

To Sea, or Not to Sea

By Shozaburo Kimura

Japan is an island country, and no doubt most Japanese would tell you it is also a maritime country. But, in truth, the Japanese do not like the sea. Or if they do not dislike it, they are disinterested.

The leading maritime powers throughout history have been the ancient Phoenicians, the Vikings, 16th-century Spain and Portugal, 19th-century England and other peoples who saw the seas as their playing field and who were oriented toward navigation as a means of commerce and exchange with other peoples living in entirely different conditions and having different histories, traditions, cultures, languages and customs. For them, the sea was both a stage and an important channel of communication and linkage with other lands.

For the Japanese, the sea is not an open road but a closed gate—a physical and psychological barrier to interaction with “overseas.” Surrounded by water, the Japanese assume it will be difficult for enemies to attack Japan. Even imports and people coming to Japan for business or pleasure are subject to rigorous checks upon arrival.

A nonmaritime nation

Another feature distinguishing a maritime nation is the possession of ocean-going ships capable of linking the homeland and far-off lands. Typically, such ships have keels—backbones with ribs attached to them. Yet until the middle of the 19th century, Japanese ships did not have keels. Instead, they were simply made of planks fastened together, such that they broke up easily in storms and were entirely unsuited for long ocean voyages. Even the envoys who traveled to Tang China (618–907) used Chinese ships. Until about 150 years ago, Japanese ships only plied coastal waters and slipped in and out of Japanese ports, never daring to venture out of sight of land.

By the same token, Japan had no real navy until the shogunate's closing days. A navy, of course, is a military force possessing ships equipped with weapons for attack or defense, and Japan's first navy was created between 1855–58, when it obtained three ships from the Dutch and one from the British. It was also about this time that the Japanese Hinomaru flag was created to identify the nationality of Japanese naval vessels. It was the arrival of Commodore Perry and his fleet in 1853 that inspired the creation of the Japanese navy. Until then, the shogunate had declared the country closed and prohibited the building of big ships. This was all to prevent free intercourse with other countries.

Of course, there were armed bands in ancient Japan who ruled the Seto Inland Sea or the Kii Channel—the Murakami, Kono, Kumano and other tribes come to mind—and fought pitched maritime battles. But their ships were not usually fitted with weapons, and they do not fit the definition of warships. The medieval Roman warships were equipped with a weapon called Greek fire, which was used to burn enemy ships. Until then, coastal cities narrowed the entrances to their harbors, built lookouts and other emplacements and drew steel nets across the harbor entrances whenever enemy ships tried to force entry.

By contrast, the Japanese military tradition was an army tradition of fighting on land, and there was very little interest in naval encounters. Even today, Japanese speak scornfully of “the Heike, the navy and the internationalists” as the epitome of groups that were never very strong in Japan and never won any battles of importance.

True land-lovers

In Japan, it is not a reaching out to other peoples and other values that prevails but a hunkering down among people with the same values. Like-minded

people band together to shut out and shut off other influences. This is doubtless related to the fact that Japanese traditions were formed and hardened in a rice-growing culture that demanded close cooperation for the group's survival. This same agrarian tradition may also be why the Japanese are attached to the land but indifferent to the sea. Everybody has a very strong interest in the land, and people are ready to defend every square meter of the family homestead to their death. Even today, the farmers' struggle against having their land appropriated for the New Tokyo International Airport at Narita continues—nine years after airport construction began.

When we hear that someone has bought a large stretch of land or a big house, we may envy him or even curse his good fortune. But when we hear that the same person has bought a big yacht, we do not know how to react. It just does not mean anything to us emotionally. We are oblivious to the sea, and it is only recently that young Japanese have taken up such marine sports as yachting or scuba diving.

Having no tradition of oceanic travel, Japanese have no tradition of looking at the shore from the sea either. This is a new perspective, and one that has arisen only in the last few years along with concern over the urban skyline. And because the Japanese were indifferent to the sea, they did not bother giving names to the surrounding waters. The Pacific Ocean was named by Magellan, and even the Sea of Japan was named only in 1815, and that on a Russian chart.

The Japanese term for the ocean, *umi*, is said to come from *ohmi*, meaning simply “big water.” This is a big stretch of water with no land—a place that cannot be farmed, and hence a place without significance. Although the land-loving Japanese people coined a number of terms to describe the difficulty of sailing the seas, they were indifferent to the seas themselves.

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The only time Japan may be said to have been a maritime nation was between the establishment of the Meiji government in 1868 and the end of World War II in 1945. One of the leading figures from this era is Isoroku Yamamoto (1888-1943). Having studied in the United States, he was well aware of America's strength and opposed the idea of going to war with the United States. He was an honest person with an attractive personality, and one of the few Japanese respected in the United States and Europe for his intelligence.

Yet despite his better judgment, Yamamoto, commander in chief of the combined fleet, was overruled by the army and ended up being blamed for the outbreak of the war. This is one of the ironies of history. But even a naval-oriented person such as Yamamoto adopted a decidedly nonnaval strategy when he decided to launch the attack on Pearl Harbor—having ships carry aircraft to the attack site and then using the aircraft to attack. Until then, ships had attacked ships with cannon to sink them. Yamamoto's innovation was to use his ships as an extension of the land.

Armchair sailors

After the war, Japan once more reverted to being an army- or land-based country. The old elementary school song about loving the sea and enjoying seeing the white waves is no longer sung. Nor does Japan lead in oceanic research. While the United States, France and other countries have oceanic research vessels capable of submerging to depths of 4,000 meters, the best Japan can do with its new *Shinkai* is half that.

Because the Japanese are so attached to the land and so indifferent to the sea, they prefer to settle at home and watch the world from their windows. Rare is the person who will venture abroad—much less live there for any extended period—in hopes of understanding other cultures

better. Businessmen assigned to overseas posts are anxious to return home at the end of their ordeal. And because there is this constant turnover every three to five years, Japanese do not develop lasting relations with people in other lands.

By contrast, 19th-century British, modern Americans and Catholic missionaries spend extended periods in foreign lands, enjoying their lives while contributing to the local community. Yet most Japanese sent overseas see this as a kind of exile or banishment, even if they do recognize that it is an essential test preliminary to promotion. Like prisoners in their cells,

they count the days until they can be freed to go back home to Japan.

This same tendency is seen in people from continental Europe, which also has a long agricultural tradition, but it achieves its clearest form in Japan. Even though Japan and Britain are both islands, Japan is your typical landlubber country, and the popular values are not so much those of a seafaring island nation as they are those of a land-tilling continental country. ●

(This is the fifth of six essays to be written by Mr. Kimura.)

