



Minakata Kumagusu and the British Museum

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Minakata in the British Museum

According to Minakata Fumie (1911–2000), the daughter of Minakata Kumagusu (1867–1941), her father continued to share his memories of the British Museum late into his life.

“When I first entered the Library, I found it to be the very place I had always dreamed of going,” [1] Minakata had said.



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It was on April 10, 1895 that Minakata applied for readership at the British Library, one of the world’s largest libraries, then located inside the British Museum in central London [2]. Minakata had been introduced by Charles Hercules Read (1857–1929), Keeper of the Department of British and Mediaeval Antiquities and Ethnography, to the Museum’s Augustus Wollaston Franks (1826–97), Read’s predecessor as Keeper, on September 22, 1893 as a young, learned Japanese scholar able to advise the Museum on the Department’s Oriental collection. Minakata became acquainted with Robert Douglas (1838–1913), the first Keeper of the Department of Oriental Books, in October, 1895 and assisted him in compiling the catalogue of Japanese and Chinese books. The British Museum thus became the base for Minakata’s academic activities in London.

In this Library of his dreams, Minakata embarked on a project to research the rare books unavailable in Japan or elsewhere, work which entailed transcribing books either in whole or in part in an anthology he titled “London Extracts,” or “*Rondon nukigaki* (ロンドン抜書).” Minakata had completed around thirty-seven volumes of this work when he was expelled from the Museum, in December 1898, for hitting another reader.

According to his diary, Minakata had visited the Museum almost every day for three and a half years, spending the whole afternoon there until closing time at 8 o’clock. Having been expelled from the British Museum, Minakata continued his work on the “Extracts” in the Libraries of the Natural History Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum (called the South Kensington Museum until 1899) until his return to Japan in 1900, by which time he had completed fifty-two volumes. Extending to more than 10,000 pages, “London Extracts” comprises transcriptions of approximately 700 books in English, French, Italian, German, Spanish, Greek and Latin, in addition to Chinese and Japanese works. The anthology is testament to the extraordinary strength of concentration of Minakata, who for this trait was regarded by some as paranoid or as occupying the borderline between genius and madness.

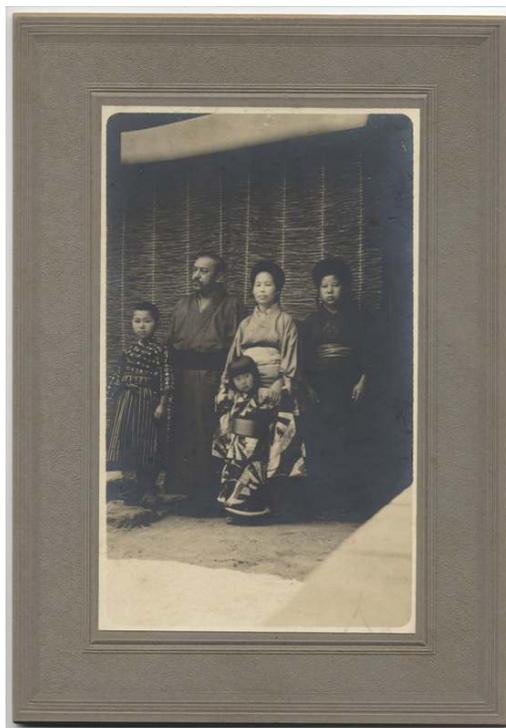
What kind of books, then, did Minakata so enthusiastically read during this period? How did they form the basis of his philosophy and study of humanity thereafter? Before answering these



questions, let's briefly look back on his academic preferences in his younger days.

Minakata was born in Wakayama, Wakayama Prefecture in 1867, and was educated in Tokyo from 1883 to 1886. In his early teens, he read and transcribed books on traditional natural history in China and Japan, as well as on Western science, which was just being introduced to Japan. At the age of nineteen, Minakata left Japan for the United States, where he stayed for five years, teaching himself through his reading and fieldwork, after quitting two schools in very short time. He studied modern European sciences such as botany, sociology and philosophy. Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) and his synthetic sciences in particular were an influence on Minakata in this period.

During his stay in the United States, Minakata became increasingly interested in cultural comparisons between the West and East, and came to feel more conscious of his own cultural background. His devotion to Buddhism as one part of his identity is reported to have burgeoned in this period. Thereafter, he came to London, believing it to be the center of the academic world. Shortly before meeting the aforementioned Franks at the British Museum, Minakata had begun to contribute essays in the English language to *Nature* magazine, and succeeded in having them published. His first essay, "The Constellations of the Far East," published in the October 5, 1893 number, compares the celestial division systems in Ancient China and India. Thereafter, Minakata continued to submit essays to *Nature*, these being mainly in the fields of "history of science" and "folklore studies," as they may be classified by today's standards.



