Side Streets of History: A Dutchman’s stereoscopic views of colonial Vietnam

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Mulder and a colleague in a sedan chair carried to the beach and surrounded by the ‘Porteuses de De Saïn’.

Harbour estuary with river sampans on the foreground. The steamship belonged to the fleet of Chargeurs Réunis.

Vietnamese housekeeper clad in brown silk tunic (quận hoa) and white tunic (quận boi than). A silver necklace adorned with dragon motives complete the dress.

Stereoscopic photograph of Vietnamese babysitter (amah) in traditional dress with hair turban (khan giai) and white tunic (quận boi than).

as well as those of local postcard producers, who also distributed prints of scantily clad fisherwomen. The Porteuses looked like singers of popular chansons (quân ho or ca tra) and were dressed in brightly coloured gauze tunics in rich purples and deep reds with multi-coloured ribbons and flattened round hats. The atmosphere of the photographs evokes a Vietnamese version of Manet’s Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe.

Life in the Tropics

Haiphong’s community of non-French Europeans was small. At the turn of the century, the city counted just 100 ‘aliens’. Mulder’s colleagues were mainly Germans working for Speidel & Co. Mulder was a bachelor but a Vietnamese housekeeper ran his household, and posed proudly for the camera on the house’s doorstep. Her long-tailed silk robe and silver hanger indicate her important household position. The stereoscopic views give only a superficial glimpse of colonial life. The names of the many men and women that figure in these photographs are unknown. But there is indeed a sense that ‘tropical time’ - slower than European time - ticked languidly away in the images. The degree of slowness is embodied in the relaxed way these people posed for the camera in white suits and their festive outfits, while they are drinking, eating or enjoying an activity, the precise nature of which is unclear to the viewer.

The extended act of remembrance is taken over by nostalgia.

Mulder showed a clear interest in his native personnel, represented by the amah, seated next to a European baby, his housekeeper and a number of Vietnamese domestic staff. Their Tonkinese clothes signify that they were part of a rich European household. Outside, there is the gardener, and in front of the gate the cyclo driver. They belonged to the underclass, pejoratively called nhau qua (hummquin or peasant).

When Mulder returned home from Haiphong in 1908, he left a place where the modern history of Vietnam had started to take shape. In that year, the first of a series of nationalist activities started a string of anti-colonialist revolts. The backdrop was provided by the emerging modernisation of Vietnamese culture and influenced by the stunning Japanese victory over Russia in 1905. Patriotic scholars organised schools free of colonial supervision, such as the Free School of Tonkin (Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc), and organised cooperatives and places of work where a new generation of Vietnamese could be prepared for a peaceful independence. The colonial administration’s tolerance for the modernisation movement was short lived and promptly vanished after uprisings in central Vietnam and attempts to poison the garrison of Hanoi in June 1908. Mulder, who must have witnessed or at least known about these events, returned to Europe and married. He had earned a fortune at Speidel’s firm, which enabled him to emigrate to the US in 1910. He founded a farming community in Virginia inspired by the Dutch socialist, writer and psychiatrist Frederik van Eeden, who, inspired by Henry David Thoreau’s Walden, established a communal cooperative in Bussum, North Holland. This idea, similar to one adopted by reformist scholars in Vietnam, was that residents would be self-sufficient, sharing everything in common. Like Van Eeden’s experiments and the ill-fated cooperatives of the Vietnamese, Mulder’s plans failed. After his return to the Netherlands, he invested in Imperial Russian Railways bonds and was eventually left bankrupt. He died in 1922. His memories embodied in his photographs are presumed here, but we cannot know with certainty what he perceived or projected.

As Roland Barthes has said, “whether or not it is triggered, it is an addition: it is what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless already there”.

The memorialisation of Mulder’s Haiphong years is not a way of reviving the past, but facing a future in which that very past is forgotten.

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