

The Clash of Trade Ideologies: Revisiting the Battle of Liaoluo Bay through the Lens of Hans Putmans' Interpretation of *Vrijen Handel* and the Ming Tributary System

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Abstract: This paper examines Hans Putmans' interpretation of *vrijen handel* (free trade) within the framework of the Dutch East India Company, contrasting it with the Ming Empire's tributary system. The study argues that Putmans' concept of *vrijen handel* must be understood in the context of the early seventeenth century. Only through this historical lens can we fully grasp the ideological conflict between *vrijen handel* and the tributary system, as well as its role in precipitating the Battle of Liaoluo Bay in 1633. The significance of this research lies in its potential to reshape our understanding of early modern trade interactions, offering new insights into how ideological conflicts shape trade practices and historical events. By analyzing these interactions, the study deepens our comprehension of VOC-Ming trade relations within the broader context of colonial expansion.

Keywords: *vrijen handel*, free trade, Battle of Liaoluo Bay, tributary system, Ming Empire, Dutch East India Company, VOC, *vrijhandel*, *Mare Liberum*

In the early seventeenth century, Hans Putmans, the fourth governor of Dutch Formosa (present-day Taiwan), mentioned the terms *vrijen handel* and *liberen handel* in missives to the Dutch East India Company headquarters in Batavia (present-day Jakarta). In early modern Dutch, both *vrijen* and *liber[eer]en* mean free; the terms *vrijen handel* and *liberen handel* mean “free trade” in English.¹ Since *vrijen handel* and *liberen handel* appear together in early seventeenth-century literature, as well as occasionally separately, it is necessary to establish a distinction in translation. The paper translates *vrijen handel* as free trade and *liberen handel* as unrestricted trade. It is important to note that this paper posits that there is no significant distinction in meaning between these two terms within the framework of this study, and therefore, both terms will be used interchangeably.

Between 1629 and 1633, the terms also appear several times in “Dagh-Registers van 't Casteel Batavia” (the Daily Journals of Batavia), “De Dagregisters van het Kasteel Zeelandia”

¹ *Vrijen* can be considered a synonym of *vrij*, meaning free. Meanwhile, *liber[eer]en* is an inflected form of *liber*, which also means *vrij*; “*Vrijen*: [behandeld onder *VRIJ*]” (*Vrijen*: [covered under *VRIJ*]), “Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal,” Instituut voor de Nederlandsche Taal, accessed December 1, 2022, <https://gtb.ivdnt.org/iWDB/search?actie=results&conc=true&xmlerror=true&lemmodern=vrijen&domein=0&conc=true&wdb=wnt&sensitive=false&uitvoer=printhtml>; “*libereeren*: [behandeld onder *LIBER*]” (*libereeren*: [covered under *LIBER*]), “Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal,” Instituut voor de Nederlandsche Taal, accessed December 1, 2022, <https://gtb.ivdnt.org/iWDB/search?actie=results&conc=true&xmlerror=true&lemmodern=libereren&domein=0&conc=true&wdb=wnt&sensitive=false&uitvoer=printhtml>; “*LIBER: Vrij*”, “Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal,” Instituut voor de Nederlandsche Taal, accessed December 1, 2022, <https://gtb.ivdnt.org/iWDB/search?actie=results&conc=true&xmlerror=true&lemmodern=liber&domein=0&conc=true&wdb=wnt&sensitive=false&uitvoer=printhtml>.

(the Daily Journals of Zeelandia), the “Instructions from Governor-General Jan Pieterszoon Coen for Governor Hans Putmans and the Council in Teyouan” (also known as Tayouan, present-day Tainan) in 1629, as well as in reports from the headquarters in Batavia, all of which show that *vrijen handel* and *liberen handel* were widely used by the Dutch East India Company in the early seventeenth century. This raises an intriguing question: Did the concept of free trade as perceived by Hans Putmans and the Dutch East India Company in the early seventeenth century align with the modern understanding of free trade? This study seeks to uncover the underlying causes of the Battle of Liaoluo Bay in 1633, since the battle is closely related to the concept of *vrijen/liberen handel*, which provides insights into the ideological conflict between free trade under the Dutch East India Company and the tributary system under the Ming Empire in the early seventeenth century.

The Battle of Liaoluo Bay in 1633 was initiated by Hans Putmans, a seasoned figure who was recognized by the writers of the East India affairs reports as a diligent, active, and zealous person.² He rose through the ranks, gaining experience in various locations such as Siam (present-day Thailand) and Batavia. Originally from Middelburg, Putmans began his journey with the Dutch East India Company as an alternate merchant officer in 1621.³ His career advanced in 1626 when he was promoted to the role of merchant officer, followed by his appointment to the chairmanship of the Municipal Council a year later. Notably, he showcased his military prowess during the initial siege of Batavia by the king of Mataram.⁴

In 1629, Putmans succeeded Pieter Nuyts (1598-1655) as the governor in reorganizing the affairs of Formosa, and on taking office he quickly adopted the strategic direction to establish *vrijen/liberen handel* by means of military force. This included eliminating pirates from the coasts of the Ming Empire in an attempt to make both the empire and the pirates fear and revere the Dutch.⁵ Hans Putmans’ strategic direction had some similarities with Hugo Grotius’ (1583-1645) *Mare Liberum* (The Free Sea, published in 1609), which discusses the use of violent means in asserting so-called just causes.⁶ This connection will be elaborated on in the following sections.

Putmans was convinced that the use of force was the only way to obtain permission of trade from the Chinese.⁷ It is plausible to suggest that the re-imposition of the Ming maritime ban in 1632, which led to a breakdown in trade, might have contributed to his decision to resort to military action. When he personally sent a report on East Asian affairs to the Batavian Council in April 1633, it directly prompted the Dutch East India Company’s leadership to initiate a

² VOC 1102, Report by J. Specx, P. Vlack, J. van der Burch and Arent Gardenijs, Batavia, 6 January 1632, fol. 1-25.

³ Fu-ming Zhang, ed., *臺灣荷蘭時期大員長官施政錄* [Record of the Tayouan Governors’ Administration during the Dutch Period in Taiwan] (鳳凰城文史協會, 2014), 61.

⁴ Shao-gang Cheng, *De VOC en Formosa 1624-1662: Een Vergeeten Geschiedenis 1* [The VOC and Formosa 1624-1662: A Forgotten History 1] (Rijksuniversiteit Leiden, 1995), 90–91.

⁵ VOC 1101, *Hans Putmans, in ’t jacht Bommel zeylende omtrent drye mylen benoorden Tayouan* [Hans Putmans, in the yacht Bommel sailing about three miles north of Tayouan], 5 October 1630, fol. 333-345.

⁶ Hugo Grotius, *The Free Sea*, trans. Richard Hakluyt, ed. David Armitage (Liberty Fund, 2004), 59-60.

