

# Japanese Civilization (Part 5)

## – Maritime Asia and Europe –

By Kawakatsu Heita

### The Three-Cornered Indian Ocean Trade Network

One of the objectives of the Europeans who came to maritime Asia (then known as East India) was to obtain pepper and spices, which were already an essential part of the triangular Indian Ocean trade network when the Europeans first arrived in East India. Apart from pepper and spices, they also encountered Indian cotton, raw silk thread, silk fabrics, various dyes, tea, china and precious stones in East India. Let us take a closer look at this three-cornered Indian Ocean trade network.

#### Three-Cornered Trade by Islamic Merchants

Before the Europeans discovered the Indian sea route via the Cape of Good

Hope, the triangular transit trade was mainly conducted by Islamic merchants. Although they included Arabs and Persians, most of these merchants were Indians (particularly Gujaratis), Burmese and Indonesians. As payment for pepper and spices, the Europeans gave them silver which they took back to India and exchanged for cotton. This Indian cotton was transported to the Spice Islands, where it was exchanged for pepper and spices. These were then carried west and exchanged for silver, which was transported back to India by the same route.

#### The Struggle for Supremacy over the Transit Trade

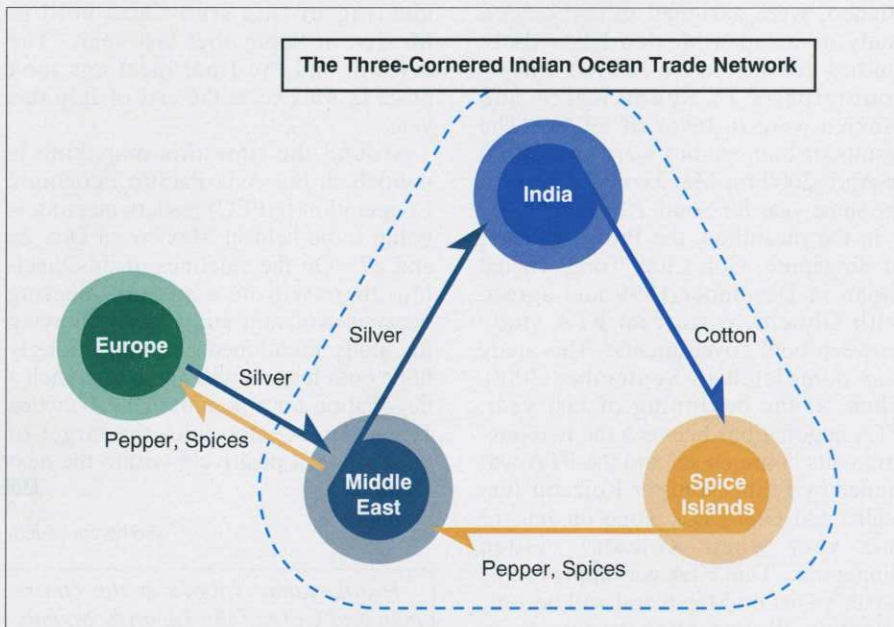
When the Portuguese discovered this three-cornered transit trade and realized its potential for profit, they seized it by force. After Henry the Navigator's

capture of the Moroccan city of Ceuta on the opposite coast from Gibraltar in 1415, the arena of the struggle between Christendom and Islam broadened from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean. In 1509, Egypt and Gujarat sent a combined fleet to challenge the dominance of the Portuguese, but they were defeated by the Portuguese fleet under the command of Francisco de Almeida off the Indian coastal town of Diu. Portugal occupied Goa in the following year and Malacca the year after that. In 1538, Turkey sent a fleet of 76 ships from the Suez to India, but they were repulsed by the Portuguese. Portugal's acquisition in 1543 of the right to impose duty at Hormuz – the point of intersection between the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea which it had taken over in 1507 – was the decisive turning point in the struggle for domination of the transit trade, resulting in a shift of the western base of the three-cornered trade from the Middle East-Venice route to the Lisbon-Antwerp route. In the 17th century, ascendancy over the transit trade again shifted from Portugal to Britain and the Netherlands, and the base moved north to Amsterdam and London.

