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The China of Tomorrow: Japan and the Limits of Victorian Expansion

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Abstract

Keywords: Japan, East Asia, Namamugi Incident, Anglo-Satsuma War, British imperialism, Meiji Restoration, merchants, press, bridgehead, treaty ports, Yokohama, Kagoshima, informal empire

In the winter of 1863-64, ten years after Japan's first 'Treaty of Amity and Friendship' with a Western power, the Victorians were weighing up the possibility of going to war with the country. Back in September 1862 a party of British residents and visitors – three men and a woman – had been attacked by samurai at Namamugi village, a short ride east of Yokohama. One of the party, a twenty-nine year-old merchant named Charles Richardson, was killed. Palmerston's Government demanded an indemnity, and while the *bakufu* (the Tokugawa Shogunate) agreed to pay its share, Satsuma domain, from which the samurai hailed, did not. Late in 1863 news reached London that the Royal Navy, despatched to bolster British demands, had engaged in a two day bombardment of the domain's castle town of Kagoshima, resulting in a conflagration 'illuminating the entire bay'.¹ For the Peace Society, events were following a wearily familiar pattern: Britain would 'in all probability' be embroiled 'in a succession of ignoble and costly wars'.² The essayist and radical Frederic Harrison feared that bombarding Kagoshima would prove insufficient; that, as in the past, 'to hold our ground we shall need to occupy territory', and so 'one annexation will necessitate another'.³ Even

¹ A. Kuper to E. Neale, 17 Aug. 1863, encl. in E. Neale to J. Russell, 26 Aug. 1863, Foreign Office (FO) records, The National Archives, UK (TNA), FO 881/1183.

² 'Memorial to Earl Russell', *The Herald of Peace* 164, 1 Sept. 1863, 251.

³ Harrison, "Destruction of Kagoshima", 288–289.

those inclined to sneer at such ‘peace-mongers’ also believed it ‘but too probable that we should have to continue our intercourse with the Japanese according to “the holy text of pike and gun”’.⁴ Charles Cookson (who as Consul at Alexandria was himself later caught up in the 1882 ‘massacre’ and bombardment of that town) also brooded on the likelihood of Britain assuming some form of protectorate over part of Japan. It was, he noted with relief, still a far-off prospect, and yet ‘who, with the experiences of India and China fresh on his mind, can say what may be the next step’. For many that winter, Britain teetered on the edge of another Asian imbroglio. ‘The India of yesterday is the China of to-day’, another critic warned, ‘and the China of to-day the Japan of to-morrow’.⁵

Imperialism is not a concept we routinely use to describe British activity in *bakumatsu* and early Meiji Japan. The bombardment of Kagoshima seldom features in surveys of British imperialism, even in East Asia. Japan in this period sits uneasily within many wider histories of European expansion, and if it does so it is, in part, because we feel we know how this story ends. Japan avoided China’s fate; its nineteenth century is often told as the story of its ‘Opening’, Meiji ‘modernization’, and imperial expansion in its own right. In Japan, this ‘Namamugi Incident’ is the subject of scores of histories, novels and dramatizations, and the bombardment of Kagoshima (the *Satsu-Ei sensō*, or Anglo-Satsuma War) forms part of a resilient narrative of national modernisation and the road to the Meiji Ishin. It is the short, sharp shock that drives home to the Satsuma domain – vanguard of the Ishin – the futility of resisting western trade and ideas, and of the need for a radical transformation of political power.⁶ In Britain, the affair remains little known, and when

⁴ ‘Editor’s Portfolio’, *Colburn’s United Service Magazine and Naval and Military Journal* (1864), i, 273–274.

⁵ Cookson, “England and Japan”, 460; and Pember, “England and India”, 228.

⁶ This particular interpretation of the story has helped to sustain an extensive Japanese literature on the ‘Namamugi Incident’ (*Namamugi Jiken*). For a useful introduction, see the work of Hagiwara Nobutoshi, in: N. Hagiwara, *Satsuei sensō* (Tokyo, 1998); and *Shika* (Tokyo, 2001). Though the incident is often mentioned in English-language histories of Japan (and in foreigners’ memoirs of the period), it has few book length treatments, save Miyazawa, *Englishmen and Satsuma*; and my own Fletcher, *Namamugi*. Ion, “Namamugi” and Hashimoto, “Collision” also provide welcome examinations of different aspects of the Incident.

written about at all is not from the perspective of imperial history, but of that curious sub-field of diplomatic history, Anglo-Japanese Relations.

That field has seen a remarkable surge in activity since the 1990s, prompted by a programme of events to mark the centenary of the Japan Society in London, and driven forward by a number of influential publication projects.⁷ A five volume *History of Anglo-Japanese Relations, 1600-2000* (2000-2003) explored many questions relevant to imperial historians, including Jim Hoare's survey of the Unequal Treaties era, and the work of Janet Hunter, Sugiyama Shinya and Antony Best on Anglo-Japanese commercial and financial rivalry.⁸ The ten volumes of the *Britain and Japan: Biographical Portraits* series (1994-2016) have rescued hundreds of lives and careers from obscurity.⁹ Collectively, this Anglo-Japanese focus has been welcomed by Japan scholars wary of historians' tendency to concentrate on US-Japan connections to the exclusion of others.¹⁰ But this approach is not without its constraints, too; recurrent themes in the literature that prefigure the types of questions most commonly asked. There is the bilateral framework of analysis itself, for example, which can militate against transnational or multi-actor perspectives, and can over-determine discussions in terms of the rise, fall and return of 'friendship' between the two countries.¹¹ Historicising the relationship has been hard and valuable work, but a marked concern for 'the chequered relations between our two countries', or with 'people who have participated for good or ill in the moulding of the bilateral relationship' has worked to favour

⁷ For useful surveys of this output, see: Cortazzi, "Britain and Japan", and Brewer, "Anglo-Japanese Relations".

⁸ This series comprises essays on political-diplomatic relations (vol.s i and ii, 2000, edited by Ian Nish and Kibata Yōichi), military relations (vol. iii, 2003, edited by Ian Gow, Hiram Yōichi and John Chapman), economic and business relations (vol. iv, 2002, edited by Janet Hunter and Sugiyama Shinya) and social and cultural perspectives (vol. v, 2002, edited by Gordon Daniels and Chūshichi Tsuzuki).

⁹ The latest volume is: Cortazzi, *Britain and Japan*.

¹⁰ Garon, "Transnational History", 73-74.

¹¹ Kato Yuzo, for example, has stressed the need 'to understand Japanese-British relations within a multi-actor environment' in this period: Kato, "Opening of Japan".

some periods and questions more than others.¹² Sometimes, the attention paid to presenting ‘both sides’ of the story can – not unlike the ‘two island nations’ rhetoric of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance itself – flatten differences between the parties, or mask asymmetries in their power relations. And while the biographical method has an important role in illuminating the global and imperial past, it remains important to contextualise these life stories within broader patterns and structures of power.¹³

This article asks how far we can consider *bakumatsu* Japan to be subject to forms of British imperialism, and what we stand to gain from bringing an imperial history perspective to bear on this, in Britain, forgotten conflict. It builds on the work of Sho Konishi and others in ‘re-opening’ conventional narratives of the ‘Opening’ of Japan, and takes its cue from Sheldon Garon’s recent call to foreground Japan’s transnational connections, and to push against narratives of Japanese exceptionalism by exploring its modern history within broader frames of analysis.¹⁴ It will argue that, in the early 1860s, Japan in fact had a prominent place in wider British debates over the ideologies of non-intervention, empire and free trade, with both advocates and critics of military intervention giving Japan a place along a spectrum of recognisably imperial activity. This was not simply a case of imperial analogies and experiences elsewhere being invoked on how best to secure the ‘opening’ of the country. The challenges Japan presented to foreign merchants and officials – and British indecision over how best to proceed – gave Japan, in turn, a place in wider reflections over Britain’s conduct in maritime Asia and its obligations to its merchants, as the prospect of a wider war, even of seizing parts of the archipelago, concerned not only Palmerston and his Foreign Secretary,

¹² As Cortazzi has explained, the *1600-2000* book series, financed by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was commissioned to address popular misunderstandings over Japan’s role in the Second World War in particular: Cortazzi, “Britain and Japan”, 395.

¹³ As editor of volumes IV to X of the *Biographical Portraits* series, Cortazzi acknowledged that the constraints of author availability had precluded the possibility of organising the volumes around particular themes or categories, and that significant gaps in coverage remain: Cortazzi, “Britain and Japan”.

¹⁴ Garon, “Transnational History”. These issues were the focus of a 2019 conference on *Reopening the ‘Opening’ of Japan* at St. Antony’s College, Oxford, and where I advanced some of the ideas in this paper.

Lord John Russell, but Richard Cobden, Lord Robert Cecil and many other statesmen and commentators of the time.

To explore this, this article re-examines the young treaty port of Yokohama in light of John Darwin's concept of the bridgehead, that 'transmission shaft of imperialism'. In Darwin's work, the bridgehead provides the key to explaining 'the baffling shape of the Victorian empire'; its performance in the face of geopolitical, economic and environmental constraints critical to understanding where and when the power of the metropole could be 'transmitted to its periphery'.¹⁵ Viewed this way, the Yokohama bridgehead of the early 1860s achieved only fitful purchase; talk of war and annexation in London did not last. Yet our understanding of imperialism has as much to gain from studying examples where intervention was merely limited, or failed – where the transmission shaft lost torque, span the tyres – as where it did not. Re-approaching Yokohama in this way takes up Darwin's challenge to write histories of the British empire mindful of uncertainty, compromise and defeat – a history 'that explains more convincingly how Britain's imperial world was constructed' – and aware of the 'terms and conditions' that bound its horizons.¹⁶ It also presents an opportunity to ask new questions of the *Satsu-Ei senso* itself; questions that go beyond its significance for Japan to its implications outside the archipelago; questions about the conduct of 'gunboat diplomacy' and the fault lines of mid-Victorian expansion; the place of Japan in British political imaginaries; the nature of informal empire; and the discourses buffeting British expansion in the turbulent 1860s.

¹⁵ Darwin, "Imperialism".

¹⁶ Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, 7-8.

