‘Great help from Japan’

The Dutch East India Company's experiment with Japanese soldiers

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Abstract

This chapter examines a short-lived VOC experiment to recruit soldiers in Japan and dispatch them to fight on behalf of the organisation in Southeast Asia. As a number of historians have noted, the Japanese mercenary was not an unfamiliar figure in Southeast Asia in this period. In the early seventeenth century, Japanese fighters found employment in Siam, where successive kings deployed a large contingent of these troops; in the Philippines, where Japanese recruits engaged in the bloody suppression of Chinese revolts on behalf of their Spanish masters; and in Cambodia, where Japanese recruits bolstered local forces gathered to resist a potential invasion. But if there were parallels, the Company’s recruits were also set apart. This chapter argues that a small group of VOC officials enthusiastically embraced Japanese soldiers as part of their drive to solve the perennial European problem of inadequate military manpower in Asia. In the process, they departed from past patterns by attempting to engineer the figure of the professional Japanese mercenary, constrained by draconian contracts and governed by Dutch officers. Not surprisingly, however, the vision put forward by high-ranking officials, most of whom had never visited Japan, clashed with the reality on the ground where Japanese recruits proved unruly soldiers who became embroiled in a series of disciplinary incidents.

Keywords: Mercenaries, non-state violence, Southeast Asia, Hirado. Amboyna Conspiracy Trial

In 1623, a contingent of Japanese soldiers in the employ of the Dutch East India Company was accused of plotting with a group of English merchants
to seize control of a fort on the remote island of Ambon in modern-day Indonesia.\(^1\) Tortured, they confessed that they had agreed to deliver the fort into English hands in return for a significant payoff and a share of the plunder. The result was a swift trial that ended in the execution of 21 men, ten Japanese soldiers, ten English merchants and an Asian slave overseer caught up in the legal proceedings. When news of what had happened reached London in 1624, it sparked immediate controversy as English officials denounced the flawed nature of the judicial procedures while ridiculing the notion that a conspiracy had existed in the first place. As news of the trial spread, propelled by the publication of cheap broadsheet ballads and incendiary pamphlets, everyone seemed to be talking about Japanese soldiers and their particular capabilities. For Dutch writers determined to emphasise the potential strength of the Amboina plotters, the Japanese were fearsome warriors capable of swaying the outcome of any conflict.\(^2\) A ‘small number of Japonians were not slightly to be regarded’, exclaimed one writer, as the ‘valour & prowess of that Nation’ made them far more potent than an equivalent contingent of European soldiers.\(^3\) Not so, ridiculed their English opponents, the Japanese were no military ‘Gyants’ and the wondrous feats ascribed to them nothing more than ‘Apochriphal Legends’ with no basis in fact.\(^4\)

Within a few years, this sudden rush of attention had faded as the Japanese soldiers caught up in the trial largely disappeared from view.\(^5\) But if they

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1. I would like to thank the participants of the Global Company Conference for their very valuable comments which greatly improved this piece. This chapter represents a return to a topic that I first published on in *Itinerario* in 2007 and I remain very grateful for the many suggestions I received from the editors and reviewers.

2. The VOC was based in the town of Kota Ambon on the island of Ambon in the wider VOC administrative area of Amboina (often spelled Amboyna in this period). The most widely read account of the Amboina trial is Giles Milton’s popular history, *Nathaniel’s Nutmeg*, which sold hundreds of thousands of copies. For a highly perceptive, scholarly examination of the trial and its background, see Coolhaas, ‘Aanteekeningen en Opmerkingen over den zoogenaamden Ambonschen Moord’, pp. 49-93.

3. A remonstrance of the directors of the Netherlands East India Company presented to the Lords States Generall of the united Provinces, in defence of the said Companie, touching the bloody proceedings against the English merchants, executed at Amboyna (London, 1632).

4. A Reply to the Remonstrance of the Bewinthebbers or Directors of the Netherlands East India Companie lately exhibited to the Lords States-Generall in justification of the proceedings of their Officers at Amboyna against the English there (London, 1632).

5. The VOC commonly referred to these troops as ‘soldiers from Japan’ (*soldaten van Japon*). Steven van der Haghen to the Amsterdam Chamber, 18 July 1616, VOC 1063: 53v. In this chapter, I use two terms, Japanese soldiers and Japanese mercenaries, to refer to them. The distinction between soldier and mercenary is frequently murky and this was especially the case when it
flashed only briefly into the global spotlight, these soldiers occupy an important position in the wider history of the two companies in Asia. Over time, both the Dutch and English companies came to rely heavily on Asian troops to provide vital military manpower that enabled the expansion of European influence away from port cities, where they could be backed up by formidable fleets, into the interior. Over the course of the companies’ long existence, hundreds of thousands of Asian troops would serve in their armies as regular soldiers, mercenaries or allies, culminating in the establishment of institutions like the Presidency Armies in India. Within this wider trajectory, Japanese soldiers were arguably the first Asian troops to serve either of the companies in significant numbers. Certainly, the available evidence suggests they were the first soldiers from Asia to be systematically recruited and the first to be dispatched across great distances to wage war on behalf of their European masters. All of this means that although the VOC’s experiment with Japanese soldiers may not have been successful, it did establish the outlines of a familiar template that would be deployed again and again as Europeans pushed further into Asia and where their success depended to a significant degree not on soldiers imported from distant homelands but on the mobilisation of large numbers of local allies and troops.

This chapter explores the forces that brought a group of Japanese soldiers thousands of miles from Kyushu to the walls of a remote VOC fortress in Southeast Asia. As a number of historians, including Iwao Seiichi who has authored a series of foundational studies on the Japanese in Southeast Asia, have noted, the Japanese mercenary was already a familiar figure in Southeast Asia in this period. In the early seventeenth century, Japanese came to VOC forces. The Dutch East India Company was a private, commercial company that waged war with a polyglot collection of soldiers drawn from Europe, including many from outside the United Provinces, and Asia. As a result, it is essentially impossible to draw a clear line between mercenaries and soldiers. Although I refer to these soldiers as Japanese throughout this chapter, I do not, as will be clear later, suggest that notions of Japanese identity were fixed or applied equally to all residents of the archipelago. Rather I use the term because this is what the VOC called these troops even as they recruited some soldiers who clearly had closer ties with other parts of Asia.

6 For a discussion, see Roy, *Military Manpower, Armies and Warfare in South Asia*.
7 For an excellent analysis of the importance of Asian troops including Japanese mercenaries to the VOC, see Raben, ‘Het Aziatisch legioen’. There are occasional references to individual Asian troops in Company employment prior to this, but Japanese soldiers were the first employed in any significant number.
8 Iwao’s groundbreaking examination of Japanese settlements across Southeast Asia remains a remarkable feat of scholarship. Tracing Japanese migrants, merchants and mercenaries across the region, it includes an extended discussion of Japanese soldiers employed by the VOC. Iwao,
fighters found employment in Siam, where successive kings deployed a large contingent of these troops, in the Philippines, where they engaged in the bloody suppression of a Chinese revolt on behalf of their Spanish masters, and in Cambodia, where Japanese recruits bolstered local forces gathered to resist a potential invasion. But if there were parallels, the Company’s soldiers were also set apart. This chapter argues that a small group of VOC officials within the organisation, led by Jan Pieterszoon Coen, enthusiastically embraced Japanese recruits as part of a wider drive to solve the perennial European problem of inadequate military manpower in Asia. Believing that Japan’s warlike energies could be harnessed, subjected to Dutch control and used to further the Company’s goals, they pictured long columns of Japanese soldiers marching outwards in service of VOC aims. In the process, they departed from past patterns by attempting to engineer the figure of the professional Japanese mercenary constrained by draconian contracts and governed by Dutch officers. Not surprisingly, however, the vision put forward by high-ranking officials, most of whom had never visited Japan, clashed with the reality on the ground where Japanese recruits proved unruly soldiers who became embroiled in a series of disciplinary incidents.

