

## Eastward bound: Exploring the enigmatic trade of Japanese Red Seal ships in Southeast Asia during the 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century

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### Abstract

This research aims to examine the historical influence of the Japanese Red Seal ship trade on Southeast Asia during the early modern era. This study investigates the historical origins, underlying reasons, and subsequent consequences of the Red Seal ship system for both Japan and the Southeast Asian nations that participated in it. This study centres on the trade routes of these ships within Southeast Asia, with a particular emphasis on notable destinations such as Indochina, Siam, the Philippines, Cambodia, and Tonkin (present-day Vietnam). This study aims to analyse the dynamics of commerce among Japanese merchants, Southeast Asian cultures, and European colonial powers, with a specific focus on the impact of such trade on local markets and economies in Southeast Asia and Japan. This study aims to fully comprehend the Japanese Red Seal ship trade in Southeast Asia through a meticulous analysis of historical records, archival materials, and existing scholarly works. This study significantly enhances our comprehension of Japan's early modern international trade and its interrelations with Southeast Asia, illuminating the regional dynamics' intricacies during that particular era. In summary, this analysis underscores the considerable importance of the Red Seal ship trade in Japan's involvement with Southeast Asia, its extensive economic ramifications, and its central role in influencing diplomatic ties among Japan, Southeast Asian nations, and Western colonial powers during that specific era.

**Keywords:** Commerce dynamics, early modern Japan, maritime, Red Seal ships, Southeast Asia, trade routes

### Introduction

Red Seal ships were armed merchant vessels sailing from Japan to Southeast Asian ports in the first half of the 17th century. These ships received red-sealed patents from the early Tokugawa shogunate. This licensing system sent around 350 Japanese ships abroad between 1600 and 1635, which, according to Manguin (2017), visited Siam, Vietnam, Malacca, Java, and the Philippines. Their main goal was trading Japanese money, copper, swords, lacquerware, and textiles for Southeast Asian spices, sappan wood, deer hides, and ivory.

Throughout Japan's history, the Red Seal ships held a dominant position in East Asian trade. According to Tsuzuki (1993), they made most of their port calls in Southeast Asian

countries, which is evidence of the company's solid commercial presence there. This trade impacted East Asian and global economies (Hoshi, 2005). According to Nakamura (2010), the commerce of the Red Seal ship enhanced Japan's international trade and migration in less than 50 years. It was a boon to local economies and helped strengthen the ties between Japan and Southeast Asia (Reid, 1993). In addition, the influx of Japanese people into Southeast Asia brought various talents, perspectives, and diplomatic tensions (Ito, 2012). Regarding the latter, the intense competition of the Red Seal ships hindered Western colonisers in East Asia's waterways, and they, therefore, tried to stop these ships' trade (Boxer, 1951a). The Southeast Asian trade history of the Red Seal ships provides a clear and compelling illustration of Japan's early modern isolationist stance. This connection is evident through the imposition of significant restrictions and regulations on these trading voyages, exemplifying Japan's cautious approach to international interactions during that era.

Firstly, the Japanese government exercised stringent control over Red Seal ships by tightly regulating the issuance of permits. These permits, which allowed private merchants to engage in international commerce, were granted to only a limited number of ships annually. This approach reflects Japan's deliberate efforts to carefully manage its participation in foreign trade and limit its interactions with other countries.

Secondly, although the Red Seal ships were permitted to trade with Southeast Asian nations, direct contact with foreign merchants was strictly prohibited. Instead, the ships were mandated to conduct business solely through intermediaries known as Nanban, or Southern Barbarian merchants. This intermediary system underscored Japan's commitment to maintaining a sense of isolation and control over its international engagements.

Moreover, despite engaging in trade with Southeast Asian nations, the primary focus of Japan's Red Seal Ship Trade remained on preserving self-sufficiency and autonomy. The voyages were primarily undertaken to acquire goods not readily available in Japan, such as precious metals and spices, rather than for extensive cultural exchanges or forging deep diplomatic ties (Surya, 2021).

