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***Yasōdokugo* 野叟獨語 [A Monologue of an Elderly Rural Man]
by Sugita Genpaku as a Source on Early
Russian-Japanese Relations**

DOI: 10.55512/wmo567986

Abstract: This study introduces and examines the work of Sugita Genpaku (20.10.1733–01.06.1817) — *Yasōdokugo* 野叟獨語 [A monologue of an elderly rural man] — a valuable historical document that describes the reaction of the Japanese government to the expedition of Khvostov and Davidov to Sakhalin in 1806–1807. It was written at the beginning of the 19th c., the period which is considered a turning point in the early Russian-Japanese relations, when Russia began to be perceived as a major dangerous enemy. This unique document, which is hardly ever mentioned in research, stands out in the long list of Japanese archival documents of the 19th c. as one of the very few that depict Russia as a possible trade partner and not an enemy. It was originally written by Sugita Genpaku in 1807 and was published for the first time in 1934 as a part of the multi-volume book called *Dainippon shisō zenshū* 大日本思想全集 [Complete collection of intellectual history works of Great Japan]. Nevertheless, it has been ignored by most scholars throughout the world, including those in Russia and Japan. This study introduces the most interesting parts of the work, which describe the response of the Japanese government to the actions of two Russian officers, lieutenant Khvostov (1776–1809) and midshipman Davidov (1784?–1809), in Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands in 1806 and 1807. This article answers the following questions: what was the image of Russia in Japan? What impact did the expedition to Sakhalin have on Japanese government and society? What was the best way to address the challenges Japan was facing and could trade with Russia help to solve them?

Key words: Sugita Genpaku, Sakhalin, Russia, Japan, Khvostov, Davidov

Introduction

Yasōdokugo 野叟獨語 [A monologue of an elderly rural man] is a valuable historical document, which was written in 1807 by the brilliant scholar Sugita Genpaku¹ (20.10.1733–1.06.1817). His mother died in

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¹ Sugita Genpaku 杉田玄白.

childbirth, and his father was working as a physician in Obama-han 小浜藩 in Wakasa province (present-day Fukui prefecture). Genpaku was expected to follow in his father's footsteps and, therefore, started studying medicine from a very young age. Miyase Ryūmon 宮瀬龍門 (19.01.1720–18.02.1771) was teaching him Chinese science, while Nishi Geni (or Nishi Gentetsu 西玄哲 1681–1760), who was a personal physician of the Tokugawa shogun, guided him through the foundations of European surgical knowledge.

At the beginning of 1771 Sugita Genpaku started his research on human anatomy by conducting post-mortem examinations. In 1774 together with Maeno Ryōtaku (前野良沢 1723–1803), who was a surgeon himself, he translated the Dutch study *Ontleedkundige Tafelen* into Japanese and named it *Kaitai Shinsho* 解体新書 [*New Book of Anatomy*]. This was the first scientific book about human anatomy in Japan. The publication of this study is considered the starting point of the western academic medicine in Japan, which in turn had a significant impact on promotion of *rangaku* 蘭学² throughout the country. In 1815 Sugita Genpaku published a biographical work titled *Rangaku Kotohajime* 蘭学事始 [*The Beginning of Dutch Studies*], in which he provided a thorough description of the events which led to the advances in scientific medicine in Japan. Two years later, in 1817, he passed away at the age of 85.

Sugita Genpaku was a very talented and outstanding scholar who is mostly known for his translation of the above-mentioned work. Although famous as an anatomist and physician, he is hardly ever mentioned as a prominent philosopher and a brilliant writer. His sarcastic and unique way of describing Japanese society at the beginning of the 19th c. in the pages of his rarely mentioned work titled *Yasōdokugo* 野叟獨語 [*A monologue of an elderly rural man*]³ deserves close attention.

This manuscript was originally written by Sugita Genpaku in *kanamajiri* style⁴ in 1807, and nowadays is stored in the Archive of Rare Materials at the Kyoto University in Japan. It consists of 66 pages without pagination, which are bound in a book. The size of the manuscript is 25×18 cm. It is a

² *Rangaku* 蘭学 (Japanese: “Dutch learning”), concerted effort by Japanese scholars during the late Tokugawa period (late 18th–19th cc.) to learn the Dutch language in order to be able to learn Western technology; the term later became synonymous with Western scientific learning in general.

³ *Yasōdokugo* 野叟獨語 [*A monologue of an elderly rural man*]. Kyoto University Main Library, the Archives of Rare Materials. 2–42/ヤ(ya)/1 ID 91002041, record ID RB00010288. (<https://rmda.kulib.kyoto-u.ac.jp/item/rb00010288>).

⁴ *Kanamajiri* style 仮名交り — i.e. the text consists of Chinese characters supplemented by *kana* syllabary.

part of *Tanimura Bunko* collection 谷村文庫 [Tanimura manuscript and book collection], which is also known as *Tanimura kyū zōhon* 谷村旧蔵本 [Book collection previously owned by Tanimura]. This collection originally belonged to Tanimura Ichitarō 谷村一太郎 (1871–1936) — a prominent businessman and former chairman of the board of Fujimoto Bill Broker Bank. Tanimura Ichitarō had a deep interest in classical Japanese and Chinese books, and readily spent a fortune to acquire rare books. This library was created in 1942 by Tanimura Ichitarō’s heir, Tanimura Junzō, who inherited the will of his father to use the documents and books in his family collection to contribute to the advancement of academic studies. He donated more than 9200 books. In order to commemorate Mr. Ichitarō’s donation, these books are affixed with the red seal of *Shūson Bunko* 秋村文庫, as his pseudonym was Shūson 秋村.

Yasōdokugo was published for the first time in 1934 as a part of the multi-volume book called *Dainippon shisō zenshū* 大日本思想全集 [Complete collection of intellectual history works of Great Japan], which was used in the process of deciphering the original manuscript. The name of the source, *A monologue of an elderly rural man*, might be the reason why it was ignored by the majority of scholars throughout the world. Genpaku was surely an elderly man, 74 years old at the time of creating this work, but he was far from being “rural”.

His whole life Sugita Genpaku had close connections with bakufu and was privileged to have an audience with the shogun himself. His last meeting with the eleventh shogun Tokugawa Ienari 徳川家斉 (18.11.1773–22.03.1841, 1787–1837 as shogun) took place in 1805,⁵ and during this audience he offered the latest medicines to the head of the government as a gift. Through his close connections with the political elite he had access to information and government understanding regarding the events of that time. So, it is likely not a coincidence that Sugita Genpaku decided to leave his medical practice and delegate all responsibilities to his son in 1807 — the year when the second expedition of Khvostov and Davidov to Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands took place. Immediately after that he started working on *Yasōdokugo*, each page and sentence of which is filled with worry about the future of his own country, Japan. It is not entirely clear if the retirement of Sugita Genpaku and publication of his work are linked in any way, but one thing is certain — he knew about the bakufu policies first-hand.

