INTRODUCTION: THE STUDY OF EDO-PERIOD CULTURE

The writings collected here, written over a period of nearly two decades and appearing in various books and journals, lack a systematic unity. I would thus like to outline my views on how Edo-period culture should best be studied. To do this adequately would require a discussion of Japanese cultural history in general, but I shall employ a more limited strategy. First, I shall discuss the kind of historical perspective necessary for a correct assessment of Edo-period culture; second, I shall outline some methods for carrying out actual research, methods that make this historical perspective possible.

Approaches to Edo-Period Culture

Two basic historical perspectives are available to students of Japanese culture during the Edo period (1600–1868). One may compare the entirety of Edo-period culture to archaic, medieval, or modern Japanese culture; or one may focus on the question of what Edo-period culture is in and of itself. Historians who have taken the former approach have tended to dismiss Edo-period culture as the “vulgar” culture of the city of Edo. When, for example, I was at work on my university graduation thesis, which focused on the kabuki plays of Tsuruya Nanboku IV (1755–1829), I was often told that such a subject was inappropriate for a thesis in the Department of History. At the time, virtually no scholarly studies of rakugo (comic monologue), kōdan (storytelling), kabuki, or the arts of itinerant performers had yet appeared. Even in the 1960s I was still frequently advised to restrain my enthusiasm for the “vulgar” culture of Edo.

A few years ago, the still healthy Kagoshima Juzō looked over some of my work and remarked that it brought back old memories.¹
When he was young, he recollected, he had gone to the house of a senior colleague to borrow some Edo-period books printed with woodblocks. On his way home, he met the poet Saitō Mokichi (1882–1953), who immediately took him to task for reading such “insipid Edo trash.” Saitō’s influence left its mark: Kagoshima was for many years unable to appreciate Edo-period culture. Only now, Kagoshima noted, was he finally able to see its true value.

Until the early years of the Taishō period (1912–1926) few Japanese showed much respect for Edo-period culture. As I have argued elsewhere, even men open and receptive to Edo-period culture—for example, the novelists Nagai Kafû (1879–1959) and Shimazaki Tòson (1872–1943)—were receptive only because they had come into contact with European evaluations of the subject. These men were, in fact, almost entirely ignorant of Edo-period culture. Even thereafter, only a tiny minority, a few pioneers, showed some appreciation; the prevailing opinion within Japanese intellectual circles was similar to Saitō’s. Even fairly recently, such bias had not completely disappeared.

What, then, are the true weaknesses of Edo-period culture? Certainly, Edo-period architecture, painting, or Buddhist sculpture did not attain the heights they achieved during the Heian (784–1185) and Kamakura (1185–1333) periods. No Edo-period painting equals the “Yellow Fudō”; nor can Edo-period swords rival the blades forged by the master smiths from the houses of Aoe or Osafune. Much the same is true of Buddhist priests. Outstanding Japanese Buddhist priests are almost all from the Muromachi (1333–1573), Kamakura, Heian, and earlier periods. These priests contributed greatly to the establishment of Japan’s superb Buddhist culture. Great Edo-period priests are rare: Jiun (1718–1804) and Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768) are the exceptions that prove the rule. Edo-period culture did have its shortcomings; but the examples cited here are of an extremely limited nature and do not support the common view that Edo-period culture as a whole is weak.

The strength of Edo-period culture is not to be found in extant artifacts of the era. Rather, its strength lies chiefly in its spectacular breadth and diversity. This was a period of unprecedented cultural prosperity. Even the general public took part in leisure pursuits and played an active role in the creation of new cultural forms. The average commoner read books or visited the theater; some even wrote haiku verses and senryû (seventeen-syllable comic verse) or performed musical genres such as gidayû, katô bushi, shinnai, or nagauta. Others went on pilgrimages sponsored by religious associations (kô) and toured distant places. The Edo period saw a rise in the quality of
culinary fare that commoners consumed; clothing and housing too showed marked improvement. Even the poor managed occasionally to indulge in the luxury of purchasing a “custom-made” comb or an ornamental hairpin. The demand for such cultural items fostered the development of a highly refined handicraft industry. Never before had there been such an extraordinary variety of hand-made cultural artifacts in Japan.

