



Construction workers' guilds in early modern Osaka

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts to elucidate one aspect of urban lower class society in early modern Osaka by describing the world of low-level construction workers known as *tetsudai*. Specifically, it examines a group of workers known as *kasaku tetsudai* who assisted carpenters and other skilled laborers on early modern construction sites. In particular, it focuses on the formation and functions of Osaka's *tetsudai* guilds. Although *tetsudai* were the most numerous of all early modern construction workers, many were low-skill laborers who performed simple tasks and earned low wages. As the process of urbanization advanced in Osaka, *tetsudai* became an increasingly specialized trade. As a consequence, the social position of early modern *tetsudai* was fluid. In an order to achieve occupational security and financial stability, *tetsudai* established trade associations known as *nakama*, or guilds. In the process, they gained an increasing level of autonomy from sources of official power and authority. *Tetsudai* guilds were unique organizations adapted to the particular manner in which *tetsudai* labor was managed. Their character was heavily influenced by the fact that demand for *tetsudai* labor constantly fluctuated. This article examines the characteristics of early modern Osaka's *tetsudai* guilds. While *tetsudai* guilds were in many ways unique, they also existed as part of the city's social structure.

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Introduction

This study attempts to elucidate one aspect of urban lower class society in early modern Osaka by describing the world of low-level construction workers known as *tetsudai*. Specifically, it focuses on *kasaku tetsudai*, or workers that assisted carpenters and other skilled laborers on early modern construction sites.¹ The term *tetsudai* was not used throughout Japan. Rather, its use was limited primarily to the western part of the country. In other regions of Japan, similar types of workers were known as *tobi*. However, unlike the term *tobi*, which is still used in many parts of Japan today, the term *tetsudai* no longer refers to a specific type of worker. In Osaka, assistant construction workers were referred to as *tetsudai-san* or *tettai-san* until the post-war "era of high-speed growth." Until then, the occupation of *tetsudai* was relatively well known. Today, however, the term *tetsudai* has now fallen from use. Originally, the word *tetsudai* referred to the act of assisting another person with their work. It retains that meaning today. It is unclear why

the word *tetsudai* came to refer to an occupation. It was likely used in reference to a specific group of workers that were already present on construction sites, such as laborers who assisted carpenters and plasterers. I will return to this issue below.

The term "urban lower class" (*toshi kasō*) refers to a diverse array of urban social groups. For instance, this special issue, which focuses on Osaka's urban lower class, examines groups as varied as "beggars" (*hinin*), stevedores, and carpenters. Among the city's construction workers, carpenters held the highest rank while *tetsudai* held the lowest. In early modern construction expense reports, carpenters' pay is commonly listed as "construction costs" or "labor." In contrast, *tetsudai* pay was referred to using the alternative terms "wages" or "day-labor wages." Additionally, carpenters' or plasterers' pay was listed in a different denomination than that of *tetsudai*. The former was calculated in *monme*, while the latter was calculated in *mon*. While the precise disparity in wages that existed between *tetsudai* and more skilled artisans is unknown, it is certain that their wages were substantially lower. While *tetsudai* are often described as *shokunin*, or artisans, it is unclear whether or not *tetsudai* can actually be considered a type of artisan. Of course, the term artisan itself is vague. However, there is a common understanding that the term refers to some-

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¹ As this paper is written for readers outside of Japan the inclusion and examination of historical materials has been kept to a minimum. For a presentation and detailed consideration of historical sources, see my earlier works, including Taketani (1998, 2000a,b).

one who performs a skilled trade. For that reason, individuals who are referred to as *shokunin*, or artisans, receive a fair amount of respect in Japan.² When *tetsudai* referred to their own associations, they identified their work as a “craft,” emphasizing that they were skilled craftsmen. However there are no examples of anyone else referring to *tetsudai* as craftsmen. For example, in edicts and other official proclamations, they are referred to as “assistant laborers” (*tetsudai ninsoku*³ or *tetsudai dōjin ninsoku*⁴). The term *tetsudai* was commonly used to refer to an unskilled or semi-skilled laborer rather than a skilled artisan. While the term *tetsudai* itself is worthy of analysis, I will discuss it no further here. This study seeks only to understand the place of *tetsudai* in the world of early modern construction laborers.⁵

This study attempts to recreate the historical world of urban *tetsudai* guilds. *Tetsudai* associations were completely different from carpenters’ associations. Due to their strategic military significance, carpenters’ associations were generally established from above and fell under the direct authority of the Tokugawa shogunate. In contrast, *tetsudai* guilds were neither created from above, nor founded in an effort to obtain official recognition or special rights and privileges. Why, then, did *tetsudai* form guilds? What did they want to achieve? The following section attempts to answer those questions by examining the origins of Osaka’s early modern *tetsudai* guild.

