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Reimagining international society through the emergence of Japanese imperialism

SHOGO SUZUKI

INTRODUCTION: WHAT DID JAPAN MAKE OF INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY?
In the not too distant past Timothy Dunne asserted that ‘[International] society is what states have made of it’. Since then much has been written about how the English School offers a valuable interpretivist approach, how it has spread across the world, how it can be improved, and what it has to say about non-European societies and ‘world society’. This paper aims to contribute to all three facets of the debate through a case study of how the Japanese elite understood international society during the bakumatsu (late-Tokugawa)/early-Meiji periods (1853–95). In doing so, it

1 Doctoral Candidate, Department of International Relations, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University. Versions of this paper were presented at the Institute of Oriental Culture at the University of Tokyo in January 2003, and at the International Studies Association conference in Portland, Oregon, in February 2003. I thank all the participants, particularly Tanaka Akihiko and Yamamoto Kazuya for their comments. I am also grateful to Yongjin Zhang for giving me the opportunity to write this paper in the first place. I should also like to thank Malcolm Cook, Miwa Hirono, and Joel Quirk for saving me from many embarrassing errors in the course of writing, and Tomoko Akami and Kathy Morton for their detailed comments in rewriting the paper. An especially big thank you is due to Len Seabrooke for encouraging me and helping me to submit this paper for the series. Japanese personal names throughout this paper are presented in Japanese form, with family name followed by given name. Exceptions are made in the case of Japanese authors writing in English who choose to write their name in accordance with the English convention. Macrons (for words such as rōjū) indicate long vowels. Macrons have not been used for well-known names such as Tokyo. Chinese names and words follow the pinyin romanisation system.


examines the emergence of Japanese imperialism from the perspective of
international society as perceived by English School scholars.

Within the English School approach, an international society is deemed
to exist when ‘a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and
common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves
to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another,
and share in the working of common institutions’.4 Although there is
dispute within the English School over the degree to which norms and
procedures should govern international society (the pluralist/solidarist
debate), it is generally argued that the commonality of interest amongst a
society of states introduces stability to an anarchical international realm by
reducing uncertainty and rampant power politics. For English School
scholars, this theory of conflict mitigation through the ‘universal’
socialisation of states is a reflection of Northwestern European experiences
over the past few centuries.

But this experience does not hold true in the case of Japan’s exposure to
international society from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. The
Japanese experienced their first full encounter with European international
society in 1853,5 when the United States forced Japan to open its ports to
the West. From that date we see Japan embark on an aggressive quest of
imperialism. It sent troops to Taiwan in 1874, and went to war with China in
1894–95, followed by war with Russia in 1904–05. Taiwan was annexed in
1895, and so was Korea in 1910. Judging from the dates Japan embarked on
its expansionary policies, there is a strong correlation between the rise of
Japanese imperialism and Japan’s entry into international society. The
Japanese imperialist response to international society directly contradicts
English School scholars’ conception of a ‘universal’ socialisation of states
that mitigate conflict through the sharing of common interests.

5 ‘European international society’ is used here in lieu of ‘international society’. ‘International society’
at the time of the nineteenth century was still very much Eurocentric, and the use of the term
‘international society’ seems hardly appropriate here. Also note that the term ‘European society of
states’ will also be used for stylistic purposes. Finally, ‘European international society’ also includes
the United States.
This is not to suggest that an imperialist perspective has greater explanatory value. In the case of Meiji Japan, while economic interests clearly played a part in the rise of imperialism, they did not assume a dominant role. Indeed, ‘the Japanese government … had difficulty in luring domestic capital into colonial investment at the outset of the nation’s imperial venture’. Moreover, ‘private economic interests … emerged after the initial steps were taken on the road to colonial conquest, not before, and their main thrust was directed less toward the formal colonial territories’. Rather, Japanese imperialism in the nineteenth century was deeply intertwined with Japan’s quest to achieve great power status within the European-dominated international order and hence its socialisation into European international society.

Despite the reservation noted above, this essay argues that the English School approach still offers a useful lens for examining the ideational aspect of the emergence of Japanese imperialism, because it provides a framework for understanding the socialisation of states. Indeed, Andrew Hurrell has pointed out that the English School has had an interest in examining ‘membership norms and relations between insiders and outsiders, and with issues of legitimacy and [with] how social order is seen from the margins as well as the centre’.

At this point, a number of clarifications are in order. My use of the English School approach indicates my belief that the theoretical concept of ‘international society’ offers a powerful tool for understanding state behaviour. By international society, it is meant that

… a group of states (or, more generally, a group of independent political communities) which not merely form a system, in the sense that the behaviour of each is a necessary factor in the calculation of others, but also have established by dialogue and consent common rules and

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institutions for the conduct of their relations, and recognize their common interest in maintaining these arrangements.\textsuperscript{8}

Within the context of the socialisation of non-European states’ into European international society, Hedley Bull and Adam Watson cite evidence such as the adoption of international law and participation in the European diplomatic system as evidence of these states’ entry and socialisation into European international society. While this evidence by itself may be somewhat weak, the fact that we see Japan’s adoption of the sovereign state system (another institution which traces its origins to Europe) provides further evidence of the (reluctant) acceptance of the institutions of the European society of states. Hence, it is assumed that Japan did enter and was socialised into European international society, even though its ruling elite may not have perceived this society as an ontological being.\textsuperscript{9}

It should also be made clear here that this study focuses primarily on the political elites of Japan, and does not deal with actors of civil society. For a start, it is extremely difficult to empirically prove the \textit{degree} to which non-elite actors could have influenced the Meiji leadership. Furthermore, this omission can be justified from an empirical point of view. While it is obvious that non-elite actors do matter and did wield some influence, the Meiji Restoration was primarily an elite affair, and the political leadership retained a strong grip on subsequent political decision-making.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, it offers a critique of previous studies which have analysed Japan’s entry into (European) international society. Second, it explores the expansion of international society from a European perspective followed by an explanation of Japanese interpretations of European international society in the \textit{bakumatsu} and early Meiji periods. It then investigates how these interpretations affected the Japanese elites perceptions of the institutions of European international


\textsuperscript{9} The notion of an ‘international society’ or \textit{kokusai shakai} (which should not be confused with the theoretical conceptualisation of the English School which is used here) only appeared in Japan after the Versailles Treaty of 1919, amid considerable scepticism. For this point, I am indebted to Tomoko Akami.
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society and how this related to the emergence of imperialism in Japan. The paper concludes by suggesting two avenues through which the English School approach can be further strengthened: first, there needs to be a greater incorporation of non-European states’ perspectives in order to gain a better understanding of their socialisation into the European society of states. Second, the findings here suggest the existence of a separate European international society that governed relations between ‘civilised’ Western states and ‘uncivilised’ non-Western states. In order to enrich our understanding of the expansion of European international society, there is a need to understand that non-Western states’ socialisation into European international society was more likely to have taken place under a different set of social structures, and this accordingly influenced their interpretations of the European society of states.

SHORTCOMINGS IN CONVENTIONAL INTERPRETATIONS WITHIN THE ENGLISH SCHOOL

The most important work examining Japan’s introduction to international society is Hidemi Suganami’s contribution to a collection of essays edited by two founders of the English School, Bull and Watson, entitled *The expansion of international society*. In this work, the metamorphosis within Japan is examined almost exclusively in terms of the adoption of co-operative norms—European diplomatic practices and international law—and Japan’s participation in international conferences. This approach seems to closely reflect Bull’s assertion that members of international society should consider themselves as being bound by a commitment to maintaining the ‘structure of coexistence and co-operation’.

Gerrit W. Gong provides further explanations for this focus on co-operative institutions of international society in his work on the ‘standard of civilisation’. He argues that treaties between European and non-European states evolved into a ‘standard’ which could ‘define the legal requirements necessary for a non-European country … to gain full and “civilized” status

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in “civilized” international society’. The ‘standard of civilisation’ was heavily imbued by cooperative norms. It stipulated that in order to be considered ‘civilised’ and gain entry into international society, states were required to ‘guarantee the life, liberty, and property of foreign nationals; to demonstrate a suitable governmental organization; to adhere to the accepted diplomatic practices; and to abide by the principles of international law’.

In this sense, the point at which non-European states were deemed by the Western powers to have satisfied the ‘standard of civilisation’—which in effect meant the adoption of the cooperative norms found within European international society—was considered the point at which such states gained entry into international society. Accordingly, both Gong’s and Suganami’s accounts of non-European states’ entry into international society depict these states’ modernisation, particularly the adoption of modern diplomacy, international law and the political structures of Western states. These efforts were to eventually gain the Western states’ recognition of Japan as a ‘civilised’ state, able to adequately protect foreign property in Japan and assert effective governance over its territory. As a result, the Japanese were able to bring about the abrogation of the unequal treaties which Japan was forced to sign in the nineteenth century, and this marked Japan’s entry as a full member into international society.

