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Michel, Wolfgang

Faculty of Languages and Cultures, Kyushu University : Professor : History of Euro-Japanese Cultural Exchange

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His Story of Japan

Engelbert Kaempfer's Manuscript in a New Translation

WOLFGANG MICHEL

Kaempfer's Japan: Tokugawa Culture Observed. Translated and edited by Beatrice M. Bodart-Bailey. University of Hawai'i Press, 1998. 608 pages. Hardback \$70.00.

ENGELBERT KAEMPFER'S book on Japan has a long history of publication in many languages. Born in 1651 in Lemgo in northern Germany as the son of a Lutheran vicar (*pastor primarius*), the author set out in 1683 from Uppsala and traveled through Russia and Persia to Batavia and, via Siam, Japan.¹ While the paths and purposes of this lengthy journey from west to east were determined by accidental occurrences and limited choices, in the collecting and cataloguing of all kinds of information Kaempfer outdid most contemporaneous European travelers. By the time he arrived in Nagasaki in 1690 he had accumulated an amazing array of records on many geographical regions, and was well versed in the careful observation and systematic description of cultures and societies. At Dejima he was fortunate to meet with a gifted and courageous partner, Imamura Gen'emon 今村源右衛門, sent to him as a servant at the Dutch trading post. Without the assistance of Gen'emon, who was to make his name as one of the outstanding Japanese interpreters at Dejima,² exploration of Japan within the short span of two years would have been an impossible task. Kaempfer left Japan richly supplied with books, translated excerpts, and all manner of notes, sketches, and maps.

On his return to Germany, Kaempfer presented ten short observations (*Disputatio medica inauguralis exhibens decadem observationum exoticarum*) at Leiden University in 1694, which earned him a doctoral degree in medicine.

THE AUTHOR is professor of Comparative Language and Culture Studies at Kyushu University, Fukuoka.

¹ See Haberland 1996.

² See Katagiri 1995.

Eighteen years later, in 1712, he published *Amoenitates exoticae* (Exotic Pleasures),³ an impressive book of more than nine hundred pages of botanical, medical, and historiocultural observations that stimulated considerable interest among experts of Oriental and natural studies. Despite his growing reputation, however, Kaempfer failed to publish his manuscript on Japan. While Latin books sold throughout Europe, the market for German publications was comparatively small and not without risk, and it is possible that in his last years Kaempfer was simply too exhausted by illness and his considerable marital problems to persevere. After Kaempfer died in 1715, the eminent London antiquary Hans Sloane purchased most of the manuscripts, some rare books, and other items from Kaempfer's nephew, once again proving his qualities as a collector and scholar. Johann Gaspar Scheuchzer, a young Swiss in Sloane's employ, subsequently translated Kaempfer's epoch-making account on Japan (titled "Das Heutige Japan" [Japan of Today] in the original) into English.⁴

Scheuchzer's translation, *The History of Japan*, appeared in 1727 and obviously pleased its readers since a second edition was printed in 1729. A further dozen versions and translations appeared in the next decade. German readers who expected an edition in Kaempfer's mother tongue, however, for some time had to be content with three partial retranslations of Scheuchzer's English version.⁵ In the late 1770s Christian Wilhelm Dohm, an ambitious young historian, finally provided a German edition based on two copies of Kaempfer's manuscript found at Lemgo in 1773. New editions or reprints of older versions appeared in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, illustrating Kaempfer's enduring reputation within Western Europe. As Peter Kapitza has shown in his pioneering study, Kaempfer's influence can be found in eighteenth-century encyclopaedic articles as well as in the writings of many renowned philosophers, writers, and historians.⁶ There have also been several partial Japanese translations, beginning with Shizuki Tadao's 志筑忠雄 version of Kaempfer's treatise on the Tokugawa policy of seclusion.⁷ The first complete Japanese version, based on a Dutch edition of *The History of Japan*, was put together by a group of Rangakusha in the bakufu's

³ Some chapters have been translated into English; see Carrubba 1996.

