

# Vietnamese–Japanese Diplomatic and Commercial Relations in the Seventeenth Century\*

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## 1. Introduction

Traditional Vietnamese historians often consider China the most influential and long-lasting Asian trading partner of Vietnam prior to the modern time. This point of view was presumed largely based on the historical fact that, throughout its long history of formation and development, Vietnam was constantly influenced, colonized, and assimilated by its vast northern neighbor. This judgment, as suggested in the recent research, is by no mean perfectly correct if one examines the case of seventeenth-century Vietnamese diplomacy and foreign trade.<sup>1)</sup> Embroidered in the war against the Manchurian from the north, the Chinese Ming dynasty declined rapidly in the early seventeenth century and was eventually dethroned by the newly-established Qing in 1644. In the meantime was the strong emergence of Japan in the regional maritime trade from the late sixteenth century. Diplomatic and commercial relations between this island empire and Vietnam (including both Tonkin and Cochinchina or Quinam)<sup>2)</sup> therefore turned to a new

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- 1) In my recent research I was able to present several revisionist thoughts on the early modern Vietnamese foreign trade and diplomacy. Please see in: Hoang Anh Tuan, *Silver for Silver*.
- 2) From the early seventeenth century, the Vietnamese Kingdom of Đại Việt was split into two kingdoms: Đàng Ngoài (or Tonkin in Western records, present-day northern Vietnam) ruled by the Lê-Trịnh government and Đàng Trong (or Quinam/Cochinchina, today central and southern Vietnam) governed by the Nguyễn family. The civil war between these two rivals broke out in 1627 and lasted until 1672.

phase in which Dutch maritime traders and, to a lesser extent, Chinese merchants played an exceptionally important role besides that undertaken by Japanese merchants in the first three decades of the 1600s.

From the early sixteenth century, East Asian diplomacy and trade underwent a constant transformation after the penetration of the first Western maritime power, the Portuguese, into the South-East Asian water. Having successfully established their firm foothold in the strategic Strait of Malacca in 1511, the Portuguese gradually explored the potential markets of China and Japan in the following decades. By the mid-sixteenth century, the Portuguese *Estado da India* has effectively created its lucrative inter-Asian trading network ranging between the Indian sub-continent and Japan. In the early seventeenth century, however, the Portuguese interrelated trading link was conquered by another Western power, the Dutch, who created an even more sophisticated and effective intra-Asian trade. The Dutch East India Company (VOC), through its trading network, not only bridged the divide between Europe and Asia but also served as a connection between many Asian countries.<sup>3)</sup> This paper examines briefly Vietnamese-Japanese commercial and diplomatic relations in the seventeenth century based partly on the study of the VOC's intra-Asian trade in order to highlight the importance of the so-called 'Japan factor' in the socio-economic transformation of seventeenth-century northern Vietnam.

## 2. Early contacts, prior to ca. 1630s

According to the Ryukyuan *Rekidai Hoan*, the initial contact between the kingdom of Ryukyu and Đại Việt took place around 1480. In this year, a minister of Malacca who was in command of naval force sent a letter to the king of Ryukyu, reporting that a Ryukyuan ship had been washed ashore in Jiaozhi (Đại Việt) and the Ryukyuan people had become engaged in a bloody fight with the people of Jiaozhi.<sup>4)</sup> Some three decades later an official relationship between the

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3) On the rivalry between the Portuguese and the Dutch in the early seventeenth century see: Ernst van Veen, *Decay or Defeat? An Inquiry into the Portuguese Decline in Asia, 1580–1645* (Leiden: CNWS Publications, 2000); Femme Gaastra, *The Dutch East India Company, Expansion and Decline* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2003). A general view of the world trade expansion in this period, see: Glenn J. Ames, *The Globe Encompassed: The Age of European Discovery, 1500–1700* (New Jersey: Pearson, 2008).

4) Cited from Momoki Shiro, 'Was Đại Việt a Rival of Ryukyu within the Tributary Trade System of

two kingdoms was officially founded in 1509 when a Ryukyuan delegation visited Đại Việt.<sup>5)</sup> For a very long while after that brief encounter nothing more was heard, probably because of the chaotic situation in the island empire which was the theatre of civil war. In 1592, of the nine licenses which *Kampaku* Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the military ruler of Japan, issued to junks trading abroad, one was granted to a vessel which sailed to northern Vietnam.<sup>6)</sup> This does not exclude the possibility that the Japanese already visited the Vietnamese coast earlier than the issue of this 1592 license. An entry in the Vietnamese annals *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* vaguely implies the presence of Japanese merchants and pirates along the Vietnamese coast in the 1550s.<sup>7)</sup> This is endorsed by a Chinese document written in the early 1590s which confirms that the Japanese regularly visited Jiaozhi (a Chinese term which was synonymous with Đại Việt or northern Vietnam) to buy silks from Chinese merchants.<sup>8)</sup>

Cogently, northern Vietnam was far from important to the Japanese in their hunt for Chinese silk. Since the late sixteenth century, the Vietnamese seaport of Hội An in present-day Quang Nam (Central Vietnam) had enjoyed a reputation among foreign traders as an important rendezvous, where Chinese ships carrying valuable cargoes of silk arrived annually.<sup>9)</sup> Most of the Japanese *shuin-sen* which

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the Ming during the Early Lê Period (1428–1527)', in Nguyễn Thế Anh and Ishizawa, Yoshiaki (eds.), *Commerce et Navigation en Asie du Sud-Est (XIVe–XIXe siècle)* (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1999), pp. 101–111.

- 5) Takara Kurayoshi, 'The Kingdom of Ryukyu and Its Overseas Trade', in J. Kreiner (ed.) *Sources of Ryukyuan History and Culture in European Collections* (Munich: Ludiclan Verlag, 1996), p. 49.
- 6) Robert LeRoy Innes, *The Door Ajar: Japan's Foreign Trade in the Seventeenth Century*, PhD. Diss., The University of Michigan, 1980, p. 54.
- 7) *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* [The Complete Book of the Historical Records of Đại Việt] [hereafter *Toàn thư*], Vol. III (Hanoi: KHXH, 1998), p. 132, records that in the tenth lunar month of 1558, Chancellor Trịnh Kiểm requested the Lê Emperor that Duke Nguyễn Hoàng be promoted Governor of Thuận Hoá to guard against the 'eastern pirates'. Historians largely believed that these vaguely mentioned 'eastern pirates' were Japanese pirates who were raiding along the Vietnamese coast. See Keith 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), pp. 45–46.
- 8) Cited from Peri Noel, 'Essai sur les relations du Japon et de l'Indochine sur XVI<sup>e</sup> et XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles', *BEFEO* 23 (1923), pp. 2–3, 15.
- 9) Innes, *The Door Ajar*, p. 53.

