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Silk for silver: Dutch-Vietnamese relations, 1637-1700

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE DUTCH EAST INDIA COMPANY AND SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY VIETNAMESE SOCIETY

1. *Dutch residents and local society*

Winter, the tenth lunar month, [the court] forbade its subjects to study the Christian religion. In the past, people of Christian lands arrived in our country and propagated their fallacious religion to attract the poor. Many foolish and ignorant people followed this belief. Inside the churches, men and women lived cheek by jowl with each other. [The court] had previously expelled the priests but the religious tracts were still circulated and places for preaching still remained. The iniquitous habits were therefore not stopped. Now [the court] again forbade [the propaganda of the Christian religion].

Toàn thư (1663)¹

Factories and factors

In order to pursue the import and export trade as profitably and conveniently as possible, the VOC needed to establish and maintain a factory in Tonkin, just as it had done in many other trading-places throughout Asia. In the first few years, the Dutch were lodged in the customs town of Phố Hiến, midway between the sea and the capital Thăng Long. As the diplomatic relations between the Company and Tonkin pursued a steady course in these years, in the early 1640s, the Dutch were granted permission to reside and trade in Thăng Long. After their removal up river, their factory at Phố Hiến was deserted.

The Dutch factory in the capital was moved several times during the 1640s before it found a permanent location in the early 1650s. Patchy descriptions of the early years of the Dutch residence in Tonkin prevent us from making any feasible reconstruction of the Dutch factory in this period. All that can be said with certainty is that it often consisted of one or two poorly constructed thatched and mud-walled houses, closely resembling most of the indigenous dwellings which were highly vulnerable to thieves, fires, and storms. In 1649, the Dutch residence was completely demolished because the Crown Prince wanted the ground to build a shooting-range. The next compound was erected on the bank of the Hồng River, near present Long Biên bridge. Although the

¹ *Toàn thư* III, 265.

factory suffered several fires and floods which required very thorough repairs, it was well maintained until 1700 when the Company resolved to leave Tonkin.

The methods of management of the Tonkin trade were also subject to change. Prior to 1671, the Tonkin factory was subordinate to both the High Government in Batavia and the VOC factory in Japan. Batavia reserved the right to issue general instructions on the Tonkin trade, leaving the calculation of and deciding on the annual investment capital, the import and export volumes of the Tonkin factory to the Japan factory. Consequently, the profits and losses on the Tonkin cargoes were calculated and subsequently entered into the bookkeeping of the Japan factory. The Zeelandia Castle in Taiwan was also involved in managing the Tonkin trade to a certain extent through supplying some of the goods and objects that the Tonkin factory demanded. After direct shipping between Tonkin and Japan was discarded in 1671, the Tonkin factory fell directly under the High Government in Batavia.

The number of Dutch factors residing in Thăng Long either rose or fell according to the state of commercial reforms and untrammelled functioning of the Company's Tonkin trade at any particular time. As the Company's import and export trade in the early years enjoyed the backing of the local authorities by grace of the amicable relationship between Batavia and Thăng Long, the Dutch factors could easily procure silk around two months before sending ships to Japan while the southern monsoon still prevailed. The revocation of the military alliance with Tonkin by Batavia in 1644 harmed the Tonkin-VOC relationship, but none the less the High Government decided to reinforce the trading capacity of the Tonkin factory by increasing the number of Dutch factors in Thăng Long. By the early 1650s, there were around nine Dutch factors in residence in Thăng Long at any one time.

The personnel of the Tonkin factory consisted of one director, one assistant-director, one bookkeeper, one surgeon, several assistants including merchants, soldiers and, occasionally, such people as tailors and trumpeters. Wary of being spied on by the local inhabitants, the Dutch factory restricted the employment of locals as much as possible, hiring the Tonkinese mainly as mediators and interpreters. As part of their duties, these Vietnamese employees were actively involved in trade, selling the import items and buying local goods for the Company. When the Tonkin factory was promoted to permanent status in 1663, the number of Dutch factors in Tonkin shot up to fourteen, but it was again reduced to around ten after the revocation of the promotion. In 1679, when Batavia reduced the annual investment capital assigned to the Tonkin trade, there were only five Company servants left in Thăng Long. They were joined by a few slaves and soldiers for menial duties, to guard the compound, escort the chief when he went out, and to assist the factors in such daily business as weighing and ferrying goods up and down the river. Generally speaking, the number of Company servants residing in

Thăng Long was smaller than that at other trading-places such as Siam in the same period.²

Although the personnel lived in Tonkin the whole year round, their business transactions were conducted mainly during the summer trading season, which took place between May and July. Prior to the early 1670s, the transactions of the Dutch factory concentrated solely on advancing silver for the delivery of silk. After the Company ships arrived in Tonkin early in the spring, the factors would hand the silver over to local mandarins, brokers, and silk-producers. Between May and July, they would be busy collecting silk from those to whom they had advanced the money, as well as buying products from retailers. In July or August, the chief accompanied the rich silk cargoes to Japan and would not return to Tonkin until the next spring, bringing with him sufficient capital to prepare for the next trading season. After the Tonkin-Japan route was abandoned in 1671, the Company ships left Tonkin for Batavia during the wintertime and would not return until early the following summer. The reconstitution of the Company's Tonkin trade in the early 1670s required more factors to live in Tonkin and carry out the commercial transactions before the Company ships arrived from Batavia. The advantage of this shipping arrangement was that the Company ships leaving Tonkin could always carry with them the silk and piece-goods purchased during the winter trading season to Batavia, where they were transhipped either to Japan or the Netherlands.

The directorship and the need for "Vietnamese learning"

Similar to, or even more demanding than other trading-places in the East, the success of the Tonkin trade depended heavily on the knowledge and experience of the chief of the factory in his dealings with the indigenous authorities. His ability to maintain favourable relations with the court and with the mandarins in charge of the Company trade was of the utmost importance. To undertake such a task, he needed to have a good knowledge of the local customs and, more importantly, the local language.

In the early years of the Tonkin trade, the chiefs of the Tonkin factory were carefully selected from merchants who had a good knowledge of Tonkin or of the "East Asian" trade in general. This was a great help when they had to contact local rulers and other people. The first chief, Carel Hartsinck, for instance, was quite familiar with the ins-and-outs of the Tonkin trade when he visited Tonkin for the first time in 1637. He had obtained in Japan reliable information from foreign merchants, mainly Japanese and

² BL OIOC G/12/17-1: 41-55, Tonkin factory to London, 7 Dec. 1672. On the Dutch factory and factors in Siam, see, for instance, George Vinal Smith, *The Dutch in Seventeenth-Century Thailand* (Northern Illinois University: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Special Report No. 16, 1977); Dhiravat na Pombejra, "VOC Employees and their Relationships with Mon and Siamese Women: A Case Study of Osoet Pegua", in Barbara Watson Andaya (ed.), *Other Pasts: Women, Gender and History in Early Modern Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000), 195-214.

Chinese, trading to Hirado. The inaugural VOC voyage to Tonkin under his command was consequently a sound success.

In the years that followed, the High Government often appointed a merchant to this office who had already been living in Tonkin for a few years. After the establishment of the Dutch factory in Thăng Long in the 1640s, it was a common, though unwritten, regulation that, in the final years of his term, the incumbent chief trained a merchant whom he trusted in order to recommend him to the High Government. The advantage of this arrangement was that the successor had already accumulated a great deal of experience about the local trade and society before he actually succeeded to the directorship. This approach was not always successful as the nominee was sometimes disapproved of or even dismissed by the High Government. In the middle of the 1640s, for instance, the most suitable person for the succession to the Tonkin directorship, Merchant Jan van Riebeeck – who, according to the incumbent director Antonio van Brouckhorst, understood the Vietnamese language well and behaved civilly to the Vietnamese – was disapproved by the High Government with which he stood accused of private trade. This proved to be a costly mistake. The third director, Philip Schillemans, who had virtually no previous knowledge of the Tonkin trade, failed to deal diplomatically with the local mandarins and thus contributed largely to the erosion of the Company's Tonkin trade in the following years.

It is important to point out here that what has been called the “Vietnamese learning” of the Dutch, and indeed of other foreign merchants at that time, was confined to the learning of the spoken Vietnamese language. As the seventeenth-century Vietnamese people used two entirely different language systems, the Vietnamese language for speaking and Chinese characters for writing, the Dutch often only learnt to speak Vietnamese which was a pragmatic necessity for their daily business. Pertinently, by that time the process of romanizing the Vietnamese spoken language by Western priests had been carried out for around a century.³ This may have helped the VOC servants to note down the pronunciation more easily. In the Dutch records, there are sporadic notes on the pronunciation of the Vietnamese language. In 1651, for instance, the Vietnamese mandarin title of “*Thiếu Bảo Quận Công*” which *Chúa* Trịnh Tráng granted Governor-General Carel Reniers was spelled by the Dutch as “*Theeuw Baeuw Quun Congh*”. Although there is a discrepancy between the seventeenth-century and today's transcription, the sounds of these two phrases, when we read them aloud, are quite similar. Just a few years before this event, Jan van Riebeeck had reportedly written some paragraphs of his report to the Gentlemen XVII in Amsterdam in the romanized Vietnamese language to show his masters how good his Vietnamese was.⁴

³ On the Romanization of the Vietnamese language by the Western priests: Jacques, *Les missionnaires portugais* (Vol. 1).

