

Three Men in a Boat? How the Suminokura, Caron, and the Zheng Experienced the Regime Changes in East Asia (1600–1670): An Essay in Global Microhistory

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This article, originally presented as a public lecture at the occasion of the Fukuoka Prize Ceremony in September 2019, approaches from biographical and microhistorical perspectives the careers of three early-modern protagonists, Suminokura Ryōi, François Caron, and Zheng Zhilong, who were all involved in the maritime trade of the Eastern Seas. It shows how these Japanese, Dutch, and Chinese entrepreneurs became entangled with the epochal changes of regime in China and Japan in the first half of the seventeenth century, and concludes with remarks on their agency, loyalty, and legacy.

Keywords: microhistory, connected history, entrepreneurship, regime change, East Asia

We are like leaves in the wind
Rustling along the edge of old forests
And everything is uncertain, and how
Could we know what only the wind knows.

—Adriaan Roland Holst

Introduction

The present essay proposes to address the epoch-making regime changes in East Asia during the first half of the seventeenth century, which not only shook up Japanese and Chinese society but also sent shock waves over the rims of the East and South China Seas and even farther. Following upon Tonio Andrade's call "to adopt the micro

historical and biographical approaches to help populate models and theories with real people,” I shall focus on three representative entrepreneurs, a Japanese, a Chinese, and Dutchman, each of whom plotted their own course in this period.¹ But before I do so let us first have a look at the macro perspective in order to create a spatial and temporal context for my biographical sketches.

Throughout the sixteenth century the Japanese empire was torn by internal strife among warlords until unification began to take shape under the regime of Toyotomi Hideyoshi in the last decades of the century.² After Hideyoshi’s death Tokugawa Ieyasu finished the job by defeating his rivals at the battle of Sekigahara in 1600. Over the following forty years, he and his successors introduced the thorough administrative reforms that laid the fundamentals of the Tokugawa shogunate, which would last until 1867.

In China, after the court eunuchs had weakened the administration at the end of the Wanli period (1573–1620), peasant rebellions brought down the Ming dynasty in 1644. Availing themselves of the political chaos in the aftermath of the last Ming emperor’s suicide, the Manchus invaded Beijing and founded the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). It would also take this new regime some forty years to pacify the entire realm and create an empire that would endure two and half centuries.

A Window of Opportunity

The impact of this political turmoil on the maritime trade relations between China and Japan was unprecedented. The centuries-old Chinese world order in which Japan had taken a subordinate position now was refashioned into two adjacent world orders, the Chinese and the Japanese. The final crack in the old relationship occurred in 1549 when, in answer to the frequent rampaging of pirate bands (*wo kou*, 倭寇 or “Japanese pirates”) on the Chinese coast, the Ming court promulgated a ban on all direct trade between China and Japan.³ Although a breach was created in the trade between the two empires, there remained in Japan a huge demand for Chinese silk fabrics and other products that were generally paid for with locally mined Japanese silver. This meant that new conduits of trade had to be found.

It so happened that around this time, the first tide of European overseas trade expansion reached Far Eastern waters. After roaming for several decades in the Chinese coastal waters, in 1557 Portuguese merchants gained a foothold in Macao, in the estuary of the Pearl River, and only fourteen years later servants of the Spanish throne founded the walled city of Manila in the archipelago that they called the Philippines after their monarch. The first Portuguese encounter with Japan occurred in 1543 when a Portuguese ship drifted ashore on the island of Tanegashima, but within a few decades the Estado da India started to send galleons from Goa via Macao to various ports of the island of Kyushu.⁴ In 1581, a local daimyo who had converted to Christianity provided the Jesuit order with Nagasaki as designated port of call. Here the Portuguese continued to conduct their intermediary business between China and Japan until their eviction in 1640. The influx of silver bullion from the New World orchestrated by the Spaniards via Manila, combined

with the supply of Japanese silver that was imported by the Portuguese network, created a veritable boom in Chinese-Japanese maritime commerce based on the two Lusitanian intermediaries.⁵

What about the Japanese merchant adventurers? Barred from the Chinese coast, but provided with shogunal passes by Hideyoshi and after him by Tokugawa Ieyasu and his son, Japanese ships sailed to various ports along the coasts of the South China Sea (Siam, Cambodia, Vietnam, Philippines, and Formosa) where they could meet with overseas Chinese merchants and thus also engage in (indirect) trade with China.⁶

The situation became even more complicated when other European newcomers arrived in the Far Eastern waters at the turn of the century and sought a share of this profitable market for themselves. The Dutch East India Company (VOC) and its English counterpart, the East India Company (EIC), opened trading settlements at the Japanese island of Hirado in 1609 and 1613, respectively.⁷ The English gave up after ten years, but the Dutch hung on and after establishing themselves on the island of Formosa (Taiwan) in 1624 eventually succeeded in obtaining a share in the triangular trade with China and Japan.

This complex arrangement of the intermediary trade networks was shaken up by the promulgation of the Japanese maritime prohibitions in 1635–37 and the anti-Christian edicts that led to the eviction of the Portuguese from Japan in 1639. All overseas trade with Japanese ships came to an end, and the “closure” (*sakoku*) of Japan was effectively ushered in, leaving the Dutch and Chinese as the only foreign merchants welcome in Japan. As a matter of fact, Chinese merchants no longer heeded the Chinese imperial embargo on the trade with Japan, because the Ming court, fighting the peasant rebellions and the Manchus on the northern frontier, had effectively lost its grip on the coastal provinces. When the Manchus took over the north of China in 1644 and started upon their march to the south, Ming loyalists in the coastal provinces continued the direct Chinese trade with Japan. As a result, the window of opportunity that had opened up for Europeans to serve as intermediaries between China and Japan closed.

Thus, it can be concluded that the first high tide of European trade expansion in Asia was effectively smothered by the outcome of the regime changes in East Asia. A trickle of Dutch trade subsisted with Nagasaki, but this was based on the trade in products from South and Southeast Asia, which were exchanged for Japanese copper, after all exports of silver and gold from Japan were forbidden by the shogunate by the 1680s.

