A Review of the Theory of Production Revolution in the Fifteenth Century

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We can confirm that mass production, supported by process streamlining and technological innovation, started first in the ceramics, stone and wood working, and coinage sectors, as well as other sectors including agriculture and ironmaking, in the late 14th and 15th centuries. There seem to have been at least two reasons for this inclination towards mass production. First, the conventional development approach had reached a certain level of maturity by the beginning of the 14th century, which is likely to have expanded workforce and product demand and resulted in a need to scale up development, at least in the agricultural sector. Second, due to the fall of the Kamakura Shogunate and the civil war between the Northern and Southern Dynasties, people who produced and sold products to vassals needed to open up wider markets to reach alternative customers, such as rural elites and urban residents, and therefore started the mass production of low-priced goods that were affordable to these new customers.

Then, such production bases mushroomed in various regions to meet the demands of a wide range of consumers, increasing production volumes, activating logistics, and expanding economies. Coupled with the low dependence of Court nobles and samurai on urban lords, this resulted in the establishment of distribution networks independent from Kyōto and Kamakura, home to Court nobles and samurai, and the development of spatially extensive regional economies. The restructuring of logistics led to the decline of some port towns and the reshuffle of the trader hierarchy. Moreover, the development of agricultural land accelerated the restructuring of rural society and the relocation of villages. In addition to these social and economic changes, the development of regional economies promoted the development of regional societies, based on which regional powers rose. Provincial military governors grew into regional powers, which decreased loyalty to the Muromachi Shogunate and eventually triggered the Ōnin War. After the war, warlords rose as regional powers closely associated with local societies/economies. Their rivalries established a new order of society and politics in early modern Japan. Thus, the technological innovation across different sectors is fit to be called as the “production revolution” as it ended the medieval period and ushered in the early modern period.

Key words: fifteenth-century production revolution, process streamlining and intensification, mass production, regional distribution zones, the Ōnin war