

What Was “The 1968 Movement”? Japan’s Experience in A Global Perspective

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Did the movements of “1968” change societies fundamentally worldwide? This article examines “1968” from the perspective of Japanese history. Japan’s “1968” shared such common elements with “1968” in other countries, as the social background, development of visual media, and progress of modernization. This article investigates Japan’s “1968” in light of the common background and characteristics of the movements in Japan and globally. I conclude that “1968” was a product of the resonance of unrelated phenomena throughout the world, and many evaluations of “1968” confuse the general trend of modernization with the specific influences of the movements.

Introduction

“1968” is said to be the heart of an era in which new social movements rose up “globally”. A book titled *1968 in Europe* published in 2008 claimed that “Nobody today seriously doubts that European societies were fundamentally transformed as a result of the events of ‘1968’.”¹ In the United States, there seems less of a tendency to emphasize the year 1968 exclusively, noting the rise of the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, the women’s movement and others that transformed society in the course of the decade.

I would like to contribute to the discussion of “1968” from the perspective of Japan, drawing on research on the Japanese student and citizen movements in the 1960s. This work was published in a two volume work of 2000 pages *1968 in Japan*.² My previous English language article, “Japan’s 1968”, investigated the characteristics of Japan’s “1968” and the social background specific to Japan.³

In this article, I would like to reflect on the common features of “1968” throughout the world in light of Japan’s “1968”.

1. The Setting

How can we discuss “1968” in the world through the lens of “1968” in Japan? To do so, it is necessary both to identify common elements and show how the global situation affected Japan’s “1968” and vice versa. To do that, it is necessary to recognize the diversity of world phenomena at that time, collectively referred to as “1968”. Not only were the phenomena diverse, but many were also unrelated.

For example, did the people who rose in the “Prague Spring”, the students in Paris, and the Red Guards in China’s Cultural Revolution have direct relationships with one another? Certainly, images of both were broadcast throughout the world, and many Western students were stimulated by the events in Paris and Beijing, and to a lesser extent in Prague. While most participants throughout the world were only dimly aware of the issues that drove the movements elsewhere, the sense that movements were taking place throughout the world, and the spirit of rebellion that animated them, magnified by the visual images of TV, film and mass media, inspired movements elsewhere and conveyed the sense that they were somehow linked. This article considers the processes in which diverse local movements with little knowledge of the causes and character of movements elsewhere came to be viewed as constituent parts of a “global 1968”.



Prague 1968

Indeed, it was often the case that even movements within a single country had little understanding much less direct relationship to other movements unfolding simultaneously. This was certainly true of the diverse groups that would come to be recognized as part of “Japan’s 1968”. Two movements that were widely cited as emblematic of the events of 1968 in Japan are the student movement and anti-pollution movement. It is interesting to note that the National Diet Library in Tokyo holds some 5,000 flyers and pamphlets issued in the course of the student revolt at the University of Tokyo from 1968 to 1969. Most of these artifacts center on issues of student action including seized buildings and criticism of university administrations. Seldom was there mention of the pollution issue.⁴ Indeed, Ui Jun, the pioneering environmentalist who was then a Tokyo University lecturer, wrote a memoir criticizing the indifference of new left groups to issue of pollution.⁵ On the other hand, it is striking that the writer Ishimure Michiko, who played an important role in making Minamata disease (mercury poisoning resulting from pollution caused by the discharge of factory wastewater) a cause célèbre throughout Japan and spearheading the movement for redress of Minamata victims, made no mention of the Japanese student movement or the anti-Vietnam War movement in her influential 1969 book.⁶ These movements would become related to one another in the 1970s, but in 1968 they were no such links.

I have no intention of denigrating these movements by pointing out that they were unrelated to one another at that time. We should not be surprised even to learn that Malcolm X and Rachel Carson personally had no strong interest in each other’s activity at that time. I do not think that such recognition would hurt the evaluation of their contributions. Rather, we should reflect on our framework of thinking if we unconsciously assume that they were linked simply because they were prominent activists in the 1960s. The same is true of various European and Asian movements within and among countries.

In other words, many events that were largely unrelated, and whose participant were even unaware of their mutual existence at that time, subsequently came to be collectively referred to as “1968”. Many books and films are titled “1968” in various countries, but most are just collections of events that happened in that era.

Then what was “1968”? Is it an “invented memory” compiled of simultaneous but largely unrelated events from the perspective of posterity? There were such aspects. However, here I discuss three important structural factors central to grasping the wider context of “1968”

in the world including Japan.

- Media Development
- Modernization
- Dislocation of the Cold War order

I will discuss how these three developments affected Japan's "1968". The first is widely recognized as important background to the movements in the 1960s. The third refer to the impact of the declining ability of the United States and the Soviet Union to shape the global agenda, and the disruption in the Cold War order.

Let me explain more about the second, modernization. Although the 1960s was a time of economic growth and industrialization, modernization is not limited to these phenomena. According to the sociologist Anthony Giddens, the driving force of modernization is "reflexive monitoring of actions".⁷ When humans start to reflect on their actions, they will change their ways of action that were limited by tradition, authority, and community boundaries. In other words, modernization is a process of increasing choices and possibilities. In the early stage of this process, it may lead to liberation from authority, expansion of space for activities, and economic development. However, as this process proceeds, the existence of numerous choices and possibilities may give rise to individualism, instability, and demand for authorities who seem to provide stability. Giddens, Ulrich Beck, and Scott Lash called the latter stage "late modernity" and discussed issues of neoliberalism and globalization such as destabilization of employment and family conflict.⁸ In this article, I use the term "modernization" drawing on this theory and its representation of Japan's "1968."

