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Author(s): Matsukata Fuyuko and Adam Clulow

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King Willem II's 1844 Letter to the Shogun “Recommendation to Open the Country”

MATSUKATA FUYUKO
TRANSLATED BY ADAM CLULOW

On 15 August 1844, a letter signed by King Willem II of the Netherlands arrived in Nagasaki aboard the Dutch East Indies frigate *Palembang*. The letter was conveyed to bakufu officials in Edo, who responded with their own document addressed to the Dutch government. The receipt of the king's missive, known conventionally as his “recommendation to open the country” (*kaikoku kankoku* 開国勸告), represents an important moment in the history of Japan's engagement with the outside world. Japanese high-school textbooks invariably reference the incident; one explains that “in 1844 (the first year of the Kōka era), the king of the Netherlands dispatched a letter urging Japan to learn from the lesson of the Opium War and open itself to trade, but the bakufu rejected [this advice].”¹

The present study reassesses the purpose, outcome, and broader significance of the king's letter. The Tokugawa bakufu's 1825 Foreign Vessels Expulsion Order (*ikokusen uchiharai rei* 異国船打払令) dictated that foreign vessels must be driven away by force, but in 1842 the regime appeared to withdraw from this hard-line stance when it issued a second edict, the Order for the Provision of Firewood and Water (*shin-sui kyūyorei* 薪水給与令), which stipulated that incoming vessels should be provided with basic supplies. Willem's letter sought to gauge the extent to which the bakufu's attitude toward foreigners had changed with the 1842 order. As such, it stemmed from a Dutch desire to preserve their long-held monopoly over trade with Japan and was not the selfless gesture of friendship that it is so often depicted to be. In addition

MATSUKATA FUYUKO 松方冬子 is associate professor of history at the University of Tokyo. Adam Clulow is a lecturer in history at Monash University. This article is a translation of chapter 6 of Matsukata 2007, “1844-nen Oranda kokuō Uiremu Ni-sei no ‘Kaikoku kankoku’ no shin’i” 1844年オランダ国王ウイレム二世の「開国勸告」の真意, prepared by Clulow in close collaboration with the author.

¹ *Shinkatei Shin Nihon shi*, p. 237.

to reassessing the nature of the king's letter, this study uses the document to consider the system of communication between the Dutch and the bakufu as well as the process by which Tokugawa foreign relations were codified into a fixed ancestral law. In so doing, it sheds new light on bakufu policy during a key period when the Western powers were beginning a sustained push to open Japan to diplomacy and trade.

The first comprehensive study of the 1844 letter, *Neêrlands streven tot openstelling van Japan voor den wereldhandel* (Dutch efforts to open Japan to world trade),² was published in 1867 by Jacobus A. van der Chijs, a bureaucrat at the Dutch colonial government in Batavia (now Jakarta). As might be guessed from the title, Van der Chijs's book was essentially political in nature and countered criticism leveled by other Western countries in the 1850s and 1860s that the Dutch had neglected to push Japan to open its ports. Van der Chijs does not call Willem's letter a "recommendation to open the country," although he does emphasize that the communication warned Japan about the dangers of an exclusionist policy not out of a desire for specific concessions, but as a return favor "for two centuries of kind treatment."³ For his work Van der Chijs relied exclusively on materials produced by the colonial government.⁴

In prewar Japan, the 1844 letter was discussed by Fukuchi Gen'ichirō 福地源一郎 and a number of other well-known scholars.⁵ The first to refer to Willem's missive as the *kaikoku kankoku* was Tabohashi Kiyoshi 田保橋潔, who argued that the letter intended to preserve trade relations between the Netherlands and Japan. In the postwar period, Morioka Yoshiko 森岡美子 criticized Tabohashi's assertion, suggesting that the message was essentially an "act of friendship"; she also examined the bakufu's response to the letter.⁶

Despite the differences in their views, all of these scholars depend on Van der Chijs as their primary source. By contrast, Nagazumi Yōko's 永積洋子 1986 article in *Nihon rekishi* 日本歴史 draws on archival materials from the Deshima factory to reconsider the significance of Willem's missive. She concludes that the letter's dispatch was essentially a "selfless" act and that the Dutch monarch was pleading for the bakufu to "open relations with other countries as well."⁷ Nagazumi does not, however, consider sources from government officials in the Netherlands.

Those sources provide the backbone to Els M. Jacobs's more recent article, which examines the archives of the Ministry for the Colonies to reevaluate the letter from

² Van der Chijs 1867, pp. 20–68.

³ Van der Chijs 1867, p. 21.

⁴ Broadly speaking, we can divide the sources related to the 1844 letter into three categories: sources from the Dutch factory on Deshima, those from the governor-general's office in Batavia, and those from the Ministry for the Colonies in the Netherlands. Of the three, the sources from Batavia are no longer fully extant.

⁵ Fukuchi 1895, pp. 53–95; Kure 1896, pp. 369–77; Tokutomi 1928, pp. 53–91; Tabohashi 1930, pp. 378–95; Inobe 1935, pp. 472–74. Fukuchi was a journalist, author, and politician active in the Meiji period.

⁶ Morioka 1975; Morioka 1973a; Morioka 1973b.

⁷ Nagazumi 1986, p. 56.

the perspective of the central government. Criticizing Van der Chijs's arguments, Jacobs maintains the king's letter was a dismal failure that resulted in "no profit from trade and no improvement in Dutch prestige."⁸ She concludes that the attempt to contact the shogun was undermined by a misguided effort to save money and that, equipped "with only words as their weapons," the Dutch "lacked seriousness of intent and were doomed to failure."⁹ Jacobs's argument is more persuasive than previous studies, which tend to present the letter's dispatch as a pure or selfless act of goodwill. It assumes, however, that Dutch officials were aiming to secure trade advantage, which is not necessarily the case.

Thus despite the extensive writing done on this subject, scholarship on the true motivation behind the king's letter has progressed little since Van der Chijs published his work over 140 years ago.¹⁰ The present article uses Dutch primary sources to consider whether Willem's intention really was to persuade the shogun to open the country. These documents contain no suggestion that the Netherlands wished to end Japan's policy of isolation. Although the letter did seem to call on the bakufu to open the country, it offered no practical guidance on how this might be accomplished; in fact, the warning seems to have been intended only as an expedient to prevent an armed conflict between Japan and Britain, a worst-case scenario that the Dutch were desperate to avoid. The primary purpose of the letter, rather, was to determine whether bakufu officials knew of the changing political conditions in East Asia and whether they wanted to further open the country to international trade. The exchange was successful in that it elicited a clear negative response to the second question. The Dutch government did not want Japan to develop relationships with the other Western powers, and the bakufu's answer was seen as a renewed license for the Netherlands to continue to monopolize Japanese trade.

Willem's letter also offers insight into the role of Nagasaki as a key gateway for information coming into Japan. The once-common understanding of Tokugawa Japan as a "closed country" sealed off from the outside world only takes into account direct relations with Europe and the United States; subsequent research focused on East Asia has significantly revised our vision of Tokugawa foreign affairs. Scholarship since the 1980s describes foreign relations during the period as a system mediated by "four gates" (*yottsū no kuchi* 四つの口): through the Satsuma domain to the Ryūkyū kingdom, through the Tsushima domain to Korea, through the Matsumae domain to the Ainu in Ezochi, and through Nagasaki to Chinese and Dutch traders.¹¹ Information and goods flowed through these portals, connecting Japan to wider networks. However, neither the influence of this system on Japan's foreign relations nor its mediating function has been fully understood. This paper considers the workings of

⁸ Jacobs 1990, p. 77.

