

## Plant Collecting and the History of Japan in Eighteenth-Century London

著者(英)	Timon Screech
journal or publication title	Senri Ethnological Studies
volume	54
page range	29-37
year	2001-03-09
URL	<a href="http://doi.org/10.15021/00002832">http://doi.org/10.15021/00002832</a>

## Plant Collecting and the *History of Japan in Eighteenth-Century London*

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### 1. INTORODUCTION

In this paper I would like to consider a few issues relating to the boundaries placed on the natural world by human cultures, and the way in which these repercuss in societies themselves. I shall take as my case study the collecting of plants in England during the Eighteenth Century, and the specific links this had to knowledge of Japan.

Japan was a major player in the plant-hunting process of the eighteenth century. A large number of species bear the academic label “japonica”. Some of the most important Europeans to visit to Japan in the late-Seventeenth to early-Eighteenth Centuries did so not to see Japanese cultural achievements, but to hunt for plants. Kaempfer, Thunberg and Siebold were all primarily interested in Japanese flora, and only tangentially in Japanese life, art or politics. Kaempfer, as his biographer put it, “went all about herborising and observing what was peculiar in Nature” [KAEMPFER 1727: 111]. Thunberg in Japan spent an enormous sum (12,000 rixdollars) on “his favorite study” (i.e. plant-buying), but purchased virtually no Japanese-made goods. On his return to Sweden, Thunberg wrote the influential *Flora japonica*[THUNBERG 1795: 30].

The above three men were all doctors and so it is not surprising that they should have been interested in plants. Although in Japan Dutch medicine had the reputation of being mostly *geka* (external medicine, surgery), the top doctors that came to Japan were in fact specialists in *naika* (internal medicine, internists). This was recognized by Sugita Genpaku, who was annoyed by the fact that Japanese people only thought of Dutch surgery, and so neglected its attitude to medicines and thus plants, as he wrote in his *Waran iji mondo*.

Plant-hunting was commonly carried out in Nagasaki, and there are many notes

in *Oranda shōkan nikki* of Dutch doctors being given permission to wander in the surrounding hills to gather plants. (We should note in passing that just as the usual Edo term *Oranda geka* is wrong because the men were actually *naika*, it is also wrong because they were often not Dutch — none of the three mentioned above were.)

Thunberg said he was expected to buy drinks for his samurai guards on these trips, which was rather expensive. The plant-hunting continued during the *sanpu*, when the three senior members of the Dutch East Company made their annual trip to Edo. In 1776, Thunberg took part in this event, and recorded in the book of his travels, *Thunberg's Travels*, how he was always trying to escape from his samurai guards and wander off the Tōkaidō into the countryside in search of plants; he recounted a comic story of how, when crossing the mountains at Hikone, he escaped into the surrounding countryside and was chased by his guards, who pulled him back [THUNBERG 1795: 165].

Many of those who lined the streets to watch the Europeans passing would have been aware that the Dutch were plant-obsessed, and certainly the upper levels of Japanese society took advantage of this to use the Dutch as plant-suppliers. Several *kapitan* stated how the shoguns (especially Yoshimune) asked many questions about these matters, and tended to assume the physician knew virtually everything. Many shoguns, Ieharu in particular, also requested specific plants (often saffron).

The hunting was therefore two-way. Since the Japanese had to rely on the Dutch to bring them things, their collecting had to be more casual and unsystematic. Some shoguns demanded more than the Dutch were prepared to give (the trade with Japan was not so valuable that they would agree to any request), and the Dutch log records in 1800 that Ienari, who is known to have been interested in gardens, was complaining: “for some years now the Emperor [that is, shōgun] has been asking for plants without getting them” [VIALLE 1997: 151]. The export of plants from Japan was more organised, as European hunters attempted to categorise Japanese flora fully. Sometimes these took account of Japanese categorisations, sometimes not: Kaempfer included pictures of plants in the manuscript that was to become his *History of Japan*, giving both Latin names and Chinese characters (sometimes written oddly). Kaempfer also collected Japanese and Chinese *honzō-gaku* books, although fundamentally, only the European system was considered valid.

