

## **An Epidemic of Syphilis: Dispute of Human Rights and Change of Policy on Venereal Disease Governance in Taiwan during Early Japanese Rule**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Previous historical studies on imperial medicine tended to focus on “the colonization of body,” which usually assumed that the colonized were the main target of public health interventions in colonial infectious disease control. This study explores this issue in the light of syphilis prevention in colonial Taiwan under early Japanese rule; examining whether the epidemic of syphilis was imported, which gender or race group was identified as the major target for compulsory inspection, as well as why and how the colonial policy changed.

Firstly, the claim of imperial medicine that local Taiwanese women were the sources of syphilis infection was unfounded. In fact, those subjected to compulsory inspection were actually Japanese unlicensed prostitutes rather than Taiwanese ones. Colonial measures of epidemic control were developed along the lines of gender rather than race. Secondly, the then Government-General of Taiwan formulated policies to expand the prevention targets from licensed prostitutes to include unlicensed ones out of concern for venereal disease outbreaks. However, such policy was suspended after a short period of implementation, due to “human rights disputes” raised by Isogai Seizou, the then Tainan Magistrate. Nevertheless, analysis at the local level did not support this official account archived by the central government. Instead, “inactive governance” was evidenced in local governance of banditry and epidemic in southern Taiwan. That is, the reluctance of local government to implement central government policy was not due to human rights concerns but administrative incompetence of the local health department. This finding suggests that adopting a local governance approach, with emphasis on local differences and governance adaptations to local conditions, could lead to better understanding of the Japanese colonial governmentality.

**Keywords:** Colonial Medicine, Local Governance, Tainan County, Unlicensed Prostitutes, Syphilis Inspection, Human Rights