

Ambassadors of Exchange The 1860 Japanese Mission to the US

By Benita Stambler



The 1860 Japanese Mission to the United States and host escorts. From the United States National Archives and Records Administration.

The 1860 expedition of the first Japanese ambassadorial delegation to the US presents instructional opportunities useful in a variety of courses. The 150th anniversary in 2010 of this official establishment of trade relations between the two countries supplemented the already-rich array of primary and secondary resources by adding a proliferation of new documents and websites. While the official purpose of the mission was to ratify the 1858 Treaty of Amity and Commerce, the Japanese entourage became the rock stars of their day in the US, surrounded by the press, approached unabashedly by girls and women, and feted by a whirlwind round of parties and special events. The mission's material bequest provides us with verbal, visual, and aural artifacts that may be used as sources for continued investigation and interpretation.

Students will be captivated by the first interactions of two societies so foreign to each other, allowing parallels to other first contacts. American popular culture icons such as the television *Survivor* series, in which hardy Americans are forced to encounter challenges in far-flung locations around the world with minimal cultural preparation, is one such example. One instructional approach that might be both entertaining and educational would be casting the Japanese delegation as contestants on a *Survivor: Washington, 1860* episode using excerpts from the diaries of some of the Japanese visitors.

The Historical Context

The Japanese had not deliberately ventured far abroad for the two hundred years prior to this mission. Since Japan was just “opened” to the West in 1854, the 1860 expedition established the first formal commercial exchanges with the US and thus is a landmark in US-Japanese trade and social relations. Occurring at the cusp between the Tokugawa period (1603–1868) and the Meiji period (1868–1912), it provides a glimpse of the Japanese in transition, eager

to learn about new technologies but distressed by such American social customs as the inclusion of women in important matters and the lack of attention to hierarchy and status.

The delegation, led by three ambassadorial samurai, was to ratify the treaty that formally established commercial ties with the US. Though forced by the previous engagements and treaties, the mission was also part of a final attempt by the Tokugawa shogunate to impress the Japanese people with the government's modernity. The Tokugawa shogun, losing power at home and virtually invisible abroad, sent this delegation to present Japan in an impressive light. While not including officials of the very highest rank, the sheer numbers of individuals and array of presents were designed to impress. Traveling to the US on an American ship, the coterie of seventy-seven Japanese came with more than fifty tons of baggage, much of it special gifts to cement the new relationship, although some of the baggage contained Japanese food to sustain the delegation members while they were away from home!¹ At the same time as approaching political upheaval in Japan, the US was headed inexorably toward a civil war. Thus, the foreign dignitaries provided a welcome respite from the otherwise mostly grim national news.

While today Americans are relatively blasé about visits of foreign dignitaries, attitudes in the mid-nineteenth century were quite different. Looking back, the excitement surrounding this event was considerable. The visitors began in San Francisco, followed by important governmental ceremonies in Washington, DC. In New York, they were feted by a parade down Broadway, now generally reserved, except for holidays, for local sports teams winning major competitions. Even Wikipedia, which lists major ticker tape parades in New York, includes only three in the nineteenth century and three so far in the twenty-first century.² Though it may be difficult to fathom such excitement

over a diplomatic event, the arrival of the mission did capture not only media attention but the popular imagination as well. For us, this means a relatively rich legacy of first-hand accounts and material objects that remain accessible and available.

We know from Commodore Matthew Perry's forceful arrival in Japan in 1853 that the Japanese had not been prepared to open their country to foreign commerce. Frightened by the opium wars perpetrated by foreigners in China, the Japanese acquiesced to American demands and signed the Treaty of Amity and Commerce on July 29, 1858. The arrival in the US in 1860 of the impressive delegation indicated that the Japanese government was resigned to the eventuality of interaction with foreigners. Later, in 1871, the Iwakura Mission was sent to the US to bring back scientific ideas to Japan. In between these two missions, the Tokugawa shogunate was overthrown, and the Meiji Restoration indicated a willing interest in new ideas. From this, we can begin to trace the rapid trajectory of Japan's embrace of Western technology and its march toward modernity. The 1860 delegation was thus a precursor to major social, scientific, and political change.

