The Transformation of International Relations in East Asia: From Ambiguity to Singularity in Diplomatic Discourse

Hiroshi Mitani

It is well known that the arrival of Matthew Calbraith Perry in Japan marked the beginning of an epoch in not only East Asian but also global history. As Secretary of State Daniel Webster wrote, it symbolized the linkage of "the last link in the chain of oceanic steam navigation."[1] However, we tend to forget that it was an encounter with aliens for both peoples in the world 150 years ago. The US envoy to Japan and the Japanese diplomats could not communicate with each other directly. This fact caused a very interesting outcome that deserves close examination.[2]

M. C. Perry's arrival to Japan changed international relations in East Asia in two ways. First, it initiated the Meiji Revolution that transformed Japan into a dynamic nation-state that pursued modern European values, including the implementation of Western international laws and the acquisition of overseas territories. However, American visitors themselves also directly influenced the transformation of international relations in East Asia through their diplomatic activities, not only by treaties and guns but also by their usage of diplomatic language.

This paper tries to show how the Euro-American view of diplomatic language transformed existing international relations in East Asia. Traditionally, international relations in East Asia had been maintained by the conscious use of ambiguity in diplomacy. American diplomats rejected this custom and forced East Asian people to adhere to treaties word for word, on the basis of singular and unambiguous interpretations of meaning. We may suppose that this tendency to make things simpler and singular offered the basis for the principle of sovereignty that required clear-cut, single-line borders between states.

1. Perry's Treaty: Two Different Versions

On March 31st in 1854, Japan and the US concluded the first treaty. It provided for the opening of two Japanese ports, Shimoda and Hakodate, for American ships that would engage in whaling or in the China trade across the Pacific. The accomplishment of Perry was limited if we compare it to the scale of his squadron, 10 ships in total. There was no agreement on permanent diplomacy or trade with Japan. This was because the US government had only entrusted him with the opening of Japanese ports to American ships to get water, food and coal.

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[1] Peter Booth Wiley with Ichiro Korogi, *Yankees in the Land of the Gods: Commodore Perry and the Opening of Japan*, Viking Penguin, 1990, p. 100.

[2] This paper is based on the book below on historical facts. 三谷博『ペリー来航』吉川弘文館、2003 (Hiroshi Mitani, *The Arrival of M. C. Perry: Japanese Perception of the Future Crisis and the Diplomacy with the Western Envoys in the 19th Century*, Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kobunkan, 2003).

The Japanese government was relieved to find that Perry's demands were less than what they had expected from his coercive manner.

However, inside this story there lies one interesting fact that has been unnoticed among historians, as is often the case with famous incidents in history. There were two versions in this treaty. Article 11 provided for the residence of an American consul at Shimoda for the protection of American sailors. But the conditions of this provision differed between the English version and the Japanese one. In the English version, the article stated that the US could place the consul if "either of the two governments deem such arrangement necessary,"[3] while the Japanese version required the agreement of the both governments. According to the former, the US could send a consul whenever it thought it necessary, while according to the latter, Japan could veto the arrival of the consul. For the Japanese government, this article was very important. It wanted to maintain the policy of seclusion as far as possible and eagerly pursued the complete exclusion of the establishment of a permanent relationship with the West, except for the Dutch. A consul at Shimoda might in practice have been nothing more significant than another Dutch head of the Deshima factory at Nagasaki, who had no plenipotentiary powers to conclude major diplomatic agreements. However, by maintaining the right to reject the arrival of a US consul, the Japanese government wished to pretend that this treaty changed almost nothing in Japanese relations with the West in the face of public opinion hostile to the policy of opening the nation.

How did this ambiguity emerge? It is obvious that it could have been avoided if both countries have had good interpreters and translators managing the exchanges in English and Japanese. There was Samuel Wells Williams, who could speak Japanese a little, in Perry's squadron. He was a missionary to China who once had learnt Japanese conversation from Japanese castaways in China. However, he could not read and write, and his ability in conversation proved inadequate when he tried to speak to a Japanese official at the time of the first contact at Uraga on July 8th of 1853. The condition of the Japanese side was not much better. There were a few interpreters at Nagasaki who had learnt English from an American. In 1848, a young man named Ranald McDonald sneaked into the northern part of Japan.[4] He was a half-white half-Indian who launched himself on world travel and chose Japan as the first place to land. He was soon arrested and sent to Nagasaki, where he spent a not particularly difficult time in prison. In contrast to those sailors who fled from whaling ships, Ranald was educated and was eager to communicate with the interpreters. He taught English and learned Japanese in return. Nagasaki interpreters such as Einosuke Moriyama and Tatsunosuke Hori thereby

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[3] Francis Hawks, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to China Seas and Japan, Performed in the Years* 1852, 1833, *and* 1854, *under the Command of Commodore M. C. Perry, United States Navy,* Washington: Beverley Tucker, Senate Printer, 1856, Vol. 1, p. 379.

