

Butter Diplomacy

Food and Drink as a Social Lubricant in Dutch East India Company Trade with Japan

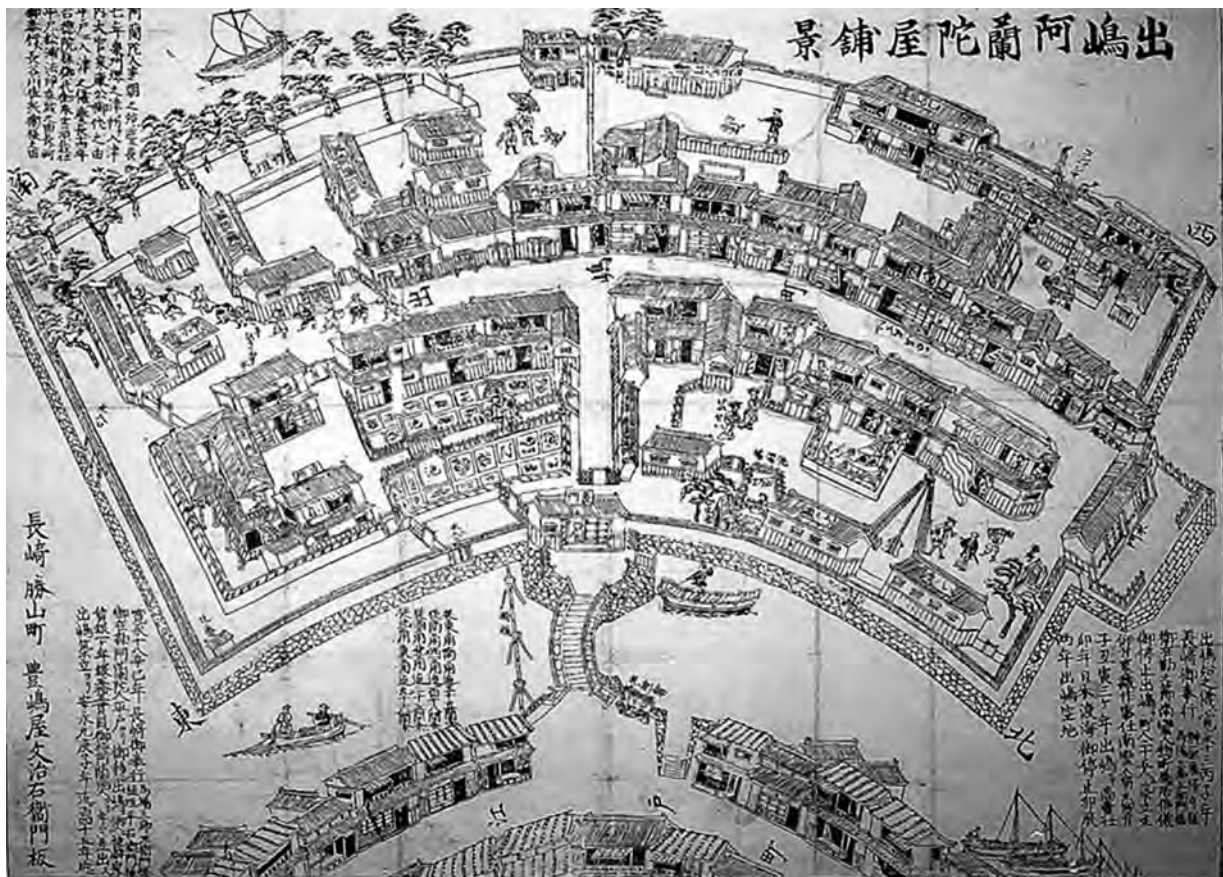
By Michael Laver

Every year the monsoon winds of the Indian Ocean and South China Sea brought roughly half a dozen Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, VOC) ships to Nagasaki, carrying a valuable cargo consisting mainly of various types of silk and other types of cloth, and also Southeast Asian luxury goods, European “rarities,” and food-stuffs such as sugar and spices. After these VOC ships unloaded their precious and varied cargo, negotiations would begin to determine the price of the silk on the Japanese market. These negotiations were often fraught affairs consuming several days of what one can only imagine were tough, knock-down sessions in which each side tried to best the other in setting an advantageous price. The negotiations were also intense because the Japanese rules put in place to tightly regulate foreign trade allowed only a limited window in which to conduct business, so as the deadline for concluding trade neared, tempers flared, and the tension became palpable.

