1 Introduction: Japan's internal and external worlds, 1582–1941

The two most widely held historical images of Japan are its self-imposed isolation (sakoku) from the outside world for almost two and a half centuries, and admiral Perry's challenge to it in 1853. Japan is equally known for its rapid economic growth after 1868 and, already famous for its cars, electronics and pioneering high-speed trains, for becoming in the 1980s the world's second economic superpower. Two questions stand out. Why did Japan pursue from the 1630s a policy of isolation; and why abandoning it in modern times did it succeed so well economically? Between the sakoku period ending in 1853–9 and its post-1960 economic triumphs stand its years of wars and conflicts, culminating in its challenge to the United States in the Pacific war. These events raise their own questions. Were they in some way a consequence of aggression latent in Japanese history, or were they simply part of a complex and mainly post-1840 story embracing the western rape of China, a failed effort by Japan to fashion a successful security policy in a changing Asia, and America's aggressive exercise of its new imperial mantle in the Pacific?

Westerners had long seen a policy of exclusion as either irrational or unnatural (though this was qualified in the accounts by four keen-sighted contemporaries, the well-known Kaempfer and the much less well-known Thunberg, Titsingh and Golownin (Golovnin), all of whom spent time in Japan). Modern writing has often made a distinction between Japanese who favoured exclusion and those who wanted to end it. In other words, writers in recent times, Japanese as well as western, sought to find a tradition which it was hoped would underpin the struggling democracy of the 1930s or the Occupation-imposed one after 1945. There has even been more recently a popularisation inside and outside Japan of a view that a full-blown sakoku policy dates only from 1793 or 1804. Likewise, Japanese trade before the 1630s is sometimes presented in Japanese accounts as large and innovative, and as trade contracted, a traffic between Japan and Korea conducted through the island of Tsushima (in the strait separating Japan and Korea) has been seen rather loosely as much larger and more central to the Japanese economy than it was. Sakoku also has been represented as an intended mercantilist or development policy. In all these interpretations lies a reaction, in itself intelligent, against older and more simplistic views which saw sakoku as a blindly repressive policy.

A reluctance has long existed in western economic thought to conceive of a comparatively closed economic system as workable or prosperous. The western urge to open Japan (in essence aggression), for justification rested on a belief that sakoku (seclusion) both deprived the country of a foreign trade necessary for Japan's own good and could only have been imposed by internal despotism. The growth of foreign trade, when sakoku was removed in mid-1859, might be seen as a measure of Japan's loss in earlier times.[1] Had sakoku not existed, gains in foreign trade, perhaps as large as those of the 1870s and later, could have been reaped earlier. Yet that overlooks the experience under sakoku. Europeans in the seventeenth century had found few Japanese goods, silver and copper apart, that they wanted, and on the other hand there were, with the exception of silk, few goods from the outside that the Japanese needed in quantity. Japan was self-sufficient in food, and there was no international trade in food in east Asia and no ready supply to turn to in the event of need. The trade arguments, whether special pleading in the nineteenth century to justify western intervention or academic ones in more recent times influenced by the assumed benefits of foreign trade, did – and do – not take account of the fact that an absence of foreign trade outside relative luxuries justified sakoku, or at least made it workable. Agricultural productivity rose sharply in the seventeenth century, and there was also a wide range of technological innovation.[2]

In economic terms the Japan of Tokugawa times was in its way a success tale. It was also at peace with itself (not riven by internal dissent, or by a clamour for the figurehead emperor to replace the shogun as the administrative ruler of Japan). Peace together with the political compromise in the shogunate of Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616) from 1603 meant that institutional changes were taken no further. In a sense Ieyasu did not seek to profit from his victory at Sekigahara in 1600 by an attempt to turn Japan into a more unitary state, and resistance ended on the basis that his victory would be pressed no further. The permanence of this outcome depended on external menace losing pace and on the

[1] The assumption that foreign trade altered things is evident in the statement by the justifiably highly respected T. C. Smith that 'in fact when foreign trade commenced in the 1850s, both national and town population *began* to grow rapidly, after more than a century of stagnation' (T. C. Smith, *Native sources of Japanese industrialization, 1750–1920* (Berkeley, 1988), p.36; italics mine.

