

“The Red Haired Barbarians:” The Dutch in Japan

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The success of Dutch merchants in Japan illustrates the uniqueness of the Dutch Republic amongst the 17<sup>th</sup> century European countries. Not only would the Dutch come to dominate trade in Asia, in Japan they would demonstrate a practicality that would enable them to be the singular Western force present in a country that would severely isolate itself from any foreign intrusion. The V.O.C. could indeed be a ruthless cartel in securing trade from its competition and in dealing with indigenous populations around the world, as in the case of slavery where human beings were reduced to mere commodities to be bought and sold. Yet, the relationship between early Dutch traders, the V.O.C., and the Japanese people delineates an entrepreneurial and cultural adeptness that was beyond that of their European contemporaries and competitors in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

It was the Portuguese, rather than the Dutch, were the first Europeans to begin a relationship with the people of Japan. The Portuguese arrived in 1543 when Japan was a war torn country divided by different warlords. Along with trade, the Portuguese brought Jesuit missionaries who successfully proselytized Christianity if not to a large-scale, which would nonetheless be significant to future Japanese rulers. During their time in Japan, the Portuguese would see the rise of the three great shogunal unifiers. The first of these was Oda Nobunaga, who actually supported Christian efforts in order to counter

the militant Buddhist domains that resisted his rule. The second unifier, Toyotomi Hideyoshi was much less tolerant of the Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries, and subsequently vacillated between policies of tolerance and banning them. Neither of these policies was ever fully enforced. The fate of the Christians in Japan was left to the final unifier, Tokugawa Ieyasu. He ushered in the longest era of peace in his country, and his decisions determined the fate of both the Portuguese and Dutch in Japan. (Totman)

One merchant ship was the first successful Dutch emissary to arrive in Japan in 1600. The *Liefde* arrived in Japan nearly two years after it left Rotterdam on 27 June 1598 with four other heavily armed ships. Their mission was to go to the Moluccas to buy spices as well as to explore the *Silver-ryke* (the Silver Empire) of Japan. They were later informed that they were also to assault and plunder Spanish and Portuguese strongholds along their route in Africa and Asia. Only the *Leifde* survived to reach the Usuki Bay in Kyushu. The original 110-man crew was reduced to 24 emaciated survivors. The Japanese inhabitants of the area pillaged the cannons, rifles, and other assorted weapons, as well as the figurehead of the ship, a representation of Erasmus (which can still be seen at the National Museum in Tokyo). Crew members Jan Joosten van Lodensteyn and the single Englishman aboard the ship, William Adams, were taken to Tokugawa Ieyasu in Edo to be interrogated by a Portuguese interpreter. The Shogun was pleased with their responses and crewmembers were compensated for their losses and were allowed to live in Japanese society. This initial meeting with Tokugawa gave the Dutch permission to trade with Japan. (Dutch)

During the period of 1600-1641, the Dutch were allowed great freedom of movement around the country and in their contacts with the Japanese people. They set up

a factory in Hirado, but this early period of trade was not profitable due to limited contact with other V.O.C. bases and lack of access to Chinese silks desired by the Japanese. The solution of the Dutch was piracy of the Portuguese trading ships carrying Chinese goods. The Portuguese subsequently complained to the Shogun who then outlawed piracy in Japanese waters. During this time, Tokugawa Ieyasu became increasingly upset over what he felt was interference with his rule as well as the disrespectful behavior of Portuguese and Spanish Christian missionaries and their Japanese Christian converts. In 1614 the shogun consequently went on to ban Christianity in Japan, evict Christian missionaries and prominent Japanese Christians, and execute other Japanese Christians who were unable to successfully hide from this campaign. Following this policy, Japanese subjects were forbidden to leave the country in 1621, as well as children born of European fathers and Japanese mothers were expelled from Japan in 1639. The Portuguese were subsequently relocated to a specially built island off of Nagasaki called Dejima. They resided there from 1636 until 1639, at which time they were expelled from Japan entirely “on suspicion of support to the Christian rebels during the Shimabara revolt” (Dutch).

