



The flowing river never stops and yet the water never stays the same.

Foam floats upon the pools, scattering, re-forming, never lingering long. So it is with man and all his dwelling places here on earth.¹

I INTRODUCTION

Kamo no Chōmei, the thirteenth-century Japanese intellectual quoted above, wrote with a sense of the transience of the world: 'Days constantly come and go, yet change is incessant.' From such perspective, an infinite number of histories can exist, like the countless bubbles that foam and burst on the surface of a river.

As a prelude to the analysis of contemporary Japan that this book undertakes, this opening chapter tries to scoop up just a few of these bubbles to position present-day circumstances in historical perspective, bringing them into relief against the past. This chapter also traces the historical transformations in the patterns of landownership and tax collection which conditioned class formation and disintegration at different times. Table 1.1 provides a highly condensed chronological table to pinpoint some key moments of Japan's history.

II JAPAN AS A VARIABLE

Although Japan is often described as an internally homogeneous island nation, it has never been a stable territorial unit with consistent cultural uniformity. In reality, Japan has had fluctuating national boundaries and changing constituent regions.

¹ Kamo no Chōmei 1998, p. 31. Used by permission of Stone Bridge Press.

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Table 1.1 Condensed chronology of historical turning points

Century / year	Event
3rd century	Yamataikoku recorded
710	Nara established as the capital
720	Hayato clan in southern Kyūshū revolt
794	Capital moved to Kyoto
801	Expedition sent to subjugate inhabitants in the north
1192	Kamakura Shogunate formally established
1274 & 1281	Attempts by the Mongol Empire to invade Japan
1336	Ashikaga Shogunate established
1429	Ryūkyū Kingdom established
1467	Warring states begin hostilities
1573	Oda Nobunaga obtains hegemony
1590	Toyotomi Hideyoshi achieves national unification
1592 & 1597	Hideyoshi invades Korea
1600	Battle of Sekigahara
1603	Tokugawa Shogunate established
1639	National isolation policy put in force
1854	Japan–US Treaty of Peace and Amity concluded
1868	Meiji Restoration completed
1875	Farmer-soldiers dispatched to Hokkaidō
1879	Okinawa incorporated
1894	Sino-Japanese War (Nisshin Sensō) breaks out
1904	Russo-Japanese War breaks out
1910	Korea annexed
1931	Manchurian Incident erupts
1937	Second Sino-Japanese War (Nicchū Sensō) breaks out
1941	Pacific War begins
1945	Defeat in World War II

1 Japan's external boundaries

The territorial boundary of Japan that exists today is a post–World War II concept. Even in the early twentieth century, Japan colonized Korea, Taiwan, northeast China,

