AGAINST A RUPTURE NARRATIVE: JAPANESE "WESTERN LEARNING" FROM TOKUGAWA TO MEIJI

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Throughout the nineteenth century, Japanese elite society simultaneously expanded its interest in affairs beyond its borders while reaffirming its distrust of foreigners and foreignness. This paper examines the variety of ways in which that elite society—those who made and influenced the decisions in the late Tokugawa and Meiji eras—engaged with the outside during the tumultuous nineteenth century. Common discourse on Japanese history typically divides the nineteenth century into a "before" and "after"; that is, before and after American Commodore Matthew Perry arrived in his gunboats to "open" Japan to trade—or before and after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, when the old semi-feudal structure of government fell apart and the country began to aggressively adopt western technologies. This traditional understanding cannot be imposed on the self-conception of Japanese identity across the nineteenth century. This paper will critique the existing discourse on Japanese external relations and synthesize a number of temporally narrow scholarly works in order to show not a rupture but a continuity in Japanese national thought throughout the nineteenth century—in the transition from the Tokugawa to Meiji eras, views on the outside world did not change nearly as much as most scholars have presumed.

But first, a briefing on the complex history of this period is due for readers new to the subject. From the early seventeenth century through the middle of the nineteenth, most of what is now Japan was ruled by a semi-feudal governmental system lead by a *shogun* (a martial ruler) of the Tokugawa dynasty. In an effort to resist the Christian influence that had been growing in Japan since the mid-16th century, the Tokugawa *shogun* introduced a broad-brush isolationism into their foreign policy from the beginning. According to the Sakoku Edict of 1635, Japanese subjects were no longer allowed to leave the archipelago, foreigners could only trade in defined hyper-controlled locations within the port city of Nagasaki, and all Christian proselytization was banned without exception.[1] The Tokugawa government, called the *bakufu* or shogunate, maintained this policy without interruption to 1853—the year in which, at the request of US President Millard Filmore, Commodore Matthew Perry sailed into Tokyo harbor and demanded at the point of a gun that Japan open up to western trade

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[1] "The Edict of 1635 Ordering the Closing of Japan: Addressed to the Joint Bugyo of Nagasaki," in David J. Lu, *Japan: A Documentary History: The Dawn of History to the Late Eighteenth Century*. (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), 221.

and diplomatic presence. After a decade and a half of massive domestic turmoil, Japanese elites and former high-ranking Tokugawa officials deposed the *bakufu* for good, and instated themselves as a governing body under the supreme rulership of the Japanese emperor, who had largely been kept in the background during the Tokugawa period. The 1868 revolution has become known as the Meiji Restoration, named after Emperor Meiji who restored it to its preeminence. The central government in the Meiji period, which encompassed the emperor's reign from 1868 to 1912, made a number of revolutionary but also highly conservative moves in the industry, domestic politics, military, and other sectors—many of these moves combined elite desires to catch up with and outdo the west in military and medicinal technology with desires to return the country to an even greater level of anti-foreign 'nationalism' than had been present under Tokugawa rule. This paper will address the continuities and complexities in this anti-foreignism across eras.

It is tempting, when talking about Japan's evolving identity in the nineteenth century, to refer to the country as a nation. But what exactly does it mean to be a nation? Kevin Doak argues it is the "conclusion of nationalism studies that the underlying force of nationalism is an emotional factor, or the sentiment of being a nation."[2] This sentiment is often a collective one, shared by all or many people in a country, or area, or even across a diaspora. But nationalism is never black and white. It is never just "us" and "them," or "inside" and "outside," and the Japanese case is no exception. What is particularly complicated for Japan in this period is the country's unique set of policies toward outside world in the preceding centuries, and the sharp change in these policies in the mid-nineteenth century. Douglas Howland, in describing Meiji nationalist epistemology, argues that the concept of "Westernization" plays a key role in the history: "Given the widespread alarm over Japan's international vulnerability, the oligarchy and its supporting intellectuals were determined to create a strong and wealthy Japan after the example of the West, a new Japan capable of resisting the Western aggression reported in China, India, and Africa."[3] In other words, Japan developed a positive relationship with the "West" (that is, western Europe and the US) in order to strengthen its defenses against the empires from that same region. However, although Howland specifically refers to post-1868 Japanese thought, Japan's relationship with the "West" had been contradictory since long before the *bakufu* fell. Let us first turn to the 1820s, when new threats were looming just beyond Japan's horizon.

