9 The Dutch East India Company in global history

A historiographical reconnaissance

Tonio Andrade

Abstract

This chapter provides a brief overview of scholarship on the Dutch East India Company, focusing on the work of major figures, including J.C. van Leur, M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofs, Niels Steensgaard, and Leonard Blussé, among others. It suggests that one can discern a consistent trend in that scholarship: toward a greater appreciation of the power and strength of Asian trading networks. It then reflects on trends in current and future scholarship, including the work of contributors to this volume, suggesting that the network models currently in the zeitgeist are paying dividends in understanding, particularly when one keeps in mind the significance of the Asian networks that underlay and competed with the European networks. The chapter ends by recognising that recent scholarship seems to support a sort of ‘global early modernity’ whose salient characteristic is a dramatic – and largely reciprocal – increase in intercultural adoption.

Keywords: Capitalism, peddling trade, TANAP, early modernisation, networks

How influential was the Dutch East India Company in Asia? To what extent did it transform or revolutionise Asian trading patterns? And how powerful and resilient were the Asian trade networks that the VOC competed with? For a long time, historians thought they had answers to such questions. In the past, the Company has been portrayed as a catalyst for capitalism and a force that brought modern rational economic practices to world trade, thereby transforming preexisting trading structures throughout

the maritime world. Today, however, historians are far more cautious, with new work following a trend toward a greater appreciation of the power and strength of Asian networks. With each passing decade, it seems, historians find the VOC – and other early modern European colonial powers – less influential than previously believed.

But this is not to say that the Company was not important. At the same time as scholars have successfully undercut older views regarding the company's impact, they have also come to a much deeper appreciation of the VOC's own shipping networks, and historians today are particularly interested in the Company's intra-Asian (as opposed to Asia-to-Europe) networks. The Company did indeed create an unprecedented network of routes and trading structures, suggesting that there may well be some truth to the older idea that the VOC had a transformative effect in Asia.¹

Still, we must keep in mind that the visible networks – that is to say, the official networks most readily apparent in VOC sources – are merely the tip of the iceberg. As historians broaden our use of non-European sources, we are gaining a more precise understanding not just of the Company's networks but also – and more importantly – of how its routes connected with the myriad other routes that crisscrossed the early modern world. We must always strive to remain aware of the complex Asian networks that worked within, against, and alongside the Company's official networks.

The origins of 'Asiatic despotism'

To understand the long arc of VOC historiography, there is no better place to start than Karl Marx. This is not so much because he was a scholar of the VOC – in fact he wrote little about it – but because his writings have been so influential. His perspective on Asia and the rise of European capitalism still affects current-day scholarship in global history in general and the VOC specifically, particularly when it comes to European impact on Asian trading structures.

Marx was far more interested in the English East India Company than in the Dutch East India Company, just as he was far more interested in the nineteenth century than in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and he believed that VOC rule in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Asia

1 This network approach must not blind us to the other phenomena that marked VOC history: war, violence, weather, and, of course the individuals themselves, who sailed the ships, wrote the documents, and loaded the crates.

was a more primitive forerunner of English rule in the 19th century. The British had, he believed, disassembled Indian society and reconstituted it for rational, capitalist plunder. The Dutch, in contrast, were 'parasites', who simply planted European control on top of Asian despotic structures, without restructuring the societies underneath.² This argument reflects Marx's famous (or infamous) concept of 'Asian despotism', which was inspired by earlier thinkers including Montesquieu. The concept of Asian despotism has had a huge influence on subsequent thought and continues to affect our understanding of world history today.

So what does Marx mean by Asiatic despotism, and by the related concept of the Asiatic 'mode of production'? In early societies, he believed, humans held property in common. This primal communitarianism was antithetical to capitalism because capitalism called for all goods and services to be translated into monetary exchange. Common property held back the development of capitalism everywhere, but in Europe this communitarian tradition was eventually overthrown, as Europeans – most importantly the British – moved toward a commercial economy. Marx believed that in Asia this early communitarianism persisted because of a despotic imperial system. Asian despotism arose for various reasons – most notably the need for irrigation structures – but the important point is that for Marx the despot did not recognise property rights. The lack of property rights retarded capitalism, and so, Marx argued, Asian economic activity stayed relatively backward, while Europeans stampeded into the future of cold cash and credit.