Silver Century

The “Silver Century” of East Asian commerce that between 1540 and 1640 offered a window of opportunity to Japanese, Chinese, and European adventurers has been studied in detail by Western as well as Asian historians. To name only a few, Charles Boxer and George Elison wrote about the rise and collapse of the Portuguese mercantile and missionary endeavours in Japan, calling it Japan’s “Christian Century.”⁸ Birgit Tremml-Werner and Ubaldo Iaccarino focused on the Spanish relations with Japan.⁹ Derek Massarella surveyed the brief English interlude in Japan.¹⁰ Early

Dutch-Japanese relations have been described and analysed by a host of Japanese historians like Kato Eiichi, Suzuki Yasuko, and Nagazumi Yōko,¹¹ and in Western languages by Oscar Nachod and Adam Clulow.¹² Iwao Seiichi and Yōko Nagazumi are remembered for their fine overviews of Japanese overseas trade and the Japanese settlements (*Nihon machi*) in Southeast Asia in this period.¹³ Recently Pierre-Emmanuel Bachelet has defended an impressive doctoral dissertation on the Japanese trade with Vietnam.¹⁴

In addition, a large number of studies by Western and Japanese scholars, too many to note here, has appeared on the “real nature” of *sakoku*, that is, the so-called closure of Japan.¹⁵ In a nutshell, the old explanation that the shogunal government shut the country in answer to European intrusion has been replaced by the proposition that the Tokugawa regime introduced a new political-economic system, the so-called *bakuhau seido*, that was aimed at self-sufficiency.¹⁶ In addition to this literature on the institutional transformation of Tokugawa Japan, multiple studies have appeared about the regime change from Ming to Qing in China and how this affected China’s overseas trade relations.¹⁷

The Men on the Spot

The bulk of academic studies, with the possible exception of the missionary studies about China and Japan, for instance Liam Brockey’s magnificent study of André Palmeiro and the Jesuits in Asia, tend to be overviews that observe the events from the top down.¹⁸ Yet relatively little is known about how the impact of the change of regime was experienced by the men on the spot and how it affected their careers. Elaborating on Tonio Andrade’s and Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s work and my own studies on overseas Chinese, I shall address three representative Japanese, Chinese, and Dutch entrepreneurs who operated in the East Asian maritime regions, within the same *conjunction* of changes of regime, but in different social and institutional settings.¹⁹ In the Japanese and Chinese case I will not speak of just one person but in terms of father and son, because after all no man is an island. Nobody in early modern Asian society can be properly understood without his family background and, as we shall see, the same even goes for the Dutch merchant whose “family” was the Dutch East India Company that he was serving. Approaching the more or less interconnected careers of these three entrepreneurs four hundred years later, it is difficult to avoid the trappings of the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy, but I shall try—as far as the evidence allows—to follow in their footsteps and see how these protagonists faced the challenges.

The Japanese entrepreneurs Suminokura Ryōi and his son Soan, the Dutch East India Company servant François Caron, and the rags-to-riches merchant-adventurer Yiguan and his kin were active in the overseas commerce of the Eastern Seas more or less at the same time. Caught up in the *glocalization* process of Tokugawa Japan, the Suminokura family had to withdraw from Japan’s overseas trade with Southeast Asia—especially Vietnam—in which they had played a prominent role. The agile Caron, with his frequent job hopping within the expanding company organisation of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), represented European entrepreneurship in the Far East. Yiguan

and his fellow clan members, facing competition from all quarters as well as the collapse of the Ming administration, ended up availing themselves of the stormy events.

Three men in a boat? Yes, in the figurative sense they were all in the same boat. What avenues remained open to the Suminokuras when the Tokugawa government denied them permission to continue their overseas trade activities? How could Caron keep the VOC's trade with Japan functioning when the Tokugawa government all but closed the door to foreign shipping? What options had Yiguan, the Chinese merchant-adventurer turned high-mandarin, when he and his kinsmen confronted the regime change from Ming to Qing? What had these individuals in common and what distinguished them? How did they interact and to some extent even become entangled with each other? How did the epoch-making shifts in political power and economic conditions affect their enterprises and their personal ambitions? Where lay their loyalties? And, finally, what was their legacy? In the following biographical sketches I hope to illuminate how the dramatic era of changes of regime shaped their lives, but also how the agency of these men affected the course of events.

The Suminokuras, Father and Son

Near Arashiyama, in suburban Kyoto's Saga district, the old *Daihikakuji* pavilion rises high on a wooded slope overlooking the Hozu River on the spot where it flows down from the mountain gorges into a wide water basin. The visitor who enters the weather-beaten structure suddenly stands eyeball to eyeball with the statue of an old man sitting on a coil of rope. Somewhat emaciated, looking almost like an *Arhat*, he holds a spade in his hands and stares at you with a piercing look. He is our first protagonist: Suminokura Ryōi (1554–1614).

The careers of Suminokura Ryōi and his son Soan (1571–1632), famous ship owners and entrepreneurs from Kyoto, have been studied in remarkable detail by the Japanese historian Hayashiya Saburo and more recently by a study group of Kyoto researchers.²⁰ Suminokura Ryōi's ancestors, bearing the surname (*honsei*) of Yoshida, were closely connected to the local Tenryū temple as healers and medicine sellers. But when family members branched out into money lending, they changed their surname to Suminokura: "storehouse on the corner." The Tenryū-ji traditionally played a key role in Japan's overseas trade owing to the temple's close ties with Buddhist monasteries in China. Via this connection the Suminokura family became involved in overseas shipping. Ryōi's father, Suminokura Sōkei, visited China twice to purchase medicinal herbs shortly before direct trade with Japan was prohibited in 1549. He was a well-known medical practitioner who served as the personal physician of the former shogun Ashikaga Yoshiharu (r. 1521–46).²¹

Ryōi married his cousin and joined her father's Suminokura pawn brokerage, and therefore changed his name from Yoshida into Suminokura. His uncle had close friends in high circles: in Hideyoshi's time, Maeda Gen'i, who happened to be the *shosidai*—the shogun's personal representative—in Kyoto, and in later days Itakura Katsushige, who served in the same position under Tokugawa Ieyasu.²² Already in 1592, Suminokura Ryōi received a *shuinjō* (red-seal patent) from Toyotomi Hideyoshi, to engage in overseas



Statue of Suminokura Ryōi in the Daihikakuji pavilion, Saga, Kyoto

shipping to Southeast Asian ports where he hoped to meet Chinese merchants, because, as explained above, there was an embargo on sailing to China. Starting in 1604, he went on to send ships to Tonkin and Hoi-an in Vietnam under the patronage of the Tokugawa shogun. His sons continued to do so until the promulgation of the maritime prohibitions (*kaikin*) in 1635.

