YOSHIDA SHŌIN'S ENCOUNTER WITH COMMODORE PERRY:
A REVIEW OF CULTURAL INTERACTION IN THE DAYS OF JAPAN'S OPENING*

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The 150th anniversary of Commodore Matthew C. Perry’s 1853 visit to Japan, commemorated on both sides of the Pacific with conferences, symposia and museum exhibitions, was a signal moment for reflection on the complex bonds between Japan and the United States over a century and a half. NHK, the public broadcasting giant, produced a special television program on Perry; the Constitution Memorial Museum,¹ as well as a number of local museums, mounted special exhibitions; several municipalities held special festivals, and scholars such as Mitani Hiroshi published new books to commemorate this historical event.² Quite coincidentally, reports of the (re) discovery of secret letters from Yoshida Shōin (1830−1859), focused new attention on his failed attempt to steal out of Japan through Perry’s flagship during the Commodore’s return visit in 1854. A dozen of newspapers across Japan reported the find.³

I. Shōin’s Letters to Perry

Yoshida Shōin was among the most charismatic figures in mid-19th century Japan, “a serious scholar of Confucianism,” as Marius Jansen wrote, “a splendid teacher, and an impetuous

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1) The Kensei Kinenkan, operated by the Secretariat of Japan’s House of Representatives.
2) Mitani Hiroshi, Peri raikō (Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 2003).
3) For example, Mainichi shinbun, January 11 & August 8; Yomiuri shinbun, January 17; Asahi shinbun, April 5; Kōbe shinbun, July 16; Ehime shinbun, July 16; Shizuoka shinbun, July 19; Kanagawa shinbun, July 22; Mutsu shinbun, July 22; Daily Tōhoku, July 23; Kushiro shinbun, July 26.
activist, many of whose students went on to play leading roles in the military and political drama that brought down the Tokugawa regime.

Shōin’s letters to Perry made their way to Yale University as part of the Samuel Wells Williams Family Papers. Williams (1812–1884), First Interpreter for the Perry expedition, was an inveterate record keeper throughout his life. In his later years, he served Professor of Chinese language and literature at Yale, a position newly created to turn his decades-long experience in China as a missionary journalist and diplomat to advantage. I had encountered Shōin’s letter, written in literary Chinese, and an attached note in Japanese epistolary style (sōrōbun), during a research trip to Yale in the fall of 2002. Extremely interested in the fact that the initial U.S.-Japan negotiations were carried out in the two medium languages of Dutch and Chinese, I was

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6) The letter and the note had first been discovered by Yamaguchi Eitetsu, a Japanese Lecturer then at Yale, and introduced in *Rokishi to jinbutsu* in 1975 (No. 10), under the title, “Nemutte ita Shōin no missho”). An Okinawa-born leading scholar in the history of Ryūkyū’s foreign relations, Yamaguchi had recently supervised the publication of a complete reprint of the 3-volume *Peri kantai Nihon ensei ki*, a translation of the original, official account of the expedition presented to the United States Congress, Francis L. Hawkes, ed. *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan, Performed in the Years 1852, 1853, and 1854, under the Command of Commodore M. C. Perry, United States Navy, by Order of the Government of the United States* (3 v., A.O.P. Nicholson, 1856; below, “Hawkes, Narrative”). Hawkes compiled the *Narrative* “from the original notes and journals of Commodore Perry and his officers, at his request, and under his supervision.” After finding the letter and the note at Yale, I traveled to Hagi, Yamaguchi, Hakodate, Matsumae, Tokyo, Yokohama, and Shimoda to visit local shrines, temples, museums, and libraries, and was able to find some new materials about the background of the letters and the incident. A detailed study entitled “Shimoda mikkō zengo ni okeru Shōin no Seiyō ninshiki: Beikoku ni nokoru Tō-i sho o megutte” was published in the special issue on the Meiji Revolution of the journal *Kan*, (No. 13, May 2003).
then searching for the Chinese documents generated during that process. The letter in Chinese set forth Shōin’s reasons for wanting to go abroad; while he was in prison, Shōin titled the letter “Tō-i sho,” “A Letter to the Barbarians.” The text follows, as it appears in Francis Hawkes’s *Narrative of the Expedition*.

