



Adam Clulow, *The Company and the Shogun: The Dutch Encounter with Tokugawa Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014, 352 pp., ISBN 978 0 2311 6428 3).

In September 2006, Prime-Minister Jan Peter Balkenende introduced the controversial term ‘voc mentality’ (*‘voc-mentaliteit’*) into Dutch political debate. While happy to take credit for Dutch economic growth, he was not particularly clear about the meaning of his neologism: ‘Let’s be grateful. Let’s be positive about this! The Netherlands can do it again! That voc mentality – daring to cross boundaries – is back. Dynamism! Right?’ The term caught on quickly. There are now entries in Wikipedia and *Dikke Van Dale*, the most authoritative dictionary of the modern Dutch language. MPs were less persuaded by Balkenende’s claims. Jan Marijnissen, leader of the Socialist Party, pointed out that the voc era was characterized by piracy and privateering, and saw the beginnings of Dutch colonization of Indonesia. ‘It may create a wrong impression abroad when our Prime Minister publicly states that he wants to return to the voc era.’ The past is, indeed, a foreign country. Both Balkenende and Marijnissen assumed that the Dutch East India Company had been a dominant force in world history, whether for good or for evil. Let us hope that they will find time in their retirement to read Clulow’s *The Company and the Shogun*, which tells a rather different story, not one of triumph and success, but one of failure and defeat. As Clulow shows, the shogun, *daimyos* and merchants of seventeenth-century Japan proved more than a match for the voc. The Company was unable to shape international relations in East Asia in any significant way, and had mixed success inserting itself into existing indigenous power structures there, to the detriment of its trade and navigation. The ‘voc mentality’, however defined, was hardly a panacea!

*The Company and the Shogun* fits in beautifully with the efforts of postcolonial historians in Asia and Europe to ‘provincialize’ European history and question longstanding historiographical assumptions regarding the superiority of the ‘dynamic’ West over ‘static’ Asian societies. It also addresses marked imbalances in the postcolonial literature produced since the 1960s. In many ways, Clulow’s approach mirrors that of the highly successful Brill series ‘TANAP monographs on the History of Asian-European Interaction’. As noted by series editor Leonard Blussé, scholars in newly independent Asian countries have tended to follow the ‘nation-building’ agenda, which does little to prepare citizens ‘for our present age of regional co-operation and globalization.’ The TANAP and Encompass programs at the University

of Leiden take a different approach. Reading VOC documents ‘against the grain’, the authors of the sixteen TANAP monographs published so far have reconstructed trade flows and trading networks in monsoon Asia, continuity and change in indigenous societies that came into contact with the VOC, and the Company’s interaction with various merchant communities and princely courts in monsoon Asia. Drawing on a wealth of Dutch, English and Japanese sources, *The Company and the Shogun* is similarly concerned with connections and comparisons, analyzing seemingly localized events from regional and global perspectives. It builds in particular on the extensive research that Blussé, John Wills and others have done on the VOC’s troubles and travails in China, Taiwan and Japan.

Clulow also gives the story an important new twist. He argues convincingly that the VOC was no reluctant imperialist, but used all means at its disposal – military, naval and political – to further its interests. There could be no trade without war, as the Company directors knew very well. The toxic mixture of naked aggression and treaty making that we call VOC policy met with marked success in Southeast Asia in the first half of the seventeenth century. The Company managed to break the power of the Portuguese, keep other European competitors at bay, and insert itself as co-ruler in a number of indigenous polities, thus redirecting regional trade flows and monopolizing worldwide production and trade in nutmeg, mace, cloves, and, later on, cinnamon as well.

Yet however much it tried, the VOC was unable to implement this strategy in East Asia. As Clulow points out, Chinese warlords and Japanese authorities could and did respond to Dutch aggression with overwhelming force when necessary. The VOC was expelled from the Pescadores in 1624, and from Taiwan in 1662, for example. Attacks on Japanese merchantmen carrying a *shuinjo*, a maritime pass from the Shogun, invariably met with heavy-handed responses from the Bakufu. As Clulow notes, VOC trade with Japan stopped completely in the period 1628-1632, following an overhasty, thoughtless arrest of two Japanese junks at Fort Zeelandia on Taiwan.irate Japanese officials demanded that the VOC hand over the culprit – Pieter Nuyts, Dutch Governor of Taiwan – for condign punishment, which it did, in total contravention of the Company’s claim to have legal sovereignty over its employees. Nuyts remained a prisoner in Japan for four years. He was only released once the VOC agreed to play by the Bakufu’s rules, assuming the position of humble vassal (*fudai*) of the Shogun, and presented Iemitsu with an extraordinary gift: a massive brass chandelier, counting no less than thirty arms. To this day, the chandelier remains a prominent feature of the mausoleum that Iemitsu built for his predecessor (Ieyasu) in Nikko.