Although the studies above have added much to our understanding of how Japan gained membership of international society, their descriptions are somewhat narrow due to their concentration on the adoption of the cooperative institutions of international society. What is lacking here is a more in-depth examination of how the fundamental normative goals of international society—understood by Bull as the ‘preservation of the system and society of states’, ‘maintaining the independence or external sovereignty of individual states’, ‘peace’, and ‘limitation of violence resulting in death or bodily harm’—were transmitted to Japan. Chris Brown has noted that “[English School] theory characteristically uses the same terminology of rules and norms to describe both the ways in which states actually
behave (a matter for empirical observation) and the way in which they *ought* to behave (the product of a moral discourse) … norms are assumed to be both the product of the interaction of states and regulative of those interactions’. However, Japan’s imperialist behaviour, prominent after its first full encounter with European international society, seems to contradict this view; a point ignored or missing from previous studies.

Suganami does mention that Japan’s interaction with its neighbours (China and Korea)

in form, was based on treaty obligations; in substance, it was an exercise in power politics … Japan’s foreign relations [with neighbouring Asian states] is one in which she began to apply what she had learnt from the West in her external affairs … [By 1911, when Japan recovered its tariff autonomy], Japan had begun to behave like a Great Power. But Suganami offers little explanation on what exactly Japan ‘learnt from the West’, which resulted in increased conflict with China and Korea. Nor does he explain adequately what the role of a ‘Great Power’, which the Japanese sought to emulate, was in nineteenth century international society.

Gong’s work, *The standard of ‘civilization’ in international society*, is more sensitive to the discrepancies between the goals of international society and Japan’s behaviour after its incorporation into international society. He argues that the Western powers’ reluctance to accept Japan as an equal partner in international society ultimately led the Japanese to rebel against this international order. In particular, Gong mentions the Western powers’ reluctance to abrogate the unequal treaties with Japan and the ‘Triple Intervention’ of 1895, where Russia, France and Germany coerced Japan to return the Liaodong peninsula (which the latter had acquired following the Sino-Japanese war of 1894–95) to China, only to then demand territorial concessions from the Chinese themselves. The latter episode aroused particular bitterness among the Japanese, who, ‘[a]fter conforming wholeheartedly to the spirit and letter of international law and

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16 Suganami, ‘Japan’s entry into international society’, p. 192.
diplomacy … conclude[d] that, in the end, only force mattered in international relations’.\textsuperscript{17} Gong concludes: ‘If anything, Japan took the standard [of civilisation] too seriously and naively, on face value, not understanding that even “civilized” international society was characterised by anarchy (the absence of a monopoly of legitimate violence) and hierarchy (because without civil society, rights depend largely on might)’\textsuperscript{.18}

Three criticisms should be offered here: 1) the social origins of Japanese perceptions of international society can be traced to the mid-nineteenth century, not the end of the nineteenth century; 2) the English School exaggerates the relevance of the European historical experience in their account of the expansion of international society to East Asia; and 3) English School interpretations of non-European states effectively rob them of agency as they are introduced to international society.

First, I am not convinced that the events that Gong offers—particularly the Triple Intervention of 1895—mark the turning point in which the Japanese decided that power was all that mattered in international society. In fact, I believe the roots of such perceptions are deeper, dating back to the time when Japan was forced at gunpoint to open its doors to international society. Furthermore, the Japanese were less naive in their perception of the ‘standard of civilisation’ than Gong thinks. An examination of primary sources by the Japanese political elite in the mid-nineteenth century (I provide more detail on these sources in the text below) suggests that perceptions of international society as a realm in which power politics reigned supreme were already formed, and that a more in-depth analysis of Japan’s engagement with international society is necessary.

Second, such shortcomings in accounting for Japan’s reaction to their incorporation into international society highlights the English School’s tendency to account for the socialisation of non-European states into international society by extrapolating from the European experience. As European international society has expanded to the degree that it is often portrayed as a ‘universal’ international society, most conventional


\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 165.
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scholarship has concentrated on how this European order came to be accepted throughout the world. Non-European states’ adoption of the diplomatic system and international law are seen as evidence of this. As Martin Wight states:

International society … is manifest in the diplomatic system; in the conscious maintenance of the balance of power to preserve the independence of the member-communities; in the regular operations of international law, whose binding force is accepted over a wide though politically unimportant range of subjects; in economic, social and technical interdependence and the functional international institutions established latterly to regulate it. All these presuppose an international social consciousness, a world-wide community-sentiment.19

The result, however, is a general tendency to assume that the normative structure of European international society, with its goals of ‘provid[ing] for peaceful coexistence in an anarchical and plural world by encouraging toleration’ (such as sovereign equality and territorial integrity) was naturally transmitted to non-European states and their respective international systems.20

In many cases, however, the expansion of international society came hand in hand not with conflict mitigation and enhanced order, but with imperialism. Imperialist expansion did not always have scope for the norms of toleration and coexistence. Conventional studies by English School scholars tacitly acknowledge the role of imperialism in the expansion of international society, but still assume that the European model of international society spread to non-European states and eventually gained acceptance. The result has been a lack of studies that explore the norms and purposes of a different form of international society which governed the relations between European states and non-European states (particularly those which were subject to colonialism by the European powers).


A related weakness with the English School approach is the tendency to overemphasise cooperative norms and underemphasise other institutions of international society such as war, the role of the great powers, and the balance of power—which appear to have more elements of power politics than international order.\textsuperscript{21} This perhaps is a result of the English School’s agenda of demonstrating that a degree of order and morality can be maintained under anarchical structures.\textsuperscript{22} Moreover, these cooperative norms are argued to stem from European civilisation. Wight argued that the ‘rationalist’ tradition originated from medieval and modern European history, and that “[t]he cultivation of this middle ground, and the discovery of political morality, seem peculiarly related to Western values”.\textsuperscript{23}

The view that the expansion of international society brought an element of order and peace into foreign relations within East Asia (and perhaps amongst other non-European areas) is deeply naive. Many non-European states’ entry into international society took place as a result of ‘gunboat diplomacy’ by the Western powers, and after some military clashes had taken place between them. Moreover the Japanese embarked on a road of imperialism which was only stopped in 1945. This returns us to my key question in exploring Japan’s introduction to international society: if international society is supposed to have the effect of mitigating global disorder, why did disorder—namely increased war or imperialism—take place after non-Asian states’ encounter with international society? Could it be that the other previously unmentioned institutions played a crucial role in producing exactly the opposite effect? In the case of Japan, neither Suganami nor Gong’s studies offer us many clues. Of course, it may be somewhat unfair to criticise Gong’s case study on this basis, as he is concerned with Japan’s conformation to the ‘standard of civilisation’, which called for the adoption of norms and political systems which would lead to more genial relations with the Western powers. However, apart from his acknowledgement of hypocrisy and highly differential treatment of non-Asian states by the Western powers, Gong appears to attribute any highly

\textsuperscript{21} Also see Hobson and Seabrooke, ‘Reimagining Weber’.
\textsuperscript{23} Wight, ‘Western values in international relations’, p. 128.
insecure interpretations of international society held by the Japanese to stem from ‘perceptions rooted in Japanese culture’. The different sets of norms which may have governed non-European states relations with European international society, and its impact upon the Japanese psyche, remain underexplored.

Third, another weakness with the English School approach is the lack of agency ascribed to non-European states. Traditionally, English School scholars (and scholars from other perspectives) have asserted that the adoption of the institutions of international society indicate a commitment to the norms governing international society. For instance, it is argued that once states are incorporated into international society, they reproduce the institutions of that particular society (as can be seen by Japan’s adoption of the modern diplomatic system). This indicates, it is then claimed, an acceptance of the constitutive norms of that particular society, rather than a shallow, practical agreement of basic rules which enables multiple states with different identities to coexist. For example, Christian Reus-Smit argues that the foundation of international society is mutual recognition, the use of standards of legitimate statehood to determine which polities will be granted the entitlements of sovereign statehood. A deep politics of identity thus undergirds international society, determining its membership.

