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A Whole New World (Order)

Early Modern Japanese Foreign Relations, 1550–1850

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Historians effectively have debunked the notion that Japan was an isolated or “closed society” (*sakoku*) during its early modern period. While it is true that the Tokugawa government (1603–1868) took decisive measures to expel Europeans from the country, with the exception of a few lonely Dutch merchants in Nagasaki, and while it is true that the government took extraordinary measures to stamp out Christianity at every turn, this does not mean that Japan was somehow disengaged from the outside world. Rather, Japan participated in a great deal of foreign intercourse, mainly with Korea, China, Ryūkyū, and Ezo (present-day Hokkaido), as well as with the Dutch and, in a somewhat disguised form, with Siam (now Thailand). Similarly, through its links with Chinese, Dutch, and Ryukyuan merchants, the shogunate was well informed about events shaping the early modern world.

There is no doubt that Tokugawa foreign relations contrasted greatly with Japanese foreign relations in the last half of the sixteenth century. Japanese merchants, who throughout the sixteenth century had settled in “Japan towns” (Nihonmachi) throughout Southeast Asia, were forbidden to travel abroad from the mid-1630s; Christianity, which had been propagated with such zeal by Iberian missionaries from 1549, was absolutely forbidden in Japan on pain of death; Portuguese merchants, who had brought silk to Japan in such massive quantities for nearly a century, were unceremoniously expelled in 1639; and the Dutch, who enjoyed the relative freedom in the Matsuura domain of Hirado, were transferred to the man-made island of Deshima in Nagasaki. These were startling changes, and the fact that they occurred in a relatively short period of time makes them seem all the more radical.

Nevertheless, a constant theme running through all these changes was the attempt to bolster shogunal domestic power vis-à-vis the daimyo, especially the *tozama* daimyo of western Japan. Japan was transformed politically and economically from a decentralized, relatively open society to one in which Edo became the sole arbiter of foreign relations, even though it “outsourced” those relations to several daimyo outside its direct jurisdiction.

OVERSEAS JAPANESE, SILVER MINES, AND EARLY EUROPEAN CONTACT

Sixteenth-century Japan contrasted greatly with the Tokugawa period in the fluidity of movement throughout maritime Asia. Japanese merchants coped with the Ming ban on direct Chinese-Japanese trade by sailing to various ports in Southeast Asia to trade with the overseas Chinese community as well as with local merchants, using trade contacts back home, along with the increasingly productive silver mines there, to effect profitable trade throughout Asia. The two biggest Nihonmachi were on the island of Luzon in the Philippines and in the city of Ayutthaya in Siam, though there were also smaller Japanese communities in Cambodia, Cochin China, and elsewhere. Japanese also became a sizable minority in the European centers of trade, particularly at Batavia, the headquarters of the Dutch East India Company (VOC).

Scholars have estimated that in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Japan produced fully one-third of the world's silver, even taking into account the Spanish mines of the Americas. Japanese merchants loaded their ships with silver, mined in ever greater quantity thanks to Chinese and European advances in smelting, and headed off to the trading ports of Southeast Asia to obtain luxury goods such as silk and spices. The transfer of Japanese and New World silver to China, which had an insatiable appetite for the metal, must be counted as one of the great engines of the early modern world economy.

Rumors of the richness of Japan's silver mines had, in fact, long set European imaginations ablaze. Marco Polo's account of the island of “Zipangu,” combined with early Portuguese rumors of Japanese merchant ships laden with precious metals, made the accidental landing on Japan of two Portuguese merchants aboard a Chinese ship in 1543 all the more significant. These merchants had a considerable effect on Japanese-European relations, completely out of proportion to their time spent on the tiny island of Tanegashima. They not only had discovered a profitable trading destination for Europeans but had also introduced the Portuguese musket to the Japanese.

Almost immediately the daimyo, then competing among themselves for supremacy, recognized the importance of the new weapon and began placing large orders for them. Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu

all used the *teppō*, as the musket was called in Japanese, to great effect in their campaigns of unification. It is telling that on a folding screen depicting the battle of Sekigahara of 1600, a large contingent of Tokugawa troops is armed with muskets, an indication of the importance of the weapon in the Japanese artistic imagination and also in military reality.

