 1920 to about 180,000 in 1925, 400,000 in 1930, and 760,000 in 1935[11]. In Japan, industries that welcomed Koreans as a source of cheap labor existed, with manual labor in coal mines and in civil engineering and construction sites serving as the most representative examples.

Below, we clarify the characteristics of Korean miners who went to work in Japanese coal mines based on surveys conducted in the 1920s[12].

(1) Gender: The majority of Korean miners were male, with 98% (4,282) male in 1924 and 97% (6,832) male in 1928, according to a large-scale survey of coal mines in the Kyūshū region. This trend was also true in Hokkaidō, where 99% were male according to the 1928 survey.

(2) Family Status: Many of the men who made up the majority of Korean miners were singles, and in the 1924 survey of the Kyūshū region, singles accounted for 86% of the miners. However, "single" in the survey meant living alone at the mine; in reality, many had left

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[9] Fukuoka Regional Employment Service Office 1929; Kitazawa 2011.

[10] Itagaki 2011.

[11] Tamura 1998.

[12] Fukuoka Regional Employment Service Office 1929; Ministry of Internal Affairs, Social Affairs Bureau 1924; Ōtsuki 1930; Tokyo Regional Employment Service Office 1925.

families behind in their hometowns to work alone.

(3) Age: According to a 1924 survey of the Kyūshū region, 55% of the workers were in their 20s and 30% were in their 30s, and the data available for individual mines also confirm that the majority of the workers were in their 20s and 30s.

(4) Educational Level: No large-scale survey on educational level was conducted; data specific to individual coal mines were presented. In Hokkaidō Colliery & Steamship Co., Ltd. (1925), 60% had no schooling, 25% had dropped out of elementary school, and about 10% had graduated from elementary school. In Fukuoka Prefecture, at the Mitsubishi Hōjō(方城) Coal Mine (1928), 92% of the employees were not enrolled in school. In terms of Japanese comprehension, 59% of the workers at the Mitsubishi Hōjō Coal Mine (1928) did not understand Japanese.

(5) Place of Origin: According to a 1928 survey conducted in Chikuhō, Fukuoka Prefecture, the largest number of Korean miners came from South Gyeongsang Province (2,212), followed by North Gyeongsang Province (1,606), South Jeolla Province (651), North Jeolla Province (467), North Chungcheong Province (251), Gyeonggi Province (119) and South Pyongan Province (118). In Chikuhō, workers mainly came from the geographically proximate southern regions of the Korean Peninsula. Meanwhile, at Hokkaidō Colliery & Steamship Co., Ltd. (1925), workers from South Gyeongsang Province, South Hamgyong Province, and Gangwon Province were numerous, constituting 80% of the workforce (detailed breakdowns by region were not recorded). In Hokkaidō, some coal mines employed not only workers from the south but also many from the north. However, it is believed that individual coal mines had their own distinct regional composition in terms of worker origins.

(6) Former Occupations: According to a 1924 survey covering Fukuoka, Saga, Nagasaki, and Yamaguchi Prefectures, 42% of Korean miners' former jobs were in the coal mining industry and 49% in agriculture, with only 9% of those who changed jobs from other industries into the coal mining industry. On the other hand, 85% of the Korean min-

ers working for Hokkaidō Colliery & Steamship Co., Ltd. in 1924 were inexperienced coal miners, and 80% of those recruited in Korea were agricultural workers. The majority of Koreans working in the mines were either new arrivals who had been engaged in agriculture on the Korean Peninsula, or people already living in Japan who had prior experience working in other Japanese coal mines.

