

*The Company and the Shogun:
The Dutch Encounter with Tokugawa Japan*

by Adam Clulow

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Adam Clulow's impressive book, *The Company and the Shogun: The Dutch Encounter with Tokugawa Japan*, analyzes the Tokugawa shogunate-VOC (Dutch East India Company) diplomatic and juridical relationship between 1608 and 1665. Structured as a study of a series of episodes, or clashes (9), between early modern Japan and the VOC, it characterizes their interaction as one of increasing accommodation and capitulation by the Dutch to Tokugawa officials who would become their Asian masters. This story is a counter-narrative of these protagonists in two ways. Clulow's VOC officials are not foremost merchants but more significantly privateers and quasi-statesmen, often pursuing political influence and promotion through violence and not merely economic gain. Second, his Tokugawa officials are not myopic despots consumed by ensuring internal peace after decades of endemic war, but in fact are skilled and sophisticated negotiators aggressively pursuing concessions from Westerners in their external relations.

As such, this revisionist story of Tokugawa-Dutch bilateral relations will be of great interest to historians of early modern Japan. Yet it gains broader significance because Clulow frames the narrative with three

interpretive threads relevant to scholars of broader Asian and global history. First, he suggests that Japanese control over its relationship with the VOC refutes the conventional assumption of Western global supremacy after 1500 (the “1492 schema” of Columbian triumphalism). This argument expands the seminal work of scholars, such as Kenneth Pomeranz and Tonio Andrade, by demonstrating that not only China (the focus of their research), but Japan as well, repeatedly proved dominant in its early modern interactions with European visitors. A second, related argument is that the success of the Tokugawa as the superior party in their relationship with the Dutch reveals a “great divergence” (3), or bifurcation, in the outcomes of contact between European and non-European powers post-1492, depending on the direction of the Europeans’ voyages. When explorers such as Christopher Columbus and Hernán Cortés travelled west to the Americas, they seized possession of local territories, subjugating their populations through violence and disease. In contrast, when other Western adventurers such as Vasco De Gama and the Dutch travelled East, to India and Japan, the local, native governments forced accommodation and successfully contained the European scope of influence. Finally, instead of focusing on the VOC as a trading company, the preferred paradigm of much extant scholarship, Clulow defines it as a “hybrid organization,” combining the “attributes of both corporation and state” (12), which prompts him to analyze its activities through the core privileges of its 1602 founding charter—diplomacy, violence, and sovereignty. These are themes which invite comparison with the exercise of power across time and space. All three strands inform his meta-project, which is to investigate what the Tokugawa-VOC relationship reveals about the “first age of globalization” in an Asian context.

The three wide-ranging powers granted the VOC in its charter become Clulow’s framing devices, with seven chapters arranged under eponymous sub-headings. In section one, “Diplomacy,” he explores the period 1608-1638, beginning with the dispatch of the first VOC document to the Tokugawa bakufu and concluding with the participation of Dutch

ships in the Shimabara revolt. Over these three decades, Clulow traces the transformation of VOC officials from autonomous foreign ambassadors to loyal Tokugawa vassals as they reconfigure their identity to fit the Tokugawa world view, and thus preserve trade relations. Clulow explains how Toyotomi Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea had severed Japanese ties with surrounding states, rendering the Tokugawa bakufu of the early 1600s receptive to any nation willing to travel to Japan and propose diplomatic relations, such as the Dutch. But the honeymoon in their relations was short lived. By 1627, the Tokugawa rejected the Pieter Nuyts mission's lobby for Japanese recognition of the VOC governor-general in Batavia as a sovereign ruler who could legitimately negotiate with heads of state. After being denied state-to-state relations, the only route for VOC officials to maintain an accepted place in the Tokugawa order was to embrace a subordinate vassal position within the domestic, instead of international, political hierarchy, a stature Clulow compares to that of the *fudai daimyo*. The primary manifestation of this "subsovereign" position was *hofries*, the annual procession of the VOC mission to Edo to demonstrate obeisance to the shogun, which Clulow likens to the alternate attendance system in an original and extended comparison. The crowning demonstration of loyalty, however, was the supply of gunpowder, cannon, and armed Dutch vessels to force the rebels within Hara castle to surrender in 1638. By the end of this first section, the VOC has conceded the "state" component of its hybrid composition in diplomatic relations and instead secured a permanent place in the Tokugawa order as a loyal vassal eager to render service. This process, however, does not strip Clulow's Dutch of all political agency in Japan. He strikes a clever, if delicate, interpretive balance as he explains this shift as a deliberate strategy of accommodation adopted by pragmatic VOC officials instead of a forced capitulation to Tokugawa demands.

