Ha Tien Trade Port in International and Regional Trade Relations during 17th and 18th Centuries

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Abstract: Ha Tien, which covered a vast area of southern Vietnam in the past, was the location of one of the most important Vietnamese trade ports during the 17th and 18th centuries. Owing to the trading expertise of Mac Cuu and the Minh Huong people (descendants of Ming loyalist immigrants who settled in southern Vietnam during the 16th and 18th centuries), as well as the strategic vision and open policies of the Nguyen lords, a large trade network was established, connecting Ha Tien with other busy trade ports in Vietnam as well as internationally at that time. This achievement also sprang from the fact that Ha Tien trade port was founded during "the Age of Commerce", when systems of international seaports were set up and developed vigorously.

Keywords: Ha Tien, Mac family, *Đàng Trong* (Cochinchina), maritime trade, Age of Commerce.

Subject classification: History

1. Introduction

In the 16th and 17th centuries, commodity trade expanded aggressively, especially after the "Age of Discovery" (15th to mid-17th centuries). As the maritime routes connecting three oceans, "the Maritime Silk Road" linked East Asia with South Asia and West Asia and resulted in the "Age of Commerce" [14]. It promoted the participation of Vietnam's trade ports within the system of international and regional trade. During this period, in addition to Hoi An and Pho Hien trading posts, Ha Tien, which was established later (in the late 17th century), actively took part in international and regional trade activities. This paper, therefore, focuses on outlining the exchange and trade activities between Ha Tien trade port and other ports in Vietnam as well as those in the region and globally. Furthermore, based on studying and analysing the trade activities, the author would like to provide an objective and comprehensive perspective on the role and position of the trade port in the international and regional trade networks during the 17th and 18th centuries.

2. Establishment and development of Ha Tien trade port

In the past, Ha Tien covered a vast expanse of land, including the entire areas of present-day Kien Giang, Ca Mau and Bac Lieu Provinces, and a small part of An Giang and Soc Trang Provinces. Under the current geographical administration it belongs to Kien Giang Province.

The establishment and development of the port of Ha Tien were related closely to the policy of the Nguyen lords in *Đàng Trong* (lit. inner land, the region in the south of Vietnam, ruled by the Nguyen clan against the Trinh lords in the north), and the progress made by the Mac clan, particularly the outstanding part played by Mac Cuu, also spelled Mok Kui, (1655-1735) and subsequently his son, Mac Thien Tu (1708-1780). According to official historical documents, Mac Cuu was born in Ligou Commune, Kanghai District, Leizhou Prefecture, Guangdong Province, China. He was a courtier in the Ming dynasty. After the dynasty was overthrown, he refused to swear allegiance to the subsequent Qing dynasty and in 1680 fled southwards with his family, and eventually settled in the region of Ha Tien. He started to carry out a policy of land reclamation in the area, with the approval of Lord Nguyen Phuc Tan (1648-1687). Since Mac Cuu's time, Ha Tien's history has been well documented. In the "Geographical Description of Gia Dinh" (*Gia Định thành thông chí*), Trinh Hoai Duc, a Vietnamese historian, wrote: "Initially, it was established by a person named Mac Cuu, who came from Ligou Commune, Kanghai District, Leizhou Prefecture, Guangdong Province of the Great Ming. He did not swear allegiance to the Qing dynasty, after the Ming dynasty was overthrown. Thus, in the 19th year under the reign of the Kangxi Emperor (1680), he kept his hair customs and fled south. Realising (…) people from China, Chenla, Java, and other lands, who gathered to gamble in the casino had to pay a gambling tax called "*hoa chi"*, he bought the right to impose the tax. Furthermore, he also found buried treasure. As a result, he became rich. He recruited Viet wanderers to settle and build seven villages in Phu Quoc, Lung Ky, Can Bot, Vung Thom, Rach Gia, and Ca Mau" [5, pp.200-201]. In the "Annals of the Mac Family" (*Mạc Thị gia phả*), however, it is written as follows: "In the late period of the Ming dynasty, great disturbances took place in China. Grand Duke Mac with given name Cuu, who was born in Leizhou on the eight day of the fifth lunar month in the year of Yi Wei (*Ất Mùi*), in the ninth year of the Yongli reign (1655), could not stand the disturbances caused by Hu invaders (Manchu), so he crossed the sea to the south (…). The event took place in the year of Xinhai (*Tân Hợi*) (1671). In that year, Grand Duke Mac was 17 years old" [1, p.14]. There are still different opinions about exactly when Mac Cuu moved to Chenla (Vietnamese: *Chân Lạp)* but what is definite is that he came to the land of Ha Tien in the late 17th century, at the time of the transition from the Ming to Qing dynasties in China.