Two scholars from Yedo, in Japan, present this letter for the inspection of the “high officers and those who manage affairs.” Our attainments are few and trifling, as we ourselves are small and unimportant, so that we are abashed in coming before you; we are neither skilled in the use of arms, nor are we able to discourse upon the rules of strategy and military discipline; in trifling pursuits and idle pastimes our years and months have slipped away. We have, however, read in [Chinese] books, and learned a little by hearsay, what are the customs and education in Europe and America, and we have been for many years desirous of going over the “five great continents,” but the laws of our country in all maritime points are very strict; for foreigners to come into the country, and for natives to go abroad, are both immutably forbidden. Our wish to visit other regions has consequently only “gone to and fro in our own breasts in continual agitation,” like one’s breathing being impeded or his walking cramped. Happily, the arrival of so many of your ships in these waters, and stay for so many days, which has given us opportunity to make a pleasing acquaintance and careful examination, so that we are fully assured of the kindness and liberality of your excellencies, and your regard for others, has also revived the thoughts of many years, and they are urgent for an exit.

This, then, is the time to carry the plan into execution, and we now secretly send you this private request, that you will take us on board your ships as they go out to sea; we can thus visit around in the five great continents, even if we do in this, slight the prohibitions of our own country. Lest those who have the management of affairs may feel some chagrin at this, in order to effect our desire, we are willing to serve in any way we can on board of the

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8) *Narrative*, 1: 420. The bracketed word “Chinese” before the word “books” in this English translation. But it has to be pointed out that the Chinese books introducing West world here meant the books published then in Chinese, including not only those compiled by Chinese editors, but also the those translated into Chinese by joint efforts of Chinese and Western scholars.
ships, and obey the orders given us. For doubtless it is, that when a lame man sees others walking he wishes to walk too; but how shall the pedestrian gratify his desires when he sees another one riding? We have all our lives been going hither to you, unable to get more than thirty degrees east and west, or twenty-five degrees north and south; but now when we see how you sail on the tempests and cleave the huge billows, going lightning speed thousands and myriads of miles, skirting along the five great continents, can it not be likened to the lame finding a plan for walking, and the pedestrian seeing a mode by which he can ride? If you who manage affairs will give our request your consideration, we will retain the sense of the favor; but the prohibitions of our country are still existent, and if this matter should become known we should uselessly see ourselves pursued and brought back for immediate execution without fail, and such a result would greatly grieve the deep humanity and kindness you all bear towards others. If you are willing to accede to this request, keep “wrapped in silence our error in making it” until you are about to leave, in order to avoid all risk of such serious danger to life; for when, by-and-bye, we come back, our countrymen will never think it worth while to investigate bygone doings. Although our words have only loosely let our thoughts leak out, yet truly they are sincere; and if your excellencies are pleased to regard them kindly, do not doubt them nor oppose our wishes. We together pay our respects in handing this in. April 11. (March 8, 1854 for the lunar calendar).
My analysis of the handwriting shows that the letter in the Sterling Library was actually a fair copy made by Williams’ Chinese assistant Luo Sen (1821–1899), a learned gentleman who had fought as a militia leader in Canton during the Opium War and escaped afterward to Hong Kong, where he pursued business opportunities. Luo was quite popular in Yokohama, Shimoda, and Hakodate in Spring 1854 for inscribing his extempore verse with elegant calligraphy on hundreds of blank paper fans, in response overwhelming demand from Japanese officers and commoners. Four of Luo’s fans survive in the Municipal Museum of Hakodate and the Local Museum of Matsumae in Hokkaidō.9) I have not yet gone Perry’s own expedition-related documents at the National Archives in Washington, D.C.; I hope that Shōin’s original letter may still remain there along with an attached Chinese note indicating how he planned to meet the Americans,10) for both of them were translated into English and included in Williams’s personal diary.11)

