

# **The Asian Maritime World and Nagasaki: A Historical Background to Regional Interaction**

Hajime Shimizu

## **(Summary)**

The rapid economic growth in the Asian and Pacific region since the latter half of the 1980s is a well documented phenomena. Over the last decade countries in the Asian-Pacific region have become major players in the international market. Firstly, the Asian-Pacific region has dramatically increased its share of the world export market. Secondly, it has emerged as one of the biggest importers in the world economy. Thirdly, the major export market for goods produced in the Asian-Pacific region has diverted from the US to countries within the Asian-Pacific region itself. This heralds a distinct trend towards economic interdependence between countries of the Asian-Pacific region.

The major factor behind the sustained rate of economic growth and interdependence enjoyed by the Asian-Pacific region is undoubtedly the emergence of a borderless regional economy due to developments in computer technology and the transnational economic activities of multinational companies. We are presently in a time of great change. The idea of the modern nation state based on principles invented and developed in western Europe over the last four hundred years—namely, territorial domain, sovereignty and race—is in decline. Complex transnational networks of production and finance are undermining the traditional concept of the nation state as a bounded, ordered and unified space. Contemporary 'industrialists' generate most of their profit by utilizing the disparity found within the different global financial systems to their advantage.

Late modern capitalism, however, is not the only system to form and utilize networks of accumulation. History provides us with numerous other examples. The pre-modern period of merchant capitalism is one well documented case.

Looking at world events from this perspective, we also become aware that networks of accumulation and exchange have long been established in East and Southeast Asia. The regions of East and Southeast Asia are in fact one maritime world linked together by a number of seas. The seas of Asia allowed cultural and economic interaction between the continent mainland, peninsulas and islands of the region, yet at the same time, they separated each land form from the other just enough so that

each region can maintain a distinct and separate identity. It is this subtle sense of distance between the regions of Asia that allows the maritime networks of accumulation and exchange to function effectively. The Asian maritime world linked together a wide range of people by trade due to a sense of community that valued difference and sought mutual interaction. The Asian maritime world was in place long before the European colonization of Asia began at the start of the 19th century. From the mid 15th century merchants were using the seas to trade in an area that covered the whole of Asia. New centers or nodes of activity emerged as the networks of exchange and accumulation grew and prospered.

Nagasaki was one of those centers. Today, as we move towards some form of global integration, I feel it is an appropriate time to reflect on the role Nagasaki region played as a vital nodal point in the maritime networks of exchange and accumulation that laced Asia together. From now on, I will refer to the Nagasaki region and its maritime environs as the Western Sea region.

The Western Sea region is potentially connected with the Korean peninsula, mainland China and Southeast Asia through tide conditions and seasonal winds. From antiquity, the region has been populated by itinerant sea travelers who made their livelihood working the sea. The origins of these wandering sea travelers is said to be from southern China. They migrated to escape the war and anarchy that engulfed southern China around the 5th or 4th century BC. Those people are said to have developed a specially constructed wooden hull ship cum raft for use in open sea journeys and utilized the currents and seasonal winds to migrate to other parts of Asia, including the northwestern Kyushu.

In ancient times those itinerant sea travelers managed to avoid extinction by subjecting themselves to the authority of the Yamato Court and becoming tribute paying subjects to the Imperial throne under the Ritsuryo system.

Around the turn of the 12th century these same itinerant people organized themselves into a warrior seafaring class known as the Matsura brotherhood. They were marginal people, literally on the political, social and cultural crossroads of the region. The mobile and itinerant lifestyle of the Matsura brotherhood meant that they were a group of people who transgressed linguistic and national boundaries.

The marginality of the Matsura brotherhood is clearly reflected in the history of the Japanese pirates, or Wako, that marauded the seas between Japan, Korea, China on and off from the 13th century until midway through the 16th century. The Wako that plundered the Korean coastline between the 13th and 15th century were mostly from the Matsura brotherhood. The main headquarters of the Wako was Hirado which was under the control of the Matsura brotherhood, even in the latter half of the 15th century when the Wako comprised mostly of Chinese and Korean vessels rather

The Asian Maritime World and Nagasaki: A Historical Background to Regional Interaction (Summary)

than Japanese. There was much interaction between the Matura brotherhood and Chinese people. It was common for the men and women of the brotherhood to co-habit and marry with Chinese.