Informal Empire in the Japanese Archipelago

In his 2017 reinterpretation of the course of the Meiji Ishin, Mark Ravina framed the politics of the late Tokugawa and early Meiji regimes in terms of a decades-long ‘crisis of imperialism’. The book focuses on Japanese actors, and stresses the agency of its reformers, but is also an invitation to reappraise the place of force – and of the threat of force – in the so-called ‘opening’ of Japan.¹⁷ For Britain’s Japan observers, news of the American expedition under Commodore Perry re-opened the question of whether the country had the right to withdraw from world trade. Drawing on the stock of literature available to them – from Raffles to Kaempfer, and even back to John Saris – they concluded, by and large, that it did not, and must now choose between ‘friendly intercourse, or subjugation, sooner or later, by one or more of the great powers of the west’.¹⁸

These observers welcomed Perry’s mission as being in the interest of all nations, but were equally determined that Britain ‘not be outstripped in the East by the Americans’. Some form of national interest was felt to be at stake, and its most obvious form, and that which has received the most attention, was trade.¹⁹ The framework for British trade was outlined by the Elgin Treaty of 1858; Nagasaki, Hakodate and Kanagawa (soon relocated across the bay to the purpose-built settlement of Yokohama) were opened the following year. It was not long, however, before the idea of calling on the navy to protect British trade with Japan became a common refrain in both official despatches and the treaty port press.

¹⁷ Ravina, *Japan’s Meiji Restoration*.

¹⁸ MacFarlane, *Japan*, 115-116; “Japan and the Japanese”, 31. Alexander Knox, in a similar review of the Japan literature for the *Edinburgh Review*, accepted that the Japanese ‘have an exclusive right to the possession of their territory’, but not if they kept other nations from sharing in its wealth: ‘the only secure title to property, whether it be in a hovel or an empire, is, that the exclusive possession of one is for the benefit of all’: Knox, “Japan”, 383.

¹⁹ Tilley, *Japan*, 98; MacFarlane, *Japan*, 125.

Rutherford Alcock, Britain's first Minister Plenipotentiary, was still *en route* to the country when he urged the China squadron to station a warship in Japanese waters to ensure 'a fair disposition on the part of the Japanese to give execution to the Treaty'.²⁰ In July 1859, during the treaty's ratification, Alcock insisted that naval officers and men process through the streets of Edo, a 'show of firmness' in the face of Japanese opposition to underscore 'the entirely new character of foreign relations'.²¹ In the months that followed merchants complained with progressing bitterness of official obstruction, harassment, and the stoppage of trade. Alcock, exasperated, declared the Treaty 'virtually annulled'. By March, 1860, his requests for a show of naval power to restart trade had become so common as to breed a certain defensiveness at Hong Kong.²²

As we shall see, the bombardment of Kagoshima can be read as the culmination of these calls to protect the British merchant, that self-styled 'pioneer of trade and civilization'.²³ But the Victorians seldom contemplated military intervention to protect private enterprise alone: a larger, 'national interest' had to be seen to be at stake. Nor did merchants have a monopoly over British designs on Japan. By the mid-nineteenth century, theirs was merely the latest in a line of British sub-imperialisms seeking London's support for their activities in these waters.

The Ryūkyū Kingdom, for example, could by the 1840s be considered the shifting maritime frontier of multiple, competing empires.²⁴ This island chain southwest of Kyushu (nominally a tributary kingdom to the Qing, but actually under Satsuma's control on behalf of the *bakufu*) may have been visited by as many as seventy European vessels in the first half of

²⁰ R. Alcock to J. Hope, 3 May 1859, Admiralty (ADM) records, TNA, ADM 125/115.

²¹ R. Alcock to Capt. Hand, no. 7, 12 July 1859, ADM 125/115.

²² R. Alcock to J. Russell, 6 Dec. 1859, ADM 125/115; J. Hope to Lord Paget, 8 Mar. 1860, ADM 125/115.

²³ *Japan Herald (JH)* 45, 27 Sept. 1862, 178.

²⁴ Kreiner, *Ryukyu in World History*.

the nineteenth-century alone.²⁵ American merchantmen to Canton and the extensive American whaling fleet were operating across the North Pacific by the 1830s, and from 1840 France, too, intensified its efforts to cement commercial and political relations with China.²⁶ But Britain's Royal Navy took a particular interest the Ryūkyūs. After 1815 the navy began surveying the North Pacific in earnest, while the 1834 abolition of the East India Company's monopoly also triggered fresh Foreign Office interest in these waters, so that numerous vessels began to call at the port of Naha —some merchantmen, but predominantly ships of war—including the expeditions of Captains Basil Hall in 1817, Frederick Beechey in 1827 and Edward Belcher in 1845. Indeed, before the Treaty of Nanking had secured the acquisition of Hong Kong, the Navy's search for potential bases 'free from the oppressions of Chinese law' made Naha an attractive candidate, especially as adverse weather conditions frequently drove ships north and east of Taiwan. The visitors' generally peaceable interactions with the authorities here – misinterpreted as straightforward 'kindness' by more than one captain in need – fuelled a naval habit of viewing Naha as a kind of unofficial British safe-haven in the North Pacific, a place that ships in distress knew to steer for to refit and repair. (Satsuma, for its part, hungrily consumed the information that arose from these encounters).

By the mid-1840s there had emerged a distinct, informal community of British seamen so convinced of the favourable situation of the islands (and of the favourable disposition of the islanders) as to request, in the context of the First Opium War, that organisations such as the London Missionary Society 'urge on the Ministers of the Crown and on the British public generally' that the 'Loochoo Kingdom' be ceded to Britain as part of the spoils of war. A British Ryūkyū, they reasoned, would become a foothold from which

²⁵ Teruya, "Ryukyu", 262.

²⁶ Beillevaire, "Wavering Attention", 185.

to ‘open wide the great gates of China, Korea and Japan’, especially if bolstered by an active missionary presence. When the LMS and Church Missionary Society both declined to back such a scheme, the sailors launched a mission of their own – the Loochoo Naval Mission – although their missionary’s increasingly fractious relationships with Ryūkyūan authorities across his stay (1846-54) put paid to wider hopes of lasting British influence in the islands.²⁷

Thirteen hundred miles north lay another maritime borderland at the opposite end of the Japanese archipelago, where Russian activity would prompt the *bakufu* into tightening its seclusion laws. In the years following 1791-93, when Russia despatched Lieutenant Adam Laxman on a mission from Okhotsk to Edo (at the same time Lord Macartney set sail for China), Japan’s northern waters became another of those spaces in which British and Russian mutual suspicions played out, opening a new round of Anglo-Russian rivalry in the Far East. Charles Whitworth, Britain’s minister to St. Petersburg, despatched ominous warnings about Laxman’s mission and of Russia’s growing power along the Amur river, concluding that ‘nothing seems more probable, than that they have designs of conquering Japan’.²⁸ He was wrong – Laxman was satisfied with far less – but the idea proved stubborn, and Japan came to occupy a peculiar place in the Admiralty’s conception of British world system.²⁹

During the Crimean War, for example, Vice Admiral James Stirling would improvise Britain’s first treaty with Japan amid growing concern at Whitehall over Russian strength in Japanese waters. Stirling came to Japan to learn if its ports were being used as Russian havens, but left with an 1854 Convention giving British warships the right to access Nagasaki and Hakodate as ports of call and supply. As the war progressed, and with the Royal Navy

²⁷ See Fletcher, “Returning Kindness Received”.

²⁸ Cranmer-Byng, “Russian and British Interests”, 365.

²⁹ The Russian bogeyman featured in even general British writings about Japan into the 1860s. ‘The acquisition of Japan would make [Russia] mistress of the Pacific ... [I]t would seem...opposed to the mercantile interests of the world that this large and important country, abounding as it does with admirable harbours, should ever fall beneath the dominion of Russia’: Kemish, *Japanese Empire*, 281.

making ready use of these harbours (while denying them to the Russians), Japan became a British asset in the wider conduct of the war, and Hakodate, in particular, a British base in all but name.³⁰ Stirling's Convention may have made no mention of trade, and left the merchants of London and Shanghai disappointed. And yet, as he explained in November 1855, it had conferred real advantages nonetheless:

Last Summer, the Ports and resources of Japan were at the disposal of any Cruiser for support, refreshments and communication, and in these respects Japan was as useful to us as a British Colony in that locality, but holding as we did the superiority in force, these Ports and resources were not available for Russian ships, and thus in the first year of its existence we were enabled to turn the Treaty to account in our own favour and against the Enemy.³¹

The British were still largely chasing phantoms: Russia did not attempt a large-scale operation in the Far East. But across the rest of *bakumatsu* era, Japan continued to serve the Royal Navy as a kind of listening post for Russian activity, a maritime counterpart to the better-known 'watch and ward' arrangements on the other side of Asia. At Edo, Alcock privately doubted that Russia had designs on Japan *per se*, but took seriously his government's instructions to observe Russian interactions and 'obtain information as to Russian proceedings in the Amoor and neighbouring countries'.³² From Hakodate, the new British Consul Christopher Pemberton Hodgson duly reported the comings and goings of

³⁰ Beasley, "Conflict to Co-operation", 88. 'If ever any European power wishes to obtain a *pied-à-terre* in Japan, no better spot could be chosen than Hakodadi [Hakodate]. Easily fortified, with good anchorage, and a delightful climate, it offers all the advantages required for such a purpose': Tilley, *Japan*, 103.

³¹ J. Stirling to Admiralty, no. 75, 8 Nov. 1855, ADM 125/1.

³² R. Alcock to J. Russell, no. 25, 3 Sept. 1859, ADM 125/115.

Russian vessels and personnel, convinced that official explanations of their movements were ‘only the foreground of the plan’.³³ It was also from Hakodate that HMS *Saracen* (1855) and then *Actaeon* and *Dove* (1859) set out on their survey expeditions of the north, making good deficiencies in the Admiralty’s knowledge exposed during the late war.³⁴ The brief Anglo-French annexation of Urup (1855-56) and the Royal Navy’s expulsion of Russian warships from Aso Bay, Tsushima (1861) further underlined Japan’s new-found implication in the forward projection of British interests in East Asia.

There was another object of wider advantage to be had in the Japanese archipelago, of which even the most casual British observers were aware: its fabled mineral wealth, and, most especially, its coal. ‘No mineral or other product the Japanese possess could be so valuable to us’, Alcock told London in 1859, ‘as a good steady supply of the best coal’.³⁵ Coal ‘gives wings and life to steam navigation’, MacFarlane enthused from the side-lines as the Perry expedition prepared to depart Hampton Roads, and while the American Commodore’s firm interest in Japanese coal is well-known (he threatened to occupy the Ryūkyū royal palace if refused permission to erect a coal depot, something rightly described as ‘the practice of imperialism’), Britain was not far behind.³⁶

Across the nineteenth-century, the Admiralty became progressively more strategic in how it thought about global coal supplies and the projection of British power, and historians have pointed to coal sources and stations – and the connections that surrounded and flowed through them – as a critical prop to the wider British world system.³⁷ By the 1880s the Admiralty had come to favour high-quality Welsh coal to such an extent that it was being shipped out from the British Isles to naval stations across and beyond the empire. But the

³³ C. Pemberton Hodgson to Senior Naval Officer of HBM Forces Shanghai, 24 April 1860, ADM 125/115.

