

Some Parallelisms seen in Japanese and Western Village Types

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Geographers as the students of regions, have a general tendency particularly to emphasize regional difference of areas they study. Needless to say, it is one of the very important approaches to the study of the various regions of the world, the analysis of which is the matter of their scientific concern, and the comparative study of regions makes an indispensable part of the geography. Sometimes, however, there is a danger involved in it that one might overlook the real aspects of the things hidden behind the superficial and incidental differences. Very often, things which look entirely different might be found similar seen in a little different ways of interpretation. We have to look for the similarity as well as the difference when we analyze the nature of various regions.

To take an example of Japanese village types, they are in many ways very different from those in the Western world. They have developed with an entirely different historical background, within a country which had little cultural exchange with the Western world. The difference is very thorough in every aspect of the villages. In Japan, most of the houses are built with timber and mud, and are not so durable as the stone or brick houses. Not only in the building materials, there is also a radical difference in their house types. The ways of farm management are not the same, giving an entirely different outlook to the general aspects of their villages. Thus considered, it is easy to understand that the types of villages thus developed are, in general, much different from those developed in Europe and in the New World. Here we have to make clear the concept of the word "village type". Village type is a vague word which needs to be defined more accurately. According to the general usage of the term, and also being a student of cultural landscape, the author intends to emphasize in it the morphological elements, summarizing such aspects as the arrangement of houses, roads, arable land, and so on, in short the ways in which the villages are seen in the maps. Thus defined too, it is easy to perceive the strong difference between Oriental and Western village types.

However, when one looks at them in a slightly different light, he might be surprised to find quite a few resemblances, or parallelisms, between the village types of entirely different parts of the world. Some of such parallelisms may be mere coincidences, while others may have come out of some cultural contacts. Seen

from geographical viewpoint, there can be no pure coincidences. All the cultural landscapes have some geographical reasons for their development, and the things which seemingly resemble each other as the result of mere coincidences may have some geographical reasons common to them to develop their apparent resemblance. This notion to look for parallelisms as well as differences will be very important to understand a region geographically, because the comparative studies can be perfect only by combining the both ways of interpretation.

How then can one say that there are parallelisms between geographical phenomena in regions which are so different, and which have had no direct communication for so many centuries? It is necessary to give some reasonings to insist the idea that there are resemblances between Oriental and Western village types. This will be the issue of this short paper.

Influence of cultural contacts on village types.

Village type is an element of cultural landscape as a whole, and there are cases in which a village type in a region has developed under the direct influence from another culture or cultures. Examples of such cases can be found in the history of this country too. In the early history of Japan, there is a case of villages whose plans were laid out under a land-system which was directly modelled after the system in China of Tang Dynasty. To this type of villages which is called *Jori*, some references will be made in the later chapter, but as it is the influence from China, it has nothing directly to do with the subject of this paper. Direct cultural exchanges did not happen between Japan and the Western world until much later, and not to the extent that might influence the general pattern of villages.

In a much more recent period, and in a restricted part of Japan, however, we did have villages whose layout might have been influenced by the contacts with the Western culture. Such are the villages of the early settlers of Hokkaido. In the later part of 19th century, the island of Hokkaido which till then remained as an undeveloped frontier of Japan, was put in the program of development under government encouragement and subsidy. Settlers were sent under so-called *Tonden-hei* system, or colonial-troop system, in which the settlers were considered to be farmers as well as soldiers to defend the island in case of necessity.

One of the most remarkable characteristics of this program was that in the colonization of Hokkaido, the agriculture in the United States was studied and was taken as a model. The climatic conditions of the Northeastern part of the United States were considered very similar to those in this island, and the agriculture of the Northeastern United States was taken as a model of agricultural development of Hokkaido. Many specialists especially in the field of agriculture were invited from the United States, and took part in the projects of the

colonization of the island. It is not surprising to find today marked resemblance in the agricultural aspects as well as in the village types in Hokkaido, which developed in this period or developed later under their influence, with such in the Northeastern United States.

Hokkaido in those days was a frontier with abundance of land, and the settlers were allotted with a piece of land which was much larger than the size of farms in the Main Island. They got obligation to clear the forests and bushes, and to cultivate the land they were allotted within limited years, and when they fulfilled the conditions they could own the land. Plans of new villages were laid out for the settlers. Unlike those in the Older Japan, the villages were characterized by their regular patterns, which often paid little attention to the details of landforms and other physical conditions. Roads were built with right angles, and the houses were arranged along the roads with even distances. In general, we can notice a close resemblance in them with American villages in the districts where the influence of township system is strong, although there may be quite a few differences in the size of the farms and in the types of houses. It is not necessary perhaps to point out the existence of casual western-style houses and even silos in Hokkaido. Although they are the result of direct influence from American culture, they do not in themselves make the core of the concept of a village type.

