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Boxer: The Great Ship From Amacon

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Review Article

The Great Ship from Amacon

One of the several plums falling to Philip II from his annexation of Portugal in 1580 was official Spanish control of Portuguese Macao, a port city below Canton, founded in 1570. The Portuguese, as intermediaries between Chinese and Manila merchants, had been in an excellent position to slice themselves in on the rich commerce of the Manila-Acapulco galleon trade. In 1581, however, they were legally barred from shipping to Manila and although the Macao merchants never completely submitted to numerous subsequent prohibitions, they afterwards turned their full attention to the silk trade with Japan. This traffic between Macao and Nagasaki is the subject of a recent study by C. R. Boxer,¹ and although the matter still remains far from exhausted, Professor Boxer's volume helps fill one of the major lacunae in Philippine history, that relating to commercial relations between Macao, Japan and Manila.²

The Macao-Nagasaki trade was based on the exchange of China silk for Japanese silver, and the Portuguese merchants

¹ *The Great Ship from Amacon. Annals of Macao and the Old Japan Trade* (Lisboa: Centro de Estudos Históricos Ultramarinos, 1959), Pp. XI, 361.

² Trade in the Far East was the subject of an earlier article by C. R. Boxer, "The Manila Galleon: 1565-1815," *History Today* (August, 1958), 538-47; complementary studies to the *Great Ship* are his *Fidalgos in the Far East, 1550-1770*, (The Hague, 1948), and *The Christian Century in Japan, 1549-1650* (Berkeley, 1951).

of Macao filled the enviable position of middlemen. An estimated annual import of a million cruzados reached Macao from Japan; eighty to twenty million grams of silver, or half of Japan's total output. In addition to silver, Japanese exports included arms, pikes, swords, lacquer-ware and slaves, all of which found a ready market in Macao.

Two of the most important figures in the trade were the Captain-major, who as commander of the annual voyage sometimes realized 150,000 cruzados, and the Factor of the City of Macao, the representative through whom all Portuguese transactions had to pass. The position of Captain-major was sold annually to the highest bidder, thereby opening the door to numerous difficulties. The Crown wrote in 1615 that many of the purchasers of the post were "persons of few parts and unfit for the post, which requires the authority and experience which you will have realized; and hence many drawbacks and many disorders occur in my service; and forasmuch as this should be remedied as far as possible, I earnestly charge and entrust you to try and do so, ensuring that these sales are celebrated with such persons as can worthily fulfill the duties of that captaincy and possess the authority which is so necessary for the occupant thereof."³

The illegalities connected with the Macao-Nagasaki trade are strikingly similar to those resorted to in the Manila-Acapulco commerce. Portuguese merchants frequently acted as agents for wealthy Indians or Chinese, as Manila agents were often in the employ of Mexican businessmen. Overloading, which caused many a tragedy in the galleon trade, was pinpointed as a main factor in the loss of the Great Ship in 1573. Undervaluating cargo to lessen taxes was not necessary, however, since the only impost at the Japanese terminus was presents given to the *Bugyo* or magistrates of Nagasaki, and the military dictator of Japan. Since the voyage of the Nao originated in Goa, in-transit taxes were paid at Malacca and Cochin. In Macao the *caldeirão* or 3% export tax, rising in 1634 to 8%, was levied. A 10% tax on all silk exports was awarded to the Capain-major of the year. By 1623 the total

³ Crown letter of February 20, 1615, in Boxer, *Great Ship*, p. 89.

taxes paid to both Chinese and Portuguese amounted to 27%-28%.⁴

Taxes, however, were not the only obstruction to be surmounted. The omnipresent Dutch who arrived on the scene in 1600 considerably influenced the trade, and played a major role in its eventual cessation in 1640. Their constant preying on the "slow moving monster" forced the Portuguese in 1618 to abandon the carrack as a carrying vessel for the swifter galliots. The Dutch successfully blockaded the Straits of Malacca and "caused the Macao merchants to concentrate on their trade with Nagasaki and Manila at the expense of that with Goa." An Englishman noted in 1635 that the trade in Macao "hath of later years been diverted to Japan and Manila, to which parts they make the benefit of doubling their principal in those short voyages; whence they return little from both places but silver (so greatly desired by the Chinas). The silks and stuffs, etc., which they transport for Japan are vended in the country itself to large and great quantities; from Manila they are in great quantities transported to the West Indies. By these means . . . those that live in China have abandoned in a manner trade to the southwards to the ports of India, etc., finding these extraordinary benefits, with a great deal more safety and shorter times to return unto them the benefit."⁵

