Pre-modern Japan and the West

Martha Chaiklin

The first Europeans arrived in Japan by accident. There was a fuzzy idea of its existence from Marco Polo's account of "Zipangu," as a country covered with silver and gold, and traders in Southeast Asia must have known of its existence but no expeditions were specifically sent in order to find it. Instead, three armed Portuguese, on a Chinese junk, drifted to Tanegashima, an island off the southern coast of Kyūshū, in 1543. So began a century of productive cross-pollination between Japan and the Western world.

In Japan this was known as the period of Warring States. The shogun still held office in Kyoto but political decay had resulted in a century of armed conflict throughout the land. As a result, the harquebuses (an early gun so large and heavy it required a support) carried by the Portuguese that arrived in Tanegashima were copied and mass-produced in less than a decade. As guns came to be included in the arsenal of the Japanese warrior, this dramatically affected warfare. Instead of the battles strategized to make use of cavalry, infantry became much more important. The first battle where guns are considered to have made a decisive difference in the outcome was the Battle of Nagashino in 1575, in which Oda Nobunaga defeated Takeda Katsuyori.

Equally important was the arrival of the Jesuit missionary St. Francis Xavier. Founder of the Society of Jesus with Ignatius Loyola, he was ordered to the Far East by the pope in 1540. After working in India, Malacca, the Moloccas, and Motorai (an island near the Philippines), he arrived in Japan in 1549. He spent two years in Japan, traveling from Kyūshū to Kyoto, and he moved on to China, which he believed was the key to converting the entire East. Xavier and his party were followed by others who set about establishing a Christian community based in Kyūshū. In 1580, in hopes of attracting foreign trade, the local daimyo granted the Jesuits the port of Nagasaki. The Jesuits converted through education, introducing many Western concepts that had nothing to do with religion. These acts included the establishment of a printing press with moveable type to print religious tracts, instruction in oil painting which was a new medium for the Japanese, and Western medical techniques.

The arrival of the Portuguese also signified the commencement of direct trading relations with the West. Portuguese trade in Asia generally was not intercontinental; rather, they served as transporters of goods between Asian countries. For Japan in the sixteenth century, this trade consisted primarily of an exchange of Chinese silks and medicines for Japanese gold and silver. Other things were introduced along the way, including tobacco, corn, and Western articles of dress such as the cape. Although the

Portuguese managed to maintain a virtual monopoly on this profitable commerce for over fifty years, in 1589, the Spanish ignored the papal bull that had divided the world and sent both Franciscan missionaries and traders from the Philippines to Japan.

At the same time Europe was going through radical changes. The Portuguese and Spanish empires began to crumble. In 1581 the Netherlands had declared independence from Portugal, and by 1595, the forerunners of what would become the Dutch East India Company sent expeditions to Asia and the Indies. It was one such expedition, also beset by storms that resulted in the arrival of the*Liefde (Charity),* the sole survivor of a fleet of five, on the shores of Kyūshū in 1600. Some of the members of the crew, notably Melichor van Santvoort, and the captain, Jacob Quackernaeck, worked actively to promote trade between the Netherlands and Japan. The United East India Company was formed in 1602, and the factory, or trading post, was established in Hirado in Kyūshū in 1609.

One of the most famous passengers on the *Liefde*, however, was not Dutch. Will Adams, the subject of at least two books and fictionalized in James Clavell's *Shogun,* was the pilot (what we would today call navigator) of the ship. Adams taught shipbuilding and navigation, and received a stipend in recognition for his services. He encouraged the English to enter the market. The English East Company ship, the *Clove*, captained by John Saris, arrived in Japan in 1613. The factory was officially established in 1614.