⁴ See Massarella 1995. For more on Sir Hans Sloane, see MacGregor 1994. On the Kaempfer materials in London, see Brown 1994. The manuscript "Das Heutige Japan," is presently held by the British Library (Sloane Collection no. 3060).

⁵ The most influential of these retranslations was the one appended to the German translation of Du Halde's famous book on China under the title *Engelbrecht [Engelbert] Kämpfers, weiland berühmten Medici zu Lemgow, Beschreibung des Japanischen Reiches nach seinem natürlichen, bürgerlichen und kirchlichen Zustande*. In vol. 4 of Du Halde 1749.

⁶ Kapitza 1980, pp. 41–63.

⁷ Scheuchzer had appended an English version of this treatise and five other "observations" from Kaempfer's *Amoenitates exoticae* to *The History of Japan*. These were incorporated in French and Dutch translations of the latter work. During the eighteenth century, several copies of the Dutch editions (*De Beschryving van Japan*, Amsterdam, 1729, 1733) reached Japan and drew the attention of Rangakusha and bakufu officials. In his translation of the treatise on seclusion, the Dejima interpreter Shizuki coined the new term *sakoku* 鎖国 to render Kaempfer's lengthy title into Japanese. His creation later became a keyword in the conceptualization of Tokugawa Japan. For more on the early Japanese translations, see Numata 1966. For a detailed discussion of Shizuki's translation and the notion of *sakoku*, see Kobori 1993.

astronomical observatory during the 1840s, but the manuscript seems to have disappeared. Another version, begun in the closing years of the Tokugawa regime and completed in 1880 by Tsuboi Nobuyoshi 坪井信良, was printed a few years ago.⁸

Kaempfer was appreciated by all those interested in Japan who did not want to depend solely on Catholic sources. Readers in the Age of Enlightenment also welcomed his writings because they provided useful material closely related to three fundamental intellectual issues of the day: the place of religion, the nature of state power and policy, and the course and aims of human history. In a Europe suffering from religious conflicts and wars, Kaempfer's description of Japan as a country where various religions (except for Christianity) coexisted peacefully inevitably aroused great interest. So did his account of the political situation. Kaempfer presented the power of the Tokugawa state and its harsh laws as the outcome of the struggle against stubborn and power-driven regional lords to unify the country. His account stimulated a lively debate in Europe on forms of government and the freedom of the Japanese people. The positions taken were "radically opposed," with Montesquieu positing a general and unavoidable "Asiatic despotism" on the one hand, while, on the other, a progressive group following Voltaire held that in Japan "the laws of nature have been transformed explicitly into civil laws." Assumptions about the supposed national character also figured in discussions of the form of government in Japan.⁹

These debates were closely related to evaluations of the position of Japan in the international community and its policy of self-isolation, which Kaempfer actively supported. Pointing to the Iberian efforts at overseas expansion, writers like Kant expressed their understanding of Japan's seclusionist stance. But it was not only Catholic authors such as the Jesuit Charlevoix who harshly condemned Kaempfer's view.¹⁰ The public happiness of mankind, C. M. Wieland wrote in 1773, could only be achieved through joint efforts for perfection.¹¹ This same spirit led the editors of the *Deutsche Encyclopädie* at the end of the eighteenth century to the conclusion that the main reason why the Japanese "do not make any progress in enlightenment" lay in the fact that they were "not allowed to associate with foreigners."¹²

Distinguished thinkers such as Montesquieu, Rousseau, Voltaire, G. T. Raynal, J. Brucker, von Haller, Bayle, Diderot, Charlevoix, Kant, J. L. Castilhon, or Herder thus drew from Kaempfer. Oliver Goldsmith, Claudius, J. J. de Boyer, and

⁸ See *Kenpuru Nihonshi*. There is also a useful commentary and index: *Kenpuru Nihonshi: Kaisetsu, sōsakuin*.

⁹ Kapitza 1980, pp. 57 f.

