3 **Contacting Japan**

East India Company Letters to the Shogun

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Abstract

This chapter describes the struggles of diplomatic embassies from East India Companies in the seventeenth century to incorporate themselves into the Japanese diplomatic sphere, focusing on their practices rather than their world views. The Dutch East Indies Company (VOC) failed to maintain diplomatic correspondence in 1627 and decided to rely on the merchants in Hirado. Along with the Tokugawa state formation around 1640 the Dutch merchants in Japan transformed into ‘pseudo-subjects’ of the Tokugawa state. Even after that East India Companies sent letters to the shogunate, but the shogunate treated the envoys not as diplomatic embassies but as merchants coming to petition for trade.

Keywords: Diplomacy, state letter, pseudo-subjects

The primary reason why the two East India Companies came to Asia was of course to trade. In order to establish trading networks and to resolve conflicts in Asia, however, the Dutch and English East India Companies dealt in both violence and diplomacy. The purpose of this chapter is to describe how European newcomers in Asia interacted with Asian diplomatic structures.¹ This question was first asked 20 years ago by the influential

¹ The research for this chapter was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP15H03236. An earlier version of the paper was presented in Japanese as ‘17-seiki-chūyō Yōroppa seiryoku no Nihon kenshi to kokusho’ [Embassies and state letters sent from the European powers to Japan in the middle of the seventeenth century], in *Nichiran kankeishi wo yomitoku* [Deciphering the Dutch-Japanese Relations] (Kyoto: Rinsen Shoten, 2015), and also as a presentation in the 26th EAJRS (European Association of Japanese Resource Specialists) conference held in Leiden in September 2015.

historian of the Dutch East India Company, Leonard Blussé, to whom this volume is dedicated.² In a groundbreaking analysis, he considered how the headquarters of the VOC in Batavia, once referred to as the 'Queen of the Orient', 'invented' its own diplomatic rituals in interaction with a range of rulers across the Indonesian archipelago.³ Blussé explained that written correspondence and more specifically letters between rulers played a prominent role in the often vertical nature of Asian diplomatic relations. This was in contrast to the European reliance on ambassadors who were dispatched as negotiating agents. In a recent study, Adam Clulow has examined the encounter between the VOC and the Tokugawa government with a focus on diplomacy. His main concern was to criticise the so-called '1492 Schema' of history, a term pulled from the work of Tonio Andrade who has also contributed to this volume.⁴ Like Blussé, he describes two different types of worldview by examining multiple examples of conflicts and misunderstandings between the VOC and the shogunate.⁵

At the same time, scholars working within East Asian history have examined Tokugawa diplomatic relations. Ronald Toby has argued against the traditional understanding of the term *sakoku* (national isolation) by examining the intra-Asian relations of the Tokugawa *bakufu*. His main point is that the legitimacy of the Tokugawa authority was partially based on its recognition by neighbouring states, especially Korea. He depicts a Tokugawa world order of hierarchical relations, in which the shogunate recognised a peer in Korea, looked upon Ryukyu as an inferior vassal state, and deemed China to be at the lowest rung of its hierarchy of partners.⁶ In Japanese academia, scholars have studied the vertical relationships in East Asia, focusing on the phraseology of diplomatic documents.⁷ Arano Yasunori argues that we should refer to the external relations of the Tokugawa period as '*kaikin-kaichitsujo taisei*' (the maritime ban and tributary system) rather than calling it a 'closed country'.⁸ In this way, he emphasises the similarity between the policies used by the Chinese and Japanese governments.⁹

2 Blussé, 'Amongst Feigned Friends and Declared Enemies', p. 155.

3 Blussé 'Queen among Kings', p. 187.

4 Andrade, 'Beyond Guns, Germs, and Steel', p. 167.

5 Clulow, *The Company and the Shogun*, pp. 218-220.

6 Toby, *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan*, pp. 229-230. The basic idea of the tribute system is perhaps best expressed in Fairbank, *The Chinese World Order*.

7 E.g. Toby, 'Kinsei shotō tai-Min no ichi gaikō monjo'.

8 Yamamoto Hirofumi proposed a counterargument in his *Sakoku to kaikin no jidai*, especially pp. 252-257.

9 It is true that the Ming and Qing courts required specific official documents such as *biao* 表 (tributary memorial for the Emperor), *zhao* 詔 (proclamation mandate of the Emperor), *chi* 勅

This chapter asks a straightforward question: to what extent were diplomatic letters in Asia always vertical? In other words, does it make sense to evaluate diplomatic relations as horizontal or vertical? My question is motivated in part by what appears to be the Eurocentric nature of such a division. In answering it, I propose a modification of past scholarship. While I agree with Blussé's argument that letters played a significant role in diplomatic interactions in Asia, the persistently vertical nature of Asian diplomacy is far less clear.¹⁰ And I suggest that we should be careful of making assumptions about two distinct European and Asian world orders.¹¹ In this chapter, I attempt to explain conflicts and misunderstandings by focusing on the practices and manners of diplomacy, with an emphasis, following Blussé, on letters as the core of Japanese foreign relations.

