RCYC LUMINARA · HONG KONG TO TOKYO

FEATURED GUEST LECTURE

Three Capitals

Kyoto, Osaka, and Edo — Ancient Capital, Merchant City, Shogun's Seat

A Companion Guide to the Presentation Slides

Dr Christopher Gerteis

Associate Professor in Modern and Contemporary Japanese History

SOAS University of London

Executive Brief

For more than a millennium, Japan was governed from three cities that divided power among themselves. Kyoto was the emperor's capital, home to the imperial court and the culture it cultivated. Osaka fed the nation, its merchants building rice exchanges and credit networks that made the economy run. And Edo — the Shogun's seat, a castle town that grew into the world's largest city — became Tokyo when a new government brought the emperor east and reimagined the country from scratch.

This lecture tells the story of how three cities divided the business of running Japan — and why it worked for 250 years. It begins in 794, when Emperor Kanmu moved the capital to Heian-kyō, a city modelled on Tang dynasty Chang'an, and built a court that would remain for over a thousand years. The Tale of Genji was composed here around the year 1010 — the world's first novel, written in hiragana because women were not taught Chinese. The aesthetic of mono no aware — the bittersweet awareness that beautiful things don't last — was born here and never left. Yet political power drained away in stages. By 1603, the Tokugawa shoguns ruled from Edo, and the emperor was confined to a gilded cage: generous stipends, zero political authority, directed by law to dedicate himself to poetry.

Osaka enters the story as the nation's financial engine. Each of roughly 270 daimyō domains maintained a warehouse-office — a kurayashiki — in Osaka, converting rice into cash and transferring funds to Edo. The city became tenka no daidokoro, 'the kitchen of the realm.' On the rice exchange at Dōjima, brokers traded futures contracts 140 years before Chicago. The wealthiest among them, Yodoya Tatsugoro, built a glass-bottomed aquarium in his ceiling. The shogunate confiscated everything in 1705 — officially for wearing silk above his station; in reality, because the easiest debt relief is to destroy your creditor.

Edo itself grew from a fishing village in 1590 to the world's largest city by 1721 — over one million people, dwarfing contemporary London and Paris. The sankin-kōtai system — alternate attendance — required every feudal lord to spend alternate years in the capital, keeping wives and heirs as permanent hostages. The cost was the point: it kept lords broke and obedient. Yet it also created a national road network, a national commercial economy, and an urban culture that produced ukiyo-e — woodblock prints that sold for the price of a bowl of soup and later revolutionised Western painting when they reached Monet, Van Gogh, and the Impressionists.

The lecture closes with a connection forward. The commercial infrastructure these three cities built — credit networks, national roads, financial instruments — became the platform for Japan's rapid modernisation. The merchant houses became industrial conglomerates. The roads became railway lines. Three cities, three kinds of power, and a contradiction so elegant it lasted a quarter of a millennium.

Tomorrow morning, guests step ashore in Kobe. By evening they will have walked through at least two of these three worlds. This guide is designed to make sure they know what they are looking at.

About This Guide

This companion document accompanies the PDF slides from Dr Christopher Gerteis's guest lecture, delivered aboard the RCYC Luminara on the Hong Kong to Tokyo voyage. It is designed to be read alongside the slides, providing the narrative and context that a live audience would hear during the presentation. Dr Gerteis is Associate Professor in Modern and Contemporary Japanese History at SOAS University of London. You can email him anytime at cg24@soas.ac.uk. All inquiries are welcome.

Slide-by-Slide Companion

Slide 1 — Title

The lecture title appears over the Luminara branding, with the subtitle 'Kyoto, Osaka, and Edo — Ancient Capital, Merchant City, Shogun's Seat.' The three-part structure is announced here: each city embodies a distinct form of power — cultural legitimacy, financial authority, military force — and the lecture will take them in turn. The slide remains on screen as guests settle. No spoken delivery over this slide.

Slide 2 — Dawn at Nihonbashi

A full-bleed reproduction of Hiroshige's Morning View of Nihonbashi from the Fifty-three Stations of the Tōkaidō, c. 1833–34, from the Met Museum's open access collection. The scene is dawn in the 1830s. A feudal lord's procession — spear-bearers, porters, mounted samurai, hundreds strong — crosses the most important bridge in Japan. Every distance in the country is measured from this spot. Every lord is legally required to make this journey, year after year, in a system designed to keep them obedient and broke. They leave their wives and children behind as hostages. They spend fortunes they don't have. And they borrow the difference from merchants in Osaka — men who are officially the lowest class in society but who hold the IOUs that keep the entire system solvent.

