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The Law of Inequivalent Exchange: The British East India Company in Japan, 1600-1625

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Abstract: The British East India Company’s business ventures in Tokugawa Japan from 1600-1625 were characterized by an attitude of cold calculation, treating the country as purely a means to an end. By exploiting the Japanese climate in order to sell wool and woolen broadcloth and eagerly seeking out Japanese natural resources like silver, the British East India Company sought to ingrain itself into the fledgling Japanese market to such a degree that the economy would become destabilized, giving the British the perfect chance to pounce upon the country and take over during the disarray. However, this ultimately did not occur because Great Britain had easier prospects to the West in the New World, as North America lacked a large, centralized government like the shogunate, as well as the intrusive meddling of the Dutch East India Company. Moreover, this attitude of callous disregard for the culture of Japan led to the technological and cultural exchange between Great Britain and Japan during this period to be one-sided. Though it did not occur during the early seventeenth century with Japan, this idea of a slow and economic form of colonialism can be seen in the example of Great Britain in India and China during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Keywords: British East India Company, Tokugawa Japan, Technological Exchange, Cultural Exchange, Economic Colonialism
"I shewed unto him the name of our country [England], and that our land... desired friendship with all kings and potentates in way of marchandize, having in our land diverse commodities, which these lands had not, and to buy such marchandizes in this land, which our country has not.”¹ The words of William Adams (1564-1620), the first Englishman in Japan, belie the cause of Great Britain in Japan at the turn of the seventeenth century. This quote leaves an impression upon the reader that Great Britain desired trade with Japan ardently and desired to entice Japan into wanting the same. While the merchants of Great Britain saw Japan as a land of economic opportunity, the viewpoint of the Tokugawa government that ruled Japan is initially less clear. However, it is evident from the actions of the shogun in appointing William Adams to be his advisor on foreign affairs, as well as in allowing the building of an English factory in Hirado, that the shogunate hoped to receive from the British trading vessels forms of technological advancement and general trade. The Tokugawa government’s reactions towards the ideas of cultural exchange that go along with these technological exchanges point to a more accepting position than that of the British to entertain this cultural conversation, as they accepted William Adams, an Englishman, into their society, while England would soon pull out of Japan entirely, cutting them out of the British world as a whole. The British were unwilling to fight to maintain their hold within Japan. I contend that the technological and cultural exchange between Great Britain and the Tokugawa government of Japan during the early years of the seventeenth

century is characterized by the British desire to use the Japanese market as a means to make money, and that this focus on the economics instead of the material culture led to a one-sided aspect of this exchange. While the British were happy to accept Japanese materials, they exhibited a disrespect for Japanese society by treating its market as simply a means to an end. The building of a British trading facility in Hirado, the accommodation of the British by the Japanese, and the reception of William Adams by Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616) all point to the exchange between Great Britain and the Tokugawa government being largely one-sided, with the Japanese working to suit British needs. By presenting a new perspective on Anglo-Japanese trade in the early seventeenth century as a form of slow and early colonialism that is ultimately put to a halt, this paper engages with other scholarly works regarding the history of Anglo-Japanese relations during the early years of the Tokugawa shogunate. By characterizing Anglo-Japanese trade in these years as oriented towards economic gain rather than cross-cultural appreciation, this paper adds to the current understanding of what the British East India Company was doing in Japan from 1600 to 1625, as well as to the understanding of the reasons behind their reasoning behind leaving the Japanese market.

It was not for the food that Captain John Saris (1580-1643) sailed to Japan, nor for the arts, nor the views of Mount Fuji. It was for coin, for merchandise, and most importantly, to bring a gift. An Englishman, Saris was the captain and chief merchant of *The Clove*, an English ship which traveled to Japan by the order of King James VI and I\(^2\) for the express purpose of establishing trade relations with Japan in the hopes of building a “factory,” which was to say, an

\(^2\) King James was the sixth of his name in the Kingdom of Scotland, but the first of his name in the Kingdoms of England and Ireland, and thus was dubbed King James VI and I.
English trading hub. Saris himself was chosen for this mission specifically for his expertise in Asia, having been head of the English trading hub in Java for several years a decade prior. To further the aim of the mission, the captain was instructed to present to the shogun a rare gift from the King of Great Britain himself. In his official interaction in 1613 with the shogun, Tokugawa Hidetada (1581-1632), and his father Tokugawa Ieyasu, Saris gave Ieyasu a most precious gift: the technological marvel of “1 prospectiue Glasce cast in Siluer Gilte,” which is to say, a telescope fit for a king.³ And increase prospects that prospective glass did, as Ieyasu, in a letter to King James copied into Saris’ journal, complimented the English on their navigational skills and their material goods, and then promptly issued a deal under which English ships were welcome to Japanese ports, giving free license for all Englishmen “for ever safelye to come into anye our portes or Empire of Japan with there shippes and marchandies.”⁴ Not only is this gift an example of the technological feats that Ieyasu was interested in obtaining, but it also inspired a precedent. By accepting this gift and implicitly requesting more English goods come into his nation with this new deal, Ieyasu bound Japan into the role of recipient of technological exchange. In that same letter that compliments the English, Ieyasu asserted that he and King James are equals in station, but his words did not match his seeming desire to acquire new technology. This is

