

# Homogeneity and Regional Variability in Cultures of The Kofun Period

Hiroshi TSUDE

University of Osaka

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to describe the process of the development of cultural homogeneity within the Japanese Archipelago using recent archaeological data. I will focus on the Kofun Period, during which large keyhole-shaped tombs were built for kings and chieftains. The period began during the late third century A.D. and lasted until the end of the sixth century A.D.

This paper suggests that the Kofun Period was a critical period not only in the formation of the ancient state in Japan, but also in the development of cultural homogeneity within the Japanese Archipelago. I suggest that the Kofun Period can already be placed in the early state stage. This stage was followed by the Nara Period, during which the full-scale state based on the Ritsu-ryo system was established. The political rank order of the Kofun Period is reflected in the size and shape of "kofun", or mound tombs. Among these mound tombs, keyhole-shaped tombs with round rear mounds can be identified as the burials for the individuals of the highest status. Since this hierarchical order of mound tombs symbolizes the power relationship during the Kofun Period, I have suggested that the political system of this period can be called the "keyhole-shaped tomb system."

In this paper, I will first briefly describe the appearance of keyhole-shaped mound tombs, the emergence of the political system represented by these tombs, and the regional range that was incorporated in this political system. I will then demonstrate that the Kofun Period was a critical period in the process of the formation of the "Wajin society", the society which probably shared a common language, culture and ethnicity. For this purpose, the development of a common language and culture should be examined. Ideally, the development of common ethnicity among the members of this society should also be examined. In particular, the latter issue concerns when each local group began to affiliate themselves with the "Wajin society".

Unfortunately, for archaeologists, the issues of language and ethnicity are

difficult to examine directly. Accordingly, this paper will focus on the development of common characteristics in the life of the people during the Kofun Period. These common characteristics include both the practical aspect of people's lives, such as subsistence activities, clothing, food, and residence, and the ceremonial aspect such as agricultural services and rituals associated with funerals. In this paper, I will examine 1) to what extent the homogeneity of the Kofun culture was advanced in comparison to that of the Yayoi culture, and 2) to what extent the cultural homogeneity of the Kofun Period formed the foundation of the cultural homogeneity during and after the Nara Period. Through these examinations, I will demonstrate how this development of common lifeways and ritual customs was related to the political system represented by keyhole-shaped tombs.

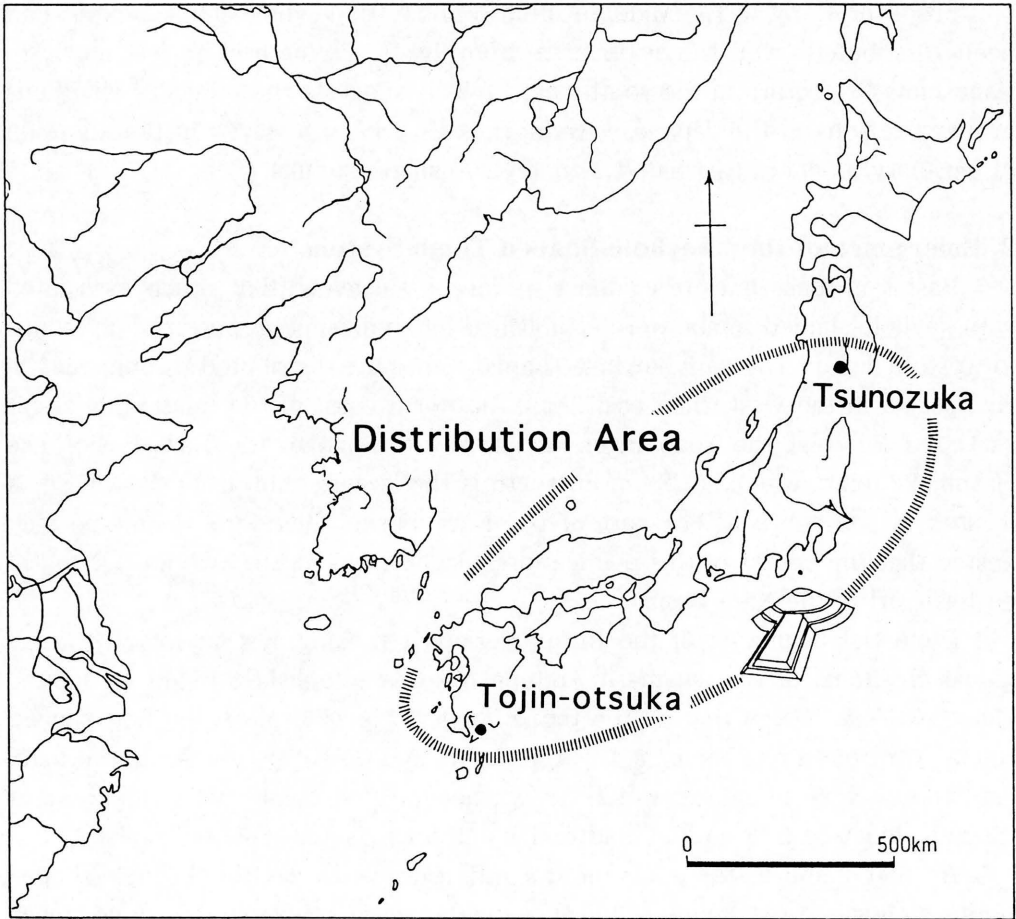
### **1. Appearance of Keyhole-Shaped Tombs**

