

In the sixteenth century, trade in Hoi An was unaffected by state considerations, but in 1600, Nguyen Hoang, in a departure from traditional thinking, determined that the proceeds of trade could sustain his fledgling state. With this end in mind, he resolved to pursue a policy that would foster good trading relationships with overseas countries.²⁹ The timing was fortuitous, as this new approach would dovetail nicely into changes in policies elsewhere.

Thirty-three years had passed since Ming China had lifted its long-standing policy banning South Seas trade, although its ban on trade with Japan remained. To circumvent this, and to help break the dominance of the Portuguese on the Macau-Nagasaki silk run, in the last decade of the sixteenth century Toyotomi Hideyoshi instituted the system of Red Seal licenses (*shuin*) to certain traders (*shuin-sen*), authorizing them to participate in foreign trade.³⁰ In the first year these licenses were issued, state-sanctioned traders arrived in Hoi An, and although they visited all Southeast Asian entrepôts, Manila and especially Hoi An were the prime beneficiaries.³¹ In Hoi An, silk, both local and re-exported, was available (fig. 2).

In accordance with the new policy direction, the Nguyen carefully nurtured this nascent trade relationship with Japan. Cordial correspondence ensued between Nguyen Hoang and the Tokugawa Shogunate. A dramatic growth in trade followed, so by the early seventeenth century, twice as many Japanese junks were licensed to trade in Hoi An, compared to Tongking. These ties were further strengthened by gestures of alliance, as in 1604, when Nguyen Hoang adopted Hunamoto Yabeiiji, first envoy of the Tokugawa government to Cochinchina. Nguyen Hoang's son, Nguyen

FIG. 2

Artist's impression of the Japanese covered bridge as it appears in contemporary Hoi An. The first bridge was built on this site in 1593 by the Japanese trading community to link their quarter with the neighbouring Chinese quarter. In 1719, in memory of his Japanese friends, Nguyen Phuc Chu named the bridge, "*Lai Vien Kieu*" (The Bridge of Friends from Afar). Artist: Tran Nguyen Dan (b. 1941), coloured woodblock print on cloth, H: 59.5 cm x W: 44.5 cm, as is.