Marx argued that the VOC, although it emerged in a Europe moving toward capitalism, made its profits not by bringing capitalism to Asia but simply by imposing a European despotism upon the existing Asian despotisms. This piggy-backing despotism was, he wrote, a 'monstrous combination', because Dutch profits were in essence based on 'a system of plunder'.^{3, 4} The fundamentals of the Asian economies didn't change

2 He quotes with approval Sir Stamford Raffles, who served as English governor of Java during the Napoleonic Wars, from 1811-1815, who says that the Dutch East India Company 'employed all the existing machinery of despotism to squeeze from the people their utmost mite of contribution, the last dregs of their labor, and thus aggravated the evils of a capricious and semi-barbarous Government, by working it with all the practiced ingenuity of politicians, and all the monopolising selfishness of traders.' Raffles, cited in Marx, 'The British Rule in India', 10 June 1853.

3 Marx, 'The British Rule in India', 10 June 1853.

4 Marx, 'The Transformation of Commodity Capital and Money Capital into Commodity-Dealing Capital and Money-Dealing Capital or into Merchant's Capital', p. 437.

– pepper, cloves, nutmeg were still produced in the traditional ways – but the Dutch gained a monopoly over the carrying of these goods. This model brought profits to the Netherlands – and to Europe as a whole – but it was a primitive type of colonialism, suited only for early capitalism. By the nineteenth century, the Dutch East India Company model had become atavistic and was eventually replaced by British capitalistic imperialism.⁵ Like his understanding of the VOC, Marx's model of the Asiatic mode of production was simplistic, but it continued to guide discussion, as scholars built upon or challenged Marxian perspectives. The most important of these scholars was the great Max Weber.

From Weber to van Leur

Like Marx, Weber wanted to explain the rise of capitalism, but whereas Marx focused on class struggle and modes of production, Weber's central concept was 'calculability', or predictability. This notion runs through Weber's work, perhaps most obviously in his posthumously-published *General Economic History*.⁶ Weber argued that during the pre-modern period, economic activity – indeed life in general – was not susceptible to ready measurement. It was difficult to transport goods because roads were poor and dangerous, and seaways were infested with pirates. It was difficult to guarantee contracts, create reliable credit networks, trust strangers, and build faith in governmental structures. Capitalism, however, required calculability. (For Weber, capitalism is 'the provision of human needs by the method of enterprise, which is to say, by private businesses seeking profit. It is exchange carried out for positive gain, rather than forced contributions or traditionally fixed gifts or trades'.⁷) So long as economic activity was hindered by unpredictability, enterprise would not be able to spread and deepen and become the primary means of providing human needs and wants.

Weber believed that among the most important obstacles to predictability were traditional social and cultural structures and, perhaps most importantly, traditional governmental systems. Asian societies, he argued,

5 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 3, Part IV, Ch. 18, 'The Turnover of Merchant's Capital. Prices'; and *Ibid.*, Ch. 20, 'Historical Facts about Merchant's Capital'.

6 Weber, *General Economic History*.

7 This is the excellent paraphrase by Randall Collins, in Collins, 'Weber's Last Theory of Capitalism', pp. 21-22.

tended to be characterised by 'patrimonial' systems of government, which vested authority in sovereigns rather than in rational and predictable legal structures. There are here clear echoes of Marxian notions of Asiatic despotism. According to Weber, the West threw off patrimonial systems (or was still in the process of doing so) and built modern legal and political structures, buttressed by new systems of belief that helped strangers conduct business with each other.

What role, then, did the VOC play in Weber's schema? Weber saw the VOC, and also its English rival, as a 'preliminary stage in the development of the modern stock company'.⁸ He believed that it helped create some of the conditions of modernity – such as transferable shares and bookkeeping innovations – which helped lead to modern capital accounting, but, like Marx, he also believed that the VOC was a parasitic rent-seeker, which merely imposed a tax monopoly on subject peoples whose economic lives went on much as they had before. He called this system 'colonial capitalism'.⁹ Instead of facilitating full-blown capitalism, the VOC's 'colonial capitalism' strengthened feudal conditions, as 'native chieftains' became territorial lords and free peasants became more like serfs.

Yet in contrast to Marx, Weber did conduct significant research into Asian societies. He understood that Asian economic structures could be quite sophisticated. He argued, however, that ultimately they were more backward than those of the West because of, first, the predominance of patrimonial authority and, second, the persistence of structures of belief that led to distrust of strangers and other anti-rational mindsets. He spent a great deal of time looking for the absence of a 'spirit of capitalism' that might have vivified the otherwise sophisticated economic structures that he understood existed in much of Asia.¹⁰

Weber's research on Asia inspired much work, including that of the most important early historian of the Dutch East India Company, J.C. van Leur. Born in 1908, van Leur became a student in the new field of Indology at the University of Leiden. This was not entirely by choice. He preferred history, but Indology promised a career in the Dutch empire, and van Leur's family was not wealthy. After he graduated, while waiting for his first posting overseas, van Leur had an opportunity to pursue his passion for history: he wrote a PhD thesis using Weberian methods to shed light on Indonesian history. The resulting work had a humble title – 'Some perspectives on the history

8 Weber, *General Economic History*, pp. 281–82.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

10 Gellner, 'The Uses of Max Weber', pp. 48–62.

of Asian trade' (*Eenige beschouwingen betreffende den ouden Asiatischen handel*) – but it ended up being extremely influential. His insights went well beyond the Company itself. In effect, van Leur set in motion a problematic that still underlies much discussion in world history today: he argued that Asian trading networks were far more resilient than previously believed, and hence that the VOC had less of an effect on Asia than had been assumed.

