

A Japanese Merchant's View on the Menacing Westerners

By Jacqueline Houtved

The year 1853 has come to stand as one of the great watersheds in Japanese history. This was the year that Commodore Perry's black ships entered the Bay of Uraga with American demands for the opening of diplomatic relations and free trade; and traditionally this event has been seen as upsetting the tranquillity of a Japan that had enjoyed peace and stability for more than 200 years of isolation under Tokugawa rule, the awakening of a sleeping beauty among countries.

However, in the context of Japanese history isolation, often described with the Japanese word *sakoku*, was not the complete sealing off of the country which one might assume. *Sakoku* laws forbade intercourse with non-Asian foreigners other than the Dutch and other than through the port of Nagasaki. Not a basic tenet of the Tokugawa regime, they were promulgated by Tokugawa Iemitsu (1604-1651), the third *shogun*, in response to the threat of Christianity.

Only from 1637, when the Shimabara rebellion of Christian farmers against their *daimyo* illustrated the conflicts of loyalty inherent in adoption of the foreign religion, had the isolation been complete, and even since then the prescribed course of action in the event of foreign ships approaching shore had changed.

Since the laws were directed primarily against the spread of religion early practice allowed foreign ships water and firewood in case of need. However, with the growing volume of traffic through the area and consequent rise in the number of incidents official attitudes changed. The 1825 Expulsion Edict ordered all *daimyo* to drive away Western ships on sight, and it is sometimes known under its graphic popular name: the "Shell and Repel" Edict.¹

It was repealed in 1842 as it turned out to be inhumane and impossible to carry out in practice, even danger-

ous to the safety of Japan in its combativeness.² This did not change the fact that in 1853 when Commodore Perry challenged the isolation policy, hardly any Japanese had direct experience of Westerners. Many suggestions for defence measures were written in the wake of the black ships, most of them by people in responsible positions in the government or from the warrior class. Among them was also one by a wealthy merchant from the province of Ise, halfway between Edo and Kyoto along the coast. Takegawa Chikusai was his name, and he had for years been cultivating an interest in foreign learning through books and his widespread trading connections within Japan.

While Chikusai did not actually go as far as to suggest the abolition of *sakoku*, he was very concerned that Japan should not get involved in a war that it was not prepared for and could not win. In his two treatises on coastal defence and how to protect the country, the *Kaibo Gokoku Ron* written in 1853 and the *Kaibo Gokoku Koron* from the following year,³ he made numerous suggestions for the rearmament and strengthening of Japan; but high on his list of priorities was the need to consider the enemy, his weaknesses and strengths.

Only by doing so could one gauge the nature of the threat against Japanese independence, its extent and severity. Without this, he insisted, there could be no viable and long-lasting solutions. Chikusai found support for this point of view among the Chinese Classics.

Knowledge and Identification

The Chinese classic widely known in the West by the name *The Art of War* is believed to have been written some time between the mid-8th and late 5th centuries B.C. and is ascribed to the mythical Sun Tzû, commonly reputed to have been an able general to the king of Wei, though none of the legends connected with the name are

1. Wakabayashi, Bob Tadashi: *Anti-Foreignism and Western Learning in Early-Modern Japan - The New Theses of 1825*, Harvard East Asian Monographs, no. 126 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), p.10: The Expulsion Edict was proposed by a government official named Takahashi Kageyasu who was "the most brilliant and informed Rangakusha [=student of Dutch (i.e.foreign) learning] of the day." On Takahashi's arguments, see *ibid.* pp. 101-107.

2. Chang, Richard T.: *From Prejudice to Tolerance - A Study of the Japanese Image of the West, 1826-1864* (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1970), pp.137-139)

3. Both included in *Takegawa Chikusai-o*, a heterogeneous collection of materials written by Takegawa Chikusai which was compiled and published by the Mie-ken Iinan-gun Kyo-ikukai (the educational society for Iinan-gun, Mie-ken) in the *Taisho* period (*Taisho* 4/1915).

actually verifiable.⁴ If the author is shrouded in legend and difficult to grasp, however, the book itself is admirably clear and to the point and has played an important role as the basis of all subsequent military strategy and tactics in the areas under Chinese cultural influence until this day.

