Bezaisen: A Symbol of Feudal Era Japan

The Edo Period (1603-1868) was a period of Japanese history characterized by strict isolationist policies (sakoku) and strong internal economic growth. The bezaisen, one of the largest and common merchant ships of this time, was a symbol of the isolationism and self-sufficiency of feudal era Japan. The construction of the ship reflected feudal-era efforts by the Tokugawa shogunate, the ruling military government of the time, to restrict interactions with and access to foreign trade. Bezaisen were intentionally built as large economic vessels with limited capacity for offshore sailing – they were commonly used for trade routes along coastal waters.

Figure 1: The copper reinforced stempost of the bezaisen adorned with decorative tassels. (Photo by author)

One of the bezaisen’s distinctive features is its single mast with main square sail made of several strips of cotton cloth sewn together with straw rope – a typical type of rope used for rigging during this period. While it may seem counterintuitive to have gaps in the sail, these gaps proved to be particularly advantageous during turbulent winds, especially during typhoon
seasons. As shown in Figure 2, openings in the sail allowed for strong winds to pass through which helped the ship avoid capsizing. Furthermore, should damage occur to any part of the ship’s sail, the partitions allowed for damaged section to be replaced easily and efficiently. In addition, the partitions in the sail gave economic indication of the ship’s capacity for goods such as cotton and rice – the greater the number of partitions, the higher its capacity. This, by extension, also gave insight into the prestige of the vessel as higher capacity ships were able to carry more valuable cargo. Planks on the deck were also unfastened, allowing for quick and easy access to goods and cargo. Nearly all available space within the bezaisen was dedicated to cargo which discouraged long trips that involved nighttime sailing as there was little to no room for crew quarters and supplies.

Figure 2: Close-up of sail partitions. Partitions were sewn together with durable straw rope and gaps were usually a few inches wide to allow some wind to pass through. (Photo by author)
In addition to the design of the sail, the design of the keel and hull demonstrated the *bezaisen*'s adherence to feudal isolationist policies regarding solely domestic trade. The flat-bottomed nature of the flat planked keel and wide hull allowed for the *bezaisen* to travel through shallow waters along the coast as well as be able to beach when necessary for repairs or maintenance. It was a ship that was built to withstand frequent contact with the coast and this can be seen through the way the ship was reinforced. Per traditional Japanese shipbuilding methods, the heads of fasteners were protected with copper covers (see Figure 1, photo by author).

![Image](image_url)

Figure 3: The wooden beam attached to the rudder to control steering. (Photo by author)

Additionally, the rudder system of the *bezaisen* is frequently quoted by historians as one of the main constructional pieces of evidence of the influence of feudal isolationist policies. The
rudder was attached to a controlled directly by a single long beam of wood that extended up to the stern’s deck (see Figure 3, photo by author). This design, historians argue, was “inherently weak” as it did not tide well in storms and gave further proof of the restrictions on the seafaring capacity of ships in Era Period Japan (Brooks 2009: 137).

However, it does not mean that the bezaisen’s construction was completely immune to foreign influences. On the contrary, elements of the bezaisen’s construction demonstrate adaptations of Chinese style maritime technologies. Unlike earlier Japanese vessels which had wooden anchors, the bezaisen had distinct Chinese-style four-fluke anchors made of iron tethered to the ship with strong straw rope as shown in Figure 4.

![Figure 4: A four-fluked iron anchor with straw rope. (Photo by author)](image)

Perhaps the strongest indication of the bezaisen as a symbol of feudal era Japan however was the speed of its disappearance. The Edo Period ended with the start of the Meiji Restoration in 1868 when imperial rule was restored. This brought Japan into a new era of rapid modernization and westernization. Many symbols and vestiges of pre-modern Japan, from strict hierarchal codes of society to traditional styles of dress and fashion, were quickly abandoned in the wake of technological and cultural revolution. It was during this period that the bezaisen
suddenly disappeared giving further proof to the strength of *bezaisen’s* embodiment of feudal Japan.
Works Referenced
