

R C Y C L U M I N A R A · H O N G K O N G T O T O K Y O

FEATURED GUEST LECTURE

Three Capitals

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

with Dr Christopher Gerteis

Associate Professor in Modern and Contemporary Japanese History
SOAS University of London



Dawn at Nihonbashi

Edo, the 1830s — the most important bridge in Japan

A historical map of Japan, likely from the Edo period, showing various provinces and domains. The map is overlaid with a grid and has several regions highlighted in different colors: red, yellow, and green. The title text is centered over the map.

How did three cities divide up the business of running Japan — *and why did it work for 250 years?*

KYOTO

Cultural legitimacy

OSAKA

Financial power

EDO (TOKYO)

Military force

PART ONE

Kyoto

A thousand years of ceremony and legitimacy.



Heian-kyō (Kyoto)

Capital of Peace and Tranquility

794 CE

Emperor Kanmu moves the capital to escape powerful Buddhist monasteries. New city modelled on China's Chang'an — 4.5 × 5.2 km grid. No city walls needed on an island nation.

THE TALE OF GENJI

Murasaki Shikibu, c. 1010 — the world's first novel, 600 years before Shakespeare. Written in hiragana because women were not taught Chinese. Women's writing became the vehicle for Japan's greatest literary achievement.

MONO NO AWARE

The bittersweet awareness that beautiful things don't last — born in Kyoto, foundational to Japanese sensibility. The imperial court remained here for over a thousand years — until 1868.

The Gilded Cage

1185

Kamakura shoguns take military authority

1603

Tokugawa Ieyasu receives shōgun title — from the emperor

1615

First law ever regulating the emperor — 'dedicate yourself to poetry'

253

YEARS

The law was never revised

The emperor was like a constitutional monarch — but even more constrained.

He composed poems, performed ceremonies — and everyone pretended he was the source of all authority.



Gold Leaf, Bamboo forest, and a Thousand Statues

KINKAKU-JI

Three floors, three styles — court, samurai, Zen. 20 kg gold leaf.
Burned 1950; rebuilt 1955. Beauty preserved through destruction.

UJI MATCHA

800 years of tea cultivation.
Shaded growing creates umami.
Sen no Rikyū's tearooms — entrances so low that samurai had to bow.

SANJŪSANGEN-DŌ

120 metres — longest wooden building in Japan. 1,001 statues of Kannon. Arrow notches in the beams from samurai archery contests.

PART TWO

Osaka

The city that moved goods and money.



The Kitchen of the Realm

Rice, warehouses, and the merchants who made the economy run

KOKU — THE MEASURE OF WEALTH

One koku \approx 150 kg of rice — enough to feed one person for a year. Samurai stipends and domain revenues all measured in rice. But samurai needed cash.

135 KURAYASHIKI

Each domain's warehouse-office in Osaka. By the 1830s, 135 clustered on Nakanoshima and Dōjima — converting rice to cash, transferring funds to Edo.

TENKA NO DAIDOKORO

'Kitchen of the Realm.' Every region's finest goods passed through Osaka. 'Kyoto people ruin themselves for clothing; Osaka people, for food.'

The Man with the Glass-Bottomed Ceiling

Dōjima, Osaka — the world's first futures market, 140 years before Chicago

YODOYA TATSUGORO

Confiscated by the shogunate, 1705

250

farms

3.5 million

gold ryō

500+

houses & warehouses

Official charge: wearing silk above his station

He converted his guest-room ceiling into a glass-bottomed aquarium filled with goldfish.

Visitors drank tea while fish swam above their heads.

When your creditor is more powerful than you, the easiest debt relief is to destroy your creditor.

But even then — Yodoya's wife kept her silk kimonos.

The Playwright and the People's Castle

Chikamatsu, Bunraku, and the rebuilding of Osaka Castle

CHIKAMATSU MONZAEMON

130 plays to Shakespeare's 37. Love Suicides at Sonezaki (1703) — based on a real event weeks earlier. Merchant morality on stage for the first time.

DŌTONBORI, c. 1662

6 kabuki theatres, 5 Bunraku houses, 47 teahouses. Osaka's present-day neon canyon of restaurants is the direct descendant.

OSAKA CASTLE, 1931

Funded by public subscription. Imagined as Hideyoshi's castle — the peasant who became ruler — not the Tokugawa rebuild. Osaka identifies with the self-made man.



江月岡亭



PART THREE

Edo

The Shogun's capital that became Tokyo.

A Million People in the Shogun's Shadow

1590

Fishing village

1605

~150,000

1721

1,000,000+

World's largest city

London c. 1720: ~630,000 · Paris: ~500,000 · Japan: ~10–12% urbanised — likely the highest in the world

THE CITY AS POLITICAL MAP

- Edo Castle at the centre · Moats spiralling outward in a clockwise pattern
- Inner ring: fudai daimyō (hereditary allies) — closest, inside government
- Outer ring: tozama daimyō (outside lords — Satsuma, Chōshū) — furthest, barred from power

Samurai: 70% of city area · **Commoners: 15%**



E JEDO



The Leash That Became an Engine

Sankin-kōtai — alternate attendance, from 1635

THE SCALE

~260 lords · 150 annual processions · 150–3,000 retainers each
Wives & heirs kept permanently in Edo as hostages

THE COST

~25%+ of annual revenue on travel & Edo residence
Every lord in debt → Osaka merchants hold the IOUs

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

National road network (53 stations on the Tōkaidō)
A national commercial economy



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圖

Illustration of the Daimyo Procession on the Tokaido, Utagawa Sadahide, 1807-1873.

Pictures of the Floating World

ukiyo 憂世 → ukiyo 浮世

'sorrowful world' → 'floating world'

HOKUSAI

Great Wave — painted in his 70s,
c. 1830–32. imported Prussian blue

HIROSHIGE

53 Stations of the Tōkaidō —
best-selling ukiyo-e series ever

UTAMARO

Portraits of Edo's pleasure quarters

unprecedented psychological intensity

Price: 12–16 copper coins — the cost of a bowl of soup. 2,000+ copies per woodblock set.

JAPONISME

After Japan opened to trade in the 1850s, these prints flooded Europe — sometimes as wrapping paper.

Monet collected 200+ (Giverny dining room) · Van Gogh: 'All of my work is founded on Japanese art'

Art dismissed as ephemeral entertainment revolutionised Western painting.

What to Look For Tomorrow

IN KYOTO

Three floors, three styles at Kinkaku-ji — court, samurai, Zen

Arrow notches in the beams at Sanjūsangen-dō — 120m of worship and warfare

If you're in Uji — 800 years of tea cultivation; you're drinking from the shoguns' fields.

IN OSAKA

Osaka Castle — imagined as Hideyoshi's castle, not the Tokugawa rebuild

Dōtonbori — 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 (Mitsui, Sumitomo) became industrial conglomerates



***Three cities. Three kinds of power.
A contradiction that lasted a quarter of a
millennium.***

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