

# Why Kansai Needs to Match Tokyo's Triumphs

Kansai, the cradle of Japanese civilization and in modern times a powerhouse of commerce and industry, has seen its economic strength decline in recent years. The region is attracting fresh interest, however, due to the unveiling of a series of imaginative plans to revive its economy.

For the following series of Cover Story articles featuring Kansai, the *Journal of Japanese Trade & Industry* interviewed Dr. Tadao Umesao, director general of the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka. His comments, set out below, give an insight into the historical background, present state and future potential of Kansai.

Umesao, a native of Kyoto who is well-known in Japan as a social anthropologist, served as a professor at Kyoto University before assuming his current post in 1974.



**Question:** *Dr. Umeshio, you were born and raised in Kansai. You live in Kansai and work in the Kansai. So first, I would like to hear your opinion of the Kansai region.*

**Umeshio:** Actually, I consider myself to be a "Kyoto-jin" (citizen of Kyoto) rather than a "Kansai-jin" (citizen of the Kansai). As this itself shows, the Kansai is not a homogeneous regional society, and in this respect the Kansai is quite different from Kanto. When people in other parts of Japan talk about regions, they tend to see Kanto and Kansai as parallels. The people of Kansai, however, do not consider Kansai a single entity. To residents of Kyoto, Osaka is just as distant as Tokyo. Kanto sprawls out endlessly around the nucleus of a single city: Tokyo. Kansai is different. It is like, one might say, a confederation of three very distinctive cities — Kyoto, Osaka and Kobe. I was born and grew up in Kyoto, and have always felt that Osaka was far away. I later lived quite a while in Osaka and learned to understand the city, but for me personally it is still a distant community. We have to recognize this structural difference between the two regions.

**Q:** *In short, despite the name there really is no single region that can be labeled Kansai?*

**A:** Exactly. Each city in Kansai is fiercely independent. Indeed, I regard Kansai as being something like a federal republic, similar in many ways to Germany. In the eastern part of Germany, Berlin is so pre-eminent that it has become central to everything. In contrast, West Germany has states, such as the Rhineland, Hesse and Bavaria, which have cities of widely different character, including Cologne, Dusseldorf, Bonn, Frankfurt and Munich. They are on an equal footing with each other within the region they form part of.

**Q:** *Was the strong spirit of independence of Kansai cities molded by their history?*

**A:** I would say so. Take Osaka. Since the 17th century Osaka has been called "the nation's pantry." It has prospered as Japan's physical distribution center. It also boasts a high standard of culture. When Japan modernized in the mid-19th century, the government at one time leaned strongly toward making Osaka the capital. In both scale and substance, the city was fully qualified.

Kobe flourished as a cosmopolitan port with the coming of the Meiji era (1868–1912). Even before that, however, it had been a prosperous port city known as Hyogo-Minato (Hyogo port).

Of all the major Kansai cities, Kyoto was the best-equipped to be a national capital. For centuries, it was the center of Japan's government, economy and culture. Economically speaking, Kyoto was basically an industrial city; light industries flourished there in the 18th century, including textiles and ceramics. At the time it was one of the great industrial cities of the world, outranking Manchester in England, and even today it is a thriving, lively community. It is not merely a tourist city living off its heritage and historical assets.

## Loss of strength

**Q:** *Does that suggest that, historically, Kanto developed much later than Kansai?*

**A:** Not exactly. Kanto and Kansai were already rivals in the 17th century. Edo (today's Tokyo) developed rapidly after the Tokugawa shogunate was established there. In the 18th century Edo was one of the world's biggest cities, with a population of one million. Since Edo's weight relative to other cities in Japan had already grown so enormously, it is not fair to regard Tokyo as a product of the 19th century. It is true that the excessive rise in Tokyo's prominence since World War II has thrown it out of balance with other Japanese cities, giving rise to a host of problems.