Merchant and mercenary

The Dutch East India Company was neither the first nor the only employer of Japanese troops in Southeast Asia but it did introduce a series of innovations that set it apart. In the early seventeenth century, thousands of Japanese migrants, merchants and mercenaries arrived in ports across Southeast Asia. This wave of arrivals was made possible by an unprecedented surge in maritime links between Japan and Southeast Asia. In the second half of the sixteenth century, Chinese maritime entrepreneurs such as Wang Zhi had pioneered new routes between Southeast Asia and Japan, but the volume of traffic remained relatively limited. The situation was transformed in the first decade of the seventeenth century with the creation of a stable

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9 ‘Qinhuo Wang Zhi’, in Zheng, Chouhai tubian. Chouhai tubian provides an account of Wang Zhi’s role in opening up commercial ties between Japan and Southeast Asia. Although he started his career as a merchant, Wang Zhi later shifted to piracy and organised a series of destructive raids against the Chinese coast.
framework for international commerce within Japan. This took the form of the *shuinjō* or maritime pass system, which required all outgoing merchant vessels to obtain special trading licenses authorising the holder to undertake a single voyage from Japan to a stated destination.\(^{10}\) As any merchant vessel carrying one of these documents was ensured a friendly welcome in ports across Southeast Asia, the passes became highly prized and drove a significant increase in long-distance commerce.

After 1604, the first year for which records exist, a total of 356 licenses were issued to Japan-based merchants. The overwhelming majority of these, just less than 300, were intended for ships travelling to Southeast Asia, with 85 licenses issued for Cochinchina, 44 for Cambodia, 52 for the Philippines, and 56 for Siam.\(^ {11}\) Although the size of these vessels varied considerably, the best estimate puts the average around 300 tonnes with the largest reaching 800.\(^ {12}\) As a result, these ships were able to transport large numbers of passengers, who paid for space for themselves and their goods, thereby defraying the costs of these voyages and ensuring at least a moderate rate of return for the shipowners even if trade was not successful. The largest recorded vessel to ply these routes, the 800-tonne behemoth referenced above, carried just 80 crew members and 317 passengers, but this was an outsized exception and most vessels probably transported around 200 passengers.\(^ {13}\) Nonetheless, if we multiply this figure by the almost three hundred ships that travelled to Southeast Asia during the lifespan of the system, the total of potential passengers moves very quickly past fifty thousand.\(^ {14}\)

Scholars have traditionally divided these passengers into three neat categories, merchants eager to trade, former samurai who intended to support themselves by selling the services of their sword arms, and Christians on the run from the increasingly fierce persecution of the Tokugawa state.\(^ {15}\)

\(^{10}\) The classic work on the *shuinsen* is also by Iwao, *Shuinsen bōekishi no kenkyū*. For a more recent study see Nagazumi, *Shuinsen*.

\(^{11}\) For these figures, see Iwao, *Shuinsen bōekishi no kenkyū*. The figure for Cochinchina includes fourteen ships sent to Annan.

\(^{12}\) Iwao, *Shuinsen bōekishi no kenkyū*, p. 5.

\(^{13}\) Iwao estimates the average number of passengers and crew at 236. Iwao, *Shuinsen bōekishi*, p. 273.

\(^{14}\) Ishizawa Yoshiaki has suggested that 71,200 men and women left aboard Japanese vessels and roughly another 30,000 on foreign shipping in this period. Ishizawa, ‘Les quartiers japonais’.

\(^{15}\) William Wray divides them into merchants ‘with commercial experience,’ Christian refugees and ‘mercenaries or political exiles from the unification wars’. Wray, ‘The 17th-Century Japanese Diaspora’, p. 77. Hung-Guk Cho suggests three categories: ‘merchants [...] who went to Southeast Asia for trade’, ‘Christians who went to Southeast Asia to escape the oppression
This division may seem self-evident but it has the added effect of imposing overly narrow categories on a turbulent period. While some individuals surely fitted neatly into just one of these three groupings, they presuppose the existence of a rigid line between merchant, mercenary, and Christian refugee that has little place in the fluid world of early modern Asia, where individuals switched easily between occupations and identities depending on the exigencies of the moment. It is also based more on general assumptions about the kind of individuals who would have wanted to leave Japan than actual sources from the period.\textsuperscript{16} While the existence of Tokugawa records related to the issuance of \textit{shuinjō} makes it possible to construct tables listing the number of vessels that left Japan in this period, we have almost no travel accounts documenting individual voyages or materials produced on the Southeast Asian side describing what happened when these vessels actually dropped anchor at their intended destination.\textsuperscript{17}

One way around this problem is to tap into a different kind of source, diplomatic letters. The decade and a half after the decisive battle of Sekigahara in 1600, which brought the Tokugawa family to power, saw a surge in such letters that was unmatched in any previous period of Japanese history. Between 1601 and 1614, Tokugawa Ieyasu dispatched 48 diplomatic missives while his advisers contributed a further 28 for a total of 76.\textsuperscript{18} The bulk of this diplomatic correspondence, 41 of the 48 letters sent by the shogun, was directed towards Southeast Asia. Between 1601 and 1606, for example, Ieyasu dispatched one letter each year to Nguyễn Hoàng, the leader of the emerging state of Cochinchina in what is now Vietnam. Eleven missives were sent to Cambodia between 1603 and 1610 while eighteen letters were dispatched to the Philippines between 1601 and 1613.\textsuperscript{19} The flow of letters out of Japan was matched by an equal influx of correspondence to the archipelago as rulers and officials engaged enthusiastically with the Tokugawa regime.

\textsuperscript{16} One source frequently cited is \textit{Shamukoku Fudo Gunki}, which describes the adventures of Yamada Nagamasa, a prominent Japanese adventurer in Siam, but this was produced in the late seventeenth century and hence has limited value. For a complete copy of \textit{Shamukoku Fudo Gunki}, see Yamada Nagamasa Kenshōkai.

\textsuperscript{17} One exception is accounts penned by European travellers, especially missionaries. Although clearly important, these tend to emphasise the transplantation of Christian communities from Japan. For a useful study, see Ribeiro, ‘The Japanese Diaspora’.

\textsuperscript{18} Fujii, ‘Jūnana seiki no Nihon’.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. 35.
The content of these letters varied. Some were essentially formulaic, little more than diplomatic boilerplate, but others addressed specific issues. By far the most frequent point of discussion concerned the violent conduct of Japanese merchants. A typical complaint penned in 1606 by the lord of Cochinchina addressed what had happened when Japanese vessels arrived in his territory the previous year. The writer explained that he had welcomed the arrival of these merchants and extended them all possible courtesies, but rather than engaging in trade they had run ‘rampant in my lands stealing goods and money belonging to Fujianese merchants and abusing neighbouring residents and women’.20 At the heart of this complaint, as with many others that followed, was a single charge: although Japanese merchants arrived seemingly intent on trade, they shifted swiftly and without warning or apparent provocation to violence. A 1610 letter from the king of Cambodia complained bitterly about the violent aftermath of the arrival of Japanese merchant vessels, lamenting that the ‘people of your country are cruel and ferocious. They come to engage in commerce but quickly act contrary to this purpose and rampage along the coast’.21 The result was to disrupt maritime traffic and undermine the prosperity of Cambodian ports.

In this way, the writers charged that Japanese merchants switched back and forth between peaceful commerce and violence. Arriving ostensibly to buy and sell goods, they opted instead to engage in ‘violent plunder and harmful disruptions’.22 The ruler who welcomed Japanese merchants into his ports could thus never be certain if he was receiving peaceful merchants or dangerous pirates, legitimate traders or opportunistic marauders. The complaints are all the more striking because they came from rulers who were eager to court Tokugawa favour in order to expand commercial ties with a rich trading partner. The Nguyễn lords of Cochinchina were, for example, heavily dependent on foreign trade, seeing it as ‘key to their survival against the more powerful Trinh state, a source of revenues, weapons, and information’.23 As a result, they had little reason to exaggerate the scale of Japanese depredations and in many cases almost certainly underplayed what was actually happening. This tendency is clear in a letter dispatched by one of Hoàng’s successors in Cochinchina, which attempted to tiptoe around the issue in order to avoid giving offence. In ‘recent years’, the

20 Kondō, Gaiban tsūsho, p. 107.
21 Ibid., p. 184.
22 Ibid., p. 198.
23 Lockard, “The Sea Common to All”, p. 234. Li Tana notes that while for some states ‘the question of overseas trade may have been a matter of determining whether they were rich or poor. For early Cochinchina, it was a question of life and death’. Li, Nguyễn Cochinchina, p. 60.
writer explained, ‘ignorant men […] have increased their selfish actions and prevented merchants from sailing [freely].’\(^{24}\) Not surprisingly, these ‘ignorant men’ turned out to be Japanese merchants whose violent conduct had made it necessary to raise the issue directly with the Tokugawa regime. Other observers were far less diplomatic, among them Richard Cocks, an English merchant based in Japan, who described the ‘burning [of] China junckes […] whereof the King of Cochinchina advised themperour [shogun] of their vnruleynesse’.\(^ {25}\)

