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A Chinese Farmer, Two African Boys, and a Warlord: Toward a Global Microhistory*

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To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.
—William Blake, “To See a World”

TAIWAN, October 1661. In the dark, dangerous waters of the Taiwan Strait, a frightened Chinese farmer tries to steer a stolen boat. The Dutch are shooting at him, but this is the only rowboat they had on their ship, and if they want to chase him they’ll have to raise the anchor, so he has a head start. He aims toward shore, hoping to run away into the high grass, but the night current carries him out toward the rest of their fleet. As he drifts between the shadowy hulls, sailors stir. They call down and ask if he wants to come aboard, thinking the shots might have been an alert about the enemy and maybe this man in a boat has information. In the darkness they can’t tell he’s Chinese. Each time they ask he answers “Neen,” one word so they can’t hear

* I wish to acknowledge the help of Emory University’s Department of History, Emory College, reviewers of the *Journal of World History* (Jerry Bentley gave particularly useful feedback on an early draft), and, most of all, my wife, Andrea Artuso Andrade, who read drafts of this article and whose enthusiasm encouraged me to see it through to publication.

his accent. He keeps rowing. A group of them begins chasing him in a sloop. They shoot from behind but miss as he zigzags wildly through the waves. There's a bump as the sloop strikes the little boat. The sailors are lashing the two vessels together. Their commander is about to step aboard. The farmer draws his knife.¹

This man's bloody death a few seconds later is insignificant in the sweep of global history. There's no pressing historiographical need to piece together his story from the sandy manuscripts where it lay for three hundred and fifty years. Except for one thing: balance. World history has tended toward the social science side of history. We've made great strides building powerful models of global historical structures and processes: global silver flows, strange parallels, divergences great and small. But we've tended to neglect the human dramas that make history come alive. I believe we should adopt microhistorical and biographical approaches to help populate our models and theories with real people, to write what one might call global microhistory.

How does one write on the scale of individuals from a global perspective? Certainly it's not something you see much in our books and monographs or in our journals, the *Journal of World History* and the *Journal of Global History*. The most effective precedents are written by scholars who haven't been associated with the world history movement: Jonathan Spence's *Question of Hu*, Linda Colley's *Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh*, and Nathalie Zemon Davis's *Trickster Travels*.² Each of these works focuses on a person traveling between cultures and uses its protagonists' adventures to explore intercultural connections and global transformations. This human focus makes the books fun to read, exciting even, and they've reached a wide audience.

I hope world historians will experiment with stories of individual lives in global contexts, and I offer here my own attempt, a short piece about a Chinese man, two African boys, two feuding Dutch merchants,

¹ There are two accounts of Sait's flight from the galiot *de Roode Vos* as it lay at anchor near Zeelandia Castle in southern Taiwan. The fullest is Dagregister gehouden bij den commandeur Cauw beginnende 5 Julij 1661 en eindigende 3 Februarij 1662, National Archive of the Netherlands, VOC Collection, VOC 1240:1–213, pp. 139–141. The other is Leonard Blussé, Nathalie Everts, W. E. Milde, and Yung-ho Ts'ao, eds., *De dagregisters van het Kasteel Zeelandia, Taiwan, 1629–1662*, 4 vols. (The Hague: Instituut voor Nederlandse Geschiedenis, 1986–2001), vol. 4, E: 637–638 (hereafter cited as *Zeelandia Dagregisters*).

² Jonathan Spence, *The Question of Hu* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989); Linda Colley, *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh: A Woman in World History* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007); Nathalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim between Worlds* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006). Another great example is Leonard Blussé's *Bitter Bonds: A Colonial Divorce Drama of the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Markus Wiener, 2002).

and a Chinese warlord. All these characters were thrown together by the great waves of international trade and cross-cultural interaction that swept the world in the seventeenth century.

The hero—the Chinese man with a knife—wasn't important in himself. He wasn't rich or powerful or connected. He was just a farmer who made a bold—you might say foolish—decision to cross a cultural divide during a time of war and paid for it with his life. As a result he left an impression in the archives, like a fly pressed between the pages of an old book. His story is useful not so much because it's significant in itself but because it offers a glimpse into another world.

In 1661, when he climbed into the boat, the Dutch colony of Taiwan had been attacked by the Chinese warlord Koxinga, ending a period of relative peace in Taiwan. The Dutch colony in Taiwan had been based on close commercial interactions between the Dutch and the Chinese and other people from around the world—it was, in the words of Taiwanese scholars, a “plural society.”³ Taiwan's Chinese residents had lived for decades under Dutch rule, and they'd prospered—particularly the wealthiest among them—by working closely with the Dutch to establish Chinese industries on Taiwan.⁴ The Dutch had welcomed the Chinese to their colony, providing tax breaks, military protection, and agricultural subventions, because Dutch administrators realized that in the absence of settlers from Europe, Chinese would be able to help make the island into a profitable colony. As one Dutch governor put it, “The Chinese are the only bees on Taiwan that give honey.”⁵

But in the spring of 1661, Koxinga invaded the island with overwhelming force: four hundred ships, a swaying forest of sails, carrying twenty-five thousand men. It was the largest Chinese expedition overseas since the voyages of the eunuch admiral Zheng He two centuries before. The Chinese settlers on Taiwan had to choose sides.

