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

Hoang, A.T.

Citation

Hoang, A. T. (2006, December 7). *Silk for silver: Dutch-Vietnamese relations, 1637-1700*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/5425>

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CHAPTER ONE

POLITICAL BACKGROUND

1. *Vietnamese maritime trade prior to c. 1527*

Les Tunquinois à peine exercent-ils aucun Traffiq hors du Royaume, pour trois raisons principales. La première, parce qu'ils n'ont pas l'art de la boussole, & du navigage, ne s'éloignans iamais dans la mer de la veuë de leurs costes, ou de leurs montagnes. La seconde, parce que leurs vaisseaux de port ne sont pas à durer aux brisans des vagues, & contre les tempestes qui arrivent ordinairement en un long voyage; les planches, & les pièces de bois n'estant point jointes, & attachées à cloux, ou à chevilles, mais seulement avec certaines ligatures, qu'il faut renouveler tous les ans. Et la troisième est, parce que le Roy ne permet pas qu'ils passent aux autres Royaumes, où le Traffiq obligerait les Marchands de s'habituer, ce qui diminueroit le tribut personnel qu'il tire de ses sujets.

Alexandre de Rhodes (1651)¹

The Hundred Viêts and the Vietnamese

Prior to the middle of the first millennium BC, the area of what is present-day southern China and northern Vietnam was occupied by a large “non-Chinese” community, the Viêt (Yue) people. The Viêt community consisted of different groups which were popularly known as Bách Viêt (Baiyue or Hundred Viêts). When Emperor Qin Shihuang successfully unified China and established the Qin dynasty in 221 BC, there were still four known Viêt kingdoms: Đông Âu (Dongou); Mân Viêt (Minyue); Nam Viêt (Nanyue); and Lạc Viêt (Luoyue). While the first three occupied modern southern China, Lạc Viêt was situated in what is today northern Vietnam. Hence, the Viêt group which formed the kingdom of Lạc Viêt was one group among what were known as “Hundred Viêt” and is widely believed to be the ancestor of the Vietnamese nation today. Thanks to the widespread use of metal tools, this Viêt group gradually expanded the territory in which they lived from the mountainous and hilly areas down to the plains in order to exploit the heavier soils in the lower Hồng River delta and the

¹ Rhodes, *Histoire du royaume de Tonkin*, 56.

northern coastal plain. Around the beginning of the Christian era, the Vietnamese were largely occupying what is present northern Vietnam.²

In 221 BC, the Chinese Qin Empire invaded its southern neighbours and began a long-term process of sinicizing the Việt people. After successfully pacifying the Việt states in 214 BC, the Qin established four commanderies in the newly conquered lands, namely: Mân Chung (Minzhong); Nam Hải (Nanhai); Quế Lâm (Guilin); and Tượng (Xiang). The last commandery included northern Vietnam.³ According to Vietnamese historiography, in order to try to repel the Qin invasion, the people of Lạc Việt allied with the people of Tây Âu (Xiou) to form the kingdom of Âu Lạc (Ouluo). After 210 BC, when Emperor Qin Shihuang died and other Việt states supplanted the Qin occupation, the Vietnamese kingdom of Âu Lạc declared its independence in c. 208 BC. However, a bare thirty years later, in 179 BC, Âu Lạc was conquered by Nam Việt (Nanyue), which, in 111 BC, itself succumbed to the Chinese Han Empire. Consequently, Âu Lạc was incorporated into the Han Empire together with Nam Việt and ruled by successive Chinese dynasties until the early tenth century.⁴

As revealed in the early Chinese sources, the Chinese motive for conquering their southern neighbours was to raid the prosperous Việt states. The Việt kingdoms had long had a reputation among the Chinese as rich lands which produced plenty of valuable goods, especially sub-tropical products such as rhinoceros horns, elephant tusks, kingfisher feathers, and pearls. Indeed, the Việt people not only enjoyed fertile paddy-fields but they were privileged by an advantageous geography which enabled them to communicate and trade with people in the southern territories. It was this coastal trade which enriched the Việt kingdoms. Early Chinese documents praised, among many other Việt places, Phiên Ngu (Panyu, near modern Guangzhou (Canton)), the capital of the kingdom of Nam Việt, as a collecting-centre for luxury and valuable goods such as rhinoceros horns, elephant tusks, tortoise-shell, pearls, fruit, cloth, silver, and copper. It was said that Chinese merchants trading to this place all grew very wealthy.⁵

² On the Hundred Việt, the Vietnamese, and the Vietnamese historiography of the early period: Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*; Trương Hữu Quýnh *et al.*, *Lịch sử Việt Nam*, 58-102; Wang Gungwu, *The Nanhai Trade: The Early History of Chinese Trade in the South China Sea* (Singapore: Time Academic Press, 1998), 1-14; Recent researches have even hypothesized that the modern Vietnamese may have originated from the Lawa who still inhabit modern northern Thailand: Tạ Đức, “Người Lạc Việt phải chăng là một nhóm Lawa cổ?” [Could the Lạc Việt People be an Ancient Lawa Group?], *NCLS* 5 (2000).

³ Wang Gungwu, *The Nanhai Trade*, 1-14.

⁴ Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Chapter 1 & 2); Wang Gungwu, *The Nanhai Trade*, 7-14; Trương Hữu Quýnh *et al.*, *Lịch sử Việt Nam*, 47-80.

⁵ Wang Gungwu, *The Nanhai Trade*, 7.

The Chinese colonization of northern Vietnam, 179 BC-AD 905

These Chinese sources recount that at the time of the Chinese colonization, in certain periods northern Vietnam acted as an entrepôt or commercial hub of China's maritime trade. These valuable documents also provide evidence of a regular trade between modern Guangzhou and the ports of the north-western coast of the Gulf of Tonkin which brought the former great wealth. Around the Christian era, the ports of embarkation for the Chinese South Sea trade were Hepu and Xuwen lying on the north-eastern shore of the Gulf of Tonkin, where pearl-fishing and a pearl market had been well established. Later, these two ports lost their role and foreign merchants began to visit modern Hanoi regularly. From the middle of the third century, a protracted revolt broke out in northern Vietnam. Worse still, the covetousness of Chinese governors and prefects there not only hampered the local trade, it was even considered the major cause which led to the Chàm invasion of northern Vietnam in the middle of the fourth century.

