

## HISTORICAL STUDY OF SITTING IN JAPAN: WITH "SEIZA" AS MAIN TOPIC

Yusei Tazaki

*Mukogawa Women's University, Japan*

**Keywords:** sitting, Seiza, Japan, floor, tatami, tea ceremony, manner, national identity

### 1. Prologue

Nowadays, we live sitting on chairs almost all day long in Japan. In individual houses, we sometimes relax on tatami mats in a traditional Japanese room or on a carpet over a hard-surfaced floor, but this is rarely done outside of the house. Even outdoors, adults rarely sit on the ground directly or squat down for a while. The modern western living style of sitting on chairs, which was introduced radically in the Meiji Period, has become pervasive. One way in which Japan still differs is that we take off shoes before entering the house. Such apparent westernization has already been completed in Japan, and the westernized life in Japanese style has been popular for young generation in the western countries for these years. However, in recent globalization, some Japanese characters have become skeletonized and lost for most Japanese. "Seiza" or sitting on one's heels, which has been a representative Japanese characteristic, is no longer very popular particularly for the younger generations.

In this study, I historically examine the sitting postures in Japan to reflect on the ontological problematics concerning the dwelling.

### 2. Various types of sitting found in the Japanese picture scrolls

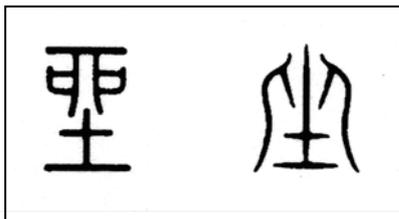


Fig. 1-a (right), 1-b (left): ancient Chinese characters for sitting

In Japan today, we use generally 座 as the Chinese character that means sitting, but properly this character was presented as 坐. In strict usage, 坐 means the action of sitting and 座 is the sitting place. When we decompose this older 坐 into three parts as 人+人+土, it is found that this Chinese character originally signified two persons sitting face to face on the ground (Fig. 1-a). After that, it also came to mean two persons sitting on a bench (Fig. 1-b).<sup>1</sup> It seems that in ancient China, 坐 primarily meant sitting on the ground and afterwards obtained the meaning of sitting on chairs, which were brought to China by invading northern mounted nomads.<sup>2</sup>

As clues for reflection on sitting in ancient Japan, there exist some documents such as the diaries of aristocrats and priests, many statues and pictures such as clay figures called "Haniwa", and Buddhist images or portraits. In particular, some picture scrolls drawn from the

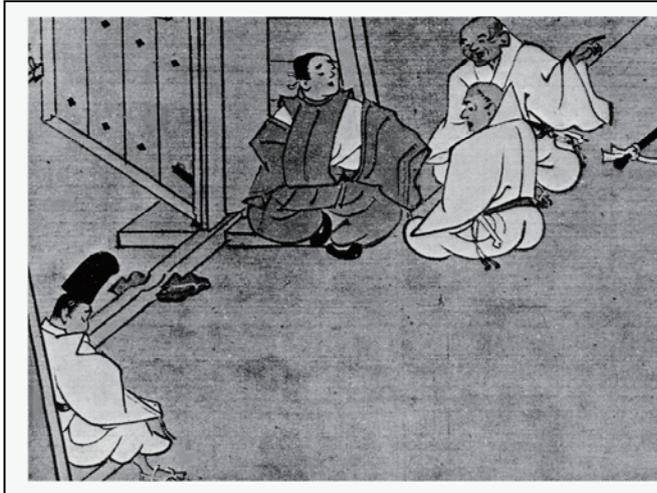


Fig. 2-a Sitting people in front of gate  
("Kasuga-Gongen-Reikenki")



Fig. 2-b Sitting warriors on the ground  
("Kitanotenjin-Engi")

end of the Heian Period until the Kamakura Period illustrate concretely the living situations of the peoples of those days. In the 12th century, in the areas around Kyoto, both the governing classes and the common people seemed to live in comfort independently without formal customs. Concerning sitting, according to Tsuneichi Miyamoto,<sup>3</sup> some aristocrats and samurai warriors sat down naturally in the "Agura" position on bare ground. They occupied raised-floor houses but didn't have a disdain for the soil and felt safe on natural ground. For the common people, who generally inhabited small, earthen-floor dwellings and walked around with bare feet, the soil and ground seemed to be more familiar than for modern people. It seems that the soil adhering to their clothes and the soles of their foot was not considered dirty. When they couldn't sit on the ground on a rainy day, they squatted to rest temporarily.<sup>4</sup> Such squat sitting is found in many picture scrolls as the defecation posture. This defecation posture has been popular in Japan until recently, but with the spread of western-style toilets, it has become a hard posture for modern Japanese to maintain.



