

Emergence of Deerskin Exports from Taiwan under VOC (1624-1642)*

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ABSTRACT

In 1624, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) set up a trading post at a fort built on a sandbank extending out from the west coast of Taiwan (Formosa). As a new supplier in the Japanese market, the VOC attempted to import deerskins from Southeast Asian kingdoms. Unlike those imported from Siam, deerskins brought from the aborigines in Taiwan were exempted from official trade barriers between Siam and Japan. The VOC wasted no time trying to take over from the Chinese middlemen deerskin trade with the aborigines in Taiwan and compete with Japanese junk traders who held a Shogunal pass to visit Taiwan. Although deerskins accounted for an insignificant percentage of the total Sino-Japanese trade volume, their trade became a token of legitimacy for the Dutch's sole control over the Tayouan harbor. The competition between Dutch and Japanese traders soon spiraled out of control and led to a violent conflict in 1628. All VOC businesses in Japan were suspended until 1633, when the Dutch were preferred to the Iberians by the Japanese Shogun because they were Protestant and not prone to proselytize their religion. The following year, the Japanese Shogunal court implemented a total exclusion policy forbidding Japanese to travel abroad.

Deerskin exports from Siam had been in the firm grip of the Japanese community there until their leader, Yamada Nagamasa, became embroiled in the political strife following the death of King Songt'am in 1628. This political turmoil stalled Siamese deerskin exports, leaving a vacuum for Taiwanese deerskins to fill. From 1628 to 1632, the VOC authorities in Taiwan, with no access to the Japanese market, allowed the Chinese in Japan to engage in deerskin trade. Gradually, the profits made from Taiwanese deerskin exports were comparable to those from Siam. When the exclusion policy took effect in

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1634 and the VOC trade with Japan resumed, the Siamese deerskin exports never recovered their previous level. Seeing an opportunity, the VOC determined to expand its Taiwanese deerskin exports. It launched a series of expeditions to aboriginal villages on the northern frontier to open deer hunting-grounds to Chinese hunters. The Siamese deerskin exports eventually stabilized in the early 1640s and the impetus of the VOC expansion slackened off accordingly. Around 1645, a new system to collect deerskins was established by the VOC authorities. This so-called “village-lease” system guaranteed keeping the Chinese-Aborigine contact to a minimum, while still providing the VOC with a certain amount of deerskins at a fixed price. Tracing the history of deerskin trade initiated by the VOC in Taiwan, the author argues that it served three purposes: to supplement Siamese deerskins, to establish the legitimacy of VOC’s control over Tayouan harbor, and to have exclusive access to the aborigines and all their goods.

Keywords: VOC, Formosa, Deerskin, Japanese in Siam, Chinese in Japan, Aborigines in Taiwan