Some Basic Problems in the Study of Ancient Chinese and Japanese Capitals and Palaces

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Concerning problems for solution in the comparative study of ancient Chinese and Japanese capitals and palaces, I have written mainly four treatises, which have been published in the journal Kaugu 考古 directed by the Institute of Archaeology, CASS (see "References" at the end of the present paper). The major points of those articles can be briefly summed up in the following ten items.

1. In shape and layout, the Japanese capital Fujiwarakyo built in the 690s, as Heijokyo constructed in the 710s and Heiankyo founded in the 790s, followed the example of China’s capitals Chang'an 长安 and Luoyang 洛阳 of the Tang dynasty from the early 7th century (AD 618–907). What they imitated was not the capital Luoyang of the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534). As the capital of the Northern Wei, Luoyang existed from the 490s down to the 530s when it was thoroughly destroyed by flames of war and became ruins, so it was impossible to be imitated by the Japanese capitals existing from the 690s. This has an additional piece of evidence from the fact that Japan had no relations with the Northern Wei dynasty and had never sent its envoys to the capital of the latter.

In the early 6th century, the Northern Wei emperor Xuanwu extended the city of Luoyang, and built the "Siyi Guan 四夷馆," or Four-direction Foreigners’ Houses, on both sides of the road outside the southern, main gate Xuyangmen 宣阳门 to receive foreign envoys and guests from all directions. As there was the “Fusang House 扶桑馆” among those buildings, some scholars believe that Japan sent its envoys to Luoyang in the Northern Wei period. Actually the word “Fusang” here referred to the east in general but certainly not to Japan in particular. The designation of the building for eastern foreigners as “Fusang House” is just similar to the naming of that for western foreigners as “Yanzi House 奄嵫馆,” for it is very clear that “Fusang” and “Yanzi” mean, respectively, the directions in which the sun rises and sets. As recorded in the “Biographies of Eastern Foreigners” of the Wei Pu 魏书・东夷传 (Official History of the Northern Wei Dynasty), there were about ten eastern foreign states who had relations with the Northern Wei dynasty. Among them were Koguryo, Pakche, Wuji and Shiwei, but no the Wo State. It is indicative to the full that even the word “Wo 倭” (ancient name of Japan) does not occur throughout the Wei Pu of several hundred thousand characters.

2. In the 580s, the Sui emperor Wendi, the founder of the Sui dynasty (581–618), built the capital called “Daxing 大兴” to the southeast of the site of Chang'an City existing from the Han period. This was followed by the construction of another city of Luoyang to the west of ruined Northern Wei Luoyang after Sui Yangdi succeeded to the throne in the early 7th century. It was the eastern capital. Yangdi had partiality for it, and often lived there for a long time. Contrary to many researchers’ opinion, I believe that, when visiting China, the famous Japanese envoy Onono Imoko had an audience with Yangdi and presented his credentials to the latter in the eastern capital Luoyang rather than the main capital Daxing.

The Sui Pu (Official History of the Sui Dynasty) says that in the 3rd year of Yangdi’s Daye reign (607), the Wo king’s envoys came to the court with tribute; and, correspondingly, the Nihon Shoki 日本書紀 records that on the 3rd day of the 7th month, 15th year of his reign (607), the emperor Suiko sent Onono Imoko to the Sui Empire. In the light of the regulations for embassies to China recorded in Japanese historical books, that day was
certainly the date of Onono Imoko’s receiving the order. Therefore, it must have been in the eighth moon or later that he departed from the capital of Japan, and at the turn between the autumn and winter of that year that he arrived in the capital of the Sui dynasty. According to the *Sui shu* from the 23rd of the 5th moon, the 3rd year of the Daye reign, to the 21st of the 3rd moon, 4th year, the emperor Yangdi lived in the eastern capital Luoyang rather than the main capital Daxing. Doubtlessly Onono Imoko’s audience with Yangdi was in Luoyang. Another piece of evidence in the *Nihon Shoki* shows that Onono Imoko, by order of the court, made a second visit to China in the 9th moon of the 16th year, the emperor Suiko’s reign (608). The *Official History of the Sui Dynasty* records that from the 9th moon of the Daye 4th year (608) Yangdi lived in Luoyang until the 20th of the 1st moon, 5th year (609), when he returned to Daxing. Evidently it was again in Luoyang that Onono Imoko was admitted an audience by Yangdi during his second visit to the Sui.