On one particular instance in September 1645, after these negotiations were brought to a close, the head of the Dutch “factory,” as early modern trading posts were called, noted in his official journal that all of the chief negotiators, representing the foremost commercial cities in Japan, were treated to sweetmeats and the best Dutch liquor on hand. Although the outcome of this particular party is not known, judging from the results of other parties, the guests all left “satisfied.”¹ The official diaries kept by the head merchant

were meant for the eyes of higher officials in the Dutch East India Company, so it is no surprise that references to wild bacchanalia and drunkenness are few and far between, although we know from other sources that drunkenness was not at all unusual, given the monotony of life on the island of Deshima. Although mine is undoubtedly a liberal reading of the actual texts, I choose to interpret “satisfied” as meaning “suitably inebriated!”

In a similar fashion, the Dutch held periodic celebrations in which the Japanese officials who facilitated foreign trade on Deshima were invited to dinner to mark various occasions. On January 1, 1663, for example, the head of the Dutch factory noted in his journal that “the *otona*, the interpreters and their children, and the two clerks were entertained at my house according to established custom.”² These parties were certainly no small undertaking because the number of people who made their living off the Dutch at Deshima was staggering and out of proportion to the handful of Dutch merchants living on the island at any given time.³ From other entries in the journals, we catch a glimpse of the type of food that was served on such occasions, including salted crane, geese, sheep, and, on one occasion in 1657, a billy goat, which the officials apparently hated! On that occasion, the head merchant noted dryly in his journal the following day that if the Japanese didn’t like the goat, then next time they should be served donkey instead!⁴



Sketch map of the Dutch residence at Deshima by Toshimaya Bunjiemon. Source: <http://tiny.cc/06m8s>. © Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2005 Visualizing Cultures.

When we examine the foodstuffs that were prevalent in Dutch life and to which the Japanese seemed to take a liking, we find that butter was a perennial favorite among the officials in Nagasaki.



Dutch dinner party by Kawahara Keiga, early nineteenth century. Source: <http://tiny.cc/xwkes>.
© Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2005, Visualizing Cultures.

The above anecdotes represent only the formal occasions on which food and drink helped in part to facilitate the yearly business of the Dutch East India Company. Apart from these annual social rituals, there were a host of other instances where food and drink played an important role in facilitating relationships between the company servants and the various Japanese officials whose duty it was to regulate the Dutch presence in Japan. This was the more so because, as Eric Rath has masterfully shown, food was much more than mere sustenance amongst the upper classes of early modern Japan but rather was laden with a great deal of symbolism and played an important role in facilitating status and power among the ruling classes in Edo and elsewhere.⁵ This article will highlight some of the ways in which various foods and drinks, mundane or exotic, served to facilitate the forming and maintaining of the relationships that were crucial as the Dutch went about their rather closely regulated lives in Japan. The diaries of the head merchants are literally filled with references to entertaining and being entertained with food and libations, but for the purpose of this article, I will simply highlight a few examples that illustrate the myriad and important roles that food and drink played in the everyday lives of the Dutch merchants, as well as in more extraordinary circumstances.⁶

There were two venues in which food and drink played a large role in the social life of the merchants in Japan. First was the ordinary, day-to-day life on Deshima in which the Dutch plied Japanese visitors with a variety of treats; second was the yearly “court journey” that a handful of Dutch merchants were required to undertake in order to present gifts to the shōgun and his officials in the shōgunal capital of Edo. On both occasions, Japanese officials often came to the Dutch residence to either ask for certain items or to be treated to food and drink on the spot. While many of us are no doubt familiar with the idea of popping ‘round to the neighbor’s for some butter or sugar in a pinch, the sheer quantity of food and drink that was requested by various officials often astounds.

