

EMPIRES AND WALLS: JAPAN'S RESPONSES TO THE OUTSIDE WORLD AS REFLECTED IN ANIME

Dr. Paul S. Price

Chapel Hill, North Carolina
Mechademia September 23, 2017

Japan is one of the few countries to experience an invasion by an “alien empire”

- In 1543, Japan was very aware of its neighbors Korea and China; however, the Nanban were a complete surprise
 - Portuguese merchant empire stretching from Brazil to Japan
 - Doorway to both Europe and the rest of the Portuguese trading network
- Japanese artists give us Japan's view of the contact with Nanban



Alien ships
Unknown technology

Weird
humanoids in
strange clothing
*Europeans, Africans,
and, Indians*





Strange
creatures



Radically new
and powerful
weapons





A troublesome religion

...and to successfully reject it!

- Japan was the most successful of Asian cultures in saying “**no**” to European contact
 - 1614 all foreigners expelled
 - 1637 Christianity is banned
- For the next 220 years trade is done on Japan's terms
 - Merchants were limited to one small island
 - Technology and limited goods come in but no religion or culture
- By saying no to western contact and deliberately choosing to stay isolated, Japan rejected both being a colony and being a colonizer

The Japanese empire (1868-1945)

- 1854: Matthew Perry demands that Japan open to the west
- Japan embarks on a wildly successful program of rapid technological development
- Japan establishes its own empire, leading to conflict with the British and Dutch colonial empires and ultimately to WWII
- 1945: After Russia declares war and two atomic bombs, Japan surrenders to the allies
- 1945-present: Tremendous economic growth, rise of the middle class, embracement of technology, and limitation of military power



Japan has had two experiences with the concept of empire

1. The first was a successful rejection of European colonial empires for 220 years
2. The second was a disastrous attempt to replicate European colonial empires

How is this experience with empire reflected in anime?

1. Placing empire as an external threat and not as a desired option
2. A longing for walls that keep the impure and dangerous world at a distance
3. The two-visit trope

In anime empires are not good things

- They are generally presented as threatening external forces
 - Macross, Arcadia of My Youth, Irresponsible Captan Tylor, Banner of the Stars, and Code Geass
- Japan is rarely presented as “leading” or happily “being a part” of an empire
 - Suspicious of military adventurism

Anime and walls

- In Western tradition walls are made to be broken. Walls limit and hide the truth.
- Progress and enlightenment require that you break down walls.

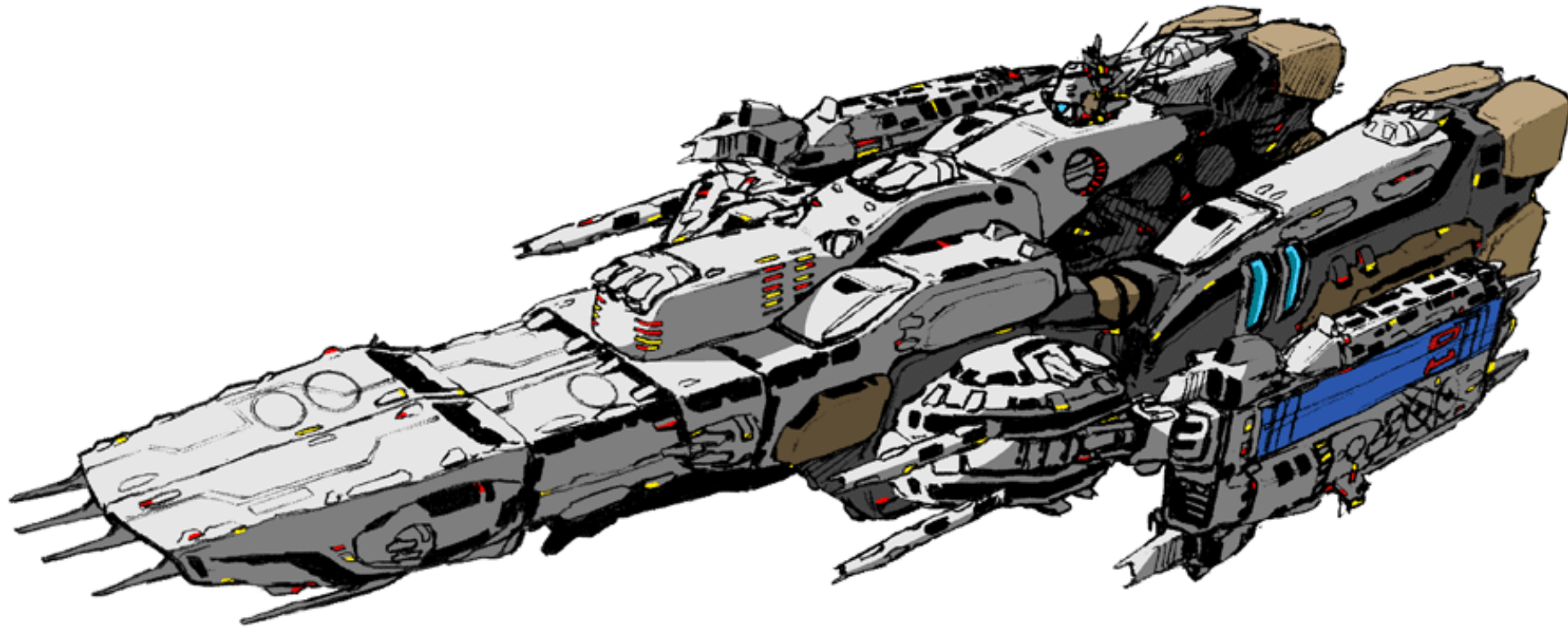


- Uchi-Soto (being inside or outside of a group) is an important concept in Japanese culture
- The walls of a household define this relationship architecturally
- Since Japan itself is the “ultimate household” it needs walls to define itself. Such walls need to be respected, not breached
- But walls can become cages that limits freedom

Anime worlds are frequently set in enclosed spaces

- The world has been reduced to a single land or area by a physical barrier/wall
- Examples include Scrapped Princess, Raxhaphon, Vexille, Yuki Yuna is a Hero, and Attack on Titan





The “two visit” trope

- The first visit brings destruction - but also “a learning opportunity”.
- A second visit is imminent; this visit will be fatal.
- Japan must master the difficult and dangerous knowledge from the first visit and beat the invader/threat at its own game by mastering and re-inventing alien technology as its own.
- Anime series with this theme include: Macross, Evangelion, and Akira.
- Captures the experience of the 1854 opening by the West and Japan’s adoption of western technology (*Wakon- Yosai* Japanese spirit - Western learning).

Summary

- Japan has had a negative experience with the concept of empire.
 - Threats from external empires
 - Failed attempt to create its own empire
- Anime reflects this experience with:
 - Identification of empires as external threats rather than opportunities.
 - The need to master external technology without losing its culture or independence.
 - Comfortable with walls or barriers that will keep threats at bay, but uneasy about its isolation.