2. Media Development

Despite the great variety of events that were eventually encompassed in popular understanding of the symbolic events of "1968" underlying all of them were the powerful visual images disseminated through new media, above all TV, that spread rapidly throughout society in Japan and many other countries in the 1960s.



Yasuda Hall, the University of Tokyo, under siege in 1969.

For example, consider the following memorable images: people surrounding a tank during the "Prague Spring". The battle between the police and helmeted Japanese students at the University of Tokyo under siege. The US Embassy in Saigon occupied by National Liberation Front forces during the Tet Offensive. The photograph of the Earth taken by an Apollo 8 astronaut. Hippies dancing during an American rock festival. These phenomena were quite unrelated. Nevertheless, as people absorbed and shared these images through television, movies or photographs, they became emblematic of "1968".

In the 1960s, TV rapidly spread throughout the world. The diffusion of TV sets per household reached 80% in 1958 in the United States and in 1963 in Japan. TV spread more slowly in Europe but it reached 200 sets per thousand people in 1965 in West Germany and in 1970 in France.⁹ On June 25 1967, a special program "Our World" was broadcast simultaneously in 24 countries using communication satellites, and people watched the Beatles in

performance. In 1968, color television began to connect the whole world.

People saw images that they had never seen before. Of course many knew little about the situation and background of events occurring in distant areas. Nonetheless, these startling images conveyed the impression that the world was changing. Indeed, as the media environment changed dramatically, it was reasonable that the idea that “the world is changing” spread among people everywhere. The simultaneous broadcast by satellite communication and the photograph of the earth made the idea of “one world” compelling.

Under these circumstances, students and youth in France, Japan and the US among many others watched TV news and photographs of Chinese Red Guards in the years 1966-1969. Of course, many of the students understood little of Chinese politics and society. However, the images of the Little Red Book and Mao Zedong reviewing millions of Red Guards in Beijing excited and inspired many beyond China’s borders.

In Japan in January 1969, a new left group inscribed the Chinese Cultural Revolution slogan “in resistance the truth is born (真理在斗争中诞生)” and raised a photograph of Mao Zedong at the gate of the University of Tokyo. The personal memoir of a student activist from this group reveals that she actually knew nothing about Chinese society and politics but sensed that something “revolutionary” was happening at that time.¹⁰ Nevertheless, images of the Red Guards inspired many and conveyed the appearance of an international relationship. In this way, while the media reported on individual movements, participants sensed that they were part of something larger. Perhaps this was also true of various movements throughout the United States, Europe, and elsewhere.

“1968” was not the first time that a change in the media environment created a resonance of various movements. For example, “1848” in Europe was a time when print media were spreading. However, in contrast to print, visual images broadcast in TV or color photo printing could transcend language divisions. It made possible wide geographical influence and had the capacity to stimulate the imagination, while being less demanding in terms of understanding. This resulted in a qualitative change in the mutual resonance of the movements.

Furthermore, new techniques of simultaneous live reporting affected global understanding of contemporary events. On June 15, 1960, a radio reporter broadcast live the anti US-Japan security treaty demonstration. The sounds of explosions of tear gas and firing in the police assault were heard, as were the words of the reporter saying “ I am now broadcasting, but a policeman just beat me over the head” vividly conveying the atmosphere of the moment and the intensity of the clash.¹¹ This was the first episode in Japan of live broadcasting of a social movement. By “1968”, simultaneous live TV broadcasting of social movements would become routine.



Anti-Vietnam War demonstrators in Chicago 1968

Activists were quick to grasp the possibilities of television coverage. Todd Gitlin titled his book on mass media and the new left in the United States “The whole world is watching,” referencing a comment by demonstrators in Chicago in 1968 and picked up and chanted by activists everywhere.¹² Japanese activists were also conscious of the media. For example,

Japan's new left groups wore colorfully painted helmets. According to the recollection of a veteran activist, when he asked young activists in his group why they painted their helmets red during 1967 demonstrations, their reply was "red is a good color for television."¹³

The movement presence multiplied through the work of the media. One example is the protest of new left groups in January 1968 when the US Navy's nuclear-powered aircraft carrier *Enterprise* called for the first time at Sasebo Bay in the south of Japan. The 50,000 demonstrators organized by the Socialist Party and the Communist Party far exceeded the protests by 1,000 or so new left student demonstrators. But television coverage focused on students wearing helmets clashing with the police. The rough handling of demonstrators by the police was televised, and audience sympathy went to the students. One police officer regretted that "we could have done well if TV had not be there."¹⁴

Small groups could gain wide influence if they received TV coverage. This encouraged the movements to focus on visual images. In January 1969, when police and students fought at the University of Tokyo, new left groups raised their flags above Yasuda Hall inviting TV coverage.¹⁵ In November 1970, when Minamata disease victims marched in protest at abuse by the Chisso Corporation, they raised black flags with the Chinese character "anger (怒, "On")" in both an expression of fury at their treatment and a powerful bid to be televised and photographed.



