

Suminokura Ryōi's Legacy

Through the course of its history, Fushimi became a castle town, an important stop on the Tōkaidō Road, and the largest port near the ancient imperial capital of Kyoto.

Fushimi grew because it was in the middle of a water transportation system that connected Kyoto to the trading center of Osaka and from there to cities all over Japan.

Key to Fushimi's development was a successful overseas trader named Suminokura Ryōi (1554–1614). Ryōi petitioned the shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616) for permission to construct canals to link the Nijō district of central Kyoto to Fushimi and link Fushimi to Osaka via the deep, fast-flowing Ujigawa and Yodogawa rivers. Ryōi had accrued a vast fortune as a principal merchant with access to Tokugawa's "red seal ships" (*shuinsen*), which were permitted to trade with the ports of Annam, Siam, and beyond. Ryōi used his personal finances to complete the Takase waterway engineering project.

The canals opened in 1614 and transformed Fushimi, effectively turning the castle town into Kyoto's southern gate to the outside world. Travelers, traders, political schemers, and tourists visited the inland port en route to and from the ancient capital aboard passenger or freight ferries. With the new canals, Fushimi was a major economic hub. Japan's first silver coinage was minted here, and Fushimi became the key point of departure and arrival for the daimyo lords of western Japan, who under the shogunate's policies were required to reside in the capital at Edo in alternate years. Only in the Meiji era (1868–1912), with the opening of a direct railway from Osaka to Kyoto in 1877, did Fushimi's star finally start to fade.