

# Transitions at the Leading Edge of Civilization and the Fusion of Asian and Western Civilizations in the Asia Pacific

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## 1. Transitions at the Leading Edge of Civilization

Tracing back the history of human civilization, we can see that with each evolutionary stage the leading region of human civilization has undergone a geographical shift.

We know that from 4,000 to 6,000 years ago, four big civilizations located in four regions of the Eurasian continent, Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus valley and China, accomplished an urban revolution. Furthermore, we know that the spiritual revolution that took place between 2,400 and 2,800 years ago was led by the four regions of Israel, Greece, India and China.

The scientific revolution of the 17th Century, which was the start of modernity, originated in Western Europe, and it was both Western Europe and North America that were responsible for its expansion up to the 20th Century.

From looking at these occurrences, it can be said that human civilization has seen different geographical areas take the lead in innovation, and that it has been able to evolve as these areas have changed. There have been cases of civilization evolving more than once in the same region, as happened in the case of China, but this is probably an exception.

When the history of human civilization is viewed from such a perspective, what position does Asia Pacific civilization occupy? In order to address this issue, I will first examine two theories that have viewed the history of civilization from a geographical perspective. These include Umesao's *Bunmei no seitai-shikan* ("An ecological view of civilization"), while more recently Heita Kawakatsu's *Bunmei no kaiyō-shikan* ("A maritime view of civilization") has been discussed as a modification of Umesao's theory.

## 2. Umesao Tadao: "An Ecological View of Civilization"

Umesao's article, "An ecological view of civilization" was published in *Chūōkōron*, in February 1957 (Umesao 1957; cf. Umesao 1967, 2003). Immediately after publication, it aroused great interest and even now this celebrated theory is invariably cited in related studies. For this reason it is unnecessary for me to discuss it here. However, it is important to relate its subsequent development, so I will give a very simple account of the essence of the theory.

(1) In order to illustrate the historical characteristics of mankind from ancient to

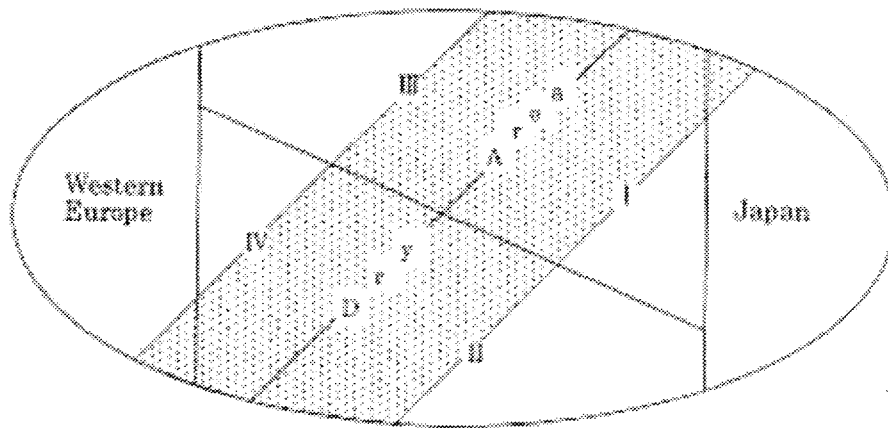
modern times, Umesao divided the heartland for the history of civilization, the Eurasian continent, into two broad areas: a savannah area centering on the large arid belt that runs northeast to southwest across the continent, and the marginal zones to the east and west of this (Figure 1). Zone 1 includes the marginal zones, which today include the advanced regions of Western Europe and Japan, while Zone Two consists of the backbone of the region centered on the large arid belt.

(2) The lives of communities and the general structure of society in each of these areas are diametrically opposed.

(3) Despite the distance between them, the Zone 1 nations of Japan and Western Europe have followed a very similar historical path. Modern Japanese civilization since the Meiji Restoration and modern Western European civilization can be viewed as parallel social developments.