The Treaty of Amity and Commerce was largely the work of Townsend Harris, the first American consul to Japan, and so it is sometimes referred to as the Harris Treaty. Portions of the treaty are online and are useful for a consideration of its "unequal" aspects.³ The treaty's provisions included opening more ports to foreign trade, allowing foreigners in Japan to be governed by their own laws (extraterritoriality) and fixed tariffs. Also online is the full Treaty of Kanagawa, the initial treaty forced on the Japanese by Commodore Perry.⁴ The threat to Japanese sovereignty by the Treaty of Kanagawa was thought to be part of the impetus for the overthrow of the shogun and the early stirrings of militant Japanese nationalism. The backlash against the government in Japan that allowed both treaties to be signed was swift and violent—news of some of it reached the mission while they were still in the US, and American newspapers speculated on its effects on the visitors.⁵ While the Harris Treaty was directed toward a commercial purpose, its effect was to cement the unequal relationship between the countries and thus the underlying attitudes of the Japanese government and the delegation.

The official relations did not have the desired effect, though. In 1863, the emperor, under pressure, issued an edict expelling foreigners from Japan, and the Chōshū clan fired on foreign ships. By 1864, in spite of the Japanese signing these treaties to prevent foreign invasion, European powers (British, Dutch, French) and the US landed troops on Japanese soil at Shimonoseki. The Westerners had used these provocations to capture and destroy Japanese fortifications, thus confirming at least some of the Japanese fears of military interference by foreigners.

Resources and the Curriculum

The mission, however, seems to have a lasting impact far beyond the treaty's contents. What did this visit mean that it should continue to be the subject of study 150 years later? Here the answer is complex and can best be answered by an examination of the resources it engendered and the various ways in which they can be used in a broad array of classes.

Masao Miyoshi's *As We Saw Them* considered major topics of race, gen-



Tateishi Onojiro 'Tommy', an interpreter for the first Japanese Embassy to the United States. Tinted albumen stereoscopic view (half shown), 1860, by Charles D. Fredricks (New York). Source: <http://tiny.cc/00i67>.

der, and politics as the important issues addressed by the memoirs of the Japanese envoys and their staff. The most factual chapters of his book are the first and fourth, with the first chapter, "Travelers," providing the views of the individuals of the Japanese delegation. The fourth chapter, "Lives," tells what befell the members of the mission after their return to Japan. Using just the first chapter and the many historical photos in the book help to deflect criticisms of Miyoshi's imposed subjectivity on the historical meaning of the event.⁶ Miyoshi's work is otherwise fascinating in that, as a twentieth-century Japanese who made the transition to live in the US, he presents his impressions of earlier Japanese arrivals, adding layers of cultural interpretation. An alternative, shorter resource with brief excerpts from Japanese diaries on a variety of topics is Yasuhide Kawashima's "America Through Foreign Eyes" article in the *Journal of Social History*.⁷

Robert Sandow, of Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania, has created a very useful website of the 1860 Japanese embassy, with old stereoview photos, a short text, and a reading list for pursuing this topic further.⁸

This can serve as a quick introduction to the mission. Further visual contrasts can be drawn between the American view of the unfamiliar Japanese and the views of exotic Westerners that are seen in Japanese woodblock prints of the same period. Both cultures made use of their own artistic conventions to present the strangeness of the foreigners. The topics of cultural stereotyping and intercultural relations can easily be raised through such comparisons. A particularly useful collection for this purpose may be found on the *Visualizing Cultures* website.⁹ Using images and some excerpts, the opinions of the Japanese in the US can be compared to Japanese views of Americans in Japan. We can see visual parallels to the opinions of the 1860 expedition participants through the essays and prints presented on the *Yokohama Boomtown* portion of the *Visualizing Cultures* online project. A unit for middle and secondary school students from SPICE, *Japan Meets the West*, further addresses artistic evidence of cross-cultural misperceptions in a broader context.¹⁰