The letters exchanged between Japan and Southeast Asia make it clear that trade and violence mixed together to form a volatile compound. Given this fact, it did not require much prompting to make the leap from merchant to mercenary. In some cases, the shift seems to have originated with local officials who decided that the warlike talents of Japanese merchants could be put to better use. This was the situation in the Philippines where Japanese merchants were enlisted to put down a Chinese revolt in 1603 and in Cambodia where they were recruited to ward off a potential invasion in 1623.\(^ {26}\) In other instances, the shift seems to have been driven by enterprising merchants who realised that there was more money to be made by selling the services of their sword arms than their goods. In Siam, for example, Japanese merchants seem to have initiated this shift themselves by eagerly and aggressively claiming the role of palace guards.\(^ {27}\) There, the available sources, both royal chronicles and European diaries, suggest that Japanese merchants went so far as to kidnap the monarch, holding him to ransom until they had succeeded in extracting concessions including a promise that the king would employ them as ‘soldiers and as bodyguards to the end

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26 Information about Japanese recruits in Cambodia comes from a letter sent from Ayutthaya to Japan designed to find out how the shogun would react if his subjects were harmed during a potential campaign. Satow, ‘Notes on the Intercourse between Japan and Siam’, p. 178. For the Philippines, see Morga, *History of the Philippine Islands from the discovery by Magellan in 1521 to the beginning of the XVII Century*, 2, pp. 41-42.
27 There are four separate descriptions, two Dutch accounts, one English, and one Ayutthayan chronicle, detailing this particular episode. Most of the descriptions agree that the Japanese attacked the palace and held the king hostage and that they extracted some concessions before they released him. However, some accounts emphasise that the Japanese outmanoeuvred Ayutthayan officials, whiles others insist that it was Japanese merchants who found themselves outwitted. The four accounts are as follows: Cushman, trans., *The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya*, p. 208; Baker, et al., *Van Vliet’s Siam*, p. 136; Floris, *His Voyage to the East Indies*, pp. 56-7; Council of the Vajiranāṇa National Library, *Records of the relations between Siam and foreign countries*, pp. 6-8.
of his life’. The result was to entrench their place at court while boosting the influence of the Japanese community in Ayutthaya.

Such descriptions make it clear that the twin roles of merchant and mercenary blurred into each other, and there is little evidence of any sort of rigid dividing line. Merchants became mercenary and then shifted back again, often holding multiple identities at the same time and deploying them according to the circumstances. In Cambodia or the Philippines, recruitment was propelled by the eruption of crises that, once abated, allowed for a return to commerce; but even in Ayutthaya, where the Japanese claimed the semi-permanent role of palace guards, there is no evidence that military duties took precedence over commercial interests. This was certainly the case with the most famous of all Japanese mercenaries, Yamada Nagamasa (d.1630), who juggled his twin identities as a violent soldier of fortune and prosperous merchant with apparent ease, engaging in successful military campaigns while building a highly profitable commercial network that saw him compete with the VOC for control of the lucrative trade in deer skins.

While few Japanese migrants were quite so successful, Yamada’s template, which mixed commercial and military entrepreneurship, would have been familiar to many inhabitants of Southeast Asia’s various nihonmachi (Japanese communities). The result is that even though there were plenty of Japanese fighters operating across the region, it is difficult to speak of a professional Japanese mercenary in this period. Rather, Japanese migrants seem to have existed along a shifting continuum, transforming into mercenaries when it suited them but equally swiftly reclaiming their role as merchants when opportunities for profit emerged. They were, in other words, military and commercial entrepreneurs rather than professional soldiers, and it was this template with its blurred lines and overlapping roles that became standard across Southeast Asia.

The Dutch East India Company aimed to do something different. In contrast to other employers, VOC officials attempted to straighten out these lines by establishing a structured programme to recruit soldiers in Japan exclusively for military service. In the process, they attempted to engineer the figure of the professional Japanese mercenary constrained and controlled by strict contracts.

29 Japanese mercenaries remained active in Siam for years. In the words of one observer, the king of Siam’s ‘power by water and land consists most of his own Vassals and Natives, he hath indeed some few Strangers, as Moors, Malayers and some five hundred Japanners, the most esteemed for their courage and fidelity’. Caron and Schouten, *A True Description*, pp. 133-134.
‘Bold men’

The first detailed mention of Japanese mercenaries in VOC sources occurs in a February 1613 letter sent by the head of the Japan trading outpost, Hendrik Brouwer, to the Governor-General, Pieter Both:

We regard here the Japanese under good command to be bold men. Their monthly pay is also low and moreover they can be maintained with a small cost of rice and salted fish. With the oral instructions that you gave me last time, we wanted to send 300 men with these ships, but so as to bring more provisions, only 68 heads were shipped, including 9 carpenters, 3 smiths and 2 or 3 masons, the rest sailors and soldiers. If you value the service of these, there will always be enough people here [to recruit] as his majesty [the shogun] has given us his consent to take out as many as we desire.31

As he makes clear, Brouwer had not conceived of the idea himself. Rather he was responding to a verbal instruction delivered by his superior, Pieter Both, to recruit large numbers of Japanese soldiers. Although the documentary trail is limited, the Governor-General’s plans were clearly ambitious. Three hundred men, the initial figure set for Brouwer to fill, may not seem like an especially large number at first, but the Company’s total military force across its various colonies, castles and outposts numbered less than a thousand soldiers, both European and Asian.32 In this way, if Both’s initial quota was met, the very first shipment of Japanese troops would have constituted a significant share of the organisation’s total fighting force. These were not in other words purely ancillary troops designed to make up numbers around the edges. Rather, Both clearly believed Japanese soldiers could become a crucial part of the Company’s fighting force.

31 Hendrik Brouwer to Pieter Both, 29 January 1613, VOC 1056: 34v. The Company also shipped a Japanese bark that could be manned by the new recruits in the Banda islands. The reference to “sailors” is to the crew for this bark.

32 The fluid nature of the Company’s operations in this period make it difficult to obtain a precise number but the figure cited above is supported by a number of sources. Coen to Heeren 17, 1 January 1614, Colenbrander, Jan Pietersz. Coen, 1:16. Van Dam, Beschrijvinge van de Oostindishe Compagnie, 1.2:525-6. Part of the reason for the Company’s perennial problem with military manpower stemmed from the length of the voyage from Europe. Soldiers brought from ports in the Dutch Republic required eight months on average to reach Batavia. Scholars estimate that about 7 percent of those embarking at the Netherlands did not survive the first leg of the voyage to the Cape of Good Hope, and another 3 to 4 percent perished on the way from the Cape to Batavia.
To facilitate its plan to recruit large numbers of mercenaries in a short space of time, the Company introduced two key innovations, both of which appear in Brouwer’s 1613 letter. Unlike other employers who did their hiring in the nihonmachi that had sprung up in key ports across Southeast Asia, the VOC opted to go straight to the source by recruiting directly in Japan. The advantages were clear. Recruiting in Japan removed any possible constraints brought about by the size of the nihonmachi communities or the limited number of vessels transiting between Japan and Southeast Asia each year. It also served to breathe new life into the Company’s trading outpost in Hirado on the northwest coast of Kyushu, which had struggled since its establishment in 1609 to turn a profit. Now, VOC officials believed that their faltering commercial hub could be transformed into a booming recruitment centre from which shipments of experienced soldiers could be dispatched.33

The second innovation was tied to the first. The Company did not want to recruit in the shadows, discreetly hiring soldiers behind closed doors, but out in the open with the explicit permission of the Tokugawa shogun. Gaining Tokugawa consent would, it was hoped, smooth over any potential difficulties and open the floodgates for recruitment. And the Company appears to have done precisely this. Brouwer’s boast that he had secured shogunal consent is supported by other sources that suggest that he had asked for and received permission to recruit mercenaries.34 The reasons for bakufu consent are less clear. Certainly, the Company was in no position to demand concessions from Japanese authorities and in fact one purpose of Brouwer’s embassy was to apologise for the lack of incoming goods and to assure the regime that the VOC would in future send more ships to trade with Japan. Instead the decision stems from the bakufu’s deliberate and systematic severing of links between the regime and the activities of its subjects abroad. While ships carrying a shuinjō were guaranteed shogunal protection, Tokugawa representatives made it clear in letter after letter dispatched to Southeast Asia that they had no interest in either regulating or protecting Japanese merchants or migrants once they were abroad. Rather, local officials across Southeast Asia were encouraged to ‘punish them immediately according to the laws of your country’ if they stepped out of line.35