⁴ On the Dutch learning of the Vietnamese language: *Generale Missiven II*, 575; Godée Molsbergen, *De Stichter van Hollands Zuid-Afrika*; Buch, “La Compagnie” (1937): 126-128.

For obvious reasons the policy of training and preparing merchants who had been living in Thăng Long for the directorship of the Tonkin factory was not without drawbacks. It appears that the longer a merchant lived in Tonkin, the greater the risk he would become embroiled in private trade as a consequence of his good knowledge of the local trade. Despite the endless efforts made by the High Government to curb the private trade between the Northern Quarters, plus heavy fines on those who brought private silk and textiles to Japan, Tonkinese silk was still smuggled to Nagasaki by the Company servants.⁵ It was said that as long as the Japanese officials and traders at Nagasaki supported if not encouraged this activity, it was impossible for the Company to eliminate its servants' Tonkin-Japan private trade.⁶ After the dismissal of the incompetent Schillemans, Batavia expected that the appointment of Jan de Groot in 1650 would restore the Tonkin trade. In order to provide the new chief with the necessary experience in managing the Tonkin trade and in dealing with the Tonkinese rulers, the High Government even sent him to Japan where he was trained by the former Chief Factor, Antonio van Brouckhorst, before he sailed to Tonkin to succeed Schillemans. To the great disappointment of Batavia, the new chief was found guilty of conducting a large-scale private trade, just a few months after he took office. He was immediately dismissed. The interim director, Jacob Keijser (1651-1653), proved to be a skilled manager, but he never won the approval of the High Government because he too was accused of trading privately on a large scale. Other competent directors as Hendrick Baron (1660-1664) and Hendrick Verdonk (1664-1665) were also reprimanded for carrying out illegal actions. It was only after the abandoning of the direct Tonkin-Japan shipping route in 1671 that the Tonkin factors' private trade could be almost eliminated. Even in the later years Tonkinese goods were still being privately transported to Batavia by the Company servants, though on a much lesser scale.

Besides observing the diplomatic protocol of the Tonkinese court, participating in the local festivities was the other important part of the activities of the chief and the factory council as well. Such activities often proved costly because the guests were expected to come with valuable presents. Since there were many feasts throughout the year in Tonkin, they became a real burden on the Dutch as well as other foreigners. There were four great occasions a year which cost the Dutch excessive amounts of money for presents for the Emperor, *Chúa*, and great mandarins: the New Year holiday; the May festival; and the birthdays of the Emperor and the *Chúa*. Besides these four main festivities, foreign merchants were quite often invited by high-ranking mandarins to dinner, dramatic performances, music, and the like at their houses. These invitations, again, cost a considerable amount of money in term of presents and tips.

⁵ Van der Chijs, *Nederlandsch-Indisch Plakkaatboek*, Vol. 1, 509-512.

⁶ Yoko Nagazumi, "From Company to Individual Company Servants: Dutch Trade in Eighteenth-Century Japan", in Leonard Blussé and Femme Gaastra (eds), *On the 18th Century as a Category of Asian History: Van Leur in Retrospect* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 147-172.

Religious practices and anti-Christian sentiments in Tonkin

The propagation of the Christian religion was forbidden in Tonkin, except for the short period between 1626 and 1630 when the priests of the Society of Jesus in Macao were allowed to propagate their faith freely and convert the Vietnamese. After a few years preaching in Tonkin, in 1630 the French priest Alexandre de Rhodes of the Society of Jesus and his colleagues were expelled.⁷ The anti-Christian policy of the court during these years was half-hearted, however, and the Jesuits in Macao continued to visit Tonkin after 1630 to resume their conversion work which was, as noted by the Dutch in 1633, just as fruitful as it was in mainland China.⁸ The number of Tonkinese Christians increased rapidly and, by the early 1640s, had reportedly reached around 100,000. The large number of Tonkinese Christians converts must have irritated the court, especially after a chaotic fight between hundreds of Tonkinese Christians and some fifty Chinese in the southern province of Nghệ An in 1639. To a certain extent, the religious disorder in Nghệ An in 1639 can be considered a miniature of the Shimabara Rebellion of 1637 and 1638 in Japan which led to the Tokugawa persecution of the Japanese Christians, Western priests, and finally to the expulsion of the Portuguese from Japan. The Lê/Trịnh government, too, reacted strongly to this event and pursued both the local Christians and the Western Jesuits without compunction. Nevertheless, it appears that the anti-Christian sentiment of the Lê/Trịnh court was not as strong as that of the Japanese Tokugawa and the clandestine propagation and conversion continued in Tonkin, though under more difficult circumstances.⁹

Learning from the harsh experiences of religious persecution to which their colleagues in Japan had been subjected, and in order to avoid unnecessary trouble with the Tonkinese rulers, the Company servants in Thăng Long constantly warned their masters in Batavia not to transport priests or religious objects to northern Vietnam.¹⁰ The anti-Christian sentiment eased slightly in the following years but was exacerbated again in 1663 when the court issued a decree banning all sort of propagation and practice of the “erroneous beliefs”, namely the Christian religion, in Tonkin.¹¹ This decree was maintained so strictly throughout the following decades that, according to Dutch observations in 1677, the religious work of the French and Portuguese priests bore “very inconsiderable fruit” in Tonkin.¹² Under increasing pressure from the Lê/Trịnh government, in 1678 the Spanish Dominican monk Joan D’ Arjona was

⁷ Rhodes, *Histoire du royaume de Tonkin*, 254-259.

⁸ *Generale Missiven* I, 397.

⁹ On the persecution of the Christians in Japan in the late 1630s and the deportation of the Portuguese: Innes, *The Door Ajar*, 156-164. On the religious disorder in Tonkin in 1639: Rhodes, *Histoire du royaume de Tunquin*, 288-308

¹⁰ *Generale Missiven* II, 177.

¹¹ *Toàn thư* III, 265.

¹² *Dagh-register Batavia* 1677, 4-5, 427.

expelled to Banten, where he appealed to the High Government in Batavia for passage on board a Company ship departing for Ayutthaya.¹³

The suppression of Christianity by the Tonkinese Government probably reached its zenith in August 1694 when the Governor of Phố Hiến had the English flag burnt in front of him, forbidding the English from then on to fly their flag in Tonkin because the English flag bore a cross on it. Although the English tried to vindicate themselves – as did the Dutch who also interceded for their English competitors – that the cross merely symbolized their country and had nothing whatsoever to do with the Christian religion, the mandarin insisted on forbidding them to fly their flag unless the cross was removed.¹⁴

The Dutch did not suffer any trouble from the anti-Christian sentiment of the Tonkin court. In contrast to its strict regulations on religious propaganda, the Tonkinese court generally tolerated the religious practices of the foreigners as long as they did not perform their devotion publicly. It appears that the Company servants in Tonkin could pray inside the factory while sailors could also follow their religious observances on board their ships at Doméa. Except for their observance, the Dutch, who were “too loose Livers to gain reputation to their Religion”,¹⁵ made no attempt to propagate their faith in Tonkin.

Paid company and sentimental attachment: foreign merchants and Vietnamese women

The relatively high degree of autonomy and the potent economic importance of women in early modern and modern South-East Asia is well-known. Recent research on sexual relations in early modern South-East Asia has revealed the striking fact that women enjoyed a high degree of freedom and played an active part in courtship and lovemaking.¹⁶ Seventeenth-century Tonkin was again an “exception” to this pattern attributable to the “progressive imposition of the sternly patriarchal Confucian system in the fifteenth century”.¹⁷

The Lê Code of the late fifteenth century contained a series of stern articles governing the sexual relations between women and men, placing special emphasis on the virginity of women.¹⁸ At the peak of the influence of Confucianism, this sexual

¹³ *Dagh-register Batavia* 1678, 202.

¹⁴ BL OIOC G/12/17-9: 369, Tonkin factory records, 21 Aug. 1694.

¹⁵ Dampier, *Voyages and Discoveries*, 70; Susan Legêne, “The Spirit of Christianity, the Spirit of a Trading Nation”, in Blussé *et al.* (eds), *Bridging the Divide*, 82.

¹⁶ Anthony Reid, “Female Role in Pre-colonial Southeast Asia”, *Modern Asian Studies* 22-3 (1988): 629-645; Idem, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, Vol. 1: *The Lands below the Winds*, 146-150; Barbara Watson Andaya, “From Temporary Wife to Prostitute: Sexuality and Economic Change in Early Modern Southeast Asia”, *Journal of Women's History* 9-4 (1998): 11-34.

¹⁷ Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, Vol. 1, 146.