[4] William S. Lewis and Naojiro Murakami, eds., *Ranald MacDonald; The Narrative of His Early Life on the Columbia under the Hudson's Bay Company's Regime: Of His Experiences in Pacific Whale Fishery; And of His Great Adventure to Japan; With a Sketch of His Later Life on the Western Frontier, 1824–1894,* The Eastern Washington State Historical Society, 1923.

learned conversation and acquired basic reading and writing skills. However, their ability was not adequate for diplomatic negotiations. At the first contact, the only English which Hori, the interpreter then on shift at Uraga, could use was "I talk Dutch."[5] Because Perry had brought with him speakers of Dutch, it was natural for both sides to choose Dutch for their negotiations thereafter.

Unfortunately, no historian has ever conducted research into the Dutch versions of the first treaty between Japan and the US. However, we can estimate that the first draft was written in Dutch from the remaining Japanese translation and the records of the American side. It is noteworthy that the contents of Article 11 are the same in the English version and the Japanese translation of the Dutch version. Both permit the US to send a consul at Shimoda "at any time after the expiration of eighteen months."

Then, from where did the Japanese version signed on March 31st come? In fact, it came from the Chinese version, written up on the day before the signing. After concluding the negotiations on the Dutch version, the Japanese plenipotentiary wrote the Chinese version and sent an official in the evening to have it confirmed by the American side. Wells Williams and Lieu Shin then checked the version with the English translation. However, they overlooked the change in the Article 11 because their attention had been caught by other trifling matters raised by the Japanese side. Thus, two different versions were signed the next day. The two plenipotentiaries exchanged four kinds of copies: Japanese copies based on the Chinese version, English copies faithfully translated from the Dutch version, Chinese copies and Dutch copies. Neither side could read the other party's copies and the American side thought that all the copies had the same contents. Meanwhile, the Japanese prime plenipotentiary Akira Hayashi made a report to the Tokugawa cabinet to the effect that the Chinese copies were the official text of the treaty.

It is quite interesting that Hayashi did not assert that the Japanese copies were the official text. One reason for this may lie in the tradition of East Asia. Here, Chinese had been used as the official text for diplomacy since ancient times. It was not the sole official language, as the facts show that some treaties concluded by Chinese dynasties with neighbouring countries were written in several languages at the same time.[6] However, we cannot doubt that Chinese was the only common language in East Asia. And, early modern Japan maintained this tradition in its diplomacy with Korea. However, the Tokugawa cabinet in the mid-19th century began to neglect this tradition. The Prime Minister, Masahiro Abe, soon saw through Hayashi's deception after close examination of the three versions he could read: Chinese version, Japanese translation from it and Japanese translation from Dutch version. He ordered Tokugawa diplo-

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[5] S. Wells Williams, *A Journal of the Perry Expedition to Japan (1853-1854)*, Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan, Vol. XXXVII: Part II, Kelly & Walsh, Ltd., Yokohama, 1910, p. 48.

[6] When Ching China and Russia concluded Nerchinsk Treaty in 1689, they built a monument on which the treaty was written in Chinese, Russian, Latin, Manchu and Mongol. (吉田金一『ロシアの東方進出とネルチンスク条約』東洋文庫近代中国研究センター, 1984) (Kin-ichi Yoshida, ***Russia's Expansion to the East and the Nerchinsk Treaty,*** Tokyo: Toyo Bunko)

mats to stop using Chinese within a month, while maintaining Hayashi's view that the official text was the Chinese version and that the Japanese government could therefore refuse the arrival of the American consul at Shimoda. This chain of incidents shows that the Japanese government did not hesitate to abandon the tradition of East Asia, but used it only as a means of minor tactics. We can find the same tendency in the fact that the Japanese received the envoy Perry on an equal basis during the ceremonies, which Tsing China continued to refuse, in order to maintain the "Chinese World Order" that required visual presentation of hierarchical order. These moves of the Japanese government reveal that Japan began to abandon East Asian norms of order in the use of language and rituals in diplomacy.

