East Asia, Asia, Localities

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Introduction

What does it mean to set boundaries for regions of the world? The Asian Association for Environmental History would be different from the Association for East Asian Environmental History, from the European Society for Environmental History, and from the American Society for Environmental History. But is this only a matter of regionality within the overarching environmental history? What is the regionality defined by the environment in the first place? Even today, there are many historical societies where discussions are held in the same language. Is there really a match between the understanding of space and place in the same language and the understanding of space and place in which the same language is abandoned and, for example, English is used as the lingua franca?

As in Europe, where Latin is the intellectual lingua franca, so in East Asia, Chinese is the lingua franca with considerable cultural-historical influence beyond its borders. However, if one considers Asia within Eurasia, or even more broadly within the world, the language of Chinese, which is at the heart of East Asian history, is quite relative in terms of cultural history. Often there is an academic world in which mathematics and statistics are the lingua franca. What kind of academic world is the study of environmental history?

In this presentation, I will discuss what the roots of Asian environmental history research should be before us, or perhaps the limits of what such a single root should be considered to be in itself. What will really happen if we shift the centre of gravity of our perspective to the infinitely local world? The Asian Association for Environmental History (AAEH) has made a proposal once before, and has once again proposed ten topics, including Animals, Plants, Microorganisms, Water, Air, Land, Disasters, Foods, Waste, and Humans. Each of these has a separate linguistic world. For example, the name of plants is very variegated. In fact, the worlds that cannot be spoken in a common language really symbolise their richness.

Core questions for Asia and the world

As for specific challenges, I would like to consider the following:

- Can Asia be discussed from within Asia itself?
- Should Asia be discussed within the context of world history?
- Can Asia be discussed through comparisons between individual countries?

- Could there be a unique regional composition in Asia?
- What is the significance of discussing environmental history in Asia, a region in which there be diverse colonial experiences and the rapid economic development that has unfolded within a short span of time?

Lost Living Spaces in Shiga-Kutsuki and Kyo-Otagi

Japan is rapidly losing its centuries-old rural landscapes. Regions where one can still witness mountain villages like the one depicted below (Photo 1) have become exceedingly rare. Rice cultivation was the defining feature of these rural vistas. However, the abandonment of paddy fields and farmland (Photo 2), alongside the neglect of forests, is causing a swift erosion of long-established ways of life (Photo 3), as well as my own concept of the 'Living Spaces' (Murayama et al. eds. 2025).

Photo 1

Photo 2

Photo 3

Let us take a look at the memoirs of a woman who was born in 1936 and lived in Kuta, in the Otagi district of Kyoto.

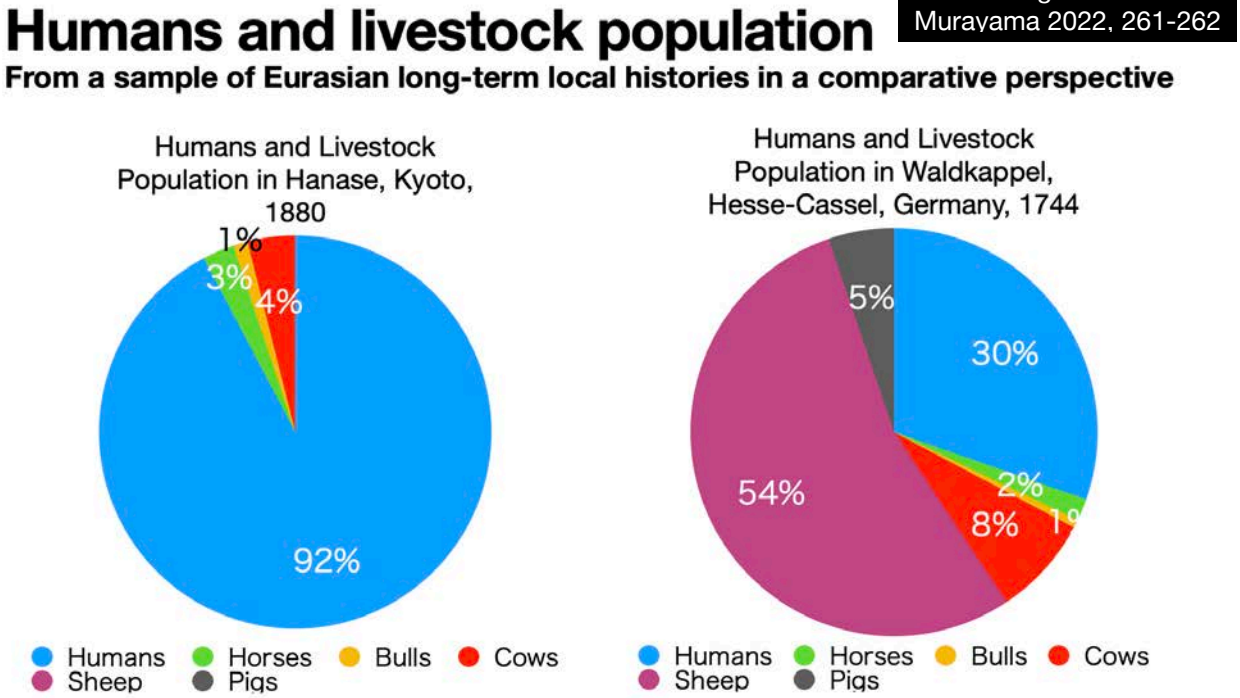
I married into a family in Kuta in Showa 30 (1955). Every day I would ask my mother-in-law, “What shall I do today, Mother”? My mother-in-law oversaw preparing meals, and since my job was to take care of our draft cattle [cows in most cases], I would go outside at dawn and get myself soaked in morning dew, cutting the grass for hay while it was still cool. During the day, I would cut the grass growing on the mountainside.

