

Just Playing Games? European Trade and Empire in Asia, 1500-1800

Zoltán Biedermann
Professor of Early Modern History
University College London

An object made in a workshop in Bengal, China or Japan in the early seventeenth century was many times more likely to end up in Europe than one made a hundred years earlier. This increase in mobility is at the heart of what we call early globalisation. In 1498, at the eve of the Portuguese arrival in India, no European operations existed in Asia. By 1620, the picture was very different. Even though nearly all of Asia's maritime shores remained in Asian hands, Europeans now occupied a series of strategic ports, allowing them to conduct trade within the region and syphon off some of the most profitable products towards the markets of the Atlantic world.

Twenty years earlier, at the end of the sixteenth century, the Portuguese had been the only Europeans – apart from the Spanish in the Philippines – to possess a system of fortified positions east of the Cape of Good Hope: Mozambique, Hormuz, Diu, Daman, Bassein, Goa, Mangalore, Cannanore, Cochin, Colombo, Malacca, Macao and Amboina were just some of the ports where the Portuguese claimed sovereignty and conducted trade, apparently at least, under their own rules. By 1620, new competitors were all around them. The Dutch were building Batavia on the ruins of Djakarta, conquered the previous year, thus creating their new capital in the East. The Danish were doing something similar at Tranquebar on the Coromandel Coast of India, albeit more modestly and under the watchful eyes of the rulers of Tanjore. English traders had a factory at Surat and engaged in diplomacy with the Mughals, putting pressure on the Portuguese *Estado*. Soon they would be involved in a successful attack on Portuguese Hormuz in the Persian Gulf. Further east, tensions were on the rise, too. Portuguese and Spanish mercantile interests in Southeast and East Asia were under pressure as Dutch power in the region grew. The expulsion of the Portuguese from Japan and their replacement by a Dutch factory at Deshima, in the bay of Nagasaki, was still nineteen years away – but change was in the air.

Observing the imperial game

Around 1620, an object might thus go straight from an Asian marketplace to Lisbon or Mexico, as it would have in the late 1500s. Or it might now go directly to other ports in England, the Netherlands, Denmark, and soon France. It is tempting, under such circumstances, to invoke a gaming metaphor: as a prelude to the so-called 'Great Game' played by European-based powers in Central Asia in the nineteenth century, Europeans active in Maritime Asia engaged in a tussle with global implications two hundred years earlier, jostling to determine who would control the movement of things. As with all such matters, today we may be tempted to sit back, watch, and perhaps feel entertained. Even as we gain an increasingly pressing sense of the disruption Europeans have caused around the globe through imperial expansion, colonialism, racialisation and the mass enslavement and displacement of fellow humans, we often look back on the period of 1500–1800 in wonder. We stand in awe as we contemplate the boldness of early maritime voyages, the richness of human encounters on beaches and ports across the

globe, and the diversity of interactions and material exchanges. We admire the groundbreaking conversations maintained by our ancestors across often deep cultural divides. Portuguese and later Spanish, Dutch, English, French, Danish and Swedish navigators, we maintain, created new routes, commercial enterprises, and at times bold imperial projects across the globe. They came to Asia attracted by the region's burgeoning economies, to purchase goods, make a profit, and learn about things unknown in Europe.

The diplomatic and commercial encounters upon which much of the European presence in Asia before 1800 was based were remarkable instances of cross-cultural communication. At the same time, the lives and livelihood of many people were often at play, as armed violence was often involved. For the soldiers who would have to risk their lives in an attack on a city, and for the families whose homes and livelihoods might be at stake, any 'games' played by their leaders, by successful companies and empires, were more than just a flourish signalling the emergence of a new, globally interconnected world. It is good to remind ourselves of the tensions as well as the beauty of early modern encounters. In every commercial transaction, every conversation between people from different societies, with different cultural backgrounds, we can observe signs of understanding and misunderstanding. Integration and disintegration, connections and disconnections grew out of the same conversations, often at the very same time (Biedermann, 2021). To grasp the simultaneity of beauty and brutality, the inextricably intertwined forces of connectivity and disconnection, is the challenge historians of early global interactions face today. And it is a challenge that historians seek to share with their audiences even as they gasp at the beauty of objects brought from Asia to Europe hundreds of years ago.

