

Japanese Civilization (Part 7)

– Maritime Asia and Early Modern Japan –

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Japan and the Song, Mongol and Ming Dynasties China – A Vast Repository of Goods and Cultures

The Song dynasty in China (960-1279) gave birth to many technical innovations. During the Southern Song period (1127-1279) in particular, Chinese merchants conducted extensive trade and exchange in Southeast Asia, resulting in the influx of a wide variety of goods from the Indian Ocean trade region via the China Sea. As a result of these developments, China underwent a commercial revolution (see Shiba Yoshinobu, *Economic History of Southern China during the Song Dynasty*, Institute of Oriental Culture, University of Tokyo). The Mongols who overthrew the Southern Song proceeded to expand their territory into the largest empire in the world. Goods from throughout the Eurasian Continent flowed into China under the Mongol (Yuan) dynasty (1271-1368), to which goods from the New World (such as corn, sweet potatoes, tobacco and cayenne pepper) were added during the rule of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). China ware with colored glazes made its first appearance at the end of the Mongol dynasty, replacing blue-and-white china as the main type of Chinese porcelain from the beginning of the Ming period. At around the same time, silk was replaced by cotton as the most popular material for clothing. From the Song to the Ming dynasty, China thus became a vast repository of cultures as goods flowed in from all over the world. The cultures forming the basis of life in Ming China were completely different from those of China under the Tang dynasty (618-907).

The Cultures Brought to Japan in Tally Ships

The mid-14th to early 15th century was

the first period of domination of the seas of East Asia by the *Wako* (Japanese pirates), who reappeared for a second period of ascendancy in the mid-16th century. Between these two periods was a hiatus of almost a century and a half from 1404 to 1547, during which Japanese tally ships (ships of “tributary countries” permitted to trade with China) made a total of 17 voyages to China. The quantity of goods carried from China to medieval Japan far exceeded those brought back by the Japanese embassies to China in the Tang dynasty (a total of 19 embassies embarked on voyages from 630 to 894, but only 15 actually made the trip). Although the missions to Ming China mainly consisted of envoys and scholars, even the official tally ships were actually operated by the shogunate, *daimyo* (feudal lords) and Buddhist temples. They also received substantial private financial backing from Hakata and Sakai merchants, without which the scale of the tally trade would have been considerably smaller. Sakai in particular was at this time flourishing as one of the world’s leading trading cities. The goods and culture brought back to Japan from China in these public and private tally ships resulted in a significant transformation in Japanese society.

The aspects of Chinese culture introduced to Japan during this period can be clearly distinguished from those brought back by the Japanese embassies to China under the Tang dynasty. The three main cultural legacies of Tang China were the *ritsuryo* system (criminal laws and administrative regulations), the castle town and the concept of “authentic history.” The *ritsuryo* system of government, the plan of the city of Heijokyo and the *Nihon Shoki* (The Chronicles of Japan) were all modeled on the administrative system of the Tang dynasty. On the other hand, the main cultures and goods

introduced into medieval Japan were Zen Buddhism, Song learning, copper coins, silk, chinaware, cotton and the Chinese style of gardening. For the most part, these were cultures connected with everyday life.

In 1976, the wreck of a tally ship loaded a huge quantity of goods was discovered off Shinan in Korea. This ship apparently met with disaster on its way from China to Japan via the Korean Peninsula some time in the first half of the 14th century. Salvaged over a period of seven years, the ship’s freight tells us what kind of goods were being imported to Japan from China at that time. The goods found in the greatest quantity were copper coins amounting to several tons, followed by about 18,000 pieces of chinaware. (Tokyo National Museum/The Chunichi Shimbun, eds., *Goods Salvaged from the Sea Bottom at Shinan*, The Chunichi Shimbun) The massive amount of copper coins is particularly significant. In China’s tribute trade, copper coins were the commodity wanted by all the tributary countries including Japan.

During the two centuries of the embassies to Tang China, the aspects of Chinese civilization introduced into Japan were mainly related to the political system, but in the period of tally trade with Ming China they were mainly related to the economic system, such as copper coins, silk, cotton and chinaware.

Japan under “National Seclusion” and Western Europe

Let us now consider the significance of these cultural imports in early modern Japanese society as compared with the Industrial Revolution in Britain.

The Industrial Revolution in Britain can be seen as having a similar significance to the production revolution that

Photo: Shinsho-Gokuraku-ji (Shin-nyo-do)



The goods and culture brought to Japan from China in the tally ships brought about a significant transformation in Japanese society

took place in early modern Japan. The British Industrial Revolution is conventionally viewed as the world's first spontaneous (or autogenic) industrial revolution, while Japan is seen as a feudal society until it reformed itself along the lines of the British model in the Meiji period (1868-1912).

However, this orthodox historical interpretation springs from an internal, landlocked perspective. If the historical development of Britain and Japan is viewed from the perspective of the sea, a quite different picture emerges.