It was never more so than in the late Tokugawa period when warfare had long become a subject of erudition rather than a practical task for the *samurai* class. *The Art of War* was an important part of any scholar's intel-



Commodore Perry lead the American expedition to Japan in 1853. This is how he appeared to the camera on the eve of his departure for Japan.

lectual luggage and Chikusai would have known it quite well.

Now, as the situation demanded practical action, one precept struck him as particularly relevant. It was the precept that one should know one's enemy and know oneself.⁵ Only by knowing both could one have informed judgement, and without informed judgement one could not serve Japanese interests. The dangers were illustrated by the otherwise "outstanding gentlemen" who had written proposals for a coastal defence (*kaibo ron*):

Their proposals either know him [=the enemy] and do not know us, or know us and do not know him. To know him and not know us, that is to fall for the wicked schemes of the barbarians through following the advice of people who read Dutch [=foreign] books and believe the tall stories they tell are the truth. To know us and not know him is to be uninformed about the past and present organization of England and America.⁶

Chikusai offered one of the commonly defended tactics for getting rid of the American ships in the bay of Uruga to show what was wrong with most of the plans for the dispelling of foreigners:

The theories that [say] it is unnecessary to learn from the West and build big ships are theories that do not consider the state of our country's navigation and the strengths and weaknesses of popular spirit. They also suggest fishermen and even farmers be banded together in groups of five and put under the leadership of a guard commander from their local lord, the groups distinguished by the colour of their headbands; then if barbarian ships approach they gather people by ringing the fire bell, and if only a few [foreigners] land, take them prisoner; or if they pull up their ships' bottoms on the shore and desire firewood and water and request trade, hide soldiers armed with firearms under the firewood and water, and [these] will be brought onto the foreign ships and pour water in the powder chests, spike the guns with wood and bamboo, and take the head [of the foreigners] prisoner and such-like; and these are all very detailed and delightful theories; but unless the barbarians who come here are blockheads, or else dummies made from clay, these plans cannot come to pass.⁷

Chikusai then added insult to the injuries that would probably result from such imprudent tactics by stating that any small child could tell you that the barbarians that actually came had been fighting amongst themselves for years, and that they were consequently well used to war, highly disciplined, practiced in the uses of their superior arms, and unlikely to be the push-over that some people seemed to think.

That they would fall for the simple ploy suggested above was not conceivable, and they probably knew a lot more dirty tricks than the Japanese if it came down to that. "And they aren't going to simply carry a person to the cannons and leave the powder chest out in plain view for him!"⁸ Plainly, to Chikusai, knowing the enemy was

4. Several translations of this basic textbook of martial science into English exist. Including extensive introduction and copious notes, the 1963 Oxford University Press version prepared by Samuel B. Griffith should be one of the better and more widely available: Sun Tzu: *The Art of War* (London, Oxford, New York, 1963)

5. *The Art of War*, p. 84

6. *Kaibo Gokoku Ron*, p.16.

7. *Ibid.*, p.17.

knowing that the foreigners were not “blockheads” or “dummies made from clay,” but vigorous, battle-hardened, fighting men. They had plenty of experience in state-of-the-art warfare, and their arms were correspondingly advanced. Also, their seafaring prowess is alluded to in the comment on “the state of our country’s navigation.” Theirs, i.e. the foreigner’s, was presumably better.

Rival Movements

It is interesting to note the ambivalence towards foreigners expressed in the above. Chikusai displayed great respect for the threat they posed to Japan. For Japan, he reasoned, safety lay in learning about Western technology and the rather vaguely expressed “past and present organization of the East (America) and West (Europe).” These are ideas traditionally associated with commitment to *kaikoku*, or “opening of the country.” Followers of this school of thought are often represented as having “[...] recognized the inevitability of “opening the country” to trade and diplomacy, and of joining the world community of nations.”⁹ However, Chikusai had more likely recognized the futility of attempting armed resistance in the face of the crushing superiority of the West.