By contrast, the attached note in Japanese laying out way Shōin planned to meet the Americans was very likely in Shōin’s own hand; it was in a style unusual in bakumatsu documents, in that that each line had a phonetic transcription in katakana at the right side. Apparently Williams was not able to fully understand the note and therefore decided to keep it in his own folder, for there was no English translation of it. But he made use of it to get the pronunciation of the two aliases in the note: Yoshida went by ‘Kawanouchi Manji,’ based the Yoshida family crest, a ĥ (manji) against a gourd shape, while his follower Kaneko Shigenosuke (1831–1855) went by ‘Ichigi Kōda.’ Williams used the same technique in the English translation of the Chinese letter. But in a slip of the brush, when Shōin wrote the katakana for Kaneko’s alias surname, the katakana “chi” looked like a “sa,” so it appears in the English translation as

9) Williams wrote that Luo “takes a lively interest in all our operations and gets on admirably with the natives; he is, indeed, the most learned Chinaman they have ever seen, and their delight in showing off to him their attainments in Chinese is increased when he turns a graceful verse or two for them upon a fan; of these he has written, I should think, more than half a thousand since coming to Japan, and nothing pleases him like being asked to do so.” F. W. Williams, ed., The Life and Letters of Samuel Wells Williams, LL.D.: Missionary, Diplomatist, Sinologue. G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1889, p. 219.

10) The note in the Narrative (vol. 1, p. 420) reads, “The enclosed letter contains the earnest request we have had for many days, and which we tried in many ways to get off to you at Yoku-hama, in a fishing boat, by night; but the cruisers were too thick, and none others were allowed to come alongside, so that we were in great uncertainty how to act. Hearing that the ships were coming to Sh[imoda] we have come to take our chance, intending to get a small boat and go off to the ships, but have not succeeded. Trusting your worships will agree, we will, tomorrow night, after all is quiet, be at Kakizaki in a small boat, near the shore, where there are no houses. There we greatly hope you to meet us and take us away, and thus bring our hopes to fruition. April 25.”

11) S.W. Williams, A Journal of the Perry Expedition to Japan, 1853–1854, ed. F.W. Williams (Kelly & Walsh, 1910). Below ‘Journal.’ See also the version in the congressional report, Hawkes, Narrative.
“Isagi” instead of “Ichigi.”

My translation of the note follows.\(^{12}\)

We two want to see the world. Please allow us to board your ship in secret. Going to foreign countries, however, is strictly prohibited in Japan. We would be in deep trouble if you tell the Japanese officers about this. If your admiral were to consent to our intention, we hope that you will send a barge at midnight tomorrow to the shore of the Kakizaki village to meet us.

April 19, 1854 (Kinoetora, March 22) Ichigi Kōda, Kwanouchi Manji

Shōin’s second letter in Chinese, also a fair copy by Luo Sun, was discovered during my research of the *Samuel Wells Williams Family Papers* in the spring of 2003.\(^{13}\) It seems to me that Williams prized it so much as to paste it carefully on the inner side of the back cover of his own handwritten Journal. According to the *Narrative*, the original letter, written on a piece of board was received from Shōin when he and Kaneko were imprisoned in Shimoda. They were

\(^{12}\) See my detailed study of this letter, “Shimoda goku ni okeru dai-ni no To-i sho ni tsuite: Shōin no kakugo ni taisuru Peri-gawa no kyōkan,” in *Kaw*, 14 (July 2003).

\(^{13}\) Ibid.
“immured in one of the usual places of confinement, a kind of cage, barred in front and very restricted in capacity....They seemed to bear their misfortune with great equanimity, and were greatly pleased apparently with the visit of the American officers, in whose eyes they evidently were desirous of appearing to advantage. On one of the visitors approaching the cage, the Japanese wrote on a piece of board that was handed to them the following, which, as a remarkable specimen of philosophical resignation under circumstances which would have tried the stoicism of Cato, deserves a record."

Williams’ English translation of the letter, included in the Journal, the Narrative, and the memoirs of other expedition participants (there were at least eight versions of Japanese translation of the letter based on them, from Tokutomi Sohō’s biography of Shōin, in 1908 to the 2002 Japanese translation of J. Willett Spalding’s The Japan Expedition: Japan and around the World), but none of the translators were aware of the existence of a fair copy of this Chinese original), ran as follows.