¹⁸ See, for instance, *Hồng Đức thiện chính thư* (Hong Đức Reign Edicts and Decrees Promulgated for Good Government), Saigon: Nam Hà Ấn Quán, 1959, 39; *Quốc triều hình luật*, 157-159.

norm was strictly guarded. It appears that, just around a century later, such regulations were being severely challenged. Besides the sixteenth-century political crises and social disorder, the arrival of foreign merchants and hence their need of sexual partners must have been a decisive catalyst in transforming Vietnamese social norms towards sexual relationships. By the late 1680s, the custom of buying wives in Tonkin, in the eyes of an English traveller, had degenerated into that of “hiring Misses”:¹⁹

[This] gives great liberty to the young Women, who offer themselves of their own accord to any Strangers, who will go to their Price. There are of them of all Prizes, from 100 Dollars to 5 Dollars [...] Even the great Men of Tonquin will offer their Daughters to the Merchants and Officers, though their Stay is not likely to be above five or six Months in the Country: neither are they afraid to be with Child by *White* Men, for their Children will be much fairer than their Mothers, and consequently of greater Repute, when they grow up, if they be Girls.

This passage is rather shocking to Vietnamese today whose general image of Vietnamese women in the early modern period is of mere followers of first their parents and then their husbands and their sons. They were believed to have had virtually no liberty in their social or sexual lives. It is therefore not surprising at all that, until today, there has been hardly any research by Vietnamese historians into this phenomenon. In the most recent historiography, there have been various loose remarks on the increase in “obscene” thoughts and novels which led the court in 1663 to issue a decree to “forbid the obscene relations between man and women”. It seems that this decree had no effect, as the court issued other decrees in 1718 and again in 1760 forbidding the printing and selling of pornographic poems and literature.²⁰

The promulgation of the 1663 decree is an indication that the situation had presumably reached an alarming level by that time. Although there was no official statement about the root of such a problem, it is most likely that the arrival of male foreign merchants in Tonkin in the seventeenth century must have largely contributed a challenge to the local sexual norms, a phenomenon which was repeated in many other South-East Asian societies in the early modern and modern periods. It has been pointed out in recent research that the need for sexual partners of itinerant traders turned many local women into temporary wives, concubines, and prostitutes.²¹ It seems evident that this trend overwhelmed the seventeenth-century Vietnamese Confucian ideology on sexual relationships.

¹⁹ Dampier, *Voyages and Discoveries*, 40.

²⁰ See, for instance, *Toàn thư* III, 264-265; Trương Hữu Quýnh *et al.*, *Lịch sử Việt Nam*, 391; Nguyễn Thừa Hỷ, “Kinh tế hàng hoá và đời sống văn hoá của nước Đại Việt thế kỷ XVI đến đầu thế kỷ XVIII” [The Commodity Economy and the Cultural Life of Đại Việt, Sixteenth-Early Eighteenth Centuries], MS. Institute of Vietnamese Studies and Development Sciences, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, 2005.

²¹ See for details: Reid, “Female Role in Pre-colonial Southeast Asia”; Idem, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, Vol. 1, 146-150, Andaya, “From Temporary Wife to Prostitute”; Pombejra, “VOC Employees”, 195-214.

Patchy information in the Dutch and English sources on seventeenth-century Tonkin supports this assertion. Not too long after their first arrival, local “*vrouwen*” [women] began to appear in Dutch factors’ daily lives although, in a similar situation to Dutch employees at other trading-places, there were hardly any detailed accounts depicting their sexual affairs. It is, however, possible to presume that it was quite easy for the Company factors to live with local women just as their colleagues in Japan enjoyed “Japanese wives” and *keisei* (courtesans) in Hirado and after their move to restricted Deshima, or as the Company employees in Ayutthaya who courted and lived with the Siamese and Mon women.²² In 1657, for instance, the assistant Evert Janszoon obtained permission from the chief of the Tonkin factory to bring a Vietnamese lady with whom he had been living for many years to Batavia to marry her.²³ Another Dutch merchant living in Tonkin in the 1650s and 1660s, Hendrick Baron, had entered into a sexual relationship with an indigenous lady who had borne him a son, Samuel Baron. Although the Dutch and English sources do not provide detailed information about this interesting story, it is clear that such an affair was not problematic for either side and this *mestizo* son faced no problems from the local authorities which many *mestizo* children in other places such as Siam suffered. In the early 1670s, Samuel Baron was even employed by the English East India Company because, according to his statement, his grandfather on his father’s side had been Scottish.²⁴

Maintaining a temporary marriage or a sexual relationship would be economically profitable for both parties. Besides the money a woman was promised before entering into the relationship, she could also make herself and her partner extra profits by retailing the import goods and using her husband’s money to invest in local goods in the off season and sell them during the trading season. The property of the English chief during the early 1690s was even retained by his “Tonquinse wench”, who strenuously challenged the new English chief factor whenever the latter tried to retrieve the Company’s property which had been embezzled by his predecessor.²⁵

While the arrangement of a temporary marriage and a permanent sexual partner was popularly resorted to in the capital Thăng Long where foreign factors resided permanently, prostitution was reportedly rife at the anchorage of Doméa, where sailors often rested two or three months awaiting their departure. Women who had been refused by wealthier merchants, wrote Dampier in 1688, would be “...caressed by the poor Seamen, such as the Lascars, who are Moor of India, coming hither in Vessels from

²² Viallé and Blussé, *Deshima Dagregisters* 1651-1660, VIII; Pombejra, “VOC Employees”.

²³ NA VOC 1222: 334-337, Nicolaes de Voogt to Governor Fredrick Coijett, 7 Aug. 1657; Buch, “La Compagnie” (1937): 142.

²⁴ On Samuel Baron: NA VOC 1330: 697-705, Jan Besselman and the Tonkin factory to Batavia, 10 Oct. 1677; BL OIOC E-3-87: 239, London General to Banten, 21 Sep. 1671. On the *mestizo* children in Siam: Smith, *The Dutch in Seventeenth-Century Thailand*, 101-102; Pombejra, “VOC Employees”, 200-214.

²⁵ See for details from BL OIOC G/12/17-9: 318-475, Tonkin factory records, May 1693- Jul. 1697.

Fort. St. George, and other places”.²⁶ The most dreadful report on the widespread prostitution at Doméa was the English chief’s laments in 1694 which said that, while the Dutch seamen were all in good health and lusty thanks to the good discipline of the Dutch factory, the sailors on the English frigate the *Pearl* were gravely ill due to “excessive debauches”.²⁷

As a curiosity it may be mentioned here that it has recently been said in the Vietnamese media that Emperor Lê Thần Tông (r. 1619-1643 and 1649-1662) had a “Dutch wife”, although the Dutch records contain no such information.²⁸

2. *The VOC trade and the feudal economy of Tonkin*

Cassies [copper coins] were very high, att 24 & 25,000 cassies per barr which sometime the noise of a ship’s coming and great deal of silver given out make their fall 30 or 40 per cent which so much proportionally enhances the price of goods which thing considered your Honours &ca. will perceive, as formerly advised [...] how much it would be to the Right Honourable Company’s advantage to have [...] a double stock since money here is not to be procured att any reasonable rate.²⁹

The Vietnamese monetary system prior to the seventeenth century

The history of the Vietnamese monetary system prior to the French colonization of the nineteenth century can be divided into two major periods: the period of gold and silver, and that of copper coins. The Vietnamese used silver and gold as the major form of exchange until the tenth century when they successfully supplanted the Chinese colonization which had lasted a thousand years and established their own independent kingdom.³⁰ Influenced by the Chinese monetary system in which copper coins had been used for centuries, King Đinh Bộ Lĩnh (968-979) minted copper coins bearing his regnal title, Thái Bình. In 984, King Lê Hoàn (980-1005) of the Former Lê dynasty minted the Thiên Phúc coins. After that, copper coins were sporadically minted during the Lý (1010-1226) and Trần (1226-1400) dynasties, and, as had been pointed out by Whitmore, were “...as much for a political as an economic purpose” since the

²⁶ Dampier, *Voyages and Discoveries*, 40.

²⁷ BL OIOC G/12/17-9: 361, Tonkin factory records, 13 May 1694.

²⁸ Some people believe that one of the statues in the temple of the Lê Kings in Thanh Hóa Province is a Dutch lady because her face looks Western. I have visited the temple but have found no such distinguishing features of the statue in comparison to the others which are placed on the same altar. On the anecdote on Vietnamese media: Mai Thanh Hải, “Giải thoại về 108 vua chúa” [Anecdotes on 108 Kings and Lords of Vietnam], www.mofa.gov.vn.

²⁹ BL OIOC G/12/17-9: 460, Tonkin factory to Fort St. George, 24 Nov. 1696.

³⁰ Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*, 203-204. See also Wick, *Money, Markets, and Trade*, 19-65.

