I. DR. PHILIPP FRANZ VON SIEBOLD’S CAREER IN THE ORIENT

By 1867 the collection of Japanese printed books and manuscripts in the British Museum numbered barely three hundred items whereas, for example, that of printed books alone in Hebrew ran to well over ten thousand. This relatively small collection of Japanese materials in what were then two sections of the British Museum (but today form part of the British Library) is some measure of just how little was yet known about this ancient, exotic, and populous civilization. However, this deficiency was shortly to be remedied to quite an extent by the purchase from Alexander von Siebold in July 1868 of 1,088 distinct Japanese works in 3,441 volumes (printed books, manuscripts, charts, and maps). At the time the vendor was serving as a Japanese interpreter to the British Legation at Edo (present-day Tokyo).

This purchase comprised the entire Japanese library formed by Alexander’s father, Dr. Philipp Franz von Siebold, during his second voyage to Japan (1859–62), together with 43 items from his first residence there (1823–9). The von Siebold Collection, as it is now known, was then the largest of its kind in Europe; and even today it rates as one of the most diversified Japanese collections ever acquired from a single person at any one time. As such it is a monument to the zeal and versatility of its originator.

Dr. Philipp Franz von Siebold was born in Würzburg, the capital of Lower Franconia, in 1796: a year in which this little city, a noteworthy centre of traditional German arts and crafts, had witnessed the defeat by Archduke Charles of Austria of an invading French army. He came from a celebrated German medical family, his father and grandfather, an uncle, and many cousins qualifying as physicians. Indeed, several of these relations, his father included, eventually became professors of medicine. Besides upholding this family tradition by reading medicine at Würzburg University himself, von Siebold was a keen student of anthropology, zoology, botany, geography, and modern languages. And it was there that, for reasons that remain rather obscure, he cultivated what proved to be his lifelong interest in all things Oriental.

After two years of medical practice following graduation, he went to The Hague in 1822; and on the recommendation of Emperor William I’s doctor, a friend of the von Siebold family, he was soon appointed by the Dutch East India Company to be the medical officer at its ‘factory’—i.e. trading post—in Japan.

By great good fortune this appointment came at just the time to enable von Siebold
to turn his scientific aptitudes to good account. For the company had recently started a thorough reorganization of its slack colonial trade; and, in association with this, a scientific study of Japan had been ordered by the Crown. The title that von Siebold was given for his Japanese mission refers to this commitment explicitly: *De Chirurgijn Majoor, belast met het natuurkundig onderzoek in dit Rijk. Dr. von Siebold.*

It was, of course, no coincidence that von Siebold had come to Japan via exactly the same channel as another German physician, Engelbert Kaempfer (1651-1716), and as Carl Peter Thunberg (1743-1828), a Swedish naturalist. Ever since 1639 the Tokugawa Shogunate had banned the entry of all foreigners bar the Dutch and Chinese who were allowed to continue trading at Nagasaki, albeit under severely restrictive conditions.

In its determination to ensure its hegemony throughout the country the Government had simultaneously suppressed Christianity and forbidden any Japanese to go abroad. This law of seclusion went so far as to authorize the immediate execution of native castaways returning illicitly to Japanese shores. So for more than two centuries of isolation prior to Commodore Perry’s arrival in 1853, the only Japanese links with the culture and intellectual life of the western world had been through the members of the Dutch factory. Gradually the so-called *Rangaku* (literally ‘Dutch learning’) imbibed in this way had come to embrace most branches of western medicine, astronomy, and military science.

Yet throughout the era of isolation successive shoguns and other feudal lords had encouraged an interest in *Rangaku* for utilitarian purposes. The eighth shogun, Tokugawa Yoshimune (1684-1751), had been a particularly zealous patron. He had even relaxed the import restrictions on foreign books and officially granted *Rangaku* students the freedom to read and write, in addition to speaking, the Dutch language. This more liberal policy was subsequently to yield the first scholarly fruit of *Rangaku*: the completion in 1774 by Sugita Gempaku of the celebrated Japanese translation, *Kaitai Shinsho*, of the Dutch edition of a standard German medical textbook, *Anatomische Tabellen*.

By the early nineteenth century, however, the authorities were feeling an even greater need for western scientific knowledge in order to cope with the increasingly menacing security situation caused by repeated intrusions into Japanese coastal waters of American, Russian, and British vessels. In 1811 a translation bureau was established within the Department of Astronomy. By this date many official as well as private *Rangaku* schools were flourishing all over the country. And already, with ‘Dutch scholars’ being promoted to various high offices, this western learning was exerting a direct and considerable influence on public affairs.

