

## ESSAYS

## Geography's Importance to Japan's History

by Patrick Grant

Japan's geography has been and is a crucial factor in its history. Geology, location, patterns of settlement, transport, and economic development are strongly influenced by spatial considerations. Our appreciation of any historical issue is greatly enhanced by learning how geography played an important role. A geographer's perspective is indispensable to an adequate understanding. This article, while much too short to give complete explanations of geographical factors, provides ideas for enterprising teachers who wish to augment their instruction of Japan's historical geography.<sup>1</sup>

It would be unfortunate and unimaginative if instruction in Japanese geography were limited to simply the memorization of major cities and islands. The National Geography Standards, published in 1994, describes specific expectations for geographical understanding.<sup>2</sup> The informed person must, for example, describe the physical and cultural characteristics of places instead of simply naming a long list of capitals. Knowing how physical systems affect human systems is more important than recalling names of rivers. These standards require students to develop critical thinking and problem solving skills by examining issues in greater depth. Standards 17 and 18 address the essential role of geography in history:

17. The geographically informed person knows and understands how to apply geography to interpret the past.

18. The geographically informed person knows and understands how to apply geography to interpret the present and plan for the future.

The diligent student of Japan's historical geography will not only learn much about the past, but will recognize causal factors for issues

of the present and become better prepared for challenges of the future. Space in one article does not permit a comprehensive plan with all the possible ways to incorporate Japan's historical geography into the classroom. This article, instead, offers a few ideas for applying these two standards by addressing some important geographical concepts.

The article touches upon many specific issues that teachers will find interesting for discussions in the classroom. The brief introduction to geology gives background to the earthquake hazard. Scarcity of space, covered in the next section, has helped to define characteristics of Japanese life. Japan's location has also helped to chart the course of its history. The proximity section looks at the relationship between Hokkaidō and Honshū to show trade development between these neighboring islands. The following section on the Ainu, an aboriginal people of Japan, also looks at one aspect of Hokkaidō. Furthermore, the rivalry between Russia and Japan, mentioned in the next section, concerns islands to the north and east of Hokkaidō.

This article concludes with two interesting examples of geographical issues. The silk industry's development is a result of several important spatial factors. Finally, the location of Japan's capitals, with the historical background, is an intriguing tale as well.

**GEOLOGY** — Japan has many earthquakes because of its position on the Pacific "Ring of Fire." The Pacific Plate moves a few inches a year westward into the Philippine and Eurasian Plates. In addition, there is a complex system of faults on the Japanese islands. The 1923 earthquake, with the resultant fire, destroyed much of Tokyo and most of Yokohama. Some 100,000 people perished in this disaster. Only twenty seconds of shaking killed 5,480 people in the 1995 Hanshin-Awaji quake around Kōbe.<sup>3</sup> The rebuilding of this area is rapidly progressing, but there are still thousands of displaced people two years after the quake.

**SCARCITY OF SPACE** — Japan, with a population of over 126 million people, is slightly smaller in land area than California, which has about 31.5 million. Furthermore, only fifteen percent of Japan's land area is considered arable. The result is an exceptional scarcity of space and the need for efficiency in resource use. During the Tokugawa Period (1600–1868), the Japanese used readily movable furniture instead of heavier Western furniture to allow multiple uses of limited space. Clothing was designed so that one garment could fit a changing human physical size, thus large closets for clothes were unnecessary.<sup>4</sup>

Public sanitation systems in developing Japanese cities during the Tokugawa period compared favorably to those of Western cities. Increasing urban population densities were, therefore, possible and did not prompt the disease that otherwise might have discouraged urban growth. The population of Japan was about twenty-six million and Edo (now Tokyo) had close to one million by the early eighteenth century. Ōsaka had about 400,000, and Kyōto some 350,000 inhabitants.

The efficient use of space is still an important characteristic of Japan today. Some urban parking garages lift autos by elevators. Suburban Japanese homes have small but attractive gardens. Rice fields are immediately adjacent to suburban development. Japan has successfully adapted to its limited land area without compromising physical well-being.



Map, drawn by the author, showing many of the places in the article.

