



# Poverty, disease, and urban governance in late nineteenth-century Osaka

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## ABSTRACT

On August 3, 1886, at the height of the deadliest cholera epidemic in Japanese history, Osaka Police Chief Inspector Ōura Kanetake issued an urgent memo to the heads of Osaka's four city wards and the commissioner of neighboring Nishinari County. Citing the immediate threat to public health and security posed by the city's rapidly expanding "slums" (*hinminkutsu*), the memo outlined a plan for Osaka's first large-scale slum clearance. Characterizing the city's slums as "dens of poverty, crime and disease," the plan called for their demolition and the mass relocation of thousands of poor urban dwellers to a walled residential compound southwest of the city. Focusing on Ōura's proposal and the series of debates that followed its presentation, this article explores the manner in which disease influenced the relationship between urban poverty and local governance in Osaka during the late nineteenth century. It argues that frequent outbreaks of cholera during the 1870s and 1880s gave rise, in both the popular press and official circles, to a discourse identifying the city's slums as the root cause of urban epidemics. Bolstered by a growing body of scientific data suggesting intimate links between poverty and disease, that discourse supported efforts by the authorities in Osaka to permanently segregate the poor and raze the slums. This article traces those efforts from the summer of 1886, when Inspector Ōura's plan was announced, to April 1891, when Osaka's first slum clearance was executed.

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## Introduction

On August 3, 1886, at the height of the deadliest cholera epidemic in Japanese history, Chief Inspector of the Osaka Prefectural Police Ōura Kanetake issued an urgent memo to the heads of Osaka's four city wards and the commissioner of neighboring Nishinari County (Yamamoto, 1982, 69–70).<sup>1</sup> Citing the immediate threat to public health and security posed by the city's rapidly expanding "slums" (*hinminkutsu*), the memo outlined a plan for Osaka's first large-scale "slum clearance."<sup>2</sup> Characterizing the city's slums as "criminal sanctuaries" and "breeding grounds of infectious disease," the plan called for their immediate demolition and the mass relocation of thousands of poor urban dwellers to a walled residential compound southwest of the city (Ōura Kanetake, 1886).

Ōura's proposal represents a significant shift in objectives and strategy on the part of the Osaka prefectural

authorities vis-à-vis the urban poor. While the ultimate aim of official policies towards the poor since the Meiji Restoration had been the controlled integration of poor workers into the local socio-economic order, Ōura's proposal sought just the opposite. In seeking to eradicate the root causes of epidemic outbreaks, he advocated the permanent segregation of thousands of slum dwellers outside the city. Ōura maintained that a massive slum clearance would help to significantly bolster public health and security, while improving the city's appearance.<sup>3</sup>

This shift was precipitated by two key factors. The first was the devastating wave of cholera epidemics that struck the city between 1877 and 1886 (Yamamoto, 1982). During that ten-year period, cholera outbreaks occurred nearly every year, resulting in the death of more than 30,000 local residents (Hayami & Machida, 2002, 178). In addition to the

<sup>3</sup> Contemporary news coverage of Ōura's proposal indicates that by the mid-1880s, local officials in Osaka and members of the media were becoming concerned about the how the city would appear to foreign visitors. Although foreign residents of Japan were prohibited from living outside areas specifically designated for their residence (*kyoryūchi*), many believed that the era of "naichi zakkyo" (mixed residence) was on the immediate horizon. Once foreigners were permitted to live among the general populace and freely move around the city, officials worried that they would catch a glimpse of slum districts, such as Nagamachi, and negatively influence their view of the city, or more broadly, the Japanese state.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the total number of reported infections in 1886 (155,923) was slightly lower than in 1879, the death toll and national mortality rate were the highest in Japanese history (108,405). On August 5, 1886, the *Asahi* newspaper reported that the cholera epidemic of 1886 was one of "unprecedented intensity."

<sup>2</sup> Katō (2002) uses the term slum clearance to describe Ōura's plan.

tremendous human cost, cholera epidemics severely hampered local commercial activity and industrial production. For example, according to figures compiled by the Osaka Chamber of Commerce and Osaka Department of Agriculture and Commerce, cholera outbreaks were responsible for nearly two million yen in losses to the local economy between May and October 1886.<sup>4</sup> As a consequence, eliminating such epidemics emerged during the 1880s as one of the Osaka prefectural government's primary concerns.

The second factor behind this shift toward the social exclusion of the urban poor was the appearance of a body of "scientific" data linking disease outbreaks with the city's poorest neighborhoods and the linked emergence of a discourse identifying Osaka's slums as the primary source of citywide epidemics.<sup>5</sup> While urban slum districts had long been identified as a source of crime and social instability, the 1880s saw the rise of a discourse, in both the popular press and official circles, that negatively characterized the city's slums as breeding grounds of disease and slum dwellers as "carriers" (*baikaisha*) who spread infection as they wandered the city begging for handouts and gathering scraps of paper, fabric and metal.<sup>6</sup> Employing similar images of the city's slums and their impoverished residents, Chief Inspector Ōura asserted the necessity of a comprehensive slum clearance in the summer of 1886.

