

Illustration 1. Map of southeastern China. Rigobert Bonne, 1771.

Letter from the King of Tonkin concerning the Termination of the Trading Relations with the VOC, 10 February 1700

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1 Introduction

Hoang Anh Tuan, “Letter from the King of Tonkin concerning the Termination of the Trading Relations with the VOC, 10 February 1700”. In: *Harta Karun. Hidden Treasures on Indonesian and Asian-European History from the VOC Archives in Jakarta*, document 3. Jakarta: Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia, 2013.

BY HOANG ANH TUAN

From the early seventeenth century, the northern Vietnamese kingdom of Tonkin (or Đàng Ngoài) was well-known for a number of export products, especially raw silk, silk piece-goods and coarse ceramics. The Japanese, Chinese and Portuguese often visited Tonkin to buy silk for the Japanese market and it was this silk trade which attracted the Dutch East India Company (VOC). In 1637, the Dutch successfully established commercial and diplomatic relations with Tonkin, and maintained their trading station in the capital of Thăng Long (present-day Hanoi) until 1700. The lucrative Dutch ‘Vietnamese-silk-for-Japanese-silver trade’ later also attracted the English and the French to Tonkin in 1672 and early 1682 respectively.

However, by the last quarter of the 1600s, Tonkin was no longer a profitable trading place. Vietnamese silk no longer reaped a handsome profit in Japan and Vietnamese ceramics proved unmarketable in island Southeast Asian markets. In Tonkin, trading conditions also deteriorated rapidly. Subsequently natural disasters ravaged the economy of the country and a wave of successive famines discouraged local craftsmen from producing goods for export. Worse still, after the protracted civil war with the southern Vietnamese kingdom of Quinam (or Đàng Trong) ended in 1672, the Tonkinese rulers seemed to be more

indifferent towards foreign trade as they were no longer in urgent need of a supply of weapons from the Westerners. Bearing in mind their long-term strategy, especially the prospect of opening up trading relations with China, the Dutch still wanted to maintain their Tonkin trade despite its current unprofitable state, perceiving that it would be extremely difficult to re-establish the relationship with Tonkin once they left the country.

Despite the Dutch persistence, the relationship between the VOC and Tonkin deteriorated rapidly during the last two decades of the seventeenth century, especially after Chúa (Lord) Trịnh Căn (r. 1682–1709) succeeded to the throne. Because the Tonkin trade now yielded such meagre returns, Batavia reduced the value of the presents sent to the Chúa, a measure which displeased him. In 1682, the Chúa informed the Dutch factors that, were the presents to continue to be of such a low value, the Company would have to leave his country if it wished to avoid becoming embroiled in a dispute. In 1688 and 1689, the Chúa stopped sending letters to the Governor-General as Batavia had failed to send him the objects he demanded. In 1691, he threatened to deport the Dutch factors from the capital because Batavia had failed to send the crystal which he had ordered in the past few years. His discontent with the Company probably reached its nadir in 1693 when he had the chief factor, Jacob van Loo, and the captain of the *Westbroek* imprisoned because Batavia had failed to send him amber. The Dutchmen were not released until the factory had signed an agreement to guarantee the delivery of amber and other objects which the Chúa had ordered on the next ship. In the next few years, the Chúa’s mistreatment of the Company servants continued. In 1694, for instance, when the Dutch factor excused



