

THIS is an exciting book. First of all, it is exciting to find an author willing to take on the much-underrated topic of the Dutch in Japan and treat their presence as a legitimate object of study. This is the first book-length treatment of the topic in English in many years. Exciting, also, is the novel approach that Timon Screech brings to the topic, for he looks at the Dutch presence solely from the perspective of Japanese materials. And these are not the Japanese materials of official *rangaku*, which have been studied extensively in Japan, but those of its undergrowth: the novelties imported by the Dutch that became the rage of the markets, along the highways, in the pleasure quarters, at festivals, and in the shopping centers. Further, the book deals with Japanese illustrations of these novelties: paintings, woodblock prints, illustrated novelettes, pamphlets, and advertisements. Finally, the book is exciting because of its style. Screech's enthusiasm for his topic is ebullient and contagious. His irreverence nicely reflects the fun that the Japanese of the later Edo period must have had when they experimented with and wrote about the things the author has retrieved for us from the garbage bin of history.

In the Introduction, Screech outlines his concerns: how his ambition is to make us see the change the Japanese underwent as a result of the optical inventions imported by the Dutch. Although, as we shall see, he promises more than he delivers in the end, his main thesis about 'the western scientific gaze' that dissects, analyzes, categorizes, and describes the minutiae of the things of the phenomenal world, is novel and stimulating. Small globs of polished glass brought up close, through spy glasses and telescopes, what had always been vague and of no immediate concern because of the distances involved. They made the invisible visible: the microcosm revealed in the microscopes as well as the macrocosm of the universe. Such small pieces of glass could be used to project images of faraway places almost life-size on a wall.

The same material, glass, could perform other functions as well, such as erecting a wall of power, with those inside glass containers the powerless object of study and those on the outside the all-powerful engaged in the description of the seen. Large sheets of glass coated with mercury on one side formed walls of reflecting images, and allowed the Japanese their first good look at themselves. In the larger, upright Dutch mirrors, they appeared as complete human beings, not as the collection of details that they had been used to seeing for centuries in their small mirrors of polished bronze. Through their imports, Screech argues, the Dutch changed the way the Japanese looked at things, and, may I add, it was this way of looking that first became decidedly 'modern', long before official modernization began. In turn, Screech does something similar: after reading his book, no one will be able to look at the illustrative materials of the later Edo period in quite the same way again.

The sheer mass of little-known publications, popular during the last quarter of the eighteenth century, used in this work is evidence of impressive and original scholarship. All of this material is presented in a way that often charms the reader through the device of looking at Western customs through Japanese eyes. About alphabetic writing, for example, Screech says:

It was indeed odd for logic to move over the page crosswise, for 'going sideways' (*yoko-yuki*) was already common slang for 'weird.' European orthography meandered obliquely in a way that seemed internally wayward, even before the text was parsed and its contents examined. (p. 24a)

Also, the author is often stimulated by his sources to give delightful descriptions of the materials at hand. About a Japanese poetic form, he writes: 'Kyoka went further than senryu in not only bouncing spheres off each other but unlocking the hold that even the wording of the verse had, and twisting words into prongs that poked and teased but never quite grabbed sense' (p. 25a). Only occasionally he slides off into jargon or corniness. About a flying octopus conveying an admirer to a prostitute, Screech says: 'Worthy of note as a display of personal unity with the stratosphere, as a courting ploy this is a dismal failure' (p. 36b). The dismal failure here is that of the author's irony.

The first chapter, 'Trade and Culture in the Eighteenth Century', is devoted to an overview of the Dutch trade with Japan. Although eminently readable because of the author's style, it really is the weakest chapter because Screech's documentary base is slim and his reading in the secondary literature of the topic shallow. When he contends, for example, that for long periods of time Dutch trade consisted mainly of smuggled items, he believes that he is breaking new ground, whereas in fact he is only advertising his ignorance of Dutch.

The second chapter, 'The "Batavian Temperament" and Its Critics', deals with the image that the Japanese constructed of the Dutch 'national character'. Here Screech is on firmer ground, even though, quite obviously, the image he describes can have had but little relationship to reality: the Dutch as makers of precision instruments (thermometers, barometers, clocks) became 'punctual', 'well-informed', 'sophisticated', 'clever', and 'well-mannered' in Japanese eyes, and showed them a way of becoming 'civilized' in a way that they had never seen in the Chinese. The third chapter, 'Mechanics and Motions', moves on to a description of the different types of instruments brought by the Dutch and their reception in Japan, especially their influence on

*karakuri* (*speeldozen* in Dutch), contraptions in which dolls move around propelled by the ‘magic’ of applied science. Chapter Four, ‘Machinery for Pictures’, describes the revolution in representational precision in terms of etching on copper, the art of creating perspective, the camera obscura, magic lanterns, and peep boxes, in short, all the instruments that ultimately led to the invention of photography and film.

