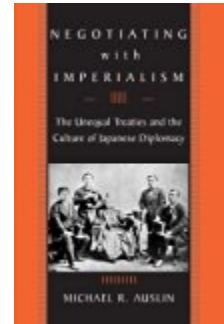


Michael R. Auslin. *Negotiating with Imperialism: The Unequal Treaties and the Culture of Japanese Diplomacy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006. 276 pp. \$18.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-674-02227-0.

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The Unequal Treaties: Understanding Nineteenth-Century Diplomatic History in Japan

The popular narrative of early modern Japanese diplomatic history begins with a sudden “closing off” of Japan from the outside world in the seventeenth century, followed by several centuries of isolation. This, then, contrasts an equally dramatic “opening,” an event initiated by Matthew Calbraith Perry’s gunboat diplomacy in 1854 and the signing of “unequal treaties” in 1858. Ronald Toby’s work *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan: Asia in the Development of the Tokugawa Bakufu* (1984) undermined this portrayal of a static, isolated Japan. In a similar vein, Michael R. Auslin argues that Japan was not as passive during its interaction with the West from the 1850s to the 1870s as scholars typically portray, nor were its treaties as unequal as they first appear. Despite lacking experience, and in some cases even the terminology of treaty-centered Western diplomacy, the Tokugawa regime proved to be a quick study, learning from the treaties that Great Britain signed with Siam and China. As Auslin ably demonstrates, Tokugawa leaders resisted the West through treaty negotiations, protecting the physical, ideological, and intellectual boundaries that the shogunate had struggled to maintain since the regime’s inception.

The first chapter seeks to qualify accepted wisdom regarding articles in the Harris Treaty that warrant its “unequal” status. We learn that extraterritoriality, often cited as the most egregious example of the unequal status, was not a problem for the Japanese. Why should the shogunate have worried about legal issues concern-

ing westerners in Japan? With no opportunity for westerners to travel throughout Japan, and little interaction between the Japanese and westerners even in those few places where westerners could live, extraterritoriality did not represent a threat. Likewise, the most favored nation clause did not alarm the shogunate; it simply kept Western powers focused on each other. British diplomat Rutherford Alcock supported the Tokugawa in this respect, establishing a neutrality doctrine that kept other Western powers from becoming too involved in Japanese domestic politics, thus checking attempts to take land from Japan. Most important, Tokugawa negotiators succeeded in keeping opium out of Japan, stalling the issue of opening port cities, and generally limiting Western presence in Japan.

The next two chapters trace the degree to which Tokugawa leaders stalled and often stymied the spatial and temporal unfolding of the treaty provisions. Their goal was to keep Japan’s physical boundaries as closed as possible, which required limiting the number of port cities opened to westerners, often with some success. In one amusing example, Auslin describes how Japanese negotiators tricked the American diplomat Townsend Harris into accepting the undeveloped village of Yokohama as an open port instead of the potentially more lucrative Kanagawa City. Because Kanagawa was located along the Tokaidō Highway, Harris hoped westerners would be able to move freely in Kanagawa City and take advantage of regular contact with the Japanese traveling through.

The useful ambiguity of the term “Kanagawa,” alternatively referring to a large region or the port city, came to mean “Yokohama,” and neither Harris nor his British counterpart Alcock could do anything about it. Yokohama was isolated from most Japanese and highly regulated by shogunate officials, much as Dejima had been for the Dutch for centuries. The senior councilor Ii Naosuke’s desire to limit the Western presence in Japan had worked; westerners remained confined to a few distant and isolated ports.

Stalling for time in opening the ports also succeeded, but unlike the spatial issue, this was not accomplished from a position of strength. The shogunate’s inability to prevent, or provide reparations for, attacks against westerners convinced foreign diplomats that opening Japan too quickly would further destabilize the shogunate and lead to more violence. According to Auslin, this point, won by the Japanese in the signing of the 1862 London Protocol, represented the apogee of the shogunate’s diplomatic triumphs. However, the strategy of negotiation had run its course, and a new generation of shogunate leaders was partly to blame. They sent a mission to the West to convince governments to close Yokohama; a doomed initiative because it lacked support from Western diplomats in Japan. They also acquiesced to Alcock’s punitive mission against Chōshū domain for attacking Western ships. Nor could the shogunate silence the growing domestic criticisms from the court, outer daimyō, and samurai zealots. Still, as Auslin argues in chapter 5, although negotiation no longer worked as a strategy, the Japanese successfully offered tariff reductions to postpone the opening of new ports. The tariff issue fits into Auslin’s revisionist history (I mean this in a positive sense) because tariffs are typically seen as yet another sign of the Tokugawa regime’s weakness.

The final two chapters address the treaties as they existed in the Meiji period. Here, the story is one of continuation; Meiji leaders adopted the Tokugawa goal of limiting Western presence in Japan. Meiji leaders were not in a position to renegotiate the treaties; instead, they

attempted to project a sense of stability to convince westerners of the new government’s legitimate claim to rule. Their efforts failed when one of the worst attacks on westerners occurred in the early Meiji period. Gradually the treaties devolved, moving away from the gains made by the Tokugawa regime, and allowing westerners greater freedoms in Japan. As new leaders began to reform the country along Western lines, they learned to understand the threat extraterritoriality represented to Japan’s sovereignty as a modern nation-state. The final death knell of the negotiation strategy occurred during the Iwakura mission (1871-72) when the Meiji leadership allowed Western powers to determine the prerequisites for final treaty revision.

Auslin’s work should be required reading for anyone who studies the diplomatic history of Japan, and I suspect that his interpretation of the “unequal treaties” will become part of the standard presentation of this era. His argument is convincing, well supported, and engagingly written, and will make excellent reading for undergraduates as well as specialists. However, at times I felt the narrative was too neat. I wondered, for example, how rank-and-file officials who interacted with westerners understood or contributed to the “diplomatic culture” established by the few key shogunate leaders Auslin describes. Indeed, such loaded terms as “culture” and “intellectual boundaries” are not fully unpacked and probably deserve another book entirely. I was disappointed to see that Auslin continues the uncritical portrayal of the ambassadors of the 1860 embassy to the United States as uncurious yes men unimpressed by their experiences abroad. This is a conscious reference on Auslin’s part to Masao Miyoshi’s now thirty-year-old book *As We Saw Them: The First Japanese Embassy to the United States* (1979), which has also been criticized on the same point. This is only a minor issue, and one cannot hope to see every paradigm overturned in a single book. Neither of these criticisms diminish Auslin’s important contribution to our understanding of nineteenth-century diplomatic history in Japan.

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