³⁴ Beasley, “Conflict to Co-operation”, 95-99.

³⁵ R. Alcock to J. Russell, no. 28, 20 Sept. 1859, ADM 12/115.

³⁶ MacFarlane, *Japan*, 273-5. For ‘the practice of imperialism’ here, see: Ravina, 91-2, especially n20 and n21.

³⁷ Gray, *Steam Power*.

1850s and 60s were years of experimentation, with the Navy keenly investigating alternate, local coal supplies in the hope of sourcing cheaper alternatives and diversifying its supply. These arrangements often exceeded the bounds of Britain's formal empire, but were nonetheless central to the maintenance of British influence; and for a time, and in the years concurrent with its 'opening', Japan was afforded an important place within them.

It was the challenge and expense of supplying the China squadron during the Second Opium War that drew the Navy's eyes towards Japan. In September 1859, Captain Charles Shadwell of HMS *Highflyer* was despatched to Nagasaki and Hakodate to conduct sea trials of local coal. Initial results left something to be desired (these coals burned too quickly, and with too much flame and smoke, not unlike 'inferior North Country coals'), but Shadwell held out hope for the future, as Japanese mines were sunk deeper. Even so, and 'bearing in mind the heavy expense of European coals in China', he recommended their use by Her Majesty's Ships when mixed with Welsh coal.³⁸ A few months later, Rear-Admiral Hope of the China Station sent Lt. Malcolm of the Royal Engineers back to Japan 'to ascertain whether any measures can be taken for improving the quality and procuring a large supply from thence during the period of the contemplated operations in the North of China'.³⁹

Hope's instructions and Malcolm's meticulous reports offer a remarkable window into the tensions surrounding these investigations, and are a reminder of the ways in which the interactions around coaling stations, even those outside imperial space, could be conducted in recognisably colonial ways.⁴⁰ Malcolm was asked to build connections with intermediaries, identify potential contractors, conduct further trials, make every effort to inspect the mines himself, and – expecting resistance – to call on the British minister for

³⁸ Although not for Gun Boats, whose furnaces would likely become choked with ash: C. Shadwell to J. Hope, 17 Oct. 1859, ADM 125/115.

³⁹ J. Hope to Lt. Malcolm, encl. in J. Hope despatch of 22 Dec. 1859, ADM 125/115.

⁴⁰ For more on the Admiralty as 'a late nineteenth-century contractor state', see: Gray, *Steam Power*.

support. Despite Alcock's help, Malcolm never made it to the mines, and Hope backed down from confrontation on this point, judging it 'inexpedient'.⁴¹ Still, Malcolm pressed on, testing Hirado coal ('a good lively coal and promises much') on a mission his Commander maintained would 'greatly facilitate the operations to the North'. By February 1860 he was back in Shanghai sharing new information about Japanese mining techniques and the coal trade. The Japanese were jealous of their minerals, Malcolm wrote, and looked upon them 'as on the bones of a body without which the body cannot exist'; but he believed their reluctance to sell could be overcome.⁴²

The following month saw Malcolm's return to Nagasaki, this time to erect a naval coal depot of 10,000 tons. It was a fraught process, involving much negotiation 'under circumstances of considerable difficulty', but it was done: by December, 1860, the depot had delivered 9,685 tons of coal to twelve British transports and five warships, with a further 3,000 tons held in storage. Hope was left in no doubt of its contribution to the success of the China campaign. The expedition's steamers had required 13,000 tons of coal, Hong Kong had had just 2,000 tons in store, and the squadron could not have gone north – atoning for defeat on the Peiho the previous year – without turning to Japan 'for such supplies as could be obtained there'.⁴³

Admiral Hope's military use of Japanese coal – 'no matter has been the subject of more anxious consideration by me' – was far from the only way in which the growth of British influence in northern China and Japan were connected. Linguistic and institutional imperatives may have worked work to keep historical studies of China and Japan apart, but an imperial history approach underscores their interconnections in this period. Shanghai and Yokohama formed a particular axis. With pebrine disease still crippling silk production in

⁴¹ J. Hope to R. Alcock, 8 Mar. 1860, ADM 125/115.

⁴² Malcolm, report of 24 Feb. 1860, ADM 125/115.

⁴³ C. Templar to J. Hope, [n.d.] Oct. 1860, and J. Hope to C. Paget, no. 233, 9 July 1860, ADM 125/115.

Europe, and with ongoing concerns about supply in a China ravaged by civil war, Yokohama gave Shanghai merchants fresh cause for commercial optimism ‘despite the danger, fraud and cheating’ they encountered there.⁴⁴ Shanghai, in turn, sent forth the capital, expertise and shipping on which exploratory trades relied.⁴⁵ Growing confidence in navigating the Inland Sea (*Setonaikai*), in particular, spared merchant vessels the most risky stage of the passage to and from the north China coast, and accelerated the ports’ interconnection from the winter of 1859-60.⁴⁶ Shanghai’s *North China Herald* keenly covered developments in the ‘opening’ of Japan, anticipating the opportunities should its government ‘be either coaxed, or frightened out of their present timid policy’.⁴⁷ The paper covered mercantile prospects and official tensions at Yokohama in detail in the early 1860s. Any account of Shanghai’s fortunes would be incomplete, it wrote in review of the year 1859, ‘were we to omit mention of Japan, of which our port is the nearest neighbour, and so far the natural organ ...’.⁴⁸ So strong were the links between the two that they altered the geography of the China trade itself, transforming Shanghai from the last in the line of the China treaty ports ‘to the epicentre of a regional trading network’.⁴⁹

Tracing the careers of the British merchants of Shanghai and Yokohama further points to the latter’s implication in the identities, outlooks and practices of the British world system. Most foreign merchants in *bakumatsu* Japan had cut their teeth on the China coast, including Kenneth Ross Mackenzie (of Shanghai’s Mackenzie Bros. & Co.), William Gregson Aspinall (co-founder of Aspinall, Cornes and Co. of Kōbe and Yokohama), and the very victim of the

⁴⁴ Makimura, *Yokohama*, 103. Raw silk made up 66% of Japan’s exports in 1860, and 86% in 1862; it remained Japan’s single largest export item until 1940.

⁴⁵ See, for example: McMaster, *Jardines*.

⁴⁶ J. Bythesea to L. Jones, 18 Feb. 1850, ADM125/115. Bythesea’s exploratory work in the Inland Sea with HMS *Cruiser* was itself an extension of his activities in northern China: in November 1859, *Cruiser* had been part of Lord Elgin’s expedition up the Yangtze from Shanghai.

⁴⁷ *North China Herald (NCH)* 141, 9 Apr. 1853, 3.

⁴⁸ *NCH* 493, Supplement (‘The Year 1859’), 7 Jan. 1860.

⁴⁹ Chappell, “Limits of the Shanghai Bridghead”, 538.

Namamugi Incident himself, Charles Lenox Richardson, who had traded tea and silk at Shanghai since 1853, and who, it seems likely, was pondering a move to Japan.⁵⁰ British officials, too, brought with them the characteristics and expectations they had developed on prior postings, and understood Japan as occupying a position comparable to other sites around Britain's informal empire. Alcock, for example, explained his uncompromising stance towards the Japanese authorities in terms of his 'years of unvarying experience among a kindred race of officials' in China (and which itself was modelled on 'the usage and custom of Europe in relations with the Barbary States and others of the Levant').⁵¹ Like many, he believed that British influence in Japan would rise and fall with the fate of its armed forces in China, and lost no time in informing the *bakufu* when a fresh fleet was on its way out from England 'to exact redress and enforce the execution of the Treaties'.⁵²

Two final factors concerning Japan's implication in British expansion flowed from the strength of the Shanghai-Yokohama axis. The first is that Shanghai's merchants did not merely carry over their capital and expertise, but also their assumptions: about Oriental duplicity, mendacity and cowardice (all much more pronounced in the treaty port press than in British descriptions of Japan at home); and about the role of force in supporting private commerce on the frontiers of British influence, informed by experience of the most recent Opium War. As the Yokohama trade failed to reach the optimistic projections of its early foreign residents (unlike Shanghai, there had been no great success stories, most merchants merely making enough to cover their rent, food, firearms and alcohol), they soon began to complain of their 'confinement' within settlement limits and of the timidity of Britain's representatives. When, in 1862, Britain's new *chargé d'affaires* announced that London had agreed to Japanese requests to delay the promised opening of key ports, many feared it would

⁵⁰ Fletcher, *Ghost of Namamugi*, 26-7.

⁵¹ R. Alcock to J. Harris, 10 Aug. 1859, ADM 125/115.

⁵² R. Alcock to J. Russell, 10 Dec. 1859, ADM 125/115.

spell their ‘perpetual exclusion’ from the country’s greatest commercial prospects. In their eyes, it offered proof of the *bakufu*’s contempt for Britain’s apparent timidity; only ‘when they begin to think us less amiable we shall begin to find them more faithful’. The Yokohama merchants now wrote openly of the need for some kind of crisis to transform their position – ‘some Harry Parkes [to] get our political relations into confusion; some Admiral Seymour [to] stir them up with shot and shell’ – if only circumstances would allow.⁵³

The second feature exacerbated by that strong Shanghai-Yokohama connection was London’s tendency to view Japan as merely an extension of its wider China system. Normally, this worked to militate against precisely the type of intervention that the Yokohama merchants desired. China was so clearly the more important market; why risk it over the tribulations of British merchants in Japan? (Some British observers had even cautioned against ‘opening’ Japan at all, lest a rebuff have repercussions for Britain’s position in China).⁵⁴ But the connection went both ways. If London could be convinced that a crisis at Yokohama carried implications for the wider China system – if it came to believe that a climb down risked undermining something larger – then its reluctance to intervene might just be overcome. This was the context in which the Richardson party, setting out on an excursion from Yokohama, came upon a quiet place called Namamugi.

‘The Blazon of Our Wrath’

⁵³ *JH* 41, 30 Aug. 1862, 161.

⁵⁴ Davis, *China*.

