

PERRY IN JAPAN

A Transnational, Digital, and Pedagogical Project

SUSAN
SMULYAN

In 2001, when Professor Masako Notoji from the University of Tokyo visited Brown University to speak to the Department of American Civilization, she asked me about the statue of Commodore Matthew Perry in Newport, Rhode Island. I hadn't realized the important role that Perry, the first official representative sent by the US government to Japan, played in the Japanese imagination and in how the Japanese had thought about US-Japanese relations since Perry's first trip in 1854. Given her interest, I arranged to have Professor Notoji look at some Perry materials in the Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection at the John Hay Library. As the time for her lecture approached, no one had seen Professor Notoji, who had disappeared into the rare books library. I hustled into the reading room and found her poring over a Japanese scroll. "It's a national treasure," she exclaimed and pulled me over to look at the beautiful, bright, and modern images of Americans and Japanese interacting contained in a twelve-panel scroll, "Request for a Good Relationship," painted by an anonymous artist. It illustrates Commodore Matthew Perry's landing in Japan, the first official contact between the American and Japanese peoples in 1854. Professor Notoji's appreciation of something that I didn't know existed motivated me to explore the digital world and to consider how it can change teaching and research, especially in an international context.

"Perry In Japan: A Visual History" began as an examination and digitization of this more than a century old Japanese scroll. The project featured student writing that highlighted how teaching and learning can expand through the use of new media ("Perry In Japan"). My students and I worked with the then newly founded Brown University Library's Center for Digital Initiatives (now the Center for Digital Scholarship). The CDI digitized all the images and built the website. The project shows how digital scholarship can integrate teaching, research, and scholarly analysis and promote collaboration between faculty and students and between researchers and libraries. It also illustrates the collaborative nature of the web, the decentering of expertise that the web can engender, the uses of asynchronous collaboration in the accumulation of knowledge, and the open-endedness of online scholarship and teaching.

Between 2003 and 2009, students in two countries examined images and documents related to the arrival in Japan of United States forces headed by Perry. In 2003, students at Brown, both as members of a seminar and as research assistants, drew partially on written texts and partially on their own examination to write descriptive and interpretive essays that explained the visual documents. In 2009, students at the University of Tokyo reviewed the Brown students' essays, read the same historical texts, examined the same

images, and wrote their own essays. Another undergraduate research assistant at Brown, who worked as a liaison between Brown and the University of Tokyo, added material to the website describing the differences in the two groups of student essays. Students learned about the need to contextualize visual materials with written texts and to consider how the meanings of visual texts changed depending on the subjectivity of the viewer. Currently, the website is being revised to include new images and nineteenth-century written materials. The pedagogical purpose of the website was to engage students in an analysis of historical materials and also to produce essays that could be used in future courses on both campuses.

"Perry In Japan" began as a website where students used historical texts, particularly visual materials; they collected research materials documenting that process, thus helping to build the archives in which they worked.¹ The students who wrote essays for this experimental site contributed to a public presentation of history; improved their practice of history, using both written and visual documents as evidence; interacted with international peers while having their assumptions about their country's place in the world challenged; and learned important lessons about collaborative work that included librarians, technologists, and faculty. The website has become part of what Dan Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig call the "History Web," an aggregate of history-related websites that range from archives to scholarship; from lesson plans to exhibits; and from interactive sites to online encyclopedias.

"Perry In Japan" explores new ways of narrating the story of one of the first American travelers to Japan. I wanted to help students to investigate the nineteenth-century beginnings of cultural interactions between Japan and the United States. The scroll, "Request for a Good Relationship," was painted sometime between 1854 and 1906 when the Chinese scholar, Wang Zhiben, titled it and wrote a commentary on the last panel interpreting the images.² The library also holds a set of lithographs by William Heine, the official artist of the Perry expedition. These lithographs depict an American view of the same events shown in the scroll and were published on Heine's return to the United States in 1855. The website thus holds three visions of the world: Japanese, American, and Chinese.