The sudden appearance of large keyhole-shaped tombs has long been an important research topic among Japanese archaeologists. Recent research of mortuary customs in the Yayoi Period, which preceded the Kofun Period, has made it clear that large communal mound tombs for the elite family already existed during the Middle Yayoi Period. Moreover, it is noticed that, in the Late Yayoi Period, the burials for the chieftain were independently constructed away from the communal cemeteries.

Examination of mound tombs from the Late Yayoi Period has provided us with useful information regarding the origin of keyhole-shaped tombs. During the Late Yayoi Period, the elite chiefs had built large, isolated mounds. However, there was considerable regional variability in burial customs during the Late Yayoi Period. Mound tombs from the Yayoi Period can be classified into two types based on their outlines: round and square. Some of these mounds have long, narrow projections. Researchers suggest that these projections developed as ritual facilities for the chieftains who were buried in the center of the mounds. In parts of the Kibi region, which is facing the Inland Sea, round mounds with projections on both ends were common, whereas, in the Izumo region on the Japan Sea side, mounds were built in a square shape with projections at the four corners.

By the end of the Late Yayoi, round mounds with a projection built on one side only, which resemble the shape of a keyhole-shaped mound, appeared in various regions from Kibi to the Kinai region. This evidence supports the argument that the frontal part of the keyhole-shaped tombs developed from the long, narrow projections associated with Yayoi mound tombs.

The standardised keyhole-shape is thus thought to be an indigenous devel-



**Fig. 1** Distribution area of keyhole-shaped tombs.

opment. Nevertheless, standardized keyhole-shaped tombs can be clearly distinguished from Yayoi mound tombs, since keyhole-shaped tombs incorporate elements inspired by Chinese mortuary practices. These elements include construction of mounds in three-steps, an orientation of the burial with the head to the north, and a preference for vermilion. The introduction of these new elements from China was also accompanied by the common ritual practice associated with haniwa, or earthenware artifacts, which were placed around the perimeter of mound tombs. My assertion is that the introduction of new elements from China as well as the appearance of rituals associated with haniwa indicate that the chieftains in the area connecting the Kinai and Kibi regions formed the nucleus of power. This gave rise to the style of ritual associated with keyhole-shaped tombs.

