GIS Approaches to Early Vietnamese Christianity

Brian Ostrowski
Cornell University

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Scope of Project

- “Spiritual history” of early Vietnamese Christian community, 1615-1665
- Who were the Vietnamese Christians? Where did they live?
- How did they understand Christian doctrine? How did Christianity affect their approach to living?
- How did Christians interact with non-Christians? With the government?
Brief Chronology

- 17th century: Vietnam divided into Tonkin (North) & Cochinchina (South)
- 1615: Jesuits arrive in Cochinchina – eventually convert 50,000+
- 1626: Jesuits arrive in Tonkin – current figures place eventual conversions at 350,000+
- 1665: Jesuits expelled from both regions & later replaced by French missionary society (MEP)
GIS-ApplIcable Areas of Inquiry

- At what rate & in what numbers did the Christian population(s) grow, as an aggregate by kingdom & specifically by locality?
- How many missionaries were preaching in each kingdom/locality at a given time? Effect on conversion statistics?
- What proportion of the population converted?
- How many churches were built? When and where?
- When and where did official repressions of Christianity occur? Effect on conversions?
- Effect of warfare on conversions? Of natural disasters?
Methods & Challenges of Applying GIS

- Nature of missionary conversion reporting lends hard data only for aggregate numbers
  - 2 large polygons
  - Little sense of local variation or areas of Christian concentration
- Data gaps
  - Possibility of estimating local numbers by dividing extra conversions proportionally based on known figures?
  - One Tonkin or 50?
Challenges 2

- Where to show missionaries & churches without cluttering map?
  - Were they all equal?
  - How to reflect ephemerality of churches & movements of missionaries?
- Repressions, wars, etc. as flashes and/or callout boxes
- Is GIS superior to traditional graphs & charts in this case?
Viet Christian Population vs Missionary Presence

Christian population

Number of missionaries

Year

0 50000 100000 150000 200000 250000 300000 350000 400000

1615 1620 1625 1630 1635 1640 1645 1650 1655 1660 1665

Cochinchina Christians
Tonkin Christians
Cochinchina missionaries
Tonkin missionaries
Christians as Percentage of Tonkin Population

- X-axis: Year (1626 to 1656)
- Y-axis: % of Total Population (0 to 8)
- Bar graph showing the increase in the percentage of the Tonkin population that is Christian over the years.
- Line graph showing the number of missionaries over the same period.
Further (Interactive) GIS Possibilities

- Hyperlink to known Christian texts
  - Problems of computerized “n<«m” script
  - OCR issues
- Hyperlink to images of Christian artifacts now being catalogued
- Hyperlink to biographies of missionaries
- How useful would it be?
Interim Conclusions

- One tool to locate & quantify Christian populations
- Helps to concretize information about a subject that tends toward the nebulous & impressionistic
- Suggests areas of textual inquiry & improves historian’s ability to weigh & analyze historical texts
  - Highlights information gaps
  - Forces question of answerable vs. unanswerable areas of inquiry
- May make clear causal relationships between external variables & conversion patterns
  - Need for collaboration to avoid duplication of work
- Can validate and call into question individual historical actors’ claims
Engaging Related Viet Studies Discussions

- Suggests further area of external influence in 17th century Viet society & culture
- Questions stereotypical images of Tonkin as conservative & isolated vs. more cosmopolitan Cochinchina
  - Martial atmosphere?
  - Cham influence?
- Adds foreign voices to period perceptions of kingdom boundaries & locations