

# Crisis facing the world history at Japanese high school

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## **World history includes Japanese history**

The Guideline of Study at high school was revised by the Ministry of Education at the end of last December (in 2008). As was before, only World History is a compulsory subject among the subjects of Geography and History. The Kanagawa Prefectural Educational Board, however, announced that Japanese History would be a required subject, prior to the announcement by the Ministry of Education, so that both World History and Japanese History were decided to be compulsory subjects in Kanagawa from 2013 on. The largest base of this requirement was the view which could be easily accepted by the majority; there are so many students who do not know the history of their own country. If there is extra time to study histories of other countries, students should study the history of their own country. They imagine “World History” based on a scheme, which was broadly accepted 30 years ago and centered on foreign histories other than Japanese history. We, teachers of Kanagawa Prefecture, clarified the differences between current textbooks of World History and the textbooks used 30 years ago, and last year we published a book entitled *How World History Should Be Taught* (イ僣磴囔名リデ柎ド(木ヌウ). As I pointed out in that book, the current “World History” includes Japanese history. In other words, Japanese history is taught through world history in senior high schools. I think it natural that the Ministry of Education did not make Japanese History compulsory at senior high school, because its elements are taught at junior high school. In the time of global societies, the notion that “Japan” existed throughout the history cannot generally be accepted in the world. In thinking about the process of the development of children, I think it is natural that Japanese history should be studied in the field of world history at senior high school, and the unique characters of Japan and the Japanese people should be studied at university or other institutions. It is quite natural that many historians agree to these arguments. Why cannot those matters be understood by the Education Board?

## **The image of “world history” 30 years ago is still taught**

However, we have some matters to reconsider. When we take a look at them, the lessons of high

school which are given today are not so different from those given 30 years ago. The image of “World History” taught 30 years ago still survives. Why cannot these lessons be changed? For one reason, Japanese university entrance examinations in World History have not changed in last 30 years. In those days its contents were focused on many foreign historical events which were explained in detail. When teachers teach at high-level high schools, they have to teach such a detailed world history. Consequently, the “world history” is centered on foreign country’s affairs and not Japan. The students who enter low level-high schools have no idea about foreign countries. Therefore, we have to introduce them foreign countries such as the United States, Russia, China, South Korea, North Korea, England, France, and Germany before teaching world history. I have to teach them where a country is located, what its capital is, what kind of background it has and so on. Such fundamental things are focused, but the students who study those things imagine that World History is merely a subject about foreign affairs, not including Japan. Now at elementary and junior high school they have no opportunity to study all foreign countries in Geography lessons. At the junior high school five countries are chosen and taught. Therefore, many senior-high students know only those five countries. As a result, we, teachers of senior high school, want them to attend the course of World History after studying Geography. But we do not require that Geography be compulsory, though it was insisted 30 years ago, because foreign countries and their cultures should be studied in the course of World History, as prescribed in the Guideline of Study.

### **High school World History is uninteresting**

Many high school students feel that World History at senior high school is not interesting, because only events in history are enumerated in the lessons. The basic problem is the entrance examination. Questions about detailed events in World History are gradually disappearing in the first phase of university entrance examination (a joint achievement test) called the “Center Examination”, but still popular in the second phase of most universities. Teachers of those universities should make questions to judge the applicants’ ability to think with a broader view, in spite of asking the amount of knowledge about historical events. High school teachers in their turn, usually imagine World History as a simple series of historical events. Actually many teachers have a difficulty in connecting the vertical line and the horizontal line of the history without historical events and characters. When the history of characters is connected with the history of events, students may be easily interested in it. However, such a history may also tend to impose a specific value of the teacher upon students. This should be avoided because it is very dangerous if students think only heroes represent or create the history as is taught at elementary school. If the history is explained merely with events, the explanations can only be

fragmentary. That is why the high school textbooks are neither comprehensible nor interesting. Students often say what is interesting in the course of World History are episodes, not main explanations. In order to solve this problem, it is necessary to teach World History with a kind of story. The old historical theory of developing stages was very useful for us, teachers of World History, but it is no longer used. The current mainstream is focusing on the theory of network in teaching the ancient and medieval times, and the theory of world system in teaching the modern times. But these methods are also difficult due to the abstract points of view. We, teachers of world history in Kanagawa Prefecture, have tried to focus our lessons on world commodities such as spices, silk, porcelains, cottons, sugar, coffee, tea, coals and petroleum in order to wipe out the unattractive lessons. Those things are specified in the Guideline of Study for the “Door of World History” and appeared in various textbooks, but the “Door of World History” is not taught usually at the school unfortunately. Between world history at high school and historical research at university, the fence between them seems to be lower, because supplementary lessons of world history can be given at university. I think it is important for students to know that the world history he or she has studied at high school shows only one side of world history.

