A Re-examination of Garbage Disposal in Edo: Beyond the Image of a “Recycling City” and “Clean City”

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Amid the heightened interest in the “global environment” that has been present since the second half of the 1980s there has been an acceptance of discourses that view Japan’s cities during the Early Modern Period, notably Edo, as “recycling cities” and “clean cities.” This image has been constructed within a re-evaluation of the society and culture of Edo that took place during the 1980s, and has been intensified owing to the subsequent rise in interest concerning the environment. The basis for these arguments is the existence of a garbage recycling system that entailed the existence of a variety of “recycling industries” in Edo and the distribution of night soil, which maintained a cleanliness that was superior to that found in Western cities during the same period. However, the author believes that this evaluation overstates the situation. In this paper he makes a re-examination of the garbage disposal systems and criticize their recent representation.

ITO Yoshiichi has already undertaken detailed empirical research on garbage disposal systems. Although these systems that involved the collection, transportation and disposal through reclamation carried out by contractors did in fact continue up until 1918 when a system operated directly by Tokyo city that covered the whole city was introduced, there were in the Early Modern Period problems on the sanitation front that preceded the concept of “public sanitation.” What is more, this system was applied to merchant neighborhoods in the central part of Edo and did not apply to the towns on the outskirts or the areas where warriors lived. The author’s study has shown that contracts were not made with garbage contractors in the towns, and it has been possible to confirm that there were towns where garbage was buried in the grounds of residences. With regard to the areas where warriors lived, garbage sites were built on the periphery of the grounds of the residence of the feudal lord and though the peasants who came and went to do cleaning took out the garbage, it has been discovered that unlawful disposal of waste continued unabated. Further, from the Early Modern Period onwards garbage from Edo was used as fertilizer in some regions in Chiba Prefecture and the continuation of this relationship into the Modern Era impeded the development of disposal by means of incineration.

Most of the writings related to garbage in Edo are founded on ITO Yoshiichi’s research and by concentrating on systems alone they have magnified the image of “the clean city of Edo.” It must be said that this kind of discourse which describes Early Modern cities as clean cities is indeed dangerous. In the future it will be necessary to investigate the situation by including areas besides systems and to look at garbage disposal in Edo from a comprehensive perspective.