He showed few signs of wishing to join any “community of nations,” and was probably more concerned with saving his own which was yet in the making. In this respect he was merely following established tradition. It is an oft remarked paradox that most of the *rangaku* scholars of early 19th century Japan, while eagerly studying Western sciences and traditions, were also adamantly opposed to opening the country.¹⁰

For while he was convinced that Japan’s salvation lay in knowing Western technology and navigation and in learning more about the ways of the Western world, Takegawa Chikusai was also no fawning admirer of everything Western.

While the word “barbarian” (read *ebisu* or *i* as in *sei-i* and *to-i*, Western and Eastern barbarians respectively) was the conventional term for foreigners from beyond the Chinese cultural sphere and contained at the time less of the value-judgement that it holds today, there are plenty of derisive terms in the text that were quite obviously used by choice.

The “schemes” of the foreigners are prefixed with the Chinese character for wicked, though the suggested phonetic reading added down the side of the word just gives “scheme.” The foreigners are inclined to “tell tall stories,”

or exaggerate and bluster in their books to impress. Their “actual coming” to Japan is suffixed with the Chinese character *shu* which means unsightly and disgraceful, again probably just meant to convey the feelings of the author to the reader visually.

The use of these epithets would have been agreeable to the “outstanding gentlemen” that Chikusai had claimed knew neither themselves nor the enemy, but were more concerned with upholding outdated laws. At the same time, even as he reviled as impracticable their plans for



Commodore Perry as he appeared to a Japanese artist upon arrival in Japan. In 1854 when this print was made, Westerners were still little better than mythological beasts.

the taking over of the enemy ship, there is little doubt that he sympathized with the projected end.

Indeed, the whole purpose of the *Kaibo Gokoku Ron* and *Koron* was to advise the people in charge of Japan’s defence on how one might keep the foreigners at bay, if one could not keep them away altogether. This aspect of the treatise belonged more with the other main school of thought in Japan around that time, namely *jo-i*, or “expelling the barbarian.” The word had an interesting history. Originating in China, the earliest Japanese scholars of

8. Ibid., p.17-18.

9. Wakabayashi (1986), p.4, offers an overview of the different approaches in contemporary scholarship to the problem of *kaikoku* and *jo-i*. A copy of the *Shinron* is among the books in the *Izawa Bunko*.

10. e.g. Wakabayashi (1986), p.10

Chinese had first used it to signify the expelling of barbarian, Japanese customs in favour of the superior Chinese civilization. Gradually, the focus had changed from the barbary inside Japan to that which threatened from without, and by the 19th century the conflict was moving from the abstract to the concrete, a development that would culminate in several killings of individual foreigners by patriotic *samurai* (*shishi*) during the 1860s.

To be fair, very few people took the “expelling” literally. Most were merely engaging in damage control, trying to insulate the common populace from corrupting, foreign influences whilst secretly resigned to the fact that Japan would have to open its harbours to some extent.

By the final years of the Tokugawa period many proponents of *jo-i* were using the slogan mainly as a pretext for revolt against the Tokugawa regime. Paired with another political catch-phrase to form the couplet *sonno jo-i* which meant “revere the emperor, expel the barbarian,” it was convenient for embarrassing the government and questioning its legitimacy by demanding that its leader the *shogun*, or *sei-i tai-shogun* to give him his full title, live up to his name.¹¹ What use was a “great barbarian-subduing general” if he did not subdue any barbarians?

Unlike the loyalist hotheads, Chikusai was too realistic to believe that the *shogun*, or Japan for that matter, would be up to executing such a policy in the present state of military unpreparedness, nor did he join the political schemers asking it of them. On the other hand, he certainly did believe that the country should (and could) take precautions and ensure her ability to do so, should the need arise at a later date.¹²

“Rich Country-Strong Army”

The precautions that Chikusai had in mind were many and concrete. They could, however, all be summed up in another slogan that was gaining popularity at the time and which Chikusai illustrated admirably.¹³

Firstly, it goes without saying that there could be no defence against the military threat to Japan’s independence without a “strong army” (*kyohei*). Chikusai did not waste paper on arguing that such a one was necessary, but launched straight into the discussion of what constituted a strong army.