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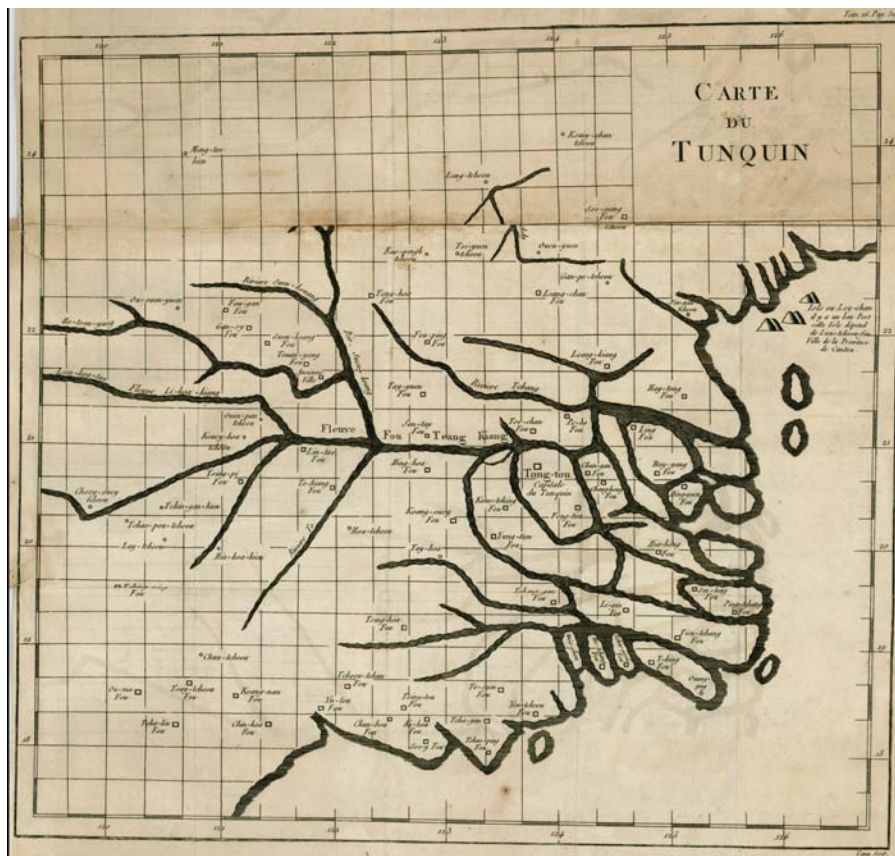


Illustration 2. Carte Du Tunquin. The river system centered on Hanoi and the Gulf on Tonkin, 1730.

himself from delivering 200 silver taels, the Chúa again had merchant Gerrit van Nes and the interpreter of the factory detained for ten days. In the following year, he imprisoned the factory interpreter and confiscated a portion of the factory silver to compensate himself for what he considered the insignificant gifts Batavia had offered him that year.

In Batavia, mightily displeased with the detention and imprisonment of Company servants, the Supreme Government began to consider the possibility of ending its unprofitable trade with Tonkin. In their missive to the Gentlemen XVII in 1695, the Governor-General and the Councillors of the Indies suggested terminating the trading relations with Tonkin. During their meeting in the summer 1697, the Governor-General and the Councillors of Asia once again considered aban-

doning the Tonkin trade. It was argued that, since the Tonkin trade had yielded no profit in recent years and the factors had often been deliberately humiliated, there was no point in maintaining such a fraught trading relationship. However, since no official reply from Holland had arrived, the Supreme Government did not want to assume the responsibility for such an important decision.

In the meantime, the tense relationship between the Dutch factors and the Vietnamese rulers continued. In the summer of 1696, once again dissatisfied with the modest presents Batavia offered, the Chúa still seized another portion of the factory silver. He also had the interpreters detained for twenty days and the factory ransacked by his soldiers. In the next two years, the relationship between the Company and Tonkin deteriorated further. Despite the Governor-Gen-



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eral's reconciliatory letters to him, the Chúa continued to make extravagant demands on the factory and even neglected to reply to the Governor-General.

Under such circumstances, during their meeting in January 1698 the Governor-General and the Council of Asia again agreed that the Company should withdraw from Tonkin. Surprisingly, the Gentlemen XVII still wanted to maintain the Tonkin trade. In their reply to Batavia, the VOC Board of Directors argued that if the Company abandoned its trade with Tonkin, where else could it buy such silk piece-goods as *pelings*, *hockiens* and *chiourongs* for the Dutch market? Unswayed by these arguments, the Governor-General and the Council of Asia continued to defend their opinion that the Tonkin factory should be closed. They argued that, if the Company could not purchase pelings and other such textiles from Tonkin, it could expediently spend that investment capital on the other products at the other trading-places including Bengal and Batavia, with the prospect of making a much more promising profit.

