

Chinese History and the Concept of “Early Modernities”

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Many historians have already discussed the propriety of using the words “early modern” in the periodization of non-European history¹. In this paper I shall make a small suggestion concerning the usage of this notion in Ming-Qing history. This paper consists of three parts. In the first part, I shall make a brief survey on how the words “kinsei (in Japanese)” and “jinshi (in Chinese)” have been used to indicate the “modern” or “early modern” periods in East Asian historiography, and investigate the reason why these notions have been regarded as controversial or ambiguous by many historians. The historical trends of the East and Southeast Asian trading world during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries will be outlined in the second part in order to show the common historical rhythm shared by most regions within this world. And in the last part, I shall discuss the possibilities and advantages of using the words “early modern” to show the common rhythm, common problems and different solutions seen in most parts of the world during this period.

The Concepts concerning “Early Modernities” in East Asian Historiography

Arguments on “kinsei” in early twentieth century Japan

The phrase “early modern (period)” is usually translated as “kinsei (literally, near ages)” in present day Japan while “modern (period)” is translated as “kindai (lit., near eras). In traditional literature, however, there was little difference in meaning between these words, both of which loosely expressed “near past” or “present day.” Naito Konan (1866-1934), a famous historian and professor of Kyoto University, was one of the first historians to use the word “kinsei” as an academic term in the periodization of Chinese history. In his famous article published in 1922², Naito enumerated the major changes in political, economic and cultural trends during the Tang-Song transition period, such as political centralization, development of cities and commercial economy, improvement in the conditions of the common people, innovations in scholarship and arts, and so forth. In his view, these changes were similar to those of the Renaissance in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe³. It should be noted that Naito did not strictly distinguish the word “kinsei” from “kindai.” In his lecture in

¹ For example, Asao (1991), Reid (1993a), the articles included in the special issue on “early modernities” in *Daedalus*, Vol.127, No.3, 1998, Goldstone (1998), and the articles by E. S. Rawski, J. A. Goldstone, Jonathan Hay, and Lynn Struve included in Struve(2004).

² “Gaikatsu-teki To-So Jidai-kan (a general view of the Tang and Song periods)” in Naito, *Works*, Vol. 8.

³ Naito, *Shina-ron* (a discourse on China), 1914, in Naito, *Works*, 5.

1928⁴, he used the term “kindai” to mean the “period of the development of the common people” after the Song, in the very same manner that he used “kinsei” in his earlier articles. This fact shows that the meanings of “kinsei” and “kindai” at that time had not yet been differentiated as they are in present day Japan.

Naito’s theory on Chinese “kinsei” is considered to have been formed around 1910 through the interchange among some historians teaching in Kyoto University⁵. For example, Uchida Ginzo (1872-1919), a colleague of Naito’s in Kyoto University, published a book entitled “Nihon kinsei-shi (a modern history of Japan)” in 1903. In that book, he argued that Japanese “kinsei” began in the early seventeenth century, when the Tokugawa Shogunate established its control over Japan. As the basis of his argument, he pointed out that the marked changes could be found in late-sixteenth to early-seventeenth century Japan, such as the development of Confucian scholarships, growth of urban commerce and manufacturing, improvement in the living standard of common people, the unification of Japan by Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi and the trends of political centralization under these powerful leaders, etc. (Uchida 1975: 157-162). It is obvious that the indicators of “kinsei” in Uchida’s theory were very similar to those of Naito’s. Their theories on the periodization of East Asian history seem to have been formed influencing each other. The main characteristics of their “kinsei” theory can be reduced to the following points.

Firstly, they endeavored to find in East Asian history a macroscopic development of society and culture transcending mere alternations of dynasties. The attention to the macroscopic development may be said to have been the common characteristic of the new historiography in Meiji Japan. In Paul Cohen’s words, they were “discovering history” in East Asia.

Secondly, their indicators of periodization were mainly derived from European history, as their comparing of East Asian “kinsei” to the European Renaissance clearly showed. We could say that they were simply searching for parallels with European modernity in East Asian history. Nevertheless, their theories rarely give us the impression of Euro-centrism, because they were not arguing that East Asian countries were “peculiar” or “backward” compared with the European model. Rather, they showed how the historical developments in East Asia were similar to or even more advanced than those of Europe.

On this point, Naito and Uchida differed from the reformers of the Early Meiji era such as Fukuzawa Yukichi and Taguchi Ukichi, who advocated the “history of civilization.” It was obvious for those reformers that the West was ahead in universal civilization and that East Asian countries should endeavor to catch up with the West as rapidly as possible. Instead of finding modernity in East Asian traditional societies, they regarded the past regimes as obstacles to modernization. For those champions of modernization, the more significant

⁴ Naito, “Kindai Shina no Bunka Seikatsu (cultural life in modern China),” Naito, *Works*, Vol. 8.

⁵ For the process of their interchange, see Yoshimori Kensuke’s rich article (Yoshimori 2001).

epoch of history was in the nineteenth century when East Asian countries experienced the Western impact and not in the autogenetic development in the tenth or seventeenth centuries. Unlike those activists, Naito and Uchida were not much impressed by the Western impact on East Asia in the nineteenth century. This may be the third characteristic of their historical views.

Fourthly, their methods of historiography were basically those of humanities. This feature makes a sharp contrast with that of Marxist historians, who professed themselves to be social scientists and became influential in later decades. Though Naito and Uchida were not exclusively specialized in cultural history, they are often regarded as having been members of the “Kyoto school of cultural history (Kyoto bunka shigaku).” They attached importance to culture in a broad sense including social atmosphere, while Marxist historians regarded modes of production as an almost exclusive indicator of their periodization.

