

A Comparison of the cultural levels of Japan and Europe.

Japan's Edo Era was two hundred seventy years of unbroken peace, a unique period in the history of the world. In addition, the isolationism of this period produced a country of people who were completely self-sufficient. The influence of the circumstances of this period on Japanese culture can be seen in a variety of ways.

However, with the Meiji Era, much of Japan's own culture was lost or discarded with the introduction and influence of the great powers from Europe.

This year, Japan celebrates Edokaifu Yonhyakunen (400 years since the beginning of the Edo Era). In response to this celebration, people all over Japan are taking another look at the Edo Era. In this issue of FOOD CULTURE, we have asked Mr. Zenjiro Watanabe, well-known author of such works as *Kyodaitoshi Edo ga Washoku wo Tsukutta*, to compare for our readers the cultural level of Japan during the Edo Era with that of European countries during the same period.



Zenjiro Watanabe

Mr. Watanabe was born in Tokyo in 1932 and graduated from Waseda University in 1956. In 1961, he received his Ph.D in commerce from the same university and began working at the National Diet Library. Mr. Watanabe worked at the National Diet Library as manager of the department that researches the law as it applies to agriculture. He then worked as manager of the department that researches foreign

affairs, and finally he devoted himself to research at the Library. Mr. Watanabe retired in 1991 and is now head of a history laboratory researching various aspects of cities, farms and villages.

Mr. Watanabe's major works include *Toshi to Noson no Aida—Toshikinko Nogyo Shiron*, 1983, Ronsosha; *Kikigaki - Tokyo no Shokuji*, edited 1987, Nobunkyo; *Kyodai Toshi Edo ga Washoku wo Tsukutta*, 1988, Nobunkyo; *No no Aru Machizukuri*, edited 1989, Gakuyoshobo; *Tokyo ni Nochi ga Atte Naze Warui*, collaboration 1991, Gakuyoshobo; *Kindai Nihon Toshikinko Nagyoshi*, 1991, Ronsosha.

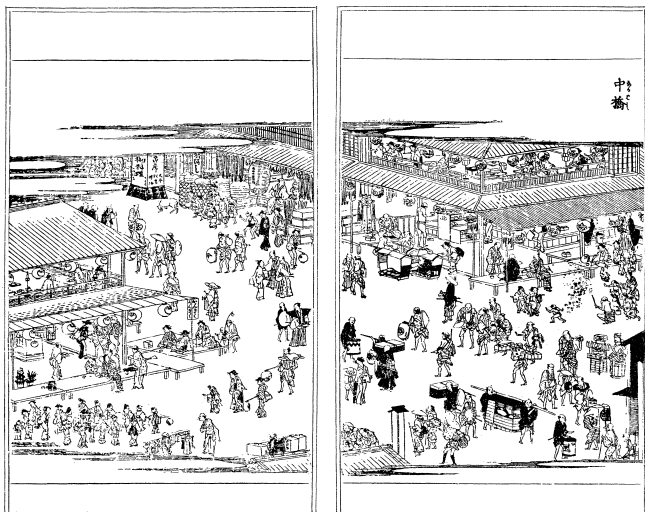
Edo—Another Civilized Society Japan and the West in the Same Period

By Zenjiro Watanabe

Edo's Image Gap

One of the most famous gourmet guides in the world was published in France in 1900. More than one hundred years prior to this however, periodical restaurant guides were regularly published in the Edo area (present-day Tokyo) of Japan. Edo supported a society that frequently ate out long before the same habits were established in the West.

The famous Brillat-Savarin, author of *The Physiology of Taste*, says that a restaurant is a business where the owner must always be prepared to serve a meal that satisfies the customer, and where an adequate balance between the price paid by an individual consumer and the cost to the restaurant has been reached.