A world of trade

The history of European empires, trade and migrations in Asia is complex and traversed by contradictions. As we observe those events from a distance, it is inevitable that contrasting narratives and interpretations emerge. All narratives, however, touch in one way or another on material exchanges. At a time when very few Asians came to Europe, Europeans came to Asia mostly for trade. Asia – or rather, certain regions of Asia – functioned as the beating economic heart of the old ecumene comprising Asia, Africa and Europe even as the Americas began to emerge on the Atlantic horizon (Pomeranz, 2001). India, China, Japan and other countries in the Indian Ocean and Pacific regions produced and consumed some of the most valuable commodities in the known world, its elites revelled in immense material wealth, its vast populations expounded and absorbed unimaginable quantities of goods, and its markets had no equivalent. Europeans came to seek out opportunities, because opportunities abounded. Europeans came to purchase goods in Asia and re-sell them elsewhere – be that in Europe or Africa or, increasingly, in the Americas. The largest profits were often those made by participating in the trade that connected Asian and East African regions with each other (the English called it the Country Trade): taking cotton cloth from Gujarat to the Swahili Coast, spices from the Maluku Islands to South China, horses from Persia and Arabia to India, and so on – including, of course, human beings transformed into saleable and transportable commodities. This was in many ways an age of 'partnership' and 'contained conflict', albeit not one that benefitted everyone involved (King & Pearson, 1979; Subrahmanyam, 1990).

To understand what trade entailed – and how it gave rise to permanent, imperial or non-imperial European presence in Asia – it is key to start with its basic material conditions. Trade in the early modern period was slow by modern standards. Much of the Asian trade involving Europeans was maritime, and whilst ships could move relatively fast from one region to another within Asia (for example, it was possible to sail from Aden to Calicut in a matter of weeks, while caravans on the land would take months), ships relied on weather patterns that often forced traders to stay put for months on end once they reached a port (McPherson 1993; Gommans, 2015). The seasonal coming and going of trading communities is one of the reasons why it is so difficult to give a good estimate of the population of a place like Malacca, for example, which has been said to have had anywhere between twenty and a hundred thousand inhabitants in the early sixteenth century (Reid, 1980). Arab traders would often settle in ports from East Africa to China and enter marriage contracts there, thus creating new households even as they kept their older allegiances in the Middle East. Portuguese sailors, soldiers and merchants would naturally develop their own, multicentric lives with multiple allegiances as they realised that, to trade in India, some of them at least had to stay in India (Russell-Wood, 1993). Later, many Dutch, English, French and other European-born men followed in their footsteps.

Transactions, too, took time. Arriving in a port, making arrangements for a safe anchoring spot, dealing with local officials, engaging with local rulers, choosing the right place to live in and store merchandise and money, finding the right people to talk to or reconnecting with old partners, catching up on the regional news, organising supplies of food and drink, looking after one's spiritual needs – all this took time and involved considerable expertise. Transactions were about much more than finding the right goods for the right price. They could take weeks or even months to be completed: trust needed to be established, intelligence to be gathered about availability and quality, consultations to be had about competing producers and middlemen. The timing and logistics of deliveries had to be discussed, goods packaged, handled, transported, cleared through customs. The quality of goods had to be examined, and examined again, as no two batches of the same good were guaranteed to be of the same standard.

With time comes an increase in opportunities for encounters and cultural exchanges – in other words, for mutual discovery (Flores, 2007). There was time to meet new people and learn from them during lengthy receptions and common meals; time to familiarise oneself with new habits, materials and artefacts, including games; time to play those games with people as trust was gradually established. There was also time to return to one's temporary dwellings, discuss and procure a game newly discovered, adopt it, integrate it into one's own life by playing it with one's own fellow travellers. Inevitably, some artefacts, including games, would gain popularity and begin circulating. Some would spread from Asia to other continents, where they might be adapted or reinvented. The games that survived – as physical artefacts originally produced in Asia, or as copies produced elsewhere – bear testimony to the rich cultural exchanges that occurred between Europeans and Asians even as some rather unpleasant processes unfolded on other fronts. They remind us of Europeans and Asians who met and talked, and also of the countless mediators who increasingly could not fit neatly in one or the other category because they developed new, transcultural identities.