[2] See K. Nagahara and K. Yamamura, 'Shaping the process of unification: technological progress in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Japan', *Journal of Japanese studies*, vol. 14, no. 1 (Winter 1988), pp.77–109.

advance of Christianity (i.e. the values of western powers) ceasing: an alliance between foreigners and trade-enriched or disaffected han would have threatened the delicate internal compromise and led to a resumption of conflict. The 1630s, the decade in which sakoku was introduced, were years of crisis, but sakoku thereafter worked for two centuries. A fear that the protracted process of transition from Ming to Ching dynasty in China might threaten stability had haunted the Japanese from the 1620s. But after the 1690s, with no Chinese threat eventuating, the eighteenth century became a remarkable, even unique, century of external security. Western ships (the handful of vessels at Nagasaki apart) were recorded only in 1771 and 1778 and again in 1792. The six western castaways who in 1704 arrived in Satsuma for long remained unique.

The question arises why, when Japan finally had to admit a foreign presence, it chose to create western-style institutions of government and more remarkably of justice. Japan's fears in the 1860s (allowance made for changed external circumstances) were similar to those which in the 1630s had justified the introduction of sakoku. Japanese views of the outside world were realistic. In the early seventeenth century, foreigners were weak and divided even if their warships were large and bristled with cannon (Portuguese, Dutch, English and Spanish all engaged in wars with one another at one time or other); commercial interest also shifted south to India and the equatorial region; Japanese silver ceased to be abundant after mid-century. Two centuries later, when the focus of western attention had shifted northwards from India to China, the maritime powers, though rivals, were not at war with one another. France and England were allied in war against China in the late 1850s and they worked together in 1864 when the ships of four western countries in concert pounded the batteries on the Choshu shores of the strait of Shimonoseki. In other words the price of attempting to preserve sakoku, as the many warships in the north Pacific and the example of China showed, was a war which Japan could not win.

Through the limited channels left open by sakoku, Japan had never disregarded the west. Conversancy with Portuguese and then with Dutch as the successive lingua franca of Europeans in Asia existed among a small corps of linguistically competent officials. When Hirado was closed in 1641 and the Dutch transferred to Deshima, the artificial island in Nagasaki bay, the interpreters not only moved but, from the status of private employees of the Dutch, became direct employees of the shogunate. While the famous *fūsetsugaki* – reports which from 1644 on the arrival of vessels the Dutch were required to make on events in the outside world and which were translated into Japanese by the interpreters for transmission to the shogunate in Edo – were political, modest steps in privately translating medical and technical texts began a decade later. Gradually awareness of the west spread from the indispensable interpreters in Nagasaki into professional circles (medical doctors and astronomers) around the shogunal court in Edo. From the 1780s, when fear of the western threat for the first time since the 1640s recurred, Japan began wide-ranging though limited political study of the west. The famous *uchi harai* policy (firing on and expelling foreign vessels), though formulated as a concept in 1793, became applicable by decree only in 1807 and was at that stage confined to Russian vessels. It was extended to all European vessels from 1825, and when it was seen that it could prove provocative, it was amended in 1842 to admit of succour to the crews of vessels in distress, and a proposal in 1848 to restore it was rejected. After 1780, isolated country though Japan was, there was an evolution of study of the outside world and a constantly changing framework for foreign policy. This awareness of the outside world was accompanied by a gradual creation, starting when Matsudaira Sadanobu (1758–1829) was senior councillor or prime minister (1787–93), of an administrative competence to cope with foreign challenges. *Rangaku* (Dutch or western studies) also had to be reorganised, to become not a somewhat maverick form of knowledge or indulgence pursued by the interpreters after hours, so to speak, and by a few highly opinionated individuals, but a continuous process serving administrative purposes. The result was that Japan had some elements of strengthened administration for foreign affairs by the 1850s, a highly competent knowledge of Dutch (and even some knowledge of other languages), and a practical if incomplete understanding of the west.

When the real challenge came in 1853 and 1854 from the largest groups of warships ever seen off its coasts, Japan was surprisingly capable of dealing with it. In 1853–4 concessions were kept to a minimum and from 1857–8 Japan not only in realistic mode made concessions but in tortuous negotiations succeeded in dragging out over a period of ten years their full application. If concessions became an issue in 1857–8, opinion divided on the extent of concession necessary, and, if concession seemed too much, on the ability of Japan to resist. While no one wanted outsiders, a degree of consensus was established by acceptance of the argument that the unwanted treaties would buy time and, when renegotiation became possible under treaty terms in 1872, it would take place from a position of strength: foreigners could then be confined to a few Nagasaki-style enclaves in isolated centres. Remarkably, from the outset individuals from different generations, whether Yoshida Shōin (1830–59), a young and relatively lowly samurai in Choshu, or Tokugawa Nariaki (1800–60), a powerful daimyo from a collateral branch of the shogunal family, had an urge to study the foreigner on his own ground. The systematisation of this urge was a series of missions to the west from 1860 to 1871: they gradually made the Japanese aware that the west was too powerful to admit of the radical renegotiation that in 1858 or in the early 1860s had seemed attainable, and for some optimists or bold spirits sooner rather than later. Hence the concept of radical undoing of the treaties was replaced by a limited and realistic one of bringing to an end the humiliating concession of extraterritorial sovereignty wrung from a defenceless Japan in 1858. The prospect of achieving this lay in creating new institutions reassuringly like western ones and under which westerner residents would feel safe rather than in diplomatic negotiation itself.

