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Engelbert Kaempfer’s Legacy to Japan

B.M. Bodart-Bailey*

keyword: Engelbert, Kaempfer, Japan, intellectual legacy

The German scholar Engelbert Kaempfer (1651-1716) visited Japan 1690-92 as physician at the trading station of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) on the man-made island of Deshima in the harbor of Nagasaki. With his subsequent two major publications, the monumental Latin work known as *Amoenitates Exoticae* of 1712 and the posthumous publication of his manuscript *Heutiges Japan (To-day’s Japan)* in English as *The History of Japan* in 1727, his legacy to the Western world is indisputable. The latter work was an immediate success and in the ten years after the initial publication appeared in a total of ten editions of reprints and translations indicating its importance. When well over a century later the American Commodore Mathew C. Perry set out to “open up” the hermit nation of Japan, he consulted Kaempfer’s *History*, and even after Japan had ended its seclusion, the book was used as a reference work by Western journalists to explain practices alien to the West.²

Kaempfer’s Work and the 20th Century Change in Historical Inquiry

The significance of Kaempfer’s work did not diminish after foreigners could freely enter the country and conduct their own research. To the contrary. Modernization came quickly and Kaempfer had recorded the life of its people before Japan opened itself to the West. Further, as the 20th century progressed, new developments in historiography were rapidly changing the subjects of historical inquiry. Marxist historians were concerned with the life of the working class rather than the ruling elite, and the latter’s political schemes and battles. However, a group of scholars in France, while in agreement that historical inquiry should deal with the life of the ordinary women and men making up the greater part of the population, considered Marxist economic determinism too restrictive. Known as the Annales School, after their publication “Journal Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations” that first appeared in 1929, they aspired to describe the past in terms of all aspects of the human condition: a fusion of economic, social and cultural history, including the findings of disciplines such as geography, climatology, zoology, etc. as the subject required.³ The

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Annales School gained wide influence beyond the borders of France after the war under the leadership of Fernand Braudel (1902-1985). Braudel’s prodigious output sketching the world’s civilizations with a broad brush, familiarized historians throughout the world with the Annales method. Together with the influence of Marxist writing, the subject of historical inquiry changed from dealing mainly with the political elite to one dealing with the life of the general population.

However, in nearly all civilizations historical sources had been controlled if not written by the ruling elite. This was certainly the case in Japan where the samurai class and upper clergy produced most of the documents still available today. They showed little interest in the life of the lower classes and when the commoners did put brush to paper it was to record unusual events and not the well-known daily flow of life. A number of popular illustrated dictionaries appeared in the pre-modern period, but again, these were written to explain what the populace did not know, and not what they were well acquainted with. In the second half of the 16th and early 17th century, the missionaries had written about aspects of Japanese culture, but often their views were colored by the fact that this was a “heathen country.” Moreover, significant changes took place after the missionaries were banned and the Tokugawa peace took effect. For the first time in Japanese history, the commoners could afford more than the bare necessities to stay alive and a flowering bourgeois culture emerged. Many of the arts considered the mainstay of traditional Japanese culture to-day, such as kabuki, haiku and ukiyo-e – the woodblock prints of the “floating world” – had developed around the time Kaempfer arrived in Japan. To keep the peace, the country had closed itself off from the outside world and strict laws governing the lives of the various classes contributed to shaping a singular culture.

Describing this unique culture, Kaempfer’s writing gained new significance for historians of Japan, both Western and Japanese, when historical inquiry shifted its focus from the achievements of the elite to the life of the broad population. It is perhaps not surprising that in his *A History of Civilizations*, Fernand Braudel used Kaempfer’s work to describe life in Japan, and praised the latter as “a masterpiece of observation”.

When evaluating Kaempfer’s legacy to Japan, his detailed description of what he saw and heard during his two year stay is perhaps the most important. Unlike other employees of the Dutch East India Company posted to the trading post on the island of Deshima in the harbor of Nagasaki, Kaempfer did not come to make gains through private trading or to promote his standing in the company. After nearly a decade of university studies, he had left Europe to travel to the Far East with the express aim of producing descriptions of foreign countries more detailed and exact than any existing. During some eight years of travel from Sweden through Russia to Persia and then via India, Indonesia and Siam to Japan, he had been able to hone in his skills of observation. He managed to evade Japan’s strict laws forbidding foreigners to keep a record of what they saw with
his well-trained visual memory permitting him to sketch what he had observed later in the privacy of his room, and while seated on horseback for many hours of travel, he succeeded in skillfully hiding his compass as well as the minute maps he drafted under plants which he pretended to sketch. But perhaps of greatest value is that he recorded the very ordinary things of daily life, matters which no Japanese would have considered worthwhile to put on paper. Such as the public toilets which farmers erected along the roads, so that travelers could relieve themselves and at the same time fertilize the fields. For people of high standing, sanitary conditions were improved by pasting fresh white paper on all parts the visitor might come in contact with. While anthropologists have pointed out that in the first half of the Tokugawa period the steam bath rather than the hot water bath was the norm, only from Kaempfer do we learn about the details of the small steam chamber and the actual experience of cleaning the body therein. Again, when Kaempfer describes the crowds of people travelling the Tōkaidō or Eastern Highway, he not only describes the dress of the people and their movements – such as the details of “the swaggering gait” of the porters of the daimyo processions – but also the sound: no voices could be heard when several hundred or even thousand men passed “only the noise of their clothes, feet, and the horses ...” Since such detailed material is generally not available in Japanese sources, both Japanese and Western historians rely on Kaempfer’s legacy when describing life in Tokugawa Japan.

A Book to be Feared

“He keeps at his side Kaempfer’s History of Japan and never is without it. He says, “There have been many books written about Japan since this one, but none can touch it. The book is now out of print, but its reputation has not diminished. That proves Kaempfer was really a scholar.”

