

Japanese Civilization (Part 13)

– Historical Periodization: A Fresh Look at Japan's Economic History II –

By Kawakatsu Heita

Periodization from a New Angle: Assimilation of Civilization

One debate over historical periodization among historical materialists has centered on the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Was the Edo period (1603-1867) pure feudalism, late-feudal absolutism or incipient capitalism? That is the debate. If we take the Edo period to be pure feudalism, that would put the preceding Muromachi (1392-1573), Kamakura (1192-1333), Heian (794-1192) and Nara (710-784) periods in the age of slavery. A huge number of scholars have been involved in this debate. An article giving an outline of the debate was included in the *Iwanami Koza Nihon Rekishi* (Iwanami Series on Japanese History). However, scholars passionately involved in this debate use the terms Kamakura period, Muromachi period, Edo period and the like without making any attempt to define them. In effect, they start out with a shared acceptance of the historical periodization scheme that all Japanese accept as a matter of course, and then argue about how to assign historical materialist labels to them.

So the first thing we must do is ask ourselves why the Nara – Heian – Kamakura – Muromachi – Edo periodization scheme is so commonly accepted among the Japanese people at large.

The first point I would like to make is that Japan is the only country in the world that names its historical periods after the seat of its capital city functions. A second point worth noting is that Japan's capital cities have always been built with the express purpose of developing a new society. Before expounding further on this point, it must be stressed that Japan did not originally have a capital city, and for this reason the biggest turning point of all in Japanese history came when Japan's first capital city was built.

It would be crude in the extreme to lump all Japanese history prior to the establishment of its first capital city into

a single period. An explanation of the “Jomon (c.a. 10,000 B.C.-4 B.C.) – Yayoi (c.a. 4 B.C.-3 A.D.) – Kofun (c.a. 4 A.D.-7 A.D.)” periodization scheme is beyond the scope of this article, but a very brief note is called for. Beginning with the very oldest of their historical records, the Chinese used such terms as “*wo*” (short of stature), “*wo ren*” (short people) and “*wo guo*” (land of the short people) in referring to the periphery of the Japanese archipelago and the people living there. But the group referred to as the “short people” also included the faces of people living in places other than the Japanese archipelago. That is not to say that the country had no “face.” It simply means that the country had more than one face.

The navy of “*Wo*” was defeated at sea in 663 in the Battle of Hakusonko by the combined forces of Tang and Silla. Within a half century after that battle, the term “*Wo*” (which first appeared in the first century *History of the Former Han Dynasty* and remained current until the 7th-century *History of the Sui Dynasty*) was abandoned by the Chinese, to be replaced in the *History of the Tang Dynasty* by Japan's modern name, “*Riben*” (or “*Nihon*” in Japanese). Everything begins from the defeat in the Battle of Hakusonko. In addition to the country's name, the term “*tenno*” (emperor) also came into use, the *ritsu-ryo* (penal codes and administrative laws) system was introduced, a capital city was built with neighborhoods laid out in a grid pattern, and the *Kojiki* (Records of Ancient Matters) and *Nihonshoki* (Chronicle of Japan) were written. These events culminated in the establishment of Heijo-kyo (710-784). All of these elements were borrowed from the Chang'an model of Tang China (618-907).

Heijo-kyo was actually preceded by Fujiwara-kyo (694-710), but this city was so short-lived that it would seem appropriate to regard Heijo-kyo as the first of Japan's capital cities. During the Heijo-kyo (Nara) period the capital was moved temporarily to Kuni-kyo and then Naniwa-kyo (located in modern-

day Kyoto and Osaka prefectures, respectively). Later the capital was moved by Emperor Kammu to Nagaoka-kyo (784-794), but a series of calamities prompted a further move to Heian-kyo. The fact that Heijo-kyo and Heian-kyo were modeled after Chang'an was highlighted, as all readers will be aware, by the many emissaries dispatched to Tang China during those years (a total of 13 trips, plus three trips that were canceled).