The Tokugawa shogunate, or *bakufu*, conducted written correspondence with Korea, the Ryukyu Kingdom, and a number of Southeast Asian countries.¹² Letters exchanged with Korea were composed in Chinese with an emphasis on equality, or rather to suggest a mutual relationship unquestioned between the two monarchs. In contrast, correspondence with the Ryukyus was written first in Chinese and then in Japanese, and clearly expressed an unequal relationship between the Tokugawa Shogun and the Ryukyuan king. As for Southeast Asian rulers, their diplomatic letters to the shogunate were composed in Chinese, but the nature of reciprocal relations expressed in them was unclear as to hierarchy, partially because skill in writing formal Chinese was usually limited.¹³

Within the Indonesian archipelago, the VOC government in Batavia forged its relations with indigenous kings and lords by regularly exchanging letters during its two hundred years' existence from 1602 to 1800.¹⁴ Scholars of Thai history have paid attention to '*prarachasan*' (or king's letters) exchanged between Siam and its Burmese and Vietnamese neighbours during the

(imperial command of the Emperor), or *die* 牒 (low level memoranda) from foreign rulers. These various terms more clearly express the hierarchical structure than *shu* 書 (letter) or *shangshu* 上書 (memorial to the throne).

10 Blussé does make an exception for Southeast Asia, where Malay rulers (as in post-Westphalian Europe) addressed each other on basis of equality even if at times they attempted to bluff their correspondents.

11 In his recent work with Lauren Benton, Clulow has argued for commonality between Asian and European diplomatic structures. Benton and Clulow, 'Legal Encounters and the Origins of Global Law', p. 82.

12 E.g. Kitagawa and Okamoto, 'Correspondence between Cambodia and Japan'.

13 Ibid.

14 Blussé, 'Queen among Kings'.

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁵ The monarchs of Siam and Persia also corresponded with each other during the seventeenth century.¹⁶ Masuda Erika has tried to bridge the gap between the Sino-centric sphere and the world of Southeast Asia by examining the correspondence between Chinese emperors and Siamese kings. She points out that missives from the latter were full of expressions suggesting equal relationships, but that these were subsequently transformed into hierarchical terms in the Chinese translations that were presented to officials in China.¹⁷ In this way, letters changed depending on their audience.

For the purposes of this chapter, I will refer to diplomatic letters in Asia as 'state letters'.¹⁸ I suggest that what might be called 'letter diplomacy' was characterised by its flexibility. Permanent and resident ambassadors facilitated a multilateral diplomatic exchange, but letter diplomacy could keep relations essentially bilateral. A letter could be, and frequently was, manipulated in translation as it travelled. We should not forget that shifting circumstances along the designated route might prompt carriers to alter official documents, in some cases to aid delivery. The letter might be deliberately mistranslated by a mediator at the port or court of the recipient. In their work, Japanese researchers have revealed many examples of such manipulations.¹⁹

While more work based on Asian and European sources is needed, I suggest that letter diplomacy was used, and expected, to bridge different world orders and mutual misunderstandings, especially when there was considerable geographical and cultural distance between the sender and the recipient. Yet, even if they were not always vertical, diplomatic practices in Asia remained difficult for European newcomers in the region to grasp. In Asian letter diplomacy the ambassadors who delivered these documents did not have the same status, agency or voice as in European diplomacy, but they

15 Koizumi, 'Ratanakōshin-chō 1-sei ōki Shamu no taigai kankei'; Koizumi, 'The "Last" Friendship Exchanges between Siam and Vietnam, 1879-1882'.

16 Embassies were sent from Siam to Persia in 1669, 1679 and 1682, and a delegate was sent from Persia to Siam in 1685. Morikawa, 'Safāvi-chō no tai-Shamu shisetsu to Indo Yō'.

17 Masuda, 'Rama 1-sei no Taishin Gaikō'; Masuda, 'The Fall of Ayutthaya'.

18 This terminology was used by Ronald Toby as, it seems, a direct translation of the Japanese word *kokusho* (Toby, pp.178-183). The original meaning of *kokusho* (or *kuoshu* in Chinese pronunciation) would be 'royal letter'. However, letters from the Dutch or Spanish Governors-General were sometimes called *kokusho*. The various forms of official correspondence, such as *biao*, *zhao*, *chi*, *zi*, or *die*, remain in need of further elucidation.