Naturally, time also brings opportunities for friction and confrontation. European expansion may have been motivated in large measure by the material attraction that Asian markets exerted, but we also know that this was not always a peaceful process. Firstly, because business

itself is full of potential for conflict. For markets to function, for encounters and exchanges to unfold peacefully and productively, there need to be – very much like in games – strong rules. There is also a need for mechanisms to enforce them. Things can easily go wrong, and violence can quickly break out when trust is lost. Commercial transactions rarely happen in a political void, without the protection afforded by a political authority. Taxes will be levied, leading to frictions between authorities and traders. But at the same time, traders look to authorities for protection. Most parties involved in trade in Asia would agree on this simple, near universal truth: there can be no prosperity without justice and, one is bound to add, no justice without taxation. The conditions might not be uniform for everyone involved, the rules not followed by everyone in equal manner, but a semblance at least of accountability is crucial anywhere for the establishment of relative commercial trust and predictability. This was always going to be a challenge in early modern times, before the establishment of modern legal systems, including international law and international organisations.

From trade to politics

To conduct trade in the early modern period, it was crucial to make a sustained effort to understand, and indeed to help create, the conditions under which trade could happen. This was a political challenge, not just a commercial one. When the Portuguese arrived in Calicut in 1498, they and their local counterparts – a Hindu ruler, a powerful, well-established Muslim trading community – famously failed to make a successful exchange happen. They could not agree on the basic rules. A little further south, in the port of Cochin, they found more fertile ground for interactions. This involved some complicated politics. The local ruler – the *raja* of Cochin – found an interest in the Portuguese not only as trading partners, but also as military allies. He could use them to support his ambition to gain power vis-à-vis the ruler of Calicut. He could host them, allow them to anchor their ships, trade, and even build a fort. It was only a few steps, under such conditions, from trade to warfare. These aspects became inextricably intertwined across Asia (for an overview of Portuguese activities in Asia see Disney, 2006).

The Portuguese realised very soon after their arrival in the Indian Ocean in 1498 that they could make a profit by choosing one of three tactics, or any possible combination: to loot the existing trade; to tax it; or to participate in it (Disney, 2007). They, like other Europeans over the following three centuries, did some of all this. Portuguese and later Dutch, English, French and Danish traders all came on ships that were sturdier than the Asian average, and heavily armed. Gunpowder was of course widely employed in Asian warfare, but on the seas, its use had been limited. The ability to sink an enemy vessel by firing multiple cannon from a moving ship gave the Portuguese considerable clout. Soon, Asian merchants and rulers would also discover the ability of Portuguese men disembarking from those ships to fight successfully on the land. The exact reasons remain a subject of debate, but clearly included good military training in the battlefields of North Africa, the presence of German and Flemish gunners, and a fighting spirit exacerbated at times by religious zeal, in particular what we would today call Islamophobia. On such grounds, the Portuguese entered Asian politics from a peculiar position: extremely vulnerable due to their minute numbers, on the one hand; yet feared for their destructive capabilities and sometimes unpredictable behaviour, on the other (see e.g. Biedermann, 2018).

The same can be said of other Europeans in Asia. As they entered the Indian Ocean, the Dutch seemed a controllable force especially on the land. The Dutch authorities emphasised the need

for diplomacy in order to conduct peaceful trade. Yet at the same time, the vast amounts of capital flowing into the Amsterdam-based trade almost inevitably also created vast military capabilities, disrupting the power balance in the Indian Ocean very swiftly. The Dutch VOC quickly built up naval capabilities that, in terms of numbers of ships and cannon, were unrivalled (Gommans & Emmer, 2020). The VOC may have been more reluctant to put ‘boots on the ground’ than the Portuguese Estado: for instance, fortresses were deliberately designed in such a way as to minimise the personnel needed to maintain and defend them. But in every case of European intrusion into Asian waters, the powers exerted on the water led to pressures on the land.