Minamata victims and supporters demonstrate demanding compensation

Changes in movement style also sometimes took the form of 'extreme' actions by small groups. Joachim Scharloth points out that terrorism became a "media event" in "1968".¹⁶ Terrorism was previously carried out covertly, but from this time on, some radical groups turned to terrorism with the expectation of media reportage. A Japanese journalist got a phone call from a new left group which threw a Molotov cocktail into the Self Defense Force grounds asking his newspaper to cover of the story.¹⁷ TV broadcast the terrorist event simultaneously with live reporting. The March 1970 airplane hijacking by the Japanese Red Army, and the harakiri suicide of right-wing novelist Mishima Yukio at the Tokyo headquarters of the Self Defense Force in November 1970, highlighted this transition.

The fact that the movements were visually appealing, often provocative or exciting, made it possible to capture the attention of a wide range of people, and in some cases to extend the reach of protest nationally and even internationally. The Japanese movements had an impact not only on one another but also on Western movements through international dissemination of visual images such as zigzag demonstrations and helmeted youth clashing with police. If there was little international understanding of the issues that drove the situation in Japan, the vivid sense of protest and the call to action could be conveyed—and shared—across nations and languages. In this way, participants of "1968" and observers throughout the world identified with one another on the basis of a shared desire for liberation from authority.

There were cases in which visual effects had political consequences. The march of Minamata disease victims attracted sympathy of many people throughout Japan and abroad, and Chisso, the company that discharged mercury waste into the water was eventually forced to

compensate the people recognized as victims. Students in the Beheiren, anti-Vietnam war civic movement in Japan, who handed out flowers to policemen to display their non-violent civil disobedience had an impact on public opinion with visual images quite different from those of helmeted students clashing with police in their own way spoke more powerfully than words. Elsewhere, the occupation of the American embassy in Saigon by the South Vietnam Liberation Front, while short lived, changed public opinion throughout the world including the United States and Japan with TV images conveying the sense that the powerful US military had been defeated.

However, media events when staged by isolated individuals or small groups did not necessarily lead to systemic social or political change. For example, the LDP, the ruling conservative party in Japan, again won in the general election in December 1969 following the 1968 struggles. Following movements of “1968” in Western developed countries, subsequent elections also often produced results at odds with movement goals, even in cases in which the movement received extensive media coverage.

3. Modernization

The broadcast media was one element of the new market consumption culture indicative of the progress of modernization. Forces of modernization led to myriad changes that impinged powerfully on youth in general, university students in particular. The rapid economic growth and modernization of this period generated intense conflicts that were most evident in the conflict between young and old generations.

The prelude to the student revolt in Japan included rapid changes in the college environment. The rise in college enrollments, coinciding with rapid economic growth, from 8% of high school graduates in 1960 to 20% in 1968, created intense entrance examination competition and tensions over rising tuition. The increase in the number of students was one factor in the decline in the quality of university education which came to be criticized as “Mass Production Education”.

A survey of the Japan teachers’ union in 1964 reported the case of a junior high school which was conducting 320 tests a year to prepare for entrance examination competition. In 1966, the student newspaper of Keio university reported that many courses enrolled over 1000 students in a huge auditorium with a microphone, and the student newspaper of Chūō university estimated that campus space per student was only 0.5 square meters.¹⁸ The Keio report was titled “The real situation of Mass Production Education at Keio.” This was the background of the student movement which protested tuition increases and various university administrative policies. Many student activists at the time wrote that intense entrance examination competition and poor quality education first led them to become aware of social issues.¹⁹



Class in Auditorium in the 1960s

As Universities expanded in the 1950s and 1960s, university administrations remained unchanged. A small number of administrators made decisions to raise tuition, and closed faculty meetings routinely rejected student demands for educational reform out of hand. Exploitation by professors of graduate students as cheap labor was a big factor behind the

student revolt at the University of Tokyo.²⁰ These situations show that the consciousness of older generations had not kept pace with rapid modernization, resulting in intense conflict. These circumstances added to these movements the characteristics of rebellion against the authority of elders and professors.

Japanese students in “1968” criticized professors who preached free thinking from the constraints of authority but imposed their own authority. Giddens and Beck note that one of the features of late modernity is that the spread of modern thinking and science reflexively returns as criticism of the authority that preached the new thinking.

Students also chafed at the declining job opportunities for graduates. In 1953 43% of Japanese college graduates obtained white-collar jobs or positions in big firms (salary men) while only 3.5% worked in lowly sales jobs. But by 1967, the composition had changed to 31% and 19%. A professor estimated that in 1968, of 164,000 Japanese college graduates, only 20,000 obtained jobs in big companies and government. The professor pointed to this situation as background to the student revolt at that time.²¹

A Japanese newspaper in 1968 reported that similar issues surfaced in the French student movement. It noted that while the number of French university students rose from 170,000 in 1958 to 600,000 in 1968, there were only 23 universities. Some 160,000 were enrolled in Université de Paris and 30,000 in Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne. The report noted that the quality of education in France had declined and described the administration of French universities as “very old fashioned as it was in the Napoleonic era.” Along with the increase of university graduates, the quality of job after graduation declined compared with the era when graduates were limited to a small elite. The report described this as the background to the French student revolt of 1968.²²



Students of Japan University protesting administrative corruption in 1968.