In its dealings with Asian rulers, the VOC preferred to act as a champion of freedom of trade and navigation, ready to liberate them from Iberian ‘tyranny’ in exchange for grants of sovereign powers (exclusive

trading privileges, the right to build a fortress et cetera). As Clulow shows, the Japanese authorities would have none of this. Much like the Emperor of China, the Shogun conceptualized the world as a civilizational order, a hierarchy of rulers that culminated in himself. Diplomatic relations could only be maintained with other suitable princes – Korea’s rulers, for example – who, lower in rank than the Shogun, were expected to pay tribute. Consequently, the Shogun was happy to receive embassies authorized by the ‘King of Holland’ (i.e. the Prince of Orange), but refused to treat the Governor-General in Batavia and his representatives as anything other than merchants. This was an important factor in the near breakdown of relations between the VOC and the Bakufu in 1628-1632. Governor-General Jacques Specx, one-time *opperhoofd* of the Hirado factory, found a way out of the diplomatic impasse. Specx was the first to describe VOC officials as ‘faithful vassals of His Majesty’ (99) in his communications with the Bakufu. As Clulow explains, the term *fudai* denoted vassals or servants who stood in hereditary subordination to another family or group and who were defined by their record of loyal service. It was applied to one group within the Tokugawa order in particular: ‘the fudai daimyo’, which staffed ‘Edo’s expanding bureaucracy’ (100). Starting with Specx, VOC officials sought to construct a ‘genealogy of service’ tying them directly to the Shogun – much like the *daimyo* did themselves (101).

Performance quickly became reality. Nor would service to the Shogun remain restricted to the famous *hofreizen*, the annual visit to the court in Edo. When a revolt broke out in the Shimabara domain in December 1637, involving ‘Christians eager to escape Tokugawa persecution’ (125), the Bakufu expected VOC officials both to offer material assistance in the form of cannons, gunpowder et cetera and to participate directly in the siege of Hara Castle. Nicolaes Couckebacker, *opperhoofd* of the Nagasaki factory, hastened to comply with the Shogun’s request. In February and March 1638, ‘Dutch gunners fired over four hundred shots into Hara Castle from ship-mounted guns, and a battery assembled on shore’ (127). In April, Bakufu forces were able to enter the castle, massacre the surviving rebels and end the revolt. Just how much the regime valued the Company’s support on these and other occasions is revealed by *Tsuko ichiran*, a nineteenth-century compendium of Bakufu foreign relations. According to Clulow, the entry for the Dutch records ‘hundreds of years of loyal service, including the Shimabara uprising and dozens of intelligence reports’ (131). Clulow is surely right to conclude that if VOC officials had started out pretending to be the Shogun’s loyal vassals – all for the sake of trade, of course – they had ended up playing the role so well as to effectively surrender any other identity in Japan. From the Bakufu’s perspective, they had become dutiful subordinates. As a result, Dutch trade and navigation in East Asia could only be conducted within very narrow perimeters. Only when Commodore Perry arrived in Uraga Harbor (near Edo) in July 1853 did Japan’s *sakoku* policy of selective engagement with the outside world come to an end.

*The Company and the Shogun* is a superb analysis of the voc's changing relationship with Japan's political and mercantile elites, and its effects on the Company's position in international relations in seventeenth-century East Asia. The loss of Taiwan in 1662 was of little interest to the Shogun, for example. He had never recognized the voc's claims to sovereignty over the island to start with. His refusal to lend assistance to the voc was a crucial part of what Tonio Andrade calls 'China's first great victory over the West.' Are there no anomalies in Clulow's argument? Of course, there are! It is disappointing that the book's bibliography does not contain a detailed list of the archival and printed sources in Dutch, English and Japanese consulted by the author. As Cynthia Viallé points out, it is a mistake to assume that the annual visits to the court in Edo only started in 1634. In analyzing voc policy in Japan, it would have been useful to draw comparisons with the Dutch Republic's ambiguous position in European diplomacy. *De jure*, the country did not attain sovereignty and independence until 1648. For a long time, it was treated as a subordinate power by its English and French allies, and acted accordingly. For example, the city of Amsterdam provided transport ships for the siege of La Rochelle, the last remaining Protestant stronghold in France to surrender to government troops in 1628. One cannot help but note the similarities with the voc's involvement in the siege of Hara Castle ten years later. Both the voc and its parent, the Dutch Republic, were jockeying for position in various international arenas. In view of the overlap in personnel – voc directors served at every level of government in the Dutch Republic – it should not surprise us to find clear parallels between the state and the company, particularly in their understanding of political economy.

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