The Red Seal ship commerce significantly impacted Southeast Asia in multiple ways. The trade between Japan and Southeast Asian nations facilitated the exchange of diverse commodities and valuable items, thereby promoting the growth and development of regional industries. In addition, commerce fostered cultural interactions between Japanese and Southeast Asian societies, resulting in an enlightening exchange of ideas and customs. In addition, commerce interactions played a significant role in shaping diplomatic relations and forming formal diplomatic relationships and agreements. The presence of Japanese immigrants and merchants contributed to the economic and social growth of the region. However, despite its success, the trade encountered obstacles, including interventions by rival powers and restrictive policies from some Asian nations. These obstacles ultimately led to the demise of the trade, as Japan enacted stricter regulations and eventually prohibited Japanese ships and individuals from travelling abroad. The Red Seal ship commerce had an enduring impact on Southeast Asia's economy, culture, diplomacy, and local communities, shaping the region's history and relationship with Japan (Li Dexia, 2010).

Generally, the Southeast Asian trade history of the Red Seal ships vividly illustrates Japan's early modern isolationist posture. It showcases Japan's cautious approach to international trade and interactions, evident in the limited issuance of permits, the use of intermediaries, and the emphasis on sustaining self-sufficiency. These measures highlight Japan's deliberate efforts to control its engagement with the outside world during that period. This article summarises the development and demise of the Red Seal ship trade from several scholarly perspectives. These

include the Red Seal system, Red Seal ship commerce, Southeast Asia and the downfall of the Red Seal ship trade, all aspects that help explain the Red Seal ship trade.

## Literature review

This research adopts a historical analysis approach to investigate Japan's Red Seal ship trade during the early modern period, a pivotal era in maritime expansion. The Red Seal system, initiated by Toyotomi Hideyoshi in 1592 and formalised by Tokugawa Ieyasu in 1604, played a crucial role in regulating and controlling foreign trade. Historical documents reveal the issuance of Red Seal permits, known as *Shuinjo*, to favoured feudal lords and principal merchants interested in overseas commerce. Through these permits, Tokugawa aimed to exercise control over Japanese traders, combat piracy in the South Sea, and safeguard the ships. The permit bearers were responsible for proving their legitimacy to foreign countries, with the Red Seal as a mark of authenticity (Hane, 1963).

Notably, the Red Seal ships drew merchants of various nationalities, including 12 Europeans and 11 Chinese residents, such as William Adams and Jan Joosten. Joosten was recorded to possess 10 Red Seal ships for commercial endeavours (Totman, 1995). The shogunate's efforts to create a favourable international trade environment led to the protection of Japanese Red Seal ships by Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, and English shipowners and various Asian rulers. However, Ming China did not participate in this practice. It officially banned Japanese ships from entering Chinese ports, although Chinese smugglers continued to set sail for Japan despite Ming officials' attempts to halt them (Boxer, 1951a).

The terms "Red Seal ships" or "Go-shu in-sen" and "Hachigatsu Shu-in-sen" both refer to the same historical trading ships used by Japan during the early modern period. The term "Go-shu in-sen" translates to "Red Seal Ship" in English, while "Hachigatsu Shu-in-sen" translates to "August Red Seal Ship." The latter term, "Hachigatsu Shu-in-sen," is a more specific reference to the timing of when the Red Seal Ships were issued each year. During the early modern period, the Japanese government would issue special permits or "Red Seals" to authorize private trade voyages to Southeast Asia and other regions. These permits were usually issued in the eighth month of the Japanese calendar, which corresponds to August. Hence, the term "Hachigatsu Shu-in-sen" indicates that the ships referred to in this context were those Red Seal Ships authorized in August. In summary, "Go-shu in-sen" and "Hachigatsu Shu-in-sen" refer to the same Red Seal Ships, with the latter term being more specific about the timing of their issuance.

