

PREAMBLE

An Execution

Today, fifty-year-old Frederick Coyet was to be executed for treason, a verdict he found deeply unjust. They made him kneel in the dirt in front of the gallows, facing the Batavia River. How easy it would be for a free man to simply sail away. Pay two stuivers and a Chinese water taxi would row you out to the junks and East Indiamen swaying in the Java Sea. Or you could float the other way, along canals as magnificent as those of Amsterdam, except in Holland there were no crocodiles. Cayman Canal, Tiger Canal, Rhinoceros Canal—they were lined with palm trees and flowering tamarinds, whose scent nearly masked the rotten smell of the water, the shit-stench of the nightsoil collectors.

It had been years since he'd been free to explore Batavia, Queen of the East, capital of the Dutch Indies. He'd been imprisoned in his own house, able to appreciate the city's cosmopolitan splendor only through the windows. Outside walked Dutchmen with their rapiers and broad-brimmed hats, Javanese women in sarongs and vests, Malay merchants in turbans, Chinese men in flowing silk robes, whose perfumed hair was so long that newly arrived sailors mistook them for women. Sometimes a Chinese procession took over the streets, with clanging gongs and nasal horns, fitful dancing, and colorful idols that made pious Dutchmen nervous. Even African slaves seemed freer than him, walking about in their puffy pantaloons.¹

This morning, people were heading to the execution grounds, because Coyet wasn't your usual sort of victim. He was no brawling sailor



Figure 1. A view of Batavia Castle, c. 1656. To the right, in the background, just beyond the horses in procession, can be seen the Hall of Justice, in front of which Coyet's execution took place. Andries Beekman, c. 1656, oil on canvas, 108 × 151.5 cm. Courtesy of the Collection Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

or deserting soldier. He'd once been at the top, one of those privileged few who rode on horseback or in carriages or in palanquins with silk curtains, who, when they deigned to alight, had servants to shade them from the tropical sun. The largest parasols were reserved for the High Councilors of the Indies, who administered the empire from the stone castle that loomed near the gallows (figure 1). Coyet had once been a High Councilor, *ex officio*, and if he'd continued his rise he might have become Governor-General, ruler of the Dutch Indies, who ran a court so grand it rivaled the courts of European kings.

But he'd been unlucky. His last position was governor of Taiwan, the largest colony in the Dutch Indies and one of its wealthiest. It should have been a stepping stone to further advance, but it had been attacked by the Chinese warlord Koxinga. Coyet did his best to hold out, defending the colony for nine months against steep odds, but eventually

he had to surrender, and when he arrived in Batavia, his colleagues didn't even let him make a report. They seized his belongings and stripped away his rank and privileges. His wife was forced to give up her pew and find a less distinguished church. They made him their scapegoat, treating him as though he had surrendered on purpose.

He was no patsy. He resisted at every step. At first he tried appealing to his colleagues' sense of justice, hoping that God, Ruler of All and Knower of Souls, might steer their hearts to clear his name, so he would, as he wrote, "again have the opportunity and pleasure of giving my faithful service for many more years."² But God didn't steer their hearts. They behaved badly. They tried to make him move out of his house and then, when he wouldn't, confined him to just one room. They forbade him to send letters home. They tried to keep him from reading the diaries and documents he'd kept so meticulously, even as they used those records to build their case, twisting the truth, portraying everything in the worst way. He wasn't trained as a lawyer like them, but he was stubborn and thorough. He fought on procedural grounds, refusing to sign papers and send affidavits, lodging statements of protest, filing countersuits. He kept the proceedings tied up for years.

They won in the end. Now he had to listen as the crier read out his sentence.³ As governor of Formosa, the man intoned, Coyet knew beforehand that Koxinga would invade but failed to put the colony's soldiers and citizens into a state of manly preparation. He left forts defenseless, foodless, and with stinking wells. He let Koxinga sail through the sea channels and land his troops. He surrendered one expensive fort without a fight and abandoned the colony's wealthiest city, allowing the pirate to steal its rice and meat and wine. Then he hid like a coward behind the massive walls of Taiwan's main stronghold, Zeelandia Castle, without even trying to drive Koxinga away. Finally, he surrendered that castle before Koxinga even blasted a hole in the walls, letting him take everything: warehouses full of silk and sugar and silver. He could have sent those treasures away, but he didn't. All of which, the crier concluded, caused harm to the Dutch East India Company and to the Holy Church that had been planted on Taiwan, not to mention the men and women Koxinga tortured and beheaded and crucified.