traded with Vietnam made port at Hội An. The reason was not only the fame of Cochinchina as a rendezvous but its reputation as a producer of several key export items such as aloes wood and calambac. In this it surpassed Tonkin which offered merely local products, most notably silks and textiles. Unsurprisingly, and in marked contrast, the Nguyễn's international outlook and flexible policies towards the foreign trade of Cochinchina also encouraged foreign merchants to make use of Hội An and turned it into an international entrepôt throughout the seventeenth century.<sup>10)</sup> The Japanese source materials reveal an interesting fact that, in the first few decades of the seventeenth century, the Nguyễn's dynamic policy towards foreign trade coincided with the Japanese court's strategy to expand Japan's foreign trade after the unification of the country in the early 1600s. There still remain fifteen letters of exchange between the Nguyễn court and the Japanese shogunate in the period 1601-1613, under the reign of *Chúa* (Lord) Nguyễn Hoàng, the founder of Cochinchina. In the last year of the sixteenth century, Nguyễn Hoàng left the capital of Thăng Long (present-day Hanoi) for central Vietnam to establish his own kingdom in order to rival with the Trịnh family in the north. One of his strategies was to develop the international seaport of Hội An in order to attract foreign merchants coming to trade in his country. Through merchants trading to Hội An, the Nguyễn rulers imported advanced weapons and military technology which contributed decisively to the survival of Nguyễn's embryonic independence against seven fierce encounters by the Lê-Trịnh armies between 1627 and 1672. Besides, the Nguyễn also endeavored to create diplomatic relations with other countries, including Japan, in order to strengthen its independence.<sup>11)</sup>

In contrast to the Nguyễn's successful dealing with the Japanese, the Trịnh rulers in the north were not only incapable of utilizing the *shuin-sen* system, they even sometimes irritated the Japanese rulers with their half-hearted attempts at

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10) Kawamoto Kuniye, 'The International Outlook of the Quang Nam (Nguyen) Regime as Revealed in Gaiban Tsuusho', in The National Committee for the International Symposium on the Ancient Town of Hội An (ed.), *Ancient Town of Hội An* (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1993), pp. 109–16; Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina, Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Ithaca: SEAP, 1998); Ishizawa Yoshiaki, 'Les quartiers japonais dans l'Asie du Sud-Est au XVIIème siècle', in Nguyễn Thế Anh and Alain Forest (eds.), *Guerre et paix en Asie du sud-est* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998), pp. 85–94.

11) Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*.

diplomacy. While the Nguyễn had contacted the Japanese *bakufu* through Japanese *shuin-sen* merchants as early as 1600, the Trịnh only sent their first diplomatic letter to Edo nearly a quarter of a century later in 1624 in rather indifferent terms expressing their wishes to create a good relationship with the Japanese government.<sup>12)</sup> It seemed that increased hostilities with the Nguyễn prompted the Trịnh to consider widening their diplomatic relationships in order to support their military campaigns. There is also a sound possibility that some Japanese merchants trading between Japan and Tonkin, who also acted as diplomatic agents for the Shogun in dealing with northern Vietnam, may have influenced the Trịnh rulers to promote the bilateral relationship between Tonkin and Japan. In 1628, one year after the official outbreak of the Trịnh-Nguyễn wars, *Chúa* Trịnh Tráng dispatched a second letter to the Shogun Iemitsu. The style of this letter, however, was so arrogant that the Japanese Shogun, annoyed by the Trịnh's haughtiness and bearing in mind his favorable relationship with the Nguyễn rulers of Cochinchina, immediately issued a ban on shipping to northern Vietnam, prohibiting Japanese merchants to sail to the Trịnh domain.<sup>13)</sup> No *shuin-sen* arrived in Tonkin in the next two years but in 1631, the Japan-Tonkin trade was resumed. It was short-lived as the maritime prohibition decreed by the Japanese government in 1635 abolished the *shuin-sen* system and the Japanese trade with Tonkin consequently ended. Some Japanese merchants remained in Tonkin and acted either as brokers or interpreters for foreign merchants.<sup>14)</sup>

Patchy source materials prevent a proper documentation of a quantitative account on the Japanese trade with Vietnam prior to the year of 1635. A record

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12) According to Hayashi Akira's *Tsuko ichiran* [A Collection of Letters Exchanged between the Japanese Government and Foreign Countries in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries], there were eight letters sent to the Tokugawa Government between 1601 and 1606 by Nguyễn Hoàng. In return, the Japanese *bakufu* replied to the Nguyễn six times. Cited from Li, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, p. 61.

13) Innes, *The Door Ajar*, p. 139; Li, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, p. 61.

14) The Dutch records documented well the dynamic presence of some Japanese people in Tonkin after the promulgation of the *sakoku* in mid- 1630s. In the early years of their Tonkin trade (1637–1700), the Dutch relied on a certain Japanese woman Urusan (or Ourusan) living in Hanoi for interpretation and dealing with Vietnamese court. Another prominent Japanese in Tonkin was a trader and broker called Resimon, who, utilizing his well-built trading network with the local people, competed fiercely with the Dutch and Chinese until his death in 1667.

of the 1634 trading season which has survived reveals that a *shuin-sen* heading for northern Vietnam that year was allotted the relatively large capital of 800 *kanme* or 80,000 taels of silver. Leaving aside the Japanese trade in Cochinchina, and if we are to accept Iwao Seiichi's estimate that the average capital per *shuin-sen* stood at 500 *kanme* or 50,000 taels, around 2,000,000 taels or 7.5 tons of Japanese silver were shipped to northern Vietnam only by the Japanese *shuin-sen* in the first three decades to be exchanged for Vietnamese silk and other local products.<sup>15</sup> That amount of money, combined with that brought to Tonkin by the Chinese and Portuguese, contributed to the rapid development of Vietnamese handicraft industries and foreign trade at that time.<sup>16</sup>

The Japanese *bakufu*'s promulgation of the closed-door policy (*sakoku*) in the middle of the 1630s led to a significant transformation in the diplomatic and commercial relation between Vietnam and Japan. In the years leading to the dawn of the eighteenth century, the Vietnamese-Japanese relationship was mainly managed mainly by the Dutch and other foreign merchants through their intra-Asian trading networks.

### 3. The VOC's intra-Asian trade and the Vietnam–Japan connection

Recent research on VOC trade has rightly considered its well-devised intra-Asian trade the key factor in the commercial success of the Dutch Company in Asia in the seventeenth century.<sup>17</sup> Shortly after their arrival in Asia, Dutch merchants realized the importance of establishing and maintaining a closely knit trading network between various trading markets. The prime task of such a

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15) Iwao Seiichi, *Shuin-sen Boeki-Shi no Kenkyu* [A Study of the Trade of Red Seal Ships] (Tokyo: Kobundo, 1958), pp. 49, 269.

