

# University Education in Ancient Times

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Photo: Kurahashi-machi Town Office, Hiroshima

A reconstructed vessel, kentoshisen imported Chinese culture including a system of the ancient form of the University

## The University and the *ritsuryo* nation

It is thought that the first university in the Japanese archipelago appeared during the reign of the Emperor Tenji (662-671 A.D.). On the mainland at that time, China had already experienced a long period of history. From the time of the Qin dynasty in the third century B.C. through the Sui and Tang dynasties (581-618 and 618-907 A.D., respectively), China had repeatedly unified then broken up, and through this the state had evolved based on comprehensive legal codes known in Japan as *ritsuryo*, *ritsu* referring to penal codes and *ryo* referring to all other laws necessary for

governance. Various countries in the region which lagged behind China in terms of founding a national government pursued diplomatic relations with China in order to learn the mechanisms of a centralized state from the more militarily, politically and culturally advanced nation. China expanded its domestic principle of ruler and ruled with an emperor and subservient nobility and officials to its neighboring states, granting positions and ranks to the leaders of those states and establishing them as vassals. In this manner, an international system of order was maintained in East Asia. This political structure taking China as its central fundament brought to the East

Asia region the common elements of comprehensive *ritsuryo* written Chinese characters, Buddhism and Confucianism.

From the first century of B.C., the people who dominated the Japanese archipelago absorbed continental culture through cycles of establishing and later breaking off diplomatic relations with China. The seas surrounding the Japanese archipelago served as routes for accelerating exchange between the people of the archipelago and the continent. It brought to Japan rice cultivation technology in the final Jomon period, metal implements and written Chinese characters in the Yayoi period (third century B.C. — third century

A.D.), Confucianism in the fifth century, and Buddhism in the sixth century. The introduction of the system of centralized government structured by comprehensive laws (*ritsuryo seido*) was an extension of this, but in contrast to the previous passive acceptance and adoption of ideas from the mainland, in this case there was an actual dispatching of embassies and active adoption of the system.

The land of Wa — the name by which the Chinese referred to the Japanese archipelago and its people, and the name by which the Japanese referred to themselves until the seventh century — emulating the establishment of an imperial state under the Tang dynasty, was establishing its own centralized authority in the late seventh century. *Kentoshi*, the embassies to Tang China took the legal codes of Tang and progressively revised them to suit the circumstances in Wa, compiled an independent code of laws and brought them to bear upon the local society.

The *ritsuryo* nation had as its special features the establishment of an emperor as the head of a centralized authority with authority administered by a bureaucracy, the people were officially registered by family, and were ruled by a unified system of documented authority based on the legal codes. The *ritsuryo* system was based on the principle of Confucianism. In order to build a nation based on such a comprehensive system of laws and actually run that nation required that politicians be imbued with the spirit of Confucianism and a large number of administrators who were able to prepare documents and make calculations. It was to train these authorities that a university was established. In documents from the year 671 A.D. we find the name of the top university administrator, so it is believed that the university was established at the latest by this year.

In the latter half of the seventh century, just as the Japanese archipelago was establishing its own *ritsuryo* nation, on the Korean peninsula territorial disputes were

heating up between the Tang and the three kingdoms of Korea — Koguryo, Silla and Paekche. The land of Wa plunged into the conflict. The country of Wa for many years had maintained ties with Paekche, and when Paekche was attacked by Silla and Tang in 663 it sent military reinforcements, but these forces were defeated and expelled and Paekche was overthrown. The nobles and technicians who fled Paekche and sought refuge in the land of Wa put their abilities to use in the building of the national political authority. Kishitsushushi, who was in charge of administrator of the university in 671, and Kosochimo, who worked as a doctor at the university in 677, were both exiles from Paekche, which lends strength to the belief that people from Paekche played a major role both in the establishment of the university and the operation of it.

