CHAPTER 18

A Metal Dealer and Spy from Nagasaki in Manila in the First Quarter of the Seventeenth Century

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**Introduction**

In 1991, the Spanish scholar Juan Gil published the results of his archival research as *Hidalgos y Samurais*, a book that presented information from the *Contaduría* section of the Archivo General de Indias in Sevilla. This study broke new ground in presenting, among other things, figures of the trade conducted between Nagasaki and the office of the Manila Governor. As we have no figures at all for the Portuguese trade, these, in fact, are the first figures related to the trade out of Nagasaki that have come to light. In recognition of this fact, a Japanese translation of this work appeared within only nine years of its original publication in Spanish.¹ The figures of the Nagasaki trade with Manila concern mostly exports of iron and steel (as bars, nails, balls, wire, and filings), copper, gun powder, saltpeter, sulfur, and hemp. Scattered in between, there are some figures concerning the export of hams, rice, and biscuits.²

Japanese merchants, then, starting in the last years of the sixteenth century, provided for over twenty years a steady stream of iron, steel, and copper to cast cannon in Manila, as well as the ammunition to go with these weapons, and also large quantities of ready-made gunpowder as well as the most important ingredients to make it. The hemp, ham, rice, and biscuits should be understood as the necessary supplies for maintaining a force of soldiers to man this war material. Immediately a conclusion presents itself: Japanese merchants provided crucial military supplies for the Spanish garrison at Manila at a time when it saw itself first threatened and then actually blockaded by Dutch naval power in Asia. This is the framework for the following paper.

During the seven years between 1599 and 1605, the number of Japanese merchants selling merchandise to the office of the Manila Governor (79) averaged

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² See the Appendix at the end of this paper.
a little over 11 per year. During the seven following years between 1606 and 1612, only 10 merchants are recorded to have sold merchandise to the office of the Manila Governor. It is, of course, possible that the records were not kept as scrupulously as before, but it seems clear that the number of Japanese merchants reaching Manila declined radically after 1605. The principal reason for this is the fact that the red-seal system imposed by the ruler of Japan, Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616), limited the number of Japanese ships permitted to trade in Manila to four per year. Free shipping from Japan had been the accepted form of the Japan-Manila trade since the early 1590s, in spite of the red-seal system Hideyoshi had tried to impose but had not enforced. Such free shipping became illegal under the Tokugawa and could only continue until 1610, when the Dutch started their blockade of Manila. Although the latter honored the red-seal letters issued by the Tokugawa Bakufu, ships without licenses risked immediate confiscation in the waters around Manila and, at best, the imprisonment of their crews.

Luis Melo

It therefore becomes all the more interesting to see which merchants managed to get permission to trade in Manila. There is one merchant in particular whose name appears over and over in the Spanish sources in these later years. His name is Luis Melo, and he seems to have had particularly good connections with the Japanese as well as with the Manila authorities. In the Spanish archive at Sevilla, we can find the following information about him.

In the first notice, dating from 1602, he is called Luis Mero, and he is recorded as a Japanese to whom 100 pesos were paid for “labor and ornaments of a church built by the Franciscans to teach the doctrine to Japanese Christians” in Manila. Indeed, from about 1595, there existed, outside Manila’s city walls between the Chinese Parián and the suburb of Laguio, a Japanese settlement with between 500 and 1500 inhabitants. Close by was a Franciscan monastery, called La Candelaria, the friars of which had undertaken to convert

3 “Se pagaron 100 pesos a Luis Mero, japon, para la obra y ornamentos de una iglesia que los religiosos de San Francisco fabrican para administrar doctrina a los japones cristianos”, in Archivo General de Indias (Sevilla, Spain), section Contaduría, 1205, fol. 484r, cited in Juan Gil, Hidalgos y Samurais. España y Japón en los siglos xvi y xvii (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1991), p. 450.