

Japanese Civilization (Part 12)

– Historical Periodization: A Fresh Look at Japan's Economic History –

By Kawakatsu Heita

Doesn't Historical Periodization Ever Change?

To get a bird's-eye view of where contemporary Japan is situated within the context of world history, one must focus broadly on the larger flow of historical events and conduct an orderly historical periodization. Theories of historical periodization seek to draw together all the different strands of historiography and weave them into a single tapestry.

The most orthodox historical periodization in contemporary historiography divides history into ancient history, the Middle Ages and modern history. This is the periodization adopted by Europeans, for whom history begins with the civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome. Europe's ancient history came to an end with the fall of the Roman Empire, which ushered in the Middle Ages (otherwise known as the "dark ages"). Then the classical revival of the Renaissance, a time when the natural sciences flourished, ushered in modern history. Such is the European view. And while some outstanding European historians have argued against the idea that the Middle Ages were a dark period, the basic tripartite periodization of Western history retains its appeal.

Japanese historians use those very same Western terms in periodizing Japanese history – ancient, medieval, early modern, modern and contemporary. Historians in post-war Japan have been profoundly influenced by Marxist materialism in working out this periodization. As the theory holds, ancient Japan featured slavery, medieval Japan had feudalism, early-modern Japan featured a transition from feudalism to capitalism and in modern Japan capitalism came to maturity. Go to a book store and browse through the various series on Japanese history and Japanese economic history put out by major publishers like Iwanami Shoten and the University of Tokyo Press. Or have a look at the 30-

volume *Nihon no Jidai-shi* (History of Japan's Historical Periods), which is currently being published by Yoshikawa Kobunkan. The "ancient-medieval-early modern" breakdown is used throughout, as if the different publications had all rolled off the same press. Upon further investigation, one will find that either the same influential people were among the editors for each of these publications, or a number of people from the same school of historiography were among the editors in each case.

Socialism was a powerful force in the 20th century, in the political world as well as in the ideological realm, but in the end it was unable to develop a new outlook and made a most ignominious exit from the stage of history. And the historical materialism upon which socialism was founded has also ended up in the dustbin of history. Both socialism and historical materialism were bankrupt by the end of the 20th century. To champion historical materialism today, 10 years after the collapse of the Cold War, is an anachronism, but that is nevertheless precisely to what many Japanese historians adhere. Historical materialism is so deeply embedded in Japanese academism that it will not easily be rooted out, and I believe that there are serious problems with the schoolbooks written by Japanese academics.

There is a series of historical monographs that has been extremely influential in shaping the historical view of the Japanese people; it sold so well, in fact, that it went through four editions in the 1960s through the mid-1970s. This was *Iwanami Koza Nihon Rekishi* (The Iwanami Series on Japanese History). The series includes a supplement entitled "Jidai Kubun-ron" (The Periodization of History), jointly authored by Toyama Shigeki and Nagahara Keiji. The authors were both editors of the series. As firm believers in historical materialism, the authors wrote: "At the risk of repeating our-

selves, historical materialism gives rise to the ideas of developmental periods and historical periodization. These ideas are hypotheses, just like any other scientific theory. Moreover, these hypotheses are recognized as an asset that is shared by the entire community of historians." This sentence is followed by a quote from Vladimir I. Lenin: "Historical materialism is a synonym for social science." And at the end of the monograph the authors note that they had received many helpful suggestions from their research group, which included such authorities as Ienaga Saburo, Ishimoda Sho, Sato Shin-ichi and Furushima Toshio. By throwing in this note, the authors show that their work had been vetted by some heavyweight historians.

In the latter half of the 1970s, Iwanami Shoten launched a second edition of its *Iwanami Koza Nihon Rekishi*. The editors for the second edition came from the same school of thought as their predecessors. A supplement to the series carries an article entitled "Hosoku Ninshiki to Jidai Kubun" (Recognizing Principles and Periodizing History), by Araki Moriaki, in which the author refers to the historical materialism set forth in Karl Marx's preface to *A Critique of Political Economy* as hallowed canon when he writes: "The establishment of the *bakuban* (shogunate and domain) system in early-modern Japan occurred as the result of a transition in the form of production from paternalistic slavery to serfdom. Toyotomi Hideyoshi's *Taiko Kenchi* (national survey of lands and their productivity capacity) were merely a compulsory enforcement of the transition." This idea was first put forward by Araki in the 1950s, and was here reaffirmed based on academic theories accumulated for more than 20 years.

