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COMPARATIVE IDEAS OF CHRONOLOGY

MASAYUKI SATO

I. INTRODUCTION

The reckoning of years is not a mere assignment of numbers in order, itself an advanced intellectual exercise peculiar to the human species.¹ It is also a political, social, and cultural act of human intelligence.

1582 A.D., the year Pope Gregory XIII introduced the new calendar, was reckoned differently in East Asia: In China and Korea it was *Wan-li 10 nien jen-wu* (the tenth year of the *Wan-li* [Myriad Longevity] era, *jen-wu* [the nineteenth year of the sexagesimal cycle]); the Japanese counted it as *Tenshō 10 nen jingo* (the tenth year of the *Tenshō* [Heavenly Justice], *jingo* [Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese ideographs *jen-wu*]); and in Vietnam it was *Quang hung 5 nam nhâm ngo* (the fifth year of the *Quang hung* [Glorious Ascendancy] era, *nhâm ngo* [Vietnamese pronunciation of *jen-wu*]). Each of these is a combination of an era name and a cycle name. The expressions *Wan-li*, *Tenshō*, and *Quang hung* are era names (Chinese *nien-hao*), and all reflect the same basic idea of reckoning years. *Jen-wu*, *jingo*, and *nhâm ngo* are cyclical names deriving from the sexagesimal cyclical system (Chinese *kan-chih*), a chronological expression common to East Asian countries. These two chronological systems (the era name and the cyclical) have been employed in East Asia, to the virtual exclusion of all other modes of reckoning, for more than two thousand years until the middle of the twentieth century.

This paper originates in the following issue regarding chronology which has puzzled me for years: Most literate societies which have introduced a chronology take a fixed point in time, based on a pivotal religious event, from which it reckons a series of years. Among these are the Christian era, the Muslim era, and the Jewish era. Why has not a "Buddhist era" prevailed as a unitary era-count in East Asia, where Buddhism was a pervasive influence?

Buddhism, though originating in India around the fifth century B.C., was brought into China by the early first century, took firm root there during the succeeding few centuries, and spread over Korea, Japan, and Vietnam by the seventh century. It attracted a vast following among East Asians, just as Christianity, though Near Eastern in origin, claimed a nearly universal following

1. Georges Ifrah, *Histoire universelle des chiffres* (Paris, 1981), 9-11, 30-34.

among Europeans. Though Buddhism sometimes established itself as a state religion in East Asian countries, a Buddhist chronology has never been used in East Asia, unlike some South and Southeast Asian countries which officially introduced it.² This is not due to any underdevelopment of such related sciences as astronomy and the calendar; China, indeed, was one of the most developed countries in the astronomical and calendrical sciences before the Christian era.³

Why did East Asia retain a chronology for two thousand years different in many aspects from that of the other major cultural areas of the world? To deal with this knotty issue of East Asian ideas of chronology, I should like to examine in the discussion that follows: (a) the rationale of the combined system of era names and the sexagesimal cycle; (b) the historical development of chronology in the East Asian countries; (c) some theoretical, political, and sociocultural interpretations of chronology; and (d) the relation of chronology to East Asian historiography. On this basis, I shall conclude by offering some answers to these puzzling issues.

I should note that one of the explanatory methods adopted in this paper is to compare aspects of East Asian chronology with other, mainly Christian, chronologies. As a result, I shall point out some features of the Christian era system overlooked by scholars of Western traditions.

Before proceeding to the main issue, it will be useful to give a general idea of such terms as “East Asia” and “chronology.” East Asia, as an historio-cultural concept,⁴ comprises the present China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. In East Asia history has developed centering around China with its overwhelming physical size and political and cultural ascendancy over its periphery, unlike Europe, where history has been figured by relatively similar-sized states. The historic

2. The Buddhist era is correctly described as a system of reckoning years from the death of Gautama Siddhārtha, the founder of Buddhism. Several Buddhist sects adopted different dates for the death of the Buddha: Thailand and Cambodia adopt 543 B.C. as the first year of the Buddhist era. In Burma, the first year of the era is the year when Buddhism was first introduced there, 638 A.D. See F. K. Ginzel, *Handbuch der Mathematischen und Technischen Chronologie*, 3 vols. (1906–1914), I, 310–448.

3. On the remarkable advancements in astronomy and the calendar in ancient East Asia, see Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China* (Cambridge, 1959), III, 171–461. In Japanese, see, Shinjō Shinzō, *Tōyō tenmongakushi kenkyū* [Studies of the History of Astronomy in East Asia] (Tokyo, 1929) and Yabuuchi Kiyoshi, *Chūgoku no tenmon rekihō* [Chinese Astronomy and Calendar] (Tokyo, 1969).

4. “East Asia” is the term now preferred among Western scholars, rather than the Eurocentric “Far East” used until World War II. Before then, the term had already been used by Japanese scholars since the latter half of the nineteenth century. See, for example, in historiography, the title of the first chapter of S. Tanaka’s *A Method of History* (unpublished lecture note, 1910–1923), “A History of East Asian Historiography.” He introduced the term as a natural consequence of his discussion of comprehensive historiography written with Chinese ideographs. It is important to note here the interesting coincidence that the term was born not from within but from without: Tanaka’s use of this terminology had close connection with his few years’ study experience in Europe: see my “Datsua-ron to rekishi kenkyū,” [De-asianism and the Study of History], *Shigaku* 48 (1977), 13–21. It is indispensable in examining this issue to refer to Peter Burke, “Did Europe Exist before 1700?,” *History of European Ideas* 1 (1980), 21–29.

East Asia has been termed “the Chinese world order,” a system of international relations with China at the center.⁵ Chinese dynasties employed a so-called feudal system, bestowing titles and fiefs on domestic nobles and vassals, a system later applied to other East Asian countries, whose leaders were bound to China as lord and vassals, by conferral of a seal and investiture from Chinese emperors.⁶ This system of international relations reached Korea and Vietnam in the early Han period (202 B.C.–9 A.D.), and Japan in the first century. Acceptance, and occasional rejection, of such relations by peripheral states formed a major historical theme in East Asia. Relations with China play a crucial role in the following discussion of the political, social, and historical meanings of the East Asian idea of chronology.

This sinocentric order also formed the common cultural heritage of East Asia originating in China: the vertical writing system with Chinese characters, the Confucian social and familial order, Buddhism through Chinese translations, and the legal and administrative system. The East Asian world might also be aptly named the “Chinese ideographic culture sphere”⁷ where classical Chinese, being specifically excluded from vernacular Chinese, was used as a common language, which is, in some sense, comparable with Latin in medieval and early modern Europe.⁸ The adoption of Chinese ideographs later stimulated the peripheral countries to create their own phonetic orthographies suitable for their languages.⁹ Borne abroad by Chinese writing, Chinese culture constituted the *básso ostináto* of East Asian culture and formed the common “cultivation” in East Asia, though it was itself transformed in the process of acceptance. Classical Chinese as a written language was, until recently, used in East Asia as the only language of communication.¹⁰ It is important to point out here that the idea of East Asian chronology is founded on the very existence of Chinese characters.

“Chronology” may be defined as “a method used in many disciplines to order time and to place events in the sequence in which they occurred.”¹¹ In this paper,

5. *The Chinese World Order*, ed. John K. Fairbank (Cambridge, Mass., 1968).

6. For details see Nishijima Sadao, *Chūgoku kodai kokka to higashi Ajia sekai* [Ancient Chinese States and the East Asian World] (Tokyo, 1983).

7. Tōdō Akiho, *Kanji to sono bunkaken* [Chinese Characters and their Cultural Sphere], revised ed. (Tokyo, 1979); Nishida Tatsuo, *Kanji bunmeiken no shikō chizu* [The Ideal-Map of the Civilization Sphere of Chinese Characters] (Kyoto, 1984); Léon Vandermeersch, *Le nouveau monde sinisé* (Paris, 1986). Writing vertically is traditional in East Asia, but writing horizontally has become much more common since World War II, even in China.

8. I recall here E. R. Curtius’s laborious work: *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (Bern, 1948). An East Asian analogue, to my regret, has not yet been published.

9. These are called *hiragana* and *katakana* in Japan, *chu nom* in Vietnam, *han’gul* in Korea. They are mutually independent orthographies. See Tōdō Akiho, “Kanji bunkaken no keisei” [Rise of the Cultural Sphere of Chinese Characters], in *Iwanami kōza sekai rekishi* (Tokyo, 1979), VI, 83–124.

10. Classical Chinese was used exclusively for writing by intellectuals in traditional China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. It may be interesting to point out the existence of the Japanese term “hitsudan” (literally “pen talk”; conversation by writing classical Chinese). I remember a *hitsudan* with my Vietnamese classmate who had not mastered Japanese yet, when he entered the University.

11. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, Micropaedia* (1974), II, 909.

however, the focus is on “a system of reckoning a series of years,” not on the calendar as “a system of fixing a year,” except when necessary. A system of fixing a year must properly be discussed separately from a method of reckoning the fixed years, though they are closely connected.¹² Chronology as discussed in this paper is thus defined as “a dating system, or a system of reckoning years, in history and historiography.” It might be suitable to add, “with the starting point (year) of an era” to this definition: it is indispensable to specify years theoretically in order to reckon years. This requirement, though troublesome, is satisfied even in dating by regnal years, Olympic dating from 776 B.C., or dating according to magistracies in ancient Rome. If we name these “absolute chronology,” we have to reserve “relative chronology” for the sexagesimal cycle, which will be discussed in the next section.¹³

II. ERA NAMES AND THE SEXAGESIMAL CYCLE

Before the introduction of the era names system, China counted years in terms of dynasties and reigns in ancient times, like most ancient empires and medieval European countries.¹⁴ *Ch'un ch'iu* (Spring and Autumn Annals), the oldest extant Chinese historiography, ascribed to Confucius (552/1–479 B.C.), covers the history of the duchy of Lu from 722 B.C. to 481 B.C., using the regnal year of the Dukes of Lu as its chronological frame.

