

# Oracle: The History Journal of Boston College

---

Volume VII | Issue I

Article 6

---

## **Kirishitan and Teppo: When Japan Encounters with Westerners**

Zicheng Ying

*Boston College, yingzi@bc.edu*

# KIRISHITAN AND TEPPU: WHEN JAPAN ENCOUNTERS WITH WESTERNERS

ZICHENG YING\*

**Abstract:** This paper introduces the first period of European-Japanese interaction, starting from 1549, when Francis Xavier S.J. landed in Kagoshima, to the early 17th Century as the Tokugawa government completely banned Christianity and restrained the rights of foreigners. This paper is primarily based on sources from the European point of view, with the accounts, statistics, and letters documented by the missionaries and businessmen. It analyzes the grounds for this encounter and how both Europeans and Japanese perceived and reacted to each other. Another primary focus of the paper is on the European impression of Japan in terms of bringing the exotic yet vastly influential Christianity and new technology. Finally, the downfall of European influence is a captivating topic that involved a series of political incidents where among the Europeans; the long-lasting conflict between Jesuits and Franciscans displeased Toyotomi Hideyoshi and the reunification of Japan after centuries also prompted Japanese rulers to be vigilant against foreigners. Some of the underexplored topics, such as population trades commanded by European traders, are also discussed in this paper.

## Introduction:

Due to its particular geographical location, Japan, as a country and region, was pretty much obscure from the European parts of the world until the modern era when Matthew Perry finally opened the Japanese border through his black ships. As an island country with a size comparable to England, everything in Japan remained quite monolithic, with its ethnicity being claimed as primarily based on the Yamato and Ainu origins. These geopolitical factors enabled Japan to be a relatively independent country for thousands of years, being an active receiver of cultural differences from other countries like Korea and China instead of suffering from invasion. Yet everything above is limited up until the pre-modern period when Japanese people

---

<sup>1</sup> Zicheng Ying is a junior at Boston College from Ningbo, China, double majoring in History and Physics with a minor in Asian Studies. Zicheng is interested in Japanese history and Ecclesiastical history in general. He works as an undergraduate research assistant for Professor Michael J. Naughton at Naughton Lab in the physics department, and as an administrative assistant at the Ricci Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History. He is also an international assistant at the Office of International Students and Scholars.

had never even thought about seeing people with blonde hair and speaking some weird languages. Following that, this paper will explore the perspectives of Japanese and European people when they first encountered each other. In a broader context, in the 16th century, Japan was able to forge relationships with European countries, principally Portugal, and benefitted from new technologies and the cultural influence of the missionaries, which propelled Japan into a new era. This period of cooperation, however, underwent a profound shift as Hideyoshi consolidated his reign and perceived the growing European influence, especially Christianity, as a potential threat to Japan's stability. Consequently, Japan's quest for unity led to the decline of interactions. Therefore, exploring such interaction and transformation is vital to understanding how Japan navigated the challenge of maintaining its independence in the changing global environment.

Medieval Japan was dull in the sense that it lacked the interaction with other countries that it had established hundreds of years earlier. The largest possible contact would be the invasion of the Yuan Dynasty when Kublai Khan issued attacks on Japan after taking over all parts of Korea and China in both 1274 and 1281. In the first attack, though the Yuan army defeated the Japanese samurai soldiers, but ended up retreating due to the lack of supplies. The second attack, much more well-known today, is when the *Kamikaze (Divine wind)* started: Yuan's army was forced to withdraw because of the great typhoon. Japan fortunately slid away from being captured by the great empire, yet the governing regime, the Kamakura Bakufu, wasn't that lucky. Since the government mobilized all the samurai and local rulers by promising to win the war and giving them land shares, the ultimate peace created significant troubles since

the government had nothing to offer as a reward. The samurai became very upset, which caused the Bakufu to be overthrown by 1333.<sup>2</sup>

The Ashikaga Bakufu, following the fall of Kamakura, needed to be in stable control of Japan. Due to constant civil wars and turmoil, the local rulers changed to Daimyo one by one, meaning they could fight each other for lands and resources without the permission of the Bakufu, and their obedience to the Bakufu was only apparent. Eventually, Bakufu's influence was limited only to Kyoto, and Japan became highly feudal during this so-called "Warring States" period.<sup>3</sup> As the name suggested, the whole era of around 200 years was characterized by constant warfare, revolts and social upheaval. However, it also opened up many opportunities that helped Japan face the Europeans. The high liquidity within the society empowered the flow of thoughts, and upheavals and wars further mobilized the samurai and caused an upgrade in their fighting tactics. On the other hand, marching into the age of discoveries, large-scale sea piracy also helped Japan gain knowledge and exploits from other countries, thus creating an environment suitable for welcoming the arrival of Europeans later on.

Conversely, the Europeans during that era were sternly interested in discovering foreign lands, equipped with their shipbuilding and sailing technologies, and competing among several countries. Spain, Portugal, England, and France were the countries responsible for seeking hidden lands and every possible opportunity for exploration. Asia became their final destiny of colonization after Africa and the Americas. Still, owing to the distance, European colonization in Asia started relatively slow compared to their works in the Americas. Similarly, the goal of their explorations in Asia was not limited to colonization but included spreading the faith and trading.

---

<sup>2</sup> Lyong, Choi, and Sang, Hun Yi, *Forced Self-Reliance: The Kamakura Bakufu Defense against the Mongol Invasion of Japan*. *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 202, 52.

<sup>3</sup> Hane, M. *Premodern Japan: A Historical Survey* (2nd ed.), Routledge, 2015, 128.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429494819>.

