

Michael Laver, *The Dutch East India Company in Early Modern Japan: Gift Giving and Diplomacy* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020, 184 pp., ISBN 9781350126039).

Founded in Amsterdam in 1602, the Dutch East India Company (Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, VOC) was the most powerful European commercial force in Asia for two centuries. The commercial force of the Dutch East India Company included political and, when necessary, military force. From their Asian base of operations at Batavia (Jakarta), the Company facilitated trade throughout Asia, and between Asia and Europe. And, after Tokugawa Iemitsu issued the *sakoku* edicts in the 1630s, the Dutch East India Company had a European monopoly on direct trade relations with Japan. The Dutch brought Chinese silk, Indian textiles, and porcelain to Japan to trade for Japanese silver, gold, and copper. As previously researched and discussed by several scholars, Dutch East India Company officials submitted to numerous regulations and restrictions ordered by the Tokugawa shogunate in order to maintain their trade relationship with Japan. While not necessarily a regulation, the Dutch quickly realized that ‘plying the Shogun and his officials with gifts [...] was the cost of doing business’ (vii).

Michael Laver’s *The Dutch East India Company in Early Modern Japan: Gift Giving and Diplomacy* is a detailed yet readable study of the economic, diplomatic, and cultural aspects of the gift giving relationship between Dutch merchants at Deshima in Nagasaki and the Japanese officials they interacted with in Nagasaki and in Edo. In today’s world, a company presenting lavish and exotic gifts to officials of a foreign country in order to maintain a business relationship would be considered unethical and probably illegal. But until relatively recently, such gift giving between companies and government officials was a commonplace business practice. The Dutch, as shown by Laver’s research in VOC archives and from the diaries of the chief merchants at Deshima, rarely complained about the necessity of gift giving, though they did sometimes complain about specific Japanese requests for gifts. Camels (two times), water buffaloes (two times), and Persian horses (a few times) were requests from shogunal officials that drew complaints from the Dutch chief merchants. Nevertheless, the Dutch complied with these expensive and logistically difficult requests for such megafauna.

For the shogun, the presentation of these animals and all elaborate gifts was not simply meant to satisfy their desire to gawk at foreign and exotic items. The gifts presented by the Dutch were in large part meant to demonstrate to the *daimyo* (‘great lords’, who ruled over their domains with relative autonomy, but were under the authority of the shogun’s

government) in attendance at the elaborate gift presentation audiences in Edo that foreigners from Europe were willing to surmount all manner of logistical obstacles to pay homage to the shogun and the Tokugawa *bakufu* (the government of the shogun). Thus, the shogun's power over foreigners was clearly demonstrated by the gifts themselves and the gift giving presentations.

Telescopes, spectacles, globes, pistols, medicine chests, narwhale horns, food, wine, and books (after 1720) were among the more common gifts to the shogun and Tokugawa officials who facilitated the trade relationship between the Dutch and Japan. More than one chief merchant of the Dutch East India Company referred to these gifts as 'trifles' and 'curiosos', presumably because the Company was well-accustomed to presenting gifts to government authorities wherever they traded in Asia. Yet, as Laver demonstrates, the gift giving 'system of reciprocity' in Japan was more systematic and often more elaborate than elsewhere, especially when the chief merchant and other VOC officials made their annual journey from Nagasaki to Edo for the required audience with the shogun.

Although noted in a previous publication by Leonard Blussé, one of Laver's mentors, Inoue Masashige was a major facilitator for the Dutch East India Company for more than twenty years in the seventeenth century. In diaries of the chief merchants in the volumes of the *Deshima Dagregisters*, Inoue is often praised for resolving problems and advising them on appropriate gifts for individual officials. This is ironic, perhaps, because at the same time Inoue was facilitating and advising the Dutch, he was also the Inspector General empowered to find, investigate, and torture Japanese Christians until they died or renounced their faith (Inoue is featured in Endo Shusaku's novel, *Silence*, and in Martin Scorsese's film version of the same novel). Unlike the Spanish and Portuguese, who came to Japan in the late fifteenth century and early sixteenth century and were interested in trade and spreading their Catholic faith to Japanese, members of the Dutch East India Company were only interested in trade and there is no evidence they were interested in spreading their Protestant faith in Japan.

Laver also discusses three missions to Japan by the Americans in the first half of the nineteenth-century, culminating in U.S. Commodore Matthew Perry's 1853-1854 mission that resulted in 'opening' Japan to more Western commerce and diplomatic relations. He demonstrates the American government was aware of the gift giving arrangements of the Dutch East India Company and brought gifts they believed would impress the Japanese, such as the working 'toy train' (120-121). While Commodore Perry and the first American minister (ambassador) to Japan, Townsend Harris, sometimes refused to follow the Tokugawa *bakufu*'s rules and suggestions when it came to negotiations, they often followed social arrangements, such as gift giving, as the cost of doing business.

In addition to Blussé, Laver makes good use of and cites the work of Martha Chaiklin, Adam Clulow, Grant Goodman, Cynthia Viallé, Iwao Seiichi, Katagiri Kazuo, Timon Screech, and Suzuki Yasuko, in addition to utilizing archives related to the Dutch East India Company in the Netherlands and in Tokyo. And the author is certainly well versed on most political, economic, and social topics of the Tokugawa Era. Through his research and his use of the research of other scholars, Laver presents a readable, coherent, and detailed study of gift giving and its importance to the Dutch East India Company in maintaining its trade relationship with Tokugawa leaders. This work also demonstrates the perpetual effort put forth by the chief merchants of the VOC to satisfy a number of Japanese officials through gifts and displays of obedience to the rules of the shogunate. The author is redundant in telling the reader ‘the gifts were a social and economic lubricant’, ‘a system of reciprocity’, and a demonstration of the shogun’s authority and legitimacy to the daimyo with numerous examples of the gift giving process. Yet, it is clear the Dutch East India Company realized quickly how important gift giving was in Japan and viewed this as part of their regular duties in order to maintain the favor of the shogun and his officials in Nagasaki and in Edo. For more than two centuries, the Dutch East India Company successfully maintained their Western trade monopoly with Japan, and Michael Laver presents us with clear evidence their careful attention to gift giving was a significant factor of that success.

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