The problem here is that this view assumes an almost homogeneous interpretation of the institutions and norms of international society, and has little room for potential variations in the acceptances and responses to these norms. It is certainly true that the reproduction of the institutions of international society has taken place. However, there exists a distinct possibility that the motives behind establishing these institutions may have been quite different. The norms and rules which governed the institutions of international society had their origins in Europe. International law gained recognition by the nineteenth century, while the concept of maintaining a

24 Gong, The standard of ‘civilization’ in international society, p. 172.

balance of power and the diplomatic system (as a conscious policy) came into being through the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 and the Congress of Vienna in 1815, respectively. European states’ frequent interactions with one another, and their subsequent ‘development of a degree of recognition and accommodation among them’ resulted in the emergence of international society.\(^{26}\) A degree of cultural affinity and familiarity may also have helped facilitate this sense of commitment to shared norms.\(^{27}\)

In contrast, many of the non-European states did not participate in the founding of international society. A lack of geographical proximity meant that both sides had insufficient contact with one another, and neither did they share a common culture or god. Bull himself agrees that prior to European expansion which resulted in the expansion of international society,

neither the Europeans nor the non-Europeans in their dealing with one another can be said to have been moved by common interests they perceived in maintaining an enduring structure of coexistence and cooperation among independent political communities over the world as a whole. They were not able to invoke a common and agreed set of rules to this end, such as came later to be assumed as the basis of international intercourse over the world as a whole.\(^{28}\)

It is therefore highly likely that a simplistic adoption of the norms of European international society did not occur but, because of the thinness of their historical and empirical details, English School scholars have failed to address this possibility.

So what were the reactions of non-European states? What follows below is an attempt to forward a critique of the aforementioned weaknesses in the English School approach through a case study of Japan’s incorporation into international society, with the hope of pointing to further avenues of developing and refining the theoretical approach of the English School. The case study first explores Japan’s encounter with international society in both

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27 Ibid. Also see Wight, ‘Western values in international relations’, p. 98.
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the bakumatsu period and the early Meiji period. Second, it then attempts to analyse the likely interpretations of international society by the Japanese elite, and examine how this led to the rise of Japanese imperialism.

INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY EXPANDS TO JAPAN: WESTERN PERCEPTIONS

Japan’s—and indeed East Asia’s—first formal encounter with international society took place in the nineteenth century. This was a time when Europe was experiencing spectacular economic and technological growth, and it is perhaps not surprising that the expansion of international society came hand in hand with the expansion of European economic interests. Eager to secure profits from overseas markets, European (particularly British) and American merchants began to turn their attention to East Asia. However, China, Japan and Korea had all officially closed off their borders to merchants. Private trade was forbidden, and only highly controlled government-approved trade was allowed. To many Western merchants, such restrictive trading agreements ran contrary to their commercial interests of exploiting what they believed to be a lucrative East Asian market. They began to lobby their governments to redress the situation and allow for free trade in the region.

The largest and most powerful state in East Asia, the Chinese Empire, was their first target. W. G. Beasley states this required that the West demand three conditions. First, that China ‘guarantee access to the trade of China as widely as possible and with the minimum of constraint.’ Second, the Chinese ‘had to afford foreign merchants a measure of protection against what were held to be the unjust and arbitrary acts of Chinese officials’. Third, the protection of foreigners’ property rights had to be promptly enforced. However, China was not the only target the European states had in mind. The West was already showing a keen interest in the

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29 In China, trade with the West was only allowed to be carried out in the port of Canton (present day Guangzhou). This form of trade is known as the Canton system of trade. In the case of Japan, trade was confined to Nagasaki (with the exception of trade with Korea). However, this system did not always function as efficiently as the political elite hoped—private trade, usually in the form of smuggling, continued to flourish.

Chinese Empire’s neighbour, Japan. An article which appeared in *The Times* on 26 March 1852 is illustrative:

> What we do know is, that Japan raises an enormous quantity of wheat, rice, barley, &c., which, together with silks, gold, copper, and silver, are sent down the coast to China, and that the revenue of the empire is estimated at $140,000,000 … we hope and trust that the day is near at hand when, under a judicious protective system, we shall be sending enormous quantities of cotton goods, iron, &c., to Japan, and receive in return her gold, silver, and dye-woods …

In addition, by the time of the nineteenth century, the ‘standard of civilisation’, which stipulated the need for ‘civiliz[ing] the peoples under … imperial rule, encouraging economic and technological progress and giving them the best possible government’, had emerged adding further impetus for expansion.31 A passage in the same article in *The Times* cited above is representative of this phenomenon. Referring to Japan’s continued policy of *sakoku* (鎖国 closing off its borders to foreign contact), the article claims:

> Now, we deny the right of any nation situated upon, and occupying a portion of the sea-coast of the world, to refuse all commercial intercourse with other nations. Such a course may be tolerated by civilized nations so long as it does not interfere with their commerce and the welfare of the human race; but we insist that it is the right of civilized and Christian nations to *compel* barbarians thus situated to submit to the general law of nations, and to a certain degree of intercourse …

The day that Japan would finally be ‘compelled’ to open its borders to the expanding West came in July 1853, when the fleet of Commodore Matthew C. Perry of the United States appeared outside Tokyo Bay. Perry demanded the opening up of Japanese ports to provide shelter and assistance for any American ships in distress. The Treaty of Peace and Amity (日米和親条約 nichibei washin jōyaku) was signed between the US and Japan in March 1854, and within two years an American consul, Townsend Harris, had arrived on the shores of Japan. This incident was Japan’s first introduction to a key institution of international society—the diplomatic system—and can be said to mark Japan’s first encounter with

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31 Keene, *Beyond the anarchical society*, p. 83. Also see Gong, *The standard of ‘civilization’ in international society*, p. 48.
international society. As is with the assumed role of international society, it appears that the West was hoping that this would facilitate peaceful relations with the Japanese. A commentary in the New York Times on 24 February 1852 stated that in

… dealing with a barbarous people, some attempts should be made … to obtain their confidence and good will, before resorting to force … they should be made to feel that as a nation we [the US] are magnanimous. To make them feel this, we should so act … We detest the spirit which urges a powerful nation to adopt compulsory measures with a weaker.

In spite of these ‘peaceful’ intentions the West may have professed and harboured in extending the institutions and governing norms of international society, the Japanese interpreted international society very differently indeed.

JAPAN AND INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY IN THE BAKUMATSU AND MEIJI PHASES

Although Japan’s first formal encounter with international society took place when Perry’s fleet arrived on the shores near Edo (present day Tokyo), their view of how European states behave dates back to the earlier half of the nineteenth century. The Japanese had a taste of the realpolitik that dominated European international politics in 1808, when the British (who were at war with the French-occupied Netherlands) warship Phaeton entered Japanese waters in Nagasaki with the aim of seizing Dutch ships. The British eventually seized two Dutch trading personnel located in Nagasaki and demanded the supply of food and water in exchange for the hostages. At the same time, British and Russian ships increasingly encroached upon Japanese shores, requesting trading relations.

It was under these circumstances that Aizawa Seishisai wrote Shinron, which discusses the European international society which was drawing closer to Japan. Aizawa himself had the chance to come into direct contact with Europeans, having interviewed British sailors who landed on the

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32 Aizawa Seishisai (1782–1863) was a samurai-scholar of the Mito fiefdom. He eventually became the head of the Kōdōkan, the Mito fiefdom’s school in 1840. His influential work, Shinron, was originally intended for the Mito lord but was later disseminated widely and influenced many samurai opposed to the signing of the unequal treaties with the West.
shores of the Mito fiefdom in 1824. Aizawa’s account of the international order outside the vicinity of East Asia is a highly dangerous one. He compares it to that of the realpolitik-dominated ‘so-called seven states of the end of the Zhou dynasty’ in which each state vied with each other for hegemony (夫れ方今、宇内を挙げ列して七雄となして、周末の所謂七雄なるものと、小大異なれりといへども、その勢もまた絶だ相似たるものあり).\(^{33}\) The European states, or ‘Western barbarians’, intent on invading China, would first form alliances with other states and progressively weaken other non-European empires such as the Ottoman Empire and the Mogul Empire. ‘They would then fight with the Qing over the land of the Jungars [i.e. Oirat Mongolia]’, and ‘if victorious would then sail over in droves and attack the celestial land [Japan]’.\(^{34}\)

If such views were still being held by a minority, the Opium War of 1840–42 and China’s subsequent defeat was to give the Japanese political leadership a strong sense that the Western-dominated international order was one which could pose a grave threat to Japan.\(^{35}\) News of the Opium War reached the Japanese through Dutch and Chinese reports (Oranda füsetsusho 阿蘭陀風説書 and Kara füsetsusho 唐風説書). In 1841, Tokugawa shogunate official Shibukawa Rokusō submitted a memorial pointing to the possibility of a Chinese defeat and a subsequent invasion of

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33 Aizawa Seishisai, ‘Shinron’, in Imai Usaburō, Seya Yoshihiko and Itō Masahide, eds, Nihon shisō taisetsu, Volume 53: Mitogaku (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1953), pp. 53–158, at p. 93. The ‘seven states’ is a description of the Spring and Autumn and Warring State periods in Chinese history. During this time, seven major city-states fought with each other for the unification of China. It is seen as a classic period in which realpolitik—such as alliances, wars, and diplomatic intrigues—flourished.

