

## 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 Kleinen immersed himself in this unique collection, determined to learn more about the images and the man behind them.

**T**here is little in the collection of photographs that Jan George Mulder (1869-1922) left to his family that provides direct information about his life in Vietnam. What we do know about the man is gleaned from archival documents, secondary sources and account books that he kept after 1908 on his return to the Netherlands. Mulder was an employee of the German firm, Speidel & Co, that began operating in Indochina in



*J. G. Mulder at home  
with a servant*

the 1880's. He travelled to Asia at the age of 35, and in 1904 started to sell lamp oil (kerosene) for the Asiatic Petroleum Company (APC) in the remote harbour town of Haiphong. APC was the marketing company for two emergent giants in the oil business, Shell Transport & Trading Co. and Royal Dutch. From 1904 to 1908, Mulder used a *Gaumont Stéréospido* to photograph his work environment (offices and outside settings), scenes from his private life, as well as outings to several places. Mulder's photographs are mainly stereoscopic images on glass plates, and depict cities, harbours, landscapes and a number of human subjects whose identities remain unknown. The result is a large number of fascinating if somewhat enigmatic images of colonial Haiphong and its surroundings, none of which contains a single caption or any textual information about what is pictured.

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 preferred format of photographic representation. Nevertheless, Mulder chose to make stereoscopic views, and his camera, a robust *Gaumont Stéréospido*, and a stereoscope have survived together with the glass plates. Mulder's choice of equipment is surprising given that he was from a family of photographers and would have had extensive knowledge about the latest developments in photography. A visit to the World Exhibition in Paris in 1900 probably induced him to buy the expensive *Stéréospido*, which was aggressively promoted by Gaumont.

## Haiphong

The gate to the Red River delta was the port of Haiphong, which means 'the Guardian of the Sea'. Traditionally, a lucrative trade in silk, tea and textiles extended as far as Yunnan in southern China. Haiphong soon became home to a small French enclave and gradually grew to include a number of villages along the main river, the Cua Cam. This *Quartier Indigène* was preceded by a harbour area where small storage facilities and a customs house were built. In 1884, the

former French resident and mayor of Hanoi, Raoul Bonnal, built a European quarter. In 1904, the year that J.G. Mulder arrived, the city of Haiphong resembled a building site, with a newly erected hospital for the French Navy and local government staff, and other major projects underway. The municipality was represented by a tribunal, a Chamber of Commerce and a local branch of the Banque de l'Indochine. The population numbered about 18,000 Vietnamese and 6,000 Chinese. A minority of the about 1,000 Europeans, mainly French men and a few women, occupied the European quarter. Mulder's compatriot, Hendrik Muller, described the town in his *Azië gespiegeld* (Asia Mirrored, 1908) as having no quayside yet, and "seen from the river it looks unimportant, but as soon as one enters, it is very hospitable. Along the excellent, paved roads, lined with small trees and pavements, are tall, beautiful houses built of brick and plastered in French style". Jan George Mulder had his office along the busy Rue Paul Bert, in a building Speidel & Co shared with a branch of the British Chartered Bank. He soon moved to a private house at the corner of the Canal Bonnal and the Rue de Cherbourg. Using his *Stéréospido*, Mulder created a visual memory for his relatives in the Netherlands. His record of Haiphong includes the Chinese quarter,



*Harbour estuary, with river sampans on the foreground*

the streets near his house, the port area and the surrounding countryside, including the embryonic beach resort of Do Son. He also photographed the storage area located at the entrance to the harbour, which contained lamp oil tins and large oil tanks inscribed with the company names APC and Speidel & Co.

Mulder's pictures of himself seated or travelling with Chinese traders are fascinating. These compradores distributed the lamp oil throughout the Delta. One of them, a Vietnamese entrepreneur who had entered the maritime trade, was reputedly one of the four wealthiest people in Vietnam. An almost visible 'colour line' existed in Haiphong. This was institutionalized in the colonial grid of the town planning, with separate quarters for Vietnamese, Chinese and Europeans. The Chinese were treated as foreign nationals or 'Eastern foreigners'. Part of an international link between the port of Hong Kong and Haiphong, their presence was tolerated as long as it benefited French business.

