

ASIAN HISTORY



Edited by Adam Clulow and Tristan Mostert

The Dutch and English East India Companies

Diplomacy, Trade and Violence
in Early Modern Asia

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The Dutch and English East India Companies

Asian History

The aim of the Asian History series is to offer a forum for writers of monographs and occasionally anthologies on Asian history. The series focuses on cultural and historical studies of politics and intellectual ideas and crosscuts the disciplines of history, political science, sociology and cultural studies.

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For Leonard Blussé, whose work has shown the way

Map 1 Southeast Asia



Map 2 South-Asia and the Arabian Sea



Map 3 East India



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Introduction

The Companies in Asia

Adam Clulow and Tristan Mostert

Although they were dissolved centuries ago, we do not have to look far to find signs of the East India Companies today. In recent years, both organisations have featured prominently in popular culture, in the commercial world and in public debate. In 2009, a Finnish games developer, Nitro Games, released the popular *East India Company* video game which places players in the role of Governor Director in charge of a process of economic and commercial expansion designed to parallel the real development of these organisations. In the Netherlands, the corporate logo of the Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* or VOC), widely considered to be the oldest in the world, has been used to market a range of products from souvenirs to gin even as the organisation's legacy has become the object of increasingly intense public debate.¹ When in 2006 the then Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende, while addressing the Dutch House of Representatives, called for more optimism and a revival of the 'VOC mentality', he voiced a strikingly resilient view of the Company, which is still regularly praised as a dynamic force in global trade and the world's first multinational. His comments, however, were met with immediate resistance from a range of groups that pointed to the violence and repression also associated with the organisation's long and frequently brutal history.

Across the North Sea, the VOC's great rival, the English East India Company (EIC) has famously been reborn as a high-end purveyor of luxury goods. Over a century after it exited from the global stage, it is once again possible to see EIC branded goods for sale in London and stores scattered across the globe. The agent of this rebirth is Sanjiv Mehta, a wealthy Mumbai businessman with a family history in the diamond trade in Surat. It makes for a compelling story – an Indian businessman buying the company that once colonised large swathes of his country – and it has, not surprisingly, generated a powerful response on social media.² The reality, however, is

¹ For one example, see www.v2cgin.com/, which uses a modified version of the famous VOC logo.

² See the comments for: <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/company/corporate-trends/the-indian-owners-of-the-east-india-company-are-betting-on-its-future-by-leaning-on-its-past/articleshow/54535557.cms>, accessed 2 February 2017.

considerably less clear-cut. The Company itself ceased to exist entirely in the nineteenth century, surrendering both its assets and legal identity. What Mehta seems to have purchased, then, although this is glossed over in the company's publicity materials which speak of its pioneering early modern heritage, was not the original organisation but a number of short-lived enterprises created during the closing decades of the twentieth century with similar names but no actual connection to the EIC itself.

If it is in fact not directly linked with the original, this latest iteration of the East India Company does at least share one feature both of its famous predecessor and its Dutch rival, the VOC, which was established two years later in 1602. These were elusive organisations that were notoriously difficult to pin down and affix singular identities to. From the beginning, observers struggled to explain exactly what the VOC and the EIC were and the place they occupied in diplomatic, commercial and military circuits. The problem was readily apparent when the first generation of Company ambassadors arrived in Asia charged to negotiate with local rulers. Not surprisingly, many early representatives opted to speak in the most general of terms or to actively conceal the true nature of their employers. The English Company famously dispatched Sir Thomas Roe, a courtier with a close connection to the monarch, to India in an effort to boost its prestige while effectively muddying the water as to whether he represented a company, a king or both at the same time.³ Early VOC ambassadors opted for a more direct subterfuge, regularly passing themselves off as proxies of the 'King of Holland' without making any mention of the complicated organisational structure of the company or the fact that it was based in a Republic.⁴

For centuries now, writers and scholars have wrestled with the seemingly contradictory nature of these organisations and how to fit them into a wider schema. This struggle has continued even as the last decade in particular has witnessed an unexpected boom in studies of the two companies. A field that was once the preserve of a handful of pioneering specialists has now experienced a significant expansion, with a string of new books coming out every year.⁵ And yet it sometimes seems as if we are no closer to explaining exactly what these organisations actually were. One solution is to locate the two companies in an uneasy space stuck somewhere between state and company by affixing labels like 'quasi-sovereign' or calling attention to

