

# JAPAN AND THE WORLD, 1450-1770

## Was Japan a “Closed Country?”

By Conrad Totman

**H**alf-truths make the world go round. One conceit American pundits seem most determined to nurture is that in 1853 the US “opened” Japan to “civilization,” ending its days as a backward “closed country” (*sakoku*). Even though scholars—Ronald Toby most convincingly—established decades ago that Japan was not “closed,” the notion lives on in popular culture and public perceptions.<sup>1</sup>

The image of Japan as “closed” or “isolated” is reinforced by the companion notion, still found even in some textbooks, that Europeans were the most important part of Japan’s external world, at least during post-Columbus centuries.<sup>2</sup> They were not. During the centuries to about 1800, Japan’s “world” consisted primarily of Korea and China, and only marginally included Southeast and South Asia and regions beyond. Contact with Korea and China was never banned, although it was carefully regulated after 1600, as we shall see.

The idea that Japan was “closed” is true, of course, in the sense that it, like all pre-industrial societies, was essentially “closed” to interaction with “foreigners.” The elites of such societies may have had some contacts beyond the areas they controlled, as did “borderland” residents. However, because of limited transportation and communication technology, the vast bulk of the populace knew, interacted with, and was significantly influenced by only its local community and rulers.

The implication that Japan was “closed” in a different and unique sense, however, will not stand scrutiny. That is so even though it was a set of islands separated from adjacent terra firma by shallow straits filled with fast currents and choppy water, which made transit a dangerous and scary business. Even during the years 1600 to 1853, when the Tokugawa-led ruling elite tried—sometimes very firmly—to regulate overseas contacts in a manner advantageous to its own interests, Japan was never a uniquely “closed” country.

So, let us saunter briefly through the history of Japan’s external relations, focusing on the period 1450 to 1770, but casting a cursory look at preceding and more recent times. By doing so we can identify not only how Japan did relate to the world, but also where the curious notion of a “closed country” came from.

### Background to 1450

Ever since the archipelago’s origin millions of years ago, Japan has been interacting both geologically and biologically with adjacent continental areas. Human interaction has occurred ever since *Homo sapiens* first entered the islands tens of thousands of years ago.

Through the millennia, those human contacts grew ever richer, and by 1450 they involved not only extensive cultural interaction (Buddhism, Confucianism, etc.), but also political contacts and an elaborate material trade. That trade was mainly with Korea and China, but via those countries, it involved other regions of Asia and—rarely—Europe. Imports included large quantities of coins as well as “silk and other cloth goods, porcelain, ceramics, lacquer ware, scrolls, medicines, and foodstuffs.” In return, Japan exported “copper, sulfur, other minerals, folding fans and screens, lacquerware, ink stones, swords, and other weapons.”<sup>3</sup>

### From 1450 to 1770

Doubtless the period 1450 to 1770 makes analytical sense for studying the history of someplace, but not for examining Japan’s politico-diplomatic history. The break at circa 1600 was too drastic and its effects too far-reaching. So let us approach these centuries in terms of two periods: 1450–1600 and 1600–1770.

**1450–1600.** During these 150 years, the most noteworthy developments in the Japan-world relationship were these four: 1) the introduction of cotton to Japan; 2) the extension of Japanese commercial activity down the Asian coastline into Southeast Asia; 3) the arrival of Europeans in Japan, and 4) the failed Japanese invasion of Korea from 1592 to 1599.

The first of these four is a thoroughly uncelebrated development. In fact, however, the introduction—from India and Southeast Asia through China to Korea and thence to Japan from the 1420s onward—of cotton clothing and, later, cotton cultivation, may ultimately have been the most consequential of the four for the largest number of islanders. For most of Japan’s people, it eventually led to a great improvement in the comfort and convenience of daily life, replacing stiff, poorly insulating ramie and hemp garments with, in effect, a poor man’s silk.<sup>4</sup>

The spread of cotton culture into Northeast Asia was but one aspect of the surging trade throughout coastal Asia, and Japanese traders and pirates were active participants in that commerce. The former established trading sites in Southeast Asia, and some of those were partially populated by groups of Japanese refugees fleeing the strife that wracked their homeland and fostered piracy throughout East Asian coastal regions.<sup>5</sup> Then, around 1590, Japan’s newly risen hegemon, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, tried—with considerable success—to stop the brigandage and milk the nonviolent trade. He did so by licensing selected oceangoing traders and ordering local military leaders (*daimyō*) to prohibit all other sailings.