Fig. 3-a Defecation posture in squatting<sup>5</sup>  
("Gaki-Zousi")



Fig. 3-b Squatting in the courtyard  
("Shigisan-Engi")

We could find the "Seiza" style in various scenes of the picture scrolls. "Seiza" was the posture for prayer on the ground and later, at ceremonies, the attendants sat in "Seiza" to



Fig. 4-a Sitting for prayer  
("Kasuga-Gongen-Reikenki")

Fig. 4-b Sitting attendants at ceremony  
("Ippen-Shonin-Eden")

show respect. In the picture scrolls, there exist some scenes of carrying tatami mats, which were a sort of floor cushion for "Seiza". Thus, the Japanese have adapted their sitting styles according to various life situations. Obviously, we could discover such variety of sitting styles under the influence of natural and cultural climates of each region not only in Japan but all over the world.

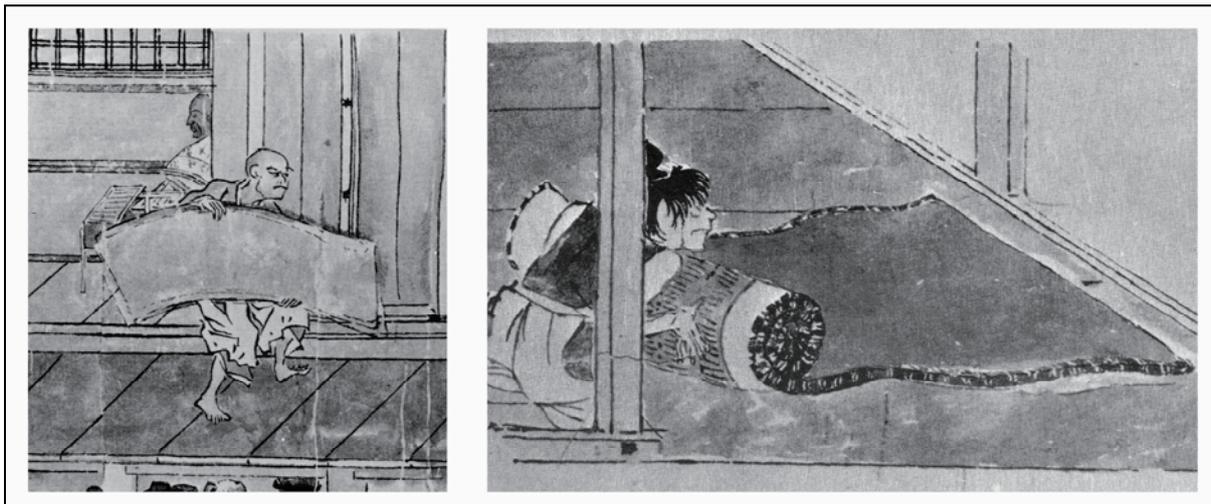


Fig. 5-a Carrying tatami mat  
("Ippen-Shonin-Eden")

Fig. 5-b Rolling up tatami mat for carrying  
("Kitanotenjin-Engi")

### 3. Diversity of "Seiza" sitting

Koichi Satoh, who established the Department of Architecture at Waseda University, was one of the groundbreakers in architecture education for women at the Japan Women's University and others. He also led the conservation movement of traditional houses in cooperation with Kunio Yanagida and Wajiro Kon. In "Ars Complete Lectures of Architecture" he took charge of writing the categories on "History of Western Architecture" and "Residential Architecture". From this fact, we could find that Koichi Satoh has held the point of view of the ordinary citizen as the pioneer of female education, and he had gained a deeper interest on



Fig. 6-a "Kikyo" for baby<sup>6</sup>

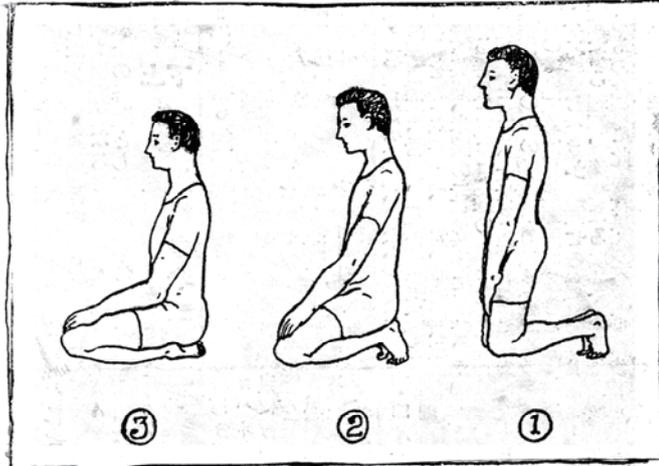


Fig. 6-b Three types of "Kiza" (③: "Seiza")<sup>7</sup>

the concrete aspects of daily life as the background of his architectural studies on buildings, particularly on the house. His article "Transition of Sitting Styles"<sup>8</sup> shows well his attitude on architecture.