⁹ Jacobs 1990, p. 77.

¹⁰ The most recent study to date is Chaiklin 2010.

¹¹ For an example of scholarship on the "four gates," see Arano 1988.

the Nagasaki gate by examining how information was transmitted by the Dutch to Japan.

In the nineteenth century, the Dutch colonial empire sprawled across Asia. Trading outposts like the one in Japan were bound to Batavia and the Netherlands by clearly established channels of communication. The head of the Japan factory, known usually by the Dutch term *opperhoofd*, managed a small staff on the island of Deshima. He in turn reported to the Products and Civilian Stores (*Lands Producten en Civiël Magazijnen*) within the larger colonial government on Batavia, but at times he sent letters directly to the governor-general, the senior administrator in Asia. The governor-general was a minister of the state, directly appointed by the king and placed in command of military forces in the Indies. Despite this position, communication with the Dutch government was mediated by the Ministry for the Colonies (Ministerie van Koloniën), which advised the king on colonial policy.

Since 1641, the Dutch had provided key intelligence regarding world events to the bakufu through regular reports called “Gewoon Nieuws” (Ordinary News) or, in Japanese, *Oranda fūsetsugaki* オランダ 風説書.¹² When a Dutch ship arrived in Nagasaki harbor—usually once a year but sometimes more frequently—interpreters interviewed the *opperhoofd* about news concerning the outside world. This news was conveyed to the Nagasaki magistrate (*bugyō* 奉行) and then to bakufu authorities in Edo. From the 1830s onward, the bakufu relied on the Dutch to provide information about the increasingly aggressive advance of the great powers into East Asia, particularly about their intentions and capabilities; the intelligence was taken extremely seriously in the determination of bakufu policy. From 1840, the governor-general in Batavia began supplementing the *Gewoon Nieuws* with a yearly report titled “Apart Nieuws” (Special News; *betsudan fūsetsugaki* 別段風説書) focusing on the impact of the Opium War on East Asia. In the same year, the bakufu ordered the Nagasaki magistrate to submit to Edo the original Dutch of the *fūsetsugaki* along with the Japanese translation.

The Dutch government knew that information was frequently altered or even discarded as it traveled from the *opperhoofd* to bakufu authorities in Edo. The 1844 letter, then, was designed to break away from the mediation of officials in Nagasaki and to establish a direct channel between the Netherlands and Japan. Initially, the Dutch government planned to accomplish this by dispatching a special envoy to Japan, but it was thwarted by a financial crisis resulting primarily from the loss of state revenue following Belgium’s declaration of independence in 1830. Instead, the Deshima *opperhoofd* was ordered to undertake the envoy’s mission. This attempt to open a direct link to the shogun ended in failure: the reply from the bakufu instructed that no further letters be sent from the Netherlands to Japan. Direct government-to-government communication with Edo was thus suspended, and the influence of the Nagasaki gate remained intact until the conclusion of the commercial treaties of 1858.

¹² For details on these reports, see Matsukata 2007.

The Firewood and Water Edict: Dutch Reactions

On 28 August 1842, the bakufu revoked the 1825 Foreign Vessels Expulsion Order and promulgated the Order for the Provision of Firewood and Water (hereafter, the firewood and water edict).¹³ The internal bakufu processes leading up to the new edict are murky, although we do know that it was drafted in a short time by a group of officials that included Mizuno Tadakuni 水野忠邦 (1794–1851), a senior councillor, or *rōjū* 老中.¹⁴ The immediate impetus for the edict seems to have been news from the new *opperhoofd*, Pieter A. Bik, on 20 July 1842 that once the Opium War ended Britain planned to send vessels to Japan to force open its ports.¹⁵ The edict thus apparently reflects the bakufu's desire to avoid military conflict with Britain.¹⁶

To understand the background of the edict, we should first consider the state of world politics in the 1840s. The Opium War had ended in the defeat of the Qing state, which signed the treaty of Nanjing in August 1842.¹⁷ Around the middle of the decade, rumors began to spread throughout Europe that Britain's next target would be Japan.¹⁸ The bakufu, for its part, had managed to resolve the dispute with Russia that began with the 1804 Rezanov expedition.¹⁹ It nonetheless remained concerned about other international activity in its waters, including the 1837 Morrison incident and the exploration of the Bonin (Ogasawara) islands by a British warship in the same year.²⁰

Meanwhile the Netherlands, Japan's traditional trading partner, was undergoing financial crisis. Belgium had declared independence from the Netherlands in 1830, and the loss of this highly industrialized and populated region had greatly reduced tax yields, which added to the costs of a failed military intervention to prevent the separation. The Netherlands was only able to stave off economic collapse by drawing revenue from its colonial possessions, but the situation there was growing increasingly unsettled as well.²¹ The boundary between Dutch and British colonial control

¹³ Ishii and Harafuji 1995, p. 435.

¹⁴ Inoue 2002, p. 148.

¹⁵ Satō 1964, pp. 308–309.

¹⁶ Fujita 1987, p. 269.

¹⁷ The Nanjing treaty resulted in the opening of five ports and the cession of Hong Kong to Britain.

¹⁸ Beasley 1951, pp. 42–43.

¹⁹ Nikolai Rezanov arrived in Nagasaki on an expedition organized by the Russian czar Alexander I. After the bakufu refused Rezanov's requests for trade, two Russian vessels attacked Karafuto (Sakhalin) and other islands. As retaliation, in 1811 bakufu officials seized Vasilij Golovnin, the captain of the surveying ship *Diana*. The stand-in commander of the *Diana* responded by seizing a Japanese merchant, Takadaya Kahei 高田屋嘉兵衛, and the situation was only resolved after both sides agreed to a prisoner exchange in 1813.

²⁰ Fujita 1987, p. 198. The *Morrison* was a U.S. merchant vessel that attempted to open ties with Japan by returning a group of Japanese castaways. It was repulsed under the Foreign Vessels Expulsion Order. Although the *Morrison* belonged to the United States, it was mistakenly viewed in Japan as part of a broader threat from Britain. Satō 1964, pp. 234–46.

²¹ For details on this period in Dutch history, see Boogman 1960.

in Borneo (Kalimantan) had remained undecided by the 1824 London treaty, and in 1841 Britain moved to seize additional concessions.²² From 1850 onward British interest in East Asia would wane as the country grew more occupied by problems in the Ottoman Empire (which would ultimately spark the Crimean War) and in Schleswig-Holstein; by that time, however, a new competitor for the Dutch would appear in the form of the United States, which turned its attention to Japan after concluding its war with Mexico in 1848.