Such cases in which we may find the results of direct influence from the Western culture on our village type are rather exceptional. In a country like Japan where the origin of the most of the villages is unknown going back hundreds and often thousands of years in their foundation, it is logically impossible to find in their original plans any influence from outside cultures.

Parallelisms as the result of human adaptation to similar environmental conditions.

When we look at the village type as the final result of human adaptation to the environments both physical and cultural, there will be the basis to look for further parallelisms between Japanese and Western village types in various regions with supposedly resembling environmental conditions. Environment is a very tricky word as a term of geography, and it is apt to provoke an easy misinterpretation and attacks from the people who are well prepared to do so. Nevertheless, it is of no use to pretend not to understand the importance of the concept of the environmental influence in the study of geography. What matters is not to argue whether there are any influences from the environment, but how to grasp the influences accurately.

In the concept to understand the cultural landscape as the final result of

man's adaptation to the nature, we find the reasoning to look for the parallelisms in regions with resembling physical conditions. Thus we interpret the similarities found in some of the village types seen in specific districts of this country with those in some parts of the Western countries under resembling physical conditions. It is easy to enumerate examples. For instance, a village will take a form of a street-village when it develops along the narrow coast under a sea-cliff, or along the foot of a fault-scarp. In both cases, the landform will influence the development of the road along which the village will be formed. Such examples are numerous both in Japan and in the Western world. In the same way, the disseminated villages are usually distributed in the regions with low productivity, and accordingly with low population densities. In Japan, there are not many examples of disseminated villages, and it is not surprising when we think of the high population density in this country. However, we do have a few examples especially in the swampy lowlands and in some alluvial fans. We can find no general rules either historical or physical, for the development of such scattered villages in this country.

In the lower reaches of some rivers in Japan, there are villages whose general patterns show remarkable resemblances with the village types developed in the lowlands in some parts of Europe, such as those called *Polder* in Netherlands and *Kor* in Denmark. In such lowlands in Japan, the villages are located in swampy deltas and are surrounded by embankments. Many canals run across the villages, and are used for the purpose of irrigation as well as drainage. Houses are built on artificial platforms, and are protected from dampness and floods which are frequent in such lowlands. In some part of Japan, this type of villages is called *Waju* meaning **encircled by embankments** literally. Thus the village types both in Japan and Europe developed as the result of the reclamation of swamps show striking resemblances in their major aspects in spite of some major differences as well. Here, for instance, the dominant form of landuse is as rice fields, while it is as pastures there. There, the main problem is to protect the land from the invasion of the sea, while here, the most serious menace comes from the rivers which cause disastrous floods almost every year especially in the seasons of typhoons.

Most of the houses in *Waju* have their store-houses which are usually built on the best protected spots of their house-lots, and on the platforms higher than the ones for the houses themselves. In case of emergency, the store-houses are the places of refuge both for the people and their treasures.

Until the recent introduction of electric pumps, the people of *Waju* had relied on their ingenious device to drain the superfluous water. That was to extend

subfluvial pipes from the lower ends of the villages to the spots where the river bottom is low enough to drain the water. Now, electric pumps are used widely. This is only an example of the progress. Modern development of technology has already made most of their devices unnecessary. To geographers, it is very interesting to observe the ways in which the villagers still stick to their old forms unconsciously. The houses are still built on the platforms, and the store-houses are still erected at the highest spots of the house-lots.

The resemblances due to the similarity of human devices.

When men are confronted with the problems of village plannings in regions of natural conditions not too different one another, their solutions cannot be too diversified. Although most of Japanese villages are too ancient in their origin to know the history of their beginning, we do have some villages whose plans were laid out artificially, and which still preserve in their general aspects the influence of original plannings.

In the 7th century, most of the then cultivated areas of Japan were redivided and redistributed to the farmers under so-called *Jori* system. This agrar system was taken after that in China of Tang Dynasty. Plains were divided into squares of 6 cho (approximately two-thirds of a kilometer), each of which were subdivided into 36 squares. Roads and irrigation canals were also arranged according to the land-division which generally followed the directions of cardinal points. After more than a dozen of centuries, we can still observe today clear influences of this original land plans in the village type in many parts of Old Japan, especially in the areas surrounding Nara, the ancient capital. Some of Japanese geographers have compared these *Jori* villages with the European villages influenced by Roman centuriation. As far as the historical antiquity is concerned, and also in the fact that the old influences are still clearly seen, the comparison is very valid.

In the later part of Edo period, the reclamation of waste land was strongly encouraged by central and local governments. It was the days of feudalism, and many of the feudal lords took lead in the reclamation of the lands which till then remained unused, mainly in the uplands and in the swamps. The villages thus founded in this period are called *Shinden*, which literally means new fields.

