substitutions per site year^{-1}, which was similar to the rate for *Hepatitis C virus* (Ina *et al.*, 1994; Tanaka *et al.*, 2002). When we used $0{\cdot}84 \times 10^{-3}$ nucleotide substitutions per site year^{-1}, which was based on all 48 sequences (24 genotype 3 and 24 genotype 4), the time of the most recent common ancestor of Japan-indigenous genotype 3 was estimated to be in the 1900s (95 % confidence interval, 1902–1917) and that of genotype 4 was approximately in the 1880s (1881–1898) (Fig. 1).

Based on the phylogenetic tree, the effective number of HEV infections through time, $N(t)$, was analysed by using a skyline plot for the Japan-indigenous HEV strains. The parameters for several models in GENIE v3.5 were examined (see Supplementary Table S2, available in JGV Online). Time t was then transformed to year by using the constant rate ($0{\cdot}84 \times 10^{-3}$ nucleotide substitutions per site year^{-1}), assuming the collecting time to be the present. Fig. 3 shows the skyline plots and population growth for the HEV strains, according to a specific demographic model in GENIE v3.5 with three parameters and a piecewise-expansion growth model, which was evaluated by likelihood-ratio testing (Ina *et al.*, 1994; Lemey *et al.*, 2003; Pybus *et al.*, 2003; Tanaka *et al.*, 2005). Our estimates of the effective numbers of HEV infections showed a transition from constant size to exponential growth in the 1920s (95 % confidence interval, 1916–1930) among the genotype 3 population (Fig. 3a), whereas the rapid exponential growth among the genotype 4 population was dated in the 1980s (1978–1990) (Fig. 3b).

Because the natural course of HEV infection in human beings and animals is usually transient, not persistent as in the cases of hepatitis B and C viruses, it is almost impossible to estimate the molecular-evolutionary rate of HEV by using serial samples from an individual host. However, even though HEV does not persist in individual hosts, it could persist in the community by hopping from host to host successively. The first study attempting to estimate the number of synonymous mutations per synonymous site (k_s) of *Hepatitis A virus* (HAV) was reported by Sánchez *et al.*

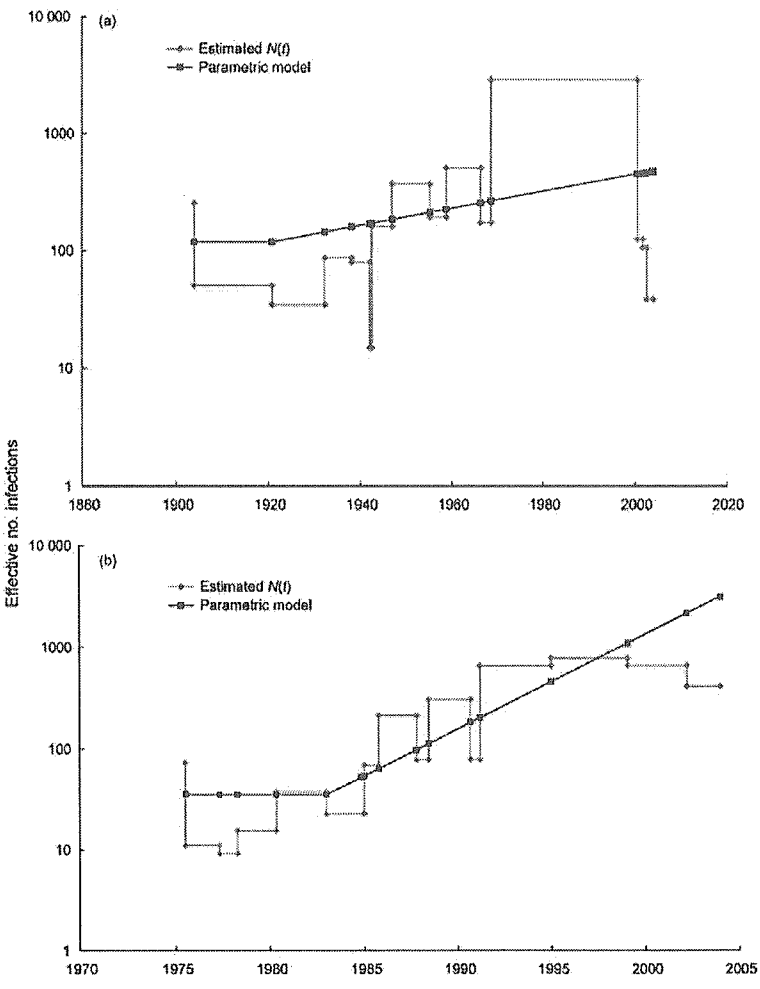

Fig. 3. ML estimates of $N(t)$ on the effective number of (a) HEV genotype 3 and (b) HEV genotype 4 infections in Japan. The parametric model is indicated by the grey line and stepwise plots by the black line, which represent corresponding non-parametric estimates of $N(t)$ (number as a function of time). Genetic distances have been transformed into a time scale of years by using estimates of the molecular clock in the partial RNA polymerase region of HEV.

