

Excrement in the City: Tokyo, 1867–1933

David L. Howell [Harvard University]

ABSTRACT: By the end of the nineteenth century, Edo lingered on the surface of Tokyo only as a palimpsest, but in the city's privies it survived as an infrastructural coelacanth. The night-soil economy was a product of Edo that persisted more or less intact well into the modern era. This persistence is remarkable not because the Edo system did not work well—quite the contrary—but rather because infrastructure was just the sort of arena in which Meiji Japan's modernising leaders sought most eagerly to emulate the West. Yet neither the awesome engineering of the London and Paris sewers nor the genuine fear of pestilence occasioned by repeated cholera epidemics prompted the state to consider fundamental changes to the mechanism for disposing of excrement in the city.

Only in 1914, when it had become clear that the city would soon outgrow the hinterland's capacity to consume its shit, did the authorities undertake construction of modern sanitary sewer facilities. The first fruits of that effort, a pumping station at Mikawashima, went into operation in 1922, but beyond a few neighborhoods in central Tokyo, flush toilets would not become the norm until after World War II. This presentation will use the persistence of the night-soil economy as an entrée into questions of Meiji Japan's engagement with Western-style modernity and progress.

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David L. Howell is the Robert K. and Dale J. Weary Professor of Japanese History at Harvard University. He is the author of *Capitalism from Within: Economy, Society, and the State in a Japanese Fishery* (University of California Press, 1995) and *Geographies of Identity in Nineteenth-Century Japan* (University of California Press, 2005), as well as numerous articles, including "Fecal Matters: Prolegomenon to a History of Shit in Japan," in *Japan at Nature's Edge: The Environmental Context of a Global Power*, edited by Ian J. Miller, Julia Adney Thomas, and Brett L. Walker (University of Hawai'i Press, 2013).

E-mail: dhowell@fas.harvard.edu