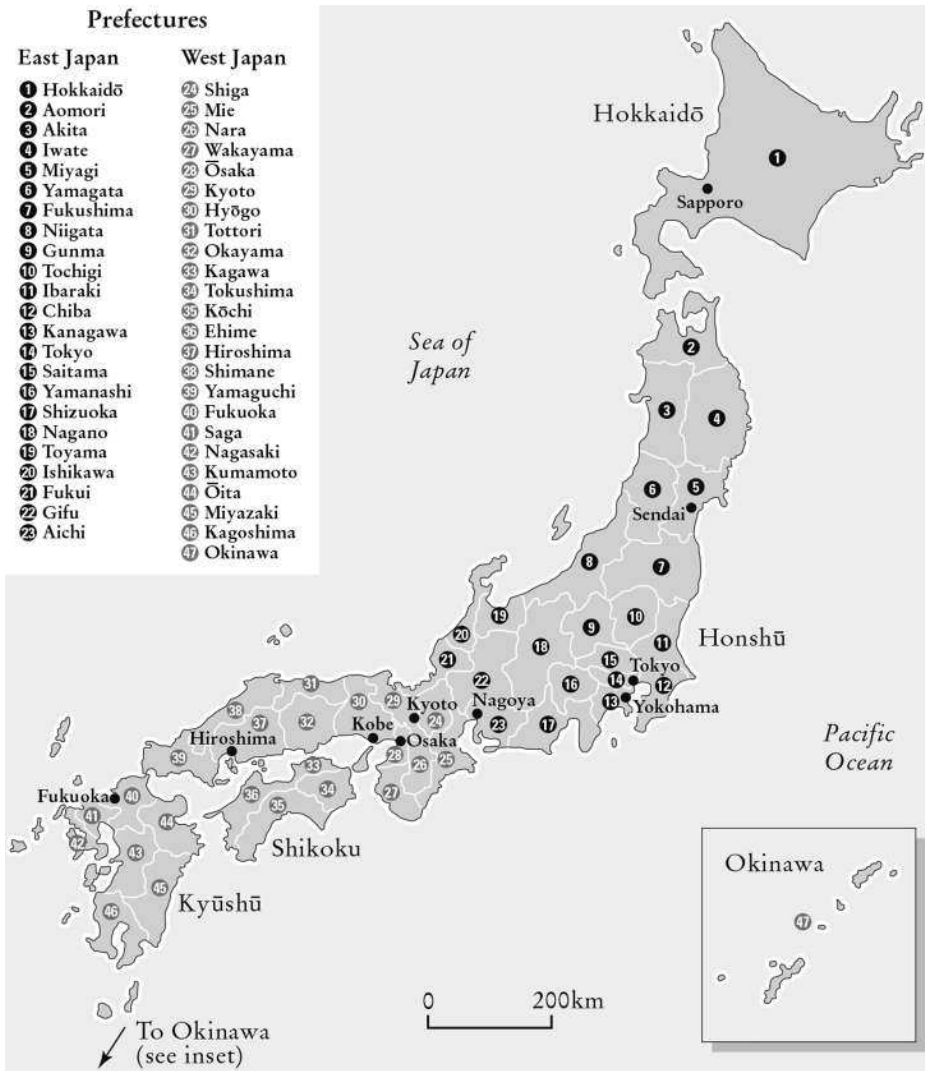


Figure 1.1 Map of Japan

and Karafuto (Sakhalin), with their populations constituting about 30 percent of ‘imperial Japan’.²

The independent Ryūkyū Kingdom endured in Okinawa, the southernmost prefecture of Japan today, for about four centuries during Japan’s feudal period, until the central government formally absorbed it as a prefecture in 1879. Before its full incorporation into Japan, Ryūkyū

2 Prewar school textbooks, published by the Ministry of Education, stated unequivocally that the Japanese nation was multiethnic. Oguma 2002, pp. 133–8.

enjoyed close trade relationships with China and other Southeast Asian polities, maintained its own autonomous culture, and identified only to a limited extent with main-island Japan. After the end of the Allied occupation of Japan, which followed its defeat in World War II, Okinawa remained under US occupation to serve as the American bulwark against communist nations and did not return to Japanese rule until 1972, when the United States gave it back to Japan.

Hokkaidō, today Japan's northernmost island, was long inhabited by the Ainu, the island's indigenous people. In the late feudal era, the Tokyo-based government firmed up its control over this territory in the face of possible Russian advancement. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, colonial militiamen were sent to Hokkaidō from Honshū, Japan's main island, to work as farmers in peacetime and as soldiers in wartime to territorialize it securely.

Karafuto, a long and narrow island situated further north, was a contentious terrain claimed by both the Japanese and the Russian authorities in a lengthy conflict. This intensified in the middle of the nineteenth century when those involved attempted to fulfill their respective imperial geopolitical ambitions at the expense of the indigenous Ainu. Japan obtained the southern half of the island in 1905 after winning the Russo-Japanese War, though it has been occupied by Russia since the end of World War II.

Other territorial disputes abound between Japan and neighboring states today, as discussed in Chapter 8. All of these cases concern the territorialization of the peripheral islands – reflecting the fact that Japan is surrounded by the sea – which are sites of dissonant culture and practice.

