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## **THESIS BOOKLET**

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**The Perception of Japan's International Relations  
in the Hungarian Press from the Beginnings to 1853**

**Doctoral Dissertation**

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## 1. Motivation for Topic Choice and Research Objectives

In my thesis I researched how news about Japan and its relations with the West appeared in the emerging and consolidating Hungarian-language periodical press up until 1853, in parallel with the Edo Period (1603–1868, *Edo jidai* 江戸時代) in Japan, with a special focus on the *Sakoku* (鎖国), or “closed country” era. The view that Japan, with a few exceptions, isolated itself from the world rejecting all attempts for contacts, even to the degree of violence, has taken root in the public consciousness. However, it is important to consider the perspective that the Japanese people did not see the period as an era of isolation, but rather as one in which they merely restricted their foreign relations suitable for their own needs. According to these regulations, during most of the Edo Period among all the European and Western nations only the Dutch were allowed to maintain official relations with Japan. Before the last restriction edict in 1639, Japan had connections from the 1540s with some European nations (Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, and England). The appearance of the first Europeans in Japan coincided with the period of unification of Japan, after which the presence of foreigners began to be seen as a disruptive force, and as a consequence, representatives of catholic countries connecting their trade with missionary activities were expelled from the country. Meanwhile the protestant English and Dutch traders were allowed to maintain relations but ultimately only the Dutch remained, after adapting to the strict regulations characteristic of the period of isolation.

The viewpoint emphasizing the total isolation of Japan became so widespread that it was not until the second half of the 20th century that research started to shed light on proofs that Japan did not completely close itself off from the outside world. Even the term *sakoku*<sup>1</sup> is not of Japanese origin; it was based on an early 19th century translation of Engelbert Kaempfer’s (1651–1716) book, *History of Japan*.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, this research of the Hungarian press of the time showed the contemporary dominant Western views about the closed nature of Japan. The Austro–Hungarian Empire (before 1868 the Habsburg Empire) had no official relations with Japan until 1869, so all the information regarding Japan came from the Western press. (Only one Hungarian traveller (Maurice Benyovszky) is known to have visited Japan during the *Sakoku* period.)

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<sup>1</sup> The compound word 鎖国 is made up of two kanji characters. The first character (鎖) means chain, iron fitting or connection and the second character (国) means country. The relevant entry in the Japanese–Hungarian dictionary gives two meanings. The first is national seclusion or isolation, and the second refers to the historical period during which Japan cut off all contact with the outside world, only allowing limited trade with the Netherlands and China. Varrók Ilona (ed.): Japán–magyar nagyszótár, 2nd edition, Budapest, Japán Stúdiumok Alapítvány, 2024, 490, さこく

<sup>2</sup> Laver Michael S.: *The Sakoku Edicts and the Tokugawa Hegemony*, Amherst, New York, Cambria Press, 2011, 1.

Based on these facts, my research falls within the field of the history of international relations and more specifically into the study of reception history. I intended to examine how such a distant country like Japan appeared in the Western perceptions, and to what extent it became a recognised and commonly accepted topic and how it integrated into the public thinking of the time. The press played a primary mediating role in this process, which is why the majority of sources used in this thesis consist of articles published in contemporary newspapers and periodicals. I considered it worthwhile to research what the contemporary Hungarian press wrote about the *Sakoku* and relationship between the West and Japan from its beginning until 1853, when the arrival of the Americans brought an end to the era of isolation of Japan.

I sought answers to the following questions: What details appeared in the articles? What did the people consider interesting or important to mention in them? How did the authors relate to the given topic? It is also important to observe how the earliest image of Japan began to shape in Hungary thanks to these articles. During the time when there were no official Hungarian–Japanese relations, readers could gain knowledge and information about this distant country through these writings. These articles shaped what people thought about Japan, what opinions and images were formed about this distant, “closed”, and strange world – as they can also be seen as forerunners of the perception of Japan that developed after the official relations were established between the two countries.

## 2. Sources and Methodology

The focus was on countries Japan had some form of contact with either during or prior to the *Sakoku* period, and on articles published in the Hungarian press from its beginning up to 1853. Specifically, I examined the Japanese relations with Portugal, the Netherlands, the USA, Russia and England/Great Britain. Among these the Portuguese represented the beginning of the contacts, the Dutch maintained continuous presence, the Americans played a pivotal role in reestablishing relations, while the Russians and the English made multiple attempts to initiate contacts during the examined period.

