

# Sakai, East Asia's Largest Trading City

## – Where did all the riches go? –

By Tsunoyama Sakae

For many years, Asia was seen as comprised of stagnant societies under despotism and subordination, and was viewed as a region with no future outlook for economic development. The origins of this image can be traced back as far as Montesque and Hegel. Karl Marx, Hegel's successor, developed the concept of "Asiatic modes of production" in Asian societies, and the image of "Oriental despotism" was established among the Marxists.

Where did this distorted view of Asia come from? Misunderstandings certainly resulted because Europeans at that time knew little about the history and cultures of Asia. More important, however, was the fact that the nations of Western Europe, especially modernized and industrialized Britain, had a sense of European superiority that shaped their view of Asia as a region whose civilization lagged behind that of their own.

It is certain that once modern capitalism became established as a result of the Industrial Revolution, the world was organized and driven by a Eurocentric world system. Before modern capitalism was established in Europe, however, that was not the case. The center of the world civilization was clearly in Asia. Products typical of Asian civilization such as foods, seasonings, clothing and handiworks, including spices, tea, sugar, cotton cloth, and ceramic and porcelain wares, were greatly admired by Westerners. By contrast, there were almost no European products the people of Asia wanted.

The flow of goods in those times, unlike today, was one-way from east to west – from Asia to Europe. Imports of Asian goods, especially tea and cotton, had a significant impact on Europe. The lives of 18th century Britons took a major turn toward Asian lifestyles; they took a liking to Indian calico and could not live without Chinese tea. Then,

they developed import-substitute industries and freed themselves of their reliance on cotton cloth imported from India (thus freeing themselves from Asia). These developments eventually led to the world's first industrial revolution in Britain.

When we reexamine the history of the Asian coastal region from this global perspective, it becomes clear that Asia in the 15th and 16th centuries was anything but backward and stagnant, and instead had become the most prosperous trading zone in the world.

If we look at the eastern sea coastline which stretches from north to south along the Asian continent, we find that this region has a geopolitically fascinating topography. That is, this coastline never directly touches the Pacific Ocean but is buffered by smaller seas, from north to south, with the Sea of Okhotsk, the Sea of Japan, Bo Hai, the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, the South China Sea, the Philippines Sea, the Java Sea, the Celebes Sea, the Sulu Sea, the Molucca Sea, and the Banda Sea. These seas are large inlets that are surrounded by peninsulas and islands. The reason I want to focus on them is that they geographically facilitate the lively exchange of goods, people, culture and information in the regions they surround, more than do larger oceans. (see Figure 1)

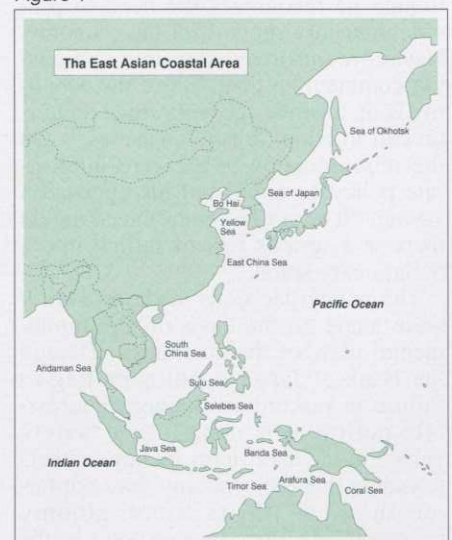
Asia is the only region in the world that has more than 15 seas linked together. The foundation of European civilization was shaped in Southern Europe in the regions around the Mediterranean Sea, the Aegean Sea, the Adriatic Sea and the Black Sea, where the ancient Aegean Sea civilization developed through the civilization of Greece and Rome. The much larger-scale Asian coastal region, by contrast, naturally had a prosperous history as a large trading zone in the 15th-17th century.