⁷ Charles Ralph Boxer, “The Rise and Fall of Nicholas Iquan (Cheng Chi-lung 鄭芝龍),” *T’ien Hsia Monthly* 11, no. 5 (1941): 422-423.

resolution to open *liberen ende vrijen handel* (unrestricted and free trade) by means of the force of arms, and in June he led a fleet of ten ships with 1,300 men.⁸

On the morning of 12 July 1633, Putmans led his frigates into position in front of Amoy Bay (present-day Xiamen Bay) and immediately opened cannon fire on the Chinese warships, formally waging war against the Ming Empire and destroying all their newly built warships. After the attack on the Chinese ships at Amoy Bay, the Dutch continued to attack the Chinese along the coast of Fujian and at sea, especially at Tangsoa (present-day Tongshan Ancient City, Zhangzhou) for about three months, until Putmans was defeated by the Pirate-turned-Ming Admiral Nicholas Iquan (also known as Zheng Zhilong or Cheng Chi-lung) on 22 October 1633.⁹ This four-month conflict is historically known as the Battle of Liaoluo Bay.

Research of established scholars in seventeenth-century Taiwanese history, such as Tonio Andrade, Wei-chung Cheng, and Wei-sheng Lin, in the discussion of the battle, focuses on the interplay of relations between Hans Putmans, the Grand Coordinator Zou Weilian (also known as Tsou Wei-lien), and Iquan.¹⁰ The interplay of relations provides an understanding of the reasons for the outbreak of the battle in 1633. However, few studies delve into how *vrijen handel* was perceived by Putmans and the Dutch East India Company. For instance, in the book *War, Trade and Piracy in the China Seas 1622-1683*, the term free trade is mentioned approximately 20 times but lacks a specific explanation in the context of the Dutch East India Company. This study will concentrate on the interpretation of *vrijen/liberen handel* through the lens of Putmans and the Dutch East India Company, while also juxtaposing it to the tributary system of the Ming Empire to elucidate the underlying factors contributing to the Battle of Liaoluo Bay.

This analysis aims to clarify the relationship between these two ideologies, a connection that has not been examined in depth in the existing historical literature. A nuanced understanding of *vrijen handel* within this historical context is imperative for examining its ideological tensions with the tributary system. This is precisely why this study considers it necessary to interpret the concept of *vrijen handel* by Putmans within the framework of the Dutch East India Company in

⁸ Shao-gang Cheng, *荷蘭人在福爾摩沙* [The Dutch in Formosa] (聯經出版社, 2000), 126; H. T. Colenbrander, ed., *Dagh-register gehouden int Casteel Batavia vant passerende daer ter plaetse als over geheel Nederlandts-India 1631-34* [Daily Journals of Batavia Volume 2: 1631-1634] (Martinus Nijhoff, 1898), 164; the resolution proposes to open unrestricted and free trade through the force of weapons: “*draegt voor dat men den liberen ende vrijen handel met cracht van waepenen behoerle te openen*,” 22-23 April 1633; Ernst van Veen, “How the Dutch Ran a Seventeenth-Century Colony: The Occupation and Loss of Formosa 1624–1662,” in *Around and about Formosa*, ed. Leonard Blussé (Ts’ao Yung-ho Foundation for Culture and Education, 2003), 147-150; Zhang, *臺灣荷蘭時期大員長官施政錄*, 61.

⁹ Shu-sheng Chiang, *De missiven van de VOC-gouverneur in Taiwan aan de Gouverneur-generaal te Batavia II 1629-1631* [The Missives of the VOC Governor in Taiwan to the Governor-General in Batavia II 1629-1631] (National Museum of Taiwan History, 2018), iii, xxviii; van Veen, “How the Dutch Ran a Seventeenth-Century Colony,” 147-150.

¹⁰ 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; Tonio Andrade, *Lost Colony: The Untold Story of China’s First Great Victory over the West* (Princeton University Press, 2011); Wei-chung Cheng, *War, Trade and Piracy in the China Seas (1622-1683)* (Brill, 2013); Wei-sheng Lin, “一六三三年的料羅灣海戰 - 鄭芝龍與荷蘭人之戰” [The Battle of Liaoluo Bay in 1633: Zheng Zhilong’s Confrontation with the Dutch], *臺灣風物* (*The Taiwan Folkways*) 45, no. 4 (1995): 47-82.

the early seventeenth century. Only by truly understanding *vrijen handel* during this period can we further explore how it conflicted ideologically with the tributary system.

The Dutch East India Company and the Ming Empire

The Dutch East India Company was founded on March 20, 1602 as the United East India Company (*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*), abbreviated as VOC.¹¹ It operated as a chartered company, possessing a certificate granted by the *Staten-Generaal der Vereenigde Nederlanden* (States-General of the United Netherlands). Article 35 of the charter gave the VOC trade monopoly rights eastward beyond the Cape of Good Hope and through the Strait of Magellan, and thus made it the sole company authorized by the United Provinces of the Netherlands to engage in trade in the Asia-Pacific region.¹² In other words, in the East Indies (that is, everywhere east of the Arabian Sea) the VOC represented the Dutch state.¹³ The company held exclusive permission to facilitate trade between the Dutch state and the Asian Seas and possessed significant authority, including the right to construct any fortresses and assurances there, appoint governors, military personnel, and Officers of Justice, and for other necessary services.¹⁴

After the VOC occupied Jayakarta (present-day Jakarta) in 1619, it established a trading post and expanded Jayakarta into the city of Batavia in 1621. The Dutch transferred the High Government, which had been established in 1609, to Batavia and established it as a base. Before that, the High Government did not have a fixed location, and most of the governors had lived in Banten (on the eastern tip of the island of Java) or on the island of Ternate. The Court of Justice was established in Batavia in 1622, and Batavia became the base for Eurasian and inter-Asian trade.¹⁵

Inter-Asian trade consisted of carrying Japanese silver and copper to the Chinese Ming Empire, Chinese silk and porcelain to Japan and Southeast Asia, and Southeast Asian pepper, sumac, cardamom, cloves, and various medicines to the Ming Empire and Japan.¹⁶ To obtain cardamom and cloves from the eastern part of the Indonesian archipelago, it was necessary to

¹¹ Jacobus Anne van der Chijs, *Nederlandsch-Indisch Plakaatboek, 1602-1811: Eerste Deel 1602-1642* [Dutch-Indies Compilation of Decrees, 1602-1811: Volume One 1602-1642] (Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen, 1885-1900), 1.

¹² van der Chijs, *Nederlandsch-Indisch Plakaatboek*, 1-2.

¹³ Andrade, "The Company's Chinese Pirates," 419.

¹⁴ van der Chijs, *Nederlandsch-Indisch Plakaatboek*, 1.

¹⁵ Hendrik E. Niemeijer, "The Central Administration of the VOC Government and the Local Institution of Batavia (1619-1811) - An Introduction" in *The Archives of the Dutch East Company (VOC) and the Local Institution in Batavia*, ed. G. Louisa Balk, Frans van Dijk, Diederick Kortlang, Femme S. Gaastra, Hendrik E. Niemeijer, and Pieter Koenders (Brill, 2007), 61-67; Kerry Ward, *Networks of Empire and Imperial Sovereignty* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 31.

