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# Circulation of Japanese Silver in East Asia and the Bureaucratic System of the Joseon Dynasty during the 16th Century

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## Introduction

The purpose of this report is to explain that circulation of silver produced in Japan, which had a significant economic impact during the 16th century throughout East Asia centering in mainland China, was closely related to the partisan strife in the Joseon Dynasty just as in other Asian countries including Japan. The report also aims to point out that this fact might connect world history and Japanese history which are clearly separated in history education in Japan and make history education in Japan richer and more interesting.

## 1. Current State of History Education in Japan: World History and Japanese History

I teach history at a high school in Japan. Before describing the main topic, circulation of Japanese silver in the Korean Peninsula, I would like to briefly explain about history education in high schools in Japan. This will also serve to explain why I became interested in this subject.

History falls under a subject area called “Geography and History” in the Japanese high school system. It is broken down into six subjects, including World History A, World History B, Japanese History A, Japanese History B, Geography A, and Geography B, and taught separately. Here, I will not go into the difference between A and B in each subject since it is not directly related to the details of this report. I will also put geography aside for now and proceed to discuss the relationship between Japanese history and world history.

In Japanese history, we explain the process of formation for the nation-state Japan by focusing primarily on domestic factors. Therefore, relationships with foreign countries are explained as long as they are direct relationships like wars and trades. Meanwhile, we have not traditionally paid much attention to matters such as the global environment Japan is placed under, influence from the neighboring countries, and synchronicity of various phenomena.

On the other hand, world history was established by combining western history and oriental history, which had been subjects in pre-war secondary education, and the details on Japanese history which should be part of world history—and especially oriental history—had been carefully excluded. This was to prevent duplication of the contents covered in Japanese history described earlier [MEXT 2009].

As for study activities, accurate memorization of names of events and historical figures is emphasized because students are likely to be tested on them in university entrance examinations. Students who are taking the entrance exam are required by most universities to choose either world history or Japanese history and memorize trivial facts. As a result, most high school students do not get a chance to study both Japanese and world history. They also tend to view Japanese history and world history completely separately and not imagine a mutual connection between them [Onishi 2013]. I don't need to reiterate how it poses a challenge in understanding the relationship between Japan and Asian countries.

I believe circulation of Japanese silver in Asia in the 16th century, which is the subject of this report, would provide a material to change this situation.

## **2. Silver Mining in the Korean Peninsula and Joseon Dynasty's Policy on Silver**

The Joseon Dynasty had a history of suffering from frequent demand from the Emperor of Ming to pay tributes of gold and silver. They pleaded for and received an exemption. Therefore, if they were to produce silver in the Korean Peninsula, they had to keep it secret from Ming [Murai 1996]. Furthermore, the Joseon Dynasty strictly prohibited the use of silver as currency, imposing punishments that included the death penalty. It has generally been thought that what prompted the change in the situation was a large amount of silver used by Ming who eventually came as reinforcements when the Japanese troops invaded the Korean Peninsula. This view is based on a government-compilation called *Mangi-yoram* from the early 19th century [Sugawa 1999].

Yet, silver mining was underway in Korea during the period when silver circulation and usage were strictly prohibited.

In 1503, they began using the cupellation method, one of the methods to refine silver from silver ore, to produce silver in Tancheon County located slightly north of Hamgyeong Province.

Two years later, King Yeonsan-gun at the time was forced out by coup and Jungjong was enthroned instead. He focused on enforcing official discipline, which was considered to have deteriorated during the era of the prior king. He saw silver flowing out to Ming as smuggling funds to obtain luxury goods as a problem because he feared that Ming might begin ordering gold and silver tributes to be paid again. Since then, they debated on the issue of silver mining in Tancheon over a long period of time, repeatedly scaling down and reopening the operation. However, they eventually ordered the mining to stop in 1533. This course of events is recorded in *The Annals of the Joseon Dynasty*, which is the official record of the Joseon Dynasty.

There are two reasons why the Joseon Dynasty continued mining silver even at a great risk.

One is that they were short of war funds to prepare for the military tension in Hamgyeong Province, the border region with the Jurchens who were beginning to thrive on the trade of marten fur. Another is that there was a widespread trend to prize Chinese goods. It has been shown that the demand for luxury goods had spread not only in the capital of Hanseong but throughout Korea as a result of agricultural technology development, the establishment of a national-scale distribution network, and the growth of regional markets in Korea at the end of the 14th century [Yi 1984].

In this way, silver mining in Korea and the social changes during that time shaped the conditions to import silver from Japan.

