

## 17. REGULATING FOREIGN RELATIONS: THE “CLOSED COUNTRY EDICTS” (*SAKOKU REI*, 1635, 1639)

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### INTRODUCTION

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Between 1633 and 1639, the Tokugawa shogunate—specifically, the SENIOR COUNCILORS (*rôjû*)—dispatched five separate documents to its magistrates (*bugyô*) in Nagasaki that limited trade and the scope of Japan’s foreign relations. Four of these sets of edicts were quite similar in substance, though each successive one contained some important additions and amendments. The fifth (1639) edict was simply an addendum to the previous one, calling for the exclusion of the Portuguese; copies of it were to be given to officials on any Chinese or Dutch ships that came to Nagasaki to trade. This series of edicts was part of the policies of the shogun, Tokugawa Iemitsu (1604–1651), to solidify political control over the country.

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### KEEP IN MIND AS YOU READ

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1. This set of edicts was untitled; only in recent times has it, and the other similar edicts issued between 1633 and 1639, been referred to by historians as the “closed country,” or *sakoku*, edicts. This interpretation of the memorandum may not have been what its authors intended.
2. There were a number of antecedents to the edicts of 1633–1639: (1) As of 1605 it was no longer permitted to build vessels with a capacity in excess of 500 *koku*; in other words, it was prohibited to build oceangoing vessels; and (2) in 1616, European traders were restricted to the ports of Nagasaki and Hirado.
3. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, before the edicts of 1633–1639 were issued, trade with Europe brought the Japanese a variety of Western goods, such as eyeglasses, clocks, firearms, and artillery, which found interest among many Japanese for a time. However, the Portuguese and other Europeans were part of an inter-Asian trade network and traded primarily in Asian, not European, goods. The Japanese could also obtain these goods through trade with the semi-independent vassal kingdom of Ryûkyû, with Korea (through Tsushima domain), and with the AINU people (through Matsumae domain).
4. The Spanish had been expelled in 1624. The year before, the English had closed down their trade factory (see Section 11) and left Japan voluntarily.

## *Document 1: Memorandum Addressed to the Nagasaki Magistrates (1635)*

1. It is strictly prohibited for Japanese ships to leave for foreign countries.
2. Japanese are prohibited from going abroad. If a Japanese goes abroad in secret, he will be put to death. The ship that transported him must be impounded, its owner arrested, and the matter reported to the authorities.
3. If any Japanese returns home after residing abroad, he must be put to death.

**Edo:** Here refers not to the city, but to the Tokugawa shogunate.

**five trading cities:** The five cities—Kyoto, Edo, Osaka, Sakai, and Nagasaki—where the shogunate allowed foreigners to conduct trade.

**Galeota:** Portuguese ship.

**Hirado:** A small island off the coast of Kyushu, not far from Nagasaki.

**Ômura domain:** The area around the city of Nagasaki.

**padre:** A father or priest in the Catholic church.

**southern barbarians:** Westerners, but more specifically those from southern Europe, such as the Portuguese and Spanish.

4. If there is any place where the teachings of the **padres** (Christianity) is practiced, the two of you must order a thorough investigation.
5. Any informer who reveals the whereabouts of the followers of padres (Christians) must be rewarded. If anyone reveals the whereabouts of a high-ranking padre, he must be given one hundred pieces of silver; for those of lower ranks, the reward must be set accordingly.
6. If a foreign ship has objections to the edicts and it becomes necessary to report the matter to **Edo**, you may ask the officials of **Ômura domain** to provide ships to guard the foreign vessel, as was done previously.
7. If there are any **southern barbarians** who spread the teachings of the padres, or otherwise commit crimes, they may be locked up in the prison maintained by Ômura domain, as was done previously.
8. All incoming ships must be carefully searched for the followers of padres.
9. No single trading city shall be permitted to purchase all the merchandise brought by foreign ships.

10. Samurai are not permitted to purchase any goods originating from foreign ships directly from Chinese merchants in Nagasaki.
11. After a list of merchandise brought by foreign ships is sent to Edo, as before, you may order that commercial dealings may take place without waiting for a reply from Edo.
12. After settling the price, all white yarns [raw silk] brought by foreign ships shall be allocated to the **five trading cities** and other quarters as stipulated.
13. After settling the price of white yarns, other merchandise [brought by foreign ships] may be traded freely between the [licensed] dealers. However, since the Chinese ships are small and cannot bring large consignments, you may issue orders of sale at your discretion. In addition, payment for commodities purchased must be made within twenty days after the price is fixed.
14. The date of departure homeward for foreign ships shall not be later than the twentieth day of the Ninth Month. Any ships arriving in Japan later than usual shall depart within fifty days of their arrival. As to the departure

of Chinese ships, use your discretion to order their departure after the Portuguese *galeota* have left.

