

Tokyo: The Birth of an Imperial Capital

Ben-Ami Shillony

Introduction

By the middle of the nineteenth century Edo was the political, military and administrative capital of Japan, the largest city in the country, one of the largest cities in the world, and the seat of the shogun and his government. Nevertheless, until 1868 it had never been an imperial capital, the city in which the emperor resides. In the seventh century, when Japan adopted the Chinese model of a capital, the first imperial capital, Fujiwara, lasted for only 16 years, from 694 until 710. The second imperial capital, Nara, lasted for 74 years, from 710 until 784. The third capital, Nagaoka, lasted for only 10 years, from 784 until 794. But then the fourth capital, Heian-kyō (Kyoto), lasted for more than a thousand years, from 794 until 1868.

During this long period, the emperors stayed in Kyoto, despite the fact that from the twelfth century political power shifted to the shoguns and the samurai class, and for almost half of that time the wielders of real power resided in the eastern part of Japan, in Kamakura and later in Edo. No one of the military rulers tried to move the emperor out of Kyoto to the place where they resided. Kyoto remained the "capital" (*miyako*) although its primacy was only nominal. The imperial palace stayed in Kyoto even when the city was torn by internal warfare and the palace was impoverished. Going to Kyoto was all the time called "going up" (*noboru*) and going from Kyoto was all the time called "going down" (*sagaru*).

Unlike Chinese emperors, who used to make inspection tours of the country, Japanese emperors did not leave the capital. Until 1868, no emperor set foot in the east of the country and none of them ever saw Mt. Fuji. Despite the fact that the shoguns and the daimyo were appointed by the emperor and ruled the country in his name, during most of the Edo period, that is between Tokugawa Iemitsu's visit in 1626 and Tokugawa Iemochi's visit in 1863, no shogun visited Kyoto or met the emperor for 237 years. The contacts between Kyoto and Edo, including the appointments of shoguns, were conducted by emissaries. The magnificent Nijō Castle in Kyoto, built in 1603 to

accommodate the shoguns on their stay at the imperial capital, remained empty for most of the Edo period.

Looking for a New Imperial Capital

The Meiji Restoration of 1868 was formally a return of power from the shogun to the emperor to whom it had allegedly always belonged. In January 1868, after the Chōshū and Satsuma troops occupied Kyoto and seized the palace, the 15-year old Meiji Emperor issued "The Great Proclamation Restoring the Kingly Rule" (*ōsei fukko no daigōrei*). Such a restoration might have meant restoring power from Edo to Kyoto, but this did not happen. The Meiji leaders, despite their professed loyalty to the emperor, did what no shogun had ever dared to do, to transfer the emperor from the sacred capital of Kyoto to another city in the east.

Why did the Meiji government refuse to settle in Kyoto, where ancient administrative organs, like the Great Council of State (*dajōkan*), still existed? One reason was that Kyoto was over crowded, without large empty spaces needed for the new organs of government. Another reason was that the imperial palace in Kyoto (*gosho*), unlike the shogun's castle in Edo, was not defensible. There was also an undeclared political reason. Although the Meiji leaders professed total loyalty to the emperor, they did not intend to make him the actual ruler of the state. They wished to use the emperor to carry out the great reforms that would make Japan a modern, strong and rich country. As the imperial family and the court aristocracy were entrenched in Kyoto, it would have been difficult to control them there.

The Meiji leaders wanted to transfer the emperor from Kyoto, but were ready to let the old capital retain some vestiges of its imperial past. In February 1868, Ōkubo Toshimichi, a leading figure in the new government, proposed to move the emperor to Osaka. Osaka was near Kyoto, it had a formidable castle, and it was the commercial capital of Japan. Making it an imperial capital could alleviate some of the financial burdens of the new government. In mid-April 1868 the emperor moved to Osaka, but the other members of the new leadership probably opposed Okubo's idea, because in late May the emperor was brought back to Kyoto.¹

In April 1868 Maejima Hisoka proposed to make Edo the imperial capital. This sounded at first too radical. So, Kido Takayoshi suggested three capitals, between which the emperor would move: Kyoto would be the imperial capital (*teito*), Osaka would be the "western capital" (*saikyō*), and Edo would be the "eastern capital" (*tōkyō*). In this manner, the advantages of the three big cities of Japan would be amalgamated. Prince Iwakura Tomomi suggested four capitals: Kyoto in the west, Edo in the east, Nara in

the south, and Sapporo in the north.² Yet, the idea of dragging the emperor between multiple capitals did not seem feasible.