Even in remote areas in the countryside or on distant, isolated islands, inhabitants cultivated rare varieties of flowers and trees and marketed unusual rocks or curiosities. As Suzuki Bokushi (1770–1842) noted in his Akiyama kikô (Autumn Mountain Travelogue, 1831), people in every corner of the land were busy manufacturing local specialties. Such articles were being produced, one by one, by thirty million people. By the late Edo period this activity had stimulated an unprecedented development of the transportation network. Mountain roads, waterways, and sea routes were extended in all directions to every nook and cranny of the country. Indeed, the construction of footpaths during the late Edo period can be seen as a kind of symbol of this golden age of handicraft culture.

No doubt, Japan today boasts a high level of culture. But the price has been high as well: severe environmental pollution and the wholesale destruction of nature. Until the end of the Edo period, red-crested cranes could still be seen soaring through the skies over the city; swans and geese flocked to Shinobazu Pond in Ueno Park. Foxes and badgers were found everywhere, and cuckoos (hototogisu) flourished in such numbers that their song was considered a nuisance. Even during the late Meiji period the water of the Sumida River was clean enough to be used for brewing tea while boating. Human activity imparted only minimal damage to nature. Viewed in this way, Edo-period culture seems almost ideal.

Certain elements of the Edo-period cultural heritage were vulgar, no doubt, but a more comprehensive view of the period reveals an almost infinite number of admirable qualities. Nevertheless, after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, governmental policies of modernization and westernization dictated a wholesale rejection of the preceding feudal era. Even the best elements of Edo-period culture were deemed outdated and vulgar and were thought to require prompt and thorough extirpation. That the true value of Edo-period culture could not yet be properly assessed had much to do with the lack of any inquiry into its origins and actual conditions. Recent research, however, has shown that Edo-period culture was outstanding in its own way and not at all inferior to the culture of earlier or later periods.
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Methods for Studying Edo-Period Culture

Research into the culture of the Edo period should have, I believe, three broad aims. First, this culture must be correctly evaluated and restored to its proper position. Past biases must be corrected; the actual conditions of this culture must be reappraised.

Second, the high level attained by handicrafts during this age must be explained. Edo-period handicraft culture developed throughout Japan, adapting itself to the natural conditions of each locality. Both Edo and Kyoto served as major cultural centers in which handicraft production was consolidated. In regional cultural centers such as Kanazawa or Kumamoto, diverse high-quality articles were also manufactured on a large scale.

Third, the relation of human beings and nature necessary for an ideal cultured life must be reconsidered. Something close to an ideal relation of production to consumption—that is, an ideal relation of people to nature—was, in fact, attained by the thirty million Japanese of the Edo period. Now I would like to outline some observations concerning the first two points.
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Toward a Correct Appreciation of Edo-Period Culture

A lack of adequate records of cultural activities of individual families during ancient and medieval times makes these eras difficult to research. This is much less true of the Edo period. During this age many houses kept detailed diaries and registers that can shed much light on contemporary cultural life.

Though of great importance, the splendid culture of the Edo-period warrior class has been especially neglected. Yet detailed records provide the researcher with much useful information. The upper-level warrior stratum kept meticulous diaries: examples include the *Matsudaira Yamato no kami niki* (Diary of Matsudaira, Governor of Yamato), the *En’yû niki* (Diary of Banquets and Amusements), and the *Moriyama Takamori niki* (Diary of Moriyama Takamori). “Secret transmissions” (*hidensho*) such as the *Heihô kaden-sho* (Transmissions of the House Concerning Warfare) by Yagyû Tajima-no-Kami Munenori (1571–1646), the *Gorin no sho* (Book of Five Rings) by Miyamoto Musashi (1584–1645), or the works on gunnery by Inatomi Ichimu (d. 1611) also constitute important historical sources. Writings of daimyo, tea masters, and literati such as Furuta Oribe (1543–1615), Kobori Enshû (1579–1647), or Katagiri Sekishû (Sadamasa, 1605–1673) are useful as well.

