What is Feudalism?—Definition, Complex, Civilization

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What is Feudalism? — Definition, Complex, Civilization —

NAOHIKO TONOMURA

1. Definition:

There are two viewpoints toward feudalism: the viewpoint from history and the economic viewpoint. The latter, which Marxian scholars stress is of too broad an application to be useful for historical analysis. Therefore, I will discuss feudalism from the viewpoint of its history as a legal institution; i.e., traditional feudalism, with a narrower meaning.

European feudalism has been at the center of historical research concerned with this traditional viewpoint of feudalism. Many European scholars are of the same opinion as Otto Hintze and Marc Bloch that all types of feudalism should be measured by European feudalism because the term “feudalism” originates from European feudalism. However, there are many independent, similar phenomena. The problem is these phenomena so we have to start from them, not from the term.

Many researchers have not succeeded in developing arguments on feudalism sufficiently because feudalism has not been clearly defined. John Hall, in his article “Feudalism in Japan - Reassessment,” has said that feudalism is “a category of human organization” and it should be definable as an ideal type." In my book, Hikaku Hokensei Ron (Feudalism: A Comparative Study), (1991), I tried to construct an objective ideal type of feudalism and define it. My procedure was first to select from many earlier definitions elements, of which feudal notions hitherto seem to have consisted. They include the definitions of Kan’ichi Asakawa, Max Weber, Otto Hintze, Joseph Strayer, and John Hall who acknowledge more than one feudal society. Secondly, I examined the actual phases of all societies that have been termed feudal, e.g., Japan, Europe, China, Egypt, Byzantium, Islam, and Russia. Thirdly, I chose specific characteristics of feudalism to construct the ideal type, giving a careful consideration to the relative importance of each of these characteristics. This work suggested that there are two types of societies that have been called
feudal: the first involves the state system itself whose public powers are wholly dispersed in the provinces, e.g., Japan, Europe, China, and Egypt; and the second type of feudalism is so called in relationship to a subordinate organization of the state whose powers are centralized, e.g., Byzantium, Islam, and Russia. Powers (or governing powers) in the former are divided between the monarch and the nobility. In the latter, they are possessed by an autocrat.

It is evident which of the two is to be considered as feudalism proper when we consider that the concept originates from the former type of feudalism (Western Europe, China and Japan); whereas in case of the latter type (Byzantium, Islam and Russia) it may be considered merely the application of the former. Furthermore, the general understanding of feudalism indicates the socio-political system of society or of the state as a whole but not an administrative system. When the core of the concept rests in the feudalism of Europe, Japan, China and Egypt, the direction of our inquiry is fixed. I suggest that the following five factors, in order of importance, should be considered.

1. grand system of state government
2. dispersion of public powers as a whole among provincial lords
3. a system of classes and ranks
4. personal relationship between a lord and his vassals
5. grant of estates

These factors are not equal terms nor are they independent of each other. They are jointly related in a ranking order, and none of them is to be ignored. The first two are the most important factors of feudalism. "Dispersion of public powers as a whole" is sometimes called "quantitative division of public power," in contrast to "qualitative division of public power" that characterizes bureaucracy. However, with only this factor of "dispersion of public power as a whole" feudalism can hardly be distinguished from the disordered condition by the prevalence of provincial powers that appears almost everywhere in world history. "Personal relationship between a lord and his vassals" and "grant of estates" have been considered essential, but with only these
two factors even systems of mafia or yakuza [Japanese mafia] could be styled as feudalism. Societies in Japan (twelfth to nineteenth centuries), Europe (ninth to sixteenth centuries), China (eleventh to third centuries, B.C.), and Egypt (twenty-third to sixteenth centuries, B.C.) fulfill the requirements of these five factors. These four societies represent genuine feudalism.

The systems of Byzantium (pronoia of the eleventh to twelfth centuries), Islam (ikta including the Timar system of the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries Osman Empire), and Russia (pomeste of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries) lack the second and fourth factors above. In each of these cases, the monarch gives nobles (and, in Russia, also farmers) pieces of state land in exchange for military services. The land, however, does not mean the property or real estate itself but rather the right to collect taxes on the land during the recipient’s lifetime. In addition, the nobles were under the rigorous control of the central government. The result was a bureaucratic system of regional administration under the central government which possessed all public powers. Dispersion of the public powers as such does not exist. It is the opposite of feudalism. The presence or the non-presence of a bureaucracy, which is contrary to the concept of feudalism, is useful for the determination of whether or not a system or society is feudal.