16) According to Li Tana (*Nguyễn Cochinchina*, p. 67), 'it seems undeniable that the Red Seal trade with Japan stimulated a real economic boom in early seventeenth-century Cochinchina and made it possible for the Nguyễn to afford the expensive modern arms that enabled them to fight the north'.

17) Om Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal 1630–1720* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 15–23; Leonard Blussé, 'No Boats to China: the Dutch East India Company and the Changing Pattern of the China Sea Trade, 1635–1690', *Modern Asian Studies*, 30/1 (1996), pp. 51–70; Paul A. Van Dyke, 'How and Why the Dutch East India Company Became Competitive in Intra-Asian Trade in East Asia in the 1630s', *Itinerario*, 21/3 (1997), pp. 41–56; Femme Gastra, *The Dutch East India Company, Expansion and Decline* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2003), pp. 124–126.

network was to supply goods for their homeward-bound ships but it also had a second essential role: to yield profits by redistributing Asian goods to these places.

The intra-Asian trade of the VOC was run as follows. Silver was invested in Indian textiles which were indispensable to conducting the pepper and spice trade with the Indonesian Archipelago. While the bulk of the Indonesian spices was shipped to the Netherlands, a large amount of these commodities was also distributed to various Asian trading centers such as India, Persia, Formosa (present-day Taiwan), and Japan. Raw silk and silk piece-goods procured in Bengal, Persia, China, and Tonkin were sent to Japan, where they were exchanged for Japanese silver and, in the later period, copper and gold. The bulk of Japanese silver was sent to various Asian trading-places as investment capital and, to a lesser extent, it was exchanged for Chinese gold in Formosa. This gold, together with that which arrived from the Dutch Republic itself was remitted to the Coromandel Coast in order to keep the textile trade running smoothly.<sup>18)</sup> With the successful re-organization of its East Asian trade during the 1630s, the fan-shape trading network of the VOC, spreading out from its centre in Batavia, enjoyed a period of high profits and great effectiveness. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the intra-Asian trade had become so important to the entire business of the VOC in the East that, writing to their masters in the Netherlands in 1648, the Governor-General and the Council of the Indies in Batavia figuratively referred to it as the ‘soul of the Company which must be looked after carefully because if the soul decays, the entire body would be destroyed’.<sup>19)</sup>

If the intra-Asian trade was the key factor in the success of the VOC business in general, its exclusive trade with Japan, which the Dutch enjoyed from the early

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18) Gastra, *The Dutch East India Company*, pp. 121–124; Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company*, pp. 16, 19; Ryuto Shimada, *The Intra-Asian Trade in Japanese Copper by the Dutch East India Company during the Eighteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 5–8.

19) Om Prakash, ‘European and Asian Merchants in Asian Maritime Trade, 1500–1800: Some Issues of Methodology and Evidence’, in J. M. Flores (ed.), *Revista de Cultura 13/14: The Asian Seas 1500–1800, Local Societies, European Expansion and the Portuguese* (Macao, 1991), pp. 131–9 (Reprinted in Om Prakash, *Precious Metals and Commerce*, Variorum 1994). See also: Holden Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient, 1600–1800* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1976), pp. 3–27; Els M. Jacobs, *Koopman in Azië: de handel van de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie tijdens de 18de eeuw* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2000).

1640s, made a critical contribution to the success of this intra-Asian trade. Insofar as the financial aspect of the Company was concerned, the rapid enlargement of its business in Asia in the early seventeenth century required an annual increase in the amount of its capital mainly in the form of silver bullion and gold. Despite the fact that there were no serious problems regarding the supply of these metals from the Netherlands, there was a limit to the capital that the Directors in Holland were in a position to send to the East Indies.<sup>20)</sup> The best solution to this shortage problem was to develop the Japan trade in order to procure silver from this island nation. The annual production of Japanese silver had increased spectacularly throughout the latter half of the sixteenth century and peaked during the first three decades of the seventeenth century.<sup>21)</sup>

Yet, in order to obtain Japanese silver, the Dutch needed Chinese silk. Prior to the arrival of the Dutch in the Far East in the early 1600s, what was known as the Chinese-silk-for-Japanese-silver trade had been conducted smoothly by Portuguese, Chinese, and Japanese traders. Having no direct access to mainland China, the VOC was forced to conduct a 'third-country trade' in order to purchase Chinese silk at a regional rendezvous. It was this trading strategy which encouraged the Company to make contact with the southern Vietnamese kingdom of Cochinchina during the first three decades of the 1600s. All of the Dutch attempts were not paid off handsomely and the Company even suffered heavy losses.<sup>22)</sup>

Nevertheless, by the middle of the 1630s the outflow of Chinese silk to regional markets gradually dried up as the economy of China was thrown into disarray by internal political chaos. Vietnamese silk presented itself as an ideal alternative to Chinese yarn on the Japanese market from this time until the middle of the seventeenth century, when Bengali silk began to capture the Japanese

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20) Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company*, 16, 19. See also: Femme Gastra, 'The Exports of Precious Metal from Europe to Asia by the Dutch East India Company, 1602–1795', in Richards (ed.), *Precious Metals*, pp. 447–76; id., 'The Dutch East India Company and its Intra-Asian Trade in Precious Metals', in Wolfram Fischer et al. (eds.), *The Emergence of a World Economy, 1500–1914* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1986), I, pp. 97–112.

21) Atsushi Kobata, 'The Production and Uses of Gold and Silver in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Japan', *Economic History Review*, 18/2 (1965), pp. 245–66. See also: Innes, *The Door Ajar*, pp. 21–41.

22) Hoang Anh Tuan, 'From Japan to Manila and Back to Europe: The Abortive English Trade with Tonkin in the 1670s', *Itinerario*, 29/3 (2005), pp. 73–92.



market and became profitable. It was this change which prompted the Dutch Company to shift its commercial focus from central to northern Vietnam in 1637. From this year, the Dutch enterprise enjoyed the lucrative Tonkin–Japan silk trade and manipulated somehow the relationship between Vietnam and Japan.