34 Ibid., p. 92.

35 This point is also confirmed by Meiji oligarch Ōkuma Shigenobu. Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi also notes that the ‘First Opium War … drastically altered long-held Japanese perceptions of Japan’s place in international power relations.’ See Ōkuma Shigenobu and Enjōji Kiyoshi, Ōkuma haku sekijitsu tan, Volume 1 (Tokyo: Tōkyō daigaku shuppankai, 1980), pp. 207–8; and Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, ‘Opium, expulsion, sovereignty: China’s lessons for bakumatsu Japan’, Monumenta Nipponica 47(1) 1992, pp. 1–25, at p. 2. However, I do not entirely agree with his assertion that ‘informed Japanese students of the world scene had viewed [international relations] as an arena of “rival states” in which China was the greatest power in East Asia, Western countries were middle-class powers, and Japan was relatively small and weak’. Sino-Japanese relations prior to the expansion of international society were not necessarily dominated by power politics. Although Japan did, to an extent, challenge Chinese supremacy in the East Asian international order, this took the form of calling itself the centre of the hierarchical order which characterised international relations in the region, rather than actually balancing Chinese military power.
Japan by the British.\textsuperscript{36} The following year, Dutch intelligence reports had reported that Hong Kong had been ceded to the British, and was now under the administration of a British governor. The report stated that the Chinese cannons were no match for those of the British, and that whereas the British ‘would have fifteen casualties, the Chinese apparently suffered one thousand five hundred casualties’.\textsuperscript{37} By 1853, it was clear to many informed circles that it was only a matter of time before the impact of the expanding West would reach the shores of Japan, and the consequences of this could be ominous for the Japanese. The governor of the Dutch East Indies, A. J. Duymaer van Twist wrote in a letter to his superior in the Netherlands:

I have no intention of hiding the fact that Japan will be facing grave conflicts in the very near future. It is certain that either America or Britain, or perhaps even both states are approaching Japan, and if they cannot obtain what they want, they may even resort to war.\textsuperscript{38}

The Dutch warned the Tokugawa regime of American plans to send a fleet to Japan, and urged them to commence peaceful trading relations with them in accordance with their wishes. The American fleet, the Dutch letter warned, ‘comprises of several steam ships and sailing ships, and are equipped to an extent that we cannot guarantee that they will not use force if their rightful demands are not met’.\textsuperscript{39} Such information clearly resulted in an increased emphasis on the importance of using coercion within international society even before Perry and his gunboats arrived. The Japanese political elite began to perceive this order as a highly coercive, insecure one in which Japan’s survival was precarious.

\textsuperscript{36} Iwashita Tetsunori, ‘Ahen sensō jōhō no dentatsu to juyō: Tenpō jū nen kara jūsan nen made’, in Meiji ishin shi gakkai, eds, Meiji ishin to seiyō kokusai shakai (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1999), pp. 3–35, at p. 15. Shibukawa Rokuzō occupied the post of tenmongata, which was responsible for analysing foreign intelligence. His memorial cited here was submitted to the rōjū Mizuno Tadakuni. The rōjū was the highest post in the shogunate bureaucracy, and responsible for policy formation of the Tokugawa shogunate. Therefore, it can be assumed that Shibukawa’s memorial would have had some impact on the perceptions of international society of the Japanese political elite.

\textsuperscript{37} Cited in ibid., p. 19.


\textsuperscript{39} Voss, ed. and trans., Bakumatsu dejima mikōkai bunsho, p. 209, emphasis added.
When Japan finally experienced its full encounter with international society in 1853, its worst fears seemed to be confirmed. Japan’s first encounter with international society was indeed one of a coercive nature, as they found a fleet of American gunboats at the doorstep of Edo. As far as many quarters in the West were concerned, this was quite acceptable. In an article titled ‘The United States expedition against Japan’, *The Times* noted:

It is a fair question how far any tribe or race of human beings possesses the right of excluding the rest of mankind from all participation in the benefits to be derived from an extensive and beautiful region … Is this right of exclusion founded on reason or on force? If on reason, we should be curious to see the arguments by which it can be maintained. If the right of exclusion is simply the right of force, why, let those who appeal to such a principle be prepared at all times to make it good. They may feel well assured that, some time or other, their pretensions will be put to the test. In any case, they can lay little claim to sympathy. They have by their own acts put themselves out of the pale of the great brotherhood of nations. They have refused all aid to others; how can they ask it for themselves?\(^{40}\)

Meanwhile, a slightly more sympathetic article ‘Japan and the United States’ appeared in the *New York Times* on 24 February 1852:

A fleet composed of several steamers, backed by a frigate and one or two corvettes, is by no means a peaceful demonstration; and we fear that the effect of the arrival of these ships in the waters of Japan will be to frighten the poor Japanese out of their seaport towns, and out of their wits at the same time, so that it will be impossible to bring them to terms in good faith.

Japanese reactions to Perry’s arrival seem to endorse the above correspondent’s fears. Although the event had been anticipated by the political elite, the sight of the gunboats indeed seems to have ‘frightened’ them ‘out of their wits’. Perry’s gunboats and their knowledge of China’s defeat at the hands of the West forced them to conclude that any resistance

against the United States’ wishes would be futile.\textsuperscript{41} In a memorial submitted to the shogunate shortly after Perry’s arrival, the lord of the Fukuoka fiefdom, Kuroda (Matsudaira) Narihiro argued that although Japan might be able to prepare itself and mount a challenge to Perry when the latter returned,

… there would be no doubt that Japanese troops will be annihilated from soldier to officer. This is what we would call a foolish war, what Sun Zi would call ‘knowing the enemy’s capability but not knowing your own capability.’ We have little choice but to swallow a little pride [and accommodate the demands of the Americans] … that, I believe, is the best solution (日本軍勢将帥に至迄、数を尽して打死相違え無、是無謀の軍、知彼不知己也。最早此場に至り、少しの御恥は御忍成被、大なる御恥と相成不様、肝要の御儀と存奉候).\textsuperscript{42}

As far as the Japanese were concerned, their incorporation into international society took place under the threat of military force. Their signing of the unequal trading treaties—which limited Japan’s sovereignty and were not reciprocal—also took place under the threat of force from US consul Harris, who warned the Japanese that British and French naval forces could arrive to force Japan to conclude trading treaties.\textsuperscript{43} It is not surprising that we again see highly negative Japanese accounts of international society identical to those written prior to 1853, that emphasised the use of coercion to attain power. The mid-nineteenth century was therefore a period in which Japanese views of international society in the early nineteenth century were confirmed. For instance, Kuroda commented that warfare was ‘a constant state of affairs in foreign

\textsuperscript{41} Satō Seizaburō notes that the rōjū, Abe Masahiro (1819–57) reported that opinions tended to be more hardline the further they were from Edo, while those ‘who came to Edo and “understood the situation of foreign countries”’ were more realistic and tended to call for some form of accommodation with the US’s demands. See Satō Seizaburō, ‘Bakumatsu/Meiji shoki ni okeru taigai ishiki no shoruikei’, in Satō Seizaburō and R. Dingman, eds, Kindai nippon no taigai taido (Tokyo: Tōkyō daigaku shuppankai, 1974), pp. 1–34, at pp. 16–17.


countries [i.e. the West’], while Matsudaira Yoshinaga stated that the international situation that Japan now found itself in was a place where ‘fights take place between those who conquer and who are conquered’. Hotta Masayoshi’s memorial to the shogunate in 1857 states that ‘[t]he current international situation resembles that of China’s Spring and Autumn period and the last years of Ashikaga rule in Japan’ (一体当今万国の形勢一変致し、粗漢土春秋列国の時、本邦足利氏の末年に似たる有様の大なるもの).

