

## BOOK REVIEW

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

Adam Clulow

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Adam Clulow challenges the conventional understanding of European power in Asia, which is that “the ‘rise of Europe’ began with the voyages of exploration in 1492 or 1497 and continued, marching according to the relentless beat of some great drum, in subsequent centuries” (p. 262), and that, in the end, “Asian states either adapted to claim a place in a Western-dominated world order in the nineteenth century or succumbed to a colonial embrace” (p. 9). True, the European dominance in Asia took hold in the mid-nineteenth century; however, as Clulow notes, it was “relatively brief” (p. 10), and before that Europeans had been subordinate to powerful Asian states such as Japan and China for a much longer period. In *The Company and the Shogun*, Clulow analyzes the encounter between the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and Tokugawa Japan, and aptly debunks Eurocentric versions of history by showing “how Europeans adapted to find a place in Asian-dominated political orders” (p. 10).

Examining how the VOC “was domesticated, confined within a self-designated role as vassal, and saddled with a raft of attached responsibilities” (p. 261) in Tokugawa Japan, Clulow draws on the notion of “contained conflict” (p. 9), which, Sanjay Subrahmanyam suggests, stands in contrast to the idea of “an age of partnership” (p. 8). The VOC, which was chartered in 1602 and given rights to diplomacy, violence, and sovereignty, found itself from the seventeenth century to 1850 “compelled to give ground, albeit always in different ways, and to retreat from its insistence on its proper rights and sovereign privileges” (p. 260) when it had to deal with the Tokugawa regime in order to gain access to Japanese markets. By focusing on a sequence of conflicts that pushed the VOC into “a process of socialization” (p. 262) within the Tokugawa order, Clulow charts the trajectory that eventually led to the Dutch being made “loyal vassals of the shogun” (p. 17).

Indeed, the Dutch were forced to adapt to the Tokugawa system once they reached Hirado, Japan, in 1608. Clulow addresses the three themes of diplomacy, violence, and sovereignty, and traces how the VOC was socialized through its confrontations with the Tokugawa bakufu. First, in a detailed analysis of the VOC’s 1627 mission under Pieter Nuyts, Clulow details how “the company’s clumsy sleight of hand” (p. 93) with regard to its claim to the right of diplomacy failed to budge the Tokugawa bakufu. Instead, the VOC found itself forced to “participate in the same ceremonies mandated of the shogun’s other subordinates” (p. 96) —ceremonies that had to be executed in the form of paying annual homage by prostrating oneself to the shogun.

The VOC was a maritime organization “specifically geared toward seaborne warfare” (p. 135), and it had at its command a formidable combination of heavy guns and robust, well-

designed ships. In brushing off competitors, the VOC engaged in the violence associated with privateering. In Tokugawa Japan, “the [Dutch] company encountered a state with very limited maritime resources” (p. 139). However, as Clulow notes: “for all these facts, it was the company that found itself strikingly powerless on the seas around Japan” (p. 139). Why? According to Clulow, this was because “the VOC became entangled within a Tokugawa legal order in which its freedom to act against its three primary competitors—Japan-based merchants, the Portuguese, and Chinese traders—was significantly constrained” (p. 139). By the “Tokugawa legal order,” Clulow means the Japanese system of maritime passes known as *shuinjō*—a system according to which the bakufu treated any attack on a trading vessel in possession of a legitimate pass “as a direct challenge to its authority” (p. 144). The Dutch, who casually and regularly used privateering in other parts of Asia, “never turned their guns against Japan-based shipping to force Tokugawa officials to change policies or alter trading conditions” (p. 142). Clulow attributes this to “the nature of the [Tokugawa] regime’s legal markers” (p. 139), which outlawed the VOC’s use of violence against any vessel related to Tokugawa Japan.

But one might wonder why the VOC was so fearful of violating Tokugawa Japan’s maritime pass system. Clulow does not provide an answer, other than to say that the VOC was hopelessly entangled with the Tokugawa legal order even though the latter was not backed by any real naval power. However, it should be noted that the Tokugawa regime exercised firm and exclusive control over Japan’s vibrant domestic markets, to which the Dutch were eager to gain access. If the Japanese markets, which were a lucrative source of trade for the Dutch, were to be closed, their voyage to Japan would be rendered useless. No matter how formidable the VOC’s naval power, it could never be a match for Tokugawa Japan’s formidable ground forces, which protected the country’s silver mines and markets. The VOC was an organization of merchants, and it was in pursuit of money, not power.

Finally, in examining sovereignty disputes between the VOC and the Tokugawa regime, Clulow sheds light on the VOC’s colony, which was set up in Tayouan. Japan-based merchants who conducted business in Tayouan had a series of clashes with the new intruder, the VOC. The news that Nuyts, the VOC governor of the Tayouan colony, had arrested Japanese merchants and sailors reached Japan and immediately outraged Tokugawa officials. To remedy this perceived infringement of Japanese sovereignty, the Tokugawa regime demanded that the VOC hand Nuyts over to Japan. The VOC thereupon abandoned its “insistence on the inviolability of its sovereign rights in favor of a more accommodating policy” (p. 207), and delivered Nuyts to Japan. Only after the VOC had presented a glittering brass chandelier, which would be installed at the Nikkō mausoleum as a symbol of its subordination to the Tokugawa bakufu, was Nuyts allowed to return to Batavia.

On the whole, Clulow offers an excellent analysis of how the VOC adapted itself to “a decidedly unequal relationship” (p. 259) with Tokugawa Japan—one in which “Asia occupied a position at the center ... [and] Europeans were forced to adapt in order to claim a place in a political order that they could do little to alter” (p. 21). *The Company and the Shogun* is a welcome contribution to the field of international relations in premodern East Asia, which desperately needs to abandon its outdated Eurocentrism.

**Reviewed by Nam-lin Hur**