Van Leur criticised the ways in which 'colonial historians', to use his term, tended to overestimate European preponderance, viewing history 'from the deck of the ship, the rampart of the fortress, the high gallery of the trading-house'.¹¹ Against those who believed that the Dutch influence had been profound and lasting, he argued that up to at least 1650 trade carried by Europeans comprised only a modest share of total Asian trade. Similarly, he suggested that Western commercial structures were not necessarily superior to Asian trading structures. He further argued that even in the eighteenth century, Western influence in Asia remained limited to a number of military outposts that could only be defended with difficulty.

For van Leur, it was the nineteenth century that saw the great disjuncture: only then did the West definitively move ahead. Prior to that point, Asian trade and civilisation remained on a level with that of Europe. This position is strikingly close to the arguments of Kenneth Pomeranz and other so-called 'revisionist' historians, who hold that developed parts of Europe and certain developed parts of Asia followed similar paths until around 1800.¹² To be sure, we must recognise that van Leur's conclusions were not based on significant primary source-based research, and, as we will see, he misunderstood some important aspects of Asian trade. But there can be no doubt of his significance. He set in motion or at least prefigured one of the most important debates in global history, a debate that continues today.

Yet subsequent scholars of the VOC have argued that van Leur was if anything too conservative when it came to the sophistication and strength of Asian trade vis-à-vis that of Europe. This is clear in the brilliant work of historian Marie Antoinette Petronella Meilink-Roelofs.

11 These words come not from his dissertation but from one of his later writings. Van Leur, in a 1939 review of Stapel, *Geschiedenis van Nederlandsch Indië*, cited in Wertheim, 'Early Asian Trade: An Appreciation of J.C. van Leur', p. 168.

12 Wertheim, 'Early Asian Trade', pp. 167-173. Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*; Wong, *China Transformed*; Rosenthal and Wong, *Before and Beyond Divergence*; Marks, *The Origins of the Modern World*; Andrade, *The Gunpowder Age*.

The 'peddling trade'

Like van Leur, Meilink-Roelofs was not trained as a professional historian. Although she audited classes at Leiden University taught by figures such as J. Huizinga and J.H. Thiel, she received her degree in secondary school teaching, and unfortunately for her, she graduated during the Great Depression. Unable to find a job, she began volunteering in the Dutch Imperial Archives (Algemeen Rijksarchief), today known as the National Archive (Nationaal Archief). Eventually, her unpaid internship led to a formal job, and she gradually became the world's foremost expert on the archives of the Dutch East India Company, a repository that is one of the world's richest sources of historical material for seventeenth and eighteenth-century global history.

In 1962, she published her landmark work *Asian Trade and European Influence in the Indonesian Archipelago*, a book that has had a deep and abiding influence on VOC historiography.¹³ It was largely a response to van Leur. Meilink-Roelofs greatly appreciated van Leur's contributions and followed him in adopting an Asia-focused perspective. But she believed that van Leur was wrong on a number of counts. First, she showed that van Leur was mistaken in saying that Asian trade was generally limited to luxury goods. Rather, she argued, there was also a significant trade in bulk goods. In addition, she felt that van Leur underplayed the influence of the Portuguese, although she largely agreed that they eked out a position in the Asian trading networks thanks primarily to rivalry between indigenous states, even as she showed how their position in trade was based on interaction with Asians. Similarly, she believed that Dutch influence was far greater than van Leur had believed. As she wrote, 'Economically the company represented a power factor in the Indonesian archipelago with which due reckoning had to be held, and which seriously disturbed or even utterly destroyed various aspects of the native economy'.¹⁴

Most importantly, however, she argued against van Leur's depiction of Asian trade. Van Leur had argued that Asian trading ports were sophisticated in themselves, but also that they were largely isolated, lacking close connections to each other. The connective tissue was weak, he believed, because it was formed by individual traders, whose routes and organisations were not systematised.