The initial visit to Tanegashima was followed by a flood of Portuguese merchants and missionaries to Japan. In Kyushu the daimyo vied with one another to lure the rich Portuguese vessels to ports in their domains, occasionally resorting to mass religious conversions to increase their chances. Eventually, the Portuguese settled at the port of Nagasaki, which was briefly ceded to the Jesuits by the daimyo Ōmura Sumitada. Thus began the extremely lucrative Macao-Nagasaki trade in which the Portuguese became middlemen in the exchange of Chinese silk for Japanese silver.

Jesuit missionaries began their activity in Japan with the visit of Francis Xavier in 1549. Xavier's intention was to travel to Kyoto to convert the emperor to the faith, thereby facilitating the conversion of the entire country. What the venerable priest did not realize, however, was that the imperial court held little more than nominal authority, and the Ashikaga Shogunate was also more or less impotent. In the Warring States period, true power lay in the hands of the daimyo; and so, somewhat dispirited, Xavier headed back to Kyushu and eventually left Japan altogether for China.

His successors, however, enjoyed much better success, so that by the turn of the century, there were an estimated 250,000 converts. The absence of a unified, central authority at the time of the missionaries' arrival in Japan worked, more than anything else, to their advantage and allowed their initial endeavors to prosper. But that situation changed drastically from the 1590s, as Toyotomi Hideyoshi, then Tokugawa Ieyasu, brought to completion the unification of the country that began under Oda Nobunaga.

THE FOREIGN RELATIONS OF THE AZUCHI/MOMOYAMA PERIOD

For all of his ruthlessness in subduing militant Buddhist sects, Nobunaga took a surprisingly tolerant attitude toward the Christians. In fact, many of the more intimate descriptions that we have of Nobunaga have come from Jesuit audiences with him. On several occasions, he personally entertained the fathers and even showed them around his impressive castle at Azuchi. The Jesuits were understandably optimistic about their future success in Japan given their warm welcome, but their hopes were dampened when Nobunaga was assassinated in 1582.

The supremacy of Toyotomi Hideyoshi was at first a boon for the Jesuit missionaries, as Hideyoshi was extremely interested in foreign trade. It seems that

Hideyoshi possessed an enormous appetite for fine Chinese silk and other Southeast Asian luxury goods, going so far as to monopolize the purchase of silk at Nagasaki. After initially tolerating the missionaries, however, in 1587 Hideyoshi suddenly ordered that all priests leave the country immediately.

The reason given was that the Jesuits, or *bateren*, as they were known, had subverted the divinely ordained order of Japan, the “land of the gods”; but Hideyoshi’s real motives were probably political. Apparently he had become alarmed at the missionaries’ success among the powerful daimyo of western Japan. He had already confiscated the city of Nagasaki from the Ōmura family and placed it under his direct authority, and now, it seems, he began to see Christianity itself, with its allegiance to a foreign clergy and monarchy—the Vatican—as a threat to his rule in Japan.

Most Jesuits ignored the order to leave the country, however, and instead became more circumspect in their missionary activities. Hideyoshi knew about this breach of his orders, of course, but overlooked the Jesuits’ defiance as he had more important matters to attend to—including the disastrous invasion of Korea that began in 1592 and ended only with Hideyoshi’s death in 1598.

This relatively lax enforcement of the ban on Christianity ended in 1597, when Hideyoshi ordered the execution of twenty-six Christians, including six Europeans, at Nagasaki. It seems that the pilot of a Spanish ship called the *San Felipe*, irked at the confiscation of his cargo when he was wrecked off the coast of Japan, began to boast that Iberian missionary activity was simply a prelude to a European invasion and cited the Philippines as evidence. Hideyoshi appears to have taken this seriously, and acted to stamp out the religion, until his death a year later put an end to the immediate persecution of Christianity. This proved, however, to be more an interlude than a reprieve.

Hideyoshi’s son and heir, Hideyori, was only five years old when his father died in 1598. Almost immediately, the five regents designated as caretakers of Hideyori’s legacy began to form alliances and fight among themselves. Things came to a head in 1600, at the battle of Sekigahara, in which Tokugawa Ieyasu won a victory over a coalition of his rivals. Lacking sufficient resources to completely vanquish all of the powerful daimyo arrayed against him, however, Ieyasu resorted to a somewhat precarious political balancing act that would have repercussions on Japan’s foreign policy as the new shogunate moved to increase its own control throughout the country at the expense of the western daimyo.

