

On the characteristics of traditional rural villages in Japan relative to those in Korea

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## 1. Introduction

Eitaro Suzuki, a well-known sociologist who contributed to the establishment of rural sociology in Japan, published “The Principles of Japanese Rural Sociology (Nihon Noson Shakaigaku Genri)” in 1940. In particular, his concept of the “natural village,” which he proposed in this book, remains influential in current studies of rural society in Japan. Suzuki moved to Korea under Japanese colonial rule as a professor at Keijyo (Seoul) Imperial University in 1942. He conducted fieldwork in rural Korea and attempted to apply this concept as a framework for comparing rural societies in Japan and Korea.

In the aforementioned book, Suzuki illustrated the characteristics of a “natural village” from two perspectives. First, plural functional social groups are organized in a multilayered manner within the sphere of a “natural village.” Second, a “natural village” is a “social unit” with members who share a social consciousness (the “spirit of the village”) and who are bound to one another by this spirit.

Suzuki found similar types of social groups within the Mura (村) in Japan and the Dongri (洞里) in Korea. He concluded that the Mura and Dongri can be regarded as “natural villages.” In addition, Suzuki suggested that to clarify the unity of a “natural village,” not only social groups but also common interest groups (groups with members who share a common interest) and social differentiation within a “natural village” should be taken into consideration.

Hiroshi Honda considered Suzuki’s suggestion and analyzed common interest groups and social differentiation in a Dongri. He reached the following conclusions. First, there were two classes in a given Dongri: an elite ruling class, “yangbang” (兩班), and a commoner class with different cultural traditions. Second, the social networks of the former class, an indispensable social resource required for class members to maintain their social hegemony, were organized within the area of a county, extending beyond the Dongri area in which individuals reside. Third, Dongri commoners frequently moved away due to the lack of a stable social and economic foundation.

According to the prior literature, these three characteristics are regarded as useful traits in clarifying differences between the Mura and Dongri. Only commoners

lived in Muras, and social networks were essentially organized, affording commoners little mobility. In this paper, in contrast to prior discussions given by Honda and other authors, similar characteristics of the Mura and Dongri are emphasized from the three aforementioned perspectives, and concrete phenomena observed in Muras in the Edo era are discussed.

## 2. Method: Examination of Honda's arguments

In this paper, we examine whether Honda's arguments regarding the Japanese Mura are true or not to relativize differences of Mura and Dongri and to present new results through a comparative study.

We do this for the following reason: to deny the Korean Dongri as a "natural village." Honda's paper focuses differences between Japan and Korea too much, while their similarities are neglected. Not every Japanese Mura was necessarily a "natural village," as "natural village" is an abstract concept.

Before we examine Honda's arguments, we confirm three main points of Honda's discussion on the "natural village" that are examined and reevaluated in this paper as mentioned above. The first point concerns the mobility of Mura residents. Honda insists that the mobility of Mura residents was very low and almost absent during the Edo Era. The second point concerns Mura social classes. According to Honda, the Mura only included commoners, "hyakusho" (百姓), with no ruling classes during the Edo period, unlike premodern and modern Korea. The third point on networks extending beyond the Mura relate to the second point in that Honda noted that in lacking ruling classes in Muras, rural Japan included no networks extending beyond Muras in the Edo era.

## 3. Results

### 1) The limited mobility of Mura residents

Regarding the mobility of Mura residents, Yoshihiro Sakane holds the same opinion. He is a specialist of Japanese modern rural history whose work has had a strong impact on understandings of rural Japan but lacks evidence-based analysis. According to Sakane, the mobility of Mura residents was very limited in contrast to that observed in China and Korea, as the number of households in each Mura was fixed in premodern Japan (Sakane 2011).

