



Hosoi Hiroshi 細井浩志, *Kodai no tenmon ihen to shisho*
 古代の天文異変と史書 [Official chronicles and astronomical
 anomalies of ancient Japan]

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HISTORIANS OF ancient Japan, from Japan or from the West, have been relying on the six official records (*rikkokushi*) since the dawn of the discipline. These compilations, which started with the establishment of an administrative system inspired by Tang China's codes, present events relevant to the state that occurred within the reign of each emperor and are arranged in chronological order. The first of the six, the *Nihon Shoki* (720), which deals with the mythical origins of the land and with legendary sovereigns for most of its first half, appears clearly as an attempt to legitimize and promote imperial power, taking Japanese aristocrats as well as the Chinese empire as its targets. As such, the recorded events that are said to have occurred prior to the beginning of the eighth century are now widely regarded by scholars as wielding little historical accuracy. Thus, common sense dictates using these accounts with care and with a critical mind. If the remaining five official records (*Shoku Nihongi*, *Nihon kōki*, *Shoku Nihon kōki*, *Nihon buntoku tennō jitsuroku*, *Sandai jitsuroku*), which cover almost two centuries, are not usually treated in the same way, of late Japanese historians have shown distrust toward these sources, and have tended to focus rather on "new" primary documents such as manuscripts that were preserved in temples in Nara, or wooden tablets (*mokkan*) excavated from the soil of the old capital. In other words, modern historians, when dealing with official records of ancient Japan, have to face two major issues. First, are the dates given for the events accurate, given the successive changes of calendar that occurred during the Nara period? Second, should we infer from the inconsistencies that might be found in these texts that compilers willingly tempered with the actual facts?

These are precisely the kind of questions Hosoi tries to answer in *Kodai no tenmon*. He attempts to shed light on how official records were compiled, and how this compilation process is reflected in the records themselves. In order to do so, he adopts a twofold method. On one hand, he chooses to apply the results obtained by scholars working in the field of chronology (*nendaigaku*) such as those on ancient astronomy by Uchida Masao and Saitō Kuniji. More precisely, as the title of this book implies, he focuses on records of astronomical events, such as eclipses, and uses them as a guideline to reconstruct the activities of the compilers. On the other hand, he concentrates

on the nature and structure of these records from the point of view of their sources, and questions the way said sources were actually managed and preserved.

Following the introduction, where Hosoi explains his method and his goals, the book, which consists of a collection of revised articles and new contributions by the author, is divided into two parts. The first forms the core of Hosoi's work, while the second serves to complement this main part with additional arguments from a different perspective.

The first part, entitled *Tenmon kiji to kokushi hensan* (Compilation of official chronicles and astronomical records), is composed of five chapters and three additional sections. As usual with this kind of collection, the chapters do not really follow continuity. However, they are not disconnected either, as they deal with closely connected topics. The first chapter, for instance, examines the changes of calendar between the seventh and ninth century. This topic is relevant for his subject, since it is crucial to determine when the new calendars actually came into use in order to establish the "true" date of events recorded in official sources. Hosoi's analysis confirms the already well-known connection between calendars and political power. Yet, he invites us not to make hasty assumptions regarding the nature of this connection. Here, Hosoi tries to show that rather than mere "upgrades" to the latest Chinese calendar, each of the four changes that were made had strong political and technical justifications. According to Hosoi, the development of calendrical skills in Japan gradually allowed the rulers not to blindly follow the Chinese example, and to carefully choose when and why to make changes in the calendar system.

The second chapter deals more directly with the problem of the compilation of official sources by addressing the question of the reliability of the accounts of earthquakes, eclipses, and auspicious omens in the *Shoku Nihongi*. Through his analysis of these records, Hosoi concludes that the presence of inconsistencies in such accounts derives only from problems of conservation of the source documents (the reports made by official astronomers), and cannot be attributed to any intention of the compiler to tamper with the records for political reasons. This chapter is followed by two additional case studies on a similar subject.