He classified our human posture into three types: "standing", "sitting" and "lying". He gave a brief account of these postures in which standing represents motion, lying represents rest and sitting, between standing and lying, is the posture for doing something with little movement. Such sitting posture is divided into two types: sitting on the floor and sitting on a raised seat or a chair. Yoshito Harada enumerated "Seiza" (sitting straight), "Kikyo" (sitting with one's legs stretched), "Sonkyo" (squatting) and "Fuza" (cross-legged sitting), and this "Seiza" is included within "Kiza" (sitting on one's heels with the legs bent) in a broad sense. "Seiza" in Japanese literally means proper sitting or correct sitting, but in fact it is quite unnatural and causes physical pain of the legs and knees. On the contrary, "Kikyo" is the first sitting position for a baby and is the most natural posture for the human body (Fig. 6-a).

Tatsukichi Irisawa wrote in his essay<sup>9</sup> on Japanese sitting that "Seiza" was counted among the strange customs in the world by foreigners, similar to Chinese foot-binding and Indian nose-rings. In his opinion, in the past, while the master boldly sat cross-legged in the "Agura" position, the servant sat on his heels in order to stand up quickly to respond to the master's orders. After this opinion, Koichi Satoh divided this sitting on one's heels into three types, and these sitting types seem to be more active than other sitting postures like "Kikyo" and "Agura", which are difficult to stand up from (Fig. 6-b).

If sitting is the opposite of standing as Tatsukichi Irisawa explained, then "Kiza" and "Seiza" seem to be preparatory postures for standing up and are only temporary positions.

In Japanese, the word for sitting is closely related to the word for existing (for human beings), and the word for standing is also often used with the word for existing.<sup>10</sup> For Japanese, sitting on one's heels may be the representative posture under the relation to standing.

#### 4. "Seiza" as a compelled manner in education in the modern period

As mentioned, such sitting on one's heels as "Seiza" was found early in the Heian Period, and this posture became the essential manner for the tea ceremony in Japan. However, this word "Seiza" was not published in the first modern Japanese dictionary "Genkai" in Meiji 22 (1889).<sup>11</sup> Nowadays, in the most popular dictionary "Kojien", it is explained briefly as "to sit in a proper posture" without any descriptions about the exact pose. "Seiza" is a matter of

common sense with no need of explanation as to only one correct posture, we believe. In the first half of the Meiji Period, the sitting of "Seiza" style was already popular, but it didn't have the name "Seiza" itself.

Therefore, there were various sitting postures in daily life, and "Seiza" was a sitting type for ceremony, prayer and respect. It's not a posture for relaxation. However, in Japan eating has been regarded as a sort of ceremony. Therefore, it has been believed that, when we take a meal, we should sit in "Seiza" as with the posture for ceremony, prayer or respect. Undoubtedly, we sit in "Seiza" on the occasion of sutra-chanting at the temple or at home. The same type of sitting can be found at places of prayer almost all over the world. For example Moslems pray to Allah sitting in "Seiza" style wherever they are at the worship time and Christians kneel in prayer in the church. I could be persuaded that such "Seiza" is a special posture for prayer or at ceremonies, but unconvinced that sitting in "Seiza" is a distinctive posture of the Japanese and "Seiza" is the correct sitting that the Chinese characters of its name mean to the letter.

It is widely known that the diffusion of sitting in "Seiza" is bound with the development of the tea ceremony. Still, "Seiza" was not indispensable for early tea drinking and, after the perfection of the tea ceremony by Sen Rikyu, sitting in "Seiza" became a requirement in the tea ceremony in order to guarantee the religious significance of Zen sect. As Isao Kumakura indicated, the posture for the tea ceremony changed from "Agura" to "Seiza"<sup>12</sup> in the early stages of the tea ceremony in Japan, and drinking tea was for relieving exhaustion and dispelling sleepiness in Zen training. Initially, the practice was not so severe, but the tea ceremony as an ascetic practice of Zen developed into a strict religion and adopted this "Seiza" with quite a bit of physical pain. The religious institutionalization of the tea ceremony required the strict "Seiza" and gave birth to the ascetic architectural space known as the "Koma", or the small austere tearoom. Its physical narrowness seems to give a *raison d'être* to a condensed posture of "Seiza" called "Tanza", or upright sitting.

In the Edo Period, as society became stable and various formalities were respected, "Seiza" was formally considered an important manner even in civic life in some cities particularly. However, in the countryside of Japan, there survived various other sitting postures on the earthen floor and so on.

