Following several centuries of intermittent civil war, Japan was for the first time united into a single empire at the beginning of the seventeenth century. This was largely the result of the efforts of a succession of powerful warlords, the last of which, Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616), assumed the mantle of military ruler (shogun) of Japan in 1600. In doing so, he became the first of a family dynasty that was to last for well over two centuries and gave his name to one of the most prosperous and defining periods in Japanese history, the Tokugawa period (1603–1868).

By the mid-seventeenth century Japan’s authorities had, by means of a series of edicts, gradually isolated Japan from the outside world, with the objective of stopping foreign interference in domestic affairs and preserve the status quo. After the Portuguese were expelled, Dutch and the Chinese traders were restricted to tiny trading posts in Nagasaki, and everyone else was forbidden to enter or leave on pain of death.

Direct contact with the Dutchmen was forbidden in all but exceptional circumstances, and the Dutch were as a rule not allowed to learn the Japanese language. Japanese authorities established an official Interpreters Guild, whose members studied the Dutch languages and acted as sole go-betweens in all transactions with the foreigners.

The purpose of all this was to protect the at that time advantageous position the Tokugawa dynasty had acquired through smart politics and brutal battles by isolating Japan from all foreign influences and thus, as it were, crystallizing the social and power structures in place at the time. And indeed, for more than two centuries a succession of Tokugawa shoguns ruled over a peaceful and prosperous Japan until in 1853 a small fleet of heavily armed American warships forced an end to Japan’s isolation.
Of course, this attempt at ‘preserving the status quo’ over two centuries was only partially successful. While the Tokugawa dynasty did remain in power throughout the period of national seclusion, class structures within Japan gradually reversed themselves over time: the uninterrupted period of peace and prosperity rendered the samurai warrior class, which had been at the top, increasingly irrelevant, while the merchants, who had been placed relegated to the lowest rank, grew in power and status.

The world at large too, of course, had not remained static. In the seventeenth century the two countries that had had the most influence in Japan before its isolation, Portugal and Holland, had been powerful nations, builders of world-wide empires, but by the 1850s these countries were reduced to small and relatively insignificant entities in terms of world politics and might. More importantly, the intervening centuries had seen a move of Western the intellectual focus from literature, theology and the like, to science and technology, leading to dramatic scientific and technological advances.\(^1\)

Over the years of this period of national isolation, an awareness grew in Japan that the coarse ‘barbarian’ Dutchmen incarcerated in their small trading post in Nagasaki represented a sophisticated culture that might in fact have something to offer.\(^2\) From time to time Japanese intellectuals, often under official orders, established contact with members of the Interpreters Guild with the purpose of obtaining information about Western culture and technology. The contact between Confucian scholar and shogunal advisor Arai Hakuseki (1657–1725) and Nagasaki interpreter Imamura Gen’emon (1671–1736) is the first known example of such an exchange.

Imamura Gen’emon, Engelbert Kaemfer and the Dutch-Japanese notebook Oranda shōi

Imamura Gen’emon was one of the most talented and knowledgeable interpreters of the Tokugawa period, and he provided Arai with a considerable amount of information on Europe. It is now clear that

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