Some may doubt whether the Tokugawa institution was feudal, for the shogunate had strong power. On every occasion of succession, all of the lords made oaths of fidelity to the shogunate and were granted their estates again. They were entrusted with the administration and the justice in their han domains and seldom had to deal with intervention from the shogunate. Therefore, they held all public powers in their hands. They were not bureaucrats who used the qualitatively divided public powers. The system of the daimyō (feudal lord’s) vassalage/fiefdom of the past era continued, though it was covered by a net of central control during this period. The Tokugawa society is, therefore, substantially a continuation of feudalism. It differs from feudalism under the French monarchy, in which the king was competing with feudal lords to create a bureaucratic system all over the country through the appointment of increasing numbers of state officials such as bailiffs. Feudalism under the French monarchy
is an example of the decline of feudalism. Tokugawa society is rather like English feudal society after the Norman Conquest. William the Conqueror changed the land system of co-equal lords to one of a rigorous feudal order. He summoned all the lords in a hall; let them swear an oath of fidelity; ordered them to dedicate their lands to him; and then regranted the lands to them. Moreover, the Norman king registered all the land in the country for purposes of taxation. These measures are the same as those that Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu applied at the end of the sixteenth century and at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

Another example of centralized feudalism is the Chou feudalism of China. Feudalism is normally formed through the disintegration of the centralized state, but the Chou Dynasty established at the very beginning an aggregate of small states that were integrated in a patriarchal manner with the religious principle of ancestor worship of the Chou House. This was not a bureaucratic political system but, rather, a system of plurality of lords who were given all official powers. The Chou period is obviously feudal from the beginning. These states, however, soon freed themselves in the Ch‘un Ch‘iu period from the leadership of the Chou dynasty and shifted to be more like other typical feudal societies in character.

2. Formation of Feudalism:

Otto Hintze once put stress on the effect of an external force such as a neighboring empire in the process of feudalism’s formation. But such external influences are lacking in China at the beginning of the Chou period. Therefore, Hintze’s opinion is questionable or at least incomplete. Rushton Coulborn also emphasized the effects of external influences on feudalism. He says that feudalism is a response to the challenge of the decay of an empire, a device to revive and reconstruct the empire, and he calls it a ghost empire. However, apart from European feudalism, it is difficult to see anything approaching the so-called reconstruction of empire in either the feudalism of China or Japan. A growing civilization realizes its own nationality and culture as it builds the state. But the foundation is too weak to support the structure of the state, so that the state soon collapses
and goes back to an earlier condition of regional independence of parts, although not to aboriginal conditions and still on a level of civilization. Outside influence is not always necessary in the formation of feudalism.

3. Phenomena in the Feudal Age:

Feudalism is not a temporary transient phenomenon, but a firm political and social system lasting for several hundreds of years or more. Phenomena commonly observed in the genuine feudal societies include:

a. absolute authority of royalty in spite of the decline of its political power
b. growth of cities and commerce
c. rise of the lower classes
d. increase of intelligence, secularization, and innovation of technology
e. germination of industrial capitalism

These phenomena can be seen equally in the feudal periods of Europe, Japan (the Muromachi and Tokugawa periods), and China (the Ch’un Ch’iu and Chan Kuo periods). Evidence for these in the case of Egypt (first Intermediate Period, Middle Kingdom, second Intermediate Period) is not always obvious, but historical descriptions often tell of the prosperous commerce as well as the social mobility of the lower classes in the Middle Kingdom. On a larger scale the answer to the question “What is feudalism?” should also be the answer to the question of why these phenomena accompany feudalism. We should note at the same time that these phenomena as a group are rarely to be found elsewhere in world history.

