Concepts for Understanding Premodern History: *Modern and Contemporary History* and *Advanced Japanese History*

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Introduction: Isolated Japanese History or Pre-modern History?

In *Modern and Contemporary History*, a newly established high school subject in Japan, students are required to raise 'questions that survey each era.' Currently, the education system and the field of Japanese history research generally divide Japanese history into four (or five) eras: ancient, middle, early modern, and modern (or modern and contemporary). Both the *Curriculum Guidelines* provided by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (hereafter, MEXT) and the contents of Japanese history textbooks reflect this division.

In a Q&A session hosted by MEXT regarding their 2018 revisions to their high school *Curriculum Guidelines for Geography and History*, the following question was posed: 'Are there any differences in the 'questions that survey each era' in *Advanced Japanese History* as opposed to those in *Modern and Contemporary History* or *Advanced World History*?'[1] In response to this question, the following general guideline

[1] According to the 'Curriculum Guideline for Senior High School Revised in 2018, English Translation of Subject Names' (retrieved 18th August 2024 from https://www.mext.go.jp/component/

was cited: 'Under the context of *Advanced Japanese History*, 'questions that survey each era' refer to those that examine historical changes within certain eras and how these changes influenced subsequent eras and the overall course of history.' Whereas in *Advanced Japanese History* and *Advanced World History* questions are generally expected to be asked whenever a student harbors any curiosity about the course contents, in *Advanced Japanese History* students are expected to first learn about and understand the turning points in each era and then to raise questions that anticipate the characteristics of subsequent eras. As one can imagine, these questions presuppose the aforementioned divisions of Japenese history into eras such as ancient, middle and modern, etc. However, the *Curriculum Guidelines* do not describe the specific reasons for these divisions: for instance, they do not divulge why the period from the 12th to 16th century should be denoted the 'Middle Ages.' Instead, students could grope for the reasons only by posing questions about characteristics unique to each era. Thus, the withholding of these concrete descriptions and the emphasis on encouraging 'questions that survey each era' can be considered a kind of tautology.

Modern and Contemporary History is another new subject and is required for first-year high school students. It combines Japanese and world history and focuses on three major themes: modernization in the 19th century, popularization (and shifts in the international order) in the early-to-mid 20th century, and globalization in the late 20th century. In contrast to older textbooks that prioritized the memorization of historical facts, new *Modern and Contemporary History* textbooks emphasize an exploration of the historical connections between Japan, its surrounding regions, and the rest of the world, the impact of which remains signifi-

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a_menu/education/micro_detail/__icsFiles/afieldfile/2019/07/08/1417610_001.pdf) issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, the English translation of *Rekishi Sogo* (歴史総合), which literally translates to comprehensive history, is '*Modern and Contemporary History*' and *Nihonshi Tankyu* (日本史探究), which literally translates to Japanese history inquiry, is '*Advanced Japanese History*.' Textbooks from many companies have also adopted these translations. The author believes that these translations do not reflect the aims of new subjects and so are not appropriate, but uses them for the convenience of the reader in this paper.

cant and influential to our daily lives. To this end, students are required to inquire, understand and apply the highly abstract concepts of modernization, popularization and globalization in their history education (*Curriculum Guidelines*). *Modern and Contemporary History* does not necessarily present Japanese and world history as a single, unified narrative. In practice, however, the key 'questions that survey each era' are built upon concepts that feature jointly in *Advanced World History* and *Modern and Contemporary History*, such as popularization or globalization. This contrasts with *Advanced Japanese History*, which inherits the existing Japan-specific period divisions from the older Japanese History B course and focuses on Japan-specific concepts such as the ancient Ritsuryo state (律令国家) and the early modern feudal domain system (幕藩体制). Naturally, *Advanced Japanese History* does not explore abstract concepts that are shared by *Modern and Contemporary History* and *Advanced World History*. Thus, *Advanced Japanese History* (premodern Japanese history) is isolated from other subjects in history.

Periodization of Japanese History

The practice of periodizing Japanese history originates from the Edo era; their timeline progressed from the 'era of the court nobles' (Nara and early Heian periods) through the transition period (Kamakura and Muromachi Shogunate Periods), when the court's power declined and court nobles and samurai warriors coexisted, to the 'Era of the warriors' (Edo period). This periodization became the prototype for the three-part division of ancient, medieval and early modern periods, to which the modern era was added after the Meiji Restoration deemed a 'restoration' of the ancient imperial rule.

