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.

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. 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...
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 unloading 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.
These rice-delivery stevedores executed the administrative tasks of taking rice certificates to storehouses and arranging for rice to be retrieved. From there, lower stevedores then loaded the rice bails that had been purchased onto boats. Thus, workers involved in the storage and transportation of rice became differentiated into two distinct strata: (1) laborers who handled cargo, and (2) administrative workers who handled the range of administrative tasks surrounding the storage and transshipment of that cargo.

Rice-delivery stevedores were originally divided into three groups. However, over time, their organizational structure became increasingly specialized. At the end of the eighteenth century, rice delivery porters had come to be divided into six territorial groupings. Each grouping was affiliated with a specific number of storehouses. Under the direction of rice traders, rice-delivery porters took rice certificates to storehouses with which their grouping was affiliated and retrieved the necessary amount of rice. It is believed that the subordinate, lower stevedores did not have their own independent organizations. Rather, they were attached to and received their wages from rice-delivery porters.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the above organizations continued to grow increasingly complex. Rice-delivery porters in each of the city's six groupings came to be divided into two types: (1) those who received rice certificates from rice traders and then offered general instructions on retrieving the rice, and (2) those who were entrusted with carrying out those directions by actually going to collect rice from the storehouses. The organizational structure became further stratified when both types of rice-delivery porter formed their own organizations with their own leaders. At the same time, lower stevedores who handled the offloading of rice delivered by boat to storehouses also created their own independent organization.

In addition, the economic dominance of rice-delivery porters' organizations also advanced. In 1772, rice-delivery porters petitioned to become a kabu nakama, or a “licensed guild.” Recognition as a licensed guild provided Osaka’s rice-delivery porters with an officially sanctioned monopoly over their trade. Initially, the city authorities issued 169 licenses to guild members. By the end of the eighteenth century, the number of licensed rice-delivery porters had fallen to less than 100. However, by the mid-nineteenth century, it had once again risen into triple digits.

The treatment of individual porter’s status as an officially sanctioned right was the precondition that enabled the organizational stratification and economic consolidation detailed above to take place. Over time, certain members of the rice-delivery porters’ guild began to accumulate official licenses, which led to a reduction in the total number of guild members.

These licenses provided guild members with the right to a portion of the rice samples that were taken from arriving bales of tax rice. Generally, 1–2% of each total rice shipment was set aside for rice-delivery stevedores. In contrast, samples given to storehouse stevedores amounted to just a small fraction of the total amount of rice. These samples were first tallied by members of the rice-delivery stevedores’ guild and then distributed within the guild. Once guild members had collected their share, the remaining rice was provided to storehouse stevedores. While the organizations of rice-delivery and storehouse stevedores developed along divergent paths, a shared right to the samples taken from arriving shipments of rice served to bind them together. In addition, the lower stevedores mentioned above are also thought to have collected separate rice samples and formed their own independent guild. As in the case of the rice-delivery stevedores’ guild, members shared control of the rice samples collected from city storehouses.

Throughout the early modern period, a massive amount of annual tax rice was shipped to Osaka’s Nakanoshima area and sold at the nearby Dōjima Rice Market. The transshipment and storage of that rice was handled by storehouse stevedores who were attached to specific storehouses and rice-delivery stevedores who were tied to individual rice traders. Both groups of stevedores established their own social organizations. Apart from their bond as manual laborers who handled the transportation of cargo, stevedores were also linked by a shared right to a portion of the rice samples that were collected from bails sent to the city’s storehouses. That shared right served as the basis of a common stevedore organization, and displays the complex nature of the relations that existing among the various types of stevedores.

**Riverside stevedores**

**Riverside stevedore guilds**

In addition to the stevedores based in Nakanoshima, there were also many who worked along the city’s “riversides” (hama), loading and unloading the small cargo boats that traveled Osaka’s waterways. While it is likely that riverside stevedores had formed a guild by the seventeenth century, the earliest extant documents that discuss the guild are from the early eighteenth century. Accordingly, this section examines the state of the riverside stevedores’ guild during that period.

As in the case of storehouse stevedores, the collective nature of the work of unloading the boats is considered to have been the impetus that led workers to join together in an organization. Along the Higashiyokobori Canal, on a riverbank called the Awajichō-hama, a riverside stevedores’ guild formed. The guild wrote a membership agreement, which bears the seal of 35 individuals. In order to prevent the mishandling of the goods that arrived at Awajichō-hama, the agreement outlined important rules that were to be observed when offloading cargo onto the riverbank, such as the specific order in which cargo would be offloaded from arriving boats.