Lastly, Naito and Uchida shared the viewpoint of cultural interchange transcending the national framework. It was Naito’s cherished opinion that Japanese history should be studied not from the Japan-centered perspective, but from the viewpoint of the East Asian world centered on China. This opinion of Naito’s might be highly esteemed by today’s “post modern” historians because of its opposition to national history, but it was fraught with serious problems in the political situations of those days. Because Naito regarded political independence as being less important than cultural development and had confidence in the capacity of the Chinese people to assimilate foreign cultures with theirs, he did not think that the non-Han peoples’ conquests of China exerted an unfavorable influence on China. According to him, Japan’s control over China should not be criticized, for it would benefit Chinese people⁶. Naito’s theory did not sympathize with nationalist movements in twentieth century China.

The words “kinsei (jinshi)” and “kindai (jindai)” in China and Japan

Now we shall take a glance at the usage of terms concerning “modern” in late Qing China. According to Fang Qiumei, who studied the usage of the words “jinshi (the Chinese pronunciation of the same characters for kinsei in Japanese)” and “jindai (kindai in Japanese)” in the late Qing and Republican periods, Chinese historians accepted the words “jinshi” and “jindai” through the Japanese historians’ works including translations of Western historiography (Fang 2004). Before the 1920s, the usage of the word “jinshi” was far more common than that of “jindai.” For example, Liang Qichao in his article written in 1901⁷ divided Chinese history into three stages: the period before the unification by the Qin in the

⁶ On this point, Masubuchi Tatsuo’s thoughtful criticism on Naito’s views is worth reading (Masubuchi 1982). But Tanigawa Michio in his recent article (2001) argued that Masubuchi did not fully understand Naito’s thought.

⁷ Liang, “Zhongguo-shi xulun (an introduction to Chinese history)” in *Yinbingshi wenji*, Vol. 6. This article included his first attempt to periodize Chinese history.

third century B. C. as “shangshi (lit., upper ages),” the long imperial period from the Qin unification to the mid-eighteenth century as “zhongshi (lit., middle ages), and the period after the mid-eighteenth century as “jinshi (lit., near ages). According to Liang, the “shangshi” was the period of struggles within China while the “zhongshi” was the period of interchanges and struggles between China and other Asian peoples. And the “jinshi” was the period of interchanges and struggles between Asian peoples (including Chinese) and Westerners. At the same time, “jinshi” was the epoch in which the two-thousand-year-old autocracy gradually gave way to national constitutional government. Although Liang Qichao used the word “jinshi,” that is, the same characters as “kinsei,” his periodization was not the same as that of Naito, who found “modern ages” in the trend of political centralization after the Song. Chinese imperial autocracy was regarded by Liang as a most obstinate enemy of modernization, in spite of (or just because of) its intangible and indirect nature as compared with pre-modern European regimes⁸.

We can differentiate two patterns in the usage of the words “kinsei (jinshi)” in East Asian historiography in the early twentieth century. One was the view that identifies the Renaissance-like “modernity” in the evolutionary process of traditional societies, and the other was the view that finds “modernity” in the processes of the collapse of traditional regimes and the efforts towards westernization. The activists pursuing political and social reforms tended to accept the latter view, for reformist passion and the view of the past as the dark ages are usually two sides of the same coin.

Next we shall mention briefly the word “kindai (jindai),” another translation of “modern” in Japanese and Chinese. The word “kindai (jindai)” does not seem to have been very commonly used before the 1920s. But after the 1920s, Chinese scholars began to prefer “jindai” to “jinshi,” and in the 1940s most of the historical works dealing with the period after the late Qing came to have titles including the word “jindai” instead of “jinshi” (Fang 2004). The same trend can be found in Japan during the first half of the twentieth century. Thus, was there any difference in meaning between “kinsei (jinshi)” and “kindai (jindai)” at that period? Although some of the scholars in those days used these two words without any distinction, there certainly existed some difference in the usage of these two words.

According to Yanabu Akira, it was not until the 1950s that the word “kindai” established its usage as an academic term for periodization in Japanese academic circles (Yanabu 1982: 51-52). Thus, what did this word mean in the pre-war period? Yanabu noticed that the word “kindai” tended to be connected with words such as “Western Europe (Seio),” “culture (bunka)” and “science (kagaku).” We can point out some characteristics in the usage of the word

⁸ For Liang’s argument on the “intangible (or indirect) autocracy” of China, see his “Zhongguo zhuangzhi zhengzhi jinhua shilun (a discourse on the evolution of Chinese autocracy,” (1902) in *Yinbingshi wenji*, Vol.9. Of course it cannot be said that all Chinese historians periodized Chinese history in the same way as Liang Qichao did. For example, some scholars regarded the Yuan or the Ming as the beginning of Chinese “jinshi” or “jindai” (Fang 2004).

“kindai (jindai)” as compared with “kinsei (jinshi)” in Japan and China during the pre-war period.

Firstly, “kindai (jindai)” had a nuance more westernized than “kinsei (jinshi).” It gave East Asian intellectuals and common people an impression of otherness, while Naito and Uchida’s “kinsei” had already become a part of their own history. “Kindai” was a word that reminded people about the Western influence and power they had been faced with since the Western impact in the nineteenth century. Whether East Asian people admired or rejected it, the word “kindai” would rouse strong emotions among them.

Secondly, “kindai (jindai)” was more often used in adjectival (for example, kindai-teki) or verbal (for example, kindai-ka) contexts than as a noun. In sentences such as “Mr. A’s thought is more modernized than Mr. B” or “we must learn modern science to modernize our family life,” the word “kindai (jindai)” was used almost exclusively, while “kinsei (jinshi)” was still prevailing as the term for historical periods. The word “kindai (jindai)” worked as a scale to measure people’s character and behavior though they did not necessarily all agree on what modernity meant.

