

Rutherford Alcock *The Capital of the Tycoon* (1863)



Akiko Ohta



Sir Rutherford Alcock. (Source: The project Gutenberg eBook of the Englishman in China during the Victorian era, Vol. II (of 2), by Alexander Michie)

Sir Rutherford Alcock was born in Ealing, a suburb of London, in May 1809. Raised in a physicians' family, he initially pursued a career in the medical field, and served as a medical officer in the British army, which was deployed to suppress the Spanish Civil War from 1836 to 1837. He later became a diplomat, and in 1843 was appointed to the consulate of Amoy in China, as secretary first, then as consul in Fuzhou and Shanghai, and from 1856, as consul in Guangdong. He was involved in the Arrow Incident. In June 1859, he came to Japan as the first Consul General to Japan and was promoted to Minister Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary in February 1860. During his tenure in Japan until the end of 1864, he played a central role in the diplomatic corps, which promoted an aggressive foreign policy toward Japan, and

Chapter author affiliation as of March 1995.

A. Ohta (✉)
Faculty of Law, Keio University, Tokyo, Japan

participated in negotiations with the Shogunate to open ports. (The Anglo-Satsuma War of 1863, however, was led by Charge d’Affaires Neale, while Alcock returned temporarily to the UK on leave). In August 1864, the British government issued a recall order for Alcock, who had taken it on himself to lead an expedition with the United Kingdom, United States, France, and the Netherlands against Shimonoseki, Japan, but once his true intentions were conveyed, his achievements were recognized and he was immediately promoted to the post of minister to Qing (China). After retiring from the diplomatic service and returning to Britain in 1871, he served as President of the Royal Geographical Society and published articles on Japanese geography, as well as books on Japanese arts and crafts, thus contributing to the study of Japan in the U.K. He died on November 1, 1897. His major publications include *The Capital of the Tycoon* (1863), *Art and Art Industries in Japan* (1878), and a guide to Japanese grammar and conversation.

After the opening of the country to the West in 1858 (Ansei 5), the Edo shogunate found itself in a difficult situation as the Western powers were strongly demanding the opening of ports and cities, and, furthermore, there was a growing anti-foreigner trend in Japan. *The Capital of the Tycoon* is a collection of observations and reflections made by Sir Rutherford Alcock, the first British Minister to Japan (originally Consul General), during his 3-year stay in Japan from June 1859 to March 1862, when he returned temporarily to the UK on leave.

Alcock, who had served as consul in Shanghai and Guangdong before his assignment to Japan, was well versed in East Asian affairs and had a strong interest in Japan. Coming to Japan with prior knowledge from reading the works of William Adams, John Saris, Engelbert Kämpfer, Isaac Titsingh, Philipp Franz von Siebold, and others, he was keenly aware of the limitations of these traditional Japan-related books. He felt that they had been written centuries or decades before, that they were far outdated, that many of them were little more than chronicles or journals, and that therefore the image of Japan was tinged with legendary, mythical, and medieval colours and treated as an extremely mystical and utopian island nation. He was harshly critical, saying that “Like Don Quixote, whose imagination invested a roadside inn, and its serving-wenches of questionable repute, with attributes of romance that left nothing to be desired—writers on Japan have hitherto seen everything through highly colored glasses, and generally of a Claude Lorraine hue.” Alcock saw the Japan depicted in these books as an idealistic entity that was culturally quite alien to the West, and lacking in reality, so he concluded that it would be impossible to explore the ideal diplomatic relationship on a realistic level without understanding the actual situation at that moment in time. However, a diplomatic blue book is cumbersome and difficult to read for the average reader. Therefore, he wanted to write in plain language what was written in diplomatic documents. In doing so, he sought to question the common belief of the time that the relationship between Europe and Asia was “an obviously higher and lower phase of civilization intersecting each other” and to reexamine what Western diplomacy should be like.