⁵ *Nihonshi sōgō nenpyō* 2001: 441.

There is one more reason why Genpaku refers to himself as an “elderly man.” In 1806, a year before his retirement, Sugita Genpaku witnessed the Great Bunka Fire 文化の大火 (*bunka no taika*), during which 1200 people were killed, 530 towns, 80 samurai houses and 80 temples and shrines burned down to the ground. Although Sugita Genpaku was one of the few lucky ones whose house was not damaged during the fire, his beliefs were shaken to the core. On the 20th of March, 1806, sixteen days after the fire, Genpaku sent a letter to his colleague *rangakusha*⁶ Koishi Genshun⁷ 小石元俊 (1743–1809), where he mentions, that “during the fire that consumed Edo, many houses burned down to the ground, and the world was engulfed in unrest. My soul is filled with anxiety”.⁸ It was not only the devastating fire, but also the turbulent state of the world that worried Genpaku the most. “Every day our bodies grow old, there is a chance we will not be here [in this world] tomorrow. There is nothing left from my desire to live a long life. I have witnessed the end of the world, I have seen the world reaching its peak, so there is nothing to regret. The only thing that worries me the most is the future of our children and grandchildren”,⁹ wrote Genpaku.

In this sense, *Yasōdokugo* is Genpaku’s attempt, being an “elderly man,” to guide the next generation through the difficult times of turmoil and share a piece of advice that would help them build a new better world. In the pages of this valuable text Genpaku blames the government for an incredibly poor state of the country and criticizes its policies. He also emphasizes the fact that Japan was not capable of winning any fight or war as the soldiers were not ready.

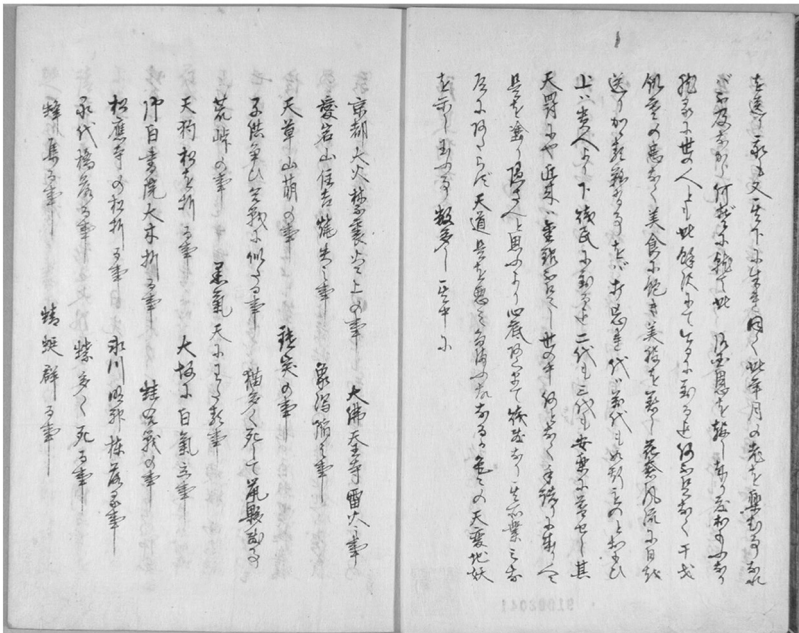
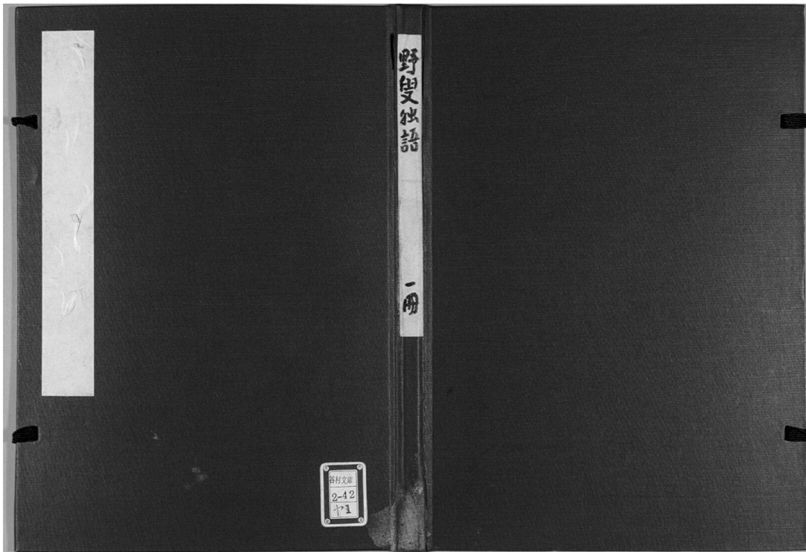
All these condemnatory ideas are hidden behind a deceptive and self-deprecatory title of the source — *A monologue of an elderly rural man*. Genpaku uses the word “monologue,” as he was most likely sure that only few people at the time would understand and support his thoughts about Japanese society and changes the country was going through. On the other hand, this kind of pejorative name would not raise any questions and draw any attention of the government officials. Probably for the same reason it also stayed out of scholars’ focus for more than a century.

⁶ *Rangakusha* 蘭学者 — scholars of Dutch studies, Japanese scholars of the late Tokugawa period who studied Western science using works written in the Dutch language.

⁷ His name can be found in *Rangaku Kotohajime* authored by Sugita Genpaku, since he was acquainted with *rangakusha* in Edo.

⁸ KATAGIRI 1971: 345.

⁹ *Ibid.*: 346.



“Yasoudokugo” 野叟獨語 [A monologue of an elderly rural man].

Kyoto University Main Library the Archives of Rare Materials. 2-42/ヤ(ya)/1 ID 91002041,
 record ID RB00010288. (<https://rmda.kulib.kyoto-u.ac.jp/item/rb00010288>)

This photo is from the Digital Archive of Kyoto University

Also, in the records of the Archives of Rare Materials at the Kyoto University this manuscript has an additional title (*Gaikō jijitsu*) *Yasōdokugo* (外交事実)野叟獨語 [(Diplomatic facts) A monologue of an elderly man]. It is interesting that the words “Gaikō jijitsu” 外交事実 [Diplomatic facts] are written on the cover of the text in a different handwriting, which suggests that they were added later in an attempt to emphasize the importance of this source.

