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Studies in Early-Modern and Modern Asian
History in the Netherlands: the TANAP and
ENCOMPASS Projects

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The Netherlands has a long history as a trading nation in Asia and as a major colonial power in the region. During the 400 years of Dutch presence in the Orient, an enormous number of original written records has been produced, initially in the many trade factories of the Dutch East India Company scattered all over Asia, and, after 1800, in the colonial possessions in Southeast Asia.

From the seventeenth to the twentieth century, probably in no other European language, apart from English, has so much been written on all aspects of Asian society as in Dutch. Since Indonesia gained full independence in 1949 and the Netherlands withdrew from the Asian scene, the Dutch government has hardly made any determined effort to promote the study of the Dutch language and the Dutch archival deposits by Asian historians. This is striking because one of its priorities is to encourage international cooperation in the field of the sciences and, more specifically, in development-oriented applied research in the social sciences. This timid cultural attitude contrasts starkly with the dynamic cultural policies pursued by other European nations with a colonial past such as England, France, Portugal and Spain. Yet there seems to be some change in the air. Over the past few years modest initiatives have been taken to remedy this situation, although it is too early to say whether the Dutch government is intending to pursue a determined cultural policy that links its present position in Europe with its Asian past.

On September 8 2004, a special meeting was held in the Van Kleffens Hall of the Ministry of Foreign affairs in The Hague in which ambassadors from various Asian countries, including of course the Japanese ambassador, Mr. Koike, participated. One of the reasons for organizing that international meeting was to hear from the Asian participants, diplomatic representatives and

scholars alike, what their views might possibly be about a more history 'oriented' Dutch cultural policy towards Asia and whether their country would welcome Dutch initiatives into this direction. The Dutch side clearly wished to show that any bold initiative to promote the historical study of Dutch historical sources on Asia should not be interpreted as some kind of neo-colonial cultural enterprise.

Why should the Dutch government suddenly be willing to discuss these matters? As some of you will recall, in 2002 the establishment of the former Dutch East India Company in 1602 was commemorated in Amsterdam, Hoorn, Enkhuizen, Delft, Rotterdam and Middelburg, the six harbor cities of the Netherlands in which the world's first multinational possessed branch offices (*kamers*) during the almost two centuries of its existence (1602-1800). Inevitably this commemoration drew many responses, both positive and negative: positive, because during its existence the VOC did bring great wealth to the Netherlands; negative, because a pressure groups from the Moluccan community in the Netherlands maintained that the Company had created Dutch colonialism in Southeast Asia.

On the occasion of these VOC commemorations, the Ministries of Education and Foreign Affairs decided to combine forces and enable the National Archives and Leiden University to set up a joint program, the TANAP (Towards a New Age of Partnership) program, with two connected goals:

- a) the inventarisation of all preserved VOC archival records on seventeenth and eighteenth century Asia (from Arabia in the West to China and Japan in the East), and
- b) the training of some thirty young university teachers from Asian universities, who would be given a crash course, a so-called Advanced Masters Program of one year, to get acquainted with the language and the handwriting of Dutch archival documents.

In other words, archival concerns such as preservation and inventorisation of the often badly deteriorated manuscript sources were linked with the academic training of students who can use them as teachers or can take care of them as archivists in the future.

The impetus that set the ball rolling was the following: In 1999 a director of one of the largest banks in the Netherlands, the ABN/AMRO bank which, as the heir to the former NHM (Nederlandse Handelmaatschappij) has offices in several Asian countries, asked me informally whether I could solicit some Dutch specialists in the field of overseas history to write (for promotional gift purposes) a series of succinct monographs about the historical relations of the VOC with every Asian country in which branch offices of the bank are situated. I answered that I would prefer to invite Asian historians to write such books about their own countries. But unfortunately there were very few Asian historians who could be called upon, because in most of those Asian countries all local know-how of the precious Dutch sources had been lost. I therefore

suggested that on occasion of the VOC commemoration it might perhaps be a good idea to provide scholarships for a training program of young Asian historians. The moral of the story being, of course, the famous dictum by the late Prince Claus that, instead of providing someone with fish to eat, it would be better to give him a fishing rod and teach him to angle. In this case the outcome of the story was that the bank shelved its plans of ordering the writing of monographs. ABN/AMRO subsidized the VOC exhibition in the Rijksmuseum but the Ministry of Education saw to it that scholarships were provided for the TANAP program by the NWO and WOTRO foundations for the promotion of science.

Since 2001 an impressive amount of work has been carried out by the National Archives at The Hague in close cooperation with the archives of Cape Town, Chennai in India, Colombo, Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur, which together hold about five kilometers of archival documents concerning maritime and continental Asia in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. The TANAP project has now resulted in a total survey of these archival deposits that have been preserved under often very problematic tropical conditions. Last year UNESCO placed the VOC archives on the world cultural heritage list.