Students from a 2003 senior seminar in the Department of American Civilization and two Undergraduate Research Assistants (Heather Velez, who worked on the site in 2003, and Chris Suh, who worked on it in 2010) used the published accounts of the Americans who went with Perry to Japan to supplement what they learned from the images. Students at the University of Tokyo in 2009, in an English language course taught by Professor Yujin Yaguchi, looked at the same images and read the same materials as the Brown students. The eleven University of Tokyo students reached different conclusions from those of the Brown students. Not all students at the University of Tokyo were Japanese, neither were the Brown students all American—this added complexity to our discussion of national points of view.

1 It thus worked like the scholarship inspired by the Visible Knowledge Project, as recently described by Michael Coventry and his co-authors.

2 The only other way to date the scroll would be by the style of the painting, which probably would not bring us closer than the fifty-year span provided by internal evidence. Many Japanese documents created long after Perry and his troops landed treat the event as if it had happened recently.

At the heart of the website are the scroll's twelve images and the six Heine lithographs. To my American eyes, the scroll images at first seemed charming and accessible. Drawn realistically, the images present simple examples of the interaction between the American sailors, clad in bright blue and depicted with big noses, and Japanese dignitaries and ordinary people. The Americans present the Japanese with a miniature railway, gigantic gears, and a telegraph that the Japanese regard with apparent amazement.³ One of the most memorable scenes shows the Japanese riding on top of the tiny train, kimonos blowing behind them. Others depict the Japanese hosting the Americans at a banquet and show the Americans leaving in boats to go back to their "black ships." The Heine images are more formal: ranks of American sailors stand stiffly at attention while being reviewed by Japanese dignitaries ("Perry In Japan").

In 2003, I taught eight students in a seminar, "From Perry to Pokemon: The United States in Japan and Japan in the United States." The class included an engineer, a political scientist, an East Asian studies student, a business major, a visiting student from Japan, and a sprinkling of humanities majors. During our third class, we visited the library to look at the scroll. I wanted the students to see the images as the earliest in a series of reciprocal cultural interactions between the two countries. Their first assignment was to read about Perry and write about the scroll images available to them both digitally and in the library. Students explored other historical and contemporary topics in their final papers including the cultural productions of Japanese-Americans in the internment camps; the US reaction to Japanese anime; the television program "Iron Chef"; and Japanese television programs that featured Americans.

One objective of the course was to consider the different kinds of knowledge that visual and written texts present. Samuel Wineburg has outlined how professional historians use written texts to contextualize visual images and the students practiced this historical method in their work on the "Perry In Japan" website (73). In an article describing how to add historical images to undergraduate courses using the web, Michael Coventry and his collaborators describe the "intricate choices" that using such images entails (1402). Students found they needed to go to the written record to more fully understand the Perry voyage and what it meant to the United States. Why did the Americans bring a miniature train and a telegraph set as presents for the Japanese? Why did the Japanese give the Americans rice in return, and what did the Americans think of that gift?

Students drew on the multiple personal accounts of Perry's expedition written and published by Americans. As I noted on the website, "the events, and miscommunications, of the first contact between the two countries had important consequences for our futures. These personal accounts show us the thoughts of the first American ambassadors to Japan" ("Perry In Japan"). Students read Perry's diary; the official report of the expedition; Heine's memoir; and the report of a cabin boy on Perry's ship to learn more about how the events appeared to the participants and

3 For a historical examination of the objects Perry took to represent America, see Lubar; for other accounts of the Perry expedition see Thomson, et al. and Wiley; and for other primary documents, consult Duus, Statler, and Tomes.

how they were presented to the nineteenth-century American public. The Brown students had access to the original publications on reserve in the library and excerpts of these written materials were later placed on the website. One student, Anne McClain, wrote about the image titled "Rice":