Since the 1630s, Japan had nominally been in a period of complete "seclusion" or *sakoku*, but in practice, this only manifested starting in the early nineteenth century. Recent scholarship has debunked the myth of actual seclusion, showing that Japan

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[2] Doak, Kevin Michael, *A History of Nationalism in Modern Japan: Placing the People* (Leiden: Brill, 2007) 19-20.

[3] Howland, Douglas, *Translating the West: Language and Political Reason in Nineteenth-century Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002) 12.

was, for the first two centuries of the period, hardly isolated in anything more than name.[4] But this changed in 1825: Bob Wakabayashi illustrates, in *Anti-foreignism and Western Learning in Early-Modern Japan,* "The Edo *Bakufu*'s 1825 Expulsion Edict was not a reaffirmation of its so-called ʿSeclusion edicts of the Kanʾei Era ʾissued from 1633 to 1639. National isolation and the expulsion of foreigners, as consciously-conceived state policies, came into being between 1793 and 1825."[5] The Expulsion Edict advocated for unprecedented hostility toward western foreigners, but this hostility was mainly reactionary toward the emergence of colonial empires like Russia in the north and Britain in the south, surrounding Japan at an increasingly close distance. Russia and Britain had even taken offensive action toward Japan on its own territory, with the incursion of Russian ships in the north, and the Phaeton Incident of 1808, in which the British ship *Phaeton* sailed into Nagasaki and threatened to ravage the city with cannon fire unless the Japanese provided resources to the crew.[6] Even the Dutch, with whom the Japanese had had a long and reasonably symbiotic relationship in Nagasaki, were removed of much of their preferential treatment as the Western threat grew: the Expulsion Edict of 1825 orders the Japanese people to "note that Chinese, Koreans, and Ryukyuans can be differentiated [from Westerners] by physiognomy and ship design, but Dutch ships are indistinguishable… even so, have no compunctions about firing on [the Dutch] by mistake; when in doubt, drive the ship away without hesitation. Never be caught off-guard."[7] The last line is particularly important, because this strain of fear, and of not being able to fight back, continued well past the end of the Tokugawa period and continued to be the primary driver of Japanese foreign relations in the Meiji period.

But what did Japan fear would happen with the increasing presence of Westerners in the surrounding area? Aizawa Seishisai, noted anti-foreign scholar and author of the anti-foreign 1825 *New Theses*, wrote: "Certain people stress the need to enrich our country and strengthen our arms in order to defend our borders. But the foreign beasts now seek to *take advantage of the fact that people in outlying areas crave a source of spiritual reliance*, and furtively seduce our commoners into betraying us." Furthermore, he suggested that, "should the barbarians win over *our people's hearts and minds*, they will have captured the realm without a skirmish. Then the wealth and

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[4] Some noteworthy scholarship on this subject are as follows: Ronald P. Toby, *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan: Asia in the Development of the Tokugawa Bakufu* (Stanford: Stanford University, 1991); Grant K. Goodman, *Japan and the Dutch 1600-1853* (London: Routledge, 2014); Robert I Hellyer, *Defining Engagement: Japan and Global Contexts, 1640-1868* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); David L. Howell, *Geographies of Identity in Nineteenth-Century Japan.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi and Yasushi Aizawa, *Anti-foreignism and Western Learning in Early-modern Japan: The New Theses of 1825* (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1986).

[5] Wakabayashi, and Aizawa, *Anti-foreignism and Western Learning in Early-modern Japan,* 59.

[6] Wakabayashi, *Anti-foreignism,* 60.