Most chose Koxinga. His armies were met by crowds of black-haired settlers bringing wagonloads of food and weapons to the shore. Thanks partly to their help, Koxinga's troops poured onto the Taiwan plains,

³ The phrase is used by Han Jiabao 韓家寶, and, as he notes, he adopts it from his mentor Ts'ao Yung-ho 曹永和. See Han Jiabao, *Helan shi dai Taiwan de jing ji tu di yu shui wu* 荷蘭時代臺灣的經濟土地與稅務 (Taipei: Bo zhong zhe wen hua, 2002). My own book, *How Taiwan Became Chinese: Dutch, Spanish, and Han Colonization in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008; available online at <http://www.gutenberg-e.org/andrade/>), advances a similar perspective.

⁴ I describe this process in detail in Andrade, *How Taiwan Became Chinese*.

⁵ Governor Nicholas Verburg, cited in Andrade, *How Taiwan Became Chinese*, p. 159 (chap. 8, par. 1).

their steel helmets flashing in the sun, and swept through the fields and paddies, winning each pitched battle against the Dutch, routing them like so many novices. They captured the Dutch positions on the mainland and chased the Dutch to an island fortress just offshore, reachable from the mainland if you were willing to get your feet wet. But Koxinga's success stopped at the fortress walls. He tried but failed to capture it, after which he decided to just surround it and starve the Dutch out. At that point the momentum of the war changed. Koxinga's huge army began to starve, and as it ravaged the land, taking food where it could, some Chinese settlers began to resent Koxinga and long for a return to Dutch rule. One of them was the Chinese farmer.

The farmer's adventure started a month before his fateful boat trip. It was September, late summer in Taiwan. Koxinga had ordered all residents to support the war effort by bringing a load of bamboo to the city he'd renamed the Eastern Capital (present-day Tainan), which lay just across the bay from the Netherlands' island fortress. The farmer left his wife and children and brought his consignment to the little city with its narrow streets and rows of brick houses, laying it down where soldiers and officials directed him to, on a big pile of bamboo and grass.

Then he observed the martial bustle of the place, the soldiers guarding a stronghold that had been built by the Dutch but taken over by Koxinga, the war junks anchored in the bay, the watchmen patrolling the old ferry port. He spoke to a Dutch prisoner who'd been captured early in the war but now served Koxinga as a surveyor, the two men complaining about how little there was to eat and how many people were starving. Maybe he tarried near the shops, running his finger over the silk robes that Koxinga's officials were pawning to buy food for their families.

Instead of going home, he walked down the coast to where the salt pans were drying under the cloudy sky and then waded out past them. Climbing ashore on the other side, he made his way past dunes overgrown with pineapples and abandoned melon patches, mindful of Chinese watchtowers and patrols, until he came to the end of the long narrow isle. Before him rose the huge gray-stone walls of the Dutch fortress, defiantly flying the blood-red flag of war.⁶

To his right, across a field of high grass, lay the battle-scarred town

⁶ The description of the Chinese farmer's route is based on *Zeelandia Dagregisters*, vol. 4, D: 774–776, and *Dagregister Cauw*, pp. 79–80. C.f. Resolution of 14 September 1661, in *Resolutions of the Council of Formosa*, 1661-08-01 to 1662-02-14, VOC 1238: 519–621, fo. 535.

of Zeelandia, which had once been a thriving international seaport, with busy harbors and bustling markets. Now the red-tiled roofs were so cannon-blasted that Chinese soldiers slept in tents in the cobblestone streets, hiding in the houses only during the day to shelter themselves from Dutch muskets and intermittent rains. The streets were stopped up with sand-basket barricades, from which cannon muzzles thrust out at the castle.

Before the war the Dutch and Chinese had lived in this city as friends, buying and selling silks and porcelain and tea, co-investing in rice farms and sugar plantations, working together to turn this once wild island into a cosmopolitan node of global commerce. In its war-ravaged stores and markets you used to be able to buy goods from around the world: ivory from Africa, cotton from India, pepper from Palembang, sandalwood from Siam, dried shrimp from Indonesia, and of course silks and porcelain and tea from China. The burned and gutted harbor complex had once bristled with masts: yachts next to junks, sampans next to sloops. Walking along the docks you used to be able to hear conversations in Dutch, Chinese, Malay, Portuguese, German, French, and various Indian and African languages. Generally these people had pursued their livelihoods here in peace. The Dutch rulers had especially appreciated people like this Chinese farmer, entrepreneurs who owned their own land and raised rice and sugar for sale and paid taxes and employed dozens or hundreds of poor Chinese laborers who paid for a residence permit each month. Capitalists understood each other.⁷

But all that had changed a few months prior, when Koxinga had arrived. Now Chinese troops had chased the Dutch into this one fortress, protected by water on three sides. It was a mighty edifice. When Koxinga tried storming it, months ago, confident after his string of victories, his best troops had been shot to bits by Dutch cannons and muskets. Afterward, his forces had entrenched themselves in the abandoned town to starve the Dutch out. For three months they'd kept the red-hairs trapped inside, seventeen hundred people without fresh food, with more and more falling ill each day, so that the floors of the old warehouse and the church were covered with sick people, giving off a terrible stench. It used to be possible to go do your wash—or send your slaves or servants to do it—on the stone waterfront below the fort, but now Koxinga was placing cannons on an island just across from the fort to the north. Even going to the bathroom was dangerous, because

⁷ Andrade, *How Taiwan Became Chinese*, chaps. 6–8.