Just as modern civilization in the Western Europe centering around Britain emerged through its dynamic relationship with ancient Asian civilization on the Eurasian Continent, Japan underwent considerable cultural exchange with Asia via the sea before it entered the period of "national seclusion." Both Japan and Western Europe thus experienced deep relationships with ancient Asian civilizations through the medium of the sea.

Japanese Awareness of "National Seclusion"

The series of measures adopted by the Tokugawa shogunate in the 1630s,

including the prohibition of Japanese overseas from returning to Japan, the ban on overseas voyages by Japanese subjects and the banishment of the Portuguese and Spanish, is usually described as a policy of "national seclusion." This is not quite accurate. In fact, the Japanese themselves did not use the word *sakoku* (national seclusion) until the 19th century. In response to Adam Laxman's request for trade between Russia and Japan at the end of the 18th century, the daimyo Matsudaira Sadanobu explained Japan's policy in terms of the concepts of communication and commerce rather than national seclusion. This clearly reflects a contemporary awareness that Japan's foreign policy was confined to communication with Korea and Ryukyu Kingdom (now Okinawa), and commerce with the Dutch and the Chinese.

The word *sakoku* is in fact a foreign concept that was directly translated into Japanese. It made its first appearance in Japanese society in 1801, when the official translator for Dutch traders at Nagasaki, Shizuki Tadao, used it in his Japanese translation of part of Engelbert Kaempfer's *History of Japan*. Translated verbatim from the Dutch, the title reads: "Discussion as to

whether it actually profits the people of present-day Japan to cut their whole country off from the outside world and forbid trade with people of foreign lands both inside Japan and overseas." In short, this was a discussion of the merits and demerits of "national seclusion." Subsequently, the Japanese awareness of "national seclusion" steadily spread during the first half of the 19th century. A letter written by the official in charge of coastal defense when the U.S. consul general Townsend Harris arrived in Japan in 1856 shows the extent to which the concept of the "laws on national seclusion" had become accepted by the shogunate: "Since the third Tokugawa shogun (Tokugawa Iemitsu) issued an edict prohibiting the entry of European ships in Ansei 13 (1636), all dealings with foreigners apart from the Dutch have been strictly prohibited, and since the suppression of the Shimabara Uprising (1637-38) the laws on national seclusion have been enforced for the sake of peace in our land." (Ronald P. Toby, *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan*)

Establishment of a Self-Sufficient Economy

The basis of the emergence in the 19th century of this self-image of Japan as an isolated nation was the realization that 19th-century Japan, unlike 17th and 18th-century Japan, had established a self-sufficient economy. When Commodore Matthew Perry urged Japan to open its doors to trade in 1854, stating that "because trade has the great merit of enabling nations to procure what they do not have, it is now flourishing throughout the world, permitting nations to become stronger and richer," the chief foreign relations official of the Tokugawa shogunate, Hayashi Fukusai, replied that since domestic goods were sufficient for all Japan's requirements and it had no need for foreign goods, foreign trade had been forbidden by Japanese law. (*History of Yokohama*, Vol. 2) This response clearly reflects the pride the Japanese felt in their self-sufficiency.

Photo: Currency Museum, Bank of Japan



Several tons of copper coins were introduced into medieval Japan in the tally trade with Ming China

It is interesting to note that the Chinese also took great pride in their economic independence. When Ambassador Plenipotentiary George Macartney visited China in 1793 to present a letter from the British King George III to Emperor Qianlong requesting the expansion of trade, the Emperor stated in his written reply to the King that China already had everything it required and did not need to trade with Britain.

Japanese-Style Chinese Concepts

Japan and China were similar in the pride they took in their self-sufficiency and policy of restricting foreign trade. The thinking underlying these self-sufficient economies was intimately connected to the Chinese concept that “barbarian” countries should provide goods to “civilized” countries and the subjects of “civilized” countries should not travel overseas to sell goods to “barbarians.”

This was also the basic thinking underlying the Chinese tribute trade. Since the country receiving tribute was expected to provide more than it

received, tributary countries profited from this exchange. This was diametrically opposed to the principle of free trade espoused by the “advanced country” Britain, which aimed to profit by selling its domestic products to overseas countries.

Although early modern Japan itself did not have a tribute trade relationship with any foreign countries, the intensity of the *sonno joi* (“revere the Emperor, expel the barbarian”) movement during the final years of the Tokugawa shogunate (or Edo period; 1603-1867) shows that the Japanese viewed themselves as civilized and Western countries as barbarian. In short, the Japanese had come to espouse a Japanese version of Chinese thinking by the end of the Tokugawa shogunate. Rather than being an original Japanese creation, the system of national exclusion was modeled on the Chinese concept of foreign trade restriction, which was the converse of the tribute system and based on the same principle. (Arano Yasunori, *Kinsei Nihon to Higashi Ajia* [Early Modern Japan and East Asia], University of Tokyo Press).