#### The Flow of Silver from Europe to India

Although the balance of power changed in the 17th century, the basic triangular structure of silver from Europe, cotton from India, and pepper and spices from the Spice Islands remained in place. Let us now examine in more detail the reasons for the long-term stability of this structure by examining each of these commodities in turn.

Gold and silver, particularly silver, flowed from Europe to India because



Source: Kawakatsu Heita, *An Oceanic History of Civilization*





A map published in 1592 shows southern China and the Philippines in the north, and Java and New Guinea in the south

there were no other commodities that India required in large quantities. In addition to their use as materials for silver rupees and gold pagodas, they were in great demand as ornaments and accessories. Precious metals were transported to India from Venice in the latter half of the medieval period, from Lisbon from 1497, and from Amsterdam and London from around 1600.

#### *The India-Spice Islands Cotton Trade Route*

From ancient times cotton was an exclusive product of India and was in great demand in the Spice Islands as material for clothing. In 1585, the English merchant and traveler Robert Fitch observed that the high-quality fine cotton fabric Dhaka muslin was not only used in India but was also sent to Pegu (present-day Myanmar), Malacca and Sumatra. Cotton produced in Cambay, Bengal, Coromandel and other regions of India was carried to the Spice Islands, where it was exchanged for spices such as cloves, nutmegs and mace (the dried outer covering of nutmegs). This demand was

not simply for Indian cotton regardless of its provenance: specific types of cotton produced in certain regions were required by particular regions of the Spice Islands and the trade routes were determined accordingly.

Since Indian cotton was the only commodity that the producers of spices would always buy, merchants had to stock up with various types of Indian cotton in advance so that they could obtain the spices they needed. When the Netherlands gained a monopoly of the spice trade in the 17th century, it set up a trading house in India to ensure the steady supply of Indian cotton because it was the only item they could trade with the inhabitants of the Spice Islands.

#### *The Spice Islands – The Moluccas, Java and Borneo*

The Spice Islands consisted of three main islands: the Moluccas, Java and Borneo. The main product of the Moluccas was cloves, nutmegs being produced in the southernmost region of Banda. Java produced various kinds of spices, including cloves, nutmegs and pepper, but in comparatively small

quantities. The chief product of Sumatra was pepper. In addition to clove and nutmegs, pepper was also produced in large quantities in the Sukadana region of Borneo.

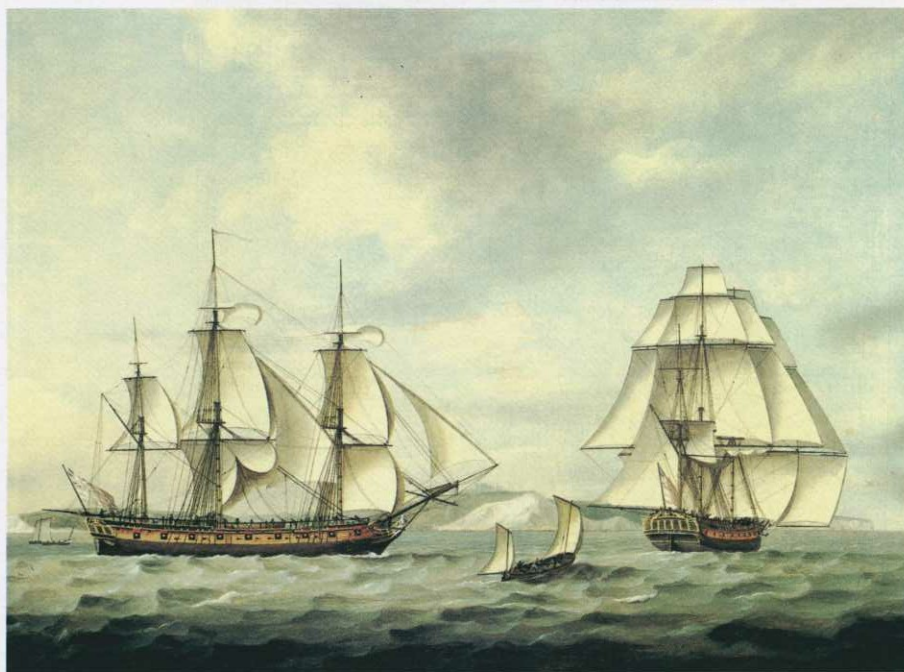
Although peppers were grown in Malabar on the west coast of India, Sumatran peppers are said to have been larger and heavier. Pepper was also produced in the Coromandel region on the east coast of India, but it was poor in quality and seems to have been relatively expensive. Even the British East India Company based in India could not accept the price of Indian-produced pepper. Since pepper and spices from the Spice Islands were clearly superior to their Indian counterparts in both quality and price, the world's merchants went to the Spice Islands for cheap, high-quality spices.