These ships carried official, red-sealed documents issued by the shogunate, similar to licences, specifying the destinations and personnel involved in the trade (Boxer, 1951b). The shogunate sought cooperation from foreign countries to ensure the ships' safety, facilitate trade, and discourage engagement with non-Red Seal ships (Sugiyama, 1976).

Recognising the potential for significant profits in overseas trade after successfully unifying Japan in the late 16th century, Toyotomi Hideyoshi devised the Red Seal ship system. To encourage Japanese merchant ships to explore foreign markets, he issued "Red Seal certificates" or permits (Totman, 2003). Estimates by Taro (1992) suggest that between 1604 and 1616, 194 Red Seal certificates were issued, followed by 159 certificates between 1617 and 1635, totalling 353 certificates. Renowned Japanese historian Kiyoshi (1974) believes that between 1604 and 1635, more than 355 ships obtained Red Seal certificates. Tarling (1992), who has conducted extensive

research on Southeast Asia history, claims 350 Japanese ships went overseas under the Red Seal permit system between 1600 and 1635.

Historical records indicate nine Red Seal ships embarked on voyages to various destinations in 1592. Subsequently, in 1609, the shogunate prohibited the construction of large ships exceeding 500 *shi* in the Western provinces, taking over any existing ships of that size. Tokugawa Ieyasu further developed the Red Seal ship system and engaged in correspondence and gift exchanges with the Southeast Asian countries Vietnam, Cambodia, the Malay Peninsula, the Philippines, and Indonesia. Copper, silver, diamonds, swords, and other goods were exported to Southeast Asia and silk, deer skins, and sugar were the major items imported to Japan (Kshetry, 2018).

While the shogunate initially encouraged Japanese merchant ships to venture overseas, their involvement in the Red Seal ship trade diminished after 1612 due to tighter control over overseas trade. Merchants in Hakata were the last major operators in this trade (Hanihara, 1962). The analysis of relevant literature reveals how significant the Red Seal ship trade was to the development of Japan's economic and diplomatic relationships during this period. The establishment, socioeconomic ramifications, and political features of the trading system are explored in depth by Surya (2021), Smith (2018), Tanaka (2015), Johnson (2013) and Li Dexia (2010) respectively. Surya (2021) and Smith (2018) investigated the socioeconomic implications of trade, focusing on its contribution to regional market development and the exchange of goods between Japan and Southeast Asian nations. Similarly, Tanaka (2015), Johnson (2013) and Li Dexia (2010) examined how the shogunate utilised the Red Seal ship system to consolidate its control over international commerce.

These Red Seal vessels facilitated commerce, diplomacy, and cultural exchange between Japan and Southeast Asia. However, despite its appeal to foreign merchants and traders, the Red Seal ship trade encountered obstacles from rival powers and the restrictive policies of certain Asian nations. Despite the extensive research conducted on this trading system, there remains a need for additional studies to comprehensively understand its broader effects on Japan's global stature and the experiences of individual merchants who participated in this historic enterprise. By delving deeper into the hindrances faced by the Red Seal ship trade and the challenges encountered by its participants, further research can shed light on the trade's overall impact on Japan's economic and diplomatic history. A more comprehensive exploration of the trading system, including its players, will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how this trade influenced Japan's position in the global context and the experiences of those who were integral to its operations.

## **Method and study area**

The present study utilises a historical analysis methodology to examine the phenomenon of early modern Japanese Red Seal ship commerce. The understanding of the trade's foundation, growth, operation, and eventual fall is dependent on primary sources such as historical documents, records, and scholarly works. The primary geographical emphasis lies in East Asia, with a specific focus on Japan and its complex relationships with Southeast Asian countries like Thailand, Vietnam, the Malay Peninsula, Cambodia, and the Philippines. These nations were of significant importance since they served as destinations for the Red Seal ships.