Nakabashi, Edo. The prosperity of Edo is clear. (Edo Meisho Zue)

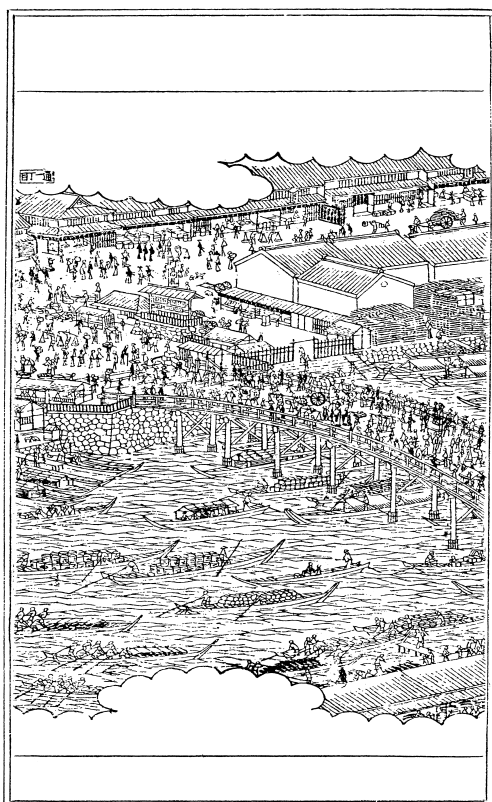
In the West, the first restaurants were said have appeared in France in 1765 and in England in 1827. If this information is correct, Edo was enjoying a successful restaurant business more than a century earlier with the first restaurant making its appearance in 1657. Edo came to be known as the city in Japan where restaurants of all types and levels could be found lining the streets in great numbers. It was during this time that the dishes typically known as Edo dishes such as *sushi*, *tempura* and grilled eel, were developed in the restaurants that began popping up one after another. The Japanese passion for eating while drinking alcohol was also developed at this time when the people of Edo, in their fever at the first bonito catches of the year would go to the tea houses that also served food and invite even the wives of the proprietors to eat and drink with them.

In any discussion of the food culture of the Edo Era, questions regarding the severe living conditions and lack of freedom of the people living under a feudal government are always raised. Well-known sayings of the time declare that the peasants are not killed but neither are they allowed to live, and that the more peasants are squeezed, the more can be taken from them. The peasants of the time lived with the constant concern for whether they would be able to eat or not, even as they worked day and night to pay the taxes demanded of them. It is often said that to declare the food culture of Edo during this period as bountiful or extravagant may be somewhat overly optimistic.

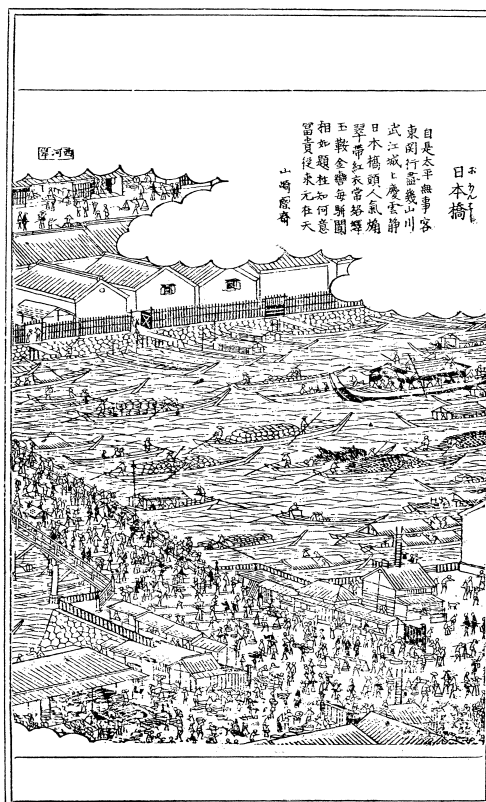
Such questions clearly illustrate the broad gap found between the food and the lifestyle of the Edo Era. Was life in Edo really so oppressive and poor? To discuss the food of the time, we must take a look at the overall lifestyle and society of the time.