And in autumn, I would cut reed grass. I took the manure out of the barn [which was often a part of the main house] once every two weeks and piled it up on the ridges between rice fields by carrying some on my back and the remainder in a bicycle-drawn cart. My hands would be sore from the green grass and the odor of the warm manure, from which I could still feel the warmth of the house cattle, was offensive, but now they are all fond memories. Back then, the house cattle played an important role in farming, so they were well cared for and fed. People used to say that one looks at the cow and you could see what a hard worker the wife was.

> Kuta Konomi Kai [Kuta Nuts Association]. Kyôto-Kuta. Josei ga Tsuzuru Yamazato no Kurashi [Kyôto-Kuta. Womens’ Narratives on Everyday Life of a Mountainous Village]; Nakanishiya Shoten: Kyôto, Japan, 1993, pp. 145-146. Citation from Murayama and Nakamura, 2021, 126.

These memoirs were recorded in the 1990s. At one time, there was a cow living inside the house. It is thought that this was a relatively wealthy household. In stark contrast to Europe, where dairy farming thrived, there were not as many cattle and horses in the Japanese countryside. For example, whereas sheep constituted the majority in a certain German village, people were the overwhelming majority in Japan, with cattle, horses and other livestock amounting to less than 10% (Figure 1). Cattle, for example, which were primarily used for ploughing, were precious possessions.

Figure 1:
Murayama 2022, 261-262



Recent research on rural decline in Japan often identifies the 1970s as the period of transformative change in the country's rural landscape. Although this trend emerged in the 1960s, the pivotal factor was a significant change in population migration patterns. In other words, the movement of people between rural communities and urban centres changed. The most significant driver of this shift was the expansion of higher education. Furthermore, the concentration of higher education in specific regions, such as Kansai and Kanto (Figure 2), is considered the most significant factor. While further research is needed, it is fair to say that the main cause of Japan's current rural decline lies in the centralisation of education.

