

Review Essay

### Placing the Poor in Japan's Long Nineteenth Century

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Maren A. Ehlers. *Give and Take: Poverty and the Status Order in Early Modern Japan*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2018. 368 pp. \$50 (cloth).

James L. Huffman. *Down and Out in Late Meiji Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018. 362 pp. \$68 (cloth).

Poverty offers a useful window onto a society's organization and values. The poor are not some timeless, universal category of those who "have not." Rather, they are products of specific geotemporal configurations of economic, social, and political power. Ideologically and practically, the poor are assigned a place in a given sociopolitical order, and understanding how they occupy or transgress that place helps us understand the mechanisms that evolve to sustain a system or that prove inadequate to that task. The two books under review address chronologically adjacent yet substantially different moments in the history of poverty in Japan. Together, they show the evolution of a set of social relations that underpinned the Tokugawa order and a dramatically increased concentration of urban poor people left largely to fend for themselves in the midst of the social, economic, and political upheavals of the late-Meiji years.

Maren A. Ehlers's *Give and Take: Poverty and the Status Order in Early Modern Japan* focuses on the social history of poverty in early modern Japan, with particular attention to the ways in which status served as the organizing principle of the Tokugawa polity. For a long time, scholars described *mibunsei*, the Tokugawa status system, as consisting of the so-called four estates (warriors, peasants, artisans, and merchants)—along with some additional orders such as beggars and hereditary outcastes—which existed as relatively fixed containers, each having a general set of functions that varied little across the entire territory, and each defined by its position in a hierarchy of subordination to the Tokugawa shogun or domain lord. Since the 1990s, however, a dynamic group of scholars in Japan led by Yoshida Nobuyuki and Tsukada Takashi (along with North American scholars such as David L. Howell) have developed an approach that treats social relations in terms of multilateral negotiations among status groups—

including warrior rulers—based on concepts of occupation, duty, and privilege, all linked to claims of territoriality. Much of this work has focused on the so-called three capitals of Edo, Osaka, and Kyoto, or on large, territorially contiguous domains. By contrast, Ehlers focuses on a smaller domain and castle town, Ōno, in today's Fukui Prefecture. As a microhistory, her work not only adds another location to the map of *mibunsei* studies but also provides opportunities for fruitful comparisons with larger urban areas and other domains. *Give and Take* thus constitutes a major contribution to both the English-language historiography of early modern Japan and the Japanese scholarship on status.

Ehlers's study reveals, for example, that the formation of status groups and their participation in poor relief, policing, or other social regulatory processes depended as much on local conditions and the negotiating capabilities of particular groups as on any standard ideology of hierarchical order. Similarly, smaller domains such as Ōno—being geographically discontinuous and relatively porous—required particular mechanisms and sensibilities for regulating social interactions, economic activity, and popular mobility. Warrior rulers may all have emphasized the norm of *jinsei* (benevolent rule) when pressuring commoners to contribute to their projects or determining when and how to respond to commoners' demands for relief, but the specific procedures varied by locality and yielded distinctive spatial formations. Nonetheless, in each chapter, Ehlers drives home the point that every domain functioned as a node of negotiations in a dense web of sociopolitical relations—"a giant ecosystem where self-governing groups gradually developed new traits to adapt to their changing environment, stumbling toward an ever elusive equilibrium" (12).

Ehlers's discussion of the Koshirō, the licensed beggars' guild that performed important policing duties in exchange for guarantees of alms revenue, demonstrates how even outcaste status was not simply imposed from the top of the power structure; it emerged and was sustained through negotiations among local actors. While granting the Koshirō some negotiating power, though, Ehlers makes clear that its members operated from a position of fundamental weakness, and that their "susceptib[ility] to minor increases in income and status" actually "entangled them in relationships that reinforced their marginal position" (105). Ehlers's investigation of the *tōdōza* (guild of the blind) shows how this organization functioned to both regulate the margins of society and provide for members' welfare while invoking claims of imperial and shogunal patronage to defend itself against incursions on its occupational or alms privileges. The discussion of the *tōdōza* in Ōno (a small, much less wealthy guild than those in the major urban centers) also permits some insights into issues of gender, as Ehlers analyzes the relationships between blind male guild members and *goze* (blind female performers), as well as between blind male guild members and their sighted wives and families.