A New Periodization is Needed

The usefulness of a Western-centered view of history has worn demonstrably thin. The same holds true with respect to historical materialism and class theory. We must open our eyes to new realities. It is time for us to free ourselves from the spell of historical materialism that has held sway for 50 post-war years. It is time to work out a new general theory of history – in effect, a new periodization – based on a view of history and new reference points that are in keeping with the age.

This paper treats “cultural and material complexes” as a key reference point. The essence of a society (i.e., material conditions without which a society could not exist) is its material complex. Since this concept is about material, as the term itself states, it can probably be regarded as materialism. But this term “materialism,” grating as it is upon the ear, is about “material” in name only. As typified by his theory of reification, Marx held that the products of our labor become commodities, and that people are controlled by commodity relations, which results in the fetishism of commodities. This, Marx argued, was the cause of alienation of man from man, and was to be avoided at all costs. Marx was primarily concerned about people.

Western thought treats the universe as dual in character, one aspect being spiritual and the other material. This duality in Christian thought treats the physical as something deeply sinful, and puts great stress on the spiritual. In his *German Ideology*, Marx criticized idealist philosophy, put forward by such thinkers as Immanuel Kant, Johann G. Fichte, Friedrich Schelling and Georg W. F. Hegel, that can be described as a paean to the spiritual. Marx cast aside religion, which stresses the spirit, as the opium of the people, and turned his attention to material conflicts of interest over the basic necessities, such as cloth-

ing, food and shelter. That is why people speak of idealism as opposed to materialism. But in actual fact, Marx’s ultimate concern was people.

The language of Marx’s “materialism” does not match up with the reality; we must distance ourselves from it. Therefore, I coined a new Japanese term, “*Kakubutsu-ron*,” in order to distinguish between true materialism and ersatz “materialism,” which has long been known in Japanese as “*Yuibutsu-ron*.” True materialism is a way of viewing society from a material perspective. True materialism seeks to identify the ideal relationship between nature, things and people. Other things exist on our planet besides people. There are other important things besides the rights and interests of people. Nature and things also have a reason for being. It ought to be possible to simultaneously preserve nature, conserve things and care for the needs of people. People the whole world over are calling for development that pays maximum attention to biological diversity and ecological sustainability.

Of these three elements which are derived from the requirement of the new reality – natural environment, things and human society – we should concentrate first on “things,” because a sound natural environment is a prerequisite for human survival. As environmental archeologist Yasuda Yoshinori and his associates have shown in a number of studies, conditions in the natural environment are intimately connected with the rise and fall of civilizations, but environmental change is extremely gradual as measured against the human lifespan. We are not unwilling to recognize the existence of “environmental history,” but the difference in time scale is too huge. When one becomes deeply involved with environmental issues, there is a strong tendency to veer off into geographic determinism (the idea that “human society is determined by

the natural environment”), or into environmental fundamentalism (the idea, for example, that “all human activity having any environmental impact whatsoever must be stopped”). Nevertheless, the anthropocentric view of history, that puts an emphasis on human subjectivity and is inclined to believe that “humans can remake the environment,” must be corrected.

We must cast aside both environmental fundamentalism and anthropocentrism, and concentrate on that which is in the middle path, somewhere between the natural environment and human society. We should be concentrating on the things that are produced on that land and used there by humans. And we should be concentrating on how such things change through the course of history.

The cultural and material complex is an appendage of the land and the natural environment where humans live. For the sake of communication, let us refer to this land and the natural environment as a “venue.” For life to be possible, there must necessarily be a venue. That venue is the land and the natural environment. It is the basis of all existence. Thus, that which we call a “venue” is the land and the natural environment, as well as the human life that occurs there. For life to be possible, there must be a basis that supports it, and that basis must consist of land and the natural environment, i.e., a “venue.” Where there is a “venue” for life, there will inevitably be a cultural and environmental complex.