Thirdly, the notion of “kindai (jindai)” was inseparable from value judgment by the people. This does not mean that all people had positive views on “kindai (jindai).” For some Japanese intellectuals, “kindai” was the root of Japan’s confusion, anxiety, and predicaments after the Meiji restoration, and should be conquered by a new value originated from Asia or Japan.

In any case, the notion of “kindai (jindai)” was strongly related to the pressure of modernization (i.e., westernization) felt by East Asian people after the Western impact. The word “kindai (jindai)” was a much more western-conscious and value-loaded word than “kinsei (jinshi)” was. It is natural that the word “kindai (jindai)” gradually replaced “kinsei (jinshi)” as the name of the period after the mid-nineteenth century. Especially in the activist pattern of periodization, which attached importance to the Western impact, the word “kindai (jindai)” became more commonly used than “kinsei (jinshi).” Though originally there was no difference in meaning between “kinsei (jinshi)” and “kindai(jindai)” in traditional literature, and both of them were adopted as translations of the same word “modern,” these two words came to be used in different meaning by the mid-twentieth century.

In the People’s Republic of China, the word “jinshi” seems to have given way to “jindai” by the 1950s. There are a few historians who use “jinshi” as a periodization term⁹, but the notion of “jinshi” does not seem to have been accepted by the majority of historians. In postwar Japan, unlike China, the word “kinsei” has been widely used not only in academic

⁹ For example, Tang Lixing in his book entitled *Shangren yu Zhongguo Jinshi Shehui* (Merchants and Chinese Modern Society) defines “jinshi” as a period from the sixteenth century to the 1920s, the main indicator of “jinshi” being the sprout and maturity of mercantile capitalism (Tang 1993: 34). Chen Xuewen also uses the word “jinshi” to show the period from the mid-sixteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries (Chen 1991:7).

circles, but also in everyday life. But it is doubtful whether this word still maintains the lively significance it once had. We shall briefly examine the present condition of this term in Japanese historiography.

Ambiguity and Controversy of the concept of “kinsei”

Most postwar Japanese historians conventionally use five words as terms for periodization: “kodai (ancient),” “chusei (medieval),” “kinsei (early modern),” “kindai (modern)” and “gendai (contemporary).” In this periodization, the position of “kinsei” is rather ambiguous¹⁰. In fact, this periodization is not based on one consistent principle but rather an expedient amalgam of the two views on “modernity” mentioned above, that is, the view finding “modernity” in the evolutionary processes of traditional society, and the view regarding the western impact as the beginning of “modernity.” “Kinsei” is an unintended product of the friction between these two “modernities.”

A famous controversy on the periodization of Chinese history developed in the 1950s and 1960s can be understood as a clash between these two views. In this controversy, the so-called “Kyoto school” supported Naito’s view regarding the period after the Song as “kinsei(modern),” while the “Historical Science Society group (Rekiken-ha)” argued that the Song to Qing periods, in which the “feudal” mode of production prevailed, should never be termed “modern.”¹¹ Of course the difference in their research methods (i.e., the humanities of the Kyoto school and the historical materialism of the Marxist historians) was an important factor of this controversy, but their different views on “modernity” might have been important as well. The Marxist historians in postwar Japan were direct descendants of activists in the early twentieth century in that they regarded the western impact as the beginning of the modern period.

This controversy ceased in the 1970s without any clear conclusion, and nowadays most historians seem to use the word “kinsei” simply for convenience without serious periodizational meaning. It appears that controversies on periodization have become obsolete. As a result, the word “kinsei” has gradually become an empty concept that is nothing more than another term of the Tokugawa period or the post-Tang-Song- transition period. This might be regarded as natural, because few of us believe that there is only one correct scientifically testified periodization. Nevertheless, we must admit that it is very difficult for us to identify macroscopic trends in history without any notion of periodization.

Can we bring about a revival of the concept of “kinsei (early modern)” again in our historiography? Before I try to show my methods of illustrating “early modern history” in the next part, I shall note some challenges facing the attempts of periodization today¹².

¹⁰ Asao Naohiro’s article about the concept of “kinsei” in Japanese historiography reveals to us the complexity and rich implications of this word (Asao 1991).

¹¹ For the process of this controversy, see Miyazawa (1993).

¹² For some of these challenges, see Wong (1997: Introduction).

The first is the problem of similarities and diversities. In the past attempts of periodization in non-European history, scholars including Naito, Uchida and Marxist historians endeavored to find similarities to the European model in non-European societies. We are now aware of Euro-centrism hidden behind these efforts. Thus is it possible for us to treat with similarities and diversities among regions and countries on a more equal footing?

The second is the problem of continuity and innovation. The ambiguity of the concept of “kinsei (early modern)” is partly caused by its position between “medieval” and “modern.” Should “kinsei” be understood as the last stage of a traditional period or the period of immature modernity? How can we escape from the trap of a teleological view of history and properly consider the problems of contingency and multiple possibilities in the historical processes of this period?

The third is the problem of the proper unit of historical analyses. If the nation-states are not necessarily suitable research units of early modern history¹³, what unit should replace them? Should we choose some integrated area as the only “proper” unit of our analyses?

To sum up, the problem is whether we can make meaningful periodization of non-European history without such analytical tools as the European model, teleological development scenario, and national framework. I shall try to answer this question in the last part of this paper.

An outline of “early modern” history in East and Southeast Asia

In the second part of my paper, I would like to give a rough outline of the early modern history of East and Southeast Asia. Here by the words “early modern” I mean the period from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century according to a rather common notion in recent historiography. We can identify a common historical rhythm within the trading world of East and Southeast Asia in the early modern period, but this does not mean that each part of this world changed in the same way. In fact, various parts of this trading world, for example, Japan, China, and Southeast Asian countries, showed very different patterns of state formation in this period responding to the changing situation at that time. Nevertheless, I would like to argue that these countries were faced with common problems that arose out of the turbulence in the sixteenth century, and tried to answer these problems in their different ways. In this sense, they shared a common historical rhythm of the same historical period.

