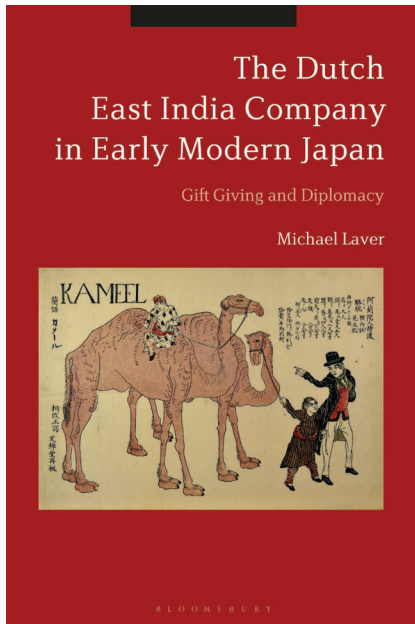


Review

Michael Laver, *The Dutch East India Company in Early Modern Japan. Gift Giving and Diplomacy*, London, Bloomsbury, 2020, 171 pp. ISBN 9781350246812.



Michael Laver's concise but wide-ranging study of the Dutch East India Company (voc) in Tokugawa Japan adopts the lens of gift exchange to provide a fascinating account of the political, social, and material engagements that facilitated and embodied the Japanese-Dutch relationship from the early seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century. This highly readable book demonstrates that gift-giving was crucial to the continuity of the Dutch commercial presence in Japan by focusing on two different yet connected levels. First, building on seminal works by Ronald Toby and Adam Clulow, Laver makes a compelling case for understanding the presentation of gifts to the shoguns and their representatives as a 'ritualistic act of submission' (14) meant to reinforce Tokugawa claims to authority within a Japan-centric worldview. Second, contributing to research on Japanese-Dutch gift exchange and material culture by Martha

Chaiklin, Cynthia Viallé, and others, Laver shows that the everyday regaling of Japanese officials with foreign goods, food items, and cordial entertainment served to sustain the social bonds of obligation and reciprocity that ensured the smooth functioning of Company trade. Offering detailed descriptions of a wide variety of gift items and the contexts in which they were presented, *The Dutch East India Company in Early Modern Japan* is the first book-length study of voc gift-giving anywhere in Asia.

One of the defining strengths of Laver's book is that it situates its explanation of Dutch gift-giving practices squarely within the political context of Tokugawa Japan. Having assumed political control by the start of the seventeenth century, the shoguns moved to strengthen their command over Japan at the expense of the feudal lords (daimyo). Starting in the 1630s, daimyo were required to attend on the shogun annually, spending half their time in Edo. That same decade, the shogunate also took extensive steps towards

establishing control over foreign relations: all Japanese were banned from travelling abroad, and the Spanish and Portuguese were banned from the country, whilst the Chinese and Dutch were permitted to trade only in Nagasaki, a port town brought under direct Tokugawa control. Here, the VOC was literally confined to the tiny man-made island of Deshima, closely watched by the magistrates (*bugyō*) appointed by the shogun to regulate foreign trade. It is against this backdrop, Laver argues, that the highly regular and regulated pattern of Dutch gift-giving should be understood as ‘a symbolic representation of the shogun’s control over all things foreign’ (56). In other words, the shogunate used ‘the yearly reenactment of Dutch servitude’ (viii) to ‘demonstrate to their vassals that it was the legitimate arbiter of power in Japan’ (35). Like the daimyo, the Dutch were required to make an annual journey to the shogunal court in Edo, performing their submission in a manner reminiscent of domestic vassals. At the same time, their foreignness was crucial to the message the shoguns sought to convey: that even ‘barbarians’ from the other side of the globe acknowledged their authority. Upholding this notion required that the Dutch court journeys (*hofreizen*) were undertaken year after year with hardly any variation. Only in 1764, as trade decreased, was the frequency of these expensive embassies reduced to every other year and subsequently to once every four years from 1790. Even then, gifts continued to be expected annually.

In a series of chapters focusing on different types of gifts, Laver argues that each of the foreign exotica presented by the Dutch contributed to shoring up Tokugawa power and prestige. These imported curiosities embodied the rare and extravagant, including live animals such as elephants, camels, oxen, buffaloes, cassowaries, ostriches, birds of paradise, and horses; works of art such as European paintings, Persian carpets, maps, globes, and glasswork such as mirrors; and technological instruments including telescopes, clocks, burning glasses, and even fire engines. Even when they were nominally sold, Laver argues, such items are best understood as ‘quasi-gifts’, procured in accordance with Japanese demand and exchanged far below their economic value. In addition to Japanese elite consumption, these chapters throw light on the wider networks of procurement and distribution the VOC tapped into, from the deerskins and rhinoceros horns from Southeast Asia, to the narwhal tusks from Greenland, and the ‘tent wine’ (*viño tinto*) from Spain. Wine was among the most common food items in the Dutch assortment of gifts, along with butter, cheese, almonds, smoked meat, and arrack, but also Japanese *sake*. Drawing productively on the translated *dagregisters* (factory journals) kept in Deshima, Laver also offers fascinating glimpses of everyday sociability between Dutch merchants and Japanese officials, such as when the latter visited the factory to dine or simply observe a Dutch game of billiards. This is also where interactions displayed a greater degree of reciprocity, with Japanese officials on their part presenting delicacies such as crane, swan, duck, carp, salmon, sweetmeats, and fruits.

Although complaints about the continual demands were frequent, Laver argues that the Dutch regarded the expensive gift-giving expected of them simply as ‘the cost of doing business’ (27). ‘They surely did not envision themselves actually becoming vassals of the Japanese Shogun’ (21), he writes. Here we may pause and question whether that scenario should really be dismissed out of hand. Whilst the interpretation of the Dutch merely playing along with the Japanese pageant of power is plausible, it is likewise true that it was

common across the early modern world for political actors to act as overlords in some relationships and as vassals in others. For the VOC to extend claims of power over certain Asian princes whilst submitting themselves to the authority of other powers when trading under their protection was simply in line with diplomatic practice in its area of operations. A longer book might have done more to engage with this larger diplomatic context. In the epilogue, Laver remarks on the similarities between the VOC's diplomatic approaches and those adopted by Commodore Perry in 1853-1854. Yet the parallels identified here reflect a much wider culture of early modern diplomacy, with Dutch or English diplomatic gift-giving in the Ottoman Empire or Mughal India (to name just two examples) offering very close similarities to the case of Tokugawa Japan. Laver's superb study, therefore, raises important questions for further research. The case study it presents will be warmly welcomed by scholars and students interested in the VOC, gift-giving, and diplomacy. Future research might show how much of the gift culture observed in Japan was typical of that context, and how experiences in Japan influenced and were influenced by the Dutch East India Company's more extensive diplomatic network.

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