¹⁰ Charlevoix, who understandably was not satisfied with many of Kaempfer's arguments, rewrote and published an augmented version of his book in 1736, the influence of which should not be underestimated. Kaempfer is mentioned on many pages, see Charlevoix 1736, vol. 1, pp. xii, 8, 49, 93, 109, 135, 143; vol. 2, pp. 125, 138, 255, 405f., 411, 423f., 457, 481, 597, 613, 617-81, 692, 690f.

¹¹ Wieland 1773, p. 173.

¹² *Deutsche Encyclopädie*, vol. 16 (1791), col. 774 ("Japanische Philosophie").

other writers of belle lettres likewise picked up some of the colorful episodes from his book and used them for a variety of purposes. Kaempfer's successors at the Dutch trading post in Nagasaki also studied his book intensively before, during, and after their stay in Japan. Even Philipp Franz von Siebold, who arrived in Dejima more than a century after Kaempfer and made outstanding contributions to modern research on Japan, quoted his predecessor at length in his monumental *Nippon*.¹³ With the reopening of Japan, however, many additional sources became available to a growing number of researchers in various disciplines. The new, modernizing Japan came to occupy the Western mind, and writers on "old Japan" gradually receded from center stage.

Kaempfer's rediscovery in the twentieth century was mainly due to Karl Meier (later Meier-Lemgo), who restored him to his rightful place as one of the earliest scientific travelers and a pioneer of European studies on Japan.¹⁴ Meier-Lemgo took pride in Kaempfer's achievements and his cosmopolitan flair. With the financial support of the regional government of Lippe he traveled to London in 1929 to have a close look at Kaempfer's legacy.¹⁵ The findings he made on this journey, no mean feat in itself considering the times and circumstances, were documented in a series of articles. At Meier-Lemgo's death in 1969, he had published sixty-four titles on Kaempfer, the most important of which are *Engelbert Kämpfer: Seltsames Asien* (1933), *Engelbert Kämpfer: Der erste deutsche Forschungsreisende 1651–1716* (1937), and, last but not least, *Die Reisetagebücher Engelbert Kaempfers* (1968), which included many parts of the travel diaries excerpted from the manuscripts in London.¹⁶ Meier-Lemgo's total focus on his countryman, however, led him to ignore the social circumstances of Kaempfer's time in interpreting the traveler and his writings. In addition, although he knew well the materials in the British Library, which held the manuscript "Das Heutige Japan," and had no problems with Kaempfer's handwriting, Meier-Lemgo gave scant attention to the problems with this piece.

During the 1930s and early 1940s, Meier-Lemgo's efforts were taken up and used for its own ends by the Nazi regime, which organized Kaempfer festivals in Lemgo and tried to present the new German-Japanese alliance as being deeply rooted in history. Although the increasing interest in Kaempfer, even after World War II, was owing largely to Meier-Lemgo, he also was responsible for a certain reluctance among German scholars to study the manuscripts housed in the British Library. It took some decades to overcome the impression given by his works that he had extracted everything of value from these materials, and that the remaining parts were barely readable, chaotic, and fragmentary.

The 330th anniversary of Kaempfer's birth in 1981 prompted renewed interest.

¹³ In his description of Japanese moxibustion, for example, Siebold presents the entirety of Kaempfer's "Moxa-Mirror," although he was in a much better position to gather new information than any of his predecessors at Dejima. Siebold 1897, vol. 2, pp. 85f.

¹⁴ On Meier-Lemgo, see Tappe and Tappe 1982.

¹⁵ Meier 1929.

¹⁶ Meier-Lemgo 1933; Meier-Lemgo 1937; Meier-Lemgo 1968.