In conclusion, now various kinds of challenges are appearing as the dialogue between high schools and universities has started. Therefore we need to communicate with each other. This must also be connected with the education of history at elementary and junior high schools. First of all, we must converse with each other before the spread of unscientific and eccentric nationalism.

### **For the re-establishment of the education of World History**

1. Thoroughness of learning maps
2. Making students have an interest in foreign countries
3. World history through commodities.
4. World history as a global history beyond national histories

### **Confirmation of the location of countries on the map**

About 80% of the present average high school students (who are, for example, the students at Fujisawa Integrated High School in Kanagawa where I teach) answer correctly the locations of China, Russia, South Korea, North Korea, and Mongolia when I ask my students in the first lesson of world history where those countries are located (see, the attached map). Most of them do not know the location of the United States (which not a few students think is Canada.),

Egypt, Australia, Southeast Asian countries like Vietnam and west Asian ones like Iraqi. (They might not know such countries at all.) They would not be certain where European countries are located. I would say that this is the result of geography lessons in junior high school. When many students had a yearning for European countries, they knew exactly where each country is located.

Under these conditions, it is hardly possible to teach World History. Students need at least know the names of the countries which appear in the World History course before attending it. It is also important to make sure where each country is located after finishing a unit. For example, if students study the ancient Orient, they should confirm its location by linking Mesopotamia with Iraqi, Phoenicia with Lebanon, the Akemenes dynasty with Iran, and the Hebraic with Israeli. The main purpose of studying World History is that students get to know exactly the location of each country which appears in World History before beginning to study contemporary history.

### **Arousing interests in foreign countries**

The present high school students show little interest in foreign countries. A student from Vietnam is visiting our school, but most of the students do not know where Vietnam is located. In the past, there were not a few students who knew the location of European countries such as France, Germany, the Swiss Confederation, etc. and their character in comparison with countries in Southeast Asian or Latin America, but nowadays two-thirds of the students have no interest in Europe, Southeast Asia and Africa. The only well-known countries are East Asian countries, probably because they are interested in such topics as the Peking Olympics, the problem of nuclear weapons of North Korea, the Northern Territories issue with Russia, Asashōryū, the famous Mongolian sumo grand champion, and Korean TV dramas. Therefore, about 80% of the students know the existence of those countries and their characters at the least.

Due to the above reasons, when we teach European history, we need to begin with introducing France by using brands such as Louis Vuitton and Chanel, and introduce Spain through soccer teams such as Real Madrid in which students are really likely to be interested. I suppose that about half of the students know the story of Harry Potter. We have to mention it to remind students of the location of England. (About half of the Japanese students might know the location of England exactly.)

In this sense, the NHK series of World cultural heritage is a good material, but the students do not easily get access to it. I wish there were easy materials about countries and regions which could be introduced to the students or the youth.