Humans cannot turn the entire planet into a venue for life. Part of the planet is the “venue,” and there we spend our lives. The term “venue” can also be called “region.” Region is a part of the planet. On the basis of some certain criteria, the whole planet is divided into regions. There is thus a relationship between the whole (the planet) and a part (region) thereof. Without the

whole there would be no part; without the part, there would be no whole. The relationship between the two is well described in the phrase “in one there are many; the many are but one.” People live in many different venues. Over time, different ethnic groups have emerged, each with its own shared culture and society. Some say there are 3,000 such groups. Others put the number at 8,000. Taken as a whole, they constitute human society. The venue where these ethnically defined societies, taken as a whole, make up human society, is nature on a planetary scale.

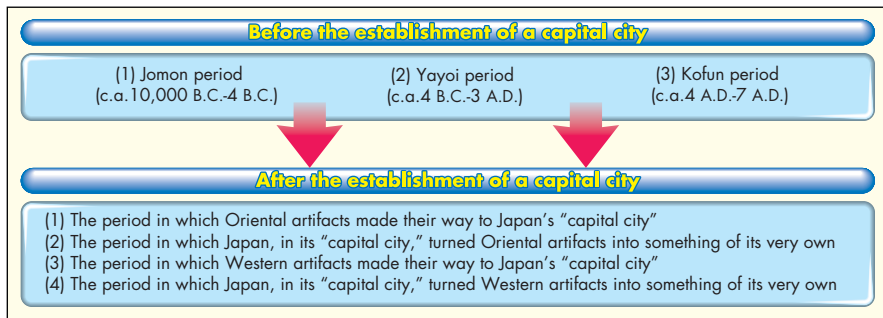
Key Indicators: “Venue” and “Cultural and Material Complexes”

It is very true, as the old Japanese saying goes, that “change of place brings change of character.” Once the “venue” changes, the material complex changes as well. In the West, the nucleus of the material complex is “livestock and wheat,” while in Japan it is “marine products and wet-rice paddies.” Every “venue” has its own “material complex.”

And it is also true that “passage of time brings change of character.” When the times change, so does the material complex. Most clothing during the Muromachi period (1392-1573) was made from hemp, but cotton became the most common type of cloth used for clothing in the Edo period (1603-1867). Japanese during the Edo period wore *kimonos*, but Western clothing is now the overwhelming choice of most people. In this manner, character changes with the passage of time.

The idea that “change of place brings change of character” is a spatial concept, while “passage of time brings change of character” is temporal. The “character” of human society at a given place and time must be periodized using true materialism. To see how the “character” of a given place will change as the times change is the perspective of the changing times. To put it in somewhat recondite terms, periodization is accomplished by looking at “venues” in space and time,

Table 1 Changes in the cultural and material complex of Japan



and by looking at changes in the “cultural and material complex” as they are reflected in changing venues.

Focusing on the Capital City

At the risk of repeating myself, when looking at changes in the material complex, the “venue” is the key. There is a central venue to the area in which human beings spend their lives. The four great civilizations are identified in terms of “venue.” The names of the Tigris-Euphrates Civilization, the Egyptian Civilization, the Yellow River Civilization and the Indus Civilization all indicate the “venues” where these ancient civilizations flourished. The “venue” (i.e., the place in time and space) that constitutes the center of Western civilization has shifted over the centuries, moving from Mesopotamia and Egypt to Athens (ancient history), from there to Rome (ancient history), then to Paris (early modern), London (modern) and New York (contemporary).

When the artifacts of “venue B” are added to the artifacts used in “venue A,” the cultural and material complex of “A” changes. Japan’s society has been influenced by all sorts of artifacts that made their way to Japan from overseas. The cultural and material complex of Japan has grown richer with the passage of time and the addition of foreign artifacts. In rough terms, those changes can be classified as in Table 1.

Japan has had a central “venue” throughout its recorded history. That central “venue” has been the capital city. Japan did not always have a capital city, and for that reason the periodization of Japanese history begins with the birth of

Japan’s first capital city. Thereafter, each move of the capital city from one place to another has marked the boundary between different periods.

Why is the capital city so important in the periodization of Japanese history?

First, what exactly is a capital city? News reports often use the names “London,” “Paris,” “Washington, DC” and “Tokyo” as pronouns referring to Britain, France, the United States and Japan, respectively. A capital city is truly “a country’s face.” Or, to be a bit more precise, a capital city is where a country’s governing agencies are located. Generally speaking, a capital city is home to that country’s head of state, in whom the political authority and political power of the state are vested.