When a hero fails in his purpose, his acts are then regarded as those of a villain and robber. In public have we been seized and pinioned and caged for many days. The village elders and head men treat us disdainfully, their oppressions being grievous indeed. Therefore, looking up while yet we have nothing wherewith to reproach ourselves, it must now be seen whether a hero will prove himself to be one indeed. Regarding the liberty of going through the sixty States as not enough for our desires, we wished to make the circuit of the five great continents. This was our hearts’ wish for a long time. Suddenly our plans are defeated, and we find ourselves in a half sized house, where eating, resting, sitting, and sleeping are difficult; how can we find our exit from this place? Weeping, we seem as fools;

14) Hawkes, Narrative, 1: 422. From the comparison made with Cato Minor (95–46 BC), the tragic hero who committed suicide in Utica, Africa rather than falling alive into the hands of Caesar, it seemed that the Americans were deeply affected by Shōin’s “letter on the board”and deeply concerned about his fate. The size of the cage, as Williams measured it, “was about six feet long by three wide and four and a half high, quite large enough to sit and sleep in, and entered by crawling through a low door; it is probably just such a cage as McCoy and his fellows were at last shut up in.” Journal, 1: 181–2. Isaac McCoy (1784–1846) was a Baptist missionary, surveyor and U.S. Indian agent, and the association by similarity made by Williams here was apparently a criticism of the inhuman treatment of prisoners in Japan then. On McCoy, see George A. Schultz, An Indian Canaan: Isaac McCoy and the Vision of an Indian State (University of Oklahoma Press, 1972).

laughing, as rogues. Alas! for us; silent we can only be.  

But since Shōin’s autograph original is no longer extant, this fair copy made by Luo Sen in the Journal became the only evidence to trace its original text. By a close examination of the text, however, I found that there were two mistakes in Williams’s translation. First, the classical Chinese word mianfu (面缚, J. menbaku) means one’s two hands are roped in the back while his face is toward the front, but it was translated into “in public have we been seized and pinioned.” This mistranslation was associated with such assumed description in the Narrative that “the poor fellows had been immediately pursued upon its being discovered that they had visited the ships, and after a few days they were pounced upon and lodged in prison.” But the truth was that Shōin and Kaneko, after being sent back ashore, immediately surrendered

16) Hawkes, Narrative, 1: 422f.
17) Ibid., 1: 422.
themselves to the nanushi, the village head, and were then transferred to the local authority and imprisoned.\(^{18}\)

Another error in Williams’s translation leads to a misunderstanding of Shōin’s self-image. The conditional clause, “looking while yet we have nothing where with to reproach ourselves” should have been followed by a conclusive clause in the present perfect tense, but Williams used the future tense saying that “it must now be seen whether a hero will prove himself to be one indeed.” In other words, while Williams seemed to think that Shōin’s greatest test still lay ahead, it is clear that Shōin already regarded himself a hero.

II. Shōin: A Terrorist or a Strategist?

Recently, Kawaguchi Masaaki has, based on a selective reading of some of Shōin’s remarks made after his failed attempt to leave Japan with Perry’s fleet, that Shōin’s real purpose in seeking to board the Black Ship was to kill Perry.\(^{19}\) It is true that as a historical figure, Shōin had a fairly ambivalent attitude toward America during his short life, but at the time of Perry’s second visit, he was by no means the kind of simple-minded terrorist Kawaguchi seems to envision.

First and foremost, Shōin was a military strategist. From early childhood he had absorbed the intensive education expected of a future military instructor for the Hagi domain. When he was appointed an instructor of military science in 1848, at the age of nineteen sai, he was entrusted by the domain to make a strategic defense plan and started an annual series of lectures for his lord on military strategy. It was, after all, only a few years since China’s defeat in the Opium War, and the expanding Western presence in East Asia was then a major concern of Japan’s leaders, as well as of intellectuals across the country.