Figure 2

Educational centrality in Japan

Kansai and Kanto

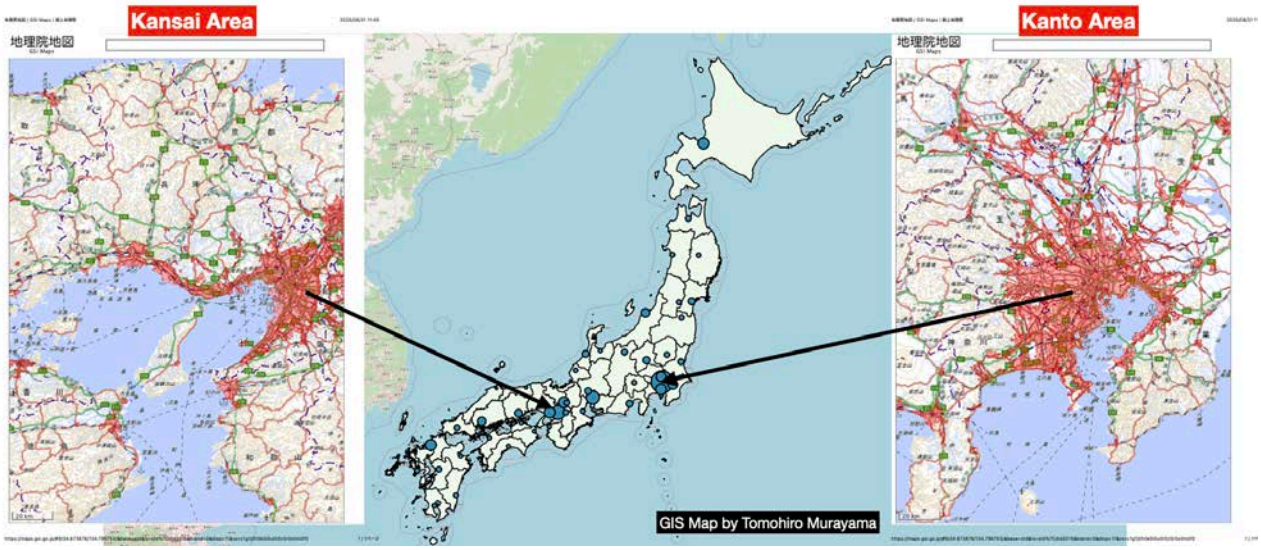
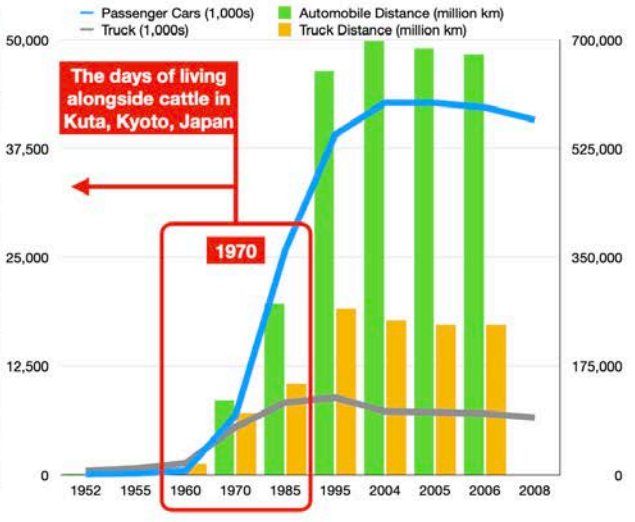


Figure 3

The Development of Japan's Automobile Fleet (1952–2008)

Source: Table 24 from Conrad Totman, *Japan. An Environmental History*, 2014, 303.

Year	Passenger Cars (1,000s)	Automobile Distance (million km)	Truck (1,000s)	Truck Distance (million km)
1952	90	1,766	419	4,034
1955	167	4,137	693	6,764
1960	441	8,725	1,322	17,445
1970	6,777	120,582	5,460	100,040
1985	25,848	275,557	8,306	146,533
1995	39,103	649,646	8,858	267,128
2004	42,776	698,232	7,280	248,728
2005	42,747	685,996	7,160	242,091
2006	42,229	677,354	7,014	241,849
2008	40,799	-	6,568	-

