Von Siebold and the Opening of Japan

VON SIEBOLD AND THE DUTCH EFFORTS TO OPEN JAPAN

It was after his return from Japan that von Siebold seems to seek a new role for himself as Europe’s greatest expert on Japan. This role was no longer that of a scholar but that of a political adviser and diplomat. His advisory activity started during his first stay in Japan with a report to the Dutch government. He became an adviser (Adviseur) to the Dutch Ministry of Colonial Affairs in matters of Dutch-Japanese relations. In 1843, von Siebold wrote a memoire, containing his advice to the Ministry. He advised on improving relations, especially trade, and on alleviating the restrictions the Japanese authorities placed on the Dutch and obtaining more freedom of movement for both Dutch and Japanese. Later, von Siebold wrote in his Urkundliche Bestrebungen von Niederland und Russland zur Eröffnung Japans für die Schiffahrt und den Seehandel aller Nationen (Documentary Evidence of the Efforts the Netherland and Russia made to open Japan for the Navigation and maritime Trade of all Nations) that he had written, while still in Japan, the following recommendations to the Governor-General of Dutch East-India:

The Netherlands must take the first step to effect a change in Japan’s trade policy. Dutch trade in Japan cannot survive as is. No other nation than the Netherlands is able to accomplish this in Japan. In possession of a pass sanctioned by centuries of tradition, the Dutch enjoy the confidence of the Japanese government. Of course, they must put their own interest in the fore. They have a right to do this
given the privileges they, and no other nation enjoy. However, should they want to keep such privileges, they must consider the trading interests of others in order to shape new trade with Japan in such a way as to adapt it to the trading conditions of other sea powers.²

We realize from the above how well von Siebold was reading his time and how accurately he was able to foresee the events leading to the opening of Japan in the 1850s. Von Siebold did not want to lose the opportunity to shape and influence these developments and, to judge from his correspondence and activities in the years to come, endeavoured to ensure that they proceed peacefully without bloodshed, but such advice seems to have been sporadic.

It was only after the news of the Opium War (1839–42) that forced China to open five ports and cede Hong Kong to the British, had reached Holland, that von Siebold started his diplomatic activities in earnest. He realized then that Japan could easily fall into the same trap as China – that direct and uncontrolled contact between radically different cultures can easily cause conflict which, given the military superiority of the Western powers, could be as disadvantageous for Japan as it had been for China. He also realized that, should events get out of hand like they had done in the Opium War, a devastating civil war might tear Japan apart, which, weakening the country internally, might play into the hands of the colonial powers. Von Siebold did warn his readers that colonizing Japan would be no easy task given Japanese social cohesion and the patriotism of its people.³ In 1843, in the English press von Siebold warned about his concern for the future of Japan:

The political wall that separates Japan from world trade will crumble sooner or later and, regardless of whoever among the sea powers will accomplish this, Japan will become the focal point of the world’s commercial speculations.

As is clear from his advice to the Dutch government, von Siebold wanted Holland, Japan’s only Western trading partner at that time, to play an active and benevolent role in bringing Japan into the league of trading nations.⁴

Some diplomatic clumsiness aside, we discover in von Siebold’s advising activities that he actively sought, not a Westernized Japan but a continuation of Japan’s feudal institutions, which he believed constituted the foundation of ‘this happy country’. Von Siebold