2 Internal rivalry

Throughout Japanese history, many people living in the area now known as 'Japan' were not conscious of being *Nihonjin* (Japanese). Even in Honshū, Japan's largest island and its most vital and powerful region, this consciousness has fluctuated. The term *Nihon* (Japan) emerged at the time of the establishment of the Japanese state in the late seventh century. At that point the concept mainly referred to the Kinai region – the area covering present-day Nara, Osaka, southern Kyoto, and southeastern Hyōgo prefectures – evident in the fact that nobles and officials sent outside it regarded their assignments as postings to a foreign area or a 'land of foreigners'.³ At the time, ordinary people dwelling outside the Kinai region did not think of themselves as belonging to the nation of Japan.

Several territorial blocs, which initially were almost nations in themselves,⁴ were identifiable during the formation of the Japanese state. Far from being a uniform nation,

³ Ōtsu 1993.

⁴ Amino 1992, pp. 127–40.

Japan has developed as one with multiple internal subnations. From the establishment of imperial rule, based in Nara and Kyoto in the seventh century, until the Meiji period, in the nineteenth century, these subnations engaged in bitter warfare in a bid to defend or expand their respective hegemony. In the initial phase, the Kinai subnation gradually conquered other blocs, placing them under its control. The feudal period, from the end of the twelfth century to the middle of the nineteenth century, eventually shifted the seat of real power to the samurai class of the Kantō subnation, but the Kinai area remained the locus of imperial power and the most dynamic hub of Japan's commercial activity. As a geographical and cultural unit, Japan should thus be seen as a variable rather than a constant, changing its external contours and shifting the balance of internal power between rival regions over time.

Setting up the signposts that direct this brief historical journey, Tables 1.2 and 1.3 provide simplified portrayals of these and other variations. Table 1.2 focuses on changes in the locations of the center of power in Japan, while Table 1.3 describes the country's fluctuating external boundaries.

Table 1.2 Changing geopolitical centers

Period	Regional center of power	Ruling institution	Dominant political class	Economic power-holders
Yamato & Nara, 4th century – 794	Kinai	Imperial court	Provincial clans	Administrators of state-owned land
Heian, 794–1192	Kinai	Imperial court	Nobility	Holders of private <i>shōen</i> estates
Kamakura, 1192–1333	Kantō (Kamakura)	Shogunate	Samurai	Holders of private <i>shōen</i> estates
Muromachi, Warring States, 1336–1603 ^a	Kinai and others	Shogunate (imperial court for a short period)	Samurai	Warlords in <i>gekokujō</i>
Tokugawa, 1603–1868	Kantō (Edo)	Shogunate	Samurai	Feudal lords, emerging merchant class
Meiji, 1868–1912	Kantō (Tokyo)	Imperial court	Ex-samurai, Satsuma-Chōshū clique	'Parasite' landlords, <i>zaibatsu</i>

Notes: *Shōen* – privately owned estates; *gekokujō* – political turbulence in which the low dominated the high and mighty; *zaibatsu* – giant family conglomerates.

^a This time span includes the Northern and Southern courts period, 1336–92, when the imperial household was split, and the so-called Azuchi–Momoyama period, 1573–1603, when the warlords Oda Nobunaga, his successor Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and their followers unified and ruled Japan.

Table 1.3 Snapshot of expansionary attempts

Period / year	Targeted region	Major consequence	Context
369–401	Korea	Temporary occupation and withdrawal	Influence over Imna ^a
663	Korea	Defeat	Battle of Hakusukinoe ^b
712–24	Northern periphery	Expulsion of the Emishi ^c	Establishment of Kinai as the center
720–800	Southern Kyūshū	Incorporation of the Hayato group	Establishment of Kinai as the center
1592 & 1597	Korean Peninsula	Withdrawal	Hideyoshi's undertaking
1583–	Hokkaidō	Incorporation	Since the rule of Matsumae-han
1879–	Okinawa	Incorporation	Abolition of the Ryūkyū Kingdom
1894–5	Taiwan	Cession	Sino-Japanese War (Nisshin Sensō)
1910–45	Korea	Annexation	Russia's southward advance
1905–45	Southern Karafuto	Cession	Russo-Japanese War
1931–45	Northeast China	Establishment of Manchukuo	Manchurian Incident
1937–45	China and Southeast Asia	Temporary occupation	Second Sino-Japanese War (Nichū Sensō), Pacific War

^a A region in southern Korea.