#### 4. Vietnamese–Japanese trade and diplomacy, ca. 1637–1670s

##### a. Vietnamese silk for Japan

As mentioned before, the abolition of the *shuin-sen* trade after the Japanese *bakufu*'s promulgation of the *sakoku* in the mid-1630s, together with its deportation of the Portuguese from Nagasaki in the early 1640s, offered the Dutch a glorious opportunity to expand its control of the East Asian trading networks.<sup>23)</sup> In 1636 Nicolaas Couckebacker, the director of the Hirado factory, joyfully informed his masters in Batavia of the declaration of the Japanese seclusion policy and the subsequent possibility to expand the Company trade to several places with which Japanese merchants formerly had regularly traded.<sup>24)</sup> Considering the current transformation in the Far Eastern trade, the High Government in Batavia confidently reported its planned strategy to take over the Japanese trading network at several places in the Indo-Chinese Peninsula to the Gentlemen XVII.<sup>25)</sup> Since the Company trade with the southern Vietnamese kingdom of Cochinchina had never been profitable owing to the fierce competition from the Portuguese and Chinese, Batavia aimed to open trade relation with the northern Vietnamese kingdom of Tonkin in order to export local raw silk and silk piece-goods to Japan.

According to the VOC records, at least thirteen years before commencing their trade with Tonkin, in 1624, the Dutch in Japan had already taken note of the marketability and profitability of Vietnamese silk goods on the Japanese market.<sup>26)</sup>

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23) Akira Nagazumi, Dhiravat na Pombejra and A. B. Lopian, *The Dutch East India Company in Japan, Siam and Indonesia: Three Essays*, Working Paper No. 16 (Amsterdam: Universiteit van Amsterdam, 1982); Van Dyke, 'How and Why', pp. 41–56.

24) *Generale Missiven van Gouverneurs-Generaal en Raden aan Heren XVII der Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* [hereafter *Generale Missiven*], 11 vols., ed. W. Ph. Coolhaas (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960–76), Vol., I, p. 513.

25) *Ibid.*, 522.

26) *Dagh-register gehouden int Casteel Batavia vant passerende daer ter plaetse als over geheel Ned-erlands-India* [hereafter *Dagh-register Batavia*], 31 vols., ed. Departement van Koloniën (The

In the following years, the Vietnamese products were again mentioned by the Hirado factors.<sup>27)</sup> To prepare for the inaugural voyage to Tonkin the following year, Chief Factor Couckebacker gathered information from those who had visited Tonkin and made a detailed report on the Vietnamese silk trade noting pertinent data about geographical, political, and trading situations, local customs, silk harvests, the current prices of silk, and the like. He optimistically calculated that annually, besides other local goods, northern Vietnam could deliver 1500 to 1600 piculs of raw silk, 5 to 6 thousand piculs of piece-goods and a batch of cinnamon.<sup>28)</sup> Having prepared well for the inaugural voyage to Tonkin, in the spring of 1637 the VOC factory in Hirado dispatched the ship *Grol* to Tonkin, opening its direct shipping between Japan and Vietnam. Between 1637 and 1700, the VOC's Tonkin-Japan direct silk trade was subject to various fluctuations which clearly fell into three main phases: the period of experiment (1637–1640); the period of high profit (1641–1654); and the period of decline (1655–1670). While the Company trade with Tonkin managed to keep going until 1700, and its export of Vietnamese silk to Japan still occurred sporadically in the 1670–1700 period, the Tonkin-Japan silk trade generally ended in 1670 when Batavia halted the Tonkin-Japan direct shipping for two reasons: unprofitable trade conditions and to control the private trade between these two places. After that the Vietnamese silk cargoes intended for the Japan trade were all carried to Batavia, where they were transshipped onto the Japan-bound ships.<sup>29)</sup>

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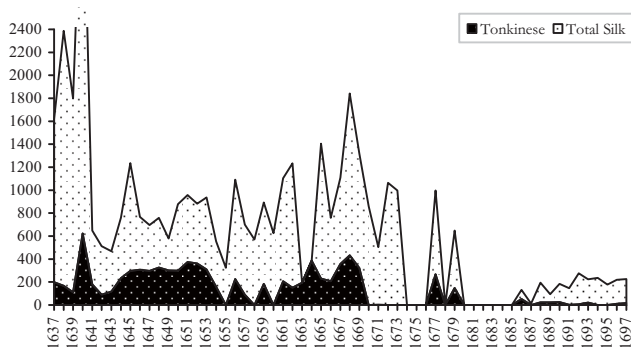
Hague: Martinus Nijhoff and Batavia: Landsdrukkerij, 1887–1931), Vol. 1624–1629, p. 12.

27) *Dagh-register Batavia 1634*, pp. 249–50; *Generale Missiven*, I, pp. 589

28) *Dagh-register Batavia 1636*, pp. 69–74. See also: Pieter van Dam, *Beschryvinge van de Oostindische Compagnie*, Vol. 2–I, ed. F. W. Stapel (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1931), pp.361–365. François Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost Indiën ...*, 6 vols. (Dordrecht and Amsterdam, 1724–26), Vol. III, pp. 1–6.

29) For a general account on the VOC's export of Vietnamese silk to Japan, see: Hoang Anh Tuan, *Silk for Silver* (chapter 6).

Figure 1: Silk exported to Japan by the VOC, 1637–1697  
(thousand Dutch guilders)



Sources: Hoang Anh Tuan, *Silk for Silver*, p. 156.

During the period 1637–1670, the Dutch company enjoyed what was known as Vietnamese-silk-for-Japanese-silver trade. In short, the VOC’s Tonkin trade revolved around the central activity of exporting local raw silk to Japan and importing Japanese silver back into Tonkin. Every year the VOC shipped to Japan a considerable amount of Vietnamese raw silk and silk piece-goods in order to exchange for Japanese silver (and copper).

The profit margin of this trade was also impressive. The short experimental period failed to produce good profits, standing at only 30 per cent, although Batavia often sent a large annual capital sum to Tonkin, around 1.1 million guilders between 1637 and 1640. The reason for this low profit margin was the ready availability of Chinese silk which still accounted for 63 per cent of the total amount of silk which was imported to Japan by the VOC, hence Vietnamese silk had a share of only 37 per cent. The profit margins on these two sorts of silk were relatively proportional: Chinese silk brought 70 per cent of the total profit while Vietnamese silk made a contribution of a modest 30 per cent. The positive signals of the flourishing of the Company’s Vietnamese silk trade in the second period can be seen in the growing gap in the profit margin on Vietnamese silk in comparison to the Chinese product. These profit margins were the result of the difference between the purchase and the sales prices (Figure 2). As the Company had to purchase Chinese silk from middlemen in Formosa and other rendezvous, the

purchase price of Chinese silk was generally high. In contrast, Vietnamese silk could be procured at a reasonable price by the Dutch factors in Thăng Long. This made a great difference in the profit margins, which were respectively 45, 56, and 67 per cent for Chinese silk and 56, 95, and 114 per cent for Tonkin product in the first three years.