Shortly after the relationship with the Chàm kingdom was stabilized, a series of Vietnamese revolts against the Chinese colonization broke out. These largely ravaged the local trade and discouraged foreign merchants who now resolved to sail farther north to modern Guangzhou, where trading conditions were relatively peaceful. Despite the fact that peace was restored later and foreigners occasionally arrived in northern Vietnam to trade, it seems that the Hồng River delta could never regain its position in the regional maritime trade once it had been lost. Meanwhile, the port of Guangzhou continued to thrive and quickly became China's maritime gateway to the South Seas. From the Sui dynasty (589-618), not only did most Chinese junks leave for the South Seas from this port, but foreign vessels trading to China also brought merchants to reside and trade at Guangzhou.⁶

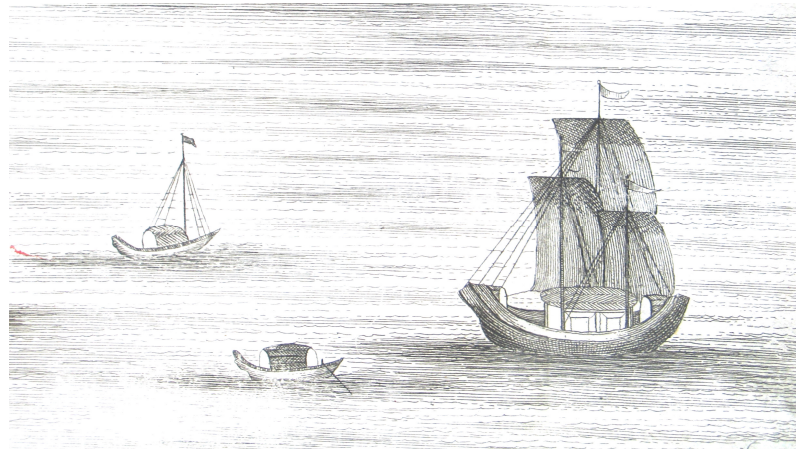
In contrast to these Chinese sources which generally acknowledge the important position of northern Vietnam in the early periods of China's maritime trade, the Vietnamese chronicles in the later periods simply considered northern Vietnam during the Chinese millenarian colonization a purely agriculture-based country and the Vietnamese as farmers whose economy was based largely on paddy-fields and domestic handicrafts.⁷ Taken in conjunction with Vietnamese written documents, recent

⁶ Wang Gungwu, *The Nanhai Trade*, 17, 25, 31, 35, 38, 44, 45; Jenifer Holmgran, *Chinese Colonization of Northern Vietnam: Administrative Geography and Political Developments in the Tonking Delta, First to Sixth Century AD* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1980), 175; Kenneth R. Hall, *Maritime Trade and State Development in Early Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, 1985), 194-197; Momoki Shiro, "Dai Viet and the South China Sea Trade from the 10th to the 15th Century", *Crossroads* 12-1 (1998): 1-34. A brief account of the Vietnamese historiography of this period can be found in Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*; Trương Hữu Quýnh *et al.*, *Lịch sử Việt Nam*, 63-98.

⁷ See, for example, *Toàn thư* (4 vols). It is important to keep in mind that these chronicles were compiled after the Vietnamese had regained their independence from the Chinese, namely, post tenth century (Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Introduction)). Li Tana even suggests that for political and ideological reasons, the Vietnamese writers of the *Toàn thư* deliberately failed to mention the international commerce which the Vietnamese had been pursuing in this famous annal. Li Tana, "A View

archaeological studies have also tended to support this largely and conventionally believed viewpoint. Moreover, meticulous analyses of motifs of boats engraved in the early Vietnamese bronze drums (dated around the beginning of the Christian era) have led scholars to draw the conclusion that these engraved motifs reflected “freshwater boats”, not “marine vessels” which could sail in the open sea.⁸

Illustration 1 Tonkinese boats in the Hồng River



Admitting their ancestors' weakness in seafaring activities, Vietnamese scholars have sought a justification in the putative generosity of Mother Nature. The general ecosystem of the sub-tropical region indubitably gifted the primitive inhabitants with sufficient food, but on the down side it made them less inventive and sapped any ambition for the improvement of technology. From this point of view, the fertility of the Hồng River delta and the propensity of the coastal plains to allow expansion have often been blamed for the inadequacy of the Vietnamese in the regional maritime trade.⁹ In short, conventional Vietnamese historiographies see northern Vietnam as an agrarian country and the Vietnamese as farmers who contented themselves with cultivating the bare coastal fields while glancing incuriously at all ships sailing past their coast.

Was northern Vietnam under the Chinese millenarian colonization, though only in certain periods, an entrepôt in the maritime trade of China as has been vividly depicted in the early Chinese documents? If this were a true picture, what was the role of the Vietnamese in these commercial activities? The following arguments seek to answer

from the Sea: Perspectives on the Northern and Central Vietnam Coast”, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 37-1 (2006): 83-102.

⁸ Nguyễn Văn Kim, “Vị trí của một số thương cảng Việt Nam trong hệ thống buôn bán ở Biển Đông thế kỷ XVI-XVII: Một cái nhìn từ điều kiện địa-nhân văn” [On the Position of some Vietnamese Seaports in the Trading System of the Eastern Sea during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries], in Idem, *Nhật Bản với Châu Á*, 108-119.