Yasōdokugo is written in a very peculiar manner: it describes the conversation of two people — Sugita Genpaku himself and *kagebōshi* 影法師 — a silhouette on the *shōji* screen that eventually disappears with the rising sun. It consists of three volumes: in the first one, the author describes Japan and compares it to the Russian Empire; in the second, he depicts the poor state of Japanese society at the beginning of the 19th c.; in the third one, he comes up with arguments proving that Japan could profit from trade with Russia. *Yasōdokugo* starts with the main question about Russia and its people, who “for the past 30 years have been moving further towards our islands north of Oku-Ezo,” and recently got more active. This was true, because at the beginning of the 19th c. Russia was putting much effort to open trade with Japan.

Establishing trade relations with this country would allow access to its ports and food, which in turn could solve one of the biggest problems the Russian Empire was facing at the time — organizing a food supply for Russian colonies in North America. However, Japan was following the policy of national isolation — so called *sakoku*¹⁰ — under which no foreigners could enter the country. The Russian government made an attempt to obtain exceptional rights to trade with Japan and sent its first official mission to Nagasaki in 1804. The head of the mission N.P. Rezanov¹¹ was aware of the critical state of the colonies and was determined to make everything possible for this plan to succeed.

In the pages of *Yasōdokugo* Genpaku mentions that after spending six months in Nagasaki, Rezanov received a refusal from the Tokugawa government: “There is shocking news that Nagasaki *bugyō*¹² rejected the foreign mission”. The head of the Russian mission was distressed and not

¹⁰ *Sakoku* (鎖国) — literally “closed country,” but meaning “national isolation”.

¹¹ Nikolai Petrovich Rezanov (Николай Петрович Резанов) (1764–1807) was a Russian nobleman and statesman who promoted the project of Russian colonization of Alaska and California.

¹² 奉行 *bugyō* — often translated as “commissioner” or “magistrate” or “governor,” was a title assigned to samurai officials of the Tokugawa government in feudal Japan.

willing to settle for this negative answer. Upon his arrival to Petropavlovsk port in Kamchatka, in 1805, he met N.A. Khvostov¹³ and G.I. Davidov,¹⁴ and began planning an expedition to Sakhalin as a means to make Japan open its doors to Russian trade. On the 8th of August, 1806, he issued a directive that authorized the expedition to Sakhalin; however, on the 24th of September, 1806, he issued another directive that cancelled the expedition (although this was carried out in a confusing and unclear manner). Lieutenant Khvostov, after some hesitation, interpreted the last directive from Rezanov as permission to undertake the expedition, and departed from the port of Okhotsk in Kamchatka to Sakhalin. Moreover, the following year, in 1807, together with midshipman Davidov, he undertook the second expedition, this time not only to Sakhalin, but to the Kuril Islands as well.

In various studies by Japanese scholars this expedition is mentioned under different names, such as “The Incident with Khvostov and Davidov” (フヴォストフ・ダヴィドフ事件),¹⁵ “Attack of Khvostov” (フヴォストフ来寇事件),¹⁶ “Russian assault” (露人の暴行),¹⁷ “Sudden attack on Karafuto” (カラフト襲撃),¹⁸ “The Russian attack in the Bunka Years” (文化魯寇事件).¹⁹ Russian and overseas researchers tend to use a more neutral term — “expedition.” In Japanese studies Khvostov is mainly depicted as an oppressor and pirate who attacked the Japanese and scared away the Ainu. On the other hand, in Russian studies Khvostov is described as a patriot, and the expeditions to Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands are seen as the start of the exploration and development of Sakhalin.²⁰ Sugita Genpaku does not evaluate his personality, but refers to his actions as *Ezochi ranbō* 「蝦夷地亂妨」 — “Ezo land disturbance”.

The Sakhalin expedition of 1806–1807 is considered not only a turning point in the early period of the Russian-Japanese relations, but also one of the main reasons why Russia began to be perceived as a major dangerous enemy from the beginning of the 19th c. Japanese archival historical documents often reveal how scared and paranoid the Japanese government

¹³ Nikolai Aleksandrovich Khvostov (Хвостов Николай Александрович) 1776–1809.

¹⁴ Gavriil Ivanovich Davidov (Давыдов Гавриил Иванович) 1784–1809.

¹⁵ ARIIZUMI 2003: 184.

¹⁶ NAKAMURA 1904: 58.

¹⁷ INOBE 1942: 219.

¹⁸ KIMURA 2005: 63; HIRAKAWA 2006: 39.

¹⁹ MATSUMOTO 2006: 43.

²⁰ POLEVOI 1959; SENCHENKO 2006; CHEREVKO 1999; POZDNEEV 1909; SOKOLOV 1852; DAVIDOV 1848.

became. Countless exaggerated reports were delivered to the shogunate: “Huge ships shaped like mountains appeared at the horizon with 600 Russians on them. They burned everything down to the ground and took all Ainu away with them. Everybody feels fear towards Russia”.²¹

The majority of the Japanese people supported the idea of fighting back against the Russians, but there were people who were against military actions and supported the idea of opening commerce with Russia. Sugita Genpaku was one of the few people who dared to mention that Russia might have been only trying to establish trade with Japan and was not interested in colonizing it.

This study introduces the most interesting parts of the work *Yasōdokugo*, which describe Russian-Japanese relations and the response of the Japanese government to the actions of two Russian officers — lieutenant Khvostov (1776–1809) and midshipman Davidov (1784?–1809) in Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands in 1806 and 1807. This valuable document provides information, clarifying the following questions: what was the image of Russia in Japan? What impact did the expedition to Sakhalin have on Japanese government and society? What was the best way to address the challenges Japan was facing and could trade with Russia help to solve them?

The First volume of *Yasōdokugo*: Japan at the beginning of the 19th c.

In the first volume of *Yasōdokugo*, which consists of thirteen handwritten pages, Sugita Genpaku describes Japan in a rather unflattering manner: the country needs to be renovated, its laws have to be revised, and its attitude towards Russia should be reconsidered. The author sees Japan of the early 19th c. as an “old house”. Genpaku examines the first Russian official diplomatic mission to Japan and the turmoil on Sakhalin and Iturup islands that followed later. He explains it all as a “common misunderstanding”, and mentions that, if all the “rumours” will turn out to be true, the “dark time”²² will be inevitable.

Sugita Genpaku’s words are full of acute criticism and are as sharp as a samurai sword, when he talks about Japanese government and its political actions. He also makes an interesting observation when he mentions that

²¹ *Tsūkō ichiran*: 218–219.

²² *Tsūkō ichiran*: 270.

people in Japan were opposed to the decision of the Tokugawa bakufu, which had decided to refuse to open trade with Russia.