A 1944 issue of the *California Historical Society Quarterly* has an article by George Hinkle, "Samurai in San Francisco: The Japanese Embassy of 1860."¹¹ It reports on the *Kanrin Maru*, the Japanese ship that came to the US a week in advance of the *USS Powhatan*, the American ship that conveyed the official embassy across the Pacific. Much is made in Hinkle's account of the different perceptions of the Chinese and the Japanese by Americans. While the Japanese are wined, dined, and respected, the Chinese laborers in California are most often denigrated, used, and abused. He quotes one publication, "There are the Chinese among us, despised, spurned, overtaxed and considered fair game for more oppressive burdens."¹²

In 2010, an exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York, *Samurai in New York*, was an opportunity to feature this embassy in a visual collection of old photographs. So popular that it was extended, the exhibition was part of a celebration by the Consulate General of Japan in New York. They produced a section of their website that addresses the relationship between Japan and New York City that includes some history as well as photos and drawings.¹³ Of particular interest to Americans at the time was the young apprentice translator, Tateishi Onojiro, affectionately known as Tommy. His affable personality,



President Buchanan welcoming the Japanese Embassy. Source: <http://tiny.cc/7upxv>.

in contrast to the more staid and dour officials, won him instant popularity, so much so that music was composed in his honor. The Consulate-General website contains a three-minute clip of an orchestra playing the *Tommy Polka*, as well as two other musical versions, written for Tommy by German-born American composer Charles Grobe. A German-American composing a polka in honor of a Japanese youth visiting the US certainly says something about the melting pot, or at least the vegetable soup, of American multiculturalism, even in the mid-nineteenth century. Additionally, the website contains a brief historical overview and a slide show of photographs. The American Museum of Photography has an online exhibition as well, *Cross-Cultural Camera: How Photography Bridged East and West*, that presents lovely tinted photographs of the members of the embassy, as well as explanatory text.¹⁴

Walt Whitman, the great American poet, wrote “A Broadway Pageant,” a poem that captures the excitement generated by the embassy’s visit to New York. Included in his *Leaves of Grass*, this work seems to view the Japanese as part of a long line of foreign dignitaries paying homage to the US.¹⁵ The 1860 mission can thus be used in American literature classes as background information for studying Whitman’s poem.

The White House Historical Association has produced a twenty-five-page publication from its White House History Series, no. 12, available online, *Guests of the Nation: The Japanese Delegation to the Buchanan White House* by Dallas Finn.¹⁶ Finn uses the analogy of “a foreign-language film without subtitles” to describe the cross-cultural encounter, another possibility for developing an instructional approach for less sophisticated students. Stanford University issued a publication in 2010, *Early Encounters: The First Japanese Embassy to the United States, 1860* which presents a lesson plan for secondary school students on a similar cross-cultural theme.¹⁷ Their earlier publication, *Episodes in the History of US-Japan Relations: Case Studies of Conflict, Conflict Management and Resolution* provides a more political and historical approach.¹⁸

The opportunities presented by the Internet can be expanded further by creating a blog related to this expedition. The San Francisco Unified School District created an 1860 Japanese Embassy Project in which students created blog posts based on the voyages of the *Kanrin Maru* and the *Powhatan*, but the diaries provide more information that can be employed to explore other aspects of the trip and other individuals involved.¹⁹ The White House visit alone would provide a treasure trove of curricular options.

