

Dutch Trading Post Heritage Network; Linking Former Asian Bases of the VOC



Members of the Dutch Trading Post Heritage Network at the annual general assembly held in Hirado in 2017 © Hirado Dutch Trading Post

During the Age of Great Voyages in the 17th century, the Netherlands came to dominate the world's seas and, through the Dutch East India Company (VOC), established trading posts across Asia. Not only in Hirado and Dejima in Nagasaki, but also in places such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Taiwan, former VOC bases remain alive today as important cultural heritage sites. The "Dutch Trading Post Heritage Network" was established to link these sites and, across 400 years of time and space, connect people and cultures.

The Legacy of the Dutch East India Company

The formation of the Dutch Trading Post Heritage Network (DTPHN) was initiated by Yoshiharu Okayama, Director of the Hirado Dutch Trading Post. Hirado was the site where the Dutch first arrived in Japan in 1609, and for 33 years it served as a key hub linking Asia and Europe. However, under the shogunate's foreign trade control policy, the warehouses at the site were destroyed, and in 1641 the trading post was relocated to Dejima in Nagasaki. According to Okayama, the restoration and public opening of these warehouses later became the catalyst for the creation of the network.

"It was not until 2011 that the restoration of the Dutch trading post was finally completed, and we began operating it as curators," Okayama explains. "As we conducted research on the Dutch East India Company (VOC), which maintained numerous bases stretching from Africa to Asia, we realized the need to study its relationships with those regions. From a global historical perspective, relying solely on Japanese sources simply does not provide sufficient information. That is why we

proposed establishing a network—to facilitate the exchange of information, promote human interaction, and share historical perspectives.”



The restored Hirado Dutch Trading Post, originally built in 1639, was completed in 2011 and is operated by the Matsuura Historical Museum Foundation under a designated management system © Hirado Dutch Trading Post

Ahead of the network’s official launch, a preparatory meeting was held in Hirado in 2014, with participants from Hirado and Nagasaki in Japan, as well as Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Taiwan. At the time, the network was initially expected to be named the “VOC Heritage Network.” However, in countries such as Indonesia, which had once been under Dutch colonial rule, the term “VOC” also evoked negative emotions.

Nadia Purwestri, Executive Director of the Architectural Documentation Center and a representative of the Indonesian members, recalls the discussions at the time. “At the preparatory meeting, I was the only representative from Indonesia. After my return from Hirado, I explained the plan to establish this network to cultural community leaders in Indonesia and related institutions that had been involved in heritage conservation activities. During those discussions, a proposal emerged to change the term ‘VOC’ to ‘Dutch Trading Post,’” she explains. “In the following year when the second meeting was held in Jakarta, it was decided that the name of the network would be the ‘Dutch Trading Post Heritage Network.’”

What began as a casually proposed name ultimately sparked differing opinions—an experience that proved to be a major realization for the Japanese side as well. Okayama notes, “Even feelings toward the VOC vary greatly from country to country in terms of historical perception. There is so much history and heritage that can only be understood from within each region. I felt strongly that sharing those perspectives with one another and advancing research together is essential.”

Experts from Nine Asian Countries Come Together

Although the term “Dutch trading post” is often used as a single category, the historical contexts behind these sites vary widely. In Japan, trade was conducted at posts officially permitted by the Tokugawa shogunate. While in places such as Jakarta, Indonesia, entire towns or districts were destroyed and rebuilt by the VOC, and remnants such as city halls, warehouses, and residential buildings still remain today. In the Banda Islands of the same country, the VOC’s attempt to monopolize the spice trade led the islanders to mount a resistance movement. As a result, 90% of the population was killed, enslaved, or deported. This event has left deep scars on the people of Indonesia that persist to this day.

While the VOC conquered new bases one after another, it was also driven out of other regions. This complex history has given rise to a rich cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible.

Through the VOC’s intra-Asian trade, regions across Asia also influenced one another. The history of the VOC used to be examined through the lens of relations between the Netherlands and local populations. With the formation of the DTPHN, however, attention is increasingly being directed toward the interactions and mutual connections among regions across Asia.



[“Newly Engraved World Map” \(17th century\), Collection of the Matsuura Historical Museum](#)

The network’s membership has expanded significantly—from the original five countries and six regions to a total of nine countries and eighteen regions, with the addition of India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. Diversity is evident not only in the regions represented but also in the members’ areas of expertise. Historians, curators, architects, urban planners, and other specialists come together to collaborate on interdisciplinary research as well as the restoration, preservation, and adaptive use of VOC-related heritage.