The end of the Macao-Nagasaki trade which came with the well-known isolationist movement following the Shimabara rebellion of 1637-1638 did not mean the collapse of the colony. But the tenacity and courage which had originally driven them eastward was again employed in seeking out new markets in Macassar, Timor and Indochina. It was a question of survival which was successfully and permanently solved. "The Spaniards have gone from the Philippines, the Dutch from Java

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17. The silks were sold in Nagasaki through the familiar *pancada* system whereby sales were not conducted on an individual basis, but on a wholesale agreement. The Portuguese merchants were never completely satisfied with the system since it put them at a disadvantage. They could always threaten, however, to pack up their silks and bring them back to Macao.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

and Formosa, and the English from Hirado and Shanghai; but the Portuguese still reemain in the City of the Name of God in China.”⁶

Although the first contacts with Japan by Portuguese traders took place in 1555, it was not until 1571 that the port of Nagasaki was selected as a permanent terminus for the silk and silver trade. The harbor had been surveyed by a Portuguese pilot and a Jesuit priest, Father Melchor de Figuereido. By the end of 1571 the Jesuits reported that the village had been thoroughly christianized, and the once tiny fishing settlement had been transformed into a respectably sizable town. Churches, colleges and a number of parishes administered by the Jesuits sprang up, and although it augured well for the future of Christianity, the material support of these establishments remained a continual source of difficulty and embarrassment since it was drawn from the profits the Jesuits themselves made in the silk trade. In April of 1578 an agreement was struck between the Jesuits and the Macao merchants over just how much the Jesuits could ship on their account, fifty piculs of the total 1600. This naturally increased over the years as the volume of the trade expanded. They became more deeply involved when Valignano accepted a quasi-political control over the town of Nagasaki which he expected would become a refuge for Japan's Christians. Heavy criticism was levelled against the Society by Spanish friars in the Philippines who incessantly bombarded the Crown with shocked remonstrances over its commercial operations. They had little effect, however, since the King was well aware that he would have to dig into his own coffers if the Jesuits did not support themselves. Fr. Alessandro Valignano who was sent as Visitor to Japan and India in 1573 wrote that:

First of all, in Japan we have more than 130 Jesuits who are living in 20 houses; besides, we have in our *seminario* more than 100 students, called *dojucos* here in Japan, and many others who help the Fathers in their various ministries... joined to this there is a large number who help in taking care of our more than 250 churches so that when

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

I left Japan five years ago I found the number of those ordinarily provided for was more than 360, while now it is more than 700.⁷

He explained that since the Society was in all parts of Japan churches and houses must be built, which could not be done by the parishioners who were generally poor.

For the payment of all these expenses we have no more than 1200 ducats of revenue which was obtained in India with permission of the kings of Portugal; and another 1000 ducats each year from the customs of Malacca which the king, Dom Sebastian, awarded, but since this passes through the hands of officials it is always considerably reduced [*se pagan siempre muy mal*] and at present they owe us 6000 ducats. Passing to China more than 30% is lost because of the exchange value; as a result not even 700 is left, and this is all that they have as revenue; certainly it doesn't reach 2000 ducats.⁸

The Jesuit Bishop of Japan, Dom Luís Sequeira, felt uneasy about the business, although he realized that not much could be done. The reasons for the complaints, he wrote, are:

...material preoccupation and our governing, even though in reality it is only direction, that the Society has in this business of the ship, through Fr. Joao Rodrigues Tcujo, and some other things pertaining to the town of Nagasaki... [these things] are affairs in themselves not akin to our profession, and by their very nature they are cause of gossip, especially on account of the way that Father deals with them, engrossed too much with them, not taking account of religious prudence that such business required, although we cannot say he is not a clever and intelligent man in such affairs. We can say with truth that all the troubles and reverses we have been having in Japan all these years—and in the future that will not be missing—were caused by our assuming the quasi-government... On account of this both Fr. Joao Rodrigues and Fr. Vice-Provincial were accused of so interfering with the government of the city that they were an obstacle to the actual governors when they wished to fulfill their duties and dispense justice.⁹

⁷ P. Alejandro Valignano, "Apología en el cual se responde á diversas calumnias que se escribieron contra los PP. de la Compañía de Japón y de la China," Enero de 1598, in Colín-Pastells, *Labor evangélica*, II (Barcelona, 1900-02), 689-92.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ "cuidado temporal e como governo, posto que per modo somente de direicao, que a Companhia por via do padre Joao Rodrigues Tcujo tem das cousas de náó, e deste comercio, e outras pertencentes a esta cidade de Nagasaqui... negocios em si considerados não serem