The source collection spanned from 2018 to 2020. During this time, I attempted to examine all accessible newspapers, journals and related publications – such as yearbooks and supplements – that published information pertaining to the foreign relations of Japan with the west and were available in the *Arcanum* database<sup>3</sup> all the way up until 1853. In this period there was no standardised system for the transcription of Japanese words, let alone the name of Japan

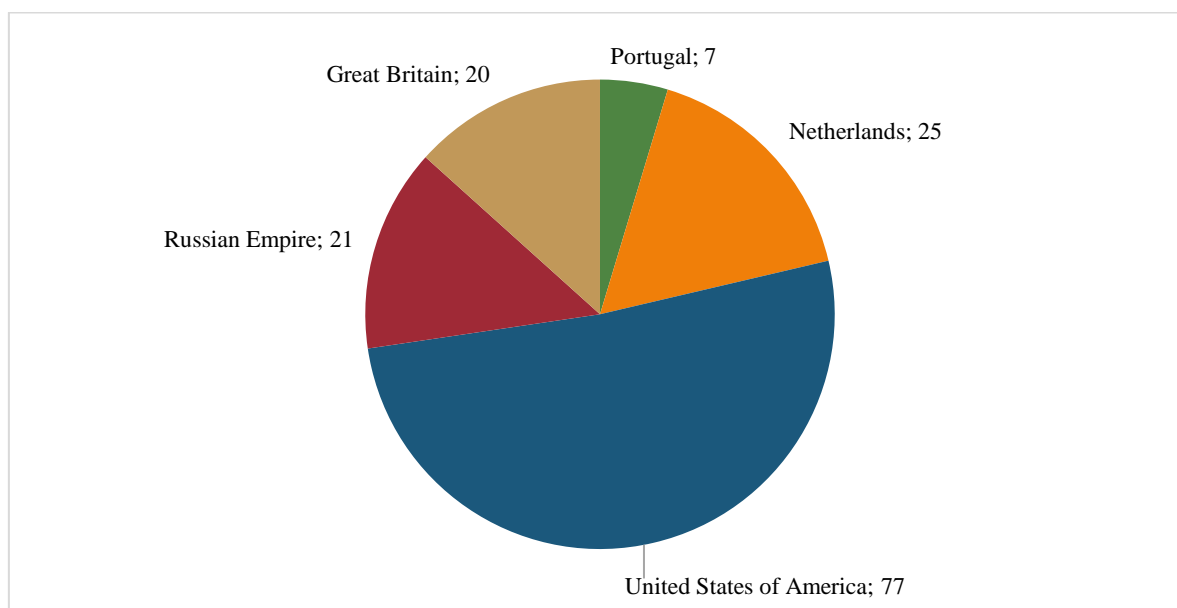
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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.arcanum.com/hu/>

itself. During the source collection I have categorised the selected materials and used them to establish the core data of the thesis. Among the various categories considered, the focus ultimately fell on foreign relations. The selected sources were organized according to their publication date, their chronological order, and finally by theme. During the analysis stage I attempted to correlate the events described in the articles with real life events based on the available secondary literature.

*Figure Nr. 1.* illustrates the distribution of the newspaper articles included in the research according to their countries. It is clearly visible from the chart that a significantly greater number of sources were available regarding the United States than Portugal. This discrepancy is not only due to the fact that the Portuguese–Japanese relations were already a thing of the past, being on hold for nearly a century by the time the first Hungarian-language articles were published, while the articles on the United States were largely dealing with relatively current events. But it is also affected by the emergence of Hungarian daily newspapers by the mid-19th century. Furthermore, the global press, including Hungarian publications, paid considerable attention to the expedition led by Matthew C. Perry (1794–1858). The development of the telegraph network during this period also accelerated the flow of information compared to the beginning of the period when news was primarily transmitted through means of letters and stagecoaches. It is also important to note that in this period, due to the lack of direct contact, news about Japan could only reach Hungarian newspapers through indirect sources and often through multiple transmissions. It also means that the emerging image of Japan was also developed through, and formed by, the help of these indirect sources often passing through several filters before reaching Hungary. Despite the fact that direct sources could have been available through Benyovszky, during the examined 70 years Hungarian periodicals rarely mentioned him in relation to Japan. As seen in the chart, the number of articles related to other countries were relatively evenly distributed. This is particularly interesting because ever since the beginning of the 17th century, the Dutch were the only examined nation with official ties to Japan. In the case of the Russians and the English, the short-lived official relations or the attempts and the desire to establish one provided ample material for journalists to write about. Moreover, British articles could be divided into only two major topics, whereas Russian articles were able to report on several different events. Articles mentioning multiple nations, for example both the Dutch and the Portuguese, were listed under both categories in the chart.