On informing Bik, the *opperhoofd*, of the firewood and water edict, bakufu officials stated that “the Dutch in the factory in Japan should understand the contents properly and work to ensure it will promote other foreign powers’ friendship [with Japan].”²³ Bik understood this to mean that the Dutch were being required to communicate the order to other countries, and he reported accordingly to the colonial administration in Batavia. On 13 June 1843, Pierre Merkus, the governor-general of the Dutch East Indies, dispatched an official report of the edict, as well as a translation of the earlier Foreign Vessels Expulsion Order, to the Ministry for the Colonies in the Netherlands with a note explaining that he believed other Western powers would view the new regulation as a sign Japan was prepared to open its ports. Should ships from these countries approach Japan and discover that the bakufu did not actually intend to open the country, Merkus cautioned, conflict might ensue. In particular, if Britain were to resort to military force as it had in the Opium War, the *opperhoofd* on Deshima would be placed in the difficult position of having to choose sides. Merkus therefore requested orders from the home government.²⁴

Merkus also attached an extract of a 20 November 1842 report by Eduard Grandisson, the outgoing head of the Deshima factory. Grandisson wrote that he had explained the outcome of the Opium War to the Japanese in an *Apart Nieuws* sent to Edo. The Japanese were, he maintained, very interested in the report, and the instructions to the Dutch to disseminate information about the firewood and water edict to other countries indicated the bakufu’s concern about a confrontation with the great powers. However, as Grandisson admitted in his conclusion, “the politics of the Japanese government are a riddle that I cannot solve.”²⁵

The documents from Batavia apparently reached the colonial minister J. C. Baud on 13 October 1843.²⁶ Just ten days later, Baud recommended to the king that he send a letter in June or July 1844 addressed “to the emperor [shogun] of Japan” warn-

²² During the Napoleonic wars, a number of Dutch territories in Asia were occupied by the British. These were later returned, and the London treaty set new lines of control. Britain gained full control over the Indian subcontinent and the Malay peninsula, while Dutch influence was limited to Indonesia.

²³ Dutch translation of the bakufu communication, 17 September 1842, *Ingekomen stukken*, no. 7 (NFJ 463; Kol. 4294, no. 458).

²⁴ *Missive van de Gouverneur-Generaal aan Minister van Koloniën*, d.d. 13 June 1843 (Kol. 4294, no. 458).

²⁵ Extract uit verslag 1842, *Aanhangsel*, §b (NFJ 716; Kol. 4294, no. 458).

²⁶ *Besluit van Minister van Koloniën*, d.d. 23 October 1843 (Kol. 4294, no. 435).

ing him of the perils that Japan faced and advising how to best to avoid them.²⁷ On securing the king's assent two days later, Baud resolved to not inform other countries about the firewood and water edict until his government had had a chance to gauge the bakufu's reaction to the letter.²⁸ None of the documents concerning the planned missive indicate that the Netherlands intended to pressure Japan to open its ports or to conclude an advantageous treaty with the Dutch.

At roughly the same time, officials in Batavia were also debating their policy toward Japan, including sending a special embassy or a formal letter from the governor-general, rather than a letter from the king. On 31 August 1843, two months after his initial communication, Merkus sent a second letter to the Ministry for the Colonies. To this was attached a report by director-general of finance J. D. Kruseman, who, based also on an interview with Grandisson, recommended using the crisis to gain trade advantages:

The Japanese government wishes to know what happens in Europe and China so that it can be ready whenever Europeans, and especially the Russians and the English, plot against Japan. . . . It wishes to be informed of what transpires in these countries and also about advances in science or knowledge. It is especially interested in anything to do with weapons or defense plans. . . . [The Japanese government] allows the Dutch and the Chinese to come to Japan for purely political reasons. It allows a limited trade only to enable them to maintain themselves in Japan, and not so the Japanese may derive commercial profit. The presence of both nations is thus of overwhelming importance to the government. Its own peace and security is tied to this presence, and hence it will make any sacrifice to prevent either from leaving. . . . [The threat from Russia and England] means that the government considers it more important than ever for the Dutch to continue in Japan. Thus we have a chance to use [these concerns] for our commercial ends. We should inform the Japanese government . . . [that if it does not improve our commercial position] we may ultimately decide to leave Japan. . . . [For this purpose] a signed letter from the governor-general [should be sent] . . . although it would be better if an embassy . . . were dispatched.²⁹

Merkus, however, thought differently. He believed that the Dutch should not threaten to leave, since even though the Japanese trade was very small, there was nothing to be gained from abandoning it. Any mission from the king attempting to negotiate trading conditions would, Merkus argued, only be misunderstood and increase the bakufu's wariness. Because of this fundamental disagreement, Merkus sent both opinions to the Netherlands, although they do not seem to have reached the colonial minister until January 1844, when plans for the king's missive had already significantly advanced.

In his letter of 31 August, Merkus added the following important insight:

[In Japan] even the most trivial of matters cannot be transmitted to the [shogunal] court in Edo without passing through the hands of a great number of subordinate officials. Commands

²⁷ Kol. 4294, no. 435; KdK. 4161, no. X38.

²⁸ Kol. 4294, no. 458.

²⁹ Nota van den Directeur-Generaal van Financiën (Kol. 4297, no. 47).

coming from the court are treated in the same way, and thus probably some parts are withheld from us. Therefore it is fundamentally impossible to ascertain what the court thinks about us or whether it intends to allow us to stay. It does not seem that the affairs in China [i.e., the Opium War] will work to our advantage [in Japan]. On the contrary, the Japanese government is showing us even less favor than before. . . . It is possible that the Japanese government views the affairs in China as unimportant.³⁰

In other words, because under the present system everything had to be mediated through officials on site, namely, the *opperhoofd* and the interpreters, it was impossible to establish a mutual understanding with the bakufu. Moreover, as Merkus admitted, it was unclear whether news regarding the Opium War had been transmitted in full to the bakufu in Edo.

The governor-general's letter referred as well to *Geschiedkundig overzicht van den handel der Europezen op Japan* (A general overview of European trade with Japan),³¹ by the former *opperhoofd* Germain Meijlan—a publication with which both the governor-general and the colonial minister were apparently well familiar. Meijlan claimed that the *opperhoofd* was viewed with contempt in Japan because he was a merchant, making it difficult for him to establish a mutual understanding with the bakufu. According to Meijlan, the interpreters concealed or intentionally mistranslated some documents. He thought that an ambassador representing the sovereign would be received with appropriate honor and be able to directly meet with the authorities; this ambassador should nonetheless certainly not participate in commerce, as politics and trade should be kept separate.³²

Thus, when Colonial Minister Baud received news about the 1842 edict and recommended sending a direct royal missive, he based this advice on a belief widely shared in the Dutch government that a direct embassy could fundamentally reorient relations with Japan.

The Manipulation of Information in Nagasaki

The manipulation of information in Nagasaki, which was a source of concern for Dutch authorities, was in fact a common occurrence. The flow of information to the bakufu was supposedly overseen by the governor-general, but in many cases the *opperhoofd*, sometimes acting in consultation with the interpreters, inserted his own judgment. At the same time, even the most experienced *opperhoofd* had difficulty completely keeping the reins: information about recent events that the Dutch did not wish disclosed might leak out to the interpreters from alternative sources.

One problem was that different agents in the system perceived the situation in different ways. Opinions diverged considerably between the *opperhoofd* on the ground on Deshima and his superiors, the governor-general in Batavia and the colonial

³⁰ Kol. 4297, no. 47.

³¹ Meijlan 1833.