The second period (1641–1654) witnessed the spectacular success of the Company's Vietnamese silk trade from the point of view of both large capital and high profit margins. Large capital sums of Japanese silver were remitted for the Tonkin trade, inspired primarily by the encouraging profit margins which the Vietnamese silk trade had been yielding and also by the current decline in the Formosa trade. According to P. W. Klein's calculations, during this fourteen-year period, out of around 12.8 million guilders' worth of goods the VOC imported to Japan, approximately 7 million or 54 per cent consisted of raw silk and silk piece-goods. Out of this 7 million, Vietnamese silk fetched around fifty per cent, meaning approximately 3.5 million guilders were spent on Vietnamese silk.<sup>30)</sup> Making sound economic sense, the wide gap between the purchase and sales prices of Vietnamese silk offered high profit margins. Throughout this period, the purchase price of Vietnamese raw silk stood at around 3.5 guilders per catty, while the average sales price fetched in Japan was 8 guilders per catty. This offered an average gross profit margin of 130 per cent for the entire period, much higher than that on Bengali and Chinese yarns which yielded 105 and 37 per cent respectively in Nagasaki.<sup>31)</sup>

The high profits obtained from the Vietnamese silk trade during this fourteen-year period was even more significant to the Company's Japan trade, considering the gradual reduction in the net profit made in recent years. Whereas the annual net profit of the Japan trade had varied between 1 and 2.4 million guilders in the 1635–1639 period, it fell to only 0.5 million in 1642 and fluctuated between

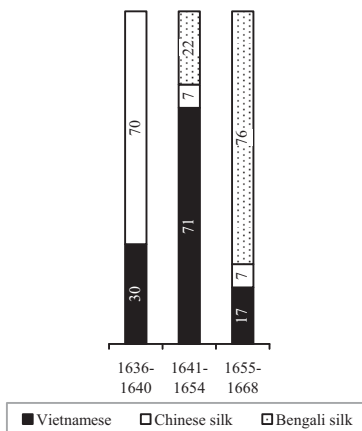
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30) P. W. Klein, 'De Tonkinees-Japanse zijdehandel van de Vereenigde Oost-indische Compagnie en het inter-Aziatische verkeer in de 17<sup>e</sup> eeuw', in Frijhoff, W. and Hiemstra, M. (eds.), *Bewogen en Bewegen: de historicus in het spanningsveld tussen economie and cultuur* (Tilburg: Gianotten, 1986), pp. 166–169.

31) Adapted from numbers given in Klein, 'De Tonkinees-Japanse zijdehandel', 169 and Table 2. It is important to keep in mind that the VOC's calculation of profits on the Vietnamese silk trade rarely took the shipping costs into account.

0.38 and 0.95 million in the 1649–1654 period.<sup>32)</sup> In the most lucrative year of 1649, for instance, the purchase and sales prices of Vietnamese raw silk were respectively 3.64 and 9.97 guilders per catty, making a profit margin of roughly 174 per cent. Hence, the Vietnamese silk cargo which was valued at 299,000 guilders that year would yield a profit of around 363,660 guilders. (It should be kept in mind that calculations on the profit do not include all sorts of expenses). Consequently, of the 709,000 guilders the Company’s Japan trade yielded this year, Vietnamese silk contributed roughly 51 per cent.<sup>33)</sup> For the entire 1641–54 period, the Vietnamese silk contributed 71 per cent to the gross profit of the Company’s silk trade in Japan and around one third of the total profit which the Deshima factory transferred to Batavia.<sup>34)</sup>

Figure 2: Division of profits from silk imported into Japan by the VOC, 1636–1668 (per cent)



Source: Hoang Anh Tuan, *Silk for Silver*, p. 163.

32) Oskar Nachod, *Die Beziehungen der niederländischen ostindischen Kompagnie zu Japan im siebzehnten Jahrhundert* (Leipzig: Rob. Friese Sep., 1897), Table A (Umsatz-Tabelle) and Table C (Einfuhr von Rohseide), CCII–CCVI.

33) Calculated from Nachod, *Die Beziehungen*, Tables A and C; Klein, ‘De Tonkinees-Japanse zijdehandel’, pp. 166–71; *Generale Missiven*, II, pp. 388, 389–391.

34) Klein, ‘De Tonkinees-Japanse zijdehandel’, pp. 169, 173 (Table 4).

During the third period of the VOC's export of Vietnamese silk to Japan (1655–1670), the low profit margin compounded by the irregularity of silk production in northern Vietnam reduced the annual capitals remitted for the Tonkin trade. The import volumes of Vietnamese silk now depended on two factors: the erratic demand on the Japan market and the export volume of Bengali silk to Japan. Since it had been introduced to Japan for the first time in 1640, Bengali silk gradually won itself a stable position on the Japanese market and, from the early 1650s, proved to be more marketable and hence profitable than its Vietnamese counterpart.<sup>35)</sup> If the purchase price of Vietnamese raw silk in the years 1637–1649 had fluctuated between 2.54 and 3.64 guilders per catty, it rose to 4.43 and 5.84 guilders per catty in the 1665–1668 period, causing a sharp increase of around 66 per cent in the purchase price. In the meantime, the sales price of Vietnamese yarn in Japan fell drastically, offering profit margins of only 58, 34, and 29 per cent respectively in the years 1652, 1654, and 1656. Between 1665 and 1669, the Company's export of Vietnamese silk to Japan revived; the value of the annual cargoes stood at around 300,000 guilders. This short-lived recovery can be attributed to the decision of Batavia to lower the annual import volume of Bengali silk to Japan to at most 170,000 pounds in order to stabilize the sales price<sup>36)</sup> and the repromotion of the Tonkin factory to the status of permanent in 1663.

In spite of these changes, Vietnamese silk did not regain its once-lost predominance over Bengali silk on the Japanese market. The annual profits remained small. In 1668, for instance, the Vietnamese raw silk cargo valued at 369,000 guilders raised a profit of only 26 per cent in Nagasaki.<sup>37)</sup>

During the last quarter of the seventeenth century, alongside the rapid reduction in its silk export to the Japanese market, the Company's export of Vietnamese silk to Japan was insubstantial, valued at hardly above 20,000 guilders per shipment. Obviously, the profits were proportionally paltry. Not wishing to flog a dead horse, the Company decided that the major part of Vietnamese silk, espe-

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35) *Generale Missiven*, II, p. 696; Souza, *The Survival of Empire*, pp. 115–120; Richard von Glahn, 'Myth and Reality of China's Seventeenth-Century Monetary Crisis', *The Journal of Economic History*, 56/2 (1996), pp. 429–454.

36) Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company*, pp. 125–126.