With this intention, that is, of exploring a realistic British foreign policy toward Japan, Alcock felt it necessary to understand Japan’s internal political structure. It is noteworthy that he attempted to understand Japan from a historical perspective, and

yet he tried to describe Japan not only in terms of its politics and economy, but also in terms of its language, society, and customs, that is, from a civilizational perspective. *The Capital of the Tycoon* is basically chronological, but occasionally civilizational findings are presented that suggest the direction of British policy. His perception of Japanese civilization involves a serious questioning of the foundations of the Western civilization to which he belongs. This book should be rated highly because, while maintaining the basic idea that the West (Britain) is more advanced than the East (Japan), Alcock's contact with Japan led him to question the "superiority" of Western civilization, which had been considered a self-evident truth, and prompted him to discuss how diplomacy between different civilizations should be conducted.

Then how exactly did Alcock introduce and examine Japanese society? First of all, he attempted to describe the customs and habits of Japan by describing his own experiences in Japan. By noting that this method "gives a livelier and a truer conception of what these political and social conditions are, than systematic methods," he proved the significance of Japan's introduction in genre journals as a step to discussing Western diplomacy. In general, he has a bad reputation as a poor stylist whose writing is difficult to read, but his way of describing Japanese customs is full of humor and esprit, and even has a lighthearted tone.

While accompanying the Shogunate's mission to Europe in 1862 (Bunkyo 2), he observed with dismay that many Japanese, who are supposed to be a maritime people, have a phobia of seasickness, and also inferred the status of women in Japan on the basis of their "grotesque" makeup, such as blackened teeth, for example. The book contains numerous illustrations to facilitate the readers' understanding, and in addition to adopting the paintings of artist Charles Wirgman, Alcock himself took up the paintbrush and demonstrated a considerable skill. This does not mean that all his observations were correct, of course. William Willis, and other members of his staff stated that "he was a man who was always writing something in his spare time," and we can sense in *The Capital of the Tycoon* the author's relentless interest in Japanese society, his painstaking documentation, as well as traces of his tireless reflection.

Perhaps what is the most unique of these is that Alcock relates his discourse on the Japanese people to their language's grammatical structure. According to him, the absence of genders to their nouns (and of their personal pronouns to express any difference between he, she, and it) corresponds to the customs in their daily life, such as public baths for both sexes in Japan. He also found that, in direct proportion to the frequent use of honorific and self-abasing words, Japanese are extremely sensitive to any indignity or affront, beneath which lies their strong sense of pride. He even used this deduction as the basis to explain a series of killings and sniping of foreigners, such as the Namamugi Incident. Alcock's ability to develop such an argument from the characteristics of the Japanese grammar is unique and insightful.

Alcock attempted to clarify the Japanese social system as it related to British diplomacy. He also turned his attention to the ruling structure of Japanese politics, popular sentiment toward the outside world, and even Japan's distribution system. He pointed out repeatedly that the supreme monarch of Japan is the Mikado

(emperor), and that the Tycoon (shogun) in Edo are merely “a façade government,” making it clear that the Mikado is the only one who can override the statutes set forth by the Tycoon. Sensing the limits of the shogunate’s authority under such “double machinery” as proof of it, he pointed to the fact that—despite the provisions of Article I of the Treaty of Amity and Commerce—foreigners were restricted in various freedoms, including freedom of passage. At the same time, he recognized that the powerful *daimyō* (or feudal lords) were real rulers of Japan at the time, but he did not seem to have predicted the collapse of the shogunate and the restoration of the Mikado’s rule.

From these considerations, Alcock concluded that the West should not merely attempt to conquer Japan by force, nor should it impose Western democracy and Christianity as something supreme, but that since Japan had unwillingly concluded treaties with the Western powers, “*non-intervention* interpreted in a thoroughly doctrinaire spirit” is also meaningless.

The observance of treaties with Eastern nations, so long as these are the results, in the first instance, not of their own free-will and desire, but the fear of a superior Power, can never be otherwise than a matter of compulsion, however the thing itself may be veiled by euphuisms of moral pressure; and, to compel where there is no effective force exercised or compulsion used is not more a contradiction in terms than the attempt to obtain the end, without appropriate and effective means, is an absurdity in action.