The social life of the Japanese people has been influenced by foreign “artifacts” that have made their way to Japan via sea routes. And the “device” into which such “foreign artifacts” were placed was Japan's capital cities, such as Heijo-kyo and Heian-kyo. It could be said, in general terms, that Nara (during the Heijo-kyo period) and Kyoto (during the Heian-kyo period) were the “venues” for assimilation of artifacts from Chang'an. In other words, the Nara period and Heian period were an age in which Japan imitated the culture and material complex of Chang'an, the Tang capital in northwest China.

During the Kamakura period of 1192 to 1333, Japan was under *bakufu* (shogunate) rule. Kamakura Japan was also influenced by Chinese artifacts, but in this case the artifacts came from coastal southeastern China, where the capital of the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279), Lin'an (modern-day Hangzhou), was located. In the *Travels of Marco Polo*, Lin'an is referred to by Polo as a trading port called Kinzai. Hangzhou today is the capital of Zhejiang Province. It is the southern terminus of the Grand Canal, which was built during the Sui dynasty (581-618), is situated at the mouth of a river, and is a key transportation hub facing the East China Sea. China has two very different faces, aptly described in the Chinese saying “horses in the north, boats in the south.” Northern China is oriented toward politics, and has a marked tendency toward rule-bound formalism, while southern China, home of the great Chinese diaspora, is oriented toward

commerce and non-formalism. Nara and Heian were the “venue” for assimilation of the “northern Chinese” face of Tang-dynasty Chang’an, while Kamakura, in contrast, was the “venue” for assimilation of the “southern Chinese” face.

Japan has a “five temple” system of Zen Buddhism (comprising five major Zen temples, including Kencho-ji, Engaku-ji, and Jufuku-ji) modeled on the five-temple system of the Southern Song dynasty. The most noted aspects of Kamakura culture – such as Zen, gardens and tea – were all introduced from the Southern Song. There are reasons why the artifacts of “southern China” came to be concentrated in Kamakura. Firstly, with the Southern Song under pressure from northern rivals Jin (i.e. the Jurchens), Liao, the Western Xia and especially the Mongols, a steady stream of top Buddhist monks left China for Kamakura. Among them were such leading lights as Foguang Guoshi, Lanxi Daolong, Daxiu Zhengnian, Wuxue Zuyuan and Yishan Yining. The process was comparable to what happened in Europe when the Eastern Roman Empire (also known as the Byzantine Empire) came under pressure from the Ottoman Empire; many learned persons opted for exile in Italy, where they helped trigger the Renaissance. Secondly, a pithy saying well summed up the situation among Japan’s different Buddhist sects at that time: “Tendai is for royalty; Shingon is for court nobles; Zen is for the military class; Jodo is for the masses.” The exiled Zen monks from China avoided Kyoto, stronghold of the Tendai and Shingon sects, and came to rely on the military rulers in Kamakura.

Thus the Nara and Heian periods were a time of assimilating the cultural artifacts of northern China, while the Kamakura period, by contrast, was a time of assimilating the cultural artifacts of southern China.

Thereafter, the capital was moved back to Muromachi, Kyoto. Emperor Godaigo established a five-temple system in Kyoto using the one in Kamakura as a model, and this carried over to the Ashikaga shogunate. Nanzen-ji was the leading temple of Kyoto’s flourishing

five-temple system. Also in the group were Shokoku-ji, Tenryu-ji and Tofuku-ji. As a result of these efforts, Kyoto became home to both the northern Chinese artifacts of Heian Kyoto and the southern Chinese artifacts of Kamakura. Southern Chinese artifacts, symbolized most prominently by Zen, gardens and tea, came to full flower in the Kitayama culture of Ashikaga Yoshimitsu and the Higashiyama culture of Ashikaga Yoshimasa. Chinese coins were the currency of the Muromachi period. Japan exported copper to China, where it was minted into coins and exported back to Japan. Chinese coins circulated in every corner of Japan. Japan freely bought Chinese artifacts using Chinese coins, and was permeated with Chinese styles. The assimilation of Chinese artifacts that got seriously underway during the Nara period reached its zenith in Kyoto during the Muromachi period, and then the Chinese style spread throughout Japan as imitation led to the appearance of “little Kyotos” all over the country.

In general terms, then, the Muromachi period was an age in which the borrowing of Chinese cultural artifacts reached its peak.