In this four-part periodization, one can see the post-Meiji restoration perspective on the imperial system and the history of Japan as a nation. For example, the new Meiji government adopted a two-government with six-minister system, based on the Ritsuryo (律令) government system, and established Ōkura-shō (大蔵省) (renamed Zaimu-shō 財務省 in 2001, but both have the same English translation: the Ministry of Fi-

nance). The fact that this structure was ideologically modeled upon the Ritsuryo is a principal reason for Japanese history textbooks' abundant and detailed explanations of the Ritsuryo system, such as the diagram of the two departments and eight ministries of the Nara period. Furthermore, despite the current research (as will be discussed below) revealing that the ruling class of the Middle Ages was made up of diverse elements—including the nobility, samurai warriors, and the power of temples and shrines—, the conventional image of the 'Era of Samurai' still has a strong hold on the public. The *Curriculum Guidelines* also considers the establishment and development of the warrior government as an axis of understanding the Middle Ages, showing how deeply embedded the conventional image of that period is.

The development of modern historical studies brought forth attempts to connect Japanese history with world history. The first such attempt was to apply the same concept of 'Feudalism' as in the Western medieval ages to the warrior system of the Japanese Middle Ages. Prior to this, at the end of the Edo period, there were disputes as to whether this Japanese system of the same period should be classified as either *gunken* (郡縣, a centralized system in which the monarch dispatches bureaucrats to govern local areas) or *hōken* (封建, a decentralized system in which the ruler delegates local governance to feudal lords) according to traditional Chinese definitions. The term hōken (封建) was adopted as the translation of 'feudalism,' which refers to a lord-vassal relationship mediated by land, despite some discrepancies between the two concepts : hōken and 'feudalism' [Ishii 2005]. The emphasis placed by Japanese history textbooks on 'gratitude (御恩) and service (奉公)' between the Shogun and his vassals, characteristic of a hōken (封建)—and thus, by way of the aforementioned translation, feaudalist—system, reflects an attempt to liken the Japanese warrior system to Western feudalism. In addition, the Japanese concept of the 'Middle Ages (中世)' was named after the Western concept of the 'Medieval Ages' although, as mentioned above, a similar concept had already emerged in the Edo period. The Edo era was also designated as 'Early Modern (近世)' accordingly.

Marxist Historiography, which became mainstream in historical

studies after World War II, proposed the theory that history does progress in developmental stages based on production. The concept of stages of development from ancient to feudal to modern were applied to the existing four divisions of Japanese history. The concept of feudalism, a social system based on serfdom, was adapted into to the study of Japanese history as the 'theory of local lordship (在地領主制).' Samurai warriors were conceptualized as 'local lords' who ruled over subservient farmers and were responsible for managing their estates. Additionally, the Kamakura shogunate was reinterpreted as a regime that organized local lords based on the lord-vassal relationship.

Thus, the inception of the Kamakura Shogunate was established to be the event that marks the beginning of the Middle Ages (as will be discussed below, the period of the cloistered emperors (院政期) is now considered to be the start of the Middle Ages). This period division stems from the emphasis on the growth of the lordship in terms of the Marxist theory on the stages of social development. Textbooks often heighten the importance of local lords' manors, their rule, and their invasion of shōen(autonomous estates) because they had assumed that the local lordship system, rather than the warrior government, is the defining characteristic of the Middle Ages. Meanwhile, the Edo period (Early Modern Period) is considered fundamentally separate from the Middle Ages because there was no the system of local lords, despite the continuing debate over whether it is 'feudal' or not. Thus, a new Western concept of feudalism was adopted, even as the traditional periodization of history was preserved, with its foundations remaining robust.

In the Curriculum Guidelines for *Advanced Japanese History*, the stress on the development of the local feudal system has diminished. This reflects a lack of research interest in the local feudal system since the 1990s. Nevertheless, elements such as the dominance of warrior still remain in the textbooks and even newer textbooks include the term 'Feudal System' in their main text and side notes (Yamakawa Shuppansha 山川出版社, Daiichi Gakushūsha 第一学習社). These are often overlooked, yet they are a legacy of comparing medieval histories between Japan and Europe and positioning Japanese history—albeit from a Western perspec-

tive—within the context of 'world history.'

The actual periodization of history is no longer discussed directly in the current Japanese history academic community. Due to the broad consensus of equating the Middle Ages with the era of the Shōen system, current textbooks take the period of the retired emperors in the 12th century, when the Shōen system was established, as the start of the Middle Ages. However, it is undeniable that there is an inertia in the research and education system with regard to Japanese history.

