The Dutch in Japan

Paul Doolan describes the unique 400-year-long trading, intellectual and artistic contacts between the Dutch and the Japanese.

Many of us have read James Clavell’s Shogun (1975), the fictional account of the adventures of the crew of the Dutch ship De Liefde, or have seen the television series starring Richard Chamberlain. April 2000 marks the 400th anniversary of the Liefde’s arrival in Japan in 1600, an event which began four centuries of Japanese-Dutch relations.

The Portuguese had been the first Europeans to settle in Japan in the mid-sixteenth century, seeking both riches and souls. In the 1570s Nagasaki was opened as the main port for foreign trade by the local daimyo (lord), and became the centre for the Jesuit Francis Xavier’s mission to convert Japan to Christianity. The Portuguese also brought firearms with them. Japan at this time was wracked by power struggles, and the last shogun (military ruler) of the Ashihara clan was deposed in 1573. Over the next thirty years Toyotomi Hideyoshi built up his position as the most powerful man in Japan, though he never claimed the title of shogun. One of his former rivals, Tokugawa Ieyasu, went over to his side and on Hideyoshi’s death in 1598 Ieyasu continued to battle the regional daimyo for control over the whole of Japan.

Then, in 1598, a fleet of four ships left Rotterdam intending to circumnavigate the world. After a disastrous voyage, the one surviving vessel, the Liefde (Charity), reached southern Japan in April 1600. Of the original 110 crew members only twenty-four survived, six of whom died shortly after arriving. By this time Tokugawa Ieyasu had grown suspicious of the Portuguese and was pleased to learn that the Dutch were their enemies. He also wished to break the influence of the Portuguese mission, and the Dutch assured him that they had no interest in converting his subjects to Christianity. In October 1600 Tokugawa Ieyasu decisively defeated his main rivals at the Battle of Sekigahara in central Honshu. For the battle he was able to call on the help of Dutch gunners and eighteen cannons from the Liefde, and his favourable impression of these new Europeans was confirmed. He appointed two of the crew, the Englishman Will Adams and Jan Joosten van Lodensteijn, as senior advisors to his government. Both remained in the service of Japan for the rest of their lives.

In 1603 Ieyasu established himself as shogun, setting up the Tokugawa Shogunate that ruled Japan until 1868. Then in 1609 two ships of the recently formed Dutch East India Company (VOC) sailed into the port of Hirado in south-western Japan. They carried a letter from the Dutch leader Maurice of Orange, in which he invited the Shogun to commence official relations between the two countries. The Shogun was so flattered by the tone of the letter that he invited the Shogun to commence official relations between the two countries. The Shogun was so flattered by the tone of the letter that he presented the Dutch with a permit giving them access to all Japanese ports. The VOC opened its first trading post in Hirado. The Portuguese trade monopoly was finally broken.

Ieyasu continued to distrust the Christian missionaries, fearing the new faith would provide a focus for opposition to his rule, and in 1612 and 1614 he prohibited Christianity, initiating a period of ever-worsening persecution. During the 1630s, the Portuguese were also increasingly penalised by the Japanese with trade restrictions, while the English abandoned as hopeless their attempt to break into the Japanese market. In 1641 the Portuguese were expelled altogether and the Dutch were ordered to move their trading post from Hirado to the tiny artificial island of Deshima in Nagasaki Bay. In order to ensure its own survival Japan now closed itself off from the rest of the world almost completely.

From 1641 until the arrival of the Americans in 1853, the strictly-controlled Dutch post on Deshima was Japan’s sole window on the Western world. This created a bilateral relationship unique in history. Crucial Western developments during these centuries—from Newton’s work on gravity to the development of the technique of smallpox vaccination—entered Japan via the VOC’s seemingly insignificant little outpost. Dutch became the imperative language for Japanese scholars interested in the outside world.

Throughout the seventeenth century the VOC went from strength to strength, becoming the largest business organisation in the world. During the 200 years of its existence nearly a million Europeans left Holland on one of the VOC’s ships. Its overseas bases employed about 25,000 workers. Deshima was only a tiny base on the periphery of the VOC’s world. In 1687–88 the company’s Ceylon and Batavia offices had over 2,500 employees each; on Deshima there were...
only twenty-seven. On the other hand, the Dutch enjoyed an envied monopoly with an extremely important partner. Until 1688, when the shogun banned the export of silver, Japan was the source of a plentiful and inexpensive supply of this precious metal. During the seventeenth century the profit on the annual trade with Japan was over 50 per cent, making Deshima the VOC’s richest trading post. The Dutch supplied the Japanese with Chinese silk, textiles from Europe, spices from the Dutch-controlled East Indies, hides from Thailand and Taiwan and ivory from Africa and South East Asia. The VOC’s exports from Japan included silver, gold, copper, camphor, porcelain, lacquerware and grains.