In these terms the background to von Siebold’s arrival was one of broad and ever-widening horizons. In its more workaday aspects, however, the environment into which he had come was narrowly confined. For the Dutch trading post was but an artificial island in Nagasaki Bay called Dejima: ‘the island that has been raised up.’ The annual rent paid for this little fan-shaped entrepôt, 200 yards in length and eighty across, was fifty-five silver kamme or the equivalent of three per cent of the prescribed total value of its trade with Japan. Since one silver kamme would buy only about five to ten bushels of rice, we are hardly talking in terms of vast sums of money.
The island was joined to the town of Nagasaki by a stone bridge manned day and night by a special corps of paramilitary officers called otona. No other Japanese except for a limited number of licensed interpreters, merchants, and geishas were to have any contact with Dejima and even they could not enter or leave the compound without specific permission from the otona. Nor could the resident Dutch pass in or out of Dejima without the express consent of the governor of Nagasaki. Furthermore, none of them was allowed to have his wife and family there. Accordingly many of them, not least von Siebold, formed liaisons with geishas.

Yet, whilst his fellow members of the Dutch factory were thereby all but imprisoned in the Dejima compound, the young von Siebold, being possessed of highly valued medical skills, soon secured favoured treatment for himself from the Japanese authorities. So much so that he was accorded the almost unique privilege of being able to see his patients in Nagasaki itself and, even more important, to ramble freely through the immediate environs of the city collecting materials for his research on flora and fauna.

More astonishing still, in an unprecedented gesture in 1824 he was given permission to open his own school at Narutaki in rural Nagasaki. From the outset many enthusiastic students of Rangaku came there from all parts of Japan. Soon their mentor, von Siebold the 'wonderful', had opened up a wide field of western learning in pure and applied science and – a new departure for Rangaku – in the humanities; and all this was in addition to the instruction on clinical surgery he was required to give. In accordance with the markedly interdisciplinary character of his own scholarship, von Siebold prescribed a whole range of topics on Japanese studies for theses to be written by his pupils in Dutch. These he was able to plagiarize extensively in the voluminous writings he completed after his return to Europe!

Just how great was the range of topics covered can be seen from the synopsis of his official report dated 2 December 1825, addressed to the Secretary of the Dutch East India Company in Batavia: (1) Religion, (2) Customs and Manners, (3) Law and Politics, (4) Agriculture, (5) Income and Taxation, (6) Geography, (7) Arts and Crafts, (8) Language, (9) Natural history, (10) Materia Medica, and (11) Curiosities. These topics correspond closely to the contents of the von Siebold Collection in the British Library, though if anything the latter is even more comprehensive.

Great scope for gathering additional materials was afforded von Siebold in 1826 with an expedition to pay tribute at the Court of Edo by a delegation from Dejima in accordance with a custom established two centuries previously. Until 1790 this custom had been observed every one or two years but then the shogun decreed that the interval be extended to five years. These excursions to Edo, usually for three to four months at a time, were virtually the only opportunities (apart from such crisis situations as volcanic eruptions or big fires in the Nagasaki district) for the majority of the Dutch expatriates to have any contact with the Japanese outside the confines of Dejima.

In the course of this journey, von Siebold prepared the first scientific survey of Japan ever made. After the completion of this work he praised highly the work of his Japanese and Dutch assistants who included a metallurgist, a geographer, a botanist, and two
Fig. 1. Nagasaki harbour with the Dutch factory Dejima in the foreground
artists. During this time, too, he acquired more printed books, manuscripts, and maps, chiefly from Japanese visitors to Nagasaki-ya, the inn where the Dutch always had to stay while in Edo. There guests could be received more freely than would ever have been possible in Nagasaki. Among them were some official astronomers and court physicians and other Rangaku scholars, all of whom had been eagerly awaiting such a chance to question the Dutch face to face about their studies. In return for von Siebold’s tuition they offered him gifts, notably of printed books and maps, and also practical assistance in his collection of Japanese materials. Unfortunately their generosity was to lead to the lamentable ‘Siebold affair’ of September 1828.

This involved the discovery in von Siebold’s luggage of a series of prohibited items after this luggage had been placed on the ship due to take him home on the completion of his first tour of duty. The items were as follows: (1) a cloak woven with the shogun’s family crest depicting hollyhocks, (2) some pictures of warriors and their equipment, (3) portraits of the shoguns, (4) sketches of shipbuilding equipment, and (5) recently completed official maps of Japan and her northernmost islands – Hokkaido and Karafuto – presented to him by the head of the Department of Astronomy, Takahashi Kageyasu.

The possession by a foreigner of any of these items, and above all of the last mentioned, was a most serious transgression of Japanese law. A full investigation followed and many of von Siebold’s known friends and correspondents were thrown into dungeons. Luckily there was a delay of about ten days before his papers were finally seized and he himself arrested. This interval enabled him to secure his most valuable documents and to prepare copies of maps and place them in the protection of the President of the Dutch factory. Apparently most of these materials were safely brought back to Europe.

The trial lasted nearly a year but ended more mercifully for von Siebold than might have been expected: he was simply expelled from Japan. Less happy was the fate of the native prisoners, despite von Siebold’s desperate attempts to demonstrate their innocence. Reportedly Takahashi, the chief astronomer mentioned above, died of natural causes whilst awaiting sentence. More probably he and several more of the twenty-three accused committed suicide in the traditional manner of hara-kiri to save his honour and to avoid further suffering. At his trial he admitted the gravity of his crime but pleaded that the maps in question were given in exchange for western books, etc., that could prove invaluable in the defence of the country in the event of foreign invasion.