To begin with, the Middle Ages in Japanese history is very difficult to define [Sakurai 2013]. In contrast to the study of the Ancient and Early Modern ages, which are concretely defined by the Ritsuryo system and the Shogunate system respectively, there is no reliable framework to guide the study of the Middle Ages. To solve this problem, Kuroda Toshio (黒田俊雄) proposed the 'Kenmon System Theory (権門体制論)' in 1963 [Kuroda 1994]. The theory is often criticized for being 'too flexible,' but the more research into the Middle Ages has progressed, the more evident it has become that the Middle Ages itself is a complex period that cannot be neatly defined by a single concept or system. Thus, while students in *Advanced Japanese History* are asked to pose 'questions that survey each era,' even researchers are not able to share such questions with one another. This situation could be attested to the gap between research and education.

What types of 'questions that survey each era' are possible with the content of Japanese medieval history at the high school level, and how can we incorporate concepts that are also relevant to *Modern and Contemporary History* and *Advanced World History?*

Revisiting the Middle Ages

If we were to borrow some universal questions and concepts from world history and apply them to Japanese history, in the case of the Ancient period, we would ask about the formation of the state, then explore concepts such as 'the spread of ancient civilizations to the periphery' and 'the independence of peripheral states' (in the Shimizu Shoin (清水書院)

textbook, this concept is explored under the category of 'cultural nationalization (国風化) in East Asia' [Yoshimura et al. eds. 2021]). In the case of the early modern era (Edo period), the theory of 'early modernization (近世化)' has already gained popularity in the academic community since the beginning of the 21st century [Kishimoto 2021][Shimizu ed. 2015]; this theory seeks to capture 'shared experiences' of the East Asian world from the 16th century onwards, on the premise that early modern nation-states varied greatly from one another. Although *Modern and Contemporary History* covers the world from the 19th century onwards, it should also consider the world after the 16th and 17th centuries onwards, global circumnavigation emerged as a result of the Age of Exploration.

How about the Middle Ages, then? As previously mentioned, the Middle Ages of Japanese history were heavily imbued with Western ideas of historical progress and Marxist progressivism, on top of the pre-existing assumption that it was a transitional period from the court nobles to the Samurai. What is more, there have been other theories that contextualized Japanese history in an entirely Western perspective. For example, Marc Bloch, in Feudal Society (1939/40), writes that 'Feudalism' was phenomenon unique to the periphery of ancient civilizations (Western Europe and Japan), rather than a universal occurence in human history [Sato 2010]. The framing of universal concepts such as 'the shrinking of ancient states', 'the development of peripheral regions' and 'decentralizing tendency of peripheral regions,' though old ideas, could help connect Japanese history to world history in a more appropriate manner. One needs no more than a high school history education to see that that the heightened international tensions of the 7th and 8th centuries influenced the construction of Japan's Ritsuryō state, and that the Middle Ages (except for the time of the Mongol invasions) was a relatively less tense period in terms of foreign relation. Moreover, a comparison of the existence of warriors such as samurai and knights could also be a great topic for students. After these comparisons have been made, it may be possible to re-utilize the concept of 'Feudalism' (which, fortunately or unfortunately, still appears in some textbooks) while taking care not to become too Western-centric.

Another potentially useful topic is climate change, which has gained growing interest in academic community in recent years. Japan's Middle Ages happened to coincide with a period of intense climate change on a global scale. The impact of that change on the transformation of ancient society into medieval one is attracting academic attention [Nakatsuka et al. 2021][Nakatsuka 2022]. High school textbooks cover the great famine of the Kamakura period. It can be inferred that the chronic famines during the Middle Ages caused frequent conflicts and affected the role of religion.

As mentioned above, the Shōen system, which is regarded as the defining characteristic of the Middle Ages, can also be established as a reflection of the decentralizing trends and 'Feudalization' during the Heian (平安) Period (794-1180s). Some scholars have recently illuminated the redevelopment of abandoned farmland as the cause for the establishment of manors; for example, the manor of Nitta-no-sho in Kozuke Kōzuke Province (上野国新田荘) was established to recover from the damage caused by the eruption of Mt. Asama (浅間山) in 1108 [Kamakura 2009], and this event is introduced in recent supplementary teaching materials. This case demonstrates how linking the roots of the manorial system to the climate change and natural disasters during the Heian Period could deepen our understanding of the Middle Ages.