The executioner raised his huge sword. The blow swished above Coyet's head. The penalty for treason was death, but the Council of Justice had decided to show mercy. It was a symbolic execution. Coyet's real punishment was the loss of his fortune and life-imprisonment on an isolated island. A couple weeks later, he was gone.

Authorities in Batavia were relieved, but if they thought banishment would silence him, they were wrong.

THE COYET QUESTION

On his humid island, Coyet kept thinking and writing, while relatives in Europe strove to free him. His younger brother was a famous diplomat, and he managed to persuade William of Orange, regent of the Netherlands, to intervene in the case. Coyet was released, and when he arrived in Amsterdam he immediately published a book called *The Neglected Formosa*, which argued that the loss of Taiwan wasn't his fault but the fault of the men who imprisoned him.⁴ He made his case eloquently and methodically. If the High Councilors had sent the ships and troops he'd asked for, if they'd paid for improvements in the fortresses as he'd advised, if they'd devoted less attention to furthering their own careers and more attention to preserving the empire, then Koxinga would have been defeated and Taiwan would still be a Dutch possession.

His book has been widely read, and his derisive descriptions of his superiors are still parroted by historians, but what most strikes scholars today, three hundred and fifty years later, is an assumption he shares with his tormenters: that the Dutch could have defeated Koxinga at all.⁵

Koxinga commanded one of the most powerful armies in Asia, a hundred and fifty thousand troops who had come close to taking over China itself. That army had shrunk by the time he attacked Taiwan, but it still contained an order of magnitude more soldiers than the Dutch had in all the Indies, and he was able to concentrate those forces on Taiwan whereas the Dutch were spread across tens of thousands of miles of ocean, from the Island of Deshima in Japan to the coasts of Africa. At most, Batavia might have mustered an additional two thousand men to help Coyet. Would they really have been able to hold off

tens of thousands of battle-hardened Chinese troops? Equally important, Taiwan lay just a hundred miles from Koxinga's base in mainland China, whereas Batavia was two thousand miles away and Amsterdam sixteen thousand miles away. Koxinga would seem to have had an insuperable advantage supplying his troops.

The question isn't an idle one. It's a piece of a bigger puzzle, one that's exercised great minds from Max Weber to Jared Diamond: Why did the countries of western Europe, which lay on the fringes of the Old World and were backward by Asian standards, suddenly surge to global importance starting in the 1500s?

There's relative agreement now about how Europeans surged over the New World. It was guns, germs, and steel.⁶ But Moroccans, Ottomans, Gujaratis, Burmese, Malays, Japanese, Chinese, and countless other peoples had guns, germs, and steel, too, so what else lies behind the rise of Europe? What explains the global empires they founded—first the Portuguese and Spanish, then the Dutch and British—empires that expanded not just over the Americas but encircled the entire world?

Historians used to answer this question by saying that Europeans had a superior civilization: they had more advanced political organization, economic structures, science, and technology. But the growth of Asian history over the past decades has challenged this view. Any time someone argues that Europe had an advantage in a given area—say property rights, or per capita income, or labor productivity, or cannon manufacture—along comes an Asian historian pointing out that that claim is false. The case for European exceptionalism has unraveled like a ball of string and is now so tangled that there seems little chance to wind it up again.