This research provides significant contributions to the understanding of several aspects of Red Seal ship trade by conducting a thorough analysis and synthesis of historical data. This study

examines the social and political ramifications of the trade and its impact on Japan's diplomatic relations with Southeast Asian nations and European colonial powers. Moreover, this study critically examines the methodologies and tactics utilised by merchants and traders, embracing several facets such as the acquisition of ships, financial practises, administration of cargo, and the formation of trade networks. This study also examines the policies and regulations implemented by the shogunate to manage and supervise trade. This study provides a thorough examination of the determinants that influenced the rise and fall of the Red Seal ship trade during the period spanning from the late 16th century to the early 17th century. It aims to provide light on the broader historical importance of this trade in the context of Japan and East Asia.

### **Operation of the Red Seal ship trade**

Scholars have noted that individuals involved in the Red Seal ship trade typically did not personally engage in seafaring activities. Their role primarily revolved around organising ships, securing funds and cargo, and recruiting merchants to pay for the ship rentals and join the voyages. The cargo capacity of the Red Seal ships varied, ranging from approximately 70 to 100 tons minimum and up to 600 to 800 tons maximum, with an average of around 300 tons (Boxer, 1951a). While there were Western-style sailboats, Japan's shipbuilding and navigation technology during that era was not on par with Europe's advancements. As a result, Portuguese navigational skills were highly esteemed by the Japanese. At one-point, Japanese law even mandated the employment of Portuguese navigators on all Japanese ships sailing to Southeast Asia (Totman, 2003). The cargo value on the Red Seal ships typically ranged from 200 to 300 *kanmon*, where one *kanmon* equalled 1,000 *mon* or 10 strings of 100 copper coins. During prosperous periods, the cargo value could reach as high as 1,500 *kanmon* (Shen Ren'an, 2003).

The Southwest monsoon, which occurred from May to September each year, held crucial importance, as any delays in departure during this season could have severe consequences. Other uncertainties traders faced included fluctuations in goods pricing at the destination, sudden changes in trade policies, particularly related to taxes, and the constant threat of pirates, who posed significant risks to life and property. For example, incidents of plundering along the Chinese coast were common occurrences (Boxer, 1951c). Red Seal ships were typically between 500 and 750 tons, comparable to or larger than European galleons but smaller than Portuguese carracks or Manila galleons, which could reach 1,000 to 2,000 tons, equal to 1,000,000 to 2,000,000 kg (Boxer, 1951c).

It is estimated that each ship had a crew of approximately 200 people, and the largest ship had a crew of 500 men (Treat, 1938:235). Haneda (2010:66) states that the crew size of a Red Seal ship varied from 100 to 300 men depending on the size and destination of the ship. The construction of the Red Seal ships varied in style and origin. Some were built in Nagasaki using Chinese and European shipbuilding techniques integrated into Japanese designs. As trade with Southeast Asia became more established, many ships were ordered and purchased in Ayutthaya, Siam, due to the high-quality construction and materials available there (Oka, 2021).

The management of these ships was entrusted to wealthy trading families, such as the Suminokura, Araki, Chaya, and Sueyoshi, as well as individual adventurers, such as Suetsugu Heizo, Yamada Nagamasa, William Adams, Jan Joosten, and Murayama Toan. These individuals or families were responsible for organising the expeditions and obtaining the funds for purchasing

merchandise in Asia. Loans for the expeditions carried an interest rate ranging from 35% to 55% per trip, and in the case of Siam, it could reach as high as 100% (Boxer, 1951b).

During the period spanning from the 15th to the 17th centuries, Japanese history experienced a significant shift marked by the growth and expansion of their economic networks along the coastline of Southeast Asia. During this historical era, Japan experienced a notable surge in its involvement in international trade, resulting in the interchange of commodities and individuals across diverse places, particularly the coastal areas of Asia and even certain sections of Europe. This phenomenon was made possible with the creation of Japanese-speaking communities referred to as “Nihon-Machi” or “Japanese towns” in various Southeast Asian regions (Totman, 2003).