⁹ See, for instance, Hà Văn Tấn, “Các hệ sinh thái”; Diệp Đình Hoa, “Thực tiễn và triết lý”; Chữ Văn Tấn, “Những đặc trưng cơ bản”; Phan Đại Doãn, *Làng Việt Nam*; Trương Hữu Quýnh et al., *Lịch sử Việt Nam*.

these questions as well as to draw some preliminary conclusions on this topic which continues to arouse controversy.

In the first place, there are some geographical terms in the early Chinese sources which perhaps need further clarification. Although the concept of modern political borders when doing historical research should be erased from the mind, particularly for the complex topic of the Hundred Việt community, it still should not be overlooked that the fact that the ports of Hepu and Xuwen, though located in the north-east of the Gulf of Tonkin, still geographically and historically were in the orbit of present-day Guangdong. By the Christian era, these two places were undoubtedly occupied by the Việt people. However, it is also certain that the Việt people who occupied these ports were not the Vietnamese from present-day Vietnam. Hence, these two ports basically developed without a Vietnamese contribution.

The second point which requires comment is that, although early Chinese sources described the Việt people as skilful sailors, they failed to distinguish to which Việt group these seamen belonged. Since the Vietnamese had descended into the coastal areas a relatively short time before, they could hardly have been those who sailed professionally to the southern China ports for commercial purposes. Weighed against this, the ports in modern Guangdong had long been known as places which produced good sailors and the best shipbuilding timber. Consequently, the “Yue sailors” described in the early Chinese records were unlikely to have been the Vietnamese. Even by the time northern Vietnam had become a hub of Chinese maritime trade, it appears that the Vietnamese may not have played an active role in this commercial dynamism either. Instead, Chinese and sinicized Việt merchants were said to be commercially mobile and dynamic in the lands newly conquered by the Chinese.¹⁰

Finally, the fact that Vietnamese maritime trade was insignificant during the millennium of Chinese domination does not necessarily gainsay the important position of northern Vietnam in the regional maritime trade. After being pacified and ruled by the Chinese, Jiaozhi (synonymous with northern Vietnam) became the headquarters of the Jiaozhou prefect which was entrusted by successive Chinese dynasties to act as the commercial hub of China’s maritime trade. One plausible reason for this trust was perhaps that northern Vietnam conveniently was located between China and other southern kingdoms from where such valuable sub-tropical products as calambac, rhinoceros horns, elephant tusks, tortoise-shell, pearls, and the like arrived. This felicitous geographical position for trading with the southern lands continued to play a significant role for Vietnam in the period of independence and this will be analysed below.

¹⁰ In her recent article on ancient and medieval Vietnamese maritime trade, Li Tana argues that northern Vietnam was highly dependent on maritime activity until the fifteenth century. Moreover, the Vietnamese were also active in the triangular trade between northern Vietnam, Hainan, and Champa. Li Tana, “A View from the Sea”: 83-102.

Independent Đại Việt and the state monopoly of foreign trade, 1010-1527

After a series of unsuccessful revolts against Chinese domination in the eighth century, from 905 to 1010, the Vietnamese Khúc, Ngô, Đinh, and Former Lê dynasties enjoyed more success and steadily supplanted the Chinese administration. They were victorious in repelling several Chinese military interventions. An embryonic independent Vietnamese administration was established and progressively renewed which laid a solid foundation for the development of the Vietnamese kingdom of Đại Việt (Great Việt) during the Lý (1010-1226), Trần (1226-1400), and the early stage of the Lê (1428-1788) dynasties. The Đại Việt's capital was established in Thăng Long, modern Hanoi. During this independent era, except for a brief invasion and occupation by the Ming Empire between 1407 and 1428, Đại Việt was a kingdom which made its mark in the region and thrice defeated the Mongol invaders during the thirteenth century. It crushed the Chinese Ming troops in the early fourteenth century, and gradually suppressed the Chăm kingdom of Champa in order to extend its southern border in the subsequent centuries.¹¹

The independent Đại Việt kingdom experienced rapid economic growth, especially in rural agriculture and handicrafts. The Vietnamese textile industry was developed so spectacularly by the early reigns of the Lý dynasty that, in 1040, King Lý Thái Tông gave his courtiers all the Chinese silks stored in the state depository and decided from then on to use local silk instead of that from China for court dress. The mining industry, especially gold-mines, also began to flourish, which in turn gave the tributary trade with China a boost. Other handicraft industries also progressed rapidly. During the Trần and the early stage of the Lê dynasties, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, large quantities of Vietnamese blue and white wares were exported to the regional and international markets.¹²

The economic growth offered a good opportunity for the expansion of Đại Việt's foreign trade. This economic branch was still restricted as it was monopolized by the feudal dynasties and confined mainly to the tributary trade with China. Indeed, in its early reigns, the Lý dynasty did seek to stimulate foreign trade when, in 1012, Đại Việt requested the Chinese Song for permission to trade to Yongzhou in modern Guangxi by

¹¹ For a general account on the independent era of Vietnam, see: Trương Hữu Quýnh *et al.*, *Lịch sử Việt Nam* (part 4). On the Vietnamese defeats of the Mongol and Chinese Ming in the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries: Hà Văn Tấn and Phạm Thị Tâm, *Cuộc kháng chiến chống xâm lược Nguyên-Mông thế kỷ XIII* [The Resistance to the Yuan-Mongol Invasions in the Thirteenth Century] (Hanoi: KHXH, 1968); Phan Huy Lê and Phan Đại Doãn, *Khởi nghĩa Lam Sơn và phong trào giải phóng dân tộc đầu thế kỷ XV* [The Lam Sơn Revolt and the National Liberation Movement in the Early Fifteenth Century] (Hanoi: KHXH, 1965). On Champa: George Maspero, *The Champa Kingdom: The History of an Extinct Vietnamese Culture* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2002); Momoki Shiro, "A Short Introduction to Champa Studies" in Fukui Hayao (ed.) *The Dried Areas in Southeast Asia* (Kyoto, 1999), 65-74.