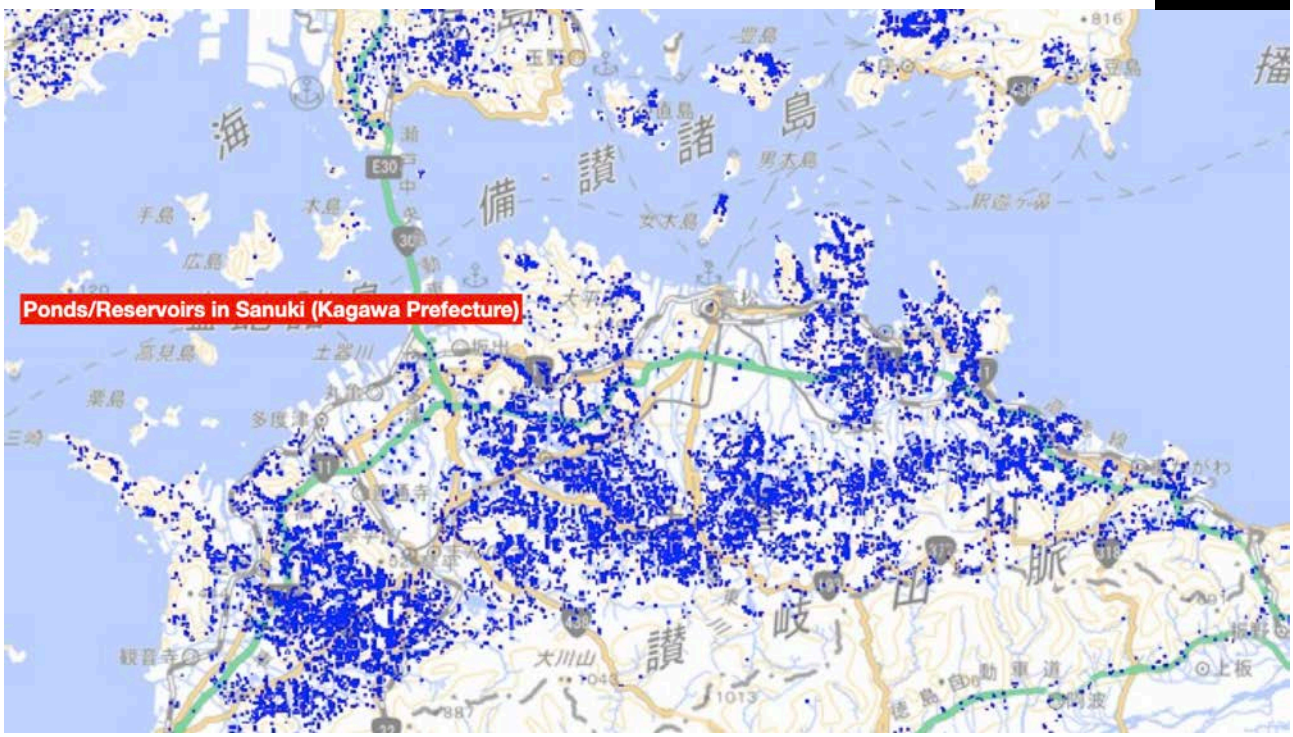


Furthermore, the concentration of higher education in specific regions is linked to the motorisation that facilitates the movement of people and goods throughout Japan (Figure 3). Focusing on Japan's history during the 1970s is becoming increasingly necessary. The lingering attachment to rural decline may seem nostalgic, but it is not an inherent problem of the countryside itself. It is necessary to re-examine the nature of cities that centralise higher education.

> “The demise of old ways of living can cause anguish, and a deep sense of loss. It is a little like the extinction of older species of animals. This is an issue of some seriousness, but it is up to the society to determine what, if anything, it wants to do to reserve old forms of living, perhaps even at significant economic costs.”
>
> Amartya Sen, Development as Freedom. New York, NY, USA: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 241.

To grasp the true meaning of Amartya Sen's words or the essence of historical change, it is necessary to distance oneself from the traditional units of analysis employed by historiography, such as agricultural societies, industrial societies, villages and cities. Rather than focusing on the objects themselves, such as cities, that human societies have produced, the focus should lie on the objects generated through interaction with nature, such as cattle, horses or for example, ‘ponds/reservoirs (PRs: surprisingly, the distinction between a pond and a reservoir is often conflated in everyday Japanese language. Therefore, these shall be collectively referred to as PRs hereafter.) in Sanuki.’ As briefly touched upon, this involves more than just humans.

