

century Japanese ceramics recovered in recent excavations from Muong grave sites show they had entered a trade network of some antiquity in the northwestern regions of northern Viet Nam and were thus used beyond court circles and urban dwellers in Thang Long. Also fed into this network was the spectrum of Viet Nam's ceramic production, inlaid wares, monochrome white, brown, celadons, and some blue-and-white, as well as Cham and Chinese ceramics.⁹⁸ As mentioned, excavations in the Southern Central Highlands evidence similar patterns of exchange.

At the same time that Tongking was exporting ceramics, and the Trinh and Nguyen lords were importing them, kilns in Hai Duong and Bat Trang (Kinh Bac) were producing substantial vessels made to order for use in local pagodas and temples (cat. nos. 89, 90). Such vessels are only rarely documented from export contexts. In keeping with their elevated role in community rituals, they are often richly embellished, and many are inscribed with precise dates, names of donors and their titles, the occasion of the donation, and sometimes the name of the potter, all of which bring valuable socioeconomic insights.⁹⁹ These substantial altar vessels are commonly constructed from several components. Lamp stands, for example, usually feature two or three separate parts. They are designed in pairs and presented in bilateral symmetry.

Due to a number of factors, including coin shortages, crippling inflation resulted. This unhappy situation coincided with the codification of increased shipping duties. This was the beginning of a chain of events that saw the unraveling of Cochinchina's merchant economy. Hoi An was no longer an attractive place to trade. In 1771, only sixteen junks arrived. Decline in arrivals meant further decline in state revenue. In the same year, the Tay Son rebellion broke out in Binh Dinh Province. In 1773, only eight junks arrived.¹⁰⁰ Then in 1774, the Trinh took advantage of the turmoil created by the Tay Son rebellion and invaded and occupied Cochinchina. The destruction the Trinh wreaked, including and especially upon trading infrastructure, crippled Hoi An, and further destruction in the ensuing wars discouraged all foreign traders. Hoi An's fate was sealed following the founding of the Nguyen dynasty (1802–1945), which by Minh Mang's reign (1820–40) had turned its back on the trade system of the Nguyen lords and was demonstrating a strong distaste for Europeans, their trade, and their religion.¹⁰¹

Nguyen Hoang's decision in 1600 to embrace foreign trade was the right decision at the right time, and the fruits of that choice perhaps went beyond even his expectations. Yet the state rode too comfortably on foreign trade, and the local economy was too tightly enmeshed in it. In the wake of early success came a plethora of changing circumstances to which the Nguyen lords could not adequately respond. The innovative leverage that had previously served them so well was no longer evident, but then, when decisions made overseas could set in motion a series of events that could just as easily bring disfavor as favor, then that was like riding the sky with Icarus.

As for Hoi An's port, changing morphology eventually made it impossible for larger ships to go upriver, and by 1787, ships were generally being offloaded in Da Nang. In 1811, Gia Long (reigned 1802–1819) issued a decree ordering Thanh Ha and Hoi An authorities to inquire after visiting Qing Chinese merchants. Those wanting to trade beyond the usual three months, or wanting to trade elsewhere in the country, must seek a permit; those trading without a permit would be arrested and punished.¹⁰² Then in 1835, Minh Mang issued a decree stipulating that all Western trading ships berth at Da Nang.¹⁰³