

Reminiscent of 'The Age of Partnership': VOC diplomatic letters from Batavia

The collection of VOC diplomatic letters that belonged to Governor-General Johan van Hoorn (1653-1711), travelled from old Batavia, to Amsterdam, to St. Petersburg. These gold-leafed Malay letters are a reminder of the expansion of European maritime trade in Asia. The letters, written and addressed to van Hoorn in different languages and scripts, are not only exemplary of the fine art of Malay letter-writing, but also of the diplomatic rituals of that time.

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THE FAMOUS RUSSIAN academic and antiquarian Nicolay Petrovich Likhachev (1862-1936) wrote that the lives of extraordinary people determine the fates of their collections after their deaths. During his own life, as an outstanding scholar and collector, Likhachev collected various rarities, among them some diplomatic letters of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), dating back to the 17th-18th centuries. The letters had travelled with their owner Governor-General Johan van Hoorn (1653-1711) from old Batavia to Amsterdam in 1710, and then to St. Petersburg in 1910.¹ Almost all of the fifty-four gold-leafed Malay letters were written between the years of 1682-1710, by captains and indigenous rulers from various Malay states, and addressed to the Governor-General in Batavia. These years fall within, what Dutch historian F. de Haan has observed in his monumental work *Oud Batavia*, as Batavia's period of prosperity (1690-1730).²

Batavia and ceremonial displays of courtesy

Batavia was established as the VOC headquarters in 1619; it resembled a typical colonial castle with a European-planned rectangular town behind the castle's walls. The famous traveler Valentijn, who visited the town at the beginning of the 18th century, called it the *Koningin van het Oosten* [Queen of the Orient] in his description of the prosperous new ports in the China Sea region, along with Canton and Nagasaki.³ The town was crisscrossed by canals and bridges reminiscent of Holland, and the most exquisite buildings in Batavia were situated on the beautiful *Tijgergracht* [Tiger Canal]. Batavia was inhabited by several groups, including Dutch, *Mardijkers* (Asian Christians), Mestizos and Chinese. It is interesting to note that in contrast to Manila, where there was a clear segregation between Spaniards and Chinese settlers, in Batavia the Dutch, Asian Christians and Chinese residents lived within the walls of one and the same town, served by a large number of domestic slaves from different parts of the Malay Archipelago, who comprised half the town's population. Residents with other nationalities, such as Balinese, Bugis, Madurese, Ambonese and Moors, were concentrated in their own kampongs in the so called *Ommelanden*, the countryside outside of town.

Batavia became a powerful trading capital and practiced diplomatic relationships with its regional neighbors. Envoys from abroad were regularly received with much pomp; upon arrival they were accompanied to Batavia Castle, where the presentation of letters to the Governor-General and the councilors of the Indies took place. The ceremonial interchange of gold-leafed letters, accompanied by the exchange of gifts between Governor-General and the envoys, was exemplary of the great value given to the diplomatic relationships. In Malay culture the writing of such diplomatic correspondence achieved high artistic forms; it was a competition in courtesy. The colonial administration of the VOC also took part in the elaborate rituals and wrote letters in Arabic, Persian, Malay, Portuguese, Spanish and Chinese.

Chinese community and learned circles of Batavia

The VOC established well-organized civic structures in Batavia, again reminiscent of the homeland. The High Government, with the Governor-General at its head, appointed *kapiteinen* [captains] among the population, who functioned as mediators between the Governor-General, the VOC administration and the inhabitants. Significantly, the VOC treated the Chinese community as almost equal economic non-indigenous partners, providing them with comparable facilities such as a well-equipped hospital, Chinese temples and cemeteries, etc. The Chinese in Batavia were also granted special privileges with regard to trade. Batavia at that time was as much a Chinese city as a Dutch colonial one. The Chinese lived there in accordance with their own customs and with their own headmen, or captains, who in turn were subject to the colonial Dutch administration. The houses of the Chinese were scattered throughout the town. This relatively harmonious relationship lasted for a considerable period of time, until the Chinese massacre in 1740.⁴ The relationship was never restored after this tragedy, so a special Chinese town was built beyond the city walls.

The American historian H. Furber in his study "Rival Empires of Trade" characterized European activity in Asia in the 16th-18th centuries as 'The Age of Partnership', because during this period the VOC managed to collaborate with indigenous populations and Chinese settlers on the Malay Archipelago. Due to this Dutch collaborative policy, Batavia became a capital of regional power in the Java Sea. Dutch historian L. Blusse investigated Chinese sources and archives, and concluded that the VOC was a "strange company".⁵ Significantly, some VOC officials were clearly seeking something more than material profits in Asia. There was a great interest in the treasures of ancient Oriental knowledge, cultures, medicine and languages, but also in scientific discoveries, and this period saw a large number of individual fieldworkers travel into the world arena of exploration. Many of them came to Asia as VOC servants, supported by the outstanding learned personality of that time, burgomaster of Amsterdam Nicolaes Witsen (1641-1717). He maintained a correspondence with many people serving in the Indies, including his distant cousin J. van Hoorn. Thus, in spite of its commercial intents, the VOC also became a channel of 'knowledge transference' about the Orient. There existed a circle of learned Dutch in Batavia among the Company's elite, distinguished by their passion for Asian cultures and languages.