Nicely illustrating this phenomenon was an entry in the journal for February 22, 1657, in which the head merchant complained, “We are almost running out of Dutch provisions, in particular olive oil and butter, because every

day many lords are sending for some . . .” On this occasion, the Dutch were staying in Edo at the residence provided especially for the court journey called the *Nagasakiya*. For the roughly two months that the Dutch spent in Edo, there was a daily stream of Japanese officials calling at the residence to interrogate them about world events, to inspect the gifts brought for the shōgun, to inquire about Dutch medicine from the surgeon who routinely made the trip, or, as we have seen, to ask for various Dutch provisions. One suspects that these Dutch items were in turn used by the high-ranking Japanese officials to entertain their guests or to give as gifts at the court of the shōgun. This was certainly the case with European goods, such as spectacles,

“spy glasses,” and a host of other European “rarities,” so it is only logical to assume that the types of perishables described in this article were also used in such a manner.

In a similar journal entry only a week later, the Dutch complained that every day Japanese officials were sending for wine to the point that the head merchant was beginning to worry whether there would be enough for presents on the return journey to Nagasaki. The Dutch kept huge quantities of a wine called variously “Spanish wine” or “tent wine” stocked on their island, probably because it was the single most popular item with which to entertain the Japanese officials. Almost every reference to hosting any number of officials, either in Edo or Nagasaki, included the liberal offering of tent wine. On March 2, 1657, for example, the head merchant recorded that a high-ranking official at court was provided with five *gantang* of tent wine. A *gantang*, a Malay unit of measurement, is equivalent to an imperial gallon, or just over four liters, so on this single occasion, the Dutch gave away more than twenty liters of wine! Given this largesse, it is no wonder that the head merchant was worried about the supply of wine for the return journey.

Back in Nagasaki, we are told that the Dutch again handed over five *gantang* of tent wine to yet another official. More common, however, was the daily entertaining of Japanese grandees at the residence of the chief merchant. On such occasions, tent wine seemed to be the drink of choice, along with a variety of foods to accompany it. Serving wine was so ubiquitous when visitors were received that one wonders why the head merchants insisted on including this detail in their journals year after year. It was included, however, and usually alongside a reference to the type of delicacy served. Three of these that routinely appeared in the journals are pastries, both Western and Asian varieties of fruits, and *sakana*, which is the Japanese word for fish and which the Dutch used in their journals, much as Westerners have simply adopted the word *sushi* in their own societies.

Usually these instances of treating officials to wine and food were accompanied by touring the island, observing the Dutch way of life, or viewing the various European goods brought to Japan for gifts to the shōgun and others. In February 1655, for example, the son of a prominent Japanese official came to the island and rifled through all of the belongings of the Dutch, including even the blankets on the bed! The chief merchant noted with resignation in his journal, “We have to accept it with a pleasant face and treat them to sakana all the while.” Occasionally, the head merchant would make explicit what the reader of the journal suspects: the Dutch were a curiosity for many of the great *daimyō* and other officials to ogle at, rather in the manner of a carnival exhibition.