3 Mishra, 'Diplomacy at the Edge'.

4 Clulow, *The Company and the Shogun*, chapter 1.

5 See Stern's recent overview of EIC historiography. Stern, 'The History and Historiography of the English East India Company'.

their duelling characteristics.⁶ While useful, the result can be to trap these organisations in a permanently liminal state, neither one thing nor the other. In his groundbreaking study of the English East India Company, Philip Stern argues against this view, asking us to assess the EIC as a ‘body-politic on its own terms’ rather than as a purely commercial organisation that strayed off its commercial path to embrace empire.⁷

Works by Stern and others provide a template for how we should think about these organisations both in Europe, where they had to negotiate a precarious and often awkward alliance with the state, but also in Asia, where there has been a fresh understanding of their impact on the region.⁸ Even as scholars have become more and more interested in the companies, they have become less and less convinced of the uniqueness of these organisations or of their transformational impact on the Asian environment. The best new scholarship aims to walk a fine line, recognising that the Dutch and English East India Companies were formidable organisations but looking closely at the actual environment in which they operated. Founded in the first decade of the seventeenth century, they were, over time, gifted with expansive powers that allowed them to conduct diplomacy, raise armies and seize territorial possessions. But they did not move into an empty arena in which they were free to deploy these powers without resistance. Early modern Asia stood at the centre of the global economy and was crowded with powerful states that wielded economic, military and cultural resources that outstripped the most influential polities in Europe. The challenge for scholars working on these organisations has been to understand the peculiar strengths of the companies while at the same time placing them firmly into early modern Asia. Both organisations did bring powerful tools to the region, but they often found their sharpest weapons unexpectedly blunted; and for every military, diplomatic or economic success, there were other moments in which their efforts either faltered or failed.

This volume brings together new work from scholars of both companies focusing on their operations across Southeast, East and South Asia. It grew out of a conference, convened in Heidelberg in December 2015 and sponsored by Heidelberg University, the University of Basel, the University of Sydney, and Monash University. While it focuses on the Dutch and English East India Companies, these were not, it should be acknowledged, the only such

6 For one example of a much wider trend, see Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200*, p. 31.

7 Stern, *The Company-State*, p. 6.

8 See e.g. Mishra, *A Business of State*.

organisations operating in Asia and a strong case could be made for including, for example, the Danish East India Company, which has generated innovative new scholarship.⁹ This said, the histories of the Dutch and English Companies are intertwined in ways that make it logical to study them as a pair. Looking at the EIC and the VOC together is by no means a new idea. For an earlier generation of Company scholars, it was standard to approach these organisations in this way. Works like George Masselman's *The Cradle of Colonialism* or Holden Furber's *Rival Empires of Trade* took it for granted that the two companies must be examined as a pair.¹⁰ In recent years, this habit has largely lapsed and it is far more common now for monographs to focus on one of the companies usually in one part of the world.¹¹ There is, however, much to be gained from considering these organisations together. Most obviously, they were, despite moments of precarious alliance, in constant competition. Given their sweeping operations, the two companies fought across multiple arenas: on Asian seas for maritime dominance, in courts spread across the region for diplomatic advantage, and on land as both organisations claimed territorial footholds that morphed over time into expansive empires.

But even as they fought, the companies remained locked together in an intimate embrace. Across Asia, the Dutch and English companies operated in strikingly close proximity, with VOC and EIC officials living essentially on top of each other. On the island of Ambon, the site of perhaps the most famous flashpoint between the two companies, their representatives lived together for years, shared the same food and attended the baptism ceremonies of each other's children; while in Hirado in western Japan both companies opted to set up outposts in the same remote port city hundreds of kilometres from Japan's commercial centres. So close was this embrace that Company officials sometimes went to great lengths in an effort to distinguish themselves from their rivals. In Banten, for example, EIC officials made a great show of celebrating their monarch's coronation day by dressing up with 'Scarves of white and red Taffata,' and decorating their lodge with 'a Flagge with the red Crosse through the middle' in order to make it clear that they were not Dutch.¹²

More important for this volume, the two organisations confronted similar problems as they pushed into Asia. Both companies were interlopers

9 See e.g. Wellen, 'The Danish East India Company's War'.

10 Masselman, *The Cradle of Colonialism*; Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade*.

11 There are a number of notable exceptions, such as Nierstrasz, *Rivalry for Trade in Tea and Textiles*.

12 Purchas, *Hakluytus posthumus*, 2:457.

in a crowded diplomatic world in which they did not fully understand the rules governing interaction; both sought the same markets and suffered the same lack of demand for Europeans goods; and both watched each other closely while attempting to learn, sometimes with success, from the other's experience. While not every chapter in this volume considers both companies together, those that do show the clear advantages of this approach. As Ghulam Nadri reveals, for example, in his contribution, both organisations were heavily (and similarly) dependent on brokers not simply to establish themselves in Asia but across the course of their long existence.

