

Aoki Konyō (1698-1769) and the Beginnings of *Rangaku*

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Introduction

Studies of Japanese interaction with the West from the mid-19th century have emphasized the importance of preceding contacts through Westerners resident in Japan. Such contacts arose as early as the 16th century, when Portugal dominated a period of vigorous European missionary and trading activity and, though severely restricted less than a century later, they continued throughout the Edo period, through the Dutch trading factory in Nagasaki. During these years a key intermediary role was played by the official interpreters, whose oral and, in some cases, written language ability gave them direct access to the representatives of Western civilization. Even more significant, however, were the efforts of another group, the Edo-based *Rangakusha* [scholars who study the Dutch learning], who emerged towards the end of the 18th century. Though in most cases their oral ability in Dutch was insufficient to permit direct conversation with the foreigners, they attempted to investigate the outside world by a study of Dutch-language books.

Regular contacts between Dutch and Japanese in Edo date from the first part of the 17th century. In 1609, the Bakufu granted permission to the Dutch factory director to pay a visit of greeting to the shogun, and from 1733 this practice was introduced as an annual obligation.¹ The system which developed over the succeeding decades was that the director, his scribe and surgeon, two Japanese interpreters, together with other Japanese officials and attendants, would set out from Nagasaki early in the new year on the five or six week trip to Edo. Shortly after arrival, usually on March 1 of the lunar calendar, they were received in audience by the shogun, to whom they offered gifts in thanks for their privileged trading relation with Japan. In the succeeding days there were less formal interviews with other officials who visited the foreigner's lodging quarters and, after a stay of approximately two weeks, the entourage set off again on the return trip to Nagasaki.

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¹ Detailed description of Dutch language source materials, together with a useful introduction to Dutch activities in Japan is given in Roessingh, M. P. H., *Het Archief van de Nederlandse Factorij in Japan/The Archive of the Dutch Factory in Japan 1609-1860* (The Hague: 's-Aravenhague, 1964). For the annual visit to Edo, see especially Section VIII.