Interpretations of the 1960s in Japan and the US: Historical Assessment and Voices from the Sixties Generation

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I Introduction

i) Voices From the Period, Research Both Gain Momentum

In Japan since the 1990s, recollections of people who took part in the social movements of the 1960s and books by historians are being published one after another. This is at least in part because those participants have been approaching retirement age at around 60, and reflecting back on their youth. In the United States, meanwhile, many works positively appraising the social movements of the 1960s have started to appear in reaction to the appearance since the conservative wave of the 1980s of research taking a negative view, depicting the 1960s as the start of the “collapse of traditional values” or the formation of “big government.” To summarize, now in the early 21st century research on the 1960s is not only abundant but has a polemical character. This makes it all the more important that we consider how to synthesize the invaluable recollections of participants into broader historical research, and—because of the very polemical nature of the historical debate—that we make serious efforts to collect primary sources and to empirically establish the historical facts.

ii) The “Long Sixties” Approach and Periodization

While almost all of the radical social movements of the 1960s seeking political revolutions ended in failure in the 1970s, some movements, such as environmental protection and women’s liberation, lived on, leading to the recent rise of the “long Sixties” approach, which sees the social movements of that decade as beginning earlier and
ending later. In the United States, this approach treats the period from the beginning of the civil rights movement in around 1955 until the end of the radical Native American movement in 1973 as one continuum. In Western Europe, similarly, Arthur Marwicke treats the period from 1958 to 1974 as the “long Sixties.”[1] We can see that viewing the origins and impact of the social movements of the 1960s as part of a longer period characterizes the “long Sixties” approach.

Applying this approach to the Japanese student movement brings the period from the appearance in 1958 of the anti-Communist Party “New Left” to the decline of the New Left with the outbreak of the United Red Army incident in 1972 into focus. Moreover, if we shift our attention to the “Old Left” comprised of such groups as the Japan Socialist Party and Japan Communist Party, we can see everything from 1955, when the left and right wings of the Socialist Party united and it became clear that the Communist Party had renounced the armed struggle line, until the end of progressive metropolitan government in Tokyo in 1979 as one era. It should go without saying, of course, that other periodizations are possible if we focus on movements such as environmental protection and women’s liberation, and that periodization itself is a contentious issue.

In the United States, there is also a strain of research that takes a positive approach to movements such as the Students Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) based on a nonviolent approach and a critical view of the period of radicalization that began in the latter half of the 1960s with calls for Black Power and Student Power. In Japan, meanwhile, after the rise of the movement against the revision of the US-Japan Security Treaty in 1960, there was a period of stagnation until momentum was regained around 1965 with the movement against the Vietnam War. Following the university struggle of 1968–69, the movement faded away with the automatic renewal of the US-Japan Security Treaty in 1970. All of this makes periodization within the “long Sixties” an important issue. There is also the issue of how the special characteristics of 1968, which saw the
rise of student movements not only in Japan but also in Western Europe and the United States, should be positioned within the 1960s as a whole.

iii) The Focus and Limitations of This Paper

My goal in this paper is, by highlighting differences in the recent upsurge of studies in the United States and Japan on the social movements of the 1960s, particularly the student movements, to clarify the questions on which we need to focus to move forward in empirical research. In this connection, I would like to focus in particular in differences between the New Left in Japan and the United States. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to the movement in Japan by its Japanese name, Shin-Sayoku, and reserve the term New Left for the movement in the United States.

Recollections by participants in the Japanese Shin-Sayoku movement, while they contain valuable information unknown to anyone else, have a strongly partisan character. Accordingly, to make use of these recollections in historical research it is necessary to construct a political-social or political-cultural historical approach putting the political movements of that period into the context of social and cultural trends as a whole. In this respect, there are many things we can learn from American scholarship. In recent years, there have been many U.S. empirical studies focusing on the origins of conservative reaction to radical movements in changing racial, ethnic, and class relations in specific cities in the 1960s. In the case of Japan as well, there is a need for a re-examination in the broad context of political-social and political-cultural history of whether the socialist revolution proclaimed by various Shin-Sayoku factions was a realistic goal, given that the 1960s saw high-speed economic growth and the stabilization of long-term Liberal-Democratic Party (LDP) power under the Ikeda and Sato administrations.