From 2000 to 2003 Leiden University taught thirty young Asian university lecturers towards an advanced Master's degree. Thanks to scholarships from NWO, WOTRO, IAS, CNWS, the board of Leiden University and several foundations in Japan, seventeen of these students are at present working towards a doctorate. In 2005 we shall soon witness the defense of four dissertations and within three years all of these graduate students should be back at their home university in Asia to resume their teaching obligations.

Over the past two years there have been several new developments which have led us to consider whether the TANAP program, which was aimed at young university lecturers studying "the VOC period" in history, namely the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, should not be extended to a broader and younger group of Asian university students and cover the entire period of four hundred years of Dutch presence in Asia. Stated succinctly, should not future research also include the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century? Specifically in the case of Indonesia, a further 10 kilometers of handwritten and printed documents are waiting to be examined by (Southeast) Asian historians and social scientists.

One point should be made crystal clear. The aim is not to engage in the study or teaching of Dutch colonial history but to training Asian researchers how to study their own history with the help of Dutch sources. Because this kind of research also involves the study of Asian-European relations, we decided to label it "Mutual Heritage history". This field of research also includes the study of material remains such as buildings, infrastructure and irrigation systems and so on in Asia.

Specifically with this last theme—the preservation and upkeep of historical objects of mutual heritage in Asia—in mind, in the past few years the Dutch cultural ambassador, Jan Hoekema, organized several sessions with cultural heritage specialists to assess the needs and the problems that demand special attention. Over and over, the shared feeling of the participants of these meetings was that there is a shortage of historical expertise on the side of the Asian counterparts, who are charged with the preservation work of historical buildings by their own governments and who are often financially assisted in their tasks by Dutch heritage project funding. Many of these well-intentioned projects are doomed from the beginning, because the basic historical training of local personnel is lacking. The general feeling therefore is that something has to be done about this.

A new development that enables us to re-examine the training of Asian students is the introduction of a BA and MA system for foreign students in the Netherlands. Leiden University, the only university in Holland with a full coverage of Asian languages and cultural studies, is now offering a new set of curricula to foreign students. In the field of Mutual Heritage studies this makes it possible for Leiden University to offer specially tailored courses to young Asian students with a BA degree in history and anthropology. This new program, *Encompass* (Encountering a Common Past) dovetails a one-year preparatory BA in Mutual Heritage studies (with a strong emphasis on Dutch language acquisition for research purpose) with an MA, MPhil and PhD program in Asian history and the history of Asian European relations.

The stimulus in the form of scholarships for Asian participants in the *Encompass* program demands a sizeable financial investment that cannot be borne by Leiden University alone. Fortunately, the Dutch state secretary for education, Drs. Mark Rutte, has recently decided to allocate extra scholarship funding for starting the *Encompass program* for Asian students.

As a result of these new developments the *Encompass* program, in the years to come, it will enable Leiden University to train some sixty young people towards an MA degree who can later be employed in their own countries in such diverse fields as mutual heritage projects, archives, institutions of higher learning, journalism and so on. It is obvious that this program can also be very useful for Japanese students particularly those involved in Southeast Asian history. If they interrupt their studies in Japan for one or two years in order to participate in the *Encompass* program, they can return to their own universities with a Leiden MA and continue their research under the direction of their own Japanese professors who are not in the position to give them this basic education in the Dutch language sources and introduce them to the Dutch archives.

This brings me to the last point: institution- and capacity-building at Asian institutions of higher

learning. There is a tremendous difference in quality and the level of organization between the various Asian countries that have participated in the TANAP program so far. Japanese universities have, for instance, traditionally nurtured such studies as *rangaku* or *yogaku*, related to Western and specifically Dutch cultural influences. Over the years the Historiographical Institute of Tokyo University has collected an impressive amount of foreign documentary sources. Over the past few decades I have been privileged to be closely involved in the training at Leiden University of Japanese students from these institutions. Through the TANAP connection with Iran, India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam and China we have made a modest beginning with training some young Historians from these countries too.

The Encompass Project with its BA, MA program and possibly ensuing PhD education proposes to provide Asian higher educational institutions with well-trained people. Hopefully upon their return home it will also provide the PhD educated young university teachers of the TANAP program with a steady flow of Dutch-trained graduate students to engage in a more balanced writing of their national history with the use of foreign sources.

And, who knows, the day may not be too far away that 10 Asian historians will be glad to write the monographs that the ABN/AMRO bank wanted to commission five years ago.