What nobody standing on that bridge quite realises is that the system which built this city — the greatest city on earth, larger than London and Paris combined — is about to collapse. In thirty years, these samurai will be gone. The lords will surrender their titles. The emperor, kept in a gilded cage 500 kilometres away in Kyoto, will be brought east. And this city will get a new name: Tokyo. Three cities. Three kinds of power. And a contradiction so elegant it lasted a quarter of a millennium.

Slide 3 — The Central Question

A graphic slide posing the lecture's driving question: how did three cities divide up the business of running Japan — and why did it work for 250 years? Three labelled panels identify the

tripartite division. Kyoto: cultural legitimacy. Osaka: financial power. Edo (Tokyo): military force. The slide connects backward to the previous lecture — 'Last time, we ended with Satsuma's sugar revenues, an island domain using commodity wealth to buy Western cannons. Today: what exactly was the system those cannons were aimed at?' — and forward to the day ahead. Tomorrow morning, guests step ashore in Kobe. By evening they will have walked through at least two of these three worlds.

Slide 4 — Part One: Kyoto

A section divider. The heading reads 'Kyoto' with the subheading 'A thousand years of ceremony and legitimacy.' This marks the opening of the lecture's first movement.

Slide 5 — Heian-kyō: Capital of Peace and Tranquility

Left panel: an Iwasa Matabei painting from the Met Museum, depicting a scene from The Tale of Genji. Right: three content cards covering the founding of Kyoto, The Tale of Genji, and the aesthetic of mono no aware. In 794, Emperor Kanmu moved Japan's capital to a new city and gave it a name that doubled as a wish: Heian-kyō, 'Capital of Peace and Tranquility.' He was running away from trouble — Buddhist monasteries in the old capital of Nara had become so politically powerful that the emperor could not govern. The new city was laid out as a grand rectangle, four and a half by five kilometres, modelled on the Chinese Tang dynasty capital of Chang'an. The Imperial Palace anchored the northern edge. A central boulevard called Suzaku Avenue ran due south, eighty-four metres wide. Unlike Chang'an, Heian-kyō had no city walls — Japan's island geography made them unnecessary.

The court that settled here would remain for over a thousand years. The Tale of Genji, written around 1010 by a court lady named Murasaki Shikibu, is widely considered the world's first novel — composed roughly 600 years before Shakespeare. It was written in hiragana, the phonetic script, because women were generally not taught the formal Chinese characters. Women's writing became the vehicle for Japan's greatest literary achievement. The aesthetic that pervades it — mono no aware, the bittersweet awareness that beautiful things don't last — became the foundation of Japanese sensibility. It was born in Kyoto. It never left.

The speaker notes also cover the Fujiwara clan's domination of Heian politics through marriage — systematically wedding daughters to emperors, then serving as regents for the resulting child-emperors. Fujiwara no Michinaga, who effectively ruled Japan for three decades around the year 1000, wrote a poem comparing himself to the full moon: 'This world, I think, is indeed my world. Like the full moon, I am flawless and complete.' The emperor sat on the throne. Michinaga sat behind it. This pattern — keeping the emperor as ceremonial figurehead while real power operated from the shadows — would define Japanese politics for the next millennium. It is the template the shoguns inherited.

Slide 6 — The Gilded Cage

A photograph of the Shishinden Hall at the Kyoto Imperial Palace anchors the left side. Right: a vertical timeline and summary cards tracing the stages of the emperor's confinement. 1185: Kamakura shoguns take military authority. 1603: Tokugawa Ieyasu receives the shōgun title — from the emperor. 1615: the first law ever regulating the emperor himself, directing him to 'dedicate yourself to poetry.' 253 years: the law was never revised.

Political power drained away from Kyoto in stages. The Kamakura shoguns took military authority in 1185. The Ashikaga brought it back briefly. Then Tokugawa Ieyasu won the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600, consolidated all military power, and moved the seat of government 500 kilometres east to Edo. Yet Ieyasu still needed the emperor. He travelled to Kyoto in 1603 to receive the title of Shōgun from the imperial court. Every Tokugawa shogun after him did the same. The emperor had no army, no treasury, no territory beyond the palace grounds. But he had one thing no one else could provide: legitimacy. The shogun ruled on behalf of the emperor. Without that fiction, the entire system had no legal foundation.