If the first four chapters are mainly descriptive, the last three are more analytical. Chapter Five, ‘Seeing in’, describes the function of glass containers and mirrors, and Chapter Six, ‘The Eye and the Lens’, shows how the Japanese of the late eighteenth century became aware of the epistemological importance of the eye, for Chinese-style medical practitioners had never deemed its anatomy worthy of serious study. The last chapter, ‘The View from on High’, takes distance as its topic: distance bridged by the telescope, and the concomitant desire for ever higher places from which to look down and gaze into the distance.

Given Screech’s declaration at the beginning of the Introduction that vision is his ‘larger concern’, it is surprising that the book has no conclusion. Readers are left to figure out for themselves what all the information they have absorbed really means for the history of Japan’s popular thought as a whole, and not just popular thought at the end of the eighteenth century. We cannot help wondering what became of that promise made in the beginning that we would be told how the conclusions about seeing were locked ‘into wider cultural concerns’. A summing-up of these concerns would have made a proper conclusion to the volume. As it stands, we get the impression that Screech was only too happy to have finished and be done with the whole thing.

I have already mentioned the author’s oddly dismissive attitude to the necessity of learning some Dutch for those engaged in his chosen field. Not only could he have avoided botching up the spellings of just about every Dutch name, book title, or quote that appear in the text, but he could also have avoided confusing Dutch and German words (*luftschiff* [sic], p. 226b) and taking over the translation mistakes of the *rangakusha* (for example, Ōtsuki Gentaku’s translation of *toverlantaarn*, p. 107b). More importantly, with only a little Dutch, the author could have consulted the records of the Dutch East India Company. Even allowing for the great gap between recorded and real imports, especially the *Negotie Journael* (trade journal)—less known than the *Daghregister* (daily diary of the factory director at Deshima) but possibly a better source for Dutch trade with Japan—could have supplied a complete inventory of the *kinds* of things imported, if not their actual number. To have overlooked this source is really inexcusable for an investigator trying to piece together a picture of Dutch trade with Japan. If Screech had taken the trouble to check the Dutch sources (even those translated into English), he would not have told us that the Dutch imported an elephant in 1726 (p. 39a), for this elephant was in fact imported by the Chinese in 1727. This small mistake has larger consequences for his argument on the page indicated.

The book, in fact, is marred by countless little errors. I know from experience how difficult it is to get all the details right when working in a field as recondite as the history of thought in the Edo period. But in this case it is the nature of the mistakes that is bothersome, and the majority of them are completely unnecessary. Does Cambridge University Press not have knowledgeable proofreaders? Why do we find incomplete (‘of those imported [few/many?] may have been’ p. 159a) and grammatically incorrect (‘seeming to supporting’, p. 180b) sentences? Why are Japanese words constantly divided wrongly (‘Wak-anran’, p. 35a; ‘Toyon-oby’, p. 65a; ‘Sum-inama’, p. 78b;

'Kash-iwade', p. 85b; 'Ju-n'an', p. 168b)? Why does the author confuse Sugita Gempaku and Ōtsuki Gentaku on no less than four occasions (pp. 88b, 107a, 169a & 194b)? Why is Daikokuya Kōdayū a 'sailor from Sendai' (pp. 69a & 134b), who was in St Petersburg 'in 1798' (p. 69a)? What do we do with a statement such as 'From 1639, for the next 229 years until 1868 when the shogunate finally fell, the VOC was in command' (p. 9a)? In command of what? Did the Company not go bankrupt in 1799? Did trading with other nations not start in 1859? Just about every part of this sentence contains a factual error. Screech also mentions 'the twelfth century Tale of Genji' (p. 64b), Yoritomo 'who became shogun in 1185' (p. 75b), and Iberian traders who arrived in Japan 'two decades' before 1609 (p. 8b).

This being said, it will not do to lose sight of the impressive wood that Timon Screech has painted for us by our looking at the flaws of some of the individual trees. This is an important book with many new insights and testifying to mostly impressive scholarship.