

ABSTRACT

Panel 5: Political Impact of Charities: New Models of Relations with State and Global Partners

**Charity Reconstructed: The Transformation of Charitable Giving in Rural Japan After the Meiji Restoration**

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In Meiji Japan, the charity of wealthy local elites played an important role in mitigating the social cost of modernization in the absence of a publicly funded welfare system. This paper discusses local charity in rural Japan before and after the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Focusing on the case of Ōno domain (later part of Fukui Prefecture), it describes how the system of semi-public charity that had emerged in the final decades of the Tokugawa period (1603-1868) was reconfigured and continued into the modern era. On the one hand, the dismantling of the status order in the early Meiji period constituted a clear break with the past, as it led to the displacement of the local lord and the denial of an old moral economy based on the notion of “benevolent rule.” On the other hand, the domain government’s vision of welfare that had emerged in the context of domain reforms prior to 1868 anticipated the Meiji government’s emphasis on Western-style public healthcare, economic productivity, and individual self-reliance. Moreover, local leaders both in- and outside the domain government who had funded and organized poor relief in the late Tokugawa period continued to do so after the Restoration. What changed was the context of their activities, and the roles each of them took on within the new nation state. Former domain vassals and wealthy commoners who had been involved with the domain reforms now served as entrepreneurs, doctors, teachers, village, town, and district officials, and delegates to the prefectural assembly. They donated to welfare initiatives no longer for the sake of domain prosperity—even as they strove to hold up the former lord’s legacy—, but to assert Ōno’s importance within the prefecture and the nation at large.

The paper examines a number of specific relief measures and institutions to uncover underlying threads in the history of social welfare in the Ōno area before and after the Meiji Restoration: smallpox vaccinations, the public hospital, relief handouts, emergency granaries, and rural relief loans, as well as loan societies for medical welfare, poor relief, and disaster aid. In doing so, it exposes shifting boundaries between public welfare and private charity, and the complex role of foreign influences as Japan was transformed into a globally connected nation state.