

Magali BIDALLED, “The establishment of the modern Japanese postal system, from its origins to the rivalry between Mitsubishi and the P&O” (“Institution du système postal moderne au Japon, des origines à la rivalité entre Mitsubishi et P&O,”), master’s thesis directed by François Macé, Inalco, 1998, 101 p.

When Japan pursued political and administrative reforms in 645 (referred to as the reforms of the Taika era), it created political and social institutions modeled on Chinese precedents and created its own communications system based on the one used by the Tang dynasty in China, a network for the efficient, rapid, and highly controlled transmission of news. The postal service was officially defined at that time (the various categories of equestrian mail, routes, and post-stations) and was still in force when the Asian archipelago was opened to the western world in the mid-19th century. At that time the Japanese discovered new communications techniques like the modern post office and the telegraph.

A modern post office is generally defined by three elements: a governmental monopoly, the use of postage stamps, and a single rate gauged to the weight of the letter. It is generally acknowledged that the modern post office was created in Japan in April 1871, although it possessed only one of the above characteristics, the use of postage stamps. After a wait of two years, in 1873, the governmental monopoly was instated and postal rates based on distance.

The institution of the Japanese postal system was the product of two communications systems: the post-station system and the modern western postal systems that the Japanese discovered through the presence of consular posts. After presenting the system of post-stations on which the new system was founded, we shall discuss the consular officials without whom Japan would probably not have discovered the efficiency of the western system so rapidly. Finally we shall describe the major steps in the institution of the new postal organization as well as its major characteristics.

In the earliest times, oral transmission was the most prevalent way of sending a message; other even more rudimentary methods included using knots in a cord or leaving drawings on tree bark. In the 7th century, communications and transportation were organized in Japan according to the Chinese model. Exclusively for governmental use, it was based on a network of post-stations. Business or private correspondence was handled by special messengers, merchants, or friends who were traveling.

There were four major periods in the development of the network of post-stations: the ancient period, the Kamakura period (1192-1333), the Sengoku period (1467-1568), and the Edo period (1603-1868).

During a great reform in 645, an imperial decree (RESCRIT) established relay stations in the regions closest to the capital. These stations were provided with a steady supply of two types of post horses: *temma* used for carrying merchandise or passengers and *ekima* or *ektba* used for urgent correspondence. These horses were also at the disposal of authorities traveling on official business. When a series of codes was promulgated in 710, the postal system was clearly defined and modeled on the Tang example in China. Roads connecting the capital to provincial headquarters were divided into three categories: main roads, secondary roads, and minor roads. A post-station was set up at 16 km intervals on each road, and the number of horses and stable boys at each station depended on the importance of the road where it was located. Travelers could rest, eat, and change mounts as needed at these post-stations. The stations’ income was derived from the sale of the products of their rice fields, taxes imposed on the maintenance of the

postal service, and contributions demanded from nearby villages. Moreover, the use of the official mail was reserved for messengers entrusted with urgent communications from powers-that-be, envoys to the imperial council and other imperial envoys, and other high-ranking individuals who only traveled privately. This system of communications based on the use of post-stations allowed the central administration to establish its authority throughout the land. From the 10th century onward, the system of codes fell into decline, bureaucratic organization deteriorated, provincial finances collapsed, and the ruin of postal inns by expenses led to the collapse of this particular organization of the postal system.

In the Kamakura period (1192-1333), lords and local knights as well as the people organized the traffic of people and merchandise privately, after the network of post-stations was abandoned. The government created a postal system that used a network of progressively spaced rest houses or *shuku* that included inns, relay stations for changing horses, tea houses, and market. These rest houses then became relay stations and were controlled by the military governors. Post horses, grooms, porters, and food supplies were requisitioned in the surrounding villages. The use of messengers called *hikyaku* who carried messages and small parcels on foot was also begun in this period. With the fall of the Kamakura government, however, this postal system also disappeared and the wars that ravaged Japan led to the loss of this system of traffic and communication throughout the country.

In the Sengoku period (1467-1568), also called the period of the civil wars, Japan was divided into vast feudal estates that the lords sought to keep entirely under their control. To do so, they created their own traffic and communication system as well as outposts along the border of their lands that allowed them to control movement within their territory and keep an eye on the movement of the other lords' troops. In these times of strife, the relay stations were used for a military purpose, but travelers and merchants were also allowed to break their journey and stay there. These border posts also enabled the lords to collect a tax on the right of passage for travelers and merchandise, but the warlords gradually abolished this tax, since it infringed upon free trade. Customs barriers were abolished in the 16th century and the postal system based on the use of relay stations was restored, roads connecting all the provinces were built, and a politics of open traffic throughout Japan was established.

The Edo period (1603-1868) saw the creation of a politics of centralization. The five major highways leading to the capital city, Edo, were fitted out with numerous relay stations. The provincial lords frequent journeys to the capital (where their family was obliged to keep a residence after 1635) contributed to the development of these axes, to the prosperity of the relay stations on these roads, and to the intensification of the exchanges between Edo and the provinces. Traffic increased constantly; when the number of horses and grooms at the stations became insufficient, horses and men were commandeered from neighboring villages. In 1694 this system of duty and requisition was imposed upon local peasants living in the villages situated near the relay stations and was not abolished until 1868. Throughout the 17th century, the developing exchanges and traffic lead to the fortification of the network of relay stations. While this feature contributed to the preservation of central power in the Edo period, it also increased the responsibilities of a growing number of villages and depleted the countryside of its resources. Moreover, the new system of message stations was intended for the exclusive use of official

government correspondence; after 1660 private individuals created new companies for the transport of letters and objects.

Messengers themselves were the most important element of the communications apparatus in Japan. Having appeared in the 17th century, they were constantly traversing and re-traversing their routes on foot or on horseback, carrying official letters as well as small parcels. It was difficult for ordinary people to use this service, since rates were high and the time needed was unsteady if not erratic. There were several different types of messengers: the *tsugi-bikyaku* or relay-messengers, were engaged for official government communications and always worked as a team, carrying letters and small parcels, day or night, working in relay fashion along the route. They were required to complete a travel form at each stage of their journey that allowed for each messenger or team responsible for delay to be found. Considered to be the most important type of messenger, they took precedence on the roads.

The *daimyô-hykyaku* were in the employ of the lords of the fiefs or *daimyô*, and provided liaisons for the government as well as between different feudal domains. Each fief maintained its own messengers and those employed by the richest fiefs enjoyed special benefits. But it was difficult for less fortunate lords and fiefs to manage a private system of communications; these nobles soon withdrew from the system when its costs became prohibitive. When needed, transport by courier was confided to a *machi-hykyaku*.

The *machi-hykyaku* served cities (*machi*) and were thus available to everyone for this reason. They carried a wicker basket to the center of the public square in towns and villages and waited there for people to deposit their letters accompanied by the sum necessary for their transport. When this system began, letters were not delivered to homes but instead were posted in the public square where receivers came to pick them up. In 1782 the government decided to recognize this private service as an enterprise or corporation in order to make it official. These businesses developed rapidly after that decision was made.

The *kane-hikyaku* were responsible for transporting money. The *machi-hykyaku* soon superseded the other types of messengers because they were trustworthy, reliable, and less expensive. Urgent letters were still carried by the specialized messengers of the shogun or military commander of the government.

The development of postal service in Japan from the 7th century to the restoration of the Meiji in 1868 (when the military government was abolished and the emperor restored to power) appears to have been efficiently organized, although it sometimes succumbed to political upheavals. At the end of the Edo period, Japan's system of communications worked equally well for businesses and city dwellers.