Suminokura Ryōi was a man of many trades. His accomplishments in contracting public works started out in the Kansai region with taming the torrential Hozu River, which he made navigable from the highland of Kameoka all the way to Arashiyama in the plain where Kyoto is situated. In the lower end, he created a reservoir where fishermen used to fish with cormorants. Nowadays this basin welcomes tourists who splash around in row boats, sipping sake and strumming the samisen. After Ryōi had also dredged the Ōi and Fuji Rivers in 1606 and 1607, respectively, he and his son Soan were invited to carry out a far more complicated water project: to dig a ten-kilometre-long transportation canal between Kyoto and Fushimi paralleling the shallow, fast flowing Kamo River. The Takasegawa canal still runs through the centre of Kyoto.²³ It is hard to

imagine that timber, huge boulders, and other construction materials were shipped along this waterway for the construction of the Nijo castle in Kyoto, which Tokugawa Ieyasu was building to keep close watch on the imperial palace nearby. Until the construction of the railroads some three hundred years later, this small canal served as Kyoto's main conduit for goods from the Osaka plain. Nowadays it has lost all practical use, but in summertime merely provides cool air to pedestrians, maybe even reminding them of Mori Ōgai's famous short story *Takasebune* (Takase boat), in which the author narrates his encounter on a canal boat with a man who is sent into exile.²⁴

Like his father, Suminokura Soan also served Tokugawa Ieyasu as quartermaster. He did so during the Osaka campaigns of 1614 and 1615, which rooted out the last resistance of the Toyotomi clan.²⁵ But as I already pointed out, the Suminokura were also involved in overseas shipping to Vietnam and it was from these ventures that they amassed their large fortune. Sixteen red-seal ships were fitted out for overseas voyages under their auspices. On one mission to the Trinh rulers of north Vietnam (Tonkin), Suminokura Soan even served as envoy for the shogun, carrying diplomatic documents prepared by the famous Neo-Confucian scholar Fujiwara Seika, under whom he had studied together with his close friend, Hayashi Razan.²⁶ The latter is well known for having given a new turn to the concept of loyalty (*chū*, 忠), by stressing that all Japanese subjects should be loyal first to their worldly ruler, the Tokugawa shogun, rather than to the imperial house. As we shall see this was borne in mind by Soan.

A large wooden votive picture (*Ema*) hanging in the Kiyomizu temple in Kyoto attests to the last voyage of a Suminokura ship in 1634–35, the same year that the curtain dropped on Japanese shipping overseas. The picture shows a European sailor with a spyglass in hand sitting under a canopy on the upper deck of the ship alongside the senior merchant of the ship. It is the Dutch pilot François Jacobsz Visser, the navigator who a few years later sailed with Abel Tasman around Australia and discovered New Zealand. When asked to do so by the Japanese authorities, the VOC factory at Hirado occasionally posted experienced pilots with up-to-date sea navigational maps on Japanese red-seal ships to safely direct them on their overseas expeditions.

Upon the closure of Japan, VOC ships continued to sail in the wake of Suminokura's junks to Vietnam, and in their trade negotiations gladly availed themselves of the services of the Japanese expatriates in Tonkin, who could not return home because of the maritime prohibitions. When Tokugawa Iemitsu (Ieyasu's grandson) formally assumed the position of shogun in the early 1630s, the *bakuhau seido* ("shogunate and domain system") gradually began to take form. Within that new economic structure, the privileged "quartermaster" merchants who had faithfully served his ancestors in their military campaigns, had to make way for the Osaka merchants, a new class of entrepreneurs who specialised in bulk storage and rice marketing and offered lines of credit to the population.²⁷ As Conrad Totman puts it: "merchants gradually shifted from official provisioning of government to entrepreneurial purveying to the general public."²⁸

In 1631 the *Rōju*, the shogunal elders in Edo, tightened their grip on Japanese overseas trade.²⁹ Foreseeing the shrinking horizon of Japanese shipping, Suminokura Soan cut off his hair and withdrew quite drastically from the worldly life of entrepreneurial

pursuits and readopted the surname of his forefathers, Yoshida. He retired as a gentleman scholar to his mansion in the Saga ward and freed of any obligations to his lord took up publishing and producing delicately edited books on his own movable-type printing press, the so-called *Saga-bon*.³⁰ A younger brother sent the last red-seal ship to Tonkin and that was the end of it: “the times they were a-changing.” The enterprising Suminokura, prominent ship owners and contractors in the early years of the Tokugawa régime, withdrew from public life as their moment passed. Japanese merchants in overseas trade were no longer needed.

François Caron

In 1619, a galley boy of a VOC vessel named François Caron arrived at the island of Hirado in southern Japan. Born in Brussels in 1600, he was of French ancestry. Like so many other French Protestants, his parents had moved as refugees to the Netherlands because of religious persecution in their home country. The Dutch and English East India Companies had opened trading offices in Hirado respectively in 1609 and 1613, hoping to use the port as a springboard to the China market. Hirado was still a beehive of activity where Chinese smugglers, Japanese adventurers, and European traders collaborated hand in hand, but the free-for-all atmosphere on the island was nearing its end as the Tokugawa regime tightened its grip on Japan’s port cities. Only twenty years later, in 1641, the port lost its position in international trade when all Dutch and Chinese shipping was redirected to Nagasaki. In the year that Caron came ashore at Hirado, no one on the scene could imagine that the relations between the VOC and Japan would soon become turbulent if not sour and would be in need of able diplomats.