This was the era of great voyages in

European history when new continents and new sea routes were being discovered. It has been depicted as a bright era in which Renaissance culture flourished. Because of this, the Eurocentric view of history has kept the prosperity of the Asian coastal regions hidden in the shadow of Europe's prosperity and prevented it from being properly understood. Recently, however, Japanese historians as well as scholars, including the Australian cultural anthropologist Anthony Reid and the American economic historian Andre Gunder Frank, have gradually been revealing the importance of the thriving past of the Asian trading zone. Of particular interest to me here is the prosperity of Sakai, Japan's largest international trading city at that time.

One of the earliest maps of Japan published in Europe is the Abraham Ortelius/Teixeira's map *Japonia Insula*, published in Antwerp (Belgium) in 1596. This is the first map to clearly

Figure 1



The East Asian coastal area has a fascinating geopolitical topography and a prosperous history as a large trading zone from the 15th to the 17th century

depict Honshu, Shikoku (*Tonsa*), and Kyushu (*Bonga*). A single heart-shaped figure in the middle of Honshu represents Lake Biwa. Next to the lake is *Meaco*, or Kyoto. A single line – probably the Yodogawa River – is drawn from Lake Biwa down to Osaka Bay, and there on the right bank of the river mouth is the mark of a city called *Sacay*. This is known today as Sakai. The correct placement of Sakai is on the left bank of the Yodogawa, but the other place names on the map, to the extent that they can be read, are all *kuni* (region) names such as *Hizumi* and *Farima*, with Kyoto and Sakai being the only two cities shown. Neither Osaka nor Edo is shown, of course. Sakai and Kyoto were considered to be the only cities representative of Japan when the map was drawn. (see Figure 2)

Sakai's heyday lasted from 1469-1615, with 1550 being the mid-point which divides the first part of its history from the latter part. Its prosperity was built in its early history on trade with China's Ming Dynasty and in its later history on trade with the Westerners. The Japan-China trade took the form of a regular tribute arrangement with China, but in reality it was a monopolistic import trade of raw silk and other silk products. It is said that for every three ships that returned home safely, there was a two billion yen profit per ship (The number of vessels Japan could use for this trade was restricted to three under the agreement between Japan and Ming China). Trade with the Westerners was mostly with Portugal, and was built on positive advancements into the seas of East and Southeast Asia by merchants from Sakai.

Sakai first came to be known by the Europeans after Francisco de Xavier visited Japan in 1549. Why did Xavier, who had originally traveled to India to spread his religious message, arrive in Japan? In 1546-47, before coming to Japan, he visited the Moluccas, then known as the Spice Islands. These were where the pepper, cloves and cinnamon essential to European cooking came from, and he thought that if he could take these back to Europe, he would be able to reap an enormous

profit. It was difficult to buy these, however, with the woolen goods he had brought from Europe, and he found that he needed silver instead. Silver was difficult to get in Europe, and Portugal was not a silver-producing country. Xavier's sudden decision to visit Japan was probably made while he was in the Moluccas when he was informed that silver was produced in large quantities in Japan.

Xavier finally arrived in Kagoshima in Japan, and immediately sent a letter to a priest in Goa, India saying, "A lot of wealthy merchants live in Sakai, a town that has accumulated more gold and silver than any other place in Japan. If a Portuguese trading house were to be established there, huge substantial profits could be reaped by the King of Portugal." He finally arrived in Sakai in 1550. He went to Kyoto to obtain permission to evangelize, but disappointed by the appearance of the city which had been ruined in the Onin war (A war fought mainly in Kyoto from 1467 until 1477. The war ushered in a century of strife and disunion known as the Warring States period), he soon returned to Sakai. As a result of Xavier's visit to Japan, however, an Asian strategy for obtaining Japanese silver had been developed. His method for obtaining Japan's silver was to buy raw silk and silk products at low prices in China and then sell them at high prices in Japan. Sometimes he could sell the goods at some tens of times the price at which he had purchased them. In this way Portugal thus forcibly occupied Macao, and established it as a post for trade with Japan and China (1557).

