

# Japanese Civilization (Part 15)

## – Japan and the Modern World System –

By Kawakatsu Heita

IN the previous article, I mentioned how hegemony had shifted from one Western Power to another – from Spain in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the Netherlands in the 17<sup>th</sup>, then to France in the 18<sup>th</sup>, England in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the United States in the 20<sup>th</sup>. Modern civilization developed in places such as these, away from the heartlands of the Eurasian continent where ancient civilizations rose and fell. This modern Western civilization is called the capitalist world system or, to borrow Immanuel Wallerstein's phrase, the "Modern World System." In ancient times, civilization revolved around politics; today, it revolves around economics. We have seen how the modern world system was born and evolved to reach full maturity.

Hegemony shifts from one country to another, and this shifting process is so important in economic history that a tremendous amount has been written about it. One of the most important themes underlying this series of articles is whether today's modern world system, with its inherent structural problems – especially war, disparities in wealth, North-South issues and environmental degradation – can survive through the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond? Wallerstein gives a pessimistic answer, but I am more optimistic because my viewpoint starts with Japan. Wallerstein basically sees the world through Western eyes, without factoring in Japan. Actually, very few scholars consider economic history as a composite of Japanese and Western economic history.

It may come as some surprise to realize that Japan has had a direct or indirect relationship with events involving the rise and decline of every hegemonic state since the modern world system began. Western Europe faces the sea from its position at the western tip of the Eurasian continent, while Japan is an island nation located off the eastern

coast of the same continent. Ancient civilization was a land-based, continental civilization, while modern civilization is maritime in nature. The maritime civilization, or today's modern civilization, has two focal points: the West and Japan.

An examination of one of these focal points, Japan, highlights its distinction as the first country in Asia to have propelled the development of modern civilization. This becomes clear when we compare Japan not with other individual countries, but with the modern world system as a whole, going back as far as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when the modern world system was born.

One common feature shared by all hegemonic states in the modern world system is their possession of both economic and military power. In the Meiji period (1868-1912), Japan strove after these two strengths, as is evident from the government slogan, "*fukoku kyohai*" (enrich the country and strengthen the military power). At the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Japan was manufacturing and using more guns than any other country in the world, and militarily speaking, Japan was very strong. The power of Japanese guns made it possible for the army of Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-1598) to invade the Korean Peninsula and penetrate as far as the area of Pyongyang. But in Japan, where the society had experienced more musket-fired revolution than anything seen in the West, guns lost their place on the battlefield after a series of problems ending with the 1637 peasant uprising in Shimabara. Guns were practically abandoned after that. The idea that a country's enrichment must be based on a strong military is a Western assumption, an assumption Japan did not share until around the time of the Meiji period.

### Two Social Revolutions: The Bourgeois and the Gentlemen Samurai

The ruling stratum during the Edo period (1603-1867) was the *bushi* (samurai) class. In this period, society was divided into four classes: *shi*, *no*, *ko* and *sho* (samurai, farmers, artisans and merchants). Today, the word "samurai" is known around the world, even appearing in the titles of movies made in other countries, but we can of course consider the word to be entirely Japanese. In Japanese dictionaries, the *kanji* (Chinese) character given for "samurai" is always 侍, one meaning of which is "to serve," and this is what the samurai originally did – they served the aristocracy by protecting them with their weapons. The original meaning of "samurai" was men with weapons, military men.

But in the Edo period, samurai were 士 ("*shi*," which means a "man of learning and virtue," or a "civilized gentleman"). Historians today consider some of the Tokugawa Shoguns and lords of feudal domains like Uesugi Yozan (1751-1822) to have been benevolent leaders. Uesugi was called a "man typifying the best of the Japanese," by an eminent opinion leader, Uchimura Kanzo (1861-1930) in his *Japan and Japanese* (or *The Representative Men of Japan*). These shoguns and lords should be characterized more as literary gentlemen than as military men. But this was not the case before the Edo period. For example, as late as the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the warlord Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582) publicly declared that his goal was *tenka fubu* (place all of Japan under military control). Beginning with the military government in Kamakura (1192-1333) and continuing through to the end of the time of the Warring States in the Muromachi period (1392-1573), samurai did exercise military power. This

Photo: THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL INSTITUTE THE UNIVERSITY OF TOKYO / Shogakukan *Hitome de Wakaru Edo Jidai* (Illustrated Book of Edo History)



The shoguns and lords in the Edo period should be characterized more as literary gentlemen than as military men (picture shows a lecture given at the Yushima Seido)

changed under the Edo Shogunate, when samurai were expected to set aside the military side of their occupation and cultivate their civilized side.