TOKUGAWA IEYASU’S FOREIGN POLICY

Among the first tasks confronting Ieyasu was to construct a coherent foreign policy with regard to both other countries and Japanese merchants trading overseas. He instructed the Sō family on the island of Tsushima, the traditional ar-

biter of relations with Korea, to the relationship between the two countries after the disastrous invasions of the 1590s. The result was a 1604 treaty, under the terms of which Tsushima was permitted a limited amount of trade at the port city of Pusan and state-level letters were exchanged between the two countries. Initially, a certain amount of subterfuge was included in these letters, inasmuch as neither country wanted to be seen as the subordinate partner. The Sō, to facilitate trade and avoid the diplomatic minutia altogether, forged the signatures of Korean and shogunate officials. Interestingly, when the Tokugawa discovered this deception, they meted out a relatively lenient punishment: In a testament to the importance of Korean trade, the Sō were permitted to retain their position as intermediary with only nominal shogunal oversight.

The Koreans and Japanese arrived at a solution to another potential diplomatic impasse when the shogun agreed to use the title “great prince” (*ōkimi*), which carried no sinocentric connotations of status relationship, in interactions with Korea. Over the course of the Tokugawa period, the Koreans sent twelve embassies to Japan, mostly to congratulate new shoguns upon their accession.

Ieyasu also moved to regularize Japan’s relations with the Ryūkyū Islands in the west and the island of Ezo in the northeast. Just as the Sō was granted a monopoly over relations with Korea, so the Shimazu family was granted control over the Ryūkyū trade, and the Matsumae family was granted a monopoly on trade and relations with Ezo. In 1609 the Shimazu was given permission to invade Ryūkyū and make it a vassal of Satsuma and, by extension, the Tokugawa—although Ryūkyū also continued to be a Chinese vassal. This intermediate position was, in fact, encouraged by the Shimazu as a way to gain access to the China trade, since Ryūkyū sent regular missions to the continent. The trade in Chinese goods, and later sugarcane cultivation on Ryūkyū, were to play a large role in Satsuma finances throughout the Tokugawa period.

Similarly, the Matsumae were given control over Ezo and its Ainu inhabitants. The Ainu were treated as foreigners, and therefore, trade in exotic goods such as hawks, eagle feathers, sea otter pelts, bear hides, and various medicines constituted a form of foreign trade, although today, of course, Hokkaido is an integral part of the Japanese state.

The Tokugawa welcomed embassies from Ryūkyū, Ezo, and Korea and used spectacles attendant to the reception of these embassies to place itself at the center of a Chinese-style tributary relationship. This political ceremony—in which the “barbarians” paraded from their arrival ports in Kyushu to Edo, the embodiment of civilization, to pay tribute and to recognize their status as vassals to the Tokugawa shogun—enhanced the prestige and the authority of the “center” and lent the shogun a tremendous amount of prestige and legitimacy.

The fact that Chinese foreign relations had for centuries operated through such a tribute system, however, made official relations between Japan and China

difficult for the Tokugawa, who were wary about preserving both the prestige of the shogunate *and* the theoretical authority of the imperial court. For that reason, no official relations were ever established, and a type of ad hoc arrangement existed, wherein the shogunate allowed private Chinese vessels to trade at Nagasaki and the question of state-to-state relations was left open.

The Dutch and English came to Japan in the first two decades of the seventeenth century for the same reasons as had the Portuguese: to tap into the lucrative silver trade of the islands. In 1600 the Dutch ship *De Liefde* limped into Uraga Bay with a handful of survivors, perhaps the most famous being Will Adams. The Dutch established a factory at Hirado in 1609, and the English followed suit in 1613, although for a variety of reasons, the English found it difficult to make a profit in Japan and so after a decade closed their factory and left Japan.

Initially, the Dutch also found it hard to make a profit, simply because they did not have access to the Chinese silk market—unlike the Portuguese, who were able to use their position on Macao to tap into the trade in Chinese goods. This changed in 1624 when the Dutch established a factory on the island of Taiwan and began to trade with wealthy Chinese merchant families, such as the Zheng. The most famous member of this house, Zheng Chenggong or, as he was known in Europe, Coxinga, exemplified the cosmopolitan nature of early modern Japan: Born of a Chinese father and a Japanese mother in Hirado, he went on to facilitate trade among the various ports of Asia in a widespread commercial empire based originally at Amoy and later on Taiwan.