Minakata Family photographed by Dr. Walter T. Swingle: Kumagusu (second left) and Fumie (middle of the front row)

PHOTO: COURTESY OF MINAKATA KUMAGUSU ARCHIVES (MINAKATA KUMAGUSU KENSHO KAI)

“London Extracts” and Comparative Studies of Folklore

From these academic preferences of Minakata, we might intuit the content of “London Extracts” to some extent. Indeed, collecting the source of comparative folklore studies is the primary purpose of these notes. The first transcription in the first volume of the anthology is from Jean Moura's (1827–1885) *Le Royaume du Cambodge* (The Kingdom of Cambodia), published in 1883. Minakata quotes a short record on p. 435 of the second volume of Moura's book about the use of a king's fingerprint. Minakata was clearly interested in this record because he had published a related essay in *Nature*, entitled “Fingerprint Method,” in 1894. His argument was that Eastern countries had used the fingerprint system for personal identification long before Western countries introduced it in the late nineteenth century. After this short article, Minakata began to transcribe all the volumes



of Moura's book, and then moved on to Étienne Aymonier's (1844–1929) *Notice sur le Cambodge* (A Report on Cambodia). Minakata probably first paid attention to Cambodia because this region had also been recorded by Chinese authors from ancient times, so he was able to compare the same local customs from the different perspectives of Western and Eastern civilizations.

Of course, it is not only Cambodia and South East Asia that Minakata researched and recorded in "London Extracts." Almost all parts of the world are covered over the 52 volumes and included in his comparative folklore studies. In a letter to Dogi Horyu, a Shingon priest whom Minakata had met in October 1893, Minakata outlined a plan to make a great journey across the Eurasian Continent.

I will be devoted in learning languages (including Jewish, Persian, Turkish, several Indian languages and Tibetan) in the next couple of years, and collect donations from people of several countries other than Japan, to visit the holy places of Christ in Palestine and of Mahomet in Mecca, then walk into Persia, travel to India, research Mahayana Buddhism in Kashmir, and reach Tibet. I will become a priest in those places, an Islamic one in Islamic countries, a Hindu one in India. [3]

Minakata soon abandoned this plan, but it would seem he was still pursuing it in the British Library in his reading of the travel books of all ages and cultures. In "London Extracts," we can find the records of such great travelers of ancient times as Xuanzang, who journeyed from China to India (seventh century); two Arabians who journeyed to China, introduced by Joseph Toussaint Reinaud (ninth century); Marco Polo, from Italy to China (thirteenth century); Ibn Battuta, from Morocco to China (fourteenth century); Leo Africanus around northern Africa (sixteenth century); and Pigafetta, around the world (sixteenth century). Minakata also drew upon the voluminous



"London Extracts," or "Rondon nukigaki (ロンドン抜書)"

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travel anthologies compiled by Giovanni Battista Ramusio (sixteenth century), Samuel Purchas (seventeenth century), Awnsham and John Churchill (1732), Thomas Astley (1745–47), John Pinkerton (1808), and the Hakluyt Society series of travel books (1846–). Of course, the books of such relatively recent explorers as Nicolai Prejevalsky, Sven Hedin, Francis Younghusband and Richard Burton are also included. With these travel accounts, the local customs and folklores not only of Europe and Asia, but also of Africa, the New Continents and Pacific Islands are accumulated in the transcriptions in

"London Extracts."

It was actually quite common to use such travel records as the source of comparative sociology and anthropology in the nineteenth century. For example, Herbert Spencer's *Descriptive Sociology*, which greatly influenced Minakata, is composed of comparative tables of the primitive cultures of



the world, taking most of its information from the descriptions of past and contemporary travelers and missionaries from around the world. James Frazer's *Golden Bough*, most of the volumes of which Minakata read at the time of their publication, also owes to these records as references to be incorporated in his grandiose version of the history of human society [4]. On one hand, such a method is the main reason that nineteenth-century anthropology was criticized and literally discarded by the anthropologists of the next generation, who emphasized the importance of "field work." On the other hand, we should not underestimate the importance of such travel records as found in "London Extracts." Unlike the contemporary anthropological information, these records contain observations following the "first contacts" or at least much earlier contacts than today's contacts between different cultures. The cultural differences in the world before the development of the mass transportation of people and information exchange in later centuries were much bigger than we can imagine from today's viewpoint. Minakata was keen to select documents written by authors from various cultural backgrounds, including Chinese, Muslim, African, as well as European writers. He could also profit from his background as an East Asian in using classical Oriental literature for his analyses of what European counterparts had recorded. In other words, Minakata sought to introduce multiple viewpoints so as to better understand the cultural phenomena in the world.