Vietnamese relied heavily on the supply of copper coins from China.³¹ It seems that the supply of Chinese copper coins to northern Vietnam ran smoothly during these centuries which gave considerable impetus to the rapid expansion of Đại Việt's economy. There was a brief period during the Hồ dynasty (1400-1407) when paper money was introduced.³² After liberating the country from the Ming occupation (1407-1428), the Lê dynasty (1428-1788) attempted to stabilize the increasing demand for cash by minting good Vietnamese copper coins. It also reset the value of these coins: one *quan* (long string) made ten *tiền* (short string) and consisted of 600 pieces of copper cash. This standard value remained unchanged until the nineteenth century.³³

The one stumbling-block was that the minting of cash by the Lê dynasty failed to keep pace with the indigenous demand. In order to reduce the shortage of these denomination coins, the central government stepped up the number of coins minted in the state factories, and it passed decrees (in 1434, 1486, 1658, and 1741) to forbid the Vietnamese to select the good and neglect the damaged coins. These efforts had little effect because there were different sorts of coins which were minted in different metals. Copper and zinc coins simultaneously circulated in the country, especially the zinc ones minted by the Mạc dynasty in the sixteenth century.

In order to stabilize the monetary system, in 1663, Thăng Long decreed all zinc coins be destroyed.³⁴ More important to the monetary situation was that, by the seventeenth century, the Lê/Trịnh rulers enjoyed an alternative source of supply of both minting materials and coins from foreign merchants trading to Tonkin. As analysed in the preceding chapters, great quantities of silver and, to a lesser extent, Japanese *zeni* (copper coins) were imported into northern Vietnam by the Dutch, Chinese and other foreign merchants. This affected the silver/cash exchange ratio and had a great impact on the feudal economy of Tonkin.

The Dutch import of precious metals and the fluctuations in the silver/cash ratio

As mentioned, the Vietnamese reduced the shortage of small change between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries by exchanging silver and gold for Chinese copper coins. This outflow of silver in exchange for Chinese copper coins was recorded by a European writer in the late 1680s:

³¹ Whitmore, "Vietnam and the Monetary Flow", 183-184. See also: Đỗ Văn Ninh, "Tiền cổ thời Lý-Trần" [Money in the Lý-Trần Dynasties], *NCLS* 6 (1979): 26-34; Idem, *Tiền cổ Việt Nam*.

³² *Lịch triều*, Vol. 3, 61.

³³ A brief account on the Vietnamese monetary system can be found in Whitmore, "Vietnam and the Monetary Flow", 365-370.

³⁴ *Lịch triều*, Vol. 3, 63-64; Whitmore, "Vietnam and the Monetary Flow", 367-369.

Another occasion of hindrance and stop to trade is, that they [the Lê/Trịnh rulers] permit the greater part of what silver comes into the country (commonly a million dollars per annum) to be carried to Bowes and China, to be exchanged for copper cash, which rises and falls according as the Chova [*Chúa Trịnh*] finds it agree with his interest; besides, this cash will be defaced in few years, and consequently not current, which grand inconveniences causes considerable losses to merchants, and signal prejudice to the public. Thus goes the silver out of the country, and no provision is made against it, which is very bad policy.³⁵

The bulk of the precious metals which Tonkin used in exchange for Chinese copper coins consisted of Japanese silver bars and, to a much lesser extent, of silver bars which were melted down in Tonkin from Spanish rials, Dutch silver coins, and Indian rupees. There were basically four sorts of silver circulating on the local market. The finest sort was called *lysee* which contained 100 per cent pure silver, the other three were respectively rials of eight (94 per cent), rixdollars (85 per cent), and Japanese silver (82 per cent).³⁶ Large transactions could be paid in silver, but small business deals and daily expenses required copper cash. Since Japanese silver constituted the most important investment capital of the Dutch and Chinese, it was regarded as the basic silver in the exchange for cash in Tonkin. Consequently, the “silver” foreign merchants often mentioned in their “silver/cash exchange rate” referred directly to Japanese silver.³⁷

The shortage of sources prevents any reconstruction of a full account of the silver import into Tonkin by foreign merchants. Nevertheless, the VOC archives allow us to obtain an overall view on the Dutch Company’s imports of this precious metal into Tonkin from 1637 till 1668, when the Japanese Government banned the export of Japanese silver.³⁸ During this period, roughly 2,527,000 *taels* of mainly Japanese silver (or approximately seven million Dutch guilders) were imported into Tonkin by the VOC. After losing its access to Japanese silver, the Dutch Company switched over to the import of such miscellaneous silver coins as *provintiëndaalder*, *kruisdaalder*, Mexican rials and Surat rupees. By that time, the annual quantity was considerably less as the Company’s Tonkin trade declined rapidly in the second half of the seventeenth century.³⁹ Although there are no records on the silver imported into Tonkin by other foreign merchants in the same period, sporadic information extracted from the VOC records suggests that Chinese merchants carried as much Japanese silver as did the Dutch to Tonkin. Quite apart from this, prior to the mid-1630s a large amount of Japanese silver had been shipped to northern Vietnam by the Japanese, Chinese, and Portuguese. Regardless of the absence of source materials and taking into consideration only the figures given in the VOC records, it seems that this stream of precious metal

³⁵ Baron, “Description of Tonqueen”, 664.

³⁶ BL OIOC G/12/17-1: 41-55, Tonkin Factory to London, 7 Dec. 1672.

³⁷ Nguyen Thanh Nha, *Tableau Économique du Vietnam*.

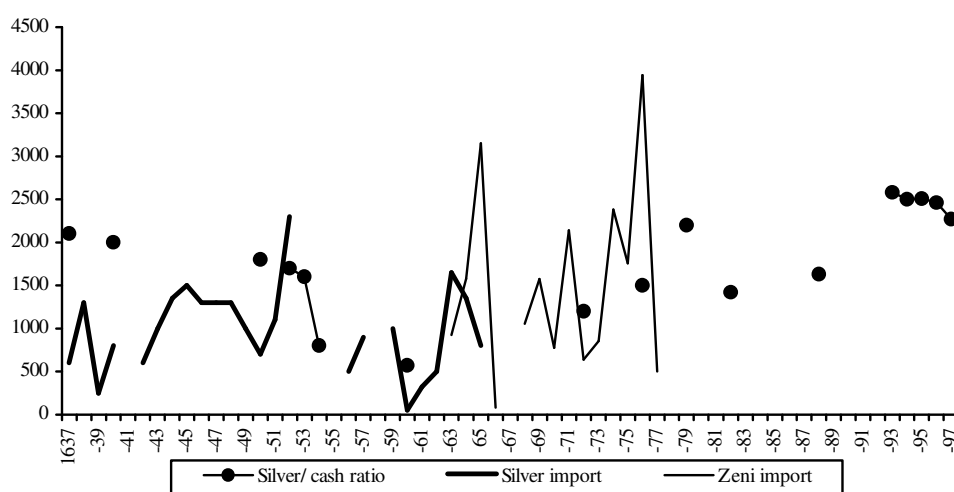
³⁸ Detailed figures on the VOC’s import of silver can be found in Table 1 in Chapter Five.

³⁹ See also Chapter Five for more detailed analyses on the VOC’s silver import into Tonkin.

has been crucial to the Lê/Trịnh rulers in their efforts to stabilize the monetary system and the feudal economy of Tonkin.

This import of silver into northern Vietnam affected the silver/cash ratio and hence the buying and selling prices in Tonkin. The exchange ratio between silver and cash often fluctuated, as figuratively noted by the English factors in 1696, according to “...the noise of a ship’s coming and great deal of silver given out”.⁴⁰ Figure 16, which consists of three different quantitative factors, has been composed on purpose to demonstrate the different trends in the exchange ratio only.

Figure 16 The VOC’s import of silver and copper zeni and the fluctuation of the silver/cash ratio in Tonkin, 1637-1697



Sources: Table 1; Figure 4; sporadic numbers given in *Overgekomen Brieven en Papieren*, G/12/17-1 to G/12/17-10, and *Dagh-register Batavia* 1624-1682.

Notes: Exchange rate: cash per *tael* of silver; Silver import: x 100 *taels*; Zeni import: x 1,000 pieces.

As shown in Figure 16, when the Dutch first arrived in 1637, one *tael* of silver was worth around 2,000 cash. By the late 1640s, the silver/cash ratio began to fall, reaching the ratio of 1/1,500 in the early 1650s, and it slumped to 1/800 in April 1654. It was then predicted by the Dutch factors that the ratio would be likely to drop to 1/700-500 within a few months should the situation not improve. This exchange rate continued to stand low until the early 1660s, when the composition of silver/copper coins imported into Tonkin by the Dutch, and the Chinese as well, was altered.

