

Chapter 10

Amazing Diversity in Local Specialization

Edo Japan was full of diversity, far beyond any stereotypes we may have of the era today. People lived on solar energy and dined on local seasonal foods. Their diet was much more diverse compared to that of people living in the convenience of current day society. In essence, Japanese life in the Edo Period was built on diversity.

The Edo Period was governed by a feudal system only on the surface. The real power, however, belonged to those who had the ability to trade highly valued local specialties rather than those who owned large sums of land or produced a large amount of rice.

In the 18th century, the central government investigated these local specialties throughout Japan, encouraging diverse agricultural production suitable for each climate and terrain. This policy resembled capitalist ideas in that it encouraged local districts to produce a wide variety of unique products. In response, district lords initiated the development of local specialties that were unique enough to compete in the market.

Since preconditions in Japan were present and ready for such changes, local districts were able to engage in their specialty businesses without much competition.

What were the preconditions? Two elements seem to be apparent contributors. First, since Japan has a wide variety of unique terrains and climates, the production of local specialties in each district was rather easy. Such variations are accounted for due to the vast distance covered by Japanese land, stretching north, south, east, and west, with mountainous regions throughout. Second, the central government at the time did not bother to intervene with the industries of each district, or "han," its subordinate territories. Not only did the central government lack officers for such tasks, but all district lords governed their "han" effectively through their own functional state system. Thus, each "han" was able to deliver its own economic policies at will.

In those days, most commodities were produced from plants. This drove farmers to orchestrate efforts to cultivate profitable plants such as tea, mulberry, sumac, paper mulberry, hemp, safflower, indigo plants, cotton, rapeseed or tobacco in addition to grains.

Japanese people in the Edo Period actively produced large amounts of local specialties in order to improve their lifestyle. To achieve that goal, it was necessary for them to utilize solar energy as efficiently as possible through agriculture (their prime industry). By creating specialties that are in harmony with local conditions, it was only natural for Japanese agriculture to develop tremendous varieties of products.

According to historical records from the period, there may have been more than 1,000 different species of rice. Variety applied not only to rice. The Owari district (the western region of Aichi Prefecture today) had a record of 143 types of barley, 65 wheats, 21 buckwheats, 161 foxtail millets, 75 barnyard millets, 21 daikons (or white radishes), and 24 taros.

Before the harvest, farmers would select and gather seeds of the most thriving and healthy plants. By repeating this process, they were able to preserve only species that were most suitable for their land and climate. There is no doubt that the improvement of crops through years of experience had significantly contributed to plant diversity. Furthermore, successful results spread widely as farmers exchanged their seeds with each other.

Another effective method for using solar energy efficiently in agriculture was multiple cropping. The practice involved rotating different crops in several cycles within a year in the same field. As multiple cropping prevented damages caused by growing the same crop repeatedly, farmers eagerly developed unique methods for cultivation in each district.

For example, in areas where the winters are mild with little rainfall, farmers saturated the fields and planted rice during the summer followed by rapeseed, wheat or barley during the drier winters. In other areas with poor water resources, farmers planted crops in the order of rice, barley, pepo and soybeans in

two-year rotations. This meant that the fields were only converted into rice paddies every other year.

In the farmlands not used as rice paddies, a variety of crop combinations were seen. Farmers developed many ways of cultivating. Some planting combinations include: a annual rotation in the order of soybeans, buckwheat and barnyard millet; a three-crop/two-year rotation of barnyard millet, barley and soybeans; a four-crop/two-year rotation of hemp, turnips, barley and daikon (white radish); and two kinds of crops on the same land at the same time.

Innovative land use was the key to understanding how people could make a living using only solar energy in the Edo Period.

During this period, the fishing industry was subject to climate and other natural factors just like in agriculture. Additionally, the fishing industry developed a variety of fishing techniques in accordance with their regional characteristics. Because of Japan's complicated coastlines, the major ocean currents around the Japanese Archipelago, named "kuro-shio," "oya-shio" and "tsushima-kairyu," coastal regions developed unique seafood products, which we still see today.

Forestry, agriculture, and fisheries were not separated into independent industries during the Edo period. This was because most fishermen in coastal villages engaged in both farming and fisheries. They regarded their farmlands, forests, and oceans as one natural resources. Historically, people had taken good care of their neighboring forests, giving them nicknames such as "uotsuki-rin (Collect Fish Forest)," "uoyose-yama (Mt. Hook Fish)," or "ajiro-yama (Mt. Fish Net)," in hopes of a large fish catch. The fishing people knew that they would not be able to have abundant water to get healthy and abundant crops, fish or other seafood, if there were no forests in the mountain.

Each "han," or clan practically had autonomous power, without interference by the central government. Some highly motivated "han" even embarked on small-scale manufacturing industries to enrich their lifestyle.

A product ranking list from the Edo Period documents a total of 132 types of local products. For instance; dried bonito from the Tosa district, cloth for traditional Japanese pants from the Mutsu district, high-class hemp cloth from the Satsuma district, painted pottery from the Owari district, indigo ball for dyeing from the Awa district, Nishijin silk fabric in the Yamashiro district, tatami rush mat from the Bingo district, traditional Japanese paper from the Mino district, thick dried kelp from the Matsumae district, Hakata kimono sash from the Chikuzen district, crinkled high quality hemp cloth from the Hokuetsu district, pottery from the Bizen district, Japanese traditional candle from the Aizu district, cloth from the Kouzuke district, cattail carpet from the Utsunomiya district, paper for calligraphy from the Iwakuni district, sweet potato from the Kawagoe district, and daikon (white radish) from the Nerima district.

With this abundance and diversity of products, it is easy to understand that a large profit must have been generated just from domestic trades. This meant that the country did not need to colonize in or invade foreign countries in order to feed the population of some 30 million.

During this period, commercial products were diverse and reflected how people adapted to climate and terrain. Unlike today's petroleum-based society where industrial plants can be easily built anywhere, Edo-era people lived on solar energy which supported local product development

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