### **The trade between Japan and Southeast Asia through Red Seal ships**

Elevated temperatures and high levels of humidity define the climate of Southeast Asia. In the early stages, human communities exhibited a preference for hilly regions as opposed to delta areas. The economic trajectory of Southeast Asia had a discernible developmental trend in contrast to that of temperate regions. The delta regions in Southeast Asia emerged as significant centres for cross-cultural trade, mostly fueled by the external demand for products originating from the interior regions. The economic benefits derived from transit commerce served as a strong motivation for individuals to establish permanent residences in coastal areas, leading to the development of prominent trading hubs such as Gresik in Java, Palembang in Sumatra, and Ayutthaya in Thailand (Shimada, 2018).

Southeast Asia was engaged in two primary categories of maritime commerce within the domain of historical occurrences. The initial category of commerce discussed is intra-Asian trade, which has persisted for a period exceeding two thousand years. Southeast Asia's geographical location, situated between the influential nations of China and India, has bestowed upon it a crucial role in the facilitation of trade between these two prominent economic forces. The presence of intra-regional commerce facilitated the economic prosperity of Southeast Asia. The 15th century marked a significant turning point for international marine trade, as it attained widespread recognition on a worldwide scale. This development had profound economic implications for Southeast Asia, as highlighted by Shimada (2018). The period from the 15th to the 17th centuries witnessed a notable expansion in maritime trade, which in turn led to the emergence of more powerful centralised nations. These states were able to generate a substantial percentage of their income through commercial activities (Reid, 1980).

Japanese vessels initiated voyages to Southeast Asia at different intervals (see Figure 1). Portuguese and Chinese traders actively participated in commercial activities during the period under consideration. Concurrently, Japanese merchants also embarked on trading expeditions to regions such as Luzon and Vietnam. The exchange of commodities, such as salt, occurred between Cambodia and Thailand. According to scholarly sources (Cho, 2000; Gakusho, 2019), it can be observed that Japan made its first foray into the waters of Southeast Asia around the 16th century. Japanese ships successfully arrived in Luzon, which is located in the Philippines, by following a navigational path that involved sailing from southern Kyushu, passing via the Ryukyu Islands, and then reaching their destination in the Philippines. During the 16th and 17th centuries, merchants from Japan and Southeast Asia heavily depended on the trade network administered by the Ryukyu monarchy. According to Gakusho (2019), it was common for Japanese merchants to trade with

regions such as Luzon, Siam, and Ayutthaya.

The granting of the vermilion seal trade licence during the late 16th century by officials under the authority of Hideyoshi was a significant milestone. This licence aimed to establish regulations for the overseas trade activities of Japanese merchants, particularly in Southeast Asia, where their engagement had been experiencing a notable upsurge. Following that, Japanese trade groups formed settlements referred to as Nihon-Machi. The aforementioned settlements, located in various regions of Southeast Asia, such as Oudong, Phnom Penh, Manila, and Ayutthaya, finally accumulated a population of approximately 10,000 Japanese merchants (Kikuchi, 2021). Over time, the Japanese merchants underwent a transformation and assumed the role of intermediaries for traders from Japan and Southeast Asia. Their function encompassed engaging in trade with Vietnam and Thailand, albeit to a lesser degree compared to Chinese traders. Japanese merchants in Vietnam mostly conducted trade in the southern region, operating within the framework of Nguyen legislation and taking advantage of the region's vibrant international trade (Cho, 2000).