The formation and development of early modern Osaka’s *tetsudai* guild

*The origins of early modern *tetsudai**

Workers known as *tetsudai* appeared in Osaka during the first half of the seventeenth century. As the city expanded and the urban economy became increasingly monetized, wage labor, in the form of day labor, assumed a more prominent role in many sectors of the workforce, replacing both conscripted and collective labor.

The earliest documents that reference *tetsudai* are a series of expense reports composed between 1639 and 1642 during the reconstruction of Nangū Shrine. Nangū Shrine was built by the Tokugawa shogunate after its predecessor, Ichinomiya Shrine, was burned down during the Battle of Sekigahara. It was a massive construction project, so the Tokugawa had to hire various types of artisans and construction workers. Two Kyoto residents—Minoya Tahē and Maruya Kahē—were specifically contracted to supply *tetsudai* (*Nangū Jinja*, 1946, 42). Unfortunately, little else is known about Minoya and Maruya. As their example indicates, *tetsudai* were treated as a distinct category of worker. Despite the fact that they spent the majority of their time assisting skilled artisans, they were contracted independently.

During the early modern period, *tetsudai* performed a wide range of tasks. Records indicate that they assisted a diverse array of skilled artisans, including carpenters, saw-

yers, steeplejacks, framers, roofers, and joiners. Although *tetsudai* sometimes worked alone, they usually labored in large groups and performed manual tasks. *Tetsudai* were commonly hired to “transport construction materials, clean and level construction sites, and lay building foundations.”⁶ In addition, they sometimes performed relatively technical work, such as building sheds and setting the foundation for walls.⁷ In summary, during the seventeenth century, *tetsudai* work was extremely varied. While *tetsudai* spent most of their time assisting skilled artisans and performing low-skill occupations, there were instances in which they worked independently and executed more complex tasks.

In order to elucidate how the character of *tetsudai* work changed over the course of the early modern period, let us analyze the 1886 *Guild Regulations for Tetsudai* (Miyamoto, 1976). According to the regulations, *tetsudai* were hired to “erect scaffolding, level building sites, lay foundation stones, construct building frames, clean construction sites, lay brick, dig wells, sink pillars, dig ditches, lay ditch stones, paint walls, thatch and tile roofs.” As the regulations indicate, by the late nineteenth century, *tetsudai* no longer spent most of their time assisting skilled artisans. In addition, their duties had come to include well digging and roof thatching. Generally, therefore, it can be said that *tetsudai* work became more independent. In other words, *tetsudai* came to perform relatively autonomous jobs, which were originally beyond the scope of their work.

In the foregoing analysis, we examined the emergence of the early modern *tetsudai* trade. *Tetsudai* appeared in Osaka during the seventeenth-century urbanization process and gradually increased their influence in urban society by assimilating tasks that were previously performed by other types of workers.

*The formation of *tetsudai* guilds*

The first historical record that mentions Osaka’s *tetsudai* guild is the 1782 Petition Seeking Regulation of the Construction *Tetsudai* of Osaka’s Three Districts (Honjō and Kuroha, 1967, vol. 12, 44). It was filed during the so-called “Tanuma era” (1767–1786), a period in which scores of previously unsanctioned trade associations received official recognition and became *kabu nakama*, or “licensed guilds.” Osaka’s *tetsudai* were no exception. During this period, they too attempted to secure recognition as a licensed guild. The above petition was filed in the name of Kiya Zenbē, a tenant of Komamonoya Chūbē.

According to the 1782 petition, the City Magistrate had never issued any official regulations for *tetsudai*. Consequently, until then, *tetsudai* had issued their own licenses and formed their own associations. However, because those associations were not officially sanctioned, there were also scores of unlicensed *tetsudai* who were unaffiliated with existing *tetsudai* associations. In addition, con-

² Nimura illustrates the respect-worthy status of the term craftsmen, demonstrating that from the beginning of Meiji era, factory workers detested being called “workmen” (*shokkō*) and sometimes self-identified as craftsmen (1997).

³ Edict No. 2744, (*Ōsaka-shi shi*, 1979, vol. 5).

⁴ Edict No. 4224. (*ibid.*)

⁵ For a consideration of “day laborer” status and artisan status, see chapter five of Yoshida (1998).

⁶ Japanese architecture is well known for using wood. When putting up pillars in house, stones would be put in place where the pillars were erected. To prevent the stones from sinking, the earth underneath would be tamped down. This was referred to as the work of “tamping the ground, placing the stone, and setting the stone.”

⁷ A detailed explanation of the construction of Japanese internal and external walls will not be given, but the plasterer was the craftsman in charge of making the walls and the *tetsudai* were in charge of preparing the foundation before work was completed.

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