Conflicting Evaluations of Edo

Intellectuals of the Meiji Era such as Toson Shimazaki often compared the Edo era to the dark ages, with the Meiji Restoration bringing a long-awaited dawn. Western visitors to Japan at the time found the change incredibly mystifying. In his diary, Beltz commented that the current society was very mysterious. He further



Prosperity around Nihonbashi, Edo (Edo Meisho Zue)



reported that the current Japanese person does not want to know anything about his or her past. On the contrary, the cultured people seem clearly ashamed of the past. They often say that they were uncivilized, that they have no history, or that their history is just beginning.

In his book *Things Japanese*, Chamberlain writes that educated Japanese people have discarded their past. They act as if Japan's past belongs to another people. In a book by Soseki Natsume, a famous Japanese author of the time, the main character, an educated man, makes the same sort of comments.

However, there were also many Westerners whose evaluation of Japan during the Edo Era was in complete contrast. Don Rodriguez, Spanish governor of the Philippines who was in Japan in 1609, wrote that the municipal government of Edo exceeded that of European cities in terms of maintenance of the streets and success of the traffic. He goes on to say that though the Edo government is the best in the world, it is very annoying that Japan is a nation of people who know nothing of Zeus, proven by the severe oppression imposed by the military.

Kaempfer, a doctor who visited Japan in 1688, wrote in his book, *The History of Japan*, that the people of Japan were blessed with a prosperity rarely seen in the world due to the constant peace of the time, the fertile fields, the prosperous domestic trade, and the physical heartiness and excellent customs and manners of the people.

Townsend Harris, the first American consul general to Japan, said that the Japanese people were clean, that there was plenty of food, good clothing and that everyone seemed happy.



19th Century Rome. We get an idea of the chaos of the city.

Harris referred to the Edo Era as a golden age of simplicity and honesty that he had not seen in any other country. Rutherford Alcock, the first English consul general to Japan, praised all aspects of Japan in his book, *Capital of the Tycoon: A Narrative of a 3 Years Residence in Japan*. He wrote that Japan was a Garden of Eden created from a land of volcanoes. He commented on the fact that a steady prosperity and high standard of quality in production were maintained by an estimated 30,000,000 inhabitants, despite the total physical and political isolation of the country. Alcock goes on to say that he discovered peace, prosperity and clear fulfillment in Japan with its villages that surpassed even English villages in terms of the care taken to keep them neat and attractive, even with the planting of decorative trees and shrubbery. Alcock wrote that he found it hard to believe that Japan was a nation of harsh tyranny with oppressive taxation when he saw the bounty of the fields and the happiness of the families. Rather, he continued, such a zest for life could never be found

among the farmers of Europe, and that he felt blessed to have spent time in a country with a warmth and abundance that could be found nowhere else.

Clearly, these Western visitors to Japan found the country different from the West, though all seem to have considered Japan an advanced civilization of the day.

Japan—A World Power

Anyone who goes to Europe and says that Japan is a small nation will be laughed at. The entire population of Europe does not exceed one hundred million, and the only countries with a larger area are France, Spain and Sweden. Even with the unification of East and West Germany, the area of the country is smaller than Japan, and size of The Netherlands does not exceed Japan's island of Shikoku. In addition to this, Japan of the Edo Era was a power eminent in the world in terms of resources.

In terms of mineral resources, Japan had deposits of gold, silver, copper and iron, and led the world in the production of gold and silver, producing nearly 1/4 the world's supply of these precious metals. Japan was truly the "golden Zipangu".

During the Edo Era, Japan was also the world's leading producer of copper. Even today, Vietnamese coins are called don, which comes from the Japanese word for copper, do. This name remains from the time when the Vietnamese imported copper coins from Japan. Japanese copper was also used in Indonesia and Bali up until WWII.

