

Views of Seventeenth-Century Vietnam: Christoforo Borri on Cochinchina and Samuel Baron on Tonkin. Edited and annotated by Olga Dror and K.W. Taylor. Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2006. Maps, 290 pp.

Historians of Vietnam are indebted to Olga Dror and Keith Taylor for making far more widely available these two fascinating accounts of the contending seventeenth-century states that existed in the northern and central regions of modern Vietnam. The texts are among the earliest direct observations of this time and place written in any European language, and doubly important because only a few indigenous primary sources survive from Tonkin from this era, and none at all from Cochinchina. While the first part of Borri's text, as translated into the wonderfully robust and idiosyncratic English of 1633, was reprinted in 1970,¹ my own failure to track down a copy of Baron's account before now indicates the scarcity of copies of his description of Tonkin, the land of his birth and upbringing as the son of a Dutch East India Company employee. By using the complete 1704 English retranslation of Borri's account, the editors have also for the first time made easily accessible in English its precious second part, in which the Jesuit missionary described local religious practices and the introduction of Christianity, something anti-Catholic animus in seventeenth-century England had excised from the 1633 edition. Until now this rich vein of historical material has only been available in a modern European language in Bonifacy's 1931 French translation.² While historians may benefit most from this new publication, the editors' numerous scholarly annotations, which elucidate almost all the obscurities in the two texts, ensure these accounts can now be far more profitably perused by people interested in early modern Southeast Asian societies and cultures in general.

The two editors share the task, with each taking primary responsibility for introducing and annotating one text each: Dror deals with Cochinchina and Taylor with Tonkin. As a result, the book falls into two chronologically-organized parts, beginning with

Christoforo Borri in late 1610s and early 1620s Cochinchina before moving to Samuel Baron's text, which is based on his early experience and knowledge of growing up in the Tonkin of the 1640s and 1650s combined with his later observations made in the late 1670s and early 1680s, as an associate of the ill-fated English East India Company factory there. Introductory essays on the lives of the two authors precede their accounts. Taylor makes as many serviceable bricks as possible from the few surviving wisps of information about Baron's life; but Dror's ability to chase down leads in several European languages, placed in the service of an indefatigable curiosity about the life and times of this early Jesuit observer of Cochinchina — and about the subsequent history of his record of observations — results in a bravura display of historical detective work. Her finely nuanced and well documented portrait of Borri reveals him in an unexpected light, primarily as a frustrated scientific enquirer driven to the East less by missionary zeal than by his own scientific aspirations and personal flaws. This is a far cry from the more usual, carefully cultivated heroic missionary persona of later Jesuit (and other) seventeenth-century missionary publications dealing with the Vietnamese missions, sketch portraits designed as they so often were to edify European Catholic sensibilities and shore up support there for far-off evangelists. No doubt more interesting than this for most students of Vietnam is Dror's later discussion of the contemporary fate of Borri's text in the hands of its 1997 Vietnamese translator (pp. 67–73). Her careful textual comparisons reveal how this precious primary source has been bowdlerized, censored, and even rewritten in its Vietnamese version. In this revisionist project, the observations of the long-dead Jesuit have been made to conform to the demands of contemporary Vietnamese political correctness and acceptable historical perspectives.

Notwithstanding the usefulness of having these two early sources readily available, and the scholarly worth of the editors' contributions to the book, questions do remain about the value of coupling these two very dissimilar texts. In their overly-short introduction to the Vietnamese historical context (pp. 20–22), Dror and Taylor point

to the lack of primary Vietnamese sources for the seventeenth century before continuing: “The voices of Borri and Baron offer unique points of entry into the Vietnamese scene of that era and at the same time carry us into their agendas, which, although not Vietnamese, reveal examples of early contact, interaction, and the exchange of information between Vietnamese and Europeans” (p. 22). My problem here is the assumption of a single ‘Vietnamese scene’ or ‘era’ spanning the 1610s to the 1680s in north and south. This was a period of considerable economic and political change in both Vietnamese polities, the period in which the Nguyen effectively broke free of the north — a process about which Borri’s account can tell us almost nothing — and in which very significant changes also occurred in the north, in particular the ascent of eunuch power in the army, government and high administration by the 1660s at least (pp. 212, 241–42, 245, 247, 250, 253).

The problem with combining these two particular texts is that, taken together, they cannot provide any sense of historical change or continuity over time for either region, let alone for ‘Vietnam’ itself. While it is completely understandable that the editors preferred to use existing English translations rather than have to make new ones, it remains unfortunate that Borri’s account was not combined with a long overdue and properly annotated English version of Bénigne Vachet’s invaluable memoir of 1670s and early 1680s Cochinchina.³ This highly desirable combination would have allowed illuminating comparisons between two missionary perspectives on the same place and people before and after the fifty years of sporadic warfare that effectively separated Cochinchina from Tonkin. The same point could be made regarding Baron’s account: how much more valuable would it have been to specialists and generalists alike had it been coupled with Alexandre de Rhodes’ very different picture of the proud, rich, and militarily powerful Tonkin of the 1620s.⁴ Even linking de Rhodes and Borri, or Vachet and Baron, would have provided much more enlightening ‘points of entry into the Vietnamese scene of that era’ than the two snapshots of different times, places and circumstances that we have here.

However, any lingering disappointment at what might have been should not temper the value of the book at hand to the English-language historiography of Vietnam. Each text of course needs to be carefully assessed: Borri, a curious and friendly stranger open to new experiences and welcome into the highest social circles, may have been too inclined to approve of all he saw; Baron, whose adult reinvention as an Englishman perhaps hints at a difficult childhood as a mestizo Dutch boy in mid-century Tonkin, ironically seems far more of an alien, begrudging and disapproving of so much about a native place that now seemingly embarrassed him. Nevertheless, in the sketches the two authors made of the Cochinchina and Tonkin that they knew, however briefly, we meet real people, discover new insights, and are given fascinating glimpses of, or occasionally disquisitions on, aspects of local social, political or cultural life that would have rarely found a comparable treatment in Vietnamese sources. The result is to endow these distant times and places with flashes of a far more vivid historical existence than the sparse indigenous materials alone could ever provide. For all this bounty, the book is a welcome addition to the literature on Vietnam.

NOTES

1. *Cochin-China: Containing Many Admirable Rarities and Singularities of that Country* (Amsterdam & New York: Da Capo Press and Thearum Orbis Terrarum Ltd, 1970), reprint.
2. "Relation de la Nouvelle Mission au Royaume de Cochinchine", *Bulletin des Amis du VieuxHué* 18, no. 3–4 (1931): 279–405.
3. L. Cadière, "Mémoire de Bénigne Vachet sur la Cochinchine", *Bulletin de la Commission archéologique de l'Indochine* 1 (1913): 1–77.
4. *Histoire du royaume du Tonkin*, introduced and annotated by Jean-Pierre Duteil (Paris: Éditions Kimé, 1999), pp. 21–92.

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