From the Early to the Middle Kofun Periods, the keyhole-shaped tombs had been distributed over the wide area from Iwate Prefecture in the north to Kagoshima Prefecture in the south (fig. 1). This suggests that kings or chieftains in many regions in the Japanese Archipelago had been involved in the adoption of mortuary practices associated with keyhole-shaped tombs.

## 2. Emergence of the “Keyhole-Shaped Tomb System”

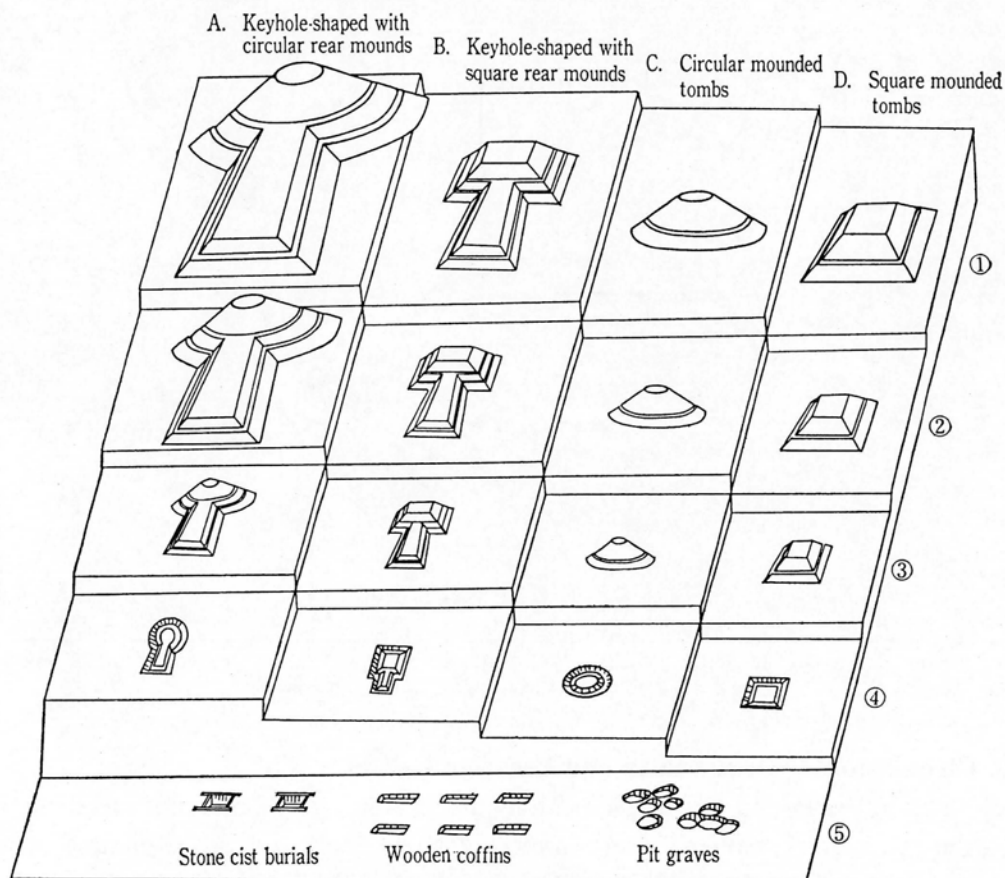
Based on these lines of evidence, it can be suggested that rituals associated with keyhole-shaped tombs were established by an alliance of powerful chieftains in western Japan. The early keyhole-shaped tombs are distributed throughout the Kibi region in the west, then east along the north coast of the Inland Sea as far as Osaka Bay and the Yodo River, and finally through to the Nara Basin. The Hashihaka tomb, which at 280 m in length is the largest tomb from this phase, is located in the southeastern part of the Nara Basin. Therefore, it can be suggested that the center of this political organization was located within the southeastern part of the Nara Basin.