Among the attributes of the Korean miners examined above, (1) Gender, (2) Family Status, (3) Age, and (4) Educational Level were generally similar in each region. These characteristics did not differ significantly from the overall trends among Koreans residing in Japan. On the other hand, the characteristics of (5) Place of Origin and (6) Former Occupations varied somewhat by region. These characteristics may be largely attributable to the method of recruiting Korean miners for the coal mines operating in each region. Incidentally, when coal mines recruited workers on the Korean Peninsula, they were required, under the 1918 Worker Recruitment Control Regulations (労働者募集取締規則), to submit employment conditions—including contract periods—to the Government-General of Korea (朝鮮総督府) in advance and obtain recruitment approval. However, from the 1920s onward, recruitment methods for Koreans not governed by these regulations also became more common. For example, methods included recruiting relatives of Koreans already employed in coal mines or hiring Koreans already residing in Japan. Additionally, brokers smuggled Koreans into Japan on clandestine ships, circumventing restrictions on Korean travel, and arranged for their employment in coal mines[13]. Such recruitment methods did not require a fixed contract period. Nevertheless, coal mines often independently set contract periods, typically around one and a half years, in order to en-

[13] Throughout the 1920s, police implemented a system that screened Koreans entering Japan for financial resources, Japanese-language ability, and employment prospects. Those deemed unqualified were denied entry, preventing from tens of thousands to more than one hundred thousand people from traveling each year. Denials increased further in the 1930s (Tonomura 2008, 33, 49-54).

courage Korean miners to continue working by providing allowances upon contract completion or extension[14]. This was necessary because, as will be discussed later, Korean miners frequently moved between jobs. This differs significantly in purpose from the contract periods established during WWII, which aimed to bind mobilized Koreans to work sites for a fixed duration.

4. Korean Miners at Mitsubishi Chikuhō Kōgyōsho (三菱筑豊礦業所)

Below, we would like to introduce the work and life of Korean miners, using Mitsubishi Chikuhō Kōgyōsho, which employed many Korean miners in the 1920s, as the main case study. Chikuhō Kōgyōsho is a division that controls the coal mines operated by Mitsubishi Mining Company Ltd. in the Chikuhō Coalfield in Fukuoka Prefecture, and consists of four large coal mines: the Namazuta (鯰田), Shinnyū (新入), Hōjō (方城), and Kamiyamada (上山田) Coal Mines. These four mines employed more than 3,000 Korean miners in the late 1920s. During WWI, human-powered coal extraction was still the mainstream method, and Korean miners produced less coal than their Japanese counterparts and were unable to achieve good results. Since the 1920s, however, the value of traditional skill has declined as new coal mining techniques and methods were introduced at major coal mines. The coal extraction method changed from the room and pillar mining method to the intensive longwall mining method. In addition, the introduction of coal mining machinery such as coal drills, coal picks, and coal cutters replaced the pickaxe, and coal extraction using dynamite blasting also became widespread. Transportation of mined coal from the working face also shifted from manual labor to troughs and the water-flow method (戸樋流し) or conveyors. These technological innovations increased the efficiency of coal extraction by Kore-

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[14] Mining Council 1932, 639.

an miners, the majority of whom were inexperienced coal miners, and Mitsubishi began to actively hire them. Mitsubishi was one company that actively pursued such technological innovations. These technological innovations increased the efficiency of coal extraction by Korean miners, the majority of whom were inexperienced coal miners, and Mitsubishi began to actively hire them.

The Korean miners worked not in mixed groups with Japanese miners, but in groups organized by Koreans. At Mitsubishi Kamiyamada Coal Mine, a comparison was made between the results of coal extraction using a drill by Korean miners and the results of coal extraction using a pickaxe by experienced Japanese miners, and the results showed that the Korean miners performed better[15]. On the other hand, there are cases where Korean miners at Chikuhō Colliery were engaged in a working environment that Japanese miners considered unpleasant and unclean, and where Korean miners were always in charge of the night shift of a two-shift day/night system. A university student who received practical training at Mitsubishi Hōjō Coal Mine recorded that the Korean miners were physically strong and patient, and that they were willing to work in filthy places and harsh conditions, which Japanese miners avoided[16]. The Korean miners endured such treatment because the workplaces for Korean laborers in the Japanese interior were extremely scarce (the most common jobs were day laborers) and because they were strongly motivated to send money home to their families in their hometowns[17]. However, in reality, not a few Korean miners could not endure the unfamiliar underground labor and harsh working conditions and fled the mines.

As mentioned earlier, half of the Korean miners working in Fukuo-

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15 Arashima 1926, 28–29.

