



Jan Pieterszoon Coen (1587–1629), by Jacob Waben. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jan_Pieterszoon_Coen_by_Jacob_Waben.jpg

A Mão de Deus? What Really Happened on Midsummer Day

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ABSTRACT: Even if in the first half of the seventeenth century the Dutch East India Company relieved the Portuguese *Estado da Índia* of most of its possessions in Asia in a series of hard-fought campaigns, the much-coveted Macao remained an elusive prize. On basis of the memoirs of the Swiss mercenary Elie Ripon, the present paper provides some new insights into the failure of the Dutch invasion of Macao on 24 June 1622. The explosion that ended the attack has traditionally been credited to a 'lucky' shot from a Portuguese cannon. However, another account has emerged suggesting that it was caused by a 'clumsy' mercenary working for the Dutch.

KEYWORDS: Dutch invasion; Macao; Macanese; Portuguese; Dutch.

Many years have passed since Charles Boxer wrote his account of the rout of the Dutch invasion forces at Macao on 24 June 1622.¹ The polyglot historian used both Dutch and Portuguese sources for his vivid description of the battle in which a sortie of a 'motley throng of Portuguese soldiers, Macanese citizens and negro slaves' dealt a mortal blow to the Dutch forces after they had suffered staggering losses due to the explosion of a gunpowder keg. In memory

of the victory, Midsummer Day was declared a local festival that was, as far as I know, celebrated annually until the Cultural Revolution brought it an abrupt end.² The holiday in honour of the victory on 24 June, however, was called the Dia da Cidade (City Day), and it continued to be celebrated up to Macao's Handover to China in 1999.³

It seems almost presumptuous to return to this topic that has been so well covered were it not for a few contextual remarks that can be added to Boxer's narrative of the events and, last but not least, because of the discovery of a testimony that, I am sorry to say, contradicts one of the better known romantic anecdotes in the town's history.

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EARLY DUTCH ATTEMPTS TO GAIN ACCESS TO THE CHINA MARKET

It was not until the 1670s that Dutch, Chinese and Portuguese private merchants initiated their own informal trade relations between Batavia and Macao. It was also not until the Canton trade system gradually started to take shape in the 1720s that the Macao administration extended its hospitality to Dutch East India Company's (VOC) merchants. Henceforth supercargoes would often stay in Macao during the months from December to August, when foreigners were required to leave Guangzhou (Canton) after their ships had departed.

From the moment they first arrived in Asia — at the port of Bantam on Java in 1595 — the Dutch sought to gain access to the China market.⁴ They did so with a two-pronged approach, by sailing directly to China or by trading with overseas Chinese merchants in Southeast Asian ports. The first ventures to discover a new route to China via the Arctic came to a tragic end with the shipwreck of the Heemskerck and Barendsz expedition at Novaya Zemlya in 1596/97. When these efforts were abandoned, henceforth all roads to China passed the traditional Cape of Good Hope route discovered by the Portuguese pioneers.

FIRST ENCOUNTER AT MACAO

On 20 September 1601, two ships of the so-called *Vierde Schipvaart* (fourth Dutch voyage to the Indies) under the command of Jacob van Neck ended up in the neighbourhood of the estuary of the Pearl River. They had been blown off course by the southwest monsoon while en route from the island of Ternate in the Spice Islands to the port of Patani on the Malay Peninsula. When he found himself in the coastal waters of southern China, Van Neck decided to head for Macao to obtain victuals and gather information about the Chinese market. With the help of local fishermen, he was

piloted to the Macao roadstead. Van Neck's brief and unfortunate encounter with the Portuguese led to an unexpected turn of events, which I have described in an article published in a special issue of *Modern Asian Studies* in honour of Charles Boxer.⁵ It does not make sense to reiterate that story here in detail.

Suffice it to say that a negotiator, Martinus Apius, was sent ashore, whereupon the Portuguese seized and murdered his crew and that of another boat taking soundings for a safer anchorage. In face of all this violence, Van Neck had no choice but to hoist the sails again. Apius, who the Macanese sent with two boys to Goa, managed to escape en route and returned to the Low Countries where he reported what had happened to him and his men. He reasoned that the Portuguese had killed his companions because they wanted to prevent the Chinese from making contact with the Dutch.

