Landscape of the Eastern Part of the Tokyo Lowlands: Features of the Landscape in Kasai and Their Transformation

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The area of lowland that extends over the eastern part of the Tokyo metropolis is called the Tokyo Lowlands. At one time the Tokyo lowlands served as a boundary between Musashino Province and Shimousa Province, with the Sumidagawa River serving as the boundary between the two provinces prior to the Edo Era. The region east of the Sumidagawa River that is comprised by present-day wards of Katsushika, Edogawa, Sumida and Koto has historically been referred to as Kasai.

During the Edo Era many inhabitants of Edo visited Kasai on the outskirts of Edo, which served as recreational area. Historical materials from the time such as “Yureki Zakki” by the Jippo-an Keijun and the “Karyo Kiko” of MURAO Masayasu allow us to form of picture of what it was like there.

KATO Takashi has suggested that “problems related to the urbanization of Edo and the view of nature and urban beliefs of urban dwellers lay behind the development of extensive recreational activities of the citizens of Edo from the eighteenth century onwards” and says “it was through interaction with nature and empathy with Shinto and Buddhism that famous places promised a ‘kinobashi (feeling of relaxation)’ to the citizenry of Edo.” This paper focuses on this suggestion, and by discovering the nature of the landscape of the Kasai region, which was visited by the people of Edo, the aim is to employ these landscape features to shed light on part of the regionality of Kasai situated in the Tokyo lowlands.

The findings of this investigation suggest that the Kasai landscape was an open expanse with a commanding view and that it had a river landscape consisting largely of riversides. In Kasai there is a concentration of rivers and it was made up of flat land with few undulations as one would expect of lowland. The land had “an indescribable natural beauty” and reeds grew thick by the water’s edge and the “nature” of the open land was formed by an interweaving of grasses and flowers, trees and birds. We also learn that the people of Edo were very fond of its wonderful vistas. Nakagawa and Koidamé were places where fishermen gathered for recreation and relaxation.

From the eighteenth century onwards Kasai, which had become a place where the citizens of Edo enjoyed a “feeling of relaxation” and which had been described in the “Edo Meisho Zue (An Illustrated Guide to Celebrated Places of Edo),” saw not only the establishment of temple and shrine events, festivals and religious worship, but also the construction of tea houses and other places of relaxation in order to entertain the people of Edo. The preparation of local delicacies such as dishes made from freshwater fish,
the establishment of beautiful flower gardens, and the operation of towboats across the Hikifunegawa River that linked Edo and Kasai set the scene for an area that offered leisure and relaxation.

However, from the Modern Era onwards the extensive tracts of open land known as Kasai were divided up as a result of the digging of water discharge channels for the Arakawa River. While the land was being consumed by the wave of urbanization that had been spurred on by the dual disasters of the Great Kanto Earthquake and the Second World War, the landscape of Kasai that had been admired by the people of Edo vanished as even the views of the sky narrowed and the rivers became polluted. All that remains of the landscape of Kasai from the Early Modern Period are the glimpses afforded by Horikiri Shobuen (Horikiri iris garden) and Mizumoto Park.