Creation and Development of Guideposts in the Edo Period and in the Later Periods

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It is not too hard to imagine how helpful guideposts were for ancient travelers who had to set out for the practically unknown. Little research, however, has been made from the standpoint of transportation history on the importance of guideposts, indispensable though they were as part of the transportation facilities at the time. The purpose of this paper is to add to what little research there has been made about the guideposts by evaluating the significance of them in the Edo period as well as in the Meiji period or later, and by analyzing those that have survived to this day.

In the Edo period, guideposts construction was not regarded as belonging to the governmental works. Most guideposts were built by individuals and were made of wood. Although the remaining guideposts are all made of stone, many wooden guideposts may be observed in some wood-printed works by Hiroshige or in some wood-printed works entitled 'Tokaido Goju San Tsugi (Fifty-Three Stops on the Tokaido Road)'. Simply, guideposts made of wood did not survive, and no research can be made about them now.

Guideposts in the Edo period were built by individuals, post-town locals or religious groups with official approvals from the authorities. In the cases of Kusatsu post-town on Tokaido, Sakaimachi on Nikko Reiheishi road, and Naka-Utsunomiya post-town on Nikko road, builders of guideposts had to get approvals from the local fief who in turn had to get approvals from the transportation magistrate of the Bakufu.

In minor roads, unlike the five major national roads or their equivalents, to which the above mentioned roads belonged to, approvals for building guideposts were granted unofficially by village superintendents although officially approvals were to be granted by the local government.

Very few historical documents exist from the Edo period for guideposts and little is known about them. In the Meiji period, however, a distinct change may be observed in the significance of guideposts and in the way they were built.

The Meiji government decreed in December, the sixth year of Meiji that mileage
from station to station and from village to village should be correctly measured. The Edo Bakufu attempted to unify the weights and measures at the beginning of the Edo period but failed to do so as the unit of mileage differed from place to place; in some places one Ri counted 36 Cho whereas in other places one Ri counted something else. The methods of measurement were also too poor to be correct.

The Meiji government also decreed that an initial post should be erected at the seat of a prefectural office and that mileage posts should be erected at every village. Both of them were made of wood. The mileage posts also served as guideposts. They were used, however, as instruments for national control as well. For example, initial posts were inscribed with the mileage to Tokyo or Kyoto and mileage posts were inscribed with the mileage to the seat of prefectural offices. With these posts, the government must have tried to indicate that the old regime had ended and the new regime had started.

The remaining guideposts show that they served not only as guideposts but as targets of worship as well: they were made images of Jizo deities or monuments of Kojin deities. Stone guideposts first appeared in the southern part of Kanto in the Genroku period and greatly increased in number year after year.

The oldest guidepost in the Kansai area, found in the city of Osaka, was erected much later than most of the remaining guideposts in the Kanto area. Most of the guideposts in Kansai are inscribed with much larger characters and easier to read than their counterparts in Kanto.

Among the guideposts surveyed this time are included ones in Chiba prefecture, which are characteristically different from the rest: they are typically new. Many of them were erected in the Meiji period or later. The time of their erection coincided with the period that monument-building nationally came into fad in about the tenth year of Meiji. In Chiba where they did not produce many stones suited for building monuments, people seemed to have satisfied their craving for monuments by erecting much simpler guideposts instead.

The government tried to control the monument-building, which had become too rampant, but the fad did not show any signs of subsiding. Especially in the Taisho period, monuments for commemorating the late Meiji Emperor stood in many places as high as 2 to 3 meters, commanding official recognition.

Most guideposts were erected for religious or charitable causes, or as status symbols
for the builders. Some magical effect might also have been expected. Village name inscribed on a stone was expected to expel evils visiting the village.

Guideposts are getting revived attention as cultural assets now. They have received little attention from researchers, however. This paper is an attempt to illuminate them from academic standpoint.