An essay by the Chinese mandarin Wang Linheng shows that this indeed had been the case. It turns out that proposals were being seriously considered to provide more trading beaches in the Pearl River Delta to 'western barbarians' because the local mandarins surmised that 'the Emperor attached great importance to advancing trade in order to line his treasury'. Wang Linheng formulated it as follows:

[Translation by author] *One more trading bay, one more source of profit! That is the best service you can give to our country. The two barbarians each will lay off their arms and avoid fighting. May thus our all-pervading humanity show and cover these two barbarians with the ways of heaven! Each will obey and will not dare to move. Thus Great Authority will be enacted.*⁶

Thus, in 1601, the Chinese were quite willing to welcome new European nations to the Pearl River estuary. If the Portuguese had not taken

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such desperate measures the Dutch might well have ended up as competitors on a nearby trading beach. Yet the seizure in 1603 of the carrack *Santa Catarina* by the Dutch changed Chinese views. They realized that the Portuguese portrayal of the Dutch as a bunch of pirates was correct. Even if they later had heard about Hugo Grotius's *De Jure Praedae Commentarius* (A commentary on the Right of Booty) written in 1604/05, it is unlikely they would have changed their minds on the subject.⁷ The brute behaviour of the Dutch on the Chinese coast, whether attacking Chinese coastal towns or fomenting and cooperating with Chinese pirates with the sole aim of forcing China to open up its ports to 'free traffic' actually would continue until 1633. At that time, the Chinese strongman Zheng Zhilong in Fujian province, and Hans Putmans, the Dutch Governor of Formosa (Taiwan), where the Dutch had established themselves in 1624, finally reached a sort of *modus operandi*.⁸

MORE ATTEMPTS

After Van Neck's unfortunate encounter at Macao, a few unsuccessful Dutch visits to the Chinese coast ensued. In 1603 Wybrant van Waerwijck, admiral of the first VOC fleet to Asia, personally sailed with two ships to the Pescadores Archipelago (Penghu), situated between Fujian and Taiwan. He did so on the advice of Impo (En Pu 恩浦), an overseas Chinese from Patani who suggested that the Dutch could establish trade relations with China if they connived with the eunuch Gao Cai. The latter man had been sent by the Emperor to Fujian to oversee the taxation of the overseas trade of that province. This mission, which is referred to in the chapter about *Helan* in the *Ming Shi*, the official history of the Ming dynasty, also ended in failure. A local Chinese naval commander, Shen Yourong, intervened and ordered the Dutch to leave.⁹ Visits by Admiral Cornelis Matelieff in the summer of 1607 to the island of Nan'ao on the border of Fujian and Guangdong Provinces and subsequently Lintin



Cornelis Matelieff de Jonge (1570–1632), by Pieter van der Werff. Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cornelis_Matelieff_de_Jonge_\(1570-1632\),_gekozen_in_1602_Rijksmuseum_SK-A-4491.jpeg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cornelis_Matelieff_de_Jonge_(1570-1632),_gekozen_in_1602_Rijksmuseum_SK-A-4491.jpeg)

(Lingding) near Macao, did not result in contacts with Chinese higher officials, because he was chased away by six Portuguese galleons from Macao.

Matelieff nonetheless penned some interesting advice on the prospects of the China trade, pointing out that the Chinese imperial administration regulated its foreign trade via two principal ports. Foreign tribute bearers and merchants were welcomed at Canton — if they were not prevented from reaching there by the Portuguese. And Chinese merchants trading at overseas ports in the South China Sea region operated mainly from the Bay of Amoy or Chencheo (Zhangzhou) as he called it. Because the Portuguese were thwarting all attempts to approach Canton, Matelieff instead encouraged trade with the overseas Chinese in the Malay Archipelago. Furthermore, he wanted to spoil the Spanish and Portuguese trade with China as much as possible with the help of privateers. In the decade that followed, that was exactly what the VOC

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Battle of Macau, 21–24 June 1622, by Jacob van Meurs. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nieuwhof-Ambassade-vers-la-Chine-1665_0739.tif

merchants did.¹⁰ They traded mainly with the Chinese in Banten and Patani. The Dutch also attacked the Portuguese and Spanish trade routes in Asia whenever and wherever they could.¹¹

COEN'S MASTER PLAN

It was not until the ascendancy of Governor-general Jan Pietersz Coen in 1618, that a clear — if not megalomaniac — Dutch strategy was adopted to gain a share in the China market whether by peaceful means or by force. Coen developed a master plan with three main objectives: the establishment of a new rendezvous in Asia (realised with the foundation of Batavia in 1619); a monopoly of the spice trade in the Indonesian