Pulling Away from Chinese Influence

Was there a model for Edo? No. Edo’s development was purely indigenous. That is because Japan by that time had become independent of Chinese civilization. By the time of the eighth shogun, Tokugawa Yoshimune, Edo had become the undisputed “beauty capital” of Japan in both the economic and cultural spheres. The Edo shogunate created a *daimyo* (feudal lord) system, with one castle per province, and “little Edos” appeared throughout the country. The national ambience of Japan had grown independent of China. In “big picture” terms, then, Japan pulled away from Asia during the Edo period and became self-directed.

Edo was the capital, and Edo Castle was its symbol. During the Meiji Restoration, Edo Castle became the Imperial Palace, and its environs became home to the legislative, administrative and judicial branches of a new govern-

ment. Edo was renamed Tokyo, thus marking the beginning of the “Tokyo period.” Bringing authority and power together in a single “venue” symbolized concentration in a single locus. Tokyo became the venue for the assimilation of Western civilization. Prior to World War II, the artifacts being assimilated were European, and especially British; after the war, the artifacts were American. Looking at the big picture, then, the Tokyo period has been an age of assimilation of Western civilization.

Japan’s imported artifacts come from many different places, but in terms of origin, these artifacts can be broadly classified as either Oriental or Occidental, each of which has its own cultural and material complex. During the Nara, Heian, Kamakura and Muromachi periods, artifacts made their way to Japan from the Orient. These periods, taken as a whole, could be called the Kyoto period. Then during the Edo period Japan became independent from Oriental civilization.

Eventually, the Tokyo period of assimilation of Western artifacts came to an end. The Plaza Accord of 1985 represented an acknowledgment by the West of the power of Japanese civilization. And at the risk of causing misunderstanding, I would qualify the ensuing bubble economy as a celebration of Japan’s new status. In broad terms, the bubble economy can be seen as a celebration of the end of the age of assimilating Western artifacts, and of the advent of a new civilization. Historical precedent can be found in the Fushimi-Momoyama period (1568-1600), under the regent Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Japan during the Momoyama period was powerful; so powerful, indeed, that it cherished the ambition of capturing the Ming capital of Beijing. Noh drama, the tea ceremony, castle architecture, and the practice of painting on partitions, screens, sliding doors and the like – all of these were very much a part of Japanese life during the Momoyama period, and all have since come to be seen as quintessential aspects of what is unique about Japan. Through *Taiko Kenchi* (national survey of lands and their productivity capacity) and *Katana-gari* (confiscation of swords from commoners), the distinc-

tion between peasant and samurai was enforced, and the foundation was laid for economic transition, not to a “capitalism of owners,” but to a “capitalism of managers.” The 900-year period of assimilation of artifacts from Chinese civilization, which began in the Nara period and continued through the Muromachi period, came to an end, and Japan prepared to become a self-directed nation. In broad terms, the Momoyama period can be seen as a festival in celebration of that change.

These two great festive outpourings in Japanese history came to grand finales in Kyoto (where Japan assimilated Oriental civilization) and in Tokyo (where Japan was busy with the assimilation of Western civilization). Japan today has a gross domestic product (GDP) of ¥500 trillion, the world’s second largest. Japan’s GDP is six times larger than Canada’s, and three times that of Britain or France.

It is possible to divide Japanese history into three periods: the period of assimilation of Oriental civilization (the Nara, Heian, Kamakura and Muromachi periods); the period of independence from Oriental civilization (the Edo period); and the period of assimilation of Western civilization (the Tokyo period).

Tokyo during the Edo period was Japan’s “beauty capital.” In the Tokyo period, it became Japan’s “power capital.” But beauty is more becoming to Japan than power. I believe that Japan has arrived at a crossroads in its historical evolution. I believe the nation is preparing to bid farewell to the Tokyo period and build a new capital city, signifying a self-directed pursuit of beauty in no way inferior to that of the Edo period. Under the reign of the Heisei emperor, we have begun to discuss a possible move of the nation’s capital functions and devolution of more authority to local governments. I would like to give my view of what the future may hold in store.

