

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

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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 Captain 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.

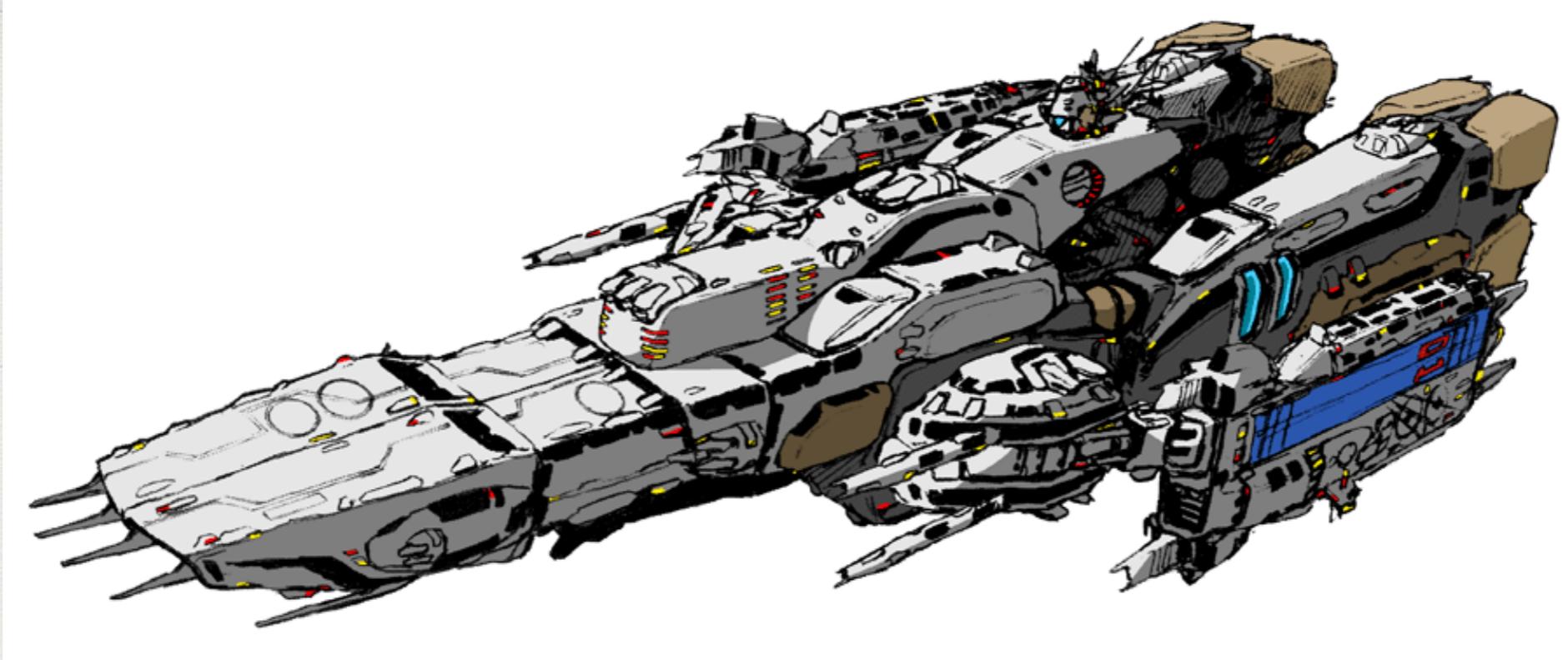
- Uchi-Soto (being inside or outside of a group) is an important concept in Japanese culture
- The walls of a household define this relationship architecturally
- Since Japan itself is the “ultimate household” it needs walls to define itself. Such walls need to be respected, not breached
- But walls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