Like so many other sailors and merchants who visited Japan in those days, Caron fell in love with a local belle. Together with this daughter of a Hirado townsman called Eguchi Juzaemon—unfortunately her personal name is not known—Caron raised six children. Because of his linguistic gifts, but undoubtedly also thanks to the input of his wife and her family, Caron quickly became fluent in Japanese. He must have been a very popular young man, because in local memory he is still remembered as a skilled *go* player and an excellent horse rider.

Before long the English and Dutch began to use the island as a naval base for joint expeditions against their Spanish and Portuguese enemies in East Asian waters. Locally drafted Japanese mercenaries were, moreover, employed by the Dutch East India Company for military service in the Spice Islands.³¹ However, this use of Hirado as a naval base for the privateering of the Dutch and English East India Companies came to a sudden end in 1621 when the shogun called a halt to all raiding against Portuguese ships sailing to and from Japan and henceforth also forbade his own subjects from accepting military employment under a foreign flag. Now that the profitable privateering had come to an abrupt end, the English and the Dutch sought to collaborate with the Chinese smugglers in Hirado who ran secret operations in Chinese coastal waters under the leadership of their local chief, Li Dan.³² In this connection Caron became acquainted with a Portuguese-speaking young Chinese, Nicholas

Iquan, whom Li Dan had assigned to the VOC as an interpreter. His normal Chinese name was Zheng Zhilong, but his comrades used to call him Mr. One, Yiguan.³³ We shall learn more of our third protagonist below.

Thanks to his remarkable linguistic and social skills, François Caron helped the VOC through critical moments in early Dutch-Japanese relations. First as a useful interpreter and later as negotiator he helped to solve the so-called Nuyts case (*Noitsu jiken*), the tug of war in which the Dutch Company became involved after the haughty governor of Formosa Pieter Nuyts picked a quarrel with visiting Japanese samurai merchants in the service of Suetsugu Heizo, the influential *daikan* (deputy of the shogun) of Nagasaki. Business negotiations went awry when the Japanese visitors to Formosa refused to follow Nuyts's orders.³⁴ Their insulted headman, Hamada Yahei, took the Dutch governor hostage in his own office. Caron, who happened to be with the excitable Nuyts acting as his interpreter, somehow succeeded in calming the heated tempers on both sides. At the end of the day, the Japanese sailed off in the company of Nuyts's young son, Pieter, Caron, and another Dutch official on a VOC ship to assure safe passage to the Japanese vessels returning to Nagasaki.

Unexpectedly, all Dutch crew members of this ship were arrested upon arrival in Japan. When informed of the incident, the shogun imposed a trade embargo and brought all Dutch trade with Japan to a halt pending an investigation into what had happened on Formosa. Between 1628 and 1632 interpreter Caron was variously in Edo or Nagasaki or was peddling back and forth between Japan and the VOC headquarters in Batavia on Java and ultimately helped to lift the embargo. Nuyts had already been dismissed as governor by then, but he was sent to Japan to explain his past behaviour to the local authorities. On arriving, he was promptly locked up in a local temple in Hirado, where he stayed under "house arrest" for three years until Caron was also able to negotiate his release in 1636. That year, the Dutch Company offered an enormous copper candelabra to Tokugawa Iemitsu, who was so enamoured of it that he had the lantern placed in front of the family's Toshogu shrine in Nikko, where it can still be seen. Around this time Caron jotted down his *True Description of the Mighty Kingdom of Japan*, a succinct but well-executed participant observation of Japanese society that also covers the terrible religious persecutions of the Christians that were carried out under the supervision of the Grand Inquisitor Ometsuke Inoue Chikugo no kami Masashige.³⁵ After the Christian rebellion at Shimabara had been suppressed in 1638, Inoue asked Caron whether the VOC would be able to completely replace the Portuguese supply of Chinese silk, which the latter gladly confirmed.

In 1639, shortly after Caron's appointment as chief of the VOC office in Hirado, a new problem arose. By then Hirado had become the Company's most profitable trading post in Asia. Because better storage facilities and offices were needed, Caron's predecessor, Nicolaas Coeckebacker, had ordered the construction of a new Dutch-style warehouse on the Hirado waterfront. Facing the castle of the lord of Hirado on the other side of the harbour entrance, this Western edifice created much local consternation due to its unusual size and appearance.

When rumours about the new warehouse reached the shogunal court in Edo the Grand Inquisitor Inoue was dispatched to inspect the local situation in Hirado. As soon as he saw "AD 1639" written as the year of construction over the front gate of the new building—that

is to say 1639 after Christ's birth—he fell into a rage and ordered the building torn down immediately. Recognising the perilous situation in which he and his personnel found themselves, Caron carried out the order immediately and without protest, not only saving his own skin but also rescuing the Company's position in Japan. Shortly afterwards, orders came from Edo for the Dutch to leave Hirado and move their affairs to Nagasaki.

In February 1641, Caron left Japan with his Japanese wife and six children, never to return again. Upon his arrival in Batavia, he was invited to join the executive Council of the Indies as extraordinary councillor. At the end of the same year, he sailed in the capacity of admiral of the return fleet to the Netherlands, leaving behind his mortally ill Japanese wife. She was too weak to join him and the children who accompanied him for further education in the Netherlands.³⁶ Upon arrival in Holland Caron proudly submitted his report on the general state of affairs in the Indies (and Japan in particular). Boundless praise was lavished on him by the Gentlemen Seventeen, the Company management. He was even promoted to ordinary member of the Council of the Indies.³⁷ Back in Batavia in 1643, Caron went on to serve in a series of important positions: first as commander of an expeditionary force to Ceylon, where he conquered the city of Negombo from the Portuguese. Immediately afterwards he was appointed governor of Formosa.

