
This is an important publication that renders several services to those interested in early modern Vietnam, Southeast Asia, and European science in the age of discovery. It brings together into one single volume the complete and annotated versions of Christoforo Borri’s early seventeenth-century ‘Account of Cochin-China’ and Samuel Baron’s late-seventeenth-century ‘Description of the Kingdom of Tonqueen’. This greatly facilitates comparison of and access to these two key early modern English-language accounts of a ‘Vietnam’ that was then divided into two independent and rivalling entities. The publication would be half its worth, however, if not for an introduction of 69 pages with a total of 332 footnotes, which renders the lives and struggles of Borri and Baron tangible and therefore also allows for new readings and reception of their work.

Although this publication is essentially composed of three self-sufficient ‘parts’ of roughly equal length that can be read independently or in any combination, this review privileges the editors’ introduction for the insights it provides. The preface explains that Dror was in charge of those parts of the introduction dealing with Borri as well as the annotations in his ‘Account’, mirrored by Taylor with regard to Baron’s ‘Descriptions’. The first, apparently jointly written section of the introduction (15-22) contains an authoritative discussion of the origins of the name of ‘Cochinchina’ and how Borri’s pioneering application of this name to the South only was closely related to the division of ‘Vietnam’ into two separate polities. While Borri thus reported from southern, downwards-pushing kingdom of the Nguyễn, Baron wrote on the northern kingdom of the Trịnh.

Although writing on different countries at slightly different times, many of the topics covered by Borri and Baron are similar. Hence both country studies have chapters on customs and manners, geography, economy, government, sects and religious practices. In terms of structure, the key difference is that Borri’s original Italian-language edition of 1631 was divided into two parts, one dealing with the ‘temporal state of the Kingdom of Cochin-China’, the other one with its ‘spiritual state’. This would prove an irresistible temptation to translators and editors. The first English-language translation by Ashley (1633) hence completely left out the second part. The first complete edition into English, which is reprinted and annotated in this volume, was consequently not published until 1704. As late as 1997, the first Vietnamese translation found it expedient to excise entire chapters from the second part and radically cut from the remaining ones, sometimes even altering the meaning, which Dror attributes to a desire to recreate a diplomatically, touristically, and politically correct feel-good past devoid of any conflict and controversy (67-73).

Although Borri’s and Baron’s chapters often deal with virtually the same topics, the conclusions they arrive at are different. Hence Borri (1583-1632), the Italian Jesuit and progeny of Milanese nobility, generally described the Cochinchinese in a positive light,
as ‘well governed, […]], welcoming to foreigners, good at trade and commerce, wealthy and prosperous, and their language […] as easy to learn’ (18-19). In contrast, Baron (c. 1640-?), the Dutch-Asian – his mother most likely was Vietnamese - merchant in British service attributed exactly opposite qualities to the ‘Tonqueneers’. These considerably contrasting perceptions could, of course, be attributed to the diverging historical trajectories of their host societies.

However, the unequal subject knowledge of Borri and Baron as well as their different passions and interests also partially explain their different views. In terms of hidden agendas, Dror’s analysis of primary sources and the ‘Account’ convincingly shows that Borri, the renegade Jesuit scholar, was far more driven by a passion for astronomical, cosmological, and navigational science than a zeal for mission, Vietnamese language acquisition, and conversion. This apparently led him to propose missions that would further his own research, in particular with regard to finding an accurate way of determining longitude (55).

In contrast to Borri’s ‘Phantasmatic Cochinchina’, one hidden agenda behind Baron’s ‘Real Tonkin’ might have been, according to Taylor, a need to justify the English East India Company’s losses in Tonkin’s political economy because Baron warns of ‘unrealistic expectations of profitable trade’ (74). However, far stronger and openly advertised was Baron’s design to provide feedback on Jean-Baptiste Tavernier’s ‘A New and Singular Relation of the Kingdom of Tunquin’ (1680) to Sir John Hoskins and Robert Hooke. Members of the Royal Society who were collecting information on foreign lands, they had interviewed him during his London stay in 1677. Soon dissatisfied with ‘correct[ing] the errors of others’ (194), however, Baron decided to ‘compose a new description of Tonqueen’, which he had completed by 1685 though it was not to be published until 1732.

Hidden or open authorial intentions aside, Borri’s and Baron’s knowledge of their subject matter was of unequal depth and arguably influenced their studies. The local knowledge of Father Cristoforo Borri, who was based in Cochinchina for up to five years, from 1618 to 1622, was uneven, sometimes insufficient, and his language skills were not fully adequate. This would lead to further distortions that were generally unintentional rather than deliberate (55), such as Borri’s ‘lack of comprehension of the basic doctrines of Buddhism and Daoism’ (37).

In contrast to Borri’s ‘Account’, the ‘Description’ of the Dutch-Vietnamese Baron was more even and knowledgeable. With at least about twenty-five years of his life spent in Tonkin, and fluent in the language, Baron was simply more in touch with matters politic and religious. Not only was he apparently born in Tonkin in about 1640 and lived there until his Dutch East India Company father sent him to Europe in 1659, but in the 1670s and 1680s Baron was accounted back in the East (Java, Taiwan, Tonkin). By then a naturalised Englishman in the service of the English East India Company, his position required him to observe developments in Tonkin’s elite politics closely.
While this book is also formally very good, several comments are in order. It would have facilitated understanding if the origin and date of the maps on pages 9 to 12 had been disclosed there rather than at the bottom of the preface on page 13. Moreover, the table of contents could have referred the reader to the thirteen plates of Baron’s book reproduced in this volume. In the bibliography (284), the sub-heading for the ‘Translations and editions of Borri’s’ Relatione (arranged chronologically)’ does not add value and is furthermore inconsistent because no sub-heading is provided for the editions and translations of Baron’s text. On the same page, ‘Buch, W. J. M. Buch’ contains one ‘Buch’ too many. The number of typographic errors is minimal: e.g. the name of the scholar ‘Schütte’, first introduced in note 33, is misspelled as ‘Shütte’ in notes 69, 72-3 (31f.); note 72 contains two further typos. On page 78, the first name of Sir John Hoskins is mistakenly given as ‘Thomas’.

These minor shortcomings aside, Olga Dror and Keith Taylor deserve praise for their service to the scholarly community, and Cornell University’s Southeast Asia Program for making this volume available at a very reasonable price. It is highly recommended for those in the fields of interests identified in the opening paragraph of this review. Moreover, some sections of the introduction and the texts are also instructive for classroom use.

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