Historians whose purview is the entirety of human history—the so-called global historians—have responded by reconceiving the history of the world, coming up with a Revisionist Model of world history.⁷ They believe that the most developed societies of Asia were progressing along paths quite similar to western Europe and that the divergence between Europe and Asia came late. It wasn't 1492, when Columbus sailed, or 1497, when da Gama rounded Africa. It wasn't 1600 or 1602, when the English and Dutch East India Companies were founded. It

wasn't even 1757, when the Englishman Clive defeated a huge Indian army at the famous Battle of Plassey, inaugurating the British Empire in India. No, the revisionists say, there was relative parity, both economically and technologically, between western Europe and many parts of Asia until the late eighteenth century, when industrialization and its concomitant economic revolutions changed the game.⁸

It's a radical proposition. The traditional narrative portrayed Europe as a beacon of enlightenment in a benighted world. In contrast, the revisionists see the rise of the west as part of a broader pattern of Eurasian development, a deep history of shared innovations in which Asian societies were prime movers.

The Revisionist Model isn't popular with everyone. A group of scholars have attacked the revisionists, frustrated that they're trying to overturn centuries of work by great thinkers from Adam Smith to Fernand Braudel. Some have accused the revisionists of distorting data and twisting logic, believing that they're motivated not by a scholar's love of evidence but by political correctness, an ideological zeal to dethrone the west and denounce Eurocentrism.⁹

The revisionists reply that the old view of world history *is* Eurocentric because it was formed when we knew next to nothing about Asia. They believe new data must be reflected in new theories. Each side buttresses its arguments with pulse-quickening statistics: wage levels of unskilled building workers in Gdansk, per capita grain consumption in seventeenth-century Strasbourg, animal-borne freight-hauling capacity in north India. Yet the debate seems far from resolution.

A key point of disagreement is the question of European colonialism before the industrial age. If the revisionists are right that the Great Divergence occurred around 1800, then how do we explain the preceding three centuries of conquest? Defenders of the old model believe that European colonialism is itself evidence of advancement, but the revisionists retort that European power was more fragile than had been assumed. This was, they say, especially true in Asia, where Europeans controlled few land colonies, and where they were deeply dependent on Asians for capital, protection, and trading opportunities. In addition, the revisionists argue, Europeans could expand into Asian seas only because Asians let them. Europe benefited from a

maritime power vacuum. They had the good fortune to sail into a gaping breach.

I myself was a revisionist. My first book examined the birth and growth of the Dutch colony on Taiwan starting in 1624.¹⁰ I argued that the Dutch were able to colonize the island not because of any superior technology or economic organization, but because the governments of China, Japan, and Korea wanted nothing to do with it. I wrote that the situation changed in the 1650s with the rise of Koxinga. His goal was to capture Beijing and restore the Ming Dynasty, but when he found he couldn't, he decided to invade Taiwan instead. In a short chapter on his conquest, I said that he had little trouble defeating the Dutch. I believed that his power was so overwhelming that the Dutch could never have defeated him. Thus I offered strong support for the Revisionist Model, and for the idea that political will, not technological prowess, was the most important factor underlying European expansion.¹¹

I believed all of this at the time, and I still believe much of it, but after the book was published, I was asked to write an article on Koxinga's invasion of Taiwan. I agreed, thinking the task would be simple, that I'd just uncover some new sources to fill out the story I'd outlined in my first book. But when I dove into the documents, I found two things that surprised me.

First, the sources were incredibly rich. They were full of vivid characters: Koxinga himself, pale and scarred and handsome, deadly with a samurai sword and a bow and arrow, disconcerting in conversation, with his flitting eyes and pointed teeth and a tendency to yell wildly and chop off heads at a whim. But also the grim and heroic general Gan Hui, the ridiculously overconfident Dutch commander Thomas Pedel, the sycophantic and maudlin Dutchman Jacob Valentine whose tears smudged the ink on his letters, the eloquent and unlucky Chinese freedom fighter Zhang Huangyan, a brave and foolish Chinese farmer, two enterprising African boys, an ostentatious German alcoholic, a resentful Dutch admiral with a speech defect, and of course Coyet himself, meticulous and proud. The documents were full of dialogue and descriptions, drama and intrigue, and there were Chinese sources with a wealth of detail about Koxinga's military,

including battle arrays, types of ships, strategies, and the like, sources that are largely unknown in western scholarship.