As governor of Formosa (1644–46) Caron encouraged rice and sugarcane cultivation and welcomed the large-scale immigration of Chinese farmers fleeing the civil war on the mainland. He is believed to have done so in collaboration with his former interpreter colleague from Hirado, the previously mentioned Zheng Zhilong, alias Yiguan, who by then had become the highest mandarin and almighty strongman of coastal Fujian province.³⁸

Recalled to Batavia on 4 May 1646, Caron was appointed *directeur generaal* under Governor-General Cornelis van de Lijn who greatly admired the capabilities of this extremely versatile and competent leader. As second in command of the VOC he ran the daily business of the Company's trade activities, but also singlehandedly managed VOC relations with Japan and helped solve yet another diplomatic crisis with characteristic flair. Irritation had been caused at the court in Edo on account of a couple of sailors of the VOC ship *Breskens* who had been arrested while fetching water in the north of the island of Honshu. When after many interrogations these sailors were released, the shogunal court demanded that an official ambassador be sent from Holland to express acknowledgement of the *bakufu's* lenient attitude. Because it was impossible to send such an ambassador within the short time required, Caron resorted to a face-saving trick to solve the problem. He dispatched from Batavia as "ambassador" a mortally ill man who travelled with his coffin to Japan and conveniently died *en route*. As expected, the ambassador, who was to apologise profusely for the stranding of the sailors, arrived shut in his coffin, thus closing the diplomatic affray to the general relief of all parties concerned.³⁹

As he had done in Formosa, in Batavia Caron closely collaborated with local Chinese labor, digging canals and investing in sugar plantations. He soon grew into the biggest landowner in town. His ambitious behaviour so enraged the Dutch burghers of Batavia that, bypassing the Gentlemen Seventeen, they sent a complaint to the States General in the Netherlands that resulted in Caron's recall to Holland on the accusation of privileging Batavia's Chinese and of being involved in private business with

them.⁴⁰ Yet upon his arrival home in 1652, Caron was honourably discharged. No further action was taken, because none of the accusations could be proven. However his career in Asia was over, or so it then seemed. Powerless to do anything and devoid of any responsible job, a grumbling Caron hung on in The Hague.

Then, ten years later, in the autumn of 1662, the vexing news reached Holland that Zheng Zhilong's son, the Chinese warlord Zheng Chenggong, alias Coxinga, had invaded Formosa and forced the garrison of Zeelandia Castle to surrender. At this critical moment, the Gentlemen Seventeen turned again to Caron on account of his experience as a diplomat and former governor of the island. As if nothing had happened in the past, they invited him to join the VOC again as junior (!) Councillor of the Indies. Proud man that he was, Caron flatly refused if he was not to be reinstated to his former capacity as director general. Consequently no deal was clenched.

This row evidently became known in diplomatic circles at The Hague and prompted the French envoy, the Count d'Estrades, to inform Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Louis XIV's energetic minister of finance, who was then involved in the founding of the French East India Company. Colbert in turn suggested to the king that this venerable "Old Asia hand" should be invited to join the French company. After all, was he not originally of French parentage? The king agreed, and thus Caron entered into the service of the French East India Company.⁴¹ In his new capacity, Caron designed the blueprint for a widely spread French trading network across Asia based on the Dutch example. He even proposed moving the French headquarters from Madagascar to the island of Banka in the Indonesian archipelago so that the French could coordinate their future trade with Siam, China, and Japan with the already existing trade settlements in the Indian Ocean. Stressing the importance of Japan, Caron intended to return to Japan himself, this time as official ambassador of the French king. It will come as no surprise that the directors of the VOC were furious about his defection to the French competition, which they considered a breach of the oath he had sworn when he entered the service of the VOC. But Caron felt little regret and left for Asia in May 1666. In the following years, he founded trading offices at Surat in India and subsidiary posts along the west coast of India, and planned to sail to Japan. His attempts to bypass the VOC and establish relations with the king of Kandy on Ceylon were, however, frustrated by the Dutch.

When in 1672 both England and France declared war against the Dutch Republic, Caron faced a moral dilemma. As a Dutchman in French service he could not take sides in the conflict. He may not have been loyal to the VOC, but when it came to the question of loyalty towards his country, he had no doubts: he refused to fight against his own people. Now seventy-two years old, he decided to retire and return to Europe with all his belongings and report to the throne.

On the way home he was informed by a passing vessel that he might not be welcome at the French court because of his sudden decision to retire. This caused him to change course and head instead for Lisbon in Portugal. Not equipped with a proper pilot, the ship hit a sandbank in the mouth of the Tagus River and sank with the loss of thirty-one of its complement, including Caron himself. Thus the adventurous life of this enterprising man came to a tragic end.

Zheng Zhilong, Alias Yiguan, and His Kinsmen

The third and last protagonist is Zheng Zhilong, alias Yiguan (ca. 1596–1661), the smuggler who together with his son Zheng Chenggong, alias Coxinga (1624–1662), and other kinsmen laid the foundation of the great trade enterprise of the Zheng lineage that dominated China's overseas trade for nearly half a century.⁴² Zheng Zhilong was born near the sea in Nan-an county in Fujian province. His early years are veiled in romantic stories.⁴³ He is said to have run off to Macao, where he was baptised Nicolas Gaspard and picked up some Portuguese, which served him well in later life. Like Caron, Yiguan showed up in Hirado in 1619. He joined the band of Li Dan, a Chinese merchant who had recently arrived from Manila and was operating a smuggling network between Japan and China at Hirado and in Formosa. Like Caron, he fell in love with a local girl, Tagawa Matsu. Several years later, in 1623, when the Dutch were trying to open trade with China from the Penghu Archipelago close to the coast of Fujian province, Li Dan sent Yiguan to spy on the Dutch and to serve as their interpreter. That explains why he was absent when his wife gave birth to Zheng Chenggong at Hirado in early 1624.