33 Katō Eiichi has argued persuasively that the VOC used Hirado primarily as a strategic rather than a commercial outpost between 1609 and 1621. Katō, ‘Rengō Oranda Higashi-Indo’.
35 Kondō, Gaiban tsūshō, p. 185.
While Pieter Both was the first VOC official to issue instructions to recruit Japanese soldiers, the driving force behind the Company’s experiment came from another source, Jan Pieterszoon Coen, who was rising in the organisation’s ranks on his way to becoming Governor-General. One year after Brouwer’s 1613 letter, Coen laid out a series of far-reaching plans involving the use of Japanese soldiers. These came in the form of an ambitious document, *Discoers aen de E. Heeren Bewinthebberen tou cherende den Nederlandtsche Indischen staet* (Discourse to the Honourable Directors touching the Netherlands Indies State), submitted in 1614, that was intended as a blueprint for a VOC empire in Asia. In it, Coen laid out the political and economic challenges faced by the Company across Asia before presenting a number of strategies through which the organisation could, he believed, seize control of key trade routes and hubs. Rather than being condemned to the defensive in its wider struggle against Portugal and Spain, which were both entrenched in Asia, the Company should, Coen wrote, attack by striking at the great Iberian centres of power in Asia: the bustling Portuguese entrepôt of Macao and the heavily fortified Spanish colony at Manila. The key to this multipronged assault lay in the participation of large numbers of Japanese mercenaries:

[By conquering Manila] the Spaniards shall be forced from the Moluccas, and indeed out of the East Indies [...] and along with this we shall get the riches of China. In executing such an important assault we can expect no small support from the islands of Manila as the poor subjects are weary of the Spanish yoke. For the execution [of the assault] we can get great help from Japan, [...] because the Japanese soldiers are as good as ours and the Kaiser [shogun] has given us his promise that we can take out as many people as we can get hold of. We can get enough as they are ready and willing, as we have found from our experience. These same Japanese soldiers can be used to do great service in the expedition to Macao, and with whom this expedition can be effected. With these victories, we shall not only capture a great treasure but also the rich Chinese trade [...].


In this way, the recruitment of Japanese troops promised to contribute to a remaking of the strategic map, helping the VOC to evict the Portuguese and the Spanish from vital chokepoints and ensuring Dutch dominion over key trade routes.

The *Discoers* lays bare the scale of Coen’s ambitions when it came to Japanese soldiers. Rather than the occasional shipment, he conjured up a large-scale, systematic programme of recruitment that would bolster the Company’s military presence in Asia. In sketching out such an aggressive vision, he introduced a distinctively martial twist on a much older idea. For decades, the Jesuits and other European religious orders had seen Japan as a zone of unrealised possibilities where dreams of mass conversions could be achieved. One senior Jesuit official wrote that this ‘enterprise of Japan is without doubt the most important and beneficial of all being undertaken in these oriental parts and, indeed in all of discovery’ and for these reasons ‘a very great harvest may be expected here.’ For such writers, Japan represented uniquely fertile ground, a bountiful field waiting only to be harvested by Jesuit missionaries. With minimal expense and only a small number of personnel, the archipelago could yield an army of converts. In much the same way, Coen saw Japan as a zone of possibility where outsized ambitions could be realised. Just as the Jesuits confidently predicted ‘a very great harvest’ of souls, he anticipated a great harvest of willing bodies. But rather than an army of Christian converts able to carry the fight to the heathen, Coen saw the possibility of long columns of Japanese mercenaries with Dutch officers at their head marching through Southeast Asia in service of the Company’s aims.

It is easy to understand why the image proved so appealing. The recruitment of these troops would, first, allow the Company to secure its already sprawling holdings. By 1614, when Coen penned the *Discoers*, the VOC had expanded rapidly, acquiring a string of colonies and trading posts across Asia, but these possessions were under constant threat, both from increasingly hostile local populations and also from the Portuguese and the Spanish, who had been entrenched in Asia for decades. They were also, as Coen constantly protested, chronically undermanned. By his estimate, the Company needed at least 2,500 to 3,000 additional soldiers to hold and strengthen its position. The recruitment of Japanese mercenaries promised to help remedy this situation, providing a reliable buttress for Dutch power in Asia. In addition to filling the depleted ranks of garrisons, such soldiers

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38 Quoted in de Bary, Gluck, and Tiedemann, ed. *Sources of Japanese Tradition: Volume 2*, p. 156
could play a role, VOC officials believed, in pacifying local populations. In
the Banda islands, for example, where local residents had persistently defied
the Company’s attempt to establish a monopoly over the trade in nutmeg,
Japanese mercenaries could compel obedience simply via the ‘reputation
alone they have in the Indian nations’. Crucially, this could all be done
without requiring additional troops from Europe or diverting ‘the might
of the Dutchers’.41

**Recruitment in Japan**

The task of recruiting these soldiers fell to Jacques Specx, the VOC’s long-
serving chief merchant in Japan who had taken over from Brouwer. Specx set
about binding Japanese recruits to draconian contracts that subordinated
them to Company demands while stipulating harsh punishments if these
were violated. Writing to his superiors, he explained that the first contingent
had been placed ‘under an appropriate oath and articles that I put together
and translated in the Japanese language and writing’. Such contracts were
designed to convert unruly recruits into dependable soldiers who could be
relied upon to defend isolated garrisons to the last man or to carry the fight
to the enemy’s walls. They were also intended to focus their actions: the
Company was clear that it had no intention of recruiting part-time military
entrepreneurs who toggled back and forth between trade and violence. It
wanted professional soldiers who would be docile in the barracks and ready
for deployment wherever their service was needed.

Rather than fitting neatly into such expectations, Japanese mercenaries
proved, however, difficult to control. One VOC official complained that ‘of
the Japanese we have the bellyful already; it is an excitable and difficult
race’. Another exclaimed that the ‘soldiers from Japan are of no service to
us, because they are very dangerous and difficult to govern’. It would, he
declared, be far ‘better to leave these people in their own lands’. The result
was a constant jostling between expansive plans engineered by high-ranking

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40 Coen to Specx, 14 May 1616, Ibid., 2:106.
41 Extract uit verscheijden resolutiën ghenomen op ’t comptoir Firando in Jappan in datis 12
en 16 Augustus, 3 September 1614, VOC 1058: 112.
42 Originele missive door Jacques Specx, geschreven ten ancker liggende voor het veroverde
Portugese fort op ’t eijlant Tijdor aen d’Ed. Heeren bewinthebberen tot Amsterdam in dato
2 Augustus 1613, VOC 1056: 89.
43 Laurens Reael to the Amsterdam Chamber, 18 July 1616, VOC 1063: 19.
44 Steven van der Haegen to the Amsterdam Chamber, 18 July 1616, VOC 1063: 53.
VOC officials like Coen and the reality on the ground. This is evident in the career of one group of these soldiers, the contingent dispatched aboard the *Fortuijn*, which sailed from Hirado in 1616. Although the sources are far from complete, this is the best documented of the Company’s mercenary cohorts and it provides some sense of the wider experience of VOC service.

In late 1615, Specx, the head of the Japan factory in Hirado, began to assemble a new contingent of mercenaries, the first to be shipped out after the 68 soldiers that Brouwer had discussed in his 1613 letter. They were to travel aboard two ships, the *Enckhuysen* and the *Fortuijn*, which were anchored in the narrow confines of Hirado harbour. Although both were blessed with good Dutch names, these were very different vessels. The *Enckhuysen* was a typical VOC workhorse, a cargo vessel built in the United Provinces and estimated at some 300 last or roughly 600 tonnes, that had made the long voyage from Europe to Asia in May 1614. By contrast, the *Fortuijn* was a local junk that had been purchased by the Company in order to make up for its shortage of available vessels and then outfitted with a new rigging. It was far smaller than its sister vessel, just 140 last or roughly 280 tonnes, making it less suitable for a long ocean-going voyage.

By November, Specx had finished recruiting and he recorded the names of 59 men alongside their salaries in a long document. As was standard practice, he moved quickly to bind them to the Company with a contract dated the ‘year and age named Iewa guannien [first year of Genna] in the 11th month and 11th day’ or 31 December 1615. This document is the only extant example of an agreement signed between Japanese mercenaries and the VOC. The contract itself was to last for three years, but crucially this was three years

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45. We know of at least four shipments of Japanese troops dispatched from Hirado although there were probably more. The *Roode Leeuw met Pijlen* sailed in 1613 with the initial shipment of 68 men recruited by Brouwer; the *Enckhuysen* and *Fortuijn* transported 67 recruits in 1615; the *Nieuw Bantam* and *Galiasse* carried 90 troops in 1619, and in 1620 another shipment of roughly 100 men was sent out aboard the *China*. Aenteckeningen van de timmeragie ongelden montcosten provision ende maentgelden gedaen en betaelt inty equipperen van de joncke als nu genaempt de fortuijne, VOC 1062: 106-121. Coen to Heeren 17, 22 January 1620, Colenbrander, *Jan Pietersz. Coen*, 1:519. Pieter de Carpentier and Jacob Dedel to the directors, 8 March 1621, VOC 1072: 376v.