How was Japan to respond to this new international order? This was an obvious question to occupy the minds of the Japanese elite for years to come. Drawing on Arnold Toynbee, Minamoto Ryōen states that the Japanese political elite showed two different responses. The first type was what Toynbee called the ‘Zealots’, who clung to their traditional culture and showed strong xenophobic reactions towards the newly introduced culture. In Japan, this took the form of attacks on foreigners and their property (攘夷). Naturally, the consequences of this form of reaction were disastrous for Japan. The protection of foreign nationals and their property was seen as an imperative component of the ‘standard of civilisation’ at the time, and failure to do so would often render the ‘uncivilised’ state beyond the pale of the protection of international law and invite more foreign intervention. Moreover, the West, fully aware of the potential resentment caused by the domineering manner in which they incorporated non-European states into international society, often believed that a demonstration of military might would be a useful way to enforce observance of the code of conduct as stipulated in the treaties and ‘standard of civilisation’. As the British minister to Japan, Sir Rutherford Alcock argued:

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44 Kuroda, ‘Kuroda Narihiro jōsho’, p. 34.
46 Hotta Masayoshi, ‘Hotta Masayoshi ikensho’, in Yoshida and Satō, eds, Nihon shisō taikei, Volume 56, pp. 67–71, at p. 69. Hotta Masayoshi was the rōjū at the time of the signing of the 1858 trading treaty between the US and Japan. The end of Ashikaga rule is known as Japan’s own ‘Warring States Period’ (sengoku jidai). During this time, many local warlords vied for the unification of Japan.
It is weakness, or the suspicion of it, which invariably provokes wrong and aggression in the East, and is a far more fertile cause of bad faith and danger among Asiatics than either force or the abuse of strength. Hence it is that all diplomacy in these regions which does not rest on a solid substratum of force, or an element of strength, to be laid bare when all gentler processes fail, rests on false premises, and must of necessity fail in its object.\textsuperscript{48}

Another response, which is labelled the ‘Herodian’ approach, was to adopt superior elements of an alien culture/society and use this to ensure the survival of the indigenous culture. As jōi movements resulted in frequent clashes with the West and subsequent defeats for the more xenophobic Japanese, it became increasingly clear that the only chance for Japan to ensure its survival was by adopting a more ‘Herodian’ approach. The drive to adopt what was considered to be superior elements of the West—military hardware was the earliest choice—gathered momentum. Eventually, an increasing number of Japanese samurai came to the conclusion that the political system had to be overhauled as well. The Tokugawa regime’s weakness in face of the ever-present Western threat would mean that Japan could never regain its former status as a fully sovereign nation free from the yoke of the Western states.\textsuperscript{49} A new form of political system had to be adopted. It was against this background that the Meiji Restoration (明治維新Meiji ishin) took place and Japan started taking real steps towards fully integrating itself into international society.\textsuperscript{50}


\textsuperscript{49} I use this word guardedly and with reservation: sovereignty as a concept did not exist in East Asian international relations, as states were arranged, often hypothetically, into hierarchical orders. Sovereign equality was not usually the norm. However, ‘sovereignty’ can be said to have existed in the sense that states within the tributary system did not interfere with each other’s domestic affairs. Owen N. Denny, the US diplomatic advisor to Korea in 1885, noted that ‘the past tribute relationships were sustained by a faith unshakable as long as China’s treatment of its tributaries remained gentle, cordial, and fair and did not seek to interfere either with another country’s system of tributary relationships or with its sovereignty and independence.’ However, Denny himself ‘was not sure whether or not Korean state sovereignty existed at all.’ See Hamashita Takeshi, ‘The intra-regional system in East Asia in modern times’, in Peter J. Katzenstein and Takashi Shiraishi, eds, \


\textsuperscript{50} The Meiji Restoration was a political movement which aimed at overthrowing the shogunate and establishing a new government that could better cope with the expanding Western powers. It is
It was during the Meiji phase that Japan’s political elite consolidated rather than radically changed their understanding of the use of coercion within international society, which was carried over from the Tokugawa period. Deep suspicions towards international society persisted, and consequently the Japanese political leadership continued to see their international environment as a highly insecure one.\textsuperscript{51} A brief survey of memorials describing international politics by key political leaders in Japan reveals a striking similarity to those of the Tokugawa officials. In a famous memorial submitted in 1869, shortly after the Meiji Restoration, Iwakura Tomomi\textsuperscript{52} offered this opinion of the international order at the time:

\ldots although it can be said that all states overseas maintain contact with each other, in the end all states overseas are our country’s enemies (海外万国ハ固ヨリ交通セサルヲ得トスト雖、畢竟海外万国ハ我カ皇国ノ公敵ナリ). What are these enemies? All foreign states nowadays study, improve their technology and aim to become rich and strong. Even small states like the Netherlands stand proud and independent, even though they are surrounded by great powers (海外万国ハ各其自国ヲシテ他国ノ上ニ立タシメンコトヲ欲ス) \ldots All foreign states wish to stand above other states: state A wants to stand above B, B over C. It is for these reasons that I say that foreign states are all our enemies.\textsuperscript{53}

Moreover, such views appear to have persisted during the Meiji period. In a memorial submitted in 1880, we see Yamagata Aritomo claiming that modern states ‘possess their own clearly demarcated territory and are responsible for protecting it themselves. If their soldiers are not strong, it is

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\textsuperscript{52} Iwakura Tomomi (1825–83) was one of the key officials of the early Meiji government. He served as vice president of the 
\textit{dajôkan} government, and was also foreign minister (gaimukyô) for a brief period in 1871. From 1871–73 he served as ambassador to Japan’s fact-finding mission to the West.
\end{flushright}
impossible for them to maintain their own independence’.

In 1887, Inoue Kaoru submitted a policy paper in which the international order was described as follows:

Since the 1870s and 1880s, troubles have been settled between the European states, and it has become impossible to wantonly resort to force. However, these [European states] have recently tended to concentrate on political tactics in the colonies … Ah! The continents of Asia and Africa have now become a hunting ground for the West.

Such views may well have been strengthened by the opinions of other international leaders. During the Iwakura mission’s visit to Berlin in 1873, the famous practitioner of power politics, German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, offered the Japanese delegation his views of international politics. The Japanese delegation concluded that Bismarck’s words ‘were extremely meaningful, and we should take note of his mastering of diplomatic courtesy and political manoeuvring’. Bismarck’s remarks on international politics appear to have made a deep impression on the Japanese delegation, and are worth citing in length:

… although all states of the world nowadays interact with each other in a friendly and courteous manner, this is entirely superficial. Behind the scenes, states both strong and weak compete with each other, and have little respect for each other. When I was young and Prussia was weak, the political leaders cared little for the country. Upon seeing the realities of small states I always felt aggrieved, and this has never left my mind. As for international law, it is supposed to be a law which protects the rights of states. However, once the interests of great powers are concerned, the law is used to protect the rights of the great powers, and if international law is contrary to the interests of the great powers, military might is used instead. Although small states may try to keep to the courtesies and rules of diplomacy to protect their independence, once

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54 Yamagata Aritomo, ‘Shin rinpō heibi ryakuhyō’, in Ōyama Azusa, ed., Yamagata Aritomo ikensho (Tokyo: Hara shōbō, 1966), p. 91. Yamagata Aritomo (1838–1922) was a key member of the Meiji oligarchy. In the dajōkan government, he was army minister (1873) and councillor (1874). He became prime minister in 1889 and 1898.


they face military tactics (by others) it is usually the case that they are unable to maintain their independence.\textsuperscript{57}

The members of this very same mission also had the chance to witness the colonised Southeast Asian states for themselves, and they appear to have concluded that international society was indeed a perilous one in which only the fittest could survive. The delegation’s secretary recorded: ‘The flesh of the weak is eaten by the strong. Ever since the Europeans began sailing to faraway lands, the weaker states of the tropics have been devoured by them [the European powers]’.\textsuperscript{58}

**REINVENTING THE JAPANESE VIEW OF INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY**

As the above discussion has shown, Japanese leaders’ understanding of international society was not one of stability and order, but of insecurity. This is not particularly difficult to imagine if one considers the coercive conditions under which Japan was incorporated into international society. However, conventional English School approaches have failed to fully incorporate these factors. Indeed, conventional analyses fail to incorporate any Japanese interpretations of the institutions of international society. If international society was a perilous world in Japanese eyes, it is difficult to imagine that they saw its institutions as serving to *reduce* uncertainty and fear.

This shortcoming appears to be primarily a product of English School scholars’ assumptions that international society plays an important role in ameliorating the effects of anarchy, thus creating a less competitive, precarious international order.\textsuperscript{59} However, this was not the case with the West vis-à-vis Asian states in the nineteenth century. Europe’s rapid industrial advances and military advantages resulted in a sense of superiority, and a tendency to regard non-Europeans as ‘barbarous’ and inferior. As Edward Keene’s work has shown, the historical evidence overwhelmingly suggests that the normative framework of European international society applied

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., p. 329.


\textsuperscript{59} Wight, ‘Western values in international relations’. Also see Jacinta O’Hagan, *Conceptualizing the West in international relations: From Spengler to Said* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 129.
primarily to European states only.\textsuperscript{60} The West’s dealings with many non-European states were based on highly coercive policies that were often contrary to the norms of international society as stipulated by English School scholars. It thus seems necessary to acknowledge the fact that non-European states (and perhaps every individual state to differing degrees) are likely to ‘reimagine’ international society and its institutions and shape their policies accordingly. Only by focusing greater attention on non-European states’ exposure to European international society can we gain a deeper understanding of how this ‘reimagining’ takes place and how it affects non-European states’ interpretation of international society and adoption of its institutions.