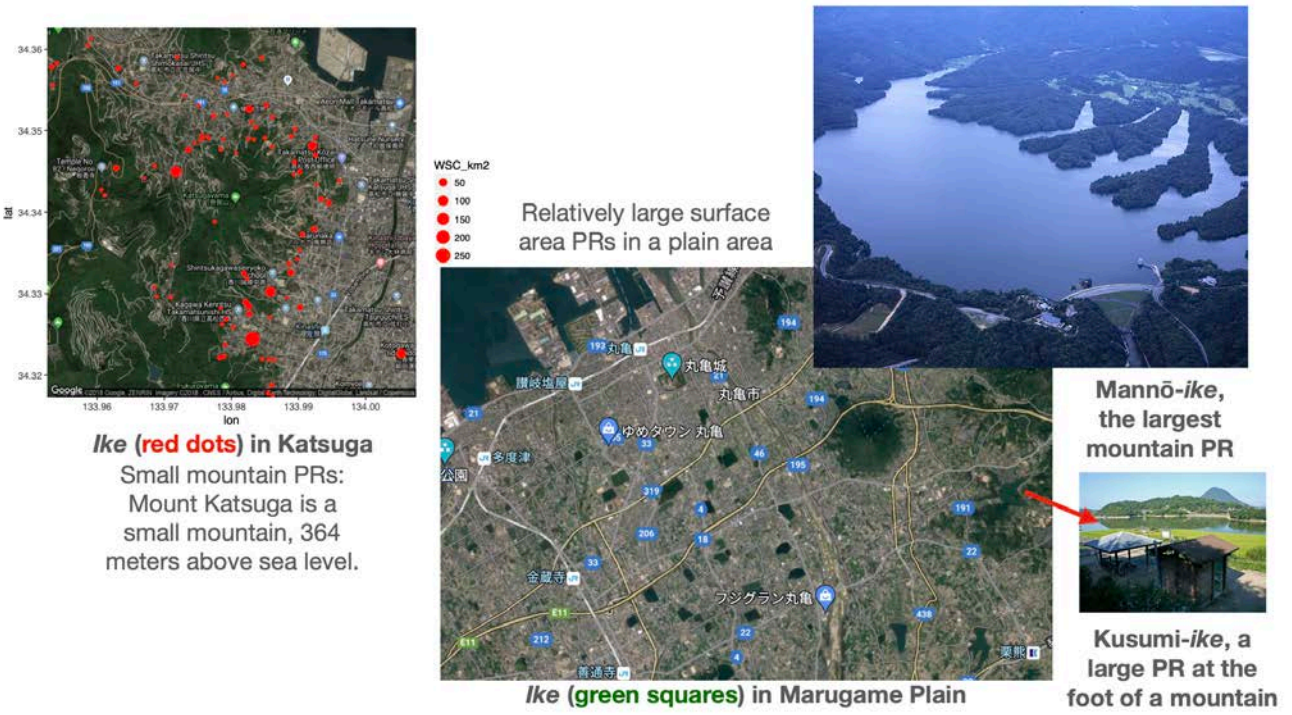
Map 1



Ponds and reservoirs culture in Sanuki

Kagawa Prefecture is often referred to as Sanuki. The term 'Sanuki' is thought to have originated from its association with tribute offerings to the ancient Japanese imperial court and expressions concerning its topography, though its exact etymology remains unclear. This region receives low annual rainfall, leading to the construction of numerous PRs to secure agricultural water supplies (Map 1). Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that the simple logic of building PRs due to water scarcity actually stems from a lack of understanding of the diverse natural elements involved. In fact, these PRs differ significantly in nature: some are formed around small mountains of just over 300 metres, some are created on flat land and some are enormous and constructed in mountainous areas (Figure 4). Entirely different Living Spaces are being created (Murayama 2025).

Figure 4



Group efforts by Buddhist practitioners

This point is relevant to the final argument in today's presentation. Japanese society, particularly in ancient times, was not so much characterised by a uniquely Japanese culture as by a mainstream culture created by immigrants from China and the Korean Peninsula. It is no exaggeration to say that these immigrants generated the central historical currents, both political and religious. The renowned Buddhist monk Gyōki (Figure 5), who constructed many water-related structures, was also of immigrant origin.