**Q:** *I think it is this loss of balance between an overgrown Tokyo and other cities that has given the impression that Kansai is on the decline.*

**A:** At one time, Kansai was a center of economic power, so much so that the Japanese economy was divided in two. It is true that Kansai has lost that power. In a free and unregulated economy, Osaka would probably still have the advantage. However, the nation's economy came under government control during World War II, and politics and the economy have been linked ever since. Economic power has gathered in Tokyo, the political capi-



tal, while Osaka's economic strength, though still formidable, is not what it once was.

The concentration in Tokyo is most conspicuous in finance and information. Although Osaka still retains much of its commercial and industrial power, Tokyo is the dominant city in Japan as regards international finance.

**Q:** *How would you rate the cultural balance?*

**A:** If journalism, publishing and fashion are culture, then it is clear they are concentrated in Tokyo. For a while following World War II, there was a lot of publishing in Kyoto, while Osaka was the center of Japanese journalism before the war. The concentration of information in the nation's political capital gradually drew these activities to Tokyo. Today, Tokyo is undeniably the center of Japan's modern culture. Kansai cannot compete in these fields.

However, Tokyo is no match for Kansai when it comes to truly indigenous Japanese culture. The essence of all Japanese culture is to be found in Kansai. The root of the word "culture" is the Latin *cultura*, which means "to cultivate." As this word signifies, Kansai is the place where people's minds and souls are cultivated. We are justified in saying that creativity stemming from Japanese cultural traditions belongs to Kansai. How to regenerate this culture and integrate it into our political and economic systems is a matter for national policymakers. In my opinion, this is the ideological basis of the widely discussed *Yonzenso* (fourth national comprehensive development program). Just considering Kansai's geographical location, it would be a terrible waste not to make greater use of the region. Tokyo is terribly short of land and there is no wasting of precious land in Kansai. It is no



Above: Typical scenes of Osaka, the main city at the heart of the Kansai, including its historic castle and the famous Tsutenkaku tower



The Kobe waterfront



Kyoto, an ancient capital of Japan and the nation's most popular tourist venue

good to concentrate everything in Tokyo. The idea of making Kansai the cultural center of the country is a natural conclusion of the search for ways to maximize Kansai's potential. In specific terms, this has led to the Kansai Science City, which I consider to be a fine concept.

## Need for balance

**Q:** *What would you like foreigners to think of Kansai?*

**A:** My first request is, "Please don't think all parts of Japan are the same." Japan has at least two parts, probably more. Unless people from other countries perceive Tokyo and the Kansai as two separate entities, they will never understand them. Historically and structurally, Kanto and Kansai are like two different countries. They are as different from one another as Sweden is from Denmark. If Tokyo is Stockholm, then Osaka is Copenhagen. Swedish and Danish are similar languages, so the citizens of the two countries can communicate with each other. But they are still different countries with different histories and different social backgrounds. It would be better if people in other nations thought of Kanto and Kansai as two different countries like Sweden and Denmark.

**Q:** *What are we to make of these differences on the one hand and the homogeneity stemming from both being part of Japan on the other?*

**A:** It is similar to the relationship between heterogeneity and unification. The antonym of "unification" is "separation," but Kanto and Kansai are not separate. Nor are they homogeneous. They make up a unit while still being two different entities. Japan has been like that since prehistoric times.

You see, Japan is a little different from what is normally conceived of as a unified nation. Japan emerged from its medieval period with a bipolar structure. The de facto seat of government was in Kanto and the cultural center in Kansai. This bipolarity continues, and will likely continue in the future. But the growth of Tokyo and the relative decline of Kansai has pushed this bipolar structure to the verge of collapse; it has to be restored. Japan must work to preserve its bipolar structure as much as possible, both industrial and cultural. This is also important from the standpoint of security. The bipolar balance has been threatened before, but each time it was restored. This time the distortions are extreme; the citizens of the "Kansai Federal Republic" will have to work harder than ever before to restore the balance. ●