

Japanese Civilization (Part 2)

– The Rise of Maritime Asia –

By Kawakatsu Heita

The Unjust “Barbarian Asia” Thesis

The German Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) is said to be the founding father of modern historical scholarship. One of Ranke's most important works is his *Outline of World History* (first published as *Über die Epochen der neueren Geschichte*), which was originally a series of lectures given for the King of Bavaria, Maximilian II in 1854. Approaching his 60th birthday, Ranke drew upon the vast stock of knowledge he had accumulated over his long career. In the first lecture titled “How Should We Interpret the Concept of Progress in History?” Ranke alluded to the history of Asia: “Let us now turn to Asia. We know that civilization sprang up there and that the Asian continent has undergone several cultural stages. But historical development in this region has on the whole been retrogressive. Asian culture was at its zenith in its most ancient period. ... The invasion of the savage tribe of the Mongols brought culture in Asia to a complete standstill.” In the 14th lecture, Ranke stated, “The barbarism that pervaded Asia in those times still holds sway today. Here is a clear case where we cannot expect what we take to be the usual progress of mankind.”

These extracts from the *Outline of World History* show that Ranke had an ineradicable disdain for Asia and even felt something akin to hostility towards the Mongols. On the other hand, Ranke was full of praise for the European Christian world, in which he felt the utmost confidence as an integrated cultural entity: “One of the fundamental concepts I have reached, and I am convinced that this is absolutely right, is that the European Christian peoples should be viewed collectively as a harmonious whole which is akin to

a single nation. ... This is the great ethnic community of Western Europe.”

Ranke delivered these lectures in 1854, the year in which Japan signed peace and amity treaties with America and other Western powers. It is clear from a single reading that even the greatest European historian of the time harbored a very strong Eurocentric bias. Incidentally, Ranke's pupil Ludwig Riess came to Japan in 1887 at the invitation of the Japanese government to teach world history (i.e. Western history) at Tokyo Imperial University (now University of Tokyo), which marked the birth of the study of modern history in Japan. As a result, historical scholarship in Japan had a conspicuous Eurocentric bias from the beginning. Did Asia really embark on a path of barbarism from the time of the Yuan (Mongol) dynasty (1271-1368) in China, as eminent modern Europeans such as Ranke believed?

At the time of the Yuan dynasty, a sentimental young Italian visited China. His name was Marco Polo (1254-1324). Setting out from his native Venice with his father Niccolo and uncle Maffeo, the 21-year-old Marco Polo arrived in Shangdo (Kaiping) in 1275. For 17 years until he returned to Venice in 1292, Marco Polo was cordially treated by the Mongol ruler Kublai Khan (1215-1294) and traveled extensively throughout China. He was amazed by the wealth of the country and wrote about it in detail in his journals, in which he described Japan as the “land of gold, *Zipangu*.”⁽¹⁾ The civilization of China under Mongol rule, which Ranke had dismissed as the death of Eastern culture, was an object of yearning for Europeans, and it was the information about this civilization provided by Marco Polo that encouraged them to set out in search of this Utopia.