Ehlers's work also provides important insights into the history of early modern poor relief, a topic that has scant scholarship in English. Ehlers eschews both the anachronistic application of the term "social welfare" to the early modern context and an older historiographical concern, derived from arguments about Japan's "incomplete

modernity” or the authoritarianism of the post-1868 “Emperor system,” with the early modern roots of modern Japan’s apparent lack of a strong network of charities and bourgeois welfare activism. Rather, her deeply contextualized investigation identifies the collaborative relationship between warrior rulers and commoner elites as a keystone of the Japanese system. By highlighting the role of leading merchant capital, coordinated to state agendas, in the relief of hunger and poverty, Ehlers offers an important alternative to studies that have celebrated commoners’ mutual relief efforts as markers of autonomy and “identified the paternalist concept of benevolent rule as a major obstacle to the development of independent communal welfare institutions” (27).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Ehlers shows how domainal authorities invoked the rhetoric of benevolent rule to reinforce or revive traditional practices of community mutual relief (e.g., 233–236). Moreover, Ehlers demonstrates that the simplistic binary of warriors vs. townsmen does not capture the complexity of a system that also depended for its survival—through the policing of mendicancy and the provision of extraordinary relief in times of famine—on the participation of more marginal status groups, such as the beggars’ guilds, which acted according to their own claims of occupation, duty, and privilege.

*Give and Take* is a lucidly written social history of a small castle town and its hinterland. One gets a sense of the foot traffic and kinds of everyday interactions that marked early modern life in a place that was not a major population center but was nonetheless connected to the currents of the changing times, from commercialization to Western Learning, and was marked by the same environmental disasters (famines, fires, and so forth) that other parts of the Japanese archipelago experienced. The details of the everyday, while rich in their own right, are always deployed to make larger points about the overall system in Ōno and, when possible, to make judicious and illuminating comparisons to other places.

The attempt to reconstruct the lives of the poor and their webs of social relations also lies at the heart of James L. Huffman’s *Down and Out in Late Meiji Japan*. In a study that is in many ways structured and reads like late-Meiji reportage by the famed journalist Yokoyama Gennosuke (e.g., [1899] 1949), Huffman provides detailed chapters on urban immigration, housing, livelihoods, family life, education, crime, and the rhythms of toil and play, as well as chapters that consider alternate experiences of hardship among rural inhabitants and emigrants to Hawai’i. His purpose is to strip away any elite or middle-class moralizations that informed late-Meiji writings (including those of journalists, like Yokoyama, whose sympathy for the poor could not always overcome their class prejudices), and instead to try to understand the daily life of the poor “as they lived and felt it” (286). This endeavor leads Huffman to talk back not only to Meiji discourse, but also to what he describes as a persistent tendency in subsequent scholarship to view the poor as passive victims lacking full agency, subjectivity, or humanity in the face of the larger forces of Meiji modernization.

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<sup>1</sup> For a representative example, see Ikeda (1986). For a critique, see the review by Narita (1988).

The result is a rich description of the worlds of late-Meiji slums (mainly in Tokyo), and of a “gritty, ingenious persistence to life-making that rendered middle-class lives bland by contrast” (125). Inspired by Edward Fowler’s 1998 ethnographic discussion of urban day laborers in postwar Japan, Huffman emphasizes that the poor made Japan, and, moreover, that they knew it: “The urban poor saw themselves as builders of the modern world” (262). In chapters 2 and 3 on labor and chapter 6 on “embracing life” Huffman draws out the relationship between different types of work and Japanese modernization, paying close attention to not only workers in factories but also the haulers, carters, rickshaw pullers, and service providers, men and women who made everyday life possible for urban society. He highlights the role of the urban poor as defenders of their own interests on the job, and as conscious activists and participants (i.e., not a “blind mob”) in the major disturbances that accompanied and transformed Japanese capitalist and political development. He emphasizes that during the late-Meiji years, the urban poor—now increasingly literate and engaged with the new mass press—made themselves into citizens who identified not only with their fellow slum dwellers but also with larger urban and national communities.