FIGURE Nr. 1.: The number of articles used in the study by country.<sup>4</sup>



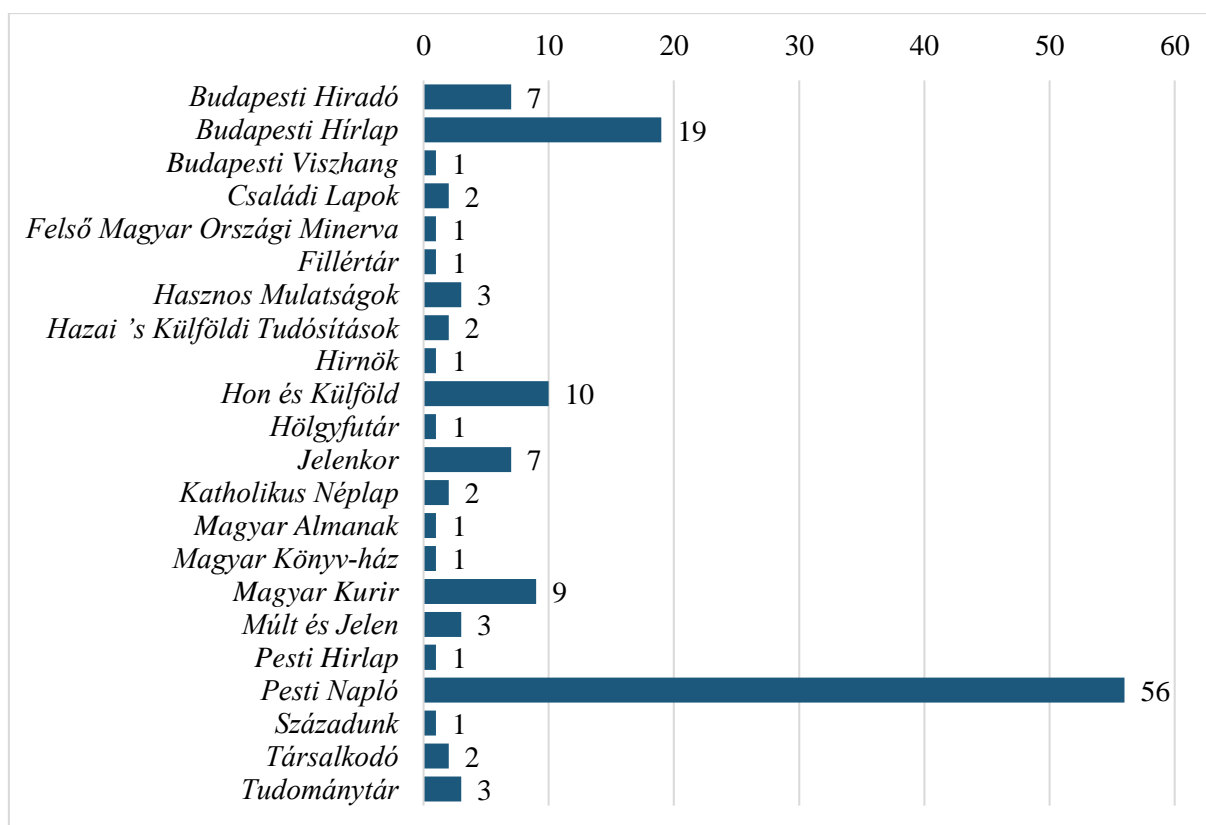
The selected sources were not evaluated based on publication context, political leaning, historical period, or legal background. Much greater focus was placed on the existence of published articles, their content and their number. I did not consider the number of newspaper subscribers either, because it did not reflect the number of readers accurately and it would have been difficult to determine in most cases. Similarly, I have not examined the literacy rates as news could have also reached people by others reading the news aloud. It is also characteristic of the era that in most cases the authors of the articles are unknown, copyright did not exist the way we understand it today, and there were instances where the same piece of news was published in multiple newspapers.