Van Leur referred to these traders as peddlers (*kramers*), and their trade he characterised as peddling trade (*kramershandel*). In English, of course,

13 Meilink-Roelofs, *Asian Trade and European Influence in the Indonesian Archipelago between 1500 and about 1630*.

14 Ibid., p. 10.

the word 'peddler' calls to mind an image like that of Edmund Spenser's poor pedlar, 'bearing a trusse of tryfles at hys backe, as bells, and babes, and glasses, in hys packe'.¹⁵ The Dutch term *kramer* refers to someone who sells items at tents or booths, as at a market or fair. Van Leur did not mean, however, that the Asian traders were just selling things at booths. On the contrary, his peddlers might own or lease large vessels carrying expensive cargos. His point was that this peddler trade was personal: markets were not linked by large or supra-national structures but by individuals making ad hoc economic decisions. He also believed that these peddlers carried primarily luxury goods and that there was little or no mass trade in bulk goods. He believed that these three factors – the lack of transnational credit systems, the individual nature of the trade, and the traders' focus on luxury goods – caused fluctuations of price and supply and decreased calculability, and that these fluctuations, à la Weber, were inimical to the rise of capitalist-type structures. In addition, he believed that this Asian trading system was ancient, having existed for millennia in the same basic form.

Meilink-Roelofs objected strongly to van Leur's depiction of Asian trade. Asian trade was not, she argued, an ad hoc affair, a matter of individual peddlers sailing about. Rather, it could be highly sophisticated, with formal structures that stretched from the Arabian Sea to the China Seas. She focused on indigenous Malayo-Indonesian structures, detailing the development of trading polities such as Srivijaya and Malacca, and on the long-distance trade of Asian groups such as Arabs, Gujarati, and Chinese who conducted regular voyages between regions.

A decade after the publication of *Asian Trade and European Influence*, another scholar resurrected the 'peddler' argument. Danish economic historian Niels Steensgaard's 1973 work *Carracks, Caravans, and Companies* argued explicitly against Meilink-Roelofs's depiction of Asian trade, suggesting that van Leur was right: pre-Dutch trade in Asia was indeed a peddler trade.¹⁶ As a result, markets were opaque and prices unstable. Like van Leur, Steensgaard included the Portuguese in this pre-capitalist peddler-type trade, arguing that they were merely tax gatherers focused on a 'redistributive enterprise', who 'might enter the market as peddlers on a grand scale. Their role might be dominating and continuous, but their behavior did not modify the market pattern in which they operated'.¹⁷

15 Spenser, 'The Shepheards Calender', p. 460.

16 Steensgaard, *Carracks, Caravans, and Companies*. This was reissued as *The Asian Trade Revolution of the Seventeenth Century*. I cite from the latter version.

17 Ibid., p. 110.

Here one can discern strong similarities to Marx and, more importantly, Weber, both of whom had argued that until the late 1700s, Europeans were merely placing European political control on top of traditional Asian structures. In this view, Europeans did not restructure Asian trade, rather they just controlled and profited from it. Of course, Marx and Weber felt that the VOC was no different. It, too, merely acted as a European despot planted on an Asian despotism, or, in the words of Weber, as an agent of mere 'colonial capitalism'. Steensgaard argued that this judgment was wrong. The VOC, he believed, had in fact revolutionised Asian trade. His focus was not on Indonesia, but on trade from the Indian Ocean basin to Europe, and he argued that although the Portuguese had pioneered the sea route to Asia, their networks were not robust. They were more medieval than modern, more ad hoc than systematic. Thus, the traditional overland caravan trade had continued much as it had for centuries before. Like van Leur and Weber, Steensgaard's focus was on calculability, and he believed that the unpredictability of the caravan trade and other Asian trading structures caused considerable price fluctuations, which in effect acted as a brake on market forces in Asian areas.

The VOC, however, changed the situation decisively, and to explain how, Steensgaard added a new focus on violence. It of course did not escape van Leur or Meilink-Roelofs that VOC trade was based on the power of Dutch guns, but Steensgaard argued that violence was *central* to the VOC's trade revolution, a position he illustrated by contrasting the company's use of violence to that of the Portuguese. The Portuguese, he argued, used violence semi-rationally because they were focused as much on religious crusade and glory as on profit. The Dutch, however, used violence 'rationally', with a consistent pursuit of profit. As a result, they achieved a monopoly that brought greater predictability to Asian markets, providing transparency and stability.

Meilink-Roelofs responded to Steensgaard in a long article, in which she defended the sophistication of Asian trade. Her views on this matter have tended to prevail.¹⁸ Partly this is due to her own spirited arguments. But it's also due to the work of later scholars. The most notable of these was Sanjay Subrahmanyam, who ended up having a deeply significant influence on the debate not just because of his outstanding source-based scholarship but also because he came at the question from a different angle.¹⁹

18 Meilink-Roelofs, 'The Structures of Trade in Asia in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries'.

19 See especially Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia*.

The Company in global history: Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Leonard Blussé, and Asia-centered perspectives on the VOC centered perspectives on the VOC

Subrahmanyam argued that Steensgaard was right to discern a major transformation in Asian trade during the seventeenth century but that he was wrong to attribute it primarily to the Dutch East India Company. Many things were changing in Asia, and even more important than the arrival of the Dutch was the expansion of major Asian states, such as the Ottomans, the Safavids, and, most importantly, the Mughals. This consolidation of political control drove the rapid development of indigenous Asian trade. Indeed, according to Subrahmanyam, the expansion of Dutch trade was likely part of a general expansion of Asian maritime trade.