However, Japan remained entirely unknown to Westerners, except from the documentation of Marco Polo, where he wrote down the existence of *Zipangu* (Japan). But did people take Marco Polo's words seriously at the time, considering he was examined as a liar? Therefore, neither Japan nor Europe were aware of each other's existence nor prepared to meet each other.

### **Europeans Came to Japan, Not Colonizing**

The first encounter between Europeans and the Japanese was a total accident. In 1543, two Portuguese men went on a Chinese junk, seeking opportunities in trading around the Malacca Straits in Southeast Asia. Unexpectedly, the junk lost track because of the severe weather and finally drifted ashore on a Japanese island called Tanegashima. Even the Chinese on the cruise didn't expect this to happen, and they soon made contact with the local Japanese people.<sup>4</sup> The appearance of the two Portuguese men became a blockbuster event, and what was more legendary was their possession of firearms. The Japanese local rulers were immediately amazed by the guns and asked their artisans to make copies of them. Some artisans even came from today's Osaka to Tanegashima to learn the skill of producing or instead copying the mold of the guns. As a result, the accidental visit of the two Europeans opened up the European vision of Japan, and Japan, on the other hand, also first experienced the technological advancement of Europe.

The first coming of the two Portuguese men spread the breaking news of the existence and location of Japan back in Europe. Europeans valued trading opportunities, and their activity also received broad scrutiny with views on exoticism. They weren't welcomed in China because of the locked country policy; they resided in Japan, wishing to trade with both Japanese and

---

<sup>4</sup> Lidin, O.G, *Tanegashima - The Arrival of Europe in Japan*, (1st ed.), Routledge, 2015 <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203479575>, 22.

smugglers to China, namely the Japanese pirates (known as Wokou).<sup>5</sup> This demonstrates a general shift in policy: while the Portuguese government prioritized its colonial missions in the Americas, Africa, and the Persian Gulf, Japan and the rest of the eastern and southern part of Asia was too large and far for them to establish effective colonial government as they did elsewhere. Consequently, the government mainly occupied ports that were important in location, such as Macao and Goa, and used them as footholds for expanding their influence. The actual “colonial works,” including religion and trading, were conducted chiefly through individuals rather than organized by the country. The Nanban Trade, therefore, became extremely popular for its outstanding opportunities for great earnings.

Still, why didn't the Portuguese and other European countries try to colonize Japan, as they saw Japan as a profitable country? Europeans certainly understood the resources within Japan, and the lure of enormous gold and silver mines was apparent. However, historian Brett Walker compared the Japanese people with the Tupis of Brazil and concluded that Japan won in favorable geological and physical conditions.<sup>6</sup> Even though the Japanese and Tupis people were both considered belligerent and war-like, Japan, as a narrow but long island chain with numerous mountains, certainly deterred the Portuguese. Furthermore, it was acknowledged that the diseases European colonizers carried were already epidemic in Japan, which created no effect in eradicating the population. The Tupis weren't that fortunate: their resistance to the diseases was very little, and vast numbers of the people died because of that, providing fruitful conditions for the Portuguese colonizers. As a result, whether it was due to the purpose of helping to colonize or simply a coincidence is unknown to us, the Portuguese government did send Catholic

---

<sup>5</sup> De Sousa, Lucioitor, *Global History and New Polycentric Approaches: Europe, Asia and the Americas in a World Network System*, Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2018, 165.

<sup>6</sup> Walker, Brett L. *A Concise History of Japan*, Cambridge Concise Histories. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, 88. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511783043.007.

missionaries, which became very influential in Japan's societal context. Even if Japan remained ununited with civil rivalries happening, the Europeans still didn't choose to colonize Japan but focused on cultural penetration.

We can also tell the Portuguese and the European countries at the time didn't have a clear goal in Japan from the loosely organized missionary works. A straightforward comparison could be made between Goa and Nagasaki: Goa was captured by Portuguese colonists with the primary goal of establishing a European-like society and assimilating the local culture while remaining absolutely loyal to the Portuguese government.<sup>7</sup> Alphonse Albuquerque also attributed all of his power to the Portuguese king, saying, "Your Highness should publicly reprimand those who serve you ill in India and publicly commend those who serve you well and zealously. It is your advantage to do this because your service and your policies are advanced thereby."<sup>8</sup> The reason for the elaborate treatment of Goa was its geopolitical importance, as Goa was a standpoint of the trade route from the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea. This was one of the most profitable trading routes in the world since it carried all the spices and gems in India to Europe, and Portuguese people almost took a monopoly over this route. Meanwhile, Nagasaki, another port city that the Portuguese essentially founded, became significant only because it was in southern and western Japan, thus closer to China and other countries. However, Japan remained a relatively isolated area, and even trading with China and Korea was already impracticable; there weren't many countries left around Japan except the Philippines, which the rival Spaniards colonized. In contrast, Albuquerque could easily travel and build connections around the Indian Ocean due to good geological knowledge and the extensive routes. As a result, he documented that traveling

---

<sup>7</sup> Coutinho, Verissimo, *Goa's History of Education: A Case Study of Portuguese Colonialism*, Dissertations 1568, 1975, 116.

<sup>8</sup> Earle, T.F., and John Villiers, eds. *Albuquerque: Caesar of the East. Selected Texts by Afonso de Albuquerque and His Son*. Liverpool University Press, 1990, 139. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv16zjjbh>.

around countries such as Malacca and Pegu<sup>9</sup> was so convenient that it was almost a routine. Thus, all the trade that came to Japan was spontaneous, while the Portuguese government wasn't involved in it.