Koxinga's cannons could sometimes target the wooden outhouses that perched over the water. The Dutch had become weary and desperate.⁸

Then they'd had a stroke of luck. A Dutch commander named Jacob Cauw had arrived with a fleet of deadly wedge-hulled ships filled with cannon and men. When Koxinga and his officials saw the eleven tall ships with their billowing flags, they panicked, running through the streets of the Eastern Capital without their servants or parasols, talking loudly in small groups. Months ago Koxinga had sent nearly all of his troops out into the wilds of Taiwan to start farms because there wasn't enough food on Taiwan, so now his Eastern Capital was sparsely defended.

Everyone was wondering what would happen next. Would the Dutch try to recapture the city across from their remaining fort? Would they attack Koxinga's headquarters in the Eastern Capital? Or would they use their ships to cordon Taiwan off and prevent rice supplies from arriving and feeding Koxinga's starving troops?

The Chinese farmer had ideas and advice about how to use the fleet, and he had information from behind enemy lines that he knew the Dutch would find valuable. But crossing sides was dangerous. The Dutch might torture him, or slap him into irons, or kill him. Or Koxinga's people might find out and do something to his family.

He stepped out of hiding and showed himself to the Dutch sentries. They led him through an archway into the fort. A while later he found himself in a room with a group of Dutchmen. The most imposing presence was the Hollanders' governor, a man named Coyet, but there were other high officials in their strange clothes, including Jacob Cauw, the commander of the fleet.

A secretary dipped pen in ink. Who was he, they asked, and why had he come? He said his name was Sait and he'd come because he couldn't stand it any more, the way Koxinga and his soldiers mistreated him and the other Chinese farmers. Koxinga's soldiers pressed them constantly for money. They forced them to chop bamboo and bring it to his headquarters. They demanded all the stockpiles of rice and sugar without paying anything and even made them bring it themselves and load it on Koxinga's ships. He and the other farmers had given up working their fields, knowing that whatever they harvested this year would be stolen from them. Now the worms ate through the rice stalks even

⁸ Various descriptions of the stench and lack of beds can be found, but among the best is Daghregister Cauw, pp. 76–77.

as Koxinga's soldiers and the poorer Chinese were dying from hunger. This year's harvest would be terrible, he said, the worst he'd ever seen.⁹

Sait said he had urgent military news. When he'd brought his bamboo to the Eastern Capital he'd seen huge stacks of the stuff there, and also piles of dry grass and the natives' tree-bark skirts. Koxinga was planning to use it all to make fire-boats to attack the Dutch fleet. Already seven rafts were ready to send out under the next dark moon, to crash into the Dutch ships and burn them up. Pilots had been chosen and had received their rewards in advance: fifty ounces of gold, a princely sum.

Sait felt that the arrival of the fleet brought great opportunity to turn the war around. Koxinga lacked food. The civil war that raged in China had disrupted his rice supplies, and his men were starving. He'd ordered thousands of them to start their own farms here on Taiwan, but they were too weak from hunger to work the fields. Now the officers were so desperate that they'd started slaughtering plow oxen for food. Only half of Koxinga's soldiers were healthy enough to fight, and most of them were scattered throughout the countryside. Very few guarded Koxinga's headquarters, the so-called Eastern Capital that lay just across the bay, within sight of this fortress. There were also few cannon there. Maybe it would be possible to attack the Eastern Capital.

But Sait believed that the Dutch shouldn't waste their time on an attack. It would be much better, he said, if the Dutch blockaded Taiwan to starve Koxinga out. He said the other farmers agreed with him and that even Koxinga himself was afraid of such a strategy. He said he'd talked to many other Chinese who felt the Dutch could still win the war. In fact, he said, the Chinese who'd lived here before Koxinga's invasion were keeping their Dutch residence permits so that if the Dutch won they could prove their loyalty.

The Dutchmen were encouraged by Sait's words, and governor Coyet seemed to like and trust him. He let him stay in the governor's house and saw that he was treated well.

But Coyet didn't follow his advice. Instead of using the fleet to blockade Taiwan and prevent Koxinga from receiving rice supplies, he decided to launch an attack. Two days after Sait's arrival, the Dutch brought their deep ships into the bay and assaulted Koxinga's troops in the crumbling town near the fortress. But the ships got bogged down in

⁹ What Sait said to Coyet, Cauw, and the others was taken from *Zeelandia Dagregisters*, vol. 4, D: 774–776, and *Dagregister Cauw*, pp. 79–80.

the shallow bay water, and the wind died. Koxinga's soldiers fired their cannons with startling accuracy. "It is incredible," Coyet observed, "that the enemy in his batteries is able to handle his cannon so effectively. . . . They put our own soldiers to shame."¹⁰ Watching from the fortress, Coyet realized the attack had failed. He ordered his flagmen to signal a retreat, but with the wind still, the ships couldn't move. The cannons kept blasting away.

Underneath, in the hold of the huge flagship, sat a Dutch deacon.¹¹ He'd spent the battle sitting here next to the musket chest, and for some reason he'd brought his son, a boy of eight years. Maybe he thought they'd be safe in the largest warship, but now it was leaking and the crew was jumping overboard. He took his son's hand and led him up onto the deck. Burnt and bleeding men lay all around screaming for help. Where was the captain? He'd rowed ashore. The deacon heard yelling in Chinese on the other side of the ship. He was a gifted linguist. He knew that the Chinese officers were ordering their men to board the ship and kill, kill, kill. He gripped his son's hand and prepared to jump. But then he saw a boat rowing toward them from the fortress. It was the ship's captain, returning with fresh men. He hesitated. An explosion tore the air. The deacon was flung into the burning sky. When he came up for air his son was gone. He swam back to the fortress alone.

