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Cartographic Japan

A HISTORY IN MAPS



EDITED BY Kären Wigen,
Sugimoto Fumiko, and
Cary Karacas

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19 What Is a Street?

Mary Elizabeth BERRY

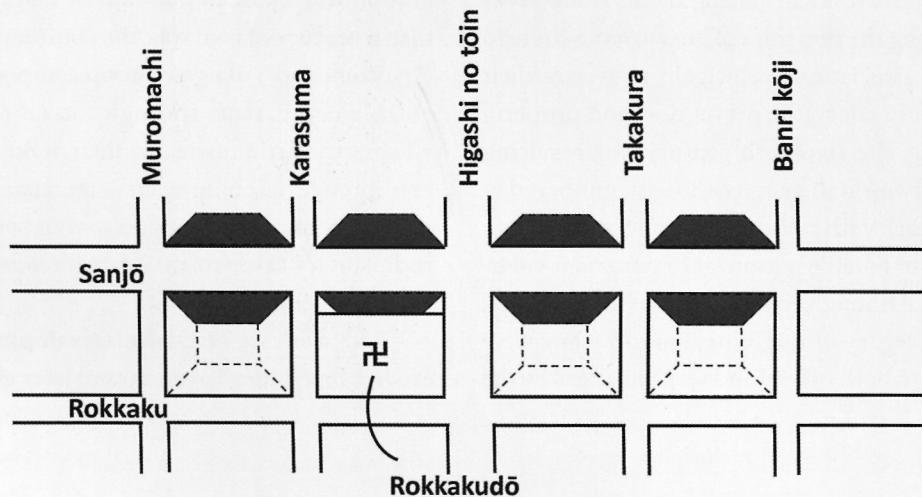


FIGURE 19.1 The configuration of medieval urban blocks. The shading indicates four two-sided blocks (*ryōgawa cbō*) facing Sanjō Avenue in Kyoto. From Mary Elizabeth Berry, *The Culture of Civil War in Kyoto* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 211. Courtesy of the publisher.

Street names are scarce in most Japanese cities, a point of marvel for foreign visitors and web pundits alike. In a riff on the resulting difficulty of wayfinding in Tokyo, Roland Barthes grew famously cranky: “the largest city in the world is practically unclassified; the spaces which comprise it in detail are unnamed.” Well aware of highly classified and detailed addresses, Barthes nonetheless dismissed them as bearing “only a postal value” in a system “apparently illogical, uselessly complicated, curiously disparate.”¹

Monsieur Barthes was too hasty. Streets play (at least) two roles in the city and inspire (at least) two naming practices that, equally “logical,” disclose variable understandings of the urban body. On the one hand, streets provide the armature of the city’s physical organization: naming them emphasizes this structural (and navigational) function. On the other hand, streets provide a matrix for the city’s human activity: naming the communities that form among them emphasizes this social character. Often enough, of course, names attach both to the roadways themselves and the neighborhoods they engender. Yet in insisting on the singular cogency of street names, which proliferated across the globe only in the nineteenth century (when new forms of municipal administration and communication favored them), Barthes ignored the powerful spatial logic still conveyed by the *quartiers* of his own Paris and the similar districts of Delhi, New Orleans, Istanbul, Rio, and countless other cities.

True enough, though, Japan does remain something of an outlier, since neighborhood names (the core feature of those “uselessly com-

plicated" addresses) continue to supplant street names almost everywhere. One factor behind the mystery is a history both long and uncommonly strong. It begins in medieval Kyoto, where mounting commercial traffic converted streets from boundaries that enclosed property (often with fortifying earthen walls) into links that connected the residents facing them. Trade-savvy commoners along the two sides of busy arteries came to form voluntary associations, principally to oversee their shared interests in safety, fire prevention, and property transactions. By the sixteenth century, the resulting *ryōgawa chō*, or two-sided neighborhoods, numbered in the hundreds, each with a distinctive name inspired by a local landmark or notable personage or dominant enterprise (fig. 19.1). Although Kyoto did have street names, an exceptional legacy of its Chinese model, they were soon surpassed in both official and vernacular use by the

names of the neighborhoods where the lives of commoners centered.

A bottom-up form of medieval alliance, the two-sided neighborhood of Kyoto became a top-down form of early modern control throughout the cities that exploded in Japan around 1600. Leading the urban migration was a vast population of samurai. After more than a century of civil war, the conquest regimes of the Toyotomi and Tokugawa houses hoped to tame these volatile combatants through forced relocation from villages to castle towns. In their wake came waves of entrepreneurial commoners—merchants, artisans, and providers of myriad services—who settled the often-rudimentary castle towns in areas reserved for them by local authorities.