Such unnatural "Seiza" seemed to be very effective for maintaining the newly established social institutions. At the beginning of the Meiji Period, the newly established government modeled a lot of modern political systems after those of powerful western countries. On the other hand, the government attached importance to schooling in order to create a national identity of modern Japan that the entire Japanese people should commonly possess. In schools, the enlightenment of "Seiza" was advanced, and this sitting posture was first named "Seiza" or correct sitting posture. In the Meiji Period, before the name "Seiza" had been popularized, Soseki Natsume, in his novels, expressed this sitting posture as sitting respectfully.<sup>13</sup> Thus, "Seiza" was not common in the daily life of ordinary people. As modernization progressed and Japan came to be seen as an emerging power by the Japanese people themselves, the name "Seiza" was acknowledged as the representative sitting posture for Japanese.

To establish the nation of Japan, the Meiji government utilized such "Seiza" politically. For the purpose of establishing the national identity of Japan, "Seiza", which looked most unnatural and curious to visiting foreigners, was made the representative Japanese sitting posture with the aid of education as in the Ogasawara School of Etiquette. The government, to emphasize the individuality of Japan, intentionally adopted this characteristic posture that surprised foreigners because of its unnaturalness. From foreigners and, similarly from Japanese people, the government hid the existence of other sitting postures on the earthen floor, which remained in the countryside, to fix a uniform image of Japan. All over Japan,

"Seiza" has spread in the usual settings, but there have sporadically remained various other sitting postures.

## 5. Conclusion and development

In this study, I could confirm that there have existed many types of sitting on floors or in chairs in Japan from ancient time to today, though it is believed that only "Seiza" has been the representative sitting posture for a long time. "Seiza" is one of the many types of sitting, and after the Meiji Period its name was used commonly. Formerly our ancestors sat on the ground immediately to relax and enjoy the warmth of the earth in each posture as "Agura" or "Kikyo" even in working. Each sitting posture has been synthetically influenced by living circumstances and particularly the sitting is linked with the structure and materials of the house floor. With the diffusion of the raised-floor and "Tatami" mat, we have detached from the mother earth and asked for the social manners for the sitting posture too. In these days tatami are disappearing from houses, and we rarely sit in "Seiza" on tatami mats. Some western furniture like chairs, tables and beds are necessities for modern daily life, but we habitually take off the shoes when entering houses as a matter of course. Under such a mix of Japanese and western traditions, we should reflect fundamentally on the sitting and living styles in Japan from a wider point of view. To that end, I plan next to research sitting postures of the many countries along the Silk Road.

## Notes

1. Fig. 1-a is the older type called "Kobun" found in "Setsumon" and Fig. 1-b is "Shoten" instituted by Qin Shi Huang or first emperor of unified China as the simplified "Daiten" character.
2. Concerning the origin of Chinese chairs, see Toyohachi Fujita, On the old Chinese chair "Kosho", The Journal of the Research Department of the Toyo Bunko, Vol.12, No.4, 1922.
3. Tsuneichi Miyamoto as a folklorist emphasized variously the liberal and magnanimous life of the Japanese common people in the middle ages in his numerous literary works. Cf. T. Miyamoto, Life history of the Japanese common people found in the picture scrolls, 1981.
4. French sociologist and ethnologist Marcel Mauss indicated, from his original point of view of the techniques of the body, that French soldiers, who couldn't squat down in the rain, were inferior to Australian soldiers. cf. M.Mauss, Sociology and Anthropology, 1968. See Hidemasa Yatabe, Sitting Styles of Japanese, 2011.
5. "Gaki-Zousi" in Kamakura Period. Two women and a child squatted in a field with Japanese wooden sandals for defecation.
- 6., 7., 8. Koichi Satoh, Transition of Sitting Styles, Ars Complete Lectures of Architecture, Vol. 1, 1927 and Vol. 2, 1928. This article was republished in Complete Works of Koichi Satoh, 1941.
9. Tatsukichi Irisawa, On the Sitting Styles of Japanese, Journal of Historical Science, Vol.31, No.8, 1920.
10. cf. Yoshiyuki Morita, Concise Dictionary for brushing up on Japanese, Volume on Verbs, 1988.
11. cf. Rie Kawamoto, Michikazu Nakamura, Origin of Seiza : Sitting-Up Straight in Japan, Bulletin of Tokyo Kasei Gakuin University, Vol.39, 1999.
12. Isao Kumakura, Cha-no-Yu : Mind and Form of Wabi-Cha, 1977. In this book, he explained that the posture at the tea party changed from "Agura" to "Seiza" with some literal documents on the Tea ceremony.
13. cf. Munetetsu Tei, Seiza and Japanese, 2009.