We shall divide the whole “early modern” period into three phases in order to illustrate the common historical rhythm found in the trading world of East and Southeast Asia.

The Turbulent Age: The 1500s to the 1630s

¹³ Perhaps Wallerstein (1974) and Skinner (1977) were most influential in destroying our national framework, though their “proper” units differed greatly each other.

The sixteenth century was a turbulent age in East and Southeast Asia. Chronic warfare was rife everywhere, especially around the periphery of the Ming empire. The most taxing problems of the mid-sixteenth century Ming government were “northern Mongols and southern Japanese (beilu-nanwo)” as the Ming people called them. Both problems seem to have reached their peak in the 1550s, when almost annually Mongols invaded north China across the Great Wall, and Japanese pirates raided and plundered the east coast of China virtually unchecked.

At the same time the Japanese Islands were in the midst of a civil war in which strong landlords were struggling to achieve the great enterprise of the reunification of Japan. Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who succeeded in this enterprise, went further by invading Korea as the first step of his ambition to occupy China. In Southeast Asia, newly rising Muslim leaders were struggling against European powers for command of the trading world in the South China and Java Seas. And, on the northeast border of China, many leaders of the Jurchen tribes were competing fiercely to gain regional leadership.

These areas can be referred to as a warfare belt surrounding Ming China. We should note that this warfare belt did not consist of poor areas but of a string of areas enjoying an unprecedented trade boom. The Chinese periphery at this time was like a hot melting pot, attracting people from many areas to mix together in its flourishing markets.

On the Mongol front, many Chinese found their way beyond the Great Wall and constructed Chinese-style cities in the steppes under Mongol rule. The kingdom built by Altan Khaghan, a powerful leader of Mongols in the mid-sixteenth century, was not a pure nomadic regime but an “agro-nomadic kingdom” that included many Han peasants¹⁴. In the South Seas, it is well documented that most of the so-called Japanese pirates were actually Chinese¹⁵. In 1564, a Ming official by the name of Zheng Xiao lamented in the preface of his book on foreign affairs that nowadays Chinese people entered barbarian areas while in times past barbarians entered the Middle Kingdom¹⁶. As an expert on boundary problems, he was aware that the wars in the contemporary border regions were different from simple invasions by barbarians in past dynasties.

The situation of “mixture of ethnicities” was seen everywhere in East and Southeast Asia during this period. As Anthony Reid vividly illustrates, Europeans, Chinese, Japanese, and natives intermingled in the port cities of Southeast Asia during the “boom years” of 1570-1630¹⁷. And in Manchuria, Jurchens, Mongols, Chinese, and Koreans lived and interacted together (Iwai 1996/2005).

¹⁴ The word “agro-nomadic kingdom” (in Japanese, “boku-no okoku”) was first used by Hagiwara Junpei (Hagiwara 1980: 216, etc.).

¹⁵ Some historians remind us that we should not presume today’s notion of nationality when we discuss the proportion of “Japanese” or “Chinese” in “Japanese pirates.” For example, see Murai (1993).

¹⁶ Zheng (1933: 2). For more detailed analysis of this phrase, see Iwai (1996/2005).

¹⁷ Reid (1993b), especially Chapter 2 and Chapter 4.

Why, then, did markets in this period flourish not in the heartland of mainland China but on its periphery? To answer this question, we shall take a glance at the flow of silver at that time. South America and Japan were the two major centers of silver production in the world during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The quantity of silver flowing into southeast China from Japan and from America via Manila rapidly increased from the mid-sixteenth century (Atwell 1982). China was one of the main absorbers of world silver in this period. It is estimated that, in the early years of the seventeenth century, 75 to 150 metric tons of silver, which was about one fifth to one third of the world's annual silver production, flowed into the trading world centered on China and circulated within this vast market¹⁸. The impact of foreign silver on the Chinese economy was, however, not a simple one.

The reign of the Wanli emperor (1573-1620) was characterized by urban development, an increase in market production, and the accumulation of wealth by high officials and important merchants. In the academic circles of mainland China, many articles have been devoted to “the sprouts of capitalism” in this period. It is indisputable that the inflow of silver from overseas stimulated this economic change. Nevertheless, if we were to regard this as a period of prosperity and economic expansion, we would risk ignoring the economic predicament of the people of that time. Rice prices did not rise until the 1610s or 1620s in spite of the abundant silver inflow (Kishimoto 1997:226), and complaints about low prices and the scarcity of silver were common in late sixteenth-century China. A Ming official named Guo Zizhang wrote in the 1580s:

Nowadays the whole empire is suffering from bad harvests, but grain prices are decreasing. Nowadays the whole empire is suffering from low grain prices but people are starving. The reason for the grain prices is not the abundance of grain but the scarcity of silver. Because silver is scarce, people have to sell a lot of grain at a cheap price to pay their taxes [in silver], so grain is insufficient, and people are worse off by the day. (Guo 1987)

This fact suggests that the expanding trade and inflow of silver did not automatically lead to a prosperous domestic economy. Why, then, did ordinary Chinese suffer from a scarcity of money in spite of the abundance of imported silver?

Both the “northern Mongols and southern Japanese” are closely related to the flow of silver within the Ming Empire. To provide for military bases to combat the Mongols, the Ming government sent at least 2 to 4 million taels of silver annually to the northern borders (Chuan and Li 1972). The quantity of silver sent to the northern borders was roughly the

¹⁸ Many historians have tried to estimate the volume of silver imported to China in the seventeenth century. This figure is based on my own estimate. See Kishimoto(1998).

same as that of silver imported into China annually. Like a merciless pump, the Ming government sucked taxes in silver from landowners all over China and channeled the money to the north. The intense need for silver to pay taxes in rural areas created a strong demand for foreign silver. Although the Ming government prohibited people from engaging in maritime trade, it could not block the torrent of foreign silver carried into China by “Japanese pirates” violating the maritime ban.