[7] "The Expulsion Edict of 1825," in Wakabayashi, *Anti-foreignism,* 60.

strength that these people stress will no longer be ours to employ."[8] What Aizawa and many of his compatriots feared was not a full-on military assault—Wakabayashi stresses this—but a spiritual one, in which the Japanese populace are slowly subsumed from the outside by the external propaganda being produced by the advanced empires moving ever closer to the Japanese archipelago. [9] The *bakufu* and their anti-foreign philosophy (called *jōi*) ideological followers believed that that an intense increase in militarism was necessary to combat this threat, which Wakabayashi says was contrary to the purely cultural resistance that anti-foreignism had entailed previously.[10] But the first line of Aizawaʼs above quote suggests that militarism alone could not cope with the foreign threat. Wakabayashi suggests that, in fact, political scholars of the time believed that Japan needed a unifying ideology far more than a military. What Japan lacked, according to both Fujita Yukoku and scholar Takahashi Kageyasu, was a way to control the common people of Japan who ʺby nature ʼare easily alienated from their rulers and ready to feel affection for foreigners," and who were ʺattracted to ʻnovel and exotic ʼgadgets that foreigners barter, and [were] susceptible to Christian teachings that foreigners spread."[11] The unifying forces of Christianity and Western influence were clearly, at least to political scholars, threatening the existence of Japan. Kageyasu was a member of the r*angaku*, a community of Japanese scholars who studied western science and philosophy through their Dutch contacts. *Rangaku* scholarship was officially discouraged or outlawed in late-Tokugawa Japan because it could potentially allow insidious foreign ideas to disseminate within Japan, so it is noteworthy that some *rangaku* scholars used their studies to foment anti-foreignism domestically.

But, to complicate this aforementioned notion, this paper proposes that scholars were just as eager to learn from the hated foreigner as they were to repel him. Aizawa himself, as well as other *kokugaku* (Japanese classical studies, literally ʺnational studies") and *rangaku* scholars, were not blind to the great success of the Euro-American world in some fields. Late Tokugawa political scholar Yokoi Shōnan ʺfeared Christian-inspired Western government as much as Aizawa, but was more candid about praising it. He too believed that Japanʼs leaders had to imitate European rulers, who skillfully used Christianity to cultivate popular unity."[12] Wakabayashi begins to tease out Japanese appreciation of western practices, arguing that knowledgeable Japanese ʺelevated [Christianity] to the level of Confucian ritual and music—an efficacious ʻdevice ʼthat sagacious Western rulers exploited to make their peoples love and fight for their countries."[13] This is where our understanding of Japanese relations with the West gets contradictory; the entire premise of the *sakoku* period, and the only

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[8] "Aizawa Seishisai's *New Theses* of 1825," in Wakabayashi, *Anti-foreignism*, 124.
[9] Wakabayashi, 124
[10] Wakabayashi, 101
[11] Wakabayashi, 105
[12] Wakabayashi, 143
[13] Ibid.

sakoku policy which the *bakufu* had actively pursued in practice, was a pure and unrelenting antipathy toward the Christian religion, the force which the shogunate perceived to be the bane of Confucian, Buddhist, and Shinto Japanese existence. But Japanese elites believed in, and perhaps even exaggerated, the need for a unifying political or spiritual cause of comparable strength to that championed by the Westerners—so that, when the Westerners finally did arrive and tried to slowly and peacefully consume Japan from within, the Japanese populace would not fall for their foreign rhetoric.

Wakabayashi's argument ends here, but this paper takes it further and suggests that, as Brett Walker illustrates the *bakufu* had already found a potential unifying solution at the turn of the nineteenth century, twenty-odd years before Aizawa wrote his *New Theses*.[14] This solution has two strains: the first is diplomatic, in which the *bakufu* tried to reassert itself as a sovereign country with sovereign rights similar to Western nations; the second is more internally nationalist, in which the *bakufu* tried to unite the populace as a collective entity within these sovereign borders. Let us first address the diplomatic solution. Walker argues that explorer Mamiya Rinzō's "mission to determine borders in the north constituted a calculated shogunal response to the threat posed by Western surveying in the region, an effort to turn European cartographic tools of empire into tools that resisted imperialism by geographically binding and, thereby, cartographically guarding Japan's sovereignty: tools that proved capable of delineating Japan's borders in a manner recognizable – and hence more legitimate – to predatory Western nations."[15] Here already, Walker identifies the tendency of the Japanese government to see the value in Western political models, similar to Aizawa and Shōnan, despite (or perhaps because of) the prominent fear that the West would use those same models to subjugate Japan. The *bakufu* knew, on some level, that a certain imitation of the West was necessary in order to not be victimized by the West. After all, if Japan did not have borders, who could stop Russia from stepping in and claiming all the land north of Japan proper as Russian territory? Mamiya Rinzō, ever the dramatic anti-foreignist, feared that Russia already believed they owned all the islands north of Japan proper, including the island of Hokkaido.[16]