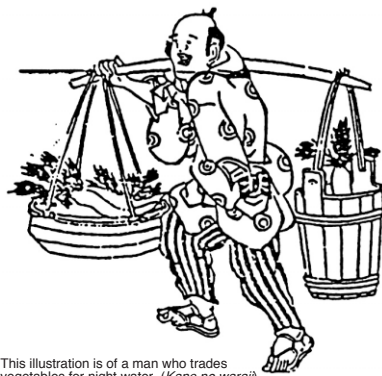
Though Japanese iron came from iron sand, during the Edo Era Japan ranked third in world production behind Canada and New Zealand. The high quality and low cost rivaled English iron, which was considered the best in Europe at the time. Though all countries of the world used gold, silver and copper for the production of money at the time, only Japan was self-sufficient in these minerals. The volcanic islands of Japan were also an indispensable source of sulfur, necessary for sparking ignition. Japanese sulfur was export-

ed to a variety of Asian countries including China. A lack of wood charcoal, the main fuel for heating and energy production around the world at the time, was not a problem in Japan with approximately seventy percent of the nation covered by forest. Japan was also a country that did not have to be concerned with a lack of water resources. Thus, it is clear that whether speaking in terms of population, land area, or natural resources, Japan of the Edo Era was an eminent world power.

Outstanding Agricultural Productivity

Japan's key industry during the Edo Era was agriculture. In terms of agricultural productivity of the time, Japan far exceeded that of Western countries. The productivity of land is measured in terms of a ratio of quantity planted to quantity harvested. In Western countries, approximately 4—5 times the amount of wheat harvested had to be planted. In France, a harvest of twenty-five to thirty-five percent of the seed planted could not be said to be a bad harvest. Bearing this in mind, Edo Era Japan was producing crops of rice that yielded nearly thirty times the amount of seed planted. This high productivity supported an enormous population of 30,000,000 people, and products that had previously been imported such as tea, silk, cotton, tobacco and sugar, began to be produced domestically. During the last days of the Tokugawa *Shogunate* (Edo Era), it is said that Japanese production of cotton exceeded American production by three to four times.

Western visitors during the Edo Era were amazed at the productivity of Japan's agriculture. One of these visitors, a doctor of agriculture and member of an inquiry commission from Prussia wrote in a book published in 1862 that the Japanese use a rational agricultural technology of multiple crops and elaborate fertilization. He went on to say that as Japan does not have a stockbreeding system, animal manure is not used for fertilization but rather, human waste is the primary fertilizer. Such utilization of human waste means that Japan does not have the pollution problems found in Europe where human waste is simply washed down rivers and into the sea, squandering a precious source of fertilizer. The Japanese, he wrote, do not use any form of crop rotation nor do they allow fields to rest. Rather, they grow crop after crop in the same field, fertilizing it once every time a new crop is planted. As European agricultural methods rely on allowing fields to rest or crop rotation, with fertilization only once a year, productivity cannot be compared to that



This illustration is of a man who trades vegetables for night water. (Kane no waraji)

found in Japan. In summary, he writes that it is a falsehood to hold up European agricultural techniques as a model when the Japanese methods with their excellent productivity are clearly superior and seem to have had no negative affect on the land, even after thousands of years.

This Prussian visitor not only admired the use of human excrement as fertilizer, but also the way a kind of compost made from refuse was used. In this way, a purely natural fertilizer loaded with all necessary minerals was applied to the fields. He wrote that though Europeans tend to believe that they maintain the highest standards and productivity in agricultural production, after witnessing the success of Japanese agriculture, he couldn't help but feel a sense of deep shame.

Western Farming Villages and Japanese Farming Villages

Differences in production capacity reflect on the conditions of the farming village.