The era names system was first introduced in 114 B.C. by Wu-ti (Emperor Wu; 140–87 B.C.) of the Han dynasty (202 B.C.–9 A.D., 23–220 A.D.). It originates in the idea of conferring a significant name to a certain series of years, instead of simply reckoning a series of years by number from a fixed point in time. This form of reckoning is found in the schemes employed by Wu-ti's immediate predecessors. Wen-ti (r. 180–157 B.C.), Wu-ti's grandfather, employed the regnal year system at first, but then renamed the seventeenth year of his regnal year “the latter first year” (*hou-yüan-nien*). Ching-ti (r. 157–144 B.C.), Wu-ti's father, divided his reign into three periods: “the first years” (*yüan nien*; 179–149 B.C.), “the middle years” (*chung yüan-nien*; 149–143 B.C.), and “the latter years” (*hou yüan nien*; 143–141 B.C.).

Wu-ti originally named the first six years of his reign “the initial first” (*ch'u yüan*), then named the succeeding each six years “the second first” (*2 yüan*), “the third first” (*3 yüan*), “the fourth first” (*4 yüan*) and “the fifth first” (*5 yüan*).¹⁵ One of his officials memorialized him, saying that:

12. In the East Asian context, this distinction played an important role, which will be discussed below.

13. The idea of chronology by indiction (*indictio*) in early Medieval Europe is also a noticeable exception from the sexagesimal cycle, in which years were given according to their place in the cycle of sixty years (the sexagesimal cycle) and fifteen years (*indictio*), the number of the sexagesimal cycle and the *indictio* itself being ignored.

14. E. J. Bickerman, *Chronology of the Ancient World*, rev. ed. (London, 1980), 62–79; Denys Hay, *Annalists & Historians* (London, 1977), 63–86.

15. These expressions may seem complicated when translated into English, but are quite straightforward in Chinese.

The first year [of each of the divided sections of the reign] should not simply be numbered, but should be named according to a Heavenly good omen: the initial first [group of years] should be named *Chien-yüan* (Founding the First [era]). The second first [group of years] should be named *Yüan-kuang* (The First Light), for a comet appeared. The third first [group of years] should be named *Yüan-shou* (The First Hunting), for a unicorn was captured.¹⁶

Adopting this idea, Wu-ti introduced the era names system, and named that very year (the third year from the fifth first year; 114 B.C.) *yüan-ting 3 nien* (the third year of *yüan-ting*), and at the same time decreed era names retroactively to his enthronement year. It is important to note here that the era names system is thus a “metamorphosis” of the regnal year system.

Wu-ti was the emperor who created the first great, unified Chinese empire, bringing parts of Manchuria, northern Korea, northern Vietnam, and central Asia under his sway. Throughout the territory, he dispatched local administrators from the center and established Confucianism as the state ideology.¹⁷ It is not too much to say that the idea of chronology was devised to show the dignity of the great emperor of the Han dynasty.

A new era name was proclaimed when a new emperor succeeded the throne, to express his administrative ideal (for example, *Yung-p'ing* [Eternal Peace]), and when a special occasion appeared during his reign (for example, *Hsiang-hsing* [Appearance of the Omen; as a result of the appearance of a yellow dragon from the sea], or *Shên-fêng* [Divine Phoenix]).¹⁸

The idea of chronology later rippled out in all directions toward the Chinese peripheral countries; it was employed in Vietnam and Korea by the middle of the sixth century, and in Japan by the middle of the seventh century at the latest. The first documented use of an era name by a peripheral people was *Yüan-hsi* (304–307) by Liu Yüan (r. 304–310) of Hsiung-nu (Hun) extraction, the founder of the former Chao dynasty (304–329).¹⁹ Subsequent peripheral peoples created their own era names when they founded their own independent states.

It should not go unnoticed that what these non-Chinese East Asian countries introduced was not the particular Chinese era names themselves, but the very idea of the era names system. It is important to distinguish clearly between the

16. Ssu-ma ch'ien, *Shih-chi* [Records of the Grand Historian] (completed circa 91 B.C.), ed. Takigawa Kametarō (Taipei, 1972), 207. The whole translation of *Shih-chi* into Western languages is not published yet. See Edouard Chavannes, *Les Mémoires historiques de Se-ma Ts'ien*, 6 vols. (Paris, 1895–1905); Burton Watson, *Records of the Grand Historian of China*, 2 vols. (New York, 1961).

17. For an English account of Wu-ti, see Michael Loewe, “The Former Han Dynasty,” in *Cambridge History of China*, ed. Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe (Cambridge, Eng., 1986), I, 103–222.

18. For further particulars on Chinese era names themselves see Ichimura Sanjirō, “Nengō ni arawaretaru jidai shisō,” [The thought of a period as revealed in Chinese era names], in his *Shinashi kenkyū* [Studies on Chinese History] (Tokyo, 1939), 405–419. It first appeared in *Shigaku zasshi* 39 (1928). For a review in English of Ichimura's work, see Arthur F. Wright and Edward Fagan, “Era Names and Zeitgeist,” *Études asiatiques* 5 (1951), 113–121.

19. Chuang Huang, *Ou-ya chi-yüan hê-piao* [Synchronized European and Asian Chronological Tables] [1904] (Tokyo, 1968), 178.

era names and the era names system when we discuss the East Asian international environment.

When used in tandem with the era names system, the Chinese sexagesimal cyclical system fulfilled its function as a method of reckoning years in East Asia. The sexagesimal cycle is expressed by the combination of two Chinese characters: the first character in the pair is from a series of ten characters called *kan* (“stems” or “trunks”: *chia, i, ping, ting, wu, chi, kêng, hsin, jen, kuei*). The second character is a zodiacal sign from a series of twelve characters called *chih* (“branches”: *tzu, ch'ou, yin, mao, ch'ên, ssu, wu, wei, shen, yu, hsü, hai*). The cycle starts from *chia-tzu*, then *i-ch'ou*, so as to finish a cycle with *kuei-hai*, after which the cycle starts again.²⁰

The ten *kan* originated in ancient China as well, where they were first used as names of the days of the ten-day “week” of the Shang dynasty (c. 1520–1030 B.C.).²¹ The application of the ten *kan* to counting years started after the Hsin interregnum (9–23 A.D.), during the Later Han dynasty, and had diffused all over the East Asian regions by the middle of the seventh century at the latest.

The cyclical system was used widely among the East Asians, and it still is.²² Yet it falls short of designating specific years because of its nature as a relative chronology, the number of the cycle being ignored. It was thus used, in most cases, in tandem with the era names system, so as to ensure an accurate chronology (for example: *Chêng-tê 2 nien jen-hsu* [The second year of *Chêng-tê* (Righteous Virtue), *jen-hsu* of the sexagesimal cycle] to show 1507 A.D.) Certain felicitous era names were used repeatedly in the East Asian countries: *Ta-Pao* (Great Treasure) was used six times in China, Vietnam, and Japan.²³

III. THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHRONOLOGY IN EAST ASIA

A survey of the historical development of chronology in East Asian countries is necessary before proceeding to discuss the reasons why such a unique chronology was employed in East Asia.

The focus will be on the era names system, because the sexagesimal cycle was the chronological system widely shared among East Asian countries. We must also note briefly that East Asians did propose various kinds of continuous-era

20. For details of the cycle in English, see Needham, 396–398.

21. Yabuuchi Kiyoshi, *Rekishi wa itsu hajimattaka* [When Did History Start?] (Tokyo, 1980), 88–93.

22. The animals were associated with the twelve branches since at least the first century. (See Wang Ch'ung, *Lung-hêng* [Critical Essays], 82–83 A.D.); *tzu* (rat), *ch'ou* (ox), *yin* (tiger), *mao* (hare), *ch'ên* (dragon), *ssu* (snake), *wu* (horse), *wei* (sheep), *shen* (monkey), *yu* (cock), *hsü* (dog), *hai* (boar). These animals are used to refer to particular years, quite popular, in Japan at least, even today. These were also used for indicating directions and hours until the mid-nineteenth century in Japan.

23. For a list of East Asian era names, see Yamane Yukio, “*Ōa nengō sakuin*,” [Index of European and Asian Era Names]; an appendix to the Tokyo reprint of Chuang Huang, 1–20.

systems, including the Buddhist era. Yet ideas of a single continuous-era system never took firm root in East Asia. These ideas are given below, and their significance examined in the following section.²⁴

China

It will be best to start with the development of the era names system after Wu-ti. Era names were changed less frequently as time passed,²⁵ though Wu-ti himself used eleven different era names during his fifty-four-year reign. This increasing durability of era names resulted from the fact that the era name at the time of a monarch's enthronement came to be esteemed as a manifestation of the new emperor's ruling ideal. Consequently, rulers were less likely to change an era name simply for superstitious reasons like the appearance of good or bad omens.²⁶ Chu Yüan-chang (1328–1398), the founding emperor of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), kept the era name *Hung-wu* (Great Military Achievement) through his entire thirty-one year reign, which initiated the practice of using one era name for an entire reign (the so-called "reign name"²⁷). This remained the practice until the abolition of the era names system in the early twentieth century. It is of great importance here that the reign name system is not a direct transformation of the regnal year system, but is rather an outgrowth of the era-name system in which an era became co-terminous with a reign. Chinese emperors were called by their reign names thereafter: Chu Yuan-chang was widely known posthumously as Hung-wu-ti (the Hung-wu Emperor, that is, the Emperor of the Hung-wu era). We could say that the reign name system is the ultimate form of the era names system.