In Japan we make a distinction between the “national government” and “local governments” (i.e. prefectures, cities, towns and villages). The national government has to take responsibility for work that cannot possibly be accomplished by local governments, such as

foreign affairs, justice, defense, national security and the minting of currency. All other work (including work performed, for example, by the Ministry of Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunications; the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport; the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology; the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare; the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries; the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry; the Ministry of the Environment; as well as most of the work of the Ministry of Finance, which allocates budget appropriations to all of the preceding) need not necessarily be performed by the national government. It could also be left to local governments.

The above is a moot point, however, for local governments do not currently have the resources to take over the gigantic operations being carried out by the national government. To downsize the national government, it would be necessary to increase the size of local governments to a corresponding degree. It would be necessary to build infrastructure capable of handling tasks not related to national sovereignty that are currently shouldered by the national government. There are measuring sticks to help us think about such infrastructure. One measuring stick is domestic, and the other is international.

The domestic measuring stick is Tokyo. The international measuring stick is the level of developed nations (e.g., the United States, Germany, France, Britain, Italy and Canada). Tokyo already has a bigger economy than Canada. Within Japan, there are several regions that can compare with Canada in terms of economic power. One is “northeastern Japan,” covering Hokkaido and the Tohoku region. Another is “Kanto Japan,” defined as the Kanto region minus Tokyo. Another is “central Japan” (the Hokuriku, Chubu and Tokai regions). Another is “Kinki Japan” (the area centered around the Kobe-Osaka-Kyoto triangle). And finally there is “southwestern Japan” (comprising the Chugoku, Shikoku and Kyushu regions). While Tokyo and the

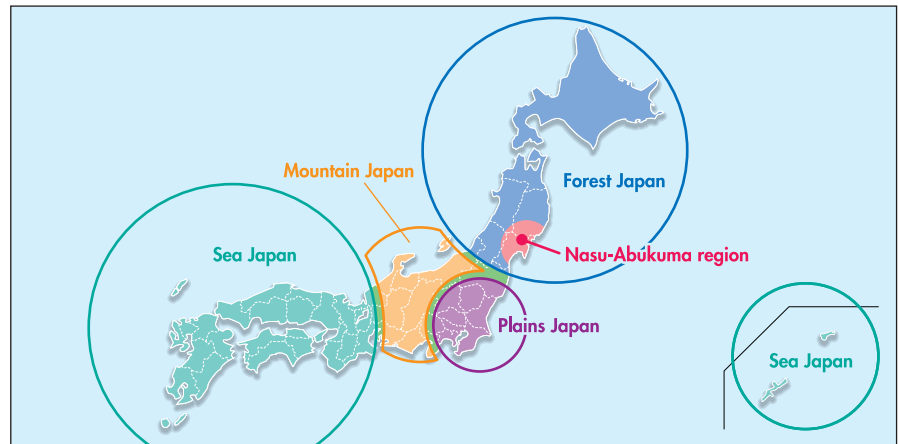
other five regions are part of Japan, each one nevertheless is capable of standing alone as a country in its own right and has an internationally competitive economy that is comparable in size to that of Canada. As such, each of these regions is capable of building the infrastructure needed to accept the authority, financial resources and human resources currently provided by the national government.

The above scenario applies to a situation in which the national power of Japan is split into six parts, each being roughly equal to the economic power of Canada. But Tokyo and “Kanto Japan” are actually integrated into a single capital region. The two put together have an economy that is on a par with that of France. The Kanto Plain is the largest plain in Japan, and the capital region occupies that entire plain with an economy rivaling that of France. We could call this “Plains Japan.” Hokkaido and the Tohoku region boast an economy equal in size to that of Canada and superb beech forests, so we could use the name “Forest Japan” here. The Hokuriku, Chubu and Tokai regions have a combined economic strength greater than that of Canada, and on account of Mt. Fuji and the Japan Alps could be called “Mountain Japan.” The Kinki, Chugoku, Shikoku and Kyushu regions have a combined economy comparable to that of France, and as they surround the Seto Inland Sea, they could be called “Sea Japan.”

Splitting Japan from north to south into Forest Japan, Plains Japan, Mountain Japan and Sea Japan, we see a nation with many different faces, yet each one of these “Japans” ranks in its own right on a par with the world’s developed nations. For these “Japans” to stand independently, they will have to have their own power of taxation. And for the new capital of the entire Japanese nation to conduct national defense, foreign relations and other matters relating to national sovereignty, each of the separate “Japans” will have to make contributions to the central coffers. What I am describing, in effect, is the EU model.

