On 29 July 1643, ten crew members of the Dutch yacht *Breskens* were lured ashore in Nambu, a domain in northern Japan, by an equal number of attractive Japanese women. The day before, during a voyage of discovery to Northeast Asia, their ship had anchored in an idyllic bay where the crew had also made a landfall a month and a half earlier. This time, however, as soon as the Dutchmen had been led out of sight of their ship, they were surrounded by a crowd of men from the neighborhood. Trussed up, they were then brought to Morioka, the castle town of the domain. There they waited until police officers came from Edo to take them to the shogun’s capital, where they were interrogated for four months before finally being released on 8 December 1643.

*Prisoners from Nambu* is the story of what these men experienced and saw in Japan. Narrative history has many advantages that, because of neglect of the genre in recent times, have remained unexplored so far in Japanese history. Through its narrow focus, it can evoke in the reader a feeling for the reality of the past such as analytical history rarely achieves. This account aims to give the reader an idea of what it felt like to be an ordinary Westerner suddenly forced to participate in the world of the samurai. It is a story of cross-cultural contact, in which, for a change, Westerners were not in control, but at the mercy of Japanese warriors.

During their detention, the prisoners were in a position to make firsthand observations of the internal structure of the Japanese government and its decision-making process concerning such matters as
the eradication of Christianity. In particular, the Dutchmen were confronted on several occasions with four Jesuit priests who had tried to come ashore by stealth in Kyushu, only one month before the men from the Breskens had been arrested. Their observations document the brainwashing process, recently perfected in Japan, by which the Jesuits were forced to apostatize and become allies of the Japanese government in its battle against Christianity.

In the end, the Dutchmen were able to convince the Japanese authorities that they had nothing to do with such matters as bringing Roman Catholic priests ashore. However, the clearer it became that the Dutchmen had been arrested by mistake, the more imperative it became for the Japanese government to find a suitable excuse for having detained its own allies. When the representative of the Dutch East India Company residing in Nagasaki came to Edo to obtain the release of the Dutch prisoners he was forced to accept a description of them as shipwrecked sailors saved by the Japanese.

This version of events created tension and difficulties for the Dutch trade with Japan in the subsequent years. For if the shogun had “saved” the lives of ten Dutchmen, he should be thanked for such magnanimity in an appropriate manner. In the eyes of the shogun himself, no manner would be more appropriate than having an official embassy from Holland prostrating themselves in gratitude at his feet. In Dutch eyes, however, this would be turning the world upside down. As the years went by, however, shogunal officials in both Nagasaki and Edo made it clear that the Dutch trade in Japan would come to a halt if such an embassy did not materialize.

The solution was found in the time-honored East Asian manner of sending a bogus ambassador. In 1649, to appease the Japanese shogun by thanking him for the release of the prisoners from Nambu, a splendid Dutch embassy was prepared, ostensibly coming from Amsterdam, but in reality put together on Java. A Dutch schoolmaster, recently arrived in Batavia from Holland, was made ambassador to Japan, although he was sick to the point of dying. This was, of course, exactly why he was the appropriate man. For if he died at sea before arriving in Japan, it would be impossible for the Japanese to investigate who had sent him.

Everything happened as foreseen. The ambassador died and was duly mummified at sea, so the fact of his existence could be verified by the Japanese officials on the arrival of the ship carrying the embassy. Of course, nobody in Japan was fooled, least of all the Japa-
inese officials in Nagasaki and Edo. However, without clear evidence of duplicity, these same officials, having insisted for six years that the Dutch should send an embassy, were now hard put to refuse to receive this one, even though the ambassador was dead and obviously fake. In the end, just as the organizers of the embassy in Batavia had hoped, the Dutch were allowed to perform their charade and the Dutch trade with Japan was preserved.

