

COMPLETION REPORT

Rusontsubo: Trade and Aesthetics in Philippines-Japan Relations in the Time of Hideyoshi

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In January 2008 Dr. Genshitsu-sen, 15th tea master in a line of the Urasenke family, prepared tea in Malacañang Palace for Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, President of the Philippines. On this occasion he made reference to two heirloom tea storage jars he had in his residence in Kyoto known as rusontsubo or “Luzon jars.” These were imported into Japan in the 16th century from the island of Luzon, then known to Japanese as “Ruson.” The jars were highly prized by practitioners chado not just for their ability to maintain the freshness of tea leaves but also for their rustic charm.

Some of these jars are still extant. One named Shoka previously owned by Hideyoshi is presently in the Tokugawa Museum, Nagoya. Another with the signature of Sen-No-Rikyu is in the Gotoh Museum, Tokyo. The Freer Gallery in the Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. owns a fully documented tea-leaf storage jar called “Chigusa.” Recent ceramic research has shown that rusontsubo were not made in the Philippines by Filipinos, rather these were ordinary storage jars of Chinese origin.

Rusontsubo are referenced in early Jesuit accounts of Japan, and other European accounts of the period like the Italian Francesco Carletti, who visited the Philippines from 1596-97, and Antonio de Morga who published “Events of the Philippine Islands” in Mexico in 1609 who both relate, with amazement, how these simple and crude jars, acquired cheaply in Luzon commanded high prices in Japan. One of the most famous Sakai merchants was Ruson Sukaenzaemon who grew wealthy overnight from the sale of rusontsubo.

It is significant that in 1594 the Franciscan Pedro Bautista wrote a report to Gomes Perez Dasmariñas, Spanish Governor-general of the Philippines, who had sent him as an envoy to Hideyoshi’s court, requesting that rusontsubo be sourced and sent to Japan as gifts for Hideyoshi and his ministers who valued these very much. So important had rusontsubo become that Hideyoshi tried to monopolize the trade in them, thus rusontsubo played a part in the diplomacy of early Philippines-Japan relations.

Rusontsubo once formed an integral part of tea practice but today these are hardly brought out, with the exception of the annual delivery of tea from Uji to the Sen family in Kyoto where the ritual opening and sealing of the rusontsubo is a reminder of a time when these the jars were brought out in parade, adorned with silk cords and covers, given names, and whose appearance was recorded in tea annals during the time of Hideyoshi as symbols of status, wealth, culture and power.

Rusontsubo are but a footnote in the history of tea, and shared histories of the Philippines and Japan but the story of these jars form an interesting picture of Japan in the time of Hideyoshi as markers of trade, evangelization, diplomacy and cultural exchange. These jars also suggest the importance of Manila as an important trading port at the time this being one of the end points of the Manila-Acapulco Galleon trade that can be seen as the beginning of globalization.

Publication of the Results of Research Project:

Verbal Presentation (Date, Venue, Name of Conference, Title of Presentation, Presenter, etc.)
Thesis (Name of Journal and its Date, Title and Author of Thesis, etc.)
Book (Publisher and Date of the Book, Title and Author of the Book, etc.)