(4) In Zone Two in contrast, the rise of the original ancient civilizations was followed by a history of repeated destruction and conquest. Feudalism did not develop and in the modern age this area was colonized by the Zone 1 nations. It was not until the 20th Century that Zone Two began to embrace modern civilization.

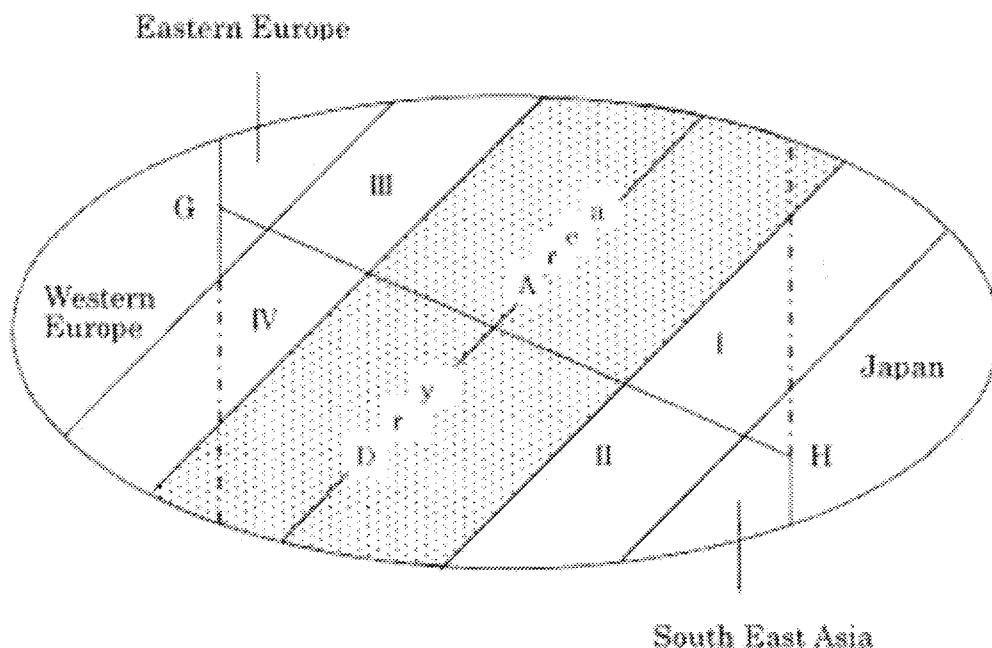
(5) Just as a parallel development between Japan and Western Europe existed in Zone 1, four large cultural regions in Zone Two also exhibited a parallel development: (I) the Chinese bloc, (II) the Indian bloc, (III) the Russian bloc and (IV) the Mediterranean/Islamic bloc, as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1 (after Umesao)**

Later on, in an article published in *Chūōkōron* in August 1958, entitled “Tōnan Ajia no tabi kara” (“Travels in Southeast Asia,” for an English version see Umesao 2003: 90-113), Umesao addressed the issue of including Southeast Asian in his diagram

by partially modifying and elaborating it. As shown in Figure 2, through the introduction of two parallel lines partitioning the region immediately surrounding the central arid belt as well as the forest/wet zones on the eastern and western peripheries, Umesao clearly defined the position of Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe.



**Figure 2 (after Umesao)**

There have already been lengthy critiques of Umesao's ecological theory and it is not my purpose to address these here. Rather, I will remark on a number of points that relate to my own argument below.

First, Umesao's "ecological view" was not necessarily an attempt to explain the dynamics of the history of human civilization. Rather, it identified the regional characteristics, particularly ecological, that appear to determine the features of each civilization and which form the basis of these dynamics. Civilizations change, particularly since the start of the modern era, when the civilizations of Zone Two came under the influence of the modern civilizations of Zone 1. Yet while its form may change, the intrinsic elements of a civilization do not.

To digress briefly, Umesao presented a second view of the development of civilization in "Bunmei no jōhō-shikan" ("An informational view of civilization") (Umesao 1988). In this work Umesao talks about the advent of the "information age," which typically follows the agrarian and industrial ages as civilization progresses. This progression has affected both Zone 1 and Zone Two, with the result that the remaining differences between these two areas are rapidly diminishing.

