

Externalist Approach of Japanese Historians of Science

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Two generations of science historians

Counting active members in the field of the history of science in Japan, we are immediately struck by the two peaks that stand out in the age-groupings, namely, a generation born in the early 1900's who started their professional careers in the late 1920's and early 1930's (hereafter called the prewar group), and the other group born in the late 1920's which entered the field after World War II (referred to below as the postwar group).

Unlike a mature academic field where a mechanism for recruitment through the higher education system has been established, a brand new discipline like the history of science has no assured way for the continuous production of those professionally committed. Younger scholars have had to commit themselves to the field without guarantees of job prospects, and thus have the possibility of being dropped out of the established academic world. Hence, the rise and fall of the production rate of science historians has necessarily and directly reflected various external causes as well as an overall *Zeitgeist*. It may not be too far-fetched to explain the emergence of these two distinct generations in connection with the two major wars of this century.

Not involved in World War I to any serious extent, Japan reaped a huge economic harvest in the absence of Western competitors. Just after that war the Japanese government in 1919 issued the "University Act" with the stated purpose of expanding higher education to match the now enlarged national prestige and economic capacity of Japan.

The pre-World War II generation of science historians enjoyed the benefits of this Act; numerous students flooded into the expanded system of higher education. When they graduated from the universities in the late 1920's, however, the Great Depression came and a surplus of college graduates suffered from widespread unemployment. This was also the time of a rising Marxist ideological wave. As a matter of course, this generation turned out to be very socially minded and some of them were, no doubt, influenced by the Marxist approach to the history of science, as exemplified by Hessen.

This sketch of the typical Japanese historian of science belonging to the prewar group—albeit an oversimplified one—is superbly confirmed by Tosaka

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