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

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CONCLUSION

The seventeenth century represented a turning-point in Vietnamese history. The political disorder of the sixteenth century had culminated in the political and territorial separation between the two opposing kingdoms: Tonkin in the north ruled by the Lê/Trịnh court and Quinam in the south governed by the Nguyễn family. During the series of Trịnh-Nguyễn wars (1627-1672), Tonkin launched seven military campaigns against Quinam. None of these expeditions achieved a decisive result. While the wars did absorb a great deal of the manpower and finance on both sides, it has to be admitted that they also stimulated the development of the commodity economy and foreign trade of both countries. In Tonkin, the feudal rulers revised their hitherto negative attitude towards trade and traders in favour of a more positive outlook, and accepted the presence of foreign merchants in their country as they were eager to buy modern weapons with which to gain an edge in the long-lasting conflict with the Nguyễn of Quinam.

Political schism was not the only change, even though it was probably the most drastic. The feudal economy of Tonkin also transformed significantly during this century. The privatization of land reduced the amount of the state-owned land on which farmers relied considerably, causing a huge surplus of labour in the Hồng River delta. Although most of these landless people migrated to the south, a large number managed to find work in local handicraft industries and trading-related services. In response to the development of the commodity economy of the country and the increasing demand for Vietnamese silk on the regional markets, such foreign merchants as the Japanese, Chinese, Portuguese, and later the Dutch, English, and French regularly visited Tonkin. The burgeoning of the country's foreign trade generated a commercial system linking the commercial city of Thăng Long to the regional and international maritime trading networks – a phenomenon not seen in preceding centuries. Political and commercial transformations in East Asia during the 1630s, but above all the seclusion policy of the Tokugawa Shogunate which forced Japanese merchants to withdraw from overseas shipping and excluded the Portuguese from the Japanese market, greatly affected foreign trade in Tonkin and its diplomatic relations with the outside world. Under mounting pressure to seek military support from a Western power, Thăng Long lured the Dutch into a short-lived military alliance. Despite the vicissitudes in their political and commercial relations, the Dutch-Vietnamese relationship lasted until the end of this century.

In the preceding chapters I have reached a number of conclusions about the political and commercial history of the Dutch East India Company in seventeenth-century Tonkin. I have also analysed general features of early modern Tonkin and investigated Dutch impact on the local society and economy. I shall not review these conclusions in

the following pages since they have been better placed in more detailed and deeply analysed contexts. Instead, I would like to draw some general conclusions about the VOC-Tonkin relationship in the seventeenth century, focusing on three major points: political vicissitudes; fluctuating commercial trends; and the Vietnamese-Dutch interactions.

Conflicting interests and the political vicissitudes

The political history of the VOC-Tonkin relationship is an eventful story of conflicting interests cultivated by each side. The Trịnh rulers realized that it would be a difficult task to conquer Quinam, whose well-built walls were sturdily defended by cannon supplied mainly by the Portuguese. However, from the early 1630s, the possibility of obtaining military support from a Western military power nurtured their hope of a victory in this war. Because the Portuguese had supported Quinam, the Trịnh rulers targeted the Dutch for help. Their continuous hints that they would grant the Dutch Company trading privileges should the latter abandon Quinam and ally itself and trade with Tonkin did encourage the Dutch to deal more sternly with the Nguyễn rulers and in 1637 to commence their relationship with Tonkin. In order to cajole the Dutch Company into a military alliance with them, the Trịnh rulers granted the Dutch factory more trading privileges than it did to other foreigners. The persistent persuasion of the Trịnh paid off handsomely as Batavia eventually agreed to send ships and soldiers to assist Tonkin to conquer Quinam in the early 1640s.

In contrast to the Trịnh insistence, the Dutch were far from interested in becoming embroiled in the Vietnamese political crisis. As was its attitude towards the other kingdoms in mainland South-East Asia, the VOC never considered conquering and colonizing the Indo-Chinese Peninsula a serious option. Its policies towards both Quinam and Tonkin in the seventeenth century were designed only to improve its commercial positions in these countries. Consequently, after opening trade relations with Tonkin, acutely aware of the importance of maintaining a friendly relationship with the Nguyễn domain to facilitate its shipping between Batavia and its Northern Quarters such as Japan, Formosa, and Tonkin, Batavia still tried to maintain a friendly relationship with Quinam. The heavy losses of Company ships, cargoes, and sailors in central Vietnam in the spring of 1642, however, caused Batavia to change its mind. The VOC-Quinam tension culminated in sporadic outbursts of open conflict between 1642 and 1651, when a short-lived peace agreement was concluded. Under such circumstances, the decision of Batavia to ally itself militarily with Tonkin in a joint venture to conquer Quinam was a dual-purpose strategy: revenging itself on Quinam and improving its relationship with Tonkin in order to facilitate its lucrative Tonkin-Japan silk trade.

Even now, the hesitance of the Trịnh to send troops to rendezvous with the Dutch fleets in 1642 and 1643 is still inexplicable. It would seem to be implausible that, after half a decade of persuading the Dutch to create a military alliance, the Trịnh would not

prepare a large operation to conquer Quinam with the Dutch support. Paradoxically, the Trịnh did not campaign as they had informed Batavia they would. This vitiated any efforts made by the two Dutch fleets in the summer of 1642 and the spring of 1643. The third campaign of the hapless allies in the summer of 1643 also failed bitterly. While Thăng Long blamed the unsuccessful alliance on the Dutch soldiers' lack of will to fight, Batavia interpreted the ambiguous non-attendance of Tonkin armies in 1642 and 1643 as a "malicious trick" by the Trịnh to transfer the heavy burden of conquering Quinam onto its shoulders. Whatever the cause may have been, Batavia now decided to suspend its military alliance with Tonkin despite the Trịnh insistence, reinforced by the unilateral wars it fought against Quinam during the period 1644-1651.