In 18th century France, three quarters of the fertile land was owned by the nobles, the church and the bourgeois, with farmers retaining at most a single hectare. During this time, Arthur Young, an English agriculturalist visited France. He said that though the land is suitable for agriculture, the local methods are terrible with the wheat yellowing poorly as it is clogged with weeds. The farmers are miserably poor with no shoes or socks, which seem to be considered luxuries. Young further described the children as having such ragged clothing as to be better off naked. It seems that even by the end of the 19th century, such conditions had not changed.

Young went on to report that the houses were pigsties with no windows and no furniture. The floors, where the men, women, children and even livestock slept, were covered with spilled food, garbage and dirty clothes, and the only concern seemed to be the conservation of fuel. Such conditions, it seems, prevailed during these times throughout France, England and Germany.



Harvesting of the landowner's crops. (Jean Francois Millet)

Donald Keene reported the following from a discussion with Ryotaro Shiba.

During the Edo Era, the Japanese learned much from the Dutch, who they seem to have thought possessed a superior lifestyle. However, this was a fallacy when seen from the Dutch point of view. Dutch farmers wore the same clothes year-round, regardless of the season, with sweat and oil making their pants stiff enough to stand on their own. Since the Dutch did not bathe either, they must have surely thought the Japanese farmers who, no matter how poor they were, bathed daily and had a separate set of clothing for summer and winter, very clean. Japanese culture at the time seems to have been superior to that of the West in all aspects.

The gap between the social classes in the West at the time was very vast. In terms of the food cultures, starvation and gluttony existed side by side. An ambassador from France reported that ninety percent of the population starves to death while the remaining ten percent die from overeating. It seems to have been the wish of Europeans at the time to live to the ripe old age of thirty-five. Anyone who lived beyond that age looked very old.

What about conditions in Japanese farming villages at the time? Townsend Harris reported on living conditions in Shimoda. He said that people seemed to lead enjoyable lives with no lack of food or clothing. The houses are clean and very pleasant with direct sunlight shining on them. Harris says that there must be no better lifestyle among laborers the world over as that found in Shimoda. He continued, saying that he had never seen a face that

displayed indigence in Japan, that the faces of the children were fat like a full moon and the grown men and women possessed a sturdy build, leaving no doubt that there was plenty of food for everyone. At the beginning of the Meiji Era, Englishwoman Isabella Bird traveled throughout Japan. In her book, *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan*, she described the scenery she found on the Yonezawa plain as follows.

The Yonezawa Plain is a true Eden with the town of Yonezawa to the south of the plain and Akayu with an abundance of visitors to its hot springs to the north of the plain. The beauty of the Yonezawa Plain seems to be something drawn with a pencil rather than cultivated with a spade. Rice, cotton, hemp, soybeans, eggplant, cucumbers, persimmons and pomegranates grow in abundance. In this place, the land is owned by those who cultivate it free from oppression. The region is full of beauty, diligence, ease and charm. In every direction, one sees beautiful farming villages. Even in the mountains, the villages are maintained with a beautiful order and crops suitable to the climate are raised in abundance. Such scenery is found throughout Japan, with a complete absence of untended fields managed by lazy people.

Famine and Euthanasia

Discussions of the widespread poverty of the Edo Era are often illustrated by the problems of famine and the euthanasia that occurred at the time. The most tragic famine was experienced in the Tsugaru territory with more than two-hundred thousand people dying of starvation. It can be said that the agricultural technology of the time was unable to cope with natural calamities.



19th Century Paris. Conditions in a Paris orphanage. (Tableau du Paris)

The same sorts of natural disasters such as famine occurred in Europe as well. At the end of the 17th century, nearly a third of the population of Finland died of starvation and in 1769, approximately one million died of starvation in France. In 1845, the Potato Famine of Ireland cut the population of eight million in half.

While euthanasia was performed in Japan, children were routinely abandoned in Europe. In the middle of the 18th century, approximately one fourth of poor children were abandoned. Orphanages were of little assistance as eighty to ninety percent of the children died of malnutrition or disease. The problem of abandoned children, however, was not limited to the lower class. In Paris during the same period, more than ninety percent of the children born were fostered out to (country nursemaids), where seventy to ninety percent of the foster children died.