However, the agreement also contained provisions governing the buying and selling of stevedore status. As discussed in section one, stevedore status became a commodity. Once again, a stable income was the precondition that made the commodification of stevedore status possible. So why did riverside stevedores form neighborhood-based rather than storehouse-based organizations?

In order to address that question, let us examine a document from Osaka’s Kitahama 4-chō-me neighborhood, which was located along the Tosabori Canal. The document was composed by neighborhood officials and is addressed to the 4-chō-me Stevedore Guild. The document pledges...
that all cargo arriving to and from the Kitahama 4-chō-me neighborhood would be handled only by the 4-chō-me Stevedore Guild. At the same time, the document also mentions “guild licenses” could be taken away from members as punishment for misconduct. This illustrates the fact that riverside stevedores’ status was impacted by the will of the neighborhood in which they were based.

Judging from this document, riverside stevedores were affiliated with a specific neighborhood, accepted its patronage, and maintained exclusive rights to handle all arriving cargo. These exclusive rights meant the guild could collect a tax from any individuals outside the guild who unloaded cargo within the neighborhood. This is the substance of the rights that were granted to guild members.

While storehouse and rice-delivery stevedores’ primary source of income consisted of the samples of rice that they were permitted to draw from the shipments of rice that they handled, the income of riverside stevedores derived primarily from their monopolistic control over all neighborhood cargo handling duties. However, in order to maintain monopoly control, it was essential that riverside stevedores form neighborhood-based organizations and receive the patronage of neighborhood residents. Because the work that they performed was simple and easily replaceable, riverside stevedores faced external competition. In other words, the character of the work that they performed restricted the ability of stevedores to protect their monopoly rights.

Developments leading to the proliferation of “pull carts” (bekaguruma)

During the late eighteenth century, the membership of the Awajimachō Stevedores’ Guild had shrunk to just 25 individuals and many guild members had taken up residence in neighborhoods far from the Awaji-chō-hama riverbank. Therefore, guild membership continued to retain value as a transferable commodity, even though the status of stevedore itself was no longer necessarily tied to the actual work of cargo transportation.

Consider, for example, the case of Hachikenya-hama, a riverbank along the Ōkawa River. Members of the local stevedores’ guild retained a group of subordinates known as “youngsters” (wakakimo). Therefore, the local stevedores’ organization was split into two strata, with a group of subordinate laborers, who actually handled the work of loading and unloading cargo, at the bottom.

Although the appearance of these subordinate laborers coincided with the decline of the small cargo boats (uwanibune) that traveled the city’s waterways, it is unclear whether or not the two are related. Uwanibune boats were unloaded by riverside stevedores, so it stands to reason that the two would either succeed or decline together as a unit. Yet, despite the decline of uwanibune, it appears that the income of Osaka’s riverside stevedores continued to increase. This increase was prompted by two factors: the replacement of uwanibune by larger cargo vessels, and the rise of new methods of overland transportation, including the bekaguruma, or pull cart. The bekaguruma—a cousin of the better-known rickshaw—was essentially a rectangular board with a large wheel on each side. Cargo could be loaded onto the board and then pushed from back or pulled from the front. Since bekaguruma transported cargo over land rather than water, they competed directly with uwanibune. By the time that the authorities moved to restrict the number of pull carts in the early nineteenth century, there were already 1678 in operation. Thus, their development must have been considerable.

The question is, then, who operated the pull carts? Actually, it appears that some stevedores also engaged in the operation of pull carts. Taking that to be the case, why would individuals who worked loading and unloading cargo from boats involve themselves with a means of overland transportation? Such a shift was made possible by the separation of riverside stevedore status from the actual labor of cargo handling. That is, the main members of the stevedores’ guild collected income without actually doing the labor themselves. From their point of view, there was no reason to focus solely on cargo transport via waterways. If there was more profit to be made, there was nothing keeping them from simultaneously engaging in overland as well as overwater transportation of cargo.

For instance, in the late eighteenth century, stevedores from Awajichō-hama submitted a petition to the warrior authorities in Edo. Until that time, stevedores in Awaji-chō-hama had been part of a broader organization known as “The Twelve Riverbanks,” which included nine local riverside stevedores’ guilds and the city’s three uwanibune boat guilds. Although the warrior government did not officially recognize the organization, its existence indicates that Osaka’s uwanibune boat guilds and riverside stevedore guilds had a communal relationship. In the petition, submitted to the warrior authorities, stevedores requested official recognition of 271 “porters” (oka nakashi) from nine area riverbanks. The term “porter” is used purposely in an effort to differentiate such persons from laborers who unloaded cargo from uwanibune boats. The term also indicates porters would be transporting cargo overland using pull carts. This move indicates an effort on the part of stevedores to loosen ties with the city’s uwanibune boat guilds.