It was against this backdrop of naval capabilities that relationships between Asians and Europeans developed. Each Asian ruler had to gauge the potential impact of European activities carefully. This involved complicated political and economic calculations because, of course, seaborne Europeans were extremely mobile. To refuse contact in one port could cause Europeans to travel to another port and create disruption with the help of another ruler. It was on these grounds that the Portuguese gained many footholds in Asia. In some places, the Portuguese felt unwelcome and moved on. In others, they might be allowed to trade seasonally; in others yet, to stay and establish a permanent trading post (a *feitoria* or factory). The latter could, in some cases, become a fortified structure, or indeed a full-blown fort housing a permanent garrison – which could serve as a base for naval operations, but also for terrestrial offensive activities. Occasionally, the Portuguese sensed an opportunity to outright conquer a port city they deemed important for their activities. This happened most spectacularly at Goa (1510) and Malacca (1511). Hormuz was subjected to ‘conquest’ twice, in 1507 and 1515. Aden, by contrast, resisted a Portuguese attack in 1513 and remained untouched by western rule until it became British.

Famously, the conquests of Hormuz, Goa and Malacca created a ‘backbone’ for Portuguese empire building in the East. It is important to remind ourselves at this point that this decisive constellation only emerged after more than a decade of trial and error. Among the first outposts were Mozambique, Cannanore and Cochin. Two early forts – Soqotra and Angediva – were abandoned after just a few years of unfruitful occupation. To look at a map and choose footholds on the grounds of geographical position alone does not warrant success. Both Soqotra and Angediva may have seemed to offer strategically valuable, easily defensible island positions near important bottlenecks of maritime trade (the entrance to the Red Sea, the central section of India’s western littoral), yet they proved entirely inadequate in practice. The action, one might say, was elsewhere. What prompted the Portuguese to reconfigure their constellation of terrestrial outposts was thus not the hubris of lone empire builders, but rather the hubris of empire builders aware of the need to harness the powers of existing polities, markets and networks (overviews in Bethencourt & Chaudhuri, 1998; Disney, 2007; Subrahmanyam, 2007).

After Afonso de Albuquerque took control of the Hormuz-Goa-Malacca axis, which gave the Portuguese a grip on the ‘silk roads of the sea’ connecting China with India and the Middle East, many other, smaller possessions were added. In fact, some of these were not at all insignificant, and in terms of social and cultural exchange – for example, the playing and transmitting of games – such places as Diu (from 1535), Bombay and Bassein (1534), Daman (1559), Mangalore (1568) or Cannanore (1503) may well have played an important role. Beyond these official possessions of the Estado da Índia, other, informal colonies grew

spontaneously where Portuguese traders could make a living, as long as the local authorities were willing to tolerate their presence. In fact, the *Estado* itself allowed, during certain periods, the dispersal of its personnel. After 1518 in particular, thousands of soldiers got dispersed (the process is known as the *grande soltura*) and many regrouped in a series of informal colonies. One such place was Mylapore – São Tomé de Meliapor – where Portuguese men sought financial independence from the structures of Portuguese colonial society, whilst being close to one of the most venerated relics of Christianity in the Orient. Other such colonies (Masulipatnam, Hughli, Chittagong) flourished around the Bay of Bengal, constituting a realm that historians have designated as the ‘Shadow Empire’ – a place where the Portuguese Crown struggled to exert authority, although of course it later became a key point of entry for British power into India. In China, Macao became a port where Portuguese traders were allowed to live and prosper, and Portuguese institutions could flourish, whilst still remaining juridically under Chinese sovereignty. Many Portuguese individuals also left all semblance of a Christian life behind and settled as merchants and mercenaries in realms such as Pegu, in modern Myanmar (for an overview see Subrahmanyam, 1993; Thomaz 1994).

