



# Stevedores and stevedores' guilds

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## ABSTRACT

During the early modern period, there were many types of stevedores that worked along Osaka's rivers and canals loading and unloading cargo. Generally, there were three types of stevedores: ① stevedores who worked at the large storehouses maintained inside the city of Osaka by domainal lords from across western Japan, ② stevedores who handled the transportation and storage of rice trade at Osaka's Dōjima Rice Market, and ③ stevedores attached to the individual neighborhoods that lined the city's rivers and canals. The members of each stevedore group formed independent trade organizations and attempted to monopolize the rights to handle cargo transportation and storage at specific locations around the city. In addition, they attempted to control the proceeds generated from such work. Over time, the rights secured by Osaka's stevedore organizations became formalized. As a result, the occupation of stevedore itself came to be traded as a commodity. In the process, ownership of the right to work as a stevedore and the actual labor of stevedoring became increasingly bifurcated. At the same time, stevedore organizations became internally stratified. Yet, very few of the trade organizations formed by stevedores actually received public recognition. Ultimately, most stevedore organizations failed to receive official recognition because the labor that stevedores performed was manual and easily replaceable. As members of an early modern status society in which a unique trade or occupational skill was essential, stevedores could never become anything more than a marginal social group.

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## Introduction

Throughout history, a tremendous amount of cargo has flowed into Osaka via the major sea routes from western Japan's Seto region. Obviously, a wide range of merchants were involved in trading these goods; additionally, various kinds of manual laborers connected to shipping were also needed.

*Nakashi*, or “stevedores,” were one such kind of laborer.<sup>1</sup> They engaged in the physical handling of cargo, and did not possess any special tools or abilities that could qualify them as skilled laborers. Anyone could become a stevedore: they were interchangeable manual laborers with the status of “day” laborers. This brief study will examine the social organizations to which they belonged and the places they occupied within the complex development of a major city.

## Storehouse stevedores and rice-delivery stevedores

### Storehouse stevedores and guilds

Several domains maintained storehouses in and around Nakanoshima, a thin strip of land separating two rivers

in central Osaka. During the early modern period (1603–1867), 1–1.5 million *koku* of rice, which was used to pay annual taxes, was shipped by boat to Osaka. Many domains established storehouses in the Nakanoshima area because it was located near the Dōjima Rice Market, where much of the rice shipped to Osaka was sold. In the mid-nineteenth century, there were more than 100 domainal storehouses in the Nakanoshima area.

Upon arrival in Osaka, rice would be loaded onto small boats called *uwanibune* and transported to storehouses via Osaka's network of canals. Stevedores played an indispensable role when bales of rice were offloaded from an arriving boat and loaded into a storehouse, and then again when rice was taken out of the storehouse to be sold. With large shipments of rice arriving and being sold around Nakanoshima, it emerged as one of the city's most important areas and, among other things, a gathering place for stevedores. This article examines the social organization that developed around these “storehouse stevedores” and that organization's formation process.

One distinguishing characteristic of that organization was the division of storehouse stevedores into two strata: “upper stevedores” and “lower stevedores.” Take, for example, the storehouse maintained by the Himeiji domain. It had two small buildings which served as

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<sup>1</sup> The content of this paper is taken from Morishita (2003, 2004).

waiting areas for stevedores arriving to work. One was located on the storehouse's eastern side while the other was on the storehouse's western side. Small groups comprised of eight or nine lower stevedores formed around these two buildings. Individual groups included not only full-time stevedores, but also those who assisted on a temporary basis. To be sure, the labor they performed was simple. Yet, when stevedores unloaded rice from boats or moved rice out of the storehouse, they had to follow procedures in the correct order and in cooperation with one another. The necessity of consistently working together is thought to have been the impetus for the formation of these groups.

The wages for lower stevedores, who loaded and unloaded rice shipments, were paid through the guild of upper stevedores; this organization was separate from the lower stevedore groups mentioned above. Examined from the outside, upper stevedores appear to have existed as part of a seemingly separate organization. However, in actuality, the groups of lower stevedores who handled the loading and offloading of rice were subsumed into the lower tiers of that organization.

