

Japanese Civilization

(Part 1)

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The World Historical Viewpoint

• From World History to Global History

To create the future, we must be aware of the present and have a clear understanding of our origins. By revealing the origins of the present, history provides a bridge from the past to the future.

The aim of Japanese history is a comprehensive understanding of the origins of Japan, and it is important that we approach this aim from the broadest possible perspective. Since a broad perspective necessarily embraces the whole world, we have to consider Japanese history from the viewpoint of world history.

Even before World War II it was recognized in Japan that "history in the future will have to be world history." The attempt to understand the origins of our own country only from the perspective of national history gives us a blinkered view, like the frog in the well who knows nothing of the ocean. To avoid this, we must consider our country's past, present and future in the context of the world as a whole.

World history was established as an academic field in the 19th century by the German Leopold Von Ranke (1795-1886), who is generally viewed as the founding father of modern historical scholarship. Since the study of world history originated in the West, it has been taken for granted that Europe should constitute the basis of historical research. The bias towards the West in history textbooks thus has its origins in the circumstances in which world history came into being.

The time has surely come for us to free ourselves from "world history" that is too biased towards Western history. In order to adopt a truly world historical viewpoint, it might be better to use the expression "global history"

rather than "world history."

At the close of the 20th century, we have acquired the ability to view the earth in its entirety and observe every detail of its surface from outer space. From the 19th century to the middle of the 20th century, parts of the globe were still shown only as outline maps, and explorers set out in search of unknown continents, the North and South Poles, deserts, high mountains and deep valleys. But nowadays aerial photographs provide us with minute information on every corner of the earth, and the blanks have disappeared from the globe.

Now that humankind has attained a greater scale of vision than ever before, we have come to view the earth as a single entity.

• Leaving the Land for the Sea

The meanings of the word "earth" include mother earth, land and soil. For most of our history, our images of the earth have always been associated with flat expanses of land. But the earth we see in the satellite pictures is spherical and the increasing use of the word "globe" is a reflection of this change in our image of the earth.

In view of this revolution in spatial perception arising from our ability to observe the earth from outer space, it is now time to move on from conventional world history to global history. Our world historical perspective must now embrace the whole planet.

Global history, however, is not simply the product of encyclopedic knowledge: it must arise from the comprehensive interpretation of the world from a global perspective. Rather than depending on the volume or profundity of knowledge, therefore, the global historical outlook rests on our ability to view the earth and its history as a whole.

Viewed from outer space, the earth is blue. This is because 70% of its surface is covered by water. For this reason, the earth is described as an aqueous planet. The remaining 30% is made up of large and small land masses. Although we tend to think of it as "terra firma," this land can be seen as nothing more than a large archipelago in a huge expanse of sea. The various large and small islands floating on this vast planet of water are the environment in which we have led our lives.

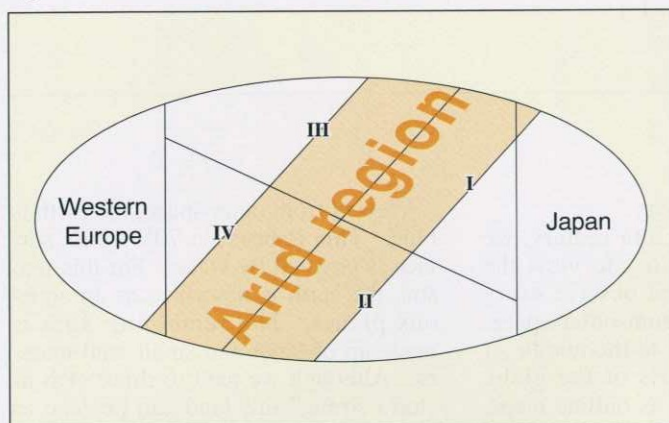
Since an island assumes the existence of water, which may either be an obstacle or serve as a bridge, it is appropriate that we broaden and deepen our historical perspective to encompass this whole network of islands linked by the sea. We need to look upon the land as a group of islands and the deepening of relationships among these islands as the formation of a network.

The time has come for history to move from the land to the sea. In the wake of the revolution in our spatial perception, this departure from the land into the vast seas of our blue planet is an inevitable development.

