Japanese Intellectual Exchange with China & Korea During the Edo Period

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A Thoughtful Encounter

It is the year 1709, and Ogyū Sorai (1666-1728) is thrilled to be meeting Abbot Eppō Dōshō (1655-1734) at Zuishoji Temple. Sorai, a Confucian philosopher, has spent many years studying the Chinese classics. He has also, since 1705, invested great effort in learning to speak Chinese. As for Eppō, he is an esteemed Buddhist priest and scholar, hailing from Zhejiang, China. Having arrived in Japan in 1686, he became first the abbot of a temple in Nagasaki and then one in Uji. The two intellectuals enjoy a long conversation, encompassing Confucian and Buddhist philosophy, historical matters, and even names for flowers and household objects. Sorai, strongly inspired, goes on to start a society for Chinese study, encouraging his students to learn not only the classics but also contemporary Chinese language and culture *(Image 1)*.

These scholars were not marginal figures in their era – many moved in high circles, associating with powerful elites. Sorai and his colleagues, for instance, would be called upon to serve as interpreters for the shogun when imminent Chinese visitors came to Edo. There was also a lively intellectual exchange among Korean and Japanese intellectuals, as well as a great amount of books from the continent circulating in Japanese towns. So why is the predominant image of the Edo period in today's popular consciousness of an isolated Japan cut off from the ideas and culture of the rest of the world?

Image 1

(L) Depiction of Eppō by Ohara Geizan (?-1733)
Original held by Kobe City Museum
(R) Depiction of Sorai by Kawahara Keiga (1786-1860)
Original held by Tokyo National Museum

The Enduring Myth of "National Isolation"

From the mid-19th century, when Japan was forced to open relations with the bulk of the Western world, it became common to refer to the nation as having formerly been a "closed country" *(sakoku)*. The term itself was not originally Japanese, having been coined at the turn of the century by a scholar as a translation of a phrase used by the German Engelbert Kaempfer (1651-1716) to describe Japan. The Bakufu (warrior government), faced with numerous missions from Russia and the United States in the 1830s and 1840s, soon found invoking the notion of *sakoku* helpful as an excuse not to add countries to its pool of trading partners. As Japan began to modernize, the myth of an isolated Japan cut off from the rest of the world took root, fueled partly by Eurocentrism and partly by contemporary politics. In the first case, Europeans, motivated by 19th-century nationalism, saw themselves as the center of the world, meaning past Japanese refusal to have relations with these nations meant Edo Japan had rejected "the world". In the latter case, the new Meiji government, seeking to enhance its own image and discredit its Bakufu predecessor, portrayed the Edo-era authorities as backward and foolish.

Historians have problematized the notion of *sakoku* since at least the early 1980s, yet the myth persists, in the mass media and in popular culture. Every online discussion forum on Japanese culture and society is filled with vague references to Japanese isolation. Why? Because myths, like stereotypes, do not persist by chance. They persist because they are useful. The isolation myth serves both right- and left-wing political interests, both "Japanophiles" and "Japan-bashers", because it gives them an excuse to treat Japan as a completely unique case unconnected to the rest of the world. They are then free to celebrate it as a country that evolved a vibrant culture without any foreign influence, or ridicule it for not following (supposedly) global standards. What, then, do we find if we strip away the myth? What was the real situation like in the Edo period?

Foreign Relations During the Edo Period

At the end of the 16th century, Japan had finally been reunified after more than a century of warfare that had followed the breakdown of the Muromachi Bakufu and the disintegration of the country into smaller territories. By 1603 a new government, the Edo Bakufu, was in control, and concerned first and foremost with preventing a relapse into civil war. Many of its regulations – severely restricting firearms, stipulating that each domain could only have one castle, requiring the *daimyō* (regional lords) to spend half the year in Edo and leaving their wives and children there the rest of the time as potential hostages, and so on – make sense in this context.