Thus wrote the painter and administrator Watanabe Kazan (1793-1841) citing Johannes Niemann (1796-1850), head of the VOC’s trading post (opperhoffd) at Nagasaki from 1834 to 1838. The book Kazan refers to is De Beschryving van Japan, the Dutch translation of the English translation of Kaempfers’s work on Japan. After its publication in 1727, the History of Japan quickly caught the attention of publishers in Holland and already two years later a Dutch version was on the market. The publication must have been a lucrative venture, for only four years later, in 1733, a second Dutch translation appeared by a different publisher. Niemann’s evaluation of the work shows that it stood the test of examination by the people who followed in Kaempfer's footsteps in Japan nearly a century and a half later.

Kazan’s first mention of Kaempfer and his work appears in his diary entry for January 2, 1831.
There was obviously some confusion who this man was. Kazan heard that Kaempfer had come to Japan as interpreter and left again after acquiring detailed knowledge about the country. Later Kazan was again mistakenly informed that Kaempfer returned secretly to Satsuma and managed to remain seven years undetected by pretending to be deaf-mute and lame. Kazan could not read the Dutch work, but more than 40 illustrations contained in the book “all of them showing in detail Japanese geography and customs” convinced him that the “book is strange but well conveys the special features of Japan, good and bad.”

One might have thought that Kazan would have welcomed this detailed, correct description of his native country now available to foreigners, but his judgement of Kaempfer’s work was: “To be feared.”10 Similar thoughts had already been expressed by the scholar of Dutch from the Fukuoka domain Aoki Okikatsu in 1804.11

With advances in shipbuilding, more and more foreign vessels, especially from nearby Russia, entered Japanese waters, surveying the coastline and demanding that the country end its long seclusion policy and open itself to trade with countries beyond Holland and China. The Dutch – intent to preserve their monopoly of trade – had from early on kept the Japanese informed on how the Catholics had toppled rulers and enslaved populations in South America. More recently they
transmitted rumors of imminent Russian attacks, strengthening Japan’s resolve not to permit foreign intrusion. A comprehensive system of supervision of the few Dutch permitted temporary residence on the small, man-made island of Deshima in the harbor of Nagasaki was to stop the foreigners from gaining any knowledge about the country. Yet with the Dutch translation of Kaempfer’s work, the Japanese learned that in spite of all precautions, a detailed description of their cities, harbors, bridges and highways – an excellent guide for any intruding army – could be purchased in Europe. Though Kazan was aware that Japan lacked the military force to repel a foreign attack, he turned into a strong advocate of sea defenses and on promotion to a senior post in his native domain of Tahara along the south-eastern coast of modern Aichi prefecture, was placed in charge of the domain’s defense in 1832.12

We do not know when *De Beschryving van Japan* first reached Japan. For members of the VOC posted to Japan there was no better introduction to what awaited them at the other end of the world – no doubt the reason why the *opperhoofd* Niemann was never without it – and one may therefore surmise that soon after the Dutch translations were available in 1729 and 1733, a copy was kept at the VOC’s trading post at Nagasaki. However, the first mention in Japan of Kaempfer’s work in Japanese sources appears only in 1778, half a century after the publication in Holland. The
philosopher Miura Baien (1723-1789) recorded that he saw the book at the house of the Deshima interpreter and physician Yoshio Kōgyū (also Kōsaku 幸作 1724-1800) in September of that year. Like Watanabe Kazan later, Baien was impressed by the many illustrations including detailed maps of major cities and the route the foreigners travelled to Edo.

One may ask why it took so long for this detailed study of Japan to find a mention in the diaries and reports of the time. The answer might well be that it was not in the interest of those Japanese who had access to the work and could read it – namely the interpreters on Deshima – to publicize its existence. It would have been obvious to all that the details recorded in the work, Kaempfer could only have obtained with the co-operation of the Deshima interpreters, the very people assigned to supervise the Dutch, bound by a blood oath not to permit transmission of any information about Japan to the foreigners. Even the mayor of the Dutch settlement on Deshima (otona 乙名) seems to have been implicated: among Kaempfer’s fifty-four Japanese volumes in the British Library, several bear the mayor’s seal of ownership.

According to Dutch sources, the interpreters knew of the Beschryving’s existence earlier and had a chance to purchase it, but chose not do so. The bookkeeper Cornelis van Brattim had died on the journey to Japan and after the vessel arrived in Nagasaki in August 1761, his possessions were auctioned. Among them was Kaempfer’s work on Japan. The senior interpreter Nishi Zenzaburō (西善三郎 1724-1768) and a colleague bought some ornaments, but nobody showed any interest in the book.

Kaempfer credited his student – only in the 1990s identified as Imamura Gen’emon Eisei (1671-1736) – with obtaining for him a large part of the information contained in his description of Japan. Gen’emon might still have been alive when the first copy of De Beschryving reached Japan. While Kaempfer did not reveal his student’s name, his work for Kaempfer could not have happened without the knowledge and tacit approval of the other interpreters. The position of the Deshima interpreters was hereditary, and even if Gen’emon and his contemporaries had passed away before the first copy of Kaempfer’s work became known in Japan, their sons would still have been held responsible for the crime committed by their fathers of permitting a foreigner to collect the detailed material contained in Kaempfer’s publication. Nishi Zenzaburō, the senior translator who had attended the auction, had entered Deshima in 1722 as a young boy to learn Dutch, one year after Imamura Gen’emon’s eldest son became an apprentice interpreter. Gen’emon himself continued his work as overseer of the interpreters till 1736, the year of his death. For fourteen years Gen’emon and Zenzaburō had been active together on the small island of Deshima, and one might wonder whether – behind closed doors – Gen’emon’s outstanding knowledge of Dutch was still attributed to his apprenticeship with a physician named Kaempfer.