37) *Generale Missiven*, III, p. 741.

cially silk piece-goods should be exported to the Netherlands.

b. Japanese monetary metals for Vietnam

- **Silver, to ca. 1668**

Of all the merchandise imported into Tonkin by the VOC, silver constituted the staple commodity. Notwithstanding the relatively high demand for Japanese copper *zeni* during the 1660s and 1670s, silver was absolutely indispensable to the VOC's Tonkin trade. Most of the silver which the Dutch and the Chinese imported into Tonkin originated from Japan. In Japan, silver could be readily procured by the Dutch factors so that the Tonkin-bound ships could depart with the required amount of silver before the end of the north-east monsoon. At another end, in Tonkin, the Dutch factors advanced this silver to local rulers, brokers, and silk-weavers in order to acquire silks during the summer sale. After Japan banned the export of its silver in 1668, most of the silver the VOC imported into Tonkin was either from the Netherlands or other Asian countries. Coincidentally, from this year, the annual import volume of this precious metal to Tonkin by the Company decreased not only because silver was in short supply but also because of the current general decline in its trade with northern Vietnam.

As the Company's Vietnamese silk trade yielded high profits in Japan in the 1637–1654 period, Japanese silver was sent directly to northern Vietnam on board the Dutch ships which sailed annually between these two places. Every year the amount of silver supplied to Tonkin was relatively stable, valued at around 100,000 taels. In the heyday of the Dutch Vietnamese silk trade (1644–1652), the quantity of silver sent to northern Vietnam rose to around 130,000 taels per year. Table 1 shows how, until the mid-1650s, silver always occupied approximately 95 per cent of the annual imports; other import products shared around 5 per cent only.

After this relatively regular and stable phase, the annual import of Japanese silver into Tonkin by the Dutch Company decreased due mainly to the rapid drop in the annual profit margins which Vietnamese silk could yield in the early 1650s as well as the fall of the silver/cash ratio in Tonkin caused by a serious shortage of local coins.<sup>38)</sup>

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38) A detailed discussion of the fluctuation of the silver/cash ratio in northern Vietnam in the mid-1650s can be seen in: Hoang Anh Tuan, *Silk for Silver* (chapter 5).

Table 1: The VOC's import of silver into Tonkin, 1637–1668  
(silver in taels; total capital in Dutch guilders)

Year	Silver	Total capital	Year	Silver	Total capital
1637	60,000	188,166	1653	-	-
1638	130,000	298,609	1654	40,000?	149,750
1639	25,000	382,458	1655	-	25,773
1640	80,000	439,861	1656	50,000	184,215
1641	-	202,703	1657	*c. 90,000	276,077
1642	60,000	297,529	1658	-	-
1643	100,000	299,835	1659	*100,000	317,500
1644	135,000	397,590	1660	*5,000	64,773
1645	150,000	454,606	1661	*32,000	164,703
1646	130,000	352,544	1662	*50,000	405,686
1647	130,000	377,637	1663	*100,000 65,000	394,670
1648	130,000	457,928	1664	100,000 *35,000	347,989
1649	100,000	334,105	1665	80,000	420,245
1650	70,000	372,827	1666	-	419,779
1651	110,000	552,336?	1667	-	137,181
1652	230,000	680,294	1668	*40,000	254,219

Sources: Hoang Anh Tuan, *Silk for Silver*, p. 129.

Note: \*: Silver from Batavia, the rest directly from Japan.

As soon as the Company's direct trade route between northern Vietnam and Japan was seriously affected by the diminution in the annual profit margin, the silver needed for the Tonkin trade was provided from Batavia *in lieu* of Japan. The reason for this change is unclear. It can, however, be confidently assumed that this had nothing to do with the capacity of the Company to export Japanese silver, since this export was relatively stable until the Japanese Government's ban on the export of silver in 1668. It may therefore be hypothesized that this was another attempt by the High Government to acquire tighter control of this trading route, or at least to reduce as much as it could the private trade between these two places which was said to have been pursued on a rather large scale.<sup>39)</sup>

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39) *Generale Missiven*, II, p. 485.



This hypothesis is based on the fact that 77,000 taels of Japanese silver were exported to Batavia for the first time in 1656. In the years leading up to 1662, the Deshima factory sent a total of 632,648 taels of Japanese silver to Batavia, of which 375,000 taels were earmarked for the Tonkin trade (Table 2).

Table 2: Re-export of Japanese silver from Batavia to Tonkin, 1656–1663  
(taels)

Year	Japan to Batavia	Batavia to Tonkin
1656	77,000	0
1657	100,000	c. 90,000
1658	83,500	0
1659	43,700	100,000
1660	132,000	5,000
1661	76,448	32,000
1662	120,000	50,000
1663	0	100,000
1664	-	*35,000
1665	0	0
1666	40,000	0
1667	80,000	0

Sources: Hoang Anh Tuan, *Silk for Silver*, p. 131.

Note: \*: Silver from the Netherlands, the rest is Japanese silver from Batavia.

Although the Japanese Government's ban on the export of silver in 1668 did not cause the Dutch Company any serious problems since it quickly turned to exporting gold and copper instead,<sup>40)</sup> it did slightly affect the Dutch Tonkin trade. Having been deprived of the traditional flow of Japanese silver, Batavia now had to look for this precious metal in other places. In 1664, when the sending of Japanese silver to Batavia was temporarily suspended, Batavia had already switched over to supplying Tonkin with silver from the Netherlands.<sup>41)</sup> During the so-called 'Japanese *zeni* period', which covered the years between 1663 and

40) Gaastra, 'The Exports of Precious Metal', p. 453.

41) VOC 1241, Missive van opperhoofd en raad in Tonkin aan Batavia [Missive from *Opperhoofd* and Council in Tonkin to Batavia], 6 Nov. 1663, fos. 356–366; *Dagh-register Batavia 1664*, p. 298.

1677, the annual quantities of silver imported into Tonkin by the Dutch Company were particularly low compared to the quantity of *zeni*; the form of the silver for Tonkin also changed from Japanese bullion to various sorts of coins such as *provintiëndaalders*, *kruisdaalders*, Mexican rials, Surat rupees and so forth. After the ‘*zeni* period’, these silver coins constituted the staple of the Company’s silver investment in Tonkin until 1700.

#### **- Japanese copper zeni**

From the early 1650s, Tonkin suffered a severe shortage of cash which not only ravaged the local economy but also greatly hindered foreign merchants in their import and export trade. In order to cut the losses which would have been incurred by silver imports, as soon as 1652, the Portuguese, utilizing their advantageous foothold of Macao, quickly switched from silver to copper, especially to copper coins.<sup>42)</sup> Having no access to the supply of Chinese copper coins at that moment, the Dutch factory in Thăng Long suffered a great loss in trade. In April 1654, the Tonkin factors lamented that the exchange rate, which had been 1 tael of silver for 1,600-1,700 cash in the last few months, had fallen to only 1/800. At this rate of fall, predicted the factors, it would likely plummet to the rate of 1/700 to 600 to 500 within a short time.