Aside from the era names system, the Era of Confucius, a single era-count beginning with his birth in 551 B.C., was advocated by K'ang Yu-wei (1858–1927) at the end of the Ch'ing dynasty (1644–1911), though it was never widely used.²⁸ The era names system was abolished in 1911 when the Ch'ing dynasty was overthrown in the Chinese Revolution.²⁹ As a substitute for the era names

24. The author has no information available on Vietnamese chronological ideas of a continuous-era system.

25. Of course there are exceptions to the frequency: the era name was changed five times in 189 A.D., for the three emperors enthroned at successive intervals during the year. Tsê-t'ien wu-hou (the only female emperor in Chinese history) changed era names fourteen times during her fifteen-year reign (r. 690–705). See Chuang Huang, 158, 277, and 280.

26. Wada Hisanori, *Sekaishi to jidai-ishiki* [World History and Period-consciousness] (Tokyo, 1985), 20.

27. "Reign name," an English rephrasing of "one reign one era system" (*J. Issei ichigen sei*) for avoiding the relatively confusing four-word phrase, must properly be understood as "a particular sort of era name that is coterminous with the reign of an emperor." I am indebted to Prof. Ronald P. Toby for this rephrasing. Also see, Herschel Webb, *Research in Japanese Sources: A Guide* (New York, 1965), 20–22.

28. K'ang advocated a radical reform, though failed in the end, in which he located Confucius as the uncrowned emperor who proposed the reformed institution for the upcoming new dynasty.

29. Attention should be given to the fact that the name of this revolution (Hsin-hai) is from the sexagesimal cycle. This sort of naming of historical occurrences was not exceptional in East Asian history.

system, some proposed an Era of Huang-ti (Emperor Huang), a single era-count beginning with the enthronement of the mythical founding emperor of China in 2698 B.C., but this idea was not accepted.³⁰ Revolutionaries formed the Republic of China (*Chung-hua min-kuo*), and decided to introduce the very name of the country as their new era name, declaring 1911 as the first year of the Republic of China (*Chung-hua min-kuo 1 nien*). The new system still shares the idea of the era names system, though the source of the name itself was different in nature from that of the preceding era names. In 1949, the People's Republic of China was established, and introduced the Christian era, together with the Gregorian calendar, as *Kung-yüan* (the public era; the international era), though the Republic of China era is still in use in Taiwan.

Korea

The first use of an era name by a Korean people is said to date back to the Silla kingdom (c. 57 B.C.–935), when Pö-p-hüng, the twenty-third king (r. 514–539), introduced the era name *Kön-wön* (Founding the First [era]) in the twenty-third year of his reign (536).³¹ This was the time when Silla was winning mastery of the Korean peninsula among the three kingdoms. In the following century, six era names were proclaimed.³² It is interesting to note here that the changes of era name in the Silla kingdom were done not at the enthronement of a new king, but in the middle of a reign. At the height of its prosperity (from the latter seventh century for a century on) the Silla kingdom used the Chinese era names with the T'ang dynasty instead of proclaiming its own era names.³³

The Koryö dynasty (918–1392) introduced its own era name *Ch'ön-su* (Heavenly Gift) at the year of its foundation in 918, but after accepting imperial appointment from the Chinese Hou-t'ang dynasty (923–935) in 933 as king, Koryö used the Chinese era names from then on, except the two years interregnum of its own era name *Kwang-tök* (Glorious Virtue) (950–951). The joint use of the Chinese era names continued during the Chinese Sung (960–1279) and Yüan (1260–1368) dynasties.

The Yi dynasty (1392–1910) was a trusted participant in the Sinocentric order of East Asia through the Chinese Ming (1368–1644) and Ch'ing (1644–1911) dynasties, and did not introduce its own era name for five centuries. Only after Japan's success in the Sino-Japanese war (1894–1895), did Koreans repudiate Chinese dependency and proclaim the Great Empire of Han when they intro-

30. It is natural for the Chinese to bring out the Huang-ti as a consequence of their successful revolution to the dynasty run by a non-Chinese people. See Wada, 23.

31. *Samguk sagi* [History of the Three Kingdoms], [1145], 3rd rev. ed. (Keijo [now Seoul], 1941), 40.

32. Fujita Ryōsaku, "Chōsen no nengō to kinen" [Korean Era Names and Chronology], in his *Chōsengaku ronkō* [Studies on Korean Studies] (Nara, 1963), 238–334.

33. *Samguk sagi* reports that Silla's envoy to China was told by the T'ang emperor that it was incomprehensible for Silla as a subject to introduce her own era names, and as a result of which Silla started to share the Chinese era name instead of her own era name. See page 57.

duced their own era names in 1896 as a symbol of independence. However, the Korean era names system ended when Korea was annexed to Japan in 1910, after Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese war (1904–1905). In all Korea decreed only twelve era names of her own.³⁴

Two ideas of a single era count system were proposed in Korea: the *Sung chǒng* era was proposed as a eulogy to Emperor Wan-li of Ming China, who sent reinforcements to Korea when Japan invaded in 1592 and 1597. After being conquered by Ch'ing (Manchu) armies in the early seventeenth century, Korea was forced to use Ch'ing era names officially, but many individuals continued to use the Sung-chong era name privately for more than a century.³⁵ The other system is the Tangi (era of Tangun), reckoned from 2333 B.C., the year in which the legendary founder of Korea, Tangun, was said to have ascended the throne. In 1945, the era system was introduced by Korea as a symbol of independence, and endured until 1961.³⁶

The Christian era system is now used both in the Republic of Korea and in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Vietnam

The first use of era names by the Vietnamese traces back to the mid-sixth century: Ly Bon (?–549), head of a powerful clan in Hanoi, founded the Van Xuân kingdom, the first Vietnamese state, by banishing the Chinese governor in 541. He enthroned himself as Ly Nam Dê (Emperor Ly Nam), and introduced his own era name *Thiên đức* (Heavenly Virtue) in 544. After Ly Nam Dê's death in 549, the dynasty ceased employing era names, and they were overthrown by the Chinese Sui dynasty (581–618) in 602.³⁷

The Ngô dynasty (939–965) did not have its own era names, but the Đinh dynasty (968–980) introduced the era name *Thái bình* (Grand Tranquillity) in 970. It was regarded as a sign of independence and as the very first Vietnamese dynasty, with everything earlier being regarded simply as the preceding age.³⁸

34. Kubo Tsumeharu explains the Korean's typical attitude to the era name among the peripheral countries by noting that Korean countries were too close to the center of Chinese power to declare independent era names (except Silla which did not share its boundary directly with China); see his *Nihon shinengō no kenkyū* [A Study of Japanese Non-Official Era Names] (Tokyo, 1967), chapter 4: "Public and Unjustified/Private Era Names in the Korean Peninsula," 46–48. It is also worth remarking that Korea employed the regnal year system in such authoritative Korean historiographies as *Samguk sagi* [History of the Three Kingdoms, 1145], *Koryō sa* [History of Koryō Dynasty, 1451], and *Chosŏn wangjo sillok* [Authentic Records of the Yi Dynasty, 1392–1910].

35. Fujita, 327–331.

36. *Ibid.*, 321–323. *Ajia rekishi jiten* [Dictionary of Asian History] (Tokyo, 1959–1962), VI, 130.

37. It could be seen as a sign of Vietnamese nationalism in the face of Chinese power that they kept their own leader, country name, and era name, though only for a short time. See Wada, 36–42.

38. *Dai Viêt Su Ky Toan Thu* [Complete Book of the Records of Vietnam], ed. and comp. Ngo Si-Lien (1479).

After the Dinh dynasty, the era names system was used continuously by succeeding Vietnamese dynasties.³⁹ In the Nguyen dynasty (1802–1945), Vietnam instituted the reign name system.⁴⁰

Vietnam is a country which consistently adhered to its own era names, but it was repeatedly ruled by China, and was exposed often to Chinese ruling intentions.⁴¹ China sometimes used different names for Vietnam from those Vietnam proclaimed for itself, for China would not admit Vietnam's independence, and habitually rejected Vietnam's assertions of equality.⁴²

The Vietnamese knew how to use terms properly even in era names; they accepted Chinese era names and names for the Vietnamese state in dealing with China, because they participated in the Sinocentric order, but they remained faithful to their own era and national names domestically, and in dealings with other foreign states. It represents the complex Vietnamese situation in the Chinese world order that Vietnam had to introduce Chinese advanced culture and institutions to enrich and strengthen itself, and in order to keep its independence from repeated Chinese imperial designs.

By the latter half of the nineteenth century, France had broadened its influence in Vietnam. The situation created Vietnam's Sino-French War of 1884–1885, a military collision between China as suzerain state, and France as a growing power. The French triumph forced China to recognize the French protectorate over Vietnam. The era names system, though, continued until the proclamation of the Vietnamese republic in 1945. The Christian era system is now employed in Vietnam.

Japan

The first Japanese era name was introduced in 645,⁴³ as a result of a *coup d'état* to eliminate the influential Soga family and to place the imperial house in direct control of Japan, and consequent political reforms. Emperor Kotoku (r. 645–654) succeeded to the throne and assigned the era name *Taika* (Great Reform), to ensure administrative reform. It is relevant to the following discussion of the

39. The earlier Lê dynasty (980–1009), Ly dynasty (1009–1225), Trần dynasty (1225–1400), and Hồ dynasty (1400–1407). After a short interval of Chinese Ming dynasty rule (1407–1427), the later Lê dynasty (1428–1789) restored the era names system. During the rise of the Tây Sơn dynasty (1718–1802), two different era names coexisted in Vietnam, for the Tây Sơn also introduced its own era names. There also coexisted two different era names in Vietnam during 1527–1677, when the Mac clan, usurper of the later Lê dynasty, introduced its own era names system. See Wada, 39, and Chuang Huang, 434–435.

40. Wada, 40–41.

41. Vietnam was ruled by China from 111 B.C.–543 A.D., 603–938 and 1407–1428, and was exposed to Chinese ruling intentions in 980–981, 1076–1077, 1257, 1284–1285 and 1287–1288.