Meanwhile, a new breed of foreigner, the *nanbanjin* or “southern barbarians,” had arrived, making their first landfall on the south edge of Japan in 1543. So-called because they were said to have come from “the south,” the *nanbanjin* are usually identified as Portuguese traders and missionaries. By 1585, they had established a beachhead in the port of Nagasaki, which they fortified and controlled. From there they worked to extend their influence across Japan. They sent missionaries to proselytize among the elite in Kyoto and elsewhere, and labored to win *daimyō* to their cause, relying on them to pressure their followers to convert.

For Hideyoshi, these *nanbanjin*, with their foreign political base and growing influence in Japan, constituted rivals for pre-eminence. So in 1587 Hideyoshi seized Nagasaki, and in following years tried to stop missionary proselytizing while retaining the lucrative Portuguese trade—including the muzzle-loading shoulder arms that came with it.<sup>6</sup>

Soon, however, his attention turned elsewhere, especially from 1592 onward. That year he launched an invasion of Korea that



*Southern Barbarians in Japan*. Pair of six-panel folding screens; ink, color, and gold on paper. First half of the seventeenth century, Japan.

Credit: The Freer Gallery of Art. Source: Newsdesk.si.edu, Press Room for the Smithsonian: [http://newsdesk.si.edu/images\\_full/images/museums/fsg/encompassing\\_the\\_globe/barbarians.jpg](http://newsdesk.si.edu/images_full/images/museums/fsg/encompassing_the_globe/barbarians.jpg)

supposedly would enable the armies of his dutiful daimyō to overrun China. As is so often the case when politicians launch military invasions, the mix of private and public reasons for Hideyoshi's venture continues to perplex thoughtful observers. However, he declared that his goal was

*to spread the customs of our country to the four hundred and more provinces of that nation, and to establish there the government of our imperial city even unto all the ages.*<sup>7</sup>

Bold intentions notwithstanding, the great enterprise went poorly, and at the time of his death in 1598, Hideyoshi was bogged down in an unwinnable foreign war, the product, it appears, of hubris, ideological self-deception, and strategic miscalculation.

As of 1599, then, Japan's involvement with the world was greater than ever before. Both Japanese and continental traders were carrying goods and people back and forth between the islands and all of coastal Asia. Some of their cargo went as far as Europe. Japanese-speaking people lived in a few "Japantowns" in Southeast Asia. Japanese armies were bogged down in Korea. New ideas from Europe and Asia, and more knowledge about both, were becoming available in the archipelago.

**1600-1770.** Japan's relationship with the world during these 170 years is perhaps best examined in terms of 1) initial Tokugawa efforts to regulate that relationship—the alleged creation of *sakoku*—and 2) the outcome of those efforts.

Turning to the first of these topics, Hideyoshi's death in 1598 led, unsurprisingly, to a struggle for supremacy among the score or so major daimyō. One of them, Tokugawa Ieyasu, won the military showdown at Sekigahara in 1600 and then faced the task of persuading his surviving rivals to accept subordinate roles in a Tokugawa-led polity. He did so by recognizing their local authority as *quid pro quo* for nominal subservience.

Ieyasu's accommodationist strategy worked, but it compelled him and his successors to be ever-vigilant lest any daimyō use that local base of power as foundation for a new challenge. Tokugawa political policy, both domestic and foreign, was built around that fundamental task.

In foreign relations, the task dictated that trade and political contacts be handled only by the Tokugawa and their authorized representatives. Such a strategy would assure that profits from foreign trade, as well as whatever useful technology, political intelligence, or alliances there might be, would serve their regime.<sup>8</sup>

For centuries, Japan's most substantial trading partner had been Korea, but Hideyoshi's invasion had wrecked that connection. Therefore, Ieyasu tried to revive the trade by recalling the troops and re-establishing diplomatic relations. The daimyō of Tsushima Island played a key role in that effort, which did restore the diplomatic ties in 1607. As a reward, he was given exclusive control of the Korea-Japan trade, which he handled through a Japanese trading station in the Korean port town of Pusan. Because Tsushima was a poorly endowed domain, the daimyō had compelling reason to promote the trade, and he, in fact, developed a substantial "private" commerce that supplemented his Tokugawa-sanctioned legal trade. He also had a compelling reason to retain Tokugawa goodwill, however, and so made great effort to keep that unauthorized trade, i.e., smuggling, hidden.