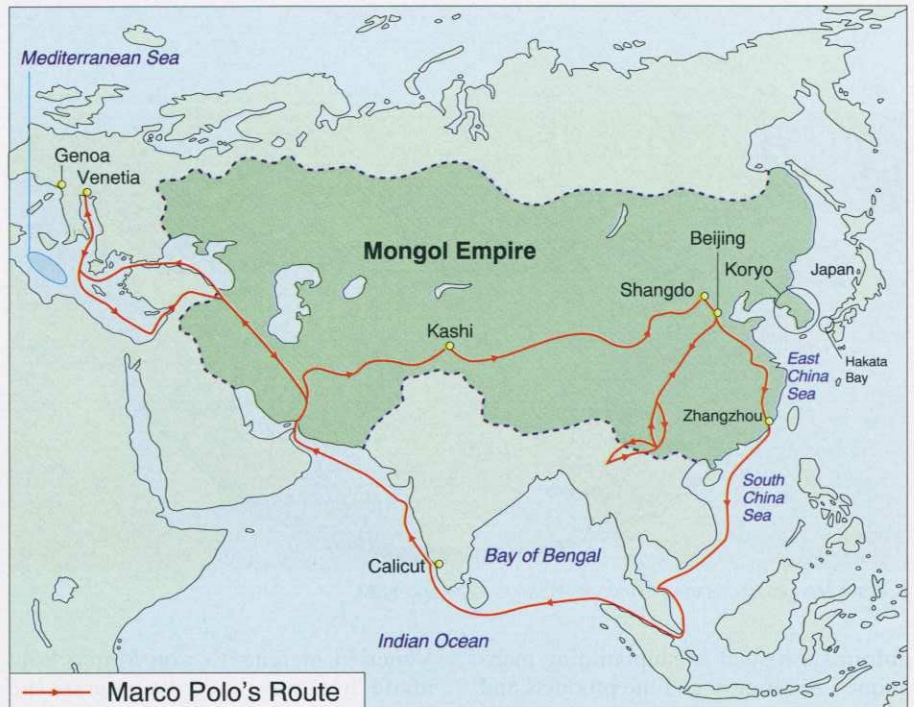
Marco Polo's route is also very significant. On the outward half of his journey, he took the east-west land route, the Silk Road, in the opposite direction, and when he returned he took the “sea route,” traveling south across the China Sea, through Southeast Asia, and finally to Venice. This shows that the world's largest circular route connecting the land route and the sea route had already been established at the time of the Yuan dynasty. The sea route was later named the “spice route” or the “china route” after the goods that were carried along it. In which direction were these commodities carried? The flow of goods was from Asia to Europe, in other words, from the place of higher culture to that of lower culture. This underlines the unjustness of Ranke's description of Asian civilization as barbarian.

After the land and sea routes were linked in the Yuan dynasty, the main stage of history steadily shifted from land to sea, and “maritime Asia” (the Indian Ocean and China Sea regions) became the pivotal axis of history. It was through their involvement in maritime Asia that Europe and Japan came to take their places on the center stage of world history.

From the Mongol Invasions to Japanese Pirates

Ancient civilization first flourished around the basins of great rivers such as the Tigris-Euphrates, Indus and Yellow River which had their sources in the great mountain ranges of the Eurasian continent. Viewed from the perspective of ancient civilization, Japan and Britain, located respectively in the seas beyond the westernmost and easternmost tips of the Eurasian continent, were the furthest removed from civilization. Geographically, they were

Routes taken by Marco Polo



literally on the remotest frontiers of culture. In these remote island nations, new modern civilizations eventually emerged. At the western frontier, Britain became the world's first industrialized nation, while at the eastern frontier Japan became Asia's first industrialized nation. While ancient civilization was formed on the Asian continent, modern civilization was born across the seas beyond the Asian continent. How did the dynamics of world history shift from Asia to "non-Asia" and from the land to the sea?

When the main arena of civilization was the continent, the Silk Road was the great artery linking the continental civilizations of the East and West. This land artery came to be connected with the sea route that had been developed in the South Seas, thanks to the tolerant attitude of the Mongol Empire towards Islam, which had already spread across the Indian Ocean to Southeast Asia. The culture and institutions of the ancient civilizations of the Middle East, India and China were transmitted back and forth across the seas by Islamic merchants. The fact that neither Europe nor Japan, the main protagonists in later ages, was conquered by the Mongols does not mean that they were not influenced by the Mongol Empire. Indeed, Mongolia had a decisive influence in leading both Japan and Europe to the sea route.

The impact on Japan, of course, occurred through the Mongol invasions in the late 13th century. In a state letter to the "King of Japan" delivered in 1266, Kublai wrote, "I pray that henceforth we can forge friendship through dialogue and enjoy mutual exchange. Wise men of the past have viewed the sea as part of their homes. If we do not travel to other lands, how can we establish our homes? Is there anyone who likes to use military force?" (A copy of this state letter is currently kept at the Todaiji Temple.) The letter clearly threatened the use of military force if Japan did not enter into diplomatic relations.