I believe that this process has been seen before. Until the 1970s, the modernization of Asia was viewed pessimistically by Europe, the United States and

Japan, and the common assumption was that the Asian economy was generally sluggish. Yet with the start of the 1980s and the spread of information technology, the Asian economies suddenly took off and Asian society began to modernize rapidly. I believe that an important issue in the theory of civilization is the relationship between the universal process of civilization itself and the ecological characteristics on which civilization is based. In this sense, there is an important tension between Umesao's ecological and informational views of civilization.

Secondly, as Kawakatsu has argued more recently, Umesao's theory was a land-based view and did not take account of the role that the oceans have played in the history of civilization. This is a point that Umesao has acknowledged in discussions with Kawakatsu (Umesao 2001). As I discuss later, it was Kawakatsu who developed this argument in his paper "Bunmei no kaiyō-shikan" (Kawakatsu 1995) and in a later book of the same name (Kawakatsu 1999).

Thirdly, Umesao's theoretical model was based on the Eurasian experience and did not include America. Even though he only included in his model those elements present during the expansion of Western Europe, the position of the American continent within the history of civilization is of great importance.

### 3. Kawakatsu Heita: "A Maritime View of Civilization"

For Kawakatsu, the fact that Umesao's model is a land-based view was a problem. To rectify the lack of inclusion of the oceans in Umesao's theory, Kawakatsu modified Umesao's diagram accordingly (Figure 3).

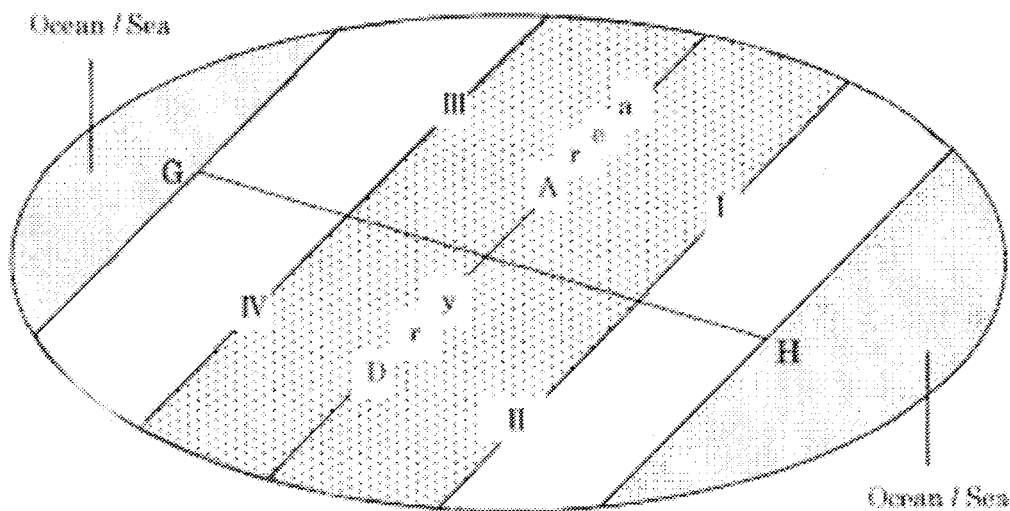
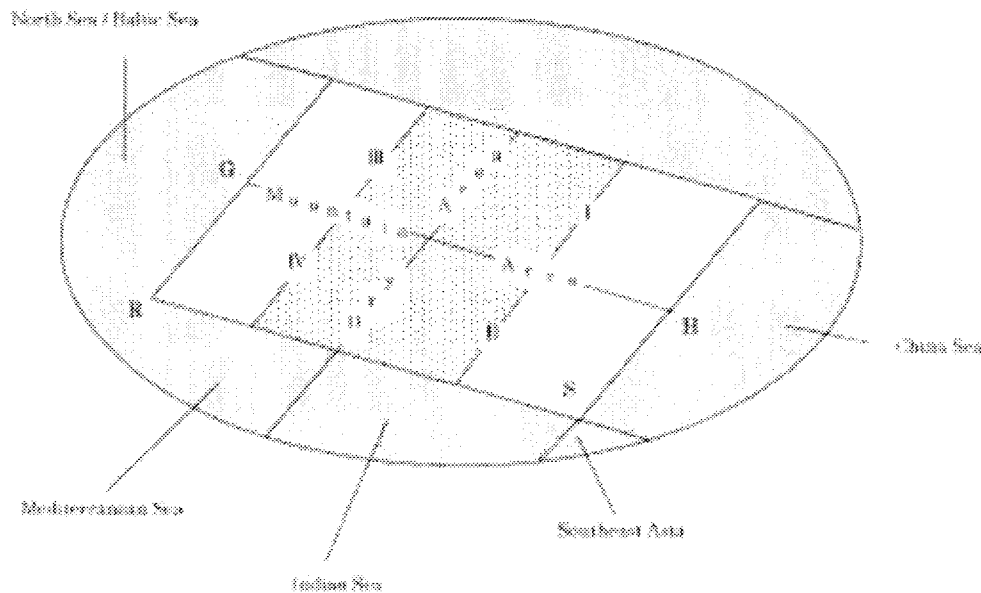