As is vividly reflected in Figure 16, at the times at which the silver/cash ratio fell rapidly, the annual import volume of silver into Tonkin by the VOC increased sharply. This raises the question of to what extent did these contradictory trends relate to each

⁴⁰ BL OIOC G/12/17-9: 406, Tonkin factory to Fort St. George, 24 Nov. 1696.

other? It seems that the great amount of silver imported into Tonkin by the Dutch Company prior to the 1650s considerably affected the exchange rate. Indeed, by 1653 the VOC servants in Thăng Long had already realized that the exchange rate was often lowered upon the arrival of a foreign ship. They therefore planned to exchange silver for copper cash either before or after the trading season in order to reduce the loss on the silver exchange. It was a forlorn hope, since it placed the factory in a dependent position.⁴¹ In 1660, Resimon blamed the low silver/cash ratio on the Dutch Company. The Japanese free merchant accused the Dutch of importing too much silver into Tonkin which contributed largely to the depression of the exchange rate.⁴² It all depends how one looks at it: the shortage of copper coins in Tonkin during the 1650s caused the severe fall in the silver/cash ratio, yet the surplus of silver on the Tonkin market in turn also affected the exchange ratio. Resimon's accusation was therefore by no means groundless, although it was not perfectly true.

It is interesting, too, to note from Figure 16 that, in contrast to the contradiction between the amount of silver imported and the exchange rate, the import of Japanese copper coins into Tonkin seems to have been parallel with, or even propped up, the silver/cash exchange ratio. After their successful introduction of Japanese copper *zeni* into Tonkin for the first time in the early 1660s, the Dutch regularly imported these coins until the late 1670s. The introduction as well as the regular importation of these coins in the later years undoubtedly helped Tonkin to overcome its severe shortage of copper coins and to stabilize the exchange rate. The above-mentioned figure reflects one clear-cut fact that, as the quantity of Japanese copper *zeni* imported into Tonkin by the VOC increased sharply in the early 1670s, the silver/cash ratio revived remarkably. By 1672, the silver/cash exchange rate had increased to 1/1,200 and it even rose to 1/1,450 in 1676. By the early 1680s, it had even reached the level of the late 1630s, standing at the ratio of 1/2,200.⁴³ With the revival of the silver/cash ratio, the severe shortage of copper coins which had badly affected the economy of Tonkin during the 1650s and the early 1660s was basically solved.

Prices

Examining the general trend in the prices in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Vietnam, Nguyen Thanh Nha has concluded that, while the price level was quite stable in the long run, the prices tended to rise and fall within short periods.⁴⁴ This conclusion

⁴¹ NA VOC 1197: 598-611, Tonkin factory to Batavia, Nov. 1653; *Generale Missiven* II, 697-702.

⁴² *Generale Missiven* III, 346-347.

⁴³ Numbers extracted from the records of the English factory in Tonkin: BL OIOC G/12/17-1: 41-55; G/12/17-3: 169; G/12/17-6: 272. See also Chapter Five for details on the VOC's import of Japanese copper *zenes* into Tonkin.

⁴⁴ Nguyen Thanh Nha, *Tableau Économique du Vietnam*.

is sustained by the fluctuation in prices mentioned sporadically in the VOC records. It appears that it was the VOC's import of silver and cash into Tonkin in particular which affected the change in the local exchange rate and hence caused a slight rise in the purchasing price of local goods in a short period. However, these imports did not have any lasting impact on the trend of prices in Tonkin in the seventeenth century. As rice constituted the staple, the prices of other wares seemed to rise and fall according to the price of rice. By and large, the buying and selling prices were highly dependent on the abundance of the agricultural harvests, including the mulberry crops which were crucial to the silk industry. They often rose in years of crop failures and the subsequent scarcity of goods and foods, and quickly returned to the normal level when the situation was stabilized again. They were also severely affected at times when cash grew scarce.

In the VOC trade in Tonkin, there were two major sets of prices to which the Dutch as well as other foreign merchants trading in Tonkin paid particular attention. The first set, and the one with which they were most concerned was the price of local export goods, silk in particular, since foreign merchants considered Tonkin almost solely as a supplier of raw silk and silk piece-goods. Prior to the early 1650s, when Tonkin experienced a severe shortage of cash, the purchase price of raw silk in Tonkin remained virtually unchanged, fluctuating at around 3.5 guilders per catty. It rose to around 5 guilders per catty during the 1650s and 1660s, before settling back to the price of the 1630s in the following decades.⁴⁵ Tonkinese silk became cheap in the later half of the 1680s when Japanese market turned its back on it. In 1687, for instance, the purchase price of Tonkinese raw silk even slumped as low as to around only 2 guilders per catty on the free market.⁴⁶ The prices of other commodities also fluctuated proportionally.

Table 7 The prices of several Tonkinese commodities in 1642

Raw silk	152,380	cash per picul
<i>Sittouw</i>	3,400	-
Cinnamon	11,000	-
<i>Sumongij</i>	2,810	cash per piece
<i>Baa</i>	3,200	-
<i>Hockiens</i>	1,200	-
<i>Pelings</i>	3,600	-
<i>Zenuwasche hockiens</i>	1,400	-
<i>Velvet</i>	7,000	-
<i>Chio</i>	1,400	-

⁴⁵ See Chapter Six for details on the prices of Tonkinese raw silk.

⁴⁶ Calculated from Buch, "La Compagnie" (1637): 183-184.

Source: Calculated from NA VOC 1146: 708-711, Governor Paulus Traudenius to Antonio van Brouckhorst, Dec. 1642.

Note: 1 *tael* of silver = 2 guilders 17 *stuivers* = c. 2,000 cash.

The second set of prices consisted mainly of food stuffs. As mentioned before, similar to and even more subject to fluctuations than export commodities, the price of food stuffs was hugely dependent on the annual harvest. It seems that, with the exception of such difficult times as natural disasters, famines, and military campaigns, the prices of daily provisions remained virtually unchanged throughout the seventeenth century. In the early 1640s one kilogram of rice cost around 20 cash and a hen cost around 110 cash. By the 1670s, a hen was said to have been only 80 cash. As reflected in the Dutch and English records, foreigners enjoyed a rather luxurious life when residing in Tonkin. Their daily expenditure on food was extremely high in comparison to that of the local population. In 1642, for example, a Dutch factor budgeted 129 cash per day on average for such sumptuous foods as chicken, geese, fish, rice, vegetables, eggs, crabs, prawns, fruits and the like. Thirty years later, an English factor spent on average of 223 cash per day.⁴⁷ These expenses were out of the question for the common people of Tonkin where a carpenter or a weaver earned hardly 40 cash per day. In the early 1690s, a Tonkinese rice cup was sold to the English at the price of 3.7 cash. Hence, a potter needed to sell at least thirty rice cups in order to buy a hen or at least five pieces to buy one kilogram of rice.⁴⁸

In short, while the import and export trade of the foreigners may have influenced the price of export goods in certain periods, it seems that their residence did not make a lasting impact on the local food prices. It might well be that the number of foreign merchants residing in Tonkin to trade was too small in order to affect the prices of provisions and daily services.

Labour

In his profound research on the impact of the European East Indian Companies on the early modern economy of Bengal, Om Prakash concluded that the "...rather impressive increase in income, output and employment took place mainly because the Euro-Bengal trade was not a 'normal' trade involving an exchange of goods for goods, but one involving an exchange of precious metals for goods, implying an export surplus for Bengal".⁴⁹ It must be stated from the outset that the foreign trade of Tonkin was by no

⁴⁷ Calculated from NA VOC 1140: Specification of the daily expenses of the Tonkin factory, 1642; BL OIOC G/12/17-1: 29-30, Tonkin factory records, 20 Aug. 1672.

⁴⁸ BL OIOC G/12/17-9: 340, Tonkin factory records, 25 Dec. 1693.

⁴⁹ Om Prakash, "Bullion for Goods": 159-187; Idem, *The Dutch East India Company*, 234-248. See also: Femme Gastra, "Geld tegen Goederen: Een Structurele Verandering in het Nederlands-Aziatisch

means comparable to that of its Bengal counterpart in terms of either size or duration. Nevertheless, the nature of these two places showed some reciprocal similarities if the “bullion for goods” trade, that is silver and copper for silk and textiles, which shaped the structure of the trade of the European Companies with Bengal is taken into consideration. Bengal therefore may serve as a suitable model for studying the internal aspects of the seventeenth-century foreign trade of Tonkin.

In order to discern the impact of foreign trade on the division of local labour, the silk industry in particular, it is necessary to recapitulate the general features of the silk and textile industry of Tonkin in the seventeenth century. The silk manufacture of Tonkin had developed spectacularly by the first half of the seventeenth century and several silk-producing centres flourished inside and nearby the capital Thăng Long. Even so, the bulk of the raw silk and silk piece-goods was still produced by farmers who had been pursuing this work as a traditional household handicraft for centuries. By the early 1640s, there were approximately 953,810 households (or 4,769,050 people) in northern Vietnam; the majority resided in the Hồng delta basin.⁵⁰ Although most of these households were involved in silk manufacturing, there can be no question they ever contemplated abandoning their paddy-fields and switching over to mulberry groves completely. Incontrovertibly, silk was produced by Tonkinese farmers as a side-line. As this handicraft industry was immensely popular, the annual production could still meet the increasing demand of foreign merchants.