But the second and most important thing I found is that I had been wrong. Coyet, with his twelve hundred troops, might well have won the war. In a clear challenge to the Revisionist Model I'd believed in, Dutch technology turned out to have areas of decisive superiority. This finding surprised me. It also corroborates one of the most compelling models for understanding the rise of the west, a variant of the old orthodox model of world history called the Military Revolution Theory.

According to the Military Revolution Theory, pre-industrial Europeans did have a key advantage over people in the rest of the world: their warfare. Europeans, the argument goes, fought a lot with each other. Over time, they got better at it. Constant wars created a cauldron of innovation, so Europe developed the most powerful guns, the best-drilled units, the mightiest ships, and the most effective forts in the world.

Both the revisionists and their critics refer to the Military Revolution, but they take different lessons from it. The revisionists admit that Europeans had a slight military edge over other Eurasians but downplay the technological aspects of that edge and deny that it reflects any general European superiority. The counter-revisionists argue that Europeans' military advantage reflects a general lead European societies had vis-à-vis Asians, economically, politically, administratively, scientifically, and technologically.¹²

Making the matter more complex is the fact that military historians themselves debate the extent of Europeans' military advantage, a debate personified in a friendly disagreement between two Brits. On one side is Geoffrey Parker, a careful researcher who has worked in hundreds of archives and libraries around the world. His seminal work on the Military Revolution makes a persuasive and nuanced case for the superiority of European arms on the global stage. Europe's technological and organizational advantages in warfare, he argues, can help explain how Europe came to control thirty-five percent of the world's land before industrialization. On the other side is his friend Jeremy Black, a prodigious scholar who has written more books than he's had birthdays, and who argues that the technological gap between Europe and the rest of the world was small and easily made up. He, too, makes a persuasive case.¹³

The debate has been hard to resolve because we know little about non-European warfare. Historians have focused on European wars, whose study makes up by two or three orders of magnitude the majority of books and articles in the field of military history.

Recently, however, a group of younger scholars has focused on Chinese military history. Their conclusions are shaking the field because they argue convincingly that the Military Revolution began not in Europe but in China.

THE CHINESE MILITARY REVOLUTION

“The founding of the Ming dynasty in 1368,” writes historian Sun Laichen, “started the ‘military revolution’ not only in Chinese but also world history in the early modern period.”¹⁴ Sun goes on to argue that “the ‘military revolution’ in China modernized [China’s] military forces and made it a military superpower and the first ‘gunpowder’ empire in the early modern world.”¹⁵ It was the founder of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) who inaugurated the revolution. As he levied his cannons against neighbors, those neighbors quickly copied them. Gunpowder states emerged on China’s borders, expanding at the expense of neighbors farther away.¹⁶ The new technologies exploded outward from their Chinese epicenter, with global historical consequences. Other historians have corroborated Sun’s findings.¹⁷

It’s a striking change of perspective. We have to keep in mind that the standard model for understanding the rise of the west emerged when many westerners believed that gunpowder was independently invented in Europe.¹⁸ Indeed, until the 1970s, historians in the west believed that the gun itself was a European invention and that China, although it invented gunpowder, didn’t think to put it into metal tubes and use it to hurl projectiles.¹⁹ Now we know that the first true guns emerged in China as early as the mid-1100s.²⁰ They became a mainstay of Chinese armies in the violent wars that preceded the establishment of the Ming Dynasty in 1368.

The members of the Chinese Military Revolution School admit that European guns became superior to Chinese guns after 1500 and that Chinese copied the new designs. Yet whereas counter-revisionists argue that China’s adoption of European guns is evidence of Europe’s relative

modernization, the Chinese Military Revolution School takes the opposite lesson. Chinese, they argue, were able to adopt European guns so rapidly because the Military Revolution had begun in China. Historian Kenneth Swope writes, “When Europeans brought their arms to Asia, they did not introduce the technology, but rather they supplemented and expanded the options already available to war-makers.”²¹