42. China termed the emperors of the Dinh dynasty district-kings of Cochin, and emperors of the Ly dynasty kings of Annam (a Chinese name for Vietnam), even though Vietnam named herself Dai Viet (literally, Great Viet) from c. 1054 on.

43. The era names system was already employed unofficially by the Japanese in 591. See Tokoro Isao, *Nengō no rekishi* [A History of Japanese Era Names] (Tokyo, 1988), 29–33.

era names system that the era name chosen, *Taika*, was a Japanese original without precedent in East Asian era names.

Japan is the only country in East Asia that still continues the era names system. After two brief abeyances (654–686, 686–701), era names have been in continuous use. During the period of the Northern and Southern courts (1332–1392), the only major dynastic schism in Japanese history, two lines of era names coexisted, for both courts claimed imperial legitimacy.⁴⁴

It is significant in the Japanese context that the exclusive right to change the era name and proclaim the calendar remained in the emperor's hands, even after secular power passed into the hands of the military caste. During the age of military ascendancy (1192–1868), the shoguns, though being at the helm of the State and seen as the rulers of Japan by other East Asian countries as well, never introduced their own era names system. Shoguns paid deep public regard to the era name which the emperor designated (though the imperial court really decided the era name at the suggestion of the shogun's government).⁴⁵

The Japanese era name was changed at frequent intervals, as in ancient China, until the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1868, as a result of the Meiji Restoration, a formal return of political power from the Tokugawa shogunate to the emperor, and the starting point of Japan's commitment to modernization, the emperor chose the era name *Meiji* (Enlightened Rule), and at the same time legislated the reign name system.⁴⁶

As a result of the Restoration, a separate system of chronology was also introduced: the *Kōki* (the Imperial era), a single era-count beginning with the enthronement of the mythical first Japanese emperor, Jinmu, in 660 B.C. It was used concurrently with the era names system until the end of World War II.⁴⁷ The era names system is still in use in Japan with the Christian era system as the *Seireki* (the Western calendar).

It may be useful to survey how an era name was changed, taking the case of Japan. The name was chosen exclusively from Chinese classics. Most era names consist of two Chinese characters. Such characters as *Ten* (heaven), *Ei* (eternity), *Sei* (correct), and so on, were employed repeatedly in the hope that all would be right with the world. The longest used era name before the reign name system was introduced was *Oei* (thirty-three years, nine months); the shortest was *Ryakunin* (two months). Of 179 era names, ten were used for less than a year; ten for one to three years; seventy-one for three to five years; forty-four for five to ten years; twenty-three endured for ten to twenty years; eight lasted more than twenty years; and one was of uncertain length. It could be said that the

44. See H. Paul Varley, *Imperial Restoration in Medieval Japan* (New York, 1971).

45. Japan's imperial institution is the oldest surviving hereditary monarchy in the world, without any change of imperial dynasty, unlike the other East Asian dynasties, and the European dynasties. The emperor has been regarded as the titular head of state, while every military governor (shogun), at least in form, was entrusted by the emperor with the reins of government.

46. Imperial rescript of 8 September, in the first year of the *Meiji* era (1868).

47. Hirose Hideo, *Koyomi* [Calendar] (Tokyo, 1981), 106–107.

length of time an era name endured was in proportion to national stability. In the stable Tokugawa period (1603–1867), the average duration of an era name was seven years, four months. Reasons for a change of era name included imperial enthronements (seventy-eight era names); good omens (nineteen era names); extraordinary phenomena in the heavens or on earth, including epidemic, earthquake, and flood damage (124 era names); Chinese theory of the *Shin-yū* revolution (fifteen era names); and *kōshi* reformation (sixteen era names).⁴⁸

IV. THE THEORETICAL, POLITICAL, AND SOCIOCULTURAL INTERPRETATIONS OF CHRONOLOGY

East Asian chronology was totally dominated by era names and the sexagesimal cycle systems. The era names system is premised on the very existence of Chinese ideographic characters. The ideographs made possible the development of the East Asian philosophy of chronology that counting years is an act not of assigning an ordinal number to a year, but of coating a year with a meaningful name. It originates in the *Weltanschauung* inherent in the ideographs that the characters cannot be freed from giving a meaningful name to the whole of this world. The era names system is a consequence, and a sign of this worldview.⁴⁹ It never occurred to non-East Asians to clothe a year with a meaningful name.⁵⁰

The Christian era system was brought to East Asia in the latter half of the nineteenth century as part of Western culture, and replaced the era names system in the subsequent century. Japan is the only country which still employs the era names system officially, though the Christian era system is widely used there as well. It could be said that era names and the sexagesimal cycle systems have already lost their monopolistic position in the chronology of East Asia. In this

48. Kawaguchi Kenji & Ikeda Masahiro, *Gengō jiten* [Dictionary of Era Names] (Tokyo, 1977). Tokoro, 97–103, 108–115. The theory of *Shin-yū* revolution and *Kōshi* reformation comes from the ancient Chinese prophecy [Ch'en-wei-shuo] that *shin-yū* (the 58th year of the sexagesimal cycle) is the year when a revolution occurs. *Kōshi* (the first year of the sexagesimal cycle) is the year when a law changes. See Yabuuchi Kiyoshi, 129–131.

49. Japan was the first country in East Asia successfully to break away from the yoke of the Chinese characters by inventing two kinds of phonetic symbols by the ninth century at the latest, the fruit of which was demonstrated by her sagacious acceptance of Western culture and science since the middle of the nineteenth century. See *Sekai no naka no Nihonmoji* [Japanese Letters in the World], ed. Hashimoto Mantarō (Tokyo, 1980).

50. It should be remembered that an era name is a sort of code name for people who ordinarily use Chinese characters, analogous to the names of the months or the days of the week for Western people. The meanings of those names rarely come to their minds when they habitually use them. A discussion among Western scholars on East Asia arose in the 1950s as to whether they should translate era names into their own languages when they write papers on East Asia in Western languages. It seems to me that translation is scarcely necessary except in a discussion of era names themselves. See Edward H. Schafer, "Chinese Reign-Names—Words or Nonsense Syllables?" *Wen-ti*, no. 3 (1952), 33–40, and also his "Non-translation and Functional Translation—Two Sinological Maladies," *Far Eastern Quarterly* (1954), 251–260. Mary C. Wright, "What's in a Reign Name: The Uses of History and Philology," in *Journal of Asian Studies* 18 (1958), 103–106.

section, I should like to discuss the era of the combined system of era names and the sexagesimal cycle from the theoretical, political, and sociocultural points of view.

To demonstrate that the combined system of era names and the sexagesimal cycle compares quite well with the system of a single era-count, it may be enough to introduce the East Asian attitude toward the Buddhist theory of the latter days of the Law (Mappō) which had a fundamental influence in medieval East Asia.⁵¹

Mappō is a Buddhist eschatological idea that the history of the world, since the Buddha's death, is divided into three periods: the period of the true law (Shōbō) for five hundred years (a thousand years according to another theory); the period of the imitative law (Zōbō) for a thousand years; and the period of the latter days of the law (Mappō) for ten thousand years. Throughout the three periods Buddha's teachings gradually decline; in the third period, people do not live by Buddha's law, and the world is in a state of desolation.⁵²

This theory emerged in northwestern India around the sixth century, and was soon brought to East Asia. It was a matter of primary concern for medieval East Asians to know when the period of the latter days of the law began, just as Medieval Europeans worried about doomsday.⁵³ It required a calculation of a continuous sequence of years. The last stage of degeneration was calculated on the premise that the Buddha had died in the fifty-third year of the reign of King Mu of Chou (949 B.C.).⁵⁴ In China, the Mappō age was thought to have begun in the third year of the *T'ien-Pao* era (552) according to the theory of five-hundred years of the True Law; in Japan, to have begun in the seventh year of the *Eishō* era (1052) according to the theory that the era of the True Law lasted one thousand years.⁵⁵

In spite of that, the idea of a single era-count as embodied in the Buddhist era system did not survive in East Asia. Even those who embraced this pessimism, including Buddhist monks, continued to use the combined system of era names and the sexagesimal cycle. It is remarkable that no historiographical description has yet come to light that employs the Buddhist era system, even in the official

51. Kuno Akira, *Rekishitetsugaku josetsu* [Discourse on the Philosophy of History] (Tokyo, 1966), 99–114.

52. Tamura Enchō, *Asuka Bukkyoshi kenkyu* [Studies on Buddhism in the Asuka period] (Tokyo, 1969), 168–173.

53. Peter Burke, "Tradition and Experience: The Idea of Decline from Bruni to Gibbon," *Daedalus* 105 (1976), 137–152. In the case of Japan, toward the latter half of the eleventh century, the society went through radical change and social unrest, which added support to the belief in the immanent coming of the last law. It was against this background that Buddhist masters emerged in the eleventh to the twelfth century to encourage people to depend on the saving grace of Buddha.

54. On the date of Buddha's death, see Kubo Tsuneharu, "Kinsekibun ni arawareta butsumetsu nendai" [Years of Buddha's death found in Stone Monuments], *Risshō Daigaku ronsō* 9 (1943), 48–56.

55. Kōen, *Fusō ryakki* [Brief History of Japan] (c. 1094–1107) in *Shintei Zōho Kokushi taikai* (Tokyo, 1965), XII, 292.

Buddhist canon of texts in East Asia.⁵⁶ Many volumes of annals and chronicles of Japanese Buddhist temples have been written over the centuries, yet none uses the Buddhist era system.