In Chikusai’s interpretation this would include both landbased and seafaring forces, and “strong military” would probably be a more accurate rendition of the slogan



Takegawa Chikusai photographed in Yokohama in 1866. Though as a merchant he belonged to the commoner class, he had been granted the privilege of wearing two swords in recognition of his great financial services to the Tokugawa regime, and of course he wore it for this solemn occasion.

11. Wakabayashi (1986), p.4 and 135-137.

12. *Kaibo Gokoku Koron*, p.114-115.

13. *Nihon-shi ko-jiten*: *Nihon-shi ko-jiten* (“extensive dictionary of Japanese history”) (Tokyo: Yamakawa Shuppansha, 1997), p. 1853. Interestingly, this slogan would later be identified so completely with the Meiji Restoration that *The Cambridge History of Japan* believes it was among the many slogans “created” by that government “for all aspects of its endeavors,” *The Cambridge History of Japan*, vol. 5 (1989), p. 467

into English. Whatever the case, building viable defences would take time; but Chikusai was confident that it could be done and claimed that “in 10 years a parade of our cannons will be like building a 5000 kilometres long fortress called Japan.”¹⁴

Secondly, and a prerequisite to the first, it was vitally important that the *bakufu* make a “rich country” (*fukoku*) of Japan. This, according to Chikusai, was actually the main concern since the preparations in themselves would be costly, and waging battles at the same time would spell disaster.

Even supposing there were cannons, guns, swords, and spears enough, with no stores of gold, silver, rice, and grain to back them up neither bravery nor wisdom would be of much avail. Should Japan contrary to expectations emerge victorious under these conditions, he warned, it would most surely lead to insupportable hardship and revolts among the common people, and thus weakened the country would fall to the next wave of attack.¹⁵

In case anybody had not got the point, a few pages further on he flatly stated that: “It is even easier to conquer a poor country with a country that has plenty, than it is to smash a hen’s egg with a big stone.”¹⁶

The Immediate Future

The urgency of the call to prepare is compelling. If it was going to take a decade to put the country on a war footing and enable it to withstand an attack from the sea, clearly the sooner one got started the better. One can imagine Chikusai’s readers worrying whether there would even be time to complete his ambitious programme of economical and martial strengthening before it was put to the test.

Maybe in order to forestall hopelessness in the face of the enormous task, towards the end of *the Kaibo Gokoku Koron* Chikusai put Japan and the threat to her in relation to the world stage as he saw it.¹⁷

He reminded his readers of what he had told them already in the *Kaibo Gokoku Ron*: Firstly, that “our country” (*waga-kuni*) was separated from the Eastern, i.e. American, barbarians by the expanse of the Pacific Ocean, and secondly, that the Western (European) barbarians had not invaded Japan up until now because they had been busy with the Napoleonic wars up until 40 or 50 years ago.

They were nowadays fully occupied, (and here inexplicably the geography shifts to accommodate the Euro-centric viewpoint) waging wars for gain on/over the American states in the West, and encroaching on the

“islands” of Melanesia (?) and Australia and the “countries and islands” of South East Asia in the East. For this reason they had no leisure to attack Japan.

He went on to specify the interests of the European countries in greater detail. Lately England had taken over parts of India, gone upstream the Indus river and conquered Hindustan in “central India”. She had also gone further north as far as the Hindu Kush mountain range beyond Hindustan where, according to Chikusai, she had joined violent battle with Russia, and all of this at the same time. Chikusai was disdainful of British claims to supervise all of India. It was clear to him that even with the many native soldiers they had enrolled under their command, their armies were terribly over-extended. Meanwhile, countries such as Spain, France, and Portugal had colonies in America, and Chikusai hazarded the guess that they would not travel as far as the “seas near us.”