15. The goods brought by foreign ships that remain unsold may not be deposited or accepted for deposit.
16. The arrival in Nagasaki of representatives of the five trading cities shall not be later than the fifth day of the Seventh Month. Anyone arriving later than that date shall lose the quota assigned to his city.
17. Ships arriving in **Hirado** must sell their raw silk at the price set in Nagasaki; only after the price is established in Nagasaki are they permitted to engage in business transactions.

You are hereby required to act in accordance with the provisions set above. It is so ordered.

**Source:** Hōseishi gakkai, ed., *Tokugawa kinreikō*, vol. 2 (Sōbunsha, 1959), 231.

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## *Document 2: Exclusion of the Portuguese (1639)*

1. The proscription of Christianity is known [to the Portuguese], but heretofore they have secretly transported those who are going to propagate that religion.
2. If those who believe in that religion band together in an attempt to do evil things, they must be subjected to punishment.
3. While those who believe in the preaching of the priests are in hiding, there are incidents in which that country [i.e., Portugal] has sent gifts to them for their sustenance.

In view of the above, hereafter entry by the Portuguese *galeota* is forbidden. If they insist on coming [to Japan], the ships must be destroyed and anyone aboard those ships must be beheaded. We have received the above order and are thus transmitting it to you accordingly.

### **Memorandum**

With regard to those who believe in Christianity, you are aware that there is a proscription, and thus knowing, you are not permitted to let padres and those who believe in their preaching to come aboard your ships. If there is any violation, all of you who are aboard will be considered culpable. If there is anyone who hides the fact that he is Christian and boards your ship, you may report it to us. A substantial reward will be given to you for this information.

This memorandum is to be given to those who come on Chinese ships. [A similar note to the Dutch ships.]

**Source:** Hōseishi gakkai, ed., *Tokugawa kinreikō*, vol. 2 (Sōbunsha, 1959), 232.

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## **AFTERMATH**

After the Portuguese were expelled from Japan (see “Portuguese Influence in Japan”), the only Europeans allowed to remain in Japan were the Dutch, who were not interested

in converting the Japanese to Christianity. They were, however, restricted to their post in Hirado and then, in 1641, forced to move to the specially constructed fan-shaped island of Dejima in Nagasaki harbor. The edicts issued from 1633 to 1639 are misleadingly referred to as the “closed country edicts”; and many texts still incorrectly claim that they were intended to close down foreign trade and to isolate Japan from the rest of the world. In fact, the shogunate only moved to expel the Portuguese once it received assurances from the Dutch that they could make up for the volume of trade that would be lost with the Portuguese gone. The Portuguese were expelled because the Tokugawa could no longer tolerate the threat to their nation building that the Catholic missionaries and their supporters represented. This step was also taken so the Tokugawa could gain control of foreign trade and prevent potentially hostile daimyo from trading with the Europeans for guns and other armaments. Rather than close itself off to the outsider world, Japan’s trade with Korea and China actually increased after the Portuguese were expelled. Only in the early eighteenth century did foreign trade levels drop, and then only because of concerns that too much of Japan’s natural resources, particularly silver and copper, were being drained to pay for imports. As a result, domestic industries in silk and ginseng, two of Japan’s main imports, were encouraged.

While the idea of a “closed country” in the sense of Japan intentionally shutting itself off from the outside world is incorrect, the edicts limited Japanese contacts with foreign countries and peoples from the 1635 until the 1850s. They also effectively ended Japan’s licensed (red-seal) trade with Southeast Asia, which had prospered since the late sixteenth century.