This does not mean that the Buddhist era was never used in East Asia. There exist some examples in Korea and Japan, in addition to the system of era names and the sexagesimal cycle, of chronological denotation with the Buddhist era.⁵⁷ A thought-provoking Japanese example is found in *Sangoku unsū fugo-zū* (A Synchronized Chronological List of India, China and Japan) by Urabe Kanetomo (1435–1511).⁵⁸ It is a table of the sexagesimal cycle, Chinese era names, the Buddhist era, and Japanese era names arranged in parallel. However, the fact that Urabe's chronology was never published, existing only in manuscript, suggests how little need there was for a continuous count of chronology.⁵⁹ The above discussion permits the conjecture that the combined system of era names and the sexagesimal cycle, interdependently, fulfilled the chronological function more than we can imagine now.⁶⁰

The cyclical chronology of the sexagesimal system was able to survive in use to the present day, we might suggest, because it is capable, when used in tandem with the era name system, of providing adequate chronological precision.

Let me start the discussion by describing the impulse behind the invention of the Christian era system in the sixth century.⁶¹ It is a matter of importance for

56. It is called the *Daizōkyō* [The Buddhist Canon of Texts as Translated into Chinese with Additional Works on Buddhism Written in Chinese] in Japanese. For the best and the latest edition of this canon of texts in the East Asian tradition, see *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* [The Buddhist Canon of Texts: A Newly-Revised Edition of the Taishō Era], ed. Takakusu Junjirō and Watanabe Kaikyoku, 100 volumes, (Tokyo, 1924–1934).

57. On examples of the Buddhist era in Korea, see Fujita Ryōsaku, 325–327. In Japan, for example, *Teiō hennenki* [The Annals of (Japanese) Emperors] (written in the early fourteenth century) employs the regnal year system, and the very years of the enthronements were supplemented with the Buddhist era system, though the era names system is employed in most of the chronological descriptions. See *Shintei zōho kokushi taikei* (Tokyo, 1965), XII. It is reported that there are found at least ten examples of the combined system of era names and the sexagesimal cycle followed by the Buddhist era in medieval Japanese stone monuments. See Kubo, 48–56.

58. The author's preface to one of the manuscripts kept in the Japanese National Archives says that this is the first work to synchronize the three independent chronological denotations (with the sexagesimal cycle system). See the National Archives Japanese Book Number 23134.

59. It is not due to the underdevelopment of printing: printing was known in Japan by the late eighth century. The oldest datable printed documents in the world are Japanese. See David Chibbett, *The History of Japanese Printing and Book Illustration* (1977).

60. Aoki Kon'yō (1698–1769), an early modern Japanese intellectual, was the first Japanese to notice the Christian era system through contact with the Dutch, the only Europeans who were permitted access to Japan between 1639–1854. He was amazed that the Dutch lacked an era names system. See Aoki, *Kon'yō manroku* [Kon'yō's Collected Works] (1763), in *Nihon zuihitsu shusei* [Library of Japanese Essays], 1st ser., 20 (1977), 52. On the Christian era in early modern Japan, see note 75.

61. It is important to note that the first year of a single era count is not the same as the year when it was first used. The Christian era system was started in the sixth century, though the era was not widely used until the eleventh century. In the papal chancery, it did not replace the *indictio* until the time of John XIII (965–972). See *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1965), V, 728.

the church to reckon the date of Easter, the principal festival of the Christian year. Easter is a movable festival, falling on the first Sunday after a full moon on or after the vernal equinox by the Alexandrian reckoning since the Council of Nicaea in 325. Years were counted, apart from the calendrical system, by the Alexandrian era of Diocletian, often as *aera martyrum*. Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444) calculated Easter tables, though he still employed the Diocletian era. In 525, when Dionysius Exiguus continued Cyril's Easter tables, he discarded the Diocletian era, and chose the date of the Incarnation, on the grounds that "We have been unwilling to connect our cycle with the name of an impious persecutor, but have chosen rather to note the years from the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ."⁶² It was important for Christians to have a system of chronology other than the era of Diocletian. It is natural that they chose the Christian era system, because the Incarnation was such a momentous event for them. If the emperor had been tolerant of Christianity, it may be conjectured that the incorporation of the system of reckoning years with the calendar system would not have taken place.

In ancient China, months were counted by ordinal numbers, and days by the sexagesimal cycle.⁶³ It was therefore quite within the bounds of possibility for ancient Chinese to have invented a single era count system, analogous to the days when the Christian era was introduced. It would have been quite simple for China to have developed the sexagesimal cycle system into an absolute chronological system, simply by giving ordinal numbers to the cycle, in the same way as the Olympic dating system.

China in fact did develop the idea of an absolute chronology based on the sexagesimal cycle system: *San-yüan chia-tzu* (a theory of the three units of a sexagesimal cycle). This was an idea of chronology which postulated a sexagesimal cycle (sixty years) as one unit, and the three units (180 years), consisting of the first, the second, and the last, repeat themselves with the ordinal number given to the unit.⁶⁴ The very first of the units was assumed to start from 2637 B.C., the sixty-first regnal year of the legendary Chinese emperor Huang-ti. According to this chronology, 1984 is reckoned as the first year (*chia-tzu*) of the seventy-eighth unit of the sexagesimal cycle, or the twenty-sixth of the last sexagesimal unit.⁶⁵ It was based on a combination of ancient Chinese astrological theory with the sexagesimal cycle. The earlier references to chronology are found in historiographies since sixth-century China, on tombstones since the early eleventh century in Korea, and in Japanese historiographies since the early

62. Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Princeton, 1964), 132. R. L. Poole, *Chronicles and Annals* (Oxford, 1926), 20–25.

63. The twelve branches of the sexagesimal cycle originally denoted the months of the year in the kingdom of Yin (c. 1520–1030 B.C.), though months were named by ordinal numbers after the kingdom. See Watanabe Toshio, *Koyomi no subete* [All about Calendars] (Tokyo, 1980), 150.

64. See Suzuki Keishin, *Koyomi to meishin* [Calendars and Superstition] (Tokyo, 1969), 120–127.

65. Chuang Huang, 23–24.

tenth century.⁶⁶ This system is nothing less than an absolute chronology capable of specifying years theoretically and practically. But it has never occupied the mainstream, nor even been an oft-used auxiliary, in East Asian chronology.

Two reasons may be proposed to explain why the Chinese did not introduce a single era count system, despite the strong potential that existed. The first reason is that the combined system of era names and the sexagesimal system was sufficiently endowed with chronological faculties. The second reason is that the era names system fulfilled an important political function.

We are now at the stage of discussing how the combined system of era names and the sexagesimal cycle functioned politically and internationally in East Asia. It is easy to imagine now that the era names system took on a political character in itself: to change an era name was a symbolic act showing the dignity of the Chinese emperor, a dignity increased later by the introduction of the reign name system. The Chinese idea that an era name was a sign of independence and a symbol of sovereignty extended to peripheral countries, which introduced the idea in full measure. It was a symbol of an independent state to have an era name as well as a name for the country, both of which, it was thought, would last as long as the country survived.⁶⁷ When plural countries coexisted in China, each proclaimed its era name. In 401, during the period of the so-called Six Dynasties, when China was at its most fragmented, there were ten different era names simultaneously within China.⁶⁸ The idea that the era name reflected the sovereignty of the state that proclaimed it extended to other East Asian countries. It became normal practice in international relations that a country under the suzerainty of another country should use the era name of the suzerain country. This shows that an era name was a mirror reflecting the realities themselves, going beyond the sphere of symbol.

This pervasiveness of era names is confirmed by the fact that other East Asian countries introduced, not the Chinese era names themselves, but the very system of reckoning years. This has deep significance for a discussion of the East Asian international environment: in East Asia where China had overwhelming power and cultural supremacy, it was a form of symbolic action toward its neighbors for a country to choose to introduce its own era name, or to use the era name of the other country. In Korea, Vietnam, and Japan, the era name played two roles: displaying the dignity of the monarch domestically, while demonstrating independence from China internationally. In Korea and Vietnam, which were always susceptible to coercion from China, the attitudes toward the era name were in striking contrast: Korea had little regard for the era name, while

66. On China and Japan, see Kita Seiro, *Baien Nikki* [Baien Miscellanies] (Edo, 1845), in *Nihon zuihitsu shūsei* [Library of Japanese Essays], 3rd ser., 12 (1977), 147–149. On Korea, see Fujita, 314–317.

67. Wada, 40–41.

68. Chuang Huang, 198–203.

Vietnam, on the other hand, attached great importance to the era name, in addition to the name of the country. To the best of my judgment, both attitudes, though offering a great contrast, can be seen as characteristic manifestations of independence from China.⁶⁹

It is important to remember that the sexagesimal cycle system, though of Chinese origin, was received in East Asia as a politically neutral system, in the same way the Christian era system in Europe was adopted by this aggregate of Christian countries. It was a masterly device well-adapted to the reality of the East Asian international environment to use both the highly ideological era name system and the politically neutral sexagesimal cycle system. Diplomatic correspondence often employed the sexagesimal cycle alone to denote the date, especially when international relations were in flux. In the seventeenth century when Japan started to use its own era names in diplomatic documents, in rivalry with Ming China, East Asian diplomats debated furiously between the Chinese and the Japanese era names and unadorned sexagesimal signs.⁷⁰ The era names system played an important political as well as chronological role in the East Asian international environment.

It is worth mentioning that the calendar was also used as a political weapon in East Asian international relations.⁷¹ The calendar was often reformed in China, unlike Europe. First, ideology required that a newly founded dynasty revise the calendar: a dynastic change represented, according to the Chinese *Weltanschauung*, the Mandate of Heaven, and the calendar was meant to indicate this. Second, since unexpected solar eclipses were believed to be evil omens, it was important to have the astronomical capacity to forecast eclipses. Revision of the calendar was one of the first duties of a new dynasty. By proclaiming a new calendar, the new dynasty intended to lead the thought of the people to an entirely different channel, and consequently to exert its authority over the world. The calendar was reformed eight times in the T'ang dynasty (618–906), and nineteen times in the Sung dynasty (960–1279).⁷² It was thought that the Chinese emperor, as the Son of Heaven, was the sole mediator between Heaven and Earth, and was responsible for rendering the new message of Heaven. The Yüan dynasty (1260–1368), however, restored the practice of retaining one calendar per dynasty. It provokes interest to note that China has revised the calendar fifty times since 104 B.C., when we recall that in Europe, since the introduction

69. The sequence of East Asian nations adopted in this paper – Korea, Vietnam, and Japan – depends solely on their geographical distances from China. Ironically, it is the reverse of the mental distance from era names: Japan, the only one of these countries separated by an ocean from China, formed a permanent attachment to era names.