^b An area in northern Korea.

^c The term used to refer to the inhabitants of the northern tip of Honshū and Hokkaidō, including the Ainu, the indigenous people of this area. See Chapter 8 for further details.

III ANCIENT TIMES UP TO THE NARA PERIOD

The Japanese mythology of the origin of Japan claims that the country was created by the goddess of the sun (*Amaterasu Ōmikami*), who resided in the abode of gods and goddesses.⁵ According to the myth, when *Amaterasu* hid herself behind the Gate of the Celestial Rock Cave, the whole world was left in total darkness. Unnerved, the pantheon got together to discuss various ways of luring her out. As one goddess (*Ame no Uzume*) performed an erotic strip dance, all the others burst into laughter.⁶ Curious, *Amaterasu* opened the gate slightly to see what was happening and was then pulled out of the cave. Immediately, the entire world brightened up, with some gods and goddesses leaving heaven to live on the earth, marking the beginning of the nation.

⁵ The narratives were recorded in the documents *Nihon shoki* (Chronicles of Japan) and *Kojiki* (Records of ancient matters), imperially approved texts in the formative years of the nation, during the seventh and eighth centuries.

⁶ For the symbolic significance of *Ame no Uzume*, see Aoyama 2018.

In this ancient myth, Amaterasu, the deity of the sun, representing splendor, brightness, and warmth, was symbolized in female form. This is a notable exception in the mythology of most world cultures, where the powerful sun god was generally male.

The earliest description of the situation in the Japanese archipelago appears in third-century Chinese documents portraying the politics and customs of a state known as Yamataikoku, headed by a female leader by the name of Himiko, most likely a shaman. After winning intertribal wars, the state was said to have controlled some thirty provinces in the archipelago and to have brought tribute to China on a few occasions. The Chinese Wei Dynasty was recorded as having given Himiko a golden seal as the ruler of Japan, which was then called Wa. A long-running debate remains as to the exact location of Yamataikoku. Some argue that it was situated in northern Kyūshū close to continental Asia, while others maintain that it prevailed in the Kinai region in central Japan.

After the collapse of Yamataikoku,⁷ numerous powerful clans in the Japanese archipelago engaged in warfare, which culminated in the gradual establishment of the Yamato nation from the fourth to the seventh century. This polity was based on a coalition of victorious regional clans in central and western Japan with the imperial family at the helm. The Yamato government progressively succeeded in the formation of the power center in the Kinai district. Maintaining the momentum, it also made several attempts to invade deep into the Korean Peninsula in the mid-seventh century, though it failed in the end.

Within the archipelago, the Yamato armed forces overcame the resistance of the Hayato clan in Kyūshū in the early eighth century. Furthermore, the imperial navy attacked the northern end of Honshū throughout the seventh century to repel the clans of the area, including the ancestors of the Ainu, in an attempt to expand the Japanese territory to the north. During this period Japan was extremely fluid both externally and internally.

While imposing tax and forced labor on dominant local clans, the Yamato court gave them hereditary status titles and occupational roles and afforded them a degree of autonomy, including in terms of possessing land and slaves. After a spate of intra-court conflicts and coups, the nation's capital was established in Nara in 710, at which point the government began to model its administrative system after the codes of the Chinese Tang Dynasty and developed the first centralized regime based on complex laws and regulations. In principle, under this system all farmland was state owned and lent to members of the public on a periodic basis in return for the payment of tax in rice administered through local government offices. The conversion of all privately owned land to public land under the control of the imperial family was indicative of the expansion of centralized power.