Tokugawa strategy also stabilized the modest but longstanding continental trade via the largely unexplored and ill-defined northern region known as "Ezo." Roughly speaking, it encompassed today's Hokkaido, Sakhalin, and the adjacent Kurile Islands and Siberian coastal zone. The small-scale daimyō of Matsumae on southern Hokkaido was placed in charge of all trade and movement to the north. Like Tsushima, he came to depend on the benefits of his sanctioned role in that trade.

Those arrangements stabilized two avenues of contact with the world. But elsewhere a couple of issues—one involving Europeans, the other, China—complicated other aspects of the overall Tokugawa strategy.

First, Iberian (Portuguese, later supplemented by Spanish) missionaries did not cooperate, preferring to go wherever followers could be recruited. Ieyasu, like other Japanese leaders of the day, had ample experience with the challenge posed by politicized religious movements, having struggled for years to suppress domestic Buddhist



Plan of the Dutch Factory in the Island of Deshima at Nagasaki.  
Image source: <http://www.virtualginza.com/okinawa.htm?japan3.htm>

versions. To control this new version of the problem, he and his two successors pursued an erratically enforced strategy of suppression that ended the missionary presence by 1640. That process, however, eventually excluded all Iberian traders.

Fortunately for the Tokugawa, who saw advantage in controllable foreign trade unencumbered with theological baggage, in about 1600 two other groups of Europeans—the Dutch and English—had come in search of commercial opportunity. They viewed themselves and their religion as rivals, even enemies, of the Iberians and their creed. Unlike the Iberians, they were willing to trade without promoting their religion. Even as Tokugawa leaders were ending the Iberian presence, they took steps to nurture the Anglo-Dutch trade while prohibiting daimyō participation in it.

As things turned out, in 1623 the English gave up, finding the trade insufficiently profitable. Nevertheless, the Dutch persevered, and during the 1630s their activities were consolidated on the man-made, Tokugawa-controlled islet of Dejima (or Deshima) in Nagasaki harbor. When the English tried to return a few decades later, the Dutch objected, and the English were refused entry. Therefore, of the Europeans, the Dutch alone remained, and—except for an interregnum during the Napoleonic Wars—they enjoyed their monopoly of the direct Europe-Japan trade until 1858.

More importantly, even as the Tokugawa were regularizing their European connection, epic changes were convulsing China, produced by 1650 a new, powerful, Manchu-dominated dynasty. Fully aware of Manchu power and mindful of the two Mongol invasions of Japan some 350 years earlier, Tokugawa leaders tried to avoid any repeat of those episodes by distancing Japan from China. To that end, they declined any sort of political relationship and tried to channel all adjacent to Dejima in direct Chinese trade through a regulated “Chinatown” adjacent to in Nagasaki. That policy also limited Chinese trade via the Ryūkyū Islands—trade that was controlled by and mainly benefited the powerful Satsuma daimyō in southern Kyushu.

Meanwhile, Tokugawa leaders also dealt with the question of Japanese traveling or living abroad. They were aware of the disorderly history of pirates and unregulated Japanese traders, and were particularly concerned lest travelers provoke Manchu displeasure or other complications. So in 1633 the Tokugawa shogunate decreed that no Japanese were to go abroad without government authorization. In fact,

once domestic peace was restored and a set of stabilized trading relationships was established, Japan’s economy experienced rapid growth and the incentive to go abroad largely evaporated. In consequence, such travel nearly ceased.

By 1650, then, stabilized trading relationships with Korea, Ezo, “the south” (including Europe), and China had been established.<sup>9</sup> The new rulers had regularized their foreign relations in a manner that perpetuated foreign trade and contact while minimizing their impact on the domestic political order—despite some persistent smuggling, mainly via Tsushima. Within that stabilized framework, foreign goods and intellectual influences continued to enter Japan, even as Japanese goods—most notably gold and silver, and later copper, ceramics, and marine products—flowed outward.

Turning to the second topic, one wonders how this Tokugawa policy of managed foreign relations worked out during the decades circa 1650 to 1770. The short answer is “reasonably well”—as long as one isn’t looking for a “closed country.”

Foreign trade survived, but did not really prosper. The supplies of Japan’s chief exports—gold, silver, and copper—failed to grow. Indeed, as the economy expanded and domestic use of the metals mushroomed, mines were petering out and exportable quantities shriveled. Having failed to develop sufficient alternative exports, Japan’s trade with Korea via Tsushima nearly ceased by 1770. Trade with China and the Dutch became more irregular. Instead, a number of goods that hitherto had been extensively imported—notably cane sugar, cotton cloth, ginseng, and silk—came to be supplied from domestic cultivation.