From the beginning of the Kofun Period, a ranking system for all the regional chieftains of the Japanese Archipelago was established based on mound shape and size. Given that all the tombs longer than 200 m are keyhole-shaped tombs with round rear mounds, this type of mound probably represents the highest status. Next in status would be keyhole-shaped tombs with square rear mounds, followed by round mound tombs and finally square mound tombs.

As noted above, the roots of the difference between the keyhole-shaped tombs with round rear mounds and those with square rear mounds can be traced back to the differences of the Late Yayoi mound tombs constructed for chiefs. These differences seem to be based on the various styles of mounds that were prevailing in each region since the Late Yayoi, expressing descent group and alliance membership.

At the commencement of the Kofun Period, a significant change occurred; a new governing principle was introduced, which resulted in the unification of the different mound shapes that formerly indicated differences in descent or alliance. It should be stressed that the keyhole-shaped tombs with square rear mounds were used by powerful chieftains in the Early Kofun Period. However, this practice was abandoned during and after the Middle Kofun Periods except in Izumo and certain other regions. The status symbolized by the keyhole-shaped tombs with square rear mounds appears to have decreased over time.

Thus, the status of Kofun Period chieftains was represented by a combination of both tomb shape and tomb size. This can be seen in Fig. 2 where the horizontal line represents the hierarchy of shape and the vertical line that of size.



**Fig. 2** Ranking System of Burial Mound Shape

At the very bottom of the diagram are the simple wooden coffins and earthen pits where the individuals of lower status were buried. In ascending order, the next are the graves with low mounds associated with powerful farmers and people of the similar status.

With keyhole-shaped tombs at its center, the kofun system with its various shapes and sizes of mounds shows that chieftains from almost all regions of central Japan participated in the same political system. This system developed from the class society which arose at the end of the Yayoi Period and was based on a very finely-divided scale of rank ranging from great kings with massive tombs to the lower status individuals who had graves with no mounds. This system of political control with keyhole-shaped tombs at its apex should be called the "keyhole-shaped tomb system".

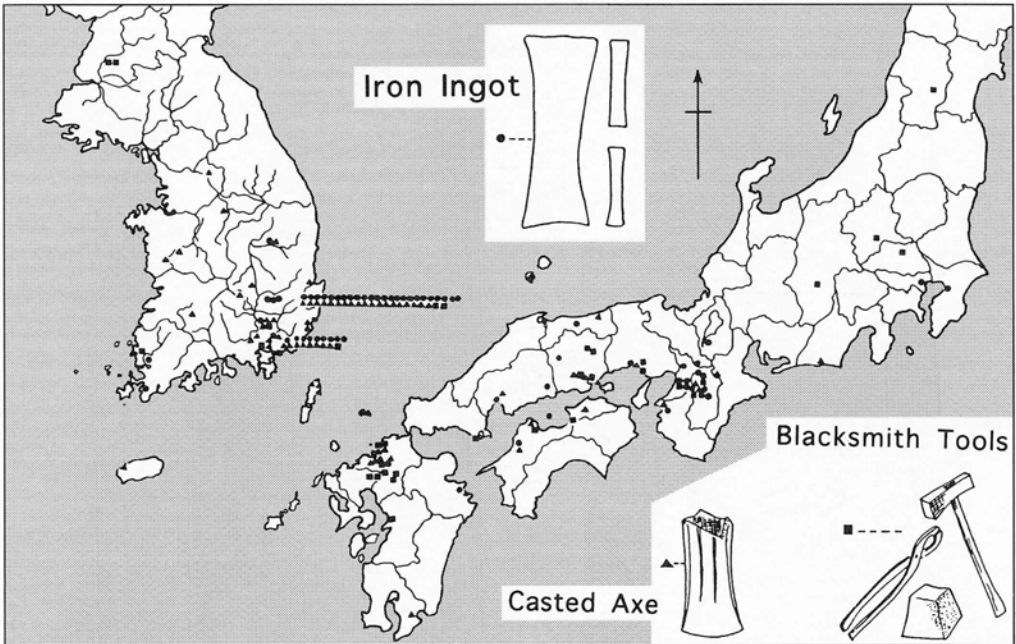


Fig. 3 Distribution of Iron Ingots in the 5th century.

