

## **Iwami Ginzan and International Contacts**

The Iwami Ginzan silver mine experienced two periods of vigorous international engagement during its 400-year history. The first of these came soon after the discovery of the mine in 1527 and lasted until the early 1600s, while the other coincided with the rapid modernization of Japan during the Meiji era (1868–1912).

### *Silver in the Age of Discovery*

In the 1500s, when the Spanish and Portuguese empires expanded global trade and colonized lands and peoples from Mexico to Macau, silver became perhaps the most in-demand commodity in the world. The source of these dominant nations' wealth—silver mined in places such as Guanajuato in Mexico, Potosí in Bolivia, and Iwami Ginzan—greased the wheels of the world economy. Iwami silver was handled mainly by the Portuguese, who bought it with Chinese silk. They sold some silver to Ming China while circulating the rest throughout their maritime empire. It is estimated that at least 10 percent of all the silver traded around the world in the late 1500s came from Iwami Ginzan. This was made possible by another product of international exchange: the *haifuki* (cupellation) method of refining silver, which was introduced to Iwami from the Korean Peninsula in 1533 and allowed for the production of high-purity silver in large quantities. Iwami Ginzan's ties to the world economy were largely severed, however, after the Tokugawa clan unified all of Japan under its banner and in 1603 established a government that was to rule the country until 1867. The Tokugawa restricted foreign contacts and adopted an isolationist foreign policy that prevailed until the latter half of the 1800s.

### *Colonial links*

Japan began to look outward again after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, which led to the establishment of a new government with Emperor Meiji (1852–1912) as its sovereign ruler. Victory in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) resulted in the acquisition of Chinese territory, including the island of Taiwan, making Japan a colonial power. At this time, Iwami Ginzan was controlled by the Fujita-gumi corporation, which had obtained rights to the silver mine in 1886 and also operated several other mines in other parts of the country. Fujita-gumi, however, was in dire financial straits due to the low profitability of its mines. In 1896, the Japanese government, eager to develop its newly acquired colony, distributed claims to two promising mines in Taiwan. Fujita-gumi jumped at the opportunity, and was awarded the Ruifang gold and copper mine near the town of Jiufen in the northern part of the island.

### *Iwami Ginzan and Taiwan*

Fujita-gumi invested heavily in its Taiwanese holdings, introducing cutting-edge mining and refining equipment and technology, some of which had been developed at Iwami Ginzan. Many engineers and other specialists were also transferred to Ruifang after proving their worth at Iwami Ginzan, and active exchange of personnel took place between the two mines. Jiufen grew into a bustling town, which survived the critical situation in 1923 when Fujita-gumi abruptly abandoned its Taiwanese operations. That was also the year when low copper prices on the world market forced the company to close its operations at Iwami Ginzan. Japanese mining in Taiwan continued at the Kinkaseki gold mine near Jiufen, which entered its greatest period of prosperity in the 1930s. In 1935, Kinkaseki was the most productive facility of its kind in the Japanese empire, generating up to 2.6 tons of gold annually. It operated until 1987 and is now designated a historic site, where a museum introduces visitors to the history of mining in the Jiufen region.