By recreating, through the story of Dutch prisoners, a slice of the life and times of the power holders in Japan during the 1640s, we are able to see close up who the men were who had just issued, in the 1630s, the series of regulations that came to be known as the “seclusion laws” (sakoku). The story allows us to view the politics and diplomacy of the time in a fresh, new light. The incident and its aftermath reveal how the Japanese saw themselves and provide insight into the motives that drove Japanese diplomacy at the time. Through this narrative, finally, we will be able to scrutinize some of the notions about the concept of sakoku, or seclusion, that have become fashionable in recent years and assert that we should abandon the notion that Japan was isolated during the early modern era.

JAPAN AND THE IDEOLOGY OF THE CHINESE CENTER

International relations between the countries of East Asia in the seventeenth century were still dominated by the ideology of the Chinese center,1 which had influenced the area since the Han dynasty (beginning in 206 BCE). According to this ideology, international relations were personal relations between the rulers of East Asia, rather than relations between the states themselves. Such personal relations were always hierarchical and centered on the emperor of China.

The Chinese emperor, in this context, was known as the Son of Heaven, who had been granted a Heavenly Mandate to rule the world because of his Great Virtue. He was held to be responsible for the balance between Heaven and Earth. Although according to the Chinese ideal he was in reality destined to rule All under Heaven, in practice he only ruled the center of the surface of the earth, the Middle Kingdom, a term the Chinese still use to indicate China. All rulers who were allowed to have diplomatic relations with the Chinese emperor had to consent in principle to behave as his vassals.

What is more, the Chinese intellectuals who pondered these prob-
lems categorized foreign rulers as either civilized or uncivilized. Civilized rulers included only those who recognized the Great Virtue of the Chinese emperor and his right to be the center of the world. They brought him tribute in the form of products from their native land to demonstrate their subservience. In exchange, they received counter-gifts, court titles, and sometimes a counter-embassy, which would confirm the foreign ruler in his status as a vassal of the Chinese emperor and constitute proof of his participation in Chinese civilization. Although there were exceptions, in principle trade relations were only permitted within the framework of this lord-vassal relationship and the concomitant recognition of China’s centrality and superiority.

This Chinese ideology was, of course, advantageous and flattering to China, and as time went on, other Asian countries adopted similar strategies, replacing the Chinese emperor and his court with their own rulers and their courts. The ideology of the Chinese center, furthermore, was so closely interrelated with the Chinese writing system that, for the areas that had adopted this system (Vietnam, Manchuria, Korea, and Japan), there really seemed to be no other way to theorize about international relations.

The emergence of “world centers” other than China brought forth all kinds of contradictions. In the first place, China itself was far from able to constantly prove military superiority over its border areas, so the Chinese emperor (or at least the bureaucrats charged with his diplomacy) often had to mitigate his demands on powerful neighbors. In the second place, the competition between the different centers of the world encouraged such phenomena as envoys “losing” their letters of accreditation, emissaries carrying forged documents, and from time to time even fake ambassadors being sent out to preserve existing trade relations or to try and create new ones.

Japan had been engaged in the adoption of the accomplishments of Chinese culture and civilization since well before the seventh century. From the beginning of this cultural transmission, however, Japanese rulers had consciously tried to downplay the idea of China as the political center of the world. Was the Japanese imperial family not descended from the Sun Goddess Amaterasu herself? And had the first earthly ancestor of this family not come straight down from Heaven in order to rule the Japanese islands?

In China, possession of the Heavenly Mandate explained the rise and fall of the different dynasties of Chinese history. But in Japan,
with her own ideology of an uninterrupted imperial line, this idea of the Heavenly Mandate was superfluous. In the eyes of Japanese intellectuals the durability of the native dynasty proved its superiority over the chaotic succession of dynasties that characterized Chinese history.

Even during Japan’s medieval civil wars, which began in 1467 and lasted for more than a century, the idea of the divine descent of the Japanese imperial family continued to dominate power struggles among generals in the field. The Japanese emperor might have lost most of his political and economic power during this period, but he remained the only source of political legitimacy recognized throughout Japan.