That last development—the adoption of new horticultural enterprises—exemplifies the other major aspect of this story: the long-term accumulation and use of more and more knowledge about the world.

Most noteworthy, perhaps, was the elaborate ideology employed during the seventeenth century to legitimize Tokugawa rule. It was taken mainly from the Confucian tradition associated with the Chinese philosopher Chu Hsi, as that tradition was understood by Chinese and Korean scholars. Japanese scholars, however, manipulated it to meet Tokugawa needs. In addition, new strands of mainland art and religion also reached Japan.

Less important at the time were aspects of European culture introduced to Japan’s intelligentsia via Dejima. Especially during the eighteenth century, Tokugawa leaders began encouraging their scholars to obtain “useful” or “practical” (*jitsugaku*) information, including whatever might be found in the so-called “Dutch Learning” (*rangaku*), from the Netherlands.

As the century advanced, scholars and physicians acquired and began translating texts relating to European art, astronomy, geography, medicine, and other technologies. They then employed facets of that learning—such as the use of perspective in painting, new approaches to map-making, a new understanding of human anatomy, clocks based on the European twenty-four-hour cycle, and telescopes to observe a heliocentric heavenly order (or a heavenly body in the neighbor’s bedroom).

Meanwhile, foreign residents of Dejima, most famously the German doctor Engelbert Kaempfer (whose nationality was kept secret while he was there), were sending reports back to the Netherlands on their trade in particular, and on matters Japanese more generally.<sup>10</sup> Their reports were stored for future reference and contributed to the growing body of European knowledge about East Asia.

As of 1770, then, when our story ends, the Tokugawa policy of managed foreign relations was still serving its basic political purpose:

daimyō continued to mind their manners. Trade continued, as did cultural exchange, both reduced somewhat from the level of earlier centuries. Perhaps the most noteworthy trend was the slowly growing attention given to Dutch Learning.

Globally, however, the times were poised for more radical change, and the Tokugawa arrangements that had sufficed before 1770 gradually lost their effectiveness thereafter. As that occurred, intriguing disjunctions appeared between the rhetoric and reality of Japan's relationship to the world. Those disjunctions helped give rise to the notion of Tokugawa Japan as a "closed country" and so require brief notice.

#### After 1770: The "Closed Country"

From about the 1770s onward, things began to fall apart. The nanbanjin—who might more appropriately be labeled *nanbokutōsei banjin*, or "barbarians from all directions"—were the main external force for disruption.

To state the matter directly, the relentless spread of Europeans around the world—Iberians, Russians, the Dutch, French, Belgians etc., but most especially Anglophones—affected Japan in several ways. In the years around 1800, the Napoleonic Wars disrupted Dutch operations at Nagasaki, enabling a few opportunistic English and American vessels to sneak into the port or otherwise create trouble there. Meanwhile, Russian merchantmen approached Japan in search of trading privileges and, when turned away in 1806, engaged in violent marauding in the region. Anglophone whalers sought landing privileges during the 1820s, and when they were refused, some engaged in plunder. The Opium War of 1839–42 set off warnings of attacks on Japan that provoked consternation among the rulers. Finally, in 1853, the American Commodore Matthew Perry arrived with a war fleet and an ultimatum: a treaty of "peace and amity"—or naval bombardment of the Tokugawa capital city of Edo.

This series of aggravations produced sharp policy debates at the highest Tokugawa levels, as well as a scramble for increased knowledge of the encroaching menace and preparations to confront it. The scramble led to intensified study of Dutch Learning, with particular attention given to military technology and techniques, and eventual attempts to produce and use new-style weapons.<sup>11</sup>

In the policy debates, some officials argued that the foreigners' demands should be accommodated until military strengthening assured that resistance would not lead to defeat. Others argued that such accommodation would only reveal Tokugawa weakness, encouraging restive daimyō finally to rebel.