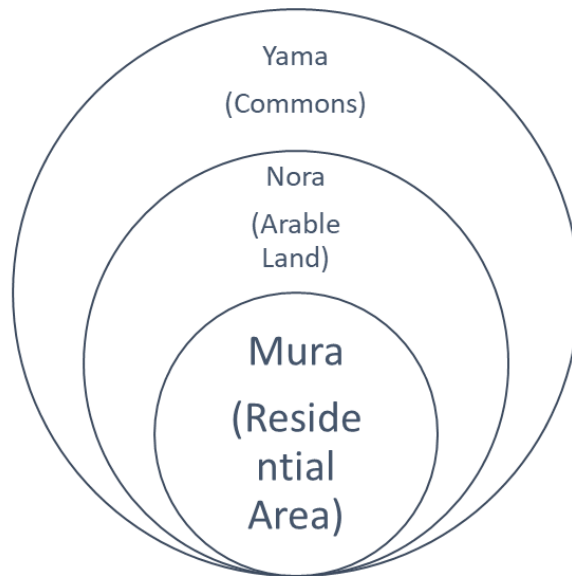
The argument of Honda and Sakane was opposed by many specialists of premodern Japanese history, citing fluctuations in the number of Mura households, as Japanese Muras suffered from population shortages due to high infant mortality rates and high rates of resident mobility (Hirano 2004, Toishi 2017, Owaki 2019).

A special adoption system kept fluctuations in the number of households small despite high rates of resident mobility (Toishi 2017). The adoption system was used to transfer kabushiki (株式会社) to immigrants (Owaki 2019, Toishi 2017). The number of kabushiki holders within each Mura was usually fixed or at least controlled by the Muras (Naito 1968, Hirano 2004, Brown 2011, Toishi 2017, Owaki 2019). In many Muras, especially those in eastern Japan, where populations declined over the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the number of households was less than the number of kabushiki holders, meaning that Muras were suffering from population shortages.

Kabushiki conferred membership to a Mura and rights to residential land, arable land and the commons (Naito 1968, Brown 2011, Toishi 2017). Kabushiki corresponds to the famous model developed by Ajiro Fukuda, who categorizes a Mura's resources into three elements essential to Japanese farming (Fukuda 1983): "Mura," "Nora," and "Yama" (Fig. 1). "Mura" refers to the residential area designated for Mura residents. "Nora" refers to arable land, which includes paddy fields, farmland, etc. Finally, "Yama" refers to the commons such as forests or grasslands, where Mura residents can collect green manure and fodder for cattle or horses. However, Mura commons do not necessarily include forests or grassland and can include rivers, ponds, lakes, seas, etc. These natural resources are governed by each Mura. Usually, only regular members of "Mura" were granted access to all three elements during the Edo era.

Non-kabushiki holder residents of Muras usually called "mizunomi" (水呑) had access to arable land, but their access to the commons was restricted. They were also excluded from decision-making regarding Mura governance.

Fig. 1 Three elements of Mura resources



## 2) Social classes in Muras: noncommoners in Muras

Honda also argued that there were only commoners, “hyakusho” (百姓), in Muras with no ruling classes. Thus, there were no “bushi” (武士) classes in Muras. Bushi, more widely known as *samurai* in international contexts, were originally designated as warriors but also served as bureaucrats to their feudal lords, e.g., shogun or daimyos. This is unlike the tradition in Korea, where “civilian control” or armies led by bureaucrats was very important and where bureaucrats were always considered superior to warriors. Hence, while the Chinese character for the premodern ruling class “shi” (士) translates as the warrior class in Japanese, it translates as bureaucrat in Korean.

In general, much of the bushi population lived in urban areas surrounding castles of daimyos or shogun. Whether bushi lived in rural areas or not is a quite controversial topic among specialists of Japanese premodern history (Imamura 2018, Owaki 2019). In some areas such as Kagoshima, Akita and Choshu, bushi lived rural areas. In other areas such as Kinki and Kumaoto, some hyakushos became bushi by purchasing the status. They kept living in the rural areas after getting the bushi status.

However, we can examine Honda’s argument without discussing this issue. We can observe other social classes that differ from commoners within Muras, as there was social labor division by occupation in Muras.

