Festivals and Excursions in the Edo Period Castle Towns

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This paper looks on the example of the castle town of Sendai in examining the “locations” at which the townspeople of castle towns in the Edo period gathered for amusement and how these amusement “locations” were perceived by the feudal lords.

Throughout the Edo period, there was no officially acknowledged red-light district in the castle town of Sendai and no permanent facilities for theatrical performances, but specified areas for performing religious ceremonies were specially allowed licenses to put on performances such as puppet shows, guaranteeing a place for the townspeople to come and enjoy themselves. There were six such facilities for religious ceremonies in the castle town and in addition, the commercial districts of Shiogama and Iwanuma near the castle town also had similar facilities. These temples and shrines were either those where local gods and buddhas that had originally been enshrined before Date, Lord of the Sendai clan, gained control of Sendai were absorbed by Date or those that were built in reverence of Date, and both types have a deep connection with Date. In other words, the locations chosen to have special licenses for theatrical performances were linked to the clan leader and, by limiting theatrical performances to such locations, the townspeople were made to feel that amusement was a favor bestowed upon them by the lord.

Along with theatrical performances, outdoor resorts where people could enjoy nature according to the season, for example through excursions to view cherry blossoms or hagi (Japanese bush clover), were established starting in the late eighteenth century. The origins for this trend can be attributed to the landscaping policies for places of interest in the seventeenth century put in effect by Lord Date Tsunamura. In 1695, Tsunamura built a shakado (shrine for Siddhartha, or Sakya-muni) in Tsutsujigaoka with cherry trees all around and opened the area to the general public, establishing it as a place where the people strongly felt gratitude to their lord. On the other hand, Tsutsujigaoka was one in a selection of places of interest revived by Tsunamura stretching from the castle town of Sendai to Shiogama and Matsushima, and it can be said that by intentionally gathering time-honored places of interest around the castle, Tsunamura asserted the authority of the castle and “decorated” it symbolically. As seen above, the intention of the feudal lord played a large part in the establishment of outdoor resorts.