(2003). The estimated k_s values from HAV strains isolated from a clam-associated outbreak varied from 0·038 for VP0 to 0·29 for VP1. Similarly, we estimated the evolutionary rate of HEV by using Japan-indigenous genotype 3 and genotype 4 strains isolated over time. The rate was estimated to be approximately $0{\cdot}8 \times 10^{-3}$ nucleotide substitutions per site year^{-1} by two independent methods, which was around half of our previously estimated rate (Takahashi *et al.*, 2004b). One of the reasons is that the molecular-evolutionary rate would depend on estimated genes; the previous report (Takahashi *et al.*, 2004b) used complete sequences, whereas this study used only RNA polymerase sequences. Another reason is that the previous extrapolation of substitution rate on pairwise (direct) comparisons can give overestimates of the molecular clock and hence divergent times of HEV species, as reported previously (Ina *et al.*, 1994). Based on the molecular clock, we traced the demographic history of HEV in Japan and the indigenization time was suggested to be similar (approx. 1900), but the spread time was quite different, between HEV genotypes 3 and 4 (1920s versus 1980s). Interestingly, in addition, the evolutionary growth of genotype 3 has been quite slow since the 1920s, whereas genotype 4 strains have spread rapidly in Sapporo since the 1980s.

Zoonosis has been implicated in HEV transmission. The first animal strain of HEV to be isolated and characterized was a swine HEV from a pig in the USA in 1997 (Meng *et al.*, 1997). Since then, many swine HEV strains, which exhibit extensive genetic heterogeneity, have been identified worldwide and shown to be genetically related closely to strains of human HEV (Chandler *et al.*, 1999; Hsieh *et al.*, 1999; Huang *et al.*, 2002; Okamoto *et al.*, 2001; Wang *et al.*, 2002). Recent findings suggested an interspecies HEV transmission between boar and deer in their wild life (Takahashi *et al.*, 2004a) and that both animals might serve as an infection source for human beings. More recently, wild mongoose was newly added to the list of HEV-reservoir animals in Japan (Nakamura *et al.*, 2006). Notwithstanding the importance of these wild animals, pigs for food must be the major reservoirs of HEV: a recent Japanese study indicated that anti-HEV antibodies were detected in 1448 (58 %) of 2500 pigs from 2 to 6 months of age at 25 commercial swine farms in Japan (Takahashi *et al.*, 2003). The importance of transmission of HEV from pigs to humans was further supported by a recent field study in Indonesia: Muslim people, for whom it is a taboo to eat or contact pigs, were significantly less frequently positive for anti-HEV than Hindu people (2·0 vs 20 %) (Surya *et al.*, 2005).

Our molecular-evolutionary analyses suggested that HEV entered Japan around 1900. If we have traced the origin of Japan-indigenous HEV correctly back to about 100 years ago, what happened at that time in relevance to HEV's indigenization? Several kinds of Yorkshire pig were imported for the first time in the history of Japan from the UK in 1900, by the Japanese government's policy to introduce excellent domestic animals for food in Western countries to Japan, as a measure to nutritionally strengthen the people (especially soldiers) of this formerly vegetarian country. Since then, the Yorkshire pigs have been propagated in Japan and, in the 1930s, thousands of pigs were reported all over Japan (http://okayama.lin.go.jp/history/2-3-1-2.htm), suggesting that the domestic spread of HEV might have been associated with the popularization of pigs for food in Japan. Indeed, a previous phylogenetic analysis of a 304 bp nucleotide sequence (ORF2) obtained from the two UK swine strains showed a close relationship with Japanese swine strains in genotype 3 (Banks *et al.*, 2004), indicating that Japanese genotype 3 may have been imported from the UK. On the other hand, Japanese genotype 4 strains were related phylogenetically to Asian strains in Taiwan and China.As the HEV found in wild boars living in the Iriomote Island, near Taiwan, was of genotype 4 (unpublished results), the source of Japanese genotype 4 might be from Taiwan or the mainland of China. Note that a phylogenetic analysis showed that the Japanese swine and human HEV strains segregated into four clusters [three genotype 3 clusters (one major Japanese and two minor clusters) and one genotype 4 cluster], with the highest nucleotide identity being 94·4–100 % between swine and human strains in each cluster (Takahashi *et al.*, 2003), suggesting that swine have served as one of the most important reservoirs for HEV to be transmitted to humans. The possible risk factor for transmission of HEV was to have eaten uncooked or undercooked pig liver and/or intestine 1–2 months before the onset of hepatitis E in Hokkaido, Japan (Mizuo *et al.*, 2005). Such eating habits, which are particularly unique to those living in Hokkaido (Sapporo is one of the big cities there) in recent decades, might be one of the reasons that HEV has been widespread in this area since 1990, as supported by our molecular-evolutionary analyses in this study.

In conclusion, based on our present data, the indigenization and domestic spread of HEV in Japan are proposed to have been associated with the importation and popularization of pigs for food in Japan. However, there still remains a possibility of different scenarios. Another animal(s) might have carried the virus to Japan: for example, mongoose was imported from India to Japan in 1910 (Nakamura *et al.*, 2006).

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