Similarly, the coming of the missionaries was more of a voluntary act than a forced mission. For instance, Francis Xavier became interested in Japan after hearing about this newly founded nation while still doing missionary work in India. Still, the mechanism of their missionary works in Japan was almost entirely different from in the Americas: as Europeans didn't colonize Japan, those missionaries kept an equal status with the Japanese people when they were in Japan, therefore creating the condition favorable of mutual understanding and learning.<sup>10</sup> The small number of missionaries in Japan also proved this point. Alessandro Valignano suggested that by 1584, the number of missionaries in Japan was no fewer than 85.<sup>11</sup> Compared with the rapidly growing population of Japanese Christians, such sheer contrast demonstrates the loose attention from both Rome and the Portuguese government. In a sentence, Japan was a less reachable and desirable place for the Portuguese government; instead, it was more of an individual and visionary act from the missionaries in different parts of Asia.

### **European Introduction of Christianity, The Works of Missionaries, and The Clash With Buddhism**

Francis Xavier, a Portuguese missionary and also one of the co-founders of the Jesuits, was the first to come to Japan as a missionary. In 1549, accompanied by a Japanese who spoke Portuguese, Xavier came to Kyushu and then traveled around the western parts of Japan. He

---

<sup>9</sup> Earle, *Albuquerque: Caesar of the East*, 143.

<sup>10</sup> Rubiés, Joan-Pau. "Real and Imaginary Dialogues in the Jesuit Mission of Sixteenth-Century Japan." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 55, no. 2/3 (2012): 449. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41725627>.

<sup>11</sup> Moran, Mr J F, and J. F. Moran. "*The Japanese and the Jesuits: Alessandro Valignano in Sixteenth Century Japan*." Routledge and CRC Press, 2014, 2.



made some good impressions on Japanese people with the initial record of bringing around a thousand Japanese people into the faith of God when he was preaching in the cities of Yamaguchi and Funai. However, considering he stayed for more than two years in Japan, and compared with later missionaries, there indeed were some area limitations Xavier experienced.<sup>12</sup>

Xavier's initial impression of Japanese people was very positive. All ordinary people showed respect and obedience to their local lords, and the samurai were also loyal to the lords because of their sense of honor. They also hated cheating and stealing, while in Europe, those traits were so familiar.<sup>13</sup> His description of the monks is the exact opposite. He described the chaos and disorganization of the Buddhistic sects, that "disputes and controversies often arise, with individuals striving to prove the superiority of their own rule."<sup>14</sup> Xavier's conversations with Ninxint, an old monk, shaped his view on Buddhism: they thought of worldly things in general, didn't restrict their behaviors, and wasted too much time on things of indulgence. He also witnessed similar acts of selling indulgence: the monks asked for alms and claimed the more they gave, the wealthier and happier they would live in the afterlife. The negative opinion on Buddhism is further imprinted on Xavier, which marked the hostility between the two religions.

Xavier recognized Buddhism and the monks as the greatest enemies of Christianity in Japan. One of the most significant conflicts happened when the local ruler invited him to talk with the monks. The atmosphere was tit for tat: the monks constantly challenged the teachings of Xavier about God. They contended with Xavier's doctrines that there was only one heaven and no reincarnation by arguing there should be different heavens for different people and that the

---

<sup>12</sup> Ellis, Robert Richmond. "'The Best Thus Far Discovered': The Japanese in the Letters of Francisco Xavier." *Hispanic Review* 71, no. 2 (2003), 155. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3247185>.

<sup>13</sup> Coleridge Henry James. 1872. *The Life and Letters of St. Francis Xavier*. London: Burns and Oates, 263.

<sup>14</sup> Coleridge, *The Life and Letters of St. Francis Xavier*, 332.

next world is a reward for this life.<sup>15</sup> Xavier's ultimate response was that Christians were humble in front of God and the teachings of Jesus and were subject to making mistakes, thus trying to partition themselves from the monks. Interestingly, such debate between the two different teachings was never resolved and continued to exist through the following decades. Another anecdote that witnessed Xavier's hatred of the monks is when Xavier was using *Deus* to call God, the monks poignantly called that into the problem by saying the Portuguese pronunciation of God sounded like a liar in Japanese, therefore arguing that the basis of Christianity is wrong.<sup>16</sup>

However, even though this incident clearly shows how the monks presented an anti-Christian attitude towards the missionaries, I think there were some reasons other than simply being attributed to xenophobia. Compared with the Japanese traders and manufacturers who appreciated the coming of Europeans because of the profits brought by technological advancement, as I've mentioned above, the monks stood for the interest of the whole class. Therefore, monks were much more stubborn since they were afraid of the turmoil that could possibly end the existing social structure and bring about great turmoil (which did happen as the Shimabara Rebellion occurred in 1638). Moreover, similar to what the Roman Church did in the Age of Reformation, the monks were unwilling to give up their established religious teaching and hierarchy system. The miscommunication was another reason, as the Jesuits initially came from Goa; the monks thought Christianity was another branch of Buddhism following the teaching of Sakyamuni, thus generating colossal contempt.<sup>17</sup>

Also, religions are closely tied to politics; for example, the missionaries greatly influenced some daimyo like Otomo Sorin in Kyushu. The direct result of his conversion was his

---

<sup>15</sup> Coleridge, *The Life and Letters of St. Francis Xavier*, 326.

<sup>16</sup> Coleridge, *The Life and Letters of St. Francis Xavier*, 330.

<sup>17</sup> Rubiés, Joan-Pau. *Real and Imaginary Dialogues in the Jesuit Mission of Sixteenth-Century Japan*, 465.

ambitious plan of establishing a Catholic kingdom in Japan, which provided him *casus bellis* for attacking the surrounding heretic daimyo.<sup>18</sup> This shows that after the missionaries better understood Japan's history and current situations, they began to exercise their power from being both foreigners and missionaries into Japanese politics. This appears to be very useful for missionaries to go down-to-earth and expand their influences to all classes, but ultimately led to Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu's distrust of their desire to manipulate politics.