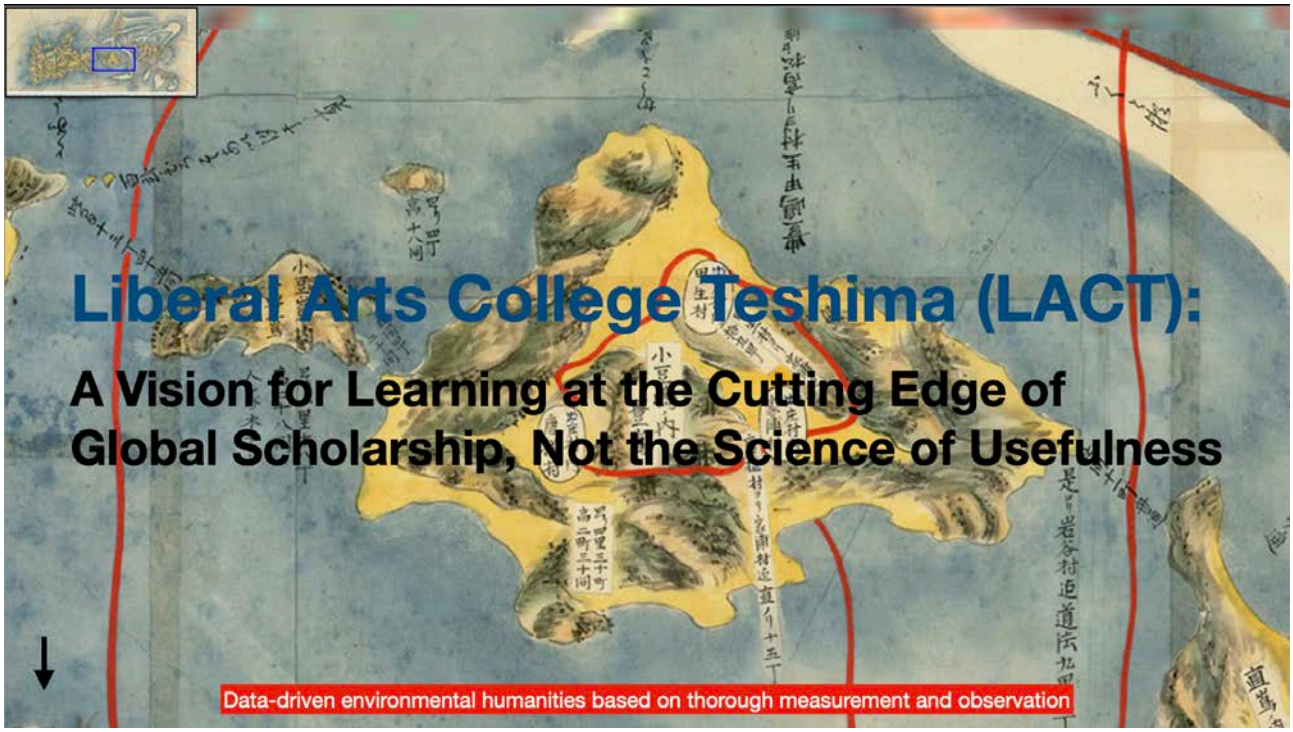
The cultivation of rice itself was imported from outside Japan and was not developed independently. Furthermore, Kūkai introduced esoteric Buddhism from China to Japan during the early Heian period and is credited with laying the foundations for Manno *Ike* (PR), the largest irrigation reservoir in Sanuki, which was reconstructed in early modern times. After this long period of Chinese and Korean influence, Western knowledge and technological prowess have driven history since the Meiji Restoration.

Figure 5

Concluding remarks

The history of irrigation PRs in Sanuki reveals that the influence of Asian, particularly East Asian, immigrant groups was significant from ancient to modern times, while concrete-reinforced dam construction and embankment building have become predominant in recent years. Without fear of oversimplification, one might call these the era of human capital and the era of industrial capital. However, this risks becoming an intellectual pitfall, as it diverts attention from the PRs themselves.

Ancient PRs construction generated human flows beyond imagination. In contrast, while modern dam construction may generate new human flows through corporate entities, those who benefit from the water flow are rarely involved personally in the process. It is the domain of government and corporate entities. In other words, it is the flow of funds generated by taxes and the economy that creates the dams, rather than the living beings – cattle, horses and people – as was the case in the past. The root of the sense of loss that Sen identified lies precisely here.



Teshima was chosen as a venue for AAEH 2025 to explore what could be created by focusing on a specific regional unit that provides an overview of the whole. Moving forward, the Liberal Arts College Teshima (LACT) intends to continue working alongside local residents on steady, grassroots activities. This involves collecting original data through local initiatives such as weather observation and ecosystem monitoring.

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