As an experienced merchant, Mac Cuu clearly saw the advantages of establishing a trade port in the area for domestic and regional exchange and trading activities. According to the "Annals of the Mac Family", "the Grand Duke spent days and nights

enticing people from foreign countries and encouraging them to come for business. The land became crowded with merchant boats and ships. Viet people, Tang people, Liao people, and Man people came to resettle there in droves. The population grew rapidly. Day by day the reputation of the Grand Duke became more illustrious" [1, p.15]. After settling there, Mac Cuu paid great attention not only to agricultural development but also the benefits brought by the sea and the trade port. Thus, he made every effort to build a trade port of international stature.

In 1708, Mac Cuu switched allegiance to the Nguyen lord and the land of Ha Tien was merged into the territory of *Đàng Trong*. After submitting to the Nguyen lords and with their support, Mac Cuu focused his efforts on building a defensive system, strengthening impressive compound, and recruiting talented people. In the same year, Lord Nguyen Phuc Chu conferred upon him the role of Commandant (*Tổng binh*) of Ha Tien and the title of Marquess Cuu Ngoc (*Cửu Ngọc hầu*). He built a military garrison (called *Mang Khảm* by Chenla people, *Phương Thành* by Viet people) and more people came to settle there [4, p.80]. Mac Cuu and subsequently Mac Thien Tu, his son and successor, worked hard to make Ha Tien trade port become the most important one on the trade route crossing Phu Quoc Bay (referred to in more detail later in section 4).

In the "Geographical Description of Gia Dinh", Trinh Hoai Duc described Ha Tien Town and Ha Tien trade port as follows: "Ha Tien defence citadel faced southeast (the *Xun* trigram) with Binh Son Mountain as its back support and To Chau Mountain as its front screen. The high sea was seen as a large moat in the south, and Dong Ho as the front. There were earthen ramparts on three sides of the citadel. The rampart running from Duong Chu to the right gate was 112.5 *trượng* (*trượng* is an ancient unit of length in Vietnam, equivalent to 4m) long, while the rampart running from the right gate to the left gate was 153.5 *trượng* long. The length of the rampart running from the left entrance to the boat-building workshop (*xưởng thuyền*) and then to Dong Ho was 308.5 *trượng*. All those ramparts were 4 *thước* (*thước* is an ancient unit of length in Vietnam, equivalent to 0.4m) in height and 7 *thước* thick. The trench was 10 *thước* in width. An office building is located in the centre of the citadel. A house called "*vọng cung"*, where people bow to the absent king, is located in front of the office building with military camps on the right and the left. In the front yard, there is a bridge called Tan Thach. The Envoy Reception and the Treasury are found on the left and the right of the front yard respectively. The Defence Governor's Palace is located at the base of Ngu Ho (Five Tigers) Mountain. A town market was opened up to the left of "*vọng cung".* Quan Thanh Temple was built to the left of the office building. Tam Bao (Three Jewels) Pagoda was located behind the office building. The Mac ancestral temple was built to the left of the pagoda. The market of the east town looked down the lake port, with a fish farm nearby. To the north of the Treasury, there is a shrine called the "Councillor Shrine" (*Miếu Hội đồng*), due north of which a ship dock is located. The citadel is divided into specific areas by main roads. To the left of Quan De Temple is Dieu Kieu Street. In the port, there is a wooden

bridge crossing the sea to Dai Kim islet. Going eastwards from Dieu Kieu Street is Old Market Street. Further eastwards is "Progenitor Market" (*Phố chợ Tổ sư*) and then a large main street. All of those were built previously by Mac Ton for trade activities. The citadel is criss-crossed with crowded streets. Viet, Chinese, Chenla, and Java people together gathered and settled there. On the river and the sea, many boats and ships sailed in and out. It really is a coastal hub of commerce" [5, pp.200-201].

Mac Cuu built seven villages along the coast of Phu Quoc Bay. This became the foundation for the establishment of markets and a hub for domestic and international trading activity. Of those markets, My Duc, Hoang Giang and Rach Gia were the principal ones. Apart from the markets, a system of seaports also was developed. Owing to the establishment of these networks, as well as the diversity of local commodities, trading activity was developed not only in the area of Ha Tien but also in different regions of Tonkin (the name for northern Vietnam in the 17th and 18th centuries) and Cochinchina. Domestic merchants, especially those from Cochinchina, considered Ha Tien to be a plentiful store of goods and a guaranteed source of good in times of famine.

After settling in Ha Tien, Mac Cuu paid attention not only to agricultural development but also the benefits brought by the sea and associated seaports, with a view to domestic and international trade of local products.

In that time, he made every effort to build Ha Tien into an economic, political, and cultural centre as a trade port of international stature. Thus, thanks to Mac Cuu's clear-sighted vision, together with a favourable geographical position, and abundant natural resources, Ha Tien flourished as a busy international trade port, In addition to welcoming cargo vessels to Ha Tien, he proactively dispatched merchant boats from Ha Tien to other seaports around both the country and the region. Consequently, a large trade network was established, connecting Ha Tien trade port with other domestic and international trade ports at that time.

3. Trade activities of Ha Tien trade port in the 17th and 18th centuries

Ha Tien was located at an intersection of trade routes, with sources of goods, and different political projects, attracting streams of migrating population, and their diverse cultures. The latter included: people from mountainous areas in Laos and Cambodia, Malays coming from the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian Archipelago, Thais from the west, and different Hoa (Chinese) groups coming from areas around the bay, and Viet people who arrived during the process of Southward expansion. Ha Tien was positioned on the intersection of one of the most ancient trade routes in Southeast Asia connecting the Indian Ocean with the East Sea (*Biển Đông,* i.e. the South China Sea) via the Thai Canal (also known as the Kra Canal, mentioned later in this paper of section 4) in the first centuries AD. The area was part of the ancient kingdom of Funan with its prosperous Oc Eo seaport, the kingdom's most important trade port at that time. Oc Eo was the largest trading centre in Southeast Asia and a commercial hub in the region and globally for many centuries. With significant links in the east area of the West Sea (*Biển Tây*), the port

had close ties with India, West Asia, many important trade ports and economic centres in Southeast Asia, as well as the Chinese market [7]. Owing to a favourable location coupled with Mac Cuu's experienced management and commercial skill, Ha Tien quickly developed into an important regional and inter-regional trade port, promoting trade activities and connecting a network with other trade ports, in Vietnam, East Asia, and globally.

3.1. Domestic trade activities

Trade and exchange relations were established between Ha Tien and many other areas in Vietnam, especially the region of Bien Hoa Province and the former neighbouring province of Gia Dinh. This can be seen through the marriage of Mac Cuu with Bui Thi Lam, a Viet woman from Dong Mon District, Bien Hoa Province, and the marriage of his younger sister with Tran Dai Dinh, the son of Chinese general Chen Shangchuan (*Trần Thượng Xuyên*), who contributed greatly to land reclamation and territorial expansion into Dong Nai and Gia Dinh Provinces. In 1679, after the military movement "Oppose the Manchus and Resurrect the Ming" ended in failure in China, Chen Shangchuan led more than 3,000 soldiers and their families, sailing across the sea on 50 ships to Dai Viet. He and his followers pledged allegiance to the Nguyen lords. Blessed with talented organisational skills, Chen Shangchuan and others were asked by Lord Nguyen Phuc Tan to move south to Cochinchina. Here they contributed greatly to the development of the Dong Nai - Gia Dinh region into a dynamic economic hub. This evolved into a crowded business and economic centre. At that time the Dong Nai - Gia Dinh area known as for Great Town Nong Nai (*Nông Nại Đại Phố*), also called Island Town (*Cù Lao Phố*), became one of the most prosperous regional and international trade ports in South Vietnam. It can be said that the aforementioned marital relationships linked Ha Tien trade port with Dong Nai - Gia Dinh, resulting in a network of rice markets in Southwest and Southeast Vietnam.

In 1735, after devoting 27 years to develop Ha Tien, Mac Cuu passed away. His son, Mac Thien Tu, later also known as Mac Thien Tich, succeeded his father and continued to govern this prosperous area. Mac Thien Tu was granted more power by the Nguyen lords. For example, he became Lord Commandant (*đô đốc*) of Ha Tien, and three ships holding Nguyen lord's certificate (*long bài*) were made available for him to carry out trade activities with Hoi An and other international trade ports without having to pay taxes. In addition, he was allowed to cast coinage. In the "Miscellaneous Chronicles of the Pacified Frontier" (*Phủ biên tạp lục*), Le Quy Don (1726-1784), wrote: "In addition to the three ships bearing the lord's badge that allowed trade activities with a tax exemption, the merchant boats came from Ha Tien to Hoi An had to pay very little tax. During this period, a merchant boat coming from Ha Tien to Hoi An only had to pay 300 *quan* (a unit of currency in Vietnam in the past) arrival tax and 30 *quan* of departure tax, while the corresponding figures Western boats had to pay 8,000 *quan* and 800 *quan* respectively. Meanwhile, a boat coming from Guangdong (China) to Hoi An had to pay 3,000 *quan* of arrival tax and 800 *quan* of departure tax. It

meant that the tax imposed on a merchant boat from Ha Tien was equivalent to 0.037% and 0.1% of that imposed on a merchant boat from the West and Guangdong respectively" [2, p.53]. This firstly demonstrates the preferential policy of the Nguyen lords on their close ties with Ha Tien, and secondly the proactiveness of expanding Ha Tien's trading activities with other seaports.

The products traded between Ha Tien and other regions in the country were largely rice, beeswax, elephant tusks, and forest products which became Ha Tien's main lines of business at that time. Local merchants, especially those in *Đàng Trong*, considered Ha Tien a storehouse on which the people could rely on against starvation. Traders also imported certain products which were in short supply in Ha Tien, such as sugar, black pepper, gold, gems, and amber. At the same time, they imported products which they could sell to other countries for profit. In conclusion, the authorities proactively incorporated Ha Tien into the network of trade ports in Cochinchina, establishing a close connection from Ha Tien to Dong Nai-Gia Dinh and further up the coast to Hoi An.

3.2. International trade activities

Ha Tien trade port was an important link in the east of the West Sea blossoming into a regional and inter-regional central trade port in the 17th and 18th centuries. This was possible due to its favourable position overlooking the Gulf of Thailand, a busy trade route and gateway between Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar, together with Mac Cuu's trade promoting policies. As such, the port was able to satisfy the demand for trade with China and other countries in Southeast and Northeast Asia.

At that time Ha Tien, known as "Little Guangzhou", was an attractive destination for merchant boats from the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, Java, Thailand, India, Burma (now Myanmar), Guangzhou, and Fujian, etc.

In order to increase the variety of products for trade, Mac Cuu's local government expanded the trade network by building additional ports. According to the "Geographical Description of Gia Dinh", these included the following:

(1) Can Bot port, which was located 160 Chinese miles (*dặm*) (the Chinese mile is known as a *li*) due west of Ha Tien Defence Governor's Palace. The port was 49 *trượng* in width and 5 *thước* in depth. It was also the place where the Java Defence Department was set up. In this location, there are market streets where Vietnamese, Chinese, Chenla, and Javanese gathered to do business. A guesthouse also opened where Siamese visitors often stayed.

(2) Kien Giang (Rach Gia) port, which was located over 193 Chinese miles due east of the Ha Tien Defence Governor's Palace. It was situated west of Kien Giang Province and was crowded with merchant boats and busy market streets.

(3) Dai Mon (Great Gate) port was located in the east of Kien Giang. It was 26 Chinese miles from the Ha Tien Defence Governor's Palace and connected to the Kien Giang River. It was a residential area for local fishermen.

(4) Doc Hoang (Ong Doc) port was four *trượng* in width and 10 *thước* in depth. Located 107 Chinese miles due west of Long Xuyen, the port was crowded with market streets and merchant boats. After

sailing 84 Chinese miles from the port, one could reach the Khoa Giang River junction and then the open sea.

(5) Hao Ky (Ghenh Hau) port, which was located in the east area of Long Xuyen County was 120.5 Chinese miles due east of Ha Tien Defence Governor's Palace. It joined the upstream port of Bo De in the southwest and Doc Hoang port in the northwest [5, pp.70-72].

To encourage local and foreign traders to do business in Ha Tien, Mac Cuu implemented a tax-exemption policy for merchant boats arriving at Ha Tien trade port on the twelfth day of the twelfth lunar month (the date of birth of his son, Mac Thien Tu). Besides promoting trade activities, the local Mac authorities were proactive in establishing fleets of merchant boats for overseas maritime trade. In 1728 and 1729, Mac Cuu sent Luu Ve Quan and Quynh Tap Quan to Japan on business. The Tokugawa Shogunate (also known as the Edo Shogunate of 1600-1868) granted them a certificate (*tín bài*) to carry out business. In 1729, another team of merchant boats also sailed from Ha Tien to China with the aim of establishing trade relations [15, p.91].

Regarding the trade relations between Ha Tien and other trade ports in the region and around the world, there was a rich diversity of products. According to the record written by Bowyer, a British merchant, trading boats from Southeast Asia in the 17th century, often carried a wide variety of products to Cochinchina, including: betel, red wood (used to dye cloth), paint, nacre (mother of pearl), elephant tusks, tin, lead, and rice from Thailand; orpiment (used for pigment), benzoin, Amomum, wax, paint, nacre, red wood, pine resin, buffalo skin, deer skin and tendons, elephant tusks, and rhinoceros horns from Cambodia; silver, eucalyptus wood, betel, red and white spandex fabric, and red dyes from Batavia (capital of the Dutch East Indies); silver, sulphur, red wood, shells, tobacco, wax, and deer tendons from the Mani Peninsula. Meanwhile, the products Cochinchina exported included: gold, iron, yarn, silk, Aaloe, myrrh, sugar, rock sugar, swallow's nests, black pepper, and cotton" [8]. In the "Dai Nam Comprehensive Encyclopaedia" (*Đại Nam nhất thống chí*), it is written that commodities that could be brought into Ha Tien were: "silk, carapaces, tortoise shell, black amber, beeswax, honey, flowered sedge mats, Aloe, black pepper, swallow's nests, sea cucumbers, swim bladders, fins, and fish sauce" [10, p.33]. Of all these commodities, black amber was considered very precious and a popular item with merchants from China, Thailand, and Malaysia. In the "Miscellaneous Chronicles of the Pacified Frontier", Le Quy Don wrote: "Black amber was abundant in Ha Tien. It looked like a lump of copper, but had a black colour like iron. It was said that one could avoid harmful effects of the wind if carrying black amber; it was very convenient to use black amber to make rosaries" [2, p.238].

In addition to the supply of agricultural, aquatic, and forest products, Ha Tien trade port was an important source of tin for merchants from Guangzhou. Although tin was not exploited in Ha Tien, it was in abundant supply at the trade port due to commercial activities with other countries in the region. According to the "Guangzhou Clerical Records" of the Dutch East India Company, much of the tin exported to Guangzhou was via Ha Tien trade port.

From 1758 to 1774, Guangzhou imported 83,267 *đàm* (1 担 is 50kg)[2] of tin from trade ports in Southeast Asia, of which 24,684 *đàm*, 30%, was imported directly from Ha Tien. In 1769 alone, Guangzhou imported 6,000 *đàm* from the port. In 1774, the amount of tin carried by a sailing boat from Ha Tien to Guangzhou was 1,400 *đàm*; additional amounts of tin were carried by two other boats from Ha Tien to Guangzhou. The total amount of tin carried from Ha Tien to Guangzhou was estimated to be 5,000 *đàm* in that year [16, pp.190-209]. The yearly amounts of tin imported by Guangzhou from Southeast Asia are shown in the following table.

Table 1: Guangzhou Tin Imports from Southeast Asia (1758-1774)

Unit: *đàm* (50kg)

Year	Siam	Passiack	Cancao	Palembang	Terengganu	Macau
1758			7,000			
1762				5,000		1,500
1763				10,000		
1764				8,000		
1765				10,000		
1766						1,500
1767		3,163	1,984	11,000		
1768	100	1,000	2,700			
1769			6,000			
1770			2,000			
1773					320	
1774			5,000	7,000		

Source: 李塔娜、范岱克 (2006),《18世纪的东南亚 水城，新资料与新观点》，梁志明主编《亚 太研究论丛》第三辑，北京大学出版社.

Table 1 shows amounts of tin imported from trade ports in Southeast Asia to Guangzhou from 1758 to 1774. The amount of tin imported from Ha Tien trade port, referred to as "*Cancao*" in the table, makes up 30% of the total amount of tin imported by Guangzhou and is ranked second, after the amount of tin imported from Palembang[3], which was the largest centre of tin production in Southeast Asia. This partly demonstrates the role of Ha Tien trade port in the international and regional trade networks. It not only provided locally produced commodities, but also played an intermediary role in providing commodities produced in other countries.

According Le Quy Don in the "Miscellaneous Chronicles of the Pacified Frontier", in the 17th and 18th centuries trade ports in *Đàng Trong* were always seen as a destination for international merchant boats

from Shanghai, Guangdong, Fujian, Hainan (China), Japan, Thailand, the Philippines, and the Netherlands. Such vessels came to Ha Tien trade port not only to buy commodities but also to sell products in response to market demand in *Đàng Trong* and other areas in the region. In order to profit from selling commodities bought in other countries, Western merchants sold goods in *Đàng Trong,* such as Japanese silver and weapons, Chinese silk, porcelain, traditional medicine, western woollen clothes, cannons, crystal, glass, and so on. Meanwhile, the products they bought in *Đàng Trong* included porcelain, silk, cotton, spices, food ingredients, sugar cane, and local forest products.

It can be concluded that the diversity of products, and favourable natural conditions of Ha Tien contributed to making it one of the busiest trade port of *Đàng Trong* during the 17th and 18th centuries. Its prosperity was a magnet for international and local merchants and was considered to be an ideal destination for those who wanted to start a business. Throughout the 18th century Ha Tien's trading activity turned the port into a dynamic hub attracting merchant boats from many regions such as *Đàng Trong*, Malaysia, Java, India, Thailand, China, Japan, Portugal, etc. Such activity accelerated Ha Tien's integration in the overall development of the "Age of Asian Commerce".

4. Position of Ha Tien trade port in international and regional trade networks

Ha Tien trade port was established during the "Age of Commerce", which saw the establishment and development of international maritime trade networks [13]. Thus, the trade port rapidly integrated and assumed an important role in international and domestic trade, becoming one of the busiest ports in the ancient and early modern periods. Although Ha Tien trade port was neither as busy nor developed as its Hoi An counterpart, it was blessed with certain advantages. It was situated in a propitious place by Phu Quoc Bay with abundant supplies of produce and the support of the Mac governors' trade-focused policies. As a result, Ha Tien became a commercial centre and played a significant role in the economic development of the southern part of *Đàng Trong.* It also solidified its position in the trading network with domestic and international trade ports.

From the 16th century, the Southeast Asian sea region was an active centre of maritime trade. Western capitalist powers came to the region to buy spices, precious stones and metals. In 1511, Portugal captured Malacca, seizing control of the strategic trading strait, before moving on to Guangzhou. Following the Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch occupied Manila and Batavia respectively. Many significant changes to the maritime trade routes in Southeast Asia were made [9, p.103]. Ha Tien trade port was built along the Dong Ho lagoon, looking out over Phu Quoc Bay, giving it advantages to develop into an international trade port. Phu Quoc Bay, also called the West Sea or Southwest Sea (*Biển Tây Nam*), was a semi-enclosed sea, with access to the East Sea, also called South China Sea, (*Biển Đông*) and connected to the Indian Ocean by the Malacca and Sunda Straits, due northwest and southeast of Sumatra respectively. These straits were lifelines for maritime

transport connecting the Western world with the Eastern world, especially after the Maritime Silk Road was formed in the 7th century. In reality, there is also the Kra Isthmus to the west of the bay, situated on the narrowest strip of land in the south of the Malay Peninsula. Over the centuries, merchant boats from India, Persia, and West Asia transported goods from the Bay of Bengal through the Kra Canal to Phu Quoc Bay. It can be said that the latter was rich in potential providing essential routes for cultural and economic exchange between countries in the region.

Ha Tien trade port was, therefore, an important post in the eastern part of the West Sea, strategically positioned on the Asian maritime trade route, running along the Vietnamese coast to either Guangzhou (China) or Luzon (the Philippines). In addition to its advantageous location, Ha Tien was blessed with an abundant supply of local products and goods. Moreover, the people there were experienced in exploiting and turning their produce into high value goods for trade. For example, they knew how to make tallow for white candles, which were very popular with Chinese, Thai, and Malaysian merchants. With these advantages, Ha Tien rapidly took part in trade activities and played an important role in domestic, regional, and international trade.

Regarding Vietnam's economy, Ha Tien was seen as the southernmost trade port of *Đàng Trong* and an ideal destination for merchants from all over the country. With advantages on the land and the sea, the agricultural knowledge of the Viet, Khmer and Hoa communities, under the leadership of the Mac family, especially under Mac Cuu and Mac Thien Tu, who had the minds of traders and a policy attaching importance to trading, coupled with the protection and support of the Nguyen lords, Ha Tien quickly became an economic centre and a significant trade port in the southern part of Vietnam in the 17th century.

It became a place for agricultural supply and trade between various regions such as Gia Dinh, Dong Nai, Hoi An, Thanh Ha, etc. As recorded in Nguyen dynasty historical documents, at the time there was a network of fairly crowded markets in Ha Tien including: My Duc market in Ha Chau District with crowded shops, where Vietnamese and Chinese people gathered to do business; Sai Phu market in Kien Giang District, also called Rach Gia market, with its bustling streets and merchant boats; Hoang Giang market in Long Xuyen District, with densely populated streets and comings and goings of merchant boats; and especially San Chim market in Dong An and Vinh Hoa Villages, Kien Giang District. Here a haven for birds in the area attracted thousands of sea birds every year during the breeding season. When the birds moulted, their feathers were collected and sold to Chinese merchants. This was called "a bird-garden tax" [11, p.28].

Regarding regional trade, Ha Tien played an important role in supplying rice and connecting trade networks between regions. It was located between two major rice producing hubs: the Mekong Delta and Chao Phraya Delta (also called Mae Nam Delta). Therefore, in addition to local produce, Ha Tien became one of the most important trade ports for rice supply in Southeast Asia in the 18th century [16, pp.190-209]. It was regarded as "the most profuse rice storehouse in the east land of Asia", which Malays,

Thais and people in *Đàng Trong,* also called *Nam Hà* (lit. South of the River), would rely upon for food when facing with the threat of starvation.

It was not only an entrepôt, as recorded by Dutch merchants, but also a place where merchants would come to exchange black pepper for salt and rice. In the 18th century, Ha Tien was also a trade centre in the lower section of the Mekong River with connections to trade networks not only with the Cardamom Mountains, the Laos Highlands and Cambodia, but also along the trade systems along the canals and the flood plains of west side of the Bassac, or Hau (Vietnamese: *Hậu*), River. In world trade, Ha Tien was seen by Southeast Asian merchants and some Western merchants as a not to be missed destination on the East-West trade route along the Maritime Silk Road. Paul A. Van Dyke, an American scholar, confirmed that Ha Tien had been an important entrepôt for goods exchange between Guangzhou and Southeast Asia in the 18th century, based on the records kept by Swedish and Dutch merchants. Every year, around 30 merchant boats would leave Guangzhou heading to Southeast Asia. A large proportion, about 85-90% of those boats, came to Ha Tien and Hoi An (Quang Nam Province) [16, pp.190-209]. Ha Tien was held in high regard in Western and Chinese documents in the 18th century. In a Chinese document titled "Huangchao Wenxian Tongkao" (Dynastic Comprehensive Examination of Literature), Ha Tien was called "Gangkou *Guo"* (*cảng khẩu quốc*): "It was a port of a small kingdom in Nanhai with a territory of 100 square [Chinese] miles. Local people favoured literature, and Confucian books. There was a Confucius temple and a school for young people, etc. Local products include sea cucumbers, dried fish, meat, and shrimp. In the 7th year under the reign of the Yongzheng Emperor (1729), a maritime trade route of 7,200 [Chinese] miles in length connecting the realm to Guangdong was established" [3, p.38]. In the 18th century, Ha Tien was so prosperous that it was not only well-known in China but also in Europe [6, p.363]. Based on these records and judging by the number of merchant boats coming to Ha Tien, it is clear to see how high the Chinese merchants regarded Ha Tien's position and role in international and regional trade.

Thus, for all the reasons previously mentioned - advantageous position, abundant goods, the Mac family's policy placing importance to trading, and support of the Nguyen lords, many people from within Vietnam and abroad were drawn to Ha Tien for long-term settlement and business opportunities.

All these factors created the foundations for the establishment and development of Ha Tien as a trade port, making it a political, economic, and cultural centre of the region and significantly helping develop Vietnam's trade. It was one of the favoured destinations of both domestic and international merchants and an important trade post connecting Vietnam with Southeast Asia and the world in the 17th and 18th centuries.

5. Conclusion

Although Ha Tien trade port was established quite late (at the end of the 17th century) and only enjoyed a short period of prosperity for one century (the 18th century), it quickly

assumed an important role in regional and international trade networks due to its favourable geographical position with access to major bodies of water shared with many countries in the region, a dense system of canals and rivers which had potential in many fields, and a convenient system of river ports and seaports. Ha Tien was seen as a very important entrepôt by Southeast Asian and Western merchants journeying along the Maritime Silk Road. Meanwhile, it was not only the southernmost station of the process of southward expansion, but also a gateway for Vietnam to exploit the East Sea via the West Sea. The above reasons clearly show how important Ha Tien's role was in the regional and international trade networks which contributed to Vietnam's commercial development in the 17th and 18th centuries. It was also a centre for cultural exchange and acculturation.

Based on a wide range of activities relating to exchange, trade, communication, and co-residence, external cultural elements were gradually adopted by Ha Tien's community, integrated harmoniously with local values and beliefs, which became a multi-coloured picture in the general Vietnam's culture.

Notes

[1] This paper was published in Vietnamese in: *Tạp chí Nghiên cứu Đông Nam Á*, số 6 (219), 2018, then developed into this English version. Translator: Nguyen Tuan Sinh. Language editor: Stella Ciorra.

[2] *Đàm* (担) is a Chinese ancient unit of weight equivalent to 50kg.

[3] Palembang is a city of the Indonesian province of South Sumatra, which is presently located in the west of Indonesia. It was one of the oldest metropolitan areas and used to be the capital of a monarchy with great maritime power.

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