

JAPANESE FEUDAL HISTORY

Samuel O. Nicholson

Japan is the longest, continuous, traceable Empire in the world with records of the past which can be proven. The evidence goes back as early as the eight fifties. Anything before that in Japan is in the area of myths, of which there might be more than one. This date was when a five-storied pagoda was built, which was the residence of a great leader in the Imperial line. It is on the road from Nara to Osaka, is now carefully preserved, and is one of the oldest wooden structures in the world dating from the eight fifties AD.

Nara is where the largest statue of Buddha in an enclosed structure is located, and it is certain that at least one Emperor lived there. This is because there is a unique air-conditioned museum nearby. It is a long narrow building, standing on two rows of huge wooden pillars that are more than eight feet high. The side and end walls are made of large eight-sided logs, with a narrow clearance between. When it is damp the logs swell, closing it tight, and the contents are kept dry. In dry periods they shrink and let the breezes in to cool the interior. Therefore, it is by far the oldest air-conditioned buildings in the world.

Every ten years, there is a ceremonial opening conducted by the chief conservationist. Then he and his assistants enter to study and preserve the contents, which are all the personal effects of a known emperor at the time of his death. They are the only ones with this access, but share their information with historians. The exact dates that the Buddha Temple and this museum were built are known.

What is not known, is that on one occasion an American art professor took part. When I was a graduate student at the Center for Japanese Studies at the University of Michigan, I took a course in Japanese art. The professor told us that, during the period of reconstruction in Japan after the war, he had served as the art expert for the military government. While he was there, the date for the opening of this treasure house had arrived. The official in charge asked him to join him in the opening ceremony, and though he demurred, he ended up taking part. He was thus the only outsider to ever see inside this building.

In the early feudal period, which was the time before the Shogun had taken control of the country in the Edo period, the people were divided into three classes. At the top were the Samurai, or warriors, because they were the protectors. In the middle were the farmers, since they produced rice — the staff of life. At the bottom were the merchants, who produced nothing and were a drag on all society. At the very top were the Daimyo, the warlords who ran everything from their castles.

At that time, each Daimyo controlled as large an area as he could from his castle. There were ever changing coalitions of these Daimyo, and open warfare could break out at any time. A very powerful Daimyo, at a historic battle in the Osada area, whose date and details are known, took control and declared himself as Shogun, or Guardian of the Frontier. He set up his headquarters at Edo (now Tokyo) and controlled all of Japan from there. He did this by requiring all the Daimyo, with their families, to move to Edo. Then, once a year, all of them had to go back to their castles, leaving their family in Edo. This was so they could spend six months maintaining their control and collecting tax, and the other six months with their families in Edo. This resulted in a period of close to three hundred years of peace. It could be said that Japan had, by far, the biggest standing army in the world that never fought.

These annual round trips required a travel route called the Tokaido, or Eastern route.

The Tokaido

The main traveling route in Japan is the Tokaido, which connects the two most important cities in the country, similar to New York and Washington here. Kyoto was the place where the Emperor lived, and Edo, now Tokyo, was where the Shogun who ran the country lived. At that time, all travel was by foot.

As I reported in the previous section, the Shogun required the Daimyo to travel to their castles from Edo and back every year. Therefore, a traveling route had to be established, and others also used these routes. This was accomplished by setting up a village every twenty-five miles or so. These had inns and other facilities needed by travelers. These villages were called stations and there were fifty-three of them on the Tokaido. This included the cities of Edo and Kyoto at the ends.

Because Edo was where there were the most Daimyo and their retainers, that was where any calculations started. That is why even today, with Japan's railway system, Tokyo Station is mile zero and all trains are either up or down in relation to Tokyo.

Although it was not something I thought about that much at the time, I later wondered why this was considered the northern border. The enemy were not the Ainu, who were only found in Hokkaido. The answer was right there. The next prefecture is famous for its mounted Samurai, and the rest of Japan had no horses. The Shogun needed a large number of Samurai to hold that border. There were no castles north of Mito, which was the castle town directly on the frontier where the border was protected.

The Rice Standard

There are records of how many bales of rice each Daimyo allotted to his retainers, all the way down the Samurai line. The rice was measured by the bale, which is a round container made of woven straw. It is about the size and weight that can be carried on the shoulder.

The Daimyo's income was determined by the extent of the area he controlled. He collected all the rice he could from his farmers and distributed a certain number of bales a year to his major retainers. They then, in turn, gave a number to theirs, and so on down the line,

Although rice continued to be transported in those bales for years, it gradually became more a matter of calculation and bookkeeping. The same is true for the western gold standard.

Samuel O Nicholson