When the Supreme Government became aware that the Trịnh rulers had neglected to reply to the Governor-General in the winter 1698-1699, they concluded that the Company had no reason whatsoever to delay its abandonment of the Tonkin trade. In June 1699, the decision to give up the Tonkin trade was finalized. One last ship was

sent to Tonkin to fetch the Company servants and property back to Batavia. In letters to the Chúa and the Crown Prince explaining the Company's decision, the Governor-General confirmed that the Company might consider returning to Tonkin if the Chúa thought that such a move would be advantageous. In contrast to expectations in Batavia, Chúa Trịnh Căn was not at all discomposd by the withdrawal of the Company. In the winter of 1699-1700, after removing all Company property, Chief Factor Van Loo handed the factory keys over to the local eunuch, and without any formal farewell or indeed any form of ceremony at all, the Dutch quietly left Tonkin, taking with them all the Dutch factors, the Company assets, and a small cargo. Before the departure of the Dutch in the spring of 1700, Chúa Trịnh Căn sent this letter to the Governor-General. It seems that the Chúa was in two minds about the Dutch decision to leave his country when he wrote that, 'after Your Excellency has perused this letter thoroughly, the Governor-General and Councillors might change their minds'. However, as Batavia could see no sign of concession from the Chúa it decided to terminate the sixty-three-year relationship with the northern Vietnamese kingdom of Tonkin.

Reference:

- Hoang Anh Tuan, *Silk for Silver: Dutch-Vietnamese Relations, 1637-1700*. Leiden: Brill, 2007.



2 Transcription of the Dutch text

Hoang Anh Tuan, “Letter from the King of Tonkin concerning the Termination of the Trading Relations with the VOC, 10 February 1700”.

UIT: DAGHREGISTERS VAN BATAVIA, 10 FEBRUARY 1700 [BEGINNEND BIJ FOL. 81.]

Translaat missive van den Coning in Tonquin aan haar Edelens de Hoge Regeringe tot Batavia geschreven.

Annam Cockong, Conink van 't rijk van Tonquin, send desen brief in antwoord aan den Ed. Heer Gouverneur Generael tot Batavia Willem van Outhoorn ende alle de verdere Heeren Raden, met toewenschinge van alle heyl, welvaren en voorspoed op aarden, mitsgaders eenen rijken oegst in haren coophandel ende dat se met hare vrinden in toegenegene en opregte liefde lange jaren mogen verkeerren.

Aangesien dat den Conink van Tonquin tot die staet en waerdigheyt van den groten God verheven is, om sijne onderdanen in vrede ende eendragt te regeren ende aan deselve een vredige t'samenwoninge ende lichaamszonderhoud te besorgen, soo heb ick altijd getragt volgens Godes bevel mijne onderdanen en rijck te bestieren, ende haren pligt is, mij als haren beschermheer te beminnen ende te gehoorsamen, welcke methode van regeren, veele vreemdelingen tot mijn rijck gelockt ende getrocken heeft, om haren coophandel ende profijt te doen.

Ick hebbe de wijt afgelegenste vremde handelaers altijd voor andere beminnet, ende haer in mijn rijck met wel te doen, gecarresseert, waerdoor ick naer vereysch onderrigtinge hebbe becomen om te kunnen onderscheyd maken tusschen goede ende quade.

Uyt den brief door den Gouverneur Generaal en Raden van [fol. 82] India aan mijn gesonden, heb ik ontdekt een misnoegen bij deselve opgevat omdat ik met het verlede jaerse schip niet geschreven had, 'twelck niet en is geschied alsof ik op deselve verstoort was ende dat ick geen grote agtinge voor deselve meer overig had. Ik betuyge dat mijne agtinge ende genegentheyt eenparig zij, ook dat daerdoor niet kan gesegt werden dat mijne vrindschap dienaangaande soude vermindert wesen dewijl ik niet geschreven hebbe. Ik versekere U Ed. dat ick noyt die gedagte gehad hebbe. Het nablijven dat ick niet geschreven hebbe, is inderdaet geschied om deselve van de moeyte te onthefpen om wederom aan mij te schrijven. Ick heb noyt aan ymaand gesegt of geopenbaert dat ick niet schrijven wilde.

