Compared to ample studies of the history of Japan’s foreign relations with China, Korea, Ryūkyū and the Ainu people, there is little research available concerning the history of Japan’s relationships with Southeast Asia. This article provides a short sketch of Japan’s relations with Vietnam in the early modern period by focusing on international trade and diplomacy, and will hopefully serve as an initiator for further research.

Tokugawa Japan (1603-1867; also known as the Edo period) set in motion a unique systematic policy for foreign trade and diplomacy with the establishment of the so-called sakoku isolationist policy in the 1630s, which continued until the 1850s when Japan signed the treaty to open ports for trade to Western countries such as Great Britain and the United States of America. The sakoku policy limited international trade to four gateway ports: Tsushima, Matsumae, Satsuma and Nagasaki.

The first three gateway ports were each managed by a han [clan] under the supervision of the Tokugawa central government. Tsushima was assigned to manage foreign relations with the Kingdom of Chosŏn (Korea), Satsuma took care of affairs with the Kingdom of Ryūkyū (present-day Okinawa), and Matsumae interacted with the Ainu people on the island of Hokkaidō. The port of Nagasaki was an exemption. This gateway was managed by the Governor, appointed by the Tokugawa central authorities, and it was the most important gateway port in terms of the scale of foreign trade. Only two types of vessels were permitted to call at this port: those of the Dutch East India Company (Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie; hereafter VOC), and tōsen (junk ships). Literally meaning ‘Chinese ship’, tōsen came in many varieties. During the 17th century in particular, several sorts of junks berthed at Nagasaki: junks from Taiwan under the control of Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga), who attempted a revival of the Chinese Ming dynasty; junks from Chinese coastal areas under the control of Qing China; and junks from ports in Southeast Asia, which were run and managed by overseas Chinese merchants.

While Tokugawa Japan officially continued to keep diplomatic relations only with Korea and Ryūkyū, Japan held a multi-directed foreign trade policy, realized through these four gateway ports, not only with Korea and Ryūkyū but also with other countries such as China, Southeast Asian states and the Netherlands. Thanks to several sorts of junk ships coming from the China Sea region, Japan successfully obtained a set of Asian commodities, such as raw silk and sugar, at reasonable prices without sending out its own Japanese vessels to China and Southeast Asia.

Japan’s trade with Vietnam

Before the establishment of Japan’s sakoku isolationist policy in the 1630s, Vietnam’s trade with Japan was mainly conducted by Japanese merchants holding the so-called ‘red-sealed letters’ provided by the Tokugawa shōgun’s central authorities. But after Japanese nationals were banned from going abroad by Tokugawa central authorities in 1635, international trade between Japan and Vietnam began to be run by overseas Chinese settled in Vietnam in cooperation with Japanese immigrants living there, and who best knew the conditions of the Japanese market. In addition to overseas Chinese traders in Vietnam, the VOC conducted trade between Japan and Vietnam under the framework of the intra-Asian trade.

The Japanese categorized junk ships from Vietnam according to their place of embarkation. The first category was the ships that came from Tonkin (present-day Hanoi) under the supervision of the Kingdom of Chosŏn (Korea), Satsuma took care of affairs with the Kingdom of Ryūkyū (present-day Okinawa), and Matsumae interacted with the Ainu people on the island of Hokkaidō. The port of Nagasaki was an exemption. This gateway was managed by the Governor, appointed by the Tokugawa central authorities, and it was the most important gateway port in terms of the scale of foreign trade. Only two types of vessels were permitted to call at this port: those of the Dutch East India Company (Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie; hereafter VOC), and tōsen (junk ships). Literally meaning ‘Chinese ship’, tōsen came in many varieties. During the 17th century in particular, several sorts of junks berthed at Nagasaki: junks from Taiwan under the control of Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga), who attempted a revival of the Chinese Ming dynasty; junks from Chinese coastal areas under the control of Qing China; and junks from ports in Southeast Asia, which were run and managed by overseas Chinese merchants.

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originating from the middle of Vietnam, for example, from the port of Thanh Hoa, the area is now known as Phu Quoc. These ships were under the control of the Nguyễn regime. The third category covered junk ships from Champa, south of the territory of Nguyễn C学生的deal. The international division of labor was a basis for this maritime trade. As direct trade between Japan and mainland China had come to a halt following the maritime ban in Ming China (1368-1644), Vietnam came to be regarded as a substitute source of raw silk for the Japanese market. Vietnam also exported cinnamon, several types of sugar, aloe wood (used in incense and perfume), ruyi knap, and animal hides (deer, buffalo, etc.) to Japan. Silver was the most significant trading item from Japan to Vietnam. In addition to silver, copper bar and copper cash were also exported from Japan to Vietnam. Japanese copper was smelted in Vietnam and used to manufacture guns and other weapons; some of the copper cash was in circulation as a small denomination currency in Vietnam. Miscellaneous goods such as lacquerware and house utensils were also shipped to Vietnam from Japan.