On the other hand, the resolute behavior of the monks also proved beneficial to Christianity in Japan. It urged the missionaries to be more competitive in spreading Christianity in competition with Buddhism, thus resulting in adaptation to Japanese culture and coming up with a much better understanding of Japanese thoughts and behaviors. Otherwise, Xavier understood that Christianity would never be on the same level as Buddhism. In the letter from Cosmes de Torres, the successor of Xavier, about missionaries in Japan, he emphasized the importance of the missionaries showing "humility" and devoting themselves to penetrating society.<sup>19</sup> I think this is a beautiful demonstration of the mutual-beneficial part of the religions in Japan since both Buddhism and Christianity were now aware of the importance of enhancing their behaviors when interacting with the people. Indeed, later in the 1580s, Alessandro Valignano even regarded the Buddhists as role models; he appreciated the bonzes' spiritual exercises and "their dignity and gravity,"<sup>20</sup> a vastly different method from his predecessors. However, the exercise of such a brilliant notion wasn't successful as Valignano noticed some Jesuits were too arrogant that they believed the Japanese could never fully understand their

---

<sup>18</sup> Strathern, Alan. *Immanent Power and Empirical Religiosity: Conversion of the Daimyo of Kyushu, 1560–1580*. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 47, no. 2, 2020, 262. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26966455>.

<sup>19</sup> Ruiz-de-Medina, Juan (ed.). 1990. *Documentos del Japón 1547-1557*, Monumentica Historica Societates Iesu 137. Rome, Jesuit Historical Institute, 217.

<sup>20</sup> Boxer C. R. 1951. *The Christian Century in Japan 1549-1650*, Manchester: Carcanet in association with the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 83.

teachings.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, from this contradiction, we can easily understand the various thoughts the Jesuits obtained in their missionary works and the conflict between them, thus foreseeing the ultimate failure and prohibition.

Buddhism was troublesome to almost all the missionaries from the beginning to the end due to its historical longevity in Japan, Luis Frois was one of them. Frois was a Jesuit close to some powerful daimyo, such as Oda Nobunaga, who harshly criticized Buddhism in Japan. Buddhism came to Japan some one thousand years earlier, way before the arrival of the Europeans. It was the single dominant religion in Japan, and has remained as such to this day. The primary benefit of Buddhism compared with Christianity was that it was already integrated into the Japanese culture itself, even into Shintoism, the native religion in Japan similar to Animism. However, almost all the Jesuits who came to Japan argued critically about the legitimacy of such a deep-rooted religion. Frois' central argument was that "the bonzes enter religious life to live in pleasure and ease and to escape hardships."<sup>22</sup> In his book comparing all the differences between Europeans and Japanese, he critiqued Japan in this part concerning religion. We have to admit that on some occasions, his comments seem very radical and one-sided, especially this one: "When the bonzes get tired of religion, they either marry or become soldiers,"<sup>23</sup> while not mentioning how the Church became decadent over the centuries in the Middle Ages, that ironically the Popes now became the most significant source of corruption. Sarcastically, half a decade earlier, Martin Luther proposed his Ninety-five Theses directly targeting the corruption within the Church and the brazen act of selling indulgence.

---

<sup>21</sup> Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan 1549-1650*, 87.

<sup>22</sup> Frois, Luis, S.J. *The First European Description of Japan, 1585: A Critical English-Language Edition of Striking Contrasts in the Customs of Europe and Japan by Luis Frois, S.J.* (D.T. Reff, & R. Danford, Eds.; R. Gill, Trans.; 1st ed.). Routledge, 2014, 94. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315852140>.

<sup>23</sup> Frois, *The First European Description of Japan*, 97.

Nevertheless, Frois' descriptions generally captured the power and influence of Buddhism in Japan concurrently. They pointed out that Buddhism and the bonzes had already become a class in the society, which wasn't different from Samurai. This further implies the obstacles that Christianity had to deal with, separating the monks from the ordinary people. Like Xavier, Frois also believed that the monks were the real problems in the society, and the opinion of the peasants remained the same. Meanwhile, Frois's acidic comments on Buddhism also established the reason for their missionary work. Japanese citizens who sensed the monks' malfeasances would naturally lean more toward the Christians, thus providing better conditions for spreading the faith.

From the perspective of the Japanese people, the coming of Xavier and Christianity was something they thought interesting, and they kept being curious about learning from Xavier. Xavier introduced them to European astronomical views, and his audiences were so into it since they had never thought of the universe. The curiosity among Japanese people was a triggering factor that helped the Europeans increase their influence, and the missionaries spread the faith. Xavier also concluded that compared with the teaching of reason and intellect, the Buddhist teaching had more to do with morality and restrictions on desires. Xavier seemed content with such differences and ensured that such qualities made Japanese people suitable for accepting Christianity, and he used the example that the first Japanese converts "whom within a month he had converted to the faith, [and became] men of the highest quality in the kingdom."<sup>24</sup>

Christianity's influence made even some of the most potent daimyo so intoxicated with the Nanban culture. Oda Nobunaga, the leader of the Oda clan who almost united Japan before his sudden assassination, was a devout student of European thought and technology. Militarily,

---

<sup>24</sup> Coleridge, *The Life and Letters of St. Francis Xavier*, 311.

he decisively saw the promising future of Teppo (firearms) in his wars and promoted them to the whole of his army. Moreover, he showed a taste in all the European goods. As a daimyo, Nobunaga has been showing his taste for collections of luxurious or renowned artifacts, such as teacups, following the traditional Japanese way of appreciating those items. Such action contained the goal of showing off his influence: having a collection of highly renowned artifacts translates into the accumulation of political power and legitimacy of Nobunaga's domination.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, it is apparent that Nobunaga's preference for European goods, such as clocks and globes, could also demonstrate his regime's power. Still, we cannot ignore that Nobunaga, the most innovative ruler in the Sengoku period, was fascinated by the new European gadgets. Natural curiosity and desire for new things caused Nobunaga to favor European technology and his tolerance of Christianity. Nobunaga enjoyed talking with missionaries, including Luis Frois, and finally, in 1580, even allowed the Jesuits to open up a seminary in the city of Kyoto.<sup>26</sup> All of this evidence demonstrates the positive impression Christianity had on the rulers and governors of Japan. Thus, it's not hard to understand the rapidity of the spread of Christianity during the reign of Nobunaga.

