

Benevolence, Charity, and Duty: Poor Relief and the Status Order in Early Modern Japan

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In the early modern period (1603-1867), Japan was governed by the Tokugawa Shogunate, which presided over a coalition of more than 250 domain lords. The moral economy of warrior rule dictated that rulers protect their people at times of distress, but this ideal was anything but easy to achieve. For most tasks of civil administration, the warriors depended on the cooperation of their subjects, who were organized in autonomous status groups--neighborhoods of townspeople, peasant villages, guilds of artisans, religious orders, and so on. Although governments were powerful enough to mobilize these groups for their ends, they needed to reward them with privileges and be mindful of their interests.

This paper explores the fuzzy boundary between public poor relief and private charity in early modern Japan. It takes up the case of Ōno, a small castle town in central Japan in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Here, the lord took an active interest in the relief of the poor and established a beggar hospice, seasonal soup kitchens, and schemes of famine relief. On the one hand, the domain entrusted major responsibilities of funding and administration to guilds of wealthy townspeople and the local beggar guild. At the same time, it invested individual acts of charity, and even almsgiving to beggars on religious holidays, with a public character.

The domain did not strictly supervise the activities of status groups with regard to poor relief. It trusted that there was sufficient convergence of interest, such as a shared fear of unrest and disorder, to keep them in line with the lord's intentions. Yet, some mechanisms existed to hold status groups accountable, and my paper will discuss a number of them: punitive action; the denial of privileges; the imposition of uniform almsgiving standards; and the power of precedent.