When Japan’s military and political unity was restored during the second half of the sixteenth century, the country’s new military leaders again began to cherish ambitions of creating a Japanese Center of the World that could compete with (and ultimately outdo and replace) the eternal Chinese center. The first of the two generals to re-establish Japan’s unity, Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582), for example, used the term “tenka”—the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese characters for “All under Heaven” (tianxia)—for his domain on Honshu, which during his lifetime he steadily enlarged. By the use of this term, he clearly indicated his desire to conquer all of Japan and possibly even more territories beyond.

In 1591 the second general, Nobunaga’s vassal and successor Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598), finally accomplished the goal of his murdered lord by subjugating all daimyo (military leaders) of Japan. During the process of political unification through military force and the astute use of argument, an important factor was Hideyoshi’s plan to organize, after the unification of Japan, a grand campaign through Asia. The aim of this campaign was to realize the dream of every proud Japanese warrior: to replace China as the center of the world by conquering and occupying Beijing.

Hideyoshi sent two large expeditions to Korea in 1592 and 1597. Although neither succeeded in crossing the border of Korea and Manchuria, these were by far the largest military expeditions the Japanese had ever undertaken abroad. The grandiose scale of Hideyoshi’s failure remained an important fact in Japanese foreign policy until the first half of the twentieth century. His legacy to the military rulers that followed him was an unfulfilled dream.
THE EUROPEANS IN ASIA

The arrival in Asia of the Portuguese, and later the Spanish, the English, and the Dutch, added a completely different element to inter-Asian relationships. The superiority of European ships at sea introduced, for the first time, the idea of the ocean as an avenue of regular communication with the peoples of Asia. Previously, in Japan for example, the ocean had always been considered a wall between the Here and the Hereafter. In the interior of India, Southeast Asia, China, and Japan, the old traditions remained intact for the moment, but along the coasts, things started to change.

The Portuguese were the first to begin building trading posts in Africa, Arabia, Persia, India, Malaysia, Java, the Moluccas, and later even in China and Japan. These settlements or factories were of course dependent on the goodwill of the local rulers, but the Portuguese freedom to act tended to grow in direct proportion to the weakness of central authority in the area where a factory was located. In China, where the Portuguese reputation of being slave traders and robbers had preceded them, they were at first not welcome and were forced to trade with Chinese traders on the open sea.

In the course of such trade, in 1542, three Portuguese merchants who had boarded a Chinese junk were separated from their own ship by a bad storm off the Chinese coast; they and the junk were blown all the way to Japan. The treatment accorded to them there and the Japanese interest in the firearms they had brought differed so greatly from their experience with the Chinese thus far that Japan soon acquired among European traders the reputation of being a sort of Eldorado, a land of untold possibilities.

The enduring civil war had provided a great stimulus for the Japanese mining industry and the extraction of metals. As a result, when the Portuguese arrived Japan possessed a large surplus of silver. For that reason the price of silver in Japan was much lower than in China. In addition, the Portuguese traders soon understood that Chinese silk was in great demand in Japan. Because of the damage Japanese pirates had inflicted on the Chinese coast over many years, the relationship between China and Japan was at a very low point, and the Chinese emperor had proscribed all contact between his subjects and the Japanese. And as long as Japan refused to send tribute to China, this was not likely to change.

This meant a great opportunity for the Portuguese, who could
now present themselves as middlemen between Chinese traders with silk for sale and an unquenchable thirst for Japanese silver, and Japanese traders with a clientele of big lords who all wanted to be supplied with Chinese silk and were prepared to pay in silver cash. Given the invulnerability of Portuguese galleons in Asian waters (because of their superior artillery and solid build), the Portuguese represented a good investment for both the Chinese and the Japanese.3

The situation provided the Portuguese with respectability in China and the cash to build a large settlement on the South China coast. Some assistance they rendered the Chinese emperor in suppressing piracy along the coast at last gave him sufficient grounds to overlook the restrictions on trading with the Portuguese that had been issued earlier and to give them permission, from 1555 onwards, to start a settlement at Macao. This settlement grew and flourished as the silk trade between China and Japan continued in Portuguese vessels. And as it happened, the Portuguese traders soon came to be accompanied by Jesuit missionaries.

