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## A DISTANCE OF 13,000 MILES: THE DUTCH THROUGH JAPANESE EYES

 Frits Vos

*Relations between the Netherlands and Japan date back to the early 1600s, and for more than two centuries Western learning could reach the island empire only through the intermediary of Dutchmen and Dutch publications. This monopoly position came to an end in 1854 when Japan abandoned its policy of isolation. The following survey of Dutch social contacts with their trade partners and the latter's stereotyped views of these merchants from the West was translated by Elizabeth Wentholt-Haig.*

This article was first published in *Delta: A Review of Arts, Life and Thought in the Netherlands* 16.2 (1973): 29-46. A selection of images from the original article is included.

After 1639, when Japan sealed itself off from the outside world, the only foreign traders granted continued access to the country were the Dutch and the Chinese. From 1641 on the Dutch were restricted to a settlement, or factory, on the islet of Deshima at the head of Nagasaki harbour, and the Chinese to a trading station in the city itself. Fan-shaped Deshima, connected to the mainland by a bridge, had been created in 1636 by the construction of a canal across a narrow peninsula. On the island, an area of little over three acres, were the dwellings, warehouses, and offices of the employees of the Dutch East India Company. There were usually ten to fifteen – never more than twenty – company officials in residence under a chief merchant or factor referred to by the Dutch as the *opperhoofd* (literally, main chief) and by the Japanese as the *kapitan* (from the Portuguese *capitão*).

Life on Deshima was far from pleasant, especially in the early years. The Dutch were constantly surrounded by spies. Since Christianity was severely proscribed in Japan, masters of incoming ships had to place all Bibles and other religious material under seal. Weapons and ammunition, and even the rudder and sails, were impounded until the vessel departed. The chief merchant alone was permitted to wear a sword, and then only on ceremonial occasions. In 1639, two years before the Dutch were confined to the island, the Japanese women to whom some of them were married had been sent, with their children, to Batavia (the present-day Jakarta), and thenceforward the company's officials were allowed to consort only with local prostitutes. Permission was rarely granted

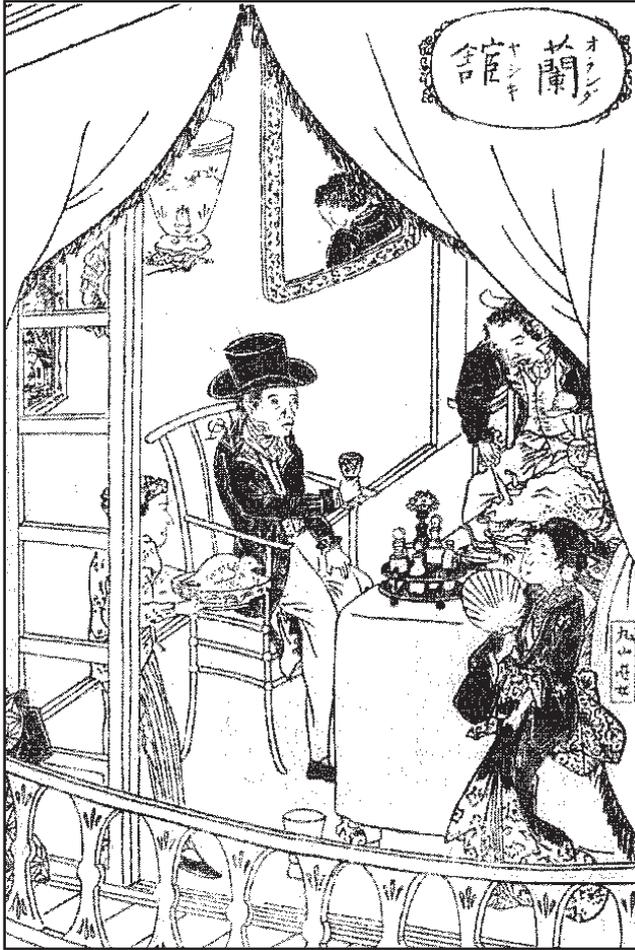


Figure 1

A Dutchman with a Maruyama prostitute  
(from a Japanese book published in 1847).

the Dutch to leave the island, which was guarded day and night. Once a year, and later once in every four or five years, the tedium of their existence was relieved by a court journey to Edo, as Tokyo was then called. There a chosen few paid homage to the *shōgun*, the administrative and military ruler of feudal Japan (the emperor, a sacrosanct figurehead, had his seat in Kyoto), presenting him with gifts which had often been ordered beforehand and were in fact a kind of tax levied for the privilege of being allowed to trade in the empire.