The event that shocked the Americans most was the generous Japanese gift of two hundred sacks of rice. It was necessary to ask for the assistance of sumo wrestlers to put this amount of rice on board the ships. The... sumo wrestlers were a great surprise to the American sailors who only knew the Japanese to be small in stature. Their astonishment was evident in statements such as "they were all so immense in flesh," and "monstrous fellows who came tramping down the beach like so many elephants."... When [the written account is] compared ... to the Japanese depiction on this scroll, it is easy to see how the cultural phenomenon of sumo wrestlers was misunderstood. In Japan, the wrestlers were considered athletes. The Americans, however, encountering the wrestlers for the first time, thought of them more as brutes.... Another misunderstanding ... is in the gift itself. The Japanese believed rice to be a food with significant meanings. As a staple food in Japan, the Japanese considered this generous amount of rice important in sustaining the Americans while at sea. The scroll depicted the Americans to be standing around casually, seemingly unimpressed by the enormous amount of rice offered to them. They talked amongst themselves and almost viewed the rice as a burden to ship home. Along with the sumo wrestlers, the gift of rice was but one [of the] cultural misunderstandings that happened during Perry's visit to Japan. ("Perry In Japan")

As they examined the scroll, students discovered that it told more than one story. The first and last panels are written by a Chinese art historian who visited Japan in 1906. This text, written in Chinese characters, served as an example of different subject positions changing the way observers view evidence. The text was translated and made available to the students, who discovered that Wang Zhiben's 1906 reading was very different from their own. One piece of this commentary, as translated by a Brown University librarian, reads:

When the American ambassadors landed, they marched swaggeringly, which made all pedestrians feel offended. On the same day, the American ambassadors acted somehow arrogantly. Sometimes, they fired empty artillery shells; sometimes, they robbed civilian houses and intruded into the Japanese inner sea to measure and draw the marine chart. This pictorial scroll recorded what really happened at that time. When I saw and displayed this scroll, the event popped out vividly.... If this scroll does not exist, our descendants would not be able to know the unscrupulousness of foreigners' arrival like this.

Are these differences in interpretation the result of differences between Asian and American viewers? Or because visual texts are open to multiple interpretations? Or because the world changed between 1906 and 2003? During classroom discussion, the Brown students discounted Wang Zhiben's account as that of a biased and disgruntled observer, presenting an interpretation overly influenced by his personal history (as described in his account). The students' responses privileged present experience, always a danger in a history classroom. Their own histories were invisible to them. However, future Brown students may have more trouble explaining away the reactions of their contemporaneous Japanese peers.

A few years after the first seminar at Brown, Yujin Yaguchi used the website in one of his English language courses. His students could see the Brown students' reactions to the visual images (now posted on the website) as they wrote their own. The University of Tokyo students saw the images more as Wang Zhiben had. They were more skeptical about the images than the US students. Benjamin Boas, a Brown student writing about the image "Trading Umbrellas," describes a scene where an American officer points a gun at a Japanese man. Boas calls the interaction "amicable" and notes that the American soldier "playfully threaten[s] a samurai with his gun as he covers his laughter with his other hand." A University of Tokyo student Yuki Kato saw the scene quite differently:

the Japanese is raising his hands in front of him as if to calm the American down, or as if he is asking for mercy...[t]he expression of the Japanese man is stiff, and this suggests that they are not simply joking...[t]he artists may have put this [interaction] in the drawing as a hint of the reality, and deliberately hid it among the amicable exchanges, so that only the observant viewers would notice. ("Perry In Japan")

Professor Yaguchi and I hope that future Brown students will interact with the essays written by the University of Tokyo students and think directly about the differences in how the two groups saw the images.

After my own trips to Japan to talk about this project and seek collaborators, it became clear that the name of the site, originally "Perry Visits Japan" would have to change. The Japanese, for whom the "black ships" in which Perry arrived are an integral part of their cultural history, did not see the Perry voyage (then or now) as a neutral "visit" but rather as a threat of invasion. The site is now called "Perry In Japan" to take account of the cultural differences that the project tries to engage. The website thus becomes a nineteenth-century visual record of two different cultural views and a twenty-first century written record about those two different sets of visual images from two different cultural viewpoints. As part of the presentation of research materials, the Perry website includes the student papers which scholars can study as examples of twenty-first century Japanese and American attitudes toward their shared histories.