In 1615, the shogunate issued the Kinchū narabini Kuge Shohatto — the first law in Japanese history to impose regulations on the emperor himself. Article One directed the emperor to dedicate himself to scholarship and poetry. A military governor was permanently stationed in Kyoto to make sure he did. The emperor lived in what historians call a gilded cage — generous stipends, zero political authority. He cut ribbons, composed poems, and performed ceremonies. Everyone pretended he was the ultimate source of power. The real decisions were made in Edo.

Slide 7 — Gold Leaf, Bamboo Forest, and a Thousand Statues

Three images: Kinkaku-ji (the Golden Pavilion), a bamboo grove, and a row of statues from Sanjūsangen-dō. Three content cards describe what guests will see tomorrow in Kyoto. Kinkaku-ji: three floors, three architectural styles — court, samurai, Zen. Twenty kilograms of gold leaf, applied five times thicker than standard. Built in 1397 as the retirement villa of Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, it is a thesis statement about the merger of court culture and warrior power. It is not the original — a young monk burned it down in 1950, an act so baffling it inspired Yukio Mishima's novel The Temple of the Golden Pavilion. Beauty preserved through destruction.

Sanjūsangen-dō: the longest wooden building in Japan, 120 metres. Inside: 1,001 statues of the thousand-armed Kannon, carved of Japanese cypress and covered in gold leaf. The wooden beams still bear arrow notches from centuries of samurai archery competitions — 120 metres of worship and warfare.

Uji matcha: 800 years of tea cultivation. The Zen monk Eisai brought tea seeds from China; his disciple planted them here. In the fifteenth century, Uji farmers invented shaded cultivation — covering the plants with straw before harvest — which creates the umami richness of modern matcha. Sen no Rikyū, who revolutionised the tea ceremony, built tearooms with entrances so low that even the most powerful samurai had to remove their swords and bow to enter.

Slide 8 — Part Two: Osaka

A section divider. The heading reads ‘Osaka’ with the subheading ‘The city that moved goods and money.’ This marks the turn from cultural legitimacy to financial power.

Slide 9 — The Kitchen of the Realm

Left panel: a Met Museum print depicting a street scene in Kyoto-Osaka. Right: three content cards covering the koku system, the kurayashiki warehouses, and Osaka’s title as tenka no daidokoro. The Tokugawa system ran on rice. Samurai received fixed rice stipends measured in koku — one koku, roughly 150 kilograms, enough to feed one person for a year. Domain wealth was measured in total production. But samurai needed cash, not grain.

Each of the roughly 270 daimyō domains maintained a kurayashiki — a combined warehouse, trading office, and diplomatic mission — in Osaka. By the 1830s there were 135 of them, concentrated on Nakanoshima island and neighbouring Dōjima. Domains shipped their tax rice south to Osaka, where brokers sold it at auction, converted proceeds to cash, and transferred funds to Edo. Osaka became tenka no daidokoro — ‘the kitchen of the realm.’ The phrase originally referred not to cuisine but to the city’s role as the nation’s pantry and distribution centre. Because every region’s finest goods passed through before redistribution, Osaka developed Japan’s most sophisticated food culture. A saying summed up the difference: ‘Kyoto people ruin themselves for clothing, Osaka people for food.’

One detail captures everything. Yukichi Fukuzawa — founder of Keio University, champion of modernisation, the man on Japan’s ten-thousand-yen note — was born at the kurayashiki of the Nakatsu Domain on Dōjima. The face of modern Japan was literally born inside the machinery of the Tokugawa financial system.

Slide 10 — The Man with the Glass-Bottomed Ceiling

The mask-drop slide. Against a background evoking the Dōjima Rice Exchange, the slide presents the story of Yodoya Tatsugoro alongside data cards: 250 farms, 500+ houses and warehouses, 3.5 million gold ryō. The official charge: wearing silk above his station. Rice brokers congregated in Dōjima from the 1680s. By 1730, the shogunate formally authorised what scholars now recognise as the world’s first organised futures market — predating Chicago by 140 years. Traders bought and sold ‘empty rice coupons’ — certificates for future delivery of rice that did not yet exist. When the session opened at eight in the morning, a fuse-cord was lit in a wooden box. When it burned out, trading stopped. ‘Watermen’ splashed water on anyone who tried to keep going.

The man who made Dōjima possible was Yodoya Tatsugoro. His family essentially founded the rice market — trading began outside their house, on a bridge so crowded that authorities relocated the operation. The Yodoya lent money to nearly every feudal domain in western Japan. By the fifth generation, Tatsugoro was reportedly the wealthiest man in the country. He converted the ceiling of his guest room into a glass-bottomed aquarium filled with goldfish. Visitors drank tea while fish swam above their heads.

