

Yoshida Shōin's Petition Found at Yale Archives

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A petition by the spiritual father of the Meiji revolution, Yoshida Shōin 吉田松陰 (1830-59), to Commodore Perry, requesting passage overseas via the “black ships” was recently found in the *Samuel Wells Williams Family Papers* in the Manuscripts and Archives of Yale University's Sterling Memorial Library.

In early April 1854, having learned that the US-Japan Treaty of Peace and Amity had been signed by Perry and the hereditary head of the Confucian college, Hayashi, Shōin and his fellow Hagi 萩 samurai, Kaneko Shigenosuke 金子重輔 (1831-55), began to make all-out efforts for smuggling themselves to the Western world. Shōin and his mentor Sakuma Shōzan 佐久間象山 (1811-1864) were both military strategists and scholars of Confucianism and Dutch Learning who firmly believed that the only way to compete with the Western powers was to master Western military technology: 師夷之長技以制夷, a slogan proposed by Wei Yuan 魏源 in his *Haiguo tuzhi* 海國圖志 (Illustrated Gazetteers of the Maritime Kingdoms) after China's defeat in the Opium War.

With Shōzan's help, Shōin prepared a well-written petition and a brief note in literary Chinese in Yokohama. Later Shōin himself prepared a brief note in Japanese in Shimoda. They also selected a few books to be carried abroad, including a pocket version of the *Classic of Filial Piety* 小折孝經正文, *References to the Selected Tang Poems* 唐詩選掌故, and two Dutch-Japanese dictionaries 和蘭文典・訳鍵. Following Perry's squadron all the way from Yokohama to Shimoda, on April 24 Shōin and Shigenosuke eventually had the opportunity to pass the petition and the notes to an American officer who happened to come ashore. On the following night, April 25, around 3:00 a.m. they successfully reached the deck of Perry's flagship and had an interview with S. Wells Williams, Perry's chief interpreter. Although they repeatedly appealed to the humanity of the Americans, they were not allowed to remain without getting permission from the Japanese authorities and were finally sent back ashore before dawn, as Perry was concerned about the newly established official relations with Japan.

Of the two documents found at Yale, the note in Japanese is apparently in Shōin's own handwriting. Carefully prepared in the Japanese epistolary style known as *sōrōbun* and with *furigana* in *katakana*, this note reflected Shōin's earnest hope to be understood by the Americans. It reads as follows:

We two would like to see the world. Please allow us to board your ship secretly. Traveling to foreign countries, however, is strictly prohibited in Japan. It would cause serious trouble for us if you were to inform Japanese officials. If your admirals were to consent to our intention, we hope that you will send late tomorrow night a barge to the shore of the Kakizaki 柿崎 village to receive us.

April 19 (Kōin 甲寅 3/22), 1854

Ichigi Kōda 市木公太

Because S. W. Williams was not able to read this *sōrōbun* note, there has been no English translation since it was passed to the American side. But it helped Williams to catch the pronunciation of these two Japanese names. Here Ichigi Kōda was a fictitious name used by Kaneko Shigenosuke; because there was a little blur in the *furigana* for the first character Ichi, making it look like Isa, Williams mistakenly put his last name down Isagi. And Kanouchi Manji was the fictitious name used by Yoshida Shōin, following the image of his heraldry which had a 卍 sign in the cross section of a squash or *ka* 瓜.

Another document found was the petition in literary Chinese, which seems to be a fair copy in the handwriting of Williams's Chinese assistant Luo Sen 羅森. The original petition and the note in Chinese, however, were not found in the *Samuel Wells Williams Family Papers*. The following is a literal translation by S. W. Williams of the petition and the Chinese note, quoted from the first volume of the *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan, Performed in the Years 1852, 1853, and 1854, under the Command of Commodore M. C. Perry, United States Navy, by Order of the Government of the United States*.

Petition

Two scholars from Yedo, in Japan, present this letter for the inspection of the high officers and those who manage affairs. Our attainments are few and trifling, as we ourselves are small and unimportant, so that we are abashed in coming before you; we are neither skilled in the use of arms, nor are we able to discourse upon the rules of strategy and military discipline; in trifling pursuits and idle pastimes our years and months have slipped away. We have, however, read in books, and learned a little by hearsay, what are the customs and education in Europe and America, and we have been for many years desirous of going over the “five great continents,” but the laws of our country in all maritime points are very strict; for foreigners to come into the country, and for natives to go abroad, are both immutably forbidden. Our wish to visit other regions has consequently only “gone to and fro in our own breasts in continual agitation,” like one's breathing being impeded or his walking cramped. Happily, the arrival of so many of your ships in these waters, and stay for so many days, which has given us opportunity to make a pleasing acquaintance and careful examination, so that we are fully assured of the kindness and liberality of your excellencies, and your regard for others, has also revived the thoughts of many years, and they are urgent for an exit.

This, then, is the time to carry the plan into execution, and we now secretly send you this private request, that you will take us on board your ships as they go out to sea; we can thus visit around in the five great continents, even if we do in this, slight the prohibitions of our own country. Lest those who have the management of affairs may feel some chagrin at this, in order to effect our desire, we are willing to serve in any way we can on board of the ships, and obey the orders given us. For doubtless it is, that when a lame man sees others walking he wishes to walk too; but how shall the pedestrian gratify his desires

when he sees another one riding? We have all our lives been going hither to you, unable to get more than thirty degrees east and west, or twenty-five degrees north and south; but now when we see how you sail on the tempests and cleave the huge billows, going lightning speed thousands and myriads of miles, skirting along the five great continents, can it not be likened to the lame finding a plan for walking, and the pedestrian seeing a mode by which he can ride? If you who manage affairs will give our request your consideration, we will retain the sense of the favor; but the prohibitions of our country are still existent, and if this matter should become known we should uselessly see ourselves pursued and brought back for immediate execution without fail, and such a result would greatly grieve the deep humanity and kindness you all bear toward others. If you are willing to accede to this request, keep “wrapped in silence our error in making it” until you are about to leave, in order to avoid all risk of such serious danger to life; for when, by-and-bye, we come back, our countrymen will never think it worth while to investigate bygone doings. Although our words have only loosely let our thoughts leak out, yet truly they are sincere; and if your excellencies are pleased to regard them kindly, do not doubt then nor oppose our wishes. We together pay our respects in handing this in. April 11.

Note

The enclosed letter contains the earnest request we have had for many days, and which we tried in many ways to get off to you at Yoku-hama, in a fishing boat, by night; but the cruisers were too thick, and none others were allowed to come alongside, so that we were in great uncertainty how to act. Hearing that the ships were coming to Simoda we have come to take our chance, intending to get a small boat and go off to the ships, but have not succeeded. Trusting your worships will agree, we will, to-morrow night, after all is quiet, be at Kakizaki in a small boat, near the shore, where there are no houses. There we greatly hope you to meet us and take us away, and thus bring our hopes to fruition. April 25.

After finding the two documents, I traveled to Yamaguchi, Hagi, Hakodate, Matsumae, Tokyo, Yokohama, and Shimoda to visit relevant shrines, temples, museums, and libraries, and paid a second visit to Yale. A detailed paper examining the documents and the incident will soon appear (early May) in a special issue of the journal *Kan* 環, published by Fujiwara shoten 藤原書店, on the Meiji Revolution. I also plan to prepare an essay in English later this year on the subject to be submitted to *Monumenta Nipponica*.