Bridgeheads, in Darwin's formulation, took all manner of forms. They could vary in size from 'a decaying factory on a torrid coast' to the swagger and dominion of John Company itself. Everywhere, however, 'whether British influence grew, or was transformed into formal or informal empire, largely depended upon the circumstances and performance of the bridgehead'. In sketching the factors involved – a bridgehead's ability to navigate its 'host environment', or attract metropolitan attention and resources, or simply endure the vagaries of British parliamentary democracy – Darwin contributed to our progressive reimagining of Britain's empire as a networked entity, constituted by a variety of flows of people, objects, and ideas.⁵⁵

Because bridgeheads could fail as well as succeed, the concept encourages us to keep an eye open for imperial dynamics in unusual places; for the aspirations and frustrations of unrealised expansion; for sites where empire met its match. Darwin approached colonial wars with a similar interest in the contingency, confusion and messiness behind their outbreak, noting the importance of prevailing assumptions, information and its interlocutors, and of *where* effective decisions were actually made in determining the use of organized violence.⁵⁶ Such an approach has much to offer our understanding of the bombardment of Kagoshima – an event seldom on the radar of historians of empire, on the one hand, and explained away as straightforward 'gunboat diplomacy' by historians of Japan, on the other. In truth, a variety of peculiar conditions had to come into alignment for the death of a merchant to be translated into naval action. After all, Richardson's murder was by no means the first to have occurred in the young foreign settlement at Yokohama. 'There are seven foreign graves on the bluff of Treaty Point', an American merchant recorded in 1860. 'Six of the occupants died violent

⁵⁵ Darwin, "Imperialism". Darwin himself took inspiration from Peter Marshall's use of the concept, in: Marshall, *Bengal*.

⁵⁶ Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, 120-121.

deaths, five out of the six having been assassinated in the streets’ – so the logic of *civis Romanus sum* is clearly insufficient to explain why the bombardment took place.⁵⁷

The answer would seem to lie with the active lobbying of the foreign merchant community here, and their success in temporarily turning a local incident into an ‘outrage’ that warranted armed intervention to protect and extend their activities. In the days after Richardson’s funeral, the *Japan Herald* - the leading voice of the foreign community - was in no doubt about the course the British Government should follow. ‘Let his tomb be the blazon of our wrath to come’, it thundered, ‘the stern remembrancer of our just revenge’.⁵⁸ Securing that outcome, however, would involve playing a weak hand well. As a bridgehead for imperial intervention, the Yokohama of the early 1860s laboured under a number of disadvantages. As W.G. Beasley demonstrated long ago, there never emerged a coherent, interventionist mercantile lobby for Japan and its waters to rival that of the ‘old China hands’.⁵⁹ British merchants felt the home government knew and cared little about the country, especially when compared with the greater commercial prospect of China: ‘what is fatal to us here’, one resident wrote home, ‘is the generally believed unimportance of Japan’.⁶⁰ What little was known was not necessarily helpful, either. In 1861 *The Edinburgh Review* criticised a stream of ‘superficial’ publications on Japan for misleading a ‘credulous public’ into thinking ‘the triumph of European civilization in Japan’ was ‘already secure’.⁶¹ Foreign merchants in Yokohama felt the tyranny of distance, too: the mail to London could take two and a half months, and getting traction in the London press was often dependent on getting a sympathetic hearing from Hong Kong or Shanghai first.

⁵⁷ F. Hall, diary for 29 Feb. 1860, in Notehelfer, *American Eyes*.

⁵⁸ ‘September 14th 1862’, *JH* 44, 20 Sept. 1862.

⁵⁹ Beasley, *Great Britain*, 50. The classic study of the activism of British China merchants is: Greenberg, *British Trade*; but see also: Melancon, *Britain's China Policy*.

⁶⁰ William Willis correspondence, vol. 44/4, no. 83, W. Willis to G. Willis, 1 Oct. 1863, Yokohama Archives of History/*Yokohama kaikō shiryōkan* (YAH).

⁶¹ ‘Japan and the Japanese’, *The Edinburgh Review* 113, no. 229 (1861), 62-63.

Richardson's murder, however, came at a critical moment for foreign trade in Japan, and British merchants seized this chance to shock London into action – perhaps even into a more general defence of British interests in Japan – even as it deepened the rift between them and their diplomatic representatives. As word of the attack came in, parties of merchants rushed out along the Tōkaidō in the hope of intercepting the attackers themselves. They were joined by the British Consul, Francis Howard Vyse, and by the French Minister, Gustave de Bellecourt. But all of them set out in defiance of instructions from Vyse's superior, the British *charge d'affaires*, Colonel Neale, who struggled in vain to order the foreign residents to remain in the settlement. Even the British consular guard were swept up in the moment, setting out on the Tōkaidō and refusing Neale's calls to return to Yokohama. Essentially, at this moment of crisis, Neale's authority over his subordinates had slipped away, and the Yokohama merchant community seized the initiative.

Having found Richardson's body found at the roadside, the merchants returned to the settlement and held meetings throughout the night. They vented their frustration at Neale's timid response; set down their lack of confidence in his leadership in a direct appeal to London; and pointedly contrasted his apparent inaction – even cowardice – with that of Vyse and Bellecourt. The next morning, at another emergency meeting, Neale eventually succeeded in talking the merchants down from effecting immediate reprisals (though not 'without occurring obloquy', as he somewhat diffidently informed the Foreign Secretary), and promised to seek fresh instructions from London.⁶² But the race was now on to control the narrative – disputed accounts of what had transpired, and what had been said, began to circulate – and to convince London to take their side in this dispute. Reading through Lord John Russell's papers, it is clear that he found the merchants' barbs contrasting praise for the French Minister's boldness with contempt for their own man's timidity particularly galling.

⁶² E. Neale to J. Russell, 16 Sept. 1862, FO 410/6.

Permission to call on the China squadron was granted, at least in part, to recapture the initiative from an increasingly belligerent merchant community.

Immediately after Richardson's funeral, Yokohama's foreign merchants assembled and approved a motion from the agent for Jardine, Matheson & Company (who days before had been urging Vyse to do more to defend British trade) to issue an extra to the *Japan Herald* carrying their collective written statement, and to get this into circulation along the China coast.⁶³ As Todd Munson has written, Yokohama's foreign community 'arrogated to itself an unprecedented degree of press freedom in the 1860s, making it perhaps the most open and eclectic publishing locale in Asia', and the instinct to prepare pamphlets, articles and correspondence formed a significant part of their immediate response to the crisis.⁶⁴ The merchants elected a delegation to restate, in the *Herald*, their criticism of Neale's behaviour; for his part, Neale attempted to quash the stubborn rumour that he had twice ordered the consular guard's recall.⁶⁵ The delegation also prepared a new preface to their direct address to the Foreign Secretary, insisting that Neale's inaction had made this 'unusual step' necessary, and urging upon him 'the general opinion amongst the foreign officials and naval authorities, as well as the mercantile community ... [that] a severe lesson inflicted on the spot would have been the best means of preventing a recurrence of a similar crime'. ('Directly opposed to the facts', Neale added in the margin.)⁶⁶ Days later *The Japan Express*, a more fitful publication, made one of its few surviving forays into print to demand an armed response:

⁶³ 'Minutes of a meeting of the merchants resident in Yokohama, held September 15, 1862', encl. in E. Neale to J. Russell, 21 Sept. 1862, FO 410/6; S. Gower to F. Vyse, 5 Sept. 1852., cited in Fox, *Britain and Japan*, 100-101.

⁶⁴ Munson, *Periodical Press*, 3-4.

⁶⁵ G. Bellecourt to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 20 Sept. 1862, Archives des Affaires Etrangères (ADAE), Correspondence politique, Japon (CP) 59, Vol. 7, No. 193.

⁶⁶ F. Bell, M. Bailey and S. Gower to J. Russell, 16 Sept. 1862, encl. in E. Neale to J. Russell, 21 Sept. 1862, FO 410/6.

“What course will England pursue?” is on the mind of every one. England has but one course open to her ... Punish the Daimios whose retainers have spilled English Blood. They are known!!!, and can be reached.⁶⁷

Across 1863 the *Herald* kept Richardson’s name alive, pushing for a showdown, making the idea of armed intervention ever more conceivable, and anxiously monitoring how the issue played out in the home and China press. By the summer the paper congratulated itself upon the attention the Yokohama community had lately received in the British press – even if it still had cause to resent the tone of some of the coverage.⁶⁸

An active treaty port press was one thing, but, as Darwin observed, getting traction could also depend on the skill and connections of a ‘second bridgehead’ at the domestic end of the imperial axis. In this, the advocates of intervention were, in part, simply lucky; lucky that Rutherford Alcock – Britain’s first Consul-General in Japan, and a trusted diviner of Japanese events – happened to be in London, on extended medical leave, as word of the attack came in. Through Alcock, the tyranny of distance that had so often kept Japan out of mind in London was temporarily bridged; and while he was normally no friend of the Yokohama merchants, on this occasion he was on hand to share their indignation, echo their views of the wider interests at stake, and to meet personally with the Foreign Secretary and urge a forceful response. Richardson’s murder, Alcock told Russell, was ‘of a character more openly defiant’ than any which had come before, and called ‘for a corresponding energy in the demand for justice and redress’. ‘There is a contagion in such examples’, he warned. Coming as it did so soon after British diplomatic concessions, it would not fail to embolden

⁶⁷ ‘The Late Murder’, *The Japan Express* I, no. 18, 20 Sept. 1862.

⁶⁸ *JH* 83, 26 Sept. 1863, 99.

those intent on ‘pen[ning] us up as the Dutch of old, in one or more [Dejimas]’.⁶⁹ Raising the twin spectres of Dejima and Canton – synonyms for the humiliation of European power in Asia – was a particularly powerful line that featured prominently in the debates that followed.⁷⁰

There was also something in the circumstances of the murder that helped mark it out as ‘the most atrocious’ of the attacks yet experienced by Japan’s foreign residents.⁷¹ It had happened, shockingly, ‘in the open day, upon the broad high road, before more than 200 witnesses’ – including European survivors. Unlike past attacks it was not, apparently, the work of an isolated zealot, but had occurred ‘in the presence of one of the magnates of the land’, raising hopes that someone might finally be brought to book.⁷² The fact that an English woman had been in the party also made this a ‘special outrage’, with some of the coverage echoing narratives of chivalry and feminine victimhood familiar to scholars of the Indian ‘Mutiny’.⁷³ Beyond these circumstances, Richardson’s murder had occurred amidst a feeling – as widespread as it was vague – that Japan stood at a crossroads, its future orientation and prospects teetering in the balance, ‘a lurid star of the first magnitude’.⁷⁴ Critics of the Opium Wars still hoped that British intercourse with Japan may yet flourish without repeating the bloody mistakes that marred its record in China, so that the Government’s response took on a wider significance.⁷⁵ All this was amplified by the heightened interest in foreign affairs that characterised British politics in the 1860s.⁷⁶ As Yokoyama Toshio has observed, the early

⁶⁹ R. Alcock to J. Russell, 29 Nov. 1862, FO 46/25.

⁷⁰ For example: G.S. Morrison, *Our Position and Policy in Japan* (Brighton, 1863).