The Ming had always taken firearms seriously, establishing a special administrative unit to produce them and train gunners. When Portuguese guns arrived in the sixteenth century, the Ming quickly set up a new bureau to study them. When even more powerful western cannons arrived in the seventeenth century, Ming officials adopted them as well, going so far as to dredge them up from Dutch and English shipwrecks and reverse-engineer them.²²

Thus, the Military Revolution must be viewed as a Eurasia-wide phenomenon. It began in China and spread through the world, eventually reaching the fractious and warlike states of Europe, who took up the new technologies rapidly and then brought them back, honed through a couple centuries of violent warfare, to be just-as-eagerly taken up in Japan, Korea, and China. This perspective, based on painstaking research, supports the revisionist position: developed parts of Asia were progressing along lines quite similar to those in Europe.

Still, the Chinese Military Revolution historians can't judge the relative efficacy of European versus Chinese arms because they focus on intra-Asian warfare, just as most military historians have focused on intra-European warfare. There are specific claims about European arms that must be examined carefully: Europe's purported advantage in drill, in fortification, and in ship design. To gauge the military balance between Europe and Asia, we must look at wars between Europeans and Asians, something that has, surprisingly, been done very little.

One of the most important wars was the struggle between Koxinga and the Dutch East India Company.

EUROPE'S FIRST WAR WITH CHINA

The Sino-Dutch War, 1661–1668, was Europe's first war with China and the most significant armed conflict between European and Chinese

forces before the Opium War two hundred years later.²³ The Opium War, of course, was fought with powerful industrial steamships, and China lost badly. The Sino-Dutch War was fought with the most advanced cannons, muskets, and ships, and the Chinese won.

The revisionists and counter-revisionists refer to this war explicitly, but both take different lessons. Revisionists argue that Koxinga's victory over the Dutch shows the limits of Europeans' coercive power in Asia.²⁴ The counter-revisionists fire back that Koxinga achieved victory only by adopting European military technology, and so the war actually supports the old model.

Who's right? My full argument will unfold gradually throughout this book, but I'll adumbrate my findings here. It wasn't so much Dutch cannons and muskets that proved superior. As Coyet himself realized, Chinese cannons were just as good as his, a point that Chinese-language scholarship has corroborated. One scholar from Taiwan, for example, notes that an analysis of Koxinga's cannons and their use leaves one "astonished at his army's modernization."²⁵ Similarly, Dutch musket companies, with their deadly volley fire technique, which was invented in Holland and allowed musketeers to achieve a constant rain of fire, proved useless against Koxinga's troops. In fact, the Chinese had developed volley fire more than two centuries before.²⁶ Koxinga's soldiers were so well trained, well disciplined, and well led that the Dutch forces usually broke formation and ran.

No, what gave the Dutch their edge were two things: the renaissance fortress and the broadside sailing ship. The renaissance fortress is at the heart of the Military Revolution Model, and the one the Dutch built in Taiwan stymied Koxinga (figure 2). Although he'd conducted scores of sieges in his time, attacking places much larger and with walls much more massive, he simply couldn't find a way on his own to deal with the Dutch fort's capacity for crossfire. It wasn't until he got help from a defector from the Dutch side—the grandiose German alcoholic I mentioned earlier—that he finally managed to overcome it.

The argument about Dutch ships is a bit more involved. Suffice to say that Dutch ships, as the Military Revolution Model predicts, easily overwhelmed Chinese warships in deepwater combat. Chinese sources make this clear, and both Chinese and Dutch descriptions of