Section Two, "Violence," backtracks chronologically to examine how the Tokugawa restricted VOC privateering campaigns, including those against ships of powerful rival Zheng Zhilong, from the 1609 Dutch

arrival in Japan through 1665, when the VOC halted attacks against Chinese shipping to Nagasaki. The Tokugawa did not initially target control of Dutch activities at sea, but as a series of complaints against VOC privateering reached Nagasaki and Edo, the bakufu expanded its juridical control from the decks of ships possessing maritime permits (*shuinjō*), to an ocean ring around the archipelago, and finally to distant shipping lanes in the South China Sea. Drawing on Lauren Benton's groundbreaking work on the patchwork nature of maritime sovereignty, Clulow's analytical trajectory offers important new evidence to challenge the conventional narrative of European dominance of the oceans after 1500 by demonstrating the previously unrecognized power of Tokugawa law over European technological advantage in the form of armed VOC vessels. The first chapter in this section explores how the Tokugawa maritime permit system, in force until 1635, protected regional trading vessels from VOC attack by legitimating their petitions to the Nagasaki Magistrate when assaulted. He then explores the 1615 VOC plunder of the Portuguese *Santo Antonio*, en route to Japan, and the subsequent 1621 bakufu edict prohibiting similar attacks as piracy (*bahan*) to trace the expansion of Tokugawa "legal remit" even to ships that did not possess a maritime pass (167). Chapter 5, "Power and Petition," examines the final stage of the Tokugawa bakufu's three part extension of maritime sovereignty as Nagasaki becomes a center of legal redress for Chinese traders attacked by VOC ships in the 1650s and 1660s. In incidents, such as the *Breukelen* case of 1657, where a VOC ship attacked a Chinese junk off Vietnam, bakufu courts ordered compensation for an assault thousands of miles from Japan. This chapter offers important new evidence for continued Tokugawa engagement with the sea, and gradually extension of its monopoly on violence into oceanic space, even during the post-1635 period of maritime restrictions.

Section Three, "Sovereignty," returns to the 1620s and 1630s to explore the Tokugawa bakufu's checks on VOC sovereign powers in Taiwan. Two primary claims bolster Clulow's argument about the VOC's

accommodation to the Tokugawa world view there. First, he reveals how the Tokugawa refused to recognize the VOC as a legitimate ruler in Taiwan because they did not exact tribute from the native population, as the early modern Japanese conception of power relations required. Since the Tokugawa did not recognize the Dutch claims to sovereignty based on a contract with Ming China and an unwritten agreement with the local Siraya population, the bakufu protested when VOC officials exacted taxes on Japanese ships trading at the core VOC commercial site of Tayouan. This clash over definitions of sovereignty culminated in the 1628 seizure of two Japanese vessel and their commander, Hamada Yahyōe, by the Governor of Taiwan, Pieter Nyuts. The VOC only rehabilitated relations with Japan by handing over Nuyts in 1632 for a four-year confinement in Hirado, as an unprecedented concession to continue trade relations in spite of the Tayouan debacle. This extradition relinquished the VOC standing right to discipline its own officials, but it was a temporary compromise confined to a single individual. After four years of house arrest, the Tokugawa released Nuyts upon receiving a stunning 800 pound brass chandelier, on display even today at the Tokugawa Mausoleum at Nikkō.

This is an elegantly structured study, and I am very grateful for Clulow's thoughtful, if provocative, placement of Tokugawa Japan beyond the traditional confines of East Asia, and instead within a broadly conceived "Asia," which extends both south to Indonesia, and then West to India and the Middle East. Yet I remain only partially convinced of Clulow's argument for re-coalescing "Asia" as his primary spatial unit of analysis. Asia as a heuristic device makes sense for a comparative study of VOC policy since the Company operated trading outposts from Europe, across the Middle East to India (South Asia) and Indonesia (Southeast Asia). But the relatively dominant VOC position Clulow describes in each of these sites, and he explores them at length as foils for the case of Japan, suggests that consistent Tokugawa strength in its relationship with the Dutch was in fact an anomaly in Asia, and not the representative encounter