¹² Trương Hữu Quýnh *et al.*, *Lịch sử Việt Nam*, 136-149, 190-215; 324-330; Yoji Aoyagi, "Vietnamese Ceramics Discovered on Southeast Asian Islands", in *Ancient Town of Hội An*, 72-76; John Stevenson and John Guy, *Vietnamese Ceramics: A Separate Tradition* (Michigan: Art Media Resources, 1997), 47-61.

sea. This petition was rejected; the Song only allowed the Vietnamese the trade to Guangzhou and other border markets which it had granted earlier. In 1149, Javanese and Siamese merchants arrived eager to trade with Đại Việt. The Lý dynasty opened Vân Đồn seaport in the modern north-eastern province of Quảng Ninh for foreign trade. It simultaneously allowed foreign merchants to trade in the Diên Châu district in the modern province of Nghệ An.¹³ From the early Trần dynasty (1226-1400), foreign trade was put under strict control in response to the pressure of the Mongol invasion. In order to prevent infiltration by Chinese spies, Đại Việt forbade foreign merchants to venture to inland markets and restricted their trade to some coastal places appointed for that purpose. This partly explains the famous adage written by a thirteenth-century Chinese traveller who noted that “This country [namely Đại Việt] does not trade [with foreigners].”¹⁴ The northern seaport of Vân Đồn seemed to decline from the mid-thirteenth century blighted by the Trần’s vigilance in uncovering Chinese spies and consequently the restrictions on the country’s foreign trade. Conversely, the southern commercial centres of Đại Việt in modern Thanh Hoá, Nghệ An, and Hà Tĩnh flourished. There, foreign merchants were not restricted simply to the purchase of Vietnamese merchandise but also could acquire valuable commodities from neighbouring countries such as Champa, Laos, and Cambodia.¹⁵

The only contentious issue, if any, concerning the overseas trade of Đại Việt in the independent periods is whether we should consider it a commencement or merely a continuity. Those who have disregarded the role of northern Vietnam in the regional maritime trade before the independent period see now a fresh commencement of the maritime trade of the country thanks largely to the rapid economic growth.¹⁶ In contrast to this point of view, others consider the overseas trade of Đại Việt in the independent

¹³ On the expansion of Đại Việt handicraft during the Lý, Trần dynasties: Phạm Văn Kính, “Một số nghề thủ công hồi thế kỷ X-XIV: nghề dệt, nghề gốm, nghề khai khoáng và luyện kim” [Some Handicrafts in the Tenth-Fourteenth Centuries: Weaving, Ceramics, Mining, and Metallurgy], *NCLS* 3 (1976): 42-53; Guy, “Vietnamese Ceramics in International Trade”, in Stevenson and Guy, *Vietnamese Ceramics*, 47-61; Momoki Shiro, “Đại Việt”: 18-22.

Examining the number of Vietnamese tributes to the Chinese court as well as the value of their tributary goods, Momoki Shiro argued that Đại Việt must have earned considerably from this tributary trade system with China because the value of the gifts which the Chinese court returned to their vassals was always higher than that which the vassal countries had presented to it. This, according to Momoki Shiro, partly explains why Đại Việt was the most enthusiastic vassal in sending tribute to China after it became independent in the tenth century.

In his recent study, John K. Whitmore proves that the rise of the northern Vietnam’s coastal trade in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had contributed greatly to the state formation of Đại Việt. John K. Whitmore, “The Rise of the Coast: Trade, State and Culture in Early Đại Việt”, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 37-1 (2006): 103-122.

¹⁴ Quoted from Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, 59.

¹⁵ Phạm Văn Kính, “Bộ mặt thương nghiệp Việt Nam thời Lý-Trần” [The Commercial Face of Vietnam during the Ly and Tran Dynasties], *NCLS* 6 (1979): 35-42; Hall, *Maritime Trade*, 173-175; Momoki Shiro, “Đại Việt”: 11-15; Wolters, *Two Essays on Dai Viet in the Fourteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1988).

¹⁶ See, for example, Phạm Văn Kính, “Bộ mặt thương nghiệp Việt Nam”: 35-42; Trương Hữu Quýnh, *Lịch sử Việt Nam*, 148-149, 209-211.

era simply as a continuity, even a somewhat pale shadow of what it had been. Momoki Shiro, for instance, argues that Đại Việt was no longer a great South China Sea trading centre after the tenth century although its development still depended more on the control of trade networks and export commodities than on peasants and agrarian produces.¹⁷ The major cause of the dwindling of the maritime trade of Đại Việt after the tenth century was the fatal shifting of the Chinese maritime trade centre from northern Vietnam to southern China during the Tang dynasty. Chinese junks trading to the Southern Seas now departed from Guangzhou and Fujian and often sailed past northern Vietnam to call at either the southern Vietnamese seaports of Diên Châu or the Chăm seaports in modern central Vietnam. These transformations in the regional maritime trade caused the southern commercial centres of Đại Việt to flourish more prosperously than the northern seaport of Vân Đồn.¹⁸

The heyday of these southern commercial centres was short-lived. The Chăm who then occupied the southern part of central Vietnam increasingly became involved in the South China Sea trade and gradually moved their maritime centres to the southern seaports of Kauthara and Paduranga in modern Phan Rang. These commercial places siphoned off foreign merchants into the Chăm coast. In the meantime, the alteration of several commercial routes affected Đại Việt's foreign trade significantly. The most significant re-routing was the reversal of Cambodian maritime trade towards the Gulf of Siam. These centrifugal movements derived Đại Việt of its profitable intermediary position between China and other southern kingdoms which it had been enjoying thus far. This explains, at least partly, the fact that during the Trần era (1226-1400), Đại Việt concentrated more on agriculture than on foreign trade. Besides, the Trần's vigilance prompted by the Mongol invasion in the thirteenth century toughened the strict measures imposed by the court to control foreign trade. These measures were taken in order to prevent Chinese spies from entering the country. Foreign merchants were now forbidden to visit the inland markets and they were strictly confined to the north-eastern seaport of Vân Đồn. These daunting measures contributed to three glorious victories of the Trần against the Yuan-Mongol troops in the second half of the thirteenth century. By the end of the following century, however, the Trần had declined and the dynasty was eventually usurped by Hồ Quý Lý, who founded the Hồ dynasty in 1400 but failed to preserve independence of the country from Ming invasion and occupation between 1407 and 1428.¹⁹

¹⁷ Momoki Shiro, "Dai Viet": 1-34. Li Tana, however, believes that, after its independence in the tenth century, the maritime trade of Đại Việt was quite flourishing thanks to its intermediary position between overseas countries and China. Northern Vietnam was also actively involved in the horse, salt, and slave trades in the Jiaozhi Ocean which stretched from the south-east coast of China southwards across the Gulf of Tonkin towards Champa. Li Tana, "A View from the Sea": 83-102.