Before then, in the Warring States period (1467-1573), the violence included samurai of inferior status rising up against their superiors. This type of revolt, known as *gekokujo* (inferiors overpowering superiors), changed during the Edo period to what Prof. Kasaya Kazuhiko calls *shukun oshikome no kanko* (detention of a lord by retainers). In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, before this practice developed, any retainer who rebelled against a lord, no matter how tyrannical, could be punished for the crime of treason. But a system developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to deal with tyranny – a group of higher ranked retainers was permitted to present their case to the *karo* (the highest ranking official in the feudal lord's government), who would investigate the matter and have the tyrannical lord detained in a room for that purpose. This practice, which removed the need for assassination, was based on the moral code studied by all samurai, *bushido* (the way of the samurai).

Thus, between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the cornerstone of the ruling class's ethical system changed from "military-oriented" to "learning and virtue-oriented." This change was so dramatic we can call it the "gentleman samurai revolution."

The modern world system is grounded on members of the middle class. In 17<sup>th</sup> century Britain, a bourgeois social revolution introduced a modern capitalist society, with citizens owning land and other assets. Their assets were convertible into capital, making them capitalists. In Edo Japan, on the other hand, gentlemen samurai did not own land, having lost it during the *heino*

*bunri* reforms that separated the samurai from peasants. The role of samurai did not depend on possession of assets – it was to manage their lord's domain and look after the people's needs (*keisei saimin*). In Europe, the bourgeois social revolution gave rise to capitalists, but in Japan the gentleman samurai social revolution led to the rise of managers.

### The Early "Managerial Revolution"

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber asserts that modern capitalist society embodies an entirely new type of system, centered not on commerce but on production. Weber's admirable thesis is that production only became paramount in society after the appearance of a new class of people who, instead of consuming whatever they had, saved and invested it.

It is commonly accepted in economic history that the modern world system is supported by two classes – capitalists and workers. The capitalist class springs from the middle class that has prospered since the bourgeois revolution. Working class' roots go back to the cruel enclosure system, under which common lands were taken from peas-

ants, forcing them to migrate to cities. The land enclosures of the latter part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century were criticized by a contemporary, Thomas More: "sheep ... may be said now to devour men." The enclosure system was applied intermittently from around More's time until the rise of capitalism. This process, called the first condition of accumulation, is roundly criticized as inhumane by Karl Marx in *Das Kapital*, in a passage that perhaps represents his most masterly prose. Marx considered the enclosure system to be so brutal that he renamed it "primitive accumulation."

Around the time of the land enclosures, the gentleman samurai social revolution removed samurai from the means of production (land) and transformed them into managers. Land-based peasants became the producers. In the Edo period, land was an asset to be used by producer (peasants), not by gentlemen samurai. The land tax reforms of 1873-1881 confirmed the owners of lands – it proved that it was the farmers who owned the means of production.

British society was typical of Europe as a whole in its division into two classes at opposite ends of the social spectrum: people with capital assets and

producers with no assets. Japanese society was also divided, but quite differently, into managers who had no assets and producers who had them. We can view the European model as being based on “primitive accumulation,” and the Japanese model on “primary accumulation.”

In Europe, economic historians became aware in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century of the importance signified by the separation of capital (ownership) and management. In *The Theory of Economic Development* (1912), Joseph A. Schumpeter posited that economic development is promoted not so much by capitalists, as by entrepreneurs. The importance of entrepreneurs and managers has been widely recognized since James Burnham’s *The Managerial Revolution* (1941).

Generally speaking, Japanese capitalism has always been propelled, right up to the present day, by managers more than by capitalists. As an example, Shibusawa Eiichi (1840-1931), the “father of Japanese capitalism,” was a masterless samurai when the Shogunate fell, not a man with capital. Yet in his lifetime he founded more than 500 enterprises, and is remembered today as a manager of businesses. In Japan, managerial revolution based on primary accumulation occurred long before it did in the West.

### Was the Meiji Restoration an Incomplete Socialist Revolution?

Beginning around 600 A.D. with diplomatic missions to Sui-dynasty China, Japan was keen to learn from other countries. The first country to seek knowledge from Japan was China. After its defeat in the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-1895, China sent students to Japan to learn from Japan’s successful modernization after the 1868 Meiji Restoration. Learning from Japan’s experience has been a major aim of foreign students in Japan ever since. The Meiji Restoration was the starting point for Japan to become a Great Power.

So how should we view the Meiji

Restoration? The most prevalent view is that it was an epoch-making transition from a feudal to a modern society, much like a bourgeois social revolution. Other scholars argue that it marked a dramatic shift to a late-feudal absolutism, with an absolute ruler, the Emperor, newly placed at the top. Under this thesis, Japan’s bourgeois “revolution” did not occur until after World War II, under the influence of American-led democracy. Both of these arguments take the European experience of social change and apply it to Japan.

But as we have seen above, in Europe, a “bourgeois revolution” created the people (capitalists) who owned land and other assets, while in Japan, gentlemen samurai promoted economic development not through ownership of land and assets but by managing them.