There are many unknowns regarding the university during this early period. In 672 there was a major revolt regarding imperial succession and in 694 the capital city was transferred, and with the political situation unstable, the operation of the university was probably still not stabilized. Further, judging from the fact that there were some immigrants from the Korean peninsula among the administrative staff and the faculty, it would seem that although the university had actually been founded, there were insufficient numbers of people from Wa to fill the necessary positions and operations were dependent upon making use of the expertise of the immigrants from overseas.

Due to the fact that the Emperor Tenmu, who was victorious in the rebellion of 672, succeeded in strengthening imperial power, the stage was set for the establishment of a true *ritsuryo* nation. However, during the thirty-year period between the establishment of the Tenmu reign and the seventh *kentoshi* embassy to Tang, diplomatic relations between Wa and Tang were discontinued. This meant that during the time when

Japan was trying to introduce the comprehensive Tang legal system, diplomacy with China was suspended. Instead of the Tang dynasty, it was Silla with which frequent negotiations were carried out. After conquering Paekche, Silla in 668 defeated Koguryo and in 676 excluded Tang influence from the Korean peninsula, establishing a unified Silla. One theory holds that the frequent exchanges with Silla occurred out of a desire to gain models for the introduction of the *ritsuryo* system from Silla, in the absence of diplomatic relations with Tang China. Other views oppose this theory, and it is thought that Silla had not actually compiled a systematic code of *ritsuryo*. However, in regard to education, which will be described in a moment, one can see points in common between the educational systems of Silla and Wa, giving sufficient reason to believe that the land of Wa took that of Silla into consideration.

#### *Systematizing "the University" and the later reforms*

The Taiho *Ritsuryo*, a legal code of penal and administrative laws, was enacted in 701. The Daigakuryo, or the ancient form of "University," was institutionalized by introducing the educational systems of the Tang dynasty and the Korean peninsula. The Tang system established six universities, and these were divided by fields into Confucian studies, laws, calligraphy and mathematics. A strict system of entrance requirements based on social status was established for the three schools devoted to studies of Confucianism, and the three schools devoted to laws, calligraphy and mathematics were open to the children of lower-level administrators and commoners. In Japan, there was only one University and it was located in the center of the nation. This was also true in Silla.

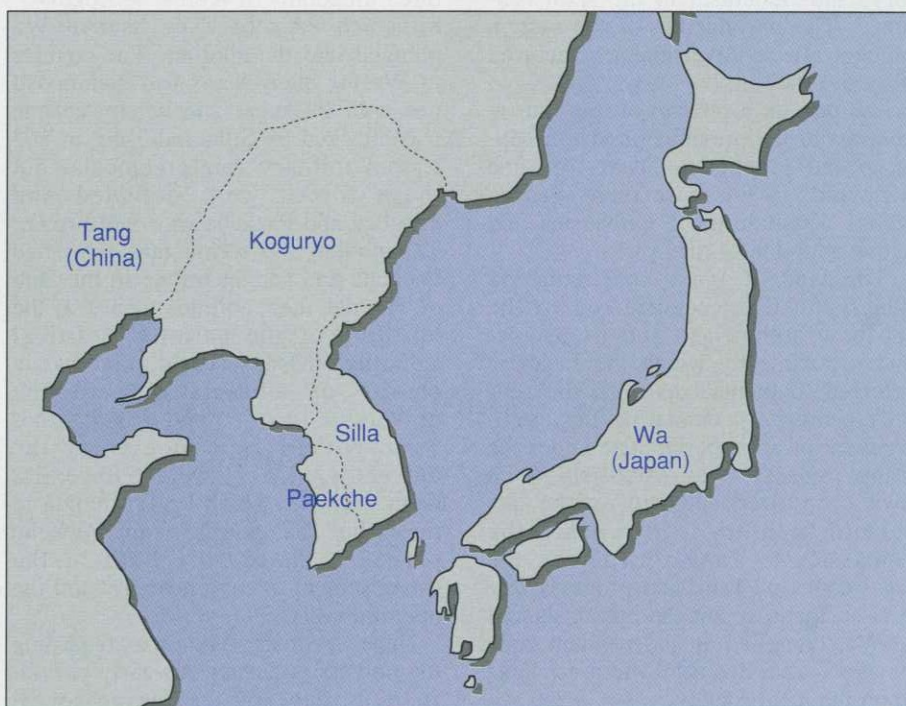
In the center of the country, in addition to the Daigakuryo, there were also schools called Tenyakuryo, a bureau in charge of the Court

