

Monument to Hamada Yahyoe

Hamada Yahyoe (dates unknown) is celebrated for standing up to a foreign trade power and forging more equitable trade terms between Japan and Holland. The Dutch East India Company (VOC), with the backing of the Dutch government, was the largest European trader in East Asia in the seventeenth century, bringing spices and silks to Europe. They acquired ports across the region as trading bases and safeguarded their interests with military force.

The Dutch in Taiwan

Hamada was the captain of a *shuinsen*, an armed merchant ship based in Nagasaki in the 1620s. These ships traded with Ming dynasty China via Tainan (in modern-day Taiwan) and received the protection of the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1867). In 1624, the VOC, unable to force China to open ports to them, established a colony in Taiwan as a trading base. However, the Chinese silk merchants were said to be reluctant to sell to the Dutch because they could command a better price selling to the Japanese. In 1625, the Dutch governor of the colony in Dutch Formosa (Taiwan) was ordered to prevent the Japanese from trading there and imposed high tariffs on all goods going through the port.

Hamada challenges Dutch hegemony

When Hamada sailed from Nagasaki to Taiwan in 1625 to buy silk and other items from Chinese traders, he refused to pay the new tariffs. The Dutch authorities confiscated his cargo, and Japanese merchant ships were temporarily banned from trading in Taiwan. The VOC already had a small trading post in Hirado on the northern tip of Nagasaki, with permission from the shogunate, and wanted to maintain good relations with the Japanese, who traded gold, silver, and copper for silks, sugar, and European goods. The governor of the Dutch colony in Taiwan sought an audience with the shogun to assert Dutch control over Taiwan but was apparently countered by Hamada, who attempted to claim that Japan had been granted control by the people of Taiwan. In the end, neither party was granted an audience.

The hostage incident

In 1628, Hamada again attempted to conduct trade in Taiwan. The VOC imposed tariffs on his cargo and anchorage fees on his ships, impounding Hamada's ships and weapons when he refused to pay. Hamada responded by taking the governor hostage and demanded the return of his ships and property. The Dutch authorities in Taiwan, fearing the loss of VOC rights to trade with Japan, agreed to his demands, and later sent the governor to Japan as punishment in a reconciliatory move. The Dutch governor was kept under house arrest for several years. The VOC made repeated overtures to the shogunate, including presenting gifts and military aid. When the shogunate closed Japan to foreign interests in 1639, only the Dutch were permitted to remain—though under strict control. Hamada Yahyoe is remembered for not yielding to the Dutch, and forcefully protecting Japan's interests overseas.