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Lu Chen

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Retelling the History of the Sengoku Period and the Era Name System

The Year in Japan

Lu Chen

The past two years have seen historical events at an almost unprecedented level of significance for Japan. First, the year 2018 was the 150th anniversary of Japan's Meiji Restoration, which is widely understood to be the most dramatic revolution in the whole of Japanese history. It restored practical imperial rule to the Empire of Japan in 1868 under the Emperor Meiji and was the starting point of Japan's modernization. Second, the Emperor Akihito abdicated at the end of April 2019, and his son, the Crown Prince Naruhito, ascended to the throne. With this change, the thirty-one-year-old Heisei era ended, and the new Reiwa era in Japanese history began. These events have inspired public interest in the history of Japan and have led to the publication of a range of biographies on historical topics.

Retelling the History of the Sengoku Period

To mark the anniversary of the Meiji Restoration, the major media outlets raised a variety of related topics for public discussion. As far away as the UK, academic communities involved in Japan Studies held conferences on the enduring significance of the Meiji Restoration. This trending interest in Japanese history has extended to earlier periods as well. Since Goza Yūichi's 2016 *The Ōnin War* became an unexpected bestseller, with annual sales reaching 280,000 copies, more and more readers are becoming interested in the history of the Sengoku (Warring States) period (1467–1600), a time of social upheavals, political intrigues, and incessant military conflicts. The period was initiated by the Ōnin War (1467–1477), which led to the collapse of the Japanese feudal system under the Ashikaga Shogunate, and it ended when the system was reestablished under the Tokugawa shogun by Tokugawa Ieyasu. The drive to rediscover and retell the history of the Sengoku period through life stories has provided a directional guide for the biography market over the past two years.

I will single out several biographies related to this period. First, Kuroda Moto-ki's *Hōjō Ujimasa: Kenkon wo seppa shi Taikyo ni kaesu* (2018) is a biography of Hōjō Ujimasa (1539–1590), a daimyo (territorial lord) of the Sengoku period. During his reign, the territorial expansion of the Hōjō family reached its peak. The first biographical introduction to Hōjō Ujimasa's life story, this book details his participation in historical events and the influence of these events on his career choices. It explains why the daimyo Hōjō family perished, even after five generations, and illuminates the role of the daimyo during the Sengoku era.

The second is Owada Tetsuo's *Akechi Mitsuhide to Hidemitsu: Toki wa ima Ame ga shitashiru Satsuki kana* (2019). Akechi Mitsuhide (1528–1582) and Akechi Hidemitsu (1536–1582) were both daimyos in the Sengoku period. Hidemitsu was Mitsuhide's son-in-law, and played an important role in the Oda family at that time. In 1582, Akechi Mitsuhide conspired against his ruler, Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582), in an event historically known as the Honnō-ji Incident (1582). Subsequently, he was typically cast as a villain and a rebel. However, his life before that famous incident has remained a mystery, along with his personality prior to the plot. This biography aims to solve such questions through archival research regarding the two men's lives and personalities before the Honnō-ji Incident. In so doing, it reconstructs the historical background of one of the most mysterious historical events in Japanese history—the Honnō-ji Incident.

The third biography, Fujii Takashi's *Ōuchi Yoshitaka: Ruiyobutoku no ie wo syo-si, daimyo no utsuwa ni noru* (2019), subverts the traditional image of Ōuchi Yoshitaka (1507–1551) as a war-weary and indecisive daimyo in the Sengoku period. Based on several historical events, such as the Kitakyushu War and the chaotic war in Aki Province, it revises the generally accepted view of his personality as a daimyo who assumed the policy of civilian control with a strong cultural concern. Through this process, it also expounds on the reasons behind the demise of the Ōuchi family.

To add to this list, other biographies of daimyo in the Sengoku period were published in 2019, such as Mitsunari Junji's *Kobayakawa Takakage and Hideaki: Kie sourawan tote, hikari masu to mosu* and Murai Yuuki's *Rokkaku Sadayori: Bumon no toryo, tenka wo heitei su*. The former explores how a legend comes into being; specifically, it examines the formation of the well-known story of the clever Kobayakawa Takakage (1533–1597) and his stupid son Hideaki (1582–1602). The latter is the first biography of Rokkaku Sadayori (1495–1552), daimyo of Ōmi Province, which today comprises Shiga Prefecture. Yuuki's book recounts the history of Ōmi Province in the Sengoku period by tackling Sadayori's life story.

