CHAPTER 2

Health and Hygiene in Late Qing China as Seen Through the Eyes of Japanese Travelers

Che-chia Chang

Arriving by boat in Shanghai in 1862, a group of Japanese travelers, the first substantial delegation to China since foreign travel was banned in the seventeenth century at the start of the Edo period, found themselves assaulted by terrible smells. The smells came as a shock. In the words of Nōtomi Kaijirō 納富介次郎 (1843–1918):

Shanghai’s roads were dirty. When I walked in lanes, they were so filled with dust and excreta that I could not find a place to step on. The people also wouldn’t clean them up.2

Such observations would have been typical of Westerners visiting China. But Japan had looked up to China for many centuries, and Japanese literary and medical culture, as well as notions of hygiene, essentially had their roots in China. Most homes in both countries at that time were without toilets. For a visiting Japanese to express such criticism reflected significant changes in thinking and attitudes.

---

1 The research for this paper was partially supported by a research grant from the National Science Council, Taiwan (NSC97-2410-H-001-088-MY2). An earlier version of this paper was presented at the International Conference entitled “Encounters and Transformations: Cultural Transmission and Knowledge Production in a Cross-literary and Historical Perspective 1850–1960” held at the University of Cambridge (September 2009). I would like to thank the participants at the conference for their feedback. In addition, I would like to thank all the members of the Integrated Project “Cultural Journeys and Knowledge Production” supported by National Science Council, Taiwan, especially its leader Professor Mei Chia-ling 梅家玲; Dr. Weipin Tsai and the copy-editor for their help with the completion of the paper; and an anonymous reviewer for some insightful comments.

As an island country, Japan benefited over many centuries from importing knowledge as well as commodities from China. From the standpoint of national security, it was long essential for Japan to keep up with the political situation there. From the seventh century on, it sent official envoys, monks, and students to China to learn various kinds of knowledge. Those who visited foreign countries were often part of the intellectual elite, and therefore usually keen to spot information worth recording and bringing home; so began a long tradition of Japanese travel writing. These travel writings were first-hand sources for Japanese of the time to gain a better understanding not just of China, but also of other external influences in the pre-modern era.

Examination of the networks of writers and readers engaged in this activity provides helpful insights into various aspects of the cultural interactions between Japan and China. This chapter explores how the travel genre exerted its influence in the transitional period from the traditional to the modern era, namely the late Shogunate and Meiji periods in Japan and the corresponding years in late Qing China, with particular reference to medical culture. This exploration is set in the context of the emergence of new social and technological factors, notably the development of print media.

To cultural historians of medicine, travel accounts are rich not only because they provide external observations of beliefs, behaviors and practices that could go unremarked by native people themselves, but also because they reveal much about the foreign observers’ sense of self and their cultural evaluations of the other. An eminent example is the twelfth century Zen monk Eisai 榮西 (1141–1215). He reported that Chinese people were living longer and were in better health than the Japanese because they regularly drank tea. Therefore he promoted drinking tea as a basic activity of Zen culture.

Along with the network linking Zen monks and the samurai group, Eisai’s efforts became one of the important origins of the tea-drinking tradition in Japan’s upper class. His major concern was the inferior state of Japanese hygiene in comparison to that of China, and how a change in lifestyle could

3 From the seventh to ninth centuries, the visits of students and monks were official. Later, Japanese Zen monks visited China to study without government support. See Mōzai Torao 茂在寅男. 1987. Kentō-shi kenkyū to shiryō 遣唐使研究と史料 (Japanese Missions to Tang China Studies and Historical Materials). Hadano: Tōkai daigaku shuppankai.