

# The British Policy of Free Trade with Japan at the end of the Edo Period; Focusing on the Shimonoseki war in 1864

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## Abstract

This paper aims to clarify the British policy of free trade with Japan at the end of the Edo Period, especially focusing on the Shimonoseki war in 1864.

The British diplomatic policy at the time was the Imperialism of Free Trade. In 1858, the Tokugawa government, which had a policy of national isolation, finally acceded to the demands of Western countries and made a commercial treaty with them. The Choshu Clan, one of the feudal lords, attacked foreign ships in the Strait of Shimonoseki in 1863 to exclude foreign countries from Japan. A year later, the combined squadrons of Britain, France, the Netherlands and America attacked the Choshu Clan in retaliation, which is called the Shimonoseki war. According to one of the British documents at the time, British Prime Minister Palmerston said about the war, “I am inclined to think that our relations with Japan are going through the usual and unavoidable stages of the intercourse of strong and civilized nations with weaker and less civilized ones.”

Therefore, it can be said that the British government described Japan as a weaker and less civilized nation and needed the Shimonoseki war, in order to progress with free trade with Japan.

**Keywords:** *Imperialism of Free Trade, Britain, Meiji Restoration, Tokugawa shogunate, Choshu clan*

## 1 Introduction

This research aims to clarify the British policy of free trade for the Edo period of Japan in the middle of the 19th century. Since the 17th century, the Japanese feudal government, Tokugawa, had been keeping a national isolation policy. At the beginning of the 19th Century, Western countries started to approach Japan to demand restarting trade. In 1858, the Tokugawa government finally acceded to the demands of Western countries and made a commercial treaty with them. However the Japanese Emperor disagreed with the treaty; in addition, people came to demand the exclusion of foreigners from Japan after foreign trade began. As a result, the Tokugawa government had no other choice but to try to cancel the treaty and order feudal lords to exclude foreigners.

The Choshu Clan, one of the feudal lords, attacked foreign ships in the Strait of Shimonoseki by the order in 1863, and a year later, the combined squadrons of Britain, France, the Netherlands and America attacked the Choshu Clan in retaliation, which is called the Shimonoseki war. Actually, the reasons for the Shimonoseki war were not only retaliation for attacking foreign ships by the Choshu clan but also British diplomatic policy for Japan, the Imperialism of Free Trade, behind it. Therefore, this research also aims to clarify the international relations of modern Japan against the background of the Imperialism of Free Trade.

## 2 The Imperialism of Free Trade

According to John Gallagher & Ronald Robinson in “The Imperialism of Free Trade”, published in 1953, they said as follows about the British Imperialism of Free Trade. <sup>1)</sup>

But perhaps the most common political technique of British expansion was the treaty of free trade and friendship made with or imposed upon a weaker state... The treaties with Persia of 1836 and 1857, the Turkish treaties of 1838 and 1861, the Japanese treaty of 1858, the favours extracted from Zanzibar, Siam and Morocco, the hundred of anti slavery treaties signed with crosses by African chiefs—all these treaties enabled the British government to carry forward trade with these regions. (pp11)

Gallagher and Robinson said, in Japan’s case, the British government made a commercial treaty in 1858, to carry forward free trade.

### 2. 1 Opinion of Palmerston

Henry John Temple Palmerston, who was a British politician at that time, was a member of the Whig Party, and in charge of the foreign ministry until 1851, and after that, the prime minister from 1855 to 1865. He had his opinion about the British Imperialism of Free Trade. In 1841, Palmerston

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\* 1 一般科目

wrote to Lord Auckland in his letter as follows.<sup>2)</sup>

The rivalship of European manufactures is... fast excluding our productions from the markets of Europe, and we must unremittingly endeavour to find in other parts of the world new vents for the produce of our industry. The world is large enough and the wants of the human race ample enough to afford a demand for all we can manufacture; but it is the business of the Government to open and to secure the roads for the market. (pp259 - 60)

Palmerton thought that to open and secure the market was the business of the Government. Therefore, the British government expanded his power to Asia, and made the commercial treaty with Japan as well.

## 2. 2 Opinion of Alcock

On June 25th, 1863, The Choshu Clan started attacking foreign ships in the Shimonoseki Straits under the order from the Tokugawa government. The Illustrated London News, which was one of the newspapers published in London, reported in details of the attack with a map. (Figure 1<sup>3)</sup>)

Rutherford Alcock was the envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary in Japan at that time. He commented on the attack by the Choshu Clan in his book as follows.<sup>4)</sup>

The object of our treaty is no doubt trade, this first and chiefly... A rougher and sterner discipline may be needed with such men as the Daimios and their supporters, to teach them the wisdom of maintaining peaceable relations by observing the obligations of treaties, instead of provoking to acts of hostility a Power that can at any time crush their best efforts at resistance, and, whatever may be the treacherous suggestions they may receive from foreign sources, will do so, if all milder means should fail. (XXX. pp193-194,204)

The extension and free development of commerce without costly armaments of war being the avowed and sole object of our treaties, ... It is manifest that where force is habitually resorted to in questions between different races and Powers...