19 Tashiro, *Kakikaerareta kokusho*; Hashimoto, *Itsuwari no Gaikō Shisetsu*; Shimizu, *Kinsei Nihon to Ruson*, pp. 140-171; Sannō, 'Shindai Chūki ni okeru Sūrū to Chūgoku no aida no monjo ōrai'.

could still sometimes carry out negotiations beneath the surface. This happened even if they were not regarded as representatives who could express the views of their superiors but were merely treated as 'letter bearers'.²⁰

This chapter describes the struggles of diplomatic embassies from various European powers in the seventeenth century to incorporate themselves into the Japanese diplomatic sphere, focusing on their practices rather than their world views.²¹ Here it should be noted that their envoys often did not come from Europe, but rather from headquarters of the East India Companies in Asia.

For the shogunate, generally speaking, royal letters did not explicitly mention trade, because they were meant to discuss 'royal business'. In order to clarify this issue, let us see how a Tokugawa high official replied to the Dutch *opperhoofd* of Deshima when the latter asked whether the VOC should send a new ambassador to thank the shogun for the hospitality shown by the shogunate to the crew members of a VOC ship:

Why should their [the Dutch] ambassador come to express gratitude for the fact that the Dutch Company's merchants live and prosper in Japan? Such business does not merit an ambassador; we only deem of substance kings and potentates, when they speak of royal business – and not of merchant business – and when they request assistance or offer assistance in war. Sending another envoy [by the VOC] will only result in trouble.²²

This response shows that the Tokugawa councillor understood 'royal business' to consist only of asking for or offering military assistance. I suggest that it might also have included the celebration of a counterpart's enthronement, the announcement of one's own enthronement, or the establishment of peace.

An embassy from the Dutch Governor-General in 1627

In 1609, the VOC began to trade with Japan. After the Company established its base at Tayouan on the island of Formosa (Taiwan) in 1624, it came into conflict with Japanese traders and samurai who had been visiting the island

20 Letter from the Governor-General, Pieter de Carpentier to the *opperhoofd* in Hirado, Cornelis van Nijenroode, 17 November 1625, Overgekomene brieven en Papieren, jaar 1626, boek II: FF, Archives of Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC) (1.04.02), Nationaal Archief (NA) 1087, The Hague.

21 Nagazumi Yōko mentioned this topic in her pioneering work, *Kinsei shoki no gaikō*, pp. 114–125.

22 Quoted in Blussé, 'Amongst Feigned Friends and Declared Enemies', p. 167.

for years. In order to request the Tokugawa government to stop issuing vermilion-seal trading passes to Japanese junks sailing to Taiwan, in 1627 the Dutch Governor-General of Batavia sent the newly appointed governor of Formosa, Pieter Nuyts, to Japan. The Dutch envoy carried letters from the Governor-General addressed to the retired shogun, Tokugawa Hidetada, and his successor, Shogun Iemitsu.²³

Nuyts was initially welcomed in Japan with the same kind of ceremony accorded to envoys from Korea. His entourage of 290 persons travelled to Edo with 78 horses, of which 70 were provided at the expense of the shogun. After arriving in the capital Nuyts was subjected to a detailed interrogation and was asked who had sent him and where he came from. After waiting two weeks without an audience with the shogun, Nuyts expressed his frustration, particularly since he did not understand the reason why his embassy had been rejected. As a result, he left Edo without even having gained permission from Tokugawa officials to leave.²⁴

Nuyts pretended in his report to Batavia that the shogun had not been willing to receive him as an ambassador, and therefore had made negotiations impossible. What really happened is that Tokugawa officials could not accept him as an envoy because that would have implied that the shogun would have recognised the Dutch Governor-General in Batavia as being of equal status. In the words of Tokugawa officials:

The letters were written by a vassal of Java in *kanamajiri* [proper Japanese]. Java is equal to Holland. As the people of Holland have no letters [i.e. do not know how to write], they had a Javanese write it. [The king of] Holland should not write to the king of Japan directly, much less a vassal of Java [...]. The letter is impolite. It was decided that they should come again through the mediation of Matsura [the daimyo of Hirado] if they want to show true sincerity.²⁵

23 The letters are not extant. The Dutch translations dated 10 May 1627 are kept in Batavia's *Uitgaand Briefboek* 1627, VOC (1.04.02) 854, NA, The Hague.

24 For details, see 'Journael van de reyse gedaen bij Pieter Nuijts ende Pieter Muijser op-percoopman, als ambassadeurs aen den Keyser en rijcxraden van Japan van den 24 July 1627 tot 18 Febr. 1628', *Overgekomen Brieven uit Batavia, jaar 1629, boek II*, OO, VOC (1.04.02) 1095. See also Katō, *Bakuhansei kokka no seiritsu to taigai kankei*, pp. 140-42, and Clulow, *The Company and the Shogun*, pp. 67-94.