The VOC spent approximately 13,514,028 guilders mainly on Tonkinese silk between 1637 and 1699, an average of around 215,000 guilders per year (Appendix 3). This period also witnessed the development of the Chinese trade with Tonkin. Although we do not have any accurate figures about the Chinese purchases, fragmentary information in the Dutch records suggests that the total Chinese investment in their Tonkin trade amounted to around two-thirds of that invested by the Dutch. If this is correct, then another sum of approximately 9,009,352 guilders was invested in Tonkinese products, mainly silk, by the Chinese during the 1637–1700 period.⁵¹ This means that there would have been 22,523,380 guilders spent on Tonkinese export products, most notably silk, by the Dutch and the Chinese between 1637 and 1700, an average sum of around 350,000 guilders per annum, apart from the purchases made by the Japanese and Portuguese in the earlier period as well as those of the English and French during the last quarter of the seventeenth century.⁵²

Handelsverkeer”, *Bijdragen en Mededelingen Betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 91-2 (1976): 249-272.

⁵⁰ Li Tana, *Ngũyễn Cochinchina*, 171.

⁵¹ According to the VOC records, there were many years in which the Chinese investment in their Tonkin trade even surpassed that of the Dutch Company. In 1664, for instance, the Chinese arrived in Tonkin from Japan with 200,000 taels of silver (c. 570,000 guilders) to buy silk for the Japanese market, while the Dutch factory was provided with 347,989 guilders only. NA VOC 1252: 209-248, H. Verdonk to Batavia, 23 Feb. 1665; Buch, “La Compagnie” (1937): 161-162.

⁵² If we take Iwao Seiichi’s estimation that one *shuin-sen* bore the average investment capital of around 50,000 taels of silver (or 155,000 guilders), approximately 2,000,000 taels of silver (or 6,200,000 Dutch

How far did this large sum of money contribute to the development of the silk industry in Tonkin? A definite answer cannot be given, but it is certain that this industry must have been boosted by the foreign demand, because the seventeenth century witnessed a spectacular development in the silk industry in northern Vietnam. When this product was still highly marketable and profitable in Japan, it was reported by the Dutch that 1,500 piculs (90 tons) of raw silk and around 6,000 silk piece-goods such as *pelings*, *baas*, *chio*, *sumongij*, *hockiens* and the like were produced for export annually.⁵³

In order to produce this quantity, large numbers of labourers must have been involved in this industry. The absence of historical documents on the average silk production per household means figures for it have to be deduced. According to a present-day farmer in the Hồng delta province of Thái Bình, his family harvests 10 kilograms of raw silk on average per season. Assuming that a seventeenth-century household harvested the same amount, at least 9,000 households or around 45,000 labourers (around 1 per cent of the population of Tonkin) could possibly have been involved in manufacturing 90 tons (1,500 piculs) of raw silk; leaving aside a great number of reelers, bleachers, weavers and so on involved in the process of producing silk piece-goods. If we make a simple calculation that a household, regardless of its investments and expenses during the season, harvested 10 kilograms (166.5 catties) raw silk per season, at the average price of 3.5 guilders per catty, this yielded around 60 guilders per year from the silk production. In an agricultural country like Tonkin, where the majority of prices were affected by the rise and fall of the rice price, the sum of 60 guilders was equal to around 39 piculs (or 2,331 kilograms) of rice at the price of 15 *tiền* (about 1.5 guilders) per picul. This amount of rice was more than sufficient for a five-person family.

Naturally this calculation is fairly rough and simple because it fails to account for the fact that farmers had to pay tax and sell part of their product to the court at low prices. Yet, it demonstrates how the silk and ceramic industries must have contributed greatly to the expansion of the seventeenth-century economy of Tonkin as they provided large-scale employment for labourers. The rub was that these flourishing industries were unstable as Tonkinese silk and ceramics were by and large supplementary to Chinese products. Therefore, when Bengali and Chinese silk was available, Tonkinese yarn lost its predominance on the regional market.

From the late 1660s the Tonkinese farmers began to convert their mulberry groves into paddy-fields and as a precaution local weavers would not begin their work until the foreign merchants had arrived or advanced them money. The decline in the silk industry also affected other classes such as merchants, brokers and the like. By the late 1680s, "...the merchant commonly stays 3 or 4 months for his goods after he has paid for them;

guilders) had been brought to Tonkin by the Japanese alone between 1604 and 1635. Iwao Seiichi, *Shuinsen*, 49, 269.

⁵³ *Dagh-register Batavia* 1636, 69-74.

because the poor are not employed till ships arrive in the country, and then they are set to work by the money that is brought thither in them.”⁵⁴ The departure of the English and the Dutch in 1697 and 1700 respectively, not to mention the exodus of many Chinese merchants during the 1680s, must have greatly reduced the number of Tonkinese labourers who had been either fully or partly employed in export handicraft industries.

The commercial centres and the commercial system

Another aspect of the impact of foreign trade on Tonkin's economy was the further growth of commercial centres, hence the development of a commercial system. The capital Thăng Long is the most outstanding example. Besides its function as a political centre, Thăng Long had also served as an important commercial centre in the Vietnamese kingdom of Đại Việt since the eleventh century. With the establishment of the Lê dynasty in 1428, the commercial role of this city entered a period of constant expansion. The royal citadel and the palaces in the city were surrounded by an economic-residential area stretching along the bank of the Hồng River. Prior to the late sixteenth century Thăng Long was still a remote place, far removed from the main routes of international commerce. Other commercial centres in the region such as Ayutthaya, Pegu, and further the Javanese port towns of Demak and Banten had developed much earlier.⁵⁵

Once it was permitted, the residence and commercial activities of a foreign community contributed towards linking this commercial city to international trade. In the following century, such foreign merchants as the Chinese, Portuguese, Dutch, and English all resided and traded in the capital. Thăng Long was therefore transformed into an international “trading city”, a status attributable largely to a series of the capital development policies promulgated by the Lê/Trịnh, the development of a commodity economy, and great social migrations.⁵⁶

The presence of foreign merchants in Thăng Long enlivened the commercial life of the city. It attracted more local people to come to trade directly with foreign traders. As mentioned before, the Dutch factors bought the bulk of their silk from local authorities and brokers. They also purchased this product from local farmers and retailers who travelled to the city on market days to sell silk and piece-goods. There were also silk guilds and silk factories in the city, which were linked to various interregional silk-trading networks. For example, raw silk and unfinished piece-goods of the villages from Buối, La, and Mỗ were transferred to Hàng Đào Street, where they were redyed,

⁵⁴ Dampier, *Voyages and Discoveries*, 49.

⁵⁵ Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, Vol. 2, 62-63.

⁵⁶ Philippe Papin, *Historie de Hanoi* (Paris: Fayard, 2001), 161; Nguyễn Thừa Hỷ, *Economic History of Hanoi*, 5-19.

bleached, and finished, before being sold to foreign merchants.⁵⁷ There were also various miscellaneous services in the city which also in part served the foreigners, including the silver refining, portage, and even prostitution.

Phố Hiến was another town which developed during this commercial century. Although the establishment of the place called the “Hiến Department” can be dated back to the late fifteenth century, it was not until the early seventeenth century that this town developed commercially, though this florescence was relatively short-lived. There was an unwritten law that foreign merchants arriving in Tonkin for the first time had to reside and trade at the riverine town of Phố Hiến, around fifty kilometres downstream from Thăng Long. After having resided there for a few years they were approved of by the court and were permitted to establish a factory in the capital Thăng Long. Enlivened by the temporary residence of the Chinese, Japanese, and the Dutch during the first half of the seventeenth century, commercial life in Phố Hiến flourished for a few decades. At the zenith of its glory, Phố Hiến is said to have consisted of two major quarters: one for the Chinese and the other for Japanese merchants. There were also various quarters in which export products were made. The commercial life of this town faded quickly, however, as the number of overseas Japanese decreased after the seclusion policy introduced by the Japanese Government in the mid-1630s and after the removal of the Chinese and Dutch residences to the capital in the early 1640s. Even then, Phố Hiến maintained its function as a customs office. It controlled all fluvial transport passing by as well as the flow of import and export goods between the capital Thăng Long and the anchorage of Doméa.⁵⁸

The development of Thăng Long and Phố Hiến was remarkable. The commercial function of other places which were involved in the foreign trade of Tonkin in the seventeenth century was of minor importance. Doméa, which has been overestimated by some Vietnamese historians as a commercial centre, was actually an anchorage. Despite its humble status, this place played a crucial role in the birth of the seventeenth-century commercial system in Tonkin.⁵⁹ By the dawn of the eighteenth century, the town of Quảng Yên on the north-eastern border with China was reportedly flourishing, benefiting from the residence of throngs of Chinese merchants. By this time, however, the foreign trade of Tonkin was already in rapid decline; one after the other foreign merchant was leaving the kingdom of Tonkin.

⁵⁷ Nguyễn Thừa Hỷ *et al.*, *Đô thị Việt Nam thế kỷ XVII-XVIII* [Vietnamese Towns in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries], MS. Department of History, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, 2004, 27-29.