However, we have to investigate further the meaning of the deception made by the Japanese plenipotentiary in the Perry treaty. Was it a mere dodge in front of the overwhelming military threat that had suddenly emerged from the opposite side of the globe? Or, was it based on any diplomatic tradition in East Asia? I would like to examine the possibility of the latter hereafter.

2. Were East Asian Officials Liars?

On July 21st in 1856, American consul general Townsend Harris arrived at Shimoda. He was refused permission to land. Japanese officials insisted that Harris's right to reside in Shimoda was weak, a position based on the Japanese interpretation of the Perry treaty that had its origin in the Chinese version.[7] Harris raised strong objections to this and finally succeeded in opening the office of consul general at Shimoda. However, his situation became worse after the frigate that had brought him left. He began a lonely life with a Dutch interpreter H. C. J. Heusken in a small isolated port of Japan.

The major reason for Harris's isolation was the Japanese policy toward the US. The Japanese government continued to maintain its seclusion policy as far as possible. Harris was supposed to be nothing more than another Dutch captain at Nagasaki, who had been caged in a very narrow island. The Japanese government neglected Harris's authority as a diplomat, even though the US government had especially invested Harris with the plenipotentiary powers needed to negotiate a new treaty that would open official diplomatic relations and trade with Japan. This was not because the Tokugawa officials were stubborn. On the contrary, Prime Minister Abe and his successor Masayoshi Hotta had begun to seek fundamental changes in foreign policy since the autumn of the year before. However, the US agent was far from being the first person that the Tokugawa officials wanted to consult or negotiate with. The US was the country that had humiliated Japan and damaged Tokugawa authority in public. It was natural for the Japanese government to consult the Dutch captain first and leave the US agent last until a thorough change in foreign policy.

Harris had been left abandoned in Shimoda for one year and three months before he was allowed to visit Yedo, by which time the Japanese government had already concluded new trea-

[7] Mario E. Cosenza, ed., *The Complete Journal of Townsend Harris: The First American Consul and Minister to Japan,* revised edition, Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1959, p. 208.

ties for foreign trade with the Dutch and with Russia. Although Harris asked Japanese officials to allow him to visit Yedo shortly after his arrival, he received no answer. He became irritated and sometimes lost his temper with Japanese officials, who had seldom heard such harsh words. This made his situation worse.

His anger is understandable. He believed that Japan's relations and trade with the US would not only confer upon Japan the ability to avoid British invasion but would also supply it with a big chance to participate as a peers in global progress. He had no armaments to back him up. His goodwill towards Japan was unquestionable. However, Japanese officials responded to him with insincerity, from his point of view. When Harris asked them if he could hire some Japanese servants, they accepted his request but made no effort to help him. They made every kind of excuse for delay.[8] On September 11, he wrote "Had a flare-up with the officials, who told me some egregious lies in answer to some requests I made. I told them plainly I knew they lied; that, if they wished me to have any confidence, they must always tell the truth; that, if I asked anything they were not authorized to grant, or about which they wished to consult, let them simply say they were not prepared to answer me, but that to tell lies to me was treating me like a child, and that I should consider myself as insulted thereby; that in my country a man who lied was disgraced, and that to call a man a liar was the greatest insult that could be given him...."[9] The Japanese officials tended to agree to everything partly because they would not offend the person in front of them by giving negative answers and partly because they wanted to leave a clear "no" for more important matters. We can see the former custom still in operation today. We can distinguish approval from indirect denial only by the careful reading of facial expression and tones in Japan. This might be very difficult and annoying to do for a straightforward person raised in the city of New York. However, the delay and insincerity were not solely caused by the manner of communication and the inefficiency of Japanese bureaucracy. They were intentional slowdowns and lies based on political judgments, too.

We can find the evidence for this in Japanese sources. In early 1857, a group of higher officials who began to insist on opening up Japan criticized the manner Japanese officials had used in diplomacy. "Hitherto, our policy to foreign agents was to refuse everything in order to keep the status-quo in short-term interests of Japan. However, it is harmful for Japan. Without impartial consideration, we can make no reasonable insistence and, if the West becomes angry, they are sure to force their will by armed threats. We know of many mistakes of this kind made by the predecessors."[10] Their solution was to change the Japanese attitude, to have sincere dialogue with foreign agents, and to keep their word after agreements were made.

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[8] ditto, p. 230.

[9] ditto, pp. 231–232.