This perspective has become generally accepted, underlying the work not just of VOC scholars, but also of more general works on global history, such as Victor Lieberman's magisterial two-volume work, *Strange Parallels*.²⁰ Asian trade was not static. It was dynamic, going through booms and busts. During the early modern period, scholars have generally discerned a trend of expansion. Indeed, it may even be the case that the expansion of European trade in Asia rested on indigenous trade expansion. Moreover, European dominance, such as it was, was, in the words of John E. Wills Jr., an 'interactive dominance', which emerged gradually and with the active participation of Asian officials, merchants, and brokers.²¹

Today, the most important figure in VOC history is the polyglot Dutch scholar Leonard Blussé, to whom this volume is dedicated. His work brought this interactivity into close focus, not just in his research and writing but also in his broad connections with scholars around the world. In general, his scholarship supports that of Meilink-Roelofs and Subrahmanyam, but he has not felt it necessary to argue stridently in favour of their views. He is more interested in drawing out their implications. He, more than anyone else, has set the current focus of VOC studies: to understand the on-the-ground (or on-the-water) interactions that made up Asian trade during the VOC period.

20 Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, Vols. 1 and 2. See also Lieberman, 'Protected Rimlands and Exposed Zones'; and Andrade, 'Victor Lieberman's *Strange Parallels*'.

21 Wills, 'Maritime Asia, 1500–1800'.

Unlike Marx, Weber, van Leur, Meilink-Roelofs, and Steensgaard, Blussé has mastered Asian languages.²² As a student, he lived for years in Taiwan and Japan, and he is at home in both Japanese and Chinese sources, modern and classical. This has enabled him to look at VOC history from all sides, using Asian sources to illuminate VOC history. In this he is much like his fellow pioneer, John E. Wills Jr., who brought an unparalleled range of sources to his studies of interactions between Europeans and East Asians. Blussé has also encouraged his many students and collaborators – including most of the VOC experts represented in this volume – to do the same. To do VOC history today means to learn non-Western languages. That's not to say one cannot make contributions using primarily European sources – there's still much fine work being produced based largely or solely on the rich sources of the VOC. But the most significant scholarship tends to take its inspiration from Blussé and Wills, using non-Western sources to supplement and even critique the Western sources.

The result has been a new understanding of VOC history. Blussé, for example, has used Chinese, Japanese, and European sources to show that despite Dutch military and economic power, it was the Chinese who truly dominated East and Southeast Asian trade through the long seventeenth century.²³ This they did by creating close connections with Japanese, Europeans, Javanese, Filipinos, Native Formosans, etc. His work has directly inspired many other scholars who are interested in intercultural history, such as Adam Clulow, Xing Hang, Cheng Wei-Chung, myself, and many others.

Even more important, however, are the bridges he formed with scholars in Asia, having spent years in Taiwan, Japan, and mainland China. His joint publishing initiatives, such as the *Kong Koan* series, the *Formosan Encounter Series* and others have brought Dutch sources to Asian readers, even as he has been a major force in the publication of Dutch sources in Dutch transcription.²⁴ But perhaps the longest-term impact of his role as a mediator between Asia and the West is the TANAP Program.

TANAP, which stands for Toward a New Age of Partnership, was an ambitious multinational project designed to lay institutional groundwork for global history. At its centre were two questions: when and how did

22 Van Leur did know some Indonesian, but he did not generally use it in his scholarship.

23 See especially Blussé, *Strange Company*.

24 A complete listing of his source publication contributions would take up far too much space, but among the most important are Leonard Blussé and Wu Fengbin 吳鳳斌, *Gong an bu* 公案簿, 13 volumes and counting; Blussé, Everts, Milde, and Ts'ao, eds., *De Dagregisters van het Kasteel Zeelandia, Taiwan, 1629–1662*, Four Vols and Blussé, Everts, et al., *The Formosan Encounter. Notes on Formosa's Aboriginal Society*.

the earth's peoples, cultures, economies, and politics become so closely interconnected? And what role did Asia and Africa play in this process? TANAP addressed these questions by focusing on the VOC, and in a bold new way: by creating international scholarly connections.