One of the difficulties in doing Company history is the vast differences between their trajectories in different parts of Asia and the way these organisations are remembered. In East Asia, for example, the companies were confined to the margins for long periods. In Japan, the EIC trading outpost lasted for just a decade, while the VOC presence was restricted to the tiny man-made island of Deshima which was placed under constant surveillance. In its attempts to gain access to Chinese markets, the VOC did succeed in establishing a colonial presence on Taiwan, but was ejected in 1662 after suffering a devastating military defeat at the hands of Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga). By contrast, in other parts of Asia, India for the English, Indonesia for the Dutch, the companies dug in deep roots that were not easily dislodged. Connecting these regions presents a challenge – how to take a place like Japan, where the VOC was utterly subservient to Tokugawa authorities, and compare it to the Banda islands, where the Company wiped out the local population and replaced them with imported slaves? But, even in the face of vast differences, there could be striking points of convergence. As Peter Good shows, for example, the companies' capacity to offer their services as naval mercenaries unifies Persia, Siam and Japan where different rulers attempted to press European vessels into service.

Our broad goal in the conference and now this volume was to collect new work on the companies with a focus on the contributions of more junior scholars. As a result, we have not aimed for or achieved a perfect split between EIC and VOC chapters, nor are all or even the majority of chapters comparative. But we believe that the contributions collected here shed light on some of the challenges that these organisations faced as they pushed into Asia. The volume is divided into three sections: diplomacy, trade and violence. These were, it must be said, never cordoned off: trade overlapped with diplomacy, which in turn spilled over into war, but Company officials returned again and again to this triumvirate.

Arriving in the region, the companies struggled to gain access to well-established diplomatic circuits. In recent years, scholars have followed the path blazed by John E. (Jack) Wills Jr., Leonard Blussé and others to map out the full extent of this diplomatic activity.¹³ One of the most exciting recent developments has been the construction of a vast database of diplomatic engagement, *Diplomatic Letters 1625-1812*, for the Dutch East India Company.¹⁴ Researchers attached to this database have catalogued more than 4,000 letters, exchanged across close to two centuries, that show the remarkable degree to which the Dutch Company became integrated into Asian diplomatic circuits.

The chapters gathered in this section reveal the complex task faced by the companies when they attempted to push into Asia. They show, first, that there were multiple centres, each with their own rules and regulations. East Asian diplomatic circuits could look very different from Southeast Asian ones and, as Fuyuko Matsukata reminds us, each centre had its own rules and conventions. Second, Asian structures were not static. If Europeans were pushing into diplomatic systems, Asian polities were, as Matsukata's chapter shows, improvising at the same time. She reveals how the Tokugawa *bakufu* was in the process of inventing a new category of 'Tokugawa subjects' just as the VOC was attempting to stabilise its diplomatic presence in Asia. Third, diplomacy took place at multiple levels. As Guido van Meersbergen demonstrates, the Company was compelled to interact with a range of officials, from powerful rulers down to local administrators. Given this, he cautions against the overwhelming focus on formal embassies. These could be grand affairs that came complete with detailed diaries and piles of documents but they frequently achieved very little. It was often the case that the real action took place in far less glamorous settings in the provinces where diplomacy was often improvised with local officials. Put together, these chapters show the need to develop a flexible understanding for diplomatic encounters that is able to accommodate a wide range of interactions.

Shifting the focus to alliances, Mostert's chapter reminds us that straightforward binaries do not translate well when applied to intricate regional networks. Mostert takes us to the eastern Indonesian archipelago where the VOC, in the process of expanding its power in the region, became increasingly enmeshed in local networks and rivalries. In the process, it

13 There are far too many works to cite here but two representative chapters are: Wills, 'Ch'ing Relations with the Dutch, 1662–1690'; and Blussé, 'Queen among Kings'.