Since holding its first general assembly in 2014, the network has convened annual meetings, each year gathering in one of the member regions. At these assemblies, representatives from each area give presentations reporting on recent research findings and activities, alongside site visits to local heritage locations and hands-on workshops. To date, general assemblies have been held in Hirado, Nagasaki, Jakarta, Ayutthaya (Thailand), Tainan (Taiwan), and Malacca (Malaysia). Most recently, the network also convened at the Netherlands Pavilion of the Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai.

According to Purwestri, the annual assemblies provide invaluable opportunities to meet new people and to deepen understanding of how Dutch trading posts are perceived in each city, and how these sites relate to contemporary historical awareness and everyday life. “In every annual meeting, there are always new insights for me,” she says.



Annual general meeting held at the Netherlands Pavilion, Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai © Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Japan

The Dutch Government as an “Observer”

The Netherlands is not a member of this network, and it does not take the initiative in the gatherings. However, the network is supported through Dutch embassies in various locations, providing participant funding and venues. Jan-Paul Corten of the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands, a part of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, describes the creation of the network as “a good surprise for us.”

“The network is an initiative driven by the members themselves, and we welcome their efforts,” Corten says. “The remains of the VOC are no longer our property, and we make no claims of any kind over these heritage sites. At the same time, it does tell something of our history. So we have an interest, and based on it, we are willing to support and collaborate with them.”



The annual general assembly held in Malacca, Malaysia, in 2019 © Hirado Dutch Trading Post

The Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands frequently participates in meetings of the Dutch Trading Post Heritage Network as an “observer”—a non-voting participant. At the request of the network, agency experts also give lectures or conduct workshops on various occasions. Jinna Smit of the Cultural Heritage Agency, who has taken part in several meetings as an observer and speaker, including the first annual general assembly, reflects on the significance of the network as follows.

“The Cultural Heritage Agency facilitates bilateral and multilateral projects. With projects joined by several countries, it is often through these activities that the experts get to know each other,” Smit explains. “But now, the members of the Dutch Trading Post Heritage Network have their own platform, and Dutch involvement is no longer necessary. To find knowledge, expertise and connections, they are no longer looking toward the Netherlands, but toward one another. I think that’s the big value of the network.”

Even so, in 2022 the Netherlands served as host for a symposium held in Amsterdam. Members from Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Taiwan, Thailand, and Japan attended, presenting reports on their local activities and discussing future challenges. Through such exchanges, the Dutch government itself has also been able to develop a more inclusive understanding of its own history.



Field training in Jakarta, 2015. © Hirado Dutch Trading Post

A Lively Crossroads of Culture

Beyond the annual general assemblies, smaller groups of network members also come together to organize workshops and exhibitions.

In 2024, for example, a workshop and exhibition themed around “sugar industry heritage” were held in Tainan, Taiwan. Participants included members from Tainan and Anping (Taiwan), Hirado, and Jakarta. The program featured exhibitions on the history of sugar production in Tainan and Jakarta, as well as illustrated scrolls depicting Hirado’s sugar trade and confectionery culture. Also on display were newly created sweets developed through collaborations between Dutch artists and confectioners from Hirado, along with hands-on workshops on making traditional Japanese confectionery.

In 2025, Jakarta and Tainan jointly organized a workshop on “rural cultural landscapes” in Koto Gadang, West Sumatra, Indonesia. The workshop explored approaches to regional development that make use of existing local assets, including Koto Gadang’s heritage as well as its natural environment, culture, and traditions, and reinterpret them for contemporary society.



“These activities are not just about history—they are deeply connected to the present,” says Okayama. “Through these activities, the members have come to be good friends. We’ve truly become a close-knit community.”

This year's annual general assembly is scheduled to be held in Ternate, Indonesia. Other upcoming initiatives include an artist-in-residence program in Hirado, bringing together artists from Indonesia, Taiwan, the Netherlands, and Japan to create and exhibit works themed around "kite and bamboo culture," as well as an exhibition on the DTPHN in Tamsui, Taiwan.

Sites across Asia that were once connected through the VOC are now being reconnected—this time through people, communities, and shared dialogue. By embracing even the more difficult aspects of history while pursuing future-oriented initiatives, the DTPHN may offer a compelling model for how cultural heritage can provide a sustainable and inclusive basis for collaboration.