

Speech at the Ceremony to commemorate
150 years of academic interaction
between the UK and Japan
by H.E. Keiichi Hayashi,
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at University College London
3 July 2013

My Lords, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is very good to be with you today to celebrate 150 years of academic interaction between the UK and Japan, precipitated by the arrival in this country of the Choshu Five all those years ago.

It has been just about two weeks since the current Prime Minister, Mr Shinzo Abe, visited the UK to attend the G8 summit meeting at Loch Erne. He and I talked about these five young men from Choshu, or the modern-day Yamaguchi Prefecture, from which both of us happen to hail.

As we celebrate the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the Choshu Five in the UK, could it be providential that both the current Prime Minister and the Ambassador to the UK come from the same Province as they did?

At any rate, Prime Minister Abe is the 90th and 96th Prime Minister of Japan and surely takes pride in occupying the post in which one of the five men from Yamaguchi, Hirobumi Ito, was to serve as the first of its kind in Japan. On my part I am proud to be working for the Foreign Ministry, of which the very first Cabinet Minister was another of the five, Kaoru Inoue.

Personal feelings aside, one cannot overstate the importance of the role of the Choshu Five– and of the so-called Satsuma Nineteen, who were soon after sent from the modern-day Kagoshima Prefecture – in laying the foundations of the modern nation that Japan is today. They took back both knowledge and a vision to Japan following their studies and experiences in the UK.

At stake was the destiny of a nation which could have been swallowed up by the waves of imperialism unless it could modernise and strengthen itself. These young men were prepared to do everything; even to risk their own lives for this purpose.

At the same time, the fact that they were able to achieve what they did owes much to the support they received from others, many of whom were, of course, British. For instance, the students' itinerary over two oceans had to be arranged by Jardine-Matheson, whose representative Sir Henry Keswick is here and will, perhaps, talk about the company's unique role in this saga. And, of course, their studies could not have been undertaken without the understanding and support of the school to which they went: UCL.

In this regard, Alexander Williamson, who was Professor of Chemistry at UCL, and his wife Catherine have gone down in history as among their most prominent benefactors. The unveiling of a monument at Brookwood Cemetery in Surrey yesterday to this enlightened and generous couple, who took under their wing the five young men and many others from an utterly alien culture, was truly moving. I don't know whether Professor and Mrs Williamson ever made it to Japan, but they certainly contributed in their own unique way to Japan's modernisation.

At the ceremony yesterday I read out a thank-you letter from Prime Minister Abe addressed to Professor and Mrs Williamson, which I presented to Provost Grant and which is displayed here. In it the Prime Minister pays tribute to the unbiased humanitarian spirit of the Williamsons, who treated not only the Choshu Five and

the Satsuma Nineteen but many subsequent Japanese students almost as if they had been their own children.

The Choshu Five and other Japanese students who followed them went on to play leading roles in politics, engineering, transport, diplomacy, commerce and many other fields. The excellent, mutually-beneficial relations that our two countries enjoy today, reflecting common interests and perspectives in a number of key areas, can in a sense be traced back to these pioneers and their indomitable spirit.

As we look to the future of Japan-UK relations, it is clear that academic exchange and the advances in technology and other fields that it generates will continue to play an important role. Incidentally, I note with pleasure the presence here of President Naito of Eizai, which reminds me of the close bilateral industrial cooperation the University has maintained with Japan in the pharmaceutical and many other disciplines. Such collaboration seems to be solidly founded on the 150-years-old tradition begun by a Professor of Chemistry.

May I pay tribute to the major contribution UCL has made in this regard, in the confident expectation that this esteemed institution will remain at the forefront of academic and intellectual interaction between our two countries.

My successor 50 years from now may or may not be from Yamaguchi, but will certainly be celebrating the bicentennial of such cooperation on an even grander scale. I hope at least some of you will be around then to recall my prediction.

Thank you.