The Spanish came to Asia via Mexico, for in 1494 with the Treaty of Tordesillas, the Pope had accorded to the Spanish crown the right to colonize the Western hemisphere. They founded their first settlements in the Philippines and visited Japan from there. The Spanish did not present a direct threat to the Portuguese trade with Japan. That came only with the arrival in the area of the Dutch, who in 1600 first landed in Japan in the ship Liefde (Charity). The Liefde’s first mate was an Englishman by the name of Will Adams, and out of the whole crew he was chosen by the leading general of Japan of the time, Tokugawa Ieyasu, to become his adviser on European matters. Inevitably, both the Dutch and the English would try to force the Portuguese from Japan.4

From the beginning of the seventeenth century, therefore, the Asian seas became the battlefield of a growing competition between the Portuguese and the Dutch, and to a lesser extent, the Spanish and English. Of all these European nations, only the Dutch, at first, profited from a new capitalist system. The Dutch traders could expand their trade by drawing on voluntary contributions from the population of the Low Countries in the form of private investment in the different trading companies that were fanning out all over the known and into the unknown world at the time. In 1602, the companies that had been trading in Asia were consolidated into one large company, which was called the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie
(VOC), or Dutch East India Company. This company held a monopoly on Dutch investments in Asia for almost two hundred years. The Portuguese, the Spanish and the English crowns, with their more limited income from taxes and their larger domestic responsibilities, were at first hard pressed to compete with it.

As a result of these conditions the Dutch trading fleet expanded on an enormous scale, and it eventually succeeded in pushing most of the Portuguese out of Asia, first from the Moluccas and Java, but later also from Ceylon, India, Malaysia, Southeast Asia, and Japan. In Japan the competition between the Portuguese and the Dutch lasted exactly thirty years: from 1609 when the first Dutch factory was established until 1639 when the Portuguese were finally forbidden to come and trade in Japan any longer.

THE TOKUGAWA BAKUFU

In 1600, two years after the death of Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who had not succeeded in establishing a firm foundation for the continuation of his dynasty, centripetal forces in Japan were realigned, once more, on the battlefield. The battle of Sekigahara pitted the new men of Hideyoshi’s fledgling bureaucracy, in league with the lords of western Japan, against Tokugawa Ieyasu and the forces of the warrior clans of eastern Japan. The battle was won conclusively by the eastern side and the alignment of forces later served as a blueprint for the power structure imposed on Japan by Ieyasu.

Hideyoshi’s federal organization of the country into domains, a legacy of the civil war of the previous centuries, was left intact. The victorious eastern army ended up as the uncontested rulers of Japan, with Ieyasu alone holding as much as 25 percent of the productive acreage of the country. The five main cities of Japan (Kyoto, Edo, Osaka, Sakai, and Nagasaki) as well as the country’s richest mines also became part of the Tokugawa domain, monopolizing in this manner Japan’s distribution system, its money markets, and much of its manufacturing capacity.

The officer corps of Ieyasu’s personal army at Sekigahara was largely enfeoffed with smallish fiefs located in strategic places around the country, ranging between 10,000 and 100,000 koku (a unit for measuring rice, equivalent to about 5 bushels). These officers were known as the fudai daimyo, the most trusted of all vassals and the
only ones eligible for the high positions in the Tokugawa central bureaucracy, or bakufu. A cordon of fudai daimyō fiefs protected the city of Edo, which had grown up around Ieyasu’s Castle and housed the bakufu. Ieyasu’s soldiers, or hatamoto, who fought the battle of Sekigahara, became the administrators of the countryside of the Tokugawa domain itself with salaries up to 5,000 koku.

Family members of the Tokugawa, or shinpan daimyō, were given bigger fiefs up to 500,000 koku. These, too, were located in strategic places. The houses of Ki and Owari dominated the Tōkaidō road, the central artery between eastern and western Japan, and so served as buffers against a possible resurgence of the western coalition. The house of Mito protected the shogunal capital of Edo from a possible attack from the north. These three houses were known as the gosanke, the main houses among the shinpan daimyō. Although well provided for in the material sense, for reasons of dynastic stability, none of the shinpan daimyo were eligible for government office.