In this sense, it is noteworthy that several of the earliest records of the Jesuit Society about Japan in the middle of the sixteenth century are excerpted in "London Extracts." Here we can find the first official report on Japan in mid-sixteenth Century, which is the first official report on Japan, written by the Jesuit officer Nicolao Lancillot, as well as the letters of Francisco Xavier, known as the first missionary to Japan, both originally compiled in Ramusio's *Navigazioni e Viaggi*.

Minakata made the transcription of these articles in 1895, so the first contact between Europe and Japan is thought to be one of the several topics about which he was interested in this period. The information brought by these Jesuits naturally contains many misunderstandings of Japanese culture, and Minakata adds some commentaries in Japanese to draw attention to those points. We can probably see here the relativization between the "discoverer" and "discovered" through the exchange of viewpoints, realized across several centuries. In one part, Minakata praises his sixteenth-century compatriot Anjiro as a "brave man" because, when Lancillot asked him, "Why do the Japanese write in such a strange way, vertically?" he replied, "Why do the Europeans write horizontally, violating the natural order of this world clearly shown in the human body, which stands vertically with a head and feet?" [5]

Sexology in the "London Extracts"

There is no doubt that travel records as the source for comparative folklore studies are the main feature of "London Extracts." The first few volumes, however, surprise us with the number of books and articles concerning "sodomy," "pederasty," "onanism," and so on. It is such a field, which might be called "sexology," or the science of sex, that is the most conspicuous in Volumes 1 to 4.

Why did Minakata read these rather "immoral" texts in a quiet corner of the huge dome shaped library? Was he sexually oppressed during his long sojourn in foreign countries? Yes, definitely. It is important to know that Minakata in his late teens had an inclination toward homosexuality. He



even had physical affairs with some of his male friends, though only a couple of times. The custom was in fact not so uncommon in the homo-social community of young Japanese students in the early Meiji period, in the same way it was not so uncommon among the youth in British boarding schools. When in the United States, Minakata once confessed in a letter to a friend in Japan that he could not find such desirable boys as he could among his colleagues in Tokyo [6]. However, the public code regarding male homosexuality in Anglo Saxon countries was much stricter than in Japan in that period. One example is the trial of Oscar Wilde, which took place in 1895, the very year that work on “London Extracts” began. It is not certain whether Minakata was aware of Wilde’s case or not, but a similar homosexual criminal in London is mentioned in his diary [7].

In this context, the transcriptions of texts related to homosexuality in “London Extracts” should not be regarded merely as a personal pleasure of Minakata. It may be supposed that what Minakata paid attention to here was rather a matter of the anthropological observation of sexology. This point is made clearer by the fact that in “London Extracts” Minakata compares the taboos and restrictions on sexual desire in different societies. He quotes the article on “bestiality” in Hughes’ *Dictionary of Islam* and Vambery’s report on homosexuality in Muslim Central Asia in order to seek a third viewpoint on the issue in addition to those of figures in the West and Japan [8]. He also compares the English translation of the chapters on “Onanisme” and “Amour Socratique (Pederasty)” in Voltaire’s *Dictionnaire Philosophique* with the original text in French, and points out that some lines are omitted in the former version, presumably as a consequence of the voluntary constraints of the Victorian sexual code [9]. He also quotes Francisco Xavier’s criticism of the practice of keeping catamites in Japanese Buddhist temples as a sin against nature.

Thus, Minakata analyses the historical and cultural background of the oppression of homosexuality in the world, probably motivated by the cultural gap he himself actually felt in the United States and England. He also extends the study of sexology to such topics as eunuchs, prostitution, sexual assault, and sexual delusion. It is interesting that such a book as Benjamin Ball’s *La Folie Erotique*, summarized in “London Extracts,” deals with the problem of mental disorder caused by sexual oppression. These facts remind us that Minakata was a contemporary of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and of Havlock Ellis (1859–1839), who developed psychoanalysis and sexology as scientific fields. Although Minakata learned about these authors after his return to Japan, and is not thought to have been much influenced by them, it is obvious that he was working in more or less the same context as them.