In the case of the Japanese political elite’s interpretations, we have seen that the leadership at the time tended to see their new international environment as a competitive one in which only the militarily strong could survive. The Meiji leadership’s response was to place national strengthening as one of its top priorities. In the Japanese leadership’s case, survival in this competitive world would mean matching the European states’ power. Slogans such as ‘rich country, strong army (富国強兵 fukoku kyōhei)’ and ‘promote industry (殖産興業 shokusan kōgyō)’ are typical reflections of this thinking.

Following from this, we can surmise that the Japanese leadership’s interpretations of the institutions of European international society were characterised by a relative lack of trust in the obligations of these institutions to promote common interests and allow for the coexistence of its member states.\textsuperscript{61} Japanese interpretations had considerable resemblance to what Wight calls the ‘realist’ interpretations of international society,\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{60} Keene, \textit{Beyond the anarchical society}.

\textsuperscript{61} This belief, also known as the ‘Grotian’ tradition of international society, is the dominant interpretation of international society advocated by English School scholars.

\textsuperscript{62} This should not be confused with realist international relations theory, particularly as forwarded by scholars such as Kenneth N. Waltz. While Waltz’s version of neorealism is a conscious effort to adopt a ‘realist’ perspective within a strictly scientific theoretical framework, Wight’s ‘realist’ tradition is a collection of traits of thought. If anything, Wight’s version comes closest to the ‘realist’ perspective adopted by Hans J. Morgenthau in his \textit{Politics among nations} (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973).
which places less faith in the efficacy of international society’s institutions and emphasises the utility of raw power politics. This connection between the Japanese interpretation of the prevalence of the use of coercion and their subsequent interpretation of how international society should be adopted is what we shall examine next.

THE MEIJI JAPANESE LEADERSHIP’S PERCEPTIONS OF INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY’S INSTITUTIONS

The institutions of war, the role of great powers, and the balance of power appear to be the most conspicuous aspects of international society as seen from the eyes of the Meiji leadership. However, unlike the Grotian interpretation, there is little room for any of these institutions to play a part in maintaining the constitutive norm of international society, the preservation of states’ sovereign integrity.

Japanese perceptions of the institution of war requires the least explanation. The Grotian interpretation of war believes that ‘[p]eace is the norm, and war the violation or exception; peace is logically prior to war’ and ‘war is a necessary evil, to be minimized as far as possible. It is necessary, because it is the only means of justice when there is no political superior’.63 The Western powers themselves did not show a strong interest in colonising Japan, and consequently ‘the view of imminent war in which Japan’s very survival was at stake’ receded after the Meiji Restoration.64 However, as the discourse of the Meiji political elite has demonstrated, this did not mean that the Meiji leadership ceased to see their international environment as an insecure one. Indeed, as Satō Seizaburō states, ‘even when the direct threats of war had faded away, “wars” such as “economic wars” or “diplomatic wars” were constantly on the minds of [the Japanese]. Therefore, the “Warring States” analogy, while taking a different form, remained and returned as the framework of analysis for international affairs whenever an international crisis broke out’.65

64  Satō, ‘Bakumatsu/Meiji shoki ni okeru taigai ishiki no shoruikei’, p. 28.
65  Ibid.
In such a dangerous world, the great powers were most certainly not seen as playing the role of maintaining the norms of international society, at least within Asia. Within the context of relations with non-European states, the moral purpose of European international society was not one of toleration and coexistence (under mutual respect for the sovereignty of states), but rather ‘the promotion of civilisation’ where the Western powers took it upon themselves to ‘encourage economic progress and stamp out the barbarism, corruption, despotism and incompetence that they believed to be characteristic of most indigenous regimes’ and intervened in non-European states to attain this purpose. Consequently, the Meiji Japanese leadership continued to look upon the great powers—the very states that had forced the unequal treaties upon them—with the utmost suspicion and regarded them as the biggest threat to the survival of the Japanese state. Yamagata’s statement in 1880 is a typical example:

Now it is said that that the Western countries do not massacre other tribes like ancient barbarians, but merely paralyse a state’s armies and use their own soldiers to bring about the capitulation of others. Therefore, they will not take over others’ lands … Now how can that be true? It is not about the West not doing this or not being able to do this, it is merely about them caring about their own gains. Therefore we see Poland being split into three and India being swallowed up by Britain. Is this not about seizing another state? … The Western states compete with each other over their weapons, each vying to overtake another … they are like greedy wolves and eye each other like tigers, trying to take advantage of the slightest chance presented to them …

Could the institution of the balance of power protect the Japanese from the threat of expanding Western powers? There was no guarantee of that either. It was certainly realised that among the Western powers, the balance of power appeared to function in such a way to allow weaker states to survive. It was acknowledged that within the West the great powers also played a crucial role in maintaining this balance of power. The Iwakura mission’s records indicate that the members noted that ‘the states of Europe all differ in size and strength, and their independence is maintained because

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67 Yamagata, ‘Shin rinpō heibi ryakuhyō’, p. 91.
the five great powers maintain a balance of power’.\(^\text{68}\) The balance of power did, as Tōyama Shigeki argues, also prevent outright expansion at the time of early Meiji Japan.\(^\text{69}\) However, this did not stop the great powers from stripping Japan of its sovereign prerogatives. In fact, the Western powers joined up to force Japan to sign unequal treaties, and, through the most favoured nation clause, made sure any economic benefits to be derived from trading with Japan would be equally enjoyed by all powers.

In conventional works by English School scholars, international law and diplomacy have usually been subject to much attention, as they provide the strongest evidence of non-European states’ adoption of cooperative institutions which give international politics a degree of order and certainty. Therefore, it seems appropriate to examine Japan’s adoption of these two institutions and whether or not these institutions were really seen as playing a crucial role in reducing the effects of an anarchical world.

The adoption of the diplomatic system was perhaps the least coercive process of adapting to international society for Japan. Primary sources indicate that the Meiji leadership itself regarded the diplomatic system as a useful institution in which Japan’s interests could be advanced. Terashima Munenori,\(^\text{70}\) who later became foreign minister, wrote in a letter in 1865:

> Although it is said that the weak are the food of the strong, Greece, Portugal, Denmark and the Netherlands are weak, and do not pose a threat to any state at all. Yet, they held each other at bay and maintain their independence, and this is also the reason why Turkey was not devoured by Russia … If Japan is to remain independent for ever and stand on an equal footing with the countries of the world, it is time for the ruler of Japan to open his eyes and rid Japan of old habits. Japan


\(^{70}\) Terashima Munenori (1833–93) was from the Satsuma fiefdom. He studied rangaku, or Western studies, and had experience of travel in Europe. He played an important part in the newly established Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
must be reborn. This means that Japan must send ambassadors to several great powers overseas.\footnote{Inuzuka Takaaki, ‘Meiji shoki gaikō shidōsha no taigai ninshiki: Soejima Taneomi to Terashima Munenori o chūshin ni’, \textit{Kokusai seiji} 102, 1993, pp. 22–38, at p. 24.}

However, Japan’s seemingly eager participation in the diplomatic system should not be taken as a sign of commitment to the Grotian ideal of diplomacy in international society, which sees diplomacy as ‘the ability to deal on even terms, the possibility of give and take, where either side can make concessions while leaving the substance of its interests intact’.\footnote{Wight, \textit{International theory}, p. 181.} Although the diplomatic system itself is not seen as particularly coercive and indeed useful, Western diplomacy is seen somewhat differently. Diplomacy is seen as an arena in which ‘exchanges of favours, threats, and secret treaties of war’ are played out.\footnote{Itō Hirobumi, ed., \textit{Hishoruisan: Gaikō hen}, Volume 1 (Tokyo: Hishoruisan kankōkai, 1936), p. 167.} Without ‘extreme bravery and deep knowledge of European diplomacy’, Japanese diplomats ‘could fall under the tricks of European diplomats and leave unspeakable national difficulties in the future’.\footnote{Ibid.}

