



Yamada Goro, editor and critic

THE political and economic center of Japan for more than 400 years is today home to some 14 million people, but despite many changes, some things remain constant. What makes Tokyo what it is? We asked editor and critic Yamada Goro.

Since the founding of Edo (present-day Tokyo) by the Tokugawa shogunate in 1603, Tokyo has developed continuously as the political and economic center of Japan. What are the main geographical characteristics of this city today?

Tokyo's greatest characteristic is that it is a city of hills. The organization of a city divided into a downtown commercial district located near the sea or rivers and a hillside residential area on the hills is seen in many cities around the world. Tokyo likewise tends to be divided into two areas,

Diversity

The Source of Tokyo's Vitality

with the Yamanote (hilltop) area to the west and the Shitamachi (lower town) area to the east (the physical lowlands along the Sumida River and its eastern side). But it isn't actually that simple. The area within the Yamanote Line (the city's central circular train line), or in other words, the downtown area since the Edo period (1603-1867), has a terrain that incorporates multiple high and low lands, and there are multiple layers of Yamanote and Shitamachi areas. There are still many hills today, and the mood of the area suddenly changes when going up or down these hills. This kind of a city, with such a complex and diverse geographic structure, is quite rare globally.

Speaking of rare, you can also say that a characteristic of Tokyo is that many wholesale districts and districts of specialty shops remain today in the central areas. Both in Japan and abroad, many cities have experienced a rise in rent and an increase in traffic congestion in central areas since the 1960s, and so the sprawl of wholesale districts to the suburbs has progressed. The same thing happened in Tokyo, but some of these districts still remain in the center: the textile districts of Nihombashi Bakurocho and Yokoyamacho, the tableware and cookware district of Kappabashi Street near Asakusa, and so on. In Kanda's Jimbocho, the world's largest used bookstore district is alive and well even today. Thanks to this, in Tokyo you can get your hands on practically whatever it is that you want. There is no other city that is this

convenient and easy to live in.

What do you recommend to enjoy Tokyo as a city of hills?

What about taking a stroll through the Yanaka, Nezu and Sendagi areas, popularly called “Yanesen”? In that hilly area between the high lands of Ueno and Hongo, you can experience the mood of both the Yamanote and Shitamachi areas that have continued since the Edo period at once. And Ueno Park is an area with so many cultural facilities that there isn’t any other place on earth like it. Packed in this area are the Tokyo National Museum, the National Museum of Western Art, the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, the National Museum of Nature and Science, the Ueno Zoological Gardens, the Tokyo Bunka Kaikan (Tokyo Metropolitan Festival Hall), and more. Given that Tokyo is an area bursting with this kind of attractiveness that you can’t find anywhere else, many young people and visitors from abroad come to visit, and among them, some come to reside in Yanesen, as well. With these new residents opening new shops, galleries and so on, a diversity is created, not just between the tops and bottoms of hills, but also between new and old generations and with people from all over the world.

What do you think has allowed this vitality to remain since the Edo period?

The diversity born out of the interactions between a variety of people is the source of Tokyo’s vitality, the same today as it was in the past. Tokyo is also blessed with geological conditions that have the Yamanote and Shitamachi areas mixed together like a patchwork quilt, and a unique culture was developed through interactions in the Edo period through hobbies such as poetry and art that went beyond social status or work for the samurai who lived on top of the hills, the monks who built temples on the slopes, and the townsfolk who lived at the bottom of the hills.

The street culture which started in Harajuku in the 1980s had an impact on the world, and this was also born out of interactions between people of different industries. Harajuku at the time had properties with cheaper rent than Shinjuku or Shibuya, so young designers, photographers, copywriters and the like naturally gathered here, and from their interactions, a new culture was born.

Cities and cultures are created not by buildings but by people. The reason why Tokyo’s vitality was not lost despite the loss of buildings in the Great Kanto Earthquake (1923) and the bombing of Tokyo in the Second World War is because a variety of people continued to live here and have continued to interact with one another.

How do you think Tokyo will evolve in the future?

In central Tokyo, unprecedented large-scale redevelopment is underway. You may think that increasing high-rise buildings contradicts the fact that the population is shrinking due to a low birthrate and an aging population, but this can be understood if you consider this the creation of a compact city. Having continued to expand towards the suburbs since the start of the Edo shogunate government, I think that Tokyo has now begun to contract towards the central areas.

Another change is the unprecedented increase in tourists and residents from overseas. Due to the novel coronavirus pandemic, the spirit of *omotenashi* (Japanese hospitality) which had picked up steam in anticipation of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics has stagnated, but interactions with different cultures will be essential as a new source of vitality for Tokyo moving forward. Maintaining diversity by creating an environment that is easy to live in for everyone regardless of nationality, gender, or work will become increasingly important in the post-COVID era. 📖

Interview by SAWAJI OSAMU