Around 1567, the Ming government lifted the maritime ban along the southeast coast, but the inflow of silver was still not sufficient to benefit the vast rural areas of China. Landowners and peasants continued to complain about the drain of silver through the tax collecting system. Where had the silver gone? It was believed that some of the silver flowed across the border to Mongolia, but the amount seems to have been only a small portion of the total sum of the tax collected. It seems certain that not a little portion of the silver fell into the hands of high-ranking officials, soldiers, and important merchants, who sucked wealth from the financial system of the Ming. The unprecedented riches of officials and merchants astonished the ordinary people of sixteenth century China. The cities they inhabited became islands of prosperity that stood in painful contrast to rural areas stricken by poverty.

We should note that silver distribution was very unequal not only among social ranks but also among regions in the late Ming period. The interior of China chronically suffered from a severe silver shortage, because the Ming government imposed a heavy tax in silver on the inland areas and brought this silver every year to the northern Mongol border far away. Silver was accumulated in the northern border regions and promoted the flourishing trade in these areas. At the same time, keen demand for silver in the inland areas caused a trade boom along the southeast coastal regions, where foreign silver was accumulated to be exchanged for Chinese commodities such as silk and porcelain. Rough but profitable markets developed in the northern and southern peripheries of Ming China. The warfare belt already mentioned was, at the same time, a silver belt, which was a magnet for people pushed out of the impoverished areas of inland China.

In spite of the important role of state finance in the economy as a whole, the Ming government gradually lost its control over society. The exploitative system of Ming finance provoked the local peoples' antipathy against the central government. The growing scale of state finance, instead of strengthening the power of the state, provided new opportunities for officials and soldiers to accumulate private wealth and power at public expense. Some of these private powers benefited from the trade boom in the northern and southeastern peripheries and grew into semi-independent military groups. The authority of the Ming in the world of East and Southeast Asia was lost during this turbulent age. The Ming dynasty was no longer the powerful center of Chinese world order that it had once been. Some of the powers that newly emerged in the warfare-silver belt surrounding China were to establish powerful new states that constituted the world of East and Southeast Asia in the post-Ming

period.

Now let us make a brief survey of the emerging new powers in the early seventeenth century. In the very early seventeenth century, Japan came under the dominion of the Tokugawa Shogunate, which was to rule Japan until the mid-nineteenth century. While the Ming government gradually lost control over Chinese society, two large powers were emerging in its north and south: one was the Manchu power, which founded the Qing dynasty in 1636 in Manchuria, and the other was the maritime overlordship led by the Zheng family that dominated the trade in the South China Sea. And in Southeast Asia, smaller in scale but powerful port-states led by Buddhist or Muslim kings were flourishing, for example, Pegu and Ayutthaya on the mainland, and Aceh, Banten, Makassar, and others in the Islands. Anthony Reid calls them “absolutist states” in Southeast Asia (Reid 1993b: Chapter 4).

It should be noted that these new powers more or less had certain characteristics in common as follows: open and multiethnic character, deep involvement in foreign trade, and high social fluidity accompanied by severe strife among various groups. In Japan, there were many Chinese, Koreans, and Europeans living together with Japanese in the port cities during the first 30 years of the Tokugawa period, when the Tokugawa Shogunate vigorously promoted foreign trade. Arano Yasunori draws our attention to this situation of multiethnic coexistence, in which foreigners not only contributed to daimyos (feudal lords)’ government with their technical skill such as literacy, medicine, engineering, and so forth, but also had great influence on the style of everyday life and popular culture (Arano 1987: 195-213). Although the civil war among the powerful daimyos ended around 1615, the Tokugawa family was still struggling to establish legitimacy and power over rivaling daimyos.

In Manchuria, too, the Manchu power emerged from a multiethnic environment of the peripheral market. Nurhaci, the founder of the Jin (later Qing) dynasty, was a military leader as well as a merchant who traded in northern staples such as ginseng and fur with Mongols, Koreans, and Han-Chinese. The ruling class of the Qing dynasty consisted not only of Manchus, but also of Mongols and Han-Chinese. When Hong Taiji came to the throne of the Great Qing Empire in 1636, leaders of Mongols and Han-Chinese as well as Manchus participated in the ceremony, which symbolized that he was the emperor not only of the Manchus, but also of Mongols and Han-Chinese (Ishibashi 1994). It was necessary for Hong Taiji to join hands with Mongol and Han military groups in order to survive the severe strife among the powerful Manchu leaders. According to Mark Elliott, the expansion of the Mongol and Chinese divisions of the Eight Banners under the reign of Hong Taiji contributed to “the creation of a new polyethnic “Qing” state by providing a home for Mongol, Han-Chinese, Korean and other adherents” (Elliott 2001: 64).

On the southeast coast of China, the Zheng family’s power was also based on the cosmopolitan maritime complex of Chinese, Japanese, and Europeans. Zheng Zhilong was married to a Japanese woman in Hirado and she was the mother of Zheng Chenggong, later

known as Koxinga. The power of the Zheng family was based on the multiethnic trading network covering the East and South China seas.

European advisers, Japanese troops, and Chinese merchants played important roles in the government of the “absolutist” kings in Southeast Asia, too. It should be noted that new weapons, technologies, and wealth gained through the foreign trade and the contact with foreign groups were crucial for newly emerging powers to survive the severe competition in the warfare belt in this period. It was an age of ceaseless war, but at the same time an age of multiethnic coexistence.