16 Tasaki 1923, 5.

17 Documents from this period frequently note that Korean miners were conscientious in sending remittances and saving money. A household survey conducted at a coal mine in Hokkaidō found that single Korean miners devoted roughly 30 percent of their monthly income to savings and remittances to their hometowns (Ōtsuki 1930, part 2, 100–104).

ka Prefecture's coal mines were new arrivals who had been engaged in agriculture on the Korean Peninsula, and half had migrated from other mines. Chikuhō Kōgyōsho hired inexperienced coal miners from the Korean Peninsula, and it did not hire Koreans who had worked in other Japanese coal mines. Chikuhō Kōgyōsho's view of those who had worked in the mines was that they were not attached to making money, lacked work ethic, were steeped in bad habits such as fighting and gambling, and would not settle in the mines, and were therefore very poorly regarded.

Chikuhō Kōgyōsho initially sent mine attendants and recruiters to the Korean Peninsula to recruit miners. However, they gradually began to place more importance on the network of local and consanguineous Koreans enrolled in the mines, a trend that became more pronounced as the number of Korean miners increased. Recruitment using geographical and blood ties of enrolled Koreans is called nepotism, and in the late 1920s, recruitment of Korean miners was conducted exclusively by nepotism. In Chikuhō Kōgyōsho's nepotism recruiting, the employer did not lend money for travel and living expenses, and applicants came to the mines either by providing their own funds or by borrowing money from an introducer who worked at the mines. When the number of days worked reached a certain standard, the miners and their introducers were given bonuses and introduction fees by the mines. This recruitment method was designed to avoid wasting recruitment costs if workers moved to other mines after a short period.

The recruited Korean miners were managed by influential Koreans who had earned the trust of the coal mining companies. These influential men were long-term employees who had wives and were called "Sewakata" (世話方) or "Hanbanushi" (飯場主), a type of foreman. The coal mining companies also expected them to be able to recruit miners on the Korean Peninsula through their social and familial networks.The system of foremen managing miners was applied equally to both Japanese and Korean miners, but Korean miners were rarely managed by Japanese

foremen[18]. Moreover, while the management system for Japanese miners at major coal mining companies shifted during the 1920s toward a system in which mine officials directly managed the miners, no such change occurred for Korean miners, as it was considered crucial that the role of managing Korean miners be filled by Koreans themselves, who could communicate effectively with them. Under the supervision of influential Koreans, called "Sewakata" or "Hanbanushi," Korean miners often resided in residential areas established by the coal mines.

The reason why the miners established a residential area for Korean miners is thought to have been to minimize contact between the two sides to avoid the frequent fights and brawls that occurred between them and the Japanese during WWI. Major coal mining companies such as Mitsubishi sought to engage miners during this period by organizing various cultural and sporting events and establishing groups comprising both miners and staff. However, little evidence exists that Korean miners participated in these events or groups. It can be considered that within the internal society of the coal mines, Korean miners were effectively marginalized[19]. As a result, this living space, isolated from the Japanese, also became a place where the Korean community and its culture could be maintained.

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[18] This miner management system can be situated within the lineage of the "naya (納屋)" stable system established during the Meiji era. Naya foremen (納屋頭) recruited their own miners, housed them in bunkhouses, controlled their daily lives, allocated work, supervised labor, and patrolled the mines (Nishinarita 1994, 62). At major coal mines, the naya stable system was abolished around 1900, and the direct employment and management of miners by the mines became widespread. However, individuals who performed functions similar to those of naya foremen remained crucial for recruiting miners and overseeing their daily lives until the 1920s (Ichihara 1997, 74–83, 168–174).

[19] Ichihara 1997, 113–118,121–122,130–133.