The progress of modernization increases choices and possibilities but the growing numbers of college graduates resulted in narrowing opportunities and failed expectations for many. This is the reflexive process of late modernity noted by Ulrich Beck.²³ The fact that this contradictory situation led students to revolt against authorities was widely shared in the developed countries, contributing to the sense that they were participating in something “large” and important. We might say that “1968” was a critical moment in the appearance of late modernity with its opportunities and contradictions.²⁴

Another aspect of modernization appeared in the organizational structure of the movement. Groups that voluntarily formed networking relationships, rather than traditional hierarchical organizational structures, emerged in Japan as in many countries. This was a period when “network society” or “late modernity” began to appear, in contrast to “Fordist” modernity symbolized by the huge organization of the mid-20th century factory in the United States.

Whereas the older Zengakuren (The national federation of student associations) was a pyramidal organization that maintained the hierarchical leadership of its central committee, the 1968 student movement spearheaded by Zenkyōtō (The collaborative conference of students) was characterized by voluntary networking. The Beheiren (The Citizens League for Peace in Vietnam) movement which attracted many students as well as citizens was also

based on voluntary networking.²⁵ These movements claimed direct democracy without formal leadership, fixed organizational structure, or fixed membership.

New media technology at that time facilitated these new forms of networking in Japan. The introduction of simple printing machines and the spread of family telephones made it possible for small groups to utilize communication power that had previously been monopolized by political parties and labor unions. At the universities occupied by students, information about breaking incidents was distributed by flyers printed by simple printing machines, a new technology that became available to activists.²⁶ Urgent actions were organized by communication networks of home telephones that activists called the “telephone web”. The philosopher and activist, Tsurumi Shunsuke, wrote in June 1960, “I never imagined how useful the telephone could be” for organizing the protest campaign against the US-Japan security treaty.²⁷ Oda Makoto, the Beheiren spokesperson, organized a simultaneous anti-Vietnam War demonstration in the United States, Japan, the UK and Ghana in 1965, and wrote “With one phone, we can carry out a unified action in various parts of the world.” “Many activists and intellectuals do not yet realize this new situation.”²⁸

That said, movement activists at that time had complex reactions to these new technologies, products of the market economy and mass production. On the one hand, the development of the media expanded the movement, and jeans and guitars became symbols of the youth culture and the student movement. On the other hand, however, there was a backlash against consumer culture and mass production. In Japan as elsewhere, the “natural” and “organic” became popular, folklore was rediscovered, and books on anthropology attracted many readers. These were also representations of the gap between rapid modernization and people’s consciousness which often had not kept up with the rapid change.

Detlif Siegfried saw anti-consumerism and interest in non-Western culture in “1968” in Europe as “a critique that emerged from modern society itself,” referencing Ulrich Beck.²⁹ I agree with this evaluation, but the elements of late modernity that appeared in “1968” were not limited to such a tendency.

The progress of modernization in this era is seen in three ways. First, new technology and culture enabled more flexible movements. Second, modernization, which brought an increase in college admissions and criticism of authority, and a decline in the quality of education gave rise to the student movement. Third, the gap between modernization and popular consciousness caused conflict between new and old generations, new movements and old hierarchical organizations, modernization and reactions to it. Although activists at that time thought that they were a new generation and thought their activity constituted a new movement, their movement was also a reaction to modernization. All of these showed that features of late modernity were significant in the movement, suggesting that it was the spearhead of social change.

4. Dislocation of the Cold War order

Political directions of the 1968 movements were diverse and often unrelated. Who can say that the participants in the “Prague Spring”, student activists in Tokyo, anti-Vietnam War activists in the United States, and Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution in China shared the same goals?

Nevertheless, they did share a common milieu of media development and rapid modernization. And politically, they shared criticism of the Cold War order.

“Prague Spring”, the May Revolution in Paris, US anti-Vietnam War activists, and the Japanese movement against the US-Japan Security Treaty (Ampo) did not have common political goals and there was little coordination among them. However, in diverse ways, all were critical of the Cold War Order dominated by the Soviet Union and the United States. China’s Cultural Revolution also leveled criticisms of the world order dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union. The Vietnam War became the most compelling international symbol of the Cold War Order with the Vietnamese people viewed as the victims of an East-West struggle. The anti-Vietnam War movement galvanized social movements in the US, Japan, France, Britain and many other countries, notably, but not exclusively, those whose governments supported the US war in Vietnam.

That was another reason why many participants in “1968” shared the sense that their movements were taking part in something “large” occurring throughout the world. The movement in each country rebelled against the “existing order”. The common background was the progress of modernization throughout the world. Even if many activists were only dimly aware of the issues that drove the movements elsewhere, rebellion against the “existing order” in each country inevitably led to resistance against the Cold War Order because each regime was part of the Cold War Order. At the same time, the movements of Western developed countries generated “new left” criticisms of the ruling Communist Party in each country that was part of the Cold War Order. This was patently the case throughout Eastern Europe. Participants in the movement in each country resonated with the movement in other countries. All were rebellions against the existing world order. “Prague Spring” would not be understood simply as a movement to resist authority in the Soviet bloc, but could be viewed sympathetically by Western and Japanese students who simultaneously rebelled against their own governments.