The beginnings of Hungarian-language journalism can be traced back to the late 18th century and even these earliest publications contained news discussing the relationship between Western countries and Japan. I collected articles from a total of 22 periodicals up until the end of 1853; these are shown in *Figure Nr. 2*. It is clear from this that daily newspapers stand out in terms of the number of published articles – especially *Pesti Napló*, mainly due to its articles covering the American expedition. Before the appearance of daily newspapers, among the earliest Hungarian newspapers, *Magyar Kurir* also stood out with its 9 published articles, published in the early 1800s briefly reporting on another (Russian) expedition. However, the number of published articles have no bearing on their length, the type of newspaper they were published in, or the amount of information they contained. For instance, while the *Felső Magyar Országai Minerva* only mentioned a piece of news related to the research topic in brief passing,

<sup>4</sup> There may be overlaps in content between articles. For example: if an article mentioned both the English and the Dutch than that entry was included in the chart under both Great-Britain and the Netherlands.

while the two articles published in *Családi Lapok* were fairly long and provided lots of interesting details not only about Japan and its foreign relations, but also about the author's attitudes towards the topic and the *sakoku* policy.

FIGURE Nr. 2.: The number of articles used in the study by publications



### 3. Implementation and New Findings

Following the introduction, and the methodology section, I provided a detailed overview in the historiography chapter of the study of Hungarian–Japanese relations. Although there were no direct connections between Hungary and Japan during the examined period, this era nonetheless serves as an important precursor and point of connection for later direct relations. Therefore, the significance of this period extends beyond the development of the image of Japan in Hungary. Furthermore, the thesis examines a period that Hungarian research has barely touched upon. Apart from Benyovszky's travels, there is currently very little research into this era. Consequently, I am able to connect to and complement earlier studies written about the period where

direct relations were established in the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century.<sup>5</sup>

Following the historiographical chapter I have presented the used sources supplemented by a brief overview on the press history of Hungary. During the source collection I came across several materials and new findings that were not present in any previously compiled source-books,<sup>6</sup> or any other sources apart from their original publication. As such, this study can be regarded as primary research. After this section I wrote on the historical period and on *sakoku*, followed by a detailed discussion on the relationship of Japan with each examined nation, starting with the more successful ones in terms of foreign relations (the Portuguese, the Dutch and the United States) and then continuing on with less successful attempts (Russians, England/Great Britain) in this order.

As shown in *Figure Nr. 3.* the earliest articles that were collected during the research were dealing with the Russians and the Dutch. Articles on the Portuguese–Japanese relations began appearing from the late 1820s. Articles concerning the English appeared as early as the beginning of the 19th century, but articles specifically on the topic of Anglo–Japanese relations mostly appeared after 1840. The Americans, later dominating the number of articles written about them, first appeared in 1839. As the data in this chart indicates, not every year featured articles related to the research topic. Usable information only appeared in 24 of the 73 examined years, therefore we cannot speak of continuous reporting up until the mid-19th century. This runs parallel not only with the birth, the development, and the consolidation of the Hungarian press, but also with the isolation of Japan during this era.

