The tokugawa ancestral law of seclusion history essay

There is widespread agreement in traditional western and Japanese historiography of Tokugawa Japan that during the period 1630 to 1853, the Japanese empire was completely isolated from the rest of the world. Discussions have highlighted the various edicts in the 1630s which on the surface were designed with a secluding purpose in mind, yet despite evidence of the limitations in trade and access as well as the expulsion of Catholics, there is irrefutable evidence which would support an alternative viewpoint. Kazui considers that the term ‘ sakoku’ – the most popular term to describe Japanese international relations during the Tokugawa period, since Engelbert Kaempfer’s works were translated, is in fact not of Japanese origin and its literal definition – “ closing the country” – diverges from the facts. [1]The contemporary term used to refer to the policy was ‘ kaikin’ meaning “ maritime restriction”, appears more applicable when considering evidence of continued trade and diplomatic relations in the period. Historians have commonly come to describe the foreign policies and practices of Tokugawa rulers as based on seclusion and the widespread usage of the term ‘ Sakoku’ has arguably led to the misinterpretation and generalisation of Tokugawa foreign relations. The main historical focus has been limited to the role of Christianity demonstrating an intolerance to Western religion and of the port of Nagasaki as the only ‘ window to the world’ during the period, yet Ronald Toby and other recent scholars have examined the issue from a broader perspective – including reference to the context of Japan’s North East Asian relations with China, Korea and Ryukyu and other examples of maintained foreign intercourse in order to give a clear outlook of the characteristics of foreign exchange during the Edo period. Whether or not the Tokugawa Shogunate intended to ‘ seclude’ Japan from the rest of the world is

debateable despite the fact that foreign relations were minimised, especially with Europe. It is also considered that the fear of foreignness was actually concerned more with the West than Japan's Asian neighbours. There must be an appreciation of the individual examples of foreign relations as well as the changing nature of Japan's socio-cultural character as a whole. While the traditional historians of the period give evidence for the assertion that the ' ancestral law of seclusion' was rigidly observed, there are those who outline evidence refuting the claim that ' sakoku' defined Japan's foreign relations.

The cultural and socio-political make-up of Japan was defined by a neo-Confucian feudal system ruled by provincial daimyo – meaning self-sufficiency and a system of self-contained policy was naturally kept to during the period. Due to the nature of Tokugawa rule, contact with the outside world was seen as unnecessary, therefore foreign relations during the Tokugawa period are traditionally discussed in terms of developments in Japan's European policy. This is understandable as there are two main connecting events which are easily identifiable as practical examples of a pattern of seclusion in Tokugawa foreign relations: the expulsion of the Portuguese in 1639 and the eradication of Christianity. The period is considered to be defined by seclusion, yet this may have been due to a combination of fear concerning foreign elements in society and Bakufu concern for Japan's traditional culture. The position of Christianity as a religion influenced from the outside world gradually became untenable as it was seen as a threat to Tokugawa legitimacy. Under the policies of Shogun Hideyoshi, the success European missionaries had enjoyed in Japan from 1600, effectively ended as the dynamics of Japanese politics were altered:

through anti-foreign and anti-Christian policies. The seclusion edicts led to Christianity being persecuted and finally crushed – an example of the proposed Bakufu reaction against globalisation.[2]The further example of the ban on Portuguese entrance into Japan makes it seem as though sakoku was observed – at least in terms of securing the regime's own cultural traditions. Yet by barring the Portuguese and the removal of Christian influences shows the Bakufu leaders sought to eliminate only elements of ' unchecked intercourse' such as the fear of foreign imperialism and Catholicism.[3]More favourable elements of foreign relations remained – as proven through the allowance of the Dutch into limited ports. In this perspective, historians have come to consider Tokugawa foreign policy as selective rather than a pursuit of total isolation.

The discussion of the strictness of sakoku is not a straightforward one, as those historians who agree seclusion was observed differ in their opinions concerning the benefits and merits of the system. Varley argues that from the 1630s, there was an identifiable policy of national seclusion which actually created the conditions for the ' Great Peace' of more than two and a half centuries. Varley proposes the intention of the Bakufu differed from the literal definition of the 19th Century term ' sakoku'; it is conceivable that the law of seclusion was carried out in order to preserve national hegemony, ' At the time of its inception, the seclusion policy was more intended to establish a new international order in East Asia, with Japan at the centre than to seal the country off permanently from all but minimal ties with the outside world.'[4]Furthermore, evidence of increased productivity in the 17th Century, as a result of the policy, makes the seclusion laws seem more

positive and not for purposes of isolation. Varley notes that different historiographical viewpoints consider the termination of intercourse with Western Europe along with the repressive feudal controls over its people as arbitrary and reactionary and ignore the economic and social benefits to the measures. In this traditional perspective, the seclusion appears to have been simply for isolationist purposes yet the security of the regime was at stake and the Tokugawa rulers arguably needed to impose seclusion due to these threats. By considering that Japan took until the 19th Century to begin western style technological and scientific developments, the assumption that the seclusion policies were observed rigidly is plausible – this must be true in some measure yet as Westerners still saw Japan as in the furthest extremity of the World and therefore inaccessible to an extent geographically, the advancements may not have been hampered by the proposed rigid observation of seclusion. Moreover Japan was not alone in acting as it did, but one of several countries of the Far East that minimised or restricted trade and cultural ties with the Western world in the 17th Century.