Table1: Number of Koreans Hired, Dismissed, and Transfer Rates at Major Coal Mines in the Kyūshū Region During March 1928

Prefecture	Coal Mine Name	Hire	Dismissal	Number of Korean Employees at Month-end	Monthly Transfer Rate(%)
Yamaguchi	Okinoyama (沖ノ山)	100	48	411	18.0
	Total within prefecture	228	89	516	30.7
Fukuoka	Mitsubishi Namazuta (三菱鯰田)	274	262	1,738	15.4
	Mitsubishi Shinnyu (三菱新入)	140	144	944	15.0
	Mitsubishi Kamiyamada (三菱上山田)	60	142	339	29.8
	Mitsubishi Hōjō (三菱方城)	65	43	413	13.1
	Nakajima Iizuka (中島飯塚)	752	568	1,768	37.3
	Asō Yoshio (麻生芳雄)	75	36	138	40.2
	Asō Tsunawaki (麻生綱分)	26	29	126	21.8
	Kaijima Ōnoura (貝島大之浦)	39	17	212	13.2
	Total within prefecture	1,887	1,617	6,511	26.9
Nagasaki	Mitsubishi Takashima (三菱高島)	11	36	341	6.9
	Kyūshū Colliery & Steamship Sakito (九州炭礦汽船崎戸)	92	60	650	11.7
	Total within prefecture	103	97	1,010	9.9

Source: Fukuoka Regional Employment Service Office 1929, 83–91.

Among the Korean miners working at Mitsubishi Chikuhō Kōgyōsho, the number of long-term workers who continued to work at the same mine for several years gradually increased. Most, however, did

not stay long and left the mines after a short period of time. Table 1 shows the movement status at each coal mine during the month of March 1928. In order to encourage Korean miners to stay, Chikuhō Kōgyōsho did not recruit those with coal mine labor experience, but used the nepotism of those who were enrolled in the mine. These efforts resulted in a lower turnover rate at the Chikuhō Kōgyōsho compared to the Iizuka(飯塚) Coal Mine and Asō Shōten Co., Ltd. (株式会社麻生商店), which employed miners with prior coal mining experience. However, even so, about the same number of Korean miners left Chikuhō Kōgyōsho every year, and about the same number were newly hired from the Korean Peninsula. In other words, in order for Chikuhō Kōgyōsho Works to maintain the number of Korean miners at 3,000, about 3,000 new miners had to be hired every year. According to the mine's survey of reasons for Korean miners leaving the mines, the most common reason other than homecoming was to escape. In short, many Korean miners disappeared without permission from the coal mining companies. Such escape could be seen as an expression of dissatisfaction with the working environment and working conditions, and as immediate resistance by the Korean miners.

On the other hand, even if those who left Chikuhō Kōgyōsho sought employment in Japan, the number of jobs available to Koreans was extremely scarce except in coal mines or civil engineering work. Especially in the Chikuhō region of Fukuoka Prefecture, where coal mines are densely concentrated, some mines began hiring Koreans who had left Chikuhō Kōgyōsho, recognizing the value of their experience. The number of Korean miners in Fukuoka Prefecture increased, with Chikuhō Kōgyōsho serving as a single point of contact for several thousand new recruits from the Korean Peninsula each year.

5. The 1930s

During the Showa Depression in the early 1930s, the number of coal miners decreased significantly, especially at major coal mines, where many miners were liquidated through rationalization, such as the intro-

duction of coal mining machinery as mentioned above. At the Yubetsu (雄別) Coal Mine in Hokkaidō and the Iizuka (飯塚) Coal Mine in Chikuhō, both effectively managed by Mitsubishi, it has been confirmed that Korean miners were the first to be targeted for layoffs during the Showa Depression[20]. As the economy recovered in the mid-1930s, the number of Korean miners began to increase, but Mitsubishi and Hokkaidō Colliery & Steamship Co., Ltd. did not resume hiring new Korean miners, leaving only those who had been working since before the Showa Depression.

In the 1930s, the main coal mines that hired Korean miners were Asō Shōten in Chikuhō, Fukuoka Prefecture, and the Okinoyama (沖之山) and Higashimizome (東見初) coal mines in Ube, Yamaguchi Prefecture, with a tendency to scatter them among the smaller mines in Chikuhō, Fukuoka Prefecture, and Ube, Yamaguchi Prefecture[21].

Coal mining companies employing Korean miners in the 1930s lagged behind the major zaibatsu-affiliated coal mining companies like Mitsubishi in terms of technical standards and working conditions, and also had lower miner retention rates. Furthermore, in 1933, female underground labor was prohibited in principle, significantly impacting coal mines that had previously employed female labor, particularly in regions like the Chikuhō Coalfield. Amidst this, as the economy recovered, the need arose to increase the number of miners, leading some coal mines to turn their attention to Korean miners. Additionally, the presence of unemployeed workers in the surrounding areas who had been laid off from mines like Mitsubishi also encouraged the use of Korean miners.

