

Miyako or Capital: The Emergence of the Urban City in Eighteenth Century Japan

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The aim of this paper is to discuss the concept of "*miyako*." This is a concept that is rooted deeply in the history of Japan, and that still exerts a strong influence on the Japanese way of thinking. On the one hand, I am a little hesitant to propose this topic, as it may be unfamiliar to the Dutch members of the audience. On the other hand, I think that Dutch historians do have a cogent reason to be interested, for "*miyako*" is a problem that Japan and the Netherlands have in common. That is why in the end I decided to choose this topic, as it seemed a suitable topic for a comparison of the early modern history of the Netherlands and Japan.

First, I would like to show you why *miyako* is an interesting topic. Many Japanese, amongst whom I include myself, are intrigued by the question, which city is the capital of Holland. I remember having a talk with my son, some ten years ago, after I had visited Holland for the first time, about my experiences. "Which city, do you think, is the capital of Holland?" I asked my son. "Of course, Amsterdam is the capital" "Yes. I agree with you. When I was a boy, I was also taught so at school. But the central government is now located in The Hague. Why is not The Hague the capital?" "As Amsterdam is the biggest city in Holland and has the palace, all Japanese think that Amsterdam should naturally be the capital." "You're right. It stands to reason ..."

A conversation like this is not exceptional among Japanese. According to the *Pocket Guide to the Netherlands and Belgium* (Japan Tourist Bureau, 1998), Amsterdam is the capital. But in the chapter on The Hague this guide book tells us that "Although Den Haag is not the capital, parliament, the central offices of the government, and all embassies are located here, and all official conferences are held here. It is the real political center of the Netherlands." The statements this guide book makes are contradictory. If the definition of "capital" is "the city or town in which is located the official seat of government of a country or state", The Hague must logically be the capital of the Netherlands. Is, then, the Dutch word *hoofdstad* not identical with the English word *capital*? Are there basic differences between the two? Does the problem we Japanese have in understanding this arrangement stem from the Dutch way of thinking about capitals or from the Japanese way of thinking?

After this long introduction, I have at last arrived at the starting point of my discussion, which is the Japanese word *miyako*. The translations of "*miyako*" given in the standard dictionary are "a capital, a metropolis, the seat of government" (*Kenkyusha's New Japanese--English Dictionary*, 1991). This translation is wrong as I will show later on. At the same time, however, it is quite true that almost all Japanese use the words "*miyako*" and "capital" interchangeably. The fact that these words are used in this way has caused basic difficulties in writing the history of the capital of Japan. One of the best books published in English to introduce Japan to non-Japanese tells us the following: "The capital was established in 794 and it remained the capital for more than a thousand years until 1868, when Tokyo took its place." (*Seventy-seven Keys to the Civilization of Japan*, Umesao Tadao, ed., 1983). Is it really true that Kyoto had been the capital "for more than a thousand years," until Tokyo took over?

The foundation of the Kamakura bakufu in 1192 put an end to Kyoto's position as the political centre of the nation. For the next seven hundred years, the country was a feudalist state, Japanese style. I shall not go into the details of the various intermediate shifts of the political centre, but restrict myself to the establishment of the Tokugawa *bakufu*, which is a very instructive case if you want to demonstrate the difference between "*miyako*" and "capital." In a sense, the following discussion is also a challenge to the Dutch historians, to see how far they would get with an analysis of the history of the Netherlands if they had to use the modern English concept "capital" instead of the Dutch word "hoofdstad."

Edo became the centre of political power after the establishment of the Tokugawa *bakufu* in 1603. Edo was, however, not considered to be the capital. At that time, no specific word denoting "the city that was the political centre" did exist. The word that came closest in meaning to "capital" was *miyako*. If the definition quoted earlier from Kenkyusha's Dictionary would have been applicable throughout the history of Japan, the people of the Edo Period (1600-1868) should have called Edo "*miyako*." But *miyako* was firmly believed to be Kyoto. Why?

The problem was signalled early in the Edo Period, in an interesting collection of notes called *Keichō kenbunshū* ("A Collection of Things Seen and Heard during the Keichō Period [1596-1614]"). The preface of the collection is dated 1614, and it is commonly attributed to Miura Jōshin (1565-1644). In this book, Jōshin insisted that Edo is the city where "the Shogun, the King who rules and protects all provinces, resides. Why, then, do we not call Edo '*miyako*'? ... the people of all provinces, including those of Kyoto, "go up to" the castle of Edo. Is not Edo the *miyako*?" (*Edo wa*

miyako ni arazu ya).¹

Miura's opinion, however, remained an exception. The most widely shared opinion was that the *miyako* had to be Kyoto. Why? Why did so many people regard Kyoto as the *miyako*, though, had they known the word, they would have to admit that Kyoto was not the capital anymore? To solve this problem, it is necessary to examine the concept of *miyako*. This consists of three inseparably interconnected elements. Originally, *miyako* meant the place where the ancient political ruler of Japan -- in English, the Emperor; in Japanese, the *tennō* or, using the older term, the *mikado* -- resided. These rulers frequently changed their place of residence. All such places were called "*miyako*." The second element of the concept, namely, that the place where the *tennō* resided, was the centre of political power ("capital"), automatically followed from the first.

These two meanings were fairly well understood by such westerners as the American missionary J. C. Hepburn (1815-1911). He was the author of the first *English-Japanese, Japanese-English Dictionary*. In this dictionary, he defines *miyako* as "the city where the emperor resides, the imperial city, capital."