Source: Iwao, 1985

**Figure 1.** The map illustrates the trade routes of red-sealed ships from Japan (Kyoto, Osaka, Nagasaki, and Hakata) connecting with various Southeast Asian regions, including Luzon (Philippines), Annam (Vietnam), Cambodia, Ayutthaya (Thailand), Java (Indonesia), Malacca (Malaysia), and several parts of China



The bilateral connection between Japan and Thailand witnessed a gradual expansion of Japanese merchants' influence during the latter part of the 16th century. During the reigns of Phracahao Songtham and his successors, a number of Japanese colonies were established in the vicinity of Ayutthaya, commonly known as "ban jipun" which translates as Japanese quarters. The examination of historical records originating from the 17th century provides valuable insights into the commercial activities undertaken by Japanese merchants in Southeast Asia, with a particular focus on the Nanban region, often referred to as Southern Barbarian (Atwell, 2011; Oka, 2017). These papers also shed light on the interactions between Japanese merchants and European traders, which were significantly influenced by the policies and acts of Ieyasu. The Japanese government, in its pursuit of gunpowder and saltpetre, recognised the strategic value of the Siamese market, as the demand for Japanese silver remained consistently strong in Southeast Asia (Iwamoto & Bytheway, 2011; Na Pombejra, 2013). As a result, the initiation of imports from Siam and other entrepots in Southeast Asia occurred.

The vermilion trade licence between Japan and Siam was formally established during the period spanning from 1604 to 1605. The involvement of Japanese merchants in trading hides and local items was of significant importance in the overall relationship. According to Cho (2000), the Japanese settlers in Thailand had a substantial role in fostering the development of both Thai and Thai-Japanese trade networks until the 1630s. The examination of these encounters can be further by referring to Tsuko Ichiran, a compilation of diplomatic records originating from the Shogunate (Iwamoto & Bytheway, 2011).

Japanese merchants significantly facilitated diplomatic and economic interactions between Japan and Siam (now known as Ayutthaya). The Japanese community in Ayutthaya played a significant role in business, although it was mostly under the Shogun's mercenary warriors. The merchants, in conjunction with Japanese mestizos, actively participated in the production of deerskins for the purpose of exportation. This trade activity played a crucial role in establishing a strong commercial connection between Ayutthaya and Nagasaki. The historical records document instances of diplomatic correspondence and the exchange of presents between the monarchs of Ekathotsarot and Songtam of Siam, as well as the Tokugawa shoguns (Na Pombejra, 2013).

Japanese merchants actively engaged in marine trade networks in the Philippines, which the Spanish colonial administration effectively aided. According to historical sources, it is evident that indigenous Filipinos actively participated in transnational commerce during the period of Spanish colonial governance. The Filipino people exchanged various commodities, including gold, wax, and deerskin, with foreign traders from East Asia. Significantly, in the 15th and 16th centuries, Filipino chieftains exhibited considerable participation in marine commerce. The earliest documented occurrences of Japanese merchants engaging in trade activities were observed in the regions of Cagayan and Pangasinan. The territories in question, which were strategically positioned and possessed favourable economic conditions, accommodated Japanese colonies that experienced a population growth of approximately 600 individuals. According to Tremml-Werner (2015), the introduction of the shuinjo had a significant impact on the manner in which Japanese merchants conducted their business operations in the Philippines.

The increasing commercial activities between Japan and the Philippines resulted in the establishment of bilateral agreements. During the 17th century, an agreement was reached between Ieyasu, a prominent figure in Japan, and the Governor of Manila, with the aim of establishing a systematic framework for trade and communication between the Japanese, Luzon (a region in the Philippines), and New Spain (present-day Mexico). This agreement enhanced the trading links between Japanese and Filipino traders. Japanese merchants holding the vermilion seal trade



permit derived advantages from meeting the luxury demands within Japan while simultaneously fulfilling the everyday requirements of the Spanish community. As a result, the number of Japanese residents in Manila experienced a notable rise in the early 17th century (Tremml-Werner, 2015).