The most important occupation in most Muras was, of course, farming, as the most important activity in Edo Japan was agriculture, as bushi life was dependent on

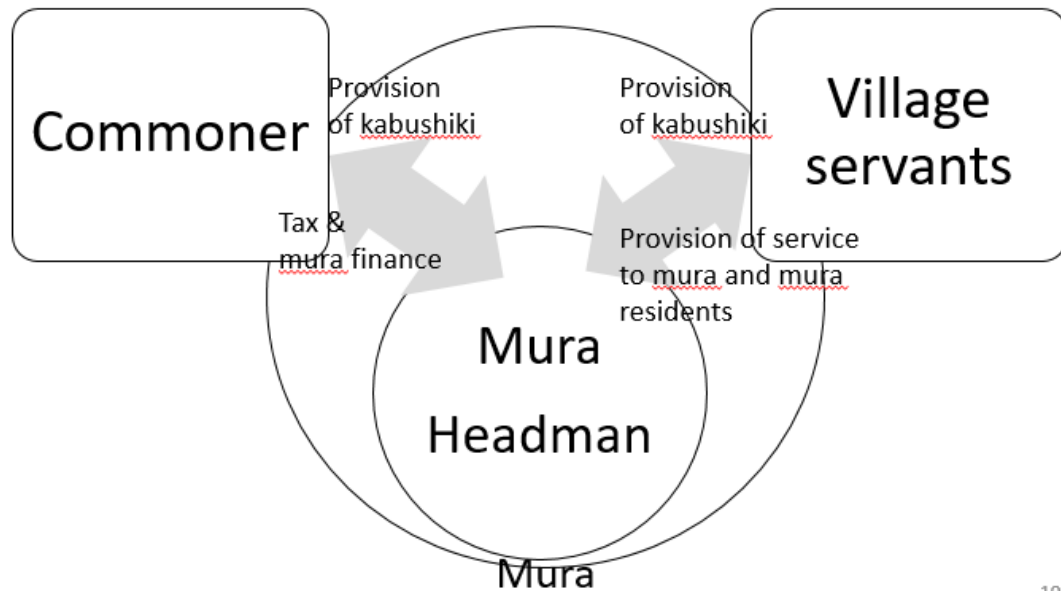
land taxes, which hyakushos paid. Officially, commoners or hyakushos were obligated to serve as farmers (Toishi 2017).

As Muras were obligated to pay land taxes to feudal lords, each Mura considered it an obligation for nonfarmers to provide necessary services in support of farming. Thus, each Mura hired village servants who provided services to farmers. Village servants or “ban-hinin” (番非人) included Buddhist priests and craftsmen, such as carpenters, blacksmiths, woodcutters, etc. (Hadano City 1982, Shinomiya 1999, Wakino 2006). Among village servants, untouchables like ban-hinins and Buddhist priests were especially common in most Muras. Ban-hinins engaged in the collection of dead bodies of cattle or horses and worked as policeman. Buddhist priest managed Mura temples and shrines, and provided religious services and mental care to Mura residents when religious events such as Mura festivals or funerals were held. We must exercise caution here because traditional Japanese agriculture did not involve animal husbandry due to cultural biases. Thus, the occupations of so-called untouchables such as ban-hinins belonged to the non-agricultural sector in the Edo era.

Unlike hyakushos, village servants, ban-hinins and Buddhist priests, in particular, were considered “marginal” classes by contemporaries, including policy makers. Thus, they were considered different from hyakushos in both institutions and functions. They were excluded from the marriage networks of hyakushos. Many sects of Buddhism required priests to be celibate, and hyakushos refused to marry or eat with untouchable groups, producing a strict system of discrimination.

The occupations of village servants were considered a form of kabushiki. Nonfarming kabushikis were granted access to compensation from Muras and were obligated to provide occupation-specific services to Muras and Mura residents and to hyakushos in particular. In contrast, the hyakusho’s kabushiki came with an obligation to contribute Mura land tax payments to feudal lords and to Mura finance systems.