As trade with the outside world expanded, Japan underwent rapid political change. In the forty years between 1560 and 1600, the warring domains were unified. This process was begun by Oda Nobunaga. One major barrier that Nobunaga had to overcome to achieve unification was to overcome the powerful Buddhist religious establishment. For this reason, and because of the economic benefits that accrued from association with the Portuguese, Nobunaga was on cordial terms with the both the traders and missionaries. After Nobunaga was assassinated in 1582, his successor, Toyotomi Hideyoshi initially continued these policies, but for reasons not entirely clear, in 1587, he prohibited Christianity. Because no attempts were made at enforcement, the Jesuits merely continued their activities in secret. However, despite the papal bull, the Spanish Franciscans arrived in 1593, and despite the ban, openly went about their missionary work. This came to a head in 1596 with the *San Felipe* Incident. Supposedly the captain of this shipwrecked Spanish ship, angered by having his cargo confiscated, told Hideyoshi the missionaries were there to prepare for Spanish invasion. Hideyoshi, then decided to enforce the ban and in 1597, twenty-six people, (six Franciscans, three Jesuits and seventeen converts) were crucified. Churches were destroyed and other attempts were made to eradicate Christianity.

When Hideyoshi died in 1598, and Tokugawa Ieyasu took control of a now unified Japan, he halted the persecution of Christianity in order to secure foreign trade. He merely prohibited daimyo from being baptized. However, in early 1614, supposedly incited by Buddhist priests and the English and Dutch, the prohibitions against Christianity were enforced. After that, enforcement became increasing regular and severe. Capture of priests and documents they held convinced shogunal authorities that Spain would not halt missionary activities so that in 1624, all Spanish were banished from Japan. A mission sent from the king to renegotiate trading privileges in 1640 was beheaded. Also in 1624, the English, unable to make their factory profitable, left of their own accord.

By the 1630s the political climate had swung toward isolationism. This was reinforced by a series of five edicts issued by the third Tokugawa shogun, Iemitsu. Known as the *sakoku*, or closed country, edicts became successively more restrictive. They banned Christianity, prohibited Japanese from entering or leaving the country upon penalty of death, ordered all children of foreigners out of the country, limited Japanese ship size to prevent ocean voyages, and forced the Portuguese to move onto a small, fan-shaped artificial island called Dejima. Finally in 1639, the Portuguese were expelled altogether. In 1641 the Dutch were compelled to move from Hirado onto Dejima.

As a result the Dutch became the only Westerners allowed to trade in Japan for the next 220 years. For most of the seventeenth century this trade was enormously profitable. It was based largely on the import of Chinese medicines and silks, and the export of Japanese copper. Copper was exported in such quantities in the seventeenth century that it affected prices in Europe. In the eighteenth century, however, trade declined for a number of reasons. Japanese production had reduced the demand for Chinese silks, which was only replaced to a limited extent by woolens, other textiles, and other products. Policies espoused by shogunal councilor Arai Hakuseki, which advocated self-sufficiency, resulted in rules that limited the number of ships that could come to Japan and the amount of copper that could be exported. Finally, the Dutch East India Company itself was in the process of slow collapse.

Nevertheless, many things came in through the Dutch traders, including clocks, textile dyes, incense, birds and other animals, leather, armaments, glass, ivory, artwork and books. The transfer between West and East did not merely consist of books, but also of knowledge. For one thing, the Dutch were required to make reports to the Japanese government about the affairs of the world. But they also brought knowledge of technological advances. Because the Dutch were required to reside on Dejima, and were not supposed to learn Japanese, a corps of interpreters grew around them. In the seventeenth century, the persecution of Christianity had led to a general distancing from anything Western. However, when Yoshimune became shogun in 1715, through his

encouragement there was an upsurge of study of knowledge of the West. Because the Dutch were the conduit for this knowledge it came to be known as *rangaku*, or Dutch studies.

Initially, *rangaku* was primarily a product of the interpreters in Nagasaki, because they had the language skills. Eventually, however, through students of these interpreters and their translations, knowledge spread slowly through intellectual circles in Japan. Progress was at times slow because often the theoretical and philosophical basis for Western technological development was absent. Often the scholars were working from outdated books. *Rangaku* could and did cover the entire range of sciences, from astronomy to zoology, and even things like painting and etching techniques. Other works trickled in too. For example, *Robinson Crusoe* was translated into Japanese in 1850.

Medicine was perhaps one the most concentrated fields of study. The publication in 1774 of the *Kaitai Shinsho* is seen as a landmark. A translation of *Tafel Anatomia* by Johann Adam Kulmus, it took Maeno Ryōtaku and Sugita Genpaku three years to complete this translation. They had been inspired by noticing how exactly this anatomy book resembled the body, unlike their traditional Chinese-based texts. Henceforth, more and more works were translated and printed. A government translation bureau, called the *Bansho shirabesho* (Bureau for the Inspection of Barbarian Books), was even opened in 1811.