### **New Technologies And Cultural Influences From Europe And Their Impact**

Christianity remained influential ever since it landed in Japan, yet that wasn't the only thing European people brought to Japan. Most conveniently, through trade, the European dealers and ships brought numerous technological advancements into Japan that none of the Japanese

---

<sup>25</sup> Pitelka, Morgan. "*Famous Objects: Treasures, Trophies, and Warrior Power*," University of Hawai'i Press, 2016, 26. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvvn521.7>.

<sup>26</sup> Hiraoka, Ryūji. "*Jesuits and Western Clock in Japan's 'Christian Century' (1549-c.1650)*." *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 7, no. 2, 2020, 204-220, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22141332-00702004>.

people had even imagined. Therefore, this essay section primarily introduces Japan's technical and cultural aspects adapted from foreigners.

Japan's geological features, such as being a long set of islands with significant coastlines, created ideal conditions for regional trading, except that most countries were pretty far by distance. However, in the 16th century, after the Europeans had improved their ability to ship, Japan's preponderance came to appear. Sakai, a city in the central area near Kyoto and Osaka, became that era's most important trading center. The prosperity of Sakai was a direct cause of economic growth in the Ashikaga period, which was also linked to the improvement of agricultural techniques. Economic prosperity came with an increasing level of fluidity, i.e., the demographic movement within the society, and that led straight to the industry of money industry and banks. This gave rise to many ports and trade cities. Sakai emerged as a significant autonomous trading town governed by a council of 36 elders<sup>27</sup>, which recalled huge resemblances with the Venetian Republic in Europe. The city even had its military power and was also paying for the sohei (monk soldiers) so that the sohei might govern their independence. It was only until the advent of Oda Nobunaga, who opposed the existence of such a regime as a threat, and managed to control it, that the city's autonomy rapidly declined.

With its particular supremacy over other ports and trading cities, as described above, Sakai became the most important one because of the preference of the Westerners and consolidated its relationship with foreign trading. Previously, the trade centers were in Western Japan, such as in Kyushu, since they were easily accessible and the Western lords did not engage much with foreigners. After the Westerners became well-known, the center shifted to Sakai, and now it became a city entirely of Europeans.

---

<sup>27</sup> Hane, *Premodern Japan*, 138.

As we've described, trading was a spontaneous work driven by the desire for profits. Thus, it created problems related to the Japanese government and the missionaries. In 1583, in his *Sumario*, Valignano criticized the moves of the Portuguese traders, that "they often go to places against the padres' wishes, there is always much jealousy and rivalry between these lords, from which follow in turn great toil and moil to the padres and Christianity."<sup>28</sup> He described the devastating consequences that the missionaries couldn't cope with the traders and criticized their myopia since the competition between the business people caused distrust of the local rulers and affected the reputation of the missionaries. Another essential downside of the trade, as we would discuss more on Hideyoshi's decision to ban Christianity, was the slave trade. Portuguese traders were enthusiastic about purchasing slaves from some local rulers, which created extreme disgust for Hideyoshi and his people, which I will emphasize more later in the discussion.

Regarding technological advancement, firearms were inevitably the most essential thing Europeans brought to Japan, decisively changing Japanese warfare. Nevertheless, after Europeans came to Japan in 1543, the first *Teppo* was produced in Sakai the following year. At the start of the years, producing firearms was brutal: the craftsmen were building a model copying the European guns; the greatest difficulty occurred on the screw, that Japan was yet to be introduced screws, so the artisans were merely creating replicas for all the individual screws. That was indeed time-consuming.<sup>29</sup> Another fact was the early production of firearms was quite dangerous, and the artisans could not restore the delicate designs of the firearms; plus, the soldiers weren't so skilled in manipulating the guns. Thus, cases of self-explosion often occurred in the early years. However, with more and more Europeans coming to Japan, their teaching of

---

<sup>28</sup> Cooper, Michael, S.J. *They Came to Japan*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965, 97.

<sup>29</sup> Lidin, Tanegashima, *The Arrival of Europe in Japan*, 102.



techniques and selling of updated types of firearms greatly facilitated the use of firearms in Japanese warfare. The issue of lack of iron was also conquered, as Japan imported a great amount of iron from India and Thailand, facilitated by the shipping routes created by the Europeans.<sup>30</sup> It was believed that as early as 1549, in one of the battles in Kyushu, the Satsuma clan was already using firearms.<sup>31</sup> By the end of this period, the amount of firearms obtained symbolized the power of each daimyo and his army. Oda Nobunaga, one of the first daimyo to purchase firearms, was dedicated to equipping his soldiers with firearms, resulting from his dominance in Japan. In conclusion, the Europeans' technologies, such as firearms, and the prosperity that occurred with their trading, greatly facilitated Japan's keeping up with the most influential European countries at the time, with some downsides, such as the slave trade.