#### *The Stable Demand for Pepper in Europe*

In Europe, large numbers of livestock were slaughtered in the autumn as food and because there was insufficient fodder to keep livestock over the winter. Pepper and spices were needed both as a means of preserving this meat



Photo: World Photo Service / LONDON: SCIENCE MUSEUM



The ships of the British East India Company, which had two main objectives – to sell domestically produced woolen cloth and to obtain pepper and spices

(although salt was mainly used for this purpose) and to improve the flavor of meat stored over a long period. Demand for pepper in Europe was therefore particularly stable, irrespective of its price. The most important use of pepper and spices was as medicines. In 1621, the Englishman Thomas Mun wrote, “Spices maintain health and because they cure diseases there was tremendous demand for them everywhere and at all times.”

To sum up, gold and silver were taken from Europe to India, where they were exchanged for cotton, which was traded in the Spice Islands for pepper and spices, which were brought back to Europe. Commerce between Europe and Asia thus took the form of a stable three-cornered transit trade that continued over three centuries.

## Indian Cotton

### *The British East India Company*

As we have seen, Indian cotton was an essential element in the three-cornered transit trade between Europe and Asia. Let us now examine the background to the great demand for Indian cotton in Europe. First of all, it should

be noted that when Portugal, Spain, Britain and the Netherlands first entered maritime Asia, none of them was aiming to import cotton from India. The British East India Company had two main objectives: to sell domestically produced woolen cloth and to obtain pepper and spices. However, British wool proved to be unsuitable for the perennially hot climate of India and the Spice Islands, which already had a plentiful supply of cotton cloth that was cheaper and more varied in color than British woolen fabrics. To achieve its second aim – the acquisition of pepper and spices – Britain had to compete with Portugal. The decisive turning point in this struggle was the defeat of the Spanish Armada by the British fleet in 1588, after which Britain and the Netherlands gained the ascendancy over Spain and Portugal.

In its global struggle with the Netherlands for domination of the seas, Britain gradually gained the advantage. In 1664, the British defeated the Dutch in America and took over the settlement of New Amsterdam, renaming it New York. Britain subsequently took the lead over the Dutch in Asia while maintaining equality in Europe.

Nevertheless, they also suffered seri-

ous setbacks. The Amboina Massacre of 1623 was a severe blow to British power in the Indies and they finally lost their foothold in the Spice Islands when they were forced out of Bantam by the Dutch in 1682. After losing its vital interest in the pepper and spice trade to the Dutch, Britain had no choice but to fall back on India. This retreat to India had a quite unexpected result: the westward diffusion of cotton. Since Indian cotton was the only commodity that could be traded for gold and silver as well as pepper and spices, the British East India Company embarked upon the plan of exporting cotton to England and creating domestic demand for it.

### *The Cotton Craze in Britain*

Even in the 1670s, the cotton-spice transit trade between India and the Spice Islands was not the chief concern of the British trading house in Bengal. Until the above-mentioned turning point in its trading policy in the Indies, the main imports of the British East India Company were indigo, drugs, pepper and spices, saltpeter, raw silk thread, and precious stones. With this change in policy, however, Indian cotton came to dominate the company's imports. For roughly a century from the second half of the 1660s, Indian cotton and other fabrics (including silk fabrics) accounted for about two-thirds of all the East India Company's imports from Asia.

The final two decades of the 17th century were known as the “Indian Craze” in Britain, and by the end of the century Indian cotton had attained a popularity unrivaled by any other commodity. A pamphlet written in 1699 described this remarkable development: “Twenty years ago, calico (also known as muslin or shades) was never seen as a fashionable adornment. But nowadays most men and women would not consider themselves dressed if they did not wear garments made of calico. Men now wear calico shirts, ties, sleeve protectors, gowns and handkerchiefs, while women favor calico hair ornaments, nightdresses, head scarves, aprons, gowns and underwear. Indian



stockings are now all the rage among both the sexes. Unless parliament passes a law prohibiting it or it incurs the ire of the royal family, it will be difficult to restrain this craze." The novelist Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) put it more succinctly: "The woolen fabrics and silk that were formerly used for women's clothing and household effects have all been replaced by Indian goods."