Although Huffman claims that the poor had a “capacity for influence ignored by scholars” (165–166), his main points are in fact widely acknowledged by scholars of social and labor history (some of whose work he cites), and his reminders that Japan’s modernization had a darker side will strike most readers as familiar truisms. English-language readers may be less familiar with the landmark scholarship of Nakagawa Kiyoshi on urban poverty in modern Japan. Huffman introduces this research to argue that the late-Meiji lower classes were not simply denizens of spaces consigned to perpetual misery, but often eager—and, over time, frequently successful—participants in the drive for social mobility that characterized the era. (Ehlers also describes the pursuit of upward mobility by members of Ōno’s *Koshirō* and *tōdōza*; in those cases, however, status categories structured—and frequently impeded—their endeavors in ways that distinguish early modern from late-Meiji society.) Huffman takes great pains to inform readers that the poor were neither different from nor inferior to the middle classes, and that much of what would have appeared to outside observers as dysfunctional or pathological stemmed not from their inherent character defects but from their struggles with circumstances (including heightened vulnerability to diseases and natural disasters) that “assailed them, sometimes with an intensity that made survival impossible” (154). This statement may also appear unremarkable. However, it bears repeating, given the persistent misconceptions regarding the poor in general public discourse then and now, in Japan and beyond. In this regard, Huffman’s reference to recent scientific findings that “the very context of poverty imposes load and impedes cognitive capacity” (quoted on 150) is particularly salient.

Naturally, Huffman refers to the harshness and exploitative nature of capitalism, the burdens of war and taxation, and the general indifference of the privileged to the struggles of the poor. However, he maintains his focus on the lives of the poor themselves; and drawing inspiration from James C. Scott (1990), he endeavors to read

sources against the grain in order to apprehend the hidden transcripts of the urban lower classes (20, and *passim*). In a few places, however, the reader is left wondering whether Huffman has unwittingly been taken in by the public transcript. For example, when, drawing on contemporary surveys, he writes, "Middle-class citizens saw rag pickers as failures, and a majority of [rag pickers] accepted that view" (90), he may find support in educator-philosopher Paolo Freire's notion of self-deprecation as a "characteristic of the oppressed" (quoted on 151); but he might have considered the possibility that at least some of those rag pickers were choosing to tell investigators what they wanted to hear. Here I am reminded of Korean literature scholar Chul Kim's recent discussion of how lower-class Koreans may have used their designation of *yobo* (a derogatory epithet with such connotations as laziness, uncleanliness, and backwardness) as a weapon of the weak, a means of remaining beyond the expectations and intrusions of Japanese colonial authority in their daily lives—in other words, as a way of carving out something that they could call their own space within a political structure that was inimical to their very existence (Kim 2016, 116). Huffman's attempt to imaginatively reconstruct the thoughts of an impoverished wife as she hopes that her husband will be able to pilfer some badly needed charcoal bricks from his workplace—"Ittai, have I lost all conscience about stealing?" (101)—also needs to be tempered by his later citation of evidence to show that many poor workers saw petty theft as "a kind of protest and an affirmation of personal initiative," and as a moral assertion of the legitimacy of appropriation in a context of radical inequality (159).<sup>2</sup>