In that same year, the Dutch withdrew from Penghu to Formosa and started to build their fortress at Zeelandia in the Bay of Tayouan, the same place where Li Dan and Japanese merchants from Hirado and Nagasaki used to stealthily barter Japanese silver for Chinese silks. Yiguan's services as interpreter were no longer needed, but he was now enlisted as a privateer in the Company's service. In order to cut off Chinese commerce with the Spanish enemy, he was provided with weapons and a junk, and dispatched to the Philippine coast to seize Fujianese junks trading with Manila. Not long afterwards, he severed his ties with the Dutch and created a pirate band of his own with eighteen allied kinsmen.⁴⁴ Plundering shipping along the Chinese coast, he became such a powerful pirate that the local authorities in Fujian province saw themselves forced to pacify him by offering a low military position in the coastal defence force allowing him the opportunity to redeem for his past misbehaviour. Henceforth, Yiguan was to keep other Chinese pirates and the Dutch "red-haired barbarians" at bay.

If the Dutch thought that they could now begin trading with their former henchman they were wrong. In his new capacity, Yiguan barred all Dutch access to the Chinese coast. When in the summer of 1633 the VOC sent twelve ships to blockade Amoy and thus force Yiguan to open up that port, the latter took care to avoid a face-to-face encounter. He kept the Dutch ships at a distance with lengthy exchanges of letters, biding his time, expecting that the annual typhoons would soon arrive and do battle with the Dutch fleet, which is what actually happened. By October, only eight VOC ships remained, the others having been sunk or forced away by the typhoons. This was the moment Yiguan had been waiting for. One morning he surprised his weather-worn enemies with a sudden attack and with a superior strength of 140 ships he chased the remaining Dutch vessels away.⁴⁵

That winter Yiguan started to send on his own terms merchant junks loaded with silk to Formosa, where the Company paid handsomely for his goods with Japanese silver. In other words, while he refused the Dutch access to the Chinese coast, he did provide the

VOC with large quantities of Chinese silk in Formosa. He thus became in the eyes of the Chinese authorities the only person who could keep the Dutch at bay and thereby made himself an indispensable person. Amassing a great fortune from the trade with Dutch Formosa, the Zheng family further expanded its operations to the Indonesian archipelago and built up a strong naval force. At the end of the day, the Chinese authorities as well as the Dutch East India Company, both of whom had initially used Yiguan as their puppet, recognised that he had become a puppeteer in his own right.

As of 1641, Yiguan, by then the highest mandarin in Fujian province and head of an ever-expanding trading network, felt that he no longer needed the Dutch as go-betweens in the Chinese silk-for-silver trade with Japan and began to send his own ships directly to Nagasaki, bypassing Formosa. Bilateral trade with Formosa continued nonetheless, and as already mentioned Zhen Zhilong is said to have pushed the emigration of Chinese labourers to the island, where they were much needed for Caron's agricultural projects.

In 1644, the Manchus invaded China after Chinese rebels had occupied Beijing and the last Ming emperor had hung himself. Called in to chase the rebels out of the capital, the Manchus took control of the palace themselves and proclaimed a new dynasty of their own, the Qing dynasty. Yiguan and his band of kinsmen initially remained loyal to the surviving Ming pretenders to the throne and were able to halt advancing Manchu troops at the borders of Fujian province. He sent out letters to Japan asking for armed assistance in the struggle, but he received no positive answer.⁴⁶ When the last Ming pretender to the Chinese throne was killed in an affray at the Fujianese border, Yiguan began to harbour doubts about what to do next. Should he continue to fight for a lost cause or should he secure what he and his lineage had built up over the previous fifteen years? Loyalty to a lost dynasty or loyalty to the survival of his own kin, that was the question. He decided to enter into secret negotiations with the Qing enemy, proposing his defection in exchange for an appointment as viceroy of the southeastern coastal provinces. This time he overplayed his hand. Upon entering the Manchu camp to sign the agreement he was overpowered and whisked off to Beijing, where he was placed under permanent house arrest. His game was over.

Yiguan's negotiations with the enemy and his subsequent arrest outraged his son Zheng Chenggong (Coxinga) and other family members. They chose to continue the struggle because, even if they had lost their leader, their vast trade network and armed forces remained intact. As successor to his father, Coxinga and his kinsmen continued to resist the Qing for many more years, and in early 1662 even dislodged the Dutch from their colony in Formosa. Closed up in his Beijing residence, Yiguan was forced to write his son and implore him to surrender and acknowledge Qing rule. When these letters were met with scorn, Yiguan was beheaded by the Qing authorities in revenge, but his kinsmen defiantly continued their resistance struggle for another twenty years, until in 1683 Formosa was finally incorporated into the Qing empire.⁴⁷

Event-Full and Event-Making Heroes

“It is very hard to remember that events now long in the past were once in the future,” the English historian Frederic W. Maitland is said to have remarked. In the eyes of many

historians, the biographical approach is little more than storytelling from birth to death. Yet it must be admitted that life stories are an excellent tool for getting under the skin not only of individuals but also of the societies in which they lived, and thus recreate the historical “life and times” sensation that lifts us above the poetic observation that mankind is just like “leaves in the wind rustling along the edge of old forests.” How do we remember people and appraise their agency?

Seventy years ago, in the middle of the Second World War, the philosopher of history Sidney Hook published an interesting essay on agency, *The Hero in History*.⁴⁸ By hero Hook did not refer to formidable military leaders, or like Thomas Carlyle to “Great Men” building up religions or “Practices of Life,” but rather to anyone who with great courage took risks in life to achieve his or her aims—in other words, pivotal people whose deeds are out of the ordinary.⁴⁹ He had in mind the visionary type of protagonist who plays an important role in solving problems: the troubleshooter. The Suminokuras, the Zhengs, father and son, and François Caron all neatly fit in this category. Crucial is the distinction Hook makes between the *eventful* man (someone who experiences many exciting historical events) and the *event-making* man in history. The event-making man, says Hook, is an eventful man whose actions are the consequences of his outstanding capacities and character rather than of the position in which he is placed by selection. The eventful man and the event-making man are both found at forking points of history where choices must be made. The eventful man, whether a military man or a political leader, may be well prepared by his own training and the logic of the situation to make the correct decision as to how to go ahead. He is appointed to the leading position to do so. The event-making man, on the other hand, does not simply arrive at a fork in the road, but rather *discovers a new* fork in the historical road. He blazes the new trail himself.⁵⁰ The event-making man leaves the imprint of his personality upon history that can still be noted long after he has disappeared from the scene. That being said, we may wonder whether that was not exactly what Carlyle also referred to.