Advocates of both positions realized that whatever policy was pursued, the Tokugawa must retain their control of foreign connections. If they failed to do so, daimyō would gain access to new weapons, profitable trade, and foreign allies. So from about 1801 onward, these advocates began to assert that the established policy of Tokugawa-controlled foreign relations was immutable, the sacred legacy of the godly founders of the Tokugawa order. Only Tokugawa authorities could modify its particulars, and any change must leave control in Tokugawa hands. They dubbed the sacred ancestral policy *sakoku*.<sup>12</sup>

So, the notion of a "closed country" came into being even as the Tokugawa system of regulated relations was in fact starting to fall apart under the hammer blows of aggressive "barbarians." Intended to preserve what was being lost, the notion utterly failed at its task.

Yet it survives today in popular foreign images of Japan, being regarded as one of that society's most distinctive historical characteristics. The survival of this notion constitutes a particular instance of a common phenomenon—the durability of misperceptions, even when

their falsity has long been exposed. So one wonders: Why does the notion of Japan's "isolation" endure? What purpose does it serve? What interests or convictions does it help perpetuate? ■

#### NOTES

1. Ronald P. Toby, *State and Diplomacy in Modern Japan: Asia in the Development of the Tokugawa Bakufu* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); paperback, (Stanford University Press, 1991).
2. On Eurocentrism in this matter, see Mounir A. Farah and Andrea Berens Karls, *World History: The Human Experience* (NY: Glencoe/McGraw-Hill, 2001), 471, and Roger B. Beck et al, *Modern World History: Patterns of Interaction*, (Evanston, IL: McDougal Littell Inc., 2003). These authors in fact give reasonable descriptions of Tokugawa foreign policy despite their Eurocentrism, but they still label it "isolation" or "closed country."
3. Quoted from Conrad Totman, *A History of Japan* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 154–155. For monographic sources and further reading, consult the endnotes and bibliographical essay in that volume.
4. Hemp and ramie clothing are woven, respectively, from the tough stem fibers of the Asian herbs *Cannabis sativa* and *Boehmeria nivea*. Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context. c. 800–1830*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 144–145, discusses the diffusion of cotton and identifies useful references. Cotton in Japan is treated briefly in Wayne Farris, *Japan's Medieval Population*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), and Totman, *Pre-industrial Korea and Japan in Environmental Perspective*. (Leiden: Brill, 2004), and more fully in Chie Nakane and Shinzaburō Ōishi, *Tokugawa Japan*. (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1990) especially 81–85. Those works, together with Totman, *History of Japan*, identify further references.
5. Archaeological evidence indicates that one "Japantown" was located in Manila and two each in the vicinity of Hue and Phnomh Penh.
6. A recent study of this topic and guide to earlier works is Olof G. Lidin, *Tanegashima—The Arrival of Europe in Japan*, (Copenhagen: NAIS Press, 2002).
7. Quoted in Mary Elizabeth Berry, *Hideyoshi*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 208.
8. This topic has been thoroughly studied by Toby in *State and Diplomacy*. Toby presents Tokugawa foreign policy as part of an overall strategy for legitimizing Tokugawa rule.
9. For more detail on this process, and for further reading, see Totman, *Early Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), especially 141–148. The finest treatment of this early Tokugawa foreign trade is the PhD dissertation (available in microfilm) by Robert LeRoy Innes, *The Door Ajar: Japan's Foreign Trade in the Seventeenth Century* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1980). A fine study of Japan-Korea Relations is Etsuko Hae-Jin Kang, *Diplomacy and Ideology in Japanese-Korean Relations: From the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Houndmills, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1997). A charming study of official Korean embassies in Japan is Ronald P. Toby, "Carnival of the Aliens: Korean Embassies in Edo-Period Art and Popular Culture," *Monumenta Nipponica* 41/4 (Winter 1986): 415–456.
10. On Kaempfer in particular and this Dutch activity more generally, see Beatrice Bodart-Bailey and Derek Massarella, *The Furthest Goal. Englebert Kaempfer's Encounter with Tokugawa Japan*. (Folkstone Kent: Japan Library, 1995), and Bodart-Bailey's translation of Englebert Kaempfer, *Kaempfer's Japan. Tokugawa Culture Observed* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999).
11. Dutch Learning has received much attention. A recent work is W. F. Van de Walle and Kazuhiko Kasaya, eds., *Dodanaeus in Japan: Translation and the Scientific Mind in the Tokugawa Period* (Leuven: University Press, 2001). The classic, and still admirable, study of this legacy in Japan is Donald Keene, *The Japanese Discovery of Europe: Honda Toshiaki and Other Discoverers, 1720–1830* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1952; rev. ed., 1969).
12. On the origin, etymology, and use of the term *sakoku*, see Toby, *State and Diplomacy*, 12–22.

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