When Commodore Perry visited Japan, Aoki Shūzō (1844-1914) was nine years of age. He was born in Hagi in the western part of Honshu island and went in his teens to the Chōshū clan academy, Meirinkan, and then to medical school, Kōseidō. As was the common practice at the time, he was adopted by a prominent family, in this case that of the famous president of the school, Aoki Kenzō. Taking the name of Shūzō, he moved to Nagasaki in 1867 to complete his studies in medicine and was instructed to go to Prussia for three years for further study at the expense of the Chōshū clan. He reached Marseilles in December 1868 and proceeded to Berlin. Aoki soon found himself in a country at war and became ‘intoxicated’ (as he said) with the Franco-Prussian War and the contrast between the performances of the Prussian and French armies.1

Because of Aoki’s first-hand observation of the conflict, his career pattern changed. He began to study politics and his status changed to that of a nyūgakusei (student abroad) for the central government of the New Japan in the New Germany. In 1873, he became a first secretary in the Gaimusho (Foreign Ministry), and entered the central government bureaucracy for the first time. In August of the following year he was appointed minister to Germany at the absurdly early age of thirty and was to spend much of the first half of his working career there.

While still a student acquiring the German language and the know-how about the most progressive nation on the continent of Europe at that time, he was much in demand from the Iwakura Mission which visited Europe in 1872-3. One of the influential members of that star-studded mission was Aoki’s clansman, Kido Takayoshi (Kōin). In August 1872, Aoki visited the commissioners soon after they reached London and briefed Kido about what the mission might expect on the continent. He obviously had an insatiable curiosity and his
enthusiasm clearly impressed Kido. When they reached Berlin in March, Aoki's help was indispensable both because of his fluency in German and his sheer knowledge of the country. Moreover the group of those studying in Germany had already acquired a circle of foreign friends who admired 'the fast progress that the 70 or so Japanese studying in Berlin had made'. They praised their high motivation and their good examination results. As a reward for Aoki's enthusiasm he was allowed to accompany the mission on its travels to Russia in April. Presumably his ability as an interpreter in German was deemed to be useful on the long rail journey to St Petersburg.

After a spell of leave, he returned to Germany as minister in the autumn of 1874. He had from time to time additional responsibilities as minister to Austria, Holland, Denmark and Norway. In 1877 he married Baroness Elizabeth von Rade and this was useful for his diplomatic activities in Germany where court diplomacy was important. Two years later his daughter Hanako (Hanna, sometimes Hanni) was born. From this point Aoki's life-style became increasingly Europeanized; and it was said that the language which was most frequently heard in his household was German. This makes it strange for him to be included in this book. But, if Aoki was a Germanophile, there is a strong current running through his diplomatic career of concern with Britain. This was only to be expected in the light of Britain's dominance in world affairs and the large number of British nationals who lived and traded in the treaty ports of Japan.

It was a sign of Aoki's standing that during a period of leave he had a memorable talk in Inoué's residence with Sir Harry Parkes, shortly before he left Tokyo. In 1880 he returned for another five-year stint in Berlin. At the end of his life he wrote an incomplete memoir of part of his career which was not published during his lifetime. In it he tells of a memorandum he wrote, arising out of discussions with the redoubtable Lord Ampthill, who as Odo Russell served as the British ambassador in Berlin from 1871 till his death in 1884. Aoki ruminated that Japan, if she were to grow as a nation, needed an alliance with either Britain or Germany. France, he wrote, was not in the running after she had been defeated in the Franco-Prussian War and while she was engaged in war with China, though she had made approaches to Japan with that in mind. He gives an account of conversations he had with Bismarck, the German chancellor, on this point. He was conscious that Japan could become a most useful ally to a European power in the east. Above all, he wanted Japan to attain equality with the powers. His long-term objective was to align his country with Britain and Germany and prevent Russia's southern expansion.

Since this was a time of alliances centring on Bismarck and the New Germany, it was not unnatural that Aoki should address the problem of how Japan should fit into the European alliance system. It was to remain a great political concern for him right down to the turn of the century. It is of course very relevant to the later Anglo-Japanese Alliance that experienced Japanese diplomats like him were already in the 1880s acknowledging the need for Japan to have an ally or allies. It may seem odd that a person who was so Germanophile should consider the merits of a British alignment so seriously at this time. But that, I believe, was a mark of the Realpolitik with which Aoki had become imbued during his stay in Germany.

On his return to Japan in 1885, Aoki assisted in the ministry. It was at this time that he penned the above memorandum and spoke along these lines to Inoué Kaoru as foreign minister. He was appointed vice-minister in March 1887.