Such documents exist in profusion, and their analysis requires much time and effort. Close reading, however, soon reveals a remarkable phenomenon: that from around the middle of the seventeenth century, the city of Edo was becoming a cultural center of Japan. It soon rivaled Kyoto, which had been the center of culture since Heian times. Two clearly differentiated types of culture were now recognized. One was the culture of Kamigata (the “upper region,” the area including Kyoto and Osaka); the other was the culture of the city of Edo.

Kyoto continued to have an elite aristocratic cultural community. By contrast, the culture of Edo centered on a far larger upper-class warrior stratum. This cultured society included both daimyo stationed in the city and the upper echelon of warriors associated with the Tokugawa bakufû. Unlike the rootless, refined individuals of the Kyoto court, these warrior nobles of Edo ruled over innumerable lower-ranking warrior houses who were tethered to rural castle towns. Cultural exchange between Edo and rural areas was stimulated by a system of “alternate attendance” (*sankin kôtai*) that required daimyo to spend alternate years in their home province and in Edo. Incessant travel between Edo and the provinces, there-
fore, spread the influence of Edo upper-class culture throughout the land.

The developments of the city of Edo had important cultural consequences. Many artistic pursuits that had existed since the Heian period—martial arts (bugei) as well as leisure pursuits (yūgei)—were now reorganized as a geidō, an artistic “Way.” No less important, the Japanese language itself underwent changes. A lingua franca spoken by people throughout the land gradually arose. In addition, many customs and forms of etiquette that were to become the basis of a nationwide style of everyday life were born at this time.

A good example of warrior culture can be seen in handicrafts associated with the martial arts. This topic has been left largely unexplored; in fact it has almost been consigned to oblivion. Nevertheless, careful study reveals that corresponding to the demand for swords—the samurai’s favorite possession—designs on scabbards and fittings developed remarkably. When a new sword was ordered for occasions such as the ceremony accompanying the attainment of manhood (genpuku) or the acquisition of an official post, everything, including the design on the scabbard, was specified in great detail. Scabbards were adorned with an infinite variety of lacquer designs. This great diversity, one of the hallmarks of Edo-period culture, was the result of individual production of most articles. Scabbard designs show that Edo-period culture was not just varied but also highly refined and innovative.

Scabbard designs are by no means the only phenomenon that has received inadequate scholarly attention. In the past, for example, the kabuki and puppet theater were often portrayed as pointless, low-brow, and crude forms of theater. Strolling performers of shinnai and other genres of shamisen and vocal music were also seen as tainted by the sultry mood of the brothel areas. Even the tea ceremony, flower arranging, and other traditional arts have often been portrayed as somewhat less than truly artistic. When, for example, a school of fine arts was founded in Tokyo’s Ueno Park during the Meiji period, the Japanese government established a department of Western music but made no provisions for the study of traditional Japanese music. Today hardly anyone would agree with this policy, but it took many years before Japanese traditional music began to be regarded as equal in value to Western music. And it was not until after World War II that Japanese music was made part of the official public school curriculum.

During the Edo period the world of culture, with its many schools or styles (ryū) and its kemoto system, played a large role in providing the Edo-period populace with a sense of liberation. The outlines of
this cultural world can be pieced together from sources that have been handed down in each house (ie): lists of disciples, accounts of secret transmissions, and extant licenses issued to students. In the past, cultural historians simply tossed such sources aside, judging them unworthy of serious consideration. Such a disdain for Edo-period culture was still common after the war, when I began to collect and copy many records of disciples. Nevertheless, during the Edo period such registers, secret transmissions, and licenses had a profound significance. For these documents list artists’ names (geimei), haiku poets’ names (haimei), and other pseudonyms that were used by Edo-period citizens when they wished to achieve an imaginary transformation.