Despite the rise of pull carts, shipping on the Yodo River by no means disappeared. In fact, porters were selected from the ranks of riverside stevedores. This division between riverside stevedores and overland porters led to the formation of independent guilds.

Stevedores in the early Meiji period

In March 1874, the Osaka prefectural government issued an edict officially recognizing the newly established Stevedores’ Trade Association. At that time, association representatives were selected on the ward level and from individual riversides. The association was divided into four major groups—the East, West, North, and South Groups—and was comprised of 180 members. In other words, as of March 1874, there were 180 sub-organizations within the broader Stevedores’ Trade Association. The smallest of the association’s four major groups, the North Group, was comprised of 38 organizations. This group covered the areas of Nakanoshima, Dōshima, and Tenma. Notably, there were very few groups from the Nakanoshima area, where many of early modern Osaka’s dominial storehouses were located. When Japan modernized, domains were dissolved and reorganized into the current arrangement of prefec-
As a result, shipments of the annual rice tax ceased and storehouse stevedores also lost the basis of their livelihoods. In the end, regardless of the development that guild organizations had achieved up until that point, everything vanished overnight.

In the association’s East Group, stevedores from 21 neighborhoods along the Yodogawa River competed with porters based in 16 inland neighborhoods. In other words, the East Group was split into two competing factions: laborers who unloaded cargo from boats traveling the Yodogawa River and those that transported cargo using pull carts.

Sources provide more detailed information about the association’s West Group. The West Group had 1200 registered members, which were divided into 68 sub-groups. That figure indicates that there were approximately 3000 individuals in all four of the association’s large groups. The West Group was by far the largest of the large groups. Its size demands additional explanation.

The 68 sub-groups included in the West Group all possessed identifiable characteristics. The smallest sub-groups had only a few members, while the largest had over 100. However, in most cases, sub-groups were comprised of 10–20 people. While sub-group members often lived in the same neighborhood or area, many sub-groups also included a significant number of members who lived in remote, outlying areas. Furthermore, an examination of subsequent developments indicates that the members of many sub-groups changed residence frequently. Some moved every 6 months, while others moved once every couple of years. Additionally, the West Group included both stevedores who actually unloaded and transported cargo as well as individuals who possessed only stevedore status. This indicates that modern trade associations actively sought recognition as bodies that also included actual laborers.

Thus, although storehouse stevedores disappeared, riverside stevedores continued to exist as they had during the early modern period, at least for the first part of the modern period. However, the manner in which guild organizations were recognized by the authorities changed. Accordingly, the character of guild organizations also changed.

Conclusion

This paper examined three types of laborers in early-modern Osaka: storehouse stevedores, rice-delivery stevedores, and riverside stevedores. I conclude by summarizing the relationship between stevedores and the social organizations of which they were a part. Originally, stevedores were unskilled laborers who developed organizations in the areas where they worked on a scale necessary for them to execute their duties. Many of the early groups formed by stevedores were established on the basis of personal relationships centering on a specific leader. Therefore, labor-based communality clearly existed among unskilled laborers as well as more skilled types of artisans.

However, stevedores also developed separate guilds in order to protect their status. In fact, status-based rather than labor-based organizations became the primary type of stevedore organization. There were many cases in which stevedore organizations established their own laws. These laws served to clearly delineate the limits of membership and the rights and responsibilities of members. They resulted in the creation of more firmly established guild organizations. The transportation of cargo, such as annual rice taxes, gave rise to a range of economic interests. The linking of those interests to a specific social status promoted the commodification of membership in organizations, such as stevedores’ guilds. In fact, that process of commodification was an essential precondition that supported the formation of guilds in which the status of stevedore was separated from the actual labor performed by stevedores. In other words, the city’s stevedore guilds were organizations that were created by separating status and labor. This in turn altered the preexisting understanding that “stevedore means laborer.”

While stevedores’ guilds did undergo a process of development, very few organizations actually sought official certification as licensed guilds. Ultimately, the labor upon which stevedores’ organizations relied was unskilled labor. As such, it was not viewed as a specialized type of work deserving recognition as the monopoly of a specific group. The work performed by stevedores was fundamentally incompatible with the basic principles of early modern status society. Therefore, stevedores had to wait for the establishment of a modern nation-state before receiving official recognition of their rights. Conversely, in early modern urban society, a rich array of unofficial communal and social organizations developed in addition to those that were recognized by the authorities. The groups formed by early modern Osaka’s stevedores represent one such organization.

References