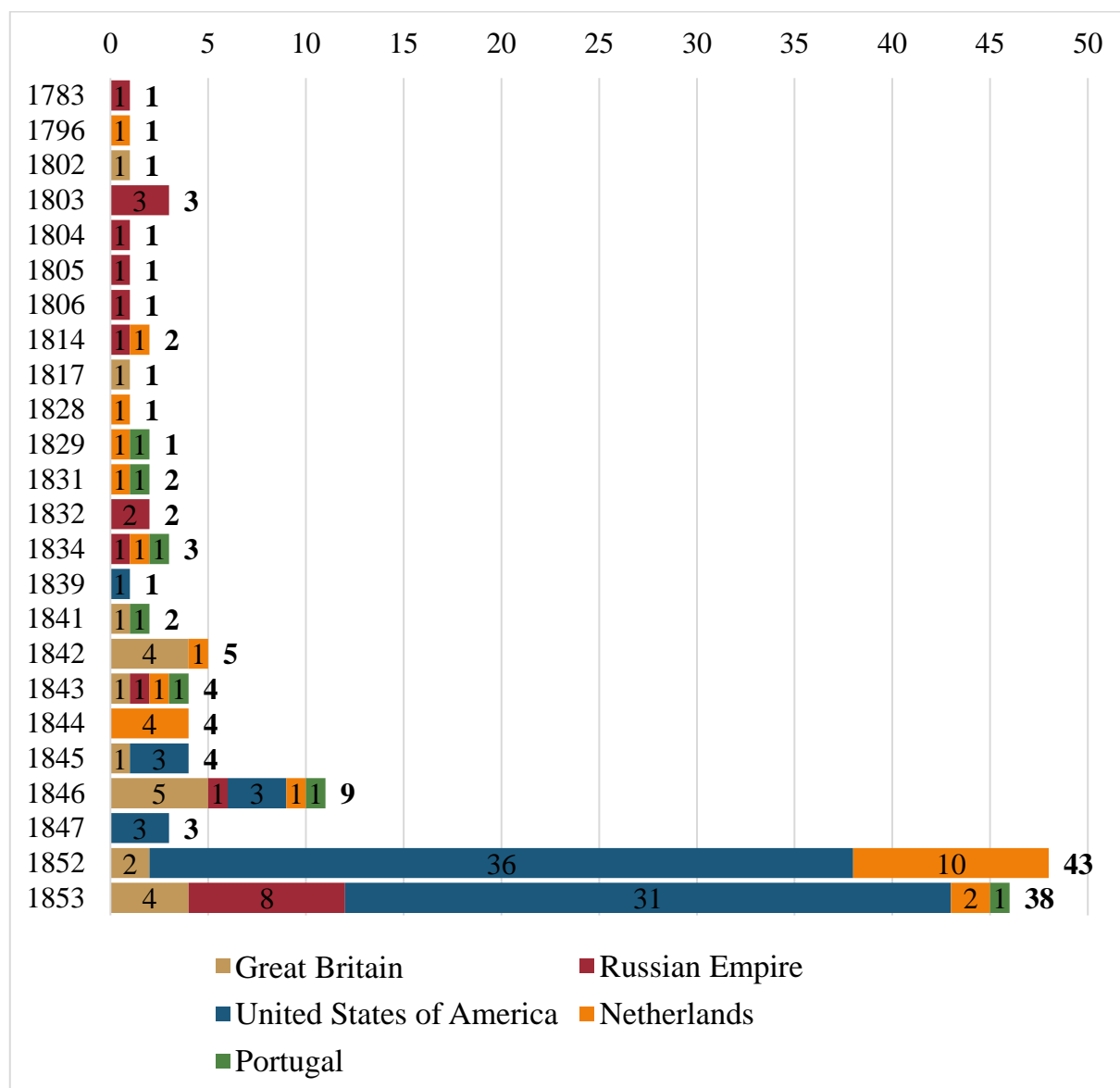
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<sup>5</sup> In connection with the image of Japan, a research group was formed focusing on how the perception of Japan changed in Hungary since 1945. I'm also a member of this research group.

<sup>6</sup> Lévai Gábor: *Japán magyar könyvészete*, Budapest, Egyetemi Keletázsiai Intézet, Keletázsiai Dolgozatok, 1943; Buda Attila (szerk.): *Messziről felmerülő vonzó szigetek*, I. kötet, Japánról szóló, magyar nyelvű ismertetések a kezdetektől 1869-ig, Budapest, Ráció kiadó, Pagoda és Krizantém, 2010.



FIGURE Nr. 3.: The distribution of articles used in the study by year of publication and country.



### 3.1. Portuguese–Japanese Relations

We cannot speak about active contacts regarding Portuguese–Japanese relations in the examined period. The sources for the articles dealing with this topic date back to 16-17th century writings. The articles cover nearly all notable events, from the discovery of Japan and the arrival of the first Portuguese, and their century of flourishing relations, all the way to their decline. The portrayal of Japan presented by these articles likely left readers with mixed reactions. Alongside accounts of the persecution of Christians, the expulsion of foreigners and the strict adherence to laws in Japan, the articles also highlighted how the Japanese people came to recognize the dangers posed by outsiders and their foreign religions. It was evident that Japanese people initially welcomed novelties with open curiosity, leading some authors to wonder what

could have happened to prompt the Japanese to introduce such drastic measures as banning Christianity and expelling all foreigners with the exception of the Dutch. Articles presenting the events objectively and those written from a more religious perspective were both attempting to find an explanation for this shift. Among the cited reasons there were mentions of conflicts among missionaries and the Portuguese pursuit of power and profit.