### **The Downfall of European Influence And The “End” of Christianity in Japan**

The decline of Christianity and foreigners was of many causes. In general, since the *Bateran Edict* in 1587, the freedom of missionaries and the tolerance of Christianity and foreigners in Japan were in constant decline. Such rapid change was the immediate cause of a unified Japan. For the rulers after Oda Nobunaga, Christianity was an imaginary enemy, especially people living in the era who had all experienced the devastating effects of the riots from Buddhist sects. However, we do have to recognize that before the *Bateran Edict*, Hideyoshi's attitude towards Christianity was amiable; in the re-distribution of the lands after he unified Japan, he treated the Christian daimyo very well and provided a reasonable amount of land for them.<sup>32</sup> Yet 1587 is still marked as a period of decisive changes, and there's enough

---

<sup>30</sup> Lidin, Tanegashima, *The Arrival of Europe in Japan*, 62.

<sup>31</sup> Lidin, Tanegashima, *The Arrival of Europe in Japan*, 62.

<sup>32</sup> Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan 1549-1650*, 144.

reason to conclude Hideyoshi's previous friendliness was indeed a camouflage. In 1587, after Hideyoshi had successfully captured Kyushu, he assumed control over the whole of Japan, and the help of missionaries and the Christian daimyos seemed unnecessary, even quite dangerous.

The *Bateran Edict* in 1587, announced by Toyotomi Hideyoshi, marked the start of the banning of Christianity. There were three significant things mentioned: Only the lower classes were free to choose the faith they wanted, while the lords were forbidden to force them into conversion; Congregations of Christian people can be even more dangerous than the Buddhist riots; the vassals and local lords must understand the lands they acquired were temporary, that Hideyoshi himself had ultimate superiority over them.<sup>33</sup> All of these demonstrated Hideyoshi's desire to consolidate and stabilize his regime: in his design, Japan was under his control. Therefore, none of the local lords he appointed were as powerful as those of Daimyo in the previous decades. For the economy to prosper, it was of the utmost importance to have the peasants remain unaffected by politics and religious turmoils. In contrast, there were frequent incidents with the local lords changing religious beliefs, and the people started losing faith in the lords. For Hideyoshi, the one who unified Japan, such incidents were intolerable for the people's living and economic growth. In addition, in Hideyoshi's mindset, he also sensed the potential danger of Christianity growing as powerful as the *ikko-ikkei* movement—massive, collective, and systematic Buddhist riots that troubled Japan for decades until the 1570s. The high degree of organization and levels within the Christian Church, plus Jesuits and Portugal's tight connection with the actual religious leader, the Pope, made Hideyoshi fully aware of their power.<sup>34</sup> The replica had already existed in Japan, where the Honnoji and its massive monk soldiers created so

---

<sup>33</sup> Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan 1549-1650*, 148.

<sup>34</sup> Boscaro, Adriana. *Toyotomi Hideyoshi and the 1587 Edicts Against Christianity*. *Oriens Extremus* 20, no. 2, 1973, 227. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44001284>.

many troubles for Oda Nobunaga that even he couldn't eradicate them all. Still, this edict, compared with the later total banning of Christianity, appeared to be mild since it never actually mentioned banning Christians; what it was doing was more of a regulation for the behaviors of the missionaries. On the other hand, this was a period when Japan experienced openness, and everything became different in the next decade.

Another primary reason for Hideyoshi's transition, which later developed into the disgust of Christianity, was a much less well-known yet gloomy aspect: the slave trade. Unfortunately, this is one of the very opposing sides of the European arrival. In 1587, Hideyoshi suddenly issued queries to the Jesuit General Gaspar Coelho, and one of the four questions was, "Why do the Portuguese buy many Japanese and export them from their native land as slaves?"<sup>35</sup> This was indeed contradictory to the ideals the missionaries had been preaching, and Coelho's response was in extreme panic. He passed the buck to the Portuguese businessmen and Japanese local lords by claiming they were the ones only concerned about monetary profits and promoted the trade of slaves, who were usually local Japanese prisoners.<sup>36</sup> There were many reasons for the Portuguese to perform the slave trade in Japan: it was believed that the Chinese and Japanese slaves were smarter and better than other slaves.<sup>37</sup> The slave trade was also quickly and massively profitable, and the Portuguese were notoriously known for their experience in the slave trade. As a result, the missionaries almost lost all of their rights and properties, and it was under the efforts and decent behaviors of Valignano that the Jesuits regained their status in Japan three years later.

---

<sup>35</sup> Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan 1549-1650*, 146.

<sup>36</sup> Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan 1549-1650*, 147.

<sup>37</sup> Saunders A. C. de C. M., *A Social History of Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal 1441-1555*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 168.

Interestingly, Mendes Pinto, a mysterious traveler and businessman who claimed to be traveling with Francis Xavier to Japan but was often challenged, documented that some Japanese rulers also had enslaved women.<sup>38</sup> In addition, one of the Jesuits also criticized the slave trade, especially the trade for sex, by saying: “A girl’s own father, mother, or brothers—without any feeling of shame on the part of any of those concerned—will without hesitation sell her as a prostitute before she is married, for a few pence, under the pressure of poverty.”<sup>39</sup> Here, he directed the spearhead against the morality of the Japanese people while acknowledging the reality of their poverty and their miserable conditions. All these details demonstrate one thing: after four decades of interaction between Europeans and Japanese people, their understanding of each other became much more apparent, and many flaws of Japanese culture stopped being obscure. Surely, Hideyoshi was aiming for complete control of the population, and he ordered the land inspection and population census, after which he decided to abolish slavery. However, we also have a sense of how the tension was built through the understanding of each other’s flaws.

On the other hand, regarding Christianity, there was a reason it stopped being favored by Toyotomi Hideyoshi: the conflict and antagonism between the Jesuits and Franciscans. After the Iberian Union in 1580, the Portuguese people remained in constant disbelief and resentment towards the Spanish people, and such national sentiment also transferred to the two Christian orders. The Jesuits, with the most support from Portugal, came the earliest, thus establishing a large population of believers. Yet the Franciscans, based in Spain, later competed with the Jesuits using a different strategy. Jesuits attracted most nobles and daimyos by the end of the

---

<sup>38</sup> Pinto, Mendes. *The Travels of Mendes Pinto*. University of Chicago Press, 2013, Chapter 141.