Archipelago (partially achieved with the conquest of the Banda Archipelago in 1621); and finally, the assumption of a large share of China's overseas trade, which was then in the hands of the Spanish and Portuguese enemies in Manila and Macao. As Matelieff had pointed out, the major part of China's maritime trade at the time was indeed carried out via two corridors: the Chinese-silk-for-Japanese-silver trade between Macao and Nagasaki, and the Chinese-silk-for-American-silver trade between the Bay of Amoy and Spanish-held Manila in the Philippines. Coen intended to block the trade of the Iberian enemies by laying cordons around Manila and Malacca, which would disrupt Portuguese trade between Macao and Nagasaki.

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THE MACAO EXPEDITION

On 9 April 1622, a Dutch fleet of 12 sails (six larger and six smaller ships) under the command of Cornelis Reyersen left the Batavian roadstead with 1,024 men on board. In his instruction issued the day before, Coen ordered his officers to head to Macao and seize the city by surprise. Coen estimated that the city harboured a population of approximately 800 Portuguese and 8,000 to 10,000 Chinese. The Dutch expected to find little in the way of fortification, 'because the Chinese did not allow the Portuguese to enclose the city and reinforce it.' Although it had been calculated that at least 1,200 to 1,500 men were needed for such an invasion, that many men were not available. The prime objective of the expedition was to occupy the Pescadores (Penghu) Archipelago near the Bay of Amoy, which Coen deemed to be the most useful place 'to enforce Chinese obedience and to obstruct Chinese trade with Manila'. If Reyersen could dislodge the Portuguese from Macao, Coen believed that this would deal a mortal blow to their trade with Japan.¹²

It took the Dutch naval force two months to sail to China. Macao was reached on 21 June. On 24 June, the strike force landed at Cacilhas Beach in 32 launches and 5 barges. The troops were divided into nine companies of 600 able men: 200 soldiers and 400 men consisting of sailors, several dozens of Bandanese and Gujarati slaves, and a handful of Japanese mercenaries. Another two companies of sailors were to form the rearguard on the Beach. Their job was to guard the sloops and smaller crafts and provide cover to the troops in case of a retreat.

The attackers met with 150 Portuguese and Eurasian musketeers who had entrenched themselves near the sea side. The Dutch troops were nonetheless able to land and break through losing some 40 men during the process.

Commander Reyersen was wounded in his belly and had to be carried back to the ships. The attack force now consisted of about 550 men, under the command of Captain Hans Ruffijn. They drove the Portuguese defenders back and advanced towards the city. Near a spring called *Fontinha*, the Dutch companies regrouped and replenished their gunpowder. According to Portuguese sources, they met with musket and cannon fire from the Saint Paul citadel.

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At this critical moment, the tide of the battle turned abruptly by divine intervention. As the Portuguese legend has it: 'A lucky cannon-ball served by the Italian Jesuit and mathematician Padre Jeronimo [Giacomo] Rho', writes Boxer, 'struck a barrel of gunpowder which exploded in the midst of the Dutch formation with devastating results.'¹³ Disheartened by this explosion and now bereft of ammunition, the Dutch attack faltered and lost momentum. Captain-Major Lopo Sarmiento de Carvalho gave the signal for the counterattack and 'with the help of a motley throng of Portuguese soldiers, Macanese citizens and negro slaves — to say nothing of armed friars and Jesuits to boot — took up the battle cry [*Santiago!*] and hurled themselves at the Hollanders'. They chased them back to the Beach where many of them were hacked to pieces in the surf. The Dutch sailors who were on the Beach panicked, withdrew to their boats, and failed to cover the retreating troops.¹⁴ According to Boxer, at least 136 Dutchmen were killed and 126 wounded. These numbers do not include the Bandanese or Japanese contingents, who undoubtedly also suffered casualties. The drubbing that the Dutch invasion force suffered on that fateful midsummer day in Macao, was a humiliating and total defeat. But the story does not end here.