4. Feudalism and Civilization:

My book, Tagen Bunmei Shi Kan (Comparative Civilizations) (1991), attempts to classify civilizations independently of the argument on feudalism. A group of civilizations attracts our attention with its large time span of duration, dynamism of historical changes, and similar phases of corresponding periods or stages. Many researchers have tried to devel-
op criteria to differentiate this group of civilizations, but they have left room for admitting subjective judgments. Because the classification of civilizations cannot be settled by means of subjective judgment, I developed simple criteria with exclusively objective elements to distinguish this group of major civilizations, including the following four stages of a civilization, each of which lasts for 400 to 500 years. There are two types:

Type A — 1. allied tribal powers → 2. a unified state → 3. civil wars → 4. world empire

Type B — 1. coexistence of tribal powers → 2. coexistence of city states → 3. civil wars → 4. world empire

Type-A major civilizations are Egypt, China, Japan, Peru, and Europe. Tibet may also be a member. Type-B major civilizations are Sumer, Greece-Rome, and India. Major civilizations are eight or nine in all. This number of civilizations is almost the same as that of special civilizations (examples are different) listed by such precursors of comparative civilization as H. Rückett, N. Danilewski, and O. Spengler. Many civilizations do not meet these criteria. Russia and the Near East, which according to many researchers are regarded as important civilizations, do not either. They are minor civilizations. (See the tables of major civilizations on pages 30 and 31)

This debate over civilization has nothing to do with the argument on feudalism. What then occurs, when these two independent arguments are combined? The societies which boasted feudalism were Europe, Japan, China, and Egypt, which all belong to or nearly overlap with Type-A major civilizations. Does this not make it reasonable or logical to interpret feudalism from the viewpoint of civilization?

My interpretation is that feudalism is usually a socio-political system from the second half of the second stage through the third stage of Type-A major civilizations. I say “usually,” for centralized feudalism appears in China at the beginning of the second stage as the prologue to its feudal system and, in Japan, it appears in the fourth stage as the epilogue of its system. Feudalism is a phenomenon that occurs in the natural course of...
### Type A: Major Civilizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Four Stages</th>
<th>Western Europe</th>
<th>Japan</th>
<th>China</th>
<th>Egypt</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Early Dynasties</td>
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<td>2. Old Kingdom</td>
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<td>3. Classical Period</td>
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<td>4. Late Period</td>
<td>Late Periods</td>
<td>Late Periods</td>
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</tbody>
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#### Western Europe
- 400 B.C. - 500 A.D.: Expansion of the Empire
- 500 - 800: Growth of Cities and Institutions
- 800 - 1000: Formation of National States

#### Japan
- 500 - 1200: Early Kingdoms
- 1200 - 1868: Classical Period
- 1868 - Present: Meiji Restoration

#### China
- 1000 B.C. - 221 B.C.: Early Dynasties
- 221 B.C. - 220 A.D.: Classical Period
- 220 A.D. - 1912: Late Periods
- 1912 - Present: Republic of China

#### Egypt
- 2686 B.C. - 2181 B.C.: Early Dynasties
- 2181 B.C. - 2125 B.C.: Classical Period
- 2125 B.C. - 2059 B.C.: Late Periods
- 2059 B.C. - 1786 B.C.: End of the Kingdom

#### Definitions
- Feudalism: A system of mutual obligations and rights between lords and vassals, characterized by the granting of land in exchange for service.

#### Key Concepts
- Alliances and treaties
- Feudal lords and vassals
- Expansion and decline of empires

#### Comparative Analysis
- Comparison of political, economic, and social structures across different civilizations.
- Impact of external influences on internal developments.

#### Historical Context
- Evolution of political and social systems in response to environmental and technological changes.

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<table>
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<th>Type B Major Civilizations</th>
<th>Four Stages</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>India</td>
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<tr>
<td>BC/1500 Birth of civilization</td>
<td>BC/1500 Birth of civilization</td>
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<tr>
<td>BC/1000 End of paleo-India</td>
<td>BC/1000 End of Paleolithic</td>
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<tr>
<td>BC/700 Axial Age</td>
<td>BC/700 Axial Age</td>
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<td>BC/300 Golden Age</td>
<td>BC/300 Golden Age</td>
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<tr>
<td>BC/100 End of Axial Age</td>
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growth of these major civilizations combined with various other phenomena mentioned earlier such as the absolute authority of royalty, growth of cities and commerce, rise of the lower classes, secularization, technological development and the like. It might be better to suggest that feudalism is a phenomenon in a complex of phenomena emerging in a certain period of historical development of Type-A major civilizations.