Crises and the “Inward Turn”: The 1630s to the 1680s

This situation changed greatly in the mid-seventeenth century, where the trade boom ended rather abruptly. Some scholars attribute this change to a series of natural calamities and the decrease of silver inflow into Asia, and call it “the seventeenth-century crisis” in East and Southeast Asia¹⁹. The trade boom ended, and the new powers were faced with the limits of economic expansion.

The patterns of response to this crisis differed from country to country. Japan adopted a so-called seclusion policy in the 1630s and began to establish a rather closed system²⁰. As Japanese silver mines were exhausted, Japan could no longer play an active role in the trading world of East and Southeast Asia. A quasi-autarkic economic system was formed after the late seventeenth century. After the enforcement of the “seclusion policy,” only Dutch and Chinese were allowed to trade at Nagasaki. They were isolated in a foreigners-only settlement, and could no longer live with Japanese people. Children of non-Japanese parents were expelled from Japan, and Japanese port cities were no longer places of multiethnic interaction. During the Tokugawa period, Japanese people came to believe that Japan was a monoethnic nation almost entirely consisting of pure Japanese. Foreigners who remained in Japan were assimilated into Japanese society through the forced adoption of Japanese language, names, manners and customs (Arano 1987).

William Atwell emphasizes that during the mid-seventeenth century both China and Japan experienced severe economic problems such as great famine and monetary difficulties, and that Tokugawa officials were able to cope with those problems but their Ming

¹⁹ For the debate on the “seventeenth-century crisis” in Asia, see the articles by J. F. Richards, A. Reid, W. S. Atwell, and N. Steensgaard published in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.24, No.4, 1990.

²⁰ The word “seclusion” (“Sakoku” in Japanese) was not used until 1801, when a Japanese interpreter in Nagasaki translated a chapter of a book written by E. Kaempfer and entitled it “Sakoku-ron (A discourse on the seclusion policy).” In the recent trend of reconsideration of foreign policies of Tokugawa Japan, many historians stopped using this word because Japan was not “secluded” from international relations in this period (as an early and typical example of the reconsideration of the concept of “sakoku,” see Toby 1984). By this word, I do not mean that Tokugawa Japan was completely secluded, but I do think the Tokugawa regime after the 1630s was “closed” compared with China and Southeast Asian countries in this period.

counterparts were not (Atwell 1986: 223-244). It is very interesting that the Tokugawa government tightened its political and economic control all over the country during this period of crisis while Ming could not do so, but we should note not only the abilities of the ruling class but also the long-term trajectories of these two regimes. The Tokugawa Shogunate was a new power that emerged from the booming silver belt around China in the late sixteenth century, while the Ming was losing its control over the peripheries through this trade boom. It was just at the very end of the boom that the Ming dynasty collapsed, but by the mid-seventeenth century the decay in imperial administration had advanced for years side by side with the expansion of foreign trade. Thus, we may regard the end of the economic boom as the coup de grace. If we compare Tokugawa Japan with the Qing, another new power that emerged from the trade boom simultaneously with the Tokugawa Shogunate, what similarity and contrast do we find between the two?

In April 1644 Beijing fell to the rebel army led by Li Zicheng, which originated in the economically devastated area to the northwest. Interestingly, the rule of post-Ming China was not established by Li Zicheng's peasant army, but was battled for by the commercial-military powers from the silver belt surrounding China---the Qing and the Zheng family. The Qing forces expelled Li Zicheng from Beijing shortly after the fall of the Ming and occupied mainland China by 1645. The Qing government reinforced the maritime ban in the mid-1650s, and in 1661 enforced the coastal evacuation policy to blockade the southeast coast against the Zhengs. These policies caused serious economic difficulties in China during the early Kangxi era. Many observers wrote about the "unprecedented poverty," "starving amidst the low grain prices," "rapid impoverishment of the rich," and so forth²¹. It was commonly understood that the maritime ban and consequent scarcity of silver were the main causes that paralyzed the Chinese economy. Not only coastal areas, but also interior regions such as Hunan, Jiangxi, and Shaanxi witnessed the decline of prices and the impoverishment of the people.

The period of the coastal blockade was crucial for the Qing dynasty, then struggling against the Zhengs and three feudatories to establish control over all of China. At first sight, the struggle during this period seems to have been an ethnic conflict between the Han and the Manchus, because the Zheng family and the three feudatories professed themselves Han patriots endeavoring to restore the Ming rule. Nevertheless, we should note that both sides of the civil war of this period were new powers that, like twin brothers, emerged from the flourishing markets surrounding China, and that neither of them was of "pure" ethnicity. We may regard the war between the Qing and the Zhengs as the finals of a tournament fought among the commercial-military forces that had developed in Chinese peripheries since the mid-sixteenth century. The Zheng family in Taiwan surrendered to the Qing in 1683, and the Qing finally succeeded in establishing its rule in the mid-1680s.

²¹ For the Kangxi Depression, see Kishimoto-Nakayama (1984: 226-256).

When the Qing government lifted the blockade in 1684, the conditions along the southeast coast were utterly different from those 50 years previously. The swelling boom in maritime trade had ended. The Japanese had disappeared from the seas of East and Southeast Asia since the enforcement of the “seclusion policy” in the 1630s. The Portuguese, shut out from the profitable Sino-Japanese trade, barely survived at Macao. The Dutch were also losing interest in direct trade with China and shifted the center of their activities to the colonial rule of the islands of Southeast Asia. Thus, the Kangxi emperor faced a calm sea, which was no longer an arena for competition among ambitious adventurers.