New left groups and Beheiren in Japan were not only critical of their own government’s support for the US war in Vietnam, they were also critical of the Soviet Union and the Japan Communist Party. In Japan, the major postwar social movements had been organized under the leadership of the Communist Party and the Socialist Party. However, partly due to progress of modernization resulting in liberation from authority, and the development of new media technology enabling independent actions, and partly due to the decline in popularity of the Japan Communist Party which had strong connections with the USSR in the 1950s, movements that were independent of the Communist Party flourished.

This situation also led to the emergence of women and minority movements. By the mid-1960s, although women and the Korean ethnic minority were involved in political activities in Japan, many were under the leadership of the Communist Party or the Socialist Party. Women activists found that criticism of gender discrimination was unwelcome in movements that accepted their subordination. Although in the fifties and sixties many women activists worked in the consumer and anti-nuclear movements, their work was often presented as the work of “housewives” or mothers to protect their families, thus reifying the traditional roles of women.³⁰ However, in October 1970, women activists began distributing flyers criticizing gender discrimination inside new left groups. One woman activist wore a white mini skirt emblematic of consumption culture at the time, when distributing flyers which were printed on a simple printing machine.³¹ The development of new media enabled her activity, and her self-presentation was influenced by the progress of modernization in

consumer society. At the same time, her challenge reflected the fact that “new issues” rooted neither in capitalism nor Marxism, had started to gain momentum. The political parties that prioritized the Cold War order had not addressed these issues including the power structures in the movement.

In these contexts, Japanese student activists evaluated positively those movements that seemed independent of the United States and the Soviet Union. Those included the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, Che Guevara and the Cuban revolution, the people in Prague, and the Chinese Cultural Revolution.



In short, Japanese student activists evaluated positively the range of challenges to the existing world order, anything that seemed independent of American and Soviet power, or that challenged or was excluded from existing capitalism and existing socialism. Multiple, and in some cases mutually contradictory, things such as ecology, anthropology, Trotsky, Marcuse, flower and peace, and the armed Che Guevara and Black Panther Party leader Huey Newton, were among myriad global symbols of the movements of “1968 worldwide.”

Image on the right: Che Guevara in occupied Kyoto University, 1969.

The late 1960s was a time when the US and the Soviet Union, which had maintained the Cold War order, declined and the order was weakening. The fact that the US, whose economic power was undermined in part as a result of the financial burden of the Vietnam War forcing suspension of the dollar’s conversion into gold, was emblematic of the weakened US position. At the same time, Washington achieved an entente with China that opened the way for US-China mutual recognition, rapidly expanding trade and investment agreements, and China’s resumption of its UN Security Council seat. The results included strengthening both the US and China while weakening the Soviet Union.

The bipolar Cold War Order emerged following the Second World War. Led by the United States and the Soviet Union, each with its own alliance structure, it provided a framework for global geopolitics. The domestic order of many countries also originated from the Second World War. In defeated countries such as Japan and Germany, in countries that were established after World War II such as China and many former colonies, and countries that had experienced occupation and regime change such as France, war memory was the foundation of legitimacy of the domestic order. The clashing memories of the history of World War II was the source of legitimacy both of conservative parties and the communist party in each country, including Japan, Germany and France. The late 1960s was a time when a new generation who did not share the memory of World War II became students and protested against the existing order. In Japan and West Germany, debates over the history of World War II became an important element of “1968”.³²

“1968” was the prelude to the collapse of the Cold War order and a milestone in the process leading up to “1989” and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Immanuel Wallerstein and Sharon Zukin have argued that “1968” brought worldwide resistance to the World System which was dominated by the US and the USSR.³³ I accept this view, but here I describe how such macroscopic trends shaped the character of the movement in Japan.

Conclusion

So what was “1968”? And what is it to us today?

The process of modernization always transforms the existing order in successive waves. Sometimes, the transformations resonate, like the movement of the mantle in an earthquake. The late 1960s and early 1970s was a time when the international order and domestic orders, which were created after WW II, were changing profoundly in numerous realms. The transformations included the 1971 end of the dollar’s convertibility to gold, the US-China entente, political changes in the Middle East precipitating the 1973 Oil Shock, worldwide protests against the US-led war in Vietnam, and protests targeting the Cold War Order and the “existing order” in each country. It can be said that “1968” was a part of the “earthquake” which resonated in many places throughout the world. It also could be called the tip of the iceberg, the visible portion of “something large” and less visible.

Several factors gave rise to “1968”. Most important were the progress of modernization and new media, particularly the global expansion of TV. Also significant was the emergence of a new generation that did not share the memory of World War II, which had legitimated the existing Cold War Order.

After 1968, the development of satellite communications and the penetration of consumption culture were among the factors that would lead to the next “earthquake” in 1989. This was not a story that was limited to Eastern Europe. Actually “1989” in Asia may be said to have begun with the democratization of the Philippines in 1986 and its international TV coverage, followed by the democratization of Korea and Taiwan in 1987. It was not that the domino effect that American leaders had warned of since the 1950s would result in a wave of new Asian Communist regimes. Rather, the dominos marked the collapse of many military dictatorships, which were relics of the Cold War order, with mutual influences provided through CNN television, and information diffusion by facsimile and copy machines in many countries. The wave of democratization in Asia ended in Myanmar in 1988 and Beijing in 1989. However, this wave would be followed by the democratization of Eastern Europe in 1989, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the elimination of apartheid in the Republic of South Africa in 1994. This could be considered a series of democratization processes spanning Asia, Europe, and Africa. We might call it a “long 1989”.