When we examine the foodstuffs that were prevalent in Dutch life and to which the Japanese seemed to take a liking, we find that butter was a perennial favorite among the officials in Nagasaki, as it is common to read of prodigious amounts being requested of the Dutch. In 1646, for example, the head merchant noted that on the 4th of February, four *catties* of butter were sent to an official, while on the 13th, ten more catties were sent to another official. One catty is equivalent to about a pound and a half, so in one month the company gave away more than thirty pounds of butter! Almonds were another commodity used as gifts and to entertain guests. These gifts must have been a

favorite of the higher officials in Edo and Nagasaki, as it is quite common to read of rather large amounts being given away. In December 1650, for example, the chief merchant noted that four to five catties (roughly seven pounds) of almonds were given away. In a similar fashion, a whole host of other foodstuffs and liquors were used to treat guests or to give away as gifts, and the company servants often complained of this constant stream of guests and gift-giving. One can imagine that if nothing else, it served to break up the monotony of life on Deshima, especially because, except for special excursions with a powerful Japanese host, only rarely in the seventeenth century were Dutch officials allowed to leave the island. In May 1668, for example, the chief merchant noted bitterly in his journal that “We live in Japan as dumb, deaf, and imprisoned men.”

Food was used, as we have seen, to entertain the Japanese officials who came to the island for either business or pleasure, but it was also used to reciprocate by the Japanese who had been entertained. On the many occasions that the head merchants wrote of the entertainment of an official, it was almost certain that the next day’s journal entry would detail a “return present” to thank the Dutch for their hospitality. These gifts occasionally consisted of *sake* or other Japanese delicacies, but more often took the form of some sort of bird, most often geese, swans, or cranes. This must have been a rather exotic addition to the normal Dutch fowl, which consisted mainly of chickens bought from a seller in Nagasaki. These return gifts represented one part of a rather elaborate social process of gift-giving and reciprocity that characterized almost every aspect of Dutch life in Japan and that helped facilitate Dutch relationships with Japanese officialdom, which was necessary in order to carry out business in the country.

Was the use of food and drink in the relationship between the Dutch merchants and Japanese officials just an interesting side note in an otherwise commercial world of buying and selling, or did these things play a bigger role in the life of the VOC in Japan? One view that may help us answer that question is the view of trade and foreign relations in early modern Japan as a matter of personal relations rather than strictly as commercial transactions between parties interested only in the “bottom line.” That is to say that the commercial relationship between the Dutch and the Japanese was not an impersonal “corporate” model but rather was premised on a personal relationship of patronage and supplication.



Dutchmen on a court journey with musicians and an elephant, a gift to the shōgun.
Source: <http://tiny.cc/rkovq>. © IISH | NEHA.

Even from the very beginning, when the Dutch established their first trading post on the island of Hirado in 1609, the Dutch were required to travel to Tokugawa Ieyasu’s court at Sumpu to obtain his personal permission to trade. Furthermore, when subsequent conflict occasionally arose between the Dutch and Japanese, the head merchant made it clear in his journal that the company was permitted to stay in Japan partly because of the precedent set by Ieyasu, founder of the shōgunate and posthumous deity, and because the Dutch were assiduous in plying the shōgun and his officials with gifts, hence demonstrating their submission to the Tokugawa. This point is most effectively seen in the requirement that each successive chief merchant of the VOC make the personal court journey to Edo to thank the shōgun personally for the privilege of trading in Japan as well as to submit to the shōgun’s authority.

When one reads the journals of the head merchants on Deshima, it becomes apparent that the company was able to carry out its commercial activities in Japan because of the personal relationships that the company had fostered over the years and ultimately over the centuries. These relationships

NEW! EDUCATION ABOUT ASIA ONLINE ARCHIVES

Thirteen Years of “Education About Asia” at Your Fingertips!

- Registration and access to the archives is free!
- Browse Tables of Contents; view and download articles from all thirty-seven back issues from 1996–2008
- Search for articles by country, author, title, or keyword
- A three-year “moving wall” will keep the archives current. For instance, all three 2009 issues will be added at the end of 2012; the three issues for 2010 will be added at the end of 2013, etc.

Subscribe or Renew Your Subscription to the Print Edition Today!

To ensure that you have access to the most recent issues of this unique publication, please support *Education About Asia* by subscribing or renewing your print subscription today. Subscription information and rates are available at www.asian-studies.org/EAA. Each issue brings you articles on all areas of Asia, with subjects ranging from ancient cultures and literatures to current affairs, along with essays describing classroom-tested educational programs, and guides to movies, documentaries, books, curriculum guides, and online resources.