Thunberg is perhaps the most relevant here since he was overtly a *categoriser* of plants, and not only a hunter. He had studied in Uppsala University in Sweden, with Linnaeus, the founder of the binomial system of nomenclature (still the norm in plant and animal categorisation), and he was certain that he had learned a system that was universally applicable. Thunberg arrived in Japan as a young enthusiast of thirty-two years old. He was impressed by Japanese medicines, and the plants from which they were made (although he was shocked by the lack of anatomical interest)[THUNBERG 1795: 200].

The Linnaean system works by setting a “generic” name before a “specific” one, for example, *Homo sapiens* (for human), or *Cryptomeria japonica* (for

suginoki). By this means all forms of life could be placed into one global frame. Some Japanese species put into the Linnaean system by Thunberg bear his name as their specific name, in recognition of his “discovery” of them.

Thunberg devoted himself to practical categorisation, and in addition to his *Flora japonica* he mentioned many interesting thoughts in his *Travels*. One thing he cited was that Japanese people’s names work in the Linnaean manner: whereas in Europe, the given name comes before the family name, in Japan, they are the other way around, such that, for example, Tokugawa Ienari, is the name as *Cryptomeria japonica*, with the first name generic and the second specific. Thunberg wrote, “it is remarkable that their family name is not put after, but always before the given name, as in botany, where the generic name of a plant always precedes the specific” [THUNBERG 1795: 266].

This observation set up a racial imbalance, putting Asian peoples into a “natural” categorisational system from which Europeans escaped. Thunberg was highly impressed with Japanese society, not just its “medicines”, but also its medical scholarship, and he was close to Nakagawa Jun’an and Katsuragawa Hoshū (Jun’an had been central to publication of the *Kaitai shinsho* in 1774, the year before Thunberg’s arrival in Japan, and Hoshū, who also worked on that translation, was soon to become *oku-ishii*, personal physician, to Ienari). But Thunberg did not consider Japanese scholars his equals, and he somewhat superciliously called Jun’an and Hoshū “my beloved pupils”, even though Jun’an was four years his senior [THUNBERG 1795: 201]. Thunberg felt he had much to teach them, but they had little to teach him. He noted they were using Dodonaeus’s outdated *Cruydtboek*, which the work of his own teacher, Linnaeus, had superseded. He offered the general observation that the Japanese were an excellent people — “the Japanese nation shows sense and steadiness in all its undertakings” — but were hampered by an absence of method and were only excellent “as far as it is possible to be without science, by whose light they have not yet been illuminated” [THUNBERG 1795: 177, 251].

The point is not to argue whether or not Thunberg was a racist — he was a man of his time, and if anything his views on Empire and colonisation were admirable. The point is to note the absolute assumption of European ethnic superiority, both in Thunberg, and in almost all who visited Japan. Japan tended to be regarded as the most civilised place in Asia, and the term “equal to Europeans” occurs with reference to the Japanese more than any other Asian peoples. But Europe remains, at all times, normative: it was the categoriser of people and culture as it was the categoriser of plants.

## 2. MOVING PEOPLE

When plants are moved, they often undergo change, even when their original environments are recreated in rockeries or hot-houses. What of people? What occurred when humans beings were moved across space in a similar way, and were “rerooted” in another place? Trade had resulted in a good deal of ethnic mixing in

almost all parts of the world. For example, there were Chinese communities in many places while slavery took people from West Africa to the Caribbean and North America. Questions were asked about what happened to such people over time. Was race absolute?

One area in which racial difference emerged was in mixed-race children. There were some famous examples, like Kokusen'ya and Tenjiku Tokubei, who were half-Japanese and half-Chinese. There were also the mixed-race Euro-Japanese children in Nagasaki. This last group are the most interesting insofar as the racial difference was greater. Efforts were made to get rid of mixed-race European children, although several were to be found in Japan. For example, girls might work in the Maruyama (Nagasaki's *yūkaku*), which is where their mothers would have come from. Thunberg was interested in the question of mixed-race children, and mulled over rumours that they were murdered or expelled, writing, "I cannot believe the Japanese to be inhuman enough for the former procedure, nor is there any instance of the latter having taken place" [THUNBERG 1795: 76].