Concern with economic development has dominated western writing on Japan. Many, perhaps most, undergraduate courses and many text-books concentrate on the century after 1868 and primarily on reasons for Japan's industrialisation. Early post-1945 study of Japan rested on the assumption that Japan's development after 1868 could be explained by a modernisation process, an approach made fashionable in the 1950s by new theories of development intended to make impossible a recurrence of the depression of the 1930s and to quicken diffusion of the benefits of growth to less developed countries. Walt Rostow's *Stages of economic growth* picked Japan out as the sole case of an allegedly less developed country which had attained take-off. The interest in Japan's success was in no small measure inspired by the Cold War, and by the fact that India had modelled its development plans on the Soviet and centrally planned model. Hence as a model based on private enterprise principles or at least on politically more orthodox principles and of proven success, Japan was seen as an alternative to the new and ideologically suspect Indian model.

If democracy was to be successful in the defeated and occupied Japan of 1945, indigenous traditions which would suggest that democracy rested not simply on values imposed by an occupation power but on domestic traditions of dissent had to be discovered, even manufactured (ironically Marxist and non-Marxist historians agreed on this). John Hall, doyen of post-war American historians of Japan, chose to make Tanuma Okitsugu (1719–88), prime minister 1772–86, the subject of his first monograph, and to cast him in the role of moderniser. Tanuma fell in 1786, and the *uchi harai* policy, at least in its first and mitigated form, was broached or threatened in a document handed to the Russians in 1793. Hence, quite apart from the urge that also existed to find dissident individuals in Japanese history and to turn *ikki* (outbursts of unrest) into a form of political protest, this interpretation of Tanuma as a modernising politician displaying readiness to modify sakoku and sympathy for the opening of trade, offered the basis of an indigenous tradition even at a political level which could be appealed to. More than forty years after the appearance of Hall's book a re-echo of the same outlook recurs in the final work by Marius Jansen, a close collaborator of Hall and a man deeply sympathetic to modern Japan.[3]

In holding out Japan as a persuasive model for less developed countries queuing up in the 1950s like aircraft on tarmac for take-off, the assumption was that Japan itself had been a backward country. Yet Japan was not backward in the 1850s. Its food output was very high not only by Asian standards of the 1850s but of the 1950s, and on orthodox principles of political economy, it already had the food surplus necessary in theoretical terms to finance economic development, an elaborate trade network and strong industrial and craft traditions. In any event, industrialisation itself was not a central feature of early policy after 1868. Exports were desirable more as a means of paying for imports than as an end in themselves. If unfortunate in having to open its markets from 1859, a crisis in silk in Europe and, fortuitously, the growth of markets in the United States created outlets for tea and silk which a few years previously, even if the will to trade had been there, would not have existed. As a result, the costs of paying for the import content of re-equipping the country on new lines proved much easier than observers, Japanese or foreign in the 1860s, had foreseen. As it was, the process of change proved painful in the 1880s when a policy of deflation had to be pursued and public investment was pruned.

The government, inheriting at the outset the inelastic revenue structure of the shogunate and han (the subordinate political units, some of them semi-independent), lacked the resources to finance widespread change, and infrastructure necessarily took precedence over industrialisation. Given these constraints and competing claims on resources, Japan's army of early Meiji times was a small one, smaller than its population warranted, and defence of the vulnerable northern territories was token. What was significant was simply that the country which in the past had either no army, or, in fragmented fashion, several or many armies, depending on how one counted its slight military strength, now had a sole and national army. Militaristic values did not run deep in early Meiji society. Bushido, the code of the warrior, as it is understood in the twentieth century was an artificial construct first published in Philadelphia in 1899 in very changed circumstances by a pacifist Nitobe Inazō (1862–1933) and, in 1933, by a militarist Hiraizumi Kiyoshi (1895–1984).[4] Its diverse origins and at such key points in Japan's military involvement with

[3] M. B. Jansen, *The making of modern Japan* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000), p.244. He had already repeated the view in *CHJ*, vol. 5, M. B. Jansen (ed.), *The nineteenth century* (Cambridge, 1989), pp.6, 8, 51, 60, 87–8.