Over a century after the crime had been committed and half a century after the publication, the
fear of investigation and punishment apparently was less acute. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the first mention of Kaempfer’s work is in the diary of the philosopher Miura Baien and not in the writings of an interpreter. Four years later, in 1782, the book was purchased by Matsuura Seizan (松浦静山 1760-1841), the daimyo of Hirado. The domain had been the original seat of the Dutch trading post from 1609, and when in 1641 the government ordered the post’s relocation to the island of Deshima vacated by the expulsion of the Portuguese, the special relationship continued. Seizan inscribed in the book that he considered it of great value making it worthwhile to pay a large sum for it. In 1807 and 1808 Matsudaira Nobuakira (松平信明 1763-1817), one of the four senior councilors running the government at Edo, requested to borrow the volume. In those two years an American and then a British vessel illegally entered the harbor of Nagasaki while Russia infringed Japanese territorial rights in the north. Perhaps Nobuakira wanted to inform himself on how much about Japan was known to the foreigners to better deal with the threat of invasion. Today the 1733 edition of *De Beschryving van Japan* with Seizan’s inscription is still preserved at Hirado as part of the city’s historical material collection.

Yoshio Kōgyū’s possession of a copy of Kaempfer’s *De Beschryving* which he permitted visitors to consult and to record that they had seen the book, suggests that from then on the existence of this volume no longer had to be kept secret. It appears that further copies were imported, for from then on an increasing number of Japanese scholars noted in their writings that they had seen or heard of Kaempfer’s work. However, as in the case Kazan there was often some misconception of who he had been and what he had published.

In 1798 the scholar Honda Toshiaki (本多利明 1744-1822) wrote quite openly in his work *Seiiki monogatari 西域物語* that a head of the VOC trading post and physician named Kaempfer had received information about Japan’s past from the interpreters during his three year stay in Nagasaki. According to Toshiaki, the foreigner had written a book “about events in Japan from the Age of the Gods to the present” on returning home. Kaempfer was of course not the head of the trading post or *kapitan* 加比丹 as the Japanese called him, but only the physician, and had stayed two and not three years in Japan. The confusion went even further when Toshiaki continued that another head of the trading post, Arend Willem Feith, had visited Edo twice and being especially knowledgeable about Japan had written the work known as *Amoenitates*. Toshiaki claimed he had examined the book and the first thing he saw was a description of the imperial palace. “Various ceremonies, the performance of *nō* and *kyōgen*, the assembly of the lords and various other matters were there in detail.”

It has been suggested that Toshiaki did not see Kaempfer’s *Amenitates Exoticae* of 1712, but the *Beschryving* instead, mistakenly thinking that the copper plate prints of Thailand in the early part of the latter work were showing the emperor’s palace in Japan. Toshiaki obviously could not
decipher Western letters and numbers, otherwise he would have realized that both books had been published some time before Arend Willem Feith (1745-1782), only one year his senior, was born. Moreover, Feith had visited Edo not twice, but four times on four different postings as head of the VOC trading post. Prior to this he already had two earlier postings to Deshima at a lower rank. On his trip to Edo in 1776 Feith was accompanied by Carl Peter Thunberg (1743-1828) as physician, who became famous for his botanical work on Japan.\footnote{Thunberg’s intention was to improve upon previous works about the flora of Japan, including Kaempfer’s “Flora Japonica” contained in the \textit{Amenitates Exoticae}. It is therefore likely that he would have carried this book with him.} Thunberg lectured to scholars of Dutch learning during his stay in Edo as well as on Deshima, and Toshiaki could well have made his acquaintance and seen a copy of the \textit{Amenitates Exoticae}.\footnote{Toshiaki does not consider the pictures he saw in the volume to show the audience with the shogun – which he must have known the Dutch went to Edo for – but to depict the imperial palace, using the somewhat unusual word of \textit{teijō 帝城}. Since hardly anything was known about the inside of the imperial palace and the life of the emperor, Toshiaki might have considered the somewhat dark copperplates in the \textit{Amenitates Exoticae} of the map of the court at Isfahan and the Shah’s audience with foreign dignitaries to be the foreigner’s depiction of the emperor’s court in Japan.} Toshiaki does not consider the pictures he saw in the volume to show the audience with the shogun – which he must have known the Dutch went to Edo for – but to depict the imperial palace, using the somewhat unusual word of \textit{teijō 帝城}. Since hardly anything was known about the inside of the imperial palace and the life of the emperor, Toshiaki might have considered the somewhat dark copperplates in the \textit{Amenitates Exoticae} of the map of the court at Isfahan and the Shah’s audience with foreign dignitaries to be the foreigner’s depiction of the emperor’s court in Japan.\footnote{The “Golden Spine” of Kaempfer’s \textit{Beschryving van Japan}.}

For the majority of Japanese who saw Kaempfer’s \textit{Beschryving}, the copper plate prints showing detailed maps, strategic buildings and even the audience of the Dutch at Edo castle were the most important part of the book. However, one of the few scholars who could read the text, Shizuki Tadao (志築 忠雄 also Shitsuki and known as Nakano Ryuho 中野柳穂 1760-1806), realized that the most topical and significant part of the book was an essay from Kaempfer’s \textit{Amenitates Exoticae} that had been appended to the \textit{History of Japan}. In the English translation from the Latin original the essay went under the lengthy title of “An Enquiry, whether it be conducive for the good of the Japanese Empire, to keep it shut up, as it now is, and not to suffer its Inhabitants to have any commerce with foreign nations, either at home or abroad.”\footnote{This was a most topical subject at a time when foreign vessels were increasingly violating Japan’s laws of seclusion and it was questioned whether Japan had the strength to fight foreign intrusion or would be wiser to open up the country to foreign trade. Moreover, different from Kaempfer’s much longer manuscript on Japan, it strongly extolled the virtues of the country and its people, welcome praise for a Japanese readership.} Shizuki Tadao was an experienced translator. He had been adopted into the Shizuki family of hereditary interpreters at Deshima, but after only one year as apprentice interpreter retired due to
illness. He was sickly throughout his life, but apparently financed by his real father, lived secluded 
from the world, studying Western science and translating a large number of Dutch texts of his own 
choice. Tadao decided that this essay was the most important part of Kaempfer’s book, its golden 
spine (kinkotsu 金骨, lit.: golden bone) as he called it, and needed to be made available to scholars 
and members of the governing elite who did not know Dutch. Kaempfer, of course, did not write 
the essay for a Japanese readership: he could not have imagined that one day his writings would be 
translated and studied in Japan.