¹⁶ Pin-tsun Chang, "十六至十八世紀華人在東亞水域的貿易優勢" [Chinese Trade Advantages in East Asian Waters in the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries], in *中國海洋發展史論文集第三輯* [Historical Essays on the Development of China's Maritime Affairs, Volume Three], ed. Yen-hsien Chang (中央研究院三民主義研究所, 1988), 349.

trade in Indian cotton cloth, which at the beginning of the seventeenth century was mainly supplied from the Gujarat region in north-west India, where silver coins were used, and from the Coromandel Coast in south-east India, where gold was used as currency.¹⁷ Trade with the Ming Empire was therefore crucial for the VOC, as the Ming Empire was an important piece of the jigsaw puzzle that made up inter-Asian trade. While trading with China was indispensable for the VOC, the Ming Empire excluded the Dutch from participating in the tributary system, and hence the VOC could only engage in smuggling or conduct trade with the Chinese merchants indirectly through Japan and Southeast Asia.

At the core of the tributary system was a set of institutions and norms governing diplomatic and political contacts, cultural and economic relations, and in particular, a clear definition of the relationship between political units. In contrast to the Westphalian idea of equality between nation-states (resulting from the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia), the tributary system emphasized asymmetry and interdependence, with inequality underpinning all relations between the Ming Empire and other states.¹⁸ A unique form of foreign trade with a broad view of order had been established in 1363 when Zhu Yuanzhang founded the Ming Empire, establishing strong authoritarian control over the entire Chinese empire through strict ordinances and laws.¹⁹ He implemented an isolationist policy, which led to the integration of tribute trade and regular commerce.²⁰ It stipulated that all dealings between the Chinese and foreigners had to take place within formal missions. In other words, foreign merchants were not allowed to make unofficial visits, nor were the Chinese allowed to sail abroad except on tribute missions.²¹

To understand the international order under the Ming Empire, it is essential to examine two fundamental policies concerning overseas trade and foreign relations. The first policy, established in the early years of Emperor Hongwu's reign (1368-1398), was a strict prohibition on all private overseas trade. As Zhu Yuanzhang declared in his ancestral injunctions: "Overseas foreign countries... are separated from us by mountains and seas and far away in a corner. Their land would not produce enough for us to maintain them." This sentiment led to the implementation of the well-known maritime bans.²² These bans were designed not only to secure coastal regions and prevent pirate harassment but also to monopolise lucrative foreign trade for the government.²³

¹⁷ Kuo-tung Chen, *東亞海域一千年增訂新版* [One Thousand Years of the East Asian Seas, Revised Edition] (遠流出版事業股份有限公司, 2013), 19.

¹⁸ David Chan-oong Kang, *East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (Columbia University Press, 2010), 55-56.

¹⁹ Patrizia Carioti, "Diplomacy, Piracy and Commerce in the Eastern Seas: The Double Standard of the K'an-ho Trading System in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries," in *Around and about Formosa*, ed. Leonard Blussé (Ts'ao Yung-ho Foundation for Culture and Education, 2003), 6.

²⁰ Wing-sheung Cheng, *海禁的轉折: 明初東亞沿海國際形勢與鄭和下西洋* [The Turning Point of Maritime Bans: International Situations along the East Asian Coast and Zheng He's Voyages during the Early Ming Dynasty] (稻鄉出版社, 2011), 45-47.

²¹ Andrade, "The Company's Chinese Pirates," 417-418.

²² Andrade, "The Company's Chinese Pirates," 417.

²³ Hok-lam Chan, "The 'Chinese Barbarian Officials' in the Foreign Tributary Missions to China during the Ming Dynasty," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88, no. 3 (1968): 414-415.

The second policy was the tributary system, which regulated interactions between the Ming Empire and foreign states. Under this system, foreign states were regarded as vassals of the Ming, recognizing the empire's overlordship by sending envoys at specified intervals. These envoys engaged in tribute trade, where they were offered Chinese goods in exchange for foreign products, all under strict official supervision.²⁴ For the Ming Empire, tribute trade was the only recognized form of foreign commerce. Private merchants were forbidden from participating in overseas trade, with Chinese merchants allowed to travel abroad solely when accompanying imperial embassies.²⁵ Thus, cooperation between foreign states and the Ming could only occur through acceptance of the international order defined by the empire.

Given the circumstances, the Ming Empire imposed numerous obstacles on the Dutch, including strict maritime bans. In a bold move on July 12, 1633, Putmans launched an attack on Amoy Bay, aiming to challenge the system of Ming tributary trade. This military campaign against the Ming Empire extended for four months and ultimately culminated in the Dutch defeat at Liaoluo Bay on October 22. This defeat marked the failure of the VOC's attempt to open *liberen ende vrijen handel* by means of armed force.

The Concept of *Vrijen/Liberen Handel* in the Early Seventeenth Century: Hans Putmans and the Intersection of Mercantilism and God's Will

Hans Putmans employed the terms *vrijen/liberen handel* in his correspondences with Batavia, which reflect the prevailing economic ideologies of the time, particularly within the context of seventeenth-century Europe, which was marked by mercantilism. During this era, European governments believed in controlling the economy to enhance national wealth by exporting more goods than they imported. Mercantilists contended that the main objective of trade was to achieve a favourable balance of trade, meaning the value of a country's exports should exceed the value of its imports.²⁶ Consequently, European governments sought to keep foreign powers out of their colonies and restricted imports as much as possible, often replacing them with domestic goods. This mindset made European governments reluctant to export gold, which they regarded as a guarantee of national wealth.

On the other hand, from the seventeenth-century Dutch point of view, trade was God's Will, and this religious attitude was reflected in the official missives of Putmans, and in particular in the Dutch reliance on God.²⁷ For example, Putmans wrote, "therefore, we must wait with great patience for God's weather and wind, trusting that the Almighty will soon provide

²⁴ Chan, "Chinese Barbarian Officials," 414-415.

²⁵ Masashi Haneda, *興亡の世界史 東インド会社とアジアの海* [The Rise and Fall of World History: The East India Company and the Seas of Asia], (株式会社講談社, 2017), 112-121.

²⁶ Matthew Johnston, "A Brief History of International Trade Agreements," Investopedia, August 27, 2021, accessed 20 December 2022, <https://www.investopedia.com/articles/investing/011916/brief-history-international-trade-agreements.asp>.

²⁷ Leonard Blussé and Guo-tu Zhuang, *荷使初訪中國記研究* [A Study on the Records of the Dutch Envoy's First Visit to China] (廈門大學出版社, 1989), 41.

