
Introduction

Conference Panel: The Dismantling of the Status System in Nineteenth-Century Japan

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On the morning of March 19, 2017, in the Birchwood Ballroom of the Sheraton Centre, Toronto, six scholars came together to participate in an Association for Asian Studies (AAS) conference panel entitled “The Dismantling of the Status System in Nineteenth-Century Japan.” The panel was comprised of four paper presenters (Dr Mio Shimazaki, Osaka City University; Michael Abele, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; Dr John Patrick Porter, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies; A/P Waka Hirokawa, Senshu University), a discussant (A/P Maren A. Ehlers, University of North Carolina, Charlotte), and a chair (A/P Timothy Amos, National University of Singapore). The panel was significant as it brought together a group of young scholars who in recent years have been engaging in ground-breaking, original empirical research and who each have an intimate knowledge of the growing body of rich scholarly work on the early modern status system and its subsequent modern dissolution.

As the aforementioned research on early modern status has consistently demonstrated, members of publicly-sanctioned status groups in the early modern period were called upon to perform official duties (*goyō*) for local authorities in whose jurisdiction they resided in exchange for various rights and privileges that enabled their survival and reproduction. The status system's dismantling, however, resulted in the abolition of both the longstanding occupational privileges enjoyed by publicly-sanctioned status groups and the official protections guaranteeing them. Each of the aforementioned paper presenters aimed in their talks to discuss specific status communities and consider how the status system's dismantling affected the territorial arrangements and ownership patterns and occupational activities of its former members. Shimazaki analysed the production and distribution of lamp oil and showed how a developing market economy was already undermining the official status order before the Meiji Restoration; Abele examined how former outcasts attempted to maintain control of trades related to animal processing after losing status-based ownership of livestock carcasses; Porter explained how former beggars in Tokyo were reintegrated into urban society after the Meiji government banned panhandling in 1872; and Hirokawa examined how practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine continued to exert influence in local communities despite attempts by the Meiji government to Westernize Japanese medicine.

Maren Ehlers next offered incisive comments about the broader themes embraced by the panel, the specific linkages and points of departure between each of the papers, and possible directions for further research development. Panel participants then responded to Ehlers' queries before discussion was opened up to the floor. Panel participants fielded excellent questions from a very knowledgeable audience; particularly memorable were probing questions by Professor David Howell (Harvard), Professor Fabian Drixler (Yale), and Professor Ian Neary (Oxford). Upon conclusion of the panel, many members of the audience stayed around to congratulate conference participants on what was a very important and thought-provoking panel.

The papers found in the following pages are essentially the talks given by each of the panel participants during the panel with some minor amendments, corrections, and elaborations. The statements these papers made both individually and collectively were important enough that a decision was made to reproduce them here in *UrbanScope* as part of the Osaka City University *Ikusei Jigyō* project “Marginal Social Groups' Experiences of Modernity: Building Bridges between Historians of Asia in Japan and the West.” Timothy Amos and Maren A. Ehlers are Overseas Co-Investigators (*shuyō renkei kenkyūsha*) on this same project, while John Porter is an Investigator (*tanto*

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kenkyūsha) and Mio Shimazaki is a Junior Co-investigator (*wakate haken kenkyūsha*).

The five papers contained in this issue reveal a new generation of transnational historians working on early modern / modern Japan capable of careful empirical inquiry, deep structural analysis, and evocative collaborative research. If these papers are any reflection of the potential for the further development of the field, then one must resolutely conclude that the future of research on early modern / modern Japanese history is indeed bright.