The Legendary World of a Mechanic, Oono Benkichi
and its Structure
— Urban Legend in the Last Days of the Tokugawa Regime —

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In recent years, the connection of Western technologies and rational thought with the starting point of modern Japanese science centered in Edo has been discussed in various forms, in a pre-modern-age argument. We do not have a true image of the mechanic, Oono Benkichi in Kaga, apart from the knowledge that he made the most of Western science to surprise his contemporaries. This paper aims to investigate the whole world of legend concerning this Benkichi and its structure, through his book "Ittoshikyuroku", and to clarify an urban legend of the last days of the Tokugawa regime.

It is said that Benkichi was born in Kyoto in the later Edo period, and went to Nagasaki as a young man to study western medicine and physical chemistry from a Dutchman. Then, he moved to the fief of Kaga, and there enjoyed a close friendship with a rich merchant, ZENIYA Gohei. Of Benkichi’s works, a teaserving marionette, revolver, lighter, telescope, pocket magnet, measuring apparatus, pacemaker, and so on, have been handed down, and he is said to have used electricity.

A portrait of a Westerner, who looks like Ph. F. von Siebold, and a strange symbol resembling the English letter “A” are drawn on the cover of "Ittoshikyuroku". However, this Westerner has not yet been identified, as Benkichi’s remedies for eye disease did not include a pupil-opening medicine, which was reportedly introduced by Siebold. The “A”-shaped mark resembles the symbolic sign of Freemasonry, which was established in England in the 18th century. This book includes records on chemistry, scientific apparatus, medical art, pharmacology, traditional technologies, and so on. When these were checked and analyzed together with his legend which involves the manufacture of strange apparatus such as marionette or camera, and remedies for mental diseases, it was found that they were copied from the “Karakuri-zui” (collection of mechanical drawings) by HOSOKAWA Hanzo, and his photography was silver-plate photography, or Daguerreotype.
As seen above, the description in the "Ittoshikyuroku" were only memorandam, rather than a consistent statement. In any case, the fact that the real image of the legendary Benkichi remains elusive shows that his technologies did not join the main flow of full-scale Western physical studies. In Kanazawa, in the final days of the Tokugawa regime, there was a scientific salon of Samurai belonging to the Kaga-han(sieif), who discussed Dutch studies, chemistry, physics, and argued about opening the country to foreign intercourse. Benkichi seems to have been a member. His activities became a complete urban legend through the transition of the character of the city of Kanazawa from an early modern castle town called "Small Edo" in the final days of the Edo period, to a modern city based on machine industry. This was because his activities were in line with the main theme of city folklore as propounded by Yanacita Kunio that "a city is a window for imported culture".