

Chapter 12

From Outside to Inside

Edo period Japan was a country that seldom used vehicles. Although there were a few wagons pulled by cows between Kyoto and Edo, large two-wheeled carts in Edo, and small carts used in parts of Osaka and Nagoya, these vehicles were used exclusively for moving heavy items such as bags of rice and lumber. It appears that there was not much transport of vegetables. In this age where people normally shouldered loads on carrying-poles or loaded the backs of horses, a 10-15 kilometer distance was the limit for moving leafy-vegetables without compromising its commercial value.

Investigating the details of this older lifestyle, we learned that the products that were transported over long distances were only products such as metal goods, cloth, ceramics and porcelain, grains, dried-food goods, and other durable goods with a relatively high unit price. Fresh foods and every-day items were, for the most part, supplied from the local area.

This former Japan consisted of self-reliant regions, each acting as small "worlds" formed together like a collection of biological cells. In Japan where nearly 70% of the surface land is mountainous, there are few open plains, but basins surrounded by mountains which act as watersheds are numerous. Near the coasts, some basin areas even open onto the ocean.

Basins were comprised of rivers and streams that would flow from mountain to mountain, pond and lakes, farm land, and towns; and in some cases, the ocean. Though narrow, hunting, freshwater fishing, foresting, farming, commerce and industry, and even sea-fishing in some regions were available.

If we take these basins as microcosms, we can think of them more and more as cultural units of the Japan archipelago. I believe this is a fitting conceptualization for understanding Edo period Japan.

In this former Japan, there were about 100 of these basin microcosms. In many cases, they were the centers of hans, regions under the rule of a daimyo (a Japan feudal lord). In that case, the daimyo's castle and castle town would lie on level land, and the basin became a small independent nation. Because the Tokugawa shogunate was an administration with less central control, this fiefdom representing about 300 lords was able to run each part self-governed. Possessing governmental powers a level above present self-governing bodies, each han fostered its own characteristic culture.

When observing regional characteristics humbly preserved to this day in traditional buildings and daily goods, or in the tangible and intangible cultural assets, such as cultural events and public entertainment, one can understand the diversity of the Edo period of Japan was within the independent small worlds of these small basins.

In the narrow small basin microcosms where self-sufficiency was the guiding principle, single-minded environmental pollution and destruction was structurally difficult to occur and through the Edo period there was relative stability. The small basin microcosms were set up so that one could live on only the sun's energy. From this came a near perfect environmental system where one could live on only the sun's energy.

One outgrowth of the stable inward-looking small basin microcosm was Japan's isolationist policy--or perhaps, the small basin microcosm was the reason the isolationist policy was a success.

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