In the introduction to his Amoenitates Exoticae, he compared himself to a merchant, offering 
samples of his ware. As the title of the work suggests, he considered the contents to be mere 
pleasantries or tidbits (amoenitas) to wet the readers’ appetite for the more solid fare of the large 
amount of material he had collected during over a decade of travel to the furthest reaches of the 
world. He listed a number of manuscripts ready for publication of which the first was Japonia 
nostri tempris (Today’s Japan), a work in German. The essay on Japan was thus an advertisement 
for a much longer manuscript for which he required a publisher and as topic he chose the one aspect 
which vexed the European trading nations most, namely the fact that they had no access to the 
country and could not share the lucrative trade with the Dutch. While in his History, Kaempfer was
even-handed in his praise and criticism, in this short work he did his best to raise the reader’s interest by eulogizing the prosperity of the country and virtue of its people.

Following the traditional dialectic method, he examined both sides of the argument: first why Japan had no right to close its boarders, to then spend the greater part of the essay contending that the closure of the country was justified because it guaranteed the peace of the country. Both arguments for and against Japan’s seclusion were close to Kaempfer’s heart and different from his usual dry, academic style, the essay shows emotional engagement. For his travels, the world needed to be one without borders, where people could move from country to country like the flocks of migrating birds. He might well have remembered how the royal Swedish delegation to the Shah of Persia, to which he was attached as secretary, had to camp for weeks at the Russian boarder when they were refused permission to enter the country and it was his onious duty to conduct the lengthy negotiations. Had other countries followed Japan’s example, he would not have reached Japan.

While the freedom to cross boarders was essential for his research, that same freedom had resulted in constant warfare in Europe. Kaempfer was born three years after the Peace of Westphalia concluded the Thirty Years’ War. At the beginning of the war, his native town of Lemgo had over one thousand houses; at the end of the war thirty years later there were only 590. The population decreased by one third in the last twenty years of the war, and the damage caused was estimated at over one million thalers. The Holy Roman Empire, of which Kaempfer’s native Westphalia was part, was threatened again when Kaempfer reached Persia. “Germany was still troubled by its most Christian and most un-Christian enemies” he wrote referring to the fact that the armies of Louis XIV of France were advancing from the West and the Ottoman Turks from the East. He therefore decided “that the lesser evil would be to embark on even more distant travels and individually and voluntarily endure the resulting inconveniences rather than return to my native country and submit to the generally prevailing bad conditions and involuntary state of war it was in.” If war could be prevented, as was in the case of Japan, then seclusion was acceptable, especially since he concluded that Japan “was never in a happier condition than it now is, governed by an arbitrary Monarch, shut up, and kept from all Commerce and Communications with foreign nations.”

This was a bold conclusion and rested upon statements that Kaempfer well knew were not correct. The reason that Japan permitted the Dutch and Chinese to enter Nagasaki to trade was that upon the expulsion of the Catholics, the Japanese government decided that the country needed the imported goods. In fact the Dutch were repeatedly questioned by the Japanese authorities whether they would be able to import the required goods in sufficient quantities before the Portuguese were expelled. The very manuscript Kaempfer was advertising contained a detailed description of Japan’s trade with China and Holland including a long list of goods imported. These ranged from woolen and other textiles to sugar and spices to substances like quicksilver, tin, lead, saltpeter,
borax, alum, gum benzoin, liquid storax, catechu, rough molten glass, etc. Under “less important items” Kaempfer mentions “lead and red ochre for writing, sublimate mercury ... delicate files, sewing needles, spectacles, cut drinking glasses” and even “mangoes and other unripe fruits preserved in Turkish pepper.”

No doubt the elite could have done without the preserved fruits, but they might not have classified their imported spectacles as a “less important item.”

There were, however, further reasons why Kaempfer’s arguments for seclusion had become invalid by the time Shizuki Tadao translated the essay and thereby made it available to a wider readership. Kaempfer visited Japan in the middle of the Genroku Period (1688-1704), the most prosperous era in the history of the country until the post WWII boom. During the second half of the 17th century, Japan had been spared major earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and failed harvests resulting in famines that plagued Japan throughout its history. With the beginning of the 18th century natural disasters again threatened the food supply and welfare of the populace. The century began with one of Japan’s strongest earthquakes in recorded history in 1703, followed by the eruption of Mount Fuji in 1707. Even though the government’s swift response prevented a major famine, large areas in the vicinity of Edo – a city with a population of around one million – were turned infertile for many years by the pyroclastic fall-out. The first major famine of the century, the Kyōhō famine of 1732-33 caused by a combination of unusually cold weather and an infestation of locusts, caused the death of around one million people. The effect of the cool summer winds known as yamase山背,偏東 was particularly strong in the 18th century resulting in periodical crop failures, peasant uprisings and famines especially in areas of north-eastern Japan. Japan’s worst famine, often estimated to have caused the death of up to two million people with instances of cannibalism recorded, resulted from the eruption of Mount Asama northwest of Edo in 1783.