physicians, and Ommyoryo, a bureau in charge of divination, and it was here that doctors and specialists in astronomy, calendar making and divination were educated. In each of the provinces — which numbered 58 over three islands at the time of the Taiho Code — there was established a provincial school, and at Dazaifu, the regional government headquarters for the provinces to the west, there was a special school. It was at such schools that the children of regional administrators were educated.

The central Daigakuryo was under the direct jurisdiction of the Ministry of Ceremonial, one of the eight ministries and the one in general charge of administering personnel matters for the civil service. The University consisted of administrators, instructors and students. There were six administrators, a total of nine faculty, one head doctor (*hakase*) and two doctors (*jo-hakase*) of Confucian studies and two doctors each of *on* (Chinese), *sho* (calligraphy), and *san* (mathematics), 400 students of Confucian studies and 30 students of mathematics. In other words, studies were divided into two sections: the studies of Confucian tradition and mathematics. In contrast with the Tang university and in common with the educational system of Silla, the Japanese University established no studies of administrative law and did not have students specializing in calligraphy, and nor were the schools separated according to the social status of the students.

Applicants who were sons or grandsons of the higher nobility, fifth rank or above, or sons of the Yamato-kawachi-fuhitobe were admitted unconditionally. There were also provisions for admission of applicants from the sixth through eighth ranks and those who had completed education at the provincial schools. The fifth rank and above meant the nobility, the Yamato-kawachi-fuhitobe were originally immigrants from the continent upon whose writing skills the Court depended, and the sixth through eighth ranks were those of

### The Korean Peninsula and Japan in the mid-6th Century



lower level administrators. Whatever their status, the regulations stipulated that the University was to accept clever students between the ages of thirteen and sixteen, yet there was no actual entrance examination. At the time of admission, the student was required to offer a gift (clothing, drink and food) to the instructors, but following entrance there was no need for paying any sort of tuition.

The nine textbooks for Confucian studies, the main subject of the Daigakuryo, included two compulsory and students were able to choose several courses from among the rest of seven textbooks. The annotated volumes were fixed. The students would first read the textbook in the original Chinese after the *on-hakase* (doctor of Chinese), then listen to lectures by the *hakase* and *jo-hakase*. The lectures were divided among the instructors according to textbooks, and once one textbook was completed, they would move on to another. Exams were held every ten days, and in the interim the instructor gave

verbal tests concerning the textbook. In the process of reading, students would be given a passage of one thousand characters with three characters missing in one place and they would be required to provide the answer. During the process of the lectures, students would be required to explain the meaning of one clause out of every two thousand characters. To pass required at least two correct answers out of three. Further, in July of every year, the administrator carried out a verbal examination of the main significance of eight clauses that had been covered during the past year. Six or more correct answers earned a mark of "*jo*" (excellent), more than four earned a "*chu*" (average), three or less received a "*ge*" (poor), and the regulations stated that a mark of "*ge*" for three consecutive years was reason for dismissal from school.

Those who completed the University took the national government examinations, and the successful examinees were granted ranks according to their

academic achievements. They were then given positions based upon this rank and hence they started their lives in the bureaucracy. Anyone who attended the University for nine years and was still unable to pass the national examinations was dismissed. There were four varieties of national examinations: *shusai*, *myogyo*, *shinji*, and *myobo*. *Shusai* had two essay questions, *myogyo* included ten or eleven questions concerning the meanings of four parts from the nine varieties of textbooks. *Shinji* included ten questions in which the examinee had to read aloud a portion of the *Monzen* and *Jiga*, both elective textbooks at the University, and write two essay questions about important matters involved in governing the nation. *Myobo* consisted of ten questions about the penal and administrative code. These were all quite difficult examinations to pass, thus according to available records the *Shusai* examination was so difficult that over a 230-year period from the beginning of the eighth century through the first half of the tenth century only sixty-five examinees were successful.