The second strain of this potential solution that *bakufu*-sponsored explorers like Rinzō championed stemmed from the unifying factors of national self-determination (insofar as the word "nation," in the Western sense, can be applied to Japan in the early 1800s). Walker says Rinzō's mapping of Sakhalin, and his fellow cartographer Inō Tadataka's mapping of Japan's coastline, "paralleled the rise in prominence of 'nativist' learning, as represented by such figures as Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801) and Hirata Atsutane (1776–1843), and other 'proto-modern' national

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[14] Brett L. Walker, "Mamiya Rinzō and the Japanese Exploration of Sakhalin Island: Cartography and Empire," *Journal of Historical Geography*, (2007) 32.
[15] Walker, "Mamiya Rinzō and the Japanese Exploration of Sakhalin Island,"33.
[16] Walker, *Mamiya Rinzō*, 33.

discourses, including the politically charged Mito School ideology."[17] Furthermore, Walker says "Late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century maps of Japan visually represented the spatial borders of Japan's 'collective memory,' or what Benedict Anderson called an 'imagined community'."[18] Rinzō and his associates' cartographic practices not only tried to strengthen Japan's physical borders in the eyes of the looming imperial monstrosities on the Eurasian continent; they also sought to strengthen Japanese conceptual and spiritual identity. After all, a Japanese polity that didn't uphold the Japaneseness of Japan would be just as dangerous to the integrity of Japaneseness as a fleet of 5th-class British warships circling like vultures around the Japanese archipelago. And, as Aizawa and his compatriots pointed out, the Western model proved that an ideological unity shared by all members of a nation would lead to great strength. By adopting the Western administrative model, Japan was already well on its way to creating a different form of 'self-definition' that Aizawa did not foresee.

What we have seen thus far is a Japan still under the rule of the Tokugawa shogunate and still politically and economically secluded from the Euro-American order. After Commodore Perry's Arrival in Japan in 1853, and the subsequent "opening" of Japan to Western resource extraction via the unequal treaties of 1858, the old Japanese world began to fall apart. Forced to interact both diplomatically and scientifically with the West, Japan became inundated with Western technologies, ideologies, and methodologies the likes of which most of its constituents had never seen. But an argument can be made, which the scholars discussed above have not really touched on, that Japan's conflicted and often contradictory relationship with the West actually remained basically constant between the Tokugawa period and the Meiji period. Susan Burns begins this comparison well in her discussion of Japanese elite fears of the West during and after the *Bakumatsu* period (1853-1867). Burns says, "Katsu Kaishu, the *bakufu* official who negotiated the end of Tokugawa rule ten years later, was in Nagasaki in 1858 and wrote later of the popular theory that 'officers from British ships had come ashore, sought out wells, and poisoned the water within them,' thereby causing the epidemic."[19] Additionally, she writes that a "Dutch naval officer in Nagasaki recorded a similar theory of origin: 'it was rumored that Buddhist priests had declared that the disease of the sick was caused by poison that had been dumped into the wells and used this to inspire among the people the notion of expelling all foreigners."[20] While these descriptions of the outside threatening Japan are more concrete than the ones composed by Aizawa and his compatriots, the

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[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Burns, Susan, "Constructing the National Body: Public Health and the Nation in Nineteenth-Century Japan," Timothy Brook and Andre Schmid, eds., *Nation Work: Asian Elites and National Identities (*Ann Arbor: Michigan, 2000) 21.