And after 2011, numerous movements throughout the world, including the Occupy movement centered in New York and Hong Kong’s umbrella movement, also adopted networking organization without fixed leadership, and effectively utilized new media technology. Movements since 2011 in Tokyo that I have researched also shared these characteristics.³⁴ Although these characteristics were shared with the movements of “1968”, we cannot say that the movements of the 2010s were the direct effect of “1968”. Contemporary Japanese activists knew little about the networking organization mode that spread widely in “1968” in Japan and elsewhere. They conceived of such a non-hierarchical approach as their own invention under new conditions such as the development of Social Networking Services (SNS). This shows the progress of modernization, not the impact of the movement of “1968” in shaping recent activity. Today, flexible organizations and activities without fixed leaders are increasing in many areas other than social movements. These changes have spread due to the collapse of structures of authority, the breakdown of boundaries on activities, and rethinking of traditional behavior. We should not confuse phenomena due to the progress of modernization with influence from the events of “1968.”



Anti-nuclear energy rally in front of the prime minister's office in Tokyo, June 2012.

If the methods and influences of 1968 did not directly shape contemporary social movements, what was the meaning of "1968"? How should 1968 be evaluated now?

First of all, the movement collectively called "1968" has been overestimated. The largest rally of new left student groups in Japan at that time took place in November 1968. It involved approximately 20,000 participants. Beheiren's biggest protest action was a demonstration of 70,000 people in June 1969. These are small compared to the anti-nuclear rally in June 2012 (200,000 participants) and the rally protesting the Abe administration's expansive new security legislation in August 2015 (100,000 participants). The Japanese Red Army, the subject of much media coverage, involved only a few dozen members, though it was capable of violent struggle and a plane hijacking. From the perspective of numbers of participants, some rallies organized by labor unions, the Socialist Party, and the Communist Party in Japan involved millions of people in the late 1960s. But in the TV era, they presented far less spectacle and therefore attracted less attention.

Japan's new left movement may be compared with that in West Germany, where the biggest march was 60,000 in Bonn in May 1968.³⁵ Although the best and only measure to evaluate the impact of the movements may not be the number of participants in large actions, my point is that the movements of "1968" in general, not only Japan's "1968", have often been overestimated.

There are several factors that resulted in the overestimation. One factor was the impact of TV coverage. The movement of "1968" included many small activities which were widely reported. Also, as there were many appealing visual images, the media often reused footage, and it continues to do so.

Another factor in the overestimation is that the movement mainly involved students, especially in the developed countries. In particular movements centered on elite university students readily attracted attention, even if their numbers were small. One reason is that among the graduates of leading universities were many people who later became influential in politics, economics, culture and academics. Some of them talked and wrote about the movement then and later. Many of the writers were not leading activists, but their writings tended to exaggerate the impact of the movement. This pattern would be found in Europe and North America as well.

Other factors contributed to the high evaluation of "1968". These evaluations tend to privilege international collaboration of movements at that time, including the emergence of global feminism, activism among minority groups in the civil rights movement, and ecological activism. 1968 had multiple impacts, some far from the goals of activists. David Harvey has observed that "the movement of 1968 whose goal was greater individual liberty and freedom from state power" paved the way for the subsequent emergence of neo-liberalism.³⁶ Indeed, economic factors including an affinity with neo-liberalism and the emergence of media technology, the Internet, flexible networking organization, and freelance work style may be seen in retrospect as factors whose origins can be traced to "1968". However, I have some criticisms of these evaluations.

First of all, these evaluations tend to overestimate small or unrelated phenomena at that

time. For example, in Japan, Beheiren's organization of simultaneous demonstrations in four countries mentioned above is often cited as a compelling example of international solidarity activism. This was certainly a pioneering activity, but it was also an exceptional episode. And not only for Japan. The movement did establish international links, especially with the United States and Europe. But most of its activity involved Japanese, and much of it centered on local issues. The evaluation that the movement at the time was international tends to overestimate the role of a limited number of students or intellectuals, and "influence" from televised images abroad.

Second, these evaluations conflate the general trend of modernization with the influence of the movement. Certainly since 1968, gender equality and minority's rights have advanced while networking type organizations expanded, individualism spread, neo-liberalism emerged, and the Cold War order collapsed. However, it would be an overestimation to regard these outcomes as the impact of the movements of "1968." These phenomena were products of the progress of modernization, in which "1968" was a part of the process. People may know that morning has come by hearing the rooster's crow. However, the crow is not the cause of the morning, but a part of the morning, which is caused by the passage of time.

Third, and most important, these are evaluations of historical facts from a contemporary perspective.

For example, as noted at the beginning of this article, the introduction to the book *1968 in Europe* states that "Nobody today seriously doubts that European societies were fundamentally transformed as a result of the events of '1968'." However, in Japan, many people regard "1968" as a fad, a moment in the past. This is not due to the fact that the scale of Japanese movements at that time was insignificant. The Japanese new left movement at that time was by no means small in terms of the number of participants compared with the movement in Germany and a number of other countries.