For, without an appeal to unvarying experience, it must be clear that 'a nation which shows it can not easily be trifled with is in a much better position, coeteris paribus, than one with which liberties may be taken without fear of punishment.' (XXX. pp308-309)

Alcock said, "The extension and free development of commerce without costly armaments of war." On the other hand, he said "A rougher and sterner discipline may be needed" against the hostility of the Daimios which means feudal lords, like the Choshu Clan. This means provability of taking military action. In fact, Britain started the Shimonoseki war with France, the Netherlands and America.

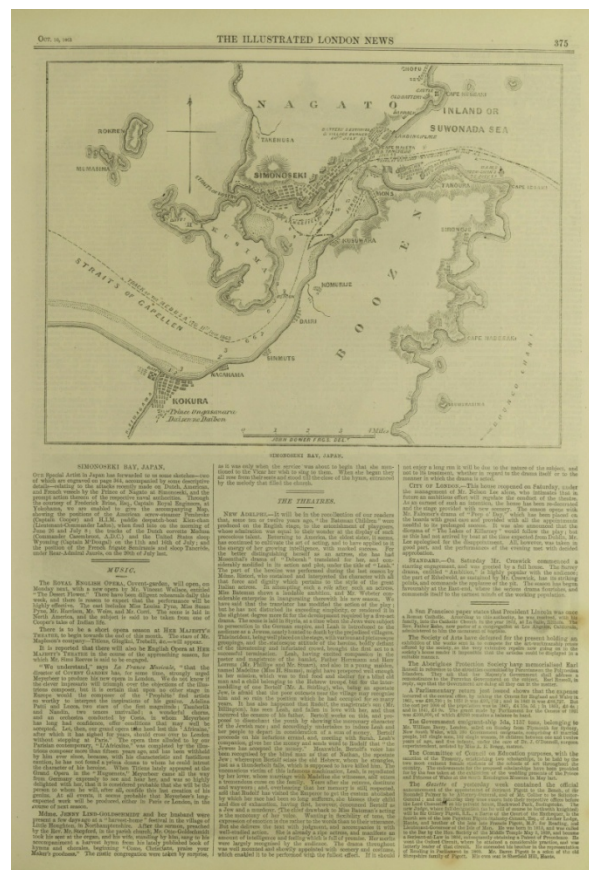


Figure 1

The Illustrated London News  
(October 10th, 1863)

## 3 Shimonoseki war

On September 5th, 1864, the Shimonoseki war broke out. The combined squadrons of Britain, France, the Netherlands and America opened fire on batteries placed on Shimonoseki, which is the territory of the Choshu Clan. They immediately landed there and occupied his forts. The Illustrated London News also reported in detail of the War with an illustration of one of the forts occupied by the British force. (Figure 2<sup>5)</sup>)

As a result, the Choshu Clan and the combined force made a peace treaty on the 14th as follows.<sup>6)</sup>

1<sup>st</sup> Henceforward all ships of all countries passing through the straits of Simonoseki shall be treated in a friendly manner. Ships shall be allowed to purchase coal, provisions, wood, and water, and every other necessary. As the harbour of Simonoseki is subject to violent winds and currents, people suffering from stress of weather shall be allowed to land without opposition.

2<sup>nd</sup> Not only shall new forts not be built, but no repairs shall be made to the old ones, nor shall guns be mounted therein.

3<sup>rd</sup> Although the town of Simonoseki might justly have been burnt for having first fired upon foreign ships, it was left undestroyed. A ransom shall be paid for this, and in addition to this, the whole expenses of the expedition shall be defrayed (by the Prince).

The peace treaty means that the Choshu Clan promised to allow foreign ships to go through the Shimonoseki Straits safely.



Figure 2  
The Illustrated London News  
(December 24th, 1864)

### 3. 1 Viewpoint of Parmerston

Regarding the Shimonoseki war, British Prime Minister Palmerston wrote to Foreign Minister John Russell as follows.<sup>7)</sup>

I am inclined to think that our relations with Japan are going through the usual and unavoidable stages of the intercourse of strong and civilized nations with weaker and less civilized ones. First agreement for trade, next breach of engagement, injustice and outrage, then Redress demanded and refused. Then operation enforced by hostility. Then temporary acquiescence, then renewed endeavours to break engagement, then successful display of superior strength, and then at last peaceful and settled commercial intercourse advantageous to both parties. We have gone through all these stages with China, we have only got half way with Japan.

Palmerston thought that the Shimonoseki war was essential stage in the relationship with Japan. It means that he considered the Shimonoseki war as the stage of “successful display of superior strength” in order to secure the free trade with Japan. Also, he needed to go through all stages with

Japan in the same way as China.

