

Workshop: Global Nodes, Networks, Orders: Looking for Transformative Connectivity

Intermediators who connected between Europe and Asia:
“Swedish” experiences in the early modern East Asia

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In the age of "transformation of the Hua-Yi order (華夷変態)", the siege of Fort Zeelandia in Taiwan played an important role in the change of international order in East Asia. It was fought between the Dutch East Indian Company (VOC) and the Anti-Quing forces which was guided by Koxinga (1624-62) in 1661-62. In this siege, the last governor of the Dutch Taiwan, who fought against the troops of Koxinga, was Frederik Coyet (?-1687) from Sweden.

The family of Coyet was one of typical "Swedish" clan, which was not originated to Sweden but contributed to the war management of the Swedish monarchy. Such non-native Swedish families, which were "swedificated", got high reputations on their professions and some of them were hired by the VOC with the confidence of their specialties. The activities of the VOC in Asia were based on such transnational conglomeration of human resources including "Swedes". In the turbulent 17th century of East Asia, the VOC sought the Swedish military and administrative experiences, and "Swedes" made their marks on the transfer of military information between Europe and Asia.

After the age of "transformation of the Hua-Yi order", a relative calm period came to East Asia. The character of professionalized manpower, which the VOC required from Sweden, also changed in accordance with the shift of East Asian situation. One of tasks of the VOC in the 18th century was to find natural resources which had social usefulness and commodity value among European market. In the result, some "Swedes", who studied the Linnaean way of natural history at Uppsala University, were employed as doctors or plant hunters by the VOC.

Carl Peter Thunberg (1743-1828), the last "apostle of Linnaeus", was one of typical "Swedes" who visited Japan in the 18th century. He was eager not only to collect information about natural resources of Japan, but also to contact with some learned Japanese and to convey the Western way of medicine to Japan. Such Japanese school of medicine has been called "Dutch school (蘭学)" and played an innovative role in the development of the natural science of Japan before Meiji Revolution.

From European perspective, some Swedes also contributed to transfer information about Japan

under the "national isolation" to Europe. However, unfortunately, such Swedish experiences as "intermediator" between Europe and Asia have been hidden under the name of "Dutch" based on the nationalized view of modern historiography. In this paper, I will reveal the role of multinational manpower in the global transmission of information by focusing on Swedish activities at the VOC.