Take the case of Osaka. Development there proceeded, first under Toyotomi and later under Tokugawa

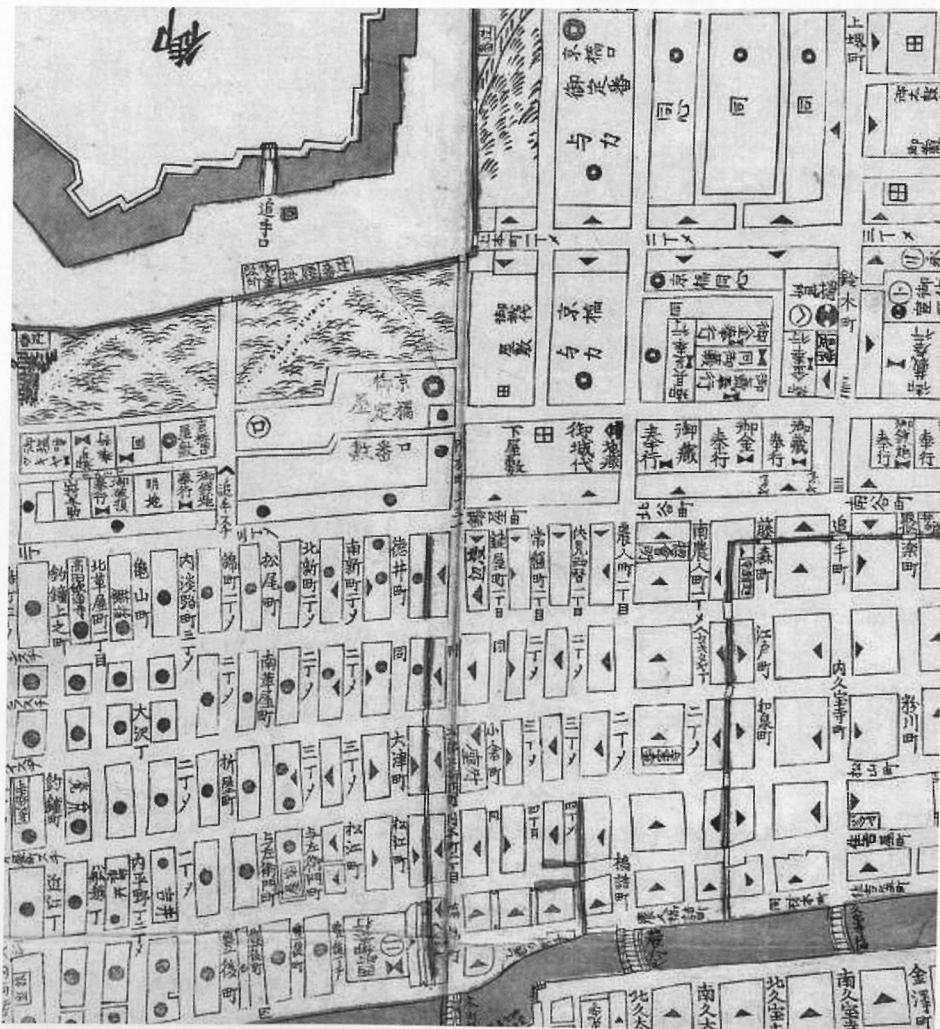


FIGURE 19.2 Detail from "Revised Map of Osaka, Settsu Province" [Zōshū kaisei Sesshū Osaka chizu 増脩改正攝州大阪地図], by Okada Gyokuzan 岡田玉山, 1806. Woodblock print, 153 × 142 cm. Courtesy of the C. V. Starr East Asian Library, University of California, Berkeley.

leadership, with the construction in the northwest of a mighty castle compound and nearby quarters for the martial elite. Commoners concentrated originally in the commercial zone laid out just west of the military precinct, where they were assembled into two-sided neighborhoods for purposes of official surveillance. But as Osaka became the national hub of commodity shipping, and a multiplying population approached four hundred thousand by 1700, commoners spread throughout the expansive “new lands” cleared and built up within the network of the city’s wealth-giving canals.

And everywhere they went, neighborhood creation followed. Figure 19.2 is taken from an exceptionally detailed and accurate map (considered a masterpiece of legibility by cartographic scholars) that shows the mature city in 1806. Like seventeenth-century models, the map marks military offices and residences with both labels and icons. The Buddhist temples zoned in the southeast bear individual names, as do the tinted canals and pictorial bridges. While a very few streets along the (secondary) north-south axis bear names as well, those along the (primary) east-west axis do not. Instead, the labels cramming the map are the names of the two-sided neighborhoods—620 of them, according to a colophon—that were organized into three larger collectivities identified by black circles, black triangles, and white triangles.

Six hundred twenty neighborhood names? Why not substitute, or at least add, street names? After all, commercial interests prevailed in this “merchant capital of Japan,” where tens of thousands of daily clients, many from afar, could do with navigational help.