What did the end of the boom mean to the Qing dynasty? It seems that the pacification of the southeast coast brought about favorable conditions for the Qing’s strengthening of imperial control all over China, and furthermore the establishment of “peace under the Qing” in East Asia. In the late Ming period, the profits from foreign trade nourished the semi-independent peripheral powers that eroded the imperial control. In the late seventeenth century, as the profits from trade decreased, the trading powers along the coastal areas such as the Zheng family lost their financial base. Perhaps this may be the reason why the Zhengs could not break through the maritime ban as the “Japanese pirates” of the 1550s did. The coastal blockade of the early Qing damaged not only the Zheng family but also the Chinese economy, which had become heavily dependent on foreign silver since the late Ming. Nevertheless, the blockade was a necessary operation for the Qing to exterminate the coastal powers which, connected with foreign powers, had acted as centrifugal forces operating against the central government. The Qing government finally succeeded in this operation, and military tensions along the coastal areas relaxed by the late 1680s. Instead of powerful pirates and adventurers, it was small traders and merchants under government patronage who led the foreign trade of the day.

It is widely accepted by historians that the end of the trade boom in the mid-seventeenth century brought a turning point to the new Southeast Asian states, too. At the same time, however, the diversity of reactions to this pressure of the period by each state has been the focus of an animated discussion. According to Anthony Reid, who pioneered the research on Southeast Asian history in the “age of commerce,” the seventeenth century was a watershed for Southeast Asia in that the seventeenth century crisis made the Asian-ruled trading cities in this region lose their place both in world trade and within their societies. Many of the “absolutist states” once powerful during the boom period disintegrated and came under the control of the Dutch East India Company. Reid argues that the most important shift in the long term “was not any absolute decline in trade but the reduced importance of commerce, merchants, urbanism, and cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asian life” (Reid 1993b: 328).

Some historians of the mainland regions of Southeast Asia, on the contrary, do not regard the seventeenth century as a watershed of history, emphasizing the continuity throughout the sixteenth to eighteenth century. For example, Victor Lieberman argues that, in spite of

certain changes in the mid-seventeenth century such as the removal of the capital far inland and the relative decrease of maritime income, the period ca. 1640-1830 maintained and perfected sixteenth-century experiments of the Burmese state---for example, the political integration, the development of commercial economy including foreign trade, and the dissemination of orthodox religion all throughout its territory (Lieberman 1993: 214-219).

Through the brief outline sketched above, we can safely say that the “crisis” in the mid-seventeenth century brought about a common trial for the commercial-military powers that had emerged and expanded in the trade boom in the East and Southeast Asia. Some powers could survive this crisis through certain changes in their political and economic structures. We might be able to call this change a kind of “inward turn.” The successful states such as the Qing, Tokugawa Japan, and some countries of mainland Southeast Asia all had rich agricultural districts within their territories that enabled the formation of a well-balanced domestic economy less dependent on foreign trade. These countries could manage to sustain the decline of international markets in the seventeenth century by relying on domestic economy, whereas the end of the trade boom was a heavy blow for the powers excessively dependent on foreign trade such as the Zhengs and port states of the Indonesian Archipelago.

Of course the words “inward turn” do not necessarily mean that all of these states established a closed structure like Japan’s. We shall see in the next section a variety of patterns of state building pursued by the states which successfully survived the end of the boom in the seventeenth century.

Patterns of State Building: after the 1680s

In the above sections I emphasized that the trading world of East and Southeast Asia shared a common historical rhythm since the sixteenth century, but this notion does not necessarily mean that the emergent states in this world shared common characteristics in their institutions and policies. Rather, I would argue, the visions and processes of their state building were very different. It is this diversity that characterizes the “early modern” period in this area.

To clarify this diversity, I shall highlight three of the most important issues faced by all the emergent states of East and Southeast Asia---and perhaps even throughout the world, including Europe---that rose out of the confusion of the sixteenth century and became the architects of a new order after the late seventeenth century. The first is the issue of ethnicity and religion. By what means of ideological legitimacy were people of diverse ethnicity and different religions to be integrated? The second is that of market economy and finance. How was the foreign and domestic trade to be controlled in order to internalize the profit of a broad-ranging market economy and to support ever-expanding state finance? And the third is the issue of social constitution. How were the various groups that emerged from the fluid

society of the sixteenth century to be incorporated into state institutions so as to create a stable social order? On a previous occasion I referred collectively to these issues as “problems common to the post-sixteenth-century period” (Kishimoto 2004).

These problems were the products of the turbulent situation of the sixteenth century from which new powers emerged. As I noted above, these new powers more or less shared the following features: open and multiethnic character, deep involvement in foreign trade, and high social fluidity accompanied by severe strife among various groups. These characteristics were factors in the new powers’ rapid growth, but at the same time could be the minus factors that would damage their stability. When they struggled to survive the seventeenth century crisis and to establish powerful states, they were forced to resolve the above-mentioned “problems common to the post-sixteenth-century period.” It could be said that each early modern state produced by trial and error solutions to these questions in its own way, and these have molded the “traditions” that have exerted influence on society down to the present day. Qing China and Tokugawa Japan showed striking contrast in their answers to these problems, the former developing its open and fluid character under the loose control of its centralized government, and the latter establishing a rather close and tight social system after the seventeenth century.

In the mid-eighteenth century the territory of the Qing reached its zenith, including Outer Mongolia, East Turkestan, and Tibet. Qing emperors often proclaimed that they were emperors not only of the Manchus, but also of all ethnic groups under their rule, and that they would treat all groups equally without discrimination (“yi-shi tong-ren” in Chinese). Languages, religions, manners and customs of these ethnic groups were rarely oppressed by Qing rulers. However we should note that this cultural pluralism was not the cultural relativism that doubted the existence of universal value. As the Yongzhong emperor’s *Dai-yi juemi lu* (Record of great righteousness to dispel confusion) manifested, their rulership, which was endowed by the heavens, should be admitted by every people under heaven.