• Modern Civilization and Maritime Asia

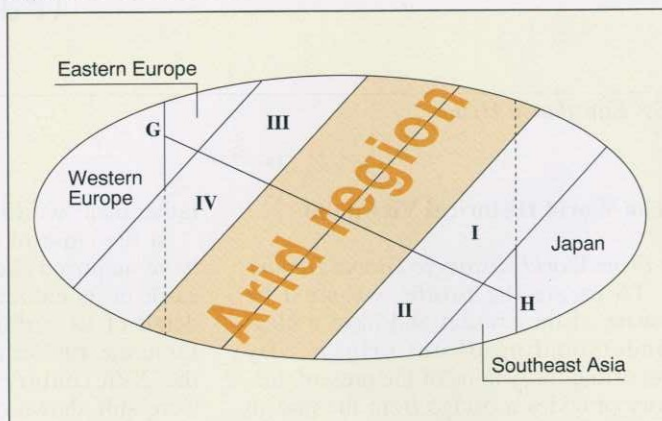
The contents and significance of this global view of history will naturally differ from the conventional West-centered perception of world history. This does not mean, however, that we should reject Western history. Particularly in the case of Japan, where modernization has been seen as almost synonymous with westernization, the rejection of the West would be tantamount to self-rejection. Certain aspects of the origins of contemporary Japan lie in Western history, which constitute part of that history. Western history thus forms part of our knowledge of ourselves and of general knowledge about Japan and the world. It is there-

Figure 1 Umesao Civilization Chart - A



Source: Umesao Tadao, *An Ecological View of History*

Figure 2 Umesao Civilization Chart - B



fore essential that we do not reject Western history but take its results fully into account.

Modern civilization is generally interpreted as having originated within feudal society in the West and expanded throughout the world. According to this interpretation, Britain first succeeded in achieving the transition from agriculture-based feudalism to industry-based capitalism. The other Western countries followed suit, and Japan followed up in the rear, gratefully receiving the benefits of Western civilization. But is this really what happened?

The essence of things comes from their origins. If we examine the origins of modern civilization without bias, we find that it did not in fact arise spontaneously from inside the West. The influence of other regions, particularly the seas of the East, in other words, maritime Asia was decisively important. Oriental culture was brought to the West via the sea route originating in maritime Asia and, as a result of its free use by the countries of the West, modern civilization came into being. Maritime Asia was the womb of modern civilization.

We can go even further and state that maritime Asia played a more decisive role than the West in the establishment of modern civilization in Japan. Located both in the Far East and the "Far West" from the standpoint of the West, Japan has been influenced by

both Western and Eastern cultures. For the birth of modern civilization in Japan, the influence of maritime Asia was an even more indispensable condition than that of the West. More precisely speaking, the modern civilizations that sprang up both in the West and in Japan were formed by their responses to the impact of maritime Asia. The aim of these essays is to demonstrate this.

Shifting Our Perspective from Land to Sea

Conventional history has focused on the workings of human society on land. Instead of this landlocked approach, I wish to examine history from a different perspective: the development of a network of islands linked by the sea. But first let us take a brief look at the views of history that have dominated Japanese scholarship in the post-war period.

• Historical Materialism and Ecological History

Post-war historical scholarship in Japan can be broadly divided into the historical materialism of the Marxist historians and the ecological history of the Kyoto School of historians. The basic premise of historical materialism is that human society in any region of the world will inevitably develop from feudal to capitalist society, and thence

to socialism or communism. The theory of historical materialism states that human beings can change the nature of society through the class struggle, while ecological history places emphasis on the environment as the main factor determining the development of human society.

In opposition to historical materialism, the Kyoto School historian Umesao Tadao advocated the ecological historical viewpoint in his *An Ecological View of History: Japanese Civilization in the World Context*. According to this study, a roughly equal power relationship existed between the nomadic societies of the arid region that stretched diagonally across the Eurasian Continent and the agricultural societies of the wet region. If anything, the nomadic societies were stronger than the agricultural societies and frequently invaded them. The history of the Eurasian Continent was the repetition of the power struggle between these two types of society. Only Western Europe and Japan avoided invasion by the nomadic societies. As a result, both achieved a smooth transition from a feudal society based on agriculture to a capitalist society based on industry.

This approach is based on the important insight that Europe and Japan achieved modernization side by side, as well as the recognition that, just as Europe was not Asia, neither was

Japan. Although these two historical theories are diametrically opposed, it is interesting to note that most of the scholars who advocated Marxist historical materialism – the main stream of the world historical outlook of the post-war Japanese – were from the University of Tokyo, while the scholars influenced by the theories of ecological history have tended to be from Kyoto University.

• *Landlocked Views of History*

However, both these views of history are full of contradictions. The aim of Marxist studies on the transition from feudalism to capitalism was the replacement of capitalism by socialism, but both the former Soviet Union and China have moved from planned economies to market economies and, bluntly speaking, are both aiming to achieve the transition from socialism to capitalism. Faced with this reality, faith in historical materialism has become an anachronism.