By the time of Perry’s second expedition, Shōin was among the most well-informed in Japan about domestic and international conditions, through extensive reading, travel around the country, and personal encounters with fellow intellectuals nationwide. By this time, his study with Sakuma Shōzan, a leading scholar of the Dutch and Chinese learning, as well as a military strategist and gunnery engineer in Edo, proved especially important to his rapidly evolving worldview. After Perry’s first visit, Shōzan had tried to persuade the high-ranking bakufu officer Kawaji Toshiakira to send a mission overseas to purchase Western warships. As one of Shōzan’s leading disciples, Shōin was supposed to join that mission. But since the bakufu later abandoned the

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18) Yoshida, Kaikoroku, in Yoshida Shōin Zenshu (YSZ), 7: 397.
mission, Shōzan encouraged Shōin to steal out of the country via the Russian or American steamers then visiting Japan, so that he could study the military technology of the West at first hand.

Both men knew well that both the bakufu and the domains urgently needed talented men to direct defense projects. The bakufu was saw the danger as so great it resorted to the unprecedented employment of commoner, Nakahama Manjirō (a.k.a. “John Manjirō,” 1827–1898), a Tosa fisherman who had been shipwrecked, and later received an elementary education in America before returning Japan. Moreover, Shōin was then a rōnin, having lost both status and stipend because he had gone absent without the domain’s permission. With no formal ties to the domain, he was determined to adventure to the outside world to acquire new knowledge and skills, believing that this was the path to recover his status. Given these greater motivations, it is hard to believe that he could simultaneously commit himself to the impractical plan of murdering Perry, his hoped-for path out of Japan.

While the seriousness of Shōin’s purpose—and Shōin was nothing if not a serious man—can be inferred from a glance at the short list of books he had prepared to take with him overseas, including the Classic of Filial Piety, References to the Selected Tang Poems and two Dutch-Japanese dictionaries, they are articulated much more clearly in Shōin’s Yūshūroku, his “confessional account of the events during the years of 1853 and 1854” written in the Hagi prison at the suggestion of Shōzan.

Although the Dutch learning has prevailed, no one can read the books from Russia, America, and England. Now that the ships of foreign countries came to our country, how can we remain without knowing their languages? Moreover, different countries have different ideas on technical styles and instrumental systems. Though their outlines could be known through the Dutch translations, it can’t be better than searching for each country’s situation through its own books. Excellent students should be now dispatched to foreign countries to buy their books and learn their arts, and having those returned students to serve as school teachers.  

Here, Shōin actually spells out the important message that “Dutch learning” (Rangaku) was no long sufficient to cope with the new challenges from Russia, America and England, and that therefore brilliant students must be sent directly to those countries and be employed as school teachers upon their return in order to absorb and master the latest in Western systems and technology.

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20) Yūshūroku, in YSZ, 3: 49-50.
As is well known, Fukuzawa Yukichi credited his puzzlement at the signs in English on shops in the newly opened trading port Yokohama in 1859, as the reason he decided to study English. Fukuzawa’s resolution has been repeatedly cited as an early symbol of Japan’s shift of focus from Dutch to Anglo-American learning. Compared with the Shōin’s argument in Yūshūroku, not to mention his action in attempting to go to America, however, it would not be an exaggeration to say that it was Shōin, rather than Fukuzawa, who first exemplified this new direction in Japan’s Western learning.

It should be kept in mind, at the same time, that Shōin’s thoughts regarding Western learning were basically derived from Shōzan, who viewed the West as a world of constant competition, and frequent changes of leadership, and believed that the only way to hold the barbarians at bay was to learn the barbarians’ advanced military technology, a strategy earlier proposed by China’s Wei Yuan in his Haiguo tuzhi (Illustrated Gazetteer of the Maritime Kingdoms), written immediately after China’s defeat in the Opium War. For example, in his letter to an artillery specialist written on April 26, 1854, a day after Shōin’s failure, Shōzan made the following analysis.

You must know that Russia’s former ruler Peter the Great learned from the Dutch, and eventually became no inferior to the Dutch; and the Northern Americans learned from the Englishmen, and finally defeated the Englishmen. Anyway, it is my opinion that there is no option but to use the barbarians’ technology to hold the barbarians. If they have big battleships, we have to make big battleships too. If they have big canons, we have to make big canons, too.

What differentiated mentor and disciple, however, was that Shōin suggested in early 1855 a long-term strategy for Japan’s survival and future supremacy.