He also mentions a terrifying letter from lieutenant Khvostov and Davidov with the following threat: “If you refuse to open trade with us, be prepared that next spring we will send our fleet and conquer these lands.” Possible existence of this letter meant only one thing for Genpaku: the beginning of the end. He states: “The world will become a chaos and the dark time will come”.²³

Japanese text of the source

兼好法師が思ふこといはざれば腹ふくるととなり、これはいはんとすれば他人の聞んことを恐る。又止めんとすれば胸問えて堪へがたし。

[…]

いつとなく無盆の住居を建續ぎ、覺えず次第々々に大家になり、扱時々の修復も加へずして捨置しに、夫が一度損し、今は已に倒れんとするに至り、修復を加る時は、不用なる建續を取棄ざれば、用立候様には成らざるもの也、然るに夫も惜し是も捨てがたしとして修復せば、必調はざるもの也、国家も其如く何となく色々仕癖しなしの付たる處を改めんとすれば、又彼の是のといふ差支有様に見えて、夫を改る事氣のごとくの様と思ふ事のみ多く、故に中興の業はかたきと也、此事は英斷にあらざれば行ひがたしといへり、申も恐れ多き事ながら、此時節は世將亂の萌見えたるやう也、専中興の御政道を行ひ可給御時代かと存る也。

先其萌の第一と申すは、近来諸人聞候處の魯西亜國の外串也、三十年以來東北奥蝦夷の諸島を蠶蝕し、又頻りに隣誼交易を取結ふの事を願ひ、これ迄段々次第して、甲子の秋長崎表へ使節を送り候處御論文を被下御取上なく差戻されし故に、彼其宿意に背きし事なれば不快に思ひしと見へ、長崎の御取扱嚴酷に過ぎ、前約異變也とて憤り、夫を名として去秋當夏蝦夷西北諸島へ亂入せしと申すなり、是事情を通ぜざる行違に出たる事なるべし。

然れとも、愚夫庸俗の類は委細の事をも辨へず、何か御異變の様にのみ心得、はるばる音物を持衆せし使者を空しく御返し被成しは、夷狄ながら大国へ對し御無禮のやうに申、彼を是とし此を非と思ふ

²³ *Yasōdokugo* 野叟獨語 [A monologue of an elderly rural man]. Kyoto University Main Library, the Archives of Rare Materials. 2-42/ヤ(ya)/1 ID 91002041, record ID RB00010288. *Dainippon shisō zenshū* 1934: 270.

様に申聞ゆる也、是無識者の論ずる事なれ共、我國の人心迄服せざる様に聞ゆる所あるに似て、以ての外的事也、天の時は地の利にしかず地の利は人の和に如ずと承れば、何事有ても我が人心に服せざるの所は大切な御事也。

[…]

抑彼魯西亜國と申すは所謂設斯箇夫亞にて、昔は一つ王國なりしが、常時より四五代以前の英主「ペテルゴロード」といふ男其近國を切從へ、其國を中興し、段々勢ひ盛になり、次第々に手を延ばし、我蝦夷の向ふ方「カムシカツト」と云處迄己が領國になし、遂に彼の方の帝位を履み、今時世界第一の強盛大邦となりして由。

[…]

扱右申「ペテル」帝より後の女王の時、我日本へも通路なし度思付しよし、是は我元文の初年の事と聞ゆ、其四年の夏我東海を通行せし異船は、此國の船と見ゆる也、しかれば七十年斗り前の事也、此頃より我國へ通じたきことを心懸しとぞ思はる々也、兎角彼地方の人は惣じて事を謀る事は心長く、子々孫々も其志を繼ぎ 色々に手をかへ品を替へ、望みを達る事と見へ、とふとふ去る頃は松前にて興へし信牌を持衆り、彌信義を通じ交易をも取結び度よしにて、長崎へ使節を遣したる事になしたり、然るに其節の御扱不宜といふを名として、去秋より當夏に至り、蝦夷地西は樺太の内、東はエトロウ島へ上陸亂妨し、若し交易御免無之は来る春は、數艘の船を差向、北地の分は攻取り可申との書を渉し一先歸帆せしよしの聞へ也、是實事ならば世は亂るべき端にして誠に御大切な御時節到来せしと存ざるなり。

Translation from Japanese

If I do not share what is on my mind, I will get sick to my stomach, but I am afraid, that even if I try to share my sincere thoughts with others, they will not listen to me, but on the other hand, if I do not say anything, I will start questioning my own morals.²⁴

[…]

Japan is like an old house, which for some time was enlarged with multiple useless rooms. It grew big, but nobody was taking care of it. When it reached a horrible condition, and the time has come to get rid of all the things that were not in use anymore, everybody started saying that they were

²⁴ Ibid.: 262 Sugita Genpaku is using the Japanese term *ring* the spirit of Japan — the it is within the country: in its old rituals and burocr.

too dear to the heart, too precious to throw them away. There is no way one can build a new house this way. This is similar to the country.²⁵ It is essential to break down all the bad habits. It is believed that it takes a lot of work to start reforms on all levels. Therefore, only a person with a strong will can succeed in reviving something that has once declined. I am afraid to say this, but if we observe present matters carefully, we will see a lot of turmoil and disturbance in this world. In my opinion, the time has come to rule people and land in a new way that will help the country to recover and grow.

There is one thing that causes disturbance in the country — the news concerning Russia that everybody is talking about. The people of that land²⁶ for the past 30 years have been moving further towards our islands north of Oku-Ezo.²⁷ Their desire to get permission to trade with Japan increased so much that they even dared to come here and ask for it. In the autumn of the year of the Wood Rat²⁸ the first mission arrived to Nagasaki, but they were denied. Displeased with the answer of the Japanese government, they furiously declared: “The way we got treated in Nagasaki crossed all the limits of harshness, and this act clearly violates the previous treaty”. Furthermore, in the autumn of the previous year and summer of the current year [autumn of the 3rd year of Bunka and summer of the 4th year of Bunka] twice in a row they invaded the islands north-west of Ezo. Most likely, it happened due to an ordinary misunderstanding.²⁹

Among people who are criticizing the warrior government, there is a perception that ordinary officials have absolutely no clue about the current situation in the world and they see the Russians only as invaders. The fact that they ignored the head of the official mission who brought the presents all the way from the other side of the world and sent him back home proves Japan to be an uncivilized country.³⁰ However, such an ill-treatment of a powerful country is unacceptable!

Of course, it is limited to those without any knowledge, but this inconsistent decision of the Japanese government planted the seed of fear

²⁵ *Nihonshi sōgō nenpyō* 2001: 266.

²⁶ The Russians.

²⁷ One of Japanese names for the Sakhalin Island.

²⁸ 甲子 *kōshi* — Wood Rat — 1st year of Bunka — 1804.