Most numerous and varied among the domainal lords, however, were the outer lords, or tozama daimyō. Their income ranged between 10,000 and 1,000,000 koku, and their domains tended to be located on the periphery of Japan. Originally, the tozama daimyō were defined as the allies of the Tokugawa at Sekigahara, such as, for example, the generals of the eastern domains who had joined Ieyasu’s side. However, those on the western side who had turned coat and joined Ieyasu during the battle, or even those lords who had simply refrained from entering the fray, were also allowed to retain their domains after the battle and were reenfeoffed as tozama daimyō.

It was the tozama who were most feared by the Tokugawa as competitors for power. Swearing an oath of allegiance to the Tokugawa and furnishing their Tokugawa liege lord with military assistance were the basis of an uneasy relationship. Hideyoshi had previously required vanquished daimyo to build residences next to his castle, where principal wife and heir of each daimyo lived as the ruler’s hostages. The hostage system now became a central pillar of the Tokugawa structure and eventually all daimyo kept main residences (kami yashiki) around the Tokugawa Castle in central Edo.

In 1635, it became the general rule for daimyo to spend every other year in the shogun’s capital. This involved much back and forth travel throughout Japan, for a daimyō needed to travel with a retinue indicative of the size of his domain. The necessary financial outlay provided economic stimuli for the regions along the country’s high-
ways and kept the daimyo from accumulating treasure that could otherwise have been turned into funds for resisting the Tokugawa. This system became known as sankin kōtai, or alternate attendance. It assured that about half the daimyo would be in the shogun’s capital at any one time to perform a biweekly attendance at the shogun’s court.

The daily governance of the country was in the hands of the shogun and his fudai advisers, who as time went on came to have specific duties on the various committees and subdivisions of the bakufu. The most important of these advisory councils was the rōjū, or senior councilors in charge of relations with the imperial house and the nobility of Kyoto, the tozama daimyō, and foreign policy—in short, with the minor centers of power encompassed within the larger center represented by the Tokugawa. Two important members of the rōjū council were the most senior retainer (tairō), and the elderman (toshiyori), whose voices would be the most likely to reach the ear of the shogun.

MEASURES AGAINST CHRISTIANITY

In the 1630s the shogun and his advisers adopted a number of measures that resulted in the diplomatic isolation of the country from China, Southeast Asia, and Europe for a period that lasted, roughly, from 1639 to 1854. This period is known as sakoku (closed country).9 It is not correct to assume that it was the intention of the Japanese authorities to close their country off from the outside world. Rather they wanted complete control over the diplomatic relations of their recently reunited island empire in order to create a Japanese center on the Chinese model.

The most important factor in the decisions that led to the break with all European nations (except the Dutch Republic) was the experience of the Japanese authorities with the activities of the southern European Roman Catholic missionaries in Japan. Following in the wake of the Portuguese expansion in Asia and in tandem with the christianizing of the New World (the Caribbean, Mexico, Peru, and Brazil), the target of the missionaries was soon enlarged to include the Asian side of the globe. From the second half of the sixteenth century, the intrepid missionaries of the new Jesuit order were already coming to Japan on a regular basis.10
This was precisely the moment that the civil war in Japan was at its height. Almost forty years later, as soon as Hideyoshi reunited the islands, he issued orders to the Roman Catholic missionaries to leave the country. Persecutions of Christians, however, only began in earnest after the Dutch (in 1609) and the English (between 1613 and 1623) had provided Tokugawa Ieyasu, the new ruler of Japan, with a Protestant alternative to trading with the Portuguese and the Spanish.

It was the existence of a Roman Catholic “center of the world” in Rome that worried the Japanese military leaders. They feared that Japanese Christians could become untrustworthy subjects, a sort of fifth column, following moral precepts controlled by foreign lords. As soon as Ieyasu had suppressed all internal resistance against his regime with the conquest of the fortress Osaka in 1615, Japanese Christians were persecuted with ever increasing intensity. The third Tokugawa shogun, prominent in this book as Tokugawa Iemitsu (1604–1651), became so immersed in what he considered his war on Christianity that he did not hesitate to participate personally in the brainwashing of arrested Jesuits.