I have written elsewhere about these issues, and I do not propose to repeat myself here [SCREECH 1995]. What I would like to consider now is the connection between human and plant categorisation, and *adaptability*.

Mixed-race children were like grafted plants. People who travelled to a new place and stayed there were like plants that took up root outside their original situation, and had to adapt in some way to their new environments. A third case was people who travelled and returned. This was not something often seen in Japan where there was little chance of going abroad and coming back. But if anyone were to do so, they would return looking and behaving, *being*, different from how they were when they had left. This was surely the fear that the shogunate had when it banned Japanese people not so much from going abroad, as from leaving Japan *and returning*. There were, however, some who did. Perhaps the best known instance is Daikokuya Kōdayū, who had been shipwrecked in 1783, rescued by a Russian ship and returned via Siberia, Moscow and St Petersburg. Kōdayū startled his Western hosts with his manners (for example sitting down in front of important people, without waiting to be invited, which was polite in Japan), but then he learned to speak Russian, began to eat and dress in the Russian way, and it might properly be asked to what extent he was still Japanese at all. When he was eventually repatriated, some of his crewmen stayed, thinking they could no longer re-adapt to Japan (some had become Christian, married Russian women, and planted themselves definitively in Europe) [LENSEN 1971: 128]. When Kōdayū and one other man, Isokichi, returned, they were considered dangerous, partly because of the knowledge he had gained, but also because their travels had turned them into people who were now different. This was made clear by the fact that when the two men were commanded to appear before Ienari, they were told to dress in Russian clothes [TOZAWA 1994: 59]. They were reckoned to have undergone some profound transformation inside, and since their skin and features had not changed, they were forced to demonstrate their difference by other visible means, giving a kind of external warning. It may be Kōdayū who is

wearing Dutch dress in the famous painting of the *Oranda shōgatsu* (Dutch New Year), now in Waseda University.

This may seem far from plants, but in fact it is not. The repatriation of Kōdayū and Isokichi was partly intended as a means of Russia opening trade with Japan, but it was also closely related to plants. The ship that brought them was supposed to have been commanded by Eric Laxman, a famous Finnish botanist who lived in Russia and had become a member of the St Petersburg Academy. Laxman had been in Siberia collecting plants when Kōdayū and the others had passed through on the way to Moscow, and he had met them. Unfortunately, Laxman was not able to realise his wish to visit Japan and study its plants because he died in 1796. To compensate, his son, Adam, took over. This gave rise to troubles because Adam Laxman was only 26 years old and would not normally have been given charge of so important a mission, and his privilege was resented by other officers. But Adam Laxman took with him a larger number of botanical specimens which his father had collected before his death with the intention of giving them to Thunberg's "beloved pupil" Katsurakawa Hoshū, who by this time was a middle-aged man. Eric Laxman knew of Hoshū because he had read Thunberg's book [LENSEN 1971: 116; HESSELINK 1995: 191].

The two areas of human and botanical collecting came closer together when the shogunate decided what to do with Kōdayū and Isokichi. They could not let them be free in Edo, nor in their home province of Kameyama-han (Izu); to have allowed this would have been like letting "real" foreigners wander about. The men also had to be punished, although as there was no precedent, it was hard to decide what the punishment should be. The shogunate began to think of a fitting one that would also keep the two men away from contact with "normal" people. They needed to be observed without contaminating others, like freak plants. The decision was made to lock them in a medical garden. The shogun's *yakusō-en* (medicinal plant garden) was given a new branch-garden, beside the Tayasu Gate of Edo Castle. Here Kōdayū and Isokichi remained; how long Isokichi stayed is uncertain, but Kōdayū was there for the next 35 years, until his death in 1828. One of the *oku-ishi*, Shibue Chōhaku, was put in charge of the site, and the two men were declared officially "dead". There is no documentation suggesting why a garden prison was thought appropriate, but it was a fascinating choice of site to keep the returnees. The garden also became home to the plants donated by Laxman. All attested to the alterations that species can undergo as they move.