25 'Ikoku Nikki', by Konchi'in Sūden, dated the 17th day of the 9th month of Kan'ei 4, *Ikoku Ōfuku Shokanshū & Zōtei Ikoku Nikki Shō* pp. 223-24.

While the author seems to have been poorly informed as to the relationship between Java and Holland, it is obvious that the understanding of the Japanese authorities was that the sender of the letter was merely a subordinate of the Oranda *yakata* [Superior of the Dutch].²⁶

There was one further point where the Dutch and Japanese were at cross purposes. The letters carried by the ambassador stated that the Governor-General had sent Pieter Nuyts with gifts both in order to thank Japan for 28 years of Tokugawa kindness to the Dutch, and to congratulate the shogun on his accession to the throne. Sending a letter to congratulate a new king upon his enthronement did follow Asian practices but the last sentence of the document introduced Nuyts as a representative or a negotiator. In fact, Nuyts insisted he was an official diplomatic representative with a commission to negotiate over the question of Dutch sovereignty in Taiwan.

Adam Clulow recently examined why Nuyts failed to be recognised as a formal ambassador. I agree with his overall argument that the failure was not only due to Nuyts' arrogant personality but also because of the differences in diplomatic customs that came into play. However, I would also stress that the main problem centred not on the status or dignity of the Governor-General but rather on the question as to whether he was an independent ruler. Both Dutch and Japanese sources reveal that there was a long discussion between Tokugawa leaders and Nuyts concerning who sent the letters and who was really in charge of the Dutch residing in Japan. Nuyts answered that the Governor-General had the same sort of authority as the lord of Holland. As a result, Tokugawa authorities believed that Holland and Java were equals and that the letter was sent by a subordinate of Java. This implied that the leader who dispatched Nuyts, the Governor-General at Batavia, was merely a subordinate of someone in Holland or Java, and this interpretation provided the basis for the rejection of Nuyts' embassy. If Tokugawa authorities failed to form a clear understanding of the political system of the Dutch, this may have been the fault of Nuyts' inept way of answering questions.

Forming Tokugawa pseudo-subjects in the 1630s

After the Nuyts embassy, the relationship between the Dutch and *bakufu* leaders worsened on account of further disputes between Nuyts and visiting

26 *Oranda yakata* does not necessarily mean the Prince of Orange. 'Oranda' in this context means 'the Dutch people', and *yakata* is used in the *sengoku* sense of a daimyo of high rank.

Japanese merchants about trade in Taiwan. As a result of all this the Japanese government imposed an embargo on all trade with the Dutch, so that the VOC saw its trade with Japan come to a full stop. In 1632 when trade was resumed, the Governor-General in Batavia decided to no longer send envoys but to rely only on the merchants stationed in Hirado. While this was happening, the *bakufu* was building up an innovative system of trade relations (in the nineteenth century called *tsūsho-no-kuni* 通商国, or a state conducting commercial relations) to accept foreign merchants without having to maintain correspondence with foreign rulers. This stemmed not only from the failure of the Dutch embassy but also from the fact that the Ming government was losing its power, which meant that the *bakufu* could no longer find a counterpart in China to address.²⁷ Europeans regarded the Chinese and Dutch merchants in Nagasaki separately, as members of the Chinese diaspora or agents of the Dutch trading empire respectively. However, the Tokugawa did not distinguish between the two communities: both were accepted as merchants without the need for correspondence on the state level.

The construction of this system ran parallel with the domestic process of the creation of 'Tokugawa subjects', as distinguished from native 'Japanese' subjects.²⁸ It should be understood that the domestic legitimacy of the Tokugawa government derived largely from its military power. Rituals and symbols supported the idea that the Tokugawa house was protecting Japan. The shogunate had to 'shadow box' with supposed enemies – which should appear neither too weak nor too strong – in order to demonstrate that the shogunate could ward off any threat to Japan. Although the shogun did not interfere with the rule of the daimyo (vassals) in their own dominions, the centrally conducted anti-Christian policy formed a unique exception, as under this 'national' policy, people had to be registered individually.

In the midst of this crackdown on Christianity, Chinese and European trading networks in Japan posed a potential problem to the shogunate. Rigid measures were taken: the Portuguese were expelled from Japan, and mestizo children born out of Japanese-European unions were ordered to leave Japan and forbidden to return. The Chinese were divided into two categories. Resident Chinese would be treated in the same way as indigenous people in

27 Matsukata, 'Countries for Commercial Relations'.

28 In Japanese academia, the concept of *bakuhansai kokka* has been dominant for several decades. Early modern Japan consisted of one state but with twin authorities, namely the shogun and the *tennō*. See e.g. Takano, *Kinsei Nihon no kokka kenryoku to shūkyō*, pp. i-xiv. Here I propose another image, one of two overlapping states, crowned with the shogun and the *tennō*.