However, Minakata’s study of sex in this period was always limited by its purely bookish nature. It is true that, according to his own confession, Minakata converted from homosexuality to heterosexuality towards the end of his stay in London. He fell in love with a barmaid called Miss Cremmy, who worked in a pub around Bayswater, which he visited almost every evening on his way from the British Museum to his home around High Street Kensington. However, he was too shy to court her in any way. According to his diary, when she touched his hand one evening while pouring his beer, he suddenly withdrew it, making her angry. We can only believe his words that he did not have physical relations with a woman until he got married at 41.

“London Extracts” After the London Period

How, then, did Minakata develop his research in “London Extracts” after his return to Japan in



September 1900? As a consequence of his departure from London, he could not continue to pursue the same academic activities he had done previously. He stayed alone in Mt. Nachi, Wakayama Prefecture, from 1901 to 1904, a place far removed from the libraries that had given him free access to academic materials of all sorts. While creating his own philosophy, called “Minakata Mandala,” and collecting so-called cryptogam plants in the wild forests, he completed several long English essays, only to find them rejected by the editors in London.

Minakata was quite disappointed by this result, caused perhaps to some extent by the distance between Europe and Japan. From this period, he began to contribute more essays to *Notes and Queries* than to *Nature*, and tended to correspond on the discussions in the magazine rather than freely express his own arguments. Although he sometimes checked the “London Extracts” for reference’s sake after his return to Japan, it was not until he started his magnum opus, called *Junishiko*, or *A Study of Twelve Animals of Chinese Zodiac*, in Japanese in 1914 that he fully used these notes. In the *Junishiko* series, Minakata displayed his huge erudition almost like a pedantic acrobat to compare the folklores in the world on such animals as the Zodiac’s tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake and horse. However, the purpose of these essays for the New Year’s celebration volume of *Taiyo* magazine was more for entertainment than academic research. As for sexology, Minakata showed his knowledge mainly in his contributions to the magazines edited by journalist Miyatake Gaikotsu (1867–1955) and in private letters to the painter Iwata Jun’ichi, but in these cases as well, his main purpose is thought to have been the maniac pleasure of the dilettantes rather than scientific analysis.

Such an itinerary of Minakata after his return to Japan suggests that the ideas in “London Extracts” were modified in his later works according to the contexts of the media in which they were featured, rather than developed as independent works. We should therefore go back to the pages of the notes themselves and Minakata’s activities of the same period alongside contemporary European academic trends, to actually understand and evaluate his original thinking. Such research cannot be conducted only by Japanese scholars on Minakata, for it concerns the history, folklore, literature, philosophy, geography and so on in the context of several European and Asian languages. Intercultural collaboration is necessary for the study of Minakata more than for any other Japanese writer of the modern period. It is not an easy task, but it surely shows us a unique example of the challenge taken on by an extraordinarily erudite non Westerner in



“Minakata Mandala” in Minakata’s letter to Dogi Horyu

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nineteenth-century London. It will also contribute, I believe, to providing a wider and balanced perspective on the cultural contacts between different societies, free from the bias generally prevalent in the past few centuries, caused by the intellectual dominance of “the West” over other parts of the world.

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Footnotes:

1. Suwa Atsuhiko, “Interview with Minakata Fumie,” *Kumagusu Kenkyu [Study of Kumagusu]*, Vol. 3, 2001, p. 40
2. Makita Kenji, “London no Minakata Kumagusu,” *Me no me*, p. 66
3. Minakata Kumagusu Zenshu, Vol. 7, p. 239
4. Minakata was also reading Friedlich Ratzel’s *History of Mankind* or Theodor Waitz’s *Anthropology der Naturvolker* and quite aware of the development of anthropology in the late nineteenth century. It is interesting that in his draft of the letter to the British Museum Committee to explain his bad attitude there, he uses the word “anthropology” to describe his research in the Library, deleting “sociology.”
5. “London Extracts,” Vol. 2, Front, p. 213 「此男中々ノ豪傑ト見エタリ」 (This man seemingly cast in a heroic mold.)
6. Letter to Sugimura Hirotaro, 19 Jul., 1887 (Minakata Kumagusu Zenshu, Vol. 7, p. 68)
7. Minakata Kumagusu Diary, 11 Nov. 1894, Vol. 1, p.356
8. “London Extracts”, Vol. 1, p.211
9. “London Extracts”, Vol. 3, Front, pp. 52–62

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