47. Parthesius, *Dutch Ships in Tropical Waters*, p. 107. The last was a variable Dutch unit to measure cargo capacity. As Parthesius writes, for a ‘general comparison with the modern measure of cargo capacity, the “tonnage”, the last value can be multiplied by two’.


49. Aenteckeningen van de timmeragie ongelden montcosten provision ende maentgelden gedaen en betaelt inty equipperen van de joncke als nu genaempt de fortuijne, VOC 1062: 106-121.
not from date of signing but rather from the commencement of service once the recruits reached Southeast Asia. If one added in waiting times and the long sea voyage itself, the result was a longer period of obligation. The contract begins much as a standard agreement that would have been immediately familiar to any one of thousands of Dutch sailors or soldiers. The recruits were required to pledge never to start brawls or engage in fighting, never to gamble, ‘drink to intoxication’, or ‘harass or attack married women and girls’. They were to obey the captain, the helmsman or ‘any Dutch authority’ at all times both on the ship as well as ashore; never to ‘speak back when given orders’ and above all ‘never oppose with deceit or otherwise the captain or other authorities, or commit treachery against their persons’. Violation of these final provisions would lead to the swift application of capital punishment.

But it was not simply their own bodies that were to be subject to punishment. Diverging from comparable agreements signed with European recruits, the contract pulled in their ‘parents, wives, children and guarantors [who] will be punished in the same way as these are also obligated by the contract’. In this way, the Company mandated collective punishment extending to the recruit’s family and the guarantor standing security for him who was also listed in the contract. The inclusion of this provision means that the contract represents, at least in theory, a striking expansion of VOC jurisdiction, giving Specx, the head of a minor European trading outpost, the ability to draw the families of his recruits into a VOC juridical web and punish them accordingly. It was by no means clear if the Company had any basis for such an ambitious extension of its authority, but the question of enforcement is less important than the psychological impact of the clause, which was designed to force the recruits into obedience by pegging outsized consequences to their actions.

Despite the harshness of the contract and the clearly hazardous nature of the duty, Specx does not seem to have struggled to find enough men willing to sign on. The handful of recruits that listed their hometowns in the 1615 agreement were overwhelmingly local, drawn either from Hirado itself or from Nagasaki, a bustling port city less than a hundred miles down the coast. Some were surely Christians eager to find a way out of Japan: the list of names includes two Miguels and one Pedro, who were probably either baptised in their youth or born to a Christian family. But the majority showed no obvious Christian connection, and the bulk of the recruits were probably seeking economic opportunity, and hence intended to (and did) return to Japan once their contracts expired. Given conditions in Hirado and Nagasaki, where the trade boom was concentrated in the hands of a
relatively small number of local officials and rich merchants, the fact that a regular salary proved enticing is not especially surprising. Hirado, the most important site for recruitment, was, according to descriptions by contemporary European visitors, flooded with unemployed men looking for work. One observer, writing in 1613 when the Company commenced its programme of recruitment, described a town filled with ‘base people or Renegados [...] loytering vp and downe the Towne’.50

The presence of a large population of what was described as ‘divers vagrant people’ was closely tied to the progressive closing down of alternative avenues for employment in Kyushu. As the Tokugawa regime consolidated its hold over the archipelago after 1600, it became increasingly difficult to find a place in daimyo armies, which had displayed a seemingly boundless appetite for soldiers during the bloody years of the Warring States period (Sengoku, 1467–1568) when Kyushu was convulsed by regular conflict. At the same time, wide-scale piracy, which had drawn in tens of thousands of Kyushu inhabitants at its peak in the sixteenth century, was by 1615 finally suppressed. Although Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the second of Japan’s three great unifiers, had officially banned piracy in 1588, these practices had initially mutated into a different form rather than simply disappearing. As late as the first decade of the seventeenth century, ports like Hirado continued to play host to a range of pirate groups, and European vessels sailing through Asian waters regularly encountered their ships on the busy sea lanes of early modern Asia. In 1605, for example, an English vessel, the Tiger, cruising off the Malay peninsula, sighted a Japanese pirate junk which ‘had been pyrating along the coast of China and Camboia’, while in 1607 the commander of a Dutch expedition stumbled upon three junks belonging to Japanese pirates (Japonesche Zee-roovers) based in Hirado.51 By the time Specx began hiring, however, little trace of the pirate industry remained and the Company probably drew at least some of its recruits from the maritime communities that had once participated in Japan’s great wave of seaborne predation. That at least some of the 59 would have had a maritime background is confirmed by the expectation that they would crew the Fortuijn, which lacked enough sailors of its own, on the long voyage to Southeast Asia, and the contract listed a handful of specialised roles including mast climber and master of the anchor.

Given the closing off of these traditional avenues of employment it is not surprising that Specx’s offer of an advance, regular provisions and a reliable

50 Satow, The Voyage of Captain John Saris, p. 179.
monthly wage proved highly attractive, and the head of the rival English factory noted that there was an abundance of ‘dasparate, warlike people & ready to adventure for good pay’.\(^{52}\) While Kyushu was clearly fertile ground, Specx was probably aided by the development of a specialised class of recruiters who had sprung up to cater for the Company’s needs. Evidence of this can be found in the contract itself, in which a handful of guarantors stood in for multiple recruits. Sakino Matsy Sejusteroo, for example, offered himself up as security for eight individuals (Ruïsero, Anthonio, Michguel, Fikofatsij, Sjosa, Jejusty, Tsjoso, and Paulo), while Amia Eunbigi stood in as security for five recruits (Jonsemon, Kiitsiemon, Kiuffy, Michguel, and Pedro). If these were indeed recruiters, then such practices were a parallel of the system that had sprung up in the United Provinces, where a specialised class of recruitment agent, the so-called *zielverkoopers* or ‘soul sellers’, emerged to supply the Company’s inexhaustible demand for labour. They did so in part by simple entrapment, effectively imprisoning vulnerable recruits in sealed-off boarding houses, but also by selling wondrous dreams of unlimited riches that extended to putting ‘a Hammer into [the recruit’s] Hands to knock the Diamonds out of the Rocks they shall meet with’.\(^{53}\)

VOC recruitment hinged in large part on the conviction that the Japanese were, to use the language of a later empire, a peculiarly martial race. In the words of one European observer, the ‘Japanese are the most warlike people in this part of the world’.\(^{54}\) They were thus set apart from the Chinese, for example, who the VOC viewed as compliant settlers capable of being used to populate colonial settlements like Batavia or Tayouan.\(^{55}\) The problem with this underlying logic was that the Company did its actual recruiting in two cosmopolitan ports, Hirado and Nagasaki, that had a long history of long-distance trade and a diverse population. The result was that even if the Company thought it was hiring Japanese mercenaries it is far from clear if it was always doing so. One clue to this messier reality comes in the last name of one of the soldiers caught up in the Amboina trial in 1623, Thome Corea. If, as the name suggests, he had a Korean connection, this was not unusual in Hirado where the local daimyo had brought back hundreds of Korean captives who had been instrumental in the creation of the famous

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\(^{53}\) Frick and Schweitzer, *A Relation of Two Several Voyages*, p. 227.

\(^{54}\) Blair and Robertson, eds. *The Philippine Islands*, 5:271.

\(^{55}\) For the process of ‘co-colonization’ in Taiwan, see Andrade, *How Taiwan Became Chinese*. The Chinese were, one writer declared, ‘an industrious people […] on whom completely depends the well-being of Batavia’, the VOC headquarters in Asia. Quoted in Blussé, ‘Batavia’, p. 161.
Mikawachi porcelain industry.56 We know from the trial records that Thome Corea was 50 in 1623, meaning that he was born in 1573 and was thus likely brought to Japan in the turbulent aftermath of Hideyoshi’s invasion.57 His inclusion in VOC ranks suggests that the Company’s recruitment plans allowed space for reinvention as former captives morphed in search of stable wages into Japanese soldiers. And he was not alone. VOC records include multiple references to ‘Japanese’ soldiers like Corea or Joan Maccau [Macao], whose names suggest origins outside Japan.58

Of Specx’s 59 new recruits, the most important was their captain, Kusnokij Itsiemon, who was appointed boatswain (hoochbootsman) for the duration of the voyage and tasked with managing the Company’s new soldiers once they had arrived in Southeast Asia. As a mark of his elevated position, he was given a salary of eight taels, which was more than three times the standard pay for one of his charges, an advance of 25 taels that could be spent immediately, and the right to bring a servant, Rockoso, who was described in the contract as a jongen or boy. Unlike most of his new subordinates, Kusnokij was from the distant commercial metropolis of Osaka rather than Kyushu. It is not clear how exactly he came to be in Hirado or why Specx felt that this was the right man to take charge of the contingent but he proved a disastrous choice whose inept leadership produced a string of problems once the Fortuijn departed Hirado.

