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Histoire du Japon moderne et contemporain : permanences et ruptures

« Charitable Townspeople and Grateful Beggars: Remembering Famine in
Nineteenth-Century Kyoto »

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Abstract

This talk explores how beggars and merchant charity were envisioned in nineteenth-century Japan. Begging was an organised activity and it was also a social-status problem in Tokugawa Japan. Beggars were not quite human; they stole and ate strange food, and their emaciated physiques resembled those of hungry ghosts. Forced by circumstance, crop failures and famine in particular, normal people such as peasants could also become beggars as they fled their home villages and became reliant on handouts. Their suffering was expressed by a longing backward glance at their distant home villages in illustrated printed books providing information on how to prevent famine. These books also noted an acceptable way to restore normalcy: peasants would receive handouts of rice gruel from their lord and return to their villages. However, these sources fail to mention what happened to peasants that could not be contained within their home domains. During the Tenpō Era Famine (1833-9), the old capital (present-day Kyoto) was inundated with famine migrants, causing charitable townspeople to fund the building of a relief hostel where food and medicine were provided to the displaced. The situation was so dire that charitable distributions were organised throughout the city. Some of these distributions and the conditions of beggars were recorded in text and image for the purpose of admonishing future generations. These images formed a lasting pictorial legacy that informed how famine was imagined in modern Japan. This talk will consider how the tropes of displacement and suffering were manipulated for producing various moral and historical positions on famine in late Tokugawa Japan.

Readings

- Ehlers, Maren, *Give and take: poverty and the status order in early modern Japan*. Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2018.
- Ehlers, Maren, "Benevolence, Charity, and Duty: Urban Relief and Domain Society during the Tenmei Famine" in *Monumenta Nipponica*, Volume 69, Number 1, 2014, pp. 55-101
- Najita, Tetsuo, *Visions of virtue in Tokugawa Japan: the Kaitokudō merchant academy of Osaka*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987
- Hirano, Katsuya, "Politics and Poetics of the Body in Early Modern Japan" in *Modern Intellectual History*, 2011, Vol. 8 (3), 2011, pp. 499-530