Up to 1854, when Japan reopened its doors to the West, the Dutch were tolerated to remain in Nagasaki because they imported useful manufactured goods from Europe and the Indies and such colonial products as spices, tin, and mercury. Moreover, the Japanese rulers kept themselves informed through the Dutch of events in the rest of the world.

The isolationist policy, which had been the aim of the Japanese government for some decades before it was fully implemented in 1639, marked the end of a period of fairly intensive contact with Western culture. The Portuguese had held trading rights from 1543 to 1639, the Spaniards from 1592 to 1624, and the English from 1613 to 1623. Notwithstanding all the restrictions imposed during the period of seclusion, a thirst for knowledge of Western scholarship and technology continued to exist, even amongst the

authorities. As time went by and certain regulations were relaxed, that interest grew, culminating in the second half of the eighteenth century in a flowering of the study of the Western sciences, which were referred to collectively as *Rangaku* — Hollandology or Dutch learning. The word *Rangaku* covered a wide range of disciplines including medicine, astronomy, mathematics, botany, physics, geography, geodesy, and military science, especially ballistics. Less attention was devoted to European history and art. The scholars who specialised in these fields, all of which were studied in Dutch, were called *Rangakusha*, or 'Hollandologists'. Japan's emergence as a major power in the second half of the nineteenth century is in large measure attributable to its rapid absorption and adaptation of Western knowledge. The foundations of this acculturation process were laid by the *Rangakusha*.

The present article, however, is concerned not so much with the *Rangakusha* as with the opinions held by the Japanese regarding the Dutch — their appearance, their habits, their customs. But first, some further information about life on *Deshima*, particularly about the few opportunities for relaxation enjoyed by the Dutch community there.

The court journey to Edo, for instance — a round-trip of approximately 1300 miles overland — required weeks of preparation and even longer on the way. It took place at the beginning of the Japanese lunar year or some time between 20 January and 19 February by our calendar. For the occasion, the chief merchant was accorded the status of a *daimyō*, or feudal lord, and travelled with a handful of his compatriots and a large Japanese retinue. Though

all this imposed a heavy strain on the factory's resources, and the travellers were subjected to constant control and supervision, the length of the journey and the unusual chances it afforded for sightseeing and diversion meant that in many ways it was truly pleasurable.

Excursions to Nagasaki and beyond were also permitted from time to time. But the occasions necessitating official calls upon the chief administrator of the city or some other dignitary were less appreciated because of the ceremonial attending them, which the staunch republicans from the Netherlands, who were obliged to make obeisance, found humiliating. On the other hand, the arrival of Dutch ships was eagerly awaited. They usually made port in August and sailed towards the end of October. The residents of Deshima forgot their boredom in the ensuing bustle of activity and especially in hearing from the newcomers the latest events and gossip at home and in the Indies.

For their love life the Dutch on Deshima were dependent on Maruyama, the licensed brothel quarter of Nagasaki, which provided the lonely Hollanders with sweet companions to while away their idle hours. Towards evening the prostitutes made their way from Maruyama to Deshima, sometimes in palanquins, sometimes on foot. From the end of the seventeenth century onwards a prolonged sojourn was condoned, generally for three days at a time. Around the end of the eighteenth century a five-day system became customary, and by the beginning of the nineteenth — in exceptional cases probably even earlier — visits by the Dutch to the Maruyama brothels were tolerated.

Of the holidays observed by the Dutch, New Year is of particular interest. Various Japanese officials and the Japanese interpreters were invited to a banquet that began at midday. A Japanese document dating from 1818 lists the many dishes served on such an occasion by the factory's Indonesian servants: soup, eggs, mushrooms, chicken, duck, halibut, sea bream, salmon, beef, pork, a boar's head, ham, turnips, Dutch vegetables, and a variety of pastries. The main beverages were *zenēfuru* (geneva, Dutch gin), *biiru* (beer), and *araki* (arrack). The word *biiru* is still used in modern Japanese, as is also *kōhii*, the rendering of the Dutch word for coffee. Coffee, incidentally, was introduced by the Portuguese and Spanish, who reached Japan from the south; this accounts for its earlier name, *nambancha*, meaning the tea of the southern barbarians.

A Dutchman who was present at one of these banquets, J.F. van Overmeer Fischer, reported that the Japanese interpreters 'not only help themselves liberally but take away with them everything that is left over; most of them wrap the food in paper and conceal it in their wide sleeves'. These souvenirs, including butter, which was thought to be an effective remedy for tuberculosis, were shared out by the Japanese guests amongst their relatives and friends.