Fig. 2: Mura and kabushiki



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### 3) Social networks beyond the Mura

According to Honda, there were no social networks beyond Muras due to a lack of ruling classes living in rural areas. By contrast, according to him, the ruling class in Korea had a very powerful network that extended beyond the Dongri and that was mainly contained within the “gun” (郡), the most important unit in rural Korea in premodern times.

However, as noted in the last chapter, other social classes of people in Mura largely worked as village servants. This dismantles Honda’s third argument that no networks beyond Muras existed in rural Japan during the Edo era, and thus his assumptions should re-examined.

We also observed that untouchables and Buddhist priests were excluded from marriage networks of the hyakusho class. However, they had their own networks. When a Buddhist priest did not wish to work in his Mura any longer due to old age or illness, he would ask the network of his sect to send someone to replace him. Untouchables used their own networks to find marriage partners because it was impossible to find a potential partner to marry within Muras due to their population sizes. The networks of other social classes, such as carpenters, included “gun” (郡)-sized networks in western Japan during the Edo era (Fujita 2013). Like other social classes, carpenters’ networks functioned as legal units and business territories (Takagaki 2012, Fujita 2013, Imamura

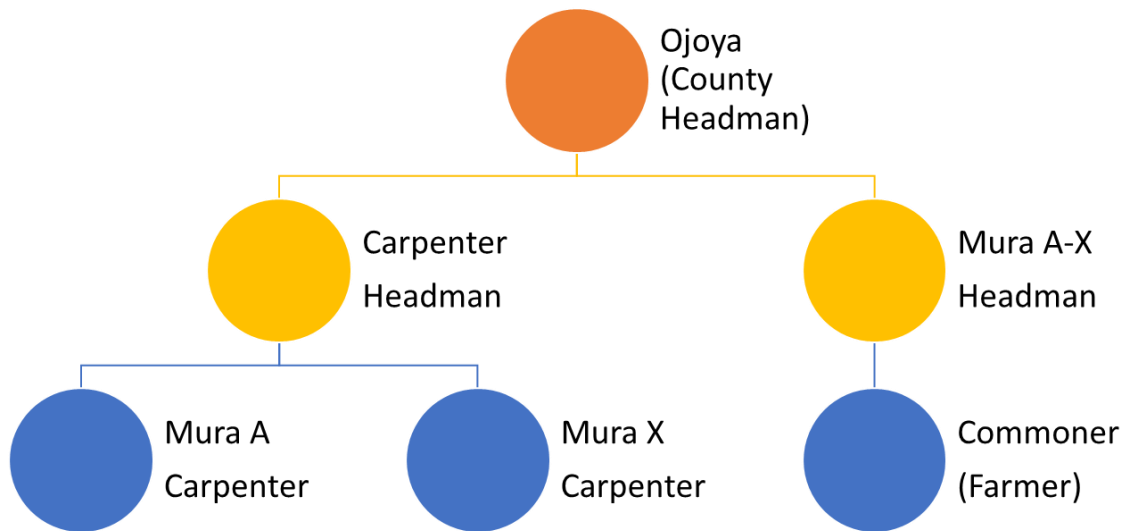
2015). Such networks of the non-hyakusho class were led by “kashira” (頭), which means “head” in Japanese (Toishi 2017).

Honda’s third argument is likely based on the incorrect assumption that there were no administrative units other than Muras and the domains of feudal lords during the Edo era. This misunderstanding is shared by Japanese historians, such as Yusaku Matsuzawa, another influential specialist of modern Japanese history. He insists that no administrative units were governed by commoners beyond Muras in rural Japan during the Edo era (Matsuzawa 2009).