¹⁸ Momoki Shiro, "Dai Viet": 1-34; Hall, *Maritime Trade*, 194-197; Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, 365.

¹⁹ See Hall, *Maritime Trade*, 181-186 and Momoki Shiro, "Dai Viet": 18-19 for arguments on maritime transformation in the Indo-Chinese Peninsula. Discussion on the Trần agrarian expansion can be found in Sakurai Yumio, *Land, Water, Rice and Men in Early Vietnam*, translated by T. A. Stanley, edited and published privately by Keith. W. Taylor, Cornell University (n.d.), 271-272 and Lieberman, *Strange*

After successfully liberating the country from the Chinese occupation in 1428, Lê Lợi established the Lê dynasty (1428-1788). The remarkable revival of the country's agrarian economy throughout the rest of the fifteenth century elevated Đại Việt to an economic and military power in the region. The state vigilance intent on ejecting Chinese spies which had been strictly regulated throughout the Trần dynasty was eased. Chinese merchants, for example, were reportedly allowed to trade at nine ports and border markets. Despite this lessening of restrictions, foreign trade was still strictly monopolized and largely bridled by the court whose Confucian ideology sought to develop agriculture at the expense of trade. Articles 612-617 of the Lê Code, for instance, regulated the heavy fines to be imposed on and severe punishments inflicted on both officials and ordinary people who carried out illegal trade at the Vân Đồn seaport.²⁰

2. *Incessant conflicts and political schisms, 1527-1672*

Les Portugais qui estoient avec nous, luy firent des presens qui leur semblèrent plus sortables, & plus propres du temps, c'est à sçavoir de belles armes complettes pour couvrir la personne du Roy, s'il vouloit s'en servir à la guerre...Il n'eut pas alors le loisir de nous entretenir de plus longs discours ayant toutes ses pensées tournées à l'attaque qu'il alloit faire.

Alexandre de Rhodes (1651)²¹

After the Lê dynasty slid into a decline in the late fifteenth century, in 1527, Mạc Đăng Dung, a high-ranking courtier, supplanted the crumbling Lê, claimed imperial status, and established the Mạc dynasty. The Mạc continued to rule the country from the capital Thăng Long, which was now popularly called Đông Kinh (the East Capital, also historically and geographically a designation of the delta of the Hồng River) to distinguish it from the Tây Kinh (the West Capital) in the Thanh-Nghệ region which was under the sway of the restored Lê dynasty. Shortly after the Mạc usurpation, in 1532, Thanh-Nghệ loyalists began a movement to restore the Lê dynasty, using Thanh Hoá and Nghệ An Provinces as a base from which to rival the Mạc in Đông Kinh. Among the supporters of the Lê restoration movement was Nguyễn Kim, another high-

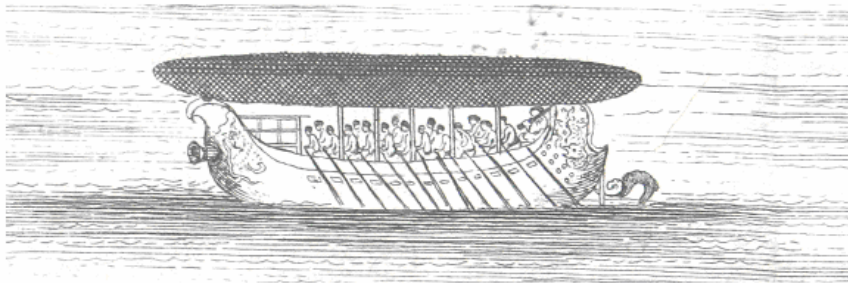
Parallels, 362-365. On the collapse of the Trần and the defeat of the Hồ by the Ming in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries: John K. Whitmore, *Vietnam, Hồ Quý Ly and the Ming (1371-1421)* (New Haven: Yale Southeast Asia Studies, 1985).

²⁰ *Quốc triều hình luật* (The Lê Codes) (Ho Chi Minh City, 2003), 221-223. See further from Nguyen Ngoc Huy, Ta Van Tai and Tran Van Liem, *The Lê Code: Law in Traditional Vietnam: A Comparative Sino-Vietnamese Legal Study with Historical- Juridical Analysis and Annotations* (Athens-Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1987). Discussion on Đại Việt's regulations on foreign merchants can be found in Momoki Shiro, "Đại Việt": 18-23.

