

Hội An, the main commercial and diplomatic interface of the Nguyễn realm (17th-18th centuries)

During the Trịnh-Nguyễn period of the history of the Đại Việt, Hội An was the main outlet for the production of resources from the Đàng Trong, mostly high-value tropical products (aloe wood in particular), gold or silk. But it was also a major commercial crossroad, where many products were imported and re-exported, such as Chinese and Đàng Ngoài silk, deer skins or camphor. Thus, foreign merchants traded local goods as well as products from all over the China seas.

At the forefront of these merchants were those whom the sources call 'Chinese', who were the most numerous and active during the period and took over the Japanese, who were in a position of oligopoly in the first half of the 17th century. These communities, in addition to dominating the activities of the port, served as brokers and intermediaries between local authorities, foreign merchants and European missionaries. The merchants of Hội An were, sometimes at the same time, sailors, pirates, interpreters, soldiers, diplomats or clerics.

Moreover, the influence of the port of Hội An played a fundamental role in the construction of the Nguyễn realm and in the strengthening of their power. In particular, the lords of Đàng Trong benefited from the import of copper, which supported their war effort against the Trịnh and developed the circulation of coinage in their domain. More broadly, Hội An's openness to foreign countries allowed the Nguyễn to forge diplomatic ties with the countries from which foreign merchants came, with Japan in the early 17th century, and later with the Dutch East India Company.

This talk will therefore examine the centrality of this port, strategically located in the network of South-East Asian ports, as well as its cosmopolitan features. Not only do merchants of various origins crossed paths, but they also mixed and settled there. The activities of these men and women formed a multi-ethnic network, in which the circulation of objects, beliefs and practices was inseparable from human mobility.

This place of exchanges and encounters was also an environment in which commercial, political and religious conflicts emerged. As elsewhere in the world, the activity of merchants was characterised by an entanglement between peaceful trade and violence, fuelled by competition but also by tensions with political authorities. Trade was intertwined with diplomacy and required a respect for etiquette that could sometimes single-handedly guarantee the success of an operation.

Hội An thus constitutes a privileged window into the dynamics of a trading port in maritime Asia in the early modern era, at the crossroads of commercial transactions, diplomatic interviews and crosscultural relations.