Japan, and non-resident Chinese could no longer permanently reside in the country.²⁹ But, the Tokugawa continued to allow the Dutch and the Chinese, as well as some merchants and sailors from Southeast Asia, to visit Nagasaki for trade as long as they strictly obeyed the anti-Christian policy under the supervision of the Nagasaki magistrates. The VOC promised to do so, and told its personnel to comply with all necessary rules in Nagasaki. Reporting foreign news (*fūsetsugaki*) to the shogun, especially on Christian powers, was required of the Dutch, and consequently they provided news concerning the outside world to the Nagasaki magistrates.³⁰ This arrangement transformed Chinese and Dutch merchants into 'pseudo-subjects' of the Tokugawa state, allowed to operate in Japan. At the same time, the shogunate severely curtailed its subjects ability to leave the country. It stopped issuing trading passes to its own people and banned Japanese junks from going abroad. As such, the VOC and rulers of Southeast Asian kingdoms such as Vietnam or Siam no longer had to accept Japanese junks into their ports. This marked a contrast with earlier periods in which Japanese merchants abroad had been as active as their foreign counterparts in Japan, thus ending the country's two-way maritime traffic.

Importantly, these measures did not cause a decline in the status of VOC personnel in Japan. On the contrary, it was confirmed and given its proper place within the pecking order of Japanese society. I therefore do not agree with Katō Eiichi, who argues that the VOC became a vassal of the shogun. Japanese society was, at least officially if not in practice, mobilised along military lines even in peace.³¹ The shogun, the daimyo, and their vassals all held the status of samurai (i.e. fighters). Other Tokugawa subjects like peasants or townspeople served to provide logistics, maintenance of roads and bridges, and building siege works and fortresses. In my opinion, the Dutch in Japan served the shogunate in an intelligence capacity by providing reports on the outside world and therefore functioned in an ambiguous space between direct fighting and civilian logistical support. The Dutch served the shogun in the suppression of the Shimabara rebellion in 1637-1638 by providing a ship, *De Rijk*, when they were asked to do so. These actions suggest that the Dutch may have been briefly able to obtain formal *samurai* or ruling rank at that time, but ultimately the Dutch did not want to bear the cost and the shogunate held little interest in granting such a privilege. In

29 Matsui, 'The Legal Position of Foreigners in Nagasaki during the Edo Period'; Arano, 'Nihon-gata kai chitsujo no keisei'.

30 Matsukata, *Oranda fūsetsugaki to kinsei Nihon*, pp. 39-40.

31 Takagi, *Nihon kinsei kokkashi no kenkyū*, pp. 1-4, pp. 127-135, pp. 321-322.

any case Shimabara marked the one and only time that the Dutch provided military service during the Tokugawa period.

The 1649 Dutch Embassy from Holland

In 1643 a VOC ship, the *Breskens*, was dispatched to explore the geographical position of the reputed Gold and Silver Islands, which were said to be located off the northern coast of Japan. When some crew members came ashore in Nanbu (today's Iwate prefecture, on the northern Pacific coast of Honshu) to fetch water, they were captured and then brought to Edo. After being interrogated they were finally delivered to the Dutch chief in Nagasaki. On the latter's suggestion the VOC administration in Batavia decided to send an envoy to the shogun to thank the Tokugawa leader for his tolerant attitude concerning the *Breskens* crew.

Reinier Hesselink has provided a detailed analysis of these events in his book, *The Prisoners from Nambu*.³² He argues that the Governor-General and François Caron, the former chief of the VOC Hirado factory, deceived the shogun by sending an ambassador without credentials signed in Holland to thank him for his lenient attitude towards the captured crew members. I argue instead that the shogun did not expect an ambassador with credentials precisely because there was no such tradition of credentialed representatives in Japan. This can be clearly seen in the letter from the Governor-General and the 'old Japan hand' Caron to the Nagasaki magistrates written in Japanese. The Japanese version is lost, but a Dutch copy is extant in the archives of the Dutch factory.³³ In the Japanese context, this letter is both a *hōsho* 奉書 (a letter written on behalf of a superior) and a *hirōjō* 披露状 (a letter addressed to a subordinate in lieu of the true, higher-ranking addressee). In this case, the Governor-General wrote on behalf of his superiors in Holland. In turn he addressed the Nagasaki magistrates, not the shogun. In other words, this letter could function as a missive from the superiors of the Dutch to the shogun. Furthermore, the chief of the Nagasaki factory, not the envoy, presented the letter.³⁴ The letter stated that the superiors of the Governor-General had been informed of the *Breskens* incident and

32 Hesselink, *Prisoners from Nambu*.

33 Dutch translation of letter from the Governor-General, Cornelis van der Lijn, to the Nagasaki magistrates, of 27 July 1649. Archives of Dutch Factory Japan (NFJ) (1.04.21) 282, NA, The Hague..