Von Siebold’s desire to return to Japan was not fulfilled until 1859, a year after a new commercial treaty had been signed between Holland and Japan and five years after the collapse of the Japanese isolation policy in the face of the expedition led by Commodore Matthew Perry. On this second visit he was accompanied by his son Alexander who was then thirteen. During the thirty years of absence, von Siebold senior had devoted himself to writing, to perusing more fully his Japanese collection, and to the promotion of Japanese studies in Europe. In addition, he had been actively involved in the repeated Dutch and Russian efforts to develop contacts with Japan through various channels; and it was his assistant, Johann Hoffmann, who in Leyden in 1855 had founded the first Japanology course in the western world.
Needless to say, Commodore Perry availed himself eagerly of von Siebold’s works prior to his fateful departure for Japanese waters. Indeed, in his journal he explicitly acknowledged von Siebold to be the greatest authority on the country anywhere in the West: ‘Kaempfer, Thunberg, Titsingh, Doeff, Fischer, Meyland, Siebold, and others, have certainly told us something about Japan. But they could not tell us all it is desirable to know... with the single exception of Siebold. He has collected new facts and materials, and the result of his observations and researches has been given to the world in his *Nippon. Archiv zur Beschreibung von Japan*...”

When the news of Perry’s projected Japanese venture circulated in Europe, von Siebold evinced an intense desire to be included. He plied Perry with endless plans and advice; and he even solicited the support of the Dutch Government in an endeavour to secure his appointment to Perry’s staff. But the latter knew all too well that, since von Siebold had been declared an outlaw by the Japanese authorities, to employ him as an interpreter and intermediary would be worse than useless. What is more Perry suspected him of being a Russian spy. Therefore whilst this shrewd and ruthless naval officer consulted von Siebold’s writings avidly, he would countenance no dealings with their author.
Subsequently the embittered von Siebold wrote numerous pamphlets and letters to prominent people claiming the lion’s share of credit for Perry’s success in opening up Japan to the world. Predictably, however, this claim was denied outright by Perry in his accounts of the expedition. Thus ended this encounter between two similarly indomitable personalities.

Although he gained richer dividends in his book-collecting efforts, von Siebold’s career during his second visit to Japan was on the whole less gratifying. Quite possibly the high-handed treatment meted out to him by Perry contributed to this. At all events the Dutch trading company who sponsored this trip dismissed him during the second year of his service on the grounds that his advice on Japanese trade was out of date.

Shortly afterwards he accepted a post with the Shogunate as a foreign affairs adviser. But the political atmosphere in Japan was then in the state of turbulence that was to culminate in the Meiji Restoration of 1868; and within this turbulence there was a strong current running in favour of excluding all foreigners once more. Some officials of the Shogunate eyed von Siebold jealously and schemed for his removal. After an assassination attempt on a minister of foreign affairs who had had direct dealings with von Siebold, the latter’s appointment was terminated abruptly. This was after a mere seven months.

He died in Munich in 1866, at the age of seventy and only three years after his final return from the Orient. He was on his way to becoming a counsellor on Japanese affairs at the court of Napoleon III. Soon many of the one hundred or so Rangaku students who had metaphorically sat at his feet would be taking an active part in the dramatic material and institutional development that was to be sparked off by the Meiji Restoration.
Another 525 items from his first tour had already been purchased by the Dutch Government in 1837. Today they are partly at Leyden University and partly at the Royal Ethnography Museum associated with it. See Philipp Franz von Siebold, *Catalogus Librorum et Manuscriptorum Japonicorum* (Leyden, 1845).

‘The Surgeon Major, Dr. von Siebold, who is charged with a natural-historical survey of Japan.’

They were stationed in the factory as medical officers from 1690 to 1692 and from 1775 to 1776 respectively.


An interesting account of the life of the Dutch in Dejima can be found in M. M. Busk (ed.), *Manners and Customs of the Japanese in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1841).

According to Itazawa Takeo’s excellent study on the history of the Japanese–Dutch cultural intercourse, Carl Peter Thunberg was the only other foreigner to have earned such a privilege.


Von Siebold’s major works are:

*Fauna Japonica* (5 vols.) (Leyden, 1833-50).
*Flora Japonica* (2 vols.) (Leyden, 1835-70).
*Bibliotheca Japonica* (6 vols.) (Leyden, 1832-7).

Itazawa Takeo, op. cit. p. 341.

A map of Japan by Inō Tadataka copied in von Siebold’s own hand was reproduced in his *Nippon*. A number of manuscript maps by Mamiya Rinzō and Mogami Tokunai, the most distinguished Japanese geographers of their time, are among von Siebold’s first collection mentioned in footnote 1.