The Jesuits, however, continued actively in the trade until the end, since a suitable alternative for supporting them and their work was never found.¹⁰ Their position in Japan, as well as the very existence of Christianity, was insecure, depending upon the good will or tolerance of the Shogun. In 1587 Toyotomi Hideyoshi turned on the Christian colony and demanded expulsion for the Jesuits and apostasy from the Christians. He made a careful distinction, however, between the Jesuits who "come to Japan and convert people to their creed, destroying Shinto and Buddhist temples to this end," and the Portuguese merchants who came in the Great Ships from Amacan. But the crisis, one of many, soon passed. Hideyoshi later explained that he had nothing personal against the Jesuits, but their propagation of Christianity struck at the roots of the Japanese social and cultural fabric.

In 1596 the famous "San Felipe" affair occurred which further embittered Portuguese-Spanish relations. The pilot of the Manila Galleon which had been stranded on Japanese shores was alleged to have said that the missionaries in Japan were merely forerunners of a military conquest. Egged on by some anti-Christian advisors Hideyoshi confiscated the cargo and executed a few Franciscans and Japanese Jesuits from Nagasaki. When the Spanish governor of the Philippines protested this action Hideyoshi declared that the measures taken against the Christians were a political expedient, and he "could no

tao proprios da nossa profissao e de sua natureza ocasionados a se murmurar, parte pollo modo que o dito padre tem de os tratar, metendose mais nelles, e com menos resguardo e prudencia religiosa do que convem, posto que se nao pode negar ser esperto e intelligente nestes negocios. Pode-se com verdade affirmar que quasi todos os trabalhos e enfadamentos que destes annos atraz tivemos em Japao e ainda agora nao nos faltao, se occasionarao deste como-governo... Por razao deste governo forao o padre Joao Rodrigues e tambem o padre Vice provincial accusados que se metiao de tal maneira no governo desta cidade que nao deixavao fazar seu officio, nem fazer justica aos governadores della." Bishop Sequeira to Jesuit General, March 1, 1607, *ibid.*, p. 67. The administration mentioned by the Bishop was not done personally by the Jesuits, but through their nominees.

¹⁰ Boxer, p. 12.

more tolerate the propagation of militant Christianity in Japan than could the Catholic princes of Europe allow Shinto or Buddhist missionaries in their realms."¹¹

In 1601, a year after the first Dutch ship thrust its prow into Japanese waters, a fleet of three Dutch sail under Jacob van Neck appeared off the coast of Japan. The smaller ships were promptly seized by the Portuguese and all the sailors were thrown into prison, eventually to be executed as pirates. Not to be denied their share of Japanese silver, nor content with preying on Portuguese and Spanish shipping, they founded Castle Zeelandia on southwestern Formosa in 1624, hoping thereby to attract a share of the Japanese trade. The Dutch were so successful that they forced the Spaniards to establish a post on the same island. About Dutch efforts on Formosa, the Spanish governor of the Philippines wrote that "this damage is clearly seen from the fact that the 50 Chinese ships which have come to these islands have not brought as much as 40 piculs of silk, whereas the enemy have 900 without the textiles; and if it were not for what has been brought from Macao, the ships from New Spain would have nothing to carry."¹²

The Dutch, however, were not alone in their designs on the Japanese trade. By 1609 a thriving trade had developed between the Philippines and Japan even though its development was somewhat retarded by mutual suspicion and religious friction. It was sufficiently large to affect the Macao-Nagasaki commerce. Towards the end of October, or in March, Japanese trading junks would arrive in Manila with cargoes of wheat, flour, salted meats, silk goods, cutlery and armor. Payment was made in Spanish silver, but the Japanese also returned with large amounts of raw Chinese silk, and it was this that worried the merchants of Macao. The Camara of Goa wrote to the crown that if the Manila-Japanese trade continued, it would soon replace that of Macao. Many urged that the long-existent Manila-Macao trade be legalized, arguing that Spanish silver in Macao would force prices up, to the advantage of those trading

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 114.

with Japan. In April of 1624 the Viceroy and council rejected the petition, but the trade continued.

