Vaccination in Asia

TASAKI Tetsuro

One feature of Rangaku (the study of Western sciences in the Edo Era by means of the Dutch language) in Japanese villages is the spread of the cow-pox method of vaccination, though not much attention has been given to the international circumstances behind this.

Edward Jenner’s method of scratching a vaccine into the lower arm applied the method of variolation (use of material from smallpox patients) that was widespread in Britain. According to one theory, the Chinese method of vaccination of inserting a tube into the nostrils was introduced to Turkey and that this was subsequently modified to the lower arm method and then introduced to Britain.

An examination of a number of documents reveals that at that time the variolation method of scratching the skin and cultivating the virus existed from India through to the Middle East and the Americas, and that it was in this process that it was introduced to Europe. One might say that as far as vaccination in the various regions of Asia was concerned, it was largely implemented as a benefit of European civilization as part of the colonial policies of European nations. However, it appears that its introduction was no easy matter before governments and companies became involved. The transportation of an effective vaccine was fraught with more than a few problems when it was first introduced to India in 1800. When a vaccine proved successful it was distributed all over the country, and though a similar attempt was made to introduce the vaccine into China, this attempt ended in failure. The vaccine had been introduced to China from the Philippines. It was brought there by Valmiz and his mission which had been dispatched to the colony by the King of Spain, and arrived in Manila in April 1805. In less than a month it had been taken to Aomen (Macao) in China. There the vaccine was introduced by those associated with Britain’s East India Company and a booklet on vaccination was also published. Valmiz visited Guangdong that September, though the relationship between his visit and the vaccination is not well understood. Although the Chinese put out their first booklet on cow-pox, dissemination was very slow and the Chinese had to wait for the arrival of missionary physicians to receive instruction.

The vaccine arrived in Japan via Java in 1849, some 44 years behind China. However, it took just one decade to be introduced throughout the country. While waiting for its arrival, the number of persons studying Western medicine had increased and they had dispersed all over the country. This kind of dissemination in Asia is to be seen only in Japan. In China, where Confucianism predominated education, intellectuals were concerned with the Chinese civil service examinations and held little respect for practical science. It might be said that Confucianism in Japan possessed diversity because of the absence of civil service examinations.