The authorities took the same pragmatic approach to foreign affairs. In the case of relations with Europe, the benefits of trade needed to be weighed against the drawbacks. The involvement of the Jesuits and European merchants in local politics, the selling of Japanese into slavery overseas, and the potential for Christianity to inspire rebellions against the authorities, as Pure Land Buddhism had done in Japan in the past, were all issues of concern. There were also fears that one of the empires, perhaps Spain or Portugal, would seek to colonize Japan as they had the territories in the Americas. Yet while it prohibited Christianity, the Bakufu did not impose anything akin to a blanket ban on dealings with the Westerners. The approach was much more ad hoc. The Bakufu eventually expelled the Spanish in 1624, and the Portuguese more than a decade later, after the latter had been suspected of fostering the disastrous Shimabara Rebellion (1637-1638) of Japanese Christian converts. The English had already left of their own accord in 1623, having decided that the trade with Japan was not profitable enough to justify the expense. Trade with the West was consequently limited to the Netherlands.

Meanwhile, Japan continued to trade with its old trading partners, China and Korea. The harshest law imposed by the Bakufu in the area of foreign affairs was the 1635 prohibition on Japanese leaving or returning to the country (except for special cases such as Buddhist temples dispatching missions of monks to China). Although travel restrictions were not unusual in the early modern world, elites were usually accorded a greater degree of movement than commoners, making the Japanese case of a uniform prohibition more uncommon. At any rate, this did not prevent non-Japanese from visiting the country, provided that they arrived legally, followed the laws and resided in the designated areas. Rather than breaking off relations with foreign countries altogether, it would be more accurate to describe the Edo period as one in which Japan strictly regulated its foreign relations, and rather than orientating itself to Western trade networks turned instead back to its old trading partners in East Asia. This trade consisted of not just material goods, but of intellectual exchange.

Intellectual Exchange with China & Korea

Japan did not have official relations with China during the Edo period because it was not willing to participate in the Chinese tributary system. The tributary system, which was the Chinese empire's traditional way of handling foreign relations, required other countries to recognize the superior authority of the Chinese emperor and engage in trade through a type of performance. Foreign countries offered trade goods as tribute to the emperor, who would then reward the "loyalty" of these foreign "subjects" with gifts in return. While trade with China could often be lucrative, it therefore also required other countries to swallow their pride and feign submission to the emperor. Understandably, some countries, such as Japan, decided this humiliation was not worth it. Therefore, for most of its history Japan had traded with China in an unofficial capacity, eschewing diplomatic relations but engaging in an active private trade among individuals and families. Japan's policy towards China in the Edo period was simply standard practice for Japan, which for centuries had tended to prefer private trade with its neighbors. The Qing court tolerated the situation because of the importance of some Japanese imports, especially silver which played a key role in the economy. The trade was big enough that in 1715 the Bakufu took steps to restrict it out of fear that the export of so many precious metals would undermine the domestic economy.

Joseon Korea, itself deemed a client state by China, was an exceptional case, in that the Korean sovereign enjoyed proper diplomatic relations with the Bakufu. No less than 12 official Korean missions were dispatched to Japan during the course of the Edo period, the first occurring in 1607 and the last in 1811. While other groups of foreign visitors at times visited Edo and met the shogun, these were usually understood as private visits and not missions occurring in an official capacity *(Image 2)*.

The main point of access to Japan for foreign trade was Nagasaki, which was consequently the premier destination for Japanese intellectuals looking to meet people from abroad and obtain foreign books. Unlike the handful of people able to visit the continent, most

Image 2

Hanegawa Tōei's depiction of the 1748 mission from Joseon Korea visiting Edo
Original held by Kobe City Museum

Japanese intellectuals interested in intellectual exchange with China had to count on Nagasaki as their point of access. The town had a sizeable Chinese quarter with many merchants and sailors, as well as people who provided them with goods and services. There were also Chinese Buddhist priests who preached to the community. Many of these priests were well-educated, and were willing to discuss various aspects of the Chinese intellectual tradition with interested Japanese scholars. Some of these figures, like Ingen Ryūki (1592-1673), who founded the Ōbaku sect of Zen Buddhism, or Eppō, mentioned earlier, entered Japan through Nagasaki but eventually took up temple positions elsewhere such as in Kyoto. They often gave Buddhist and Confucian texts to their Japanese colleagues and students, and introduced new schools of thought from the continent.

There were numerous Korean communities to be found in Japanese towns in the Edo period; some in parts of Kyushu became especially well-known for their pottery work. For Japanese intellectuals, however, by far the most important Koreans were the official envoys. As elite Confucian intellectuals, the envoys were a symbol of continental knowledge and authority. Japanese scholars would ask the envoys for their thoughts on philosophical or historical issues. Japanese doctors were also eager to meet the envoys, because Korean doctors accompanied the missions and it was an opportunity for them to discuss medical findings and treatments. Japanese intellectuals also frequently gave the envoys essays or poetry to assess. If an envoy told a Japanese intellectual that his work was of excellent quality, this could give the intellectual's reputation a boost.