The web version of the scroll, in addition to being easier for students and scholars to work with, since it is searchable, and can easily be enlarged, changes the relationships between students and teachers. Peter Stallybrass notes that "scholarship, as traditionally conceived, has maintained its prestige partly through its privileged relation to the protection and retrieval of scarce resources" (Stallybrass 1581). The accessibility of the digital archive changes the relationship between "expert" faculty and neophyte student. An instructor helps students and the public understand and analyze documents that everyone can now see. A digital archive removes from the individual scholar one of her claims of expertise ("I've seen the evidence and you have not") by making the materials available to more people. Randy Bass has called the phenomenon of "the novice in the archive" one of the most important ways that teachers can decenter themselves (Bass, "Engines of Inquiry"; Bass and Rosenzweig). How do pedagogy, and relationships within the classroom, change when students and teacher have access to the same materials?

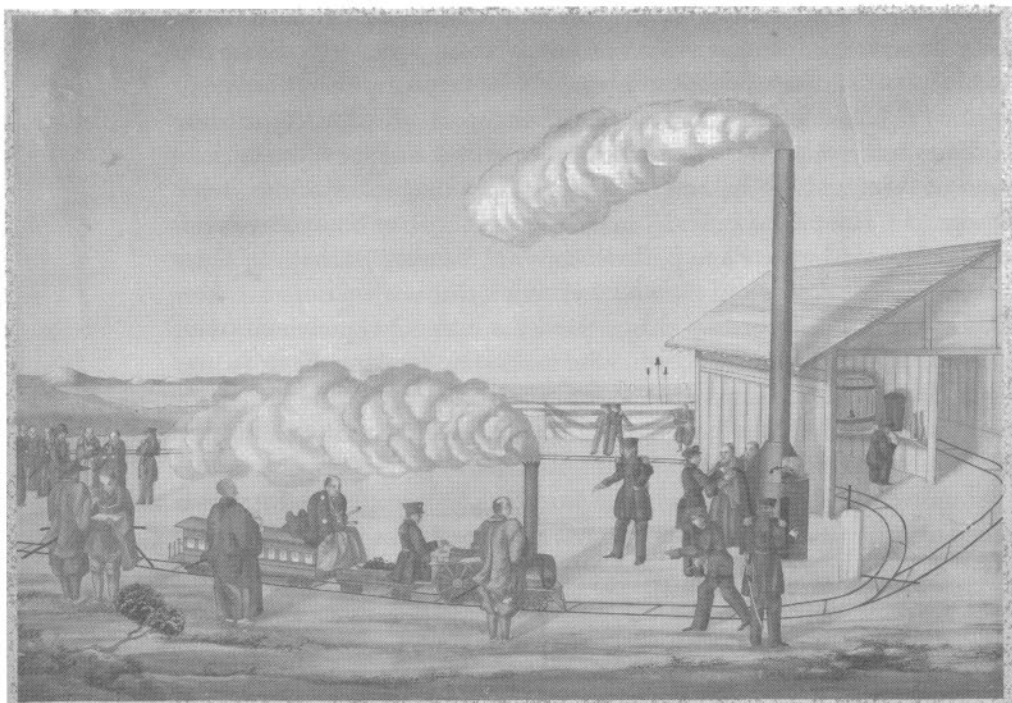
One answer may lie in the collaboration demanded by web-based scholarship which reflects the collaboration necessary to produce a website. Online archives make international collaboration easier, in that scholars can easily share sources, in this case sources that have a connection to both countries. It makes sense to call on colleagues in other countries to help puzzle out the meaning of documents that might need more than one point of view to become legible. Students develop into just another group of collaborators taking their place among senior scholars, archivists, and technologists from around the world to work toward a better understanding of a set of documents. Given help to understand the history and cultural context of the project, student essays can become an integral part of the website. Students don't need to work synchronously to make a contribution or to learn what colleagues in other countries understand about the shared endeavor.