<sup>39</sup> Cooper, *They Came to Japan*, 64.

16th Century. At the same time, according to their mendicant disciplines, the Franciscans were immediately favored by most people experiencing poverty. The Jesuits were more traditional in their methods, while the mendicant orders were much more radical. Valignano, the person in charge of the Jesuits' missionary work in Japan, excluded the Franciscans as he desired the Jesuits' dominance in Japan. In his *Sumario*, Valignano informed Rome about the importance of Jesuits' dominance in Japan and pinpointed the inconveniences brought by the lack of collaboration or even the negative impression from the works of the other Christian orders.<sup>40</sup> This proved to be correct, that even when Hideyoshi banned public preaching, and the Jesuits followed it strictly by preaching clandestinely, the Franciscans believed they had secured the relationship with Hideyoshi and were rampant against the Bateran Edict.<sup>41</sup>

The culmination of the worsened circumstances was the 26 Christian Martyrs in 1597. The *San Felipe* incident was the direct cause of the great purge of Christians in Japan. In 1596, the shipwrecked *San Felipe* from New Mexico reached the shores of Japan. After an investigation by the Japanese government, the ship's captain referred to the missionaries by arguing their work was not to convert and take control of Japan. Hideyoshi immediately became furious and ordered his people to investigate accordingly. However, it was also believed that Hideyoshi voraciously desired the gold and goods on *San Felipe* and that everything was designed to be a plot to seize the goods.<sup>42</sup> The incident became even more complicated and uncanny, and both Jesuits and Franciscans blamed each other for being responsible for enraging Hideyoshi. In a conversation with Joao Rodrigues, one of the influential missionaries in Japan in the final decades, he confessed that he didn't offer help to the Franciscans and Spaniards because

---

<sup>40</sup> Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan 1549-1650*, 154.

<sup>41</sup> Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan 1549-1650*, 163.

<sup>42</sup> Chen, Xizi. *Squabbles Between the Jesuits and the Franciscans: A Historical Review of Policies of Two Christian Orders in Japan*, *Trans/form/ação* 46, no. 1, 2023, 246.

they didn't consult the Jesuits.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, on February 5, 1597, 26 Christians, with the majority being Japanese believers and four Franciscan friars, were crucified in Nagasaki, the symbolic trading city.<sup>44</sup>

However, even after such a brutal incident, Christianity and the missionaries remained prosperous for almost twenty years until Tokugawa Ieyasu unified Japan and established the Tokugawa Bakufu. This demonstrates that Toyotomi Hideyoshi was using this incident to target the rampant foreigners and manifest his absolute power, where he could even order the foreigners to death. Still, we must recognize that Japan was, in the long run, fighting against the Koreans, and Hideyoshi was losing popularity. Thus, we can conclude that partly because Hideyoshi relied on the Europeans to provide weaponry and cooperate with the Jesuits and partly due to his declining control of Japan, the foreign community still persisted for a while after his death. The ban on foreigners came when Tokugawa Ieyasu took charge following Hideyoshi's death in 1598. The number of Jesuits until 1615 was consistently above 100, showing the still loose policy until the Tokugawa government consolidated its power. From 1614 to 1615, the number of Jesuits dropped drastically from 118 to 53, showing a fundamental change in policy, which was concurrent with the eradication of the remaining Toyotomi clan in the siege of Osaka.<sup>45</sup> The siege of Osaka also destroyed Sakai and the following European communities.<sup>46</sup> Essentially, after becoming one of the most potent *Shoguns* (leaders of Bakufu) in history and distributing most of the lands to his descendants and daimyo loyal to him, he didn't need anything from the Europeans and missionaries. In a shocking turn, as we can imagine, in the age

---

<sup>43</sup> Cooper, *They came to Japan*, 125.

<sup>44</sup> Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan 1549-1650*, 166.

<sup>45</sup> Schutte, Josef Franz, S.J. *Introductio ad Historiam Societatis Jesu in Japonia 1549- 1650*, Roma, 1968, 379.

<sup>46</sup> Cooper, *They came to Japan*, 254.

of peace, weaponry was the most dangerous and unnecessary thing for the government. Therefore, it became reasonable for Ieyasu to ban everything related to the Europeans. We can also connect the lines of reasoning between Ieyasu and Hideyoshi, that Hideyoshi directly pointed out: “I have received information that in your kingdoms the promulgation of the law is a stick and deceit by which you overcome other kingdoms,”<sup>47</sup> showing extreme disgust and the concern on Japan being the next target of colonization. Therefore, the two rulers' transition in attitudes toward Europeans showed that they never trusted the Europeans but manipulated them for their purposes in a qualified way.

Finally, in 1635, the son of Ieyasu, Tokugawa Iemitsu, issued the *Sakoku Edict* (lock-country edict). This highly harsh edict forbade the coming of all foreigners, as well as Japanese going abroad, not even any ship.<sup>48</sup> This was a real ban, and Japan virtually disappeared from the world's knowledge by forbidding all global interactions, which marked the end of a century of European and Japanese engagement. Until this year, all the arguments from the missionaries and the trading spots and stores established by the Europeans came to a finale. But that doesn't mean they were all meaningless, as the Europeans returned to Japan two centuries later.

## **Conclusion**

If we move our sight a little bit in the span of history to the world where Matthew Perry just knocked out the Japanese lock-country policy, and Europeans and Americans returned to Japan after almost three centuries, shall we ask ourselves, if Japan remained open, would it be

---

<sup>47</sup> Chen, *Squabbles Between the Jesuits and the Franciscans*, 248.