We hope you will make every effort to introduce educators, students, and the public to *Education About Asia*—and make sure that the library in your own school, college, or university subscribes.

Register for the archives and subscribe to the print edition at www.asian-studies.org/EAA



ranged from the lowest level of junior interpreter to the shōgun himself. In between, there were officials that required lavish gifts, made frequent visits to the island, and, as we have seen, were entertained at the company's expense. The governors of Nagasaki, the several daimyō who were responsible for guarding the bay, and the important daimyō who were immensely influential with the Tokugawa shōgunate were all periodically entertained on Deshima and in Edo and then advocated for the Dutch at court.

A testament to this personal relationship was the expense and inconvenience that the VOC incurred to bring "rarities" to Japan as gifts for these myriad officials. Cynthia Klekar describes gift-giving as "a cross-cultural language of gift exchange, reciprocity, and obligation that informed early modern conceptions of international trade and diplomacy. I am arguing here that food and drink form an integral part of that "cross-cultural language."⁷ Seen in this light, the gastronomic hospitality that the Dutch provided for their Japanese counterparts was much more than an occasional pleasantry; rather, it represented an essential aspect of Dutch life in both Nagasaki and in Edo that ultimately allowed the VOC to carry out their trade in Japan.

The Dutch on Deshima knew perfectly well that the officials with whom they dealt, especially the higher-level officials such as the governors in Nagasaki and the shōgunal councilors in Edo, could easily harm the company's interests if they were not (please excuse the pun) adequately catered to. This very fear was realized in the 1660s when a high-ranking Japanese official named Inaba Mino-no-Kami Masanori was angered that the Dutch presented the shōgun a gift of two copper lanterns that were supposed to go to him. This seemingly trifling affair would come to have grave consequences for the Dutch, as the next several years were spent trying to placate this one official. It was at this time that life on Deshima became much more strictly regulated, and there is some evidence to suggest that one of the reasons for this was that one of the offended official's family members became a governor of Nagasaki, thereby bringing the conflict much closer to home. As Engelbert Kaempfer, a German physician in the employ of the VOC at the time, notes:

Mino, disappointed in his expectation, thought himself offended to the highest degree, and from that moment took such a hatred to the whole Dutch nation, as without a fatal and sufficient revenge he knew would be pursued, even after his, by his descendents and relations. The Japanese in general, when once they throw a hatred on a person, know how to conceal it for a long while, till a favorable opportunity offers to take revenge for the insults and affronts they have, or fancy to have received. In like manner, Mino watched the opportunity to put the revenge he mediated to take of us in execution, and it offer'd no sooner but he gladly embraced it and chastis'd us most severely.⁸

In order to avoid this sort of eventuality causing harm to the company's commercial interests in Japan, the Dutch went to extraordinary lengths to ingratiate shōgunal officials to them, and liberal food and drink were two of the prime vehicles for this. By treating so many local and shōgunal grandees as honored guests on Deshima; by treating their children and even distant relatives to pastries, fruits, sakana, spirits, and wine; by doling out extraordinary quantities of butter, almonds, tent wine, and spirits—the officials were ensuring through these social lubricants that their commercial endeavors in Japan proceeded smoothly and that the personal relationships that facilitated Dutch trade were maintained at all costs. The generous provision of food and drink was just one way that these relationships were maintained, but in the end, it was clearly an important ingredient in maintaining the VOC's long-standing trade with Tokugawa Japan. ■

MICHAEL LAVER is Assistant Professor of History at the Rochester Institute of Technology, where he teaches East Asian History as well as classes on European Interaction with Asia. His research focuses primarily on the Dutch East India Company, and more broadly, early modern Japan. His most recent work is titled *The Sakoku Edicts and the Politics of Tokugawa Legitimacy* (Cambria Press, 2011).