European rivalries in Asia

By the time other European nations began to ponder a permanent presence in Asia, the ‘Portuguese Empire’ was a multifaceted, complex, often contradictory and even incomprehensible formation, and its long ‘shadow’ made it even more resistant to simple classification. Certainly, the Portuguese can be said to have adapted successfully to conditions across many regions of Asia, and were themselves, to some extent, ‘Asians’. The *Estado da Índia* itself, with its complicated diplomatic, military and trading systems, can be correctly described, in part, as an Asian polity. Because it was – apart from the Spanish who had begun to settle in the Philippines in 1565, connecting Manila to Mexico across the Pacific – the sole European power in the East for a hundred years. Despite countless crisis, parts of it remained resilient over the next two centuries as well, during which time it played a crucial role in material and cultural exchange.

When the Dutch entered Asian waters, they went for Southeast rather than South Asia at first. An attack on the Portuguese fort of Amboina in 1605 was successful, but the more ambitious attack against Malacca in 1606 failed. The VOC became heavily disruptive on the seas (Murteira, 2014). From the 1610s onwards, the Dutch also used a route going directly from the Cape of Good Hope to the Sunda Strait separating Sumatra and Java. They briefly considered Bantan for their headquarters (the Portuguese had pondered this, too), before settling for Djakarta, soon known as Batavia, in 1619. Like Goa and Malacca before, this city was conquered thanks to the willingness of key local players to cooperate with the European newcomers diplomatically and militarily. The full-frontal Dutch assault on the *Estado* began with the capture of Malacca in 1641. A period of intense rivalry ensued, with Europeans clashing in Asia in the quest for profit (Furber, 1976). As VOC fleets inflicted increasing damage on Portuguese armadas, the *Estado* was weakened even in its original heartland. Colombo fell in 1656, Jaffna in 1658, and Cochin in 1662.

In the meantime, English ships had also made an appearance in Asian waters. A long tradition of trade with Muscovy and the Levant took English travellers to the Orient. In 1600, the East India Company (EIC) was founded, and yearly voyages to Asia ensued. A first English factory

appeared at Bantam in Java in 1603, a second one at Masulipatnam in 1611, and a third at Surat in 1612. The English, too, engaged in activities designed to undermine Portuguese dominance, projecting power even as they aspired primarily to trade (Stern, 2011). An Anglo-Persian alliance led to the expulsion of the Portuguese from Hormuz in 1622. But much of the EIC's expansion – with larger outposts at Bombay (1668), Madras (1639) and Calcutta (1690) – occurred during a later period. With the *Estado* too fragile to compete for supremacy, the following century would be marked by fierce Anglo-Dutch rivalry on the one hand, and a remarkable residual survival of Portuguese networks on the other, with some prosperous times still ahead, for example in Macao. Historians have long discussed the reasons for Portuguese decline, weighing up internal causes, such as organisational decadence and moral exhaustion, against external ones, such as the material impacts of Dutch and English attacks (Van Veen, 2000; Valladares, 2001). Clearly, the material reality of three yearly fleets being dispatched from the Netherlands as opposed to one from Portugal made a difference. If we shift our perspective only slightly, however, the much more interesting matter becomes how Portuguese structures and networks remained in place across Asia for so long, and to understand this, it is important to take other factors into consideration. This includes the willingness of Asian powers to tolerate Europeans and play their own “games”. For example, Macao survived as a Portuguese commercial hub thanks to Chinese interests even as Canton/Guangzhou grew to greater importance for the European trade in the eighteenth century. Equally important were the structural characteristics of European enterprises and their relative adaptability to diverse Asian contexts.

Portuguese resilience is particularly notable when compared with the volatility of two further European presences in Asia. The French *Compagnie des Indes Orientales* was created with state support in 1664, following up on earlier attempts to conduct trade in the region. An early French position in Madagascar was soon abandoned again, while outposts did survive on Réunion and Mauritius. Following a profound crisis, the company was refounded in 1719 and its main entrepôt in India became Pondicherry. But up to the middle of the eighteenth century, French forces had a comparatively limited impact on the larger picture (Haudrère, 2014). Not far from their headquarters was Tranquebar, the city where the Danish East India Company had built up its own centre of operations since 1619 (Diller, 1999). The Danish company had outposts at Masulipatnam, Surat and Balasore, but its capabilities declined early, in the 1640s. The enterprise went through three cycles of existence, between 1616 and 1650, then between 1670 and 1729, and then from 1730 as the *Asiatisk Kompagni*. In fact, in 1731 yet another Scandinavian East India Company was founded, this time in Gothenburg. The Swedish concentrated their trade at Surat and Canton. It is tempting to conclude that companies tend to be more volatile than state-like formations when it comes to establishing a permanent presence far from their homelands. Even Portugal created a trade organisation of this sort – the *Companhia da Índia Oriental* founded in 1628 – that was short-lived and unable to change the *modus operandi* of Portuguese trade in the region.

