The Legacy of Sekijima Ryochi, a Village Physician of Western Medicine at the End of the Edo Era and the Beginning of the Meiji Period

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As trends in rural physicians practicing Western medicine at the end of the Edo Era through to the Meiji Period have come to light in recent research on Rangaku, so too have the roles which these physicians played in modernizing regional medicine. In addition, the activities of these physicians in regional politics, particularly their contribution to civil rights movements, is also becoming clearer. However, there is still much that is not known about the roles that these regional physicians played in encouraging new industries. Thus, this paper sheds light on the kind of involvement that these physicians of Western medicine had on regional modernization at the end of the Edo Era and the beginning of the Meiji Restoration by centering on the activities of Sekijima Ryochi, a physician of Western medicine in Iida.

Ryochi's father Ryoki was a physician of the Chinese school who, in addition to his medical practice looked after a garden of medicinal herbs called Hyakka-en, provided education at a temple school and also paid attention to encouraging new industries such as urging the village to cultivate sweet potato. Ryochi, who was adopted by Ryoki, studied under Yanagida Ryoun who was a physician of Western medicine in Nagoya, learned botany and natural science with Mizutani Houbun before returning to his natal village where he opened a medical practice. In addition to continuing with running Hyakka-en, teaching at the temple school and engaging in cultural activities such as promoting Kabuki, he bought a great many books on traditional Chinese medicine and Western medicine and published a textbook on Western medicine. Besides his study as a school teacher and his study of Chinese and Western medicine, his scholarly endeavors extended to an interest in natural history, which had developed from botany, and in particular the collection of ancient artifacts.

When, after the Meiji Restoration (1868) he was called upon for his knowledge of Western medicine and botany and herbs, he set about collecting produce in his capacity as a produce officer for the Vienna World Exposition. Physicians from throughout the country and enthusiasts of produce were chosen for these positions. During this stage of trial and error during the early Meiji years it is clear that his knowledge gained from Western medicine was useful with regard to the collection of products.

Sekijima Ryochi was deeply involved in regional education as in addition to being a teacher at a temple school he established an elementary school and was active as one of the schools teachers, providing his own residence as a temporary school. In this way, we get a clear picture of Sekijima Ryochi's activities as a physician of Western medicine while he lived in the countryside at the end of the Edo Era and during the beginning of the Meiji Period and was involved with regional education and the fostering of industries. Because the exhibition of products at
the Vienna Exposition was undertaken under the auspices of those responsible for regional culture who were knowledgeable in botany, herbs, natural science etc, we may conclude that in the process of searching for information on the activities of those from throughout Japan who were in charge of products for the Vienna Exposition, items for viewing by the emperor as well as exhibitors, we will likely obtain a clearer understanding of the relationship between Rangaku and developments in the modernization of regional industries that occurred through preparatory collaboration that included the collection of rare items and natural science exhibitions, industrial exhibitions and competitions.