## **3. The Spread of the Cupellation Method to Japan and the Influx of Silver to the Korean Peninsula**

The first large-scale silver mining in the Japanese archipelago took place in Iwami Ginzan in current Shimane Prefecture. According to *The Old Records of Iwami Silver Mine* which recorded the course of the Iwami Ginzan discovery and development, it was 1526 when a Hakata merchant noticed the presence of silver lode in Iwami Province. Seven years later, two technicians from Korea were brought over to start refining and it prompted a mass mining and production of silver. It is probably true that silver was brought into the Korean Peninsula immediately after that because it coincides with the time period when articles about Japanese silver are found in *The Annals of the Joseon Dynasty*. As mentioned earlier, silver flowed into the Korean Peninsula even though its distribution and use were strictly prohibited there through the end of the 16th century. Famous South Korean historian Yi Taejin thought it was because the official trade between

Japan and Ming, which was tributary trade, was discontinued [Yi 1984]. However, this argument is not very convincing because late-period *wakou* (Japanese pirates) were already active by this time (even though they are referred to as “Japanese pirates,” they are mixed groups of individuals across borders and ethnic groups and not necessarily Japanese in reality) and the official trade before it was discontinued had not been very frequent, indicating that the impact of the discontinuation on the overall trade between Japan and Ming could not have been significant. In addition, an article can be found in *The Annals of the Joseon Dynasty* indicating that people who seem to be involved with *wakou* were repurchasing Japanese silver in the Korean Peninsula and bringing it to mainland China. This is because the demand for silver to change the tax system and cover the military expenditure in the northwest frontier was increasing in China.

If that is the case, the reason for the technology being introduced from Korea to Japan to make increased production of silver possible and the silver being flowing into the Korean Peninsula have to be attributed to the situation in the Korean Peninsula. And it is natural to presume it was the trend among all—not just the ruling class but even common people—to seek Chinese products such as showy silk fabric.

When you look in detail at debates over the use of Chinese silk, you will see that they are divided roughly into an argument that says “although it might be necessary to restrict the use of silk, it should be loosened on silk worn at the time of rituals at the Royal Court” and an argument that calls for strict regulations on silk worn at the rituals. The former argument was made primarily by officials in the department called *Uijeongbu*, equivalent to today’s Cabinet, while the latter was made mainly by officials in agencies such as *Saheonbu* who monitor frauds and denounce government officials [Onishi 2002].

In 1542, after about ten years since Japanese silver began flowing into the Korean Peninsula, a monk named Anjin who claimed to be an envoy of the King of Japan came to Korea with 80,000 tael of silver (800 kan, or about 3 tons) along with other cargo and asked to exchange them with cotton cloth. Cotton production wasn’t yet common in Japan at the time. This is probably why Anjin and the party sought to exchange a large amount of Iwami silver with cotton. However, previous studies has revealed that Anjin and the party were not official envoy of the Japanese King; they were most likely to be set up as a fake envoy in Tsushima. Moreover, the Joseon Dynasty was not at liberty to meet Anjin’s request easily because cotton cloth was a means of tax payment and had a function as a type of currency.

The debate within the Joseon Dynasty over how to handle Anjin’s request again resulted in *Uijeongbu* with their agencies and agencies such as *Saheonbu* and *Saganwon* (an agency intended to directly admonishes the king about mistakes with politics) completely opposing to each other. From the standpoint of the friendship with the neighboring country, the former argued to purchase as much silver as possible with cotton stored at government agencies and local government offices and then to have the private sector purchase the rest. On the other hand, the latter insisted not to allow the trade on the basis of three reasons: silver cannot be used directly for food and clothing, Japan would bring even more silver if the Dynasty accommodated the purchase this time, and it would conflict with the laws that restrict the use of silver.

Caught between the two, the king made a neutral decision of having the government and private sectors split and purchase two thirds of the silver. But what was behind this conflict in the first place?

The former group—those who supported the acceptance of silver—come from families of meritorious retainers who were instrumental in founding the Joseon Dynasty; they were officials of noble birth whose economic base was the ownership of large lands. In contrast, the latter group—those who opposed the

acceptance of the silver—were government officials who rose by studying Confucianism; they were small and medium-sized landowners who worked to reconstruct the order of village societies [Furuya 1993]. These two groups fiercely opposed to each other on every issue and, being the center of the government, the former aggressively oppressed the latter. In this way, Japanese silver spread in the Korean Peninsula while becoming deeply involved in the partisan conflicts in the country of Korea [Onishi 2002].

## **Conclusion**

In world history, which covers a wider geographical range, there are not many opportunities to go into the details such as domestic political strife and internal contradictions in societies. In Japanese history, which covers a predetermined area, however, students must learn matters such as political strife and internal structure of societies in Japan fairly in detail partly because there are more primary historical documents available compared to other regions in the world. At the same time, because most matters outside the regional framework are cut and there is a fixed idea that “Japan is an isolated island country,” we tend to become indifferent to situations surrounding the Japanese archipelago. And since most high school students study only world history or Japanese history under the current system, it is difficult to get a chance to gain a unified historical view. In addition, sometimes college entrance examinations ask questions that are trivial even to teachers who have received specialized education on history at universities. That also makes it difficult to develop a perspective that is temporally and geographically global.

Such a situation in history education is not in any way desirable. I believe this report has a potential to change the current relationship between world history and Japanese history taught in high school. Going forward, I would like to continue collecting these types of examples [Yokoi 2008].

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