These events paved the way for the arrival of Jesuit missionaries and Portuguese merchants to Japan: Sakai in particular. Soon the major European merchants from Spain, Holland and

Britain arrived in the East Asian coastal region and in Japan. They had all come to participate in the highly profitable trade between Japan and China. They had all come to Sakai in search of gold and silver.

The port of Sakai was a free port at this time, so there are no remaining records, such as tariff ledgers, that document the active trading that occurred there. In the *Journal of the Dutch East Indies Company Embassy to Japan (Gedenk-Waerdige Gesantschappen der Oost-Indische Maatschapy aan de Keisaren van Japan)*, the so-called "Journal of Japan (*Nihon-shi*)," written in 1669 by a Dutch priest Arnoldus Montanus, who visited Japan under the isolation policy in the mid-17th century, we can see a diagram referring to the prosperity of Sakai during this period. Montanus' *Map of Kyoto, Sakai and Nagasaki*, a one-page bronze-engraved map of Japan that includes Kyoto and Nagasaki, was published in Amsterdam in 1720. (see Figure 3)

The upper area of the diagram shows Kyoto, but depicts a ruined image of the city along both banks of the Kamogawa River, while the bottom center shows Dejima in Nagasaki. On the left is the Port of Sakai (*Ville de Sakay*), which was bustling with arriving and departing shipping vessels, and on the right is the Grand Temple of Sakai (*Grand Temple de Sakay*), an exotic building constructed in the southern style. Sakai is unquestionably depicted as Japan's primary interna-

Figure 2

Photo : Sakai City Museum



Sakai and Kyoto were considered to be the only cities representative of Japan in Abraham Ortelius/Teixeira's map *Japonia Insula*

tional port of trade. The Jesuit missionaries that visited Sakai in the 1560s called the city the "Venice of Asia." This means that Sakai, like Venice, was a self-governing and prosperous international trading city in Asia. Venice, the most popular international trading city in Europe at the time, reached the height of its prosperity in the mid-16th century, and was the largest city in Europe with a population of 130,000. The population of Sakai, by contrast, was 80,000-100,000. Cities of comparable size in Europe would have been Madrid, the capital of Spain, and Florence, Italy. London, by comparison, had a population of about 100,000 in 1550 and about 200,000 in 1600.

One of the most powerful indicators of the prosperity of Sakai and of the entire country was Japan's mass production and exports of silver. The fact that Japan was a country of gold had already been conveyed in *The Book of Marco Polo* (well-known in Japan as *Toho Kenbun-roku*). Because of the dominance of the Eurocentric approach to researching the world's economic history, however, the story of Japan's gold and silver wasn't told as a part of world history for many years. The stories of silver in the 16th and 17th centuries were stories of Mexican silver or Potosi in South America discovered by Spain. The concept of bullionism developed by 17th century economists stipulated that a country's wealth was determined by the quantity of gold and silver it possessed. According to that theory, Spain, which had obtained large quantities of silver from Central and South America, had become the wealthiest country in the world by virtue of its silver. As post-war research of the economic history of Japan progressed, however, it became known that Japanese silver exports in the 16th and 17th centuries were so large as to rival the amount of silver exported from Spanish-occupied territories of South America. If this were the case, then 16th century Japan would have been an economic giant on par with Spain in competing for the title of the wealthiest country in the world.

Gold and silver were produced all over the country in 16th century Japan,

but the areas boasting the largest production were the Omori Mountains in Iwami (now the west part of Shimane Prefecture) and the Ikuno Mountains in Tajima (now the northern part of Hyogo Prefecture). Sakai, which prospered from the trade of primarily Ikuno silver with the Westerners, rapidly developed not only as a center for finance and international trade, but as a center for information on domestic and foreign politics, economy and culture, and as a munitions industry center for gun production.