³² Meijlan 1833, pp. 332–34, 343–46.

minister in The Hague. Philipp Franz von Siebold, the king's adviser, represented yet another set of views.³³ The *opperhoofd* were anxious to gain even a minor advantage in the Japan trade and also were able to witness Japanese concern over English activities in East Asia firsthand. By contrast, the governor-general and the colonial minister had no contact with the Japanese, while Von Siebold often treated Japan as an object of academic analysis, rather than as a place to secure profit. As the king's adviser, he also tended to view everything through a political lens. We see a consistent awareness that no one, regardless of the position he held, could be certain whether information presented on Deshima was actually transmitted to Edo. The Dutch were continually frustrated by the ambiguous nature of negotiations and information exchange with the bakufu.

Likewise on the Japanese side, a considerable divide lay between bakufu officials and the interpreters working in Nagasaki. On 31 October 1843, for example, Bik wrote that it was simply impossible for him to follow the bakufu's instructions and force the English to obey the shogun's 1843 edict prohibiting surveying of the coast and requiring that Japanese castaways be returned solely via China or Holland. Indeed, he said, even the interpreters agreed the instructions were absurd.³⁴ Thus, whereas the bakufu believed the shogun's orders would demonstrate the regime's power and compel obedience even among the British, the interpreters had a better understanding of the realities of global politics and felt that such orders might, on the contrary, provoke armed conflict.

In the 1840s therefore, both sides were forced to rely on mediators: the bakufu on officials in Nagasaki (primarily the interpreters but also the magistrate), and the Dutch central government and colonial administration on the *opperhoofd* and the Deshima factory. Tokugawa foreign relations functioned sufficiently only because those on the water's edge at the Nagasaki gate made adjustments to smooth over differences of perception between the two central administrations. However, as East Asia entered a more turbulent period, this sort of brokered relationship had clearly begun showing its limits.

Earlier, by providing information regarding the Opium War, the Dutch colonial authorities and the *opperhoofd* had hoped to cause enough alarm within the bakufu to prompt an easing of trade restrictions. The failure of these expectations to be fulfilled was blamed on the Nagasaki gate and on the manipulation of information that took place there; it was believed that the news of the Opium War in the *fūsetsugaki* report had not been transmitted properly to Edo. The direct letter from the king was intended to break through these barriers and to compel the bakufu to understand the changes sweeping through East Asian politics. The Dutch documentation indicates the colonial

³³ After leaving Japan in 1829, Von Siebold moved to Leiden, where he wrote books on Japan while serving as an adviser to the king.

³⁴ Missive van P. A. Bik aan de Gouverneur-Generaal, d.d. 31 October 1843, Bijlage A. Afgegane Stukken, 1843 (NFJ 1644). The text of the 1843 edict can be found in the letter from the *rōjū* to the Nagasaki magistrate, 30 August 1843 (sixth day of the eighth month of Tenpō 14), BuZa 3141.

minister was confident the letter would successfully circumvent the Nagasaki gate and elicit a direct response from the shogun.

A Letter without an Embassy

The documents surrounding the preparation of the 1844 letter provide considerable detail, but they need only be briefly summarized. After gaining the king's consent to the letter, Baud consulted Von Siebold in Leiden.³⁵ Von Siebold embraced the task, submitting a number of drafts of the letter, lists of Japanese officials who should be presented with gifts, and instructions for the ambassador to the Minister.³⁶

On 22 November, the director of the king's office gave instructions for the ambassadorship to be assigned to C. Nepveu, a major-general in the army, and an official request was sent the next day.³⁷ Nepveu had already been appointed by the war minister and the colonial minister to inspect military installations on Java as part of a wider plan to improve the island's defenses against the threat of Britain, which had encroached into Borneo.³⁸ He insisted, however, on making the Java inspection secondary to the mission to Japan, and this, coupled with his extravagant financial demands, led to his later dismissal as an envoy. Straitened public finances prevented the Ministry for the Colonies from devoting funds toward an embassy only to Japan, and so it was resolved in correspondence dated 19 January that the king's letter would be presented instead by the head of the Japan factory.³⁹ While this decision to not send a special embassy was motivated by financial hardship, it may also indicate that the importance attached to the letter had diminished.

To prevent possible leaks, the *opperhoofd* on Deshima was not informed in advance of the letter's contents; in fact, he only learned of the letter through news brought aboard the regular trade ship two weeks before the arrival of the *Palembang*. The fear of leaks was not entirely unfounded, as the *opperhoofd* were frequently known to make unauthorized statements to Japanese officials. Von Siebold was concerned that advance warning of the letter might prompt Japanese authorities to refuse it, as they had when Nikolai Rezanov visited Nagasaki in 1804.⁴⁰ He also hoped that if the letter was kept secret, the ambassador might receive permission to carry it to Edo.⁴¹ In the end, the *opperhoofd* was only able to deliver the letter to Japanese officials in

³⁵ Kol. 4294, no. 458.

³⁶ Kol. 4297, no. 47.

³⁷ Kol. 4295, no. 488.

³⁸ Jacobs 1990.

³⁹ Kol. 4297, no. 47; KdK. 4164, no. M2.

⁴⁰ Rezanov tried to open trading links with Japan during that visit. Local authorities in Nagasaki refused his overtures, until finally in 1805 a bakufu official from Edo informed him that trade was not possible, that the czar's letter would not be accepted, and that he should immediately leave Japan.

⁴¹ Jacobs 1990; Missive van Von Siebold aan Minister van Koloniën, d.d. 16 December 1843 (Kol. 4297, no. 47).

Nagasaki. We can do no more than speculate whether events might have unfolded differently had financial conditions permitted the sending of a special ambassador.

The Letter

Before considering the contents of the letter, we should first consider its form. As far as we know, the original letter has been lost, forcing us to rely on the final draft, which is preserved in the archives of the Ministry for the Colonies.⁴² The salutation is incorporated into the main text. Willem's lengthy titles appear in large writing across the entire top of the first page; the body follows in smaller writing on the right-hand side. Finally come the date (15 February 1844), the king's signature, and the minister's countersignature. Although a diplomatic letter, the document closely resembles the official royal proclamations also found in the ministry's records. Indeed, the tone is imperious and reads as though addressed from a superior to an inferior.⁴³

The letter was sent in Dutch without a Japanese translation; Van der Chijs includes the Dutch in his book.⁴⁴ Three contemporaneous Japanese translations survive, and a modern Japanese translation has been published as well.⁴⁵ The text, which is relatively lengthy, begins by harking back to the issuance of an official trading pass, or *shuinjō* 朱印状, to the Dutch by Tokugawa Ieyasu 徳川家康 in 1609. After discussing the technological transformation today known as the Industrial Revolution, Willem points out that the British government is now determined to expand the markets for its manufactured goods even at the cost of conflict with other countries. The Opium War, which arose from this thirst for markets, was a calamity, and the king warns that the same danger might await Japan. He understands that the bakufu intends the 1842 firewood and water edict to apply only to ships driven to Japan by inclement weather or lack of supplies, and not to vessels coming to seek trade; even so, if those vessels are violently repulsed, war will surely result. Citing how steamships have reduced distances and brought countries together, the king comes to his central point:

Soften your laws against foreigners, or fortunate Japan may be destroyed by war. We give Your Majesty this advice with honest intentions, free from political self-interest. We hope wisdom will make the Japanese government realize that peace can only be maintained through friendly relations, and that these are only created through commercial ties. . . . Should Your Majesty desire to receive further information on this matter, which is so important for Japan, we would be pleased, after receiving a letter in Your Majesty's own hand, to

⁴² Kol. 4299, no. 144. Copies in Geheim stukken, 1844–1845 (NFJ 1716) and BuZa 3141.