The discovery of this process of imaginary transformation, which has profound implications for Edo-period cultural history, did not result from a use of traditional research methods. It was, instead, the fruit of a thorough and stubborn investigation utilizing a broad range of hitherto unused historical sources. Such documents are available in nearly limitless abundance. Unearthing and carefully inspecting such sources opens up entirely new fields of inquiry.

There is yet another reason why Edo-period culture has not been properly appreciated: the influence of Chinese culture has not yet

Chinoiserie, Edo style. From Tōshisen ehon, 1791. (In the possession of the translator.)
been properly understood. During the Edo period Chinese culture was highly venerated. Its deep and lasting influence was important, not just for Japanese Confucianism and Confucian scholarship, but for a whole range of other pursuits as well. The effect of Chinese poetry and literature, or of Ming and Qing dynasty art and scholarship, can hardly be overestimated. For example, the book *Tianxia yitong zhi* (Records of All the World) greatly influenced the *fudoki* (gazetteers) produced throughout Japan. This volume was published as *Dai Min ittō-shi* (Records of the Ming Dynasty) at the beginning of the Genroku era (1688–1704) by a warrior from the Wakayama domain. Similarly, the volumes *Gai yu cong kao* (*Gaiyò sòkò* in Japanese) by Zhao Yi (1727–1814) were also profoundly influential. The respect for things Chinese lasted until the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), but thereafter the fact that Chinese culture had once been of great importance faded from memory.

Similarly, “Dutch learning” (that is, Western learning, *rangaku*) was also highly important during the Edo period. Over one hundred times throughout the Edo period, the chief of the Dutch settlement at Dejima in Nagasaki came to Edo to receive an audience and present gifts to the shogun. For some twenty or thirty days during the spring, the chief and his retinue stayed at the Nagasaki-ya, a lodge at Hongoku-chō. From around the middle of the Edo period, a number of cultured individuals made use of these few weeks to engage in unfettered cultural exchange with the Dutch. Japanese were strictly forbidden to enter the Dutch outpost of Dejima in Nagasaki, but within Edo much free activity was possible. After the Meiji Restoration, however, the diplomatic relations maintained by the Tokugawa bakufu with the Dutch were overshadowed by the Meiji government’s policy of strengthening ties with England, France, Germany, and the United States. In turn, much that concerned *rangaku* was forgotten. Although cultural exchange with the Dutch was once of great significance, its conditions and historical role have only recently begun to receive scholarly attention. Such examples show that Edo-period culture demands reevaluation. The type of historical perspective suggested here should begin to make a correct appraisal possible.

**Edo-Period Culture and Handicrafts**

Let us now turn to another area of inquiry: the sophisticated and widespread handicraft culture of the Edo period. Throughout its long history, Edo-period popular culture maintained a remarkably high standard. This is obvious, for example, in books of famous art-
works by Ogata Kōrin (1658–1716), published by Sakai Hōitsu (1761–1828) under the title Kōrin hyakuzu (One Hundred Drawings After Kōrin). Sakai transferred to woodblocks some two hundred of Ogata’s paintings, privately publishing the first volume of one hundred pictures for the 1815 Ogata centennial, the Buddhist ceremony of which he was in charge. The second volume followed eleven years later in 1826. Although Ogata was a highly respected artist at this time, publication of these books seems to have taken place with no concern for public demand. Yet a look at the preface written by Kameda Hōsai (1752–1826) for the first volume, or the preface written by Tani Bunchō (1763–1840) for the second, reveals that these men greatly praised “Saint Hōitsu” for making two hundred of Ogata’s pictures available to the public at large.