### 3. ADDING CULTURE

The special danger of Kōdayū and Isokichi was that they had assimilated (to a degree) the culture of Europe. It had become natural for them to wear its clothes and speak its language. Presumably they continued to speak Japanese too, but the shogunal policy towards them seemed to be that, once Russified, they ought to be kept that way, like "samples."

The essential Russification of Kōdayū (again, Isokichi's fate is unknown) was

demonstrated by the one annual holiday out of the garden that he was allowed. Everyone was entitled to a relaxed schedule at Japan's most important festival, New Year, and the shogunate permitted Kōdayū some freedom too. On New Year's day he was allowed to leave the *yakusō-en* for a party. But to prove that his foreign stain was indelible, he was not allowed out on the first day of the first month to celebrate the *Japanese* New Year, but was obliged to celebrate the *European* one. Kōdayū was kept in his state of Russian-ness as a performance for the benefit of others. This was called the *oranda shōgatsu*, although actually, the Russian and Dutch New Years were not the same, for their calendars were different. The most famous *oranda shōgatsu* party was the subject of the painting referred to above, and took place in 1795, at the Shirandō in Edo's Mizutani-chō, which was the Rangaku *juku* of Sugita Genpaku. Genpaku was the older colleague of Jun'an and Hoshū, who were present, as were numerous dignitaries from the Rangaku world.

Unlike plants, people have cultures based on ritual and tradition. The motivation to collect plants was often medical, but it often also came from a desire to assess how people made use of their plant environments in cultural ways. The mediaeval European tradition of the *peregrinata medica* had the dual purpose of showing doctors plants they did not have at home, and revealing foreign traditions of using them. The eighteenth-century travels of doctors were part of a larger process of gathering and arranging aspects of the varied human experience. Many of the collections that were formed as a result contained medical objects and also other cultural things, like eating utensils, furnishings, clothes or works of art. These were kept in rooms called "philosophical cabinets", and some have grown into our modern museums. The other term for them was "cabinets of curiosities", or in Dutch, *wonderkabinet*. Another castaway, Doi Tsūdayū, who visited St Petersburg in 1801 during the time of Alexander I, was taken to see the Czar's *wonderkabinet* which included medical objects (like an aborted foetus), rarities of flora and fauna (the Czar's dog taxidermised), and cultural items, including a lot of Japanese clothes [ŌTSUKI 1900: 577].

Tsūdayū referred to the Czar's collection as *musukaamuri*. This, and its equivalents, like *wonderkabinet*, was an important word to know when dealing with Europeans. The first Japanese-Dutch Dictionary, *Bango-sen*, published in 1788 by Hoshū's brother, Katsuragawa Hosan (also known as Morishima Chūryō), included the similar term *wonder*. We should also recall that Siebolt came to Japan with the prime target of collecting objects for the *wonderkabinet* being built up by the king of the new United Netherlands.

I would like to finish with a link between plant-hunting, medicine, cultural collecting, and specifically Japan, and this brings us back to Kaempfer. His manuscript had lain unread since his death in 1716, and was several times nearly lost. It was eventually published eleven years later. Although it is known in Japanese as *Nihon-shi*, its title is actually *A History of Japan together with a Description of the Kingdom of Siam*. Siam also provoked huge excitement in Europe (both before and after the fall of the Ayutthayan Empire in 1767). But it was Japan that was regarded as

a special case. Its high cultural level was recognised, and also memories probably remained of how nearly it had come (so the Europeans believed) to being Christianised (i.e. fully 'civilised' by the European definition) in the seventeenth century.

Let us take a step back in order to look properly at this link. Perhaps the foremost repository of exotic foreign goods built up in the first half of the 18th century was not that of a king or noble, but of a scholar by the name of Sir Hans Sloane. He died in London in 1752. Rather than selling his objects, which numbered in the thousands and came from all parts of the world, he donated them to the nation. His *wunderkabinet* became public, and accordingly was given the name of The British Museum. In 1772, its size was doubled through the purchase of Sir William Hamilton's collection of mostly Italian, Greek, and Egyptian objects.