Ecological history, on the other hand, has almost nothing to say about Western Europe and Japan, which have respectively played the main role and a very important part in the development of the modern world. In *An Ecological View of History*, Umesao Tadao writes: "The primary region [Japan and Western Europe] is like a greenhouse that successfully escaped aggression and destruction at the hands of the secondary region [arid region], and its societies are like boxes in the greenhouse. I see them as having grown and developed comfortably to this day under these favorable conditions, renewing themselves several times in the process. In ecological terms, the primary region has steadily undergone the process of succession. In these places, we can interpret history as having developed through intra-societal forces, that is, by means of autogenic succession. In the secondary region, on the other hand, history was determined for the most part by extra-societal forces."

Japan and Europe thus sprouted modern societies like colonies of plants reaching the climax of a steady process

of succession. In what respects is this theory inadequate?

Umesao's model is firmly based on land: its constituent elements are of nomadic society and agricultural society. The sea is not included at all in the "Umesao Civilization Chart" (Figures 1 and 2). According to historical materialism, on the other hand, the basis of feudalism is land ownership and the basis of capitalism is ownership of the means of production. Therefore, historical materialism is also a land-based theory focusing on the changing relationships of land ownership. Ecological history and historical materialism are both landlocked views of history that fail to take account of the significance of the sea.

• *Importance of the Sea*

Is it really possible to explain the history of Europe and Japan without extending our viewpoint to the sea? The original model for the nation-state in Europe was the maritime city of Venice, and Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands and Britain were all great seafaring nations. Indeed, the history of modern Europe can be interpreted in terms of oceanic history from the "Mediterranean Age" to the "Atlantic Age."

The sea has been just as important in Japanese history. As studies such as Ueyama Shumpei's *Nihon no Seiritsu* (*The Formation of Japan*) and Okada Hidehiro's *Nihonshi no Taniyo* (*The Birth of Japanese History*) show, the seafaring inhabitants of the kingdom of Wa (the Chinese name for ancient Japan) played a decisive role in the formation of Japan as a nation.

After the destruction of a naval force from Wa by the Tang Chinese fleet in the Battle of Hakusukinoe in 663, the people of Wa disappeared from the scene, the Omi Code of laws was compiled, recognizing the position of the Emperor for the first time, Japan was officially given its name and, with the completion of the *Nihon Shoki* (*Chronicle of Japan*) in 720, the national identity of the Japanese was established.

The birth of Japan following the

defeat of Wa in the Battle of Hakusukinoe corresponds to its renewal under the massive external pressure of its defeat in the Pacific War. On both occasions, having lost control of the sea, Japan was forced to renew itself.

Early modern Japan's policy of national seclusion was also known as the sea embargo: there was a strong awareness of the need to protect the country against external pressure from across the sea. An entry in the *Nogyozensho* (Agricultural Encyclopedia) of 1697 reveals an acute sense of crisis regarding the outflow of wealth from Japan: "Every year many Chinese ships filled with all kinds of goods, even quite useless things, come to these shores to trade, turning the wealth of this nation into profit for theirs. How can we tolerate this? If the people of this country do not study the methods of agriculture, we shall be stripped of all our wealth."

The same sense of crisis is also apparent in a survey of the flow of wealth of the Imperial Court by the shogun's adviser, Arai Hakuseki (1657-1725): "The amount of gold we have sent abroad is equivalent to one-third of all the gold in this country. The amount of silver left in this country [Japan] is about twice the amount that has gone abroad... We can compare the gold and silver circulating in this world to the bones of the human body, while the other surplus wealth is like the blood, flesh, hair and skin. If the latter are lost or come to harm, they can grow again, but if the bones are broken and protrude from the body, they can never be replaced. Gold and silver are the bones of the world... If this country loses its bones, they will never grow back again."

• *Time to Adopt an Oceanic Historical Perspective*

Umesao Tadao is right in saying that Japan and the countries of Western Europe were never forced to capitulate to the nomads, but economic power is in no way weaker than military force. The economic power and market pressure brought to bear by seagoing peoples can be seen as forces equivalent to