⁴³ Nagazumi comments that the letter makes the Dutch sound like the “patrons” of the Japanese (see Nagazumi 1986, p. 51), while Herman Moeshart, in a private communication, has suggested it reads more like “an adult admonishing a child.” This tone does not, however, seem to have become a problem on the Japanese side.

⁴⁴ Van der Chijs 1867, pp. 47–52.

⁴⁵ For details on the translation process, see Morioka 1973a. For the modern Japanese translation, see Nagazumi 1986 (digest) and Kogure 2004.

send an envoy to Japan. This envoy would have our entire confidence and would be able to explain to Your Majesty the details of what we have roughly outlined in this letter.⁴⁶

The letter closes by asking the shogun for a reply.

The communication includes two main points. First, it warns the bakufu of the danger of a military confrontation attending the British advance into East Asia.⁴⁷ To this end the king references the Opium War, the symbol of the potential perils facing Japan. Second, the letter suggests that the firewood and water edict, though prompted by knowledge of the Opium War, is not entirely adequate and that it would be better for Japan to open trade relations. This advice, however, constitutes a very limited and modestly phrased “recommendation to open the country” only in a worst-case scenario. The primary aim of the letter, rather, is to gauge the bakufu’s stance—to determine whether the 1842 edict was simply a temporary measure designed to avoid potential conflict, or whether the bakufu had truly turned away from its exclusionary policy to one of friendly relations. This information was crucial if the Netherlands was to maintain its monopoly over Western trade with Japan.

Indeed, the letter includes no concrete proposal to open Japan’s harbors, in contrast to later communications by the Dutch colonial administration. In 1852, the year before Matthew C. Perry’s arrival in Japan, Governor-General Albertus J. Duymaer van Twist sent a draft of a Dutch-Japanese treaty to Nagasaki along with a new *opperhoofd*, Jan H. Donker-Curtius, who was given plenipotentiary powers of negotiation.⁴⁸ The 1844 royal letter was accompanied by a certified translation of the Nanjing treaty from English into Dutch. Despite the fact that this treaty was the first agreement between a European power and an isolationist country in East Asia, it was presented to the bakufu merely as one proof of the tragic result of the Opium war, and not a model for Japanese officials to also follow. The Dutch sense of crisis had undoubtedly been much less in 1844 than it was in 1852, when the government clearly believed that something needed to be done.

The colonial minister wished to ensure that the letter’s advice to open the country would not be interpreted as the usual pursuit of trade advantages by the Dutch.⁴⁹ By maintaining a clear distinction between diplomacy and commerce, he sought to boost the letter’s importance in the eyes of the bakufu as something more than a mere merchant’s gesture. In that vein, the letter emphasized its recommendations to be entirely based on selfless goodwill—its actual benefit-seeking motives notwithstanding.

⁴⁶ Van der Chijs 1867, pp. 47–52.

⁴⁷ The Dutch government was aware that an *Apart Nieuws* (*betsudan fūsetsugaki*) detailing the Opium War had been sent to Japan in 1842.

⁴⁸ Kanai 1989, pp. 53–54.

⁴⁹ Nagazumi 1986 and Jacobs 1990.

The Bakufu's Reply

The bakufu's reply, addressed to the "minister for Holland" (*Oranda sesshō daijin* 和蘭撰政大臣), was produced on 5 July 1845.⁵⁰ As the Dutch had asked for a translation into Dutch or Chinese, the document was written in *kanbun* (Chinese-style text) and rendered official by the joint signature of the *rōjū*.⁵¹ In addition, the bakufu issued a document in *wabun* (Japanese-style text) referred to as the "remonstrance" (*yusho* 諭書).⁵² Although the *yusho* specifies neither author nor addressee, the title of the attached Dutch translation—"written translation of the court's order"—indicates it was sent from the bakufu to the *opperhoofd*.⁵³ The reply and *yusho* share roughly the same content, although they differ in character: the reply is an official letter, whereas the remonstrance provided a supplementary explanation in case the Dutch were, for whatever reason, unable to fully understand the reply.

The bakufu initially asked Confucian scholars to draw up a draft of the reply, which was then discussed in a series of meetings. Although the participants of these meetings are known, their views and the nature of the discussion remain unclear.⁵⁴ The only clue is a letter written by the Nagasaki magistrate Izawa Masayoshi 伊沢政義, to an unknown recipient.⁵⁵ That recipient, Satō Shōsuke 佐藤昌介 has suggested, was the Edo municipal magistrate (*machi bugyō* 町奉行) Torii Yōzō 鳥居耀藏.⁵⁶ The authenticity of the letter is difficult to confirm, but its contents are illuminating.

Izawa first discusses the content and intention of the "investigation" (*tansaku* 探索) related to the letter. He explains that given the strong European desire for greater commercial opportunities, there is a chance France and Britain will demand Japan open the door to trade. Izawa, moreover, states, "Neither country intends to invade any part of Japan, but wishes only to engage in widespread trade; therefore we should not respond violently, for if we do so the results will be unimaginable."⁵⁷ In other words, the magistrate believed that while these countries did not desire territory, improper treatment would cause the situation to deteriorate. Izawa grasps quite precisely the thrust of the Dutch king's letter, an understanding he and other Japanese are, however, unlikely to have reached on their own.

We can assume that by "investigation," Izawa meant an interrogation of the *opperhoofd*, who was in possession of a sealed copy of the king's letter that had also been

⁵⁰ The original, with Johan Hoffman's translation, is in BuZa 3147a. For the text of the Japanese, see *Tsūkō ichiran zokushū*, pp. 526–27.

⁵¹ Nagazumi 1986.

⁵² Kol. 4324, no. 142.

⁵³ NFJ 1716; Kol. 4324, no. 142.

⁵⁴ *Tsūkō ichiran zokushū*, pp. 528–89.

⁵⁵ *Tsūkō ichiran zokushū*, pp. 513–15.

⁵⁶ Satō 1978. Torii, the son of the Confucian scholar Hayashi Jussai 林述齋, was close to the *rōjū* Mizuno Tadakuni, although he distanced himself from Mizuno following the outbreak of the Opium War. Izawa was a conservative ally of Torii's. Together, they incriminated Takashima Shūhan 高島秋帆 in order to hinder Mizuno's policy for coastal defense.

⁵⁷ *Tsūkō ichiran zokushū*, p. 514.

transported on the *Palembang*; he had been forbidden to divulge the contents and even the very existence of this copy until the bakufu had opened the original.⁵⁸ We cannot confirm from the Dutch sources that such an interrogation did in fact take place, and it is unlikely the *opperhoofd* would have left a formal record if he had indeed prematurely revealed parts of the king's letter to officials in the magistrate's office or to the interpreters.