[10] 海防掛大目付・目付上申書（安政4年正月）(a report by the councilors of defense to the cabinet, Feb. 1857)、佐藤誠三郎・吉田常吉編『幕末政治論集』岩波書店、1976、45頁（*Political Arguments during the Late Tokugawa Era*, Iwanami Shoten, 1976). The "predecessors" may mean the Chinese before and after the Opium War.

Thus, Harris's denunciation of the Japanese as liars could be partially confirmed by the contemporary Japanese themselves. Even if they were not precisely liars, it is obvious that they were very reluctant to meet Harris's demands. Everyone living in his situation might have complained as he did. However, was the attitude peculiar to the Japanese at that time? No! Harris also denounced Thai people as liars in his diary. He visited Thailand just before coming to Japan in order to conclude a treaty of amity and commerce. There, he had a similar experience. After Thai officials promised something, they would often delay its fulfilment and begin negotiation all over again from the starting point. Harris was also annoyed by many ceremonies and trivial procedures. Thus provoked, he went so far as to write "To lie is here the rule from the Kings downward. Truth is never used when they can avoid it."[11] A Yankee was too straight to understand the thinking of Thai people who feared the Western powers and were trying everything to maintain their face in their party. Not only the Japanese but also the Thais were liars from his point of view.

Why did both of these people take such an attitude? Why did Harris denounce "the duplicity of the Oriental diplomat"[12] in general? One answer is simple. What Harris was encountering was the wisdom of the weak. If the weak are to continue resistance in the face of unfavourable relations with the strong, there is no other way but to make a slowdown or forget promises. We can find this phenomenon everywhere and at every time in human history. Nonetheless, in addition to this explanation, we can try another interpretation for the situation here in East Asia.

3. The Collapse of the World Order Based on Ambiguity

Before the mid-19th century, there was a "China-centred world order"[13] in East Asia. It was quite different from the Western international order that would come to regulate the whole world in the 20th century. Instead of several states competing on an equal basis, there was a single big empire at the centre that formed radiating, hierarchical relations with its surrounding states. The latter sent tributaries to the "Middle Empire" and expressed themselves as subjects in order to avoid conquest, to acquire superior civilization, to obtain excellent goods, and to gain primacy over domestic and neighbouring authorities.

In this world order, peripheral states officially accepted Chinese supremacy. However, they saw these relationships differently inside their domains, especially during the early modern era when they accomplished a maturity of civilization comparable with that of China. For example, within its borders Vietnam called itself a "Southern country" that was equal to the "Northern country," i.e. China. Was this a betrayal of China? Were the Vietnamese insincere towards

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[11] *The Complete Journal of Townsend Harris*, p. 153.

[12] ditto, p. 122.

[13] 三谷博・山口輝臣『19 世紀日本の歴史』放送大学教育振興会、2000（Hiroshi Mitani and Teruomi Yamaguchi, *A History of 19th Century Japan*, Hoso Daigaku Kyoiku Shinkokai, 2000）. Its view on traditional East Asian world order is based on the works of Takeshi Hamashita（濱下武史）.

China? Is it proper to denounce them as double-tongued people?

We can find another example in the Chosung dynasty of Korea. After being invaded by the Manchus, Korea promised to obey Tsing China and sent tributaries very often. However, it also worshipped the emperors of the Ming dynasty in a negation of the legitimacy of the Tsing dynasty. Moreover, Korean intellectuals began to assert that the essence of Chinese civilization had in fact moved to Korea after the barbarian Manchus had usurped "the centre of the world." Koreans might have been cautious enough to express this view only within their own country. However, it is possible that even while noticing Korean's antipathy towards and despising of Manchu China, the Chinese overlooked it. Here, the mutual acknowledgement of ambiguity formed the backbone of international peace.

We can similarly find the systematic use of ambiguity in diplomacy in Japan-Korea relations during the early modern era.[14] That they were equals is shown by the fact that the Korean king and the Japanese Tycoon exchanged letters written in equal form. However, this equality was the outcome of a synthesis of complex inequalities. Moreover, both parties looked down upon each other in spite of knowing about this unpleasant situation. For example, the Japanese sent no envoys to the capitol of Korea, although Korea sent envoys to Yedo twelve times to celebrate the inauguration of new Tycoons. This was because Korea wanted to prevent the Japanese from observing their domestic situation because of its fear of another invasion from Japan. However, the Japanese side interpreted this one-way dispatch of delegations as tributaries. On the other hand, Korean delegations marched through Japan flying the flag that declared them to be participating in "the inspection of the king." This indicates that they saw Japan as a kind of extension of Korean territory. Metaphorically speaking, Japan-Korea relations in the early modern era were similar to a set of two reverse signs of inequality.