Thus, from the 1920s to the 1930s, coal mining companies employing Koreans underwent significant changes. For Korean miners, howev-

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[20] Sagawa 2021, 157-189.

[21] The Chōsei (長生) Coal Mine in Yamaguchi Prefecture was also nicknamed the "Chōsen" Coal Mine—"Chōsen" meaning "Korea" in Japanese—because of the large number of Korean miners working there. At this mine, many Koreans died in a flooding accident in 1942. In August 2025, remains believed to belong to victims of that accident were discovered during an underwater survey conducted by a civic group, attracting considerable public attention. https://www.chouseitankou.com/

er, this meant being excluded from the relatively better-paying large coal mines and finding their labor market increasingly limited to small and micro-sized mines with poor working conditions and little business continuity.

In the Chikuhō coalfield of Fukuoka Prefecture, where many Korean miners continued working throughout the 1930s, the coal mining company Asō Shōten replaced Mitsubishi Mining as the primary employer of numerous Korean miners.

Asō Shōten was a prominent local company operating multiple small-scale mines within Fukuoka Prefecture. However, it differed significantly from major mining companies like Mitsubishi in terms of operational scale, technical standards, and the character of its miners. The low productivity of Asō Shōten's coal mines can be illustrated, for example, by comparing coal production per worker in the Chikuhō region. In May 1930, Asō Shōten's production was 1.08 tons. This figure was only about half that of the largest companies, Mitsui and Mitsubishi, or regional powerhouses like Kaijima and Meiji (明治). The cause of Asō Shōten's low productivity was the delay in introducing new coal mining techniques. However, by the early 1930s, during the Showa Depression, Asō Shōten, though still lagging behind other large-scale coal mining companies, showed some progress in technology adoption. Around this time, the use of Korean miners began to expand.

Table2: Comparison of Efficiency and Wages by Coal Mining Company in Chikuhō During May 1930

Coal Mining Company Name	Coal Production Per Coal Face Worker	Percentage of Coal Face Workers among All Miners	Daily Average Wage Per Coal Face Worker
Major Zaibatsu Coal Mining Companies			
Mitsui (三井) (5 mines)	2.60 t	34.8 %	2.245 Yen
Mitsubishi (三菱) (4 mines)	2.32 t	32.6 %	2.208 Yen
Sumitomo (住友) (1 mine)	1.53 t	44.8 %	2.143 Yen
Furukawa (古河) (2 mines)	2.72 t	29.0 %	2.137 Yen

Major and Small Local Coal Mining Companies			
Asō Shōten (麻生商店) (6 mines)	**1.08 t**	**57.0 %**	**1.611 Yen**
Kaijima (貝島) (6 mines)	1.98 t	35.2 %	2.007 Yen
Meiji (明治) (7 mines)	2.11 t	44.5%	2.062 Yen
The other major local coal mining companies (8 mines)	1.52 t	45.3%	1.624 Yen
Small coal mining companies (27 mines)	1.09 t	56.6 %	1.331 Yen

Source: Ayukawa 1997, 22

Furthermore, the prohibition of female miners' underground labor during the Showa Depression period also contributed to Asō Shōten's expansion of Korean miners' employment. The 1928 revision of the Regulations concerning Relief for Miners (Kōfu rōeki fujo kisoku 鉱夫労役扶助規則) prohibited, in principle, women and minors from working underground or performing night shifts in coal mines. This law had a significant impact on the coal mining industry in the Chikuhō region, where it was common for husbands and wives to work together as pairs in coal extraction. Consequently, a five-year grace period was established for the law's implementation, and exceptions were also created. This legislation forced coal mining companies to reorganize their labor structures and transform their coal extraction techniques. Furthermore, the ban on women working underground significantly affected the livelihoods of coal miners who relied on dual incomes to support their families. Women could no longer engage in high-paying underground work, leading to a reduction in household income.