In 1750, 2,339 children were gathered into a camp for the poor in London. Five years later, only 168 children had survived. The abandonment or fostering out of children at this time seems to have

been equivalent to murdering the children. Euthanasia in Japan and abandonment in Europe seem to have been the birth control or family planning methods of the time.

Technology and Culture

Heinrich Schliemann, world-famous discoverer of the remains of Troy, visited Japan in 1865. About Japan, he said that if the word civilization is indicated by materialism, then Japan is truly a civilized country. This is proven, he continued, by the fact that the Japanese have developed the ability to create high-quality industrial products without the use of steam engines. Alcock supported Schliemann's conclusion when he said that Japan's civilization was a highly material civilization with a high level of finishing without the use of steam engines or machinery-assistance of any kind.

Japan was at an equal level with Europe not only in terms of technology, but also in the level of the culture. At the time, Japan had the highest rate of literacy among its masses in the world. It must be assumed that placards, lettered signs, tile engravings and written fortunes found throughout the cities were produced by the common people. 19th Century English records state that only one in fourteen people received an education at the time. In the famous Japanese book, *Ukiyo-Buro*, a young girl living in Edo complains to her friend that between her daily tasks, studies, music lessons and practice, she has no time at all to relax and play with other children.

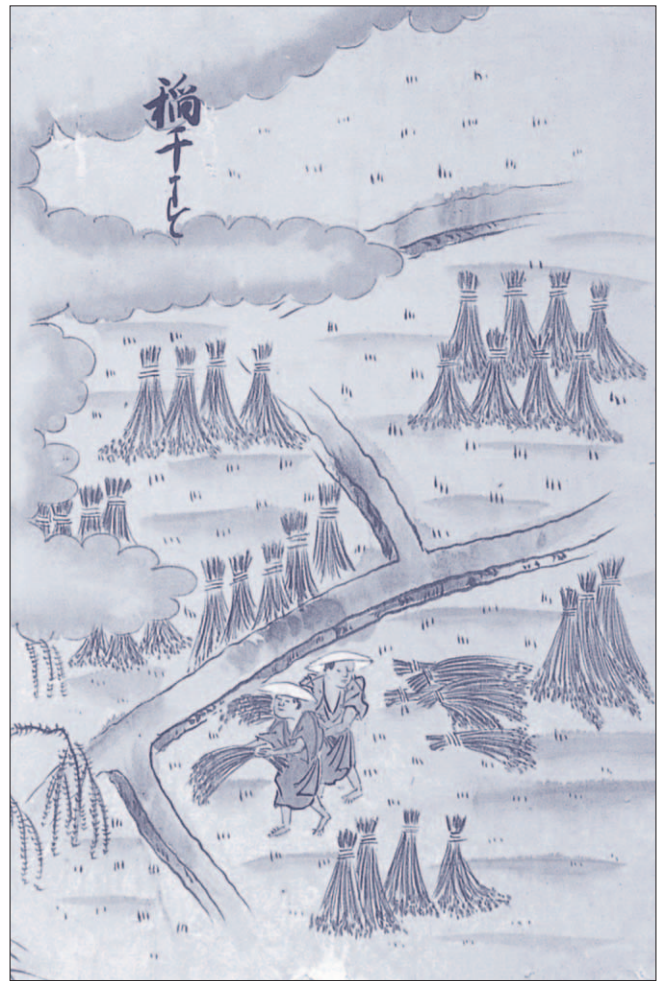
Adults also exceeded their class boundaries by learning and practicing a variety of arts including poetry, various types of traditional singing and musical instruments such as the *shamisen*. An English botanist who visited Japan at the time was surprised to find that even the lower classes in Japan enjoyed flowers. He said that if the cultural level of a nation is measured by its love of flowers, the lower classes of Japan are certainly more cultured than their counterparts in England. Edo's gardening culture at the time was far more advanced than anywhere else in the world at the time.

