How Did Late Tokugawa Villagers Choose Doctors?: Cases Appearing in a Village Headman’s Diaries

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The aim of this article is to examine how inhabitants of rural areas chose doctors when they got sick in the nineteenth century. There were many ways to cure disease in the Edo period. In the nineteenth century, village doctors increased in number to cope with villager’s needs. As scholars engaging in Dutch learning opened their private schools in Edo, more and more local doctors came to be trained at the schools. Thanks to this development there were many medical doctors working in villages, who had mastered Chinese or Dutch medical learning. So in rural area’s people could ask for help to doctors when necessary. People could even choose better doctors to cure their disease. How did they choose their doctors for themselves?

This article focuses on the choice of the medical doctor from the view point of patients and their families, depending on one of the village headman’s diaries, “Koshi nikki” as the main source of information. His village was located on the “Koshu Kaido” in North Tama region, in the western suburbs of Edo.

Usually, people depended on their home doctors when they got ill. They chose their home doctor for various reasons. The home doctors were chosen because of their close local, or blood, or marital ties, or cultural relationship, or other reasons. But when people got eye disease or injured, they relied on specialists. And their physical problems got worse, the more often they tended to change doctors. They relied on their home doctors and also the urban doctors.

When patients couldn’t get well, they wanted to see urban famous doctors. But they chose doctors with quite practically. They didn’t choose the doctor even if he was one of the most famous doctors in Edo. And they sought for more effective doctor and visited him. Many of the doctors chosen by them were doctors who mastered Dutch learning. But this does not necessarily mean that people chose doctors because they learned Dutch medicine. What were the backgrounds behind? One of the major facts in the background was the influence of “Sho-sen-do” which was strong in this particular region. “Sho-sen-do” was the private school of a Dutch medical doctor, Ito Genboku. So his pupils were active in this region. Of course there were other facts, economical, regional, historical condition, human relationship, and characteristics to the suburb of Edo, in the background.