3. In the late 610s, the Tang dynasty was founded and replaced the Sui, with Daxing still functioning as the main capital of the country but renamed “Chang’an,” and Luoyang as the eastern capital without change in name. From the 4th year of Tang Taizong’s Zhenguan reign (630) to the 3rd year of Wenzong’s Kaicheng reign (838), Japan sent out its formal “envoys to the Tang” 13 times. Of them, the 4th mission came in the 4th year of the Xianqin reign (659) and had an audience with the Tang emperor Gaozong in the eastern capital Luoyang. The 5th mission came in the late 2nd year of the Linde reign (665) and may have directly gone to the Mount Tai 泰 for attending the grand ceremony of worship of heaven and the earth, which was held in the 1st moon of the next year with Gaozong himself in presidency. Apart from the two embassies, the formal Japanese missions took unexceptionally Chang’an as their main destination. But as Luoyang was located to the east of Chang’an, the Japanese envoys going to or returning from Chang’an were bound to pass Luoyang and visit it on the way.

Following Onono Imoko and other envoys to the Sui, the Japanese missions to the Tang, leading numerous talent students and monks going abroad for study, visited China and made deep-going investigation on Chinese politics, economy, religion and various cultural affairs, including the exploration of Chinese capital architecture. Therefore, it is self-evident that the form and layout of Japanese capitals imitated those of Chang’an and Luoyang cities of the Tang dynasty.

4. The palace city of Tang Chang’an City was called “Taijigong Palace 太極宮,” and its main hall, “Taijidian Pavilion 太極殿,” doubtlessly from which came the name “Daigokuden 大極殿” of the main pavilion in the palace of Japanese capitals. In the 660s, the Tang emperor moved his residence from Taijigong to the newly built Daminggong Palace 大明宮. Thus the latter as the new political center in Chang’an replaced the former. The main pavilion in Daminggong was called “Hanyuanian 含元殿.” It featured a great height of its foundations and the presence of “dragon-tail steps” flanking it in front. In the Japanese capitals Heijokyo and Heiankyo, the main pavilion Daigokuden of the palace was also constructed on the high terrace called Ryubiden 龍尾壇 or Ryubido 龍尾道, i.e. Dragon-tail Platform, in the front of which, at the edge, were the left and right ramps or flights of steps. Evidently, the form of the Daigokuden Pavilion in Heijokyo and Heiankyo followed the example of the Hanyuanian Pavilion in the Daminggong Palace of the Tang Chang’an.

Nevertheless, the main pavilion in the Japanese palace was all along called “Daigokuden” rather than “Gangenden 含元殿.” This indicated that its naming “Daigokuden” must have been prior to the 660s. From this date onward, the Daminggong Palace in the Tang Chang’an and its main pavilion Hanyuanian became the most important new palatial buildings in then China, but as the main pavilion of the Japanese palace had named “Daigokuden” long before, this name was long been used in Japan without change.

As is widely known, the first Tang-visiting Japanese mission with Inukamo Mitsuki as the ambassador visited Chang’an in the 4th year of the Zhenguan reign (630) and had an audience with Tang Taizong, which is bound to have been in the Taijidian Pavilion of the Taijigong Palace. This must have been the most important reason for the main pavilion in the Japanese palace being called “Daigokuden.” According to the *Nihon Shoki*, it was in the 4th year of the empress Kogyoku’s reign (648) that the name “Daigokuden” came into being. At
that time Japan had no regular capital, but the Asukano Hatakinomiya Palace where Kogyoku lived had become the political center of the state. Although the Nihon Shoki's record about the existence of 12 gates and the like in this palace is an exaggeration or imagination by false analogy, the statement that its main pavilion was already called “Daigokuden” may not necessarily be incredible.

5. In terms of Heijokyo and Heiankyo, in addition to the main intrapalace pavilion Daigokuden, the main southern gate “Suzakumon 朱雀門” of the palace city as well as communication lines and commercial blocks were also named after the corresponding places in the Tang Chang'an City. They include “Suzaku Road 朱雀大路,” the “East Market” and the “West Market.” The palaces, Buddhist temples and other high-level buildings of these Japanese cities were roughly of the same structure and form as their counterparts in the capital of Tang China. In general layout, the palace city of either Heijokyo or Heiankyo was located in the center of the north, and Suzaku Road ran straight along the central axis, dividing the whole city into two even parts (left and right “capitals”). Moreover, many other streets and roads as well as blocks and markets were arranged roughly according to the principle of bilateral symmetry. This plan was extremely similar to the layout of the Tang Chang'an City and undoubtedly resulted from the two cities’ imitation of Chang'an.