The Choice of Tokyo

In May 1868, Etō Shimpei and Ōki Takatō submitted a compromise proposal, according to which Kyoto would become the "western capital" (*saikyō*), Edo would become the "eastern capital" (*tōkyō*), and the emperor would alternate between the two capitals. The proposal was initially approved. Edo had many advantages: It had been the administrative and military capital for more than 250 years, it had the infrastructure needed for a capital, it had a huge castle which would become a defensible imperial palace, it had many empty lots created by the return of the daimyo to their domains which could be used as military barracks and government offices, it had a large bay convenient for shipping and international trade, and it was near the port of Yokohama, the settlement of the foreigners with whom Japan wanted to have close relations, from whom it wished to learn modernization, and whom it wanted to control.

On 3 September 1868, the 16-year old emperor issued an edict, that said: "From now on [the city] called Edo will be the eastern capital" (*jikon edo wo shōsite tōkyō to sen*). This edict elevated Edo to the status of the eastern imperial capital, but it did not abolish the status of Kyoto as the western capital. Having two capitals, called by their geographic directions, was a novelty in Japan, but it had existed in China, which had two capitals, the "northern capital" (*Beijing* 北京) and the "southern capital" (*Nanjing* 南京). The edict did not clarify whether *Tōkyō* (東京) referred to the new status of Edo, or it was the city's new name. Gradually, it became the new name and the name Edo went out of use. But the pronunciation of this new name was also unclear, as the character 京 can be pronounced as either *kei* or *kyō*. In the early Meiji years the city's name was pronounced *Tōkei* and only later it was replaced by *Tōkyō*. The name of Kyoto (京都), which includes the same character 京 which means "capital", was not changed.

An Attempt to Alternate Between the Two Capitals

In November 1868, two months after the imperial edict had been issued, the young emperor was taken, in a close palanquin, to the new capital Tokei or Tokyo. It was the first time that a Japanese emperor saw Mt. Fuji or set foot in the east. The magnificent retinue, led by Prince Arisugawa, was remindful of the great daimyo processions to and from Edo during the Tokugawa era. The procession, numbering 3,220 attendants, made its way along the Tōkaidō, the main sea-coast road between the two cities. It covered the distance of 488 km. in three weeks, a speed of about 23 km. a day. The

people along the road could not have a glimpse of the emperor, but monetary prizes were distributed along the way to "worthy subjects," which referred to very old people, filial children, chaste wives, loyal servants, and people who had contributed to public enterprises.³

Tens of thousands of townspeople lined the streets of Edo on 26 November to see the imperial procession enter the city and proceed to the castle, which had been for a very long time the residence of the shogun. After settling in the castle, the emperor ordered to distribute 2,990 barrels of *sake* and 1,700 bundles of dried cuttlefish to the people to celebrate his arrival and to endear himself to the locals who had suddenly an emperor in their midst.⁴ In January 1869, the emperor, for the first time, received the diplomatic envoys of the foreign countries. The unprecedented meeting of a Japanese emperor with foreigners was made to impress them that the emperor was the ruler of Japan, that Tokyo was the new capital, and that Japan wished to cooperate with the foreign countries. Later that month, the emperor boarded a Japanese warship to observe the fleet maneuvers and to demonstrate that he was the commander in chief of the armed forces.

The principle of two imperial capitals seemed at first to work. On 20 January, two months after he had arrived in Tokyo, the emperor was taken back to Kyoto. This time his retinue numbered only 2,153 people and it made the way in 16 days. To placate the people of Kyoto, who worried that the emperor preferred Tokyo over their city, large amounts of *sake* were also distributed to the people of Kyoto. In March 1869, Prince Iwakura stated that Kyoto would remain one of the two imperial capitals and that the emperor's journey to Tokyo had been just a visit to the eastern capital.⁵ Yet, the events did not develop that way.

In May 1869, the emperor was taken again to Tokyo, this time with his wife Haruko, his concubines, the empress dowager, and other members of his family and the court nobility. This time the route was longer, because it included an unprecedented detour to visit the Ise Shrine. Although that shrine is dedicated to the sun goddess Amaterasu Ōmikami, the progenitor of the imperial family, it was the first time that an emperor visited the place and worshipped there. The visit to Ise Shrine was aimed to solidify the link between the emperor and what would soon become State Shinto.

