

## EAST ASIAN HISTORICAL ERAS

Our discussion of the calendrical systems used in East Asia has already raised the issue of how time has traditionally been reckoned there. Studying the East Asian past requires that we have a firm grasp of the way the past is divided in the various countries in the region. At the same time, it is useful to understand the ways that scholars divide East Asian history. This handout is designed simply to give you a comparative overview. The excellent discussions of chronology in the Wilkinson guide and the *Princeton Companion to Classical Japanese Literature* are far more complete and should be read carefully.

### East Asian Eras

The particular historical experiences of each of the East Asian nations have produced distinctive ways of calculating the passage of historical periods in each. Since China has the longest historical experience and deeply influenced the cultures of the other East Asian nations, we will start there.

#### Chinese Eras:

From early times, Chinese political theorists assumed that the world (“all under Heaven” or *tianxia* 天下) should be ruled by a single sovereign (an Emperor). Although there were definite periods during which the territory of China was divided between rival states (most notably before the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. and between A.D. 220 and 589), traditional historians developed the practice of identifying the legitimate ruler of every period. This allowed them to construct an unbroken line of rulers from earliest antiquity until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The political, economic, cultural, and geographical conditions in China, however, resulted in a political history in which a series of ruling families monopolized the imperial throne. These were China’s dynasties. Each of these dynasties adopted its own title and calendar. This is why Chinese historians often refer to dynasties and the “dynastic cycle.”

Each Emperor from the Han dynasty (206 B.C. – A.D. 220) also gave the periods of their reigns auspicious names. These were known as reign titles (*nianhao* 年號). Such auspicious names supposedly summed up the qualities of the Emperor’s rule. Prior to the Ming Dynasty (A.D. 1368 – 1644), an Emperor could have numerous reign titles because they would often change the title to reflect changes in their situation, either to respond to good news or to break out of a bad stretch. The years of each reign title were then simply enumerated. The first year was designated as the “original year” (*yuannian* 元年) and then each subsequent year given the appropriate number (二, 三, etc.).

Since the Ming and Qing Emperors had only one *nianhao* each, it is very common to refer to those emperors simply by their reign titles. For example, the reign title of the first Ming emperor was Hongwu 洪武, therefore he is usually referred to as the Hongwu Emperor. His posthumous title in the Ming imperial ancestral temple, however, was Taizu 太祖, so you will sometimes see him referred to as Ming Taizu 明太祖. Before 1368, when rulers usually had more than one reign title, it is common to refer to the

Emperor by his ancestral temple title and periods of time with the reign titles. This is not as cumbersome as it might at first seem. Americans often refer to time according to the “ruler” (e.g., the Clinton Administration). Chinese living under a dynasty had an instinctive understanding of when the periods occurred.

### **Japanese Eras:**

The Japanese dating system was heavily influenced by the Chinese system, but it differs from it in one very important way. There has been only one “dynasty” throughout recorded Japanese history. The result is that references to the dynasty are chronologically meaningless in the Japanese historical context. The succession of Emperors, however, is not. As did the Chinese, Japanese Emperors after the 6<sup>th</sup> century adopted reign titles (*nengō* 年号) to give auspicious names to the periods of their reign. Again, as in China, Japanese emperors could have a number of *nengō* during their reign. It was not until the Meiji Restoration (*Meiji ishin* 明治維新) in 1868 that Japanese emperors limited themselves to one *nengō* per reign. The use of the reign titles follows Chinese practice, simply numbering the passing years. They begin with the “original year” (*gannen* 元年) and then simply number each subsequent year (二、三、四). The *Princeton Companion to Classical Japanese Literature* has excellent lists of the Emperors and their reign periods. *Nelson’s Japanese English Dictionary* also includes a chronological list of the Emperors and reign titles.

### **Korean Eras:**

The history of the Korean kingdoms and dynasties has been even more intertwined with the history of China. As a result, the influence of Chinese practice has been even stronger on Korea. The Korean kingdoms used the same basic system in which Korean rulers adopted reign titles (*yanho* 年號) and then numbered the years of each reign. During the Chinese Ming and Qing dynasties, the close relationship between the Chinese and Korean Yi dynasty courts resulted in the use of Chinese *nianhao* in official documents. After 1644, documents usually used the corresponding Qing dates (see Wilkinson, *Chinese History*, pp.194-195 for further odd complications). Korea was forced during the Japanese occupation to adopt Japanese reign titles.

## **PERIODIZATION**

Understanding how dates are recorded in historical sources is necessary to establish the basic chronology of events in a given country, but scholars studying China, Japan, and Korea also divide the histories of those countries into larger periods as part of their effort to interpret their pasts. This is called “periodization.” The impact of interpretation on the periodization scheme can be minimal, or it can be great. First, we might consider what are essentially “convenience periodizations,” in other words divisions of the past that simply evoke a time frame and perhaps a very vague sense of the atmosphere at that time.