Curiously Hook had nothing to say about the tragic hero. “Show me a hero and I shall write you a tragedy,” wrote F. Scott Fitzgerald, and I think he was right. After all, the lives of the three protagonists under study here ended under more or less tragic circumstances.⁵¹ What makes the hero tragic is almost always the matter of loyalty when he has to make a choice. The famous samurai story of the forty-seven *rōnin* says it all.

In this essay, the careers of three *eventful* and at critical moments perhaps even *event-making* personalities have passed review. They operated simultaneously within their own institutional and social environments but in one way or another were entangled with each other in the same conjuncture of time. At some stages in their careers Caron and Yiguan even connected with each other, even as they were directing their own course.

Questions of Loyalty

Let us first take into account the social environments in which each of these entrepreneurs navigated. Historians of trading communities often like to emphasise that “trust” is the binding factor in all business operations. Within the social context of East Asia that we are dealing with here, however, I would like to suggest that loyalty was its moral

compass. Loyalty was the cement of hierarchical societies like Japan and China and even of the Dutch East India Company, which made all its employees swear an oath of allegiance. In a crucial period in which the Tokugawa were creating a new world order in Japan, the Suminokura lost their original function as quartermasters to the shogun's military forces and were told to give up their money-making overseas ventures. In response to this, Suminokura Soan chose to withdraw himself from his worldly duties. Released from ties of obligations and loyal service to his ruler, he could devote his later years to a new mission in life as a *Freischwebende Intelligenz* and patron of the arts.

François Caron found himself in a totally different situation. In terms of loyalty, he was in a sense the most "modern" of the three. The Company's meritocratic system allowed him to rise from the lowest position to the top on the basis of his achievements, but thanks to his linguistic and enterprising capabilities he was able to serve more or less as a "free agent" within the corporate organisation. Seizing every available opportunity, Caron climbed to the top of the trading company that he served. In the end, this restless but gifted person was defeated by his own ambitions. Or was it perhaps that he lacked the necessary connections and patronage in the Netherlands? Deeply insulted by his own superiors, he felt no scruples about breaking the oath he had sworn as a Company servant that he would never join the competition.⁵² But late in life he did feel loyalty, if not to his company, to his fellow countrymen, and he refused to take up arms against them when war broke out.

Apart from his own daring and brilliance, Yiguan's rise to power undoubtedly owed much to the support he received from his brothers, kinsmen, and loyal followers. Thus he was able to gain control of the profitable overseas trade with Japan, Manila, and the Dutch on Formosa. When he committed the fatal mistake of negotiating with the Manchu enemy and abandoned his loyalty to the Ming dynasty, he did so because he felt his loyalty lay with his kin. Was he just selling out his own country, *maiguozhe* 卖国者, as Chinese historical literature suggests? Or was he simply trying to save his own skin and secure the interests of his own lineage in Fujian province? It boils down to the dilemma that figures as the major trope in that famous novel on brotherhood, the *Shuihu quan*, 水浒传 (Water Margin), in which the members of the brotherhood have to make the choice between *zhong* (忠), loyalty to the Son of Heaven, the emperor in the capital far away, or *yi* (義) allegiance to their sworn brothers. Unlike his father, Zheng Chenggong, properly educated according to the Confucian tenets, had no doubts about this: for him loyalty to the Son of Heaven came first. He carried on "the just cause of resistance" and was honoured by the last Ming pretenders with the imperial surname, *Guoxing*. Hence Guoxingye (Koksengya), Lord with the Royal Name.

Agency and Legacy

Eventful men they were, but were they also event making? Let us turn the last question around. First of all, Suminokura father and son were shaped by events and in both cases lived up to them. The difference between them was that Soan at a certain moment felt that "he had done his duty and could go" and forsake his worldly obligations. Caron, the

many talented man, at various times saved the position of the Dutch East India Company in Japan, but could not disengage from his personal ambitions in life, with tragic consequences. Properly speaking, the only event-making man was not Yiguan, but his son Zheng Chenggong. Facing the change of regime and confronting the superior military power of the conquering Qing, he remained defiantly loyal to the Ming cause and appropriated Formosa from the Dutch. With the backing of extended family relations he built up a virtual kingdom of his own close to the Chinese coast. That was the lasting legacy, one that lives on in today's Taiwan after a curious historical trajectory of three hundred years of changes of power.

What was Caron's legacy? Thanks to his various balancing acts, the Dutch East India Company could hang on in Japan when the doors were set ajar. Most people will have forgotten about that, but if his fame still lives on, it is thanks to the masterful observations he made in his *True Description of the Mighty Kingdom of Japan* published in 1661.

Curiously, though, it is the less dramatic Suminokura father and son who have left the most tangible legacies. Soan is primarily remembered as the publisher of the exquisite book collection of the *Saga-bon*. The votive *Ema* painting, the only memento of the accomplishments of the family as overseas merchants, has been recently removed from the Kiyomizu temple and stowed away in the storeroom of a museum, but father Ryōi's Takasegawa canal in downtown Kyoto and the public works in the Saga district endure as a living legacy. Is it not ironic that because of his contributions to today's tourist industry Ryōi has recently even been honoured by the town councillors of Saga with a full length statue in the Arashiyama Park, depicting him as a swaggering samurai. I wonder whether that monument would have pleased him. The wooden statue in the Daihikakuji pavilion portraying Suminokura Ryōi squatted on a coil of ropes with a spade in his hand seems a more fitting remembrance of this tamer of rivers and seas.