²⁹ *Yasōdokugo* 野叟獨語 [*A monologue of an elderly rural man*]. Kyoto University Main Library, the Archives of Rare Materials. 2-42/ヤ(ya)/1 ID 91002041, record ID RB00010288. *Dainippon shisō zenshū* 1934: 267.

³⁰ Sugita Genpaku is using the term *iteki* 夷狄, which can be translated into English as “barbarian,” although in Japanese this word has a more moderate connotation — *mikaikoku* 未開國, which literally means “the country that has not been opened (developed) yet”.

and anxiety even in the souls of all Japanese people.³¹ There are other things as well. It is said that the opportunities given by heaven cannot match the favorable conditions of the land, and the favorable conditions of the land cannot match the harmony of the people's hearts. No matter what happens, it is important that we do not submit to our human feelings.

[...]

The original name of Russia, as we call this country now, used to be Moscovia, and it occupied a relatively small territory. However, a great monarch (ruler) named Peterugorodo,³² reformed it into a prosperous country and spread his influence all the way to Kamchatka,³³ which is very close to our Ezo.³⁴ Apparently, he became the emperor of all the countries he invaded, and his country became one of the strongest empires in the world.³⁵

[...]

After the reign of the emperor named Peteru, the era of the Empress has begun. This Empress wanted to start trade with our country, and in the 4th year of Genbun,³⁶ foreign ships — very similar to Russian ones — have entered the waters of the Northern Sea causing quite an uproar. It is clear that already then, about 70 years ago, they were planning to establish commerce with Japan. It seems that once people from that place have a goal they do everything possible and impossible to achieve it, and put all their energy into it. If the goal is impossible to achieve within one man's life, they leave it to later generations, to their children and grandchildren. That way, by changing tactics, they do not stop until they get it their way.³⁷

Eventually, after going to Matsumae and receiving a permission to trade, they decided to establish commerce [with Japan] by sending a mission to

³¹ *Yasōdokugo* 野叟獨語 [*A monologue of an elderly rural man*]. Kyoto University Main Library, the Archives of Rare Materials. 2-42/ヤ(ya)/1 ID 91002041, record ID RB00010288. *Dainippon shisō zenshū* 1934: 267.

³² Peter the Great (1672–1725) ruled the Tsardom of Russia and later the Russian Empire from 7 May (O.S. 27 April) 1682 until his death. “Peterugorodo” likely comes from his name in the Dutch language “Peter de Grote”.

³³ In the original Japanese text Kamchatka is called *Kamushikatsuto* カムシカツト.

³⁴ Ezo 蝦夷 — the former name of Hokkaido, the northern island of Japan.

³⁵ *Yasōdokugo* 野叟獨語 [*A monologue of an elderly rural man*]. Kyoto University Main Library, the Archives of Rare Materials. 2-42/ヤ(ya)/1 ID 91002041, record ID RB00010288. *Dainippon shisō zenshū* 1934: 269.

³⁶ Genbun 元文 — the name of the period that lasted five years: 1736–1741.

³⁷ *Yasōdokugo* 野叟獨語 [*A monologue of an elderly rural man*]. Kyoto University Main Library, the Archives of Rare Materials. 2-42/ヤ(ya)/1 ID 91002041, record ID RB00010288. *Dainippon shisō zenshū* 1934: 270.

Nagasaki, but were treated disrespectfully. Therefore, from last autumn to this summer they reached the lands of Ezo and caused disturbance on Karafuto [Sakhalin] in the west and on Etorofu [Iturup] in the east. They also sent a letter which said: “If you refuse to open trade with us, be prepared that next spring we will send our fleet and conquer these lands”. If this is true, the world will become a chaos and the dark time will come.

The Second volume of *Yasōdokugo*: the state of the Japanese society at the beginning of the 19th c.

In the second volume, which consists of twenty-five handwritten pages and is the longest one, the author describes the disturbingly bad state of Japanese society on all levels at the beginning of the 19th c. Samurai, feudal lords, retainers, commoners — all of them become victims of Sugita Genpaku’s sharp criticism. His very bold, at times sarcastic, remarks about effeminate feudal lords and warriors who were not able to sit in the saddle are quite entertaining and shocking at the same time.

While comparing the state of the two armies — Japanese and Russian — Genpaku repeatedly emphasizes strength and superiority of the latter, comparing it to a “young hot-blooded soldier”.³⁸ He disapproves the use of armed force against Russia, saying that “Japan does not even have the third of the army it used to have and be proud of”.³⁹ To prove his point of view, he emphasizes that the Russians “defeated the Mongols — and that is something that even Chinese troops could not do. [...] If our weak warriors with no spirit even think of fighting the Russians, who have won the war with the Chinese emperor of the Qing dynasty, I believe that the outcome is obvious”.⁴⁰

It is quite interesting that Sugita Genpaku was one of the very few people who did not fully trust and were critical of all the reports with horrifying information about the Russians on Sakhalin in 1806–1807. In fact, they were exaggerated. The first Russian-Japanese conflict on Sakhalin in 1806 was described as a large-scale armed conflict with 500–600 “red people”⁴¹ involved, when, in fact, it was a fight between three Russians⁴² and four

³⁸ Ibid.: 277.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.: 276.

⁴¹ *Akajin* 赤人 — the Russians.

⁴² Lieutenant Khvostov, Karpinskyi, Koryukin.

Japanese.⁴³ According to revealed historical documents that shed light on the course of the fight, it becomes obvious that it was basically a small fist fight,⁴⁴ in course of which the Japanese were “biting buttocks and legs of the Russian soldiers”.⁴⁵

Genpaku, convinced that it all happened due to a common misunderstanding, claims that Russia has no intention to colonize Japan. He writes: “We should satisfy their wish to trade with us for our own sake. It will make common people of our country only happier”.⁴⁶ Moreover, he suggests a way, quite innovative for its time, to solve this problem. The idea was to conquer the fear, send people to Russia, talk and discuss all the problems, ask for forgiveness and open the doors to trade with the Russian Empire.

Japanese text of the source

[...]

されども今日の世の武家内の情態を見るに、二百年近く豊なる結構至極の御代に生長し、五代も六代も戦ひといふ事は露程も知らず、武道は衰へ次第に衰へ、何ぞの事あらん時御用に立つべき第一の御旗本御家人等も十が七八は其形ち婦人の如く、其志しの卑劣なることは商賣人の如くして、士風廉耻の意は絶たる様也、其中にて能き分の武藝を嗜と申人、弓馬鎗劍は懸れ共、是を以立身出世御番入の手元とする了簡にて、物の師医に阿り諂らひ頭前を拵、身分の節に至り仕合、能尺二の的を射はづさず、また猫の様に仕入たる馬に打跨り、地道を恙なく仕おふすれば、その功にて御番入立身し、其後は何もかも棚へあげ置見向きせず、世話に成たる師家へも無沙汰し薄情の至極いふべからざる徒のみ多し、其専ら志す處の實心は數代

⁴³ Torizō, Genshiti, Tomigorō, Fukumatsu.