### 3. Circulation of Commodity and Prestige Goods

The Kofun Period can be placed fully in the Iron Age. The end of the second century saw the complete disappearance of stone tools and the beginning of a full-scaled Iron Age. It may be possible that the smelting of iron within the Japanese Archipelago, which could guarantee the supply of iron implements, began from this time. However, at the present, the oldest archaeological evidence for the production of iron in smelting furnaces is the sixth century sites of Ozoike Minami in Okayama Prefecture and Enjo in Kyoto Prefecture. Even if it is provisionally granted that smelting was known in the archipelago from the second century, the simultaneous dependence on Korean sources of raw materials is suggested by accounts in the ancient Chinese chronicles. This may have been because of a need for high quality iron for weapons and armour.

Many iron ingots used as raw material have been excavated from fifth century tombs in Japan(Fig. 3). Chemical analyses have demonstrated that the iron originated in China or Korea. The weight of iron ingots was regulated, with one tenth of the ancient Chinese unit of chin (=220 g, or about half a pound) being used as the basic unit. The ingots were in turn used as a substitute for currency. If these ingots were distributed through the Japanese Archipelago to make tools as well as weapons, then we can be sure that any interruption in the supply of raw material would have had serious consequences. With this in mind, we can

see the economic background behind the Five Kings of Wa frequently dispatching envoys to the Chinese court seeking guarantees of political and military control over the Korean Peninsula. If the central polity in the Kinai controlled the distribution of iron, then that would explain the economic basis of its domination over the regional chieftains.

While the salt can be produced in any coastal location by heating sea water, salt-making in the Kofun Period was limited to several specific regions. This indicates a division of labour between regions, which may have been controlled by political means. The production of sue ware also began in the beginning of the fifth century. The production of sue ware was initially limited to several manufacturing sites such as the Sue Mura kilns in Osaka. However, by the sixth century, sue ware was being produced in various regions, and local distribution spheres emerged.

While both production and distribution of salt and sue ware developed along regional lines, during the fifth century, most supplies of some materials such as iron had to be imported from external sources outside Japan. These circumstances allowed the central polity in the Japanese Archipelago to control the importation and distribution of iron ingots from Korea. Thus, it is possible to verify the close links between the development and maintenance of political authority and control over the distribution of necessary commodities.

During the Kofun Period, the control and exchange of non-utilitarian items such as bronze mirrors, jasper bracelets and decorative swords also played a major role in the establishment of political contacts between chieftains. These items, which can be called prestige goods, served as reinforcement of political rank of provincial elites by the Kinai central authority. Great importance was attached to Chinese mirrors and Korean crowns, swords and horse trappings, since they were obtained from the emperors and kings of foreign land. Together with these Chinese and Korean items, bracelets made of green jasper and exotic shells were obtained from equally distant chiefs of the islands in the southern Japanese Archipelago. These items were valued not only for their intrinsic value as scarce items but also because they were a powerful way of displaying political and economic links with distant countries: Chinese mirrors indicated that authority had been recognized by the Emperor of China, and the shell and jasper indicated the allegiance with distant chiefs. Control of the distribution of both essential and luxury goods, therefore, was an important basis for the acquisition and maintenance of political power. During the beginning of the development of keyhole-shaped tombs, the central polity in the Kinai had obtained control over both of these types of exotic items.

#### **4. Development of Cultural Homogeneity in the Japanese Archipelago**

During the Kofun Period, cultural similarities between regions can be recognized in the archaeological remains of not only chiefs but also the individuals of lower status. The following cultural characteristics are commonly recognized from the southern half of the Tohoku region to the southern end of Kyushu.