²¹ Rhodes, *Histoire du Royaume de Tunquin*, 135.

ranking courtier of the Lê dynasty. It is important to stress here that, although Emperor Lê Trang Tông was enthroned in 1532, the restoration movement was entirely masterminded by Nguyễn Kim. When this orchestrator was poisoned by a Mạc agent in 1545, Trịnh Kiểm, his son-in-law, succeeded him and continued the fight with the Mạc. In 1592, the restored Lê defeated the Mạc and returned to Đông Kinh. The Mạc fled to the northern province of Cao Bằng and continued to contest with the Lê/Trịnh court until the late seventeenth century under the spiritual protection of the Chinese Ming and Qing dynasties.²²

Illustration 2 A Tonkinese warship in the Hồng River

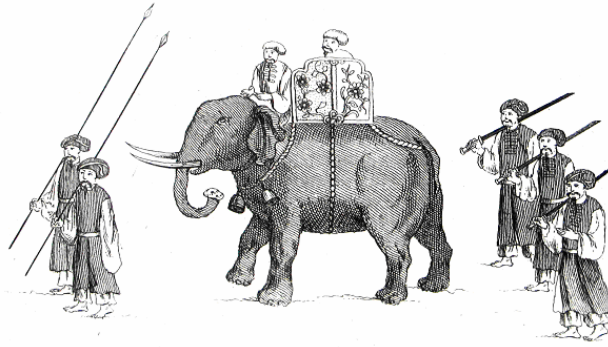


At the time the Lê and the Mạc were fiercely waging war, conflict and confrontation erupted among leaders of the Lê restoration movement which consequently led to another internal conflict in the following century, the Trịnh-Nguyễn wars. After succeeding Nguyễn Kim in 1545, Trịnh Kiểm assassinated Nguyễn Uông, Nguyễn Kim's eldest son, and kept a vigilant eye on Nguyễn Hoàng, the second son of Nguyễn Kim. In this way he consolidated his position and eliminated his potential rivals. Considering his precarious position under Trịnh Kiểm's suspicion, Nguyễn Hoàng feigned insanity and returned to the countryside. In 1558, Nguyễn Hoàng asked his sister to intercede with Trịnh Kiểm, her husband, to appoint him governor of Thuận Hóa prefecture, consisting of present-day Quảng Bình, Quảng Trị, and Thừa Thiên Huế Provinces. Believing that Nguyễn Hoàng would not be able to survive in such a vulnerable frontier jurisdiction, Trịnh Kiểm approved the request. In the same year, Emperor Lê Anh Tông appointed Nguyễn Hoàng garrison commander of Thuận Hóa prefecture. In 1572, Nguyễn Hoàng was awarded the southerly prefecture of Quảng

²² An account on the fifteenth-century Vietnamese historiography can be found in Trương Hữu Quýnh *et al.*, *Lịch sử Việt Nam*, 338-345; Taylor, "Surface Orientations": 949-978; Trần Quốc Vượng, "Trạng Trình Nguyễn Bình Khiêm trong bối cảnh văn hoá Việt Nam thế kỷ XVI" [Nguyễn Bình Khiêm in the Cultural Context of Sixteenth-Century Vietnam], in Trần Thị Băng Thanh and Vũ Thanh (eds), *Nguyễn Bình Khiêm: về tác gia và tác phẩm* [Nguyễn Bình Khiêm: His Life and Works] (Hanoi: Giáo dục, 2001), 70-83.

Nam, which consisted of modern Đà Nẵng, Quảng Nam, and Quảng Ngãi Provinces, for his meritorious services to the country over the past years.²³

Illustration 3 Tonkinese elephant troops and infantrymen



While the Đông Kinh and Thanh-Nghệ regions were badly devastated during the fierce Lê-Mạc wars, the southern prefectures of Thuận Hóa and Quảng Nam enjoyed a fairly peaceful atmosphere thanks to Nguyễn Hoàng's benign government. Strikingly enough, the people of the infertile Thuận-Quảng regions were capable of supplying provision not only for themselves but also for the Lê/Trịnh troops garrisoning the Thanh-Nghệ provinces. Besides agriculture, foreign trade also flourished. The northern annals of *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* had to admit the fact that Nguyễn Hoàng "...ruled with geniality [...]; seaborne merchants from foreign kingdoms all came to buy and sell, a trading center was established".²⁴

When the Mạc were finally driven out of Thăng Long in 1592, Nguyễn Hoàng brought his armies back to Đông Kinh to counter-attack the Mạc alongside the Lê/Trịnh troops. He cherished the hope of eliminating the Trịnh family in order to unify the country under his sway. In 1599, his hope seemed blighted as Trịnh Tùng, his rival, was promoted from the rank of grand duke to that of king (*vuong*) while Nguyễn Hoàng still remained a grand duke. Having to swallow this setback in the face-to-face competition with Trịnh Tùng at court and, having spent almost ten years in Đông Kinh without achieving his ambitions, Nguyễn Hoàng made a sudden return to his southern base in the same year.²⁵ From that moment on, Nguyễn Hoàng began to plan his new strategy:

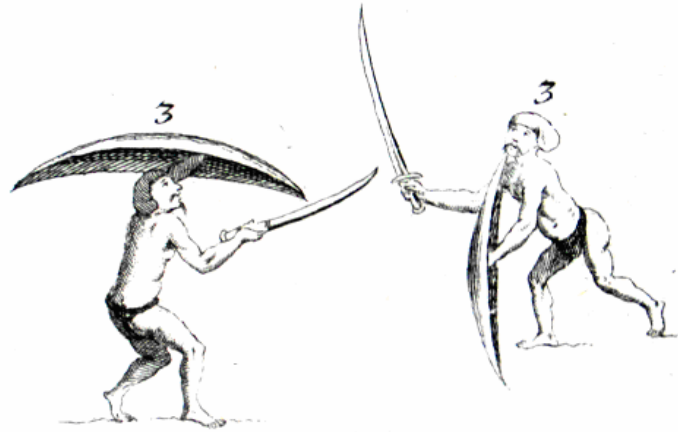
²³ *Toàn thư* III, 132 and passim. *Thực lục* I, 27-28, Trương Hữu Quýnh *et al.*, *Lịch sử Việt Nam*, 342-343. An analysis of Nguyễn Hoàng and the Nguyễn southward expansion can be found in Taylor, "Nguyễn Hoàng", 42-65; Li Tana, "An Alternative Vietnam?": 111-121.

²⁴ *Toàn thư*, III, 147, quoted from Taylor, "Nguyễn Hoàng", 49. See also in the Nguyễn annal *Thực lục*, I, 31.

