

Rethinking the Ninth Century as a Significant Epoch of East Eurasian History

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In Japan, scholars of Japanese history primarily examine the connection between the history of Japan and world history from the perspective of “East Asia”. The historical concept of “East Asia” is framed by the Japanese Archipelago, the Korean Peninsula and mainland China. This perspective, however, makes it difficult to evaluate the essential connection between Japanese history and world history.

In this paper, therefore, I approach the process of Japanese history from the wider, and novel perspective of “East Eurasia”. This area contains Central Asia and Southeast Asia in addition to what has traditionally been defined as “East Asia”. By using this new concept, I expect to find hitherto neglected linkages between Japanese history and world history. “East Eurasian History” during the ninth century will serve as a case study to explore these linkages.

During the ninth century, Japan twice dispatched an envoy to the Tang Dynasty: in 804 and in 838. The latter turned out to be the last Japanese envoy to the Tang court. Why were no Japanese envoys dispatched to Tang after the middle of the ninth century?

I will suggest that the abolition of the envoy was related to the dramatic political and economic changes in the history of East Eurasia and Japan at the time. Drawing mainly on the Japanese records of the last two envoys, I will investigate some relevant aspects of the political and economic changes experienced by East Eurasia during the ninth century. Based on this investigation, I will tentatively emphasize the importance of the middle of the ninth century as an epoch of change in the history of East Eurasia.