During the Tokugawa period, Japan also forged diplomatic ties with Cambodia, but at a later stage in comparison to its contacts with China. The establishment of these contacts may be traced back to the post-Angkor period when Japanese commercial groups hailing from Kumamoto prefecture exchanged goods with the Khmer people and embarked on visits to the Angkor temples. While the precise dates remain disputed, historical sources indicate that there were instances of Japanese visitors to Angkor Wat and trade interactions involving the exchange of gold for the construction of a castle in Kumamoto. The diplomatic ties between the Tokugawa shogunate and the Khmer kingdom persisted from 1603 until the decline and eventual collapse of the Khmer monarchy in the mid-17th century. According to Ravina (2015), historical records have proved the presence of Cambodian ships that sailed to Nagasaki.

Prior to the enforcement of the Sakoku policy, there was a discreet level of Japanese engagement in the Malay Peninsula, namely in the region of Malacca. The initial trade interactions between Japan and the Malay Peninsula entailed the regular visits of Japanese brokers hailing from the Ryukyu Islands to the port of Malacca. These visits were conducted on a yearly basis, with the primary objective of exchanging Japanese commodities for Chinese souvenirs. During the 17th century, Japan had a notable increase in its foreign trading activities, which led to the establishment of direct and lawful connections with the Malay peninsula. This was evidenced by the regular visits of Shuisen ships to the port of Malacca. In contrast to settlements in Luzon, Siam, and Vietnam, it is noteworthy that no significant Japanese payments were observed in the Malay Peninsula during the same time frame. The emergence of a burgeoning Japanese community in the Malay Peninsula occurred subsequent to the Meiji Restoration. During the latter half of the 19th century, the number of Japanese residents in the Malay Peninsula had surpassed 4,000 individuals, as documented by Leng (1978). This particular era represented a notable turning point in the trajectory of Japanese colonies within the region of the Malay Peninsula (Surya, 2021).

## Conclusion

In summary, the period between the 15th and 17th centuries marked a significant transition in Japanese history, characterized by the expansion of their economic networks throughout Southeast Asia. This expansion led to a notable increase in trade with various regions, the emergence of Japanese settlers in Southeast Asia, and the reshaping of trade dynamics with different nations. This intricate web of trade, diplomacy, and cultural exchange was influenced by factors such as the issuance of vermilion seal trade licenses, the establishment of agreements with other powers, and the growth of Japanese populations in different areas.

The Red Seal ship trade was at the heart of Japan's maritime commerce during the early modern period. It was a vital component that positioned Japan as a formidable competitor to European merchants and solidified its active role in global trade. Spearheaded by figures like Toyotomi Hideyoshi and later Tokugawa Ieyasu, this trade network flourished, with Japanese ships embarking on voyages to Southeast Asia and beyond. The Red Seal ship trade played a pivotal role in boosting Japan's economic prosperity by expanding overseas markets and introducing sought-after goods such as silk, lead, spices, and precious metals. Beyond economic gains, this trade also

facilitated the exchange of goods and fostered cultural interactions, contributing to the growth of regional economies in Southeast Asia. However, these endeavours encountered challenges, particularly from European merchants who aimed to curtail the influence of this burgeoning trade network.

In response to these challenges, the shogunate enacted measures to regulate and control international commerce, eventually prohibiting the international travel of Japanese ships and individuals. However, despite its eventual demise, Red Seal ship commerce significantly impacted Japan's economic and diplomatic history. It improved Japan's global connectivity, promoted cultural exchange, and shaped its relationships with Southeast Asian nations. This study enhances our knowledge of Japan's early modern period by comprehensively examining the Red Seal ship trade's historical context, motivations, and consequences. From the perspective of the Red Seal ship system, illuminates the complexities and dynamics of maritime commerce, the interactions between regional powers, and the obstacles a developing nation must overcome to establish itself on the global stage. Red Seal ship commerce exemplifies Japan's ambitions, economic aspirations, and evolving diplomatic relations during a period of transformation. This study sheds light on the multidimensional nature of Japan's global engagement and the enduring impact of its maritime trade on the nation's history and international standing.

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