In 1614, a year after the English successfully founded a trading post at Hirado, Tokugawa Ieyasu decreed the banishment of all missionaries. He gave three reasons. (1) Suspicion of the missionaries' real motives, since the Japanese could not believe that they would travel so far merely to teach a new religion. (2) It was generally believed that Japanese Christians were more obedient to the missionaries than to their civil superiors. (3) A number of political and financial scandals in which prominent Japanese Christians took part.¹³ As a result, on November 7-8, about 155 religious left for Manila and Macao. It was not long, however, before they began to re-enter Japan, either smuggled in or disguised as merchants or seamen. Between 1614-1618, twenty religious entered in this manner. Jeronimo de Macedo de Carvalho, Captain-major for 1621, was arrested on charges of helping missionaries enter Japan. He remained in captivity until his death in 1632. And he was not alone in paying the penalty for aiding the missionaries.

The English and Dutch played a large part in arousing Japanese mistrust of the missionaries, as their joint embassy to the Shogun in 1619 clearly shows.¹⁴ A pact between the two countries called the "Treaty of Defence" stipulated that both England and Holland would share in the Spice Islands trade, the Dutch getting 2/3, the English 1/3. In addition both East India companies agreed to maintain a "Fleet of Defence" whose captains were ordered, "If you meet Portuguese Spaniards or their adherents anywhere, assault and surprise them." All spoils taken were to be divided between the Dutch and English.

A financial crash in 1632 foreshadowed the end of the Macao-Nagasaki trade. It resulted from Japanese demands for payment of outstanding Portuguese debts which in 1635 rose to 600,000 cruzados of silver. Incidents took place, searches, imprisonment, hostages taken, which indicated a worsening si-

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

tuation. The Shimabara revolt of the persecuted peasantry and Christians, which led to the burning of Buddhist and Shinto temples, was believed to be instigated by the Portuguese; the war-cry of the rebels was the Iberian "*Santiago*." Retaliation was swift. In 1637 over 287 men, women and children left Nagasaki, exiled to Macao. The next year the Macao Senate wrote: ". . . judging by the bad treatment, wrongs, and injustices which they inflicted on us in Japan, both on our persons and on our trade, it can be presumed that they gave us to understand that we should not return thither."¹⁵ In 1639 the end came. The trade was declared terminated and the remaining Portuguese were read the following decree:

1. You and your compatriots have continued to bring missionaries into the country, despite the stringent laws against this practice.

2. These missionaries and their converts have continually received aid and comfort from you and your compatriots, to help them accomplish their designs.

This has resulted in many of our vassals forsaking their bounden duty, and thus caused the death of many.

For all these reasons you people are worthy of death, and His Imperial Majesty should justly kill you, but he has condescended to spare your lives, and hereby ordains that you should leave Japan, and never return. If you should subsequently break this command, you will then infallibly be punished as you now deserve to be.¹⁶

The report of the Japanese decision caused panic in Macao and ambassadors were immediately rushed to Japan to attempt negotiations. But their prompt execution merely put a period to the decree of 1639. The news of their fate was received in Macao with mixed emotions:

Many of them [citizens of Macao] with tears of joy in their eyes, congratulating each other on such a piece of good fortune, especially the families and relatives of the martyrs, all of whom dressed, not in mourning but in gala clothes. They did not shut the windows of their houses from grief, but opened them wide, placing many lights in them, and sounding shawms and other musical instruments for many days, singing many tuneful songs as a sign of their joy. It is a most noteworthy thing, that as the welfare, maintenance, and almost the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 160-61

very existence of this city depends chiefly on the Japan trade, if the news that the embassy had failed in its purpose had come without that of this glorious triumph, the citizens of Macao would have been aghast and their hearts sunk to their shoes. With this glorious news, however, everyone rejoiced exceedingly, and nobody spoke sadly or showed any sorrow because the trade was not reopened. On the contrary, they all rejoiced in the comforting thought that they had their ambassadors in Heaven, hoping with good reason that through their intercession, God would cast his eyes on that commonweal to save or sustain it, either by restoring the Japan trade, or by opening some other way for its preservation.¹⁷

The Dutch of course were delighted with the turn of events as they now had the silk trade to themselves. But the Shogun soon realized that "You Hollanders are all Christians like the Portuguese. You keep Sunday. You write the date of Christ's birth over the doors and on the tops of your houses, in the sight of everyone in our land. You have the ten commandments, the Lord's prayer. . . . The principles are the same, and we consider the differences between you unimportant. We have known long since that you were Christians but we thought that yours was another Christ."¹⁸ They eventually fell under the Japanese exclusion policy but were allowed a trading post on the island of Deshima, off Nagasaki. They thereby successfully enjoyed a monopoly of direct trade with Japan for the next two centuries.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 165-66.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 167.