

[Japan Society-New York: Documents Project. (1890-1930, Culture/Art/Literature)]

[Document 47]: “Plundering *narikin* . . . With honest work this could be you.” “Carefree,” a song by Soeda Azenbō, 1918. [Note: get details of biblio from Lewis, *Rioters and Citizens*, 101—and check the translation]

Showing magic lantern images of plundering *narikin*,

A teacher at a broken-down school tells his pupils

With honest work this could be you.

He's teaching them success.

Ah, aren't we carefree!

It's because we are poor, we Japanese are great!

Atop that, our patience is first-rate.

Prices know no ceiling as they rise.

But supping boiled water and rice gruel,

We somehow survive.

Ah, aren't we carefree!

Eating Nanking rice, being eaten by Nanking bedbugs.

Living in the likes of pig sties.

Japanese citizens don't have voting rights,

But we are proudly arrogant nonetheless.

Ah, aren't we carefree.



Swell, swell, our nation's might swells.

The tyranny of the capitalists swells.

My wife's belly swells.

The ranks of the poor swell. [ck verb number]

Ah, aren't we carefree!

Source: Soeda Azenbō, “Carefree,” in Michael Lewis. *Rioters and Citizens: Mass protest in Imperial Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, 101.

Context.

Politicians and officials typically described the Japanese people as prosperous and content in the 1910s. But for millions of farmers and city workers, the reality was different. Urban factories spawned huge slums; farmers made barely enough to put food on the table; rising prices made life hard for city dwellers and peasants alike. The commoners’ discontent was captured by many popular artists, among them the street singer Soeda Azenbō, who won a wide following with his trenchant, often sarcastic songs, called *enka* (popular ballads), which described both the difficulties of commoner life and the smug hypocrisy of those in the ruling classes.

Questions.

1. What contradictions does Azenbo see in the lives of commoners?
2. What is his view of those in the political and economic establishment?
3. What does he mean by his repeated use of the phrase, “Ah, aren’t we carefree!”



Terms.

Magic lantern. The magic lantern, a method of projecting images onto a screen prior to the invention of electricity, was used a great deal in early Japanese schools.

Narikin. Literally meaning “made (or coming into) money,” this term referred to the newly rich, a class of people who were criticized widely for the ostentatious way they often displayed their wealth.

Nanking rice, Nanking bedbugs. Azenbō refers here to the fact that inflation in the late 1910s made Japanese-grown rice too expensive for many commoners, forcing them to buy lower quality, despised rice imported from China and elsewhere. Along with that, he sneered, had come foreign pests.