"Three men in a boat," but definitely not like Jerome K. Jerome's friendly Englishmen who spent a two-week holiday rowing and punting on the Thames river.⁵³ Each protagonist kept his own course on the stormy waves caused by the changes of regime in East Asia and each met in his own way the challenges that he was facing. Acknowledging the changing rules of the game, the Suminokuras came ashore, the ambitious Caron put to the test the opportunities that the Company network offered him, and Yiguan and his kin broke out of the mold and laid the foundation for a short-lived kingdom of their own on Formosa.

Taking risks in turbulent times, these three protagonists were early weavers of the ever-changing tapestry that constitutes the globalised world as we know it today.

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Notes

- * Leonard Blussé is Professor Emeritus in the History of European-Asian Relations at Leiden University.
- 1 Tonio Andrade, “A Chinese Farmer,” 574, quoted in Ghobrial, “Seeing the World like a Microhistorian,” 14.
 - 2 Berry, *Hideyoshi*.
 - 3 Revisionist literature has shown that these so-called Japanese warrior bands were actually made up of Chinese and Japanese alike. See So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China*; Kung and Ma, “Autarky and the Rise and Fall of Piracy.”
 - 4 Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan*.
 - 5 Giraldez, *The Age of Trade*; Tremml-Werner, *Spain, China, and Japan*.
 - 6 Iwao Seiichi, *Shuinsen boekishi no kenkyu*; Péri, “Essai.”
 - 7 Mulder, *Hollanders in Hirado*; Massarella, *A World Elsewhere*.
 - 8 Boxer, *The Christian Century*; George Elison, *Deus Destroyed*.
 - 9 Tremml-Werner, *Spain, China, and Japan*; Iaccarino, *Commercio y Diplomacia*.
 - 10 Massarella, *A World Elsewhere*.
 - 11 For English see Suzuki Yasuko, *Japan-Netherlands Trade*.
 - 12 Clulow, *The Company and the Shogun*; Nachod, *Beziehungen*.
 - 13 Iwao Seiichi, *Shuinsen boekishi no kenkyu*; Nagazumi Yōko, *Shuinsen*.
 - 14 Bachelet, *Bateaux-pigeons, quartier japonais et cartes nautiques*. Université de Lyon 2020.
 - 15 On the revision of the concept of sakoku, see Blussé, “Japanese Historiography,” 193–224; Toby, *State and Diplomacy*.
 - 16 Asao Naohiro, *Sakoku*; Toby, *State and Diplomacy*; Blussé, “Japanese Historiography,” 193–224.
 - 17 For instance, Spence and Wills, *From Ming to Ch’ing*.
 - 18 Brockey, *The Visitor*.
 - 19 Here I am thinking of Sanjay Subrahmaniam’s inspiring *Three Ways to Be an Alien*.
 - 20 These biographical data are based on Hayashiya Tatsusaburō, *Suminokura Soan*; Hayashiya Tatsusaburō, *Suminokura Ryōi to sono ko*; Mori Hirohisa et al., *Suminokura ichizoku to sono jidai*.
 - 21 One of his sons continued in the medical profession serving Toyotomi Hidetsugu, and later became the personal physician to Tokugawa Ieyasu in Kyoto. See Innes, *The Door Ajar*, 138.
 - 22 Ibid., 139.
 - 23 Ishida Takayoshi, *Kyoto Takasegawa*.
 - 24 Mori Ōgai, “Le Takasebune.”
 - 25 Ooms, *Tokugawa Ideology*, 121.
 - 26 Boot, *Adoption and Adaptation*, 219.
 - 27 Crawcour, “Changes in Japanese Commerce,” 190.
 - 28 Totman, *Early Modern Japan*, 157.
 - 29 Beginning that year, the red-seal ships needed an additional *hōsho*, or letter from the elders, who also sought a share of the trade for themselves.

- 30 Boot, *Adoptation and Adaptation*, 97. It is rumoured that in his last years he may have suffered from leprosy, and that this may have been another reason for his withdrawal from public life.
- 31 Adam Clulow, *The Company and the Shogun*.
- 32 Iwao Seiichi, "Li Tan."
- 33 The suffixes guan 館 or ge 哥 are intermittently used as honorifics throughout Southeast Asia.
- 34 For lucid accounts of this incident see Clulow, *The Company and the Shogun*; and Nagazumi Yōko, "The Japanese Go-Shuinjo Trade."
- 35 The report was first published without Caron's permission, but he republished it later in French, English, German, and Latin editions. An annotated Japanese translation *Nihon Dai Ōkokushi* by Koda Shigetomo appeared in 1967 in the Toyo Bunko series. Leonard Blussé, "The Grand Inquisitor," 23–43.
- 36 Two of his sons matriculated at Leiden University and later served the Company as Protestant ministers.
- 37 Published by François Valentijn in his section on Japan in *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, vol. 5-b, 33–6.
- 38 Fang Hao, "Chongzhenchu Zhengzhilong yimin rutai shi," 37.
- 39 See the fascinating study by Reinier Herman Hesselink about the affair: *The Prisoners from Nambu*.
- 40 Van den Bergh, *Uit de dagen der Compagnie*.
- 41 Vrankrijker, *François Caron*.
- 42 Cheng Wei-chung, *War, Trade and Piracy*.
- 43 Wills, "Iquan's Origins."
- 44 Lu Cheng-heng, "Between Bureaucrats and Bandits."
- 45 Blussé, "Minnan-jen or Cosmopolitan?"
- 46 Carioti, "The Zheng Regime."
- 47 Cheng Wei-chung, *War, Trade and Piracy*.
- 48 Hook, *The Hero in History*.
- 49 Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, 348.
- 50 "He increases the odds of success for the alternative he chooses by virtue of the extraordinary qualities he brings to bear to realise it." Hook, *The Hero in History*, 156–7.
- 51 F. Scott Fitzgerald, "The Crack-Up."
- 52 Higher Company servants, the so-called *gequalificeerden*, had to swear an oath upon receiving their appointment.
- 53 Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*.