The Network of Acquaintances and Intellectual Information of Kimura Kenkado

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With regard to the study of the development of regional Rangaku, among the research that has been conducted on Rangaku in villages there has been little that has dealt with urban regions. Thus, the topic of this paper is Kimura Kenkado (1736-1802), an intellectual who was active in the latter part of the Edo Era, and makes a study of Kenkado’s association with Rangaku, though he himself was not a “Rangaku scholar”, through bringing to light his relations with his friends and acquaintances who were Rangaku scholars.

Though Kenkado was a merchant who operated a sake brewing business, he is famous for being a literatus, collector of books, a collector of cultural artifacts, and a scholar of natural history. He had an extremely extensive network of acquaintances and friends and it is possible to learn about his friendships through the diaries he left behind and the exchange of letters between himself and friends. As well as being a good example of an Osaka intellectual of his day, there is evidence of the influence of Rangaku on his activities covering a wide range of fields and his interaction with Rangaku scholars and persons associated with Rangaku. Using the letters sent to Kenkado by Otsuki Gentaku and Udagawa Genzui, I also make an examination of the nature of the knowledge and information that these men were seeking and how they regarded each other.

We learn from the letters sent by Otsuki Gentaku to Kenkado that Kenkado sought from Gentaku information on Western commodities and relied on him to translate Dutch and other languages, while Gentaku sought from Kenkado knowledge he had as a scholar of natural history. The letters of Udagawa Genzui reveal a great interest in Kenkado’s clever arguments and new theories, from which we may conclude that these Rangaku scholars regarded Kenkado as a person who was able to give them useful information.

Kenkado sought to actively absorb information on Western subjects through his thirst for knowledge as a scholar of natural history and not as a scholar of Rangaku, and it is also fair to say that the Rangaku scholars too were influenced by people like Kenkado who had a scholarly curiosity in Rangaku. This exchange of information relating to the various fields in which they had their own expertise served as an intellectual stimulus.

There were many people like Kenkado who where interested in obtaining information on Western subjects, and these people need to be included in studies on the spread of Rangaku.