Izawa's reference to France, which is not discussed in the king's letter, also suggests that his document was based on this investigation and reflects his concern over news from the Ryūkyūs. In 1844—the same year that Willem attempted to make contact with the shogun—Jean-Baptiste Cécille, the admiral of a French fleet to Indochina, sent a young missionary to settle in the Ryūkyūs as the first step in a wider advance into Japan.⁵⁹ Izawa must have received the news about the French incursion at almost the same time as he learned about the Dutch letter, and the combination must have provoked a sense of crisis.⁶⁰ We can surmise that in his investigation the magistrate asked the *opperhoofd* about French territorial ambitions and was given assurances that their primary intention was commerce. This information then appeared in Izawa's letter.

In the second half of his letter, Izawa presents his opinion of the Dutch missive:

As I have previously stated, Holland always tries to establish itself as an intermediary. Therefore it repeats the same things about enemy countries. They [the Dutch] are always sly [*kōkatsu* 狡猾]. . . . This emissary should be turned away.⁶¹

Izawa adds that if French or British ships do arrive, they should be driven out. In the years before the arrival of the 1844 letter, successive heads of the Deshima factory had attempted to loosen trade restrictions by emphasizing the value of the Dutch in shielding Japan from the threat of other countries. The Nagasaki magistrate's past experience with this negotiating strategy clearly informed his characterization of Dutch attempts to insert themselves between Japan and other countries as "sly." Although we cannot be sure whether Izawa's opinions influenced the *rōjū*'s reply, his comments provide insight into the thinking of the officials who policed the Nagasaki gate.

The *rōjū*'s reply and the remonstrance include five main points. First, they acknowledge that Japan had engaged in friendly relations with a variety of countries at the beginning of shogunal rule. This reference to past policies presumably responds to the king's mention of the 1609 trading pass that was granted to the Dutch by Tokugawa Ieyasu. Second, the documents explain that after this period of initial engagement the bakufu limited its foreign interaction to "countries for diplomatic relations"

⁵⁸ Geheim instructie voor het opperhoofd van den Nederlandschen handel in Japan, art. 14–16, Geheim ingekomen stukken betreffende de zending naar Japan van Z. M. fregat *Palembang*, 1844 (NFJ 1710, no. 3).

⁵⁹ Yokoyama 1996, p. 372.

⁶⁰ Mitani 2009, pp. 87–88.

⁶¹ *Tsūkō ichiran zokushū*, p. 514.

(*tsūshin no kuni* 通信之国), or Joseon-dynasty Korea and the Ryūkyū kingdom, and “countries for commercial relations” (*tsūshō no kuni* 通商之国), or Holland and China.

Third, because the Netherlands is a “commercial” and not a “diplomatic” country, replying to the king’s missive contravenes Japan’s “ancestral laws” (*sohō* 祖法). This explanation indicates the *rōjū* were aware that the lack of a direct communication from the shogun might be considered discourteous by the Dutch. Fourth, the *rōjū* states that they have nevertheless decided to reply to the “minister for Holland,” as it would have been impolite to have done nothing at all. Here again, the bakufu apparently seeks to soften the absence of a direct response from the shogun. Finally, the crucial fifth point denies the Dutch hopes for a direct channel of communication with the bakufu: the *rōjū* warn that no future letters should be sent and that any to arrive would be returned unopened.

At its core, the *rōjū*’s reply is designed to explain why the shogun had not sent an official reply to the king’s missive. That letter’s central query—whether the bakufu was prepared to open trade relations once the firewood and water edict proved insufficient to deflect conflict with Britain, as it inevitably must—remains unanswered. In that sense, the *rōjū* follow Izawa’s suggestion that the embassy be returned empty-handed. The document essentially repeats the same points made in papers issued to the Russians Adam Laksman and Nikolai Rezanov when they attempted to make contact with Japan.⁶² As such, the reply simply reconfirms past policy; in particular, recent scholarship takes it to contain the clearest formulation and codification of the bakufu “ancestral law” limiting foreign relations to the two categories of “diplomatic” countries (Korea and the Ryūkyū kingdom) and “commercial” countries (Holland and China).⁶³

On receiving the reply, colonial minister Baud turned to Von Siebold for a Dutch translation. Von Siebold sought assistance from the noted scholar Dr. Johan Hoffman, who produced a generally accurate translation. On 4 May 1846, Von Siebold sent Baud the translation, his own opinion on the exchange, and a German translation of the document previously issued to Rezanov. Von Siebold’s assessment was as follows:

In formulating this letter, the state councillors [*rōjū*] clearly consulted all the preexisting documents (*oorkonden*) connected with foreign affairs.⁶⁴ They will not break from their time-honored regulations regarding foreign nations, or from the declarations accumulated over more than two centuries, which are consistently evoked in response to requests for free trade. The letter largely concurs with the policies that the Japanese regime has made clear on different occasions to the *opperhoofd* who manage the trade of the Netherlands. . . . However, the letter does demonstrate the value [in Japan] of the old passes that we

⁶² These documents stated that it was a national law that only China, Korea, the Netherlands, and the Ryūkyū kingdom were allowed to send legations and trade vessels to Japan. While the basic content of the letters is largely identical, there were some minor differences between them.

⁶³ See, for example, Fujita 1992.

⁶⁴ Von Siebold refers to the documents issued to Rezanov and other foreign emissaries from the late eighteenth to the nineteenth century.

acquired in 1609 and 1611 from the founder of the current dynasty. . . . Old customs and constantly repeated precedents acquire in Japan the strength of laws.⁶⁵

Baud's report to Willem II, presented on 12 May, was based on Von Siebold's comments. The colonial minister observed that the letter had clearly prompted gratitude from the shogun, but advised patience until this bore fruit. In the meantime the government in Batavia should not pursue profit at any cost, since doing so would damage the favorable impression created by the letter.⁶⁶ In short, Baud had concluded that the firewood and water edict did not indicate a shift in the bakufu's exclusionary policies, and that therefore the Netherlands should avoid hasty attempts to pursue an increase in their profits from trade. Although in his report Baud did not declare the letter to be a success, we may conclude that he did not consider it a failure, either: it achieved at least one of its goals, that of helping him to determine the Netherlands should not change its policy toward Japan.

Immediate Consequences

The Dutch feared that the news of replacement of the 1825 Foreign Vessels Expulsion Order with a less aggressive regulation would be interpreted by the other Western powers as a sign that Japan was abandoning its exclusionist policies.⁶⁷ Given that the *rōjū*'s reply indicated this was not the case, the Dutch government, clearly believing that publicizing the firewood and water edict would be of no benefit, did not disclose it to other countries until years later.⁶⁸ In 1847, however, the Dutch did choose to announce to Britain, France, and the United States the 1843 edict prohibiting maritime surveys of the Japanese coast.⁶⁹ As discussed above, at the time of this edict the *opperhoofd* and the interpreters had deemed it unreasonable for the bakufu to expect the Dutch would be able to both disseminate and enforce this order among other Western nations. Yet by 1847, the Dutch government had obviously decided that the difficulties were outweighed by the value of the edict in demonstrating the bakufu was not abandoning its exclusionary policies.