All companies followed the notion that, to conduct trade in Asia, more capital was needed than that at the disposal of the Portuguese Crown. There was a widespread perception that Portuguese expansion in Asia had been weighed down by its political and social ballast. In Asia, the Portuguese created a state-like structure, both hierarchical and institutionally complex, with numerous social groups and institutions competing against each other for resources. Political, fiscal, judicial, military, municipal and even religious officials all sought

to conduct their own operations both in the name of Crown or Church *and* to further their own group-based interests. Family networks were crucial and dominated in the redistribution of resources. It has thus often been argued that the Portuguese system in Asia was ‘less modern’ than that of other European nations (Van Veen, 2000). The EIC and the VOC in particular functioned as successful joint stock companies, channelling huge investments into trade and navigation and extracting even larger profits.

The reality was obviously far more complex than such schematic interpretations suggest. To begin with, the Portuguese *Estado* followed the rationality of its own day when it was created in the early 1500s, almost a century before any other European organisation managed to gain a foothold east of the Cape of Good Hope. Secondly, whilst much money was apparently squandered across the *Estado* and its countless fortresses and factories, the cash flow supported a complex colonial society far beyond the narrow logics of a simple company. In terms of naval capabilities, cartography and military technology, the *Estado* was a highly efficient, world-leading organisation during its heyday (Almeida, 2018). On the other side of the divide, companies were rarely the beacons of financial rationality they liked to present themselves as. Then as now, companies were riddled by corruption, violent competition, and a propensity to project power – often at a huge financial and human cost – well beyond the objectives established in their charters (Boxer, 1965).

Ironically, too, the two most successful companies, the VOC and the EIC, can be said to have perpetuated their presence in Asia precisely by adopting to the realities that the *Estado* had helped create. Both the Dutch and the English replicated, partly at least, the process of state formation that the Portuguese undergone. The Dutch in particular followed the path from maritime hegemony to territorial conquest and colonisation laid out earlier by the Portuguese, most spectacularly in Sri Lanka and Java (Biedermann, 2018; Schrikker, 2007; Kwee, 2006). As for the EIC, the impact that its own process of politicisation and territorialisation had on Asia is widely known. By the time the EIC was extinguished, Britain was on its way to being not just a global maritime power, but also a colonial power in South Asia on a scale not seen before. Any comparison between Portuguese, Dutch, English and other European enterprises in the East is bound to produce complex, at times contradictory conclusions, depending on the perspective taken by historians.

A world of diplomacy and urban sophistication

If there is one common theme cutting across all European presences in Asia beyond trade, it is diplomacy – not just as a friendly forum for intercultural dialogue, but as a means to regulate interactions, channel the potential for mutual aggression, and consolidate new power relations. Diplomacy was crucial for the establishment of Europeans across Asia throughout the entire early modern period. It was the precondition for the presence of Portuguese, Dutch, English, French and Danish merchants, companies and imperial agents. Wherever we look in the chronicles and other sources narrating early modern encounters, people negotiated not just the prices of goods, but also the conditions under which exchanges took place and the political meanings that could be attached to them. A successful business deal tells stakeholders and other observers a lot about the conditions involved, including relations of power. Whenever we purchase something, the price we pay reflects not only the relation between supply and demand,

but also the conditions of power that exist between supplier and consumer. These conditions are made explicit and shaped to fit various stakeholders' needs through diplomacy.