The pyroclastic fall out of the eruption poisoned the soil and blocked rivers causing floods, while the fumes ejected into the atmosphere sickened the populace and blocked sunshine, resulting in failed harvests for years to come. As Mount Asama’s poisonous gasses belched into the atmosphere, Mount Laki in Iceland had one of its largest eruptions discharging vast quantities of sulphur gasses, thereby increasing the stratospheric aerosol veils circulating the globe that affect global weather patterns by blocking solar radiation. With weather irregularities continuing in Japan, food shortage was causing wide-spread uprisings, resulting in plundering and destruction.

Shizuki Tadao completed his translation of Kaempfer’s essay in 1801 and for the next fifty years his commentated rendition of Kaempfer’s text circulated in manuscript form. In these same fifty years, the number of peasant protests rose sharply: while the average number of uprisings per year was 4.2 during the fifty year period 1651-1700 in which Kaempfer visited Japan, now it was 16.3, only exceeded by an average of 22 protests per annum in 1851-1867, the remaining period of Tokugawa rule. It made a mockery of Kaempfer’s claim that Japan’s prosperous and contented
In his attempt to convince his readers that Japan was a country blessed by the gods even though the circumstances seem to indicate otherwise, the nationalist Shinto scholar Hirata Atsutane (平田篤胤 1776-1843) cited Kaempfer’s claim to this effect in his work *Kodō tai* 古道大意 of 1824. Especially when less than a decade later the country came into the grip of yet another famine, the so-called Tenpō famine of 1833-37, made worse by the spread of disease, the foreigner’s words must have had a hollow ring, especially since it was traditionally believed that natural disasters expressed the anger of the gods.

Finally it must have become obvious to all those concerned with the defense of the country that Kaempfer’s claim of dangerous seas protecting the Japanese islands was no longer altogether true. The black smoke stacks of steamships appeared for the first time in Japanese waters when the American Commodore Matthew C. Perry entered the harbor of Uraga on July 8, 1853, but it could not have escaped notice many years earlier that the foreign ships violating the government’s seclusion policy had become larger and more efficient at navigating the dangers of the sea. Japan, on the other hand, due to the government’s prohibition on the construction of ocean going vessels had not developed shipbuilding techniques. In other words, the seclusion policy made Japan more vulnerable to attack rather than protect the country. Already in 1718 the shogun Yoshimune (1684-1751) showed interest in the development of foreign ships, asking the Dutch for pictures and detailed specifications of their vessels. He even inquired whether such a ship could be ordered for himself. An ocean-going vessel would have been in contravention of the seclusion policy, and the request was not followed up.

With Kaempfer’s arguments for the continued closure of the country having lost their validity, his initial statements of why the closure of the country was immoral and against the order of nature gained in force. The essay of the foreigner indicated that Japan’s isolation violated the principles of Western political thought and hence would not be tolerated. It appears that the government realized that contrary to appearance, the essay went against its policy of seclusion, and when the Japanese version finally appeared in print in 1850, the publication was soon halted by the authorities.

Even though unpublished, Shizuki Tadao’s translation was widely circulated as manuscript. The scholar Ōshima Akihide has located 94 copies with slight variations. The number of copies in existence in the 19th century is likely to have been even higher when one considers the loss of papers through neglect, fires or earthquakes and the destruction of the last war. Rather than copy the whole manuscript, some scholars made notes on subjects of particular interest to them, like the scholar Yokoi Shōnan (1809-1869) who was relieved to read that London, Paris and Rome were smaller than Edo and learnt for the first time about the exports under the Catholic missionaries and how these depleted the coffers of the country. It was not until the Meiji period that the manuscript
was finally made available widely in printed form. This might well have been for educational purposes since Kaempfer’s praise of Japan counteracted the high regard Western culture was held in once the country had opened itself to its influence in the Meiji period.

Kaempfer’s essay on the closure of the country had already been criticized by the editor of the first German edition, Christian Wilhelm Dohm (1751-1820) for lacking the objectivity of his other writing. Not providing altogether reliable material for the historian, the translation might well have fallen into oblivion had the translator not decided to replace Kaempfer’s unwieldy title by a succinct heading of three characters: sakoku ron 鎖国論, literally: closed country debate.

**Sakoku: the Creation of a new Japanese Word**

The laws forbidding the free movement of people in and out of the country had not previously been referred to by the term sakoku. When China had forbidden overseas travel along its southern coastline one hundred years before Japan, the word kaikin 海禁, lit.: “forbidden seas” was used, a term also adopted by the Japanese government. The scholar Asano Naohiro points out that the word “closure” had negative connotations and that neither the Japanese government nor the people saw the laws restricting free movement in these terms. He asserts that by implication Shizuki Tadao’s usage of the term demonstrates a condemnation of “the laws of the ancestors”, i.e. government policy. It was for this reason that the manuscript was not printed but circulated secretly, and when it finally was published in 1850, the Tokugawa government quickly ordered the closure of the press. The Meiji government, on the other hand, blamed the isolation policy of the Tokugawa regime for Japan’s backwardness and the negative term of sakoku gained general acceptance.

*Sakoku* is now the standard term used by historians to denote the period of closure. The fact that the word only came into being thanks to the translation of Engelbert Kaempfer’s essay is still today considered important enough to be listed in the syllabus prospective university students are expected to memorize for their history entrance exam covering over two thousand years of Japan’s past.

There is no way of finding out whether Kaempfer’s essay influenced the government’s decision to open the country at the time it did since political debate led to imprisonment and was conducted in secret. However, Kaempfer’s legacy to Japan can be defined by the fact that with the translation of his essay, a new word was added to the Japanese language.
Bartering Knowledge and its Legacy.