This dual view of the cooperative elements of international society persists in Japanese views of international law. In the minds of the Japanese leadership, one of the most important institutions in international society was international law. Indeed, one of the first announcements of Meiji Japan’s desire to participate in international society was couched in terms of participation in ‘the [international] order of “the law of nations”’.\footnote{Takao Sakamoto, ““Bankoku kōhō” to “bunmei sekai””, \textit{Gaikō föramu} 100, 1996, pp. 76–84, at p. 82; Hosono Kōji, ““Bankoku kōhō” ninshiki kara tōyō meishuron made: Ono Azusa no taigiron to sono tenkai’, \textit{Waseda daigakushi kiyō} 12(16) 1979, pp. 81–111, at pp. 84–5.} Accordingly, the five national goals announced by the Emperor Meiji (\textit{Gokajō no seimon}) in 1868 stated that ‘Old habits shall be discarded and [the new government’s national policies] will be based on the way of heaven and earth’.\footnote{Rekishigaku kenkyūkai, ed., \textit{Nihonshi shiryō}, Volume 4: \textit{Kindai} (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1997), p. 82.} However, despite this agreement over the importance of international law, there appears to have been some division over the
interpretations of international law among the Meiji elite. Hirosawa Saneomi, who became councillor in the daijōkan government acknowledged the role international law plays in protecting the sovereignty of states, stating that ‘small states rely on this [international law] for their preservation, compelling the larger states to refrain from using threats and force.’ Similarly, Sanjō Sanetomi acknowledged the function international law is supposed to serve in his memorial to Iwakura in 1871:

The existence of international law (rekkoku kōhō) is to enable states, with equal rights and free from the threats of aggression, to profit from trade and engage in diplomacy on equal terms. As states possess equal rights, it goes without saying that the treaties they sign are on equal terms. International law exists to preserve states’ independence, the balance of power and the benefits of diplomacy and allow states to enjoy the benefits of trade. It controls imbalances of power … and assists the norms of heaven and humanity.

To a certain extent, the acceptance of international law in Japan is a result of Chinese influences in Japan’s learning of international law. One of Japan’s earliest introductions to international law was via the Chinese translation of Henry Wheaton’s Elements of international law, titled Wanguo gongfa (万国公法 Bankoku kōhō in Japanese). The Chinese translation itself uses Chinese terms of philosophy and ethics such as tianfa, the ‘heavenly laws’ to explain legal obligations, and places emphasis on natural law. As a result, early Japanese views tended to view international law as a form of natural law similar to Confucian ethics that was applicable to all nations, and facilitated their acceptance of it. However, this view of international law does not seem to have gained

77 Hirosawa Saneomi (1833–71) was a samurai from the Chōshū fiefdom.
79 Iwakura, Iwakura kō jikki, Volume 2, p. 927.
much support among the Meiji leadership. Iwakura, for his part, claimed in a memorial in 1875:

They say that international law is there to protect peaceful relations between states and preserve peace. The logic of international law is said to be precise, its ethics [‘way’] wide-ranging and fair. If so, even if a state is poor, its soldiers weak and its polity not formed it has nothing to fear. However, this is certainly not the case. It is also claimed that there is nothing better than self-protection [to preserve peace] (jishu jigo). Large states stand on equal terms with each other and maintain the balance of power for this, but they do not take part in international law.\(^{82}\)

In his diary, Kido Takayoshi also confessed his mistrust of international law, stating:

I am forced to believe that the military power of the Empire [Japan] must be great enough to deal with the great powers of the West as potential enemies. One cannot depend on international law without having a well-prepared military force. Many countries use the cloak of international law to seek their own interest in dealing with weaker nations. This is one of the reasons that I call international law a mere tool for depriving a weak nation of its rights.\(^{83}\)

Such negative views of international law were naturally a result of the coercive nature in which Japan was incorporated into international society. Despite the fact that states were supposed to be guaranteed their sovereignty, the Japanese found their sovereignty limited by the Treaty Port system. The realities of international law as stipulated in Western works seemed to have little resemblance to Japan’s reality. Moreover, the fact that Chinese translations of international war tended to emphasise the role of natural law in international law only served to highlight the disparities between the ideals (‘heaven’) and realities (‘humanity’) of an international order supposedly regulated by international law, and reduced its legitimacy as a norm for emulation.\(^{84}\) Consequently, the Japanese leadership soon developed their own dual interpretation of international law.

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84 Tanaka, ‘Waga kuni ni okeru sensōhō no juyō to jissen’, p. 396.
law. In this ‘dual’ interpretation, it was acknowledged that those who were deemed to have more Westernised or ‘civilised’ political systems were more likely to be afforded the protection of international law. This was of course the result of the emergence of the ‘standard of civilisation’, which had emerged by the time Japan was incorporated into international society and had the effect of placing those states labelled as uncivilised beyond the pale of the protection of international law as afforded to European states. Therefore, apart from undertaking concerted efforts in modernising in accordance with the ‘standard of civilisation’, the Japanese began to utilise international law to protect Japanese interests from the West. During a dispute with the British Minister to Japan, Sir Harry Parkes, over the Meiji government’s punishment of Christians, Ōkuma Shigenobu invoked the laws of domestic sovereignty claiming that ‘foreign countries had no right to interfere with Japan punishing its own people in accordance with its own laws’.  

INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY AND THE RISE OF JAPANESE IMPERIALISM

The way in which Japan interpreted European international society had consequences that undermined its very purpose. The result was a rise in power politics and imperialism. This interpretation was deeply intertwined with Japan’s socialisation into international society. It is of course possible to argue that Japanese militarisation and imperialism was simply a result of the pressures brought upon them by the Western powers’ encroachment; that Japan learnt that within an anarchical system it must adapt to Western practices or suffer like China. We can even find this argument in the English School. For example, Watson notes that non-European elites embraced Western forms of domestic governance wholeheartedly, primarily as ‘[t]he mastery of Western governmental practice and military technology enabled these élites to run a modern state’. We could expect

86 Ōkuma and Enjōji, Ōkuma haku sekijitsu tan, Volume 1, p. 285. Ōkuma Shigenobu (1838–1922) was a middle-ranking samurai from the Hizen fiefdom. He held cabinet posts in finance and foreign affairs. He was prime minister in 1898 and 1914–16. He also founded a political party, the Rikken kaishintō and Waseda University.
much the same from Kenneth N. Waltz’s understanding of how states are socialised within an anarchical international system. But the problem here is that the Japanese state did not simply aim to become a functional ‘lean, mean competitor’, but sought to reconfigure its own identity and create a domestic socialisation in which Japanese civilisation was on par, or surpassed, European powers. In Alexander Wendt and Michael Barnett’s words, entry into the society of states is

… also a matter of being recognized as a member of the society of states. In any society the identity of the self is in important part constituted by the expectations of others, and as such state formation is also a process of identity formation.

In the case of Japan, we see the elites undertake a complete overhaul of their state’s domestic political structures and identity to be comparable (not competitive) with Western models. Such deep socialisation is not recognised by functionalist accounts, which emphasise the learning of realpolitik behaviour.

This then begs a question: if Japan was indeed engaged in a process of socialisation into international society, why was its behavioural outcome so different from that as conceptualised by previous English School scholars? The answer lies in the dual nature of international society in the nineteenth century. This was a time when different sets of rules applied to the ‘civilised’ states and ‘barbarous’ states. As the Japanese elite noticed themselves, those states that were deemed civilised had attained full membership of the society of states were indeed often accorded the protection of the norms and institutions of international society, which

89 Alexander Wendt and Michael Barnett, ‘Dependent state formation and Third World militarization’, Review of International Studies 19(4) 1993, pp. 321–47, at p. 336, emphasis in original. Wendt and Barnett’s term ‘state formation’ may be somewhat inapplicable in the Japanese case, as Japan had already successfully asserted central control over its territory at some point in its history. Moreover, this term gives a somewhat Eurocentric impression in that it seems to imply that any non-European state that failed to follow the historical process of state formation (in itself a term derived from a study of European history) cannot be considered to have been a viable ‘state’.
aimed for some form of coexistence among states. However, the situation for ‘civilised’ states with regard to their behaviour vis-à-vis the ‘non-civilised’ states was different. At a time when imperialism was frequently seen as a mission of civilising those deemed as barbarous, imperialism and a strong military to support this was also regarded as an integral part of a ‘civilised’ state’s identity. Rather than respecting their ‘sovereignty’, the Western powers frequently invoked (or ignored) international law to invade and colonise many Asian and African states. They respected the balance of power with each other, and this even extended to their imperialistic expansions, where each state carved up a ‘sphere of influence’ for itself.

Japan’s socialisation into international society did not necessarily entail a deep commitment to preserving the sovereign independence of other states, particularly weaker ones. Instead, the Japanese elites decided that Japan should become a strong, imperialist power like the European powers, and encouraged the transformation of Japanese society, as well as the socialisation of other peoples in East Asia, along these lines. The Japanese elite concluded that to become a full, ‘civilised’ member of international society, in addition to meticulously observing the ‘standard of civilisation’, they would have to construct a strong, imperialistic state: after all, the great ‘civilised’ powers were at the same time the most militarily powerful and possessed vast colonies.

