



Maren Annika Ehlers. *Give and Take: Poverty and the Status Order in Early Modern Japan.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018. xiv + 351 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-98387-8.

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“Samurai (*shī*), peasants (*nō*), artisans (*kō*), and merchants (*shō*)”—many use this proverbial “*shi-nō-kō-shō*” model to explain the hierarchical status system of the Tokugawa regime (1603–1868). Of course, we all know the model isn’t perfect. Where are the clerics? Itinerant entertainers? The outcastes (*hinin*)?—so the common critique goes. Most scholars these days bring it up somewhat tentatively, both in research and teaching, mostly to point out its flaws and say, “well, the reality was much more complicated than that.” Maren Ehlers’s multifaceted study, *Give and Take: Poverty and the Status Order in Early Modern Japan*, is an indispensable resource for anyone seeking to explore this complexity to its fullest extent.

Ehlers presents her research through several analytical angles. First, she argues that in order to comprehend the mechanism of the Tokugawa status order, it is inadequate to rely solely on categories such as “samurai” and “merchants,” and it is necessary to analyze the functions of local “occupation groups,” particularly those consisting of marginalized individuals, such as “beggar guilds” and “guilds of the blind.” Second, the author highlights poverty relief as a social forum in which the ideal of “benevolent rule” (*jinsei*) was enacted as the conceptual legitimation of the early modern status order. Third, Ehlers argues that the intricacies of the status-based relationship between the

Tokugawa authorities and their subjects is best investigated through an in-depth study of a specific locale. In particular, she chooses Ōno, a small castle town in a domain of the same name in Echizen Province, and makes extensive use of town elders’ journals covering forty-nine of the years between 1740 and 1870.

Ehlers arranges her chapters both thematically and chronologically. Chapter 1 is a critical introduction of Ōno town, its position in the early modern polity, and the local primary sources central in Ehlers’s research. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on Ōno’s “beggar guild” (known as the Koshirō). Ehlers puts into relief how beggars in Ōno, considered as *hinin*, interacted with the rest of the Ōno community and how they were organized under “beggar bosses” whose responsibilities included, among others, negotiating with the authorities for a begging privilege, running the beggar hospice, and serving as a kind of local police force by warding off unauthorized beggars. In short, Ehlers shows that “managed mendicancy” was regarded as an occupation, albeit a highly stigmatized one, and that beggars were not passive recipients of alms and actively fulfilled a number of social roles in Ōno.

Ehlers then turns to another marginalized group in Ōno in chapter 4, the guilds of the blind, organized as the male *zatō* and the female *goze*. These guilds, existing both nationally and locally,

sought to secure occupational privileges for the blind, mainly a monopoly on massage, acupuncture, and the performance of select stringed instruments. Particularly illuminating is Ehlers's discussion of the female *goze* guilds, which were the only status groups consisting of and controlled by women during the Tokugawa period (other than nunneries). The *goze* guild in Ōno remained relatively small and was subordinate to the male *zatō* guild, exemplified by the fact that blind women were distributed a smaller share of alms than their male counterparts. The *goze*, nonetheless, fought hard to protect its interests, for example, by preventing a house owned by a blind woman from being taken over by her relatives (pp. 171–2).

Chapters 5 and 6 dissect Ōno's poverty relief initiatives, focusing on the domain's response to the Tenmei famine in the late eighteenth century and the shifting conceptions of charity in the late Tokugawa and early Meiji periods. Ehlers examines varied modalities of poor and famine relief coordinated between the authorities and well-to-do subjects, such as "rice gruel kitchen" for beggars, grain loans for the impoverished, and donations provided by the wealthy. What remained constant, even in the last years of the Tokugawa period, was the ideal of "benevolent rule" and the reciprocal understanding that Tokugawa subjects were obligated to repay the compassionate relief provided by the bakufu with frugality and diligence. This reciprocal social agreement survived into the Meiji period in a modified form, with the shogunate replaced by the emperor. As Ehlers shows, local commoner elites also continued to influence the operations of modern charities, primarily in public health, education, and disaster relief.

Ehlers skillfully weaves together Ōno's local history, the perspectives of marginalized occupation groups, and the ideological underpinnings of early modern poverty relief programs, all helping to sketch out in rigorous detail the ways in which the Tokugawa status order was constituted both

from the bottom up and top down. Throughout the book, Ehlers provides compelling anecdotes extracted from Ōno elders' journals to highlight the agencies and intersecting agendas of local actors, including townspeople, villagers, the outcastes, and the impoverished, and showcase that these actors interacted with one another much more actively than we usually think. Ehlers's discussions of the notions of *osukui* (seigneurial relief) and *segyō* (almsgiving) can also be read fruitfully alongside works with a focus on early modern disaster relief, such as Kitahara Itoko's *Ansei daijishin to minshū* (1983) and Gregory Smits's *Seismic Japan* (2013). In addition, Ehlers elucidates that despite the "break" posed by the Meiji Restoration, the development of modern charities in Ōno was informed by Tokugawa precedents and propelled through preexisting networks of local community members. Her book is a stellar demonstration of the necessity to probe both continuity and discontinuity beyond the convenient reference point of 1868.

In addition to early modern and modern historians of Japan, this book will be of special interest to scholars of Tokugawa religions. In particular, Ehlers points out that the language of charity in Tokugawa Japan was primarily Buddhist, in many cases employing the ideas of "compassion" (*jihī*) and "merit" (*kudoku*); yet Buddhist institutions themselves did not play an active role in poverty relief during the Tokugawa period (save for a few regions, such as Kyoto). This was in stark contrast to the medieval period, during which Buddhist temples were leading providers of charity. Ehlers attributes this change to the subordination of Buddhist temples by the warrior class in the late sixteenth century, which curtailed the autonomy of Buddhist temples (p. 28). To be sure, there were individual temples that served as places of refuge for widows, orphans, and the hungry, but these acts of charity were not carried out systematically. The relationship between Buddhism and charity in Tokugawa Japan remains understudied, and further examinations of the impact of the *danka* (temple parishioner) system on Buddhist charity are need-

ed. In this regard, Ehlers book can be brought into conversation with Nam-lin Hur's *Death and Social Order in Tokugawa Japan* (2007).

Since this study focuses specifically on one castle town, Ehlers is careful not to universalize the particular examples from Ōno. Yet the tension between the local and the national (broadly conceived) is felt throughout the book, and the reader at times wonders how representative Ōno was in its administration of charity and the management of a variety of status groups. Also, because the town elders' journal central in this study covers the period between 1740 and 1870 somewhat intermittently, Ehlers's use of this source also occasionally reflects its sporadic nature. More specifically, Ehlers in some parts raises examples from a few different decades to illustrate her points. In one section of chapter 6 (p. 221), she discusses two petitions submitted to the authorities to widen the coverage of certain relief measures, one from 1789 and the other from 1860. Her point here is that the Tokugawa authorities were not very flexible in changing the scope of certain charities. The diachronic examples from 1789 and 1860 are helpful in illustrating this point, but one also wonders what contextual factors from the 1780s and 1860s might have been at play in determining these policy decisions. This speaks more to the limitations of the sources than problems of methodology, but more historical context would have been helpful in instances like the one above.

These quibbles aside, Ehlers makes an essential contribution to destabilizing and nuancing our understanding of the Tokugawa status order. Clearly written and presented with engaging anecdotes, the book should be both accessible to advanced undergraduates and useful in graduate seminars. More broadly, her book should benefit anyone interested in the intersections of poverty, class, marginalization, identity, charity, and (ideological) performativity and how they helped to constitute the foundation of an early modern polity.

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