This relationship virtually came to an end in the early 19th century when Japan and Korea became dissatisfied with the ongoing unpleasant situation. Until then, Japan had depended on Korean trade for the import of silk goods from China. However, when the Japanese succeeded in producing high quality silk themselves during the 18th century, they became unable to endure being looked down upon from Korea. The Japanese government proposed to Korea to move the place of reception from the capitol Yedo to Tsushima, a peripheral island lying between the Korean peninsula and Kyushu island. The Korean government accepted this proposal because there had been no sign of invasion for more than 200 years. This agreement was carried out in 1811 and it was the end of the reception of Korean envoys in Japan.

This last fact indicates that Perry and Harris were not the first people to begin changing the intentional use of ambiguity in diplomacy. By the time they came to Japan the Japanese themselves had begun to secede from the East Asian world order by abandoning the traditional style of diplomatic discourse. Perry and Harris put pressure on Japan to quit seclusion policy, and,

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14) 田代和生『近世日朝通交貿易史の研究』創文社、1981 (Kazui Tashiro, *A Study on Japan-Korea Diplomacy and Trade*, Tokyo: Sobunsha, 1981). Ronald P. Toby, *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan: Asia in the Development of the Tokugawa Bakufu*, Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1984.

at the same time, to proceed towards the abolishment of double talk. As Prime Minister Hotta pointed out, the Japanese government became critical of diplomatic attitude toward Western powers, for example of its practice of resorting to conventional trivial practices and spacious excuses.[15] It is obvious that Harris's repeated complaints and anger influenced this transformation. After concluding the new treaties of diplomacy and commerce in 1858, the Japanese government began to make sincere efforts to keep to the word of its treaties, although its officials continued to resist any Western demands to force radical change in international relations.

Conclusion

Japan's adoption of European style diplomacy marked the beginning of the transformation of the East Asian regional order. It began to follow the international laws set by modern Europeans along with the concept of clearly defined territory, the legitimacy of resorting to war in the national interest, the right to acquire colonies, and the unambiguous use of diplomatic language. Although there was a famous saying "an ambassador is an honest man who is sent to lie for the good of his country," it might be judged by the norm of sincerity whether one lied or not in modern Western diplomacy.[16] That is, the lies might be judged by the norm of singular meaning and sincerity in modern Western diplomacy. Here, in traditional East Asia, the stability of international relations depended to a large extent upon the ambiguity that allowed for various interpretations among the parties involved.[17] We may state that Perry's arrival to Japan at least lessened the weight of this custom and introduced straightforward discussion as a primary norm of diplomatic discourse.

Why did the Japanese accept the change of rule? It may be interesting to imagine what would have happened if the Korean government had sent an envoy to revitalize Korean-Japanese relationships in order to protect both countries from Western invasion. They could have relied on the tradition that offered room for ambiguity while trying to conclude an agreement with clear content. But in reality the Japanese had no tradition to rely on when American envoys appeared in their strong battleships. They were very different from the Dutch at Nagasaki who had obeyed the Japanese government as subjects. Because of this perception, the Japanese government treated the US envoys on an equal basis by breaking its tradition of placing foreign envoys in subordinate positions during ceremonies. Perry was invited into a reception room where he sat on a chair arranged on the same level as the seating mats of the Japanese plenipotentiaries. Shogun welcomed Harris at Yedo castle by allowing him to remain standing in front of the sovereign. No one could have imagined that any of the sovereigns in

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[15] 老中達書（安政 4 年 2 月 24 日）(Hotta's order to councilors)、『幕末政治論集』51 頁。

[16] Cited in Harold Nicolson, *Diplomacy*, 3rd. ed., Oxford University Press, 1964, p. 21.

[17] There were the same kind of relation in 18th century Yezo among Matsumae officials, Ainu people and Japanese lower agent-cum-interpreters. 坂田美奈子『18 世紀における松前藩の「蝦夷人介抱」とアイヌ世界の「ウレシパ」』（近刊）(Minako Sakata, *Matsumae Official's "Care for Ainu" and Ainu's View of the Same Relationship,* to be published).

East Asia would dare to allow such equal relationships with foreign envoys. The ceremonies that had visually demonstrated the hierarchical structure of foreign relationships began to disappear. And as the complex rules of inequality in diplomacy became unnecessary, the custom of maintaining ambiguities in diplomatic discourse became useless. This may explain the reason why the Japanese use of diplomatic language has become simpler and simpler since the mid-19th century.