The histories of Peru and Tibet also draw our attention to the similar feudal phases and ongoing civil wars throughout the second half of the second stage through the third stage. We observe as well the same feudal aspects and civil wars in the second half of the second stage through the third stage of such Type B major civilizations as Sumer, Greece-Rome, and India. This view of civilization can thus also suggest the answer to the question of why the complex of phenomena including feudalism, or the phenomenon feudalism itself, rarely occurs in world history.

Let me make a brief comment about Japan. Many would be skeptical of counting Japan as a major civilization and would not like to hear also that Japan had a history of feudalism equal to that of Europe. They think that Japan is but a small country with a parochial culture that has much depended on China. However, this is not accurate. The Japanese are a nation quite different from the Chinese. Japan boasts a unique, independent culture that lies outside the Chinese Confucian cultural sphere. Indeed, historically Japan has borrowed many cultural elements from China, but the dependence is of the same type as that of Europe on Greco-Roman culture. It would be natural, even inevitable, for a younger civilization to mature through learning and absorbing much from an advanced civilization in the region. Geographically, Egypt developed a civilization on a plain 1700km long and but 3~30km wide; the surroundings were desert. The extent of ancient Greece is estimated to have been no more than that of Kyushu, an island of Japan. Until the third stage Chinese civilization developed mainly along the Yellow River an area not much larger than that of Japan. The original area of West European civilization (northern France and southwest Germany) is also almost the same as the area of Japan. As it enters into the fourth stage, the major civilization begins to expand, as does Japan which shows from the end of the third
stage to the beginning of the fourth an expansion that included overseas territories as far as Korea, China, the Philippines, Cambodia, Siam, and Java.

5. Absolute Authority of Royalty, Capitalism, Modernization:

I would take up here two of the five phenomena of the feudal age mentioned above in Section 3; viz., the absolute authority of the royalty and the germination of capitalism, and, finally, the topic of modernization.

These two characteristics, each meaningful at the present time, have been the source of dispute for a long time. The former, i.e., the absolute authority of royalty, has links to Tennoism, so that in Japan it has given rise to numerous disputes, even now.

In every feudal society, royalty gradually lost real power, and its sphere of political influence was narrowed, but it did not lose its absolute authority throughout the feudal age. Why? Two quite opposite rationales have been offered. One rationale is that the royal authority in a strong unified state which predated the feudal age was still alive. A contrary opinion insists that inside the feudal system existed the necessity to liquidate rivalries among lords, which called for the existence of royal authority.

These two opinions are not so contradictory as they appear, because those who support the latter viewpoint usually talk about the utilization of existing royal authority rather than of the creation of a new authority. Hence the question, where does the continuity of the royal authority, which both sides acknowledge, come from?

European historians in general acknowledge the authority of Christianity that is explicit in the divine right of kings theory as the basis of the royal authority in Europe. But is the power of religion so decisive? This author interprets this issue from the standpoint of comparative civilization above as follows.

Civilized society begins in Egypt with the first Dynasty founded by Narmer-Menes; in China with the Shang Dynasty, by Ch'eng T'ang; in Japan, with the State of Yamato established by Queen Himiko; and, in Europe, with the Merovingian Dynasty established by Clovis. These time-points deserve pride of place in the history of the civilized world. The dynastic founders stand at the junction between savagery and civilization. With them...
begin the genealogies of dynasties, not to mention the formation of traditions of high culture, as well as many splendidous developments of histories. When retracing the lines of royalty, culture and history, we always arrive at this time-point. Are these early dynasties with such accomplishments — such as invention of ideograms or the commencement of the use of ideograms, foundation of administrative organizations, undertaking of great constructions, establishment of an artistic style whose distinguished example is Egypt — not the source of the authority that flows through following centuries?

