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

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PART ONE: THE SETTING

Vietnamese-speakers occupied an extremely narrow coastal strip, wedged between sea and mountains and balanced at either end by an open delta, that of the Red River in the north and of the Mekong in the south. The eight-hundred mile corridor itself was cut up into narrow east-west basins, with no single center of gravity, no interior axis comparable to the Irrawady or Chaophraya.¹

Introduction

A watery environment and a maritime atmosphere are striking features which impress foreigners once they arrive in Vietnam. Leaning against the western mountain range, the long, extenuated country enjoys three thousand kilometres of Eastern shoreline covering the entire Indo-Chinese coast. This auspicious topography means that most Vietnamese live relatively near to the open sea.

Watching ships passing by from a Vietnamese beach, it would be impossible not to think of a glorious history of maritime trade written by local mariners. Such a natural upwelling of feeling had indeed once been shared by the French priest Alexandre de Rhodes, who visited Vietnam in the early seventeenth century.² Despite this maritime environment, Vietnamese maritime history, taken as a whole, was far from significant, especially when the tremendous geographical advantage that the Vietnamese have on their doorstep is considered. The ancient Vietnamese who had originally occupied the mountainous and hilly north-western part of modern northern Vietnam began to exploit the Hồng (Red) River delta as early as the first millennium BC, but they virtually halted their exploration on the coastal plain. The newly arrived Vietnamese contented themselves with cultivating the rather infertile littorals, casting an indifferent eye on all

¹ Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, 343.

² The French priest Alexandre de Rhodes who visited both central and northern Vietnam in the early seventeenth century was impressed by the fact that there were at least fifty sizeable seaports along the Vietnamese coast, each of which could afford between fifteen and twenty big ships to lie at anchor at the same time. These ports were so safe that vessels could lie overnight without necessarily dropping anchor. Alexandre de Rhodes, *Histoire du royaume de Tunquin* (Lyon: Jean Baptiste Devenet, 1651), 56-57.

Such a wonder has been briefly discussed in Charles Wheeler, "A Maritime Logic to Vietnamese History? Littoral Society in Hội An's Trading World c. 1550-1830". Paper presented at the conference: *Seascapes, Littoral Cultures, and Trans-Oceanic Exchanges*, Library of Congress, Washington DC, Feb. 12-15, 2003; Idem, "Re-thinking the Sea in Vietnamese History: Littoral Society in the Integration of Thuận-Quảng, Seventeenth-Eighteenth Centuries", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 37-1 (2006): 123-153. On the Vietnamese watery tradition: Keith W. Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam: Sino-Vietnamese Relations to the Tenth Century and the Origins of Vietnamese Nationhood* (PhD Dissertation, Michigan University, 1976), (Introduction).

ships passing by and unresponsively turning their backs to all commercial tides which prevailed in the waters adjacent to them in the later periods. This disinterested attitude towards seafaring activities was fostered by the feudal Vietnamese dynasties which ruled the country from the early eleventh century.³ Although the political crises and conflicts they engendered during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries forced feudal Vietnamese rulers to thaw their frigid attitude towards overseas trade and encouraged them to contact foreign merchants in their quest for military support, this improvement was but transient. As the costly Tonkin-Quinam conflict eventually was terminated in a ceasefire in 1672, the Vietnamese rulers' concessions to foreign trade decreased. By the early eighteenth century, there were hardly any Western merchants left in northern Vietnam. In the central and southern regions, despite the Nguyễn's more open and flexible outlook, foreign trade also declined. Notwithstanding the predominant presence and administrative control of the southern Vietnamese in most of the water frontier of the lower Mekong delta from the mid-eighteenth century, their participation in this regional trading hub was marginal.⁴

Before examining in detail the eventful political and commercial history of seventeenth-century Vietnamese-Dutch relationship in the following chapters, it is important to provide historiographies with a focus on relevant topics. This part therefore briefly introduces the history of Vietnamese maritime trade, the internal political unrest versus economic enlargement from the early sixteenth century and after, the expansion of the country's foreign trade, and the lively presence of foreign merchants in northern Vietnam in the seventeenth century.

³ On the Vietnamese expansion to the lower Hồng River delta and their seafaring weakness: Hà Văn Tấn *et al.*, *Khảo cổ học Việt Nam* [Archaeology in Vietnam], Vol. 2 (Hanoi: KHXH, 2000); Phan Đại Doãn, *Làng Việt Nam: một số vấn đề kinh tế xã hội* [The Vietnamese Village: Some Socio-economic Issues] (Hanoi: KHXH, 1992); Diệp Đình Hoa, "Thực tiễn và triết lý sinh thái nhân văn của người Việt trong nông nghiệp" [Reality and Eco-humanistic Thought of the Vietnamese about Agriculture], *NCLS* 1 (1992): 11-20; Chữ Văn Tấn, "Những đặc trưng cơ bản của văn minh Việt Nam thời khai sinh" [Significant Features of Early Vietnamese Civilization], *KCH* 2 (1994); Hà Văn Tấn, "Các hệ sinh thái nhiệt đới với tiền sử Việt Nam và Đông Nam Á" [Tropical Eco-systems and Vietnamese and South-East Asian Prehistory], *KCH* 3 (1994). A brief history on independent Vietnam from the eleventh century on can be found in Trương Hữu Quýnh *et al.*, *Đại cương lịch sử Việt Nam* [A Brief History of Vietnam], Vol. 1 (Hanoi: Giáo dục, 1999).

⁴ On the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Vietnamese foreign trade: Thành Thế Vỹ, *Ngoại thương Việt Nam*; Nguyen Thanh Nha, *Tableau Économique du Vietnam*; Keith W. Taylor, "Nguyễn Hoàng and the Beginning of Vietnam's Southward Expansion", in Anthony Reid (ed.), *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 42-65; Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*; Idem, "An Alternative Vietnam?": 111-121; Charles Wheeler, *Cross-Cultural Trade and Trans-Regional Networks in the Port of Hoi An* (PhD Dissertation, Yale University, 2002); Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, (Chapter 4); Nola Cooke and Li Tana (eds), *Water Frontier*.