[4] See chapter 8, pp.265–71.

the outside world as 1899 and 1933 reflected its ersatz qualities. External events, not internal circumstances, shaped Japanese foreign policy, whether sakoku in the 1630s, its forced abandonment in the 1850s, or the vigorous role which Japan took, with Korea the main background factor, in its successive confrontations with China (1894–5) and Russia (1904–5). China and the Pacific were to determine Japan's future. Japan's efforts to establish a foothold, economic and territorial, on mainland Asia, to match both Russian encroachment in Manchuria and the growing western stake in a debilitated China, created new tensions. In particular they aroused the distrust of the United States which had its own ambitions in both Asia and the Pacific. Its sense of insecurity led Japan to assume onerous burdens in both China and the Pacific. Competing for scarce resources, both army and navy were in conflict, and rivalry reflected an unresolved problem of allocating resources to cope with challenges in the world's largest country (China) and largest ocean (the Pacific). Even after Japanese victory over Russia in 1905, the fear of Russia, in the wake of the collapse of czarist Russia in 1917, turning into dread of its Soviet and revolutionary successor, accounted for Japan's policies in Siberia (1918–22) and throughout the inter-war period in Manchuria and China. The interests of the United States were to prove even more deadly for Japan. A race by maritime countries to occupy the scattered islands of the north Pacific, beginning in the 1850s, had already added to Japan's insecurity. With the acquisition by the United States in the 1890s of external territories, the Philippines and Hawaii, the possibility of a future conflict between the two countries began to emerge.

Japan in its post-1600 history had been variously helped and handicapped by its institutions or lack of them. The Japan of 1600, at the end of a long period of civil war, was in essence a political compromise, a balance between on the one hand the authority of the shogun or ruler of Japan in foreign policy and on the other the independence in their territories or han of local rulers (daimyo). This was certainly the case for the *tozama* or han which before 1600 were effectively independent, variously supportive, hostile or neutral, and thus contrasting with *fudai* daimyo, mere camp followers, already holding daimyo status or soon to be rewarded with it. Above all there was no central taxation. The delicate nature of the compromise has been underestimated in modern terminology: the term feudal, an ambiguous term often applied to the country, has had to be refined to one of centralised feudalism. This, of course, creates a further problem as Japan demonstrably was not centralised. The term *bakuhan taisei* (bakufu-han system) – a modern creation in Japanese historiography – suggests that the government of Japan was more systematic than it was.

In particular the notion of a system of between 260 and 280 han is misleading; many han were not meaningful institutions in any sense, some so small as to be marginal economically, socially and administratively. The power of the shogun rested on the support of one to two dozen small to middle-sized han, and its political limitations were created by the need not to alienate the large *tozama* han of the south and west. The repeated use of the term bakufu in modern historiography, Japanese and foreign alike, to denote the shogun's government or the action by his officials, suggests a greater freedom of action, a larger number of policy-making officials and a greater capacity for decision making than was the case. There is an irony in the use of the term bakufu at all as it was an archaism popularised in the 1860s by its opponents from the *tozama* as a term of abuse of the shogun's government. A small number of decision-making figures (*fudai* daimyo) apart, there were few functionaries or civil servants to define or execute policy. Except in Nagasaki, Japan's centre of foreign contact, there was nothing akin to government ministries, and in Edo, below *ō-metsuke*, *metsuke*, *kanjō bugyō* and *daikan*, there were few officials with a training to execute the routine tasks of policy administration.

Three circumstances, sakoku, fiscal weakness and internal political compromise, went together. However, if serious challenges to sakoku, such as the sort of external crisis that threatened in the 1630s, were to persist over the years, internal political compromise in facing them could become unworkable. Would the Japanese response to external events – a foreign threat which became progressively more alarming in the middle decades of the nineteenth century – be determined by the shogun or by the han; would the benefits of trade – and trade became an issue when the opening to foreigners of Osaka, long the centre of domestic trade, was in prospect – go to the shogun or to the han? When the shogunate collapsed in 1867–8 Japan had no constitution (apart from a fiction that the shadowy figure of the emperor conferred legitimacy on the leaders of the revolt as it had on the Tokugawa dynasty itself from 1603). From 1868 to 1889 Japan was governed by the representatives of two to four former han, a situation made possible only by use of imperial authority for the legitimisation of the new regime, moderation in demands by Japan's new ad hoc rulers, and grudging acceptance of others (a situation made easier by the knowledge that Japan faced an external challenge). It was a rerun of some of the circumstances of the early 1600s.

