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

Kleinen, J.

Published in:
IIAS Newsletter

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (http://dare.uva.nl)
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 Kleinien 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 for presenting views of colonial Vietnam.

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 Grand 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 An Giang Wat. Boats were the primary mode of transport, and Mulder used the river during his few trips to Hanoi, where he photographed the Pont Dauver, the busy waterfront and the Hoan Kiem Lake.

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.

Judging from his images, Mulder was most interested in the Vietnamese countryside where he visited com- munal 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 ‘Dreischeibe of Haiphong’. About 6000 workers ranged the dirt road to Do Son for cars. A local transport entrepreneur, A. Bertrand, promoted his private taxi service, while the city council designated 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 Porteaux de Do Son attracted the attention of Mulder’s lens.
and as those of local postcard producers, who also distributed prints of scantily clad fisherwomen. The Porteuses looked like singers of popular chansons (quân ho or ca tro) and were dressed in brightly coloured gauze tunics in rich purples and deep reds with multi-coloured ribbons and flattened round hats. The atmosphere of the photographs evokes a Vietnamese version of Manet’s Le Déjeuner sur L’Herbe.

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 an integral part of these photographs. 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 memorialization of Mulder’s Haiphong years is not a way of revising the past, but facing a future in which that very past is forgotten.

John Kleinen
University of Amsterdam
kleinen@uva.nl