II Between Shin-Sayoku and New Left

In Japan, there is a tendency to emphasize the similarities between the Shin-Sayoku and New Left movements, due in part because of the
similarity of their names. However, if one examines SDS, a group seen as representative of the New Left, it is the differences that stand out. First of all, all left-wing organizations were buffeted by the winds of the red-baiting McCarthyism that swept through America in the 1950s. When SDS was formed in 1960, for example, it came into being as the student wing of the League for Industrial Democracy, a social democratic organization, but, amid criticism of Cold War policies, distanced itself from the parent organization’s anti-communist stand, becoming a broad-based progressive organization including a left-liberal wing. The SDS was initially not a group seeking socialist revolution, and its 1962 manifesto, the Port Huron Statement, called for the progressive transformation of the Democratic administration’s policies through participatory democracy, including mass direct action. The group, moreover, was a loose confederation of SDS branches at universities, rather than the typical Old Left-type organization with a central decision-making authority.

In Japan, meanwhile, the event seen as the birth of the Shin-Sayoku movement is the 1958 formation of the Communist Bund. While this organization criticized Stalinism, broke with the Japan Communist Party, and proclaimed the formation of a “true Marxist-Leninist vanguard party,” it paid more attention to mass direct action than to doctrinal unity. The group won attention for carrying out direct actions such as forcing its way into the Diet during the 1960 struggle over the revision of the U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty, but most of its leaders were arrested, and the group fractured with the ratification of the treaty. In the sense that the formation of the Communist Bund represented the formation of a Marxist-Leninist political party modeled on the Russian Revolution apart from the Communist Party, it symbolized the diversification of the Communist movement. The group was also significant for advocating a leading role for the student movement, and contributing to the rise of the 1960 Security Treaty struggle. In terms of its platform and organization, however, the group was part of the Marxist-Leninist lineage, with some calling it “the last of
Later Shin-Sayoku groups fractured into many sects, most of them sharing the same tendencies as the Communist Bund.

As we have seen, the New Left and Shin-Sayoku began with major differences in goals and organizational structure. From the latter half of the 1960s, however, as a result of the SDS’s radicalization and turn toward socialism along with the radicalization of the African-American movement and the spread of the movement against the Vietnam War, it is a fact that the American and Japanese movements came to share more in common. In the United States, as a result of the continuation of economic and social discrimination in the northern cities even after the legal abolition of racial discrimination with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, from 1966 the African-American community, rather than relying on the Democratic administration, began advocating Black Power as a means of self-realization, and groups arose such as the Black Panther Party supporting armed self-defense.

As a result, the Black Nationalist movement, which valued the kind of self-reliance advocated by Malcolm X and in some cases was prepared to engage in armed self-defense, became an increasingly visible strand of the black liberation movement, in competition with the kind of movement of non-violent resistance advocated by Dr. Martin Luther King. However, although armed self-defense itself is not illegal in the United States with its constitutional right to bear arms, adoption of this approach led to many violent clashes with the police, and it is a fact that this led to the decline of the movement. Moreover, with the intensification of the Vietnam War, the anti-draft movement gained momentum among students and their clashes with police become more intense. In line with this, white students began to call for Student Power and SDS took a more confrontational stance toward the Democratic administration, increasingly calling for transformation of the system and taking on greater socialist tendencies. However, even after its radicalization the American student movement maintained its stance of placing value on improving communities and universities, so despite the struggles of the 1960s such as university occupations, the movement
won lasting gains such as university-established departments of Afro-American Studies and Ethnic Studies.

III Contrasts Between First, Second Halves of the Decade

In the United States, scholars working from a liberal perspective tend to take a positive stance toward the movements of the first half of the 1960s that, based on nonviolent resistance, sought a transformation in the policies of Democratic Party administrations, and to be critical of radicalized later movements. In Japan, as well, researchers point to changes in the character of the movements between the first and second halves of the decade. According to Oguma Eiji, for example, who published his masterwork 1968 in 2009, because the leaders of the Shin-Sayoku groups such as the Communist Bund that led the Security Treaty struggle of 1960 were born before or during the Pacific War and grew up during a period when Japan was still poor and memories of the war were still dormant, their opposition to the Security Treaty was rooted in a desire to overcome “modern unhappiness” through liberation from poverty and dictatorial rule. By contrast, Oguma says the Zenkyoto (All Campus Joint Struggle) movement that rose in 1968–69 was rooted in a desire to overcome “contemporary unhappiness” originating in the alienation of managed society in the period of high economic growth.\(^{(3)}\)