In his prologue to his *History of Japan*, Kaempfer wrote that once the Christians were expelled and the borders were closed “the Japanese also closed their mouths, hearts and souls towards us, the foreign and imprisoned visitors.” All Japanese in contact with the foreigners were bound by an oath signed in blood not to pass on to the foreigners any information “about the situation of their country, their religion, secrets of government, and various other specified subjects.” Yet Kaempfer’s voluminous work on Japan as well as his unpublished notes in the British Library contain extremely detailed material about these very subjects.

Kaempfer soon realized that the Japanese could not be deterred by the involuntary oath they had to swear to gods they did not believe in. They were “a brave, clever and imperious people”, “hungry for knowledge” about the foreigners and their “history, arts and sciences”. In this hunger for knowledge of the Japanese, Kaempfer saw his opportunity and he bartered his own knowledge for information about Japan which none of his predecessors had been able to assemble. What did he have to offer in this exchange and can this legacy still be traced?

When Engelbert Kaempfer wrote to his brother in 1687 that he had taken employment with the Dutch East India Company, he explained that while the job was useful to execute his plans, it was low ranking. The Dutch East India Company only employed physicians with practical medical training as surgeons or barbers, which could be accomplished during a few years of study. Kaempfer, however, was a university-educated doctor: for some ten years he had not only studied medicine, but also a host of other subjects such as geography, mathematics and astronomy which were considered essential to understand the workings of the human body, as well as Latin and Greek to read the early medical writings. Moreover, in eight years of travel he had untiringly studied the cultures and environment he encountered.

The VOC always had a physician reside on Deshima, who would be asked to treat important locals and was given a young man as servant and assistant with the expectation that the youth would gain some medical knowledge and learn some Dutch by observing the foreigner. However, as Kaempfer explained in some detail, the foreigners regarded the interpreters and those in training as spies, intent upon restricting their life and overcharging them for services. One can well imagine that the interaction between the two groups was limited by such sentiments and that such negative feelings were likely to have been one of the reasons for the low level of Dutch by the Japanese interpreters.

Kaempfer differed from his predecessors in as much as he came to Japan with the purpose of collecting sufficient information about the hermit country to produce a publishable work. He therefore had to make an effort to gain the acceptance and friendship of the Japanese. To achieve
this goal, he offered them free medical treatment and medicines as well as instruction in astronomy and mathematics, entertaining them with sweet liquors when they visited his house. He even adjusted his behavior to cater to their sense of superiority as samurai over in their eyes low ranking Dutch merchants. “By such means I successfully obtained and enjoyed the total confidence of those in charge of the Dutch and of the interpreters who daily visited our settlement.” Kaempfer wrote.\(^{55}\)

The greater part of his information he managed to obtain from the young man who was assigned to him as his servant and assistant for the purpose of being instructed in Western medicine. The name of the young Japanese remained unknown until some 300 years later when reading the daily record of the Dutch trading station, the daghregister for Deshima, in order to translate and publish the marginalia, Paul van der Velde came across an entry that provided the clue. It was not contained in the record for the years 1690-1692 when Kaempfer was in Japan – which scholars had searched previously – but in that for September 1695, three years after Kaempfer had left.

The entry for September 26, 1695 stated that three young men had been appointed as apprentice interpreters. The first of these, “Morijama Takits” (森山太吉郎) known as interpreter of Portuguese, had demonstrated at an exam on the 22nd of September that he was becoming more and more accomplished in the Portuguese language. The second, “Im’amorach Ginnemon” (今村源右衛門) was examined in Dutch “in which language he is so experienced that he is superior to any other interpreter, having been the servant of the senior physician of this trading station from the time he was young until now”.\(^{56}\) Documents located among Kaempfer’s manuscripts in the British Library by Yu-Ying Brown confirmed Imamura Gen’emon’s identity.\(^{57}\)

Imamura Gen’emon was born in 1671. His grandfather and father worked as interpreters for the VOC and like the sons of other men with these duties, he was expected to follow in their footsteps. At the age of ten he was given access to Deshima to learn the language and acquaint himself with his future duties. When Kaempfer arrived in Japan in 1690 Gen’emon was nineteen, and had served previous physicians on Deshima.\(^{58}\) While the records refer to his status as “servant”, his life would have followed the Japanese pattern where learning entails both being taught by the master and carrying out duties for him, including those of domestic nature, a custom still observed in the study of arts and crafts in Japan today.

Even though future interpreters started their study of Dutch at an early age, the method was apparently not very successful. The entry about Gen’emon’s promotion and praise of his Dutch language skills in 1695 goes on to say that the third person promoted was the son of a senior interpreter who had passed away. The young man succeeded to the hereditary position of his father even though he did not speak a single word of Dutch.\(^{59}\) The complaint that the interpreters did not know sufficient Dutch to correctly understand what the foreigners wanted to convey was frequently expressed.\(^{60}\) Also Gen’emon, though “learned in Japanese and Chinese writing” had in the nine
years of his training on Deshima not acquired enough fluency in Dutch to be useful to Kaempfer. He therefore spent the first year teaching him Dutch grammar and when, after Kaempfer’s departure, Gen’emon was praised for having more experience in the Dutch language than anybody else, this no doubt refers to the many hours he would have spent with Kaempfer explaining the customs of his native country, translating documents and books and helping the foreigner to learn Japanese. When Kaempfer wrote his manuscript on Japan in his native Westphalia, he concurred with what was being recorded in Japan, namely that Gen’emon could write and speak Dutch far better than any Japanese interpreter before him.\textsuperscript{61}

Gen’emon did not become a famous doctor, but his exceptional language skills lead to a rapid rise in seniority as interpreter. The 8th shogun Yoshimune even raised him to the rank of goyō kata御用方, a shogunal employee, and appointed him as translator for the foreign riding master Johan Georg Keyserling (or Keijser, 1696-1736). Further, Gen’emon translated Dutch books on the art of riding and horse breeding. He also went down in history as the interpreter between the Italian priest Giovanni Battista Sidotti (1668-1714) who entered Japan illegally and the Confucian scholar Arai Hakuseki, (新井白石 1657-1725) who questioned the former extensively about the West and wrote his work Seiyō kibun (西洋記聞 Report on the Occident) about what he learnt.\textsuperscript{62}

With the identification of Imamura Gen’emon as Kaempfer’s student and assistant, the legacy he received from Kaempfer is well described in the studies of his life that have since appeared. However, what legacy did Kaempfer leave to those men who daily visited his house to take advantage of the one foreigner who willingly instructed them and even offered them liqueurs?