Figure 3 (after Kawakatsu)

(1) First, Kawakatsu revised Umesao's Figure 2 to group the North Sea and the Baltic

Sea together with “Eastern Europe,” and to group the East China Sea and South China Sea together with “Southeast Asia.” What Kawakatsu produced is shown in Figure 4, in which Japan and Western Europe are located in the oceans on the eastern and western peripheries.

(2) By extending to the south the line that runs from north to south across the arid belt, the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea are specifically represented as the southern oceans of the Eurasian continent. In Umesao’s Figure 2 above, Southeast Asia is represented as belonging entirely to Zone Two; however when the Indian Ocean is taken into account, it is clear that Southeast Asia has been influenced much more from the oceans than from the continent. In other words, makes more sense to distinguish Southeast Asia from the rest of Zone Two, as is shown in Figure 4.

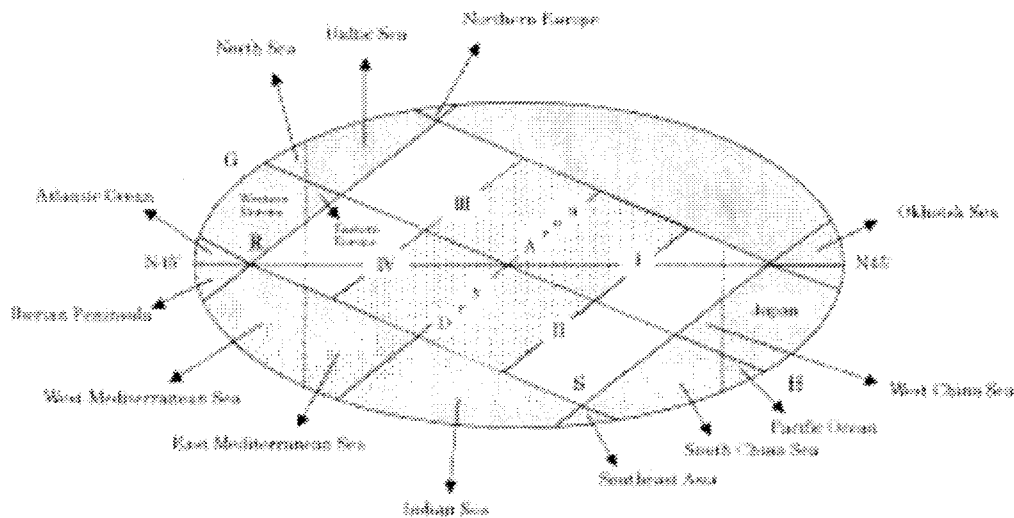


**Figure 4 (after Kawakatsu)**

(3) With the introduction of the oceans into the reckoning, the two perpendicular lines to the east and west of Umesao’s figure take on another meaning. The western perpendicular separates the North Sea from the Baltic Sea and the Western from the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, while the eastern perpendicular separates the East China from the South China Sea and demarcates the Pacific Ocean, as in Figure 5.

