THE JAPANESE ELITE’S PERCEPTION OF FOREIGN COUNTRIES IN THE 18TH CENTURY

KIM, KYOUNG HEE
HANKUK UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN STUDIES, SOUTH KOREA
MINERVA COLLEGE.
Kim Kyoung-hee
Minerva College
Hankuk University of Foreign Studies,
South Korea.

The Japanese Elite’s Perception of Foreign Countries in the 18th Century

Synopsis:

The study aims to focus on an 18th century intellectuals, Ueda Akinari, and examine his encounters with Joseon and foreign countries. Furthermore, to examine his recognition on his own country and foreign countries, including Joseon, through the “sun-god debate” that caused between the Motoori Norinaga.
The Japanese Elite’s Perception of Foreign Countries in the 18th Century

Kyoung-Hee Kim

1. Introduction

Previous studies on the history of modern literature in Korea and Japan have focused on the history of exchange between Korea and China and the exchange between Japan and China; consequently, the relationship between Joseon and Japan has been neglected. Therefore, it is deemed necessary to examine the trend of international exchanges in East Asia by re-illuminating the influential relationship between Joseon and Japan in the study of early modern Japan. To this end, the present study aims to focus on an 18th century intellectual, Ueda Akinari (1734–1809), and examine his encounters with Joseon and foreign countries. Furthermore, this paper intends to examine his opinions on his own country and foreign countries, including Joseon, through the “sun-god debate” he participated in with Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801).

2. Akinari’s Perception of Joseon

In Ueda Akinari’s life, he encountered tonginsa (government delegates) from Joseon on two occasions. Both encounters occurred during the late Joseon Dynasty, the first with Joseon...
Tongsinsa in 1748 and the second with a group of Joseon Tongsinsa in 1763. Relevant records of these meetings are documented in “Tandai Shoshinroku” (1808), a book of essays Akinari wrote during his later years. The following is a citation from the 61st column:

As there is a Haiku titled “At a year-end party where meeting toujin (Chinese) twice is considered an important occurrence,” I have seen Joseon people twice and am not likely to meet them three times in my life. I was about fifteen and thirty. When I called Joseon people toujin (Chinese), Confucian scholars scoldingly corrected me to call them karabito (Joseon people). When I heard that a Joseon tongsinsa group was in Osaka Tsumuramido (the name of the temple in Osaka), I visited them for a short time to have a conversation in writing through the exchange of Chinese poems.

The meaning of the Haiku that Akinari quoted — “At a year-end party where meeting toujin (meaning of Chinese) twice is considered to be an important event” — means that, at a year-end party, people tend to mention the most pleasant and congratulable events that had happened to them during the past year. On one occasion, someone boasted about meeting Joseon tongsinsa (who are hard to meet even once) twice. As a result, this shows that Japanese people during the Edo era apparently regarded meeting tongsinsa as a considerably delightful event. In the following section of the passage, Akinari says that he also met Joseon tongsinsa twice, which was an important occurrence, and he speculates that he will not have the opportunity to meet them three times in his life. In this Haiku, we can see that Japanese people during his time called Joseon people “toujin” (meaning of Chinese). The next sentence describes what happened when Akinari called Joseon people “toujin;” Confucian scholars rebuked him, instructing him that he should refer to them as “karabito” (meaning of Joseon people). This citation shows that “toujin” was a common term used by Japanese during the Edo era in reference to Joseon people.2

We shall further investigate this use of language by analyzing what Joseon Tongsinsa recorded.

* Hankuk Univ. of Foreign Studies

1. This book contains Akinari’s free writings concerning his travel experiences, recollections, academic and historical research, his opinions on Confucianism and Buddhism, etc. The cited section is from “Tandai Syosinroku” (Ueda, Akinari. Ueda, Akinari syu. Edited by Nakamura, Yukihiko. 56 vols. Iwanami Syoten, 1959)

“HaeYuRok” (1719 Joseon Writer’s Travelogue of Japan), a journal written by a Jesulguan (a government technical writer) named Shin Yu-Han (1681–1752), who accompanied Tongsinsa Nam Tae-gi (1699–1763) and Hong Chi-jung (1667–1732) in 1719, holds relevant content.

Woo Sam-dong said, “That is correct. However, many ethnic groups always call us ‘wajin,’ and this is not what we want.” Then I answered, “It has been so long since your country was named ‘Wa.’ What grievance do you have?” He replied, “According to Chinese history, ‘Wa’ has already been changed to Nippon (Japan), so it is proper for you to instruct your servants to call us Nihonjin (Japanese)” I asked him again, “You call us toujin (Chinese) and write ‘Toujin’s Notebook’ on our notebooks. What is the meaning of this?” Then, Woo Sam-dong replied, “Our government ordered us to refer to you as ‘maroudo (Guest)’ or ‘Chosŏnjin (Joseon people),’ but we call your people toujin because we admire your customs, which are similar to Chinese culture.”