[relief].”²⁸ He also mentioned, “we intended, as Your Excellency writes, that if God had pleased, the Company’s affairs had remained as they were at the time of our last missive, we would have remained in Teyouan.”²⁹ Furthermore, he expressed a hope for the future, stating, “may God transfer her (the company’s) losses and grant her better luck and prosperity in the future,” and cautioned, “if the good Lord does not bless you, no matter how much courage you have, how hard you work, and how diligent you are, it will all be in vain.”³⁰

The Reformation split Europe into two factions: one led by the Pope, known as the Catholic Church, and the other by the new Protestant movement, which advocated *Sola Scriptura* as one of the Five *Solae* defining Protestantism. As Calvinists (Protestants), the Dutch believed in direct access to God’s will without the Pope as an intermediary. They perceived God’s favor behind their demands from the Ming Empire, viewing trade development as their divine duty given by God. Putmans stated, “furthermore, we believe that if we can obtain any favour from the Chinese Empire through free, unrestricted trade...and may the good God grant that it may continue forever for the benefit of our honourable masters.”³¹

This assertion underscores the Dutch belief that their trade endeavours were not merely economic pursuits but were divinely sanctioned actions that aligned with their spiritual convictions. Putmans’ perspective illustrates a clear link between *vrijen/liberen handel* (free/unrestricted trade) and their divine mandate. The terms signify not just an economic ideal but also an interpretation of the Dutch belief in a God-given right to engage with the Chinese Empire without restrictions. Despite the VOC’s monopoly being formally granted by the States-General of the United Netherlands, the company was driven by three guiding principles: monopoly, maximum profits, and short-term profits.³² The Dutch sought to establish a free monopoly on Chinese trade, and the company exhibited numerous monopolistic characteristics.³³ *Vrijen* and *liberen* can be seen as terms that justified the monopoly’s reality, framing it as divinely ordained. Thus, a more accurate interpretation of *vrijen/liberen handel* would be the free exercise of the monopoly of trade or, more precisely, the God-given right of the VOC to freely

²⁸ “*Weshalven met groote patientie naer Godts weer en wind moeten wachten, dat den almoogenden in corten versien wil,*” VOC 1113, *Hans Putmans, in ’t comptoir Taijouan* [Han[s] Putmans, in the trading post Taijouan], 1 February 1633, fol. 773.

²⁹ “*Wy waren voornemens gelijk Uedt. schryft, indien het Godt gelieft hadde dat de saacken van de Compagnie als ten tyde van onse jongste missive waere in staadt gebleven, ons op Teyouan te onthouden,*” 5 October 1630, VOC 1101, fol. 333-345.

³⁰ “*Godt versette haer schade ende gheve haar in toecomende beter geluck ende voorspoet,*” 5 October 1630, VOC 1101, fol. 333-345; “*T is verlooren naarsticheyt gedaan, met couragie aangevangen ofte diligentie geoeffent, als’t dien goeden Godt niet gelieft te zegenen,*” 5 October 1630, VOC 1101, fol. 333-345.

³¹ “*Ten anderen soo meynen wij, bij sooverde den vrijen libren handel met eenige dienste aen ’t rijck van China te bewijzen te becomen is, ... dat de goede Godt geve voor altyt tot proffyt van onse Ed. heeren meesters mach continueren,*” VOC 1101, *Hans Putmans, in ’t jacht Texe; geanckert liggende in de reviere Chincheo voor de stadt Aimoy* [Hans Putmans, in the yacht Texe; lying anchored in the river Chincheo in front of the city of Amoy], 24 February 1630, fol. 347-359.

³² van der Chijs, *Nederlandsch-Indisch Plakaatboek*, 1-2; Johan Fourie, Ada Jansen, and Krige Siebrits. “Public finances under private company rule: The Dutch Cape Colony (1652–1795),” *New Contree*, no. 68 (2013): 57-58.

³³ Lin, “一六三三年的料羅灣海戰,” 47; Arthur Weststeijn. “The VOC as a Company-State: Debating Seventeenth-Century Dutch Colonial Expansion,” *Itinerario* 38, no. 1 (2014): 15.

exercise its monopoly of trade. This understanding of *vrijen/liberen handel* sets the stage for a deeper exploration of how such a form of trade operates. The next section will elaborate on how a form of free trade that combines the freedom to trade with the existence of monopolies operates, focusing on three specific points.

Modern free trade, aligning with the concept of *laissez-faire*, promotes the reduction or elimination of barriers to trade between countries, involving the removal of tariffs, quotas, and other restrictions on the movement of goods and services.³⁴ Definitions provided by the *Financial and Business Dictionary* and the *Nederlands Woordenboek* define *vrijhandel* (free trade) as “international trade without trade barriers” and the “free import and export of goods between different countries.”³⁵ It can be seen that the substantive meanings of *vrijen/liberen handel* perceived by Putmans and modern free trade are opposite to each other. Special attention should be paid when interpreting free trade translated from *vrijen/liberen handel* in the early seventeenth century to avoid misunderstanding.

We have to be cautious with the Chinese translation like the two series translated by Shu-sheng Chiang, *熱蘭遮城日誌* (the Daily Journals of Zealandia) and *荷蘭聯合東印度公司臺灣長官致巴達維亞總督書信集* (the Missives of the VOC Governor in Taiwan to the Governor-General in Batavia), as well as Shao-gang Cheng’s *De VOC en Formosa 1624-1662*.³⁶ All of these sources translate the Dutch term *vrijen/liberen handel* literally as 自由貿易 (free trade) in Chinese. It is noteworthy that the *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal* (WNT), compiled by Matthias de Vries and five generations of editors, considers *vrijen* and *liber[eer]en* as synonyms of *vrij*.³⁷ This implies that these three Dutch terms *vrijen*, *liberen*, and *vrij* can be regarded as synonymous; however, using *vrijen handel*, *liberen handel* and *vrijhandel* in different historical contexts leads to different interpretations. Therefore, it is particularly important to note that these

³⁴ Ian Fletcher, *Free Trade Doesn't Work: What Should Replace It and Why* (U.S. Business & Industry Council, 2011), 19-36; A. Plate and F. Jzoon, “De eischen van den vrijen handel” [The Requirements of Free Trade], *De Economist*, no. 19 (1870): 401–416; S. Vissering, “Het Internationaal Congres Voor Den Vrijen Handel te Brussel” [The International Congress for Free Trade in Brussels], *De Economist*, no. 5 (1856): 214–219; “Heeft het Beginsel van Vrijen Handel Zich in de Praktijk Weldadig Getoond?” [Has the Principle of Free Trade Proven Beneficial in Practice?], *De Economist*, no. 1 (1852): 33–51.

³⁵ “Internationale handel zonder handelsbelemmeringen” (International Trade Without Trade Barriers), “Financial and Business Dictionary,” Amo Institute of Sciences, accessed 1 September 2023, <https://www.economischwoordenboek.nl/zoek/vrijhandel>; “Het vrij in- en uitvoeren van goederen tussen verschillende landen” (the Free Import and Export of Goods Between Different Countries), “Nederlands Woordenboek,” Woorden, accessed 1 September 2023, <https://www.woorden.org/woord/vrijhandel>.