The Emperor Settles in Tokyo

Despite these initial attempts, the emperor's alternation between the two capitals did not work. The formal status of Kyoto as an imperial capital was not abolished, but the

emperor and his family stayed in Tokyo. The constant transfers were too expensive, and the emperor was needed where the government was.

Instead of shifting the emperor between Tokyo and Kyoto, he was taken on extensive tours of the country. The emperor's transfer to Tokyo ended a long tradition of imperial confinement, when the emperors were confined to their palace and were not seen by the people. Between 1872 and 1885, Emperor Meiji conducted six "great tours" (*junkō*), which brought him to most parts of Japan. In those tours he met local officials and observed the lives of ordinary subjects. In 1877 he went to Kyoto, this time by boat and train, to worship at the tomb of his father Emperor Kōmei on the tenth anniversary of his death. But he stayed in Kyoto for only nine days.

Following the Meiji Restoration, when the shogun and about 250 daimyo and their large retinues had left the city, the population of Tokyo dwindled from about one million to about half a million. The economic restoration of Tokyo required that the imperial government stay and grow there. In 1871, the nobility, which included the old court aristocracy, the former daimyo and the new leaders, was ordered to relocate to Tokyo. The official reason was that the nobles should assist the emperor, but the real reason to keep the nobles under the government's control. As the civilian and military establishment organs expanded, many people and enterprises moved there. In 1885 Tokyo regained its population of one million.

When the emperor first arrived in Tokyo in 1868, the name of Edo Castle (*Edo-jō*), which became his residence, was changed to Tokyo Castle (*Tōkyō-jō*). In 1869, when he settled permanently in Tokyo, the name of the castle was changed again to "Imperial Castle" (*kōjō*). In 1888, after a massive renovation, its name was changed to "Palace Castle" (*kyūjō*). This stayed the name of the imperial palace until the end of the Second World War. After the defeat, when Japan became a pacifistic country, the military-sounding term "castle" (*jō*) was dropped and the emperor's residence was renamed "Imperial Palace" (*kōkyō*) as it is called today.

Since 1869 Tokyo has been the undisputed capital of Japan. Travelling to Tokyo has become "going up," and leaving Tokyo has become "going down." In 1943, after an amalgamation with surrounding districts, the official name of the city, as it is used in addresses and legal documents, became "The Capital Tokyo" (*Tōkyō-to*). The additional character *to* (都), which is also the second character of the name Kyoto, can be read *miyako*, which means capital. Thus the name *Kyōto* became incorporated in the name *Tōkyō-to*.

Despite its fall from grace, Kyoto retained some of its old symbolic status. When Emperor Meiji died in 1912, he was buried in Kyoto. But he was the last emperor to be buried there. His son, Emperor Taishō, was enthroned in Kyoto, but was buried in Tokyo. Emperor Shōwa (Hirohito), like his father, was enthroned in Kyoto but buried in Tokyo. The present emperor, Akihito, is the first emperor to be enthroned in Tokyo. He too will be buried there.

In recent decades calls have been made in the Diet and in the mass media to "move the capital" (*seno*) from Tokyo to another city, to alleviate the excessive concentration of political, economic and administrative power there. Experts have warned of a breakdown of government in the case of a major earthquake or a deadly nuclear radiation from a stricken reactor, as it almost happened in 2011. Over the years, various alternative locations have been suggested, including Kyoto. There are still people in Kyoto who claim that their city has never ceased to be one of the two imperial capitals of Japan. Yet, the conservative mood of the nation and the staggering costs of such a move, make the transfer of the capital and the relocation of the imperial palace, for the time being, improbable.

¹ Asukai Masamichi, *Meiji taitei* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1989), p. 126; Kido Takayoshi, *The Diary of Kido Takayoshi* (tr. Sidney Brown and Akiko Hirota. Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1983), vol. 1, p. 19.

² Ogi Shinzō, *Tōkei jidai: edo to tōkyō no aida-de* (Tokyo: Nihon hōsō shuppan, 1980), pp. 7-9; Henry Smith, "The Edo-Tokyo Transition: In Search of Common Ground", in Marius B. Jansen and Gilbert Rozman, eds., *Japan in Transition: From Tokugawa to Meiji* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 353-355; T. Fujitani, *Splendid Monarchy: Power and Pageantry in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp.56-57.

³ Donald Keene, *Emperor of Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 161-162.

⁴ Keene, *Emperor of Japan*, p. 163.

⁵ Keene, *Emperor of Japan*, p. 178.