Het is U Ed. mede bekend, ende wij bevinden het, dat God aan ons niet en schrijft, nog met ons spreekt, maer desniettemin soo bestierd Hij alles onder den hemel door de verwisselinghe der vier jaergetijen, sodanig dat wij ons daerover verwonderen ende swijgen moeten. Waertoe dienen veele brieven te schrijven? Het is maer papier dat de oogen verlustiget, sonder meer.



TRANSCRIPTION OF THE DUTCH TEXT

Aan alle vremde handelaers die dit rijk gefrequeenteert hebben, om hun voordeel en profijt te doen, is enkelijk toegestaan geweest om buyten onse steden te mogen woonen. Maer aen U Eds. onderdanen is vergund een steene huys binnen de stad te bouwen, daeruyt U Eds. besluyten kunnen voor dewelcke men hier meer toegenegentheyt heeft gehad.

Den Gouverneur Generael en sijne Raden klagen bij haren jongsten brief dat uwe onderdanen in mijn rijk residerende in het drijven van haren coophandel grote overlast zijn aangedaan geweest, 'twelck in verscheyde voorvallen kan waeragtig zijn, maer uwe onderdanen hebben daertoe altijd selfs oorsake en occagie gegeven.

Mijn regeringe is eenparig ende niet eenzijdig, des in mijn rijk besorge dat niemant van mijn onderdanen, nog van vremdelingen overlast gedaan werd, gelijk een yder sulx ondervonden hebbende, getuygen kan, dog met dit beding dat se alle mijne wetten moeten gevolgen, ende gehoorsamen, gelijk in U Ed. landen en andere rijken gebruykelijk is, ende dit een waarheyt zijnde, die niet en kan werden tegengesproken. Waerom willen U Ed. onderdanen in mijn rijk dese vastgestelde wetten niet opvolgen, maer zoeken haer telkens met leugen en te behelpen, om mij en mijne regeringe bij U Ed. verdagt te maken[?]

De wetten deses rijk dicteren dat de vremdelingen hunne aangebragte coopmanschappen moeten opgeven sonder yets het minste te verswijgen, ende desen ter contrarie bevonden werdende, blijven de verswegen goederen confiscabel verclaert, 'twelk egter met onderscheyd altijd is g'executeert.

Maar U Ed. onderdanen tragten daarna om onse wetten te overtreden ende tot onser kleynagtinge meer als de helfte van hare aangebragte contanten, en coopmanschappen te sluyken ende te verswijgen. Dog daerop bevonden sijnde, hebben onse magt gebruykt ende ons tegens dese overtreders in postuur gesteld, om onse wetten staande te houden. [fol. 83]

Het is een bekende waarheyt dat U Ed. onderdanen lange jaren in dit ons rijk hebben geresideert, ende hunnen handel gedreven, waermede onse voorsaten selden of noyt in verschil hebben geweest, als ick wel ter contrarie in weynig jaren heb moeten verdragen. U Ed. is van resolutie geworden, deselve uw onderdanen van hier op te roepen ende mijn rijk en handel te verlaten, 'twelck ick als uwen wille niet konnende tegenstaan, hebbe moeten laten geschieden. Edog soo vertrouwe ik, dat naerdatt U Ed. met opmerkinge desen brief sullen gelesen hebben, dat den Gouverneur Generael en Raden andere gedagten mogen become.

Geschreven in ons Coninklijk hof Senhoo in 't 20e jaar mijner regeringe in de 10e maand den 19en dag.



3 English translation

Hoang Anh Tuan, “Letter from the King of Tonkin concerning the Termination of the Trading Relations with the VOC, 10 February 1700”.