³⁶ Shu-sheng Chiang, ed. and trans. *熱蘭遮城日誌 第一冊* [The Daily Journals of Zealandia, Volume 1] (臺南市政府, 2011); Shu-sheng Chiang, ed. and trans., *荷蘭聯合東印度公司臺灣長官致巴達維亞總督書信集 II, 1627-1629* [Missives from the Governor of the Dutch United East India Company in Taiwan to the Governor-General in Batavia II, 1627-1629] (國史館台灣文獻館, 2010); Shu-sheng Chiang, ed. and trans., *荷蘭聯合東印度公司臺灣長官致巴達維亞總督書信集 III, 1629-1636* [Missives from the Governor of the Dutch United East India Company in Taiwan to the Governor-General in Batavia III, 1629-1636] (國史館台灣文獻館, 2015); Cheng, *De VOC en Formosa 1624-1662*.

³⁷ “*Vrijen*: [behandeld onder VRLJ]” (*Vrijen*: [covered under VRLJ]); “*libereeren*: [behandeld onder LIBER]” (*libereeren*: [covered under LIBER]); “*LIBER: Vrij*”, Instituut voor de Nederlandsche Taal, “Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal.”

scholars translated the text correctly, but subsequent scholars had to interpret the terms before applying it to the context of the time, otherwise it would have given rise to errors in literal understanding.

For instance, equating *vrijen/liberen handel* with modern free trade risks misunderstanding it in two important ways: First, it blurs the true nature of trade policies and misconstrues the role of governments and their level of intervention. Second, it mistakenly places the origin of modern free trade as early as the early seventeenth century. Neither Hugo Grotius' concept of the freedom of the seas (to be discussed in the next section) nor Putmans' implementation of *vrijen handel* align with the principles of modern free trade. Unlike modern free trade, which champions minimal state intervention and promotes open competition, seventeenth-century *vrijen handel* was deeply rooted in mercantilism. This system emphasised state-directed economic control and growth, prioritizing national interests over open markets and free competition.

As Lai believes, the uniqueness of Grotius's discourse lies in its contradictory emphasis on freedom of the seas and freedom of maritime navigation, while simultaneously advocating for the resulting monopolistic rights.³⁸ We must recognize that seventeenth-century free trade fundamentally differs from modern free trade, the former being entangled with monopolies, God's will and mercantilist practices, while the modern concept prioritizes minimal government intervention and market competition.

God-Given Rights versus Heavenly Mandate: The Dutch Challenge to Ming Trade Ideology

As discussed above, *vrijen/liberen handel* was perceived by Putmans as the God-given right of the VOC to freely exercise its monopoly of trade. *Vrijen/liberen handel* was based on the mercantilist notion of economic monopoly, filled with ambitions to dominate the Chinese market, stemming from the VOC's inability to obtain a favorable trading position in the Ming Empire. Therefore, both sides were operating under conditions of monopolies, and their competition was embodied in a clash of ideologies about trade:

1. the God centric *vrijen/liberen handel* versus the *Tianzi*-centric (Son of Heaven) tributary system
2. a network of free-trading merchants versus restricted tribute trade
3. the strategic approach of the VOC versus entrenched Sino-centrism

First, the Ming Empire promoted a broader political order in the world, centered on the Son of Heaven.³⁹ The empire restored the tributary system and imposed a policy of maritime

³⁸ Yun-i Lai, “「每場有正當理由的戰爭都是義戰」：格勞秀斯《論捕獲法》的論述策略及其政治思想運用” [Every War Derived Entirely from Just Causes, Is a Just War]: Hugo Grotius's Discursive Strategy and Political Thought in *De Jure Praedae*], *人文及社會科學集刊* [Journal of Social Sciences and Philosophy] 33, no. 2 (2021): 203.

³⁹ Yung-ho Ts'ao, “明洪武朝的中琉關係 [Sino-Ryukyuan Relations during the Ming Hongwu Dynasty],” in *中國海洋發展史論文集第三輯* [Historical Essays on the Development of China's Maritime Affairs, Volume Three], ed. Yen-hsien Chang (中央研究院三民主義研究所, 1988), 283.

bans. From the seventeenth-century Dutch point of view, trade was God's Will.⁴⁰ This religious attitude was reflected in the official missives of Putmans mentioned earlier, and the justification for the free exercise of the trade monopoly came from the Dutch belief in God.⁴¹ This belief underpinned Putmans' proposal "to prevent or not allow any [Chinese] junks to sail to Manila, Quelang, the Bay of Patana, Siam, Cambodia, and all other places except Batavia to be excluded."⁴²

The idea of restricting or banning Chinese ships from sailing to Manila, Quelang (present-day Keelung), the Bay of Patana and other places except Batavia, as Putmans suggested to Iquan, amply reflected the strong monopolistic overtones of *vrijen/liberen handel* in his perspective. However, the tributary system emphasized the asymmetry and interdependence of superior/subordinate relations. Inequality, therefore, was the basis of all relations between the two players from the Chinese perspective. These two sets of trade ideologies were completely incompatible with each other, with both carrying strong monopolistic overtones, ultimately leading to the use of force to resolve their differences.

The second point shows that Dutch merchants were unaccustomed to subordinating themselves to any single entity or political authority. In the early seventeenth century, Grotius formulated the principle of freedom of the seas in his book *Mare Liberum (The Free Sea)*. This principle was conceived as a response to the global maritime dominance of Spain and Portugal, both of whom had divided the world's seas between themselves under the authority of the Pope.⁴³

Grotius asserted that the high seas could not be considered *res nullius* (things belonging to no one), a status that would have allowed for the application of the principle of first occupancy, where something unowned could be claimed by the first person to take possession. Instead, he argued that the sea, by its very nature, could not be owned and was associated with the public interest. This public interest was grounded in the idea that the seas should be open to all for navigation and trade, thereby maintaining their status as a public thing (*res publica*).⁴⁴

This concept was particularly significant in the context of European and Indian Ocean trade during the seventeenth century. The Dutch, emerging as a formidable maritime power, embraced Grotius's principle of freedom of the seas as it aligned with their commercial ambitions. In the first chapter of *Mare Liberum*, Grotius explicitly states: "Our purpose is shortly and clearly to demonstrate that it is lawful for the Hollanders, that is the subjects of the confederate states of the Low Countries, to sail to the Indians as they do and entertain traffic with them."⁴⁵ For the VOC, the notion of the sea as a *res publica* justified their assertion of the right

⁴⁰ Blussé and Zhuang, *荷使初訪中國記研究*, 41.

⁴¹ 24 February 1630, VOC 1101, fol. 347-359; 5 October 1630, VOC 1101, fol. 333-345; 1 February 1633, VOC 1113, fol. 773.

⁴² "T beletten ofte niet toelaaten van eenige joncque naar Manilha, Quelang, de bocht van Patana. Siam. Cambodja ende alle andere plaetse uytgesondert Battavia te vweseylen," 24 February 1630, VOC 1101, fol. 347-359.

⁴³ Grotius, *The Free Sea*, 3-4, 15-17.

⁴⁴ Grotius, *The Free Sea*, 112-119.