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21) “I had been striving with all my powers for many years to learn the Dutch language. And now when I had reason to believe myself one of the best in the country, I found that I could not even read the signs of merchants who had come to trade with us from foreign lands. It was a bitter disappointment, but I knew it was no time to be downhearted. Those signs must have been either in English or in French—probably English, for I had had inklings that English was the most widely used language. A treaty with the two English-speaking countries had just been concluded. As certain as day, English was to be the most useful language of the future. I realized that a man would have to be able to read and converse in English to be recognized as a scholar in Western subjects in the coming time. In my disappointment my spirit was low, but I knew that it was not the time to be sitting still.” Eiichi Kiyooka, trans., The Autobiography of Yukichi Fukuzawa (Columbia University Press, 1960), p. 98.

22) Shōzan had read Wei Yuan’s Haiguo tuzhi and Shengwu ji, copies of which were circulating in Japan. Knowing that Wei was also a military strategist, Shōzan called him “a comrade overseas.” Seikenroku, in Nihon shisō taikei, vol. 55, Watatane Kazan, Takano Chōei, Sakuma Shōzan, Yokoi Shōnan, Hashimoto Sanai (Iwanami Shoten, 1971), pp. 251–2.

Now that the treaties with Russia and America have been settled, we should never violate them, which would cause the barbarians to lose faith in us. Rather, we should firmly observe them and treasure the faithfulness. In the meantime, try to strengthen our national power and control Korea, Manchuria, and China, which are easy to conquer, so as to cover the losses [we will incur] in trade with Russia and America with the land taken from Korea and Manchuria.

Although we had a big chance in 1853 and 1854, we have lost it without any accomplishments. But that is already in the past. To form a strategy for today, we should keep friendship with America and Russia in order to hold them, and seize this opportunity to enrich our nation and strengthen our military force, to tap Ezo, take away Manchuria, and incorporate Korea into southern Japan, then crush America and defeat Europe, so as to be invincible. It should not be a deep regret that we lost the chance in 1853 and 1854.  

Here, Shőin showed a perfect roadmap to be followed by modern Japan. If taking both of Shőin’s strategic suggestions of learning from America now and defeating America in the future into account, one may be easily aware that his first Chinese letter was written in an extreme dilemmatic situation: though he wished to go abroad for learning advanced military technology to defend his motherland, his government prohibited him from going; in order to defeat the Americans who intruded into Japan by gunboats, he had to first bow before Commodore Perry so as to get a passage to travel overseas. So, as a Japanese scholar has analyzed, Shőin’s remarks on killing Perry made after his failed action might well have been a reveal of his grievance against Perry who treated him mercilessly regardless of his sincere expression of admiration for American military power and his repeated appeal to the humanity of the Americans.

III. Perry’s Dilemma: National Interest vs. Human Rights

It was on April 25th, 1854, at around two o’clock a.m., that Shőin and Kaneko finally clambered onto the deck of the Powhatan after an exhausting struggle with wind, waves, and the American guards who tried to stop them from climbing aboard. Coming less than a month after the US-Japan Treaty of Peace and Amity was signed on March 31st, this incident put Perry in a dilemma of making a choice between the American national interest and human rights. And the

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incident did not end immediately, but evolved into a drama in three acts: importuning, investigation, and imprisonment.

The first act, according to the Narrative, was as follows.

On their reaching the deck, the officer informed the Commodore of their presence, who sent his interpreter to confer with them and learn the purpose of their untimely visit. They frankly confessed that their object was to be taken to the United States, where they might gratify their desire of travelling, and seeing the world. They were now recognised as the two men who had met the officers on shore and given one of them the letter. . . . They were educated men, and wrote the mandarin Chinese with fluency and apparent elegance, and their manners were courteous and highly refined. The Commodore, on learning the purpose of their visit, sent word that he regretted that he was unable to receive them, as he would like very much to take some Japanese to America with him. He, however, was compelled to refuse them until they received permission from their government, for seeking which they would have ample opportunity, as the squadron would remain in the harbor of Simoda for some time longer. They were greatly disturbed by this answer of the Commodore, and declaring that if they returned to the land they would lose their heads, earnestly implored to be allowed to remain. The prayer was firmly but kindly refused. A long discussion ensued, in the course of which they urged every possible argument in their favor, and continued to appeal to the humanity of the Americans. A boat was now lowered, and after some mild resistance on their part to being sent off, they descended the gangway piteously deploring their fate, and were landed at a spot near where it was supposed their boat might have drifted.26)