## China:

Because dynasties have been such a prominent feature of Chinese history, the succession of these has become the most common shorthand for referring to the different periods. Educated Chinese have an instinctive feel for when the Tang 唐 dynasty ruled China. The great events of the past, however, still influence how the references to the dynasties. Thus, it is common to distinguish between the Northern Song (*bei Song* 北宋) and the Southern Song (*nan Song* 南宋) even though the same family ruled throughout both periods because the two were divided by the conquest of North China by the non-Chinese tribal group known as the Jurchen. Many dictionaries have tables of the Chinese dynasties that you can consult. The better dictionaries also include the posthumous titles of Emperors and their reign titles (e.g., *Mathews' Chinese English Dictionary*). As noted above, traditional historians identified the legitimate dynasty for every period, but some periods are so complicated that other names are used. Thus, within the Eastern Zhou (Chou) 周, we usually distinguish between the Spring and Autumn, *Chunqiu* (*Ch'un-ch'iu*), 春秋 period and the Warring States, *Zhanguo* (*Chan-kuo*), 戰國 period. Similarly, the period between the Han and Sui dynasties is often referred to as the Six Dynasties or, in the West, as the “period of disunion.”

## Japan:

As noted above, references to the imperial dynasty itself are not really chronologically specific, therefore it is common to divide Japanese history into different periods depending some characteristic of the period, where the seat of government was, or which family exercised real power over government. The traditional succession of periods prior to the twentieth century is as follows: Jōmon 縄文, Yayoi 弥生, Yamato 大和, Nara 奈良, Heian 平安, Kamakura 鎌倉, Ashikaga 足利 (also known as Muromachi 室町), Warring States (*sengoku* 戦国), Tokugawa 徳川 (also known as Edo 江戸), and Meiji 明治. For periods after the Meiji period, scholars use either Western dates or references to the reign titles of the Emperors. The period after 1868 is often referred to as modern (*gendai* 現代). Note that, aside from a near universal recognition of the importance of 1868 as a dividing line in Japanese history, there is a great deal of debate about the endpoints of the traditional periods. Nevertheless, they do serve the purpose indicated above of giving a general sense of the periods.

## Korea:

Since Korea has seen a succession of different dynasties, it is common to refer to these periods. This scheme is useful, but, as in the case with China, there were occasionally periods in which the Korean peninsula was divided and references to a single dynasty are therefore a little misleading. The usual succession of dynastic periods is as follows: Old Chosŏn 古朝鮮, Wiman Chosŏn 衛滿朝鮮, the Three Kingdoms (*samguk* 三國 of Koguryŏ 高句麗, Silla 新羅, and Paekche 百濟),

Silla, Koryŏ 高麗, Chosŏn (Yi) 朝鮮 (李). References to twentieth century events generally use the Western dating system. A good reference work containing genealogies of the ruling families through the Chosŏn Yi dynasty is Ki-baik Lee's *A New History of Korea* (tr. by Edward Wagner, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

### **Interpretive Periodization:**

You should also be aware that scholars divide the past for the purposes of providing an interpretation of its overall development. Different disciplines also have different conventional divisions that may or may not be relevant to other disciplines. For example, an economic historian may not see the need to divide a country's economic history between two dynasties while a political historian may see such a divide as crucial. Literary scholars may see different divisions entirely. Of course, there can also be disagreement between individual scholars in the same field.

Broader interpretive positions can also influence periodizations. If you read scholars pursuing a Marxist analysis, references to slave, feudal, and bourgeois periods may override the conventional divisions discussed above. The desire to offer such generalized periodization has become common in the scholarship of all three countries. Thus, in China, it is common to refer to divide history into ancient history (*gudai* 古代), medieval (*zhongshi* 中世), modern (*jindai* 近代), and contemporary (*xiandai* 現代). Needless to say, there is a great deal of debate about when each period begins and ends.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHICAL RESOURCES**

The following resources are useful in looking up the historical eras of different countries. Many dictionaries have essentially the same information in useful appendices. Indices of Chinese reign titles can also be found in the calendrical sources covered in the section on telling time.

Lee, Ki-baik. *A New History of Korea*. Tr. Edward Wagner with Edward J. Shultz. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984.

The genealogies of the Korean kings appear in the appendix on pp. 387-394. Note that these lists include the Chinese characters for the kings as well as the dates for their reigns. They do not include reign titles.

Mathews, R.H. *Mathews' Chinese-English Dictionary*. Rev. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1943.

Appendix A.I contains tables of the Chinese dynasties complete with the succession of Emperors and their reign titles. The lists do not include

romanizations of the characters. Unfortunately, since *Mathews* is unreliable for pronunciation, if you do not know how to pronounce them, you will have to consult another, more reliable dictionary. The *Xinhua zidian* is a reasonable first step.

Miner et al., ed. *Princeton Companion to Classical Japanese Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

This work has terrific tables. Not only does it include a chronological list of all the Emperors, it also includes an alphabetized list so that if you know the Emperor's name, you can find the years of his reign easily.

Nelson, Andrew Nathaniel. *The Modern Reader's Japanese-English Character Dictionary*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Rev. ed. Rutland, Vt: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1974.

Appendix 8 contains very useful historical tables. One table lists the major periods of Japanese history as given by various sources. This is followed by a chronological list of all the Emperors and their reign titles. Note that the appendix begins with a list of Chinese dynasties since these are often referred to in traditional Japanese sources.