For instance, Arai Hakuseki (1657-1725), an influential Confucian scholar as well as a prominent advisor to the Bakufu, gained a lot of respect after Korean envoys on the 1682 mission praised his work. Arai was later involved in planning the reception of the 1711 mission, and exchanged a substantial amount of correspondence with the envoys, including chief envoy Jo Tae-eok (1675-1728) and deputy chief envoy Im Su-Gan (1665-1721). There were also cases where Japanese scholars asked Korean envoys to add comments to essays, poems or drawings. Confucian philosopher Hayashi Razan (1583-1657) asked the envoy Kim Se-ryeom (1593-1646) to write a comment on a drawing for his friend artist Kano Sansetsu (1590-1651) – in effect, the contemporary version of asking a celebrity for their signature. Poetry and essays received by the envoys were taken back to Korea to preserve, while both sides kept records of their discussions. In addition to their diplomatic function, then, the missions were also an opportunity for intellectual exchange.

Communication Methods

How did Japanese intellectuals communicate with their Chinese and Korean counterparts? Long-term residents from the continent learned spoken Japanese, and some Japanese intellectuals learned how to speak other languages. In the case of Chinese, in Nagasaki there were Japanese priests who could speak the language, alongside the many merchants who learned Chinese to communicate with Chinese visitors. Mixed Japanese-Chinese families in the city could serve as interpreters as well. Of course, there were also students like those of Sorai who had made learning spoken Chinese a priority.

Most Japanese intellectuals, however, had little opportunity to learn how to speak Chinese or Korean. The easiest method of communication was to carry out conversations not orally, but with brushes. Because knowledge of classical Chinese was a prerequisite skill among educated people across East Asia, even with each culture's particular ways of reading and writing Chinese characters they could still smoothly communicate with each other through writing. If a Japanese intellectual encountered a Chinese or Korean colleague, they would be able to discuss even highly theoretical and abstract concepts without knowing how to speak a word of each other's language. The upshot of this was that classical Chinese writing provided a regional language that linked people across East Asia. It is perhaps ironic that today, when we see our world as much more closely connected than in the past, this is no longer the case.

Continental Scholarship & Japanese Scholarship

In the early modern era, learning grounded in Confucian frameworks and modes of analysis connected the scholarly worlds of Japan, China and Korea together. A foundation in the Chinese classics and Neo-Confucianism, in the tradition that had evolved from the Song dynasty philosopher Zhu Xi (1130-1200), was expected of all educated individuals. In Japan, the 17th and 18th centuries were a high point in Japanese scholarship in this vein, and this was fueled by the intellectual exchange with China and Korea.

It would be a mistake to see this intellectual movement as something backward. While Neo-Confucianism celebrated traditional values, it could also be forward-thinking, stressing the importance of observation and analysis of the world and contemporary society. Kaibara Ekken (1630-1714), a pioneering botanist, was inspired to investigate and analyze the natural world directly, while Sorai's logic impressed the 20th-century political scientist Maruyama Masao so much that he suggested Sorai was Japan's first "modern" thinker (*Studies in the Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan*, trans. Hane Mikiso. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974). Sorai departed from Zhu Xi to pursue his own form of Confucian study, contributing to what became called the Kogaku (ancient learning) school of thought.

While Kogaku unapologetically celebrated the study of ancient China, Japanese scholars in general acknowledged the importance of continental learning. Its influence could be seen not only in the works of the great philosophers of the era, but also in literature. Ueda Akinari's (1734-1809) collection of supernatural tales, *Ugetsu Monogatari* (Tales of Moonlight and Rain), for instance, blends elements of Chinese and Japanese folklore, history and literature together and assumes the reader can follow the numerous references. Like this, various facets of the intellectual world of the

Edo period reflected a productive synthesis of local ideas and styles with those of the continent, and in this respect it could be said to be more open and Asian in character than is often assumed.