70. Ronald P. Toby, "Contesting the Centre: International Sources of Japanese National Identity," *The International History Review* 7 (1985), 347–363. Also see his *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan: Asia in the Development of the Tokugawa Bakufu* (Princeton, 1984), 90–97.

71. On Chinese calendrical astronomy, see Joseph Needham, 390–408.

72. Yabuuchi, 61–71.

of the Julian calendar in 47 B.C., there has been only one calendar reform, the Gregorian calendar reform of 1582.⁷³

The political role of the calendar is revealed when we refer to the Chinese world order in East Asia. The crucial relationship in the “Chinese world order” was that in which vassal states “received investiture” from, or “paid tribute” to, China. This exchange of investiture for tribute was the mechanism by which non-Chinese monarchs were brought into this “world order.” In this context, the significance of sovereignty over the calendar will be clear when we recognize that this ritual exchange was also known as “receiving the calendar.”⁷⁴ It could be said that the calendar also played a symbolic role in hierarchical East Asian international relations.

We can now examine what the absence of a single era count system in East Asia implies, which we will review through the changing attitudes of East Asians toward chronological systems in the late nineteenth century when the political and cultural screens of East Asia were removed by Europeans. It was not until then that East Asians recognized that their combined system of chronology had only a regional universality, conditioned on East Asia as the world of literary Chinese.

The Christian era system came to East Asia in earnest in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and was introduced officially or, in some countries, only practically by the middle of the twentieth century.⁷⁵ This resulted mostly from the alteration of the political system of the East Asian countries⁷⁶: the communization of China, North Korea, and North Vietnam; and the democratization of South Korea and South Vietnam. The era names system disappeared in company with the breaking-up of monarchy.

It is necessary to refer to Japan and the Republic of China. After the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japanese political power returned from the Tokugawa shogunate to the Emperor, and the reign name system started. It could be said that Japan returned to the emperor system, the reverse of other East Asian

73. C. R. Cheney, *Handbook of Dates* (London, 1978), 1–11.

74. Toby, *State and Diplomacy*, 90–92.

75. The Christian era system was first brought to East Asia in the middle of the sixteenth century by Jesuit missionaries, though the system was not circulated even among East Asian Christians. Hubert Cieslik reports the only known exception, a Christian tombstone in Kyoto: “Goshusseirai 1608 nen boshin 7 gatsu 8 nichi . . .” (the eighth of July in boshin [Japanese version of the 45th of the sexagesimal cycle; wu-shen]; in the 1608th year from the Incarnation). See his “Genna 3 nen ni okeru Ōshu no Kirisitan” [The Japanese Catholics in the Northern Part of Japan at the 3rd year of Genna era], in *Kirisitan kenkyū* 6 (1961), 83–120.

76. It is also true that in much of East Asia Chinese characters have fallen into disuse. Vietnam uses Roman characters as the sole national script. North Korea uses the native Han’gul alphabet exclusively, but South Korea has resumed teaching Chinese characters since 1987, to continue the mixed writing of characters and Han’gul. Japan still retains a mixed writing system of Chinese characters with the Japanese syllabary. China has introduced simplified Chinese characters. Still, as explained below, we should not attribute the abolishment of the era names system (except in Japan) to the disuse of Chinese characters.

countries, strengthening the rationale for era names in Japan. In 1979, after heated controversies,⁷⁷ the Japanese national Diet legislated the continuation of the era names system, though the Emperor had been reduced to a symbol of the State and of the unity of the people after World War II.⁷⁸ In Taiwan, the Government represents itself as the successor to the Republic of China founded in 1911, and still uses the Republic of China era system.

The introduction of the Christian era system in East Asia was grounded in the realistic judgment that the Christian era was employed in most of the world. A good example is found in the declaration of the People's Republic of China, in 1949, to introduce the Christian era system officially. It did so not as the "Christian era system" but as *Kung-yüan* (the public era; the international era), because it was the chronological system used in most countries of the world.⁷⁹

The same attitude toward the Christian era system is found even in Japan, where the *seireki* (the Western calendar) is widely used in order to synchronize with other countries (even though Japan is the only country that still officially uses the era names system). Even those Japanese who take a positive attitude toward the continuation of the era names system admit the necessity of the Western era. Perhaps it can be said that the Japanese use the two chronological systems each in its proper way.⁸⁰

It is worth asking why the Christian era system was introduced by non-Christian civilization. The reason was, it seems to me, the invention of "B.C.," by which concept the Christian era system transformed itself into a chronological system capable of locating every historical event on a single time line.

It is often pointed out that the Venerable Bede was one of the very early historians to use A.D. (Anno ab incarnatione Domini: Year of the incarnation of the Lord) as the main chronology, in his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (731). But it has long escaped historians' notice that he also employed the expression "anno igitur ante incarnationem Dominicam" (before the incarnation of the Lord) two times in the work.⁸¹

Thereafter, the expression was found in the work of a monk in Köln in 1474, who employed "Ante Nativitatem Christi" with "Anno Mundi" as a practical

77. Tokoro, 218–247.

78. *The Constitution of Japan* (1947), chapter 1, article 1 in *Chūkai Nihonkoku kenpō* [Commentaries on the Constitution of Japan], ed. Hirano Ryūichi (Tokyo, 1953), I, 61.

79. *Chung-yang jên-min chêng-chih fa-ling huei-pien: 1949–1950* [The Collection of Laws and Regulations of the Central Government of the People: 1949–1950], ed. The Legislative Committee of the Central Government of the People (Peking, 1952), 15. The same attitude toward the introduction of the Christian era is found in Vietnam. See *Sekai no kyōkasho: Betonamu I* [The World's Textbook on History: Vietnam I], ed. Yoshizawa Minami and Furuta Moto'o (Tokyo, 1985), 16.

80. The situation is best understood by analogy to the use of the metric system and the foot-pound-second system among English-speaking peoples. The persistence of the traditional measurement system derives from the fact that the system is suitable to daily necessity, and has become an integral part of people's everyday lives.

81. The Venerable Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, in the Loeb Classical Library (1954), I, 22; II, 374.

time reckoning method.⁸² The expression was used after the late sixteenth century in the period of the so-called dispute over Christian chronology.⁸³ It was derived both from the disputes among scholars concerning dates from the Creation of the world to the birth of Christ, and the difficulty of reconciling non-Christian ancient histories (including China) and the Bible. It is plausible that the idea of B.C. was put forward by Dionysius Petavius as “ante Christum natum” from the practical point of view during the agitation for traditional Christian chronology.⁸⁴

The expression was thereafter used in Bossuet’s *Discours de l’histoire universelle* (1681). In this work Bossuet describes, for example, the Year of Creation as “An du m. I.– Av. J.-C. 4004,” and the year of the foundation of Rome as “753 ans devant Jesus-Christ.”⁸⁵ Since the seventeenth century, the idea of B.C. has been used widely in Europe.⁸⁶

It should be remembered that B.C. was used not singly but as an auxiliary chronology to Anno Mundi. The “secularization” of the Christian idea of history was necessary for the exclusive use of B.C., which started in the eighteenth century. The shift from the Biblical chronology to the secular chronology was first found in Voltaire’s *Essai sur les moeurs et l’esprit des nations. . .* (1756), where B.C. first acquired citizenship in chronology.⁸⁷ It was later developed into a system of denominating years serially backwards from the birth of Christ, to cope with the extension backward of “the Creation of the World” as a result of the development of archaeology and geology in the scientific revolution of early modern Europe.⁸⁸ It is undeniable that this very idea of chronology is precisely the Christian idea of time reckoning,⁸⁹ but it is also undeniable that the invention of B.C. relativized Christian chronology. It made the Christian era system shift from a chronology-within-Christianity to a universal chronology. It was accidental in the earlier stages, in the sense that B.C. was used only to describe the years between the Creation of the World and the birth of Christ. It was beyond their imagination to think of a period “before the Creation of the World.”⁹⁰

82. Adalbert Klempt, *Die Säkularisierung der universalhistorischen Auffassung* (Göttingen, 1960), 86–87.

83. Paul Hazard, *La Crise de la conscience européenne 1680–1715* (Paris, 1968), I, 52f.

84. F. Rühl, “Die Rechnung nach Jahren vor Christus,” *Rhein Museum für Philologie*, Bd. 61 (1906), 628–629.

85. Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, *Discours sur l’histoire universelle* [1681] (Paris, 1966), 47, 63.

86. Hay, 27.

87. Maekawa Teijirō, *Rekishi o kangaeru* [Thinking History] (Kyoto, 1988), 21–25.

88. It is worth introducing Joseph Needham’s idea of chronological expression avoiding the writing of dates as “B.C.” and “A.D.” by the use of “–” and “+” respectively, because, “such a convention seems also more suitable for civilizations which were never part of Christendom.” See his *Science and Civilization in China* (Cambridge, 1954), I, 23. Shih Hsiang-tsai and Hsia Yün-ch’i seem to borrow the “B.C.” notion when they introduce a system of reckoning years backwards from the first year of the Republic of China era in their *Chi-nien t’ung-p’u* [Chronological Table] (Shanghai, 1933).