The Dutch lost 128 soldiers in this battle, many killed and others captured, and the following morning they found bodies washed up on shore beneath the fortress. Some were found without arms and legs, others with noses cut off, others bound together in pairs, arm to arm, thumb to thumb, hair to hair. Some had nails hammered into them. Worst of all were those who'd had their genitals cut off and stuffed into their mouths. The enemy had sent these bodies here on purpose, letting the tide deliver them to the fortress, grisly symbols of defeat.¹²

That evening, the sound of horns and drums and flutes came from the city. The Chinese were celebrating. From the fort's ramparts you could see fires where Chinese soldiers burned offerings and incense to thank the gods for their victory.

¹⁰ *Zeelandia Dagregisters*, vol. 4, D: 784.

¹¹ The Dutch term is *ziekentrooster*, a layperson who assisted ordained ministers.

¹² *Zeelandia Dagregisters*, vol. 4, D: 785; *Dagregister Cauw*, p. 93; Albrecht Herport, *Reise nach Java, Formosa, Vorder-Indien und Ceylon, 1659–1668*, vol. 5 of *Reisebeschreibungen von deutschen Beamte und Kriegsleuten im Dienst der Niederländischen west- und ost-Indischen Kompagnien, 1602–1797*, edited by S. P. L'Honoré Naber. 13 vols. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1930), p. 74.

After this fiasco, Sait told Coyet he'd be willing to go back to Koxinga's Eastern Capital to see how things stood in the aftermath of the attack, how many new troops and ships and supplies Koxinga had brought there, whether any new rice supplies had arrived from China, and what Koxinga planned to do next. He promised to return in three or four days.¹³

Coyet and some of his advisors were inclined to agree to the plan. Others were more skeptical. Commander Cauw, who had his own secretary and kept his own log of events, didn't approve of Coyet and others here in Taiwan. They'd let the gunpowder spoil and the cannons rust and the water run out in the other fortresses, and they'd given the best fort up without a fight, trusting Koxinga's promises about how he'd treat the Dutch prisoners, so now Koxinga himself lived in it. He felt that Coyet had made a mistake in allowing the Chinese to occupy Zeelandia City, when he should have burned it down and taken all of its supplies. "Some of the high officials here," Cauw wrote, "had such a hard time trying to understand the philosophical books of Descartes that they found it impossible to pay attention to these little details."¹⁴ Cauw felt himself to be a simple man of unstylized letters, but one who knew his business, which for now was fighting. One shouldn't be too trusting of these heathen Chinese.

Cauw was frustrated because Coyet wouldn't let him take part in the war. On the day Sait had arrived, Cauw had seen some Chinese soldiers doing something suspicious near the crumbling tollhouse just across the plain. He'd ordered a gunner in the fort to fire his cannon. When Coyet heard the shots he'd sent a runner out to order Cauw to stop shooting. Cauw marched over to Coyet's office and asked why.

"I don't want a single shot fired without my express order," said Coyet.

"If I'm not even allowed to shoot a cannon at the enemy when I can see right before my nose that the enemy can be fruitfully attacked, then maybe I should just leave the fort and go back to my ships."

Coyet didn't reply.¹⁵

Cauw stayed in the fortress, but he felt his talents were being wasted. "The governor and others here do not seem to think much of

¹³ Resolution of the Council of Formosa, 23 September 1661, VOC 1238: 545–546; *Daghregister Cauw*, pp. 97–98; *Zeelandia Dagregisters*, vol. 4, D: 792–793.

¹⁴ Letter from Jacob Cauw to Joan Maetsuijcker and the Council of the Indies, 22 November 1661, in *Daghregister Cauw*, pp. 184–185.

¹⁵ *Daghregister Cauw*, pp. 81–82.

me," he wrote, and he was right.¹⁶ Coyet felt that Cauw's experience of war was limited to his student days in Leiden, when he'd run through the streets and thrust his sword through people's windows. Coyet found him annoying in person, calling him "a person so defective in speech that you almost needed an interpreter to understand his words, which were all spoken through his nose."¹⁷

Cauw had wanted to lead the attack against Koxinga. After all, he'd brought the fleet and was technically the top military commander. But Coyet had said no. The attack had failed, and Cauw was sure it would have been more successful if he'd been in charge.

And now, in this meeting, Coyet and the others were inclined to let Sait become a spy for them. They argued that Sait could do little harm, even if he went over to the enemy. After all, they said, he'd only lived in the governor's mansion, and although he might have been able to hear the sounds of Dutch activities out in the courtyards, he couldn't have learned anything important about the number of dead or wounded or sick, or about the cannons and gunpowder store.

Coyet and his council decided to give Sait thirty pieces of eight for the trouble, a great deal of money. They found it encouraging when Sait told them he'd only take ten pieces of eight now and pick up the rest when he came back, because if he were discovered with too much money outside he might be killed. The council also promised that when everything was peaceful and the Dutch were once again in control of Taiwan, Sait and his descendants would never have to pay taxes again on their land.¹⁸

That night, the sentries led him outside and watched him disappear into the dunes. He came back a while later, saying he'd walked all the way to the narrow part of the bay, where the salt pans were but couldn't get across because the water was too high.¹⁹ A couple days later, when the tide was low, he set out again.²⁰ This time he managed to get across.