The termination of the military alliance ended the intimate phases in the VOC-Tonkin relationship. Notwithstanding their constant demand for weapons, the Trịnh rulers now dealt more harshly with the Dutch factors. As a consequence, the Vietnamese-Dutch political relationship deteriorated rapidly, especially from the middle of 1650s, when the Tonkin-Japan silk trade of the Company declined. The failure of the "Tinnam strategy" in the early 1660s was a severe blow to attempts by Batavia to revive the Tonkin trade and heavily affected the VOC-Tonkin relationship in the following years. The subsequent reconstitutions of the Tonkin trade by the High Government in the 1670s (abandoning the Tonkin-Japan direct route in 1671 and reducing the annual capital for the Tonkin factory in 1679) meant that the value of its annual presents to the Trịnh was also reduced. This irritated the Trịnh rulers and, from the early 1690s, was the major cause of disputes between the court and the factory. Tonkinese rulers detained Dutch factors and interpreters whenever they felt dissatisfied with the presents and goods Batavia offered them. Disappointed with the unprofitable Tonkin trade as well as extremely annoyed by the increasing maltreatment of its servants, from the middle of the 1690s, Batavia considered withdrawing from the Tonkin factory. It was the Gentlemen XVII's hesitance about abandoning the relationship with Tonkin which delayed the withdrawal from the Tonkin factory until the spring of 1700, when the *Cauw* brought all the Company's assets and servants to the safe haven in Batavia.

The intra-Asian trade and varying commercial trends

One of the most crucial factors which contributed to the success of the VOC's intra-Asian trade during the seventeenth century was its well-devised Japan trade. As silk was regarded as the key to unlocking the Japanese market, the pursuit of this commodity was pivotal to the success of the VOC's Japan trade. Possessing no direct access to mainland China, the Dutch Company endeavoured to procure Chinese silk from regional markets outside China. Chinese silk attracted the VOC to Quinam, but in the end it was Tonkinese silk which prompted the Dutch Company to shift its commercial focus from central to northern Vietnam in the mid-1630s. There were three major phases in the history of the VOC's silk trade with Japan: the phase of the Chinese product prior to the early 1640s; the phase of Tonkinese silk between 1641 and 1654;

and the phase of Bengali silk from 1655. Tonkinese silk played a crucial role in the success of the VOC's Japan trade between 1637 and 1654. The success of the Tonkin silk trade was particularly significant to the Japan trade of the VOC if we bear in mind the very fact that the net profits which the Dutch factory in Nagasaki transferred annually to Batavia during these years were falling rapidly. Therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that, if Surat was the "left arm" of the spice trade with the Moluccas, Tonkin, certainly for the 1641-1654 period, was the "left arm" of the silver trade with Japan.

Being a link in the chain of the East Asian trade and, in a broader perspective, the intra-Asian trade, the commercial function of the Tonkin factory was often reconstituted according to the commercial re-organization of the Company's Asian trade. If prior to the mid-1650s the Tonkin factory functioned as a silk provider for the Japan trade, this role altered significantly in the decades thereafter. From the middle of the 1650s, the Tonkin factory was ordered to diversify its export products, ranging from Tonkinese raw silk to Tonkinese silk piece-goods and ceramics, and Chinese musk and gold. The "Tinnam strategy" devised by Batavia in the early 1660s for the purpose of trading across the Tonkin-China border was obviously an attempt to adapt its Tonkin trade to the transformations in the East Asian trade and the intra-Asian trade.

The decline of the Japan trade of the Company during the last quarter of the seventeenth century forced Batavia to reduce the size of its Tonkin trade. With its decision in 1679 to reduce the amount of annual investment capital for the Tonkin factory down to approximately 150 thousand guilders, Batavia indirectly admitted its failure to revive the Tonkin trade to the levels of the preceding decades. Nevertheless, the Tonkin factory still provided some marketable commodities necessary to the Company trade and could serve as a strategic connection in the long-term strategy of the Company towards the Middle Kingdom. But when its factors were increasingly being maltreated in Thăng Long, Batavia eventually decided to abandon the Tonkin trade in the spring of 1700.

Trade as a bridge for Dutch-Vietnamese interactions

Although the Dutch were not the first Europeans to trade in Tonkin in the early modern period, they were by far the most influential merchants. Their permanent residence in the capital and large-scale trade influenced the indigenous society and economy critically. It appears that in northern Vietnam, the Dutch interacted well with, though were not really integrated into, the indigenous society. The Dutch Company servants, especially the chief merchants, learned the Vietnamese language and familiarized themselves with Vietnamese customs to facilitate the trade of the factory. Some of them lived in domestic harmony with their "Tonkinese wives", and itinerant maritime traders found it easy to go "hiring misses" or courtesans. Vietnamese-Dutch offspring was born as a consequence of these sexual relationships. While trading and interacting on an

intimate level, the Dutch, along with other Europeans, also diffused Western thoughts, technology, ethic, religion, and other new streams of ideas into Tonkin.

The impact of Dutch trade on the indigenous economy was unequivocally clear. The rise and fall of the annual import and export volume of the Tonkin factory was the factor which decided the production of, for instance, raw silk and silk piece-goods, and hence, the number of labourers employed in these industries. It also affected other aspects of the local economy such as the silver/cash ratio and buying and selling prices.

It is therefore no exaggeration to say that during the course of sixty-four years of residing in and trading with Tonkin, the Dutch significantly influenced the local political economy. If any one single external factor which contributed to the internal transformations of seventeenth-century Tonkin had to be singled out, the influence of the Dutch, together with the Chinese, must take pride of place.