High school students can develop a short play dramatizing the encounter between President Buchanan and the Japanese envoys, using as a model the encounter between the Chinese and the British in *Qianlong Meets Macartney: Collision of Two World Views*.²⁰ In this case, actual drawings of the encounter of the Japanese with the American president exist (from *Frank Leslie’s Illus-*

trated Newspaper, on the Consulate General of Japan website), leaving only the actual words of the event to student imagination.²¹ (First-person impressions are available from the diaries of various participants.) Unlike the Chinese situation, Buchanan’s niece and other women were prominent, as detailed in media illustrations. Such a reenactment could focus on diplomatic protocols of the time, differing national intents, potential for cultural misunderstandings, etc. The list of “Projects for Students” from the Qianlong article seems mostly relevant for instructional purposes focused on Japan as well.

The Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership has included a lesson on “Orientalism and Japanese Immigrants in America” developed by Aldo J. Regalado that explores issues surrounding this mission and the Iwakura Mission of 1871.²² It uses a lens of orientalism, designed for an eleventh grade US history honors class. Documents from both missions may be found in the volume edited by Peter Duus, *The Japanese Discovery of America: A Brief History with Documents*.²³ It includes two Japanese versions of the 1860 encounter, two American versions, and the Whitman poem. Its documents on the 1871–1873 Iwakura Mission would make a useful comparison for the changing face of Japan when compared to the 1860 delegation, slightly more than a mere decade earlier. Both missions remark on the “regrettable aspects of republican government,” particularly addressed by the comments of the 1860 ambassadors on the boisterous and seemingly ineffective actions of a session of the US Senate.²⁴ These observations could be the impetus for a discussion of the historically consistent but often contentious processes of American democracy. A comparison for political science classes could also be made between views of the 1860 Senate sessions and more contemporary descriptions or television footage of the Senate in operation. Still other context and inspiration may be found in “The Case for Commodore Perry in the Classroom” by Joan Mortensen.²⁵ Though her focus is Perry, she places him within a framework of American foreign policy that could be applied to this mission as well.

Conclusion

In our own time, with sushi offered in supermarkets and *Hello Kitty* paraphernalia on the shelves in discount stores, it is difficult to imagine an era when Japanese cultural items were not ubiquitous in the US. From the first cultural exchange with Japan just over 150 years ago, relationships not only between the governments of the two countries, but also between its peoples, have flourished. This brief overview of the foundation of this connection provides much to explore, the intervening years, of course, much more. The 1860 mission could be carried to the present (and future) in any number of ways, particularly through an examination of international and cross-cultural relations. Its resources offer appealing instructional materials that can begin to entice students into an array of studies, just as the mission began a multiplicity of encounters in the real world. ■