The Dutch, however, showed comparative prudence in maintaining relations with the Japanese. They fought on the Shogun’s side during the Shimabara revolt and “stressed several times that they could provide the Japanese with all the goods that the Portuguese had previously supplied” (Dutch). The Dutch benefited from the expulsion of the Portuguese, as illustrated by a Dutch saying of the time: “Rain on the Portuguese means drizzles on the Dutch” (Dutch). In spite of their efforts to prove their loyalty and usefulness to the Shogun, the shogunal government would find reason to confine the

Dutch to Dejima. Head merchant Francois Caron would make a mistake when he had two warehouses built out of stone to prevent loss to fire. Below the roof arch, as was European custom, the words “Anno 1640” were engraved to show the year of completion. Mentioning a Christian date proved unwise and the Dutch traders were ordered to tear down the warehouses and move to Dejima, thus leaving the relative freedom provided at Hirado. In spite of this restriction, it would be the Dutch who would be the only Europeans allowed to remain in Japan for more than 200 years.

Life for the Dutch on the Dejima island was not ideal. The *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (V.O.C.), founded in 1602, which became the “first multinational, joint-stock, limited liability corporation as well as the first government backed cartel,” (Sayle) established a post on the island of Dejima. The Dutch had to abide by strict rules. They could not leave the post without official permission, and Dejima was prohibited for women. Though exceptions were made for the “public women of the Murayama district,” who could stay one night at a time on the island (Dutch). Permission for the Dutch to leave the island was granted only for official visits to the Shogun. Most merchants spent their life idle until the arrival of ships, mostly in the period between August and October. The Dejima period of trading was not as profitable as it had been during the Hirado period, when free trading had been allowed. Goods were sold at fixed prices by the shogunal government. Yet the V.O.C. did make profits and continued to trade mainly silk for gold, silver, copper, and camphor. As well lacquer work, porcelain, and tea were bought and export to Batavia or Europe. Japanese porcelains would gain great favor in Europe: “Arita, Imari, and other Japanese ceramics were very popular in the Netherlands and other European countries” (Dutch). Surprisingly, despite the

hardships of the posting, it was a popular one for V.O.C. agents. They were able to earn additional income through the limited personal trading granted by the Japanese government, sometimes reaching “20 times their normal annual salary” (Dutch).

For the V.O.C. itself, their primary interest in Japan was access to silver. According to author Murray Sayle in “Japan Goes Dutch”, the V.O.C. never made a net profit in Nagasaki... The attraction for the V.O.C. was silver, Japan being the only major source outside the Catholic Spanish Empire available to the Protestant Dutch. With silver they [the Japanese] purchased Chinese silk...” the V.O.C. was then able to use their silk earnings to purchase spices. “Between 1630 and 1680 the V.O.C. was clearing three million guilders’ worth of precious metals a year from Asia alone” (Sayles). This silver gained from Japan in particular would enable the Dutch to finance more V.O.C. voyages and develop “the beginnings of what might have been the first temperate-climate world empire” (Sayles).

Being confined to Dejima did not in fact limit the influence of the Dutch in Japan; in actuality it “had the unexpected effect of expanding the profile of the Dutch rather than restricting it” (Dutch). After the Portuguese were expelled, the Dutch language gradually took over and the role of translator and interpreter became critically important. These Dutch translators would become known as *Orando Tsuji*, numbering approximately 150, they were in charge of “the administration of trade, diplomacy, and cultural exchanges” (Dutch). They would also play an important role in the “propagation and spreading of western sciences” (Dutch). One important task of the V.O.C. was to provide information on western sciences and politics in order to continue to prove their worth to the Japanese shogunal government. Thus, the V.O.C. sent many academics to Japan. This learning

