



# JAPAN VIII. SAFAVID STUDIES IN JAPAN

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Among Japanese scholars interested in Iran, the ratio of historians who conduct research on pre-modern Iran is relatively higher than that in Europe and North America. This seems to be due to the fact that, while in Europe and North America researchers interested in Iran are trained either in the departments of Oriental Studies or Middle Eastern Studies, where a variety of related subjects are taught, in Japan they usually come out of the departments of Oriental History. The unique notion of “Oriental history” (*tōyōshi*) is closely related to the Japanese world view at the turn of the 19th-20th centuries. Until quite recently, there have been neither special departments for Persian language and literature or Iranian philosophy, nor a department of Middle Eastern Studies in any large university in Japan. As a result, historical studies has been the only choice for a student who wanted access to Iran.

Japanese scholars began to become interested in Iran and the Middle East in the 1970s, when serious historical research began. The growing interest in the history of a remote country like Iran, which had had no close relations with Japan, seems to reflect the stability and prosperity of Japanese society some thirty years after the end of the Second World War. At the same time, Japanese



economic dependence on the Middle East, revealed by the Oil Shock of 1973 and the Iranian Revolution in 1979, raised the general interest in Iran and the Middle East.

Minobu Honda, the founder of Japanese historical studies on Iran and a specialist of the Mongol period, became professor in the department of West Asian History at Kyoto University in 1975. To make Persian primary sources accessible to researchers and students of Iranian studies, he made efforts to furnish the library with published Persian sources as well as microfilms of important Persian manuscripts kept in Western and Iranian libraries. He also invited distinguished Iranian scholars such as Iraj Afšār to Japan to train students in using Persian manuscripts. Under the direction of Honda and Eiji Mano, associate professor in the same department, the Kyoto School of Iranian history became firmly established. The Safavid period was one of its popular topics, because it was regarded as the starting point of modern Iran and the fact that a considerable number of primary sources remain extant and easily accessible, compared with those of the earlier periods. Students such as Tōru Horikawa and Masashi Haneda, the second generation of the Kyoto school, became interested in Iranian and Central Asian history in the 16th and 17th centuries. Haneda, after getting his doctorate in Paris with a thesis on the Safavid military system (pub. as *Le châh et les Qizilbâš*), moved to the University of Tokyo and trained students such as Nobuaki Kondō, Akihiko Yamaguchi, Yukako Gotō, Kazuo Morimoto, Hirotake Maeda, and others, who are all interested in the medieval and modern history of Iran. Teaching of Persian language was done mainly by Koichi Haneda at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, who had spent several years in the 1970s in Tehran. Thus, the school of Iranian history was established at the University of Tokyo, in addition to the already existing Kyoto school, from which noted scholars such as the late Shiro Ando, Kazuyuki Kubo, Tomoko Morikawa, and others have emerged. Kondō and Morimoto spent some time in Iran, while Maeda stayed in Georgia for a couple of years. Yamaguchi and Gotō carried out their research in Paris and Bamberg respectively. Only M. Haneda took part in the second Safavid round table held in Cambridge in 1993, but when the fourth Safavid round table was held in Bamberg in 2003, there were five Japanese participants. Japan has now become an important center for the study of Safavid history.

The genesis of Safavid studies in Japan was an outgrowth of the interest in the history of the Mongols and the Turkic people, which is a significant point



characterizing Safavid studies there. A second such point is the current strong tendency to place Safavid history within a general framework of Middle Eastern history.

Iranian history has usually been taught as part of Oriental history in most Japanese universities, where the history of the Mongols and Turkic people is a favorite theme and which has had a long tradition of study since the end of the 19th century. Consequently it was quite natural that the first generation of scholars interested in Iranian history, like Honda and Mano, should have started their research through an interest in Mongol and Turkic history. The second generation of scholars, such as Horikawa and Haneda, inherited the outlook of their teachers and, making use of the extensive work already done on Mongol and Turkic history in Japanese, attempted to point out the significance of Turco-Mongol tribal elements in Safavid society. This kind of approach was able to relativize Walther Hinz's (q.v.) theory of the rebuilding the Iranian nation state by the Safavids, which was widely accepted in Japanese academic circles at the time.

In Japan, the tendency to set up a research field called the "Islamic World" is so strong that historians of Iran are usually regarded as being in the same group as historians of Arab countries and the Ottoman Empire. They often exchange research information with one another, and, as a result, find common topics, such as the institution of pious endowments (*waqf*), the "Islamic" slavery system, the comparative military system, the social role of the ulema, and so on. Such communication beyond the borders of ethnicity and political territory is a strongpoint of Japanese studies on Iranian history. On the other hand, Japanese scholars are inclined to establish a framework of the "Islamic world," almost equivalent with the Arabo-Perso-Turkish world of the Middle East, and confine their studies within it.

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