Key, clearly, was so insistent an association between streets and social formation that rival naming practices gained little traction. This coincidence depended, in part, on the continued centrality of neighborhoods to Osaka’s military administrators, who never ceased relying on neighborhood leaders to announce and enforce their many, many regulations. (The extant fraction of official directives from the eighteenth century alone numbers over ten thousand.)² More important was the voluntary extension of neighborhood governance into most aspects of communal life and a resulting convergence between neighborhood membership and social identity. Over time, internally selected officers (including councilors, officiating elders, deputies, monthly functionaries, and various servitors) developed portfolios as copious as their staffs:³

They undertook essential policing, especially at night, when they closed and guarded the gates erected at intersections.

They organized fire-prevention and fire-fighting protocols.

They maintained local streets and bridges; they cleared debris from the waterways.

They authorized property sales and rentals, routinely restricting access to enterprises that were hazardous because of fire (bathhouses and blacksmiths, for example) or raucous (bars and samisen schools) or just too dependent on heavy but low-profit traffic (dealers in firewood and charcoal).

They recognized marriages, adoptions, succession decisions, and wills.

They assigned and collected the levies due both the military magistrate and the neighborhood itself (which were several times heavier).

They stipulated the “ritual” fees payable upon property transactions, marriages, adoptions, coming-of-age ceremonies, and appointments of surrogate householders.

They made loans to needy residents, kept obligatory records for diverse purposes (including religious registration), and staged major seasonal celebrations (most splendidly at the New Year and Feast of All Souls).

This startling list reminds us, I think, that cities are places of constant migration and anonymity and, consequently, places of suspicion, loneliness, ambiguous morality, and latent lawlessness. Complex institutional services can help relieve the fear and abate disorder, but most early modern urbanites had to look to themselves, if anywhere, for the resources to fashion those services. Across the urban spectrum in Japan, commoners found the necessary organization, labor, and revenues in their neighborhoods—a response notable in both the intimacy of its focus and the ambition of its reach.

There were human costs. Neighborhood associations put residents under heavy surveillance and made fine hierarchical distinctions among them. Membership in the governing council and eligibility for office, for example, devolved solely on property owners. And holders of frontage properties, renters and owners alike, outranked renters in the longhouses that typically crowded the rear (and drove neighborhood populations as high as

five hundred to seven hundred persons). Administrative burdens grew sufficiently onerous, moreover, to dispose wealthy commoners to rent rather than buy property and, hence, disqualify themselves for appointment as (unsalaried) neighborhood elders. Additional disadvantages seem likely but hard to prove—from braking commoner mobility and entrepreneurial innovation to foiling the centralization of urban services at higher levels.

Even so, neighborhood associations apparently provided enough advantages to keep them going for an extravagantly long time. They delivered indispensable services. They maintained acceptable levels of safety and order. They offered sociability, a ceremonial life, and frameworks of trust. They also accorded remarkable governing continuity, not least because some offices became hereditary. It was neighborhood administration, not incidentally, that helped preserve stability during the long decades of upheaval attending the collapse of the Tokugawa shogunate and the construction of the Meiji state.

My mission, however, is not to pass judgment on neighborhood formation but to elucidate its primacy in the spatial order of early modern Japan. Neighborhood names mattered because they defined urban attachment. As vital as the commercial traffic of strangers surely was, the public character of streets ceded to communal identity in the fundamental practice of naming.

So, too, today. But if scholars have helped us understand the importance of neighborhoods well into the twentieth century, the persisting scarcity of street names—in giant metropolises with skyscraper apartment blocks and swarms of outsiders—baffles not just Monsieur Barthes. I would predict an increase in street names and a slow vanishing of neighborhoods. Except for a revelatory development at the shelters that housed refugees from the Fukushima disaster. The survivors who gathered in those large school gyms and auditoriums organized themselves into *chō*, not so much “two-sided neighborhoods” as equivalent communities of succor, support, and, again, copious responsibility (from draining fuel from damaged cars to massaging the shoulders of elders in pain). The inertia of history was hardly the point. Ascendant once more was the spatial logic of social attachment.

Notes

1. Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, [1982] 1983), 33.
2. Kuroha Hyōjirō, ed., *Ōsaka machi bugyōsho ofuregaki sōmokuroku* (Osaka: Seibundō Shuppan, 1974).
3. These and the following remarks rely on Miyamoto Mataji, *Kinsei Ōsaka no keizai to chōsei* (Tokyo: Bunken Shuppan, 1985); Shinshū Ōsaka Shishi Hensan Iinkai, ed., *Shinsbū Ōsaka shishi*, vol. 3 (Osaka: Osaka City, 1989); and Ōsaka Shishi Hensanjo, ed., *Ōsaka no machi shikimoku* (Osaka: Osaka City, 1991).

Suggested Readings

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