Guns were first brought into Japan in 1543 by Portuguese traders at Tanegashima island in Kagoshima. It was the artisans of Sakai who had the skills needed to be able to look at these weapons and recreate them. Many *daimyo* (feudal lords) put in numerous orders for guns in Sakai to be able to get their hands on these new weapons. The people taking these orders and playing the role of today's trading companies were the Sakai merchants. They organized the artisans and managed to achieve mass production by developing a kind of production system of modern interchangeable parts. The number of guns produced in Japan in the latter part of the 16th century, according to one source, was 300,000. This exceeded the total number of guns in Europe at the time. Imai Sokyu and Sen Rikyu, known as a master of the tea ceremony, were Sakai merchants who were active in the gun trade.

Sakai produced Japan's first commercial bourgeoisie as a result of the wealth it accumulated through commerce. The citizens of Sakai had built a kind of commonwealth that even the military power holders could not easily penetrate.

In spite of the fact that Sakai thrived as a result of its trade with China and with the West, and that it was likened to Venice, the two cities are very different today. The vestiges of Venice's prosperity remain, and it continues to thrive as a destination for tourists from around the world, while Sakai was burned by fires mainly in the Second Siege of Osaka Castle by Tokugawa Ieyasu in 1615 and bombings during World War II, and the traces of its for-

mer prosperity have been all but lost. Where in the world did that wealth go?

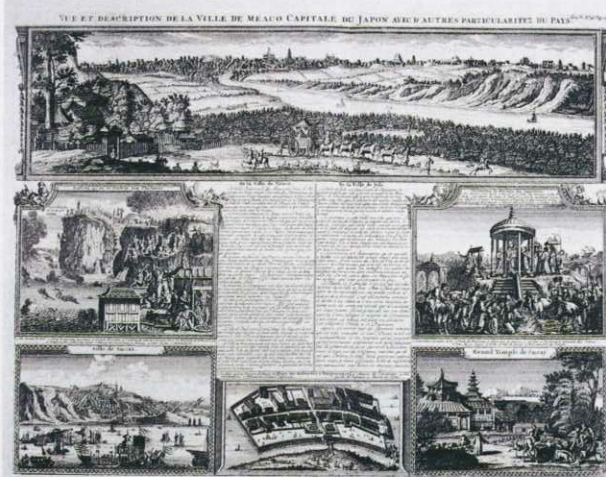
There are three possible explanations. One is that Sakai's wealth was contributed to temples to be used as funds to restore Kyoto after it was destroyed in the Onin war. Contemporary merchants had no concept of hoarding their accumulated wealth as their own personal or family assets. Making a profit was not viewed as something to aspire to. By offering the money up to the Shinto and Buddhist religions and donating their money to a temple, the merchants would have felt that they could die with a sense of spiritual peace.

There's another explanation. Sakai is a moat-surrounded city that ran 1km east to west and 3km north to south, within which many temples had been built by the end of the 17th century. A large map of the city drawn in 1689 shows that it had 225 temples and about 70 mansions that had been donated to the temples, bringing the total number of temples to nearly 300. With these numbers, Sakai would have had the most temples after Kyoto. Some of these were built before 1400, but most of them were built in Sakai's heyday in the 15th and 16th centuries. Generally merchants would use their wealth to build fancy mansions, but in Sakai at that time, mansions with gold leaf tiles were not permitted. Rather, newly built residences were often transferred to temples, and the occupant and their families would become priests to take care of the temple. It was in this way that a great deal of the wealth of the Sakai merchants was transferred to the temples, some of which still remain. For example, Daianji used to be a residence of Luzon Sukezaemon, and Shounji was a Tani family temple founded by wealthy Sakai merchant Tani Masayasu.

The third explanation is that the Sakai merchants spent most of their money indulging in the tea ceremony while they were alive. There are various views about the origins and nature of the tea ceremony, but it seems that the *History of Church in Japan (Historia da Igreja do Japao)* by Joao Rodriguez well explains how the tea ceremony served as a useful representa-

Figure 3

Photo : Sakai City Museum



Sakai is depicted as Japan's primary international port of trade in this picture (on the lower left), while Kyoto was described as a ruined image of the city (top) (Montanus, *Map of Kyoto, Sakai and Nagasaki*)

tion of the cultural environment in Sakai back in those days. Rodriguez reasons that interpersonal relationships and the custom of entertaining guests in Japan were an important part of the social culture, and the venue for such entertainment was at a banquet. Once a banquet that included food, drink, hot water and fruit had been concluded, tea was brought at the very end to finalize the event. We use the generic term "tea" but in fact it was high-priced *hikicha* (powdered tea) that was used for such special occasions.