[20] Burns, *Constructing*, 21.

message was nevertheless the same: the Japanese elite feared the West's advance into their territory, not through direct military campaign but through insidious methods. It is significant that these fears existed even after Japan "opened itself up" to the West: no matter what Japan's diplomatic relation with the West (isolated or accessible), the current anti-Western fears nevertheless remained strong.

And as Burns and others show, fears of acquisitive western powers by no means ended with the Meiji Restoration and the "westernization" of Japan. Central to the political and social restructuring of Japan was the work of cultural change or westernization. As cited earlier, Howland reminds us that "the oligarchy and its supporting intellectuals were determined to create a strong and wealthy Japan after the example of the West, a new Japan capable of resisting the Western aggression."[21] How exactly did the Meiji plan to Westernize in order to resist Western imperialism? The answer is quite similar to the plans regarding Mamiya Rinzō and the mapping of the north seventy-five years earlier: by adopting Western science, the Meiji believed they could harden themselves against further Western incursions. Burns reveals this in her essay about medical and political practices in Meiji Japan: she illustrates that the Meiji elite tendency to valorize "German medicine rested upon… an assumption of causality. As Miyamoto Shinobu has suggested, to the Japanese leadership of the 1870s Prussia in particular seemed to present a model of nation building worth emulating. It was a monarchic state with a strong military that had succeeded in industrializing rapidly."[22] Like the model of geographic sovereignty that Rinzō and his fellows adopted from the West, Meiji scholars believed adopting an administrative model of a successful Western nation would be causally linked to an increase in both diplomatic and internal sovereignty in Japan.

Defense and national unity defined this administrative model that Meiji elites believed Japan needed in order to be strong. Like the models identified by both Walker in his article and by Aizawa and his contemporary scholars, the Meiji model promulgated the absolute necessity for a strong and unified national polity to resist foreign imperialism. Extending from the Tokugawa model, however, the Meiji saw the necessity not just for conceptual strength but physical strength: the human body, as much as the human spirit, became the symbol of national strength. In her discussion of public health official Nagayo Sensai and the role of medicine in the formation of the Japanese nation, Burns says "Nagayo's concern for the public understanding of *eisei*, which had come to signify a wide range of 'healthy' practices from brushing one's teeth to quarantining the sick, is revealing of the Japanese government's interest in the bodies of its citizens, an interest that was intimately tied to the pursuit of the new national goals of ' Increase Production and Promote Industry 'and 'Rich Nation, Strong Military, 'as popular slogans of the day put it." A fellow Meiji scholar even went

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[21] Howland, *Translating the West*, 12.
[22] Burns, *Constructing the National Body*, 24.

so far as to say "healthy bodies and active spirits are the single great foundation of Japan's wealth and power."[23] Comparing this to the need for spiritual unity discussed earlier in this paper, we can then see that spiritual unity would be rather ineffectual without homogenized physical strength: only with a combination of physical and spiritual power could Japan become the defined, sovereign nation that it needed to be in order to remain Japan; but only by importing non-Japanese models for these powers could Japan attain the strength it needed to do so.

Common understanding of the Japanese nineteenth century so often treats the Tokugawa period and the Meiji period as absolutely separate entities, between which occurred a complete shift in thought and ideology. Even scholars who argue that *sakoku* was a myth still tend to leave the Meiji period well enough alone; likewise, Meiji scholars often fail to address the similarities in thought between the two periods. In terms of the ideological and scholarly currents about Japanese relations with the exterior, the late Tokugawa period and the Meiji period were actually quite similar. This paper has synthesized and provided analysis of scholarship of the first to the last decade of the nineteenth century, which can help the 21st-century historian understand both the causes and continuities of these ideologies. Japan was never quite isolated from the West, but its elites also rarely wanted more influence from the ever-encroaching Western empires. Furthermore, few nineteenth-century Japanese scholars believed that Japan could remain safe from those empires if their country just remained scientifically and politically stagnant. Many saw the rather oxymoronic necessity to adopt Western methods into Japan in order to keep the West out. Both the Tokugawa *bakufu* and the Meiji government knew Japan had to conform to the new world system in order to remain Japanese; although this text of this policy may have changed throughout the nineteenth century, the spirit did not.

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[23] Burns, *Constructing the National Body*, 18

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