In fact, even scholars critical of continental scholarship, such as those belonging to the Kokugaku (national learning) and Mitogaku (Mito domain learning) schools of thought, were themselves highly versed in the Chinese classics and continental scholarship. Their critiques came from a position of knowledge, not ignorance, and in many cases they respected the traditions in their own right but disagreed with their dominance of the intellectual world. They felt that Japan should privilege its own intellectual tradition instead of depending on those of foreign countries. Yet even they were not averse to exchange with colleagues from the continent. The *daimyō* responsible for laying the groundwork for Mito learning, Tokugawa Mitsukuni (1628-1701) himself, after all, exchanged letters with the 1682 Korean mission, and sent the envoys both a gift of silver and a poem.

Print Culture in the Edo Period

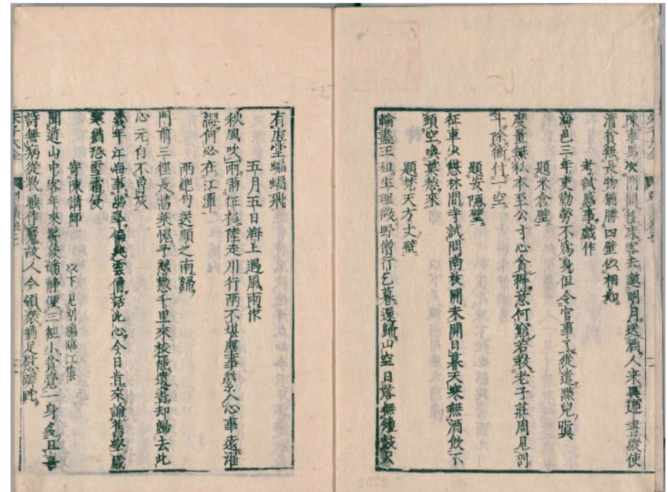
Not every Japanese intellectual was able to benefit from directly meeting foreign counterparts. That, however, did not mean that they were unable to engage in intellectual exchange, thanks to books. In terms of the circulation of ideas, the Edo period was an era of greater amounts of material, and greater access to that material, than ever before. This was the result of improvements in two related areas: literacy and printing.

Literacy underwent a dramatic improvement during the Edo period because of the proliferation of schools. In addition to private academies there were *terakoya* (temple schools, although they were not necessarily affiliated with temples) that taught children reading and writing. Emphasis on the importance of education meant that in not only the cities but even the villages there were more and more people who had at least some degree of literacy. More readers, naturally, meant a greater market for reading material.

As for printing, although moveable type presses had been introduced to Japan back in the 16th century, the technology failed to catch on. When a printing revolution occurred in the 17th century, it occurred with the older technology of woodblocks. Today the beautiful *ukiyoe* prints are the most famous remnant of this world, but printed books were also a major part of Edo culture. Bookstores and lending libraries were common in the cities, and there was a great variety of both classical and contemporary works of literature, history, philosophy, and scholarship available to readers. Some works were directly imported from overseas, but most were printed in Japan.

Books from the continent were often available in original Chinese text. However, examining the printing and circulation of books during the mid-to-late Edo period also reveals a great number of translations. The vast majority of translations were adapted from Chinese texts to make them accessible to a broader Japanese audience, but there were also works translated from Dutch.

Image 3: National Diet Library Digital Collection



Pages from a volume of one of Zhu Xi's works, published in Japan in 1712

Alongside domestic Japanese works and those from the continent, there were also Western works, available either translated from Dutch or from Chinese. In fact, we could call the Edo period, rather than the Meiji period, Japan's first great era of translation, as Rebekah Clements has ably demonstrated in *A Cultural History of Translation in Early Modern Japan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) *(Image 3)*.

Conclusion

The Edo period was an exciting time: Japan was not isolated, but instead firmly plugged into the intellectual world of the continent. Japanese intellectuals met with their counterparts visiting from China and Korea, and enjoyed both more books, and greater access to them, than ever before. As a result, they were kept abreast of the literary and scholarly developments elsewhere in Asia, and through translations, also gained news about current events, including a sense of what was happening in the West. Ultimately, this also played a role in Japanese modernization. When Qing China – at the time, the greatest power in Asia – tried, and failed, to fend off the Western powers, Japanese intellectuals were paying careful attention and seeking to avoid the same fate. The new scientific knowledge did not replace the older intellectual tradition, but was carefully merged with it, just as for centuries Japanese intellectuals had adapted useful ideas from overseas. JS

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