In Japan, however, the situation has not always been quite that straightforward. During the Heian period (794-1192), after Japan came under the ruling power of regents, the emperor still had political authority but he did not have political power. Political power was in the hands of the Fujiwara clan, and later in the hands of military rulers. Authority and power were split. That has been the Japanese tradition since the Heian period. Still in post-war Japan, authority and power are split. Today’s emperor has authority (extending to absolutely no one), but he does not have power.

Authority or Power?

In Japan, with its separation of authority and power, authority and power have not always been located in the same place. The seat of authority (i.e., the emperor’s palace) was Kyoto from the Heian period through the Edo period, but the seat of power moved around,

Photo: Kobori Tomoto, 東京御着戴 (Emperor arriving in Tokyo) / Meiji Memorial Picture Gallery



The Meiji Emperor moved his residence from Kyoto to Tokyo after the Meiji Restoration

from Kyoto to Kamakura to Edo(now Tokyo). It is often said that “the capital was moved from Kyoto to Tokyo early in the Meiji period (1868-1912),” a reference to the fact that the Imperial family moved to Tokyo from the palace in Kyoto. This statement focuses on the seat of authority. But the shogun, in whom political power was vested, resided in Edo throughout the Edo period. When speaking of political power, the capital was not moved during the Meiji period. The seat of political power moved to Edo in 1603 when the Tokugawa *bakufu* (shogunate) was established, so it can also be said the capital of Japan was moved to Edo in the early 17th century.

The period from the establishment of the Tokugawa bakufu until the Meiji Restoration is sometimes called the Tokugawa period. This style of periodization is based on the name of the person holding political power. For reasons given below, I choose to focus on the capital city serving as the seat of political power, and thus speak of the “Edo period” rather than the “Tokugawa period.”

The period since the Meiji Restoration is generally subdivided into the Meiji period, Taisho period (1912-1926), Showa period (1926-1989) and Heisei period (1989-), with the period names coinciding with the name of the reigning emperor, but this sort of appellation is based on the Chinese idea that the emperor controls the time. Because I focus on the capital city, I prefer not to subdivide the period since the Meiji Restoration, but refer to this entire stretch as the “Tokyo period.”

Speaking of capital cities, the subject of “moving the capital’s functions” away from Tokyo has become something of a hot topic in recent years. The term “capital functions” refers to the ruling agencies in charge of the nation’s legislative, executive and judicial functions, i.e., the nation’s political power. In speaking of moving the “capital functions” away from Tokyo, the subject of the Imperial Palace is never mentioned. The seat of authority has nothing to do with it; all talk focuses strictly on the

seat of political power.

Which is more appropriately considered the capital city? Should it be the seat of authority? Or the seat of political power?

I think it should be the seat of political power. It is political power that has a direct impact on the daily lives of the nation’s citizens. Moreover, the nation’s citizens can also exert their influence upon the nation’s political power. In short, for the nation’s citizens, the seat of political power is more important than the seat of authority. For that reason, I refer to the seat of political power (i.e., the location of the capital functions) as the capital city.

The capital city has moved over the years from Nara to Heian, Kamakura, Muromachi, Edo and now Tokyo. Japan’s capital city has been moved a number of times over the centuries. To put it in another way, the “venue” constituting the nation’s center has changed many times.

Naming Japan’s historical periods after the capital city serving as the seat of political power is the most commonly accepted method of periodization in Japan. Thus we have the Nara period (710-784), Heian period, Kamakura

period (1192-1333), Muromachi period, Azuchi-Momoyama period (1568-1600) and Edo period. It is noticeable that this method of periodization is extremely natural to the Japanese people. That is why I conclude that we should not use such periodization schemes as “ancient Japan – medieval Japan – early modern Japan – modern Japan – contemporary Japan,” or “slavery – feudalism – capitalism – socialism.” I think we should go back to the periodization that is used by the great majority of the Japanese people. And because the capital of Japan since the Meiji Restoration has been Tokyo, I would also argue that referring to the entire period since the Meiji Restoration as the “Tokyo period” is also in line with the natural periodization instincts of the Japanese people. **JS**

(Continued in Part 13)

Kawakatsu Heita is a professor of economic history at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies in Kyoto. His books and articles have been published in both English and Japanese. He also serves as an advisor for various governmental bodies such as the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport.