The Spread of Vaccination and Folk Customs in the Aizu Feudal Domain

Sakai Kozo

The topic of this paper is the spread of vaccinations in Aizu, Mutsu Province, with a focus on the relationships between smallpox and vaccinations and feudal lords and commoners. Before vaccinations came to be adopted, various kinds of folk customs were employed against smallpox. The problems related to the use of smallpox and the resistance of folk customs to it that were encountered during the process of the adoption of vaccinations can be traced to the measures that people relied on to deal with smallpox at the end of the Edo Period.

First, there were a number of folk practices related to smallpox that were adopted parallel to one another. Though the participants included both the ruling class and commoners under their rule, it has been discovered from historical materials that there were some practices solely for the rulers, such as the akabeko (a small red cow with a bobbing head believed to prevent smallpox), and some practices solely for their subjects, such as the smallpox deities.

As illustrated by shingan and tensenkagan remedies, among the options made available to people under the control of rulers was the osukui (aid) given on account of a feudal lord's oboshimeshi (respect), which was distributed among his subjects. This may be interpreted as something initiated for the purpose of reaffirming the authority of the feudal lords.

In this paper, I estimate that vaccinations began in the Aizu feudal domain in 1850. Using examination of vaccinations conducted in Wakamatsu-Oomachi as source material, we see that although vaccinations were mainly administered by domain physicians, there are also some instances in which they failed completely, suggesting that the vaccination method had not been standardized. There are also examples of vaccinations by physicians who were not feudal domain physicians, from which we may observe the behavior of physicians from outside the domain's territory.

Among books on the widespread adoption of vaccinations there are those that characterize vaccinations as an extension of folk customs and completely fail to denounce folk customs related to smallpox, and there are those that from a totally polarized position completely abstract its involvement with folk customs. Other sources show that in some cases the objective was to create a cycle that would protect vaccinated children and in so doing encourage the vaccination of non-vaccinated children, and others in which there were attempts to use the introduction of examples from other feudal domains for removing any obstacles that hindered the adoption of vaccinations.
From around 1853 and 1854 the contribution on the part of the domain gradually increased in the form of inspections of vaccinations, the use of official notices and the distribution of pamphlets from the magistrate's office. We may interpret this as an intention on the part of the feudal domain to place vaccinations under its own control.