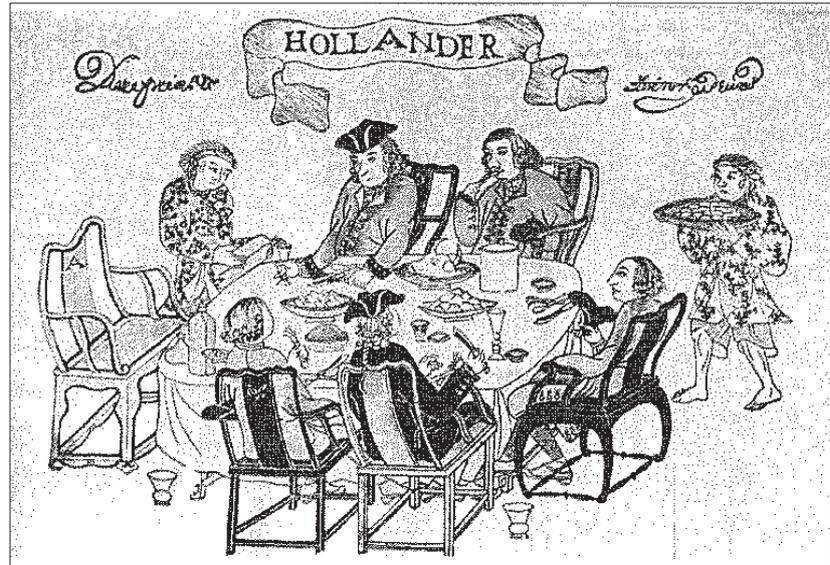


Figure 2

Late eighteenth-century Japanese colour-print showing Dutchmen at dinner, waited upon by Indonesian servants.



**Figure 3**

'The Dutch flag continued to fly above Deshima.' Johan Huizinga's evocation of a Dutch merchant in Japan.

The Dutch, deeming it judicious not to impose too severe a test on their visitors' palates or skill with knife and fork, followed the Western-style meal with local dishes and *sake* (rice wine) served by Maruyama damsels to the accompaniment of music and dancing. These fraternisation revels continued deep into the night, and the sobriety of both hosts and guests undoubtedly left much to be desired.

Another annual celebration is especially interesting. It was known as *Oranda-tōshi* (Dutch winter solstice). Having expelled the Portuguese and Spanish for overzealous proselytising, the Japanese permitted the Dutch to remain in their country only on condition that no attempt was made to practise the Christian religion or to attract converts. For the sake of trade, the East India Company ordered this rule to be scrupulously observed. Inspired, however, by the fact that the Chinese in Nagasaki celebrated the winter solstice towards the end of December, the Dutch on Deshima conceived the idea of using this holiday as a cover for their own Christmas celebration, modest though that might be. The local inhabitants took part in the festivities, assembling at dawn on the appointed day for what was called the procession of Dutch ships. Some time earlier, the tradesmen who supplied the Dutch with their daily needs had grouped together with the artisans who did all sorts of odd jobs on Deshima to make wooden models of Dutch ships, which were now carried in

procession to the sound of gongs. The revellers made their way to Deshima to offer their best wishes to the chief merchant and his staff. Meanwhile large crowds from the town and its environs had gathered on the banks opposite the island to watch the procession enter the settlement. The model ships were presented to the Dutch, who in turn bestowed small gifts of money upon their visitors. And again a banquet was held in honour of the local officials and interpreters. Remarkably enough, the Japanese, otherwise so watchful for signs of the forbidden Christian practices, never seem to have suspected the true reason for these particular festivities.

During the Napoleonic period of French rule in the Netherlands (1810–13), the Dutch flag continued to fly above Deshima, and after the liberation of the low countries two more holidays were added to the calendar there: Victory Day, in commemoration of the Battle of Waterloo (18 June), and the King's Birthday. The birthday of the Dutch governor-general in Batavia also seems to have been celebrated, though perhaps not as a fixed annual event.

The Japanese view of the Dutch and the Netherlands can best be prefaced by a few excerpts from one of the earliest treatises on the subject, *Tōdō shinden* (A True Account of the Supreme Way), by Andō Shōeki (?1701–58). In his work, Andō uses his own interpretation of the Chinese philosophy concerning the action of the five elements (fire, water, wood, metal, and earth) to explain various phenomena. The geographical location of the occident means that the Netherlands is completely dominated by the physical prin-

ciple of the element metal – that element which corresponds to the west, autumn, cold, sensuality, righteousness, and so on. He writes:

The people average six feet in height. Because of the prevalence of the physical principle of the element metal, the essence of autumn, the same principle is strongly at work in their bodies. Its unyielding nature obliges them to keep up their strength with meat, which they eat at every meal. They brew strong drink, which they keep for a time before consuming it. The influence of the physical principle causes wheat, which is in affinity with it, to grow excellently in the Netherlands, and consequently the Dutch always eat bread made from wheat.