An outstanding example of Edo-period handicraft design is Katsushika Hokusai’s Imayō sekkin hiinagata (Modern Comb and Pipe Designs, published in 1822). This work presents one hundred and fifty designs for combs and an equal number of designs for the metal fittings of pipes. The publication of these marvelously detailed drawings demonstrates that Hokusai (1760–1849), in this way no different from Kōrin and Hōitsu, was not an artist who sought to produce museum pieces but, rather, a craftsman who lived in close contact with the common people. In other words, just as the general public could purchase and enjoy inexpensive ukiyo-e (woodblock prints) by Suzuki Harunobu (1725–1770), Kitagawa Utamaro (1753–1806), Tōshūsai Sharaku (fl. 1794–1795), and Utagawa Kunisada (1786–1864), it could also savor the drawings of Kōrin and Hōitsu and order such illustrations transferred onto combs and pipes, fans, screens, and sliding doors. During this age of handicrafts and custom-made articles, volumes by Hokusai and others functioned as catalogs that showed the public what was available. Collections of designs for small-sleeved kimono (kosode) had also been published since the early part of the Edo period. Similar catalogs existed for other articles as well. From these volumes, the public selected designs to be executed by highly skilled artisans, most of whom are not known to us by name today.

In the past, the study of much Edo-period culture was relegated to dilettantes, hobbyists, and collectors. But some collectors and so-called dilettantes have made important discoveries. Let me give a few illustrations. Takao Ryōichi was a highly cultured man who served as an administrator in the Imperial Household Agency and painted many wonderful sets for the kabuki. Since his student days he worked on a detailed study of the tens of thousands of senryū in the Haifū yanagidaru collection, filling over one hundred notebooks
Pipe designs by Katsushika Hokusai, as seen in *Imayō sekkin hiinagata*. From *Hokusai no e-tehon*, vol. 5 (Iwasaki Bijutsusha, 1986).

Comb designs by Katsushika Hokusai, as seen in *Imayō sekkin hiinagata*. From *Hokusai no e-tehon*, vol. 5 (Iwasaki Bijutsusha, 1986).
with commentary. As a result, the meaning of only about a dozen of these comic verses remains obscure. Yet this great work of scholarship, the fruit of a lifetime of painstaking research, remains almost entirely unknown. We must look with humility upon such unpublished works from which we have much to learn.

Two other scholars who have taught me much are Iwasa Ryōji and Watanabe Yoshitaka. Iwasa is an expert in Edo-period gardening; Watanabe has studied the cultivation of hybrid morning glories. A result of my visits to these two men was my study Kaei bunka shiron (An Examination of Kaei-Period [1848–1854] Culture). Although my study deals only with the development of the hybrid morning glory, I discovered that the culture of the 1840s and 1850s—the time from the Tenpō Reforms to the opening of Japanese harbors—was the high point of Japanese handicraft culture.

The development of hybrid morning glories was just one element of a refined and broadly based culture in which a high premium was placed on handmade articles. This culture included ukiyo-e woodcuts, flyers and chapbooks, the kabuki, storytelling, clothing, gardening, and much else. That this culture has often been labeled “decadent” merely reflects bias or sloppy and myopic research meth-

*Kosode* kimono designs. From Asai Ryōi, *Shinsen ohiinagata* (published in 1666). The design on the left is a rebus: *kasa* (sedge hat) plus *sagi* (snowy heron) equals *kasasagi* (magpie), a bird associated with the seventh-month Tanabata Festival. The design on the right features Mount Fuji and cherry blossoms.
Morning glories cultivated during the late Edo period. From Asagao sanjûrokkasen. (In the possession of the Tokyo Metropolitan Central Library.)
ods. Decadence can of course be found here; but the creative urge of the common citizenry of this era was nothing if not sound and healthy.

Finally, I must mention the so-called folk and popular performing arts. Today many Edo-period folk and popular arts survive only as shadows of their former selves. Their present inferior and debilitated versions have little of the vigor the originals once possessed. Since they lack the permanence enjoyed by works of pictorial or literary art, past forms of performing arts have been lost and their earlier states forgotten. Cultural history can breathe new life into such vanished forms only with great difficulty. Few scholars have recognized that many of these arts, though perhaps mediocre today, were in the past quite remarkable.

In sum, then, a proper evaluation of Edo-period culture calls for broad perspectives. Today there seems to be more reason than ever to review the possibilities latent in Edo-period culture. For this culture was made possible by two hundred years of peace and isolation, conditions entirely at odds with Japan’s history of war since the Meiji period. Perhaps now, at last, times of peace will once again prevail. This respite should allow us to rethink the conditions necessary for leading cultured lives.