Hawkes’s description of the two-hour interview was basically identical to Shōin’s account in the Kaikoroku, recording his negotiations with Williams, and the key message from Williams that, since the Commodore Perry and Hayashi Daigaku no kami had made a treaty between the two countries at Yokohama, so he and Kaneko could not be received here privately.27) However, Shōin did not know that Perry was not in bed then but in active charge of the interview, because he was facing Williams alone. Sometimes by speaking Japanese words, sometimes by writing Chinese words, the conversation was an uneasy one. During the interview, Shōin asked to meet with Luo

26) Hawkes, Narrative, 1: 421.
27) Kaikoroku, in YSZ, 7: 415. Hayashi Fukusai (1800-59) was the shogun’s chief Confucian lecturer, and head of the bakufu-sponsored Confucian academy. More to the point, even before the first Perry expedition he had prepared for the bakufu a compilation of its diplomatic precedents from Ieyasu to the present day, Tsūkō ichiran (8 v., Kokusho Kankōkai, 1914).
Sen in order to obtain a more smooth and effective communication in writing Chinese, and also asked to get back the letter and notes now that his appeal had been denied, but both requests were gently refused. Needless to say, there were some suspicions on the American side about the real purpose of Shōin and Kaneko. As Williams noted in his *Journal*, they “were probably just what they said they were, eagerly wishing to go to the United States, though some said they were thieves, others spies sent by officers to see how far we would keep the Treaty, and others that they were refugees from justice.”

But after all it was apparent that in Perry’s mind about the national interest had a prior claim over the concern about human right, even though Shōin had expressed the fear that he would lose his head if he was sent back ashore.

The second act began the following day, when a Japanese official interpreter came out to Perry’s ship to investigate the commotion Shōin and Kaneko had stirred up. Williams recorded the scene in his *Journal.*

> The Commodore, upon hearing of the visit of the interpreter and apparent anxiety of Japanese authorities in regard to the conduct of the two strange visitors to the ships, sent an officer on shore in order to quiet the excitement which had been created, and to interpose as far as possible in behalf of the poor fellows, who it was certain would be pursued with the utmost rigor of Japanese law. The authorities were thanked for the solicitude they had expressed lest the Americans should have been inconvenienced by any of their people, and assured that they need not trouble themselves for a moment with the thought that so slight a matter had been considered otherwise than a mere trivial occurrence unworthy of any investigation. The Japanese were further informed that they need give themselves no anxiety for the future, as none of their countrymen should be received on board the American ships without the consent of the authorities, as the Commodore and his officers were not disposed to take advantage of their confidence or act in any way that would be inconsistent with the spirit of the treaty. If the Commodore had felt himself at liberty to indulge his feelings, he would have gladly given a refuge on board his ship to the poor Japanese, who apparently sought to escape from the country from the desire of gratifying a liberal curiosity, which had

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been stimulated by the presence of the Americans in Japan.\textsuperscript{29)}

Perry recognized how serious the situation had become, even though, despite their warning about the unavoidable persecution they faced, he had decided to send Shōin and Kaneko back. Therefore, he saw to it that the two men reached shore in safety, and tried to persuade the Japanese authorities to play the things down, “hop[ing] to mitigate the punishment to which it was amenable.” In the meantime, Perry reassured the Japanese authorities that he would not violate the spirit of the new treaty by giving refuge to any Japanese stowaways. Because, after all, “there were other considerations which, however, had higher claims than an equivocal humanity. To connive at the flight of one of the people was to disobey the laws of the Empire, and it was the only true policy to conform, in all possible regards, to the institutions of a country by which so many important concessions had already been reluctantly granted.”\textsuperscript{30)} Again, Perry’s concern about the national interests gained up hands here over his compassion about the human rights.

The curtain rose on the third and final act when Perry received Shōin’s letter on the wooden tablet, along with the report from the officers who had witnessed Shōin and Kaneko in their cage.