In 710 the capital was moved to Heijokyo (modern Nara prefecture). The *ritsuryo* nation which had formed at the beginning of the eighth century had from the outset exhibited various problems so the government was occupied with measures for solving them. This was also true of the frequent reformations of the educational system. In 728 the two new subjects of literature and legal studies were added, and in 730 a system for graduate students corresponding to our current form of graduate school was instituted. In 739 measures to encourage the children of the nobility to enter school were introduced.

It is held that Daigakuryo of the Nara period (710-794) was less active compared to that of the early part of the Heian period (794-1192). The reason for this is that it is nearly impossible to confirm through documentation who entered school, especially the children of the nobility.

That the children of the nobility did not study at the University was due to the fact that status was guaranteed by the system of hereditary court ranks (where a child was granted the rank of his ancestors after reaching the age of 21) and to the fact that they were guaranteed a place to learn Confucianism on a private basis. For the children of noble families, even if they were to pass the examinations for positions after long years of study at the University, there was little advantage to be received if the position they attained was lower in rank than the position they would automatically receive as a result of the system of hereditary court titles. China also had a system of hereditary ranks, but because the system of higher civil-service examinations (*kakyo*) was open to a wide range of social classes and meritocracy was widespread, the children of the nobles could not remain idle. Because the land of Wa had a patriarchal society and it was culturally behind China, meritocracy was not widespread. The upper level bureaucracy, as a result of the system of hereditary court ranks, was regenerated from among the upper five ranks of the courtiers.

### *The prosperity and decline of Daigakuryo*

In 794 the capital was moved to Heiankyo (modern Kyoto), and the curtain rose on four centuries called the Heian period. Because the early Heian period saw the promotion of government policies which actively emulated the culture and centralized system of Tang dynasty, the period is usually seen as one of reconstruction of the *ritsuryo* system. The Emperor Kanmu (reigned 781-806), employed new textbooks for Confucian studies, increased the number of students of legal studies, increased the amount of land which served as the source of revenues for the University, and in addition to taking measures to enrich and promote University education, he promoted the meritocratic aspects of a true *ritsuryo* state. Because this trend continued throughout the early part of

the Heian period, graduates of the University went on to become high-level bureaucrats in the central government, provincial governors who improved the administrative record of regional governments, as well as men of letters.

The fact that there was a number of graduates of Daigakuryo among the successful provincial administrators was because it was expected that the Confucian studies and history (originally subordinate to Confucian studies and literature, but in 806 made into an independent area of study) which they pursued at the University would be employed in the actual government of the reconstruction of the *ritsuryo* nation and because there were a number of bureaucrats who carried it into actual practice. Confucian studies were serviceable as political thought and historical studies were useful in learning the scope of one's own actions within history. Originally the *ritsuryo* government was expected to be a benevolent form of government which encouraged agriculture and stabilized the livelihood of the farming populace based on the Confucian morality and precepts of the provincial governors who shouldered the weight of regional administration. Through the studies of Confucian thought, the University had as its purpose the teaching of the Confucian spirit to the bureaucratic reserves. In the early Heian period such education by the University can be said to have functioned effectively.

Given that there was a comparatively number of Daigakuryo graduates among the upper ranks of the bureaucracy and among the active literary figures, one can say that in the first half of the ninth century, the concept that the great undertaking of governance was done in writing was the national slogan. In China, it was thought that the kings learned the merits and demerits of government by observing public morality, and thereby considering for himself what is proper. It was possible to learn the merits and demerit of political administration by observing public customs

through poetry because poetry was considered capable of manifesting human nature. This concept was introduced to Japan as well, where it was the basis for attempting to accomplish a government by means of the power of written language. In the three collections of poems in Chinese compiled within a short span of time within the early ninth century, there is a long string of names of graduates of the University. With the high appraisal of writing ability, those who learned writing at the University achieved high positions in the bureaucracy.