First, the use of iron tools, as opposed to lithic tools, became common. Stone blades for agricultural and manufacturing tools were replaced by iron ones. This resulted in a significant improvement in productivity. At the same time, iron weapons and armour became more commonly used.

Second, the plan and structure of pit-dwellings became quite uniform throughout the above-mentioned regions. Pit-dwellings from the preceding Yayoi Period were characterized by considerable variability between regions. On the other hand, the majority of pit-dwellings from the Kofun Period have square plans, and the roofs were supported by four posts.

Third, the presence of cooking ovens became common. Pit-dwellings from the Palaeolithic to the Yayoi Periods normally had associated hearths. However, during the fifth century, cooking ovens were introduced into Japan by immigrants from the Korean Peninsula. This custom spread very quickly, and made the use of a hearth obsolete.

Fourth, the use of individual food vessels became common. During the Yayoi Period, large, communal serving vessels were commonly used. This change in food vessels must have occurred under the influences of the dining customs in China and Korea.

Fifth, common ritual practices, such as agricultural services and rituals associated with the cooking oven fire, appeared throughout the regions. This can be argued based on the common presence of ritual stone objects in the shapes of knives and comma-shaped beads. Although the ritual ceremony itself is difficult to reconstruct, it seems very likely that the rituals practiced in these regions shared some common characteristics.

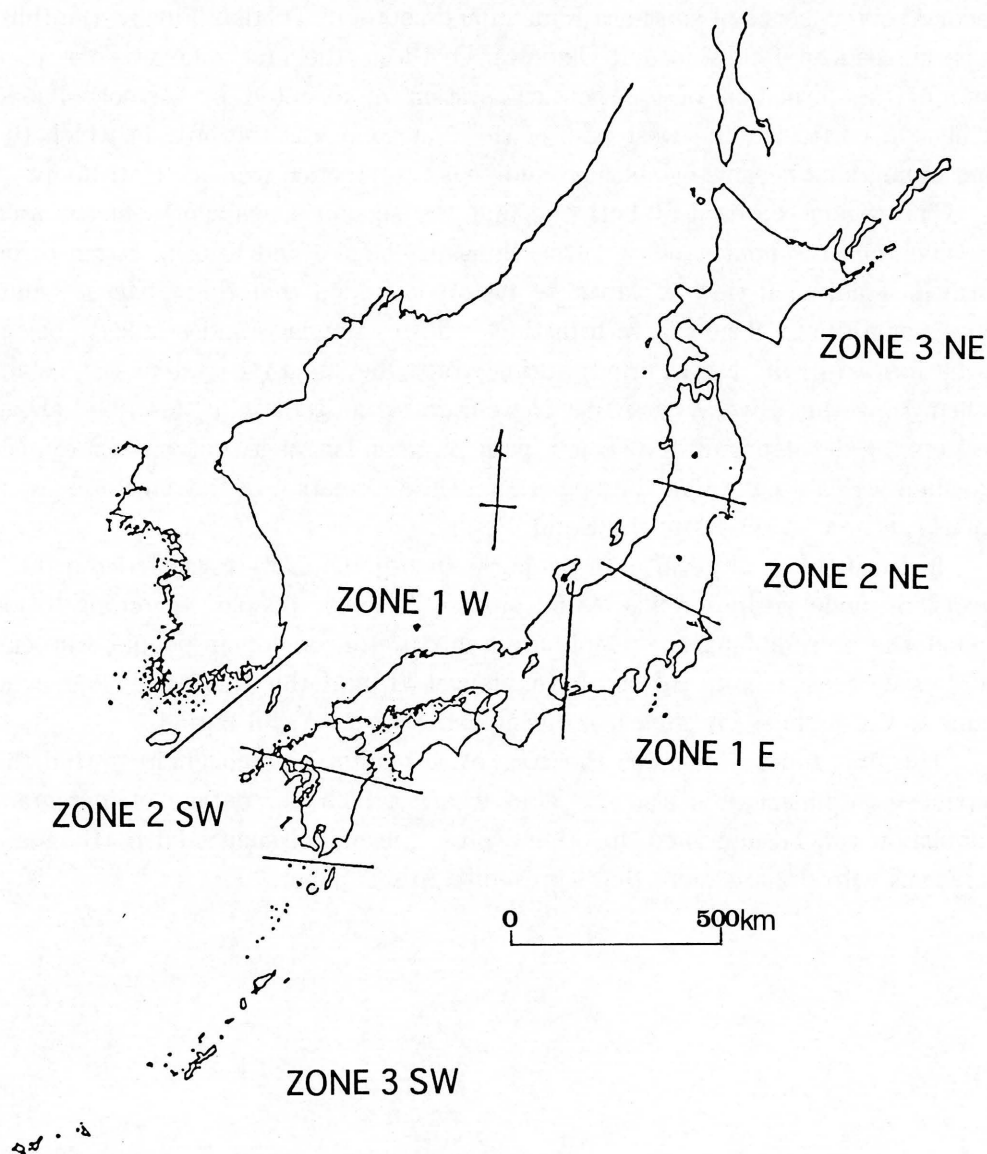
In addition to the archaeological evidence as described above, written documents also support my hypothesis that the cultural uniformity within the Japanese Archipelago began to be formed during this period. Historical documents such as "Nihon shoki" and "Kojiki", both of which were compiled during the eighth century, suggest that homogeneity began to be formed in various aspects of cultures including religion, performing arts, and language.