In Europe, asset ownership and management were not separated until capitalism reached its prime in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Japan the separation occurred much earlier in the Edo period. Now we can ask ourselves once again, how should we view the Meiji Restoration, which occurred at the end of the period of gentleman samurai management? How, for example, did Qing-dynasty China view it? After losing the Opium War, China began pursuing the acquisition of military technology from the West, but after seeing developments in post-Restoration Japan, it decided to change the political system and learn the way from Japan instead. This still did not prevent the Qing from being swept away, but finally the dynasty collapsed in the 1911 Revolution (Xinhai Revolution). Out of the dynasty’s ashes eventually came China’s Communist Party, and later, the establishment of Communist China. Japan’s impact was evident – the Meiji Restoration led to the Sino-Japanese war and China’s defeat, which created the conditions that brought on the 1911 Revolution and the rise of Chinese communism.

Japan’s impact was evident elsewhere as well. Russia’s defeat in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) led to disorder

in Russia, which brought on the rise of the Bolsheviks, the downfall of the House of Romanov, the socialist revolution and the creation of the Soviet Union. The flow of history in Russia thus somewhat mirrored that in China. These two communist powers went on to pose a threat to Western capitalism.

*Das Kapital*, published one year before the Meiji Restoration in 1867, aimed at overthrowing modern capitalism. The opening of Japan and the Meiji Restoration were actually attempts to control Western power by adopting its superior technology – in other words, to curb the expansion of Western capitalism. There are no “ifs” in history, but let us ask the question anyway – if Meiji Restoration reformers had read *Das Kapital*, could they have fostered the world’s first socialist revolution in Japan?

### Intra-Asian Competition

We have glimpsed the historical processes that began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, in which Japan emerged as Asia’s first economic superpower. After the Meiji Restoration, Japan developed two characteristics seen in Western economic superpowers – wealth and military might. But our study of the Edo period shows that Japan began by acquiring these characteristics in its own way, abandoning firearms and fostering a social revolution that created gentlemen samurai managers.

Modern hegemonic powers have based their economic prosperity on production. Britain’s Industrial Revolution in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was based on a capital-intensive, labor-saving revolution. On the other hand, Japan’s production revolution was based on labor-intensive, capital-saving methods. This was the 18<sup>th</sup> century “Industrious Revolution,” a term coined by Hayami Akira and now used both in Japan and abroad.

Were Edo Japan’s demilitarization, gentleman samurai (managerial) revolution and Industrious Revolution influenced by models from other countries?

Photo: Parliamentary Museum



At the first House of Representatives election in Japan in 1890, 109 gentlemen samurai were elected as members of the Imperial Diet

Yes, they were derived from ideas originating in other parts of Asia, especially the China of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) and the Korea of the Yi dynasty (1392-1910). The European model is based in good part on the world of Islamic Asia – for example, Europe’s industrial revolutions were influenced by the “Arab Agricultural Revolution” (described by Andrew Watson), and its concepts on international law sprang from the Arab view of “House of Islam and House of War.” (Limited space here prevents a more detailed discussion of this issue.)

Firearms were used in China at the time of the Yuan (Mongols), but Ming China and Yi Korea did not develop into strong military powers, even though they remained aware of gun manufacturing methods. Instead, governments there fostered the study of Confucianism and the rule of virtue. This stands in contrast to the European cult of supremacy. Japan’s gentlemen samurai based their moral outlook on the Confucian Four Books studied

throughout East Asia: *The Great Learning*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *The Analects* and *Mencius*. Many other attributes of civilization were also introduced to Japan from China and the Korean peninsula. Japan’s labor-intensive Industrious Revolution was inspired partly by agricultural methods practiced in Jiangnan (the Yangtze Delta), according to Prof. Shiba Yoshinobu. Edo Japan’s policies of national seclusion reflected Ming China and Yi Korea policies prohibiting maritime trade. The alternate attendance requirement system of the Edo period may have been a variation of a similar tribute custom on the continent.

These various ancient models demonstrate that East Asian systems developed independently from Europe. They also imply the existence of regional rivalry. The three East Asian countries managed to avoid being colonized by European powers. The outcome of this intra-Asian competition was that Japan assumed top place in the Edo period, a status exploited to the full after the

Meiji Restoration.

Against this backdrop of intra-Asian competition, the two biggest rivals have been Japan and China. China has launched its own campaign to “enrich the country and strengthen the military.” Now that American hegemony has already peaked, Japan and China could enter a new phase of rivalry. Will this rivalry promote world peace? The answer depends on whether the two countries once again reduce military capacity by embracing their common heritage of cultivating knowledge and virtue, two principles embraced by the gentlemen samurai of Edo Japan. **JS**

(Continued in Part 16)

Kawakatsu Heita is a professor of economic history at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies in Kyoto. His books and articles have been published in both English and Japanese. He also serves as an advisor for various governmental bodies such as the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport.