

## **Merchants from the West**

*Written by Tam Thanh Nguyen*

Around 1293, on his journey home from China to Venice, Marco Polo - a legendary European merchant - passed through the Kingdom of Champa in the present-day South-Central Vietnam and Côn Đảo Island in the South. Through his captivating storytelling about the 24,000 kilometers traveled over 24 years in the East, the Kingdom of Champa became known to Europeans at the time as a wealthy land filled with elephants, fragrant woods of indescribable and mysterious elegance, jet-black ebony, odd marriage customs, and a king with 326 children. This King voluntarily submitted to and offered 20 elephants annually as tribute to the Yuan Emperor in China to avoid war. Côn Đảo Island was where Marco's fleet found shelter during a violent storm, losing eight out of 14 sailing ships but miraculously surviving.

However, Marco Polo was not the first merchant to set foot in Vietnam from the West. Dating back to the second century BC, Indian merchants and missionaries journeyed through Southeast Asia to northern Vietnam, pausing to establish the Buddhist hub of Luy Lâu in present-day Bắc Ninh province, before heading north to China. Archaeological evidence indicates that by the 2nd-3rd centuries, merchants from the Mediterranean, Middle East, and India frequented the thriving international trading port of Óc Eo (located in present-day An Giang province, Vietnam), trading with Southeast Asian nations and travelling north to trade with China. In the seventh-century, Arab explorers cum merchants, bringing with them Islam, also recorded their visits to the Kingdom of Champa.

Between the 16th and 18th centuries, the most powerful European maritime merchants (from Portugal, the Netherlands, England, and France one after another), along with Christian missionaries, interacted actively with Vietnam at ports like Hội An (in central Vietnam) and Phố Hiến (in northern Vietnam). The Nguyễn and Trịnh lords welcomed European merchants primarily to acquire weaponry for their armies, especially cannons and shipbuilding, and to form military alliances, amidst the bloodiest civil war in history, which dragged on for nearly 300 years. The warlords implemented a selective foreign trade policy, inviting European merchants capable of supplying weapons. Spain abstained from involvement due to the 1529 Saragossa Treaty with Portugal, an agreement extending the earlier 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas, which divided global influence and assigned Asia to Portugal while granting Spain the Philippines and the vast American continent. Although Denmark, Sweden, and Italy possessed strong fleets and East Indian Companies, they did not focus on supplying weapons and could not compete with other European powers, thus did not engage in Vietnamese trade during this period.

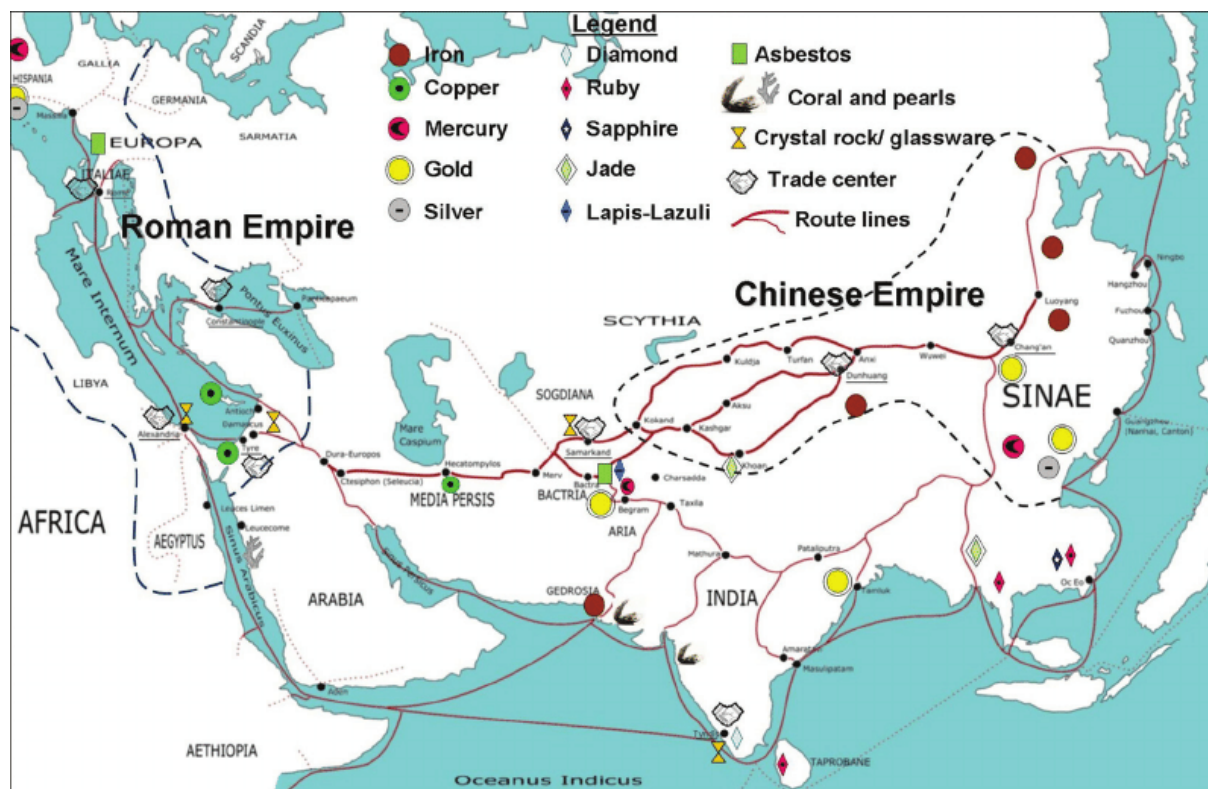
By the late 18th century, civil war had ended and weapon demand dropped, causing a decline in trade with Westerners. Essentially, trade with Westerners in previous centuries was not aimed at opening the economy nor integrating into the world, but rather at serving the demands of the civil war. Once those needs faded, rulers halted trading. The Western merchants' withdrawal from Vietnam was also due to unregulated commerce, discrimination in favour of Chinese merchants, extortion, corruption (especially in the North), and small-scale production unable to fulfill large orders. Surprisingly, these problems of the 16th-18th centuries remain much the same in Vietnam's early decades of the 21st century.

During France's colonial rule in Vietnam (1880s-1954), French merchants dominated trade, extracting natural resources and cheap labour via protectionist policies. Key industries included northern mining (coal and tin), southern plantations (rubber and coffee), and banking

led by the Bank of Indochina. Most raw products like rice, coal, and rubber were exported to France.

The latter half of the 20th century brought a series of dramatic historical events and bloody wars that deeply affected Vietnam’s international trade. Once again in Vietnamese history, the country was divided until 1975. The South followed a market-driven economy and traded mainly with the US, Japan, and France. The North adopted a command economy and exchanged goods with the Soviet Union, China, and other socialist countries. Both depended heavily on huge allied aid and faced trade deficits. By the century’s end, Western merchants found new opportunities to return, thanks to the ruling party’s open-door economic policies.

Vietnam’s location in the heart of the Far East kept the country from any initial contact from the West, unlike Malacca, Manila, and later Singapore, which were nodes for expanding eastward mutual trade links. Nevertheless, Vietnam’s seaports have consistently played a crucial role in Southeast Asia’s regional and international maritime trade networks. Ancient maritime trade routes connected East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, East Africa, and Southern Europe. The sea lanes linked the East China Sea, the Yellow Sea, the South China Sea, the Malacca Straits to the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and Mediterranean. Thus, from ancient times to the modern era, Vietnam has been at cross-roads of North-South and East-West trade routes stretching from Rome (Italy) in the west to Hakata port on Kyushu Island (southern Japan) in the east. See the map below.



**Old Maritime Mercantile Road**

*Source:* David Sevillano-López and F. Javier González (2011), “Mining and Minerals Trade on the Silk Road to the Ancient Literary Sources: 2 BC to 10 AD Centuries”, in J. E. Ortiz, O. Puche, I. Rábano and L. F. Mazadiego (eds.), *History of Research in Mineral Resources*, Cuadernos del Museo Geominero, 13, Instituto Geológico y Minero de España, Madrid, ISBN 978-84-7840-856-6, © Instituto Geológico y Minero de España 2011, p. 46, [link:https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236881270\\_Mining\\_and\\_minerals\\_trade\\_on\\_the\\_Silk\\_Road\\_to\\_the\\_ancient\\_literary\\_sources\\_2\\_BC\\_to\\_10\\_AD\\_Centuries](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236881270_Mining_and_minerals_trade_on_the_Silk_Road_to_the_ancient_literary_sources_2_BC_to_10_AD_Centuries)

Vietnamese mercantile ports served as important stop-overs on these maritime routes. Notable ancient ports included Long Biên, Vân Đồn, Phố Hiến, and Thăng Long-Kê Chợ in the North. In the Central region were the ports of Cù Lao Chàm, Hội An, Thị Nại, and Phan Rang. In the South were the ports of Óc Eo, Côn Đảo Island, Sài Gòn (Nhà Rồng port). Today, Hải Phòng in the North, Đà Nẵng in the Central region, and Bến Nghé, Cái Mép-Thị Vải in the South are prominent modern ports. Throughout the long history of maritime trade, Vietnam has served not only as a “trans-shipment”, “transit point”, or “entrepôt” for goods from China destined for global markets (due to Vietnam’s fatally geographical location), but also as a direct exporter of its own “exotic goods”.

In ancient times, Vietnam sold bronze drums, spices (mainly pepper and cinnamon), jade, agarwood, musk, camphor, ivory, fresh water (to foreign merchant ships), and even slaves. Later, exports expanded to include rough ceramics (of Bát Tràng brown glaze), gold, gems, raw silk, silk, forest and aquatic products, lacquerware, coal, and brown sugar. Today, Vietnam ranks among the world’s top exporters of rice, coffee, shrimp, cashew, and electronics.

Vietnam has traded with the world for goods like glassware (originally crafted by ancient Greco-Roman civilisations and distributed through Indian and Arab merchants), as well as weapons and military technology brought by Western merchants (including cast iron cannons, large guns, rifles, gunpowder, saltpeter, sulfur, wrought iron, copper, lead, and ship-building). The nation also imported silver (in the form of ingots and coins), zinc alloy for coins, textiles (like felt and Indian cotton), Western currencies, machinery and equipment, *etc.* From the 16th century onward, European East India Companies and modern multi-national corporations have connected Vietnam to international value chains.

Ancient maritime trade networks served not only as commercial channels, but also as pathways for cultural, religious, and political exchange, bringing European science and technology to Asia. These interactions profoundly influenced the social structures, development, and history of many nations, Vietnam included. These maritime networks should be celebrated as a shared heritage - built over generations by people from numerous nations - who crafted these legendary routes. Today, the countries along these maritime pathways are keenly aware of their strategic geo-political significance in the modern global order, shaped by super-powers rivalry.

Since the 13th century, the book “*The Travels of Marco Polo*” captivated Europe for centuries with thrilling tales of the East, sparking curiosity and motivating explorers like Christopher Columbus, Vasco da Gama, and Magellan. Today, the East and Vietnam are much more accessible to the world. Vietnamese people are known to be hospitable, energetic, versatile, and open to foreign cultures. Vietnamese people have embraced everything: from Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Confucianism, and the Latin alphabet to Marxist-Leninist doctrine, market economy concepts, and anything else if needed. Today, more and more foreign merchants are making their way to Vietnam, eager to discover new sensational stories that remain untold about this country.

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