The tea ceremony took the drinking of tea that marked the conclusion of a meal out of that context and established it into an independent event. It became a special form of entertainment separate from the customary banquet. The tea ceremony became popular particularly in both Kyoto and Sakai at the end of the 15th century and into the 16th century. The feature of the tea ceremony specific to Sakai was that it was conducted in a very small, independently situated tearoom that was considered to be a sacred space. Its development took place in the Warring States period (from the mid-15th to the end of the 16th century), a time characterized by a great deal of mistrust between people, when parents and children and sisters and brothers would turn against one another, and in which there was a great deal of instability and disorder in society caused by lower-ranking retainers overthrowing their overlords. The sig-

nificance of the creation of the tearoom would become clear if we consider that it was the only place in the midst of these chaotic conditions where peace and safety could be secured. Warriors of every rank were required to put their swords on their sword holders and remove all their weapons before entering the tearoom. They also had to remove their armor and helmets. This

was necessary to enable them to hunch over and enter the room through a small square hole in the corner of the small room. Also, the host would sit in this small room and would prepare tea for his guests right in front of them. To ensure that they were not being poisoned, a drinking etiquette and style were developed whereby everyone would pass around the tea and drink from the same cup. This allowed people to build strong and trusting relationships.

Another point worth emphasizing is that, in order to demonstrate his respect and his sincere desire to entertain his guests, the host would spend all his money on his tea ceremony implements. How expensive were they? Missionaries visiting Sakai were surprised to learn that these items were traded at extraordinarily high prices, such that the cost of items such as the teabowls, tea container, teascoop and kettle – and sometimes even the cost of a single teabowl – exceeded the entire annual budget of the Jesuit church in Japan.

How are we to interpret such a phenomenon? I suppose this is a case of what Thorstein B. Veblen called "conspicuous consumption" in his 1899 work, *The Theory of Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions*. Conspicuous consumption did not end with tea implements. We must also recognize that the host's best furnishings were used for entertaining.

For example, not only would the garden outside a tearoom be cleaned and sprinkled with water, but the host would place hanging scrolls, decorative objects, and fresh flowers in the alcove in the tearoom to match the hobbies, interests and likings of the guests.

In this specially furnished "sacred space," there was great significance in the fact that the host would prepare tea in front of his guests. This allowed them to eliminate mistrust and to develop mutually trusting relationships. Sen Rikyu expressed the concept of the tea ceremony as "one opportunity, one encounter" and "mutual communication, respect, hospitality and tranquility." In other words, the heart of the tea ceremony is the heart of hospitality; the heart of peace.

The tea ceremony culture is the greatest cultural legacy left by the prosperous Sakai of the 16th century. Still practiced in its original form by the Rikyu school in Japan today, the tea ceremony is very much alive in the everyday life of the Japanese.

The Jesuit missionaries who visited Sakai during the golden age of the 16th century and came into contact with the strange custom of the tea ceremony that had spread among the warrior and merchant classes were extremely moved and surprised by it. It was the first Western encounter with tea as a drink. It is significant that the discovery of tea by Europeans first occurred in Japan, in Sakai, and it is important that it was not discovered as a mere drink, but in the context of a cultural custom. The first tea was shipped to Europe on a Dutch ship sailing from Hirado in Kyushu in 1609. It arrived in Amsterdam in the following year, 1610. The contribution made by the prosperity of 16th century Sakai to the rest of the world may very well have been the introduction of tea and the export of the tea culture to Europe. **JTI**

*Tsunoyama Sakae is the Director of the Sakai City Museum and an Emeritus Professor of Wakayama University. He specializes in economic history, especially that of modern Britain.*