In time, the status of individual stevedores associated with the groups that formed on the eastern and western sides of the Himeji domainal storehouse transformed into an inheritable and transferable right, which was sometimes even controlled by women. Therefore, stevedore status and the actual work of cargo handling split apart. Over time, the latter turned into something increasingly distinct. In response, when the stevedore groups that formed on the eastern and western sides of the Himeji domainal storehouse were reunited at the end of the eighteenth century, stevedores were reorganized into autonomous guilds with 18 fixed members.

Looking at these trends of the Himeji domain storehouse, it is possible to make the following points. From the beginning, the cooperative nature of the work performed by stevedores served as the source of their social organization. While the stevedore groups that formed around the Himeji storehouse included a number of core members, they can be thought of as vaguely delineated associations in which members could be added or removed. However, when the work that they performed became separate from their status, stevedores needed to establish guilds in order to protect their status. Thus, the status of stevedore became a sort of inheritable right and the associations that they formed developed into cooperative organizations comprised of members possessing such status.

It can be concluded that stevedore organizations became internally stratified as a result of the separation of stevedore status and labor.

#### *Storehouse stevedores and rights*

Of course, in order for the above bifurcation of status and labor to take place and for the status of stevedore to become an inheritable right, the work itself had to be the source of a stable income.

The first source of stevedore income that comes to mind is *sashimai*, or samples taken from the arriving shipments of rice sent each year to Osaka. Samples were taken by

inserting a special bamboo rod into a straw bale and drawing out a small amount of rice to check its quality when the bales were unloaded from boats or from storehouses. Although individual samples were not worth very much, stevedores were allowed to keep the rice for themselves. Thus, rather than receiving a separate wage for their work, they divided the sample rice among themselves.

However, in the mid-eighteenth century, measures were taken at a number of domainal storehouses to ban this sort of rice sampling. The ban was issued because officials believed that if stevedores were permitted to freely siphon excess rice from arriving bales, unscrupulous acts would follow. That is, the sampled rice exceeded a salary commensurate with their work and became a source of surplus income. This is likely one factor that prompted the concession of rights to stevedores.

At storehouses where the taking of rice samples was banned, stevedores were given a fixed allotment of rice instead. These rice allotments led to the formation of stronger ties between stevedores and specific storehouses. These relationships in turn gave rise to new rights. The rice that was shipped to Osaka's domainal storehouses was auctioned off at Dōjima. In fact, auctions were administered by stevedores themselves. This enabled them to buy rice under advantageous conditions, a factor that apparently led them to begin acting as rice buyers. Deepening relationships with a storehouse was the basis of this development of rights. Furthermore, the ban on keeping rice samples was temporary, and the practice was resumed at the end of the eighteenth century. Yet, because they were only entrusted with the duty of handling rice that was transported to the storehouse, they were unable to set any limits of any kind.

The practice of rice sampling, which domains viewed as dishonest, and the favorable positioning of stevedores to purchase rice fostered a closer relationship between particular stevedores and storehouses. This relationship in turn enabled many stevedores to obtain official status as "storehouse stevedores," or stevedores affiliated with a specific storehouse. By affiliating with specific storehouses, stevedores were able to further expand the scope of their authority, while the transformation of their status into a transferable right continued to advance. With over 100 individual stevedores attached to individual storehouses, "storehouse stevedore" organizations gradually formed.

#### *Developments surrounding rice-delivery stevedores*

When the rice was auctioned off, bids were made at the Dōjima Rice Market. Rice was then allocated to the rice trader with the winning bid. Buyers were issued a *kome-kitte*, or "rice certificate," which served as a sort of cashier's check that they could use to collect their rice from the storehouse after purchasing it. When the rice traders actually needed the rice they had purchased, they took the certificate to the storehouse and exchanged it for the proper amount. To complete this exchange, storehouse stevedores retrieved the rice from the storehouse, passed it to group of workers known as "rice-delivery porters," and the porters transported it directly to the rice trader. Rice-delivery stevedores who worked for specific rice traders and were involved in the retrieval and delivery of rice also developed their own distinct social organization.

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