As analysis has traditionally been focused on the restriction of European relations, Japan’s diplomatic relations in Asia have largely been ignored, yet it becomes clear that generalisations about Japan’s foreign relations based on the exclusion of certain people, are inadequate to explain foreign policy with other Asian countries. For instance it is apparent that the Ieyasu’s edict expelling Catholics from Japan in 1639 cannot be regarded in the same light as other foreign policy. From the 1970s, Japanese and American historians have challenged the traditional view of a unique isolation policy by showing that Bakufu leaders kept Japan engaged with in trade and diplomacy, in

order to emphasise the positive aspects of Japanese foreign policy – specifically with neighbours in Northeast Asia. Ronald Toby, considers that an examination of Japan's non-European relations highlights there was less discontinuity in Japanese relations in 1630s than is traditionally thought. [5]Trade and diplomatic relations in fact continued in Northeast Asia, with Korea, Ryukyu and China all engaged in intercourse with the Tokugawa Empire. In terms of the development of trade specifically, Kazui refers to the request by the Bakufu for the Dutch to supply silk to the Japanese markets soon after the exclusion of the Portuguese. In this respect, there was undoubtedly a selective motivation for the Edict expelling the Portuguese in 1609, yet as the Dutch were given trading rights instead, the practical observation of the seclusion laws are more complicated under the surface – as trade prospered through certain ports. Therefore the term ' kaikin', meaning " maritime restriction" is more applicable to the historical context. Therefore, in practice, each Edict should be considered in their own merit and not as part of a general theme of intended isolation. The Bakufu knew that new relations were equally as important to its stability as the foreign relations which it terminated,[6]and by maintaining maritime trade relations with certain countries Japan recognized the advantages and disadvantages to the country's security, as well as its economical and cultural goals.

Recent historiography concedes that some aspects of the Tokugawa ancestral law of seclusion may have been observed rigidly yet highlights that these aspects may have been consistent with Japanese economic relations at the time anyway. ' The attention to Bakufu political actions, both domestic and international, give a more concrete expression to the sense of legitimacy

it was trying to foster.'[7]Toby deduces that Japan's foreign policy goals were influenced by consistent legitimising principles and it was these which were observed and not the proposed isolationist seclusion: The Bakufu genuinely wanted to hold on to Japanese culture and perhaps were only minimally isolated but only because of the determination for legitimacy and security. The limit on foreign trade and ports was another practical means of satisfying the government's legitimisation goals and brought economic stability. The various examples of Japan's continued trade: especially with its Northeast Asian neighbours and the Dutch, albeit from restricted ports, serve to invalidate the traditional view that that the seclusion laws were observed rigidly and were meant to isolate the country from the rest of the world. Granted, there are examples of changes in relations but these were in line with Bakufu goals in order to preserve national hegemony and secure Japan's best economical interests.

More recent historiography, both American and Japanese, is tremendously useful in examining the observance of the ancestral seclusion laws. It is arguable that a new generation of historians are able to examine Japan without the traditional emphasis on the country's failings in comparison with the Western development and focus on the Bakufus' eagerness to increase certain imports and the selective process of Japan's international commercial activity.[8]Ronald Toby highlights that the restraint on Japanese people from travelling abroad is also disputed in Japanese revisionist historiography, questioning a chief representation of proposed isolation in the period. A balanced interpretation of this matter would examine the foreign influence especially of the Dutch in the period, to undo the exaggerations, yet it is

conceivable that this element of sakoku did exist: the restrictions of movement under the Tokugawa reign were kept to as part of the fear of foreignness and was considered at the time to be vital to the ‘ great peace’ and unprecedented economic productivity. There is disproportionate historiographical emphasis on the importance of the arrival of the United States in 1853 – making the ‘ opening’ of Japan seen more drastic than it actually was. Hellyer notes that Japan was able to be diplomatically and commercially engaged with foreign nations, ‘ The Edo-period system of foreign relations allowed Japanese leaders to remain flexible and pursue nuanced approaches to intercourse with the outside world.’[9]If Japan was open to trade and diplomatic relations then the seclusion laws could not have been observed in terms of the ‘ closed’ definition of sakoku, as conservative historians propose. However, the policies of the 1630s, exterminating Christianity and blocking European access to trade ports suggest a possibility that these differences were due to rigid observance of the seclusion laws. Yet the Tokugawa rulers limited and tightly controlled the access to political, economical, and ideological influences from the outside world, in particular, the West because they were concerned with the long term process of looking after Tokugawa legitimacy and not because they wanted to isolate Japan. It was these concerns which led to selective observance of elements of the seclusion laws as well as constant changes in diplomatic and trade practices. Furthermore, the stark differences between Japanese and Western development in the nineteenth century do add credibility to the more conservative scholars’ interpretations. Yet, there are examples of other countries such as China which also fell behind in development, due to its global position. With an appreciation of the

instances of continued and in some cases increased commercial activity, there is a strong argument that the law of seclusion was not detrimental and neither were its considered isolationist elements observed with any rigidity.