⁷¹ R. Alcock to J. Russell, 29 Nov. 1862, and encl. R. Alcock, ‘Memorandum on Admiral Hope’s despatch to the Admiralty in reference to Japanese Affairs’, FO 46/25.

⁷² *JH* 44, 20 Sept. 1862, 173; see also: *JH* 45, 27 Sept. 1862, 179. Foreign magistrate Mizuno Tadanori agreed that the failure to bring assassins to justice was ‘particularly reprehensible in the case of the Namamugi affair, for although it took place before the eyes of the lord himself, his retainers have been allowed to escape’: T. Mizuno to M. Inoue, 20 April 1863, cited in Beasley, *Select Documents*, 240-241.

⁷³ Blunt, ‘Embodying War’; Paxton, ‘Mobilizing Chivalry’.

⁷⁴ *NCH* 625, 19 July 1862, 114, republished in: *JH* 38, 9 Aug. 1862.

⁷⁵ ‘The State of Our Relations with Japan’, *The Herald of Peace* 157, 1 July 1863, 217-219.

⁷⁶ Howe, ‘Free Trade’, 35.

1860s did not merely witness a sea change in British depictions of Japan; because of its remoteness ‘Japan became a country which...authors felt free to use for any kind of argument’.⁷⁷

In positing the bridgehead concept, Darwin called for closer attention to the ‘information milieu’ of British expansion – the forms and means by which information from the periphery ‘was gathered, processed and disseminated at home’. In Japan, British officials admitted their difficulties in understanding Japanese factions, distinguishing Japanese personalities, and in making any sense of a tumultuous political environment.⁷⁸ But in the absence of consistent, coherent political analysis, the importance of how fragmentary information was packaged and presented grew, so that the fog of confusion that surrounded Britain’s Japan policy presented the merchants with a chance to influence events.

A number of sets of images seem to have really cut through to shape the decision to approve military action, impressions formed in the treaty port press and echoed in official and private papers that winter. One was the image of Richardson as a martyr for the cause of free trade. This was vital to the merchants’ bid to conflate Britain’s response to his death with their own demands for ever greater commercial access. The idea spread alongside a carefully curated image of Richardson himself as a ‘fine and manly specimen of a young Englishman’, whose ‘gentle manner and chivalrous disposition, were concealed under a quiet exterior’: a laudatory assessment that would only later be challenged.⁷⁹ Men like Richardson, the *Japan Herald* insisted, had ‘responded to the call’ and ‘come here as “pioneers of trade and civilization”’; it fell to the British Government to ensure they were not abandoned to assassination ‘or driven out by threats until our trade is annihilated and our prestige

⁷⁷ Yokoyama, *Japan in the Victorian Mind*, 87.

⁷⁸ Neale despaired of ‘the great difficulty of obtaining any reliable information in this country’: E. Neale to Major-General Brown, 12 May 1863, FO 46/40. For similar complaints by France’s Minister in Yokohama, see: G. Bellecourt to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 11 June 1862, ADAE, CP 59 (Japon), Vol. 6, No. 161.

⁷⁹ See further: Fletcher, *Namamugi*.

destroyed'.⁸⁰ These were powerful images to deploy in the 1860s in Britain, where a vague awareness of the persecution of Christians and of the exclusion of foreigners made up much of what was known of Japan, and where the ideology of Free Trade ran at its peak. By the start of 1863 the Yokohama merchants had become adept at equating their restlessness with the march of progress, while depicting Neale as a brake on deeper access. Crucially, the habit of connecting Richardson's murder with the survival of foreign trade had become widespread, his killing read in terms of a premeditated campaign to grind the commercial treaties out of existence.⁸¹

Framing Richardson's murder in this way greatly increased its impact in Britain. It created a simple framework through which those with no knowledge of Japan could imagine the stakes and empathise with the merchants. As Russell put it neatly, if crudely, the Japanese 'appear from a distance to be divided into free traders and protectionist parties, as we have been at home'.⁸² It also helped to overcome more positive impressions of Japan and the *bakufu*, either emanating from more optimistic voices (such as the American Consul, George Fisher) or belonging to an earlier wave of Japan literature in Britain.⁸³

A second set of images concerned Japan's seaways, highways and entrepôts. We might refer to these as the imagined geographies of intervention, for they helped policymakers quite unfamiliar with Japan to imagine what was at stake, and what Britain might do about it. First, editorials drew knowingly on the spatial imaginary of 'confinement' to the coast – that powerful motif of the Opium Wars. As Hong Kong's *China Mail* put it in January 1863, 'it is only too well known that our liberties and privileges in Japan have been gradually curtailed, until they have reached those narrow limits by which we are virtually

⁸⁰ *JH* 45, 27 Sept. 1862, 178.

⁸¹ *JH* 44, 20 Sept. 1862.

⁸² J. Russell to R. Alcock, 26 Apr. 1861, PRO 30/22/101.

⁸³ Yokoyama, *Japan in the Victorian Mind*, 85.

confined to a spot of earth ...'.⁸⁴ It was particularly effective, with British influence, commerce and civilisation being 'imprisoned' within 'narrow' and 'vulnerable' enclaves; even those hostile to the merchants' demands found themselves using this language.⁸⁵

Another image floating before policy-makers' minds was of the high road, the Tōkaidō; not as an artery for greater western commerce (foreign residents really only used it for leisure) but as a gauntlet for national prestige. Again, historians of the Opium Wars have shown the importance of issues of dignity, honour and pride in understanding how colonial conflicts escalated; not least their role in crystallising a sense of what was at stake for a Cabinet for whom East Asian affairs were at most of intermittent interest.⁸⁶ In *bakumatsu* Japan, these issues were intimately bound up with the idea of The Road. John Reddie Black, the first editor of the *Japan Herald*, recalled the emotive power of 'the far-famed Tokaido' in the eyes of the Yokohama merchants, and its place within their demands for ever greater levels of access. Exploring the high road 'was something to talk about as a kind of feat of daring', Black remembered, 'deserving of being described to all one's friends as something very heroic and wonderful'.⁸⁷ Accounts of trips and of incidents on the road filled the pages of the settlement press and featured often in consular despatches. It was by exploring the road that the merchant community contrasted their position with that of the ignominious confinement of the Dutch at Dejima, with parties insisting on their right to roam within treaty limits, relating near-misses with daimio processions, and loudly demanding an extension of the range of excursions permitted. By the time of the Namamugi incident, foreigners' use of the Tōkaidō had become a portentous symbol of status, an activity so charged with potential for insult and slight that it was bound to generate conflict sooner or later. In the weeks and

⁸⁴ *China Mail* 937, 29 Jan. 1863, 18.

⁸⁵ R. Cobden, letter of 7 Nov. 1863, cited in Hobson, *Richard Cobden*, 315-7.

⁸⁶ Bickers, *Scramble*, 81; Melancon, *Britain's China Policy*.

⁸⁷ Black, *Young Japan*, 240. A similar frisson accompanied excursions into the countryside around Shanghai before the Treaty of Tianjin: R. Alcock to G. Bonham, no. 57, 23 May 1848, TNA, FO 228/90.

months following Richardson's death, foreign merchants defiantly set out along the high road to, in the *Herald's* words, 'exercise our liberty'; Neale's repeated attempts to discourage this behaviour were among the foremost complaints lodged against him.⁸⁸

A third imagined geography of intervention concerned the idea that the archipelagic nature of Japan made its leading *daimiyo* particularly vulnerable to even a limited application of naval force. This idea seems to have taken hold over the spring of 1863, temporarily overturning long-standing reservations about the difficulties of fighting in Japan. 'No daimio is more accessible for redress than this prince', wrote one merchant about Shimazu Hisamitsu, noting his city by the bay, his shipping concerns, and his interests along the Ryūkyū island chain.⁸⁹ These views were shortly being echoed in official, naval and private correspondence: Satsuma's territories 'lie within our grasp', urged Alcock, 'and are peculiarly exposed to attack from the sea...'.⁹⁰ Satsuma's true relationship with the Shogunate may have been a mystery to the British; its attitude towards foreign trade was widely misunderstood; but a growing belief that a naval demonstration here would be both cheap and effective helped to favour that course of action nonetheless. Within a week of news of the Namamugi affair reaching London, the First Lord of the Admiralty was writing to Lord John Russell with 'information...of use in considering how we should act ... I have now a chart of the Japanese islands, on which the properties of several principal Daimios are marked. They can be attacked by ships and gun-boats'.⁹¹ This was music to Palmerston's ears. 'If their residences are approachable to ... our ships', he wrote privately to his Foreign Secretary, 'or if they have an interest in Ports which can be blockaded or knocked about their ears without disturbing our ports of commerce, an example or two of just retribution would

⁸⁸ *JH* 44, 20 Sept. 1862, 173; *JH* 55, 6 Dec. 1862, 219.

⁸⁹ F. Hall, diary for 17 Sept. 1862, in Notehelfer, *American Eyes*, 450.

⁹⁰ R. Alcock to J. Russell, 29 Nov. 1862, PRO 30/22/101. In 1868, in marked contrast, British officialdom's collective unfamiliarity with Northern Honshu contributed to their wariness towards intervening in the Boshin War. For more on this geographical dimension, see: Daniels, "Japanese Civil War", 241-263.

⁹¹ E. Seymour to J. Russell, 5 Dec. 1862, TNA, PRO 30/22/24.

go far to teach these Gentlemen better conduct'.⁹² Ultimately, this reading of Satsuma's acute maritime vulnerability led to overconfidence: the British would be surprised by the damage they themselves sustained at Kagoshima.

And so, while the Prime Minister may ordinarily have shown no particular interest in Japan, he could quickly recognise the contours of this crisis. Richardson's death presented such a neat image that it cut through the fog: abstract issues of national prestige and the course of free trade were embodied in the aborted progress of one man along a country road. Threats of and recourse to blockade and bombardment, he wrote to Russell that December, were 'the true [method] for putting an end to these atrocities'. *Daimyō* residences 'should share the fate of the Summer Palace in China'.⁹³ Within a month, fresh instructions were on their way to Neale in Yokohama. While they approved of his caution in the immediate aftermath of the killing, and censured Vyse for his flagrant insubordination, they also contained an implicit warning: some form of resolute action, backed up by the threat of force, would now be required to keep on the front foot. Vyse's conduct may have been wayward, but London could 'perfectly understand the feelings of indignation and alarm' which had spread through the merchant community: Neale must demand reparations from the *bakufu* and Satsuma alike and, if necessary to secure them, call on the navy to take such measures 'of reprisal or blockade, or of both'.⁹⁴

To re-establish Neale's authority in the merchants' eyes, he was explicitly given ownership of the new policy. He would need to act decisively to prevent the community's fearful agitation from boiling over once again. Ultimately, any understanding of how the bombardment of Kagoshima came to pass must take into account the fragile authority of Britain's man-on-the-spot, and the tremendous strain upon him. The midnight meetings of

⁹² Palmerston note of 5 Dec. 1862, PRO 30/22/24.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ J. Russell to E. Neale, no. 38, 24 Dec. 1862, TNA, FO 46/20.