⁵⁸ Most of the Vietnamese historians still believe that Phố Hiến was commercially flourishing throughout the seventeenth century. This was based mainly on the assumption that the Dutch and other foreign merchants maintained their factories at Phố Hiến, even after they had been allowed to reside and trade in the capital. In fact, once they had been granted a licence to trade and live in Thăng Long, foreign merchants in general abandoned their trading footholds at Phố Hiến. See: *Phố Hiến*; Phan Huy Lê, “Pho Hien”, 10-22; Nguyễn Thừa Hỷ *et al.*, *Đô thị Việt Nam*, (Chapter Three).

⁵⁹ See Chapter Two for discussions on the role of Doméa as well as its position in the commercial system along the “Tonkin River”.

The commodity economy and the sprouts of capitalism

The question of whether the first seeds of capitalism had been sown in Vietnamese society in the pre-modern period in the wake of the development of the commodity economy of the country and the expansion of its foreign trade was the topic of an enduring debate among Vietnamese historians during the 1960s. As the northern Vietnamese were setting up a political system with a socialist orientation after the defeat of the French in 1954, it was said that “the study on the emergence and development of the capitalist economy and the bourgeoisie contributes an important significance to today’s revolutionary task”.⁶⁰ By that time, populist propaganda spread the story that the country had evolved directly from a feudal into a socialist society without experiencing a capitalist period. Most Vietnamese scholars, however, believed that, although Vietnam was by and large a feudal society until the establishment of the socialist government immediately after the Second World War (1945), capitalist elements had obviously taken root in it. In other words, the first seeds of capitalism had been sown in Vietnamese feudal society several centuries earlier.⁶¹

In this debate on the sprouts of capitalism in Vietnam, one of the central questions was when and in which forms they emerged in Vietnamese society. The various answers and propositions adduced can be divided into two major groups. The first group believed that there had been an embryonic capitalist mode of production in northern Vietnam as early as the seventeenth century. The most visible indications of such a new economic trend were the large-scale handicraft industries in textiles and ceramics as well as the increasing number of free labourers working in these industries.⁶² Taking a contrary position, the historians of the second school claimed that such indications were not convincing enough and accused the scholars of the first school of “misinterpreting” the Marxist theory of capitalism. They concluded that “the commodity economy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was a feudal economy”, and that what is known as the “capitalist mode of production neither sprouted nor developed in the feudal period between the seventeenth and the early nineteenth century”.⁶³

It is not my intention to reassess this complex debate which covers various fields and many centuries since this study focuses on the Dutch-Vietnamese relationship. Nevertheless, since this monograph deals with the development of the commodity

⁶⁰ Đoàn Trọng Truyền, *Mầm mống Tư bản chủ nghĩa và sự phát triển của Chủ nghĩa Tư bản Việt Nam* [The Seeds of Capitalism and the Development of Capitalism in Vietnam] (Hanoi: ST publishers, 1959), 4.

⁶¹ The debate on the emergence of the capitalism in Vietnam in the early modern and modern periods can be found in *NCLS* in the 1960s.

⁶² See detailed arguments, for instance, from: Nguyễn Việt, “Bàn về mầm mống chủ nghĩa Tư bản ở Việt Nam dưới thời Phong kiến” [On the Seeds of Capitalism in Vietnam in the Feudal Period], *NCLS* 35 (1962): 21-34; 36 (1962): 28-37.

⁶³ See, for instance, Đặng Việt Thanh, “Vấn đề mầm mống Tư bản chủ nghĩa dưới thời Phong kiến ở Việt Nam” [On the Seeds of Capitalism in Vietnam in the Period of Feudalism], *NCLS*, 39 (1962): 33-43; 40 (1962): 41-47.

economy and foreign trade of Tonkin in the seventeenth century, it may be useful to toss some relevant information into this dispute in order to prompt a reconsideration of the once-dominant question of whether the first seeds of embryonic capitalism were sown in seventeenth-century Tonkin. Recapitulating the debate from a twenty-first century perspective, it is clear that both schools have presented convincing historical facts. Their approaches and arguments, however, have been too heavily influenced by classical Marxist theories on capitalism, which would have been much more appropriate to the European context than the Oriental and Vietnamese background. In most of the cases, instead of considering the phenomenon of the expansion of the commodity economy as it was in seventeenth-century Vietnamese context, scholars have tended to frame it into the Marxist theories of, for instance, the mode of production, the productive force and the like. In this sense, it seems that the Vietnamese scholars made the mistake against which Marx had often warned: not to consider his theory as a detailed prophecy.

In recent research it has been stressed that the transformation from feudalism to capitalism cannot be located on any one day in any one month in any one year, and that it was a transition composed of a multitude of partial changes.⁶⁴ Looking back at the case of seventeenth-century Tonkin, it is obvious that significant transformations occurred in the economy and society of the country such as the privatization of state-owned land, the increasing number of free labourers, the development of the handicraft industries and foreign trade, and the growth of several commercial centres. These, to a certain extent, could be considered the embryonic elements from which a capitalist mode of production evolved. However, as was the situation in most other Asian countries, these elements were prevented from developing any further to transform Tonkin from a feudal to a capitalist society.⁶⁵ It has recently been pointed out that the two basic economic elements from which commercial capitalism sprouted, namely a long-distance trade and the large-scale production of handicraft manufactures, failed to materialize in Vietnam.⁶⁶ As mentioned in the preceding chapters, although silk was the key export product of Tonkin in the seventeenth century, silk manufacture was by and large a household handicraft industry. Most of the labourers working in the silk-producing areas around Thăng Long were part-time workers who travelled to the capital during the off season in search of extra income and would return to their villages during the cultivation and harvest seasons. In short, there were new socio-economic elements apparent in seventeenth-century Tonkin, but they never attained the strength to transform Tonkin from a feudal to a capitalist society.

⁶⁴ Immanuel Wallerstein, "From Feudalism to Capitalism: Transition or Transitions?" *Social Forces* 55-2 (1976): 273-283. See also: Claudio J. Katz, "Karl Max on the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism", *Theory and Society* 22 (1993): 363-389.

⁶⁵ See, for instance, M.A.P Meilink-Roelofs, *Asian Trade and European Influence in the Indonesian Archipelago between 1500 and about 1630* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1962), 9. Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, Vol. 2, 268-270.

⁶⁶ Nguyen Thua Hy, *Economic History of Hanoi*, 222-234; Idem, "Kinh tế hàng hoá".

3. *The Dutch catalyst in the Tonkin-Quinam conflict*

All rich curiosities instruments or materialls of war never escape the King or in fine anything else that he fancies, & he take them at his owne rates. The Dutch takes care to furnish him, but it's with such things as yield them profitt. [...] The Dutch bring him yearly saltpeeter, brimstone, cast round shott from the Coast, demy-culverin.⁶⁷

The Dutch East India Company played an active role in the Tonkin-Quinam wars in the early 1640s. As a maritime trader whose wishes were to export Tonkinese silk to Japan, it had quickly become involved in the Vietnamese political crisis. By the late 1630s, the High Government began to consider an alliance with the Lê/Trịnh Government to fight against Nguyễn Quinam. Dutch activities in the early 1640s transformed them from the position of having to be persuaded by Thăng Long into that of the persuader, as they enthusiastically urged the Lê/Trịnh rulers to campaign against Quinam. The prevaricating Lê/Trịnh rulers consecutively backed out of the allied campaigns in the summer of 1642 and the spring of 1643 without offering a good reason. But it is clear that the enthusiasm of the Dutch greatly influenced the Trịnh rulers to send troops to attack Quinam in the summer of 1643. This joint campaign was unsuccessful as the Dutch ships were heavily damaged by the Quinamese navy before they had had a chance to co-operate with the Tonkinese troops to attack Quinam. Three bitter failures within two years and the two ambiguous non-appearances of the Tonkinese armies discouraged the High Government which decided to revoke the military alliance with Tonkin after the 1643 defeat. Instead, it continued to take revenge on Quinam alone in the period 1644-1650. Because of increasing pressure from the Gentlemen XVII in the Netherlands, Batavia finally signed a treaty to end the protracted conflict with Quinam in 1651. Within only a few months, the treaty was not worth the paper it was written on. In the early 1660s, Batavia made several attempts to trade with Quinam, but in vain.⁶⁸

Despite its revocation of the military alliance with Tonkin in 1644, the Company still supported Tonkin against Quinam by selling weapons and military equipment to the former. Hundreds of cannon and a huge number of cannon balls, ammunition, saltpetre, sulphur and other martial appurtenance were shipped to Tonkin by the VOC. This supply was maintained at a high level even after the Trịnh-Nguyễn conflict ceased in 1672. The reason was that another rival of the Lê/Trịnh rulers on the border with China, the Mạc family, was not completely defeated until the late 1670s. In 1675, for instance, the *Experiment* carried a total of 40,800 Dutch pounds of refined Bengali saltpetre and 20,000 musket balls to Tonkin. The bronze cannon which Batavia had ordered to be manufactured in the Netherlands for the Tonkinese rulers according to the wooden models had not yet arrived there to be forwarded to Tonkin.⁶⁹ Generally speaking,

⁶⁷ BL OIOC G/12/17-4: 42, Tonkin factory to London, 7 Dec. 1672.