<sup>48</sup> Vaporis, C.N., & Vaporis, C. *Voices of Early Modern Japan: Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life During the Age of the Shoguns* (2nd ed.). Routledge, 2020, 99. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003005292>

advantageous or disadvantageous to the whole country in the face of an open, global, yet dangerous environment?

It was true that Japan slacked behind and discarded the opportunities to keep up with European countries from the starting lines. Sarcastically, the abdication of Tokugawa Yoshinobu was directly caused by the Japanese people's anger towards the government's fainted response to foreign threats of colonization. This was the opposite of Ieyasu's design, which was supposed to protect the Japanese people from alien invasion. However, we have to recognize that Japan remained well-off for more than two hundred years, and its unity was beneficial to its rapid growth and prosperity after the Meiji Reformation.

If we compare Japan with China, we realize that the two countries were adopting very similar lock-country policies. Yet, the response in the face of foreign invasion in the 19th century was vastly different: Japan quickly transformed its power from the Shogun and local rulers to a centralized government following the world's current. At the same time, China put in massive efforts, but all types of corruption and resistance existed. One reason was that Japanese people were well aware of the changing global situation and clearly understood in the 19th century that remaining isolationism was killing Japan. Different from the 16th century when they still had choices to make themselves, now there was this single way left, and they had to execute their decision.

From the tremendous momentum brought by the Europeans in the 16th century, Japan managed to maintain its independence and import helpful knowledge from the Europeans, as well as the attempt to believe in Christianity. When they perceived threats, the rulers decided to isolate Japan from other countries, a decision from the modern view was considered a double-



edged sword. The 16th century was such a turbulent time, and the Japanese people managed to survive firmly and were recognized by the Europeans.

## Bibliography

- Boscaro, Adriana. *Toyotomi Hideyoshi and the 1587 Edicts Against Christianity*. *Oriens Extremus* 20, no. 2 (1973). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44001284>.
- Boxer C. R. 1951. *The Christian Century in Japan 1549-1650*, Manchester: Carcanet in association with the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.
- Chen, Xizi. *Squabbles Between the Jesuits and the Franciscans: A Historical Review of Policies of Two Christian Orders in Japan*, *Trans/form/ação* 46, no. 1 (January 2023).
- Coleridge Henry James. 1872. *The Life and Letters of St. Francis Xavier*. London: Burns and Oates.
- Cooper, Michael, S.J, *They Came to Japan*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965.
- Coutinho, Verissimo, *Goa's History of Education: A Case Study of Portuguese Colonialism* 1975.
- De Sousa, Lucioitor, *Global History and New Polycentric Approaches: Europe, Asia and the Americas in a World Network System*, Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2018.
- Earle, T.F., and John Villiers, eds. *Albuquerque: Caesar of the East. Selected Texts by Afonso de Albuquerque and His Son*. Liverpool University Press, 1990. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv16zjjbh>.
- Ellis, Robert Richmond. 'The Best Thus Far Discovered': *The Japanese in the Letters of Francisco Xavier*. *Hispanic Review* 71, no. 2, 2003. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3247185>.
- Frois S.J., Luis. *The First European Description of Japan, 1585: A Critical English-Language Edition of Striking Contrasts in the Customs of Europe and Japan by Luis Frois, S.J.* (D.T. Reff, & R. Danford, Eds.; R. Gill, Trans.; 1st ed.). Routledge, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315852140>.
- Hane, M. *Premodern Japan: A Historical Survey* (2nd ed.), Routledge, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429494819>.
- Hiraoka, Ryūji. *Jesuits and Western Clock in Japan's "Christian Century" (1549-c.1650)*. *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 7, no. 2, 2020, 204-220, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22141332-00702004>.
- Lidin, O.G, *Tanegashima - The Arrival of Europe in Japan*, (1st ed.), Routledge, 2015 <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203479575>.

- Lyong, Choi, and Sang, Hun Yi, *Forced Self-Reliance: The Kamakura Bakufu Defense against the Mongol Invasion of Japan*. *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2021; 52 (2). doi: [https://doi.org/10.1162/jinh\\_a\\_01696](https://doi.org/10.1162/jinh_a_01696)
- Moran, J. F. *The Japanese and the Jesuits: Alessandro Valignano in Sixteenth Century Japan*. Routledge; CRC Press, 2014.
- Pinto, Mendes. *The Travels of Mendes Pinto*. University of Chicago Press, 2013.
- Pitelka, Morgan. *Famous Objects: Treasures, Trophies, and Warrior Power*, University of Hawai'i Press, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvvn521.7>.
- Rubiés, Joan-Pau. *Real and Imaginary Dialogues in the Jesuit Mission of Sixteenth-Century Japan*. *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 55, no. 2/3, 2012. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41725627>.
- Ruiz-de-Medina, Juan (ed.). *Documentos del Japón 1547-1557*, Monumentica Historica Societates Iesu 137. Rome, Jesuit Historical Institute, 1990.
- Saunders A. C. de C. M. *A Social History of Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal 1441-1555*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Schutte, Josef Franz, S.J. *Introductio ad Historiam Societatis Jesu in Japonia 1549- 1650*, Roma, 1968.
- Strathern, Alan. *Immanent Power and Empirical Religiosity: Conversion of the Daimyo of Kyushu, 1560–1580*. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 47, no. 2, 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26966455>.
- Vaporis, C.N., & Vaporis, C. *Voices of Early Modern Japan: Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life During the Age of the Shoguns* (2nd ed.). Routledge, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003005292>
- Walker, Brett L. *A Concise History of Japan*, Cambridge Concise Histories. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511783043.007.