There was, in fact, a change in emphasis between the Japanese student movement of the first half of the 1960s, which focused on nationwide issues such as opposition to the Security Treaty and to the Treaty on Basic Relations Between Japan and the Republic of Korea, and the movement of the latter half of the decade, which combined local campus issues such as opposition to tuition increases and undemocratic administration into a nationwide struggle. Moreover, in the Zenkyoto struggle at the University of Tokyo, what began with limited issues such as the demand for reversal of unfair punishments in the medical school widened into calls for self-denial and demands for such things as the dissolution of “imperialist universities,” and saw the occupation of
buildings across the campus. As a result, with no room left for compromise, the movement ended in a violent clash between students occupying the university’s central Yasuda Hall and the police. In that process, the students who took part in the occupation began to describe the university as a “knowledge factory,” reject their own “manufacturing” into an intellectual elite, and emphasize the goal of dismantling the university as an institution contributing to the “imperialist system.”

The idea of incorporating this kind of “logic of self-denial” into a political movement had stronger existentialist than Marxist tendencies, and was a characteristic not seen in American student movements. As a result, while the Zenkyoto movement won the hearts of many students, it left no room for compromise with the university authorities and ended in a self-sacrificing violent clash, so we must judge the results as ambiguous at best.

IV Old Vs. New Left

In Japan, there were clearly major differences between the Old Left and the Shin-Sayoku Movement over the best way to proceed with the movement against the 1960 revision of the US-Japan Security Treaty. The People’s Conference Against Revision of the Security Treaty, which the Japan Socialist Party and Sohyo (General Council of Trade Unions of Japan) led and in which the Japan Communist Party participated as an observer, was the nucleus of the movement. Students, led by the Shin-Sayoku Movement, carried out independent activities against the revision such as street demonstrations. When the LDP government of Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke rammed the treaty through the Diet, many citizens saw this as a “crisis of parliamentary democracy,” and the opposition movement suddenly gained many new participants. It was under these circumstances that the leaders of the Shin-Sayoku student movement forced their way into the Diet, and in the process a female student was killed and President Eisenhower cancelled a planned visit to Japan. The Kishi Cabinet, as a result, had no choice but to resign en
masse, but the treaty revision went into effect.

Most leaders of the Old Left took a positive view of this outcome, seeing the resignation of Kishi, who had been a cabinet minister during the Pacific War and was named afterwards as a suspected war criminal, as a rejection of any return to prewar-style reactionary politics and a sign that “postwar democracy” had taken firm root. The Shin-Sayoku, however, focusing on the passage of the Security Treaty, saw this as indicating that the movement had collapsed. This also demonstrated the tendency of the Shin-Sayoku to discount the value of parliamentary democracy as, in the words of the movement’s ideological leader at the time, Yoshimoto Takaaki, as nothing more than a tool of “bourgeois democracy.”(4)

We can thus see that there was a decisive difference between the Socialists and Communist parties of the Old Left, which comprised a parliamentary left inclined to seek revolution through the parliamentary system, and the Shin-Sayoku, which saw little value in parliamentary politics and was in essence a leftist direct action movement that sought revolution through the direct action of the masses. This stands in stark contrast to the German New Left, many of whose members went on to serve in Parliament as members of the Social Democratic Party or Green Party, but the question is why Japan’s Shin-Sayoku took an anti-parliamentarian line. The Japanese Old Left’s tendency, on the other hand, to focus on politics in the voting booth rather than in the streets, emphasizing efforts to expand its influence in the Diet, led it to clash even more harshly with the Shin-Sayoku than it might have otherwise. This kind of conflict arose within the Japan Communist Party as well, with part of the leadership of the Communist faction within the student movement in the University of Tokyo struggle of the late 1960s emphasizing direct action, leading to their expulsion in 1972.