In this way, when opportunities expanded to make use of the Confucianism spirit and writing ability learned in Daigakuryo, the children of the nobility who were to bear the future government were entrusted with the dream of a reconstructed nation, were appointed to study at the University, and undertook several kinds of studies. In 806 and 824 the children of the nobility were commanded to enter the University.

That the University which was created to meet the demands of the *ritsuryo* nation shared the destiny of the *ritsuryo* nation is hardly surprising. At the beginning of the 10th century when the centralized state collapsed, national educational institutions including the Daigakuryo, the *Ommyoryo* and the *Tenyakuryo* were also suspended. The University itself burned down in 1177, bringing its role in name and reality to an end. Replacing the government institution in educating administrators were the hereditary scholar families. The phenomenon of scholarship turning hereditary was manifested between the 10th and 12th centuries, and within each of the various fields scholarship came to be limited to two or perhaps three families, hence making the position of Doctor hereditary. These "doctoral" families, as authorities on hereditary learning and technology, also undertook the administration of certain government offices. Once learning became hereditary within the doctoral families, those from outside

the family who aimed at gaining knowledge had to become disciples of the doctoral families. In this way, the doctoral families were able to send people that they themselves had trained to the government offices that they were in charge of administrating, and this gave the family stability in its operations. For example, in the true sense anyone who studied Confucian learning should have been able to do so regardless of which family or clan they belonged to, and in actuality until the 10th century the instruction in Confucian learning was carried out by instructors from various families. However, from the 11th century onward, the instructors came exclusively and hereditarily from the two families of the Nakahara and Kiyohara, and these two families became hereditarily the top administrators of the *Gekikyoku*, the bureau in charge of preparing documents and administering the implementation and recording of public affairs and investigating precedents. While these two families produced the successors to the faculty and the administrators of the *Gekikyoku*, they also produced them from among their disciples. In other words, they became parent organizations for the cultivation of the administrators and technicians who were necessary for the nation. Such families continued into the modern era remaining still in the current *Iemoto* system, or the school head.

The special characteristics of the University of the ancient period which we have examined influenced the universities of the modern period. The universities of Europe — as symbolized by the fact that the word university is taken from "universitas" meaning a guild or trade association of members of the same profession — commenced as guilds of those who taught and learned the specialized knowledge of such things as law. It can be said that they came into being through the autonomous activity of those who sought learning. When the system of higher education was first introduced into Japan at the beginning

of the Meiji period, the Japanese term used for "university" and "college" was applied for the word "daigaku." In Japan, prior to its application to the modern university, the word "daigaku" had been used for the ancient "Daigakuryo," but as seen in the fact that "daigaku" originally came from Chinese, the ancient Japanese "daigaku" had been established for the national purpose of education administrators, and hence had been created "from above." Moreover, the educational system had been introduced from the mainland and from the Korean peninsula and had relied upon help from outside such as in the employment of immigrants from overseas as faculty and administrators. This is a characteristic shared by the imperial universities typical of the modern system of universities in Japan. The imperial universities were founded with the purpose of teaching the learning, technology and arts required by the nation, and at the beginning they depended on the assistance of faculty from abroad. It was at the time when the long period of seclusion during the Edo period was coming to an end and Japan was attempting to construct a modern state. Both the ancient and modern "daigaku" are different in nature from the western "university" which was created by the people. It can be said that they were created by the state and were reliant upon external assistance.

Even in Japan, from ancient times there have been gatherings of people who have venerated as teachers who possess superior knowledge and technology, but unlike the case of Europe in the middle ages, these gatherings did not evolve into universities. This may have resulted from the fact that from the middle ages onward, knowledge and technology became the exclusive and hereditary possession of the family. JJTI

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