

Restructuring Ironmaking in the Eighteenth Century

The government of the Matsue domain set about reforming its ironmaking industry in 1726. In addition to appointing nine experienced families as proprietors, domain officials promoted greater cooperation between farmers and ironworking communities.

Prior to the reforms, farmers and ironworkers often quarreled over natural resources. A common method for gathering iron sand filled nearby irrigation canals with dirt and rocks, disrupting farming and angering the farmers. To address rising tensions between the two groups, the government banned the practice for a period in the seventeenth century.

The officials of the Matsue domain held specific families accountable for these disruptions and ordered them to create a more equitable system for managing natural resources. The resulting compromise allowed the ironworkers to continue gathering iron sand in the mountains, but only from late autumn to early spring.

Once the proprietors had secured a stable supply of iron sand and charcoal, they were able to focus on improving the quality and quantity of their output. As its reputation grew, more and more of their iron and steel was loaded onto boats or into saddlebags to be sent to blacksmiths around the country.

This success caused ironworks to grow in scale. For example, Itohara family records indicate that in 1875, around 1,200 workers were employed to handle the operations and output of a single furnace. Counting family members, as many as 5,000 or 6,000 people lived or worked at the site.