The heart of TANAP was student exchange. Between 2000 and 2007, dozens of students came from countries in Africa and Asia to the Netherlands to enrol in an MA programme at Leiden University. Many went on to compose PhD dissertations, which were published by Brill in a series of groundbreaking books.²⁵ These monographs have managed to connect European and Asian historiographies in unprecedented ways, as the authors, having been trained in seventeenth-century Dutch language, early modern palaeography, and the use of VOC archives, asked new questions and, even more importantly, made connections between Dutch documents and sources in their home countries. As a result, TANAP has not just enriched our understanding of the VOC but also the history of the many lands with which the VOC came into contact: China, Japan, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, etc. In all these places, scholars have turned to VOC sources to understand their own history, because VOC sources contain details lacking in local sources and offer new perspectives.

Conclusions

TANAP graduates are exerting a significant effect on current historiography, which leads to the question: where do we stand now with regard to the great question of the VOC's impact on Asian trade? Today, historians generally agree with the basic thrust of the van Leur thesis. Their work continues to show that Asian trading structures were generally not overturned or destroyed by the VOC. Indigenous networks continued to operate alongside VOC ones. Indeed, in many areas the VOC carried considerably less trade in volume and value than did other groups. In general, the more we learn, the more we appreciate the sophistication of Asian trading structures, institutions, and networks.

Even more intriguing is the fact that historians are increasingly aware of just how much the VOC's own networks were influenced by and constructed upon Asian networks. This was not of course true of the VOC alone. The English East India Company, the other subject of this volume, also depended

25 A complete list of these books can be found at Brill's website: www.brill.com/publications/tanap-monographs-history-asian-european-interaction (accessed 2016-03-04).

closely on Asian trading structures, which often were extremely powerful and resilient. For instance, Ghulam Nadri, in his chapter, investigates the wealthy Gujarati merchants that the British interacted with. The merchant Virji Vohra lent huge sums to the Company. His influence was such that Company officials knew they must tread carefully. As EIC official Edward Knipe wrote to London in 1643, 'Virge Vora, by reason of our continuall mighty ingagements, must not bee displeased in any case. [...] And I conclude that, so long as Virge Vora is so much our creditor, little or no proffitt [is] to bee made uppon any goods wee can bring to Surratt'.²⁶ It is becoming increasingly clear that the European companies were dependent on Asian and African structures, and that these organisations could be enormously wealthy. For example, it seems clear that the Zheng family of Southern Fujian Province, China, brought in more revenues per year from overseas trade (starting in the late 1640s) than did the VOC from all of its holdings.²⁷

These Asian organisations were not just rich. They were also powerful, even in the military sphere where the narrative of European superiority has been most persistent. Indeed, many authors still assume that Europeans had a significant advantage in military power, which they used to impose their will on indigenous powers. But recent studies on the VOC show that, at least through the mid-1700s, Asian polities displayed considerable military dynamism, able to hold the VOC back, even defeat it. To be sure, the VOC did have a formidable military, but even so, it was unable to impose its will upon a range of local political structures or other types of powerful organisations. Scholars such as Leonard Blussé, Adam Clulow, Tristan Mostert, Merle Ricklefs, and many others, including myself, have revealed the military power of many Asian organisations.²⁸

But even more interestingly, historians are increasingly painting a picture of global adoption and adaptation, what we might call 'global early modernisation'. For example, in his contribution to this volume, Adam Clulow notes how effectively Japanese soldiers used muskets, arguing – as others before him have done – that they were using the musketry countermarch technique long before Europeans were. But the Japanese were not the only Asians whose musketry innovations were precocious. The Chinese were using the countermarch technique with early firearms, long before the

26 Foster, ed., *The English Factories in India, 1642–1645*, p. 108.

27 Hang, *Conflict and Commerce in Maritime East Asia*. I independently came to the same conclusion. See Andrade, *Lost Colony*, p. 52.

28 Clulow, 'Finding the Balance'; Blussé, 'De Chinese nachtmerrie: Een terugtocht en twee nederlagen'; Andrade, *Lost Colony*; Andrade, *The Gunpowder Age*; Ricklefs, *War, Culture and Economy in Java, 1677–1726*.