89. Oscar Cullmann, *Christus und die Zeit*, 2nd ed. (Zurich, 1948).

90. Anthony T. Grafton, “Joseph Scaliger and Historical Chronology,” *History and Theory* 14 (1975), 156–185. Even a chronological table published in the early nineteenth century starts from

Ironically enough, the invention made it easier for the Christian era system to cope with the scientific revolution and spread itself beyond the Christian world.⁹¹

V. EAST ASIAN CHRONOLOGY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

It goes without saying that history was understood as a stream of time in East Asia,⁹² although it was expressed not as consecutive numbers, but as a stack of era names. It is undeniable, however, that the system of era names produced powerful effects on East Asian historical consciousness and historiography, in which contexts the idea of chronology is now to be discussed.

The combined system of era names and the sexagesimal cycle leads first to the subject of time consciousness in historiography. It is a matter of common knowledge that there exist two kinds of time consciousness, “continuous time” and “compartmentalized time.”⁹³ It might be proposed that the lack of a single era-count system hindered East Asians from developing their historical consciousness. I should like to respond in the following manner. It is natural to employ “compartmentalized time” rather than “continuous time” when we look back into the past. Our past is often referred to in our daily life as “before or after a memorable event,” as “our school days,” or as “a time when we lived somewhere,” in the same way historians invent “compartmentalized time” to

the biblical creation of the world in 4004 B.C. See *Chronology of Public Events and Remarkable Occurrences within the Last Fifty Years* (London, 1821). James Bell’s *A View of Universal History* . . . (London, 1842) was a very early example of a chronology liberated from the traditional idea of “the Creation of the World.”

91. In chronology, the two-way scale system is thought to be ahead of the one-way scale method, in contrast to physics, where the absolute temperature system is thought to be more advanced than such relative temperature systems as the Celsius and Fahrenheit scales.

92. The following discussion focuses on East Asian ideas of compartmentalized or boxed time, though this does not mean that there was no idea of linear time in East Asia. There is no room in this paper to remove the false impression of “Timeless Asia” long prevalent in the West. On the idea of linear time in China, see Joseph Needham’s erudite essay; “Time and Knowledge in China and the West,” in *The Voices of Time*, ed. J. Frazer (Amherst, Mass., 1966), 92–135: “If their [Chinese] time had not been linear it is hardly conceivable that they would have worked with such historical-mindedness and such bee-like industry.” (134) This is extremely important when we try to understand the foundation of the voluminous historiographies in China, and in East Asia as well. Whenever I come upon a discussion of “timeless Asia,” I recall the passage, “Once when the Master was standing by a stream he observed: ‘All is transient, like this! Unceasing day and night!’” (*Analects*). Japanese ideas of linear or streamy time are discussed by Maruyama Masao in his “*Rekishishiki no ‘koso’*” [“Basic Strata of Historical Consciousness”] in *Rekishishisōshū* [Collection of Historical Thoughts], ed. Maruyama (Tokyo, 1972), 3–46. Also see Tanaka Gen, *Kodai Nihonjin no jikan ishiki* [Time Consciousness of Ancient Japanese] (Tokyo, 1975).

93. “Compartmentalized time” seems to be based terminologically on such “undue assumptions or axioms” that time is fundamentally continuous. In the East Asian historiographical context, O. B. van der Sprenkel’s work is stimulating on this issue. See his “Chronology, Dynastic Legitimacy, and Chinese Historiography,” (unpub., 1956). (I am indebted to Dr. Joseph Needham for this reference.) Also see his “Chronographie et historiographie chinoises,” in *Bibliothèque de l’institut hautes études chinoises* (Paris, 1960), XIV, 407–421. I am indebted to Prof. Paul Rule for this reference.

research the past, and search for a certain unity there. Modern European historiography was formed by weathering the long and strong tradition of annals and chronicles, a form of historiography that had depended solely on a series of continuous time.⁹⁴ A list of the titles of recent historical works is nothing but an inventory of variously compartmentalized time.

There are two different sorts of compartmentalized time. One makes use of an actual historical compartment; the other was created and applied retrospectively by historians. Dynastic periodizations widely used in the East and the West are typical of the former. The latter is represented by the periodizations of Christophus Cellarius, Karl Marx, and Auguste Comte in the West, and Jien, Kitabatake Chikafusa, and Date Chihiro in the East, especially in Japan.⁹⁵

Era names have often been used as a category for such historical compartments as dynasty, reign period, year, month, and day, and they were used properly in accordance with the context mentioned. The average duration of one era name, 7.4 years in Tokugawa Japan for example, made up a gap between reign period and year.⁹⁶ It was a convenient tool for historians to look back upon the past, a convenience made greater by the fact that era names were changed, in many cases, as a result of political or social changes. Compartmentalized time was a natural and indispensable historiographical tool for East Asians to look back upon the past. Era names were not a hindrance, but rather a stimulus to the development of historical consciousness.

The Christian era system had long been used in the West when the buds of modern historiography emerged in early modern Europe. Historians took an interest in compartmentalizing the past to think about history. It was, in a way, a declaration of the independence of modern historiography from such traditional historiography as annals and chronicles. The use of “century” since the seventeenth century in the West signifies in itself the necessity for compartmentalized time in order to think about history.⁹⁷ The natural invention of such expressions, often found in Western historiography, as “the first half of a century,” “the first quarter of a century,” or “1930s,” and so on, was a sign of the indispensability of compartmentalized time in order to be able to look back upon the past, to develop a way of grasping the past that could not be attained by absolute years.⁹⁸

94. I am recalling Benedetto Croce's “Pensare la storia è certamente periodizzarla.” See his *Filosofia come scienza dello spirito*, IV, “Teoria e storia della storiografia,” rev. 2nd ed. (Bari, 1920), 98–99.

95. On metaphysical interpretations of historical courses or processes in Japan, see *Jidai kubun no shisō* [Ideas of Periodization], ed. Ishida Ichirō (Tokyo, 1986). Also see my “Great Historians: Japanese” in *Great Historians from Antiquity to 1800*, ed. Lucian Boia (New York, 1989), 281–295.

96. Kawaguchi and Ikeda, 97–103, 108–115.

97. *Oxford English Dictionary* [1933] (1970), II, 227.

98. Voltaire may be one of the earliest historians who started to use “siècle” repeatedly. See his *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* (1756).

In the West, if we may offer a schematic summary, the idea of a single era count, the Christian era system, formed the basis of chronology. Based on this, kinds of periodization were employed by historians as compartmentalized time to think about history. By contrast, in East Asia, compartmentalized time was virtually the only form of chronology found in historiography.⁹⁹

This may raise a question about the sexagesimal cycle. The sexagesimal cycle seems, on the surface, to be a form of continuous time when discussed in relation to era names. However, it is actually a system of recurrent time, and should be thought of as a compartmentalized time. It was used in historiography either jointly with era names, or by itself, yet it was rarely used when historians looked back to the past, or when people referred to their past.¹⁰⁰

How, then, did East Asians conceive of diachronic history? The answer is found, not in ideas of chronology themselves, but in chronological tables.

It is necessary here to distinguish the purposes of chronological tables from those of annals and chronicles. Annals and chronicles attach importance to the content they record; chronological tables, by contrast, stress the date or sequence of historical events. Chronological tables played two important roles in East Asia: one was to give a bird's-eye view of the stream of history; the other was to ascertain the synchronicity of historical events in various parts of East Asia.

The chronological table was a desk companion for men of letters in East Asia when the joint system of era names and the sexagesimal cycle was the sole system of chronology, and it still is for students of East Asian history. More than fifteen-hundred era names were customarily referred to in chronological tables.¹⁰¹ It should not pass unnoticed that the earlier development of chronological tables in East Asia than the Western world was largely because of this joint system of chronology.

In the West, it is said that a synchronized table of era names was made in the early fourth century at the latest, when Eusebius wrote his *Chronicle*, presumably based on the already-lost *Chronologies* of Africanus.¹⁰² The surviving Latin version by Jerome (331–420)¹⁰³ shows us that it may be seen as a sort of synchronized table of era names, but it seems to me that it aims first at establishing the dates of events in the Bible. The West had to wait for its first chronological table, to my knowledge, until the late sixteenth century. The tables by Jean Funck or Theodorus Bibliander, for example, may have been intended as

99. It is not that East Asians lacked the ability to count years continuously; rather, they did not employ the expression of a single era count system in historiography.

100. In modern Japan, for example, it is rare for people to refer to the sexagesimal cycle when looking back to the past, except when they refer to an age in a roundabout way.

101. 1,526 era names have been used in East Asia to date. See Yamane, 1–20.

102. Maekawa, 11–14.

103. Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Princeton, 1964), 140–187.

a reference for chronological information.¹⁰⁴ It need cause no surprise that this was just the time when modern European historical scholarship appeared, as separate from universal history.¹⁰⁵

In East Asia, chronological tables had already been proposed as a reference for comprehending history by Ssu-ma Ch'ien (135?–93? B.C.) in his *Shih-chi* (Records of the Grand Historian). He allots ten of 130 chapters to chronological tables. His conception of chronological tables is summarized in his introduction to the fourteenth chapter of “Chronological Table of the Twelve Dukes”:

Confucianists discuss only justice and duty, and Orators indulge in sophistry alone: They will not strive to take a survey of the whole from the beginning to the end. Calendricians hold mere years and months in esteem. Astrologers value Heaven's will solely in view of the results of their divining sticks. It is difficult for us to get them when we have something to investigate. Therefore I made this “Chronological Table of the Twelve Dukes,” going from the republic age to the days of Confucius, to show the outline of historical rise and fall as researched by scholars of *Spring and Autumn Annals* (Ch'un-ch'iu) and *Narratives from the States* (Kuo-yü) as a table, for those students who intend to study history through the above two historical works.¹⁰⁶

Ssu-ma arranged “the chronological table of the twelve dukes” by separating lines for the events of each of the twelve states: by reading down the columns, one can see what happened in each state in any given year by the sexagesimal cycle and regnal years of each state.¹⁰⁷ Reading across the columns, one can see the sequence of historical events in any given state. We could say that he made the table to show us history in temporal and spatial contexts.¹⁰⁸

The idea of the chronological table that appeared in the *Shih-chi* spread to become a common historiographical asset throughout East Asia; it became a mandatory element in official Chinese dynastic histories. The chronological table was more necessary and useful for the peripheral countries of China: in Japan, for example, where its own era names system has been maintained continuously since the seventh century, 161 chronological tables had been published by 1968.¹⁰⁹ Many of these are designed to ascertain the synchronicity of Japanese era names, Chinese era names, and the sexagesimal cycle; they have

104. Jean Funck, *Chronologia cum commentariis chronologicis ab initio mundi ad resurrectionem Christi* (Nuremberg, 1545); Theodorus Bibliander, *Temporum condito mundo usque ad ultimam ipsius aetatem supputatio, partitio que exactior* (Basileae, 1558). I will not go into the issue here: I am preparing a work on a history of chronological tables West and East.