A group that held a unique position in this structure between the Old Left and the Shin-Sayoku was Beheiren, or the Citizens’ Federation for Peace in Vietnam. This organization was founded in 1965 under the
leadership of intellectuals opposed to the Vietnam War such as Oda Makoto and Tsurumi Shunsuke, but gained increasing influence among students as well. This was a loose federation around the single issue of opposition to the Vietnam War and sought to strengthen public opinion against the war through teach-ins and peaceful demonstrations. Beheiren resembled the early-period SDS in organization and activities and, in fact, many of its leaders had either studied in the United States or thought highly of American-style pragmatism.\(^{(5)}\)

Beheiren was thus a pioneering organization among Japanese citizens’ movements, and carried out unique activities, including efforts to forge cooperation between the Old Left and the Shin-Sayoku in opposition to the Vietnam War and the US-Japan Security Treaty.

V International Factors Behind Radicalization of the Student Movement

Behind the radicalization of the American student movement—in addition to the influence of the radicalization of the African-American movement, as we have already discussed—lay the fact that internal campus struggles, even for expanded freedom in political activities as seen in the Free Speech Movement at the University of California at Berkeley in the fall of 1964, could not have been carried out without occupying university buildings. At the same time, as the war in Vietnam escalated the student movement incorporated the demand for abolition of the draft, leading to increasing clashes with the police and, out of a feeling of solidarity with the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam groups came to the fore that attempted to apply a similar national liberation war-type of revolutionary strategy in the United States. This approach of taking a “Third World” type of armed struggle as a model was influenced by events from the Cuban Revolution of 1959 to the Chinese Cultural Revolution beginning in 1966. The Weatherman Group, which split from the SDS at the latter’s final convention in June 1969, was an example of this tendency. Attempting to bring about revolution through street clashes and armed struggle in
an “advanced country” with a parliamentary system, however, exposed such groups to an intense police crackdown against their “illegal activities,” leading to their collapse in the early 1970s.

In Japan, after students took over buildings at Keio University in opposition to tuition increases in 1965, this tactic became widely used at other universities, and escalated to the closure of an entire university with the Zenkyoto movement in 1968. In addition, it was during the October 1967 struggle at Haneda Airport to prevent Prime Minister Sato from visiting South Vietnam that the violent groups known as “gebra-bo” (“gebra” means German word Gewalt and “bo” means stick) and helmeted activists made their first appearances in Shin-Sayoku street demonstrations, and from this point on, clashes between these violent groups and the police became a regular thing. Once the police intensified their crackdowns and demonstrations were increasingly suppressed, however, groups began to appear that openly advocated armed struggle with bombs and guns, such as the Red Army Faction, which was formed in the fall of 1969. As shown in the United Red Army incident in 1972, however, this kind of armed struggle line not only led to defeat through the arrests of leaders and direct police suppression of the movement, it also caused the atrophy of the Shin-Sayoku Movement as a whole by giving rise to internal purges and violent clashes.

Increased interest in the Third World, of course, in addition to influencing the radicalization of the student movements in places such as Japan and the United States, was also important in spurring new strands of thought, such as the trend in the United States toward seeing domestic minorities as part of a global consciousness as a “Third World Within,” and the rise of Postcolonial Studies. It should not be forgotten that this interest in the Third World was a major stimulus to new strands of thoughts and movements in both the United States and Japan, where it had an influence on the formation of movements to end the discrimination faced by Korean and Chinese residents of Japan and advocating postwar compensation for the foreign victims of the Pacific War.
The simultaneous appearance of student movements in 1968 in the “advanced countries” of Japan, Western Europe and the United States, and the relationship between “Third World elements” and “advanced country” elements in the social movements of the 1960s are important topics for research.

VI Atrophy of the Student Movement: a Japan-US Comparison

As we have already seen, the 1972 United Red Army incident was a major cause of the atrophy of the Japanese Shin-Sayoku Movement. In addition to resulting in a defeat for armed struggle, this shocking incident led to many deaths and involved internal violence and purges between members of fundamentally different groups that had joined forces to carry out armed struggle—the Red Army faction, which drew on the Bund tradition of internationalism, and Maoist groups. It is clear that this incident played a major role in the decline of the Shin-Sayoku movement, as seen in survey of over 500 Zenkyoto movement participants published in 1994. While 24% of the participants cited internal violence as the reason why they left the movement, the next biggest factor cited—at 17%—was the United Red Army incident.(6)