#### **5. Conclusion**

The cultural homogeneity as described above can be recognized in Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu. Cultures in Hokkaido and Ryukyu Islands, on the other



hand, were quite different from those in Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu. It is very important to note that keyhole-shaped tombs have not been found in Hokkaido and Ryukyu. It suggests that these two regions were not part of the political system represented by the keyhole-shaped tombs. It also means that these two regions were excluded from the distribution system described above. As a result, the subsistence practice in these two regions remained one of hunting and gath-



**Fig. 4** Six cultural zones in the Kofun period.

ering, which resulted in different lifeways and religious systems from the rest of the Japanese Archipelago. The Kofun Period was the time when these two different lifeways began to diverge from each other.

Based on the above argument, the Japanese Archipelago during the Kofun Period can be divided into three cultural zones based on the degree of cultural homogeneity (fig. 4). The first zone, which can be subdivided into the east and west parts, covers from the northern part of Kyushu to the Kanto region. The second zone consists of southern Kyushu and southern Tohoku. Finally, the third zone consists of Hokkaido and Okinawa. Of these, the first zone was the core area of the formation of the political system represented by keyhole-shaped tombs. In particular, the west part of the first zone was the area in which the first immigrants became established and began to practice wet rice cultivation.

The regions covered by both the first and second zones represent the area in which cultural homogeneity within Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu began to be formed. Traditional view of Japanese history assumed that the Japanese "min-zoku", or a group of people with distinct culture, language and ethnicity, began to be formed in the Nara Period, during which the Ritsu-ryo system was established. However, if we assume that the cultural homogeneity as described above reflects the development of a society with common language, culture and ethnicity, then we can argue that the beginning of the formation of the Japanese "min-zoku" can be traced back to the Kofun Period.

In the field of physical anthropology, Kazuro Hanihara suggested the dual-structure model of the origins of the present Japanese people. According to his model, the present Japanese people are a mixture of the Jomon people, who can be classified as a group of southern Mongoloid, and the Neo Mongoloid, who came to the Japanese Archipelago during and after the Yayoi Period.

The first zone, which was the core of the cultural homogeneity within the Japanese Archipelago, is also the area where a high percentage of immigrant population can be identified. In other words, the model suggested by Hanihara conforms with the argument that I presented in this paper.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Prof. Junko Habu for her kind comments on the earlier version of this paper. Thanks are also due to Prof. Keichi Omoto for his organizing efforts of the conference and editing work of this proceedings.

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