

Book Reviews

Asia

Merchant in Asia: The trade of the Dutch East India Company during the eighteenth century

By ELS M. JACOBS

Leiden: CNWS Publications, 2006. Pp. 474. Illustrations, Maps, Tables, Notes, Bibliography, Index.

doi:10.1017/S0022463408000234

This work is a virtually unchanged English reprint of the same author's dissertation, which she defended at Leiden University and published in Dutch as *Koopman in Azië: De handel van de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie tijdens de 18de eeuw* (Amsterdam: Walburg, 2000) in the same year. *Merchant in Asia* explores commercial dealings of the servants of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in its major Asian settlements from Mocha to Nagasaki during the 'long' eighteenth century, approximately 1650–1800, during which the VOC operated as regular merchants in Asia.

In the first introductory chapter, Jacobs criticises previous studies on the eighteenth-century VOC as explaining its decline excessively from its internal problems. Instead she calls attention to the VOC business in Asia, which was still profitable in a large part of the 'long' eighteenth century, and considerably affected the fate of the Company.

The second chapter focuses on spices. Examining the VOC trade of clove, mace, nutmeg, cinnamon, and pepper in the Indonesian Archipelago, Ceylon, and India, Jacobs discusses the VOC monopoly policy and its difficult implementation. The third chapter explains the VOC trade in India. While focusing on textiles and raw silk, Jacobs also discusses saltpeter and opium, which VOC servants collected in India, and Japanese copper and Persian, Padang, and Pontianak gold, which were exchanged for Indian textiles. The fourth chapter focuses the tea trade in China, while it also discusses tin, Chinese tea's one of the major exchange items, from Malay Peninsula, Siam, and Palembang. The fifth chapter discusses the trade and cultivation of sugar and coffee in Java as contours of a colonial system.

In the sixth chapter, Jacobs concludes that the VOC was still strong in most of the 'long' eighteenth century, in spite of its eventual downward trends. She states that the downward trends derived not so much from incompetence of the Company executives, private trade of servants, and the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War itself as assumed, as from problems in Asia, which hampered production and trade, such as domestic conflicts in Asian states, the rise of the British position in India, and growing competitions with Asian and European rivals.

The main text is followed by 47 tables occupying 68 pages, which show the trends of the eighteenth-century VOC trade in three categories: the trade between its 27 Asian

settlements, the trade between the Dutch Republic and its six major Asian settlements, and the trade of 12 major commodities (spices, textiles, metals, and cash crops).

This work gives new insights into the study of the VOC. Discussing different interests of the Company executives in Amsterdam, the governor-general in Batavia, and VOC Asian settlements, Jacobs effectively shows that the VOC was not a monolithic enterprise. The author's solid trade statistics, produced from the archives of the Central VOC accounts in Batavia (*Generale journalen van de boekhouder-generaal te Batavia*) in the National Archives in The Hague, makes her discussion convincing. Her study on wide range of settlements and commodities is far more extensive than other researches that used the same series of sources, focusing on one or a few settlements or commodities.

The uniqueness of this work is that the author does not examine the VOC trade from region to region chronologically as previous studies often conducted, but she focuses on commodities. This makes her work not a story of the Dutch overseas expansion but a story of dynamic exchanges. Including such various actors as cultivators, local rulers, rival traders both Asian and European, and also individual VOC servants, she vividly explains how they negotiated and competed with each other over the control of the production and trade.

The commodity-based approach leads the author to examine the VOC trade between Asian settlements. When the VOC wanted certain Asian commodities but it did not have enough resources from homeland, it was very common for the Company to obtain them in exchange for other Asian commodities. For example, the author showed how the VOC gold trade from Persia facilitated its textile purchase in India. This gives a picture of large-scale commodity exchanges throughout Asia, thanks to the author's wide range of study on a number of VOC Asian settlements.

The wide geographical scope, however, may lead readers to a series of questions. How was the VOC commodity exchange situated in the overall intra-Asian trade, in which Asian and other European traders participated? How much did it impact the development of the intra-Asian trade, and vice versa? The VOC trade can be discussed in the context of world history. How much did it facilitate global commodity exchange? Was the eighteenth-century VOC trade a transition from early-modern to imperial types of commerce? This work contains a number of hints to such questions, but it is regrettable that the author does not attempt to discuss the VOC trade in the wider contexts.

It is not fair, however, to criticise this work as lacking in attention to the wider contexts, because it clearly declares to focus on the VOC trade. Nevertheless, this work deserves attention from various fields of historians. Historians of world history and Asian trade will especially benefit from its thick statistic data. Historians of particular regions of Asia will learn that the Dutch impact on a certain region was not isolated, but it was connected to many other regions through the VOC trade. In this way this work has a potential to bridge regional histories and world history.

OTA ATSUSHI

National University of Singapore / Academia Sinica