In 1850, after the repeated arrival of foreign survey missions, the Nagasaki magistrate instructed the *opperhoofd* to reaffirm to the other Western powers that the firewood and water edict was only a humane measure to save castaways and that it was not to be mistaken for a change in the traditional national law of Japan.⁷⁰ Receiving word of this correspondence, in March 1851 the colonial minister requested the foreign minister to inform other governments of the regulation, but to emphasize

⁶⁵ Kol. 4324, no. 142. There is also a copy in Geheim stukken betreffende geschenken voor Z. M. den keizer van Japan alhier met Z. M. fregat *Palembang* aangebragt over 1845, 1846 en 1847 (NFJ 1713, no. 10).

⁶⁶ Kol. 4324, no. 142.

⁶⁷ In the West, the 1825 order was seen as the climax of the bakufu's exclusionist policies.

⁶⁸ Kogure 2004, pp. 88–90.

⁶⁹ Yokoyama 1996, p. 380.

⁷⁰ Geheim ingekomene en afgegane stukken, 1850 (NFJ 1696, no. 12).

that the edict indicated Japan's policy of isolation would continue.⁷¹ As Yokoyama Yoshinori 横山伊徳 points out, the Dutch government was clearly displeased that other foreign powers were steadily encroaching on Japan.⁷²

As for attitudes on the Japanese side, Mitani Hiroshi 三谷博 writes that the references "by the Dutch to the changing international environment in East Asia . . . made the bakufu keenly aware of the need to reduce the desire of Western countries to encroach on Japan."⁷³ The bakufu saw two options in its relations with the Western powers: maintaining an unbending policy of exclusion or adopting a limited policy of conciliation. The third option, radically changing course and opening the country, was largely ignored. Indeed, there was even some discussion of reinstating the policy of expelling foreign vessels by force.⁷⁴ Dissenting opinions, however, ensured that this possibility was never realized, apparently because the king's letter had made clear to the bakufu that expelling foreign ships, far from being a realistic solution, might provoke conflict and defeat for Japan.

On the most basic level, the king's letter had been motivated by a desire to avoid the worst-case scenario of a military conflict between Japan and Britain or another Western country. Insofar as the letter influenced the bakufu to reduce the chances of confrontation, it did fulfill one aim, at least when viewed from the Dutch perspective.

A New Threat from the United States

After the exchange of letters, the Netherlands continued to pay close attention to British policy toward Japan.⁷⁵ Increasingly, however, it came to view the United States as a greater threat. From 1849 onward the United States requested cooperation from the Netherlands over its Japanese policies; these requests, and the Dutch response, have been extensively studied by scholars including Tabohashi and Yokoyama.⁷⁶ In 1850, news of U.S. plans concerning Japan reached the *opperhoofd* on Deshima. Nevertheless, both the *Apart Nieuws* sent by the colonial government to the bakufu and the statements by the *opperhoofd* to the interpreters downplayed the military character of those policies.⁷⁷

Despite such Dutch cover-ups, the bakufu was aware of the new threat. In a letter dated 31 October 1850 informing the governor-general of the Nagasaki magistrate's aforementioned instructions regarding the firewood and water edict ten days earlier, the *opperhoofd* Joseph Levissohn and his successor, Frederick Rose, expressed this added concern:

⁷¹ Yokoyama 1996, p. 385.

⁷² Yokoyama, 1996, p. 379.

⁷³ Mitani 2009, pp. 87–88.

⁷⁴ Fujita 1987, pp. 348–60.

⁷⁵ Klapper op het geheime-en kabinets verbaal, 1846 (Kol. 4398) and 1847 (Kol. 4399); Kol. 3218.

⁷⁶ Tabohashi 1930, pp. 378–95; Yokoyama 1996, pp. 381–91.

⁷⁷ NFJ 1703.

The anxiety of the Japanese government over foreign attempts to contact Japan is greater now than in the past. We believe that this is, in part, due to information we provided in the *Apart Nieuws* that merchants from the British Indies and Birmingham, as well as their counterparts in North America, have appealed to the governments of England and the United States, respectively, to ensure that trade with Japan is opened to them. . . . Reports indicate that there is talk within the two very powerful states of acting to secure trade relations with Japan. We wish to advise Your Excellencies of the great importance that attaches to the careful editing of the *Apart Nieuws*. For many reasons, we believe these announcements carry significant weight with the court in Edo. . . . The strong interest in these reports is evident from the urgency with which they are requested and also from the speed with which they are translated and sent.⁷⁸

In short, the *opperhoofd* wished to impress on the governor-general the importance the Japanese attached to the *Apart Nieuws* reports concerning British and U.S. plans toward Japan. The bakufu considered news from the Netherlands to be important, Dutch attempts to disguise the true military character of the U.S. policies notwithstanding. For this reason, both heads of the factory recommended that the next (1851) *Apart Nieuws* provide any available information regarding British and American attempts to seize trade, or explicitly note that there was no such information if this were the case.

Indeed by 1851 U.S. plans had become much more concrete, despite which the governor-general elected to continue omitting references to them in the *Apart Nieuws*.⁷⁹ In a resolution on 7 June, an extract of which was later forwarded to Deshima, the governor-general and the governing council determined that “[U.S. secretary of state] John M. Clayton’s plan . . . should be kept secret so as not to cause unnecessary anxiety to the Japanese.”⁸⁰ Instead, only “appropriate” information was to be presented to the bakufu, the decision of what exactly was appropriate being left to the chief of the factory. As Yokoyama notes, “the decision to delegate matters to the *opperhoofd* hardly represents a radical shift in policy toward actively reworking relations with Japan.”⁸¹ Rather, it endorsed the management and manipulation of information by officials at the Nagasaki gate. This mediating space, then, served as a convenient buffer not only for the interpreters and the *opperhoofd*, but also for the Dutch colonial administration.

In December 1851, the Ministry for the Colonies compiled a memorandum and list of documents concerning the dispatch of the king’s letter.⁸² The list was supplemented on multiple occasions and eventually contained material extending up through 27 October 1854, including the 1847 document informing other countries of the 1843 survey prohibition edict as well as the 1851 announcement of the 1842 firewood and

⁷⁸ Geheim ingekomene en afgegane stukken, 1850 (NFJ 1696, no. 10).

⁷⁹ Besluit, 7 June 1851 (ANRI, Algemeene Secretarie, no. 16).

⁸⁰ Ingekome en uitgegane stukken, 1851 (NFJ 1697, no. 2).

⁸¹ Yokoyama 1996, p. 386.

⁸² Nota van het historische der buitengewone zending naar Japan in 1844 (Kol. 3218).

water edict. Also covered were U.S.-related documents including those concerning Dutch-U.S. negotiations over policy on Japan—an indication the list had been prepared in response to U.S. plans toward Japan.

In 1852, Willem III, who had succeeded his father, sought to send another letter to Japan.⁸³ It was eventually decided, however, that Governor-General Albertus J. Duymaer van Twist, discussed above, should send his own document to the bakufu. The decision was undoubtedly motivated in part by fear that a letter from the king would not be accepted, as the *rōjū* had warned in their 1844 reply. The governor-general's letter was sent to Nagasaki along with the draft of a Dutch-Japanese treaty and an explanatory document. There, it was accepted by the magistrate and sent to Edo after the *opperhoofd* assured that it could be treated in the same way as the *fūsetsugaki* and hence required no reply. As foreign pressure on Japan had significantly escalated in the previous few years, the magistrate clearly understood that the letter could not simply be rejected unread. Thus it appears that he, with the cooperation of the new *opperhoofd* Donker-Curtius, devised the agreement that no return letter was expected to finesse the inconsistency with the bakufu's past stance.⁸⁴

The Nagasaki gate functioned as a threshold space between two cultures and civilizations. It was a bridge between two countries, but also a place where information was managed by local officials, most notably the *opperhoofd* and the interpreters. In 1852, this space and the mediating role that it played remained intact.