105. The following works remind me of the issue of contemporaneousness: Donald R. Kelley, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship* (New York, 1970); George Huppert, *The Idea of Perfect History* (Urbana, 1970).

106. Ssu-ma Ch'ien, 229.

107. It should be remembered that the era names system started in 114 B.C., during his lifetime, and that the sexagesimal cycle system was still the only common method Chinese historians had for denoting years.

108. On the chronological tables of Ssu-ma Ch'ien, see Burton Watson's explanation in his *Ssu-ma Chien: Grand Historian of China* (New York, 1958), 112–115.

109. Okuno Hikoroku, *Nihon rekishi nenpyōshi* [A History of Japanese Chronological Tables] (Tokyo, 1972), 537–553.

also, since the mid-nineteenth century, added reference to the Christian-era system.¹¹⁰

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Let us conclude this essay by answering the problem posed at the outset: why has the Buddhist era not been used in East Asia, where Buddhism was so pervasive?

We have seen that the combined chronological system of era names and the sexagesimal cycle in East Asia was a system comparable in many aspects with such chronological systems based on the idea of a unitary chronology as the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim eras. But there is a passive but significant feature of Buddhism as a religion which had let the combined system of chronology have its own way. Though Buddhism is called a religion, it is definitely different in nature from Judaism, Christianity, and Mohammedanism: all three Western religions are revealed religions, which suppose that an almighty God has created all nature. On the other hand, Buddhism does not suppose, but rather denies, a single almighty God.¹¹¹

Buddhism was founded by Gautama Siddhârtha (c. 563–483 B.C.). He was born a prince of the Sâkya clan in Nepal, and renounced the world at around twenty-nine years of age. He resolved to seek truth for himself. After years of ascetic practices, he finally gained the great enlightenment, sitting quietly in meditation. That is why he is called the Buddha, “the Enlightened one.” Buddhism later spread to the eastern parts of Asia, and divided into two types: southern and northern Buddhism. It is decisive that the Buddhism introduced into East Asian countries was that of the northern tradition. In the southern tradition, Theravâda Buddhism of southeast Asia, Gautama is the only true Buddha in the present world cycle. By contrast, in northern Buddhism, that is, the Mahâyâna tradition practiced in East Asian countries, Gautama is but one of innumerable Buddhas who are active in the present world cycle.

Gautama was but a mediator who first found the truth (dharma – universal laws which govern human existence), and showed people how to realize it. It

110. It may be of interest that the persistence of the chronological table in Japan since the mid-nineteenth century has no direct relation with its long tradition of the chronological table. It rather reflects the Japanese attitude toward history as a school subject. Japanese chronological tables of history have been used as a desk companion for school history since the modern educational system started in 1872. History as a school subject has aimed not at cultivating pupils' historical thinking, but at letting them learn by heart events that occurred in the past, according to the content of the history textbook. History as a discipline has only been pursued at the university level. There still is an insuperable gulf between the two histories. See my “Shakaika no juyō to henyō: Igrisu to Nihon (II)” [The Acceptance, Incorporation, and Transformation of Social Studies in Japanese Education and English Education (II)], *Yamanashi Daigaku kenkyū kiyō* 38 (1987), 81–93.

111. It was Prof. Kuroda Toshio who first suggested to me the historiographical meaning of “revelation,” in his 1974 lecture “Muslim History of Historiography.” See his *Isuramu no kokoro* [The Spirit of Islam] (Tokyo, 1980).

is this point that distinguishes Gautama from the founders of revealed religions, who presented themselves as agents of almighty God. Almighty God was not presupposed in Buddhism. Only the depersonalized truth is found there. It is people who seek and gain the truth. The religious idea in East Asian Buddhism is that it is not God but people who approach the truth. Gautama was but the first who showed people how to gain it. Zen, which denotes meditation, contemplation, concentration, and so on, is one efficacious method to attain the state of enlightenment. Those who have attained enlightenment are themselves called Buddhas. There have been, and will be, countless buddhas.¹¹²

Buddhism has never reigned over East Asia as an entity above states; rather it sometimes enjoyed national patronage. This distinguishes it substantially from Christendom in Europe. East Asian Buddhism is no more than a religion introduced and patronized by East Asian rulers and nations. It functioned politically as a religion to ensure the powers of the privileged few, though it infiltrated into the life and thought of ordinary East Asian people as well.¹¹³ Such religious events as the Crusade or the penance of Canossa in Christianity were beyond the bounds of possibility in East Asian Buddhism. There is nothing in East Asian Buddhism comparable to the Pope or the Papal court in Catholicism.

Yet we can not conclude a discussion of chronology in East Asia without referring to Confucianism, Taoism, and Japanese Shintōism. None of these three “religions” is a “revealed religion.” Confucianism suspends judgment on the existence of a Supreme Being.¹¹⁴ Confucianism is an ethical teaching and a political philosophy rather than a “religion,” concerned to maintain social order and to consolidate political power. It evolved to become the Chinese orthodoxy, since its establishment as the official state ideology by Emperor Wu, the very emperor who started the era names system. It has had a fundamental influence on East Asian cultures and societies, being the dominant ideology for more than two-thousand years into the twentieth century. Taoism joined with Confucianism to form the basis of Chinese mental life. Taoism is a dominant Chinese metaphysics based on an appreciation of cyclical change and a “religion” with no reference to the Creator. It spread to all of East Asia as a popular belief, unlike Confucianism, which circulated among the ruling classes. Taoism mixed with native beliefs in various parts of East Asia, and consequently played an indispensable role in forming the East Asian religious environment.¹¹⁵ Shin-

112. Hajime Nakamura, “Buddhism,” in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (New York, 1973), I, 247–257.

113. For details, see Takasaki Jikidō, “Higashi Ajia Bukkyōshi” [A History of Buddhist Thought in East Asia], *Iwanami kōza: Tōyō shisō* (Tokyo, 1988), XII, 1–31. Tsuji Zen’nosuke, *Nihon Bukkyōshi* [History of Buddhism in Japan], 10 vols. (Tokyo, 1944–1955) is the most detailed social history of Japanese Buddhism.

114. It resolves itself into the following passage of the *Analecst*: “The Master never talked of mystery, strength, immorality and god.” (vol. 7, no. 20). See my “Kong-zi (Confucius)” in Boia, ed., 62–66.

115. It may be worth adding here that the existence of more than twenty (unofficial) Taoist era names is reported. See Kubo, 39–40.

tōism, the indigenous Japanese “religion,” is rooted in the folk beliefs and rituals of an agricultural people. It later reshaped itself as a “religion” by codifying its doctrines under the stimulation of already-introduced Buddhism and Confucianism. These doctrines made no reference to a unitary supreme god.¹¹⁶

It is remarkable that none of these four East Asian religions refers to a single almighty God. East Asia has a fundamentally different concept of religion from that of the revealed religions. The revealed religions have an idea of the beginning of the world, and as the logical consequence of that, the end of the world. They accordingly introduced the pivotal religious years as the first year of their eras: the Jewish era took the first year (Molad Tohu; 3761 B.C.) to be the year of the creation of the world. The Christian era took its first year as the year of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The Muslim era settled the first year (622 A.D.) as the year of *Hegira*, the year in which Mohammed fled from Mecca to Medina.¹¹⁷

In the East Asian religions, there was no room to assume the end of the world. There only existed “future land” in the different dimensions of these religions. It could be said that East Asia produced a civilization without God.

The failure of the Buddhist era to achieve widespread currency, and to dominate calendration in East Asia in the way that the Christian era did in the West, is owing to the particular character of Buddhism as a religion. Yet this is but a part of the significance of our review of chronological systems in East Asia: the combined-chronology system using both era names and the sexagesimal cycle, which had been in use from the late second century B.C., provided the cultures of the region with a chronological system adequate to the needs of both contemporary and historical reckoning in the cultures of the region.

Systems for reckoning years and series of years are a decidedly political, social, and cultural construction of human intelligence. Thus, when the environment of East Asia was transformed in all three respects during the past century by the impact of the West, the peoples of East Asia had little choice but to adopt the chronological system of the Christian era. This choice was dictated, not by the propagation of Christianity as a religion, but by the status of the “Christian era” as the “Western era,” the internationally accepted chronological system. The political nature of this choice is underscored by the simultaneous widespread use of combined systems of chronology in forty-one countries around the world, where the Christian era is employed as the “common era,” while systems with other (Islamic, Jewish, era-name, and so on) systems with a “native” religious or political color are used for the reckoning of “domestic” time.¹¹⁸

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116. For an English-language introduction to the subject, see Allan G. Grapard, “Shintō,” *Kōdansha Encyclopedia of Japan* (Tokyo, 1983), VII, 125–132.

117. Finegan, 126–131.

118. Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Seireki igai no kinen hōshiki o mochi’ite iru kuni ichiran” [A list of countries which use the chronological methods other than the Western era], *Hōrei kaisetsu shiryō sōran* (Tokyo, 1979), XI, 45–47.