¹⁶ Letter from Jacob Cauw to Joan Maetsuijcker and the Council of the Indies, 22 November 1661, in *Daghregister*, pp. 188.

¹⁷ Frederick Coyet, *Neglected Formosa: A Translation from the Dutch of Frederic Coyett's 't Verwaerloosde Formosa*, ed. Inez de Beauclair (1675; San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1975), p. 69. I've altered the translation slightly for readability.

¹⁸ This detail about the freedom from taxes comes from Cauw's account (*Daghregister* Cauw, pp. 97–98), but it is missing from the Resolutions, which say only that beyond the thirty reals were offered "more good promises for the future, if everything here can be restored." Resolution of the Council of Formosa, 23 September 1661, pp. 545–546. Nor is it mentioned in the *Zeelandia Dagregisters*, vol. 4, D: 792–793.

¹⁹ *Daghregister* Cauw, p. 98.

²⁰ *Zeelandia Dagregisters*, vol. 4, D: 792–793.

He slept on the opposite shore and then, traveling at night, went to the Eastern Capital and then to his farm to see his family.²¹

Coyet and Cauw half expected never to see Sait again, and it would have been better for him if it had turned out that way.

But several days later he was back. Again, he brought welcome news. He'd heard some of Koxinga's watchmen complaining that if this siege lasted much longer, hunger would force them to mutiny. Koxinga had tried to strengthen his defenses by recalling other soldiers who had been sent out to till the land, but many of them had died. Of the thousand Chinese troops who'd been sent to the south part of Taiwan, only two hundred had come back alive, and they were sick and on crutches, no use in battle. It wouldn't get any better, either, because the harvest would provide only two months of food for the island's swollen population. People were so malnourished that if they got a cut on their leg, even a little cut, it wouldn't heal. It would grow and grow until they couldn't walk. Even Koxinga was sending his wives back to China, and there were rumors that he'd soon follow himself, particularly because there were reports that a great force of Koxinga's other enemies, the Manchus, was attacking his base in China.²²

Coyet's secretary recorded Sait's report without comment, but Cauw's secretary reported a different story. Cauw, who had little else to do, had been inspecting troops and talking with soldiers. The watchmen told him that on the night before Sait returned they'd seen him standing behind the ruins of the hospital that stood a hundred paces south of the fortress. Standing there he must have been in clear view of Koxinga's sentinels and couldn't have been there without their consent. Even more peculiar, they said, was the fact that the next morning when Sait had come over to the fort he'd walked over not from behind the dunes, like the first time he'd come, but from the ruined city, which was controlled by the Chinese. Cauw agreed that these were suspicious actions.²³

Sait tried to explain. He said he'd been forced to come back a different way this time because Koxinga's troops were keeping a stricter watch along the shore on the other side of the bay, for miles in either direction. He said that when he'd tried to follow his previous route

²¹ This itinerary is based on the perhaps suspect report Sait gave of his spy work on 1 October 1661 in *Zeelandia Dagregisters*, vol. 4, D: 796–798 and in *Daghregister Cauw*, pp. 105–107.

²² *Zeelandia Dagregisters*, vol. 4, D: 796–798 and *Cauw Dagregister*, pp. 105–107.

²³ *Ibid.*

they'd shot at him with arrows, so instead of walking through the pineapple dunes, he'd gone right through the abandoned city. He'd gotten there yesterday afternoon but couldn't find a safe time to come over until morning.²⁴

Cauw wasn't persuaded. "It seems," his secretary wrote, "that this scoundrel wasn't the right man for the job."²⁵ Confronted with this evidence, even Coyet turned against Sait. So when Sait asked to go home as Coyet had promised, the governor said no. Instead, soldiers escorted Sait through the rain to the pier and rowed him out to one of the ships that lay at anchor outside the bay.²⁶ The cold, rough waters were as effective as prison walls, and there was plenty of work to be done on board.

So that's how the farmer found himself a prisoner on a Dutch ship as the cold winds began blowing from the north. He was obedient at first. Maybe he would've survived the war swabbing decks or carrying water or washing dishes if it hadn't been for two African boys.

The boys came to the fortress a couple weeks after Sait had been sent out to the ships, and they came as he had, creeping through the high grass to the watchmen. Before the war, the older one belonged to a Dutch official and the younger was a freeborn, the son of a Dutch soldier and an African slave. There were many Africans in Taiwan, borne across the seas to work for Dutch citizens or for the Dutch East India Company. The African slave trade had long stretched into the Indian Ocean and Asia, but after the Portuguese began bringing Africans in large numbers to East Asia in the mid 1500s, African slaves seem to have become a status symbol in southern China. Koxinga's father had a large honor guard of African soldiers, and although many of them were killed or captured in a battle in 1646, Koxinga himself also developed a corps of African soldiers, and when he arrived in Taiwan he freed hundreds of African slaves and incorporated many of them into a special musketeer corps. They were some of his most effective snipers.²⁷

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Dagregister Cauw, p. 105.

²⁶ The decision to take Sait out to the ships and Coyet's doubts about his report are absent from the *Zeelandia Dagregisters* account (vol. 4, D: 796–798). See Dagregister Cauw, p. 107.