A Peaceful Society and the Lifestyle of the Masses

When speaking of world peace, "Pax Romana" comes to mind. The vast Roman Empire included all lands around the Mediterranean Sea and most of Northwest Europe, leading to a generally comfortable way of life and the first extended peace seen in the world. This term of peace, however, lasted only one hundred years. The Edo Era, however, experienced nearly three hundred years of peace unbroken by domestic or foreign wars. This period could be called "Pax Tokugawa", and was a virtual miracle in the history of the world.

Periods without warring in Europe are limited to a ten-year period in the 16th century and a four-year period in the 17th century. Europe has historically embroiled itself in religious wars, wars for succession and wars brought on by the fever of colonization. Heavy taxes in the colonies and slavery were wasted on the construction of palaces in the motherlands and supporting the cost of wars. In the middle of the 17th century, approximately ninety percent of England's annual expenditure was spent on wars. During the same period, Louis XIV spent nearly seventy five percent and Peter The Great spent eighty five percent of their annual expenditures on wars.

Taxation was truly oppressive. It is said that taxation to support Louis XIV is wars with England drove one in ten citizens to become beggars. In addition to direct taxes such as citizen tax and military tax, hidden taxes including domestic tariffs and a type of sales tax were imposed. In England, a tax on salt meant that people could not afford the salt needed to make bacon, and in Amsterdam in 1670, it is said that more than thirty different taxes were applied



Left: Ine-kariage no hiwai, Right: Inehosu These illustrations portray a successful autumn rice harvest and the celebration that follows. (Nogyo Zue)

to a plate of boiled fish with sauce served at a pub.

A visitor to Japan from Sweden at the end of the 18th century compared conditions in Japan to those of Europe. He said that while Japanese farmers were taxed only by their own feudal lord, European farmers were taxed by their kings, their nobles and their priests, and in addition to the burden of the taxes came the burden of dealing with cruel and arrogant tax collectors. Recent research indicates less than two people in eight bearing the burden of heavy taxation at the end of the Edo Era.

There seems to be a large deviation between assumed and actual conditions of the Edo Era. The travel diary of villagers who visited the city of Kokubunji, Tokyo in 1841 has been discovered. At the time, Kokubunji was a small village of seventy homes and three hundred people. Nineteen of these villagers set out on a two-month excursion. Their itinerary indicates that they set out from the Tokaido (a main traffic route in the Edo Era) to Ise where they prayed at Ise Shrine. They next traveled on to sightsee in Kyoto and Osaka, crossed to the island of Shikoku and then returned home via the Nakasendo (another major traffic route in the Edo Era). Based on the population of the village and the number of travelers, thirty to forty percent of the village's men must have taken this excursion. Even today, it seems very indulgent to take a

two-month vacation. Several such travel diaries have been discovered in Japan, and it seems that a two-month vacation was quite the norm at the time. There is even an example of five people taking six months to go sightseeing in Nagasaki on the island of Kyushu in southern Japan.

The death poem of Kason Hosetsuan, a haiku poet who lived at the end of the Edo Era remains in Kokubunji. Though his poem is very eloquent, the poet was a farmer in a small village near Kokubunji. As a farmer, he was ranked thirty third in rice production in a village of just fifty five farmers, and also worked taking care of horses. This man had three thousand poetry apprentices, most of whom came from homes outside of the village. Taking the population of the time into consideration, it can be assumed that such culture was not reserved for only wealthy farmers, but also applied to those who were not wealthy. It is surprising to see that even farmers living outside of established villages had an intellectual level that allowed them to learn and enjoy haiku poetry.

