



Kodai Higashi Ajia sekai to Nihon

古代東アジア世界と日本

By Sadao Nishijima [Yi Sungshi ed.], Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, Japan, 2000.
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Introduction

Nishijima Sadao, author of the *Old East Asian World and Japan*, served as Professor of History, Tokyo University, with unrivaled authority on the ancient history of Japan. East Asia preoccupied his lifetime scholarship, and he reached the stage where he asserted that East Asia deserves the appellation of “world” in the sense that some common elements brought China and its neighboring countries into a single cohesive entity. The book cited above major dissertations he wrote on this topic. Lee Sungshi, Professor of Korean History at Waseda University worked on compiling these dissertations, and his commentary constitutes the major feature of the conclusion. He notes the unrivalled contribution of Nishijima to the study of the East Asian world, as well as to Japanese history.

1. The Formation of the Old East Asian World

Lee Sungshi asserts that “the formation of the Old East Asian World” is the core of this book. He went so far as to call the book “the declaration of the East Asian World.” The contents related to the conceptualization of East Asia consist of three components, namely, the definition of the Old East Asian World, the process by which East Asia developed into a world, and the transformation of the East Asian world and its projection into the future with specific reference to what lies ahead on the way to self-generated development in the region.

2. The East Asian World and Investiture System

The author views East Asia as a single entity in which a connecting tissue binds China with its neighboring countries. Inter-country relationships present a kind of hierarchical order, with China serving as the master and others appearing as subordinate satellites. The political bond which ties them into one single entity is the investiture which emphasizes ritualistic and symbolic obligations of the countries involved. The dispatching of diplomatic missions on festive occasions, accompanied by the reciprocal exchange of gifts represent the major features of the bilateral relationship. The hierarchical order of the countries resembles a spider’s network implicating countries to one another. By honoring China as a kind of a reliable elder, the vertical relationship of the countries resembles a master-disciple relationship. The investiture system, which applies to all satellite states surrounding the Middle Kingdom, traces back its origin to the sixth-eighth century, or the Three Kingdom period of the Korean Peninsula. For what seems a master-subject relationship, in reality the investiture system allowed each country much of its autonomy in the presence of its own monarch. Rarely did the master intervene in the internal affairs of each country.

Mediated by a tributary system, this hierarchical relationship accounts for a relatively long spell of peace when compared to the expansive battlefields that distinguish most of history in the European world.

3. The East Asian World and Japan

Nishijima did not fix his search for the Old East Asian World to a particular time frame in the past. He treats a series of historical events spanning 2000 years as a flowing stream leading to the present. He examines the process of political, economic, cultural and social changes that have occurred over this extended time span and he discusses how the history of Japan unfolded in this context. His particular emphasis on culture invites the search for a common cultural base that cuts across its member countries, and the cultural genesis of Japan which represents ethnic creativity. He employs plain language to better facilitate the understanding of the investiture system centered on the relationships between countries of the East Asian world. This book focuses on East Asia as the background shaping the history of Japan. However, his description creates the feeling that the background description of a subtly inter-connected East Asian world pales relative to the highlight of the Japanese history at the forefront of his thinking. Given this fact, one wonders about the author's lack of attention to the history of the monarchical kingdoms in the Korean Peninsula. As presented in this book, his approach to the history of Korea cannot escape criticism for its biased treatment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one should consider critiques of the author's global perspective on history by other scholars, most notably including Lee Sung-shi, the book's chief editor. The author developed his global perspective on history while he was working as an editor for The "Iwanami World History Series" thirty years ago. One might as well call the book the product of his recollections, such a pervasive view of history permeates his interpretation of facts. Later, he confided that he based the global perspective of history on Uehara Senroku's model, through the process of addressing the problems that confronted Japan in the 50s and 60s. In the presentation of history, he avoids the traditional method of illustrating events in chronological sequence; the uniqueness of his approach lies in the highlighting of problems in terms that create a stronger appeal for the development of theory to grapple with them.

Lee Sungshi is of the view that the Nishijima's study arbitrarily defines boundaries. Indeed, many cases reflect the arbitrary decisions of the Japanese scholars, particularly when it comes to establishing the bounds of research about Japan in relation to its neighboring countries. Not surprisingly, scholars from other parts of the East Asian world criticize this work for embracing scholarly dogmatism. The self-assertiveness on their own terms is something that they should endeavor to do away with. Japanese scholars must try to obtain a consensus with others regarding even the terminologies they employ in their daily discourse on pragmatic matters. Inadvertent use or the arbitrary definition of terms will subject them to attack. Cognizant of the problem, historians are gaining momentum in their attempts to treat the history of each country in a broader context of interaction with other countries. Despite its own flaws in this respect, Nishijima's work, has its own qualities worthy of praise, and historians will long remember this work as a textbook which will guide many forthcoming studies of East Asia.

Despite the fact that Lee sungshi pointed to some problematic areas

of this study, Nishijima's work more than makes up for its flaws. In order to stamp out the dogmatic view of history which prevailed in the pre-war period, he establishes a strong tendency to treat East Asia as an integrated whole, and to place the history of Japan in this context. The so-called investiture system represents a connecting tissue that cuts across the countries in the region. Apart from such common factors, other factors account for the indigenous nature of the country. Insularity or geographical isolation may activate these indigenous factors. In the case of Japan, Chinese influence thinned out and Koreans despised Japan as an outpost of the universal culture. The eagerness to mirror Chinese culture maintained a much lower profile in Japan, setting the stage for a cultural hybrid.

If applied to the study of Japan, the methodological emphasis of the study on China, may seriously eclipse the history of Korea. A deliberate exclusion of the history of Korea finds its manifestation in the rightist-authored textbooks of Japanese history. An abiding bone of contention between the two countries, this issue makes it difficult to come up with a viable alternative. A biased treatment of history advanced to embrace the theory of investiture which raised Japan to the middle kingdom of East Asia. The theory of the Inma Commandery in the south of the Korean Peninsula presents another example of dogmatism which in a way negates the political autonomy of the confederated leagues of Koreans. The colonial policy of Japan in Korea presents another interpretation which attests to Japan's apathy toward the historical appeal of Korea. It remains important to understand East Asia through an enlarged prism, but stressing the importance of this view should not impair an appreciation for the indigenous qualities of each country.