The comparative study of cross-cultural diplomacy in early modern Asia has only just begun. It is already possible to state without much doubt that diplomatic exchanges in this context were among the most powerfully diverse, multicultural communicational events in human history. To begin with, diplomacy was everywhere. It framed and supported the conduct of trade and the settling of Europeans. Apart from some unilateral conquests mentioned earlier in this overview, many settlement arrangements involved diplomatic negotiations with local rulers who felt either coerced or tempted (or a combination of the two) into hosting the newcomers. Importantly, diplomacy served as a key mechanism for material and cultural exchanges. Diplomatic gifts in particular conveyed a sense of what was available in each region in terms of high-end production (Biedermann, Gerritsen & Riello, 2018). Gifts whetted all participants' appetites for new trading opportunities, but it is only relatively recently that they have become an object of systematic study. Games in particular are likely to have been among the objects transacted, even though at present we know of few examples. Diplomacy unfolded first in the many ports and nearby courts of what historians and geographers call 'Maritime Asia'. Soon, Europeans also made their entry into the life of larger, more magnificent courts in the mainland Empires of Asia – and, of course, countless smaller courts, especially in Southeast Asia and Japan. A tension often existed between the interactions of Europeans with authorities near the sea and those larger, more complex courts further inland. Here, Europeans started their careers as minor players in the face of magnificent, vast court gatherings. They gained importance over the decades precisely if they could convince continental rulers of their strategic importance in maritime trade – or, when it came to the Mughals, European powers' ability to disrupt the maritime pilgrimage of Muslims to Arabia.

Along the shores of the Indian Ocean and South China Sea, Europeans either dwelled in cities controlled by Asian rulers and merchant networks, or built their own, near-sovereign environments. The comparative study of European urban practices in Asia is very much in its infancy today, but some aspects are obvious to anyone. Whether it was Portuguese Goa, English Madras, Danish Tranquebar, French Pondicherry, or Dutch Batavia, all these cities were much more than simply 'European cities' casually established in Asia (Biedermann, forthcoming). They were large maritime ports and trading centres, home to bustling markets and warehouse complexes inhabited by communities with many different linguistic and religious backgrounds. Naturally, cohabitation was more or less successful according to the varying degrees of toleration that Europeans brought with them and were willing to adopt in Asia. Generally speaking, it is probably correct to state that European authorities struggled with the notion of allowing every religious group to follow their own creed and practice their own justice with full autonomy and under the full protection of the state. Pressure on Goan Muslims and Hindus to convert to Catholicism, for example, began to mount in and around Goa as the sixteenth century progressed, with shocking and lasting results for non-compliant families or communities (Xavier, 2008). In Batavia, a relatively peaceful coexistence gave way to deadly clashes and segregation after 1740. The comparative history of racist attitudes and cosmopolitan practices across European empires has yet to be written. For example, it has often been assumed that the Portuguese were 'better' at marrying into local societies, allowing for the formation of Creole populations under the umbrella of Catholicism. In reality, Dutch company servants also mingled intensely, often choosing their lovers and wives precisely

among the Christian communities that spoke Portuguese-based Creole languages (Niemeijer, 2005; Blussé, 2008).

Conclusion

The panorama of European presences and activities in Asia is as vast and complex as its two fundamental components: Europe was a mosaic of warring political formations, and Asia was even more diverse in terms of geographical environments, cultures and polities. Add to this the time factor – the fact that fundamental changes in the organisation of trade, politics and warfare occurred between 1500 and 1800 – and it becomes virtually impossible to draw a simple conclusion. European populations today can rightfully be expected to engage with the darker as well as the brighter aspects of their global historical heritage. The material heritage of European-Asian encounters bears testament to histories of brutality *and* coexistence, confrontation *and* cooperation. During the early modern period, European capabilities to inflict serious harm on Asian states were still limited, so the challenges this heritage poses today are in some ways less daunting than those posed by memories of conquest, enslavement and colonisation elsewhere. There is thus hope that historians and publics can engage together in critical dialogues about the past and embrace its contradictions, rather than shy away from them or take sides. That would indeed be the ultimate Great Game, and one that could benefit us all.

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