Chikusai may have been right to discount the threat from these countries on the grounds that they were otherwise engaged, though England, Spain and France were all present and played active roles in the Asian theatre at the time. He was well aware of the Chinese predicament, and it seems somehow unlikely that he was not also informed about Indochina; but he may have wished to downplay the distant European countries in favour of the quarters from which he considered the real threat to be coming.

One such quarter was The United States of America. Though they were probably the worst menace to Japanese peace with their inopportune arrival in the bay of Uruga, Chikusai can scarcely conceal his admiration of them when he describes “the Eastern barbarians with their republican government (*kyowa-seiji*).”

They had driven away the Western barbarians to build a country (*kuni*) of their own, and with their excess of strength they were engaging in the task of making a rich country (*fukoku*) of it, and travelling to distant seas. Unfortunately, he added, since they travelled the over-seas route to Asia they had in recent years appeared and disappeared time and again in the Pacific Ocean off Japan.

Similarly Russia, whose ships were setting out from Okhotsk on her Far Eastern seaboard to several destinations, among them America and the unidentifiable “Kasatsuka” and “Koto.” She was encroaching upon the islands Sakhalin (Karafuto) and “our” Hokkaido (*waga-Ezo*), and since this development would create a common

14. *Kaibo Gokoku Koron*, p.133.

15. *Ibid.*, pp.114-115.

16. *Ibid.*, p.117.

17. The remainder of this chapter is closely based on pp.167-168 of the *Kaibo Gokoku Koron* and notes refer to these unless plainly stated.

border between Russian and Japanese territories, Chikusai feared that they, too, could probably come in the foreseeable future.

Chikusai ended off by declaring that any threat to Japan would come only once the Crimean War was over, and once Spain, France, Portugal and Germany had carved up America¹⁸ and islands such as Australia to the south a couple of decades from now. Come that time, Chikusai saw nothing that would keep them from turning their attentions on Japan, and they would in his opinion certainly visit the Japanese shores.

Already by distinguishing between Eastern and Western barbarians Chikusai was offering a more discerning view of the outside world than was generally represented in the *Kaibo ron* of his contemporaries. Many of them treated the barbarians as one homogeneous mass and as being of one mind and one intention in regards to Japan.

By differentiating between the foreign countries, allowing for variations in motive for their approaching Japan, and studying the circumstances surrounding each of the countries individually, Chikusai was able to demonstrate the error of this perception. The barbarians did not form a united front against Japan, and their internecine rivalry would play into the hands of the Japanese.

To sum up, Chikusai was of the opinion that Japan would be left alone in the immediate future, but that it was a question of a few short years before more foreigners would come and test the defences of the country. Before then Japan would need to devote substantial sums to the building up of these defences.

Confrontation or Peaceful Relations

In the mean time, there was the question of what to do about the American ships at Uraga. The country was clearly not ready for an armed confrontation yet, and Chikusai had already in the *Kaibo Gokoku Ron* warned against seeking one before the country was ready for it.

Any positive effect on morale from the call to defence would be cancelled out by the negative effect of the inevitable defeat, and the soldiers would become timid and excessively careful “as he who has learnt from [being burnt by] the soup, blows on the brine to cool it.”¹⁹ In fact, what Chikusai was suggesting was that one look at the interests of the country before mindlessly repeating the

fiercely worded, but unenforceable laws.

He elaborated early in the *Koron*: It was all very well to snatch up arms and run to the defence of the country; but the indignity of doing so in the knowledge that one would probably back down and meet the requests of the foreign ship in the end, would be insupportable.

It wounded the prestige of the country (*kokui*), it was harmful to the polity of the country (*kokutai*), and it could very easily cause the country’s morale (*kokumyaku*) to weaken and decline.²⁰ Also, Chikusai was apparently shrewd enough to recognize that if Japan wished to have any influence on the manner and degree of foreign intercourse, loosing a violent confrontation over the issue would probably not be the best basis to work on.