⁴⁵ Grotius, *The Free Sea*, 10.

to trade freely on the seas, unhindered by the monopolistic claims of Spain and Portugal. Grotius' ideas provided the VOC with a legal and moral framework to challenge these claims and assert its right to navigate and trade in the waters of Europe and beyond. The tributary system, on the other hand, emphasized inequality and viewed foreign envoys as participants in tribute rather than as trading partners: merchants and emissaries could only trade if they were clearly affiliated with a state from which the Ming Empire was willing to accept tribute. These limitations underscore the fundamental contradiction between the tributary system and the Dutch pursuit of *vrijen handel*. For instance, Putmans pointed out that “the restricted trade, requiring a significant capital investment, puts the Company at great risk due to the unfaithfulness of the Chinese.”⁴⁶

Putmans perceived the Chinese as exhibiting unfaithfulness, as he believed that Chinese officials were inconsistent in their commitments to uphold the Dutch concept of *vrijen handel*, frequently reneging on their promises and using various excuses. For example, a new *Combon* (Provincial Military Commander) had arrived who was unaware of previous promises, along with other unfounded excuses with which the Chinese officials keep delaying and seeking to entangle the Dutch.⁴⁷ This situation compelled the VOC to engage in smuggling, an endeavor fraught with considerable risks. The paradox between the pursuit of *vrijen handel* and the constraints imposed by the tributary system underscored the challenges faced by the VOC in its efforts to expand commercially in the Ming Empire.

Third, Putmans was not the first to propose the idea of eliminating the pirates off the coast of China by force in exchange for *vrijen/liberen handel*. As early as April 24, 1629, Putmans' superior, the governor-general of the Dutch East Indies Jan Pieterszoon Coen, had issued an instruction to Putmans before he took office in Formosa, suggesting that Putmans should assist Chinese officials in eliminating pirates off the coast of the empire in exchange for *vrijen/liberen handel*.⁴⁸ The theoretical basis for this approach could also be found in Grotius' *Mare Liberum*. Grotius argued that if a country attempted to monopolize the seas and deny others the right to trade, this could constitute a just cause for war.⁴⁹ These ideas were particularly significant for the VOC, as they sought to navigate the complexities of maritime trade in East Asia, especially in their interactions with the Ming Empire, which imposed its own restrictive tribute trade policies.

The Dutch sought to establish *vrijen handel* in the Ming Empire, and when negotiations

⁴⁶ “... soo een gedwongen negotie, met veel capitael op de hant te geven, de Compagnie door de trouweloosheyt Der Chineesen groot perijckel does loopen,” VOC 1102, *Hans Putmans, in 't comptoir Tayouan* [Hans Putmans, in the trading post Tayouan], 17 March 1631, fol. 460-461.

⁴⁷ “...a new Combon was sent, and [there would be] a thousand other unfounded excuses with which they continue to deceive us, seeking to make [us] perish under the burden” (... 't zy dan datter een nieuwen Combon gesonden was, ende soo duijsent andere ongefondeerde wtvluchten daar zij ons mede sleijpende houden ende soecken onder den last te doen vergaan), VOC 1102, *Hans Putmans, in 't jacht Wieringhen, ter reede voor Aijmoij, in de riviere Chincheo* [Hans Putmans, in the yacht Wieringhen, at anchor before Aijmoij, in the river Chincheo], 22 February 1631, fol. 446-455.

⁴⁸ VOC 1097, *Instructie [van gouverneur generael Jan Pietersz. Coen] voor den E. Gouverneur Hans Putmans ende den raet in Teyouan* [Instructions [from Governor-General Jan Pietersz. Coen] for the Honorable Governor Hans Putmans and the council in Teyouan], 24 April 1629, fol. 146-154.

⁴⁹ Grotius, *The Free Sea*, 59-60.

failed, Grotius's principle of just cause was invoked to justify the use of force. The repeated failure of negotiations with the Ming authorities was interpreted as a sign of the ineffectiveness of peaceful means, providing a theoretical foundation for the use of violence.⁵⁰ Grotius' arguments allowed the VOC to perceive itself as upholding the public interest at sea, using force as a legitimate means to protect their right to *vrijen handel*. Similarly, Putmans' strategic direction aligned with Grotius's discourse, as Putmans stated in a letter on February 24, 1630: "if the desired and unimpeded trade does not follow as a result, it may have to be pursued by force."⁵¹ These ideas constituted the groundwork for the ideology of the VOC, becoming the driving force behind its violent engagement with the Ming Empire in 1633.

Putmans' idea initially aimed to assist Chinese officials in eliminating pirates as a gesture of goodwill.⁵² However, he gradually began to realize that rather than expressing goodwill towards Ming officials, it would be more effective to attract their attention by demonstrating military strength greater than that of the pirates, thereby fostering support for Dutch trade. Putmans had observed a fascinating pattern in the intricate relationship between pirates and Chinese officials: When the pirate Iquan was at the height of his power, the governor of Fujian granted him amnesty and appointed him as an official in Amoy. When another pirate, Quitsicq, surpassed Iquan in power, the governor of Fujian granted amnesty to him, too, and bestowed authority upon him. When pirate Toutzailacq emerged as the strongest, the governor of Fujian offered him similar privileges. From these observations, Putmans devised a strategic approach to demonstrate military power by attacking the Ming Empire.⁵³ His aim was to compel Chinese high officials to wake up and listen to him.⁵⁴

Despite the shift in implementation—from assisting in the removal of pirates to demonstrating superior military strength over them—the overarching policy of the VOC remained the same: to open *liberen ende vrijen handel* with the Ming Empire. Contrary to the Dutch expectation, however, the use of force only deepened the cultural divide. Inasmuch as the Chinese understanding of the outside world was defined by a tributary relation, it was also marked by a disdain for foreign cultures stemming from ignorance and suspicion. Based on the political reality of the distinctions between Chinese and barbarians,⁵⁵ Chinese officials distrusted the "red-haired barbarians" and their powerful ships.⁵⁶ Once the Dutch resorted to force against the Chinese trade embargo, it further validated their initial suspicion that the so-called barbarians could not be trusted, and they responded with equal force.

⁵⁰ Grotius, *The Free Sea*, 11-20, 59-60, 112-119.

⁵¹ "Dievolgende bij sooverde den lieven ende onbecommerden handel nu niet en volgt, sal deselve met geweld moeten versocht syn," VOC 1101, *Hans Putmans, in 't jacht Texe; geanckert liggende in de reviere Chincheo voor de stad Aimoy* [Hans Putmans, in the yacht Texe; lying anchored in the river Chincheo in front of the city of Amoy], 24 February 1630, fol. 347-359.

⁵² 24 February 1630, VOC 1101, fol. 347-359.

⁵³ Chiang, *De missiven*, xxvii.

⁵⁴ Chiang, *De missiven*, xxvii.

⁵⁵ Ts'ao, "明洪武朝的中琉關係," 283.

⁵⁶ Andrade, "The Company's Chinese Pirates," 415.