The response to the ban on women working underground differed greatly between large and small coal mining companies. While some major companies, like Mitsubishi, actively introduced new technologies from the 1920s, this was not the norm. Particularly, introducing troughs and the water-flow method or conveyors into the coal transport process at the coalface meant taking work away from the women (wives) who had traditionally performed this task. In other words, advancing mecha-

nization necessitated dismantling the traditional miner's custom of working as a couple and the labor organization. However, miners resisted mechanizing coal transport at the coalface because they disliked the loss of income that would result from their wives (or partners) no longer being able to work underground. In the 1920s, some mines, like the Sumitomo Tadakuma (住友忠隈) Coal Mine, faced miner sabotage and had to suspend mechanization efforts[22]. Furthermore, since women were not prohibited from working underground in the 1920s, if one mine attempted to force mechanization of coal haulage from the face and dismantle the labor organization, the miners would simply move to another mine. In fact, this was precisely the phenomenon occurring at Mitsubishi Chikuhō Kōgyōsho. The use of Korean miners at Chikuhō Kōgyōsho expanded to replace the married miners who had moved away during the process of introducing new technology.

By the late 1920s, large coal mining companies recognized the labor organization of couples working together as a factor hindering productivity gains through mechanization. Consequently, these major mining companies did not oppose the enactment of laws prohibiting women from working underground. Instead, they actively leveraged this legislation as a lever for reorganizing labor structures and advancing mechanization as rationalization measures during the Showa Depression. For example, at the Mitsui Tagawa (三井田川) Coal Mine, while transferring wives working underground to surface jobs or arranging home-based work, the company simultaneously pursued thorough rationalization and mechanization. This aimed to increase coal extraction efficiency and raise the wages of husbands (coal miners), ensuring households could maintain their livelihoods even if wives' wages decreased[23]. On the other hand, at Mitsubishi, the legal ban on all female underground labor reduced the need to rely on Korean miners for labor as had been the case previously. Due to the blanket ban on women working underground, Jap-

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22 Ministry of Internal Affairs, Social Affairs Bureau 1924, 98.

23 Noyori, 2010, 139–148.

anese miners who had previously worked as couples could no longer transfer to other coal mines merely because their wives were prohibited from working underground. If they wished to continue working as a couple, their only option was to move to small- or micro-sized coal mines where women's underground labor was exceptionally allowed. Most miners preferred to remain at the large coal mines, where the husband served as the household breadwinner while the wife engaged in supplementary aboveground work, rather than move to smaller mines with less favorable conditions. Amid these changing circumstances, Korean miners at Mitsubishi's coal mines became primary targets for layoffs.

Meanwhile, the response of small and micro-sized coal mining companies to the ban on female underground labor was entirely different from that of large mining companies. Operating under poor mining conditions and lacking financial resources, these smaller companies could neither advance mechanization nor offer husbands wages high enough to support their families. Consequently, in stark contrast to the large mining companies, small and micro-sized mines strongly opposed the ban on female underground labor. These companies demanded and secured an exception clause during the legislative process allowing female underground labor in mines where mechanization was difficult. Consequently, female underground labor continued widely in small and micro-sized mines throughout the 1930s.

Of particular interest is the position of Asō Shōten, which expanded its use of Korean miners in the 1930s. As a company lagging in rationalization progress and productivity, Asō Shōten likely found it difficult to substantially raise coal miner wages through efficiency gains, unlike other major coal mining companies. Thus, while the actual conditions of the mines it operated were closer to those of small and micro-sized mines, Asō Shōten was a major regional coal mining company. Its founder had even served as the representative of the Chikuhō coal mining operators' association. Consequently, unlike other small and micro-sized mines, it could not continue employing female underground workers. Thus, Asō Shōten's position—lagging behind major coal mines in rationalization efforts yet unable to continue employing female pit workers like small

and micro-sized mines—led it to expand the use of Korean miners as female pit labor became prohibited. Furthermore, the mines operated by Asō Shōten were located near Mitsubishi Chikuhō Kōgyōsho. Asō Shōten could utilize Korean miners dismissed by Mitsubishi as a labor source. Unlike Mitsubishi, which recruited new arrivals from the Korean Peninsula, Asō Shōten employed former coal miners residing in Japan.

