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

Histoire du Japon moderne et contemporain : permanences et ruptures

«A Study of East Asian Fermentation Chemistry: Asia's Microbial Gardens in
Japanese Eyes»

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Abstract

A scientist of the early twentieth century once described the molds and yeasts kept in Japanese laboratories as being like “microbial gardens”—collections of useful objects, like plants, that could be cultivated for specific purposes. With the importance of traditional brewing in the Japanese economy, microbes’ (especially *kōji* and other molds used in Asian brewing) ability to transform the chemical composition of their surroundings gradually became a broader tool to intervene in political economy and the environment. Between military and industrial expansion on the one hand, and massive rice riots as well as unprecedented Malthusian visions of social instability and agricultural resource limits on the other, the management of national production in such everyday areas as the food and alcohol industries was a critical problem in interwar Japanese society. In this light, this talk looks at fermentation chemistry in imperial Japan: the ways in which it sought to alter the national-level relationships between resources and consumption, as well as vividly reflected the use of regional knowledge in practice.