The purpose of these recruits was to act as a spearhead for VOC forces in Southeast Asia. To facilitate this, Specx set about equipping them with a small arsenal consisting of different weapons ‘that were needed to arm the Japanese’.59 These included 40 Japanese firearms (Jappanse roers), 11 Japanese bows, and 45 Japanese spears of different lengths.60 The muskets were not cheap, costing a total of 72 taels, but they packed a powerful punch. Musket technology had advanced in leaps and bounds in Japan through the sixteenth century, driven in large part by the involvement of these weapons in the endemic conflict that characterised the Warring States period. Like other muskets from this period these were slow to reload, but in the hands of

56 For a recent study, see Hwang, To, and Yi, Imjin Waeran Kwa Hirado Mik’awachi Sagijang.
57 This is the conclusion reached by Iwao Seiichi. Iwao Seiichi, Zoku nanyō Nihon machi no kenkyū, p. 257.
59 Aenteckeningen van de timmeragie ongelden montcosten provision ende maentgelden gedaen en betaelt inty equipperen van de joncke als nu genaempt de fortuijne, VOC 1062:120.
60 Ibid., VOC 1062:120.
well-trained troops they could be lethal, with Japanese commanders perfecting the use of volley fire independently of their European counterparts.61

But if the recruits were armed to the teeth, there was a problem; the vessels designated to transport them were in no state to undertake the long voyage to the trading port of Banten on the island of Java. In fact, it would take close to four months from the date of recruitment on 18 November before the two ships were ready for departure in early March 1616. This long delay earned Specx a reprimand from his superiors who accused him of disrupting the wider trading schedule through his incompetent management of the refitting process.62 For the recruits, however, the delay would have been far more welcome. By 1615, Hirado had earned a reputation as ‘a second Sodamye’ home to dozens of brothels and taverns clustered along the shoreline. There was, one visitor explained, ‘never a house in the towen butt the bassest swabber in the fleete may have wine and a hoore’.63 The combination of ready alcohol and large numbers of idle sailors created ample opportunities for violence, and observers recorded groups of mariners ‘stagring drunk up & downe the st[...]etes, slashing & cutting ofee each other w’th their knyves, lyke mad men’.64 To restore some order, local authorities were forced to take drastic measures, including hacking a group of sailors into pieces and throwing these to the town’s dogs.65 The long period of inactivity also gave time for rivalries to fester within the contingent itself. The most dangerous emerged between Kusnokij and a charismatic rival, Ceyemon, who, clearly covetous of his superior’s position and privileges, worked to undermine these. The rivalry simmered for months in Hirado before exploding with bloody results when the recruits finally arrived in Southeast Asia.

Finally, after months of preparation, the Enckhuijsen and the Fortuijn departed Japan on 5 March 1616 with the bulk of the recruits, perhaps forty or fifty men, crammed into the hold of the smaller junk, which was placed under the command of Jacob Joosten van Lodensteijn. Van Lodensteijn was the brother of one of the original Liefde mariners who had been shipwrecked in Japan in 1600, but unlike his sibling, who had established himself as a successful merchant, he had little experience of Japan and little facility with the language.66 The result was that he had to rely absolutely on Kusnokij,
who was posted on the *Fortuijn* to maintain control of the new recruits. Clearly aware of the brewing conflict, Specx elected to place Ceyemon on the *Enckhuijsen* to take charge of the handful of Japanese soldiers there and keep him out of Kusnokij’s way.

In total the two ships were to spend 51 days at sea, arriving in the port of Banten on 24 April. For the larger *Enckhuijsen*, the voyage seems to have passed without incident, in part because of Ceyemon’s leadership but also because the ship was (in relative terms) far larger and more spacious. Aboard the *Fortuijn*, however, things quickly deteriorated.67 The life of a VOC mariner, whether European or Asian, was always a harsh one. Likened by one observer to ‘subservient slaves’, a sailor aboard a Company vessel had to be ready ‘on the slightest nod or command of any superior, to do everything he is told without grumbling. At any show of reluctance, he is threatened and beaten with the rope’s end.’68 For the crew of the *Fortuijn*, however, a combination of the poor conditions made worse by the small size of the vessel, unfamiliarity with the ship’s routines and inept leadership pushed the recruits close to mutiny. The problem was clearly recognised by Specx who explained to his superiors that shipping out recruits on smaller vessels invariably created more problems. We are, he declared, ‘always apprehensive that more discontent and troubles will take place on the junk as the ship’.69

On vessels like the *Fortuijn*, the crew would probably have been divided into two four-hour shifts, giving them at most four hours sleep at any one time. The result was that most sailors slept in wet clothes, tumbling into their hammocks as soon as they finished their duties only to have their sleep cut short when the watch changed again.70 In such conditions, illnesses like dysentery spread quickly and there was little prospect of medical attention.71 If conditions were already poor in fair weather, they quickly became appalling in stormy conditions. When the weather turned, the hatches were battened down, sometimes for days or even weeks on end. Water seeped into everything, the smell of rotting mixing with the general

67 Coen to Specx, 14 May 1616, Colenbrander, Jan Pietersz. Coen, 2:111.
70 Iris Bruijn summarises the situation when she writes that the ‘combination of poor diet and substandard sleeping and living quarters plus the climate put a severe strain on the physical resilience of the crew’. Bruijn, *Ship’s Surgeons*, p. 73.
71 We know from the sources that the 1613 contingent, which was shipped three years earlier, developed a number of tropical illnesses as they moved into warmer conditions. Originele missive door Jacques Specx, geschreven ten ancker liggende voor het veroverde Portugese fort op ‘t eijlant Tijdoor aen d’Ed. *Heeren bewinthebben tot Amsterdam in dato 2 Augustus 1613, VOC 1056.*
stench created by crowding large numbers of people into small spaces with inadequate ventilation. With sailors unable to access the primitive toilet facilities, which were usually located in the open on the bow of a ship, the cabin was quickly fouled with excrement and vomit.

To this must be added the inevitable terrors of a long ocean voyage in the age of sail. For those unused to the open ocean, and a significant share of the recruits had probably never been to sea before, the experience was, in the words of one equally unprepared voyager, ‘altogether unconceivable’. Conventional bravery counted for nothing; ‘tho’ I have been oftentimes in great dangers [...] and upon many occasions have, with Courage enough, stood before the Enemy; yet did none of these dangers ever terrifie me comparably to this [experience of a storm]. In these moments, ‘death doth not only seem sure and inevitable, but comes attended with all the Horrour imaginable, and drest in its most hideous and terrifying shapes’.

Such fears were of course justified as VOC ships did periodically disappear without a trace. This was the fate of the China, which departed Japan in 1620 with a contingent of close to a hundred Japanese mercenaries, but which was lost somewhere along the sea lanes with its crew and passengers drowned.