³ John Saris, The Voyage of John Saris to Japan, 1613. Edited by Ernest Satow (London: Hakluyt Society, 1900), 113. Though Ieyasu had retired from the office of shogun at that point, he was still the recipient of Saris’ gift because he retained power over the shogunate in all but name.

⁴ Saris, Voyage, 137 and 138.
exactly as King James VI and I desired, for it was his wish for the new telescope bauble to entice Ieyasu into forming a trade partnership with the British East India Company.

Thanks to this marvel of technology and the promise of more with accompanying trade, Saris’ request to build a trading post in Hirado was accepted, with the shogun himself giving express permission for its construction. It was there that the British East India Company would begin their work in trying to use the Japanese market to their advantage. Richard Cocks (1566-1624), head of the trading post in Hirado, would remark to a friend that “the emperor [the shogun] offered to give the English anything that might be for the benefit of their nation,” which goes to show how accommodating the Tokugawa shogunate was for the British. In this level of accommodation is an implicit desire for English goods and trade, and by desiring English goods and trade, the Tokugawa shogunate imposed upon itself the shackles of a seemingly needful nature; by the law of supply and demand, the Tokugawa shogunate was at a disadvantage. The mammonistic British East India Company could take full advantage of their new position in Hirado by selling to Japanese markets that which they had no access to before, and by then taking in that which the British East India Company deeply desired. Dr. Timon Screech, professor of art history and the history of the Edo period at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies in Kyoto, in his book *The Shogun's Silver Telescope and the Cargo of the New Year's Gift: God, Art and Money in the English Quest for Japan, 1600-25* details the precise

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desires of the British East India Company in Japan. The resource that the British East India Company so desperately desired was silver, a form of currency that England historically had little way of acquiring within its own borders. But Japan was rich with it, and here was an opportunity for the British to become rich with it too. Better yet, the British had something that the Japanese would want: wool and broadcloth. A staple of the British exportation business, wool was particularly valued in Japan because of the fact that Japan, at the time, had no sheep. Additionally, Japan was a terrific candidate for the British East India Company to trade woolen broadcloth with because its climate necessitated warm clothing during parts of the year. In comparison to balmy Java or sweltering India, Japan’s cold winters meant that its residents would want warm wool to keep themselves protected from the elements. So the British East India Company proceeded with this plan to sell wool and broadcloth of wool in order to gain silver. When one considers the fact the any manufactured good from the Japanese market would be an example of material culture, the hesitancy of the British East India Company to engage in the trade of said material culture and instead focusing on the silver currency itself becomes quite clear for what it is: The British did not care about Japanese culture at all. Japan was nothing but a resource, a silver mine, a piggy bank to be shaken out.


8 Screech, *Shogun’s Silver Telescope*, 34.
In draining Japan of its silver and exploiting its climate to sell more wool, the British East India Company showed a lack of respect for the land of Japan, and by extension, a lack of respect for the culture and society that they traded with. Richard Cocks especially seemed derogatory toward the Japanese, believing that they were so foolish that they were “so addicted to silks that they do not enter into consideration of the benefit of wearing cloth.”\(^9\) However, respect was in fact delivered from the Japanese end towards the British through cordially written letters sent from Tokugawa Ieyasu to the King of England, and, more pointedly, towards the singular British character of William Adams. For a period of almost thirteen years, Adams was the only Englishman in Japan, and as a result, maintained an almost celebrity status. Adams received much favor from the shogun, showing that the Tokugawa shogunate by extension had an interest in the global world as presented by the information they could gather from Adams. While Adams himself would go on to assimilate exceedingly well into Japanese society, being granted a domain and even a new Japanese name, his personal interest and appreciation for the culture of the Japanese elite that he was exposed to while serving as the foreign advisor to the shogun does not translate to the British as a whole appreciating the culture of Japan as a whole. It should instead be taken as proof of how willing and even excited to share Japanese culture the shogun was. In an unprecedented show of gratitude for providing him with such insight into the

workings of the European world, Ieyasu would make Adams one of the first non-Japanese samurai, and even allegedly declared Adams dead so that he could adopt his new Japanese name, Miura Anjin. Not only this, but he also sent to King James VI and I a thank you gift for the telescope that he had received, a gift which better portrayed its country of origin than the silver telescope did of Great Britain.

