

Reframing Hygiene as Cultural Heritage in Meiji-Era Japan

Dr Kerry Shannon

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During the late 19th century, Japan underwent a period of rapid modernisation following the 1868 Meiji Restoration. This transformative process included public health, where the concept of 'hygiene' took on new meanings and significance. Dr Kerry Shannon from California State University, Dominguez Hills, has delved into the pivotal role played by the Sanitary Society of Japan in shaping the discourse around hygiene during this tumultuous era.

New Public Health Challenges: The Meiji Restoration

The Meiji Restoration of 1868 marked the end of Japan's Edo era. This period saw the increased opening of ports and the rise of a new political order. However, these changes also brought about public health challenges, with increased cases of diseases such as cholera, dysentery, and smallpox wreaking havoc across the country.

In response, the Meiji government embarked on a series of public health reforms, which included establishing a central Hygiene Bureau, creating a nationwide network of hospitals and clinics, and implementing maritime quarantine boundaries. Despite these efforts, the government struggled to persuade the public of the benefits of hygienic modernity, and there was continued resistance to unfamiliar and often misunderstood new health practices.

The Sanitary Society of Japan's Mission to Modernise

In 1883, amidst this era of immense societal change, prominent figures in medicine and the medical social sciences established the Sanitary Society of Japan (Dai Nippon Shiritsu Eiseikai). Dr Kerry Shannon from California State University, Dominguez Hills, is an expert in this era. He explains that the Society's mission was to reformulate popular understandings of hygiene and health in response to the government's early public health programmes.

The Society served as a forum for discussing and sharing hygiene-related knowledge, bringing together doctors, pharmacists, medical researchers, and officials. Through speeches, articles,

and educational initiatives, the Society sought to broaden the discourse of hygiene while ensuring that it remained within the purview of medical elites.

Viewing New Practices Through the Lens of Tradition

One of the key strategies employed by the Sanitary Society was to ground the new and unfamiliar concept of 'hygiene' within the familiar vocabulary of supposedly shared medical traditions. Dr Shannon argues that the Society repurposed and reformulated supposedly native Japanese healing practices to make the idea of hygiene more palatable to the masses.

Society leaders invoked Edo-period concepts like seeking a 'sick-free long-life' (mubyō chōju) and the largely invented samurai-like discipline of 'bushido' to frame hygiene as an extension of Japan's cultural heritage. By presenting hygiene as a unique and primordial Japanese concept, the Society aimed to foster a sense of continuity and cultural uniformity in the face of rapid change.

Despite the Society's efforts to define and control the meaning of hygiene, the concept remained ambiguous and dynamic. Dr Shannon points out that even among the medical elite, there was no clear consensus on what constituted 'authentic' hygiene. This ambiguity was sometimes leveraged by figures like Fukuzawa Yukichi, who encouraged Society members to manipulate the term to expedite the implementation of public health policy. Fukuzawa candidly admitted that linking hygiene to Japan's old habits and customs was a means of transforming Japanese subjects into proper and responsible subjects without them ever becoming aware of it.



Nagayo Sensai and the Reinvention of Hygiene

One of the central figures in the Sanitary Society of Japan was Nagayo Sensai, often regarded as the 'founder of hygiene in Japan'. Dr Shannon delves into Nagayo's pivotal role in shaping the discourse around hygiene during the Meiji era. Nagayo is credited with rendering the German term 'Gesundheitspflege' into the Japanese 'eisei', which became the standard translation for 'hygiene'. However, as Dr Shannon points out, Nagayo's understanding of hygiene was not a direct translation but an amalgamation of his observations of various Western health systems.

In his speeches to the Sanitary Society, Nagayo emphasised the need to revive Japan's supposedly ancient military arts, including 'bushido', as the foundation for a uniquely Japanese form of hygiene. By linking hygiene to these cultural traditions, Nagayo sought to make the concept more accessible and appealing to the Japanese public. However, Dr Shannon notes that Nagayo's sudden nostalgia for samurai skills was somewhat surprising given his previous critiques of Edo-era medical traditions and his advocacy of Western public health practices. This paradox reflects the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of the Meiji-era modernisation process, as traditional practices were selectively reinvented to serve the needs of the present.

The Legacy of the Sanitary Society in Modern Japan

The Meiji era's reinvention of hygiene and the work of the Sanitary Society of Japan has had a lasting impact on public health in Japan. As Dr Shannon's research demonstrates, the Society's efforts to ground hygiene in Japanese cultural traditions helped to facilitate the adoption of modern public health practices and lay the foundation for a more robust healthcare system.

Today, Japan is renowned for its high life expectancy, universal healthcare coverage, and emphasis on preventive medicine. These achievements can be traced back, in part, to the groundwork laid by the Sanitary Society and other public health pioneers during the Meiji era.

However, contemporary Japan also faces new public health challenges, the foremost of which is an ageing population. Addressing these challenges will require a continued commitment to innovation, collaboration, and cultural sensitivity in public health initiatives.

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MEET THE RESEARCHER

Dr Kerry Shannon, Department of History, California State University, Dominguez Hills, Carson, CA, USA

Dr Kerry Shannon is an Assistant Professor in the Department of History at California State University, Dominguez Hills. He received his PhD in History from UC Berkeley, where he wrote his dissertation on public health and modernisation in Japan and Korea from 1868 to 1910. Dr Shannon also holds MA degrees in History and Asian Studies from UC Berkeley. His research focuses on the history of public health, hygiene, and modernisation in East Asia, with a particular emphasis on Japan and Korea during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Dr Shannon has presented at numerous conferences and has been awarded several prestigious fellowships, including a Fulbright IIE Fellowship and a Korea Foundation Fellowship for Dissertation Field Research.



FURTHER READING

K Shannon, *Reinventing "Hygiene": The Sanitary Society of Japan and Public Health Reform During the Mid-Meiji Period*, *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: An International Journal*, 17(3), 285–306. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/18752160.2023.2197786>



CONTACT

kshannon@csudh.edu

<https://www.csudh.edu/history/faculty/kerry-shannon>



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