**LOCATION** — Japan has long benefited from its location near other lands. The Japanese have traded with peoples on the Asian mainland since at least the fifth century A.D. Such trade probably existed long before then, but it is difficult to determine when it began. Chinese and Korean culture deeply influenced Japan for many hundreds of years. Religion and writing are often thought of as key examples of acculturation from both China and the Korean peninsula. Japanese writing was developed from the Chinese, and most of the principal Japanese Buddhist sects, including Zen, Tendai, Shingon, and Amidism, originated in China.<sup>5</sup>

That Japan is an island nation proved very useful during the thirteenth century in preventing Mongol occupation. The Khan, furious at Japan's temerity to resist his demands for subservience, tried twice to seize Japan, in 1274 and again in 1281. Typhoons conveniently arrived on both occasions to defeat the attackers.<sup>6</sup> The Japanese rejoiced for their "divine winds" that saved them from Mongol domination. Japan was not invaded again until 1945.

The arrival of a Portuguese ship in 1543 began an important period of European interest in Japan. Portuguese missionaries gained a significant presence in Nagasaki. Trade came with Portuguese and Spanish missionary efforts. Nagasaki became the main port for a rapidly developing trade between Japan and Europe. The English East India Company, for example, eventually established itself through William Adams, who won the favor of the Tokugawa shogunate in the early seventeenth century and alerted the English to the lucrative possibilities of a triangle trade: English broadcloth to Japan, Japanese silver to the Spice Islands, spices back to England.<sup>7</sup> The Tokugawa shogunate, however, subsequently became concerned about European rivalries and intervention and sought to isolate Japan during the early seventeenth century.

Japan had fewer contacts with European countries during the Tokugawa period, but it is misleading to say that Japan cut itself almost completely from the outside world. The Tokugawa government allowed trade, under their control, with China and Korea, and the Dutch maintained an active but reg-



Ainu women, Hokkaidō, Japan.  
Photo from *Indigenous Peoples of Asia* edited by R. H. Barnes, Andrew Gray, and Benedict Kingsbury. Photographer: Katarina Sjöberga. Used here with permission of the publisher, the Association for Asian Studies, Inc.

ulated trade through the small island of Deshima in Nagasaki Harbor. Japan actively kept informed of European technology through this Dutch contact.

**PROXIMITY** — Many medieval maps of Japan by the Japanese excluded all or most of Hokkaidō, now Japan's northernmost major island. The Japanese government took a much greater interest in Hokkaidō during the Meiji period (1868–1912), yet there were already significant economic links between Hokkaidō and Honshū during the preceding Tokugawa period. Even earlier, Japanese "armed merchants" visited Hokkaidō by the twelfth century. By the fifteenth century, Japanese were establishing forts in southern Hokkaidō.<sup>8</sup>

One Noto Peninsula family revealed in documents from 1619 their trade with Matsumae in southwestern Hokkaidō. The family sold salt and charcoal in exchange for *konbu* (a sea vegetable) destined for Ōsaka. While this family was also engaged in farming, it was part of a complex network of trade.<sup>9</sup> The Tokugawa government established the Matsumae lord's role as a trade intermediary between the Japanese and the indigenous Ainu people of Hokkaidō.

Fisheries along Hokkaidō's west coast sold herring for food and fertilizer to Honshū customers during the Tokugawa and Meiji periods. Herring was so important that the Matsumae domain prohibited gunfire near the sea for three months each year so as not to frighten them during their

spawning season.<sup>10</sup> The Ainu were an important source of exploited labor for this industry.

**ABORIGINAL PEOPLE** — The Ainu have histories and cultures well worth further study. These diverse peoples lived not only on Hokkaidō, but on northern Honshū, Sakhalin Island, and the Kuriles as well. During the Tokugawa period, many Ainu became increasingly dependent upon Japanese commodities. They became closely integrated into the Japanese economy through their labor in the fisheries and their increasing taste for Japanese material goods.<sup>11</sup> Their numbers, however, decreased because of smallpox and measles.