7 The description of Yamataikoku disappears from Chinese imperial documents from the mid-third century to the early fifth century, and it is unknown how it collapsed.

Chinese influence on early Japan



Despite the prevailing notion that Japan has been an isolated and solitary island nation, throughout its history it has in fact been heavily reliant on the surrounding sea, which forms a variety of corridors through which people, goods, and information have traveled back and forth. Japan has been a sea-dependent society which enriched itself through maritime and mercantile activities.⁸

Early in its history, Japan was subject to the influences of Chinese civilization; this was facilitated by the nautical interaction between the two regions. As a peripheral country on the Asian continent, Japan adopted technology, art, and legal practice from China, long at the center of the region politically, via trade and diplomatic sea-lanes. From the seventh to the ninth century, Japan's government sent nearly twenty official missions to China to study its culture and institutions. As Japan had no written language, its leaders imported ideographic characters invented in China (*kanji*) and phoneticized some of them (*hiragana* and *katakana*) to produce the Japanese alphabet, with *hiragana* initially widely used by women. The Japanese elite also brought in Confucianism – the ethical teachings of governance said to have been advocated by China's most influential philosopher, Confucius (551–479 BCE; see Chapter 10) – and it became the major doctrine learned and practiced in the country, providing the basis for the highly bureaucratic style of government that developed at the time and persists today. Traditional Chinese medicine was also brought to ancient Japan, though it underwent substantial advancements and domestic modifications from the sixteenth century onwards. Throughout premodern Japan, the elite were treated using the Japanized Chinese medicinal practices called *kanpō*, which have taken hold at various levels of contemporary Japanese society.

Until this era, females often occupied the throne. Throughout Japanese history, eight empresses existed, and six of them reigned before or during the Nara period. The most recent female empress was Gosakuramachi Tennō, who reigned from 1762 to 1770. The rules about imperial succession around this time were relatively gender neutral in comparison with the post-World War II Imperial Household Law (enacted in 1947), according to which only males in the imperial lineage are entitled to accede to the throne.

Reflecting the increasing unification of the nation, the *Man'yōshū* (Collection of 10,000 leaves), the earliest anthology of Japanese verse, was compiled in the second half of the eighth century. It comprised twenty volumes – some 4,500 poems – composed not only by the sophisticated literati but also by people from all walks of life, expressing their unrefined feelings in a direct manner and revealing the energy of the formation of the ancient nation. The collection provided an important model to Japanese poets in later periods.

IV HEIAN PERIOD: RISE AND FALL OF THE NOBILITY

Marking the state-building process further, in 794 the capital was moved to Kyoto, then called Heian-kyō, where it remained the seat of imperial power until 1864, well over ten and

⁸ Haneda and Oka 2019.

a half centuries later. The four centuries up to nearly the end of the twelfth century, when the Kamakura samurai group seized centralized power, is conventionally labelled the Heian period. During this era, the imported legal code system was refined and solidified: powerful clan heads were given occupational posts, titles, ranks, and stipends and were absorbed into the bureaucratic structure instead of directly controlling land and people. They now formed the nobility, enjoying prestige and privilege intergenerationally as high-status officials at the imperial court.

Financially, the nobility regime was based upon privately owned estates called *shōen*, which caused the gradual collapse of the system of state-owned land. The government legalized private ownership in the mid-eighth century, a move which intensified competition among wealthy locals to acquire and expand newly developed rice fields. Analogous to manors in Britain, *Grundberrschafts* in Germany, and *seigneuries* in France, these estates spread around the country to occupy a comparable area to publicly owned land. Owners of this type of private land included officials who were initially dispatched from the central government and permanently settled down to enjoy their local advantages and benefits. Private landholders collected ground rent, mainly in the form of rice, from the farmers who worked their land, who on occasion were also forced to do service labor, unpaid work with no financial or material returns.

Nobles and religious institutions in the center were immune from land levies. To avoid tax, many *shōen* owners donated their estates to these privileged groups, became the administrators of the land, and were rewarded with management fees. This type of tax avoidance scheme undermined the revenue sources of the Kyoto authorities and eroded the basis of the nobility rule.