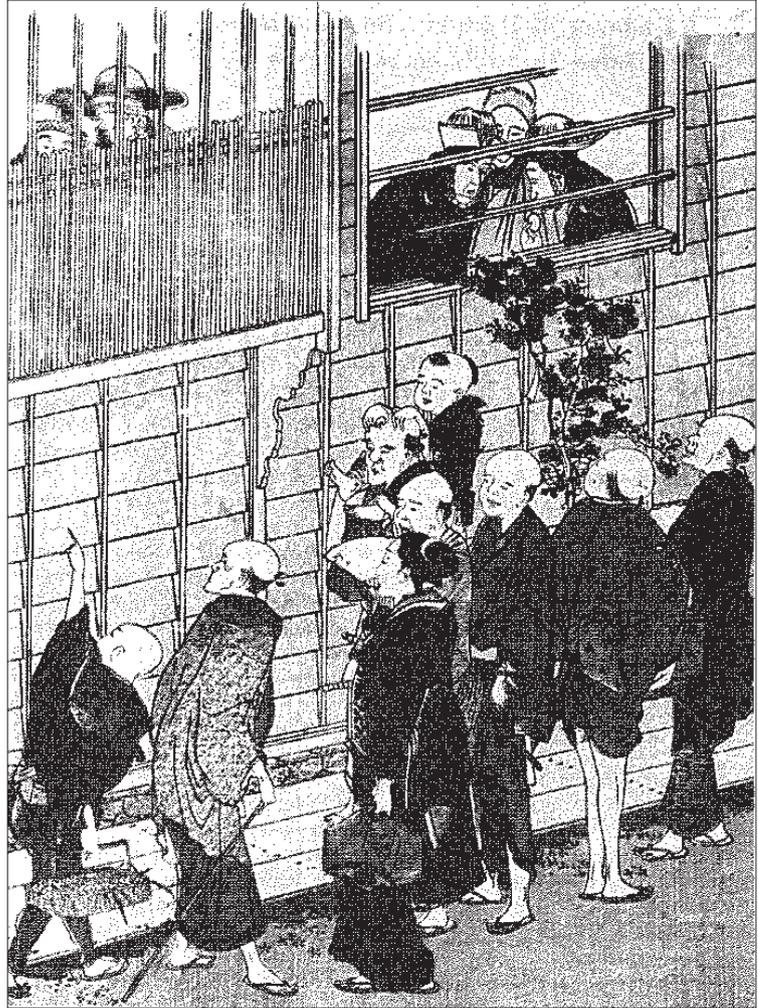
The pupils of their eyes are clear and light red, like those of monkeys. Their eyes are set deep in their round faces; their teeth are exceedingly white. They are very partial to tobacco and always carry the instruments needed for smoking in a pouch on the hip... . They are blessed by nature with wondrous skills of many kinds and have an inborn self-restraint and sense of justice.

Andō goes on to present an idealised picture of the relations obtaining between the seven provinces of the Dutch Republic, emphasising their concord when attacked by foreign powers. From time immemorial, he asserts, there has been no internal strife, nor have the Dutch ever attacked other countries. He comes to the conclusion that the Dutch are of a greater purity than the many other nations of the world and underscores this flattering comparison with a brief discourse on the selfishness, greed, and poverty found not only in China and India but also in Japan. For all this, the Dutch have their idiosyncrasies, which he goes on to describe:

Owing to the prevalence of the physical principle of the element metal in their physical structure, they are deficient in nourishing blood of a yielding physical principle. Consequently they do not live very long, and most of them die between the ages of forty and fifty. It is said that no one reaches the age of seventy or eighty. On the other hand, however, they are more sagacious at the age of ten than other people at thirty or forty ... .

Japanese sake is too sharp for their taste and they do not drink it. Dutch liquor is sweetish, strong-smelling, and unpalatable for the Japanese. Owing to their excessive fondness for meat, their bodies exude a nauseous odour of such pungency that it is impossible to approach the places where they dwell.