The Commodore, on being informed of the imprisonment of the two Japanese, sent his flag lieutenant ashore to ascertain unofficially whether they were the same two who had visited the ships. The cage was found as described, but empty, and the guards declared that the men had been sent that morning to Edo, on orders from the capital. They had been confined, it was stated, for going off to the American ships, and as the prefect had no authority to act in the matter, he had at once reported the case to the imperial government, which had sent for the prisoners, and then held them under its jurisdiction.\textsuperscript{31)}

This time, Perry seemed to be quite concerned for the fate of the two men, and began to take serious measures to intervene with the Japanese authorities to ameliorate the penalties they

\textsuperscript{29)} \textit{Narrative}, vol. 1, p. 421–2. Shōin’s brave and resolute action, gave Perry and the Americans expectations of a bright future for Japan. “The Empire of Japan forbids the departure of any of its subjects for a foreign country under the penalty of death, and the two men who had fled on board the ships were criminals in the eye of their own laws, however innocent they might have appeared to the Americans. . . . The event was full of interest, as indicative of the intense desire for information on the part of two educated Japanese, who were ready to brave the rigid laws of the country, and to risk even death for the sake of adding to their knowledge. The Japanese are undoubtedly an inquiring people, and would gladly welcome an opportunity for the expansion of their moral and intellectual faculties. The conduct of the unfortunate two was, it is believed, characteristic of their countrymen, and nothing can better represent the intense curiosity of the people, while its exercise is only prevented by the most rigid laws and ceaseless watchfulness lest they should be disobeyed. In this disposition of the people of Japan, what a field of speculation, and, it may be added, what a prospect full of hope opens for the future of that interesting country!”

\textsuperscript{30)} \textit{Narrative}, 1: 422.

\textsuperscript{31)} \textit{Narrative}, 1: 423.
might face. The *Narrative* describes Perry's intervention:

The fate of the poor fellows was never ascertained, but it is hoped that the authorities were more merciful than have awarded the severest penalty, which was the loss of their heads, for what appears to us only liberal and a highly commendable curiosity, however great the crime according to the eccentric and sanguinary code of Japanese law. It is a comfort to be able to add, that the Commodore received an assurance from the authorities, upon questioning them, that he need not apprehend a serious termination.\(^{32}\)

It remains unclear whether “the assurance from the authorities” that Perry obtained government had come from the local authorities in Shimoda, or from Edo itself. But the assurance was apparently a relief to Perry, who had been in the dilemma of making a difficult choice between the national interest and human rights.

### IV. Concluding Remarks

Yoshida Shōin’s attempt to escape from Japan with Perry in 1854 has been a subject of both scholarly and popular attention for more than a century. By examining the text of the “original” letters kept at Yale and analyzing the dilemmas of both the addressee and the addressee, however, I have tried to rediscover its meaning in the context of Japanese dawning relations with the United States and other western nations.

I see no foundation for the assertion that Shōin was a terrorist trying to kill Perry. To the contrary, I have confirmed that he was a trained military strategist with lofty goals for himself and his country, and have argued that both his motives for going to American to study the advanced military technology, and his actions in attempting to do so, symbolized a new direction in Japan’s Western learning. In this, Shōin had recognized the importance of learning about—and from—the English-speaking world fully five years before Fukuzawa Yukichi began to advocate shifting from “Dutch learning” to Anglo-American learning. At the same time, I noted that the unusual difficulties that Perry had experienced in choosing between the American national interest, and his concern for the human rights issues he recognized in dealing with Shōin’s request for passage abroad—the fact that Shōin would be handled as a criminal.

Japanese scholarship has not, to date, seen the encounter between Shōin and Perry in terms of human rights, largely because Shōin was regarded a national hero making extraordinary contributions to the Meiji Restoration, and his role as mentor of such leading Chōshū politicians

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\(^{32}\) *Narrative*, 1: 423.
as Itô Hirobumi and Yamagata Aritomo. Therefore, his attempt to stow away has been considered as motivated solely for the national cause, without interrogating his personal motivations, as I have done here. By “reducing” a hero to an average person and simply looking on Shōin as an ordinary stowaway, however, it has become possible to read the complexities of this historic event and the dilemmas on the both sides.