Focusing on Ōura's proposal and the complex administrative process that unfolded following its official presentation in September 1886, this article examines the manner in which infectious disease influenced the relationship between poverty and urban governance in Osaka during the late nineteenth century. It argues that frequent outbreaks of cholera during the 1870s and 1880s gave rise to new forms of discrimination against the urban poor and prompted the establishment of an increasingly exclusionary regime of local poverty management. By segregating the city's poor and reconstructing the slum districts in which they lived, the prefectural authorities aimed to establish an orderly, hygienic and secure urban core in Osaka exclusively populated by "middle and upper class persons."<sup>7</sup>

Although Ōura's proposal was eventually rejected, it triggered a five-year debate about how to effectively address the perceived threat to public health and security posed by the city's slum districts. This debate culminated in the execution of a large-scale housing reform project in Osaka's largest slum, Nagamachi, in the spring of 1891. As a result of that project, hundreds of back-alley tenements were razed and thousands of slum dwellers were driven from their homes to villages in neighboring Nishinari and Higashinari Counties.<sup>8</sup> While the authorities "succeeded"

in dismantling Osaka's largest slum, these efforts led to the dispersion of thousands of slum dwellers across the city's periphery, setting the stage for the emergence of a number of a twentieth-century Osaka's largest slums, including the massive Kamagasaki day laborer district (Katō, 2002, 99–101).

## Poverty, disease and social exclusion

### *Nagamachi: a brief sketch*

The primary target of Ōura's proposal was Osaka's infamous Nagamachi slum.<sup>9</sup> Jutting out from the city's southern edge, the area had served as a gathering place for "unregistered persons" (*mushuku karaninbetsu*), vagrants, and other members of the urban underclass since the seventeenth century. This was largely the result of a deliberate policy pursued by the Osaka city magistrate (*machi bugyō*) vis-à-vis unregistered persons beginning in the 1660s.<sup>10</sup> In addition to permitting the establishment of dozens of specially licensed flophouses (*kichin'yado*) in the Nagamachi area, the city magistrate granted the flophouse proprietors there the exclusive right to provide lodging to unregistered persons and arrange employment for them in three local industries: sake brewing, oil pressing and rice processing.<sup>11</sup>

As historian Uchida Kusuo has noted, the decision to grant those rights was strategic. According to Uchida, the city magistrate's office worked to concentrate unregistered migrants, who were considered a key threat to urban stability but also represented a vital source of labor for three of Osaka's most important early modern industries, in a single area by permitting them to seek temporary lodging in Nagamachi. At the same time, city authorities called upon local flophouse proprietors to engage in the day-to-day regulation of unregistered persons (Uchida, 1992, 847–851).<sup>12</sup> In other words, the authorities worked to guarantee a steady supply of labor to three vital local industries, while ensuring that unregistered persons remained constantly supervised.

After the Meiji Restoration, Nagamachi expanded rapidly, absorbing destitute migrants and persons displaced following the dismantling of Osaka's four designated *hinin* enclaves, or *kaito*, in 1871. According to urban historian

<sup>9</sup> Nagamachi, or Nagomachi, was the popular name for the five long, narrow quarters running along both sides of Nipponbashi Boulevard just south of the Dōtonbori Canal during the Meiji period. The neighborhood is currently the site of Osaka's Den-Den Town electronics district. In 1893, journalist Sakurada Bungo described the neighborhood as "the city's largest slum" (*shichū saidai no kikankutsu*) (Sakurada, 1893 [1970]).

<sup>10</sup> The establishment and operation of flophouses inside the Nagamachi area was initially permitted in the 1660s and 1670s during Ishimaru Sadatsugu's term as city magistrate. During that time, 106 establishments were authorized to operate in four licensed quarters in the southern part of the city.

<sup>11</sup> According to a late eighteenth-century record of *kichin'yado* occupants, in 1791 there were 1,374 lodgers staying in flophouses and cheap inns located in Nagamachi. 1,034 of the lodgers worked as unskilled and semi-skilled day laborers in the city's oil mills, sake breweries and rice mills. The record also indicates that flophouse occupants included more than 220 beggars (*kotsujiki*) and 110 riverside prostitutes (*hamadachime*). *Kichin'yado hatagoya namae oyobi shukuhakunin kakiage*. 1791. Osaka University of Commerce Archive.

<sup>12</sup> While that right was threatened at various points in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by the appearance of competitors providing similar services, Nagamachi's flophouse proprietors maintained control over it by incorporating competitors as subordinates in a hierarchy over which they presided.

<sup>4</sup> Osaka shōhō kaigisho, 1886 (1933). "Korerabyō ni yoru dageki." *Meiji taishō ōsaka-shi shi, shiryō-hen*. Osaka: Seibundō shuppankai, 613–620. *Asahi shinbun*, 1886. "Rabyō yori kitaseru shoshō no songai." *Asahi shinbun*. 12 September 1886. *Asahi shinbun*, 1886. "Songai chōsa." *Asahi shinbun*. 10 November 1886.

<sup>5</sup> Osaka-fu keisatsubu eiseika, ed. 1919. *Osaka-fu densenbyō ryūko shiyo*. Osaka: Osaka-fu, 10. According to official figures compiled by the Osaka prefectural government during the 1885 epidemic, nearly half of the 1,071 cases of cholera reported in Osaka occurred in the city's slum district, Nagamachi.

<sup>6</sup> *Asahi shinbun*, 1886. "Nagomachi no ura nagaya iten no kekkō." *Asahi shinbun* 17 August 1886.

<sup>7</sup> *Osaka nippō*, 1886. "Shiku ichigun rengō chōsonkai." *Osaka nippō*. 19 August 1886.

<sup>8</sup> *Osaka mainichi shinbun*, 1891. "Nagomachi no kaoku kaizō." 24 April 1891.

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