The multiethnic character of the Qing dynasty makes a striking contrast with the monoethnic ideology of Tokugawa Japan, where the rulers thought that the diversity of ethnicity and religion were a threat to political integration. The rapid expansion of the Qing economy in the eighteenth century reflected in the increase in population and prices of commodities, too, is very different from the economic situation of Japan, where a rather prosperous economy was maintained without little increase in population and prices. Under the open and fluid socio-economic system of the Qing, the population growth and food shortage in southeast China caused migration to the Sichuan basin, mountainous areas in central and south China, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia by land as well as by sea. The expansion of economy centered in China also influenced the state-formation of Southeast Asian countries in ethnic, economic and social terms, but I shall refrain from describing the complex history of Southeast Asian state-making because of limits of space and ability.

The Concept of “Early Modernities”

In the above, I try to outline the sixteenth to eighteenth century history of East and Southeast Asia focusing on the common historical rhythm, common problems faced by emerging countries, and the diversity of their answers to these problems. I would like to call these three centuries the “early modern period” of this area. The reason why I use the term “early modern” is that I think the rhythm and problems were basically shared by the histories of Europe and Japan in the same period conventionally called “early modern” or “kinsei.”

Of course, we should not be too hasty in our claims that the rhythm and problems could be found all over the world during this period. To the best of my poor knowledge of European history, the changes in the economic phases in early modern Europe seem to roughly coincide with those of East and Southeast Asia. The religious conflicts, mercantilist policies, and constitutional changes in European absolutist states can also be understood as a variety of answers to the “problems common to the post-sixteenth-century period.” Nevertheless I am not sure if we can find the same rhythm and problems in the South and West Asian empires of the period such as the Ottoman Empire, Safavi Dynasty, and Mughal Empire. These empires enjoyed their golden ages in the sixteenth century, just when the Ming Empire was losing its control over the peripheral regions. How should we understand the historical rhythms in world history during this period? It is a question still to be investigated empirically.

If, then, we can find a common historical rhythm in most parts of the world during this period, is it useful to call this period “early modern”? Can it contribute any “new” ideas to the methods of periodization? I shall answer this question focusing on three points mentioned at the end of the first part of this paper.

The first point is the problem of similarity and diversity of the historical process. Many scholars have questioned whether they could apply the concept of “early modernity (modernities)” to non-European civilizations: “Were there similar developments in other civilizations, and if so, when did they occur? If they occurred at this time, were they primarily due to diffusion or to indigenous factors? Finally, is the term “early modernity” relative to a specific civilization or may it be used broadly?” (Eisenstadt and Schlucher 1998: 2) Of course, it is not difficult for us to find similar phenomena in the various areas of the sixteenth to eighteenth century world, for example, growth of centralized states, development of commercial economy, new religions, rural disturbance, and so forth, as many historians have already pointed out²². At the same time, however, we cannot help but notice many striking differences among the newly established regimes of this period. For example, can

²² Fletcher (1985) may be one of the earliest attempts in identifying the “early modern period” on a world-wide scale.

we find the orientation to the nation-state in the Qing government? Why did some states heavily depend on foreign trade, and others did not etc.?

The efforts to find some common denominators of early modernity in non-European civilizations seem to have been led to either of the following two routes: emphasizing similarity and ignoring difference, or making the concept of “early modernity” so flexible (or dilute) that the difference could be understood as varieties within early modernity. But such efforts do not seem to help us greatly to consider not only the similarity but also the sharp contrasts among regimes during this period. If we use the term “early modern” to represent the common problems and different answers, as we attempted in this paper, it would be easier for us to consider seriously not only the similarity, but also the peculiarities of early modern states.

The second point is the problem of continuity and innovation in the historical process. The researchers of Asian history who focus their attention on the “modern” in the nineteenth century tend to regard the period from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries as the last stage of the old regime. Even if they could find in this period new trends such as “sprouts of capitalism,” anti-autocratic thought, and so forth, the entire social and political structures are regarded as continuation or reorganization of old long-standing regimes rather than as new regimes established by emerging states of the early modern era. In this paper, on the contrary, I have emphasized the newness of the “early modernities”---that is, the various efforts of emerging powers to establish new regimes.

At the same time, I would like to note that the “early modernities” argued in this paper do not mean the immature stage of “modernities” of the nineteenth century and after. Some aspects of the regimes established in the early modern era---for example, the ethnic frameworks and collective identities---were inherited by modern nationalism, but other aspects---such as autocracy or the hereditary status system---became the very targets attacked by the modern reformists or revolutionaries. We should not imagine early modernities as something like sprouts of modernities that would automatically grow into modernities if left to develop undisturbed. It would be important for us to pay sufficient attention to contingencies and multiple possibilities that existed not only in the formative processes of early modern regimes but also in their dissolving patterns.

The third point concerns about the units of historical analyses. The researchers of early modern history have been faced with difficult questions about the “proper” units of historical analyses: what is the proper unit of research---nation, region, or something resembling the world system²³? As above argument obviously shows, this paper advocates the viewpoint transcending the narrow framework of national history. Nevertheless, I would not claim that there is only one exclusive proper unit to be adopted, such as the world system or the

²³ As an interesting argument about the attempts in Asian historiography to depict history in units of broad regions falling between the “nation” and the “world,” see Wong(2004).

East Asian world. Rather, I would like to emphasize that economic relations, political integrations and collective identities were changing dynamically during this period. We should not presume that there existed some substantive units that we can safely use as our analytical premises, but should keep our minds open and flexible so as to observe carefully the complexity and variety of meaningful units for historical analyses.

In short, I would like to stress the contemporaneity of the early modern states, and the variety of their answers to the common issues of this period. Which answer was right? We should not draw a conclusion too hastily from the “modern” point of view. Each of the various answers seems to attract our attention afresh in the early twenty-first century when we are reconsidering from the historical perspective what modernities were and what modernities could have been.

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