Side Streets of History: A Dutchman's stereoscopic views of colonial Vietnam

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Side Streets of History: A Dutchman’s stereoscopic views of colonial Vietnam

Jan George Mulder, a salesmam from Haarlem, left a legacy of over 2000 stereo photographs, more than half originating from his time in French colonial Indochina. Yet not one of them contains a caption or even a hint about the contents.

What’s more, Mulder’s life in Vietnam remains something of a mystery. John Kleinen immersed himself in this unique collection, determined to learn more about the images and the man behind them.

J.C. Mulder at home with a servant. The chamber servant (jay) was also responsible for fanning the room, with a pankah, a large frame covered with cloth and suspended from the ceiling.

Mulder’s photographs - stereoscopic views - were produced using a technology that had lost its once exalted position. These views were made by mounting two photographs side-by-side. They appear three-dimensional when viewed through a stereoscope. They enjoyed tremendous popularity but around the time Mulder was photographing, the picture postcard was taking over as the primary method of transport, and once to Angkor Wat. Boats were originally a centre for blue water fishing. Soon it would serve as the ‘Deauville of Haiphong’. About 3000 workers readied the dirt road to Do Son for cars. A local transport entrepreneur, A. Bertrand, promoted his private taxi service extensively, but more colourful was a local service using Bertrand’s taxi service extensively, and once to Angkor Wat. Boats were originally a centre for blue water fishing.

Juge from his images, Mulder was most interested in the Vietnamese countryside where he visited communal houses, temples and pagodas, and where he went duck hunting. He favoured outings to the Bay of Ha Long. This fishing village was originally a centre for blue water fishing. Soon it would serve as the ‘Deauville of Haiphong’. About 3000 workers readied the dirt road to Do Son for cars. A local transport entrepreneur, A. Bertrand, promoted his private taxi service extensively, but more colourful was a local service using Bertrand’s taxi service extensively, and once to Angkor Wat. Boats were originally a centre for blue water fishing. Mulder’s pictures of himself seated or travelling with Chinese traders are fascinating. These compradores distributed the lamp oil throughout the Delta. One of them, a Vietnamese entrepreneur who had entered the maritime trade, was reputedly one of the four wealthiest people in Vietnam. An almost visible ‘colour line’ existed in Haiphong. This was institutionalised in the colonial grid of the town planning, with separate quarters for Vietnamese, Chinese and Europeans. The Chinese were treated as foreign nationals or ‘Eastern foreigners’. Part of an international link between the port of Hong Kong and Haiphong, their presence was tolerated as long as it benefited French business.

The colonial city, which still had a number of empty spaces at the time Mulder lived there, resembled a quiet, slumbering French provincial town. The best-known locations were the Hôtel du Commerce, a meeting place for bachelors and European prostitutes, and the Hôtel de Marseille, near Speidel’s office. Though tourism was not yet developed, the hotels served those travellers who used Haiphong as a stop-over before boarding ships to destinations in Asia or Europe. Mulder’s own travels remained confined to an occasional visit to Hanoi and once to Angkor Wat. Boats were the primary method of transport, and Mulder used the river during his few trips to Hanoi, where he photographed the Pont Doumer, the busy waterfront and the Hoan Kiem Lake.

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as well as those of local postcard producers, who also distributed prints of scantily clad fisherwomen. The Porteuses looked like singers of popular chansons (qua...)

Life in the Tropics

Haiphong’s community of non-French Europeans was small. At the turn of the century, the city counted just 100 ‘aliens’. Mulder’s colleagues were mainly Germans working for Speidel & Co. Mulder was a bachelor but a Vietnamese housekeeper ran his household, and posed proudly for the camera on the house’s doorstep. Her long-tailed silk robe and silver hanger indicate her important household position. The stereoscopic views give only a superficial glimpse of colonial life. The names of the many men and women that figure in these photographs are unknown. But there is indeed a sense that ‘tropical time’ - slower than European time - ticked languidly away in the images.

The colonial administration’s tolerance for the underclass, pejoratively called ahu-qu (humpkin or peasant). Mulder showed a clear interest in his native personnel, represented by the asamah, seated next to a European baby, his housekeeper and a number of Vietnamese domestic staff. Their Tonkinese clothes signify that they were part of a rich European household. Outside, there is the gardener, and in front of the gate the cyclo driver. They belonged to the underclass, pejoratively called ahu-qu (humpkin or peasant).

When Mulder returned home from Haiphong in 1908, he left a place where the modern history of Vietnam had started to take shape. In that year, the first of a series of nationalist activities started a string of anti-colonialist revolts. The backdrop was provided by the emerging modernisation of Vietnamese culture and influenced by the stunning Japanese victory over Russia in May 1905. Patriotic scholars organised schools free of colonial supervision, such as the Free School of Tonkin (Đỗng Kinh Nghia Thúc), and organised cooperatives and places of work where a new generation of Vietnamese could be prepared for a peaceful independence. The colonial administration’s tolerance for the modernisation movement was short lived and promptly vanished after uprisings in central Vietnam and attempts to poison the garrison of Hanoi in June 1908. Mulder, who must have witnessed or at least known about these events, returned to Europe and married. He had earned a fortune at Speidel’s firm, which enabled him to emigrate to the US in 1910. He founded a farming community in Virginia inspired by the Dutch socialist, writer and psychiatrist Frederik van Eeden, who, inspired by Henry David Thoreau’s Walden, established a communal cooperative in Bussum, North Holland. This idea, similar to ones adopted by reformist scholars in Vietnam, was that residents would be self-sufficient, sharing everything in common. Like Van Eeden’s experiments and the ill-fated cooperatives of the Vietnamese, Mulder’s plans failed. After his return to the Netherlands, he invested in Imperial Russian Railways bonds and was eventually left bankrupt. He died in 1922. His memories embodied in his photographs are presumed here, but we cannot know with certainty what he perceived or projected. As Roland Barthes has said, “whether or not it is triggered, it is an addition: it is what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless already there”. Not being remembered at all: that is the fate of most of the people in Mulder’s images. The memorialisation of Mulder’s Haiphong years is not a way of reviving the past, but facing a future in which that very past is forgotten.

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