After his death, in 1616, Ieyasu had already been deified as the “Light Shining in the East” (tōshō).\(^{11}\) This deification was at once a declaration of war against Christianity, a challenge to the idea of the Chinese center, and a reference to the age-old Japanese tradition of sun worship—all of these concentrated in the founder of the Tokugawa dynasty.

It was obviously no coincidence that the measures taken by Iemitsu to rebuild and enlarge Ieyasu’s shrine at Nikkō coincided with the orders meant to eradicate Christianity in Japan, which later became the foundation for Japan’s policy of isolation. On 6 April 1633, the military authorities or bakufu issued a list of seventeen articles, which prohibited foreign travel by Japanese nationals on ships that did not have special permission from the authorities in Edo for that purpose. Japanese who had lived abroad for some time were forbidden to return to Japan. The same list of articles reiterated the prohibitions against Christianity and refined the rules that foreign ships had to obey while they were in Japan.\(^{12}\)

These seventeen articles were promulgated once more on 23 June 1634. At the same time, three new articles were added, forbidding foreign missionaries from coming ashore in Japan, Japanese traders from exporting weapons from Japan, and all other Japanese from
leaving Japan for any reason. The next year, on 12 July 1635, these orders were tightened once more. This time, all Japanese ships (even those that had previously obtained permission to trade overseas) were prohibited from leaving the country.

One year later, on 22 July 1636, the bakufu sent a list of nineteen new articles to the governors of Nagasaki. These raised the rewards for denouncing Japanese Christians, expelled from Japan the children of mixed marriages, and tightened the prohibition against contact with overseas family members. Even correspondence with such family members was no longer allowed.

THE DUTCH IN JAPAN

At the same time that the Portuguese were bringing their last silk cargoes to Japan, the Dutch were trying to convince the Japanese authorities that they did not need to depend on the Portuguese for their foreign trade. The Portuguese were used to selling their cargo every year all at once, for prices they had agreed on with the merchants of the Japanese silk guild, the so-called *pancado* prices. As a first step in the process of replacing the Portuguese, the Dutch now had to agree that the silk they brought to Japan would be sold under the same conditions the Portuguese had been used to.

In May of 1636, the Portuguese residents in Japan were interned on Deshima. This was a fan-shaped, artificial island that had just been built in the bay of Nagasaki, on Japan’s southern island of Kyushu. It was only connected with the city by a bridge and was intended to separate the Roman Catholic Portuguese from the citizens of Nagasaki. The following year, in nearby Shimabara, a revolt broke out in which a large number of Christians participated. The bakufu held the Portuguese co-responsible for this insurrection, and because of this eventually decided to prohibit them from coming to Japan.

In March of 1638, after the suppression of the insurrection (during which the Dutch had been asked to put their artillery at the service of the bakufu), the Dutch chief factor was asked during his visit to the Edo that year if he could supply Japan with the same textiles as the Portuguese had always brought to Japan. One year later, the Huguenot François Caron, Dutch chief factor, convinced the supreme ruling council or rōjū of Japan that, at sea, the Dutch had nothing to fear from the Portuguese. With the help of charts brought along especially for that purpose, Caron elucidated the extent
of the Dutch power in Asia and guaranteed the Japanese authorities that the Dutch would be ready to supply the Japanese with everything they needed. Happily, he was able to point out that during the previous trading season of 1638, the volume of the wares brought to Japan by the Dutch had finally exceeded that of the Portuguese.

Eventually, on 9 August 1639, a new series of orders was issued. The main difference was that the preceding four had been the shogun’s direct orders to the governors of Nagasaki. This time, however, the orders were read to all the daimyo in Edo at that moment. The domainal lords were ordered to organize a security system with outlook posts all along the Japanese coastline, so that the bakufu might be informed as soon as possible about the arrival of any foreign ships. A direct representative of the shogun left immediately for Nagasaki to announce to the Portuguese their expulsion in person.