It is probably for this reason that former leaders of the Shin-Sayoku Movement have sought to analyze the causes of the United Red Army incident and internal violence in general. Many of them have concluded that participants’ belief that only their own faction was in the vanguard of the movement caused them to reject the very existence of other factions, leading to a tendency to seek even their physical extinction. Because some participants recall having peaceful interaction with members of other factions in the early 1960s, however, it can probably be said that internal violence gained momentum only in the latter half of the decade. Through the time of the 1960 Security Treaty struggle, the movement was organized around autonomous student organizations, and factions competed for power in elections for these organizations. It can be said, however, that that from the Zenkyoto period of the late 1960s, when alliances of activists with “fighting spirit”
became more central than the student organizations to the Shin-Sayoku movement, internal democracy began to erode. Moreover, some have pointed out that once the Shin-Sayoku Movement, which had originally been critical of Stalinism, began to repeatedly carry out internal purges it failed to put its anti-Stalinism into practice. We can say, accordingly, that under the influence of the belief that only one’s own faction was in the vanguard and of a model of organization that concentrated power in the center, individual members lost the freedom to leave their factions and purges were instituted that ignored human rights. This problem can be seen in the context of the Shin-Sayoku Movement downplaying the concept of respect for human rights established after citizens’ revolutions, deriding this idea as part of “bourgeois democracy.” While there are some reports of fatalities arising from internal clashes in the United States and Western Europe as well, there do not appear to have been many calculated attacks with dangerous weapons on opposing factions like those seen in Japan, a point requiring serious examination for those concerned with the Shin-Sayoku Movement.

VII Some Conclusions

Finally, we need to place the student movement, for good and bad, in the context of the history of the 1960s as a whole. It can be said, first, that the movement in both Japan and the United States, by playing a central role in the movement against the war in Vietnam, made at least some contribution toward bringing the war to an end. It is worthy of attention that groups such as Beheiren developed a new consciousness of solidarity in organizing opposition to the war, identifying with the people of Vietnam not through a “victim consciousness” but through a self-critical “aggressor consciousness.”

Second, it should be pointed out that, because the US student movement not only sought revolutionary goals but also demanded reforms in the curriculum such as the establishment of Ethnic Studies departments, American universities underwent major changes from the 1970s onward. There is a major contrast in this respect with the
Japanese student movement which, with its radicalization in the late 1960s, ignored the need for individual reforms, and left behind no major results in terms of university transformation. It is worth noting that with America’s deep-seated spirit of pragmatism, there is a tendency to give importance to the accumulation over time of individual reforms, and that even radical groups had a tradition of focusing on the improvement of the communities in which their members lived, as seen in the Black Panther Party’s demand for free lunches at schools in African-American areas.

Third, in the Japanese case it is striking that, despite the many social movements that arose in the 1960s, at the level of parliamentary politics the LDP maintained control of government for many years. A close examination of support rates shows, however, that the ratio of absolute support for the LDP versus the opposition—which was 47.5 to 24.1 in 1955—narrowed to an almost equal 32.3 to 31.8 in 1969. While part of the reason for this change can be seen in the trend toward party diversification under which parties such as Komeito (Clean Government Party) and the Japan Communist Party won more seats in the Diet, there was also an increase in people who supported no party at all, which illustrates the insufficient linkages between the rise of the social movements of the 1960s and parliamentary politics. This brings into relief the fact that—because of the clash between the Japanese Shin-Sayoku movement’s anti-parliamentary tendencies and the old left’s contrasting focus on parliamentary politics—no broad reformist coalition was established. This is surely related to the fact that both the Old Left and Shin-Sayoku in Japan had an extremely factional character, and it was extremely difficult for them to unite around broad principles.

Fourth, in the course of opposing the Vietnam War American social movements gave birth to a counterculture movement, resulting in lasting changes in lifestyles and family structure. American social movements thus, even if they failed to cause a political revolution, brought about a major cultural revolution, including the transformation
of universities that we touched upon earlier. In the Japanese case, however, it would be difficult to say that the political movements of the 1960s led to any cultural revolution such as a major transformation in mass culture, despite the appearance of scattered phenomena such as the “folk guerrillas” who arose out of Beheiren. The reasons for this difference are also a major topic for future research.

Notes

(7) Masumi Ishikawa, *Data Sengo Seiji shi*, Iwanami Publisher, 1984, pp. 120, 125.

キーワード
1960年代、学生運動、日米比較、ニューレフト、ベトナム反戦運動