6. The city of Heiankyo, first built in the 790s, can be rated as an agglomeration of the achievements in the architecture of ancient Japanese capitals. In its palace city, the most important building complexes were three groups of palaces: “Chodoin 朝堂院,” “Dairi 内裏” and “Burakuyin 豊楽院.” The first group Chodoin was located right in the center of the south of the palace city; its main pavilion Daigokuden corresponded to the Hanyuandian Pavilion of the Daminggong Palace in the Tang Chang'an City and was the place of the Japanese emperor’s holding grand ceremonies. The second group Dairi was situated to the north of Chodoin, in the east of this part. It was the emperor’s residence with the Shishinden Pavilion 紫宸殿 as the building where he handled government affairs, a hall corresponding to the Zichendian 紫宸殿 of the Tang Daminggong Palace. The third group Burakuyin lay to the west of Chodoin and was the place for the emperor along with his ministers to hold banquets on festivals and those given to foreign (Bokkai State) envoys, as the Lindedian Pavilion of the Daminggong Palace functioned.

In Fujiwarakyo and Heijokyo of earlier times, Dairi, Daigokuden and Chodoyin already existed in the palace city. But there was no Burakuyin specially for banqueting, which, therefore, can be taken to have been a great innovation in the palace city of Heiankyo. In the Tang Chang'an City, in the west of the Daminggong Palace, there was the large-sized Lindedian Pavilion specially for the emperor to hold grand banquets in person, including those given in honor of foreign envoys. It can be recognized that Burakuyin in the palace city of Heiankyo was set up under the inspiration of the Lindedian Pavilion in the Tang Daminggong Palace.

From the 740s, the palaces in the palace city of Heijokyo were rebuilt in layout and design. The main changes were the eastward move of Daigokuden and Chodoyin to the area south of Dairi and the construction of the building complex called “West Palace” on the site of the original Daigokuden, mainly for banqueting. So it should be said that the building of Burakuyin in the palace city of Heiankyo not only imitated the Lindedian Pavilion in the Tang Daminggong Palace. It was also due to the influence of the West Palace existing before in the palace city of Heijokyo, which was also undoubtedly set up under the influence of the Lindedian Pavilion in the Daminggong Palace.

7. The whole plan of the Tang Chang'an City was a horizontal rectangle with the major axis stretching from west to east, while Heijokyo, Heiankyo, and other Japanese capitals were shaped like a vertical rectangle with a north-south major axis. Then again, apart from those on both sides of Zhuque Street 朱雀大街, which were nearly square in plan, the blocks in the Tang Chang'an City, for an overwhelming majority, had a rectangular plan with the major axis pointing to the west and east, while in Japanese capitals, almost all the blocks were square in plan. The two differences of Japanese capitals from the Tang Chang'an City, if they did not result from the Japanese’s own creation, must have originated from the Tang Luoyang City. Surveys and excavations show that the whole plan of the latter was roughly a vertical rectangle with the eastern city wall measuring 7312 m in length and the
northern one 6138 m, at a length-to-width rate of five to four, just close to the plan of the main part of Hejokyo. According to the Liangjing Xingji (New Records of the Two Capitals), the blocks of the Tang Luoyang City were all three hundred steps square; surveys also verify the square plan of most blocks in Luoyang.

8. It should be emphasized that in various aspects of Heiankyo, the influence of the Tang Luoyang City was distinctly increased. In contrast to Hejokyo, the city of Heiankyo had no outer capital, looked like a regular rectangle with a north-south major axis, and was still closer to Luoyang City in the rate of length to width. Of the more than 70 blocks of Heiankyo, 68 were square in plan, also the same as most blocks in the Tang Luoyang City.

In Heiankyo, to the south of the palace city, there were four neighboring blocks with the same name; and in the flanks, six blocks shared a common name. Thus among the 17 blocks names of the whole capital, “Doda 稽陀” “Kyogyo 教業,” “Senfu 宣風,” “Jinji 津風,” “Anshu 安樂,” “Toka 陶化,” “Hosai 豕財,” and “Ikusai 機財,” totaling eight, came from the Tang Luoyang City, while “Eisho 永昌,” “Sujin 崇仁,” “Einei 永寧,” “Sengi 宣義,” and “Kotoku 光德,” altogether five, named after their counterparts in the Tang Chang’an City. What is important is the unusual priority of Luoyang over Chang’an in the naming of Heiankyo’s blocks.