September 1862, six subsequent months of merchant pressure, and London's concern about their official's local legitimacy combined to greatly increase the odds of military action. *The Japan Express* had not hesitated to claim that had another official been in Neale's position 'the result would have been very different', and that Neale's failure to demonstrate greater 'Pluck' or 'Humanity' had 'endangered the life of every foreigner in the Settlement'.⁹⁵ Once negotiations began, the repeated cycle of deadlines set and missed worked to ramp up the tension again and again. The *Herald*, reprinting criticisms from the Hong Kong and Shanghai papers, repeatedly suggested that Neale's caution and timidity made him unfit for his post, and that he ought to be recalled.⁹⁶ Periodicals in Britain and the treaty ports dared him to act with thinly-veiled accusations of cowardice; there were calls for an enquiry into his conduct. 'The never-ceasing fatigue, anxiety and overpowering responsibility to which I have [been] subjected from the day of my arrival in this country', Neale later told Russell, 'has weighed heavily on my health and spirit'.⁹⁷ He felt the sting of the merchants' embrace of his French counterpart particularly keenly, and a year later was still complaining bitterly of the embarrassment this had caused him.⁹⁸ Cloistered away in this tightly-packed community, it was perhaps inevitable that the pressure would begin to tell. It was only with the order to make sail for Kagoshima – and among first reports of its apparent destruction – that Neale's reputation, locally at least, began a rehabilitation of sorts.

⁹⁵ 'The Late Murder', *The Japan Express* 1, No. 18, 20 Sept. 1862.

⁹⁶ Black, *Young Japan*, 141.

⁹⁷ E. Neale to J. Russell, 1 Dec. 1863, FO 46/37.

⁹⁸ E. Neale to J. Russell, 31 Oct. 1863, FO 46/37.

A Bridgehead Too Far

The term ‘gunboat diplomacy’ can obscure as much as it reveals. Sometimes it stands in the way of more serious investigation of the complex dynamics of expansion. It can also imply that a particular colonial conflict was more one-sided than it really was. Both shortcomings have affected our readings of what happened at Kagoshima in the August of 1863. For two days the British squadron under Rear Admiral Augustus Kuper bombarded the principal port of the Satsuma domain, and while it succeeded in damaging a large portion of the town, it did not feel much like victory. The squadron was caught off guard when Satsuma’s batteries opened fire first, in an exchange so intense that old hands likened it to the siege of Sebastopol. One ship was forced to slip her cable, another ran aground, while aboard the flagship the Captain and Commander were killed on the bridge by the same shot. By the time the squadron was in position a typhoon was raging in the bay, snapping spars, forcing ships out of line, and bringing on an early dusk that forced the squadron to suspend operations. By the end of the second day the British had sustained sixty casualties, half in the flagship *Euryalus* (hulled ten times, her rigging ‘cut to pieces’), so that readers were troubled to learn of the deadly work done by Satsuma’s ‘splendid artillerists’.⁹⁹ The squadron departed without attempting a landing – let alone securing the arrest of Richardson’s assassins, as had been hoped. ‘We came away’, one shipboard observer wrote, ‘for the most part in a great state of discontent; nearly everyone wanted to go in again the next day, instead of leaving...’.¹⁰⁰

The bombardment of Kagoshima would represent the high water mark of the lobbying of Yokohama merchants for intervention. Yet while London waited to hear the outcome of its

⁹⁹ ‘The Japanese War’, *The New York Times*, 21 Nov. 1863, 2; *Overland China Mail (OCM)*, 11 Sept. 1863.

¹⁰⁰ E. Satow, diary for 13 Sept. 1862, in Morton and Ruxton, *Diaries*, 81.

demands, and again as it digested reports from Kagoshima, there was widespread contemplation of the possibility of a wider war with Japan, and perhaps even occupation of part of the country. Seasoned Japan observers had long suspected that violence might prove necessary before foreign trade could really take root here.¹⁰¹ The liberal *Huddersfield Chronicle* was unusual in giving thanks for Neale's initial caution, but nonetheless suspected that a state of war might not lie very far off.¹⁰² That fight would neither be quick nor easy. The Japanese were 'as warlike as the people of the Punjab', and war with them 'a far more formidable affair than any of our wars in China, perhaps more than our wars in India.'¹⁰³ In Japan both foreign and Japanese authorities issued proclamations that showed just how far they expected things to escalate; the latter requisitioned private boats and began evacuating its subjects from coastal areas.¹⁰⁴ For Palmerston, bombarding Kagoshima sat neatly within a general scheme of 'the usual and unavoidable stages of the intercourse of strong and civilized nations with weaker and less civilized ones' which, to his mind, had already played out in China: treaties were drawn up, faith was breached, and violence ensued until the 'successful display of superior strength'.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, both advocates and critics of intervention in Japan gave that intervention a place along a spectrum of recognisably imperial activity. In London, Frederic Harrison predicted that Britain would now be dragged along a haphazard course of occupying territory across the Japanese archipelago, "'temporarily" of course at first ... to sustain the very authority which we have violently destroyed'.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ Davis, *China*.

¹⁰² 'The Murder of Mr Richardson', *The Times*, 28 Nov. 1862, 7; 'The Past Week', *The London Review*, 29 Nov. 1862, 474; 'What are the Terms of Intercourse with the Japanese to be?', *Huddersfield Chronicle*, 29 Nov. 1862.

¹⁰³ Harrison, "Destruction of Kagoshima", 288-9.

¹⁰⁴ Yokohamashi Rekishi Hakubutsukan, *Namamugi Jiken*, 46. Bellecourt was left in no doubt about the likelihood of conflict: 'Obviously the Japanese are looking for weapons; as soon as they have enough, they will doubtless look for enemies': Bellecourt to Direction Politique (MFA Paris), 10 Oct. 1862, ADAE, CP 59 (Japon), vol. 6, no. 200.

¹⁰⁵ Palmerston to J. Russell, 5 Oct. 1864, cited in Steele, *Palmerston*, 359.

¹⁰⁶ Harrison, "Destruction of Kagoshima", 288-9.

These warnings sound outlandish now, but they were not unfounded. During the eleven month interval between Richardson's murder and the clash at Kagoshima the Admiralty, consular officials and the press raised a number of such possibilities. Initially, attention focused again on those 'Loochoo Islands', the Ryūkyūs, where unofficial designs for greater imperial influence had been floated since the 1840s. Now, as the British considered ways to put pressure on Satsuma, the extent of that domain's authority over those Islands was finally made plain, raising once more the question of some form of British intervention.¹⁰⁷ For the *Japan Herald*, now was the time to eject Satsuma from Ryūkyū altogether, to oversee 'the separation of Loochoo from Japan', to appoint a Resident to advise its King, and to make Naha 'a free trade port'. The advantages to foreign trade were obvious and would radiate out across the North Pacific, just as Hong Kong had proved 'the fulcrum on which the lever has rested which is opening up China'.¹⁰⁸ Nor was this the only annexationist idea doing the rounds. Rutherford Alcock discussed the possibility of temporarily occupying Nagasaki. The consul at Nagasaki, Charles Winchester, proposed occupying an Inland Sea island, perhaps Awaji-shima. The Admiralty, meanwhile, noted the advantages that would accrue from a tighter British hold over the Bonins.¹⁰⁹ Nothing came of these visions, but they are important nonetheless. For a time, the Japanese archipelago held out the prospect – at least to some interested Britons – of potential *points d'appui*; its islands and its coastline a springboard for the further projection of British commerce and power.

These visions remind us of Japan's place in wider discussions of British imperialism in maritime Asia. Arguably, they were as close as Britain – or any of the foreign powers – would come to sidestepping the treaty system and imposing force on *bakumatsu* Japan. And

¹⁰⁷ E. Neale to J. Russell, 28 Oct. 1862, FO 46/25. Neale's French counterpart, Duchesne de Bellecourt, was similarly alive to the potential implications of the Namamugi Incident for the Ryūkyū Islands: G. Bellecourt to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 8 Oct. 1862, ADAE, CP 59 (Japan), vol. 7, no. 199.

¹⁰⁸ *JH* 45, 27 Sept. 1862, 179.

¹⁰⁹ R. Alcock, 'Memorandum on Admiral Hope's despatch'; C. Winchester to J. Russell, 26 June 1863, FO 46/38; Admiralty to A.H. Layard, 29 July 1863, FO 46/40.

yet armed intervention did not result in territorial expansion. The framework of relations established by the Ansei treaties survived, and understanding why this was so offers an insight into the [drivers] and [constraints] underpinning British expansion as a whole.¹¹⁰

In this case, the relative performance of British and Japanese arms mattered, as word of Kagoshima served to check momentum for further operations. News of the squadron had been keenly anticipated, but if this was indeed ‘a fair test of what foreign fleets can do, should the war become more general’, then the results were not encouraging.¹¹¹ To have left with such high casualties, and without effecting a landing, allowed those on shore to rightly celebrate ‘that the English ships did not succeed in coming and that they were swept out and chased away...’.¹¹² The best that *The Overland China Mail* could say of the engagement was that it was ‘wonderfully indecisive’, and it was precisely that indecision which now stoked debate in London about the whole course of action.¹¹³ The bombardment was also seen as offering a trial of the Royal Navy’s new, heavier, breech-loading Armstrong guns, but even these disappointed: reports of their unreliability at Kagoshima would see the navy revert to muzzle-loaders for years to come.¹¹⁴

Kuper, for his part, seems to have been unsure how to proceed. Upon the squadron’s return to Yokohama, he reported soberly on the daunting prospect of more ‘extensive operations’ against other anti-foreign ‘princes’ in Japan.¹¹⁵ The British authorities at Yokohama were thus taken by surprise when, some three months later, envoys from Satsuma unexpectedly arrived and announced their willingness to talk. Ultimately, the British agreed

¹¹⁰ For the Ansei system, see: Auslin, *Negotiating*.

¹¹¹ ‘The Japanese War’, *The New York Times*, 21 Nov. 1863, p. 2; *OCM*, 11 Sept. 1863.

¹¹² *Yokohamashi shi, Shiryō-hen* (Yokohama, 1969), v, 102, cited in Hashimoto, “Collision”, 85.

¹¹³ *OCM*, 15 Oct. 1863.

¹¹⁴ Rowbotham, “Bombardment”, 278.