This was the first collection to bear the name of a nation-state. Great Britain had then been in existence for only about 50 years, after the Act of Union united England and Scotland. This two-part country (four-part once Wales and Ireland were counted) sought to bind itself together in part by amassing objects from beyond its borders, as evidence of Otherness. The Sloane pieces showed the vast range and cultural diversity of the world, much of which was now governed from London; Hamilton's pieces were proof of British ownership of the classical world, particularly the empire of Rome, in which the home culture was itself rooted. This venture was directly supported by Parliament, which paid the colossal sum of £8,400 toward establishment of the new museum.

The museum had (and still has) no modern European objects: contemporary Europe was housed elsewhere. This reflects the Orientalist view that, whereas most of the world is bound by its history, Europe has escaped tradition to create a dynamic present. Departments within the British Museum are still known as "the Department of so-and-so Antiquities," as if past and present had ruptured only in Europe, whereas elsewhere all objects were necessarily an embodiment of tradition.

Sloane was a physician by profession, with an interest in medicinal plants. He was head of London's very own *yakusō-en*, the Chelsea Physic Garden, located near the banks of the Thames, into which he gathered plants from throughout the world. This garden was later surpassed by the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew (note the shift from "physic" garden to "botanic" garden), but in Sloane's lifetime Chelsea was superior, and one of the oldest of its kind in England, second only to that of Oxford University, founded fifty years earlier in 1621. In 1732, Sloane designed the first hot-house for Chelsea. The collection grew to be so fine that even Linnaeus visited it in 1736, to see plants unavailable elsewhere.

On his death, a marble statue of Sloane was erected in the center of the garden to memorialise his achievements. The extant statue is life-sized, and shows Sloane wearing the robes of a member of the Royal College of Physicians. This statue stood, like the returned *Kōdayū*, in the middle of a garden of foreign things, sprouting out of strange but curative plantlife. In an interesting irony, in 1984 the statue had to be removed indoors for reasons of preservation, and a replica was put in its place.

The new home chosen for the original was the entrance to the British Museum.

Sloane certainly had an interest in Japanese plants and sought to add them to the garden. He also treasured a book which he referred to as “Kinmodsui,” that is, *Kinmōzui*, an important publication from the Edo period. This he referred to as “a Japanese plant book in which are the figures of near 500 plants and trees growing in Japan, with their names and uses” [quoted KAEMPFER 1727].

This was not the total extent of Sloane’s interest in Japan. It was through him that Kaempfer’s *History* was published. Sloane’s young Swiss secretary, J.-J. Scheuchzer, also a member of the Royal College of Physicians, undertook the arduous work of editing and translating into English a French version of Kaempfer, which had been prepared but never published. He did this, it seems, against his will; his heart was not in it and he made many mistakes, dying shortly after the work was completed. Kaempfer’s book was illustrated, mostly with reworkings of Kaempfer’s own sketches, but some pictures were taken from Sloane’s “Kinmodsui,” including some of tea bushes—an interesting choice given that tea was one of the world’s most well-travelled plants and, after the British took it to India, the one most associated with empire.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The 18th century was a time when the world seemed to expand and contract at the same time. It contracted because of improvements in transport, and expanded through the discovery of new things, places, and systems of human life. These had to be collected if they were to become objects to be used, rather than things to be feared. In previous ages, the world had room for the unknown and the odd; mythic, fanciful categorizations were tolerated; the gap between the real and the imagined did not have to be closed. In the 18th century, however, thinking changed.

Plants proved the essentially unitary nature of the world. They could travel. Nothing, in the end, belonged in only one place. And as plants moved, people moved too, taking them with them as they travelled. The greatest takers became the builders of the greatest empires. To take plants was to take land. Japan’s anomalous position of remaining uncolonised—shared only with Siam whose people were called Thais (*thai* means “free”)—lent it a special interest, since absolute possession of its natural resources remained perpetually beyond the colonisers’ reach. It was for this reason that people kept coming to Japan over many decades.

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