In the same year, the High Government made its first effort towards alleviating the Company’s drawback in this copper cash equation, having some copper coins minted in Batavia and shipped to Tonkin for a trial. This attempt failed because the Lê/Trịnh rulers accepted only the big coins and devalued the small ones.<sup>43)</sup> The cash plague showed no sign of abating and after 1660 was more detrimental to the Company. This year, the silver/cash ratio fell to 1/570 to 850 only, setting a new record of a silver devaluation up to 30 per cent. The low exchange rate was perhaps one of the reasons the Trịnh rulers refused to accept any of the silver the Dutch offered them for the delivery of silk. And, perhaps to reduce to some extent the scarcity of copper coins which seemed to have reached an alarming level, the Trịnh rulers had a great quantity of copper coins minted by

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42) See Hoang Anh Tuan, *Silk for Silver* (Chapter Four) for further details on Tonkin’s cash shortage in the early 1650s and Chapter Eight for discussions of the fluctuation of the silver/cash ratio.

43) VOC 1206, Missive from Louis Baffart from Tayouan to Batavia, 18 Nov. 1654, fos. 65–90; Buch, ‘La Compagnie’ (1937), p. 139.

the State mint.<sup>44)</sup>

Batavia was doubly disadvantaged as it had no means to dissipate the sluggishness of its factors in their grappling with the shortage of copper coins which compared badly with the dynamism of other foreign merchants trading to Tonkin. Having thought long and deep, in 1660 Batavia ordered the Deshima factory to purchase some Japanese copper *zeni* as samples for Tonkin. The next year, 400,000 coins were sent to the Dutch factory in Thăng Long and this proved to be a success, yielding a profit of 40 per cent.<sup>45)</sup> But the most successful aspect of this trial was that besides silver, from now on the Company could send Japanese copper *zeni* to Thăng Long compensating, at least partly, the loss in the silver trade the Company had had to endure thus far in Tonkin. Having hit upon a good solution, from 1663 the Dutch regularly imported Japanese copper *zeni* into Tonkin and, as soon as this specie became popular and profitable in northern Vietnam, they reduced the import of silver to a remarkably small quantity (Table 3).

Table 3: The VOC's import of Japanese copper *zeni* into Tonkin, 1660-1679  
(pieces, unless stated otherwise)

Year	Total	Year	Total
1660	0	1670	7,750,000
1661	400,000	1671	c. 21,400,000
1662	0	1672	6,360,000
1663	9,230,000	1673	8,520,000
1664	c. 15,762,184	1674	23,809,523
1665	31,524,369	1675	17,568,000
1666	800,000	1676	c. 39,400,000
1667	10,080 lb.	1677	c. 5,000,000
1668	10,540,000	1678	0
1669	15,748,300	1679	0

Sources: Hoang Anh Tuan, *Silk for Silver*, p. 136

44) *Dagh-register Batavia 1661*, pp. 49–55.

45) VOC 1236, Missive from Hendrick Baron to Batavia, 12 Nov. 1661, fos. 829–55; *Dagh-register Batavia 1661*, p. 89; *Generale Missiven*, III, pp. 450–451.

This naturally prompts the question: what were these Japanese copper *zeni* and how did they fit into the Vietnamese market? Generally speaking, the export of Japanese copper coins to Vietnam can be divided into two major phases; each phase marked by different sorts of coins. The first period was the early seventeenth century when, in an attempt to standardize the monetary system of Japan, the Japanese Government decided that only good coins minted in Japan could be circulated on the Japanese market. Coins imported from China (*toraisen*) or minted privately in Japan in the earlier years (*shichusen*) were banned from domestic circulation. The Japanese *shuin-sen* merchants and the Dutch, Chinese, and Portuguese therefore exported these banned and hence devalued coins in great quantities, mainly to central Vietnam, where the Nguyễn rulers, having neither a source of copper nor a coin supply, either used them as money or melted them to cast guns and utensils for daily use.<sup>46)</sup> Consequently, these coins circulated in Tonkin alongside other sorts of cash. The French priest Alexandre de Rhodes, who arrived in northern Vietnam in the late 1620s, observed two sorts of coins in use on the Vietnamese market: the ‘great coins’ imported into Tonkin by the Chinese and Japanese and accepted throughout the whole country, and the ‘small coins’ minted locally and circulating only inside the capital and four surrounding provinces.<sup>47)</sup>

The second phase took place between 1659 and 1685. During this period, the Japanese in Nagasaki were allowed to mint Nagasaki trade coins for export. Besides the coins which were minted for the Nan Ming in southern China and the Zheng family in Formosa in the later period (*eiryaku sen*), the bulk of the Nagasaki trade coins was shipped to both central and northern Vietnam. Most of these coins bore the Chinese Song reign title of Yuanfeng and were called *genho tsuho* by the Japanese.<sup>48)</sup>

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46) Luc Duc Thuan, ‘Japan Early Trade Coins and the Commercial Trade between Vietnam and Japan in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century’, *www.VietAntique.com*; Whitmore, ‘Vietnam and the Monetary Flow’, pp. 363–396. On the export of *Toraisen* and *Shichusen* to CochinChina: A. van Aelst, ‘Japanese coins in southern Vietnam and the Dutch East India Company, 1633–1638’, *Newsletter* (The Oriental Numismatic Society, 109, Nov.–Dec. 1987), (n.p); Li, *Nguyễn CochinChina*, pp. 90–93.

47) Alexandre de Rhodes, *Divers voyages et missions* (Vietnamese edition) (Ho Chi Minh City: Ủy ban Đoàn kết Công giáo, 1994), pp. 59–60.

48) Innes, *The Door Ajar*, 587; Luc Duc Thuan, ‘Japan Early Trade Coins’; Shimada, *The Intra-Asian Trade in Japanese Copper*, 95.

The *genho tsuho* coins were not only crucial to the economy of Cochinchina, whose severe need of all sorts of coins to meet the great demand of the local market virtually never abated throughout the seventeenth century, they also played an indispensable role in balancing the monetary system of Tonkin during the third quarter of the 1600s. After their successful experimental import of 400,000 Japanese copper *zeni* into Tonkin in 1661, the Dutch, as well as the Chinese, increasingly imported this coin into northern Vietnam until the late 1670s. Thanks largely to the sufficiency of these coins, the shortage of copper coins in Tonkin was basically solved; the silver/cash ratio subsequently revived.