To make its sailors behave as ‘subservient slaves’ in the face of such conditions, the Company imposed harsh discipline. The captain of the Enckhuysen, Fortuijn’s sister ship, stipulated that anyone found bringing unauthorised alcohol onto the ship would be dropped from the yardarm [van de rae vallen] three times and then lashed before the mast. This involved hoisting the culprit up in the rigging, tying his arms and then dropping him, usually around 40 for 50 feet, thereby either dislocating or breaking his arms. The standard punishments used in VOC ships for more serious offences were characterised by a gruesome ingenuity that was calculated to terrify the average sailor into obedience. A mariner involved in a knife fight was forced to place his hand against the mast, so that a knife could be driven into the centre of it. There he remained until he was able to pull the blade through his hand, cutting through flesh and severing tendons in the process. For even graver crimes, the offender might be

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72 Frick and Schweitzer, A Relation of Two Several Voyages, p. 30.
73 De Carpentier and Dedel to the directors, 8 March 1621, VOC 1072. Blair and Robertson, The Philippine Islands, 1493–1898, 19:70.
74 De Graaf, Oost Indise Spiegel, p. 30.
75 Copie resolutien getrokken in Japan, 18 Augustus 1615 tot 2 Maert 1616; VOC 1061: 247-257.
76 For some of these punishments, see Hoogenberk, De Rechtsvoorschriften voor de Vaart op Oost-Indië.
keelhauled (*kielhalen*), thrown overboard and dragged under the keel of the ship to the other side, almost drowning him while ripping his flesh away on the encrusted hull of the vessel.\(^78\) While such punishments occupied the extreme end of the spectrum, the VOC also enforced a comprehensive system of fines and levies for a range of trivial offenses that seemed calculated to strip sailors of their earnings.\(^79\)

For the recruits, the transition from an extended period in Hirado’s welcoming embrace to the life of a VOC sailor must have been jarring. In this, they were broadly similar to tens of thousands of new recruits that departed the United Provinces but crucially, the Japanese contingent shipped aboard the *Fortuijn* lacked the rigid hierarchies that compelled obedience in such circumstances. The task of maintaining order fell to Kusnokij, who was now required to justify his wages and privileges. He proved entirely ‘unsuitable for command’, an idle and unreliable captain with no capacity to control his increasingly unruly charges.\(^80\) The result was a total breakdown in authority that seems to have brought the recruits to the very edge (if not actually over the brink) of violent mutiny. The recruits were, their Dutch officers declared, nothing more than a ‘mutinous rabble’, who had ‘behaved very maliciously’, endangering the safety of the ship and coming precariously close to armed resistance.\(^81\)

When the news of what had happened aboard the *Fortuijn* reached the VOC hierarchy, it prompted a swift response. On 14 May, just a few weeks after the eventual arrival of the junk in Banten, Jan Pieterszoon Coen addressed the problem in a letter to the head of the Japan factory. In future, Specx must ‘inspect’ (*monsteren*) his recruits more carefully and make sure that any potential troublemakers were weeded out before leaving port.\(^82\) As Coen saw it, the problem could be solved simply by better hiring practices and proper diligence by officials on the ground. Specx should simply line up the recruits on the shore, remove any bad apples and dispatch the rest. Such comments reveal a crucial blind spot that persisted throughout the Company’s decade-long experiment with these soldiers. It was, Coen in particular insisted, not a problem with the recruitment plans as a whole but simply a matter of finding the right disciplinary formula. In response, Jacques Specx, who was acutely aware of the difficulties of exerting control,

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78 Frick and Schweitzer, *A Relation of Two Several Voyages*, p. 10.
79 Boxer, *The Dutch Seaborne Empire 1600-1800*.
82 Ibid., 2:111.
pointed out that ‘such scum [geboeften] can often, as long as they are on land, remain quiet so that they are difficult to recognise and be weeded out’.83

Rather than an isolated incident, the voyage provided a taste of things to come. Despite his performance on the Fortuijn, Kusnokij had managed to retain his position as head of the Japanese contingent, which had swelled again with the arrival of the Enkhuijsen to include his long-time rival, Ceyemon. Their rivalry was swiftly renewed; on 2 March Kusnokij decided to take action by ambushing Ceyemon as he lay in his bunk with his fellow mercenaries, talking and smoking. Stabbed without warning from behind, Ceyemon died immediately. It was a bloody climax to months of simmering tension and the perpetrator was seized immediately for punishment. But if Kusnokij was an incompetent leader, he proved far more ingenious when it came to legal manoeuvring. When he was arrested, he insisted that his actions had been entirely legal and that he was simply fulfilling his role as commander of the Japanese, a charge that had been given to him, he maintained, both by Specx and the daimyo of Hirado. Since Ceyemon had been ‘mustered under his command’, Kusnokij was entitled to punish him for insubordination and his repeated attempts to ‘belittle him and make himself master’.84 When he stabbed his rival he was, in other words, acting as a properly constituted officer rather than carrying out a private vendetta.

It was a shrewd and essentially plausible defence as the recruits were bound by a contract that stipulated harsh punishments if any of them attempted to subvert or oppose the officials placed in charge of them. It did not, however, satisfy the VOC tribunal, which convened the day after the original incident to issue a verdict. Lamenting the loss of Ceyemon, who had been marked for greater things, the tribunal concluded that such actions were an affront to ‘Christian justice and also Japanese custom’. The result was that these offenses could only be punished by death, and ignoring Kusnokij’s protests about his authority he was swiftly executed. With the murder of Ceyemon and the execution of Kusnokij, the Fortuijn contingent had already lost two potential leaders and Company officials moved quickly to make a new appointment on 10 June, just a week after the incident in the barracks. The new captain Gonssen, who was described as ‘an expert at war of their manner and otherwise qualified and trusted,’

83 Specx to Coen, 1 October 1616, Colenbrander, Jan Pietersz. Coen, 7.1:199.
84 Jaccatra Resolutions, 3 June 1616, Ibid., 4:125-6. The episode is also discussed in Iwao, Zoku nanyō Nihon machi no kenkyū, pp. 121-22.
might have wondered what he was taking on but he was at least spared the prospect of another extended sea voyage.\textsuperscript{85}

If VOC officials were able to dismiss such incidents as isolated episodes that could be eliminated once the Company located the right disciplinary formula, it was also the case that the recruits performed well when thrust into actual battle. When Coen and others had devised their plans for mass recruitment, they had envisaged Japanese mercenaries acting as a vanguard in attacks against fortified Portuguese and Spanish strongholds. The reality was less impressive as the soldiers transported aboard the Fortuijn were thrust into a series of minor marketplace skirmishes that erupted between the English and the Dutch in Banten.\textsuperscript{86} The first of these, which took place in July 1617, started as a dispute over the purchase of fish in the marketplace before turning violent.\textsuperscript{87} First into the fight, one of the Company’s Japanese soldiers was severely injured with a sword cut through his shoulder blade that left him permanently disfigured.\textsuperscript{88} In the second incident in November, a large mob of English merchants mixed with local allies and heavily armed with pikes and firearms marched on VOC warehouses intent on violence. The Dutch merchants based in the warehouse wisely opted to flee, seeking shelter in a house belonging to one of the Chinese merchants operating in the port city.\textsuperscript{89} This left the Company’s Japanese recruits, just seven in number, to defend their employer’s goods alone against a force estimated at more than two hundred.\textsuperscript{90} They fought ferociously, cutting some of the opponents almost in half, but losing three dead and one severely wounded.

Such engagements established a basic template and VOC records are peppered with praise for the bravery of Japanese mercenaries in combat.\textsuperscript{91} One official wrote that ‘the Japanese soldiers show themselves as brave as our own. Their banner was first on the walls. Through their great boldness and fearlessness many were injured.’\textsuperscript{92} Their willingness to take on the most dangerous tasks meant that these troops participated in most major VOC campaigns in this period.\textsuperscript{93} The most significant of these took place in

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\item \textsuperscript{85} Jaccatra Resolutions, 10 June 1616, Colenbrander, \textit{Jan Pietersz. Coen}, 3:366.
\item \textsuperscript{86} First-hand descriptions of both incidents can be found in IJzerman, \textit{Cornelis Buijsero te Bantam}.
\item \textsuperscript{87} These incidents are discussed in Iwao, \textit{Zoku nanyō Nihon machi no kenkyū}, pp. 234–35.
\item \textsuperscript{88} IJzerman, ed. \textit{Cornelis Buijsero te Bantam}, p. 56–7.
\item \textsuperscript{89} Coen to Heeren 17, 18 December 1617, Colenbrander, \textit{Jan Pietersz. Coen}, 1:301-2.
\item \textsuperscript{90} Citing a different source, Iwao suggests there were just 5 Japanese soldiers involved in this skirmish. Iwao, \textit{Zoku nanyō Nihon machi no kenkyū}, p. 235.
\item \textsuperscript{91} Coen to Heeren 17, 18 December 1617, Colenbrander, \textit{Jan Pietersz. Coen}, 1:302.
\item \textsuperscript{92} Coen to Heeren 17, 1 January 1614, Ibid., 1:17.
\item \textsuperscript{93} Resolutions, 14 March 1621, Ibid., 3:699.
\end{itemize}
March 1621 when Coen assembled a large army, including two contingents of Japanese soldiers, to invade and subdue the Banda islands. One of these contingents was rewarded with a personal gift of 30 reals per soldier for their bravery in the fierce fighting that opened the campaign.\footnote{Ibid., 3:698-9.} As military operations morphed into an extended process of violent pacification, the Company’s recruits were pressed into a different kind of service as executioners. On 8 May 1621, VOC officials decided to execute 44 elders or orangkaya for allegedly plotting to renew hostilities against the Dutch. In a gruesome scene that was widely condemned even within the Company, six Japanese soldiers were ordered ‘with their sharp cutting swords’ to hack the eight leading orangkaya through the middle, then cut off their heads and then quarter their bodies before killing the remaining 36 leaders.\footnote{Leupe, ‘De Verovering Der Banda-Eilanden’, p. 427.}