The difference between the evaluations in Japan and Europe is due to the difference of historical trajectory after 1968. In Western European countries and the United States, with the worsening economic situation in the 1970s, there was an expansion of the role of women in the workforce, flexibility of employment, and network organization. By contrast, Japan continued economic growth in the 1970s and 1980s, and politics and society remained stable. For that reason, although "1968" involved comparable scale social movements in Japan, the conservative order did not change significantly. Many Europeans regard the causes of contemporary social change, such as increasing gender equality, flexibility of work culture, and the rise of the new right, as the aftermath of "1968". By contrast, many Japanese believe that the causes of the same contemporary social changes are the result of the stagnation of the Japanese economy since the burst of the economic bubble in the 1990s and the spread of information technology. However, all of these could be explained by the progress of modernization. From this perspective, which derives from investigation of Japan's "1968", it could be said that the evaluation of "1968" in European countries confused subsequent social change with the impact of the events of "1968."

History is a mirror of the present, and how we understand history depends on our understanding of the present. I am not in a position to comment on the historical dynamics of other countries. My intention is to offer a view from Japanese history to contribute to further discussions and research on global 1968.

I have to add one thing as a Japanese intellectual. The preservation of the Japanese old order in the 1970s and 1980s is the cause of many contemporary problems, notable among them being gender inequality. In Japan, as a result of the strong economy and stable employment in the 1970s and 1980s, social movements in the wake of 1968 were sluggish. It was only after 2011 that social movements gained momentum in Japan in response to the 3.11 nuclear disaster and protracted economic stagnation. In the future, Japanese may say “Nobody today seriously doubts that Japanese society was fundamentally transformed as a result of the events of ‘2011’.” This would not necessarily mean that the movement spurred by the 3.11 Fukushima earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown itself transformed Japanese society. We are still experiencing modernization, which proceeds differently in each society.

At the same time, how we promote the “positive” elements and mitigate the “negative” elements of modernization is the responsibility of people who are living today, not those who acted in “1968”. It is our responsibility to understand the relationship between “1968” and the present society.

Let me conclude. What was “1968”? My answer is that “1968” was an “earthquake” that was touched off by the modernization of the existing order at that time. And what *is* “1968” depends on the kind of society that we are making today.

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This article is substantially revised from Oguma Eiji, “‘1968’ towa Nande Attaka, Nan de Arunoka (What was “1968”, and What is now?),” *Shiso*, No.1129, May 2018, pp. 6-19.

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Notes

¹ Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth, “1968 in Europe An Introduction”, in Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth ed. *1968 in Europe*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 1-9, p7.

² Oguma Eiji, *1968*, Tokyo, Shinyōsha, 2009

³ Oguma Eiji, “[Japan’s 1968: A Collective Reaction to Rapid Economic Growth in an Age of Turmoil](#),” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* Vol. 13, Issue 11, No 1; April 1, 2015.

⁴ Oguma, *1968*, vol.1, p. 229. I examined 23 volumes of about 5000 flyers and pamphlets. However, I could not find any mentions of pollution or Korean minorities except some information of student workshop groups referring to these issues as among the topics they studied.

⁵ According to Ui, when he discussed pollution with one of the leaders of the new left group *Kaku-Marū*, the leader viewed pollution as trivial compared to questions of capitalism. He said, “such a trivial issue will be easily solved if we seize power”. See Ui Jun, “Urugaeshi no Tennō Sei no Replica”, in Watanabe Ichie, Shiokawa Yoshinobu, Oōyabu Ryusuke ed., *Shinsayoku 40 Nen no Hikari to Kage*, Tokyo, Shinsensha, 1999, pp.297-302.

The term “New Left” in Japan at that time was problematic. Radical groups that committed violent actions and upheld their own understanding of Marxism such as Kaku-Maru and ML were called “Sects” in Japan. “New left” was a general and vague term for the new movements which emerged in the 1960s and were not associated with the communist party. Sects, non-communist civic movements such as Beheiren, and student activists who were not members of sects, were generally called “new left” in the mass media. However, some intellectuals called sects “new left”, while others did not. In addition, student activists at that time often moved from one group to another, such as from Beheiren to a Sect. I use the term “new left” in the meaning of non-communist leftists in general including Beheiren and “new left groups” to include sects in this article.

6 Ishimure Michiko, *Kugai Jōdo*, Tokyo, Kōdansha, 1969.

7 Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*. Cambridge, Polity Press, 1990.

8 Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1994.

9 Göran Therborn, *European Modernity and Beyond: The Trajectory of European Societies, 1945-2000*, London, Sage Publications, 1995, p.142.

10 See Kashiwazaki Chieko, *Taiyō to Arashi to Jiyu wo*, Tokyo, Nobel Syobō, 1969. The new left group known as the Shagaku Dō ML faction (known as ML), claimed that it was employing Maoism.

11 This is recorded in Tsuji Kiyooki ed. *Shiryō Sengo 20 Nen Shi : Seiji*, Tokyo, Nihon Hyoronsha, 1966, p. 164. On the media environment and its impact on the anti US-Japan security treaty movement of 1960, see Chapter 12 of Oguma Eiji, *Minshu to Aikoku*, Tokyo, Shinyōsha, 2002.