⁶⁸ See: Buch, "La Compagnie" (1937): 145-158.

⁶⁹ *Dagh-register Batavia* 1675, 129-132.

despite their non-involvement the Dutch still played a critical part in the Trịnh-Nguyễn wars by supplying weapons and military equipment to the Lê/Trịnh rulers.

Towards the end of the Tonkin-Quinam conflict, the Tonkinese rulers demanded the Company provide them not only with weapons but also with such specialists as military engineers and constables in order to assist them to improve the quality of their armies. Since the Tonkin trade was no longer lucrative, the High Government often found excuses not to comply with the Trịnh demands. A stance it would never have dared to adopt at other important trading-places such as Japan, where it was more than willing to satisfy the Japanese rulers in order to facilitate its trade.⁷⁰ In order to reduce discontent at the court as much as possible, Batavia ordered its servants in Thăng Long to do whatever they could to satisfy the Trịnh rulers. In 1677, for instance, *Chúa* Trịnh Tạc had a big gun cast by his craftsmen but then could not shift it. The Dutch and the English were summoned to the court and asked to design a big crane to move the gun. According to the English source, despite having a Dutch carpenter with them, the Dutch failed to construct a suitable crane to shift the gun but the English successfully lifted it. After their failure in this competition, the Dutch suffered a great deal of resentment and subsequent hindrance to their trade from the local authorities.⁷¹

In any such discussion, it is important to bear in mind the fact that, although Dutch weapons were a critical element in the seventeenth-century Vietnamese political wrangle, they did not arrive in Vietnam, in Sun Laichen's words, "in vacuum" since the military technology of Đại Việt (both Tonkin and Quinam) was quite well developed by that time.⁷² Vietnam had long been known as an "intermediary in technology transfers" and by the late sixteenth century its weapons had become quite superior on the battlefields against the Chinese in the north as well as against the Chăm in the south.⁷³ While the Nguyễn rulers in central Vietnam had better access to Western-style military technology, the Chinese-style weapons of the Lê/Trịnh were by no means far inferior to those of their Nguyễn rival. Supplemented by Dutch weapons after 1637 the fighting quality of the northern armies improved considerably. Alexandre de Rhodes noted in the early 1650s that the Tonkinese musketeers handled their weapons "with great dexterity".⁷⁴ By the late 1680s, there was a comment by a European traveller that the Tonkinese soldiers were "...good marksmen...inferior to few, and surpassing most nations in dexterity of handling and quickness of firing their muskets".⁷⁵ Besides

⁷⁰ Viallé and Blussé, *Deshima Dagregisters 1651-1660*, II. See also: G.K. Goodman, *Japan: the Dutch Experience* (London: Athlone, 1986).

⁷¹ BL OIOC G/12/17-4: 212-215, Tonkin factory records, Aug. 1677.

⁷² Sun Laichen, "Chinese Military Technology".

⁷³ Sun Laichen, "Chinese Military Technology"; Nguyễn Thế Anh, "Traditional Vietnam's Incorporation of External Cultural and Technical Contributions: Ambivalence and Ambiguity", *Southeast Asian Studies* 40-4 (2003): 444-458.

⁷⁴ Alexandre de Rhodes, *Rhodes of Vietnam, The Travels and Missions of Father Alexandre de Rhodes in China and Other Kingdoms of the Orient*, translated by Solange Hertz (Westminster: Newman Press, 1966), 57.

⁷⁵ Baron, "Description of Tonqueen", 686.

wielding the guns which were often described, the Tonkinese soldiers were also armed with the so-called “Backs Guns” which were carried and handled by two soldiers. These weapons were said to be extremely useful in clearing passes or firing over the rivers, where the enemies were firmly entrenched.⁷⁶ This sort of weapon must have been critical in attacking the Nguyễn troops assembled on the southern bank of the Gianh River.

4. *Miscellaneous issues*

The arrival of foreign merchants and priests in the early modern period offered the Vietnamese a good opportunity to learn Western techniques. It was said that *Chúa Trịnh Tráng* was very excited about the accuracy of the European cog-wheeled clocks and hour-glasses with which the French priest Alexandre de Rhodes presented him in 1627.⁷⁷ Since clocks were strange objects to the Vietnamese who had virtually no knowledge of such mechanisms, the European priests in Tonkin were said to be “purposely skilled in mending Clocks, Watches, or some Mathematical Instruments”. The reason was that knowing they were so skilled the mandarins would ask them to come to the capital Thăng Long, a place strictly forbidden to the priests, to mend the malfunctioning clocks for them. Once they were in the city, these priests would seize any opportunity to preach and convert the Vietnamese.⁷⁸ Clocks were so attractive and respectable that, according to some sources, in the eighteenth century a Vietnamese man from Quinam even travelled to Holland to learn the techniques of making and mending clocks. Upon return, he was employed by the Nguyễn rulers. With his skills and knowledge, he was not only capable of mending malfunctioning time-pieces but also of manufacturing very sophisticated cog-wheeled clocks and telescopes.⁷⁹

The trading connections between Tonkin and foreign merchants with other Asian ports also offered the Vietnamese a good opportunity to travel. Prior to the seventeenth century the Vietnamese dynasties had rarely sent ships to other countries to trade. The Vietnamese, when they travelled abroad, went first to such ports in southern China as Guangzhou where they took passage on board of foreign vessels to visit other trading-places.⁸⁰ With the arrival of foreign merchants from the late sixteenth century, the Tonkinese could travel on board foreign ships to Nagasaki, Batavia, Malacca, and Ayutthaya. Free foreign merchants living in Tonkin even fitted out their own vessels and hired as many as fifty Vietnamese seamen to sail between Tonkin and other ports.

⁷⁶ Idem; Dampier, *Voyages and Discoveries*, 54-55.

⁷⁷ Rhodes, *Divers voyages et missions*, 70-71.

⁷⁸ Dampier, *Voyages and Discoveries*, 69.

⁷⁹ Lê Quý Đôn, *Phủ biên tạp lục*, 328-329. See also: Nguyễn Thế Anh, “Traditional Vietnam’s Incorporation”: 444-458.

⁸⁰ Pires, *Suma Oriental*, Vol. 1, 114-115.

For instance, in the 1650s and 1660s the Japanese merchant Resimon, who was residing permanently in Tonkin because he could not return to Japan, possessed two junks sailing between Tonkin and Manila and Siam. Most of the sailors on these junks were Vietnamese. There were also a number of Vietnamese sailors and people living and trading in such South-East Asian ports as Banten, Batavia, Ayutthaya, and Malacca.⁸¹ Occasionally, the Tonkin court also asked the Dutch Company to allow its officials to travel to Nagasaki on board the Company ships leaving Tonkin for Japan. The purpose of their voyages, as recounted by the Dutch factory in Thăng Long, was to sell Tonkinese silk in Nagasaki in order to buy various sorts of Japanese objects for the royal family.⁸²

The Tonkinese court did not raise strong opposition to the travelling abroad of its subjects until the late seventeenth century, when it issued a decree forbidding such passage. This was caused by the accident to an English junk in Quinam in 1693. In that year, some English factors in Thăng Long bought a junk and signed on some thirty Tonkinese crew to sail the junk to trade in Malacca. Upon its return the junk was wrecked off the Quinam coast; the Tonkinese people were captured. Seizing upon this accident as a pretext, in January 1694 the court issued a decree forbidding foreign merchants from allowing the Tonkinese to travel on board their ships leaving Tonkin. With this decree, a century of relative freedom in sailing abroad on board foreign ships by the Tonkinese people ended.⁸³

⁸¹ *Generale Missiven* II, 613, 702, 779; *Dagh-register Batavia* 1661, 49-55.

⁸² NA VOC 1278: 1892-1907, Cornelis Valckenier to Batavia, 12 Oct. 1670.

⁸³ BL OIOC G/12/17-10: 318-345, Tonkin factory records, May 1693-Feb. 1694; NA VOC 1580: 1-7, J. van Loo and Leendertsz to Batavia, 24 Dec. 1694.

Concluding remarks

The Dutch left their influence on virtually every aspect of Tonkin society between 1637 and 1700. While the Dutch impact on the local culture and society still leaves much to be speculated on and examined, their influence on the indigenous economy is obvious. The feudal economy of Tonkin was stimulated by the great amounts of silver, copper, and copper coins imported into the country by the Dutch Company during the period 1637-1700. The Dutch import and export volumes had a considerable impact on the local exchange rates, on prices, and on labour. Besides, the VOC also played a role as an active catalyst in the Tonkin-Quinam crisis, even though its involvement in the Vietnamese conflict was rather transient.