THE SAKOKU EDICTS: TOKUGAWA RESTRICTIONS ON TRADE AND RELIGION

The notion that the “closing” of Japan represented a sudden turnabout for the Tokugawa, or that legislation restricting trade and religion was a monolithic piece of xenophobia, is completely mistaken. Rather, the move toward “isolation” began at the very start of Tokugawa rule and continued to its final form in 1641 with the removal of the Dutch to Deshima. These edicts and restrictions were tied up more with Tokugawa domestic control than with the shogunate’s concerns about foreign countries.

The first restriction came in the form of the *shuinsen*—literally, “red-seal ships.” The *shuin* were formal seals issued by the shogunate, and in this case they represented formal approval for overseas trade. Although this system of controlling foreign trade had been initiated by Hideyoshi, it was expanded by Ieyasu and came to be the only mechanism through which Japanese could trade overseas. It served to control both the piracy that had been rife in East Asian waters for centuries and the movement of people and goods into and out of

Japan. The shogunate issued an average of about ten *shuin* per year for a total of more than 350 ships between 1604 and 1634. The system became more restrictive as the years went by until, in the last few years of this trade, only seven prominent merchant families were allowed to trade overseas, and in 1634, oceangoing trade, save for that with Korea and Ryūkyū, was abandoned altogether on pain of death.

From 1633 to 1639 the new foreign policy came to be finalized in the so-called *sakoku* edicts. These seventeen decrees can be divided into three groups: the prohibition of travel abroad by Japanese; the prohibition of Christianity, embodied in a system of rewards for those who informed on Christians; and the creation of a machinery of foreign trade at Nagasaki that placed the sale and distribution of foreign goods directly into the hands of the shogunate. These edicts brought to an end the relatively free movement of people and goods that had existed during the medieval period. Two further restrictions with far-reaching consequences for foreign trade were the expulsion of the Portuguese in 1639 and the removal of the Dutch to Deshima in 1641.

The decision to expel the Portuguese came about after the Shimabara rebellion of 1637–1638 convinced the shogunate that the Portuguese could never completely divorce trade from religion. The rebellion itself was not a religious uprising—it was a protest over years of heavy taxation in famine conditions—but it did occur in a region that had been a center of Jesuit activity. The Tokugawa regime chose to interpret the rebellion as a Christian challenge to its authority and put it down savagely, with thousands executed in the aftermath. The Portuguese were expelled from Japan shortly afterward, and an embassy sent from Macao in 1640 to reestablish trade was rejected—and all but its thirteen servants were executed as a warning.

The following year, the Dutch factory was shifted from the relative freedom of Hirado to the island of Deshima in Nagasaki. The ostensible reason for the move was the fact that the Dutch had erected a warehouse inscribed with a Christian-style date, which to the Japanese was an unacceptable display of Christianity. But the real reason for the move was so that the shogunate could directly control the trade in Chinese silk. The cartel in charge (the *itowappu*) had control over Portuguese imports of silk, but after their expulsion the Portuguese lobbied heavily for the shogunate to move the Dutch to Nagasaki. In addition, the Tokugawa controlled the city of Nagasaki directly, and so the move placed the Dutch under direct shogunal control, thereby strengthening the regime's position with regard to foreign relations. The Dutch were allowed to stay in Japan, because the shogunate derived a measure of legitimacy from having yearly Dutch embassies present exotic gifts to the shogun, in addition to the fact that the Dutch were a source of intelligence, presenting yearly reports to the shogunate on conditions in Europe and in European colonies in Asia.

With the Dutch removal to Deshima in 1641, the major circumstances of foreign relations were set in place and would not substantially change until the arrival of Commodore Perry in 1853. Henceforth, Nagasaki, Tsushima, Matsumae, and Satsuma represented the four “mouths,” or “windows,” at which foreign trade was allowed to occur and at which the shogunate was able to gather intelligence about the world beyond Japan’s shores.

EPILOGUE: BARBARIANS AT THE GATES

Not until the nineteenth century, when the increasing military and economic might of the Europeans began to encroach on this system, did the shogunate face a real threat to the new international order that it had constructed. Even before Western ships began to call on Japanese ports, the shogunate was relatively well apprised of the situation in Europe and the advances that European countries were making into Asia: The shogunate learned that the British had been steadily encroaching on China and that the Americans had been increasing their merchant shipping in the Pacific. It also seemed to have been aware of American ambitions on the West Coast of the American continent. And finally, it knew of Russian expansion into the Kuril Islands, Sakhalin Island, and even into areas of Ezo. The regime’s response to these developments was decidedly reactionary, as the shogun and his councilors moved energetically to address the encroaching Western threat, only to abandon any real reform of the system of foreign relations once the immediate threat had passed.