At this time, the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279) was still strong in China and Japan enjoyed exchange

with it through maritime trade. Mongolia, which had the capacity to overthrow the Song rulers, was their greatest enemy. From the intelligence the Japanese had received from the Chinese, Japan already viewed the Mongols as potential invaders and refused Kublai's request for diplomatic relations as a matter of course. Kublai persistently repeated his demands, sending envoys to Japan on as many as six occasions, but the regent Hojo Tokimune (1251-1284) remained firm. Kublai finally decided to invade Japan. In the first Mongol invasion of 1274, the Mongol forces consisted of about 20,000 Mongols, North Chinese and Jurchen Tartar troops and an army of 6,000 men from the Kingdom of Koryo. The main battles were fought on the islands of Iki and Tsushima and in the western part of Hakata Bay. Just when the Japanese army seemed to be getting the worse of the struggle, relief came in the form of a typhoon, later described as a "*kamikaze* (divine wind)," which wrecked much of the Mongol fleet.

Following his victory against the Southern Song two years later in 1276, Kublai again sent an envoy to Japan. Hojo Tokimune beheaded him, making a second Mongol invasion inevitable.

In 1281, Kublai invaded Japan with a fleet of 4,400 warships bearing 140,000 men. The outcome of the battle is described in the ancient Chinese chronicle: "On August 1st, most of the fleet was destroyed by a fierce wind. On the 5th, Fan Wen-hu and other generals escaped on the ships that had survived the gale, leaving more than 100,000 troops behind at the foot of the mountains. With no ships to return in, the troops chose a leader and, following his orders, decided to cut down trees to build ships. At that moment, on the 7th, they were attacked by the Japanese army. The majority died in the battle and the remaining 20 to 30 thousand were taken prisoner and marched to Hakata. Here the Japanese killed the Mongols, Koreans and North Chinese (Han) troops, but spared the lives of the South Chinese, making them slaves. Thus the invasion ended as a tragic failure in which, as the legend goes, only three out of a 100 thousand returned."

The South Chinese troops whose lives the Japanese spared were from the Southern Song empire that had been overthrown by the Mongols several years earlier. Masters of maritime trade, they were a people well known to the Japanese who, by keeping them as slaves, were able to obtain various

Photo : Imperial Household Agency



Kublai's Mongol troops tried to invade Japan in 1274 and 1281

information such as shipbuilding techniques, sea routes, and the products and characteristics of foreign lands. This gave the Japanese the knowledge they needed to plunge into overseas adventures and led to the appearance of the *Wako* (Japanese pirates) who became feared on the Asian continent. The Mongol invasions thus indirectly spawned the Japanese pirates.

The Age of Great Voyages

As explained in the previous section, the Mongol invasions had the unexpected result of making prisoners of the Japanese many South Chinese who had made their livings on and around the China Sea. By obtaining information about the China Sea region, the Japanese were able to strike out into maritime Asia. This was the dawn of the "age of great voyages" that lasted from the 14th century to the beginning of the period of national seclusion in Japan in the early 16th century.

Two main factors brought the Europeans to maritime Asia. One was the information on Japan provided by Marco Polo; the other was the Black Death. Both of these are deeply connected with the Mongol Empire. This section focuses on the first factor – information about Japan.

