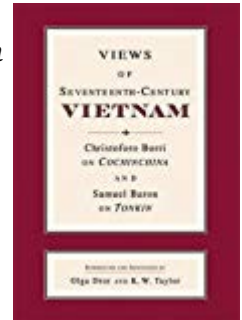


Olga Dror, K. W. Taylor. *Views of Seventeenth-Century Vietnam: Christoforo Borri on Cochinchina and Samuel Baron on Tonkin.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006. 290 pp. \$23.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-87727-741-5.



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This volume is a republication of two Vietnam travelogues from the seventeenth century, complete with annotation and introduction by two historians of Vietnam based in the United States. The value of this book lies not only in its presentation of firsthand accounts of seventeenth-century Vietnam, but also in the insightful introductions and detailed annotations by Olga Dror and K. W. Taylor. With its ample, well-researched footnotes and concise prose, this multilayered book can both occupy the interested reader and introduce unfamiliar readers to this most lively period in Vietnamese history through the eyes of two English-language accounts. In particular, readers with an interest in missionary histories, commerce in early modern Southeast Asia, and representations of religious life and state institutions by European travelers prior to the establishment of formal colonial rule will find this publication very helpful.

Dror and Taylor present two accounts of areas in present-day Vietnam (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 1976-present). The first, "An Account of Cochinchina" by a rogue Jesuit astronomer

named Christoforo Borri, requires a substantial introduction owing to the large amount of documentation concerning Borri and the recent 1997 complete translation of Borri's "Account" into contemporary Vietnamese. The second, "A Description of the Kingdom of Tonqueen," by Samuel Baron, a Hanoi native of Dutch and Vietnamese parents, has a shorter yet equally helpful introduction. Both republished seventeenth-century texts appear with ample footnotes containing references and tangential information, evidence of both editors' exegetical abilities. The subscript commentary alone illuminates these seventeenth-century travelogues.

Borri's account concerns the "temporal" and "spiritual state" of "Cochin-China" (Table of Contents, pp. 5-6), a place that corresponds to the southern kingdom of Dang Trong. Ruled by the Nguyen lords in the name of the Le Emperor since the beginning of the seventeenth century, Dang Trong or Cochinchina was later the site of the French colony of Cochinchina in the mid-nineteenth century. At the time of Borri's visit, the area had only recently come under the authority

of the Le Court following a series of migrations and military campaigns often mythologized in Vietnamese historiography as the "southerly march" (*nam tien*). His account of Dang Trong, which he refers to as "Cochin-China" with a reference to the term used by Portuguese traders, introduces readers to a strange foreign land through a combination of intellectual curiosity and spiritual zeal.

The editors have republished Borri's text in topical sections varying in length from three to ten pages, ideal for undergraduate or graduate level primary source classroom exercises. Of the "temporal" and "spiritual" topics covered by these small sections, among the most interesting are remarks on language in the section on civil and political government, the "Power of the King," trade and commerce, and all of the sections dealing with missionary activities, the conversion of Cochin-China's elites, and the "spiritual" needs of the Cochin-Chinese people.

Borri's remarks on the language of Cochin-China seem at once erudite and odd. He notes the coexistence of standardized classical characters with altered vernacular characters (Chu Han or Chu Nho and Chu Nom), but claims that "the Cochin-Chinese[sic] have reduced the characters to three thousand, which they generally make use of" (p. 123). Borri compares this practice of selectively using "Chinese" characters to the, in his estimation, more progressed system of Japanese phonetic alphabets (Hiragana and Katakana) to supplement Kanji or Chinese characters. Whether or not Borri's reference to "women's letters" in the Japanese case, being a derisive term for Hiragana, relates to the practice of Nushu among communities of women in China remains to be explored, although Dror does document his contentions about Hiragana with a reference to the *Japan Encyclopedia* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1993) (p.123).

Borri neatly sums up the linguistic situation in Cochin-China with an appeal to Europe, positing a two-tiered language environment in which

classical Chinese has the role that Latin occupies in Europe and Cochin-Chinese, in its spoken and written forms, serves as a vernacular tongue for the purposes of personal communication and, at times, poetic expression. The imposition of this comparison is more than just an explanatory device. By enabling interested readers to understand the linguistic world of Cochin-China in these classical terms, Borri casts the "doctors, judges, and governors" as stewards of a classical literary tradition much like that in which he had been educated (p. 123). His favorable comparison of the Cochin-Chinese canonical texts with "Seneca, Cato, and Cicero, among us" establishes an equivalency between two elites, a tendency noted by other studies of Jesuits in Asia (such as Lionel M. Jensen's *Manufacturing Confucianism: Chinese Traditions and Universal Civilization* [1997]) (p. 122). His remarks on language extend that equivalency to the relationship between the studied language and the spoken tongue.