We do not know the names of these visitors since they in turn also committed the crime of informing the foreigner about their native country. However, it is interesting to note that Japan’s first anatomical work Oranda zenkunai gaibun gōzu和蘭全賭内外分合図, a translation of Ontleiding van het mensehelijk vertiimd word appeared in 1696, four years after Kaempfer had left Japan. The author of the original work, the German Johann Remmelin (1583-1632) became famous on the publication of his Latin Catoptrum microcosmicum (microscopic mirror) in 1619, illustrating the structure of the human body by the use of superimposed flap overlays. The book was translated into several European languages and sections published under various titles.\textsuperscript{63} One of these was the Pinax microcosmographicus published in Amsterdam in 1645 and 1667 on which the above-mentioned Dutch translation was based. It was a work Kaempfer would have certainly been familiar with.

The translator was the senior interpreter Motoki Ryōi (本木良意 1628-1697) who frequently appears in Kaempfer’s History under his earlier name Shōdayū庄太夫. Ryōi was the interpreter who in 1682 on the request of the fifth shogun Tsunayoshi arranged for an additional audience where all members the Dutch delegation appeared and were asked to enact how foreigners behaved
and danced and sang when they socialized. On Kaempfer’s second trip to Edo, Ryōi accompanied the delegation as senior interpreter and Kaempfer’s performance for the shogun of a song he composed for this occasion might well have been planned at the encouragement of the interpreter.

Given the above set of circumstances, it seems reasonable to assume that Motoki Ryōi when translating Remmelin’s work frequently consulted the friendly foreign physician who was familiar with this book. The translation circulated in manuscript form and was only printed in 1772, two years prior to the publication of *Kaitai shinsho* 解体新書 by Sugita Genpaku 杉田玄白 and Maeno Ryōtaku 前野良沢 which is often heralded as the first Japanese translation of an anatomical work.

The original drawings of Remmelin’s work above, and a simplification in Motoki Ryōi’s translation *Oranda zenkunai gaibun gōzu* 和蘭全賭内外分合図, below.

Another interpreter mentioned by Kaempfer is Narabayashi Chinzan (楢林鎮残山 1648-1711), known to the Dutch as Shingobei. He was promoted as apprentice interpreter already in 1656 and during his long tenure on Deshima studied under the physicians of the VOC. His 1706 work *Kōi geika sōden* 紅夷外科宗傳 was based on a Dutch translation of the work of Ambroise Paré (1517-1590) which Chinzan apparently obtained only in 1688. Here again it is likely that he took up
Kaempfer’s offer to instruct and help with the study of medicine.

Kaempfer mentioned that he did not only teach medicine, but also astronomy and mathematics. A contemporary of Kaempfer’s in Nagasaki was the astronomer and geographer Nishikawa Joken (西川如見 1648-1724). In his work Tenmon giron 天文議論 of 1712 became the first Japanese astronomer who distinguished between meiri 命理, the Confucian concept of a moral heaven, and keiki 刑気, a physical heaven to be explored in scientific fashion as in the West. Praising European research in astronomy and geography, he too is likely to have taken advantage of the chance to learn more about these subjects from someone who had formally studied them.

Only three years after Kaempfer’s departure, in 1695, he published the first version of his Ka’i tsushōkō 華夷通商考, a treatise on Japanese trade with China and „the barbarians“ giving a short description of the characteristics of each country and then listing the goods that could be usefully imported from there into Japan. The idea no doubt was inspired by the wide-spread trading network of the VOC, and the large variety of goods they imported from a great number of countries into Japan. Joken based himself on the work of earlier interpreters, but it is likely they he would also have consulted Kaempfer, the foreigner who not only had studied geography, but also travelled more widely than most of his colleagues. In his description of Germany, Joken used the phonetic ドイチラント (doichiranto) approximating the German pronunciation for „Deutschland“ rather than the phonetic for „Duitsland“, the Dutch name for Germany. This might point to the fact that some of the information for his book he received from the German Kaempfer.

Conclusion

With his work providing a source for the description of life in the Tokugawa era, Engelbert Kaempfer’s legacy to Japan in the modern period cannot be ignored. Further, the translation of Kaempfer’s essay on the closure of the country produced a new word for the Japanese language, that of sakoku, which is likely to remain in use, while from the achievements of Imamura Gen’emon, we can gauge the legacy he left to his student and assistant thanks to whom he received a large part of the information for his History of Japan. However, when it comes to the most intriguing part, namely the question of how Kaempfer’s instruction shaped the work of Japanese scholars who interacted with him, source material is lacking due to the illegality of this exchange of knowledge, and we can only surmise of what in all likelihood happened.

1 The full title of Kaempfer’s Latin work is Amoenitatum exoticarum politico-physico-medicarum fasciculi V: quibus continentur variae relationes, observationes & descriptiones rerum Persicarum & ulterioris Asiae,
multā attentione, in peregrinationibus per universum Orientem. However, this is generally abbreviated to Amoenitates Exoticae, changing the genitive plural amoena, itatum exoticarum to the nominative plural amoena, itates exoticae.