²⁷ The creation of this force is described in Jiang Shusheng 江樹生, ed. and trans., *Mei-shi Riji: Helan tudi celiangshi kan Zheng Chenggong* 梅氏日記荷蘭土地測量師看鄭成功 (Taipei: Han Sheng Zazhi She Gufen Youxian Gongsi 漢聲雜誌社股份有限公司, 2003), rear p. 31. See also *Zeelandia Dagregisters*, vol. 4, D: 662, 806. Koxinga's enemies, the Qing, also

The African boys said they'd been captured by Koxinga and then given as slaves to a Chinese general named Ma Xin (馬信), the man who commanded the troops in the city near the fortress.²⁸ Now, they said, they'd found an opportunity to escape the heathens and return home, and they told an eager audience of Dutch officials about the Dutch who'd been captured when Koxinga swept through the island. They said they'd seen with their own eyes how Koxinga, angry at the recent Dutch offensive, had given his Dutch prisoners a good meal and then beheaded all of them, even the preachers and schoolteachers. They said that some girls, such as a sixteen-year-old sister-in-law of a preacher, had been married to Chinese officials and generals and now wore Chinese-style clothes and bound their feet like Chinese women, and that one Dutch girl, the sweet daughter of a preacher named Hambroek, now served Koxinga as a concubine, forced to live in his women's palace.²⁹

The boys were welcomed and fed and allowed to explore the fortress. But suspicious reports began coming in. Some Chinese defectors said they'd known the boys on the Chinese side and that their Chinese master Ma Xin had treated them uncommonly well, trusting them to do as they pleased and letting them live in his own house, eat the best food from his own table, and drink the best drink. Perhaps Ma Xin had sent them over as spies. More damningly, some Dutch soldiers saw the older boy measuring the mouths of cannons with a stick and heard him asking unusual questions, such as how heavy a cannonball the large bronze cannons could shoot, or how many of those special cannons the Dutch had that could shoot cannonballs so high up in the air, meaning, surmised the soldiers, the mortars that had killed and maimed so many of the enemy.

The younger boy was seen walking through the church and warehouses that served as hospitals in a way that made it seem like he was

employed Africans. For instance, a Dutch account indicates that the Qing military governor of Fujian, Li Shuaitai (李率泰), had at least one African servant. *Corte aanteykening van t geene Melchior Hurdt en Jacob Cleweriq naar de vermaarde stadt Hoksieuw doort landt van China is voorgevallen*, 16 October 1661 to 3 November 1661, VOC 1235: 959v–974, fo. 968. On Zheng Zhilong's African honor guard, see C. R. Boxer, "The Rise and Fall of Nicholas Iquan," *T'ien Hsia Monthly* 11, no. 5 (1941): 401–439, esp. p. 437.

²⁸ The boys used his title, Commander Ma (馬本督), which they pronounced Bee-bontock.

²⁹ The information about the black boys is much more copious in Cauw's *Dagregister* than in the *Zeelandia Dagregisters*. News of their arrival and report is found in *Dagregister Cauw*, pp. 128–130.

counting the ill and wounded, and he'd also been asking people how many soldiers had arrived with Cauw's fleet.³⁰

Coyet ordered the boys to be taken up to cells in the upper fortress. The next day soldiers led them into a room with a torture rack, its macabre platform shaped like an oversized gingerbread man, legs and arms splayed out, with ropes and chains for binding.³¹ At first the boys stuck to their story, saying they'd fled from the heathen Chinese so they could be with Christians again, who'd always treated them well and kept their bellies full and didn't hit them and beat them like the Chinese. The Dutch decided to "press the truth" out of them.³²

The younger boy was the cleverer of the two and seemed to be the leader, probably because, Dutch officials reasoned, his father was a Hollander. But the older boy succumbed quickly. It was all true, he said. Their new master, Ma Xin, had sent them here to find out everything they could about the fortress, what the Dutch did each day, how many cannons there were in the bastions, how many sick people there were, and so forth.

At this point the younger boy realized it was futile to hold to his story and began talking too. He said Ma Xin had ordered him to measure the height of the walls of the fortress with pieces of rope, to find out precisely how many healthy and how many sick soldiers were within, to learn why so many of the Dutch ships had recently departed and where they were going, and most important of all to learn how much gunpowder the Dutch had. In fact, he said, they were planning to escape this very evening and tell their new master all they'd learned.

None of this affected Sait. But as the Dutch pressed the boys for more information, they began to name other false defectors. In the two weeks that Sait had spent aboard the ships, four Chinese men had come to the fortress to surrender and then been sent out to the fleet. The boys said these men were spies like them, so Dutch soldiers rowed out, rounded them up, and took them back for questioning. Sait must have watched or heard about this, and people on the ships were saying that the boys were going to be naming other spies.

³⁰ How the black boys fell under suspicion is described in *Daghregister Cauw*, pp. 134–135.

³¹ The shape of the rack is not described. Usually racks of this period were shaped like a human body with arms and legs splayed out, but they might also be solid wooden planks. Cauw's *daghregister* notes that the *pijnbanck* would be used as a threat but does not note that it was in the same room. And later they used canes to beat the boys rather than just the rack itself. *Daghregister Cauw*, p. 135.

³² The description of the interrogation and torture of the two boys is taken from *Daghregister Cauw*, pp. 135–137, and from *Zeelandia Dagregisters*, vol. 4, E: 632–634.

So Sait waited until night arrived, cold with a bitter wind, and then crept to the side of the ship. He lowered himself into the rowboat below and used a knife to saw through the mooring rope. He pushed off and dipped the oars into the rough water. They discovered he was gone shortly afterward and shot at him from the decks, and that was when he'd paddled hard but drifted away from shore and toward the other ships, and then they'd sent the sloop to chase him and bump his boat, and now their leader was preparing to step aboard, and Sait had his knife out.