This cycle of energy and inertia is nowhere more evident than on the island of Ezo. A series of Russian visitors to Japan from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries convinced the shogunal officials that they must secure Japan’s northern borders. They therefore sent inspectors to survey Ezo and the northern islands, conduct interviews with the locals, and assess Matsumae’s capacity for defense. The officials concluded that the Matsumae were not able to adequately defend the northern border and had consistently mistreated the natives in their extraction of resources from Ezo. The result was that from 1799 to 1821 Ezo was put under direct Tokugawa control. Characteristically, once the Russian crisis had passed, the island was again returned to Matsumae auspices until the shogunate once again assumed control in 1855.

Nagasaki also experienced a series of crises, as foreign ships tried, by direct negotiation or by the return of castaways, to convince the shogunate to open commercial relations. In 1838 the American ship *Morrison* entered Uruga Bay for just this purpose, but was fired upon by Japanese gun batteries and forced to leave the coast. The reason for this hostile reception was that the shogunate had instituted a policy in 1825 of firing on all ships not authorized to approach the coast—meaning essentially all vessels except those of the Dutch or Chinese. Al-

though the policy resulted in only two incidents of ships being fired upon, it represented the shogunate's harshest measures against foreigners to date and was largely the product of ardently anti-Western thinkers, such as Aizawa Seishisai (1781–1863). The policy was abandoned in 1842 after the shogunate learned of the British victory over the Chinese in the Opium War and the humiliating peace agreement that the Qing dynasty was forced to sign at Nanjing.

The regime's response to foreign encroachment was thereafter adapted to fit the occasion at hand. In the north, for example, it took steps to defend the border against Russian encroachment, including sending survey teams to strengthen its claims to the northern islands. There was also a fair amount of public discourse surrounding Japanese foreign policy in this region. Several scholars, including Honda Toshiyuki, advocated the colonization of Ezo and even dreamed of a substantial Japanese colonial presence on the Asian continent. It is true that pundits had to be careful to avoid the shogunate's ire (they often circulated unpublished manuscripts among themselves), but the point is that, much as with the *sakoku* policy itself, there was no uniformity of opinion concerning the course of action the government should take against the approaching "barbarians." This is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the varied opinions that the daimyo gave to Abe Masahiro's request for advice on what to do about the arrival of Commodore Perry, who so brazenly sailed into Edo Bay in 1853.

In the end, that is perhaps a good way to summarize Japanese foreign policy in the early modern period: there were a few points, such as the bans on Christianity and the Portuguese, that were not open to negotiation, but most aspects of foreign relations were comparatively fluid. Chinese were allowed to trade in Japan in large numbers, despite the lack of any official ties to the Qing dynasty; American ships made several trips to Deshima when the Dutch were unable to maintain contact with their distant outposts during the Napoleonic Wars; Russian merchants made contact with Japanese merchants in the Kurils and Sakhalin; Siamese junks routinely came to Japan under the guise of Chinese vessels; Chinese and Dutch merchants flouted trade restrictions at Nagasaki through the use of "private trade"; and toward the end of the Tokugawa period, Japanese were authorized to supply foreign ships with provisions if they put in along the coast of Japan.

Except for a few years in the nineteenth century, there never was a clear-cut anti-foreign policy, apart from Tokugawa abhorrence of the Portuguese, and even the harsh order to fire on foreign vessels was quickly abandoned. It is no surprise, then, that when the Americans arrived in 1853, and were soon followed by other nations, the Japanese were able to adapt to the new international

situation relatively quickly. It is true that the arrival of the foreigners spelled the eventual end of the Tokugawa era, and that a fair amount of anti-foreign violence marked the early years of relations with the West. But it is also true that the Japanese were remarkably adept at quickly conforming to the new international norms of trade and diplomacy, rising within a single generation to join the ranks of the advanced nations of the West. That they were able to adapt so readily to conditions after 1853 and the subsequent Meiji Restoration is surely due, in part, to the relative fluidity of foreign relations under the shogunate, despite the existence of the *sakoku* system.

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See the bibliography for complete publication data.

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