In short, Alcock distinguished himself from the proponents of gunboat diplomacy, who sought to suppress by force at all costs small Eastern nations that would not submit to the West, while at the same time he criticized optimistic trade advocates who believed that the “practical and material interests” of trade relations had universal value that transcended cultural differences. *The Capital of the Tycoon* is driven throughout by the belief that a “clash of cultures” is inevitable in the encounter between the East and the West, with their culturally different norms, and that it cannot be settled by any such philosophy of “a well-cultivated and enlightened regard for our own best interests.”

Alcock emphasized that trade frictions between nations with markedly different cultures usually entail cultural frictions, and that these two cannot be separated. This view of his displays modernity as it equally applies to Japan-U.S. or Japan-Europe trade friction, which is being heatedly debated today in the latter half of the twentieth century. At the same time, it is fair to say that this was a far more realistic view than the trade theories of Cobden and Bright, who were leading public opinion in Britain at the time. It can also be said that he had a sense of mission as an active diplomat to protect the “chain” of the British Empire in Asia against Russia, who was looking for an opportunity to advance southward.

Alcock concluded that in order to maintain diplomatic relations established by coercion, it was essential to refrain from inciting fear and alarm among the Japanese by forcing them to promote religious and trade relations more than necessary.

If progress and civilization follow, as doubtless they will, if not injudiciously put out of their place and natural order—follow as the necessary attendants of commerce when this is in the hands of a Christian people, then will they come gradually to be understood and *in the end*

desired; and not civilization only, but a true religion also may find its place, and take an ever enlarging field within its fold.

In Alcock's view, however, a certain degree of conflict was unavoidable. Although this conclusion was somewhat prosaic, it can be seen as a characteristic of Alcock's diplomatic theory that the conflict of values between Japan and the West should be resolved over the long haul and that actual diplomatic issues at hand should be handled to the extent feasible.

But it is incorrect to immediately view Alcock as a civilizational relativist here. The idea of "the progressive West and the backward East" was still at the base of his thought, and in that sense, he was advocating a revision of Eastern civilization from an overarching perspective. While he cautioned against linking Christianity to foreign policy, he could not help thinking that it was ultimately a value standard that could raise "the lower standards." He also noted that the Edo period was not a dark feudal age, but rather a progressive period of industrial development, but he often pointed out the "backwardness" of Japan. Similarly, while he was opposed to the image of a "mysterious, upside-down, foreign Japan," such conventional stereotypes became mixed in with his own reflections. He says, "Japan is essentially a country of paradoxes and anomalies," often citing images of the Garden of Eden and medieval Europe. Although his view of Japan was never confined to such a typological level, it appears that his theory of Japanese culture was still unorganized in his mind.

What should not be overlooked here, however, is the fact that he was asking himself questions about the Westerners' self-image when discussing Japanese culture. Alcock had a strong distrust for high officials of the Shogunate, and on numerous occasions he was angry at Japanese officials for their lying. However, in the process of tracing the basis of his distrust of the Japanese, he repeatedly asked himself, "How do the Japanese view us Westerners?" This new kind of awareness indicate that he moved beyond the stage of simply ingesting foreign cultural elements and entered the stage of reinterpreting them. This is in sharp contrast to the records of Japanese envoys who visited Western countries from the end of the Edo period to the beginning of the Meiji period, where the viewpoint of seriously asking oneself about one's "self-image" had not yet arisen. On the other hand, the appearance of the aforementioned contradictory passages in his Japanology can only be attributed to the fact that he had not yet reached the stage of reconstructing his views. It would be very interesting to trace the process of change in his view of Japan after his departure from Japan at the end of 1864 and his experience in China until 1871.

Approximately 2000 copies of *The Capital of the Tycoon* were printed in Britain at the time of its publication. Although it was published in an unusually large volume for this kind of book, it fell far short of the best-selling copies in circulation at the time. It has been read to this day mainly by readers who are particularly interested in Japan and East Asia.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this chapter or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