of a strong Asia, in the face of European power, that proves Clulow's opening arguments for the "great divergence." Clulow's Japan comes across as an outlier rather than a case study that typifies the experience of Safavid Persia, Mughal India, or the Ayutthayan kingdom of Siam (each employed as comparative example of VOC influence), where the Dutch consistently gained greater concessions than in Japan. Other than Japan, the state that reveals greatest success in containing VOC activities is Ming China, which in the 1620s provides a compelling parallel of another Asian power able both to foil maritime raids of the VOC in 1622 (141) and then to reject the VOC's occupation of the Pescadores in 1624 (209-9). This ambitious framing is a welcome attempt to change the geographical scale of conversation about early modern Japan, but the success of Tokugawa Japan and Ming China in controlling VOC operations suggests that Clulow's most persuasive finding may be for a strong East Asia, and not for a strong wider Asia. As Clulow observes in the section on violence, "Indeed, the Tokugawa/VOC relationship was marked by a striking lack of violence and the absence of the kind of tactics conventionally employed by the company in dealing with Asian states." (142) This is one of many scattered assertions that in fact contradicts initial claims about Tokugawa Japan illustrating a common, strong experience of an "Asian" encounter with the West.

A smaller quibble is the chronological backtracking of the three sections (Section I: 1608-1638; Section II: 1609-1665; Section III: 1624-1636), which makes it difficult to evaluate aggregate change across time. One of Clulow's central arguments is that VOC accommodation and Tokugawa control of the relationship increased across the seventeenth century, but it is difficult to identify the moments of greatest transformation when a single period, such as the 1620s and 1630s, is examined at three separate places in the book. One remedy might have been to reverse the order of the final two sections on violence and sovereignty, altering the sequence of powers as presented in the original charter to make analysis more diachronic.

A final request to both author and publisher when this fine book is released in paperback, and I am sure that will be soon, is that a revised edition include additional maps for relevant sites in Europe, and the Indian subcontinent, if not the Middle East. At the moment, Clulow only includes two maps—one of Tokugawa Japan, and the other of VOC operations in Southeast and East Asia—but without state borders to demarcate the kingdoms and dynasties to which he compares the Tokugawa regime. Increasing the number of maps would help the reader visualize the geographic stretch of VOC relationships across the globe, which serves as Clulow's foils for comparison with Japan, underscoring his claims about a larger Asia. As well, these graphics would make the book a stronger teaching tool in the University classroom.

In spite of these small criticisms, Clulow is a superb stylist, and his carefully polished prose is a pleasure to read. His book makes a seminal contribution to historiography on early modern Japan by extending the recent work of scholars such as Robert Hellyer (*Defining Engagement: Japan and Global Contexts, 1640-1868*, Harvard University Asia Center, 2010) to demonstrate that Japan was not only deliberately engaged with foreign powers, but in fact was often the dominant actor in those relationships. By situating his project within Asia as defined by VOC outposts, Clulow not only expands the spatial context of Tokugawa Japan, but also integrates extended use of Dutch language documents. His linguistic dexterity provides beautifully mined details, such as discussion of the rejection of the 1627 Nuyts embassy due largely to the poorly informed translation of documents which included valedictions such as, *miuchi no mono* ("your obedient servant"). This term was generally used to describe low-ranking vassals, and the Tokugawa interpreted it as proof that the VOC governor-general was not a powerful sovereign leader worthy of state to state relations (86).

In both the introduction and the conclusion, Clulow suggests that his case study of Tokugawa mastery of the Dutch reveals that Japanese capitulation to American demands in the 1850s was not predestined, or

the natural continuation of a long standing pattern of Asian subservience to the West. Yet I found this monograph particularly thought-provoking for a different reason. It comes to light just as the globe commemorates the 70th anniversary of the ending of World War II, and Asia celebrates the defeat of Japanese imperialism. Clulow's snapshot of dominant Tokugawa foreign relations suggests that Japan's rise to Asian, and then global, power following the Meiji Restoration was not so surprising or unprecedented as conventionally argued. More significantly for readers of the twenty-first century, this book portrays a Japanese regional dominance based on sophisticated diplomacy and expansive maritime sovereignty buttressed by judicial might, rather than naval prowess. This historical vision of Japanese power—exercised without military force—mirrors the source of Japan's global stature today in important ways. Clulow's Tokugawa officials achieved dominance in relations with proximate external actors—both East Asian and European—without resorting to violence. This is an approach many current observers of East Asia hope twenty-first century Japan will continue to embrace.