What Chikusai suggested was that peaceful, foreign ships should be allowed in Japanese waters, given supplies if necessary, and assisted when in trouble. Such munificence on the side of the Japanese government would inspire respect and a return of the favours, should Japanese ships need them.²¹ He seems to have considered that opening some measure of friendly relations would take the pressure out of the increasing number of chance encounters between Japanese and foreign ships off the coast.

However, it was also his expressed hope that making it the official policy would take the edge off rumour-mongering inside Japan. Every sighting of a foreign ship, he argued, now caused panic in Edo, panic that disrupted the distribution and prices of goods, and caused some people to loose all their profits and even their homes.²²

In other words, allowing the foreigners to use some Japanese port(s) as a stepping-stone on their long-distance sea-voyages, would be not only charitable and diplomatically sensible, but would also serve to stabilize the domestic situation. Readers with a more calculating turn of mind might see it also as a way of biding one’s time while one prepared economically for an eventual showdown.

Suggested Relations

As for the nature and extent of the friendly relations, they would need to accommodate foreign needs and demands, while at the same time respecting the intentions of the isolation laws. Chikusai assumed as a matter of course that any contacts with the foreigners would go through government channels.

18. p.168. Presumably he is thinking of South America, though the mention of France and Germany in this context might suggest that Africa, where these countries were more active, should be included or substituted.

19. *Kaibo Gokoku Ron*, p.33. The meaning of this proverb is similar to the English: “Once bitten, twice shy.”

20. *Kaibo Gokoku Koron*, p.111.

21. *Ibid.*, p.125.

22. *Kaibo Gokoku Ron*, p.83.

He calculated that with 20-30 American ships bound for China and South East Asia (Indo) and 20-30 Russian ships bound for America annually, and all of them calling at a Japanese port twice, there would be about 100 calls in all. Chikusai proposed that 10.000 *ryo* worth of goods be “presented” to every ship, not only the all but proverbial firewood and water, but rice, wine, miso paste, soy sauce, tea, cloth, paper, lacquer ware, porcelain, coal, and notions. The aggregate expense in a year would be 1.000.000 *ryo*.

Separately from this they would need cows, sheep, chickens, pigs, and various types of vegetables. The sum would most likely increase with the number of ships attracted by the great kindness of Japan. So, incidentally, would the financial return, which Chikusai expected would be 50.000 to 70.000 *ryo* for every 10,000 *ryo* spent.

This was a conservative figure based on the Dutch trade through the artificial island Dejima in Nagasaki harbour; Chikusai quoted nine-ten times the initial outlay as the average return in British shipping, possibly in an attempt to plant the idea that one should reconsider the ban on Japanese ships going abroad to trade. And of course there would be an income from the leasing of some sort of “Dejima” to other nations.²³

Clearly there was great earning potential in staying on the right side of the foreigners. Chikusai was dangling a tempting bait in front of the financially strained Tokugawa regime; and at the very end of the *Kaibo Gokoku Koron* he returned to it, arguing forcefully that the road to *fukoku* went over benevolence towards the

barbarians and an increase in exchange of goods.²⁴ Though he never spelled it out himself, Chikusai thought his observations and suggestions sketched the contours of a pretty paradox: In order to defend herself against foreign encroachment, Japan had to become a “rich country.” And in order to become a “rich country,” she would have to open relations with the very foreign encroachers that she wished to minimize contact with.²⁵

The paradox was not without its own pragmatic logic. Since the foreigners were going to be so difficult to keep away, why not let them supply the financial means of their own undoing?

Chikusai was recommending trade as the salvation of Japan in the face of the foreign challenge. He was in doubt whether the country ought ultimately to choose confrontation or peaceful coexistence with the foreigners, and seemed willing to take his cue from the behaviour of the foreigners in the immediate future; but there was no way around the need to rearm, and money for that purpose could most readily be made from trade with the foreigners themselves.

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23. *Kaibo Gokoku Koron*, p.124-125.

24. *Ibid.*, p.177-178.

25. For a contemporary of Chikusai's who spelled the paradox out: Sakuma Sho-zan, see Chang (1970), pp.174-175