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RIPON'S TALE

In 1990 Yves Giraud published a previously unknown journal from a Swiss mercenary named Elie Ripon. In it, he recounts his adventures as an arctic whaler and a mercenary in the service of the Dutch East India Company.¹⁵ Ripon joined the VOC in 1618, and during his ten years with the Company he visited many countries and served in various military expeditions. He also participated in the disastrous attack on Macao. Ripon was able to save himself by swimming away from the barrage of Portuguese bullets raining down like hail around him. His testimony provides a detailed account of the Macao campaign. The details concur with Reyersen's account, but Ripon is much more critical and informative.¹⁶ Because Reyersen was wounded, he had to rely on information from other people when writing his report.

Ripon stated that after the Portuguese trench by the sea had been conquered, Captain Ruffijn was convinced that victory was theirs for the taking. Although Ruffijn saw that his men were beginning to show signs of exhaustion, he nevertheless set off in pursuit of the withdrawing Portuguese. Because of this move, his soldiers were not allowed to replenish their ammunition or recover from the initial attack. 'While I witnessed the tragedy to unfold', writes Ripon, 'I remembered what Ruffijn had said to his soldiers the day before: "I shall lead you against the enemy, but may the Devil guide you back"'.¹⁷

Ripon had ordered a sergeant to replenish the gunpowder and to take a position on a hill close to the enemy's line of defence, which was at a nearby abbey.

[Translation by author] *After we had fought furiously three or four hours, the enemy understood that they could not gain the upper hand and threw two to three hundred slaves into the battle, who they had*

intoxicated and provided with sabres, pikes and all kinds of other weaponry. Thereupon their leader on horseback chased them with a large sabre to attack us. Not caring about our muskets or other weapons, those slaves fought so furiously and chaotically that the earth was trembling. In desperation they lunged upon us like animals and thereby also suffered many casualties. When at last the ammunition arrived the soldiers immediately wanted to serve themselves of it. A clumsy Japanese soldier, who wished to get hold of the gunpowder, let it catch fire and exploded with it [powder keg and all]. When the enemies saw this they gained courage, as they understood we had run out of gunpowder and lunged on Ruffijn's company who they hacked to pieces with the exception of eight or nine men under the command of ensign Derrick Statlander of Mecklenburg and me on the hill near the abbey, where the enemy attempted to cut off our retreat. When I saw this I said 'We are all finished because, we have run out of ammunition'.¹⁷

Thus, according to Ripon, the explosion of the ammunition was not caused, as legend has it, by the lucky shot of a Jesuit priest. Rather it was prosaically inflicted by an inept Japanese mercenary in Dutch service.

After some more frantic man-to-man fighting the other Dutch companies also began to withdraw because they ran out of ammunition. Ripon ordered his men to run for their lives to the coast, but when they reached the trench that had been conquered they noticed that the sloops had been withdrawn from the beach 'so that our fleeing men who wished to embark were slaughtered like chicken'. Swimming for his life, the Swiss managed to reach the boats where he found only a few of his soldiers still alive.

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Bird's Eye View of the City of Macao, circa 1665, by Johannes Vingboons. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AMH-6030-NA_Bird%27s_eye_view_of_the_city_of_Macao.jpg

[Translation by author] *Of the 800 men, some 250 had remained at the battleground including six captains, three lieutenants, nine ensigns and seven sergeants. All this because of lack of ammunition and because Ruffijn had not been able to maintain order.*¹⁸

Looking back on the event, Ripon remembered his brief exchange with Ruffijn prior to the attack and drew his conclusions about the cause of the defeat. When he had proposed to pray to God, Ruffijn had said that it wasn't necessary 'because we all were already rich men'. With a

smile Ripon had reposted: 'Don't dream of wealth, but let every man do his duty'.

According to Ripon, 'Ruffijn's wealth'

[Translation by author] [...] *consisted of the twelve sabre gashes he received because he was standing up front. He was the first to succumb. The other captains were all merchants, skippers and junior merchants who had been pushing their luck. They behaved themselves as if they were taking care of their shop. This experience resulted in their death, because it is wrong to put one's nose into business that one does not understand.*¹⁹

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In other words, in Ripon's view, the Dutch failed because their force was made up of men who had no battle experience.

AFTERMATH

The failed attempt to conquer Macao should indeed have been a proper and bitter experience for the Dutch, and in particular, for Governor-general Jan Pietersz Coen. The obvious lesson was not to underestimate the adversary on the battlefield. During the two years of the Dutch occupation of the Pescadores from 1622 to 1624, Ripon witnessed

another defeat. In that battle, the Dutch were unable to maintain their forward position because of the large size of a Chinese invasion force. In 1624, the VOC was forced to withdraw its troops to the nearby island of Formosa.