Based on the figures modified as I have outlined above, Kawakatsu develops his “maritime view” by stressing the role that the oceans have played in the rise to power of modern civilization. As we know, ancient civilization originally took shape on the Eurasian continent. Later however, the development of civilization took to the sea, starting with the Mediterranean. In the 5th Century BC, the Eastern Mediterranean Sea provided the setting for Greek civilization to flourish, as well as for the expansion of

the Roman civilization that followed. The Mediterranean Sea became a “Roman Sea,” until the rise of Islamic civilization in the Middle East. Moreover, as Islam extended its influence to the east, an immense maritime Islamic civilization took shape around the Indian Ocean.



**Figure 5 (after Kawakatsu)**

Meanwhile, the China Sea and Yellow Sea regions of the Northeast Asia formed “Maritime China,” a world in which Chinese civilization formed a great power bloc. The productiveness of the maritime regions extending from the Indian Ocean across Southeast Asia to the China Sea and Yellow Sea formed the basis of trade throughout the region. Through this trade, the Asian civilizations of China, India and the Islamic world became actively engaged with each other, and the result was a fusion of civilizations within the region. Kawakatsu asserts that this maritime region surrounding Southeast Asia was the point from which modern civilization was launched. According to Kawakatsu, “waves” of civilization originating in this region spread out to both the east and the west. The first such wave rolled from Southeast Asia through Maritime China into southern China, and then on into Korea and Japan, leading eventually to the modernization of Japan following its period of isolation. Another wave spread across the Indian Ocean to Western Europe and the Atlantic Ocean. This gave rise to the renaissance of Western European civilization, which began in the 15th Century and led in turn to the scientific revolution.

As a consequence, some major changes came about. The Mediterranean Sea changed from an “Islamic Sea” to a “European Sea.” European power expanded into the Atlantic Ocean and enveloped both America and Africa, forming a civilizational bloc on the Atlantic rim. Meanwhile, the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia came under the influence of Western Europe.

Based on this insight (and contrary to popular theory), Kawakatsu emphasizes the simultaneous, parallel development of modern civilization in the two regions located at opposite ends of the Eurasian continent, Japan and Western Europe.

### *Kawakatsu's "Pacific Civilization" Theory*

From this maritime perspective, how does Kawakatsu envisage the development of civilization in the 21st Century? He asserts the possibility of a new civilization in the Asia Pacific, that is to say one that is neither oriental nor occidental, and he sees the growth of APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation) as related to this. However, Kawakatsu argues that the term "Asia Pacific" does not fit well in this context, and that in future the concept of "Asia" as a region will disappear while the concept of "the Pacific" will remain. Following from this, the civilization that will form in this region will not be an "Asia Pacific civilization" but a "Pacific civilization." In spatial terms, Kawakatsu appears to define "Asia Pacific" as the islands of the western Pacific extending outwards from Southeast Asia. He has stated that Asia's NIES (Newly Industrializing Economies), centered on Japan and ASEAN, will be chiefly responsible for this Pacific civilization, and they are located in the western Pacific.

I am also of the opinion that there is the possibility of a new civilization in the Asia Pacific in the 21st Century and I believe that this is a matter of great importance. However I think it is impossible to view this as merely an extension of Kawakatsu's maritime model in which Southeast Asia is the birthplace of modern civilization. The "Asia Pacific" is not simply a spatial concept, but a new fusion of modern Western civilization with the accumulated traditions of Asia; in other words, it is a new "east-west fusion" of civilizations. In this model, "Asia" and "the Pacific" are seen as inseparable.

### **3. Beyond Kawakatsu's "Maritime View of Civilization"**

#### *Transitions of the Leading Region of Civilization*

My thinking here is based on a further development of the geographical view of civilization. I examine this further here.