⁴⁴ *Ekstrakt iz jurnala fregata Yunony, plavaniya ot Okhotska v gubu Aniva i obratno v Kamchatku, Gavan Petra i Pavla. Sentiabria s 24, noyabria po 10e chislo 1806 goda* [Extract from the logbook of Frigate Yunona, the journey from Okhotsk to the Aniva bay and back to the port of Peter and Paul. From 24th of September till 10th of November 1806]. RGAVMF. F. 14. Op. 1. Ed. hr. 183.

⁴⁵ *Roshia ibun* 魯西亜異聞 [*Strange rumours about Russia*]. Kept at the Historiographical Institute, The University of Tokyo. This handwritten historical document consists of five parts, which were written based on the words of Torizō and Fukumatsu who were captured by Khvostov and brought to the port of Petropavlovsk. Without pagination.

⁴⁶ *Yasōdokugo* 野叟獨語 [*A monologue of an elderly rural man*]. Kyoto University Main Library, the Archives of Rare Materials. 2-42/ヤ(ya)/1 ID 91002041, record ID RB00010288. *Dainippon shisō zenshū* 1934: 286.

奢りに長じすり切たる身代を御役料や御番料の後蔭を以、取直さんと思ふ斗のみなり、又左なくは何の知恵分別もなく、歌舞伎の大將役者同然に一幕也とも人に尊敬されたき望迄也。

其柔弱なる證據は先年小金原御鹿狩の時、數日の間繋き置、或は目を縫い候猪鹿を捕ふさへ、如何なる戰場にも向ふの様、暇迄して盃取かはす様成事の振舞なり、さるにより其後に八官野鹿狩に、人か鹿かの身分けも付ず、傍人に鏑付る様なるうろたへたる事も出来たり、其他水普請の輩は朝夕に唄浄瑠璃、琴三味線、歌舞妓者の眞似に日をくらし、能き分が茶湯生花歌誹諧、又是等を不好等は唐鳥を飼ひ植木を作り、町人を相手に内々にて商をなし、馬好きと呼る々人は駒を乗入癖馬を直し、下直の馬を商賣する思案をめぐらし、大抵が武士が武士たる志有人はなし。

[…]

御旗本何萬人何石に何程といふ御軍役の御定有共、至て御手薄き事の様に奉存候事也。

又大名逆同じ事にて[…] 依ノ是又何事ぞん云ん時は、一人も危き供に可立者は有べからず、然は一騎分の軍役を可持人も人數不足して戰場へ向ふ時は自身鏑長刀持行より外は有べからず、

殊に夫々馬の數は不揃、よし揃へんとても、俄に買集見ても其馬もつみに矢玉の音も聞かず甲冑を帶せて人を見た事も無之事なれば、物怖して用に立べからず、然れば御旗本衆も倍臣も、人馬共に用に立ざる時といふべし。

[…]

まだ其内にならば取扱方も有へき也、夫は先頃の長崎使節御取扱の不行届は、今更すへき様なし、此度夫を名として蝦夷地亂妨をなすといふもの、左のみ此方人民を害せしといふ程にもあらず、唐太エトロフ島の小屋陣屋を焼、米も大方は送り返したりと聞、こなたにてこそ御紋付の御道具を奪れしと承れば、狼籍亂妨とも思へ共、畢竟此方の御備兼て手薄く油斷して居るゆへ、有合ふ人々上陸させ、勝手次第にいたさせ敗走したる故、腹のたてども初めこなたよりいたすまじ、是はこれ彼等が深意はどこ迄も交易を望む宿願也と聞ば、我國備の程も知れぬ事に、何んぞ最初よりかくの如き勝ちを取んと思ふべきや、全こなたの油斷からして、大敵を受けし心地して敗走せし故の事と見ゆる也、彼國にては彼方にて悪む程の不法と思へるにもあらざるもしれず、詰まり交易さえゆるし給はば、何もかも如故の事にして、擒も送り可返と申越せしなれば、一旦の腹いせ小兒の鬪事同前の仕打、彼と是と其情態と接せざる處より出たる如しと見へたり。

[...]

愈彼王命に出たるか、又は北境の者共思ひ企しか、何れにも海上の氷り解て後、通船もなるべき頃、其邊の渡海に馴たる夷人を土地の案内者にして、物に耐て且才氣有人を御撰有て、一先彼領地カムシヤーツカ迄被遣、彼地には和語も通ずる者有よしなれば、荒立ざる様に對話問答し、能々其情を聞糺し、扱彼の所望も能聞抜け、僞忽を陳謝し、偏に交易を望む趣なれば、是迄の事は宜事情の通ぜざるより行違有しと、其所を辨別し、全く御國威の引けさる様に言葉を調べ、一先交易を許たき物なり、かく通辨能く整ひなば、彼も是迄我國への願事應對、文辭言語の通せざる事を得道し、且つ宿願の義成就を幸にして、速に事済むべし、但其交易濟こと經日の後に、根強き夷狄の情不知飽習なれば、又年経る内には色々望生じ、如何様の難題を申すべきも斗られず、其時こそ、手切の一策、合戦に及ぶ事の奇計良術も有べし、尤夫迄には十年も十四五年も間有べし。

但此節の事故なきに氣たゆまず、何卒此間に武族を養ひ軍兵を訓練し、是迄の風俗も御改めさせ、武風を勵し武備嚴重に整て、御用に立候様御世話有之、萬端整度との事也、其時は魯西亜より攻来る共、彼を防ぐ事足り可申、一戦し給ふ共御勝利を得給ふべきなり、此度は衰弱の時勢を案し、世を救い給ふが第一の御趣意にて、まげて交易を御免被成候はば御恥辱の様なれ共、其時こそ必雪き給ふべし。

[...]

Translation from Japanese

[...]