FROM : DAILY JOURNALS OF BATAVIA CASTLE, 10 FEBRUARY 1700 [BEGINNING WITH FOL. 81.]

Translation of the missive from the King of Tonkin written to Their Excellencies the Supreme Government in Batavia.

Annam Cockong, King of the realm of Tonkin, sends this letter in answer to the Noble Lord Governor-General in Batavia Willem van Outhoorn and all the other Lord Councillors, wishing them good health and prosperity on Earth, as well as a rich harvest in their trade and that long may they live with their friends on affectionate terms and in sincere love.

As the King of Tonkin, raised to this state and dignity among the great ones of God in order to rule over his subjects in peace and unity and to ensure the latter a tranquil society and adequate livelihood, I have continuously endeavoured to govern my subjects and my realm according to God’s instructions, and their duty is to owe me their devotion and to obey me as their protector, which method of rule has enticed and attracted many strangers to my realm to trade and make a profit.

I have always favoured the most distant [of these] foreign merchants, and made much of them by treating them well in my realm, through which I have acquired the knowledge needed make a distinction between good and evil.

From the letter which the Governor-General and Councillors of [82] Asia have sent me, I have learned that they are displeased with me because I did not write (send a letter) by last year’s ship, and its absence seemed to indicate that I was displeased with them and that I no longer held them in any great respect. I testify that my respect is unwavering, and that hence it cannot be said that my friendship in this respect is in any way diminished because I have not written. I assure Your Excellency that I have never entertained any such thought. Indeed, the reason that I did not write was to relieve them of the trouble of having to write back to me. I have never said nor disclosed to anyone that I did not wish to write.

Your Excellency will also know, as we do, that God does not write to us, nor indeed [does He] speak to us. None the less, He governs everything under Heaven by the changing of the four seasons, and all we can do is to wonder and say nothing. What is the use of penning many letters? It is but paper which pleases the eyes, that is all.

Of all the foreign traders who frequent this realm for their profit and advantage, only Your Excellency’s subjects have been granted consent to build a brick edifice within



ENGLISH TRANSLATION

the city, from which Your Excellency might [be able] to draw a conclusion about which people enjoy the greatest favour here.

In their most recent letter, the Governor-General and Councillors complain that your subjects who reside in my realm have suffered great annoyance when conducting their trade, which in some instances might indeed be true but your subjects have always been the cause and occasion of this.

My government is unanimous but not unilateral, wherefore in my realm care is taken that no one among my subjects nor any foreigner is subjected to any harassment, to which anyone who has experience of it can testify. As long they adhere to all my laws and obey [them], just as is the custom in Your Excellency's territory and as in other kingdoms, and this is an incontrovertible truth which cannot be contradicted. Why Your Excellency's subjects in my kingdom will not obey these enacted laws, but constantly seek to make shift with lies which cause me and my government to be suspicious of Your Excellency.

The laws of this kingdom dictate that foreigners must report the commodities which they have brought without concealing anything at all, and should anything untoward be found, the undeclared goods are declared forfeit, the which is always applied without discrimination.

However, to our belittlement Your Excellency's subjects attempt to trespass against our laws and smuggle and conceal more than half of the ready money and goods they bring here. When they are discovered, [we] have exercised our power and have proceeded against them in order to preserve our laws [83].

It is a well-known fact that Your Excellency's subjects have resided in this kingdom for many long years, and have carried on their trade, and have hardly ever had any quarrel with our ancestors, in contrast to what I have had to put up with for these last few years. Your Excellency has taken the decision to summon your subjects to quit here and abandon my realm and trade which, as it is your will, I cannot oppose and must concede. Nevertheless, I trust that after Your Excellency has perused this letter thoroughly, that the Governor-General and Councillors might change their minds.

Written in our Royal Court Senhoo in the twentieth year of my reign in the tenth month on the nineteenth day.



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5 Folio image

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Archival Source, ANRI, HR 2520, fols. 81-83.