Kawakatsu's maritime model was important in bringing about a modification of the land-based view of civilization. However, I believe that it is still constrained by the fact that it is an expansion of Umesao's model. Here I present a geographical view of civilization that goes beyond Kawakatsu's maritime view.

To begin with, I will state the underlying points on which this geographical view of civilization is based. First, the maritime view that I present derives from a global perspective and is not limited to the oceans that surround Southeast Asia. When one thinks this way, the larger Indian, Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and the smaller China Sea, Yellow Sea and Mediterranean Sea enter the field of vision. The problem that remains is how to develop a global maritime view of civilization that encompasses all of the earth's main oceans and seas.

Second, as I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, human civilization has been able to evolve while moving geographically between centers of innovation, so that the leading edge has shifted. Herein lies the problem that was evident earlier. What role did the earth's oceans and seas play in these transitions?

Human civilization can be seen to have shifted between three major geographical

regions:

- Stage 1: The Eurasian continent and the Indian Ocean and China Sea/Yellow Sea
- Stage 2: Central East Asia and the Mediterranean Sea
- Stage 3: Western Europe (the western portion of the Eurasian continent), the North American continent and the Atlantic Ocean

Though the majority of facts are common knowledge, I will explain each of these stages in slightly more detail.

#### *The Eurasian Continent and the Indian Ocean and China Sea/Yellow Sea*

As we know, between 4,000 and 6,000 years ago (2,000 to 4,000 BC), four unique civilizations were born and the urban revolution became a reality. These four civilizations appeared in three regions of the Eurasian continent, namely Mesopotamia (the Tigris/Euphrates River basin), India (the Indus River basin) and China (the Yellow River basin); and in the North African region connected to the Eurasian continent, namely Egypt (the Nile River basin). More recently, the existence of a civilization that predates that of the Yellow River is coming to light in the Yangtze River basin in China, a region as large as that of the Yellow River.

Following the success of these ancient civilizations during the period from the 8th to the 4th Centuries BC, there was a major change in thinking through the spiritual revolutions which took place in four regions: Greece, Israel, India and China.

It is becoming clear that while these ancient civilizations each possessed their own unique origins, they also interacted on various levels in both space and time, and shared similar processes. The oceans surrounding these regions also played an extremely important role. For example, there is evidence that exchanges were taking place between most ancient civilizations in Mesopotamia and the Indus basin. It is therefore certain that the role of the Indian Ocean, which connects these two civilizations, was very significant indeed. In addition, the Greek civilization that was responsible for a large part of the spiritual revolution evolved around the Mediterranean Sea, as did with the Roman civilization that continued the Greek tradition. Similarly, the Indian Ocean, the China Sea, the Yellow Sea and the other seas of Eastern Asia all played a profound role in the spread of the spiritual revolution that began in India and China to all parts of Northeast and Southeast Asia. But whichever way we look at human civilization, we can assert that the Eurasian continent and its surrounding oceans were the main stage for the evolution of civilizations, from the urban to the early spiritual revolution.

#### *Central East Asia and the Mediterranean Sea*

A later phase of the spiritual revolution began with the emergence of Islam and Islamic civilization. This civilization developed in Central East Asia in the 7th Century and quickly spread to both the east and the west, forming a region that extended from North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula in the west to Southeast Asia including Indonesia in the east. Islamic civilization experienced increasing interaction and extensive fusion with the previously established Greek and Roman civilizations in the west and the



Indian and Chinese civilizations in the east. In this process, it was ultimately the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean that played the major roles, as described above.

### *Western Europe, the North American Continent and the Atlantic Ocean*

After the Italian Renaissance of the 15th Century and the scientific revolution, Western Europe took the lead in the development of civilization. With Western Europe at its hub, the scientific revolution of the 17th Century evolved into the industrial revolution of the 18th and 19th Centuries. This extended westwards across the Atlantic to North America, giving rise to the industrial Euro-American civilization that dominated the 20th Century. The existence of the Atlantic was therefore of paramount importance in bringing about a single industrial civilization which straddled the ocean. The ocean ensured allowed easy exchange between the two continents as well as the evolution of a single great Euro-American civilization.

