Peter Borschberg (ed.)

Journal, Memorials and Letters of Cornelis Matelieff de Jonge. Security, Diplomacy and Commerce in 17th-Century Southeast Asia. Singapore: NUS, 2015, dcciv + 704 pp. ISBN 978991697983, price: SGD 42.00 (paperback), 97899715279, 64.00 (hardback).

As the title unmistakably indicates, this book assembles a series of epistolary accounts pertaining to Cornelis Matelieff de Jonge, who has been described by historians as one of the forefathers of a Dutch imperial project east of the Cape of Good Hope. Matelieff served as fleet commander of the second VOC voyage to Asia, launched in 1605, and upon his return to Europe in 1608, he was a board member of the Rotterdam Chamber for life and became one of the Gentlemen XVII. He was, thus, in a privileged position to use his knowledge of the political and commercial reality of Southeast Asia to inspire policy drafting in the Republic's decision centres. The main purpose of this edited compilation's is precisely to flesh out Matelieff de Jonge's vision regarding Dutch trade, settlement, and war waging in Asia and show how his views were received by the political elites and within the commercial circles.

The corpus of sources included in this volume comprises letters written by Cornelis Matelieff de Jonge (to figures such as the *land's advocate*, Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, or Hugo Grotius), memorials, and reports concerning the company's operations, as well as apocryphal texts such as journals of his voyages. Aside from Matelieff's own writings, the book also contains several treaties celebrated between the VOC and Southeast Asian polities during Matelieff's wanderings across the Eastern Indian Ocean.

As the editor elucidates in the introduction, part of the epistolary correspondence had been published on previous occasions. However, as these publications were considerable old (centuries old in some cases), today they enjoy very limited circulation and remained scattered. Other sources, such as company records, sources of municipal nature and even materials pulled out from non-Dutch archives find their way into a publishing medium for the first time. The relevancy of gathering documentation produced either by Matelieff or his close collaborators, or directly related to his career was therefore totally justifiable.

Concerning the content and insight of Matelieff's writings, they are not merely retrospective and descriptive. In his letters and memorials the admiral pledged his first-hand experience for the sake of a better informed decision-making by company directors and other political institutions of the Republic. Through them Matelieff did not simply diagnose what he saw as the main pitfalls in the company operations during the first decade of the seventeenth century, he also proposed solutions and pointed-out future directions for the company's ventures.

Matelieff's letters and reports are particularly insightful because they unveil the internal debates that defined the early days of Dutch expansion in Asia. As it has been amply documented, by the time of Matelieff's commission in Asia, the Dutch East India Company was at a crossroads. Should it remain strictly a maritime-trading enterprise, chartered to generate swift financial returns from overseas trade to its investors? Or should it also set up military and fiscal-administrative structures that would secure a tighter grip on the trading circuits, thus leaving the door open for imperial designs to be pursued in Asian and the Indian Ocean? Furthermore, how should the Cape and Asian country trade play a role in the war against the Hispanic monarchy, in the shape of Portugal's *Estado da Índia*? Echoes of these structural debates are to be found repeatedly in Matelieff's writings. No better is this shown than in his recurring pleas for the establishment of permanent administrative headquarters (*rendez-vous*) and the reform of the company's organizational framework in Asia, with the appointment of a plenipotentiary general-governor to replace the fleet commander system.

Matelieff's arguments are reminiscent of debates that the Portuguese underwent precisely one hundred years earlier, prior to establishing of a capital for the *Estado da Índia* in Goa and seat to a vice-regal/governmental authority. This invites further enquiry. Even though Matelieff's command of the Portuguese language is acknowledged, as is his knowledge of the history and structure the Portuguese empire in Asia (see how he makes parallels between his and the misfortunes of Portuguese viceroys and governors decades prior in one of his letters to Grotius), one is left wondering to which extent the Portuguese organizational precedent shaped his views on the structure and operations of the Dutch presence in Asia.

Aside from advocating a sounder infrastructural investment, Matelieff also defended in his writings a pragmatic and selective approach to the company's commercial grip in Asian waters. Instead of a uniform and systematic control over all trading sectors, requiring the company to employ too many resources towards an unattainable goal, the VOC should set its eyes only on the most lucrative trades (in which he included nutmeg, mace and cloves). The least profitable sectors should rather be left to the initiative of privates, through a leasing-out regime. The admiral's approach regarding pepper trade is also instructive, showing how in his mind, military and commercial goals were by no means incompatible, and should be pursued hand in hand. Matelieff considered that attaining full monopoly over such a vast and complex sector as the pepper trade was but a mirage, and therefore what the company should strive for was to flood the European markets with the commodity, certainly for a profit, but also to plunge the return margins of the Portuguese, and reduce their financial capacity.

Concerning the volume's edition, Borschberg and NUS Press have done a very competent job. The transcriptions of the source-material are preceded by an excellent 138 page-long introduction, which, not only details the political and economic context in East and Southeast Asia, but also the evolution of the Dutch domestic politics and the Republic's diplomatic-military relations with the Hispanic monarchy. Biographic data on Matelieff's life and career, and an elucidation of the organization and selection of the source material is also to be found in this introductory section. Throughout this introduction, but also in the footnotes and in the extensive glossary, the editor navigates between a vast and multilinguistic body of literature and materials that clarify and expand the documentation.

One of the books greatest merits is precisely the way it bridges linguistic gaps between different readerships and national historiographies. The English translation of the letters and texts brings this valuable body of sources to a wider non-Dutch-speaking audience, which would otherwise remain oblivious to their relevancy. But the book breaks the linguistic and historiographic barriers even further, by using Portuguese materials and secondary literature to clarify and offer a contradictory to Matelieff's writings.

The volume also successfully clarifies how Dutch company men regarded the political systems, social organizations, cultural traits, and economic structures of East and Southeast Asia at the dawn of the seventeenth century, but also how they perceived the organization and goals of their own overseas ventures.

Overall, it can be said that the writings of Matelieff and the supplementary documentation included in this volume will be welcomed by scholars, undergraduate researchers, and students interested in the history and political-diplomatic interactions between Europeans and Asians in the area that encompasses present-day Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. The book is certainly a valuable addition to an ever burgeoning historiographic field.

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