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

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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.

There is little in the collection of photographs that Jan George Mulder (1869–1924) left to his family that provides direct information about his life in Vietnam. What we do know about the man is gleaned from archival documents, secondary sources and account books 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, harbour, 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, none of which contains a single caption or any textual information about what is pictured.

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 Mulder used the river during his few trips to Hanoi, where he photographed the Pont Doumer, 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 frequented 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 ‘Dravaille of Haiphong’. About 3000 workers reached the dirt road to Do Son for cash. 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 Porteurs de Do Son attracted the attention of Mulder’s lens.
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 degree of slowness is embodied in the relaxed way these people posed for the camera in white suits and their festive outfits, while they are drinking, eating or enjoying an activity, the precise nature of which is unclear to the viewer. The extended act of remembrance is taken over by nostalgia.

Mulder showed a clear interest in his native personnel, represented by the au pair, 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 tuaque (hempkin 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 (Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc), 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 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 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 revising the past, but facing a future in which that very past is forgotten.

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