

LEONARD BLUSSÉ : *Visible Cities. Canton, Nagasaki and Batavia and the Coming of the Americans*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2008. xii + 132 pages. Illustrations. ISBN-13: 978-0-674-02614-8.

This small volume, based on some Harvard lectures which Leonard Blussé gave in 2005/06, looks at three cities - Canton, Nagasaki and Batavia - and their role in Euro-Asian relations. The idea was not to present detail after detail, but to furnish a well-structured summary of major political, economic and cultural events that can be associated with these places in the period from roughly the early seventeenth century through to the beginning of the Napoleonic wars. The author was particularly interested in trying to link the fate of each port to both regional and global developments, and to outline what they shared in common, as well as how they can be distinguished from each other.

The reason for singling out these three places, rather than, say, Manila and Macau, is rooted in the fact that, seen through the author's looking-glass, they were then the most vibrant meeting points between "East" and "West", especially in terms of trade. Furthermore, the Dutch are perceived as a major player, although their weight and role changed over time - and in each location somewhat differently - as the author explains. Naturally, the overture is set in Batavia. The close relations between this port and the Chinese are sketched in a manner that reminds of the many well-known books and articles which Blussé has published on this vital subject.

Among other things it is argued that, back in China, the two provinces of Fujian and Guangdong did not "behave" along the same lines: While the Fujianese were actively involved in the maritime sector, Guangzhou often sat back to receive its foreign clientele. Recently this very essential "dichotomy" between an "expanding" and a rather "passive" branch of Chinese trade, with all its structural implications for the continental "home frontier", has been described in a major study by Li Qingxin 李庆新, *Mingdai haiwai maoyi zhidu* 明代海外贸易制度 (Beijing 2004). After the conquest of Taiwan through the Qing, but especially in the eighteenth century, the "twin-towered architecture" outlined above emerges even more clearly, one of its facets being that, in Guangzhou, trade was practically controlled by two non-local "groups", the Manju

administrators and the Fujianese merchant elite. One wonders how the local Cantonese felt about this unusual situation and how Macau ties into it.

The Batavia massacre (1740), the growth of direct shipping between Guangzhou and Europe, the rise of country trade, various shifts and changes in local networks, and a general re-orientation of the Chinese towards other horizons inside the Nanyang world, hurt the VOC in many ways. In that sense the South China Sea, or rather maritime Southeast Asia in toto, was marked by instability; everything was in flux, especially from the later half of the eighteenth century onwards. As was just said, to some measure this had to do with the colonial powers, whose impact on a “system” that was once a “closed” scenario, almost like a “quasi-Mediterranean” (Braudel is often quoted in Blussé’s book), came from outside that “structure”. Elsewhere I have argued - and I think, Blussé might support the idea - that the South China Sea underwent a process of gradual “de-Mediterranization”, while the East China Sea with Nagasaki as its most important northeastern “terminus” was, for a long period, not so much torn into global rivalries and therefore experienced a slightly different fate.

Indeed, Nagasaki, so it appears, followed its old “rhythm”, at least for some time, and almost with a genetically inherited ability to digest various kinds of foreign “challenges” in a surprisingly smooth and sometimes rather curious way. In short, Japan’s doors were open, and yet they remained closed, as seen through Dutch eyes. I am not sure, however, what the Chinese viewpoint would be, since shipping from Fujian and Zhejiang to Kyushu was considerable, a fact that tends to be underestimated by Western historians. Here one might also think of such “marginal” places like the Ryukyu chain and their possible functions within exchange across the Yellow and East China Seas.

As one moves on in time, Europe’s weight in world politics and its share in international trade increases dramatically. But on the other side, this inevitably contributed to the outbreak of wars and certain unfortunate developments on the old continent, which in turn weakened the Dutch position in Asia - while the British, profiting from the foul games they played nearly everywhere, managed to score several extra goals. We are usually less well informed about the role of the Americans, who, expanding their trade to Mauritius and other places, eventually became a major player in the South China Sea as well, often stepping in where Europeans had to “resign”. This

already occurs before 1800 and adds to the complexity of the entire Nanyang-scenario - especially in the sense that this part of the world now became even more closely bound to global events, as the book explains. The story ends, more or less, with the Jefferson Embargo Act (1807) and thus at a time, when many cards are shuffled anew, especially around the shores of the South China Sea, where we see fresh structures emerging and new sins being committed, in the early nineteenth century and thereafter.

To round off my comments: While the older sins of the Dutch are somewhat overlooked in Blussé's account, and the Catholic world is usually placed aside, *Visible Cities* is certainly not a *faux pas*. Based on a multitude of mostly English and Dutch works (and a small amount of other sources), it will go as a delicate assembly of glimpses from the eagle's perspective, a lecture in "northern" anatomy which X-rays several vital bones inside a fatty substance. Bostonians once thought that selling opium was "fair, honorable, and legitimate" (p. 99); their minds, the author appears to suggest, should have changed by now... This brings me to my final observation: In recent years Blussé has developed a certain taste for personal remarks (in the present account such glosses probably add up to several pages). Therefore one may advertise his study by referring to p. 69: *pinda pinda lekka lekka* ("peanut peanut tasty tasty")...

Roderich Ptak, Munich