Figure 3 Oceanic History of Civilization Model Chart 1

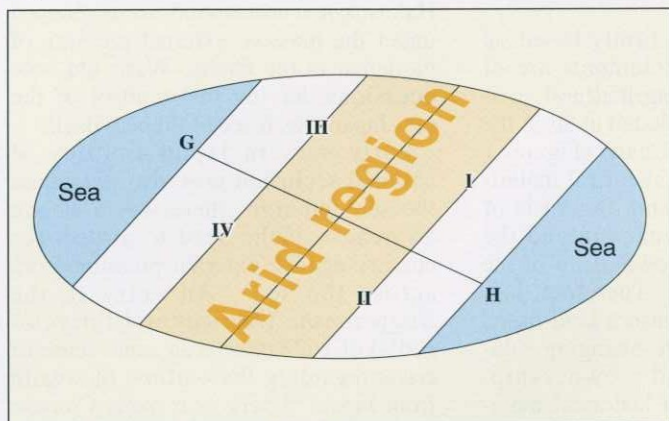


Figure 4 Oceanic History of Civilization Model Chart 2

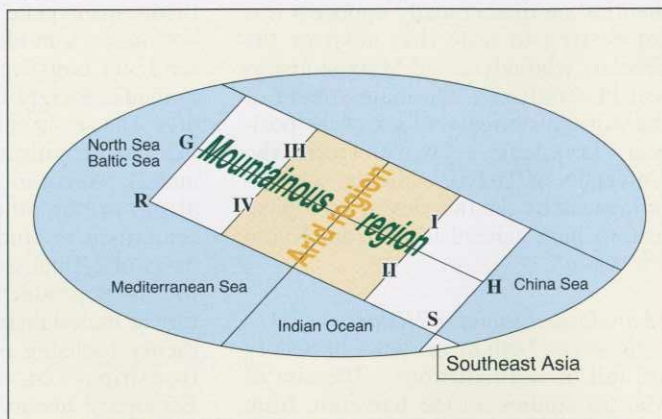
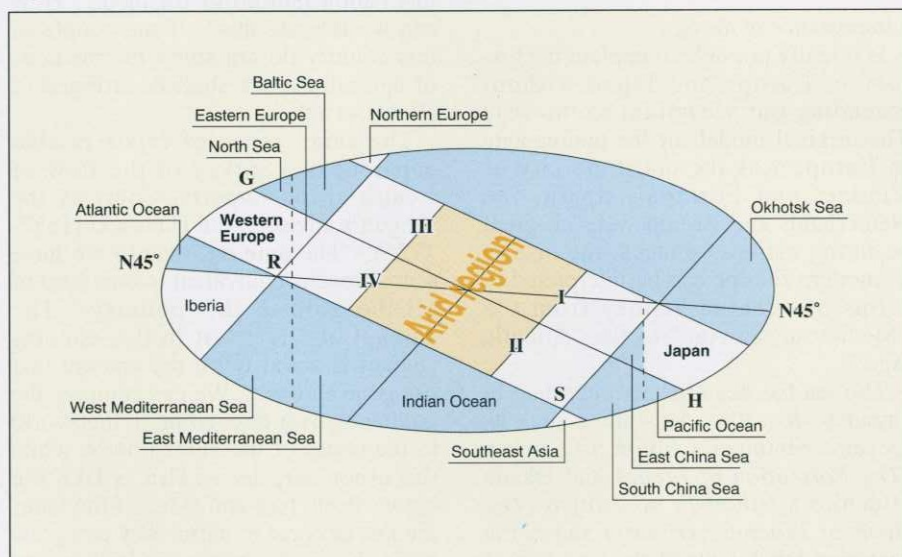


Figure 5 Oceanic History of Civilization Model Chart 3



Source: Kawakatsu Heita, *An Oceanic History of Civilization*

(or forests) and the timber transported by rivers to the coast, where boats were built. Rivers provided the links between mountains and sea. The appearance of the maritime peoples through these links between mountains, rivers and sea should be viewed, together with the appearance of farmers and nomads, as a new starting point in world history.

As I will argue during the course of these essays, since both Japan and Europe clearly received a strong impact from the sea, the time has come to adopt an oceanic rather than a land-based historical perspective. As a rough chart illustrating this oceanic perspective, I have added the sea to Umesao's model of the ecological history of civilization to create a model for the oceanic history of civilization (Figures 3, 4 and 5). JTI

(Continued in Part 2)

the fierce military power and violence of war wielded by the nomads. While Europe was pressured by "maritime Islam" in the Indian Ocean region, Japan was pressured by "maritime China" in the China Sea region. Europe and Japan have not renewed themselves and grown autogenically, as Umesao claims.

The "maritime Chinese" who put economic pressure on Japan were overseas Chinese merchants. Like all seafaring peoples, they were dynamic and strong – a force to be reckoned with.

The time has come to consider the fundamental principles of the relationships between the islands (land) linking these maritime peoples.

In the same way that the agricultural revolution gave rise to settled farmers and the livestock revolution to mobile nomads, it can be argued that the fishing revolution gave rise to maritime peoples who were both settled and mobile. The key to the fishing revolution was the invention of boats that made it possible to traverse the seas. Trees were cut down in the mountains

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