Have a close look at the samurai. They have not known wars for more than 200 years and lived in a peaceful environment: five or even six generations have not even witnessed war. As a result, martial arts have declined. Even if there is a small dispute, 7 or 8 out of 10 retainers of the shogun, who are supposed to react first in such situations together with the vassals of the shogun (*gokenin*⁴⁷), have become so similar to women that

⁴⁷ 御家人 — *gokenin* — was initially a vassal of the Kamakura and Muromachi shogunates. In exchange for protection and the right to become *shugo* (governor) or *jitō* (military estate steward), in times of peace *gokenin* had the duty to protect the imperial court and Kamakura, in case of war had to fight with his forces under the shogun's flag. During the Edo period the term finally came to refer to a direct vassal of the shogun below an *omemie* (御目見), meaning that they did not have the right to an audience with the shogun.

they spend days putting their makeup on. They are vulgar like merchants, and the spirit of the samurai has been lost.⁴⁸ Of course, one cannot say that there are no longer people familiar with martial arts, but they, as a rule, use this ability only as a tool to get social status and to achieve growth in their own career. Indeed, there are only a few left who fully dedicate themselves to the way of the warrior — *bushidō*. They carry out their duties every day, but they hardly have any interest in what they are doing.⁴⁹

Feudal lords can hit the mark only if it is 1 *shaku* 2 *sun*⁵⁰ away from them! Similar to cats, they can sit in the saddle of only a trained⁵¹ horse, and ride it only if there are no holes in the ground!

As a result of their deeds, they were promoted to a higher position, and after that they put everything on the shelf and did not look back. There were many people who were extremely callous and uncaring, neglecting the masters who were taking care of them.

Living a comfortable prosperous life for a few generations, they cannot change a thing now and can only count on their own income. Living a life without fear and worries, they became very similar to kabuki theatre actors, playing the roles of generals on the big stage, trying to attract our attention in the very first act.

Here is a clear example of the weak spirit of the samurai. Last year,⁵² there was the Koganehara Deer Hunt,⁵³ during which nonsensical things took place, such as hunting deer and wild boars that were tied up for a few days or had their eyes sewn.⁵⁴ Right before that, they exchanged sake cups⁵⁵ with their relatives as [warriors do when] they are about to go and fight thousands of enemies on the battlefield to the last drop of blood. Later,⁵⁶ during the

⁴⁸ *Yasōdokugo* 野叟獨語 [A monologue of an elderly rural man]. Kyoto University Main Library, the Archives of Rare Materials. 2-42/ヤ(ya)/1 ID 91002041, record ID RB00010288. *Dainippon shisō zenshū* 1934: 272.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ 35 cm.

⁵¹ Sugita Genpaku is using the Japanese term 仕入れたる馬 *shiiretaru uma* which literary means “a horse that was bought (or trained)”.

⁵² 1795 or 7th year of Kansei period that lasted from 1789 to 1801.

⁵³ Koganehara Deer Hunt, also known as *Koganehara Oshishikari* 小金原御鹿狩, was a large-scale hunt during the Edo period in which Tokugawa shoguns hunted deer, wild boars, etc. It mainly took place in Nakanomaki and Koganemaki area (present-day Matsudo City in Chiba Prefecture).

⁵⁴ *Me wo nuu* 目を縫う, literally, “to stitch the eyes”.

⁵⁵ *Sakazuki* 盃.

⁵⁶ First year of Bunka 文化元年 corresponds to 1804.

Yakanno Deer Hunt⁵⁷ some so-called warriors could not even distinguish a man from a deer and were shooting people standing nearby.

This poor state of affairs can be seen not only among the shogun's vassals, but among the feudal lords as well. In case of serious danger they will not risk their own lives to defend others. Due to the lack of warriors, generals have no other way but to take swords and fight for themselves.⁵⁸

As for warriors of lower rank, they spend their days playing *koto*⁵⁹ and *shamisen*,⁶⁰ acting as kabuki theatre actors. Those who have abilities are involved in flower arrangement (*ikebana*), recite *waka* and *haikai* poems, while others, not fond of these [pastimes], raise foreign birds *karatori*⁶¹ and plant trees.⁶²

Some of them are doing part-time jobs informally, horse-lovers are training horses and selling them for a triple price, concerned only with their own profit. One can say that there are almost no people left who could be called true samurai.⁶³

There are not enough horses in the cavalry. Even if you get all the necessary horses in case of an emergency, these horses never heard the sound of a gun or an arrow, never saw an armour-clad warrior, and they would not be able to make a single step on the battlefield. As a result, there are no respectable warriors left nowadays neither among the shogun's retainers, nor among other vassals and cavalry soldiers.⁶⁴

[...]

There is shocking news that Nagasaki *bugyō*⁶⁵ rejected the foreign mission. There is nothing one can do about it now. Our government sees it as the cause of all the trouble and chaos, which is happening in the land of Ezo now. But there were almost no casualties on our side, and even though some

⁵⁷ Yakanno Deer Hunt is also known as *Yakanno Shishigari* 八官野鹿狩.

⁵⁸ *Yasōdokugo* 野叟獨語 [*A monologue of an elderly rural man*]. Kyoto University Main Library, the Archives of Rare Materials. 2-42/ヤ(ya)/1 ID 91002041, record ID RB00010288. *Dainippon shisō zenshū* 1934: 275.

⁵⁹ 琴 *koto* — a traditional Japanese half-tube zither played by plucking its strings.

⁶⁰ 三味線 *shamisen* — a three-stringed traditional Japanese musical instrument.

⁶¹ 唐鳥 — *karatori* — foreign birds such as parrots and peacocks.

⁶² *Yasōdokugo* 野叟獨語 [*A monologue of an elderly rural man*]. Kyoto University Main Library, the Archives of Rare Materials. 2-42/ヤ(ya)/1 ID 91002041, record ID RB00010288. *Dainippon shisō zenshū* 1934: 273.

⁶³ *Ibid.*: 274.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*: 276.

⁶⁵ 奉行 *bugyō* — often translated as “commissioner” or “magistrate” or “governor,” was a title assigned to samurai officials of the Tokugawa government in feudal Japan.

huts (shacks) and encampments on Karafuto⁶⁶ and Etorofu⁶⁷ were burned down to the ground and some food was taken, all people who were captured were returned back home safely. Of course, if we believe all the rumours saying that some government officials' armour with family crests were taken, then it does look like a violent disturbance. On the other hand, our own defences were weak, which in turn allowed foreigners to reach our shores and move around freely on our land. If we had been strong, it would have never happened. Therefore, it would be wiser to accept their offer to trade while they are giving us this opportunity peacefully. We should not start a war without being confident in our own forces.⁶⁸

[...]

It is unclear whether it happened upon the orders of their monarch or it was a random act of violence of people from the north. That is why it would be wiser to send a talented patient messenger, escorted by the Ainu experienced in sailing, from Ezo to Kamchatka as soon as ice breaks and navigation starts. As there are people who understand Japanese, we should carefully and without anger gather all necessary information to be able to understand the current situation. We should ask about their desires and wishes, repeatedly apologize to them, and if the only thing they are asking for is trade, we should forget about what happened, and with words that would not be too disgraceful to our country, we should grant them a permit to trade with us. This way, if we succeed in reaching mutual understanding, Russia will be pleased and will bury all the problems in the past. Of course, the problem will not be solved if the Russians after satisfying one need will demand more, or another problem will arise. Then it will be time to use force. However, until that time comes, we have at least 10 or even 14–15 years.⁶⁹

If we do not change anything within the next decade, then nothing is going to help us. It is very important to use this time wisely to raise the spirit of warriors, reform the army and train our soldiers. We need to be really careful and pay attention to all the details, only then we will be ready. In that case, even if Russia attacks us, we will be able to chase them away from our land. If the bakufu will agree to trade for the sake of the people, it will of

⁶⁶ 樺太 — Karafuto — the Japanese name of the Sakhalin Island.