But as was standard, praise for Japanese valour was balanced by ongoing disciplinary issues, which continued to feature regularly in VOC correspondence. One Japanese soldier, Pedro, was found sleeping when he should have been patrolling the walls of the fortress and was promptly executed by firing squad, while another, Saennon, was sentenced to hard labour for a similar offense.\footnote{Iwao, Zoku nanyō Nihon machi no kenkyū, pp. 402-3; Resolution, Fort Jacatra, 13 November 1619, Colenbrander, Jan Pietersz. Coen, 3:192.} The result was a continued search for a reliable method to turn the recruits into ‘obliging servants’. Back in Hirado, Specx insisted that VOC commanders needed to use the harshest possible discipline to keep the recruits in line. The ‘sabre’ was, he argued, the only medicine that the Japanese could understand and it must be used to hold these soldiers in check.\footnote{Jaques Specx to Coen, 1 October 1616, Ibid., 7:1:200.}

In the months after they arrived in Southeast Asia, the Fortuijn contingent was broken up and scattered around the Company’s various outposts wherever they were needed. They start to reappear in the records again around 1619 when their initial three-year contracts come to an end. Some, like Tombe, Schoyts, Itsico, Thosoo, Groboo, Johan Fanso, and Joan Maccau, opted to re-enlist at slightly elevated salaries in July 1619.\footnote{Resolution, Fort Jacatra, 18 July 1619, Ibid., 3:3528.} Others, seeing their numbers diminished by sickness or death in battle, decided they had had enough of Dutch service and resolved to return to Japan. Once they reached Hirado in 1620, however, a conflict broke out centred on whether they could claim back wages from 5 March 1616 when their ship had actually departed Japan or from 18 November 1615 when they had first signed their ‘letters of article’. It was almost too much to bear for Specx, who wrote
furiously that the recruits’ demands for an extra three and half months of back pay went ‘against reason and Japanese custom’.99

Viewed as a whole, the experience of the Fortuijn contingent encapsulates some of the tensions embedded in the Company’s recruitment scheme. And yet despite persistent problems, the VOC officials and especially Jan Pieterszoon Coen continued to issue order after order requiring their subordinates to pick up the pace of recruitment. On 30 March 1618, Coen demanded that Specx dispatch ‘the most suitable, brave young men.’100 In 1620, he wrote that ‘for the strengthening of all the garrisons we have sent for good number of Japanese; [...] a good number will also be sent to the Moluccas and up to 3 or 400 shall be sent this year.’101 The same year he demanded between one and two hundred more Japanese recruits while using every possible opportunity to insist that Specx ‘send here as many brave Japanese as time and circumstances permits. They will not be used for labour but for war.’102

Remarkably, these instructions endured even as the Tokugawa regime moved to clamp down on the steady flow of soldiers out of the country. In 1621, the bakufu, alarmed at the expanding scale of the mercenary trade, barred the Dutch from further recruitment of soldiers in Japan. The edict, dated Genna 7, 5th month, 22nd day, or 11 July 1621, was issued to the daimyo of Hirado. It prohibited the ‘taking of purchased men and women to foreign countries’ as well as the ‘sending out of swords, daggers and other weapons’.103 Specx provided the best explanation for this shift in policy when he wrote that the edict stemmed from a newly emerged bakufu concern that its subjects would ‘become involved in foreign wars’, thereby drawing the regime, which was increasingly determined to curtail its foreign engagement, into an unwanted conflict.104 For Coen, however, the ban represented nothing more than a temporary stumbling block and he ordered his subordinates in Japan to spare no effort in overturning the edict: ‘It is necessary that you work with discrete diligence to once again gain the previous license to ship Japanese and weapons from the kaiser [shogun].’105 In another letter, he was even more insistent, instructing his subordinates to ‘spare no cost or trouble’ in overturning the shogun’s ban.106 Such letters show that VOC

99 Specx to Coen, 24 February 1620, Ibid., 7:1501.
100 Coen to Jacques Specx, 30 March 1618, Ibid., 2:373.
101 Coen to Heeren 17, 22 January 1620, Ibid., 1:519.
102 Coen to Specx, 26 June 1620, Ibid., 2:748.
103 The complete edict can be found in Nagazumi, ‘Hirado ni dentatsu sareta Nihonjin’, pp. 67-81.
ambitions to use Japan as a source of troops remained resilient even after the bakufu had acted to suppress the mercenary trade. This only changed in 1623 when the discovery of a terrifying conspiracy on Amboina triggered an emphatic rejection of these troops.

The end of the experiment

On the evening of 22 February 1623, Shichizō, one of the hundreds of Japanese soldiers shipped out from Hirado, asked a Dutch sentry patrolling the walls of the castle in Amboyna how many soldiers manned the fort and how often the guard was changed.107 This line of questioning quickly aroused suspicions, and he was detained and interrogated. Answering at first that he asked these questions for his own ‘amusement and pleasure’ (uyt vermeyen en om plaizier gedaen), he confessed after torture that he had plotted with the English merchants on the island to seize control of the castle.108 In his confession, Shichizō incriminated another Japanese mercenary called Sidney Migiell who was then arrested and interrogated, and proceeded to confess. After Migiell all the remaining Japanese in the VOC garrison were questioned and tortured with the same result.

As Shichizō, gasped out the details of the supposed plot, the castle’s Japanese contingent morphed from trusted soldiers into shadowy agents of a sprawling conspiracy. Rather than securing territories like Amboyna against outside threat, they became the agent of dispossession, the mechanism by which Amboina could be transferred from the Company’s dominion to that of its English rivals. Heavily armed and with free access to every part of the castle, the Japanese were to ‘hand over the castle to the English’, slaughtering all those who resisted and opening the gates of the fortress for their new paymasters to march in.109

Spurred by a series of powerful anti-Dutch pamphlets, much of the writing on Amboina has focused on the English merchants caught up in the conspiracy trial. But, Amboina was also a traumatic episode for the

107 Shichizō’s name appears as Hýtjeio, Hitiesio or a range of alternate spellings in VOC sources. I follow Iwao Seiichi that this is most likely 七蔵 (Shichizō). Iwao, Zoku nanyō Nihon machi no kenkyū, p. 256.
108 Copie autentycq van de Confessien ende Sententien van Mr. Touwerson ende Complicen over de Moordadige Conspiratie op t’ Casteel Amboyna voorgenomen, dat door Godes merckelijke ende genadighe beschicking opden xxiii Februario 1623 is aend en dach gecomen als mede de resolutien by den Hr. Gouvernr van Speult & den raet daer over genomen, VOC 1680, 136v.
109 Copie autentycq van de confessien ende sententien, 136v.
Dutch Company, which believed it had uncovered a sprawling plot with soldiers from Japan at the centre. The result was a shift in VOC policy and an abandonment of any further calls to recruit Japanese soldiers. Summoned by the States-General in the Dutch Republic to explain what had happened on Amboina, VOC officials declared that they had lost all faith in these troops. The Japanese have, they explained, ‘ever been in good esteeme with us, and have alwaies been much trusted, and not having any occasion of malice, or rancor, or feare of them, or against them’. But in the post-Amboina world this had all changed and ‘it behoveth our nation to be alwaies in mistrust of the Japonians, and not so confidently to use or be served of them as before’. In this way, the 1623 conspiracy trial marked a turning point in the Company’s experiment although Japanese soldiers already in Southeast Asia continued to feature sporadically in VOC muster rolls.

Given the limited duration and scale of recruitment, how then to assess the Company’s experiment with these troops? In the final analysis, there were too few Japanese soldiers in VOC ranks to alter the military balance. The Dutch never recruited more than a few hundred Japanese mercenaries, and although they featured in important campaigns their presence alone was never enough to alter the course of any single conflict. But these soldiers were also more significant than their numbers suggest for they initiated a pattern that was to become increasingly important for the VOC and its English rival, both of which went on to recruit tens of thousands of Asian soldiers over the course of their existence. The Japanese experiment might have ended in failure, but the wider template that they represented proved essential to the success of European empires in Asia.

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110 A remonstrance of the directors of the Netherlands East India Company presented to the Lords States Generall of the united Provinces, p. 10.
111 A group of Japanese soldiers featured for example in the 1628 siege of Batavia. I am grateful to Mischa Frenks for this reference.


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