The Creation of a “Mini-Chinese Empire”

However, the Japanese economy at the beginning of the Edo period cannot be described as self-sufficient. Japan paid huge sums for the import of large quantities of raw silk thread, silk cloth and sugar from China via Nagasaki and Tsushima. Trade was indispensable for Japan in the 17th century and its biggest import was raw silk thread. But by the time Japan opened its ports to foreign trade in the mid-19th century, raw silk thread was no longer imported and actually became Japan’s biggest export. Even before Japan opened its doors in the final years of the Tokugawa shogunate, it had already embarked on the process of producing substitutes for imported goods in order to free itself from economic dependence on China. This independence was gradually achieved from the mid-early modern period onwards as Japan started to produce imported goods domestically.

“National seclusion,” therefore, can be seen as a system for attaining economic self-sufficiency through the creation of a “mini-Chinese empire” that contained everything it needed. This self-sufficiency could be only achieved through the domestic production of substitutes for imports from China. National seclusion was above all an economic process.

Social Revolution and Domestic Production

A similar social revolution and radical transformation of the “product complex” (the aggregate of the materials utilized by human beings in order to live in society) thus took place in Japan as it occurred in Europe at roughly the same time. During what Western historians call the “age of discovery,” the Japanese were also trading with maritime Asia, which they referred to as *tenjiku* (far-away land) or *nanban* (the barbarian south). Today this is the region extending from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean.

Through trade with this region, Asian goods including cotton, sugar and chinaware (as well as goods from the New World such as sweet potatoes and tobacco) flowed into Japan, and the creation of mass demand for these imported goods led to a social revolution in Japan just as it did in Europe. The period of transition in Japan from the medieval to the early modern period was thus a major turning point in the product complex of society. This is reflected in the comment of the historian Naito Konan that Japanese history before Onin War (1467-77) “seems to me like the history of a foreign country.” (*Research on the History of Japanese Culture*)

This is not the only similarity between the historical developments of Japan and Europe. In order to import goods, Japan exported the materials used for minting money (including copper) to Asia on as large a scale as Europe. From the end of the 18th century to the 19th century, this outflow of precious metals and copper from Japan was effectively brought to a halt.

During this period, Japan succeeded in producing domestically the new goods it had been importing from Asia and developed the techniques for processing them, thereby achieving complete economic self-sufficiency in the latter part of the early modern period.

The Industrial Revolution and the "Industrious Revolution"

Hayami Akira has put forward the interesting thesis that Japan underwent an "industrious revolution" rather than an industrial revolution in the Edo period. He uses the word "industrious" not in an ethical sense but to refer to the nature of the combination of the three elements of production: capital (plant and machinery), labor (human labor) and land (including raw materials). The main point of Hayami's thesis is that the combination of capital, labor and land differs between an industrial revolution and an "industrious revolution," determining the method of production.

Since labor was in short supply in the West in relation to the vast area of land that had been acquired through colonization, the most rational way of combining the elements of production was to raise the productivity of labor, resulting in a new capital-intensive combination. In Japan, on the other hand, because land was scarce compared to labor, the most rational response was to raise the productivity of land through the use of a large amount of labor, resulting in a new labor-intensive combination.

Early Modern Japan and Europe Surpassing Asia

It is important to emphasize that neither of these new combinations of the elements of production was necessarily better or constituted the essential criteria for revolution. Both were rational choices based on the existing production conditions and both achieved the same result: emancipation from dependence on imports from Asia. Both Japan and Europe succeeded in breaking free from the pressure brought to



Photo: NAGASAKI MUNICIPAL MUSEUM / Zusetsu Gakushu Nihon no Rekishi 4, Obunsha Co., Ltd.

Under the "national seclusion" policy, only Dutch and Chinese nationals were allowed to trade with Japan at Dejima in Nagasaki (Folding Screens Showing Nagasaki in the Kanbun Era [1661-1673])

bear on them by the markets of maritime Asia and achieving economic independence. The period of transition from medieval to early modern in Japanese civilization are thus related to the development of civilization in Western history. Just as the establishment of modern Western civilization occurred through Europe's escape from economic dependence on one oceanic region of Asia (the Indian Ocean region), Japan's national seclusion was an escape from dependence on another oceanic region of Asia (the China Sea region).

Culture always flows downstream from the place of higher culture. By culture here we mean ways of life and their constituent elements. New systems were established in Japan and Europe because both were attracted by the ways of life and their constituent elements brought to them across the seas from the ancient civilizations of Asia. In order to adopt these elements of Asian civilization, they had to pay with vast amounts of precious metals, and when the price became too high they were forced to find ways of stopping the flow. Europe's establishment of the modern world system spanning the Atlantic Ocean was one solution to this problem; Japan's national seclusion

bringing everything within its own borders was another.

From the perspectives of both world history and the history of civilization, the early modern eras in Europe and Japan had the same significance: they arose through the development of new systems of economic independence from Asia. However, the Asian civilizations that Europe and Japan surpassed were not the same. While Japan was mainly involved with Chinese civilization via the China Sea, Europe was mainly involved with Islamic civilization via the Indian Ocean.

But the early modern system and national seclusion were both processes through which they assimilated the essence of these ancient Asian civilizations and were freed from their yearning for them. **JTI**

Continued in Part 8

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