Japanese applied it to muskets.²⁹ Moreover, recent work suggests that the Chinese were adopting and innovating with musketry technology and techniques at precisely the same time as the Japanese, and with similar thoroughness.³⁰

This military 'early modernisation' was just one aspect of this process of adopting and innovating new ideas, technologies, and techniques. And it is important to note that this habit of inter-adoption did not flow only one way, that is from Europe to Asia. Everyone copied and adapted from everyone. For example, as Tristan Mostert has noted, the Makassarese were obtaining military manuals not just from Europeans, but also from Islamic lands, and Peter Shapinsky has called attention to the development of a 'hybrid maritime culture' in East Asia during the seventeenth century, showing, for example, how Japanese traders sailed Chinese junks with European rigging, their Chinese and Portuguese navigators deploying dual-language portolan charts.³¹

Put all of this work together, and we begin to glimpse an early modern Asia that is far more responsive and adaptive than has long been thought. But how to theorise this 'early modernization'? What large-scale models can we use? Here, the work of Victor Lieberman can be very useful.³² In his model of *Strange Parallels*, European states are contextualised in deeper Eurasian context: European states were not unique in their rapid economic and demographic growth, or political centralisation, or vernacular cultures, or 'proto-nationalism' (Lieberman prefers the more neutral term 'politicised ethnicity'). Rather, much of Eurasia was undergoing remarkably similar trends, and the timing of florescences and crises was eerily similar from one side of Eurasia to the other. We must see the VOC, the EIC, and other European overseas organisations in this context. They were part and parcel of a general expansion across Eurasia and the northern and eastern African littorals.

Since van Leur we have been compelled to view the Dutch East India Company as much less influential – at least in Asia – than our metanarratives once implied. But we must not go too far. Asian structures were certainly more powerful, durable, and sophisticated than once believed, but the VOC also had unique strength and staying power. It established

29 Laichen, 'Ming-Southeast Asian Overland Interactions, 1368-1644,' p. 500; Andrade, *The Gunpowder Age*, pp. 144-166; Andrade, 'Late Medieval Divergences'.

30 Andrade, *The Gunpowder Age*, pp. 166-187.

31 Shapinsky, 'Polyvocal Portolans'.

32 Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*. See also Lieberman, 'Protected Rimlands and Exposed Zones'; Andrade, 'Victor Lieberman's Strange Parallels'.

an unprecedented structure of international communication. Today, VOC historians are increasingly focusing on the organisation's astoundingly sophisticated networks. The idea of the 'network', the 'web', is of course very much of the zeitgeist. We live in the networked age – our refrigerators talk to our phones. Like all generations, our current preoccupations influence our scholarship, and historians today see VOC trading ports as nodes and hubs, the ships as packets flowing back and forth. This perspective is salutary. The network model yields significant insights. Yet we of course must not lose track of other phenomena in the company's history: war, weather, and, of course, the individual personalities and life trajectories that not only make history rich and interesting but also deeply affect its trends and vicissitudes.

Equally importantly, when we map the VOC's formal networks – which is to say, those routes and connections that are most apparent in Dutch sources – we are viewing only the visible part of deeper networks. Today, internet technology experts distinguish between the surface internet and the deep net.³³ The surface net is that part of the internet that is indexed by search engines and viewable by internet users. The deep net consists of databases, proprietary information, items hidden behind paywalls, and so on that are not indexed by search engines and remain hidden from most users. The deep web is to be distinguished from the dark web, where illegal things happen.³⁴ But what may be surprising is that the deep web is at least five hundred times larger than the surface web and is growing much more rapidly.

In just such a way, we must keep in mind that the networks we view through the VOC's sources are only the visible tip of deeper structures. There was far more trade and circulation going on that remains invisible to us. Some of this trade involved employees of the VOC, who were constantly dealing under the table, their transactions usually involving Asians. But most of this unseen trade was carried out by Asian organisations that operated alongside or below official VOC structures, and often deliberately hidden from official view. Sometimes, parts of these Asian organisations operated within VOC networks, subverting or co-opting them, often with the active connivance of Company employees.³⁵

The Dutch East India Company was probably not the catalyst of capitalism that it was once considered to be, but it helped connect human societies in denser and stronger webs than ever before. These global connections brought

33 Wright, 'Exploring a "Deep Web" That Google Can't Grasp', 22 February 2009.

34 See Andy Greenberg, 'Hacker Lexicon: What is the Dark Web?', 19 November 2014.

35 See, for example, Andrade, *How Taiwan Became Chinese*, Ch. 2; and Andrade, 'Pirates, Pelts, and Promises'.

dramatic changes to all sides, as humans found themselves becoming less parochial, less isolated, and far better informed about the increasingly small planet they inhabited.

