



Title	Export of Japanese Sulfur and World History from the 11th to the 16th Centuries
Author(s)	Yamauchi, Shinji
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Panel 1. Export of Japanese Sulfur and World History from the 11th to the 16th Centuries

Introduction

I study Japanese maritime trade during the 9th to the 16th centuries. And recently, I am very interested in a problem of international sulfur distribution in pre-modern Asia. Today, I would like to propose a new linkage between “Japanese History” and “World History”. This linkage is derived from my historical study on the international distribution of sulfur covering whole Asia. I will consider how to connect “Japanese History” with “World History” in Japanese high school education by using this new linkage as a teaching material.

1. The problem of Japanese sulfur export.

Some Korean and Chinese books written in the 15th and 16th centuries, in which various data on Japan are compiled, give some accounts of the information on a small island located in the south of Kyushu. In these books, this island is called “Iojima(硫黄島)”. In Japanese, this name means the island of sulfur. This “Iojima” island is identified as present “Iojima” of Mishimamura, Kagoshima prefecture. This island is very small, with an active volcano, located in the south-western frontier of the Japanese Archipelago, and has a small population of about 120. Even today, we can see sulfur ores are used as a block of stone wall in Iojima. In those Korean and Chinese books, Iojima is described as a sulfur mine managed by Japanese people. From these descriptions, we can understand that Iojima was a very famous sulfur mine in early modern East Asia.

Why did Iojima become such a famous sulfur mine? And when did sulfur mining start in Iojima? For these questions, The Tale of the Heike(平家物語) gives us an important key. This classical work describes mining and commerce of sulfur in this island in the 12th or 13th century. From those descriptions, I suppose that the sulfur mined in Iojima was carried from the island to the trading port of Hakata via the west coast route of Kyushu, and then the sulfur was exported from Hakata to Song China by Chinese merchants.

Why was Japanese sulfur exported from Japan to China during the Song Dynasty? In the end of 10th century, with the beginning of Japan-Song trade, sulfur export from Japan to China was also started. The start of sulfur export from Japan to China has a relationship with the invention of gunpowder in the 9th century China and the development of firearms after the late 10th century China. Japanese sulfur was mainly used as one of indispensable materials of gunpowder in China of that time. Then, why did Song China need to import Japanese sulfur? There were only a few volcanoes in Song China, particularly in the territory of the Southern Song Dynasty. So, in China during the Song Dynasty, sulfur production was extremely limited. However, despite this situation of sulfur production, the demand for sulfur as an ingredient of gunpowder rapidly extended. For this reason, self-sufficiency in sulfur was quite impossible in the Song period of China. China in the Song Dynasty needed the sulfur import from beyond the sea, volcanic island, Japan.

Next, I would like to expand our historical scope from Japanese sources into those of other Asian regions. So we can find that China in the Song Dynasty imported sulfur from Korea, Southeast Asia and West Asia as well as Japan. As mentioned above, since the Song period, China had extensively imported sulfur by maritime trade route from East, Southeast and West Asia. This worldwide trade network of sulfur was supported by the monopoly of gunpowder and firearms technology by the Song Dynasty.

Based on this fact, I would like to propose a new historical concept of “the Sulfur Road”. This is a conceptual diagram of “the Sulfur Road” during the 11th to the 13th centuries.

2. The transformation of “the Sulfur Road” in East Asian region during the 14th to the 16th centuries.

In the late 14th century, Korean Yi Dynasty learned gunpowder technology from a Chinese maritime merchant and began to make gunpowder and use firearms. However, as mentioned above, sulfur production was extremely limited in the Korean Peninsula. So, the Yi Dynasty needed the sulfur import from Japan. According to this historical fact, we recognize the formation of a new “Sulfur Road” between Japan and Korea in the 14th century. Japanese sulfur was continuously imported by China in the Ming Dynasty during the 15th and 16th centuries. The usage of it, of course, was an indispensable ingredient of gunpowder.