### **3.2. Dutch–Japanese Relations**

Writings on Dutch–Japanese relations addressed not only historical events but also contemporary developments. The articles explored the unique position of the Dutch in Japan in a wide range of topics and attempted to explain the reasons behind it all. These explanations varied, presenting both positive and negative opinions. A common theme across multiple articles was that they were willing to do anything to maintain this relationship even to the point of enduring humiliation or convincing the Japanese people that their form of Christianity was entirely different. Some authors wondered why the Japanese were willing to believe this at all. The Dutch were also criticized for not sharing the information they have obtained, though this criticism is not fully founded. The articles frequently referenced the authors of the most important sources of the era, including Engelbert Kaempfer, Carl Peter Thunberg (1743–1828) and Philipp Franz von Siebold (1796–1866). Through these articles readers could gain insight into the daily life of the Dutch in Dejima, and there were several mentions of the letter written by the Dutch king to the ruler of Japan in the early 1840s as an attempt to draw the Japanese attention to the shifting global political landscape of the times. Whether the authors expressed envy or admiration, it was clear from their writings that the Dutch deeply valued the relationship they worked so hard to build and maintain.

We can learn from these articles that the Japanese imposed extremely strict controlled conditions upon the Dutch. While painting the image of suspicious, law-abiding, and distrustful people who insisted firmly on their beliefs, the articles also introduced the Japanese as having a strong thirst for knowledge, being curious, well-informed, and having an appreciation of complex rituals and formal expressions of politeness.

### **3.3. American–Japanese Relations**

The majority of articles during the examined period focused on American–Japanese relations, thanks to the growing interest surrounding the upcoming American expedition and the articles published in the emerging Hungarian daily newspapers. The earliest articles reported on

shipwreck survivors, written a few years after the actual events. Initially it was clear that Japan's extremely strict laws did not even spare their own countrymen, as these survivors were not allowed to return home. Over time, a slight shift in Japanese regulations became noticeable, even if the newspapers did not point out specific legal changes. Although at the same time, it became apparent that by the 1840s Japan's policy seemed to soften in some areas. This, however, did not indicate any intention for broader changes in Japanese foreign policy. The authors raised the question of how long Japan's isolation can be maintained in an era when due distances were decreasing, owing to the advancements of technology, and more ships were sailing on Japanese waters.

News about the American expedition led by Matthew C. Perry appeared in many articles in both the international press and in Hungarian publications. Just a few months after the first reports about the planned expedition, the Hungarian press began to cover the topic as well. Readers were informed about every important aspect of the undertaking. This included the planning process, the reasons for launching the expedition, the number of ships made available to Perry, listed both by name and type. Readers were even able to follow the route of the expedition. The question of why so many ships were needed for a mission that was ostensibly peaceful in nature was raised multiple times.

International reactions to the expedition also appeared in Hungarian periodicals, several articles were written about the official document required for the mission as well as the gifts sent to the Japanese. By the autumn of 1853 news of the successful American–Japanese contact reached the Hungarian readership, although the outcome of the negotiations, which were postponed until the spring of the following year, were still unknown at the time. Nevertheless, it was considered a success that the Japanese had finally opened up, albeit by force, to official dialogue with representatives of a western nation other than the Dutch. At the same time, it became clear that the Japanese were willing to make compromises on their foreign policy in the future.

The image of the Japanese also evolved, became more nuanced and, at the same time, more favourable. The articles mentioned finer details such as higher-ranking Japanese wearing one or two swords, whose appearance, according to the ones writing the reports, were more refined than that of the Chinese. They were seen as well-informed and highly cultured. Given the opportunity they were willing to communicate and even exchange small gifts. The articles also revealed that the Japanese were aware of the approaching American expedition and were ready to make compromises in order to avoid conflict. The Japanese attended this meeting in large numbers even erecting special buildings at the site of the event, demonstrating that they made an effort to receive the Americans under appropriate conditions. The Japanese ability to adapt

to the situation helped avoid a more serious conflict with the Americans. The signing of the Treaty of Kanagawa in 1854 marked the end of the Sakoku period which was considered to be a positive development from a western perspective.