Kayano Shigeru's memoir, *Our Land Was a Forest*, offers an informative perspective. He writes of Japan's increasing interest in Hokkaidō:

*Mainland Japanese had crossed the strait to our national land hundreds of years earlier, but it was in the early Meiji era that they began a concerted, all-out invasion. Laws like the Former Hokkaidō Aborigine Protection Act restricted our freedom first by ignoring our basic rights, as a hunting people, to hunt bear and deer or catch salmon and trout freely, anywhere and at any time, and then compelling us to farm on the inferior land the Japanese "provided."*<sup>12</sup>

Kayano Shigeru describes, in his memoir, a journey that reminds one of the Cherokee Trail of Tears.<sup>13</sup> One can draw some parallels from the Ainu experience to that of Native North Americans, the Maori in New Zealand, or the Aborigines in Australia. Indigenous peoples were forcibly moved to less desirable land in each of these places. Japan certainly had increasing economic interests in Hokkaidō during the Meiji period; the aforementioned herring industries prospered during this time. Herring became less expensive than dried sardines for agricultural fertilizer.

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## ESSAYS

**RIVALRY** — Rivalry with Russia also increased Japan's interest in defining the northern extent of control. Boundaries in the northwestern Pacific changed frequently from 1850 to the present. Southern Sakhalin was controlled by Japan from 1905 to 1945. The Kurile Islands are still in dispute. All of the Kuriles are controlled today by Russia, but Japanese atlases and maps show the southern islands of Etorofu, Kunashiri, Shikotan, and the Habomai as Japanese territory.<sup>14</sup>

This issue remains a most sensitive one between Russia and Japan. The leaders of the two countries, Boris Yeltsin and Ryutaro Hashimoto, met during November 1997 in Russia to discuss it. While they promised an agreement by 2000, thousands of Russians marched outside to protest the possibility the southern Kuriles might be returned to Japan.

**SILK MANUFACTURING AND TRANSPORT** —

The silk industry in nineteenth-century Japan proliferated in the mountainous regions of central Honshū, including present Nagano Prefecture. Access to inexpensive labor also contributed to the location of silk factories in the mountainous interior. During the Tokugawa period, farmers increased production of silk in proto-industrial cottage industries. The silkworm, whose cocoon yields silk thread, must eat large quantities of mulberry leaves. Rural farmers who kept silkworms had to vigilantly feed them and clean their areas. Furthermore, silk cocoons were very perishable. Too long a transport journey might result in delivering moths instead.<sup>15</sup> Yet improved transport methods during the Meiji period did allow silk thread and finished textiles to reach ports and large urban areas in Japan.

Large factories evolved with economies of scale. With a few exceptions, silk factories treated workers, mostly women, with little compassion. Young women were often contracted by their impoverished rural parents to work long hours, in unpleasant conditions, for little pay.<sup>16</sup>

It is interesting to note that tobacco proved incompatible with mulberry trees. The pollen from tobacco poisons silkworms, thus silk mulberry trees were not grown close to tobacco farms.<sup>17</sup> Tobacco was such a highly profitable cash crop in the late nineteenth century that many farmers chose to continue producing tobacco instead of mulberry.

**JAPAN'S MANY CAPITALS** — Prior to the establishment of a capital in Nara in 710, the seat of Japan's government, the emperor's palace, moved frequently from place to place. Before the Asuka period (552–710), each new emperor prompted a move to a new location because many believed the previous emperor's death defiled the old location. Asuka became the seat of government during the reign of Empress Suiko, who reigned from 593 to 628. Nearby Fujiwara (about 30 km southeast of present-day Ōsaka), served as the capital from 694 until 710.

Nara, fifteen kilometers north of Fujiwara, was the capital for most of the Nara Period (710–794). Its impressive grid pattern of the streets followed Chinese models. During the 740s three nearby locations, Kuni, Naniwa, and Shigaraki, served very briefly as capitals before the imperial court returned to Nara. A key factor that prompted the Japanese to move the capital in 784 was not the death of an emperor, but rather a desire to remove the government from influence of increasingly powerful Buddhist monasteries in Nara. Yet the new capital of Nagaoka, thirty kilometers north, lasted only ten years, probably because many thought the spirit of the Emperor Kammu's murdered brother lurked about. Kammu consulted geomancers who recommended Heian, a few kilometers to the northeast.