My students' work with the digital version of this rare scroll raises complex questions for scholarship, particularly where it intersects with pedagogy. For example, "Perry In Japan" asks about how history is narrated. On the web, readers can experience stories (fictional or historical) in any order they like. One reader can proceed chronologically, while another moves thematically; or a reader can use first one and then the other approach. Evidence becomes more integral to the story because all the evidence can be included. My favorite example is a hypertext issue of the American Studies Association's *American Quarterly*, which included essays from "Dreaming Arnold Schwarzenegger" to "The Spanish-American War in Media Culture." These articles showed how the inclusion of the evidence within an essay changes the nature of scholarly production. In a hypertext article presented online, readers can compare their interpretation of the documentary sources with that of the author, and readers can also be introduced to more unconventional sources ("Hypertext Scholarship in American Studies"). The inclusion of the evidence changes the nature of historical storytelling.

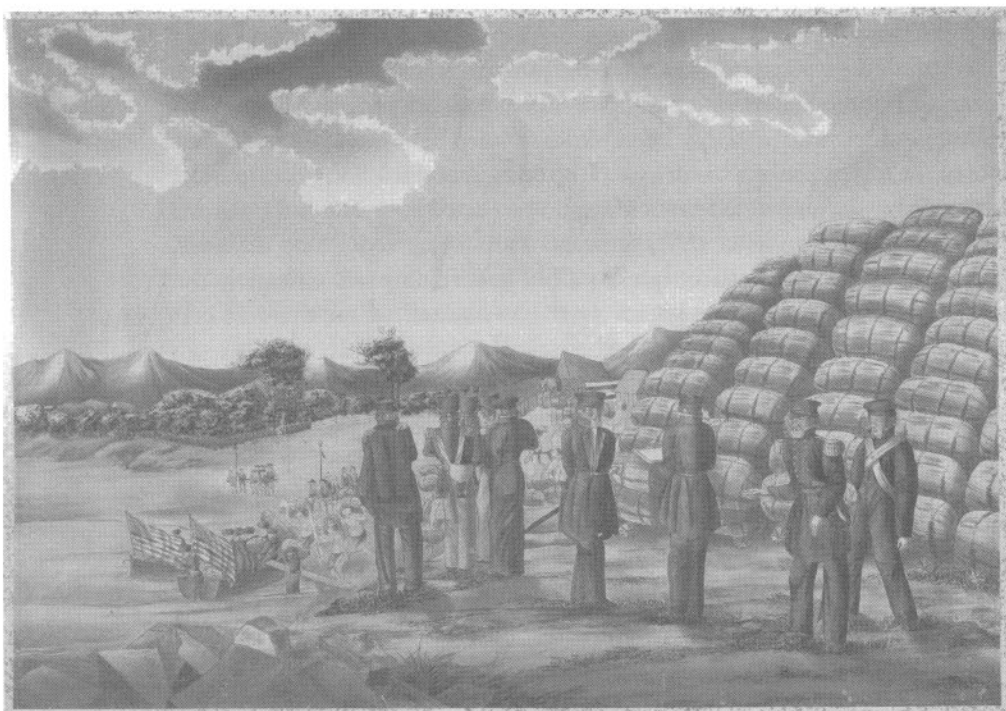
One of the most important explorations of historical narrativity is by John Dower, the foremost American historian of Japan, who also has a website that features images from Japanese scrolls showing Perry's arrival in Japan. "The Black Ships and Samurai" site, part of MIT's "Visualizing Cultures" project, provides a complete set of images that show the interactions of Perry and his Japanese counterparts including many of the Heine lithographs. This project provides an excellent example of how the web can change historical storytelling ("Black Ships and Samurai"). Dower includes an essay that makes use of the visual materials that readers can easily see. Dower and his collaborators change how the material is presented (with links to primary documents beyond the images) by breaking the story into eight sections which viewers can access in any order; telling the story both with images and in words; comparing Western and Eastern visual images of the same events; and offering lesson plans. Dower's essay remains one of the most compelling versions of the story, in part because he employs a range of materials and techniques to tell it, impossible in a book or article version. The University of Tokyo students consulted Dower's website and we hope to introduce the issues of narrativity to both groups, via Dower's work, the next time around. I want students to compare "Perry In Japan" and "Black Ships and Samurai" as narratives and to discuss how each site views history, perhaps as a writing assignment.