In the preceding year OAG (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens) in Tokyo had published a facsimile reprint of Dohm's German edition, together with three influential studies by Peter Kapitza, Hans Hüls, and Imai Tadashi.¹⁷ Imai's comments on the Japanese background, based on his 1973 Japanese translation,¹⁸ and the first on this subject written in a Western language, did much to identify the Japanese proper names given by Kaempfer and the sources he used. An expanded version of Imai's study was included in a valuable collection of articles put out by the Engelbert Kaempfer Society in Lemgo in 1982.¹⁹

The next wave of activity culminated in 1990, when the three-hundredth anniversary of Kaempfer's arrival in Japan stimulated specialists in various disciplines to review the state of the field of research on him. Beatrice Bodart-Bailey, the translator and editor of the edition under review, played a significant role in initiating an international symposium on Kaempfer, organized by the Deutsches Institut für Japanstudien (German Institute for Japanese Studies) in Tokyo in December 1990. Her suggestions were also well received in Lemgo, where another international symposium took place a few months earlier.²⁰

In a study published in 1988, Bodart-Bailey highlighted various distortions and additions in Scheuchzer's 1727 edition of *The History of Japan*.²¹ It is clear that there were misinterpretations. Kaempfer depicted a culture that differed greatly from what Scheuchzer knew, and the Swiss writer had to translate Kaempfer's text into a language that was not his mother tongue. No doubt, as he explained, he tried hard to satisfy "the genius of the English language," with the result that he rendered Kaempfer's dry German into rather flowery phrases. This pursuit of elegance and readability resulted in all sorts of amplifications and frequent omissions. Kaempfer's praise of Japan was toned down and his criticisms accentuated in many cases. Scheuchzer also wrote a new opening chapter based on Kaempfer's Siam travel diaries, and consequently had to amend all other parts in the original manuscript referring to that country.²² He was similarly unconstrained in his attitude towards Kaempfer's illustrations, choosing freely whatever seemed useful among the various materials at hand. These plates have become the standard illustrations for all editions and translations to this day.

In another study, Bodart-Bailey addressed as well the problems with *Geschichte und Beschreibung von Japan (1776–1779)*, the version put together

¹⁷ Kapitza 1980; Hüls 1980; Imai 1980.

¹⁸ Imai 1973. This translation is based on Dohm's German edition. A revised second printing appeared in 1997.

¹⁹ Hüls and Hoppe 1982.

²⁰ Many papers from both symposia were published in Haberland 1993. Further papers and studies are to be found in Massarella and Bodart-Bailey 1995.

²¹ Bodart-Bailey 1988a.

²² Scheuchzer's chapter on Siam made some sense. The intensive trade between Japan and Siam in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries made both countries interesting to Europeans. Christoph Arnold's 1672 account of Japan, Siam, and Korea might have had some influence, too. See Arnold 1672.

by Dohm, who used the German manuscript copies mentioned above in addition to the work done by Scheuchzer.²³ At the Lemgo symposium in 1990, Herbert Bräutigam took up this subject again and demonstrated in detail how Dohm had “refurbished” his edition.²⁴ The gifted young Dohm, born in Lemgo a century after Kaempfer, had already demonstrated his ability to engage in intellectual debate in the spirit of the Enlightenment, and had thereby gained the patronage of influential men such as J. W. Gleim, J. C. Lavater, and A. J. Büsching. Having edited travel books and published his own studies on southern and eastern Asia, Dohm seemed to be the right man to deal with the manuscripts on Japan. As could already be seen in his previous writings, however, the sharpness of Dohm’s mind and his obvious self-confidence were paired with a certain bravado and a cavalier attitude to the work of other authors. Living in the Age of Enlightenment, he was fascinated by Kaempfer’s text because it described a people whose “spirit had not been bent by Greeks and Romans.”²⁵ He nevertheless did not consider Kaempfer’s book to be an accomplished work because it did not contain “everything a scholar of history wants to know about Japan.”²⁶ Dohm went on to describe his plan to “make up for the shortages” of Kaempfer and to publish “a systematic encyclopedia of all our knowledge of Japan” in magazine format. He even considered putting out a *catalogue raisonné* of all writers on Japan in order to demonstrate the progress of Western knowledge about that country.