On paper, Yodoya was the lowest of the low — a merchant, bottom of the Confucian social hierarchy. The samurai lords who owed him money could legally wear silk and carry swords. He could not. In 1705, the shogunate confiscated everything. The official charge? Wearing silk above his station. The real reason? When your creditor is more powerful than you, the easiest debt relief is to destroy your creditor. Yet even then, Yodoya's wife kept her silk kimonos — because they bore her family crest, making them personal property the samurai could not legally touch. The mask was maintained. Everyone in Osaka knew who really had the money.

Slide 11 — The Playwright and the People's Castle

An image of Osaka Castle with three content cards covering Chikamatsu Monzaemon, Dōtonbori, and the 1931 castle reconstruction. Osaka's merchant culture found its voice in the theatre. Chikamatsu Monzaemon — sometimes called the Shakespeare of Japan — wrote 130 plays to Shakespeare's 37. His masterpiece, The Love Suicides at Sonezaki, was written in 1703 based on a real double suicide that had occurred just weeks before. The central conflict — duty to family versus love — was the moral universe of the merchant class put on stage for the first time.

Dōtonbori — the entertainment district many guests will walk through tomorrow — had six kabuki theatres, five Bunraku houses, and forty-seven licensed teahouses by 1662. The neon canyon of restaurants visitors see today is the direct descendant of a 400-year tradition.

Osaka Castle was originally built in the 1580s by Toyotomi Hideyoshi — a peasant's son who rose to rule all Japan. The Tokugawa destroyed it in 1615. They rebuilt the walls but the main tower was struck by lightning in 1665 and not rebuilt for 266 years. When Osaka finally rebuilt the tower in 1931, 150,000 citizens donated the funds in six months. They chose Hideyoshi's design, not the Tokugawa version. Osaka identifies with the self-made man, not the dynasty.

Slide 12 — Part Three: Edo

A section divider. The heading reads 'Edo' with the subheading 'The Shogun's capital that became Tokyo.' This marks the final movement of the lecture.

Slide 13 — A Million People in the Shogun's Shadow

A data slide tracing Edo's explosive growth: fishing village in 1590, roughly 150,000 by 1605, over one million by 1721 — the world's largest city. London at the same date had 630,000. Paris, 500,000. Japan was likely 10–12 per cent urbanised, the highest rate in the world. Below: content cards explaining the city as political map. Edo Castle sat at the centre, with moats spiralling outward in a clockwise pattern. Inner ring: fudai daimyō, hereditary Tokugawa allies, inside government. Outer ring: tozama daimyō, former rivals like Satsuma and Chōshū, barred from power. Samurai residences occupied up to seventy per cent of the city's area. Commoners crammed into fifteen.

When Tokugawa Ieyasu arrived in 1590, Edo was a fishing village at the edge of tidal mudflats. The name literally means 'bay entrance.' Within 130 years, it became the largest city on earth. Ieyasu built it by force — draining marshes, filling in the Hibiya cove where Hibiya Park now stands, diverting the Kanda River. The Tamagawa Aqueduct, completed in 1654, brought fresh water forty-three kilometres from the Tama River through a gravity-fed canal built in just eight months by two brothers. It eventually connected to over 3,600 wells through 150 kilometres of underground pipes — one of the largest pre-modern water networks on earth.

The callback matters. Those tozama lords pushed to the edges? Satsuma was one of them. For 250 years they sat on the outside looking in. When they finally had the money — sugar money, from the lecture before last — they used it to tear the whole system down.

Slide 14 — Procession Image

A full-bleed image of a daimyō procession, setting the visual scene for the sankin-kōtai discussion that follows.

Slide 15 — The Leash That Became an Engine

A data-rich slide on sankin-kōtai — alternate attendance, formalised from 1635. Three content panels: THE SCALE — roughly 260 lords, 150 annual processions, 150–3,000 retainers each, wives and heirs kept permanently in Edo as hostages. THE COST — roughly 25 per cent or more of annual revenue consumed by travel and Edo residence, every lord in debt, Osaka merchants holding the IOUs. UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES — a national road network (53 stations on the Tōkaidō) and a national commercial economy.

The scale was staggering. The Maeda clan of Kaga marched with three thousand retainers. The journey from Kagoshima — Satsuma's capital — to Edo took roughly forty to sixty days on foot. The procession had to be fed, housed, and entertained at every post station along the way. Local villagers were sometimes conscripted as porters. It was a moving economic stimulus package that drained the lord and enriched the road.