¹¹⁵ A. Kuper to Admiralty, 26 Aug. 1863, FO 46/41.

to terms that fell a little short of their initial demands, to the ire of many in the Yokohama foreign settlement.¹¹⁶

By then, the drama had shifted from Yokohama to London, where news of the bombardment arrived in late October 1863. In the context of the navy's setbacks, the weaknesses of the Yokohama bridgehead now reasserted themselves, and other voices – ones better placed to bring wider angles of vision onto the case – returned to drown it out. Just as the outrage over Richardson's death had been amplified by the confusion that surrounded British readings of Japan, it now was the turn of fresh misunderstandings – about the scale of destruction apparently wrought upon Kagoshima – to engender feelings of outrage from the other side of the aisle. Rumours began to circulate – quite erroneous – that the entire city had been levelled, and thousands killed; and in Parliament, in the press, and in meetings around the country, the bombardment of Kagoshima became the issue of the day. Alcock quickly perceived the scope for controversy. 'Many questions will arise in the Public mind', he advised Lord Russell that November, '...and be more or less anxiously discussed, as the certainty of another Eastern complication, and the possibility of a protracted war are realized'.¹¹⁷ He was right, for while Kagoshima did prompt letters and petitions from Congregationalists, Baptists, the Peace Society and Richard Cobden (who hoped it might mark 'the turning point in our Eastern policy'), the backlash went deeper and wider than these usual suspects.¹¹⁸ 'The whole transaction', the Liberal MP Justin McCarthy remembered, 'was severely condemned by many Englishmen who did not belong to the ranks

¹¹⁶ 'I confess I look upon the settlement as a mistake. It fails as a lesson to Japanese Daimios and people and mere blood money is useless ... We are hated and despised in Japan and it only remains for us to be feared': Willis correspondence, vol. 44/5, no. 88, W. Willis to G. Willis, 17 Nov. 1863. See further: Fletcher, *Namamugi*, 103-4.

¹¹⁷ *The Times*, 12 Jan. 1864; *The Times*, 12 Dec. 1863. R. Alcock to J. Russell, 'Memorandum on Japanese Affairs' [n.d.], encl. in R. Alcock to J. Russell, 5 Nov. 1863, FO 46/47.

¹¹⁸ See the various petitions encl. in FO 46/41. R. Cobden, letter of 19 Nov. 1863, cited in Hobson, *Cobden*, 319. This letter, addressed to the Mayor of Rochdale, appeared as: 'Mr Cobden on the Japanese Question', *The Times*, 10 Nov. 1863.

of those professed philanthropists whom it is sometimes the fashion to denounce ...'.¹¹⁹ *The Times* reported the bombardment coming up 'at most meetings between members of Parliament and their constituents', and gave space to relate some of the most interesting exchanges.¹²⁰ In that respect, and as a political debate that was simultaneously about British rights and 'freedoms' and the morality of policy, Kagoshima warrants consideration alongside some of the great debates of the age: a successor to the Don Pacifico Affair of 1850; a forerunner to Jamaica and the Governor Eyre controversy of 1865.¹²¹

While much has been written on the impact of the bombardment on Satsuma and on Japanese politics, its fallout in Britain seldom receives the attention it deserves. Read critically, however, it helps plot the headwind against which the case for sustained intervention here had struggled. At first, it was the perceived ferocity of the bombardment itself that set the protest in motion.¹²² Critics read with horror Kuper's own verdict that 'the entire town of Kagosima is now a mass of ruins'.¹²³ And while there were, at first, no further accounts with which to corroborate his claim, the stubborn idea took hold that thousands of innocents must have perished in the bombardment – all to avenge the death of one Englishman. As Colonel Neale was later forced to explain, Kagoshima's population was in fact smaller than most supposed, and almost all its inhabitants had been ordered out of the city by the authorities before the first shot was fired.¹²⁴ There was also some sleight of hand in the most ardent of these critiques, for they tended to gloss over the strength of Satsuma's resistance. But the

¹¹⁹ McCarthy, *History*, iii, 185.

¹²⁰ *The Times*, 12 Jan. 1864; *The Times*, 12 Dec. 1863.

¹²¹ For an extended reflection on the moral dimensions of Britain's Japan policy, see: Stephen, "Japan". A number of contemporaries drew comparisons between the Government's handling of the Namamugi Incident and the Don Pacifico affair, in which an assault on a British subject in Athens led Lord Palmerston, then Foreign Secretary, to order a naval blockade of the Greek coast. Palmerston's conduct was approved by the Commons, but censured by the Lords, becoming a point of reference for diverse commentators on British imperial and foreign policy thereafter.

¹²² *Bee-Hive*, 14 Nov. 1863, 4, cited in Claeys, *British Sceptics*, 86. 'In Europe', wrote Harrison, 'towards white men, towards Christians, the tenth part of this ferocity is impossible'.

¹²³ A. Kuper to E. Neale, 17 Aug. 1863, FO 881/1183.

¹²⁴ TNA: FO 46/43, E. Neale to J. Russell, 16 Jan. 1864; TNA: FO 262/56, E. Neale to J. Russell, 17 Nov. 1863.

misunderstanding over the casualty figures was in all probability quite genuine, driven by a mix of ignorance, outrage and inference (the number of Japanese directly killed by British action may even have been in single figures). Either way, the notion that Neale and Kuper had ‘committed wholesale massacre in revenge for an attack on three British traders’ proved hard to shift. It was still to be found in some accounts from the early twentieth century.¹²⁵

For some, the precise figure was by the by: it was the nature of Kuper’s firing on the town that had brought shame upon the action.¹²⁶ Kuper maintained that he had sailed to Kagoshima ‘with pacific intentions’; his defenders (including, naturally, the *Japan Herald*) denounced Cobden and his ilk for seeking ‘to excite the indignation of the British public against...gallant officers...for acting up to their unmistakeable duty’.¹²⁷ But he had also been heard, before the bombardment, telling Satsuma’s envoys that the city lay at his mercy, and would be destroyed unless they submitted.¹²⁸ Either way, it was hard to overlook the fact that Kuper had continued his bombardment even after it became clear that his shells had fired the city. For some, this became the true ‘outrage’ of the Richardson affair: ‘an act of barbarity unworthy of the civilization of our era’; ‘the most wanton and shameless outrage which has stained the English name for years’.¹²⁹ The *New York Times* thought Kuper’s conduct even more heinous than ‘the blowing of Hindoo rebels from British cannon’ during the Indian ‘Mutiny’.¹³⁰ For others, the bombardment had exposed to the world the extent of Britain’s hypocrisy, for while the government ‘roar[s] like a lion in the Southern or Eastern seas’ against forces ‘utterly incommensurate with ours’, it had felt ‘all the tenderness of [its] lamb-

¹²⁵ For example: Harrison, *Autobiographic Memoirs*, i, 292-3. See also: House, *Kagosima*, 32. A newly-reissued biography of Palmerston repeats the error (and a number of others besides): D. Judd, *Palmerston* (London, 2015), 192-3.

¹²⁶ Gascoyne-Cecil, “Foreign Policy”, 504.

¹²⁷ G. Morrison, untitled pamphlet, 16 Nov. 1863, encl. in G. Morrison to R. Alcock, 4 Dec. 1863, FO 46/38.

¹²⁸ ‘The Destruction of Kagoshima, and Our Relations with Japan’, *The Herald of Peace* 161 (N.S.), 1 Dec. 1863, 279-280; *The Times*, 12 Dec. 1863.

¹²⁹ Petition of the Liverpool Peace Society to Lord John Russell, 18 Dec. 1863, FO 46/41; Harrison, *Autobiographic Memoirs*, i, 290.

¹³⁰ ‘British Barbarity’, *The New York Times*, 24 Nov. 1863, 4.

like bleating' against opponents of equal strength. In the context of recent humiliations in British foreign policy in Europe, backing down from collisions with Prussia (over Denmark) and Russia (over Poland), it seemed clear that 'the arrogant patrons of the *Civis Romanus* will only defend him against safe antagonists' – more echoes of the Don Pacifico affair. Thus had British policy been reduced to 'bullying the weak and truckling to the strong ... a portentous mixture of bounce and baseness'.¹³¹

As criticism of the navy's conduct at Kagoshima mounted, international acquiescence in Britain's unilateral intervention also began to break down. That united front had helped enable action in the first place. The French Minister Bellecourt, as we have seen, was just as keen as the merchants to see Satsuma humiliated and European prestige restored, while it was the French Admiral Jaures' undertaking to protect Yokohama in the absence of Kuper's squadron that freed the Royal Navy to sail for Kagoshima. (American diplomats in Japan were more guarded in their support, but frankly admitted their diminished authority in light of the spectacle of their own Civil War.)¹³² The reported scale of destruction at Kagoshima played badly, however, as newspapers in France and the United States seized the opportunity to paint Britain as a bully and to decry 'British barbarity' – much to the chagrin of Robert Gascoyne-Cecil, the future Lord Salisbury.¹³³ Such criticism made its way back into British politics: in proposing a fresh debate on the bombardment in Parliament, the MP Charles Buxton hoped 'that the character of England for humanity [would] be vindicated', for 'it has suffered severely in the eyes of foreigners from this act'.¹³⁴ When the Government's demands arrived in Japan, it was even reported that the Russian and American representatives had

¹³¹ Gascoyne-Cecil, "Foreign Policy". *Parcere superbis et debellare subjectos*, Harrison quipped: an inversion of Virgil's dictum, 'spare the vanquished, subdue the arrogant': Harrison, *Autobiographic Memoirs*, i, 285.

¹³² Ion, "Namamugi Incident", 9.

¹³³ Gascoyne-Cecil, "Foreign Policy". For *The New York Times* 'the burning and shelling of an unprepared Japanese city' was 'something sickening and horrible beyond expression': 'British Barbarity', *The New York Times*, 24 Nov. 1863, 4.

