

Jeudi 19 novembre 2015

Séminaire collectif du Centre de
recherches sur le Japon (EHESS)

Histoire du Japon moderne et contemporain : permanences et ruptures

« Japan as a Nodal Point in the 18th-century World Wide Web of Knowledge »

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Abstract

Despite the fact that scholarly consensus no longer takes the description of Tokugawa Japan as a “closed country” for unproblematically valid, the trope of isolationism continues not just to shape the popular awareness of the period, but to determine disciplinary agendas. This is particularly true of the disciplinary culture of intellectual history, which has mostly continued to take “Japanese thought” for its self-evident object without any qualms.

And yet, in face of considerable geopolitical and logistical odds, by the eighteenth century there in fact existed a fairly densely interconnected sphere of textual culture that can be seen as Eurasian in its scope. Japan was part of this network to an extent that hardly allows for the trope of “closed country” to continue as a characterisation of the intellectual activity of the early modern period.

The presented case study is an attempt to demonstrate how we could do intellectual history differently, precisely by recasting Japan as a nodal point within a Eurasian network of transmission of texts and generation of knowledge. This is done by following the trajectory of one particular text around several points of Eurasia over more than a century. The text—originally a French Jesuit report on the Russo-Qing diplomatic encounter from 1689 in its various embodiments and uses—ended up retranslated via Dutch into Japanese in 1805 and by early nineteenth century acquired a new life in the context of the rethinking of the world order by many Japanese scholars and officials alike.

It becomes clear, however, that in order to understand even this one single thread of textual transmission and adaptation, we need to retrieve the wide web into which it was woven. This provides us with a situated view into a republic of letters that was already at this early point safely on its way to becoming global.