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 salesman 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.

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 medium of choice.

There is little in the collection of photographs that Jan George Mulder (1869-1922) left to his family that provides direct information about his life in Vietnam. We do know about the man is gleaned from archival documents, secondary sources and accounts that he kept after 1908 on his return to the Netherlands. Mulder was an employee of the German firm Speidel & Co that began operating in Indochina in the 1880s. He travelled to Asia at the age of 35 and in 1904, started to sell lamp oil (kerosene) for the Asiatic Petroleum Company (APC) in the remote harbour town of Haiphong.

APC was the marketing company for two emergent giants in the oil business, Shell Transport & Trading Co. and Royal Dutch. From 1904 to 1908, Mulder used a Gaumont Stéréospido to photograph his work environment (offices and outside settings), scenes from his private life, as well as outings to several places. Mulder’s photographs are mainly stereoscopic images on glass plates and depict cities, harbours, landscapes and a number of human subjects whose identities remain unknown. The result is a large number of fascinating if somewhat enigmatic images of colonial Haiphong and its surroundings.

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

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 Hotel 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 building ships to destinations in Asia or Europe. Mulder’s own travels remained confined to an occasional visit to Hanoi and once to Ankor Wat. Boats were the primary method of transport, and Mulder used the river during his few trips to Hanoi, where he photographed the Pont Daumer, the busy waterfront and the Hoan Kiem Lake.

Judging 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 and the beach at Do Son (24 kilometres from Haiphong). This fishing village was originally a centre for blue water fishing. Soon it would serve as the ‘Deauville of Haiphong’. About 3000 workers resided the dirt road to Do Son for cars. A local transport entrepreneur, A. Bertrand, promoted his private taxi service, while the city council designed a tramway, which was completed after Mulder had left the country. Mulder used Bertrand’s taxi service extensively, but more colourful was a local service of human porters who carried European tourists and rich Vietnamese around in bamboo sedans.

The so-called Les Porteuses de Do Son attracted the attention of Mulder’s lens.

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Mulder and a colleague in a sedan chair carried to the beach and surrounded by the ‘Porteau de De Steer’.

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 amah (khan giai) and organised cooperatives at their office.

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 one 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 1942. 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 imag es. The memorialisation of Mulder’s Haiphong years is not a way of revisiting the past, but facing a future in which that very past is forgotten.

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Stereoscopic photograph of Vietnamese babytitter (amak) in traditional dress with hair turban (khan-giai) and white tunic (vo ban than). A silver necklace adorned with dragon motives complete the dress.