The Tokugawa shogunate was able to increase its power and authority by controlling foreign trade and relations. As a result of these limitations, Japan was able to concentrate on internal developments and to enjoy the fruits of several centuries of peace. However, although it was not the intention of the Tokugawa leaders to shut Japan off from the outside world, with the force of time, the restrictions imposed induced a state of mind, or *mentalité*, in which the ideal state for Japan was one of isolation. Later, in the mid-nineteenth century, when various Western powers attempted to convince the shogunate to undo the restrictions, Japanese officials referred to Japan’s isolation as “ancestral law.” The Americans were the first to succeed in getting the shogunate to change its foreign policy stance of not dealing with foreign governments by forcing upon it a Western-style diplomatic treaty (1854). This was followed a few years later (1858) by a full-blown commercial treaty.

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### ASK YOURSELF

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1. Do you agree with the interpretation that this memorandum should be called the “closed country” edict? (Why or why not?) How did it affect the Japanese people?
2. The 17 articles that comprise the memorandum arguably can be divided into three major sections. What are the three sections, and how would you entitle each of them?
3. According to the various articles, how was foreign trade to be regulated? Why did the shogunate prohibit samurai from trading directly with foreigners?
4. Why do you think a significant number of European scientists and physicians, such as the German Englebert Kaempfer and the Swede Peter Thunberg, sought employment with the Dutch East India Company? What attraction might a period of residence in Japan have had for them?
5. Why did the shogunate establish such a strict policy toward Japanese traveling abroad?
6. Why was it necessary to issue the 1639 edict? How did it differ from the earlier 1635 edict?

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**TOPICS AND ACTIVITIES TO CONSIDER**


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- ∞ Using several of the web sites provided below, consider the depiction of the Catholic missionaries and merchants of Portugal and Spain—the “southern barbarians” or *nanbanjin*, as the Japanese called them—in the Southern Barbarian Screens (*nanban byōbu*): How are the foreigners distinguished from the Japanese? What objects or clothing mark the visitors’ foreign origins? In what activities can we see the foreigners engaging? What might these depictions of foreigners tell us about the Japanese?
- ∞ Remember: Japanese art of the Edo period was meant to be “read” from right to left!
- ∞ Consider the *nanban* screens themselves as material culture (objects). Using the print and Internet sources below, research the function of the screens: How were they used? (Hint: What does the Japanese term for screen, *byōbu*, mean?) Who might have owned one or more? Also consider the artistic techniques used on these late-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century screens and the artistic values inherent in the objects: What techniques of perspective, if any, are used? What do the artists do to suggest depth? What aesthetic qualities did the artists value?
- ∞ Consider the way in which rulers in other countries, particularly China, tried to restrict international trade. For what reasons did they do so?

**Further Information**

- Boxer, Charles R. *Portuguese Merchants and Missionaries in Feudal Japan, 1543–1640*. London: Variorum Reprints, 1986.
- Okamoto, Yoshitomo. *The Namban Art of Japan*. Translated by Ronald K. Jones. Tokyo and New York: Weatherhill, 1973.

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**PORTUGUESE INFLUENCE IN JAPAN**


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The Portuguese and their culture had some influence on Japanese clothing, accessories, food, and language. (Of course, their introduction of the musket in 1543 revolutionized warfare in Japan during the last half of the sixteenth century.) The unifiers Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi were fond of wearing Western clothing, which the Portuguese introduced. Even though the Portuguese were expelled from Japan in 1639, *pan* (bread), *konpeito* (a type of candy), *tempura*, *kasutera* (sponge cake), and *shichimi togarashi* (a seven-flavored spice mix) have remained a part of Japanese cuisine and language to this day. Some other Portuguese foreign loan words are listed in the chart below:

Portuguese	Japanese	English
alcool	arukoru	alcohol
padre	bateren	priest
veludo	biroodo	velvet
botao	botan	button
capa	kappa	raincoat
tabaco	tabako	tobacco
confeito	konpeito	candy
Pao de Castella	kasutera	sponge cake

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**Web Sites**

- “*Nanban* (‘Southern Barbarians’ in Japan).” Art through Time: A Global View. <http://www.learner.org/courses/globalart/work/166/index.html> (accessed October 29, 2010).
- “Portugal in Japan.” Embassy of Portugal in Tokyo. <http://www.embaixadadeportugal.jp/cultural-centre/portugal-japan/namban-art/en/> (accessed October 29, 2010).
- “Southern Barbarians (*Nanban byôbu*).” Art Institute of Chicago, Department of Museum Education. <http://www.artic.edu/aic/education/trc/SouthernBarbarians.pdf> (accessed October 29, 2010).