Syrian Studies in Japan

By Toru Miura

Middle East studies in Japan started in late 19th century after the National Government of Japan was founded in 1868. At the time, Japan had a keen interest in revising the unequal treaties in Egypt and Ottoman Turkey, for it was also forced to conclude similarly unequal treaties with European countries and the USA. However, interest in Syria among Japanese scholars was never as strong as that in Egypt. Japanese scholars first became interested in Syria during the 1920s when reports appeared about the emergence of Arab nationalism; the Syrian revolt against the French Mandate after WWI; and the strengthening of commercial exchanges with Syria as a part of increased trade between Japan and Middle East. According to a 2005 survey of the 672 members of the Japan Association of Middle East Studies, roughly 5% of members of the association consider Syria as their main country of study. Egypt still commands the lion’s share of Japanese scholars’ interest with 20% of the association’s respondents saying it is their main area of interest.

Here I would introduce readers to the main research trends among Japanese scholars of Syria since the early 1980s. Until the 1960s, political and economic issues dominated Japanese scholarship and Arab nationalism, in particular, was the focus of attention in Asia during the Cold War period. The pioneering works were published in 1980s and included Yoshihiro Kimura’s Studies on the Formation of the Countries of the East Arab (in Japanese) in 1987 and Tsugitaka Sato’s The Syrian Coastal Town of Jabala: Its History and Present Situation in 1988. Syrian studies in Japan also benefitted from the invitation of Syrian scholars to Japan. Daad al-Hakim, Director of National Archives of Damascus, came here in 1987 to teach younger scholars how to read sharia court records. Abdul-Karim Rafeq, Mahmoud Hareytani, André Raymond and Muhammad Adnan al-Bakht were invited to participate in the International Conferences on Urbanism in Islam in 1989 and 1990, and Rafeq brought with him the off-prints and photocopies of his all papers. This large research program devoted to urbanism in Islam (headed by Yuzo Itagaki) inspired many Japanese scholars to turn their attention to Syrian studies in which urban networks are characteristic both in terms of internal and external relations.
Exchange programs between Japan and Syria were accelerated as Keiko Ohta and Hidemitsu Kuroki stayed in Damascus during the late 1980s thanks to a Japanese scholarship/fellowship program. Ohta published her work on early Islamic history in Syria, and Kuroki his on the social history of Aleppo. Toru Miura started his study of Damascus from medieval times into the Ottoman period using sharia court records and focusing on the history of the Salihiyah quarter. Tomoki Okawara had the unique experience of working on the staff of the National Archives of Damascus through a Japan International Cooperation Agency program. He compiled a database of sharia court records and edited and published a catalogue of these records with Brigitte Marino of IFEAD (now IFPO). This collaboration enhanced relations between IFEAD and Japanese scholars, lead to the appointment of Marino and Stefan Knost as Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) Post-doctoral Fellows.

The interest of Japanese scholars has recently moved in the direction of exploring the pluralism of Syrian society which is composed of people of a wide variety of religious orientation, in addition to Islam. This is shown by the work of Ohta, Kuroki and Masaki Uno. Taeko Nakamura’s interest is in diplomatic relations among Muslim and Crusaders states during the medieval period. Jun’ichi Taniguchi completed his study of medieval Aleppo by focusing on the relations between soldiers, members of the ulama, and urban commoners. Yasuhisa Shimizu edited Ottoman Turkish texts of tax farm registers from the Province of Damascus in the 17th century preserved at the Museum of Arabic Calligraphy in Damascus in conjunction with his study of the tax farm system of the Province. Recently, younger scholars such as Hiroyuki Aoyama and Kota Suechika have conducted socio-political studies of the Syrian Republic.

Today, the Islamic Area Studies Program (subsidized by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Technology) is intensifying international research by inviting scholars of international renown such as Randi Deguilhem (IREMAM, France) and Muhammad Ghassan Obeyd (Director of the National Archives of Damascus) to Japan. More information about the Program can be found at its website: http://www.islam.waseda.ac.jp/en/).

The study of Syria in Japan has developed dramatically during the last 20 years owing to the collaboration between Japanese and non-Japanese scholars and between research institutes in Japan and abroad. In 2006, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies founded the Japan Center for Middle Eastern Studies in Beirut, which go even further to promoting relations between Syrian studies scholars in the Middle East region and their Japanese counterparts.

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Original artwork on title page by Palestine artist Vladimir Tamari who lives in Japan.

Selected Bibliography

Two on-line databases of Middle East and Islamic Studies in Japan are available and provide access to the publications cited below. The “Bibliography of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies in Japan 1868-1988” can be found at http://www.toyo-bunko.or.jp/ToyoBunko-E/index-e.html and the “Bibliographical Database of Middle East Studies in Japan 1989-2008 (BDMEJ)” is at: http://wwwsoc.nii.ac.jp/james/


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