The palace city in Japanese capitals was combined results of the influence from the palace city and imperial city of the Tang Chang’an and Luoyang. Take the names of palace gates for example, the “combination” is embodied in the facts that the palace-city gate of Fujiwarakyo was sometimes also called imperial-city gate, the southern gate of the palace city in Heiankyo was called Suzakumon 朱雀門 in imitation of the southern imperial-city gate in the Tang Chang’an, and the southern gate of Chodoyin was named Otemon 應天門 after the southern palace-city gate of Tang Luoyang. The southern palace-city gate in Tang Chang’an was called Chengtianmen Gate 應天門, but the southern gate of Chodoyin in Heiankyo was named Otemon 應天門 rather than Shotenmon 承天門, which also indicates the rise of the influence of Luoyang in the architecture of Heiankyo.

9. The Chinese capital Luoyang drew special attention from Japan of the Heian period (794–1192), the word “Luoyang” even becoming the synonym of Heiankyo. As Fujiwarakyo and Hejokyo, Heiankyo was divided with Suzakuro Road as the central axis into the left capital and the right one. They were called “East Capital” and “West Capital” respectively according to their location. From antiquity Luoyang (洛陽, Rakuyo in Japanese) and Chang’an (长安, Choan in Japanese) of China had the alternative names “East” and “West” capitals respectively, which were not changed in the Tang dynasty, so the Left Capital in Heiankyo was renamed “Rakuyo,” while the Right, “Choan.” Later, as the latter was low-lying and damp and fell into a desolate situation while the former was densely populated and flourished vigorously, the name “Choan” gradually faded from people’s memory, and “Rakuyo” became the synonym of all Heiankyo. Thus, starting from the name “Rakuyo,” Heiankyo was often renamed “Keiraku 京洛,” “Rakuto 落都,” or “Rakuchu 落中.”

Since the Kamakura period (1192–1333), usually the name “Heiankyo” has no longer been used, but the city has always been called “Kyoto 京都” because there existed the emperor’s residence. In that period Kyoto continued to bear the laudatory titles “Keiraku,” “Rakuto” and “Rakuchu,” and the trip from various areas of Japan to Kyoto was called “going to the capital Rakuro 京洛” or “entering Rakuto 郞到.” This was not changed even in the Edo period (1603–1867). The city of Edo was renamed “Tokyo” in the first year of the Meiji reign (1868) and became the capital of modern Japan in the next year, when the Japanese emperor moved from Kyoto to there. But up to the present sometimes the trip to Kyoto is still archaically called “going to the capital Rakuro” or “entering Rakuto.”

10. As an ancient Chinese capital, Luoyang attracted special attention from Japan of the Heian period. This was mainly owing to the following facts. Firstly, some of the Japanese emperors in the early Heian period of the 9th century, such as Saga, were of great erudition and advocated the Tang style. Secondly, the then Japanese court officials from the literati were largely familiar with Chinese classics and historical books. They knew very well that Luoyang was the longest Chinese capital, and Japan’s first establishment of formal diplomatic relations with China can be traced to the AD 50s, or Emperor Guangwu’s reign of the Eastern Han dynasty.
nasty, when the king of Nakoku State of Wo (Wa in Japanese, ancient Japan) sent his envoy to Luoyang. From the early 2nd century to the middle and late 3rd century, Japanese missions visited the Eastern Han, Wei and Jin capitals of Luoyang one after another and gained lots of achievements. In the early 7th century, the envoy from Crown Prince Shotoku submitted his credentials to Emperor Yangdi of the Sui just at the court in Luoyang. The main pavilion Daigokuden in the Japanese palace was named, of course, after the Taijidian Pavilion of Taijigong Palace existing in the Tang Chang'an from the 630s. But to trace to its source, this name first originated from the Wei emperor Mingdi's building the Taijidian Pavilion in the South Palace of Luoyang in the 3rd year of the Qinglong reign (235). All the above-mentioned constituted the main reason why the ancient Chinese capital Luoyang drew special attention from Japan in the Heian period.

References Cited


Note: The original paper was published in Kaogu 2001. 9: 70 – 77, with no illustration, and authored by Wang Zhongshu. The English version is abridged in Chinese by the author himself and translated by Mo Runxian 莫润先.