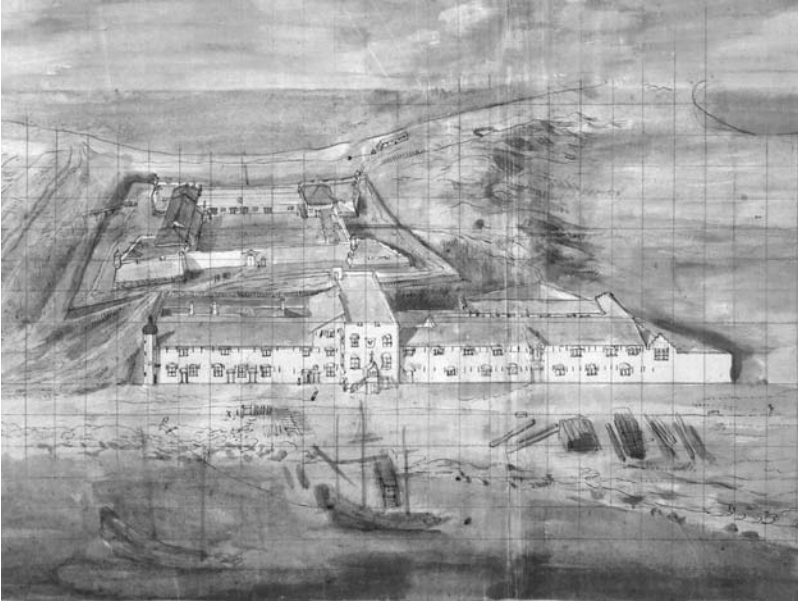


Figure 2. Zeelandia Castle, c. 1635. This drawing shows Zeelandia Castle in an early form. It was a classic square renaissance fortress, with four protruding bastions. Below it are warehouses and residences, the most prominent of which is the Governor's Mansion, which stands in the middle. These structures were later enclosed by more walls, which became known as the Lower Castle, whereas the original fort became known as the Upper Castle. The artist of this image was likely the famous mapmaker Johannes Vingboons, who was working from an original by David de Solemne. Image used by permission of The National Archives of the Netherlands, The Hague, VELH Verzameling Buitenlandse Kaarten Leupe: Eerste Supplement, finding aid number 4.VELH, inventory number 619.118.

sea battles show that Chinese captains had to find unusual ways to counter Dutch naval superiority. But Dutch ships also seem to have had another advantage: a surpassing ability to sail into prevailing winds. This is a venerable argument about European nautical superiority, and some might well dispute it.²⁷ But as we'll see, the Dutch ability to sail into the wind nearly turned the tide of the war, shocking Koxinga and throwing his officers into panic at a crucial period.

These points and other data from the war corroborate the Military Revolution Model and point us to a middle ground between the revisionists and their critics. The counter-revisionists are correct that the Dutch had a technological advantage over the Chinese in warfare, but

the revisionists are right that it was a slight one, easily made up. The weapons Koxinga used were more advanced than those used even a hundred years before, so we must be wary of old narratives that portray Asian societies as stagnant and European societies as dynamic, a portrayal that in any case the huge outpouring of data from Asian history over the past four decades has made clear is false.

In many ways, Asian and European societies were developing along similar lines, toward specialization, commercialization, more effective agricultural techniques, and more deadly arms. But the revisionists should also admit that in certain areas at least, European societies were developing more quickly. Perhaps we have not a sudden Great Divergence occurring around 1800 but rather a small and accelerating divergence beginning in the sixteenth century. In many areas, this small divergence would have been imperceptible or absent. But as the decades passed, the divergence accelerated, and during the period of industrialization—the great take-off—the acceleration became so rapid that it appears in retrospect to be a sudden rupture.

These points about the revisionist debate are important, but this book is more than an extended argument. It's also a narrative history of this important but poorly understood conflict. The Sino-Dutch War is frequently mentioned in historical literature and in textbooks, but there's never been a major study of it in any language that makes use of the many sources—Chinese and European—that are available.²⁸ Historians will doubtless uncover new documents and find errors and omissions here, but I hope this book will lead to greater understanding of this fascinating episode of global history.

I've certainly found it fascinating to write. One thing that absorbed me as I read the sources is how the weather—the planet—became a major character. Time and time again, the war turned on a storm. Even before the war started, a typhoon destroyed a Dutch fortress on Taiwan and altered the sandy island on which it had been perched so much that the Dutch couldn't even rebuild it. This left Coyet particularly vulnerable to Koxinga's invasion. Another storm drove away the relief fleet that Coyet had managed to summon against the winds,

dashing one of its vessels to the ground and, more importantly, taking from Coyet the element of surprise. Tide surges, unexpected currents, freak winds—over and over again nature changed the course of the war. I came to believe that nature was more important than any other factor in the war.