This viewpoint is visible in Inoue’s memorial. After giving an overview of an increasingly precarious East Asia, Inoue claims that the only way for Japan to survive this is ‘to transform our empire and its people into a state and people like Europe. I emphasise that the only way [for Japan to ensure its independence] is to create a new, European-styled empire in the Orient’. Being a powerful imperialist power would not only militarily protect Japan, it would also help Japan be recognised as a full member of the ‘civilised’ society of states and be accorded its protection. This view does not necessarily appear to have been one unique to Japan. It is no


92 Inoue, Segai Inoue kō den, Volume 3, p. 913.
accident that Japan’s revision of the unequal treaties, which symbolised Japan’s entry as a full member into European international society, came about in 1911, after Japan had defeated both China and Russia (the latter being a European imperial power) and attained colonies for itself.

Accordingly, Japan’s military expenditure soared. Japan also moved towards attaining ‘civilised’ identity by sending out military expeditions to its Asian neighbours, which would greatly assist in ‘civilising’ these states. In striking similarity to the Western powers’ behaviour vis-à-vis non-Western states, it was claimed that imperialism had a civilising element to it. In the case of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95, it was claimed that

Japan, as the most modernized nation in Asia, had the obligation … to come to the aid of its weaker neighbor [Korea] and to punish the Chinese who had not awakened to the importance of cooperating with the Japanese to spread civilization in Asia.93

This decision was deeply intertwined with the goal of becoming a full member of international society. It was made more acute by a deep sense of anxiety on the part of the Japanese that the Western powers were constantly seeking to gain some form of concessions at the expense of Japan.94 The Japanese had observed that those who were accorded full membership of the society of states were more likely to be accorded the respect and protection of the norms of international society which applied to ‘civilised’ states only. Moreover, the ‘civilised’ member states of this society appeared to have been given the prerogative to manipulate the ostensibly cooperative institutions (particularly international law) of international society to advance their own interests.

The oft-cited cooperative institutions which indicate Japan’s incorporation into international society, international law and diplomacy, often became a useful tool with which to justify Japan’s aggression, and in many cases the great powers did little to stop Japan. In many ways, this was a perfectly plausible interpretation of international law. The territory of ‘Backward Peoples’ who possessed ‘a tribal organization whose community

93 Iriye, ‘Japan’s drive to great-power status’, p. 312.
is not to be considered as a State’ could be legally occupied by the ‘civilised’ powers.\textsuperscript{95} In this sense, the ‘standard of civilisation’ was more than just a ‘response to the practical problem of protecting European life, liberty and property in sometimes hostile non-European countries’ or a ‘response to the philosophical problem of determining which countries deserved legal recognition and legal personality in international law’ which ‘provided a doctrinal rationale for limiting recognition in international law to candidate countries’ as argued by Gong.\textsuperscript{96} It provided the legal basis for colonisation and, for Japan, the signing of the unequal treaties.

However, at the same time, the Japanese leadership was perceptive enough to realise the duality of international society and that international law could be applied in international relations, provided the states in question were accorded ‘civilised’ status. Consequently, the Japanese leadership developed a dual use for international law. International law was used to demonstrate Japan’s civilisation and place Japan on an equal footing with the Western powers. Equality with the West would give Japan a better chance of joining the ‘civilised nations’ and placing it under the protection of international law, and the Japanese made sure that Japan’s adoption of ‘civilised’ norms were propagated. In an article written in 1898, shortly after the Sino-Japanese War, Sakue Takahashi elucidated Japan’s ‘civilised’ wartime behaviour by juxtaposing it with an ‘uncivilised’ China that had not even entered international conventions. Takahashi stated:

At the very beginning of the war the Japanese Government thought it would be the most convenient and civilized course to make some communication with China regarding the exemption of private property on sea. China was not a signatory of the Declaration of Paris, and, moreover, she had never made any effort to enter into any convention of such a kind; but it was the purpose of Japan, notwithstanding the nature of her opponent, to give an example of generosity by carrying on hostilities in an enlightened and lawful fashion.\textsuperscript{97}


\textsuperscript{96} See Gong, \textit{The standard of ‘civilization’ in international society}, p. 117.

\textsuperscript{97} Sakue Takahashi, \textit{The application of international law during the Chino-Japanese war} (London: Stevens and Sons, 1898), p. 2.
Towards its weaker neighbours, Japan fully utilised international law to justify any aggression. It claimed the right to send an expeditionary force to Taiwan by arguing that the island was not effectively ruled by China, even though the latter claimed territorial possession. This, of course, was exactly the same logic used by the West to interfere or colonise those ‘uncivilised’ states.

**SOME PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS**

Several points emerge from this article on the study of the expansion of international society. First, it would be disingenuous to presume that non-European states would commit themselves to the norms of international society in such a short period of time. This is perhaps a result of legal positivism adopted by scholars such as Wight or Bull, who believe that entry into international society implies an almost automatic and reciprocal commitment to the institutions and practices of international society.98 While it is probably correct that even improvised rules, ‘if and when they are observed for long enough, come to be reflected in common “modes of thought, patterns of behaviour and preferred norms and values”’99 this can take longer than generally assumed by English School scholars. Moreover, they can even be re-interpreted, quite often because of the very way in which these states were incorporated into international society. Many non-European states’ outlook on international politics and the reconfigurations of their domestic structures were likely to have reflected the different norms which governed their relations with European powers, as well as their own interpretations, rather than simply reflecting ‘the dominant European standard of “civilization”’.100 Nowadays, with increasing interdependence and globalisation taking place, it is easy to claim that the norms and institutions of international society have gained worldwide acceptance. At an age when conflicts are increasingly taking place in areas outside the industrialised states rather than within, it may be

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100 Gong, ‘China’s entry into international society’, p. 172.
of some use for us to explore such states’ failure to adopt the cooperative norms and institutions of international society. It may be necessary for critical reflection of whether or not the great powers, who supposedly have an ethical responsibility in ensuring that the norms of international society are observed, are partly to blame for this.

Second, and most importantly, it is necessary to fully acknowledge that international society does not have a single, cooperative feature as has been previously portrayed. International society in the nineteenth century was two-faced—it had different sets of norms and institutions, and shaped the West’s behaviour between themselves and non-Western peoples accordingly. To be fair to English School scholars, this point has been suggested to a certain extent. Wight stated that there ‘is an outer circle that embraces all mankind, under natural law, and an inner circle, the corpus Christianorum bound by the laws of Christ. The inner circle is unique’. Bull, for his part, argues that it was almost inevitable that international society was dualistic, as ‘it could hardly have been expected that European states could have extended the full benefits of membership of the society of states to political entities that were in no position to enter into relationships on a basis of reciprocity’. However, the main focus of the study of international society has been on the relations between its constitutive members, where there exist ‘common interests, practices, rules and institutions’. Scholars working within the international society tradition have not adequately conceptualised the constitutive norms and institutions of international society as applied to non-members and the actions and outlooks of constituent members towards these states. This one-sided debate renders the English School approach unable to explain why the Japanese framed their national interests and goals in militaristic/imperialistic terms, rather

than cooperative terms. Neither can the English School demonstrate why the Janus-faced nature of Western international society was reproduced by the Japanese, who defined membership of the society of states in terms of imperialist behaviour and used its institutions accordingly to attain this goal. Japan’s duplicitous use of international law, on the one hand, to protect itself from Western encroachment, while on the other utilising the very same law to gain territories at the expense of other Asian states which it now also labelled as ‘uncivilised’, mirrored that of the Western powers’ behaviour in East Asia and is a case in point.

However, this does not mean that I render the English School approach as useless: as stated in the introduction, my intention is not to destroy the English School, but better it by subjecting it to a tough case. The English School has seen something of a revival in recent years, with many scholars pointing to new, exciting research agendas which could be undertaken by this approach.

Of these I suggest that most exciting, and rewarding, is for the English School to seriously engage with its dualistic past—as a force of imperialist conquest and as a force of cooperation. As the case study of Japan has highlighted, this aspect of international society gave rise to very different patterns of socialisation. If the English School is to take its interpretive agenda seriously, it needs to explore how this neglected ‘international society’ which governed relations between ‘civilised’ and ‘uncivilised’ states affected new members’ socialisation into this society of states.

An additional reason for suggesting this new agenda of research is also a normative one. It has been frequently argued that the English School has been deeply concerned with upholding some form of morality in the life of humankind. As these words are being written, the great power(s) are in the process of attempting to socialise rogue states back into the society of states. If we are to avoid the re-emergence of an international pariah Japan turned itself into in the 1930s and 1940s, it is imperative that we ‘socialise’ these states into a more just, cooperative international society. A deeper examination and understanding of the darker past of the society of states is surely a good starting point.

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