In the eighteenth century, though, the VOC’s profits in Japan began to dwindle. In Europe the Dutch Republic was losing its preeminent place as a trading power to England and France. London replaced Amsterdam as the world’s financial centre. In the early part of the century a series of disastrous shipwrecks in East Asia proved costly for the company. These difficulties were compounded by increasing Japanese trade restrictions. In 1728 there was talk within the VOC of closing the Japanese office. In 1743 the Deshima trade post made a loss for the first time.

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Ironically, as trade decreased Dutch influence on Japanese culture was growing. By the late fifteenth century, Portuguese had become the language of commerce. By the eighteenth century it had been all but forgotten, however, replaced by Dutch. In the second half of that century the term Rangaku—Dutch studies or ‘Hollandology’—appeared. Specialists in the study of Europe became known as Rangakusha or ‘Hollandologists’. These Japanese scholars threw themselves into the study of Western medicine, astronomy, maths, botany, physics, chemistry, pharmacy, geography and the military arts—all studied in Dutch of course. Early Rangakusha contributed to the development of a new spirit of enquiry in Japan. Those who studied Dutch medical techniques were impressed by the accuracy of Western science. This led to a Japanese questioning of some of their beliefs and, ultimately, contributed to an attitude of scepticism towards the entire feudal system. By the mid-nineteenth century civil servants and young men from all over Japan were attending the Tekijuku, a school in Osaka to study Dutch language and Western sciences, founded by the physician and teacher Ogata Koan. The Dutch-inspired premise of free enquiry propagated at this school was revolutionary for Japan. One graduate of the school, Fukuzawa Yukichi, became the founder of Keio University, arguably the most prestigious and influential private university in Japan today. Remembering his years in Osaka, he wrote:

> We students were conscious of the fact we were the sole possessors of the key to knowledge of the great European civilisation... The resources of our minds were beyond the reach of any prince or nobleman of the whole nation.

We can only imagine the astonishment and disappointment that many Japanese must have felt when the country opened its doors to the outside world in the 1850s, only to discover that Dutch was far from being an international language. Rangaku scholars had worked hard to conquer the language of the Netherlands but now it turned out to be incomprehensible to all but a few foreigners. But the Dutch influence on the Japanese language can still be found today. Plenty of Japanese words in current usage derived from Dutch. For example, ‘birru’, from the Dutch ‘bier’, meaning beer; ‘garasu’, from the Dutch ‘glas’, meaning glass and ‘kohii’ from the Dutch ‘koffie’ meaning coffee. All these words entered the Japanese vocabulary in the eighteenth century. Clearly, the Japanese saw the Western world through a Dutch lens—and the Japanese word ‘renzu’ comes from the Dutch word ‘lens’.

By the late eighteenth century the Dutch settlement on Deshima had become something of a tourist attraction for visitors to Nagasaki, who would try to catch a glimpse of a ‘red-headed’ on the little island. As a result, woodblock prints depicting the foreigners or their mighty ships began to be sold as souvenirs. These prints had become a speciality of Nagasaki publishers by the nineteenth century.

Elsewhere, the annual journey undertaken by the Dutch from Nagasaki to pay their respects at the shogun’s residence at Edo might afford a glimpse of the red-headed ones. Not surprisingly, misconceptions regarding the foreigners were common. It was widely believed that the Dutch never reached fifty years of age; that they had the eyes of a dog; their feet had no heels (which explained why they wore shoes with wooden heels), and that they raised a leg, in the manner of a dog, when urinating. As is often the case with stereotypes, the Dutch were considered to have ferocious sexual appetites. The large number of ladies of pleasure that were employed in Nagasaki might have contributed to this impression, as well as babies born in Nagasaki with European facial features and, it was said, no heels. Of course, some rangakusha attempted to correct popular misconceptions. When the artist and pioneer of Westernisation Shiba Kokan (1747?–1810) was asked to explain how the Dutch, who belonged to the animal world, exceeded the Japanese in some areas of science and technology, he replied dryly: ‘apparently human beings are not as clever as animals’.

