

Trade and Exchange in the Sixteenth–Eighteenth Centuries through the Prism of Hoi An

Hoi An, located on the Thu Bon River along the narrow strip of land bordering the South China Sea (East Sea to Vietnamese), has been a place of settlement, trade exchange, and cultural contact across a succession of epochs: Sa Huynh, Champa, Cochinchina, and Viet Nam. It was favorably located on the major maritime route to and from the great market that was China, on the long-distance trading network that extended to western Asia, and within easy distance of the archipelagic world of Southeast Asia. Textual accounts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries include long lists of Hoi An's trade goods. In its heyday in the seventeenth century, it was a much-favored entrepôt. Today, Hoi An lies in Quang Nam Province, central Viet Nam, thirty kilometers south of Da Nang City.

Hoi An, or a place near it, was almost certainly an important Champa port when Tra Kieu was at the height of its prosperity, and before that, it had been a site of the ancient Sa Huynh culture. This premise is supported by a wealth of cultural remains, compatible with Tra Kieu, and a string of place-names evocative of Champa, which survive to this day.¹ The Hoi An entrepôt of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century fame inherited an excellent site for secure anchorage, a trading reputation, certain Cham installations, and the diverse talents of a polyethnic population. Freshwater wells of Cham construction survive along the lake on the northern branch of the Thu Bon River and in present-day Hoi An (fig. 1). Another well, located on Cham Island and mentioned in Arab records, provided fresh water to their northbound ships.²

Beyond this, information about the old port in earlier eras remains hazy and is hindered by lacunae. Vietnamese historian Do Bang shares this viewpoint.³ Recoveries of ancient Vietnamese ceramics confirm that Hoi An was a touchpoint for ships plying the ceramic trade out of Viet Nam. This trade, active from approximately the mid-fourteenth century, and at its peak in the fifteenth century, brought Vietnamese ceramics to West Asia and East Asia, but principally to Southeast Asia. In the same period, Champa exported its ceramics to markets also principally in Southeast Asia, logically from its port in Thi Nai Bay (contemporary Quy Nhon). Ceramics excavated from grave sites at Lam Dong, in the Southern Central Highlands, date from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century, and are identified as Khmer, Thai, Cham, Vietnamese, Chinese, and

FIG. 1

Ancient Cham well in Hoi An town is still in daily use.