I say “nature,” because to me all this is an expression of the stochasticity of a beautiful but indifferent universe. As a botanist friend of mine says, “What do the stars care about some slime mold at the edge of one galaxy?”²⁹ But of course the Dutch and Chinese saw it differently. Both felt that there was a higher power intervening in earthly affairs. The Dutch called it God, the Chinese called it Heaven, and although their cosmologies and theologies differed, they saw in storms and tides, famines and floods a divine purpose. That each side thought Heaven favored their own people—or should favor their own people—is just the way we’re built, it seems.

The fact that I kept finding myself writing about nature comes mostly from the sources—or I believe so anyway—but it resonated with me because I’m trying to make sense of my own time, when climate catastrophe looms, when nature is about to start bucking like never before in our history. It bucked pretty hard in the mid-seventeenth century, too. Right around the time the action in this book takes place, the global climate cooled abruptly. The cooling might not have caused major problems by itself, but it was accompanied by severe climatic instability, just as global warming will be. There were floods and droughts, locusts and famines, riots and rebellions. Bandits raged and governments fell like never before and never since. In fact, if it hadn’t been for this seventeenth-century global climate crisis, the Sino-Dutch War might never have happened. Koxinga might have ended up a Confucian scholar, passing examinations and writing poetry. The Dutch might have kept Taiwan for generations longer.

So did Koxinga win because he just happened to be better favored by the weather? No. Although luck played a role, Koxinga won because of leadership. His troops were better trained, better disciplined, and most important, better led than the Dutch. Bolstered by a rich military tradition, a Chinese “way of war,” Koxinga and his generals outfought Dutch commanders at every turn. There’s still an idea,

prevalent in both the west and China, that the Chinese were a people for whom war was considered unimportant. We're learning now how false that idea is. In fact, a historian of China has recently argued that "until 1800 China had a military tradition unequaled by any other polity in the world."³⁰

The Sino-Dutch War can thus teach us valuable lessons about military history. It was fought at a time when the technological balance between China and the west was fairly even, a time more similar to today than the periods of other Sino-Western wars—the Opium War, the Boxer Rebellion, the Korean War—all of which were fought across a steep technological gradient. Military historians have posited the existence of a "western way of war," a "peculiar practice of Western warfare . . . that has made Europeans the most deadly soldiers in the history of civilization."³¹ But partisans of this sort of argument are generally ignorant of Chinese military tradition. In the Sino-Dutch War, Chinese strategies, tactics, and leadership were superior, and all were tied to a set of operational precepts drawn from China's deep history, a history that is as full of wars as Europe's own. The Chinese sources I read are woven through with strands of wisdom from classics like *The Art of War* and *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Indeed, Chinese historians have argued that Koxinga's victory over the Dutch was due to his mastery of this traditional military wisdom.³²

I often feel in my scholarship like I'm walking a tightrope, trying to balance between Eurocentrism and an overly Asiatic counterposition, between revisionism and the standard model. When I feel I'm starting to teeter, waving my arms to stay balanced, I find it's best to dive into the sources. European documents make clear how the Dutch were outfoxed by Chinese commanders. Chinese sources admit freely that the "red-haired barbarians" had weapons and ships superior to their own. Both sides were deeply aware that nature—Almighty God or the Will of Heaven—was the supreme determinant of human affairs.

So let's go back to the early seventeenth century, before the war started, when Coyet's predecessors were laying the foundations of the Dutch Empire in the Indies. What they found when they tried to establish a presence in the rich China trade is that they needed help from Chinese citizens. One of the citizens they met was Koxinga's father,

a pirate named Zheng Zhilong. Zhilong helped the Dutch make their new colony of Taiwan into “one of the most beautiful pearls in the crown” of the Dutch empire.³³ The Dutch helped Zhilong become the most powerful pirate in the world, a position he used to become fabulously wealthy, drawing an income larger than that of the Dutch East India Company itself. Since much of his wealth and power eventually passed to his son, it’s no exaggeration to say that the company helped create the man who would defeat it.