Korean miners employed by Asō Shōten also often worked in areas separate from those of Japanese miners, as was the case at Mitsubishi. A 1935 report compiled by the local labor union (Japan Coal Miners' Union 日本石炭坑夫組合) pointed out that at Asō Shōten, Koreans were assigned to sections with high gas concentrations and poor ventilation—areas that Japanese miners normally avoided[24]. The report also provides examples from several small-scale coal mines where Koreans were likewise placed in locations eschewed by Japanese workers. In the same year as the labor union's investigation, a student who conducted practical training at Asō Shōten's coal mine recorded that the company evaluated Koreans as physically robust, capable of enduring arduous labor, highly obedient, and displaying what the company regarded as a pronounced focus on improving their economic situation[25]. As discussed earlier, many Korean miners endured harsh working conditions because they needed to send remittances to their families in their hometowns and because their employment options were severely limited. Mine managers, however, praised their physical stamina and used such evaluations to justify assigning Koreans to work environments that Japanese miners avoided.

6.Wartime Labor Mobilization

Finally, I would like to offer some perspective on how the history up to the 1930s is connected to the emergence of people who were mobilized

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[24] Japan Coal Miners' Union 1935, 161.

[25] Morisawa 1936, 9–10.

to work in the coal mines under the wartime labor mobilization policy. Coal mining companies had differing attitudes toward labor mobilization policies for Koreans. While coal mining companies with experience in using Korean miners, such as Mitsubishi, Asō, and Hokkaidō Colliery & Steamship, were proactive, coal mining companies that had never used Korean miners before, such as Mitsui Mining Co., Ltd., initially adopted a stance of avoiding their use. According to a survey conducted by the Institute for Science of Labor (労働科学研究所) during the war, Mitsubishi, which had a small number of Korean miners remaining, and Asō Shōten, which used a large number of Korean miners, assigned one registered Korean miner to each group of 10 to 20 mobilized Koreans to supervise and instruct their work[26]. Additionally, regarding living conditions, Korean miners who had been employed previously were involved in managing and caring for the dormitories and camps where mobilized Koreans were housed. However, the presence of Korean miners who had worked in the coal mines before the wartime mobilization policy began did not yield the results the coal mining companies had hoped for. For example, it is known that quite a number of mobilized Koreans escaped from the mines during the war, and at Asō, the number of escapees was larger than the average for Fukuoka Prefecture. In other words, the presence of Korean miners employed before the war period did not prevent mobilized Koreans from escaping. Moreover, the coal miners and security authorities assumed that the enrolled workers were involved in some way in escapes, such as by guiding the escapees. Thus, those who had been enrolled prior to the labor mobilization policy were placed in the complicated position of having to guide and manage the mobilized Koreans, while at the same time being the object of scrutiny by the security authorities and the coal mines. However, further examination is needed regarding the relationships between Korean miners mobilized during WWII and those employed at worksites prior to wartime mobilization, both in production areas and living quarters, as well as the differences in their treatment.

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[26] Institute for Science of Labor 1943, 1784.

Conclusion

This study has examined the long-standing relationship between Japanese coal mines and Korean workers, demonstrating that a comprehensive understanding of the history of coal mining requires considering the presence and roles of Korean miners in the pre-WWII period. This issue is closely related to the ongoing World Heritage debates. For example, the Industrial Heritage Information Center[27], which introduces the "Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution," presents testimony from the son of a Korean miner who had been working at the Hashima Coal Mine since before the wartime mobilization began. Such testimonies, however, can only be properly contextualized by examining the prewar role and status of Korean miners. Furthermore, beyond the coal industry, there existed specific industries in Japan that employed Korean laborers prior to the wartime mobilization. Some of the coal mines in which they worked, as well as the dams and tunnels whose construction they contributed to, continue to exist today either as industrial heritage sites or as facilities that remain in operation. Any attempt to present a comprehensive historical account of such industries needs to incorporate the experiences of Korean laborers as an integral part of that history.

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[27] The problems with this facility's exhibition are discussed in detail in the report by Johnsen (2021) presented below.

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