In its policy of national seclusion, the Tokugawa shogunate turned Nagasaki region into an outpost of Japanese interaction with China and Europe. The rise of Japan as a great modern power in the second half of the 19th century, to a large extent, can be attributed to the acquisition of knowledge, from the outside world and the swift adaptation of technological and scientific innovations. Nagasaki as an international axis of learning, exchange and adaptation laid down the foundations for Japan's modernization.

The opening of Japan by the Western powers had the uncalculated social affect of providing new networks of exchange and movement of people between Asia and the Western Sea region. From the Amakusa Islands and Shimabara peninsula region migrant sexual laborers known as the karayuki-san left the islands to find work at various destinations abroad. Most of the women who became karayuki-san came from villages situated on the coast, rather than mountain communities. The fact that the karayuki-san came from coastal villages reveals a clear demarcation in the daily customs and mores of peasant agricultural and fishing communities in Shimabara and Amakusa.

After the opening of Japan and its formation into a modern nation state, attitudes toward the karayuki-san changed dramatically. The women were labeled as 'female stowaways' and 'Japanese overseas prostitutes', and treated as a disgraceful slur to national pride. The term 'female stowaway' that came to replace 'karayuki-san' is a word loaded with the connotations of well defined national boundaries.

The Japan that emerged as a modern nation state after Meiji integrated successfully the Western Sea region within the borders of the nation. It also brought the inhabitants of the region, such as the karayuki-san, under the regulation of the state. The borders of the Japanese state formulated on the Western principles of statecraft had found the capacity to extend its sphere of rule to include the Western Sea region.

The Japanese modern nation state is based on historically specific Western models of political organization around the principles of a racially homogeneous bounded territory ordered under the rule of legitimate sovereign authority. In contrast, the Western Sea was a natural space of human habit and activity that conforms to no national boundaries and does not belong to any racial group. However, as long as the Western Sea continues to be a space where networks of interactions in the form of trade, financial transaction and personal encounters meet and merge with some frequency, then it will continue to be a region of transnational activity. The fundamental constituents of the Western Sea region as a sphere of transnational economic and cultural activity means that it will

never fit neatly into the strictly defined regional borders of a nation state. One can argue however, that the Meiji state had no option but to define and delimit its territorial borders if it was to keep the Western imperial powers at bay. Yet, one can also point to the Janus face process where in defining the limits of Japanese sovereignty, the Meiji state was attempting to bring the economic activity and conduct of the itinerant population inhabiting the area under administrative control. The principles that gave shape to the highly administrative Japanese modern nation state did not stop when they fulfilled their goal domestically. The same principles expanded and grew until they spewed out into Asia as unadulterated imperialistic ambition.

These events were more than fifty years ago. As we draw closer and closer to the 21st century we are seeing economies becoming borderless and the formation of the first transnational region in the EU. Asia is not an exception to this trend. In the face of such changes, we are forced to once more reflect on the relationship between the state power and regional differences. Despite this massive increase in the flow of resources, people and finances across national borders and the fact that the increased mobility of people will erode the sentimental attachments we have for our place of birth and the culture we grew up in, it would be foolish to think we have seen the end of the sovereign nation state. Yet, there is no denying that as the trend to regionalism swells in Asia, there is no turning back. The major issue that will face us in the near future will undoubtedly be the way in which we build borderless networks of accumulation whilst still recognizing national boundaries.

Moreover, if we are to surpass the principles of the modern nation state and reinstate the concept of regions that are open and accessible to cultural and economic interaction, then we may see a shift in the relationships of power between Japan's center and its periphery. If this shift does occur, perhaps we shall see the Western Sea region, designated as the periphery of Japanese by the Ritsuryo system of ancient Japan and the Meiji nation state, reinstated once again as an area in the forefront of economic growth and cultural innovation. However, will this trend signify a Japan committed to open trade and living in harmony and in mutual interdependence with its neighbors in the Asian-Pacific as was the want of a young modern Japan during the first years of Meiji? Or will we see the return of the Japanese imperialist mentalities and conduct where relations with Asia are based around Japanese assumptions of superiority and the right to dominate? The answer is intrinsically tied up with the way events unfold in Japan, both politically and economically. What is certain is that if the Western Sea is to re-emerge once more as a region of cultural, economic and political interaction, Japan has to extricate itself to some degree from the highly centralized style of administrative government it is committed to at present.