Cauw's secretary described in vivid terms what happened next: "Just as the skipper was about to step into the little boat, the scoundrel shot toward him and would have given him his end, as they say, with a knife, if a brave sailor had not grabbed him and held him fast. Then the Chinaman, seeing that he had fallen again into our hands, raised the same knife against himself and sliced his throat clean open with a single swipe, putting an end to his traitorous life."³³

How could Sait, who was being held tight, have been able to wield a knife well enough to kill himself? Cauw didn't address this question.

Maybe Coyet, that fan of Descartes, was considered a more skeptical audience, because his secretary recorded a more consistent report: When the Dutch soldiers stepped into the little boat, Sait had already slashed his throat. "They found the heathen lying there smothered in his own blood."³⁴

Maybe the Dutch soldiers killed him themselves and then reported the death as a suicide. It's possible. They were certainly in the mood for revenge. That morning ten of their comrades had staggered one after the other through the high grass to the fortress, their faces and arms streaming with blood. Their right hands had been chopped off and tied to their waists with a loop of string, dangling as they walked. Their faces and heads were bloody because their ears and noses had been cut off.³⁵ This was a standard method that Koxinga used to frighten his enemies.³⁶

The noseless, earless soldiers had told grim stories about their captivity, how they were captured in a fight against the Chinese and then tied together thumb to thumb, toe to toe, and forced to stand that way

³³ Dagregister Cauw, p. 141.

³⁴ *Zeelandia Dagregisters*, vol. 4, E: 637–638.

³⁵ *Zeelandia Dagregisters*, vol. 4, E: 634–637.

³⁶ See, for example, Yang Ying 楊英, *Xian wang shi lu* 先王實錄, Chen Bisheng 陳碧笙, ed. (Fuzhou: Fujian Renmin Chubanshe, 1981), p. 134.

for hours and hours. Then they'd been taken to Koxinga, who'd asked them questions about the fleet and how many cannons were on the ships, and when they'd said the large ones had thirty-five or thirty-eight or forty cannons and the small ones had twenty or twenty-four or twenty-six, he'd shaken his head. And then he'd sent them across the bay to Ma Xin, who'd forced them to kneel with their faces in the dirt while he ate a leisurely afternoon meal, perhaps happy for vengeance because his own son had been killed by a Dutch grenade.³⁷ After an hour with their faces in the dirt, they'd been fed, their Chinese jailers shoving the fish and rice and alcohol into their mouths for them because they couldn't move their hands. Finally they'd been brought out into a square of the ruined town. The Chinese had tied their right thumbs tightly in back of them to a rope around their waists. Then they'd sliced off their noses. Then the ears. Then the right hands. They were released still bleeding and told to go tell the other Dutch that this is how all of them would be treated when the fort was captured.³⁸

So it's conceivable that Sait was killed by vengeful soldiers. But suicide is also possible. In fact, slitting your throat (自刎) as a practice to avoid capture or torture or to show your loyalty was not uncommon in this period. In fact, Koxinga prized this kind of devotion. Once, when Koxinga's troops were fighting in China they encountered an enemy general so loyal that he slit his own throat and threw himself into a river to avoid capture. Koxinga ordered the man brought to him and cured by his own doctors. Then he appointed the man to a high office.³⁹ Was Sait making a similar act of loyalty, avoiding capture so he did not reveal anything under torture? It's impossible to know.

The Dutch crew pulled his body up out of the blood, threw it into the black waves, and brought the rowboat back where it belonged.⁴⁰

Sait was not mentioned again.

Two days later the African boys were brought in chains before Coyet and Cauw and the other Dutch officials for a test. As they stood there, eight Chinese men were brought out and lined up. The boys were told to pick out the men they'd accused of being false defectors.

³⁷ The death of Ma Xin's son is found at *Zeelandia Dagregisters*, vol. 4, E: 633.

³⁸ *Zeelandia Dagregisters*, vol. 4, E: 634–637.

³⁹ Yang Ying, *Xian wang shi lu*, p. 39. In a Japanese play about Koxinga first performed a half century after the warlord's death, honors suicide is taken to ridiculous extremes, with one main character after another committing suicide for loyalty or honor. Chikamatsu Monzaemon, "The Battles of Koxinga" (國姓爺合戦), in *Four Major Plays of Chikamatsu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961).

⁴⁰ *Zeelandia Dagregisters*, vol. 4, E: 637–638.

The boys didn't know that four of the Chinese in the lineup were wealthy Chinese merchants, friends of the Dutch who'd been asked to put on dirty old clothes and muss their hair so they looked like common Chinese.⁴¹

The boys pointed out two of these merchants and said they'd worked in the same house with them and that their master Ma Xin had sent them here to spy. Are you sure? asked the governor. Yes, the boys said. Concluding that the boys were liars, Coyet sent them away in chains.

It didn't matter, but Sait had died for nothing.

If he'd just stayed on board, patiently swabbing decks, he'd probably have been okay. So why did he flee? Maybe he was the sort of person who's always making bold moves. But it seems likely that he really was a double agent at the end. The way he arrived the second time—coming from the Chinese encampment in view of the sentries—is certainly suspicious. Maybe something happened when he left the fortress as a spy for the Dutch. Maybe he was captured by Chinese soldiers as he crept through the reeds. Maybe he found soldiers waiting in his house when he got back home. Maybe Koxinga forced him to return as a spy, keeping his family hostage. He might have been worried that the boys might name him as a double agent.