¹³⁴ C. Buxton to J. Russell, 29 Jan. 1864, PRO 30/22/14D.

offered the *bakufu* ‘moral and material support’ should they stand their ground. That rumour could never be proven, but it nonetheless gave pause to some erstwhile advocates of a forceful policy towards Japan, lest further intervention ‘[add] a European quarrel to an Asiatic difficulty’.¹³⁵

More broadly, the bombardment shocked audiences because it jarred so strikingly with the generally positive images of Japan circulating over the previous decade. Back in the 1850s news of Lord Elgin’s commercial treaty had been ‘proclaimed with a loud flourish of trumpets’; Laurence Oliphant’s highly-regarded *Narrative* of that expedition conveyed a delightfully romantic impression of the country.¹³⁶ Visitors routinely praised its cleanliness and its climate, the chastity of its women and the ‘Englishness’ of the scenery, so that the advocates of military intervention found themselves colliding with ‘statements that Japan was like a garden of Eden...before Europeans entered the country...’.¹³⁷ Indeed, Kagoshima renewed discussions as to where, precisely, Japan sat in the spectrum of ‘civilized’ and ‘barbarous’ states, and what those indices of ‘civilization’ might be. The London Peace Society, for instance, thought the Japanese ‘in many respects as civilized as ourselves’; Cobden thought their bravery, ‘mechanical ingenuity’ and ‘progressive character’ to be ‘their best security against injustice’.¹³⁸ Frederic Harrison went a step further, believing both ‘Christian’ and ‘civilizational’ indices of human worth to have been forever tainted by the imperatives of empire: instead, from a humanitarian perspective, the Japanese were ‘*relatively* our equals, occasionally our superiors, and essentially our brothers’.¹³⁹ This was a minority concern, but the Kagoshima controversy did lead others to question the justice

¹³⁵ Reeve, “Sir Rutherford Alcock”.

¹³⁶ Gascoyne-Cecil, “Foreign Policy”, p. 494; Yokoyama, *Japan in the Victorian Mind*; Oliphant, *Narrative*.

¹³⁷ J. Hughes to J. Russell, 11 July 1863, FO 46/40. For a contemporary reflection on themes in the new literature on Japan, see: ‘Japan and the Japanese’, *The Edinburgh Review* 113, no. 229 (1861), 40-45.

¹³⁸ ‘Destruction of Kagosima’, *Herald of Peace*, 278; Cobden, letter of 19 Nov. 1863, cited in Hobson, *Cobden*, 319. For more on this question in Victorian political thought, see: Pitts, “Victorian International Law”, 67-88.

¹³⁹ Harrison, *Autobiographic Memoirs*, i, 289-290 (emphasis in original). Looking back, Harrison considered Kagoshima the ‘breaking-point’ in his growing critique of British imperialism: Claeys, *British Sceptics*, 84-85.

forcing commercial treaties on Japan in the first place ‘in the teeth of all their strongest prejudices, and in defiance of their traditional policy’.¹⁴⁰

In these circumstances, and with Britain seemingly ‘in the thick of a policy which involves itself in the affairs of every state from Finland to Sicily, and from Japan to the Caspian’, Kagoshima was taken up as a means to make broader attacks on Palmerston’s Government.¹⁴¹ While a motion of censure in March 1864 failed (partly because Cobden saw little prospect of besting his old antagonist this time, and pulled his punches), it nonetheless mobilised a broad range of opinion, and new critiques of empire.¹⁴² Robert Gascoyne-Cecil, for instance, dismissed as cant the government’s talk of merchants’ rights and free trade. Bombarding Kagoshima merely flattered its need to display its ‘warlike and heroic side’. This was ...

attractive to a Government like that of England at this moment, that is forced to shape all its foreign and all its domestic policy with a view of picking up stray votes in the House of Commons. The opportunity is most fascinating of coming forward at once as the champion of the British merchant and of the British flag – of uttering endless flourishes about *Civis Romanus* – and running all the while no risk of defeat nor even of embarrassing expenditure. Japan presents this union of advantages in a high degree...¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ ‘The State of Our Relations with Japan’, *The Herald of Peace* 157 (N.S.), 1 July 1863, 217. See also: memorial of the London Peace Society, encl. in H. Richard to J. Russell, 13 Aug. 1863, FO 46/40.

¹⁴¹ McCarthy, *History*, iii, 208.

¹⁴² The Kagoshima debate occurred alongside narrow votes of censure against British military actions in southern Africa and New Zealand. It dynamized new voices critical of Britain’s role in the world, including the Positivists (Frederic Harrison considered it ‘a turning-point in our whole Eastern, one may say almost our whole foreign, policy’), so that Kagoshima played an important part in the development of a new, humanitarian critique of empire that some felt would be forceful than either Cobden’s economic internationalism, or Bright’s Christian cosmopolitanism: Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics*, 84-86.

¹⁴³ Gascoyne-Cecil, “Foreign Policy”, 492-3.

For Cecil, British intervention in Japan was part of a political offering of moral indignation and careless belligerence, tailored to the tastes of the middle class. Palmerston's Radical opponents, in contrast, focused on the government's role in whipping up outrage to 'hypnotise' Parliament and the nation, distracting them from attending to the cause of reform at home.¹⁴⁴ To them, the whole affair brought back memories of the Second Opium War (1856-60), and reaffirmed how merchant lobbying could deflect the course of British policy.¹⁴⁵ This inspired a new wave of criticism of the behaviour of British merchants in Asia, and would see the unfortunate Mr Richardson himself recast as an avatar of merchant arrogance, intolerance and cupidity.¹⁴⁶

The Yokohama merchants responded indignantly, but nonetheless lost ground in London across the latter part of 1863. By bombarding Kagoshima, Palmerston's government had touched a nerve. As yet another of Britain's 'semi-wars', it compounded a wider feeling in the 1860s that international affairs were in crisis. Word of this reaction got back to Japan, where Mitsukuri Teiichirō translated coverage in the Yokohama press for circulation among high-ranking figures in the *bakufu*.¹⁴⁷ Ultimately, the outcry was sufficient to warn Britain's government against launching further unilateral operations in Japan. Late in 1863, Russell issued instructions that henceforth 'no wanton injury should be inflicted upon the Japanese population', nor even forts and batteries attacked if they be 'surrounded by the dwellings and places of trade of the non-combatant inhabitants'.¹⁴⁸ Japan, unlike China, would not become the object of sustained military attention.¹⁴⁹ The whole experience, in fact, had been rather

¹⁴⁴ Harrison, *Autobiographic Memoirs*, i, 286-7; Taylor, "Imperium et Libertas".

¹⁴⁵ For one example among many: *The Herald of Peace* 153 (N.S.), 1 Mar. 1863, 170.

¹⁴⁶ For example: 'Why Mr. Richardson Was Killed', *The London and China Telegraph*, 29 Oct. 1863, 529.

¹⁴⁷ Yokoyama, *Japan in the Victorian Mind*, 84.

¹⁴⁸ J. Russell to Secretary to the Admiralty, 14 Nov. 1863, FO 262/54. See also the new instructions to Alcock: J. Russell to R. Alcock, 17 Dec. 1863, FO 46/31.

¹⁴⁹ British warships would go into action once more, at Shimonoseki in September 1864 – but on the local initiative of Rutherford Alcock (who had by then returned to Japan), and against the wishes of the Foreign

humbling. ‘However formidable as an engine of destruction’, Neale was forced to conclude of Kuper’s squadron, it could not ‘by such operations as are within the reach of ships of war, coerce the rulers of this country into the adoption of the measures and course of action we may desire and have a right to expect’.¹⁵⁰ So much for the maritime vulnerability of the leading *daimyō*. In Japan, ‘gunboat diplomacy’ had met its match.

Conclusion

For historians of Japan, and among the wider Japanese public, the killing of Charles Richardson and the clash at Kagoshima have a firm place in narratives of the Meiji Ishin. If they have seldom received attention from historians of empire, then one rare British treatment of the incident’s international implications has an explanation: ‘the overall importance to Britain of what occurred in Japan was small ... What were Britain’s incidents were Japan’s major events’. This article has suggested that this does a disservice to the response these events inspired in Britain. For a time, the details of the affair – a dead British merchant, the celebrated Tōkaidō, a fledgling foreign settlement, a Royal Navy squadron, a city aflame – became evocative symbols in a wider debate over the nature and direction of British expansion.

This article also warns against confusing the ultimate absence of imperial expansion with disinterest in its possibility. During the final years of Tokugawa rule, Japan became the

Office. Even then, they did so as part of a coordinated, international squadron, and with the limited objective of disabling specific military batteries to keep the Inland Sea open to western shipping.

¹⁵⁰ E. Neale to J. Russell, 14 Oct. 1863, FO 46/37.

focus of attention of a variety of sub-imperial groups, and if they tended to struggle to get purchase, win influence or direct events, their frustrations have just as much to offer us, as historians of imperialism, as examples of protectorates, occupations and annexations elsewhere. Exploring the contingency, confusion and messiness of British expansion has become one of John Darwin's signal contributions to the field. It was by taking this seriously, exploring its complexities, that he sought to take further the work of Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, in particular.¹⁵¹ For a period, circumstances allowed Yokohama to act as a bridgehead of imperialism, and the private interests of its foreign merchants to be parlayed into an issue of wider, national interest. By exploring these conditions in detail – the activism of the merchant press, the power of the images it mobilised, the crisis of authority of the local British representative, poor communications, international acquiescence, and the skill of the 'domestic bridgehead' – as well as understanding how they were eclipsed, we enrich our understanding of expansion and its constraints. In that sense, thinking with a concept of the bridgehead can geographically expand the scope of imperial history into new, less-familiar locales. Imperial 'failures', such as Japan would ultimately prove, do not merely offer a fresh take on the stresses and dynamics of imperial expansion. They also help us to locate British and other expansionisms within their global and not merely imperial contexts.

If the case of *bakumatsu* Japan has much to offer scholars of imperial expansion, then there is plenty yet for imperial historians to contribute in return, by bringing Japan into more active dialogue with other situations of informal empire in the mid-nineteenth century. Historians of Japan, and also of Anglo-Japanese relations, have sensed as much, though they may not routinely use this terminology.¹⁵² In tracing the contours of the Richardson affair, we

¹⁵¹ 'What we can add', Darwin wrote in 2012, 'is an emphasis upon the multiple viewpoints and sometimes conflicting activities of all those individuals and interests...for whom empire represented either a valuable asset or a desirable prospect': Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, 12.

¹⁵² 'Japan was now linked to the international system in a subordinate position'. Kato p. 72.

can sketch out the limits of a window in time – perhaps from the late 1840s to the 1880s – in which British influence in Japan can be explored in much the same way as we might examine it in the eastern Mediterranean, or South America, or along the China coast, and alive to commonalities and connectivities between these settings. Doing so can offer a fresh perspective on old questions, and challenge some of the cherished exceptionalisms that have long featured in Japanese historical writing – from the story of the *oyatoi gaikokujin*, the thousands of foreign ‘experts’ and assistants hired by the Meiji state (whose experiences take on a different complexion when viewed through the prisms of ‘imperial careering’ and informal empire), to re-framing mid-century diplomacy around the concept of anti-colonial ‘resistance’.¹⁵³ The Victorians’ intervention in Japan may have proved limited in scope, and their interest in intervention fitful. But it nonetheless illuminates that ‘long chain of mundane activities’ that somewhere, sometimes, translated into that ‘grand word: “empire”’.¹⁵⁴

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¹⁵³ Auslin, *Negotiating*.

¹⁵⁴ Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*.

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