CHAPTER 17

Copper Transportation in Tokugawa Japan: Its Influence on Copper Shortage in Nagasaki

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Introduction

A dramatic incident occurred at Nagasaki in 1738:1 Three Chinese were beaten to death by their fellow countrymen. These three men, who had entered the port of Nagasaki two years earlier, were due to leave for their home country. Other Chinese merchants, who had also been at Nagasaki for a long time, were envious of the crews of two homeward-bound ships and so attacked their fellow-countrymen at night. In the following year a riot broke out among Chinese merchants in Nagasaki which left two dead and eleven injured. Besides these cases of injury or death, the Chinese set fire to their compound several times.2

These incidents tell us how frustrated Chinese merchants at Nagasaki were. Though the sea journey home took only two weeks, they stayed in the small Chinese compound in Nagasaki for more than two years, awaiting deliveries of copper. And because there was a shortage of copper at Nagasaki, serious security problems arose for the city.

There are three possible reasons to explain shortage of copper at Nagasaki. First of all, not enough copper was being produced in Japan. The peak year for copper production was around 1700. Thereafter it decreased and stagnated, though demand for it continued to be high.3 Second, the share of domestic demand for copper had increased. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, around 70% of copper produced in Japan was exported. In the 1770s, however,

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1 Years have been converted to the Gregorian calendar, while days and months are left in original numbering (e.g. 1715.6.11). Japanese names appear in their original order, with the surname first.
only just over 50% of copper was for export. Therefore, less and less copper was available for the export market. Third, some copper was lost during transportation from the mines to Nagasaki, partly through accident, e.g., shipwreck, and partly through theft. This paper discusses the problems that arose during transportation. We examine how the copper was procured from all over Japan and how it was actually transported. For this examination we take the examples of copper transport from the domains of Nanbu and Akita in the north-eastern part of Japan to Nagasaki, since 50% or more copper had come from these regions since the beginning of the eighteenth century. From this examination we try to establish what made copper transportation difficult and consequently contributed to the shortage of copper at Nagasaki.

**Copper Procurement System**

Incidents such as the above-mentioned riot among Chinese merchants were a source of concern. One of the measures to avoid such incidents was to shorten the stay of Chinese at Nagasaki which in turn required the timely delivery of sufficient amounts of copper. Whether or not intentionally in 1738, the same year as the riot, the Shogunate issued a regulation (ofuregaki 御触書) that all the copper produced in Japan should be collected in Osaka. Through this regulation the Shogunate tried to establish a system to efficiently procure and channel all copper to Osaka.

**The Osaka Copper Office**

The 1738 regulation was, however, not the first attempt of the Shogunate to collect all copper at Osaka. As early as 1701 the Shogunate had established the Copper Office (dōza 銅座) in Osaka and assigned it to execute the collection, refinement, and export of copper. During the Tokugawa period, the Copper Office was established three times:

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6 The copper for utensils and tools were exempted. “Nagasaki kaidō fusoku ni tsuki Ōsaka fukiya e uriwatasubeshi no koto” 長崎廻銅不足を付大阪吹屋に可売渡之事, in Takayanagi Shinzō 高柳真三 and Ishii Ryōsuke 石井良 (ed.), *Ofuregaki Kampō shūsei 御触書寛保集成* (Tōkyō: Iwanami shoten, 1958), p. 935.