

A study on the long lives described in the classics

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Preface

The classics of the world include more than a few examples of ancient people who lived to the ages of 80 or 90, and sometimes to over 100 years of age. These people lived in the era of Christ or before, and it is well-known that ancient Greek philosophers such as Socrates (who died at age 70) and Plato (who died at age 81) lived long lives. According to “Lives of Eminent Philosophers” by Greek author Diogenes Laertius in the third century B.C., (1) these early philosophers lived longer than contemporary ones. For example, it is recorded that Gorgias died at the age of 109 and Zeno at the age of 98. Therefore, it would seem that people of the fourth or fifth century B.C. lived incredibly long lives.

Furthermore, one of the most famous pharaohs of ancient Egypt was Ramses II, who supposedly reigned for 67 years (from 1279 to 1212 B.C.) and died when he was 92. (2) In addition, according to the Old Testament. (3) Moses is believed to have lived until he was 120.

In the East, it is recorded in Buddhist literature (4) that The Buddha in India lived until he was 80 and that his disciple Subadda died at age 120. Confucius in China is said to have died when he was 74. Life spans and reigning periods of the emperors in the Chou dynasty were seemingly much longer than those of the emperors in Han and later dynasties.

Few scientific and historical investigations have been performed on the long life spans of ancient people who are mentioned in the classics. In this paper, I propose that the phenomena of ‘long lives’ are due to what may be called a “double-year calendar” system, such that the period known today as a year was divided into two years in ancient times. From this point of view, the ages of ancient people become half of what is described, which is reasonable for a human life span and does not contradict archaeological knowledge.

Discovery of the double-year calendar

In Japan, Takehiko FURUTA proved that ancient Japanese (called Wajin / Woren 倭人 in the second century) used a double-year calendar that divided one year into two. (5) The following statements were derived from descriptions in “Gishi Wajin Den” and “Giryaku” (6) of “Chronicles of the Three Kingdoms”:

“As for their life spans, maybe [they were] one hundred years, or eighty to ninety years” (Gishi Wajin Den / Weishi Woren-zhuan 魏志倭人傳).

“People do not know the calendar with the New Year or four seasons, but count their years by cultivation in the spring and harvests in the autumn” (Giryaku / Weilue 魏略).

Previously, scholars perceived the descriptions of typical Wajin life spans -- “one hundred years, or eighty to ninety years” -- to be exaggerations, and they did not take them seriously. However, Furuta showed that the description of the Wajin in “Giryaku” indicated a double-year calendar that divided one year into spring and autumn, and that the life span of the Wajin could be understood as 40 to 50 years.

The ages of the 90 people (i.e. 27% of the total of 332 people) whose ages at time of death are mentioned in “Romance of the Three Kingdoms” were investigated, and the average life span was determined to be 52.5 years. It was also disclosed that if individuals, mentioned because they lived particularly long lives, were excluded, then the typical age at death was closer to 30 or 40 years old. The life span of the Wajin was twice this amount; therefore, the age of the Wajin must have been based on the double-year calendar.

Discovery of the double-year calendar may explain the average life span of 90 years for the emperors in “Kojiki / Gushiji 古事記” and “Nihon-Shoki / Riben-Shuji 日本書紀”. Furuta pointed out that their ages must have been described using the double year calendar, which then leads us to a reasonable understanding. (7) Furthermore, he expanded his theory to include hypothesis which states that the origin of the double-year calendar was the Pacific region, including the Palau Islands. (8)

Traces of the double-year calendars that are found in worldwide classics are introduced below.

