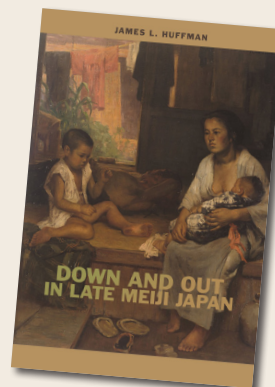


BOOK REVIEW

Down and Out in Late Meiji Japan

By James L. Huffman

University of Hawai'i Press, 2018
xii + 350 pages.



Reviewed by Alistair SWALE

This work of scholarship is perhaps not quite in the vein of the author's previous and certainly substantial engagement with the historiography of Meiji Japan.¹ Yet this is clearly a work of conviction that has been percolating for some time. Indeed it is evident that it has been written with a sense of commitment. The tone of exposition tends towards a more personal register, and there is the rather unusual device of employing a fictional construct of the Ueki family. So, this is by no means a conventional historiography of the late Meiji urban environment, or a socioeconomic analysis of the structure of urban poverty *per se*. The focus is firmly on the people and their experiences in late Meiji Tokyo and Osaka, with existing commentary, primary sources, and research to round out and substantiate the exposition.

The introduction accentuates how the metropolitan centers in which the new urban populations were living were in one important regard a departure from the Edo cultural legacy: they were distinctly *modern*. Though "modernity" is a somewhat problematic term, Huffman convincingly articulates that the class of people to which he is devoting his attention does not stem from a traditional status group. Rather, what we have is an entirely new phenomenon of the rural migrant becoming an urban worker engaging in, for the most part, hitherto non-existing forms of employment.

The book proceeds through chapters 1 and 2 to explore the stages of the transition into urban life. Huffman explores the economic and social causes for people leaving rural areas, the experiences of novices arriving in the major cities, and the manner in which they solved their most pressing needs: shelter and the sources of relatively constant employment. He incisively captures the core predicament of the poor: the payment of rent exacted for shabby, substandard accommodations by rentiers who had little or no interest in the well-being of their tenants or the upkeep of their premises. The author's depiction of the *kichin'yado* flophouses in particular gives insights into the day-to-day precariousness of shelter for all manner of unmarried workers, from itinerant performers to day laborers, whose ability to rent a soiled futon for the night rested on the difference of a few *sen* in income.

¹ See Huffman 1980, Huffman 1997, Huffman 2004, and Huffman 2010.

The book also excels in how it presents in chapter 3, “Earning a Living: Movers and Servers,” an exposition of the bewilderingly multifaceted array of occupations engaged in by the inhabitants of the urban slums. Huffman notes that even sympathetic contemporary journalists such as Yokoyama Gennosuke and Matsubara Iwagorō were constrained in their ability to discuss occupations. This was either because they were unwittingly preoccupied with relatively conventional categories of work and employment, or they preferred to leave the more nebulous occupations to one side out of a sense that they were not as important. Under the broadly construed category of “service,” Huffman is able to discuss meaningfully in the same compass precisely those nebulous occupations of rag-picker, performer, or night-soil collector that certainly were an integral part of the panorama of daily life in the modern Japanese city but were not as clearly identifiable as the rickshaw driver, the train conductor, or a factory worker.

The texture of domestic life, and its tenuous economic foundations, is explored in minute detail in chapter 4, followed by a catalogue of potential woes and catastrophes that afflicted the urban poor in chapter 5, such as floods and fires, cholera and TB. Of additional interest is Huffman’s exposition of distinct forms of crime that were evident throughout the city but had particular implications for the dwellers of the *hinminkutsu*. And there were the ultimate recourses of the desperate—suicide and murder—accounts of which populated the inner pages of popular newspapers such as the *Yorozu chōhō* and the *Niroku shinpō*.

In chapter 6, “The Sun Also Shone: Embracing Life,” Huffman balances the relatively dire picture of poverty with an emphasis on “agency.” While highlighting subtle forms of resistance to employer tyranny as well as an enthusiasm for communal gatherings and simple modes of end of day “letting off steam,” he also accentuates the aspirations of families to find something better, to hope against hope that things could improve with perseverance and a bit of luck.

This comprehensive overview of the tapestry of life for the urban poor forms a telling counterpoint to the examination in chapter 7 of the rural poor, the body of the impoverished from whom the urban poor sprang. The author’s attempt to draw this contrast in one chapter is undoubtedly ambitious, but ultimately it succeeds. Huffman depicts two key characteristics of the experience of poverty in the countryside which differ from the city: the first being the non-negotiability of the seasons in dictating the basic conditions of life (rather than economic trends); the second being the knowledge that poverty was a burden shared alike, in a sense relatively evenly and communally.

The last chapter dealing with emigration to Hawaii pushes the scope of the work out rather broadly. But given the prevalence of emigration for a significant proportion of the regions of western Honshu, Kyushu, and Okinawa, the topic certainly merits inclusion. And it is of interest to note some of the experiences of migrants that resonate with their counterparts in Japan. An initial situation with a preponderance of male workers and their complete dependency on the whims of employers with scarcely adequate remuneration to support daily life is followed by a trend towards the strengthening of communal identity and the more widespread establishment of families, leading to more stability and higher aspirations for improvement.

Overall, Huffman succeeds in presenting the case that the poor, particularly the urban poor, had a significance in the development of Meiji Japan that merits the extensive coverage he has given them. The author captures the sources of acute dislocation and displacement,

as well as the profound sense of alienation engendered by an unrelentingly oppressive work life. At the same time, he balances this with a depiction of the slowly emerging sense of self-awareness of common humanity among the poor, of their right to “be at the table” with every other Japanese, and a determination to eke out whatever improvements might be possible. As Huffman quotes from George Orwell, “Poverty....You thought it would be quite simple; it is extraordinarily complicated” (p. 259).

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