Dohm thus did not hesitate to intervene in Kaempfer’s text. He omitted sections, added emphasis, and replaced Kaempfer’s baroque vocabulary with less colorful terms, which took away much of the precision and power of the original. Dohm even suspected Kaempfer of having traveled only to bring back confirmation of his preconceived “favorite opinions.”²⁷ He consequently added numerous commentaries, critical remarks, and corrections, and so tried to influence the reception of his new edition. Despite the lengthy explanations, illustrated by concrete examples, of his editing principles, one of his readers, the philologist Christian Gottlieb Heyne, already had doubts.²⁸ In his detailed review of *Geschichte und Beschreibung von Japan*, Heyne suggested that Dohm should hand the two manuscripts found at Lemgo over to a famous university to ensure that future scholars would be able to use the sources and decide for themselves as to the correctness of the edition.²⁹ Dohm did not follow this advice, and both manuscripts disappeared under unknown circumstances. Thus, up to the present, none of the published versions of Kaempfer’s book could be said to be accurate.

After the two symposia in 1990, the Engelbert Kaempfer Society in Lemgo, supported by the state of North-Rhine Westphalia, established a framework for

²³ Bodart-Bailey 1988b.

²⁴ Bräutigam 1993.

²⁵ Dohm 1774, p. 24.

²⁶ Dohm 1774, p. 26.

²⁷ Dohm 1774, p. 6.

²⁸ *Auserlesene Bibliothek*, pp. 500–19.

²⁹ *Auserlesene Bibliothek*, p. 505.

publishing the Kaempfer manuscripts in London; the manuscript on Japan is to appear in 2001.³⁰ Bodart-Bailey, however, took up the challenging task of producing a new English translation of this manuscript. This was a most worthwhile undertaking, since to read Kaempfer's idiosyncratic style in the original requires experience and perseverance even for native German speakers. An accurate and readable English translation is therefore essential to promote an understanding of Kaempfer and his book, contributing as much as it has to the European image of Japan.

Bodart-Bailey has named her translation *Kaempfer's Japan: Tokugawa Culture Observed*, and not *Japan of Today* as in the original manuscript. There are good reasons for this decision. Bodart-Bailey has not only set aside all of Scheuchzer's additions, which had changed much of the structure and content of the book, but, because her main aim is "to make available to as large a readership as possible an accurate version of Kaempfer's eye-witness account of Tokugawa Japan" (p. 22), she also has abbreviated or omitted some chapters and paragraphs written by Kaempfer himself.³¹ Today, no one need look to Kaempfer when seeking such basic information as the succession of shogun or tennō, since details such as these can be found easily in modern reference materials. Present-day readers are attracted to Kaempfer's work for what cannot be found in other historical sources: his individual firsthand observations on late-seventeenth-century Japan. His work also provides stimulating material for anyone dealing with the complex problems of intercultural perceptions. Readers familiar with earlier editions will not feel the lack of the parts omitted by Bodart-Bailey—with the exception, perhaps, of chapter 5 of book 1, where Kaempfer takes up the much-disputed question of the origin of the Japanese people and discusses at length Sino-Japanese similarities and differences. This chapter shows the coexistence in his thinking of Christian traditions and rational analysis. His ultimate source of reference is the Old Testament with its story of the tower of Babel and the ensuing punishment by God, who made people speak different languages and dispersed them all over the world. From this starting point, Kaempfer had to find a route that would bring the first Japanese from the Near to the Far East. In his careful argumentation he uses language comparisons to prove ethnic contacts. Topographical and climatic information serve to rule out less plausible routes. From the point of view of structure and argumentation, he achieves a quite impressive result.

Despite intensive cooperation with his "assistant," Imamura, Engelbert Kaempfer did not reach a deep insight into the morphology and phonemics of the Japanese language. When transliterating Japanese words, he followed his German writing habits to represent his often unstable aural impressions.³² In Bodart-Bailey's translation this inconsistent and unsatisfying transliteration is

³⁰ To be published by Iudicium Verlag in Munich.

³¹ Book 1: chaps. 1, 2, 6; book 2: chaps. 1, 3, 4, 5, 6.