Strangely, especially in light of Baron's extended arguments with Taverniere as introduced by Taylor in the same volume, Borri proclaims the ease with which a foreign speaker can learn to communicate in the language of Cochin-China. As Dror points out in her introduction to Borri's account, we know from other sources that the extent of Borri's linguistic abilities remain unclear with respect to Cochin-China. If there existed more than a passing similarity between the spoken idioms of Baron's Tonkin and Borri's Cochin-China, then remarks about the relative simplicity involved in learning one or both as a nonnative speaker should inspire doubt or, at the very least, measured suspicion.

The chapter entitled "Of the Power of the King of Cochin-China, and of the Wars he has in his Kingdom" offers a fascinating piece of state historiography filtered through the lens of Borri's account. Borri claims that the Mac family, which ruled from Hanoi from 1527 to 1592 before being isolated to the northern province of Cao Bang, had

contact with the Nguyen, the rulers of the kingdom in Cochin-China. Although, as Dror carefully reminds us, there has not yet surfaced any corroboration of this contact in other sources, Borri's insight does make the political picture of seventeenth-century Vietnam seem even more interesting, with a Cochin-China-based ruling elite (Nguyen) possibly seeking the assistance of a deposed dynasty (the Mac) limited to Cao Bang through the sponsorship of Ming China.

Dror also carefully considers the limitations of the recently published 1997 Vietnamese-language translation of Borri's text through the footnotes of this section. Drawing attention to the omission of favorable comments about the Mac present in Borri's account from the 1997 edition, Dror notes that deviance from the established story of the seventeenth century is "still a highly censored issue in Vietnamese historiography" (p. 129 n 9). Although this may be the case, curious readers might want additional information about sources for this standard story, one that has had such a strong influence over the profession of historical research in Vietnam and elsewhere that deviation from it constitutes a censorable offense. The otherwise thorough and rigorous citation of external sources suffers a rare yet lamentable stumble.

The section on commerce and trade, "Of the Trade and Ports of Cochin-China," should be of particular interest to readers already familiar with the work of Li Tana (*Nguyen Cochinchina* [1998]). Again, Borri supplies us with a text that demands the consideration of its larger circumstances. In this section, the omission is committed not by publishers/translators in Vietnam, but by Robert Ashley, the seventeenth-century British translator responsible for the English-language edition of Borri's account. In a lengthy footnote, Dror comments that Ashley's "interpretation" excludes Borri's mention of "expressions of hostility of inhospitableness on the part of the CochinChinese" (p.134 n 10). In so doing, he eliminates any

mention of the incident with the Dutch ship, an incident in which, per Borri's account, the Portuguese assisted the Cochin-Chinese in expelling the unwanted vessel. Willful omission or alteration of Borri's text during a translation project in the service of ulterior motives, in Ashley's case the avoidance of any positive picture of the Portuguese, is not the sole enterprise of modern Vietnamese translators. However, Ashley's selective editing is an "interpretation" (rather than an "omission") with the goal of attracting foreign investment and trade (p. 65).

A minor annotation issue from this chapter relates to the port city mentioned. Very possibly, the city referred to as "Chincheos" could be the modern city of Qinzhou in southern China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, southwest of Canton (Guangzhou) and approximately one hundred miles east of present-day Vietnam's Quang Yen province (p. 132). The 1622 de Herrera map cited by Dror may have referenced this city, a possibility that would enable historians of commerce familiar with Chinese-language sources to investigate the relationships among traders and travelers with a clear idea of the historical geography. A brief note could have indicated whether or not the editor had considered the plausibility of Chincheos as present-day Qinzhou.

The entire second part of Borri's account, "Of the Spiritual State of Cochin-China," contains observations about the conversion of Cochin-Chinese elites that illustrate the worldview and spiritual strategy of Jesuit missionaries. The story of the death of the Pulucambi (Faifo or Hoi An) governor exemplifies the Jesuit strategy of working closely with elites in the hopes of influencing the larger society. Although none of the fathers working with Borri succeeded in converting the governor, the *omsaiis* (Ong Sai, elders) asked about the state of the late governor's soul. The Jesuit fathers responded that his soul was not damned, despite his lack of baptism, due to the fact that the governor would have requested baptism if not for his

severe injuries. In the chapter "How God Made Way for the Conversion of the Province of Pulu-cambi, By Means of the Noblest Persons in it," the very title of which illustrates the focus and tactic of the Jesuits' missionary efforts, Borri's colleagues baptize the wife of a Cochinese ambassador to Cambodia. The ensuing baptism of her husband, and of his concubines, occurs only after he discusses the church's prohibitions against polygamy. Once he accepts the requirements of his conversion, the ambassador gives up his concubines, taking up the post in Cambodia with only his wife, the very person who had initiated contact with Borri in the first place. As Borri concludes, "being reputed a man of great knowledge, his example moved many of the most learned persons of Pulucambi to be baptized" (p. 161).