34 Letter from the Governor-General van der Lijn to the *opperhoofden* in Japan, Dirq Snoek and Antonij van Brouckhorst, of 27 July 1649 in *Historical Documents in Foreign Languages Relating to Japan: Diaries Kept by the Heads of the Dutch Factory in Japan*, Vol. 11, Appendix IV, pp. 207-252.

asked him to send a letter of gratitude in their place because they could not compose a proper letter in Japanese for the shogun:

Five years ago, some Dutchmen were arrested near Nanbu in Japan [...]. They were absolved by extraordinary mercy of the Emperor [the shogun] and sent back to their homeland. Our superiors in Holland heard of the incident and became most thankful. They discussed how to express their thanks for this special benefit by sending a special envoy. The gentlemen were willing to attach a letter expressing gratitude, but were anxious whether or not the manner of the letter would be appropriate and modest enough to be directed to the Emperor. They were also concerned whether a Dutch text would be acceptable in Japan because of their ignorance [of Japanese custom]). Therefore, they ordered me [the Governor-General] to compose a letter in the most appropriate manner. According to the order, I, with this letter, respectfully ask your favour and help in appropriately dispatching the envoy to the Emperor.

Who were these superiors? In the Japanese context, this issue could remain vague. In fact, the Nagasaki magistrates forwarded the letter to Edo without querying who the Dutch superiors actually were, and only asked this question after they received a positive answer from the Tokugawa headquarters. The envoy answered that his superiors were the States-General of the Dutch republic, although his instructions specified that he should pretend that he was sent by the *Heeren XVII*, the Directors of the VOC.³⁵ In any case, the Tokugawa shogun had no interest in securing a credentialed ambassador as there was no such tradition in Japan.

Contrary to what Hesselink has argued, it was actually not the shogun but the envoy Frisius that was deceived. The instructions for Frisius do not mention the letter addressed to the Nagasaki magistrates, although the letter went together with him to Japan on board of the ship *Robijn*.³⁶ The delivery of the letter was mentioned in the instructions for the chief of the Dutch factory in Nagasaki, Antonij van Brouckhorst, who had arrived in

35 Dachregister van 't voornaemste voorgevallende ende gepasseerde in 't legaetschapaen de Keyserlijke Mayesteit des rijcx van Japan. Overgekome ne brieven en papieren, jaar 1651, boek I bis:NNN bis, VOC (1. 04.02) 1176, NA, The Hague.

36 A letter of instructions (*Instructie*) of the Governor General and Council of the Indies addressed to the ambassador Petrus Blockhovius, dated 27 July 1649, in *Historical Documents in Foreign Languages Relating to Japan: Diaries Kept by the Heads of the Dutch Factory in Japan*, Vol. 12, Appendix, pp. 243-263. Petrus Blockhovius was initially appointed as ambassador, but after his death Frisius took his place. This is detailed in Hesselink's study.

Japan from Tayouan just before the letter. Van Brouckhorst could boast of a long career in Japan and Vietnam, while Frisius was a newcomer who had just arrived from Europe.

Louis XIV's Letter

In 1664, Jean-Baptiste Colbert re-established the French East India Company and invited the now-former VOC official François Caron to join it. After joining the French Company, Caron in 1667 was to carry as ambassador a letter from King Louis XIV to the shogun, but he never managed to reach Japan. He made it as far as Surat in India but had to return to Europe due to differences with his French colleagues. The letter, which was probably drafted by Caron himself, introduced France and briefly explained why the king had selected Caron as his ambassador and why he proposed the opening of free trade with France.³⁷ The letter could be called a credential rather than a state letter because its main purpose was to introduce the position of Caron as ambassador. In contrast to the Dutch and English Companies which were established by merchants and later formalised by the government, the French Company was established by policymakers at the royal court. Thus the French East India Company could prepare a true royal letter. Caron also carried instructions referencing Japanese customs unfamiliar to French policymakers and based upon his own experience and knowledge.³⁸ These instructions mention his experience in 1627 as a member of the failed mission led by Nuyts.

