

Peter Borschberg (ed.) and Roopanjali Roy (translation), *The Memoirs and Memorials of Jacques de Coutre: Security, Trade and Society in 16th- and 17th- century Southeast Asia*, Singapore, NUS Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-9971-69-528-6 Paperback; ISBN: 978-9971-69-783-9 Hardback

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The history of the European presence in Southeast Asia in the late 16th and early 17th century is generally characterized by the decline of the Portuguese overseas empire in the Orient, the *Estado da Índia*, the first Dutch voyage to the Maluku Islands, also known as the Spice Islands (1595-1597), and the events that subsequently unfolded in the struggle for supremacy in the European-Asiatic spice trade, i.e. the defense of the exclusive Portuguese right declared in the treaties of Tordesillas (1494) and Zaragoza (1529), or the defense of free trade from the Dutch point of view. At a time when Portugal was under the control of the Habsburg Empire (between 1580 and 1640 Portugal was joined to Spain under the rule of the Habsburgs – known as the Union of the Two Iberian Crowns), Intra-European politics, such as the revolt in the Netherlands against the Spanish (Habsburg) Empire, were transported to the East, where they also resulted in complex interactions of political and economic interests in Asian waters.

Jacobus van de Koutere, or Jacques de Coutre, born in Bruges, Flanders, in 1572, was a Flemish gem trader, who in 1591 set sail for the first time from Europe to Asia on board a Portuguese vessel, *Nossa Senhora de Nazaré*, and spent most of his life traveling around Southeast Asia. Having witnessed several important instances of the European presence in Asia – the battle between the Spanish armada and the Dutch fleet under the command of Olivier van Noort off Manila (1600), the political crisis between the Portuguese and Johor at Melaka (1602) – he returned to Europe in 1606. However, in 1609, he returned to Asia, where he stayed until 1620. Arrested and charged with treason, de Coutre was deported to Lisbon in 1623, but was later rehabilitated and made a knight of the Order of Santiago. Jacques de Coutre died in Zaragoza in 1640.

His personal memoirs, the *Life of Jacques de Coutre* and his *Memorials to the Crown and the Viceroy*, written between 1623 and 1628, are kept at the National Library of Spain. Now

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translated by Roopanjali Roy and published in an annotated version by Professor Peter Borschberg, this book covers the years between 1592 and 1903, providing not merely an eyewitness account, but above all an insight into the relationships between East and West.

Aimed above all at a readership interested in the History and Culture of modern-day Southeast Asia, the book is divided into two main sections: *Jacques de Coutre's Life in South East Asia* and *The Memorials of Jacques de Coutre to the Crown and Viceroy*. It is also accompanied by an introduction, an appendix and a glossary of geographic and non-geographic terms, as well as a carefully selected assortment of charts, frontispieces and images, e.g. common features of previous publications by Peter Borschberg such as *The Singapore and Melaka Straits: Violence, Security and Diplomacy in the 17th Century* (2010) and *Hugo Grotius, the Portuguese and Free Trade in the East Indies* (2011).

Written in a vivid first person narrative and addressed to the king of Portugal (and Spain), de Coutre's *Memoirs* offer a rich description of Southeast Asia, and the customs and habits of the people living in the kingdoms of Johor, Siam and Manila. Yet, he also describes his experiences while accompanying embassies to these same lands, as well as the battle off Manila (1600) and the seizure of the Portuguese ship *Santa Catarina* off Singapore (1603).

"With regard to the city, its streets are well laid out and it is walled similarly to the best cities in Europe, with beautiful buildings and palaces. On the outskirts of the city there is a village of heathen Chinese [called Parián]. Their houses are made of planks covered with tiles, in which live more than 40,000 Chinese." (Borschberg, 2013, 155)

The fact that de Coutre mentions the Chinese as a nation of traders in Southeast Asia is quite interesting given that most European travelers to that region throughout the 16th and 17th century (Kley, Lach, 1993, 1418) expressed their curiosity and fascination with these unknown people with black hair, wearing sandals and exhibiting *strange* behavior, such as eating food with chopsticks while sitting on the ground.

As in the section of the *Memoirs*, Professor Borschberg chose the first four chapters of the *Memorials* for inclusion in this publication. These economic and political observations and advice are of a different nature (to the *Memoirs*), mainly expressing de Coutre's concern with the economic situation that the Portuguese *Estado da Índia* was confronted with in the face of Dutch (and English) competition. De Coutre talks about Melaka, the well-known commercial town conquered by Afonso de Albuquerque in 1511, but lost to the Dutch during the first three decades of the 17th century. In de Coutre's opinion, Melaka was of great importance to the Portuguese due to its geostrategic position at the southern entrance

to the Melaka Straits and its proximity to the kingdom of Johor and the island of Java, where the Dutch had erected their headquarters at Batavia (formerly Jayakarta or Jakarta), and he emphasizes the trade that was carried out before the arrival of the (Dutch) *rebels*, remarking on how this trade was damaged and interfered with. Chapter 3 of the *Memorials* in particular deals with the need for a Portuguese fortification overlooking the Singapore Straits through which, as de Coutre's writing powerfully suggests, the Portuguese could once again obtain control of the spice trade as they had done before.

“These vessels come laden with nutmeg, mace, cloves and other merchandise. [...] All these vessels pass through these Straits of Singapore. All this commerce as described above has been usurped by the rebels. They are the ones who today benefit from the said trade. To remedy this state of affairs and redirect trade to Melaka, Your Majesty must order that a very strong fortress or citadel be built in the Strait of Singapore [...] The old Strait is so narrow that it can be closed off with a chain; the New Strait is wider, but no vessel can pass through either of these straits without being in reaching distance of the citadel, which can then sink them with artillery.” (Borschberg, 2013, 229-231)

During the course of the first decades of the 17th century, these plans were actually discussed and taken into serious consideration by the king of Portugal, Filipe II, but, in the end, due to the already overwhelming presence of the Dutch in Asian waters, they were abandoned (Pato, 1884, 471-48, 1885, 380, f, 1893, 277-280)

Closing his presentation of the life and memorials of Jacques de Coutre, Professor Borschberg chose to publish three Dutch and one Portuguese historical document directly related to the events described in de Coutre's *Memoirs*. While de Coutre is explicitly mentioned in the affidavit of the Dutch Admiral Jacob van Neck (appendix 1), the following two appendices (appendices II and II) only mention de Coutre implicitly. The last appendix, a letter from Fernão de Albuquerque, a captain at Melaka, relates to the *Santa Catarina* incident of 1603, which de Coutre described in Chapters 17 and 19 of his *Life*.

In this summary of the *Memoirs* and *Memorials* of Jacques de Coutre, the interested reader not only receives an insider's eyewitness view of historical events in the late 16th and early 17th century, but also catches a glimpse of the mentalities and attitudes of Europeans in Southeast Asia. At the same time, scholars and students alike will benefit from this publication, as it provides a useful introduction to their studies with a well-selected bibliography and glossary.

On reading Jacques de Coutre, the reader inevitably hopes for the continued publication of the remaining books of the *Memoirs* and *Memorials*.

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