The revelation of the profitability of the Japanese copper *zeni* in the Tonkin trade assumed even greater significance after the 1668 ban on the export of silver by the Japanese Government. If silver still accounted for roughly 40 per cent of the investment capital in 1668, the last year of the dispatch of a consignment of silver bullion to Tonkin by the Company, it was almost none in the following year, but simultaneously 15,748,300 Japanese copper *zeni* accounted for approximately 40 per cent of that year's capital. In 1674, 23,809,000 *zeni* sent to Tonkin by the Dutch accounted for around 66 per cent of the total capital and two years later, the share of this specie had even increased to around 73 per cent. Taking the entire 'zeni period' into account, these Japanese copper coins provided around 22 per cent of the annual capital sent to Tonkin by the Company.<sup>49)</sup>

It may well be that proven Dutch capacity for importing Japanese *zeni* into his kingdom was the reason for the *Chúa* to grant the Dutch the monopoly of this specie in Tonkin in 1675. The Company, however, could not enjoy this privilege for long because, in the following year, *zeni* became cheap in northern Vietnam. Reporting trading conditions at the factory in 1675, the chief of the Tonkin factory, Albert Brevinck, informed his masters in Batavia that the Japanese copper *zeni* had been losing profit by the day.<sup>50)</sup> The next year, copper ingots were said to be preferred to *zeni* though the latter were still indispensable to the purchasing of local goods, particularly low-quality silk. Armed with these figures, for the import of metals to Tonkin this year, Batavia ordered the Deshima factory to lessen the number of *zeni*, while expecting a good quantity of copper. In obedi-

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49) Hoang Anh Tuan, *Silk for Silver*, 133–138.

50) VOC 1314, Missive from Albert Brevinck and Council to Batavia, 19 Nov. 1675, fos. 19–22; *Generale Missiven*, IV, p. 88.

ence to this order, only 5,000,000 *zeni* were conveyed to Tonkin in 1677. The year after, it was widely reported that from now on the Tonkin factory no longer required the Japanese copper *zeni*.<sup>51)</sup> The Company once again switched back to importing silver into Tonkin as it had done regularly before the *zeni* period.

The reasons of this sudden end are a bit of a mystery. Iwao Seiichi has suggested that the circulation of Japanese *zeni* in Tonkin had been reduced after 1661 when an embassy from Qing China arrived in Thăng Long and ordered the Lê/Trịnh rulers to strike Chinese copper coins for circulation in Tonkin themselves.<sup>52)</sup> It is true that the Qing decrees and presents arrived in Thăng Long in 1662 and, in the following year, Tonkin sent its first tribute to Peking.<sup>53)</sup> Nevertheless, this seems to have had no effect at all on the import into or the circulation of the Japanese *zeni* in Tonkin since these coins were imported in growing quantities by the Dutch and the Chinese until 1677. It could well be that the VOC stopped importing Japanese *zeni* into Tonkin after 1677 because of the growing availability of Chinese coins allied with the attempts of the Vietnamese court to mint good copper coins in the State minting houses.

### c. Tedious diplomacy

In contrast to the lively trading relation between northern Vietnam and Japan which was operated by the Dutch and the Chinese, the diplomatic tie between the two governments during the Bakufu's *sakoku* was tedious. There were virtually no diplomatic activities between the two countries after 1637. In northern Vietnam, there were several attempts made by the Trịnh rulers in the middle of the 1650s to send some mandarins and servants on board the Dutch ships sailing to Nagasaki. The only aim of these passages, however, was to exchange Vietnamese silk for Japanese goods and curiosities rather than to contact the Japanese authorities in order to create any diplomatic relation with the *bakufu*.<sup>54)</sup> In 1682 the English in Tonkin pleaded with the *Chúa* to intervene with the Japanese central government for permission to trade at Nagasaki but without success because, according to the Trịnh's reply, Tonkin had not maintained its diplomatic

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51) *Generale Missiven*, IV, pp. 88, 111, 174.

52) Quoted in Shimada, *The Intra-Asian Trade in Japanese Copper*, p. 95.

53) *Cương mục*, II, p. 296; *Toàn thư*, III, pp. 260, 262, 264.

54) *Generale Missiven*, II, pp. 700–702.

relations with the island empire for many years.<sup>55)</sup> This incident reveals a clear-cut fact that the Vietnamese–Japanese diplomatic relations in the latter half of the seventeenth century had never been intimate. Neither the Nguyễn court could gain a better relationship with the Japanese court despite its sporadic endeavors in reviving the diplomatic node with Edo and especially to encourage the Japanese in Nagasaki to export copper coins to central Vietnam in the late 1680s.<sup>56)</sup>

### **Concluding remarks**

During the course of the seventeenth century, East Asian trade and diplomacy underwent unprecedented vicissitudes. The decline of the Chinese Ming since the early 1600s and the Ming–Qing dynastic transition in 1644, followed by a civil war in southern China in the subsequent decades, represented Japan an appropriate opportunity to thrive in the regional maritime trade and diplomacy. Backed by a large amount of silver (also copper and gold) mined annually as well as a huge annual consumption of foreign products, most notably Chinese silk, textiles, deerskin, sub-tropical products and so on, the Japanese court deployed an open-minded attitude towards diplomacy and foreign trade. The first three decades of the 1600s therefore witnessed the presence of a great number of Japanese maritime merchants in many Asian ports and trading places.

The Japanese expansion in the early seventeenth century coincided with the socio-economic transformation in Vietnam. In their pursuit of weapons, money, and spiritual support from the other foreign powers in the fierce and protracted rival with the Trịnh in the north, the Nguyễn rulers in Central Vietnam successfully utilized the Japanese *shuin-sen* merchants to create a favorable relationship with the Japanese government. In northern Vietnam, despite their tardiness in establishing diplomatic node with Japan, the Trịnh rulers were still able to benefit considerably from the Japan trade through firstly the Japanese *shuin-sen* trading system and later on the Tonkin–Japan commercial bridge erected and managed effectively by Dutch and Chinese maritime traders. It was in the main this flourishing foreign trade, largely backed by the regular flow of Japanese monetary metals into Tonkin in exchange for local raw silk and silk textiles, which stimulated the development of various handicraft industries and the expansion of the

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55) G/12/17/8, Tonkin General to Bantam and London, 8 December 1682, fols. 304r–308v.

56) Kawamoto Kuniye, ‘The International Outlook of the Quang Nam (Nguyen) Regime’.

commodity economy of Tonkin in the seventeenth century.

It is therefore explicable that, under such economic and political vacuum left by the Chinese in the regional theatre in the former half of the seventeenth century, the rise of Japan as an economic and political power in East Asia has had significant impacts on the regional polities, and the economic development in the Vietnamese kingdoms of Tonkin and Cochinchina were by no mean an exception.