The most difficult thing to understand is the third element. When Heian-kyō (the official name of Kyoto) was established as the new *miyako* (794), it was a political creation, an artificial city with a population of approximately one hundred thousand inhabitants. Four hundred years later Kyoto had grown into an economically prosperous city and had become the undisputed cultural centre of Japan. Due to these historical changes, the concept *miyako* acquired a third meaning, namely that of urbanity. By the end of the Heian Period (794-1292), Kyoto could pride itself on being the imperial residence, the political centre of the nation, and the single really urban and urbane city in Japan. It was the perfect *miyako*.

Edo was the first real rival of Kyoto for the position of *miyako*. In the beginning of the Edo Period, in the seventeenth century, Kyoto was still keeping up its end. Though it was no longer the "capital," Kyoto was evidently still regarded as the *miyako*. In other words, in order to determine whether a city was the *miyako* or not, economic prosperity and cultural sophistication were vital. This is why people would not, in spite of Miura's insistence, regard Edo as the *miyako*. In the course of the eighteenth century, however, a fundamental transition occurred, which was brought about by the rapid rise of Edo and the gradual decline of Kyoto.

In his essay *Nanreishi* (1749), Toda Yoshitoshi (1698-1750) raised the question why the inhabitants of Miyako (i.e., Kyoto) do not speak with a provincial accent. His answer was that "A *miyako* is the urban city *par excellence*; people from the various provinces, who [in the beginning] all speak their own dialects, gradually meet each

other halfway and create a harmony amongst themselves. ... Ever since [our] Miyako was founded by Kanmu Tennō (737-781-806), a thousand years ago, Miyako has been [such] an urban city, so that the dialects of all provinces there attain a happy mean." In his conclusions, Yoshitoshi states that "Any urban city with a history of more than three hundred years will be able to attain this same happy golden mean."²

Yoshitoshi's concluding remark is, I think, very insightful. Not only a *miyako*, but any *tokai* could reach some measure of cultural maturity. Impressive though it was, the *miyako*-ness of Kyoto was no longer absolute. Edo, which had already become the biggest city in Japan and its political centre ("capital"), was rapidly becoming urban. The next step would be that Edo made the shift from *tokai* to *miyako*. That such a shift was about to occur was clearly perceived by contemporary observers, many of whom wrote comparative essays on the three urban cities: Edo, Kyoto, and Osaka -- a genre that is nowadays generally known as *santo*--ron ("three city discourses").

A hidden topos in these writings was to disparage the urbanity of Kyoto, especially as compared to Edo. For example, Kyoto was said to be behind in fashion; its people, once renowned for their elegance and sophistication, had become rustic, its *tōfu* (bean curd) was too coarse, etc. In the eighteenth century, many people from Edo who visited Kyoto noticed that Edo was much more urbane than *miyako*. Nishotei Hanzan (died 1783), for instance, in his essay titled "A Narrative of Kyoto Observed" (*Mita kyō monogatari*, 1781), claimed that "Two hundred years ago, Kyoto ceased to be Miyako. At present, it is a elegant rural city (*hana no inaka*). As a rural city, it still is quite magnificent."³

The difference was not lost on foreign observers, either. Von Siebold visited Kyoto on the first day of June in 1826, on his way back from Edo. He wrote that "When we arrived in Kyoto, no one realized we were there already. Our friend, who was waiting for us, had to tell us. Compared with Edo and Osaka, the streets were very shabby; we would never have noticed that we had arrived in Kyoto."⁴ So, by the late eighteenth century, Kyoto had also lost its long-lasting status of *miyako* in the sense of the highest ranking of all *tokai*. Kyoto had become one of the three urban cities, but at that time, the biggest urban city was Edo. It was Edo's second step on its road towards becoming the *miyako*.

As an expression of the growing *miyako*-consciousness in Edo, the word "Eastern Miyako" (*Tōto*) was coined, which in the nineteenth century became a quite popular term. It was the result of a dual course of events: as Kyoto's status as Miyako became more and more nominal, Edo's "*miyako*-ness" became more and more real.

At the time of the Meiji Restoration (1868) Edo was renamed Tokyo -- a name that literally means "Eastern Miyako." In the following year, the emperor's residence

was moved from Kyoto to Tokyo. It was the restoration of the perfect *miyako* after the collapse of the first perfect *miyako*, Heian-kyō. All three elements were finally reunited again.

I do have not the time to discuss the details of the transition from Edo to Tokyo. Moreover, I would prefer to concentrate on the comparative problem, so I conclude my lecture with the following questions. Is the relation between Kyoto and Edo in the eighteenth century similar to the relation between Amsterdam and The Hague? Does Amsterdam still maintain its status as capital? If so, what is the exact meaning of the word *hoofdstad*? Is the question where their capital is located, a matter of serious consideration for the Dutch?

NOTES

1. *Nihon Shomin Seikatsu Shiryō Shūsei* ("The Collected historical documents of the common people's life of the Edo period") Vol. 8 (San'ichi Shobō, 1969), pp. 497-498,
2. *Nihon zuihitsu taisei*, first series, Vol. 17 (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1976), p. 361. The word translated as "urban city" is *tokai*; the characters with which this word is written, can also be read *subete atsumaru*, i.e., "pulling everything together."
3. *Nihon zuihitsu taisei*, third series, Vol. 8 (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1977), p. 17
4. Siebold, Philipp Frans von, *Edo sanpu kikō*, Saitō Makoto transl. (Tōyō Bunko, Vol. 87; Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1967), p. 229.