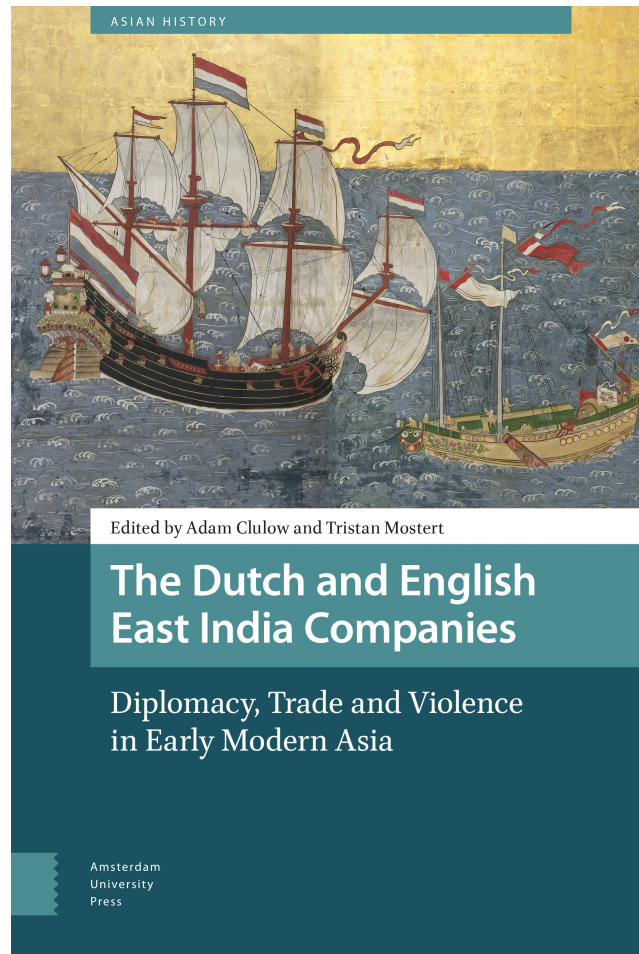


Review

**Adam Clulow and Tristan Mostert (eds):
*The Dutch and English East India Companies: Diplomacy,
trade, and violence in early modern Asia***

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Reviewed by Suzanne Moon



The Dutch and English East India Companies: Diplomacy, trade, and violence in early modern Asia is an absorbing collection of essays that offers readers valuable insights into the Asian activities of these two influential companies. The editors point out that the very nature of these companies has always been elusive. Are they bodies politic? Commercial enterprises with political features? Inspired by and following the work of Leonard Blussé, the articles address these broad questions by offering richly detailed explorations of the companies in action, attending to the ways they navigated (successfully or not) existing Asian commercial and military networks. What unites the essays is their shared interest in how the English East India Company (EIC) and the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, VOC) crafted the essential relationships needed to operate in the complicated and changing Asian commercial and political environment. Each essay explores how and why these companies structured their interactions the way they did and how their choices did (and sometimes did not) affect their exercise of power in the region. The volume's well-chosen, well-researched, and well-written articles are valuable for experts and newcomers to the field alike.

The volume gains coherence from the shared focus of each article on the tricky business of establishing, maintaining, and sometimes coping with the unintended consequences of diplomatic and commercial relationships. The focus on relationships and networks helps undercut historiographic tendencies to either overplay or underplay the power of the companies in Asia. The editors argue in their helpful introduction that scholars should seek a middle ground, something that the essays in this volume do. We see the companies by turn succeeding with their strategies, muddling through unanticipated fallout of their choices, and failing. The companies operate (sometimes to their regret) on limited or wrong information, are drawn into relationships they did not anticipate, and struggle with the many common problems that Asian states also had, such as managing military logistics or careful management of their relationships with more powerful political actors. One of the benefits of focusing on relationships and networks is that East-West binaries that have informed some earlier historiography quickly vanish from sight. Instead, the articles depict diverse and sometimes ad hoc political and mercantile alignments that created shifting forms of dependence and interdependence, mutual advantage, and competition. Strong primary source research undergirds these stories, offering fascinating detail to these on-the-ground (or on-the-water) explorations of the companies' activities.