Traces of the double-year calendar in the year of the Buddha's death

In the research on the history of Buddhism, two major theories exist regarding the year of the Buddha's death. One theory places the Buddha's life from 563 to 483 B.C., based on the oral tradition in south Ceylon. It assumes that King Asoka was enthroned in 266 B.C., and that 218 years passed between that year and the year when the Buddha died. Thus, the year of the Buddha's death was fixed at 483 B.C. (9)

The other theory, proposed by Gen Nakamura, indicates that the Buddha lived from 463 to 383 B.C. This theory, based on a northern legend, is derived from research on Greece, which claims that King Asoka was enthroned in 268 B.C. Based on views such as the one in “Shibabulun 十八部論” (10) that King Asoka ascended the throne 116 years after the Buddha died, the death year of the Buddha was determined to be 383 B.C. (11)

The only possible explanation for the discrepancy between these theories is that different calendars were used. Quite possibly, southern legends such as the ones in Ceylon were passed down using a double-year calendar, and northern legends were passed down with a single-year calendar. Thus, the existence of two distinct theories about the year of The Buddha's death indicates the existence of a double-year calendar.

In conclusion, the actual year of the Buddha's death should be understood to be 383 B.C., as suggested by Gen Nakamura. (12) Furthermore, the year of his birth should be recorded as 423 B.C., which was 40 years before the year of his death, instead of 463 B.C., which is 80 years before his death, as originally assumed.

Traces of the double-year calendar in Egypt

One historical document on the chronicles of successive dynasties of Egypt is “History of Egypt” by Manetho (367-283 B.C.). This document is the framework of the Egyptian history known today. However, it has not remained in perfect form, and only the parts that were quoted in other

documents still exist. This document recorded 30 dynasties from the first unified dynasty of Egypt in 3100 B.C. to the last Egyptian Pharaoh, Nectanebo II.

In "History of Egypt," it is recorded that King Semerkhet (3000 B.C.) ruled for 18 years. However, on the Palermo Stone (created between 2498 to 2345 B.C.), which is one of the oldest epigraphs in existence today, the period of Semerkhet's reign is recorded as nine years. (13) The difference is exactly half; therefore, it can be assumed that Manetho wrote "History of Egypt" using the double-year calendar. This implies that the absolute ages of ancient Egyptians that have been chronicled according to "History of Egypt" could be interpreted quite differently. In addition, the periods of reign (not the ages) of many kings in "History of Egypt" were nearly 50 years, (14) even though the life span of ancient Egyptians is considered to have been 40 or maybe less than 30 years. (15) This fact raises the possibility that the document was recorded with the double-year calendar.

Traces of the double year calendar in "Zhuangzi"

Zhuangzi lived toward the end of the age of the warring states in ancient China (second half of the Fourth Century B.C.). In "Zhuangzi 莊子," in which the words of Zhuangzi were recorded, it states, "For men, a hundred years is long, eighty is medium and sixty is short" ("Zhuangzi," edited by Toseki, Vol. 29). (16) One hundred years is an incredibly long life span even today. But if Zhuangzi used the double-year calendar for the description, his account would mean 50 years was a long life span, 40 years was average life span, and 30 years was considered a short life span. This would correspond well with the ages at time of death of Chinese people, which were recorded in the later part of "Romance of Three Kingdoms." In addition, "Guanzi 管子," "Liezi 列子," "Analects of Confucius / Lunyu 論語," "Zengzi 曾子," and "Xunzi 荀子" were edited with the double-year calendar, and several traces of the calendar are also seen in "Shiki." (17)

Conclusion

The seemingly absurdly long lives of ancient people in the classics become understandable once the idea of the double-year calendar is introduced. Furthermore, with the double-year calendar, the reigning periods of the kings and emperors actually become half of the original descriptions. Therefore, it is a logical possibility that actual chronicles of the ancient history of Egypt, Greece, and China may vary dramatically. Thus, the concept of the double-year calendar forces a reconsideration of the actual life spans of humans in ancient dynasties all over the world.

Incidentally, a calendar with 210 days in a year is used in Bali. (18) It will be our future task to research how this double-year calendar came to exist and when it was used.

In closing, I would like to thank Mr. Takehiko FURUTA for his advice and support in publishing this paper.

