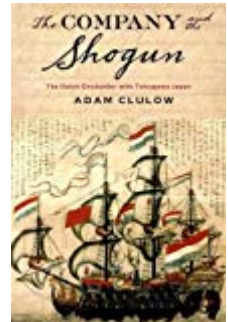


**Adam Clulow.** *The Company and the Shogun: The Dutch Encounter with Tokugawa Japan.* Columbia Studies in International and Global History Series. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. 352 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-16428-3.



**Reviewed by** Xiaolin Duan

**Published on** H-War (May, 2015)

**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

*The Company and the Shogun* focuses on the encounter between European and Asian power during the seventeenth century, a time period that has been recently regarded as the “first age of globalization,” or, to use Timothy Brook’s phrase in *Vermeer’s Hat* (2008), “the dawn of the global world.” While a challenge to the traditional concept of “the rise of Europe” is not new among scholars who orient their geographical focus on Asia (such as Kenneth Pomeranz and R. Bin Wong), Adam Clulow has written one of the most in-depth works on the nature of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in its interaction with the Tokugawa regime. Clulow’s analysis of the Dutch reveals how European power, in its contact with Asian regimes, was compelled to retreat from its insistence on privileges and by the end “found itself forced into a consistently subordinate role” (p. 259). With this case study, Clulow argues against the assumption that the year “1500 represented a crucial historical moment when a confident, well-armed Europe surged ahead both in the New World and Asia, thereby creating the modern world” (p. 5).

The book starts with a comprehensive overview of previous scholarship centering on the Euro-Asian encounter and properly places its own argument within such context. This makes the book, especially the introduction and conclusion, both a gold mine for scholars, including myself, who want to further dive into the early modern global world, and a great model for students who take classes on transnational communication. Following historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s rationale that defines early modern Asia as “the age of contained conflict” (p. 9), Clulow divides his discussion about the nature of the VOC into three wide-ranging sections: “Diplomacy,” “Violence,” and “Sovereignty.” This three-fold discussion moves away from the approach that insists on a narrow focus of trade. Instead, Clulow wants to regard the VOC as “a hybrid organization that successfully combined the attributes of both corporation and state.” He discovers the same basic pat-

tern in each of the three cases: the initial claims of the Dutch about the company’s rights always triggered a sequence of conflicts, which were only resolved by VOC’s “withdrawals, concessions, or outright surrender” (p. 12).

While all three parts of the book are thought provoking, the second part on violence is particularly inspiring due to the insightful examination of maritime spaces. Clulow demonstrates how the most formidable European weapons succumbed to Asian legal webs. The most straightforward impression we get about Asian seas comes from European maps, most of which present a landscape with sparse control by Asian regimes and thus, in European minds, offered the potential for European domination. Clulow’s work, however, traces the invisible but unavoidable legal network as planned by the *bakufu*, the Tokugawa feudal military government, and used to ensnare the Dutch. Centering his discussion on the sea, Clulow is also able to weave the power of Portugal and China into this intertwined and struggling relationship. This shift from land to the maritime world echoes a new trend in East Asia historical studies. A few years ago, when Haneda Masashi and some other Chinese scholars brought up the concept of maritime history, they called for special attention to be paid to the periods of 1500-1600 and 1700-1800.[1] Clulow’s discussion in the second part of the book partially fills in the gap of the seventeenth-century maritime history.

The clash between the two parties reaches the conceptual level in the third part, about sovereignty. The conflict between two world views—one is the European model of direct sovereignty over colonial possessions and the other is the Asian hierarchical model of the tributary system—has long been discussed and acknowledged as an outcome of the nineteenth-century expansion of Western imperialism. Clulow’s discussion about the conflicting claims over the Bay of Tayouan fleshes out the beginning stage of such conceptual discrepancy during the seventeenth century.

I am convinced by his analysis of the compromise made by the Dutch company and would speculate, based on my limited knowledge about the VOC and Tokugawa, that such concessions might also have been a deliberate decision made by the Dutch, after the calculation of all possible expenditures and gains, to maximize and secure their business. In this sense, some analysis of the economic profit acquired by the VOC would have been beneficial for the readers. I especially appreciate the connection Clulow makes between transnational encounters and the domestic situation. In tracing the development of the diplomatic strategy adopted by the company, the first part of the book provides a brief but essential introduction to the republican background of the Dutch. The domestic situation in Tokugawa, especially the analysis of the third shogun, Iemitsu, is likewise incorporated into the discussion about the gift from the Dutch company in the last chapter. This book also takes full advantage of the author's language skills to make comparisons between the Dutch and Japanese versions of the same document. The rhetorical power of language is thus vividly presented especially in diplomatic communication.

Throughout the book, the author masterfully places the case of the shogun in a wider global and especially Asian context, in contrast with China, India, Siam, Portugal, and so on. Therefore, this is not only a comprehensive work of the Dutch company and the foreign policy of the Tokugawa regime but also an inspiring study that scholars and teachers who are interested in world history will find extremely useful.

#### Note

[1]. Fudan daxue wenshi yanjiu yuan, *Shijie shi zhong de Dongya haiyu* 世界史中的東亞海域 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 7.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

**Citation:** Xiaolin Duan. Review of Clulow, Adam. *The Company and the Shogun: The Dutch Encounter with Tokugawa Japan*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. May, 2015.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=43092>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.