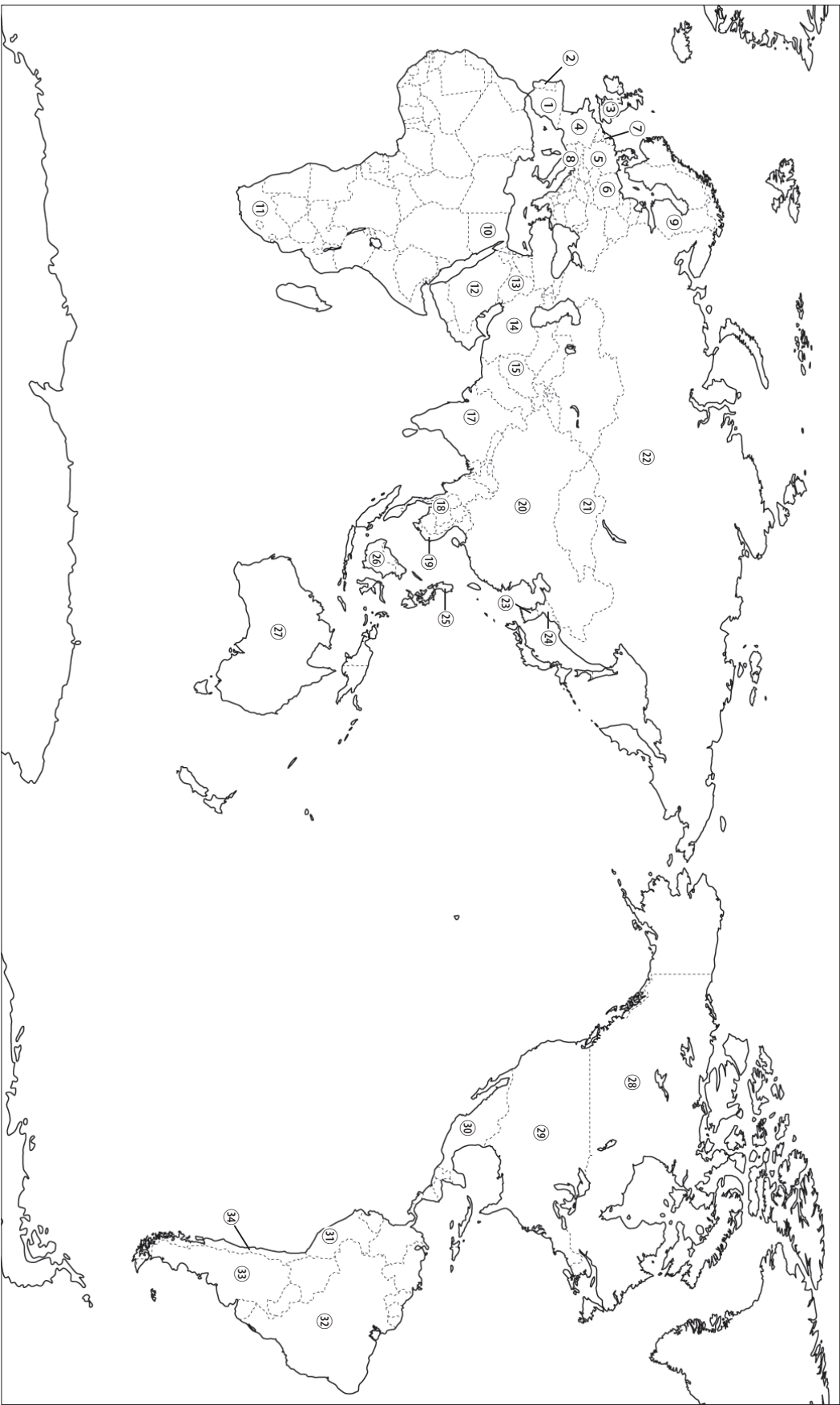
### **World history through commodities**

Spices such as pepper, nutmeg, clove and cinnamon are showed to the students in class. In order to get these spices, European people began the Age of Discovery or “the Age of Great Voyages” ( 寯 薙 焜 燹 楳 楳 ) in Japanese. This kind of teaching method familiarizes the students with the Age of Great Voyages of Spain and Portugal, countries that are not familiar for students. We make students confirm the location of India and Java, where pepper is produced, the location of the Maluku islands, where clove and nutmeg are produced, and the location of Ceylon, where cinnamon is produced. Through this, we teach the importance of “the Maritime Routes” to them. The Netherlands, which monopolized the spice trade and trade with Japan, became a hegemonic country. This in turn, can be connected with the knowledge of the trade in Nagasaki, where only the Netherlands among Europeans were engaged in the commerce with Japan during the seclusions of Japan.

Then we go to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when European people wished (as prestige goods) to have cotton made in India and coffee and sugar produced in Central-south America in stead of spice, the price of which fell rapidly in the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time we teach the structure of triangular trade across the Atlantic Ocean, which involved the slave trade, for which England competed with France, and acquired its rights. As a result, England accumulated capital and developed the Industrial Revolution. After the Industrial Revolution, the most important goods were coal and iron ore. Finally we can make students understand the background of wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century for petroleum, without which the cause of wars cannot be comprehensible.

### **Global history beyond Japanese history**

According to the traditional framework of Japanese History, Japanese people are excellent and diligent and so kept independence and became one of the Great Powers of the world. However, now the necessity to overcome such a nation-state-oriented historiography is growing stronger. If Japan and the Japanese are still to be treated as absolute beings, we cannot help but fight against Russia concerning the northern territories problem, against Korea concerning the problem of the Takeshima or Docdo Island and against China concerning the East China Sea. In this sense, the education of history centered on isolated Japanese History would make the relationship with Asian countries increasingly worse in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Moreover, the relationship with all of East Asia would stagnate. Under such circumstances, not Japanese History, but a global history based on the history of East Asia should be the focus of the history education.



Write the name of each country:

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What percent of the students answered each question correctly?  
 Above 80 percent: China, Russia, North Korea, South Korea and Mongolia  
 Above 50 percent: USA, Australia, Brazil, India, England and Egypt  
 Above 20 percent: France, Germany, Canada and Thailand  
 Few students know other countries.