Johan van Hoorn is undoubtedly an interesting historical figure, not only as Governor-General of Java (1704-1709), but as a personality who possessed vast amounts of knowledge about the Javanese and Chinese cultures, and who contributed much to the transference of knowledge. His interest in Chinese culture was closely connected to his father Pieter van Hoorn, who was sent as VOC Ambassador to the court of the Chinese Emperor in 1665, accompanied by his young son. Pieter van Hoorn was famous for being a connoisseur of Chinese civilization. In 1675 he published the translation of the Chinese teaching, "The Ode to Confucius".⁶ In 1704, when J. van Hoorn became the Governor-General he began to put into action the ideas of his father. Both his private and business interests were closely intertwined with the Chinese community, in which he was greatly respected. Van Hoorn became famous in Batavia for his collaborative policies and close relationships with Chinese residents, even more so than with the indigenous population. A Chinese account of Batavia⁷ and Valentijn's memoirs both tell of the Chinese doctor *Tsebitja*, who was bestowed the privilege of staying in Batavia's castle and who treated Van Hoorn's family. He later accompanied the retired Governor-General J. van Hoorn to Amsterdam on board the ship *Sandenburg* in 1710.⁸

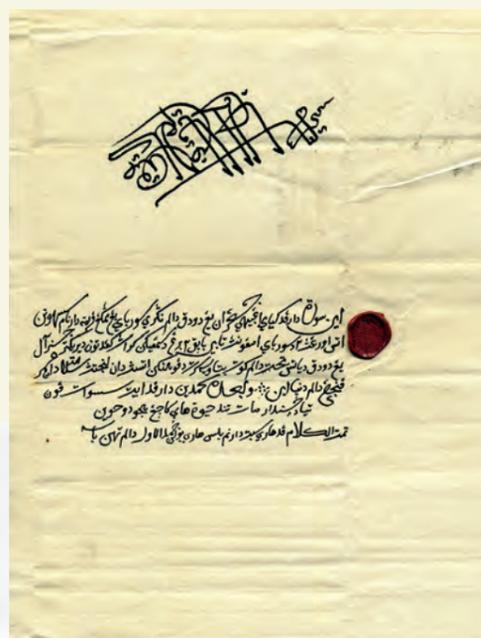
Van Hoorn's collection of letters

Van Hoorn maintained a vast correspondence with captains, local rulers and aristocracy during his service in the VOC administration (Head of the Chamber of Orphanage, President of the Extraordinary Councilor of the Indies, Director-General in 1691 and Governor-General 1704-1709). One of the most intriguing features of the Van Hoorn/Likhachev's collection is their linguistic and geographical diversity. Van Hoorn selected fifty-four letters to take along to Amsterdam. In this collection one can find a variety of scripts used for diplomatic correspondence at that time, namely Malay (*Jawi*), Javanese (*Pegon*, *Carakan*), Spanish, Old Dutch and Chinese. Moreover, the collection contains samples from almost all locations with which the VOC administration in Batavia had diplomatic and trading relationships, including from the Malay states Palembang, Japara, Malacca, Tallo, Gowa, Bima, Banten, Cirebon, one letter from Agra in India and a dozen from China.⁹ Most of the documents are written by prominent historical figures like Sultans, Princes, Governors and religious leaders representing a great variety of seals and signatures. Some of them contain important data with regard to VOC diplomatic relationships, linked to the life and service of J. van Hoorn. His choice of correspondence was most likely not accidental, but rather motivated by his exceptional knowledge of Oriental cultures, tremendous diplomatic experience and his fidelity to the ideals of his lifetime: collecting and transferring knowledge to Europe. The Malay letters, written and addressed to him in different languages and scripts are not only exemplary of the fine art of Malay letter-writing but also of the diplomatic rituals of that time, and are thereby an important primary source for the study of the political and economic history of the Dutch East Indies.

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References

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- 3 Valentijn, F. 1724-1726. *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indien*. 6 vols. Dordrecht /Amsterdam, IV-1.
- 4 After sugar prices declined and government repression had become too severe, Chinese sugar mill workers rioted, but were met with deadly force; eventually, nearly the entire Chinese population of 10,000 was killed.
- 5 Blusse, L. 1988. *Strange Company. Chinese settlers, Mestizo women and the Dutch in VOC Batavia*, KITLV Verhandelingen Serie No. 122., Leiden.
- 6 Booklet published by Joannes van den Eede, Boeck verkooper en Boeckdrucker der Ed. Compagnie: Batavische Mercurius, 1675. One copy is preserved in Museum Pusat, Jakarta.
- 7 "Kai-Pa Li-tai shih-chi" («The Historical records of the Foundation of Batavia Through the Ages») in L.Blusse. 1988. 'Strange Company' Ch. V ('Batavia 1619-1740: The Rise and Fall of Chinese Colonial Town') Verhandeling van het KITLV 122, p.75.
- 8 Blusse, L. 1990. "Chou Mei-Yeh's Voyage to the West", in de Poorter, E. & F. Vos (eds.) 1990. *As the Twig Is Bent ... Essays in honour of Frits Vos*, Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben.
- 9 Katkova, I.R. 2010. "Pisma Gollandskoy Ost-Indskoy Kompanii iz kollekzii N.P. Likhacheva v sobranii Instituta Vostochnih Rukopisej RAN", *Pismennije pamyatniki Vostoka* 1(12), Spb-Moskva.



Above:
OIC 17 Banten
Letter, Likhachev's
collection.

Left:
Batavia 1656,
F. de Haan Oud
Batavia Special
Collections of
Leiden University
Library, Mi577.

