The collection of VOC diplomatic letters that belonged to Governor-General Johan van Hoon (1653-1711), travelled from old Batavia, to Amsterdam, to St. Petersburg. These gold-leaded Malay letters are a reminder of the expansion of European maritime trade in Asia. The letters, written and addressed to van Hoon 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.

Johan van Hoon is undoubtedly an interesting historical figure, not only as Governor-General of Java (1704-1709), but also as a personality who possessed vast amounts of knowledge about the Javanese and Chinese cultures, and who contributed much to the transfer of knowledge. His interest in Chinese culture was closely connected to his father Pieter van Hoon, who was sent as VOC Ambassador to the court of the Chinese Emperor in 1665, accompanied by his young son. Pieter van Hoon was famous among contemporaries of Chinese civilization. In 1675 he published the translation of the Chinese teaching, “The Ode to Confucius.” In 1704, when J. van Hoon 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 Hoon became famous in Batavia for his collection policy, not only with Chinese residents, even more so than with the indigenous population. A Chinese account of Batavia and Valentijn’s memoirs both tell of the Chinese doctor Tsjibitja, who was bestowed the privilege of staying in Batavia’s castle and who treated Van Hoon’s family. He later accompanied the retired Governor-General J. van Hoon to Amsterdam on board the ship Sandenburg in 1710.

Van Hoon’s collection of letters

Van Hoon maintained a vast correspondence with captains, local rulers and aristocracy during his service in the VOC administration. As the Twig Is Bent … Vol. 6: Theatrum Commercialium, 1988, p. 100. The most intriguing features of the Van Hoon/Likhachev’s collection is their linguistic and geographical diversity. Van Hoon 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, Coroek), 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, Tgowa, Bima, Banten, Cirebon, one letter from the Cape in India and a dozen from China. Most of the documents are written by prominent historical figures like Sultans, Princes, Governors and religious leaders representing a great variety of scales and signatories. Some of them contain important data with regard to VOC diplomatic relationships, linked to the life and service of J. van Hoon. His choice of correspondents 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.

References

1 P. Likhachev’s collection of VOC documents has been preserved in the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, St. Petersburg, since 1938. Currently, the research is supported by the Consulate General of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in St. Petersburg.
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.
6 Broeklift published boekjes van de eindige, Broek verkoop en Broekbrickerder der E.C. Compagnie: Batavische Mercurius, 1675. One copy is preserved in Museum Pusat, Jakarta.
7 “Kai-Pu Liat shih chih” (The Historical records of the Foundation of Batavia Through the Agreed in 1688. Strange Company. Ch. V (Batavia 1697-1740: The Rise and Fall of Chinese Colonial Town) Verhandeling van het KITOV 122, p. 75.