12 Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980.

13 Mikami Osamu, *1960 Nendai Ron 2*, Tokyo, Hihyōsha, 2000, p.81.

14 Oguma, 1968, vol.1, p.530.

15 An activist at Tokyo University criticized the new left groups, recalling that “It was highly regrettable that our activity provided publicity for new left groups.” NHK ed. *Chisso Minamata, Todai Zenkyoto*, Vol.3 of *Series Sengo 50 Nen Sono Toki Nihon ha*, Tokyo, NHK Publications, 1995, p.339.

16 See Joachim Scharloth, “‘1968’ and Mass Media”, in *Shisō*, No.1129, May 2018, Tokyo, Iwanami Syoten, pp.13-145, p.139.

17 Miyamoto Mitsugu, “Keishichō Kisha Club Monogatari,” in Mainichi Shimbun ed. *Rengō Sekigun, Ōkami Tachi no Jidai*, Tokyo, Mainichi Shimubunsha, 1999, pp. 290-291, p290.

18 On these reports, see Oguma “Japan’s 1968” and Chapter 1 of Oguma Eiji, 1968, vol.1.

19 On these memoire of activists, see Chapter 2 of Oguma Eiji, 1968, vol.1.

²⁰ See Chapter 10 of Oguma, 1968, vol.1.

²¹ On these statistics, see Chapter 2 of Oguma, 1968, vol.1. The estimation of the professor is Miura Shimon, “Nihon Daigaku yo Amaeru Nakare”, *Chūōkōron*, vol. 83, issue 8, August 1968, pp. 287-294.

Miura was a professor of Japan University where student revolt was strong.

²² Mainichi Shimbun, *Student Power*, Tokyo, Mainichi Shimbunsha, 1968, p130, 131. This book was a compilation of Mainichi Newspaper's articles on student movements in Japan and the world.

²³ See Chapter 6 of Ulrich Beck, *Risiko Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1986. English translation is Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society, Towards a New Modernity*, London, Sage Publications, 1992.

²⁴ As I mention in the later, Detlef Siegfried mentioned Ulrich Beck when he evaluates anti-consumerism and interest on non-Western culture in "1968" as "a critique that emerged from modern society itself". I agree this evaluation but the features of late modern are not limited within these kind of "positive" elements. This article is also discussing "negative" elements of late modern, such as neoliberalism, which has been argued that its origin was "1968".

²⁵ On Beheiren, see Chapter 15 of Oguma, *1968*, vol.2 and Thomas R. H. Havens, *Fire Across the Sea: The Vietnam War and Japan 1965-1975*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1987.

²⁶ The simple printing machine was called "Gari Ban Insatsu Ki" in Japanese, and the technique (Gari-Kiri) of using this machine was critical to activists at that time.

²⁷ Oguma Eiji, *Minshu to Aikoku*, op. cit., p. 522.

²⁸ Oda Makoto, "Sekai he Hiraku Undō wo", in Beheiren ed. *Shiryō Beheiren Undō*, vol.1, Tokyo, Kawade Shobo Shinsha, 1974 (the original text was written in 1965), pp. 12-14, p.14.

²⁹ See p.68 of Detlef Siegfried, "Music and Protest in 1960s Europe", in Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth ed. *1968 in Europe*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan op cit., pp. 57-70.

³⁰ For example, Shufu Rengo Kai (Housewives association) which was established in 1948 as a consumer movement, and Nihon Haha Oya Taikai (Japan Mother 's Association) which was established in 1955 as an anti-nuclear weapon movement, claimed that they were only aiming to protect their family without any political ideology. That was a strategy to compromise with anti-communism conservative local leaders and attract conservative women.

³¹ See Chapter 17 of Oguma, *1968*, vol. 2.

³² The attitude of the new left toward article 9 in the Japanese Constitution was complex. Article 9 was enacted by the United States to prevent Japanese rearmament and militarization, and the long-ruling Liberal Democratic Party has long sought to amend it, while the Communist Party and Socialist Party supported it. The new left after 1970 criticized Japan's war actions, but said little about Article 9. For them, both the Constitution, including Article 9 and the Communist Party that supported it, were part of the "existing order." New left students preferred to proclaim their movement as "anti-war" and privileged regime change rather than a "peace" movement that sought to maintain the existing order. Some sympathized with the right wing novelist Mishima Yukio because he declared his opposition to the existing order including the Constitution, which was something they could not say openly. The intellectuals who experienced World War II and became leaders of Beheiren were critical of this trend among young. See Chapter 14 and 15 of Oguma, *1968*, vol. 2.

³³ Immanuel Wallerstein and Sharon Zukin, "1968, Revolution in the World-System: Theses and Queries", *Theory and Society*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (July, 1989), pp. 431-449.

³⁴ Oguma Eiji, "[A New Wave Against the Rock: New social movements in Japan since the Fukushima nuclear meltdown](#)," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* Vol. 14, Issue 13, No 2; July 1, 2016.

³⁵ Martin Klimke, "West Germany", in Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth ed. *1968 in Europe*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan op cit., pp. 97-110.

³⁶ David Harvey, "Neo-Liberalism as Creative Destruction," *Geografiska Annaler*, vol. 88, Issue 2, June 2006, pp145-158, p.151.

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