Clashing Trade Ideologies: An Analysis of the Causes Behind the Battle of Liaoluo Bay

The interactions among Putmans, Zou Weilian, and Iquan provide only a limited perspective on the outbreak of the Battle of Liaoluo Bay, failing to capture its underlying causes. First, the new Grand Coordinator Zou Weilian appeared to harbor dissatisfaction with the Dutch due to their perceived collaboration with pirates. This, however, was rooted not only in this specific concern but also in Zou Weilian's preconceived stereotypes and impressions of Dutch. He described them as having distinctive physical traits like deep-set eyes, long noses, red beards, and vermilion hair, and as being of a treacherous and sadistic nature, a sentiment shared by many.⁵⁷ This attitude further highlights the influence of Sino-centrism on Zou Weilian's stance: as a Chinese official who had probably never met a Dutchman, his subjective impression of the Dutch was that "he knew he did not like them."⁵⁸ This vividly underscores the prevailing political discourse during the Ming dynasty, marked by an emphasis of the differences between the Chinese and barbarians.

Zou Weilian's aversion to the Dutch can largely be attributed to this Sinocentric perspective. This perspective, in turn, was shaped by tribute trade practices and ideology. Zou Weilian's actions were primarily aligned with the established tributary system and its underlying trade ideology, which accentuated the dichotomy between the Ming Empire and the outer barbarian entities. Particularly noteworthy is the role played by the Chongzhen Emperor, who issued strict directives to suppress rampant piracy along the Fujian coast. Given the imperial focus on regulated trade, Zou Weilian, in his capacity as the recently appointed governor of Fujian, adhered to the emperor's command, consequently forbidding Dutch ships from engaging in trade in Amoy.⁵⁹ He also instructed the armed forces to intensify their vigilance. It is essential to recognize that Zou Weilian's adherence to the emperor's orders, aimed at enforcing Ming-sanctioned trade, indeed intensified the ongoing conflict between the principles of *vrijen/liberen handel* and those of Ming-regulated tribute trade.

Second, the Ming court decided that Iquan was too powerful to be subdued with military force, and resolved to woo him with a summon-and-appease policy. Early on October 1, 1628, the Chongzhen Emperor offered Iquan an official title, an imperial rank, and an opportunity to prove his loyalty. Iquan was named Patrolling Admiral and ordered to clear the coast of pirates, but he was faced a dilemma.⁶⁰ On one hand, he understood that it was significant to maintain a good relationship with the Dutch. On the other hand, it was also important to retain the trust of the high officials of the empire.⁶¹ Iquan's attitude of not wanting to offend either side displeased Putman, as the Dutch could not trade in Chincheo (present-day Zhangzhou) as they wished, and

⁵⁷ Zou Weilian, "達觀樓集" [Daguanglou Collection], 中國哲學書電子化計劃 [Chinese Text Project] (6), 72, accessed 15 February 2023. <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=346821>.

⁵⁸ Andrade, *Lost Colony*, 32.

⁵⁹ Chiang, *De missiven*, xxvi.

⁶⁰ Tonio Andrade, *How Taiwan Became Chinese: Dutch, Spanish and Han Colonization in the Seventeenth Century* (Columbia University Press, 2008), 46.

⁶¹ Chiang, *De missiven*, xxvi.

the business in Tayouan could not meet their needs. This frustration was evident when Putmans wrote to the governor-general Jacques Specx saying “his Excellency, please consider that if such a person as Iquan, who is regarded as a father of our nation (and who has enjoyed so many virtues, as is well known from the Company), is held in such esteem, what can then be expected from other unfamiliar Chinese without any considerable power?”⁶²

We can read from this that Iquan was a respected figure, a significant personage who had established a relationship with the VOC. His title as the *vaeder onser natie* (father of our nation) suggests his status both among the Dutch and within the context of trade relations. As the intermediary between the Ming Empire and the VOC, Iquan had neither the power nor the capacity for mediation. While he maintained a positive relationship with the Dutch, he candidly acknowledged his inability to secure free trade for the Dutch.⁶³ This underscores the limitations of the tributary system and the maritime bans that prevented Chinese officials like Iquan from facilitating *vrijen handel* with the Dutch. As a result, the Dutch, including Putmans, came to believe that since even Iquan, their only trustworthy contact, was unable to obtain *vrijen/liberen handel* for their benefit, the only recourse was to resort to force.

Third, when Putmans assumed the governorship of Formosa, his primary goal was to assist the VOC in implementing *vrijen/liberen handel*. Chinese products and markets were integral to inter-Asian trade, making Putmans’ objective a crucial one for the VOC in the Asia. This can be gleaned from the *Instructions from Governor-General Jan Pieterszoon Coen for Governor Hans Putmans and the Council in Teyouan*, dated April 24, 1629: “it is recommended to pay greater attention than before to trade with China, and to attract merchants to Teijouhan (also known as Tayouan) with as much friendliness and accommodating treatment as possible...not only should efforts be made to facilitate trade on the Chincheu River in Fujian, but also to expand along the coast of Chincheu and further north, as it will be most beneficial for the Company.”⁶⁴

Putmans’ mission upon assuming the role of the Governor of Formosa was to establish *vrijen/liberen handel* in the Ming Empire. This decision was not a personal one but aligned with the overarching policy of the VOC. Once he assumed the governorship in 1629, he began employing various strategies to realise this goal, as he wrote in his missive to Batavia saying, “[we] should not neglect, whether by one means or another, to procure free trade in China as much as possible.”⁶⁵ Over several years, Putmans attempted, through multiple avenues, to

⁶² “*Sijn Edt. Gelieft te considereeren, als ons sulcx van Iquan, die een vaeder onser natie bij haer genaempt wert (ende soo veel deuchden gelijk selffs bekent van de Compagnie corts genooten heeft) voor wert gestelt, wat dan uijt andere vreemde Chineesen sonder aensienelijcke maecht te verwachten is*”, 17 March 1631, VOC 1102, fol. 460-461.

⁶³ Andrade, “The Company’s Chinese Pirates,” 435.

⁶⁴ “*Gerecommandeert beter dan voor desen op den handel van China te letten, de negotianten met alle vriendelyckheyt ende accommodabel tractament sooveel mogelyck is in Teijouhan aen te trecken Niet alleene onderstaen den handel in de reviere Chincheu te procureren, maer oock op de custe van Hoccheo ende voorder om de Noort, na dat ten besten van de Compagnie doenelycken wesen sal*,” 24 April 1629, VOC 1097, fol. 146-154.

⁶⁵ “*sullen niet naerlaten ’t sy by d’ een off d’ ander middel by soo verde het mogelijck sij den vrijen handel in China te procureren*,” VOC 1098, *Hans Putmans, in ’t fort Zeelandia* [Hans Putmans, in the fort Zeelandia], 28 September

communicate with Chinese officials through protests, gift offerings, and proposing to assist in eliminating pirates along the Chinese coast as a gesture of goodwill.⁶⁶ However, the repeated failures of negotiations gradually eroded his patience.