from Western academics sent to Japan was called *Rangaku*. Consequently, the Japanese ruling class came to believe that “the westerners had exceptional, and valuable, knowledge in many fields” (Dutch). While there, many academics also studied Japanese culture, as well as collected Japanese artifacts and household goods. Though the knowledge and information of the outside world was highly prized by high-ranking Japanese officials, the academics of the *Rangaku* were still limited in what they were able to do while in Japan. Creating maps of Japan, for example, was strictly forbidden. A German academic, Von Siebold, was sent to Japan in 1823 and became “the most revered V.O.C. employee of his time in service of the Japanese and Dutch alike...” received “secret maps of Japan” among the goods exchanged for his teaching services (Dutch). When these maps were discovered, he was “banned for life under suspicion of being a spy” (Dutch). His eviction in 1829 became known as the “Siebold Incident”.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Dutch cultural influence in Japan was their participation in the *Edo Sanpu*. The Dutch were required to make an “annual court journey” as were all regional Japanese leaders. The Dutch leadership from Dejima had to pay annual tribute to the Shogun in Edo and “provide a detailed report on the outside world, the so-called *fusetsu gaki*” (Dutch). On this journey, which could take up to three months to complete, the Dutch leadership and *Oranda Tsuji* would be accompanied by a V.O.C. surgeon and Nagasaki civil servants – approximately 150 to 200 people. “The procession with the ‘Red Haired Barbarians’ attracted many curious onlookers and it was completed 170 times...The mission would be completed partially by boat to the Osaka area and continued to Edo via the Tokaido-route” (Dutch). The visit demanded “many special and expensive gifts” for the Shogun – such gifts included: “telescopes, medical

instruments, medicines, cannons, globes, exotic animals such as zebras, camels, and monkeys...Scientific books were especially popular” (Dutch). In return for these gifts the Dutch would receive expensive silk kimonos. The Japanese cultural interest in the Dutch during the *Edo Sanpu* and their life on Dejima was a consistent theme in *Nagasaki-e*, woodblock prints from Nagasaki. These were popular from 1800 to 1860, and were made for and purchased by Japanese people who rarely had a chance to see a “Red-haired Barbarian”. These were not prints produced with elaborate techniques, rather “they were targeted at a broad Japanese public – more on a coffee table book level for people curious as to how these barbarians may look” (Yonemura).

Though the Dutch factory on Dejima would remain into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, profits and trade for both the Dutch and Japanese deteriorated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Japanese authorities established new regulations that limited the number of ships permitted into the factory as well as a new exchange rate for silver and gold. The result was restricted profits for the Dutch. The Dutch also lost command of the seas and “between 1795 and 1813 few V.O.C. vessels managed to reach Dejima as a result of which V.O.C. employees lost income” (Dutch). In fact V.O.C. employees would become dependent on the Japanese for food and clothing. The last *Opperhoofd*, Hendrik Doeff, spent his time writing a Dutch-Japanese dictionary and “invested special efforts in maintaining good relations with the Japanese authorities” (Dutch). In 1853, U.S. Commodore Perry arrived in Japan with his gun ships. This ultimately led to contact and trade concessions with many Western Nations. The Dutch were no longer the “single window to the world” for the Japanese (Dutch).

The relationship between the Dutch and the Japanese continues to be celebrated in Japan. The city of Nagasaki has painstakingly re-created the Dejima factory. The Dutch in Nagasaki as the “window to the world” for the Japanese is a prevalent theme at sites dedicated to the heritage and history of Nagasaki. Successful Dutch-Japanese relations are remarkable in the historical context of an isolated East Asian country and a 17<sup>th</sup> Christian European society that did value tolerance. It is said that when V.O.C. ships began arriving in Japan they would shout, “We are not Christians! We are Hollanders!” (Sayles). This may not be accurate, but that this is part of the narrative of the Dutch in Japan illustrates the uniqueness of Dutch merchants and traders in acclimating to a greatly different culture. That the idea of tolerance was not prevalent for 17<sup>th</sup> century Europeans is demonstrated by the Portuguese experience in Japan, yet somehow the Dutch managed a cultural acumen that was remarkable for this time period.

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