Isolation as Ancestral law

According to Fujita Satoru 藤田覚, “[Tokugawa] foreign relations, which were first formed in the mid-seventeenth century and became established in the eighteenth century, continued as they were despite lacking, in some respects, defining laws or regulations. Then at the end of the eighteenth century . . . [the bakufu] began attempting to assign legal authority to its preexisting foreign policies, arguing for the presence of an ancestral law that distinguished between ‘diplomatic countries’ and ‘commercial countries’ and that prohibited the opening of new relations.”⁸⁵ Fujita's comments bear a striking resemblance to Von Siebold's assertion that in Japan “old customs and constantly repeated precedents” acquired a legal power of their own, an observation that provides fascinating insight into the nature of bakufu attitudes. In the experience of the Dutch who had actual contact with Japanese officials, not only written statutes but also custom and precedent could in Japan acquire the force of law.

As Von Siebold noted when he referred to “preexisting documents connected with foreign affairs,” these precedents had been fixed and codified in the papers previously issued to the Russian explorers and other foreign emissaries. It was to illustrate this

⁸³ Missive van Prins Hendrik aan de Directeur van het Kabinet des Konings, d.d. 14 April 1852 (KdK. 4232, no. S7). The author (Matsukata) wishes to thank Herman Moeshart for bringing this source to her attention.

⁸⁴ Vos 1993, pp. 33–34.

⁸⁵ Fujita 2000, p. 216.

point that Von Siebold provided the colonial minister with a translation of the Rezanov document. The bakufu had answered the Russian incursions by organizing and codifying its precedents in written form; these papers given to Rezanov and others, in turn, became the crucial basis for producing later documents responding to foreign threats.

Thus, although ancestral law, as Fujita notes, was only codified at the end of the eighteenth century, once it was recognized it consistently underpinned bakufu responses to communications such as Willem's 1844 letter. The incident surrounding the king's letter, then, can be seen as one of the last stages in the bakufu's formulation, over a long period of time, of a fixed ancestral law governing foreign relations.

Conclusion

To now return to one of the questions raised at the beginning of this article, what was the true motivation behind the 1844 letter? As already discussed, the letter sought to discern whether the bakufu had relaxed its exclusionary policy with the promulgation of the 1842 firewood and water edict, or, alternatively, had merely made a limited concession. But why did this probe need to take the form of a "recommendation to open the country" and to suggest that trading relations might in fact be opened?

The Dutch government (as well as, of course, the head of the factory on Deshima) was acutely aware of the possibility that Britain might resort to military force to open Japanese ports, as it had in China. The Dutch feared being forced into the difficult situation of choosing between Britain and Japan: regardless of which decision they made, they would surely be compelled to endure the hatred of the opposing side and the persistent suspicions of their supposed ally. For the Dutch, the worst-case scenario, and one they wished to avoid at all costs, was one in which their long-term sacrifices, such as the continued sending of ships to Nagasaki even after trading profits had largely disappeared as well as the acceptance of humiliating treatment by the Japanese, would prove to have been in vain.

Even so, there was little that the Netherlands, which was much weaker than Britain and lacked that nation's ability to project military power into East Asia, could actually do to avoid this scenario. The only available option was to counsel the bakufu that if British ships indeed demanded trade negotiations, it should agree rather than risk war. Given the distance separating the Netherlands and Japan, there was a chance that Britain would act before the exchange between the king and the bakufu was complete. Thus to cover all contingencies, the king's letter combined language designed to discern the true intentions of the firewood and water edict with a "recommendation to open the country" in case conflict loomed. In short, the Dutch government did actually call on Japan to open its shores, but this was essentially an expedient to prevent the country from clashing with Britain. In truth, the Dutch government wished to prolong its monopoly and to exclude other countries from intervening. The 1844 letter was thus in no way selfless.

Through the exchange of letters, the Dutch government was able to confirm that the firewood and water edict was nothing more than a minimal concession and

that the bakufu intended to maintain its exclusionary policy. The government interpreted this to mean the Netherlands could continue to monopolize trade with Japan. Consequently, Baud, the colonial minister, did not view the letter as a failure; on the contrary, it gave him renewed faith in his country's traditional policy toward Japan, which he continued. As discussed above, evidence also suggests that the king's warning played a role in avoiding the Netherlands's worst fear, which was an intensification of the bakufu's exclusionary policy and a return to the 1825 edict calling for attacks on foreign ships. If the letter did indeed thus reduce the chances of a military confrontation, then it may even have succeeded beyond expectations.

The 1844 letter anticipated two very different possibilities: either that Britain would begin pressuring Japan to open trade or that the bakufu would abandon its exclusionary policy. The intention was to secure the best outcome in either case. Neither the Dutch central government nor the governor-general considered greater trade relations with Japan and increased profits to be the goal of the letter. On the contrary, both were highly critical of the *opperhoofd's* outspoken demands for expanded trade. Thus in the text the king emphasized his sending of the missive to be a selfless act in which greed played no role. In that respect, Jacobs's assertion that the endeavor was a failure because it did not improve either Dutch profit or prestige is inaccurate: the letter was not intended to achieve a commercial return in the first place. At the same time, Nagazumi's assessment that the letter was a "selfless" gesture that had "a profound impact" on the bakufu is also flawed, because the missive's true aim was to protect the Dutch monopoly.⁸⁶

The letter's second purpose, opening a direct channel of negotiation bypassing the Nagasaki gate, succeeded at least in the sense that the communication elicited a response from the *rōjū*. That response, however, stipulated that no future letters should be sent from the Netherlands. Thus the document failed in the long term to circumvent mediation and move away from a system of negotiation in which information was filtered by the *opperhoofd*, the interpreters, and the magistrate. In short, the Nagasaki gate remained intact.

Past scholars have characterized Willem's letter as a "path to opening Japan through peaceful diplomacy" and the "starting point of the Netherlands's modern diplomacy toward Japan."⁸⁷ Even if this document did represent a beginning of sorts, however, I hesitate to use the word "diplomacy" to describe it. In 1844, there was no common language or etiquette for diplomacy between the Netherlands and Japan. Instead, each side displayed a fundamental ignorance and misunderstanding of the other, creating a gulf that was rendered less problematic only by the mediation of those in Nagasaki. The Nagasaki gate remained in place well into the 1850s, many years after the king's letter. There, information was manipulated by both sides in order to accommodate the expectations of distant superiors in Edo and Batavia.

⁸⁶ Nagazumi 1986, p. 56.

⁸⁷ Morioka 1975, p. 62; Nagazumi 1986, p. 57.

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ANRI

Republic of Indonesia archives, Jakarta, Indonesia.

BuZa

Ministry of Foreign Affairs archives, National Archives, The Hague.

KdK.

Cabinet of the King archives, National Archives, The Hague.

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