After working in the service of the Mongol ruler Kublai for 17 years, the

Venetian merchant's son Marco Polo made his way back by sea to the Persian Gulf via Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. From Baghdad, he traveled by land to the Black Sea coast and again set sail from Constantinople (now Istanbul), reaching his native Venice in 1295. After his arrival in Venice, he was captured by the Genoese navy and wrote *The Travels of Marco Polo* while in captivity. The seafaring Genoese must have been very interested in the sea routes that Marco Polo had used during his travels. At the easternmost end of this route was the country of "Zipangu" (based on the Chinese pronunciation "Jiipenguo"). About Japan, Marco Polo wrote,

Zipangu is an island in the eastern ocean, situated at the distance of about 1,500 miles from the mainland, or coast of Manji. It is of considerable size; its inhabitants have fair complexions, are well made, and are civilized in their manners. Their religion is the worship of idols. They are independent of every foreign power, and governed only by their own kings. They have gold in the greatest abundance, its sources being inexhaustible, but as the king does not allow of its being exported, few merchants visit the country, nor is it frequented by much shipping from other parts. To this circumstance we are to attribute the extraordinary richness of the sovereign's palace, accord-

ing to what we are told by those who have access to the place. The entire roof is covered with a plating of gold, in the same manner as we cover houses, or more properly churches, with lead. The ceilings of the halls are of the same precious metal; many of the apartments have small tables of pure gold, of considerable thickness; and the windows also have golden ornaments. So vast, indeed, are the riches of the palace, that it is impossible to convey an idea of them. In this island there are pearls also, in large quantities, of a red (pink) color, round in shape, and of great size, equal in value to, or even exceeding that of the white pearls. It is customary with one part of the inhabitants to bury their dead, and with another part to burn them. The former have a practice of putting one of these pearls into the mouth of the corpse. There are also found there a number of precious stones.

Of so great celebrity was the wealth of this island, that a desire was excited in the breast of the grand Kublai Khan – now reigning – to make the conquest of it, and to annex it to his dominions.⁽²⁾

This information on Japan had a decisive influence on Christopher Columbus (c.a.1446-1506), the leading figure at the dawn of the age of the great voyages of discovery. Columbus was born in Genoa, from where Marco Polo's accounts of the East were initially conveyed. In all, he made four voyages, leaving a detailed record of the first. On Aug. 3, 1492, Columbus set sail with three ships from the port of Palos. While subduing the smoldering discontent of his crew during the long voyage without sight of land, Columbus aimed for Japan. When he finally arrived at what is now Guanahani Island in the Bahamas on Oct. 12, he wrote, "On this island, they have gold, which the natives wear in their noses, but I do not intend to tarry here. Above all I want to find Zipangu." (*Voyage of Columbus*)

Why did Columbus want to discover Japan? His aim, of course, was to obtain gold. Why did he need gold? Gold was the means of acquiring all

things. What did the Europeans purchase with gold in those times? They bought goods from the East. The commodities that were in greatest demand were pepper and spices. What did the Europeans use pepper and spices for? They used them for medicinal purposes. Why were these medicines needed in Europe? It was believed that they were effective in treating a great plague that took the lives of one in every three Europeans in just a few years in the middle of the 14th century.

These medicines were produced in maritime Asia. Since gold was the means of purchasing them, its discovery was a life-and-death matter. And since the plague spread from Mongolia, the shadow of the Mongols lies in the background of the age of great voyages.

The Black Death Crisis in 14th-Century Europe

The worst plague that struck Europe was the Black Death (bubonic plague) in the middle of the 14th century. The first Europeans to catch the Black Death are thought to have been Italian merchants who became infected with it when they were besieged by the Mongol army in the Crimean Peninsula in 1346. The disease was carried by ship over the Mediterranean Sea and spread inland from Venice, Genoa and other ports. The tragedy is vividly described in Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1348-53): "In 1348 a deadly plague swept through the city of Florence. All attempts to prevent its spread proved useless. The pious entreaties of God-fearing people were of no avail. Both men and women developed hard tumors in their groins and armpits and were dead within three days after this first sign. There was no discrimination between the religious and secular worlds, and the authority of the law was completely powerless in its wake. The stench of the dead was everywhere. Countless corpses were carried out but there were never enough graves to bury them. Between March and July more than 100,000 people lost their lives inside the walls of Florence."

