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 Hông (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.

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:
12-15, 2003; Idem, “Re-thinking the Sea in Vietnamese History: Littoral Society in the Integration of
Thuận-Quangkan, Seventeenth-Eighteenth Centuries”, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 37-1 (2006): 123-
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. 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.

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.

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