That the shogun was serious, he proved the following year when an unarmed Portuguese delegation from Macao visited Japan once more to beg for a revision of the expulsion order. Iemitsu sent two personal aids to Nagasaki, who had 61 men of the delegation decapitated for transgressing against his expulsion order of the previous year. The same autumn the Dutch factory at Hirado received a visit of the ōmetsuke (chief spy) Inoue Masashige, who in the name of the shogun ordered the immediate destruction of all the buildings of the Dutch factory.

Inoue’s words are quoted in the factory diary or Daghregister:

His Imperial Majesty had heard that all of you are Christians, just like the Portuguese. You honor the Sunday, you write the date of Jesus’ birth on the facades of the houses you build, visible for everyone in the country. You keep the Ten Commandments, and you pray the Lord’s prayer, you believe in baptism, the sharing of bread, the Bible, the testament, Moses, the prophets, and the apostles. . . . The differences between your religion and that of the Portuguese we hold to be very small. We have long known that you were Christians as well, but we thought another Christ was meant.

For these reasons, His Majesty has ordered me to instruct you to take down all the buildings (without exception) with the [offending] date. . . . We will not allow that you publicly observe the Sunday, so that the name of that holiday may be forgotten here.9 From now on, the kapitan [chief factor] will not be allowed to reside in Japan for longer than one year and will have to be replaced every year.15

*Ironically, the Dutch word “zondag” survives today in the Nagasaki dialect as “dontaku” (holiday).
Even if he regretted tearing down the expensive warehouses and other buildings of the factory at Hirado, Caron did not hesitate, for he understood that permission for the Dutch to keep on coming to Japan depended on his decision of that moment. All the buildings, therefore, were destroyed, one after the other, and the next year Caron himself left Japan after a sojourn of twenty years. The new Dutch factor was told, during his visit to the court that year, that from now on the Dutch were to bring their trade to Nagasaki. The little island of Deshima, which had been empty since the departure of the Portuguese, would serve as their place of residence.

A JAPANESE CENTER OF THE WORLD

The Japanese military government allowed Chinese and Southeast Asian traders to come and trade in Nagasaki, but in contrast with the Dutch the merchants from these nations could never obtain permission to visit Edo for an audience with the shogun. From the beginning of the seventeenth century, there were therefore only two Asian countries that sent “official” embassies to Japan: Korea and Ryukyu. The relationship of Japan with Korea was a delicate one, for the King of the Land of the Early Morning Calm was traditionally a vassal of the Chinese emperor. The weakness of the present Ming dynasty, however, predisposed the Korean court to forget about Hideyoshi’s invasions, and under Ieyasu the relationship with Japan was normalized on the basis of falsified documents.16

The falsifiers were the Sō family and their retainers, residents of the island fief of Tsushima, situated in the straits between Japan and Korea. Already during the Japanese civil wars, the daimyo of these islands had been recognized by the Korean court as the sole possible intermediary for its contacts with the different military leaders of Japan. It was the prerogative of the Sō to issue passports for visits to Korea, and for this reason the Sō were able to change the credentials of both sides in such a manner that the Korean king did not have to betray his Chinese liege lord, while the Japanese shogun was not disturbed by expressions in the documents referring to China’s centrality.

The very learned gentlemen bureaucrats of the Korean court were still deadly afraid of a repetition of the massive invasion attempts by Japan during the last decade of the sixteenth century. Therefore, every-
one (including the King) was prepared to send embassies to Japan every time the etiquette of East Asian diplomacy required a vassal to do so. In this way, they could at least be sure that those proud and violent neighbors of theirs would not suddenly threaten their door-step again. Their Japanese counterparts in the bakufu, in their turn, had “proof” that Korea was a tributary nation of Japan.

