Fear and Delusion in Bakumatsu Japan: 
The Cholera Disturbance in Omiyacho, Suruga Province

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How do people confront life-threatening dangers when they strike? In Japanese history, people have faced repeated cataclysmic disasters and infectious epidemics ("diseases of instantaneous death"). With the scientific revolution and the advance of civilization in modern times, it is easy to think that people's fear of death has receded. The stir caused by SARS in 2003, however, reminds us that mortal fear is still close by. This study attempts to demonstrate the dangers and state of panic caused by the sudden outbreak of cholera in Ansei 8/1858. Focusing on the concrete example of Omiyacho, Suruga Province (modern-day Fujinomiya City), the study asks how people responded to the dangers attending the attack of cholera, feared by people as a "disease of instantaneous death." The study begins with a reading of the meticulously recorded journal of an Omiyacho townsman.

After coming ashore at Nagasaki with the crew of an American ship, the cholera bacterium spread further and further east, infecting people with a strange illness and producing an unprecedented number of deaths. Numerous medical efforts were taken against the disease, efforts which also generated a wide and diverse body of information that fed the spread of fanciful accounts of the disease. As if the world were turned upside down, people witnessed the destruction of the psychological frameworks that had offered them peace of mind. In response, they sought help through the use of pacifying magics of all kinds.

As cholera spread across space and time, people became increasingly active as they struggled with the strategies of an nonquotidian, otherly world.

Based on a traditional superstitious belief, people identified the source of the disease in the workings of the fabled kudagitsune fox. To keep the fox away, they installed wolves and, in particular, sought to borrow the famed dog of Mt. Mitsumine. Also, a strong local belief in the efficacy of Mt. Shichimen, a mountain associated with the Nichiren sect of Buddhism, also prompted people to climb the mountain for its reputed powers to inhibit the disease.

It is in the actions of people under extreme conditions that the psychological structure of an era and society are laid bare.