The *Return* incident of 1673

After leaving Japan in 1623, the English East India Company (EIC) planned to reopen the Japan trade on the basis of its good relationship with the

37 Au Souverain, et Très-haut Empereur et Régent du Grand Empire du Japon, dont les sujets sont très soumis et obéissants, le Roi de France souhaite une longue et heureuse vie et beaucoup de prospérité en son Règne. in *Le Puissant Royaume du Japon*, pp. 228-30. I would like to thank Segawa Yûta and Shimanaka Hiroaki for their assistance with the translation from French into Japanese.

38 'Instruction pour François Carron, Envoyé du Roi de France et de Navarre, à l'Empereur du Japon, pour lui délivrer la lettre et le present de Sa Majesté, et suivant laquelle il se conduira pour l'exécution des affaires projetées et qui lui sont commises'. *Le Puissant Royaume du Japon*, pp. 231-240.

Zheng regime in Taiwan. A ship, the *Return*, left England in 1671 and Simon Delboe, the EIC official aboard, was instructed to establish a new factory in Japan and to become its chief. The VOC had anticipated the designs of the EIC, and informed Tokugawa authorities of the marriage between Charles II of England and Catharine, a Portuguese princess.³⁹ The *Return* arrived in Nagasaki in June 1673. When Japanese officials asked Delboe why he had been dispatched, he explained that he brought the king's letter to the 'Emperor of Japan', i.e. the shogun, in order to conduct commerce in Japan.⁴⁰ However, the letter was not handed over to the Nagasaki authorities, although the substance of the petition was probably written down in Japanese and sent to Edo.

In other words, the Tokugawa authorities treated Delboe not as an ambassador but as a merchant, mainly because he came to ask for trade. It is useful to quote the king's letter here:

Yours abounding in gold, silver, & copper, being of great use for the carrying on of commerce & trade, and our kingdoms affording such great varieties & quantities of woollen cloths & stuffs fit for the clothing of all sorts of persons, which not only tend to the great health & fortifying the spirits & delight of them that wear them, especially in such climates as your empire, but are much more lasting & cheaper than other clothing, which causes so many countries to desire them that our merchants do vend exceeding great quantities thereof [...].⁴¹

The letter itself indicates that officials in the EIC's headquarters had little understanding about the Japanese. It did not even pretend to celebrate the shogun's accession or inform the Japanese side about the accession of their king. From the Japanese point of view, this looked like the correspondence of a merchant and not a king. As the *Return* came to request permission for trade, it should be treated merely as a merchant ship. This did not close off the opportunity for further negotiation, but rather enlarged it. In fact, the Nagasaki magistrate, Okano Magokurō, seriously considered accepting the EIC as a trading partner and asked the Dutch about the possibility of sharing Deshima. In Japan, Tokugawa subjects maintained the right of petition, although they had to proceed step by step in any appeals.

39 Nagazumi, '17-seiki kōhan no jōhō to tsūji'.

40 'Iapan Diary 1673,' of 29 June 1673, in *Experiment and Return*, pp. 90-91.

41 *Experiment and Return*, p. 20. I have updated the spelling here to reflect modern conventions.

In the end, the *bakufu* did not accept the English, because they could not rely on their compliance with Tokugawa prohibitions of Christianity. After the *Return* incident, no European embassies visited Japan for more than a hundred years before the arrival of Adam Laxman from Russia in October 1792.

Conclusion

In the middle of the seventeenth century, some emissaries from European powers visited Japan, most of whom were sent by officials based in Asia, such as the Dutch Governor-General in Batavia. After the failure of Pieter Nuyts' mission, Dutch-Japanese trade came to a halt for several years. When it reopened, the Tokugawa's framework for accepting the Dutch emerged from the idea of seeing them as 'pseudo-subjects' without correspondence on the state level. This process paralleled the creation of Tokugawa subjects that included prohibitions of Christianity. The VOC administration in Batavia accepted the system because it saved them the cost of sending diplomatic envoys and it also preserved the right of petition, even though many troublesome regulations had to be endured by the organisation's personnel on Deshima.

France and England dispatched emissaries and letters in 1667 and 1673 respectively, but the former did not reach Japan and the latter accomplished nothing. French and English efforts failed in part because their position in the China Seas was less established than that of the Dutch and they lacked sufficient understanding of East Asian diplomatic customs. The European Companies expected their letters to function as credentials and their envoys to negotiate trade, but the shogunate operated under a different set of rules. As a result, the *bakufu* treated the emissaries not as diplomatic embassies but as merchants coming to petition for trade because it did not recognise their documents as 'state letters'. To date, historians have attributed the failure of European 'petitions' to the Tokugawa prohibition of Christianity. To this, I would add that from the Tokugawa point of view, the *bakufu* could decide arbitrarily whether or not to accept a 'petition' because it was not an inter-state but a domestic matter.