²⁵ *Toàn thư* III, 205, 208; *Thực lục* I, 33-35. A detailed analysis of Nguyễn Hoàng's competition with Trịnh Tùng for power at court during the period 1592-1599 and his resolution to return to Thuận Hóa can be found in Taylor, "Nguyễn Hoàng", 55-59.

establishing his own independent kingdom. Under these conditions he expanded foreign trade using it as a crucial means to gain money and, more importantly, modern weapons to arm his troops. Therefore, through foreign merchants trading to Hội An, the Nguyễn rulers imported Western weapons and military technology which contributed decisively to the survival of Nguyễn's embryonic independence against seven fierce counter-attacks by the Lê/Trịnh armies between 1627 and 1672.²⁶

Illustration 4 Tonkinese soldiers practising sword fighting



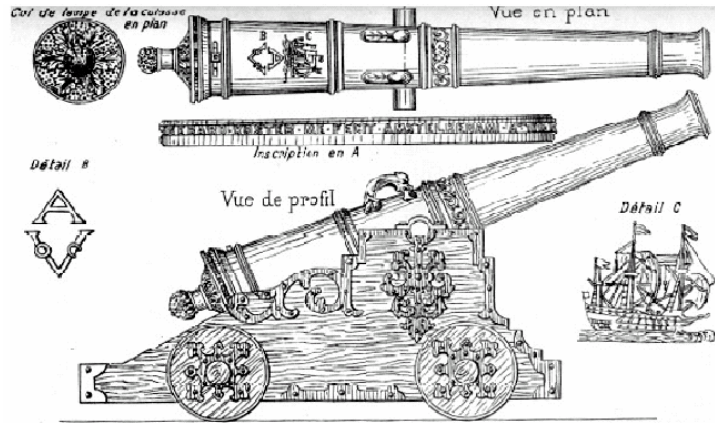
The sustained consolidation of Thuận-Quảng worried the Lê/Trịnh rulers in Đông Kinh. In 1620, taking the Nguyễn's tarrying with tax payment as a pretext, Trịnh troops harassed the southern border but were repelled. Considering its well-armed troops after almost three decades of consolidation and painfully aware of the Trịnh's hostile attitude, the Nguyễn decided to abandon the sending of their tax obligations to Đông Kinh and openly declared their intention to restore the Lê dynasty. In 1627, the Trịnh raised the banner of "supporting the Lê emperor to suppress the rebellious Nguyễn" as a rallying call to attack Thuận Hoá, commencing the Trịnh-Nguyễn wars, popularly known in Vietnamese history as the conflict between Đàng Trong (Quinam) and Đàng Ngoài (Tonkin).²⁷ Notwithstanding their numerous armies – as many as 180,000 soldiers were deployed at some times in the conflict – the Trịnh could never get over the Nguyễn defensive walls at Đồng Hới. Seven campaigns launched by Tonkin were all defeated by Quinam. The southern armies also hit back and briefly held some parts of Nghệ An Province between 1655 and 1660.²⁸

²⁶ C.R. Boxer, *Portuguese Conquest and Commerce in Southern Asia, 1500-1750* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1985), 165-166; Taylor, "Nguyễn Hoàng", 61-65; Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, 43-46.

²⁷ On the terminology of these words, see note 1 in Introduction.

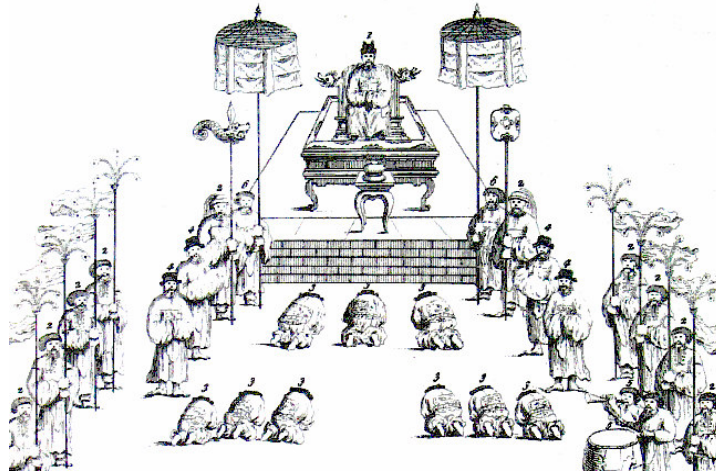
²⁸ The seven campaigns took place in 1627, 1633, 1643, 1648, 1655-1660, 1661, and 1672. See for details *Toàn thư* III, 226-290. Analyses of Tonkin's military power can be found in Alain Forest, "La guerre et le militaire dans le Tonkin des Trịnh", in Nguyễn Thế Anh and Alain Forest (eds), *Guerre et paix en Asie du sud-est* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998), 135-158.

Illustration 5 Detailed drawing of a Dutch cannon currently preserved at the ancient capital of Huế. This cannon may have been one of those the Nguyễn confiscated from the Dutch shipwrecks off Quinam's shore



After the seventh campaign ended without any breakthrough, the Lê/Trịnh of Tonkin decided to end this protracted and costly conflict, bitterly accepting their failure to suppress the Nguyễn separatists. The Gianh River in modern Đồng Hới, the unconquerable frontier in this conflict, came to serve as the border between the two kingdoms. The 1672 cease-fire offered each side a free hand to focus on their own territorial affairs. Tonkin carried out a series of attacks on the Mạc clan who had been stubbornly contesting the Lê/Trịnh rulers under the spiritual protection of the Ming and later on the Qing dynasties. In 1677, Cao Bằng was completely pacified; some members of the Mạc clan fled to China but were later on captured and handed over to the Lê/Trịnh rulers by the Chinese authorities in 1683. In the meantime, the Nguyễn also geared up their territorial expansion towards the south. Under increasing pressure from the southern Vietnamese, the Chăm kingdom had finally vanished by the turn of the eighteenth century. From now on, the southern frontier region was completely open to the Vietnamese-speaking people who gradually made their dominant presence known in present-day Saigon and the surrounding provinces throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.²⁹

²⁹ *Cương mục* II, 340-341, 349-353; *Lịch triều*, Vol. 4: *Section of International Relations*, 204. On the Nguyễn southward movement: Taylor, "Surface Orientations"; Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*; Nola Cooke and Li Tana (eds), *Water Frontier*.

