

The Changing Fuji Faith

Early Modern Pilgrims: Sacred Circuits

By the second half of the fifteenth century, lay pilgrims were already climbing Mt. Fuji in significant numbers. In the early seventeenth century, the wars that had plagued Japan for centuries came to an end with the founding of the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1868). Peace brought prosperity to people across the country, and pilgrimages to sites across the country became popular as a way to combine sightseeing with spiritual practice that was thought to bring direct, palpable benefits. In the eighteenth century, a network of organizations known as Fuji-ko (Fuji confraternities) arose, dedicated to worshipping Mt. Fuji and organizing pilgrimages to the sacred mountain.

The Fuji-ko network was centered on Edo (modern-day Tokyo), where there was said to be one Fuji-ko for each of the city's 808 neighborhoods (an exaggeration, perhaps, but there were certainly hundreds). The movement radiated outward across the Kanto region. Fuji-ko met regularly, and each group sent a few representative members on a pilgrimage to the mountain every climbing season. Each local group had an arrangement with an *oshi* priest at the mountain's base who provided them with accommodation, supplies, and spiritual guidance for the climb.

As time went on, Fuji-ko pilgrims developed other forms of worship. As well as climbing to the summit, some circumambulated the mountain roughly halfway up along the Middle Road (Ochudo). Others took the Eight-Lake Circuit (Hakkai Meguri) of lakes and ponds, performing purifying ablutions at each. Treading these routes as a form of religious practice was known as circuit pilgrimage (*junpai*).