Foreign relations around Japan in the seventeenth century were based on 'letter diplomacy'. In letter diplomacy, the letter bearer was neither a negotiator nor a representative. Correspondence functioned to maintain mutual relations. The correspondence itself, including the form of the letter, determined the relationship between states. In fact, the members of the

envoy party often engaged in commercial negotiations, but negotiations could never serve as the main task of the dispatched party.⁴² So what did actually happen when Europeans entered into this framework? Both Asian states and European powers struggled to adapt to the new circumstances, but until the nineteenth century, Europeans had to compromise with Asian customs, at least in the case of Japan. That said, European newcomers wanted to negotiate and conclude mutual treaties because they did not have a place within the existing diplomatic network. For European merchants in the Asian seas it was impossible to repeatedly ask for royal letters in order to promote their commerce. When European envoys reached Nagasaki, Japanese officials asked them if they wanted to negotiate as merchants or if they wanted to be treated as diplomatic embassies. They naturally chose the first option. For the Tokugawa government, too, it was easier to treat Europeans as merchants. In his work, Clulow has suggested that the Dutch lost their diplomatic prerogatives after the failure of Nuyts, but I would argue instead that the Dutch simply stopped sending embassies with diplomatic prerogatives. The Dutch chief was at no stage a diplomatic representative.

By way of conclusion, I do not want to suggest that Europeans were realists and Asians formalists. For example, after the Meiji Restoration in 1871, the Iwakura Mission visited Europe hoping to negotiate for the revision of the unequal treaties. At this time, European states did not move to negotiate with the embassy. Rather, it can be argued that they welcomed the mission simply in order to confirm the illusion of a Eurocentric world order.

The *bakufu* created a new framework to accept Dutch merchants without formal correspondence. Such acceptance could be considered a privilege, because the Governor-General of the VOC, for example, did not have to accept any Japanese junks in Batavia or Taiwan. The privilege depended on the *bakufu*'s certainty that it could control VOC agents, especially when it came to Christian prohibitions. That certainty was based on the ongoing relationship between the Tokugawa and the VOC. It was harder to extend it to newcomers. When the Russians came to Japan in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the *bakufu* discussed seriously if it would accept the Russians or not, but in the end formulated concrete policies not to accept any newcomers. Later the Japanese called the policy *sakoku* or 'seclusion policy'.⁴³ Moreover, the fact that the Tokugawa shoguns did not conduct commercial negotiations with the Dutch did not mean that they had no

42 My comments are limited to East Asia and do not extend to similar forms in other parts of the early modern world.

43 Fujita, *Kinsei kōki no seijishi to taigai kankei*, pp. 3-20.

Figure 5 The reply from the senior council of the shogunate to the letter of King Willem II (1845).

Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken 2.05.01/3147a, Nationaal Archief, The Hague, 2.05.01 (Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), inv. nr. 3147a.

interest in trade. They took measures to control foreign trade in Nagasaki via the Nagasaki magistrates and the Nagasaki *kaisho* (the shogun's trading office conducted by the merchant groups of Nagasaki). Trade was regulated by 'contracts' between the Dutch and the Nagasaki *kaisho* signed by shogunal interpreters in Nagasaki instead of by commercial treaties.

In 1844, the Dutch King William II sent a letter to the Tokugawa shogun, recommending that he open up the country in order to allow international trade and to avoid conflict with Great Britain⁴⁴. In their reply, the council of the Tokugawa government stated that they would maintain the status quo in foreign relations, recognising Korea and Ryukyu as 'Countries of Diplomatic Correspondence (*Tsūshin-no-Kuni* 通信国)', and China and the Netherlands as 'Countries of Commercial Relations (*Tsūshō-no-Kuni*)'.⁴⁵ This served as an excuse for the fact that the shogun himself did not reply to the king, and furthermore refused any future letters from the Dutch sovereign. The shogunate had attempted to explain its policy to foreigners from the end of the eighteenth century, but this response to Holland serves as the clearest portrait of the Tokugawa framework of foreign relations yet.⁴⁶

44 Matsukata, 'Reevaluating the "Recommendation to Open the Country"'.
 45 Archives of Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2.05.01) 3147a, NA, The Hague.
 46 Matsukata, 'Countries for Commercial Relations', Fujita, op. cit.

When Commodore Matthew Perry came to Uraga in 1853, he brought two letters from President Millard Fillmore both carrying the same date, i.e. 13 November 1853.⁴⁷ One, explaining the peaceful aim of Perry's dispatch, has been called a state letter in Japan. It functioned as a state letter, allowing Perry to be accepted as a diplomatic envoy in Japan. The other has been ignored in Japan but it was a credential for Perry to open another way of diplomacy. When the *bakufu* permitted him to negotiate, a new age of Japanese diplomacy started.

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