But even if he was innocent, he had good reason to be afraid of the Dutch. They were growing increasingly cruel. Several days before his flight, a Dutch surgeon had vivisected a Chinese prisoner. It happened on one of the ships that stood at anchor, although not the one Sait was on. While sailors and soldiers looked on, the surgeon, with permission from the ship's one-eyed captain, began his demonstration by showing how one might remove a cataract, taking a needle to the man's eyes. Then he drilled a hole in the man's head. Then he made incisions on either side of the groin, explaining, as he went, various medical points. Then he cut off the right leg below the knee, and then the left hand, and then the top of the head. Finally, he cut open the chest and stomach so the audience could see the heart and lungs. Afterward sailors threw the body into the ocean.⁴² Sait probably heard about this gruesome experiment. Fleeing might have seemed the safest course of action.

There's no way to know whether Sait was a double agent. Certainly it doesn't seem to have been the case the first time he arrived. He

⁴¹ Dagregister Cauw, p. 142.

⁴² Resolutions of the High Council of the Indies, 12 April 1662, VOC 678: 71–72.

provided real military information, advice that if followed might have won the Dutch the war. And the anger he expressed corroborates other evidence, both Chinese and Dutch, about how much the people of Taiwan were chafing under Koxinga's rule. Koxinga's desperation for food led him to seize crops and belongings from Chinese inhabitants on Taiwan, costing him their trust and cooperation. Even Koxinga's own chronicler noted that "there were daily worries about incidents of desertion and unrest."⁴³ Many people—especially the Chinese farmers who'd done so well under Dutch rule—wished that the Dutch were still in power. Taxation had been clear and calculable. Hard work had resulted in profits. And food was plentiful. Maybe Sait was different from them only in his willingness to act.

We'll never know. But Sait's short encounter with history offers a glimpse of another world of war and globalization. When war came, the intercultural cooperation that had allowed Taiwan to thrive dissolved. Friendships across cultural lines became harder to maintain. Sait might not have been guilty of conspiring against the Dutch, but he knew he'd have a hard time persuading them otherwise. He saw how the other defectors had been treated and how prisoners were being tortured. He knew all Chinese were under suspicion.

Yet the Dutch were perhaps foolish to treat their defectors so badly. Of course, they had to worry about spies, but they didn't make as good use of defectors as Koxinga did. Even in the thick of war, when he was most desperate, Koxinga employed Dutch surveyors, English surgeons, Portuguese translators, and African musketeers. Whereas the Dutch often slapped Chinese defectors into irons, afraid they'd run back to the other side, Koxinga seems to have been good to the Dutch defectors who joined him, giving them freedom and authority. This practice paid off spectacularly when a German man who'd been a sergeant in the Dutch army helped build siegeworks that allowed Koxinga to capture the fortress a few months after Sait's death, ending the war.

What if Coyet and Cauw had listened more carefully to Sait? He said that the way to defeat Koxinga was to blockade Taiwan, to prevent rice ships from arriving there, and other Chinese defectors agreed. Yet the Dutch ignored this advice and instead launched a foolish attack. If they'd listened to Sait they might have stopped twenty junks full of rice from China that arrived while Sait was a shipboard prisoner. Koxinga's starving troops might have mutinied. The Dutch might have won the war.

⁴³ Yang Ying, *Xian wang shi lu*, p. 257.

But they lost. They packed up their letters and diaries, and many of these ended up back in the Netherlands for a historian to read three and a half centuries later, still sparkling with the Taiwanese sand that the secretary used to dry his ink. And as I type these last lines, I can't help but wonder about the other lives that left no trace. There were hundreds of thousands of people living that same year in Taiwan alone, one island on a vast planet.

Some of these lives left a faint mark. The same day that the boys fingered the wrong Chinese in the lineup, a scullery maid was doing the wash on the beach beneath the fortress walls when a Chinese cannonball ripped away her leg. She died toward the evening. Her death was recorded in Coyet's diary, just a line and a half.⁴⁴ It doesn't appear in Cauw's.

We'll never know anything about her—where she was born, how she got to Taiwan, what children or loved ones she left behind. She'll remain as anonymous as most of the lives lived on earth.

We global historians can be proud of the work we do to understand the structures and processes of world history. Yet we should also use our unique position as custodians of the world's past to be mediums, to bring alive, just for a few pages, some of the people who inhabited those structures and lived through those processes, using what Braudel called the most important tool of the historian: imagination.⁴⁵ There are stories out there waiting to be told, traces in the archives that can provide individual perspectives on the great historiographical issues that are the core concern of our discipline. Perhaps as you read this, you're thinking of one. Please tell it.⁴⁶ Let's bring the history of our interconnected world to life, one story at a time.

⁴⁴ *Zeelandia Dagregisters*, vol. 4, E: 639.

⁴⁵ In 1967, when historian Geoffrey Parker was working on his doctoral dissertation, he visited Braudel in France and asked, "What's a historian's most valuable characteristic?" Parker thought the master might say "hard work" or "languages," but his reply was a simple word: "Imagination" (personal communication, Geoffrey Parker, 2 July 2009).

⁴⁶ And please contact me: tandrad@emory.edu. There are publishers out there very interested in such stories.