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 Hotel du Commerce, a meeting place for bachelors and European prostitutes, and the Hotel 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 Angkor Wat. Boats were the primary method of transport, and Mulder used the river during his few trips to Hanoi, where he photographed the Pont Doumer, the busy waterfront and the Hoan Kiem Lake.

Judging from his images, Mulder was most interested in the Vietnamese countryside where he visited communal houses, temples and pagodas, and where he went duck hunting. He favoured outings



*Mulder dining with Chinese compradores at their office*



*Storage for lamp oil, brand Crown Oil, produced by Shell or Dutch Petroleum, and distributed by APC through Speidel & Co.*



*European quarter of Haiphong with the Hotel de Marseille and the Hotel de l'Europe (today the Huu Nghi Hotel) in the background*

to the Bay of Ha Long and the beach at Do Son (20 kilometres from Haiphong). This fishing village was originally a centre for blue water fishing. Soon it would serve as the 'Deauville of Haiphong'. About 3,000 workers readied the dirt road to Do Son for cars. A local transport entrepreneur, A. Bertrand, promoted his private taxi service, while the

city council designed 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.



*Mulder and a colleague in a sedan chair, surrounded by the 'Porteuses de Do Son', and on the way to the beach*

The so-called *Les Porteuses de Do Son* attracted the attention of Mulder's lens as well as those of local postcard producers, who also distributed prints of scantily clad fisherwomen. The *Porteuses* looked like singers of popular chansons (*quan ho or ca tru*) 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 Dejeuner 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 taken over by nostalgia.

Mulder showed a clear interest in his native personnel, represented by the amah, seated next to a European baby, his housekeeper and a number of Vietnamese domestic staff. Their Tonkinese clothes signify that they were part of a rich European household. Outside, there is the gardener, and in front of the gate the cyclo (tricycle) rider. They belonged to the underclass, pejoratively called *nhaque* (bumpkin or peasant).

When Mulder returned home from Haiphong in 1908, he left a place where the modern history of Vietnam had started to take shape. In that year, the first of a series of nationalist activities started a string of anti-colonialist revolts. The backdrop was provided by the emerging modernisation of Vietnamese culture and influenced by the stunning Japanese victory over Russia in May 1905. Patriotic scholars organised schools free of colonial supervision, such as the Free School of Tonkin (*Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc*), and organised cooperatives and places of work where a new generation of Vietnamese could be prepared for a peaceful independence. The colonial administration's tolerance for the modernisation movement was short-lived and promptly vanished after uprisings in central Vietnam and attempts to poison the garrison of Hanoi in June 1908. Mulder, who must have witnessed or at least known about these events, returned to Europe and married. He had earned a fortune at Speidel's firm, which enabled him to emigrate to the US in 1910. He founded a farming community in Virginia, inspired by the Dutch socialist, writer and psychiatrist Frederik van Eeden, who, inspired by Henry David Thoreau's Walden, established a communal cooperative in Bussum, North Holland. This idea, similar to one adopted by reformist scholars in Vietnam, was that residents would be self-sufficient, sharing everything in common. Like Van Eeden's experiments and the ill-fated cooperatives of the Vietnamese, Mulder's plans failed. After his return to the Netherlands, he invested in Imperial Russian Railways bonds, and was eventually left bankrupt. He died in 1922. His memories embodied in



*Vietnamese housekeeper clad in brown silk tunic (ao nam than). A silver necklace adorned with dragon motifs completes the dress*



*Vietnamese babysitter (amah) in traditional dress with hair turban (khan giai) and white tunic (ao ban than)*

his photographs are presumed here, but we cannot know with certainty what he perceived or projected. As Roland Barthes has said, “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 memorialisation of Mulder’s Haiphong years is not a way of reviving the past, but facing a future in which that very past is forgotten.

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This article is an abbreviated version of an essay that John Kleinen wrote for a collection of Mulder’s stereo photos, *J. G. Mulder. Zijstraten van de geschiedenis - De wereld rond 1900 in stereofoto’s*. Amsterdam, De Verbeelding, 2006, ISBN 90 74159 96 8. A longer version was presented at a conference on Vietnam’s early modernisation in Aix-en-Provence, May 3-5, 2007.

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