Tokugawa Ieyasu gifted to King James VI and I two sets of armor, one of which is pictured here. This gift was far more meaningful, culturally speaking, than a gift of a silver prospective glass, for while a prospective glass was a technological marvel that King James believed could wow the shogun into being willing to further trade with the British, it was not a
touchstone of British culture or society. In fact, the invention of the prospective glass had only been shown to King James in 1609, naught but a few years prior to Saris’ gift-giving voyage. Armor, on the other hand, was a functional yet decorative part of the life of a samurai in the Warring States period of Japan (1467-1603). Though by establishing a shogunate under his name, Tokugawa Ieyasu ushered Japan into a new era, the Tokugawa or Edo period (1603-1867), he maintained the mindset required of him during the Warring States period, and as such, sent gifts that were cultural touchstones of this fundamentally important period in his and his country’s life as opposed to sending any new trinket.

The comparison of these gifts shows a markedly different understanding of and intent behind gift-giving as it pertains to cross-cultural exchange. King James sent a flashy gift with the empty panache of a charlatan, for the telescope was a new bauble to him, but Tokugawa Ieyasu sent back a gift with a depth of meaning, showing off the military might, aesthetic taste, and legacy of his government. In sending a trinket, King James was almost talking down to Ieyasu. Like jingling keys in front of a baby, he expected to garner an amazed response, and with that response, open arms in welcome to English trade. Though it could be read as condescending, Ieyasu does enjoy the gift. He chooses to make this known not only with an invitation for all

\[10\] The end date for the Warring States period is debated. This date denotes the year in which the Tokugawa Ieyasu founded the Tokugawa shogunate, though it could be argued that the period did not end until Ieyasu assured his rule by laying siege to Osaka Castle in 1615 and eliminating any resistance to his rule from the Toyotomi clan.

\[11\] The Edo period was named such after the capital city of Japan under the Tokugawa shogunate, Edo.
English merchants to find trade and safe harbor at his ports, but with a far more thoughtful reciprocal gift as well.

More than this, a comparison of the nature of the gifts in the present day is useful. The gifts to King James are extant, held within the museum of the Tower of London. The silver-gilt prospective glass fit for a king, though, has been lost to time. This even further speaks of the inequality in this gift exchange. Tokugawa Ieyasu gifted to King James a timeless piece of art, to be treasured for centuries to come. King James gave Tokugawa Ieyasu the latest fad, a novelty knick-knack that would become passé and obsolete soon after it was given. England continually got more than it gave throughout the course of its interactions with Japan in the early seventeenth century. In respect, in trade, and in gifts, England snubbed Japan its equal share and instead chose to exploit the relationship.

To gain a fuller picture of British economic exploitation in East Asia, it is important to consider other parts of the region in which the British East India Company conducted such ventures. For example, in India and China, the British East India Company participated in a growing amount of trade throughout the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which is detailed in the article “From Cross-Cultural Credit to Colonial Debt: British Expansion in Madras and Canton, 1750-1800" by Jessica Hanser, associate professor of history at the University of British Columbia. More specifically, the British East India Company introduced itself into foreign markets via the trading of goods and the offering of loans. Once firmly established, it began using any means available to it, be they monetary or military, by which it could extort the country and run it dry of its capital, wrecking havoc on its economy. The British formed a network of creditors which acted in effect to destabilize the Indian and Chinese economies until, in the case of Madras, the Indians faulted on their loans, resulting in a hostile
takeover by the British East India Company in 1801. When their business was not being satisfied, the British responded with military violence, and the threat of the same is true in Canton. When enough credit was left unpaid in Canton in 1780, British brokers appealed to Admiral Edward Hughes to threaten the Chinese government as a representative of the King of Great Britain in what Hanser describes as an “early foray into gunboat diplomacy.”

We see repeated instance of trade being established within East Asia with the supposed intention of mutually beneficial cross-cultural exchange of money, technology, or culture, but we ultimately find that in India and China in the early 1800s, the British bullied their way into taking advantage of this exchange, becoming the sole beneficiary. This can be thought of as a slower form of colonialism, one led not by the seizure of land, but led by the integrating of oneself into a country’s economy to such a degree as to cause financial crises, then stepping in with the military to take what the colonizer, in this case Great Britain, wants. “Madras and Canton, can be used to show how voluntary and (initially) mutually beneficial financial transactions and credit relationships could morph into something different, something imperial: cross-cultural credit could quickly become colonial debt.” The application of this line of thinking towards the British actions in Japan would be of note, as it speaks to a larger threat to the newly emerging Japanese economic market that is not described in the primary sources that have been examined throughout this paper. A newly established and unstable market, Japan had only been recently

13 Hanser, “Cross-Cultural Credit”, 104.
14 Hanser, “Cross-Cultural Credit”, 90.
united into a single functioning country with a legitimate and stable power as its head in the year 1603 by the shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu. It had previously been experiencing a constant state of civil war for almost two centuries, during which Japan was only “united” under a figurehead emperor, with the position of emperor holding no real power since the fourteenth century. Shifting from a collection of local economies into one larger national market was a process, and the inclusion of a foreign power into that market was a dangerous addition. To approach the new market at such a tender time would have been the perfect opportunity for the British to ingrain themselves into the Japanese economy to the degree that it would become destabilized. Thus, it is within reason to believe that British interaction with Japan was part of a larger British plan to colonize it through economic destabilization.