6 Perhaps the best example of Kaempfer’s sketch by memory is that of his audience with the shogun. Engelbert Kaempfer, Kaempfer’s Japan: Tokugawa Culture Observed, ed., trans. and ann. B.M. Bodart-Bailey. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1999, p. 363. For concealing his compass and maps see pp. 244 and 341 respectively.

7 Kaempfer’s Japan, p. 266-267. For anthropological writing on the subject see Yanagida Kunio, Furo no kigen 風呂の起源 in Teihon Yanagida Kunio shū, 底本柳田国男集 vol. 14, Tokyo, 1962.

8 Kaempfer’s Japan, p. 273.


12 Grant K. Goodman, Japan and the Dutch 1600-1853, Curzon, 2000, p. 221. Keene, Frog in the Well, p. 111.

13 Ōshima Akihide 大島明秀, Sakoku to iu gensetsu 鏇国と言う言説, Minerva shobō ミネルヴァ書房, 2009, p. 56.

14 Kobori Keiichirō 小堀桂一郎, Sakoku no shisō 鏇国の思想, Chūkō shinsho 中公新書 358, 1974, p. 126.


18 Ōshima, Sakoku, pp. 56-57. For an illustration of the volume with the inscription of Matsuura Seizan see the exhibition catalogue Doitsu jin no mita genroku jidai kenperu ten ドイツ人の見た元禄時代のケンペル展 1990-1991, pp. 61, 151.


23 Thunberg published his Flora Iaponica in 1784. The preface, p. XXVI lists Kaempfer’s Amoenitates Exoticae as one of the works consulted and where appropriate, reference to Kaempfer’s work is supplied in the text. For instance on p.17 for the plant Ligustrum where Kaempfer supplied the Japanese name “Ibutta” (Thunberg: “Ibuta vel Ibota”) the reference “Amon. exot. fascic V, p. 896” is given.


25 Amoenitates Exoticae, p. 178 and next to p. 217.

26 Amoenitates Exoticae, fasciculus II, relatio XIV, pp. 478-502. The original Latin title is “Regnum Japoniæ optimã ratione, ab egressu civium, & exterarum gentium ingressu & communione, clausum”.


30 Erich Kittel, Geschichte des Landes Lippe, Köln, 1957, p. 109. To understand the value of one million
thalers, it should be noted that the crown tax levied to pay for the coronation of Frederick III of Brandenburg as King of Prussia over the whole kingdom of Prussia amounted to 500,000 thalers, and the total sum for this extremely lavish event is estimated at 6 million thalers. *Iron Kingdom*, 68.

31 *Kaempfer’s Japan*, p. 27.


34 *Kaempfer’s Japan*, p. 209


42 Kobori, *Sakoku no shisō*, pp. 146-147.


45 For an analysis and description of variations see Ōshima, *Sakoku*, pp. 222-351.

46 Kobori, *Sakoku no shisō*, pp. 149-150.


48 Fujii Jōji 藤井譲治 et. al., *Sakoku to kaikoku: Kinsei nihon no uchi to soto* 鎖国と開国: 近世日本の内と外, Kokuritsu Taiwan Daigaku 国立台湾大学, 2017, p. 36.


50 Zenkoku rekishi kyōiku kenkyū kyōgikai 全国歴史教育協議会, ed., *Nihon rekishi B yōgoshū* 日本歴史B用語集, 2004, p. 198. Items are rated on how frequently they appear in the text books on which the exams are based. Engelbert Kaempfer and his *History of Japan* are rated 9 out of a maximum of 11, and *Sakokuron*, the title of his essay, is rated 7 out of 11.
Japan: Tokugawa Culture Observed., p. 27.

unter einem schlechten Titul, lit.: had a bad title. Engelbert Kaempfer, Geschichte und Beschreibung von Japan, p. XX.


Kaempfer’s Japan, p. 202-204.

Kaempfer’s Japan, p. 28.


Van der Velde, “Die Achse”, pp. 177-178.


Imamura Hideaki, Oranda shokan nisshi, p. 1.

For instance in the dagregister entry for 28 March 1735, the opperhoffd D. Drinkman wrote about the long-serving senior interpreter Brasman (Yokoyama Matajiemon 横山又次衛門 dates unknown):

“However, Brasman was unable to translate what I said. He is only able to utter some fixed sentences, but is not able to translate what I really say.” Van der Velde, The Deshima Diaries Marginalia 1700-1740, p. 442, line 103, 28 March, 1735.

Kaempfer’s Japan, p. 28.

Van der Velde, “Die Achse”, p. 192.


Yōgakushi jiten, p. 705.


Goodman, Japan and the Dutch, p. 93.

Nishikawa Joken, Ka’i tsushōkō, manuscript, National Diet Library, Tokyo, no page numbers.
博物学者エンゲルベルト・ケンペル（1651－1716）は、1690－1692年にオランダ東インド会社（VOC）の医者として長崎の出島に滞在した。その間、江戸参府に二度参加している。帰国後、ラテン語の『廻国奇観』とドイツ語の『日本誌』を著し、日本の政治、地理、習慣、庶民の日常生活などを詳しく描写した。

日本に残したケンペルの遺産は、三つある。第一に、歴史調査が支配階級から庶民生活へと移り変わる時代の中で、外国人であるケンペルの視点から観察・記録した資料には、日本人の視点では遺しえないものがあり、それらは歴史家にとってかけがえのないものとなったこと。第二に、ケンペルの著作の翻訳である志筑忠雄の『鎖国論』（1801）によって、「鎖国」という言葉が造語として初めて使用されたこと。第三に、出島に滞在中、ケンペルが日本に関して収集した情報を提供することによって、蘭学者と彼の助手に知の遺産をもたらしたことである。