

Network of Knowledge: Western Science and the Tokugawa Information Revolution.

By Terrence Jackson. Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press, 2016. Pp. 198. ISBN 10: 082485358X; ISBN 13: 9780824853587.

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This short book looks at a big topic. It considers the introduction (or re-introduction) of Western information into Japan in the latter part of the eighteenth century and the early part of the nineteenth. The ramifications of this, as can be readily imagined, were enormous. And yet the trajectory was neither smooth nor uncontested.

It is well known that Japan had been open to infiltration by Western people for several decades until 1614, in which year Roman Catholic priests were expelled. The 1630s saw a wider closing down of engagement with Westerners and their culture following the Shimabara Uprising, blamed on Christians. Then in 1657 came the great fire of Edo (modern Tokyo, the shogunal city, oddly referred to by Jackson as the capital), during which all elite collections of books and artefacts were lost, whether Western or otherwise. Japan's 'information revolution' is generally taken as having begun some years after this with something of a *tabula rasa*, flourishing in the 1680s. Yet fear of being branded Christian made scholars and the populace wary of investigating Europe, so this 'revolution', with its surge of publishing, passed Western knowledge by. In 1708, quite unexpectedly, a Sicilian (i.e. Spanish) Jesuit named Giovanni Battista Sidotti arrived illegally in Japan, where he was captured, but well treated and thoroughly interrogated by a senior shogunal official. This gave rise to a major treatise on the West – the first in about a century. It was not published, but then politically-sensitive books generally weren't, which did not prevent their circulating plentifully in manuscript – a clever case of shogunal blind-eye turning.

The accession of the enlightened eighth shogun, Tokugawa Yoshimune, saw a clarification of the government's position with regard to Western knowledge: there was no objection, he announced, so long as religion was avoided. The rise of 'Western learning' in Japan (*rangaku*) accordingly dates from the mid-eighteenth century. It goes without saying that the 'Western knowledge' now encountered was utterly different from that of a century before.

If *rangaku* had a 'rise', it also had a fall, and that began about the year 1790. The Dutch East India Company was the sole Western body still trading with Japan (though by this point weak, and often leasing US ships to avoid attacks by the British). The Dutch noted on their regular visits to Edo that their treatment suddenly deteriorated. On occasion, their lodgings were even stoned – impossible without government authorisation of the violence. Many *rangaku* experts left the field at this time, and the Dutch company was wound up too. Before long, Holland would become a part of France. It is possible that this would be the end of *rangaku*. But it enjoyed something of a revival in the 1820s, though in twisted and more military form, and if experts were more informed than before, they were fewer in number, nor was popular enthusiasm so apparent.

The story of *rangaku* could no doubt be told differently too, but such are the main parameters.

The chronological treatment, however, is not Jackson's method. His approach is sociological rather than historical (with one too many invocations of 'cultural capital' for this reviewer's taste). The book centres on a particular figure, Otsuki Gentaku (1757–1827), a physician in the hereditary employ of a powerful northern lord. Certainly Gentaku was a major *rangaku* figure and towards the end of his life became effectively shogunal spokesperson on Western affairs. Jackson provides a useful biography of Gentaku, who until now has been but sketchily treated in English, and the doctor then moves in and out of this book's ensuing pages. We have had monographs on other *rangaku* experts as well as on

movements or particular academic subjects within the field, but Jackson's book is not a biography. What the reader receives is the picture of an intellectual world that Gentaku might have inhabited, which, given his interests, was much related, though not exclusive to Western knowledge (not in fact the 'science' of the title, though medicine was critical). We learn how aspiring scholars had a system of schools to attend, including Gentaku's, and if they were military class it would require their lord's permission to attend them. These institutions had secret transmissions and in-house traditions, as did all other Japanese schools. But Jackson interestingly pairs this with more informal salons at which class structures, and sometimes also gender ones, were suspended. Salons have been discussed before, and the polarity between them and formal training is understood, but it has not previously been analysed for *rangaku*. The importance is that in allowing social mixing, salons offered looser and more experimental fora, which 'Western science', being pretty much self-taught in Japan, certainly required.

Perhaps a problem in focussing on Gentaku is that he seems to have been a rather sombre figure. Though his school was surely solid, his salons don't sound much fun. Compared with the commoner-class Shiba Kokan, for example, whose polemical and divisive personality continues to provide grist to the mill of lively anecdote, or to Hiraga Gennai who was never short of clever repartee, Gentaku is a touch dour. He may not be the best example of the salonist. But Jackson discusses an unknown (to me) piece of 'playful writing' (*gesaku*) by Gentaku, and an unpublished and quite lyrical travel diary, and there also exists a portrait of him pulling a silly face, so perhaps it is our reading of the doctor that is at fault. If he wasn't playful or lyrical that often, he had friends who were.

Gentaku was born after *rangaku* had been shogunally-endorsed, and his father may have been involved with it in a minor way. He then lived across the c. 1800 watershed when many retired (like Kokan) and many others (as chance would have it) died young, some (like Gennai) suspiciously. Gentaku held his course, and it is thus instructive to follow through into how times changed across his career, though again, Jackson is largely synchronic and is not explicit or historical. Other than Gentaku most of the scholars participating in late-stage *rangaku* were not those who had been involved before, and are of a different ilk, widely deficient in playfulness and lyricism.

If Jackson's approach misses some important watersheds, his telling of the story through the lens of Gentaku irons out some mistaken canonical moments, like the overrated publication of the *Katai shinsho* [New Anatomical Atlas] in 1774, which I am delighted to see passed off in just a couple of sentences. But a trouble is that those outside Gentaku's circle are excluded. True, he went to Kyoto, Osaka, and Nagasaki and had learned connections there, but he had next to no link with Kokan, who merits just five fleeting mentions in this book, while the Akita Dutch specialists do not figure at all. This cohort were painters, and as an art-historian, I'm bound to say it is disappointing that the visual realm has so negligible a role in Jackson's assessment. Yet given the language problems, pictures were actually extremely useful, and it was claimed at the time (perhaps apocryphally) that Yoshimune himself had been first inclined to the West after viewing a Dutch book's illustrations, while the *Katai shinsho* project came about after some senior physicians compared imported medical pictures with an actual cadaver, realising how faulty their understanding was. Nevertheless, this book is an excellent addition to the field and its orientation makes for a nice pairing with the much-admired (and much longer) articulation of Edo period sociology by Eiko Ikegaki in *Bonds of Civility* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).