14 <https://sejarah-nusantara.anri.go.id/diplomatic-letters/>, accessed 2 February 2017.

entered into a game in which it could not always set the rules or predict the dynamics. Mostert shows how the alliances constructed by VOC officials made the organisation a party to existing rivalries between expanding states in the Moluccas and their European allies.

Part 2 moves the focus to trade. Looking across an extended timeline, Ghulam Nadri shows how both companies' relationship with Indian merchants was characterised by a pronounced dependence on brokers and local intermediaries that waned but never disappeared. But if the companies required the services of brokers to prosper, these brokers also needed the companies to provide protection in a dangerous world, and Nadri's study reveals the development of a broadly reciprocal relationship. Martha Chaiklin continues the same focus on the two companies in Surat. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, another groundbreaking scholar of the companies, once wrote of the 'congealed power' of the Company archive that acts to draw in the researcher and blind them to the world outside European records.¹⁵ The same theme is picked up in Chaiklin's reassessment of the traditional timeline that sees the fall of Surat following inevitably on from the rise of Bombay. Focusing on ivory, a vital trade but one that was not well captured by European records, her contribution gathers together clues from a wide range of sources to show how local demand and the presence of large numbers of craftsmen underpinned Surat's remarkable resilience into the eighteenth century.

The final section of the volume turns our attention to violence. While recent scholarship by Tonio Andrade and others has effectively blunted outdated notions of an overwhelming European military advantage, there can be no question that Europeans brought with them to Asia a formidable capacity for violence.¹⁶ In her chapter, Martine van Ittersum cautions us not to go too far in our search for indigenous agency or resistance and thereby to lose sight of the devastating combination of treaties and violence deployed by these organisations. Treaties could be vehicles of indigenous agency but they could also be nothing more than a milestone along the route to dispossession, and we should be careful of freighting these documents with meanings that may not have existed when they were signed.

The history of the companies was underpinned by a consistent tension brought about by the fact that they were powerful on the waves but weak on land. The final chapters by Adam Clulow and Peter Good address this

¹⁵ Subrahmanyam, 'Frank Submissions', p. 70.

¹⁶ For one example of Andrade's numerous books, see Andrade, *Lost Colony*.

central problem in different ways. For Clulow, Japanese soldiers pressed into VOC service presented a way for the Dutch to compensate for their perennial lack of military manpower. In this case, Asian mercenaries became a vehicle, albeit one that never delivered on its promise, to expand European power on land by recruiting long columns of Japanese troops to march outwards under VOC banners. Peter Good describes the reverse case, in which the English Company was pressed into service by an Asian ruler as a 'navy for hire'. This pattern was duplicated in other parts of Asia, where local rulers attempted to turn the power of European vessels to their advantage. In such cases, naval resources represented a vital bargaining chip for these organisations that were deployed in order to carve out a position in Asia.

Put together, the chapters collected in this volume show the ways in which the companies were forced to accommodate themselves – economically, diplomatically and militarily – to existing structures in Asia. Even in situations where they had genuine advantages, in for example naval power, this did not necessarily translate to success, as these advantages were often offset by local circumstances. It was the resultant process of adaptation which underpinned the companies' longevity. The companies may have been established in Europe but they owed their development to a continual process of interaction and accommodation with Asian structures.

The field of Company history has been dominated by a string of extraordinary scholars who have shaped the way we understand these organisations today. This volume is dedicated to one of these giants, Leonard Blussé, who, by virtue of his remarkable scholarship, organisational capacities and sheer energy, shifted the focus of the field by placing the Dutch East India Company where it belongs, in Asian networks of goods and people, while opening up a vast array of new sources to consider these organisations. Across his long career and in addition to a steady stream of field-defining publications, Professor Blussé has been an indefatigable mentor to dozens of scholars across the world, including both of us and many of the contributors to this volume. The concluding chapter, written by Tonio Andrade, a hugely influential scholar of the VOC in his own right, charts the long trajectory of Dutch East India Company history from Marx until today while recognising the enormous contribution made by Professor Blussé in shaping the ways in which we now understand this organisation. While we cannot adequately repay Professor Blussé's generosity to so many of us, we hope this volume goes some small way to further acknowledging his vital role in the ongoing evolution of the field.

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