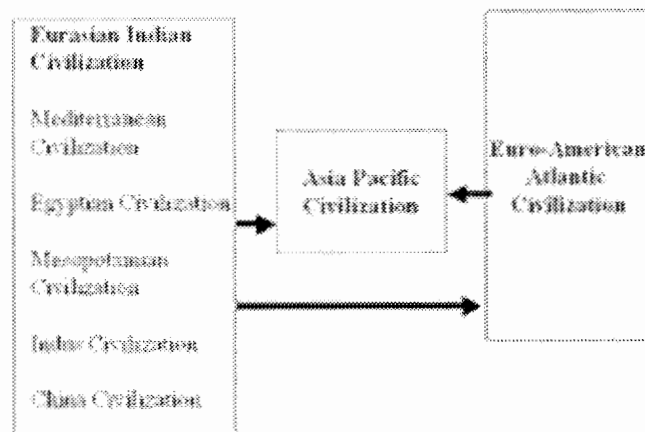
By examining these major currents in human civilization, we see that it has evolved by moving westwards from (1) the Eurasian continent to (2) Central East Asia and then to (3) Western Europe and North America. In each of these movements particular maritime regions, namely (1) the Indian Ocean, China Sea and Yellow Sea surrounding the Eurasian continent, (2) the Mediterranean Sea and (3) the Atlantic Ocean, played a pivotal role.

Figure 6 shows these transitions in the cutting edge of civilization. This is not to say that the evolution of a civilization stopped when its role at the cutting edge of development ended. There were occasions when this did occur, or when civilizations experienced a period of prosperity and then completely collapsed. However in the majority of cases, even if those civilizations no longer played a leading role in evolution, they still managed to evolve independently in order to arrive at the stage where they are today. While the future cannot easily be predicted, it is certainly possible in the light of recent patterns in economic development that regions that once led the way will again take a leading role in human history. I think that this is particularly important for understanding Indian and Chinese civilizations in Asia.

Whatever the case may be, human civilization has continued to evolve as the cutting edge has shifted in a mainly westerly direction around the globe, and as such the world's oceans have played an immense role in the evolution of human civilization.

### **The Advent of an “Asia Pacific Civilization”**

From this historical overview of transitions at the cutting edge of civilization, we can expect further westward movement, so that the Asia Pacific region will emerge as the next leading region. Specifically, the Euro-American Atlantic civilization, which developed from the 15th Century onwards in Europe and later America, will merge with the Asian civilizations that have developed from ancient times in a new fusion in the Asia Pacific Region



**Figure 5. Relationship between Asia Pacific Civilization and Historic Civilizations (Sakamoto)**

From an examination of recent changes in global society, there are indications that this Asia Pacific fusion may become a reality. I think it is fair to say that the biggest indicator of this is the rapid economic development that has taken place in Asia since the 1980s.

From the 19th Century, Asia was under the influence of European and American powers. It was released from its colonial status following the end of the Second World War yet, despite this, most Asian economies failed to develop until the 1970s. With the exception of Japan, the long-held general image of the region was one of stagnation. However the 1980s heralded rapid economic growth in Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, and these countries seemed in some ways to be taking after Japan. Moreover, there was a major step forward as economic development began like a chain reaction in the economies of today's ASEAN member countries. From these conditions at the start of the 1990s, Asia became the world's major center of growth, and people began to label the 21st Century the "Asia Pacific Age."

Yet as we know, with the collapse in the value of the baht in Thailand in 1997, the whole of Asia experienced a currency crisis and economic difficulties. Not only the economies of Asia but Asian society as a whole was plunged into chaos. This was as Paul Krugman predicted in 1994 and it caused us all to wonder whether the Asian economic miracle had been an illusion after all. Even among those analysts who had been loudly advocating the advent of the Asia Pacific Age, there were those that declared that economic growth in Asia was already over.