Heian lasted so long as the capital that it became known as Kyōto (Japanese for "capital city"). Kyōto was both the imperial capital and administrative capital during the Heian Period (794–1185). The imperial throne remained there until 1868, yet the Japanese emperor has often not been directly involved in matters of government. Many thought everyday politics was beneath the emperor. While all governments through 1945 have acknowledged the emperor's supremacy, they have not always felt it necessary or beneficial to control Japan from the same city. Soon after Minamoto Yoritomo defeated the rival Taira clan in 1185, he decided to form a *bakufu* "tent government" in Kamakura. Yoritomo held power over administrative issues, but still honored the emperor who remained in Kyōto. Kamakura was the administrative capital until 1333.

Effective power in Japan was somewhat decentralized from 1333 until 1600. By the beginning of the Sengoku-Jidai "period of the country at war," (1467–1600), power

was largely in the hands of the some twenty *daimyō* "great names" who had substantial domains. The reunification of Japan completed by Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616) resulted in forming a new bakufu in Edo (presently Tokyo). The emperor, meanwhile, remained in Kyōto but was still, officially, the head of state. With the ascension of the Emperor Meiji, who ruled from 1868 to 1912, the imperial throne moved to Tokyo where it remains today.

**CONCLUSION** — The historical geographer's perspective can contribute to an understanding of Japan's past. While this article briefly considers a few important topics, there are many more worthy of further investigation. Examples include patterns of migration within Japan, railroad development during the Meiji period, and trade between Japan and elsewhere in the western Pacific. Of course, there are issues of the present and future that deserve more attention. For example, what long-term impacts on the environment can we expect from the growth of the Ōsaka-Kōbe harbor? How will the dispute over the Kurile Islands be resolved? How will Japan continue to cope with the risk of earthquakes as well as the reality of very limited space?

Finding answers to such difficult questions will require the kinds of problem solving strategies demanded by the National Geography Standards. Geography gives an important perspective and, therefore, deserves a prominent place in the curriculum of Japanese history.<sup>18</sup> ■

## NOTES

1. A special thanks to Tony Hepworth and Yuming Han-Hepworth, Charles Sturt University, New South Wales, for their kind assistance in editing drafts of this article.
2. See *Geography for Life: The National Geography Standards* (Washington D.C.: National Geographic Society, 1994). See also Susan Wiley Hardwick and Donald G. Holtgrieve, *Geography for Educators: Standards, Themes and Concepts* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1996), 24–28, for concise information about the National Geography Standards as well as the five fundamental themes in geography: location, place, relationships within places, movement, and regions.
3. See Hyogo-ken Kyoiku Iinkai, *Shinsai o Sei kite* (Kōbe, 1996), for information on the distribution of earthquake damage and casualties in different areas in southeastern Hyōgo Prefecture. This book includes many informative maps.