And where would we locate the four regional capitals? For Plains Japan, I would suggest placing the capital in the

Japan can be divided into four “Japans”



city formerly known as Omiya (present-day Saitama City), where a secondary city center is now under development. For Mountain Japan, my choice is the Tou-noh region of Gifu Prefecture (which is also the second-leading candidate to serve as Japan's new national capital) in and around the cities of Tajimi, Toki and Mizunami. For the capital of Sea Japan, my recommendation is Mega-Float, a “moving island” in the middle of the Seto Inland Sea. And for Forest Japan, I believe an appropriate location would be the area near Shikotsu-Toya National Park, which is not far from Chitose Airport in Hokkaido.

For the new national capital, my top candidate is the Nasu-Abukuma region, for three reasons. Firstly, Nasu-Abukuma (which straddles the border between Tochigi and Fukushima prefectures) is the number-one choice of the Council for the Relocation of the Diet and Other Organizations. Secondly, Nasu-Abukuma is on the boundary between “Forest Japan” and “Plains Japan,” at the entrance to the sacred forest, and as such has a spiritual dimension. And thirdly, the region is home to the Nasu Imperial Villa, which would enable the emperor to carry out national functions without undue delays for travel time.

In a location like Nasu-Abukuma, one can well imagine that the sacred forest would serve as the leading symbol of the capital. It would set the tone of the place, so to speak. There is historical precedent in this regard. While Meiji Japan aimed for “civilization of power” based on the wealthy nation and powerful army, the forests of Meiji Shrine in Tokyo provide a beautiful natural setting throughout the year. Without being told by anyone to do so, the Japanese people, who adored the Meiji Emperor, acted on their own volition to create, in the middle of their capital city, the man-made forests of Meiji Shrine. The forests of the shrine are not a Western imitation. In that sense, they manifest the “genetic material of Japanese culture” that the Japanese people have cultivated over the millennia. Non-Japanese civilizations, especially modern civilizations, have destroyed forests. The forests of Meiji Shrine stand in stark antithesis

to such destruction. The Meiji Shrine forests can be seen as the thing that paved the way for Japanese culture to transcend the modern “civilization of power.” If that concept were the basis for our building of a new national capital, we would witness the rise of a new Japan – a nation based on the culture of beauty and made up of Plains Japan, Forest Japan, Mountain Japan and Sea Japan.

In the last century, capitalist Japan, Europe and America as well as the socialist Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China all shared in the goal of increasing productive capacity. But the pursuit of that goal generated huge amounts of waste, led to environmental degradation and caused pollution of the global environment. “Productive capacity” is no longer the key to a new age. One of the largest and most high-profile international conferences of the entire 20th century was the 1992 United Nations World Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, often called the Earth Summit. This summit marked the end of the “capitalism vs. socialism” standoff, which originated in the West, and highlighted the need for a new paradigm encompassing the entire planet. The signing of a global warming treaty and a biodiversity treaty at the Earth Summit sent out a message that all living things, whether sentient or not, are important, and that we must not squander them. Truly, in this day and age it is important that each individual's way of life be in harmony with the surrounding environment. Toward that end, we must rework the material complex that forms the material basis of our

lives.

We sum up so that we might sally forth again. The message of the summary presented above is this: It is time for us to build a new national capital in a new “venue,” one that will give expression to a new Japan that focuses on beauty. The very best of Eastern and Western civilization has been assimilated and accumulated over the years in “venues” such as the capital cities of Nara, Kyoto, Kamakura and Tokyo, and has spread from there to the whole of Japan. Aspects of the civilizations created by humanity have accumulated throughout Japan. That is a wonderful thing. The task facing us now is to capitalize on the latent power of the civilization that has built up throughout this “venue” we call Japan. We must bring the latent power of civilization to full fruition. We must take the artifacts to be found in living environments across the country and make them into something new, unique and irreplaceable, so that in the process we might create vibrant ways of life and achieve a new capital city where people live in cohesive harmony. We are called upon to harness the power of civilization for the good of humankind. ■

(Continued in Part 14)

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