The cost was the point. By the late seventeenth century, practically every lord in Japan was deep in debt. The Kōnoike family served as bankers to over thirty domains, charged twelve per cent interest, and pioneered double-entry bookkeeping. Today their descendants are part of MUFG. The comparison that works for this audience is Versailles. Louis XIV used the same logic: keep the nobility busy, broke, and far from their power base. But sankin-kōtai had consequences Versailles did not. It created a national road network. It forced daimyō to sell local products in national markets. It generated consumer demand in Edo that spawned an entire urban culture. The Tōkaidō Shinkansen — the bullet train — still follows the exact same route. The system was designed as a leash. It became an engine.

Slide 16 — Daimyō Procession

A full-bleed image captioned ‘Illustration of the Daimyo Procession on the Tōkaidō, Utagawa Sadahide, 1807–1873.’ The image underscores the sheer scale and spectacle of alternate attendance — the visual reality of the system just described.

Slide 17 — Pictures of the Floating World

A visually rich slide tracing the ukiyo-e tradition and its global impact. The word ukiyo originally meant ‘sorrowful world’ — Buddhist language for the suffering nature of existence. Edo’s merchants flipped the meaning: same sound, different character. Now it meant ‘floating world’ — savour what floats by, because it will soon vanish. A philosophy of joie de vivre born from constraint. Merchants were officially the lowest social class but often the wealthiest. Barred from displaying status through rank, they turned wealth toward taste, fashion, and patronage. The woodblock prints they commissioned — ukiyo-e — sold for twelve to sixteen copper coins. The price of a bowl of soup.

Three masters are highlighted. Hokusai created the Great Wave when he was in his seventies, using imported Prussian blue pigment. Hiroshige’s Fifty-three Stations of the Tōkaidō became the best-selling ukiyo-e series ever. Utamaro captured the faces of Edo’s pleasure quarters with a psychological intensity no one had attempted. After Japan opened to trade in the 1850s, these prints flooded Europe — sometimes used as wrapping paper for exported ceramics. Claude Monet collected over 200 and hung them in his dining room at Giverny. Van Gogh wrote: ‘All of my work is founded on Japanese art.’ The art that samurai society dismissed as ephemeral entertainment for commoners revolutionised Western painting.

Slide 18 — What to Look For Tomorrow

A three-column summary slide connecting the lecture to the next day’s shore experience. IN KYOTO: three floors and three styles at Kinkaku-ji; arrow notches in the beams at Sanjūsangen-dō; 800 years of tea cultivation in Uji. IN OSAKA: Osaka Castle imagined as Hideyoshi’s, not the Tokugawa rebuild; Dōtonbori’s 400 years of theatre and food in the same streets; kuidaore — ‘eating until you ruin yourself,’ Osaka’s merchant philosophy on a plate.

CARRY FORWARD: the commercial infrastructure these three cities built — credit networks, national roads, financial instruments — became the platform for Japan’s rapid modernisation. Merchant houses like Mitsui and Sumitomo became industrial conglomerates. Japan did not industrialise from scratch. It industrialised on foundations that three cities had been laying for 250 years. That is the story the final lecture will pick up — from treaty ports to global metropolis.

Slide 19 — Closing

A full-bleed closing image with the lecture’s refrain: ‘Three cities. Three kinds of power. A contradiction that lasted a quarter of a millennium.’ The speaker’s name and affiliation appear at the bottom. The closing is delivered with an unscripted feel: ‘The road between Edo and Kyoto was 500 kilometres long. Thousands walked it every year. At one end sat the shogun. At

the other, the emperor. And in between, in Osaka, the merchants counted the money that made the whole system go. Tomorrow you'll be at the Kyoto end. Walk through the temples. Drink the tea. But remember: everything you see was built in the space between three cities, three kinds of power, and a contradiction so elegant it lasted a quarter of a millennium.' The slide remains on screen during any questions from the audience.

About the Lecturer

Dr Christopher Gerteis is Associate Professor in Modern and Contemporary Japanese History at SOAS University of London. His books include *Gender Struggles* (Harvard University Press, 2010) and *Mobilizing Japanese Youth* (Cornell University Press, 2021). He is General Editor of the six-volume Bloomsbury *Cultural History of East Asia* (forthcoming in 2027–28) and director of the *Simulating Silence* digital heritage project. His research examines how institutions produce the categories through which societies are governed — from postwar Japan to the sugar colonies of the East China Sea. You can read more about Chris at https://christophergerteis.net

RCYC Luminara · Hong Kong to Tokyo · Featured Guest Lecture Series