Physicians in the Shonai Kawakita Region in the Last Days of the Tokugawa Regime and in the Early Years of the Meij Era: Through the Activities of One Physician

IWABUCHI Reiji

Based on the diaries of a village physician Bun’an from the Shonai Kawakita region, this paper examines the following three aspects: the process of becoming a physician, the function of relationships between physicians, and the organization of physicians prior to the promulgation of a medical system. Having a dislike for farmers and a fondness for paintings, after a period of travel Bun’an became a pupil of a town physician in Tsuruoka in April 1843 and after undertaking training in Edo he returned to his natal village to practice as a physician. His studies were supported by a network of local villagers, educated men from various districts and by a temple. Bun’an became a physician at the end of the Early Modern Period, a time when regional culture was reaching its zenith. Although his medical treatment was based on traditional Chinese medicine, he also used Western medicine. In the region where Bun’an practiced there was a group of physicians that organized themselves on a village basis, supported each other’s practices (standardized prices for medicines) and studied together (lessons using medical textbooks). However, though the group aimed to monopolize the medical profession, they had little power or status in the eyes of the village. Even though the physicians had successfully formed a group, regional society did not recognize them as a group but as physicians. It is interesting to note that while the farmers who sought medical treatment usually had faith in the advice of their physicians, physicians were seen as having the people in the different fields so that, for example, their participation in farmer’s riots was rejected.

These physicians were organized in the early years of the Meiji Period. In the towns of Tsuruoka and Sakata where town magistrate’s offices had already been established, there were groups of town physicians who served the feudal domain. These town physicians had built a medical clinic together with wealthy merchants in 1833, where they applied themselves to the art of medicine. Though the medical clinic had burned down, it was rebuilt for the purpose of administering vaccinations when vaccination techniques were introduced from Yonezawa where there had been a greater acceptance of Rangaku. From 1870 onwards, medical clinics in Sakata-ken and Yamagata-ken formed the foundation of the region’s medical policies. It was in response to requests from these town physicians that Sakata-ken and Yamagata-ken funded medical treatment that included vaccinations and Western medicines. Examinations for physicians were carried out at these medical clinics and physicians were selected, including those for posting to rural villages. Bun’an regarded this trend as a shift to “Western studies”, and continuing in the medical profession he formed close relationships with the physicians in the medical clinics.