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Jeffrey Keith. "Civilization, Race, and the Japan Expedition's Cultural Diplomacy, 1853-1854."

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Review by **John E. Van Sant, University of Alabama-Birmingham**

U.S. Navy Commodore Matthew Perry was sent to Japan by President Millard Fillmore to establish formal diplomatic relations with three specific objectives.¹ First, to guarantee good treatment of American shipwrecked sailors who washed up on Japan's shores. Second, to obtain ports for coal, water, and other provisions for American vessels sailing in the Pacific. These ships, mostly from New England, were either engaged in whaling or in the China trade. And third, to establish a general trade agreement between the two countries. Perry's expedition, backed up by the power of his armed, steam-powered "black ships", caused significant internal political problems for the Tokugawa shogunate and dramatically exacerbated the debate among Tokugawa officials, imperial officials, *daimyō* lords, and samurai intellectuals over the issue of "opening" Japan to more contact with Western countries. Perry achieved the first two of his objectives with the Kanagawa Treaty of 1854, but he was unable to obtain a general trade agreement. Townsend Harris, the first American consul based in Japan, finally obtained the "Treaty of Amity and Commerce" in 1858. Nevertheless, it is the Perry Expedition of 1853-54 that is usually credited (or condemned) by scholars with "opening" Japan to the West.

Jeffrey Keith's interesting article argues that "cultural activities constituted the core of the expedition's approach" (180) to negotiations with Japanese officials of the Tokugawa government. Perhaps not surprisingly, the perspectives of Perry and his men "extended from a nineteenth-century worldview steeped in white supremacy and cultural chauvinism about the pre-eminence of Western civilization." (181) Keith adroitly

¹ Millard Fillmore was no longer President by the time Perry arrived in Japan on 7 July 1853. Franklin Pierce, elected President in November 1852, took office on 4 March 1853.

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describes and interprets this nineteenth-century, American worldview of Manifest Destiny, Christianity, white racial superiority, technological superiority, and even music as exhibited by Perry and his men.

The author has searched out and usefully drawn upon first-hand accounts by Perry and his men to reveal their cultural worldview and their impressions of Japan and of the Japanese. Appropriate secondary sources, such as Joseph Henning's *Outposts of Civilization: Race, Religion, and the formative Years of American-Japanese Relations* (New York University Press, 2000), have been effectively utilized for interpretive analyses. Unlike most other studies of the Perry Expedition emphasizing geopolitics and/or internal disarray within Japan, Keith's article is refreshingly unique in its focus on the cultural aspects of American diplomacy.

While the cultural aspects of the Perry Expedition as described and interpreted in this article are useful to scholars examining this momentous event in American foreign relations and Japanese history, there are two major problematic issues. One is that there are almost no Japanese or Japanese-based sources in the entire article, with the exception of Tokugawa Nariaki's complaint directed to the shogunate on the last page of the article. What we learn about the Japanese in this article is filtered through the nineteenth-century worldview lens of Perry and his men. Although Keith implies it, he never directly states that much of what Perry and his men believed about Japan and Japanese culture demonstrated their own ignorance, and was either completely or mostly wrong. In this respect, the article tells the reader nothing about what Japanese, including Japanese officials, really thought about Perry, his cultural activities and his diplomacy.

Second, Keith claims that Perry's cultural presentations "succeeded" (201) in achieving the American political and geopolitical agenda. Considering that we learn almost nothing of what Japanese officials thought about Perry and his negotiations in this article, it is impossible to prove that Perry's cultural diplomacy was a major factor resulting in the Kanagawa Treaty. Moreover, Perry did not achieve a general trade agreement as part of the Kanagawa Treaty; therefore, one can argue that Perry's expedition was only partially successful, and this article does not demonstrate that cultural presentations by the Americans made any difference in the negotiations.

As mentioned above, Jeffrey Keith's "Civilization, Race, and the Japan Expedition's Cultural Diplomacy" is a unique and useful study of the cultural activities and nineteenth-century worldview of U.S. Commodore Perry and his men in Japan. However, the article does not demonstrate that this cultural diplomacy by the Americans had an effect on their Japanese counterparts during the negotiations resulting in the Kanagawa Treaty between the United States and Japan.

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of Illinois Press, 2000) and co-author of *The Historical Dictionary of United States-Japan Relations* (Scarecrow Press/Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

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