NOTES

1. All references to the official journals kept on Deshima at the behest of the VOC are taken from Leonard Blussé and Cynthia Viallé, eds., *The Deshima Dagregisters, Volumes XI-XIII* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Institute for the History of European Expansion, 2001). The original dagregisters can be found in the National Archief in den Hague, The Netherlands as "Dagregister van de Factorij te Japan." A transcription of the first half of the seventeenth century of the Dutch journals from Hirado and Deshima can be found in the series titled *Nihon Kankei Kaigai Shiryō: Dagregisters Gehouden bij de Opperhoofden van het Nederlandsche Factorij in Japan*, published by the Shiryō Hensanjō at the University of Tokyo.
2. The *otona* was an official who was responsible for a particular ward within the city. In the case of Nagasaki, the island of Deshima had its own, who, in conjunction with the two governors and various other officials, were responsible for overseeing the Dutch and ensuring that they remained relatively isolated from the ordinary citizens of Nagasaki.
3. Grant Goodman compiled a list of the various officials involved with the company and states that "For this small group of defenseless and isolated Hollanders, the Japanese had developed an overgrown bureaucracy which defies even the twentieth-century imagination." Grant K. Goodman, *The Dutch Impact on Japan* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1967), 21.
4. *Deshima Dagregisters, Volume XII*, May 10–11, 1657.
5. Eric C. Rath, *Food and Fantasy in Early Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).
6. The English, during their brief ten-year sojourn in Japan, also found it expedient to ply their Japanese counterparts with food and drink. In an entry dated February 23, 1621, Richard Cocks recounts the following gifts given to a Japanese official, "We carried him a bottle of strong water and another of Spanish wine, with a great box of sweet bread; and the Hollanders two bottles of Spanish wine and one of strong water—which he took in kind part and soon after sent us two *barsos* of wine and a salmon." E. M. Thompson, ed., *The Diary of Richard Cocks, Cape Merchant in the English Factory in Japan, Volume II* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1883), 143.
7. Cynthia Klekar, "Prisoners in Silken Bonds: Obligation, Trade, and Diplomacy in English Voyages to Japan and China," *Journal of Early Modern Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2006): 84.
8. Engelbert Kaempfer, *The History of Japan, Together with a Description of the Kingdom of Siam, Volume II*, trans. J.G. Scheuchzer (Glasgow, Scotland: James MacLehose and Sons, 1906), 224.

SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Blussé, Leonard, and Cynthia Viallé, eds. *The Deshima Dagregisters. Volume 12, 1651–1660*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Institute for the History of European Expansion, 2001.
- Bodart-Bailey, Beatrice. *Kaempfer's Japan: Tokugawa Culture Observed*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999.
- Chaiklin, Martha. *Dutch Commerce and Dutch Commercial Culture, The Influence of European Material Culture on Japan, 1700–1850*. Leiden, The Netherlands: CNWS, 2003.
- Goodman, Grant K. *The Dutch Impact on Japan, 1640–1853*. Leiden, The Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1967.
- Innes, Robert. "The Door Ajar: Japan's Foreign Trade in the Seventeenth Century." PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1980.
- Kaempfer, Engelbert. *The History of Japan, Together with a Description of the Kingdom of Siam*. Three Volumes. Translated by J.G. Scheuchzer. Glasgow, Scotland: James MacLehose and Sons, 1906.
- Klekar, Cynthia. "Prisoners in Silken Bonds: Obligation, Trade, and Diplomacy in English Voyages to Japan and China." *Journal of Early Modern Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2006): 84–105.
- Massarella, Derek. *A World Elsewhere: Europe's Encounter with Japan in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.
- Rath, Eric. *Food and Fantasy in Early Modern Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010.
- Thompson, Edward, ed. *The Diary of Richard Cocks, Cape Merchant in the English Factory in Japan*. Two Volumes. London: Hakluyt Society, 1883.
- Toby, Ronald. *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan: Asia in the Development of the Tokugawa Bakufu*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.