Civilization is a social revolution, as well as a revolution of consciousness. Civilization reaches to the depth of consciousness and brings about a new apprehension of the world. Through civilization existence reveals its characteristics that we nowadays recognize. Civilization is in this sense a new light. And the founder of civilization is the source of the light. The light goes over the space and time of the human world and fills the natural world as well. Everything was newly born in this new bright world. Is not the authority of royalty the authority of the head of civilization that opened the world and has been reigning over it ever since? No matter that royalty loses its power in the field of politics; it still maintains power in other fields. Minamoto Yoritomo (1147-1199), founder of the Kamakura Shogunate, as well as Ashikaga Takauji (1305-1358), founder of the Muromachi Shogunate, could not be a ruler of Japan without depending on the authority of the Imperial Court. Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542-1616), founder of the Tokugawa Shogunate, also depended on the authority of the Imperial Court. Social strata of the Tokugawa period, regardless of high or low, lived in the vital hierarchic pyramid of ranks and honors granted by the Imperial Court. In the case of China, feudal lords of the Chou period, during which the power of the Chou House declined and its domain decreased, often gathered and swore oaths to support the Chou House, and the strongest of them aspired after the title of “Supreme Lord” to be conferred by the Chou House. Civilization is the largest unit of the human society that works consciously or unconsciously in the human mind. In so far as civilization is lasting, the king of a state, who is also the head of civilization, works as the centripetal force to integrate dispersed powers and to stem.
the breakdown of society. The reason why the absolute authori-

ty of royalty is continuous throughout the feudal age lies in my

dgment in the concept of royalty itself which originates from
the earliest point of the civilized world. Religious sanctification
should be regarded as a kind of decoration, or, to put it popular-
ly, the icing on the cake.

It is generally assumed that industrial capitalism has occurred
only once throughout world history; i.e., in Europe. However,
supposing that its final substance consists in merchandise pro-
duction by means of purchased labor, then, may we not assume
that the economy of ancient Rome, of the Han Dynasty and of the
Tokugawa period were of the same type? The resemblance
between the socio-economic aspects of the late Tokugawa period
(eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) and those just before the
Industrial Revolution in England (seventeenth and eighteenth
centuries) is striking. The cotton and silk industries, by the
putting-out and manufacture systems, evolved simultaneously at
that time in many locales as a pioneer of modern Japanese indus-
tries. If manufacture means the cooperation of many employees
in a single place, which Karl Marx described as the preceding
stage of the machinery-factory system in the development of cap-
titalistic production, it is found also in the production of oil, salt,
wax, foil, paper, as well as in the smelting of metal and in the
brewing of liquors, in the late Tokugawa period. Traffic networks
of sea and land were widespread throughout Japan: markets were
unified; commercial agricultural products began to be cultivated
in the suburbs of big cities; the bank system of deposits, loans and
bills was founded; and speculation markets were formed. Masses
of laborers flew from rural districts into the big cities like Edo
(currently Tokyo) and Osaka, whose populations were at that
time the largest in the world. This was the situation brought
about not by the influence of some other civilization, but as a
result of the gradual development of Japan’s own for many cen-
turies. It would be natural, therefore, to attribute the socio-econo-
mic similarity between Europe in the seventeenth and eight-
teenth centuries and Japan in the eighteenth and nineteenth cen-
turies to their belonging to the same type of civilization in the
same generation.

This fact can be a key in solving the puzzle of the rapid mod-
ernization of Japan. It excited wonder in the world that Japan was so quick to become a modern state in only three decades after opening its doors to foreign forces and soon to rank among the world’s political and military powers. No other example of such a success is known in non-European areas. Many ascribe this advance on superficial grounds to the diligence or skillfulness of the Japanese, accumulation of capital not tied to land, and cheap labor, among other reasons. Max Weber says the idea of the contract that is inherent in feudalism may have nurtured European individualism in Japan, while Edwin Reischauer and Joseph Strayer are of the opinion that the experience of feudalism was useful for the formation of a modern society through cultivating the ideas of duty and law. These historical views are useful and may be correct. It would, however, not suffice to give attention merely to the preceding period. The problem extends across the whole range of history. The histories of Japan and Europe followed parallel lines of development from the beginning so that the modern ages of the two came to overlap. This factor, then, is the fundamental cause of the rapid modernization of Japan and its advance to the present day.

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NOTES

9. Cf. E. Herbert Norman, Japan’s Emergence as a Modern State (1940) and Feudal Background of Japanese Politics (1945).