Additionally, the village of Kokubunji was located on infertile soil poor for farming. With very few rice paddies, the people of Kokubunji supported themselves by supplying Edo with charcoal. Due to the location of Kokubunji, the people were often obliged to provide lodging for traveling nobles. In ancient documents,

Kokubunji is always referred to as “the distressed village”. Even taking the negatives of Kokubunji’s poor soil and inconvenient location into account, the fact that the villagers were able to enjoy traveling and haiku hardly seems representative of a poor and oppressed people. Previous assumptions aside, these people seem to have led a comfortable lifestyle. Thinking otherwise is to completely disregard historical fact.

Discrepancies in Public Sanitation in the Cities

In addition to the poverty and lack of public order found in Western cities, the biggest problem was sanitation. The cities of the grand and brilliant West were full of filth, smelled terrible, and were a constant breeding ground for epidemics. With anything and everything being thrown away in the street, it is clear that the collection of such trash was either inefficient or lacking altogether. Arthur Young wrote that the residents of London, with its overpowering stench of excrement, were doomed to either die in abject poverty or live in extreme filth. Without exception, visitors to Japan from Europe and the Americas had their eyes opened to the possibilities when they saw the beauty and cleanliness with which Japanese cities were maintained. Alcock wrote that in Japanese cities, in stark contrast to other major cities of the world, the streets are very clean with trash collected in a manner so that it does not obstruct traffic. When these foreign visitors saw that people sweep the street in front of their own houses two or three times a day, they noted that it was a sight never to be seen in Europe.



An 18th Century painting of London shows human excrement being thrown out second story windows. (from “THE GREAT ARTISTS” magazine)

In Japanese cities, waste including human excrement, table scraps, rice bran and ashes were collected and sold as a valuable fertilizer to farmers who then reduced it to a usable form. This excellent fertilizer was, of course, one of the reasons for the high productivity of Japan’s agricultural industry. Using all of this waste also meant that the cities were kept clean and sanitized.

In the West, waste in the cities became a clear obstacle. In Paris and London, all manner of waste was washed into the sewers and finally found its way to the Seine and Thames. Water from these rivers was, therefore, not only the source of drinking water, but

also a wide variety of infectious diseases. In the 17th century, London was the only Western city with a proper, albeit crude, sewage system. Paris had no sewage system until the Napoleonic Era, and New York developed its first sewage system in 1842.



Early 19th Century Paris. People drawing water from the public water supply, which they will then sell. (Tableau du Paris)

During this period, London had a waterworks system for “clean” water, but it could only be used three days a week for approximately seven hours a day. In comparison, Edo had developed a waterworks system that was always available from several stations throughout the city including Kanda, Tamagawa, Aoyama and Mita, extending for 150 kilometers and serving sixty percent of the population. It was with pride that the people of Edo often said that the water for a baby’s first bath should be water from the public water supply.

The reason that it was possible for the people of Edo to come to appreciate dishes such as *sushi* and *sashimi* was that the cleanliness maintained by the people and the cities allowed the catching of fish from unpolluted rivers and seas, and further allowed for clean transportation of these items to the restaurants or households where they were prepared in clean and healthy environments. This was indeed a miraculous ability given conditions in other parts of the world.

In this article, we have taken a look at both Japan and the West during Japan’s Edo Era from a variety of angles. My goal was to reveal the misconception that the West was highly developed while Japan was suffering in poverty and inferiority during this time. Rather, Edo Era Japan seems to have been a highly civilized society on an equal or superior level to that found in the great powers of the West. It seems safe to say that the food culture of Edo can also be discussed based on the same premise.

Historical References

- ◆ *Edo Komon*,
published by Tokyo Senshoku Kogyo Kyodo Kumiai
- ◆ 1851 map of Edo
provided with thanks by Kochizu Shiryō Shuppan Co. Ltd.
- ◆ Paper from the Edo Era
provided with thanks by Yamagataya Kamiten in Kanda Jinbocho