There is considerable evidence against Matsuzawa’s argument. There were administrative units that extended beyond Muras in different areas, such as counties called “tenaga” (手永), “tomura gumi” (十村組), “go” (郷), etc. (Kodama 2006, Shimura 1999). Their headmen were typically called “ojoya” (大庄屋) and belonged to the hyakusho class. Naoki Imamura studied internal structures of “tenagas” found in Kumamoto and identified that ojoya (in Kumamoto, “sojoya”) engaged not only in hyakusho policies but also in policies concerning other social classes (Imamura 2015).

To summarize this section, we can conclude that there were active networks of various social classes extending beyond Muras during the Edo era. Ojoyas, county headmen, controlled not only Muras through Mura headmen but also various non-hyakusho networks (e.g., carpenters) through their corresponding headmen.

Fig. 3 Ojoya, Mura headmen and carpenter headmen



#### 4. Analysis

In the last chapter, we cited considerable evidence against Honda's arguments. We thus evaluate the results of our examination to contextualize differences too heavily emphasized in previous studies.

Honda's first argument that the mobility of Mura residents was limited during the Edo era is not true. While fluctuations in the number of Mura households were limited, this does not necessarily mean that residents enjoyed limited mobility, as kabushiki was tradable through adoption within/beyond Muras. Thus, Muras used the kabushiki and adoption systems as instruments to manage high levels of resident mobility "Spirits of the village," a central tenet of Suzuki's "natural village" concept, was maintained in spite of resident mobility achieved through both systems. In other words, each kabushiki holder was expected to adopt membership and access rights to local Mura resources from previous kabushiki holders, conferring Mura residents high levels of mobility similar to those observed in Dongri.

Honda's second argument is not accurate either. Mura residents were assigned to different social classes. Muras included their own servants, who were required to deliver kabushiki services. Some classes of people and "untouchables", in particular, did not marry members of other social classes, resulting in their discrimination. Premodern



rural Korea included a discriminated minority referred to as “baekjeong” composed of butchers, executioners and animal doctors (Lee 2011). While Honda likely overlooked these “lower classes,” we can confirm that different social classes coexisted in both Muras and Dongri.

Honda’s last argument is also incorrect. Various networks extending beyond Muras were developed by noncommoners. Administrative units were managed by commoners and nonfarmer networks in certain areas such as Kumamoto. In these areas, county headmen called ojoyas performed powerful headmenhip roles, controlling various networks of nonfarmer classes beyond Muras through their headmen.

Thus, networks extended beyond Muras and Dongri in rural Japan and rural Korea, respectively. However, we must exercise caution when referring to the natural resources of Muras and Dongri. Dongri had neither borders nor territories while gun included both. As result, different local natural resources were managed by different user networks. For example, members of irrigation user networks differed from members of forest user networks.

In contrast, Muras were divided by borders and territories, which were formed through intense conflicts over the commons and over natural resources with neighboring Muras in Medieval times. Thus, participation in user networks concerning different types of natural resources was strictly controlled by the Muras as noted above. However, statistics show that Muras managed smaller areas in some regions (e.g., Kumamoto) than in others. This suggests that Muras were not just entities that governed natural resources in rural Japan.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, we examined three facets of Honda’s discussion and found that his arguments excessively emphasize differences between Mura and Dongri to insist that Dongri were not “natural villages” as argued by Suzuki.

First, small fluctuations in the number of Mura household do not necessarily denote that Mura residents enjoyed less mobility. An adoption system granted immigrants access to kabushiki status. Kabushiki status conferred a set of resource use rights in Muras, rendering it essential for Mura farmers.

Second, Honda overlooked noncommoner classes in Muras and thus overlooked non-commoner networks extending beyond Muras. In many areas, Muras formed administrative units led by commoners called ojoya. Thus, Honda’s last argument is also

inaccurate.

Thus, features Honda emphasized as differences between Muras and Dongri were in fact similarities.

When comparing commons in both countries, we must take these similarities into account, especially when considering networks extending beyond Muras, as not only rural Korea but also rural Japan originated from a multilayered system of natural resource governance.

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