4. Susan Hanley, *Everyday Things in Premodern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 51–76.
5. See Mikiso Hane, *Premodern Japan: A Historical Survey* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 52–54, 74–82, and W. Scott Morton, *Japan: Its History and Culture*, 3rd Ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 36–37, 61–63, for an introduction to important Buddhist sects that came to Japan during the Heian and Kamakura periods.
6. See Martin Collcutt, Marius Jansen, and Isao Kumakura, *Cultural Atlas of Japan* (New York: Facts on File, 1988), 105, for a useful map of these attacks.
7. John Keay, *The Honourable Company: A History of the English East India Company* (New York: MacMillan, 1991), 52–60.
8. David L. Howell, *Capitalism from Within: Economy, Society, and the State in a Japanese Fishery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 28.
9. Amino Yoshihiko, *Rereading Japanese History*, Alan Christy, trans. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1996), 1–22.
10. Howell, 35.
11. Howell, 45.
12. Kayano Shigeru, *Our Land Was a Forest: An Ainu Memoir*, Kyoko Selden and Lili Selden, trans. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 60. See also Oswald Iten, “Japan’s Injustice to the Ainu,” *Swiss Review of World Affairs*, February 1996, 15–20, for more information on the Ainu.
13. Shigeru, 23–36.
14. See, for example, *Shim shō kōtō chizu*. (Tokyo: Teikoku Shoin, 1995), 85, and *Global Access. Tokyo* (Shobunsha, 1996), 29. Japan considers Etorofu, Kunashiri, Shikotan, and the Habomai islands as “Japan’s Northern Territories.” See Jacquelyn Johnson and Lynn Parisi, *Faces of Japan II* (Lakewood, Colorado: Pacific Mountain Network, 1990), 23–24. The maps on these pages clarify the Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ position on the sovereignty of these islands.
15. See Kären Wigen, *The Making of a Japanese Periphery, 1750–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), for a thorough historical geography of the Ina Valley in southern Nagano Prefecture.
16. See E. Patricia Tsurumi, *Factory Girls: Women in the Thread Mills of Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), for a complete study of treatment against workers.
17. Wigen, 151.
18. See Hardwick and Holtgrieve, *Geography for Educators*, 314–321, for more good ideas about teaching the geography of Japan. Glenn T. Trewartha, *Japan: A Geography* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), includes many useful tables that teachers can compare with current data, such as those found in the Keizai Koho Center’s booklet, *Japan: An International Comparison* (Tokyo, 1997).

## Geographic Gateways to Seeing and Understanding Korea

by David Nemeth

This article introduces what I call a “Gateways” approach to teaching about places, and uses Korea as its example. I developed the Gateways approach around the assumption that popular support for geography in the schools is, and always has been, rooted in its ability to reproduce in the classroom the vicarious experience of geographical exploration. I take the mainstays of the popularity of geographical exploration to be a combination of human curiosity and mobility. On this basis, I suggest that teaching geography in the classroom might try to be more of a “moving” experience as it seeks to increase its popularity and effectiveness among contemporary students. My model for the Gateways approach to teaching is a hypertext environment, for example, that complex hypertext world created by tens of thousands of people with home pages on the Internet. The Internet has motivated curious students everywhere to enter into those infinitely digressive explorations we term “surfing the web,” and it is this type of journey through hypertext-like Gateways that I explore in this article.

Of all the senses that can be exploited by a teacher during a class on place geography, the most underrated and underutilized may be the sense of movement itself—the kinetic sense. The Gateways approach to teaching about places, therefore, is characterized best by its attempt to annihilate as much as possible the distance between the student in the classroom and another place. The Gateways approach to teaching about places creates an illusion that a student can not only experience another place firsthand without leaving the classroom, but that the student is also *in control* of the experience as it unfolds.

### TENNYSON’S ARCHES

What is the Gateways approach, and how does it create this illusion? For an inspirational insight into the idea behind the method, we can turn to that great poetic ode to exploration, “Ulysses,” by Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809–92), in which he writes:

*For all experience is an arch  
where through  
Gleams the untravell’d world*

*Whose margin fades*

*For ever and for ever when I move.*

Tennyson’s “arches” are enticements to discovery; Gateways through which a teacher can lead a room full of curious students toward vicarious and participatory experiences in imaginary places. The teacher’s challenge is to offer to take students somewhere interesting—for example, to the Korean peninsula—and to facilitate a classroom conversation that can keep them moving on the momentum of their own sustained curiosity.

Since humans are naturally curious, the potential already exists to get the class motivated, that is, moving. To do this, the teacher need not tell the student that he or she is entering a strangers’ world, for that might cool their curiosity by triggering their unwanted and unnecessary caution and hesitation. One reason that exploration on the Internet is so enticing to students is that it creates a romantic illusion that they themselves are the strangers; invisible strangers moving from place to place. This illusion advantages a sense of anonymity and immunity that empowers Internet users to enjoy a more enriching journey in cyberspace. However, using the Internet is not the same as learning from the Internet.

### GATEWAYS EMPOWER TEACHERS IN CLASSROOMS

The classroom has something important that the Internet still lacks as a learning environment—the teacher. Adapting the hypertext environment to a classroom situation is a real challenge and opportunity for geography teachers. This is because the traditional classroom, though it persists as the standard institutional learning environment, is being

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