³² More on Kaempfer's transliteration can be found in Michel 1993.

standardized according to Hepburn's conventions, making the text easier to read and allowing a compact Japanese glossary to be included as an appendix. Converting the marginal headings of the manuscript into subheadings has added to the accessibility of the book.

The methodology and limitations of translation have been extensively discussed by generations of linguists and translators. In the case of texts such as Kaempfer's, any attempt to slavishly imitate the original is doomed to failure. Kaempfer's convoluted and difficult style quite understandably led Dohm to rewrite many sections in his German edition. Almost certainly, Kaempfer would have reworked his own manuscript before sending it to a printing-house because it contains so many ambiguities, repetitions, incomplete sentences, incongruities, and misspellings. Bodart-Bailey has been highly successful in translating Kaempfer's writing into lucid English while preserving the flavor of the original. Difficult terms and expressions that could not be adequately explained within the text, as well as other details such as proper names, are clarified in copious notes. A few minor errata³³ do not detract from the value of this background information.

The selection of illustrations required some difficult decisions. Manuscript 3060 in the Sloane Collection consists of Kaempfer's text (fol. 1-427) followed by a bundle of notes, memoranda, some rough and some more finished sketches, drawings, samples of Japanese *iroha*, and so on (fol. 428-559). Kaempfer had drafted a list of illustrations to be included in his book,³⁴ but in the appendix to his manuscript we find only a few drawings ready to be sent to an engraver. Scheuchzer picked up whatever seemed useful to him, adding some items and leaving others out. Five decades later when Dohm worked on his newly found manuscripts, he had only a sketch of Dejima (different from that in London) at hand, and therefore decided to use all the plates from Scheuchzer's *The History of Japan*. While there is still room to speculate as to which of the many unpublished sketches Kaempfer might have included in his book,³⁵ it can be safely said that the errors in earlier editions have finally been corrected by Bodart-Bailey, who presents a convincing set of illustrations. Now, for the first time, we get to know Kaempfer's sketch of the main enclosure entrance to Edo castle, and another of a boy playing *hatchōgane* 八丁鉦, and we discover quite a few differences between the original sketches and the plates reprinted so many times since 1727. It would have been useful, however, to give the measurements of these drawings and sketches since some of the originals are amazingly tiny, while others are much bigger than the impression given by this handy edition.

³³ More precise biographical information on Ides and Rumph, for example, can be found in *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie*.

³⁴ These are in folio 558 of Sloane 3060, entitled "Verzeichnis der Figuren so zu der Historia von Japan gehören."

³⁵ In the case of the interesting sketch of a *yamabushi's* hand position included in Bodart-Bailey's translation some doubts remain as to Kaempfer's intention. It is neither part of the manuscript in Sloane 3060, nor is it mentioned in Kaempfer's list of illustrations.

The impact of Kaempfer's writings during the eighteenth century is now part of history, and we shall never know precisely to what extent the distortions in Scheuchzer's and Dohm's classic editions affected the image of Japan held by Europeans. We may wonder what differences there might have been had the manuscript been published in its original form. Perhaps G. I. Lessing would not have written his drama *Tonsine*, about a Catholic Japanese woman, Constantin Phaulcon's wife, a woman of great courage and high moral standards, for the play was inspired by the chapter on Siam added by Scheuchzer.³⁶ On the other hand, Kaempfer's treatise on the seclusion policy of Japan, which evoked various responses, was already known from its original Latin version published in *Amoenitates exoticae* (1712). His equally stimulating description of the various religions in Japan was altered considerably by both Scheuchzer and Dohm, but his message retained its power and impact. As with many texts on distant countries and cultures, whatever came through to European readers and authors was used quite freely. Depending on the writer's point of view and objectives, the conclusions drawn from the same description frequently differed significantly. Thanks to Bodart-Bailey's laborious work, we are now in a position to see the extent of these alterations and errors. Her translation gives a fresh view of Kaempfer and his magnum opus, and provides a reliable source for anyone interested in late-seventeenth-century Japan. This book well deserves a place on many shelves.

³⁶ See Kapitza 1997.

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