The third chapter elaborates on the conservation of the primary sources, which official records are based on. This study is grounded on the results of previous scholarship on ancient astronomy and bibliographical studies. More precisely, this chapter aims to show that the preservation of the primary documents used when compiling official histories, such as reports of astronomical anomalies, may vary depending on external causes. Thus, poor conditions of preservation, or a lack of scribes at a given time, may have had consequences in the final records. In other words, the compilation process can be divided into three steps: observation of facts, recording of all the facts in primary sources, and selection of said facts for inclusion in the official chronicles. Hosoi concludes that as far as primary sources are concerned, every observation was duly noted. As such, the relation between those sources and the final records appears as a key to understanding the compilation process.

The fourth chapter goes further on this topic by reevaluating the role of the records produced by the inner secretary (*naiki*), as opposed to those by the external secretary (*geki*). According to Hosoi, contrary to what has been assumed by most scholars so far, the records produced by the *naiki* were actually more important than those of the *geki* until the ninth century, at which point the balance shifted in favor of the latter. Hosoi's main, and in fact quite simple, argument here is that the astronomical notes were not sent to the *geki* but to the *naiki*, and thus he feels comfortable to assume it was indeed the *naiki* who provided the sources for the official records.

In the last chapter of the first section, Hosoi scrutinizes the conditions of the production of the *Nihon kiriyaku kōhen*. By pointing to some important gaps in terms of astronomical records, he infers that the part dealing with events after the Engi era was not completed, and that this situation was probably linked to political matters, such as the exile of Sugawara no Michizane.

The second and shorter part counts only three sections, and is followed by a general conclusion. In the first chapter, Hosoi delves further into the question of the role of the *naiki* in order to show what kind of records it was producing, and since when. He concludes rather abruptly that the *naiki* was operational as soon as the Yōrō code was established in 757.

The second chapter develops an argument Hosoi already presented when reviewing NAKANISHI (2002). To sum up briefly, he criticizes Nakanishi's view of the *Shoku Nihongi* as something having been heavily tampered with on Emperor Kanmu's orders, most notably by forging the so-called "Dōkyō incident." What is more, he dismisses Nakanishi's theory of an original record produced by the Bureau of Books (Toshoryō), arguing that, as far as its structure goes, this institution was not suited for accomplishing such a task. Hosoi makes a very interesting and convincing point here: as these official records were shared among the aristocracy, there was in fact little room for forging and tampering.

The third chapter is rather abstruse for nonspecialist readers. It deals with a new theory developed by Tanikawa Kiyotaka, an astronomer, which offers a different method to retro-calculate the solar eclipses that occurred in ancient Japan. This method allows finding more congruence with the eclipses recorded in official chronicles than before. However, in Hosoi's view, inconsistencies should be taken as such, and he finds no reason to resort to this new method.

In his conclusion, which is very clear, Hosoi summarizes his goals and achievements, and stresses the necessity of considering official chronicles as a common property of the aristocracy, carefully crafted by "historians" of the time from more or less reliable sources who may still have expressed their own opinion in their choices.

Although the author of this review is not a specialist of Nara Japan, he feels Hosoi's work should be praised, not only for its very innovative and refreshing character, but also for reminding us how cautious we have to be when making assumptions of any sort about official records. What is more, Hosoi's study, while sometimes difficult to follow, demonstrates we still have a lot to learn from documents as "obvi-

ous” as the *Shoku Nihongi* and the following chronicles, especially regarding how and why they were compiled. The only criticism that might be made here would be about the applicability of Hosoi’s results to records not dealing with astronomical events. Hosoi chooses to take such a leap, and to infer “definitive” conclusions from what he could observe in these records. However, one may not decide to follow him on these grounds. This would not disqualify his results, nor invalidate his achievements to limit his conclusions to his main theme: astronomical events.

All in all, Hosoi’s book appears as a major contribution to several fields, from ancient history to calendar studies and ancient astronomy.

REFERENCE

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