The book from which the above passages are drawn and other Japanese works contain enough material for a list of misconceptions about the Dutch:



**Figure 4**

*The men in the street in Edo try to catch a glimpse of Dutchmen on their court journey, by Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849).*

(1) They are not blessed with longevity. Though Andō, as we have seen, explained this on ‘scientific’ grounds, another writer, Hirata Atsutane (1776–1843), often called the theologian of *Shintō* (Japan’s ethnocentric religion), ascribed it to their addiction to sexual excesses and drink. ‘It is just as rare for a Dutchman to reach fifty,’ he writes, ‘as for a Japanese to reach a hundred.’ (2) Their height is always wildly exaggerated, the prevailing opinion being that they are taller than other (or normal) people. (3) They have eyes like animals, and no heels. Hirata states that their eyes resemble those of a dog, and goes on to say that ‘because the back part of their feet does not appear to touch the ground, they attach wooden heels to their shoes’. (4) ‘To urinate,’ according to Hirata and others, ‘they lift up one leg after the manner of a dog.’ (5) The stereotype so often held by one people of another’s sexual potency was in evidence here as well, it being widely believed in Japan that the Dutch possessed remarkable sexual powers which they heightened still further with potions and the like.

In his *Ransetsu benwaku* (Corrections of Erroneous Theories Concerning the Dutch; 1788), Ōtsuki Gentaku (1757–1827) rebutted such popular fallacies, though without much success, as is apparent from the writings of Hirata and others. ‘The length of human life is a gift from heaven,’ Ōtsuki maintained, ‘and in that respect there can be no distinction whatsoever between one country of this world and another.’ The hardships of seafaring and the influence of the ocean’s miasma could, he conceded, shorten a sailor’s life, but ‘the people who remain in their own country are in no way different from the people here. Some fulfil their allotted span ‘at life at one hundred; others reach the end of their fleeting years at ten or twenty.’ And he had this to say about other misconceptions:

In colour and appearance the Europeans are slightly dissimilar to us, the inhabitants of Asia, perhaps because of the variant locations of the continents. But there is no difference at all in either the structure or the function of their bodies. When I observed the Indonesian servants of the Dutch on a visit to Nagasaki, I noticed that their eyes were of a divergent shape. Such differences are also found among the Chinese, Koreans, and Ryukyuan. Even among the inhabitants of our own country, I believe I can distinguish variations according to place of origin. But although there may thus be a slight deviation in the matter of colour and shape, the actual function of the eyes is everywhere the same ... Products though we all are of one and the same creative force of nature, minor variations cannot fail to occur owing to the location of the various countries.

As regards the heels, they constitute the base of the body. How could we walk without them? This is not even worth discussing. In the matter of these people’s height ... that is not all the same, and there were wide variations among the many Dutchmen I saw in Nagasaki ... . The tales that they raise one leg to urinate, are well versed in sexual techniques, and use aphrodisiacs are just so many false rumours, unworthy of serious attention.

Andō Shōeki had a very high opinion of the sexual morality of the Dutch. In his treatise on the Supreme Way he dwells on the subject at some length:

Their way of marriage is truly correct. Once a man is married he does not mix with other women, nor does his wife meet other men. They observe the mutual love of husband and wife and have no affection for others. When a man without a wife becomes involved with someone else’s wife, his kinsfolk get together and kill him; and when a widow becomes involved with someone

else's husband, her family gets together and kills her... [It may happen that during his stay in Nagasaki] a man who has a wife [in the Netherlands] will forget himself and have dealings with Japanese harlots. When he returns to his country ... his wife will immediately know this by the expression on his face and will hurry to inform his kinsfolk, who will get together, and kill him at once. The ability to know such a thing immediately is a characteristic of the people of that country, which in this respect is superior to all other countries.

Some *Rangakusha* carried their admiration for the real or imagined virtues of the Dutch to such lengths that their compatriots mockingly said they were suffering from *rampeki* (Hollandomania). A few *Rangakusha* of this period were also admirers of the uncomplicated Latin alphabet and of Western painting. Shiba Kōkan (1747–1818) stated in his *Seiyō gadan* (Notes on Western Painting; 1799):

The basis of painting in the Western countries is what is called the portrayal of reality and is vastly different from the approach to painting in this country ... . That portrayal of reality is such that whatever the subject — whether it be a landscape, flowers and birds, cattle, trees and rocks, or anything else one is struck every time by its freshness; the animals and birds look as though they are alive, as though they are walking and flying. This can be achieved only by the Western-style of painting, and to anyone who understands this art and applies it, the traditional Japanese and Chinese paintings are like the fumbblings of children.

This eulogy on the superior merits of Western painting is only one of many voices from Japan's past. The *Rangaku* period coincided with a change in the Japanese philosophy of life, with not only the *Rangakusha* but many other scholars as well turning steadily further away from the culture of China which had hitherto been held in such veneration. But with one or two exceptions, their admiration for the West remained limited to its scientific and technological achievements. The principle consciously followed in the acculturation process set in motion by the Meiji Restoration of 1868 found clear expression in the slogan *wakon yōsai*: Japanese spirit and Western learning.