Under a parliamentary system created by the constitution of 1889, insecurity, caused by Russian ambitions on land and growing foreign encroachment in Korea, could be responded to more decisively as a result of the ability to raise money by taxation. The risks, apart from the immediate uncertainty over prospects of victory or defeat in the field, were from a long-term perspective finite as long as the armed forces were small, and the commanders were the first generation of political generals who saw action as subordinated to politics. However, what was to happen when the army became permanently larger and the first generation of generals as they aged or died were replaced by new officers? The risks were compounded by the keenness of the first generation of politicians to minimise outside political interference in administration. In surrendering their authority under the constitution of 1889, they kept as much power as possible in their hands: cabinets were nominated by the emperor, not dependent on approval by the two houses. That ensured at the outset that cabinets consisted of *ex officio* members, and appointment of army and navy officers as heads of the war ministries kept the control of the armed forces safely beyond the control of parliament. Ironically, the constitutional Japan of 1889 was politically weaker than the less legitimate Japan of the preceding two decades. Its army was potentially a semi-independent force; its parliament fractious (predictably hostile to extra taxation) but equally unable to determine policy. Given the vagueness of the constitution, it soon led to the informal emergence of the *genrō*, a small elite of retired senior politicians, who advised the emperor on major issues (notably the nomination of prime ministers) and whom prime ministers in turn were also expected to consult. It was in effect an attempt by the old guard to ensure continuity, one which inevitably broke down in time. Cabinet government, which became true parliamentary government in 1918 (when a majority of cabinet members were parliamentarians), was stable in the 1920s (though ominously the army had sought to plough an independent furrow in Siberia). An unstable China and Soviet strength in Siberia threw things out of balance in the 1930s. Divides between interest groups, divides within factions and even within the foreign ministry itself, traditionally the most open, pointed to an alarming situation. Hence policy drifted dangerously: intervention in China was incoherently planned, the risks were not clearly appreciated. The complacency of politicians, strident militarism in and beyond the armed forces, and ambivalence in public opinion which resented – in the tradition of all that transpired from 1853 – foreign pressure on Japan, can be seen with hindsight to have prepared Japan's nemesis. At the time, foreign diplomats remarked that it was hard or even impossible to meet anyone who really had authority over events.

A question which is unanswerable is the precise assessment of the benefit conferred by sakoku or the price paid for it. Sakoku gave Japan two and a half centuries of peace and a remarkable freedom from external complications. Japan's economic vitality was powerful; intellectually, thought had been free to the point of anarchy (whatever the contrary image painted in much modern literature); expansive internal trade meant that its tea and silk, inadequate in the seventeenth century, were able to command new markets when unexpectedly such markets appeared after 1860. Did sakoku enable Japan to relate better to the outside world after 1868, or had isolation left the country poorly equipped to cope with challenges? Or if put a different way, had Japan engaged more and earlier with the west, would it have lost out as all other Asian countries who had truck with the west did, or would it have become more unitary, and hence have combined preservation of its distinctive character with a not necessarily entirely harmonious but none the less constructive *modus vivendi* with the west? The balance sheet is complex. Japan's policy of sakoku was itself in its time successful. Equally, the realism of its policies in the 1850s and 1860s was striking, and, despite the swirling complexities of China in subsequent decades, abroad Japan retained much respect to the end of the first decade of the new century (Japanese intrusion in Korea as a bulwark against Russian advance was welcomed by the other powers). On the other hand, misjudgements accumulated in the 1910s and more alarmingly in the 1930s. Foreign attitudes to Japan reflected the changes. An admiration, somewhat patronising but also in many ways unqualified for Japan, was replaced by growing dislike and by diplomatic hostility. A final judgement on this equation would also require detailed scrutiny of western intentions and behaviour. Western presence in Asia, its proselytising Christianity, its aggressions, its rampant colonial expansion of the nineteenth century, the rivalries among western powers themselves, these are as much part of the equation as Japan and its policy. They are in a sense the catalyst of all that happened in Japan and in east Asia.

The argument of this book in a nutshell is that the Japanese policymakers were rational and for its time sakoku policy was equally rational; the economy was highly developed; and the obsession by western writers for explaining why and how Japan could rival the west is not only patronising but, as far as its economic content is concerned, directed to a non-problem created by reluctance to accept that an eastern country, or at least one eastern country, when it willed it, could apparently effortlessly equal the west. The one problem was that at the outset of its opening Japan had no exports and fortuitous circumstances created the outlets for tea and silk. The economic uncertainties of the 1860s are greatly minimised in modern accounts because foreign trade itself is uncritically seen as not simply a long-term aid to development but an immediate and automatic answer to the international payment needs created by the opening of the country.

The economic resilience as well as the rationale of its institutions, both old and new, has to be a central concern of any study of Japan. The