“Woo Sam-dong” was the Korean name for Ahmenomori Hooohsyu (1668–1755), who, as a government officer in charge of foreign affairs in Tsusima han (藩), played an active role in the trade between Joseon and Japan. This citation discusses the problematic terms: Joseon people called Japanese “wajin” while Japanese called Joseon people “toujin.” It can be seen that Japan’s feudal government issued an ordinance that Joseon people should be referred to as “maroudo” or “Chosŏnjin.” The conversation between Ahmenomori Hooohsyu and Shin Yu-Han indicates that the term used to refer to Joseon people—“toujin” implies that Japanese people considered Joseon to be a Chinese representative instead of an independent country, and this carrys a disparaging connotation. Although Hooohsyu explained to Shin Yu-Han that it was based on reverence, we must examine this further in order to determine how reliable his remark is. As stated in the 61st column, Akinari’s usage of “toujin” in reference to Joseon people shows that it was based on the general perception of Korean people at that time. Nevertheless, Akinari immediately corrected his terms after he was criticized.

Akinari also referred to Joseon people in the 62nd column. We shall examine the citation.

There was a huge riot after Suzuki Denzou, a man from Tsusima Island, had killed a so-

---

3 Published in 1907.
4 Shin Yu-Han, translated by Sung, Nak-hun, 1974. A partial travel log (the main text is from a Korean classics database).
and-so “karabito (Joseon people).” (omission) After the investigation was completed, Denzou was beheaded in front of a group of karabito from Shirinasi River. When Denzou was being transported, there were many spectators on the road. Many young women were standing at Nishiguchi (name of the place) in Shinmachi (name of place) and said, “Here comes the ‘Toujinkoros’ (killer of a Joseon person)!” They peeked inside the wagon and noticed that the man was handsome. They mumbled, “Is that him? How could such a good-looking man kill someone? People in the upper echelons of the feudal government must be cruel.”

The citation describes the incident where a Dohundo (a non-commissioned officer), Choi Cheon-jong, was murdered by a resident of Tsusima Island, Suzuki Denzou. This occurred at a lodging in Osaka named Nishi Honganji (the name of the temple in Osaka) on April 7th, 1764, when the Dohundo was on his way back to Korea after tongsinsa Cho Eom’s group had completed diplomatic protocols in Edo. From this extract, we can see that, the general public still referred to Joseon people as “toujin” during this period. Even Akinari initially referred to Joseon people as “toujin,” but he changed the term after he was corrected, as described in the 61st column. Although “toujin” was still used among people, Akinari switched to “karabito.” With regard to the titles of Joseon people, it is safe to say that at least Akinari had an objective perception of Joseon, although this must be confirmed through other data sources.

3. Kokugaku Scholars and the Perception of Foreign Countries

Now, with regard to how, as a Kokugaku scholar, Akinari’s perception of Joseon transformed his perception of foreign countries, I would like to examine the “sun-god debate,” in which he participated with Motoori Norinaga. This is because this ideological debate between Akinari and Norinaga concerning kogugaku displays a clear distinction of how the two intellectuals each perceived their own country and the world during the closed Edo era.

The sun-god debate began as follows: Tou Teikan wrote to “Syoukouhatu”(1781), discussing the various problems with the old history of Japan. In response, Norinaga made a harsh criticism by writing “Kenkyoujin” (1785), in which he compared Tou Teikan to a madman and indicated in the
title that he would put shackles on him. In reaction to this, Akinari wrote “Kenkyojin Ueda Akinari Hyo (鉗狂人上田秋成評)” (1786), and criticized Norinaga’s view. In return, to refute Akinari’s argument, Norinaga wrote “Kenkyojin Ueda Akinari Hyodo ben (鉗狂人上田秋成評同弁)” (1787). In this manner, the kokugaku debate continued.

First of all, I will cite a paragraph on the sun god, a well-known extract from Norinaga’s “Kenkyoujin.”