### **3.4. Russo-Japanese Relations**

The earliest articles about Russo–Japanese relations, similar to those about the Americans, dealt with shipwrecked persons. Not only did these stories report on the rescue of the sailors and mutual assistance between nations but also provided readers a view into the lives of the first Japanese language teachers working in Europe. Newspapers also wrote about the early Russian embassies sent to Japan. In one particular case in the early 19th century a unique situation arose in which the emerging Hungarian press, taking into account the circumstances of the time, managed to briefly report on these events almost as current news. This is remarkable even if further details about the specific events could only be learned from articles published over the course of the next decades.

There was hardly any newspaper coverage of Vasily Mikhailovich Golovnin's (1776–1831) two-year-long captivity in Japan. On the other hand, more details were published about his experiences in Japan, which seemed to confirm reports from Dutch sources regarding the Japanese peoples' thirst for knowledge. These articles also affirmed that the Japanese people are proud and adhere firmly to their customs and laws. The reporting is mostly favourable here as well, with some negative points. It is particularly interesting how little the press mentioned Yevfimiy Vasilyevich Putyatin's (1803–1883) expedition compared to that of Perry's, despite the fact that the two events took place simultaneously, but as we know, the Americans were the ones to arrive first.

### **3.5. Anglo-Japanese Relations**

In the case of Anglo–Japanese relations, two major topics appeared in the contemporary Hungarian press. The first of these dealt with the earliest, short-lived contacts in the early 17th century and provided readers with detailed accounts of William Adams (1564–1620), and the story of the English trading post, as well as the story and the subsequent rejection of the delegation sent to Japan in the latter half of the 17th century to reestablish relations with the country. The second group of articles written in the 1840s, and more prominently after the First Opium War, were discussing how the British could or at the very least should, go to Japan. Nevertheless, official British policy did not seriously consider the matter until the mid-1850s.

Anglo–Japanese relations did not provide nearly as many topics as the previously mentioned countries, yet still numerous articles appeared in the newspapers, especially on the second topic. Readers likely found it amusing to imagine how strange European politics must have seemed to the Japanese. For instance, that in the 17th century a Protestant country could be allied with a Catholic country against another Protestant state, or that a Protestant monarch could marry a Catholic princess, should the political situation require it. These articles also highlighted the Japanese peoples’ strong attachment to their customs and laws.

#### **4. Summary**

All things considered, as far as the circumstances of the era allowed, readers were provided with accurate and, in many cases, detailed information on Japan’s relations with the West both before and during the period of isolation. They were introduced to both Japanese locations and individuals who had a significant impact on Japanese history. Among these articles, several dealt with historical events, while others focused on contemporary international political relations.

In summary, to the question of how much could contemporary newspaper readers have known about Japan, the short answer is: quite a lot. The articles of the time featured all five countries and the key events in their international relations with Japan, many of which continue to be discussed in modern academic literature. Thus, readers with an interest for colourful, distant cultures could occasionally encounter stories about Japan in the newspapers of the time. The more educated readers, in general, at the very least knew that on the far end of Asia lay an island nation which, while not too fond of foreigners, had distinct and interesting traditions as well as customs, was highly cultured, and – if circumstances allowed – open to learning about new things.

As for the development of the image of Japan in Hungary, given that there were no alternative sources available at the time, the articles published in the Hungarian press were based on foreign materials. As such, these articles reflected the perspectives, attitudes, and representations that had already taken shape abroad. It thus appears justified to state that the early image of Japan presented in the Hungarian press was in alignment with the European and American views of Japan, since the authors of these articles relied on writings published in those regions. Moreover, the Hungarian image of Japan continued to evolve more or less in parallel with its Western counterparts throughout the second half of the 19th century. This topic, however, is beyond the scope of the present study.

It can be stated that the articles published in the Hungarian press presented Hungarian readers with a rich variety of themes and diverse knowledge about Japan's foreign relations and its distinctive customs. Most notable is the fact that the Hungarian perception of Japan developed largely in alignment with and based on Western sources.

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