In their general patterns, *Shinden* are of various types from one place to another according to the diversified circumstances which led the people to the reclamation. Some of the *Shinden* villages were developed as the result of reclamation of uplands which till then had been woodlands. One of these types is seen in the case of *Shinden* villages in Musashino upland not too far from the present

city of Tokyo. There, the reclamation was commenced by the construction of irrigation canals across the upland, and the village plans were laid along the canals and the roads built along the former. The pattern of villages thus developed shows an astonishing resemblance to the type of villages in Central Europe developed as the result of colonization of forests; such type of villages which Western colleagues call *Waldhufendorf*. There is only one explanation for this marked resemblance for the origin of which there is no reason to suspect any cultural contact, and the explanation is the similarity of human ways of thinking.

The parallelism found in the cultural landscape in various parts of the world is in itself a matter of geographical importance, as it is the final result of reciprocal actions between environment and human response. The stronger one of these factors, the more evident the parallelism in the cultural landscape accomplished. In this sense, we can expect the existence of strong parallelism in the modernized world of today, when human factor as the builders of cultural landscape is overwhelmingly forceful.

Now it is the time to pay attention to the worldwide phenomenon of this century, the urbanization. All over the world, the rapid growth of modern cities is changing the landscape of not only the cities themselves, but also that of the countryside near the big cities into residential sections. Lands are divided into house-lots with geometrical outlines, straight and wide roads are constructed, and many multistoried apartment houses are built, to change the suburban areas into solid agglomerations of blocks of gray buildings. Many of these residential sections of modern cities look very similar all over the world. Indeed, it betrays the poverty of human devices in spite of the efforts of architects who exert themselves to give personality to their productions. In this point, Japan is not an exception, and we can find many similarities in the landscape of Japanese suburban areas to that of Western cities.

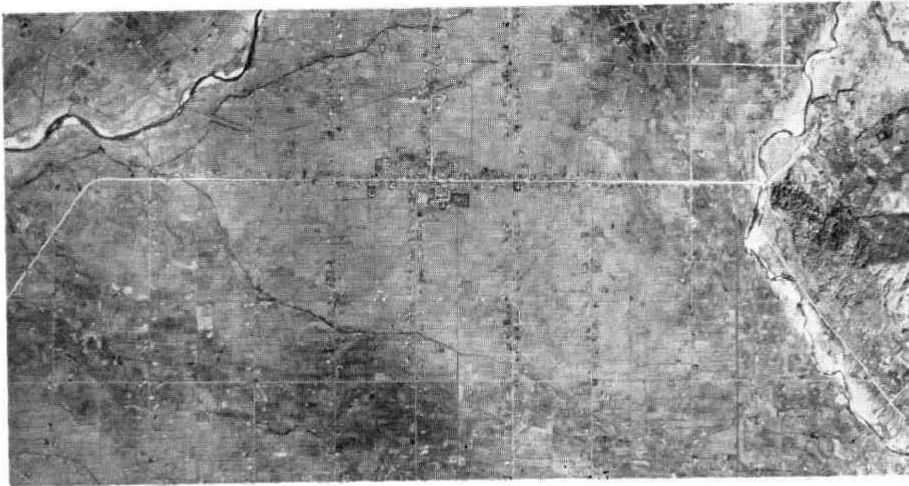


Photo 1. Tonden-hei village in Hokkaido. Notice the rectangular pattern and the arrangement of the houses.

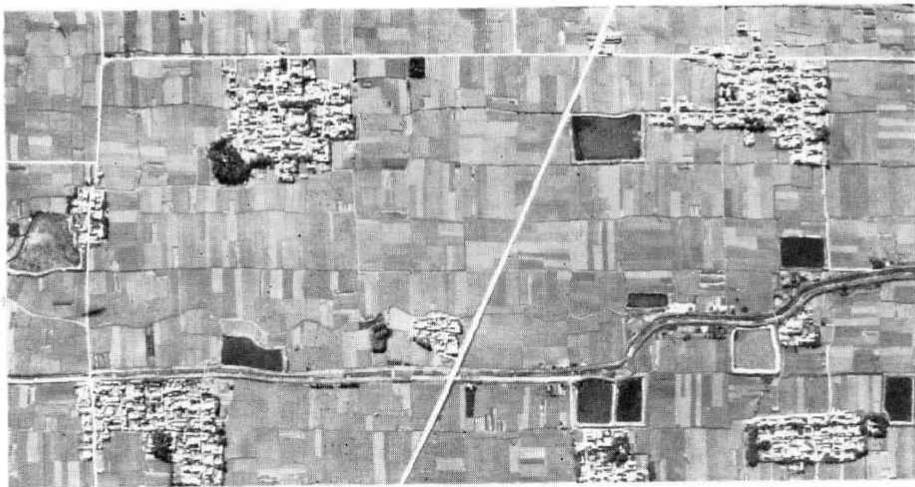


Photo 2. Waju, the Japanese version of Polder. The houses are located along the embankments or on the natural levees.



Photo 3. Jori village in Yamato Basin. Notice the arrangement of roads, settlements and irrigation ponds.