The position of the Ryukyu Islands was, if possible, even stranger. This island chain had been conquered in 1609 by soldiers of the southern Kyushu fief of Satsuma. The economy of the archipelago, however, was completely dependent on trade with China. Because of the lack of diplomatic relations between China and Japan, it would have been impossible to continue this trade if its conquest by Japan had become officially known in China. So to preserve the trade and to profit from it behind the scenes, the daimyo of Satsuma (with the silent permission of the bakufu) allowed the court of the Ryukyuan king to continue to exist and maintain its relations with the Middle Kingdom.17

Behind the scenes Satsuma ruled the islands. Whether the Chinese were really fooled by this charade or whether the magistrates of Fujian and Zhejiang provinces, on the other side of the Chinese sea, closed their eyes to avoid damaging the trade, does not become clear from the documents.18 The fact remains that the so-called king of Ryukyu continued to send fake ambassadors to the Chinese court until the nineteenth century, while every time a new Ryukyuan king ascended to his “throne” he was officially invested as such by an envoy from China.

In both the Korean and the Ryukyuan cases, the confirmation of Japan’s centrality by embassies sent from these countries was more apparent than real. The various daimyo of Japan may individually have been impressed by the power of the bakufu, but it is less sure that the military government of Japan itself was as convinced of its own influence overseas. It is not surprising, therefore, that the shogun and his advisers remained on the lookout for opportunities to expand the number of their foreign “vassals.”

The Dutch, who among Europeans had proved to be the most willing to do the shogun’s bidding, were naturally the obvious candidates for such an expansion of Japan’s formal influence overseas. In 1643, shortly after the move from Hirado to Deshima, an event suddenly occurred which, in the eyes of Tokugawa Iemitsu himself, provided a good opportunity for a tributary mission to
be sent by this European vassal to Japan. The only problem was to make the Dutch agree and see things the way the Japanese wanted them to.

After the men from the Breskens had been arrested, they had to leave behind on their ship their own way of understanding the world. When the ship itself left, their familiar physical universe was gone and the men had no choice but to accept the world on the terms of their captors. The world of the warrior (bushi) was a frightening one, even for those who were born into it. The strand that held it together, at least up to the seventeenth century, was raw power. The rise to pre-eminence of Japan’s warrior class was itself a sign of the gradual secularization of Japanese society. Because of the profession he was born into (which by Tokugawa times had already become his lineage), the warrior dealt in death. Death was the instrument by which, during the medieval period, the warrior class gradually fashioned a new society from the ruins of the ancient Japanese state.

The warriors who imposed their rationality of power on Japan constituted no more than 5 or 6 percent of the country’s population. During the Edo period (1600–1868), they lived mainly in castle towns of the country, and especially in the castle town “par excellence,” Edo, where they formed the majority of the population. Inside the castle towns of Japan the warrior class had its own quarters, closely packed around the castle itself. Physically, then, and mentally as well, the bushi class was separated from the rest of the population to a remarkable degree. Their education as specialists of power did much to reinforce this separation.

When power is valued as the ultimate touchstone of social relations it must be made visible. Death was visible in Japan to a degree hard for us to imagine today. Execution grounds were located along the main roads leading into and out of the cities. The two sabers the bushi carried were, at the same time, the symbols and the instruments of their power. The expected response of the masses was instant and total submission. The Dutch group caught on very quickly. One of the things stressed by them in the report they left of their captivity was that they constantly “paid their respects in the proper manner.” This rather euphemistic expression meant that the Dutchmen would go down on their knees, put their hands flat on the floor in front of them, and bow their heads down until their noses touched the ground. Their hesitance to clearly admit to this fact afterwards is connected
with their awareness that such an act of submission would not be understood in a European context, where one knelt on one knee in front of a king, and on two only when praying to God.\textsuperscript{19}

In Japan, however, the Dutch were used to conforming to this local custom, which even today is still practiced by Japanese in a wide variety of social situations. The Dutch merchants were very much aware that they would only be tolerated in Japan on Japanese terms.\textsuperscript{20} In this, their experience during the 218 years of their exclusive trading rights differed fundamentally from that of most of the other European nations that maintained settlements in Asia. As long as there was money to be made, the Dutch did the bidding of the Japanese. The story of the prisoners from Nambu is, maybe, the best example of this unequal relationship.