The book is divided into three sections as indicated by the subtitle: diplomacy, trade, and violence. The articles gain coherence by highlighting shared themes that amplify the volume's larger aims: the establishment of functional relationships through interested intermediaries, the challenges of being a (not

quite) sovereign in Asian networks, and the often-ad hoc response they necessarily had to employ in the face of a complex political world.

The section on diplomacy emphasizes the on-the-ground processes of coping with the unexpected, the obstructive, and often their lack of knowledge about getting things done in Asia. Tristan Mostert's article about the VOC's political alliances in the eastern Malay Archipelago demonstrates efforts to operate in areas far from politically stable enmeshed companies into complicated and combative alliances and enmities, constraining although not determining their choices. Guido van Meersbergen explores the diplomatic engagements of both companies with provincial officials in Bengal and Orissa during the Mughal period. Van Meersbergen convincingly demonstrates that these provincial engagements were extraordinarily important for establishing their presence, even more important perhaps than the grand embassies directed at central authorities. Fuyuko Matsukata explores VOC's failures to establish diplomatic relationships with the Tokugawa Shogunate on the VOC's desired terms and their transition to working with merchants as go-betweens instead. The essay highlights the changing political dynamics within Japan, about which the VOC was largely ignorant, and the challenges presented by the VOC's odd political identity. Each article helps show how diverse (and occasionally ad hoc) the strategies were for creating political alliances, the varied group of actors and go-betweens needed, and the unintended consequences of those choices.

Although the section on trade has only two articles, they complement each other well. Ghulam Nadri investigates the companies' relationships with Indian merchants, exploring interdependencies and strategic alliances that could result in mutual advantage (thus motivating Asians to work with the companies). Nadri shows how the companies' abilities to offer protection to Asian merchants proved to be an important service that could cement contractual relationships as trade became more violent in this period. However, Nadri never loses sight of the continued existence of strong competition for markets. The company, for all of its military power, could not simply roll over existing commercial networks. Martha Chaiklin makes this point by examining the ivory trade between Africa and Surat (employing a skillful and welcome emphasis on material culture), demonstrating how and why this trade was so resistant to disruption by European actors hoping to shift Surat's trade to Bombay. The balanced treatment of company power that the editors argued for is particularly evident in both of these essays.

In the final section, the authors focus on violence, one area of company activity in which VOC and EIC arguably held some demonstrable advantages (in certain times and places) over their Asian counterparts. However, the articles continue to give us a balanced view on why and how those advantages might or might not translate to real power. Martine van Ittersum explores the process of

treaty-making in both Asia and North America, arguing that far from being documents meant to ensure peace, most treaties were focused on acquiring rights to trade and territory. They tended to shift or structure patterns of warfare rather than eliminate conflict. Adam Clulow offers a fascinating look at the VOC's mainly failed attempt to use Japanese mercenaries to compensate for their insufficient numbers of military personnel. I appreciated the way that this essay corrects any image of the companies as unstoppable military juggernauts. This essay offers us a "best-laid plans" story that emphasizes the challenges of keeping up their military strength in Asia and the hybrid Asian-European character of that work. Peter Good completes the section by offering a detailed look at the EIC's entanglements with Nader Shah of Persia, who sought their help to create a modern fleet. The EIC's strategic aid was essential to the growth of this Asian power – another story that breaks down old-fashioned East-West binaries in useful ways.

The volume ends with a valuable historiographic discussion about the East India Companies from Tonio Andrade. It offers a thought-provoking look at scholarly trends and some cogent thoughts about where the field is going. It makes for a satisfying conclusion to an excellent volume.

The Dutch and English East India Companies avoids the serious pitfalls that often trip up edited collections. The articles share an overarching perspective that gives them a collective coherence while offering usefully diverse vantage points from which to understand the history of the VOC and EIC in Asia. I strongly recommend it.

About the reviewer

Suzanne Moon is associate professor in the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine at the University of Oklahoma (US). She has published on Indonesian colonial and post-colonial history and is currently completing a book about technology in Southeast Asian history.