It is, however, of note to distinguish the differences in historical moments between the British East India Company’s ventures in Tokugawa Japan versus their ventures in late eighteenth to early nineteenth century India and China. Moreover, such differences in context and historical moment elucidate the difference in outcome of these British expeditions, for while the British continued to eventually occupy and own all of India until 1947, as well as have heavy influence in China for the remainder of the nineteenth century with the Macartney Expedition and the Opium Wars, the British East India Company ultimately left Japan freely and of its own volition by 1625. It is worthy of taking into account that at the time of their interaction with Japan, Great Britain had not yet experienced the American Revolution. In fact, they had only just begun their colonization of North America. In the early seventeenth century, the British had two opportunities for expansion: the East, with a rival of the Dutch East India Company in the same area and a local authority that was establishing its own rule over Japan by this time, or the West, where there were only unorganized French fur-trappers and no centralized native government.
The choice was obvious. The British had not yet felt the bitter sting of being ousted by their colonies, and as such, were willing to give up on their endeavors in Japan. Having never felt the embarrassment of fighting to maintain a colony and coming to lose that war and the colony itself, the British had not yet developed so tight a grip on their international ventures that they did not feel they could cut their losses in Japan and instead focus their time on trade with the American colonies.

Additionally, the responses of the different countries set them apart and mark them as separate historical moments. The response by the shogun to the gift of a telescope and the request of a trading hub was by no means offensive. Amenable in his language, affable in his agreeableness to allow the establishment of an English factory, and even so reciprocal as to send gifts back to King James, Ieyasu showed himself to understand the gravity of receiving a gift from another sovereign ruler. Meanwhile in China, the response of the Qing emperor, Qianlong, to the Macartney Embassy was quite different. The Macartney Embassy was a similar mission to that of Saris in Japan, in which George Macartney, first Earl Macartney (1737-1806) was sent by King George III of England (1738-1820) to China to give a gift to the emperor and request a port to trade from, but it had wildly different results. In a series of edicts, Qianlong belittled the country of England, claiming that it was a “barbarian land” that had “yearned for the blessings of [Chinese] civilization,” mocked the king of England by conferring to him “valuable gifts in excess of the number usually bestowed [emphasis added] on such occasions,” and denied the English any trading hubs, declaring that “every inch of the territory of our Empire is marked on the map and the strictest vigilance is exercised over it all; even tiny islets and far-lying
sandbanks...” To snub his nose at the King of England and intentionally give an excessive number of gifts was a declaration that he was better than King George III, wealthier and more generous. His magnanimous pseudo-generosity, as well as the obviously offensive term of “barbarian land” and the denial of even the consideration of providing a trading port to the British East India Company, was a blow. This would not stand with the British, and their subsequent drug-peddling of opium into China through India and the resulting Opium Wars are a testament to that fact. The British fought their way into Chinese policy, economic and domestic, and as such had hearty reservations against letting go of said position of power. In contrast, in Japan the British kindly requested ports and were given them freely, so the vindictive edge of feeling the need to fight for that which they had already fought for was not present.

In conclusion, in allowing the British to establish a trading post in Hirado, the Tokugawa shogunate agreed to receive technological advances such as the telescope and woolen broadcloth, as well as effectively debase themselves to be the lesser in this relationship between two international powers. In choosing to accommodate the British, the shogunate exacerbated this problem, to the degree that disrespect from the British in the form of seeing Japan as purely a business venture and not as another international power became more common. As opposed to disrespecting the British in turn, the shogunate instead treated them cordially and celebrated the information the Englishman William Adams shared with it regarding foreign countries, showing its willingness to engage in cultural exchange. It even returned the flashy gift of a telescope with

a gift embedded with meaning, two sets of samurai armor. The enervating strategies of the British in Japan can be explained by looking at their strategies in other parts of the world like India and China and seeing how they performed a form of slow-motion colonialism by destabilizing local economies and swooping in to take over during the fallout. Finally, the manner in which the British East India Company left Japan instead of proceeding with their colonialism as in the case of Madras and China can be explained by their North American investments, as well as the differences between the historical moments of these separate colonization attempts.
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