Because all of these works focus on the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a question naturally arises: why has the Sengoku period become a specific and palpable trend in biographical writing during the past two years? It is clear to readers that great changes have taken place in the Japanese regime because of this period of civil strife: the ancient Japanese system of state power, constructed by the court (aristocrats), monastery (monks), and shogunate (samurai) in Kyoto, has collapsed. From

this perspective, the Ōnin War should be regarded as a more significant revolution than the Meiji Restoration. Among the classes of court, monastery, and shogunate, the samurai class is most closely related to these historical events. Therefore, with Japanese audiences' increasing interest in history in the past two years, there has been a new and enthusiastic demand for biographies of daimyos. This interest in the samurai spirit is also reflected in Hosaka Masayasu's *Mishima Yukio to Tatenokai Jiken* (2018). This work provides a detailed account of the life of Mishima Yukio, the famous modern Japanese writer, from the perspective of the Shield Society (*Tatenokai*) Incident, when Mishima committed suicide by ritual self-disembowelment in the traditional samurai way.

Reconstructing Modern Japanese History: The Emperor and the Era Name System

As the only country that still uses the *gengō* (era name) system, Japan's benchmarks for dividing and interpreting periods in its history differ markedly from those used in other parts of the world, and Japan is meticulous and sensitive about the division of its history. The Emperor is the symbolic entity who corresponds to each benchmark. A *gengō* can be replaced only by the abdication of an emperor; it is for this reason that the names of the Emperors Meiji, Taisho, and Showa are also the names of their eras.

In August 2016, Emperor Akihito announced his intention to abdicate, promptly causing heated discussion across Japan. The *Yomiuri Shimbun* reported on December 21, 2019 that "there has been no abdication of the reigning emperor for 202 years since Emperor Kōkaku in 1817." As a result, the previously unknown Emperor Kōkaku (1771–1840) also attracted the public's attention. Fujita Satoru's *Kōkaku Tennō: Jishin. wo ato ni shi tenka banmin wo saki to shi* (2018) is a biography written in response to this new interest. Satoru points out that Emperor Akihito—who had just abdicated—actually came from the lineage of Emperor Kōkaku, and he examines how the abdication of an emperor was handled 200 years ago.

On May 1, 2019, Japan officially launched the new era, Reiwa, and Crown Prince Naruhito ascended to the throne. On the same day, Emperor Akihito became His Majesty the Emperor Emeritus (Jōkō), and the thirty-one-year-old Heisei era came to an end. To memorialize the passing of the Heisei era, the popular Shōgakukan press published *Akihito Tennō Monogatari* in 2019, following close on the success of its publication of the biographical *The Tale of Emperor Showa* series (2017–2019). The publication of such biographies of the emperor reflects a clear strategy: centering on the character of the emperor as a way to order, restate, and restructure Japanese history as it is separated by its era names. At that time, the Shōgakukan press also published a manga biography, *Akihito Tennō Monogatari* (2019). As is well known, manga has long been a major feature of Japanese popular culture, widely accepted and read by people ranging from experts and scholars to primary school students. *Akihito Tennō Monogatari* reorders the events of Akihito's

life from birth to abdication, interspersing relevant historical events between them. Furthermore, it strategically employs the narrative form of manga to summon a wider range of readers to participate in its act of historical ordering.

Emperor Akihito was born in December 1933, when Japan was caught amid tense international relations. After the Sino-Japanese War that broke out in 1937, a major air strike in Tokyo on March 10, 1945, and the atomic bomb explosion in Hiroshima in August of the same year, Japan reached its nadir and its defeat in World War II. Akihito was installed as crown prince on November 10, 1952, against this historical backdrop. When his father, the Emperor Hirohito, passed away on January 7, 1989, the new emperor became known to history as Emperor Akihito. After ascending to the throne, the era name was changed to Heisei. After that, he was tied to this era until his abdication. Therefore, writing a biography of Emperor Akihito entails organizing and reorganizing the entire Heisei era.

This kind of biographical publication based on the emperor enacts a narrative strategy of retelling and reorganizing Japanese history hidden behind the transitions of eras by centering on emperors. Distortions and deviations are inevitable in this process. Not all of the texts discussed above exist for the sole purpose of restoring historical facts; nevertheless, they all restate and reconstruct the history behind them through the genre of biography, and attempt to reopen the inseparable and dynamic relationship between human beings and history through such an exposition.

Roland Barthes famously called Japan the “Empire of Signs,” and as key symbols of Japan, the emperor and the daimyo Sengoku period not only provide distinctive characters and perspectives for biographical writing, but they also offer a scale and possibility for the particular divisions of ancient and current Japanese history. As long as the era name system continues, such a method of historical division in Japan will persist. What emerges from this is the fact that biographies have become and may continue to be a tool for exploring and reconstructing Japanese history.

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Lu Chen is a postdoctoral fellow at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, currently teaching at Waseda University in Japan. She is a scholar of modern Japanese literature, a former Research Fellow of the Japan Society for Promotion of Science (2016–2018), and a former Visiting Scholar at University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (2017–2018). She is the translator of *200 Years between Japan and China: Re-exploration from the History of Culture* (Sekiguchi Global Research Association, 2020). In addition to some of her research achievements being published by Japanese journals, she won the KIRO Poetry Award in Japan in 2017. Her selected poem is also published in *An Anthology of Emerging Poets 2019* (Z Publishing House).