During this period, Japanese sulfur export was mainly governed by Muromachi Shogunate and its powerful vassals. In this period, in addition to Iojima, a new important sulfur mine was developed in Japan. It was located in Bungo province, the eastern region of Kyushu, and managed by the Otomo clan. On the other hand, Iojima was governed by the Shimazu clan and maintained its position of a primary sulfur mine in Japan. However, Japanese sulfur export gradually came down after the late 15th century, because of the beginning of sulfur export by the Ryukyu Kingdom. Through this fact, we know, in the East Asian region, the initiative of sulfur trade moved from Japan to the Ryukyu Kingdom.

Sulfur export from the Ryukyu Islands to China started in the late 14th century. This new situation was deeply in relation to the establishment of Ming Dynasty in 1368. Then, the Ryukyu had entered into the “Sulfur Road” as a new player. And after the establishment of the Ryukyu Kingdom in the early 15th century, the kingdom had continued to pay sulfur tribute to the Chinese dynasties, Ming and Qing, to its downfall. Ryukyu’s sulfur mine is Iotorishim(硫黄島) island, located 120 kilometers north of Okinawa island. It is a very small uninhabited island with an active volcano. Sulfur was carried from this island to the Okinawa island.

In the end of this chapter, I would like to survey the changes of the “Sulfur Road” after the 14th century from a view point of Pan-Asia as follows. First, on East Asia, we can indicate some important changes such as the spread of gunpowder and firearms technologies from China to Korea, the formation of some new distribution routes and the appearance of a new influential sulfur exporter by the Ryukyu Kingdom. Next, on Southeast and West Asia, the situation of the changes in regards to the “Sulfur Road” has not become yet clear enough in my research. However, probably, the historical situations in these regions would be nearly the same as those of East Asia. That is, Gunpowder and firearms technologies were introduced from China during the Yuan Dynasty. Then, self-consumption of sulfur as an ingredient of gunpowder began in Southeast and West Asian regions. As a result, most of sulfur export from these regions to China would be cut off.

As was mentioned above, during the 13th and 14th centuries, gunpowder technology had spread from China to many other regions such as Korea, Southeast Asia and West Asia. And consequently, gunpowder production was started in those countries and regions. Then, a large amount of sulfur, mined in those regions, was probably supplied for the domestic and regional consumption instead of being exported to China. Under this situation, we can find out the multipolarization of the “Sulfur Road” after the 14th century.

3. Linkage between “Japanese History” and “World History” in Japanese High School Education

Today, in the history education of Japanese high school, the insufficient linkage of subjects between “Japanese History” and “World History” is often pointed out as a serious educational problem. In my presentation, it is indicated that Japan exported a large amount of sulfur and played an important role as a supplier of the military materials in pre-modern Asia. According to this research, we will recognize the linkage

between the development of Asian military history and of Japanese history. We have hardly paid attention to such a military linkage until now. I suppose, my research, will provide an effective material for the Japanese history education to connect “Japanese History” with “World History”. In addition, based on my research, we will be able to grasp the linkage between “Japanese History” and “World History” from more wider historical perspective than the frame of “East Asian History”, which has been used as a key concept to connect “Japanese History” with “World History”.

The frame of “East Asian History”, including Japan, Korea and China, has greatly contributed to the development of historical study and education in Japan until now. However, recently, various problems had been pointed out about the frame of “East Asian History”. Therefore, I think that my research, including Southeast Asia, South Asia, West Asia as well as East Asia, will be helpful for relativization of the frame of “East Asian History”.

Conclusion

As discussed above, in pre-modern Asia, the Japanese Archipelago, including Japan and the Ryukyu Kingdom, had played an extremely important role as a sulfur supplier. The sulfur mined in that region was abundantly exported to China, Korea and other countries, and then used as an indispensable material of gunpowder. That is, the Japanese Archipelago had firmly supported Asian military history.

However, such a linkage between “Japanese History” and “World History” has hardly been noted until now. I would like to make further investigation into such a historical linkage.

YAMAUCHI Shinji (Kobe Women’s University)