NOTES

1. Dallas Finn, "Guests of the Nation: The Japanese Delegation to the Buchanan White House," in *White House History*, Journal of the White House Historical Association 12, (2003): 373. Also online at White House History.org, <http://tinyurl.com/4xqsu5w>.
2. "Ticker-tape Parades," *Wikipedia*, last modified February 1, 2011, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ticker-tape_parade.
3. The Treaty of Amity and Commerce between the United States and Japan, 1858 (The Harris Treaty), accessed April 20, 2011, <http://core.ecu.edu/hist/tuckerjo/harris.html>. For texts of other historical documents, see also Wikisource, last modified March 26, 2011, http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Main_Page.
4. "Treaty of Kanagawa: Setting the Stage for Japanese-American Relations," Featured Documents, National Archives & Records Administration, accessed April 20, 2011, http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured_documents/treaty_of_kanagawa/ for a hand-written copy. For the text of the complete treaty, see "Treaty of Kanagawa, March 31, 1854," US Navy Museum (includes a brief lesson plan), accessed April 20, 2011, <http://www.history.navy.mil/branches/teach/pearl/kanagawa/friends5.htm>.
5. See, for example, "The Japanese in Philadelphia: Where they Went and What they Saw Yesterday. Report of the Tycoon's Death Discredited. The Japanese Game of Chess. The Japanese at Philadelphia. Effect of the News from Japan—Is it True?—The Japanese at Philadelphia Stores," *The New York Times*, June 11, 1860, published June 12, 1860, accessed April 20, 2011, <http://tinyurl.com/62kh9ml>. In fact, the person assassinated in this Sakuradamon incident had signed the Harris Treaty and so was being held responsible for Japan's capitulation to the foreign "barbarians."
6. Masao Miyoshi, *As We Saw Them: The First Japanese Embassy to the United States* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2005). See Mark D. Ericson, review of *As We Saw Them*, by Masao Miyoshi, *Journal of Asian Studies* 42, no. 4 (1983): 963–965.
7. Yasuhide Kawashima, "America through Foreign Eyes: Reactions of the Delegates from Tokugawa Japan, 1860," *Journal of Social History* 5, no. 4 (1972): 491–511.
8. Robert Sandow, "The 1860 Japanese Embassy," accessed April 20, 2011, <http://www.lhup.edu/rsandow/1860embassy.htm>.
9. John W. Dower, "Yokohama Boomtown: Foreigners in Treaty-Port Japan (1859–1872)," accessed April 20, 2011, http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/yokohama/yb_essay03.html. Part of the *Visualizing Cultures* website, <http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/home/index.html>. Student handouts such as the Treaty Article Matrix, Handout 02-A are particularly helpful. There is a link at the bottom of this page to the teacher's edition and seven lesson plans that provide a curricular context for using these handouts and materials. Each lesson includes history standards, objectives, materials required, and procedures. See Lynn Parisi and Meredith Melzer, "Yokohama Boomtown Curriculum," http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/yokohama/cur_student/yb_cur_toc.html.
10. SPICE Publications, *Japan Meets the West: A Case Study of Perceptions*, (Stanford: Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education, 1994).
11. George Hinkle, "Samurai in San Francisco: The Japanese Embassy of 1860," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (1944): 335–347. Also online at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25155869?seq=12>.
12. *Daily Evening Bulletin* (San Francisco), March 22, 1860. This theme of distinctions in American views of the Japanese and Chinese is further explored by Hilary Conroy, "Comparative Observations: American Images of China and Japan" in *America Views China: American Images of China Then and Now*, eds. Jonathan Goldstein, Jerry Israel, and Hilary Conroy (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 1991).
13. Consulate General of Japan in New York, "Japan-NYC 1860–2010: A Heritage of Friendship," accessed April 20, 2011, <http://tinyurl.com/643c9xv>.
14. The American Museum of Photography, "Cross-Cultural Camera: How Photography Bridged East and West," accessed April 20, 2011, <http://photographymuseum.org/japaneseembassy.html>.
15. Walt Whitman, "A Broadway Pageant," in ed. James E. Miller, Jr. *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose by Walt Whitman* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959): 177–179.
16. Finn, "Guests of the Nation," 372–396.
17. SPICE Publications, *Early Encounters: The First Japanese Embassy to the United States, 1860* (Stanford: Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education, 2010).
18. SPICE Publications, *Episodes in the History of US-Japan Relations: Case Studies of Conflict, Conflict Management and Resolution*, (Stanford: Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education, 1993).
19. 1860 Japanese Embassy Project, accessed April 20, 2011, <http://1860japaneseembassyproject.blogspot.com/>.
20. John R. Watt, "Qianlong Meets Macartney: The Collision of Two World Views," in *Education About Asia* 5, no. 3 (Winter 2000): 6–18. Also online at <http://www.asian-studies.org/EAA/watt.htm>.
21. See note 13.
22. Aldo J. Regalado, "Orientalism and Japanese Immigrants in America," *JapaNet* (Steve Heine Project Director), Institute for Asian Studies, Florida International University, (2004–2007): 101–103. Funded by the Japan Center for Global Partnership. Online pdf document at <http://tinyurl.com/6ff6d44h>.
23. Peter Duus, *The Japanese Discovery of America: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997).
24. Kume Kunitake, "Report of the Iwakura Mission 1878" in Duus, 174.
25. Joan E. Mortensen, "The Case for Commodore Perry in the Classroom," *World History Connected*, February 2007, <http://tinyurl.com/6yhdea4>.

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