In 1348, the Black Death spread from Italy to France, sweeping through the Iberian Peninsula, Germany and Poland, and finally making its way to Britain via the port of Dover. By the end of the next year, it had spread throughout Britain and into Scandinavia. The population of Europe was reduced by one-third. The enormity of this calamity can be clearly grasped by comparing it with the death rate of soldiers in World War II. Even in the totally defeated nations of Japan and Germany, the death rate of soldiers in the regular army was about 20%. A death rate of one-third of the whole population would result in a situation verging on complete panic. For the next 150 years, population growth in Europe was stagnant, labor was insufficient and the direct management of feudal domains proved difficult, resulting in the breakdown of the feudal system.

According to Professor M. W. Dols, an expert on Middle Eastern history, one-third of the population of the Middle East also died of plague in the 14th century. The American historian W. H. MacNeill, a reputed expert on the history of the bubonic plague, has argued that the Black Death originated with the Mongol invasion of Yunnan Province, where Mongol soldiers became infected with this endemic disease. The population of China, estimated to be about 123 million around 1200, had plunged by almost one-half to an estimated 65 million by 1400. During a period of just two years in 1353-54 shortly before the final overthrow of the Mongol Empire in 1368, the Black Death was reported to have been particularly rampant throughout China, killing about two-thirds of the population.

Although the facts are uncertain due to the lack of written records, the Japanese pirates are said to have been active from the middle of the 14th century. They infested the seas every year from 1351 and their raids became more intense with each year. The fact that they seized people and food suggests that labor and food were in short supply in Japan as they were in Europe.

The whole of the Eurasian continent

thus faced an enormous crisis in the mid-14th century. To escape from the deadly plague, people needed medicine, and the medicines believed to be most effective were the pepper and spices produced in Southeast Asia.

The Merchant of Prato (revised edition, 1963) by Iris Origo, a document describing everyday life in the Tuscan region of mediaeval Italy based on some 150,000 letters, contains the following description of the medicines used from the 14th century to the beginning of the 15th century: "By far the most common items on the bills of an apothecary in Florence were spices of various types – saffron, pepper, ginger, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg and quassia. Of these, orders for saffron and pepper were the most common, and the highest priced. This is because these included pills for the plague."

A century later, 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." Thus various seafaring peoples at both extremes of the Eurasian continent, from western Europe to Japan, sought and acquired medicines from the islands of Southeast Asia. Maritime Asia consequently became a region of dynamic exchange among these peoples. This included Europeans and Japanese, who became the main protagonists in the new age that emerged against the backdrop of the oceans of Asia.

Modern Europe and Japan Developed through Trade with Maritime Asia

The American continent came to play an important part in world history after its discovery by Columbus, but Southeast Asia already exerted a profound influence on the surrounding regions before the arrival of the Europeans. In his "Suma Oriental que trata do Maar Roxo ate os Chins," the merchant adventurer Thomé Pires marveled at the vast variety of peoples who engaged in trade in Malacca, Moors from Cairo, Mecca, Aden, Abyssinians,

men of Kilwa, Malindi, Ormuz, Parsees, Rumes, Turks, Turkomans, Christian Armenians, Gujaratees, men of Chaul, Dabhol, Goa, men of the Kingdom of Deccan, Malabars and Klings, merchants from Orissa, Ceylon, Bengal, Arakan, Pegu, Siameser, men of Kedah, Malays, men of Pahang, Patani, Cambodia, Champa, Cochin China, Chinese, Lequeos, men of Brunei, Luzon, men of Tamjompura, Laue, Banka, Linga (they have a thousand other islands), Moluccas, Banka, Bima, Timor, Madura, Java, Sunda, Palembang, Jambi, Tongkal, Indragiri, Kappata, Menangkabau, Siak, Arqua (Arcat), Aru, Bata, country of the Tomjano, Pase, Pedir, Maldives.⁽³⁾

The pronunciations of some of these peoples are so different from their modern equivalents that it is impossible to identify them, but it is clear from this list that an amazing variety of people came to Southeast Asia from the whole maritime Asian region spanning the Indian Ocean and the China Sea. The Lequeos mentioned here are Ryukyuan from the Ryukyu Kingdom, which is now Okinawa. In the 14th century, the main island of Okinawa was divided into three kingdoms situated in the northern, central and southern regions. This Three Mountains Era came to an end in 1429 when the second king of the Sho dynasty, Sho Hashi (1372-1439), unified the island. The prosperity of the Ryukyu Kingdom, which traded not only with China, Korea and Japan but also with Siam and Malacca, is reflected in names such as "Horaito (Isle of Eternal Youth)" and "Bankoku no Shinryo (Bridge to the World)."