From viewpoint of Parmerston, this shows that Japan was the same as China which was weaker and less civilized nation. Therefore, it can be said that the Shimonoseki war, just the same of the Opium War, was the essential stage for him in order to progress the free trade with Japan.

### 3. 2 Viewpoint of British Parliament

A year later, on February 7th 1865, the Lords Commissioners gave a speech to the both Houses of Parliament explaining about the Shimonoseki war as follows.<sup>8)</sup>

A JAPANESE Daimio in Rebellion against his Sovereign infringed the Rights accorded by Treaty to Great Britain and to certain other Powers; and the Japanese Government having failed to compel him to desist from his lawless Proceedings, the Diplomatic Agents and the Naval Commanders of Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, and the United States of North America, undertook a combined Operation for the Purpose of asserting the Rights which their respective Governments have obtained by Treaty. That Operation has been attended with complete Success; and the Result has afforded Security for Foreign Commerce and additional Strength to the Government of Japan, with which the Relations of Her Majesty are friendly.

This speech shows that the British government considered the success of the Shimonoseki war as “Security for Foreign Commerce and additional Strength to the Government of Japan.”

This Hansard, which is a British parliamentary paper, was sent to Japan by British Foreign Minister John Russell. Two months later, on April 7th, Charles Winchester, the deputy envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary in Japan, handed the Hansard to the Tokugawa government with a letter. His letter is as follows.<sup>9)</sup>

To their Excellencies:  
the ministers for Foreign Affairs.  
H.M. Legation.  
Yokohama 7<sup>th</sup> April 1865.

It is the custom of our sovereign to address to the nobles and representatives of the people on the annual opening of Parliament, a discourse stating the views of the Government, on the principal events, which have taken place during the recess.

Earl Russell the Secretary of state, has forwarded to me several copies of the speech of Her Majesty delivered 7<sup>th</sup> February last, which contains a paragraph on British relations with Japan indicative of the friendly goodwill of Her Majesty the Queen towards His Majesty the Tycoon.

With respect and consideration  
Charles A Winchester,  
H. B. M. Charge d' Affairs.

Winchester emphasized that the speech contains “a paragraph on British relations with Japan indicative of the friendly goodwill of Her Majesty the Queen towards His Majesty the Tycoon.” The paragraph means that the British

government supports the Tokugawa government. Therefore, it can be said that the paragraph implied that the British government demanded the Tokugawa government extend free trade with foreign countries.

#### 4 Conclusion

This paper clarifies the British policy of free trade with Japan at the end of the Edo Period, especially focusing on the Shimonoseki war in 1864, as follows.

First, as Alcock said, Britain needed “a rougher and sterner discipline” against the Choshu clan which tried to exclude foreign countries. Second, as Palmerston said, the Shimonoseki war was an essential stage of “successful display of superior strength” to secure the free trade with Japan. Third, as the speech, that the British government considered the success of the Shimonoseki war as “Security for Foreign Commerce and additional Strength to the Government of Japan.” That is to say, the British government demanded the Tokugawa government extend free trade with foreign countries.

As a next step, the Japanese diplomatic policy against the free trade imperialism is going to be clarified.

#### Notes

- 1) John Gallagher & Ronald Robinson, “The Imperialism of Free Trade” *The Economic History Review*, Second Series, Vol. VI, No.1, 1953, pp11.
- 2) Letter from Palmerston to Lord Auckland, January 22, 1841. Ridley Jasper, “Lord Palmerston” Constable, 1970, pp259-60.
- 3) “Shimonoseki Bay, Japan.” *Illustrated London News* [London, England] 10 Oct. 1863: 375. *Illustrated London News*. Web. 14 June. 2012.
- 4) “The Capital of the Tycoon: a narrative of a three years’ residence in Japan” Sir Rutherford Alcock, in Two Volumes. New York Harper&Brotheres, 1863.
- 5) “The Late Action at Simonosaki, Japan.” *Illustrated London News* [London, England] 24 Dec. 1864: 621. *Illustrated London News*. Web. 14 June. 2012.
- 6) Enclosure No.2 in China letter No.360 of 14 Sept.1864. The National Archives, ADM1/5876.
- 7) Letter from Palmerston to John Russell, October 5, 1864. The National Archives, PRO30/22/15C.
- 8) The Speech of The Lords Commissioners to both Houses of Parliament, February 7, 1865. “HANSARD’S PALIAMENTARY DEBATES, THIRD SERIES, VOL.CLXXVII(177)” The National Archives, ZHC2/139.
- 9) Letter from Charles Winchester to the Tokugawa government, April 7, 1865. The Historiographical Institute The University of Tokyo. “Zakken Eikoku-no-bu” Gaimusho-hikitsugi-shorui961.

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