#### *The Background to the Diffusion of Indian Cotton*

Three reasons can be given for the rapid diffusion of Indian cotton in Britain and Europe. The first is the preference for light and sheer fabrics that developed after the arrival of Indian cotton. In the second half of the 16th century, a change in fashion from furs to woolen fabrics was already taking place among the wealthy and the privileged. This preference for thinner cloth continued in the first half of the 17th century with the popularity of "new drapery" woolen textiles made by carding long-fibered wool and characterized by the lightness of the cloth and the ease with which they could be made into dress materials of various colors and patterns. Since cotton goods were clearly superior to this new drapery both in their lightness and flexibility of finish, Indian cotton that was "delicate like a woman and thin like a spider's web" rode the crest of this wave.

Secondly, the East India Company deliberately implemented various policies to create a fashion for cotton goods in Britain. Gaining the favor of the post-Restoration aristocracy, it promoted a preference for cotton goods among the upper classes, sending samples of patterns favored by Europeans to India, where they had them copied and dyed.

It also dispatched British artisans to India to teach the local people how to make designs according to European tastes.

Thirdly, Indian cotton itself had certain characteristics that strongly appealed to the British. Compared with other textiles, it was easy to dye and print, and its color did not fade with

washing.

For the British in the late 17th century, these were unbelievable qualities. Indian fabric dyeing techniques were the most advanced in the world, producing a level of color fixing that the British had never experienced before. Furthermore, at about a third of the price of woolen cloth, Indian cotton was considerably cheaper than European fabrics.

#### *The Clothing Revolution Caused by Indian Cotton*

Indian cotton imports had a profound influence on clothing materials in Britain and Europe, which had hitherto mainly been leather, woolen fabrics and fustian (thick twilled cotton cloth). The impact on European fashion of thin and colorful Indian cotton goods went beyond the craze from the end of the 17th to the beginning of the 18th century: it created a sensation that lasted for a whole century. The enthusiasm of consumers overwhelmed the opposition of the government and the traditional textile industry. Existing clothing customs were shaken at their roots, and the new fashion also gained rapid popularity in the New World colonized by the Europeans. This was nothing short of a clothing revolution.

Around the same time, according to the historian Nagahara Keiji, Japan was also experiencing the "textile revolution" – the transition from hemp to cotton – as a result of cotton imports from Korea and China (Nagahara Keiji, *Sengoku Jidai* [The Upheaval of the Sengoku Period], published by Shogakukan Inc.).

#### *The Crisis in the Traditional Textile Industry*

The Indian cotton craze spread from Britain to France, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain and the rest of Europe. As a result, traditional silk, wool and other textile businesses in almost every country went bankrupt one after another and all woolen merchants and manufacturers felt a strong sense of crisis. Large numbers of pamphlets criticizing the

British East India Company were printed, one of which denounced Indian cotton thus: "Made by devil-worshipping heretics who work for a halfpenny a day, it is gaudy, patchily died, shabby, threadbare and cheap." The situation was clearly critical.

This crisis was strikingly similar to the situation the Indian cotton industry found itself in over one century later when the tables were turned on it by British machine-finished cotton. According to a contemporary report, "This poverty is almost without parallel in the history of commerce; the Indian countryside has turned chalk-white with the scattered bones of cotton artisans." But from the end of the 17th century to the beginning of the 18th century, it was Britain that experienced the crisis.

If a developing nation is viewed as a country whose economy is based on the export of primary goods and import of manufactured goods, then Britain, which exported bullion and imported cotton products, may be said to have possessed these characteristics. The normal practice of a developing nation is to import manufactured goods and to take protectionist measures to defend its domestic industry, and this is just what Britain did. I therefore cannot accept the fashionable historical interpretation of today which views the past interaction between Britain and India as a typical relationship between an advanced nation and a developing nation at different stages of civilization. The British assumption that their country has always been more economically advanced than India is nothing more than a contemporary prejudice. JTI

Continued in Part 6

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