⁶⁷ 択捉 — Etorofu — the Iturup island.

⁶⁸ *Yasōdokugo* 野叟獨語 [*A monologue of an elderly rural man*]. Kyoto University Main Library, the Archives of Rare Materials. 2-42/ヤ(ya)/1 ID 91002041, record ID RB00010288. *Dainippon shisō zenshū* 1934: 280.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*: 281.

course be somewhat shameful, but this disgrace will certainly be wiped out then [when the bakufu is ready].⁷⁰

[...]

The third volume of *Yasōdokugo*: “to trade or not to trade” — Russia as a potential trade partner

In the third volume, which consists of twenty-two handwritten pages, Sugita Genpaku explains his thoughts about the ways Japan could use trade with Russia for its own benefit and turn into a prosperous country that can face any enemy who dares to attack Japan.

According to Sugita Genpaku, the most important thing was to gather all necessary forces and finances to strengthen Ezo. He admits that it is one of the crucial and most difficult problems that should be immediately solved, and accuses the government and feudal lords of their unwise way of spending money on different kinds of unnecessary old rituals.

The author encourages the government and the vassals to spend less money on meetings and gatherings, and to make decision-making process faster, in case foreign ships show up at the shores of Japan. As an example, he brings up the case of one Chinese ship that reached the borders of Japan in the 4th year of Bunka.⁷¹ Then it took almost half a year to go through all bureaucratic procedures to let the ship enter the waters of Japan. The author worries: “It would not create a good image of Japan, if the same happens when Russian ships come”.⁷² It becomes obvious that Sugita Genpaku was thinking of the global image of Japan as an open country, which would only profit from trade with the Russian Empire.

The only way to save Japan, according to Sugita Genpaku, is to revive the samurai spirit, make aristocrats and officials send their families away from the capital to villages (in order to benefit the country’s finances), and make everybody work hard towards the common goal of restoring the country by doing everything possible.

Why did Sugita Genpaku not make a proposal to the government sharing his ideas with the officials? The answer that the author gives us in the pages

⁷⁰ Ibid.: 282.

⁷¹ 1807.

⁷² *Yasōdokugo* 野叟獨語 [A monologue of an elderly rural man]. Kyoto University Main Library, the Archives of Rare Materials. 2-42/ヤ(ya)/1 ID 91002041, record ID RB00010288. *Dainippon shisō zenshū* 1934: 290.

of his book is simple: he did not want to be considered crazy. He was convinced that nobody would believe him and take him seriously. He felt helpless, worried and angry. It seems that even this work, his monologue, did not relieve his almost physical pain as his very first and very last words are “I feel sick to my stomach”.

Japanese text of the source

[…]

有徳院様の御時、山下幸内と申せし浪人在寄申出し事有しが、寄特者としてさして御咎もなかりしが、今は時代も替りし事なれば如何者べし、罪を得ん事固より不厭とも、猶狂氣もせずして亂心ものに取扱れん事の残念なれば、申出もならず、只足下の我と限りなき憂をのみ語り合ひ、ふくれし腹内の有雑無雑を、思ひ残さず吐き盡す迄也、必々他人に聞せ給ふなと語れば、夜はほのぼのと明にける。

Translation from Japanese

[…]

In the Yūtokuin’s⁷³ time, one *rōnin*,⁷⁴ whose name was Yamashita Kōnai, shared his thoughts,⁷⁵ and nobody blamed him [for that]. Time has changed and nobody knows how it will go this time. I do not mind committing a sin [and sharing my thoughts with everybody], but I am silent and will stay this way, only because I do not want to be considered crazy [or mad], since I am not. We have been talking about sorrowful things for such a long time that I started feeling ill and sick to my stomach. Promise me that you will keep secret everything we talked about here”. The shadow on the *shōji* screen, that has talked to me for a long time, disappeared. I looked around and realized that the night has passed, the light of my lantern got almost invisible, and that I am silently sitting all alone in my room.⁷⁶

⁷³ Yūtokuin 有徳院 is the dharma name (acquired during Buddhist initiation) of Tokugawa Yoshimune 徳川吉宗 (1716–1745).

⁷⁴ 浪人 — *rōnin* — a samurai with no lord or master in feudal Japan (1185–1868).

⁷⁵ In 1721 Yamashita Kōnai (山下幸内, ?–?) sent a proposal to the government. He criticized the reforms of the Kyōhō era (*Kyōhō no kaikaku* 享保の改革), which were aimed to reform Japan’s social and economic conditions, and were implemented during the 30-year rule of the eighth Tokugawa shogun, Tokugawa Yoshimune (徳川吉宗, 1716–1745).

⁷⁶ *Yasōdokugo* 野叟獨語 [*A monologue of an elderly rural man*]. Kyoto University Main Library, the Archives of Rare Materials. 2-42/ヤ(ya)/1 ID 91002041, record ID RB00010288. *Dainippon shisō zenshū* 1934: 301–302.

Special Signs

[...] — text is omitted by the author of this article

[] — additional comments by the author of this article

Conclusion

In the pages of *Yasōdokugo* Russia appears as a prosperous country that spreads its influence and cannot be defeated. The Russians are described as people with a strong spirit, who never stop until they reach their aim, while the Japanese are described as a nation that has lost its spirit, with “effeminate feudal lords”, soldiers “chewing fried chicken”, and weak samurai lacking spirit.

Sugita Genpaku makes it clear that the true enemy is not outside Japan, but within the country: it is found in its old rituals and bureaucratic procedures that become obstacles to further growth of the country. As a solution, he proposes to renovate the country on all levels: political, financial, military and economical. The author suggests that opening trade with Russia could only help in these undertakings. The main goal would be restoring the spirit of Japan, the spirit of the samurai.

Yasōdokugo lets us see Japan and its people from a new perspective. In a quite unusual way Sugita Genpaku provides evidence confirming that N.P. Rezanov (1764–1807), the head of the first Russian diplomatic mission to Japan, was to some extent right when he assumed that “many Japanese minds are supporting Russia”.⁷⁷

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⁷⁷ AVPRI F. SPGA I — 7. Op. 6. 1802 god. d7 l. Papka 37, l. 242.

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