The VOC was also engaged in the Vietnamese trade, where it maintained trading posts in Tonkin and Champa. The silver trade was important for the Dutch Japan trade; in order for the VOC to acquire large volumes of silver in Japan, it needed Asian products for the Japanese market. Trade between Japan and Vietnam was done under the framework of the VOC’s intra-Asian trade; by supplying Southeast Asian goods to Japan, the VOC obtained silver and copper from Japan and sold Japanese goods in South Asia, where it could procure Indian cotton textiles for the market in Southeast Asia. Through this triangular trade in Asian waters the Dutch company was able to reduce silver exports for the market in Southeast Asia. Through the Ming-Qing transition, the arrival of politicalpeace in China and the recovery of the Sino-Japan trade. After the surrender of the Zheng family in Taiwan (Kingdom of Tungting, 1661-1663) to Qing China, the trading pattern of junk traders changed on a large scale around the China Sea region. Until 1683, most junk traders had been overseas Chinese settlers in Vietnam. Some of these overseas Chinese were merchants and some were junk ship crew members. Afterwards, more Chinese junk traders from mainland China began to participate in the Vietnam-Japan trade. In 1692, for example, 45 Chinese and only 6 Tonkinese were registered on a particular junk ship from Tonkin to Nagasaki. But then, due to the rapid increase of the numbers of Chinese junk ships coming from the Yangtze River Delta in the 1680s, Japan undertook to restrict the volume of international trade. And so, in 1715, the Shōtoku Shinsen Act was issued by the Japanese Tokugawa central authorities. This act introduced a new restriction policy for international trade, and the pattern of maritime trade by junk ships began to change again in the China Sea region. From 1715, to around the 1760s, Vietnam trade with Japan was conducted only by Chinese traders based in ports around the Yangtze River Delta, such as Chupu and Shanghai. They departed from ports in the Yangtze River Delta, headed to Vietnam to procure Vietnamese goods for Japan, and shipped onwards to Nagasaki. Copper purchased in Nagasaki was sold in mainland China. However, during the 1700s, Vietnamese products became widely available in the Yangtze River Delta, and Chinese junkies for the Japan trade no longer needed to travel to Vietnam. In fact, the last junks to sail to Nagasaki (according to VOC records) from Tonkin and Cochinchina did so in 1763 and 1767 respectively, and from Champa already in 1731. In this letter King Narai expressed his wishes for a peaceful link with Vietnamese states, especially for the junk trade between Japan and other Southeast Asia countries, for instance, when castaway people were sent back to Japan from China, local governors or officers would just exchange letters. Vietnam was also ‘rejected’; in 1688, the King of Cochinchina sent an official letter to the shogun to ask for copper cash from Japan, yet the Tokugawa central authorities never sent an official letter back to Vietnam. However, while the Tokugawa central authorities did not reply to the official diplomatic, they did want to maintain positive practical relations, for example, through the regular junk trade. In words, Japan continued to make an effort to keep peaceful links with Vietnamese states without an official relationship at the top levels. For example, the King of Cochinchina sent a letter to the Governor of Nagasaki in 1695 to assure the Tokugawa authority of sending Vietnamese castaways back from Japan. These Vietnamese castaways, however, were brought back by a Chinese junk ship going to Nagasaki and they were sent back from Nagasaki to Cochinchina under the supervision of the Japanese Governor of Nagasaki. Another example took place in 1795; seventeen Japanese castaways discovered on the Vietnamese coast were brought back to Nagasaki by a Chinese junk ship.

Diplomatic relations with Korea, China and Vietnam

Unlike with Korea, Japan refrained from official diplomatic relations with the states in Southeast Asia after Japan’s establishment of the sakoku isolationist policy in the 1630s. For example, when Thai King Narai took the throne of the Kingdom of Ayutthaya in 1656, he sent a mission to Japan with his official Royal letter addressed to the shogun. In this letter King Narai expressed his wishes for a peaceful link with Japanese states. However, the Tokugawa central authorities refused his request. By contrast, the Tokugawa central authorities did choose to reopen diplomatic relations with Korea in order to further develop the international trade between both countries. In spite of the King’s eagerness, the Tokugawa central authorities refused his request. This act introduced a new restriction policy for international trade, and the pattern of maritime trade by junk ships began to change again in the China Sea region. From 1715, to around the 1760s, Vietnam trade with Japan was conducted only by Chinese traders based in ports around the Yangtze River Delta, such as Chupu and Shanghai. They departed from ports in the Yangtze River Delta, headed to Vietnam to procure Vietnamese goods for Japan, and shipped onwards to Nagasaki. Copper purchased in Nagasaki was sold in mainland China. However, during the 1700s, Vietnamese products became widely available in the Yangtze River Delta, and Chinese junkies for the Japan trade no longer needed to travel to Vietnam. In fact, the last junks to sail to Nagasaki (according to VOC records) from Tonkin and Cochinchina did so in 1763 and 1767 respectively, and from Champa already in 1731. In this letter King Narai expressed his wishes for a peaceful link with Vietnamese states, especially for the junk trade between Japan and other Southeast Asia countries, for instance, when castaway people were sent back to Japan from China, local governors or officers would just exchange letters. Vietnam was also ‘rejected’; in 1688, the King of Cochinchina sent an official letter to the shogun to ask for copper cash from Japan, yet the Tokugawa central authorities never sent an official letter back to Vietnam. However, while the Tokugawa central authorities did not reply to the official diplomatic, they did want to maintain positive practical relations, for example, through the regular junk trade. In words, Japan continued to make an effort to keep peaceful links with Vietnamese states without an official relationship at the top levels. For example, the King of Cochinchina sent a letter to the Governor of Nagasaki in 1695 to assure the Tokugawa authority of sending Vietnamese castaways back from Japan. These Vietnamese castaways, however, were brought back by a Chinese junk ship going to Nagasaki and they were sent back from Nagasaki to Cochinchina under the supervision of the Japanese Governor of Nagasaki. Another example took place in 1795; seventeen Japanese castaways discovered on the Vietnamese coast were brought back to Nagasaki by a Chinese junk ship.