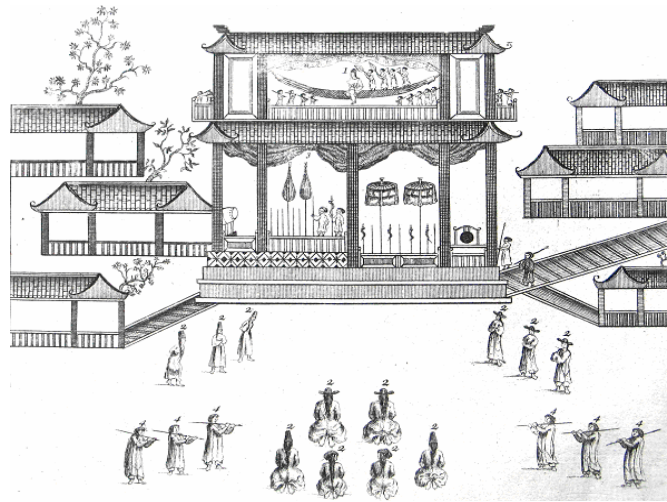
Illustration 6 Vua (Emperor) Lê at his court

On paper, the numerous Trịnh troops could or should have easily defeated the Nguyễn armies, which were much smaller in number. This assumption would have been entirely misplaced. Recent studies have looked for the causes of the Trịnh failures in various aspects of the conflict. It is popularly argued that the distance of the battlefield decisively hindered the Trịnh armies which had to travel hundreds of miles to the southern frontier and required a well-maintained supply of provisions along extenuated routes. In contrast, the Nguyễn soldiers only needed to garrison in their forts to resist the northern invaders. Climate also played a hand; because of the sub-tropical climate of the Thuận Hoá region, the Trịnh armies could only campaign during the spring season when the weather was relatively cool and dry, but had to withdraw before the hot and rainy summer season. Therefore, the southern armies which were garrisoned in well-built forts mounted with superior ordnance simply needed to persist in their defence to see the Trịnh withdrawing their troops before a lack of provisions forced them to and their soldiers succumbed to the intolerable climate.³⁰ Nevertheless, the really crucial factor was the difference in the weaponry employed by each side in the war. While the Nguyễn were in the position to arm their troops with Western-style cannon, ordnance, gunpowder, and other military innovations which were either imported from overseas or manufactured locally by employing knowledge garnered from Western technology, the Trịnh still mainly employed traditional and Chinese-style weapons. Superior weapons

³⁰ In his letter to the Governor-General of the Dutch East India Company in Batavia in 1643, *Chúa Trịnh Tráng* complained that a large number of his soldiers had died on the battlefield succumbing to harsh weather, and therefore asked for more military assistance from the Dutch Company. See: NA VOC 1149: 683-685, *Chúa Trịnh Tráng* to Batavia, 1643; François Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost Indiën* [...], Vol. 3 (Dordrecht and Amsterdam, 1724-1726), 17-18. Discussions on geographical features of the frontier of *Đồng Hới* can be found in L. Cadière, "Le mur de *Đồng-Hới*: étude sur l'établissement des Nguyễn en Cochinchine", *BEFEO* 6 (1906), 138; Keith W. Taylor, "Regional Conflicts Among the Việt People between the 13th and 19th Centuries", in Nguyen The Anh and Alain Forest (eds), *Guerre et paix*, 109-134.

offered better results. Hence, the Nguyễn not only successfully resisted the Trịnh attacks at Đồng Hới, they even had the armed capability to destroy Dutch ships in the early 1640s, and to overrun and occupy the southern territory of the Trịnh for several years at the end of the 1650s.³¹

Illustration 7 Chúa (King) Trịnh at his court



Why did Nguyễn Quinam have access to Western weapons and modern military technology while Trịnh Tonkin did not? Indubitably, it was the well-organized foreign trade of the Nguyễn which played a key role throughout the seventeenth-century wars. With a clear strategy in his mind after returning from Đông Kinh in 1599, Nguyễn Hoàng and his successors consolidated and facilitated the foreign trade of the country to build relationships with other foreign powers, most notably the Portuguese in Macao and the Japanese Tokugawa. Via these commercial and political links, the Nguyễn could import foreign weapons and modern military technology. This bestowed on the Nguyễn almost three decades in which to prepare for the conflict which broke out in earnest in 1627. Instead of looking outwards, the Trịnh mired in the ongoing wars with the Mạc. Moreover, it seems that the Trịnh rulers did not really consider employing Western weapons and modern military technology until after their second defeat by the Nguyễn in 1633. By this time, the Trịnh must have been fully aware of the superiority of Western weaponry which the Nguyễn had been employing so efficiently. The Trịnh, therefore, energetically began to seek external military assistance from foreign powers to balance the internal conflict. To lure foreign commercial and military powers to their land, the Trịnh rulers utilized the products of Tonkin's handicraft industries. The

³¹ *Thực lục* I, 55-56; D.G.E. Hall, *A History of Southeast Asia* (London: MacMillan, 1968), 415; Boxer, *Portuguese Conquest*, 165-166; Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, 43-46; Sun Laichen, "Chinese Military Technologies and Đại Việt, 1390-1497" (Working Paper No. 11, National University of Singapore, 2003).

following section discusses this sector of the local economy during the centuries of political unrest.³²

³² Brief discussions on handicrafts will focus on the Trịnh domain only. On economic aspects of the Nguyễn realm: Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*; Wheeler, *Cross-Cultural Trade*.