Yet as we moved into the 21st Century, the Asian economies were showing signs of a rapid recovery and foreshadowed the emergence of a new phase in Asia. While Japan has not yet emerged from its economic stagnation, the ASEAN member nations are, by and large, experiencing a new phase of economic development, while the growth of China has been particularly astounding. It is now evident that Asia is becoming the world's major manufacturing center, the "factory of the world." Much of

the world's manufacturing capital is centered in Asia. The biggest manufacturing center of all is China and this is greatly stimulating the Asian economy. Such economic growth in Asia is the most important indicator we have of the possibility of an Asia Pacific age and an Asia Pacific civilization in the 21st Century.

Thus history shows us that not only has manufacturing been the main basis for economic development, but that it has also been the driving force behind the development of civilizations through the ages. In that sense then, it is necessary to evaluate the current progress in Asia from the perspective of a theory of civilizations. The Asian economic development described above can be seen as related to an even more profound aspect of the evolution of human society: a new fusion of Eastern and Western civilizations, with the Euro-American civilization which has developed from the 15th Century merging with the Asian civilizations which can be traced back to ancient times. Fusion of Eastern and Western civilization has occurred on a number of occasions throughout history. Earlier there was the fusion that took place via the Silk Road and the Indian Ocean. However the fusion today is taking place on a scale never before seen in human history. It is fair to say that it will be an overall summation of the history of human civilization up to the present day. Thus, while this fusion may be described as the "Asia Pacific civilization," it should also be recognized as a phenomenon of global importance.

#### *Issues in Asia Pacific Civilization and Asia Pacific Studies*

The creation of this new civilization as a summation of human history carries with it an immense burden in terms of the tasks to be performed.

More than anything else, it means the conservation of the global environment as an absolute requirement for human existence, while creating better living conditions for mankind; in other words, we need to achieve a balance between these two interests when developing the economy.

Furthermore, when we look at the history of mankind, we see that the centuries that comprise the modern era can be described as centuries of war. Thus another major task for the 21st Century is to convert it into a century of peace. The remarkable developments in science, technology, and industry that have characterized the modern era have created both affluence and severe poverty because of the imbalance in economic development. Moreover, the biggest amplifier of poverty is war. Overcoming the poverty that has been born out of such conditions is another task for the 21st Century.

As we enter the 21st Century, there are renewed calls for us to focus on "sustainable development" and "human security." As illustrated previously, these two issues together reflect the problems that the new Asia Pacific civilization will have to deal with. However, it is self-evident that the arrival of a civilization which can shoulder responsibility for resolving these global problems will not occur of its own accord while those of us who live in the 21st Century sit idly by. It will take the conscious efforts of the peoples of the 21st Century to make it happen. We cannot wait for this civilization to arrive; we must consciously create it.

I am therefore proposing the establishment of Asia Pacific Studies as a new academic discipline to achieve this. This new discipline is not merely the "area studies" of the Asia Pacific; it must also include studies of the policies to be used in the creation

of the new global Asia Pacific civilization. It is my belief that the study of such policies is essential for the creation of the Asia Pacific civilization that is to come.

### Note

Transitions between the leading regions of civilization as described in this paper and the associated advent of an Asia Pacific civilization first caught my attention in Arifin Bey's book *Ajiataiheyō no Jidai* ("The Asia Pacific Age") (Chūōkōron-sha, 1998), particularly Chapter 1, "Ajiataiheyō jidai to Nihon no yakuwari" ("The Asia Pacific Age and the role of Japan"). In this book, Bey talks about the establishment of an Asia Pacific University as a center for cultivating the human resources necessary for the new Asia Pacific age. He suggested the year 2000 as the year in which to implement this proposal. Thus the opening of Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University in April 2000 was a realization of Bey's earlier proposal.

### Editorial note

This article is based on Chapter 4, "Bunmei chushinjiku no seni" (The shifting axis of civilization), pp. 95-119 in Professor Sakamoto's book, *Ajia Taiheyō jidai no kōzō* (Creation of the Asia Pacific age, Sakamoto 2003). The initial draft of the translation was prepared by Amanda Walker.

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