In a scholarly and informative introduction to the Borri text, "Phantasmatic Cochinchina," Dror gives readers a historical and personal context for Borri, allowing us to understand the motivations both for his writing the account and for its publication in English. Especially for readers unfamiliar with the intricacies of Vatican politics and the Jesuits during the seventeenth century, Dror's concise narrative is a useful complimentary piece to Borri's annotated account. Dror, however, uses this introduction to make a claim about "Vietnamese translators" similar in tone to a remark from the annotation of the Borri text. Although Dror cites a wealth of scholarly sources to substantiate Borri's goal and motivations for writing the text, she analyzes the "omissions" of the Vietnamese translators of Borri's work without reference to any source other than the 1997 publication of Borri's account in Vietnamese. While generalizations about the limitations of Vietnamese historiography and the production of intellectual work in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam are not necessarily inappropriate, Dror might have provided readers with some indication as to which

sources provided the basis for some of these claims.

The first claim relates to the deliberate inaccuracy of the 1997 edition. Although Dror, in the annotation of the Borri text, notes that Ashley omitted the episode about the Dutch ship to make Cochinese seem more inviting for potential investment, this interpretation is dwarfed in significance by "the revisionist project of the Vietnamese translators" (p. 72). Dror begins the section about the 1997 edition (sardonically entitled "Long Live Vietnam!"), with the evenhanded comment that "the Vietnamese translators pursued different goals" (p. 67). She, then, details the consequences of these different goals by highlighting some issues with the 1997 translation. One, in particular, concerns the rendering into Vietnamese of the English word "superstition." Although we are never given the term from the Italian original, Dror tells us that the translators replace "the condescending word 'superstition'" with "the neutral and more respectful compound 'habits and customs'" (p. 69).

Taylor annotates Baron's "A Description of the Kingdom of Tonqueen." Baron's account, divided into nineteen sections, describes life in seventeenth-century Tonkin through a series of brief compositions, similar in form to Borri's text. At several points, however, Baron expresses his dissatisfaction for one "M. Taverniere," also an author of a Tonkin travelogue but one, in Baron's estimation, of questionable content. Baron's criticism of Taverniere provides the theme for at least two of the sections, "Taverniere's Account of Tonqueen Animadverted On" and "That There is No Such Manner of Coronation and Inthronization of Their Kings, as is Related by M. Taverniere." In the introduction to the Baron text, Taylor compares Baron's tone to that of Paul Bunyan: "In both voices there is a sense of conviction and momentum, of engagement of error in defense of truth" (p. 83).

In his annotation of the Baron section, Taylor resists focusing on the traces of this personal ani-

mosity in favor of clarifying (and questioning) Baron's knowledge of Tonkin. In particular, Taylor qualifies Baron's depiction of Tonkin's system of government and law with several appeals to secondary scholarship about the seventeenth century. He also provides leads for readers who want more information about the context of Baron, notably recent work by Hoang Anh Tuan.

Some descriptions within Baron's account resonate with later, nineteenth-century colonialist language about Tonkin and the Tonkinese. For instance, Baron characterizes the "Mandareens" as "insatiable" (p. 210). When vessels trading foreign goods arrive, they would "cause the ships to be rummaged, and take what commodities may likely yield a price at their own rates, using the king's name to cloak their griping and villainous extortions" (p. 210). The theme of venal officials also appears in the nineteenth-century writings of Jean Dupuis (especially *L'Ouverture du Fleuve Rouge au Commerce et les Evenements du Tong-Kin, 1872-1873* [1879]) as an ancillary justification for opening the Red River to foreign commerce.

Though much briefer than Borri's, Baron's account offers a fascinating perspective on life in seventeenth-century Vietnam. Taylor's introduction and annotation guide readers through the contingencies and complexities of Tonkin as seen by a Dutch-Vietnamese merchant.

Readers can appreciate *Views of Seventeenth-Century Vietnam* on a few levels. Primarily, as a republication of valuable firsthand accounts, the book provides a service for educators, students, and those with a general interest in Vietnam prior to French colonialism. On a secondary level, the introductions help guide readers and, in the case of Dror's, reveal some of the tensions between the industries of scholarly production within and outside of Vietnam. Lastly, the annotation alone is enough to occupy some readers who will find inviting avenues for further inquiry and informative historical tangents.

One issue remains, however. Subtly introduced in the jointly authored introduction is the following statement about the accounts of Borri and Baron: "Any use of their writings to document two separate Vietnams must also take into account their backgrounds, perspectives, and aims" (p. 19). While the authors go to great lengths to demonstrate the backgrounds, perspectives, and aims of Baron and Borri, the sly suggestion of "two separate Vietnams" remains unaddressed. The qualification or confirmation of the distinctness of multiple Vietnams awaits future historical research.

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