"Perry In Japan" approaches historical narrativity from a different angle than "Black Ships and Samurai." Instead of one distinguished historian using a wide array of visual sources, Brown students, faculty, and library staff gathered a few sources and allowed beginning historians to use them to tell a range of different stories. In addition, the website is not a finished historical narrative, but the beginning of an open-ended research project. Many of my colleagues are scandalized that I don't know more about the scroll itself (they worry for my career as a historian). How can I spend this long on a project and not know who painted the scroll, who preserved it, or its style? But with "Perry In Japan," students, colleagues, and I are trying something different. We want the answers to those questions but believe they will emerge as the work continues and as others get involved. The students are not the only collaborators in this project. We hope other scholars and archivists will also join us. While "Perry In Japan" is certainly not Web 2.0, perhaps it is an example of Web 1.5. We're counting on various forms of invited participation, but also on scholars and students finding the site, seeing what we've done with the materials, and offering their own expertise and interpretations. As Randy Bass writes, such "distributed epistemology" may

change the role of the scholar, the nature of editing, and the creation of exhibitions and public collections.... the presence of primary electronic materials will produce some amount of tension and counterforce to institutional hierarchies—of scholars and non-scholars, professionals and "amateurs," elite research schools and teaching institutions, and novice and expert learners. (Bass, "Garden in the Machine")



Miniature Train. From Perry In Japan: A Visual History.
Brown University.



Rice. From Perry In Japan: A Visual History.
Brown University.

The web is no longer simply a place to transfer information: users answer back; people more easily build and organize accessible archives. Websites work best not as one-way presenters of information but by inviting interactive questioning of accepted knowledge.

We have already undertaken, and are considering, a number of different ways to expand or improve "Perry In Japan." We sought to make the site's historical written materials more accessible to the Japanese students. Colleagues have suggested adding different translations of Perry's writings into Japanese and we will include a 1901 version in the new website to allow Japanese students to read in Japanese and then look at the images. If they want to write in Japanese, we could arrange to get their essays translated. Translating the whole site into Japanese is very costly, but we have made a beginning with some of the explanations and the Brown student essays.

I like the idea of having different cultural views of the images, of thinking about the images as both culturally and temporally bound, and I would like to invite students from other cultures to add their ideas. What would an Australian or Brazilian view of these images be? Or we could add essays from younger students. A high school teacher from Niskayuna, New York, Catherine Snyder, discovered the site and sent her lesson plans and student essays from her "World Connections" and "Global History and Geography" classes. Some of these high school students wrote journal entries in the personas of people involved in the encounter, while others compared thematically or artistically related images from "Perry In Japan" and other sites. The high school students used the website to learn about Perry's time in Japan and their essays are now part of the site.

Early on in the site's history, both a Brown archivist, Peter Harrington, and my colleague, Japanese historian Kerry Smith, suggested another text that might be digitized. The Japanese published a series of broadsides, known as *kowaraban*, containing both images and Japanese text, that described Perry's landing. By digitizing three examples held in the Brown collection, we have been able to share these with colleagues (both faculty and graduate students) in Japan and hope that they will write for the website comparing the Brown *kowaraban* with those held by archives in Yokohama, the site of Perry's landing.

The most important visual additions have been a new set of images, from scrolls picturing Perry's landing held by the Newport Historical Society and displayed at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. When rare materials are made available online, their presence creates new knowledge, whether contributed by high school students who see Japanese scrolls in their upstate New York classroom, or by other cultural institutions that want to make their materials available as well.

This is not a finished story. New media have the potential to make scholarship more democratic and to change how we teach by enabling students to build the archives which they then learn how to navigate. No longer are we lonely toilers in an ivory tower, but we are collaborators in building knowledge with colleagues around the world and with those in our own classrooms.

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