The ineffectiveness of negotiations, characterized by persistent failures, constituted one of the theoretical bases employed by Grotius to rationalize the use of violence.⁶⁷ This likely afforded Putmans a conceptual foundation, reinforcing his perception of what he perceived as the untrustworthy nature of the Chinese. He meticulously documented his observations for the headquarters of the VOC in Batavia saying, “the unfaithful Chinese, as we have already experienced during our short time of residence here and as has become abundantly clear, are entirely untrustworthy. They do not hold to agreements, promises, or contracts, and they won’t even engage in trade unless they can profit from it; Instead, they often leave us with a pretext, which they cleverly use through their King or *Combon*, ([as we] have seen many times), presenting reasons of apparent truth, claiming that the King absolutely cannot allow us to trade there.”⁶⁸

This highlights the ideological and cultural differences between the Dutch and the Chinese. Putmans believed that not informing the emperor about their trading activities was merely an excuse for Chinese officials to get rid of him, demonstrating that the VOC, including Putmans, did not have a full understanding of the tributary system, maritime bans, and the distinctions between Chinese and the barbarians that constituted Chinese official doctrine. Furthermore, Zou Weilian's perception of the Dutch—who had not had dealings with China since ancient times and invaded Fujian and Guangdong during the reign of the Wanli Emperor (1572-1620)—was that they were not part of the traditional Chinese tribute vassal states.⁶⁹ Under the tributary system, the Chinese regarded themselves as a celestial empire and everything beyond as lands of barbarians. As a result, Putmans expressed his despair about the inability to establish *vrijen handel* in the missive, stating “in summary, there is little hope for the free unrestricted trade.”⁷⁰

These ideological differences had significant repercussions. Four months after the VOC had begun to wage war against the Ming Empire, Putmans was caught off guard by the decisive Chinese response. The Chinese retaliated with near-suicidal fire attacks against the well-armed Dutch fleet, a reaction that starkly contrasted with the VOC’s expectations of achieving

1629, fol. 39-42.

⁶⁶ 24 February 1630, VOC 1101, fol. 347-359; 6 January 1632, VOC 1102, fol. 1-25.

⁶⁷ Grotius, *The Free Sea*, 59-60, 112-119.

⁶⁸ “*Oock en zyn de trouweloose Chineesen, voor sooveel wy alreets geduyrende den cleynnen tyt onser residentie alhier ondervonden ende gesien hebben ende oock genoechaem voor dese is gebleecken, gantsch niet te vertrouwen. Want zy houden van accort, belofte noch verbandt, jae selfs coop niet, als zy daarby niet en commen proffiteren; maar setten ons dan (gelyck het veeltyts is gebleecken) met een pratgien af, waartoe zy zeer aardich als bullebacken weten te gebruycken haeren Coninck ofte Combon; voor redenen van schijnwaarheijt bybrengende dat den Coninck gantsch niet mach waten dat wy daar comen handelen,*” 5 October 1630, VOC 1101, fol. 333-345.

⁶⁹ Zou Weilian, “*達觀樓集*,” (6), 72.

⁷⁰ “*In somma, tot den vrijen liberen handel is weijnich hoope,*” 17 March 1631, VOC 1102, fol. 460-461.

vrijen/liberen handel.⁷¹ This unexpected outcome illustrates not only the miscalculation of the Dutch but also their profound misinterpretation of the Ming Empire's resolve.

As early as 1632, these misjudgements became more apparent when the Ming Empire reimposed the maritime ban, forcing the VOC into a critical juncture. They had two options: to promise never to dispatch any vessels to the coast of the Ming Empire but be allowed to trade with Chinese merchants in Batavia and Formosa or to abandon the Chinese market entirely and seek other trade opportunities.⁷² Interestingly, the company and Putmans did not consider these options. Instead, they opted for a more radical approach which was a forceful invasion of the Ming Empire. The decision to use force highlights the three ideological motivations behind their actions explored in the previous sections: that *vrijen handel* was a God-given right; that they had the right to freely monopolize trade; and that they could enforce *vrijen handel*, considered just cause, by using violence.⁷³ Their goal was to impose their trade ideology on the Ming Empire, which contradicted the empire's own ideology and aimed to assert *vrijen handel* over the tributary system. This ideological clash ultimately justified their decision to resort to military action: "The reasons that prompted us to take up war were that no other means remained available to us to obtain or secure free, unrestricted trade."⁷⁴

This line of argument demonstrates that, despite alternative courses of action available to the VOC, it wilfully disregarded peaceful solutions and opted for violent conflict with the Ming Empire. The decision underscores their unwavering commitment to the principle of *vrijen handel* and their rejection of the tributary system. Thus, the Battle of Liaoluo Bay was a direct consequence of ideological differences about trade.

Conclusion

The discussion in this paper does not center around the evolution and development of *vrijen/liberen handel*, but rather, delves into the interpretation of this concept by Putmans within the framework of the VOC in the early seventeenth century. It has demonstrated that the concept of *vrijen/liberen handel*, as perceived by Putmans and the VOC in the early seventeenth century, does not align with the modern understanding of free trade and conflicted with the economic and diplomatic underpinnings of the Ming Empire's tributary system. The Battle of Liaoluo Bay was a result of these ideological differences.

The Dutch defeat in the Battle of Liaoluo Bay cannot be solely attributed to Putmans, who came to Formosa in the context of the overarching policy of the VOC, namely,

⁷¹ Leonard Blussé, M. E. van Opstall, and Yung-ho Ts'ao, eds., *De Dagregisters van het Kasteel Zeelandia, Taiwan 1629-1662 Deel 1: 1629-1641* [The Daily Journals of Zeelandia, Taiwan 1629-1662 Volume 1: 1629-1641] (Rijks-geschiedkundige Publicatiën: 1986), 137-139, 22 October 1633.

⁷² Cheng, *War, Trade and Piracy*, 137-143.

⁷³ Grotius, *The Free Sea*, 59-60.

⁷⁴ "die ons gmoveert hebben den oorlooge bij der handt te neemen, alsoo ons geene andere middelen meer resteerden om den vrijen, liberen handel te becomen ofte waaren bij der handt te nemen," Blussé, van Opstall, and Ts'ao, *De Dagregisters*, 112, 24 July 1633.

vrijen/liberen handel, which fundamentally conflicted with the tributary system. From the point of view of Putman and the VOC, the idea of *vrijen/liberen handel*—the God-given right of the VOC to freely exercise its monopoly of trade—carried stronger overtones of monopoly, God’s will, and protectionism than the modern *vrijhandel*. The battle can be seen as a showdown between the God-centered *vrijen/liberen handel* and the *Tianzi*-centric tributary system: the result of a conflict between a network of free-trading merchants and the restrictions of tribute trade, ultimately a fundamental contradiction between the VOC’s strategic approach and entrenched Sino-centrism.

In short, Zou Weilian and Putmans each championed their respective trade ideologies with determination. Iquan, in his intermediary role, found himself devoid of substantial influence or leeway for mediation. The Battle of Liaoluo Bay, therefore, emerged as a poignant representation of the confrontation between the Dutch principle of *vrijen/liberen handel* and the Ming-regulated tributary system. It serves as a tangible embodiment of the divergent trade ideologies upheld by these opposing factions, showcasing the inherent tensions that existed within this complicated historical context. This battle was not merely a military confrontation, but a manifestation of the broader struggle between two fundamentally different approaches to trade and diplomacy during the early seventeenth century.