Nobility culture, notably literature written by female courtiers, flourished against the backdrop of the opulent lifestyles of the elite. In particular, a full-scale novel, *Genji monogatari* (The tale of Genji), which novelist and poet Murasaki Shikibu produced early in the eleventh century, portrayed with an elegant and sensitive touch the romantic life of a handsome noble. Long acclaimed as the most monumental work in Japanese literature, the tale has since attained an international reputation. During this period the nobility started to modify their culture by, for example, developing a Japanized dress style to replace the previous one modeled on Chinese court attire.⁹

V THE ASCENT OF THE SAMURAI CLASS AND THE DUALITY OF POWER

To protect their *shōen* estates from outside forces, landholders required and trained armed groups, as did nobles and other high-ranking officials. These military groups were known as *samurai*, and with mutual cooperation and intense rivalry, they developed into several large regional clans that vied to claim central political power. In the end, the Genji clan, based in eastern Japan, was victorious and established its base in Kamakura, near present-day Tokyo, and was appointed to the post of *sei-i-tai-shōgun* (shogun) by the imperial court in Kyoto. The clan formed the first long-term warrior-led shogunate regime (*bakufu*) in 1192, commencing

⁹ Morris 2013.

the military-class rule that endured for almost seven centuries, while the emperor (*tennō*) continued to reside in Kyoto, backed by court nobles. This was the beginning of Japan's dual power structure; the imperial court retained formal, cultural, and symbolic authority, while the shogunate exercised military, political, and legal power. The relative influence of the two establishments differed, depending upon the era.

Japan's feudal system began with the consolidation of the reciprocal relationship wherein the shogun granted land, through multiple steps of distribution, to his immediate vassals, who in return could be called upon at any point to go to the battlefield. The core of the bilateral connection lay in the exchange between the samurai's remunerative indebtedness and provision of military services to the shogunate. Meanwhile, the economic foundation of the Kamakura Shogunate covered mainly the *shōen* estates in the Kantō region and did not deviate significantly from the system of the Heian period. Yet, this was the first time that the political center emerged and solidified in eastern Japan, distant from Kinai.

As a sea-girt nation, Japan was subject to foreign naval attacks. The Mongolian Empire tried to invade Japan twice in the latter half of the thirteenth century, crossing the Sea of Japan with naval forces from Korea and China. Though the shogunate weathered the attempted assaults, serious financial difficulties ensued. The samurai class was impoverished as a result, and some of them took the opportunity to form new regionally based groups to compete with the central power. Their moves led to an eventual instability involving power struggles between a variety of old and new forces, resulting in the downfall of the Kamakura Shogunate in 1333.

VI DISINTEGRATION: THE WARRING STATES PERIOD

1 The ascendancy of *daimyō*

Out of these conflicts, warlord Ashikaga Takauji achieved a final victory and established the Muromachi Shogunate in Kyoto in 1338, shifting the power center once again. Soon thereafter, however, the imperial house was split into the Southern Court and the Northern Court, though they were reunited half a century later. The Muromachi period was plagued by a number of civil wars and rebellions over the subsequent two centuries, including lengthy years of hostilities among warlords from the mid-fifteenth to the mid-sixteenth century, an era referred to as the Warring States period. At this point the pendulum swung towards disintegration and decentralization.

In these tumultuous years, feudal lords who owned large tracts of land and had numerous followers began to establish themselves as strong regional power-holders. They were called *daimyō* and arose from two different backgrounds. The old type consisted of those who were appointed by the shogunate as the provincial heads of law enforcement. With the erosion of centralized power, however, they gradually lost full control over their territories. New types of *daimyō* emerged in the mid-fifteenth century when low-ranking retainers reversed the existing order, provoked upheavals and successfully supplanted the elite in a political turbulence called *gekokujiō* (where the low dominated the high and mighty). During this period, each *daimyō* consolidated their power by enforcing taxation, labor, and military services upon the populace