Knowledge was trickling in but official international relations remained much the same. The English had tried to reopen trade in 1673, but even they had been turned away. The Japanese gave as reason that the Queen of England was Portuguese, but isolationist policies had essentially become the traditional precedent by which future decisions were made.

By the late eighteenth century, the Russians were moving into Asia. Clashes occurred in Hokkaidō with Russian sailors. This awareness of a threat to the north spurred Japanese exploration of the island of Hokkaidō. Until then, a southern corner belonged to the Matsumae domain (*han*). The Japanese conducted a fairly extensive trade with the Ainu (the native Japanese of the area), but had not sought to expand their borders before Russian incursions. Finally in 1792, an expedition was sent under Adam Laxman (who was actually Finnish) to open trading relations between Russia and Japan. He returned several Japanese castaways but was told that all negotiations for trade had to be conducted in Nagasaki. Laxman left thinking permission had all but been granted so in 1804, the Russians sent an ambassador, Nikolai Resanov, to negotiate the details. The embassy was kept isolated for six months, and ultimately their gifts were refused

and trade declined. The outbreak of the Napoleonic Wars then kept Russia occupied for a number of years.

Napoleon also greatly affected the Dutch trading empire. The Dutch East India Company had collapsed by 1799. The factory on Japan still stood, but the Dutchmen there were essentially abandoned. Factory head Hendrik Doeff was stranded there for seventeen years. During that time, ships were chartered from other countries, including Denmark and the United States, to maintain trade. In 1813 Thomas Raffles even sent a ship, and tried to replace the Dutch in Japan, but Doeff convinced the English that the Japanese were still too angered by the actions of Captain Pellew in 1808. Known as the *Phaeton* incident, Pellew sailed into Nagasaki. He took two Dutchmen prisoner and demanded supplies or else he would hang the Dutchmen and set fire to all the ships in the harbor. Insufficient defenses had resulted in the suicide of the magistrate of Nagasaki. Doeff advised the English to wait until anger had cooled. Raffles sent another ship the following year, but then, apparently distracted by Singapore, he lost interest in Japan.

Dutch trade continued initially through investors in Batavia (now Jakarta) who had formed into the Private Trading Society. In 1824, the quasi-governmental Netherlands Trading Society was formed to conduct trade, but it was never profitable for the Dutch Government.

It is generally believed by scholars that the *sakoku* edicts were never meant to be permanent. However, tradition, Dutch efforts to main a monopoly, and lackluster efforts by Western powers resulted in little outside contact. The mid-nineteenth century was a time of change throughout the world. Imperialism as we understand it today was born through rapid advances in military technology such as percussion rifles. The Japanese were aware of this through the Dutch, and galvanized by knowledge of English victory in the Opium War in 1842, attempted to modernize their military.

The United States was also increasingly a player on the world stage. American ships sailed frequently in the Pacific in pursuit of whales. The United States was angered by Japanese treatment of these ships. As a result in 1853, a squadron under the command of Matthew Calbraith Perry steamed into Uraga in 1853. The Japanese tried to use the same stalling technique that worked so well with earlier Russian embassies, but Perry left with an ultimatum that a treaty be signed upon his return. Thus in 1854, the Treaty of Kanagawa was signed, which opened the ports of Nagasaki, Shimoda, and Hakodate to foreign ships so that they could purchase fuel and water.

The “opening” of Japan to trade took several more years of negotiation but by 1860, the United States, the Netherlands, Britain, France, and Russia all had commercial treaties and several other ports were opened. The pressures caused by these changes were a

contributing factor to the downfall of the shogunal system of government and Japan's entrance into global politics.

Suggested Reading

Blussè, Leonard, *et al. Bridging the Divide: 400 Years The Netherlands–Japan.* Leiden: Teleac, 2000.

Boxer, C. R. *The Christian Century in Japan*. Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 1951.

Cooper, M. J. *The Came to Japan: An Anthology of European Reports on Japan, 1543–1640.* Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1965.

Sansom, George. *The Western World and Japan*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1970.