Refining the Concepts and Rethinking the Present

The textbooks published by Shimizu Shoin (清水書院), to which the author also contributed, provide variegated materials about the period of the Mongol Invasions and offer questions that encourage students to discern the characteristics of the Middle Age [Hattori 2014]. One of the aims of the textbook is to convey the fact that the Middle Ages was not just the era of Samurai, but also the pluralistic time when the nobility, samurai, the powers of temples and shrines, and various forces stood separate. In particular, the temples and shrines forces was greatly influential. From the end of the Middle Ages to the beginning of the early modern state, the relationship between politics (secular powers) and religion changed

significantly under the influence of the 'Ikkō-ikki' (一向一揆) religious movement, Christian forces, and the ban on Christianity.

Because the Shimizu Shoin textbooks follow the policy of containing each topic within two facing pages, they are only able to provide the minimum amount of necessary materials. Had this limitation not existed, they would have contained more materials related to prayers for good harvest and peace, which were recited each year. As Taira Masayuki (平雅行) (author of Jikkyo Shuppan (実教出版) textbooks) emphasizes, Buddhism in the Middle Ages was regarded just like science in the modern era, permeating all aspects of society and facilitating prayers for good harvest and peace for the people [Taira 2010]. As mentioned above, the Middle Ages also saw significant climate change, which resulted in famines and conflicts: one can see, then, why the presence of Buddhism and the shrine forces became even more significant during this period.

Another point of emphasis in the textbooks is that, contrary to the popular preconception of Japan's Middle Age as one of weakened political power and a divided ruling class, external crises such as the Mongol invasions prompted a strengthening of internal authority. This implies that the relatively lower external tensions in the Japanese archipelago from the 10th to the 16th centuries made a centralized and strong state system somewhat 'unnecessary' in certain respects.

Modern historical studies have a tendency to regard a strong state system as the ideal form of government and to look down on periods of weak state power as 'declining times'. One must question, however, whether a strong state system (including military system) is necessary in the absence of external crises. World history textbooks also tend to regard the eras and regions with weak national systems as inferior. If a real external crisis were to occur, a rapid centralization of power could happen in a short period, as in the case of the Kamakura Shogunate during the Mongol Invasions.

Then, what can we derive from studying the medieval Japanese state that could challenge our definitions of an 'early state' or a 'modern state'? We may reconsider whether a strong state is truly necessary and thus reexamine our current assumptions about 'the state.' Instead of

needlessly adding new concepts to emphasize the difference between a state in its early and modern stages, we can use the Middle Ages (or pre-modern) as a place to re-examine and refine the concepts that students must have learned in *Modern and Contemporary History* (a required first-year subject before *Advanced Japanese History*).

The last point is about commerce. Many textbooks state that private trade with China continued, despite the Mongol Invasions. This explanation is based on the premise that the Southern Song Dynasty, which was destroyed by the Mongols, had actively traded with Japan, specifically with many Zen monks traveling back and forth and that the expansion of Mongol power followed trade routes and the first Mongol invasion, or 'The Battle of Bun'ei (文永の役)' was part of the strategy to conquer the Southern Song. These points show that, although medieval Japan was isolated in terms of official diplomacy, the interchange of religious figures and merchants across the East China Sea remained active, as one can see from the import and distribution of Chinese coins in Japan. In brief, Japan was tied to China's economic sphere.

Concerning the Heian Period and particularly national culture, the textbooks explain that an environment was created in which cultural artifacts from the East Asian continent could be imported without official state-to-state diplomacy, such as the Envoyship to Tang China. Yet, due to the concision required in Japanese high school textbooks, they could only explain the change itself and its historical causes, giving less attention to the question of how long such a change lasted and the manner in which it maintained itself. Still, the textbooks may be able to compensate for this limitation by at least showing that the East China Sea maritime network functioned until the Ming Dynasty's maritime trade ban policy around the late 14th century [Enomoto 2020]. In addition, we could raise questions about the international environment that defined the Middle Ages and compare it with the ancient and early modern periods. We can also investigate the time were comparable to those in Europe's medieval age or in Southeast Asian port-polity and, using knowledge from *Modern and Contemporary History*, raise questions about how they differ from modern 'globalization,' where goods, capital, and information can move

across national boundaries.

Taken altogether, in this presentation, I have introduced aspects of the Middle Ages beyond the negative image of weak state in premodern times. Nonetheless, weak state control meant a regress in state security. From the textbook descriptions, we can see the significant presence of religion and religious people who assumed roles of 'publicness' [Taira 2018], such as the Eison (叡尊) sect's rescue of lower-class people and the activities of the Kanjin-hijiri (勧進聖), or religious practitioners who collected donations. How did people ensure social stability during the Japanese Middle Ages? This question remains relevant to us, who live in the post-modern era—often referred to as the 'new Middle Age.'

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