

EXCERPTS FROM SHINRON (NEW THESES): "THE BARBARIANS' NATURE"

by Aizawa Seishisai

Introduction

Aizawa Seishisai (1781-1863) was an important Confucian scholar and tutor to the lords of Mito, a branch of the Tokugawa family. Aizawa's greatest work, *Shinron* ("New Theses"), was written in 1825, in the wake of a string of incidents of Western ships entering Japanese waters. Now considered a seminal contribution to Japanese nationalist thought, *Shinron* tapped into rising sentiments in Japan supporting a more active political role for the emperor and a firm stand against the intrusions of Western "barbarians." Aizawa's writings, as well as the work of other scholars in what was known as the Mito School, would later prove an inspiration to the detractors of the Tokugawa shogunate who rallied around the slogan *sonnō jōi* ("revere the Emperor and expel the barbarians").

Selected Document Excerpt with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

From *Anti-Foreignism and Western Learning in Early-Modern Japan*, by Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi (Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1986), 208-209, 213.

Excerpts from Shinron (New Theses): "The Barbarians' Nature"
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The barbarians coming to spy on our Middle Kingdom during the past three hundred years arrived one after another from various nations. Though their homelands differ, they all revere the same god. This means that Christianity has had designs on our Middle Kingdom for the past three hundred years. In dealing with this [sustained threat], our Middle Kingdom has on each occasion adopted a different policy based on the then-prevalent opinion. The predators have a firm, fixed objective and steadfastly try to achieve it; the prey intermittently changes its defense posture, at times assuming the hard-line, at times, the soft-line, always vacillating between the two. Who can guarantee that the predators forever will meet frustration trying to discover our weaknesses? To turn our vacillation into constancy of purpose and eliminate the weaknesses we possess, we first must fully understand the barbarians' nature. We first must fully understand the barbarians' nature.

Questions:

1. How would you characterize Aizawa's view of the West?
2. Given Japan's historical experience dealing with the West, do you think that Aizawa is at all justified in his views?

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3. How does Aizawa feel about Tokugawa policy toward and preparations for the Western threat?
4. What does Aizawa believe is Japan's proper course of action in confronting the "barbarians"?
5. Why is it significant that Aizawa calls Japan "our Middle Kingdom"?

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The bakufu once made it plain to Russia that Japanese law requires us to destroy on sight any barbarian ship approaching our coasts. But now the English regularly appear and anchor off our shores, and we do not lift a finger to drive them away. [Quite the contrary, as in the recent Ōtsuhama affair,] when they have the gall to land, we go out of our way to provide for their needs and send them merrily along. Will the barbarians have any respect for our laws after they hear about this? The English come and go as they please, draw maps and sketch our terrain, disrupt our inter-island transport system, and win over our commoners with their occult religion and the lure of profit. If smuggling increases and we fail to stop commoners from aiding and abetting the barbarians, who knows what future conspiracies may hatch?

But our temporizing, gloss-it-over officials reply, "The foreigners are just fishermen and merchants doing nothing out of the ordinary; there is no cause for alarm." What simpletons! The barbarians live ten thousand miles across the sea; when they set off on foreign conquests, "they must procure supplies and provisions from the enemy." That is why they trade and fish. Their men-of-war are self-sufficient away from home. If their only motive for harpooning whales was to obtain whale meat, they could do so in their own waters. Why should they risk long, difficult voyages just to harpoon whales in eastern seas?

(Gloss: The waters off Greenland, for example, teem with whales. That is why barbarian whalers from all over the world go there. Moreover, Greenland is but a short voyage from England.)

Their ships can be outfitted for trading, or fishing, or *fighting*. Can anyone guarantee that their merchant vessels and fishing boats of today will not turn into warships tomorrow? ...

But some dimwits argue, "The warriors of our Divine Realm have been peerless throughout the world since antiquity. The barbarians are puny runts; there is no cause for

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alarm." True, the fighting men of our Divine Realm are brave and skilled in warfare, and our customs reinforce this [native martial spirit]. But times change; there are eras of weakness as well as strength. During the Warring States period [1467-1568], our warriors were truly fit for combat; proper movements on the battlefield were simple reflex actions. Our warriors proved their valor through actual battlefield achievements, such as capturing enemy banners or beheading enemy generals. But two hundred years have passed since our warriors last tasted battle. How many of them today are trained well enough to cope with the sudden thrusts and feints or the other complexities of warfare? The weak-hearted would flee for their lives, disrupting the ranks; the courageous would die meaninglessly, their valor coming to naught. Our skill and valor do not guarantee victory. When the Mongols attacked [in 1274 and 1281], the military prowess of our Divine Realm was at its prime. But due to our ignorance of enemy formations and tactics, our valor counted for little. Our headlong charges led only to self-decimation. This is why I maintain that victory in war depends entirely on the statesman-general's stratagems and long-range planning. But the art of war as taught today consists of outmoded ideas and tactics employed by medieval generals like Takeda Shingen and Uesugi Kenshin. We do not observe foreign troops directly, nor do we gather information about them. Once war breaks out, they may engage us in a totally unexpected way, so it is a poor idea to rely solely on our reputation for valor.

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