Similar questions arise from Huffman's approach to gender, in particular regarding the social meanings of sex work. While noting that overseas sex work could accrue some social prestige, Huffman asserts that "[A]s a rule, brothel work evoked shame or pity," and uses as his sources for this claim the social historian Horikiri Tatsuichi, the Meiji novelist Tayama Katai, and the *Yorozu* editor, novelist, and social crusader Kuroiwa Shūroku (210, and *passim*). Yet the fact that Kuroiwa framed his views in terms of not only social evils but also national shame should give pause to anyone attempting to read against the grain. Indeed, this is one of the main arguments made by historian Bill Mihalopoulos in his pathbreaking work on the social worlds of overseas Japanese sex workers and the construction of an archive that turned them, and the rural poor more generally, into "problems" (2011). Given his agenda, Huffman would have done well to engage with Mihalopoulos's excavation of the "disqualified knowledge" of the poor themselves, who appear often to have understood sex work as one form of labor or even as a rite of passage rather than as a source of shame.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For a comparative example, see the discussions of petty theft in histories of British working-class life, such as Humphries (1995).

<sup>3</sup> Mihalopoulos (2011) suggests that feelings of shame would have emerged as an effect of the superimposition of elite, outsider discourse on rural communities such as those of Kyūshū's Shimabara and Amakusa regions. Writing of early modern Japan, historian Amy Stanley argues, "The social meanings commoners attached to prostitution varied across space even as they changed over time," and notes that the aspersions cast on prostitutes (not as pitiful victims but

What had happened to the early modern social order by the time of the emergence of the lower class as a late-Meiji “social problem”? In the case of Ōno, Ehlers shows that even after the Meiji Restoration led to the abolition of the status system and the rejection of negotiation as a mode of governance, local elites (both former commoners and former samurai) continued to draw on some of the basic ideological postures and logistical paradigms of the old order to promote social welfare and economic development, at least until the Meiji state began to take a more active role in the provision of relief at the turn of the twentieth century. These findings contribute greatly to our understanding of the continuities and ruptures in social relations across the long nineteenth century, a topic that remains in need of further elucidation. (Ehlers’s discussion of the promotion of welfare and public health projects in the interest of an emerging domain mercantilism, like Fabian Drixler’s analysis of anti-infanticide projects [2013] and Daniel Botsman’s research on punishment [2005], also reminds us that the rise of biopolitics in Japan cannot be understood simply in terms of exposure to European modes of governmentality.) Traces of early modern Edo appear in Huffman’s discussion of the Tokyo poor, in passing references to former outcaste communities, *gōmune* (street performers), and blind healers and entertainers. Although he does not address the impact of the elimination of the status system on their social conditions, one can infer that the change was significant and would have been felt as such.

Yet the early modern system had an afterlife. New industrial workers developed different types of status and class claims vis-à-vis employers and the state, and widespread socioeconomic dislocations during what historians call the “era of urban popular violence” (1905–1923) threatened to undermine the foundations of political order and social hierarchy. Amid these developments, government officials and their allies constructed systems of poverty management that, though grounded in the latest European trends in social welfare, drew some of their ideological power from their invocation of idealized notions of the pre-Meiji past. In this updated vision of community, the state tasked local notables with providing assistance to their least fortunate neighbors, expected givers and recipients of assistance to express gratitude for the lord’s (now the emperor’s) benevolent rule, and reserved direct acts of imperial benevolence for only the most extreme cases of need.<sup>4</sup> The actual workings of this new system are beyond the scope of the books under review. But what is clear from these

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as willful pursuers of self-interest) came largely from elites concerned about the crumbling of patriarchal authority in the face of rapid commercial development (2012, 153 and passim).

<sup>4</sup> On changing status and class claims and political cultures, see Smith (1984) and Gordon (1992). Traditionally, the “era of urban popular violence” has been identified as ending with the Rice Riots in 1918; more recently, Fujino Yūko (2015) has extended the framework to encompass acts of popular violence, including anti-Korean pogroms, at the time of the 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake. On the transformations of welfare in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see, for example, Garon (1998).

two eminently readable studies is that the poor *made* their respective polities through their participation in key elements of social reproduction and economic production, and that we would do well to attend to the agency of what Ehlers calls “an assertive underclass” (162).

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## About the Reviewer

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