For Europeans, Japan remained an enigma. Members of the VOC were the sole contact between Japan and Europe and a few of these officials threw themselves into the role of interpreter of this strange civilisation. The German VOC surgeon Englebert Kaempfer compiled his *History of Japan* in the late seventeenth century, a work that remained the standard European description of the country for nearly 150 years. In the eighteenth century Hendrik Dœff and Isaac Titsingh immersed themselves in Japanese culture, while the Swede Carl Peter Thunberg, a student of Linnaeus, used his time as surgeon for the VOC on
Non-invasive techniques: Japanese acupuncture was studied by the Dutch; the figure of a man shows the points on which moxa (smouldering herbs) should be applied for various illness, while the sketch of the woman shows acupuncture points, though somewhat less convincingly. From Kaempfer's *History*. The Japanese were equally fascinated with Western surgery: the print of an amputation (insert) was made in about 1810.
Dutch influence did not disappear overnight. During the turbulent mid-nineteenth century, Dutch scientists and technical experts helped to shape modern Japan. Koenrad Gratama, a chemist, was instrumental in founding the medical faculty of the University of Osaka, for example, while engineer Cornelius van Doorn introduced the modern principles of water management. At first the Dutch were much needed as secretaries and interpreters, too, for Dutch remained the *lingua franca* in Japan for a few years more. Inevitably, however, the Dutch gradually lost their special place in the Japanese view of things and the Netherlands became a minor player on the world stage.

Yet the Dutch may have bequeathed to the Japanese nation one legacy of

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great symbolic value. In 1855 William III of the Netherlands decided to donate a paddle steamship, the Soenbing, to Japan. During the transfer ceremony, one Admiral Fabius lowered the Dutch flag only to discover that the Japanese authorities had no national flag available to hoist in its place. The quick-thinking Dutch admiral grabbed the nearest available flag to hand. No one knows exactly what flag it was he raised. Perhaps it was the standard of the Satsuma clan, who were then challenging the shogunate for power. But eye-witness reports describe the flag which flew over the Soenbing as a red ball on a white field. Was this the accidental origin of the hinomaru, the flag that has symbolised the Land of the Rising Sun ever since?

The friendly relations that had existed between Holland and Japan turned to deep suspicion in the twentieth century when the Japanese empire began to expand. Japanese imperialism clashed head on with Dutch imperialism in the Dutch East Indies, present-day Indonesia. The Japanese invasion of Indonesia commenced on January 10th, 1942. Victory was swift, and nearly 150,000 Dutch citizens found themselves prisoners of the Japanese. The Japanese occupation only lasted three-and-a-half-years but it all but brought to an end Dutch rule in this area.

The trauma of war gradually faded and relations between the Netherlands and Japan were normalised during the 1950s. Since then commercial, cultural and scientific contacts have grown. One sign that the Netherlands still holds a special place in the imagination of many Japanese is the success of the theme park Huis ten Bosch. All the buildings are lifesize and one could almost be in Holland but for the absence of graffiti, and the fact that this Holland attracts far more Japanese visitors than the real one.

One issue concerning the two countries’ shared past remains sensitive: when an exhibition—organised by the Dutch National Institute of War Documentation and partly subsidised by a Japanese grant—on the relationship between the Dutch, Indonesians and Japanese during the Second World War, opened in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, last summer, the Japanese ambassador to the Netherlands turned down his invitation. The exhibition was due to open in Tokyo in December 1999, but it has still not reached Japan. Indeed a proposed venue for the exhibition in Tokyo was picketed in February while a leading newspaper carried an article expressing outrage at the exhibition. At the time of going to press, discussions regarding the ‘modification’ of the exhibition for the Japanese public were still taking place. Any indiscreet reference to ‘The Great East Asian War’ is likely to ignite the fury of nationalists, including Tokyo’s elected mayor, Ishihara Shintaro.

Nevertheless, there is much to be celebrated in both countries. In August 1999 the Vincent Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam opened a new wing designed by a Japanese architect and paid for by a Japanese donation—a gift from one country to another for 400 years of almost continual friendship. In the Amsterdam suburb of Amstelveen, home to more than half of the five thousand Japanese residents of the Netherlands, a street will be renamed ‘Deshima Avenue’. This month [April 2000] Dutch television will broadcast an extended series on the 400-year relationship. Dutch orchestras will visit Japan throughout the year. Paintings by the Japanese artist Shiba Kokan will be exhibited in Amsterdam, while works of Rembrandt and Vermeer and other Dutch masters will be taken to Japan. The football club Feyenoord of Rotterdam will also tour Japan.

As for the Liefde, it has long since disappeared. But in 1926 a statue was discovered among the Buddhhas in a temple north of Tokyo. No one knows how it got there or how long it had been there. It clearly was not an image of Buddha as the facial features were Caucasian. In fact it was a statue of Erasmus and it had once decorated the stern of the Liefde, which had previously been known as the Erasmus. It is all that remains of that fateful ship. Today the statue can be found in the Tokyo National Museum, a solid reminder of the arrival of Will Adams and his Dutch shipmates 400 years ago.

FOR FURTHER READING


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