Originally, the sun god (Amaterasu), who shines her light all over the world, was born in Japan. (omission) As the central country, Japan is the origin of all other countries and the most excellent country; therefore, everything about the god’s age from the moment of creation has been handed down completely and very accurately. Even today, Nihonsyoki (The Chronicles of Japan) and Kojiki (the oldest extant chronicle in Japan) remain.5

Norinaga argued that Japan is the birth country of sun god and is the origin of the world. Based on ancient Japanese mythology, he claimed the superiority of Japan. His sense of pride in Japanese mythology is accentuated in the following sentences:

Although each and every country argues that they have ancient legends, their legends are not accurate. Some countries partially distort while others rashly forge their stories and deceive naive people. (omission) Japan’s legends are not comparable to other legends from foreign countries. Our legends are the representation of truth and no one can fully explain with words the awe present in today’s world and how human beings conform with the descriptions of the god’s age.6

Norinaga disapproved of other countries’ ancient legends, regarding them as being inaccurate and forged while arguing that Japan’s ancient legends were truthful. This shows his strong recognition of his own country. In Norinaga’s argument, there is no relativistic standpoint on ancient legends or mythology; on the contrary, he emphasizes the Japan-centered worldview and view of mythology.

In reply to this, Akinari used a world map, which had been introduced to Japan due to the influence

---

5 Motoori, Norinaga. 1971: 541
6 Ueda, Akinari. 1990: 238
of western learning called Rangaku (蘭學), and argued his objective view on Japan, in which the

country exists as one part of a vast world.

When I looked at a world map, few countries could communicate with Japan in writing. I

have not even heard of the names of most countries. Besides, I saw some massive countries

on the map. When I looked for Japan on the world map, it was only a small island that

resembled a tiny leaf on a huge pond.7

Through the world map, Akinari recognized the existence of many unknown countries. With such a

world view, he could realize the geographical location of Japan. In response to Norinaga’s claim that

Japan is the center of the world and superior to all other countries, Akinari highlighted that Japan is

only a small island that resembles a floating leaf in a spacious pond.

Furthermore, Akinari showed a relative standpoint about the mythologies and legends of other

countries. India has its own legends, and so does China. He argues that there is no need to be

concerned about other countries because they also have their own mythologies and legends.

Through this, we can tell that Akinari was aware of all mythologies and legends from a relative

point of view. In comparison to Norinaga’s Japan-centered world view, Akinari’s viewpoint of

ancient mythology was far closer to the modern viewpoint. However, in a situation where an

ideological debate had already occurred, it would have been challenging for Akinari, with an

objective and relative attitude, to continue the debate against Norinaga, who held his claims and

argument as his firm belief.

What is the reason that “Ten” (天) has so many different meanings? Confucianism,

Buddhism, and Taoism, as well as other ancient documents all use the word in a different

context. “Sky,” that which we look up at, is not the only interpretation of the word. In

Confucianism, the word can be used for different concepts, such as heavenly blessing (天禄),
natural endowment (天資), lifespan (天命), and national disposition (天稟). In Buddhism, it

is said that heaven’s emperor (天帝) came down to the human world and listened to
Buddha’s preaching. In Kirishitan (Christianity), there is an entity of worship called the Lord
of Heaven (天主) who is God, the origin of everything.

7 Ueda, Akinari.1990: 234
On the other hand, there are people who claim that Japan’s Ten (天, Takamagahara) is the center of Japan and even the sun (Amaterasu) and the moon (Tsukuyomi) were born here. This is too absurd for other countries to understand. Therefore, the logic that other countries must worship Japan as their lord is beyond reason.8

As shown in the above citation, through his essays Akinari continued to express his opinion about Norinaga even after the debate with Norinaga was over. Akinari displayed universal and reasonable thinking by explaining the various meanings of “Ten (天)” used in Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Christianity. In doing so, he dismissed Norinaga’s claim that Japan is the superior country and all other countries must serve Japan. Nonetheless, the ideological debate between Akinari and Norinaga petered out without a clear ending. Afterwards, Norinaga built an academic base for his Kokugaku ideology and firmly established it in the history of modern ideology.

4. Conclusion

This paper focused on Ueda Akinari, an intellectual from Osaka active during the Edo era, and examined his experience of Joseon and his perception of foreign countries. As the study question was “how has his experience of Joseon through encounters with Joseon tonginsa influenced Akinari?,” related literature was reviewed to examine his perception of Joseon.

It appears that Akinari accepted the pervasive image of Tonginsa of the time and maintained his personal objective viewpoint. In the 61st and 62nd columns in “Tandai Shoshinroku,” we witnessed the change in his terms after he was advised to use “karabito” to refer to Joseon people instead of “toujin (Meaning, such as Chinese or similar),” a common term of the time. Even though people around him still used the term “toujin,” he himself described Joseon people as “karabito.” In order to examine how Akinari’s experience with Joseon led to his perception of foreign countries, this paper also examined the sun-god debate he had with Motoori Norinaga. By comparing Akinari’s argument with Norinaga’s, I could confirm Akinari’s relative and objective perception of his own country and foreign countries. A future task would be to discover where such perceptions were derived from.

8 Ueda, Akinari.1990 : 311-12
References