The Lequeos had made their way to Malacca, which had become established 500 years earlier as the hub of international trade. In the first half of the 16th century, Southeast Asia was already a center of world trade and a base for cultural exchange. Southeast Asia formed the boundary between the two regions of Maritime Asia: the Indian Ocean and the China Sea regions.

On the Indian Ocean the Islamites went back and forth in their dhows, while the Chinese crossed the China

Sea in their junks. Viewed from the perspective of these leading figures, the Indian Ocean region could be called "maritime Islam" and the China Sea region "maritime China." Ever since the arrival of Vasco da Gama (1469-1524) in Calicut on the west coast of India in 1498, Europeans had been buying Eastern goods from maritime Islam, mainly via Venice. Maritime Islam provided the goods that formed the basis of modern European life, such as pepper and spices, coffee, sugar, Indian cotton and indigo, and by the 16th century Europeans were traveling to the maritime Islamic world to directly purchase these commodities. Portugal, followed by countries such as Spain, Holland and Britain, proceeded to enter maritime Asia backed by comprehensive support from their governments.

The Chinese, on the other hand, have long been known as tireless travelers over both land and sea. There is a tendency to think that the Chinese first appeared in Southeast Asia as a result of their employment by western nations at copper mines, rubber plantations and the like. In fact, however, the maritime Chinese from coastal cities such as Fujian and Guangdong had been active in trade in the China Sea region for over 1,000 years. At the beginning of the 15th century, Nanjing was made the official capital of Ming China (1368-1644), and through the overseas campaigns of Zhenghe (seven campaigns from 1405 to 1433), China even developed a sea empire.

The Japanese have only looked upon China as a continental nation represented by cities such as Chang'an and Beijing during the Tang dynasty (618-907), when Japan regularly dispatched embassies to China, and in the present day. In all other ages, it has deepened trade relations with a China that it viewed primarily as a maritime nation. From the medieval period onwards, the Japanese based themselves at Ningpo on the South China coast and referred to the maritime Chinese as *Tojin*. As we have seen, the fact that Japanese spared the lives of only these *Tojin* after the second Mongol invasion is proof of the closeness of this relation-

ship. (Mongol China distinguished between Mongols, tribes of the Western China, North Chinese and South Chinese. The Japanese killed the "continental Chinese" – Mongols and North Chinese – as enemies.) In Ayutthaya and other Japanese towns in Southeast Asia, the maritime Chinese lived together with the Japanese as neighbors. During Japan's period of national seclusion in the Edo period (1603-1867), the trade conducted with the Chinese and Dutch at Nagasaki (Nagasaki trade) was also called the *Tojin* trade and the Chinese were provided with an estate that was bigger than Dejima, where the Dutch resided.

From medieval to modern times, Europe and Japan were continuously influenced by maritime Islam and maritime China respectively. These two main forces in the modern age, situated at the easternmost and westernmost tips of the Eurasian continent, developed through trade and cultural exchange with maritime Asia. JTI

Continued in Part 3

Notes

- 1) Marco Polo's description of Japan is recorded in *The Travels of Marco Polo* (New York, The Orion Press), an account which triggered the age of great voyages by explorers obsessed with dreams of the Orient.
- 2) *The Travels of Marco Polo*, pp. 262-6
- 3) "The Suma Oriental Which Goes from the Red Sea to China," compiled by Thomé Pires, [six book], *Of Malacca*, translated from the Portuguese MS. in the *Bibliothèque de la Chambre des Députés*, Paris, and edited by Armando Cortesao

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