PART I

TOKUGAWA JAPAN

Japan: Sixteenth, Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

While 1492 was not in itself a year of particular significance in Japan’s history, it roughly marked the start of the greatest transformation Japan had ever experienced. A transformation with many facets – political, economic, social and cultural – that was to continue through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Indeed, it was this transformation that set the guidelines for creating the special characteristics of modern Japan.

In short, prior to that transformation, the main elements constituting Japan were greatly influenced by systems and culture either in China or originally brought over from China. Japan was in many respects a member of the ‘Chinese World Order’, and a very faithful member at that. Again, prior to that transformation, there was, first, no clear distinction in Japan between the religious and the secular; second, political power and economic wealth were often to be found in the hands of the same individual. Thus, in the religious sphere, ‘art’ would be for the benefit of Buddhism, while in the political sphere, shoguns wielding political power would invest in their own foreign trade operations.

However, after the transformation, not only was Japan divorced from the ‘Chinese World Order’, but the values constituting its society were separate and independent. Subsequently these started interacting with each other to produce a society having pluralistic values. Inhabitants of the Japanese Archipelago became worldly as opposed to religious, and formed social groups based on a mentality emphasizing economic values. In this sense, one is justified in calling it ‘a great transformation’ when looking at Japan from a historical perspective (Hayami, 1986).

Of course, a transformation of this nature did not come about overnight. One might say 100 to 200 years were required. Moreover, it did not progress simultaneously throughout the entire Japanese land mass. It varied in nature from region to region, and the sequence of the various facets was not the same everywhere. Thus it at times involved an incoherent state that could be called a temporary state of confusion, chaos or crisis. In this context, the new experience of diverse (outward and inward) international relationships added an extra dimension, making the situation more and more complex.

Below, we discuss how this transformation came about and the Tokugawa Japan that was the final result.