Notes:

- (1) "Lives of Eminent Philosophers" by Diogenes Laertius, Vol. 1 pp. 153 and 250, Vol. 2 p. 228, Vol. 3 p. 57; 2004 edition, Iwanami Bunko.
- (2) "Chronicles of the Pharaohs" by Peter Clayton, edited by Sakuji Yoshimura, p. 201, the fourth impression of the first edition, 2001, Sogensha.
- (3) "Holy Bible-New Translation," p. 336, 1994, Japan Bible Publication.
- (4) Notes by Mitsuyoshi Saegusa and others in "Diigha-nikaaya-pali / Changahanjing 長阿含經 1 ." p. 122, 1993, Okura Publication.
- (5) "There was no Yamataikoku" by Takehiko Furuta, p. 395, 1971, Asahi Shimbun.
- (6) "Romance of the Three Kingdoms" by Chinjyu, Vol. 3, p. 856, 2000, Chuka Shobo.
- (7) "Lost Dynasty of Kyushu" by Takehiko Furuta, p. 125, 1973, Asahi Shimbun.
- (8) "Future of Ancient History" by Takehiko Furuta, p. 118, 1998, Akashi Shoten. In Palau, six months form a year (RAK), and those six months with the same names are repeated.

(9) “Life of Shakuson, Gotama Buddha” by Gen Nakamura, pp. 31-32, 1994, Hozokan.

(10) “Shibabulun 十八部論”, in “Taisho Shinshu Daizokyo/ Dazangjing 大正新修大藏經 Vol. 49,p.17, 1927.

(11) Same as note (9).

(12) As mentioned later, this “383 B.C.” may change with the revision of the absolute chronicles, using the double-year calendar.

(13) One view is that the inscribed years on the Palermo Stone were based on the number of livestock that were checked every two years, so that the actual years must be obtained by doubling those years (“British Museum Dictionary of Ancient Egypt” by Ian Shaw and Paul Nicholson, translated by Sugihiko Uchida, p. 403, 1997, Hara Shobo). However, the long periods of reign in “History of Egypt” cannot be explained this way.

(14) According to “Chronicles of the Pharaohs” by Peter Clayton, edited by Sakuji Yoshimura, pp. 25-102, (the fourth impression of the first edition, 2001, Sogensha), periods of reign were 62 years for Hor-Aha, 57 years for Djer, 47 years for King of Hor Ninetjer, 66 years for Khafra, 63 years for Menkaura, 50 years for Mentuhotep II, 44 years (including 10 years of joint reign) for Senusret I, and so on.

(15) In “Les Momies, Un voyage dans l'éternité” by Francoise Dunand et al., edited by Sakuji Yoshimura (p. 150, the fifth impression of the first edition, 2000, Sogensha), the average life span is stated as 40 years, or even shorter if still births are considered. This is even shorter than the 30 years mentioned in “Three Thousand Years of Egypt Kingdom” by Kaoru Yoshinari (p. 185, 2000, Kodansha Sensho Mechie).

(16) “Zhuangzi” Vol. 4, p. 111,2002, Iwanami Bunko.

(17) Please refer to “The World of the Double-Year Calendar” by Tatsuya Koga in Vol. 7 of “New Ancient Study,” pp.128-153 (2004, Shinsensha) and “The World of the Double-Year Calendar Part 2” in Vol. 8 of “New Ancient Study,” pp. 147-159 (2005, Shinsensha). In these books, the author argues that the double-year calendar was also used in the “Odyssey” by Homer, the “Republic” by Plato, the “Rhetoric” by Aristotle, the “Cato Major: A Dialogue on Old Age” by Cicero, the “Shortness of Life” by Seneca, and “The Laws of Manu.”

(18) “Culture Tour with the Calendar” by Hiromitsu Nakamaki in Asahi Shimbun, Kansai area evening news on 16 April 2003.