Taken in all, Ripon's testimony largely confirms what the Portuguese sources have shown, and, what C. R. Boxer asserted many years ago about the victory on that midsummer's day in Macao. But if his account is the correct one, then it sadly deprives the Portuguese defenders of the triumphant claim that divine intervention turned the tide of the battle. **RC**

NOTES

- 1 Charles Ralph Boxer, "Midsummer Day in Macao, anno 1622," in *Fidalgos in the Far East 1550–1770. Fact and Fancy in the History of Macao* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1948), 72–92.
- 2 According to what Father Manuel Teixeira told me when I first visited him in the summer of 1970. For an interview with this colourful person and 'historian extraordinary of Macao', see "The Phantom of the Seminary: Father Manuel Teixeira" in Leonard Blussé, Frans-Paul van der Putten, and H. Vogel, eds., *Pilgrims to the Past: Private conversations with historians of European expansion* (Leiden: Research School CNWS, 1996), 101–112. I don't know whether since that interview the annual celebration has been reinstated.
- 3 Cathryn H. Clayton, *Sovereignty at the Edge: Macau and the Question of Chineseness* (Cambridge: The Harvard University Asia Center, 2009), 232–233.
- 4 The best study on the earliest trade relations with China is: Willem Pieter Groeneveldt, *De Nederlanders in China. De eerste bemoeiingen om den handel in China en de vestiging in de Pescadores (1601–1624)* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1898).
- 5 Leonard Blussé, "Brief Encounter at Macao," *Modern Asian Studies* 22, no. 3 (July 1988): 647–664.
- 6 Wang Linheng, *Yue Jian Bian* (The Sword of Yue) (Taipei: Guangwen, 1969), 178–179.
- 7 Blussé, "Brief Encounter at Macao," 647; Martine Julia van Ittersum, "Hugo Grotius in Context: Van Heemskerck's Capture of the *Santa Catarina* and its Justification in *De Jure Praedae* (1604–1606)," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 31, no. 3: 511–548.
- 8 Tonio Andrade, "The Company's Chinese Pirates: How the Dutch East India Company tried to lead a Coalition of Pirates to War against China, 1621–1662," *Journal of World History* 15, no. 4 (2004): 415–444; Leonard Blussé, "Minnan-jen or Cosmopolitan? The Rise of Cheng Chih-lung alias Nicolas Iquan," in *Development and Decline of Fukien Province in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, ed. Eduard B. Vermeer (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 245–269.
- 9 Leonard Blussé, "Impo, Chinese merchant in Pattani," in *Proceedings of the Seventh IAHA Conference* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1979), 290–309; "Helan zhuan (Chapter on Holland)," *Mingshi* (History of the Ming Dynasty), *juan* 325.
- 10 Groeneveldt, *De Nederlanders in China*, 35–42.
- 11 The so-called Eighty Years' War of Independence ran from 1568 until the conclusion of Treaty of Munster in 1648. For Dutch privateering see Jurje Knoest, "Company Privateers in Asian Waters: The VOC-Trading Post at Hirado and the Logistics of Privateering, ca. 1614–1624," *Leidschrift* 26, no. 3 (2011): 43–57; André Murteira, "Dutch Attacks against the Goa-Macao-Japan Route, 1603–1618," in *Macao — The formation of a Global City*, ed. C. X. George Wei (London: Routledge, 2014), 95–106.
- 12 "Instructie voor den Ed. Commandeur Cornelis Reyerssen," in Groeneveldt, *De Nederlanders in China*, 314–316.
- 13 According to another version the famous Father Adam Schall would have been the sharpshooter.
- 14 Boxer, "Midsummer Day," 82.
- 15 Elie Ripon, *Voyages et aventures du Capitaine Ripon aux Grandes Indes. Journal inédit d'un mercenaire, 1617–1627*, ed. Yves Giraud (Thonon-les-Bains (Haute-Savoie): L'Albaron, 1990).
- 16 For Reyerssen's brief account see Groeneveldt, *De Nederlanders in China*, 87–88.
- 17 Ripon, *Voyages et aventures*, 90.
- 18 Ripon, *Voyages et aventures*, 91.
- 19 Ripon, *Voyages et aventures*, 93.

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