Works cited

- Andrade, Tonio, *The Gunpowder Age: China, Military Innovation, and the Rise of the West in World History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).
- Andrade, Tonio, 'Late Medieval Divergences: Comparative Perspectives on Early Gunpowder Warfare in Europe and China', *Journal of Medieval Military History* 13 (2015): 247–276.
- Andrade, Tonio, 'Victor Lieberman's Strange Parallels', *American Historical Review* 117(4) (2012): 1173–1176.
- Andrade, Tonio, *Lost Colony* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).
- Andrade, Tonio, *How Taiwan Became Chinese: Dutch, Spanish, and Han Colonization in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
- Andrade, Tonio, 'Pirates, Pelts, and Promises: The Sino-Dutch Colony of Seventeenth-century Taiwan and the Aboriginal Village of Favorolang', *Journal of Asian Studies* 64(2) (2005): 295–320.
- Blussé, Leonard, *Strange Company: Chinese Settlers, Mestizo Women, and the Dutch in VOC Batavia* (Dordrecht: Foris Publications, 1986).
- Blussé, Leonard, 'De Chinese nachtmerrie: Een terugtocht en twee nederlagen', In Gerrit Knaap and Ger Teitler, eds., *De Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie tussen oorlog en diplomatie* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2002), pp. 209–238.
- Clulow, Adam, 'Finding the Balance: European Military Power in Early Modern Asia', *History Compass* 13(3) (2015): 148–157.
- Collins, Randall, *Weberian Sociological Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
- Foster, William, ed., *The English Factories in India, 1642–1645: A Calendar of Documents in the India Office* (Westminster, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913).
- Gellner, David N., 'The Uses of Max Weber: Legitimation and Amnesia in Buddhism, South Asian History, and Anthropological Practice Theory', in Peter Clarke, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- Greenberg, Andy, 'Hacker Lexicon: What is the Dark Web?' *Wired*, 19 November 2014, www.wired.com/2014/11/hacker-lexicon-whats-dark-web/, accessed 2016-03-06.
- Hang, Xing, *Conflict and Commerce in Maritime East Asia: The Zheng Family and the Shaping of the Modern World, c. 1620–1720* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

- Laichen, Sun, 'Ming-Southeast Asian Overland Interactions, 1368-1644', PhD dissertation (University of Michigan Department of History, 2000).
- Lieberman, Victor, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830*, Vol. 1 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- Lieberman, Victor, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830* Vol. 2 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- Lieberman, Victor, 'Protected Rimlands and Exposed Zones: Reconfiguring Pre-modern Eurasia', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50 (2008): 692-723.
- Marks, Robert, *The Origins of the Modern World: A Global and Ecological Narrative from the Fifteenth to the Twenty-first Century*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2007.
- Marx, Karl, 'The Transformation of Commodity Capital and Money Capital into Commodity-Dealing Capital and Money-Dealing Capital or into Merchant's Capital', in Karl Marx, *Marx's Economic Manuscript of 1864-1865* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).
- Marx, Karl, *Capital*, Vol. 3, Part IV (1867-1894), www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894-c3/ch18.htm#1a, accessed 2015-11-09.
- Marx, Karl, 'The British Rule in India', New-York Herald Tribune, 10 June 1853. At www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1853/06/25.htm, accessed 2015-11-09.
- Meilink-Roelofs, M.A.P., 'The Structures of Trade in Asia in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: Niels Steengaard's Carracks, Caravans, and Companies: The Asian Trade Revolutions, A Critical Appraisal', *Mare Luso-Indicum* 4 (1980): 1-43.
- Meilink-Roelofs, M.A.P., *Asian Trade and European Influence in the Indonesian Archipelago between 1500 and about 1630* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1962).
- Pomeranz, Kenneth, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
- Ricklefs, Merle, *War, Culture and Economy in Java, 1677-1726: Asian and European Imperialism in the Early Kartasura Period* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1993).
- Rosenthal, Jean-Laurent and Wong, R. Bin, *Before and Beyond Divergence: The Politics of Economic Change in China and Europe* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).
- Shapinsky, Peter D., 'Polyvocal Portolans: Nautical Charts and Hybrid Maritime Cultures in Early Modern East Asia', *Early Modern Japan* 14 (2006): 4-26.
- Spenser, Edmund, 'The Shepheards Calender', in *The Complete Works of Edmund Spenser*, ed. R. Morris (London: Macmillan and Co, 1897), 446-89.
- Steensgaard, Niels, *The Asian Trade Revolution of the Seventeenth Century: The East India Companies and the Decline of the Caravan Trade* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1975).
- Subrahmanyam, Sanjay, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia, 1500-1700: A Political and Economic History* (London: Longman, 1993).

- Weber, Max, *General Economic History*, trans. Frank H. Knight (New York: Greenberg, 1927).
- Wertheim, W.F., 'Early Asian Trade: An Appreciation of J.C. van Leur', *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 13(2) (1954): 167-173.
- Wills, Jr., John E., 'Maritime Asia, 1500-1800: The Interactive Emergence of European Domination'. *American Historical Review* 98(1) (1993): 83-105.
- Wong, R. Bin, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).

Contact details

Tonio Andrade, Department of History, 221 Bowden Hall, 561 S. Kilgo St.,
Atlanta, GA 30322
Tel.: +1 404.727.4469
tandrad@emory.edu